Silpa Mukherjee

<u>Notes on Living with the Disaster</u>

For the longest time I could not write (rather I did not want to write). I started conscious social distancing from the evening of March 13th. It also happens to be a Friday. Since then I *felt* several Fridays the 13th. Only when I started writing did I realize that I had conflated dates, numerals, days of the week, and sometimes the month with the kind of films that I had been watching. For three weeks I would grapple with calendar date and clock time, with *events* (mostly affective): movie titles, last opened PDFs on my laptop and phone calls, the light outside being treacherous in the Western hemisphere, it might be 8:30 PM already. The lockdown brought me face to face with the harsh reality that my every day is not very different from disaster times. In fact, I have always been bad at recollecting exact dates; it was raining heavily the day we went to Soho, my umbrella had overturned; the last time I went to Squirrel Hill Cage I was running across the street at night; when we met in NYC we had Ethiopian food, the restaurant had generic African masks on the ochre colored walls; I have always needed to *feel the skinliness of an event* to be able to register it. Very soon I started to fail, there were no events to be felt, or rather every moment was an event. The feeling of disaster dawned on me when I realized that this failure to make sense of clock and calendar time had become the world's question. At that point I decided to make an attempt at theorizing my somewhat privileged position in the comfort of my space, truncated by my newfound physio-spatial relationship with *techne* (in the Heideggerian sense of modern technology as a "mode of revealing" of the world) where time is infinitely suspended, a less than 5 foot distance between the sofa and TV separated by a coffee table: TV screen, Blu-ray player, HDMI cable, Mac adapter, Echo, multiple remotes,

chargers and extensions, phone, and laptop, the world being served to my senses through the ambient noise of news, Spotify podcasts, Amazon playlists, and curated movie platforms.

A lingering fear is that the post lockdown world will never be the same again, our lives are going to be more constrained and more virtual than ever before. Borders will harden and along with that comes the impossible fear that I will never be able to go home again. With the virus constantly mutating, the crisis mutates and so does the world and the way we picture the world. Something changed with one particular news report from the lockdown measures taken in India. It was not the lockdown per se but the ramifications that an unpremeditated total shutdown of the economy and social spaces might have for the country's vast numbers of poor migrants who live in squatter settlements in urban areas and live primarily out of daily wage-based livelihoods. I wanted to write this paper as a speculative fiction addressing coronavirus as a disaster, to read disaster as mutation and migration. Although the current situation is more easily fathomable as a fantasy fiction than an academic response paper, I am not cheerful enough to begin writing fiction yet.

I must have seen close to a hundred movies since the Spring break; moving swiftly from one genre to another, one filmmaker to another. However, all the titles I saw *felt* similar in tone and affect possibly because of the way that I have been consuming them, rabidly and hopelessly, sometimes like an addict, sometimes like a sociopath. I must acknowledge that I did not have much the appetite for "positive," "lighthearted," "feel good" titles and genres. A day of watching only classical Hollywood musicals made me anxious, desperate, and despairing as I realized that I had wasted a whole month not working towards my project. It is interesting how the reception of film genres mutates depending on the circumstances of their consumption. A heady dose of Italian *giallo* films made by Dario Argento and Mario Bava in the 1970s and 1980s; a lot of

American underground and B movies of the 1950s and 1960s; regular re-watching of David Cronenberg films; some contemporary auteurs like Gaspar Noe and Zhang Zhen and even more recent, Diao Yinan and Bong Joon-Ho kept me floating through the rhizome of the disaster.

Recently (a word that no longer makes any sense to someone who has lost all temporal anchors) two films, *Bacurau* (Brazil, Kleber Mendonca Filho, 2020) and *The Platform* (Spain, Galder Gaztelu-Urrutia, 2020) released for online streaming due to the shutdown of theaters, narratively addressed the disaster with ruthless clarity and force. In both films, the spaces in which they are located had already faced the disaster in some way and are also secretly aware of the fact that it never stopped happening. Bacurau (meaning nighthawk) is a village in future Brazil's backcountry which cannot be located on satellite maps and where cellphone networks fail. The people engage in ritual pill popping and rationing of bootlegged medicines, a village under literal lockdown as water supply and roadways are cut off by regional gang wars. At the same time, the villagers are secretly prepared for something worse, as coffins are readied, booby traps set up, machetes sharpened as gun totting white neoliberal tourists arrive in Bacurau with their flying saucer like surveillance devices aiming to kill the natives.

