Introduction
Between the Universal and the Particular

In 2020, two pivotal events on opposite sides of the globe helped catalyze a series of developments that each had far-reaching implications. First, on the morning of January 22, the Chinese government announced that the city of Wuhan—a metropolis with a population of more than 11 million—would immediately be put under lockdown in an attempt to halt the spread of a dangerous new virus. International news coverage initially treated this outbreak primarily as a local Chinese phenomenon, but within a few months the virus had reached almost every nation on earth.1 Second, in the evening of May 25, a Black man named George Floyd was detained by Minneapolis police on charges of trying to pass a counterfeit $20 bill, and during the ensuing confrontation an officer used his knee to pin Floyd's neck to the ground for almost nine minutes, killing him. A bystander's video of the incident was posted to the internet, leading to a series of public protests that were initially concentrated in the city of Minneapolis but which quickly spread around the world.2

In both cases, an event that initially appeared to be rather provincial in its implications (relating primarily to the cities of Wuhan and Minneapolis, respectively) almost immediately came to have global ramifications. In the first case, within a day the Wuhan lockdown had been extended to twelve other cities in Hubei Province. Moreover, despite the fact that most of the international coverage initially concluded that this sort of measure was only possible in an authoritarian state like China, by the time the Wuhan lockdown was lifted two months later, over seventy countries around the world (representing all of the world's continents except Antarctica) had implemented national lockdowns of their own.3 Similarly, the George Floyd protests began in Minneapolis on May 26, but by the next day they had been joined by demonstrators in many cities across the country. Protests continued for several months, ultimately peaking in the United States on June 6, when approximately half a million people showed up to demonstrate at almost 550 different locations. Moreover, in addition to these US protests, there
were demonstrations in over sixty nations and on all seven continents—some sought to display solidarity with the US protesters, while others tried to draw attention to similar patterns of racial injustice in their own countries.\(^4\)

Although a World Health Organization official called the Wuhan lockdown “unprecedented in public health history”\(^5\) and a *New York Times* analysis similarly concluded that the tsunami of social justice demonstrations following George Floyd’s death almost certainly were “the largest movement in the country’s history;”\(^6\) in reality neither event was a unique or historically isolated occurrence. Instead, Covid-19 is just the most recent in a string of pandemics caused by influenza or an influenza-like illness, with earlier crises including the 1918 “Spanish influenza” pandemic (caused by the H1N1 virus), the 1957–1958 pandemic (H2N2 virus), the 1968 pandemic (H3N2 virus), and the 2009 H1N1 pandemic (H1N1pdm09 virus). Moreover, although the 2002–2003 SARS outbreak was not officially labeled a pandemic, it was nevertheless caused by a strain of coronavirus (SARS-CoV) that is very similar to the Covid-19 coronavirus (known as SARS-CoV-2), and it prompted a response that anticipated the initial response to the Covid-19 outbreak. Similarly, George Floyd’s death was just one in a depressingly long list of unarmed Blacks killed by US police or by individuals associated with law enforcement—with prominent victims in recent years including Trayvon Martin in 2012, Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014, and Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor in the months leading up to Floyd’s death in May 2020. In fact, it was precisely the acquittal in 2013 of the man charged with Martin’s death that resulted in the establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement, which in turn played a critical role in helping coordinate many of the subsequent protests, including the ones following Floyd’s death in 2020.\(^7\)

The resulting tension between the particular and the general—namely, the tension between a focus on the geographic and historical specificity of events like the pandemic and the protests, on the one hand, and an attention to the broader transregional and transhistorical processes within which those same events are embedded, on the other—also characterizes a range other sociocultural phenomena, not to mention the theoretical paradigms and interpretive methodologies that are used to interpret them. That is to say, although many cultural studies theories and methodologies are shaped by the specific intellectual, ideological, and sociocultural conditions under which they were initially developed, there is often nevertheless an interest in applying them to a much broader range of phenomena. In particular, many contemporary theories and methodologies developed out of a Western intellectual tradition and are shaped by a set of modern assumptions and concerns, leading some critics to ask how they may be applied to the analysis of non-Western or premodern phenomena while avoiding the hazards of epistemological imperialism.

