

Contagious Collaborators and Microbial Kin: Re-worlding in the Company of Infectious Agents beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

Exploring the incursion of SARS-2 COVID-19 into human cultures at the beginning of 2020, this paper investigates how microbial, and specifically viral, worlds might be positioned as beneficial companions in telling the stories of our times and radically reconfiguring what possible futures come next. While most intellectual efforts to understand COVID-19 have had the intention to control, suppress or eradicate it, approaching the pathogen through a posthumanist framework enables the consideration of what viral worlds might invite if approached as a collaborative agency, rather than adversary. How might thinking with and through COVID-19 reconfigure relations between human and non-human worlds in not just the present but also the future? Developed and delivered during 2020, Emissary 2920 (E2920) was a participatory, multiplatform, and pervasive two-week experience delivered to local audiences experiencing lockdown in Narm/Melbourne. This work positioned participants as time-travelling emissaries from the future Department of Human/Viral Relations who had volunteered to complete field work and gather experiential, sensory data from within the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper utilises the thematic sequences of E2920 to frame an extended inquiry into the potential of human/viral entanglements and shared futurity, and considers the transformative ideological opportunities available through viral interventions by asking: What futures become available if the vital agencies of virus worlds are welcomed as co-conspirators in their making? How do viruses reimagine the human? And how might these infectious agents demonstrate the model for adaptation, hope and collective care so urgently needed in these post-normal, post-pandemic times?

Welcome, Emissary; if you are reading this, you have successfully arrived in the year 2020. You will find yourself embedded in this period, complete with an

identity, relationships, and memories of a past. You are likely experiencing temporal distortion or disorientation. Do not be distressed. These, alongside lethargy, malaise, and anxiety, are common symptoms when adapting to the linear time perceptions native to periods between 0001 and 2130. You now perceive yourself to be traveling back towards 2920 at the pace of one going forward, one second per second. (E2920)

The incremental arrival of SARS-CoV-2 pathogen COVID-19 in the early months of 2020 commenced a period of extraordinary upheaval and disorientation. In its wake, the collective trauma of the pandemic has settled, altering global perspectives and practices in diverse ways, some more apparent than others. In a period increasingly defined by destructive anthropogenic impact on Earth's ecosystems, COVID-19 emerged as a profoundly disruptive figure, at once a symptom of ecologic imbalance, a diagnostic tool highlighting existential risk, and a companion in refiguring its ideological assumptions. This viral incursion into human affairs swiftly demonstrated the intimate, fleshy implications of inhabiting a nature-culture continuum, asserting the entangled state of diverse, multi-scalar ecologies at every airport, shore, or retirement home it settled within. Demonstrating the symbiotic conditions of earthly life in all their wonder and terror, it has threaded supermarket ventilation systems in Brisbane with wet markets of Wuhan and displaced the central figure of Anthropos to become the primary social agent in a dispersed assemblage that refuses a centre entirely.

While environmental and climate discourse had long highlighted the potential perils of unchecked ecologic disregard, the emergence of COVID-19 made clear that the consequences of pervasive mistreatment of non-humans could yield existential consequences for human cultures. Thought to be provoked by endemic abuse of animals and ecosystems, the pandemic matches this pervasive violence in a consequence of planetary proportions, despite its microbial protagonist (Braidotti “We”). Zoonotic pathogens inherently distress the neat delineations and categories that have enabled and sustained anthropocentric ideologies. COVID-19 makes no distinction between the human figure and the other forms and forces within which it is enmeshed. It perforates and slips unencumbered through the imagined binaries of inside/outside, biotic/abiotic, utopia/dystopia, subject/object, and human/non-human, illuminating the cartesian, colonial, and capitalist (CCC) foundations of anthropocentrism as fallacious, and fragile

when in the company of microbial agents. Refusing habits and assumptions of CCC mastery, COVID-19 deftly evaded containment, prevention, or cure for many months, even in a ‘post-pandemic context’.¹ Though the zoonotic origin of COVID has since been identified, what enabled its transference from bat to human systems still eludes certainty. Early theories surrounding the possible pathways between bat and human infection foregrounded pervasive mistreatment and violence in live-animal markets, both criticising the abuse of the animals in the markets themselves and extractive practices that exhausted eco-systems and caused humans to aggressively intervene in previously undisturbed environments (Lyons, Mitchell 2020).

Along with existential threat, COVID-19 proved an effective ideological intervention, demonstrating the wonder and terror of symbiotic entanglement. The pandemic has been followed rapidly by severe and catastrophic climate chaos as the planet escalates towards potential and feared tipping points. The microbial presence of COVID appeared at once a warning, a messenger, and an invitation towards courageous futures empowered by an honest acknowledgment of the dire circumstance of the times. What do the alterity, attributes, and effects of viral worlds have to teach about the heterogeneous assemblages that comprise a nature-culture continuum? While most intellectual efforts to understand COVID-19 have had the intention to control, suppress or eradicate it, what sorts of knowledge sets, stories and futures might become possible if infectious agents were reframed as collaborators in the narratives of our times rather than as adversaries? Using a framework and text from a participatory work, *Emissary 2920*,² this paper explores COVID-19 as a partner in knowledge production and a vital, antagonistic and posthumanist agent. It examines what ideas, models, and pathways towards collaborative multispecies survival become accessible, if thinking with and through, rather than about or in opposition to, COVID-19 (Torrent). Reconfiguring perceptions and experiences of self, proximity, porosity, and temporality, the monstrous force of COVID-19 has continued to offer instruction in agency, adaptation, and response-ability amidst ongoing precarity.

¹ I use ‘pandemic’ and ‘post-pandemic’ to delineate periods of unified, although unevenly distributed, death, disruption and disaster wrought by the initial appearance of COVID-19 and the global attempts to mitigate its impact. As the virus still persists and mutates with the result of regular and deadly infections in all countries, a truly post-pandemic period has not yet begun at the time of publishing this article.

² *Emissary 2920* was created, written and designed by Luna Mrozik Gawler, produced by Stephanie Spiers, with artistic assistance from Steven Duckham. It featured sound art by Jake Steele and Stephanie Spiers, Glitch art by Sabato Visconti and GIF art by Erica Anderson. It was presented at the Melbourne Fringe Festival 2020 and was supported by the Fringe Cash for Creatives Grant.

