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Pandemic Histories

Meditations and Migrations

The pandemic mandates new histories of the global. Even as racial capitalism and the attendant erosion of social provision escalates global ecological doom, the meteoric rise of authoritarianism as explicit statecraft shapes universalized conditions of catastrophe. On the one hand, the global reach of the virus makes the perils and possibilities of geopolitical interdependence more urgent than ever. Asymmetries of the past (the Global North versus the Global South) are seemingly set aside for a more unified front against the pandemic. On the other hand, the virus has functioned to escalate racist discourse and vigilante attacks on Asians in particular, just as the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on subaltern and minoritized collectivities amplify the need for radically new racial and geopolitical imaginaries. The march of authoritarianism alongside worldwide struggles for racial and economic justice during the pandemic calls for a redressing of settled modes of historical thinking and practice.

Histories of pandemics across time and space that proffer narratives of specific disease outbreaks (the flu of 1918, the black plague) as temporally marked moments, organized through a telos of beginnings and endings, successes and failures, are not our focus here. Rather, we seek to challenge geohistories of triumph and defeat, success and failure, crisis and stasis, that are clearly disrupted by the urgencies of our political, social, and environmental crises. If the current pandemic summons histories of contagion, vulnerability, threat, and devaluation, such histories are always already sutured to the very idea of the Global South. While the focus of the global pandemic continues to be on the outbreak's original epicenters (China, Europe, the United States, India, and Brazil), it is the people in the Global South, we are repeatedly told, who will suffer even more: more loss, more decimation of lives and

HISTORY of the PRESENT ▪ A Journal of Critical History ▪ 13:1 ▪ April 2023
DOI: 10.1215/21599785-10253213

livelihoods. It is this inevitable invocation of the Global South as a perilous, contaminating geography of vulnerability, precarity, suffering, and poverty that fuels our meditations.

Our special issue refuses the continued insistence on viewing the Global South as either a place of historical failure or a site where theory is implemented. We present an alternative conceptual nexus of "pandemic histories" to theorize modes of historiographical thinking that defy narratives of death and detritus. If anything, the containment of the pandemic, in the very geographies of so-called death, has provided more fodder for such ruminations. Histories of the Global South, we contend, are always pandemic allegories, histories of (literal) widespread foreign occupation, threatened constantly by inequality and landscapes of loss and dispossession. While such historical orientations have continued to define geopolitical forms, we are keen to animate these habits of reading anew. Our special issue inhabits such inherited historical modes of devaluation more as genealogies of hope and disruption than of dispersal and attenuation. To speak of pandemic histories is to forge new vernaculars of the geopolitical, to assemble spatial imaginaries that refuse rather than relent to the insistent march of capital and empire. Three questions are central to our meditations: First, what happens in the time of our pandemic to such pandemic histories and archives of occupation? And how are histories of regions reordered within new terrains of escalating loss and mourning? Second, what does the Global South teach us about navigating crisis? Third, how can the conditions of temporal, material, and social suspension inspire new ways of writing the past and envisioning the future?

Regions

By bringing South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa in conversation on pandemic histories in times of the pandemic, we explore the bridges that have historically informed these sites through centuries of commercial, political, and intellectual exchange. Even as the heady era of decolonization posed South Asia and the Middle East as parallel areas of experience and liberation, national imperatives and the nation-state form have foreclosed the early promise of transnational collaborations and solidarities. The ethnicization and racialization of religion and the consolidation of authoritarianism, xenophobia, and racism in both South Asia and the Middle East are founded in and nourished by these foreclosures. Staging South-South geo/historical conversations has become even more critical to the survival of liberation struggles. To be clear, such conversations are not always pathways to radical thought or invention; indeed regional hegemonies often sustain the very structures of asymmetry we seek to attenuate. India, for instance, re-

mains a regional behemoth within South Asia, as does Egypt within broader geographies of the Middle East and North Africa. The Arabian Peninsula, while offering multiple historical potentialities, is also today the place from which the Saudi Arabian regime funds and arms a devastating war on Yemen as well as a global counterrevolution.

