

A

PRACTICE

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OF

GATHERING



Adelita Husni-Bey, *Postcards From the Desert Island*, 2011. Still from SD video, 22:23 min (color, sound).

Performance emerges through and as an act of gathering. There is, furthermore, an intertwined relationship between performance, philosophy and political education, such that pedagogy can be understood as a way of staging acts of worlding through gathering, embodiment, performance and roleplay. At times, these worlds constitute and conjure something illicit, something that cannot be prefigured. In my work, participants commit their own acts of worlding under my invitation and guidance. They convene and practice gathering against the notion of calculated risk, immersed in the incommensurability of what can happen when we come together.

I want to start by thinking about gathering—coming together for Mass or in protest, clouds building up before a storm, or strings being wound together to make rope. Gathering, as an active verb, requires a force that moves everything toward a point. That pull, which is indicative of a willingness and a desire, seems to be the central trait of gathering. While ways for gathering have been (unevenly) altered by the pandemic, the practice and power of gathering has intensified. Struggles against the violence of immiseration have become more visible, present, and active in the wake of George Floyd’s murder. We have seen successful campaigns to reclaim vacant homes, calls for rest and pay by essential workers who bear the brunt of this particular crisis, and reconfigured collective calls to abolish the police, rent, and work as we know it. The following five sections are framed by the idea of gathering. When I first presented this text as a talk for the Film and Digital Media Department at the University of California Santa Cruz in November 2020, I imagined it as a kind of litany.

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After I lost my mother last year in June, everything took the oceanic shape of grief. It was not as if my grief extended into the world, but as if the world had made manifest its capacity for grief to me. While households routinely gather around the body of the dead, a pandemic’s wake without bodies has the capacity to explode the nominal intimacy of grieving into another kind of choir. This transitory, historical moment of mass death—death by erasure through graphs and datasets that offer nothing to grieve—rubs against the incalculable loss and injury enacted on those who are deemed expendable and on the families who are denied their deceased. Is this exploding of individualized grief also a way of expanding the household, at least in the interregnum when there can be no private funerals?

Between February and June 2020, the months between my mother’s cancer diagnosis and her death, her care workers and I gathered at her house in Milan. I shared a bunk bed in my childhood bedroom with Yangkyi, who worked half of the night shift with me, while waiting for Veronica, who arrived every day shortly after dawn. Waged labor, stacked on top of blood-family labor, stacked on top of the labor of love of caring for the sick. The *oikos*, the family, the

economic unit, the patriarchal home left without a father, now inhabited by the four of us. One rests, while the others clock in and out of rooms, carefully calculating the risk of existing in the cracks of their care work. Gathered in communion, in love, in exhaustion.

This manifest capacity for grief, rendered raw and thrown into relief by Covid-19, is a result of capitalism’s operations of calculated loss—planned forms of risk-taking that lead to what Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes as “organized abandonment.” For immunocompromised people with life-long disabilities, like my mother, this reality was true in life, and very true in the hospital room where I was asked if her individual “quality of life,” (which was somehow supposed to be constant and which, I, not her, was expected to judge) was: a) good b) satisfactory c) bad. The doctor’s question had to do with resources: how many beds were available? How much money had been allocated to care for the sick? It had to do with how the private restructuring of public health along lines of profitability had impacted the linoleum-clad department we were standing in, in front of each other, feeling the manifest grief of the world.

Charles E. Fritz, a sociologist at the University of Delaware with a research focus on the study of disasters, developed a theory of social responses to calamity. Fritz observed that an emergent “community of sufferers” creates a unique “interactional pattern” based on the shared experience of coping with natural disaster.¹ This community, which was forged through suffering, relates in a way that Fritz found to be “therapeutic.” They practice mutual and institutionalized aid, joining together, for example, to rescue people or retrieve household objects from the rubble, to repair damaged roads, and to collectively narrativize the events.

The texture of this disaster has a longer history and origin, beyond the wakes bereft of bodies to grieve. The current pandemic exposes pre-existing forms of quarantine imposed by neoliberalism, a *cordon sanitaire* which institutes everyday life in separation and in competition for survival. Throughout this pandemic, we have witnessed both abandonment and its opposite, global responses that recognized our mutual entanglement. Official calls to sacrifice the most vulnerable by decree continue to be met with resistance through the sustained generation of mutual aid networks (of varying scale and degree), self-organized nurseries, collectively developed and shared online syllabuses, prison revolts, fleeting balcony choirs formed by neighbors across courtyards. Could quarantine, historically a form of social distancing, also engender its opposite—a renewed, therapeutic practice of gathering?

