

# On the Scene of Zoonotic Intimacies

## *Jungle, Market, Pork Plant*

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**Abstract** COVID-19, like HIV/AIDS before it, is being allegorized as a cost of perverse intimacies with nature. This essay surveys three scenes of intimate zoonotic exchange—the jungle, the wet market, and the pork plant—and maps how each contributes to the operation of racial capitalism.

**Keywords** COVID-19, AIDS, animals, race, biopolitics

Zoonoses are a problem of intimacy, with germs and bacteria transgressing specieative boundaries willy-nilly in an orgy of unlicensed somatic exchange. To breed animals we must be intimate with them, and this intimacy always exchanges more than we had intended, more than we realized, and more than we can hope to control or contain.

Anyone who has ever had a messy roommate (or a twenty-something boyfriend) knows too well that sharing a *domos* means living in the detritus and filth of our intimates. The ancient Greek *domos* gives us domestication, which means literally to bring something into the home and to place it under the authority of the patriarch there. Animals are typically understood to be domesticated when they reliably reproduce “in the home” at the patriarch’s direction. This foundational exercise of biopolitical imperatives, premised as it was on the inclusion of animals in the home subject to the entrainment of their reproductive capacities and subsequent multiplication, carried risk for all members of the household, patriarchs included. Archaeologists tell us that the proximity of domestic animals unlocked a variety of illnesses that may have driven down human life expectancy. Put differently, through the proximity of domestication, human bodies had increased contact with the vectors of animal illnesses: zoonoses. Political theorists such as James C. Scott (2017) ascribe world-historical significance to the intimacies of domestication: the ecological entanglements of humans, grain, and livestock—the orchestration of life and death across so many species we call

domestication—have ultimately rendered the reproduction of humans, plants, and animals alike as vital objects of governance (see also Hodder 1990).

The global COVID-19 pandemic concretizes the threat of zoonotic exchanges in ways that descend rapidly into allegory: of “nature” striking back at humanity’s excesses and encroachments. The virus’s posited origin in Chinese “wet markets” lends itself to this allegory, since the markets are allegedly organized around the sale and slaughter of “wild” animals for meat. These are animals an American audience will imagine belonging in a verdant forest or overgrown jungle and not in a soup pot. The fantasy image of wet markets is about problematic (and problematized) intimacy with animals, proximity and contact that leads to a fatal exchange of fluids and then viral seroconversion. My point is not about any positive transformative possibilities this intimacy with animals might offer—little, I would wager—but is, instead, about the selective narration of problematic interspecies intimacy. How does marking one interspecies intimate exchange as aberrant result in the normalization and immunization of other (arguably riskier) interspecies intimate exchanges? What is striking about the COVID-19 allegory, and what renders it continuous with the ongoing allegory of HIV/AIDS, is the way in which it marks some kinds of intimacy with animals as perverse and racialized, but, at once, it also normalizes other intimate contacts with animals that result in the accumulation of capital and are conducive to the reproduction of qualified white American life. In this essay, I survey three scenes of intimate zoonotic exchange and map how each contributes to the operation of racial capitalism.

### 1. HIV/AIDS: Man and Ape in the Jungle

Critical scholarship on the HIV/AIDS epidemic has shown that how we narrate epidemic illnesses shapes the political and social imaginaries that, in turn, constrain institutional and activist responses. These imaginaries include those centered on perverse relations with nature and animality. As Cindy Patton (1985: 28) argues, the designation of AIDS as a “gay disease” in the early years of the epidemic transformed a lethal medical condition into a morality play and reversed the conventional causal relationship between risk factors and symptoms: “Being homosexual somehow became a symptom of AIDS.” Historian Jennifer Brier (2009) contends that the designation, by confusing sexual acts with sexual identities, also routed public health and activist responses through identitarian frameworks that, in turn, struggled to make inroads with at-risk people of color and, in particular, men who have sex with men who disidentified with the gay community. Paula Treichler (1999) notes that, by the 1990s, narratives of HIV/AIDS pivoted toward understanding the trajectory of the illness outside the United States as an “African” problem overdetermined by the poverty, passivity, and bestial nature of “Africans.” That narrative also contrasted a naturalized and indigenous “African

AIDS,” transmitted by the natural hypersexuality of all Africans, with an unnatural American HIV/AIDS tied mostly to an immoral pathological minority (see also Patton 1990).