Approaching COVID-19 in this manner makes apparent the potent invitation at the core of its disorientating and disturbing incursion.

Developed in response to and guided by these questions, Emissary 2920 (E2920) was a participatory, pervasive, multi-platform work distributed to local Narrm/Melbourne audiences during the first year of pandemic lockdowns. This speculative, participatory work positioned participants as voluntary time-travelling emissaries from the future Institute of Human-Viral relations. Having travelled back to the year 2020, Emissaries completed experiential and multisensorial fieldwork as citizen scientists, gathering data on what it was to 'inhabit and perceive from within a "human" body in the emergence of a SARS-CoV-2 culture' (E2920). Utilising a mail-out kit, a web portal, text messages, glitch art, meditative exercises, audio work, and a 1300 phone number, E2920 invited participants to reflect on the disruption of viral bodies as a collective force, provoking imaginative, sense-led, and intuitive inquiries into their relationship to COVID-19 and the myriad ways it affected their daily lives, psyches, and well-being (see figures 1-4 for examples throughout this essay). Over a two-week reporting period, the content of E2920 highlighted a range of viral behaviours that troubled dominant anthropocentric ideologies, intending to provoke curiosity, resist the habitual ease of apocalyptic visions (Mulgan) and gaze toward possible, distant futures, which centre on radically redefined relationships in trans-species communities. Following the reporting period, emissaries posted their findings to a post office box, which having survived the great floods, has been recovered in a private collection from a penthouse apartment in 2890, resulting in the initiation of the Institute for Human-Viral Relations.

E2920 utilised posthumanism as a navigational tool in both its form and content. Participants were guided through the experience by six themed sequences, each featuring a posthumanist reflection on subjectivity, alterity, immanence, vital agency, and transcorporeality as parsed through the disorientation and disturbance of the COVID-19 pandemic. This work was motivated by the observation that the COVID-19 pandemic performed an accessible, material demonstration of posthumanist themes and an interest in what insight might arise from considering the viral incursion through an affirmative frame, seeking not to deny the painful aspects of the pandemic but instead to consider how they might foster new knowledge and support a more inclusive way of caring across a

transversal, multispecies spectrum (Braidotti “We” 11). This paper draws from three of six thematic sequences in E2920 to consider:

1. how the virus re-figures the human beyond the container of the individual;
2. how the virus contextualises the human amidst a global state of disruption and anthropogenic violence; and
3. how viruses demand literacy in adaptation.

The pandemic commenced in a period already marred by vast changes and urgent response to climate related events. For those living on the east coast of Australia, the first of the pandemic lockdowns began immediately after unprecedented bushfires seared through bushland, killing three billion native animals. Distant cities found their parks and streets aflap with displaced birds and scented by the acrid incense of thick remanent smoke. This unusual and indelible disruption, then conflated with the conditions of sudden global health crisis and the local response of immediate lockdowns, made the COVID-19 virus provocative company. Even for those unable to immediately witness the aftermath of an event as devastating as the 2019/2020 bushfires, COVID-19 thrust the material articulations of a more-than-human world into the foreground of mainstream awareness. Where we stand, more than fifty years after the first warnings of climate change and its impact, but still struggling to enact significant policies and practices to mitigate its occurrence or effects, COVID-19 asserts that prepared or not, a time of significant change is upon us. The force with which it halted and mutated the daily rhythms of human lives was breath-taking in its scale and pervasion, swiftly closing the gap between believing in environmental co-dependence and knowing it to be true (Žižek, Tsing).

For a species governed by an assumption of global multispecies mastery, COVID-19 was irrefutably and pervasively overpowering. It humbled humanity before a microbial agency, a lifeway, and knowledge set that fundamentally distressed the conditions of the ideologies responsible for its existential precarity. It seized the fantasies of CCC ideologies by their roots and implemented new conditions (Povonelli), repopulating its monoculture soils with a knotted mess of ecologies mutualistic, symbiotic, and manifold in their forms. In a period where 'thinking-as-usual' has become dangerous to collective well-being, COVID-19 was a well-timed, if devastating, intervention (Haraway ‘Tentacular’).



Figure 1. CAPSID mail-out kit, Emissary 2920. Image credit: Devika Bilimoria

In a 2013 conversation with Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, Isabelle Stengers proposed the ‘damaging’ intrusions of Gaia – the consequences of mistreatment of earth systems by those imagining themselves at the centre – as points of bifurcation (Stengers 171). These forks in the narrative offer the choice to either ‘furiously keep to’ anthropocentric narratives despite the circumstances or ‘accept that if there is a post-Anthropocene worth living in, those who will live in it will need different stories’ (173). COVID-19 has breached the borders of anthropocentric narrative, offering a monstrous tale of adaptation and co-emergence instead.

Microbes are the original ‘terraformers (and reformers)’, fundamentally adept at collaborative transformation and versed in it through every temporal niche in earthly and interstellar histories (Haraway ‘Anthropocene’ 159). Viral figures are integral to the planetary biosphere, weft through symbiotic and parasitic negotiations with every aspect

of earthly life (Kirksey 4). Through every cosmic, atmospheric, geologic, aquatic, animal, vegetal, and fungal world, viruses slip, tangle and crack narrative branches that stretch beyond the limitations of human-centered knowledge production. Perpetually disrupting, infiltrating, augmenting and rerouting life, viruses demand recognition for copious aspects of the articulate worlding³ and future building perpetually underway in Earth's lively multi-scalar, multispecies biosphere.

From within the depths of an escalating pandemic it proved challenging to envision what futures lay beyond its scope. Though the post-pandemic 'new normal' has slowly become once again 'normal', the same challenges of long-term vision of futurity prevail, as global attention ricochets between multitudinous catastrophes, traumas, and injustice induced by climate destruction. Witnessing the global, multispecies, and existential consequences of CCC cultures, the 'old saws' of human exceptionalism and bounded individualism have 'become unthinkable' (Haraway 'Symbiogenesis' 30). But the end of one paradigm, or cultural narrative, has not generated another. Between 2020 and 2021 'unthinkable' and 'unimaginable' appeared in English-language news articles over three million times (McGonigal xiii). The pandemic made starkly apparent that the public imaginary has blazed into the present day as short-term as it is fragile, fundamentally unable to look beyond the immediate present and collectively vision a future beyond crisis. As a moment of stupendous rupture to the everyday the 'global pause' (Lapman 546) of COVID-19 presented an invitation to identify, and remedy this state, to consider futures radically transformed from pandemic presents, and to populate those futures with previously excluded non-human agencies who continue to assert their significance in human worlds one crisis after the next.

