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Defying the Normal: Biopolitics and the Rising Bodies in the Time of Covid-19

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We say life is normal when it resembles itself.
We say numbers are normal when the appearance of outliers follows a certain formula, as though freak occurrences were normal.
We say a line is normal when it sits square to another line, as though it were normal to be at cross-purposes.
- D.H. Tracy, *The New New Normal*

Abstract

This essay discusses the biopolitics of the coronavirus pandemic practiced on both human and non-human animals. By introducing the idea of biopolitics and othering the author brings two animals, bats and minks, together to explain the role of biopolitics in manipulating the bodies of non-human animals. The discourses surrounding both animals frame bats as the wild and minks as the productive—and the categorization of both disembodies the animals and subjects them to exploitation. The essay examines the role of the environment in creating a shared vulnerability between human and animals. The coronavirus pandemic is a crisis evoked by a system that profits from the use of biopolitics through the creations of dichotomies between the “normal” and the “abnormal.” To reimagine our future, we need to seek a sustainability that fosters entanglements, instead of separations, of all creatures.

Introduction

The biopolitics woven into the fabric of our daily life has reached beyond humankind and into the realm of non-human animals and the environment, manipulating their life and death as targets of political processes. Sanctions on animals have abounded in the history of viral outbreaks, and this pandemic is no different. The source points to wild animals, especially bats, as the monstrous partner of the crime of wild-taste-seekers in China. Media quickly grouped the people into the primitive, along with the bats, who reside in the fearful “wilderness.” Another animal at the center of the pandemic is the mink. Outbreaks in mink farms around the world have caused waves of mink culling. While American politicians stress the otherness of the virus, the coronavirus paradoxically traces the local and global forces that together subject bodies—human or non-human—to exploitation. How does the politics of coronavirus further accentuate

and exploit the ideology of otherness, hence creating a shared vulnerability? What can we learn from the coronavirus pandemic to move beyond the otherness and seek a sustainability that nourishes the live energy of all beings?

First, the author discusses the functioning of biopower in the pandemic: the disciplining of human bodies via various constructions of otherness that separate them into the “normal” and the “abnormal.” Expanding the idea of biopolitics, the author argues both non-human animals and humans are under a constant gaze. Although examples from past epidemics are presented as well, the focus here is bat and mink in the coronavirus pandemic. Discourses in media categorized them completely differently: the former as the wild and the latter as the productive. The process of annihilation and the creation of fear for both animals demonstrate simultaneously the local and global commodifying forces and the unceasing resistance against them. Finally, by engaging the physical environment, the author uses Braidotti’s (2013) posthuman theory to replace the shared vulnerability with “zoe,” or a living energy that transgresses the boundaries between humans, non-human animals, and the environment.

The Biopolitics of the Pandemic

Everyday life during the coronavirus pandemic has been a nightmarish replay of Foucauldian visions, the most relevant among which are the ideas of discipline and biopolitics. Through investigating the genealogy of imprisonment, Foucault (1995) traces how the focus of government shifted from punishing individuals to disciplining the population, under the panoptic observation that assures a “permanent visibility” (p. 201). This visibility is sustained by discipline, a power relation that permeates institutions and individuals. Although his analysis focuses on the history of imprisonment, the practices of discipline can enact beyond the prison. Quarantine is an obvious example of disciplinary regulations (Hannah et al., 2020). Many countries have, to various degrees, implemented surveillance measures to constrain human movement: governments have deployed drones to check body temperatures and enforce lockdowns (Couch, et al., 2020), and mobile apps for virus tracing dictate who is free to travel (Grantz et al., 2020). All of these measures compose the gaze that categorizes human bodies into those that are “normal” and those that are not. This division leads to Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, or biopower, developed in his discussion of the history of sexuality. In similar ways, confessions and science give us the will and power to seek the “truth,” even inciting desires, thus extracting knowledge of our sexuality. This knowledge then creates docile bodies regulated by sexuality and reproduction. On a more general level, biopolitics is concerned with “making live and letting die” (Foucault, 1976, p.165). During the lockdowns, some people such as healthcare, delivery, and domestic workers, were subjected to more risk of contracting the disease, in order to enable other people to work safely from home (Latour, 2020) —not to mention that many of these jobs are low-waged and uninsured. Death rates are also rampant among people confined—already docile and left to die—either prisoners or detained immigrants. Biopolitics also penetrates into our identity, in fact so surreptitiously that we often contribute to them unknowingly: reporting on a neighbor’s violation of the lock-down rules, self-monitoring, and self-isolating to ensure the “greater health” of the society are a few examples.

