

Entangled Roots and Otherwise Possibilities: An Anthropology of Disasters COVID-19 Research Agenda

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We develop questions for a COVID-19 research agenda from the anthropology of disasters to study the production of pandemic as a feature of the normatively accepted societal state of affairs. We encourage an applied study of the pandemic that recognizes it as the product of connections between people, with their social systems, nonhumans, and the material world more broadly, with attention to root causes, (post)colonialism and capitalism, multispecies networks, the politics of knowledge, gifts and mutual aid, and the work of recovery.

Key words: colonialism, multi-species ethnography, epidemics, politics of knowledge, reciprocity, mutual aid, otherwise

Introduction: Why We Write

In this short article, we present several questions for a COVID-19 research agenda from the anthropology of disasters, a field that developed to make sense of society's role in transforming hazards and viruses into disasters and pandemics and giving them form and magnitude. Over time, we have come to understand the production of disasters as an outcome of the normatively accepted societal state of affairs—an effect of routine, not an anomaly. Much as we might endeavor to confront the coronavirus as a monster that emerged from a nature that lies outside society and into which it only crossed because of a transgression of boundaries, we encourage a reframing that recognizes the pandemic as the product of connections (and disconnections) between people, with their political economic systems and technologies, nonhumans, discourses, and the material world more broadly. This, as we see it, is the first step to operationalizing a set of critical research questions rooted in abiding and emergent themes in disaster anthropology.

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As we draw the pathogen into society, we must also undergo a process of off-centering by recognizing that the misfortunes and incoherencies we see unfolding are not proper to “elsewhere” and accidents, exceptions, or invasions of a center of an otherwise well-functioning system. We take seriously that the devastation, ruination, and shifting assemblages of the state, modernity, and the capitalist world system are not accidents but predictable consequences. But we are mindful also that we have entered space-times at once familiar and strange. As disaster researchers, we are witnessing so many dynamics, dramas, and tragedies unfold that we recognize as eternal returns but which are forever misrecognized and forgotten as extraordinary. For this, we write as agents of collective memory. Yet, we share with others the uneasiness, the palpable malaise that insists that no, there's something not merely unfamiliar but truly singular about the world unfolding in 2020. For this, we write as collaborators in speculation. We endeavor to offer informed and provocative questions, not ready answers.

A disaster anthropology of COVID-19 is not merely an academic exercise. We are working for solutions to the current crises, to ask questions about what came before, what happens now, and importantly, what happens *next*. The answers are not found in technocratic planning nor scientific testing and development alone, or even principally, though these areas of activity are nevertheless vital; we need science, and we need to understand human behavior. But people are not lab specimens. Their perceptions, affective sensibilities, relationalities, practices, and material conditions directly shape their behavior in relation to COVID-19, which, in turn, shape the disease's spread and impacts. Disaster anthropologists are

uniquely situated to help understand this because questions people are just now starting to ask publicly in new ways are questions we've been investigating for some time.

What we aspire to in this article is not a comprehensive review of all issues and contexts of a disaster anthropology of the pandemic but a selection of topics that we see as among the more salient concerns at the time of writing. And, though the pandemic has affected people in every corner of the world, we draw primarily on our own work in the Americas to sketch out our arguments. We begin with a reflection on what elements of the conceptual framework(s) of the anthropology of disasters apply in the COVID-19 and what we might revisit. We follow this with a set of questions around how colonialism shapes and exacerbates the pandemic, followed by an examination of discourses and relations surrounding sites of intense human-animal relations. Next, we address the politics of knowledge, or how human relationships with science and risk are situated and contingent, rather than being simple matters of information dissemination. This is followed by a section on disaster capitalism, gifts, and mutual aid in a time of social distancing and the global supply and distribution chains implicated in the decidedly unequal spread of the virus. We conclude with a set of questions around recovery or how we (re)assemble our worlds mindful of the root causes of disasters and global pandemics and with an eye towards otherwise possibilities.

