

December 2022

## Biopower, Biopolitics and Pandemic Vulnerabilities: Reading the Covid Chronicles Comics

Pramod K. Nayar Ph.D.  
*University of Hyderabad, India*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://mds.marshall.edu/criticalhumanities>



Part of the [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#), and the [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Nayar, Pramod K.. "Biopower, Biopolitics and Pandemic Vulnerabilities: Reading the Covid Chronicles Comics." *Critical Humanities* 1, 1 (2022). <https://mds.marshall.edu/criticalhumanities/vol1/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Critical Humanities by an authorized editor of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact [zhangj@marshall.edu](mailto:zhangj@marshall.edu), [beachgr@marshall.edu](mailto:beachgr@marshall.edu).

# Biopower, Biopolitics and Pandemic Vulnerabilities: Reading the *Covid Chronicles* Comics

---

Pramod K Nayar  
*University of Hyderabad*

## Abstract

This essay examines *Covid Chronicles: A Comics Anthology* from the perspective of biopower and biopolitics. It contends that, on the one hand, the comics capture individual suffering and collective trauma of the pandemic; on the other hand, these comics draw attention to the role the state plays in regulating bodies to be monitored, governed and, in some cases, deemed disposable.

*Pramod K Nayar teaches at the Department of English, the University of Hyderabad, where he also holds the UNESCO Chair in Vulnerability Studies. His newest books include *Alzheimer's Disease Memoirs* (Springer 2022), *Essays in Celebrity Culture* (Anthem 2021), *The Human Rights Graphic Novel* (Routledge 2021) and the edited collection, *From Discovery to the Civilisational Mission: English Writings on India* (5 volumes, Bloomsbury 2022). Winner of the Visitor's Award for Best Research in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences from the President of India (2018), his forthcoming books include *Nuclear Cultures* (Routledge 2023) and *The Raj: A Journey Through Ten Documents* (Bloomsbury 2023).*

In this essay, I examine one set of Covid Comics, *Covid Chronicles: A Comics Anthology* (2021, hereafter CC) for its theme of biopower and biopolitics. The comics capture, inevitably, individual suffering and collective trauma during the pandemic. In the process, they also draw attention to the role of the state in implementing policies and regulations wherein bodies (individual and the body politic) are monitored, governed and, in some cases, deemed disposable. The comics also, therefore, map the rise of new vulnerabilities among populations and the exacerbation of older vulnerabilities. For instance, the pandemic states of being of the youth in terms of employment, forced isolation and social relations gesture at the rise of new vulnerabilities. Then, when the comics address the problems of the Native Americans, their reservations and states of being, or the racialized social trauma of the colored people, they are aligning older vulnerabilities engendered by race with those engendered by the pandemic.

In section 1, “Pandemic Epistemes and Biopower,” I examine how the comics not only speak of epistemic gaps in Covid-19 knowledge, but also present a new episteme where our sense and knowledge of Covid-19 is segued through a social history of pandemics and their biopolitics of vulnerability. In section 2, I turn to a key component of (Foucauldian) biopower, sovereignty. In ‘Questions of (Bungled) Sovereignty’, I examine comics that draw the tensions between individual and collective sovereignties (including instances of misplaced state sovereignties and vaccinationisms).

---

<sup>1</sup> Rosi Braidotti, “The Politics of ‘Life Itself’ and New Ways of Dying,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency,*

Section 3 is a conclusion and addresses the theme of ‘biopolitics from below’ in comics that speak of solidarities and reinforced communities but also think in terms of collective mourning and memorializations.

----

Admittedly, the question of biopower has been foregrounded in numerous discussions of Covid-19, from surveillance strategies, the amplified reach of the state, the crisis over Human Rights, among others. In the case of the CC, the visual representations of biopower combined with the verbal offers several interesting features in many of the individual ‘stories’.

