

Strategic Inessentialism

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Abstract The following introduction provides an overview to the Dossier on COVID-19, curated by Jules Gill-Peterson and Grace Lavery. This introduction explores how the pandemic has intensified the inessential denotation grafted onto trans people's material lives through health care, policing, incarceration, immigration, and racism. The ongoing crisis in academic labor and its uncertain pandemic futures are, similarly, an important place for trans studies to attend in this moment.

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We write from a moment when time and space are seemingly superseded every few days or weeks, and therefore when writing is more than usually conscious of its immanent irrelevance. Such a time and space of global pandemic is one in which trans people have real experience writing, practiced as we are in the arts of the inessential, the nonessential, and the wrongly essentialist. And so while we understand that the ideas gathered in this dossier will undoubtedly be read in a future whose form we cannot anticipate, we affirm that trans writing can make an affordance out of that condition of inessentiality to say something across the folds of pandemic time and space that ripple from us to you.

Although it is coincidental that this dossier on COVID-19 makes its home in this special issue of *TSQ* on HIV/AIDS, the shared space of these pages allows us to confront the many observed and disavowed points of interface between the two. Comparison, analogy, and allegory have been invoked time and time again between HIV/AIDS, as some form of precursor, and COVID-19, though such rhetorics fail when they presume that HIV/AIDS is already over, or precontemporary, or separable from this viral pandemic. As this special issue's coeditors Eva S. Hayward and Che Gossett importantly point out, HIV+ people have been placed under particular restriction and duress by this coronavirus. Individual and collective experiences with the state's investment in mass death may provide some lessons in activism and mutual aid, but the shape of COVID-19—its curve, however variably flat or peaked—is not the shape of HIV. They do not inhabit the same time and space.

Though that does not mean that they are unrelated, either. Far from a “great equalizer” because of its contagious spread through the air and surfaces, COVID-19 moves wildly unevenly and makes existing vectors of race, class, poverty, incarceration, ability, and citizenship into comorbidities. The fantasy that COVID-19 would compromise the immunity of the whole population as an act of egalitarianism, or make everyone into an immunocompromised subject, disavows the disproportionate impact of this pandemic on those who were already immunocompromised, where there is no equalization to be found, only intensification.

In a context of artificially restricted and market-driven health-care provision, trans people have had treatments deferred, delayed, or canceled on the grounds that they are—that we are—“nonessential.” And for many more, being restricted to home effectively suspends forward movement in pursuing all manner of transition-related and gender-affirming plans, medical and otherwise. The further loss of income, financial security, and housing security many are facing only compounds those dynamics. In one sense, then, the state’s admission that transgender and transsexual treatments are inessential dedramatizes the regime of medicalization under which trans people have been forced to live for decades, in which transition needed to be framed as urgent, irresistible, and its denial life threatening, before it could be accessible at all. To learn from that body of accumulated knowledge, as with the knowledge of the HIV+ and immunocompromised, rather than rail against our “new” position as inessentialized bodies, we want to ask what distinctive engagements might be enabled by a strategic inessentialism. The narrative drama that trans studies has lent to many of its accounts of oppression, transphobia, and necropolitics has perhaps diminished our attention to the bodies of knowledge that make possible the significant fact of living on and desiring otherwise, without the idealization that is often obliged to arrive at the exalted terrain of resistance we would imagine as successful. Though none of us has elected to dedramatize the conditions of contemporary trans life in this way—it was, after all, the state, in collusion with the pandemic, that did so—we nonetheless ask after its unexpected affordances.

Another way to say this is that we are worried about the widespread desire to be or become cops under the state of emergency, and for all that desire does to regenerate a biopolitics of comorbidity and racial capitalism. Our concern addresses the root biopolitical problem of “immunity” as a concept, which models a self-contained body and body politic that must be defended against the fantasized virus and/or invader. Yet to sustain that fantasy of an inside and outside, the body politic must likewise sustain an internal, constitutive violence: to kill and let die the life that has been deemed external to a healthy body despite already being inside it, or sacrificeable to preserve the integrity of the body/nation (Cohen 2009). Of course, viruses are unusual in that way, since they are not quite alive by

conventional definitions, making them both disturbing in their indifferent actions on our bodies and eminently killable, en masse. Immunity metaphors therefore have immense purchase beyond all appeals to reason, or even shame: enter here the Republican Party's "kill your grandmas to save the economy" line, the line between reason and shame collapsing perhaps most spectacularly in the advice from a notoriously germophobe president that "it would be interesting" to consider "injecting" bleach into a living lung, to clean out whatever viral contamination dwells inside.

