

How does the virus make you feel?

By Micol Bez

Micol Bez is currently teaching in the CPES (Cycle Pluridisciplinaire d'Études Supérieures) at the University of Paris Sciences and Letters. She is a graduate of the École Normale de Paris. Her research focuses on race and whiteness in post-kantian philosophy and on the political uses of the quasi-transcendental. She is working currently on sexual violence and on phenomenological approaches to fear in sexual abuse. Originally from Italy, she did her undergraduate work at Georgetown University, and has studied at Sciences Po, the University of Paris VIII Vincennes-Saint Denis, and the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (Kingston University London) before entering the École Normale Supérieure in 2016. She is also a published poet, playwright, and dedicated teacher. In 2019 she taught as a temporary lecturer at the University of Johannesburg.

Bez, Micol. "How does the virus make you feel?" *Living with Plagues: New Narratives for a World in Distress*, Buffett Institute for Global Affairs, (2020), doi: [10.21985/n2-5n76-bz44](https://doi.org/10.21985/n2-5n76-bz44)

Copyright © 2020 Micol Bez. Licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) (CC BY NC ND 4.0)

I struggled to find the thread, logical or narrative, to talk about the virus and the experience — perhaps still too raw — of the multiple modalities in which it has fashioned our lives, our relations, and our subjectivities. In thinking about this problem of method, I kept running into the same question, not even my own, actually, but somebody else's question, which framed my own thinking. It was Anne Cvetkovich who asked it, three or four years ago, during a writing workshop in Belgrade: how does capitalism make you feel? The simplest of questions, naïve even, but one which opened up a new critical vocabulary for me. In order to understand the hold of power over the subject, Cvetkovich said, we must catalog its feelings: trace the intimate geography of the collective affects and political feelings that this power generates, as well as those it makes impossible and unlivable. I asked myself then: what are the feelings of my generation, of those who live, grow, and plan on the brink of extinction? What are the affects of generational politics, what does it mean to resent the "parents" who have left us with futureless ruins, economic precarity, and environmental disaster? And how does it feel to say "I don't

want to have children, you know, because of climate change” – what loneliness is in this sentence that keeps rolling out of the mouths of my dearest friends? Is that political loneliness? How do we feel as a generation, as a country, as a people? Do states have feelings? Does Greece feel betrayed by Europe? Did America become depressed after Trump’s election?¹

If thinking about the virus has meant, for me, going back to this critical register, it is in part because there is direct continuity between the questions of the feelings of capital and those raised by the virus, but also because, at this early stage of reflection, with the wound still open, questions of feelings may be the only kind of questions that I feel capable of answering. So, what I propose is not a thread, narrative or logical, that we need to retrieve, to make sense of, or to account for the phenomenon of the virus, but rather a libidinal center, to which we need to find an access point; in other words, we must ask ourselves: how does the virus make us feel? What new feelings does it produce and what old feelings does it awaken? What feelings does it outlaw or make impossible?

Let us start with what is most pressing and, paradoxically, what is most universally shared: solitude. We have been alone. Maybe, for the first time, we have all been alone. We have been all alone, or better, we have been alone together, at the same time, collectively, even if, of course, under very different conditions. It has been a complex form of loneliness, which could become a source of despair and abandonment, but also a declaration of love, solidarity, and protest. In his seminar *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida addresses the paradoxical features of loneliness that are precisely the ones I would like to discuss in this short essay:

Meditate on the abyss of such a sentence: I am alone with you, with you I am alone, alone in all the world. Because we’re always talking about the world, when we talk about solitude. (...) I am alone with you in the world. That could be either

¹ Cf. Anne, Cvetkovich, *Depression: a public feeling*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2012.

the most beautiful declaration of love or the most discouraging despair-inducing testimony, the gravest attestation or protestation of detestation, stifling, suffocation itself.

Solitude implicates the world, says Derrida, and what we have experienced is exactly that: the loss of the world, the disappearance of the possibility of a natural non-reflexive relationship to the world-for-living. It is not even just about the loss of the material world. Suddenly “the world has become unheimlich, bizarrely unsettling and devoid of its familiarity,”² What we lost was the world as a complex structure of relational meaning-making experiences. The naturalness of our touch, gestures, activities, and projects was disrupted as distance and anxiety turned into the organizing principles of the social. I have been alone and world-less, I could not write anymore because I was without world. I have been alone and incapable of reaching my loved ones. I have been alone, without the places and activities of my life. But most of all, I have been alone without appeal and without support; one crosses the threshold of suffocation here, at the point where the political and social world abandons us.