Rosi Braidotti has argued that in the posthuman age, biopower is not only “the government of the living but also . . . [about] practices of dying.”<sup>1</sup> We can see, she argues, ‘new practices of “life” [that] mobilize not only generative forces but also new and subtler degrees of extinction’ (203). We also know, after Foucault, that biopower rests on and operates through sovereignty, discipline and governmentality. Foucault has argued:

Government is defined as a right manner of disposing things so as to lead not to the form of the common good . . . but to an end which is “convenient” for each of the things that are to be governed... There is a whole series of specific finalities, then, which become the objective of government as such. In order to achieve these various finalities, things be disposed . . . with government it is a question not of imposing law on men, but of disposing things: that is to say, of employing tactics rather than laws, and even of using laws themselves as tactics - to arrange things in such a way

*and Politics*, eds. Diane Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 201.

that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved. <sup>2</sup>(1991: 95)

He continues: “the finality of government resides in the things it manages.” <sup>3</sup>

The pandemic not only highlighted the role of sovereignty of the state but also the “management” and “disposing”, through the organisation of the social order, the supply of medical services and the regulations around vaccinations, masks and other control measures, all of which were assumed to protect individual vulnerabilities from the threat of exposure to contamination, and to protect the crowd from itself.

### Pandemic Epistemes and Biopower

In Seth Tobocman and Tamara Tornado’s “Apocalypse of Ignorance”, one of the short texts in CC, we have 11 panels, 9 in the conventional 3 square panels per row model and concluding with two rectangular ones on the first page. The second page has uneven panels: 7 of them and one figure without empanelment.

In the first 9 panels, the faceless and headless protagonists have an interrogate mark in the place of the head. The text accompanying the image is in the form of queries:

I don’t know if I’ve got it  
 You don’t know if you’ve got it  
 We don’t know if it is safe to shake hands... <sup>4</sup>



Figure 1. Reproduced with permission from Seth Tobocman and Tamara Tornado’s “Apocalypse of Ignorance”



Figure 2. Reproduced with permission from Seth Tobocman and Tamara Tornado’s “Apocalypse of Ignorance”

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies In Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 95.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, “Governmentality,” 95.

<sup>4</sup> Seth Tobocman and Tamara Tornado, “Apocalypse of Ignorance.” In *Covid Chronicles*, eds. Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson (University Park, PA: Graphic Mundi, 2021), 46.

And the crisis of ignorance escalates in intensity as we move across the panels:

You don't know if hugging your child will kill you  
A child doesn't know if hugging a parent will kill that parent. <sup>5</sup>

The last two panels read:

We don't know how many are healthy  
We don't know how many are sick.<sup>6</sup>

In the very last panels on this page, we no longer even have stick figures: we see skeletal forms as in an x-ray.

What the panels do is to draw not just ignorance in the form of the interrogative in the space of the head. They also demonstrate the epistemic gaps that mark biopower and life in Covid times. The last text shows a head where the interrogative has been replaced by an exclamation mark and the text says

We know that we deserve better.<sup>7</sup>

From Foucault we know of the disciplinary power of knowledge and the valorisation of "expertise". During the pandemic, this was precisely what was undermined, as the texts in CC reveal. Annoyed people ask in "Shelter-in-place Sing", Lee Marris draws a man asking

What's the World Health Organization been doing? The National Institutes of Health? ! Or the goddam CDC? !!! <sup>8</sup>

The "problem" of expertise is linked to the nature of the American government. To the above rant, the old woman after responds:

The WHO issued a notice in mid-Jan. About the outbreak. We just didn't hear about it. Remember who's President? <sup>9</sup>

Here the immediate invocation of common knowledge, almost as a shorthand, shows how expertise was denied and rejected by not fellow experts but by the political class. Now, Foucault spoke of the "medicalization of politics" and the CC depicts a politicization of medicine and medical expertise in the US government's rejection of the advisories from immunologists and epidemiologists.

