

## Book Review

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Bishnupriya Ghosh (2023) *The Virus Touch: Theorizing Epidemic Media*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 304 pp, ISBN: 9781478019213 (paperback)

Already at the very outset in the introduction of this dense and highly informative book, Ghosh highlights the fact that considering our bodies as a singular entity is an illusion, given that, for example, microbial cells outnumber human cells ten to one. With this introduction to the human microbiome, Ghosh moves on to set out that her book is devoted to how the extreme situation of the global COVID-19 pandemic compelled a ‘[...] recalibration of multispecies politics.’ (2) Moreover, for Ghosh, making sense of emerging infectious disease, or EID, events, cannot be accomplished without taking into account multispecies relations, which consistently surface as ‘[...] organizing nodes for plotting targeted interventions into individual bodies, populations, and disease milieus.’ (2) On a more fundamental level, multispecies relations are crucial since, as Ghosh argues, models suggest that ‘[...] 60.3% of EIDs are zoonotic; among these, 71.3% originate from wildlife.’ (163)

Ghosh’s analysis, situated within scholarship that is concerned with the intersection of medical humanities and media studies, amongst other things, such as the work of Lisa Cartwright (1995) and Kristen Ostherr (2013)<sup>1</sup> - focuses on ‘epidemic media’, or the technical mediation through which infection is made legible, and she studies epidemic media across epistemic settings such as laboratories, clinics and forests, to understand how they ‘[...] actualize multispecies relations so as to measure, assess, and locate harms.’ (2) Further, for Ghosh, epidemic media within the context of her book is ‘[...] a capacious rubric for much more than the proverbial contagion fare of films and television shows, pulp fiction, and literary works.’ (8) Ghosh’s study of epidemic media “[...] attends to life unfolding as process-relational ontologies, to life as always becoming.” (8–9) For Ghosh, there is also a contingent element to epidemic media, given that they are dealing with detecting and composing a novel multispecies relations, ones that are necessarily composed by lively materialities. As she argues,

‘When the effort is to detect and compose a novel multispecies relation, the representation is necessarily, and often explicitly, conjectural or speculative. Machinic inscriptions often run up against accelerating viral changes (mutations becoming variants, for example) or the new complexities of multicellular organization (which of ‘our’ proteins help the viral spike protein to fuse to “our” cells)’. (13)

Moreover, not all lively materialities are always, strictly speaking, biological processes such as the ones just mentioned. As Ghosh puts it,

“Sometimes liveliness registers as disruptive excesses, as strong affects. An animal spotting a camera trap alters its route and subsequently dislodges the camera; a vital medium poses haptic danger despite controlled safety precautions. Too much noise or disturbance, error or redundancy, scuttles efforts at efficient machinic capture. These differential agencies, animal or machinic, underwrite the speculative orientation of epidemic media’s biotechnical forms.” (13)

Moreover, epidemic media are ‘[...] processes of mediation that render multispecies relationalities sensible so as to manage them during, or even better, before the next epidemic. These media materialize in scientific practices, artistic compositions, and activist inscriptions.’ (28) Mobilizing objects such as viruses and hosts, Ghosh explains, epidemic media set in motion research agendas, institutional action, and public policy. The reflexive, open-ended nature of epidemic media, given their breadth, contingent, and conjectural nature, is, however, tempered by a specific goal: the need to ‘[...] produce biotechnological or biomedical solutions to stem host losses.’ (27)

Ghosh further asks how exactly epistemic media inscribe infection, or what epistemic objects enable targeted interventions into changing multispecies relations. Here, Ghosh begins by answering that one might begin with epidemic media as ‘[...] enactments of epistemic cuts in dynamic multispecies assemblies. There is mastery in the mediatic objectification of *one* multispecies relation plucked out from the living processes and relations of the biological churn.’ (3; emphasis in the original). Ghosh casts suspicion at the manner in which epidemic media have functioned, considering it myopic: ‘[...] their material construction of epistemic objects extracts and isolates biological targets from processes and relations, then compounds the problem by iteratively folding those targets into problem-solving exercises aimed at producing viable industrial solutions.’ (27) Pesticides and antibiotics that ‘[...] have generated microbial drug resistance and cancerous conditions’ (27) are historical evidence of the problem of this approach. Epidemic media can also serve to possibly recast this myopic view that ‘[...] ends in a biotechnological fix (in vaccines and drugs)’ (27), to take a more holistic approach that encompasses our multispecies entanglements, and which also takes into account our ‘[...] precarious life in a precarious planet.’ (27). Ghosh does not appear to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater, here. She does not seem to be arguing that biotechnological fixes are to be entirely dismissed – but rather, that they themselves have limitations, given that ‘[...] biological processes outpace machinic capture even as “we” race to modify a new multispecies relation.’ (27). Ghosh also argues that one needs to learn to accept the inherent precariousness and unpredictability of life itself. As she puts it,