The Platform on the other hand is conceptualized around the titular platform, a mobile food distribution system moving along the vertical axes of an endlessly deep vertical carceral space called "The Hole" (although some people chose to be a part of it), is a scathing response to prolonged periods of human isolation and rationing of food across socio-economic hierarchies. One does not know if there could have been a fair distribution had the cellmates at the upper levels taken only the food they needed. As one would expect, they plunder the platform, and leave little for those at lower levels, forcing them to either starve or stoop to inhuman tendencies. The film instead spends a bulk of its energies in staying with the mental landscape of the

protagonist, Goreng, a cellmate who constantly prepares to sometimes create solidarities across the levels and sometimes to dodge predatory behaviors of his cellmates.

The two films were peddled as "essential viewing during COVID-19 pandemic", "perfect parable for a pandemic", and "Quarantine Cinema."[i] My experience of being a spectator of these two films along with several others resonates with my reading of two recent theoretical propositions. The first comes from a series of metaphors: "sympoiesis" (collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries), mourning and grief (mourning as a way of developing response-ability and grief as a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying, together enabling us to live with a loss), and "alignment" (borrowed from Latour's logic of articulating assemblages through situated work and play in chaos, "a relentless reliance on the material-semiotic trope of trials of strength") offered by Donna Haraway's tentacular thinking.[ii] Haraway proposes a speculative fiction/science fiction/scientific fantasy/speculative fabulation around tentacular thinking or what she characterizes as "staying with the trouble". As a challenge to the capitalist, racist, neocolonial, neoliberal, sexist regime of the Anthropocene and *anthropos* and *capital*, she proposes "chthulucene" where all sorts of temporalities and materialities fuse and multispecies beings with their companion species are connected to one another and "live together" and "die together".[iii] The chthulucene is what she calls "a rich worlding", one that eschews futurism and invests in the eternal presentness, stays with the trouble by making "oddkin".[iv] Drawing on the ancient spider "chthulu" Haraway notes: "The Chthulucene does not close in on itself; it does not round off; its contact zones are ubiquitous and continuously spin out loopy tendrils."[v] Tentacular thinking is premised on the idea that "we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost

piles."[vi] In staying with trouble, one is entangled and worldly and "play string figures with companion species."[vii]

The second theoretical proposition that I wish to draw upon is offered by Christina Sharpe in her work *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, where wake is, first of all, a metaphor and a methodology for talking about the legacy of chattel slavery and structural inequalities of everyday life. As a conceptual prism, however, "wake" is much more than that. In the wake of so many "ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people," Sharpe argues that black death is a foundational aspect of American citizenship.[viii] I'm especially drawn to her nuanced position on trans-Atlantic slavery as a disaster that has never ceased; whereby "wake work" is to labor within the moment of structural injustice and black exclusion and to acknowledge that moment as an embodied and material fragment that survived slavery's afterlives and will continue to exist. Her book "looks…to current quotidian disasters in order to ask what, if anything, survives…insistent black exclusion." She stresses that "to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding."[ix] Quite similar to Haraway's notion of seeking the "collective", "kinship", and "tentacular" while emphasizing the importance of mourning in the chthulucene, Sharpe's wake is a problem of and for thought. She posits *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* as a work that "insists and performs that thinking needs care ("all thought is Black thought") and that thinking and care need to stay in the wake."[x]

Today, in a moment of utmost [un]certainty, as Anthony Fauci, the director of National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, announces: "We will have coronavirus in the fall…I am convinced of that because of the degree of transmissibility that it has, the global nature. What happens with that will depend on how we're able to contain it when it occurs…", staying with

trouble and in the wake seem be to essential ways of world picturing.xi In the gross absence of a foreseeable positive near future, one of the key modes of world picturing will entail ways of living together through a disaster, in conversation with each other, sharing experiences and knowhow, and building new kinds of global solidarities.

