
 Małgorzata Sugiera

Rethinking Posthumanism in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic

 TEKSTY DRUGIE 2023, NR 2, S. 70–81

 DOI:10.18318/td.2023.en.2.5 | ORCID: 0000-0003-4953-2422

Paradoxically, during the long months of the COVID-19 pandemic many people hoped for a return to normalcy and believed that what they are enduring belongs to those one-of-a-kind experiences, which at the same time should deeply change our way of living. Today, without having undergone those hoped-for radical changes, everyone, historians of infectious diseases included, seem to have come back to business as usual. A case in point is Richard Conniff's *Ending Epidemics* that narrates the struggle against contagion across three centuries, premised on a growing understanding of the human body as a habitat that has to be defended against external pathogens.¹ Although written recently, with good reason the narrated story finishes with the unprecedented eradication of smallpox in 1978. As the author acknowledges, he decided not to include more recent pandemics like HIV, SARS or COVID-19 in the storyline because his aim in depicting only successful battles with pathogens was to establish a powerful model for what humanity can still

¹ Richard Conniff, *Ending Epidemics: A History of Escape from Contagion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023).

This article was written within the framework of the project "Epidemics and Communities in Critical Theories, Artistic Practices and Speculative Fabulations of the Last Decades" (UMO-2020/39/B/HS2/00755), which was funded by the Polish National Science Centre (NCN)

Małgorzata Sugiera – Professor at the Jagiellonian University and Head of the Department of Performance Studies at the Faculty of Polish Studies. Her research interests include the issues of decoloniality and speculativeness, issues of performativity and materiality of nineteenth/twentieth-century culture, with particular emphasis on the history of science and the relationship between artistic phenomena and technoscience. She recently published *Sztuczne natury. Performanse technonauki i sztuki* [Artificial natures. Performances of technoscience and art] (2016), and co-edited *Worlds in Words. Storytelling in Contemporary Theater and Playwriting* (Cambridge, 2010), *Theater spielen und denken* (Suhrkamp, 2008) and *Emerging Affinities. Possible Futures of Performing Arts* (Transcript, 2019). Email: małgorzata.sugiera@uj.edu.pl

achieve in a unified global effort to fight successfully the upcoming contagion. Nonetheless, while calling for training and supporting multinational teams of virus hunters to prevent emergent spillovers, Conniff seems to be fully aware of the fact that in our times, when epidemics overlap and mutually influence each other not just human species will need to be protected but the world itself.

Indeed, the Coronavirus has turned out to be not an epidemiological singularity but rather a globally noticed origin of new pandemic threats, one of many which emerge nearly annually.² These threats are caused not only by a wide variety of pathogens, representing different taxa, source hosts, modes of transmission and clinical courses as well as global webs of travel and trade which help once local spillovers become new epidemics. Increasingly often the reduction and disruption of tightly entangled and complex ecologies have also spurred the emergence and evolution of new pathogenic strains. Although from 2010 onwards many scientists and science journalists have been writing about and warning against what they often called “a New Pandemic Age,”³ it eventually became common knowledge and a widely recognized threat only after the last pandemic. For instance, in *Dead Epidemiologists*, a collection of articles written during the last outbreak, Rob Wallace, an evolutionary biologist and public health phylogeographer, focuses on the capital-led agricultural production and trade as one of the major reasons for the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ He convincingly demonstrates the damaging effects of turning living organisms into commodities and entire production chains within more and more capitalized landscapes. By replacing ecologies that are more natural, today’s agriculture promotes invasive species and alternate xenospecific relationships, which, in turn, disrupt long-term ecosystemic function. Therefore, Wallace recommends that “we err on the side of viewing disease causality and intervention beyond the medical or even ecohealth object and out into the field of

2 More on this subject: Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Chronopolitics of the Anthropocene: The Pandemic and Our Sense of Time,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 55 (3) (2021): 324–348; Barney Jeffries, *The Loss of Nature and the Rise of Pandemics: Protecting Human and Planetary Health* (Gland, Switzerland: Word Wide Fund for Nature, 2020); David M. Morens and Anthony S. Fauci, “Emerging Pandemic Diseases: How We Got To COVID-19,” *Cell* 182 (2) (2020): 1077–1092.

