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Reflections on Bodies and Absences in the COVID-19 Interregnum

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Reflections on Bodies and Absences in the COVID-19 Interregnum

Abstract

This is a meditation on the role of absence during the COVID-19, especially the ways absences are felt and experienced. It explores the roles of bodies as both symbols and material. Bodies are both thought through the logic of borders and difference but also as the raw resources of scientific investigations. This is all examined within and against “education” both in my and in my students’ (pre and in-service teachers) classes and our anxieties of not knowing the what or how we of our jobs in these conditions.

Keywords

COVID-19, sociology of absence, tissue cultures, education

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Cover Page Footnote

I dedicate this to Susan Burnham who has had to live with this process and these anxieties.

Interregnum – “A lapse or pause in a continuous series.” —Merriam-Webster

ONE

I seem not to be able to write coherently in the current crisis. I am dazzled by others’ abilities to make sense of and to reframe the current moment that has me drowning in loss, Zoom, the piling of papers, and housework. So what I have produced here is a set of resonances, associations, and articulations that have unfolded during this time—what I think of as the interregnum—of COVID-19. It will wander, it will associate, it will gather and assemble different discourses as I repeat and work through my experiences as a science teacher educator.

I think if there is a through-thread here, an elastic that connects and masks these thoughts, it is an idea of absence which I am taking from Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s “Virus: All That is Solid Melts into Air” (2020) which outlines the nature of knowledge in the interregnum, e.g., “the normality of exception” and “the frailty of the human.” In this list of Covid-19 key phrases is, “the sociology of absences”. He points to the immigrant camps in Greece, but that same erasure of humans by detention is present in my city, Tacoma, where migrants are held in horrific conditions (e.g., without soap and kept from preventative COVID-19 quarantine) at Geo Corporation’s Northwest Detention Facility.

I am not going to dwell on these dramatic absences which signify political violence, i.e., the disappeared populations imprisoned in camps, that Bonaventure is pointing to, but rather, the way that such absences are produced in the small interactions of teaching and elsewhere during the interregnum. I want to claim that the sociology of absence also extends to *these* missing students. I polled graduates of my teacher education program about how they were faring in this crisis. Their worry, to a person, was about their missing students. They were suffering 50 to 70 percent absences in their classes. Students had given up, removed themselves from the simulation of the education system that had haphazardly emerged from sudden declaration of quarantine. (I don’t mean to be snarky in using the word “simulation” to describe what schools were offering. My students when invited into my classes to explain what happened to them at the start of the interregnum, reported from multiple districts that they were directed to not teach anything new. If schools are not teaching new things, it seems to me that what is offered really are simulations of schools, not new forms of schooling.) Such massive absences are a damning critique: a critique of the ways simulated schools were irrelevant or a mismatch to the conditions of home life in quarantine—especially if one did not have a home, technology, or connectivity. (Why didn’t Tacoma School District simply socialize a citywide high speed Wi-Fi and pass out computers to all involved if they were serious about education?) But this is a different kind of absence in that it was visibly experienced: names on rosters not answering, or, in my own teaching, an awareness that the number of Zoom participants were dwindling in my classes. And my students also felt it as groups and projects began to erode, as students absented themselves or were drawn away by children, work, or family members (some dying or dead). They were absent, but were also a keenly felt absence. For my remaining students that sense of the missing often translated as anger (at the missing students not completing some promise made at a project’s start). I send out emails, notices, and Zoom links to try to take the pulse of the missing, but they are gone.

But even those present are absent to me. At best they are a matrix of faces not quite looking at their cameras. My undergraduate class, often using phones and other barely working technology, turn their cameras off leaving a field of black squares marking their attention in class. I am rattling on, hoping I am reaching them. But Zoom makes simple discussion difficult at best. My favored techniques for reflection (Think-Pair-Share kind of moments to get them to reflect upon whatever I have been prattling about) have been rendered impossible.

Some of my anxiety and loss no doubt is an effect of “seeing like a state.” Anarchist anthropologist James Scott, defines this as the ways that governmental centers impose order and orders on organic forms ignoring the local both in the dimensions of experience (what locals know) and geography—how the landscape and place have properties that resist the grid like logic of solutions from the governmental center (1998). He gives the example of urban planners in governmental centers drawing straight lines to indicate new roads, oblivious that there are hills, mountains and unpassable land features that will make such a task a travesty. As a professor in a public institution, I am part of the state. The university is both a reflection of and productive of capitalism, for instance, innovation or some such, is one of our so-called values, a keyword of neoliberal logics in which entrepreneurship is held up as a heroic ideal (Leary, 2018). I am, as are my alumni working in middle and high schools—part of a panopticon that watches the population, and segregates them into the “successful” and “failing.” Taking attendance in the COVID-19 interregnum is the poster child of Scott’s modernist projects: thinking that the former rituals and mechanisms of surveillance based on physical presence would operate unchanged.

