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Narrative Immunities: The Logic of Infection and Defense in American Speculative Fiction

Riley R. McDonald, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Schuster, Joshua, *The University of Western Ontario*

Joint Supervisor: Carmichael, Thomas, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English

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Abstract

In this project I analyze the roles that notions of viruses and immunities and their figurations play within the narrative discourse of speculative fiction. Focusing on a series of texts from twentieth- and twenty-first century American fiction, I seek to examine the ways in which the dialectical confrontation between infection and immunity is explored, reified, or challenged on a narrative level. The terms “virus” and “immunity,” so intrinsic to life sciences, have come into use to describe specific micro-organisms and biological processes only within the last 150 years. Yet these terms possess a significantly longer history in political, legalistic, and philosophical discourses. As such, their use in describing biological activities is always, at some level, a cultivated form of narrative. Central to my discussion is what I call “narrative immunity,” the sense that the narrative perspective within a text acts as an immunizing factor against the threat of viral contamination. Narrative immunity is a way of constructing, within a literary world undergoing a cataclysmic structural event (as is often the case in the plots of viral outbreak), a space and identity of familiarity and recognition for the reader. As such, looking at how immunity and infection are narrated within fiction, I posit, allows us to gain an understanding of how discourses of biopolitics germinate and develop along narrative lines.

Through a reading of Jack London, William S. Burroughs, Samuel R. Delany, and Colson Whitehead, I argue that narrative immunity may be deployed in a variety of ideological ways, and that it can support both reactionary impulses and radical liberatory projects. What I argue throughout is that an understanding of how viral infection and immune defense are encoded within the narrative logic of a text allows us a means of grasping the biopolitical constructivism that frequently informs cultural production.

Keywords

Virus; immunity; speculative fiction; Jack London; Colson Whitehead; zombies; plague; Samuel R. Delany; HIV/AIDS; Cold War; American literature; William S. Burroughs; genre study; narratology; materialism; Roberto Esposito; biopolitics; narrative immunity

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Introduction

“As a biological concept, the cell is surely overdetermined to a considerable degree”

(Georges Canguilhem, *A Vital Rationalist*)

“The power of the viral image came from its simultaneous invocation of disgust and fascination, the mundane and the mystical”

(Priscilla Wald, *Contagious*)

“Pasteur knew how important it was to keep the plain people thrilled about microbe hunting—it was the *drama* of science that they can understand”

(Paul de Kruif, *Microbe Hunters*)

In 1926, Paul de Kruif, a microbiologist who had assisted the American novelist Sinclair Lewis in writing *Arrowsmith* (1925), the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about the life of an idealistic young biologist, published his own non-fiction account of a canon of medical heroes who made legible the microbial world. Titled *Microbe Hunters*, de Kruif depicted a Manichean world of “immensely small assassins” and the noble “death fighters” who sought to find and eradicate them (3). Profiling such medical luminaries as Louis Pasteur, Robert Koch, Walter Reed, and Paul Ehrlich, and written in a breathless, bombastic style, de Kruif details a progressive narrative of entities that, in spite of their microscopic size, prove to be “much more efficient murderers than the guillotine or the cannon of Waterloo” (57). The power of these beings is held in check only by those figures possessed of a singular curiosity and ingenuity: “to-day we demand with a great hue and cry more laboratories, more microbe hunters, better paid searchers to free us from the diseases that scourge us. How futile! For progress, God must send us a few more infernal marvelous searchers of the kind of Robert Koch” (124). What *Microbe Hunters* returns to again and again is the idea that scientific discovery is a narrative, and that science is both a war with deadly creatures and an ameliorating tale of making visible

(and, therefore, comprehensible) the world around us. It is no accident that de Kruif begins his heroic litany with Anton van Leeuwenhoek, the seventeenth-century inventor of the microscope. For de Kruif, it was Leeuwenhoek who had first “stolen upon and peeped into a fantastic sub-visible world of little things, creatures that had lived, had bred, had battled, had died, completely hidden from and unknown to all men from the beginning of time” (11).

This rhetoric recurs in his chapter on Elie Metchnikoff, the first scientist to formulate a theory of “natural immunity,” the belief that the body possessed microorganisms of its own to defend itself against foreign invaders. In words remarkably similar to those describing Leeuwenhoek’s journey, de Kruif extols how Metchnikoff “had peeped prettily into a thrilling, deadly struggle on a tiny scale, he had spied upon the up till now completely mysterious way in which *certain* living creatures defend themselves against their would-be assassins” (216). A few pages later, de Kruif makes this idea of science as a narrative explicit when he remarks that “[Metchnikoff’s] theory of immunity—it would be better to call it an exciting romance, rather than a theory—this story we that we are immune because of a kind of battle royal between our own phagocytes and marauding microbes, this yarn had thrown the searchers of Europe into an uproar” (220-221). War, discovery, and storytelling become synonymous in de Kruif’s historiographic method, and he repeatedly underscores that viral outbreaks and immunities are accepted and considered as a narrative style. Yet it is really only one story that de Kruif tells over and over again: the triumph of science and discovery over the fears of the unknown and superstitions of the unlearned. De Kruif casts the history of microbiology as a teleology, in accord with Pasteur’s observation that “[i]t is within the

power of man to make parasitic maladies disappear from the face of the earth” (qtd. in 124). Echoing Pasteur, de Kruif concludes his lengthy exegesis with this optimistic proclamation: “[i]t is as sure as the sun following the dawn of to-morrow that there will be other microbe hunters to mold other magic bullets, surer, safer, bullets to wipe out for always the most malignant microbes of which this history has told” (358). The story may not be finished, but it is moving toward a definitive conclusion.

My project is formulated in response to how de Kruif (and others) see the *narrative shape* of viral outbreak and immunity. If viruses and immunities can be represented in narrative terms, I seek to gain a better understanding of how these narratives can be deployed and interrogated. Briefly put, this work attempts to think through a series of questions: how does twentieth and twenty-first-century American literature read and interpret infection and immunity? How does (speculative) literature prime us to consider questions about viruses, immunities, and the embodiments and environments that are shaped by these visions? In what follows, I wish to trace some of the subsequent questions that have developed from this original quandary, and think through some of the critical and theoretical responses to these ideas. Viruses offer a wealth of political, medical, philosophical, economic, and existential questions, and I wish to insert the literary into this company. How does literature seek to understand how viruses and those afflicted by such infections? How are we meant to narratively, formally, and thematically recognize these questions and what answers (or non-answers) does literature provide? What practices are involved in reading viruses, and how can we consider the role of narrative in disseminating these ideas? To begin with these examinations, I suggest that speculative literature foregrounds the *narrative body* as the

primary site of investigation into the notion of contamination and immunity. That is, the body is not just a material object, but one that is always mobilized in order to organize a narrative. By emphasizing the *narratological* aspect of viral narrative, this project endeavours to explore the ways that spaces and subjectivities become shaped and reshaped by microbial contamination.

A Brief History of the Virus

Viruses—as biological organisms and as conceptual frameworks—become more peculiar the longer one looks at them. The virus is an exemplar of what Timothy Morton calls the “strange stranger,” the thing or identity that becomes more enigmatic, withdraws further from our sense of categorical understanding, the more we engage and recognize it: “[t]he strange stranger is not just the ‘other’—the ‘self’ is the other. Since there is no (solid, lasting, independent, single) self, we are the strange stranger: ‘I is an other’” (*Ecological Thought* 87). The strange stranger deconstructs the concepts of clearly defined bodies and boundaries between the imaginaries of self and other, creating a bleeding effect of flowing materialities. Such are the feelings and qualities raised by the material manifestation of the virus. Or so we desire. Viruses, as most scientists and thinkers observe, are neither alive nor not-alive—they exist along a strange continuum that possesses characteristics beholden to what we would consider life and that which falls outside its categories. Viruses are strands of RNA encased within a protein shell that allows them to enter other organisms. Lacking a DNA component, viruses therefore lack the ability to reproduce themselves—they require the machinery of other cells in order to successfully produce future iterations. Viruses behave in ways similar to life and yet are denied a key component in what makes life. This seemingly paradoxical positioning has

led to innumerable fascinated proclamations about how viruses disrupt the simplistic border determinations of life and death, forcing us to rethink such fundamental ontological categories through more supple criteria.

Within the scope of biochemistry and medicine, viruses are a relatively “new” discovery, even though their effects have been felt for millennia. Diseases like polio, smallpox, and yellow fever, have long ravaged human and non-human populations, but it has been little over a hundred years since viruses were understood as organisms and less than a century since scientists were first able to visually confirm their existence. Indeed, initially there was much confusion about what a virus actually *was*. While the bacteriological revolution of the late-nineteenth century, heralded by Louis Pasteur, Robert Koch, and others helped to identify the existence of bacteria and prove their reproductive generation, still smaller particles were unable to be located. In 1879, tobacco crops in the Netherlands were devastated by an unknown disease.¹ In an attempt to uncover the cause, Dutch scientist Martinus Willem Beijerinck, studying a disease affecting tobacco plants, applied Koch’s filtration principles only to find that plants still were affected by a disease—something far smaller than a bacterium.² Beijerinck referred

¹ Early attempts to diagnose this illness were performed by scientists Adolph Mayer and Dmitri Ivanovsky at different points. Both were able to figure out that the cause of the plant sickness was not due to bacteria, but were unable to say positively what organism was causing the infection (see Zimmer 4 for Mayer, and Flint 10 for Ivanovsky’s experiments). Ivanovsky is sometimes attributed the honour of first postulating the existence of viruses, but scientists have since noted that Ivanovsky “assumed that his infectious liquid was caused by a defect in his porcelain filter,” and that “he did not identify the tobacco mosaic disease pathogen as a distinctive agent” (Wendell and Valens 24; Flint 11).

² Viruses are exponentially smaller organisms than bacteria. Stanley and Valens suggest that “[t]he volume of the average [bacterial] germ is perhaps 10,000 times as great as that of the average virus” (95). To underline this point further, Stanley and Valens explain that “the millimeter is a convenient measure for camera lenses, the micron for living cells and the millimicron for viruses—or 1000 millimicrons to a micron (and 1 000 000 millimicrons in a millimeter)” (18).

to the sickness affecting these plants as the tobacco mosaic virus, and believed the cause to be what he termed a “contagious living fluid” (Zimmer 4; Stanley and Valens 23). The idea of an organism smaller than a bacterium would remain controversial until Wendell Stanley provided an image of a virus in 1935 with the aid of an electron microscope, which magnified material to a much greater degree than previously possible. Wendell was able to disprove Beijerinck’s “contagious living fluid” thesis, demonstrating that viruses consisted of proteins, and possessed a crystalline structure (Wendell and Valens 24-25; Flint 12). Rather than put to rest the question of what viruses are, however, the making-visible of the virus only confronted scientists (and the public) with a greater number of complex questions. As science writer Carl Zimmer notes, the question over what makes viruses continues to this day: in 1998 Bernard La Scola discovered that the ostensible bacterium called “*Bradfordcoccus*” was, in fact, a giant virus, far larger than any virus heretofore recognized, as well as possessed of more genes than it was believed possible. In other words, the *Bradfordcoccus*, now renamed the mimivirus, “had broken the cardinal rules for being a virus” (90, 91).

In literature on viruses—whether scientific, popular, or figurative—one will inevitably encounter the conundrum: are viruses alive? Wendell Stanley and Evans Valens describe the organisms as existing in “the twilight zone of life, midway between living and nonliving” (23). Eula Biss comments that viruses, while “not exactly inanimate” are also “not, strictly speaking, alive” (31).³ Laura Diehl summarizes the

³ Similar sentiments are shared by Timothy Morton, who remarks that “[v]iruses are structurally incomplete. Like Coleridge’s Life-in-Death, they are neither alive nor nonalive in a commonsensical way” (*Ecological Thought* 67), Wald, who writes of how viruses “existed on—and seemed to define—the border between the living and nonliving” (158).

beliefs of scientists when Stanley's images of the virus crystals were made public: "[i]f viruses were infectious agents that multiplied like parasites, yet could be crystallized like 'dead' chemicals, then were they alive or not alive?" (94).⁴ This question has proved endlessly fascinating to thinkers and writers, since viruses seem to display a conceptual undecidability at the heart of contemporary thoughts of life—viruses can be seen as Jacques Derrida's *pharmakon*, both life and nonlife at once, cleaving into the heart of such a fundamental categorization an awesome uncertainty.

Yet, as Zimmer points out, considering whether viruses definitively are or are not alive is perhaps not the proper question: "it may be more useful to think about how viruses and other organisms form a continuum. We humans are an inextricable blend of mammal and virus. Remove our virus-derived genes, and we would be unable to reproduce" (93).⁵ Bodies are inextricably entangled with viruses; our reproducibility and agency, our material facticity is owed to viruses. Our embodied operations, and our environments, depend upon this productive enmeshment. It is important, then, to consider how viruses and immunities are *embodied*—given a material dimension. This organization allows us to think about how bodies, microbes, and environments intersect

⁴ The textbook *Principles of Virology* offers a more stoic account of viruses, noting that they "can be viewed as microbes that exist in two phases: an inanimate phase, the virion; and a multiplying phase in an infected cell" (18). The writers go on to add that describers of viruses often attribute "life," "actions," and "motives" to these cells, and that these "anthropomorphic characterizations are inaccurate and also quite misleading. Infected cells and hosts respond in many ways after infection, but viruses are passive agents, totally at the mercy of their environments. Therefore viruses cannot employ, ensure, synthesize, exhibit, display, destroy, deploy, depend, reprogram, avoid, retain, evade, exploit, generate, etc." (18).

⁵ As Flint et al. reinforce, "[e]very cell in our body contains viral DNA. Human endogenous retroviruses, and elements thereof, make up about 5 to 8% of our DNA" (4). In a more poetic vein, Biss notes that "[o]ur own adaptive immune system, the branch of our immune system that develops long-lasting immunity, is thought to have borrowed its essential technology from the DNA of a virus. ... This technology was viral technology before it was ours" (31-32).

and intra-act with one another to create not just new visions of materiality, but subsequent orderings of communities, political affiliations, and ecological concerns, and how such material elements create the building blocks for narrative considerations of such biological forces.

Acculturating Viruses and Immunities

The way that the virus has shaped American culture and politics, in particular, is interesting to track. In a sense it may be counterproductive to yoke the idea of viruses so tightly to a national space, as viruses spill across arbitrarily erected human boundaries. Yet, while it is certainly true that viruses do not particularly care about borders, it is equally true that border-makers and -maintainers care very deeply about viruses. In that regard, American cultural and political production returns ceaselessly to the drama enacted by narratives of infection and immunity. Cotton Mather's *The Angel of Bethesda* (1724) is paradigmatic in this regard. The text, which advocates for inoculation and explores his beliefs in a sub-visible world of vital actants, is the "first medical book published in the American colonies" (Silverstein 13). Mather's account of the world is both remarkably prescient and extremely speculative: he writes,

Every Part of Matter is *Peopled*. Every *Green Leaf* swarms with *Inhabitants*. The Surfaces of Animals are covered with other Animals. Yea, the most *Solid Bodies*, even *Marble* itself, have innumerable Cells, which are crowded with imperceptible Inmates As there are Infinite Numbers of these, which *Microscopes* bring to our View, so there may be inconceivable Myriads yet Smaller than these which no glasses have yet reach'd unto. (qtd. in Cohen 64)

Not only is medical literature inaugurated in the United States as a response to viral infection, and not only does Mather's understanding anticipate microbiological discoveries 150 years in the future, but I would contend that his Puritan prose is

profoundly speculative. Mather's penetrating vision estranges the world and recontextualizes it around a vision of a depthlessly *tangible* world.

But Mather was not merely philosophizing; his ideas about infection and protection developed from a very real situation involving epidemic disease and its wider cultural framing. While British doctor Edward Jenner is often credited with discovering a defense against the smallpox virus through the act of inoculation, the idea of developing an acquired immunity to the disease through measured exposure had long been in practice throughout the world.⁶ In 1721 a smallpox epidemic broke out in Boston, and amid the disease a vociferous debate erupted between those pledged to exploring vaccination as an option and those vehemently opposed to it. This outbreak, and the resulting responses to it, would become vital in informing the ways that disease and defense are thought of as they relate to American narrative.⁷ Perhaps most intriguingly, the roles typically assigned in more recent debates over vaccination were, in this instance, reversed: the religious Mather was the most ardent supporter of vaccinating the citizens of Boston, while the city's medical establishment almost uniformly opposed such a response. Robert Tindol remarks how Mather's pleas for inoculation were predicated on

⁶ Jenner biographer Robert Fisher notes "[m]ost writers agree that [the concept of vaccinating against smallpox] was imported to Constantinople late in the seventeenth century by Circassian traders carrying goods from China and Persia," adding that "[v]ariolation was ... practiced in China and India" long before Jenner popularized it in England, "albeit by sniffing dust from the scabs on drying smallpox lesions rather than by inoculation." He further remarks that "[t]he great Arab physician, Avicenna [980-1037], has been credited with the discovery of the technique, but there is no hard evidence" (15). In terms of its apprehension by literary figures, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) wrote of variolation practiced in Istanbul during a 1717 outbreak to a friend in England (Baxby 22), while the French satirist Voltaire penned an essay titled "On Inoculation" in response to a 1723 outbreak of smallpox in Paris wherein he castigates French superstition toward the practice of inoculation while valorizing the English for their attempts to do so (see 63-71).

⁷ The authoritative text on the smallpox epidemic of 1721 and the wider socio-political implications it had on early American life is Stephen Coss's *The Fever of 1721*.

his religious understanding of community and that science provided a means of obeying the will of God: “Mather’s enjoinder for the community to embrace inoculations to defeat the devil was not so much to gain a victory in a specific time as to establish a timeless errand in which American righteousness would defeat all temporal setbacks. If such is the case, then one naturally would fight the smallpox epidemic just as one would fight off marauding Indians” (10).⁸ American exceptionalism is encoded into Mather’s sermonizing on inoculation; it is immunity that will create the holy character of the Puritan race destined to inhabit God’s kingdom. Science becomes the means of better embodying the imprimatur of the lord for Mather. The Boston doctors’ rejection of Mather’s urgings, meanwhile, derived from their belief in his violation of discursive bounds: Mather was a preacher pushing his way into secular matters of which he had no knowledge or expertise. The medical faction, led by doctor William Douglass, portrayed themselves as “members of an elite medical profession” who “represented the beginning of a drive to create a more exclusive medical establishment” (Sivils 40). Here, too, we can detect the discourse of expertise as a means of understanding and directing the body. The fact that the doctors’ objections to smallpox vaccination as dangerous only underscores the contingency of such roles.⁹ One final important element in response to this epidemic is the role of racial relations in understanding immunization. Mather’s

⁸ Mather had, in the 1690s, remarked on the eradication of Indigenous peoples as part of God’s plan: “the woods were almost cleared of these pernicious creatures, to make room for a better growth” (qtd. in Clark 202). The majority of deaths caused by the European colonization of the Americas can be attributed to microbial infections for which Europeans had developed immunities to over centuries, while Indigenous peoples, unexposed to such contagions, had no defenses against (see Clark 195-197; Diamond 210-212).

⁹ Sivils claims that “Douglass opposed the practice of inoculation not because he thought it was ineffective, but because he resented the meddling of the clergy, namely Cotton Mather, in matters best left to those trained in medicine” (43). Thus, the objection to inoculation during the 1721 smallpox epidemic stems less from scientific than political reasons.

source for the efficacy of vaccination against smallpox came from his slave, Onesimus, who showed Mather the vaccination scar he had on his arm and explained the process of inserting a small amount of smallpox tissue into a healthy body in order to provoke an immune response (Tindol 4). Mather and his pro-inoculation supporter, Dr. Zabdiel Boylston, would narrate Onesimus's account in their pamphlet *Some Account of What is Said of Inoculating or Transplanting the Small Pox* (1721) as part of their attempt to persuade the citizens and physicians of Boston into accepting the vaccination proposition. This testimony is part of an intentional rhetorical strategy: "Boylston and Mather include [Onesimus's] brief narrative in the 'plainly, brokenly, and blunderingly' style that they credit as undeniably honest" (Sivils 47).¹⁰ Mather's knowledge of inoculation is at least partly informed by the system of slavery so essential in structuring the United States, and the narrative of immunity draws some of its epistemic power from this system. What Mather and the 1721 smallpox epidemic demonstrate, above all, is that narratives of disease invariably intersect with larger social systems of discourse, and can be used in ways to organize and reorganize such stories.

As Eula Biss strikingly puts it at the beginning of her memoir *On Immunity* (2014), "[i]mmunity is a myth" (6). The idea that there is the possibility of creating a completely self-protected sphere of safety is a story we tell ourselves, one that is proven to be insufficient time and again. This myth of the enveloped and protected singular identity can become solipsistic and dangerous, especially when compared to the way that

¹⁰ Kenneth Silverman notes that Mather and Boylston follow up Onesimus's account more official discourse from established physicians because they were "aware that Onesimus' folkish narrative would not be persuasive enough" (qtd. in Sivils 48).

immunity is predicated upon bodies in common rather than in isolation. Yet the term is a borrowed one, taken from older legalistic discourse.¹¹ As Antoinette Settler notes, the first usage of “immunity” in a medical context was in 14th-century Europe (qtd. in Silverstein 3), but literature’s employment of the term to think through medical relations has a head-start of several hundred years: “poetic license permitted the Roman Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (39-65 AD) to use the word *immunes* in his epic poem ‘Pharsalia,’ to describe the famous resistance to snakebite of the Psylli tribe of North Africa” (3; see also Esposito, *Immunitas* 7). The term derives from the Latin “*immunitas*,” which is the “negative or privative term whose meaning derives from what it negates or lacks, namely, the *munus*” (Esposito, *Immunitas* 5). The root “*munus*,” per Esposito, refers to obligation and responsibility, as well as a kind of gift (*Communitas* xiii). Thus, the immune, defined here in terms of legal or political exception, is the person who is outside the obligations and rules that create the conditions for a group of people: “what counts in defining the concept is exemption from the obligation to the *munus*” (*Immunitas* 5). As Esposito notes, “the true antonym of *immunitas* may not be the absent *munus*, but rather the *communitas* of those who support it by being its bearers” (6). As Ed Cohen notes in *A Body Worth Defending* (2009), the usage of the concept of immunity to describe the way the body defends itself against intrusive outsiders is almost entirely accidental. Drawing on the microbiologist Elie Metchnikoff, Cohen recounts how the scientist, while examining cells through his microscope, exclaimed that “a new thought flashed across

¹¹ As scientist Arthur Silverstein notes at the beginning of his authoritative tome *A History of Immunology* (2009), “[t]he Latin words *immunitas* and *immunis* have their origin in the legal concept of an exemption: initially in ancient Rome they described the exemption of an individual from service or duty, and later in the Middle Ages the exemption of the Church and its properties and personnel from civilian control” (3).

my brain. It struck me that similar cells might serve *in defense of the organism against intruders*” (1, italics in original). The concept of the body as a battlefield, with the host organism waging a defense against intrusive microbes, is a metaphor with massive staying power, and comes to define the concept of how bodies work against disease.

Thus, the concept of immunity had been well-established in the rhetoric of politics and legalism when it was borrowed to describe the operations of biology. When Metchnikoff utilized the principles of invasion and defense to conceptualize how bodies work, he also set up a horizon for the epistemology of thinking through how bodies and illnesses operate. As Cohen notes, “immunity is not a *natural choice of images* for our ability to live as organisms among other organisms of various sizes and scales—nor is defense, for that matter. Instead, both terms derive from the ways that Western legal and political thinking accounts for the complex, difficult, and at times violent manner that *humans* live among other *humans*” (3). Biss similarly observes that “[o]ur understanding of immunity remains remarkably dependent on metaphor, even at its most technical level” (55).¹² Drawing on the concept of herd immunity, Biss notes that vaccinating the body against illness is really about “how it affects the collective body of a community”

¹² To provide another example: In 1901, German microbiologist Paul Ehrlich theorized the concept of “*horror autotoxicus*,” or, “the horror of becoming toxic to yourself” (E. Martin 134). In spite of the ominous intonations of such a term, Ehrlich brought up the concept as a hypothetical; he in fact believed that such auto-toxicity, the turning of the immune system against itself, was an impossibility. “[T]he organism,” he wrote, “possesses certain contrivances by means of which the immunity reaction, so easily produced by all kinds of cells, is prevented from acting against the organism’s own elements” (qtd. in Silverstein 155). In Ehrlich’s conception of the development of the immune system—one Silverstein calls “Darwinian” (171)—the body develops to a point of increasing health and defense, one that cannot be turned against it. Such a belief, claims Silverstein, was built on a “teleologic appeal,” one which “deni[ed] that some biological price might be exacted for the benefits that antibodies endow upon the individual organism” (171). While the discovery of autoimmune diseases in the twentieth century, such as lupus, would force a reconsideration of Ehrlich’s postulation, the literary effect of his conception of “horror autotoxicus” remains a powerful one.

(19). Thus, the idea of herd immunity “now seems implausible only if we think of our bodies as inherently disconnected from other bodies. Which, of course, we do” (20).

Biss’s final sentence is significant: while it is understood that the concept of the “immune system” is an imperfect metaphor¹³ that describes a much more complex and mysterious operation, and while we understand that our bodies are not pure organisms arrayed against a world of malignant, infectious microbes, the mythology persists. More than just representing a misguided and outmoded belief, however, immunity has come to dominate the American way of thinking politically about biological life.

In 1793 an outbreak of yellow fever in Philadelphia, then temporarily serving as the nascent nation’s capital, killed five thousand citizens and caused thousands more to flee; “[f]or a century afterwards,” notes J.H. Powell, “the fearful disease remained an annual threat for people in many states and towns to dread, and every year they remembered the great Philadelphia plague as the worst, the most frightening, the very classic of plagues” (xvii). Following along the lines of Powell’s portentous description, the outbreak is perhaps best captured in Charles Brockden Brown’s 1799 gothic novel *Arthur Mervyn*, which is set against the backdrop of the plague-ravaged city. As Leslie Fiedler remarks, “[o]nly when [Brown] describes something monstrous and extraordinary like a city under pestilence, do his descriptions approach the ‘reality’ of the realists”

(155). The fantastical literature of the gothic becomes suddenly mimetic when it is linked

¹³ As Cohen aptly remarks, “[t]he longer I work on this project, the less I understand why it seems obvious to us to use a complex legal and political concept to describe how we coexist as organisms. Taken at face value, immunity has little to recommend it as an organismic possibility; indeed, once called to our attention, it seems hard not to notice that the trope only works as catachresis” (14). For Cohen, the body’s operations and the method of legal-political exemption are so distinct that their attempt at resemblance is almost non-existent. Thus, we could think of Metchnikoff’s revelatory metaphor as either poor literary analysis, or, if we were being charitable, a particularly brilliant example of cognitive estrangement.

with an outbreak of a virus; the implication of Fiedler's words is that connections with the virus estrange us from our mundane sense of reality. The continued outbreaks of smallpox throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth led to American health officials across the country advocating for comprehensive programs of—sometimes enforced—vaccination, which, in Michael Willrich's words, “sparked one of the most important civil liberties struggles of the twentieth century” over the idea of the government's right to vaccinate its citizens (14).¹⁴

The twentieth century, the dawn of the discipline of virology, further intensified the spillage of such discourses into the realm of American social life. The scientific developments of bacteriology and virology unfold in parallel to reception and reaction based in popular culture—as Wald notes, “[t]he discoveries of bacteriology did not emerge through the pure culture of the laboratory,” but influenced and shaped by the wider culture (19).¹⁵ This intersection of scientific and cultural discourse has been a

¹⁴ As Biss notes, the term “conscientious objector,” which now commonly applies to anti-war positions, originated as a term used to describe people opposed to receiving smallpox vaccinations on grounds that it violated their civil rights (118). This conceptual mobility further reinforces how the discourses of immunity and conflict are enfolded into one another, which I discuss at greater length below.

¹⁵ Curiously, in spite of the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, responsible for the deaths of approximately 550 000 Americans and anywhere between 20 and 40 million people worldwide (Crosby 207), contemporary popular culture's engagements with the pandemic are almost nonexistent. Katherine Anne Porter's modernist novella *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939) is one of the few accounts of the flu's effects on American lives. Porter herself was stricken with the flu, which killed her fiancé, and the novella's characters of Miranda and Adam are thinly fictionalized versions of these real-life events. In addition, Thomas Wolfe's autobiographical *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) involves a chapter where protagonist Eugene Grant's brother (the novel's stand-in for Wolfe's brother Benjamin) is felled by the virus. Crosby notes that Porter and Wolfe were able to write about the flu directly because “it struck too close to their hearts ever to be forgotten” (317). Elizabeth Outka responds to Crosby's suggestion with an interesting reading of canonical modernist texts such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). For Outka, the flu's appearance at the tail end of the First World War meant that the two events became conflated for survivors, and thus the “[m]odernist literary corpses . . . always potentially have (at least) a double meaning, signifying not simply the war dead, but also those dead in the flu” (939). More recent works of fiction, such as Thomas Mullen's *The Last Town on Earth* (2005) and Myla Goldberg's *Wickett's Remedy* (2006) have attempted to create retrospective narratives about the outbreak (see Belling).

continually informative one. Laura Diehl notes how politicians and thinkers of the 1920s raised the specter of genetics in their calls for curbing immigration to the United States: “eugenicists ... conflated infection with miscegenation, exploiting invasion fears to conceptualize the boundary between healthy and sick bodies, between subjects of Empire and those subjected to Empire” (87).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the rise of antibacterial drugs led to a decrease in the fear of the quotidian germs that had so vexed the imaginations and bodies of Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century (Tomes 13). Yet in the place of bacteria the virus came to serve as a more-than-adequate substitute: the increasingly public knowledge of the world of viruses, and the increasing amounts of money poured by the American government into research and development for scientific purposes, led to a new fascination with microbes, and a new anxiety. With the post-War political sphere divided into a Manichean conflict between capitalism and communism, the cultural understanding of biological concepts became tinged with suspicion: there was a “conceptual exchange between virology and Cold War politics. As viruses became increasingly sinister and wily, sneaking into cells and assuming control of their mechanisms, external agents, such as Communists, became viral, threatening to corrupt the dissemination of information as they infiltrated the nerve center of the state” (Wald 158-159). American popular culture, such as Robert A. Heinlein’s *The Puppet Masters* (1951), Jack Finney’s *The Body Snatchers* (1954) (and its popular film adaptation, Don Siegel’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956]), and the Howard Hawks-produced *The Thing from Another World* (1951) (based on John W. Campbell Jr.’s 1938 novella “Who Goes There?”) all depict American life under attack by insidious, mutating viral

organisms that reach from America's imperial outposts (such as the Alaskan scientific station in *The Thing from Another World*) right to the idyllic and idealized center of American life (the rural suburb of Santa Mira, California in Finney's novel and Siegel's film). The bio-logic of the virus proved particularly malleable, and easily modulated from a fascinated discovery in the 1930s into a fear of external contagion during the early decades of the Cold War.¹⁶

Interestingly, by the 1970s, the idea of the virus had receded into the background of the Cold War American imaginary. As medical historian Alfred W. Crosby notes, “[i]n 1969 the Surgeon General of the United States, William H. Stewart, assured us that we had left infectious disease behind in our dust. Three years later, in the final edition of the classic *Natural History of Infectious Disease*, author and Nobel laureate Mcfarlane Burnet concluded that ‘the most likely forecast about the future of infectious disease is that it will be very dull’” (qtd. in Crosby xi; see also Wald 25). There exists, in such formulations, the idea of an immune American culture, a progressive narrative whereby the foundational myths of the American nation can be left behind in the post-war liberal consensus.¹⁷ Such illusions of a post-viral age were shattered by the epidemic of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in the early 1980s and the subsequent

¹⁶ Kirsten Ostherr's survey of the intersections of biopolitics and mass media in American culture makes the contention that, due to the invisible nature of microbial agents, films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and other 1950s alien invasion films helped to grant an imagery (and, therefore, a grammar) to the logic of disease outbreak (80). Such recurrent imagery helps to reinforce certain ideological narratives, too.

¹⁷ It is worthwhile to note that, it is in this “viral void” of the 1970s that the field of medical humanities begins its inception—Jones et al. note that it was this decade that saw a growing academic interest in the intersections between literature and medicine (2). Likewise, Heather Houser (about whom I will discuss more below) begins her thinking of the “ecosickness” novel in the 1970s, as the environmental movement increasingly enters the forefront of American political activism.

revelation that the disease was caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) in 1983, a viral infection that continues to impact millions of lives throughout the world. I will discuss the cultural legacy of HIV/AIDS writing in greater detail in Chapter Three, but it suffices here to say that, in spite of de Kruif's positivist ideology of progressive immunity, the reality of microbial diseases often belies the simplistic mythologies of infection and protection.

Entering the twenty-first century, the viral has become an almost ubiquitous sociocultural artifact. From the omnipresence of the virus as a tool in narrative fiction (such as malignant and omnipotent computer infections, or the omnipresent zombie, which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four) to the popularization of the term “viral” to describe “videos that gain popularity by being shared and recommended through online word of mouth” (France et al. 20),¹⁸ to the periodic appearances of novel viral outbreaks (i.e., severe acute respiratory syndrome [SARS] threat of 2003, the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic, and the brief but highly visible fear of Ebola in 2014) viruses circulate the cultural imagination of the United States in a myriad of real and abstract, biological and metaphorical fashions. Viruses have evolved not only alongside the biological body, but American culture's understandings and uses of the virus to explore, explain, and define itself.

In my consideration of the virus in both epidemiological and cultural terms, I draw heavily upon Priscilla Wald's path-defining work in *Contagious* (2008). There,

¹⁸ France et al. empirical analysis of the online popularity of videos complicates this somewhat basic explanation, suggesting that there are multiple types of videos that could be described as “viral” (from “initial viral,” to “delayed viral,” to a more erratic “polynomial viral” [20]).

Wald rigorously traces what she terms the “outbreak narrative,” a narrative constantly “evolving” but following a series of tropes, fashioning a “formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment” (2). In identifying the repertoire of stylistic devices used to illustrate, dramatize, and make sense of infectious disease outbreaks, Wald makes clear that science and culture overlap to mutually produce, reinforce, and hierarchize the stories that do (and do not) get told about disease outbreaks. These narratives draw upon and support cultural myths in order to make themselves intelligible; “epidemiological narrative,” Wald asserts, “is, like the microscope, a *technology*” (19), and diseases are just as much a narratological tool as they are an “epidemiological fact” (2). Indeed, Wald cites virologist Philip Mortimer who admits as much, explaining that “[a]n outbreak ... like a story, should have a coherent plot” (qtd. in Wald 19). As for what that plot is composed of, Wald sees it in terms of myth, which she glosses as “an explanatory story that is not specifically authored, but emerges from a group as an expression of the origins and terms of its collective identity” (9). Narratives about disease are ways for a nation’s authors to construct stories about themselves, their identities, and the constitutive character of their territory or domain. Disease narrative is thus one of the most potent tools in exploring the concept of a nation or population.¹⁹

¹⁹ And a particularly long-lived one. Wald points as far back as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* as examples of stories about disease being used to explore the boundaries of identity and community (11).

While Wald's examination of this idea—moving from the turn-of-the-century social realist writing of authors like Jacob Riis and the mythologizing of Mary Mallon into the plague-spreading “Typhoid Mary” to the demonization of AIDS victims and the 1990s' obsession with contagion in films like *Outbreak* (1994)—is extremely thorough, I find that the outbreak narrative expresses only one way of thinking about the possibilities of disease epidemics as a narrative tool. The outbreak narrative provides an elegant and linear epistemological and narrative tool. But the virus, that enchantingly enigmatic figure beloved of poststructuralist thought, resists such a linear unfolding. The point of this project, then, is to expand on Wald's work by outlining some of the contours that stories about viruses and immunities can potentially take, specifically in the American tradition of speculative fiction.

On “Virality”

Indeed, if Wald's thinking about what viruses are has been confined to the singular vision of the outbreak narrative, then the reception of the troublesome microbe by poststructuralist critics has had the opposite problem. In their special issue on the concept of the viral, Jasbir Puar and Patricia Clough use “viral” as a way of thinking about the metaphoric logic of the virus in the contemporary age of global capital. Remarking that “[t]he ‘viral’ has come to describe a form of communication and transmission in and across varying domains: the biological, the cultural, the financial, the political, the linguistic, the technical, and the computational,” Puar and Clough note that “the viral has itself *gone viral*” (13). This introduction—and the subsequent special issue—expertly trace the ways in which the term “viral” has come to diagnose a *cultural condition*, a means of conceptualizing and understanding the age of networked, global

neoliberalism, a more pungently aggressive metaphor than Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity." There is none of the idyllic, calming sense of flow here—the viral age is one of substance-less speed, the privileging of the reorienting hijack, and the need to proliferate endlessly. In this sense, Puar and Clough are completely correct.

Yet this reading does not sit entirely well with me. As Puar and Clough go on to note, the "viral" and the "virus" are not coterminous with one another—"the characteristics of the virus, we would argue, serve as a threshold, a horizon against and alongside which virality takes its action" (14). The biological entity of the virus serves as the map onto which the larger discursive characteristics of twenty-first century Western society can be explored through. Yet in doing so, the biological, the embodied, the material seems to be relegated to the background. While several articles in the special issue—including the issue's epilogue, a reprinting of Donna Haraway's seminal feminist-posthumanist text "A Manifesto for Cyborgs"—seem to place the body at the center of the analyses of viral systems and institutions, the morphing of the virus into virality seems to mitigate its material dimension. Virality treats politics, economics, aesthetics, language, and bodies as all operating on the same logic of "replication without reproduction, without fidelity, without durability [the] generative differentiation that is repeated" (Puar and Clough 14). Bodies become indistinguishable from the systems that control them—a metonymic similitude results from the ways in which the body and the speculative economy of global capitalism (for example) operate. I am uncomfortable with this all-purpose metaphor that connects such disparate ideas together.

This is not to say that Puar and Clough and their contributors are the only scholars engaged in such an action. Recent work by scholars such as Thierry Bardini, Eugene

Thacker, Alexander Galloway, Jussi Parikka, and Tony D. Sampson all take this potent figurative language of virality and utilize toward expansive and productive ends. Bardini, for instance, in *Junkware*, describes “the virus ... is the entity of choice, not only for a molecular biology that it helped build, *but for today’s ontology and ethics, and hence for a current metaphysics*,” adding that “the virus is the master trope of ‘postmodern culture’” (2, 179). Sampson, meanwhile, in his book *Virality*, draws on the work of Deleuze and French sociologist Gabriel Tarde in order to articulate a theory of crowds. For Sampson, virality explicitly becomes a project for thinking through the concept of affect, describing virality as both the mobilization of sophisticated forms of biopolitical social control, but also possibilities for revolutionary social change “located in the accidents and spontaneities of desire” (5, 6).²⁰ Jussi Parikka, in his history of the development of computer viruses, explores how the development of discourses of computer viruses are analogically linked to themes about bodies, and therefore operate along biopolitically ordained lines (see 120), while Thacker and Galloway, in *The Exploit*, employ the virus as a means of thinking through the contemporary security state apparatus, drawing an explicit analogical relationship between biological microbes and computer programs, noting that both “exploit the normal functioning of their host systems to produce more copies of themselves. Viruses are life exploiting life” (83).

²⁰ Interestingly, Sampson identifies his project as “an ontological investigation of contagious relationality intended to probe *outside* the generality of metaphors and analogies” (3). Sampson suggests that the biological thinking of virality narrows it to thin discussion of how things are *like* viral infection, while an investigation into the mobility of affect provides a stronger basis for thinking through the flow of desire and intention amid groups of people. While this project contends almost exactly the opposite, I find Sampson’s full-throated defense of distinguishing “virality” from “the virus” to be a useful one. I will discuss Sampson’s theories in greater detail in Chapter Four.

Such texts echo the fascination of 1980s poststructuralist thinkers with the conceptual malleability of the virus. Jean Baudrillard's nihilistic vision of postmodern culture, for instance, sees it as quintessentially viral in nature: "[v]iral attack is the pathology of the closed circuit, of the integrated circuit, of promiscuity and of the chain reaction—in a broad and metaphorical sense, a pathology of incest. He who lives by the same shall die by the same. The absence of otherness secretes another, intangible otherness: the absolute other of the virus" (*Transparency* 65). In a less fatalistic key, Jacques Derrida evinces an evident fascination with the latitude of the virus as a deconstructive concept. In *On Spirit* he notes "the virus that obsesses, not to say invades everything I write. Neither animal nor nonanimal, organic or inorganic, living or dead, this potential invader is *like* a computer virus. It is lodged in a process of writing, reading and interpretation" (qtd. in Wills 105). In a later interview with Peter Brunette and David Wills, Derrida reiterates and sharpens this point, noting that the virus forms "the matrix of all I have done since I began writing" (12).²¹ In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari further rhapsodize the concept of virality by aligning it with their concept of the rhizome: a non-hierarchical, non-stratified representation of interrelationality. Deleuze and Guattari marvel at how the virus "can take flight, move into the cells of an entirely different species, but not without bringing with it 'genetic information' from the first host," concluding that "[w]e form a rhizome with our viruses, or rather our viruses cause us to form rhizomes with other animals" (10). While Deleuze

²¹ Beyond its utility as a particularly elastic metaphor, however, Derrida does not seem to consider viruses themselves. As Esposito is right to note, the concept of biopolitics "is utterly extraneous to [Derrida's] thought" ("Interview" 53).

and Guattari's formulation appears to be more linked to the biological understanding of viruses, in opposition to Baudrillard's and Derrida's more expansive visions, it is still considered as a trope or mobile signifier for a greater project of dissolving the bonds of epistemological structuring. Virality therefore becomes a metonym that helps to draw affinities between massively variegated systems of discourse. In so doing, I find that it can abstract the body, placing it along nexuses that are undifferentiated. In this way, the viral becomes the sign *par excellence* of neoliberal capitalist exchange: the viral (if not the virus) becomes the standard by which various institutions and systems are thought of. With the late-capitalist subject pinballing between the extremes of viral economics, viral media, viral political structures, it seems as though that embodied subject becomes lost amid the narrativizing powers of the viral itself.

The Materialist Turn

In opposition to this concept of "virality," indebted as it is to the linguistic turn in critical theory, I am interested in the way that contemporary critical philosophers have attempted to grapple with the concept of the material, and how these theorizations of the material's existence and action can be accounted for in the virus. Rather than reduce the virus to an undifferentiated adaptable metonym, material thinking perhaps offers a stronger avenue to consider its presence.