Disaster and Pandemic

As we make sense of this pandemic, we can avail ourselves of decades of anthropological studies that have identified the root causes of the production of disaster (for overviews, see Sun and Faas 2018; Faas and Barrios 2015; García-Acosta 2020; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2020). A broadly political ecological framework has long held pride of place in the anthropology of disasters. Though it was not the first analytical approach employed to center social, cultural, political, and economic structures and processes in coproducing—as root causes—the conditions of disaster, by the 1990s, it was firmly established as an effective shorthand for the broad strokes of this argument (e.g., Oliver-Smith 1996). Root causes are intersections of multiple social processes in relation to hazards that may be biological, geophysical, hydrometeorological, technological, or hybrid (and they are all, in the end, hybrid; Latour 1993). Social processes include political and economic forces operating at different levels (local, regional, and international) that not only coproduce risk, hazards, and disaster, but also their distributions and the distribution of their impacts in society. This general conceptual framework is intrinsically political—with acute attention to inequality, racism, colonialism, capitalism, and unequal distributions of risk, power, resources, and safety in society—and temporal—surfacing historical processes beginning long before disaster and continuing long after, a view that unsettles the common perception that disaster is “temporary.” But far from providing a canned set of variables or a set of broad political economic

conclusions, disaster anthropology is a largely inductive approach to tracing not only the root causes of disaster at varying levels of spatiotemporal scale, but also dramas of power and agency, and how people creatively cope with and adapt to hazards.

Key also to this argument (and others it's paired with) are distinctions between *hazards* like the COVID-19 virus and *disasters* such as the pandemic, the well-documented unequal distribution of hazards and the impacts of disaster, the historical (re)production of subalternity, and particular development practices as sociocultural co-agents of disaster. And it is not that disasters only affect the subaltern, but a society's social fault lines are generally reliable indicators for tracing the manifestation of risk and hazards and the distribution of resources; attention to unequal power relations and inequality in general not only trains our attention on the bottom of the pyramid, as it were, but also brings into view the *nested layers* of subalternity in society. Disasters do not emerge out of nowhere and affect everyone equally—hazards are usually well-known, and the social conditions for disaster have long histories and entangled roots. But, useful—and, in many ways, accumulative of numerous arguments and concept metaphors—as political ecology may be, anthropologists have nearly always synthesized its basic arguments with other frameworks, including but by no means limited to postcolonialism, multispecies ethnography, (post)structuralism, medical anthropology, science and technology studies, critical (race) theory, and economic anthropology.

The Network for Social Studies on Disaster Prevention in Latin America,¹ known as La RED, recently began framing the study of COVID-19 as a disaster and “an expression of underlying risk,” while calling for an examination of the social construction of risk to human life, public health systems, and the economy. The argument is that, as in other disasters, confusing risk with the virus itself “dissimulates the operation of a range of other underlying risk drivers,” while eliding attention to policies and practices that transfer risk and expose people to the coronavirus (Lavell et al. 2020:para. 1).

There is also a politics of knowledge implicated in the (re)production of disaster. Anthropologists have long presented research to policymakers who consistently defer to physical sciences, whose results are far more convenient because they locate disasters in “nature” and categorically outside of society (Sun and Faas 2018). In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the public and public policy, especially in the Americas, were seemingly stuck in a double bind between choices of anti-science populism or medical science—especially epidemiology—a dilemma that evidently prevailed at all latitudes of decision making, even as human actions that were far from inevitable exacerbated the pandemic in plain sight. We therefore invite studies of policies and economic practices and their implications for (*certain*) human lives; healthcare access; global networks of production and circulation of bodies, pathogens, capital, and commodities; enduring colonial and neocolonial forms of exploitation and domination; risk communication and enactments of

measures to prevent or slow the rates of transmission; and politics of knowledge refracted through positionalities that coproduce forms of compliance and resistance. Because these relationalities and dynamics could be otherwise and because, but for their scale, they are all-too-familiar, we endeavor here to offer anthropological perspectives to think through several questions that can enrich our understanding of COVID-19 and future pandemics.

We are interested in generating an agenda for investigating specific cases resulting from ethnographic research and mapping the contours of socio-historical processes that coproduce each case but also in exploring divergences between disasters and pandemics. Are there limits to the applicability of disasters frameworks to a global pandemic? If anthropology locates the root causes of disaster in the broadly political ecological vein described above, does the emergence, spread, and management of COVID-19 bring new factors and relationalities into view? What can we learn by treating the coronavirus as a hazard that triggers pre-existing conditions to create disaster?