The development of this paper spans the full breadth of the COVID-19 pandemic and emergence into the 'new normal' of post-pandemic life. E2920 was first conceived early in 2020 during the first wave of lockdowns and delivered in the most severe of lockdown conditions later that year. The research behind the work was delivered as a conference paper at the 2021 ASLEC-ANZ conference, with this paper then drafted in 2022 and finalised in 2023. As such, this paper reflects evolving perspectives and proximity to viral companions. It combines pre-pandemic sources with those published recently and intends

³ Worlding is used here to refer to an active ontological process, replacing familiar and fixed nouns with an active verb to indicate the ongoing production of co-constituted realities (Palmer and Hunter) For more on this see Donna Haraway (*Species*).

to reflect an ongoing sensitivity to the disquieting nature of a topic still so actively agitating human affairs. It is not a comfortable thing to propose after three years of heightened viral awareness that humans should draw closer to viral bodies, or that they are beneficial companions. It is laborious and disquieting to rest attention continuously on a subject of such intensity marked by a collective urgency to forget. The discomfort of casting back three years to reconnect with the earliest of this research was palpable and amplified by contracting the virus once while initially writing, and again during the final edit. It was a helpful reminder that conceptual and corporeal encounters with viral bodies entail markedly divergent experiences, and while that might enrich the article, it is not an appealing realisation at 2:00 a.m. whilst fighting a fever.

In *Always Coming Home* (1985) Le Guin begins the initiation song from Finders Lodge with the phrase, ‘Please bring strange things. Please come bringing new things. Let very old things come into your hands.’ Reframed as a comrade or a companion in the stories of our times, COVID-19 is a presence both new and strange. Viruses are uncanny, multitemporal guides that weft the stories of our times with those of the deep past and those of futures still evolving. COVID-19 and its microbial kin offer myriad models for flourishing, despite risky terrain, moving collaboratively and embracing entanglement in the more-than-human flesh of the world. They are masters in collaboration, and survival amidst precarity. In a time where new stories are desperately needed to build new, radically different worlds (Haraway *Staying*), microbial narratives like COVID-19 manage to span the breadth of an ancient universe while still holding ‘the edges open and being greedy for surprising new and old connections’ (Haraway *Staying* 160). What behaviours and practices swarm the foreground of microbial stories? What tales do viral figures weave of the present, distributed as it is across diverse species, scales, and systems? How might they offer continuance models to be parsed into possible future practices? How does COVID-19 act as an invitation to reconfigure the human as embedded and embodied? How does COVID-19 make visible earthly life as one of heterogeneous, multispecies, and multi-scalar assemblages, bound in symbiotic becoming and flourishing only through mutualistic care?

Host: the body is nested [_kin]

The body, to begin with, is not your own.

This is a collaborative container. A container flourishing in complex assemblages of intent. 380 trillion viral entities make up the fleshy territories of the human virome. You are inhabited.

You depend upon their unseen labour. Life is not solitary work. You are surrounded. Your body is only one site of its co-creation. Viruses reach between bodies, across scales. Creeks, ghost gums, hurricanes, supernova, Uluru, cuttlefish, bogong moth. All bodies. All sites of complex community creation. All collaborative sites of survival. The virus is a body dispersed. On the move. (E2920)

It is a challenge, in a time of neo-liberalism, constructed from the materials of CCC, to oppose the imagined figure of the individual as a lone entity, and one solely responsible for their own well-being. This is the first key invitation of the COVID-19 incursion, as viruses are experts in dispersing notions of the individual. The ease with which a zoonotic pathogen enters the human subject is a reminder that life arises only as it is generated by a complex network of both human and non-human agents, and internal functions of the body are no exception (Oppermann and Iovino). While anthropocentrism imagines the human subject as a singular, delineated figure, separate from and without obligation to the inferior intelligence of non-human worlds, viruses tell a different story. Humans are an ecosystem unto themselves, filled with, and flourishing through the labour of strange organisms and objects who work as a symbiotic collective.

Zoonotic diseases approach human bodies as any animal flesh, and perhaps this is why, despite the tens of thousands of diseases that can infect mammals (Oliver), it is those that transgress the ontological divide between humans/nature, such as AIDS, Ebola, chickenpox, and COVID-19 that most capture global attention. Apart from the flagrant disregard for human exceptionalism, the zoonotic leap is disquieting in its reminder of the perpetual state of microbial migrations that puncture the human body and make it a host. Humans have always been human-microbe assemblages. Microbes assert a more enlarged and distributed notion of the posthuman subject, a figure that far exceeds a contemporary definition of the human as separate from and superior to the non- or in-human systems that both inhabit and surround it. Microbes make visible the busy world beyond the

borders of any individual body and make clear that human worlds, like all others, are relational, immanently interconnected, fundamentally embedded in, embodied, and affected by, and affecting the complex environmental ecologies they inhabit (Braidotti and Hlavajova).

The nested state of microbial habitation comes most commonly to discussion through the microbiome. The microbial community hosted by the human body makes up quite the crowd, teeming with staggering numbers of symbiotic and parasitic life forms. Microbes demonstrate that at every scale, from individual organisms to collective communities, humanity is ‘co-constituted inside dense webs of lively exchange’ (van Dooren et al 14). Less popular than the increasingly discussed human microbiome, the human virome is comprised of 380 trillion viruses that perform tasks so crucial to our well-being that survival would be impossible if they were eradicated (Oliver). Housed on skin and in flesh, ‘microorganisms outnumber human cells 10 to 1’ (Morton and Boyer 64). It would be ‘foolish to define [yourself] as something purely human’ (Bennet 116), while 90% of human cells are comprised of bacteria, fungi, viruses, and archaea whose microscopic efforts enable the conditions for life, from your first sip of breast milk to your last drawn breath (University of Queensland). As 8% of total DNA in any individual is composed of viral fragments, with another 40% suspected to have viral origins (Arnold), attuning to these microbial dynamics helps refigure the human as a multispecies event and offers an opportunity to consider ethical and care-full approaches to the non-human worlds as they are inhaled, digested, and absorbed.

