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The COVID-19 Pandemic: An Environmental Humanities Perspective



Articulating Visual Infrastructures of COVID-19 in the Global South through Pandemic Photography

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by Paromita Patranobish



Abstract

This article examines the relationship between photographic practice, visual epistemologies and iconographies of crisis, and the racialized and economically regulated infrastructures of COVID-19 in the Global South—including infrastructural transformations of built and non-human environments. Taking its cue from the conjunction of affect and image, planetary precarity and mediating apparatus, social activism, and archival framing within which photography as form and praxis, aesthetics and politics, is situated during the pandemic—this article will focus on a mix of journalistic/documentary, art, and amateur image making praxes by Samyukta Lakshmi, K. Venkatesh (India), and Muhammad Fadli (Indonesia). While considering the blurring of genres and styles that the specific spatio-temporal realities of isolation and distancing enforce, the analysis argues that the photography of the pandemic’s multiple registers and scales—from the microscopic dimensions of human and nonhuman bodies to the monumental scope of public places, environmental commons, and institutional architectures—does not just document an ongoing narrative of events. Rather, the photographic apparatus as a media ecology consisting of visual conventions, technological affordances and limitations, and the photographer’s own historically emplaced corporeality, actively intervenes into and modifies official infrastructural arrangements fostered by juridical, medico-legal, and social protocols.

Keywords: pandemic imaginary, virality, COVID-19 photography, media ecology, social distancing, pharmakon



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Articulating Visual Infrastructures of COVID-19 in the Global South through Pandemic Photography

Paromita Patranobish

In the midst of COVID-19, the Wellcome Trust commissioned five professional photographers from around the world to document the psychological effects of the pandemic. This led to work ranging from intimate portraits of the aged and ailing, and scenes of everyday domestic life under conditions of material constraint, to semantically charged still photography of ordinary objects, and cinematic shots of desolate public spaces. Highlighting the disease's affective dimensions—be it individually experienced anxiety and grief or collective structures of feeling comprising fear, outrage, and mourning—these images also testify to the role of visual media and aesthetics in the production and mediation of particular affects. The *COVID-19 Anxiety Project* by the Wellcome Trust foregrounds the participatory enmeshment of the camera in a viral ecology, simultaneously as a witness oscillating between the perpetrations enabled or performed by its complicit gaze, as well as a cohabitant within a planetary space of shared precarity.¹ Such an approach toward photography as what Donna Haraway (1988, 575) calls “situated knowledge,” undermines the medium’s claims to sovereign representational vantage and reconfigures it as a mode of bodily and affective entanglement with the subjects of capture. The Wellcome project is in fact one of several curatorial, publishing, and archival endeavors that include, among others, the Magnum Foundation’s *Magnum 2020* and Prix Pictet’s *Confinement* photo books, the crowdsourced and open access digital COVID Museum aiming to create “a living and breathing time capsule of life in the time of quarantine.”²

Taking its cue from this conjunction of affect and image, planetary precarity and mediating apparatus, social activism and archival framing, within which photography as form and praxis, aesthetics, and politics, is situated during the pandemic, this article will examine the relationship between photographic practice, visual epistemologies and iconographies of crisis, and the racialized and economically regulated infrastructures of

COVID-19 in the Global South, including infrastructural transformations of built and nonhuman environments. Focusing on a mix of journalistic/documentary and art photography, by Samyukta Lakshmi, K. Venkatesh, and Mohammad Fadli, this analysis argues that the photography of the pandemic's multiple registers and scales—from the microscopic dimensions of human and nonhuman bodies to the monumental scope of public places, environmental commons, and institutional architectures—does not just document an ongoing narrative of events. Rather the photographic apparatus as a media ecology consisting of visual conventions, technological affordances and limitations, and the photographer's own corporeality, actively intervenes into and modifies official infrastructural arrangements fostered by juridical, medico-legal, and social protocols. In undertaking this analysis of the performative and material role of specific media in shaping the discursive and infrastructural topographies of disease, this article situates itself within a burgeoning field of the medical environmental humanities, focusing thus on the emergent ethico-political questions, cultural negotiations, and aesthetic forms at the intersection of the ecological concerns and medical and social pathologies ushered in the late capitalist Anthropocene.

