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Structural violence and hope in catastrophic times: From Camus' *'The Plague'* to Covid-19

Ahmed Kabel and Robert Phillipson*

Abstract:

Covid-19 has triggered a resurgence of interest in Albert Camus' book, *The Plague*. The novel is a complex narrative of an epidemic, stressing the human factor in addressing a social crisis as well as how individuals experience the personal drama of quarantine, isolation and death. These existentialist tropes have powerful resonance in the age of Covid-19. However, Covid's interlocking with structural violence worldwide requires a different engagement with *The Plague* beyond an aesthetics of suffering and hope. Both Camus' book and Covid-19 intersect with structural violence and suffering which are mediated differentially. Covid-19 intensifies other social catastrophes feeding on the ruins of structural inequality and the racism that condemns the marginalised to loss of agency, social apartheid and disposability. It also lays bare the necropolitics of neoliberalism - its power to dictate life and death undergirded by racialized, class, gendered and neocolonial logics. We witness emerging cartographies of power combined with virulent nationalism, authoritarianism and xenophobia. The Covid crisis is also likely to expand disaster capitalism, digital imperialism, and algorithmic surveillance, further entrenching racial, class and gender hierarchies. If humanity is to avoid the pitfalls of these myriad fields of disaster intervention, what is needed is reflective analysis that has to aim at major societal change, at decolonisation that ends systemic abandon and racist structural violence. Camus' book fails to assist this.

Keywords: Camus, *The Plague*, Covid-19, structural violence, racism, catastrophe, hope, decolonisation.

Reading Camus in Algeria and Morocco

Covid-19 has triggered an explosion of sales of Albert Camus' book, *The Plague*. The book is brilliant in many ways, stressing the human factor in addressing a social crisis: a subtle, complex, and powerful narrative of an epidemic, the struggle to limit the impact of a killer illness, and the social and personal drama of quarantine, isolation, death, and how a variety of individuals experience an appalling situation that strains all aspects of human survival. Individual scenes, such as the dying hours of a child, and a teenager's life being changed by revulsion at a social system that legitimates capital punishment, are high points in a vivid, gripping book.

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The powerful resonance of these humanistic tropes rings powerful bells in the age of Covid-19, its traumatic impact worldwide, and its interlocking with and intensification of class, racial and gender hierarchies and injustice. However, engaging with Camus requires a new approach. We reveal how, in his attempt to utilize the plague as an allegory of the human condition, Camus himself masks the realities of colonial violence and domination that furnish the historical and spatial backdrop of *La Peste* (*LP* henceforth). This erasure, we maintain, has a bearing on how we understand catastrophe and hope in the era of Covid-19 and the prospects for politics in a post-Covid-19 world.

Since the personal is political, our (re)reading of Camus is shaped by our biographical trajectories, and engagements with the question of post-coloniality. RP's understanding of the book is influenced by living in Algeria from January 1965 until July 1968. The country was attempting to recover from 130 years of French colonialism and eight years of an atrocious liberation war. The setting of *LP* is Oran in Algeria for a book that was published in 1947. An uprising in 1945 in several eastern Algerian towns by Algerian nationalists resulted in a major massacre. The figures are disputed but at least 20,000 Algerians were killed, and 100 European colons. Freedom from French colonial exploitation (it took 50 years for military control to be imposed after invasion in 1830) was already a central political challenge in the 1940s.

AK lives in North Africa and reads the book from the vantage point of a subaltern who takes Camus' omissions to be symptomatic of the variegated effacements of colonialism and its postcolonial afterlives. Ours is a world sculpted by colonialism and its ideological apparatuses. The colonial detritus that is racism, structural oppression, and disposability stacked against the 'wretched of the earth' (Frantz Fanon's vivid term in 1961 for the colonized, after working as a medical doctor in colonial Algeria and for the liberation movement) remains a formidable force undergirding the discriminatory triage of necropolitics and 'surplus life' during the Covid crisis. The wretched in neoliberal times are those for whom 'self-isolation' from Covid infection is an impossibility, in impoverished districts in the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Brazil, South Africa, Morocco etc.

