

## Tick Problematic: Motherhood as a Posthuman Predicament

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This story happens on the kind of late summer day pictured above, a day when I took my son to a local lake to throw stones, ride his bicycle, and, when we were both good and sweaty, to swim. Like many mothers, I love to be in 'nature'. I feel connected to it, humbled by it. I want to nurture a healthy 'natureculture' (see: Haraway, 2003). I want to do work to restore the balance between largely non-human ecologies and the human-made systems that touch and sully every part of them. I feel one-ness, humility

and gratitude, as I swim beside my kid on that August afternoon, a big-sky afternoon, an expansive, even endless afternoon, an afternoon of which we seem to be the tiniest, luckiest part.

And then, behind his ear, in a white spot made clear by the pushing-aside of his wet hair, I see an even tinier part of the afternoon: a tick attached to my child's nape. (Bruno Latour and Michael Callon would call it his "nuque." A lovely French word.) Suddenly, I am thrown out of one reality and into a new one. I want no part of this connection to nature. This connection implies disease, medicalized pathology, and long, drawn-out worry.

How does a tick translate a 'networked effect' (see: Latour, 2004) into a message that a mother might not want to grapple with? A tick attached to the back of my son's neck is an obligatory passage point into at least three networks of which I am aware in real time, networks that form a grid around my commitments as mother, scholar, and ostensible environmentalist. I am aware of these networks because I am a scholar of scientific communication, and I think of them even as I deal with the tick, as I try to breathe calmly and not squeeze its body, as I try to remove its bloodthirsty insectoid snout from my child's soft flesh:

- (1) a biome that has begun to extend further south because of anthropogenic climate change and thus allowed for more of the species to flourish;
- (2) an epidemiological ecosystem that has become more concentrated, stressed, and in proximity to human activity, all of which make it likely that this tick carries one or more strains of intracellular bacteria that have recently become more well-known and widespread, and
- (3) a network of data collection and database management in which this tick would be a set of data points, if I were to send it in to the black box of tick science. This network--the database that produces statistical knowledge at a large scale--is the focus of the rest of this piece.

But, to be more heavy-handed, all of this is to say: if all three of these networks' resistance were translated into an English-language telegram from an ecosystem, the telegram might (in one version of the translation) read: Back off. Get out of here. Stop multiplying. I am ill-equipped to receive this message.

After frantically googling and calling the doctor, knowing that my only sure move is to wait 8-10 days and watch for tell-tale bull's eye rash and fever, I send the dead tick, starved and dried up inside of a plastic piece of Toast Chee wrapper, much like a dried

up roach from my youth (though not the entomological kind), to the Laboratory of Medical Zoology at the University of Massachusetts. There, it will become part of their database, and they will run tests to detect any pathogens potentially swimming in my kid's blood. I am pretty sure at the outset that the experience isn't going to be satisfying, but it might be rhetorically fascinating [1]. I receive this encouraging email when the lab receives the tick:

TickReport Order #54847 Update

**Hello,**

This email confirms that we have received your specimen related to order #54847 at our laboratory and have begun the identification process. In the event your specimen is determined to not be a **tick**, you will be immediately notified. Otherwise our laboratory will begin the testing process.

Testing is completed within 1-3 business days depending on order volume. You will be notified by email as soon as the tests results are available. You may also check the status of your TickReport anytime by clicking the link below.



[View TickReport](#)

If we can assist you in any way, please send an email to [support@tickreport.com](mailto:support@tickreport.com), or simply reply to this email.

And then after two more days I am able to click the link for my full "tick report." Here it is, complete with a cute snapshot of the tick itself, dead or possibly interminably dormant, sleeping the sleep of organisms highly evolved for survival:

**Laboratory Identification**

Species: *Amblyomma maculatum* (Gulf Coast tick)  
Sex: male  
Stage: adult  
Feeding State: No visible signs of feeding (flat)

**Internal Quality Control Tests**

Test	Result	Cost
Tick DNA Quality	PASSED	included
Tick RNA Quality	PASSED	included

**Test Results**

Pathogen	Result Date	Result	Cost
<i>Borrelia general species</i> <small>( Lyme or relapsing fever- oenetic)</small>	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included

**Test Package**

Current Package: Comprehensive Package - All Available Tests

**Customer & Host Information**

**Customer Contact:**  
Kate Maddalena  
5020 Huntingdon Dr.  
Raleigh, NC 27606  
  
Phone: 9195591519  
Email: themaddalenas@gmail.com

**Where tick was found:**  
City: Raleigh  
State: NC  
Zip: 27606

**Host Information:**  
Label: Tick #1  
Source: human

The catchphrase in the top right corner ironically reads: “because a piece of data is peace of mind.” If communication scholars know anything about communicating medicine, we certainly know that one piece of data is often quite the opposite of “peace of mind.” Also, in the techno-corporate jargon of this lab, I am referred to as a “customer”--a way of distinguishing me, I think, from a “patient.”

I should note that my purpose here is not to critique the lab out of hand for these rhetorical choices. I understand them. They do not surprise me. I am aware that the most impactful action I’ve taken by sending a tick to Amherst, MA is to contribute to a data set I have added one datum to data that may help a knowledge-making network establish a climate change correlation with tick-borne illness (i.e. establish a phenomenon) and map the occurrences of that illness. That data may also (eventually) help to establish some kind of policy or action change in response. I do wonder, though, how many other mothers have this same level of awareness. Specifically--I am deeply aware that what they find out won’t bring them closure or “peace of mind.”

