



Itaparica, Brazil

Digging into the Future: An Account of Notions of Time and Place

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The first sunlight that breaks through a gray sky at dawn is always the strongest. A few minutes after it appears, reds, greens, and many more colors start manifesting, one after the other, within the black-and-white background. Morning twilight, an ode to obscurity and ambiguity, seems like a numb body in which blood starts to flow the second the sun rises. To inhabit a moment like this, unfolding metaphorically between the Aristotelian notions of *actuality* and *potentiality*, needs patience and care, as well as a sense of bittersweet tenderness; a set of qualities that are lost within the busy courses of our lives, where—bombarded with unfiltered information, in full discontinuity with the natural environment—we run headlong into fulfilling the “obligations” of naked capitalism.

Today, I was awakened by a disobedient sunbeam that found its way into my left eye through the wooden blinds as early (or late) as 5 a.m. Here, on the island of Itaparica, in the middle of nowhere for some, or the center of the world for others, just a thirty-minute boat ride from metropolis of Salvador, everything rushes to enjoy the day. The sun does, too. Again, what are place and time?

Rather than articulating a series of presupposed fixations on cultural and historical traits, a further questioning on the issues of time and place as they are being constantly

shaped anew seemed to be a more appropriate contribution to a book that seeks paths toward new/old commonalities. Time is relative; a mere matter of perspective. It always was, even before Einstein scribbled the Theory of Relativity on his blackboard. There are thousands of “times” on earth, depending on who is keeping them. Western culture is fascinated with the idea of time progressing as a storyline from past to future. The desire to impose clock time as a common metric agency is in itself colonial. “Time is everywhere in nature,” writes Jay Griffiths in her meditative book *A Sideways Look At Time*. “In urbanized life, clocks are needed precisely because there is no other way of telling the time. But while nature knows a million varieties of time, the clock of modernity knows only one. The same one. Everywhere.”¹

In the meantime, we should not forget that in most Latin languages, the word time (*temps/tempo*) means both weather and time. This is how related time is to the seasonal cycle. As to place, what truly informs a place today? Is it exclusively its coordinates on a map? Its history and local culture? Or is it its interactive and interpenetrable relationship to the rest of the hyperlinked transworld? If a geographical place is some locus that can be defined by a common-sense consciousness, what factors shape this consciousness today? How can the *polis*—in the word’s Platonic sense, meaning the meeting of citizens to create a place in the form of a city-state guided by philosophical and humanitarian values—be reconsidered? In a 2013 lecture in Athens, Giorgio Agamben argued:

The new identity is an identity without the person, as it were, in which the space of politics and ethics

1 Jay Griffiths, *A Sideways Look at Time* (New York, 1998) pp. 12–15.

loses its sense and must be thought again from the ground up. While the Greek citizen was defined through the opposition between the private and the public, the *oikos*, which is the place of reproductive life, and the *polis*, the place of political action, the modern citizen seems rather to move in a zone of indifference between the private and the public, or to quote Hobbes, the physical and the political bodies.²

How can we reinhabit this most recent version of *polis*, of place, which is not only emerging from the ruined boundaries between the notions of “public” and “private,” but is also informed by many localities at the same time? The *polis* has indeed become a space of political and spatial contestation. Yet, it is in this contestation that it should legitimate its social body by reimagining itself. In the fifty-second newsletter of the *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*, which popped as an email onto my screen just now, Vijay Prashad writes:

Millions of people are on the streets, from India to Chile. Democracy is both their promise and it is what has betrayed them. They aspire to the democratic spirit, but find that democratic institutions—saturated by money and power—are inadequate. They are on the streets for more democracy, deeper democracy, a different kind of democracy.

A polis should possess the potential to transform itself. And this is what is happening these past months through a series of interconnected street struggles that take place

2 Giorgio Agamben, “For a Theory of Distituent Power,” speech from November 16, 2013, <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2014/02/05/theory-distituent-power/> (accessed on April 10, 2020).

around the world. Different constituencies protest at the same time, in different places, because of the same need: To reclaim the commons.