The cunning of colonial allegory and truth

'No one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences', Albert Camus, *The Plague* (1947: 35).¹

LP has been interpreted in many ways. Some see the book as an allegory of France under Nazi occupation. Others read it as a metaphor of chaos and absurdity in the modern world. A reviewer in *The Guardian* waxes lyrical about the way the book can be seen as reflecting different ways of reacting to the moral vacuum of modern materialist culture.² Confining the book as standing for an allegorical portrayal of the fascism that evolved in much of Europe in the 1930s and the atrocities of World War II limits its message and impact significantly. Those working to control the plague are noble, societally responsible, but, as Camus writes at the end of the book, we live in a world in which evil is present and erupts spasmodically. But a focus on Nazism effaces completely the colonial ambivalences of Camus. The anti-fascism that was important for Camus in occupied France is largely immaterial to his Algerian politics. His advocacy of assimilation in Algeria predated and continued after the 'demise' of

fascism.³ There is also the patent divergence between Camus' resistance and vitriol in the journal *Combat* against German occupation, his unstinting endorsement of violence and purge on the one hand, and on the other his defence of French colonialism, and condemnation of 'revolutionary' violence in Algeria. The towering presence of colonial evils, manifestly, did not exercise Camus' humanist sensibilities.

The absence of any concern with Algerians in *LP* is striking. The entire focus of the book is on the population of European, colonizing origin. Individual moral travails overshadow the decimation of Arabs by the plague. Likewise, the focus in *L'Étranger*, published in 1942, is on people of European origin only; the Algerian victim is anonymous. Camus' analytical studies (*Chroniques Algériennes* 1939-58, Gallimard 1958) published midway through the war of liberation (1954-1962) offer descriptions of the extreme poverty of the Kabyle Berber population, and Camus pleads for more to be done to assist them. On the other hand, this poverty is disconnected from the colonial political economy. Camus' position during the 1939-1945 and the Algerian liberation war, 1954-1962, was that the French had as much right to be in Algeria as those present at the time of French invasion. He campaigned for power-sharing, which not surprisingly, failed. In both the fiction and non-fiction of Camus he is not disturbed by the territorial, cultural, and linguistic dispossession that was the foundation of this French colony. The choice of topics in the novels is therefore classic imperialist discourse, that directly, overtly, and with complicity, accepts the racist hierarchy that all European countries imposed on other parts of the world.

Emmanuel Macron, ever the opportunist, visited Algiers in February 2017 during his election campaign, and described the French colonisation of Algeria as a *crime against humanity* (reported in *Le Monde*, 30 July 2020). Now that Macron, as President, represents the official face of France, he is unlikely to repeat a statement that could trigger a demand for reparations, or set a precedent that might appeal in other former colonies.

Camus' much-vaunted universal humanism conceals his parochial colonialist politics. Also deeply problematic is his *apolitical* existentialist thrust hinged on *individuals* wrestling with disillusionment and 'catastrophe'. This is all the more dubious when the 'individual' is a colonist who resolutely stands his (always 'his' for Camus) ground while the colonial backdrop is entirely elided in the process. The crisis is depoliticized, rendered individual (even 'social'), but never structural as part and parcel of the moral economy of colonialism. Situating the narrative in colonial Algeria while ignoring the inhumanity of colonialism is morally indefensible.

These colonial imbrications and other related themes in Camus' *oeuvre* find their ultimate forensic dissection in Edward Said's *Culture and imperialism*.⁴ James Baldwin, on his part, perceptively described the existentialist repercussions of Camus's colonial connivance. According to him, Camus and French colonialism occasioned existentialist effacement by legislating for Algerians their 'ontological situation', thereby denying them the agency to determine and wrestle with their 'existential condition' on their own terms.⁵ The concealment of the naked violence of the colonial condition, very much a part of the world Camus grew up in, is compounded by the 'colonial epistemics of erasure'—the silencing of the Other as epistemic violence, epistemic injustice⁶ and denial of authenticity.