Pathogen	Result Date	Result	Cost
<i>Borrelia general species</i> (Lyme or relapsing fever- generic)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included
<i>Borrelia burgdorferi sensu lato</i> (Lyme borreliosis- specific)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included
<i>Borrelia miyamotoi</i> (Hard tick relapsing fever)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included
<i>Borrelia mayonii</i> (Lyme borreliosis)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included
<i>Babesia microti</i> (Babesiosis often found in humans)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included
<i>Ehrlichia muris-Like Agent</i> (Ehrlichiosis)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included
<i>Anaplasma phagocytophilum</i> (Human Granulocytic Anaplasmosis; HGA)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included
<i>Borrelia lonestari</i> (Southern Tick-Associated Rash Illness; STARI)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included
<i>Rickettsia rickettsii</i> (Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever; RMSF)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included
<i>Rickettsia philipii</i> (Pacific Coast Tick Fever)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included
<i>Rickettsia parkeri</i> (Rickettsia parkeri rickettsiosis)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	POSITIVE	included
<i>Francisella tularensis</i> (Tularemia)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included
<i>Ehrlichia chaffeensis</i> (Human Monocytic Ehrlichiosis)	08/20/2018 @ 11:51 AM EDT	NEGATIVE	included

**Host Information:**

Label: Tick #1  
Source: human  
Gender: male  
Age: 4  
Attached: Yes  
Site of Attachment: Head  
Time Attached: 12 Hours  
Rash Present: Yes  
Rash Size: 2"

Date tick was removed: 2018-07-22

Customer Notes: The host had a fever 14 days after the bite (not RMSF), and a rash on the ear and face 18 days after. We are concerned about an undetected tick-borne illness.

And then, of course, comes the piece of data that is most definitely not peace of mind. There, in a series of comforting, black, negative-result tests, is the bright-red positive. Almost perfect, but not quite, like every test I ever took in high school. The tick is a carrier of *Rickettsia parkeri*, a bacterium related to the one that causes Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (and has, I have since learned, been identified as a cause of RMS since 2004). At this point the stuff I already know about science communication and especially medical communication ends, and I really start to learn something.

I call my child's doctor, and I learn definitively what I already suspect: knowing that a tick carries this particular pathogen has no effect on how we treat my son. If the tick had begun a bloodmeal (all signs pointed to no), or if there were a black spot at the bite, he would go on antibiotics, but if not, we wait and watch.

The lived-in substrate for the discursive spaces of medicine and science is an environment. It has trees and lakes and ticks in it. It is the realm of mothers and children, where I live, painfully aware of the discursive spaces, as well. In the discursive spaces, I am perhaps a datum, a word. The discursive space of science translates the world; the discursive space of medicine translates the body. But there is only me to translate my body in the world. More poignantly, there is only me to translate this smaller body that I hubristically brought into the world.

Motherhood is a posthuman predicament (see: Braidotti, 2019). The mother subject position is pretty ill-prepared to listen to ecosystem mediators for multiple, wicked reasons. I am a mother, and as such, I am well-equipped to see how ill-equipped I am to hear an ecosystem speaking in certain ways. If you're thinking, "that proposition sounds like a masochistic exercise in self-loathing," you're not wrong. How might an ecology be able to speak? How are we able to listen? These questions are the philosophical starting point for conversations in environmental communication, and inventing answers becomes immediately complicated. For my own part, I tend to reframe the second question into something more personal and critical, something like, "why am I unable to listen?" The posthuman predicament is a vulnerable, self-critical one. This particular flavor of discomfort isn't new to theories of environmental communication, but it is newly exigent. How can we turn the discomfort into right-minded action?

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[1] I'm not including the fee in this image because it's too embarrassing. (And I should note--the price to get lab results back from UM's lab is an obstacle to participation at best and predatory on an emotionally compromised audience like my mother-self at worst.)

[2] My own questioning owes much to others' work in rhetoric of science, technology, and medicine. For example: Nathan and Meredith Johnson's provocative presentation at the 2018 Association for the Rhetoric of Science, Technology, and Medicine (ARSTM) NCA preconference (<http://www.arstmonline.org/meetings/prior-cfps-schedules/arstmnca-2018-schedule/>) in Salt Lake City, "Moralizing the evidence of materialisms," which posited their child's embodied experience and arguments against theory-laden language in the context of a socially-conscious, technological solution to a social-environmental problem (a bus system) and Lynda Olman (formerly Walsh)'s work on Gray Wolves. Olman's recent article in *Written Communication* (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088319842566>) focuses on the written discourse of wildlife advocacy, but in 2018 at ARSTM she asked the question, "how do the wolves advocate for themselves, and how can a rancher hear them?" (to paraphrase). These approaches posit the human experience of empathy for other humans as a major stumbling block to extending a similar empathy to ecosystems.

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Johnson, N. R. & Johnson, M. A. (2018). Moralizing the evidence of materialisms. Presented at ARSTM Preconference, Salt Lake City, UT, 2018.

Latour, B. (2004). Politics of nature. Harvard University Press.

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