The mess of all species evolution is only accomplished ‘in company’ (Haraway *Species* 4), and viruses make clear that becoming has always been becoming-with (van Dooren et al; Haraway *Species* 4). COVID-19 demonstrated a non-hierarchical vision of animal flesh, reminding CCC humans that ‘the life in [you] does not answer to [your] name’ (Braidotti and Hlavajova 13) – a realisation that demands a radically different approach to environmental care. COVID-19 confronts the human identity, making its creaturely home in creaturely flesh, without regard to whether an animal, plant, or ocean has or knows itself by any name. Val Plumwood imagined that the crocodile, with its threat of predation, might help dismember human-centered narratives of mastery and replace them with something more modest and suited to the humble truth of an enmeshed mortal life that depends on the labour of others. Where the eye of the crocodile might have

permitted some evasion by those labouring under a belief of mastery, COVID-19 captured the attention of every culture participating in the modern mesh of CCC industry and ideology.

The pandemic punctured human worlds with more-than-human narratives of extraordinary diversity and time scales beyond that of the brief, perishable human life. Closely attending to viral worlds embeds the human subject in planetary, cosmic durations, with every cell in the body representing an unbroken chain of life that has extended over 3.8 billion years. COVID-19 reminds humans that the components and residents of all flesh are epochal, ancient, arising from and returning to processes embedded in an arc of time that far exceeds those made familiar by instantaneous cultures of the modern-day world. In a culture where a lifetime is imagined as less than a hundred years, and long-term planning commonly refers to a three-to-five-year vision, temporal literacy becomes a very real hurdle to approaching climate disruption. Alterations in Earth's liveability are incremental and iterative, and occur at vast geologic, cosmic scales, and so necessitate responses and strategies that are also intended for similar durations. A close look at viral worlds calls attention to the extended temporality that composes the cosmos, and all subjects within it, lodging the human in both deep histories and speculative futures, weaving bacteriophage with the blue whale, and trilobite fossils with the off-planet colonies not yet realised. Joining the flu of 1918, the black death, and smallpox, COVID-19 reminds us that pandemics are always a matter of time. The conditions for zoonotic pathogens are only improved by ongoing anthropogenic interference (Vidal) and must be urgently considered as a matter of survival.

OBSERVE: which bodies have power over others.

TEST: What tensions are emerging?

REPORT: Are you alone? Y or N

[kith_contained:occupying: binding_strangers/vital: neat_kin: floating:
flesh:holding: re_make: brood: flourishing: cling] (E2920)



Figure 2. Sequence 1, Emissary 2920. Image credit: Devika Bilimoria

Swarm: response is choreographic undoing [_pivot]

The virus reinvents itself and redreams the world again, again and again. It reconfigures the limbs and borders, redefines the relationships and connections, and stretches into the untouched spaces (tilt your head back – it must brush the back of the throat). The virus sculpts, slashes, dismembers, leaks salt tears and rushes windows and chimneys with the sound of grief swept wailing. It kills. It demands regeneration. The virus reinvents spaces, phrases, homes, deletes systems, economies, and expectations. It is a mobile phantasmagoria. It hot wires dreamscapes to inspire new choreographies of collaborative survival. The virus says – move, step quickly, pause, pivot, unthread, renegotiate, put down, pick up, hold on— pivot. Pivot. Pivot. Pivot. (E2920)

Performing a dynamic and vast augmentation on contemporary life, COVID-19 offered the stark realisation that for multispecies worlds, change is a necessary condition of life. While the CCC propensity has been to control or ‘negate the emergent processes of the planet’ (Brown *Emergent* 3), ecosystems and their inhabitants are perpetually engaged in adaptation (Margulis). Dwelling in the precarious conditions of an unbalanced ecology,

viruses perpetually swarm and coalesce with other feral and multispecies forces to form new worlds. They are prone to change, prone to creating new conditions. COVID-19, prone to mutation, with its endless strains provides lessons in continuance and growth upon ever-changing terrain.

Viral worlds dismember ideas of stasis and refuse stabilisation. The pandemic occurred in the wake of decades where environmental protection or preservation occurred under the banner of 'sustainability', a notion which perhaps exacerbated instead of quelled ecologic imbalance. In a world of furious extraction, 'sustainability' distracts with its implication of change, while maintaining or propelling 'violent, self-serving systems' (Alaimo 175). COVID-19 made the safety of stasis inaccessible, and inconceivable. Rather than a return to the familiar, post-pandemic time was proposed to be a 'new normal', radically different from the world of early 2020, a place of amplifying precarity. As the instructions came to 'pivot', again and again in personal and professional domains, it became apparent that comfort with ongoing uncertainty might be a requirement of life co-created with viral companions. That nothing stays the same is the very basis of history and evolutionary theory (Alaimo 177). The quote from Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* seems an apt introduction to times created in the company of COVID-19:

All that you touch you change. All that you change changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change. (4)

Living within a pandemic is to dwell in the existential crisis of the Sixth Great Extinction without respite. COVID-19 demands grappling with the trouble of the present, not retreating to Edenic visions of the past or reaching for comforting visions of salvific futures (Haraway *Staying*) but instead confronting the possibility of earthly extinction. It makes clear the necessity to accept that which has already changed, or already lost to the ever-escalating catastrophes of climate disruption. It may be that these disruptions will continue to alter the conditions and geographies of human life without end. It may not be possible to recover from one climactic event before another appears fully, and so 'get[ting] in right relationship with change' (Brown *Emergent* 8) may become necessary for well-being. Certainly the breathtaking frequency of floods, fires, heatwaves and rising ocean levels now occurring globally suggest as much. Climate refugees are shifting from the pages of fiction into crisis accommodation following floods and hurricanes, mega-fires,

and landslides. Island nations in the Pacific and inland towns in regional Australia alike, face abandonment if climate conditions are not radically improved. Such diverse and ever-mutating conditions almost calls for 300 distinct words for climate change in the same way that Sámi languages have 300 words for snow.

