FROM THE EDITOR

Panic and Pandemics

Deborah A. Thomas

Because we work on a three- to six-month lead schedule, these From the Editor remarks were written in early March, just as the COVID-19 crisis was generating stay-at-home orders, but before we saw the incredible surge of COVID-related deaths in Italy, New York, and elsewhere. At that point, our universities were hastily “depopulating,” and the federal response was tepid at best. I had wanted to write something that would reflect the uncertainty, anger, and fear of that moment, and because I was having difficulty capturing those atmospheres in academic prose, I decided to write a parable. Reading it in proofs now, only one month later, after so much has changed (and so much will change again before these remarks actually appear online), it feels insensitive. What was meant to be a critique of isolationism, anti-scientism, knee-jerk nationalism, and narcissism, and a celebration of the forms of life and care that people enact even in the face of extraordinary difficulty, now falls a bit flat. We will no doubt all be changed by the COVID-19 pandemic in ways we cannot even imagine just now: we will have lost people we love, we will be more circumspect, we will be enraged by the many structural inequalities globally that the virus has drawn in stark relief. But we will also have had moments to be grateful, and I hope that you will receive this parable in the spirit of its original intention, within the context of its historical moment. If ever there were a reminder that all anthropological writing is actually also historical, this is it.

It had already been twenty-seven days since Kalila, Aaron, Matthew, and Idalia had been sequestered in the country of Qaitanya. They had with them a baby named Aleta, who had been handed over to them when her mother made the decision to brave the journey south to attempt to cross the border. They had thought this a foolish decision, because the word coming back north was that all borders were closed. Walls had been built. No one could climb over the barricades Leader Gaspar had ordered, and those who had crossed the border before the walls were built would never be allowed to leave again. The walls were, it was thought, impenetrable. Kalila’s own brother, Graham, had set out to the border to try to trade some of the food they grew in their backyard for clean water, but they hadn’t heard from him since he left three weeks before, sneaking out when one of the guards fell asleep.

Leader Gaspar had only recently become the ruler of Qaitanya in a bitter struggle against the former queen, Fancy. Queen Fancy had been beloved by many, but she was distrusted by those who controlled the trade of water. Qaitanya boasted many beautiful mountains, and its forests were legendary in the region for the animals who populated them, animals that couldn’t be found anywhere else in the world, such as the red-spotted coot or the four-toed hypercat. What Qaitanya didn’t have was water. Not one lake broke the surface of the land throughout the territory, and not one river connected Qaitanya to any neighboring country. A barely trickling stream emptied near the northernmost border, and that area was controlled by Gaspar’s henchmen, henchmen who had long-standing ties to the band of traders who maintained a monopoly on this particular water supply. It was a meager supply, but it did manage to provide many in northern Qaitanya with enough water to meet most of their needs, and they guarded it jealously. Prior to the elections, Queen Fancy had been working with other leaders throughout the region to organize a series of rainwater catchment collectives. These collectives would be proclaimed “No Border Zones,” and they would complement the desalination plants that had already been built to treat the brackish water collecting in aquifers constructed by the previous administration, before the fresh water supply had run out. Were Queen Fancy’s plan realized, Gaspar’s henchmen would have lost their control of the northern economy, and Gaspar himself, a squat and shapeless man beset by a rare genetic ailment that caused his eyes to turn inward, would have seen the momentum he had been gathering in his campaign against Queen Fancy vanish. As it turned out, however, a rogue agent funded by the neighboring Republic of Balvonia, assassinated Queen Fancy, and in a gesture of tearful hypocrisy, candidate Gaspar declared a month of national mourning as he installed himself Leader.

After the mourning period, Leader Gaspar moved quickly to solidify Qaitanya’s monopoly on the water trade and to consolidate the political power of the north. Thus it was that he began sequestering dissidents. Now, to be labeled a dissident in this period was not to have done anything any reasonable person would understand as a political offense. Dissidents, for Leader Gaspar, included anyone who shared food with a neighbor, anyone who had created family with a foreigner, and anyone who played a musical instrument. You might wonder why music would have been outlawed, but it
is true that music was the main mode through which Qaitanya expressed love and commitment to each other and the main medium through which they communicated with people outside the country. Humming, in particular, was considered a capital offense, as the vibrations were thought to travel far beyond Qaitanya, and even far beyond the region. Dissidents also included anyone who spoke Balvonian or any of the other languages of the region, anyone who worshipped the rare faeries rather than the dominant priests, and anyone who wore their hair in wide plaits instead of the narrow circular twists that had been decreed.

This is how Kalila (who played the mandolin), Aaron and Matthew (who both spoke Balvonian), and Idalia (who worshipped a minor agricultural deity) came to be sequestered. Because they had the baby with them, they were given an additional ration of food every day, but beyond the allotted three daily strolls around their house, they were to remain indoors. They were not to play any card games, and they definitely were not allowed to read, but most importantly they could not play any music.