In the last months we have known — or reencountered — solitude, abandonment, and suffocation. But we must qualify the nature of such feelings. If, on the one hand, we are forced to recognize their extraordinary nature, on the other, let us admit, we haven’t breathed in a long time, and we were abandoned long ago. Political abandonment, the awareness of the utter lack of any social protection, precarity as the structure of subjectivity — these are not new feelings. The virus has shown us the abysses of a political solitude that we already knew all too well and all too intimately: a dispossession of the world as a place of futurity and sociality, as a place of flourishing and protection for human life. If suffocation has become the

² E. Illouz, « L’insoutenable légèreté du capitalisme vis-à-vis de notre santé, par Eva Illouz », *Nouvelobs*, 23 mars 2020 , <https://www.nouvelobs.com/idees/20200323.OBS26443/l-insoutenable-legerete-du-capitalisme-vis-a-vis-de-notre-sante-par-eva-illouz.html>. Translation of the author.

governing symbol of our era, it is because it doesn't mark an event but a systemic condition. It is truly the feeling of our time, the affect that cuts across and binds together virus, precarity, racism, and police violence. The crisis has exposed the normally silent and hidden structures of contemporary suffocation. I could not locate the beginning of this feeling even if I tried. But I am sure it was not in February. "The virus of suffocation"³ is not that new.

We haven't breathed in a long time – here is a shared feeling and a possible basis for multiple solidarities. This is another paradox of our solitude that Derrida's text exposes: we have been alone with others, like never before, we have all been alone together, at the same time, in a radically and painfully shared manner. What new forms of solidarity and resistance emerge from this shared solitude? The task at hand is not merely to trace how the political constructs our affects, but also to recognize the political and radical potential of our feelings. We must ask how our intimacies can disrupt, displace and alter the modes of power, following Audre Lorde's plea for a "disciplined attention to the true meaning of 'it feels right to me'" as the condition of possibility of resistance and revolutionary politics.⁴ We haven't breathed in a long time, yes, but, as the last few months have taught us, nobody breaths alone. I am suffocating with you, I am alone with you, and that could be either the most beautiful declaration of love or the ground for fierce contestation. See the streets and harbors, they attest to collective suffocation but also shared respiration. Let us stop and listen to suffocation, for nine minutes, at least, as dock workers on the West Coast did in the memory of George Floyd.⁵ Nine minutes, enough time to suffocate but also, perhaps, to regain the breath of solidarity.

³ D. Di Cesare, *Virus Sovrano? L'asfissia capitalistica*, Bollati Boringhieri Editore, Torino, 2020, p. 9

⁴ Audre, Lorde, "Poetry is not a luxury", in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Berkeley, Crossing Press Feminist Series (1984), p. 57.

⁵ This symbolic nine minute protest was followed by massive mobilization by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). Today, on June 19th, members of the ILWU shut down all ports along the West coast from Alaska to San Diego in solidarity with the ongoing protests over the

These are the paradoxes of solitude, abandonment, and suffocation I would like to explore in this short text, starting with a few quarantine stories. Personal stories, which belong to me in the sense that they have traversed me intimately, because, like for many of us, my confinement took place at the border, in relational non-places: online, on WhatsApp, between three continents, always at the crossroads of multiple solitudes — never having been, in the end, perhaps, all that lonely.