The vanguard of this emphasis on the importance of objects as material within a universe of embodiments in perpetual becoming are Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour. Latour's work in the history and philosophy of science continually underscores the ways in which social relations characterize certain statements about epistemology and ontology. His most common image is that of the black box, a shorthand for any concept

whose inner workings are too complicated to explain with brevity. Instead of explaining the laborious processes that go into the construction of such black boxes (an example Latour uses is the double-helix structure of DNA, which was agonized over by generations of scientists, and is now accepted as uncontroversial fact), we make use of such short-hand in order to provide reliable output about elements of science (see *Science in Action* 1-7). Latour is not interested in denying the veracity of such black boxes; instead, he is interested in, as he puts it, opening them up, looking inside and seeing how larger social discourses and ideologies are involved in the consensus-building of scientific fact. His work in *The Pasteurization of France* (1984) examines this interest in how such conceptual schema are developed in reference to infection and immunity. Latour seeks to challenge the narrative of the “discovery” of bacteriology and the canonization of Louis Pasteur as the singular genius who shifted the paradigm of nineteenth-century scientific thought. Rather, Latour focuses on the specifically social engines that not only power scientific discovery, but allow them to become understood as indisputable fact. “We would like science to be free of war and politics,” he writes, but such segregation of discourse is a fantasy: “what is it that watches over health? Medicine. And what does medicine itself depend on? The sciences. And what are the sciences in turn made up of? Money” (10-11). The real story of bacteriology, for Latour, is not a linear narrative of scientists in the dark fumbling toward some kind of truth, but rather how social forces and actors are mobilized toward such seemingly uncontroversial positions. And what is implicit in Latour’s analysis is how narrative is used in shaping such societal reorganizations: “[n]o one, toward the end of the [nineteenth] century, could do without contagion in connecting men, plants, and animals” (37). What was so

effective about Pasteur and his acolytes in triumphing over their scientific rivals was that the bacteriological explanation offered a compelling narrative about the way society is organized and operates. The presence of microbes as the causative agent behind disease—as opposed to the more nebulous and vague etiology of the hygienists, whereby “[i]llness . . . can be caused by almost anything. . . . Everything must be considered” (20)—offered a vision of society with a clear causal chain. It also suggested, per Latour’s reading, the possibility of new kinds of social interaction. The explanation of microbial agency behind disease implicitly promised that, were such meddling organisms halted in their action, a person would be granted unfettered access to certain relations: “[a]fter the Pasteurians have invaded surgery, only then will the surgeon be alone with his patient. After we have found a method of pasteurizing beer, then the brewer will be able to have nothing but economic relations with his customers” (39). Bacteriology’s reshaping of science and the wider society is, in part, a means of reorganizing the way that social relations are narrated, and what kind of interactions are made visible by such interventions. Latour’s work in thinking through these ideas is vital in demonstrating the discursive interlinkages of science and culture, the ways that a good story affects aspects of health, embodiment, and identity.

Haraway, like Latour, is interested in the social strategies of discourse that are instrumental in shaping the facticity of science, and uses the concepts of disease and immunity in order to explore these terms. Where Latour focuses much of his attention on the beginnings of microbiological thinking in the nineteenth century, however, Haraway is more interested in the rise of post-Second World War biomedical discourse in the United States. “‘Science says’ is represented as a univocal language,” Haraway writes,

but an analysis of the discourse of science reveals “a barely contained and inharmonious heterogeneity” (*Simians* 204). Haraway’s critique of science is also fueled by an interest in opening up the black box, in demonstrating the ways in which science is influenced by other realms of knowledge production. Usefully, while Latour looks at infection, Haraway’s focus centers on the concept of immunity. Reading immunity as “both an iconic myth object in high-technology culture and a subject of research and clinical practice of the first importance” (205), Haraway identifies the way this configuration operates as both a transhistorical notion of protection and a deeply historicized scientific object that is continually refined and redeployed. The purpose of such examinations of science is to critique the notion of a “perspectiveless perspective” (Alaimo, *Exposed* 7), the idea that scientific discourse is somehow uninflected by larger ideological formations. Stating some form of objective truth is not what Haraway is interested in; indeed, such an action would simply replicate the ideologically charged belief in a neutral and non-subjective scientific truth. Instead, such thinking has shaped responses to ideas such as health and disease in discernibly political ways. Instead, Haraway’s research is motivated by a desire to “turn the discourse suggested by [immunologists] into an oppositional/alternative/liberatory approach” (*Simians* 220), a way of using these scientific discourses as ways of articulating subjectivities and collectivities ignored or effaced by dominant scientific discourse. While Latour is interested in tracing the historical structuring of science, Haraway sees a utility in reworking these configurations toward a radically liberatory politics.

What separates Latour and Haraway from being exemplars of the poststructuralist turn that suggests the predominance and inescapability of language is

that, for the two of them, the materiality of societies, and indeed, of the microbes that are narrated by those societies, are very real entities. In her essay “Situated Knowledges,” for instance, Haraway argues for the “granting the status of agent/actor to the ‘objects’ of the world. Actors come in many and wonderful forms” (*Simians* 198). Haraway thus rejects a subject/object divide in favour of a vision of actors engaged in a series of enmeshed and material engagements. Likewise, Latour’s “actor network theory”²² emphasizes the role of relationality as opposed to any concrete sense of identity: “an actor-network is what is made to act by a large star-shaped web of mediators flowing in and out of it. It is made to exist by its many ties: attachments are first, actors are second” (*Reassembling the Social* 217). In such a configuration, metaphysical distinctions between objects and subjects are of little importance; what matters, for Latour, is how such concatenations of materials form into extant and functioning systems, and how said systems become interwoven with others. Where Latour aptly de-emphasizes the focus on metaphysical categorizations in favour of thinking through extant materiality and the way such relationships create functioning systems, Haraway makes such a project a cultural and political one: it is through this materialist understanding of identity that politics are formed and can be reshaped.

The work of Haraway and Latour has been fundamental in informing the thought of subjectivity beyond the narrow limitations of the human. Of all such “posthuman” theory, Cary Wolfe’s is likely the most powerfully realized in terms of its attempts engage with the conceptual work that goes into such a philosophy. Cultivating an archive

²² A term he did not invent, and one he wryly laments as being “so awkward, so confusing, so meaningless that it deserves to be kept” (*Reassembling the Social* 9).

from the poststructuralism of Jacques Derrida, the second-order systems theory of Niklas Luhmann,²³ and the work of biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Valera, Wolfe develops a rigorous conceptualization of posthumanism that is predicated upon the rethinking of how forms of embodiment are central to the concept of philosophy and language. Arguing that posthumanism

comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms But it comes after in the sense that posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms ... (xv-xvi)

For Wolfe, posthumanism²⁴ is a methodological approach that brackets the concept of humanism and, drawing on affinities of systems theory and poststructuralism to trouble the binary operations that hypostasize humanist philosophy, is the best way of inculcating a richer and more just approach to thinking through the deployment of the “human” and the “nonhuman” in literary and philosophical models. Wolfe’s thorough investigation of the autopoietic nature of complex systems and how they work to efface the

²³ Luhmann’s systems-theory is differentiated from “first-order” systems theory popularized in the post-war period by thinkers like Norbert Weiner, John von Neumann, Gregory Bateson, and others. First-order systems theory, also known as cybernetics, is predicated upon the role informatic patterns play in shaping systems. As defined by Bruce Clarke and Mark Hansen, cybernetics was largely uninterested in the materiality of objects studied, but rather focused on the immaterial element of informational patterns. Thus, this early form of systems theory “marks a shift away from the building blocks of phenomena ... to the form of behaviors, what things do and how they are observed” (3). By way of contrast, second-order systems theory offers a “new level of attention to the media of its forms, or, more concretely, to the *environments* and the *embodiments* of systems” (5). As Wolfe astutely notes, while systems theory has received a chilly reception in America for its perceived “social Darwinism” (3), it is in fact analogically complementary to the deconstructive project of Derrida—systems theory “does not occlude ... but rather *begins* with difference” (14).

²⁴ Wolfe clearly prefers “posthumanism” to “posthuman” (120). The former term emphasizes not the end of an era of a particular instantiation of human embodiment, but the ideological tools and concepts that are used to render that image smooth and naturalized.

“system/environment” border in favour of a continually recursive and self-(re)producing network lays out a compelling picture of how bodies and environments interact and construct one another, and how this image of embodiments will allow for a more nuanced thinking of this ambivalent construction.

Yet where I want to push Wolfe’s theorization a bit further comes when he thinks about the so-called “viral logic” that characterizes the thinking of Derrida and Luhmann (xviii). In thinking through this second-order systems theory, Wolfe explicitly refers to these thinkers as exploring a method that is “in fact ‘viral,’ in the specific sense of a mutational logic of the trace structure of any notational form, any semiotic system, that exceeds and encompasses the boundary not just between human and animal but also between the living or organic and the mechanical or technical” (xviii). Wolfe deploys the term viral in a slippery fashion, as he metonymically defines such thinking as “mutational, viral, or parasitic,” and later explicitly notes the metaphorization when he refers to “this new logic [that] itself virally infects (or deconstructs, if you like)” (xxi). For Wolfe, the concept of the viral is a handy metaphor that vividly illustrates a system of philosophical thought, a synonym for the Derrida’s philosophical project (and one that Derrida himself endorses). But in thinking through the concept of embodiment and materiality, I don’t want to leave the virus only in the realm of the metaphorical, the vehicle that enables the rethinking of the human being. I wish to expand on Wolfe’s explicitly animal studies project to engage with how literature thinks about viruses. It is my contention that viruses possess a particular materiality that literary thinkers attempt to explore. More than just being a metaphor to think through the slipperiness or malleability of concepts, viruses are an extant factor in life, and their material embodiment within

speculative fiction occasions authors to think through a dialectics of embodiment. Understanding identities and ecologies is not accomplished through the use of the metaphor of virality, but its particular formal and representational characteristics *within* the literary universe.

“Apparently humanism is alive and well, despite reports of its demise,” Wolfe wryly notes in the introduction to *What is Posthumanism?* I take him at his word, and seek to think about how discourses of humanism and posthumanism become entangled in the literature of viral outbreak, which so potently dramatizes these collisions of competing visions. Too often posthumanism is utilized as a shorthand for a kind of utopian escape from the narrow ideological strictures of humanism. Yet, as I explore throughout these chapters, visions of viral outbreak, immune bodies, and possibilities for postapocalyptic, post-infectious bodies and collectivities are subject to similarly reactionary or exclusive limitations. In Chapter Two, for instance, I examine how William S. Burroughs’s extremely post-human idea of embodiment and subjectivity is ultimately predicated on a misogynist vision of performative masculinity. This is not to deride posthumanism as a useless field of inquiry, but to suggest that even ways of radically rethinking identity, embodiment, and collectivity are not freed from ideological constraints. We may never have been human, but the continued purchase that such a signifier (empty though it may be) has in speculative fiction suggests grappling with this idea instead of simply consigning it to the wastebasket of history.

The recent academic interest in “new materialism” has continued to develop the work of Haraway and Latour in fascinating ways, drawing attention to the ways materialism is a highly politicized concept and how a need to understand the lability of

the material shapes these narratives. New materialist thinkers—particularly Jane Bennett, Mel Chen, Stacy Alaimo, and Heather Houser, as well as Haraway in her more recent work—are engaged by the means by which subject/object dualisms collapse in processes of becoming. This materialist turn emphasizes the entanglements of subjects and objects and the epistemological work that comes from thinking outside of these hierarchical binaries. Instead of fetishizing the object's unknowability, new materialist thinkers inflect the assemblages that develop from these productive connections. In doing so, new materialist thinkers are able to push for an ethical approach emphasizing feminist, posthumanist, ecocritical, and other radical politics that appear in the dissolution of these binary oppositions.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) offers one of the clearest examples of this approach. Drawing on a diverse archive of thinkers, from Lucretius and Spinoza to Thoreau and Deleuze, Bennett rejects the "onto-theological" binaries that separate human beings from nonhuman figures, favouring instead a Latourian approach that highlights all matter as "actants" that offer possibilities of entangling with one another and provoking a rethinking of causality and agency. Challenging the model of action that privileges "a doer (an agent) behind a deed" and instead offering the concept of "a doing and an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage" (28), Bennett provides a clear meditation on how to think through action, relationality, and existence in a world teeming with vital sources of potential action. In *Animacies* (2012), meanwhile, Mel Chen suggests the term "animacy," or the degree of an object's vitality, to think through the relations of materiality that do not conform to reductive binary oppositions (2). The concept of animacy allows Chen to examine not only the ways that such dualisms are troubled, but

also diagnose ways in which “insults that refer to humans as abjected matter or as less than human ... cannily assert human status as a requisite” (13). For Chen, animacy is a method of thinking through how hierarchies of subjectivities are organized, and also how a more capacious engagement with how we think about levels and interactions of animacy can develop new political and social bonds. Haraway’s most recent output, *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), argues that the cataclysm of climate change demands neither a retreat into “awful edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures,” but rather “making oddkin,” developing networks and lines of connection where before those possibilities seemed unthinkable. As Haraway forcefully puts it, “[w]e become-with each other or not at all” (4). The ethical response to disaster is to become ingenious, to think in ways which anthropocentric ideologies have disallowed or negated. Haraway’s boundlessly ranging view of the possibilities of sympoiesis—a natural outgrowth of symbiosis and opposed to the more myopic view of “autopoiesis”—suggest a method of contextual expansion to embrace within its ever-shifting borders the inhabitants of a context.²⁵ Be it a familiar “companion species” of animal, inanimate objects, or bacteria, Haraway sees the possibilities of sympoiesis as endless self-creation. Using Lynn Margulis’s conception of symbiosis as a philosophical model,²⁶ Haraway seeks to

²⁵ Virologist Marilyn Roossinck notes that, in spite of the positive connotation of the word “symbiosis,” in a scientific context “symbiosis actually encompasses several different relationships, including antagonism, commensalism, and mutualism” (99-100). Roossinck, who wishes to push back against the image of viruses as solely dangerous and threatening microbes, explores throughout her article how these various relationships have had significant benefits to life on earth (108).

²⁶ Margulis is a notable bacteriologist whose work challenges the self/nonself model so often deployed in scientific discourse. In *Dazzle Gradually*, a collaborative work with her son, Dorion Sagan, the two put forth the idea of a “microbial consciousness,” an awareness of the necessity of microbes in organizing and maintaining life (37). They posit that, “[w]ithout microbes, life’s essential processes would quickly grind to a halt” (31), and attempt to translate this biological understanding of microbial necessity into philosophical and cultural models of self and society. “Scrutinizing life at the microscopic level,” they write, “is like

highlight the interpenetration of micro-organisms with subjective selves. In a literally ecstatic utopian vision, Haraway writes of how “[c]ritters interpenetrate one another, loop around and through one another, eat each other, get indigestion, and partially digest and partially assimilate one another, and thereby establish sympoietic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms, and ecological assemblages” (58). In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway develops the materialist approaches of Bennett and Chen into an heuristic for building these new connectivities.

Stacy Alaimo’s ecofeminist work, which she encapsulates in the memorable phrase of “trans-corporeality,” perhaps most clearly explores the ideas of enmeshment with different kinds of materiality, and importantly thinks about how these ideas relate to narrative and art. Describing the trans-corporeal as the recognition that “the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world,” Alaimo “underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (*Bodily Natures* 2). This kind of thinking—influenced by major ecofeminist critics such as Haraway, Karen Barad, and Evelyn Fox Keller—explores a boundary-breaking philosophy whereby understanding the radical openness to the shifting conceptual structures of bodily composition and ecological organization mutually organize and structure each other. By examining these myriad contaminations in philosophical, literary, and legal history, Alaimo pushes for an epistemological reconfiguration of life

moving ever closer to a pointillist painting by Georges Seurat: the seemingly solid figures of humans, dogs, and trees, on close inspection, turn out to be made up of innumerable tiny dots and dashes, each with its own living attributes of color, density, and form” (46). Such a conception of the individual, microcosmic elements being required to understanding the grander forms and processes of a society is a clear influence on Haraway’s philosophy.

and social interaction,²⁷ whereby “environmentalism, human health, and social justice cannot be severed” (22). For Alaimo, we are all “toxic bodies” (22), infected and affected by a flow of materiality beyond our control or knowledge. Rather than retreating into a reactionary false sense of security by erecting contentious (and fictional) barriers, we must think about and embrace our position as profoundly toxic.

Heather Houser, in her book *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction* (2014),²⁸ builds on Alaimo’s trans-corporeal approach: Houser’s project arrives out of a rejection of a clear, linear narrative—of which Wald’s outbreak storyline is paradigmatic—asking instead “what happens when artists abandon quests for etiology as the driving force of their narratives” in favour of more atmospheric depictions of “human bodies enmeshed in their environments” (2). Houser is interested in the way that “lines of connection” are formed between environments and bodies that are mapped through the literary investigation of illness. In this ingenious conception, bodies become “stages” to enact dramas of encounter that link them to wider environmental concerns (10). Houser draws on the affective work of thinkers like Brian Massumi, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Silvan Thompkins, and Charles Altieri to suggest that bodies and landscapes undergo a continual series of reshapings. Literature, in its detailed attention to characters’ emotions

²⁷ Or, to utilize the terminology of Barad that Alaimo employs throughout her study, “intra-action,” which, in Barad’s words, “*signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*. That is, in contrast to the usual ‘interaction,’ which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through their intra-action” (33). Barad characterizes her approach as one of “agential realism,” which has much in common with Latour’s philosophy.

²⁸ Houser distinguishes her notion of “sickness” from ideas of “disease” and “illness”: whereas the former concept implies a specific kind of material agent (a microbial figure) that can be read as the causal agent of an impairment, “illness” refers to the self-reflective concept of the absence of health that a patient feels. Houser’s utilization of “sickness” as opposed to “illness” because it “emphasize[s] the relational dimension of dysfunction to a contemporary narrative” (11).

and the way that objects and situations are filled with symbolic significance, becomes a privileged space for thinking through the connections of bodies to spaces. Houser's mode of thinking through the affective ways in which (sick) bodies and environments operate in a continual process of construction and engagement offers literary studies far greater possibilities of exploration and analysis.

Where I disagree with both Houser and Alaimo, as well as Haraway, is in their implicit or explicit claim that such a posthuman and environmental epistemology necessarily promotes a radical ethics. Alaimo writes that "[a] posthuman environmental ethics denies the human the sense of separation from the interconnected, mutually constitutive actions of material reality" (*Bodily Natures* 157). Likewise, Houser explains that, in the "coconstitutive worlds" of the human and the "more-than-human" that such narratives emphasize "produce ethical and political adjustments bearing on the fate of bodily and planetary vitality" (3, 15). My examination of microbial infections and how they are rendered through American speculative fiction to produce specific embodiments and environments leads me to a more ambivalent conclusion: while this ecological awareness is certainly possible, it can also reinforce chauvinistic positions privileging the access to health and land of certain subjects over others (this will be the central focus of this project's first chapter). In examining the ways that immunity becomes a narrative (and narratological) unit of such writing, many of these stories lack such clear ethical imperatives. It is not that writers like Jack London or William S. Burroughs conform to strict dualistic readings of nature/humanity in their work; rather, they embody some of the most vivid literary engagement with thinking about material embodiment and trans-corporeality. This engagement, however, allows them the space to further entrench their

own ideological thinking on race and gender.²⁹ In other words, while trans-corporeality and ecosickness offer precise analyses on how engagements with the “natural world” formulate a powerful literary and epistemological re-engagement with notions of material embodiment, these literary experiments are not innately radical or liberatory. I believe that thinking through how these conservative or reactionary impulses arise alongside such deformations and deconstructions of human materialities and subjectivities helps us to better understand about the deployment of health, embodiment, and ecology in literature as an ideologically inflected space.

Perhaps what most clearly articulates this project’s divergence from new materialist and ecofeminist thinking develops from an emphasis on immunity.³⁰ In my own examination of American literature and its engagements with bodies and environments rendered through the lens of viral infection, I find that immunity is the concept that most stands out. The narrative voices I consider in each chapter do not emanate from those who are themselves sick, but rather from subjects who are viewing

²⁹ Houser’s ethical position is influenced by her decision to focus on post-1970 American fiction, selecting literature possessed of a greater environmental consciousness. As Houser notes, the “advanced conditions” and greater awareness of the post-Second World War technoscience that “draws together environmentalist and biomedical discourses” is what “distinguish[es] post-1970 ecosickness fiction from its antecedents” (5, 9). Likewise, as Houser is not specifically focused on microbial infections, but a broader concept of sickness (from the exploration of the neurological condition of Capgras syndrome in Richard Powers’s *The Echo Maker* to the variety of physical and mental illnesses that affect the characters in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*), this time frame makes sense. My more expansive timeframe in this project is due in large part to the popularization of the germ theory of disease at the dawn of the twentieth century and its impact on literature and culture (see especially Tomes 57-62).

³⁰ Houser, for instance, is uninterested in immunity: whether people are directly suffering from a sickness, or a healthy person bearing witness to illness (as in her first chapter, which examines two AIDS narratives—one from poet David Wojnarowicz, ill with the disease, and the other from Jan Zita Grover, a nurse who does not have HIV but worked in a hospital with HIV/AIDS patients), everyone is implicated in the paradigm of ecosickness. Meanwhile, Haraway’s vision of sympoiesis promotes visions of an animality where “[t]o be animal is to become-with bacteria (and, no doubt, viruses and many other sorts of critters; a basic aspect of sympoiesis is its expandable set of players” (65). Yet for all of this intoxicating vision of how to become-with the microbe (or, at least, bacteria; viruses remain more of a hypothetical for Haraway [see 62]), it is unclear how one could become-with viral entities.

the effects that diseases have on communities and landscapes. The immunity of the speaker is the constant among these figures.³¹ Immunity is a vital concept in thinking through the ways that ecosickness can operate, and how in literature it plays out: if a person (or character) is unable to be infected (if not affected) by the diseases that connect bodies to landscapes, then how does this in turn shift the understanding of ecology and embodiment? How are these interrelated concepts yoked together through the gaze of a “healthy” narrator? The result is a far more ambiguous rendering of identity and materiality than the ethical imperatives of Haraway, Wolfe, Houser, and Alaimo would imply. In order to think through immunity’s prevalence in contemporary understandings of the body, however, it is first necessary to explore in greater detail how the discourse of immunity acts as an expression of political power.

Biopolitics: The Immunization of Life Itself

Philosopher Georges Canguilhem was quite correct when he perceived that “[p]olitical philosophy seems to dominate biological theory” (171). In the last three decades, biopolitics has come to serve as one of the most popular concepts—or, less charitably, buzzwords—of contemporary theory and philosophy. Derived from Michel Foucault’s—a student of Canguilhem’s—lecture series “*Society Must Be Defended*” and the final chapter of the first volume of his *The History of Sexuality*,³² biopolitics (and its

³¹ One could raise the objection that this is not the case for William S. Burroughs, whose insistence on the virality of language would seem to implicate any speaker as a particularly profligate infector. While Burroughs’s elastic troping of viruses to encompass everything from addiction to language would certainly suggest that his narrative voices (who often don’t possess enough bandwidth to be considered “characters”) are sick, the point of Chapter Two is to demonstrate the ways Burroughs attempts to recode the viral aspects of literature and culture toward an immunizing discourse.

³² It should be noted, however, that Foucault did not invent the term “biopolitics.” In Roberto Esposito’s exhaustive study of biopolitical thinking in philosophy, he traces the term to Swedish thinker Rudolph

etymological twin and shadow, “biopower”) is the “politicization of biology” (Campbell vii), the opening of the concept of “life itself” into the arena of political power and control. Foucault charts biopolitics as emerging out of the shift away from the absolute monarchy of the sovereign and toward the modern liberal-democratic nation-state. For Foucault, the sovereign power over life and death gives way to a more precise and subtle continuum of control. In Foucault’s famous formulation, sovereign power “took life and let live. And now we have the emergence of a [bio]power that I would call the power of regularization, and it, in contrast, consists in making live and letting die” (“*Society*” 247). With an eye to viewing “population” as a vital entity which needed to be cultivated and protected, the operations of power became subtler and more minute. This movement develops from the epistemic shift away from seeing individuals as subjects of a specific sovereign to a more encompassing view of “life in general” (*History* 142). This can be considered not just a change in the way power works over life, but an expansion thereof: as Foucault notes, the power of execution wielded by the sovereign, “has tended to be no longer the major form of power but merely one element among others, working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces” (136). This catalogue of enumerated powers belonging to a biopolitical regime takes the health of an entire population of a nation-state,³³ a series of

Kjellen, who made use of it in a 1916 volume entitled *The State as Form of Life* (*Bios* 16). Likewise, he notes that Foucault debuts the term “biopolitics” in a 1974 lecture in Rio, where Foucault states “for capitalist society it is the biopolitical that is important before everything else; the biological, the somatic, the corporeal. The body is a biopolitical reality; medicine is a biopolitical strategy” (qtd. in *Bios* 27). While Esposito dismisses these sentences, saying that this initial articulation “doesn’t have much importance” (27), I think that Foucault’s clear centering of the body as the chief concern of such a regime of power is worthwhile to keep in mind under increasingly complex exposition on what “biopolitics” entails.

³³ Which can also be considered as the formulation of race and racism, as Foucault examines in his lectures. This idea of how the nation’s population is considered a race leads to Foucault to note that “[w]ars are no

strategies utilized to maintain the well-being of life as an abstracted mass and norm. Biopolitics thus supplants the dualistic power of sovereignty, introducing ever more supple mechanisms of control meant to encourage the growth of life of the acceptable life-form while making sure to destroy the threatening figure.

Foucault's early analyses of biopolitics remain fruitfully and frustratingly abridged; his subsequent lecture series, *Security, Territory, and Population*, begins with some illuminating remarks on biopolitics, but he quickly shifts to thinking about the role of population and governmentality, and the next lecture series *The Birth of Biopolitics*, despite its promising title, largely revolves around a historical working-through of neoliberalism.³⁴ While Foucault's research interests moved elsewhere, his formulations on biopolitics sparked a massive amount of interest from generations of scholars. Thinkers like Giorgio Agamben (whom I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Two), Paolo Virno, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri provide illuminating exegeses on Foucault's premises. However, the thinker who deals most clearly with Foucault's implicit question of why "biopolitics continually threaten[s] to be reversed into thanatopolitics" is Roberto Esposito (*Bios* 39). In his book *Bios* (2004), Esposito

longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity; massacres have become vital" (*History* 137). The seeming paradox of a power apparatus dedicated to the maintenance and flourishing of life that has also produced the fact that "wars were never as bloody as they have been since the nineteenth century" (136) can be logically satisfied only through this idea of state racism and the idea of acceptable life. The examination of how totalitarian regimes of power are predicated upon biopower will be developed in far greater detail by Agamben, Esposito, Heller, Campbell, Hardt and Negri, and Lifton.

³⁴ Christopher Breu contends that, in spite of this seeming divergence from the title topic, *The Birth of Biopolitics* does intriguingly suggest that the privatization of public welfare institutions is the high-water mark of biopolitics: capitalization upon the body is the logical endpoint for this power relationship (15).

productively builds on Foucault's biopolitical genealogy,³⁵ and notes a key conceptual absence in his thinking. Esposito is animated by the way that Foucault attempts to temporalize regimes of power, and the difficulties the French thinker has in separating them. As Esposito notes, for Foucault "biopolitics is primarily that which is *not* sovereignty. More than having its own source of light, biopolitics is illuminated by the twilight of something that precedes it, by sovereignty's advance into the shadows" (33). Through a detailed reading of Foucault's lectures in "*Society Must Be Defended*" and *Security, Territory, Population*, Esposito traces Foucault's hesitations in organizing his thinking—sometimes biopolitics appears to be a clear temporal break with sovereign power, while at other times "[Foucault] returns it to a logic of copresence" (40). There is a constitutive element in Foucault's diagnosis of power missing, in other words; "[i]t is as if between the two models, sovereignty and biopolitics, there passes a relation at once more secret and essential, one that is irreducible to both the category of analogy and to that of contiguity" (40). That relation, as Esposito defines it, is the paradigm of immunization, a logic that helps the philosopher to link together Foucault's thought on biopower and sovereignty.

Immunity is the key to thinking through regimes of power and identity, as Esposito suggests. And it is this complex history of immunity in systems of thought that allows for a rich analysis of how bodies and politics intersect. Esposito's primary

³⁵ A term Foucault specifically invokes at the outset of his investigation into biopower. In the first lecture in "*Society Must Be Defended*," Foucault draws upon Nietzsche's concept of "genealogy," which Foucault defines as an "antiscience" that brings together scientific knowledge with local understandings in order to struggle against hegemonic discourse (8-10). This Nietzschean-Foucauldian concept of genealogy shares much in common with the Benjaminian notion of dialectics that inform this project, the arranging of constellations of concepts to bring together new and striking kinds of thought.

intervention in thinking through immunity's operation within the West is his assertion that we are able to understand immunity and community as mutually constitutive: "the category of immunity is inseparable from that of community: as its inverse mode, it cannot be eliminated" (*Immunitas* 16). There is no way to single out either of these diversions of the *munus* from one another—they each limn the other and, together, provide the contours of contemporary social thought. "Immunity," then, as Esposito claims, "is the internal limit which cuts across community, folding it back on itself in a form that is both constitutive and exclusionary: immunity constitutes or reconstitutes community precisely by negating it" (9). Community can only operate with the principle of immunity, and there is no way of thinking outside of the immunitary discourse that has developed around the social and philosophical functions of the West.

But what are we to do with this knowledge? Esposito offers perhaps his most intriguing analysis when he suggests that "[d]isease and antidote, poison and cure, potion and counter-potion: the *pharmakon* is not a substance but rather a non-substance, a non-identity, a non-essence" (*Immunitas* 127). What immunitary biopolitics *is*, then, Esposito implies, is a *perspective*. The *pharmakon* offers a means of thinking through the dialectical relationality of identity formation in the crucible of illness. Indeed, this would align with Nikolas Rose's crucial insight that "[b]iopower is more a perspective than a concept: it brings into view a whole range of more or less rationalized attempts by different authorities to intervene upon the vital characteristics of human existence" (54).³⁶

³⁶ Indeed, thinking outside of immunity is not what interests Esposito. Rather, his intention is to think of how immunity, which is so often employed toward entropic and self-destruction ends, can instead be the

Moreover, the dialectical character of immunity and community is not one that exists along a meta-binary axis, but one that is likewise fraught and complicated. For Esposito, the revelation of immunity as a perspectival figuration “overturns [the] prevailing interpretation [of immunity]. From this perspective, nothing remains of the incompatibility between self and other. The other is the form the self takes where inside intersects with outside, the proper with the common, immunity with community” (*Immunitas* 171). Neither term can ever triumph over the other: the possibility of a perfectly self-consistent, protected sphere is as much of a fantasy as a borderless, flowing community unimpeded by the blockages of immunity.³⁷ Thus, if immunity remains a foundational element of any kind of *socius*, the question should be how to think about the ways that the discourse of immunity gets employed among a group. What matters, for Esposito, is a perspectival shift: the interpretative work of immunity involves reaching the point where the two interrelated terms of the *munus* hold each other together toward productive, as opposed to destructive, ends.

basis for a positive biopolitics; “[t]he fact that the genetic heterogeneity of the fetus rather than its genetic similarity is what encourages the mother’s immune system to accept it means that the immune system cannot be reduced to the simple function of rejecting all things foreign” (*Immunitas* 18). This point is also made, with less philosophical emphasis, by Biss, who notes that “[t]he cells that form the outer layer of the placenta for a human fetus bind to each other using a gene that originated, long ago, from a virus” (31), and by Morton, who states with characteristic ostentation that “you are here today reading this partly owing to a virus in your mother’s DNA that may have prevented her from spontaneously aborting you” (35). Each thinker zeroes in on a different element of this biological process, but the point is that viruses are not the irrevocable other, but something far uncannier.

³⁷ As Esposito notes, “[i]t is logically impossible to extend a right to all without emptying it of meaning as a right. If it were extended to everyone, it would no longer even be perceived as such. Not being proper to anyone, it would no longer be a right but perhaps, at most, a fact” (*Immunitas* 24). Here Esposito is referring specifically to law, the structure which binds together community. In other words, from the very outset, community is riven with constitutive gaps. Rather than attempting to eliminate them, Esposito is interesting in forcing a shift in perspective to consider how these gaps can operate within the community.

Ironically, however, in this shift to the singularity of embodiment, Esposito ends up abstracting the very concept he seeks to liberate from the province of the biopolitical. In order to fully dismantle the autoimmune teleology that characterizes Nazism, Esposito urges that “we shouldn’t limit ourselves to skirting Nazi semantics, or for that matter confronting it from the outside,” but rather to “overtun them and to turn them *inside out*” (*Bios* 157). Esposito thus engages in a project whereby the foundational elements of Nazi biopolitics are reworked toward a positive valence. This biopolitics would see the shared singularity of life in “a being that is both singular and communal, generic and specific, and undifferentiated and different, not only devoid of spirit, but a flesh that doesn’t even have a body” (167). Thus, from *Immunitas*, which envisions a potential way of rethinking the logic of immunity from the perspective of embodiment, in *Bios* Esposito instead articulates a reworking of bodies to end the immunitary logic that dictates the biopolitical regime. Esposito’s approach, while comprehensive, feels disconnected from any kind of lived reality, emphasizing an idealized flesh over the bodies that inhabit the biopolitical world. Esposito is wary of the individual that underpins liberal-humanist philosophy, seeing how the liberal state’s increasingly biopolitical purview immunizes an increasingly small group of people from “precarity.” Janell Watson’s astute critique of Esposito’s grappling with biopolitics makes clear the issues with this approach. For Esposito, “the affirmative community is incompatible with the individual autonomous subject” (Watson n. pag.). Yet the political problems with this articulation are evident: “[p]aradoxically, while the negative community offers protection, the affirmative community exposes everyone to risk” (n. pag.). As I explore through the speculative literature on virus and immunity, this undifferentiated articulation is only fitfully

possible. Concepts of immunity, sovereignty, and self-identificatory differentiation predominate throughout the plagues that ravage these texts. Viruses offer a window into thinking about the contours of material embodiment, and relations of subjectivities to environments and communities, but the submergence of these categories of liberal humanism are not so easily done away with.

To this end, Christopher Breu's work in *Insistence of the Material* has been key to this study. Breu expertly links together the archives of biopolitics, new materialism, and American fiction to "theorize and attend to the material in the era of biopolitics" while also remaining aware of "language's limits in doing so" (2). For Breu, literary fiction in the second half of the twentieth century shifted toward considering the material well in advance of the current academic scholarship on the topic (5-6). Breu thus grapples with a central tension of this approach: how the material is composed through a linguistic medium. Rather than examine only how the material is subordinated to a linguistic representation, however, Breu is interested in how authors (including William S. Burroughs, the subject of my second chapter) of post-Second World War American fiction mobilize the medium of fiction toward exploring the depiction and management of the body within a sociopolitical framework that takes the concept of "life itself" as its key subject of interest.

Expanding on Breu's work, I wish to suggest that, through American speculative fiction dramatizing contagious outbreaks, we are able to pick up on key ideas of infection and immunity, and the specific kinds of embodiments that these concepts take on in a literary sphere. It is my contention—indebted to Breu's—that fiction is fascinated with exploring the biopolitical, and that viral literature does offer us a means of understanding

these ideas. How does literature give (literal) shape to these conceptual frameworks? Furthermore, what do such embodiments entail for the project of thinking about aesthetics, (eco)politics, and social relations? I find Breu's titular insistence upon the way that literature engages with the biopolitical questions of materiality a persuasive one, and wish to extend his critique beyond his own frame of "late-capitalist literature" of the post-war era (27) to encapsulate the age of the germ that stretches from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. While Breu is interested in the "postwar period of biopolitics and biopolitical production as a core organizing principle of everyday life, in which the body and subjectivity are immediate products of the process of economic production (rather than adjuncts to it)" (26), I find that a similar analytical approach can be extracted from thinking through the twentieth century's long fascination with viral outbreak, with the newly minted concept of the immune system of defense, and with the dialectical processes that such nascent biological processes embody.

While Breu focuses on post-war literature in general, Sherryl Vint helpfully points to science fiction as specifically a means of connecting biopolitics and posthumanism within an aesthetic purview. Vint notes that science fiction and biopolitics are linked together in their mutual focus on embodiments and technologies of power. "Under biopolitics," Vint explains, "life itself becomes the object of political governance, and political governance becomes the practice of seeing the biological life of individuals and species. Technoscience, sf speculation and biopolitical practice converge in this context" (161). Vint argues convincingly that, as "life itself" and the management thereof becomes more complex, distributed, and wrapped up in the exercise of power, the more "[t]he tools of sf are crucial for helping us understand and—ideally—intervene in this reality"

(165). It is in speculative fiction that we are able to most clearly apprehend means of thinking about embodiments that expand or explode the concept of the “human,” while also demonstrating how these concepts are delimited by wider political and ideological projects that we can enfold within the concept of “biopolitics.”

A Note on Terminology

Throughout this introduction, as well as the wider project, I make use of the term “speculative fiction” (hereafter shortened to “sf”) to refer to the texts I examine. This term is met with some contention in the field of science fiction studies. “Speculative” has often been seen as a way of making respectable the often marginalized genre of science fiction. Notably, Margaret Atwood ignited a debate over these generic definitions when she referred to her 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake* as “a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper,” citing her text’s lack of “intergalactic space travel ... teleportation ... Martians,” and other such flashy signifiers of sf (qtd. in P.L. Thomas 2).³⁸ In invoking the term “speculative fiction,” I do not mean to enforce a boundary between speculative and science fiction reproduced by Atwood, or segregate fantasy fiction and science fiction (as does prominent sf critic Darko Suvin).³⁹ I offer two justifications for this

³⁸ As Thomas recounts, Atwood’s dismissal of sf prompted a reply from renowned sf and fantasy writer Ursula K. Le Guin, who wrote that “[Atwood] doesn’t want the literary bigots to shove her into the literary ghetto.” This response provoked a measured reply from Atwood, who accepted that her hardline distinction between science fiction and speculative fiction may not hold up, and that “what Le Guin means by ‘science fiction’ is what I mean by ‘speculative fiction,’ and what she means by ‘fantasy’ would include some of what I mean by ‘science fiction.’ ... When it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefined” (7-8). This episode makes clear, to me, that “speculative” is the most generous and encompassing term for exploring these intersecting textual approaches.

³⁹ In his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), Suvin describes fantasy as “anti-cognitive” escapism, lacking the qualities of cognition and estrangement (discussed further below) that characterize “true” sf (37).

decision. The first is purely practical: not every text discussed in this project would fall under the banner of “science fiction.” While Samuel Delany is best known for his genre-redefining work in science fiction (from his early *Babel-17* [1968] to the experimental *Dhalgren* [1975] to later works such as *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* [1983]), the two texts that I look at do not possess any of the traditional science-fictional settings of alien or alternate worlds, or futuristic settings. Indeed, the first of his works I explore, *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, from his collection *Escape from Nevèryon* (1984), is largely set in his pre-Atlantean world of Nevèryon, populated by barbarian warlords, ominous sorcerers, dragons, and other common features of sword-and-sorcery fantasy. Likewise, his novel *The Mad Man* (1994), while possessing several nonmimetic characteristics, such as the fantastical monster that appears at the novel’s beginning (ix), adheres to the setting, plot, and characters typical of literary realism. Thus, to characterize this project as science-fictional would be to misapply this terminology, while “speculative fiction” better encapsulates the strange visions of these authors. On a more critical note, however, I think that “science fiction,” with its implicit refiguration of how science can reformulate thinking of identity and ecology, to be somewhat constraining. As noted above, Delany’s novella *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* moves between a fictitious past and the present day in order to think analogically about the cultural reception of plague outbreaks. In other words, it is not always necessary to look into the future in order to situate ideas about the present; the past (especially as the religious and unscientific fantasy envisioned by Delany) offers the same critical and dialectical tools for thinking through these concepts just as well. I follow Jason Haslam who suggests that the designation “sf” (or “SF,” as he writes it)

can stand as an abbreviation for any number of generic or modal categories: science fiction, speculative fiction, science fantasy, science fiction and/or fantasy, scientific fictions I use ‘SF’ as a term because it can encompass so many of the categories listed above, all of which identify different examples of non-realist narrative: forms that do not rely for the creation of meaning primarily on a ‘purely’ mimetic relationship between material reality and narrative fiction. (2-3)

The most important method for “sf,” in the polysemy of its signifiers, is the possibility of narratively breaking with a recognizable mimetic fidelity in order to better explore the nuances of how material concepts are *thought*, and how they hold out the possibility for change.

The Speculation of Fiction

With this terminological flexibility in mind, it is now incumbent to think about what sf as a literary methodology is capable of accomplishing. As Paul Kincaid writes, there is no “unique, common thread” capable of defining sf. Instead, we should take sf to be comprised of a series of “family resemblances” as opposed to works constructed around a singular expression of ideas (qtd. in Rieder 16). In other words, there is no unifying *content* around science fiction; however, form is another matter. Wald argues that the outbreak narrative is an exemplary example of a myth: “an explanatory story that is not specifically authored, but emerges from a group as an expression of the origins and terms of its collective identity” (9). The outbreak narrative, and its cultural iterations, Wald suggests, “offer myths for the contemporary moment” (10). But the relationship between myth and sf is perhaps not so easily situated, and in responding to Wald’s vision of the “outbreak narrative,” I wish to consider how the narratological properties of speculative fiction as a genre work against Wald’s claim. Darko Suvin, for example, in his genre-defining study *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), responds harshly to this notion of myth, describing it as “diametrically opposed to the cognitive approach [of

sf] since it conceives of human relations as fixed and supernaturally determined” (19). Myth, for Suvin, “is oriented toward constants,” and is thus “a conservative force, a guarantee of the status quo” (40, 48). For Suvin, fiction can offer different types of responses to the totalization of myth, but it is sf that is most radically capable of challenging it, since it “illuminate[s] such relations by creating a radically or significantly different formal framework” (31). In his famous description of sf as the literature of “cognitive estrangement,” Suvin argues that this genre challenges the everyday structure and description of the world by presenting it in an unfamiliar and altered context (hence, *estrangement*⁴⁰), but also a cognitive element predicated upon a historically materialist understanding of the world: “SF sees the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable, and therefore subject to a *cognitive* view” (19). Myth, for Suvin, is a reactionary form of storytelling, a mode of adhering to a static view of the world that upholds the organizing logics of a community. SF, by contrast, through its cognitive estrangement, offers a way of alienating those familiar structures of being, while still adhering to the principles and structures of a time period, rather than inventing an entirely dissimilar universe. Still, Wald is certainly right in noting the “outbreak narrative” as a kind of myth, one that is mobilized to erect and reinforce the borders between communities, to protect a sense of identity and collectivity at the expense of another. I wish to extend that observation by attending to the ways these authors and texts envision embodiment, to suggest that a more complex and multifaceted series of

⁴⁰ Suvin explains that this term develops from Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s “defamiliarization” and from German avant-garde artist Bertolt Brecht’s notion of the “Verfremdungseffekt,” or “estrangement-effect” (18).

narratives can be told alongside (or in opposition to) the *myth* of outbreak and containment. Indeed, I argue in my second chapter that the work of William S. Burroughs is more than just a subsection of the outbreak literature of the 1950s in the wake of the Cold War and the popularization of viruses—it is a means of imagining materiality in an age of viruses. The effect of his kaleidoscopic trilogy is far more than a renegotiation of a familiar story of infected and immune.