These omissions have been challenged significantly in a novel in which the main character is the brother of the victim in *L'Étranger*, who wants to set the record straight. The book explores the story from the perspective of the family of the man killed on the beach (Kamel Daoud, 2014. *Meursault, contre-enquête*. Paris. Babel, Actes Sud; 2013, Alger: Éditions Barzakh). Daoud's account heralds a 'negative colonial dialectic'; it contradicts the colonial negation that Camus so masterfully orchestrated and recovers the memory and humanity of the victim; and in so doing it gives voice to the silenced wounds and histories of the subaltern. Daoud's 'decolonizing gesture' should, however, be subjected to a radical decolonial critique. This should be attentive to more than the politics of 'writing back', to more than commanding a hearing from the 'master'. 'No victim asks his executioner: if I were you and my sword greater than my rose, would I have acted as you have done?' Such is how Mahmoud Darwish dramatizes the underbelly of 'writing back'⁷. The writing back drops a historical veil between the colonial and the postcolonial. It takes literally the temporal rupture and succession suggested by the *postcolonial*. Negative colonial dialectics needs to grapple with colonial detritus and the unfurling colonial entanglements of the *postcolonial* condition; 'decolonization is not a metaphor' nor is it a game of mirrors. 'Blaming the victim' is as disarming as 'the politics of blame'.⁸

Camus' colonial ambivalence also affects his ethics of truth. Early in *LP* there is one reference to a journalist, Raymond Rambert, arriving in Oran to investigate the living conditions of Algerians. Doctor Rieux asks him whether he is free to write the truth about the local population, who are impoverished, and it transpires that this is not the case. The rat invasion that heralded the epidemic was a better topic for the French media. In the first half of the book the journalist is exclusively interested in enjoying himself and in escaping back to his girlfriend in France. When this fails because of lockdown, he agrees to assist the doctor in controlling the epidemic. Rieux refused to collaborate at the outset because he had 'no use for statements in which something is kept back'. He was 'a man who was sick and tired of the world he lived in [...] and had resolved, for his part, to have no truck with injustice and compromises with the truth'. This might be Camus' ultimate *parrhesia* moment in *LP*. But the 'Great Compromise' with truth and injustice inside the colonial matrix seems to have escaped Camus' rather parochial existentialist/epistemic/moral compass. The recognition that truth-telling is imperative in a world replete with suffering is compromised by Rieux's strategic silence, his refusal to speak. Is *Parrhesia* reduced to 'irony without solidarity' or to playful spectatorship? Adorno underscores the profoundly political dimension of truth when he affirms that 'to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth'.⁹ Camus' 'spectator theory of truth' expunges its political potential, its subversive solidarity.

The predicament of speech

A word on the (im)possibility of translating catastrophe. When Albert Camus writes that 'a pestilence isn't a thing made to man's measure', he emphatically accents the predicament of human language; 'the mute appeal of presences'¹⁰ emerges as a prosthetic for discourse, and groans 'become the normal speech of men' (*ibid*: 95).¹¹ Tethered to 'a world of abstractions' and faced with the visceral materiality of death, both reason and its fellow traveller, language, flounder. Catastrophe elusively lurks at the edges of language's denotational ambit. With an acute sensitivity to the tragic, Toni Morrison vividly evokes an 'unyielding language content to admire its own

paralysis'¹² before catastrophe. But there is more to rendering catastrophe than mere semiotic paralysis. It highlights our struggle to countenance the sheer *structural* enormity of what Marcel Mauss called 'total social facts', 'events' of such magnitude that they unsettle the totality of society—unravelling its institutions, values and profound nature and unhinging our phenomenological universes.¹³ Covid is an archetypal exemplar of a total social fact. As it made its momentous interspecies leap, the virus has unmoored our habitual anchorings, leaving us scrambling for stories and words to reassemble our battered certitudes.

Of myths and 'men': Covid-19 as equalizer

Confronted with the enormity of the Covid catastrophe, a predominant story is to seek analytic sustenance in human nature or some variant of humanist universalism.¹⁴ An analogous narrative is to insist on the fragility of the human condition bound to an urgency to jettison anthropocentric hubris, and an affirmation of radical humility vis-à-vis others and other worlds. There is also the insistence on a collective consciousness of 'togetherness in catastrophe', a creeping encroachment of the condition of the Other. While these enunciations of a 'new existentialism for infectious times'¹⁵ are clearly valuable and often powerful, they tend to disregard the systemic coordinates of catastrophe, or consign them to fortuitous contingencies or subsidiary importance, and thus limit possibilities for political praxis and transformation in catastrophic times. The crisis is cast in an overly existentialist idiom that obscures the fact that total social facts are historically constituted, structurally conditioned and mediated, and interlace with various sites of inequality, domination and power(lessness). We contend that certain (re)renderings of Camus' *LP* both generally and in the current pandemic are open to this charge.

