



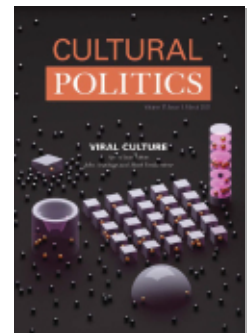
PROJECT MUSE®

Virus is other People

Irving Goh

Cultural Politics, Volume 17, Issue 1, March 2021, pp. 145-149 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/786399>

VIRUS IS OTHER PEOPLE

Irving Goh

Abstract While we disavow or renounce the virus that is ourselves in viral cultures such as a pandemic or systemic racism, we envy the viral force of others who are trending on social media. In viral cultures, we tend to think that virus is other people, forgetting our own viral potential or threat. In any case, all viral cultures make us sick; if not, we make one another sick. And when a vaccine is not available, rest is all we have at our disposal. We also tend to forget or belittle this rest. To break from viral cultures, then, this intervention calls for a general pause in human activity, which must include thinking, and which, if ever possible, would take place in common among all humans.

Keywords COVID-19, racism, affects, rest, reparation

#JeNeSuisPasUnVirus or #IAmNotAVirus: those were the hashtags that went viral when the COVID-19 pandemic started to rage in early 2020, when it started to really go viral everywhere in the world. Communicated by Asians in France, the United States, and the United Kingdom, and spreading to cities throughout Europe, these hashtags were in response to racist attacks against them, fueled by reports that the origins of COVID-19 came from Wuhan, China. Of course, these racist attacks cared not whether their victims were Chinese, Vietnamese, or Asian Americans or were from other parts of Asia. Thus one cannot, and should not, fail to highlight that this racism disseminates not solely from the current pandemic; it is a systemic one that has its roots from a long time ago, its historical trace resurfacing in other epithets for the pandemic such as the anachronistic “yellow peril” or the stupid-sounding “kung flu” (as proclaimed by Donald Trump, the sovereign but equally stupid “big man,” as Lauren Berlant [2017] calls him). Systemic racism is that other virus that we need to urgently deal

with and eradicate as well, the pandemic notwithstanding, since it is also in times of sanitary crises that systemic racism finds its parasitic support to resurface and to unleash itself from its obscurant caves. Perhaps that is why the Black Lives Matter movement flared up during the pandemic as well, likewise the “Justice pour Adama Traoré” protests in France. There is no letdown in the fight against viral systemic racism even in the face of a pandemic; in fact, that fight is intensified.

But let us go back to the hashtags. Yes, *I* never likes being called a virus. Virus is always other people, even outside the context of racism. In this current pandemic, there is no denying the paranoia that the person next to me, near me, around me, more than six feet apart from me even, asymptomatic or not, is potentially a “super spreader,” no matter whether he or she is of the same race or color as myself. My mask or my face shield, my hand sanitizers, and all the wet wipes I use to wipe down surfaces are not so much to protect others as to protect myself against viral traces left by other people (again, regardless of their race or color). No mask can dissimulate the pretension to altruism in this pandemic. To reiterate, in the time of a pandemic, virus is always other people, and any *I* will resist any association with the term *virus*. And yet, if virus is indeed other people, *I* cannot not be a virus too, since *I* is equally “other people” in the eyes of others. In one way or another, then, we are all viruses.

In fact, we each have our own viral potentialities, tendencies, and desires, all of which are very much on display on social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, all viral mutations of the social-networking Facebook apparatus. And when these platforms exploded on the social media scene in the years just before

