

Introduction

DEBARATI SANYAL

In the wake of shattering events—slavery, colonial conquest, occupation, war, dictatorship, apartheid, genocide—critical responses oriented by the quest for justice have tended to focus on recovering histories from suppression, revision, or oblivion. The imperative to remember often drives disciplinary studies to “articulate the past” as “the way it really was,” in Walter Benjamin’s words, or to enshrine particular national or ethno-cultural histories as objects of recovery.¹ But to retrieve distinct pasts, like so many relics, is not the same thing as to understand temporality as a changing, many-stranded, and *entangled* phenomenon. To think of time as entanglement is to attend to history’s vitality, its pulse, its ruptures, its untimely returns. It is “to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”² Entanglement asks us to probe intimacies between histories of violence, injury, and loss, to acknowledge alliances forged beyond specific times and spaces in the pursuit of justice. The recognition of contact—between pasts, places, races, selves—not only reveals connections between structures and legacies of violence; it also discloses forms of persistence and resistance across them. Entanglement orients us toward the links between regimes and events without collapsing them into so many iterations of the same catastrophe. Far from the linear thrust of imperial time, and the relentless returns of traumatic time, the time of entanglement is, in Achille Mbembe’s formulation, “not a series but an interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other pasts, presents, and futures.”³ Entanglement asks us to see temporality as an interplay of pasts, presents, and futures, where none of these terms are given, but emerge in relation to one another. The connections between these seemingly disparate times are enacted according to competing political projects, from rehearsals of postcolonial melancholy to summons of a democracy to come.

CRITICAL TIMES | 2:3 | DECEMBER 2019

DOI 10.1215/26410478-7862509 | © 2019 Debarati Sanyal

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0).

347

How do we establish the contours of an event? When does one time end and another begin? How do we conceptualize a history's afterlives, imagine its long shadow, listen for its echoes within the accelerating pace of our own political time? The term *aftermath* indicates a causal relationship, the consequence of what is usually a harmful event. Aftermath thus conveys the ongoing-ness of an event even when, strictly speaking, it has ceased to be. In agriculture, since the fifteenth century, aftermath refers to the second "math" or cutting down of grass within a same season.⁴ It also designates new growth after the initial mowing of the grass. The word carries within it the idea of time's resistance to the clean cut and smooth mow of linear historical narrative and the politics it serves. The math of aftermath conveys the intrusion of the past into the present in uncanny returns, the repetition of history as farce or as more tragedy, as more seasons in hell. But the return of the "math" also conveys the emergence and persistence of life forms and practices that resist such violent harvest. Aftermath points paradoxically toward future possibility.

Entanglements and aftermaths ask us what critical theory means, and does, in the shadow of the violent dispossession of human beings, an event that is as foundational as it is recurrent. Today, civil war, occupation, forced migration, statelessness, techno-surveillance, and the rise of authoritarian ethno-nationalisms around the globe raise urgent questions about the place and form of critique itself. The essays and creative pieces gathered here reflect on the untimeliness of our unfolding time. They probe the enmeshment, repercussions and returns of slavery, empire, colonial extraction, apartheid, and genocide, those legacies of racialized violence that have drawn thresholds of humanity and biologized the species as "assemblages of the human, the not-quite human, and the nonhuman."⁵ As reflections on the contemporary orders of political time, these essays seek to rupture the veneer of ineluctability with which the present so often delivers itself. Their conceptual frameworks, archives, and creative interventions negotiate continuities and ruptures between a history or event and its aftermath, offering the possibility of remembering—and also of imagining—"otherwise."

"Coding Time," by David Theo Goldberg, takes up the conjunction of technology, security, and racism, an entanglement that recurs throughout this issue. Goldberg argues that algorithms remake human conceptions of time and memory as they anticipate, surveil, and securitize the social, thereby restricting the sphere of the political. The temporality of the algorithm is at once predictive and determinative; its patterned and patterning forces are world-making. Algorithmic time turns past, present, and future into so many manufactured "future presents," in which threats are neutralized preemptively. In a culture of risk-management, the algorithm is a "hyper-discriminating machine"; its anticipatory surveillance perpetuates racial biases, but invisibly. If techno-capitalism programs people to pursue the

means of their own instrumentation into products, techno-surveillance consigns others to the “dead time” of illegality, encampment, or deportation. As AI, informatics, and big data redefine what it means to be human, Goldberg adumbrates an algorithmic ontology that refuses the human-technology divide, but that also parts ways with theories of the posthuman.