The problem arose when, on the twenty-eighth day of their sequestration, baby Aleta began to hum. At first, no one knew what the weird buzzing noise was. It was not unpleasant, but also not harmonic, so it didn’t immediately worry them. When they realized it was coming from Aleta’s crib, they stood over her and stared in wonder. Seeing them smile, baby Aleta hummed louder. When she began to hum melodies, the four of them got nervous. They worried the neighbors would hear her and report them to the guards, or that the guards themselves would hear and report them to Leader Gaspar. They tried to quiet her, but baby Aleta would not stop humming. Indeed, it seemed that she could not stop, and they wondered how she so suddenly would have developed this compulsion. They could not have imagined it would have been contagious, but sure enough, after a day and a half went by, Kalila also began to hum. By this time, the group was really concerned. They did not understand how the baby had infected Kalila with the humming, and didn’t know what to do as the humming grew louder and louder. Finally, after much deliberation, Aaron, Matthew, and Idalia decided to take Kalila outside to the guards. They thought that by sacrificing her, they could keep the baby safe and they could demonstrate their loyalty to Leader Gaspar, whom they nevertheless despised. They thought Kalila would struggle as they led her to the guardhouse, but she seemed unaware of where they were going, blithely continuing to hum even when face-to-face with the main guard. After about five minutes, Aaron, who had been holding Kalila’s left hand, also began to hum. Matthew and Idalia were alarmed and immediately let go of both Aaron and Kalila, and just as they were about to turn and run back into their house, the guard himself started humming. The other two guards immediately killed Kalila and raced with their comrade to the hospital three blocks away. The neighbors, having been roused by the confusion, now heard Aaron humming and began shouting death threats against Matthew and Idalia for placing them in danger. In violation of their sequestration, they ran to the nearby store and bought muzzles to try to stop the spread of the humming, but it kept moving from person to person anyway.

Having rigged up a radio, Matthew found out that similar humming clusters were developing all across Qaitanya, and that Leader Gaspar was alarmed at this unprecedented spread of dissidence. Stories continued to come in from field reporters all across the country about people succumbing to the humming, and as more and more hummers sought treatment, the hospitals were overwhelmed. Doctors themselves were catching the humming and passing it on to other patients. Soon, it seemed like everyone was humming, and Leader Gaspar, at a loss for how to stop the pandemic, reached out to other regional leaders for help. Because they believed Leader Gaspar had something to do with Queen Fancy’s death, and because Gaspar had been against their development of “No Border Zones,” these leaders refused to help him. Leader Gaspar then turned to the scientists. He asked them to develop a gas that he could use to poison the water supply, in the hopes that this might stop the humming. But because Leader Gaspar had condemned those same scientists when he installed himself as ruler, forbidding them from working with other scientists in labs beyond Qaitanya, they also refused to help him. Leader Gaspar developed his own poison, but as the gas reached the pipes of Qaitanya across the country, it only made the humming louder. Eventually, the vibrations from the humming were felt all over the world, and finally, Leader Gaspar himself succumbed to the humming. The vibrations jostled his body so much that his eyes twisted outwards. Able to see clearly for the first time in his life, Leader Gaspar realized he could no longer sustain the isolationism he sought, and he hummed himself into oblivion. When Leader Gaspar died, a minor earthquake settled the land, and a river began to flow from north to south in Qaitanya.

IN THIS ISSUE

We begin this issue with three research articles addressing contemporary questions about belonging and the relationships between human and nonhuman resources. Luis Felipe R. Murillo focuses on how expertise in computers has become a politicized skill set in his article “Hackerspace Network: Prefiguring Technopolitical Futures?” He is interested in how hacker collectives in Pacific Rim countries create global infrastructures of computing and how they develop a transnational network for the cultivation not only of technical information but also of moral dispositions. He asks whether these hackerspace networks constitute a temporary form of “alter-globalization,” in that they instantiate an alternative to Euro-American technology firms (through their interest in open source materials and minimal contracts), despite the fact that they are not anticapitalist per se. Does an “electronic commons,” he queries, disturb liberal notions of property, ownership, and selfhood sufficiently to make them heterotopic spaces of community building? In
what ways might their own forms of exclusion (their masculinism, for instance) mitigate against this?

“Panics over Plastics: A Matter of Belonging in Kenya” addresses the ways plastic, and the people who collect, handle, or distribute it, generates forms of panic that also mirror emergent politics of belonging and citizenship in Kenya. George Paul Meiu explores how plastic has become a symbol of both new forms of consumption and new anxieties about moral disorder and global political-economic reconfigurations. Focusing on so-called plastic boys—those Kenyan youth who make a living selling antiques and plastic artifacts—Meiu attends to the objectifications and repudiations of plastic in terms of how they index historical experiences and how they inform people’s sense of attachments to various modes of belonging within a context of intensifying ethnic nativism.