But part of my anxiety is in part an awareness of the gap between myself in quarantine and the lives of my students, many of whom may have no means to quarantine themselves: either a home (bought or rented) or a job that can be done remotely. My students were traveling to funerals, working in childcare centers, and serving food. Also, my work is unusually protected compared to those of my students. The first day of the quarter was actually the third week of the quarantine. News of layoffs was in the paper every day. I asked my students how many had been laid off; about a third raised their hands. They were in the thick of the crisis and loss as this quarter began. Given this general background of crisis and loss, the students held a wide variety of needs regarding my class. Many students were furious that classes was now online; they had avoided on-line learning environments having experienced failure in them. Some realized that their work/life schedules were in flux and the fact that we were still meeting synchronously made attending impossible. At the same time there were others that needed the comfort of continuity, i.e., they needed the synchronous class, the normality of class, as a support in the time of crisis—while the class content itself offered little in the way of anodyne materials: it is all about power and inequity and capitalist logics of schooling, even as capitalism is reorganizing itself in the moment.

At about the same time in the quarter a young (age 33) black man, Manuel Ellis, the son of a community leader, died in police custody (Wikipedia, 2020). At first this was hardly commented on in the news, but after George Floyd’s murder by police on May 25, the city was in a state of constant protest, and Mr. Ellis’s name was everywhere. The intersection of Black Lives Matter and the COVID-19 interregnum is material. My students, especially the ones still working, were almost all Black, Latinx, or Asian. The exposed, the workers on the front line, the essential workers, all those at risk tended to come from communities marginalized and oppressed by the dominant ethnoclass-of which, safe at home, I am part. It

is not that the virus discriminates in some biological way—I have, after all, lost a cousin to it—but that in our caste system risk is managed through exploiting specific populations.

Here I can't help but think of Mary Douglas, the British anthropologist who ignited social studies of risk and risk management through her structuralist analysis *Purity and Danger* (1966). Her theory was that risk—as acknowledged socially and rhetorically—is a collective social projection. For any culture dirt is a question of matter out of place; and cleaning is a restoration of a cosmological model. In the reactionary actions of the President this is clear: manage the risk, i.e., manage the disease, by keeping foreign elements out. The contamination is always the racialized/immigrant Other.

But such complex cultural projections of symbolic images of the body and disease (Trump's enacting of the body/nation as fortress, akin to 1950s visions of the immune system described by Emily Martin (1994)) are not merely the province of the conservative worldview. The very practice of isolation that is the favored medical model, the quarantine itself, or as the New York Times on July 2, 2020 put it "Skip the party. Stay home. Don't make a bad situation worse" (No author, para 14), can be seen as an extension of a moral universe in which everyone is responsible for their actions, and that morality in this case premises the safety of a house (property) and the ability to socially isolate. This is an arrogant and elitist perspective that invites ridicule, as so many need work in jobs incapable of being done in quarantine; the quarantine often depends on the exposure risk of others (e.g., the delivery person). Epidemiologist Julia Marcus (2020) notes that the current regime for dealing with the disease is the medical equivalent of abstinence only, and just as likely to succeed. She offers instead a vision of harm reduction. To understand how our current approach is deeply cultural, she notes

This country has always been slow to embrace harm reduction, a resistance that dates back to our Puritan roots. The oft-cited concern is that offering people strategies to reduce the harms of risky behavior will end up *promoting* that risky behavior. It's no surprise that this concern comes up most frequently in the highly moralized contexts of sex and drug use. People have argued against providing the HPV vaccine to teens out of concern that it will lead them to have sex earlier or with more people, even though no evidence shows this to be the case. People have argued against providing sterile syringes to those who inject drugs out of concern that it will encourage more frequent drug use. It doesn't. (para 8)

What abstinence only COVID-19 policies enact is an arena of moral outrage, judgment, against those who cannot follow the social rules for whatever reason: the person with the mask under their nose (because they can't breathe), the person not giving space, the person who surrenders and sees friends, the person who must live with others because they have no permanent address, the person who is lonely and needs contact. The local NPR station, KUOW, even had (7/1/20) had on its "The Record" program on July 1, 2020, a COVID etiquette person; to think about compliance as etiquette frames plague action within a particular cultural and class framing.

Two

The interregnum of COVID-19 entangles disease, science, the materiality and symbolisms of the body, the erasure of subjects, and apocalyptic narrative in one go. STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), that ubiquitous 21st century articulation of different fields, seems implicated everywhere. For instance, despite our local economy becoming more and more precarious as shops are closing, Bill Gates (representing the T of STEM) has been wheeling and dealing with New York's Governor Cuomo to provide online education for the duration. Technology (medical and non-medical) are embraced to circumvent disaster: virus testing, social distancing apps, and news graphics generated from massive databases of exposure rates—or so we are told. STEM is both a site of anxiety and salvation. On the one hand there are anxieties about the slowing of medical research (Adams, 2020)—initially all research was paused— but also excitement as emergent fields of virology have sold themselves as salvation from the interregnum (on science as salvation see Midgley, 1992).