In his analysis of the generation of a specific pandemic imaginary through a combination of nationalist rhetorical constructs and images of medical modernity, Neel Ahuja demonstrates how visual media emerges as a key tool of governance through the materialization of forms of risk and control, as well as a site for configuring India as a major economic power in the map of global responses to COVID-19. Thus, as Ahuja (2021) argues:

[A]fter the COVID-19 outbreak, Hindu nationalist biopolitics oscillated between images of emergency threat in the early days of March and April 2020, visions of modern health security that attempted to counter the knowledge of the widespread outbreak that overtook the country by summer, and a vision of India ascending to provide the global solution to the pandemic at the moment of vaccine approval in the fall. In India's pandemic biopolitics that combine medical intervention, minority threat, and surveillance, images of masking and policing have become central to the public imagination of health security. (27)

As its methodological premise, this article situates itself at the intersection of medical humanities and visual media studies, with particular emphasis on the pandemic's ecological dimensions, primarily its reconfiguration of anthropocentric worldviews, decentering of the humanist subject, and disclosure of the inherently entangled nature of existence as a set of multispecies relational webs. A paradoxical aspect of the official management of the pandemic at local and national levels was the discrepancy between a

clinical rhetoric of sanitation and distance and the proliferation of forms of toxicity and seepage—be it through the scores of bodies dumped into India’s major waterways, or the atmospheric effects of mass cremations. Thus, shadowing the medical discourse of protected breathing and ban on collective habitation of shared spaces, were other configurations of breathability, livability, corporeal commingling and permeability, and their systemic invisibilization.

Framing the Pandemic: Precarious Bodies and Visual Infrastructures

In his persuasive work on the redistribution and readjustment of spatiotemporal scales enforced by biopolitically informed responses to the virus, Ahuja further demonstrates how the modern securitized airspace becomes a site where medical and environmental knowledges intersect to produce new regimes of control, regulation, stratification, assimilation, and disposal of bodies. Be it revised protocols of air travel that are organized around ensuring the safety and mobility of the bourgeois traveler while compromising through an outsourcing of the risk of contagion, the precarious bodies of transport and aviation workers, or a reconceptualization of the atmosphere itself through a range of what he calls “prophylactic technologies,” that include both disease management measures as well as discursive strategies—air functions as a fluid infrastructure in which material practices and culturally mediated representation converge to determine the spatialization, segregation, and stigmatization of populations. Underneath the official account of equitable access and distributive justice lay the dual tactics of privatizing foreclosure and fragmentation of public and environmental commons, represented paradigmatically by Delhi’s massive oxygen shortage. This is juxtaposed with forms of violence and exploitation suffered by essential caregivers, particularly Dalit waste workers and agricultural producers, which Elizabeth Povinelli (2018) and Kathryn Yusoff (2019) identify in the context of settler colonialism, as capitalism’s geologization of certain racialized bodies by equating these with nonhuman matter as resource to be expropriated, exploited, and disposed.

The representational idiom and documentary ethics of photography thus enter into this contradictory pandemic space in the Global South with its unequal parameters of stewardship, caregiving, and disposability. The dynamics of this contradiction have been explored in the context of India by recent work on the right-wing government’s deployment of a double-edged ideological approach: comprising of the liberal discourse of medical modernity coupled with civic consciousness advocating for the adoption of state-of-the-art technological advances in biomedicine and stringent segregation norms on the one hand, and the reiteration of a Hindu nationalist rhetoric that connects this scientific worldview to purportedly Vedic origins on the other. The latter strategy not

only serves to co-opt the truth claims of scientific knowledge as an instrument for validating and legitimating nationalist politics, including its exclusionary biopolitical regime carried out along communal, ethnic, caste, and class divisions, but it also fits in with historical modes of the politicization of disease, particularly contagious disease, as a technology of racialization, displacement, and disenfranchisement, and invisibilization of certain vulnerable populations by exposing them further to precarious conditions. At the crux of this exclusionary matrix lies a carefully constructed managerial imaginary of security, risk, and regulation. Such a matrix works simultaneously through allegorical and juridical channels, by conjugating certain populations with the virus, and reconfiguring public spaces. These spaces become tightly policed sites where accessibility and mobility norms are enforced to manage and eliminate risky exposures to certain bodies and beings, ensuring the global image of the modern and scientifically progressive nation-state to be circulated and preserved. By making a certain racially and economically configured conception of health an index of national development, such biosecurity measures mobilize the domain of meaning, representation, and intelligibility as regulatory modes that determine the distribution, value, and destination of bodies based on a particular kind of biomedical scale in which medicine and nationalist hegemonies come to cohere.

Visual media serves as both reinforcement of such hegemonic formations as well as sites of resistance and exposition that bring out the economy of convergences and erasures through which fields of representation participate in the production of an unequal and oppressive pandemic regime via the generation of a specific kind of pandemic imaginary. In recent critical literature on the role and proliferation of visual media during COVID-19, particularly in the Global South, this connection has been explored in terms of how the foregrounding of a model of the afflicted third world or developing nation as the custodian and advance guard of both pandemic protocol and preventive and curative apparatuses, has been at the expense of systemic invisibilization of the plight of the underprivileged. The latter include migrant workers displaced from their workplaces owing to stringent and abrupt lockdown mandates; unemployed daily wage laborers, women, and other marginalized communities forced to live in violent or precarious situations; caregivers and essential workers with inadequate compensation; and, most importantly, the economically backward sections of society without access to private healthcare and medication in the event of the overburdening and collapse of public healthcare, especially in India during the onset of the Delta variant. Taken in the context of such glaring disparities in how disease is experienced, encountered, dealt with, and assimilated into the discourse and perception of normality, these analyses of the role of visual culture in intervening into, transforming, or challenging these

disparities, demonstrate how the relationship between contagion and neoliberal biomedical discourse impinges on and is furthered by representational conventions and practices.

