



## Vector

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Virologists define *vector* as an organism that carries disease without being infected,<sup>1</sup> but it becomes possible to imagine extending this concept to humans when asymptomatic and seemingly uninfected humans can carry deadly viruses. During the COVID-19 pandemic, humans became vectors.<sup>2</sup> Students left universities because they could shed viruses onto desks; children avoided playgrounds because they could bring disease home; and neighbors smiled from six feet away because their breath could spread infection. Across these scenes, the concept of *vector* provides a description of being human that reveals horrifying aspects of relationality. Being a vector shows that a person can radically alter another and that these changes—like infection—can spread rapidly, and rapidly beyond control.

Being a vector calls attention to reasons humans may resist relationality. Marilyn Strathern has described resistances to relationality that occur when Western legal systems presume *the individual* as preexistent to relations.<sup>3</sup> In her accounts, relationality undermines professions of individualized selfhood. Refusals to acknowledge relationality can also be understood as effects of the Anthropocene,<sup>4</sup> such as the desire to amass wealth, which increases divisions and disparities. Being a vector renders these refusals moot. In ostensibly atomizing cities, we see more clearly how humans can act as vectors. Beings like viruses, which jump from animals like cows, pigs, and sheep to

1. Nading, *Mosquito Trails*; WHO, “Vector-Borne Diseases,” [www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/vector-borne-diseases](http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/vector-borne-diseases).

2. Rothan and Byrareddy, “Epidemiology and Pathogenesis of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak.”

3. Strathern, *Kinship, Law, and the Unexpected*.

4. Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*.

humans,<sup>5</sup> find in our extreme proximity the capacity to travel. To accept our entanglements is to confront traces we leave behind and vulnerabilities in our own pores and membranes. Being a vector confronts us with the fact that we are thoroughly relational and that relationality is a condition, not a choice.

When Donna Haraway wrote about humans as companion species,<sup>6</sup> it is possible to imagine she was writing toward (if not about) the age of pandemics. Haraway acknowledges how humans might feel horror at the dismantling of our individuality, but asks us to respond to our current climate crisis by rethinking the era as a Chthulucene rather than an Anthropocene. Though Cthulu is the name of a Lovecraftian monster, for Haraway the homophonous term *chthulu* references a mode of being that contends with relationality as its premise. To “stay with the trouble” means to acknowledge the odd kinships between humans and nonhumans. The horrors this proposition turns our attention to are not those of a monster rising from the depths of the earth but those of viral spreads, invisible threads of infection, connecting us to one another. This kind of *tentacular thinking* extends bodies beyond human skins.

Being relational means simultaneously being a vector and being subject to vectors, showing illness and well-being to be threaded through one another’s bodies. This threading can alter what it means to be human. For example, take Michel de Certeau’s argument that Ursuline sisters developed new ideas of the self after being possessed while confronting the spread of a highly contagious disease. De Certeau’s connection between the bubonic plague and the rise of individualism suggested that contagion may drive humans to alienate themselves and their fellows. When Self exists at the expense of Other, staying human requires dehumanization. Roberto Esposito speaks on this paradox when describing immunity as foundational to *communitas*: “a void, a debt, a gift to the other that also reminds us of our constitutive alterity with respect to ourselves.”<sup>7</sup> If *communitas* diminishes fears of vulnerability, then contemporary rises of xenophobia might be connected to the costs of lacking and acquiring immunity to viruses like SARS.<sup>8</sup>

In 2020, it became impossible to think of the COVID-19 pandemic without also thinking about a vector of transmission: the bat, the snake, even the pangolin. In Western media, the figure of a nonhuman vector came to stand in for an explanation and thus offered a way of blaming something racialized, far off, and exotic for something more unexceptional, which is to say, systemic. In the past and during the COVID-19 pandemic, blame for the spread of a novel virus fell on poachers who hunt the vector or rural people who eat it.<sup>9</sup> When scapegoating nonhumans as vectors, it becomes possible to forget to account for cheap laptops, incentives for factories, loopholes in labor rights, and impositions of global industrialism that, in fact, spread new viruses. These

5. Grauerholz, “Cute Enough to Eat.”

6. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

7. Esposito, *Communitas*.

8. For contemporary rises of xenophobia, see Zimmerman, “Origins of the ‘Globalist’ Slur.”

9. Zhan, “Civet Cats, Fried Grasshoppers, and David Beckham’s Pajamas”; Keck, *Avian Reservoirs*.

infrastructures enable and circulate novel diseases along commodity chains.<sup>10</sup> Seeing the vector *only* as a nonhuman animal reduces a broader range of cause-effect relations to a simple line: the pangolin, the poacher, the wet market. Instead of investigating shared accountabilities, this exoticizing maneuver blames more-vulnerable and hyper-visible vectors for the contagion—nonhumans and the structurally oppressed.

Being a potential vector forces us to reckon not only with the end of individualism but also—more terminally—with the possibility of an end. Can we confront that end while also engaging with our shared obligations to one another? To understand *being a human* as *being a vector* shows that we are simultaneously vulnerable to, and accountable for, community's contagions: a potentially transformative revelation.

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10. Hinchliffe et al., *Pathological Lives*.