As we ponder anthropological contributions to understanding the pandemic, the discussion and analysis offered by *The Anthropology of Epidemics* (Kelly, Keck, and Lynteris 2019) is edifying and, in its overwhelming attention to Africa and Asia, complements the recent publication of *The Anthropology of Disasters in Latin America* (García-Acosta 2020). Perhaps the shared attention to the Global South and postcolonial settings helps explain the many similarities in these studies of how a range of hazards triggered disasters. The analyses in *The Anthropology of Epidemics* are built around frameworks particular to medical anthropology yet quite similar to those found in disaster anthropology. For instance, Frédéric Keck and colleagues (2019:1) observe that epidemics “are the dark side of modernisation, medical and political progress; they represent the impossibility of securing the body politic in an ever-more interconnected, technologically advanced and globalised world.” To be sure, we need to work more closely (and not just along parallel paths) to understand these disasters that, on different scales, accumulate, aggregate, and exacerbate the growing risks facing people worldwide.

One place to begin is to examine sociocultural differences in perceptions of and responses to the pandemic. There are questions worth exploring around the politics of epidemiological surveillance, quarantine, and other exceptional measures to monitor and control populations in different contexts and the perceptions and means by which people have alternatively assented to or resisted these measures. There are opportunities for anthropologists to return to communities previously affected by disasters to study how past experiences have influenced their response to COVID-19, a process already begun with support from the United States Natural Hazards Center’s Converge COVID-19 Working Groups.²

Pandemics are compelling spaces for examinations of how humans confront and make sense of what they are going through. With the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems we

are beginning a new journey, facing a global disaster. To the extent that this is true, it is not the first. The 1918 and 1957-1958 influenza pandemics—problematically and misleadingly referred to as the “Spanish” and “Asian” flus—were similarly global and disastrous. But the pandemic obliges our attention to scales both temporal (the Braudelian *longue durée*) and spatial (local-regional-national-global), and relationalities that may reflect not one, but multiple situated disasters related through common hazards and global processes.

The Coloniality of COVID-19

In early 2020, after ravaging the city of Wuhan, the epicenter of the pandemic of novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) shifted from China to Western Europe. Thereafter, COVID-19 seemed to travel the globe on the familiar, blood-worn ruts of empire. This emplacement of global contagion routes for COVID-19 sounded a grim echo of the epidemics that occurred after 1492, when Europeans imported pathogens that decimated Indigenous populations. What did SARS-CoV-2 reveal about globe-spanning population movements that spread the virus in resource-poor colonial and post-colonial contexts? In what ways did the class-based dynamics of these mobilities affect the more familiar social and epidemiological perceptions that commonly blame the poor for spreading disease?

As spring blossomed and the pandemic spread, tourists boarded cruise ships only to become caught in densely infected closed societies. Cruise ships circulating dangerously in visitor economies are nothing new—they have always entailed environmental devastation and economic ruination (Ellis Neyra 2020). The pandemic has not only demonstrated the fragility and inadaptability of visitor economies but also showed how enclosed spaces of privilege and visually sanitized Whiteness (such as resorts) became breeding grounds for the virus and threats to local populations. Thus, we invite further research into how different diseases articulate with highly class-based, racialized, and gendered relations of service, consumption, and care within the visitor economy and tourist industry, especially in relation to the ways they are understood by some as “essential” economic drivers.

The geopolitical itinerary of the virus mirrors the flows of capital, imperialism, and structural violence. While European tourists and wealthy travelers were the most common vector for initial outbreaks in the Americas, Indigenous people (especially the Diné, Amazonian tribes, and smaller tribes and pueblos of the Americas), and Black and Latinx Americans have been the most affected. As the peak of the pandemic’s first wave waned in urban centers, the virus found a foothold in rural and forest areas, establishing itself as a killer of the elderly, poor, disabled, hungry, and the working class—“essential” yet implicitly disposable laborers who lived and worked huddled in small spaces: meat processors and farmers; factory, warehouse, and transit workers; prisoners and detainees; health care providers; the permanently unemployed and underemployed; and those living in shelters

and substandard housing. People around the world have witnessed these “grotesque disparities in how illness, death, and suffering are unevenly distributed” in the United States, Latin America, and elsewhere (De Genova 2020). How can the many types of inequalities highlighted by the pandemic be compared across these disparate global contexts?

Further research is needed on how medical research and practice can contemplate colonialism as a comorbidity (Czyzewski 2011). Even as infections grew in Brazil in June 2020, many parts of Europe and the United States emerged (however briefly in the latter) from periods of quarantine under state-mandated “lockdowns” and stay-at-home orders, and nodes of social exposure created conditions for early death among marginalized Black and Brown populations. The social determinants of health that best predict the likelihood of any given person to die from COVID-19 are the same that correlate with chronic illness, from malnutrition to hypertension and diabetes. Public health scholars are therefore confronted with a highly political question about the interconnection between the potential for health and well-being of communities in the Global South and the need for decolonization and reparations for slavery and colonialism.