COVID-19 extends an invitation to relinquish outmoded ideas of consistency, or 'normal' and to acclimatise instead to ever-altering conditions. 'Thinking about long-term survival involves acceptance of impermanence and imperfection' (Le Guin 2017, 87), a state which runs contrary to modern lives that have been tailored to a stable climate and have attempted to evoke stable economies, industries, and life expectancies. But 'changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival' (Tsing 2015), and with the right approach and preparation, the ongoing shocks induced by COVID-19 might offer a key opportunity to grow resilient futures, deeply rooted in, and comfortable within, profound change (Brown 'Murmurations'). Adaptation is even making its way into policy documents and strategies to mitigate catastrophic climate events. Defamiliarization can be productive for conceptual disobedience, the incommensurability between COVID-19 and comfortability, or stasis seems a fertile circumstance to refigure what comes next radically (Braidotti "We").

Alongside the requirement for daily adjustments, the pandemic asserted the urgency for fundamental change beyond mask mandates, lockdowns, and Perspex screens at check-outs. It drove home the hard-to-avoid truth that without profound change from those in positions of power, the liveability of the earth will continue to be compromised for innumerable kinds of species, communities, assemblages, and individuals. Amongst other collaborative lifeforms, the microbial world of bacteria and viruses continues to proliferate, survive, grow, and sustain (Brown *Emergent*), indicating that history is written by those willing to move with changing times, and 'microbes will adapt to put it mildly' (Haraway *Staying* 43). The absence of adaptation has been hypothesised as the cause of collapse in some past civilisations (Sohn) but despite the rising frequency of climate related crises, the conversation is slow to turn from climate change itself and towards the necessary response, which will be climate adaptation, reliance, and capacity building. COVID-19 stresses that human cultures adapt and respond or perish, and that becoming literate in change will also necessitate learning to grieve and accept all that is already lost.

II: Declaration: Align with the viral body and travel forward into a speculative space. Can you visualise a hopeful future that includes the viral body and learns from it? What does 'human' feel like there?

[amplify_conspire/morph_wake_kiss:swept_rush:rush:shift_fledgling:
conspire: declare_dance: riot] (E2920)



Figure 3. Participant identification disk, Emissary 2920. Image credit: Devika Bilimoria

Arc: you're leaking [_inhale]

The body is not pristine. It is an ecotone. A junction. A place of meeting. The body is the brink, where the world slips in. It slips in on many legs, across the lips, through the lungs, under the nails – the fibres of your carpet, the compounds in your sunscreen, fur-covered, flitting, flowing, floating, sprinting, it makes its animal home in animal flesh. The body is exposed, adapting to worldly suggestion, evolving alongside what comes in through the tap, the window, the medicine cabinet. Traces of ocean, of open-cut mines, of strangers' hands who picked or packed or posted your plastic-wrapped spinach. The body is always breached, there are too many openings to keep out

the world, or hold it in. All bodies are porous. Even ‘marbles are a sort of sponge’ (Bryant). (E2920)

Viruses elegantly demonstrate that within a nature-culture continuum, the conditions of life are intra-active and co-dependent. The boundaries between the human body and diverse non-human worlds have always been ‘porous and dynamic’ (Braidotti and Hlavajova 1), a state COVID-19 made conspicuous. A ‘healthy human adult breathes 12-20 times per minute’ (Gorska 43), and every breath draws the particles of the world into the body, in all their material complexity. Borders have always leaked, and pathogens do not respect boundaries, travelling amidst storm or sigh, transgressing the thresholds of nations and nostrils alike. Alongside oxygen, every inhalation includes numerous other elements, including dirt, dust, allergens, human skin, bacteria, fungi, moulds, chemical compounds, and viruses. Air is a posthumanist messy and multispecies affair, an unavoidable site of exchange that disrupts conventional boundaries of human embodiment as each breath draws the outside in before ‘letting the inside out’ (Gorska 29). Particles of breath find their way into the lungs, veins, organs, and cells via atmospheric currents, and filtration work of oceans, storm clouds, glacial ice, or sphagnum moss. The pandemic made alarmingly apparent the soupy milieu of the air we breathe. The unavoidable condition of inhabiting living, breathing bodies necessitates passing breath between local, distant, present, and ancient bodies. COVID-19 drew to the fore the realisation that the ‘[h]uman is [only] one among a wide many’ (Cohen xxiv) and, as such, is implicated in the other ‘animal, vegetable, and planetary bodies that materially course through [each of] us’ (Neimanis 2), eucalyptus tree, prime minister or freshwater eel alike.

COVID-19 acts as a tracer, a visible, material thread between distant but entangled narratives across the ecological, sociological, and political. It calls clear attention to human health as planetary health, folding the harm enacted on non-human bodies back into the intimacy of the human experience (Braidotti “We”) in an undeniable demonstration of biospheric interconnection. By centering attention on the ease with which these bodies cross through and transform the human body, COVID-19 made visible the link between human well-being and other living bodies or ecosystems.

Each natural thing appears nested in a system, and each system, in turn, is nested in larger and older systems the closer one looks...this troubles the very division of us (as human entities) and nature (out there) we share substances but also exist in the same field of forces. (Cohen 252)

Furnishing humanity with a distinct reminder that all earthly life occurs within an invisible mesh of ‘substance, materialities, and forces’ across ‘biological, chemical and climactic processes’ (Alaimo 158), viruses demonstrate that embodiment is a process of exposure, prone to leaks and contamination. Borders of all sorts, skin, and species alike, are ‘always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation’ (Neimanis 2). All bodies, human or more-than, sip, swallow and suck the material world into their cells as a necessary fundament of life. Viruses like COVID-19 perform ‘meaningful mattering of bodies as a question of earthly survival’ (Neimanis 2). ‘Earth entities share this location’ and rely on its terrestrial elements (Braidotti “We” 26), and the pandemic made evident this pervasive mesh of interdependence, affirming that ecologic consequences will not stay contained in the regions they occur. There is ‘no away’ (Morton 112), and while for some the risk of environmental catastrophe appears geographically, or temporally remote, primarily the problem of the Global South, or even ‘Global Future’, COVID-19 makes clear that for earthly life, all crises are local, though their impact might be unevenly experienced. The pandemic illustrated how there is no distant place where the consequence of environmental disregard accrues, but rather one global system where all will be subjected to the repercussions. COVID-19 invited a reckoning with the ‘toxic substances we have created and exploited’ (Davis 109), slipping by oil, air-borne pollution, chemical and hormonal changes to animals, soils, and waterways wrought by CCC thinking, and the industries that have flourished in their wake.

