Crisis: the decisive moment (as in a literary plot) . . . an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending, especially one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome: a financial crisis, the nation’s energy crisis . . . a situation that has reached a critical phase: the environmental crisis, the unemployment crisis.
Merriam–Webster Dictionary

We completed this special issue of south: a scholarly journal on the first anniversary of Donald Trump’s election, an event to which all three definitions of “crisis” apply. When editor Sharon P. Holland proposed the theme of crisis: opportunity and asked me to join her as a guest editor, Trump’s victory was months away and still inconceivable to most of us. Needless to say, the gravity—if not the focus—of the theme shifted beneath our feet. Trump’s campaign trafficked in explicit racist messaging, mobilizing white supremacists (the so-called “alt-right” and “white nationalists”) of every stripe. His victory gave them a voice in the White House, the chimera of legitimacy, and even license to kill. This part was to be expected. Prior to the election, self-proclaimed white supremacists were on the rise again, and the battles over Confederate flags and monuments, along with the massacre at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, were among their many declarations of war.
Trump's victory produced another predictable outcome. As traumatized liberal Democrats scrambled for explanations, many laid the blame on the South—the region they are quick to dismiss as a political backwater and home of racist right-wing reaction. In California, where I live, this became a kind of mantra along with smug, self-satisfied slogans calling for Left Coast secession. How quickly they forget the state that gave us Ronald Reagan, Prop 187 waging war on undocumented communities, Prop 209 eliminating affirmative action in public universities, the blueprint and model for the modern prison nation, and Tom Metzger, the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan who actually won the Democratic primary in Southern California's 43rd Congressional district in 1980.

While it is true that the South has been the site of intense struggles against white supremacy, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, not to mention resistance to the general assault on democracy, Phillip Gordon’s contribution, “Night Train Across America: Mapping EthnoHeteroNationalism in the Age of Trump,” reminds us that these are national, not regional, struggles. He warns against directing “our ire at a mythic South run amuck in bigotry” and insists that “the South” is now only a region in our mind, a metaphor that obscures as much as it reveals. It has always been this way. Slavery, dispossession, white supremacy, and patriarchy are the basis for ethnoheteronationalism, and the foundation stones for the entire nation, from sea to shining sea. Besides, by scapegoating the South, we not only “miss the degree to which the rest of the nation is involved in this same EthnoHeteroNationalism,” but we end up erasing the black and multiracial groups at the forefront of resisting Trump’s authoritarian agenda and building power outside the mainstream Democratic Party. Many are in the former Confederate States. Among them are Project South, Southerners on New Ground (SONG), the Moral Mondays Movement, Kindred: Southern Healing Justice Collective, Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi, Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) in Louisville, Asian Americans Advancing Justice in Atlanta, and the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights.

Most of the essays gathered in this issue are not reactions to Trumpism but strike broader themes, attend to endemic crises, introduce new analytic and conceptual categories, and leave us with new lenses through which to see the world. But they also take up the issue’s challenge, which is to complicate the crisis: opportunity dialectic. It is all too easy to treat crisis: opportunity as a kind of maxim without ever interrogating what it means and what it obscures. The oppressed are rarely in a position
to benefit from, or take advantage of, the crises that beset their lives. For example, the economic system’s periodic crises are opportunities for capital to temporarily resolve its own contradictions, to restructure and consolidate power, or to find new ways to incorporate opposition. Neoliberalism itself was a response to the global slump of the 1970s and the virtual collapse of Fordism, which provided the opportunity for radical economic restructuring by privatizing public assets, assaulting organized labor, dismantling the welfare state, deregulating banks and industry, revolutionizing monetary, fiscal, and financial policies as a means of promoting unregulated free market activity, and perhaps most importantly, adopting an ideology that conceals what has been an ongoing crisis for the world’s working people.

Crisis, then, can become in the words of Dutch social theorist Willem Schinkel, the “opening up of history to itself, the shift from closed to open horizon, from providence to progress, from arrest to mobility” (37). The essays included here embrace this theme or use it as a scaffolding to tell a story of horizons of possibility or rupture. Most of the authors are concerned with how to turn the opening up of history into opportunities to resist not just Trump but the neoliberal racial regime in all of its patriarchal and homophobic articulations. These essays do not make magical predictions or offer solace and optimism in these dark times, but they all agree on the urgency of struggle and the necessity of social transformation. Patrick Elliot Alexander’s “Education as Liberation: African American Literature and Abolition Pedagogy in the Sunbelt Prison Classroom” demonstrates how the crisis of mass incarceration and criminalization is an opportunity for radical education, for a pedagogy of freedom that can prepare the way for social change. Alexander discusses his work in prison education, namely the founding of college prep and college-in-prison programs at Parchman Mississippi State Penitentiary and Orange Correctional Center in North Carolina. Creating and maintaining such college programs, especially in the post-Clinton crime bill era in which federal funding for higher education in prisons was abolished, is critical in these times. Building on Angela Davis’s pioneering insights, Alexander sees their intervention as an incipient “abolition pedagogy, a pedagogy that exposes and opposes educational deprivation and the mass-based social control logic that have come to define the prison-industrial complex.” The incarcerated are not only transformed in the process but, in turn, become producers of new knowledge. The stories he shares reveal the power of transformative pedagogy, of collective,
self-directed knowledge production, how history and literature can illu-
mine the present, and above all, the value of the classroom. Indeed, any-
one working in classrooms across the country should be able to see how
an abolition pedagogy might extend to all.