Contrary to Fritz, Italian communist Amedeo Bordiga saw nothing “natural” in natural disasters. Bordiga insisted that capitalism had mastered the development of an “economy based on disasters.” The thousands of deaths during the cholera epidemic in Naples in 1911, or the earthquakes that struck Reggio and Messina in 1908, he wrote in 1951, only amplified a set of specific relations of domination.² Government officials in gleaming rubber boots who line riverbanks for photo ops, Bordiga notes, cement the State; abundant charity from the rich cements the function and power of philanthropy; contractors looking to pour more concrete teem with excitement at the sight of mudslides dragging homes and people down a mountainside. If every disaster can be therapeutic, every disaster is an occasion for further exploitation and immiseration too. If according to Fritz our suffering and needs bind us when we gather during and after disasters, Bordiga argues that disaster binds us only insofar as our needs are an expression of our class position. Bordiga thought that the intensification of needs at the apex of disasters could be handled better politically if the origin of the catastrophe was not understood to be located in “nature,” but in the fact that buildings had been constructed with second grade material or too close to rivers known to break their banks.



Screenshot from Workshop: “On Necessary Work,” featuring healthcare workers from the United States and Denmark, April 2020.

I recently facilitated a workshop for healthcare workers who discussed their unease with the emergence of the idea that their work should be equated with sacrifice and remunerated with applause. A nurse described the day in March 2020 when the hospital administration packed up their offices to begin working remotely. In the afternoon, the ghostly upper floors were silent while the ICUs began filling up with rows upon rows of stretchers heavy with wailing patients. Like the burden of risk is placed on those hoisting sandbags on the banks of the swelling river, it fell onto the nurses, by virtue of the “essential” quality of their work, to keep the hospital going. Narratives produced in times of emergency, like the one of essential workers barehandedly and heroically countering the fierceness of “nature,” maintain the illusion of the elusiveness of the origin of the crisis, siting it somewhere distant, exotic, unnamable, in misfortune, in God, but not in offices, boardrooms, policies, food production systems, and supply chains.



Pierart dou Tielt, Miniature illustrating the *Tractatus quartus* by Gilles li Muisit (Tournai, c. 1353). Source: Wikicommons.

The epidemiologist Robert Wallace would agree with Bordiga, as he situates the outbreak of Covid-19 not in a Wuhan wet market, but in the boardrooms of US companies where intensive agriculture, deforestation, and mass monoclonal farming are peddled to the rest of the world as unrestricted low-cost, high-yield profit-making programs. The ideologues and pioneers of these programs are shielded from risk. But risk does not just evaporate, it is shifted onto necessary workers remunerated with applause, onto emergency workers hauling sacks of sand erecting very temporary dikes, onto the corpses missing from their wakes and families left without bodies to grieve.

1 Charles E. Fritz, *Disasters and Mental Health: Therapeutic Principles Drawn from Disaster Studies* (Newark: University of Delaware, Disaster Research Center, 1996), 28.

2 Amedeo Bordiga, “Omicidio Dei Morti” (Murder of the Dead), *Battaglia Comunista*, no. 24 (December 1951).

In September 2020 I was hired to teach art students on Zoom who were, like me, confined to their rooms across the United States. Six months after gathering around my mother's missing body, I gathered with them under different, but similarly unideal circumstance to learn. In the Zoom meeting room, supposedly a classroom, I teach about a school set up by enslaved and recently freed people between 1819 and 1865 in Savannah, Georgia. I have no images to screen-share as none remain. I tell my students I can only assume these gatherings operated out of a shared grief and as a form of therapy in the midst of the entirely man-made calamity of slavery. From the rubble of that shared condition emerged, I would like to think, a kind of gathering that brought solace and tools with which to carve a chance to live or refuse a chance of dying. I tell my students as we gather in our Zoom room that the participants of these schools referred to them as "stealin' the meetin'." The officious nature inherent in the term "school" can be stolen, repurposed, brought underground—the mark and ethos of liberatory pedagogy is always prefigured as an assembly of accomplices committing some kind of transgression, and this transgression is the mark of political education.

