

Visceral non-presence

Ethnography in the age of COVID

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Black patches flashing before me and my stomach swirling, our arrival consumes me: The odor of the slaughtered hogs. The dry, bone-chilling cold. Splashes of blood dripping on the walls and mixing with water in puddles on the floor. The crimson footprints. The hog heads, connected to carcasses by a rod and threads of sinewy, red flesh, moving slowly by on the conveyor belt, eyes shut and mouths agape.

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The local slaughterhouse's coronavirus cluster was the first large outbreak we heard about in Champaign County. The sprawling pork processing plant sits in the midst of cornfields some 17 miles north of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Until early May, workers there processed 35 million pounds of pork a month. The company reported its first case on 25 April. Health inspectors arrived two days later to find the plant 90 percent out of compliance in its infection control practices. By 15 May, after testing 200 of the 627 workers for COVID-19, 83 got positive results. Management admitted it was 'complex' to track employees being tested and to follow up with those who had to be quarantined. That's when they contacted the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. They then announced confidently to the local press: *We've got it under control. We have the scientists now.*

They did get the scientists. Some are the kind that measure air quality and test sewage for the virus. Others study microscopic cells and nucleic acids in labs – including Jessica Brinkworth, a biological anthropologist who studies how the evolution and variation in human immune function shapes severe infections. But they also (perhaps unwittingly) got social scientists – specifically, cultural anthropologists: Korinta Maldonado, an activist anthropologist who works alongside Indigenous communities, including local Maya migrants; Gilberto



Rosas, an anthropologist of borders and Latinx communities; and Ellen Moodie, who has researched Central American discourses on danger and risk.

We tell funders that our project ‘investigates the social context and the related inequalities of the transmission, understanding, and mitigation of SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19’. We recognise how many current, top-down efforts to contain the novel coronavirus rely on a form of individualised control of conduct that presumes a ‘normative’ body. Deviations from the prescribed behavior thus serve to pathologise populations that become infected. By the time we began this project, it was just becoming clear that the virus was disproportionality infecting, and killing, Black and Brown bodies all over the country (Oppel et al. 2020) – a reality long known for severe infections such as sepsis, and something Brinkworth’s lab had been trying to address. One of our aims, then, is to work with the diverse members of the Rantoul community to construct a model for contending with this threat to life and livelihood. But how do we research the threat of COVID-19 in the context of the threat of COVID-19?

In this short essay, we contrast our different perspectives on this emergent project on local manifestations of the global coronavirus crisis. For all of us, this has been an unprecedented and necessary opportunity to work together, merging biological and cultural anthropology in ways Franz Boas surely never imagined. We opened with an almost classic arrival scene – a vivid, Other place, the Rantoul slaughterhouse, depicted by Rosas (above and below) in shocking and visceral language, intentionally. But we know there will be no real empathic presence in this research. Of course the concept of ethnography has expanded far beyond Clifford Geertz’s professorly description: ‘What a proper ethnographer ought properly to be doing is going out to places’ (1988: 1). But the fact is, especially now, we yearn to *be there* – in places, with people. Some of us wish we could just remain ignorant of all these insidious shared particles we’re suddenly learning so much about. We crave visceral presence. The real visceral drama might just be witnessed through screens attached to high-powered objectives and detectors, showing arms races between host and microbe nucleic acids, as Brinkworth demonstrates below.

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The workers all don heavy, blood-stained smocks, goggles, ear plugs and now, of course, masks. They remind me that the cyborg is not new: ‘man’ and machine

were compressed together long ago. On the line, workers – pushed together, no social distancing here – wield knives, carving the beasts in practiced, precise motions, over and over. Flesh – meat – falls from the animals’ thighs, chests, legs and elsewhere on the dead animal, moving on down the line. All will be packaged and then sold.

But to back up: this is just after a digital thermometer was shoved in and pulled out of our ears. This is just after we slipped thick plastic covering over our heads and necks, and then a hair net, a helmet, white smocks over our coats, gloves and tight ear plugs to protect our hearing. And, of course, we don our own masks; we brought those with us. We have walked through puddles of red water, the latter the product of a mist sprayed on the floor to keep things clean. Residues of hog flesh and blood must be in the air, too, and likely on us, even though we can’t see them. Like the droplets or aerosols carrying viral particles we cannot see, we can only imagine, until we start coughing or shivering or we lose our sense of smell.