For many in North America and Western Europe, the pandemic inspired new temporal understandings: living in the interlude, experiencing a modality of life drenched in waiting. These experiences were ever heightened in the face of the Trump administration's unmitigated contempt for the people and polity of the United States. Yet, for most collectivities in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa, this suspended temporality is a way of life. Authoritarian regimes nourish contempt for the people they govern, foreclosing timelines of futurity. Precarity and daily violence foster a temporality that is at once elongated and condensed. In such plangent times of crises, military rule, authoritarian resurgence, and war, surviving short interludes of time becomes the only way to ponder continuity. People plan not for the future but despite it. Such suspended temporalities of survival emerge out of and against the imperative of decolonization: even as colonial states preached a politics of deferral to maintain legitimacy and rule, natives had to be "educated" in the languages of self-rule and sovereignty.

In South Asia, the right-wing Hindu state in India, for example, has mobilized the precise language of the pandemic and its accompanying structures to further buttress its enshrined communal agenda. The new authoritarianisms of the current pandemic in South Asia work precisely because they borrow from longer pandemic histories of minority communities—histories of contagious, dangerous outsiders (be they Muslims, Maoists, or Communists) that threaten everyday Hindu life and contaminate the daily sanctity of Indian citizenry. The discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) that was proposed before the onslaught of the current pandemic and the disputes over the Farmers Laws (2020) deploy the same languages of exclusion we see in lockdown India. Pakistan, in contrast, continued prayers at mosques during the holy month of Ramadan, contributing to the notion of Muslim histories as the super-spreaders of pandemic forms. While Sri Lanka repurposed the bellicose jingoism of a costly thirty-year Civil War to fuel a corrupt Sinhalese majoritarianism, recasting Tamils, Muslims, and Christians as the carriers of national demise and disease, Bangladesh marshaled histories of labor, development, and partition to summon divisive oppressions of region, religion, and gender divisions.

The Middle East and North Africa witnessed counterrevolutionary resurgence in response to a decade of sustained uprising. Imperial invasion in Iraq;

ongoing settler colonialism, occupation, and apartheid in Palestine; the wealthiest Arab regime (Saudi Arabia) ravaging the poorest Arab country (Yemen); an uprising turned civil war turned proxy war in Syria; a military regime that has suffocated any form of political and intellectual expression in Egypt; the reign of fiscal corruption in Lebanon—these have ravaged people's bodies and denied their basic needs. They have fortified regimes of sectarianism and civilizational hierarchies. For many people in these countries, some version of isolated lockdown had been the norm long before the current pandemic.

Pandemic histories invite us to think with and alongside these lived modes of life and survival, not as dire responses to a pandemic but as historiographical forms that migrate, contaminate, and infuse life precisely at the moment of extinction. As such, we believe that it is time to gather, listen, and learn from the experiences and struggles of subaltern collectivities and nonsovereign actors in South Asia and the Middle East—to turn to iterations of pandemic histories that unfold in times of state contempt, in temporalities of relentless crisis, and in purloined futurities. With the demise of the fantasy of a functioning state, Dalit histories, Palestinian histories, and more emerge as new forms of historical presence and possibility. Let us imagine those histories together (fig. 1).

Format

Our efforts to gather diverse genres of geohistories required a more creative arrangement of contributions and meditations than the traditional essay form for articles. Since March 2021, when we began thinking together about pandemic as a historiographical episteme, a multiplicity of breakdowns and lockdowns unfolded in our various locations and homes. The latest Russian invasion/occupation of Ukraine has made pandemic histories even more pertinent, especially as the Global South is once again subject to the brutal calculus of grief, legibility, and recognition as human subjects. Many of the people we invited to think with us were themselves subject to heightened states of emergency, incarceration, and intimidation in the midst of, and overlapping with, rolling global crises. In keeping with the shifting tempo and tenor of the histories we have invoked, we have chosen to go with a congeries of reflections that migrate away from the seductions of inclusivity and/or coverage.

