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Living Together in Precarious Times: COVID-19 in the Philippines

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Living together in precarious times

COVID-19 in the Philippines

Gideon Lasco

Ostrich

On 4 August 2020, just as Metro Manila, Philippines, was living through a newly reimposed lockdown, two ostriches escaped from a gated upper middle-class village, running through streets made deserted by the restrictions on public transportation and stay-at-home mandates. Within hours, the footage of the ostriches had gone viral on social media, giving rise to numerous memes, celebrity reactions and even political commentary. ‘The absurdity of the runaway ostriches – which are not native to the Philippines – made them an Internet sensation and a welcome distraction during one of the world’s longest and most stringent lockdowns’, a report from *The Washington Post* observed (Cabato 2020).

Just like the other animals – fake and real – that went viral throughout the world at the height of the pandemic (see, for example, Daly 2020), the ostriches were a reminder, foremost, that this is a more-than-human world. In my own house in Los Baños – some 50 kilometres away from Manila – olive-backed sunbirds have taken up residence in the small garden. Like dogs, sunbirds can live up to 12, even 15 years. Without the pandemic and the quarantine, I surely would not have had the opportunity – and the perspective – to notice my nonhuman *companions*.

Of course, the ostrich is something else: not only is it relatively rare, it is also relatively big for a bird. In the viral videos, one notable aspect was how people actually talked to the ostriches. In their *macro*-ness, they seemed amenable to conversation. ‘You need a quarantine pass!’, a village guard jokingly shouted after them, referring to the slip of paper issued to

one member of each household that served as a requirement for going out of one's house. Adding to the birds' appeal was the fact that their mad dash through the streets of Quezon City was a transgression of the world as we knew it: roads are for people; ostriches belong to the zoo, or in the wild. Seeing these birds on the streets had some subversive quality, especially at a time when humans themselves were confined to their houses.

In the end, one of the ostriches died and was cooked into a local dish called *adobo*, eliciting some outrage because such a 'cute' animal – an animal that belongs to a 'more charismatic species who are "big like us"' (Greenhough 2012, 291) – should not have been eaten. Anthropologists, of course, would have immediately bracketed such responses in terms of cultural norms of what is good to eat. Elsewhere, there were questions about the legalities of keeping an ostrich in a subdivision.

Framework

This is all in keeping with the turn towards multispecies anthropology and the conceptualisation of the Anthropocene (for example, Chakrabarty 2009; D'Souza 2015), falling under the rubrics of science, technology and society studies that see humans as enmeshed, entangled and imbricated in networks with nonhuman actors (Latour 1993). I will not rehearse the literature, for as the cultural geographer Hayden Lorimer (2005, 84) puts it, 'To do so would very likely bore the most devoted and risk baffling the uninitiated'. However, it is important to stress that today, as we live through a pandemic – or more aptly, a syndemic (Singer et al. 2017) – a multispecies perspective is not just a fancy theory but an ecological and even existential necessity.

Indeed, a multispecies perspective is upon us whether we like it or not. Ten years ago, 'living with a virus' may have been a title of a conference, a panel or an academic paper, but today it is a catchphrase used by politicians and physicians alike. We are learning, via the hard and painful way, what Donna Haraway calls the 'foolishness of human exceptionalism' (2008, 244), for, as Jane Goodall averred back in April, 'it is our disregard for nature and our disrespect for animals that has caused this pandemic' (Burton 2020).

Moreover, and relevant to COVID-19, a 'public health optimism' that imagined a world free from disease – borne of the Pasteurian belief in antibiotics and vaccines – has not aged well. Not only are humans becoming increasingly affected by non-communicable diseases like

hypertension and diabetes; microbes have adapted to antibiotics, and today antimicrobial resistance is a growing threat (Chandler et al. 2016). Viruses have proven particularly difficult to diagnose and treat, as they, too, can mutate, especially when they cross species. Consequently, the pandemic has forced humans to grapple with a world where we are vulnerable, even through the air we breathe, a world where microbes pose an existential threat.