One way of approaching these tensions between an emphasis on the singular or universal character of sociocultural phenomena—or of the theories and meth-
odologies used to interpret those same phenomena—is through the concept of immunity, which coincidentally has been central to many discussions of both the contemporary pandemic and protests. On the one hand, one of the factors driving the pandemic has been the fact that SARS-CoV-2 is a novel virus to which most people lack prior immunity. Furthermore, some of the key elements of the global response to the pandemic have involved attempts to develop a vaccine, as well as debates over when communities were likely to develop herd immunity (meaning that enough individuals have acquired immunity, either through vaccination or through prior infection, that the virus can no longer circulate freely through the community). Moreover, one of aspects that make the virus so dangerous is that in some patients it triggers an autoimmune-like antibody response, which poses a greater threat than the symptoms directly associated with the virus itself.

On the other hand, a central issue behind the George Floyd protests has been a legal doctrine known as qualified immunity, a limited form of sovereign immunity that grants government officials partial exemption from civil suits relating to actions performed in the normal course of duty (unless their actions are deemed to have been in violation of “clearly established” law). In recent years, this doctrine has frequently been used to defend police officers against suits for use of excessive force. This use of qualified immunity—particularly when combined with the tendency of the police to try to protect their own, and of the court system to give police the benefit of the doubt whenever possible—means that it is often exceedingly difficult for victims of police brutality to achieve redress through normal legal channels. The protests following the death of George Floyd and others, accordingly, involved precisely an attempt to pursue justice outside these same normal legal channels.

Although at first glance these two concepts of biomedical and juridical immunity might appear unrelated to each other, they actually both derive from the same root. Roberto Esposito traces the word immunity back to the Roman legal concept of immunity, which designated a state of exemption from social obligation. Esposito notes that this earlier concept was positioned in opposition to the root word munus, which means an office (i.e., a social duty or obligation), while immunis (the adjectival form of immunitas) refers to someone who performs no office. At the same time, however, Esposito argues that the true antipode of immunity “is not the absent munus, but rather the communitas of those who support it by being its bearers.” That is to say, the status of being immunis positions the subject simultaneously inside and outside of a community produced by shared obligations, meaning that the status of being immunis is not possible in the absence of the communitas whose obligations it contravenes. For this reason, Esposito argues, the category of immunitas is precisely a “condition of particularity” that stands in dialectical opposition to the condition of commonality embodied in the concept of community itself: “Immunity, in short, is the internal
limit which cuts across community, folding it back on itself in a form that is both constitutive and deprivative: immunity constitutes or reconstitutes community precisely by negating it.”

Esposito also notes, meanwhile, that the parallel medical understanding of *immunitas* has long roots (he cites an instance of the term in Lucan’s first-century CE *Pharsalia*, to refer to an acquired resistance to snake poison). The concept, however, acquired a more precise significance with the development of the modern biomedical understanding of the immune system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, at which point it was adopted to describe the condition whereby an organism is protected from the harmful effects of pathogens. However, as discussed in detail by Elie Metchnikoff—who is credited with discovering the basic workings of the immune system in the early twentieth century—the same functionality that allows an organism’s immune system to target harmful pathogens also permits it to mistakenly target the organism’s own healthy tissue, resulting in an autoimmune response wherein the immune system effectively becomes a destructive force in its own right. The result, as Donna Haraway has observed, is that a vision of an organism as a coherent, unitary entity is actually a contingent product of the immune system’s continual process of recognition and misrecognition, as opposed to being its enabling condition. Moreover, even when the immune system is functioning “correctly,” the organisms produced through this process are themselves thoroughly hybrid and heterogeneous entities. The human body, for instance, is actually teeming with microorganisms, some of which are benign while others, such as gut flora, are virtually essential to human survival. In fact, as Stefanie Fishel notes, the Human Microbiome Project’s 2010 announcement that genetically “foreign” microorganisms in the human body outnumber “human” cells by a ratio of ten to one encouraged a precipitous reimagining of “what it means to be human and the intra- and interconnections with nonhuman objects.”

A more explicitly political correlate of this concept of immunity, meanwhile, can be found in the legal concept of a state of exception or state of emergency. Whereas juridical immunity designates an individual who is exempt from social obligations, a state of exception instead designates a situation in which an entire political body is effectively placed outside the bounds of the normal legal restrictions. In the early 1920s, during the early years of the Weimar Republic, for instance, Carl Schmitt theorized this state of exception in detail, arguing that every legal order relies on the existence of a sovereign entity who is empowered, either explicitly or implicitly, to suspend the normal legal order if the situation demands. In fact, Schmitt famously defined the sovereign as “he who decides on the state of exception.”