In Puerto Rico, which had the lowest COVID-19 testing rate within United States federal jurisdiction, an activist refrain summarized this dynamic: *Colonialism is the virus* (Garriga-López 2020). The lockdown instituted by Governor Wanda Vazquez included legally contested 7:00 P.M. to 5:00 A.M. curfews that remained in place for months even as continental United States cities had stay-at-home orders but no curfews. Policing again became the state’s response to a public health crisis (Lebrón 2019). In upscale areas of San Juan, police harassed brown skinned local residents riding bikes to the supermarket, while sunburnt tourists celebrated St. Patrick’s Day drinking in the streets of Old San Juan. Puerto Ricans were forbidden to use public beaches, including going out to sea to fish subsistence catches while tourists moved around the Caribbean basin on cruise boats and yachts and flew into San Juan from infected cities in the United States and elsewhere freely and largely without health screenings, a dynamic that articulates with known modalities of “disaster capitalism” (Gunewardena and Schuller 2008). We might therefore ask how the pandemic created barriers, or modified access to, and transformed the social and spatial ecologies of public areas like beaches, parks, and rivers in contexts around the world. How have these changes driven by the pandemic deepened or extended the alienating effects of the visitor economy in colonial and postcolonial contexts?

In Bolivia, where “dengue met coronavirus at the door,” activist Maria Galindo declared, “Our only real alternative is to rethink contagion, cultivate contagion, expose ourselves to contagion, and disobey in order to survive” (Galindo Neder 2020 [Garriga-López, trans.]). In many parts of the world, subaltern realities make isolation-based prevention impossible because “forms of subsistence that are life itself” require social interaction and cannot be avoided (Galindo Neder 2020). Therefore, the eco-political and bioethical questions

with regards to survival for many people necessarily shift from isolation and avoidance to moderated exposure. Can we study the ways that people cultivate agentic relationships with contagion?

Multispecies Intersections

COVID-19 is a zoonotic disease, having jumped across mammals—*homo sapiens* included—but the interspecies connections only begin there. COVID-19’s zoonotic origins upset dominant cultural narratives of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism, reminding us of our shared biology—subject to shared viral vulnerabilities. This exceptionalism often finds expression in humans mistakenly locating themselves “at the center of the ecosystem when they are only one of its actors” (Keck 2020:178). As COVID-19 highlights these biological and cultural contingencies, Eben Kirksey (2020) proposes that it marks the end of the problematic reification of humans at the center of being, as “we’re being brought to our knees by a microbe we barely understand—challenging all facets of society.”

In researching the H5N1 “Avian” influenza, Celia Lowe (2010:626) conjured the illustrative phrase “multispecies clouds,” or “collections of species transforming together in both ordinary and surprising ways,” as a means to think through the multitude of actors and forces that birthed the Avian flu and were amalgamated by its spread—from besieged immune systems to struggling human institutions. In addressing COVID-19, especially in the early stages, we only grasp at the particles in this cloud, attempting to put pieces into place before the storm intensifies. Here, we address a piece deeply ingrained in the multispecies assemblage of COVID-19—both in origin and aftermath: our complicated relationships with the animals we eat.

Criticisms of the exotic wildlife trade, otherized food consumption, and multiple sites of known foreign zoonotic transmissions have dominated public discourse on the origins of COVID-19. At the center of this discourse is the Wuhan Wet Market, which has been effectively invoked as a scapegoat in the United States especially but also in diverse contexts around the world. The painting of a farmers’ market in which live animals can be butchered onsite as “unclean” or “festered with disease” employs Orientalist language and the everyday ethnocentric perceptions of a foreign food culture (Kirksey 2020). Perhaps most noteworthy is the ease with which blame can be directed at foreign intensive human-animal spaces when United States production facilities are marked by cognitive and spatial distance from consumers’ experience (Bulliet 2007). COVID-19 closed this distance, underlining intersectional connections between humans and non-human animals within these sites of disease emergence.

