My mask is green with zebras on it, a feeble attempt to liven up the veil of cotton protecting me from others, or others from me. An artefact of a new era. Interaction with other humans reduced to deciphering expressions conveyed by eyes and crinkling foreheads, voices muffled by layers covering mouths. A cautious nod from across the street. A casual step off the pavement to ensure a wide berth in human crossings. Our viral potentialities now define our encounters. After all, we are all potential vectors.

This pandemic situation has made me reflect on another, smaller vector, one that I have become familiar with through my own anthropological research. My PhD investigates multispecies coexistence in Medellín, Colombia, where I conducted an ethnography of the World Mosquito Program (WMP). This global health intervention is rearing and releasing *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes infected with *Wolbachia* bacteria, which significantly reduces the mosquito’s ability to transmit diseases. The reproduction process of the mosquitoes ensure that the bacteria are passed on to their offspring. In this way, the WMP intervention is seeking to gradually replace local dengue-transmitting mosquitoes with bacteria-infected counterparts, through regular insect releases across the city of Medellín. The human population is encouraged to reconsider their normally antagonistic relations with this insect, and instead to actively cultivate an ambivalent and ‘enhanced’ form of coexistence with a mosquito-rendered-public-health-tool. Yet this mosquito still bites, and importantly, one cannot tell just by looking at it whether it is ‘safe’ (infected with *Wolbachia*) or not.

Can thinking with other vectors shed light on our own vector capacities? Just as with the mosquitoes in Medellín, I can’t know if I am standing next to a healthy person, an asymptomatic coronavirus carrier, or even whether I am harbouring the virus myself. We are all rendered potential vectors in this situation. It is this unknowability, this uncertainty, that we must learn to navigate, and we are in unchartered waters.
Usual standards of social etiquette are no longer safe anchors as lockdown eases. When someone offers an outstretched hand to shake, is it rude to return an elbow? Or in Switzerland where I usually live (I am currently “stranded” in California), will the customary bise (one to three kisses on the cheek, depending on the proximity of social relations with the person) ever again be an acceptable greeting?

Coronavirus has not gone away “like a miracle”, as the tangerine man would have it. Instead, it has humbled us, just as, I would add, we are humbled by the mosquito, albeit on a different scale. Indeed, we are forced to reckon with both virus and vector, insectoid and humanoid. The mosquito has proved to be extremely tenacious and persistent in its ability to survive and thrive in unlikely places, and it has been impossible to completely and successfully eradicate it. As for Covid-19, it seems unlikely that vaccines are going to appear in the immediate future. It looks like the only solution – at least at this moment in time – is to learn to navigate a new territory of multispecies coexistence, as well as the potentiality of our own vector capacities.

If coexistence with the mosquito is anything to go by, the road ahead in the new, vector-ridden, viral landscape of Covid-19 will be complex. Coexisting with a mosquito is hard. It bites. It’s irritating. It’s itchy. It can also carry and transmit deadly diseases. The burden of coexistence is felt differently across diverging socio-economic strata, with structural factors participating in mosquito ecologies and access to healthcare is not guaranteed for all. In a similar vein, the distribution of Covid-19-related deaths and critical cases is revealing of how the burden of coexistence with the virus is, and will continue to be, felt more acutely by disadvantaged, discriminated, and marginalised communities. This is evident here in the USA for instance, as African American, Latinx and Native American populations are greatly and disproportionately being impacted by the virus, reflecting the deep historical, political and socio-economic inequalities that persist today in a myriad of complex manifestations. Coexistence entails far more risk for some rather than others.
Coexistence is therefore political. In the case of how to manage mosquitoes in Medellín, the project of multispecies coexistence brought about by the WMP sometimes clashes with the local approach favouring chemical fumigation. Seeing as one cannot tell if a mosquito is infected with *Wolbachia* or not, the WMP encourages people to continue with their protective methods, including to wear insect repellent and prevent mosquito breeding sites from forming in their homes. Yet the reality is that the intervention needs its female bacteria-infected mosquitoes to bite people, in order to obtain the protein found in blood that is necessary for the insects to lay their eggs, and thus reproduce and proliferate. While this last point merits critical unpacking on another occasion, for the current discussion I want to highlight how a similar issue, embodied here in the tension between having to be bitten and the success of the mosquito intervention, appears in the management of the coronavirus. As the economy is pitted against public health, there is no clear-cut solution. The question of reopening states and countries or remaining in lockdown means preparing for different outcomes according to the inequalities present in any given society. With some countries opening up and others relying on the development of herd immunity as a solution, whose lives are endangered for the “greater good” becomes a political decision. At the same time, a prolonged lockdown can further hurt those already facing precarity and poverty with little or no government support.

Every day we are discovering and experiencing how this pandemic is profoundly reshaping society. It seems certain that living with Covid-19 is the only option for now. Yet as I have seen in my research on human-mosquito relations in Colombia, this multispecies coexistence is ambivalent: is this mosquito/person infected or not? Should this being be avoided? As such, coexistence must be constantly negotiated. As we learn to live with Covid-19 and its ramifications, we will continually be navigating these new forms of sociality, that may or may not include masks with zebras. Nevertheless, we must remain attentive to the ways in which different layers of society will bear the impacts of political and social decisions surrounding this coexistence. We must not lose sight of which lives are being made and unmade.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosie Sims has recently submitted her PhD thesis in Anthropology at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. Her research investigates a global health intervention releasing bacteria-infected mosquitoes as a flying biotechnology against viruses like Zika, dengue, and chikungunya in Medellín, Colombia. Her dissertation explores how this alternative approach to vector control is premised on the idea of multispecies coexistence, implying a reconfiguration of human-mosquito-microbe relations and more complex understanding of health.

*Photographs by the Author*