Of course, for the 2.6 million people caged in America, the crisis did
not begin with the global turn to authoritarianism. Trump’s election
hardly signaled a state of emergency for most people since many of us
have been living in such a state for years: living in ghettos and barrios
with underfunded, crumbling schools that are now annexed to the crim-
inal justice system; living under the war on drugs or the war on terror,
subject to the constant threat of state-sanctioned violence or enduring
a continuous media loop of police killings of unarmed black and brown
people; undocumented families living under the constant threat of
deporation and detention; indigenous people subject to state violence,
incarceration, ongoing dispossesssion, resources extraction, and the vio-
lation of sovereign rights. Here, Walter Benjamin’s oft-quoted passage
from his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” is instructive:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emer-
gency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must
attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.
Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real
state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle
against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the
name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. (257)

In other words, normalization, that idea that the state of things is nat-
ural and the logic behind it becomes common sense conceals the state of
emergency that the most oppressed not only recognizes but endures and
resists. To resist normalization and create a real state of emergency is the
task at hand, for it signals a loss of consensus or legitimacy of the dom-
inant group. It means that it can no longer “lead,” but can only “rule,”
as Antonio Gramsci put it. Once ordinary folks no longer believe what
they used to believe, it creates a crisis. As Gramsci explained, “The crisis
consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be
born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind
come to pass” (32–33).

For black people in America, the condition of racism produces some-
thing akin to a permanent state of crisis. The very violence and ferocity of
everyday racism, ironically, proves its fragility. It is built on fictions that
must constantly be shored up, not for its victims but for those who stand to benefit. According to Cedric Robinson, “The archaeological imprint of human agency radically alienates the histories of racial regimes from their own claims of naturalism” (xiii). Thus black people exist in this interregnum where morbid phenomena constrain black lives. Shermaine M. Jones’s essay, “‘I Can’t Breathe!’: Affective Asphyxia in Claudia Rankine’s Citizen: An American Lyric,” is a meditation on Rankine’s use of white space to signal the audible sigh and recurring motif of suspension as metaphors for emotional suffocation. “Black people,” she writes, “must choke down the rage, fear, mourning, and other emotions that arise when confronted with racism.” Rankine’s Citizen gives us an accounting of the price of racism, from the mundane to the spectacular, from microaggressions to state-sanctioned violence. She coins the phrase “affective asphyxia” to theorize the ways in which black emotional expression is policed, suppressed, and silenced. For Rankine, one way to resist affective asphyxia is through the power of mourning, not as a lonesome isolated act but as a public expression. Rather than lead to passivity and acceptance, the act of mourning inspires militancy and deepens our commitment to struggle.

Moving beyond this interregnum requires the kind of qualitative leap that is about more than seizing opportunity. For Benjamin, what is required is a political vision and critique that contains messianic traces—an image of a future beyond both the catastrophe and the recovery. An understanding of history as flashes of hope at a moment of danger, that attends to the traditions of the oppressed, can generate the sort of political critique and vision that moves beyond the closed dialectic of crisis: opportunity to some sort of revolutionary break. Here legendary anti-racist activist Mab Segrest finds flashes of hope in histories buried deep beneath white nationalist and neo-Confederate mythologies—or what Cedric Robinson would call the “makeshift patchwork masquerading as memory and the immutable” (xiii). Her essay, “Flagged Up, Locked, and Loaded: The Confederacy’s Call, the Trump Disaster, and the Apocalyptic Crisis of White People,” reckons with the neo-Confederates vowing to “take back” Alamance County, North Carolina. They are just a microcosm of the movement battling to preserve monuments dedicated to the defenders of slavery and white supremacy, monuments we know were built to memorialize the so-called Lost Cause during the early twentieth century in the afterglow of the erection of modern Jim Crow and disfranchisement. Segrest shows that “many of today’s neo-Confederates’
ancestors likely rebelled against the Rebellion.” These were poor and working-class whites who were conscripted against their will during the Civil War, who were punished mercilessly when they deserted, whose wives and daughters were not only tortured by Confederate brass in search of deserters but often participated in food riots. In some cases, they descended from communities that were once abolitionist outposts along the underground railroad. In other words, it is more than ironic that today’s neo-Confederates hail from counties that resisted the “real” Confederacy and contributed to its temporary defeat in 1865.

Yes, temporary. The war continued into the turn of the twentieth century. The monuments to Robert E. Lee and Nathan Bedford Forest, the resurrection of the Confederate flag, and the screening of Birth of a Nation were declarations of victory. By the time the Klan was reborn after 1915, the Confederacy not only had won the Civil War but also had won over large swathes of the white working class and poor once seen by the planter class as cannon fodder, recalcitrant renegades, and subversives. There was something of a second temporary defeat during the Second Reconstruction in the 1950s and ’60s, but the new Confederacy is on the rise again. It not only seeks to consolidate power over the former slave-holding states, but like the South itself, it has captured the federal government. As Segrest writes, “The resonances between Trump’s threats to North Korea and the state’s paramilitary’s are but one indication of the reach of the far right into the highest echelons of the U.S. state as the country’s ongoing crisis of whiteness reaches apocalyptic proportions.”

This special issue is not a playbook or a blueprint for resisting Trump or neoliberalism or white supremacy. However, taken together these essays remind us that nothing is guaranteed. Life, struggle, crises are always contingent. Opportunities are usually seized by those who are ready.

WORKS CITED


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