Biopolitics is deeply rooted in otherness. The division between “normal” and “abnormal” required for disciplinary hegemony is not randomly made—it relies on the othering of certain groups. The practices of othering existed well before the pandemic, but they have been accentuated since the beginning of this year. The Trump administration has been emphasizing the otherness of the virus since the beginning of the outbreak, referring to its source in China. The term “China virus,” used by Trump repetitively, has fueled xenophobia across the country, especially discrimination toward the Chinese community. The practice of associating a race with a disease is not unprecedented in American history: the government along with corporates used the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 to defend themselves from the “yellow peril,” once their exploitable bodies—that served as inexpensive labor during the Gold Rush and the construction of railways—became a threat (Karuka, 2019). After that, various diseases such as influenza, swine flu, and SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) have been associated with Chinese people.

Chinese community has hardly been the only target. In the past, diseases such as the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, the Spanish Flu, and the “Ebola” virus were named after a specific region, despite their inaccuracy and contribution toward stigmatization (Hoppe, 2018). Such associations are one of the driving forces behind the process of othering that is rampant in this pandemic. The U.S. government pushed for drastic immigration policies by using public health and emergency measures as an excuse. Even before the pandemic, detention rate has reached an all-time high in American history during the Trump Administration (Kassie, 2019). Under the “zero tolerance” policy, the US government have separated over 2000 children from their families, because the adults were charged with a crime and the children were not. Citing public health concerns, the ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) has begun to put children into private hotels without their parents, attorneys, or child advocates from non-profit organizations, who are otherwise present to help the children seek legal protection (Dikerson, 2020). Ironically, the ideology of otherness quickly unraveled during the coronavirus pandemic. Even after closing the U.S. border to foreigners, the country’s number of Covid-19 cases continued to increase exponentially and eventually became the leading figure in the world. The immigration policy did not stop the spread of the virus in America—on the contrary, the deportation of immigrants increased global traffic and contributed to its spread (Kassie & Marcolini, 2020).

Policies centering on exclusions and othering do not work, because American people are becoming displaced by their own country (Latour, 2018). Racial disparities exist all around the country where both infection and death rates are disproportionately higher for Latinos and African-Americans, who have been three times as likely to be infected and twice as likely to die from the virus (Oppel Jr. et al., 2020). The killing of George Floyd caused a national uproar; long-practiced police violence and discrimination burst into flames under the tension of the pandemic. Under the working of biopolitics, certain groups of people (the “abnormal”) are framed to be responsible for the deprivation of various needs—in this case, public health—of other groups of people.

The Wild and the Productive

The ideas of discipline, biopolitics, and otherness can be used together to decipher the hegemonic machine in operation before and during epidemics. This section examines the local and global assemblages of non-human animals and humans surrounding the disease. How have local and global hegemonic forces stripped the bodies of non-human animals of their corporeality? How does it create a shared vulnerability between non-human animals and human beings? Specifically, the author focuses on different discourses surrounding bats and mink in this pandemic, while utilizing examples from previous epidemics as well. Both animals are linked to hidden networks facilitating the exploitations of their bodies, which have consequently set up the perfect conditions for the pandemic.