Industrial animal agriculture involves numerous intensive spaces of human and animal contact that have most recently produced the H1N1 “Swine” and H5N1 “Avian” influenzas. In April 2020, the United States President signed an order invoking the Defense Production Act to classify meatpacking

plants as “essential” infrastructure, sending laborers—including racialized and class groups already disproportionately affected by COVID-19—back to dangerous working conditions (Ribas 2015). From the framework of biosecurity and posthuman labor, Alex Blanchette (2015:647) found that the everyday lives of workers in industrial swine production were viewed as risks to the animals’ health, reversing the traditional human-animal hierarchy: “This reversal marks a zone where the protection of the porcine species is broadly privileged over the cultural lives of the corporation’s four thousand employees, in spite of individual pig bodies being radically killable as a nondescript biomass in the slaughterhouse.” In May 2020, due to disrupted infrastructure for processing, these same porcine bodies were being steamed to death, among other unsavory methods, in gruesome mass killings.

As laborers return to high-risk facilities, are they too perceived as killable alongside the animals they prepare for consumption? These conditions are a result of a rapid increase in the livestock industry, and accompanying growth of political and economic power, as the American diet has gradually increased consumption of animal protein (Ribas 2015). The balance between the efficient production of cheap animal products and the robustness of the systems that produce them was toppled by COVID-19, exposing risks and ethical concerns regarding the bodies—human and animal—that lie within.

Reminding us that we are part of multispecies societies, in what ways has zoonotic COVID-19 affected the perception that humans are the center of being? What we know thus far is that COVID-19 unveiled urgent intersectional problems within a food system that is demonstrably vulnerable to the very disruptions it can produce. We are in a unique space to question and critique the literal “meat and potatoes” of culture and society.

Politics of Knowledge

In *Stone Age Economics*, Marshall Sahlins (1972) used the term *crise révélatrice* to convey the idea that, in mid-20th century Polynesia, catastrophes shed light on social fault lines—in this case, divisions between kinship groups and individual households, commoners, and chiefly classes—obscured by hegemonic discourses of group identity (narratives of generalized reciprocity among kinship groups) during “normal” times. Two decades later, Jacqueline Solway (1994) and Anthony Oliver-Smith (1996:304) mobilized Sahlins’ concept in the maturing field of disaster anthropology, the latter calling disasters revelatory crises in which “the fundamental features of society and culture are laid bare in stark relief by the reduction of priorities to basic social, cultural and material necessities.” Oliver-Smith has long championed the analytical perspective of recognizing disasters as diachronic processes in which human practices enhance the materially destructive and socially disruptive capacities of geophysical phenomena, viruses, and technological “accidents.” Consequently, Oliver-Smith (2000:36) describes disasters as “one measure by which we can judge the success of adaptation to

the environment.” Thus, not only can disasters illuminate the fissures of a society’s body politic, they can also operate as a test of a society’s sustainability.

The COVID-19 pandemic instigated a flurry of social commentaries by public intellectuals asserting that the unfolding crisis irrefutably revealed the inequities and unsustainability of neoliberalism and global capitalism. Furthermore, the aftermath will supposedly present an opportunity for progressive social change involving resource redistribution, environmental consciousness, and the refurbishing of state population security apparatuses (i.e., public health and social welfare). Recently, however, several prominent disaster researchers have frustratedly asked why, despite the great strides in identifying how disasters take shape and magnitude, they seem to persist (Hoffman and Barrios 2019). One productive way to engage this question is to look at the contributions historians and philosophers of science have made to the ways we understand the production of scientific knowledge. Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer (1985) observed that a key complication in the making of scientific facts is the establishment of assent among observers about what they have witnessed in the laboratory as well as the implications of their varying interpretations of what they observed for scientific knowledge. Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1986) have likewise de-fetishized the process of scientific knowledge-making, illuminating alliances among and between people and things necessary to create public agreement on the value and merit of scientific breakthroughs. Facts, it turns out, are not inherently unanimously acceptable as universal truths; they must be made so through the sociopolitical efforts of scientific knowledge-makers and their allies. As Kim Fortun (2001) demonstrated, even the determination of when and where a disaster (or pandemic) begins and ends is a matter involving political actors weighing social justice, economic, and public health interests.

Observations by historians and philosophers of science have encouraged disaster anthropologists to pay attention to the interpretative and politically contested nature of disasters by asking if disasters are revelatory crises and, if so, whether they reveal the same to all their beholders (Barrios 2017a). This question compels social scientists to recognize the sociopolitical positions from which innumerable disaster actors behold and interpret catastrophes, how those interpretations are negotiated or contested over the course of disasters, the implications of these negotiations and contestations for disaster risk reduction or production, and the role that catastrophes can play in transforming the perspectives through which catastrophes are observed and interpreted. Our reflections on the politics of knowledge urge us to ask: (1) What are the vantagepoints from which diverse social actors interpolated by the COVID-19 pandemic behold the ongoing health crisis? (2) How will these actors negotiate or contest their varying interpretations and to what effect? (3) What change, if any, will the sociomaterial unfolding of the pandemic bring to the vantagepoints from which people behold crises; that is, what novel beholding subjects will be borne out of COVID-19?