‘[...] even though we’d rather turn our backs on pathogenic germs, exterminating them when we can, *we have no option but to emerge with them*. The radical uncertainty of new pathogenic emergences just reinforces the issue [...] Epidemic histories tell us it is not always possible to calculate all outcomes to life’s unfoldings.’ (27 – 28; emphasis in the original)

Ghosh further contends that a more comprehensive approach needs to be adopted that locates microbes, and individual bodies, within their larger context, and social and

environmental backgrounds. The intentional politics of the book are, as Ghosh argues, characterized by a ‘multispecies politics of health.’ (29) Within this multispecies politics of health, which recognizes our relations with other species and environments, non-human animal and ecosystem health cannot be ignored. Ghosh’s arguments are also presented within a setting that firmly understands colonial dispossession, amongst other things, as central to understanding infectious disease emergence. This historical context also has ongoing effects, with infectious diseases being ‘[...] deadlier for those living with generational, often deepening harms. In tracking uneven socioeconomic distributions of health, the colonial sphere continues to haunt the biosphere.’ (39). Opening our eyes to the historical context of infectious disease emergences allows us, as Ghosh argues, to recast epidemics as biological, social, and ecological crises.

Chapter 3 is one of the most interesting chapters in the book, and focuses on the clinical translations of blood. During the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s, blood was made ‘[...] public as an interior milieu under attack that was equally a medium recalcitrant to containment at the epidermal limits of the molar body.’ (114) In this chapter, Ghosh traces processes of mediation that materialize blood in biotechnical spatial forms composed as interior milieus. Ghosh characterizes these intensive time-spaces read for their multispecies distributions as ‘biotechnical milieus’ (114), and further probes their ecological and social dimensions. Ghosh focuses on the mediatic processes that clinically translate blood into three forms; frozen blood samples (for refrigeration), blood data (for the database) and blood pictures (for points of clinical care). Taking volumetric and numeric forms, these biotechnical milieus are temporally organized as serial snapshots in the blood files. Here, blood ‘[...] is the quiet backdrop to a multispecies drama transcribed as mathematical ratio ( $x$  particles in  $y$  mL).’ (114; emphases in the original). Following blood beyond its original site of production, Ghosh brings to light multispecies entanglements as social and ecological relationalities. Technical mediation puts us in communication

‘[...] with vital media bristling with multispecies signals, gesturing towards disease milieus. What one breathes and ingests, where one lives and travels, one’s intergenerational vitality, all determine how infection unfolds in the intensive interior milieu.’ (121).

The porousness of bodily boundaries, or rather, its inability to be divorced from its social, cultural, and political contexts, amongst other things, is made explicit in Chapter 3. Ghosh discusses the manner in which consequent to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s, urgings to get tested became commonplace in American public life, as was knowledge of how HIV was transmitted and its molecular effects. Within this backdrop in the United States, patient-centred HIV/AIDS movements made the technical modification of blood, in tests and therapy, a communal enterprise. In addition, Ghosh argues that blood did not only have a symbolic function, but was also sensible insofar as in scientific and artistic compositions, blood, as that which is internal and intimate, was externalized and given existence outside of the body and its boundaries. As Ghosh argues, the early days of the HIV/AIDS crisis necessitated making blood, or the interior milieu, visible and tangible in order to push for greater awareness and action to stem the epidemic. As Ghosh puts it, ‘The interior milieu had to become perceptible as a public sensorium.’ (147) Here, Ghosh makes reference to artists like Robert Sherer and Ron Athey, who both used blood in their artworks. For Ghosh, ‘[...] the HIV/AIDS pandemic ushered in a *medicalized* epoch

sanguinis [...] in which this highly politicized, excorporated substance once more came to define social kinship.’ (115; emphasis in the original)

