

What the Virus Wants

Filipa Ramos

To write about Napoleon or a bacillus in the first person is to write fiction.^[1]

In the beginning, the virus wanted nothing. 'The virus was fine where it was. I don't think it was looking to hop anywhere'.^[2] Probably this was not a very ambitious virus. Unlike the rhinovirus or the picornavirus, common cold viruses, that truly believe in growth and expansion, this virus wanted to stay where it was. This is probably why, once it got taken out there, it did not know how to behave evenly on its hosts, being very discrete on some and too loud on others. Rhinoviruses and picornaviruses know that softness and docility lead the way to success. As a virus, if you are too aggressive, sooner than later you will end up in a bottleneck situation and you will be over in no time. Lethality also kills the virus. But this virus knew little and wanted little more than to be left alone.

It was warm, dark and cosy where the virus was, probably inside a furry, warm-blooded mammal who could fly like a bird, hear like a machine, and be suspended like a fruit. Then the virus was carried away and started travelling from one body to another, attuning itself to the life it encountered. It did not travel

alone. Just as sound needs a medium to travel, so does the virus need a conveyor. Solids, liquids, and gases are exemplar mediums of acoustic and viral attunement. But differently from sound, which is vibration without matter, a virus is an amorphous thing that jumps from cell to cell, mutating at every step. A virus is a dynamic colony that, incapable of living by itself, needs a carrier and avoids extinction by constantly moving, changing and evolving on the way. A generation of viruses can occur in a single day – the 24-hour reproductive cycle of a virus equals a period of 25 years for a human. Copy and mutate, copy and *mutatte*, copy and *muttatte*. 'The restless exuberance of gene flow cannot be stilled'.^[3]

Despite this exuberant flow, it was only in recent times that the likelihood of an animal carrier reaching a far-off location alive, of a human carrier surviving an infection from an unknown pathogen and of the animal and human carriers remaining close to other animals and humans grew exponentially. Advanced infrastructure, medicine and communication are highly effective vectors for a virus. Accelerated transmission became the propeller of both the modern world and the modernised virus. The virus found itself everywhere and in everything. It thrived across global population, density, and traffic, and learned to master virality: a single individual – animal or human – can spread it to so many other individuals. In a few months, the virus managed more than the joint efforts of humans and algorithms. For decades, people and bots have attempted to compress and dwarf the planet: connecting, uniting, and merging places, things and beings, calculating and reducing the degrees of separation that ties every single individual to everyone else, virtually inviting the friends of the friends to become friends.

The virus was caught into this spirit. Now it believes that you and me and them are us. That

'We' are one. That you and me and them are made of the same stuff. That 'We' breathe and speak and laugh and spit and sneeze and fever and cough alike. That 'We' rejoice and revel and cry and suffer and love and hate alike. That tragedy, contingency, dispossession, and comedy happen to all. This virus, which was brought from its happy latency into a state of global circulation, now wants to show that you and me and them are us.

What the virus ignores is that despite being the same, 'We' are far from being the same. Some of us are historically and genetically and politically and sexually and geographically better positioned than others in this entanglement 'We' call existence. You and me and them and us may well be the same but we are not all equipped in the same way. 'We' have been endowed with uneven features, powers, and agencies; our capacity to act is different. I can object you are subjected they can decide 'We' are subjugated. No commas separate us.

The virus tries to play dumb to the world order; it ignores it, it hovers above it like an abstract anarchist, reshuffling the criteria of societal organisation. But there is a gap between what the virus wants and what the virus knows. And what the virus does not know is that the world order has its own DNA. This DNA is a strong, self-replicating material that permeates many beings and non-beings in the planet. It is a foundational matter, so embedded into the system of present life that the virus not only struggles to break its strands, but it even gets trapped within its net. This DNA can be called many things. Extractive capitalism, Anthropocene, Chthulucene, Oilgarchy, Plantationocene, you name it, the virus will not. And even if the virus is not a life form, if it is anti-social, asocial, unsocial, and does not participate in any of the entanglements and arrangements and divisions and classifications and taxonomies and differentiations and identities that some make to break up the 'We'

the virus not only struggles to disrupt them but even complies with them. This is the story of a virus that fails to get what it wants, even if it gets many other things on the way.