'Common humanity' emerges as a trope to underscore our collective destiny in the face of the pandemic. This trope is relayed through the catchphrase that Covid is a 'great equalizer'. From politicians to billionaires to celebrities, most, unsurprisingly, seem to have succumbed to this 'pop philosophy'. But they are not alone. 'The main thing about a pandemic like the novel coronavirus', one journalist asserts, 'is that it doesn't discriminate. Whoever you are, wherever you live, you're vulnerable...the microbes themselves are impartial'.¹⁶ Camus was also prone to embracing this romantic egalitarianism. Throughout *LP*, he reiterated the dispassionate even-handedness of the disease, its 'impartial ministrations', its attendant 'inerrable equality of death'. 'The plague was no respecter of persons' Camus affirmed, 'and under its despotic rule everyone was... under sentence', under the sway of its 'impartial justice'.¹⁷ This attitude informs the current faith in the radical impartiality of Covid, sometimes touted cathartically as a moment of reckoning for the rich and the privileged. For better or worse, Covid comes to be understood as the 'Bolshevik of pandemics'.¹⁸ All these narratives appeal to a lineage of abstract humanistic and existentialist categories to help us come to grips with catastrophe. While appealing, they do not seem to offer a basis for directly apprehending the structural entanglement of Covid and addressing politically the enduring armature of dehumanization and suffering.

The narrative of equality in catastrophe is immediately disarrayed by the asymmetries of experience under the hierarchical, disposable logic of capitalism. While the privileged are working from home, platoons of human beings have seen their

livelihoods and dignities eroded while the poor and the precarious are abandoned as detritus of a profit-ravenous system. This simply aggravates the inherent capitalist condition of ‘*letting die*’ embodied in human-as-waste— excretions in the form of unemployment and underemployment— and more radically in the confluence of dead labour, structural violence and the worker as *homo sacer* dispensable and without sacrificial protection.¹⁹ The notions of dead labour and *homo sacer* apply equally poignantly to the elderly whose ‘systemic obsolescence’ condemns them to the zones of social death where they become a captive sacrificial target for Covid. Then there is the emerging class of ‘essential workers’ who, under duress, have no or little choice except to continue to sell their labour power to sustain life for themselves and for others, and in the case of medical staff, at great risk of losing their lives. This ‘new working class’ is doubly exposed: at one and the same time exposed to the virus and susceptible to capitalist disposability.²⁰ Largely lodged at the nexus of social and economic precarity, the new working class shoulders the weight and the risk of caring for the living and the dead (and those caught in-between). The class character of this burden interlocks with the interposed layers of gendered, racialized, and ethnicized precarity and disposability. Under Covid, this labour configuration thus magnifies the archipelago of systemic expandability embedded in the dialectic capitalist matrix of producing profit and reproducing ‘life’. The Covid crisis has also laid bare the politics of work by uncovering the tension between value and social contribution. It has uncovered the lopsided matrix of ‘bullshit jobs’ and the ‘bullshit economy’ which tends to reward professional pursuits, especially those at the middle and higher echelons of business and the bureaucracy, that are just not productive or vital for the reproduction of life, but conducive to inequality and systemic injustice.²¹ Conversely, the bullshit economy consistently depreciates and dispossesses those who cater most directly to the fundamental needs of society; the paradox is that these vocations, systematically underpaid and undervalued and routinely degraded as ‘unskilled’, are now elevated to ‘essential work’. It remains to be seen whether the growing awareness of this contradiction will generate enough collective action to reverse this capitalist oddity. In Covid times, those who work in the arts and creative industries are also rendered precarious.

There is a gendered twist to this new politics of labour whose occlusion, other things being equal, resonates with Camus’ treatment of women in his fiction. An important blind spot in the universe of *LP* is the shadowy presence of women. Women and children play virtually no active role in the book: for Camus ‘people’= ‘men’. When women are referred to it is as lovers, carers (Rieux’s mother), or an absent spouse (Rieux’s wife is in a sanatorium and dies by the end of the book). Camus’ universe is entirely male-dominated. By contrast in Daniel Defoe’s *A journal of the plague year* (describing the plague in London in 1664-65, published in 1722), which Camus was familiar with, and which he draws on for many of the themes in *LP*, women are more present, as they are described as playing a key role as itinerant nurses for the sick in London. The influence of the plague on women in labour, and the hideous consequences for the mother and the baby, are also described in Defoe’s documentary detail. This absencing of women is patently visible in the gendered matrix of an exploitative capitalist economy. The predominantly gendered character of reproductive work under the neoliberal aegis of ‘care’²² as well as the ‘feminization’ of ‘services’ accentuates female precarity and further deepens gendered oppression. The burden of unrecognized and un/under-remunerated reproduction, private and public, during the Covid crisis multiplies the risks of exposure and oppression as well