From the outset of the global pandemic, we observed some political leaders contesting scientific knowledge about contagion, mortality, inequity, and prevention. We also noted how this knowledge was interpreted in varying ways across the global political spectrum. Well before the pandemic, Latour warned that such varying interpretations are the product of decades of efforts on the part of political conservatives to interrupt the sociomaterial networks that produce scientific knowledge (Kofman 2018). Additionally, we also know from the study of risk that populations systematically exposed to many normalized hazards (poverty, dangerous work environments, police brutality, toxicity) may rightfully interpret public health warnings as hegemonic impositions that ignore their quotidian experience of subalternity (e.g., Checker 2007). Anthropologists must document and theorize the various perspectives through which COVID-19 is interpreted in societies across the globe. Such anthropological knowledge will allow us to devise strategies for critically navigating the politics of knowledge-making as well as address myriad other risks to which subaltern populations are routinely subjected.

Gifts and Capitalism / Recognition and Mutual Aid

In his study of the Trobriand Kula ring of inter-island and inter-tribal exchanges of ceremonial necklaces and armbands, Bronislaw Malinowski (1984) claimed that Trobrianders were unaware of the aggregate pattern of their exchange network, knowing only their individual motivations and actions. How resonant is this observation with the conditions of late-stage capitalism, with its global supply chains and productive ruinations far afield of our gaze? And in disaster, it is the state that is expected to provide the biggest “gifts.” But so many of the “gifts” delivered in the pandemic’s early months came wrapped in the most historically brazen acts of disaster capitalism—channeling funds and favorable policy change to big capital interests under cover of catastrophe (Gunewardena and Schuller 2008)—the most blatant of which took place in the United States. While citizens and political leaders at all scales were anxious to pass economic relief legislation, those at the bottom and in the middle of the pyramid were compelled to scrape by with nominal (and highly politicized) cash payments, the urgency of which provided exceptional cover for incredible capital flows to major corporations. In the United States, oil and gas companies, cruise lines, tech corporations, airlines, defense contractors, pharmaceutical companies, restaurant chains, and other highly capitalized firms claimed CARES Act “small business” loans and major tax breaks (Dlouhy 2020; Dwyer and Kochkodin 2020). Given the well-known challenges of connecting the near and the far in late capitalism, there is a real place for multi-sited ethnographies of the social and cultural lives of the policies and capital flows of economic aid in the time of COVID-19.

On March 13, 2020, political sociologist Jerry Kloby posted, “Now is the time for us to come together and keep our distance” on social media. Though partly in jest, this

was also sincere and called attention to a vexing irony. Gifts and mutual aid are critical and perhaps universal aspects of human behavior in emergencies and disaster, but physical distancing protocols implemented around the globe to slow the spread of the virus precluded many common forms of social support and mutual aid.

Malinowski (1984) also challenged the largely unquestioned assumption that material accumulation for personal gain was a primordial human motivation. Kula, he said, served no need, circulated purely symbolic value, and items were never “owned,” only possessed until sociomaterial pressures compelled their return to the exchange network. Yet, Malinowski described other forms of exchange accompanying Kula—utilitarian barter and canoe production and trade, belying the claim that this was truly distinct from economy in the modern sense. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people around the world sought means to come together at a distance, and online retailers were undeniably central in the transmission of gifts and social support. While media attention focused on hoarding and price gouging, people also turned to online retailers to send care packages, personal protective equipment, essential items, and even superfluous gifts to kin, friends, and strangers in need or perceived as deserving of kindness. These exchanges were not merely peer-to-peer but rather involved global supply chains within which commodities and capital pass through many hands. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos was already the richest person in the world and saw his fortunes swell significantly during the pandemic, while coronavirus spread across more than fifty Amazon warehouses, infected thousands of workers, and resulted in multiple deaths (Ghaffary and Del Rey 2020). In what ways, then (if at all), do gifts and mutual aid in the time of coronavirus depart from the polarizations, violences, and ruinations of late-stage capitalism? How do people organize cooperative projects around community-controlled exposure to contagion in contexts where other threats to life might be more immediate?