Within such emerging configurations, what archives can we draw on to imagine antiracist, transcontinental solidarity? In a searing indictment of surveillance capitalism, the alt-right, Afro-pessimism, and the collapse of the antiracist movement into “neoliberal diversity speak,” Paul Gilroy summons the rhythms and sounds of the Black Atlantic as a resource against algorithmic rationality and neo-fascist temporality. “Rhythm and the Force of Forces” diagnoses the complicity of corporations with social media, big data, and AI in the manufacture of mass sentiment and the erosion of left, antiracist critique. Our current political culture and its media ecology freight prior legacies of conquest, extraction, enslavement and mass manipulation. To disrupt the repetitions of history and the acceleration of technopolitics, Gilroy invokes the *rhythm* of Black Atlantic music. In what is also an homage to the late Hugh Masekela, renowned South African anti-apartheid jazz musician, Gilroy returns to the 1970s, when music (such as Rock Against Racism) mobilized against racism and moved political movements. The essay conveys lessons from the archive of the Black Atlantic soundscape and its diasporas—an archive of play, ritual, remembrance, cultural resistance, and revolutionary hope that cultivated a distinctive temporality and register of attention. With its face-to-face encounters, creole modernisms, and unruly embodiments, Black Atlantic music and musicking instantiated a temporality of slowness, even of suspension, that opened the possibility of living in common and “acting in concert.”⁶

The slowness and even suspension of time that Gilroy recovers in Masekela’s music also features in Vilashini Cooppan’s essay “Time Maps: A Field Guide for the Decolonial Imaginary.” Whereas Gilroy maps the restorative fantasies of authoritarian populism (“make something great again”), Cooppan tracks the forward-looking temporalities of nation-state formation and imperialism. She notes the persistence of Eurochronology—or history’s map drawn according to the linear time of empire and nation-state—in the colonial *and* postcolonial imaginary, including in theorizations of world literature according to a global literary system organized around a “Greenwich meridian of literature.” “Time Maps” offers an alternate, decolonial map of time, one developed through figures that crisscross the archives of visual art (William Kentridge), literature (Joseph Conrad and V. S. Naipaul), and personal history. For Cooppan, as for Gilroy, critical theory will not suffice for us to confront the residues of empire and their violent temporalities. If political time, as a time of critique, is to be *lived*, it must “take its pulse” from arts that convey the “kinetic, ludic, and insurgent” forces of bodies and affects. In

an echo of Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to "provincialize Europe," Cooppan wonders what it would mean to "provincialize political time." Inspired by her South African ancestry and the Indian Ocean's ecology, she proposes the temporality of an "oceanic soft time" as an alternative to both the repetitions of trauma and the progressive time of empire.

Marianne Hirsch and Debarati Sanyal address the experience of time in forced migration, statelessness, and exile. Those whose lives are ravaged by displacement, detention, or deportation can be seen to inhabit zones of indistinction and symbolic death, as David Theo Goldberg observes in "Coding Time." Yet if migration/refugee studies, and critical theory more generally, tend to posit the recognition of citizenship as the only framework for a livable life, Hirsch and Sanyal ask how the refugee, as a figure that "unhinges the old trinity of nation/state/territory," also embodies, practices, and materializes alternate political imaginaries.⁷

In "Stateless Memory," Marianne Hirsch moves from her personal history as a stateless person to visual works by Mirta Kupferminc and Wangechi Mutu that gesture toward counter-national forms of community and belonging. "Stateless memory" is a form of remembrance, transmission, and vision emerging from within the anguish of displacement, un-belonging and transience. Inspired by Hannah Arendt's "right to have rights," which is a performative conjuring of what does not yet exist, Hirsch envisions stateless memory as a practice of imagination that summons a common political world. Like Gilroy's consideration of music as suspension, Hirsch identifies moments of temporal arrest, suspensions in the aesthetic experience that interrupt the historical recurrence of expulsion and statelessness (Kupferminc) and global capitalism's logic of accumulation and waste (Mutu). Reminiscent of Cooppan's "oceanic time," these artists offer a feminist, connective map of counter-monumental memories, fragile embodiments, and resistant imaginaries that hint towards alternate distributions of power.

Sanyal's "Humanitarian Detention and Figures of Persistence at the Border" examines the detention of children in the name of care at Europe's outer borders. New technologies of surveillance and detention have turned borders into battlegrounds that redraw the boundaries of the species itself, reinscribing racist, concentrationary, and colonial histories. But with technology's anticipatory surveillance (addressed by Goldberg), and under humanitarian governance, the illegalized body is both a security threat *and* a life to be secured. The refugee child is an exemplary site for this contradictory operation. Sanyal examines the paradoxical logic of humanitarian detention through the visual rhetoric of the refugee "crisis" and turns to *Blue Sky from Pain*, an experimental short film on abandoned camps at the Greek-Turkish border that documents arts of memory, persistence, dissidence, and revolt within detention. Challenging dominant visions of the subject of human rights and the object of humanitarian compassion, the film stages

the Möbius twists by which a space of abjection can momentarily become a political space of emergence and rebellion.