Carl Freedman responds to Suvin's work in his *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2000) by arguing that each of his titular terms is synonymous with the other (xv). Critical theory—in the sense of a rigorously dialectical mode of apprehending the world—is what science fiction does (and vice-versa). These methods of thinking through sf involve apprehending the dialectical character of both, which Freedman, in a post-Hegelian, Marxist (read: materialist) vein, glosses as examining historical mutability, material reproducibility, and utopian possibility (xvi, 32). Rejecting a static and hegemonic myth, sf is radically involved in thinking through how bodies exist and are understood in history, and how they can be both understood within contemporary frameworks of knowledge, and radically disconnected from them. Following Suvin, Freedman emphasizes the estranging effect of sf, while modifying Suvin's reworking the latter's concept of "cognitive" into a more expansive "cognition effect,"⁴¹ whereby the cognition "is not any epistemological judgment external to the text itself on the

⁴¹ China Miéville responds to both Suvin's and Freedman's contention that fantasy is excluded from the privileged space of "sf" due to its lack of "cognitive" character or "cognition effect." For Miéville, rather than being an anti-cognitive genre, fantasy's "unreality function," its radical alterity, in fact offers a more refined estranging effect (244). As Haslam elaborates, the real "novum" of sf literature "does not necessarily rely on the extrapolative science of the text, but rather on the alacrity of the reader's ability to move into a space of hesitation, the willingness to accept unreality as reality and vice versa" (10).

rationality or irrationality of the [the text's] imaginings but rather ... the attitude *of the text itself* to the kind of estrangements being performed" (18).⁴² Freedman's cognition effect is less concerned with actualities than with the means by which a discursive framework is constructed around a narrative event. Thus, Freedman's more critical and less dogmatic approach to sf categorization allows for more imaginative visions of viruses and immunities to enter into his schema: while zombies and extraterrestrial viral gangsters may be "ideally impossible" (Suvin 83), within the formal structure of the narrative they are accepted as possible, enabling one to refocus the body as the locus of thinking.

Indeed, as Vint suggests, the content of viral narratives, like "vampirism and zombies ... images of genetic mutation and viral contamination" among others (165), serves as a means of accessing and exploring the biopolitical organization of sociopolitical power in the West. In extending Vint's analysis, I suggest that thinking about the formal characteristics of viral sf is important to examining how the body and the institutions into which it is enmeshed become theorized. If we consider sf as a literature predicated around a dialectical engagement proposing estranging principles meant to be held in tension with our lived existence, then we can add a further dimension to Vint's reading. Not only on the level of its thematic content, but at the level of form, the narration of virus outbreaks in American prose fiction attempts to engage critically

⁴² Freedman provides as an example Isaac Asimov's short story "The Dying Night" (1956), which is premised upon Mercury's rotation being matched precisely to its orbit around the sun, thus producing places on the planet that are permanently enshrouded by night. While at the time Asimov composed the story such an idea was scientifically plausible, future discoveries disproved this hypothesis (Freedman 18). Freedman suggests that, under Suvin's stricter criteria of "cognition," Asimov's story would be disqualified from the category of sf, while Freedman's more expansive "cognition effect" would allow the story to maintain its place as sf since within the fictional universe, for it is still "cognitively valid" (18).

with the structural ideologies and effects of biopolitics. Sf and biopolitics are tightly linked to one another, and a formal analysis of how literature attempts to narrate the material changes and contingencies of bodies, communities, and environments reveals to us the contours of such power operations.

This apprehension returns us to an analysis of the specifically literary and narrative character of virus fictions, a way of thinking through the particularity of literary iteration, whereby the content and the form of an aesthetic work must be comprehended together, as a unity in opposition to a discontinuous series of discrete parts. What I wish to suggest is that literary criticism attending to the narrative character of the body (both as infected and protected) is particularly fruitful when applied to narratives about viruses and immunities. These fictions all place at the center of their aesthetic concern bodies undergoing extraordinary transformations, and in turn transforming the larger institutions into which these bodies are imbricated. Attending to the narrative structure of sf novels, to their dialectical bodies, allows us to think clearly about the biopolitical regime where life itself has become the locus of political operations, and to think through how these systems and ideas are predicated upon transitory ideology, logics of shifting domination, and glimpses of potentially radical freedom. What sf literature does when its object is the virus, then, is mobilize the images of infection and defense doubly: the virus is clearly deployed metaphorically to illustrate questions of social ills that the authors see (the question of immigration and American identity for London, or the idea of postmodern global capitalism for Whitehead). Yet the virus cannot be understood simply as an “objective correlative,” as T.S. Eliot defines it—“a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external

facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (145). What is interesting about narratives of viruses is that, beyond the metaphor, these stories are indeed quite literally *about* viruses. The microbe is at once a metaphor and a means of thinking through material embodiments and environments. This double articulation of viruses and immunities is useful in thinking through its dialectical character.

Narrating the Body

If narratology can be broadly defined as “the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story’” (Bal 3), then one would imagine the role of the body to be of central importance to such and discipline. Yet, “[d]espite the excitement that the body has generated in literary and cultural criticism,” writes Daniel Punday, “it has had almost no impact on narratology” (2). Indeed, for all of narratology’s interest in the qualities of fabula (or elements), the levels of narration that can exist and overlap within a story, and the forms that narrators and narrations can take, the body is often presumed to be a relatively stable concept. The major names of contemporary narratology—such as Mieke Bal and Seymour Chatman—have, in Punday’s words, “a complete lack of interest in the body as a narratological category” (3).⁴³

⁴³ Of course, this is not to say that narratology has never taken on consideration of the body as an object of study. Punday cites Deirdre Lynch and Mark Seltzer as two important critics who continually foreground the body as a fundamental narratological element. Lynch, for instance, is important for stressing how our understanding of character has a historical development to it that is shaped by the discursive construction of the body, while Seltzer looks at the way American naturalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries focus on the narratives of individual bodies to illustrate issues of identity and economy during the industrialization of the nation (8-9). Punday also draws on feminist narratologists such as Susan Lanser and Robyn Warhol and their attention to the ways gender is involved in the construction of character, but

Punday seeks, therefore, to turn narratological thinking toward how the body shapes and determines what can be told within a story. His idea of “corporeal narratology” focuses on “how the body contributes to our ways of speaking about and analyzing narrative” (viii, ix). Punday, arguing that “narratology is perhaps the discipline within literary theory that has most aggressively sought out transhistorical and transcultural patterns and dynamics” (186), pushes instead for a rigorously historicized concept of embodiment and how that image is folded into contemporary forms of narrative art (chiefly, the novel). In Punday’s own words, narratology as a discipline “depends upon modern conceptions of the body” (11). Working through how novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries use bodies to organize structural elements such as plot, setting, and character, Punday offers a compelling reading of how the materiality of the body is utilized to limn the structural features of narrative prose, and how we must engage with these depictions of bodies in order to understand the horizons of what can be narrated and by whom.

Of particular interest to me is how biopolitical Punday’s narratological work is. While he never uses the term himself, his conception of the historical mutability of embodiment certainly augurs a means of thinking about how “life itself” becomes the process of not just political, but aesthetic apprehension, as well. Looking at how scientific theories of “embryology” and dissection in the seventeenth century came to see the body as a series of material elements as opposed to a cosmic paradigm, Punday concludes that “[m]odern scientific study of the body, then, marks a fundamental transition in the way

suggests that “these feminist narratologists have remained interested in questions of ‘how’ rather than ‘what,’” not fully focusing on the construction of the body as a narrative unit (4-5).

that the body is made meaningful, and especially implies that we must give up the symbolic qualities attributed to the surface of the human form” (39). Echoing Foucault, Punday notes that the regimes of power moved from an understanding of material surfaces to material depths, and this corresponded in an alteration of the narration of such frangible corpuses. Indeed, Punday’s archive is notably familiar, drawing on Foucault, Haraway, and Judith Butler to underscore the re-orientation of the body within wider cultural discourse. He points to Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” to demonstrate the way in which new narratives about embodiment and cultural belonging occur—for Haraway “[t]he cyborg is not merely a new ‘origin myth’ but rather an image of origins as themselves constructed in the process of narration, a process that Haraway rightly recognizes runs directly counter to all of our biological assumptions about physical identity and human reproduction” (49). For Punday, the body and its narrations are inextricably co-constituted (190), and thus we must think about how technologies of biopower are mobilized toward thinking through the structural characteristics of prose fiction.

Perhaps the most striking note of Punday’s book is his notion that “the unruly body is not a natural thing ... but rather a discursive object very much constructed to make sense in light of the general body to which it is contrasted” (100). But who or where do we gain access to this “general body,” which is just as ontologically unstable as those unruly bodies that Punday explores?⁴⁴ I wish to suggest that it is at the level of

⁴⁴ Punday’s examples include Lucius Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, Samuel Richardson’s distinction between male and female bodies in *Pamela*, and Beloved’s temporally disconnected body in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

narrative that such a body is supplied; in other words, that the voices of these texts offer us a kind of *narrative immunity*. Punday’s implicitly biopolitical narratology can be wedded to more recent explorations in that field, particularly those of Esposito and Cohen, to suggest that the narrative operates as a kind of immune function within these texts. The fabula of these texts—the events and the actors who perform them—are able to be conveyed to us only through the paradigm of a voice unaffected by the crises of transformation ongoing.⁴⁵

One way we can detect this narrative immunity is to place Esposito and Punday into conversation with one another. Challenging Foucault’s description of biopolitics as a radical break with the logic of sovereignty, Esposito asserts that “sovereignty isn’t before or after biopolitics, but cuts across the entire horizon, furnishing the most powerful response to the modern problem of the self-preservation of life” (*Bios* 57). Central to this figuration of sovereign biopolitics is Thomas Hobbes. Esposito reads Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) and its expostulation of sovereignty and civil society as an enactment of this paradigm of immunity, extended from the legalistic and into an undifferentiated plane where life and politics are intersected:

[i]f life is abandoned to its internal powers, to its natural dynamics, human life is destined to self-destruct because it carries within itself something that ineluctably places it in contradiction with itself. Accordingly, in order to save itself, life needs to step out from itself and constitute a transcendental point from which it receives orders and shelter. . . . Nor does this mean that the category of life in the modern period replaces that of politics, with progressive depoliticization as its result. On the contrary, once the centrality of life is established, it is precisely politics that is awarded the responsibility for saving life, but—and here is the decisive point in the structure of the immunity paradigm—it occurs through an antinomic *dispositif* that proceeds via the activation of its contrary. In order to be saved, life has to

⁴⁵ This is not to suggest, of course, that all fiction about viruses must come from the narrative positioning of an immune person. This is an idea I will return to in the Conclusion.

give up something that is integral to itself ... namely, the acquisitive desire for everything that places itself in the path of a deadly reprisal. (58-59)

For Esposito, Hobbes inaugurates biopolitical thinking, and the Leviathan (particularly the famous frontpiece of the first edition of the treatise) conceptualizes this immunitary logic. Hobbes's Leviathan is a means of immunizing the body politic by way of self-defense. As Cohen remarks, Hobbes and other thinkers like him see "modern embodiment as an essentially defensive posture through which the fortress body fends off the marauding tendencies of hostile enemies" (67). The immune body is the one that remains sovereign, and the one that must serve as the locus of biopolitical management. In an analogical key, Punday too takes Hobbes as representative of a paradigm shift in institutional epistemology. For Punday, however, the Leviathan is a way of rethinking the *narrations* of embodiment. Hobbes's "body politic," Punday contends, "describes ... an imaginary position from which the whole of the nation can be narrated" (160). Here is precisely where we can see the operations of narrative and biopolitics fold in on each other: the body politic, the anthropomorphized conception of the *nation* as materially encased and instantiated, offers a way of thinking about how the general body both regulates its own health through an immunity principle of self-defense, and, more importantly, *narrates* this logic in the key of a defense of health against the encroachments of debilitating illness. Thus, as Punday correctly notes, "*Leviathan* ... is precisely the project of escaping the limitations of the body by turning to the disembodiment of reading. But this disembodiment in turn is possible only through the metaphor of another body that acts out the events that no one individual can see—the body politic" (162). In other words, the means of narrating a body is predicated around a

relationship with a sovereign political structure, one that operates on the principle of immunity.

Thus, in combining the biopolitical insights of Esposito and Cohen with Punday's "corporeal narratology," we can gain a valuable perspective on how biopolitics possesses an operant function within the realm of aesthetics too. The level of narrative, with this understanding of the modern body, works as the "general body," immune from the infectious spread occurring at the level of action within the text and able to convey a sense of normativity to the reader. The narrator manages the reader's engagement with the infection at the level of text, utilizing the unruly body as a means of exploring this relationship of bodies to viruses. The narrative becomes another bastion for which the province of biopolitics extends its managerial reach.

By opting to focus on a series of texts across a plethora of decades and literary styles within the United States, I wish to show that this principle of narrative immunity is not subject to any one specific kind of narratological discourse. Indeed, the naturalism of Jack London appears to offer a mimetic illustration of viral outbreak, whereas William S. Burroughs's extreme literary experimentation presents something more akin to Brian Richardson's conception of "unnatural narrative," an antimimetic poetics (xvii).⁴⁶ The flexibility of narrative immunity with respect to various styles and practices of

⁴⁶ Richardson takes care, in his book *Unnatural Narrative* (2015), to differentiate his conception of the unnatural from the identically named theory proffered by Jan Alber. Richardson notes that "[f]or Alber, a narrative is unnatural if it contains events that are physically or logically impossible" (13), echoing Freedman's critique of Suvin's narrow conception of the cognitive. Indeed, Richardson suggests that most speculative fiction is entirely "natural," due to its mimetic and/or conventional aspects (10-11). For instance, Richardson believes that fiction about impossible things (for instance, zombies) can be related in a narrative felicitous to mimesis, which indeed is what Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*—the subject of my fourth chapter—does.

storytelling suggests that the biopolitical concept of sovereign-immunity possesses an artistic resilience: the immune figure can be represented and narrated across a variety of potential frames. Rather, the encounter with the virus opens a space in each narrative—irrespective of its mimetic or (un)natural character—to examine the mutability of the virus and its sibling concept of immunity. The virus is incorporated and explicated within the framework of various narrative approaches, but in each case it provokes the narrative voice to foreground and interpretatively work through embodiment and the political frameworks that organize and limit such thoughts. In this sense, it is necessary to examine a specifically sf approach to formal analysis.

This project would seem to then be about the content, the thematic of the virus as it is expressed through a variety of authors over the period of a century. And yet, I find myself attracted to a mixture of genre study and narratological understanding of prose as a means of engaging with how narratives about viruses are formulated. In thinking about viruses and literature, one cannot turn away from the cultural and historical projects going on around these concepts of microbial nature, human health, epidemiology, and other related discourses. It is imperative to historicize the workings of the literary within the wider cultural context—this is what Wald expertly performs in her discussion of the “outbreak narrative.” Yet in her expansive study of how film, literature, social criticism, scientific study, and memoir intersect, there is no differentiation between the aesthetic and the sociological: all become variations on the theme of outbreak and containment. In my emphasis on the literary, I wish to underline the ways in which literature apprehends bodies in a biopolitical era, and how a formal (this is to say, dialectical) approach to

reading the virus allows us to grasp a way of thinking about the political, cultural, and aesthetic investments and ideologies that are mapped out across bodies in this approach.

In addition to the formal level, however, sf literature is certainly about how the representation of content also offers a means of reading embodiment. I am taken by Jason Haslam's notion that sf is about "self-reflexive modelling" of identities, a mirror through which these potential, speculative subjectivities can be cast (1). Haslam writes that "SF ... becomes a meta-tool for analysing the ways in which we can, if not transcend, then transform ideologies of identity surrounding such concepts as gender and race" (12). In a clever play on words, Haslam notes that "SF is best defined as 'signs fiction': but given that the Latin word for mirror, *speculum*, shares a root with speculative, perhaps the most accurate expression of SF falls between the two: 'specular fictions'" (18). Haslam's way of presenting sf as an analytical tool for exploring how embodiments (and ideologies of embodiment) are inscribed, reinforced, and/or deconstructed, offers an appealing method of thinking about the viral as a reading practice. Once again, the viral's double-articulation of bodies, both for discussing larger social issues and also as more literally apprehended discussions of the morphology of embodiment, thrust the body into the front of this specular surface. Speculative fiction is a mirror. It envisions a way in which an identity inhabits a space. And like a mirror, it bends and warps the shape of both the identity and the space, reshaping its look to be something askew. Above all, what a mirror does is provide a frame, a series of edges or boundary lines in which to consider

the scope of these newly considered subjects and ecologies. The speculative mirror is not boundless; it is literally bounded up.⁴⁷

The Shape of the Project

In Chapter One, I look at Jack London's short fictions about microbial outbreak and the corresponding collapse of civilization. London's work has often been read as a paradigm of engaging with a concept of American masculine identity, particularly with reference to his animal fictions. I wish to expand this view to take into account microbial entities, which evidently fascinated London, even as a scientific language for viruses did not yet exist. In examining two short texts—"The Unparalleled Invasion" (1910) and *The Scarlet Plague* (1912)—I show how London conceives of a "microbial sublime," a quasi-mystical vision of germ-like purity that redeems both an imperiled masculine identity and the frontier mythology of the United States at the outset of the twentieth century. In thinking about London's less popular speculative fiction, I want to think about how his naturalist rendering of the fantastical constructs a mythology of a "natural" masculinity at a formal level. Through romanticized depictions of biological warfare and apocalyptic destruction, London's speculations create a redeemed American frontier worthy of inhabitation by the virile, hetero-patriarchal white male so idealized throughout London's career.

While London explores a very literal manifestation of viral outbreak and the narrative of immunity that is constructed around such an event, my subsequent chapters

⁴⁷ Thus, the role of gender, and especially the fact that the four chapters of this project are both written by men and feature male characters or perspectives as narrators, is another important aspect to consider. This is another avenue that I take up in the Conclusion.

will look at how this narrative form accustoms itself to more figurative viral engagements. Chapter Two moves ahead to consider the work of the poet laureate of the virus, William S. Burroughs. Burroughs's evident fascination with the concept of the virus makes it his master-metaphor for all his fictions from *Naked Lunch* (1959) to *The Ticket That Exploded* (1966). Burroughs, a consummate biopolitical thinker and writer, is interested in the ways that the materiality of the flesh becomes subsumed by the dominion of discourse and narration. In his novels, Burroughs literalizes this relationship by having language become viral, invading and hijacking the vulnerable body. Ultimately, Burroughs seeks a new way to narrate the flesh, one that avoids the parasitic relationship that conventional stories offer. Through his famous techniques of literary experimentation, the cut-up and fold-in methods, Burroughs's novels seek an egress from the mutually assured logic of a virus/immunity binary, and the possibility of giving a literary space for this new flesh.

Chapter Three looks at Samuel R. Delany's fictions of HIV/AIDS, and the way Delany employs the tools of speculative fiction to discuss this real disease. Delany's writing on AIDS—from *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* (1984) to *The Mad Man* (1994)—offer a way of thinking about how viral narratives shape spaces and identities, and how those borders can be manipulated to allow for queer spaces to exist. In his former tale, Delany charts the ways in which the discursive borders of disease and infection are impossible to transcend; in the latter, he thinks about how these lines that equate bodies and territories can be reworked to optimistically foreground the queer male bodies and spaces that have been coded as toxic. Formally speaking, Delany's fascination with “paraliterature,” the modes and genres considered inferior to “literary fiction” (such

as science fiction, fantasy, pornography, and others) are combined and juxtaposed throughout these texts. Delany brings together sword-and-sorcery fantasy, pornographic excess, and documentary realist modes of narration to bear as frames considering the limitations of narration to fully define and explain embodiments as signified under an epidemic. Delany's quasi-mimetic, quasi-fantastical narratives provide a topology to think through how queer male identity and urban space can be reclaimed from the degenerative discourses that mainstream American society scripts in the era of AIDS.

Chapter Four moves us, appropriately, to the apocalypse. At the end of the world we encounter that most enduring of all virus narratives—the zombie outbreak story. While versions of zombie pandemics are everywhere in popular culture, I examine how the threat of the undead is focused on the ways that community is narrated. If the immunitary principle of biopolitics is inscribed so totally into our politics and social lives (and, as I contend, our narratives), then perhaps it is only the unstoppable deluge of the infected creatures that provides a means of escaping this logic; it is the zombie that offers the radical promise of community. In examining Colson Whitehead's zombie satire *Zone One* (2011), I look at the ways American late capitalist society has become affectively and narratively exhausted, and how it is the zombie invasion that promises the final end to an immunitary society. Whitehead's satirical text imagines an America recovering from an undead outbreak in much the same way it envisions a return from the Great Recession of 2008: with a zealous dedication to the status quo. The survivors of this cataclysm fully invest themselves in the "American Phoenix"—a PR-strategy-cum-provisional-government that promises the country will return to exactly the way it was before the arrival of the zombies. Whitehead demonstrates how exhausted late capitalist

narratives of progress have become, where the end-point of history has been definitively reached. The zombies that triumph at the novel's end offer not an end to narrative altogether, but the beginning of a new narrative that we do not have the tools yet to shape. Whitehead's negative utopia-to-come brings with it an end to the immunitary principle of social organization, and with it the end of our knowledge of storytelling.

My conclusion briefly examines the ways that narrative perspective and gender can be further explored in future work. Each of the main chapters of this project examines a text written by a male author and involves a male narrator (or narrative voice) who is unaffected by the viral outbreak. Thus, I will briefly consider ways in which narratives that involve a character who is sick, as well as narratives of viruses and immunities that are told from non-male perspectives, are necessary components in figuring the next steps of this project.

Viruses in speculative literature involve bringing together multiple different discursive perspectives and reading practices centered on the overdetermined body. As biological secrets about microbial life, infectious potential, and the interactions of viruses and immune systems become further integrated into popular knowledge, examining the narrative qualities of these fictions is necessary. Virus narratives provide us a means of thinking dialectically about these interactions and the effects these have on politics, social organization, and ecology. The concept of the immune (masculine) narrative voice that pervades each text further allows us to think about how the formal structures of narratology impact the ways that biopolitical conceptions of bodies and environments are displayed and understood. The virus becomes that speculative mirror through which we glimpse at fantastical (and abjected) potential embodiments within environments. But

these visions are inevitably shaped and ordered by ideological conceptions of what constitutes a healthy body and community; they become a “funhouse mirror” (Haslam 1) through which we need to understand the ideological work that goes into such a reflective (and reflexive) construction. Thus, to paraphrase Paul (or, to keep faithful to the sf genealogy I trace, Philip K. Dick): we see but through a microscope darkly.

Chapter 1

1 The Thinning of the West: Jack London's Microbial Sublime

“Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing conditions”

(Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”)

One of the most remarkable biopolitical documents of the early twentieth century is Jack London's short essay “Stalking the Pestilence” (1914), in which London examines the military preparedness of the United States, especially as it relates to measures taken to control against disease, or what London terms “[m]odern war” (*Reports* 162). Opening his essay with the portentous intonation that “[i]n all the long red history of war, disease has stalked at the heels of armies” (160), London praises the surgeons and medical personnel of the armed forces in combatting disease outbreaks and injuries in order to keep the army in a state of vigilant maintenance.⁴⁸ He writes rapturously of the medical discourse that keeps America's fighting force (particularly its occupying armies) at a state of readiness; indeed, the doctors often displace the soldiers as the martial heroes, for London, referring to surgeons as “pioneers” and writing that “[m]odern war of men against men on the field of battle is now preceded by micro-organic war on the part of our surgeons before our every men depart for the front” (164, 162).

⁴⁸ London notes that “our army surgeons, wise in tropical diseases from their service in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Panama, and the Philippines, are not apprehensive of any grave epidemics in Mexico” (161). This passage points to the beginning of American imperial adventurism at the end of the nineteenth century, where, in the Spanish-American War (1898-1902), the United States captured colonial territory held by the Spanish empire as well as territory not belonging to any imperial power, while the reference to Mexico points to America's involvement in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), an intervention which London supported. For more detail on London's enthusiasm for American intervention in the Mexican Revolution, and his break with other left-wing socialists for this support, see Taylor.

“The United States was the first country to inoculate its soldiers and sailors against typhoid,” London states and, in perhaps the most visceral passage in the entire essay, he recounts in graphic detail this means of acquired immunity. It is worth quoting London at length here:

The inoculation is a fairly simple matter. The serum is hypodermically injected into the arm in a series of three injections ... In the way, the injectee becomes a sort of peripatetic graveyard. The first injection puts into his blood the nicely dead carcasses of some 500,000,000 micro-organisms along with all their virtues of deadness which bring about a change in the constitution of the blood that makes it resistant to future invasions of full-powered, malignant typhoid micro-organisms. ... In short, when his body has become the living cemetery of half a billion more dead bodies than there are live humans in the world, he has become so noxious to the particularly noxious and infective typhoid that he may be classed a positive immune. (162)

The most notable aspect of this process is the highly material and violent terms in which London renders it. The body becomes a mobile crypt, interring within itself uncountable numbers of microbe “carcasses.” It is through the accumulation of the dead that one becomes more powerful, more healthy and able to fully engage in the strenuous activities of empire-building and maintenance. The joyous tone in which London discusses this method of immunization—he comments immediately afterward that “I have had the *pleasure* of reducing my nonimmunity of 100 per cent to zero per cent” (162, emphasis added)—suggests a violent destruction of a kind of bare life (is microbial life the barest life of all?) to effect a glorious purification of the body and to ensure its readiness to inhabit an ecology taken by martial strength. The practitioner of medicine is an integral part of the project of constructing both a strong and martial individual identity and nation.

The end of this essay makes such a connection explicit. In spite of his awed tone toward the discipline of the United States’ doctors, London makes sure to advise that “[a]s long as individuals in a wild country—say the head hunters and cannibals of the

Solomon Islands—carry killing weapons, even a philosopher, traveling among them, would be wise to go armed. Neither algebraic equations nor high ethical arguments are efficacious to a kinky headed man-eater with an appetite” (171). For London, every encounter is fraught with the potential for annihilatory violence, and science must always be wed to force. “As with individuals, so with nations,” London continues. “As long as certain nations go armed in a wild and savage world, just so long must the enlightened nations go armed” (172). Thus, as individuals are dangerous, violent, and perhaps disease-ridden, so too are “unenlightened” nation-states, and it is the duty of those enlightened powers to subdue these threats through whatever means available.

“Stalking the Pestilence” is a concatenation of several ideas and themes that London finds fascinating: his obsession with violence, his belief in the interrelationship of bodies and ecologies, his focus on physical exertion as the healthiest means of preserving both the individual and the nation, and his interest in science,⁴⁹ particularly the nascent science of microbiology. These concepts and themes all mutually inform and support one another, and the associate cluster they define also informs several of London’s short fictions. While London is most often considered to be a writer of adventure tales in the Alaskan Klondike or on the seas—or “a rowdy hack who produced some popular adventure stories for ‘boy-men,’” among those less charitable (Labor, *London xi*)—his contributions to speculative fiction—and, for the purposes of this

⁴⁹ In a letter to John M. Wright a year before his death, London remarks how, in his younger years he “destroyed this Pantheon” of classical history “and built a new Pantheon in which I began by inscribing names such as David Starr Jordan, as Herbert Spencer, as Huxley, as Darwin, as Tyndall, etc. etc.” (*Letters* 3:1498). Mary Lawlor notes that one of the courses London took while enrolled at the University of California in 1896 was a survey course taught by popular social Darwinist thinker David Starr Jordan on writers “including Darwin, Huxley, and Spencer” (113).

chapter, narratives of apocalyptic germ outbreaks—have occasioned only intermittent discussion.⁵⁰ This chapter endeavours to examine how the enigmatic role of the microbe comes to play a significant part in two of London's shorter works, his notorious 1910 short story "The Unparalleled Invasion," and the often-overlooked novella *The Scarlet Plague* (1912).⁵¹ I argue that these texts demonstrate a kind of "proto-viral" fiction—while science is only newly aware of the existence of bacterial microbes, and can only hypothesize about the existence of viral organisms (scientists are aware that there are particles smaller than bacteria, but will not be able to positively identify and visually apprehend these organisms until the 1930s with aid of electron microscopes)—London writes about the microbe and its sub-visible yet civilization-upending power with an awe that borders on the religious. London's "microcosmic sublime," as I term it, becomes a means for the author to explore and organize several of his other recurrent interests, such as the strength of the individual and the nation, the masculine compulsion for domination and control,⁵² and the belief in a restorative violence. London's literary rendering of the microbe, both in his fictional and non-fictional work, creates a biopolitical fantasy that

⁵⁰ Clarice Stasz has put forward the argument that London's sf literature forms not only a significant fraction of his total output, but also is as worthy of consideration as his more famous works (qtd. in M. Martin 21). John Hay, Michael Keith Schoenecke, Michael Martin, and David Raney are all more recent scholars who have paid particular attention to London's sf narratives and argued for their importance in both the author's own canon and in the wider canon of twentieth-century American fiction.

⁵¹ These are not the only infection narratives written by London. His early tale "The Plague Ship" (1897) deals with an outbreak of yellow fever about a steamship headed to port in San Francisco, and the resultant social collapse-in-miniature that results, while "Yah! Yah! Yah!" (1909) offers a less speculative tale of British merchants using measles as a biological weapon against an island of Indigenous peoples in the South Pacific.

⁵² As Jonathan Auerbach astutely notes, "manhood itself would increasingly come to reside for London in his body, the corporeal source for his authority and integrity as a writer" (8). I am interested, in the pages that follow, in tracing how that masculine embodiment is both complicated and legitimated in London's writing through appeals to microbiology.

allows for worlds to be completely re-ordered and shaped according to the power of the immune, who are the proper inheritors and inhabitants of the spaces, both domestic and foreign, that fall under the purview of the imperial United States.

1.1 The Frontier and the Border

Jack London's whole life was spent locating, defining, and enforcing boundaries and borders. In a letter to his friend Cloudsley Johns, London muses on the differences between race and species:

Do you know that the physiologists say that the difference between the highest forms of man and the lowest forms of man is greater than the difference between the lowest forms of man and the highest forms of the rest of the vertebrates? [sic] This being so (and it is so), where are you to draw the line? (qtd. in Bruni 90)

His concluding question to Johns is filled with a rhetorical anxiety of a border displaced, a revelation of the precarious existence of such boundaries. This is a question that recurs throughout London's intellectual labours. In the novel *White Fang* (1906), Weedon Scott states that "we must draw the line somewhere" (244) after the titular wolf attacks one of Scott's employees. Though the wolf's spirited aggression makes White Fang a coveted animal for Scott to own, when that violence crosses species lines, it must be rigidly policed. In another letter, London extends this anxiety about borders to questions of race, he asks "Where am I to draw the line? At the white. . . . Let Mr. White meet another white hemmed in by dangers from the other colors—these whites will not need to know each other—but they will hear the call of blood and stand back to back" (qtd. in Raney 422). As much as his fiction is invested in the affinities between species, London's work is also heavily involved in maintaining boundaries, and depicting as catastrophic the consequences when these borders are breached. It is the same logic that informs the

famous “Law of Club and Fang” in *The Call of the Wild*, his version of a Spencerian “survival of the fittest” that is enacted through aggressive encounter with other beings.⁵³ With the scientific discoveries of the microbial world, London discovers another extension of these immutable laws of nature and how they reflect onto the sociocultural organization of the United States. In essence, London uses microbiological knowledge (or at least semi-knowledge) in order to explore and reinforce his racial and cultural beliefs, and to erect and enforce boundaries that cannot be transgressed.

The first, and most palpable of these boundary lines is the geographical frontier that fired the imagination and ideology of American life for centuries. In the late nineteenth century, the work of Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt was vital in memorializing the frontier as a necessary space of American masculinity vanishing amid industrial expansion. Writing that “[f]or nearly three centuries the dominant fact of American life has been expansion” (74), Turner, in his famous essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), identifies the frontier as the space where a uniquely American cultural identity is formed, one distinct from the European models of history. The 1890 federal census marked a closing of the frontier as an existing space, and this prompted Turner to eulogize this locale as a constitutive feature of American life (37). The frontier, which Turner famously terms the “meeting point between savagery and civilization” (38), is the mobile space between the inhabited

⁵³ London was particularly enamoured with the Spencerian strain of evolution. He owned several books written by Spencer (see Hamilton 156-158), and, in a letter to Cloudsley Johns, London remarks that “Spencer’s *First Principles* alone, leaving out all the rest of his work, has done for more mankind, and through the ages will have done far more for mankind than a thousand books like *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Hard Cash*, *Book of Snobs*, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (qtd. in Hamilton 156). In a later letter to Johns, London wrote “I am trying to assimilate Spencer’s philosophy just now, so there is a chance that I may yet attain to happiness” (*Letters* 1:204).

urban sphere and the completely depopulated wilderness. As Mary Lawlor notes, Jackson's invocation of the frontier does not "distin[guish] between a physical and a conceptual meaning of wilderness: the frontier is as much a state of mind for Turner as it is anything else" (44). The frontier is thus the liminal space of an American dialectics: a zone where citizens of the country bring to heel the untouched space of "pure nature" but are themselves transformed in the process into something else entirely. Turner describes this frontier space as a "crucible" that forges the American identity, yet that identity did not include the Indigenous inhabitants of the land before European colonization. Indeed, if the frontier was a place for the struggle to develop an American identity, it was often (both literally and mythologically) a struggle against Indigenous peoples, consigned to manifestations of the untamed and uncivilized wilderness. As Richard Slotkin notes, "[t]he compleat 'American' of the Myth [of the Frontier] was one who had defeated and freed himself from both the 'savage' of the western wilderness and the metropolitan regime of authoritarian politics and class privilege" (*Gunfighter Nation* 11). With such emphasis placed on the frontier as the specific ecology (both literally and figuratively) of American identity, it is no wonder that the vanishing of the frontier in the 1890s is of such crucial historical importance for Turner. His closing words in the essay are tempered, noting that "the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history"; yet it is clear that, for Turner, this cessation is unprecedented and ominous (62).⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Yet as Slotkin points out, "[a]s a material entity, the Frontier was far from closed" at the time of Turner's writing, and the following three decades (1890-1920) would result in some of the most productive public cultivation of these frontier lands in the American west (*Gunfighter Nation* 30). The distinction comes, Slotkin notes, from the previous era, marked by individualist entrepreneurial cultivation of the frontier

Turner's examination of the frontier is matched in influence only by that of Theodore Roosevelt, whose writings and speeches throughout the 1880s and 1890s cast the frontier in an even more sanctified location of white masculinity.⁵⁵ In his four-volume history *The Winning of the West* (1885-1894), Roosevelt seeks to give a totalizing account of the spread of a superior white race. Starting with the emergence of the Teutons on the borders of the Roman Empire and moving to the American skirmishes with various Indigenous tribes throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Roosevelt describes a genealogy promoting a narrative of conquest and civilization (see Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 42-51). Where Turner's approach "marginalizes the role of violence in the development of the Frontier" (55), focusing instead on the struggle against the elemental forces of an untamed wilderness, Roosevelt's mythology casts this settlement in explicitly violent martial terms: the four volumes comprise an exhaustive description of wars and skirmishes between military and "the original savage owners of the soil" (3:128). His heroes are "[r]ough, masterful, lawless ... neither daunted by the prowess of

(which Turner triumphed) and the growing power of monopoly capitalism in controlling these spaces and their resources (31).

⁵⁵ Slotkin adds that, despite their ideological affinities, the frontiersmen that Turner and Roosevelt exalt are very different characters. Turner was interested in looking at the frontier as a material figuration, "in which abstractions like 'American values' and 'national character' would be related to the concrete matter of land acquisition and cultural production" thus, the chief figures of Turner's frontier thesis are farmers, whom he valorizes not as individual figures, but as a mass force (*Gunfighter Nation* 32, 33). Roosevelt, on the other hand, possessed a more politically expedient reading: "the end product of the Frontier is the production of a new kind of ruling class," and whose emblematic representatives are "aristocrats and military professionals" (50-51, 36). Likewise, London himself is of a different political affiliation than either Turner or Roosevelt. London identified as a socialist throughout his life, and indeed resigned from the Socialist Party of the United States in 1916 due to "its lack of fire and fight, and its loss of emphasis on the class struggle" (*Radical Jack London* 263). Speaking of the ways in which his fierce class consciousness and his racial prejudices often uncomfortably collided, Jonah Raskin sees London as representing "in a grand and magnificent way, the contradictions inherent in the socialist ideal" (49). That Roosevelt, Turner, and London could have such varying political positions and still be united in their consideration of land toward some ideal of American identity suggests the central role such thinking had in ideologies of masculinity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

the red warriors whose wrath they braved, nor awed by the displeasure of the Government whose solemn engagements they violated” (4:32). *The Winning of the West* is an ode to the belief in a rejuvenating violence that forges the character of its users and the nation to which they belong. It is this theme of physical striving and the interconnectedness of individuals and nations that Roosevelt recapitulates in his most famous speech, “The Strenuous Life,” delivered in Chicago in 1899. In it Roosevelt argues that “the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife” is necessary to the healthy development of both individuals and nations (1). For Roosevelt, the physicality of the strenuous life is something that will create a robust, virile, and vital nation of men.⁵⁶ Indeed, to object to the project of the strenuous life is a kind of “race suicide,” the damning of the white American type to degeneration and death (9). Roosevelt’s speech not only recapitulates the points he discussed in *The Winning of the West*, it also manipulates the scope of the frontier into the imperial project of which Roosevelt was one of the most significant supporters.⁵⁷ As Slotkin notes, Roosevelt’s advocacy for vigilant war against “savages” extends beyond the domestic space of the United States and toward the wider world stage. Thus, rhetorical substitutions are employed to fit the wider geopolitical situation into the familiar images and narratives about the frontier: “[a]pplying the Frontier Myth to the imperial project begins with a metaphoric extension of Frontier categories to a new situation in which Asians become figurative Apaches”

⁵⁶ Roosevelt specifically genders the nation thusly. As he explains, it is the duty of patriotic men to be active and physical in their labours, while the healthiest and best place for women is as eager housewives, supporting and maintaining the domestic space (3-4).

⁵⁷ Roosevelt, along with Massachusetts senator Henry Cabot Lodge, was one of the primary proponents of imperialist expansionism, and would be one of the vital figures in reshaping the foreign policy of the Republican Party in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (see Kinzer).

(*Gunfighter Nation* 53). While both Roosevelt's speech and Slotkin's analysis are concerned with the question of the American war with Spain taking place in Cuba and the Philippines, as well as the question in Congress as to whether the nation should seize and colonize Hawaii, and Puerto Rico, and Guam (see Kinzer 50-59; Wong, *Racial Reconstruction* 11), this expansion of the American frontier onto the global stage once again allows for the renewal of the racial and ecological project of developing an enduring "American" identity and culture.

The ideological importance of the frontier depends upon what Slotkin memorably terms "*regeneration through violence*" (*Gunfighter Nation* 12). If Turner and Roosevelt are the speakers for the idealism of the frontier, Slotkin is the primary analyst of the destruction and brutality that necessarily underpins such an expansionist project. Slotkin makes the claim that "[t]he Myth of the Frontier is arguably the longest-lived of American myths," its interpretative power stretching from the colonial era to the present day (*Fatal Environment* 15). Since the frontier has been the organizing principle of American sociopolitical life, then the effects of American culture—"a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and 'progressive' civilization"—are predicated upon "the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it" (*Gunfighter Nation* 10). Thus, the frontier myth operates on violent conquest, and so it frames this violence as a necessity toward achieving this unique identity: "[t]he original ideological task of the Myth was to explain and justify the establishment of the American colonies," as well as each subsequent expansion of the American national boundary (10). The frontier as a space is suffused with carnage, a place where the established laws that

characterize the safe havens of “civilization” are forged but have no purchase. The narrative of the frontier is one where the material gains and comforts of a society are underwritten by a continually renewed violence. It is little wonder that such an ideological space appealed to Jack London. If, as Turner contends, the frontier as an actually existing space was foreclosed at the end of the nineteenth century, then the ideological ecology of the frontier only increased in persuasive power for those who believed in it. And if “[i]n each stage of its development, the Myth of the Frontier relates its achievement of ‘progress’ to a particular form or scenario of violence” (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 11), then the closed frontier can only be reopened—in speculation, at least—through spectacular acts of destruction.

The second border is less visible, but just as ideologically invested as that of the frontier. London’s relatively short life (1876-1916) occurred during a paradigm shift in the way disease was understood by both experts and the public. This era has been called the “‘golden age’ of microbiology” (Booss and August 6), a time when rapid technological advancements and experimental procedures disproved the belief of illness resulting from miasmatic environmental emanations. The work of scientists like Louis Pasteur, Robert Koch, Adolph Mayer, and Elie Metchnikoff, among others, established the link between infectious illness and microbial entities. This new “germ theory of disease” asserted that diseases were caused by microbial organisms rather than by ambient environmental effects, and that these microbes developed linearly from previously existing germs, rather than “spontaneously” entering into existence, as had been argued (see Tomes 33). The new understanding of epidemiology is summed up by the 1885 American periodical *Popular Science Monthly*, which triumphantly announced

“[t]he germ theory appeals to the average mind, it is something tangible; it may be hunted down, captured, colored, and looked at through a microscope, and then in all its varieties, it can be held directly responsible for so much damage” (qtd. in Tomes 7). Made visible and legible, these microbes became manageable.

And yet, while bacteria had been made visible, other diseases—rabies, yellow fever, polio—remained elusive and unseen despite thorough epidemiological work. Scientists had mapped the vectors of infection and devised successful vaccines for these illnesses, but the biological characteristics of these infectious agents remained a mystery—literally too small to see. Pasteur voiced his frustration when researching the elusive cause of rabies: “rabies has not been isolated yet, but judging *by analogy* we must believe in its existence” (qtd. in van Kammen 4). The originary agent remains invisible, detectable only retrospectively, in its ravaging effects.

The horizon of scientific vision was extended but was not total, and this incomplete awareness of a new world provoked a new concern. As John Tyndall, an early microbiologist, notes, “[w]e have been struck by invisible scourges, we have fallen to ambushes, and it is only today that the light of science is reaching those terrible oppressors” (qtd. in Latour, *Pasteurization* 10). The specter of these agents who remain elusive in spite of the shining light of new science provides an interestingly spectral character to this social organization. As Bruno Latour lays out in his *Reassembling the Social*, the concept of the social is not an essential, pre-existing structure to which various historical groupings conform. Rather, the social is a constantly recreated connection between groups of actors (36). Each new relation creates a new society, and it is the work of critics to discern the traces of these new societies, rather than prescribing a one-size-

fits-all description. In Latour's theorization of the world, existence is tied particularly to action: in order for a thing to exist, it must have an *effect* on the things to which it is connected (53). Thus, the viral microbe in the early twentieth century is a kind of Latourian actor *par excellence*: We can only trace the virus in its after-effects, the visible marks it leaves on its victims, the ruins of the societies that fall under its contagious logic. Tyndall's reports about this new microbial world were often "a curious mix of the familiar and the awesome" (Tomes 39), and this dual feeling of both awe and fear match how this concept enters into the popular culture consciousness at the time: the United States was gripped by what Nancy Tomes terms "the gospel of germs," an anxiety about "bodies of the ill, as well as the objects they touched" and their "capacity to spread disease," and this anxiety propelled public health officials and civilian reformers to engage in practices of hygienic maintenance (56, 64).⁵⁸ Thus, with the filtering of the microbiological into popular culture awareness, the organization of the social and the effect of a sub-visible world had become completely reinscribed, and the power of this old but only newly glimpsed actor became a new frontier of knowledge.