How, then, can anthropology account for the interspecies encounters in the time of COVID-19? One approach – one that I follow in this chapter – entails following species as they travel amid the milieu of the pandemic and expanding conceptions of their trajectories beyond the individual level (e.g. ‘How did the ostrich *qua* species reach the Philippines in the first place?’). Analytically, it also involves moving nonhumans from the level of *zoe* or ‘bare life’ to that of *bios* – ‘with legibly biographical and political lives’ (Agamben 1998, in Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, 545), and foregrounding them in our ethnographies. In the oft-cited language of Eduardo Kohn (2013, 4), we must move towards ‘an anthropology that is not just confined to the human but is concerned with the effects of our entanglements with other kinds of living selves’ – and just as importantly, recognise that such a perspective is as valid and vital in highly urbanised cities like Manila as it is in the Amazonian rainforest – or the Philippines’ own lush tropical jungles. If not more so: after all, the world has never been more urbanised and has brought species together in unprecedented proximity and intimacy, and this is why pandemics are closely linked with urbanisation (Santiago-Alarcon and MacGregor-Fors 2020).

For the purpose of this chapter, what is more useful is to highlight that this perspective, or set of perspectives, has long animated the ‘national anthropology’ in the Philippines, albeit often implicitly. For instance, at the 2018 conference of Ugnayang Pang-Agham Tao (UGAT), the country’s association of anthropologists, the theme was ‘Our Interconnectedness: Doing Anthropology in Times of Environmental Crisis’. The conference featured presentations that ranged from human–seaweed relations in the Tawi-Tawi Islands and human–elephant communications in a zoo, to living with crocodiles in Palawan Island and with cats in urban settings. Taken together, these papers underscored that far from linear, let alone vertical, our encounters with nonhumans are best characterised as ‘rhizomatic’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988) – that is, non-hierarchical and relational (see also Ogden et al. 2013).

This ecological consciousness comes to us not just as part and periphery of global anthropological currents, but also from our interlocutors who have always thought along these lines, not as a way of

thinking, but as a way of living. As our wealth of ethnography, folklore and cultural history shows, local notions of ecology have always seen the world as animated by more-than-human actors. When the Mindanao indigenous leader Bae Inatlawan performed a ceremony in April to pray amid the pandemic, she mentioned the trees, the birds and the eagle in the same breath as humans and the virus, unknowingly, as she spoke of humans belonging to the forest as much as the forest belonging to humans, endorsing the tenets of 'biophilia' (Kellert and Wilson 1993).

Such knowledge is vital not just in asserting the local character of our anthropology but also in tempering our own aspirations as to what this way of thinking might mean for the world. Writing on human–pig relations among the Pala'wan, Will Smith (2020) rightfully warns against a 'post-environmentalism' that assumes 'affective relationships' will always be based on loving and caring. His warning echoes the insight of Padmapani Perez (2018) in her work on conservation in Benguet and Borneo – we cannot idealise indigenous peoples as 'noble green savages'.

As for microbes, while little – if any – local research has been in terms of characterising human relations with them, the above warning is likewise useful, for, while we can either view them as noxious germs that must be killed with antibiotics – or as 'good bacteria' to be cultivated and consumed, it is more insightful to view them in terms of what Paxson (2008, 18) calls 'microbiopolitics', or the 'recognition and management, governmental and grassroots, of human encounters with the vital organismic agencies of bacteria, viruses, and fungi'.

My own thinking in this direction was inspired by my fieldwork with forest guards in Mindanao, but also by my childhood experiences of growing up near Mt Makiling in the university town of Los Baños, southeast of Manila, and by my travels to ecotourism destinations of the world. Before the pandemic, I had the opportunity to visit the Amazon rainforest and the Galápagos Islands. In the former I saw the intimacy with which people lived with wildlife. In the Galápagos I glimpsed the world without humans, although within a few centuries of human settlement on Isabela Island, guava trees had invaded hectares upon hectares of land, while Darwin's finches approached humans with evolutionary innocence, unaware of the havoc we have wrought throughout much of the planet.