To do so we need to revisit the two iterations of disaster that shape this paper. The first was a derivative of tentacular thinking which enables us to see disaster as mutation. One of the fears associated with coronavirus is that it mutates faster and in ways that cannot be anticipated. The shape shifting virus is thus potentially resistant to any vaccine or antibody. An article states that a research group in Zhejiang University who tested a pool of patients found mutations that were earlier not reported.xii These mutations could create strains deadlier than others capable of substantially changing its pathogenicity; it could affect how severely the virus caused disease or damage in its host. Another article notes research done by National Changhua University of Education in Taiwan in collaboration with Murdoch University in Australia suggests that the constant mutation of the coronavirus means the vaccine will need periodic tests and updates, adding that a coronavirus strain isolated in India carried a mutation that could upend vaccine development around the globe.xiii In the slums of India, where testing facility is nonexistent and the standard of living extremely poor, the scale of the pandemic (driven by the wild forms that the virus can mutate into) could lead to a humanitarian crisis which would remain unknown to the rest of the world. This disaster mutation which forces us to stay with the trouble resonates with Donna Haraway's focus on biological networks and the way biotechnology constructs bodies. McKenzie Wark refers to Haraway as a Marxist investing commodity fetishism with a commodity that has labor but also chimerical objects.xiv Haraway insists on including nonhuman actors in what would be an otherwise relentlessly human category of that-which-labors. "The

actors are not all 'us.'"[xv] Her cyborg theory of hybrids explodes the already wobbly partition between object and subject, nature and culture, apparatus and labor. In a moment of coronavirus, it might be productive to engage with this mutating virus as one where the ultimate "lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints".[xvi] The world question that begs to be asked is what happens as the world continues to stay with the mutating virus. Tony D. Sampson and Jussi Parikka note that viruses are largely judged in negative terms; mistakes, spanners in the works, bugs in the system, diseases, malfunctions, irregularities. However, one needs to reflect on the virus's relationship vis-à-vis the host. Viruses are rarely purely destructive phenomena at constant war "with the forces of logos or the state, lively irregularities capable of interrupting and destabilizing a world of conformity".[xvii] Parikka's cybernetic language here begins to echo Haraway's sentiments of tentacular thinking. Being so thoroughly entangled with the lives of their hosts makes it almost impossible to judge viruses as anything other than vital elements of the systems they traverse. Will COVID-19 eventually become a retrovirus, an integral part of the human genome which would have threatened the body at one time but now is simply part of the code?

　　　　The second iteration of disaster that I ruminate upon is disaster as migration or migration fueled by disaster, migration as a necessary condition of disaster —thus the relationship and possible interchangeability of the categories of "mutation" and "migration." Is the pandemic positing mutation as a form of migration? This idea was born of a widely shared image on social media *in the wake* of largescale forced migration, violence, hunger, and death of millions of migrant workers in India who are forced to walk on foot for over thousands of miles without food as they try to return *home*. The image is an artwork by Moustafa Jacoub titled

`Syrian Exile' depicting a mildly diagonal bloodied razor blade hung on a barbed wire like clothes drying on a line. Against the scorching heat of the sun, a group of five (reproduced from a well-known photograph of a family fleeing their home during the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947) walk over the blade carrying their belongings, as if walking on the tightrope to a metaphorical and figurative homeland. The diagonal is symbolic of the journey above, to heaven, and thus dying on the way to the homeland. The image is a testimony to the ongoing global refugee crisis. What struck me is its appropriation to articulate one's feelings about the unique ramifications of the pandemic in India. One particular user who shared this image on Facebook writes: "Syrian exile by Moustafa Jacoub. The huge number of transient migrant workers in India who are suddenly left with no gainful employment, no support, no wages, zero resources, zero transportation to walk back to their homes thousands of miles away. They are poor, born malnourished, extremely vulnerable to the virus, and they are forced to walk on foot carrying all that they have in the world. There are hordes of migrants on the roads of urban India now." Another writes: "As we sit in our homes, safely washing hands, this scene unfolds outside. Maintain six feet distance, did they say? Don't go out, did they say? Keep washing your hands, did they say?"