This special issue, "Pandemic Histories" (the title is a conceit and a provocation), commences with a series of brief and spirited meditations that invite scholars to envision pandemic worlds as places to listen to, and learn from, to cull the strategic and (sometimes) painful genealogies of area and

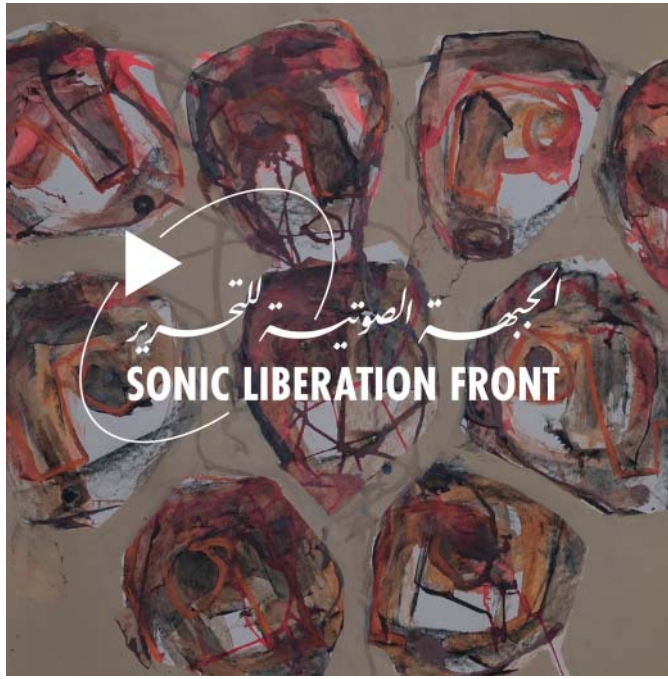

FIGURE 1. The Sonic Liberation Front. Hosted by Ernesto Chahoud and Yousef Anastas; artwork by Semaan Khawam. Courtesy of Radio Alhara (an artist initiative and communal media platform launched from Bethlehem, Palestine).

thought as creative pathways to possibility and survival. As the range of the reflections shows, there is both divergence and convergence among the scholars writing about South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Pandemic forms loom centrally over the lived exigencies of geohistories, the functioning of which mandates a devaluation of life, on the one hand, and a habituation to loss and vulnerability, on the other. Each reflection seeks to move with and against the persistence of erasure, disappearance, and violence to forge imaginaries of dissent, migration, refusal, and even surrender.

We begin with Sharika Thiranagama's lyrical rendition of pandemic histories of migration within and without her "native" Sri Lanka. As she writes, how does one imagine a world, a history, within "an expanding military infrastructure threatening to subsume the state and popular life?" Sri Lankans remain in a time of suspended migration, moving back and forth between familiar violence and new forms of violation and disenfranchisement. Vaccines present a cure for a virus that merely concatenates inequity: the North's loss is wrenching; the Global South's, endemic. Trusted vernaculars

of hate around refugees and migrants are repackaged into the discovery of epidemiological lexicons. Suturing pandemic histories to subaltern futures, Thiranagama weaves collective and personal histories, speaking to her own volatile investments in the times of migration that ferry her from one pandemic world to the next. Setting the stage for the meditations to follow, Thiranagama's prose tunes into the porous violence of migrant futures, immanent in the best lives we imagine for ourselves, reaching for arrivals at the very moment of departure.

