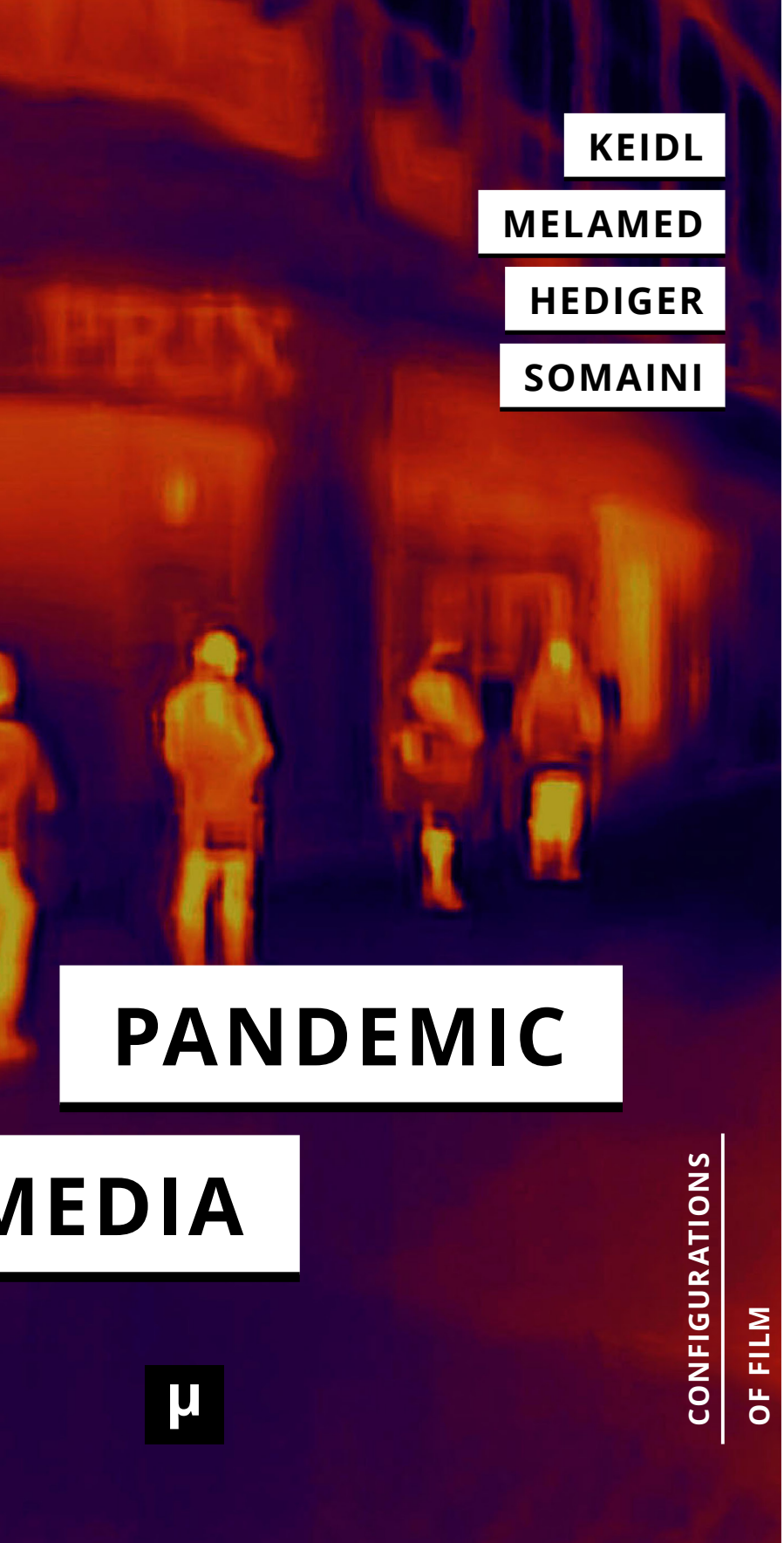

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Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini

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COLONIALISM

CO-RESISTANCE

EPISTEMIC PRIVILEGE

HORROR

INDIGENOUS FILM

RECIPROCITY

Anticipating the Colonial Apocalypse: Jeff Barnaby's *Blood Quantum*

Kester Dyer

This article considers how Jeff Barnaby's Indigenous zombie feature *Blood Quantum*, released online during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores long-standing Indigenous viewpoints which anticipate the tensions magnified by this crisis. Drawing on the film's reception in the media as well as interviews with creative personnel, this essay frames its analyses within Indigenous theoretical paradigms while mobilizing the feminist concept of "epistemic privilege." Thus, it argues that *Blood Quantum*, partly through intertextual allusions to earlier anti-racist horror cinema, highlights the convergence of Indigenous responses to colonialism with interventions that oppose anti-Black racism. In addition, this essay finds that *Blood Quantum* innovates with genre in ways that mirror the emphasis placed on reciprocity by Indigenous thinkers, while firmly rejecting the recentering of Indigenous struggles around white allyship.