3 Nathan Wolfe, *The Viral Storm: Dawn of a New Pandemic Age* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2011); David Quammen, *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

4 Rob Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of the COVID-19* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020). Kindle.

eco-social relationships.”⁵ Despite his narrow focus on agriculture, Wallace’s recommendation seems to me of utmost importance in our time of epidemics cropping up in the wake of detrimental global environmental damage of anthropogenic origin, interwoven with other economic and social crises.

Admittedly, after the last pandemic many researchers have been – or, at least, tried to be – more optimistic than Wallace. One of them is Conniff who recalled and brought to the fore the first (and actually the only one) humanity’s success in fighting smallpox and attaining temporary global immunity. Suffice it to recall Roberto Esposito’s recent update of his rather utopian concept of affirmative biopolitics, “one in which, for the first time in history, we can glimpse the unprecedented silhouette of a c o m m o n i m m u n i t y.”⁶ However, I would rather side with a more pessimistic Wallace who in *Dead Epidemiologists* warns that viruses “may easily evolve out from underneath the population’s immune blanket.”⁷ For the challenge is not so much to control and manage the global problem of pandemic threats any more but to face the paradox highlighted in the edited volume *Endemic* already a few years before the last outbreak. As the editors of the volume point out in their introduction, what urgently needs to be reflected upon is “the persistence of contagious rhetoric and logic in a society that has ideologically construed itself as impervious to infectious disease.”⁸ Contrary to this, the last pandemic clearly proved that we are not impervious to infectious diseases, in particular of viral origin, and moreover notably unprepared to track and quarantine asymptomatic and minimally symptomatic cases due to specific biomolecular characteristics of viruses and their still relatively unknown place in the pathogen’s evolutionary web. Therefore, after the COVID-19 pandemic it is definitely important that also humanities use new microbiological and cultural findings on viruses and multispecies relations, which habitually surface during infectious diseases to rethink the pre-pandemic foundations of the posthumanism. Obviously, it is too ambitious a task to accomplish in an article of a limited scope. In what follows, however, I would like to tentatively demonstrate why a closer look at viruses and the reciprocal capture of scientific-cultural performances

5 Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologists*, chap. “Notes on Novel Coronavirus,” sec. “Structural Causes of Disease.”

6 Roberto Esposito, *Common Immunity: Biopolitics in the Age of the Pandemic*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 5 (emphasis in original).

7 Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologists*, Interview “Agribusiness Would Risk Millions of Deaths.”

8 Lorenzo Sevitje and Kari Nixon, “The Making of a Modern Endemic: An Introduction,” in *Endemic: Essays in Contagious Theory*, ed. Lorenzo Sevitje and Kari Nixon (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4.

out of which they emerge as epistemic, technical-aesthetic objects compels a recalibration of multispecies relations and politics on which posthumanist theories are based. I will do it through rethinking the concept of Gaia as a main framework of posthumanism as well as the interrelated idea of planetary immunity. For as the American social philosopher William Irwin Thompson put it concisely: “Gaia, in essence, is the immune system of our planet.”⁹

Immunitary Gaia?