as the stratification of the ‘obligations’ of care, thus reinforcing the cognitive schemas and institutional underpinnings of gender domination. The Covid crisis is deepening gender inequality in the areas of education and health and is intensifying gender-based physical and sexual violence.²³ These ruinations are further exacerbated by the violence, expulsions and displacement in conflict zones, refugee camps and the myriad islands of social precarity.

Lockdowns have also seemingly brought home the notion of radical human equality. Framed in the language of quarantines and ‘isolation’, feelings of ‘enclosure’ soon acquired a strong pigment of collective captivity. In one of her ‘reflections’, distinguished anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes wonders if ‘shelter-in-place’ is not tantamount to ‘house arrest’. Between the bouts of ‘boredom’, ‘claustrophobia’, ‘cabin fever’ and ‘sauntering home like an urban flaneur’, one feels ‘totally caged’, stranded in warped time-space. Analogous schemas are at work regarding social distancing. Social distancing ‘feels like apartheid’: ‘We’d love to hug our neighbours, but we can only mimic our desires with body gestures. We bow, we open our arms, and we try to put a twinkle in our eyes, and to carry an invisible smile under our tight masks’.²⁴

These intellectual construals reflect both an existentialization and aestheticization of catastrophe and risk downplaying the structuration of violence and suffering and their entangled intertwinement with Covid. An auto-ethnography of solitude tends to cast ‘incarceration’ as an individualized phenomenology of stasis. Although real, the psychic weight of the pandemic has impressed on us a collective melancholy to the point where structural determinations and asymmetries of catastrophe are often flattened. It has aestheticized ‘stuckedness’²⁵ as an objective condition of existential and social immobility, de-emphasizing the gritty realities of institutionalized abandonment in zones of social death. Catastrophe, like tragedy, is not monolithic; it is a polyvalent category mediated by one’s condition in a system of hierarchical ordering.²⁶ These disparate sites of articulation invest catastrophe with meanings and material realities that are both historically located and structurally mediated, and thus produce divergent objective conditions and subjective experiences of suffering. Suffering is not random; it represents ‘symptoms of deeper pathologies of power [...] linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer[...] and who will be shielded from harm’.²⁷ Differentiated suffering represents the structurally regulated differential embodiment of catastrophe. This is the material infrastructure on which unequal exposure, suffering and death under Covid are grafted.

On the other hand, ‘shelter-in-place’ and ‘stay home’ injunctions presume the possibility of sheltering to be universally available (and comfortable), which further removes from view structural abandonment. ‘Disposability at large’ is also a ‘pre-existing condition’, the result of the multitudes of ‘expulsions’ and ‘evictions’²⁸ of all those who are ‘marooned’ in the multiple ‘zones of non-being’ at the outer edges of empire, state, capital and humanity. The psychological toll of abruptly severed sociality and denied warmth is real and can be shattering. However, it again fudges the paradox that ‘social distancing’, saturated with its doxa of individual space, proximity and boundary as classically theorized by Georg Simmel,²⁹ is class habitus (as in the caste hierarchy in India) now writ large as a planetary ‘civilizing process’. In zones of precarity and social abandonment, social distancing is more than social

gentrification. It is an unaffordable privilege; its impossibility is the corporeal signature of ‘stuckedness’. Such are the ruinous crevices where the ‘biopolitics of disposability’³⁰ and the ‘necropolitics of non-being’ meet in the time of Covid.