The very centrality of these medical fields, and the front-page roles they have played in providing hope necessarily have also revealed the fields' uncertainties, shifting understandings and, ultimately, science's questionable authority. This tension between science as it happens and its claim of authoritative knowledge is actually one area in which I have some expertise. I have documented this conflict before. After the anthrax attacks of 2001, Dr. Nidaa Makki and I analyzed the ways the news operated as a public pedagogy of the disease (2009). Daily, news papers would offer advice and how-tos for opening mail and identifying white powder; but would also undermine that authorial voice with a story of "science-in-action" to use Bruno Latour's phrase (1987), in which the news reversed the recommendations or even the scientific facts of the case. A similar pattern of facts and then undone facts unfold daily in the COVID-19 media, by which I mean a mix of mainstream news, counter news (e.g., Fox News), the U.S. administration's contradicting statements and actions, accurate and blown forecasts, all forming a cloud of doubt about the disease. Sometimes it's not even undone facts, but simply a new surprising one that undermines the authority of science. How can science be trusted if it seems always caught off guard? If it did not anticipate this or that (the way COVID-19 can be both a respiratory and blood disease, for instance.) why believe it? Even worse is the advice contradictions, e.g., the American Association of Pediatricians seeming to tell schools to reopen (Kamenetz, 2020), while stories of outbreaks among children in camps are reported simultaneously (Rabin, 2020). Of course, these seams in the public face of science are taken advantage of by a more polished, entrenched, and organized reactionary media network operating to undermine the science on hand (it was nascent at the time of the anthrax crisis), who view science as an obstacle. What the scientific community treats with excitement (new discovery) is the very grounds for undermining it by those with interests elsewhere.

I am a science educator, and, so, of course, believe people need to better understand what science we have about the disease, but I also believe that people must understand the contingency of our knowledge and that in this moment of crisis people want the security of enduring facts. Asking people to be subtle and nuanced when the papers are filled with morbidity and mortality statistics and people they know are dying is asking a lot. Also, I have to believe that educators have little reach compared to the President who dithers, risks exposure, whips up conspiracy theories, using the media to spread his spectacular nonsense. Neither logic or knowledge alone will convert those who are invested so much in the current social arrangement or so vulnerable that expert recommendations do not speak to their living

conditions (e.g., to work from home, when you do not have one or one that is safe) that they would prefer conspiracies over science. So while science education seems like it should be the central location for articulations of the crisis: teaching about viruses, disease, etc., education as a medium for moving publics is problematic at best. While it is useful to educate publics, about the nature of science and what we know and are figuring about viruses, for instance, education is not salvation any more than science is.

THREE

But I also think about how the crisis has interrupted, shifted, and renewed the need for bodies in medical science. This section will require a bit of a scholarly and personal meander. The sociology of absence is not immediately so visible here. It shall return to haunt us, however.

A month before the quarantine I had found a news blurb circulated by Cory Doctorow, the techno-antiestablishment author, which noted that blood had become a major export of the U.S. (MacCleod, 2019) This blood and tissue economy returned me to work I had done on cultural politics of professional human subjects (Weinstein, 1999). In the U.S., in the 1990s, the medical industry was concentrated in a few cities with large research centers, e.g., Philadelphia. The need for human subjects in those cities lead to a cadre of professionals “guinea pigs,” i.e., people who lived off of participation in medical experiments (Abadi, 2010). Eventually these professionals started to recognize the community of subjects as having an important story to tell. An anarchist activist and historian of local (Philadelphian) anarchist history created the journal (actually a zine) called *Guinea Pig Zero* to share research subjects’ history, art, evaluations of medical research units, and investigative journalism (GPZ, 1996–2000; Weinstein, 2001).

The work of “guinea pigging” or being a human subject (Helms prefers “guinea pig” because it highlights the power relation between the researcher and the medical subject) has been taken up in various volumes by Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby, who see this as specialized forms of clinical labor within tissue economies (Cooper & Waldby, 2014; Waldby & Mitchell, 2006). These economies depend upon the poor and desperate, and in the U.S. caste system, Black and Brown people (Fisher, 2020). While Helms’s anarchist analysis is that guinea pigging was something other than labor, per se—the body of the guinea pig is more kind of raw material—there is work and specialized knowledge that comes with the task, e.g., understanding the consent process or the self knowledge that one probably will not vasovagal faint from a blood draw. The labor of guinea pigging is about enduring: sitting still in a chair as blood is taken, waiting to see whether one has been given the placebo or the treatment.