Yet these caricatured proposals from the usual suspects are not the only exercise of power that alarms us. We note the sheer patrolling of social participation that extends police powers to detain and interrogate, as well as to fine one's fellows, to every "good" and obeying subject in the realm, despite already ample evidence to suggest that police are deploying those very powers against people of color, immigrants, and sex workers, in typically violent manner. Here, to dedramatize the maneuvers of the pandemic affords us greater clarity with which to apprehend what forms of state power are actually being internalized under a moral-ethical framework of acting in the best interests of the social body. That imperative, of course, is not simply affirmative: it involves righteous punishment for those who do not live up to a monied, white scenography of social distancing while comfortably working from home, ordering delivery from local restaurants as a sort of moral practice of consumption. How much have certain elements of academia carried this banner in celebrating the heights of productivity possible while working from home; in exhorting feverish new value production for corporate universities as a form of self-sacrifice for the fantasized good of students; the displacement of teaching onto video-conferencing software, accelerating the convergence of teaching with surveillance technology distributed by profiteers; or, in the surprisingly inflexible approaches to students in distress who become unable to keep up with online learning, as so many social media tales relate? Has higher education not been a longtime laboratory for this sort of internalization of police power under the sign of benevolence? Isn't educability its progressive, but thoroughly governmental, mandate?

The form of ethical obligation supposedly entailed by pandemic conditions in which symptomaticity is not a requirement of viral communication, and recovery is no proof of immunity, is poised to satisfy as well as to reproduce the perfect form of isolation that neoliberalism has long sought to maintain. Distancing is an ethical obligation privatized solely in the individual subject, and it is, in principle, both interminable (without a knowable end) and limitless (without knowable exceptions). And that's exactly why it provides the perfect ideological cover for the traditional vehicles of state power, like the police, who are making the most of their new powers to harass, arrest, and detain people of color. It's why

the vast majority of jails and prisons still have not been emptied out. Perhaps less spectacularly, it's also how regimes of state and corporate surveillance are already making use of the declared state of emergency to institute cellular, digital, and public modes of data capture and risk assessment that dovetail with, and greatly inoculate, policies that mere months ago were considered objectionable by many, such as "travel bans," or concentration camps on the border, precisely by subjecting the unmarked citizen to moderately less extreme forms of the same, and calling that a pretty good deal.

The securitization of the border, in particular, illustrates the outcome of a resurgent immunity concept regenerated from all sides, including those well-behaved and socially distant subjects. While militarized police presence has seen an observed uptick in places like the southwestern US states, we read that the detention and deportation of migrants have also increased significantly, as the emergency powers the federal administration has granted itself take advantage of the apparent legitimacy of public health to pursue once-contested plans with full-throated expediency. Not only is immigrant detention an incredibly dangerous place to be during a pandemic, but the deportation of so many people has itself played an observed causal role in Guatemala's COVID-19 outbreak, for instance (Martin 2020).

Anti-immigrant securitization is part of the racialization of virality and immunocompromised comorbidity. This manifests in the United States in the radically higher rates of COVID-19 mortality among Black patients, which has been characterized as an implication of institutional white supremacy, and for which the Surgeon General's claim that responsibility fell squarely on the shoulders of Black people's individual comportment led to rare public acknowledgment of its sheer absurdity (Sellers 2020). In the market, the hospital itself is part of racial capitalism's comorbidity, a space where risk is displaced onto already stigmatized bodies, while the heroic men and women in white coats are cheered, in their almost-comical absence, at seven in the evening. Meanwhile, considering that many nurses and low-wage health-care and senior-care workers are Black and immigrant women of color, particularly in the United Kingdom, their disproportionate deaths are also scrubbed from the balcony clapping for the National Health Service.