This contrast helped explain to the American public why AIDS could be “unnatural” in the American context, and therefore a problem eventually contained by forceful biomedical and state intervention. At the same time, it construed AIDS as a natural, if lamentable, fact of life in Africa about which there was little to be done (Farmer, Connors, and Simmons 1996). How else can we make sense of the fact that the lethality of the epidemic in the United States quickly waned after the introduction of effective antiretroviral treatments in the late 1990s, but that millions of people in sub-Saharan Africa perished from HIV/AIDS in the two decades after effective treatment was possible? Surely, the greed and rigidity of American and European pharmaceutical companies are partly to blame, but popular apathy was also rooted in the fact that, to the American public, an Africa ravaged by AIDS was indistinguishable from what many already assumed was Africa without AIDS.

These dominant public narratives were accompanied by a thicket of myths and conspiracy theories informed by the exotic othering of afflicted Africans (Gilman 1988). One long-standing myth is particularly striking in terms of zoonotic intimacy. Even in the 1980s, scientists studying AIDS recognized similarities between the disease and various immune disorders found in other primates. This gave rise to the theory that HIV/AIDS was a zoonotic illness likely transmitted from primates to humans somewhere in Central Africa during the early twentieth century. Subsequent epidemiological scholarship, based on gene sequencing and historical tissue sampling, supports this theory. Furthermore, this scholarship suggests that the specific context for zoonotic transfer was likely a hunter who was exposed to the blood of a chimpanzee infected with a simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV). In human hosts, SIV evolved into HIV-1, which, through sex workers and a colonial inoculation regime, spread rapidly in human populations (Pepin 2011). A pervasive vernacular myth, however, locates the viral “jump” from chimpanzee to human in an act of sexual intercourse between man and monkey. According to this theory, AIDS was the result of the prevalence of bestiality among African men, one of the many problematic relations Africans seemed to maintain with animals. As Treichler (1999: 114) writes, “Africans are said to have sexual contact with these monkeys, or eat them, or eat other animals they have infected (Haitian chickens?), or give their children dead monkeys as toys.” Contemporary studies describe the AIDS “bestiality” myth as particularly “prevalent among US Whites,” and, as recently as 2011, a Tennessee Republican state legislator publicly ascribed the origin of AIDS to “one guy screwing a monkey, if I recall correctly, and then having sex with men” (Heller 2015: 45; Signorile 2012).

As outlandish as the “bestiality” myth may strike the reader, it was animated by important assumptions about sexuality. Its assumptions about the prevalence of African bestiality dovetailed with American racial logics that portrayed black men as hypersexualized and animalistic, racial logics at least partially emerging from the violent extraction of sexual labor under slavery (Roberts 1998; Foster 2019). Less obvious, however, the bestiality myth also drew from a supposedly vanished premodern and nonidentitarian idea of sodomy inherited from Christian theology common in the early modern Atlantic World. This conceptualization collapsed homosexual sex into a broader category of nonprocreative sex acts that also included sex with animals (Murrin 1998; Godbeer 2002; Chauncey 2004; Tortorici 2012, 2016, 2018). That is, rather than linking the “gay disease” to a fixed and object-specific internal “gay desire,” the bestiality myth placed it in continuity with a hypersexuality that was not object specific nor tied to a stable identity formation or interiority. This vision of sodomy reckoned the desire, instead, to be sparked by an opportunistic and fleeting encounter—that is, by the contingent environmental conditions that prompted the lure of bestial contacts.

