

Book Reviews

Frédéric Keck. *Avian Reservoirs: Virus Hunters and Birdwatchers in Chinese Sentinel Posts*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 245. 2020.

COVID-19 has created a peculiar Gold Rush effect in anthropology. Scholars who for decades have ignored the field of health, disease, and illness have overnight transformed into ardent examiners of the pandemic. The effect is particularly noxious, as complex pandemic realities are squeezed into ill-fitting, pre-existing anthropological schemes or interpreted through hastily constructed anthropologically sounding frameworks that upon closer examination prove to be but threadbare patchworks of old and often defunct approaches to such phenomena from other disciplines. Frédéric Keck's book is an oasis in this embarrassing analytical desert. *Avian Reservoirs* was not written in response to COVID-19, but is instead the result of a life-long commitment to the ethnographic examination and anthropological interrogation of epidemics and zoonotic diseases. The book masterfully brings together multi-sited ethnography and anthropological theory with a background of a robust understanding of life science approaches to its subject matter.

The heart of the book's bold approach comprises in unravelling the transformation of human-bird relations under the banner of preparedness for a future avian flu pandemic through an anthropological examination of a series of 'techniques': sentinels, simulations, and stockpiling. *Avian Reservoirs* shows these to be far more than technoscientific conjuring tricks in the age of neoliberal Global Health. Keck shows that, as a preparedness technique, the use of sentinel birds to signal early warnings of the emergence of new, potentially pandemic influenza strains, involves complex but essentially cynegetic relations of lure and trust that entangle virus hunters, birdwatchers, and domesticated as well as wild birds in exchanges that are always on the verge of complacency and overreaction. Through multi-sited fieldwork in Hong Kong, Keck shows that for birds to function as reservoirs of a future pathogen, what is required is a 'common imaginary' of reciprocal exchange between humans and birds that transforms signals into values. In turn, the book relies on ethnographic case studies in Hong Kong and Singapore to show that, as techniques of preparedness for 'an uncertain encounter between humans and animals' with a pandemic potential, simulations are 'public health rituals' that transform the meaning and value of birds by way of play and performance. Finally, reflecting on ethnographic experience in Taiwan, Keck contrasts stockpiling to storage, so as to show the former to be an exchange practice that, by simulating scarcity (of vaccines

for a future pandemic) as a configuring event, is at variance with tinkering modes of reasoning.

Rather than being static or self-contained, the three ‘techniques’ discussed in the book are constantly interrelated so as to bring to the fore a broader anthropological analysis of pandemic preparedness, which underlines that the latter stands in constant tension with older techniques and frameworks of disease prevention. As distinct but entangled modes of anticipation, preparedness, and prevention are shown to have impacted formative anthropological and sociological thinkers (Spencer, Robertson Smith, Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss) and to involve forms of causality, language and visibility, which fluctuate between the poles of pastoralism and predation. To what extent, the book asks, can these complex relations be rendered legible, not through the soothing lens of dialectical synthesis but through what Keck calls a ‘diabolic mode’? For the author, this becomes actualised in each of the three techniques (sentinels, simulations, stockpiling) and the manner in which they bring humans and birds together in ‘ritual, performance, play, and fiction’.

Through its philosophical-anthropological approach and fine-tuned ethnographies from East and South-East Asia, *Avian Reservoirs* is a world-leading contribution to the anthropology of epidemics and of zoonosis, which should be required reading in our pandemic age. Not being afraid, as is often the case today, to employ tools from across the discipline’s history in order to perform precise, revealing, and unsettling critical and analytical incisions, *Avian Reservoirs* adheres to no disciplinary orthodoxy, much less a medical anthropological one, and we are all the more fortunate for that. What this at once robust and iconoclastic book achieves is to help us think preparedness otherwise, beyond both the tried and tired schemes of biopolitics and biosecurity and the positivist interpellations of “One Health”: as a field where human-animal relations become constantly unsettled in light of their future potentiality, both imagined and real.

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Lars Højer and Morten Axel Pedersen. *Urban Hunters: Dealing and Dreaming in Times of Transition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 270. 2019.

At first glance *Urban Hunters* appears to generate its important conceptual interventions from the relative uniqueness of its subject matter. The book’s ethnographic core is an account of the urban context of Ulaanbaatar. The authors are extremely effective in capturing a period of unprecedented social and economic upheaval in the period around the turn of the millennium. The book thus provides not only a wide range of fresh ethnographic insights but also resultant challenges to an array of theoretical concerns. Yet throughout the book, it also becomes increasingly clear that what is being conceptualised is not *just* humanity in an exceptional place and