Despite the posthuman turn in academia in the late twentieth century that deeply questioned human exceptionalism while trying to apprehend complex entanglements and necessary disentanglements in the more-than-human world,¹⁰ humanities have been increasingly haunted by the concept of the Anthropos as a key-figure of universal humanity. That is why already in its subtitle, the recently published edited volume *Life in the Posthuman Condition* spotlights the fact that the new conceptualizations of the eponymous life in the posthuman condition gathered there propose closer examinations of and critical responses to the Anthropocene.¹¹ Hence, the editors of the volume rightly point out in their introduction: “it is as if the danger and urgency to react to the climate emergency pushed back all theoretical efforts in post-colonial, decolonial and feminist discourses and created the conditions to rehabilitate a new type of hyper-humanism.”¹² Therefore, to confront this rather unexpected comeback of rehabilitated humanism adequately, they argue for a reconceptualization of research methodologies, together with the whole apparatus of thinking about our entanglements in much larger biological, geological and technological systems. Although it is not the one and only example of a renewed discussion about posthumanism in the context of the increasingly popular new geological epoch named after the human,¹³ I focus

9 William Irwin Thompson, “Introduction: The Imagination of a New Science and the Emergence of a Planetary Culture,” in *Gaia 2: Emergence – The New Science of Becoming*, ed. William Irwin Thompson (New York: Lindisfarne Press, 1991), 11–29, 24.

10 For the second see particularly Eva Haifa Giraud, *What Comes after Entanglement?: Activism, Anthropocentrism, and an Ethics of Exclusion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

11 S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė, eds., *Life in the Posthuman Condition: Critical Responses to the Anthropocene* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

12 Audronė Žukauskaitė and S.E. Wilmer, “Forms of Life in the Posthuman Condition: An Introduction,” in *Life in the Posthuman Condition*, 3.

13 What is in stake in this discussion, in a concise way expresses Bruce Clarke, an expert of what he calls “Gaian science”: “naming a new geological epoch after the human or some

precisely on the volume *Life in the Posthuman Condition* because of its Gaian context and perspective, clearly flagged in Bruce Clarke's opening chapter "Anthropocene Desperation in Gaian Context."¹⁴

As Clarke rightly recalls, thanks to the originator of the idea of Gaia, independent British scientist and inventor James Lovelock and his close cooperation with the American evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis, Gaian science brought the climate crisis into focus decades before the official acknowledgment of the Anthropocene as the newest epoch in Earth history. Since then Gaia has been conceptualized in many ways – as an autopoietic system of a single cell, a kind of organism, or rather an emergent, recursive form of self-production and self-maintenance in which the biosphere interpenetrates dynamically with the geosphere and technosphere. Irrespective of all differences in its conceptualization, Gaia was consistently depicted as run by microbes, fully dependent on the ongoing evolution of bacteria, that is single-celled organisms or their colonies. A short time ago, Dorian Sagan, who together with Lynn Margulis coauthored several books on planetary biology and evolution through symbiosis, confirmed this depiction in the context of the Anthropocene by saying that Gaia "is essentially a microbe-based system... and appears to be able to take care of itself through complex feedbacks."¹⁵ While Clarke quotes his words to give a glimpse of hope in the dark time of apocalyptic desperation in the Anthropocene, I recall them rather to demonstrate that Gaian science still marginalizes viruses as apparently abiotic entities, 100–500 times smaller than bacteria. Even though a year later, during COP26 in Glasgow to which Lovelock was not invited, he wrote about viruses in *The Guardian*, he clearly did it, taking an epidemiologist's perspective. For he concluded that unless humans learn to live in partnership with the Earth, it will move "to a new state in which humans may no longer be welcome. The virus, Covid-19, may well have been

subset thereof as a geological force on a par with life altogether looks to me like a defensive crouch in response to the advent of the posthuman. Relative to this particular human-centered neologism Gaia is the better concept to confront Western modernity in particular with its others and its unintended effects, including an account of humanity's minor part in Earth's geostory." Bruce Clarke, *Gaian Systems: Lynn Margulis, Neocybernetics, and the End of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 256–257.