Although *Blood Quantum* succeeds in stressing the crucial significance of Indigenous perspectives for contesting injustices compounded by COVID-19, misconception yet remains about the link between the lived realities of Indigenous peoples and the film's aesthetic choices. This essay concludes that such persistent biases confirm the vital urgency of ensuring the increased prominence and broad influence of Indigenous viewpoints to counter the homogenizing tendency of Eurocentric culture.

Introduction

Mi'kmaw director Jeff Barnaby's much anticipated second feature *Blood Quantum* portrays an apocalyptic contagion in a strikingly topical way. Premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2019, its theatrical release, planned for spring 2020, was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, *Blood Quantum*, fully exploiting the allegorical potential of the zombie subgenre, remarkably echoes current global health and political crises. Premised on the spread of a horrific disease that turns non-Indigenous people into zombies but to which Indigenous people are immune, the film's narrative, coupled with an online release coincident with racial tensions in the wake of COVID-19, intensifies engagement with the history and legacy of colonialism in North America. As such, *Blood Quantum* illuminates the crucial significance of Indigenous perspectives for contesting flawed hegemonic social and political structures, and urges viewers to more incisively critique the bases of colonial violence long denounced by Indigenous artists, scholars, activists, and leaders.

Set in 1981 on a fictional reserve that stands in for Barnaby's home community of Listuguj, which was raided by Québec provincial police that same year, *Blood Quantum* builds on this historical moment.[1] This approach correlates with patterns observed by Grace L. Dillon, who notes that Indigenous genre authors often imagine alternate histories to "well-known cataclysms" where

1 On June 12 and 20, 1981, Québec minister for Recreation, Hunting and Fishing Lucien Lessard ordered two provincial police raids on the Mi'kmaw community of Listuguj, aiming to forcibly limit their fishing activities. These events are documented in the 1984 NFB documentary *Incident at Restigouche* by celebrated Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin. Barnaby has credited Obomsawin's work, and this film in particular, as having had a profound impact on his filmmaking career.

historical circumstances are inverted, with Indigenous figures either coming out as victors or at least being at the center of the narrative (2012, 9). In Barnaby's case, the 1981 Restigouche raids clearly correspond to such an event and are combined in *Blood Quantum* with the history of decimating epidemics following Indigenous encounters with Europeans. In the film, Indigenous characters, led by Traylor, the reserve's head of police, Joss, his ex-partner and mother of his youngest son Joseph, and Traylor's father Gisigu, a sword-wielding elder, do battle with the zombified white population and struggle to deal with white survivors seeking refuge on their territory. In parallel, the group also contends with internal discord catalyzed by Lysol, Traylor's troubled older son from a previous relationship, who opposes the accommodation of white survivors. By deploying the zombie, a figure associated with the history of Black enslavement, *Blood Quantum* aligns itself with other non-white peoples oppressed by European colonialism, a move consistent with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's call for Indigenous activists to form "constellations of co-resistance with other movements," including "radical communities of color" (2016, 27). Meanwhile, *Blood Quantum* focusses firmly on a struggle over land in accordance with Glen Coulthard's concept of "grounded normativity," which emphasizes connections between land, knowledge, and ethical relationships (2014, 13). Thus, drawing on the film's reception in the media and interviews with creative personnel, this essay argues that *Blood Quantum*'s basis in Indigenous thought, redeployment of genre, and thematic relevance highlight the perspicuity of Indigenous concerns and the vital importance of scholarly, pedagogical and cultural spaces that center on and heed unobstructed Indigenous viewpoints and epistemologies.