My visit to the Galápagos – weeks before the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in the Philippines – reminded me of environmental writer Robert Macfarlane's (2016) call to imagine ourselves as 'inhabitants not just of a human lifetime or generation, but also of deep time'. Can we approach the pandemic in those same terms – not as a singular moment

in human history, but as event in longer processes? And, following Anna Tsing (2013), can we analyse how nature comes into being rather than seeing it as a backdrop for this account?

Coronavirus

First, of course, we need to attend to the encounter between humans and microbes, including bacteria and the coronavirus itself. Technically, viruses are not a 'species' because they don't fulfil the criteria of 'organism'. Anthropologists, however, have labelled them as quasi-species, and, in any case, part of a multispecies perspective is to question the ontology and validity of our biological categories.

Microbes have been around for billions of years. Scientists tell us that they're the earliest organisms, hardy enough to survive in the depths of the earth, the deepest parts of the oceans, perhaps even in space, as the recent brouhaha over possible life on Venus showed (see Lasco 2020a). But as far as humans are concerned, viruses are a recent phenomenon. People never viewed illness as caused by microbes prior to their discovery. For example, the Filipino national hero and polymath Jose Rizal, whose medical practice came at the twilight of humoral theory, opined that *El aire, el calor, el frio, el vapor de tierra y la indigestion, son las unicas causas patogenas que se admiten en el pais* ('Winds, heat, cold, vapors of the earth, and indigestion are the main causes of illness in the country') (Bantug 1953, 12).

The Pasteurian worldview – which today remains the dominant mode of thinking on illness – sees the world as made up of noxious microbes against which humans must battle through antibiotics or vaccines. According to anthropologist Heather Paxson (2008, 15), this view explains why people 'blame colds on germs, demand antibiotics from doctors, and drink ultra-pasteurized milk and juice, while politicians on the campaign trail slather on hand sanitizer'. Likely, it explains the appeal of Filipino soap commercials from the 1970s onwards that depict germs on the body as being eliminated '99 per cent of the time'. Although, as mentioned above, this view has been shattered by the failure of medicine to eradicate pathogens, it remains at the fore of people's consciousness.

In some ways, however, the pre-Pasteurian worldview is still upon us, with microbes and wind melding in people's conceptions, as when President Rodrigo Duterte interpreted airborne transmission to mean that COVID-19 is *nasa hangin*, even as the outdoor *hangin* does not

correspond with biomedical understandings of airborne transmission (for instance, as occurring in poorly ventilated, indoor spaces) (see [Tan and Lasco forthcoming](#)). Similarly, people's 'germ consciousness' may not correspond with Pasteurian notions of virus. As Michael Tan (2008, 91) noted:

Concepts about microorganisms vary, sometimes with amusing variations. The idea that food dropped on the floor isn't necessarily dirty if it hasn't been on the floor for a certain time (varying between 30 seconds and 5 minutes) is tied to childhood concepts that the dropped food 'scares' off germs ... Germs are often given qualities of humans, if not the supernatural. Women fear toilet seats, believing that the germs lie waiting, ready to pounce on the vulnerable. Terms such as *kumakapit* (sticking on) show that the germs' mode of infection [is] not often understood. I have found villagers speaking of intestinal parasites (*bulate*) as 'adult germs' (*mikrobyong naging laki*).

These insights resonate today when people talk about '*madapuan*' ng virus and '*matamaan*' ng COVID. When Duterte joked, back in February, just as the threat of a pandemic was emerging, that he wanted to slap the virus, he was reaching for an object. The microscopic, transcending our sensory faculties in terms of scale, is semantically transposed to language that facilitates our ability to visualise and conceptualise the virus, on top of technologies that render the virus visible. Unlike colonial plagues that did not localise onto a tangible object, COVID-19 has acquired an *objecthood*. Thanks to our technologies of imagination, we visualise the virus as this red pathogen with spikes, even though viruses actually do not have colour and the red is merely the human attempt at visualisation. But such is the certitude of the virus' existence as this red, spiked object that food writers have even compared it to the rambutan, much to the outcry of many Southeast Asians ([Estrada 2020](#)).