14 Bruce Clarke, "Anthropocene Desperation in Gaian Context," in *Life in the Posthuman Condition*, 15–32.

15 Dorion Sagan, "Gaia Versus the Anthropocene: Untimely Thoughts on the Current Eco-catastrophe," *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 1 (1) (2020): 137–146, 144.

one negative feedback. Gaia will try harder next time with something even nastier.”¹⁶

Hence, in his short commentary in *The Guardian* Lovelock defines the virus causing COVID-19 – and supposedly all viruses – as an epidemiological threat and exterminable target(s). His position could be, however, better understood when taking a closer look at those earlier conceptualizations of Gaia which I have already pointed at in this section. Modelled on the discrete integrity and autopoietic closure of a living cell, they clearly emphasize Gaia’s status as a thin planetary membrane, responsible for its identity and immunity. However, the more recent ecological depictions of the immune system as a communal construction have already gone beyond the earlier ontologies of the self-referential, immune self. In “Planetary Immunity,” a chapter of his book *Gaian Systems*, Clarke sums up, for instance, the current and widely accepted view on Gaia according to which “the science of Gaia now recognizes that neither life nor its planetary medium is so fundamental that either can be said to control the other.”¹⁷ As he further explains, “geobiological history has thoroughly churned them all together into a planetary holobiont that maintains and defends its components to an appreciable degree against cosmological as well as ecological insult.”¹⁸ Nonetheless, this bounded envelope as an implication of Gaia’s systemic identity still functions as the planet’s frontline immunizing organ, producing and maintaining a delimited zone of habitability. In other words, even Gaia conceptualized as holding together the many selves of the symbiotic ecology, remains a bounded, closed system, and its main role comes down to immunizing the entire planetary life, in particular by the fending of all threats and dangers, viruses included.

Contrary to those imaginaries of immunitary Gaia, premised on the epidemiological concept of pathogens, their transmission and ways of spreading, today’s scientists more and more often define contagion, especially of viral nature, not only as a deadly threat but also as an open-ended system that enables a jump cut to something qualitatively new. Therefore, it is the right time we imagined Gaia anew – as a virus-based system rather than microbe-based one.¹⁹ This, in turn, may bring along significant changes in the way we

16 James Lovelock, “Beware: Gaia May Destroy Humans Before We Destroy the Earth,” *The Guardian*, November 2, 2021, accessed October 9, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/02/beware-gaia-theory-climate-crisis-earth>.

17 Clarke, *Gaian Systems*, 239.

18 *Ibid.*, 239.

19 Referring to works by Karen Weynberg, the Australian expert on bacteriophages and synthetic biology, Astrid Schrader demonstrates that although until recently viruses were

apprehend not only our entanglement in/as the environment but also our knowing/doing practices and life as such. Before that, however, a closer look at how viruses have been conceptualized, depicted and technologically materialized predominantly as pathogens in both popular and medical imaginaries would be well advised.

Explanatory Tropes of Viruses

The best example of how little we know about viruses, even though they are the most diverse life-form in the world, and how much our knowledge is limited to a pathogenic part of a more differentiated virosphere and human virome is undoubtedly the shifting image of what has caused the recent outbreak. The very name of the COVID-19 pandemic encourages us to think that it has been caused by an emergent zoonotic virus. However, the latest studies show that for at least several decades SARS-CoV had been circulating undetected, most probably causing local epidemics in Asia and maybe elsewhere, although it did not spread globally. Viruses not only still exist at the edge of our technical capacity to enhance sight, they are also in flux – they proliferate in quickly mutating swarms, forming clouds of particles with a fluid genetic make-up.²⁰ Mainly for this reason, their material worlds are still accessible to us only through indices and symptoms in a similar manner as they did when microbiologists discovered the first traces of viruses at the turn of the twentieth century.²¹ However, contrary to the latest findings of viral relational agency and pluripotency, we still imagine viruses as self-contained particulars with clear boundaries and stable inherent properties along the lines of a neo-liberal agenda, according to which genetic information could become a patented and traded commodity. As Caitlin Berrigan rightly points out, “viruses, fathomable only by means of scaffolds of metaphors, are evacuated of their