Fortunate enough at the moment to be on a writing residency, I have the temporary and hard-earned luxury of getting lost in thought. Spare words, fragmented sentences, and brief texts cover every inch of the notebooks around my studio. My laptop is a silent discussant, waiting patiently to hear what must be written every day. Sometimes



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it is not so silent. Interruptions for world news as well as personal updates from other lives change the rhythmic continuum. Simultaneous realities penetrate the routine of the natural elements that measure the passage of time here. Different birds sing their own songs at particular moments of the day; the tide rises and falls; the local fisherman comes every morning—for the past fifty-four years—at the same exact time and place to fish; the echo of the Yoruba

drums sounds every night together with the faraway sound of Brazilian samba. These things mix occasionally with updates on current events such as the fires in Australia, the protests in India, Chile, Lebanon, Haiti, and Hong Kong; the news of escalating police brutality in Greece, or the killing of Indigenous leaders and environmental activists in Brazil. Yet, as far apart as these actualities seem to be from each other and from nature, they are connected. For various Indigenous communities, the personal, social, and ecological are closely interconnected: “health” is the state in which they are all in balance, a Quechua friend from Bolivia once told me.

In his much-discussed essay “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault suggests that the present era is above all the “epoch of simultaneity: the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, the epoch of the dispersed.” He asserts that we are in a moment when “our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects its own skein.”³ How has the overabundant reception of real-time information—unstoppable wherever we are—affected our sense of “the world”? How has it manipulated our awareness? Are we still able to see outcomes as dependent on human acts? Or has the dissociation between visual impressions and facts been so effective that we’ve completely lost touch with the “humane,” which is meanwhile submerged in cybernetic stimulation? Can we identify a set of new queer capacities that might be emerging, and go beyond the “hip-steria” of hyperconnectivity and navigate the turbulence within the demanding superterritorial terrain in which we all live?

3 Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” in *Politics, Poetics, Documenta X* (Berlin, 1997), p. 274.

Cities have morphed into unfamiliar landscapes. Politics are not the politics we recognize; our belongings are not ours anymore. Public space does not belong to us either; and even private space, if it still exists, is negotiable. We are entities in transit, in which nothing is familiar and everything is banal at the same time. But for how long? We are living through a rupture. As we experience this inevitable change, in which everything is in flux, space loses its shape and transforms into nothingness, an immaterial place: the space for the impossible. Can we transform this uncontrollable oscillation from here to there and elsewhere within a space where “everything” might—again, or at once—be “possible”? How can we bring the past into the present and how can “the future” again become plausible within our lives?

As long as we can be enlightened witnesses of this transitory process and make good use of the realities unfolding simultaneously on multiple levels, there might be a hope for better presents to come. It is, perhaps, time to accept the nature of transition per se—the “and” instead of the “or”—and to find the paths to a series of inclusive spaces where the keys to the entrances are not pre-cut, but are discovered endlessly in the process, through mere interaction. The maze shouldn’t be the problem. Closed doors, absolute points of view, and rigid “solutions” are the problem.

Varied observations, dialogues, and desires weave new narratives along the way; they are fluid and open to constructive complexification. These narratives have as much to do with the information we access, people, and places we encounter and relate to, as with our awareness of ourselves. History is tied to geography, but what does history mean before it defines a locality? “History is certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory

meet the inadequacies of documentation,” writes Julian Barnes in *The Sense of an Ending*, one of his most popular novels.⁴ Then, what about in times as ours in which the digital networks give us the opportunity to access past documents and doctrines around the world we never could imagine existed? The “complexification” of the process and the notion of modernity seems more needed than ever today. The universal version of Modernity (with a capital M), which was (intellectually) imposed on the biggest part of the world as a single path to progress, is hugely informed by many other knowledges beyond the West/North conglomerate, as is evident by now. Yet, in a world that has been organized by colonial processes for so long, it takes effort and time, courage and introspection to fully admit this.

So how can we fight asymmetries and unjustified hierarchies within so-called meta-colonial times? How can we respond to the popularity of the ultra-right, authoritarian, nationalist governmental morphologies? How can we redefine how our differences bring us together and celebrate them, as Audre Lord suggests?⁵ By questioning the notions of place, perspective, and time, we could arrive at the formation of vocabularies that encompass risk and precarity but also promise new forms of solidarity and interconnectedness, beyond the hegemonic relation of the “middle” and the “margin.” What about, then, a third space—or a series of third spaces lying between centers and peripheries—where people meet to imagine the possibility of other ways of being in the world? A place “between places,” a correlation of space, form, and politics consisting of various

4 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London, 2011), p. 17.