Disciplinary measures refused by many and a refusal endorsed by the state in the case of Covid-19 however are ironically presented in Marris. George Floyd's murder at the hands of white policemen was also the result of such "disciplinary" processes, targeting the blacks. In Marris, the panel which first introduces the Floyd murder theme has at the foot of the panel a textbox with a list:

Oscar Grant, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Aiyanna Stanley-Jones, Emmet Till, Trayvon...<sup>10</sup>

The community which meets regularly to sing songs and cheer themselves up, is agitated. Marris writes:

The songs changed then. <sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Tobocman and Tornado, "Apocalypse," 46.

<sup>6</sup> Tobocman and Tornado, "Apocalypse," 46.

<sup>7</sup> Tobocman and Tornado, "Apocalypse," 47.

<sup>8</sup> Lee Marris, "Shelter-in-Place-Sing." In *Covid Chronicles*, eds. Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson (University

Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 119.

<sup>9</sup> Marris, "Shelter," 119.

<sup>10</sup> Marris, "Shelter," 122.

<sup>11</sup> Marris, "Shelter," 123.

The songs now are “This land is your land” from Woody Guthrie and “We shall overcome”. The accompanying images show protests under the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

Here biopower’s disciplinary emphasis and its operations produces critiques along two lines comics: racialized structures such as law enforcement, and the new politics of disciplining in the guise of public health requirements and safety.

Two stunning texts in the collection offer these critiques, both of which may be said to embody a “pandemic episteme” in which the contemporary outbreak of Covid-19 is located within a knowledge of a social (and racialized) history of pandemics and the biopolitics of such pandemics. That is, the texts foreground historical vulnerabilities and historically at-risk populations that have been particularly affected not just by the virus but by the social contexts in which the disease spread: absence of health services, poor sanitation in their neighbourhoods and state indifference to their conditions of living.

“How to have a Powwow in a Pandemic” - with its nod, perhaps unconscious, to Paula Treichler’s *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic* (1999) – begins with two clear statements:

Native communities in North America have been particularly hard-hit by Covid-19.

This isn’t the first time.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 105.

Just as Lee Marrs linked the pandemic’s disciplinary aspect to both, a history of victimization of the Blacks in the USA and the recent “Black Lives Matter” movement, Rosenbaum and Starr here begin by turning to history. Clearly, the focus is not on Covid-19, but the context of historically-determined risky lives in which the virus has prised rendered their vulnerability into helplessness.

In one panel they offer four thumbnail sketches representing four momentous and disastrous epidemics that ravaged the Native Americans: childbirth fever 1792, smallpox 1811, whooping cough 1813, measles 1818.

They add as text:

Native people have endured pandemics before. Native records from that time tell the story.

BY the late 1800s, tribes had endured wave upon wave of pandemics...

That would worsen with the deprivation and forced marches of the government’s Indian removal program.<sup>13</sup>

Rosenbaum and Starr locate Covid-19’s destructive power not only within a history of pandemics afflicting the Native Americans. They locate it within a political history of deprivation, oppression and extermination. It is only three pages later that they return to Covid-19 and what it did to the Native Americans:

<sup>13</sup> Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory*, 105.



Covid has been particularly deadly in native communities, for the same reasons as previous pandemic: poverty and oppression.

On many reservations people live with little access to health care or, sometimes running water...a legacy of broken agreements and underfunded services from the US government.<sup>14</sup>

In a later text, Julio Anta's "Between Two Worlds", the racial dimensions of Covid-19 protocol implementation are drawn. Headlines intervene between panels:

As police begin enforcement, over 80% of social distancing summons given to blacks and Latinos.

