

Fred Moten

Preparing to Imagine

The particular range of devastation visited on the neighborhoods of upper New York City during the Covid-19 pandemic has been brutal for all the usual reasons and also for a couple of others. One of those is that it is so impossible to measure. How do you count even one loss when anyone lost is so many people for so many people? A beloved *abuela*, whose touch or glance is no longer shared, and the sound of whose voice or the taste of whose cooking fades from sure materiality to uncertain memory, so that the very familiarity that makes a family begins to waver and must somehow remake itself, is also that lady that we see every morning at the bus stop, the one whose eye catches every one of ours in silent greeting, the one you watch, with a small secret joy, mark, with her own small secret joy, some child's passage from being carried, to toddling, to running too fast down the street as the seasons change and folks move in and move out and move on. When you watch the way she watches, when you watch with her, and see with her, you share the knowledge of what it is to belong to the neighborhood and to its histories of refuge and displacement so that then and there, somehow, you are hers and she is yours in a memory you share of where you've been, and of where and how you've been moved, and of the many different ways you both got there that day until the day she's not there. Then, at that same time and place you've been sharing every morning, you are disoriented and out of step. You take a wrong turn, or the right turn now feels wrong, because you share a loss you have no way of knowing that you share. She's just not there one day and you weren't the only one who missed her, and so the neighborhood grows palpably less sure of itself, less welcoming to itself and to its changes, with no way of counting, no way of fully knowing, this exponential diminishment of the maternal ecology.

And then there's that whole other thing about how it's all so needless. She's not supposed to be gone because she had to go to work, because all still depends upon all she had to give and how she had to serve. All the losses that are held in her being lost didn't have to happen and they didn't have to happen that way, all lopsided, all unequal in effect, all skewed in brutal reversal of the normal, brutal transfer from those who give to those who take. Why is it that when loss happens those who give are given more, more and more, so much more than they can take? And why are you who lose given the responsibility of creating a miracle, like the miracle of remembering you've made tonight, where you show what it is to share unknowable and uncountable loss and, in that sharing, turn immeasurable privation into incalculable wealth?

I keep saying “they”, and “you”, when what I want to say is we. I want to say it so bad that I can taste it, or smell it, or hear it as if it were being whispered in my ear. Do I have to earn that solidarity? Can you grant it to me? Will you suffer me to suffer with you, as if I were a little child? I feel like I feel something with you, even if it can’t be what you feel. I lost someone, too, who was so much and so many more than one. On April 16, 2022, my mother, whose name is B Jenkins, would have been 88 years old but for the fact that on April 16, 2000, she died on her 66th birthday. I was the only child to whom she gave birth, but she watched so many children in passage that I have never been an only child. It’s just that sometimes it feels like my contact with all the brothers and sisters I know and don’t know is always faltering in her absence. That feeling deepens when the weather starts to break and so, this evening, this spring, as life comes back in what has become my customary season of depression, I stand before you, a motherless child, trying to get ready for something new, trying to feel my way back to the neighborhood. Is spring repair or preparation? Is its renewal a function or a negation of destitution? That’s a problem I can’t solve. Spring will never be the same for me; springtime really hangs me up the most; and all I know for sure is that I’m in something I’ll never get over.

One of the last things my mother said to me, with neither one of us having any expectation that she would carry out her own imperative, is, “I see now I’m gon’ have to let you go.” She could never let me go. I can’t let her go, either. When I say I’ll never get over it, that’s what I mean. We’ll never let each other go. It’s just that there is, somehow, an all but unimaginable release in how we bear the unbearable burden of always having to prepare for what we’ll never get over. We’re always getting ready for this harmony of holding and handing, this murmur of mourning and remembering. When we send our kids off to school in the morning that’s what we’re studying. Every “bye, mama,” or “hey, baby,” in whatever economy of love they are arranged, is another lesson in the giving and taking of what we never fully have and cannot do without. Beyond any either simple or complex distinction between mourning and melancholy, there is this condition of entanglement and accompaniment and conspiracy that is an inability, which turns into a refusal, to let go or to be let go. And what if the extent to which we conspire in this inability and refusal to get over it is the extent to which we will have come to know how we get over? Our conspiracy, that collective soul, which is given in all the materialities we share in practice, will have looked back in wonder while we move ahead, while we try to find our bearings in movement, which requires that we prepare to imagine the terrible and beautiful double edge of what is: that we practice the alternative, which is our subsistence, in a war against the alternative.