§ 1. I need you: institutional abandonment and shared vulnerability

The first article about this crisis that touched me profoundly was a brief one, written by my dear friend Jessy Simonini. In his short piece, Jessy unveils the connection between the neoliberal cuts to public healthcare that have been implemented in Italy over the last twenty years, the disappearance of a serious alternative on the left, and the current health crisis: the reason that our grandparents are dying is that we have voted badly, for too long. Or, more accurately, that we, Italians, have stopped mobilizing and engaging, that we have abandoned all ambition, all utopian horizons and political imaginaries⁶; letting twenty years of corrosive neoliberal politics demolish our healthcare system and, more fundamentally, our right to health. Let me quote the most striking passage of this article, extremely relevant to our current purposes as it critically mobilizes an affective register that resonates personally, generationally, and nationally:

*My grandfather just died, alone, in the intensive care unit of the Bologna University Hospital, in Italy. He was eighty years old. The consequences of the COVID-19 virus were fatal. But the personal is always political.*⁷

murder of George Floyd. The day of action is [slated for Juneteenth](#), the day celebrating the heralding of the emancipation proclamation to Texan slaves more than two years after the proclamation took effect in 1863.

⁶ Cf. C. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2004.

⁷ Jessy, Simonini, “Au revoir là-haut, Baffo!”, *Mediapart*, 20 March 2020, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/jessy-simonini/blog/200320/au-revoir-la-haut-baffo>

The personal is always political, says Jessy, hinting not only at the fact that political and legal actions have painful consequences within the intimacy of our homes and families, but also that the kind of families, intimacies and relating that we can have, the kind of subjects that we can be, is determined by years of political deliberations. Thus, our solitude becomes, whether with our consent or passive abstention, political loneliness. The public is never somewhere outside, we are entangled, dispossessed.⁸ The virus – this political assemblage of illness, body, and neoliberalism – showed us the paradoxical nature of vulnerability.

On the one hand, there is perpetual dread; vulnerability appears today, like never before, as a universal and defining condition of life on earth. We have all suddenly become very aware of our physical and mental vulnerability, as well as of our dependency on others. There is no I without world, without you. The virus unveiled, phenomenologically, through our narrations and intimate analyses, through our everyday experiences of confinement, the relational ontology that Judith Butler was advocating all along. We are all dependent: if you get sick, I get sick. If you fall, I fall. Your misery damages me, it threatens me, too. Your suffering is always already mine. I will fall if you don't catch me. I will catch you so that I don't fall myself, trust me. I need to trust you to wear your mask around my grandfather. But also, I need to trust you to vote better next time, for my grandfather. The pandemic calls for a paradoxical solidarity: solidarity in isolation, community in the face of the fragmentation of the social body. We need to be alone together, so close:

not touching

*but joined in astonishment as two cuts lie parallel in the same flesh.*⁹

On the other hand, the virus has brutally unveiled the intersectional structure and unequal distribution of vulnerability. It shed, borrowing Donatella Di Cesare's words,

⁸ Cf. J. Butler, *Dépossession*, Diaphanes, Paris, 2006.

⁹ A. Carson, *Autobiography or Red*, Vintage Books, New York, 1998.

a “merciless light on the social apartheid”.¹⁰ As a shared experience, vulnerability can ground profound solidarities — which have been mobilized during the pandemic — but its disproportionate effects on some lives need to be accounted for in the construction of such solidarities. Like any alleged universal, the virus knows how to discriminate: vulnerability is shared, yes, but unevenly.¹¹ The pandemic is indeed there for everyone, it is a biological matter. But its impact is uneven because of the uneven distribution of resources, protection, and care, and that is how its solitude becomes political, and turns into profound loneliness. In fact, and this is Jessie’s argument, the cuts to healthcare that neoliberal governments have operated in the last twenty years have made the Italian population vulnerable to an extent that other European governments have not. We haven’t breathed in a long time, we – here, in this institution, this nation, this class, this income bracket, this racial category – haven’t breathed in a long time. Suffocation always spreads unevenly.

We didn't have to wait long for the intersectional politics of vulnerability to manifest during the COVID crisis. We know very well that the virus has impacted black and immigrant communities in disproportionate ways, to the extent that, as Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez observed, racial inequality in the US counts as a "pre-existing condition;"¹² but we could say the same of the working class, openly sacrificed to the needs of the national economy in Europe and elsewhere — a form of crisis management that Eva Illouz called, quite poignantly, “economism”.¹³ This is one way in which politics becomes intimate, by allocating vulnerability and shaping intimate

¹⁰

¹¹ Ibid, p. 31.

¹² L. Fruen, « AOC tells The View 'inequality is a pre-existing condition' as the coronavirus ravages African American communities and says it's 'no surprise' the vulnerable are being worst hit », *DailyMail*, 15 Avril 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8222899/AOC-tells-View-inequality-pre-existing-condition.html>.

