

# Counter-collaborations towards alternative bio-securitizations

**Mohammed Rafi Arefin**   
University of British Columbia, Canada

**Carolyn Prouse**  
Queen's University, Canada

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## Abstract

In this commentary, we argue that geographical thought and praxis must engage with repressive biosecurity and biosurveillance systems and fight for alternatives. In doing so, geographers can contribute to an emerging anti-colonial and anti-racist interdisciplinary science. We suggest two counter-collaborations towards alternative bio-securitizations: working with those who have been cast out of biopolitical worlds and have long been fostering life for their communities; and working with practitioners of hegemonic science to re-direct biomedical efforts. Building these collaborations would orient biosecurity praxis to those bio-securitizations that already exist at the margins of violent security programs and foster communal and just care relations as the foundation for a liberatory and interdisciplinary science.

## Keywords

Anti-colonial, anti-racist, biosecurity, biosurveillance, science

## Introduction: Towards a science of alternative bio-securitizations

The beginning of 2020 witnessed an unprecedented slowdown of global social and economic relations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst the uncertainty and fear, this momentary slowdown presented an opportunity: a space to fundamentally rethink the political–economic and environmental relations that led to the pandemic. Roy (2020) framed the pandemic as a portal – a passageway through which repressive configurations of capital, racism, and patriarchy could pass through unscathed or be radically transformed. But this portal quickly closed. Almost as soon as things slowed down, states and capital moved to establish an imaginary of a post-pandemic world premised on a return to

‘normalcy’ and intent on bolstering individualism and ‘free’ markets. The lives of some have been made secure at the expense of others through biosecurity and biosurveillance fixes. In this commentary, we argue that geographical thought and praxis must engage with repressive biosecurity and biosurveillance systems and fight for alternatives. In doing so, geographers can contribute to an emerging anti-colonial and anti-racist science that has the

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### Corresponding author:

Mohammed Rafi Arefin, Department of Geography, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada V6T 1Z4.

Email: rafi.arefin@ubc.ca

ability to reopen and reconsider the portal that Roy astutely identified.

### **Against bio-necro collaborations**

In the move to return to a pre-pandemic world, those who are older, disabled, immunocompromised, and rendered marginal have been continually cast out and left to die, discarded in the race to return to normal (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Prouse et al., 2020). How the recent intensification of biosecurity and biosurveillance regimes exacerbate old and create new socio-spatial inequalities is still an open question, but thus far we have witnessed a number of concerning trends. Sentinel sites for the detection of emerging viral variants, such as in South Africa, have experienced border closures and limited vaccine access, preserving the uneven security of the overdeveloped world. Meanwhile, in migrant labour-dependent economies like Singapore, biological information collected through wastewater surveillance has been used to monitor and quarantine workers who are thousands of kilometers away from their homes and loved ones (for more details on this program, see National Environmental Agency, 2020). To tease out these kinds of inequitable impacts of security and surveillance, infrastructures require careful geographic analysis attuned to social and spatial justice.

Yet much of the existing geographical literature on biosecurity with which we can analyze this moment carries potential limitations. Five years before the COVID-19 pandemic, geographer Kezia Barker had already suggested that the field of biosecurity theorization had 'reached a moment of saturation' (2015: 362). She was responding to the biopolitical preoccupations of Foucauldian and actor-network theory that emerged soon after 9/11 (2001) and SARS-CoV-1 (2003), which focused on the temporalities (Anderson, 2010; Cooper, 2006), spatialities (Hinchliffe et al., 2013; Mansfield, 2012), and juridical technologies (Braun, 2007) for making and managing the life of populations. At the time, Barker recognized that some theorizations were still underdeveloped in the field, especially political-economic approaches. She argued that while it was crucial to re-think

biosecurity theory, it was ultimately time to re-imagine biosecurity and 'alternative bio-securitizations' (Barker, 2015: 362).

We believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened the need to develop tools, programs, and care relations based not in individualism and markets, but in 'alternative bio-securitizations' grounded in communal obligations. We argue that to envision and enact alternative bio-securitizations requires counter-hegemonic collaborations based in an anti-colonial and anti-racist science. Anti-colonial and anti-racist science (Benjamin, 2019a, 2019b; Browne, 2015; Liboiron, 2021) centres the life and flourishing of those cast out of biopolitical worlds who have always fostered life outside of or at the margins of hegemonic regimes. Counter-collaborations must endeavour to be anti-colonial so as not to assume mastery over land, nature, and bodily relations (Liboiron, 2021; Tallbear, 2013). They must be founded in anti-racism to pinpoint and dismantle the ways racialized difference is constructed and sedimented into health governance, surveillance, and technology, with the effect of naturalizing and justifying inequality (Braun, 2021). Finally, they must continue to tackle the obstacles of capital and ableism that naturalize eugenicist policies and prevent collective liberation (Parry, 2004; Sins Invalid, 2019).

In short, we are calling for a rupture in, and reorientation of, biosecurity and surveillance research. This reorientation builds collaborations against the biosecurity logics that both make live and make die, the latter of which Ahuja (2016) and Puar (2007) call 'bio-necro collaborations'. In what follows, we draw on existing and emerging work to suggest two counter-collaborations needed for an anti-colonial and anti-racist science in service of alternative bio-securitizations. First, we call for theorizing with and working alongside those cast out of the life-making worlds of 'biopolitics', who have always foregrounded care relations to protect life. Second, we see the need to renew the call and urgency to work with and alongside those studying pathogens and disease-mitigating techniques. We end by suggesting that these counter-collaborations can and should start in our own institutional lives.

## Counter-collaboration 1

Following scholars such as Mbembe (2019), Browne (2015), and Fiske (1998), we contend that Foucauldian biopolitical foci do not fully account for the life and death worlds of those cast out of, or differentially incorporated into, biosecurity and surveillance endeavours, nor have they historically addressed how imperialism and colonialism are central to the racialized, ableist, and classist organization of life itself. Ahuja (2016) begins to approach this problem by drawing on Mbembe's necropolitics, arguing that imperial forms of biosecurity constitute a 'bio-necro collaboration' (see also Puar, 2007) that involves both making live *and* making die. Foregrounding the necropolitical nature of the biopolitical project casts a spotlight on those left out – those actively killed in the name of certain life – while recognizing that 'those humans targeted for biopolitical optimization constitute a shrinking population' (Ahuja, 2016: xii).

Highlighting the necropolitical – the racialized, the disabled – is not simply a theoretical move. Collaborating in close relation with scholars who are already doing this work forces the hegemonic centre of biosecurity studies to reckon with the fact that *alternative bio-securitizations* have always existed, sustained by those made expendable in biopolitical, colonial-capitalist projects. Indigenous geographies and ways of knowing have since time immemorial recognized the importance of co-relational land stewardship, in a mode of ontological reciprocity that far predates relational notions of OneHealth, the latter now a global framework for mitigating zoonotic disease (Mubareka et al., 2022; Todd, 2016). An anti-colonial biosecurity science that takes Indigenous cosmologies seriously would write against any science that 'assumes mastery over Nature' (Liboiron, 2021: 20). At the same, it would centre Indigenous modes of co-relational care and the Indigenous peoples who have long been doing this work.

Black studies scholars and geographers, too, point to openings for re-thinking biosecurity that is deeply rooted in a liberatory and abolitionist praxis. In her work on bringing blackness into

surveillance studies, Browne calls racializing surveillance 'a technology of social control where surveillance practices, policies, and performances concern the production of norms pertaining to race and exercise a "power to define what is in or out of place"' (2015: 16). But in racializing surveillance, Browne also emphasizes how, since at least the transatlantic slave trade, Black people have employed tactics of resistance, refusal, and care for one another, outside the gaze of surveillance. Drawing on Thacker (2006), who himself builds on a Fanonian anti-colonial science, Browne calls for a critical biometric consciousness that unsettles political-economic inequities in the making and rolling out of surveillance technologies, while privileging public debate, accountability, and rights over one's bodily (and community) sovereignty in alternative-surveillance projects. It is in these calls for new and already-existing alternatives that we see the power to build networks of counter-hegemonic collaborations against dominant bio-necro collaborations.