This concept of the sodomitic was deeply interwoven with colonial violence in both the Americas and Africa, where colonized populations were presumed to be closer to nature and, therefore, in the grips of bestial lust and without the reason to restrain it (Tortorici 2018; Hagler 2019; Sigal 2000). Ecological transformation from wilderness to, first, settled agriculture and then urban modernity winnowed the opportunities for bestial contact while expanding the thick social relations necessary for complex interiority and stable, object-specific sexual identities. On the one hand, this is why metropolitan culture, in both the United States and Europe, has tended to understand bestiality as a sexual anachronism practiced almost exclusively in premodern societies or isolated rural quarters (Rosenberg 2020a). On the other hand, the sexology of the metropole also positioned indigenous “bestialists” and sodomites as the hypersexualized terrain that provided the specific contrast for the (white) identity formation of the homosexual. Simple as they were, bestialists did not possess an interiority or psychology; rather, they impulsively took whatever nature offered. Indeed, the reduction of colonized and indigenous subjects to mere instinct and impulse robbed them of the possibility of interiority and bestialized them, since animals were similarly considered to be incapable of the reflection and moral reasoning that fully human Europeans possessed. The “bestiality” myth, then, located the emergence of the global AIDS pandemic in an environment in which bestial men had too many opportunities to come into contact with sick apes. The narrative of the virus among American homosexuals, by contrast, revolved around a pathological interiority in which, in Leo Bersani’s (1987: 212) memorable phrase, homosexuals were associated with the “intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a

woman.” Put simply, white Americans did not need a complex psychoanalytic account to make sense of African AIDS, since it fit perfectly with racist assumptions about the nature of bestial black sexuality.

## 2. COVID-19: Man and Bat in the Wet Market

Early efforts to narrativize COVID-19 have also rendered racialized interspecies intimacies as infectious. Although the epidemic imaginaries of AIDS and COVID-19 are quite different, both use the scene of interspecies intimacy to shore up the operation of racial capitalism. The image of the “wet market,” in particular, now sets a different scene of intimacy across species, with the wetness of the market summoning the image of the slick kiss of fluid touching skin. In this mixing of skin, fluid, and viscera, the boundary of species gets soaked: the fluid of one animal enters the body of another.

President Donald Trump insists on calling the novel coronavirus the “Wuhan” or “Chinese” virus. Such scripting ascribes collective responsibility to China and exculpates American officials, Trump most of all, of criminal incompetence. But it also seeks to explain through racial designation the heightened virulence of the pathogen. That is, although the Chinese are said to have caused the virus, this narration also suggests that the virus itself shares an infectious character with the Chinese: that the virus is both racialized and racializing as Chinese.<sup>1</sup> This, in turn, draws from the history of racist tropes that characterized China and the Chinese as infectious, filthy, overpopulated, and riven by endemic illness. Turn-of-the-nineteenth-century white Americans frequently claimed that Chinese immigrants lived in unsanitary tenements because it accorded with their animalistic natures and their disregard of personal freedom and individuality. As historian Nayan Shah (2001) contends, white workers explicitly contrasted their own vision of dignified labor against the unfree “coolie,” who resembled little more than a beast of burden. “The ‘abjectness’ of the Chinese ‘mode of life’ was manifested in the comparisons to farm animals,” Shah writes, “feeding a perception not only of Chinese immigrants’ inferiority but also of their inhumanity” (27). Contact with Chinese immigrants allegedly carried a heightened risk of contagion for white Americans precisely because it was an infectious bestial contact: contact between the fully human white American and a bestialized Chinese immigrant risked lowering the former to the status of the latter.

Diet tends to be one place where powerful lines of social exclusion and inclusion are drawn, since eating is a paradigmatic act that tests and constantly remaps the body/world boundary (Douglas 2003; Kristeva 1992). As such, diet is a frequent focus in racializing and bestializing discourses (Tompkins 2012). Inclusion in the category “fully human” entails following a diet defined by the protocols of one’s species, gender, race, class, religion, nationality, and so on.