Stock footage and photographs of the horrors of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 that led to mass exodus of people, communal violence, and death currently surge on social media. Images in the moment of disaster work as apotropaic mnemonics; as magical figures of memory that serve as an antidote to the magical amnesia, the sleight of hand, of the postcolonial state, which makes things disappear not by keeping them out of its archives but by making them disappear within. The work of the Syrian artist in exile reminding us of the trauma of the Partition was triggered by the photographs of the migration of people as a result of the

coronavirus lockdown. The power of the photographic image to not let people forget the disasters of the past and to enable tentacular thinking in times of disaster is what occupied my thought. The comparison of the failure of the current regime with that of the leaders of 1947 registers the fact that they both indulged in gross underestimation of the visceral power of fear. The photographs are linked to deep time, capable of connecting human figures thousands of years apart. Within them are the figures of the transmission of memory beyond all possibility of human history akin to the functioning of the chthulucene.

Jussi Parikka uses a geological metaphor and methodology to understand the temporalities of such contemporary media as not just an "alternative account as concretely linked to the nonhuman earth times of decay and renewal but also to the current Anthropocene and the obscenities of the ecocrisis—or to put it in one word, the Anthrobscene."[xviii] The word "Anthrobscene," broken down would quite literally, points toward the obscenities of the Anthropocene. More than this, the term signifies a way of understanding the environmental impact of the energy intensive age caused by human production and destruction. As Parikka explains it, "environmental themes become a way to articulate a global history that offers a complementary narrative to globalization, as told through the media technological and capitalist expansion of trade, travel, and communication routes over the past centuries" as well as its "acceleration in past decades."[xix] The Anthrobscene is a mode of understanding the physical impact of humans, it is integral to capitalism's deep time on the earth from the inception of our species to the present, particularly upon the accelerated energy consumption dating from the first instances of coal mining. To map the distribution of the human species on the globe, we might abridge its explanation in Anthropocene (or Anthrobscene) climate terms—according to "The Anthrobscene logic: the North affords the Cool, the South provides the Cheap (labor)".[xx]

In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot remarks: "The disaster comes back; it would always be the disaster after the disaster—a silent harmless return whereby it dissimulates itself. Dissimulation, effect of disaster.".xxi Blanchot's oeuvre is crucial to our project of world questioning today for its provocative position on the history of disaster as an event that is never limited to a single place. Like the deep history of trauma, its proliferation of repercussions, and its exchangeability, the shock of the pandemic is auto generative and unhinged from a single place and time. It figures as an event that never finishes happening. To say the least, there is no cemented site of haunting. The journey from the Partition of undivided British India into India and Pakistan to the contemporary jungle of the most dangerous neoliberal ideas is a giant leap. For all its specificities, it is pervaded by the sense and awareness of precarity; the precarities of the afterlives of largescale displacement, migration, and violence. This enables us to rethink the world today through the lens of the past, as a microhistory of trauma and vulnerability. Blanchot again: "The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact. . .When the disaster comes upon us, it does not come. The disaster is its imminence, but since the future, as we conceive of it in the order of lived time belongs to the disaster, the disaster has always already withdrawn or dissuaded it; there is no future for the disaster, just as there is no time or space for its accomplishment."xxii

If the Partition, a planned disaster, now historical, might become an anchor of thought and articulation of present-day world questioning, the repetitive quality of the affect associated with impending disaster maps disastercene is deeply atemporal. Like every disaster, it has a microhistory on its own and is followed by public disorientation. Today, radical free market policies which benefit a few and terrorize the majority seize their moment. The Coronavirus disaster raises one world question: "What would a "new" New Deal look like?" One kind of

answer is the "pandemic profiteers," such as the CEO of Zoom, one piece of the wealth

inequality puzzle in America; "People went into the pandemic with the economic hangover from

the Great Recession."xxiii Naomi Klein recently cautioned us about a "pandemic shock doctrine"

whereby the volatile moment of shock is utilized to enrich the already unimaginably wealthy

while further fleecing the vast majority of vulnerable people.xxiv At the same time, however,

Klein reminds us of the New Deal following the Great Depression and is hopeful that the disaster

might bring in transformative change if the sensible and fair ideas designed to maintain the

health and safety of the maximum number of people are acted upon. This is the second kind of

answer to the world question posed by the virus.