All rivers lead to the sea and all pollutants to the flesh, be it through virus-infected breath, glyphosate-laced bread, chromium-infused drinking water (Biello) or Per- and Polyfluorinated Substances (PFAS), known colloquially as ‘forever chemicals’, found in the food chain (Mikkonen and Taylor). Alongside our more-than-human companions, humans too must metabolise the muck of ecologic misconducts. COVID-19 lets monsters slip down our ideological throats to multiply amidst the radium, microplastics, and pesticides, to form a hard-to-swallow truth. It makes the severity of ecologic disturbance palpable and accumulates it into the blood or breast milk. COVID-19 cultivated a

conversation that was long overdue, the sudden focus on a pathogen making all too apparent the shared vulnerability and the toxicogenic state of all earthly life. The focus on a pathogenic pandemic initiated a comprehensive health check that included every facet of civilisation and found it wanting. It exposed the vast social inequalities across distant cultures and the risk of governance that gives preference to economic growth over health or even life. It showed where social and governance systems have become, or always were, callous mechanisms intended to benefit a few to the detriment of many, but it also revealed the opportunities and capacities for alternative models. Mutual-aid projects appeared and flourished in the absence of sufficient social services. Though the pandemic was experienced through different circumstances, it was felt by all. The air is a commons, unbound by geography, temporality, or species delineations, that touches upon, passes through, changes, and is changed by all breathing bodies. The first oxygen production on earth is linked to the labour of ancient eukaryotic cells (Haraway ‘Symbiogenesis’), and so air has always been the domain of the microbial.

Inhabiting and flourishing in this shared realm, COVID-19 evokes multispecies relations in a spectrum large enough to ‘encompass the entire planet’ (Braidotti and Hlavajova 28), illuminating a horrific truth: the monstrous disregard and violence visited by human cultures upon non-human worlds occurs in a contained, muddled, and interconnected system, through which all bodies are implicated, and all ecologic violence whether exploitative, extractive or extinctive is inevitably parsed through the biosphere and returned to the perpetrator.

TEXT MESSAGES DAY 4-6:

Are you leaking Y for always N for often

What have you absorbed in the last two hours?

Did you wash your hands? Y or N

[drip_exit: swallow_soak: exhaust: reaching: offer: wipe: evolve_undone: fall:
breach: stain/leech/lick: spill_slip] (E2920)

Phage: we eat one another and that haunts us [living—non-living]

The virus comes to stalk us from the ruins, its edges traceable in statistics or symptoms, but never seen directly; it causes dis-ease. Uncertainty. It is a reminder of things we have agreed to forget, whispering from crowded hospital wards, lurking in supermarket aisles, and bus stops. It comes too close. It disturbs and upsets. Mocks the urge to disinfect, eradicate, defeat. Muddies the pristine corners, pushes roots through tiles smelling like something wet and rotting, something birthing. The virus asks if you might yield to the mess of w/s/eeping bodies. Make a place to nest in the fear, a bower weft from the microplastic in your organs, the radium in your trout, the triethanolamine in your hand-cream, the Bromide in your bread. (E2920)

In circumstances requiring urgent and sudden change, like those of violent climate disruption, monsters can make for good comrades. Monsters act as both disruptor and harbinger of change – if a monster is frightening enough, the duress it facilitates might be enough to induce epistemological and ontological reckoning, potentially rupturing well-trodden paths of meaning-making, perhaps creating a crack through which something else might receive sufficient light to grow.

COVID-19 makes for a perfect monster, a mutating form shapeshifting across cultures and circumstance, hard to define in a ubiquitous manner and exceed understanding by splitting the walls of categorisation as hybrid, chimeric forces – nature-culture continuums ‘catastrophically’ integrating the outside in, and the inside out (Peterson 2020). Like other monsters, COVID-19 leaked, fractured, recombined, and slipped between those notions of ‘pristine’ or ‘pure’ environments both public and private preferred by the colonial imagination (Godin 121). It forced a foregrounding of the dispersed and ubiquitous interspecies exchange on which earthly life depends, irrefutably entangling human well-being with that of other species and systems. The scale of this disruption induced a pervasive embodied reckoning with the untenable, painful, and unacceptable disasters of our times – the zoonotic pathogen itself is a monstrosity of ecologic modification, manipulation, and mutation, an unruly consequence of attacks on multispecies liveability turned back against the human (Tsing; Braidotti “We”).

Beyond the rigid anthropocentric ideologies of CCC the sudden threat of unstoppable viral agents also distressed the clean, green rhetoric of contemporary environmental

discourse. In her essay 'On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature', Eileen Crist interrogates the environmental discourse that attempts to dismiss the state of ecologic precarity through a softening of language. She notes that in ecological discourse language around anthropogenic impact too often errs towards generosity. Phrases such as 'changing, shaping, transforming, or altering the biosphere' appear more favoured than confronting, but more accurate phrases such as 'destruction, depredation, rape, loss, devastation, deterioration' (133). These are apt words for the state of the earthly commons as they teeter on the brink of disfunction induced by CCC greed and short-sighted decimation.

COVID-19 made the most of monstrosity, its iterative and multi-scaled horrors infecting and mutating so much of what was deemed 'normal' that the language of return in post-pandemic periods is imagined as someplace wholly other, a new landscape still to be grasped, the 'new normal,' an entirely different terrain which will entail entirely new ways of living. It has forced an alarming and distressing conversation about collective well-being to the kitchen table, the Microsoft teams meeting, and the dog park. The disruption has hardened language, refused the ease of distraction or disassociation by unsettling every facet of daily life, and provided an extended period to reflect on the grave, multispecies consequence of imagining nature and culture to be outside of one another. The pandemic presented an opportunity to confront and reckon with the horrendous circumstances of life amidst this heinous ecologic disregard, and its uneven consequences.