One of the images that frequently accompany news of Covid-19 and inundate social media is of bats, framing the animal as something alien and hostile, and human encounters with it equally unimaginable. One video of a young Chinese woman holding and biting into a bat went viral online in January (Palmer, 2020). The video became one of the first links made between China and the coronavirus by the rest of the world. Ironically, the video went popular in China first before it was circulated around the globe. Articles in Weibo—one of the main Chinese social platforms—identified the woman incorrectly as Wuhanese. Criticism and disgust abounded likewise. Although the woman clarified later that the video produced in 2016 for a travel show in Palau (where bat soup is a local delicacy), it did not take long for the soup to dominate the Internet imagination of the disease. Social media around the world was inundated with the same bowl of bat soup in juxtaposition to images of Asians, monsters, even Xi Jinping. One says, “when you make a bat soup and it’s so good that the world knows about it in one month.” This line, interestingly enough, puts the perils of globalization under the spotlight. But the author apparently had another message in mind: to ridicule the nonchalance of the bat-soup-maker in the face of a monstrosity.

These accusations are, to say the least, completely inaccurate. The virus is traced back to a genetic archive of coronaviruses collected from bats, but it was most likely transmitted through an intermediate animal, instead of being passed directly from horseshoe bats to humans (Singla et al., 2020). Bats are a diverse order of mammals found throughout the world. Their ability to carry viruses without showing signs of diseases, long life span, and migration behavior are some of the factors that make them effective hosts of viruses (Calisher et al., 2006). Although they have been identified as one of the major reservoirs for viruses (rodents being the other), researchers have argued that their virus-hosting ability is proportional to the number of species they have, *not* due to any traits unique to bats (Mollentze and Streicker, 2020). The hosts of viruses hardly warrant as much attention as the environmental changes that brought them to humans. In the coronavirus pandemic, pangolins are the suspected intermediate transmitter of the virus, but scientists have warned that conclusions on the virus’s transmission path cannot be derived. The virus was likely transmitted across multiple species before reaching humans (Li et al., 2020). However, this has not stopped the denunciations of wild animals. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the virus’s transmission path, the Chinese government closed the wet market in Wuhan and again banned wildlife trade under international pressure early in the pandemic. Wild

animals have been the scapegoats for past epidemics as well. In 2004, after the epidemic of SARS, the Chinese government exterminated over 10,000 civet cats. In order to vanquish their bodily substance, they drowned them in disinfectant and then put them in a pressure cooker (Pan, 2004). They also banned wild animal production and trade in 2003.

Responses to the disease's spread indeed cater to the perspective that staying away from the "wild"—animals and nature—can prevent future spillovers of diseases. Nevertheless, is such division even possible? Cronon (1996) has famously discussed the creation of the ideology of wilderness. Early American conservationist Waldo Emerson retorts that to go into nature is "to go into solitude...to retire from his chamber as from society," but "wilderness is as much a state of the mind as a description of nature" (Tuan, 1990). The idea of wildlife is equally questionable. Fearnley (2015) followed a group of scientists seeking the source of avian influenza H5N1 virus to examine discourses surrounding animals and disease transmission. At the center of their attention is the swan geese (*Anser cygnoides*), whose migration route encompasses central to northern parts of China (Wang et al., 2016). While the bird is listed as a vulnerable species (IUCN, 2016), farmers in China have in fact been raising them for years for consumption, and the farmed "wild" geese are indistinguishable from their actual wild counterparts. According to the official classification, as long as the traits of the animal do not change, they remain wild. The wildness of these geese then separates them from the industry-raised poultry and increases their market value. The farmers are indeed, in Fearnley's term, "breeding wildness." Zhan (2005) also illustrates the vagueness of China's wildlife ban in 2003; although the civet cat was among the group of animals subjected to the ban, it was mostly farmed in the country.