the pandemic, “virus is other people” was an enviable condition. It remains so even today, in fact, as these platforms continue to live on, immune to biological viruses and resilient against digital ones (surviving well beyond any hacking incident, not to mention largely indifferent and barely unapologetic when individual accounts are hacked). But to go back to “virus is other people” in this viral culture: it is very often other people who come up with that viral tweet or make that viral YouTube or TikTok video. And suppose by chance I did produce that tweet or video, for those who are retweeting or watching me over and over again, in their perspectives, it is, again, I as “other people” who have produced the viral content. “Virus is other people” is the status that every *I* on social media yearns for and strives to attain. Here, to be viral is to be narcissistic—no doubt about that. It is narcissistically driven, this viral narcissism; it is terribly infectious, as other people are always wanting in, fighting to be the next super spreader. But one also has to understand that it is other people—those who retweet or share the video with millions of other people—who make one’s content viral, who send echoes down the rabbit hole of social media to boost and bolster one’s narcissism, one’s viral status. No viral without other people too, therefore. And one could say that all this is nothing less than viral anthropocentrism, in which the status of the viral has been expropriated from its microbiological origins, with its biological lethality very much tamed.

Never had a viral culture been so readily embraced, hailed, by the global millions, its “followers” always asking to be fed more viral content, with rarely or barely a resistance put up against it, as if never sick of it, as if never getting ill from it. Even #IAmNotAVirus or #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus,

written in social media script and for social media users, needed to be viral to have any effect. So, in many cases other than a pandemic, we do want to be viral—until, that is, what goes viral becomes detrimental to one's image, when it sees to one being "canceled," when it sees to one being turned against by other people. One then becomes the bad virus, to be banished, to be exterminated, to be rendered invisible on the viral platforms. That is the risk one takes with unfiltered viral narcissism: the autoimmune already at work the moment one is plugged in to the viral network. Which is also to say that one can already be sick within this viral culture, even in the absence of the familiar, palpable feeling of sickness, like how a microbiological virus such as COVID-19 can already be affecting the body of an asymptomatic person in undetected or undetectable ways. It certainly does not take long for negative feelings or affects, through viral envy or simply by being a passive follower, to swarm us, to swallow us up, or to drown us, in the waves of this viral culture: jealousy of other people's viral force; anxiety of one's viral status; melancholy, depression, and shame when one fails to be viral; loneliness in one's obsession with this viral narcissism; and fear of being "canceled." Add to all these the more or less similar affects of anxiety and paranoia of getting infected by other people that circulate in this current pandemic, mixed with the contradictory yearning for physical contact with other people when under "shelter at home" orders, of genuine concern and worry for susceptible loved ones, of shame and mortal fear when one does contract the virus, and of uncertainty as to when everything can go back to "normal." Add to all these the rage against systemic racism through the Black Lives Matter or "Justice pour Adama Traoré"

movements. Add to all these the uneasy, undesired, exhausting, and now unbearable "minor feelings" (Hong 2020) in reaction not only to racial slurs and attacks against Asians but also to social, cultural, and professional inequality that a majority of Asians face, all these feelings made to accumulate with barely an outlet because of a systemic bracketing or even silencing of any Asian complaint.

Virus—real or microbiological, or anthropomorphized as "influencers" on social media or as pariahs under racism—just makes us sick. We should be reminded that it can be deadly too, like COVID-19 or the online bullying and harassment that have driven many to suicide. This is also not to forget that we humans of all races, colors, and genders—we the idols of the Anthropocene—are also viruses to the world, making the world sick; poisoning its air, rivers, oceans, lands, flora, and fauna; and unapologetically leaving our indelible carbon footprints at a deep geological scale in the wake of our so-called progress or civilization. Of course, we seek medical intervention when something makes us sick, especially so in the case of viral infections. But when the vaccine is not readily available, when it needs time to be developed, the only device with which we are left is rest, that is, to let our bodies be unplugged from all the daily preoccupations, to let the body reboot, reset itself. Chasing after viruses, whether to fanatically ride its waves (social media) or to desperately eradicate it (COVID-19) or to put a halt to its rampant pervasive spread (systemic racism), is tiring and tiresome too, after all. To rest, to reboot, to reset: that is what the lockdowns, in part, in many places in the world have allowed some of us to do. We take a breather from the daily grind. We let the air breathe again, leave it less polluted by air and ground travels,