COVID-19 is a multi-scaled horror story of heartbreak, isolation, premature death, sorrow, and despair, that demands that more-than-human care occurs even in the company of those grotesque others who stalk the fetid perimeters of anthropogenic tales. It makes clear ancient lines of multispecies entanglement present in electronic waste, radioactive fish, abandoned quarries, and gamma rays and insists on their inclusion in the tales of the times alongside more agreeable agents like cetaceans, cephalopods, mountains, or moths. COVID-19 brings into focus a host of contaminated, altered, and beastly entities whose presence arises from vast injustice, mounting extinctions, and the unresolved suffering of more-than-human narratives both past, present, and still to come. Viral worlds entreat inclusion of other monstrous kin, those other forces and forms that stew and seep from the convergence of CCC frameworks and their enduring impact. The unsanctioned, abnormal coupling performed by zoonotic pathogens casts a disquieting thread through other monstrous coalitions: the sedimentary rock and plastic of

plastiglomerate, the Pacific garbage patch and the drug-resistant super bug all stalk in the shadows cast by viral times, similarly monstrous inhabitants reminding any who look closely of numberless others with hard-to-reconcile narratives proliferated by fetid, unpalatable and atrocious circumstance of these times (Povinelli 19).

...a monster is not such a terrible thing to be. From the Latin root *monstrum*, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once. (Vuong)

As a viral protagonist, COVID-19 induced an ongoing 'state of troubling' (Mazurov, in Braidotti 2018). It revealed where dominant epistemologies have been inadequate in conceiving the world as it flourishes outside systems of categorization, the poverty of environmental nomenclature, or the myths of control and stability disseminated by CCC, commanding recognition of their failures and consequences. Troubling requires a departure from the safe harbors of dominant conceptual vehicles, including those that continue to parse the stunning horror of climate precarity into narrative fragments that do not threaten its ideological foundations. While Enlightenment Europe attempted to cast out the unruly, irrational, and abhorrent form of monsters, COVID-19 makes clear that in a symbiotic landscape, where all species are exposed to each other's ills, CCC humans must learn to make companions with the monsters, to count ourselves amongst their abhorrent, altered forms.

Accepting the permeability of human worlds and bodies at a microbial level requires a confrontation with other types of corporeal contamination – the toxic seep of endocrine disruptors, carcinogens, and microplastics that slip in through sandwiches and shampoos, through microfibres and plasterboard, through car fumes and smoke machines, through farms and factories alike. As it becomes apparent that all we require for life is contaminated, COVID-19 invites us to dwell in the monstrosity of subsisting in the Capitalocene, the Plasticocene, or Toxicocene (Haraway; Mroziak Gawler) offering a comprehension of rhizomic entanglement through the shared condition of contamination. Informed by Heather Davis' exploration of toxicity and extending on proposals for epochal names proposed by Haraway, Moore and Malms, 'toxicocene' is offered as a definition that both refers to the ideological toxicity of dominant cultures, the pervasive

destruction of multispecies well-being it has empowered, and the accumulative, ubiquitous contamination of all life-systems that are their consequence. All earthly life is currently unified in its exposure to toxicogenic cultures both intentional and incidental, local, or distant. It reflects a recognition that the human-made chemicals, plastics, and other materials have infiltrated every aspect of our environment, from the depths of the oceans to the air we breathe, and have led to the mutation and transformation of living beings in unforeseen ways. The concept of toxicocene points to a post-normal and post-human future, characterized by forms that are less familiar, challenging the traditional notions of what constitutes life, and what kind of existence is possible. It is intended as a neutral term, emphasising the need to acknowledge the reality of the present and to generate adaptive visions of what might come next. Toxicocene thinking encourages us to move beyond the binaries of nature/culture, human/non-human, and to recognize the complexity and entanglement of our shared existence in a world shaped by the byproducts of industrialisation and capitalism. This notion of shared and ubiquitous toxicity foregrounds the sympoetic conditions of life and foregrounds the current state of planetary condition of imbalance, in which all forces, flows and entities are united in multi-scalar alterations and mutations, regardless of participation in, or immediate proximity to anthropocentric ideologies or capitalist cultures. Adding to discourse on contamination, this definition contextualises the epoch in a collective condition of toxicity to reckon with the trouble of contaminated times and speculative on what might emerge, or flourish in its ruins.

Viral bodies demonstrate the wonder and terror of symbiotic entanglement, at once a warning, a messenger, and an invitation towards courageous futures empowered by an honest acknowledgment of the dire circumstance of the times. It matters which stories tell stories, and, while we cannot cease the ecologic damage already wrought on the more-than-human world, it is possible to include or even be led by the narratives of contamination, hybridity, and chimeric monstrosities that proliferate it.

Fieldnote: Use the card to access Emissary link. Record what unsettles you most about the virus – record any specific textures, scents, sounds, or images you have sought to avoid or are repelled by. What do you wish to banish?

[slipping:companion:cover_bone:hold:close:rest_shiver:keel_snap:bone_reach:
groan/lurch/gasp:under_sheild: echo: grieve: kneel, resist] (E2920)