The relationship between the politics of disease control and management and visual culture is a historically entrenched one. In recent critical work, Allison Bashford (2001), Marsha Morton and Ann-Marie Akehurst (2023), Kirsten Ostherr (2015), David Serlin (2010), Davis Hopkins and Disa Persson (2023), and Christopher Pinney (2014) have underscored this historical connection across transnational outbreaks of contagious diseases between virality and visibility, whether it is visual works representing the diseased body, educational documentaries, and public awareness films by organizations like the World Health Organization meant to instruct the audience about hygiene, precaution, and medical advances, scientific imaging, and maps seeking to capture the invisible virus, to artistic interventions from within academic and avant-garde positions that appropriate and subvert dominant visual narratives of disease and contagion. As Christopher Pinney (2014) shows with reference to colonial photography, the photographic surface's egalitarian leveling of hierarchies is seen as a threat to caste, class, and gender stratifications in the medium's early days in India—photographic instantaneity in its erasure of social scripts of segregation and a replacement of the latter by the possibility of a common visual space of horizontal occupation emerges as a “dromospheric contamination” (72).

This virological optic of photography—photography as what Pinney drawing on philosophers Plato and Derrida describes as *pharmakon*: an entity that is at once both poison and cure—destabilizes the spatial therapeutics of social distancing by foregrounding through visual strategies like close-ups, granularity, enlargement, angular displacements, chromatic manipulations, and discordant juxtapositions—the predominance of a racialized logistics in the material instantiations of sanitized, disinfected, and insulated public architectures, where norms of distance and isolation replicate and amplify at an infrastructural level, existing social discrepancies (Pinney 2014; Lipiński 2014; Eaton 2020).

Visual Cultures of COVID-19: Toward a Pandemic Imaginary

Attempts to analyze the cultural life and afterlife of COVID-19 are necessarily incomplete without an acknowledgement of the pandemic's visual dimensions. The proliferation of medico-scientific data visualizations—in the form of graphs, charts, infographics, anatomical illustrations, and other imaging technologies—aims to record, transcribe, translate, and, by extension, transform the radical contingency of the novel microorganism, including its molecular scale, into a set of knowable and controllable

parameters. This includes various institutionally mandated official maps tracking and tracing in real time the virus's global spread, algorithmically enhanced biometric tools engineered to monitor and contain infected bodies, to the generation of a new popular visual cultural discourse of the pandemic primarily within the digital sphere, in which photographic and videographic documentation of lived experiences, journalistic reportage, and ideologically inflected iconographies produced by various national media and communities targeting BIPOC and other racial minorities—the pandemic's multi-sited and interdisciplinary visual topography—constitutes a complex and intersecting terrain that I refer to as a visual infrastructure. As J. Scott Brennan and colleagues (2021) have shown, the pandemic's visual infrastructure not only has a scientific and informational dimension aimed at generating usable data, but underlying such ostensible usages of the image are the latter's insertion within various politicized appropriations of images as contested sites of truth claims. "Visuals" thus "illustrate and selectively emphasize arguments and claims, purport to present evidence for claims, and impersonate supposedly authoritative sources for claims" (Brennan et al. 2021, 278).

The use of an infrastructural rubric to address the processes and practices of image making, dissemination, and circulation during and after COVID-19 is meant to indicate the social ontology of pandemic visibility as inextricably tied to, generative of, and in some instances subverting, neoliberal capitalist and biopolitical norms with their attendant racialized, heteropatriarchal, and carceral operations. In arguing for the infrastructural role of visibility during COVID-19, this article also draws on work in media studies, primarily Marshall McLuhan's expansion of the materiality of infrastructure to include various forms of materially instantiated cultural media, and media studies scholars Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski's (2015) conceptualization of the tangible and corporeal phenomenology of information as what mediates, permeates, flows through and between bodies, objects, landscapes, affects, and spaces, shaping and being shaped by the dynamics of their positions, meanings, and relationalities in order to produce soft infrastructures.