¹³ E. Illouz, « L’insoutenable légèreté du capitalisme vis-à-vis de notre santé, par Eva Illouz », *Nouvelobs*, 23 mars 2020 , <https://www.nouvelobs.com/idees/20200323.OBS26443/l-insoutenable-legerete-du-capitalisme-vis-a-vis-de-notre-sante-par-eva-illouz.html>

life and its possibilities. A friend in Italy tells me that, in the company where she works, social class literally materialized physically as distinct walking paths were established for workers and managers in order to avoid contagion –”and most managers were working from their couches anyway”. Within and between national populations, the price of the lockdown has been terribly uneven. I am thinking of my friends in South Africa, where confinement was imposed in a military fashion on a population plagued by extreme inequalities and still plunged into segregation, of which a huge part lacks even the means for subsistence. In the time of COVID, it is undeniable that vulnerability is unevenly distributed.

It may seem logical and even obvious that during a pandemic, just like on the battlefield, we must resort to triage. But who pays the price? Who remains, really, alone? Who is worth more than whom? The virus, often approached through utilitarian models of health response, disproportionately increases the vulnerability of those who are already most vulnerable: the elderly, people with disabilities, and people with preexisting conditions. To face the crisis, health institutions have adopted triage methods that, by weighing costs and benefits, discriminate against the most fragile lives: “like a skilled taxidermist”, the pandemic lifts off the skin of able-ism “to find the invidious structural armature that gives it shape and form”.¹⁴ In the United States, for example, many states have adopted utilitarian guidelines: official Washington State guidelines recommend that the limited resources be allocated only to younger and healthier people; Alabama describes people with intellectual disabilities as “unlikely candidates for ventilator support,” while Tennessee has excluded from critical care those who suffer from spinal muscular atrophy and need assistance with activities of daily living.¹⁵ Let us think of the horror

¹⁴ L. Davis, « In the Time of Pandemic, the Deep Structure of Biopower Is Laid Bare », *CriticalInquiry*, 26 Juin 2020, https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/06/26/in-the-time-of-pandemic-the-deep-structure-of-biopower-is-laid-bare/?fbclid=IwAR2S1eX3E8oxEAwDJV6bmZ57hBy2ltD7u8_cYtA4Rmo9SHCN4kljuUp4hY0.

¹⁵ Ibid.

of the most hateful sentence of this pandemic: “If I get corona, I get corona. I’m not afraid of the virus, only old and already sick people die of it”. It is when we begin to push back the thresholds of acceptability of violence, when we trivialize and even normalize such everyday thanatopolitics, that the deepest loneliness sets in — and some of us are much more alone than others.

§2. Alone without you, without world, like you: the body at the border

I write am writing this text as I travel from Chicago to Sardinia, Italy. The journey is anomalous, not only in its modalities and difficulties, but also because I did not choose my destination. I wanted to go to Montreal, where my dearest friend lies in a hospital bed. Or else I might have gone to Paris, to my home, to reconnect with the warmth of my community. Despite all this, my flight landed in Italy, where my family lives and where I will quarantine again. What matters here is that my privilege has always made it evident that I could get to a destination. My body always moved with ease between continents and within the imaginary geometry of borders. Now, the virus becomes an interruption and an epoché. It unveils the structure of our privilege, thereby allowing us to treat this privilege as something other than “natural”. For the first time I could not get where I wanted to go. For the first time I could not reach my loved ones in a moment of need or decide where I would live and shelter. This is nothing new for millions of migrants, but for me it is a novel feeling of impotence and solitude, which I think can be reversed only, I tell myself, by wondering what kind of solidarity it might engender.