## Counter-collaboration 2

Although collaborating on alternative bio-securitizations is a crucial step towards a more just, life-giving world, we argue that it is also necessary to foster cautious collaborations with those developing the hegemonic tools of biosecurity and biosurveillance in order to serve those people and communities harmed by dominant science. As Fanon (1994) reminds us, many of the tools and knowledges of biomedical science can be usefully applied, and even appropriated, towards more just causes when protecting *all* life is the foundation of scientific and medical practice. Although calls for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration are not new in geographies of biosecurity (see Craddock and Hinchliffe, 2015), the current moment necessitates a renewal of this call towards supporting an emergent anti-colonial and anti-racist science.

Critical geographers are often wary of collaborations with natural scientists and engineers because of deep ontological and epistemological differences.

Without erasing these differences, we see the need to develop closer ties to create successful counter-collaborations. This requires a cautious but meaningful attempt to, in Schuurman and Pratt's words, tackle 'enframing assumptions while remaining invested in the subject' (2010: 291). What might it look like for geographers to approach biosecurity and biosurveillance with care as a foundation for scientific collaboration?

Some guides for this work exist within geography and the allied social sciences. Craddock and Hinchliffe (2015) outline a few ways critics of biosecurity can collaborate with scientists, including foregrounding uneven geographies, reframing problems, and, importantly, redistributing expertise. De Wolfe et al. (2021) put this impetus to work in a focused way, crafting collaboration between natural, biomedical, and social scientists that shows how racial variables have served as an unjust and imprecise proxy in the biomedical sciences obscuring structural drivers of inequality. They provide a framework for interdisciplinary collaboration to replace racist proxies with the analysis of structural racial, racist, and racialized drivers of inequality. From a different ontological foundation, anti-colonial geographer and Métis scientist Max Liboiron shows how scientific fields' enframing assumptions are built on settler and colonial land relations which 'strip away the complexities of Land' (2021: 39-40). They provide the praxis of an anti-colonial collaborative science that is not a rejection of Western science but a critique of the ways dominant science erases certain ways of knowing, practices, and evidence (Liboiron, 2021).

Drawing inspiration from these extant relationships, we see the need for collaborating with those producing the technics of biosecurity and biosurveillance in order to materially support alternative-biosecuritizations. Working towards such collaborations provides the material infrastructure for biosecuritizations and practices that are oriented towards social and spatial justice. A popular and anti-colonial biosecurity science would highlight the inequitable contexts in which the tools of biosecurity are made and deployed and would centre community control, data sovereignty, and data justice in caring for all lifeworlds.

## Conclusion

Where might geographers of biosecurity begin to foster counter-collaborations with those marginalized by biosecurity praxis *and* those building the science? As universities become the frontlines in replacing communal forms of care with increased forms of surveillance or abandoning public health measures all together, institutions of higher education are contested sites over the future of biosecurity and biosurveillance. As such, we argue that a starting point towards building these counter-collaborations is in our own places of work. By collectively organizing with students, staff, and other faculty across disciplines, universities can serve as the prototypes of – building on Browne (2015) and Thacker's phrase (2006) – a collective critical biosecurity and surveillance consciousness, a mode of knowledge production and action that shifts the focus of public health surveillance and security measures from the individual to the communal while centering care and justice based in anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist principles. There already exist, inside and outside the discipline, robust guides for this re-imagining of alternative biosecuritizations, from the medical programs of the Black Panthers (Nelson, 2013) to the activism of socialist patient collectives (Alder-Bolton and Vierkant, 2022), and Indigenous geographies of health and wellness (Richmond and Nightingale, 2021). As we think through the future of geographical thought and praxis, we suggest mobilizing geographical tools in collaboration with these already-existing programs and actions, in service of constructive liberatory futures in ongoing crises of care.

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## ORCID iD

Mohammed Rafi Arefin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9227-9587>

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