
Books Forum Introduction

Flu oracles, Ebola spillover and runny metaphysics

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The belief, so prevalent in the social studies of science today, that all kinds of non-human entities await human construction work to come into being often amounts to a new idealism. Viruses, however, actually do rely on *Homo sapiens* and other animals to replicate and spread. The body of literature discussed in this Books Forum examines the categories, practices, infrastructures, politics and ecologies shaping our relationships with different viruses, from the flu to Ebola.

Anthropologist and medical doctor Vinh-Kim Nguyen reviews three books on the loom of a worldwide influenza outbreak: Carlo Caduff's *The Pandemic Perhaps* examining modern-day oracles prophesying "the next big one"; Theresa MacPhail's *The Viral Network*, which finds a correspondence between the global communication network of public health experts and the spread of the H1N1 virus in 2009; Frédéric Keck's *Un monde grippé*, a study of how discourses and measures around bird and swine

flu reconstruct the relationship between humans and animals.

In his review of Alex Nading's book on dengue fever in Nicaragua, *Mosquito Trails*, physician, poet and historian Warwick Anderson remembers how *Aedes aegypti* had introduced him to the virus in Indonesia and comes to realize how his illness experience had never just been about himself but a whole ecological microbiopolitics subverting anthropocentric notions of disease. Thus turned on, however, Anderson would have preferred a further expansion of his consciousness from Nading's singular focus on the social and ecological entanglements of the dengue epidemic to an analysis of its place in a broader syndemic constituted by the aggregation and interaction between multiple disease vectors in a population.

In her reading of science writer David Quammen's *Ebola*, sociologist Marsha Rosengarten takes on the mechanistic metaphysics underlying zoonotic thinking. Instead of presuming that isolated entities are subsequently connected when the virus jumps from its so-called natural reservoirs in Central and West African wildlife to human populations, Rosengarten follows the metaphysics of philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, which assumes no split between nature and culture but postulates a unified ontology in which everything is connected.

In very different ways the literature discussed in this Books Forum not only looks at how we give life to viruses, in our bodies and ecosystems, but also in our collective imagination. Yet, as these tiny RNA machines spill over into the human realm, they also seem to be infecting our increasingly fluid and runny metaphysics.

Nicolas Langlitz is Associate Professor at The New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of *Neuropsychedelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain* and currently studies the epistemic culture of neurophilosophy, as well as the intersection between primatology and the human sciences in chimpanzee ethnography.