Although the most immediate object of Schmitt’s analysis was Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution—which Hitler used a decade later to seize dictatorial
power—other theorists have productively extended Schmitt’s discussion. Most notably, Giorgio Agamben, in his book *State of Exception*, argues that a state of exception represents a peculiar state that “is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other.”\(^{15}\) Coincidentally, it was also in 2003—the year Agamben released the original Italian version of *State of Exception*—that Achille Mbembe published his influential *Public Culture* article “Necropolitics” (which Mbembe would subsequently expand into a book-length study published in French in 2016 under the title *Politiques de l’inimitié*, released in English three years later translation under the title *Necropolitics*), which also opened with a discussion of the relationship between the concepts of sovereignty and state of exception. To Schmitt’s definition of the sovereign as “he who decides on the state of exception,” Mbembe added the correlate that the sovereign is he who has control over the death of others. Moreover, observing that many other critics have taken the Holocaust as a paradigmatic example of a state of exception, Mbembe argues that the colony and the Black slave trade should also be approached in a similar fashion. More specifically, as a converse to Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, Mbembe proposes the concept of necropolitics, or necropower, to describe “the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*.”\(^{16}\)

Meanwhile, underlying these questions of how to theorize the relationship between the universal and the singular and between the general and the exceptional is a parallel set of questions about the use of theory itself. Recognizing that all critical theories and analytical methodologies are necessarily inflected by the cultural and historical conditions under which they originate, we may ask how theories and methodologies “travel” from one cultural or historical domain to another.\(^{17}\) What is involved in applying theories and methodologies to other cultures or historical periods? Conversely, what is assumed when one attempts to apply certain theories or methodologies to analyze their own cultures or historical periods?

This question of how theories and methodologies travel, in turn, is one of the driving concerns behind this new *Prism Theory Forum*, which will appear in every other issue of the journal and will feature clusters of essays examining interrelated theories and methodologies. The forum’s primary focus is not how theories and methodologies relate to the field of modern Chinese literature but, rather, with how they intersect with one another. At the same time, however, one of the forum’s guiding assumptions is that fields of study—like that of modern Chinese literature and its various proximate fields and subfields—are never autonomous
entities independent of the various theories and methodologies that are deployed to analyze them; rather, these fields are themselves constituted (and continually reconstituted) by those same theories and methodologies. Ideally, careful attention to a variety of different sets of theoretical and methodological concerns will help shed light on the constitution and continual transformation of the field(s) of modern Chinese literature. Accordingly, for this inaugural Theory Forum we have commissioned three essays that examine a set of intersecting theoretical and methodological concerns within the fields of animal studies, critical race studies, and environmental humanities, with a view to reflecting on how these theories and methodologies may be applied not only to the contemporary pandemic and protests but also to other phenomena and fields of inquiry.

In the first essay, Neel Ahuja opens by noting that, whereas 1970s utilitarian animal ethics had proposed that a critique of racism (and particularly the prioritization of whites over nonwhites) was foundational to a broader critique of speciesism (and particularly the anthropocentric prioritization of humans over nonhuman animals), more recent animal studies scholarship has instead tended to argue the reverse: that a critique of speciesism is foundational to a critique of racism. Ahuja then traces some of the intellectual and ideological shifts that have helped drive this reversal while also examining several sets of critiques—particularly from scholars working in the fields of feminist and gender studies—of the ethical and conceptual assumptions underlying the discussion of speciesism within contemporary animal studies. Ahuja concludes by considering how three recent works by Black Studies scholars address the relationship between concepts of race and species within Animal Studies and then brings these questions to bear on the critique of racialized police violence at the heart of the recent wave of social justice demonstrations. In this way, Ahuja examines not only shifting understandings of the human species within Animal Studies and other fields but also the shifting relationship different “species” of academic inquiry.