These discoveries, and the frustrating limits of microbiological science, would have been of significant interest to London. John Bruni identifies London and his naturalist contemporaries as "scientifically literate" thinkers who were exposed to and developed an educated perception on the matters of popular science in America (3). Likewise, Eric Carl Link suggests that London and fellow early-twentieth century

⁵⁸ In fact, as Tomes notes, the "gospel of germs" changed with the times—the initial wave, at the end of the nineteenth century, was focused primarily "sanitarian" in character, focused on hygienic sterility, while in the early twentieth century the focus shifts to how bodies and objects are precariously interconnected with one another (92).

naturalist writers were obsessed with the questions of biology, genetics, and inheritance (2-3)⁵⁹ And, as biographer Andrew Sinclair remarks, London himself harboured “secret fears of contamination by disease” (qtd. in Raney 400). Clearly his work in “Stalking the Pestilence,” with its veneration of immunity and doctors, was meant to give voice to his interest in such scientific pursuits. What is irritating for Pasteur becomes instead invigorating for London, for the inability to gaze upon these microcosmic entities leaves intact a sublime aspect of nature’s power. London’s speculative fictions thus serve as a valuable counterpoint to the outbreak narrative because they intentionally lack closure.

Between the ideology of the frontier as the uniquely American space, and the concomitant anxiety that the frontier was disappearing under an industrial capitalist order friendly to big business and immigration, as well a nascent understanding of a world of active and powerful germs, we can see how London’s speculative fiction sees these problems as mutually informing one another. Charles L. Crow claims that London’s primary literary obsession was “to find a way of living in harmony with the landscape” (46). If Crow’s characterization is apt, then London’s speculative narratives of microbial infection in fact extend the scope of his naturalist style and perspective:⁶⁰ he depicts a

⁵⁹ Link suggests that naturalist and speculative fiction share a fundamental question in common: “*what can science tell us about the human condition and the relationship between humans and their environment?*” (3, emphasis in original).

⁶⁰ American literary naturalism is the mode or style of writing in which Jack London is canonically accepted. Donald Pizer’s definition of naturalism as a literary mode that “usually unites detailed documentation of the more sensationalistic aspects of experience with heavily ideological (often allegorical) themes, the burden of these themes being the demonstration that man is more circumscribed than ordinarily assumed” (xi), and particularly that the characters of these fictions exist within a “closed and destructive mechanistic and Darwinian world of struggle in which it was assumed most Americans functioned” (qtd. in M. Martin 26) remain the clearest descriptors. As Charles Child Walcutt asserts, London’s use of “scientific determinism, Darwinism, the Spencerian philosophy of evolution, and Marxism, all of which in some way reflect the anti-supernaturalism and anti-traditionalism of a presumably scientific approach to human affairs,” which “renounce the free will and ethical responsibility that underlay the classic novel of manners” are what “place London in the naturalistic movement” (44). James Lundquist

world where the political animal is necessarily dependent on unforeseen evolutionary chance, and a place where the microbes come to represent a new area of the ecological space that human beings must become aware of in order to persist in the world. If the frontier is a space necessary for the virile white male subject to assert himself and prove his worth (as well as to inhabit a “pure” and “natural” space as opposed to a degraded urban sphere polluted by both materials and the presence of other bodies), then instead of engaging in nostalgic reminiscences of a place that has disappeared forever (as Turner’s essay seems to suggest has happened to the frontier), it is necessary to rejuvenate the space. When the space has been returned to its original “wilderness,” deprived of the masses of people subsisting on the land, then both the American subject and the ecology will be healed. Thus, London’s fantasies are future-oriented rather than backward-looking, and they are accomplished through a communion with a kind of scientific divinity: an agency invisible but present, whose operations are mysterious but whose effects are unmistakable, and whose power is unchallenged—a microbial sublime.

1.2 The Microbial Sublime

When the titular wolf of *White Fang* is captured by human beings, London’s narrator muses on the power and persuasion of the numinous realm as it relates to humans and animals. While the latter “find their gods in the living flesh, solid to the

adds that London’s naturalism, while still predicated on structures of “determinism,” differs from contemporaries like Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris in that “man and animals are similar in most aspects of behavior because all species must live under the Law of Life, which is to say they are all subject to the processes of evolution” (100). For London, then, biology supersedes the sociopolitical structures that interest other American naturalists. Michael J. Martin, in his discussion of *The Scarlet Plague*, ties London’s naturalistic style into the speculative content of the novel, suggesting that the formal qualities of naturalism can be applied to the non-mimetic content of the novel. Thus, as Martin suggests, sf is not beholden to any one mode or genre of literary form or style.

touch, occupying earth-space and requiring time for the accomplishment of their ends and their existence,” the gods of humanity “are of the unseen and the overguessed, vapors and mists of fancy eluding the garmenture of reality ... intangible outcroppings of self into the realm of spirit” (130-1). For humanity, the greatest wonder is in what cannot be detected by the eye, that which exists in the realm of the numinous. Into this space, London uses a working knowledge of the biological science at the time while constantly underlining the limits of this science in understanding sub-microscopic particles. What answers science cannot furnish, the microbial sublime can by appealing to fantasies of identity, power, and violence. London’s microbial sublime thus becomes a crucible for reworking older mythologies of masculinity, subjectivity, and ecology under the veneer of scientific fact.

I am calling London’s proto-viral fiction a depiction of the “microbial sublime” because of its fascinated, rather than repulsed, attempt to gesture toward the world of the invisibly small. While we have a tendency to think of the sublime as the unaccountably vast, Edmund Burke makes reference toward the other scalar direction as well: “as the great extreme of dimension is sublime, so the last extreme of littleness is *in some measure* sublime likewise” (108, emphasis added). Burke’s minor clarification here, that the very small is “in some measure” sublime hints that we still tend to think of vastness as superior to the tiny. Furthermore, Burke urges us to “push our discoveries yet downward ... [f]or division must be infinite as well as addition; because the idea of a perfect unity can no more be arrived at, than that of a complete whole, to which nothing may be added” (109), and we are left with the sense of a singular, microcosmically small organism existing in the pureness of unity. London’s vision differs from Burke’s

directionality: he is not concerned about the organism as it exists in theoretical wholeness, but the interconnection of microbial organisms and how they are connected to the world of human beings. Burke's thought experiment of reduction beyond the vanishing point is an abstraction beyond London's purview. The microbial sublime of Jack London is the idea of embeddedness within a massively expanded horizon of the world that we cannot extricate ourselves from. As Timothy Morton says, "[v]ery large finitude is harder to deal with than an abstract, ideal infinity Actuality presents us with disturbingly large finitudes. Quantity humiliates" (*Ecological Thought* 40). Rather than Kant's infinite mathematical sublime, the microcosmic world presents a human quasi-observer with the paradox of a massively vast atomic universe.⁶¹

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. refers to the sublime as "a shock of imaginative expansion, a complex of recoil and recuperation of self-consciousness coping with phenomena suddenly perceived to be too great to comprehend" (146). This description also captures London's proto-viral investigations of a world he cannot fully excavate, even if the actual material invokes the obverse of the science-fictional sublime, the grotesque. As Csicsery-Ronay Jr. writes of that element of sf, "[s]cientific materialism has disciplined this mythological imagination by expanding the range of what can be considered normal in creation. As anomalies are discovered—salamander, platypus, virus, pulsar—they become occasions for extending the power to explain nature's rational rules of creation" (195). Yet, while London's fictions, I argue, are interested in grappling

⁶¹ Yet while Morton goes on to say that this revelation effectively jars the human subject from its privileged position at the top of the world's hierarchy, and instead forces us to consider our embedded among a universe of forces and intensities, this chapter will show that such an understanding of the microbial can be used to reaffirm and reinforce existing stereotypes and mythologies.

with the world of the virus, which has so typically been rendered in speculative narratives as the place of uncontrollable and catastrophic mutability, London fixates more on the human's ability to apprehend this new world that has been discovered.⁶² Indeed, the grotesque is ultimately "the realization that objects that appear familiar and under control are actually undergoing surprising transformations" (146), a notion that resonates with London's contention that humans fundamentally do *not* understand the nature of viruses, nor do we have them under control. London's fiction is engaged in revealing how the virus opens our minds to realms of accessibility. The concept of the viral in literature is often read in terms of disgust and the grotesque, a chaotic materiality that we are ineluctably tied to. By emphasizing the absence of full knowledge or understanding of what constitutes a virus, and with only the vague and incomplete discoveries of germ theory and bacteriology, London mobilizes the lack of knowledge as a frontier for a sublime grasp of a physical world far vaster than we could have anticipated. Yet in rendering these worlds as full of a sublime wonder at invisible particles, London emphasizes the catastrophic violence wrought by such virulent germs. The fascination toward a depthless nature is juxtaposed with images of destruction and death on massive scales. Thus the microbial sublime becomes, in London's fiction, a way of imagining new figurations and narrations of bodies destroyed and identities rehabilitated.

⁶² Csicsery-Ronay Jr. is not unaware of this process of translation, writing by way of example "[t]he platypus has been a grotesque freak of nature, as well as a sublime demonstration of evolutionary principle" (147). What is interesting to me is that, in my conception of American literature, the process moves in the other direction: the more familiar we become with viruses, the more grotesque they appear. The following chapter on Burroughs will examine this idea in greater detail.

1.3 After the Outbreak: Contingency and Immunity in *The Scarlet Plague*

In a letter penned during his voyage of the South Seas, London writes to a friend that “[w]e of the white race are the survivors ... in the war with micro-organisms We who are alive are the immune, the fit – the ones best constituted to live in a world of hostile micro-organisms” (*Cruise of the Snark* 170). Yet in spite of this confidence in his non-fiction writing, London’s proto-viral narratives reveal a greater ambiguity in this belief. In the two stories examined in this chapter, London engages in substantial engagements with the concept of the microbial sublime, depicting an awe-inspiring, overwhelming violent agency that completely reshapes the landscapes and populations of the world. But rather than being an unequivocally rejuvenating force,⁶³ the power of the microbial sublime can destroy that vision of humanity London wishes to redeem, as *The Scarlet Plague* clearly illustrates.

The Scarlet Plague offers London’s meditation on the ideas of ecology, immune inheritance, and the power of narration in a world ineluctably reshaped by a contagious outbreak. Set in the year 2073, the story depicts the enfeebled “Granser”—formerly James Howard Smith, a literature professor at the University of California, Berkeley—who is “the only person alive to-day that lived” during the apocalyptic outbreak of the “Scarlet Death” of 2013. Granser, accompanied by three “grandsons” of various surviving tribes—Edwin, Hoo-Hoo-, and Hare-Lip—attempts to explain to them the

⁶³ As is the case in Fergus Hume’s novel *The Year of Miracle* (1891), where a catastrophic plague that wipes out the population of London is ultimately seen as a boon, for “what with socialism, anarchy, war, famine, and Heaven knows only what, it’s a bad look-out for the twentieth century,” but with the intervention of the plague and the restarting of a civil society, “the twentieth century began its career under the happiest auspices” (qtd. in Raney 398).

advanced civilization that existed prior to the plague and the suddenness and totality of the collapse of human civilization brought on by the plague's spread. Amid this tale, which only fitfully interests the boys, Granser reflects on the enormity of loss and tries to imagine how human civilization will reconstitute itself. The prospects, for Granser, are rather bleak, and he fatalistically concludes that it will be "the same old story over and over" (*Fragments* 196).

While critically dismissed at the time of its publication,⁶⁴ the novella, which London referred to in a letter as a "pseudo-scientific tale" (qtd. in Raney 398), has more recently attracted scholarly attention due to what is seen as it being an exemplar of trends in American speculative fiction. John Hay describes the novella as "continu[ing] to theorize the Last Man theme for the twentieth century" (357), a subject that had been popularized in works like Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), while Michael J. Martin sees the framework of an elderly figure attempting to retain some pre-apocalyptic meaning in the aftermath of catastrophe as a strain of American naturalist storytelling that extends to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). David L. Raney, meanwhile, pays particular attention to the novella's emplotment of outbreak and civilizational collapse to suggest that London explores "that period's debate over complicated issues of class- and race-mixing," and how "the new science of microbiology, with its emphasis on contact and borders, met the needs of a particular historical moment" (392). In thinking of its contributions to the particularly

⁶⁴ H.L. Mencken, a defender of London's, notably derided *The Scarlet Plague* as "little more than garrulous notes" rather than a developed narrative of its own (qtd. in M. Martin 21). Raney discusses in greater detail the critical dismissal the novella initially received (see 398-399).

speculative character that the frontier had developed into by the early twentieth century, I argue that *The Scarlet Plague* represents London's interest in a regenerated ecological and existential topography for "the human race" (as exemplified through white men) to rebuild, as well as his anxieties over the uncontrolled power of the microbial sublime, and the disastrous consequences of unchecked evolutionary events. *The Scarlet Plague* renders bare the contradictions and ambiguities of London's beliefs in civilization, violence, and power.

This ambivalence is most clearly registered by the lack of any utopian ideation in the novella. The post-outbreak world is almost wholly depopulated, and Granser estimates that "the present population of the world between three hundred and fifty to four hundred," hardly optimistic prospects for a triumphant reconstruction of the world that once was (194). Yet the pre-collapse society upon which Granser reflects with nostalgic affection is also dystopian, albeit in a different fashion. This United States was a place of a rigid class hierarchy, the wealthy represented by the "Board of Industrial Magnates ... the dozen men who ruled the world," and a servile class of ironically named "freemen" (163, 167).⁶⁵ While this pre-collapse America was a place of material plenty (the boys register their wonder at Granser's previous occupation as a professor, a job that allows him to "just talk, talk, talk!" instead of hunt and gather food [166]), it was also disastrously overpopulated. By 2010, just before the outbreak, Granser informs the boys that the world's population was eight billion, and the population of San Francisco alone

⁶⁵ This bifurcated class structure has echoes both with Wells's *The Time Machine* and its ethereal Eloi and brutish Morlocks (see Hay 361), as well as London's own novel *The Iron Heel* (1908), in which America is ruled by an Oligarchy that is violently opposed by various waves of working-class revolutionaries.

was four million (166). He then interrupts his own narrative to explain the concept of large numbers to the bewildered boys: “like sand on the beach,” Granser tells them, “each grand of sand a man, or woman, or child” (166). Using a series of props to represent large numbers, “[t]he boys’ eyes ranged along from the teeth and from hand to hand, down through the pebbles and sand-grains to Edwin’s fingers. And back again they ranged along the ascending series in the effort to grasp such inconceivable numbers” (166). The estranging effect of accumulation here is meant to concretize the enormity of this threat, and London makes sure to underscore the cataclysmic ecological effects this overpopulation had: “[t]he land was not now as it is then,” Granser explains, “[i]t was all cleared of trees and brush, and it was cultivated. The food for millions of mouths was growing, ripening, and going to waste” (185). Indeed, Granser further asserts that these numbers were indirectly responsible for the plague: “[t]he easier it was to get food, the more men there were; and the more men there were, the more thickly were they packed together on the earth; and the more thickly they were packed, the more new kinds of germs and diseases” (170). As the United States became a fully industrialized nation, it succeeded in both reifying a capitalist hegemony and providing enough sustenance to maintain a massive population. And in this demographic explosion, the frontier, both as a physical space and an ideological ideal, vanished amid the masses of flesh. As both a socialist and a Darwinian (or Spencerian), the rapacity of capitalism is repugnant to London, and it inevitably produced an overfed, entropic nation doomed to be destroyed.

And so, when a new mutation of germs—known as the “Scarlet Death” because of the characteristic rash that appears on the faces of its victims (172)⁶⁶—arrives, this precariously balanced society collapses almost instantly. The plague turns pandemic within weeks, managing to infect the entirety of the country (and apparently the entire world) and is completely terminal (174). When the Scarlet Death infects Berkeley, “[a]ll law and order had ceased ... Murder and robbery and drunkenness were everywhere” (175). The plague levels the hierarchical bonds of advanced capitalist society, but leaves in its wake pure anarchy. This is seen when Granser describes the looters in Berkeley as those of the freemen class: “[i]n the midst of our civilization, down in our slums and labor-ghettos, we had bred a race of barbarians, of savages; and now, in the time of our calamity, they turned upon us like the wild beasts they were and destroyed us” (179). Here again we can register London’s ambiguity: he clearly indicts the capitalist order that has produced the Board of Magnates and the freemen, but he sees in this latter group no redeeming qualities of civilization—like the Scarlet Death, they are a force of undifferentiated destruction.

While Raney finds in *The Scarlet Plague* London at his most ambivalent, unable to reconcile his belief in the physical striving of the working classes and contempt for professional intellectuals with his belief in “civilization” and higher ideals to separate “men” from “savages” (403), the novella does nonetheless depict one section of society

⁶⁶ Critics note the affinity of the description between the plague—and the apocalyptic tone of the novella more generally—and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842). London was a self-professed admirer of Poe and considered him a literary forebear (see Lundquist 170), and London initially considered titling the work “The Scarlet Death” (Raney 398).

as unambiguously valorous: bacteriologists.⁶⁷ Throughout the narrative, Granser praises these scientists, referring to them as “heroes” and to the boys as “goatherds” and people who “fought all the sicknesses and destroyed them, just as you boys fight the wolves away from your goats” (172, 170, 169). These scientists are responsible for the greatest advances in human development for Granser, even as their profession retains the martial mastery that characterizes the physicality so prized by London. Just as the wilderness and its manifestations are tamed by London’s manly repertoire of protagonists (John Thornton in *The Call of the Wild*, Weedon Scott in *White Fang*, Wolf Larsen in *The Sea Wolf*), so too do bacteriologists extend this kind of heroic settlement into the realm of microcosmic wilderness. Yet even they prove to be no match for the Scarlet Death because of the overpopulated state of the world: Granser states that a German bacteriologist named Hoffmeyer is believed to have discovered a means of inoculation, but immediately follows it up by stating, “[t]hat was the last word, to this day, that we of America ever received from Europe. If Hoffmeyer discovered this serum, it was too late” (175). Bacteriologists are London’s paragons of masculine virtue in the novella, but even they cannot reshape the structures of society by virtue of their will.

The plague’s sudden and total destruction of a seemingly powerful civilization recalls H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1895), with its discussion of the bacteriological world both as metaphor (the novel opens with the comparison between the unsuspecting human beings about to be invaded by the Martians—“[w]ith infinite

⁶⁷ While Raney does not spend much time discussing the role of bacteriologists in the novella, he is correct in noting how the beliefs of bacteriology provide a solution to some of London’s questions: “[g]erm theory allowed London to have his intellectual cake and eat it, reconciling after a fashion the warring claims of evolution and revolution” (427).

complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. It is possible that the infusoria under the microscope do the same” [51]), and later, as the saviour of the occupied human race, whose victory comes about not through any martial supremacy, but due to immunity (“by virtue of this natural selection of our kind we have developed resisting power; to no germs do we succumb without a struggle. ... But there are no bacteria on Mars, and directly these invaders arrived, directly they drank and fed, our microscopic allies began to work their overthrow” [184]). Humanity and microbes exist in a mutually productive (at least at the level of species) symbiosis in Wells’s narrative, a familiar ecology that the imperial Martians disrupt and, in so doing, bring about their own destruction. Yet London’s novella lacks Wells’s sympoetic optimism: while Wells’s narrator speaks with assurance about the connection between humans and bacteria, and the conditions of Martian ecology, the characters of *The Scarlet Plague* are confounded by the microbial world’s mysteries:

You see, the micro-organic world *remained a mystery to the end*. They [bacteriologists] knew there was such a world, and that from time to time armies of new germs emerged from it to kill men. And that was all they knew about it. For all they knew, in that invisible micro-organic world there might be as many different kinds of germs as there are grains of sand on this beach. And also, in that same invisible world it might well be that new kinds of germs came to be. *It might be there that life originated*. (170, emphasis added)

Unlike the assured rhetoric that accompanies Wells’s scientific narrator, Granser’s lecture on the origins of the plague underscores the persistent uncertainty of the origins of the microbial world (and, by extension, the origin of life itself on Earth). Scientists are aware of its existence, but they cannot understand its full extent. Narrating the effect of the Scarlet Death is not possible. Indeed, Granser’s description of the plague emphasizes this

impossibility, noting that “[n]o sooner was a person dead than the body seemed to fall to pieces, to fly apart, to melt away even as you looked at it” (172). The body literally disintegrates, refusing to be apprehended beyond its momentary engagement with the infection. And this is a universal condition, for as soon as “the scarlet rash appeared on a person’s face, that person was marked by death. There was never a known case of recovery” (174). The only ones who can speak of the Scarlet Death are the survivors, the immune, those who were not “marked by death.” The plague is totalizing in its reach, and cannot be narrated from the other side. Moreover, the viral world acts beyond the ken of its human observers. Bacteriologists are unable to penetrate further into the microcosmic world, to find the viruses that are orders of magnitude smaller than visible bacteria. The microcosmos provides another frontier that London’s human protagonists are unable even to envision. Therein lies the sublimity: the promise of a frontier that cannot yet be apprehended, but one that still offers promising new worlds to explore (and, potentially, conquer).

The post-apocalyptic world, a world without bacteriologists, is likewise a space of deep uncertainty for London. The world itself seems to be in a state of recovery: the novella opens with an image of an empowered nature, with “what once had been the embankment of a railroad” now overgrown, “[t]he forest on either side swelled up the slopes of the embankment and crested across it in a green wave of trees and bushes” (156), and Granser later explains to the boys that “when the hand of man was removed, the wild vegetation smothered and destroyed practically all the domesticated vegetation” (187). Animals, too, recover from the meddling of human beings, with dogs, “always a social animal,” freed from the individuated domestication as pets, now “com[ing]

together and run[ning] in packs,” killing off the unfit kinds of breeds and turning into “medium-sized wolfish” creatures (186).⁶⁸ Here London colourfully depicts a Spencerian “survival of the fittest,” with only the hardest flora and fauna capable of inhabiting the post-Scarlet Death world.

Yet at the level of human beings, the outcome is depicted in less restorative terms. The most powerful man in this new world is a man known as “Chauffeur,” so named for his profession in the pre-plague world. Granser possesses nothing but contempt for Chauffeur, describing him as “a perfect brute—the most abhorrent man I have ever known” (188). Granser’s repeated attacks on Chauffeur’s character emphasize the class distinctions between them: he calls Chauffeur “common,” a “servant,” and “wholly devoid of the finer instincts and chivalrous promptings of a cultured soul” (163, 190). It is only Chauffeur’s physical prowess that allows him to become a power in the post-apocalypse. In what Granser considers to be Chauffeur’s most repugnant act, he takes the aristocrat Vesta Van Warden as a captive wife and forces her into a life of domestic labour and child-rearing while he serves as chieftain of one of the few extant tribes of human community left in America. The way Granser narrates this union is significant: “you cannot understand the awfulness of the situation. The Chauffeur was a servant, understand, a servant ... [Vesta Van Warden] was a lord of life, both by birth and marriage. ... And, in the days before the plague, *the slightest contact with such as he would have been pollution*” (190, emphasis added). The tendency to segregate peoples

⁶⁸ In one of the only figurative descriptions of contagion in the novella, Granser speaks of “a veritable plague of dogs” in the post-plague world (186). The idea that the dogs work like a plague, combined with Granser’s later discussion of the contagious connection between Chauffeur and Vesta Van Warden (see below) suggests that the violent power of men, animals, and microbes all possess some innately “masculine” quality.

according to class in pre-plague America extends to rhetorical descriptions as well, and Granser sees these violations as contaminative in the same way that the plague is.

Chauffeur, in his virile and violent masculinity, is representative of the same reordering power as the Scarlet Death itself. And this reordered world is one of opportunity for the previously oppressed freemen; as Chauffeur tells Granser, “you had your day before the plague . . . but this is my day, and a damned good day it is” (191).⁶⁹

Raney makes the persuasive case that *The Scarlet Plague* can be read as a celebratory narrative of racial regeneration along the frontier, for even though there appears to be no common ground between the timid intellectual Granser and the powerful but boorish Chauffeur, they possess a shared connection in a racial-cultural heritage: “[t]he one attribute that survives the ravages of pestilence is culture, which for London was not accrued but intrinsic and, finally, Anglo-Saxon” (419-420). Certainly, the novella itself seems to point to this outcome, with Granser speaking of “a new climb toward civilization” now that the plague is gone and the survivors have proven themselves hardy, “a new Aryan drift around the world” (*Fragments* 194).

Raney, like other scholars who examine the novella, turns to the pastoral image in the closing pages, reading it as an allegorical potential for the return of the dominant

⁶⁹ It is at these moments in the novella where the narrative voice and Granser as the narrator within the fictional universe appears to be at odds with one another. Granser’s contempt for Chauffeur, as seen when the former says that “[a]ll [Chauffeur] could talk about was motor-cars, machinery, gasoline, and garages,” his vaunted portrayal of Vesta as “the perfect flower of generations of the highest culture this planet has ever produced” his eulogizing for “[w]e, who mastered the planet—its earth, and sea, and sky—and who were as very gods, now live in primitive savagery” (191, 189, 194), suggest that he is not meant to be taken as wholly reliable or sympathetic, that his nostalgic longings for his privileged class position are meant to be interrogated. As Hay suggests, *The Scarlet Plague* offers one of the most rounded depictions of characters in London’s bibliography: although we are certainly not meant to side with Chauffeur (whom readers are only told about by Granser, and never encounter outside of his narration), Granser himself “elicits neither pity nor praise” (363). The complexity of narrative within *The Scarlet Plague*, and the way London engages with narrative unreliability, will be discussed in greater detail momentarily.

human figure.⁷⁰ In this final scene, Granser and Edwin see “a small herd of wild horses” gathered on the beach, “led by a beautiful stallion” (196). Granser remarks that this is the “[f]irst time I ever seen ‘em on the beach” (197), suggesting that a process of domestication and recivilization may finally be occurring. The stallion is clearly meant to symbolize Edwin, the only one of Granser’s charges who shows any interest in his story, as well as any interest in intellectual pursuits (Hoo-Hoo and Hare-Lip, by contrast, exalt in fantasies of becoming witch-doctors with magic powers; Edwin, however, is enchanted by Granser’s story of gunpowder and wishes to attain knowledge of its scientific properties [196]). The ending seems to suggest that, while the majority of the human remnant may be violent and small-minded—“true savages,” as Granser calls the young boys (160)—there still exist great men like Edwin to redeem and advance the race once more. As Michael Martin suggests, “Edwin’s presence throughout the novel and stronger connection to Granser does suggest that the future world may not be as hopeless as it now seems” (32), that Edwin offers a potential for a reinvigorated life. In a more cynical context, Raney dismisses Granser’s own ambivalent reaction to the arrival of the horses and states that “[d]espite London’s hesitations it seems clear enough where that trail leads” (428)—to an Anglo-Saxon American utopia.⁷¹ However, I would like to advance

⁷⁰ See also M. Martin 31.

⁷¹ Other critics would quibble with the “American” adjective: for Hay, *The Scarlet Plague* illustrates a “radically *post*national environment,” and further suggests that the plague’s among the Scarlet Death’s victims is imperial power, for “[t]he United States of America has not been succeeded by any other dominant people; the star of empire has not merely passed westward” as is feared in “The Unparalleled Invasion” (368). Yet Granser’s summation that “[w]e, who mastered the planet—its earth, and sea, and sky—and who were as very gods, now live in primitive savagery along the water courses of this California country” (194) suggests that American landscape and identity are still tied very much to these remnants. Of note too are the names of the tribes of surviving tribes: while the most powerful are called “Chauffeur” after the name of their patriarch, the remaining tribes are all geographically named—“Santa Rosa,” “Utah,” “Los Angelito,” and “Carmelito” (193, 194).

another reading: Granser sees in this arrival of horses not a triumphant image of a re-energized society, but rather the result of “the mountain lions getting thicker and thicker and driving ‘em down” (197). The Darwinian landscape of this post-cataclysmic America means these horses are driven by fear of a gathering and encroaching wilderness.

Likewise, Granser’s gloomy meditation at the end of the novella seems to take this potential for regeneration into account:

[T]he same old story over and over. Man will increase, and men will fight. . . . Just as the old civilization passed, so will the new. It may take fifty thousand years to build, but it will pass. All things pass. Only remain cosmic force and matter, ever in flux, ever acting and reacting and realizing only the eternal types—the priest, the soldier, and the kind. . . . Some will fight, some will rule, some will pray; and all the rest will toil and suffer sore while on their bleeding carcasses is reared again, and yet again, without end, the amazing beauty and surpassing wonder of the world. It were just as well that I destroyed those cave-stored books—whether they remain or perish, all their old truths will be discovered, their old lies lived and handed down. (196)

Granser’s fatalistic musings—which see humanity as trapped within inescapable cycles of growth, violence, and collapse—mitigate the possibility of any kind of utopian cessation of history. The beauty of the returned frontier wilderness is not enough because the larger structures to which it will become the material of myth are unchanged. The state of the world is too fragile, too subject to factors that exist beyond the purview of humanity.

This fear of the contingent is most precisely explored in the musings on immunity that crop up throughout *The Scarlet Plague*. In perhaps the most significant passage of the novella, Granser attempts to explain how he survived the Scarlet Death

Of the four hundred that sought shelter in the Chemistry Building, and of the forty-seven that began the march, I alone remained . . . Why this should be so

there is no explaining. I did not catch the plague, that is all. I was immune. *I was merely the only lucky man in a million.* (185, emphasis added)⁷²

Rather than surviving through an evolutionary imperative, Granser is spared from the contagion for undetermined reasons. This echoes an element of Darwinian evolutionary theory ignored in Spencer's survival-of-the-fittest teleology: the intervention of unpredictable, chance events that radically alter an evolutionary landscape.⁷³ *The Scarlet Plague* thus points toward individualism as a kind of pure contingency: Granser is left to carry on the human race for reasons that exist beyond understanding, but are clearly not related to one's inherent fitness in a landscape.

Such an understanding of immunity is repeated when Granser considers how the despised Chauffeur also survived the contagion: “[w]hy the plague germs spared him *I can never understand.* It would seem, in spite of our old metaphysical notions about absolute justice, there is no moral justice in the universe” (188, emphasis added). There is no discernible order in this universe, no way to predict who is most able or ready to survive the plague. Raney's suggestion that it is Granser's and Chauffeur's shared Anglo-Saxon heritage that ensures their survival is also suspect—among the four hundred survivors Granser knows of, he refers to the leader of a fellow tribe as Lopez, whom he says “was descended from the ancient Mexicans and was very black” (194). *The Scarlet Death* undermines the Spencerian notion of a racialized hierarchy best biologically able

⁷² Granser's wonderment recalls that of Defoe's narrator in *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), who catalogues the catastrophic death toll the bubonic plague while noting that “there were many wonderful Deliverances of Persons from Infection, and Deliverances of Persons when Infected, which intimate singular and remarkable Providence ... and I esteem my own Deliverance to be one next to miraculous, and do record it in thankfulness” (170).

⁷³ Lawrence Berkove points to an earlier London story, “A Relic of the Pliocene” (1901) as an example of this same principle: the dogs of the narrator are stomped to death by the sudden appearance of a mammoth, which intercedes on the natural course of evolution (“Evolution” 248).

to endure the ravages of microbes—a Darwinian contingency is what Granser (and the reader) is left to contemplate. Lawrence Berkove refers to Granser as one of the “random survivors” of the plague (“Evolution” 251), which seems more accurate than Raney’s reading of racial regeneration: the infection is indiscriminating in its reach, and the racial makeup of the world, prior to London’s own musings about Anglo-Saxon immunity, are no added protection.

This uncertainty and anxiety extend to the level of narrative as well.

Unsurprisingly, the children—all of whom were born decades after the Scarlet Death and the subsequent societal collapse—don’t speak English but rather a rough approximation. The narrative voice intervenes in the text to inform the reader that “[Edwin] did not exactly utter these words, but something that remotely resembled them and that was more guttural and explosive” (159). Even Granser, the last remnant of the pre-apocalyptic intelligentsia, has lost the power of that language: the narrator describes Granser’s words as “approximately an English that had gone through a corrupt bath of usage,” and later explains that “[e]ven the speech of Granser was so corrupt that were it put down literally it would be almost so much nonsense to the reader” (164). It is only when Granser begins reminiscing about the plague that his language is modified, that “[w]hen he got into the full swing of babbling to himself, [his speech] slowly purged itself into pure English” (164). Narration about infection requires a purgative, purified English language, and the narrative must intervene within the scene in order to correct the rough and degraded pidgin of Granser and the boys. This signals London’s most furtive realization about the

unchecked power of infection: when the power to narrate disease becomes compromised, the infection has won.⁷⁴

The Scarlet Plague thus demonstrates London's fascination with the concept of the microbial world as a potential reinvigoration of a corrupt and decayed America that he witnessed at the start of the twentieth century. Yet the novella is also rife with ambivalences and anxieties about the character, shape, and sustainability of the cataclysm's survivors. The workings of germs and the qualities of natural immunity are far too mysterious to be accounted for, and the result is a disordered collection of bodies and a damaged quality of narration. If the microbial sublime is meant to offer a chance of American regeneration for London, then its apocalyptic violence must be harnessed and directed by human hands toward a dehumanized enemy.

1.4 Weaponizing the Microbial in “The Unparalleled Invasion”

As the frontier closed, the space of purely American values was considered to be imperiled by another pressure: overpopulation, the product of lax immigration laws. Immigrants from east Asian countries—and particularly among them China—were seen as having invaded the shores of the American nation. Chinese immigration into California had begun in 1848 and continued steadily, and the resulting anxieties and conflicts demonstrated a split between the factions of American capital and labour. In 1868 the United States Congress ratified the Burlingame Treaty, which “encouraged Chinese ‘coolies’ (a source of cheap labor) to enter the country to help construct the

⁷⁴ An alternative reading would be that the narrative voice of the story is recounting an event at some point long after Granser's own story, when a recognizable English language has been recovered.

Pacific railroads” (Tatsumi 68). Corporate America saw in Chinese bodies a useful and inexpensive source to both instantiate their resource empires and to disempower the labour movements taking root in the west. In response, white labour unions took aim at the Chinese as parasitic organisms depriving white workers of needed jobs and pay (see Hsu 98-103). Increasingly, the nation backed nativist, anti-Chinese xenophobia which soon made its way into law. Draconian measures were passed through Congress for the next twenty years, such as the infamous Chinese Exclusion Act, which denied Chinese immigrants the right to naturalized citizenship and placed a ten-year ban on new labourers entering the country, an act renewed and extended in 1902 and 1904 (Lee 94-95).⁷⁵ Likewise, the 1892 Geary Act “effectively criminalized all Chinese laborers in the United States by requiring them to register and carry photographic identification cards proving they were legal citizens” (Hsu 78-79), one of the first acts of governmentally ordained biopolitical monitoring.

Despite the sweep of these legal measures, they did little to quell the fears and hostility of white Americans, which were exacerbated by the rhetorical link between Chinese identity and infectious illness. Nayan Shah describes how the Chinatowns throughout California were deemed “laborator[ies] of infection” and “permanent site[s] of urban sickness,” while Asian bodies themselves were seen as generators of illness: in 1877, the San Francisco public health committee “denounc[ed] the Chinese as the very *embodiment* of sickness” (1-2, 22). The settlement of Chinese citizens in America was

⁷⁵ It was not until 1943, during the height of the Second World War and America’s alliance with Chiang Kai-shek’s Chinese forces against the occupying Japanese, that the passage of the Magnuson Act, also known as the “Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act,” finally removed these original laws from federal statutes (Lee 256).

read as a contamination of national character; the frontier was sick, and the Chinese were the infecting agent.⁷⁶

Perhaps not surprisingly, in “The Strenuous Life” Theodore Roosevelt contrasts the hypothetical strenuous nation (being, of course, the United States), with that of an archetype of indolent decadence: the empire of China. Roosevelt exhorts: “[w]e cannot, if we would, play the part of China, and be content to rot by inches in ignoble ease within our borders, taking no interest in what goes beyond them” (6). In this example, Roosevelt categorizes China as a place of stultified decadence and decay—a state secure in its physical boundaries and thereby submitted to an entropic fate of disintegrating within this space. China, for Roosevelt, does not enact strenuous living, does not utilize the bodies that comprise the subjects of its empire toward the cleansing and regenerative process of strife (whether laborious or martial). In Roosevelt’s fantastical conception, China is a sick nation because its national project is not one of conquest and domestication of the wild, and while Roosevelt does not directly comment upon Chinese immigration to America in the speech, the implication that this existence is corrupting America’s shores remains implicit.

Jack London’s interest in China mingles Roosevelt’s contempt with an increased level of fear and paranoia. During the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), London

⁷⁶ In dealing with the complex racial politics that characterize London’s writing and life, Andrew Furer concludes that non-Anglo-Saxon people provoke fear and hatred in London most acutely when they are considered as part of an abstracted mass. Furer notes that, in London’s later novel *The House of Pride* (1912), and stories published in the same volume, such as “Chun Ah Chun” and “Koolau the Leper,” the “fear of the Yellow Peril almost entirely disappears. When London gives Asian and other non-white characters individuality accompanied by exceptional ability, his anxiety dissolves into admiration” (163). In other words, when an individual is drawn out from his or her racial background, made immune against the contamination of threatening materiality, fear is replaced by respect.

travelled to Japan and Korea to serve as a war correspondent for the *San Francisco Examiner*, and briefly visited China during this time (*Reports* 3). Upon returning to California, London would go on to pen the alarmist articles “The Yellow Peril” (1905) and “If Japan Wakens China” (1909) that fretted over the possibility of disastrous and destructive wars to come through “race-adventure” (*Reports* 360). The threat, as London perceives it, comes from Japan, which defeated the vast Russian empire in the war, becoming the predominant military power in the Pacific. Possessing “the finest machines and systems of destruction the Caucasian mind has devised,” the Japanese are a “rejuvenescent . . . race” with wider imperial ambitions (346). The Japanese, as beneficiaries of Western material progress, are in a privileged position with respect to the rest of East Asia.⁷⁷ Yet London ultimately does not fear the “forty-five million Japanese in the world” (360), seeing the empire as too small to truly threaten Western hegemony. Rather, London dreads “the four hundred millions of yellow men [China] should the little brown man [Japan] undertake their management” (346). While London contends that the West and the Chinese possess no means of communicating with one another, Japan is able to translate the technologies and institutions of modernity which the Anglo-Saxon race has developed into tools comprehensible to the Chinese mind. The Japanese can do this, in London’s racial ordering, because “they [the Japanese and Chinese] diverged

⁷⁷ In “The Unparalleled Invasion,” London—through his narrator Walt Mervin—will elaborate on this idea, describing the Japanese as “the freak and paradox among Eastern peoples,” as they are capable of intuitively understanding and communicating not only with other Asians, but with the occulted Western mind as well (110). Mervin is baffled by this receptivity of the Japanese, stating that there is “no explaining this peculiar openness of Japan to the alien culture of the West. As well might be explained any biological sport in the animal kingdom” (110). In both his fiction and non-fiction accounts, the Japanese are incapable of developing their own materials and expertise, but only the secondary inheritors of true Western ingenuity.

from a common root, an ancient Mongol stock. There have been changes, differentiations brought about by diverse conditions and infusions of other blood; but down at the bottom of their being, twisted into the fibres of them, is a heritage in common—a sameness in kind that has not been obliterated” (345).⁷⁸ The similitude of race is ultimately what allows for communication between groups, and Japan’s ability to translate the inventions of the West is alarming. Claiming that the Chinese are “not dead to new ideas, new methods, new systems,” and that “[u]nder a capable management he can be made to do anything” (345), London sees a deadly spread of information—the Japanese receive the expertise and knowledge of the West, and in turn are able to translate this to China, who will then, with their significant population, threaten the stability of the Western imperial world and its holdings.⁷⁹

The recurrent image employed throughout these essays is that of sleep and wakefulness. London describes China as a political entity long dormant, not “dead” but only slumbering (345), and the threat of this empire’s awakening will signal the end of the era of white supremacy. It is not only China that sleeps, however; London writes that the nations of the West “are dreaming as all race-adventurers have dreamed” (360-361).

⁷⁸ This explanation is repeated verbatim in “The Unparalleled Invasion” (111). Such recapitulation would lend credence to the theory that London intended for his speculative tale to be understood as sincere as opposed to satirical.

⁷⁹ London ends his essay by noting that, while materials and knowledges are products of a race and are thus “interchangeable,” the “soul stuff,” or essence of each race, that fires these endeavours, cannot be repackaged (*Reports* 348). It is this untranslatability of the essential characteristic of the “Saxon,” which London glosses as containing “a certain integrity, a sternness of conscience, a melancholy responsibility of life, a sympathy and comradeship and warm human feel, which is ours, indubitably ours, and which we cannot teach to the Oriental as we would teach logarithms or the trajectory of projectiles” (348) that London sees as preserving hope against the threat of Chinese or Japanese power. Even though these nations may gain access to and mastery of Western ideas and weapons, London believes that the innate qualities that led to these discoveries is what will preserve his own race.

And it is this dream of unchallenged supremacy that worries London, for in that sleeping state, the vigorous action of the strenuous life has given way to fantasies of security. He ends his article “If Japan Wakens China” with a powerful China on the verge of waking up, while “[w]e are still dreaming” (361).

“The Unparalleled Invasion” picks up directly where London’s articles of warning leave off. The story, narrated as a fragment of a future textbook by historian Walt Mervin, recounts the central geopolitical conflict of the twentieth century staged between “the world and China” (109).⁸⁰ The latter, described as being “rejuvenescent, fruitful, and militant,” experiences a rapid modernization thanks to the intervention of the Japanese empire, allowing China’s population to increase exponentially and to harness contemporary technologies. This empire, which the narrator repeatedly refers to as a nation “awakened” (109, 110, 112, 113), threatens the hegemony of the imperial nations of Europe and North America, and prompts increasingly desperate martial responses from these nations. When conventional means of conquest fail—France’s navy ineffectually batters China’s coasts, while China “withdrew like a turtle into her shell” (114), and its attempts to invade the Chinese mainland fail when its expeditionary force is “swallowed

⁸⁰ Much of the criticism around “The Unparalleled Invasion” has to do with whether or not the story is an uncritical instance of “yellow peril” fiction, or a slyly satirical takedown of such racial panic literature. Patrick L. Sharp presents the former opinion, arguing that the story “London’s future-war story was consistent with the rampant anti-Asian bigotry of his time” and that “this story was fanning the flames of race hatred” in the United States (104). Berkove, on the other hand, makes the case that the short story is in fact a critique of unchecked American manifest destiny (“Parallax” 33-39). Metraux offers a similarly ironic reading of the text, and Edlie Wong refers to “The Unparalleled Invasion” as a “darkly ironic” twist on the Chinese invasion genre (“Future Tense” 516). John N. Swift offers a synthesis of these readings, suggesting that, while it is quite possible to read the story as a “darkly Swifitean satire, a critique of racist technology,” it nonetheless reinforces stereotypes about the ontological differences between Asians and Caucasians, and reflects the values of racial difference of American culture at the time (67). As Swift aptly notes, the scientist who devises the biological warfare solution to the Chinese empire is named Jacobus Laningdale, who shares the same initials with the story’s author (67).

up in China's cavernous maw" (114)—the American scientist Jacobus Laningdale proposes a different tactic: bombarding China with every available type of “bacteria, and germs, and microbes, and bacilli” (118). This avenue of attack proves successful, and the Chinese population of “a billion souls” is wiped out within months (120). The plague-destroyed Chinese empire, its population erased and its territory turned into a “howling wilderness” (120), becomes the site of a new frontier expansion, one that proceeds “according to the democratic American programme” (120). “China had laughed at war,” the narrator Mervin explains, “and war she was getting, but it was ultra-modern war, twentieth century war, the war of the scientist and the laboratory, the war of Jacobus Laningdale” (119). It is with up-to-date knowledge and mastery of the microbial that the Western powers are able to quash a racial threat and re-establish an imperial equilibrium.