Epistemic Privilege

Several film critics describe *Blood Quantum*'s unsettling relevance as "timely" or "prescient" (Crucchiola 2020; Tallerico 2020; Yamato 2020), but the film rearticulates core ideas long held by Indigenous scholars, leaders, and artists. Accordingly, though he acknowledges the film's timing in terms of reflecting the current sociopolitical moment, Barnaby himself distinguishes this from prescience. "What I am doing here isn't even prescient," he explains, "because it's a pulse that was already in the culture. It's always been in the culture" (Bramesco 2020). Indeed, global human and environmental crises anticipated by Barnaby's film constitute lived reality for Indigenous peoples. The film thus brings perspective to the broader effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Barnaby downplays *Blood Quantum*'s insight in anticipating the wide-ranging consequences of the virus as a mere reflection of longstanding Indigenous realities (Monkman 2020), and points out that "what's interesting about this virus is … it's the way Native people have always lived. It's nothing new for

a Native community to face record unemployment while at the same time dealing with large amounts of diseases" (Crucchiola 2020). Indeed, Dillon's analysis of Indigenous futurism confirms that "it is almost commonplace to think that the Native Apocalypse, if contemplated seriously, has already taken place" (2012, 8). Likewise, Simpson describes her own nation's experience of colonialism as "four centuries of apocalyptic violence in the name of dispossession" (Simpson 2016, 21). Echoing these views, Michael Greyeyes, who plays Traylor in *Blood Quantum*, describes the colonial settler state as "another kind of apocalypse," noting that "his community knows only too well what it feels like to fight against annihilation." Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers, who plays Joss, concurs with Greyeyes. Indigenous people live with "the daily reality of state-sanctioned systemic violence," she explains, "zombie apocalypse or not, our realities wouldn't be all that different" (Wong 2019). And, although some critics fail to comprehend the film's dialogue and acting choices (Ehrlich 2020; Hertz 2020; Tallerico 2020), others recognize the appropriateness of Indigenous actors' performances, acknowledging, for example, that Traylor's father Gisigu (Stonehorse Lone Goeman) reacts to events in a manner that is suitably horrified, yet composed, evidence that this elder has "seen and survived plenty before zombies" (Yamato 2020) (fig. 1). As Greyeyes summarizes, "We're survivors. We totally get it …. Who would be the best survivor in an actual apocalypse? Us" (Wong 2019).

[Figure 1] Gisigu (Stonehorse Lone Goeman), composed as he prepares to defend the land against white zombies (Blood Quantum (2019), Jeff Barnaby).

These views speak to the notion of "epistemic privilege," which, contrary to economic, social, and political privilege, transpires as the possession of a deep understanding of systemic inequalities through one's material disadvantages and the lived experience of discrimination. The concept of epistemic privilege was developed most notably by feminist standpoint theorists and applies to

any marginalized group. Starting from the basis that knowledge is socially situated, it posits that the lived experiences of marginalized groups enable them to discern the deep structural patterns of systems that oppress them, which tend to remain invisible to those in positions of social, political, and economic privilege. Thus, according to Sandra Harding, "standpoint theories map how a social or political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemological, scientific, and political advantage" (2004, 7–8). *Blood Quantum* combines this idea with an innovative take on the zombie movie that links it to analogous Black struggles. Indeed, the film recollects and builds on the resourcefulness attributed to Ben (Duane Jones), the Black hero of George A. Romero's classic *Night of The Living Dead* (1968). Like his Indigenous counterparts in *Blood Quantum*, Ben proves better equipped than white characters to withstand the zombie apocalypse, having personally experienced the legacy of slavery (fig. 2). Likewise, in Barnaby's own allegory, Indigenous characters have developed a physical immunity to the contagion, presumably due to their prior exposure to colonialism and its ongoing iterations. No Black characters appear in *Blood Quantum*, just as no characters from other non-white groups appear in *Night of the Living Dead*. Yet, Romero's film has been compellingly read as a critique of other forms of oppression and imperialism due to the sociopolitical context of its release (the same year as the Tet offensive in Vietnam, and of the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy), and also because of the interconnectedness of class and ethnic conflicts implied by the film, as well as an "absent presence" of other oppressed peoples in its narrative and aesthetics (Higashi 1990). By extension, the absence of non-Indigenous, non-white characters in *Blood Quantum* reciprocates Romero's far-reaching condemnation of white supremacy. Thus, *Blood Quantum*'s implicit reference to its legendary precursor suggests co-resistance against European colonialism manifested as hordes of ravenous white zombies.

[Figure 2] Ben (Duane Jones), better equipped than white characters to withstand the zombie apocalypse (*Night of the Living Dead* (1968), George A. Romero).