Divergence from culturally and historically specific dietary protocols sparks social revulsion, censure, and even punishment. Not surprisingly, images of Chinese immigrants as infectious agents dovetailed with widespread lurid fascination with strange diets that reaffirmed their bestial natures. Just as livestock subsisted on a monotonous diet of grain, the labor organizer Samuel Gompers (1908) famously claimed that the “Asiatic coolie” diet of rice was inadequate for a laboring “American manhood” that needed proper meat and bread to maintain his robust independence. But white publics have also long imagined Chinese diets to involve the regular consumption of taboo, forbidden, and exotic animals, a dietary pattern consistent with a bestial willingness to eat anything (Coe 2016; Kim 2015). White audiences were simultaneously intrigued and repulsed. By the early twentieth century, Chinese restaurants were increasingly popular as venues to consume what white audiences believed was an exotic, primitive cuisine. As Haiming Liu (2015) shows, this obsession with inappropriate meats has been a persistent and sensational component of anti-Chinese racism in the United States and continues into the present.

Given that history, it’s predictable that the COVID-19 origin story has now narrowed to “bat soup” from “wet markets” as the dominant fantasy of zoonotic exchange and, indeed, as a vivid scene of racialized interspecies intimacy (Reid 2020). The strategic deployment of the term *wet market* itself does quite a bit of work, since it refers simply to markets where vendors sell fresh, as opposed to durable, goods. Wet markets are regular facets of daily life throughout much of the world and, in particular, in East and Southeast Asia where consumers frequent them instead of the Western-style grocery stores that offer both durable and fresh ingredients. Nevertheless, American and European media regularly conflate that general definition with a narrower set of “open-air markets where animals are bought live and then slaughtered on the spot for the customers,” to quote philosophers Peter Singer and Paola Cavalieri (2020) in a recent essay calling for an international ban on wet markets. Their definition of wet markets is, of course, plainly wrong. Wet markets need be neither “open-air” (and so what if they are?) nor places where animals can be bought live and slaughtered on the spot. But they buttress this generalization with the sort of selective sensationalizing that is impossible to disentangle from the racist troping we’ve just reviewed. First, they list the menagerie of strange beasts available in these markets: “wolf cubs, snakes, turtles, guinea pigs, rats, otters, badgers, and civets.” Next, they quote a vivid *NPR* report meant to illustrate the horrifying conditions of the market: “Live fish in open tubs splash water all over the floor. The countertops of the stalls are red with blood as fish are gutted and filleted right in front of the customers’ eyes. Live turtles and crustaceans climb over each other in boxes. Melting ice adds to the slush on the floor. There’s lots of water, blood, fish scales, and chicken guts.”

Singer and Cavalieri are vocal proponents of vegetarianism, but surely one or the other has been to an American seafood restaurant with live lobster tanks. “Wet markets, indeed,” they then add. Wet is the tactile sensation of fluid touching skin. What makes the market wet is wild animal fluids making contact with human flesh and unlocking an infectious intimacy.

### **3. Impossible Intimacies: Man and Pig in the Pork Plant**

Industrial animal agriculture fails to lend itself to similar allegories about the intimate. In late 2019, “African swine fever” swept through China, killing an estimated 300 to 400 million pigs (Charles 2019). At the time of this writing, farmers in South Carolina are battling a strain of avian flu that, during a similar 2015 outbreak, killed some 50 million poultry in the United States (Pitt 2020). Both diseases have dramatic zoonotic potential, and it is mostly just simple chance that the “big one” happens to be linked to (some) wet markets rather than to the vast zoonotic exchanges that occur in the context of industrial animal agriculture. The grisly slaughter of wild charismatic megafauna in wet markets dramatizes the tragedy of human encroachment on pristine wilderness, and it lends itself immediately to an allegorical narrative of COVID-19 as “wild nature strikes back.” The death of millions of livestock from veterinary illness does not. It can hardly be understood as a tragedy, since those millions of pigs were bred only to die anyway. Swine fever hastened deaths that most American consumers think of as positive contributions to their qualified “good lives.” When pigs die, humans usually eat well, and, for humans to eat well, pigs must usually die. If their deaths are reckoned tragic, it is only because their deaths were financially wasted. It is a tragedy, then, for human farmers, but not for the pigs or for an abstract nature.

