

Introduction to the Issue

In Flames, Not Yet Born?

FRANCESCA KILPATRICK, HANNAH VOEGELE¹

The Minneapolis Police Precinct. The Moria Camp on Lesbos. Brazil's wetlands to the Arctic Circle. Fire was a defining image of the past year(s) - though its meaning, power and effects differ massively. When we approached this year's issue of *Interfere*, we thought about these different elements of fire, from the transformative to the destructive. Writing this introduction in November 2021, it is hard not to feel we are in the midst of exclusively destructive flames - more prone to death than birth. Almost two years into the pandemic, we write this in between taking covid tests - despite, or rather because of, so called 'freedom' from most covid measures in many "Western" countries. We write this while witnessing and experiencing continuously shored up borders around those in possession of short-termed individual 'freedom' versus everyone else in need or desire of long-term social emancipation. At a different point of the pandemic, it still seemed, as Anne Boyer phrased it, that saying 'society should, and must, be organized around need' felt like 'a small voice in a growing chorus.'² At least within dominant society, even this brief hopeful sentiment turned out to be more smoke than fire.

But this is where the 1983 passionate feminist sci-fi film *Born in Flames*, nothing more nothing less than an inspiring spark for this issue, compels us to engage the power of the political imaginary for shaping the future. From a point of disappointment and frustration, the film shows the mobilization of anger for open rebellion and the insufficiency of a radicalism bound by an account of politics proper. It refuses the tidy narrative of linear progress as well as

¹ We want to thank the *Interfere* Editorial Board for their support for this issue, especially the previous senior editors, Viktoria Huegel and Harrison Lechley; the Book Review Team, Luke Beesley, Luke Edmeads and Ana Živković; and website and social media support from Ian Sinclair and Christopher Griffin.

² Anne Boyer, "Find Something To Hide As Soon As Possible; an Interview with Anne Boyer," ed. Sam Jaffe Goldstein, *The End of the World Review*, September 15, 2020, <https://endoftheworld.substack.com/p/find-something-to-hide-as-soon-as>.

complicates ideas of revolution and apocalypse as finished events. Exploring the complex discriminations and overlapping structures of oppression now called ‘intersectionality’, the realities of community organising and direct action, the film rather points to the messy processes and multitudes of tactics when fighting for transformation. This issue is not based on the film, yet some of the theorising in the issue can also represent a constellation of ‘part documentary, part fiction’³, when it provides both a sober view on current structures of violence as well as a fantastic view, and vital ruptures, of imagining and organizing otherwise. In this spirit the issue offers articles, interventions, reviews, conversations, and talks exploring protest imaginaries in the face of catastrophe, tactics and strategies in the struggle for transformation, and imaginaries and strategies of abolition.

Protest Imaginaries in the Face of Catastrophe

The portents of climate change are increasingly alarming. Our pandemic-ravaged social systems demonstrate once more that present capitalist systems are incapable of tending effectively to human and non-human life. In the face of catastrophe, manifestos for transformation emerge. The political imaginary has a vital role in directing the course of societal transformation, with protest and other forms of collective imagining forming and framing the future. But how do the emotions and desires we feel in response to catastrophic imaginaries affect political action and theorisation? How do we do politics in the shadow of catastrophe without falling into authoritarianism? The first cluster of articles in this issue addresses these questions.

Are fear and freedom in inevitable opposition? In *Eco-Activist and Fear: Some Feminist Insights about Affect and Agency in Catastrophic Times*, Léna Silberzahn critiques the pathologisation of fear by malestream frameworks. Silberzahn advocates addressing fear collectively and using it as a resource for social movements. Using affect theory as part of feminist praxis, Silberzahn argues that so-called ‘negative’ emotions such as anxiety, fear, and

³ Lizzie Borden and Alison Kozberg, “Stay Ready: Lizzie Borden on the Post-Revolutionary Future of Born in Flames,” *Walker Reader*, April 27, 2016, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/interview-lizzie-borden-born-in-flames>.

despair can lead us to become more aware of our interconnectedness. With the awareness of these affective arrangements, we are transformed and empowered to fight against disaster capitalism as a collective.

Citizens Assemblies are one proposed way of manifesting the collective emotional and political process. They have featured prominently in future imaginaries of contemporary climate movement as forms of inclusive deliberative democracy. Wojciech Ufel in *Are Citizens' Assemblies a Good Strategy for Climate Activists* addresses Chantal Mouffe's conception of deliberative democracy as a practice that does not challenge hegemonic discourse in a meaningful way, and he puts into question whether Climate Assemblies truly are a tool for radical collective imagination, or if they instead reinforce the status quo. He concludes that deliberative practices can be tactically useful in concert with more radical strategies, but that a rethinking of politics and democracy may be necessary.