Despite evidence, NYPD police commissioner denies racial bias in coronavirus social distancing policies.<sup>15</sup>

And in a clear reference to the George Floyd incident, the white cop kneels on the black boy (who is, incidentally, masked) and the boy groans: "you're hurting me" (194).<sup>16</sup>

Kay Sohini in "Pandemic Precarities: An Account from the Intersection of Two Worlds" lists those groups who were targeted for being carriers: migrant workers, northeast Indians, Muslims (for the behaviour of the Tablighi Jamaat).<sup>17</sup>

She notes how "systemic racism is indicated by the outbreak in the meat packing industry, where most of the workers are black

and Latinix" and the "ableism seen in the practice of rationing care."<sup>18</sup> The most vulnerable populations, she notes, are the first to be disenfranchised even as billionaires got obscenely richer. She writes:

This pandemic has exposed and amplified everything that is wrong with our world – obscene wealth disparity, ableism, racism, sexism, bigotry.<sup>19</sup>

Sohini, like the other authors-artists, examining the socially engendered vulnerabilities - and thus shifts the focus away from the virus qua virus.

In "The Right to Breathe" Maureen Burdock and Joanna Regulska also point to the link between state biopolitics and the history of systemic racism. They begin with:

Everyone is vulnerable, but not equally so, black and brown people, the poor, the elderly, and those with compromised immune systems are hit the hardest.<sup>20</sup>

Later, they add:

While the pandemic ravages the population, centuries-old, state-sanctioned, violent racism devastates the social body.<sup>21</sup>

With references to Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd they depict the white man (easily identified as Trump)

---

<sup>14</sup> S. I. Rosenbaum and Arigon Starr, "How to have a Powwow in a Pandemic." In *Covid Chronicles*, eds. Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 110.

<sup>15</sup> Julio Anta and Jacoby Salcedo and Hassan Otsmane-Elhaou. "Between Two Worlds." In *Covid Chronicles*, eds. Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 193-4.

<sup>16</sup> Anta and Salcedo and Otsmane-Elhaou, "Between," 194.

<sup>17</sup> Kay Sohini, "Pandemic Precarities." In *Covid Chronicles*, eds. Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 215.

<sup>18</sup> Sohini, "Pandemic Precarities," 216.

<sup>19</sup> Sohini, "Pandemic Precarities," 217.

<sup>20</sup> Maureen Burdock and Joanna Regulska, "The Right to Breathe." In *Covid Chronicles*, eds. Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 204.

<sup>21</sup> Burdock and Regulska, "The Right to Breathe," 205.

riding a monster, as people protest holding placards saying:

Black Lives Matter  
Racism is a pandemic too!<sup>22</sup>



Figure 3. Reproduced with permission from Maureen Burdock and Joanna Regulska's "The Right to Breathe"

The social history of pandemics and their racial dimensions, rather than Covid-19 as an isolated example is the story here. The focus in most of the stories in CC is therefore the nature of vulnerable populations – Native Americans, Latinos, African Americans – and their emplotment within the biopolitics of the state. CC therefore is not all about Covid-19, it is a document about the pandemic episteme in which we are made

aware that the newest pandemic is an iteration of older inequities and injustices.

## Questions of Sovereignty

One of the cornerstones of biopower is sovereignty as identified by Foucault, Agamben, Esposito and others. This can be at two levels: the assertion of sovereignty by individual Americans and the deployment of tools of state sovereignty.

In Peter Dunlap-Shohl's "The Dance of Death", Death literally stalks the streets and neighbourhood in the form of a walking body crowned by a skull. While Dunlap-Shohl's purpose is to demonstrate the old theme "death walked everywhere and came for anyone at any time", but he ends up doing much more in terms of the idea of sovereignty. Individuals gather in public places – and none of them wears a mask. Shops, restaurants, the beach are thickly populated and crowded, with "un-masked" individuals. In each panel, Death walks through the crowds, staring at one individual or the other, almost as though marking his next victim (Death is male in all these). The key moment of Dunlap-Shohl's tale is pictured in the form of a large panel set in the White House. Trump is speaking at the lectern. And of course he is without a mask. To his left stands Death. Beneath this panel which indicts the President of the USA for not following Covid-19 protocols, is Dunlap-Shohl's indictment of the Americans who claim individual rights above all else. Here several protestors hold up placards:

Re-open America  
Live free or die

<sup>22</sup> Burdock and Regulska, "The Right to Breathe," 208-9.