‘Social distancing’ invariably maps onto the geography of striated social space shaped by exclusion and inequality. Gated communities and ghettos are institutionalized social distancing enforced by (para)legal regimes of private property, policing and security. Gatedness and ghettoization are two sides of the same technology of social ‘immunization’ operating on the entire social body to inoculate the privileged from contamination against *intrusion* and ‘*ex/trusion*’. These paradoxes of biological and social immunization, whose risks are unevenly distributed, are becoming increasingly palpable as Covid’s selective predatory calculus becomes more visible. Arundhati Roy vividly chronicles the tragedies of ‘social distancing’ in a world of many apartheid and compressions. ‘The lockdown to enforce physical distancing had resulted in the opposite — physical compression on an unthinkable scale’. On the one hand, ‘the poor are sealed into cramped quarters in slums and shanties. On the other, as the economy shut down, the ‘towns and megacities began to extrude their working-class citizens — their migrant workers — like so much unwanted accrual’. The ‘exodus’ is almost Biblical. This ‘surplus humanity’ was ‘driven out by their employers and landlords, millions of impoverished, hungry, thirsty people, young and old, men, women, children, sick people, blind people, disabled people, with nowhere else to go, with no public transport in sight, began a long march home to their villages’.³¹ They marched for days, perhaps towards their own death; ‘where do old birds go to die?’, Anjum—the main character in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, an outcast *hijra* who lives in a graveyard—asked the Imam Sahib, ‘Do they fall on us like stones from the sky? Do we stumble on their bodies in the streets?’.³² Like the ‘unconsoled’, if they are honoured, they turn up as a heap of statistics.

Catastrophe as concatenation

One effect that Covid-19 has produced on a planetary scale is a reversal of the imagining of catastrophe; a shift from contemplating catastrophe as a ‘future imperfect’—as an imminent exception such as nuclear war, climate disaster, or economic meltdown³³ presaging the ‘disorder of things’—to catastrophe as ‘present imperfect’, a crude fact of life defining the new ‘order of things’. But this analytics of catastrophe in the age of Covid does not fully consider ‘other’ temporalities and densities of catastrophe, namely that catastrophe for large swathes of humanity is a lingering past flowing seamlessly into the present and protruding defiantly towards the future. Catastrophe is not merely a sudden eruption or impending doom, but an indeterminate and durable existence. Police brutality against black people, indigenous resource plunder, the war on terror, AIDS, civilian killings in Syria, Rohingya genocide, to randomly name a few, are not singular happenings. These unfold along a historical trajectory of collective catastrophe marked by conquest, genocide, slavery, colonialism, state violence and dispossession. These resilient interlockings compose what Bonilla calls a ‘catastrophe swarm’, the variegated systemic accretions which enable but eclipse the singularity of ‘one’ event and its aftershocks to encompass the ‘repetitive and enduring trauma’ of the *longue-durée*.³⁴ Catastrophe is a concatenation. This framing allows us to appreciate the unevenness of suffering and death visited by Covid. Covid lays bare the uninterrupted flux of this concatenation and thrusts another stratum into this unfurling armature of differentiated suffering.

‘Bodies remember’; differential catastrophe is the ‘inscribing of historical time onto flesh’;³⁵ collective trauma is history rendered decapacitated flesh. Racialized bodies are also sites of memory; they are archives of violence.

It is against this backdrop that co-morbidities and subaltern vulnerability associated with race, ethnicity and indigeneity need to be understood. This highlights the necessity to complicate our understanding of these categories beyond social construction or identity and to broaden our compass of the structural maldistribution of oppression. It is not race, ethnicity, or indigeneity *per se* or as a social construction that kills. Sedimented *in/disposability* does. Covid feeds on the ruins of structural and embodied racism. The latter percolates through psychological and biological pores cumulating chronically into debilitating disease, stress, hormonal alterations and biological ageing. Through complex biopsychological channels, embodied racism spills over into systemic trauma that is then bequeathed,³⁶ perpetuating somatic and psychological deprivation and disability. Chronic exposure to police brutality, criminalization, routine discrimination, poverty, chronic insecurity and the thousand and one incidents of ‘banal dehumanization’ coalesce into a collective experience of trauma. Racialized violence as embodiment thus becomes a technology of ‘necropower’ that systemically erases the racialized body through summary elimination or slow death.³⁷ It is at the intersections of systemic wreckages that Covid’s racial and ethnic preferential lethality plays out. Even the natural sciences have been unforthcoming in recognizing these determinations. The prestigious journal *Nature* felt obliged to issue a *mea culpa* in this respect: ‘we recognize that *Nature* is one of the white institutions that is responsible for bias in research and scholarship. The enterprise of science has been — and remains — complicit in systemic racism, and it must strive harder to correct those injustices and amplify marginalized voices.’³⁸