For Elora Shehabuddin, such imagined pasts and futures emerge at the very moment of pandemic erasure. In "On the Politics of Viruses and Visibility," Shehabuddin confronts the obdurate representations of Muslim women as archives awaiting the heroics of liberal recovery and "unveiling." She turns to photographs (not lost but misplaced) that amplify histories of gendered solidarity across South Asia (East *and* West Pakistan, then Bangladesh and Turkey) within the strictures of pandemic life. An official photo of a Pakistani delegation to Turkey in 1952 charts a visual archive of collaboration and conflict at a time when tensions between India and Pakistan were escalating and the idea of Bangladesh was rising into view. Shamsun Nahar Mahmud, a leading educationist in East Pakistan, with ties to Bengali Indian feminists, stands alongside a young university student, Sufia Ibrahim (later Ahmed), in the newly established department of Islamic History and Culture at Dhaka University, all part of a pandemic history rarely materialized amid the stranglehold of development discourse and security concerns.

Suraj Yengde amplifies Shehabuddin's efforts to speak to unwritten pasts and presents in his centering of caste histories as pandemic histories. More polemical in tone, Yengde demands an attentiveness to caste zones, siloed spaces of isolation and distance, that exist alongside and prior to emergent histories of our current pandemic. Focusing specifically on the Dalit experience of caste oppression, Yengde explores forms of life, loss, and mediation that remain subaltern even within histories of the Global South. The cany pragmatism of Dalit existence supplements all efforts at erasure: we exist, Yengde suggests, despite or rather because of the privations of history.

If Yengde provokes us into a language of risk and action, Bishnupriya Ghosh's "Emergence and History: Variola Stories" charts the narrative figures capturing pandemic growth. Variola stories, medico-mythologies of vaccines, viruses, and distributive networks, theorize our orientations to histories of pandemic loss and contagion. We move from the mediatic force of prophecies to the iconicity of "traditional medicine," all variola stories that tether histories of contemporary "cure" to longer histories of colonial/postcolonial science within and without South Asia. Ghosh offers

us genealogies for the present viral emergence, as we learn of dizzying networks of "cross-species transmission from horseshoe bats, of the mutating virus, of the comorbidities, of uneven vaccine distributions, of failing health infrastructures, of disrupted supply chains, of the biopolitical purge of dispensable populations, of the stunning vacuum in global leadership."

These genealogies of ailing infrastructures, calculations of dispensability, and structures of vulnerability are just as resonant in the Middle East and North Africa. Aomar Boum takes us to his village of Lamhamid, at the foot of the Bani Mountains of Morocco. He maps a dramatic reversal: the village, so long a place of deprivation and dispossession, crystalized as a social refuge and economic sanctuary in the throes of COVID-19. The "village, long imagined as a place constraining movement and sociability, becomes a site of freedom from bureaucracy and surveillance." Boum invites us to learn from the elasticity, fragility, and resilience of migration and social bonds. Lâle Can, too, offers new ways to think about mobility and sociability in her exploration of the nineteenth-century experience of Central Asian hajj as a lens on what she calls the state of pandemic. British and Russian imperial forces mobilized the threat of cholera and the trope of Muslim fanaticism to quarantine, regulate, and pathologize Muslim subjects. The harsh conditions of crowded vessels and quarantine stations confined Muslim mobility and were sites of rapid contagion. Can suggests that late capitalist nation-states, much like these colonial empires, were the epidemiological complementary to pandemics, and that racism was a central technology therein.

Using the pandemic as a window onto the content, form, and temporality of crises, Ilham Khuri-Makdisi delves into history and historiography and what they can tell us about "structures of vulnerability." She begins with the understanding of crisis as an event, as in the 1907 Egyptian stock market crash, and takes us to Beirut and intellectual production in the wake of the 1875 cholera outbreak. Pivoting from the reliance on crisis as a mechanism of periodization and historical understanding, Khuri-Makdisi then destabilizes crisis as a unit of historical analysis, offering exits from the old binaries of crisis and normalcy, hope and despair.