Despite failing, in wanting to show that you and me and them are us, the virus manages to disturb the foundations of extractive, abusive, divisive capitalism. I am exposed, you are protected, 'We' are vulnerable, they are sheltered. Except that some of the protected and some of the sheltered get badly infected and cough their way to death. Except that some of the exposed and some of the vulnerable are immune (or healthier, luckier, blessed, or whatever you want to call them), and prodigiously breathe throughout their complicated lives. And they manage to make their way beyond the logics that divest them and determine their position on the bad side of the entanglement where you and me and them and us are.

The virus is not interested in morals though. It does not care if you are on the fair or unfair side of things, on the lucky or unlucky part of life. The virus does not even know what justice is. Its rationale is another. The virus is not affected by how some find ironic that a statesman is infected, that some find it cruel that physicians fall from the cure they are trying to bring, that some find telling that the invisible remain uncounted, untested and unprotected, and that some think it is unfair that the old die alone and the young party together.

The issue with this virus is that while being indifferent to these separations and criteria, in wanting to be rebalance such togetherness, to a large extent it perpetuates the state 'We' live in and the logics 'We' operate by. And sometimes it ends up reinforcing those same foundations it is aiming at. Despite the exceptions, the virus largely extends the agency of those who already have it, it makes uneven distribution

even more uneven, it redistributes power to the powerful, access to the validated, wealth to the wealthy, health to the healthy. The virus wants to change everything for everything to change but for now is changing everything for everything to stay the same. But what the virus wants and what the virus gets are two different things.

Yet some things may change. The edges and the centres are coming together. Boundaries are harder to establish. By coming from the cave, the virus turns our cities into caves. By coming from the jungle, the virus shows that the jungle is in us. The virus finds its way from the cave to the jungle, from the jungle to the trap, from the trap to the cage in a market, from the cage in a market to the floor that sticks, and from the floor that sticks to the hand that touches and the air that is breathed and the body that hosts and transports. The diffusing and reverberating body – a body that is metabolically constituted by the life of the jungle, the life of the cave, the arrested life of the market and the non-life of the virus. A body that becomes bodies that becomes virus that becomes matter. A body that ingests exploitation, violence, abuse, toxicity and fear. A body that feeds on toxins, hormones, transgenes, antibiotics, herbicides, pesticides and fungicides. A body that is made of and part of the bodies that keep capitalism alive.

The bat, the civet cat, the pangolin are in us. The chicken the duck the gull the macaw the pigeon and the sparrow. The chipmunk the mouse the rabbit and the rat. The camel the cow the deer and the horse. The salamander the snake and the turtle. The monkey and the porcupine. They are all in us. They gave us meat, heat, company, and cure but also infections and diseases. AIDS anthrax bird flu brucellosis bubonic plague chikungunya encephalitis ebola influenza leprosy lyme malaria MERS rabies SARS toxoplasmosis tuberculosis zika. From my DNA to yours,

without love.

We ‘form a rhizome with our viruses, or rather our viruses cause us to form a rhizome with other animals’. They treat us we threaten them. They feed us we kill them. They heal us we breed them. They kill us we eat them. They threaten us we treat them. They bite us we host them. With so much spillover, it is no wonder the virus finds distinctions hard to grasp. You animal me person them beings us life. The problem, again, is that the virus has been trapped within a system that is more complex than itself. Knowing what the virus wants may help us to deal with it. Knowing what the virus knows may help us come to terms with a condition ‘We’ have been trying to avoid for too long. You and me and them are indeed us. We reverberate within each other; our echoes bounce back and forward incessantly. You pangolin me bat them persons ‘We’ life. The old world awaits the new us.

The author would like to thank Dr. Leah Kelly and Dr. Lisa Pomeranz, from the Laboratory of Molecular Genetics of The Rockefeller University, New York, for their generous guidance in the research that lead to this article.

Cite this piece as:

Ramos, Filipa. ‘What the Virus Wants’. The Contemporary Journal 3 (April 09, 2020).

[<https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/sonic-continuum/what-the-virus-wants>].

[1]

Ursula K. Le Guin, *Steering the Craft* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2015), 48.

[2]

Elizabeth A. Povinelli, 'Virus or Interdependence of Lives, an audio interview with Dani Blanga Gubbay', *Four Rooms*, 3 April, 2020.
<https://www.facebook.com/thekhanorg/videos/151814866175052/>

[3]

Donna J. Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 9.

[4]

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 10.