Systemic oppression against indigenous peoples exhibits a similar constellation of systemic toxicities: colonialism, racism, poverty, morbidity and institutionalized neglect stoked by the simmering embers of genocide and dispossession. For indigenous peoples, pandemics hold uniquely chilling resonance representing collective trauma, genocide and civilicide. These intersect with other forms of structural and symbolic violence such as linguicide, memoricide, historicide, and culturicide. The objective condition of enduring structural and internalized catastrophe makes indigenous peoples acutely vulnerable to the ravages of the virus, further deepening their material, physical and spiritual plight and collective loss. As Covid ‘will invariably take a toll on elders, who are the reservoirs of language and history, their deaths would represent an immeasurable cultural loss’.³⁹ Covid is ‘a reagent that condenses’⁴⁰ these catastrophic assemblages.

Hope in catastrophic times

‘We’ve inherited hope—the gift of forgetting. You’ll see how we give birth among the ruins’ (Wisława Szymborska 1995: 4).⁴¹

Camus has been canonized as a saint of hope by the high priests of global capital. For years protagonists of ‘neoliberal dis-imagination’, the *Wall Street Journal* and *The Financial Times*, for example, have emerged as Delphic Oracles proselytizing hope in ‘troubled times’.⁴² Unlike Camus’s philosophy, however, neoliberal hope has the distinction of being both existentially superficial and politically disabling, likely to

induce only ‘collective bad faith’. This is consistent with neoliberal subjectivity and moral order hinged on individual deliverance. Camus concedes the ‘bleak sterility’ of a world ‘without illusions’.⁴³ Void and exile could beget only ‘hope against hope’ as the afflicted, forsaken in a cold, calculating pestilence, ‘suffer and hope irrationally’. Camus, through Rieux, does not appeal to reason, ethical praxis or secular sainthood; for him, the quotidian promiscuity of death makes a mockery of these abstractions; his politics of solidarity in ‘righting the plague’ find succour in ‘common decency’.⁴⁴ In confronting the ‘banality of suffering’, our ordinary humanity is our sole refuge—and hope. ‘While unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences’, all mortal earthlings can hope to do is ‘strive their utmost to be healers’.⁴⁵ After all, in Camus’s penultimate whisper, is it not true ‘that there are more things to admire in men than to despise’?⁴⁶

That said, Camus’ translation of hope remains deeply problematic. It is tainted by a cynical sentimentalism or humanistic mysticism indistinguishable from ‘yearning’. But radical hope is not Panglossian optimism. Likewise, President Macron’s confession of the sins of the colonial past leads to no action, it remains a gratuitous gesture. At times, Camus imbues hope with a naïve idealism sufficient to reroute the unfolding of history: ‘once the faintest stirring of hope became possible, the dominion of the plague was ended’, and ‘the first thrill of hope had been enough to shatter what fear and hopelessness had failed to impair’.⁴⁷ Yet again, history is impervious to the vicissitudes of our mental states. At its most ‘real’, Camus’ hope is an artefact of ‘individual authenticity’: ‘Without memories, without hope, they lived for the moment only’; and ‘there can be no peace without hope’.⁴⁸ This is hope as individual salvation, the one the neoliberal entrepreneurs of hope are most besotted with. In all three cases, these permutations reflect politically innocuous hope because it is destructured and dehistoricized.

‘Hope is not a singular undifferentiated experience but a socially mediated human capacity’.⁴⁹ Like catastrophe, hope is structurally arbitrated sometimes even blighted, and always organically tied to its sites of articulation. There is no such thing as ‘zero-point hope’. Unlike Camus’, hope as ‘militant utopianism’ is situated and needs to ‘attend to the ways in which institutional forces and [...symbolic] power are tangled up with everyday experience’.⁵⁰ Hope should therefore be politicized not romanticized, and channelled towards ‘the problematization of the future rather than its inexorability’ or, *pace* Camus’, indifference to its unfolding.⁵¹ Radical hope acknowledges that consciousness and action are not necessarily transitive or translatable, and that evil does not solely result from ignorance: ‘good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding’.⁵² While also ‘tempered by the recognition of human finitude and frailty’ and of the ‘human impossibility of paradise’, unlike Camus’ disdain for grand political projects and arresting presentism, radical hope, without subscribing to any dogmatic *telos*, fully embraces a ‘militant fallibilism’—an affirmative possibility of a redeeming of history albeit always *against the grain* and *in struggle*.⁵³ Beyond the plastic optimism of the corporate Panglosses, the politics of hope should critically engage with the intertwined global logics of colonial and capitalist combustion, racism, poverty, inequality and forms of domination that reproduce the contemporary matrices of power, and with them the differential predatory calculus of Covid.