Next, Patrice D. Douglass approaches the intersection of concerns raised by the contemporary pandemic and protests by noting that a disproportionate number of Covid-19 fatalities in the United States have been Blacks and Native people. Douglass argues that the reason for this disparity lies not in biological differences between different racialized populations but, rather, in conditions of racialized structural violence that exacerbate the effects of the pandemic itself. In particular, Douglass takes the Black community’s heightened vulnerability to the pandemic’s viral contagion as a starting point for examining the category of Blackness itself as a product of a process of social contagion. Like Ahuja, Douglass examines how contemporary Black Studies scholars, and particularly Black feminist theorists, have attempted to interrogate the underlying assumptions on which the category of the human is itself predicated, arguing that a modern understanding of the human is grounded on an unexamined ground of anti-Black racism.
For instance, Douglass discusses Black philosopher Axelle Karera’s critique of a tendency to rely on the concept of the Anthropocene within contemporary discussions of disaster, noting that this reliance is often predicated on an “interdependence thesis (that we are all in this together) [that] overshadows how the social structuring of Black life and death makes the collective ‘we’ a structurally impossible equivalency, despite the affective and emotional desire for such to be true.” Douglass concludes with a detailed examination of the death of George Floyd and other recent victims of racialized violence—including not only figures like Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor but also less publicized victims such as the transgender individuals Nina Pop and Tony McDade. Here, Douglass essentially turns the Black Lives Matter mantra on its head, arguing that there is an equally compelling need to engage with the fact that Black deaths matter and that only by acknowledging and validating these deaths will it be possible to address the structural forces that produced those deaths in the first place.

Finally, Margherita Long approaches the pandemic through a discussion of an essay titled “The Invention of an Epidemic” that Giorgio Agamben published in late February 2020, approximately two weeks before Italy announced its national lockdown. In this essay, Agamben begins by citing Italian government statistics suggested that only 4 percent of patients infected with the coronavirus end up requiring “intensive therapy” and then asks why—assuming these statistics are accurate—the government has begun to implement a set of measures designed to generate not only a “state of fear” but also a more generalized “state of exception.” Rather than follow Agamben’s lead in criticizing the public health measures implemented by the Italian government in an attempt to limit to the spread of the virus, however, Long instead takes inspiration from the response of the psychoanalyst Rocco Ronchi, who argues that, when faced with the twin challenges of a devastating crisis like the pandemic and a set of potentially restrictive public health measures enacted to address the crisis, it is important for people to focus on issues of mental health, and especially the need to embrace “the responsibility that each individual has toward all living beings for the simple facts of (still . . .) being part of this world, and wanting to be a part of it.” Taking this emphasis on an ethics of individual responsibility as her starting point, Long then turns to three literary works by Hayashi Kyoko, Kimura Yusuke, and Kobayashi Erika—each written in the immediate aftermath of Japan’s 2011 Fukushima nuclear crisis. Long then discusses contemporary Japanese critic Kimura Saeko’s emphasis on recognizing and validating the “inchoate anxiety” generated by the crisis and concludes with a gesture very similar to Douglass’s own final point concerning the need, in a state crisis, to confront and embrace not only life but also death itself. Like Douglass, Long contends that, under this type of circumstance, it is only through a productive engagement with death that it will be possible to appreciate and value life.
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**Notes**

1. On March 11 the World Health Organization officially declared Covid-19 to be a pandemic, and on April 4 the organization reported that the global total of confirmed cases had exceeded a million, including over 50,000 deaths. See WHO, “Coronavirus Disease 2019.”

2. For details on the George Floyd protests around the world, see the list compiled on Wikipedia: “List of George Floyd protests outside the United States.”

3. For details on pandemic lockdowns around the world, see the list compiled on Wikipedia: “COVID-19 lockdowns.”


5. Reuters, “Lockdown.”

6. The *New York Times* reports that by early July an estimated 15 million to 26 million people around the United States had joined the protests and notes that, even if the actual number of protesters was only half of the lower end of this estimated range, that would still make the George Floyd protests by far the largest protest movement in the nation’s history. See Buchanan, Bui, and Patel, “Black Lives Matter.”

7. Although George Zimmerman, who killed Trayvon Martin, was not himself a policeman, he was nevertheless theoretically acting in his capacity as coordinator of his community’s neighborhood watch program, which was administered by the local police department. Similarly, although the men who killed Ahmaud Arbery were not themselves actually police, the local district attorney nevertheless initially recommended that they not be arrested on the grounds that their actions were lawful under Georgia’s citizen arrest law (meaning that they were viewed as though acting in a policing capacity).

8. The concept of qualified immunity was first introduced in the 1967 civil-rights–era Supreme Court decision *Pierson v. Ray*, which involved the arrest of a group of priests protesting for racial equality. Beginning in 2005, the doctrine has increasingly been used to defend police officers accused of using excessive force.


11. See, e.g., Metchnikoff, *Prolongation of Life*.


References