“The Unparalleled Invasion” is representative of the “yellow peril” fiction⁸¹ that dominated Anglo-American popular culture at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. With growing immigration from East Asian countries into the United States beginning in the 1840s, and exacerbated by Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, the United States came to view Asians as an undifferentiated and hostile race threatening the destruction of its sovereignty and capture of its land (Tatsumi 66). As Edlie Wong notes, “[b]y the final decades of the twentieth century, the notion of an Asiatic threat was well established in U.S. culture, in part through the popularization and propagation of Yellow Peril fears in visual and print media” (*Racial Reconstruction*

⁸¹ The term itself derives from M.P. Shiel's novel *The Yellow Danger* (1899), which “coined the term ‘yellow peril’ and popularized its use” (Tatsumi 68). Shiel's novel also involves germ warfare as a “solution” to this irresolvable problem, and London's short story clearly borrows from its predecessor (Wong, *Racial Reconstruction* 153).

14). An off-shoot of the popular subgenre of “future war” fiction, speculative narratives that retrospectively imagine catastrophic, world-changing conflicts predicated on Darwinian notions of struggle and competition (see I.F. Clarke 49), “yellow peril” fiction particularly depicted an apocalyptic race war between “white” nations and an undifferentiated Asian menace (typically China or Japan). These narratives of catastrophic race war thus yoke together older mythologies of the purifying violence of frontier conflict within new scientific discoveries. The result is that the frontier becomes the site of a sanctioned biopolitical violence necessary for the racial survival of white America. In “*Society Must Be Defended*,” Foucault famously suggests that the movement from a regime of sovereign power to a regime of biopower requires thinking in “racist” terms, or, more precisely, thinking “the break between what must live and what must die” (254). When political communities are organized around an understanding of race with particularly inherited characteristics and traditions, rather than around subjects under the rule of a sovereign, then violent conflict is inevitable, as war is no longer seen as a political but rather a hygienic action—“the imperative to kill is acceptable only if it results not in a victory over political adversaries, but in the elimination of the biological threat to and the improvement of the species or race” (256). This racist ethos is also at the heart of the frontier myth’s regenerative violence, for as Slotkin notes, the core of this ideology is the belief in “savage war,” an apocalyptic total-war to make the land habitable for one group or another, a conflict that is coded in explicitly racial binaries of “wilderness/civilization, Indian/White” (*Gunfighter Nation* 12, 14).⁸² If the scope of

⁸² There are obvious echoes here with the expansionist policy of the United States in the eighteenth century of spreading smallpox to Native populations. The tactic of using biological agents as weapons of

biopolitics, as Foucault explains it, is “massifying, that is directed not at the man-as-body but at man-as-species” (“*Society*” 243), then the frontier becomes the location for the genocidal explosion of biopolitical management, turning the frontier into an Agamben-esque “zone of indistinction” where a racialized and threatening form of life is rendered as a medical threat and sterilized. “Yellow peril” fiction, then, is particularly engaged in the transmigration of older myths into new discursive modes of racial organization.

The opening of “The Unparalleled Invasion” reiterates London’s belief that there is an impossible barrier between racial communication: “*between [the West] and China was no common psychological speech*” (110). Americans and Chinese are incapable of conversing with one another; they cannot produce any form of diplomatic dialogue necessary for delicate geopolitical relations, or even on a simple narrative level. The attempt to narrate Chinese subjects, as opposed to a “massified” Chinese body, becomes an impossibility. For London, China and its citizens cannot be understood by the Western mind and are therefore of no consideration beyond their appearance as an essentialized and unchanging material presence, one that threatens the physical and ideological borders of American hegemony.

Where Roosevelt invokes China as an example of an inactive nation, London turns this seeming passivity into a looming threat and angle of attack against the rest of the world. Throughout “The Unparalleled Invasion,” China is described as a distressingly productive nation. Indeed, Mervin claims that China’s power comes from “the fecundity

imperialist expansion can be traced back in the United States at least to the Seven Years’ War, where American general Jeffrey Amherst suggested the use of smallpox against Native peoples along in the Ohio territory. Writing to a subordinate, Amherst recommends “Small Pox,” saying “We must . . . Use Every Stratagem in our power to Reduce them” (qtd. in Shannon 135).

of her loins” (113). Unsurprisingly, then, China is turned into a collective entity and is feminized, as the nation is referred to as “she” throughout the narrative. This depiction of China is one a kind of monstrous feminine, as its productive capacities are seen as a kind of infection threatening the stability of the imperially managed world. Its industrialization does not bolster its military capabilities—the country has a militia in place of a trained army, and “[h]er navy was so small that it was the laughing stock of the entire world” (113). The feminized China refuses to compete in the masculine sphere of martial prowess. Instead, China carries out its expansion by other means: not through arms, but bodies. The citizens of the nation “spill[] over the boundaries of her Empire,” taking control of colonies belonging to the French, British, and Russian powers. “China sent down an army of militia-soldiers a million strong. Behind them came the wives and sons and daughters and relatives, with their personal household luggage, in a second army” (114). Instead of engaging in a bloody test of wills between at the interface of the frontier, China displaces that boundary line, overrunning not only established Western colonial boundaries, but also the boundaries separating the martial and the domestic. As Mervin explains, China’s means of territorial accumulation occurs in three waves: “[f]irst came the immigration . . . Next came the clash of arms and the brushing away of all opposition by a monster army of militia-soldiers, followed by their families and household luggage. And finally came their settling down as colonists in the conquered territory” (114-115). This China disorders the rules of conquest, smothering the conflict so necessary to healthy nation-maintenance between the surreptitious act of immigration and the image of families and their “household luggage” turning territory into a home. China is an empire without imperial ambitions, a power paradoxically mobilizing inertia

in order to entropically absorb the territory around it; it is an alien power that does not resemble the actions and developments of the Western powers, and this is what particularly makes it so threatening and horrifying to Mervin.

The statisticians of the West examine China's birth rate with a kind of horror:

Burchaldter called attention to the fact that there were more Chinese in existence than white-skinned people. He performed a simple sum in arithmetic. He added together the populations of the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, England, France, Germany, Italy, Austria, European Russia, and all Scandinavia. The result was 495,000,000. And the population of China overtopped this tremendous total by 5,000,000. Burchaldter's figures went around the world, and the world shivered. (113)⁸³

Later in the story, the scientist comes to the startling revelation that his "simple arithmetic" was incorrect, and that "[t]here were two Chinese for every white-skinned human in the world, Burchaldter announced, and the world trembled" (115). The collectivizing of the non-Chinese world into singular embodied reactions of shivering and trembling not only highlights the dualism of this story, but also places the conflict on purely material, embodied terms. The power of China is thus its ability to crowd out the world through a profusion of an undifferentiated mass of flesh, one that Mervin renders in terms of abject horror: "[t]here was no way to dam up the over-spilling monstrous flood of life" (116).

China's method of acquisition is thus accomplished not through spectacles of destruction but through absorption, infiltrating and mutating the colonial makeup. As Mervin notes, "China had entertained no dreams of conquest. The Chinese was not an

⁸³ London performs this same racial arithmetic in "If Japan Wakens China." There he notes that the combined white people of the world are outnumbered by the combined populations of China and Japan (*Reports* 360). As this article was composed the year before "The Unparalleled Invasion," it is clear that these conclusions which so startled London prove to be the predicates for his speculative imaginings.

imperial race. It was industrious, thrifty, and peace-loving” (114). The power of bodily production that China possesses thus is not made for martial conquest but for displacement of other bodies. Indeed, furthering the sexualization of the nation, “[China] welcomed invasion” (116), as London’s narrator unsubtly puts it. As Shah notes, the image of Asian women in California at the time was that of the syphilitic prostitutes who, in the words of a contemporary physician, were “saturated” with diseases and whose infected bodies “haunt the [white] client, his spouse, and his progeny with venereal infection” (107, 89). The Chinese nation is a diseased and promiscuous body, whose every geopolitical action is rendered as contaminating Western health.

If China is the devouring mother, the children it produces are depicted as a singular mass. In the story, Mervin gravely intones that America already nurtures an infection: “[f]irst came Chinese immigration (or, rather, it was already there, having come slowly and insidiously during the previous years)” (114). In this narrative rendering of Chinese bodies, it is possible to read both the historical fears of Asian immigration in the nineteenth century, and London’s own non-fictional writings on the Chinese. In “The Yellow Peril,” London’s remarks on the Chinese have to deal entirely with their embodiment—he refers to them (personified as a representative “he”) as “the perfect type of industry” and “an indefatigable worker,” whose “[w]ork is the breath of his nostrils. It is his solution to existence” (343, 345). And yet, in spite of the almost mechanistic love of labour that the Chinese population possesses, the country is unable to become a world power because “his government is set, crystallized” in its traditions and unwilling to modernize for fear of jeopardizing their own power and prestige (345).

As Eric Hayot notes, China was seen at the time as enacting “relentless reproduction of its own social and governmental form” (33). Reproduction without differentiation: China is read as a kind of virus illustrated in the figure of the “coolie,” a derogatory term for Asian labourers. The coolie operates as a border-crossing figure for London, an abject outward appearance disguising a sinister agenda of foreign power. These bodies are meaningful not as individuals, but as representatives: Li Fang Twung, the spokesman for the Chinese Emperor, and the text’s only named Chinese character, taunts the American government to “[d]estroy, as you have threatened . . . the ten million coolies we have forced upon your shores—why, the amount scarcely equals half our excess birth rate for a year” (116). The coolie body is another vector of Chinese contagion, a replaceable but omnipresent figure threatening the capability of the labouring white body.

The figure of the labouring body complicates the idea of animacy: there is a kind of hyper-productivity applied to this figuration, one that trumps the abilities of the white male. Such fears develop Mel Y. Chen’s work on “animacy,” in which “the fragile division between animate and inanimate—that is, beyond human and animal—is relentlessly produced and policed and maps important political consequences of that distinction” (2). The way that bodies are considered to be animated are hierarchized within biopolitical paradigms. Interestingly, Chen focuses on images of the Chinese labourer’s figuration as a rat in 19th-century caricatures, demonstrating “the logic of similarity between rats and Chinese people to stir up fears of infection, invoking not only a similarity but a consanguinity” (110), with the rat suggesting a kind of lesser animacy, something not as fully living as a human being. Chen’s analysis is no doubt correct, yet in

similar images from the era we can detect another kind of anxiety. The coolie-as-octopus, depicted in G. Frederick Keller's caricature for *Wasp Magazine* in 1882, juxtaposes the hyper-productivity of the Asian body in comparison to the idleness of the disenfranchised white labourers (see Hsu 101). As Hsuan Hsu notes of this image, the effect leads one to see Chinese bodies as "multiple, swarming, or grotesquely combined bodies, rather than as individual subjects" (101-102). Thus, between these two infamous caricatures of Chinese coolie labourers, we can see how multiple the fear of the Chinese body is. To these readings I would add that, while Keller's cartoon is used to connect Chinese labour to the monopolist corporations dominating the American west, it is possible here to detect a note of panic: that the Chinese body may be more productively powerful than the American male can hope to achieve.

Of course, a body's productive capabilities does not alone imply a superiority on the animacy hierarchy, for such ability can still be subordinated to the racist logics of domination, as Chen well notes (10-11). However, London's paranoid racial taxonomies provide a means of empowering this hyper-productive body. The intervention of the Japanese that London fantasizes about in his essays is reiterated in "The Unparalleled Invasion," with Japan seeking to increase its imperial span and "awakening" China to modern technologies and ideologies. In an infectious transfer, Japan receives the inventive gifts of the Western world and in turn passes them on to China, which puts them to use and becomes a daunting power. The labouring capacity that London sees in Chinese bodies, married to the acquired inventions and ideas of the West, means that China's animacy possesses the potential to topple the racial and social hierarchy that sees white Western powers as indomitable. Once more, London resorts to the figurative

language of infection to describe this fear: “China rejuvenescent! It was only but a step to China rampant” (112).

Like a virus hijacking the replicative machinery of an organism’s cell to reproduce itself endlessly, China’s acquisition of Western technology makes the reproductive power of a global health threat. But of course, that description is only analogical: China reproduces *as though* it were a virus, relying on the logic of similarity. As Tatsumi notes, one of the features of later “yellow peril” fiction involved “the exemplary future-war imperative, ‘Don’t act until a virus is slaughtered by another virus’” (70). Narratives of race war with Asia operate on tropes of replication and expansion, and the main weapon in an Anglo-American arsenal is the microbe. London illustrates the limits of such metaphorical association in the end of his story, where the associative infection of China encounters the actual American pandemics. Jacobus Laningdale’s suggestion to bombard China with every possible contagious illness places China’s reproductive capabilities into conflict with the destructive potential of the outbreak. London’s aesthetic shift registers this distinction. Swift describes London’s story as biopower met with biopower: “the West appropriately responds to the plague of uncontrollable reproduction with the managed bio-technology of germ warfare” (61). Certainly, this is the case in the deployment of the world’s accumulated armies to surround China. While the Chinese expect a hopeless invasion by the rest of the world: “[a]fter all this enormous preparation, there was no invasion,” to which Mervin notes that “[s]he [China] could not understand” (117). While China may not be a military power, it understands the established rules of military conquest and is able to beat the colonial empires based on changing these tactics. Yet the Chinese government does not

understand that the mobilized armies and fleets of the West are not an invasion force, but a quarantine line erected to contain the soon-to-be-infected population. The armies ensure that China is fully isolated from the rest of the world, and that its population is contained: “[t]he slaughter of the mad hosts on the boundaries was stupendous,” Mervin exclaims, “[t]ime and again the guarding line was drawn back twenty or thirty miles to escape the contagion” (119). China’s entire populace is consigned to an infected agent, and so the principles of biopolitical management are employed to sequester and control the plague.

The body of the racial other is described in visceral terms meant to evoke disgust and anxiety: China’s wave of immigrant-conquerors are described by Mervin as an “overflowing monstrous flood of life” (116), and its citizens described only in the aggregate as a “chattering yellow populace” (117). The actual contagious diseases, by contrast, are rendered in a more ethereal register: the airships that convey the infectious arsenal are described as “tiny dot[s] of black” in the sky, while the shells themselves are “strange, harmless ... tubes of fragile glass” that “shattered into thousands of fragments on the streets and house-tops” (117). The frangible imagery and euphonic flow of these images emphasizes the seemingly effervescent quality of the biological agents, the glass operating like the protein coating that protects the core of real viruses. “[T]here was nothing deadly about these tubes of glass,” Mervin assures the reader, and twice repeats the refrain “[n]othing happened” after these delicate containers break. Only “one or two thought they saw some mosquitoes fly out” of the tubes (118): these possibly glimpsed insects remain the only palpable trace of presence. At the moment of contamination, the descriptions shift from surging, repulsive materialism to ghostly, imperceptible impressions.

The story breaks off at this moment of infection,⁸⁴ registering a temporal gap between the moment of the attack and its grisly aftermath. Again, London's naturalism precludes an engagement with narrative encounters with infection. The voice of the narrative, embodied through the academic persona of Mervin, is insulated from this contaminating encounter, and there is potential for any other narrative to arise. The microbial sublime is a *fait accompli*—as soon as the germs are released, there is only one possible end to the story, and so Mervin's historical encounter jumps over the moment of infection to its genocidal aftermath. On the day of the surreptitious bombardment, Mervin refers to the “the imperial city” of Peking filled with “eleven millions” of people, the streets teeming with life (117). The narrative shifts to a quick paragraph describing the presence of the airships all over China, and then abruptly returns to Peking “six weeks later” where the reader would now, per Mervin, “have looked in vain for the eleven million inhabitants. Some few of them he would have found, a few hundred thousand perhaps, their carcasses festering in the houses and the deserted streets, and piled high in the abandoned death wagons” (118). This narrative prolepsis allows the reader to contemplate the awe-full power of these diseases that an etiological narrative would render visible and thus, in some way, understandable. Instead, this gap signals an almost mystical process of rapid and unstoppable transformation whose power can be understood only retrospectively, in its legible after-effects.

⁸⁴ The day of the germ attack is May 1, which, as Wong astutely notes, is International Workers Day. Thus, “London's American-engineered plague roughly yokes together labor activism and empire” (*Racial Reconstruction* 153).

And these after-effects are gratuitously visceral. Mervin, to this point in the story a rather staid narrator, rhapsodically catalogues China's swift collapse: the country becomes a mass of "plague-stricken wretches" who carry the cocktail of viruses with them wherever they go (118). China becomes a "charnel house" and an "inferno" where "hundreds of millions of dead remained unburied and ... millions died of starvation daily" (119, 120). "Cannibalism, murder, and madness reigned. And so perished China," Mervin enthusiastically concludes. These excessive tableaux perform the aesthetic function of displacing all the fears of invasion and defeat back onto the Chinese body, and London indulges as much as he can, describing the invisible meta-plague as "the all-conqueror" and "the destroying angel" (118, 120). For just as the Chinese body is overdetermined as a site of contagion at every level of social existence, it is afflicted with every plague known to science: "[t]he man who escaped smallpox went down before the scarlet fever. The man who was immune to yellow fever was carried away by cholera" (118), and in the chaotic destruction new viral life emerges: researchers "suggested that a new plague-germ originated ... a hybridization between plague-germs" (119). Extinguishing threatening races while establishing an entirely new viral life (one, Mervin notes, that is eagerly studied by American scientists [119]) demonstrates once more London's fascination with the vitality of the microbe.

China's metaphorical virality proves no match for the encounter with the literally viral, what Mervin defines as "ultra-modern war, twentieth-century war, the war of the scientist and the laboratory" (119). America's ability to channel the power of the microbial sublime to attain its imperialistic ends is read as its skill in the new century. Mervin ends his historical discussion with a note of American regeneration: the

wilderness that was China becomes colonized and sectioned-off by the conquering imperial powers (120). This territorial occupation is a “tremendous and successful experiment in cross-fertilization” Mervin assures the reader, “a vast and happy intermingling of nationalities” living under benevolent American rule. Thus, the microbial sublime opens up not only the scientific frontier of an invisible world we can only gesture toward, but also a physical frontier as those microbes depopulate the overcrowded west and reinvigorate the space of white masculine destiny once supposed to have vanished. London finds in the microbe an incredibly useful narrative tool, foreclosing a challenge to an animate hierarchy while opening up new physical and intellectual spaces for the white male body to inhabit.

“The Unparalleled Invasion” thus serves as a narrative of biopolitical fantasy: the rhetoric of plague as the great social leveller is infused with a twentieth-century bacteriological understanding of the microbial world and its impact. Indeed, the genocidal project is referred to in hygienic terms as “the great task, the sanitation of China” (120), implying a formulaic resolution to issues of global complexity. London’s understanding that there exist organisms that are smaller than bacteria, the notion that there is a sub-visible realm of microbes with the power to destroy bodies entirely, is used for purposes of an ultraviolent regeneration: Slotkin’s understanding of the frontier myth’s accompanying violence is updated to the microbial bastions of twentieth-century biological warfare, extending and replicating the violence that has characterized American frontier power for centuries. In “The Unparalleled Invasion,” London sutures violent fantasy to an ostensibly scientific discussion, infusing the speculative and the naturalistic toward a fantasy of hegemonic white supremacy. London’s awe at the

microbial sublime is a means toward assuaging the anxieties accompanying a vision of a settler America at the beginning of the twentieth century: a closed frontier, a supposedly waning American life, persistent Asian immigration, and the waxing power of Asian nation-states at the dawn of the twentieth century are all quickly and easily resolved through the *deus ex machina* of the microbial intervention. The speculative fantasy of “The Unparalleled Invasion” rejects diplomacy and other geopolitical matters of international, intercultural encounter in favour of a totalizing vision of genocide.

1.5 Narrating Backwards: The Romance of Futurity

The element of fragmented futural temporality plays an important role in both of these stories. In both “The Unparalleled Invasion” and *The Scarlet Plague*, characters from a far future speak back toward their past, which is the writer’s present. The former’s ending note that the story we have read is among the “*Excerpts from Walt Mervin’s ‘Certain Essays in History’*” (120), as well as its veneer of scholarly examination, suggest an uncontroversial history that has been fully absorbed into the cultural consciousness. Likewise, *The Scarlet Plague* also possesses a telescoping narrative, with Granser and his youthful charges living in the 2070s, reflecting back on the Scarlet Death outbreak of 2013 (and a past-tense narrative that suggests that Granser himself has long passed on). Wong notes that such temporal manipulation was common to the future-war and Chinese invasion literature of the time, as it disrupts “the linear model of historical progress found in national reconciliation romances” and instead “defamiliarize[s] and restructure[s] the experience of the present” (“Future Tense” 516-7), a feature common to speculative fiction (see Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 77-79). The significance of the positioning of this narrative voice helps us to resituate our thinking about London’s ideas of microbial

sublime and immunity. Even in these futures, the narrative voices are no more certain about how the microbial world operates—it is still a matter of mysterious awe and sublime violence. The additional levels of narration are no more able to demystify or historicize the processes of the destructive microbes—they remain just as immune to narrative as they did during the events themselves. Narrators in London become the new mythologizers, drawing together well-worn stories of American identity and progress and weaving a new (if vague) understanding of science in order to inject these stories with a new sense of life.⁸⁵ Thus, to cite London’s famous line from *White Fang*, that “life is movement; and the Wild aims to destroy movement” (4), in his speculative fictions, London seems incapable of moving beyond his reified image of the male body. The inability for London’s multifaceted narrative voices to interrogate or question each other or the myths they propagate, and the sense of reification that links together these temporally extended narratives, suggests that such obsessive focus on the violence of the microbial sublime as a mysterious solution to the issues of ecological contamination, immigration and international diplomacy, are anxieties around white masculine identity from which London cannot escape. Rather than rejuvenating his preferred American bodies and landscapes through interventions of the microbial, London’s texts freeze them, substituting movement for an illusion of an eternally vital masculine body that never existed.

⁸⁵ Indeed, it is this sense of unreflective mythologization that Berkove sees as evidence that “The Unparalleled Invasion” to be read ironically. He argues that the narrative voice of Walt Mervin is intentionally ridiculous, and that “[i]t is impossible to believe that London would identify with a historian so obviously shallow and ethnocentric” (“Parallax” 34).

Chapter 2

2 The Voice of the Flesh: Traversing the Immuniverse with William S. Burroughs

“Among living beings, only man has language”
(Aristotle, *Politics*)

“In the beginning was the word and the word was God and the word was flesh ... human flesh ... In the beginning of *writing*”
(William S. Burroughs, *Electronic Revolution*)

In Chapter One, the idea of narrative immunity was utilized for the purpose of constructing and maintaining boundaries. For Jack London, the awareness of the microbial world opened up anxieties relating to the role of white male subjectivity; the incompleteness of that knowledge could be used to foreclose that same gulf. The lack of a clear understanding of the epidemiology and pathology of microbial agents allowed London to inject ideological fantasy into his speculative fiction, creating narratives in which the white male body is redeemed from the threats of global capital and racial encounter and reconciled with a re-naturalized American frontier. If London resorted to the microbial to rescue borders that were becoming precariously porous, then William S. Burroughs (1914-1997) converges on that same space with the goal of disintegrating such barriers. Writing almost half a century after London, Burroughs’s fiction of the late-1950s and 1960s—from his landmark novel *Naked Lunch* (1959) to his more experimental “Nova trilogy” comprised of the novels *The Soft Machine* (1961, revised 1966), *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962, revised 1964 and 1967), and *Nova Express* (1964)—is primarily fixated on the narrative entrapments into which subjectivities have become entangled. Human beings are now little more than what he calls “soft machines,” bare material upon which limiting and controlling “scripts” (or narratives) have been

encoded. Self-possessed identity is an illusion overseen by shadowy and totalizing forces of control, for Burroughs. The problem, in other words, is narrative, and Burroughs's solution is to relocate and reinvigorate the materiality that is located within these stories. The flesh of the body, its presence—despite or because of that body's grotesque or abject qualities—becomes the locus for Burroughs's attempt to rework a narrative practice that is not predicated upon a power asymmetry that he terms "*The Algebra of Need*" (*Naked Lunch* 201).

Burroughs is not a writer who can be said to cloak his political and aesthetic interests beneath layers of subtlety. He prefers to deliver his ideas with the force of a hammer. As he explains in an interview:

My basic theory is that the *written word* was actually a virus *that made the spoken word possible*. The word has not been recognized as a virus because it has achieved a state of stable symbiosis with the host, although this symbiotic relationship is now breaking down [...] Is the virus simply a time bomb left on this planet to be activated by remote control? An extermination program in fact? (qtd. in Miles 482).

For Burroughs, the entire history of humanity can be pathologized through the flesh's encounter with the viral organism of language. This encounter is fundamentally predicated upon an imbalance between the word that narrates and the flesh that becomes encoded and understood through these words. Burroughs thus maps a kind of onto-mythology of human existence and subjectivity that is appended to infection. What makes this story one of urgency, as Burroughs suggests at the end of the excerpt above, is that the chasm between materiality and the word is continuing to expand, and an apocalyptic cataclysm cannot be far behind. The virus, for Burroughs, signifies a violent hunger, and in the widening gyre of modernity comes the increasing likelihood of an entropic end.

Burroughs's theorization of the word resonates with the biopolitical project of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In contradistinction to Foucault's claim that, "starting in the seventeenth century, this power over life evolved" (*History* 139), Agamben understands the biopolitical project to have a far longer history. Agamben notes that the Hellenic Greek terms for life, *zoe*, meaning "the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)," and *bios*, "the form or way of living proper to an individual or group," constitute a political hierarchization of life from the outset of Western civilization (*Homo Sacer* 1). This organization of life into different qualitative spheres inaugurates the whole project of biopolitics in the West: indeed, Agamben views every iteration of governance and rule from this period on to be marked by this distinction between *bios* and *zoe*. This is precisely because, for Agamben, the role of sovereignty is not a type of power regime that morphs over time into a wider biopolitical array, but is the constitutive feature that animates Western political projects. Drawing on Carl Schmitt's idea of the "sovereign exception," a principle of power where "[s]overeign is he who decides on the state of exception" (qtd. in *Homo Sacer* 11), biopolitics utilizes sovereign power to announce who belongs within the sphere of *bios* and what is representative of a base *zoe*. The obverse to the sovereign, then, is the titular *homo sacer*, or "sacred man," a Roman legal term referring to a person "who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*" (8). In other words, *homo sacer* is placed in a "zone of indistinction," existing as the bridge point between the spaces of *bios* and *zoe*. More than this, the existence of *homo sacer* is what allows such a hierarchization to exist; the death of *homo sacer* "is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege" (9, 82). Removed from any access

to *bios*, the *homo sacer* is the figure for the bare life that is necessary for the maintenance of this political system, but also a body forever excluded from access to the space of politics.

Homo sacer thus becomes the “conditional negative” that is situated between two disconnected spheres. *Homo sacer* inaugurates a politics on a negative grounding. Here again we can detect Agamben’s divergence from Foucault: the latter saw biopolitics as a transformation of regimes and institutions of power, but did not see biopolitics as possessing an inherently positive or negative character. Agamben, by contrast, sees biopolitical organization as *necessarily* negative, as it “constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life,” meaning that political organization cannot be considered except with bare life as the negative figure haunting it (*Homo Sacer* 7). Therefore, “until a completely new politics—that is, a politics no longer founded on the *exception* of bare life—is at hand, every theory and every praxis will remain imprisoned and immobile, and the ‘beautiful day’ of life will be given citizenship only through blood and death or in the perfect senselessness to which the society of the spectacle condemns it” (11). All (Western) politics is biopolitics, and this politicization of bare life will yield only further mutations of domination, violence, and mass murder.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Indeed, Agamben suggests even radical political critiques operate with an unconscious acceptance of this negative figure at the heart of its politics. Agamben suggests that the “weakness of anarchist and Marxian critiques of the State was precisely not to have caught sight of this structure and thus to have quickly left the *arcanum imperii* aside, as if it had no substance outside of the simulacra and the ideologies invoked to justify it” (*Homo Sacer* 12). For Agamben, the political project must be wholly rethought; in this sense he has some affinity with Burroughs, who had little interest in any kind of critical political project aimed at capitalism: “I was never tempted by any political program,” he claimed (qtd. in Miles 52). Yet where it’s clear that Agamben’s politics is focused on rethinking a politics of community and collectivity, Burroughs is most commonly recognized as embracing a hyper-individualistic libertarian political ideology (see Miles 487; A. Seltzer 347.; McCarthy 38). When asked about his stance on the Vietnam War, Burroughs responded bluntly: “I don’t want to hear about the fucking masses and I never did” (qtd. in Miles 52).

Foucault famously said of his analysis of biopolitics that “[f]or millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle, a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence” (qtd. in Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 119). Foucault’s definition here paraphrases another of Aristotle’s ontological distinctions, that which privileges the human as the “living being with the additional capacity for speech” (McLoughlin, “The Sacred” n. pag.). Agamben traces an affinity between these two concepts in his philosophical project, finding a direct correspondence between the metaphysical and the biopolitical. The role of language in determining the human is an idea to which Agamben continuously returns, for it sutures together his various other philosophical projects. In the introduction to *Homo Sacer*, Agamben claims that “[t]he link between bare life and politics is the same link that the metaphysical definition of man as ‘the living being who has language’ seeks in relation between *phone* and *logos*” (7). In Agamben’s conception, both the metaphysical definition of humanity and the (bio)political dimension of human organization are structured in an homologous fashion. Thus, if biopolitics is predicated upon the inclusive exclusion of bare life, then the metaphysical definition of humanity as the being that possesses language is similarly structured upon an inclusive exclusion. In *Language and Death*, Agamben traces out his thinking on this subject, providing a similar model to that more famous shape of his biopolitics. Between the “animal voice” of *phone* and the discursive meaning of *logos*, Agamben detects what he terms “Voice” (with a capital to distinguish it from *phone*). “Voice” operates as the mediation between these two separate spheres, for it is “a *no-longer* (voice) and a *not-yet* (meaning),” a point by which the human being is made distinguishable from the unintelligibility of animal

sound but prior to an entrance into language (35).⁸⁷ However, Agamben immediately clarifies, this Voice “necessarily constitutes a negative dimension,” for it is the “*ground*” of the metaphysical dimension of the human that necessarily disappears in order to establish the human within language (35). Thus, the connection between the metaphysical and biopolitical structures is made clear here: both are founded on an originary negativity, a grounding in a disavowal that can nonetheless be exorcised from the centrality of these structures. Voice and bare life haunt these models of thinking through their inclusive exclusion, both of which necessarily limn the possibilities and considerations of contemporary philosophy and politics. It is through this negative philosophical project, spanning metaphysics and biopolitics, that we can gain an understanding of Burroughs’s literary project.

Given the affinities between Agamben’s philosophical interests—the tenor of the biopolitical, the metaphysical concerns of the human being, the central role that language plays in both, it is surprising that his philosophical project has not more often been utilized to examine Burroughs’s literary works.⁸⁸ Throughout Burroughs’s writing, the metaphysical condition of the human as a living being possessing language and a living being possessing the capacity for politics is ceaselessly interrogated and inverted. For instance, *The Soft Machine* ends, appropriately enough, with a “negative creation myth” (Robinson 48) that depicts the alien origins of the language virus and its corrupting influence on pre-linguistic human beings. The final routine, entitled “Cross the Wounded

⁸⁷ As Agamben will explain in *The Open*: “[a]nimals do not enter into language, they are already inside it. Man, instead, by having an infancy, by preceding speech, splits the single language” (qtd. in Attell 57).

⁸⁸ The major exception to this statement is Christopher Breu, who utilizes both Agamben and Esposito to think about Burroughs. I will discuss Breu’s contributions in greater detail below.

Galaxies” (*Soft Machine* 173-178) depicts pre-linguistic, animalistic beings and their first encounter with the “muttering sickness” or “talk sickness” (173). The narrative voice recounts:

We waded into the warm mud-water. hair and ape flesh off in screaming strips. stood naked human bodies covered with phosphorescent green jelly. soft tentative flesh cut with ape wounds. peeling other genitals. fingers and tongues rubbing off the jelly-cover. body melting pleasure-sounds in the warm mud. till the sun went and a blue wind of silence touched human faces and hair. When we came out of the mud we had names. (174)

Pre-linguistic materiality is fundamentally altered in this closing scenario, reshaped by language in a grotesque baptism of filth. Indeed, cutting up this passage, Burroughs’s narrative voice adds on the following page that “[h]uman our bodies melted into when we crawled out” (175). The concept of “human” is something that the hypostatic material condition becomes when it encounters language. The “ape flesh” is rendered as beholden to a different ontological character from when it becomes linguistically equipped, and this idea sets up the rest of the trilogy’s obsession with an invasive, parasitic force. There is a clear temporal disjunction between the “ape flesh” that exists prior to its transcendent mud bath and the divided being that emerges on the other side. This form of bare life is riddled with a narrativizing past: in closing *The Soft Machine* with a kind of “origin story,” Burroughs plays with the notion that a narrative history of language can exist. “Cross the Wounded Galaxies” thus acts as a kind of satirical biopolitical myth of human origin and linguistic capability—a story of the predation of language on the body, which will recur endlessly throughout the remaining volumes of the trilogy. We think of ourselves as mutated by language into something else, removed from our fundamental flesh into an entirely different ontological category.

Yet if language is an infectious and malevolent organism, then how can it be possible to write one's way out of such a trajectory? How is it possible to narrate immunity when the concept of narration, for Burroughs, is *a priori* one of contamination?⁸⁹ Burroughs famously claimed that “[a] new mythology is possible in the Space Age, where we will again have heroes and villains with respect to intentions towards this planet—the future of the novel is not in Time, but in Space” (qtd. in Grauerholz and Silverberg 181).⁹⁰ The Nova trilogy represents that attempt to disempower the old myths of human existence and prepare a new storyline. Clearly, Burroughs sees the possibility of instantiating a new relationship to language. If, as Alex Houen contends, Burroughs's literary project while writing the Nova trilogy sought to “extend the possibilities of the human *as a species*” (104), then this involved thinking not only in terms of geopolitical entities, but of microcosmic factors and encounters as well. In order to understand how he approaches such an ambitious project, it is necessary first

⁸⁹ This is of course a question with which all Burroughs scholarship grapples. Toby Tanner notes the “paradox of using language to release people from language” as organizing Burroughs's writing career, and suggests that Burroughs's move beyond this impasse is to engage in a kind of “sky writing” that “fad[es] even at the moment of articulation” (122, 140). Meanwhile, Robin Lydenberg sees the Nova trilogy as attempting to perform such radical experimentation on the capacities of language so as to “exhaust the language parasite, to push linguistic strategy and physical sensation to their limits,” resulting in a liberatory escape from the body (137). Breu notes “the ambiguity of the concept of the virus in [Burroughs's] hands” (38), while Oliver Harris notes that the virus for Burroughs is a “mythic object of radically ambivalent fascination” (214). Lastly, David Porush adds that “[t]rue silence cannot be attained in this universe, since noise is a background condition of the cosmos But this silence Burroughs hopes to attain is the *absence of code through cancellation of the message*” (103).

⁹⁰ Burroughs delivered these remarks at a contentious literary conference in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1962. There Burroughs's work was both highly praised and excoriated from various camps. Most interestingly, Mary McCarthy defended Burroughs's works (primarily *Naked Lunch*) by stating that “I thought the national novel, like the nation-state, was dying and a new kind of novel, based on *statelessness*, was beginning to be written” (33, emphasis added). McCarthy's homology between the literary form of the novel and the role of national identity is an interesting one with respect to biopolitics. As Breu remarks, the novel's setting of Interzone (loosely based on Tangier, Morocco) “points forward to late-capitalist economic and social organization that [was] just emerging or becoming newly dominant in the fifties and sixties” (37).

to examine the cultural milieu in which Burroughs was writing, and the advent of new discourses of infection and immunity at this time.

2.1 Mutually Assured Exclusion—The Shape of Cold War Biopolitics

In the fifty years between the speculative naturalism of London and the early postmodern experiments of Burroughs, the science of microbiology and immunology both developed tremendously. While the virus was still a theoretical concept in the early twentieth century, by the 1930s Wendell Stanley was able to finally glimpse a virus under an electron microscope and isolate a dead viral microbe. It was only after the Second World War, and the dawn of the Cold War, however, that virology entered its own “golden age” (Radetsky, qtd. in Foertsch 22). As Priscilla Wald demonstrates, the 1950s saw the virus enter into the public consciousness, with the discoveries made by microbiologists rapturously reported in mainstream newspapers such as the *New York Times*, and “[t]he earliest treatments of viruses in both specialty and mainstream press expressed wonder at this unusual life form,” marveling in particular at its liminal character, existing on the boundaries of both life and death (161). Yet this wonder was soon eclipsed by greater existential fears, for “[a]ccounts of viruses frequently shared the page with another topic of particular interest: the allegedly emerging global threat of communism and the politics of the Cold War” (158). The characteristics of viruses as beings hijacking the “healthy” machinery of a body in order to spit out identical copies of itself had a specific resonance in the Cold War imaginary. As Daryl Ogden notes, “[v]irologists posited the existence of powerful viruses, dangerous enemies beyond the body’s borders, capable of violating those borders under favorable circumstances” (248).

Science and ideology emerged side-by-side, and mutually informed one another: “[f]rom the press to the movie theater, the classroom to the television screen, Americans, like their Soviet counterparts, were inundated with stories and images of a cunning enemy waiting to infiltrate the deepest recesses of their being” (176).⁹¹ The threat of the virus became the threat of a hostile and organized invasive force, an image eerily familiar to Americans on the geopolitical scale.

In concert with the post-war boom in virology were similar advances in the field of immunology, the study of the body’s response to disease. As Arthur Silverstein remarks, the years between 1951 and 1972 were “the era of most rapid change in immunology” (367), a period marked by vast amounts of government investment of people and resources into a better understanding of the idea of the body and bodily defense. Ogden claims that “following the conclusion of World War I theoretical and experimental advances in immunology advanced at a snail’s pace,” and would not reach mainstream awareness until the 1949 publication of Frank Fenner’s and McFarlane Burnet’s *The Production of Antibodies* (244, 245).⁹² Starting from this study and continuing on throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Burnet would posit that the immune system works on the basis of what is termed “self/nonself discrimination” (Cohen 26). As Burnet would explain in a later book, “[t]he production of antibodies or any other

⁹¹ One of the examples Wald provides of this intermingling rhetoric is in a report from the House of Representatives that reads “[c]ommunistic ideals are germs in the body politic, hostile, but harmless so long as the body maintains a healthful condition and reacts normally to human needs. They are dangerous only when the resistance of the body becomes weakened through social or selfish errors” (172). Cindy Patton adds another dimension to this connection, noting that “medical and military imagery [were] interchangeable: reds and queers were alternately diseases and invasions” (*Sex & Germs* 88).

⁹² In fact, this was the second edition of a volume published under that name. Burnet (without Fenner) had originally published *The Production of Antibodies* in 1941, but this version “made no mention at all of autoimmunity or antiautobodies” (Silverstein 165).

immunological reaction by an organism is carried out against foreign materials, that is, against anything that is not part of that organism” (qtd. in Esposito, *Immunitas* 154). The body produces unique “self markers” on every one of its individual cells, which prevents the body’s immune system from targeting and destroying them. When a cell not indigenous to the body enters, it lacks such self markers, and therefore provokes an immune response (Silverstein 164). Burnet’s theorization is that the body is capable of recognizing its own cells while targeting alien invaders that do not possess such a biological signature. So persuasive was Burnet’s theorization of self/nonself that the theory came to dominate the thinking of immunology for decades, and, as Silverstein notes, “immunology has more than once been called ‘the science of self-nonself discrimination’” (92). Once again, such a familiar image lent itself well to the political situation, as “immunologists warned healthy and sick Americans alike of formidable enemies within the body that appeared ... to constitute the Self but were, in fact, Other” (Ogden 248).

The landmark developments in post-war virology and immunology suggest a development of a new paradigm of understanding bodies and their relationships to environments. Yet as Cindy Patton aptly remarks, “[a]lthough we commonly characterize modern medicine as a move away from mystifications about the body ... both science and popular culture retain the logic of older symbolic systems,” and the explosive scientific interest in virology and immunology in the 1950s “can be viewed as articulations of more longstanding basic models” (*Inventing AIDS* 58). For Patton, these new paths of science not only tinge the cultural imaginary, but are themselves drawn from the established beliefs and ideologies that shape that culture. Wald does the most to

unite these two strains of thought, showing how they are both involved in the idea of subversion and sabotage within the American political and cultural landscape of the Cold War. Noting the “conceptual exchange between virology and Cold War politics,” Wald sees how “[a]s viruses became increasingly sinister and wily, sneaking into cells and assuming control of their mechanisms, external agents, such as Communists, became viral, threatening to corrupt the dissemination of information as they infiltrated the nerve center of the state” (158-159).⁹³ Patton describes how “[i]mmunology provided the grammar for shifting dominant metaphors of disease from offense to civil defense,” useful in the time of “lingering Cold War paranoia [that] demanded that our immune systems should conform to a policing and confessional ideology” (*Inventing AIDS* 60). Ogden, meanwhile, notes how the two disciplines offered different rationalizations for the wider cultural clash with communism: “virology capitalized on fears of a hot war with America’s communist adversaries while immunology was predicated on the fear of disloyalty and subversion within the body (politic) itself” (248).⁹⁴ And Emily K. Martin explains that it was during this era that “the imagery of the body as a fortress or a castle was most vibrant” (71).⁹⁵ The sciences help to reify the idea of diametrically opposed forces and the need for vigorous maintenance of defensive structures in order to protect

⁹³ While the Cold War’s most infamous sign may have been nuclear weapons, Iliana Semmler points out that “[t]o a considerable degree, the virus has taken the place of the nuclear bomb as a threat of destruction that animated film and fiction during the Cold War and after” (161).

⁹⁴ As both Ogden and Patton prove, the sciences of virology and immunology existed in competition with each other during this time, “until a virus was discovered which was causally related to immune failure,” this being HIV/AIDS (Patton 58; see also Ogden 248).

⁹⁵ Wald disagrees with Ogden, Patton, and Martin, suggesting that what most captivated both virologists and the American public during this era was “the virus’s ability to appropriate the mechanisms of the cell for its own reproduction” (173), rather than simply the invasion and destruction of the host organism. For Wald, these readings overlook the subversive and infiltrating power the virus had in the American cultural imaginary.

the mutually embodied entities of nation and state. Thus the Cold War organizes the contours and elements of biological and biopolitical thinking, placing the body and the environment within a sphere of aggressive conflict for mastery. Such thinking will inform the particularly immunological declension biopolitics takes, as well as potentially enabling the means to see beyond such bellicose discourse.