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None of us can see the virus in the mouths of people we are talking to – or even the aerosols and droplets produced in a sneeze or friendly conversation. In the lab, centrifugation of a contaminated sample can aerosolise viable viral particles, throwing them into the air for hours (van Doremalen et al. 2020). This is true of other pathogens as well, and lab personnel undertake procedures to lower that invisible risk: we contain the problem in o-ring sealed centrifuge cups, create barriers and hide behind with filtered biosafety cabinets, masks, goggles, face shields, multiple gowns and gloves (OSHA Standard 1991). But the effects of this invisible risk are visible. In crowded hospitals, in shuttered schools, in empty stadiums. As of 28 July 2020, the global count stands at an invariably underestimated 16,540,137 infections, 655,300 dead (Dong et al. 2020).

For this invisibility, coronaviruses have some nanometric heft by virus standards. They are approximately 0.125 nanometers in diameter, housing astoundingly large genomes for a virus (Fehr and Perlman 2015). SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, maintains nearly 30,000 nucleotides into which almost three HIV genomes could fit (Sah et al. 2020). While coronaviruses have evolved to maintain and continually transcribe their genomes, we can actually visualise the cellular changes they initiate (Nelemans and Kikkert 2019). Electron tomography shows us that much of coronavirus assembly is happening in cell’s endoplasmic reticulum, a network of tubules where protein production

and transport take place. SARS-CoV-2 and its viral relatives (positive strand RNA viruses) make outpouchings (double-membraned vesicles) in these tubules to house various parts of new virus particles while putting them together (Knoops et al. 2008; Snijder et al. 2020).

With a combination of electron microscopy and metabolic labeling, the locations of the vesicles that SARS-CoV-2 makes to protect and shuttle new virus components through the cytoplasm have been found (Snijder et al. 2020). With scanning electron microscopy, assembled infectious viral particles (virions) delivered to the cell membrane to ‘be born’ can be seen budding off a cell now made irregular by virus induced membrane extensions, filopods, that facilitate the release of virions directly to neighbouring cells (Bouhaddou et al. 2020). Once inside a host cell, the virions are realised as virus. The images generated in the effort to understand how coronaviruses such as SARS-CoV-2 get through their life cycles reveal microorganisms beautifully adapted to settle onto a host, and replicate and disseminate themselves with little disruption. As people talk or sing or shout or simply breathe, as they take breaks from slicing dead hogs, respiratory droplets plop, aerosols hover – and some people get sick.

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Flying pig parts, floating virus particles: these constitute the conditions of the working day in 2020. They are likely routine to these Black, Puerto Rican, Congolese, rural white, Indigenous Central American and other Latinxs, who work in masks and in mass at this small slaughterhouse that kills and dismembers some 7,300 hogs a day, at least when times are good. They aren't so good right now. The virus deepens the vulnerability for these communities.

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Who are these communities? For some, they are unwelcome invaders, akin to the virus itself. In 1993, the end of the Cold War banished Rantoul's main revenue source and biggest employer, the Chanute Air Force Base. Since then locals have endured wrenching shifts, in not only economic terms but also demographics. A predominantly white town has given way to a more diverse population. Black and Latinx communities have arrived, seeking cheap housing and factory/warehouse and agricultural jobs. Largely Maya communities from Central America have joined a continuous flow of Blacks leaving the complexities of Chicago. By 2010, these ‘new’ communities had doubled in this town of 12,000.

A Rantoul demographics report estimates the population to be 25 per cent Black, 13 per cent Latinx, 6 per cent mixed-race and 60 per cent white (Retail Coach 2016), numbers that will likely change when the results of the 2020 census are released. Further, the census does not account for the hundreds of predominantly Mexican American farmworkers and their families who have arrived every year for decades from South Texas and Florida to detassel corn, harvest soybeans or perform other agricultural jobs. They stay from one and a half to four months.

The ‘newness’ of many of the communities of color run against discourses of whiteness embedded in narratives that blame Black and Brown communities for the uptick of violence, lack of job opportunities and perceived community decay. This particular racialised context positions each of the distinct communities of color in knotty relationships not only with the local white population but among each other. Mestizo Mexican migrants and other Latinx groups reproduce Latin American national discourses of *mestizaje* in which Indigeneity and Blackness have no place. Hierarchies of color matter. In COVID times, pre-existing tensions intensify. Ideologies of race can be masked through languages of cultural difference. Some whites and Blacks perceive Latinx as the major culprit of ‘infection’. Some Latinx suggest darker Indigenous newcomers are the problem: the *guatemaltecos*, a local resident once told one of us, probably don’t understand what COVID is.