There is a lack of creative imagination within contemporary politics for addressing our global problems, despite the constant and overwhelming influx of information and imagery we receive. In *The Imaginal as Spectacle: An Aristotelian Interpretation of Contemporary Politics*, Abigail Iturra engages with this imaginal void through Chiara Bottici's theory of spectacularization in political imagery, and argues that Bottici has reversed cause and effect. She demonstrates that the inundation of virtual images on our screens is the result rather than the cause of a qualitative change whereby the images become ends in themselves. For Iturra, this affects too the political imaginal, which ends up motivated by the image - the political desire - as its own end, devoid of concrete solutions.

The role of desire within politics, particularly in the Lacanian sense, is a key touchstone in *Our Only Hope is the Making of Humanity*, an interview with Erik Swyngedouw facilitated by Francesca Kilpatrick. Swyngedouw points out that politics is driven by enjoyment, and that protest can become an end in itself foreclosing radical imaginaries and centering the protestor or the oppressed identity instead of speaking on behalf of something universal. Touching on Esposito's Immunopolitics and Lacanian discourse of the university, he discusses the role of the radical political academic within the neoliberal institution. Finally, he confronts the climate apocalypse narrative arguing that this catastrophic imaginary displaces actually existing

apocalypses and instead focuses on a future managed by technical fixes without allowing the socio-ecological order to change. The only way to save the universalised so-called ‘Humanity’, Swyngedouw argues, is to start organising to make a universal collective of that kind truly exist.

Between Oppression and Resistance: Tactics and Strategies in the Struggle of Transformation

As touched upon by some of these articles, from our profound moment of crisis there is still no (single) roadmap to change. As so often throughout history, organizers, thinkers, activists, etc. disagree on the tactics and strategies best suited to bring about much-needed transformation, let alone what this transformation should look like - ranging from more reformist mobilizations and aims to full-blown rebellion and revolution. The book reviews, the intervention piece and the article that follow can be said to continue this glimpse at recurring debates, reflecting on different modes of understanding and *doing* politics, and the relationship between order and resistance. In what relation to the world – and the different paths to changing it – do we find ourselves, and what allows for safe, or “right”, passage out of such long formed violent orders? What values and norms do we want to take with us “through the portal”⁴? Who are “we” and our comrades in struggle - and how are we formed in and as a relationship to violence in the first place? How are specific modes of engagement situated vis-a-vis structures of oppression?

One of the values often held as self-evident and self-explanatory of “Western” liberal democracies is “free speech.” The limits and contradictions of free speech have been debated over and again. Most recently, in debates on free speech on university campuses appearing as the “right” to teach and give platform to racist/transphobic/misogynist/climate or covid-denying/etc. doctrines, have dominated the public realm. Anthony Leaker’s *Against Free Speech is intervening in this discourse*. In his review of the book, Ian Sinclair argues that Leaker’s analysis “should give pause to even the most ardent advocate of free speech.” As Sinclair outlines, the book traces the intellectual origins of free speech and its relationship to liberalism, and engages

⁴ Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic Is a Portal,” *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

with what free speech does as an idea that ends up being used to reproduce rather than question certain dominant forms of power.

Ellen Clifford's *The War on Disabled People: Capitalism, Welfare, and the Making of a Human Catastrophe* captures this 'enduring struggle between oppression and resistance,' as Luke Beesley describes in his review. The book provides a social history of the precarity effectuated by government policies, accounts for organized resistance by disabled people, and politically theorises how disablement is linked to capitalism in the 21st century. Luke Beesley's review embeds the book within the literature on disability in Britain, which has recently seen a remarkable increase. This increase precedes the pandemic, but the centrality of the social struggle of disabled people should only have become clearer in times when disabled people in particular are killed and abandoned by public health and social systems that are explicitly created against them, framing these political decisions as necessary or even natural.

From within these multiple devastating crises of pandemic, climate catastrophe, etc. - how to still struggle for a better world? Whilst for some this position marks that the time for incremental changes is over – if there ever was one – others seem to abandon the idea of broad systemic change. In his review of David Harvey's *The Anti-Capitalist Chronicles*, James Bell draws out how Harvey's controversial claim that "capitalism is too big to fail" can be seen as a logical continuation of Harvey's theoretical development, rather than a rupture with it. Especially in relation to the climate crisis, the way that Harvey situates the problem and the solution of unsustainable extractive capitalist ecological relations on the level of policy, reveals its fault lines, so Bell.