While the securitization of immunity and exhortations to individualize responsibility rely on exposing many groups of marginalized people to the vulnerability of being labeled inessential life, we note that inessentialism, then, is an axis of solidarity. Turning toward academia and trans studies, in which the inversion of our long-fought enemy "essentialism" is too rich to pass up, we would suggest that inessentialism puts the "contingency" in "contingent labor" and, even more so during the pandemic, the "adjunct" in "adjunctive treatment."

The crisis in academic labor has long felt like an event that destroys time and space for generations of scholars whose structural underemployment never

measurably recovered from its supposed most recent cause in 2008, only to find that 2020 has now hit. Part of what has been so stark in the COVID-19 pandemic is the naked disaster capitalism of the most elite institutions, who set the stage for industry-wide adoption of contingent labor and other neoliberal practices, as was the case with the move to online teaching. Brown was among the first to announce a hiring freeze. Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, with a combined nearly \$100 billion in endowments, have led the charge in refusing to extend contingent contracts while preemptively slashing the expectation of new employment for those who will lose their income and health insurance. Now we hear of public universities following suit by furloughing staff, slashing salaries, and making preemptive budgetary cuts.

Yet we might interject to say that the numbers don't quite check out, either: if you let all your adjuncts' contracts expire now, for one thing, there will be no one to provide the essential labor of the university later. Without contingent labor higher education would go belly-up. Indeed, contingent positions are being construed as inessential only because they exist under the university's fantasy that they are adjunctive treatments for prevailing economic conditions—which makes them, in fact, utterly essential because “cure” is not on the table. What we might rightly fear over the next several years, then, is not only that some existing contingent labor situations will disappear under mass layoffs but also that elite schools will pilot a much more aggressive adjunctification of the professoriate than we have already witnessed (though that scarcely feels possible). Perhaps this adjunctification will occur in concert with the collapse of smaller institutions of higher education that cannot withstand an economic downturn owing to their lack of multi-billion-dollar endowments to hoard, like community colleges. And so perhaps what we are now witnessing is the rapid acceleration of a process that has been ongoing for decades. The adjunct will be presented yet again as a stopgap for which we have no choice but to accept graciously, exactly as the Ivy League presented online teaching as a stopgap measure that we now expect to continue at least into the next academic year, as if this were not a flagrant and coercive shift in basic working conditions.

How do we say no? How do we make our strategic inessentialism a potent force for solidarity that generates action? Through labor organizing, for one thing. Jules writes fresh on the heels of a faculty organizing meeting held digitally, where an ongoing fight for a union has found newly expansive importance. While the faculty at the University of Pittsburgh have been obstructed by the administration at every turn, with a lengthy legal battle both pending and suspended by the pandemic, organizers have turned to solidarity and mutual aid to apply an important brake on administrative dictates, building collective energy to respond to radical shifts in policy and working conditions that were delivered in over sixty

separate emails from university executives in March. Within departments, faculty have also reached out to colleagues in the spirit of affective solidarity and care. Jules can testify to the emotional relief that accompanied taking time to talk to her colleagues and share feelings of exhaustion, worry, and fear. This practice of care has countered the further individualization and isolation of labor that working from home intensifies and is made contingent on other assumptions (on a stable internet connection, a quiet room in which to work, and without other responsibilities for care work). And labor organizing builds strength to imagine better, more equitable working and learning conditions whose implementation would not require further individual Herculean effort, and that could include being cared for. The very inessentiality of taking time to refuse isolation and talk openly and vulnerably with colleagues prompts solidarity and nonessential care that can energize labor actions.

Grace, meanwhile, writes in the midst of a set of challenging conditions encountered by the wildcat strike called by graduate student laborers at the University of California, Berkeley, a vote for full work stoppage that passed on the same day as campus administrators suspended in-person instruction. Yet in addition to having the force of their collective actions blunted by the administration's response, grad student workers are now compelled to carry the affective weight of the present crisis, as frontline educators holding discussion sections and office hours—using software that, of course, makes surveillance all the easier. And, additionally, the fiction of an imminent rally of the academic labor market, a fiction with which campus administrators have busted unions and incentivized workers into unlivable conditions, has collapsed once and for all, and the work of ensuring that such workers can continue to live is one that now draws in more and more inhabitants of this collapsing institution.