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But then, who does fully understand the virus? Scientists, too, are scrambling to figure it out. What they do know: we have inherited and evolved an immune system highly reliant on reception of molecules associated with pathogens or host damage – seeing things that do not belong (Kawai and Akira 2011). Microorganisms like the coronavirus have responded by evolving means of not ‘being seen’. The most successful pathogens we encounter have evolved means of bypassing or manipulating early immune defenses (Brinkworth and Alvarado 2020). SARS-CoV-2 is exceptionally successful. Its as yet poorly known means of immune escape contribute to the terrifying reality that for *at least* two to four days, its presence in a host is often not clinically obvious. Its strategy is to either trigger uncoordinated mild symptoms in its new human hosts, or display no clinical symptoms at all (Wu and McGoogan 2020). Its ability to hide even from the infected host drives a substantial portion of its spread (Moghadas et al. 2020).

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'Hola', a short woman with braided hair says to me in one of our few chances to talk with workers. Ellen and I speculate later that she is Gualtemateca. Her smile breaks through the white mask. This encounter reminds me that ethnography demands a different kind of ethical commitment, an entanglement with a discipline embroiled in white supremacist domination, abolitionist possibilities (Shange 2019), and people. Our analyses should be shared.

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That trip to the slaughterhouse was essentially tourism for the ethnographers: we got high drama and imagined we were at the scene of a crime (at least the crime of capitalist exploitation if not the actual spread of the virus – which isn't so clear, the virus experts on our team tell us now, which is precisely why we are doing this research). Given coronavirus conditions, we have decided that ethnographic interviews over the phone would be our best bet. We have begun archiving all the blogs and articles that have come out since the beginning of the pandemic, detailing the multiple possibilities and limitations of phone or online interviews. For most of us, face-to-face interactions are central to our work. We admit it: we fetishise presence, corporeal presence, even after all those debates on the metaphysics of presence in graduate seminars. We know that what matters is not only what is said in the interviews but also the affective relations that lead up to them.

We miss place. We miss sensuous there-ness. We miss silences that are thick pauses (not panicked technology fails). We miss the smiles or frowns that might come up at particular moments, the gossip before getting serious, the hug, the handshake and the tensions that might be easier to decode in person. We miss all those grounded, visceral elements that bind us and that give meaning to the words being spoken. We miss the fecund multiplicity that traverses a particular relationship with an individual: the children screaming and playing, the partners, the grandmothers and nosy neighbors who stop by and give us a glimpse of the everyday.

We don't think we are romanticising presence. These daily, face-to-face moments provide coordinates of how, when and where to move, of whether we are doing well, of what we may have missed and if we need to redirect our gaze and other efforts. And in research on the transmission of the virus, on the social relations that lend to its spread, on

the senses of embodied space in which breath and droplets and aerosols are shared, this is no small loss.

As we debated ethnographic possibilities and research risks – speaking through the safety of the video conferencing platforms on our screens at home – we decided that the best way to engage with this emergent and rapidly unfolding context was to bring members of the community to the research team. We are working with them, remotely, to design and carry out the interviews and surveys. What we are doing is not necessarily new. Collaborative, community-based participatory research, action, feminist, decolonial, militant, committed and activist ethnography, among other frameworks, all amply discuss ways to engage and position in the field to generate research that emerges from and answers to community needs. The ‘how’ is still fraught. Even more so now.

We are challenged by the profound distrust of local communities, a distrust now deepening as the university, the major employer in the county, has announced its intention to bring fifty thousand young, breathing bodies back into the area for the fall semester. But this distrust goes beyond this chaotic moment. To become a ‘research subject’ inevitably sounds like being a poked and prodded as part of a lab experiment. Communities become sites of extraction and ‘otherness’ as students and professors come and take and leave. *Ethnography in the dawn of COVID demands multiple layers of mediation.* We must accomplish it virtually, remotely in our non-presences, studying the invisible invaders, and visible bodies via community researchers, while pining for routine viscosity of their and our daily lives.



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