Indigenous Reciprocity

Eurocentrism posits western knowledge as inherently superior, obscures its own contradictions, and encourages intrinsically dehumanizing attitudes that preclude reciprocity (Shohat and Stam 1996, 1–3). Its limitations prove not only destructive to those it oppresses, but also to itself. In contrast, many Indigenous thinkers value reciprocity for sustainable life. In *Red Skins, White Masks*, Coulthard draws on anticolonial thinker Frantz Fanon and adapts Marxist theory, rendering the latter compatible with core Indigenous principles. These enriching exchanges mirror Barnaby's genre innovations. Both *Blood Quantum* and *Night of the Living Dead* depict the warning Jean-Paul Sartre directs to Europeans in his introduction to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. "In these shadows from whence a new dawn will break, it is you who are the zombies" (1963, 13), Sartre writes. But *Blood Quantum* enhances the portrayal of (self-)destructive and (self-)dehumanizing colonialism. Shifting the emphasis of Marxism, Coulthard specifies that the settler state primarily targets Indigenous land over Indigenous labor, and that Indigenous struggles are "not only *for* land in a material sense, but also deeply *informed* by what the land *as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations* can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms" (2014, 13). *Blood Quantum* dramatizes this conflict as white survivors covet reserve space above the bodily protection afforded by their Mi'kmaw hosts. Survivors hide the truth to enter the reserve as an emergency measure, not as an opportunity to fundamentally redefine their relationship to the land and others. This epitomizes the west's persistent unwillingness to discern and genuinely tackle the root cause of global crises. Indeed, white survivors and some Mi'kmaq, like Traylor's oldest son Lysol (Kiowa Gordon), replicate the brutality of the colonial system, and end up polluting Indigenous territory as a last viable refuge (fig. 3).

[Figure 3] Lysol's (Kiowa Gordon) anger, though warranted, comes to replicate colonial brutality (*Blood Quantum* (2019), Jeff Barnaby).

By continuing to ignore and suppress Indigenous ideas, *Blood Quantum* suggests, the Eurocentric capitalist and colonialist worldview, unless effectively countered by the very epistemologies it occludes, will destroy itself and others. This aspect of the film's social commentary echoes recent real-world conflicts such as the Wet'suwet'en land defenders' protests against the Coastal GasLink Pipeline through unceded Indigenous territory in British Columbia, a project oxymoronically justified as ecologically progressive ("Trudeau Touts"), and coercively enforced by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, an organization that has now finally acknowledged its own systemic racism (Ballingall 2020; Walsh, LeBlanc and Tait 2020). Indeed, it is telling that certain conservative politicians see the COVID-19 pandemic as a unique opportunity to press on with pipeline building unimpeded by protestors during confinement (Bracken 2020). Seemingly mirroring such issues, *Blood Quantum* memorably visualizes elders' struggles to protect the land when, in his final scene, Gisigu refuses to abandon Mi'kmaw territory again and, filmed in a long shot that emphasizes his tenacious struggle against overwhelming odds, single-handedly battles a swarm of zombies.

Implicating Non-Indigenous Viewers, Decentering White Narratives

Barnaby does not underestimate white society's stubborn refusal to recognize the need for spaces where Indigenous knowledge can flourish unimpeded. Indeed, his hard-hitting style and adoption of the zombie subgenre astutely communicate, through irony and excess, the destructive contradictions of Eurocentrism and the imperative to listen to Indigenous ideas. Barnaby

openly expresses his desire to deploy genre filmmaking to reach "younger and broader audiences," and admits to deliberately instrumentalizing the current hyperpopularity of the zombie film to encourage viewer engagement with difficult issues, both historical and ongoing (Black 2020). Indeed, the premise of *Blood Quantum* is inherently edifying. As lead actor, Michael Greyeyes recognizes, the "idea that colonial history has been reenacted subversively is a message that even the most non-political, non-socially informed person will understand right away" (Yamato 2020). At the same time, *Blood Quantum* heeds Simpson's warning against recentering Indigenous struggles around white allyship (Simpson 2016, 30). Non-Indigenous characters remain largely peripheral. Only Charlie, the pregnant girlfriend of Traylor's and Joss's teenage son Joseph, takes up significant narrative space. Barnaby's initial difficulties in getting his project funded (Lipsett 2020; Wong 2019), however, reflect an ongoing reluctance to support Indigenous-centered stories.[2] Commenting on why he found no takers when he proposed the project to financiers in 2007, Barnaby explains that "nobody was ready to hear that the great capitalist dream was falling apart and colonialism was going to help usher us into destruction. So it was the culture that took catching up to the script. Nothing changed, just the cultural perception of it" (Yamato 2020). In *Blood Quantum*, signs of an attitudinal change are barely perceptible. Only in Charlie's dying moments do we sense a recognition of the West's absurd self-destructiveness. Having just given birth to a daughter, but doomed to die of a zombie bite, Charlie protects the child from herself by handing her over to Joseph and Joss. Charlie then asks to be killed before turning into "one of those dead people." Her child's entrustment to its Indigenous family ironically upturns Canada's genocidal education and childcare policies, a reversal that is underscored in the film's final shot of Joss holding the baby.[3] Here, it is white society that is deemed "unfit" to educate the next generation (fig. 4). Hope for humanity amid the chaos rests partly on the decentering of whiteness signaled by Charlie's self-effacement.