Such a critical materialist and expanded frame for reading visual culture not only underscores the function of the image as material locus of power beyond its indexical and rhetorical capacities, more significantly, it highlights how visual norms, habits, practices, and technologies engendered by the specific socioeconomic landscape of COVID-19 in the Global South enter into contentious and complicit encounters with the marked crisis of public and health infrastructures that has been central to the pandemic experience in several third world nations. A glaring contradiction in the case of urban India during the peak months of the pandemic was seen between, on the one hand, the emergence of various prophylactic digital interfaces and technologies under the utopian

umbrella concept of the smart city—apps, websites, devices, and virtual assistants aimed at facilitating the administering and monitoring of vaccination and self-quarantine, with live updates and interactive maps. On the other hand, the systematic collapse of the nation's medical, legal, and economic infrastructure in the form of rampant unemployment, displaced and deracinated migrant workers, curbing of civil liberties and authoritarian suspension of rights to dissent under the draconian UAPA laws, and sanctioned exploitation of agricultural and local industrial sectors through moves to privatize and monopolize them. The acute shortage of medical supplies in public hospitals and clinics—oxygen cylinders, beds in wards, antiretroviral drugs, and eventually space for disposing the dead became a defining exposition of the necrocapitalist machinations of India's right-wing government, further bringing to light pre-existing structural inequalities. Recent scholarship by Neel Ahuja (2020), Ayona Datta (2020), and Thy Phu and Danielle Wong (2021) has critically analyzed this rift revealed by the contingencies of an uncontrollable viral contamination between purportedly sophisticated visual technologies of the pandemic and a corresponding production of conditions of precarity. As summed up by Datta (2020):

The teleological control of pandemics through quarantine apps has much to do with the simultaneous absence of physical infrastructures of viral containment—mass quarantine centres, basic urban services, physical tracking and tracing, health infrastructures and so on. In their absence, the state prioritises the infrastructures of big tech, cloud servers, mobile towers, miles of cable and the smartphone. (236)

The engendering of a particular mode of visual engagement with contagion—in which competing epistemologies of scientific rationality, state surveillance and policing, moral regulations and cultural norms around conduct, hygiene, contact, purity and pollution, and information media comprising various doctrinaire, propagandist, and hegemonic configurations of knowledge participate—demonstrate how the mobilization of the resources of seeing, visibilization, and legibility around the central figures of an invisible virus and infectious disease is steeped in and productive of settler and/or neocolonial extractivist technologies of racial profiling, othering, and disenfranchisement.

Photography as Pharmakon

As a visual medium anchored in imperial history, how does pandemic photography engage with its historicity even as it enters into new spaces of conflict and negotiation with contemporary visual registers and hegemonies? Do the photograph's material conditions of production—its status as an open-ended, participatory event involving collective agencies, including nonhuman, affective, elemental, and technical agencies,

rather than a self-enclosed artifact reflecting the singular authority of the photographer—enable as Christopher Pinney (2014), Ariella Azoulay (2008), and Parmod K. Nayar (2022) have shown, a destabilization of the ideological linkage between vision and power, replacing it with what Azoulay (2008) calls a civil contract: modes of envisioning that are based in an impure and contagious technicity of reciprocity and enmeshment between the seer and seen, subject and object, medium and scene?

Pinney's concept of the photograph's pharmacological potentialities seems to provide a useful analytical hinge for COVID-19 imagery. In his analysis of colonial photography, particularly ethnographic images taken by British anthropologists and administrators in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India, Pinney (2014) demonstrates that while the medium was intended to serve as a tool of colonial rule and knowledge formation, including taxonomic categorization and appropriation of local populations and places, in its actual operations, the photographic process entailed forms of constraint, unpredictability, dissonance, and difficulty that disrupted the seamless consolidation of such imperial epistemes. In its capacity to straddle both a referential and evidentiary function as well as a material, corporeal, technological, chemical, and affective domain involving the play of light, color, weather, acid, mechanical processes, and bodily contingencies, photography ended up destabilizing its own use as a tool of accuracy and control. What was intended as cure or remedy thus became at once a poison or deterrent to imperial logistics.

Pinney's (2014) use of the concept of *pharmakon* references both traditions of philosophical thought through which the concept has traveled in contemporary times: Jacques Derrida's depiction of writing as consisting of a supplementary or hauntological dimension that subtends and escapes discursivity, alluding to without registration the presence of what is invisible and inarticulate, threatening to disrupt from the margins the seemingly stable and repressive semantic structure of discourse, and Bernard Stiegler's (2013) reading of media technics as imbued with a pharmacological logic, which both grounds as well as delinks media ecologies from their panoptical (Foucault 1977) and control society functions (Deleuze 1992), opening up spaces of ambivalence, uncertainty, and dissonance in articulations of difference beyond purely binaristic resolutions. For Pinney the photograph is not merely an indexical artifact of verisimilitude, documenting or framing an instance of irrefutable reality; on the contrary, it contains an internal structure of multiple resistances to this indexical process in the form of chromatic aberrations, accidental placements, and atmospheric interference that draw attention to the photograph as a material event in space and time and photographic truth as involving degrees of epistemic and representational violence that militate against such eventual aesthetics to produce a semblance of socially and culturally

commensurate truth. This supplemental aspect is what makes a photograph prophetic rather than merely evidentiary, indicating interpersonal relations, cultural practices, affective dispositions, social arrangements, and structures that could be but are not. Transposed to the context of COVID-19 photography, Pinney's (2014) theory of the photograph as *pharmakon* foregrounds how, as a medium of bearing witness to the sociocultural trajectory of the pandemic, the photograph enters into an already heavily mediated and saturated visual space to institute a new logic of visibility, one that demonstrates the power structures underlying visual regimes of representations while attesting to the liminal presence of that which is invisible, intangible, and marginal to official accounts, including communities and experiences that are invisibilized through a failure or refusal to include them in vocabularies of subjectivity, personhood, livability, and grievability.