I am an Italian citizen. I study in France and am paid by the French state to do research in philosophy. My institution, the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Paris, sent me to the United States as part of an exchange program to work with and meet other scholars and professors; nothing more natural, nothing more privileged. The decision was taken with a certain understanding of national borders and how they work, and with a certain understanding of the privilege that my country’s relative geopolitical power and my whiteness afford me in terms of travelling the globe

freely. I was grateful for the opportunity, and in particular for the chance to be close to Canada and my best friend who had to undergo complicated brain surgery. We had gone back and forth between Chicago and Montreal, we felt close. Then there was a pandemic and borders were closed. My relationship to geography, as well as to my body and its possibilities was disrupted. All of a sudden, Canada became inaccessible. A border materialized between me and my friend who, in January, was only a bus-ride away. A deep solitude set in, one which before now would have been absolutely unacceptable. Never. I will never leave you alone. And yet, the bar was lowered, we learned to accept the unacceptable. I am alone, without you, on my side of the border, like you on yours. After all, there is a pandemic; borders are closed.

Europe seemed shipwrecked, distant. I felt unsafe. Should I leave the States, go back home where I could count on socialized healthcare? Our embassies were urging us to repatriate. But which was my embassy, really? I was denied entry into France as it is not my official place of residence, even though I have lived there for years. Or better, I used to think of myself as living in Europe, and suddenly I was an Italian who wanted to go to France, as they became two newly distinct political spaces. Spaces and bodies were being renegotiated. I was not refused entry to France on the grounds of my nationality, as I was by Canada, since I am after all a European citizen. In order to enter France, I would have had to produce proof of residency: the ownership of a house, or a formal contract that shows that I rent an apartment and that it is my main place of residence. The criterion of residence seems therefore to constitute another form, albeit temporary, of “inscription of the native in the legal order of the nation-state”¹⁶. It renegotiates the category of the foreigner, and the way we distribute vulnerability at the frontier, through the lenses of capital.

¹⁶ G.Agamben, « We Refugees », http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Phil%20108-07/We%20Refugees%20-%20Giorgio%20Agamben%20-%201994.htm

The pandemic has engendered “acts of redefinition”¹⁷ of our notions of belonging and exclusion, which intertwine with economic asymmetries: to own an apartment or to have a long-term lease is evidently the privilege of a few, especially in Paris. Nothing new here, the right to international mobility has always been filtered through capital. Visas to Europe, the US, and the UK demand the ownership of capital as a condition of possibility and are therefore inaccessible to the majority of the world. The novelty is that we white people, we in the global north, we Europeans, have experienced these limits and these solitudes. The world is not ours anymore, there is a pandemic. We have also learned to distrust the temporary, and always mark its traces. My partner, an Italian citizen in the United States, could not join me in Italy because of Trump’s new “travel ban” – aimed at safeguarding the American people, or perhaps his re-election – which means extending this state of exception and denying, entry to visa holders deemed to constitute “a Risk to the U.S. Labor Market Following the Coronavirus Outbreak”.¹⁸ As a result, he has not been able to return to Italy, fearing that he would be unable to continue his postdoctoral program in the fall. We will meet in winter.

To continue this small catalogue of solitudes, a friend who had recently denounced a case of sexual abuse within her family was forced to return to her country of origin like I was. The political management of this global health crisis has engendered a complicated, intimate situation: since she was refused entry into France, which is where she usually lives, she was forced to return to her country of origin because her American visa had expired, and where she had to isolate for fourteen days in her family home. The border closure reconfigured her as a political subject and as a gendered subject, renegotiating her material possibilities to secure a place to live

¹⁷ N. Xenos, « Statelessness : The Making and Unmaking of Political Identity », *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms*, 1:2, 820-825, p. 823

¹⁸ Cf. « Proclamation Suspending Entry of Aliens Who Present a Risk to the U.S. Labor Market Following the Coronavirus Outbreak » du 22 juin 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspending-entry-aliens-present-risk-u-s-labor-market-following-coronavirus-outbreak/>.

and shelter, her epistemic possibilities to testify and denounce violence, and her ability to inhabit the complex forms of her multiple citizenships. The pandemic has unexpectedly redefined her privilege and her subjection, engendering new forms of solitude, abandonment, and vulnerability. The pandemic has also redefined our families, the bonds and relationships understood as legitimate, important, or even necessary, and those that quickly become impossible. My friend had to return to her “family of origin”, even though she considers Paris to be her home, and I couldn’t enter Canada because my best friend is not my sister, at least not officially. Yet another example: during Phase Two, the Italian government authorized visits to relatives through the new category of “congiunti” – not a small group of people freely chosen by each citizen, but a group defined by predetermined categories of natural kinship.