In a similar vein, Elsadig Elsheik's dispatch on Sudan raises the question of humanitarian and military intervention under the guise of care, especially when the "crises" that these interventions address are in fact the long aftermaths of imperial pasts. In "Sudan after Revolt: Reimagining Society, Surviving Vengeance," Elsheik reports on the aftermath of the popular uprising that deposed Omar Al-Bashir in December 2018. The International Criminal Court had indicted Al-Bashir for war crimes and crimes against humanity in 2009, seeking to impose punitive, retributive justice in the name of the responsibility to protect. The dispatch traces the Darfur conflict back to the British colonial administration's racialization of the region's inhabitants, among other factors that would lead to subsequent civil wars. Instead of an interventionist, retributive justice enmeshed within colonial legacies, Elsheik calls for a "survivor's justice" from within that aims for peace, reconciliation, and comprehensive reform.

The confluence of times, the tasks of critique and the commitment to justice are preoccupations central to the creative pieces that appear in the issue. As Bouchra Khalili indicates in the artist statement, the video installation *The Tempest Society* was inspired by an agitprop theater group of immigrant factory workers and French students in the aftermath of May 1968. Khalili resurrects this collaboration and resituates it at Europe's contemporary borders, turning the theatrical stage into a political platform for refugees and undocumented workers to claim rights and forge solidarities.

Finally, "PAN: A Performance Lecture" by Jane Taylor returns us to the questions of technology, race, embodiment, and thresholds of the human with which the issue opens. At once an essay, a lecture, and a puppetry performance, "PAN" stages an improbable crossroads in intellectual history between early primate research, race theory, artificial intelligence, and literature. In the early to mid-twentieth century, primatology "looks . . . at cybernetics; and Artificial Intelligence gazes back," in a confounding reciprocity that "calls for a deliberate dissection of the various skeins of thought." Yet another figure for the temporality of entanglements and aftermaths taken up by the issue, these skeins are unspooled into a prehistory of the current juncture of technology and race, as addressed in the essays by Goldberg on algorithmic reason and algo-being, Gilroy on big data and new racism, and Sanyal on biometrics at the border. "PAN" considers the lines between apes, humans, and machines that were drawn and contested by biology and engineering, primatology and early cybernetics, through the slippery distinction between feedback and insight. In the puppetry performance, the puppet of an ape is animated by an interracial pair of puppeteers and actors who also take on the personae of Jane Goodall, Samuel Beckett, and Franz Kafka's ape, with Taylor lecturing off to the

side (as shown in the photos). An ethical meditation on the thresholds of empathy, where the wooden puppet of a chimpanzee can invite the projection of a humanity denied to racialized “others,” “PAN” also stages a dissociation of the human into a clustered, cross-racial “being multiple.” Taylor’s piece recapitulates this issue’s engagement with the entanglements and aftermaths of historical violence, and with the recovery—or creation— of alternate archives that unleash their critical force in an unfolding present.

DEBARATI SANYAL is professor of French at the University of California, Berkeley. The author of *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (2006) and *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (2015), she is currently completing a project on testimony, cultural form, and the refugee “crisis.”

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Sarah Nuttall, with whom I co-convoked a conference at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WiSER) in Johannesburg, South Africa, titled “Entanglements and Aftermaths: Reflections on Memory and Political Time,” and whose thoughts are woven through this introduction. Several of the essays here emerged from this conference.

Notes

1. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 247.
2. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 247.
3. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 83–84.
4. I am indebted to Ross Chambers’s articulation in *Untimely Interventions*: “The word aftermath, then, although it is regularly taken to refer to the sequential relation of a cause to its consequences, can also be taken to signal a strange dedifferentiation of the received categories that divide time into past, present, and future and make cause and consequence distinguishable” (xxii).
5. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 43.
6. See Butler, “Acting in Concert.”
7. Agamben, “We Refugees,” 117.

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. “We Refugees.” *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 49, no. 2 (1995): 114–19.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn. London: Pimlico, 1991.
- Butler, Judith. “Acting in Concert.” In *Undoing Gender*, 1–16. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Chambers, Ross. *Untimely Interventions: Aids Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.
- Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Weheliye, Alexander. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.