End the lockdown !  
Give me liberty or give me death. <sup>23</sup>

All of them are of course without masks.  
Amongst them is Death holding up the placard

My rights are essential. <sup>24</sup>

Dunlap-Shohl's criticism is clear: Americans have privileged their individual freedoms over public well-being.

Kay Sohini in "Pandemic Precarities: An Account from the Intersection of Two Worlds" notes how in the USA, many Americans were furious for being asked to follow Covid protocols

I feel threatened !!!  
That man harassed me for not wearing a mask !! <sup>25</sup>

As the medical humanities scholar Lisa Diedrich puts it:

By refusing to wear masks and practice social distancing, people have sought to demonstrate—to show by action and display of feeling—how much they don't care that people are dying in unprecedented numbers. <sup>26</sup>

Commenting on the American refusal to practice Covid protocols, she adds:

this disregard for the health and care of others has become politicized... The mask is a visible sign of regard for others. It communicates an understanding that one's body is not autonomous from but interdependent with the bodies of others. That some would fixate on the requirement to wear a

mask as somehow restricting one's bodily freedom is a most cynical disregard for the specific practices of public health... <sup>27</sup>

Possibly, such assertions of individual freedoms and sovereignty could be read as forms of resistance to governmentality and state power, at both individual and collective levels (collective: the gatherings, parties and beach visits as depicted in Dunlap-Shohl). That is, during the pandemic, there were both individual and collective ways of subverting official regulations embodying a counter-governmentality. Embracing their vulnerability to the virus and infection by the anti-vaxers (as they were called) and the anti-mask brigades was (mis)aligned with the state's injunctions to ensure the alleviation of individual and collective vulnerability.

Tools of state sovereignty deployed in the pandemic include:

orders and decrees forbidding certain activities, requiring others, and the passing (or suspending) of laws in order to ensure that these measures are legally and constitutionally legitimate or adequately funded. Police, national guards and in some cases even the military (and paramilitary units) have been called upon to enforce restrictions.[3] These sovereign tools are being deployed in a broadly bi-political sense, that is, for making (rather than letting) live. (Hannah et al 2020) <sup>28</sup>

These restrictions on individual and collective behaviour, however, erase certain specifics. First, the epistemic gap in democracies wherein the population is unable to

<sup>23</sup> Peter Dunlap-Shohl, "The Dance of Death." In *Covid Chronicles*, eds. Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 174.

<sup>24</sup> Dunlap-Shohl, "The Dance of Death," 175.

<sup>25</sup> Sohini, "Pandemic Precarities," 216.

<sup>26</sup> Lisa Diedrich, "Disregarding the Health of Others," accessed June 15, 2021, <https://lisadiedrich.org/2021/01/19/disregarding-the-health-of-others/>.

<sup>27</sup> Diedrich, "Disregarding."

<sup>28</sup> Diedrich, "Disregarding."

formulate informed opinions about the virus. The second page in “Apocalypse of Ignorance” builds on the epistemic gaps already hinted at, and dovetails Foucauldian biopower with Ian Hacking’s argument about styles of reasoning.

We don’t know because ...we don’t have enough test kits.

We don’t have enough test kits because the U.S government refused to import test kits from Europe.

They preferred to invent a test of their own. Which did not work,

We don’t know why they made this very bad decision.

They say it’s standard procedure.<sup>29</sup>

The large, un-empanelled image shows Trump holding up his hands, palms inward... and the text says, “We know the Trump administration has blood on its hands” (47). Here, the epistemic gap in the public awareness of Covid-19 is compounded by bizarre assertions of national identity and vaccinationisms, such as the ones depicted in Tobocman and Tornado’s text. Whether vaccinationism is a mode of organizing global populations and their vulnerabilities, or inducing vulnerabilities into populations, is a question these representations throw up.