The pharmacological imaginary instituted by photographs of the pandemic while situated within the testimonial field of documentary media, simultaneously disclose the hauntological dimension of contemporary urban infrastructures and the perceptual regimes that these engender. Taken in conjunction with the statist production of civic sites as immunitary habituses during the pandemic in which norms of access, mobility, distribution, and sociality are strictly policed, arranged, and monitored in accordance with an epidemiological model of the body politic under threat of foreign invasion—the material-sensory interventions of photography into this medico-juridical reconstitution of national life to articulate and disclose a hidden domain of affective excess and traumatic rupture operate along technology's pharmacological lines. In the following sections, this article will explore how three photographers deploy the medium to not only document the pandemic's unequal, ambivalent, and ruptured social dimension, but also become in their capacity as media infrastructures, material-semiotic sites for recalibrating bodily, sensory, and affective experience of the pandemic, in excess of what is accorded by the boundaries and protocols of immunitary statehood.

Photographing Precarity: Lakshmi, Venkatesh, and Fadli

Documentary photographer and photojournalist Samyukta Lakshmi's series on the fraught conditions of mobility and displacement experienced by a huge contingent of migrant workers stranded in Bangalore during the declaration of a nationwide lockdown in March 2020 are centered on unpacking the unequal and oppressive dimensions of urban infrastructure. Individual photos in the series aim at highlighting this structural lacuna by deliberately juxtaposing staggered and immobilized queues of forcibly displaced daily wage laborers with architectures of transit and containment—bus stops, barricades, gates, and police lines. Evocative of what scholars Paul Moawad and Lauren

Andres (2022) in their ethnography of refugee experience of Syrian immigrants in a quarantine center in Lebanon, call “spatialities of abjection” (469), these images highlight the kinds of ironies, contradictions, and ethical oversights that accompany the uncritical imposition of universal juridical norms of quarantine, social distancing, isolation and lockdown in the unequal geographies of the Global South where emplacement and territoriality are deeply contentious phenomena marked by patterns of uneven development, poverty and homelessness, forced migration to overcrowded cities from neglected and marginalized rural areas, and the spatialization of socioeconomic difference through the creation of slums with deplorable housing and sanitation conditions.

Images of displaced populations waiting in transit, their thronging bodies lining strategically deployed barriers or listlessly submitting to COVID-19 protocols bring out both the violence and fragility of such enforcements under conditions where basic infrastructural and economic necessities are denied to a large section of the citizenry. The photographs’ focus on the minutiae of pandemic life—masks, food supplies, bottled water, sanitizers, and thermal detection kits underscore both the arbitrariness and redundancy of such prophylactic technologies, which become mere managerial instruments reinforcing existing biopolitical structures of disposability and control, without addressing deeper social iniquities, economic injustices, and material disparities plaguing civic spaces.

A particularly poignant image captures a group of migrant workers from the Eastern Indian states of Bihar and Odisha waiting at a Bengaluru bus stop for the state sponsored special buses that were rolled out during the first lockdown period to carry these laborers to their home states. Framed by billboard adverts for state-of-the-art real estate in the city’s posh neighborhoods, these bodies bear witness to the endemic bedrock of inequality upon which the urban infrastructure of India’s Silicon Valley rests. The very mandate of a civic lockdown seen through Lakshmi’s lens thus exposes the unstable contours of concepts of home, containment, and privacy seen as essential to controlling the disease. The exorbitantly priced high-rise apartments serve as infrastructural paratexts supplementing while contributing to the production of the exposed, overworked, and vulnerable body of the social precariat. The camera positioning itself on the other side of the road provides an unfinished, inconclusive yet critical fourth wall teasing out the invisibilized connection between a certain privileged and exclusionary paradigm of place and a corresponding domain of exile, placelessness, uncertainty, and uprooting, in turn debunking the myth of equal susceptibility to an indiscriminating virus. The exposure of these abandoned and disposable bodies to the camera indexes

other iterations of exposure—to disease, inclemencies of climate, police violence, starvation, and of course the coronavirus itself.