2.2 Additional Capacities—The Persistence of the Flesh

Wald claims that “[n]o one more insightfully chronicled the anxieties of the age than William S. Burroughs,” due in no small part to his “understanding of the science he used in his work” (183, 185). Burroughs’s era is characterized by the paranoia and uncertainty that the new political and scientific horizons portend, and the virus becomes his guiding metaphor of these turbulent times. Yet, more than just a writer with an awareness of science, Burroughs is, as Christopher Breu contends, in the first instance a writer of biopolitics. From *Naked Lunch* onward Burroughs constructs “fictional landscape[s] that [are] built around biopolitical production,” and where “[b]are life becomes the locus in which sovereignty is fully visible” (37, 56). Most interestingly, Breu analyzes how Burroughs examines “the flesh as a key site of resistance as well as exploitation in late capitalism” (47). What makes Burroughs’s fiction so resonant is that he is aware of how the ideologies of inclusive exclusion are built on top of the human flesh. Such a locus is not just a vector of exploitation and violence in a biopolitical regime, but it is also how to rethink biopolitics beyond its negative declension that informs Agamben’s reading. If there is a possibility of reworking biopolitics, then it must involve rethinking the body and how we narrate it and its relationship to immunity.

For Breu, this “new flesh” focuses the possibility of grounding a response to biopolitical regimes of production and control. But how are we to consider this flesh? As something pre-linguistic, an immanence that can undercut the primacy of language in poststructuralist thought? Breu himself does not fully theorize the idea; to think through Burroughs’s engagements with the flesh’s biopolitical qualities requires thinking through some of Roberto Esposito’s densest meditations on biopolitical ontology. Esposito expands upon the work of Foucault and Agamben by suggesting that the reason “a politics of life always risk[s] being reversed into a work of death” (*Bios* 8) is because political organizations rely on a “paradigm of immunization” that “introject[s] the negative modality of its opposite” (52). Bare life, then, is that which is negatively opposed to a community of *bios*, and must be immunized against. For Esposito, this paradigm inevitably tends toward increasingly (self-)destructive autoimmunity. To this point, the biopolitical projects of Agamben and Esposito are aligned, as they trace the role of bare life in biopolitical organization and the way that such biopolitical organization will become increasingly mobile and rapacious. Yet there is a key distinction in their thought: in contrast to Agamben, who sees biopolitics as ineluctably inflected with a negative violence directed at bare life,⁹⁶ Esposito believes that biopolitics possesses an affirmative as well as destructive valence.

⁹⁶ Esposito’s translator and commentator Timothy Campbell argues that “the overwhelming impression” of Agamben’s biopolitical project “is of a kind of flattening of the specificity of a modern biopolitics in favor of a metaphysical reading of the originary and infinite state of exception that has since its inception eroded the political foundations of social life” (“Translator’s Introduction” xxii). This historical critique is a valid one, yet it also further aligns the projects of Agamben and Burroughs, as Burroughs is only intermittently interested in historical epochs and, as will be discussed below, treats the language virus and the materiality of the flesh as transhistorical, hypostatic concepts.

The way to approach and comprehend such a non-destructive, non-immunitary principle of biopolitics requires deconstructive inversion of these principles at their most violent. To this end, Esposito attempts to outline a deconstructive reading of the autoimmune biopolitical regime *par excellence* of Nazi Germany. Esposito identifies the three main pillars of the Nazis' biopolitical program as "the absolute normativization of life," "the double enclosure of the body," and "the anticipatory suppression of birth" (*Bios* 11). If these programs represent the apex of biopolitical destruction, then it is necessary to rework these terms, to "turn them *inside out*," in order to develop a generative vision of biopolitics (157). The most salient of these strategies, for the purposes of this argument, is Esposito's focus on the concept of "flesh." For Esposito, Nazi Germany's "double enclosure of the body" involved "the chaining of the subject into his own body and ... the incorporation of such a body in that extensive body of the German ethnic community" (157).⁹⁷ The body becomes an absolutely fixed point within such a biopolitical regime, and the individual body becomes a kind of microcosmic replication of the national body of the German state, a homunculus used to represent the hygienic and genetic character of the German people. In the development of the individual body and the "body" of the nation-state, Esposito detects the apotheosis of the immunitary paradigm, predicated upon a self/nonself binary distinction and the radical destruction of the latter category.

⁹⁷ This point seems to develop Agamben's description in *Remnants of Auschwitz* that "[w]ith the emergence of biopower, every people is doubled by a population" (84). This is an expansion on Foucault's point made in *Society Must Be Defended* that it is the introduction of a biological racism into political calculation that turns (or, rather, extends) people defined by political organization into racial figures who are biologically categorized (see 254-255).

If the Nazi regime, representative of a kind of biopolitics taken to the extremity of its autoimmune potential, absolutely captures subjectivity within embodiments, then Esposito's remedy is not to decouple the individual body from the national body (which would be the sign of post-War neoliberal governmentality and is still irrevocably tied to this notion of the immune body), but to working out a concept of "flesh" that forces us to rethink material presence and social being. While the notion of "flesh" has been critiqued by poststructuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy as a relic of a transcendental metaphysics, becoming for them "the most directional vector through which Christianity penetrates modern philosophy" (Esposito, "Flesh and Body" 89), Esposito himself reverses these concepts—"modernity expressed its increasing demand for immunization by assigning absolute centrality to the figure of the body" (95). In contrast to the critical approach of Derrida and Nancy, Esposito turns to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who reads the flesh as that which "has no name in any philosophy" (qtd. in Esposito, *Bios* 159). This is because, per Esposito, "no philosophy has known how to reach that undifferentiated layer (and thus for this reason exposed to difference), in which the same notion of body, anything but enclosed, is now turned outside ... in an irreducible heterogeneity" (159).⁹⁸ When Merleau-Ponty claims that "my body is made of the same flesh as the world ... and moreover ... this flesh of my body is shared by the world" (qtd. in 160), Esposito sees that commonality of identity and world, of a shared ontology, as a vital component in articulating a new biopolitics. His formula that "the flesh is to community what the body is to immunity" ("Flesh and Body" 95) makes this

⁹⁸ Esposito's reference to flesh as an "undifferentiated layer" has a significant echo with Burroughs's exploration of "undifferentiated tissue" in *Naked Lunch*, of which I will discuss in greater detail below.

connection explicit. It is the ontological commonality of the flesh, its ability to link together a material presence in the world that is undifferentiated and unprivileged in its presence that is not only philosophically invigorating, but generatively biopolitical. Such a vision does not mean to reduce everything down to a shared and completely self-coincident experience. Esposito will go on to reject the normativity of life through the experience of singularity, suggesting that his affirmative biopolitics would see the shared singularity of life in “a being that is both singular and communal, generic and specific, and undifferentiated and different, not only devoid of spirit, but a flesh that doesn’t even have a body” (*Bios* 167).

Thus, the biopolitical stakes of Burroughs’s literary project are set out:

Agamben’s approach in thinking through how the “inclusive exclusions” of both animal voice and bare life are necessary negativities to prop up the intertwined metaphysical and biopolitical projects that excavate and define what is “human,” but he remains somewhat reticent on how to articulate a vision unrelated to these domineering logics. Esposito’s deconstructive project of immunity and his focus on the flesh as the site of ontological community while maintaining an affirmative singularity allow us to begin to think what such a biopolitics not organized around (auto)immunity might look like. As Breu suggests, Burroughs is a writer of the flesh in all its grotesque, abjected, and relentlessly morphological possibility. For Burroughs, narrating flesh is a means of narrating immunity, of halting the asymmetry of viral infection that creates bodies that matter only insofar as they do not matter, and challenging the illusions of immaterial transcendence that are replete in postwar capitalist society. Burroughs is the poet of bare life, using it as his hypostasis for exploring the universe. If the *Nova Trilogy* is to serve as the

“mythology for the space age,” then it must explore a myth of bare life beyond its role in immunization, beyond its subservience to the virus of the word. Burroughs’s project, in other words, is an attempt to immunize against immunity, to divine a narratology of flesh.

2.3 Atrophied Preface: *Naked Lunch* and the Biopolitical Flesh

Naked Lunch most immediately explores the abjected role of the flesh under threat; the novel creates “a fictional landscape that is built around biopolitical production” (Breu 37). The clearest example of this is instantiated in the character of Bradley the Buyer. Bradley is the “[b]est narcotics agent in the industry,” owing to his unique ability to appear indistinguishably from other heroin addicts. “He is so anonymous, grey and spectral,” the narrator informs us, that “the pusher [sic] don’t remember him afterwards” (*Naked Lunch* 14). Yet while this physical appearance mirrors that of the junkies, Bradley’s addiction is not that of the opiate, but his own addiction to taking orders and working within the hierarchy. The narrator states that Bradley’s “body is making his own junk equivalent,” that Bradley has a “steady connection. A Man Within you might say” (15). Addiction manifests itself on the body of its mark, no matter what the element of addiction is—it any case, it subordinates the subject to a deteriorating materiality, and the interchangeability of addiction makes it a useful tool for police infiltration. Indeed, Bradley is so good at his job that he becomes an object of disgust in the police department, and he is fired from his job by the District Supervisor for being too skilled at manifesting need. In response to this deprivation, a distraught Bradley, craving the effect of control, absorbs the District Supervisor into himself (16). The conclusion of this sub-routine follows an almost paradigmatic Agambenian

trajectory: Bradley is arrested and placed before a judge who states that “I would recommend that you be confined or more accurately contained in some institution, but I know of no place suitable for a man of your caliber. I must reluctantly order your release” (16). The increasingly inhuman Bradley, reduced to a ravenous fleshiness, “spreads terror throughout the industry” through his relentless absorption of both police and addicts, until “he is caught in the act of digesting the Narcotics Commissioner and destroyed with a flame thrower” (17). As a cap to this story, the narrator explains “the court of inquiry ruling that such means were justified in that the Buyer *had lost his human citizenship and was, in consequence, a creature without species*” (17, emphasis added). This passage depicts Bradley’s loss of identity within the “algebra of need,” and how the systems of control can no longer classify him as a human citizen, but a material “creature without species,” the ultimate bare life, a hungry flesh that must be policed and destroyed before it disrupts the black-market economy and the police action that develops parallel to it. Bradley’s identity is stripped away until he becomes manipulable bare life, capable of being destroyed or reformed according to regimes of biopower. Bradley The Buyer in particular seems to echo with Agamben’s warning of the mobility of bare life, that “[b]are life is no longer confined to a particular place or definite category. It now dwells in the biological body of every living being” (*Homo Sacer* 140).⁹⁹

⁹⁹ In the routine titled “*islam incorporated and the parties of interzone*” (*Naked Lunch* 121-141), Burroughs satirically organizes political factions around explicit concerns of the flesh. The four major political parties in Interzone are the Factualists, the Liquefactionists, the Divisionists, the Senders. The Divisionists represent the “moderate” party of Interzone, so named because they “literally divide,” amputating “tiny bits of flesh and grow[ing] exact replicas of themselves in embryo jelly” (137). Lest the Divisionists be considered representatives of a freeing of fleshly materiality, the narrator immediately adds that “[r]eplicas must periodically recharge with the Mother Cell,” suggesting that there remains a central organism from which all other replicas emanate, that they are copies without any independence or lives of their own (138). Thus the Divisionists represent a kind of empty materiality, forming mindless clones of themselves used

In spite of the sad fate of Bradley, Breu suggests that it is possible to see the flesh as a “site of resistance” within the novel, and points toward the most (in)famous portion of *Naked Lunch*, the story of “the man who taught his asshole to talk” (111) that appears in the routine titled “*ordinary men and women*” (101-121). In the routine, narrated by the sinister Dr. Benway, a carny is able to grant his asshole the ability of speech for the purposes of entertaining his spectators at his nightly show; however, the asshole comes with a conscience and subjectivity of its own, one that exists in distinction and opposition to the carny. Eventually, the voice begins “demanding equal rights” that are possessed by the carny’s whole, though not his hole (111). Benway’s story ends with the asshole victorious: Undifferentiated Tissue grows around the carny, filling his mouth and leaving only his eyes unencumbered; this story is rendered by Benway as a moment of horror, as “you could see the silent, helpless suffering of the brain behind the eyes, then finally the brain must have died, because the eyes *went out*, and there was no more feeling in them than a crab’s eye on the end of a stalk” (112).

Benway’s tale is a literalization of the revenge of matter, as the carny is grotesquely subsumed by a materiality that extends beyond his sense of self, a hungry and vital flesh that rebuilds the body onto which it is a part. Benway refers to this “new flesh” as “un-D.T., Undifferentiated Tissue, which can grow into any kind of flesh on the

only for physical and sexual labour. It is the Senders, however, who are described as “the most dangerous and evil men in the world” (136). This faction is composed of telepaths, who practice a form of “encephalographic research” termed “biocontrol,” in a prescient echo of biopower. The Senders use their mind control abilities to beam out “telepathic broadcasts instructing the workers what to feel and when” (137). The Senders stand in for forms of complete biopower manipulation, and the narrative voice explains that this form of mental control is predicated on replicating and maintaining its own power: “[y]ou see control can never be a means to any practical end...It can never be a means to anything but more control...Like junk...” (139). The Senders are the apotheosis of biopower in Interzone, reducing bodies to static pawns controlled by a singular operator, the mental dominating the physical.

human body” (111). For Breu, this moment represents the positive tonality of a Burroughsian biopolitics—he sees the talking asshole as “the new flesh in its initial emergence—flesh that has no stable place in the symbolic and indeed exists in contradiction to it” (Breu 58). Yet it is important to consider how this new flesh is being narrated, and by whom. The novel introduces Benway by describing him as “advisor to the Freeland Republic, a place given over to free love and continual bathing,” then noting that his appearance in this state “indicates all is not well behind the hygienic facade; Benway is a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing, and control” (19). Throughout *Naked Lunch*, Benway experiments on the flesh and identities of patients that happen to pass through his ever-changing official residences. In this sense, the bare life of “un-D.T.” represents the ultimate vector of control for Benway, the canvas upon which he can develop and construct endless experiments of materiality.¹⁰⁰

This memorable story is bracketed by the sinister Drs. Benway and Schafer and their interests in the experimental capacities of the human flesh. The story is prefaced by the doctors’ interests in modifying the human being—as the latter comments, “[t]he human body is scandalously inefficient,” proposing “one all-purpose hole to eat *and* eliminate” in place of a “mouth and anus to get out of order” (110). Benway one-ups his colleague by suggesting “[w]hy not one all-purpose blob?” before launching into his

¹⁰⁰ While Benway is perhaps Burroughs’s most recognizable antagonist, Sean Michael Bolton offers an interesting dissension, suggesting that “Benway reflects Burroughs’s own hyper-practical approach and becomes a sort of alter ego” (68). For Bolton, Benway’s fascination in experimenting on the flesh that characterizes bare life is akin to Burroughs’s own literary project, that both Benway and Burroughs serve as “the *pharmakeus*, the administrator of the *pharmakon* as writing” (69).

story (110). Likewise, after Benway's story reaches its conclusion, he returns to a more general discussion of tissue:

That's the sex that passes the censor, squeezes through between bureaus, because there's always a space *between*, in popular songs and Grade B movies, giving away the basic American rottenness, spurting out like breaking boils, throwing out globs of that un-D.T. to fall anywhere and grow into some degenerate cancerous life-form, reproducing a hideous random image. Some would be entirely made of penis-like erectile tissue, others viscera barely covered over with skin, clusters of three and four eyes together, crisscross of mouth and assholes, human parts shaken around and poured out any way they fell. (112)

Benway continues by noting that: “[t]he end result of complete cellular representation is cancer. Democracy is cancerous, and bureaus are its cancer. ... Bureaucracy is wrong as a cancer, a turning away from the human evolutionary direction of infinite potentials and differentiation and independent spontaneous action to the parasitism of a virus” (112).

Benway's homology between the tissue of the individual being and the organization of the nation-state here act as the extension of Esposito's theorizing of the “double enclosure,” material that allows for the growth of viral agents. While Breu is correct in seeing the radical materiality that un-D.T. portends within Burroughs's literary universe, he does not attend to how that flesh will become inevitably recaptured within narration. Benway, the ultimate biopolitical operator, is able to direct the tissue within a narrative of corruption and disgust. Thus, Breu is correct in seeing in Benway's “un-D.T.” an evocation of a post-war “new flesh” that operates as both the site of domination and resistance within Burroughs's conception. The new flesh is a kind of literalized “bare life,” a materiality stripped of any political quality whatsoever, reduced to a present immediacy. For Breu, such depictions demonstrate how “[b]are life thus becomes the locus in which the violence of sovereignty is fully visible and can be enacted outside of the dictates of constitution, social contract, or law” (56). But if that is the limit point of

bare life's presence in the text, then we still remain trapped within Agamben's paradigm of a biopolitics predicated upon the "inclusive exclusion," where bare life is taken as the source of sovereignty's power. In other words: it is not enough for Burroughs to merely *represent* bare life; a truly radical program requires reworking narrative taking bare life as its protagonist. The un-D.T. remains wholly within the experimental and narrative purview of the sinister Benway, who uses it to pronounce a parasitic and viral threat that must be contained and subverted through rigorous experimentation. Benway serves, at this point, as the novel's perspective of immune narration, devising un-D.T. as an ambivalent concept that he, as a medical professional, is capable of pathologizing and exploring.

Naked Lunch is, above all, a novel exploring the potentiality of materiality. As the author writes in the "Atrophied Preface" that closes the novel (182-196), "[y]ou can cut into *Naked Lunch* at any intersection point...I have written many prefaces. They atrophy and amputate spontaneous" (187). *Naked Lunch* is about breaking away from the outdated form of the novel as an embodied whole, of representing instead a series of fragmentary entrance points. In empowering the flesh, Burroughs writes that "[t]he *Human Virus can now be isolated and treated*" (141). As Breu notes, Burroughs's invocation that "the way OUT is the way IN" represents his belief that the flesh that is manipulating and dominated by regimes of control is also the locus of resisting this biopolitical power (58). Yet at the level of narration, Burroughs is uncertain how to proceed. *Naked Lunch* provides a useful prologue to Burroughs's Nova trilogy, for it is in this novel that he depicts or gestures toward several of the ideas that he will develop in his later work. The fragmentation of conventional narrative structure and character, the

focus on a mutating and vibrant flesh-without-body and the ways in which narrative attempts to recoup and manipulate such illustrations are all helpful. Perhaps most importantly, however, Burroughs starts working toward a thinking of the parasitic character of the virus, and how it operates. His consideration of “The Human Virus” throughout *Naked Lunch* shows Burroughs’s interest in thinking through illusions of identity and its predatory nature toward flesh. Yet we can also see the limit points of Burroughs’s radical thinking in *Naked Lunch*; by moving on to the Nova trilogy, with its increasingly notable formal and narratological experimentation, we can detect Burroughs’s more radical formal engagements with the narration of bare life.

2.4 The Nova Trilogy: The Flesh Made Word

Burroughs’s Nova trilogy develops directly from the ideas he explored in *Naked Lunch* and its “algebra of need.” Burroughs expands his scope to include not only the abject citizens of Interzone, but the entire universe and all of human (pre-)history in its scope. Burroughs’s chronotope encapsulates the entire realm of existence within the algebra of need in order to demonstrate how such logics of domination have developed and permutated, and to explore options in counteracting this degraded life of the flesh. While in *Naked Lunch* Burroughs speaks of “The Human Virus,” the Nova trilogy extends this idea of addiction-infection to include almost every aspect of life. At the heart of this ontology, however, Burroughs identifies a central source:

The “Other Half” is the word. The “Other Half” is an organism. Word is an organism. The presence of the “Other Half” a separate organism attached to your nervous system on an air line of words can now be demonstrated experimentally. ... [T]he “Other Half” worked quite some years on a symbiotic basis. From symbiosis to parasitism is a short step. The word is now a virus. (*Ticket 49*)

It is language itself that Burroughs identifies as the *ur*-infection, the alien force that operates on the flesh, creating out of it human identity while simultaneously capturing and enslaving that material life. The reason for this is simple: viruses, unlike bacteria, lack the replicative machinery to make copies of themselves, and so they require host bodies with DNA machinery in order to maintain existence. “What does a virus do wherever it can dissolve a hole and find traction?” Burroughs’s narrative voice, Inspector Lee, asks—“It starts eating—And what does it do with what it eats?—It makes exact copies of itself that start eating to make more copies that start eating to make more copies that start eating and so forth to the virus power the fear hate virus slowly replaces the host with virus copies” (*Nova* 73). In this mytho-philosophy, the flesh is the existential hypostasis upon which a predatory viral language has erected the concept of human being and human civilization.

Parodying a Biblical pronouncement, Burroughs lays out the scope of his literary project: “[i]n the beginning was the word. In the beginning of what exactly? The earliest artifacts date back ten thousand years give a little take a little and ‘recorded’ — (or prerecorded) history about seven thousand years. The human race is said to have been on set for 500,000 years. ... What we call history is the history of the word” (*Ticket* 50). Burroughs identifies a scope of existence that exceeds the province of language—there is some quality, some essence of life that precedes the intervention of the word. Word empowers the speaking animal, and thus the political animal; for Burroughs, the dominating power that all political structures take, therefore, is an epiphenomenon of the word on the living presence of a universal flesh. Thus, the purpose of the *Nova* trilogy is

two-fold: to excavate that vital principle, and to rescue it from this grotesquely literal prison-house of language.

Burroughs further explores this parasitic connection between language and flesh through the description of writing. Throughout the trilogy the connection between flesh and paper is drawn: “[t]hese colorless sheets are what flesh is made from — Becomes flesh when it has color and writing — That is Word And Image write the message that is you on colorless sheets determine all flesh” (*Nova* 28). And, even more explicitly, to “[l]ook through the human body the house that passes out the door — What do you see? — It is composed of thin transparent sheets on which is written the action from birth to death — Written on the ‘soft typewriter’ *before* birth” (*Ticket* 159). The thin pages are the material instance, the background, the focus not on its instantiation but only as the ground by which written language appears. The word depends for existence upon these transparent sheets, but becomes the focus point of attention. And it is made clear throughout the novels that this sheet-flesh is of primary importance to the viruses of the nova mob. In *Nova Express*, for instance, a virus explicitly takes over the narrative to explain “I am not two—I am *one*—But to maintain my state of oneness I need twoness in other life forms—Others must talk so that I can remain silent—If another becomes one then I am two—That makes two ones makes two and I am no longer one” (77). In this philosophical disputation, the virus’s sense of oneness is predicated upon the divisibility, the non-unity of that which it invades. A monad-like sense of self-presence requires preying upon the flesh, of dividing it endlessly through experiments, through destruction of the bare life of the flesh. This is language itself speaking, explaining that its pure presence can only be maintained through a constitutive negation, the separation and

continual divisibility of the (bare) flesh, the life upon which it supports itself to become unified and self-present. The absence of that flesh would not lead to a oneness, but to a total absence, an annihilatory void.

Nova Express offers the clearest vision of Burroughs's radical position, opening with the announcement of Hassan i Sabbah¹⁰¹ to the citizens of the earth, reiterating that the planet is the victim of an extraterrestrial viral invasion (aided and abetted by human collaborators). Hassan urges the citizens of the earth to reject the Boards of the Earth and their alliance "[w]ith any people anywhere who offer you a body forever. To shit forever" (4). Hassan then asks, rhetorically, "[w]hat scared you into time? Into body? Into shit? I will tell you: 'the word.' Alien word 'the.' 'The' word of Alien Enemy imprisons 'thee' in time" (5). Anticipating his critics, Hassan warns that the viral collaborators will accuse Hassan of "want[ing] to take your body and all pleasures of the body away from you," substituting it for "his cold windy bodiless rock" (5). Thus *Nova Express* opens with a battle over the terms of life as they relate to the body and its component flesh. This central conflict will be written into the master plot that organizes the three novels.

2.5 "Dial *police*"—Scripting Nova

On the surface, the Nova trilogy appears to offer a reasonably straightforward allegory of infection and immunity in a Cold War key. In the overtly sf storyline that informs the

¹⁰¹ "Hassan i Sabbah" refers to the ninth-century Isma'ili Muslim cleric. Timothy Murphy provides a detailed biography of the historical Hassan (120-122), noting that he was a convert to Isma'ilism (a subset of Shi'a Islam), who became the spiritual and military leader of a group of Muslims from his fortress "Alamout" (121-122). The word "assassin" derives from the pejorative "*hashishiyyun*," or "user of hashish," which was applied to Hassan and his followers (122). As many critics have noted, Hassan becomes another of Burroughs's literary obsessions, and becomes another of his constantly shifting fictional avatars (see Bolton 182; Harris 185).

novels (particularly *The Ticket That Exploded* and *Nova Express*), a sinister extraterrestrial cabal comprised of “The Insect People of Minraud” and the “Virus Power Of The Vegetable People” has “formed an alliance . . . to occupy the planet earth” (*Nova* 72). These alien beings are aided and abetted on earth by a corporate board of executives who, “[i]n three-dimensional terms . . . is a group representing international big money [and] who intend to take over and monopolize space” (*Ticket* 139). These conspiratorial forces represent the shadowy and antagonistic powers that shape and control human existence. Life on earth is subject to a vast and planet-wide biopolitical procedure that trains bodies into a (literally) circum-scribed life. As the narrative voice somewhat gnominically puts it: “[d]eath *is* orgasm *is* rebirth *is* death in orgasm *is* their unsanitary Venusian gimmick *is* the whole birth death cycle of action — You got it?” (53). These alien powers, who have surreptitiously maintained the hierarchical control mechanisms of earth’s governmental and social apparatuses, represent the emanation of a distorting and organizing influence of power on the flesh of the body.

As Burroughs is interested in examining how language operates as a malignant infectious organism within these novels, he establishes a cabal of extraterrestrial criminals called the “nova mob,” a cadre of sentient viruses that direct the operations of the Board and the Insect People of Minraud. The nova mob—Burroughs’s literalization of the language virus within the narrative—are represented as a kind of B-movie gangster organization, its members possessing such names as “‘Sammy the Butcher,’ ‘Green Tony,’ ‘the Brown Artist,’ ‘Jacky Blue Note,’ ‘Limestone John,’ ‘Izzy the Push’” and so on (*Ticket* 55). Notably, these criminals “are not three-dimensional organisms” and so in order to operate on earth they require the use of pliable human bodies. The mobsters

accomplish this through infecting the bodies by their addictions, turning humans into mindless “coordinate points,” vectors through which the mobsters can move (as “a single controller can operate through thousands of human agents” [57]). This description of the nova mob echoes that of the Senders in *Naked Lunch*, except whereas they were of human origin, the nova mob are an alien virus.

The purpose of the mob on earth is laid out in stark terms as well: to “create as many insoluble conflicts as possible and always exaggerate existing conflicts” that will lead the planet toward “terminal identity and complete surrender” (*Ticket 55; Nova 13*). The mobsters, as a representation of language’s control mechanisms, have succeeded in completely enslaving the planet to their whims, turning human beings into puppets that enact their desires. Inevitably, the rapacious appetites of the nova mob and their antagonistic relationship to the flesh will “lead to the explosion of a planet, that is to nova” (*Ticket 55*). The nova mob garner pleasure and experience through the manipulation and control of bodies, and their desires eventually culminate in an apocalyptic inferno. As is stated in the text, “these life forms should not be on the same planet [as humans] —Their conditions of life are basically incompatible in present time form and it is precisely the work of the nova mob to see that they remain in present time form” (55). This incompatibility is expressed through the asymmetry by which the flesh of earthlings is present while the nova mobsters always remain somewhat immaterial and abstracted. As such, the threatened destruction of the planet does not existentially threaten the nova mob, because they are never fully instantiated in the coordinate points they inhabit. The mob operates on a fundamental asymmetry between their seeming immateriality and the existing and pliable flesh, and so planets like earth act as an endless

and horizonless pleasure palace for the criminals, who are exposed to experience without themselves being affected by time and death.

In spite of how thoroughly the planet and its inhabitants have been captured and placed under the sway of the nova mob and their co-conspirators, the fate of the planet is not completely hopeless. The hegemonic control of the nova mob is challenged by the arrival on earth of a counterforce: the nova police, a collection of agents who are empowered to “expose and arrest Nova criminals” (*Nova 7*), revealing their schemes to the denizens of earth and then removing them from their positions of power. As nova police spokesman Inspector J. Lee¹⁰² explains, “[w]hen disorder on any planet reaches a certain point the regulating instance scans *police*” (54). This reference to a “regulating instance” seems to suggest that the nova police act as galactic antibodies, intervening to prevent the spread of viral power and the terminal infection of life on earth. Indeed, the nova mob appears as a particularly dangerous infection, for Lee explains that “the work of the nova mob ... [is] to create and aggravate the conflicts (55).¹⁰³ Instead of

¹⁰² Lee is widely read as an alter ego of Burroughs himself. “Lee” was Burroughs’s mother’s maiden name, and he used the pseudonym “William Lee” for his first novel, *Junky* (1953) (Miles 11, 240-241). Furthermore, the protagonist of *Junky*, *Queer*, and *Naked Lunch* is in each case named “Lee.” As Roberta Fornari notes, “William Lee” is a “semi-autobiographical” character “who reflect[s] the tension between author and creation” (257n2). When Inspector Lee confronts the virus “Genial” in *Ticket*, the latter seems to remember Lee, who responds “I’m immune now, remember?” (28). Given that the nova mob operate through the vices of coordinate points, it is reasonably clear that “Genial” is meant to be read as an anthropomorphization of heroin addiction, and Inspector Lee’s membership in the nova police and immunity to “Genial” represents his kicking of his heroin habit he displayed throughout Burroughs’s earlier novels (see also Murphy 133-140).

¹⁰³ It is worth noting that “nova” is a bit of a misnomer. Carl Sagan describes a nova as a process belonging only to binary star systems, which are “powered by hydrogen fusion,” while a supernova is the event that happens to single star systems through a process of “silicon fusion” (243). “While two stars of roughly the same mass will evolve roughly in parallel,” Sagan writes, if there is an unequal distribution in mass, the larger star will burn quicker, and thus enter into “final white dwarf decline” sooner (242). With one star closer to the end of its life, the proximity of the two stars leads to an increased profusion of hydrogen, which becomes superheated and leads to an explosion (243). All of this may simply be a case of Burroughs misunderstanding astrophysics terms, but Murphy notes that the nova mob’s leader, Mr. Bradley Mr. Martin “is himself a doubled character and may also be an autoparasitic double star that consumes itself” (126). In

maintaining symbiotic equilibrium, the nova mob appears to tend toward complete consumption that will end in “nuclear war and nova” (55). The viruses in Burroughs’s universe are entropic creatures, causing an inevitable dissolution of the host bodies in apocalyptic annihilation. The nova police, however, vow to intervene and shut down the nova mob before they can fully enact their plan.

Given Burroughs’s countercultural attitudes, a squadron of police heroes seems somewhat out of place. Yet, as Lee explains, the nova police are of a fundamentally different category than terrestrial law enforcement agencies: “we found that most existing police agencies were hopelessly corrupt—The nova mob had seen to that” (*Ticket* 56). Quotidian police agencies operate on the same principles of domination and control as the nova mob. But Lee points out that there is one primary difference between nova police and other kinds: “the nova police have no intention of remaining after their work is done — That is, when the danger of nova is removed from this planet we will move on to other assignments — We do our work and go” (54). This self-effacement is the nova police’s rejection of power and control. Lee’s superior, the District Supervisor, elaborates on this point, explaining to Lee that the nova police “is in point of fact a *non-organization*” that does “not encourage togetherness, *esprit de corps*. We do not give our agents the sense of belonging. As you know most existing organizations stress such primitive reactions as unquestioning obedience. Their agents become addicted to orders” (10, 9). Collective purpose engenders the organizational models that Burroughs sees as inevitably linked to controlling mechanisms, and the police serve as the most potent

one sense this idea further illustrates Burroughs’s dislike of entropic dualisms, as critics have demonstrated, but in another way we can understand that to “go nova” always requires a duality.

illustration of such dangers.¹⁰⁴ The nova police, by contrast, are singular beings, acting without direct orders (the District Supervisor informs Lee that “[y]ou will receive your instructions in many ways. From books, street signs, films” [10]). The job of a nova policeman is ultimately one of *interpretation*, to examine the signs and to make the right moves to apprehend the nova criminals and prevent the spread of their viral control. In this way, the nova police are represented as the kinds of ideal readers—figures who are capable of working on their own to discern the hidden actions of control rather than being dictated orders and a purpose. As the Supervisor makes clear to Lee, for the nova police “[t]here is no certainty. Those who need certainty are of no interest to this department” (10).

In the fundamentally different kinds of organization of police agencies, Lee traces a specific kind of medicalized resonance: “[t]he difference between this department and the parasitic excrescence that often travels under the name ‘Police’ can be expressed in metabolic terms: The distinction between morphine and apomorphine” (*Nova* 51).

Whereas regular police are an iteration of addiction to power and control, rigid hierarchy, a maintenance of the status quo, the individualistic and dis-organized nova police are representative of what seems to be Burroughs’s perfect inoculative agent. Burroughs first encountered apomorphine in 1956, as he sought a remedy to his heroin addiction. He travelled to London and there met Dr. John Dent, a specialist in addiction who placed him on a regimen of the “metabolic regulator” apomorphine that was injected into the

¹⁰⁴ It is worth recalling that, in *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault examines the provenance and establishment of police departments as a constitutive feature of the movement into a biopolitical regime; one of the initial purviews of police power is overseeing and enforcing public health, because such an organization’s job involves “the ‘preservation of life’” (334).

body to help control cravings for addictive substances (see Miles 284-285). Burroughs was—temporarily—cured from his addiction to heroin and considered apomorphine to be the miracle drug that could break the total through which addictive substances held the body in its thrall.¹⁰⁵ In the “atrophied preface” of *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs praises the power of apomorphine to break the control of addiction, calling it “the best method of withdrawal I have experienced” (220). Importantly, as Burroughs contends, “[n]ot one case of addiction to apomorphine has ever been recorded” (203). The drug works to cut off the addictive potential of other drugs without substituting itself as a new addiction. Within the context of the Nova trilogy, Lee specifically aligns the nova police with this curative. If “[w]ord begets image and image is a virus” (*Nova* 48), then what is required is to shut down those things from iterating. Apomorphine is “no word and no image” (*Nova* 48), it blocks the proliferation of these constitutive features of addiction and viral enslavement. Without the production of word and image, the enslaved life of planet earth can be freed from the viral controls placed on it.

Indeed, the nova police’s apomorphic power seems to extend to their command of language. In the meeting between the District Supervisor and Lee, the latter recounts how “the D.S. walked behind me talking in a voice without accent or inflection, a voice that no one could connect to the speaker or recognize on hearing it again. The man who used that voice had no native language. He had learned the use of an alien tool. The words

¹⁰⁵ Burroughs would combat addiction to heroin (as well as other substances) throughout his long life. While apomorphine did allow himself freedom from heroin for some years, he found himself hooked on the opiate throughout his life, especially during the years in New York City in the 1970s, where his appreciative circle of fans and the ready supply of the drug led to his relapse (see Miles, 550-551). Seeking to break from his addiction once more, Burroughs began taking the methadone cure while in New York, and would continue to do so for the remainder of his life (552).

floated in the air behind him as he walked” (*Ticket 9*). Although the content of the Supervisor’s speech (referenced above) is straightforward and imperative, Lee focuses on the tactile quality of this speech, how its seeming anonymity contributes to its seeming strangeness. The D.S.’s speech takes on the same grey and anonymous quality of Bradley The Buyer, that exemplar of bare life. Once again, Burroughs makes explicit this connection between the nova police and immunity-as-absence: the Supervisor’s manipulation of language, the way in which it lacks an individual identity, as “no one could connect [it] to the speaker” means that it maintains a kind of universal quality, something that has not been placed into a discrete identity, a subjectivity that is predicated on the exclusion of otherness. Lee refers to the words as though they have taken on a material quality of their own, “float[ing] in the air behind” the Supervisor (9). Unlike the fantasy of immateriality and transcendence upon which language operates, the D.S. concretizes language, forces it into a material existence upon which it shares a symmetrical relationship with the flesh.¹⁰⁶ The nova police utilize language with all the delicacy and awareness that goes into maneuvering an “alien tool”—instead of becoming a constitutive part of an identity, and opening a vector through which language can invade, the D.S. flattens language, inhabits it rather than allowing it to inhabit his flesh.

¹⁰⁶ There are obvious affinities here with the formalism of poetic language discussed in Viktor Shklovsky’s influential essay “Art as Device” (1919). Famously, Shklovsky contrasts “poetical” and “practical” language and notes that the latter method language becomes automatized, is turned into an algebra of symbolization (79). Poetical language, on the other hand, “exists in order to give back the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things, in order to make the stone stony” (80). This method of “*ostranenie*” has most frequently been translated as “estrangement” or “defamiliarization,” echoing Bertolt Brecht’s “*Verfremdungseffekt*,” but, as Alexandra Berlina points out, a more correct translation would be “*en*strangement,” which emphasizes not distance and alienation from language, but an awe with the unfamiliar contour and texture of language (see 56-61). Thus, Shklovsky’s formalism, like Burroughs’s, is about redrawing connections with the word’s materiality.

The nova police have therefore been taken as Burroughs's thematization of an immunizing power to counterbalance the destructive rapacity of the nova mob (see Hayles 214, Lydenberg 70, Tietchen 113). As the trilogy progresses, however, the presence of the nova police as an immunizing force against the viral exploitation of the nova mob seems to give way to a more familiar depiction of the stasis that such a dualistic Manicheanism implies. The police are authorized by some higher galactic authority and Lee explains in his press conference that "[y]our earth case must be processed by the Biologic Courts," which satirically morphs the vision of a covert apocalyptic war into something more mundane and bureaucratic (*Ticket* 54). Lee then immediately problematizes this recourse to justice, noting that the Biologic Courts are "admittedly in a deplorable condition at this time — No sooner set up than immediately corrupted" (54). This literalization of a universal biopolitical apparatus (that distressingly appears to mirror the inertia of a twentieth-century bureaucratic state) suggests that the nova police have their own limits, are less a miraculous force of immunization than a fallible and limited agency. Indeed, equipped with their "antibiotic handcuffs" and vowing to "arrest these criminals and turn them over to the Biologic Department for the indicated alterations" (*Nova* 75; *Ticket* 56), the police do not appear to want to eliminate the threat of viral power so much as to contain and modify it. In configuring this galactic battle between the nova mob and the nova police less as an apocalyptic war of total contamination or purification than as a cops-and-robbers plotline, Burroughs suggests that such a straightforward narrative of immunity is insufficient to encapsulating the nuances of flesh in biopolitics.

Indeed, *Nova Express* is a consciously anticlimactic end to the trilogy, wherein the nova mob is apprehended and brought to the Biologic Courts, only for things to become bogged down in total judicial paralysis. In a lengthy chapter entitled “This Horrible Case” (133-146), Burroughs transforms his hallucinogenic and mutating universe into a dull procedural narrative, with the lawyers for the nova mob endeavouring to hoodwink the jury into a “better chance of a compromise verdict suspended pending mutation proceedings” by hiding the predatory nature of the nova mob’s viral predation as “absolute biologic need” in favour of a narrative around which the nova mob ends up on earth through pure happenstance and accidentally mutates to adapt to the ecology (*Nova* 143). This staid courtroom drama, and the mob’s newfound goal to endlessly defer judgment through legal loopholes—in other words, through the manipulation of narrative—suggests that Burroughs is uninterested in the idea of two diametrically oppositional forces. That same narrative that inflects Cold War thinking from the geo- to the biopolitical Burroughs is clearly disdainful of, and the development of the nova police from a radically immunizing force to an apparatus of a dysfunctional bureaucratic macrocosm, mirrors the writer’s own apprehensions with such ways of narrativizing infection and immunity.

In an interview with Conrad Knickerbocker after the publication of his trilogy, Burroughs enunciates this skepticism about the immunizing qualities of the nova police,¹⁰⁷ exclaiming that “[o]nce you get them in there, by God, they begin acting like

¹⁰⁷ Similarly, in a letter to Alan Ansen, Burroughs wrote that “I endeavored to distil an archetype of the perfect police in Inspector Lee” (qtd. in Miles 407). The meaning of “perfect” here is ambiguous—it could mean that Lee represents the ideal, non-authoritarian police officer who serves as a regulating force against the domineering powers that populate the universe, or, on the other hand, that Lee is the police officer *par excellence*, a duplicitous and dissembling agent of those very mechanisms of control.

any police. They're always an ambivalent agency" (qtd. in Lotringer 70).¹⁰⁸ In spite of their claims of non-addictive potential, the nova police become, as Timothy Murphy suggests, a "second-order addiction" (131), whose presence, while not explicitly viral like the nova mob, still requires the flesh to exist with the aid of a regulating agency whose motives are unclear and tied to hierarchical power structures. The nova police's presence manages to disrupt the entropic narrative that the nova mob use to enslave the planet, but as the novels progress, the familiarity of a linear narrative reasserts itself. If, as Burroughs suggests, language itself is a virus, then literary figures created within that language cannot immunize against its infective qualities. In order to narrativize bare life in a way that does not replicate the dominating structures it has been subjected to, Burroughs's project moves away from representations of immune narrators to exploring a formal concept of immunizing narrative itself.

¹⁰⁸ Burroughs then adds: "[f]or Nova Police, read technology, if you wish" (Lotringer 70). The technological aspects of Burroughs's fiction have been a major source of critical comment. Marshall McLuhan positively reviewed Burroughs's novels, seeing in them illustrations of his own ideas about media extensions of the body. He writes that, "[i]t is the medium that is the message because the medium creates an environment that is as indelible as it is lethal. To end the proliferation of lethal new environment expression, Burroughs urges a huge collective act of restraint as well as a nonclosure of sensory modes" (72). Katherine Hayles likewise sees in the omnipresence of the tape recorder in *The Ticket That Exploded*, as well as in Burroughs's frequent recorder experiments in his private life, the idea that "technology [is] not only ... a theme but [is] an articulation capable of producing new kinds of subjectivities" (217). Anthony Enns, meanwhile, explores how technologies such as the tape recorder and the typewriter are crucial elements for Burroughs's formal and narrative experiments (104-110). As Burroughs himself says in *Electronic Revolution*, "technologies with escalating efficiency produce more and more total weapons until we have the atom bomb which could end the game by destroying all players" (57). The only way technology can work for the freedom rather than enslavement of humankind is if it, like apomorphine, effaces itself upon its usage (58).

2.6 Rewrite Department: The Immunizing Power of the Cut-Up

If the word is such a dangerous viral entity, then its opposite, silence, serves as a radical space of freedom. Throughout the Nova trilogy, silence is viewed as the ultimate inoculation against the word's power: Lee tells the citizens of earth that "[a]pomorphine is the only agent that can disintoxicate you and cut the enemy beam off your line. Apomorphine and silence," while the D.S. "contemplate[es] the risky expedient of a 'miracle' and the miracle he contemplated was silence" (*Nova 6; Ticket 51*). The final page of *Ticket* features an image by Brion Gysin that renders the phrase "To say good silence by" in a scrawl that becomes more and more illegible until it finally gives way to the blankness of the page itself (203). Silence is the optimal mode of escaping the word's viral logic. But such an escape is easier said than done, so to speak. As Lee explains, "[m]odern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that *forces you to talk*" (*Ticket 49*). The word virus is deeply lodged within physical being, and silence is no longer an option. It is this paradox between the wish to escape the viral power of language and the necessity to exist within a linguistic universe that compels Burroughs to attempt to write his way out of the infective trap language has laid. When the narrative voice in the Nova trilogy announces "[t]here are no good words — I wrote silences" (85), this is more than just an oxymoronic statement: it is an attempt to foreground the necessity of engaging with language, of bringing it to the forefront of thought of the material. Burroughs seeks to "write silences" by reconfiguring how to narrate the body that does not cede control to the viral capacities of language and the biopolitical structures such a movement entails. If the "plot" of the Nova trilogy (such as

it is) details the flesh-made-word, the surrender of the materiality of the body to the entropic scripts of narrative that is always biopolitical and predicated upon an unjust rendering of bare life, then at the level of narrative, Burroughs seeks to free the flesh from this trap. Indeed, Burroughs's aim is to turn the word into a kind of material entity, something that is present rather than absent, to grant a material dimension to the word in order to narrate the flesh in such a way that it does not become the raw material of domination.