I know I can't have earned the right to say we, and I don't know if you can grant me that right, but I'm gonna ask you to do so anyway. I guess I shifted into it almost without knowing because now I know something you know – that we share that we go on while never knowing how we can go on; and that we share knowing that this natural thing of loss in sharing is made unnatural in the malignant war we must prepare to imagine. Now, under this duress, we're made to think about what we're doing right now, and to figure out how we can do it again tomorrow. We don't have the luxury to be careless about noticing everything that might keep us from being here again and again. Every time we gather, we do so in mourning and celebration, with immeasurable joy and incalculable sadness. Incalculable because the loss is uncountable, because I don't know what I lost, because I still don't know all of whom I lost when I lost my mama. I'm still preparing to imagine her loss, and the loss of *nuestra abuela*, and of all those who lived in her, all of whom I imagine, but all of whom are known, in the real, by all of you right here, right now, and lost, in the real, to all of you right here, right now. The people in her are lost to me, too, and in the real, right here, right now, we share that. We must prepare to imagine the living we've always made of sharing, under the shadow of the war we must prepare to imagine, too. We must imagine with and in the evidence that's all around us, the evidence that we are, in mourning, the evidence of our loss, which is a constancy that continues to condition this pandemic as an aspect, as a facet, of the world, which is now war's theater in the round, where we are held in all but captive witness to our genocide, whose absolute terror is not lessened by the fact that somehow we survive it.

The inequalities that structure this pandemic on global and local scales are manmade, which means our loss, which will have always been bigger than the sum of our losses, can't be attributed to any natural cause. We must prepare to imagine how and why that is. We must prepare to imagine that what is given in the facts of our shared history of loss, where the vicious forces that put refugees on the move from Olumo Rock to La Perla to Washington Heights are like a constant crossing, x marking every spot along the path of every step we take, is the ongoing convergence of the war against subsistence and the war of conquest. Our neighborhoods – our family circles and pulsive corners, are also battlefields, and movement in and from them is under the gun. Somehow, we live here though we can't live here. To live here, we somehow have to see that we can't live here anymore.

To imagine that our stories of loss are also stories of war is also to imagine that there will be no repair, that this is something we'll never get over, and that this not getting over it, which will have always been part inability and part refusal, bears so much more than the limited possibilities that repair implies. These wounds, these losses, that we can't and won't get over – if we practice

sharing them, if we prepare to imagine the truth, which is that we share them – are the ground of a future in which “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal group differentiated vulnerability to premature death,” which is what the great geographer and social activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls racism, is no longer accepted or acceptable as the basis of our existence, which is unbearable in a world that will not bear it. We can’t see the future we want if we can’t see the present in which we live. But if we prepare to imagine the real world, in which my mother, in which all our mothers, did not die of natural causes, then we prepare to imagine the surreal world, in which my mother is not only my own, in which she remains of the maternal ecology we share in all our sensual experiences of family and in less palpable but no less real intensities of encountering those with whom we tarry on the street in the neighborhoods we breathe and ground and move and share in dispossessive resistance to dispossession, those whose names are unknown but whose presence is felt in the broken fellowship of the distant shore. We move, here, so we can move away. This is our persistence. We remove, with no return and no repair, in refusal of the normal, and we prepare to imagine that we protect what we practice when we practice vigilance, militance and love, which (the abolition of) war demands.