Beyond the processes of visualisation, there are also the politics of association, as when certain groups of people and places get lumped together with the virus – from Chinese tourists, returning overseas Filipino workers (and returning Senegalese workers, see Onoma, [Chapter 10](#)), to Donald Trump referring to the coronavirus the 'China virus' or the 'Wuhan virus'.

Yet already before the pandemic, anthropologists had documented a shift to a post-Pasteurian view that considers microbes not as harmful but in some ways potentially useful ([Paxson 2008](#)). From the Yakult and

yoghurt to keffir and kombucha, we have become patrons of microbial *goodness*. Now more than ever, we recognise microbes and macrobes alike as what Donna Haraway (2006) terms ‘companion species’.

The microbial presence in the human body is actually even more profound. Year after year, scientists continue to chart the full extent of so-called ‘normal flora’. As the Human Microbiome Project of the National Institutes of Health (2012, n.p.) revealed:

The human body contains trillions of microorganisms – outnumbering human cells by 10 to 1. Because of their small size, however, microorganisms make up only about 1 to 3 percent of the body’s mass (in a 200-pound adult, that’s 2 to 6 pounds of bacteria), but play a vital role in human health.

Additionally, and contrary to popular imagination, 50 per cent of the oxygen we utilise comes from microbes. At one point, this recognition led to questions over the necessity of handwashing, while Japanese doctors voiced concerns that ‘hygiene addiction’ might actually remove good microbes (Uranaka 2001).

The pandemic has at least temporarily suspended – or superseded – this paradigm, renewing our suspicion of microbes, helping make sense of the ‘rituals of disinfection’ of our time (Lasco 2020b) regardless of their biomedical efficacy. Suddenly, people are potential vectors of a virus, despite the fact that we have long been exchanging all kinds of microbes not just among ourselves but also our nonhuman companions (Rillig et al. 2015). And while this exchange with every handshake, hug or huddle has largely been unwitting, it is worth mentioning that once upon a time, human vectors of a virus arrived in the Philippines not as a threat, but as salvation, as when orphan boys from Mexico came to the country, their blood containing the weakened viral strains of smallpox as part of the Balmis expedition (Mark and Rigau-Perez 2009).

The divergence between local and biomedical knowledge of microbes can have public consequences, and when this tension is adjudicated by the powers that be – as when Duterte decided that one metre physical distancing was good enough (Reuters Staff 2020) – we see, often painfully, what is truly at stake with the ‘microbiopolitics’ of COVID-19. Indeed, the contested knowledge claims about the virus – whether it is airborne, whether masks are enough, whether face shields are needed – all rest on our understandings of the virus and how it is mediated. But, ultimately, it is political actors who make the decision with life-and-death consequences for their constituents.

Of course, it's not like other microbes have disappeared. Floodwaters still pose the risk of leptospirosis infection, and tuberculosis has not left us. Neither have HIV and other venereal diseases, or the myriad other viruses in and around us that are harmless and perhaps even beneficial – to say nothing about the viruses and bacteria that afflict nonhumans and can potentially cause zoonoses and human pandemics (Levitt 2020). We have always been exchanging microbes, from one community to another, but microbiopolitics foregrounds the ways in which some viruses are visible and others, invisible.