studied mainly as disease-causing agents, the survival of our species may nonetheless depend on them. In particular, Schrader focuses on marine viruses and their role in the global carbon cycle wherein they take decisive part in regulating and manipulating the conversion between organic and inorganic carbon as well as in enabling and contributing to the storage of carbon in the ocean. Astrid Schrader, “Elemental Ghosts, Haunted Carbon Imaginaries, and Living Matter at the Edge of Life,” in *Reactivating Elements: Chemistry, Ecology, Practice*, ed. Dimitris Papadopoulos, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa and Natasha Myers (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 108–130.

20 See *E-flux Journal* 130 (October 2022), Special Issue “Viral Theory”, accessed October 11, 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/130/>.

21 See Carlo Caduff, *The Pandemic Perhaps: Dramatic Events in a Public Culture* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

material relations and come to operate as the metaphor itself.”²² Therefore, it is not surprising that theorists and politicians alike have often deployed the pathologized virus as a figure that stands in for foreign agents or invaders.²³

The well-known example of how a metaphorized virus might and has been politically deployed is Elizabeth Povinelli’s set of three figures of geontopower in her *Geontologies*, one of which is the Virus, the main token of which is the Terrorist.²⁴ The author defines both the Virus and the Terrorist as an ultimate threat to the capitalist system but demonstrates that at the same time the two figures serve as considerable sources of profit. Significantly, Povinelli came back to her figure of the Virus just after the second wave of the Coronavirus pandemic, in November 2020. In “The Virus: Figure and Infrastructure” she shows how the Virus-as-Terrorist effectively blocks a vital understanding of the current pandemic as yet another form of structural violence, a manifestation of the ancestral catastrophes of colonialism and slavery.²⁵ Therefore, as she emphasizes, the only way to see that the current pandemic is yet another form of toxicity that colonialism has seeded, bringing along also the Anthropocene, is to differentiate the actual virus from the Virus. However, Povinelli focuses on the difference between the real pathogen and the figure of virus in the recent cultural and political discourses. That is why she does not even mention how deeply the ordering principles, genres and narrative devices of medical epistemologies have always already informed our cultural imagery. For the rhetoric of scientific visualization and explanation is also dependent on a historically informed and distinct cultural tropology. This has recently been demonstrated by Hannah Landecker, a sociologist from the University of California working at the intersection of anthropology and history of biotechnology and life science.

In her article “Viruses are more like Cone Snails” Landecker looks closely at how microbial studies have domesticated viral agencies and actions to

22 Caitlin Berrigan, “Kinship Is Anarchy,” *E-flux Journal* 130 (October 2022), accessed October 11, 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/130/491388/kinship-is-anarchy/>.

23 The tendency to imagine anticolonial rebellion, Muslim insurgency specifically, as a virulent form of social contagion reveals Raza Kolb’s recent study that assembles a diverse archive from colonial India and imperial Britain to the neoimperial United States. Anjali Fatima Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

24 Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), Kindle. Chapt. “Three Figures of Geontology.”

25 Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “The Virus: Figure and Infrastructure,” *E-flux Journal* 113 (November 2020), accessed October 11, 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/sick-architecture/352870/the-virus-figure-and-infrastructure/>.

