

The Future of the Here and Now

As a writing collective, we kept saying to ourselves that we need to think about longer arcs of time and space that consider slavery and colonialism as well as other catastrophic timelines. Some of us referred to this as celestial time, or the intergalactic environments for past-present-future thought experiments about and for the (racialized) human. We cited the literature on geological time to consider how feminist science studies reshaped the horizon of interdisciplinary humanist endeavors.

But beware! Time/space contingencies can be dangerous. They help us get beyond the here and now as ahistorical accounting, or as their own narcissistic arrival point. They also help us depart from the presentist obsession with unhinging alternative facts, such as the now ubiquitous fact check. But can time/space contingencies move us out of the current capitalist predicament of feeling pressured to consume pharmaceuticals like Adderall in order to meet the demands of imposed production schedules? *We need to finish this text today! No, really! This is the last day of the five-day sprint!*

Situated representations of space and time tell us about the deep imprints that are less than utopic. What imaginations present the planetary future, or what theorists from the UK green movement term *dark optimism*?¹ Is there no return from the nuclear weaponization of Earth? Does the plastic ocean ever expel or recover? Are dispossession and capitalism inevitable finish lines? What experiments with the end of life as we know it capture the immeasurable depth of the human's impact on the geophysical world? How far back, and how far forward, might we take our comrade's notion of "the there and then"?² The first sense in which we sought to place the here and now under erasure, then, was to mark the impossibility of thinking both with and against the urgency that necessarily convenes us.

Geo-endings and Beginnings

In a recent piece in a Bushwick gallery, the Thai artist Korakrit Arunanondchai documents the Anthropocene from the perspective of a richly textured, vast, and relentlessly dystopic landscape.³ This is a world that emerges after globalism, defined in the here and now as the logical endpoint of techno, racial, and exterminating capitalism and its planetary making of the extractive zone. The artist positions the viewer and audience within a surreal landscape that is at once filmic and performative, a disturbing display of the inhuman apocalyptic. In this ruinous and shadowy complex imaginary, the products of capitalism do not neatly melt into another form, as recycled or upcycled debris from the condition of disaster turned into a better, green, or even “sustainable” capitalism. Biomatter does not grow back and thrive to take back the urban metropolis. The artist instead points us to how global waste systems have become overfilled with our technomateriality, the infrastructure of our digital lives, the overreaching of our personal and corporate material desires. Whose gunky and excessive materiality must reside somewhere? Whose land becomes the dumping ground, pilgrim?

In Arunanondchai’s filmic world there is at least the possibility of cruel optimism: images of Buddhist simplicity abound, the verdant leafiness of new potential, a living sea, and the natural life of an elderly woman—the artist’s grandmother perhaps? She seems to live a peaceful and healthful life as she wanders through the garden, cruelly setting us within the garden before the subsequent performance of an “unnatural” death of racial toxicity. The film produces a sequence of images where geographies of violence are visualized as militarized spaces of a present-future ruin. The video focuses on Hong Kong human rights movements, death in the streets against the constant threat of the nuclear option. Toward the end of a thirty-minute film, we see bodies in motion amid hellish worlds and then a live performance.

Future Beingness

What Arunanondchai’s work inhabits and makes palpable is another ending, and a beginning, a toxic, radioactive, and bleak terra, where only two figures survive: the super-rat that evolves into a bare cyborg forever condemned to be painfully hooked into a machine apparatus ten times his size, and a super-human (also known as the performer Boychild) whose Marvel-like body emerges from the ruin through a painful dance of ripping muscles and pulsations that pull the human body apart into some other cyborg form. In this new world the future is captured in sonic reverberations of techno-harp music, the backdrop that haunts the condition of that which remains.

Arunanondchai works with dirt, asphalt, shells, smoke, and green lights to create a dark afterlife of capitalist destruction, where only these two characters are left on a dying planet. They move with the extraordinary agency of only those who have lived and survived a rough and tortured life. In some ways this is a postgender world: “It has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness,” as Donna Haraway put in the “Cyborg Manifesto.”⁴ Arunanondchai’s setting becomes visible only after the film and half-hour performance have ended. As Boychild’s monstrous yet luminous naked body writhes, muscle groups autonomously fight themselves in a war within, an increasingly rapid paced centrifugal force that culminates with jaw-dropping back bends and downward dog positions that reveal a tautly defined skeletal frame. Toxicated flesh gleams in the luminous traces of caca-colored paint thickly spread all over their body.

At the end of an enchanting yet pained performance, “the last one standing” moves into a backlit room. Matrix-like sentinels hang on the wall in gigantic proportion. Orange and blue glass globes flash with the dystopic signs of a civilization gone mad. The thick and heavy traces of machinery do not simply fall apart or upcycle into something new, but leave a damning impact upon the landscape that will not go away for at least seven generations. The asphalt comes to stand in for the process: an ocean at its point of death, a petroleum-filled hardened surface whose representation of capitalist afterlives destabilizes what we know and how we understand the Anthropocene. Arunanondchai revises the Anthropocene’s categories of difference.

For our own project in *Social Text*, we write to imagine the future into being within its own longer arcs of space and time. There appears to be nowhere else to go but the planetary here and now. What will become of it? What will become of us? And if we are seeking to unseat Man and the subject as the protagonist, what other avatars might we fabulate?

Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See “How This Text Was Written” (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. See the writings of David Fleming in *Lean Logic*.
2. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.
3. #FFFFFF Walls, “Korakrit Arunanondchai—Bushwick.”
4. Haraway, “Cyborg Manifesto,” 292.

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