While researching the AIDS crisis in New York for this class, I recalled a scene in the documentary *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (dir. Jim Hubbard, 2012) where protesters gather in front of the White House lawn. Reaching between the iron bars of the monumental gates, their clenched fists scatter the ashes of lovers, brothers, sisters, and friends at the President's feet. Three hundred and fifty-six years earlier, in 1631, the mayor of Monte Lupo, a plague-stricken town in Tuscany, wrote to the Magistracy in Florence complaining that the gravediggers contracted by the town to bury the dead are refusing to dig graves. They too, like the activists in 1992, gathered at the gates of power, this time threatening to leave the dead in front of the mayor's house if their salaries were not promptly paid. As the "essential workers" of 1636, the gravediggers of Monte Lupo gathered in strike, one of the oldest forms of gathering, and refused to bury the dead. In doing so, they not only performed refusal, but built a therapeutic relation through and in the midst of a disaster—against the equation of alienated labor with sacrifice that gets remunerated with applause. The disaster of the plague in Monte Lupo made manifest the problem of unpaid work, like the disaster of AIDS made manifest the problem of unequal care. Monumental loss revealed to both the gravediggers and the activists that their position could be wielded in common. They will not bury their dead. I imagine an allegory where the gravediggers of Monte Lupo, the activists, and the nurses from the workshop gather at the President's gates to demand a chance to live or perhaps to refuse a chance of dying.



Ashes Action, c.1992. Source: <https://actupny.org/campaign96/OctoberActions.html>, ACT UP Historical Archive.

In 1378, the Florentine elite, accustomed to waves of plague periodically hitting the city, took off en masse to isolate in their countryside homes. Depictions of the Wheel of Fortune are scrawled on doors in areas of the city inhabited by laborers. According to the historian Sheldon Watts, any rumors of the plague were met with the recurrent motto "Flee early, flee far, return late."³ Rebellious woolworkers who had been denied any kind of political representation through the guild system by the Patrician oligarchy violently overtook the empty government buildings and released inmates from prisons as they stormed the city. The revolt, borne out of unsustainable burdens of debt and taxation, lasted several months and led to a shift of power relations in favor of the Ciompi, laborers not represented by any guilds—the working class. While current imaginaries detour visions of radical change in favor of producing the myth of a "return to normality," I reminded my students on Zoom that these moments of refusing the possibility of dying are entangled with the creation of new conditions for living.

3 Sheldon Watts, *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power and Imperialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 9.



Adelita Husni-Bey, *Chiron*, 2018. Still from single-channel 4K video, 18:13 min. (color, sound).

Twenty years after the publication of Fritz's study, I am contracted to develop a workshop for UnLocal, a New York-based organization offering pro-bono legal aid to migrants facing deportation. The power invested in them by law is the power of changing a life's trajectory, and that power is overwhelming, paradoxical, too hard to endure. I propose holding the workshop at night, with the lights off, in their offices. We move in the hallways, navigating between desks stacked with towering files spitting tongues of paper. In the dim light of the exit sign, the participants talk to me about the transactional nature of the word "client" and how the sharp edge of the juridical marks this relationship. I suggest trying to understand the complex relation of dependency between them and their "clients" through movement instead of words. We employ Augusto Boal's "person-person" technique, where two bodies become increasingly entangled through a series of instructions. Feeling the pressure of one's leg against one's arm draws attention to the distinction between support and imbalance, and it is perhaps a way of saying that support and imbalance are always in conversation. When practiced together, entanglement can offer the warmth of eroticism and intimacy, and at the same time the possibility of collapsing or falling to the ground. What comes of playing roles for, against, with each other—in contrast, in grief, in labor, in a choir, erupting from the seam of alienated life?



Adelita Husni-Bey, *After the Finish Line*, 2015. Still from 4K video, 12:39 min. (color, sound).