The Nova trilogy represents, for Burroughs, his "most formally radical work" (Murphy 102), and this is due to heavy involvement in manipulating and re-arranging his (and others') work through a process he called the "cut-up technique." In 1959, when Burroughs was living in the famed "Beat Hotel" in Paris, his friend Brion Gysin began experimenting with cutting into and rearranging diverse texts in order to produce new and unexpected associations. When Gysin showed his experiment to Burroughs, the latter "agreed that the results were amusing but immediately recognized its importance as a technique and pronounced it to be 'a project for disastrous success'" (Miles 363).¹⁰⁹ Burroughs explained that "cut-ups make explicit a psychosensory process that is going on all the time anyway," a process by which one's surroundings and environment leak into the practice of reading (*Third Mind* 5). For Burroughs, one's contextual situatedness is a

¹⁰⁹ The randomization effect of the cut-up technique of course precedes its "discovery" by Gysin. Edward Robinson's historicization of such a formal technique points back to T.S. Eliot's collage work in *The Waste Land* and Tristan Tzara's 1920 instructional "To make a dadaist poem" that invites would-be practitioners to cut newspapers to bits, place the pieces into a hat, and rearrange them (6-7). Indeed, Burroughs refers specifically to both of these artists as forebears, and explains that "I had been working toward the same goal" (qtd. in Robinson 6). While *Naked Lunch* is often believed to be the beginning of this formal experimentation, it was not until after Burroughs had finished writing the novel that he began to work on the cut-ups in earnest.

dynamic element involved in reading and thinking, and the cut-up is a way to materialize into language the complexities of that process. As Burroughs explicates the function of the cut-up technique, he indexes language to a form of material existence. In describing the act of reading a man reading a newspaper, Burroughs describes how “his eye follows the column in the proper Aristotelian manner, one idea and sentence at the time. But subliminally he is reading the columns on either side and is aware of the person sitting next to him. That’s a cut-up.” (*Third Mind* 4-5). In other words, the cut-up technique is meant to be a recognition of an expansion of the physical sensorium to encompass a more expansive version of reality; cut-ups “establish new connections between images, and one’s range of vision consequently expands” (4). As Burroughs expounds on in *Nova Express*, “[t]here is no true or real ‘reality’ — ‘Reality’ is simply a more or less constant scanning pattern — The scanning pattern we have accept as ‘reality’ has been imposed on us by the controlling power on this planet” (53). Within the context of the novels, this scanning pattern is represented as the “Reality Studio,” a production company that reifies experience through a curated simulation of reality.¹¹⁰ Thus, one of the mantras repeated throughout the novels is the need to “[s]torm the reality studio and retake the universe” (*Ticket* 151).

¹¹⁰ The “Reality Studio” seems to anticipate the theoretical work of Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard radicalizes Guy Debord’s concept of the “society of the spectacle,” pushing it to its logical extreme. He suggests that late capitalist society has surpassed such spectacle and gone headlong into the “hyperreality” of pure simulation (*Simulation 2*). While the spectacular still posited an outside referent, the society of simulation is lost within a vertiginous and totalizing self-referential environment: “[e]verywhere, in no matter what domain—political, biological, psychological, mediatized—in which the distinction between these poles [time and space] can no longer be maintained, one enters into simulation” (31). The postmodern affinities between Burroughs and Baudrillard have often been remarked upon, particularly in Murphy (42-43), Russell (“Guerilla Conditions” 171), and Bardini (189).

Burroughs and Gysin formalized the process of the cut-up technique, taking excerpts from Shakespeare, Rimbaud, Pound, and T.S. Eliot, along with magazines such as *Life* or *Time* and then “cut[ting] them into four sections . . . [that] were moved against each other until a likely phrase or sentence was found. . . . This process was repeated for as long as it produced interesting new word combinations” (Miles 363). Burroughs later developed the “fold-in” method, an “extension” of the cut-up whereby a page of original writing is folded down the middle and overlaps another page, creating a “composite text” that is “read across half one text and half the other” (*Third Mind* 75). The effects of the cut-up experiments, Nathan Moore suggests, “have no meaning but they have sense, a becoming, a particular evocativeness (sensuality)” (439). In particular, what these experiments reveal is that Burroughs is interested in engaging with the *flesh* of the written word, the pulp upon which its materialization comes into being. As seen above, Burroughs consistently describes flesh as “transparent sheets,” making explicit the link between writing and material instantiation. By performing such specifically physical actions on the written word, Burroughs (and Gysin) attempt not only to rewrite language, but to engage with language’s material contexts. Linear language constructs a limited frame that narrows the possibilities of the senses from experiencing the full effect of reality; the cut-up method, in Burroughs’s belief, allows the flesh to experience a fuller, if less ordered, experience of that reality.¹¹¹ The cut-up and fold-in methods, in their

¹¹¹ The affinities between this idea and Lacanian notions of the symbolic and the real are evident. As Lacan in *Seminar II*, the symbolic order of language operates as the structuring mechanism by which a chaotic and disordered reality is shaped through the subject’s entrance into the symbolic substitution of language. The “real,” as Lacan puts it, is “without fissure,” and as humans “we have no means of apprehending this real . . . except via the go-between of the symbolic” (97). Indeed, it would not be possible to speak of human beings without the symbolic, because without this language that is “constitutive for the subject” there would be no means of navigating such unstructured presence (*Ecrits* 7). Intriguingly, Lacan does adopt a

disruption of that “Aristotelian” notion of linear semantic order, recouple language with materiality, allow it to graze against the chaotic and unstructured flux of reality without a delimiting order that narrows the sensory aspects of the flesh.

Within the context of the Nova trilogy, the experimental quality of these techniques has also been popularly read as a kind of practice of defense against the virus. As Priscilla Wald suggests, “[t]he strategy of inoculation became an explicit aesthetic” in Burroughs’s novels (186), while Scott Bukatman likewise contends that “[t]he cut-up technique represents an immunization against the media-virus; a strengthening of the host organism against the infectious agent” (78). Allen Hibbard further sees Burroughs’s novels as the act of “putting words together in new combinations and disseminating them as a sort of inoculation or counter-virus” (qtd. in Bolton 52). The cut-up technique is seen as somehow a kind of necessarily inoculative practice, the act of cutting through linear narrative and rearranging text in a collage method in order to develop individuated associations is naturally immunizing. While this is certainly Burroughs’s intent in employing the cut-up method, the relationship between immunity, narrative, and embodiment has not been fully explicated. Why is this form of writing immunizing against the viral word? Robin Lydenberg claims that the technique serves as “a linguistic weapon against the binary thinking which generates conflict on a philosophical level (in

slightly infectious tone when talking about the symbolic, noting that it “takes hold in even the deepest recesses of the human organism” (6). It is precisely this structuring mechanism that Burroughs seeks an escape from. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Lacan has been a major influence in Burroughsian scholarship. For instance, when Tietchen describes Burroughs’s work as dramatizing the entrance into language as “intersubjective discourses which are in turn (mis)recognized as individual” (110), while Bolton explores how both Burroughs turns Lacan’s structuring of language as the Symbolic dimension as a traumatic encounter with a pre-existing power (128-130). Breu claims that “Burroughs’s conception of language as a virus suggests the applicability of Lacan’s theory for the analysis of his works,” and sees Burroughs’s writing of the “new flesh” as exemplifying an unruly materiality unconstrained by the limits of the Symbolic; that is, the tissue of the Real (39, 42).

all either/or antitheses)” (70), but such a reading seems to simply move that binary to a meta-narrative level (conventional, linear language vs. experimental literary cut-ups).¹¹² Such readings can only end up replicating the binaries that Burroughs endeavors to reject, reinscribing the nova dualisms on a narrative level. Instead, we should look at Burroughs’s literary method not as a kind of antivirus, but rather an attempt to reconfigure the terms through which we think of virus and immunity, as mediated through the bare life of the flesh.

2.7 Enfleshing the Word

“Suppose there is no enemy??,” muses one of the narrative voices (*Nova* 112).

Appearing more than halfway through the final volume of the trilogy, this idea seems to lack the same kind of force as the continual recourse to the language of intergalactic war and stellar apocalypse that has characterized the style of the narrative thus far. Yet it is nonetheless a vital point to make: if the dualistic narrative of nova mob versus nova police settles into inertia, then perhaps the good/evil, virus/immunity narrative must be

¹¹² Within the narrative of the trilogy, Burroughs articulates what one of these experiments would look like. The routine “The Mayan Caper” (*Soft Machine* 81-93) depicts the reporter Joe Brundige embarking upon an ambitious time travel scheme to return to the heyday of the Mayan Empire and destroy the “codices” of the Mayan priest class, thereby destroying the procession of linear time that organizes Mayan life and serves as a prefiguration of capitalist management of time. In order to travel back in time, Joe melds with a Mayan boy in order to go undercover. A symbiotic operation leads to a “composite being” rather than a parasitically controlled one. This queer subjectivity, part-Joe, part-Mayan, is then able to successfully complete his “Mayan Caper.” He is able, after seducing one of the Mayan priests, to surreptitiously “mix the sound and image track” with revolutionary commands to “[c]ut word lines—Cut music lines—Smash the control images—Burn the books—Kill the priests—Kill! Kill! Kill” so that “the priests would go on pressing the old buttons with unexpected results” (91). The caper is a success, and the peasant labourers under the hierarchical control of the priests rise up and destroy their oppressors. What Joe (narrating these events after the fact, and presumably returned to his original body) notes of the dying priests is that “[y]ou see the priests *were* nothing but word and image, an old film rolling on and on with dead actors” (93). In contrast to Joe’s highly embodied odyssey, the priests possess no quantifiable materiality—their seeming existence is a sham, a concatenation of the disembodied “word” and “image” viruses that are used to maintain an asymmetrical relationship to the bodies of the labourers under their command.

rejected in favour of a different epistemological model. Even the nova policeman Lee hints towards this idea when he muses that “[t]he word *may once have been a healthy neural cell*. It is *now* a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system” (*Ticket* 49). The point is less an historical one—that the word organism and the human body existed in harmonious equilibrium (something the origin story in *The Soft Machine* would dispute) but rather that there exists the possibility that these two organisms could potentially intersect with one another on a symbiotic basis without degenerating into parasitism (though that threat of parasitism always remains in Burroughs’s paranoid thought). The problem, Burroughs implies, is the fantastical investments of the word’s immateriality and the body’s immortality. Breu identifies in Burroughs’s work a “dialectic between the material and immaterial” (50). In the expansive mythology of the Nova trilogy, this same dialectical consideration is extended from the locus of “junk” to the *ur*-contagion of language. There is the tendency to think of the word as insubstantive, a medium through which communication operates instead of an actual thing. Yet, as Inspector Lee intones, “[t]he human organism is *literally* consisting of two halves from the beginning ... whereby two entities inhabit the same three-dimensional coordinate points” (52, emphasis added), and, likewise, the nova mob are neither “ghosts” nor “phantoms” but “very definite organisms indeed” (*Ticket* 58). The point of these expostulations is to make clear the word’s innate materiality, and the way this is hidden from the denizens of the earth, the inhabitants of language. Burroughs implores the reader to consider the virus—even when instantiated as language—as a material entity. The first step in countering the threat of material/immaterial binaries is to remember that the word possesses a material dimension to it.

What seems to be the heart of the problem of viral invasion for Burroughs is one of asymmetry. As Lydenberg correctly notes, “Burroughs perceives the disembodied voice of language as a strategy of *absent* control rather than *present* self-expression” (137). An example is given early on when Inspector Lee investigates a case of a mysterious suicide in England, believing it to be the work of a nova mobster. Examining the case of “Harrison,” Lee discovers that, instead of committing suicide, the man was compelled to do so by the virus known as “Genial” that had turned him into a coordinate point and experimented on him. Lee explains how this works to a Scotland Yard detective: “so long as the spliced tape finds an outlet in actual sex contact it acts as an aphrodisiac .. nothing more .. but when a susceptible subject is spliced in with someone *who is not there* then it acts as a destructive virus .. the perfect murder weapon with a built-in alibi. ‘Genial’ was not there at the time. He never is” (*Ticket* 20). Illuminating this passage through the narrative mode of detective fiction allows Burroughs to explain how language operates as a weapon at war with the flesh. The word, instantiated in this episode as the nova criminal “Genial,” illustrates the way we consider language to be that absence that we never possess.

The idea of asymmetry recurs throughout *Ticket*: toward the novel’s end the narrative takes on an instructive tone, informing the reader of a hypothetical experiment between the subjects “S” and “W.” The nervous systems of the two subjects are capable of “total recording” of the sense perceptions of the other. Thus experiments between the two can take place whereby the experiences of S are spliced in with those of W and vice-versa. But the narrator goes on to warn that “[*i*]f S is spliced into the total record of W and W is not spliced into the total record of S this unilateral splicing may result in W

contracting an S virus to his considerable disadvantage” (165). In other words, the relationship existing between the two beings requires a shared exchange of information and experience in order to produce a symbiotic subjectivity. If the exchange is not reciprocal, then one element will have an unfair advantage over the other, and that is the origin of parasitism. Again, Burroughs recurses to the eternal bare life of Bradl(e)y, who, in his appearance as a space explorer in *Ticket*, is captured by the Insect People of Minraud and experimented on once again. This time he is spliced in with the alien organism known as “Mr Martin.” This organism is joined together with the unwilling Bradly, who is not reciprocally spliced into the body of Mr. Martin. As the doctor performing the operation comments, “[t]he difficulty is with two halves that — other parasites will invade sooner or later — First it’s symbiosis, then parasitism — The old symbiosis con” (85). The resulting entity, termed “Mr Bradly Mr Martin,” becomes the putative “leader of the [nova] mob,” and “the separation gimmick that keeps this tired old show on the road” (55, 134). Bradly once again becomes Burroughs’s index for exploring the experiments in plasticity that bare life undergoes, this time using Bradly to demonstrate the invasive story of language’s takeover of the body. Mr Bradly Mr Martin introduces this narrative fragment, stating “[n]ow for me — The story of two halves,” but it is clear that the bare life of Bradly is silenced in the enunciation of Mr Martin.

If the heart of the problem is an asymmetry between the material human and the impalpable virus, then the question becomes how to effect a new equilibrium. Early on in *Ticket*, Lee muses on the possibility of escaping viral logic through the use of a virus. He explains: “of course parasitic life is the easiest form to create...I wonder if...” As Lee trails off, the narrative voice picks up his train of thought, speaking of “a nice virus ..

beautiful symptoms .. a long trip combining the best features of junk hash LSD yage .. those who return have gained a radiant superhuman beauty!” (19). The suggestion here is that, if the virus can be utilized for destructive purposes of enslavement and domination, then perhaps its replicative qualities can be utilized to perform a magnificent posthuman transformation. Certain critics read such a possibility as implicit in the trilogy: Bolton connects the promise of the “*nice virus*” to that of apomorphine, seeing it as “transcend[ing] the parasitism of language and its binary oppositions,” (25) while Steven Shaviro reads a postmodern invocation to “[s]tylize, enhance, and accelerate the process of viral replication: for thereby you will increase the probability of mutation” (45), a kind of postmodern team-up with the viral power.¹¹³ Such a position seems to filter down to the novels themselves, as in *Nova Express*, where the scientist Winkhorst notes that “[i]t is of course misleading to speak of a silence virus or apomorphine virus since apormorphine is anti-virus,” and yet nonetheless this conceptualization characterizes Burroughs’s thinking (48). Only a few pages later, Uranian Willy the Heavy Metal Kid commands to “Release Silence Virus” (59), which, by the novel’s end, appears to come to pass. In his essay “My Own Business,” Burroughs muses on an “*obligate cellular parasite*” that “occup[ies] a certain brain area which we may term the RIGHT center” (*Adding Machine* 16). Burroughs connects the physiology of the right lobe of the brain to politically conservative ideology, suggesting that it is the political right that

¹¹³ Thierry Bardini’s analysis of “junk” develops Shaviro’s postmodern thesis. Bardini sees what he calls the “hypervirus” as the ultimate image of late capitalism, and cites Burroughs as the “*patient 0* of the hypervirus, the original vector” (179). For Bardini examining Burroughs’s screenplay *Blade Runner: A Movie* (1977), “redemption comes from the underground, that is, the junked world, not in the form of the android, but rather *in the form of a virus*” (177). A virus is unleashed that stops a cancer outbreak and rescues the dying human race; for Bardini, this is the essence of “junk” as the ontology and ethics of postmodern late capitalism.

pathologically replicates the viral organism. On the following page, however, Burroughs's prescribed cure is "a virus designed to attack the already occupied RIGHT centers in the brain, inflaming and irritating these centers so that the target, muttering and finally screaming imprecations, dies in convulsions of rightness" (17). Yet Burroughs seems to discard these ideas and instead reformulate his opinions on the following page:

[p]erhaps the most effective tactic is to alter the conditions on which the virus subsists. That is the way various manifestations of the RIGHT virus have disappeared in the past, as in the Inquisition. Conditions change, and the virus guise is ignored and forgotten. We have seen this happen many times in the past forty years. With the RIGHT virus offset, perhaps we can get the whole show out of the barnyard and into space. (18)

Viral thinking only ever succeeds in reproducing itself, even when it purports to be antiviral in nature. Recourse to narratives of the virus, even if used in "liberatory" purposes, will ultimately only ever reproduce those conditions of viral control that Burroughs seeks to escape.¹¹⁴

One way of affecting this symmetry, Lee suggests, is through the use of the tape recorder.¹¹⁵ "[Y]ou can separate yourself from the 'Other Half' from the word," he claims in the press conference, by use of the tape recorder (*Ticket 50*). The recording capabilities of magnetic tape allows for the possibility of exorcising one's internal

¹¹⁴ Eric Mottram, one of the first scholars to critically engage with Burroughs's work, argues that the dominant theme throughout the writer's career is "the way in which victims of vampirism themselves become addicts in a chain of organized predatory lust and loss of identity," and cites Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) as a clear influence (63). This idea of vampiric parasitism links Burroughs's viral thinking not only to the nascent fields of virology and immunology, but more clearly to older narratives and stories about infection and parasitic control.

¹¹⁵ The tape recorder, at the time of Burroughs's writing, was a relatively new and advanced technology (see Hayles 208). Burroughs was fascinated with the possibilities that the tape recorder provided for literary experimentation, and would, with his lover Ian Somerville (a sound engineer), experiment with recordings as he did with written text (see Miles 403). Hayles in particular focuses on the tape recorder and its potentially revolutionary aspects in Burroughs's writings, noting that "[m]anipulating sound through tape-recorders becomes a way of producing a new kind of subjectivity" (220).

monologue, the “sub-vocal” speech that has parasitically grafted itself onto the body and “convince[s] by association that your body sounds will stop if sub-vocal speech stops” (160). By placing one’s language inside a tape recorder, and then experimenting upon it through juxtaposing language and sound, one can achieve a radical break from the confines of language. “Splice your body sounds in with air hammers,” Lee suggests, “[b]last jolt vibrate the ‘Other Half’ right out into the street” (50). Burroughs sees with this media technology “the metonymic equation between tape-recorder and body” (Hayles 211), as a place that can rematerialize the word. Yet if the tape recorder is analogous to the body, the magnetic tapes themselves represent the re-materialized flesh in all its physical presence. Throughout the “*writing machine*” routine (*Ticket* 62-68), the image of this magnetic tape cut up and reconfigured recurs: “[s]heets of magnetized calligraphs drew colored iron filings that fell in clouds of color from patterns pulsing to metal music,” “[g]reat sheets of magnetized print held color and disintegrated in mineral silence as word dust falls from demagnetized patterns,” “[p]hotomontage fragments backed with iron stuck to patterns and fell in swirls mixing color dust to form new patterns, shimmering, falling, magnetized, demagnetized to the flicker of blue cylinders” (*Ticket* 62-63). With word encapsulated in technology, the potential to engage with it in a symmetrical and non-predatory encounter exists.

The nova storyline ultimately replicates the Cold War ideology that Burroughs seeks to escape. In *Electronic Revolution* Burroughs claims that “EITHER/OR is another virus formula. It is always [sic] you OR the virus. EITHER/OR. This is in point of fact the conflict formula which is seen to be archetypal virus mechanism” (56). From the political blocs of capitalist/communist down to the microscopic level of virus/antibody, this

dualistic logic is always ultimately viral in nature because of its divisionist ontology. But the self/nonsself model of immunology is a product of political ideology rather than a scientific fact. Polly Matzinger, for instance, proclaims that we must “stop running a cold war with our environment,” positing instead a “danger” model of immunity that “allows us to live without maintaining a rigid sterility that segregates us from the environment. We become a habitat,” instead of a fortress (qtd. in Cohen 29). Likewise, Haraway makes note of the immune “system’s” omnipresence in the individual body and the “vast array of potential circulating antibodies,” which not only do far more than repel and devour foreign interlopers, but are also constantly undergoing a process of mutation (217). Thus, the self/nonsself melts away into a more generative image of the network: “[t]he immune system is everywhere and nowhere. Its specificities are indefinite if not infinite, and they arise randomly; yet these extraordinary variations are the critical means of maintaining individual bodily existence” (218). Esposito, in his project to deconstruct the paradigm of immunization that marks biopolitics, articulates an ambitious project wherein “we imagine a philosophy of immunity that, without denying its inherent contradiction, even deepening it further, reverses the semantics in the direction of community” (*Immunitas* 165). For Esposito, “the most extraordinary example of this [immunity-community] dialectic—partly due to its symbolically germinal character—is pregnancy,” exploring in a deconstructive key how the development of the child’s body within the mother’s demonstrates the productive and affirmative alterity that is always already a part of the human (169-171).¹¹⁶ In this ambitious move, Esposito attempts to rework the declension

¹¹⁶ One of the most common challenges evoked by critics to the self/nonsself binary with respect to immunology is the growth of a fetus inside a mother’s body. As Emily Martin notes, “[f]rom an

of immunity from that which divides life into overarching categories of self/nonself in favour of an expansive and mobile ecology of recognition, adaptation, and connection. What all of these thinkers try to do, ultimately, is put forward an epistemological rethinking of the process of immunity to break it free from the shackles of reductive Cold War terminology and ideology, and toward a more expansive and materialist conception of body and environment. It is a way of effecting a philosophical symmetry that will help avoid the lapse into the EITHER/OR that winds inevitably toward a nova.

Daniel Punday highlights Burroughs's literary experimentations as developing a "post-evolutionary body" within the framework of narratology, exploring these texts in such a way that the reader is meant to understand "how the narrative body, the starting point for the fictional world, is itself the product of some far more important and fundamental process that has created and shaped this entity" (50, 51). Punday's reading is persuasive, and he is certainly correct to highlight the way that Burroughs's thematic and representational content is reflected in his formal and narratological methodology, but his reading of Burroughs's narratological qualities as primarily about the viral seems to miss the point. He writes that "[t]he virus ... is the mechanical process that produces the body almost as an afterthought," that "[e]ven if the virus itself contains no content, no real message, it itself directs and drives the body that carries it" (50, 51). Punday sees

immunological point of view, the fetus is a 'tumor' that the woman's body should try furiously to attack" (59). Timothy Morton cites the retrovirus "ERV-3" that "may confer immunosuppressive properties to the placenta, thus allowing embryos to coexist in the mother's body." The point, for Morton, is that "[t]here is no way of knowing which bits of our DNA are actually 'ours' and which are plasmid insertions" (*Ecological Thought* 35). Eula Biss too explains that "[t]he cells that form the outer layer of the placenta for a human fetus bind to each other using a gene that originated, long ago, from a virus. Though viruses cannot reproduce without us, we ourselves could not reproduce without what we have taken from them" (30).

Burroughs as writing narratives that are about viruses, where human bodies are of secondary concern, the hosts that the virus organizes and maneuvers in space and time. But Burroughs is not writing fictions of the virus; he is thinking of ways to prevent the repeated outbreak narrative from happening again. His novels are not about privileging a newer, “viral” kind of narrative, but about rethinking what narrative immunity would look like.

2.8 “Shift Linguals”—The Voice and Cut-Up Narration

It is worthwhile, at this point, to return to Agamben’s interest in the intersections of language and politics. As mentioned above, Agamben sees structural affinities between the metaphysical description of the human being and the biopolitical. Thus, for Agamben, the Voice becomes the “negative foundation of language” (Mills 37), the linkage point through which the purely animal *phone* and the *logos* that is uniquely the province of the human are connected. As he will explain in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, his most explicit conjoining of his metaphysical and biopolitical projects, “this Voice is always a mythologeme or a *theologoumenon*; nowhere, in the living being or in language, can we reach a point in which something like an articulation truly takes place” (129). The Voice is an emptiness, a “non-place” (130) that is utilized to structure the metaphysical constitution of the human being.¹¹⁷ Voice is never present, and Agamben’s project is thus

¹¹⁷ Indeed, critics often note how Agamben’s conceptual terminology circles back to these models. McLoughlin, for instance, notes how the concept of “Voice” would later develop into the idea of “sovereignty” that dominates Agamben’s later work (in Murray and White 197).

to highlight the empty and nihilistic foundation upon which the philosophical project of exploring the human being has become.¹¹⁸

It is here, within the speculative character of Burroughs's narrative, that we can detect a divergence point between his thought and that of Agamben's. Both McLoughlin and Mills make note of how the imperative of Agamben's thinking about the relationship between *phone* and *logos* is to develop a concept of "language without Voice" ("Voice" 198; 37), and Attell notes that Voice "is not the negative breach within the hegemonic metaphysics of presence, but rather the very ground of the hegemonic metaphysics of negativity" (82). These critics thus suggest that Agamben's project is one of scrutinizing that negative metaphysical grounding: a project that attempts to rework the constitutive negativity that is inscribed at the outset of the metaphysical project, in the same way that biopolitics must be thought of without bare life as the negativity needed to support its structures. This is what Agamben will term the "step-backward-beyond" (qtd. in McLoughlin, "Voice to Infancy" 157). Yet we can conceive in Burroughs a similar movement, of returning to an originary split in order to articulate a new embarkation

¹¹⁸ Agamben's critique of the metaphysics of language is a less well-known hermeneutic than that of Jacques Derrida's *différance*. While Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence as instantiated in the idea of the voice seems resonant here, I wish to foreground Agamben's approach for two reasons. The first is simply that the a Derridean approach to Burroughs's work has been thoroughly conducted by critics (see, for instance, Bardini 179-186; Murphy 35-36, 41-42; Lydenberg 123-124, 173-174). More substantially, however, there is a clear split in the critical approaches to language and metaphysics between Derrida and Agamben (see Attell 74). Whereas Derrida's deconstruction explores how the concept of "presence" must always be haunted by the trace that supplements such an assertion, and thus that presence always contains within it absence (see *Of Grammatology* 26), Agamben sees negativity instantiated in the zone of indistinction between *phone* and *logos*—in Voice. Thus, Derrida's attempt to demonstrate that absence subtends presence is, for Agamben, a restatement of this negativity. Therefore, as McLoughlin notes, "Agamben criticizes Jacques Derrida's grammatology as returning philosophy to its originary negativity" ("Voice" 198). While I suggest that Burroughs's project is not ultimately coterminous with Agamben's, I do believe that the latter's search for an affirmative presence, as opposed to an endless permutation of trace and play that summarizes Derrida's approach, to be much closer in spirit to Burroughs's literature.

point for a politico-philosophical project. Agamben is concerned with mapping out the ways politics continually resorts to bare life in order to instantiate itself; Burroughs seeks to create a mythology in which bare life is the starting point for thinking about life and social interaction. Thus, rather than trying to think of a “language without Voice,” Burroughs is interested in inverting the negative inflection of Voice, turning it from something that is a “non-place” (Agamben, *Remnants* 130) into something that is fully present and can be accounted for. In that zone of indistinction that Agamben obsessively returns to and maps out, Burroughs sees the possibility of articulating a new radical ontological project, a space of bare life speaking with its own Voice.

Agamben’s linguistic project is heavily informed by the linguistic analysis of Émile Benveniste. In particular, Agamben is interested in the idea that “every language has at its disposal a series of signs (which linguists call ‘shifters’ or indicators of enunciation, among which, for example, there are the pronouns ‘I,’ ‘you,’ ‘this,’ and the adverbs ‘here,’ ‘now,’ etc.)” (*Remnants* 115). These shifters, according to Benveniste, “cannot be defined except in terms of ‘locution,’ not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. *I* signifies ‘the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*’” (qtd. in Agamben, *Remnants* 116). Such shifters, in other words, contain no informational content on their own until they are inhabited by the speaker in the act of speaking; they are “‘empty signs’ that become ‘filled’ when they are assumed by the speaker in the act of discourse” (Attell 70). For Agamben, such shifters represent the process of the way that language organizes the thinking of the human being, as “the psychosomatic individual must fully abolish himself and desubjectify himself as a real individual to become the subject of enunciation and to identify himself with the pure

shifter ‘I,’ which is absolutely without substantiality and content other than its mere reference to the event of discourse” (*Remnants* 116). If, as Attell suggests, “the first-person pronoun . . . turns out to be precisely the key to the door that for Agamben will lead past the paradoxes of subjectivity” (55), it is because through the purely empty content of “I” (and other linguistic shifters), Agamben is able to demonstrate the wholly self-referential quality of language and its self-positing field.

Burroughs once again seems to think along the same lines as Agamben, but his speculative thinking allows for a literalization very different in quality from Agamben’s philosophy. Burroughs’s interest in the linguistic malleability of the signifier is perhaps the most interesting character of his cut-up method, and where his attempts to enliven language become most clear.¹¹⁹ The phrase “[s]hift linguals” repeats throughout the trilogy (*Soft Machine* 149; *Ticket* 104; *Nova* 61, 62, 65, 67), an invocation to rearrange our understanding of the referential character of linguistics. The routine “*do you love me?*” (*Ticket* 43-49) is a particularly sustained and illuminating example of the quality of the cut-up’s potential. It is worth quoting one paragraph at length to demonstrate its potential:

Do you love me, Nancy of the laughing sex words? — Still i feel the thrill of your charms vibrated to neon — giggling out all the little things you used to do — ‘Twas good bye on the line of Bradly’s naked body — love skin on a bicycle built for two — like a deflated balloon — Your cool hands on his naked dollars, baby — You were meant for me sucked through pearly genital face — Still i feel the thrill of you spurting out through the orgasm seems to whisper: “Louise, Mary, swamp mud” — In the blood little things you used to do — recorder jack-off — Substitute mine — Bye bye body halves — i’m half crazy all for the love of color

¹¹⁹ While Burroughs does not appear to be aware of the linguistic theory of Benveniste, he was certainly interested in exploring linguistic possibility. In the 1930s he enrolled in the linguistic seminars of Alfred Korzybski, whose work focused on “the fallacy of Aristotelian either/or logic: that a proposition is either true or false . . . [Korzybski] said that the either/or contradiction does not correspond with the human nervous system at all. It is not either/or; it is both/and” (Miles 73; see also Bardini 180).

circuits — Do i love you in the throat gristle? Ship ahoy but remember the red river body explode sex words to color — Do you love me? — Take a simple tape from all the things you were — Moanin' low my sweet 8276 all the time — Who's sorry now in the underwater street? 'Twas good bye on color bicycle built for response in the other nervous system— (48).

The entire routine consists of modifications on this raw material, churning out and reconfiguring these phrases and words cut-up from popular love songs, such as Rudy Vallee's "I'm Just a Vagabond Lover," The Contours's "Do You Love Me," and Harry Dacre's "Daisy Bell" with fragments of the sf terminology that forms the plotline of the novels (the "body halves" that the nova mob infect, the bare life of Bradly). These cut-up phrases are robbed of any kind of context or connection to conventional sentence structure, but they are not pure asemia or glossolalia which, as Agamben notes, "merely radicalizes a desubjectifying experience implicit in the simplest act of speech" (*Remnants* 115). Burroughs seeks a mid-way point between enunciating language and glossolalia, providing recognizable fragments from popular culture or the novel's own narrative structure, but robbed of their linear connections. The "i"s that are utilized throughout these fragments are thus robbed of a unifying context—there is no uniform subject of the "I" who inhabits and enunciates this discursive space, but instead a constant foregrounding of these shifters as material signifiers. Indeed, Burroughs seeks to expand that shifting quality to *all* of language, not just to certain *deictic* pronouns. The words in these cut-up scenarios depend upon a constant deformation of a separation between the word's material instance and its linguistic signification. It is in these attempts that Burroughs tries, at the level of form, to imbue the narrative with the trace of the material, to imbue the Voice with an affirmative character.

The “*writing machine*” routine in *Ticket* gives a clear narrative example of this material practice. The routine depicts a carnivalesque “Exhibition” that appears as a macroscopic tape recorder, where customers can enter and transform writing. One room involves a giant “writing machine that shifts one half text and half the other through a page from on conveyer belts,” clearly referencing the fold-in method (65). According to the narration, “spectators are invited to feed into the machine any pages of their own text in fifty-fifty juxtaposition with any author of their choice,” and watch in delight as the machine responds by “permutating through page frames in constantly changing juxtaposition” (65). The remainder of the routine is devoted to examples of these fold-ins, with the poetry of Shakespeare, Rimbaud, Eliot, as well as Nova trilogy characters such as Mr Bradley Mr Martin appearing throughout. Here again, the text becomes wholly devoid of its linguistic powers, reduced to a narration of Voice rather than a commanding narrative language (such as the Mayan codices). Hayles sees a “chaotic recursivity” at work in this section of *Ticket*, exploring an infinite generative possibility that an emptied language cannot delimit (217). Yet where Hayles sees Burroughs as playing between the poles of a normative “body” and an individuated “embodiment,” between hegemonic practices of inscription and radical self-composing writings of incorporation (193), and thus a writer whose “emphasis remains on subversion and disruption rather than creative articulation” (220), I think that such a reading does not push Burroughs’s rewrite project far enough. In thinking about the Nova trilogy as explicating the Voice of the flesh, as the hypostatic units of a new and affirmative politics of bare life, then Burroughs is not defining things in negation, but taking those constitutive negations and setting them at the beginning of a new iteration of philosophy and biopolitics. The flesh and the Voice are

the keys to Burroughs's Agambenian step-backward-beyond, and in pushing these concepts to the forefront of his poetics, one must discard the antiquated and tainted terms of "body" and "language."

2.9 The Qualified Flesh

All of this said, Burroughs's bare life is ultimately still a qualified one. Burroughs made little secret of his misogyny, and his writings and interviews from the time are replete with references to the malignant, alien qualities of women. As Miles recounts, Burroughs became particularly withdrawn and antisocial during the writing of the Nova trilogy, and his "theories ... had reached the stage where he now proposed that women were not human at all but had been sent from a distant galaxy as agents for a giant trust of insects that were manipulating the Earth. Burroughs suggested that all women should be exterminated just as soon as males had found some form of parthenogenesis" (393-394). Such opinions filter their way into his writing as well: in *The Job*, a combination of routines, essays, and interviews, Burroughs responds to the question "[h]ow do you feel about women?" with the response: "[i]n the words of one of a great misogynist's plain Mr. Jones, in Conrad's *Victory*: 'Women are a perfect curse.' I think they were a basic mistake, and the whole dualistic universe evolved from this error. Women are no longer essential to reproduction" (110). Similarly, in his later novel *The Place of Dead Roads* (1983) Burroughs, through his persona of Kim Carsons, expounds that "[w]omen must be regarded as the principal reservoir of the alien virus parasite" (qtd. in Grauerholz and Silverberg 453). At the level of gender, then, Burroughs seems to recourse to the dualism that much of his Nova trilogy is seen to challenge and deconstruct. As Jaime Russell notes, "[t]he binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine, and soul/body are supposedly

rendered obsolete by the texts' creation of a monocentric universe in which the concepts of 'female,' the 'feminine,' and ultimately the 'body' are erased through exclusion" (*Queer Burroughs* 157). In the viral logic of the Nova trilogy, women are consigned to be that parasitic other, another of the overdetermined origins of the dualism that Burroughs reads as being the vital juncture upon which power relations have been erected. As such, the flesh of his bare life mythology is a solely masculine one. Throughout the Nova trilogy, the scenarios of genesis and intimacy are solely the province of queer male contact: in one routine in *Ticket*, the boy-prostitute Ali, on meeting with a client, becomes the site of a new, generative spawn—"Ali could feel something coming alive in his rectum and wriggling down into his testicles," and then, at the climax of their encounter, "[t]he man caught [Ali's] ejaculation in a jar — Tiny green frogs with sucker paws stirred in the sperm" (38). Ali is just one example of a continually generative possibility within Burroughs's universe, a universe where the privileging of the flesh of bare life and its morphological possibility is predicated on the exclusion of a feminine materiality. Indeed, in the Nova novels the only named female character that appears is the nova mobster "'Hamburger' Mary." The other references to embodied women bodies are always qualified as a closing bracket in a binary equation: Johnny Yen (another nova mobster) is referred to by Inspector Lee as "[t]he Boy-Girl Other Half strip tease God of sexual frustration," while an alias for Mr. Bradley Mr. Martin is "Mr and Mrs D" (*Ticket* 53, 55). In both of these cases, the dual-gendering of the nova mobsters is meant to signify the binary structures that the viral word is predicated upon, a crystalline sectioning of their power of dividing the flesh. The feminine is not invoked in the flesh for Burroughs, but remains a sign of the viral corruption of the flesh of bare life.

This qualification ultimately sneaks the dualisms Burroughs so vehemently opposes back into the structural logic of his narrative. Interestingly, Burroughs seems to doubt the efficacy of a “pure” cut-up narrative or universe. Upon publication of the first draft of *The Soft Machine* in 1961, the most intensely abstract and experimental cut-up Burroughs had performed, he found himself dissatisfied. In a letter to Timothy Leary, Burroughs complains that “*The Soft Machine* is too difficult. I am now writing a science-fiction book that a twelve-year-old can understand” (qtd. in Miles 398). Indeed, following its publication, Miles notes that Burroughs “became so dissatisfied with *The Soft Machine* that he completely rewrote it, taking out most of the cut-ups and substituting sixty-five pages of new material in a straight narrative line” (407). On its own, the pure narrative confusion and chaos of the cut-up technique is unsustainable, producing a complete absence of localizability.¹²⁰ The cut-up is part of a dialectical process, in other words—it needs to be situated within the context of conventional, linear narrative in order to be efficacious.

Indeed, within *The Ticket That Exploded* (a novel that also underwent substantial rewrites), Burroughs juxtaposes substantial linguistic experimentation with almost straightforward routines. For instance, the routine “*do you love me?*” (discussed above), perhaps the most sustained example of cut-up experimentation in his novels, immediately

¹²⁰ And leading critics to level one of their most consistent complaints against Burroughs’s experimentation: that of boredom. John Willett maps a trajectory of reaction to Burroughs’s prose: “first shock ... then a steady nausea ... finally boredom with the endless monotony” (41). Alvin J. Seltzer makes a similar comment, claiming that “[w]hat was shocking in *Naked Lunch* becomes repetitious in *The Soft Machine*, and alternately annoying and uninteresting in *Nova Express* and *The Ticket That Exploded*” (359). Punday suggests that “[a]mong the many frustrating qualities of Burroughsian prose, one of the most striking is the repetition of scenes with slight variations” (50). And David Lodge, while referring to *Naked Lunch* as a “very indecent” book, seems to compliment it when comparing it to *Nova Express*, which he derides as “very tedious” (76).

precedes the routines “*operation rewrite*” (49-54) and “*the nova police*” (54-62), two of the most comprehensible and straightforward sections of the text, which lay out in an explicit and declarative fashion the viral nature of the word and the actions of the nova police. Indeed, perhaps to humorously underscore this point, the last few pages of “*the nova police*” are conducted in question-and-answer format between Inspector Lee and his interlocutors of the press. “Question: ‘Inspector Lee, i don’t quite understand what is meant by a ‘coordinate point’—Could you make this a little clearer?’” one voice helpfully asks (*Ticket* 58). As Breu is right to point out, Burroughs’s writing style often takes this approach: his sentences often begin conventionally, with a clearly identifiable subject and predicate, but decompose as they continue along, clauses accumulating until the whole structure collapses (41-42). In Breu’s own words, “[t]he second half of the sentence[s] emphasize[] the materiality of the signifiers deployed and, in clustering these signifiers together, creates discrete subsyntactic units . . . that become entities unto themselves” (42). To add to Breu’s insight, and to connect this idea back to the narrative power, these “subsyntactic . . . entities” only make sense, are only empowered, through the appearance of the conventional embarkation points. This same progressive defamiliarization structure is scaled up to the organization of the novels themselves. Thus we can see the dialectic of Burroughs’s narration, the way that immunity is predicated upon a constant refamiliarization with the familiar markers of sentence structure and plot. As the D.S. tells Lee at the beginning of *Ticket*, “[a]s you know, inoculation is the weapon of choice against virus and inoculation can only be effected through exposure” (10). On the level of narrating a war with the word, Burroughs continually inoculates and re-infects his reader, exposing them to the radical experimentation of language, as well as an almost

parodically didactic narrative throughline. The narrative immunity that emerges in the Nova trilogy, then, results from a symmetrical coupling of the word to the flesh and transmuting this synthesis into a Voice.

At the beginning of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben announces that “[t]he protagonist of this book is bare life” (8), and the philosophical project that follows continually centers this material existence at the (excluded) heart of political and metaphysical apparatuses. Bare life is what enables and empowers these thoughts and images of power to exist, and Agamben’s philosophical career is devoted to tracing the contours of this idea. In a similar, and far more literal vein, Burroughs too makes bare life the hero of his novels stretching from *Naked Lunch* to *Nova Express*. Burroughs, a biopolitical thinker *avant la lettre*, is concerned with how the flesh is constantly consigned to hierarchical functions of power that continually repress, shape, and imprison its mutable vitality. Thinking of bare life as that which is excluded in both metaphysics and politics by language, Burroughs is obsessed with thinking through a way outside of this trap. His Nova trilogy of novels is ultimately, then, concerned with a seemingly straightforward question: how is it possible to narrate immunity when language is itself an infectious entity? The novels themselves can be considered experiments that attempt to locate various avenues of access to this immune principle, moving from plot and character to narrative voice and ultimately to the structure and materiality of narrative language itself. Burroughs’s discovery seems to be that there is no way finally and completely to think one’s way outside of the virus, outside of the infectious quality of language, but only to continually subject the reader to infection in order to inoculate through a deforming experience. The flesh will always be subject to reterritorialization, to capture by viral powers. What Burroughs’s literary

project ultimately does is excavate the bare life of the flesh from its subsumption beneath the illusions of body, identity, and language, exposing it as the hypostatic in-common that subtends all political and philosophical thought. However, this flesh must be recognized and re-presented through constant exposure to the virus of language. As Burroughs writes in the introduction to his novel *Queer* (1985), “to set the record straight: writing [is] inoculation. . . . I achieved some immunity from further perilous ventures along these lines by writing my experience down” (128; see also Wald 186). Yet this writing can only be immunitary when considered as a whole—when comprised of viral and inoculative writing practices, linear narrative and formal experimentation, the dialectical connection that the process of reading these interconnections provides. It is only as a whole that the Nova trilogy can speak in the Voice of bare life—analyzing the work on the level of language will always threaten to negate that Voice, to promote the language of the viral, and to restart the biopolitical project once again.