[i]Garcia, Beatriz. "The unusual Brazilian thriller that the quarantine has not stopped", *Aldia*. 2020.
https://aldianews.com/articles/culture/film-television/unusual-brazilian-thriller-quarantine-has-not-stopped/58087
Placido, Dani di. "Netflix's 'The Platform' Review: The Perfect Parable For A Pandemic". *Forbes*. 2020.
https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2020/03/21/netflixs-the-platform-review-the-perfect-parable-for-a-pandemic/#10d21cd138a4

[ii] Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. London, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. pg- 5,38,41.

[iii] Ibid. pg-39.

[iv] Ibid. pg- 3,4.

[v] Ibid. pg-33.

[vi] Ibid. pg- 4.

[vii] ibid.

[viii] Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. London, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, pg- 6,7.

[ix] Ibid. pg-14.

[x] Ibid. pg-26.

[xi] Toussaint, Kristin. "American billionaires have gotten $280 billion richer since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic" *Fast Company*, 2020. https://www.fastcompany.com/90494347/american-billionaires-have-gotten-280-billion-richer-since-the-start-of-the-covid-19-pandemic?partner=rss&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=rss+fastcompany&utm_content=rss&fbclid=IwAR00qCNDa6b9OTfd7vaSTQ7x_JxHm9w86PJ1ZOS7P7RlhT2O8fOFk7ioE7U

[xii] Chen, Stephen. "Coronavirus's ability to mutate has been vastly underestimated, and mutations affect deadliness of strains, Chinese study finds", *SCMP*, 2020.

https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3080771/coronavirus-mutations-affect-deadliness-strains-chinese-study?fbclid=IwAR0dOf8UJgjdYAR0JDNZKyXcAPfly8s-mzpotpF2XYDDR4ocWNXE33kB39Q

[xiii] https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3079678/coronavirus-mutation-threatens-race-develop-vaccine

xiv Wark, McKenzie. "Blog-Post for Cyborgs—McKenzie Wark on Donna Haraway's 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' 30 years later". *Verso Books*. 2015.

xv Haraway, Donna. *A Cyborg Manifesto*. New York: Routledge, 1991. pg-466.

xvi Ibid. pg-462.

xvii Sampson, Toni., Jussi Parikka. *The Spam Book: On Viruses, Porn, and Other Anomalies From the Dark Side of Digital Culture*. Hampton Press, 2009. pg-7.

xviii Parikka, Jussi. *A Geology of Media*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. pg-44.

xix Ibid. pg-19.

xx Ibid. pg-25.

xxi Blanchot, Maurice. Trans. Ann Smock. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Lincoln and London: University of Nesbraska Press. 1995. pg-8.

xxii Ibid. pg-1,2.

xxiii Toussaint, Kristin. "American billionaires have gotten $280 billion richer since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic". *Fast Company*, 2020. https://www.fastcompany.com/90494347/american-billionaires-have-gotten-280-billion-richer-since-the-start-of-the-covid-19-pandemic?partner=rss&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=rss+fastcompany&utm_content=rss&fbclid=IwAR00qCNDa6b9OTfd7vaSTQ7x_JxHm9w86PJ1ZOS7P7RlhT2O8fOFk7ioE7U

xxiv From "Coronavirus Capitalism": Naomi Klein's Case for Transformative Change Amid Coronavirus Pandemic on *Democracy Now*, 2020.
https://www.democracynow.org/2020/3/19/naomi_klein_coronavirus_capitalism