Our collective comfort with this scene, despite its loudly heralded and well-documented possibility for zoonotic exchange, may partly lie in our inability to see domestication and animal agriculture as a scene of sociality and intimacy (Wallace 2016). Indeed, we are accustomed to collapsing the horrors of animal agriculture into the scene of killing: the slaughterhouse is an especially evocative symbol of modernity’s capacity to produce mass death. In this, we see the slaughterhouse as the apotheosis of the nonrelational, driven by the cruel absence of attachment to animals by the slaughterer and the impossibility of real contact. Yet empirical work on the labor of animal agriculture suggests that livestock agriculture is also the sight of abundant, if often harrowing sociality among and between animals and humans alike. Alexander Blanchette’s (2020) groundbreaking ethnography of industrial pork production, for example, shows that animal agriculture produces and ultimately relies on affective relations, somatic contact, and sensual proximities between workers and pigs. These entanglements span the deep emotional attachments workers forge with runty piglets they

bottle-feed to the arousal and impregnation of sows during artificial insemination.<sup>2</sup> Blanchette resists the tendency to overread those social spaces as merely those in which the speciesist domination of pigs by humans is enacted. Instead Blanchette notes that the pork plant remakes the social relations of all its workers, humans and porcine, and that the decisive divide is between racialized labor and capital, not human and animal.

COVID-19 has also laid bare the fact that agricultural workers in both China and the United States share something quite important with the animals they labor alongside. Livestock facilities are extremely dangerous places to work without infectious disease, but workers there also face the heightened risk of exposure to zoonoses and subsequent illness as a result of their intimate interactions with animals. Low wages and dangerous working conditions are par for the course in low-margin, high-volume industries like meat. In China, as in the United States, the rapid consolidation of the pork industry has been partially driven by the availability of cheap grains for feed (Schneider 2014). The growing need for farmlands to sustain the grain-meat complex, in turn, causes agricultural encroachment into wildlife areas, heightening the risk of zoonotic exchange between previously secluded ecologies and highly susceptible industrial monocultures. It has also pushed small farmers out of the pork market and into one of the few remaining niche agricultural markets: the exotic game market. Due to competition from huge multinational agribusinesses, some Chinese farmers must farm civets and wolf cubs, not pigs (Lynteris and Fearnley 2020). Rather than seeing wet markets where wild game are slaughtered as the characteristic of a perverse and racialized “Chinese” appetite, then, we should see them as an intimate form produced through the ecological transformations of global capitalism. Workers in those wet markets and pork plants both enact a dangerous intimacy with animals. Americans see the one form of intimacy as barbaric, and the other they do not see at all. Capital orchestrates both, just as it orchestrates the exposure to zoonotic exchange workers in both locations bear.

COVID-19, like HIV/AIDS before it, is being allegorized as a cost of perverse intimacies with nature. Yet these allegories work primarily to dramatize the danger of bestial humans, bestialization that has long been interwoven with the racialization of nonwhite and colonized peoples (Rosenberg 2016, 2020b; Heyward and Gossett 2017; Pergadia 2018; Jackson 2020; Amin 2020). Even as inappropriate intercourse with wild nature becomes a site of anxiety, these allegories immunize the human-animal interactions of industrial agriculture, in which slaughter is not reckoned as intimate. Indeed, the public largely misapprehends interactions in animal agriculture as fundamentally nonrelational and, therefore, unlikely to carry the same threat of zoonotic contagion. This, in turn, reinforces the commonsense terms of the “anthropocene” allegory: we live in a time when humans



have conquered nature; nature is victim and humanity the perpetrator. We should resist this allegory, but not because we should be indifferent to the current ecological catastrophe or deny its reality. We should be skeptical of how the sole axis of difference that structures this allegory—humans versus nature—elides the unequal access many humans have to the category of “human,” the economic system of racial capitalism that drives that inequality, and the vital possibilities for the more-than-human solidarity that may be needed to resist it.

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### Notes

1. On the complex racialization of the nonhuman, see Chen 2012.
2. On the somatic intimacy of livestock breeding, see Rosenberg 2017.

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