Resistance requires a reassessment of the logics and thought patterns which structure society, both at a conceptual and spatio-temporal level. The past year has seen a resurgent push for decolonial thought practices as tools and sites of struggle. In *Building Black Against Architecture*, Elliot C. Mason argues for a Black ethics and praxis of architecture against colonial, modern urban logics. Mason proposes dance as an alternative thought practice to structure thinking about spatial cartography, as a strategy for resistance both at a theoretical level to the dogma of European philosophy, and the physical reality of the Heygate redevelopment in Elephant and Castle, London. Through a close reading of Denise Ferreira da Silva's project on

ruptures in Kantian spacetime and Fred Moten's treatise on poethical movement, Mason explores the racialised redevelopment of the Heygate area as a result of prescriptive cartographic practices, as well as the countermovement by local activists.

Prefigurative actions are a powerful tactic within longer-term struggles, as Ricardo Juozepavicius Gonçalves demonstrates in *Rights-related arguments in the São Paulo public school occupations of 2015*. Gonçalves explores the massive and unprecedented mobilisation of students and school occupations in Brazil in 2015 as resistance in favour of community ownership and orientation against institutional authoritarianism. Alongside this empirical work Gonçalves draws on Axel Honneth's theorisation of daily experiences and practices of subjects as knowledge informed by social plurality and democracy to offer a methodological critique. He addresses Honneth's and Robin Celikates' critical theoretical discussion of the social and cognitive labour required by social agents in oppressed groups, as well as the need for theorists to acknowledge the distance or overlap with their own labour. Returning to the school occupations, he concludes that the presentation of student arguments and demands as a practical resource allowed a much wider dissemination and reverberation of the action, a valuable strategic lesson for reform movements and prefigurative community-builders.

Imaginarities and Strategies of Abolition

Unimpressed and undistracted by a main focus on reform, abolitionists have recently challenged the broader public, especially in North America but also elsewhere in the world, to dare to think beyond what's right in front of them. As Angela Davis puts it, "In the most expansive sense, abolitionist approaches acknowledge interconnections and interrelations that ultimately require us to be critical of myopic reforms"⁵. This way we come to pursue not just a slightly less violent version of this system but "ask what needs to be changed about the larger society, so that we no longer need to rely on institutions that reproduce the very violence that

⁵ Angela Davis, Brenna Bhandar, and Rafeef Ziadah, "Abolition Feminism: Angela Davis," in *Revolutionary Feminisms*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah (London: Verso, 2020), 214.

they are supposed to minimise.”⁶ Abolition is open-ended and multifaceted. In this issue, we approach the notion from the (now, thanks to the movement for Black lives, quite well known) perspective of the abolition of prisons and police, but enhance the view to borders and nation states, property and individual law, as well as museums and art institutions, and finally the family. The point is not to subsume every theorist here under the umbrella of “abolitionist”, even less so as an “abolitionist of this or that kind.” Rather, by relating different ways of thinking to the idea of abolition we engage with the question of how to live with and through contradictions and see every intervention on abolition as always at the same time an experiment in imagining.

Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson engage in such experiments, or “rehearsals”, in their forthcoming book “Rehearsals for Living” and also in their conversation *Every Day We Must Get Up and Relearn the World* in this issue facilitated by Christopher Griffin and Hannah Voegelé. This does not mean forgetting necessary tactics or concessions, Robyn reminds us, as “sometimes, people are going to take the sneakers”. Through Maynard and Simpson’s words we hear the engagement of a chorus of voices and practices from fellow organizers, thinkers, elders, kids and communities. Layering their work like this, the conversation touches upon Black feminist and Indigenous thought on the politics of recognition, the notion of apocalypse, ways to disrupt linear temporalities, practises of reciprocity against proprietary logics, the gendered violence of state apparatuses, and worldbuilding as a method of resistance.