Another highly interesting chapter is Chapter 4, which pursues epidemic media that ‘[...] detect and compose animal movement in the wild, the “living laboratories” of the earth, to locate and identify the time-spaces of potential spillovers (160). The literature on zoonotic spillovers has attributed them to novel interfaces between wild non-human animal hosts and human populations, sometimes through intermediary hosts. Here, Ghosh is suspicious of the ‘[...] implicit centering of species taxa’, since ‘[...] crafting species difference conceived along a classificatory logic ‘[...] imposes an impossible organismic purity.’ (160) Organismic purity is a fantasy – as Ghosh highlights, animal hosts are always already multispecies, as ‘[...] lively media for the transport of microbes, they are always already *not* one species.’ (161; emphasis in original). Therefore, to analyze viruses and the complex backstory to specific EID events, one must track and sense animals in their environments, or tracking and sensing ‘biotechnical kinesthesia’ (161), in which they further materialize that environment. Chapter 4 examines processes of technical mediation that differentiate specific animal hosts from their environments, and these ‘[...] mediatic processes ultimately produce the ‘multispecies kinesthetic’ as the basis of controlling EID events’ (161). The multispecies kinesthetic specifically ‘[...] gestures toward transmission as viral infection within and between species, accessed through animal movement patterns. Disease transmission becomes intelligible as the spatial distribution of life on earth [...] (161). More specifically, movement, or traffic, characterizes the multispecies kinesthetic: firstly, traffic as in, microbial kinesthesia in cross-species transmission; secondly, traffic as in the population densities that form the demarcated areas termed an ‘environment’; third, traffic as in economic activities, from wildlife trading to food activities that have been identified as the considerable drivers of pathogenic emergence; and finally, traffic as in the machinic signal transmissions of animal movements.

Echoing a number of other works that focus on planetary health, One Health, and multispecies relations<sup>2</sup>, amongst others<sup>3</sup> in tackling EID events, Ghosh’s most vital contribution is her highly persuasive conveying of the importance of situating the molecular in its larger social, cultural, historical, and political-economic milieus, and vice-versa. Ghosh highlights, for example, the lacuna that arises when the pursuit of viral media as media environments

‘[...] mostly relegates them to clinical scales. This is because bodily fluids (blood, semen, saliva, vaginal/rectal secretions, respiratory mucous) have restricted circulation. They are ontologically fragile, unable to survive long outside their site of generation.’ (120)

But as Ghosh notes – these fluid media, by-and-large, ‘[...] exceed their molar boundaries, whether by human habits or ecosystems.’ (120) The biological cannot be disentangled from the social and the ecological and vice-versa, and further, interior milieus are ‘[...] fractal environments mirroring unfolding processes in disease milieus [...]’ (120) Ghosh’s fundamental message seems to be the necessity of connecting the micro to the macro, the molecular to the molar, and vice-versa. Neither can be considered in isolation or to the exclusion of the other. To not ‘keep abreast of pandemic scatter’ (209),

as Ghosh puts it, would be to our detriment when it comes to crisis events like COVID-19, which will otherwise arrive ‘[...] every so often, demanding expensive solutions that take decades to distribute.’ (209) There is also an implicit political economic orientation to Ghosh’s arguments, one that is highly suspect of capitalism’s ability to deliver when it comes to ‘health’ as a whole. As she argues, what all modern pandemics have shown is that,

‘Health is not the purview of medicine alone; it must include the care of life in therapies and wellness regimes, in housing and food security. Health cannot be left to the free market’s vicissitudes but must become a global commons. Health cannot be constrained to human health; it must be crosshatched with animal and ecosystem health.’ (73)

To conclude, therefore, Ghosh’s book speaks to the necessity of thinking of our imbrication within our environmental, social, cultural, political and historical milieus, and of the inherent multispecies politics and ‘ecosystem entanglements’ (167) implicated within this context, not just in relation to health, but more broadly in terms of our everyday lives.

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### Notes

1. I am thankful to Benjamín Schultz-Figueroa for bringing these specific works to my attention.
2. Ghosh seems to conflate the notions of ‘One Health’ and ‘planetary health’ at certain points, such as on page 7, but the two are not entirely the same. As [de Castañeda et al. \(2023\)](#) explain, for example, animal health remains the most prominent One Health research field, whereas planetary health research does not address animal health. Planetary health focuses more on the environment, particularly climate change and human health, and on social determinants of human health. Nonetheless, this is a small critique, and mainly mentioned here by way of clarification.
3. In relation to planetary health, see, for example, [Vatter and Lemm, 2022](#); [Härtling and Meek, 2024](#); [Browne and Sutton, 2024](#). In relation to One Health, see, for example, [Braverman, 2023](#).

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