Cultural commons: Critical responses to COVID-19, part 2

Jilly Boyce Kay [iD]
University of Leicester, UK

Helen Wood [iD]
Lancaster University, UK

It feels like we launched *Cultural Commons* – a short-form section committed to voicing radically contextualist, rapid response analyses – at an opportune moment, just as the world seemed to spin off its socio-political axis amid a global catastrophe. The crisis context of Covid-19 is generating reflections and re-evaluations that are pouring out in myriad forms, and it is now almost impossible to keep abreast of the pace of change and the reach of the virus into every terrain of cultural, political and economic life. The virus has tracked and intensified existing inequalities and injustices, but in doing so seems to have irritated the tectonic plates of racial capitalism, accelerating global and local movements for black liberation in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the United States.

In Bristol, United Kingdom, the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston was pulled down by Black Lives Matter activists, rolled through the streets, and pushed into the river Avon. Priyamvada Gopal (2020) writes that these protestors are 'agents of historical change' who are destroying not history, but white colonial mythology. These forms of destruction, of tearing down, are not a denial of history, as conservative commentators insist, but an opening up of the public imaginary – a form of generation, possibility and hope. Jade Bentil (2020) writes that the protests are 'part of the war for black life on the streets of London, Minneapolis, Atlanta, Paris and each and every space marked by the constellations of black existence'.

On Twitter in June, jokes abounded that while at the beginning of lockdown, everyone was posting about making their own sourdough, now this had shifted into radical calls

Corresponding author:
Jilly Boyce Kay, School of Media, Communication and Sociology, University of Leicester, 132 New Walk, Leicester, LE1 7JA, UK.
Email: jilly.kay@le.ac.uk

for de-funding the police. A wholesale social shift – in which a love of bourgeois baking has been replaced by a commitment to black liberation – has clearly not taken place; the forces of white supremacy and racial capitalism are redoubling in response. But we *have* seen radical ideas suddenly, newly visible within mainstream discourse: the politics of abolitionism, of tearing down not only the statues but the violent institutions they symbolise, has moved into the horizon of national and international discourse. The radical intellectual work that has been undertaken over many years by black, feminist, anti-colonial and queer theorists may even be entering a new phase – providing the imaginative energies and intellectual tools with which to survive this moment and fight for a liberated future.

- Competing against the possibility of systemic change are the forces that want to 'return to normal' – that is to say, a normality in which social inequalities continue to rise and capital is still at the heart of everything. In the United Kingdom, the official government discourses have shifted from 'fighting' the virus to 'reviving' the economy, as Chancellor Rishi Sunak invites us to 'eat out to help out'.[1] On a global scale, we are seeing a dizzying range of nationalisms that are entangled with and animated by different forms of aggressive masculinist fantasy. On the one hand, we are seeing an intensification of the competitive 'biopolitical nationalism' identified by de Kloet et al. (2020) in the last *Cultural Commons* issue, in which bellicose nationalistic pride is taken by many citizens (notably in East Asia) in their state's capacity to control them more effectively than any other nation, and on the other hand, the kinds of white libertarian toxicity emblematised by Trump, in which masculine autonomy is equated with the right to ignore scientific advice and go manfully maskless.

The gender politics of biopolitical nationalism are complex and shifting; some national 'success' stories are attributed simplistically to essentialistic notions of women's leadership styles, rather than to stronger state infrastructure and longer histories of investment in public health. Nevertheless, commentators have noticed that many countries with female leaders (Germany, Taiwan, New Zealand, etc.) have fared better, speculating that this is because these leaders have been more willing to listen to the diverse perspectives of various experts.[2] On the other hand, countries with radical-right illiberal populist male leaders (Brazil, United States, Russia and United Kingdom) are the places where cases are still rapidly rising, and where scientific guidance has often been sacrificed to conspiracy theory.[3] These governments have generated a false tension between prioritising economic health on the one hand and public health on the other, while their male leaders have become icons for the libertarian 'anti-masking' movement (see Jayson Harsin, 1060–1068).

It's too soon to tell what all this might mean for the spiralling growth of populism across the political landscape – and this is just one of a series of pressing questions emerging from the crisis. These include how the visibility of Black Lives Matter might translate into meaningful structural transformation; what the intensified focus on the domestic home might mean for gendered patterns of social reproduction (Kay, 2020);

how the visibility of social inequalities and the treatment of our care workers might be channelled into some form of redress (Wood and Skeggs, 2020); in what form will the arts and culture re-emerge from their current crisis, and how might they be (re)valued (Banks, 2020; Hermes and Hill 2020); or what the consequences of the acceleration of platform capitalism be as it crashes up against a resurgence of calls for universal basic income and a 4-day week? These are just a few of the many questions that are now part of the discursive landscape, and to which our critical attention must be turned. As these potential shifts play out, for now, this is our final rapid-response section dedicated to Covid-19, as research now moves into more sustained territory, and we imagine that we will receive full-length articles in due course.