Marcel Mauss (1990) made much of the fact that gift exchange is intimately related to recognition, the invitation to be included and to be seen, and how failures of recognition in exchange networks can be fatal. Disaster researchers often point to disasters as “revelatory” of historically produced inequalities (i.e., recognition), but if disaster itself is coproduced by inequalities structural and quotidian, what does it truly reveal and for whom (Barrios 2017a)? The social and environmental injustices from which disaster emerges and through which it cascades may already be all-too-familiar to some, but the question remains as to whether the pandemic can foster the development of greater recognitions of the human and multispecies entanglements of economy and of broader movements too—alliances that transcend but also explicitly confront race, ethnicity, class, gender, and ability.

Gifts and *communitas* in disaster are frequently short-lived, and several studies have pointed to the tendency for such practices to dissipate after short periods, often coinciding with the arrival of outside aid, but not when cooperation is

an institution of a community or society (Faas 2017). Especially given the protracted temporality of the COVID-19 emergency, we can further examine the spatio-temporality and relational dynamics of mutual aid, cooperation, and gift exchange. Communities where cooperation and mutual aid institutions—*minga* in the Andes, *Bayanihan* in the Philippines, *tequio* in Mexico—and communities who have built and sustained mutual aid institutions to recover from past disasters and enduring injustices—Emergency Communities, Mutual Aid cooperatives, the Community Solidarity Fund—are important contexts for applied research on human capacities to institute and sustain such institutions. How do people sustain recognition, create prefigurative cooperative projects, and make it last, during emergencies and beyond?

What Does Recovery Look Like?

Questions asked during the COVID-19 pandemic about issues such as inequality, risk, and access to resources, healthcare, clean water, and education will linger long after the development of vaccines and treatments. What lies at the other end of this pandemic will be part of these questions as well, not in one singular sense but rather in a series of ongoing and long-term *recoveries*, experienced by different peoples in a variety of ways, on a range of time scales, and with roots not merely in the pandemic itself but in the various responses to it, and the historical and cultural contexts that work with the virus to create the disaster and the parameters of response and recovery possibility.

Recovery is built of relations of unequal power. And disasters are shaped and contested by a range of people in varying contexts and are also dramas in which people may be homogenized (e.g., “victims”) or where non-homogenized people are instead, also problematically, otherized by bureaucratic operations that mediate alterity while insisting on culturally specific procedures and cult objects (Marino and Faas 2020). Distribution of and access to aid is contested, controlled, and approached in varying ways by differently situated people, reflecting a multiplicity of cultural contexts, wants, needs, and powers and can, again problematically, replicate unequal distributions of power (Marino and Faas 2020; Zhang 2016). In COVID-19, these differences and contestations became clear early on in larger conversations about rights, actions, and aid, a pattern that will continue through recoveries. We therefore invite research into the relations and discourses of expert-driven recovery measures and their (mis)alignments with affective sensibilities of those seeking to rebuild lives upended by the pandemic (Barrios 2017b).

COVID-19 recoveries will be compounded by ongoing recoveries from previous disasters and the impact of future disasters and issues like (un)employment and healthcare access. These cascading effects complicate, delay, and frustrate COVID-19 recoveries but not uniformly. People who are excluded from social, political, cultural, and economic power are disproportionately affected by disasters due to limited access to resources and spaces of political representation.

For example, in the United States, there was a disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people, racism targeting Asian people, and perceptions of the acceptability of greater risk for specific populations based on their (“essential”) jobs, income, and abilities.

These problems were not caused by COVID-19, and while they have been increasingly discussed during the pandemic, there is no guarantee that this discussion will lead to change, particularly when such potential changes threaten the interests of people or systems in power (Hoffman 2020; Krishnan, Ogunwole, and Cooper 2020). This raises complications regarding discussion of, research with, and assistance for disproportionately affected people. Increasingly, anthropologists have pointed to the problems of labeling populations as “vulnerable,” “at risk,” or “resilient,” as such labels may be misused to blame affected people and compound larger problems in historical and cultural contexts, including potential changes enacted during recoveries (Marino and Faas 2020).

While it is tempting to say “COVID-19 will prompt change,” such clarity and rapidly codified change is unlikely. The reality will be far more complex, nuanced, messy. Structural inequality is resistant to change, even in disasters, and any change is therefore likely to take time and be far subtler and more incremental than people desire (Hoffman 2020). The details of how COVID-19 recoveries are themselves intrinsically entwined with structural inequality cannot simply be attributed to the relationship of the disease and existing structures. How are these structures transformed or further entrenched in different ways in COVID-19 recoveries? How do recoveries vary across cultural and sociohistorical contexts and nuances of local manifestations of the pandemic?

