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The pandemic present

Since the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, past events and future plans have collapsed into successive moments of uncertainty. Hundreds of thousands may die from this virus. Countless others could become casualties of collapsing economies. Governments implement measures by the day, then push them back week by week. Financial markets nose dive and then recover, so fourth-quarter gains look like first-quarter losses – but only if you sell. Disease models forecast the year ahead but must adjust by the day to account for the test results from the week prior that arrive a week later.

As we try to catch up to this emerging reality, and evaluate risk within a culture of danger (Caduff 2015), experts who study pandemics say they saw this coming and knew we would be unprepared (Lakoff 2017). Yet, we find ourselves here again, asking, ‘What will this become?’ To stay with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged earth (Haraway 2016), we suggest the current pandemic and our collective response to it reveal the contemporary conditions of life, which have been and continue to be defined by gross inequities (Bear 2016). While projections change and responses adapt, the pandemic reveals these are the conditions of life now. This is the pandemic present.

It is, as it was. Pandemic response reveals what was already there. At the same moment we conjure an idealised vision of what could have been, we are forced to reckon with the fact that we failed to prepare for the present. We knew a pandemic event was coming, and we were told we would be unprepared. Only months after the Centers for Disease Control completed a simulation for a pandemic event, which revealed gross unpreparedness, we found ourselves within it. Only a year after President Trump cut the US pandemic preparedness team, we learned the nation needed it. Memories haunt. We remember the last time financial markets crashed, hurricanes swept away coastlines and fires tore across the continent. History is instructive. Past disasters tell us how markets will be managed – big businesses will be bailed out and insurance companies will not pay out.

We are here, now. Our place in time is defined by gross inequities. For those of us privileged to be in good health, have jobs and live in homes, this may be just a moment. However, for many of us, including people of colour and migrants, this pandemic could mark an end of hope, or a continuation – of organizing, of coalition-building, of resistance (Chang and Holmes 2020). While projections change and responses adapt, the pandemic reveals these are the conditions of life now. This is the pandemic present.

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