These six articles therefore represent the second round of *Cultural Commons'* critical contributions to cultural studies in a time of coronavirus. These two rounds in themselves, written across just 4 months, capture the way in which the context is shifting beneath our feet, in front of our eyes, and beyond our imaginations with every passing day. The diversity of topics in this second dossier on Covid-19 points to the ways that the pandemic is infecting multiple dimensions, and to the ways it is mediated and imagined, from the intimate spaces of girls' bedrooms to the rural vistas of eco-fascist imaginaries; from the maskless men who see public health measures as an intolerable threat to their masculinist white freedoms, to the corporate brands who mobilise a vapid sense of 'togetherness' while materially exploiting and endangering their workers.

First up, David Craig's essay on 'Pandemic and its metaphors' revisits Susan Sontag's work on the discourses around AIDS. Craig considers the continuing critical value and explanatory power of Sontag's analysis of cancer metaphors, and updates them in the context of Covid-19. For Craig (as for Sontag), the metaphors of plague and warfare through which the coronavirus is imagined and articulated, and the conjuring of a foreign, alien and diseased 'other' who is to blame, wreak as much lethal damage as the pathogen itself. Craig writes that 'Western AIDS discourses described how the disease travelled from the "darkest continent" to the Western world, spread by Haitians and queers'; now, racist imaginings of the 'Wuhan virus' or the 'China flu' are weaponized to create another kind of despised 'other'. But as Craig powerfully argues, metaphor, language and media can also be weaponised to fight back against the hateful othering; towards the end of his essay, Craig cites these lines written by the poet W.H. Auden: 'we must love one another or die'.

Next, Francesca Sobande's essay 'We're all in this together' points to the ways in which corporate brands have clamoured to capitalise on the sense of social connection that has emerged during the pandemic, at the same time as their claims to unity and togetherness obscure material inequalities – and their complicity in sustaining them. As Sobande writes, while supermarkets and other multinationals cheerily claim that we'll get through this together:

> there is still a glaring dearth of meaningful analysis of how issues regarding racism, anti-Blackness, classism, ableism, ageism and other intersecting forms of structural oppression significantly shape the different risks that people are dealing with right now, and the likelihood of them receiving adequate and life-saving support and care.

Since this was written, the disconnect between this widespread corporate rhetoric of 'unity' and the material reality of oppression has become starkly apparent in Leicester, United Kingdom, where the extreme exploitation of garment workers working in sweatshops across the city has come to public visibility in July. The fast fashion giant BooHoo, which has seen enormous profits during the crisis, and to which most Leicester garment factories supply their clothes, has been posting caring messages about 'We're all in this together, we'll all come out of this together. Love, BooHoo'.

Next, Jilly Boyce Kay reflects on the ways that 'nature' has assumed a highly visible role in the transformed spatial conditions of pandemic. Discourses abound of the ways we are newly enchanted by green space; gardening and visits to parks and countryside are touted as solutions to the mental health crisis, and as things that should be more highly valued, cherished and protected in the wake of the crisis. The symbolic rural, she argues, has become a key modality through which the post-covid future is imagined. This intensified political potency of the rural entails both the possibility of a greening or re-ruralisation of the world, but also the risks of further emboldening an eco-fascist politics of 'blood and soil'. Inspired by the work of Raymond Williams, Kay asks how we might conceive of and build a 'radical rurality' that will liberate the land from the material and symbolic enclosures of whiteness and capitalism.

The essay 'Ruining Instagram' by Annelot Prins records her experiences of 'live-archiving' the crisis through #coronadiaries, on a social media platform that traffics in aspirational pursuits of happiness, cruel optimism and smiling women. She reflects on her ambivalent relationship with the platform, and her quest to 'ruin' Instagram from within, by posting images of trash cans in Berlin and writing lengthy, pessimistic captions on anxiety and critical theory. She considers how her training in cultural studies has in many ways shaped her response this moment, and provides the conceptual tools to understand and respond to it. She writes, 'The boundaries between ourselves and our research become even messier during a collapse. In few other fields are academic research and political activism so intricately connected'.

Alison Hearn and Sarah Banet-Weiser's essay 'Future tense: Scandalous thinking during the conjunctural crisis' takes inspiration from Stuart Hall, who pointed out that, above all, the value of Karl Marx's thinking was that he 'insisted on thinking radical and subversive thoughts'. Their essay is a powerful call for cultural studies scholars to embrace the kinds of thinking that will 'scandalize' bourgeois professors, and refuse the temporal logics of white, western, patriarchal thought. They see this crisis moment as 'an opportunity to relinquish our material, affective and intellectual investments in a racialized capitalist future'. In many ways, the global movements for Black Lives Matter show the radical possibilities of scandalous thinking; the momentum around calls for police and prison abolitionism, for example, has been made possible precisely thanks to Black intellectual thought that has dared to transgress the narrow trammels of accepted academic thinking.