The five short entries in this dossier on COVID-19 explore the zones of being, embodiment, knowledge, critique, and feeling that live in the trans inessential of pandemic space-time. We invited contributors to pursue genres that could move with their thoughts and capacities as they varied from day to day, or week to week, and so we are delighted to introduce several critical essayettes, a letter to the future, a reflection on contingent labor, and much that testifies to the specific feeling of writing now. This is writing generously offered without any expectation that the future in which that writing will appear, or in which it will be read, will resemble even the most recent past.

One axis of thought that travels through several contributions concerns what, exactly, constitutes this pandemic, and what sorts of critical knowledge formations take root in its midst. Gabriel N. Rosenberg explores the founding mytheme of zoonosis, an intimate contact between species (human and animal) that grounds the emergent historiography of COVID-19, as it continues to shape

the way that HIV/AIDS is narrated and formulated into policy. Reading against the phobic response to intimacy that describes, for example, “wet markets” as racialized spaces of contamination and penetration rather than simply places where one buys produce, Rosenberg offers grounds for a conceptually robust engagement with zoonotic contact, in the name of developing new and newly porous ways of thinking about interspecies relation.

Kelly Sharron takes the COVID-19 pandemic as a powerful illustration of Karl Marx’s understanding of wage labor as both the defining freedom of the free subject and, thereby, the sole freedom with which we are endowed by capital, whose interests have wholly subsumed any organs of governmentality in the US state. Sharron’s analysis shows us how the very categories on which we engage with the present moment—of the (putatively antagonistic) difference between “economy” and “life”; the opposition of “freedom” and “health”—depend on the naturalization of capitalist logics whose death-dealing and freedom-limiting power is in forceful evidence.

A second axis of thinking across this dossier concerns the states of feeling that characterize writing from the scene of trans life, living on and, especially, working during a pandemic. Harlan Weaver writes a love letter to the future from a trans surgical team that has just completed major surgery on the present, a set of procedures for making whole chronic conditions that did not originate with COVID-19. Weaver writes from a future after the pandemic as it presently moves has shifted, from the perspective of the countless trans people who have long been engaged in vernacular sciences of survival and invention. In their name, Weaver asks after the collective expertise born of relegation to the nonessential rather than waiting for a crisis to end.

Julie Beaulieu digs further into the contradictions of surviving and suffering at the same time among the contingent: trans, academic, and teaching in the midst of registering the impact of what is happening to our workplaces, our students, and to us. Beaulieu sets trans pedagogy in a moving question about what it might mean “to teach students about topics as though they are happening to all of us.” While a gentrifying university in a gentrifying city in a gentrifying world accelerates a loss of imagination about what it means to do more than get by, Beaulieu confronts a difficulty for so many queer and trans people in the academy: the brutal realities of contingent labor sit uneasily for many with a long-desired narrative of class escape. How does a pandemic enter this realm of academic laboring for queer and trans people, with its competing mandates to care for our students but to also “fail fabulously” at online teaching?

Since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, governments have enacted or announced new restrictions on trans people in Poland, Hungary, the United Kingdom, and the United States, at both state and federal levels. The now dominant

trans-antagonism, which positions trans bodies not as inessential but as positively undesirable, frames every expression of trans identity or desire as a metaphysics. A strategic inessentialism might help trip up these ever more certain philosophers as they frog-march us out of the toilet, out of the hospital, out of the clinic, out of the house, and out of the state. When we say “trans women are women,” we are making a political claim rather than a metaphysical one: we are women because we are positioned by the capitalist cisheteropatriarchy as such. Our weak theory doesn’t meet metaphysical charges of transphobia and violence with a more robust metaphysics but rather hews closer to an adaptability that mounts a political response to conditions of inessential life. If the ontology of the crisis is the logical grounds for ever more explosive and vicious implantations of disaster capitalism, perhaps strategic inessentialism can guide us toward what Morgan M. Page (pers. comm., April 2020) calls “disaster communism.”

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