

<http://somatosphere.net/2020/decentering-metabolism.html/>

## Decentering Metabolism: Peripheral and Southern Diffractions

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In the last few years, a renewed interest in metabolic exchange, and in ideas of a porous and permeable body, has come from disciplines like microbiomics, nutrigenomics, and epigenetics. Moreover, a number of technological changes from food manufacturing to different body/technology interfaces have brought to light conceptions of a “new metabolism” offering “a window onto profound changes to the material and conceptual constitution of environment and ideas of environmental determinism” (Landecker, 2011). Recently, ethnographic texts such as Harris Solomon’s *Metabolic Living* (2016) have further encouraged us to think critically and imaginatively about present transformations of body/world configurations, and questions about bodies and environments (their boundaries, their mechanism of communication, metabolism and incorporation, especially of toxic milieus). In Australia, where both the editors and most of the contributors to this series are based, the bush fires currently raging across the continent and the smoke blanketing cities and filling lungs adds urgent, pressing impetus to questions of ecological vulnerability, wildland flammability, and biological impressionability.

This series of eight short provocations is the result of a one-day workshop at Deakin University, Melbourne, organized through the Alfred Deakin Institute’s “Culture Environment and Science” research stream in August 2019. The workshop’s aim was to diffract the concept of “metabolism” through different disciplines (history, social theory, archaeology, and anthropology), and scales (individual bodies, city, nature). The common thread across these papers is firstly geographical: each approaches metabolism *from postcolonial areas outside Euro-America* and its peculiar cluster of problems and style of investigation. Secondly, and so decentered, each attends in diverse but intersecting ways to *the politics of metabolism*—to considerations of race, (post)coloniality, and class that articulate through, and shape, metabolic processes. Each provocation also seeks to move beyond both the sciences and literal conceptions of biology, to grapple with the cultural, the social, and the figurative dimensions of relationships between porous bodies and the environments they inhabit and produce. A central concern running through many of the pieces is with the layered histories that underpin and produce

contemporary metabolic processes and politics.

The contributions to this special issue (from researchers based in Australia and South Africa) respond to some of the prompts and ideas above. Disciplinarily, the pieces engage the biological sciences—microbiomics, nutrigenomics, and epigenetics—but also bring insights from anthropology, philosophy, archaeology, and cultural studies. The spirit of the workshop was informal, creative, and exploratory, something we have tried to maintain in the final published forum. We like to think that this forum contributes to efforts to move research outside the Euro-Atlantic realm to investigate non-western regions as a *biopolitical laboratory* (Cooper and Waldby, 2014) with escalating patterns of intergenerational metabolic disease, health inequalities, and particular understandings of science and its sociopolitical effects. The ethos of our group reflects a belief in the importance of studying *sciences in societies*, pluralizing epistemologies and places and highlighting frictions and disconnections as knowledge travels across sites (Sivasundaram 2010) to challenge the monolingualism of academic debates. Not just the North looking at the North or the North at the South, but the South looking at the South, and also the North. Indeed, both Australia and South Africa offer vantage points from which to perhaps explode this binary altogether and probe and elaborate differently-configured accounts of geographic, political, and colonial hierarchy.

Metabolism, we believe, remains a particularly fertile site for this task. For its hybrid position between latest advance in science and subjugated body/world configurations of fluidity and plasticity, it offers a unique opportunity to question polarities between traditional and modern knowledge, and focus on forms of epistemic hybridity where past and present, North and South (and otherwise), global and situated are deeply entangled (Anderson, 2009).

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