the human scale.²⁶ One of several telling examples to which she refers is the figuration of the virus as hijacker of the early twentieth century. Landecker points out: “as with many apparently innocuous explanatory tropes, this figure of the viral hijacker perhaps hides as much as it reveals.”²⁷ Indeed, the virus conceptualized as a foreign agent that infects by forcibly taking over the “cellular machinery” in a kind of illicit raiding operation because it does not possess its own metabolism supported the fundamental ideas of newly founded epidemiology and its policies. Moreover, in this frame of reference, we may reasonably situate also Povinelli’s figure of the Virus-as-Terrorist as a successor of this older figuration, which emerged out of cultural mobility between popular imagination and the way viruses were materialized in scientific discourses by epidemiologists and microbiologists. This time, however, it is a medical understanding of viral contagious agency that has infected cultural and political discourses of late liberalism, underpinning their racist, neocolonial policies which Povinelli lays bare in her already mentioned *Geontologies*. However, what Landecker calls domestication, denotes not only metaphorization of viral agencies and actions but also the conceptualization of viruses. A case in point is the modern definition of the virus, understood as “a DNA or RNA core contained in a protective package transmittable across time and space between and within susceptible hosts.”²⁸ It was introduced in the early 1930s, roughly at the time of the expansion of international networks and modes of shipping people, valuables, and factory-produced commodities around the globe. Hence, at that time the increasingly expanding international networks of trade and communication did not only facilitate transmission and global spread of contagious diseases. They also decisively influenced the way in which viruses were visualized and materialized in both cultural and scientific/medical imaginaries.

Mindful of the historical taproots of both seemingly innocuous explanatory tropes referred to above, in her article Landecker offers also a kind of speculative exercise, inviting the reader to imagine viruses in terms of predatory sea snails. For instance, one species of the group, *Conus geographus*, uses an insulin overdose to disorient and disable its fish prey, releasing the toxin into water. Importantly, because the toxic overdose mimics fish insulin, it does not affect the snail itself. A similar kind of a predatory metabolic convergence,

26 Hannah Landecker, “Viruses are More Like Cone Snails,” *E-flux Journal* 130 (October 2022), accessed October 11, 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/130/491398/viruses-are-more-like-cone-snails-than-hijackers/>.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

in the mid-1960s called “molecular mimicry,” allows some viruses to mimic their host’s cell cycle and metabolic processes. In other words, this speculative exercise makes clear that not all viruses are pathogenic agents, which kill their host cell to replicate. Some replicate and continue their existence within their host’s cell as symbionts, provided they know how to mimic its metabolism, to become its protein kin. Such viruses – a horde much bigger than the one already identified as dangerous for humans – have been marginalized, or even made invisible when the virus was conceptualized as hijacker or terrorist. Therefore, it indeed matters “what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions”²⁹ to use Donna Haraway’s phrasing.

Redefining Viruses, Redefining Life

Researching how microbial figurations have domesticated viral agencies and actions, and in so doing have also decisively influenced the way we apprehend viruses as deadly pathogens, Landecker focuses mostly on discursive metaphors. However, to take a closer look at how a depiction of Gaia run by viruses, which this article would like to roughly outline, may initiate a new posthumanist turn through a redefinition of life, we need to realize that it also matters how viruses as such have been scientific-technologically materialized as a subject of microbial experiments and studies. This has recently been demonstrated by Bishnupriya Ghosh in *The Virus Touch*³⁰ in which the author discusses viruses as such submicroscopic particles that can be made perceptible and materialized only through technical mediation. Significantly, Ghosh refers mostly to the HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 pandemics which in her perspective fruitfully unsettle one another and have very much shaped her as both a researcher and a person. Within this framework she presents new and ecologically influenced research on microbiome, in which humans have already been recognized as *Homo microbis*, that is multispecies “super-organisms.” She juxtaposes these concepts with epidemiological findings on pathogenic microbes which usually surface during infectious disease emergencies presented as malevolent antagonists to give a stronger impression of controlling their transmission. Mindful of this paradox, Ghosh devotes her

29 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.