Why are wild animals at the center of individual attacks and institutional sanctions, then, if we are not certain about the transmission paths of the viruses nor the very "wildness" of these animals? Zhan (2005), in his article on the SARS epidemic in 2003, explains how orientalism promotes such association. The linking of the first SARS patient—an animal handler in a wet market—with the narrative of the zoonotic origin of the virus, Zhan argues, creates an "uncanny affinity between Chinese people and the nonhuman and the wild." Western media's emphasis on firstly the affinity as an age-old tradition, and secondly on the exotic others, aligns with the orientalist perspective of the exotic and unpredictable Chinese—a "mythic discourse" (Said, 1979) actively maintained by the West. This is replicated in the coronavirus pandemic. The xenophobic remarks were accompanied by criticism toward the "wild" lifeways of people consuming wildlife. The "primitive" behaviors of Chinese people, according to the narrative, were responsible for the spread of the virus. In fact, the early violence among Chinese people toward Wuhanese citizens can be explained by the internalization of orientalist discourse within the country. However, the narrative of the exotic tradition hardly aligns with reality. In China, the elites, instead of "the primitives," are the major consumer of wild animals. The entitlement to "wild taste" ("ye wei" in Chinese) is a privilege that many are willing to lavish their money on. The orientalist discourse associating the wild with the primitive, however, completes the othering of both.

As the construction of otherness in humans, the ideology of wildness can be detrimental because it subjects human beings and nonhuman figures to exploitation, and

subsequently leads to crises such as the coronavirus pandemic. The “wilding” of nature has been associated with the suppression of minority groups (Katz & Kirby, 1991). Similarly, post colonialism argues that the ideology of wilderness further appropriates the capitalist perspective of linear progress and frontier, which divides the land and people on it into civilized and wild, owned and exploitable (Estes, 2019). The wild geese farmers in Fearnley’s (2015) story, for example, were not able to get licensed under the Ministry of Agriculture; classified as “special type husbandry,” the geese belonged to the Department of Forestry instead. This means that they were not getting subsidies from the government as they would if raising traditional domestic animals. It also means that they were not subjected to the same rules and inspection required for domestic poultry—vaccination for H1N1, for instance.

The “wildness” of these animals also makes them extremely lucrative, encouraging illegal animal trafficking. Pangolin meat, for example, can be worth three hundred and fifty dollars per kilo. The price for their scales—that supposedly have high medical value—is even more astonishing: \$50,000 to \$60,000 per kilo (Sutter, 2014). An estimated nineteen tons of pangolin scales were exported from Malaysia to China and Hong Kong between 1994 and 2000 alone (Quammen, 2020). In fact, they might well be the most trafficked wild animal in the world (Sutter, 2014). While these pangolins are shipped from all around the world, a lot of them alive, they may experience an abnormal level of stress, which makes them more susceptible to viruses from other animals. The lack of safety measures and hygiene can also facilitate transmissions. Although the media often focuses on their wild bodies as the transmitter of diseases, their circulation is the real cause for the spread of disease.

Another animal that has attracted attention during this pandemic is mink. Minks have been used for fur across the world for many years and are the most popular animal farmed for the purpose. Humans wear their fur for warmth, and more recently, as a fashion statement. While trapping wild minks is one way to obtain the fur, most mink fur comes from farmed minks living in captivity, often in cages shared by hundreds of them (Bale, 2016). In April, outbreaks of Covid-19 in the Netherlands began to develop in mink farms, where both humans and animals were showing symptoms and tested positive for the virus. While it was unclear whether workers on the farms had gotten the disease from the minks (instead of from their co-workers or people in their households), evidence from gene sequence showed that humans had first transmitted the virus to the minks, among which the virus then was widely circulated (Munnink et al., 2021). Seeing mink farms as a hotbed of disease, the Dutch government ordered the culling of around a million minks around the country (Kevany, 2020). In November 2021, Denmark, home to around 17 million minks, ordered another mass culling (later the order was changed to a recommendation after its legality was questioned). The Danish Prime Minister quoted the danger of human-animal transmission, claiming that the new strand of the virus circulating in the animal population could render the vaccine ineffective, based on unpublished results.

This order, unlike the wildlife trade ban, received a lot of pushback from mink breeders and trade organizations throughout Europe (Olsen, 2020). Breeders complained that the culling order could destroy the mink industry. In the Netherlands, for instance, mink farms were already suffering because the government had rolled out a complete ban on

mink farming by the spring of 2021 after the mink farm outbreaks. News article (Henley, 2020) headlined “culled minks rise from the dead to Denmark’s horror” described the haunting scene of minks emerging from their shallow graves, after millions of them were killed and buried in mass. The article also voices environmental concerns including potential contamination of water supplies.