“Human Energy Expenditure in Anthropology and Beyond,” by Cara Ocobock, explores the components of the relationships between human ecology and life history. Reviewing studies on human metabolism and total energy expenditure, she emphasizes the flexibility and variability of human total energy expenditure (and associated selective pressures) while also arguing for the importance of cross-disciplinary work in order to generate a fuller picture of human metabolism. Getting a more comprehensive sense of human energy expenditure, Ocobock argues, will help us better understand our evolutionary past and will give us new insights into contemporary feedback loops between behavior (individual and social) and biology.

We are so pleased to publish Alex Barker’s Presidential Address from the 118th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Vancouver (2019), in which he addresses anthropological notions of time and temporality, and especially the current moment, one he calls “The Predatory Present.” Marking our own thinking through time, we present our year-in-review essays, authored by Ryan Cecil Jobson (sociocultural anthropology), Alejandro Paz (linguistic anthropology), Melissa S. Rosenzweig (archaeology), and Lauren Schroeder (biological anthropology).

Our year-in-review essays are followed by a special section on “Face and Race,” coedited by Amade M’charek and Katharina Schramm. This section is designed to interrogate the face as an object of critical inquiry in much the same way that the body has been within anthropological scholarship and beyond. To do so, the contributors to this section position the face in relation to debates about race and science. They engage with the various ways the face makes an appearance within scientific and other practices while also denaturalizing these appearances in order to critically interrogate the biases they generate, particularly those that are grounded in phenotypically based understandings of appearance and therefore those of history, inheritance, and selfhood. The face, for these authors, cannot be thought to be transparent and cannot be understood as providing reliable information about the past or the present. Grounding their analyses in the ways the face has been used within anthropological research to categorize human diversity, the authors attend to how late nineteenth-century atlases of anthropometric portraits provided a rationale for the emergent relationship between imperialism and scientific racism, one that would also encourage a German public to construct a relationship between individual subjectivity and racial categories (Mak); to the ways facial reconstructions from a colonial cemetery in Cape Town that were meant to translate the lives and work of those buried to a contemporary public in order to generate new discussions about urban slavery and dispossession in South Africa ended up instead refracting conflicting political agendas and community concerns (Schramm); to how new facial recognition technologies also lead to new forms of surveillance, profiling, and exclusion (Nieves Delgado); and to the ways forensic DNA phenotyping does not produce a composite image of an individual suspect, as is commonly understood, but instead generates the face of a suspect population, thereby contributing to a more general biologization of appearance that not only generates racial profiling but also reproduces affective relations to risk and criminality (M’charek).

Our World Anthropologies section this issue focuses on questions of ethics within anthropological research and activism. After an introduction by Emily Metzner, we feature an essay by Başak Can (Koç University) that discusses the various ways increasingly authoritarian political institutions regulate ethnographers’ research and publications, particularly for those working in clinical settings. Drawing from her own experience (and those of her graduate students and other medical and social researchers), Can demonstrates the vagaries of navigating the need to obtain research permits from official institutions while also maintaining an ethical stance toward interlocutors. Her essay is followed by commentaries by Aditya Bharadwaj, Susanna Trnka, and Hatice Erten and Marcia Inhorn. We round out this discussion with an essay by Gordon Mathews on an anthropologist’s response to the protests in Hong Kong.

An article by Debra Vidali is featured in our Multimodal Anthropologies section, which is part of the ongoing section developed by Gabriel Dattatreyan and Isaac Marrero-Guillamón titled “Multimodal Anthropology and the Politics of Invention.” Vidali’s article, “Ethnographic Theater-Making: Multimodal Alchemy, Knowledge, and Invention,” argues for participatory ethnographic theater-making as anthropological practice, one that is multisensorial and collaborative. She argues that the elements of theatre creation combine to produce something that is more than the sum total of its parts and that this total also allows us to rethink our relationships to ourselves and others. Moreover, she states, it is this coproduction of knowledge through embodied, collective participation that generates new breakthroughs in knowledge and representation. We are also happy to present a review of The Maribor Uprisings: A Live Participatory Film, by SED Mitchell.

Don’t forget to visit our website (www.americananthropologist.org) for new posts in our Public Anthropologies
section. There, you will find an essay on the post-assassination protests in Iraq, a virtual issue on “Race, Racism, and White Supremacy” that complements the special section on white supremacy in the March issue and a virtual issue on “Disease and Pandemics” organized in response to recent events, and a forum discussion featuring responses by Mark Anderson, Zareena Grewal, Irma A. Velásquez Nimatuj, and Ghassan Hage to Junaid Rana’s article “Anthropology and the Riddle of White Supremacy.”

Finally, we feature eight book reviews in this issue, and, as always, we conclude with obituaries, honoring Jane Hill (1939–2018), Richard King Nelson (1941–2019), and Constance R. Sutton (1926–2018).

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