We have seen the emergence of new modalities of inscription of nativeness at the border and of kinship within the social order. The virus, with its many channels of circulation through regimes of neoliberal governance, has established a number of new discourses, material anchors, and ontological domains that limit our understanding of what is possible, of what a subject can be and what kind of relations it can sustain with others. The pandemic has become a central mechanism for people to articulate their most intimate relations with their governmental institutions and to distinguish “which forms of intimate dependency count as freedom and which count as undue social constraint; which forms of intimacy involve moral judgment rather than mere choice.”

We have been alone, separated by borders we previously considered irrelevant. Alone, without world. Far from me to claim we have been subjected to a draconian limitation of our rights, or that we now understand the plight of migrants. But it is still important to observe the new ways these biopolitical assemblages construct our subjectivities. What sentiments, what new solitudes have been created at the frontier? What new thresholds of injustice, suffering and pain have we experienced? And what new possibilities of solidarity will lower those thresholds? In a recent

article, Angelo Vannini invites Europeans to take advantage of their momentary immobility and rethink the injustice through which the right to international mobility and migration is distributed and reserved for the citizens of the global north. Angelo suggests mobilizing the experience of immobility to reflect on “the dynamics that regulate the conditions of human existence both locally and globally, and against any idea of justice”. In other terms, we should reflect on the subjugation of those who are sentenced to the illegitimacy of every movement – those in the world, without a world. Yesterday, for the first time, I started a journey whose destination I was unable to choose. For the first time, I was unable to choose to be with my loved ones in a moment of need. I am alone, but this solitude aligns me with a multitude.

§3. Universitas?

I like teaching. I am new at it and I still cannot believe I get to do this job I value so much. But teaching this year imposed some unbearable questions: how — why — do I teach philosophy to students who go to work every day in Amazon warehouses without any protection? What’s the point? Should I talk about trade unionism instead? To what extent should I question what a university is, its expectations, its priorities, and its temporality in this time of crisis? How to fight the loneliness of an atomized form of teaching that has lost its sociality? And how to react to the crisis, how to do our best in such a situation without being coopted by the neoliberal educational-industrial complex? Is our candid can-do attitude helping or precipitating this situation, sacrificing pedagogy for efficient problem solving and a bit of virtue signaling? And how much of this state of exception will be made permanent in the future idea of the university? Will we even remember what universitas meant to begin with?

Let us return to feelings, learn to admit them, especially within institutions that make them shameful, undesirable, unprofessional. In other words, we must resist the institutional credo, "online teaching is so sexy and — incidentally — marketable," and ask, instead, “how do my students feel?”, or “how does Zoom

make you feel?” I have been alone, as a teacher and as a student, I have to confess. We have to learn to admit to failure, to recognize its potential for resistance. After all, as Butler says, failure opens a space of dissonance and resistance, when the subject fails to reiterate the norm “in the right way”.¹⁹ We have done our best, yes, but we also recognize that online education is problematic. It is likely to increase the precariousness of teachers, the disparities between students, the almost commercial exchange of teaching units — small tasks to complete online instead of a real high-level academic discussion — the pressure of an inexorable advance, at all costs, of the academic year (i.e. at the cost, sometimes, of the well-being of students and teachers), the depoliticization of the university experience, and the atomization of exchanges.

In the face of crisis, the university has responded, at times, with business-like efficiency, unable to take a moment of reflection or a break, a moment of silence or rest, oriented to the sole purpose of completing the syllabus, securing exams, and providing a service. A purely pedagogical, and not just institutional reflection on the meaning of this urgency would have produced other results, aimed at safeguarding the quality of education, the well-being of students, teachers, and of all workers, as well as the very idea of the university as *universitas*. Let me, again, resort to the work of a dear friend, Gorata Chengeta, who, in a recent article, calls on us to rethink pedagogy in crisis. The word “emergency” itself, she explains, evokes temporal connotations and it is important to have contestation here, to elucidate how institutional power has shaped the temporality of the university in times of crisis — making us feel very lonely:

As a teacher, for me, the emergency is not that readings and assessments were outstanding. The emergency is the impact of the pandemic on the bodies of my students. The emergency is that my students who have their mental illnesses

¹⁹ Cf. J. Butler, *The Psychic life of Power : Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997.