5 See Audre Lord, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider* (London, 2019 [1984]), no page number (ebook).

interrelated sovereignties? A place that remains constantly open to unexpected dialogues among neighborhoods, cities, regions, associations, and approaches. It is perhaps in this narrow space, between the two or more surfaces—the “heres” and “theres” that have been partially separated—where inconsistencies, flaws, and scarifications can be reconfigured and harnessed with sensitivity and affection.

Or what about the formation of one strong collective (consisting of the so-called weaker marginalized groups) that bypasses national borders and clock times as we have known them so far, and which responds to new commons based on empathy and resonance shared between specific localities? What if a set of new connectivities based on



Map of the Bay of All Saints, Brazil

common “worries,” as well as a fresh unity under the notion of “lack” and not “power,” could be more appropriate and more inclusive?

For now, I am at my desk—situated momentarily “here” in northern Brazil—writing for the “future” section of this book. My view is of a place where saltwater meets fresh water. This is an auspicious point for traditional communities and it is often used as a metaphor for different people coming together to share knowledge and reach mutual understanding. In Itaparica, tradition manifests in loops the same way ancestral waters do. Polyvocality, polytheism, syncretism; all seem *ad rem*. If lucky, you can meet the ancestral spirits walking the dirt roads in their elaborate costumes, greeting you warmly and sharing their useful advice for contemporary living; (metaphorically speaking, of course.) Yoruba, coming from West Africa, is the second language after Portuguese, even if it is not taught in school. The reason why is obvious: histories of slavery are still apparent in Bahia. Stories are told and retold; memories blended within today’s society and healed through the processes of an alchemical historiography. Or this is how it seems to my unprofessional eyes.

Among the primary obligations of people here is to maintain the sacred connection with everything that exists on Earth and beyond, unfortunately unlike us in the broader Western empire. The authority of traditional knowledge bears on the present, as it is performed in different rituals that take place, far and wide, in this small town. Yet, as customary rituals are tirelessly repeated over time, their reception and interpretation are altered and reinvigorated. Present encompasses past the same way the freshwater embraces the salt and is enveloped by it in the natural microenvironment in front of my modern wooden shack. Synesthesia is the norm here, even if Brazil is currently governed by an enemy of nature and his destructive

political party. Candomblé, the Afro-Brazilian religion, among other traditional communities, is still one of the main spaces of resistance. What about the future?

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The brief for this essay encouraged me to speculate on how a post-global art world and art discourse could look through the lens of art-theory publishing and curating as an activity. Will the precariat revolt? What might become the new normal, curatorially and discursively? These are some of the questions upon which I reflected. Thus I find myself asking: *Which way is South? And what is the time there (here)?*

I was born on the other side of the equator, so when I change sides it takes some time to get a grip on the new orientation and the new clock. From “here” (Itaparica, Brazil) things look different—as different as they would look from any other part in the world. After all, positioning depends on the vanishing point of the subject in question, and this is something we should always keep in mind—especially when we talk about any “global,” “post-global,” or “planetary” environment.

To attempt an answer, I do not know what will become the curatorial and discursive new normal. I find it difficult to think in terms of normality, as I think that cultural identity and art should be in constant negotiation with the margins. Yet I know that as I write, new art centers and events are being initiated by local professionals in locations that would be considered out of the art world’s range in the past, among them Lubumbashi, Accra, Dakar, Jakarta, and Dhaka. As these locations and events gain international agency, they productively shift the cultural dynamics of the contemporary art world. At the same time the so-called proletariat is revolting in many places around the world.

The reasons for protest are almost the same for everyone: access to equal rights and privileges. A day after a duct-taped banana selling for \$ 120,000, an “artwork” by Italian artist Maurizio Catellan was exhibited in Art Basel Miami Beach, underpaid janitors marched through downtown Miami with bananas stuck on their purple union T-shirts to protest low wages and poor working conditions. “How much are we worth?” was their question.

