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The Fear of Insects, the Fear of Incest, 2014

“There are more of us than we thought. When we speak of men, societies, culture, and objects, there are everywhere crowds of other agents that act, pursue aims unknown to us, and use us to prosper. We may inspect pure water, milk, hands, curtains, sputum, the air we breathe, and see nothing suspect, but millions of other individuals are moving around that we cannot see.”<sup>1</sup>

It is in these terms that Bruno Latour describes what is at play in the Pasteurian revolution. He continues: “the social link is made up, according to the Pasteurians, of those who bring men together and those who bring the microbes together. We cannot form society with the social alone. We have to add the action of microbes. We cannot understand anything about Pasteurism if we do not realize that it has reorganized society in a different way. [...] In order to act effectively between men [...] we have to "make room" for microbes”.<sup>2</sup>

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During my recent trips to Guyana, I noticed that many of my friends, all of them hunters, had round or oval scars of an impressive size on their arms, legs and sometimes even their face, some of these so deep that they pitted the flesh right down to the muscle. Intrigued by the similarity between all of these scars, I asked my friends what had caused them.

This is when I first heard of *Dermatobia Hominis*, whose larva is more commonly called macaque-worm in Guyana. This fly found in South America, from Mexico to Argentina, lives in tropical old-growth forests, that is to say forests that remain untouched by man and provide ideal territory for hunters with their fortuitous game reserves.

To reproduce, this little fly has to capture a mosquito in order to attach its eggs to the abdomen. The larvae may hatch when the mosquito is standing on a warm-blooded host, either a man or primate. This kind of interaction and cooperation between flies and mosquitos, which involves one transporting another, is called phoresy. The practice is very widespread among invertebrates, for example mites, which can be carried very long distances by insects like sandflies. Once the larvae have penetrated the skin of the man or animal, they will grow for a gestation period of 1 to 3 months before coming out, thus completing their metamorphosis. During this whole subcutaneous gestation time, they feed on the host's body, while secreting an antibiotic that prevents infection.

But let us return to those scars that intrigued me so much. It turned out that all of my friends had tried to get rid of the larvae, killing them by various means, but had never succeeded in extracting them completely, and had provoked serious infections in the process. They all agreed that it was best to wait until the natural end of the gestation and the complete metamorphosis of the larva in order to avoid biological complications. I enjoy imagining one of

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p.35.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 35-36

the men with a larva in his body, travelling halfway around the world, from Guyana to France, then China or Australia for example, to allow this little fly—which is too fragile travel that distance on its own—to discover and inhabit new spaces. It is a way of imagining that archipelization of states beyond national boundaries as a chance to find a kind of continuity between the basic interaction and cooperation of a fly, a mite and a mosquito, one in which humans would naturally have their place.

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I am six or seven years old, it is a beautiful day and the sun is high in the sky. The air has an autumnal mildness. At the sight of the reddening treetops, I guess that we are around the month of October. A mountain chain that could be the Alps outlines the horizon. My grandfather is taking me to collect mosquito larvae. He seems very young, not a day over thirty. We cross a pasture fenced in by an electric wire, where around twenty cows are idly grazing. We hear the electricity clicking in the wire with metronomic regularity.

We soon arrive near a watering hole, protected from the sun by the abundant branches of a hazel tree. My grandfather teaches me to distinguish mosquito larvae from those of other insects, and I am soon able to easily recognize their hairy heads. He takes a certain number of them and places them in several large glass bottles. I enjoy watching them squirming to get back up to the top.

A moment later, we are heading towards the electrified fence, in order to take another path that leaves the pasture and joins an asphalt road.

I go first, keeping as low as possible to avoid an electric shock. I then watch my grandfather, who is suddenly 85 years old and having a lot of trouble bending down. He touches the wire. He then lets out a cry and explodes into a cloud of mosquitos that fly around me, completely obscuring the sun. I hear his voice, produced by the sound of thousands of mosquito wings, saying to me: “I’m the shadow of my shadow, and my blood is full of blood.”

I pass out. When I open my eyes, the mosquitos are no longer flying around me. I look at my arms, fluttering with the movement of a thousand wings, covered by those insects, which are feeding on my blood. I violently tear them away by slapping my forearms, leaving one brown smear after another. Suddenly I am watching my red blood cells explode during a malarial fit. I wake up.

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For a few years I have been trying to assemble materials, documents and archives that would enable to me write a biography on my grandfather, Emile Abonnenc, seen through the prism of his scientific work as an entomologist.

It was while consulting a 1952 publication on sandfly dipterans in Guyana and the French West Indies that I was surprised to encounter the *Phlebotomus abbonenci*.

Phlebotomi are small insects, sort of like small mosquitos, mainly found in the tropical regions of Africa and South America (Brazil, Suriname,

French Guiana). Like some mosquito species, they are carriers of agents that are infectious for humans, and could transmit viruses like leishmaniasis.