*exacerbated by the chaos we're in right now need support. The emergency is that my students who are solely responsible for childcare need support. The emergency is that my students who are considered essential workers, as well as those who have lost their incomes, need support. The emergency is also that as I navigate deep COVID-related losses in my life, on top of my own mental health issues, I need rest"*²⁰.

We must, to move forward, rethink the emergency and its solitude, the multiple forms of institutional abandonment which it has engendered.

§ 4. Finally, breathing together

The virus is a critical agent: it traces the limits of our socio-political thought. On the one hand, the pandemic revealed itself quickly to be the critical limit of the biopolitical paradigm and Agambenian analysis. Because the virus exists, we need, as Butler argues so well, a politics of truth and science, in as much as the pandemic requires a coordinated response from countries and institutions. On the other hand, the virus exposes the limits of Žižek's statism, because we need to watch out for ways in which the imperialist state and the capitalist market mold us, and seek modalities of collective resistance. Finally, the virus has revealed the limits of post-Fordism, as it clearly showed that primary essential workers are still needed – the working class still exists, and it always gets sacrificed first – while also requiring an approach to social disparity that integrates a critique of precarity, the exploitation of intellectual work, and the fatigue of “smart-work” as tools of the hydra-like neoliberal machine.

This virus traces limits and points out possibilities. More than ever, we feel the need to re-politicize the intimate and domestic. This is possibly the only way to maintain collective action and political activism in the wake of the pandemic, and to avoid

²⁰ G. Chengeta, « Lamentations on the body that teaches and curriculum-time », *blackademiagasm*, 5 juice 2020, <https://blackademiagasm.home.blog/2020/06/05/lamentations-on-the-body-that-teaches-and-curriculum-time/>.

passive submission to the regimes of biosecurity and techno-capitalism. In recent times, we have seen that our homes are not a site of apolitical solitude, but constitute relational and political spaces of conflict, violence, and resistance. The global increase in domestic violence during the pandemic has shown how the domestic sphere is a site of conflict and violence that can only be approached as a collective and properly political question. The sudden disappearance of domestic workers from the households of the rich has reminded us that our homes are sites of structural asymmetry, of constant relationality and labor. The closing of schools made us feel the burning need for an educational system. The virus has entwined us, or better still, it revealed our entwining.

I recently discussed the forthcoming economic mutations with a friend from Emilia-Romagna, one of the epicenters of the virus in Italy. He expressed a captivating thought: “throughout this tragedy, I see a major political and economic change: parents came face to face with their children”. Far from me to celebrate the lockdowns – we have seen their prejudicial impact on vulnerable populations, especially in the absence of a welfare state – we should remark, however, that for many people the lockdowns were their first break from the modes of action and consumption of late capitalism. People got to experience the advantages of free time and a general deacceleration of lifestyle. They were forced to adjust their habits of consumption drastically: there were no shopping sprees during the pandemic, no take-away sushi, or low-cost Lisbon getaways. We all experienced immobility, even in situations of need, even to join our loved ones or to choose where to live. Such drastic and sudden changes in our intimate and domestic lives could be productive if they engendered new political feelings, new solidarities, new “social imaginaries” and “counterpublics” capable of being mobilized in the construction of radical political propositions. As Catherine Malabou explains, many reflections on the necessity of mutual aid, solidarity and cooperation have appeared here and there since the beginning of the pandemic. But that’s not enough. It is important to note that mutual aid is not a set of actions limited in time and determined by the

urgency of a crisis. On the contrary, it is a “an actual revolutionary dynamism, the motor of a totally renewed vision of the social”. We shared the suffocation. We have been alone together, yes, but that in itself does not guarantee a restored or redeemed society. Now we need to mobilize the feelings we experienced, to re-politicize the intimate, to weave transversal solidarities capable of engendering new political propositions. Let’s consider what is emerging from the BLM movement: a fundamental political demand of economic redistribution and the development of tools for mutual aid within communities. There is much more here than a protestation against violence. It’s a starting point to search for a response to the social and political crisis that plunged us into the despair of a most acute solitude, the inability to breathe, even suffocation. I look at Angela Davis, strong and vulnerable in the crowd: I don’t think she is by herself.