The evocation of “abolitionism” is a rich and productive idea to interrogate. Thought in relation to regimes of ownership and the workings of property, we can develop some of its challenging notions and yet again stress its meaning of pointing beyond itself. In the conversation *Unsettling Our Relationship to Things and People* facilitated by Harrison Lechley and Hannah Voegelé, Brenna Bhandar and Eva von Redecker discuss how “doing away” with

⁶ Ibid. But also, this does not mean a refusal to engage in lifesaving reforms. Rather, to engage with ‘non-reformist reform’ as Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it. This means that reforms which reduce rather than enhance the grip of violent institutions on people’s lives, such as the call to defund the police, that by mobilizing to direct funds away from the police and towards enhancing people’s social conditions of living, engage with reforms that ultimately aim to abolish the institution as such (as well as the conditions that make it possible in the first place). E.g. see Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, 1st ed. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt5hjht8>.

something is not enough, which becomes especially clear in relation to always insufficient individual legal provisions that still serve as some forms of protections in the current conjuncture. Considering the ‘anti-accountability-structures’ the liberal political sphere has created, the specific ontologies of the self-possessive subject and the fantasy of property ownership as the precondition for freedom, it becomes clear that just ridding ourselves of the law or renouncing all possessions will not transcend the violences of today. Thus, Bhandar and von Redecker discuss how to reconceive relationships to land and the possibility of settling without appropriating and, finally, look for (non-proprietary) strategies of taking care of this world in the face of climate catastrophe.

Speaking straight from the midst of organizing, mobilizing, and providing collective opportunities for counter-education, the conversation *Modernity is an Imperial Crime* between Ariella Aisha Azoulay, Dalaeja Foreman, Shellyne Rodriguez, and Nitasha Dhillon, from the StrikeMoma movement (transcribed, and edited by Jandra Boettger and Hannah Voegele), directly engages with abolition discourse and how it relates to the museum and other institutions of (modern) art. The discussants situate the “museum as [a] site where plunder continues to be cultivated as private property,” but immediately open up the “opportunity to think about the museum beyond the question of restitution of discrete plundered objects” in their conversation. They unsettle imperial geographies and temporalities by thinking together about how to re-engage with what is lost, how to develop living cultural production spaces against the infrastructure of plunder that bring together, rather than separate, objects and people. Considering how to live with contradictions, and deciding what contradictions we have control over, enables them to imagine alternatives, exit institutions and build our own.

Some of the ambivalences and contradictions of the language of abolitionism come into sight when “stretching” the term to include family abolition. “Abolish the family”, once one infamous slogan (among many) by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto, is now popularized once again by a particular strand of (mostly communist queer) feminism. In some contexts, the juxtaposition of abolition and feminism will lead to very wrong - in fact contrarian - associations as in some countries, such as Germany, “abolitionism” within feminist circles has been appropriated to mean campaigns against sex work, i.e. “anti-prostitution feminism.”

People familiar with Sophie Lewis's thought will find themselves in no danger of confusing the two. In this talk, *Disloyal Children of Shulamith Firestone*, she re-engages with Shulamith Firestone's gestational utopianism in a mode of "comradely disloyalty" and puts her in conversation with Black, queer and trans feminists today. With their help, she steals what she needs from Firestone whilst not ignoring, but clearly pointing out Firestone's faults. With, against, and beyond Firestone, Lewis takes an anti(-all)-work approach, instead of agitating against sex work. Rather than falling down the racist and revisionist trap of the "white slavery" appropriation of that kind of feminist abolitionism, she invites us to actively dive into gestational utopian literature and speculative fictions, to see that the abolition of oppressive structures and institutions, like the family, will "generate problems" but "that is not a problem" and "seems worth trying for."

The conversations and exhortations in this issue constitute experiments in collective thought; in using the transformative imaginary as a tool for resistance and rebirth. We cannot escape the fire, but we can choose how to pass through it.

WORKS CITED

- Borden, Lizzie, and Alison Kozberg. "Stay Ready: Lizzie Borden on the Post-Revolutionary Future of Born in Flames." *Walker Reader*, April 27, 2016. <https://walkerart.org/magazine/interview-lizzie-borden-born-in-flames>.
- Boyer, Anne. "Find Something To Hide As Soon As Possible; an Interview with Anne Boyer." Edited by Sam Jaffe Goldstein. *The End of the World Review*, September 15, 2020. <https://endoftheworld.substack.com/p/find-something-to-hide-as-soon-as>.
- Davis, Angela, Brenna Bhandar, and Rafeef Ziadah. "Abolition Feminism: Angela Davis." In *Revolutionary Feminisms*, edited by Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah, 203–16. London: Verso, 2020.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. 1st ed. Oakland: University of California Press, 2007. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt5hjht8>.
- Roy, Arundhati. "The Pandemic Is a Portal." *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.