Finally, we see this microbiopolitics in the conceptualisation of vulnerability and resistance, as when people say, *Ang tibay ng mga mahirap* ('The poor are strong'). In my ongoing ethnographic research on local health knowledge and how it has affected how people make sense of the pandemic (see Tan and Lasco 2021), I have encountered people saying that the poor – particularly those in urban areas – cannot be infected by the coronavirus because they are exposed to a lot of bacteria and, therefore, have higher *resistensya* to viruses. *Resistensya* is to the physical as resilience is to the social, and both have been used to justify health and social disparities in the time of COVID-19. To borrow from Stawkowski's (2016, 155) account of marginalised communities living in the aftermath of radioactive pollution in Kazakhstan, it seems that for the urban poor in Manila and elsewhere, 'their only option is to become (or believe themselves to be) enhanced human beings who can survive in toxic environments'.

Nonhuman animals

Beyond and alongside the virus, other animals have been involved in the pandemic in various ways. As Deleuze and Guattari (1988, 11) write: 'We form a rhizome with our viruses, or rather our viruses cause us to form a rhizome with other animals'. Animals figure in the purported genesis of the virus' jump to humans; they figure in the way humans cope with the virus, in entanglements that range from abuse to affection. And I refer not just to the ability of dogs to detect the presence of a virus, even though this is an amazing reminder that our sensory universes hardly overlap.

At the start of the pandemic, animals figured in two major ways. First, there was the question of which animals served as vectors or hosts, that is, which animals were to *blame* for the pandemic. Pangolins were proposed as intermediate hosts, which struck a chord among Filipino environmentalists, given that the pangolin is poached heavily in Palawan.

Eventually, suspicion fell on bats; this remains the current view. But bats have always had coronaviruses. In the Philippines, a study found that among bats from two campuses of the University of the Philippines, 55 per cent had coronaviruses of some sort (Watanabe et al. 2010). The question is how the virus jumped from bats to humans, why and how bats have come to be in such close proximity to humans, and why this particular strain of coronavirus is so virulent and effective.

The indictment of certain species as disease carriers – potential or real – is a matter of life and death for them. When millions of chickens were culled in Indonesia as a result of avian flu, Celia Lowe (2010) described those chickens as part of a ‘viral cloud’ of H5N1 in the country. Similarly, in November 2020, millions of minks were killed in Denmark over fears of spread and potential mutation of the coronavirus through them. To quote one report: ‘Mass graves have appeared in the Danish countryside filled with the slaughtered animals’ (Murray 2020). Farmers were in tears, although their concern was more over their lost livelihoods than the lost lives of the animals whose fur is used to make luxury garments and fake eyelashes. Evidently, unlike the ostrich, which, when turned into adobo, sparked outcry in the Philippines, certain species do not attract as much human sympathy: a further reminder of our local moral taxonomies.

Another major way in which animals have figured in the pandemic is via the narrative of ‘nature’s revenge’ – or of a healing planet. In the early months of the pandemic, the news media repeatedly circulated images of animals roaming and ‘reclaiming’ the streets: from deer in Japan and monkeys in Thailand to wild goats in Wales and wild boar in Spain (Kretchmer 2020). But as environmental scientists have pointed out, COVID-19 is actually not ‘good’ for the environment. Discarded personal protective equipment is contributing to plastic waste, while economic deprivation has led people to hunt down and poach endangered species. Zoos and wildlife parks are losing revenue and funding, leaving their animals vulnerable both to hunger and the virus itself (Wang et al. 2020). Two months into the lockdown, Filipinos were greeted by the pitiable sight of an emaciated lion in the privately owned Malabon Zoo, its owner appealing for cash donations (for which he felt embarrassed because ‘the focus should be on humans’):

[Some were] apologizing that during this time, the focus has been on human beings and somehow the animals seem to have been forgotten. And I had to assure them that [they were right; the focus should be on] people, especially the poor and the hungry people.

So I myself am ashamed to be asking for help for the animals during these trying times (Valenzuela 2020).