Robert Esposito observes in an interview that the affirmative forms of biopolitics is also possible, and he identifies “de-

privatizing the water supply, reclaiming and protecting forests” and “defending public lands”. Esposito argues that such campaigns have been disrupted by “anti-pandemic measures” (Esposito 2020).<sup>30</sup> In “Back to Work”, Seth and Tamara reflect on the campaign to “re-open” America. They note that

Trump has used the Defense Production Act to keep open meat packing plants where workers have died of Covid 19.

They want us back to work so they can stop paying unemployment benefits. They want small businesses to reopen and then go under, so they don’t have to bail them out.<sup>31</sup>

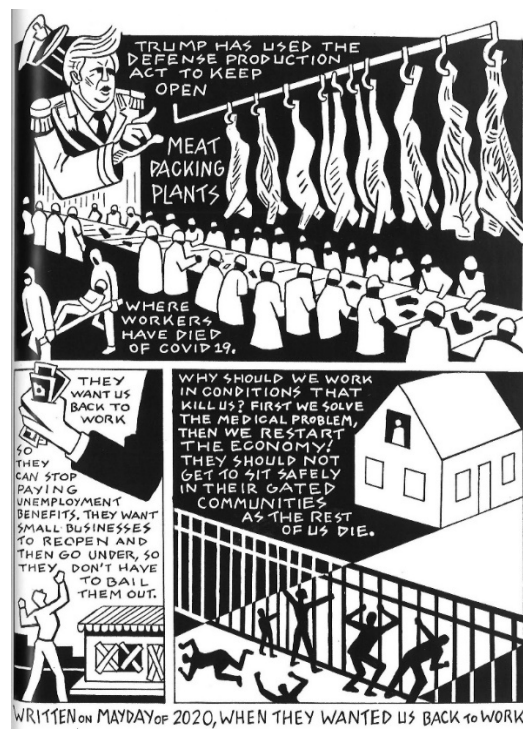


Figure 4. Reproduced with permission from Seth Tobocman and Tamara Tornado’s “Back to Work”

The first panel on this page shows the meat packing factory, but the image of dead meat

<sup>29</sup> Tobocman and Tornado, “Apocalypse,” 47.

<sup>30</sup> Roberto Esposito, “The Biopolitics of Immunity in Times of COVID-19: An Interview with Roberto Esposito,” accessed 16 June 2020. <https://antipode-online.org/2020/06/16/interview-with-roberto-esposito/>

<sup>31</sup> Seth Tobocman and Tamara Tornado, “Back to Work.” In *Covid Chronicles*, eds. Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 227.

on the factory hooks is an allegory for the row of workers beneath the meat – all of whom are also likely to die, as the text indicates. That is, the dead meat on the hooks is only a prefiguration of the men who will be dead soon too.<sup>32</sup>

The deployment of Acts and legislation to enforce a “reopen” campaign at the risk of the massive spread of the infection is the climactic moment in the assertion of state biopolitics and biopower.

### **Conclusion: Biopolitics from Below**

That said, a biopolitics from below is also documented in some stories. Survivalist modes and collective organization at the level of the community are documented. In other cases, the call to memorialize and mourn the Covid-19 dead also constitutes a biopolitics from below.

In Ben Mitchell’s “This is My Wartime Haircut”, we have the story of Ali Downer from Glasgow, now in Newcastle (Australia), and owner of the sandwich café, Chiefly East. He battles state regulations and clamp-downs. Keeping the food supply going in the form of take-aways, Ali and his café become, “a community stalwart” because “customers found a sense of normalcy in picking up their own orders and making small talk from a distance with Ali and his family.”<sup>33</sup> Lee Marrs shows how communities come together to sing and create “Blake St Pandemic Choir and Random Orchestra.”<sup>34</sup>

In these and other texts, the demand for accurate information, health services, the end to racialized capitalism and some measure of equitable welfare constitute what Panagiotis Sotiris called “biopolitics from below”. Sotiris writes:

In such a perspective, the decisions for the reduction of movement and for social distancing in times of epidemics, or for not smoking in closed public spaces, or for avoiding individual and collective practices that harm the environment would be the result of democratically discussed collective decisions. This means that from simple discipline we move to responsibility, in regards to others and then ourselves, and from suspending sociality to consciously transforming it. In such a condition, instead of a permanent individualized fear, which can break down any sense of social cohesion, we move to the idea of collective effort, coordination and solidarity within a common struggle, elements that in such health emergencies can be equally important to medical interventions.