So in this book listing over a hundred different types of Phlebotomi, I discovered that, as was (and still is) the custom, my grandfather's name had been given to a type of Phlebotomus that had not yet been described at the time.

As Yves Delaporte has noted, "this naming method can no doubt legitimately be called symbolic: baptizing the insect with a patronymic is not only a semiotic act, leading to the application of a preexisting signifier and signified for the sake of convenience; it is also a tribute that, being linked to a natural object, has an absolute, permanent value: as long as Linnaean nomenclature survives and regardless of the future progress of entomological science, this name will continue to be used. It is therefore nothing less than granting immortality to the eponymous person. [...] Much of the nomenclature thus becomes the reflection of the history of entomology, and at every moment its everyday practice updates a whole historical memory (...)." <sup>3</sup>

We could also draw another conclusion by extending this nomenclature's performative sphere of use. In fact, based on this information about mosquitos having the same name as my grandfather, and instead of seeing them as reflections of a historical memory, why not also recognize them as a bunch of relative that are of course nonhuman, but are nevertheless quite alive?

If the Linnaean taxonomy and its use in the description of the fauna of the French Union made it possible to name an insect after one of the first scientists to have captured it, can one not now apply certain kinship codes to attempting to disrupt and extend the effects of this convention? Can a mosquito not be imaged as a relative, a grandfather whose name, presence and unpredictable, shapeless qualities would at the same time be the memory of a localized past as well as the promise a time when, for better or for worse, associations, affinities and families will have irreversibly gone beyond all of those forms of classification inherited from the Enlightenment?

And could the same not be done even with those beetles, bugs, phasmids and crickets carrying the names of Henry Morton Stanley, David Livingstone and Marcel Griaule?

To my mind, the epistemological displacement represented by the fact of seeing these mosquitos and other insects as relatives is a metaphor that could go beyond relations of the kind that the old imperial powers had (and still have) with their former colonies, especially as regards the use of scientific discourse. In fact, many times and under many pretexts, the French colonial enterprise made self-serving use of the work of scientists, doctors and researchers to give a philanthropic and humanitarian justification to France's presence and domination.

Every discovery, in addition to being an advance for science, was also the sign of an ever-deeper, more brutal installation of the colonial administration and its methods of exploiting territories and bodies. The *Phlebotomus abonnenci* could therefore become that uncontrollable sign created almost inadvertently, that memory of a past in which science relied on the colonial

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<sup>3</sup> Yves Delaporte, "Sublaevigatus ou subloevigatus ? Les usages sociaux de la nomenclature chez les entomologistes", in *Des animaux et des Hommes*, Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel, 1987, pp.199-200.

enterprise and vice versa. A sign whose impossible circulation would only reinforce its evocative power. In fact, the circulation of animals, amphibians and insects coming from countries outside the European community is strictly controlled. At least this is what can be read in articles L.236-1 and L.236-9 of the rural code. Contravening these regulations also means risking a 15,000-euro fine, as well as a prison sentence of up to 3 years.

Borders, laws and fear would therefore be the tools, the reasons that make it possible to deny the complexity of the relations we inherit. Antagonistic places and forces, joining everything together while keeping it separate. And despite all of these controls, one can imagine how they might circulate, going from the middle of nowhere to transit centers, from airplane holds to distribution centers and then quarantine centers, liminal spaces that have now become the common places of a life under global capitalism

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In a recent text<sup>4</sup>, American artist Candice Lin reminded us through Lynn Margulis that 9 out of 10 human cells have bacterial origins. Therefore, what we consider and designate as a human thought is in fact the result and evolution of the mass movement of bacteria responding to stimuli as basic as heat, food or changes in light intensity.

She goes on to suggest that we imagine what we believe to be our most irreducible, most private identity as a kind of model of shared evolution, which indebts and links us to the actions of others, of whose existence we would not necessarily be aware of.

Imagine the consequences that this displacement could have on how power is distributed in our globalized world.

And maybe it is this new flesh that we should be calling for, a flesh without norms, inhabited by a multiplicity of viable monstrosities whose survival depends on their ever-renewed cooperation.

It would then be a matter of creating a physical and metaphorical landscape that would place us at the heart of these feelings of attraction and repulsion, perhaps enabling us to imagine other ways of building communities beyond identity presuppositions. During periods of crisis, to the questions “Who makes up that ‘us’, and what could lead someone to join such a group?”, Donna Haraway offers this suggestion: “there has also been a growing recognition of another response through coalition—affinity, not identity.”<sup>5</sup>

And maybe these insects/relatives are there as signs of these new affinities beyond identities.

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<sup>4</sup> The long-lasting intimacy of strangers, ....

<sup>5</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, Abingdon, 1991, p.155.