Beyond the material consequences of the pandemic to animals, social scientists have warned that such narratives simplify the discourse and reinforce the 'apart-ness' of humans from so-called 'nature' (Searle and Turnbull 2020). Of course, animals do not just figure as part of the etymology of the virus and its ecological impacts, but also in the phenomenological experience of the pandemic. Dogs and cats have served as quarantine companions, immune to the rules of physical distancing. Already, there is emerging literature from various countries on how human–dog relations were also disrupted during lockdowns (Morgan et al. 2020; Tomé 2020); how the presence of pets became more important than ever; and how the constant presence of humans in their houses has endangered intimacy between households of humans and nonhumans.

Plants

All of the above point to the pandemic as a more-than-human event. But it is also more-than-animal. One fascinating development during the pandemic is the ersatz 'botanic boom'. Biking in my hometown in Laguna, I would see tricycles packed with potted plants, plants being sold on the highways, people traveling all the way from Manila just to buy plants. Social media, too, has become overgrown with monsteras and carnivorous plants. And not just for the upper and middle classes. I see people in low-income neighbourhoods walking with plants they just purchased, tending to their recently refurbished gardens.

Filipinos have long cared for and nurtured plants; the Spanish priest and chronicler Antonio Morga described the first bonsai seen by westerners on his visit to Manila in 1603. These seemingly mundane houseplants actually come from different places, finding their way from colony to metropole and back to colony – a reminder that just like the pandemic, colonialism, too, was a multispecies process that involved uprooting and transplanting different species. The irony now is how 'plants are able to travel much more freely than humans in the time of the pandemic', as a friend pointed out.

Another notable observation is the growing trend of naming houseplants. To name is to confer importance, and humans only give names to people and things that matter to them. While mostly said in jest,

being ‘plant parents’ – *plantito*, *plantita* – establishes a form of kinship that is arguably new, at least among the many who have recently discovered the joys of nurturing houseplants. And with this, there is growing concern about the commodification of plants. What happens when something taken for granted suddenly has value, and when that value can be quantified in monetary terms? Plants hold immense value, but they have to be literally uprooted for such value to be realised, like trees in a forest that are more valuable dead than alive. Given that ferns can now sell for far more than rice, how will this phenomenon shape our mountains, and transform our ways of living?

At the personal level, of course, plants matter differently to different people. Some may see them as a project to be shared with others. Others may see nature in them, even as they are far from ‘natural’ given all the artificial interventions from breeding and transportation to potting and cultivation. And then there are those who perceive the health benefits of plants, an inkling increasingly supported by the notion of ‘biophilia’ (Ulrich 1993).

But the plants thriving in our homes cannot be dissociated from their ecological entanglements. For instance, their popularity has prompted cries of alarm from environmentalists who fear its impacts on biodiversity (Lim and Lasco 2020):

Some of the plants on sale are sourced from our mountains and other unique ecosystems, disrupting habitats and potentially further endangering plant species and the wild fauna that depend on them for food and shelter. With rarity and ‘exotic-ness’ being valued characteristics in plant collecting, this craze might drive unscrupulous entrepreneurs deeper into our forests in search of plants that will command high prices in both local and international markets. Already, Department of Environment and Natural Resources offices in many parts of the country are reporting encroachments driven by the demand for these plants.

They also warn that ‘plants can also bring along with them pests and diseases that can infest, infect, and kill other plants in one’s collection’ (Lim and Lasco 2020), further underscoring the limits of thinking in terms of individual species. Although plants are thought to be immune to coronaviruses, it is also worth adding that they are not without their own viral nemeses, not to mention all kinds of pests – as consequence of their participation in our lifeworld – even as they can also forge alliances with microbes (Wilkinson et al. 2019).

My own thinking about plants (Lasco 2020c) is that they link us to the past by serving as enduring lifelong companions. My mother has held on to her bonsai since she was in her early twenties, taking the plants with her from apartment to apartment until, when my parents had the money to buy their own land, the bonsai, too, were allowed take root in the ground. ‘They’ve been around for much longer than you, and unlike human children, they never leave’, she told me, showing that trees are ‘portable companions’ that can follow humans – not just in the sense of Lucia Monge’s *planton movil* (Vich 2016; see also www.luciamonge.com). Perhaps beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, the plants we have today will hold a special place as companions through a difficult moment. Moreover, at a time when life itself seems most precarious, perhaps plants offer an alternative vision of life, one of growth and regeneration, with each new leaf signifying hope and positive change.