Liminal sites of transit and waiting are also featured extensively in documentary photographer K. Venkatesh's photos of the pandemic. However, unlike Lakshmi's incisive social commentary, Venkatesh's images have a more philosophical approach, drawing our attention to the affective dimensions of the pandemic. Also situated in Bangalore, Venkatesh's long takes and panoramic shots of depopulated urban spaces—particularly empty roads seem to use the visual medium to index the affective trace of the virus. Loss, mourning, destabilization, anomie, and alienation are suggested by the photographs' focus on vacant sites or their play with scales contrasting the finitude of the human body with a certain surrounding cosmic vastness. If a predominant visual response to the virus includes attempts to contain and map it within scientific frameworks, these photos institute an alternative cartographic idiom of viral contagion drawing attention to the pandemic as a space of multispecies and entangled relationalities involving rationalities and agencies that cannot entirely be subsumed within anthropocentric and logocentric grids of empirical knowledge. Abandoned and bare civic infrastructure seems to accommodate the virus's particular hauntological agency as supplemental and in excess of humanity's hubristic designs, rendering in turn the city spectral and strange. At the same time, these sites of urban uncanny serve as funerary assertions of grief and mourning as constituting the affective and ethical orientations generated by the pandemic without designating any specific subject or space as the proper or privileged locus of such affective and ethical negotiations. Rather, these images seem to inaugurate a new methodological engagement using the effects of contagion on time and space to suggest modes of attunement toward planetary life and matter.

Venkatesh's photos thus seem to attempt to move the spectator and her interpretive activity from specific sociological concerns toward recognizing the former's close connection with ecological crises and the need in turn for an appropriate response toward questions of justice, remediation, obligation, and recognition that includes both human and nonhuman sites of vulnerability and endangerment. This shift in perspective of new perceptual and ethical capacities vis-à-vis forms of alterity; it also mobilizes new idioms of stewardship, community, and care.

Muhammad Fadli's photographic project on COVID-19 in Indonesia, foreground the question of caregiving and community ethics. Commissioned by the *National Geographic* magazine and taken in the context of the government's prolonged denialist attitude, rash and lax disease management policies, and refusal to declare a nationwide emergency or

lockdown that led to Indonesia recording the second largest number of COVID-19 deaths in Asia after China. These images document the efforts spearheaded by local citizen groups and activists to create makeshift quarantine zones with construction material and household supplies, while extending care and aid to afflicted members of the community through DIY thermal detectors and PPE kits, sharing of food, local remedies, and indigenous therapies. In the face of the visual regime instituted by the government that seeks to avert accountability by invisibilizing the effects of the virus, Fadli's documentary images offer an alternative insurgent imperative to visibilize not only the presence of the virus but also ways of responding to it that are not based in carcerality, policing, and control, but caregiving and commoning practices. Fadli's images participate in what scholars Jordin Clark, Solange Muñoz, and Jeremy Auerbach (2023) have termed "vernacular infrastructures of care" (542), infrastructural rearrangements fostered through community engagement in situations where governmental agencies have failed to provide adequate and sustainable material resources to deal with the pandemic.

Several of Fadli's COVID-19 images present an aerial view of unnamed mass graves, a technique also used by the late Danish Siddiqui in his now iconic bird's-eye view photographs of Delhi's mass crematoria. These funerary photographs at one level reference the image's collusion in what Pramod Nayar in his analysis of pandemic photography calls an *atmo-technics*: modes of contemporary neoliberal imaging practices drawing on clinical rhetoric and military visuality to institute all pervasive regimes of surveillance and control that operate via the dehumanization and decorporealization of individual subjects into extractable biometric data fields. Taken in the context of the photographs' role as journalistic testimonies of manufactured precarity, the globality of such atmospheric perspective alludes to the incomprehensibility of scale, both the virus's status as a hyperobject that eludes capture and cognition, as well as the enormity of devastation, while attempting to rescue this representational impasse from the cold, impersonal, and commodifying logics of statistics. Secondly, these depopulated funerary infrastructures, while indicting the failure of public healthcare and governments, also serve as ethically informed spaces of public and collective mourning. Finally through a visual contrast and alignment between human death either as burning pyres or freshly dug graves and a surrounding environment that bears the burdens of human losses—depicted in Fadli's photos as stark and bare, and in Siddiqui images as inundated with toxic fumes—these images draw a visual parallel between such losses of individual lives and planetary extinctions, underscoring those irrefutable ecological connections that are testified by the very ontology of the zoonotic virus.

The Mediated Virocene: Beyond Biopolitics and toward a Pandemic Planetaryity

An analysis of the cultural ramifications of the pandemic is incomplete without taking into consideration the virus's institution of a global biopolitical imaginary and the discursive landscape that has been constituted around its interpretation especially in the humanities and social sciences. One methodological junction linking the pandemic as a medico-legal configuration on the one hand and a planetary event on the other (and therefore situating the disciplinary implications of COVID-19 and cultural responses to it at a threshold between the medical humanities and environmental humanities) is the critical philosophical approach to the pandemic. This approach, particularly when envisioned as a corollary of the capitalist, extractivist, and neocolonial dimensions of the Anthropocene enables an affirmative biopolitics as opposed to the negative biopolitical *dispositif* of carcerality and control as emphasized especially by Agamben (2021) in his writings on COVID-19. Agamben sees the pandemic, institutional and medico-legal responses to the virus, conditions of containment, exclusion, access, and distribution, and the slew of nationalist rhetoric and right-wing populist discourses the pandemic generated, as a confirmation of western modernity's basis in a biopolitical paradigm that operates through states of exception to continually inscribe and demarcate life as either qualified "bios" or bare "zoe." However, Agamben's ascription to the pandemic the status of a new biopolitical regime has been complicated by thinkers who identify in this new viral regime a provocation to at once reexamine the Anthropocentric biases informing modern biopolitics, including its logic of articulating the shared world into hierarchical binaries, as well as acknowledge the limits of the humanist conception of the Cartesian individual as a bounded, unified and stable entity.