This offers the possibility of a democratic biopolitics. This can also be based on the democratization of knowledge. The increased access to knowledge, along with the need for popularization campaigns makes possible collective decision processes that are based on knowledge and understanding and not just the authority of experts... social movements have a lot of room to act. They can ask of immediate measures to help public health systems withstand the extra burden caused by the pandemic. They can point to the need for solidarity and collective self-organization during such a crisis, in contrast to individualized “survivalist” panics. They can insist on state power (and coercion) being used to channel resources from the private sector to socially

---

<sup>32</sup> Tobocman and Tornado, “Back,” 227.

<sup>33</sup> Ben Mitchell, “This is My Wartime Haircut.” In *Covid Chronicles*, eds. Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson

(University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 159.

<sup>34</sup> Marrs, “Shelter,” 122.

necessary directions. And they can demand social change as a life-saving exigency. (Sotiris 2020)<sup>35</sup>

As nations and communities mourn their dead, practices of mourning and memorialization are instances of such a biopolitics from below too, since these practices seek to apportion responsibility for the deaths. In several of the comics discussed above, mourning the Covid-19 dead is also a mourning for the continued social injustices that produced the Covid-19 dead. That is, memories of the Covid-19 dead are dovetailed into mourning racial inequalities, structural and systemic shortfalls, the hyper-exploitative white capitalist economies that place differential values on lives and deaths. The images of campaigns and protests in the midst of the pandemic instantiate a biopolitics from below because they call attention to social and cultural factors that produced more dead among certain segments of the society.

As Anna Kurian put it in her two essays on mourning Covid-19:

I believe that the “COVID dead” should be seen differently, not as having died only of an illness, but because their deaths are revelatory of structural inequities, of systemic failures and of a failure as a nation to have enabled life, rather than death. (2021, “Why We Should Collectively Mourn the COVID Dead”)<sup>36</sup>

She adds:

---

<sup>35</sup> Sotiris, Panagiotis, “Against Agamben: Is a Democratic Biopolitics Possible.” In *Critical Legal Thinking*. Accessed June 16, 2021. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/14/against-agamben-is-a-democratic-biopolitics-possible/>

each time we see a person who counts among the “COVID dead” as singular, my family member or yours, in Delhi or in Kerala, in a village in Telangana or in Pune, we open ourselves to the grief and mourning we perform in our individual or familial capacities and we leech away the significance of what it means to a country when so many die of the same reason, and are easily robbed of their significance, as individuals and as the collective “COVID dead”. It is only in mourning them collectively that we can acknowledge that we failed as a country, and that this failure brought about their deaths.<sup>37</sup>

And concludes with:

It is only if we are convinced of the intrinsic worth of each individual, it is only if we see each life and all lives as meaningful that we need to think in terms of collective mourning. In the absence of that understanding, private grief is all that is possible. Or necessary.

A long time ago, John Donne said: “[A]ny man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” But if we see only as far as our loss, if we see the innumerable deaths as removed from us, then why should we mourn as a nation?<sup>38</sup>

In a later companion piece, Kurian would also, like the chroniclers in CC, point to the differential value of death and dying:

In the past few years, more and more of us have become non-grievable lives – the average Muslim, the Dalit, women have all been lives that were always negated. What the pandemic did, and especially in its second wave throughout India, was to increase the

<sup>36</sup> Anna Kurian, “Why We Should Collectively Mourn the COVID Dead.” In *The Wire*. Accessed June 16, 2021. <https://thewire.in/rights/collective-mourning-covid-19-victims-memorial-india>.

