

“The Map Is (k)Not” (sculpture: copper wire, rope, moss foam balls)

Artist: Dr. Rimona Afana, Visiting Scholar at the Vulnerability Initiative, Emory School of Law

Scientist: Dr. Patricia Griffin, Chief of the CDC Enteric Diseases Epidemiology Branch

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each year nearly 600 million, or almost 1 in 10 people in the world, fall ill after consuming contaminated food. Of these, 420,000 die, including 125,000 children under the age of 5, according to 2015 WHO estimates. Over 250 foodborne diseases have been identified, infections caused by bacteria, viruses, parasites, harmful toxins and chemicals which contaminate food. The most common germs causing foodborne illnesses in the United States are: norovirus, Salmonella, Clostridium perfringens, Campylobacter, and Staphylococcus aureus. Other pathogens that cause fewer illnesses, but more likely result in hospitalizations are: Clostridium botulinum, Listeria, Escherichia coli, and Vibrio. Enteric bacteria are acquired through contaminated food and water, by contact with animals or their environments, or by contact with the feces of an infected person.

Dr. Patricia Griffin directs the Enteric Diseases Epidemiology Branch at CDC. Her branch conducts research on human illness due to bacterial agents such as Salmonella and E. coli O157, collects reports of investigated outbreaks, tracks trends in illnesses, and maps data on the ties between infections and particular foods. To identify the causes, sources and manifestations of illness, and propose prevention measures, Patricia’s branch involves close collaboration between epidemiologists, microbiologists, public health statisticians, regulatory agencies and health departments. Branch programs include FoodNet, the National Outbreak Reporting System, and the human epidemiology arm of the National Antimicrobial Monitoring System for Enteric Bacteria.

Between November 2018 and February 2019 I met several times with Patricia and her colleagues Robert Breazu, Jessica Healy, and Sean Browning. Behind epidemiology and microbiology studies, statistics reports and outreach efforts, I discovered people who had fallen in love with these microorganisms with devastating macro effects. One morning it dawned on me that my research at the Vulnerability and the Human Condition Initiative and what I had been learning on enteric diseases are connected. We are all vulnerable throughout our life span, sources compounding our inherent vulnerability are omnipresent, and we are interdependent. That made me see humans-animals-plants as a continuum of both vulnerability and of potential resilience. Vulnerability theory, so far with mostly jurisprudence applications, foregrounds vulnerability as universal and constant. As Prof. Martha Fineman puts it, vulnerability stems from our human condition: embodied (our existence depends on a fragile material case, the body) and embedded (we are never autonomous but depend on others in complex ways).

These ideas found a similar expression in my dialogues with Patricia and her team, who highlighted interconnectedness in the transmission, treatment and prevention of enteric diseases. In this sculpture, copper wire passes through nodes (moss balls), abstract representations of animals, plants, humans, institutions. During our dialogues I felt their work could be imagined as making sense of a complex network, both in understanding the elements of a disease and in terms of prevention/outreach: the multiple actors, locally and nationally, they need to engage with. While for hours tying knots in rope to cover the wire frame, I felt transported to different physical, conceptual, symbolical terrains: fishermen knots, Gordian knots, the ouroboros, the lemniscate...to me all related to this abstruse juncture between us and our environment. My title, “The Map is (k)Not” is a twist on Alfred Korzybski’s dictum “The map is not the territory”, hinting at the chasm between an object and its representation.



Sculpture exhibited through March-April 2019 at the Carlos Museum, the Carter Center, Georgia Tech, and at the Atlanta Science Festival Expo, part of the Science.Art.Wonder program.