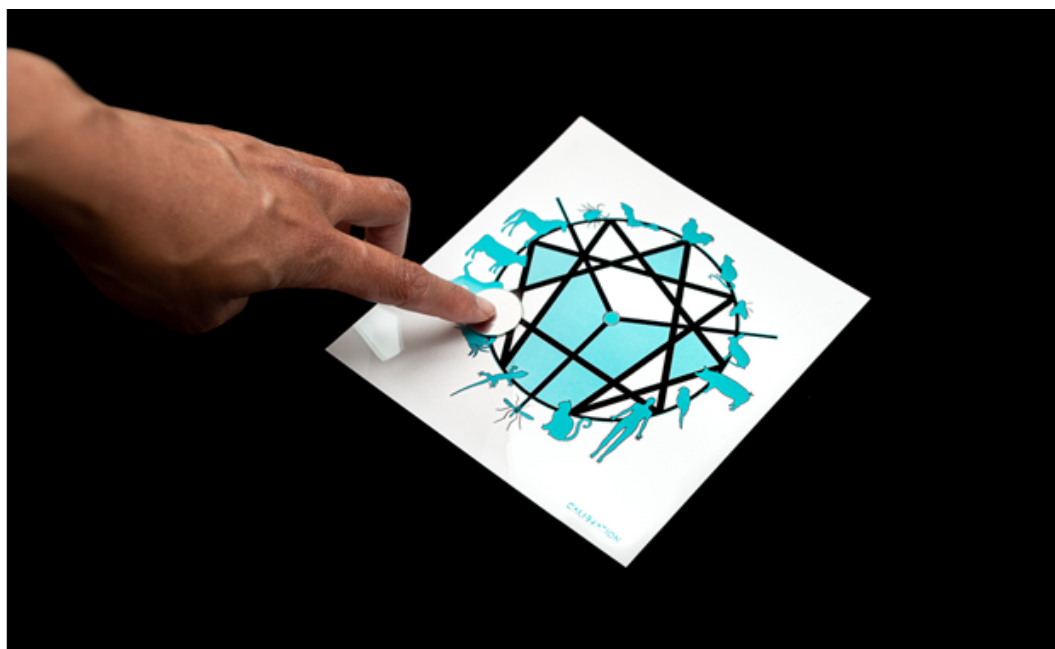


Figure 4. Calibration card, Emissary 2920. Image credit: Devika Bilimoria

Encode: particles are not empty language [mutating]

The world speaks in myriad tongues. The lexicon of the living world is composed of scent, gesture, temperature, form, rhythm, repetition, pheromones, vibration. The direction and colour of a leaf speaks of season, the nutrient content of the soil, the bodies that eat nearby, or live within. The valley and stain of the iron ore boulder speaks of long rains, and infinite change. The river speaks in flood lines, by inscribing its wellbeing in the bodies of animals and fish sick or well in its depths or banks. The birds sign and flap their vocabulary, the wind uses others to articulate itself, moving objects and bodies to speak about the sky.

Many voices singing to us from the other languages – humans are mostly adept at human-only discourse, ignoring multispecies fray as noise. Not dialect. What conversations are occurring? (E2920)

Anthropocentric narratives are always beings shaped by more-than-human forces whether consciously or not. To refuse anthropocentric ideologies comprehensively, the desire for education, communication, and inclusion of a multispecies world must extend beyond those worlds which are easily within reach of human scale, understanding and culture. COVID-19 highlighted the importance of care practices that deftly morph between the macro and the micro and are not bound by species or scale. The invisible respiratory contagion urges us to think big, to reframe our view of what has become of the earth's ecosystems, what this moment in time is, and how humans are figured within it. COVID-19 is an invitation to confront the circumstances of our times boldly. To embrace collaborators of all scales, no matter how uncanny or disquieting their presence, and let their unruly, ungovernable multiplicities act as both warning and inspiration, that we might see a tip of our total dependence on forces beyond the human, be awestruck by their impact, and embrace their spectacular ecological intelligence. Will we endure, witness, and learn all we have in the past two years only to reinstate that which we know does not serve us? 'Particularly as we know that the old order is implicated in not only the pandemic but the multiplying signs of the unsustainability of this world 'as currently configured?' (Wark). Embracing the conditions set by COVID-19, and welcoming its unsettling company as collaborator in visioning post-pandemic futures, may well lead towards more understanding of inhabiting a nature-culture continuum, of approaching health as a multispecies and planetary affair, or learning to welcome change and to be propelled forward through cycles of adaptation and transformation.

This paper touches on only a few of the themes included in E2920, and does not speak to other equally significant aspects of the pandemic experience, such as those of perspectives on time, death, grief, rest, collectivism, or social justice. The human-viral assemblage of the COVID-19 pandemic is still open-ended, still unfolding and evolving (Tsing), and there is much more work to do to make meaning from or create response to it.

Activist, philosopher and author Grace Lee Bogs liked to ask her students 'What time is it on the clock of the world?' (Brown 'Murmurations'). The COVID-19 pandemic has been

one of reckoning, but also revelation. In a murmuration, shoal, or swarm, ‘each creature is tuned into its neighbour’, at the right relationship, with the right distance, not so close to crash, but close enough to feel the micro-adaptations of each other’s bodies. ‘There is a deep trust, to lift because the other birds around you are lifting, to live based on your collective real-time adaptations’ (Brown *Emergent* 71). The COVID-19 intervention is both a consequence of anthropocentric hubris and an invitation to reflect on what a post-pandemic future entails and whose knowledge will guide its creation. COVID-19 removes the illusion of anthropocentric power, inflicting a modesty that, while maybe not voluntary, certainly ‘open[ed] up the possibility of speculating differently about liveable amalgamations on earth’ (Torrent).

What futures might be produced from taking up the invitations, reckonings, demands and evidence of COVID-19? From drawing more closely towards microbial worlds, and celebrating rather than ignoring the ways all biologic life is at stake to one another? Perhaps a celebration of the ongoing state of human-viral assemblage in a post-pandemic world might yield futures that move fluidly through precarity and offer a model of resilience that accepts evolution, and bends with it rather than hoping for stasis and breaking in its absence. Or futures firmly founded in the reckoning and acceptance of these terrible times, and recognition that all are shaped by it, implicated in it, composed from it. Perhaps even futures that courageously embrace the presence of toxic bodies and get fixated on an immediate collective remediation, recovery, and regeneration. Might this approach, though perhaps uncomfortable, ultimately lead us to new possibilities for a grounded, informed practices of hope, rather than stasis, or fear-induced paralysis? At very least, the insistent, intimate companionship of COVID-19 will continue to act as a reminder that we must move alongside our more-than-human collaborators with a humble sensibility, moving not so close as to disrupt, but near enough to respond to their micro-adaptations, even on a microbial scale. Like the leader of a murmuration mid-flight, COVID-19 has invited us to change direction. Whether we lift together is yet to be seen.

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