2 In spite of these initial difficulties, *Blood Quantum* was announced as boasting "the largest-ever production budget for an Indigenous film in Canada," according to a 2019 imagineNATIVE report (Black).

3 Residential schools formed a central part of Canada's policy to assimilate all Indigenous people (an aim explicitly stated in 1920 by Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs). This system forcibly separated Indigenous children from their families and communities, placing them in church-run institutions often located at great distances away from their homes, and exposing them to institutionalized neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and high death rates. It is estimated that 150,000 Indigenous children attended residential schools in Canada from 1883 to the late 1990s (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 4). The "Sixties Scoop" is the term popularly attributed to the disproportionate, and largely non-consensual, removal of Indigenous children from their families into provincial childcare, foster care, and adoption programs, a phenomenon intensified in the 1960s but not limited to this decade, and which arguably continues today (Hanson 2009, Vowel 2016).

[Figure 4] Joss (Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers) holding her newborn granddaughter. (*Blood Quantum* (2019), Jeff Barnaby).

Conclusion

With *Blood Quantum,* Barnaby reiterates viewpoints long-expressed by Indigenous commentators, but his innovations with genre and their implicit alignment with co-resistant communities find new ways of challenging western assumptions about the political crises surfacing with global pandemics like COVID-19. In his own words, Barnaby Indigenizes horror (Bramesco 2020). However, not all mainstream critics understand or welcome the stylistic imperatives of these innovations. Unused to sharing communicative space with works anchored in other traditions, these critics blame the author's creative choices for their own inability to follow narrative patterns or empathize with characters (Ehrlich 2020; Hertz 2020; Tallerico 2020; Vincentelli 2020). Such dissent doubtless rests in part with a disproportionate investment in individualism rather than in reciprocity, and with a lack of awareness of the lived realities of marginalized groups. Barry Hertz, for example, reproaches Barnaby for overemphasizing Lysol's complexity, and describes this antagonist as a "side character," thereby failing to grasp Lysol's centrality to the film's exploration of the legacy of colonial policies. Astonished that certain viewers fail to understand the motivations for Lysol's anger even though the film makes clear this character's traumatic experience of the childcare system (Crucchiola 2020), Barnaby elaborates on the considerable burden of informing non-Indigenous audiences about the historical roots of colonialism and white privilege. "A lot of people are not 'getting' the film because they don't know the contextual history underlying the ideas," he observes. "That's always the issue when you're dealing with a non-Native audience; they're not going to understand where you're coming from" (Black 2020). In contrast with the above-mentioned commentators who divorce their appraisal of the film

from anything beyond a superficial understanding of its historical resonance, Joe Lipsett, whose article probes the historical and sociopolitical significance of the film more incisively, praises its character development as well-crafted and its performances as compelling and soliciting audience investment. Thus, although meaningful understanding of Indigenous narrative and its aesthetic logic is attainable for viewers open to non-hegemonic worldviews and approaches, continued miscomprehension only confirms the urgent need to counter the homogenizing tendency of Eurocentric culture.

Meanwhile, *Blood Quantum* also signals its solidarity with parallel interventions opposing anti-Black and other forms of racism. Tellingly, not only is Lysol a character whose complexity exposes him to being misunderstood, he is also the character who most explicitly articulates co-resistance with non-white allies when he stresses the threat posed by white survivors seeking shelter and describes them as "never [having] seen a brown person since their grandparents owned one." In light of recent Black Lives Matter protests, fueled also by the exposure of racial injustice during COVID-19, this alignment further augments the film's apparent prescience. And while enduring Eurocentric stereotypes of Indigenous ghosts tend to mobilize such supernatural figures as a way to "disappear" Indigenous presence from the territory now known as North America, for Michelle Raheja, works by Indigenous artists deploying Indigenous ghosts conversely "draw attention to the embodied present and future" of Indigenous peoples (2011, 146). As such, even though *Blood Quantum* engages with the zombie rather than the ghost, the clairvoyance attributed to this film appears to correlate with Raheja's theorization of Indigenous prophecy. Indeed, *Blood Quantum* combines the zombie's origins in the idea of eternal Black slavery with the parallel idea of eternal Indigenous dispossession. Appropriating both of these tropes, *Blood Quantum* instead casts the white population as eternally (self-)enslaved to boundless systems of accumulation and (self-)dispossessed of the rich reciprocal possibilities of learning from non-western epistemologies.

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Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini (eds.)
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and polities with which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.

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