The future might be most about navigating the complexities of time and space in a nonlinear way. The fact that the past is no longer and the future has not yet come establishes a general pressure toward constant change—“progress.” Yet if we look into different traditions, we do not see the same vectors of progress. In Bahia, daily life is shaped by ancestral spirits. The Aymara people, who live in the highlands of the Andes, think of the past in front and the future behind them. In contrast to predominant Western belief, the Aymara believe that what is known is what we see in front of us with our own eyes and what is unknown lies behind us, where we cannot see. The Maoris hold similar views of time. Even if this perception of “historical time” reads as an oxymoron, it feels logical, sensitive, and sophisticated to approach life by prioritizing the notion of continuity as a vital force. Above all it is urgent to understand that the easier access the West gains into such knowledges enlarges the “universal” meaning (and direction) of evolution and its entanglements.

Art is not separate from culture, but how necessary is it to think exclusively in terms of concrete geography and distinctions, especially if we want to define a destiny that claims real freedom, or at least an attempt at it? Where do we start if we want to open a possibility for discursive

change? Whose experiences are narrated here, by whom, and why? Who defines what we, whether artists, audiences, professionals, or people in general, are and where we are at this moment? “Current history might be about false communities and calculated absences,” argues the Invisible Committee in their 2009 book *The Coming Insurrection*,⁶ “however, ‘art,’ as a kind of magic operation always offers an exodus from the rigid reality to a more ‘invented’ one. Often it not only captures an actual time and place, but also predicts and even influences the future.”

How is the notion of a “common postcolonial heritage” upheld in times of thriving neocolonialism, triggered not only by the global economy but also by the new ultra-right-wing nationalist and authoritative forces that have gained popularity around the globe? What if we recomprehend the South as polysemic symbol that stands for direction and movement and questioning “South” as a set of idiosyncrasies to be rediscovered?

Like many others, we found ourselves in a similar discussion when we initiated the journal *South as a State of Mind* in 2012.⁷ Soft, slippery foundations seem to create a need for territorial quests. In our case, the magazine was the imaginary territory in which we found and still find refuge during the devastating, everlasting crisis in Greece and beyond. The idea was, and still is, to give space to polyphony and cross-contamination—even if the voices that we present sometimes conflict with each other. Yet, how can coexistence be manifested in the form of a journal? How can networks emerge from a concentrated, sometimes even brief, exchange of ideas and shared intensities

6 The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), p. 109.

7 With a small group of collaborators, we founded this journal in Athens in 2012, which for four issues over the course of two years served as the official magazine for Documenta 14.

that takes place in the seemingly limited space of a bundle of printed pages?

It seems like yesterday when we began in Athens, possessed by a spirit of absurd authority guided by ideas that derive from Southern mythologies, which proved powerful for facing down an image of our future—an image presented to us as bleak and closed, after much rational calculation. We never thought of the South in purely geographical terms. For us, it stands as a parable upon which we built our endless quest for imaginary territories where intellectual freedom, as well as new/old methodologies, ways, pasts and presents, even new/old words, can flourish beyond any sense of compromise and tactics of *crypto-colonization*.

Within history (and the realms of theory, political sciences, and contemporary art practice), the notion of the “Global South” has provided a strong defensive mobilization against the hegemony the North. At times, however, efforts to forge a counterdiscourse to hegemony can become hegemonic themselves. Models of inclusion and exclusion, even if profoundly necessary when formed and adopted, can eventually defeat their own purpose. How can the very ideas of liberation and self-determination escape the subjective viewpoint of the “author” that brings them together? How can we go beyond the division of the “civilized” North from the “primitive” South without falling into the trap of self-imposed cosmopolitanism or self-imposed ethnicity?