all of them largely coming to a halt during these times. We let the waters clear up again, welcoming swans and fish back into the canals of Venice. We let vegetation overgrow unchecked, letting it reclaim the land. We let wild animals have the right and freedom to explore and roam in urban spaces too. And in some cases, “social distancing,” part of the lockdown measures, has also shown us that it is OK not to allow viral capitalism make every single unit of space a profit potential; we leave some spaces to breathe themselves too, loosening capitalism’s grip on them, returning them to their quintessential materiality as common space. It is possible to (take a) break from high-speed, high-volume, high-density capitalism.

For a while, the world had some time to recover a little. We too need to rest to free ourselves from all the viruses in the world. We need to rest to take time to come to terms with all our negative affects accumulated from all those viruses, to regroup, and to gather all the parts of ourselves, parts of others, and parts of the world torn asunder by our viral cultures. From there, we can only hope to move toward some form of reparation in favor—if not, better yet, in recompense—of ourselves, of others, and of the world. That is to say that we need time to reset, reboot our mode of existence. We need a lucid silence to wash over and soothe all human activity. And perhaps through this silence, we will find the time to exit from current modes of existence toward another (yet unimaginable) one that is not so insistent on all the things we imagine to be necessary to, and indissociable from, our lives, our survival: one that is even prepared for a certain extinction (Colebrook 2014). And we will need to do this in common, all of us humans: the sick, the healthy, the susceptible, the super spreader, the

infected, the asymptomatic, the immune, the living, the dying, the rich, the poor, the essential worker, the inessential worker, the unemployed, the furloughed, the powerful (even the other sovereign “big man,” Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, like Trump, was not immune to COVID-19’s European—and not Chinese—strain), the powerless, the homeless, the quarantined, the isolated, the lonely, the gregarious, and so forth. Collectively, we must make this common rest possible. And this pause in human activity will have to include thought too, thought that has also been no less guilty of wanting to be viral, as made manifest during the pandemic, for example, by Giorgio Agamben’s (2020) regrettable last-ditch effort to make his theory current again while ignoring the critical difference between COVID-19 and the common flu. Only then in the reset, when everything can really begin again on an almost clean slate, can we have a veritable posthuman thought, that is, one that does not have the human as its point of origin, its voice, its preoccupation, and its horizon. For thought, then, the rest must be silent too; it must indeed let the rest be silence.

But humans will always be too human, too resilient, ever so paranoid, too eager to prove themselves stronger than any other species, stronger than any crisis, stronger than any pandemic, capable of living on despite and beyond any disaster, and stronger too, perhaps, than any real virus. They cannot bear resting (beyond a certain period of time), always keeping an eye on the always accelerating ticking hands of capitalism’s clock. They cannot bear to think of existence that does not insist on human resilience. No entertaining any thought of exit from the Anthropocene; no to human extinction. Virus, even in the eyes of real viruses, is indeed the all-too-human other people.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2020. "The Invention of an Epidemic." In "Coronavirus and Philosophers," special section in the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*. www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2017. "Big Man." *Social Text Online*, January 19. socialtextjournal.org/big-man/.
- Colebrook, Claire. 2014. *Essays on Extinction*. Vol. 1 of *The Death of the PostHuman*. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities.
- Hong, Cathy Park. 2020. *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. New York: One World.

Irving Goh is the author of *The Reject: Community, Politics, and Religion after the Subject* (2014), which won the MLA Twenty-Third Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for Best Book in French and Francophone Studies, and *L'existence prépositionnelle* (2019). He is also editor of the recent volume *French Thought and Literary Theory in the UK* (2019). *The Deconstruction of Sex*, a work in collaboration with Jean-Luc Nancy, is forthcoming. He is currently President's Assistant Professor of Literature at the National University of Singapore.