Eighteen years after the publication of Fritz's study, two years before the scene above, I am standing with a group of young athletes in a disused mall in Cupertino. I have gathered these athletes through an open call looking for young people who want to discuss the problems of competition, the unsustainability of a model that asks you to run, leap, and dethrone others—until you break. We use poetry to chronicle injury, and the poetry of collective injury to chronicle some kind of repair. The workshop consists of varying techniques of worlding, originating in the crack of

the unendurable and the unnamable. Participants perform ritual gestures of their respective sport, seconds before the ritual of competition begins: adjusting swim caps in front of imagined Olympic pools, stretching, getting into a crouch start position before a sprint, pulling up knee guards. These gestures are an extrapolated sequence drawn from the imaginary of success their bodies have been trained in, which now excludes the race and calls for a different ending. We mark the beginning of another trajectory from within the crack, from the broken arm, the shin splint, the concussion, as an act of worlding that flees forced individuation. These modes of learning, gathering through embodied pedagogy (a memory in the contactless world of the pandemic), remind me that contagion and contact share the same root, *contingere*, to touch, to move, to affect, to influence, to perturb, to involve each other. Gathering—coming together for Mass or in protest, clouds building up before a storm, or strings being wound together to make a rope.

Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci described a moment during which the different social, political, economic, and ideological contradictions at work in a society erupt together in a “conjuncture” producing a momentarily specific and distinctive character that can never be repeated. Thinking of history as a succession of these conjunctures, like volcanic nodes in a network, I imagine a series of overlapping processes interwoven via their dysfunctions, set alight by their contradictions. Akin to the act of rubbing sticks together, which will eventually start a fire, these autonomous forces convene, conjure, and mobilize over the progeny of earlier crises, genealogies of previous volcanic eruptions, spreading their ashes on the smoldering embers of the past.



Members of the Ustica Prison School, Ustica, c.1926. Source: https://www.ansa.it/canale_viaggiart/it/regione/sicilia/2019/10/18/a-ustica-un-laboratorio-antifascista_cddf86e1-df6a-4e30-9f6b-ac3db4f30f49.html

Bordiga, who believed there was nothing “natural” in natural disasters, and Gramsci were both arrested and exiled by the fascist regime on the remote Italian island of Ustica, off the coast of Sicily, in 1926. Ustica was a penal colony at the time, inhabited by political prisoners, convicts, and fishermen and their families who roamed the island in partial freedom. In the six weeks between his arrival and his ten-year imprisonment in Milan (where he would begin writing his *Prison Notebooks*), Gramsci, alongside Bordiga and other exiled communist intellectuals, funded the Ustica Prison School. Piero Straffa, an economist and friend of Gramsci’s set up an account for him in a Milan bookshop to supply the school with materials. Catering to the island’s prisoners and other inhabitants, held in courtyards and under trees in the village square, the school emerged from the rubble of that shared condition—a kind of gathering that brought solace and tools with which to carve a chance to live, or refuse a chance of dying.

Throughout this text I have argued that gathering, sometimes under the guise of pedagogy, under the guise of

protest, or under the guise of striking, is a way of understanding, refuting, reorganizing, and acting in opposition to the isolating injury of institutionalized abandonment. I have shown that political education always stages, through gathering, through embodiment, through performativity and roleplay, acts of worlding that constitute and conjure illicit worlds—participants which commit their own acts of worlding convene and practice gathering against the notion of calculated risk, immersed in the incommensurability of what can happen when we gather.

Alongside this illicit scene I see, through a lifetime of caring for and with my mother, how debility has always offered a radically different ethics of living. I want to return to the scene I mentioned at the beginning of the text; in the hospital where my mother died in June 2020 I was asked to describe her “quality of life.” Eva Feder Kittay, writing from the reversed position of a mother caring for and with her disabled daughter, recognizes that unequal care is practiced every day in their relationship.⁴ Here, “quality of life” is a shared project and not an individuated metric in the grand operation of risk calculation. This form of unequal care keeps both mother and daughter alive, in conversation with Marx’s envisioning of a post-revolutionary society that will inscribe its banners with the motto “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” In opposition to risk calculation, which will inevitably perform an uneven subtraction of life and livelihood from our shared social sphere, I want to end by asking the following question: How will we gather if we reimagined gathering through the expansiveness of the world’s manifest capacity for grief, if we reimagined gathering through the fact of debility, accepting gathering as an act of unequal care, if we reimagined gathering against the violence of immiseration and organized abandonment, under the current historical conjuncture, stealing meetings in this ever-expanding penal colony as rivers swell and break their banks once more?

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4 Eva Feder Kittay, “The Ethics of Care, Dependence, and Disability,” *Ration Juris* 24, n. 1 (March 2011): 49–58.

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