30 Bishnupriya Ghosh, *The Virus Touch: Theorizing Epidemic Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023). For a more larger picture of how microbes and viruses are materialized by computer animation technologies and how molecular animations produce new regimes of seeing and knowing see Adam Nocek, *Molecular Capture: The Animation of Biology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

book to the topic crucial also for my argument in this article, namely “how the extreme situation of a global viral pandemic compels a recalibration of multispecies politics.”³¹ The last recalibration of this kind, as she explains, took place recently when global contagion has been recast as a manifestation of an unfolding ecological disturbance. Contrary to Povinelli and Landecker, who dwell on viral tropology in different kinds of discourses, Ghosh focuses on the scientific-technological mediation of “life” which by materializing pathogens targets scientific/medical intervention into dynamic, fluctuating more-than-human assemblies. The way we see and understand viruses and witness their effects depends largely on how epidemic media enact epistemic cuts in those assemblies to inscribe, store, and transmit their relations as stable and, therefore, knowable and manageable configurations. In so doing, Ghosh demonstrates how it is possible that facing species extinction in a near future of the Anthropocene we would rather have microbes as infectious germs exterminated despite knowledge of our ever-swarming, multispecies biobodies.

Looking closely at different forms of media across the current epistemic setting – from laboratories to clinics to forests, from scientific theories to clinical instructions to public health policies – Ghosh demonstrates in *The Virus Touch* “how epidemic media actualize multispecies relations as to measure, assess, and locate harms.”³² Although the last contagious disease outbreaks have already been reconfigured as unfolding ecological disturbances, epidemic media still institute infection as fluctuating relations between two discrete entities – viruses and their hosts. It is out of these relations, of intra-active biotechnical performances that isolated pathogens appear as exterminable targets. Nonetheless, Ghosh notes, “inquiries into making/doing/enacting epidemic media habitually disclose the entangled materiality of living processes and relations.”³³ Thus, premised on her insights, Ghosh insists on another kind of knowledge, which we need to activate to cope in the current situation of multipronged crises: a sensuous apprehension of multispecies entanglements that implode all organismic boundaries. However, before we start to think/know/do and live otherwise, humanities need another posthuman turn, which would analogously focus on how differential human, animal, plant, and machinic agencies other than viruses have been materialized through similar processes of mediation, instituted and rendered in their objectivized differential relations as epistemic objects (and facts).

31 Ghosh, *The Virus Touch*, 2.

32 *Ibid.*, 2.

33 *Ibid.*, 200.

It is for a reason that Ghosh has chosen the time-space of HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 outbreaks, which she calls the current epidemic episteme, to reflect not only on viruses as products of scientific-technological mediation but also on a much broader topic of multispecies entanglements. As she explains: “epidemics are intense experiences that collapse from the epistemic object; one is hyperaware of being viscerally entangled ‘in’ the very media environment one studies.”³⁴ In a sense, this article follows in her footsteps, engaging critically with viral tropology which is so tightly entangled in much larger cultural imaginaries that each change in the way we conceptualize viruses would certainly entail consequences for how various spheres of life are envisioned and understood and how we conceptualize life as such. Assuming that a critical reading of Gaia as an incorporation of bacteria-based evolution will influence also how posthumanism is defined, the article invites rethinking together the immunitarian conceptualizations of Gaia and new understandings of and findings on viruses. According to their novel materializations they are not only proliferating in quickly mutating swarms but also a vital resource of life on Earth. This confirms that it is, indeed, crucial how we think about and with viruses.

Abstract

Małgorzata Sugiera

FACULTY OF POLISH STUDIES, JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY

Rethinking Posthumanism in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The article analyzes how the coronavirus pandemic changed the definition of posthumanism. The starting point of the article is the observation that the Coronavirus has turned out to be not an epidemiological singularity but rather a globally noticed origin of new pandemic threats, one of many which emerge nearly annually. Although from 2010 onwards many scientists and science journalists have been writing about and warning against what they often called “a New Pandemic Age,” it eventually became common knowledge and a widely recognized threat only after the last pandemic. The author of the article analyzes the effects of the pandemic on the development of posthumanities research, referring, among others, to research by S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė; as well as to the thesis of Bruce Clarke and Dorion Sagan.

Keywords

science, posthumanism, pandemic, Gaia, biopolitics, COVID-19

³⁴ Ibid., 204.