According to Roberto Esposito (2022), while institutional biopolitics around epidemiological science and disease management have functioned according to an immunitarian model of society as a self-enclosed entity that needs to be protected from external invasion through an incorporation of a particular structure of power that exempts or exonerates certain members from duties and obligations toward the collective, one of the prominent interventions made into this immunitarian logic by the pandemic was the reinforcement of the embodied, entangled, porous ontology of the subject and thus the institution of new ecologically and ethically attuned models of sociality, what Esposito calls "common immunity." Esposito's understanding of common immunity as a new instantiation of political ecology based in collective ownership, mutual obligation, relationships of care and recognition of shared vulnerability in the face of the Anthropocene's unprecedented crises, also points toward the pandemic's status as a planetary force, what Fernando (2020) calls "the Virocene epoch," that

“throws into relief the ultimate continuum amongst the various bodies, whether this continuum is desired or undesired” (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2020, 35–36).

The novel coronavirus’s agential capacity, unfolding as its reconfiguring of political and biological systems, including the neoliberal economic order, cultural assumptions, social stratifications, and phenomenologies of habit and habitation, has also led to the concomitant recalibration of concepts of personhood, subjectivity, individuality, agency, voice, and authority. As James Baumlin puts it, “no longer a single macro organism, [we are] in fact an assemblage of microorganisms, upon which life depends absolutely” (2020, 46). The autonomous self is no longer the paradigmatic point of reference for the liberal humanist rational subject. Rather the virus’s permeation of bodies and spaces, defiance of medico-legal norms, and alteration of historically entrenched boundaries between human and animal, self and other, inside and outside, purity and pollution, create what Christine Daigle (2021) calls “fissure at the heart of the concept ‘human’” (28). It highlights thus a constitutive rift in the conception of the Anthropocentric subject whose destructive exploitation of planetary resources and other species has led to the outbreak and spread of the virus as a “posthuman recoil . . . an effect of the human that propels the human into a posthuman state” (Boetzkes and McWebb 2021, 119). The pandemic, while traceable to conditions created by the Capitalocene and its apparatuses of factory farming, toxic dumping, petrochemical extraction, and habitat depletion, also subverts and underscores the limits of the humanist metaphysics of absolute mastery, territorialization, and ownership, turning the exclusivist fantasy of species supremacy and insularity into its Posthuman, virological, and multispecies antithesis—“human imbrication in a planetary flesh” (Boetzkes and McWebb 2021, 119).

This “strange interregnum between worlds . . . as well as radical emancipatory possibilities” (Newman and Topuzovski 2021, 3) introduced by the pandemic occasion the emergence of a Posthuman subject, one whose possibilities for foregrounding a planetary view of existence have been critically harnessed by ecocritical thinkers as a provocation to reimagine the grammar of the subject as “transjective”: “dynamic assemblages of unfolding relations, experiences, beings and agentic capacities. This assemblage, which materializes as an embodied being, is itself a porous and permeable being . . . I use the term transjective which blends the material and the subjective” (Daigle 2020, 28). Drawing on the material feminist writings of Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett, and Samatha Frost, posthumanist ecocritical interpretations of the pandemic highlight it as an event that demonstrates how social and cultural epistemes, norms, values, practices, methods, and forms, including those that support fictions of bounded subjecthood, have material dimensions and implications and are in

effect inseparable from ontological structures of porosity, interdependence, exposure and exchange, both symbiotic and parasitic.

In their book, *Touch in the Time of Corona*, Veel and Steiner (2021) describe the need to devise an alternative vocabulary to “comprehend the way the pandemic affects humans in a wider sense,” one that goes beyond the “vocabulary of epidemiology and the medical sciences” and engages with the “affective and often contradictory categories through which we experience the pandemic the way its effects become visible, felt, or noticed” (2). Drawing on the paradoxical status of touch and touching during the lockdown, the authors identify the predicament of inhabiting the existential topography of the pandemic as the simultaneous need for human contact and the constraints around the same. The notion of touch becomes a useful conceptual tool with which to address the human condition as embodied and emplaced in “multispecies knots” and thus the precondition of cultural systems of expression and meaning as one of “vulnerability that is implied when we are meant to caress distance rather than other human beings” (3).