<sup>37</sup> Kurian “Why we should.”

<sup>38</sup> Kurian “Why we should.”

pool of those who can be seen as dispensable, those whose life was not “worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving”.<sup>39</sup>

She adds:

If we cannot accept our culpability for what transpired these past two months in our country, we cannot then mourn the dead. Nor can we look to the future and say, we need to change and improve. To not accept our responsibility is to negate the value of those lives and to perpetuate the myth of our greatness, even if the dead are all around us, everywhere, in hospitals and morgues, in ambulances, at cremation grounds, makeshift and established, buried on the banks of rivers, floating down the waters.

The dead ask that they be counted.<sup>40</sup>

Kurian’s point is not only about disposable and vulnerable lives, but that there is not even the possibility of mourning them when these lives end, or the way in which their lives ended. Those whose lives were lived in conditions of extreme vulnerability (and Kay Sohini’s “Pandemic Precarities”, which I have cited above, listed these lives) are condemned to unmournable deaths.

Like self-reliance in the CC stories, acts of mourning and memorialization, including Black Lives Matter and other campaigns are, admittedly, limited and not quite adequate to take on state biopower, but it remains, in these texts, a significant moment in the discourses of Covid-19. Foregrounding the state reinforcement of vulnerability in entire communities and populations, several of these comics are political interpretations of the biomedical “condition” of Covid-19.

For the comics artists, corona is a political virus, and Covid-19 a biomedical state of being that preys upon, segregates and surveils existing vulnerabilities but also produces new ones.

*An earlier version of this paper was delivered as a keynote address at Comin 21: International Conference on Indian Comics, IIT Delhi, 4 December 2021. I am grateful to Subir Dey for inviting me to speak at the event. The author also acknowledges the Professional Development Fund of the Institution of Eminence project of the University of Hyderabad.*

---

<sup>39</sup> Anna Kurian, “Why We Cannot Memorialize the Covid-19 Dead”. *The Wire*. Accessed June 16, 2021.

<https://thewire.in/rights/why-we-cannot-memorialise-the-covid-19-dead>.

<sup>40</sup> Kurian, “Why We Cannot.”



## References

- Braidotti, Rosi, "The Politics of "Life Itself" and New Ways of Dying." In *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, edited by Diane Coole and Samantha Frost, 210-220. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Covid Chronicles: A Comics Anthology, edited by Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021.
- Diedrich, Lisa, "Disregarding the Health of Others," accessed June 15, 2021, <https://lisadiedrich.org/2021/01/19/disregarding-the-health-of-others/>
- Esposito, Roberto, "The Biopolitics of Immunity in Times of COVID-19: An Interview with Roberto Esposito." Accessed June, 16, 2021. <https://antipodeonline.org/2020/06/16/interview-with-roberto-esposito/>
- Foucault, Michel. "Governmentality." In *The Foucault Effect: Studies In Governmentality*, edited by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller 87-104. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Hannah, Matthew Jan, Simon Hutta and Christoph Schemann, "Thinking Through Covid-19 Responses With Foucault – An Initial Overview." Antipode Online. 5 May 2020. <https://antipodeonline.org/2020/05/05/thinking-through-covid-19-responses-with-foucault/>
- Kurian, Anna, "Why We Should Collectively Mourn the COVID Dead." In *The Wire* May 25 2021. <https://thewire.in/rights/collective-mourning-covid-19-victims-memorial-india>.
- Kurian, Anna. "Why We Cannot Memorialize the Covid-19 Dead." In *The Wire* June 2021. <https://thewire.in/rights/why-we-cannot-memorialise-the-covid-19-dead>.
- Sotiris, Panagiotis, "Against Agamben: Is a Democratic Biopolitics Possible." In *Critical Legal Thinking* March 14, 2020. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/14/against-agamben-is-a-democratic-biopolitics-possible/> .
- Treichler, Paula, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.