We must overcome centrism in respect to the myriad of other truths in the world. We must also be careful with our approach to multiculturalism, as there are still structures of power that lie within it. In the past years, the focal point of the so-called art world has shifted from a few major centers to a multiplicity of artistic communities around the

planet. Cultural power is still perhaps concentrated in some cities and regions more than others (hopefully not for long), but the affinities between the “peripheral locations” have started to shape a different geography of contemporary art. How can we go even further, besides the cultural dependence between the center and the peripheries? Is it possible to decentralize the canon completely? A spherical understanding of time and geography is urgently needed to fight the renewed demand for exoticism. The historical colonial narratives of “discovery” continue unstopably within art’s geography. Despite all art-market pressure, we need to defend the spaces—museums, art institutions, exhibitions, universities, or journals—that make serious critical thought possible.

The constant redefinition of South can also be a deliberate act of rapprochement, a path that both “swerves away from the influence of predecessors,” and heads toward a “third space.” In the words of cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis, “This relational energy that connects personal and historical claims not only curves away from the compulsive trajectories that head North, but also draws force from the swirling gestures of rapport with other like-minded southerners.”⁸ Above all, South is a living entity.

The journey South is not predetermined. For us at *South as a State of Mind*, driven by the feeling of *abjoy*—a term from provincial Friulian poetry redefined by Pier Paolo Pasolini as the nostalgia for living toward the possibility of development through simultaneous euphoria and melancholy—this journey has been a sort of return: a dig into the future. Not necessarily a literal return to a fixed

8 Nikos Papastergiadis, “What is the South?,” *South as a State of Mind*, available online at <http://southasastateofmind.com/south-remembers-south-nikos-papastergiadis> (accessed March 12, 2020).

time or topography, but to the rediscovery of the subjectivities that have been and keep formulating the condition of South. Our journal's present became a renegotiation with the past. And our future became many pasts and presents to be. Across his writings, Antonio Gramsci believed that creating a new culture not only means one's individual original discoveries, but also the diffusion in a critical form of truths already discovered and their socialization into the present. The point is to make these past truths the basis of vital action again, and together an element of coordination and intellectual and "moral" order. How can "ruins" transmit knowledge through a series of presences and absences?

"The years between 1492 and 2012 are special years in our current era. In general, for most Indigenous peoples, this period represents 520 years of oppression and dispossession. In contrast, for European colonists and missionaries it represents a period in which the modern industrialized and technological society was born. It was their Golden Age," writes Jorge Garcia in his text on timekeeping, published in the tenth issue of *South as a State of Mind*.⁹ For Mesoamericans, however, the "dark" was less about despair¹⁰ than being part of a transitory time. Anticipating a long period of oppression, Indigenous peoples evolved strategies to survive and safeguard their ancestral ways and knowledge. But they knew that this

9 Jorge Garcia, "Timekeepers: The European Golden Age, the Mesoamerican Time of Darkness, and the New Dawn of Indigenous People," in *South as a State of Mind*, Issue 10 (2018), p. 132.

10 This is not to say that the conquest of the Mesoamerican continent was not devastating for millions of Indigenous people, but rather that for Mesoamericans the conquest was far more than simply an earthly encounter. Venus's movement indicated a cosmic time in which their knowledge would be safeguarded until the New Dawn—when it would resurface and people would continue with a way of life Europeans had interrupted.

period would ultimately end, and its conclusion would be announced by the passing of Venus in front of the Sun as it did in June 2012, a moment marking the beginning of a cycle known as the New Dawn of Indigenous Peoples. The post-2012 era is about the future. If we could all understand “facts” the way they did, that changes on Earth are the result of passing time, as marked solstices and equinoxes, and learn to live in harmony with cosmic events, today’s planetary concerns would have been solved long ago. There are no entities without irregularities. If we master our fear and find ways to face the darkness within an unwelcome void without being swallowed by it, this emptiness might become a space to fill with brilliance and beauty.

Today is the last day of the decade. As I write, I read on my screen that a “Santa Claus” traveled from Chile to Athens, Greece, to visit an “illegal” squat hosting Syrian and African refugees. He gave presents to the children and encouragement to the adults. Symbols are objectified and made available to users distant in time and space. This is how they stop being parochial. No one can be totally self-reliant. On this island, one of the still-celebrated *orishas* (gods) is called Exu. His function is to bring to each of us the truth that we are all interconnected. This is the bare essence.

United we go South.¹¹

11 In the positive sense, contrary to the popular racist definition of the idiom “to go South,” which means to take a turn for the worse.