Each of the four longer essays that follow our opening set of meditations theorize pandemic histories through engagements with archives of labor, translation, and disease. The essays assemble archival traces and ethnographies that route their concerns through a transnational South Asia and Middle East to think through the challenges posed by the presentism and/or temporality of the current pandemic crisis. Dwaipayan Banerjee's "The Mystery of the Missing Pandemic" speaks directly to the historical force of "forgotten" pandemics and the erasures and mythologies they repurpose. Focus-

ing on the historiography of the absent but present 1918 pandemic, Banerjee chronicles the strategic nonmemorialization of a disease that decimated a large section of colonial India. For Banerjee, the missing data on this event provides the broader historical landscape for post/colonial and neoliberal histories of medical access and care. To historicize the loss of human population in the Global South, Banerjee argues, is precisely to forget their existence, to dispense with their right to care, access, and reparation.

Nidhi Mahajan's "Locked up in Lockdown: Patronage in a Time of Pandemic in the Indian Ocean" carries Banerjee's observations (as it were) to sea. Building on extended fieldwork on migration histories of Indian laborers on dhows (sailboats, ships of voyages) across the Indian Ocean, Mahajan foregrounds lineages of peril and profit undergirding networks of trade and commerce. Mahajan centers the minoritized life histories of working-class male laborers caught within the geopolitical great game, shunted to the backwaters of historical memory and economic uplift. Locked up and locked away, these are the pandemic histories Mahajan hopes to restore and revise.

Transporting us to the turn of the twentieth century in Alexandria, Egypt, Taylor Moore conducts an "epidemiological reading" of the spirit-possession healing cult *zar* as an archive of the dispossessed and enslaved. Moore peels back the layers of elite Egyptian anxieties about superstition, depicted as a "vile plague," excavating what "disease poetics" can reveal about Egypt's colonial expansion and imperial anxieties. Zar, we learn, went hand in hand with the enslavement of Black Africans from Sudan and Abyssinia, the enslaved populations who built "modern Egypt." Tracing the songs, the pantheon of spirits, and oral histories, as well as the priestesses and their jinn, Moore offers new ways to envision the global and transnational.

Rosie Bsheer excavates a buried archive of material and discursive breadth. Using pandemic history as an epistemic device to ponder geopolitical interdependence and disrupt settled modes of historical thinking, she excavates the buried history of the al-Sawlatiyya school in Central Mecca to reveal another Arabia, one layered with Islamic, Ottoman, and South Asian pasts and potentialities. Bsheer follows the journey of anti-colonial scholar Muhammad Rahmatullah al-Kairanawi (1818–1891) as he led two hundred mujahideen from Utter Pradesh to Delhi in the 1857 Indian Rebellion, escaped to Bombay, and finally took refuge in Mecca. There he established the al-Sawlatiyya school, where along with South Asian, Indonesian, African, and Arab scholars, Kairanawi socialized a generation of thinkers. By attending to the stories and networks of migrants like Kairanawi, Bsheer complicates our understandings of migrants in Arabia, linkages between Arabia and other parts of Asia, and Arabia itself. Through this other Arabia, she invites us