I ended my research on political subjects in the mid 2000s. By then much of the political economy of human subjects had changed. Medical research had globalized, i.e., moved overseas due to costs and the desire to sidestep ethical guidelines in the U.S. (Petryna, 2009). According to a 2017 *Scientific American* article, 90% of new therapies approved were tested on subjects outside the U.S. with reason to believe that they were less safe and effective than they would have been had they been tested in North America, the article groups Canada and U.S. (Robbins, 2017). As a result the community of domestic professional guinea pigs has declined.

But tissue economies as a larger field remain vibrant and important here in the U.S. Awareness of these economies was raised through Rebecca Skloot’s biography of Henrietta

Lacks (2010) which opened up discussions about the ethics of cell harvesting and the ways structures of race and class play into tissue economies. Furthermore, while the human subject market moved over seas, the national blood and plasma market has blossomed. Alan MacCleod's (2019) article titled "Harvesting the Blood of America's Poor: The Latest Stage of Capitalism" documents this shift. He writes,

The number of collection centers in the United States has more than doubled since 2005 and blood now makes up well over 2 percent of total U.S. exports by value. To put that in perspective, Americans' blood is now worth more than all exported corn or soy products that cover vast areas of the country's heartland. (para 2)

In short, the blood economy had partially supplanted guinea pig one as a way for the poor to use their bodies, a primary resource to them, to make ends meet.

MacCleod's article fit perfectly with my science methods curriculum. I teach two science teaching methods classes, the first in Fall focuses on creating meaningful lab work for students; a second in winter focuses on connecting science to personal and social issues. In the second, I use my research about Bob Helms and *Guinea Pig Zero* to reconsider science education through the lens of guinea pig labor (I call this guinea pig pedagogy). I had students read one of my articles (Weinstein, 2004) that argued that human participation in research (as a form of scientific objectification) is central to science and therefore should be taught as a part of science education. The MacCleod article was a nice update to the ways science objectifies bodies, and I thought, that while depressing, it would reinforce the importance of my human subject work. When I presented the MacCleod article I didn't anticipate—as I should have—that two of my five students were regular "donors" themselves. The article infuriated them because it described people making \$75 a week doing this, and neither had received anything close to that amount. My attempt to shock and intrigue my students had to be reframed, exploring instead how to name and have agency within the tissue economy my students were all-too-familiar with.

Here again the sociology of absence becomes relevant. MacCleod's article actually builds to an argument of how the harvesting of blood and plasma from the desperate leaves the poor exhausted.

A common method of cheating in endurance sports is to inject extra blood into your system before a race, giving you a huge performance boost. But extracting it has the opposite effect, making you sluggish and tired for days. Thus, this debilitating practice is zombifying America's poor. (para 13)

The population of "donors" (notice the phrasing of this as gift when it is actually a financial exchange) intersects both the populations of my students and "essential workers." They are not only absent from my class. They are experiencing an absence of attention and energy above and beyond the loss we are all feeling due to grief and social change in the interregnum. But, it should be noted that this latter absence is not a trait of the interregnum per se, but of the larger moment of biocapitalism, of which the interregnum—with its spike of biomedical research on the virus—represents a mere intensification.

The blood economy has been impacted in some ways by COVID-19. As with all forms of face-to-face services, donations have slowed, as fewer beds can be filled (social

distancing) and surfaces need to be cleaned more carefully between donors. At the same time, according to the Wall Street Journal “Federal health officials are in talks with the American Red Cross and blood organizations about ramping up the collection of blood plasma from recovered Covid-19 patients, in a large-scale effort to build supplies of the promising experimental treatment, according to people familiar with the discussions” (A. D. Marcus, 2020). So blood is both the vehicle for cure and the means to survive in the interregnum of COVID-19.

Thinking through blood, the body and its needs, and the body’s objectification by medical science as a collection of resources provides an alternative lens onto the virus beyond the pedestrian symbolizing of bodies as threat and at risk. Much has been made about how the incompetence of the executive branch along with the collapsing economy point to the U.S. as a failing state (Packer, 2020). But the blood economy shows the continuities in the desperation of neoliberal capitalism before and after the quarantine. There is suffering not only by the exposed but by those getting by with their bodies as objects of extraction in our world.

FOUR

The sociology of absence covers so much of the moment: the missing schools, the lost jobs, the absent students, and the exhaustion left by blood being drained. It also points to bodies and facts we can’t account for, the virus that does not express itself but remains contagious, the feeling that I am not adequately speaking to this moment. These are absences too. I know the absent will return in some form I cannot anticipate. That is, I know this is ultimately an interregnum, but leading to what new forms of being I don’t know. I tell my students often that I am trying to prepare them for forms of education that I do not yet understand and neither do the local districts. In the end I am left guessing; preparing them for schools that at the moment simply don’t exist. Necessarily it seems, this conclusion is also an absence.

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