Although the fate of minks appears to be quite similar to that of their “wild” counterpart, the public discourse surrounding the order is actually much different. This is because the media scrutinize the productive bodies of minks differently from the wild bodies of civet cats and bats. Mink farming is connected to a larger global network and operates under the market framework usually validated under the model of capitalist accumulation and protected by the law. In 2013, during the boom period of the mink industry, global mink production was worth \$4.3 billion, the biggest demand coming from Asia, especially China and Hong Kong (Olsen, 2020). Although the demand has decreased globally due to animal rights issues, mink farming has long been normalized. Therefore, the media did not turn to the narrative of monstrosity we see around bats, at least not until the pandemic. Even after the outbreaks, the narrative struggled to paint a picture of an industry at the mercy of unjustified policies. Nevertheless, such industry had transformed minks into mere commodities under capitalist exploitation and dismissed their corporeality. Unsurprisingly, once the precarious balance between productivity and public health was broken, their incorporeal bodies were immediately subjected to annihilation. If anything, the emerging mink bodies further awaken us to the reality of the mechanism of suppression those otherwise remains hidden.

Despite the different categorizations of bat and mink, they are abandoned by the same capitalist system whose commodification of everything renders them exploitable and expendable. In fact, these processes of construction are not only comparable: they emerge together and out of each other. Biopolitics can draw the line between normal and abnormal, wild and productive, but ultimately the panoptic gaze turns life dispensable, once it is not controllable. In other words, by stressing on the monstrosity of bats and dispensability of infected minks, the capitalist system subjects both of them to the process of othering. This goes hand in hand with the othering of the Chinese people and immigrants in general in this pandemic, who also bear the unjust blame of spreading the disease. Although the hegemonic powers that thrive under this system aim to sustain themselves through these acts of othering, we can now see how its exploitation has led us toward the current crisis.

Environmental Effects on Diseases

The previous section alludes to how the dichotomous ideology of nature and culture relate to the suppression of the bodies of animals (human and non-human). In this section, the author wants to further address how environmental degradation, specifically during the pandemic, could lead to environmental injustice and animal rights issues, and how these issues together amplify the severity of the disease’s spread.

Struggles against the racial disparities during the coronavirus pandemic is part of the ecological struggle situated in the nature-culture continuum. In American cities, environmental benefits and damages are not distributed equally, and discriminated groups are subjected to less access to environmental resources and more exposure to

environmental hazards. The EPA published an article that demonstrates the reality of environmental discrimination against non-White people (Mikati et al., 2018). The study examines particulate matter-emitting facilities; it finds that people in poverty are subjected to 1.35 times higher exposure and non-Whites are subjected to 1.28 times higher exposure than the general population. Air pollution has some of the most detrimental effects on public health. High exposure to particulate matter, especially PM2.5, has been associated with health issues, including respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. Its effects, however, can be imminent and deadly in a pandemic. New research finds that the coronavirus deaths rate is higher in areas with higher levels of air pollution in the US; a 1 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in PM2.5 is linked to a 15% increase in the death rate (Wu et al., 2020).

In addition to causing environmental injustice upon people, human-induced environmental degradation has also deprived animals of their habitat, which could ultimately facilitate transmissions of viruses between animals and human beings. Spreads of disease more often happen at the intersection of the natural environment and human activities. The intrusion of roads and houses and the elimination of food resources together force wild animals into interactions with humans (Johnson et al., 2020). Human encroachment into wildlife habitat for the purpose of logging, mining, and other commercial activities also leads to contact with wildlife. In these ways, diseases that normally circulated among wild animals themselves are finding their way into human beings. Ebola, for example, only exists in tropical regions. Because of climate change, Chapman et al. (2015) reason, the fruiting of trees became unreliable, except for fig trees. For that reason, more animals have aggregated around and foraged on fig trees than before. While fruit bats (the main reservoir of Ebola) and other animals shared the fruit, the virus could be transmitted among them, and later transmitted to humans who might hunt these animals for food.