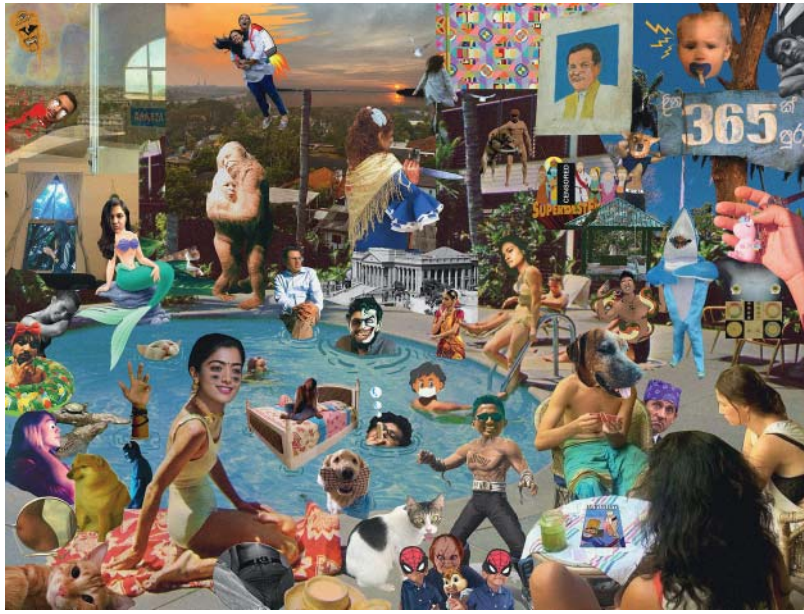

FIGURE 2. Muvindu Binoy, *Quarantine* (2020). Giclée print on archival photo paper, 107 × 142 cm. Courtesy of Saskia Fernando Gallery.

to see history not as a string of singular and isolated crises but as constitutively pandemic, defined by crises, breakdown, and catastrophes (fig. 2).

Booster

What if pandemic histories were enlivened and not deadened by dispatches of the present? What imaginaries of collaboration and conflict emanate at the very moment of pandemic dispersal and decimation? Our last section brings together four dispatches (ruminations from the ground, as it were) from scholars and activists who imagine pandemic histories of survival, occupation, and pleasure. Anish Gawande's "From Petitions to Demands, Restitution to Representation" provides us a snippet of possibility amid the corrosive segregations of sexuality, caste, and religion within contemporary India. Gawande narrates a story of a march, a refusal, a collaboration, and a transition within queer/trans resistance movements. Even as the pandemic rages on, Gawande speaks of marginalized collectivities that refuse to cede ground, cautiously working to safeguard futures of unity. Amrita Sharma and Peerzada Raouf Ahmad's "Containing Contagion in a Garrison State: Field Notes from Kashmir" unleashes brutal histories of the Indian state's occupation of Kashmir, wherein Kashmir remains the central site

of Muslim contagion, a paradoxical region of unbridled terror and extreme vulnerability. For Sharma and Peerzada, the pandemic becomes an allegory for Kashmir, a zone of continuous lockdowns and unchecked human disposability. Yet life persists, flowers bloom, and the imagination perseveres. For a migrant Kashmiri woman, *covid ka phool* (COVID-19 flower) becomes less a source of violence than a blooming artifact of hope that crosses regions, conjoining peoples across broken borders and histories.

Hana Sleiman draws, too, on a century of dispossession from another nearby shore, in Lebanon, a place that has in the past two years sustained one catastrophe after another. Palestinian refugees in this place of world-shattering crisis are subject to additional forms of long-term suspension. Sleiman shows how Palestinian women in their shaping of history as a cautionary tale offer a historiographic form that through pessimism, realism, and detachment preserves history in the face of memoricide, captures the magnitude of crises, prepares us for the crisis to come, and makes sense of life not out of hope but despite it. Writing from another landscape of occupation, Rana Barakat opens horizons beyond "the last sky." She invites us to learn from the Palestinians, in the West Bank, in the Gaza Strip, and inside Israel, who, ravaged by settler colonialism and vaccine apartheid, defied colonial borders to demand freedom. That freedom, she suggests, might just lie in that persistent state of statelessness, and in the ongoing struggle for liberation.

The pandemic histories contained within this issue do not settle into any easy geopolitics. Rather we have chosen to curate contributions that repeat and rupture the weight of pandemic forms, that challenge racialized misrecognitions, and that invite new modes of thinking past, present, and future. We offer these histories as an invitation to places, experiences, and strategies that, long before COVID-19, navigated the nagging uncertainties of past and present; that confronted the "normal" and the "status quo" as sites of danger and elimination; and that inhabited the temporalities of crises that have refused to end. Now, more than ever, these are the geohistories we must traverse. ■

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