Thinking through and with conceptualizations of the pandemic as a planetary event and the virus as a posthuman agent disturbing the foundational metaphysics of the Anthropocene expands the methodological scope of existing scholarly debates around the biopolitical framings of COVID-19 to accommodate questions of multispecies justice and kinship, ecological conservation, and relationality as integral to the pandemic imaginary. A posthuman environmentalist reading of the virus as what opens up new ontological arrangements and material reconfigurations no longer containable within the discursive structures established by Enlightenment rationalist thought also foregrounds the social, political, and economic implications of such multispecies ecologies as fostered by viral vectors of risk and contagion, new articulations of individuation, and life, including self-replicating autopoietic systems, new technological assemblages, and forms of agency, including necrotic agencies. As NY Manoj (2024) suggests, “the pandemic calls for a posthuman ontology and multispecies ecology that can affirm the multiplicity of life and resist its commodification” (3). The virus visibilizes prevailing orders of social precarity, dispossession, and deprivation, while also catalyzing possibilities, ethics, and vocabularies for solidarities, care, mutual aid, and coexistence, “sticky dependencies among humans, machines, and nature . . . in the interval between abandoned city centers and digitally mediated gatherings” (5). Such viral exposures in turn affect and inflect modes of cultural expression, particularly visual culture.

The coronavirus’s propensity to effect drastic and unprecedented rearrangements, orderings and disorderings of bodies, ecologies, matter, time, and space makes it a “significant curatorial agent co-making a new milieu which is borne out of pervious

forms” (Cameron 2021, 219). As a “radical rhizomiccuratorial agent,” the virus also renders palpable modes of expression, intelligibility, and existence that are made to fall below the threshold of normative and hegemonic regimes of truth and value, highlighting thus the repressive role of representational systems and their institutionalized articulations, particularly visual cultures, including those established by or adhering to the medical gaze and clinical mandates (Cameron 2021, 219). As the recent ideological history of COVID-19 in South Asia, evidences, dominant modes of consensus regarding the virus’s origins and ontological bearings cohere around the production of an emergent state of exception that places at its sacrificial center an abject and dehumanized corporeality. Within this new model of the contagious body, in which multiple, culturally, and historically mediated inflections of contagiousness and impurity come to coexist, the racialized body of the Asian/Dalit/migrant worker and the discursively overdetermined image of the (“Chinese”) virus enter into a zone of indistinction. The saturation of digital mediascapes with a particular pandemic imaginary and the permeation of visual technologies of tracking, monitoring, sharing, and datafication into the enclosed spaces of everyday private life are thus interrelated parts of a visual regime where (pan)opticality—self-reflexively interiorized into the domain of the private, including the individual body and reproduced interminably as streams of commodifiable and commercially expropriable data—takes on the force of a material antidote to the virus’s intangibilities.

The erection of such elaborate visual modalities and epistemologies of control also underscores how the virus itself functions, as Ahuja argues, as a technology of visibilization, a revelatory and disruptive form of countervisuality that exposes the calibrations of hegemonic and unequal visual regimes. As Kirsten Ostherr (2020) and Danielle Wong (2021) argue, the cultural crisis produced by the pandemic is at once a visual crisis—“the global pandemic poses a visual problem” (Wong 2021, 13)—one that necessitates negotiations with intersections between neoliberal industrial modernity’s structures of oppression and its sensory, cognitive, and epistemic technologies. Aesthetic forms particularly those that work with visual apparatuses and media need to be understood and resituated vis-à-vis this crisis of conjunction. Photographs documenting spaces, experiences, and communities under duress can collude in modes of abjection and social precarity enforced by the carceral capitalist state. Photographs as informed by the logic of testimonial apparatuses and their specific media ecologies of framing, juxtaposition, editing, and ventriloquizing of subjects often performatively reproduce forms of epistemic violence toward subaltern and indigenous subjectivities. The photographic responses to COVID-19 explored in this article extend this viral function disclosing an optical unconscious of the pandemic’s biopolitical underpinnings while at

the same time serving as affective exposures of a common planetary condition of shared vulnerability and eco-entanglement. Straddling a tense threshold between distance as communal ethics: a form of civic care-giving in contagious environments, and proximity as an affective and imaginative experience catalyzed by the camera's particular mode of encountering and mediating these pandemic imposed ruptures in space and time. The photographs explored in this article, enact a performative virality and impurity, entering into these clinically mandated distances and biopolitically informed enclosures to expose the underlying politics that structure these new spatial arrangements, while offering visual, affective, and epistemic imaginaries to disrupt them.

Notes

¹ Wellcome Trust. n.d. "The Covid-19 Anxiety Project." Accessed August 15, 2023. <https://wellcome.org/what-we-do/our-work/wellcome-photography-prize/2020/covid-19-anxiety-project>.

² Covid Photo Museum. n.d. "The Covid Photo Museum." Accessed August 15, 2023. <https://www.covidphotomuseum.org/about>.

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