Moving Beyond Shared Vulnerability

The capitalist construction of the dualism between nature and culture encourages the othering and exploitation of both human and non-human animals, as seen in the examples of mink farm and pangolin trade. It does so because capitalist accumulation *relies* on positioning nature as mere resources. Marx's reaction to this is insufficient because he still treats nature as a means of production, only arguing that capitalism stands in the way of the domination of nature (Harvey, 1996). In fact, early environmental movement and philosophy suffered from their affinity with shallow, rather than deep ecology (Plumwood, 2002). This means that they only argue for the need to promote sustainability based on how it would translate to human benefits, conforming to an anthropocentric and instrumentalist view of nature (see Naess, 1998 for more on shallow vs. deep ecology). Later environmental scholars such as the ecofeminists debunked the anthropocentrism inherent in these earlier thoughts and point out the danger of the illusion of human separation from nature within humans are actually deeply enmeshed (Mies and Shiva, 1993; Plumwood, 2002). Braidotti (2013) developed her posthuman theory from this branch of environmental thoughts, criticizing the Victorian Man that so dominated the field of humanism, as it restricted what counted as human to a Eurocentric ideal. Unsatisfied with stopping at equity, however, she instead suggests a more materialist approach that dissolves the dichotomies between culture

and technology, culture and matter. Examples of technology used to increase surveillance and interconnections between the living being and the environment in this pandemic indeed illustrate the techno-imbued culture-nature continuum where we all reside.

Expanding on the biopower in deciding what to make live and what to let die, Braidotti argues that death is not “a human prerogative” and focuses on the impersonal death instead of the personal death. Impersonal death, according to Braidotti, is beyond the ego of personal death, “ahead of me and marks the extreme threshold of my powers to become” (p. 133). Transforming the personal death to the impersonal death also switches the focus to what she calls “zoe:” the life force and flow that blurs boundaries and emphasizes interdependence. It also “undoes any clear-cut distinctions between living and dying” (p. 114). She defines sustainability as the responsibility to pass on the ability for endurance and becoming of all beings to our future generations.

As the coronavirus physically trespasses species and geographical boundaries, it also forces us to expand the boundary of the ethical community to include non-human creatures. Habitat loss of bats and wildlife trades of animals such as pangolins facilitates transmission of diseases. Poor conditions and exploitation in animal farms intensify the health crisis. To work toward sustainability in Braidotti’s term is not to shy away from the interconnections demonstrated in a time of crisis through the process of othering. Rather, it becomes imperative for humans to situate themselves among the rest of the world and recognize the life force running through all beings. To acknowledge these intimate relationships between humans and non-human beings, the first step is perhaps to recognize the very materiality of human bodies (Bennett, 2010). Respiratory diseases like Covid-19 are transmitted through the inhalation of particles in the air, which is part of the larger human process of exchanging materials with the “outside” world through not just the air but also mundane activities like food consumption. These exchanges—sometimes-viral ones—in turn shape and reshape the cultural and social identities of the humans and non-humans involved. How these social and political changes (lockdowns, mobile tracing, etc.) then impede or encourage material interactions are well demonstrated in this pandemic and serves as a valuable lesson for envisioning a more sustainable future.

Conclusion

As we watch the events of 2020 unfold, hearing the ominous drumbeats of the virus getting inevitably louder and louder, it is all too easy to resort to an apocalyptic narrative. We reminisce about normalcy, anticipating the imminent return of the “normal” life. Then perhaps what we considered as “normal” is all trouble. The biopower dominating our public and private lives, hegemonic constructions of the dichotomies between nature and culture, human and non-human beings, and environmental injustice—none of them is new. Tracing some of the material forces and networks with the virus yet again enables us to understand the mechanism behind the hegemonic constructions. As Haraway (2016) suggests, we have to get on with the trouble, *stay* with the trouble. By unleashing the rising bodies, we can start making responsible decisions based on aggregated knowledge from all living beings and the environment;

by making kin with other beings, we can reimagine “a present that endures” (Braidotti, 2013).

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