As we explore these questions, it is important to consider whether disaster recoveries triggered by a virus differ from those triggered by other hazards. Not only do the hazards themselves vary, but so too responses, as disaster recovery or risk reduction agencies differ from healthcare systems in many ways, including funding, ethics, mandates, and policies. These differing structures and approaches raise important notes about what questions we ask and the ethical domains we navigate as we study COVID-19 and how researchers navigate deeply related biomedical and cultural questions (Marino et al. 2020).

We must also consider how global humanitarian efforts can replicate larger power systems, including justifications of interventions by foreign actors who disrupt local practices, even when those practices are adaptive and well-suited to the contexts (Barrios 2017b; Faas 2017; Schuller 2016). The need for an understanding of local contexts encourages the entry of anthropologists into such efforts and questions in humanitarian efforts (Koons 2020), but it also reveals the critical importance of working with affected people themselves (Barrios 2017b). This calls on anthropologists to question forms of humanitarian aid and the decision makers involved, both on the ground and in the media where otherizing and hierarchical networks of giving and receiving are frequently reproduced (Schuller 2016).

We cannot examine COVID-19 processes as short-term, universal, or through a narrow biomedical lens. Understanding COVID-19 recoveries necessitates investigating the impacts of the disease and responses to it in larger cultural and historical contexts that navigate long-term questions of identity, inequality, perception, beliefs, and behaviors. Anthropological methodologies not only stand to assist in understanding COVID-19 recoveries but also in tracking and understanding what change happens, if any, how it is enacted, and by whom. Research on COVID-19 recoveries, like the recoveries themselves, is likely to endure for years, if not generations.

Inconclusions: Procedural Vulnerability and Otherwise Possibilities

As we conclude, we reflect on the all-too-common yet inconvenient truth that disaster risk reduction, response, and recovery efforts frequently exclude key groups—either willfully, by malign neglect, the rote machinations of bureaucratic process, or as a result of the fact that global humanitarian networks are themselves formations of the fundamental inequalities of (post) coloniality and late capitalism—in decision making, planning, and the distribution of information and material resources. Our objective is not only to conduct research in service of reducing disaster risk by addressing root causes, but also to reduce *procedural vulnerability* (Veland et al. 2013), or the reproduction of inequalities that are the root cause of disasters in the very responses that are ostensibly meant to help and recover; what we might call doing “good” *badly*, but these terms too beckon us to interrogate notions of the good and any “normal” aspired to as likewise born of unequal power relations. At the time of writing, the global spread of the Black Lives Matter movement is compelling greater public attention at once to the root causes of racism, injustice, inequality, and disasters as well as the reproduction of these relations in the very responses meant to address them. Perhaps, though, this historical convergence can make it that much harder, that much less desirable, to return to any status quo ante. Though incommensurate with our experiences with past disasters, we find ourselves hoping this time around is not merely revelatory but transformative. We therefore encourage research that not only advances scholarly interpretations of the roots and the reproduction of disaster processes and procedures but which compels the attention of the public, political leaders, and those positioned to influence policy and practice in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. We realize that this is no mean task in most critical issue areas, as the many volumes of *Human Organization* since 1941 well attest, but it is a task no less imperative for its inconvenience.

We must also think beyond inclusion and reform and consider otherwise possibilities and autonomous strategies. People often endeavor to craft and enact autonomous processes for risk reduction, response, and recovery, electing (by preference, necessity, or both) to construct their futures outside of the state. We invite researchers to interrogate the politics, strategies, and processes of and for inclusion, autonomy, combinations thereof,

and to complicate these facile distinctions in the processes of envisioning future possibilities. Following Savannah Shange and Roseann Liu (2019:para. 1), we want to explore the conditions and relationalities of “thick” varieties of solidarity that transcend empathy to work across specific and disproportionate positionalities to craft “something that we can sense and not yet name—something like repair, like ethical cohabitation, like an otherwise world.” A critical COVID-19 research agenda from where we find ourselves in the anthropology of disasters therefore entails drawing attention to agency and incommensurate subjectivities of peoples as they aspire to their own versions of the good.

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Notes

¹La Red de Estudios Sociales en Prevención de Desastres is a group founded by social scientists in 1992 that has played a leading role in the development of disaster research in Latin America and globally.

²URL:<<https://converge.colorado.edu/resources/covid-19/working-groups>>

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