But regardless of the entanglement of motivations that have allowed plants to take root in our households, and mindful of the threats to plant life that the pandemic has exacerbated, the question remains: Can our newfound affection for plants translate to heightened concern for the planet?

Living together

In light of the necessity of multispecies ways of thinking about the world, our mandate is clear: we must act on the implications, from the personal to the political, of our more-than-human togetherness amid the precarities of our time. At a personal level, this can simply mean a greater appreciation for the world-at-large, perhaps making us less lonely, wherever we are. Here in Los Baños, I have not welcomed a single guest since March, but the sunbirds, our two dogs, the narra trees and even the *Stephanie erecta* that I have been nurturing, all keep me company. They also raise the stakes of whom – and what – we are responsible for.

At a professional level, thinking of and about interspecies connections should enrich our praxis and broaden our conceptions of the ‘field’ to include what these connections actually do, and what they mean, for the people with whom we engage. At the outset, I already argued for the methodological necessity of following species as they travel, and foregrounding them in our ethnographies. But in light of COVID-19 and its aftermath, we need to go back to our interlocutors, human and nonhuman, and see how they are living, and living together, in a pandemic. Given our current constraints, we need methodological

innovations and research ethics adaptations that facilitate and support these changes. Surely, many anthropologists are already working on this, and we will hopefully see the fruits of their labours in the coming years.

Logistically, this can also lead to engagements with people from other disciplines – microbiologists, horticulturists, zoologists, farmers, physicians – and a host of other fields, advocacies and activisms. If the task at hand is ‘thick description’, and if it entails long-term observation, then we have a lot to offer in helping people understand their own work, especially among those dealing with other species. While resisting the urge to view terms of *engagement* solely as terms of *endearment*, we need to trace the connections – from affectionate to antagonistic – that make up the ‘convivium’ of organisms to which we belong.

Finally, at a political level, it entails recognising the power relations that underwrite, disrupt, destroy and render antagonistic our relations with nonhumans – the structural violence that not only exposes humans to harmful species, but exposes other species to human harm. Although those at the forefront of thinking about post-human politics are suggesting an attention to land and indigenous peoples as priorities (see [Panelli 2010](#)), this is something we in the Philippines have always known.

It also entails challenging the neoliberal order that renders vulnerable not just humans, but the whole planet, from the rising incidence of diabetes among our pets, global warming that threatens animal habitats and, of course, the pathogenic viruses that result from habitat destruction, illegal wildlife trade and industrial farming. On the local scale, we see this unfold in what Wolfram Dressler ([2011](#)) calls ‘nature as capital’, as when national parks protecting immense biodiversity are viewed in terms of their ‘market value’. Surely, anthropologists can speak to debates on valuing and expanding our time-honoured notions of reciprocity and kinship to ‘natureculture’ ([Fuentes 2010](#)) around us. It may even lead us to interrogate our symbolic taxonomies – how some species are seen as more worthy of compassion than others – as well as rethinking our unsustainable ways of life. After all, do we really need millions of rodents in farms just so humans can have fur coats and fake eyelashes?

I conclude with three questions. The first one, raised in the 2018 UGAT conference, remains salient as ever. In light of our interconnectedness, how do we live together in precarious times, in times of environmental, medical and political crises? Mindful that structural violence and state violence (see [Tandog 2020](#)) necessarily extend to nonhumans, we should also ask: How can we bear witness to forms of more-than-human togetherness, from abuse to affection, in ways that lead to action, in ways that do justice to both humans and other species? Finally, returning to

anthropology's core mission: How do we do all this in ways that allow us to deepen our understanding of what it means to be human in a more-than-human world?

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