

Locating the Diseased Body

On 16 March 2021 killing of 8 Asian-American women rocked Atlanta.¹ This followed a year of misinformation by the 45th US President and the right wing media about the causes for the spread of Covid-19 in the United States. The right wing media gleefully quoted the former American President terming the novel coronavirus as “China Virus.” This horrific incident once again portrays how a pandemic produces its own scapegoat or the original diseased body.

A few years before Covid 19, Richard A McKay in his book *Patient Zero and the Making of the AIDS Epidemic* wrote:

In our daily lives we most frequently use words, stories, and images to interpret external phenomena and express our understanding of the world, and so it is vital to see these elements as an essential, constitutive part of our reality and not simply a neutral, natural label or a depiction of how things “actually” are in the world.²

Patient Zero was a HIV positive flight attendant named Gaetan Dugas, who was vilified even after his death as people accepted a “big lie” that he infected a huge number people willfully and without remorse. Dugas denied this charge until his death and posthumously these charges were proven fraudulent, but the lie persisted.

If we consider the last few decades as part of the long 21st century it can easily be termed as the age of pandemics. The 20th century closed with the AIDS epidemic and the 21st began with the SARS virus that was identified in 2003. People spent days debating on the uncertain animal reservoir that ultimately infected humans. The AIDS, the northern world decided began in Africa and the first known infections of SARS, it was speculated appeared in Guangdong Province of China in 2002 so the world heaved a sigh of relief because it could now be logged as the Chinese pandemic. It was extensively argued that the disease must be a result of the Chinese exotic food habits and lifestyle and so the Atlantic world had nothing to worry as this disease was of foreign origin. After all this is exactly how the Atlantic or the civilized white world had previously come to terms with AIDS.

The SARS was followed by the swine origin H1N1 in 2009 and this time it was Mexico. The world was caught up in H5N1 from Asia and then came H1N1. Now the blame game was centered on another poor, impoverished exotic culture and the global North could easily blame another underdeveloped country albeit with a rich history but an impoverished economy. The trope that pandemics only affect poor countries lived on and the global North again remained under prepared but happy that such diseases did not touch them. Then came the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome or MERS and it broke at least one widely held assumption. Prior to this outbreak, the strange and exotic forests of Africa, and the crowded urban slums of Asia, where people lived crowded lives with their rats, chickens, and swine were considered the two most important birthplaces for new human pathogens, but not anymore. However, the global North now argued that whatever happens in the Arab world

stays among the Arabs so the “civilized” Western world forgot all about the disease and perpetrated the myth that all these diseases are foreign, so no preparation was needed. Then came Ebola and although it attacked the rich and the poor alike but after all it originated in Africa. The world remained unconscious because if Europe and United States was not affected then everyone could sleep peacefully. The diseased body was happily located elsewhere.

Much of the politics of ascribing the source of the disease has to do with questions of authority and representation. It will not be remiss to say that this hunt for “Patient Zero,” which today is more a metaphor than a real person, has been a recurring phenomenon in the last few hunts for the pandemic. Locating the diseased body has now become an industry with fancy surveillance systems all in the name of science. As one report suggests:

Contact tracing in an Ebola virus disease (EVD) outbreak is the process identifying individuals who may have been exposed to infected persons with the virus, followed by monitoring for 21 days (the maximum incubation period) from the date of the most recent exposure. The goal is to achieve detection and isolation of any new cases in order to prevent further transmission.³From this the leap to the original diseased body is but a short one. And herein begins my study.

In this paper I seek to address a few questions:

1. In any pandemic in the long 2020 why has finding the diseased body become such a crucial aspect of disease management? Is it more to do with ordering of society or rather fear of social disorder?
2. How did the idea of locating the diseased body come to exert such a strong influence in popular imagination?
3. What are the essential elements in this hunt for a diseased body? And why pandemics always lead to this hunt?
4. Is this a recent phenomenon? If not then why has it acquired such significance in this present times?

¹ “8 Dead in Atlanta Spa Shootings, With Fears of Anti-Asian Bias,” The New York Times, 17 March 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/03/17/us/shooting-atlanta-acworth>, accessed on 19 March 2021.

²Richard A McKay, *Patient Zero and the Making of the AIDS Epidemic* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2017) p. 6

³Mikiko Senga et. al. “Contact Tracing Performance During the Ebola Virus Disease Outbreak in Kenema District, Sierra Leone,” *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences*, Vol. 372, No. 1721, Theme issue: The 2013–2016 West African Ebola Epidemic: Data, Decision-making and Disease control (26 May 2017), p. 1.