Jayson Harsin's essay 'Toxic White Masculinity, Post-truth Politics and the Covid-19 Infodemic' considers how a certain kind of aggressive, masculinist 'truth-telling' is itself proving contagious in the pandemic. He explicates the concept of 'emo-truth', which is a 'particular form of aggressive masculine performance of trustworthiness [. . .] resulting in a legitimated status of the popular truth-teller'. The disinformation that circulates

via the vectors of emo-truth has 'mortal effects', and Harsin persuasively argues that coronavirus and the deaths it causes must be understood as a *cultural* phenomenon as well as a biological one: the virus was 'saturated with power relations before it ever leapt from bat to pangolin to consumer'. Radical white masculine selfishness is at the very heart of the virus's lethality.

Finally, Melanie Kennedy's essay on TikTok celebrity, girls and the Coronavirus crisis considers how the pandemic has catalysed the hyper-visibility of girlhood online. She focuses on the video-sharing social network platform TikTok, where certain kinds of classed and racialised girlhood have become spectacularly visible in conditions of lockdown. Revisiting the classic cultural studies work of Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber on bedroom culture, Kennedy considers how these intimate domestic spaces – where girls have historically found privacy and some kind of freedom from patriarchy's scrutinising gaze – are now increasingly opened up to surveillance and judgement. While TikTok visibility is often touted as a form of empowerment – in the idea that 'teenage girls rule the Internet right now' – Kennedy shows how the media spectacles of white, wealthy TikTok stars function to eclipse other kinds of more radical girlhood, such as the young women and girls who are at the vanguard of the Black Lives Matter movement.

As Ghassan Hage (2020) pointed out in an earlier *Cultural Commons* article on Covid-19, the temporality of academic critique on the one hand, and the temporality of practical action on the other, are not happy bedfellows. In the teeth of a global pandemic, instantaneous intellectual responses might seem to be of dubious value, or even graceless in their opportunism. But, as these six pieces show, crisis moments do allow for a kind of intellectual doubt and ontological destabilisation that can permit more radical, scandalous, open kinds of thinking. In a similar vein, Susan Buck-Morss points to the value of '*plumpes denken*' – a kind of vulgar or inelegant thinking (see Olla and Buck-Morss, 2019) that refuses to think according to established disciplinary traditions. This kind of open thinking can lead to imaginative and intellectual leaps of faith that expand the horizons of the politically possible; the loss of one kind of future can be the opening to another.

These contributions are offered in the spirit of a commitment to 'scandalous thinking', *plumpes denken*, and radical intellectual doubt. Perhaps, as cultural studies scholars who are always-already denied full membership of the bourgeois professors' club, we should now more deliberately inhabit our outsider status, and commit to undertake a collective project of scandalization.

Funding

ORCID iDs

Jilly Boyce Kay (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9548-296X
Helen Wood (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9269-9944

Notes

1. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/food-and-drink/news/eat-out-help-out-restaurant-voucher-scheme-government/
2. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html
3. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/briefing/coronavirus-populist-leaders.html

References

Banks M (2020) The work of culture and C-19. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23: 648–654.

Bentil J (2020) Black lives matter, grandma and me: How our world changed during lockdown. *The Guardian*, July 18. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jul/18/black-lives-matter-grandma-and-me-how-our-world-changed-during-lockdown

de Kloet J, Lin J and Chow YF (2020) 'We are doing better': Biopolitical nationalism and the COVID-19 virus in East Asia. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23: 635–640.

Gopal P (2020) Removing statues doesn't erase history: It makes it. *HuffPost*, June 26. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/statues_uk_5ee33c50c5b609f241c952b7

Hage G (2020) The haunting figure of the useless academic: Critical thinking in coronavirus time. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23: 662–666.

Hermes J and Hill A (2020) Television's undoing of social distancing. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23: 655–661.

Kay JB (2020) 'Stay the fuck at home!': Feminism, family and the private home in a time of coronavirus. *Feminist Media Studies* 20: 883–888.

Olla N and Buck-Morss S (2019) Critique and tradition: A conversation with Susan. *LA Review of Books*. Available at: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/critique-and-tradition-a-conversation-with-susan-buck-morss/

Wood H and Skeggs B (2020) Clap for carers? From care gratitude to care justice. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23: 641–647.

Biographical notes

Jilly Boyce Kay is a lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Leicester, UK, and the editor of *Cultural Commons*.

Helen Wood is professor of Media and Cultural Studies at Lancaster University, and editor of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.