It is true that ‘pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew’.⁵⁴ This pandemic ‘is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next’. And the choice is ours: ‘we can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it’.⁵⁵ Without collective action and imagination, neither our existential reckoning nor catastrophe alone will be sufficient to (re)compose the future. Arundhati Roy also rightly points out that ‘unlike the flow of capital, this virus seeks proliferation, not profit.’⁵⁶ But the wizards of capital never let a crisis go to waste;⁵⁷ some have seen to it that the propagation of the virus announces the glad tidings of new markets and niches for profit. This is a stark reminder that catastrophe is also a portal for power to mould the future in its image. Crises are standardly prime fields of intervention for disaster colonialism, disaster capitalism, right-wing populism and authoritarianism. We already witness the phenomenal expansion of Leviathan and the state of exception, the emergence or consolidation of virulent nationalism, authoritarianism and xenophobia and an obscene spectacle of profit accumulation in the gruesome backdrop of death and suffering.⁵⁸ The Covid crisis is also facilitating the rapid expansion of emerging cartographies of power such as digital imperialism, data colonialism and surveillance capitalism.⁵⁹ Equally, the colossus of a ‘biopolitical empire’ in gestation looms large on the horizon as the harvesting of biomedical data opens up unprecedented frontiers for empire, state power, profit and the (mis)management of life. Instead of openings into a free world, portals can also be thresholds to a precipice—portents of a descent into the abyss.

Concluding remarks

‘Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging.’ (Toni Morrison 2019).⁶⁰

We now demonstrably live in an age of anger.⁶¹ William Davies elucidates the increasing salience of anger in modern politics and describes the roles it plays in contemporary political struggles. Davis distinguishes between two varieties of anger, fast and slow. Fast anger is pre-reflexive, reactionary, and, mired in the immediacy of the moment, eludes both memory and thought. Slow anger, by contrast, is cumulative and reflective, sedimented over time through the inscription of injustices, pains and wrongs, remembered and thought.⁶² In our appropriation, fast hope is momentary eruption, pre-reflexive, apolitical and sparked by a particular circumstance. This, we contend, is by analogy the brand that most existentialist readings and current appropriations of *LP* and Camus are inclined to embrace. Slow hope, conversely, is tied to praxis: the creative work of historical memory, reflexive thought and action. What we propose for a post-Covid politics is a synergetic anchoring of anger *and* hope. It is slow anger that connects catastrophe as an objective condition and hope as political potential; anger stemming from the present wreckage, and, crucially, from an apprehension of the deep time of catastrophe, its systemic debris and variegated permutations; and hope embedded in a gloomy realism that these are bleak times, tempered by the recognition that catastrophe is historical, ‘man-made’, and, however cemented and its causes faintly traceable, its injustices, pains and cruelties can at least be mitigated, neutralized if not diachronically reversed.

Instead of exclusively dwelling on its purely existential import or an aesthetics of hope and catastrophe, a (re)reading of *LP* under Covid should reorient our gaze towards the durable lineage of administered dehumanization and dispossession in a time of a global killer pandemic. As injunctions to live with the virus multiply, the quotidian trickle-down of death and the uninterrupted, screened ‘theatre of numbers’ should not anaesthetize us into an adjustment to the banality of suffering and the soporific narrative of the great equalizer. Rather, it should ignite a militant maladjustment to the impairing matrices of disposability and systemic violence in the shadow of a virus that preys on and intensifies structural oppression. Hence the vitality of providing the language of *structural disarticulation* to think and problematize the future with a view to decolonizing it. To decolonize hope is to think it through the lens of structured catastrophe, to think it as decolonial praxis *in struggle* against the grain of ossified structural evil and suffering.

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