Chapter 3

3 ()topia: Queer Topologies and Topographies in the AIDS Writing of Samuel R. Delany

“[T]he condition called AIDS does not have, as it were, natural borders”
(Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*)

“Well, here during the Great Plague, I’ve kind of given my psyche a little push and gone back to my old perversion. So far, so good.”
(Samuel R. Delany, letter to John Bravard, 1983)

The preceding two chapters have dealt with viruses as a speculative concept: for both Jack London and William S. Burroughs, narratives of viral outbreak and immune response allow one to model and rethink social identities and relationships. This chapter turns away from narratives of fictional viral outbreaks in order to consider a representation of the very real HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This is not to retreat from the analysis of speculative fiction that I have heretofore employed; rather, in examining the work of Samuel R. Delany (1942-), I wish to explore how a writer confronting an actual viral epidemic makes use of speculative literary tools in order to challenge dominant and prejudicial assumptions of viral transmission, and offer a means of thinking radically about alternative conceptions of identity, community, and space.

3.1 Discourse and the AIDS Epidemic in America

It has been noted that the dominant thinking of the American medical establishment toward the end of the 1970s was a triumphalism over infectious disease. As Alfred W. Crosby notes,

[i]n 1969 the Surgeon General of the United States, William H. Stewart, assured us that we had left infectious disease behind in our dust. Three years later, in the

final edition of the classic *Natural History of Infectious Disease*, author and Nobel laureate Macfarlane Burnet concluded that “the most likely forecast about the future of infectious disease is that it will be very dull.” (xi)

Such narratives of the end of infectious disease were, as Crosby informs the reader, derailed by the onset of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s (xii).¹²¹ First noticed by the medical establishment in 1981 with a publication in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (see Wald 220; Triechler 49),¹²² the provenance of the disease remained unknown until the viral origin of the syndrome in the Human Immunodeficiency Virus was discovered in 1983.¹²³ Sontag suggests “[t]he advent of AIDS has made it clear that infectious diseases are far from conquered and their roster is far from closed” (72). Concomitant with this awareness of the continued vulnerability of human populations to opportunistic infections come those narratives so clearly familiar associated with these ideas of infection.

As I explored in the previous chapter, the post-war sciences of virology and immunology were engaged in a rivalry with one another to explain the origins and effects

¹²¹ Following this line, Susan Sontag writes of how, prior to the discovery of AIDS, “[m]edicine had been viewed as an age-old military campaign now nearing its final phase, leading to victory” (72), while Heather Houser notes that “[i]f the 1970s seemed to confirm a narrative of biomedical progress due to an explosion of vaccines and novel procedures ... [t]he first cases of HIV/AIDS ... shook the confidence of epidemiologists and pharmaceutical researchers” (31). Likewise, Priscilla Wald notes that “[t]he human immunodeficiency virus jolted scientific researchers and medical practitioners out of their sanguinity” (213).

¹²² Cindy Patton makes clear, however, that even earlier incidences of the disease among vulnerable communities, such as intravenous drug users, likely went unnoticed. She writes: “it now appears that injecting drug users had already experienced an epidemic of HIV-related pneumonia deaths in the late 1970s. The epidemic, noted at the time as ‘junky pneumonia,’ did not trigger public health investigators’ interest because it was not considered remarkable that drug users should get sick and die from any number of illnesses” (*Inventing AIDS* 27-28).

¹²³ The two main research teams that worked on identifying the virus were led by Luc Montaigner at the Institut Pasteur in France, and Robert Gallo of the National Cancer Institute in the United States. The French research team first isolated the virus in 1983, while the Americans discovered it the following year. United States Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret Heckler publicly announced these findings in 1984 (Jones and Salazar 26, 34).

of infectious disease. It was the advent of AIDS that brought these two disciplines into close contact with one another, as both required the other to fully account for this particular virus. As Emily Martin remarks, “it is frequently implied in the press that virologists will have to become immunologists to understand HIV. This is a way of saying that virologists will not be able to understand the tiny microbes that they study in isolation unless they understand them in the context of the immune system as a complex system” (130). Immunological research during the AIDS epidemic required “accounting for the specific trigger that sets in motion the immune reaction and its subsequent malfunction,” while virology “cannot study the life of HIV unless it can be observed in relation to host cells” (Patton, *Inventing AIDS* 58). Because HIV is an immunodeficiency virus, wherein the immune response of a human body is suppressed by the viral agent,¹²⁴ the two sciences that were once contrasted with one another now reinforced one another’s understanding of the ways in which infections develop and are transmitted. Likewise, as I have shown in the previous chapter, such models of etiology and epidemiology are never exclusive to the realm of science, but are always informed by and in turn shape the wider cultural and political sphere.

As Cindy Patton notes, “[t]he paradigmatic representation/embodiment of the ‘AIDS virus’ is the gay man. Thus gay men are in the uncomfortable position of being

¹²⁴ An immunodeficiency virus is one that impacts the ability of the immune system to successfully mobilize and respond to infectious agents. In the case of HIV, the primary area affected, as Victoria Harden notes, are immune cells known as “helper T-cells,” which are vital in immunological response for directing an anti-viral reaction (17). When HIV enters the body, it targets T-cell receptors in the immune system. Although the immune system launches an anti-viral response, the virus’s ability to evade anti-viral cells (through misrecognition and through mutation) means that the body is able to contain the virus but not eradicate it. As HIV remains inside T-cells and continues to reproduce, the ability of T-cells to recognize and attack opportunistic infections is progressively eroded, until the point where the body is unable to prevent microbial illnesses from replicating inside it (see Noursadeghi and Pillay 6-10).

constantly spoken *about*,” inscribed within specific cultural narratives over which they have little or no control (*Inventing AIDS* 55).¹²⁵ Certainly, this was how the disease was first received by the medical community, which termed it Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, or “GRID” for short.¹²⁶ Such a framing of the syndrome as one afflicting gay men only heavily informed the socio-medico-political response to the burgeoning crisis. Michael Scarce, for instance, notes the number of less formal terms for the disease that persisted in the early years of the epidemic: “gay lymph node syndrome, gay cancer, gay plague, homosexual syndrome, community-acquired immunodeficiency (CAID), and acquired community immunodeficiency syndrome (ACIDS)” (347). Wald astutely points to how the usage of such terms, and in particular the “D” in GRID referring to “deficiency” as opposed to “disease,” subtly implies that “the immunodeficiency [was] not the result of an acquired disease, but an outcome of homosexuality itself” (222). Such organizing of HIV/AIDS as something that affected gay men only had the dually damaging effect of singling out this group for stigmatization and demonization, while at the same time effacing other groups at risk from the syndrome. This segregation of gay men from the rest of society, as those marked by the disease, allowed for the mobilization of politically regressive action (or inaction).

Paula Treichler’s famous claim that “the AIDS epidemic is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification”

¹²⁵ The problematics of this figuration are manifold, rhetorically constructing heteronormativity as somehow safe from the “gay disease,” while at the same time effacing the many non-gay male demographics disproportionately affected by the illness.

¹²⁶ Paula Treichler notes how “[b]y late 1982, enough nonhomosexual cases had been documented to render GRID an unsuitable diagnosis,” and the acronym “AIDS” was chosen to replace it at a medical conference that same year (47).

(11) underscores that the epidemic in the United States indelibly intertwined ideas of biological pathology with homophobic, racist, and classist cultural narratives.¹²⁷ Even when the rhetoric deployed to discuss the epidemic did not rely on the overtly racist, homophobic, or millenarian figurations,¹²⁸ it still often portrayed queer subjects as enacting a malignant kind of choice. Popular nonfiction accounts of the disease, most notably Randy Shilts's highly controversial account of the early years of the AIDS crisis in *And the Band Played On* (1987), traffic in these tropes. The enduring legacy of Shilts's book is its narrative throughline following airline steward Gaetan Dugas, who becomes the infamous "Patient Zero."¹²⁹ In Shilts's book, Dugas turned the spread of the infection into a kind of conscious act: "Shilts ... endowed [Dugas] with the sinister agency of

¹²⁷ Around the epidemic has accrued a staggering amount of cultural narratives that attempt to explain or contextualize the disease's appearance within the cultural consciousness. Such narratives, which attempt to assign blame or contour a neat logic of infection, have persistent and often damaging material effects on those who are afflicted by the syndrome. Jesse Helms, the Republican Senator from North Carolina during the epidemic, was instrumental in using his political influence to "prohibit the use of funds [of an act to promote AIDS research and education] ... from being used to provide AIDS education, information, or prevention materials and activities that promote, encourage, or condone homosexual sexual activities or the intravenous use of illegal drugs" (qtd. in Crimp 70; see also Patton, *Inventing AIDS* 56). Crimp concludes with the note that the Senate voted overwhelmingly in favour of Helms's amendment, 94-2 (156).

¹²⁸ One of the more common narratives deployed against gay men in an attempt to rationalize the transmission of the virus dwelled in imagery of Biblical apocalypse. Peter Allen cites a doctor in New York referring to AIDS as "the 'Wrath of God Disease'" in a conversation. Thomas L. Long, meanwhile, traces the history of equating male homosexuality with irredeemable sin by evangelical preachers and fundamentalist politicians throughout the 1960s and 1970s, which then saw the virus and its associated symptoms as a form of divine retribution (9-18). Long quotes celebrity preacher Billy Graham, who frames the disease by claiming that "God has chosen to allow man to reap what he sows to help him learn the bitter lesson that sin brings pain," and Republican Congressman William Dannemeyer of California, who speaks of "a corruption of spirit that leads to selfishness and preoccupations with pleasure At that point, excess and perversion come into fashion, and, after that—catastrophe" (qtd. in 18). The cultural logic of such a narrative created a linear causality that had calamitous material effects for those affected by the disease.

¹²⁹ Shilts's book and its depiction of Dugas—as well as its description of Dugas as the infamous "Patient Zero"—has long been controversial (see Crimp; Wald). As noted in a paper published recently in *Nature* by Worobey et al., the blood belonging to Dugas possessed "neither biological nor historical evidence that he was the primary case [of HIV] in the US" (98). *New York Times* reporter Donald McNeil further adds that Shilts's description of Dugas as "Patient Zero" was also a misnomer: "in an early epidemiological study of cases, [Dugas] was designated Patient O, for 'outside Southern California,' where the study began" (n. pag.).

retribution,” writes Wald (215), while Crimp notes how “Shilts created the character of ‘Patient Zero’ to embody everything that the book purports to expose: irresponsibility, delay, denial—ultimately murder” (57), and Patton states how “[i]t is now commonly believed ... that gay male sexual culture before AIDS was chaotic, amoral, and thoughtless. Randy Shilts’ epic *And the Band Played On* has been particularly influential in confirming just this view” (*Inventing AIDS* 44). As each of these critics understand, the trajectory suggested in this rendering of the gay male is a movement from a frivolous, dangerously ludic existence to a more sober and “mature” post-AIDS identity.¹³⁰

If Treichler’s “epidemic of signification” adage holds true, then the paramount importance of signification was understood not only by conservative forces proffering various narratives of immune purity or responsibility, but also among activists seeking to challenge such destructive myths, particularly in the America of the 1980s and 1990s.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Indeed, the concept of maturation and responsibility is central to Crimp’s highly critical response to conservative gay commentator Andrew Sullivan’s 1996 *New York Times Magazine* article “When Plagues End: Notes on the Twilight of an Epidemic.” Sullivan pens a stark narrative of progress that can be detected in the epidemic, where “[b]efore AIDS, gay life—rightly or wrongly—was identified with freedom from responsibility, rather than its opposite,” but the onset of the disease has forced a reckoning in the gay community, and “with AIDS, responsibility became a central, imposing feature of gay life” (qtd. in Crimp 5). Sullivan professes a progressive narrative of gay life in which the hedonistic rebelliousness of the post-Stonewall era is fundamentally transformed by AIDS into a sober understanding of a “mature” political and communal identity (15). Philip Brian Harper critiques Sullivan along a different axis, exploring how the title of Sullivan’s article, “When Plagues End,” suggests that the deaths that will continue to occur as a result of the syndrome—deaths that Sullivan himself admits are inevitable—are rhetorically consigned by the commentator “do not constitute AIDS-related deaths at all” (95). Harper paraphrases Sullivan’s article as: “I know that many people who are not white or not U.S. residents will still die, but in my narrative, those people do not really have AIDS” (95). Harper’s critique, ergo, crystallizes the concept of narrative immunity and its biopolitical implications dramatized by Sullivan’s article. Sullivan’s idea of an immature and self-destructive queer community that is forced into “maturity” (read: neoconservatism and respectability politics) certainly evokes immunity as a means of insulating certain bodies from the apocalyptic narrative of AIDS while marking those outside this narrow category to an unnarratable death.

¹³¹ The classic text detailing the aims and practices of ACT UP’s activism is the handbook *Women, AIDS, and Activism* (1990), published by the Women’s Caucus of ACT UP. For a more recent survey of the role of AIDS activism, see Deborah B. Gould’s *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (2009), which takes into account the affective power and charge of such action. David France’s successful documentary *How to Survive a Plague* (2012), as well as its textual counterpart (2016) have proven to be

Perhaps best encapsulated in the famous slogan of the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP), “SILENCE = DEATH,” printed on posters beneath the pink triangle of the gay rights movement, the power of signifying and rhetorically fashioning the way in which the disease was interpreted and responded to by the wider American culture became a field of contestation.¹³²

Among the many commentators and theorists on the role of signification and language in shaping the epidemic, Samuel Delany is one of the most thoughtful. A queer black writer living in New York City during the epidemic, Delany saw first-hand the devastation caused by the disease and the effect that the denigrating narratives around HIV/AIDS had in amplifying the crisis.¹³³ In his nonfictional writing, Delany specifically seeks to dismantle “the discursively impoverished notion that AIDS is a ‘homosexual disease’” (*Jewel-Hinged Jaw* 219). Indeed, it is this focus on the discursive construction of the disease that fuels Delany’s 1993 lecture “The Rhetoric of Sex/The Discourse of Desire,” a paradigmatic example of his thinking on AIDS. In a self-consciously

popular, though not entirely uncontroversial depictions of the ways activism and institutional science approached the disease. Sarah Schulman’s and Jim Hubbard’s documentary *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (2012) provides a bleaker depiction of AIDS activism than that of *How to Survive a Plague*, while also attending to groups of activists often overlooked, including lesbian and transgender activists.

¹³² Literary theorist Lee Edelman pushes Treichler’s idea further, suggesting that the AIDS crisis is not just an “epidemic of signification,” but a “plague of discourse” (“Plague of Discourse” 94). For Edelman, while the work of AIDS activists is invaluable in saving the lives of communities afflicted by the disease, in the responses of the ACT UP campaign, there is the potential “to naturalize and reposition certain aspects of the ideological structures that inform and produce those noxious representations [of gay men] and those oppressive subjectivities in the first place” (97). In Edelman’s deconstructive analysis, the famous “Silence=Death” activism campaign works within the production of a discourse that becomes oppositionally entangled (and thus enables) the homophobic narratives it seeks to counteract. The political power of rhetoric is Edelman’s chief object of analysis, and I will discuss this in greater detail through the nonfictional AIDS writing of Delany.

¹³³ The focus on the racial aspect of queer identity is beyond the purview of this chapter, though it is important to the intersectional analysis of identity and community that Delany explores throughout his career. For a thorough overview of how race operates in Delany’s thought and fiction, see Tucker. For an intersectional analysis of how Delany’s interests in race, sexuality, and class overlap, see Griffiths. For the racial politics of *The Mad Man*, see Ravela.

Foucauldian vein, Delany defines discourses as a specific function of language, one which “lodge[s] inchoately in the processes by which we make a text make sense” (8). The primary action of discourse is to “assign import,” or value, to figures that unfold within language (11). Rhetoric, meanwhile, is the particular mode in which such discourses are expressed and transmitted. The juxtaposition of these terms allows Delany to work through how the “homogenization of discourses” of race, sexuality, gender, and class around the concept of AIDS “has produced an angering, murderous sexual rhetoric,” one shaped by the discourse of patriarchy (36, 38). He takes particular aim at the spread of cultural misinformation having to do with “repeated sexual contact” as the cause of infection, referring to such claims as “murderous misinformation” (37). Delany states that the empirical facts of AIDS transmission are that “it is not transmitted by oral-genital sex between men. And that it is transmitted easily and effectively through anal sex,” adding that “[a]nything else we might say about its sexual transmission is all in the realm of superstition” (38).¹³⁴ The lack of publicly disseminated studies on the disease acquisition vectors only further the pernicious and false discourse of “repeated sexual contact” of any kind being the cause of the illness (38). Delany urges his audience to “demand with me that monitored studies be initiated, be rigorously overseen, and their results be widely disseminated,” for it is in this kind of study that the cultural underpinnings of such conservative discourses of sex and sexuality can be challenged. In the final words of the lecture, Delany suggests that his audience “[e]ncourage” the

¹³⁴ In Delany’s case, he admits that his own approach is purely anecdotal, based upon his own personal sexual experiences and sero-status, and that he is not uniformly advocating such an approach (*Shorter Views* 56). As Tucker remarks, “Delany is not arguing that oral sex is safe, but pushing against the hysterical underpinnings of supposed discourse analysis” (263). Indeed, Delany uses his own anecdotal evidence to underscore the vital need for increased scientific studies to be done on AIDS transmission.

rhetoric of desire “through your own discussions” (39), emphasizing a dialogic approach to thinking through the formation and transmission of received discourses, and how rhetorical modes can challenge such approaches.

Another significant work by Delany on the role of discourse in the shaping of the disease occurs in his article “Street Talk/Straight Talk” (1990). Delany identifies two modes of rhetorical strategy that shape the discourse of AIDS: straight talk, in Delany’s parlance, is “mellifluous, precise, sophisticated,” the purpose of which being “‘to inform’—as it often says of itself—where formal differences and divisions have become unclear, violently erased, violated” (41, 42). In other words, Delany’s straight talk is a kind of “official” discourse, the rhetorical mode implied by institutional modes of explanation. In contrast to this mode is “street talk,” which is “[b]rutal, repetitious, vulgar,” a mode of articulation that operates in “ignorance, rumor, misunderstanding, and outright superstition” (41). While such ordering would seem to suggest a clear preference for straight talk over street talk, Delany suggests that each rhetorical method casts “shadows”—straight talk’s shadow is “awkward, obscurantist, and often crashingly irrelevant,” while street talk’s shadow is “clear, concrete, and honest” (42). The problem comes about when these discourses are combined into one another, which produces the contradiction that, while studies show AIDS is unlikely to pass through oral sex, “perfectly learned statements flood society, all stating, equally unequivocally, that AIDS can be transmitted by any and every sexual act involving an interchange of bodily fluids,” a kind of misinformation, a “discursive crime at one with murder” (53, 54). Separating out the two modes of discursive action, making them irreducible to one another, and then employing both street talk and straight talk is Delany’s method of exploring the power of

rhetorical engagement with a disease. Delany is certainly aware that “[n]either street- nor straight-talk rhetorics can fully encapsulate a disease” (Hirtle 331), and his literary project makes use of both without any attempt to privilege one over the other, to hierarchize a relationship between these modes of articulation and the shadows that they cast. “Rhetoric *can* control discourse,” Delany insists, “but only if it is insistent, accurate, analytical, and articulate” (56). Delany argues that rhetorical practice is the best means of contesting a unidirectional discourse about AIDS, and this requires rhetorical practices of street talk and straight talk, a dialogic engagement with how discourse operates.

In his continued emphasis on the importance of dialogic engagement in his writing, how such “rhetorical dialogue becomes the ideal discourse on AIDS” (Hirtle 322), Delany implies the necessity for a communitarian response to the syndrome. Rather than a monologic approach to knowledge, Delany underscores the need for discussion, for the transmission of ideas and engagement shared by a circuit of people. Such a requirement in order to combat dangerous discursive formations means that community is of central concern to Delany’s thinking about AIDS. And in Delany’s writing, such a community is granted a specifically spatialized character that prevents it from becoming idealized in temporal logics of a futurity.

Work on Delany’s role as an AIDS writer-activist has explored his vital contributions to the discourse. Thomas L. Long concludes his discussion of Delany’s AIDS writing by claiming that “[f]or three decades, Samuel R. Delany has been alerting fiction readers (queer and otherwise) to these [epistemological] disparities, and to the clinical reticence and inadequate research that contributes to these disparities” (224). Likewise, Kala Hirtle reads “street talk” and “straight talk” as complementary modes of

discourse that “force[] the reader to analyze what is being said: this is the first step to changing the discourse of AIDS” (331). Hirtle points to the way that Delany considers writing and fiction to be an invaluable vehicle for engaging with and redirecting sociopolitical structures. The power of writing, for Delany, is that it cannot be reduced to a singular axis of examination or interpretation, either for the author or the reader. As Robert Reid-Pharr suggests, Delany “refuses to remain within the often unspoken limits that distinguish ‘literary’ fiction from paraliterary forms like science fiction, pornography, comics, and literary criticism. On the contrary, Delany remains tightly focused on demonstrating the full range of social, discursive, and aesthetic contours of the world he imagines” (681). Such an approach includes his fictional as well as nonfictional writings; throughout, Delany seeks to mobilize the rhetorical and narrative structures and tropes of fiction in order to engage with the social effects of discourse. “Fiction makes models of reality,” Delany writes in an essay on the efficacy of sf, and it is the power of language and the latitude of its aesthetic deployment in non-mimetic writing that allows readers and writers to rethink the society into which they are embedded (*Jewel-Hinged Jaw* 31). This latitude enables sf to explore the possibility of language more powerfully than naturalistic fiction. The latter category, Delany states, is predicated around the idea that it “*could have happened*,” while sf is built around events which “*have not happened*” (10, 11). Plausibility based around present knowledge forecloses the fullness of linguistic possibility, while an openness to futurity, or at least an admission of the incompleteness of such knowledge, is reflected in the language and structure of sf. Delany provides as an example the sentence, “[t]he red sun is high, the blue low,” which he says is “meaningless” in naturalistic fiction. “The particular verbal

freedom of SF,” he contrasts, “coupled with the corrective process that allows a whole range of the physically explainable universe, can produce the most violent leaps of imagery” (11-12). SF has a utility insofar as it allows us to expand the vocabulary and narrative possibility of figuring worlds. This is an approach he will take up in his fictional writing on AIDS: his 1984 novella *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* and the 1994 novel *The Mad Man*. Both texts interweave informational aspects of AIDS prevention and safe sex within speculative literary environments, juxtapose naturalistic writing about New York City with phantasmagoric landscapes and characters. The skill of Delany’s writing is that such approaches are not sectioned off from one another, or hierarchized; the non-mimetic narratives of *Plagues* and *The Mad Man* are not didactic allegories about the history of AIDS, but essential elements in a larger project of reworking the discourse around queer identity, community, and space in the era of AIDS.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Such a parallel, non-hierarchical structure is something Delany utilizes throughout his career. For instance, his memoir *The Motion of Light in Water* (1987) provides readers with perhaps the author’s clearest demonstration of this idea. Delany begins his memoir with his recollection of his father’s death in 1958 when Delany was seventeen years old. After finishing writing this account, however, he notes the historical inaccuracies involved: his father passed away in 1960, and Delany was eighteen at the time. He sums up the introduction (and the memoir’s theme of parallelism) thusly:

“My father died of lung cancer in 1958 when I was seventeen.”

“My father died of lung cancer in 1960 when I was eighteen.”

The first is incorrect, the second correct.

[...] In no way do I feel the incorrect sentence is privileged over the correct one. Yet, even with what I know now ... the wrong sentence still *feels* to me righter than the right one. (xviii).

Later in the memoir, Delany explains that a linear ordering “hierarchizes” the memories, while a parallel printing of his impressions allows him to represent their intertwined and equally privileged effect (29). Parallelism is Delany’s formal touchstone as a writer, a way of analogizing and contextualizing space and the identities within such spaces. This will be an important rhetorical figure deployed in thinking through how AIDS is formulated with relationship to queer identity, community, and space.

3.2 Sick Spaces: How Environment Informs AIDS Thinking

In Mary Douglas's famous examination of dirt and disorder in *Purity and Danger* (1966), she aptly notes that "[w]here there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systemic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (35). Douglas's comparative analysis of religious and social systems continually underscores the point that pollution is a conceptual category mobilized to define and delimit the boundaries of what is considered proper. Pollutive material is utilized in classifying social spaces and identities along binary boundaries. Douglas's study, though not about the United States and antedating the AIDS crisis, is invaluable in demonstrating how such an organizing mechanism is enacted during a viral epidemic. Allen remarks that "there was a long tradition in the West of seeing disease as God's punishment for sin" (xv), and in this sense, HIV/AIDS adhered closely to this narrative. Yet the hegemonic reception and recoding of the disease also made use of other archaic narratives of disease transmission in order to vilify those affected by it. Susan Sontag clearly articulates this idea when she explains that "AIDS has a dual metaphoric genealogy. As a micro-process, it is described as cancer is: an invasion. When the focus is on transmission of the disease, an older metaphor, reminiscent of syphilis, is invoked: pollution" (17). Sontag identifies the way in which HIV/AIDS is rendered as an environmental kind of disease, one in which the thinking of disease becomes tied not only to queer bodies but also spaces that have been designated (and denigrated) as queer. This older theory to which Sontag refers has echoes with the miasmatic theory of disease that was posited as an alternative to theories of contagion until the bacteriological work of Pasteur and Koch in the nineteenth century definitively proved the contagionist theory

true. Miasma theory suggested that “epidemic diseases were caused by environmental conditions, such as noxious gases emanating from human wastes, unhygienic living conditions, rotting animal and vegetable matter, and swamps” (Osborne 8). Unlike contagion theory, however, miasma theory did not impute any microbial organisms as the causes of disease—the *environment itself* had become polluted, a tainted area whose degeneracy corrupted healthy bodies. Indeed, as Osborne further remarks, “the supporters of the miasma theory posited that certain individuals had a predisposition to catching epidemic diseases due to physical infirmity, diet, corrupted morals, and emotional excitement” (8).

And indeed, such statements about the growth of AIDS rely on such a lineage. Peter Duesberg, a biochemist, for instance, speculates in 1982 that “[c]ombined with the bathhouses, all these infections go with lifestyles which enhance them” (qtd. in Crimp 51), while Shilts claims that “[j]ust about every type of unsafe sex imaginable, and many variations that were unimaginable, were being practiced with carefree abandonment [sic] at the facilities” of New York bathhouses (qtd. in Crimp 56). Furthermore, Patton writes of how, in the early 1980s, “immunological interpretations of AIDS emphasized the relationship between environmental management and internal bodily breakdown. Early epidemiological studies were cited as evidence of gay men’s failure to thrive in the high-stress ‘gay’ lifestyle” (*Inventing AIDS* 61). In such readings, it is as though the space of queer contact itself becomes suffused with infectious potential, as though the disease emanates from these places, turning them into vectors of the contagion.¹³⁶ Ira Tattelman,

¹³⁶ This focus on urban space and queer community has been commented upon by queer theorists, most notably Judith Halberstam, who writes that “[m]ost theories of homosexuality within the twentieth century

in his examination of bathhouses as an important aspect of queer urban community, notes that they “could have become a site for AIDS education, demonstrations, workshops, and videos” (“Meaning at the Wall” 404). The space, which brought together queer citizens from a variety of demographics, could have been a perfect nexus for promoting safe sex without demonizing spaces or subjectivities. Instead, “[t]he existence of bathhouses and press coverage of them made the baths mythic. HIV was transmitted through some of the sexual activities that took place in the bathhouse, and AIDS as a condition formed outside the bathhouse was used to interrupt the activities within the bathhouse” (394). Queer theorist Aaron Betsky writes that “AIDS destroyed queer space,” which he means both in the direct sense that gay clubs and discos were closed down by public health authorities, but also that “the fantastical structure of queer space as communal reconstruction disappeared” (180, 177). Space becomes just as tinged with “sin” as the bodies that occupy it, and must be policed as those bodies are as well.

Indeed, such a logic resonates with what Lawrence Buell terms “toxic discourse.” Noting that toxicity is “an interlocked set of topoi” (639), Buell is interested in thinking how the concept of the “toxic” gains a rhetorical force and clarity in yoking together various social, economic, political, and even aesthetic concerns under a banner of poisoned atmospheres. While there has been a long history of American environmentalist

assume that gay culture is rooted in cities, that it has a special relationship to urban life, and that ... erotic dissidents require urban space because in rural settings queers are easily identified and punished” (35). Halberstam terms such queer writing “metronormative,” and seeks ways of deconstructing such a hierarchized binary. Likewise, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, in their anthology *Queer Ecologies*, seek ways of drawing connections between queer theory and ecocriticism, “advocating a position not only of queering ecology, but of greening queer politics,” that draws explicitly on Halberstam’s attempts to queer the urban/rural divide (22). Heather Houser, meanwhile, takes Halberstam’s idea of metronormativity and uses it with specific reference to AIDS narratives, claiming that “[i]n the U.S. the native habitat of HIV/AIDS was and remains the city,” and is interested instead in how “what emotions arise when AIDS experience is transplanted to unfamiliar landscapes” (32, 34).

writing that makes use of narrative tropes and themes of toxicity,¹³⁷ Buell cites Rachel Carson's landmark environmentalist text *Silent Spring* (1962) as the beginning of the modern era of toxic discourse that makes use of scientific and aesthetic understandings of toxicity and pollution in order to think through and strategize responses based in environmental justice (see 645). In Buell's theorization, toxic discourse allows people to access a language that is capable of connecting ways of discussing social, political, environmental, and economic discourses in ways that are potentially liberatory. In a similar vein, Heather Houser's concept of "ecosickness" resonates well with this idea. Houser's project notes how affect "contours a narrative of environmental investment or disengagement that is centered on sick bodies" (7), how bodies and ecologies come to mirror and script one another. Affective understandings, for Houser, allow one to create connections between bodies and environments and interrogate how these ideas can be analyzed analogically. Language and affect are ways in which artists, thinkers, and readers are able to apprehend and respond to methods of ecological damage and bodily illness. While the AIDS epidemic of the United States (focalized, for Delany, specifically through New York City) may not exist on the same register as chemical disasters like Love Canal, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, or Bhopal, I suggest that Buell's and Houser's fruitful methods of thinking through how toxicity incites calls to social and ecological justice that fit within Delany's framework. As Buell argues, "toxic discourse may invoke a sense of place to call a localized collectivity into being or, if it is already

¹³⁷ Buell traces the antecedents of toxic discourse back to the "gothic representation [of] public health issues" in Charles Brockden Brown's late-eighteenth-century novels of yellow fever, *Arthur Mervyn* (653n50). This, as I note in my Introduction, is an early example of a virus outbreak narrative.

self-consciously there, to raise it to a higher degree of self-consciousness” (653). Thus, where homophobic rhetoric of AIDS transmission relies on ideas of perverse bodies and corrupted spaces, the ideas of toxic discourse and ecosickness fiction focalize approaches that can radically rework and appropriate such discursive powers.

Delany is not often thought of as an ecocritical writer,¹³⁸ and yet his AIDS fiction seems to meditate on these notions of toxic discourse and ecosickness, emphasizing the ways that bodies and communities are made discursively visible, are brought to the forefront of rhetorical figuration, through analogical discussions interweaving space, bodies, and disease. Delany, who as a reader and scholar of Foucault, is highly interested in the ways that discourse is used to shape social reality (see *Shorter Views* 23, 41), interprets the conflation of the queer body as always already diseased and the decadent, morally corrupt urban space as the incubator of such diseases; thus, examining New York City and its gay male population through the prism of toxic discourse allows us to understand the ways that identities and spaces are yoked together. Buell suggests that toxic discourse “calls for a way of imagining physical environments that fuses a social constructivist with an environmental restorationist perspective” (656); in *The Mad Man*,

¹³⁸ A notable exception would be Tavia Nyong’o’s article “Back to the Garden: Queer Ecology in *Heavenly Breakfast*,” which situates Delany’s first memoir, about his time in a folk music group-cum-hippie-commune as one that demonstrates the “ambient poetics” of Delany’s writing in a way that cultivates and ecological understanding of New York community and identity without relying overtly on sentimentalized depictions of pastoral “nature” (747). Nyong’o’s work is important in aligning the undertheorized ideas of ecocriticism in Delany’s body of work with the omnipresent discussions of queer theory. As Nyong’o argues, “Delany’s literary and sexual ecologies ‘without nature’ provide a way of pursuing the utopian spirit of the musical and sexual subcultures of the sixties without necessarily seeking pathways ‘back to the garden’” (747). Delany locates the importance of ecological protection and community even located in the urban Greenwich Village. While Nyong’o does not focus on Delany’s AIDS writing, her work is invaluable to outlining this strand of ecological thought. Likewise, Mary Catherine Foltz’s discussion of “excremental ethics” in *The Mad Man* points to Delany’s way of rethinking the cultural logic and capital that absents itself from waste in the extravagant pornographic scenes involving excrement in the novel. Here too, albeit in a less explicitly stated vein, Foltz connects Delany’s work to ecocritical approaches.

the spaces where the queer community is allowed to flourish are constantly under threat of erasure by institutional forces, and Delany finds a way of articulating an optimistic mirror to the toxic discourse that co-determines the body and the land as sites of infection. He sees queer space as vital to the continuation of queer identity, and charts its perseverance and flourishing in Manhattan during the AIDS epidemic.

Delany's approach to thinking through the importance of space, both in its importance to queer community and the biopolitical aspects of control, is central to his celebrated memoir *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, which he began writing shortly after the completion of *The Mad Man*. In it, Delany discusses how "the city has instituted not only a violent reconfiguration of its own landscape but also a legal and moral revamping of its own discursive structures, changing laws about sex, health, and zoning, in the course of which it has been willing, and even anxious, to exploit everything from homophobia and AIDS to family values and fear of drugs" (xi-xii). The metropolis is the key site of a kind of queer identity, it is the site of a democratic vision of "interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will" (111), wherein erotic connections between people are highly charged and filled with a potential. Indeed, Delany compares the strict enforcement of queer spaces (movie theaters, adult video stores) to management of plagues: "[o]ne is reminded of seventeenth-century London and Marseille's response to the plague—though here the plague may just *be* that pleasant suburban couple, lawyer and doctor, herding their 2.3 children ahead of them, out the door of the airport van and into the Milford Plaza" (xvii). Thus, the project of his AIDS writing (both fictional and nonfictional) is to push against the rhetoric that circumscribes AIDS as a death sentence, an atomizing condition, and an unbridgeable difference. Queer

sexuality in the time of AIDS may indeed be surrounded, but within that space the possibilities for queer topographies exist and can be explored.

Jolene Hubbs's examination of Delany's essay *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* makes the vital claim "that a healthy public sphere facilitates carnal connections for and among its varied inhabitants" (352). For Delany, space is sexy, and is imbued with the erotic characteristics of its inhabitants. Even more intriguingly, Hubbs goes on to add that Delany's exuberant and positive reading of Times Square in the 1970s and 1980s as a place of queer sexual identity is one that reverses the dominant medical narratives: "Delany turns on its head rhetoric used against the old Times Square," suggesting that the plague narrative that Times Square-as-queer-space is subject to can be repurposed and turned against its rhetorical assailants. Yet Hubbs's view of plague and place is strictly figurative: the issues she describes as plaguing are "pornography and poverty—ailments to be cured by gentrifying development," while Delany's rhetorical reversal demonstrates that "a mouse brought the plague to Times Square—Mickey Mouse, that is" (352). I wish to extend Hubbs's linking of queerness and place to notions of health and disease by making her claim more literal and by connecting Delany's thoughts about queer New York City to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, the intersection of which Delany wrote about extensively.¹³⁹ The reorganization of Times Square and other queer spaces in New York was (among other reasons) begun explicitly in response to the AIDS crisis and the fear that public queer space would serve as a breeding ground for HIV

¹³⁹ Although Delany describes himself as not being particularly activist beyond his fictional and non-fictional writing on AIDS. In an interview with Thomas Long, Delany admits that "[o]utside of writing and writing-related activities (lecturing to and talking with various groups, usually in colleges around the country) I've done very little [for AIDS activism]" (*Shorter Views* 125).

transmission. Under this logic, space made legible as queer must be effaced, reordered or manipulated to prevent the propagation of this deadly “lifestyle.” Thus, Delany’s writing project is located in exploring, fighting for, and naming space as queer, finding linkages to other spaces and connecting them together in a coherent if shifting map or *periplum*. Taken from Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, Delany glosses the *periplum* as “from before advent of universal longitude and latitude . . . [p]eriploi were detailed descriptions of the coastlines of the mainland and the various islands” (*Times Square* xv-xvi). This progenitor of the fixed, organized map, the *periplum* offers Delany a way of describing “what the temporal and the lay of the land looked like and felt like and the thoughts [the navigator] had while observing it” (xvi). Thus, in the shift and sway of the coastline, the imprecision of the border, one can imagine not only the combination of the subjective and the objective, but a border that is not so rigidly fixed.

Prior to 1985, Delany notes, “public sex was largely a matter of public decency—that is to say, it was a question of who was or wasn’t offended by what went on in public venues.” With the advent of AIDS, in what Delany terms a “sham concern” on the part of the local powers that be, the discourse shifted to one of infection and quarantine (91). In examining this logic, what Delany sees is “that even as the city has spoken of supporting ‘safer sex,’ while it hasn’t made ‘being a homosexual a crime’ . . . by law it has *criminalized each and every homosexual act* . . . ‘in public’” (91). Echoing his concerns in his essays on AIDS, Delany is focused on the ways institutional discourses (of public health, of urban planning and renewal, of an omnipresent and conservative sexual moralism) have come together into a dangerously self-reinforcing mechanism of controlling both bodies and spaces by conflating them. During the late 1980s and early

1990s, during which the AIDS epidemic continued to balloon while all but ignored by federal and local government institutions, an ongoing attempt to “renovate” New York City was placed underway, until the stewardship of Republican mayor Rudolph Giuliani. For Eric Rofes, Manhattan—and Times Square specifically—were transformed during this time from “a primarily working-class, poor neighborhood into the centerpiece of Rudolph Giuliani’s empire,” an empire predicated around a sanitized, “Disneyfied” space catering to the tastes of white, heterosexual middle-class families who travel into the space of Times Square but do not inhabit it (103). Along a similar line, Tim Dean argues that “[a] legitimate desire to make the city safer was harnessed to the rhetoric of safer sex that had been invented by gay men committed to public sex, and then cynically deployed against the institutions of public sex at the expense of all those (but especially sexual minorities) who used those institutions” (187). In this renovationist rhetoric, Times Square becomes figured as diseased, as a giant miasma containing fears of potential infection, and the response is to reshape its space so that access is heavily policed and restricted, and those moments of queered “interclass contact” disappear.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Queerness is heavily spatialized in Delany’s thinking, and the attempts of institutional power to dominate that space require action. The attempt to “clean up” New York City constructs the discourse of the city and its inhabitants as unclean, infected, both propagating and spreading a disease. Thus, these actions then determine a logic of urban renewal by which the local businesses of Times Square (particularly the pornographic theatres, clubs, adult video stores, and other “immoral places”) were shuttered and the city was able to “open up the sites for developers” (*Times Square* 91). The result is that Times Square has been turned into a shining beacon of a tourist trap whereby the “small-town” visitor gets to “have fun, as you sample the food and culture and see the monuments and architecture,” but “the one thing you do not do is go out into the street alone and meet people. The fear of such activity in New York City is, for most out-of-towners, one with the fear of bodily contagion from AIDS” (156, emphasis added). With not just the identities of queer men in New York City, but the spaces they live in and experience placed under the sign of AIDS, Delany is focused on writing a counter-narrative, of deploying his prodigious rhetorical gifts, in ways to undo such denigrating discursive structures.

Delany's project is a multifaceted one: while attempting to educate his readers on the necessities of safe sex, he also seeks to revivify the spatial component of urban queer contact that is so vital to his thinking. If, as David Bell suggests, "public sex is not only a form of physical occupation but also a practice of intimate citizenship, one that ... often demands and creates particular kinds of public nature to accommodate and facilitate it" (qtd. in Erickson 17-18), then Delany, both in his fiction and nonfiction, seeks to embody just such a stance. Inhabiting and existing within communal urban space is a means of asserting one's identity and community. In the face of a destructive disease, this is vital work. In articulating an awareness of safe sex and its practices, Delany does not want to retreat into defensive narratives that delimit the possibility of queer intimacy and relationality. Crimp closes his famous essay "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic" by noting that "we are now reclaiming our subjectivities, our communities, our culture ... and our promiscuous love of sex" (81). In responding to and writing about the AIDS epidemic, Delany is adamant about tracing the space of that queer community.

3.3 Communal Ground

Much of the criticism on Delany focuses on whether or not his fiction can be considered utopian. At a first glance, an answer seems straightforward: in an interview with a graduate class of students at McGill University in 1986, Delany speaks candidly about his reluctance to use the term "utopia," stating, "I don't think SF *can* really be utopian. I mean utopia presupposes a pretty static, unchanging, and rather tyrannical world," and further adding, "I've always seen SF thinking as fundamentally different from utopian thinking" (*Shorter Views* 323, 324). In Delany's conception, utopia involves a rigid, top-down thinking involving a conceivable *telos* which a society must move

toward an eschatonic stasis and then enter into it.¹⁴¹ In this fashion, Delany seems to accept Michel Foucault's reading of utopias as "fundamentally unreal spaces" ("Of Other Spaces" 24), that are therefore ultimately not useful in conceiving of a vision of the future.¹⁴² For Delany, we can detect a distinction between the *impossible* and the *unreal*: while the former may appear consistently throughout his texts, they remain *apprehensible*, things that can be understood as occurring under different circumstances. If, however, the ability to conceive of those circumstances strikes one as fundamentally impossible, then those narratives become meaningless.

This utopian impossibility is tied, in a foundational way, to the concept of temporality. As Fredric Jameson argues, the postmodern moment, riven as it is with the collapse of a sense of history in favour of an all-pervading concept of space, can be seen through the "symptom" of the "waning of the utopian ideal" ("Politics of Utopia" 36). Utopia, for Jameson, is that which "emerges at the suspension of the political," at those moments when the political order has become so disconnected from the lived experience of everyday citizens, that the possibility of imagining otherwise becomes a particularly powerful critical and political tool (43). But that imagination of alterity is always conceived of through its temporal character, as something that could only come into being were the extant political institutions to rupture. Ultimately, for Jameson, the

¹⁴¹ Long comments on the affinities between the apocalyptic and utopian strains in American fiction. He cites Lois Parkinson Zamora, who notes that "apocalypse, one of the most basic yet least understood myths, has always been essential to America's conception of itself" (qtd. in 45). He himself points out that American literature's apocalypticism has always contained within it a "utopic sensibility" (36). I will discuss these ideas of utopia and stasis at greater length in the following chapter.

¹⁴² Griffiths charts Delany's change in thinking about utopia, noting that, after the pornotopia of *The Mad Man*, he constructs a "meta-utopia" in his most recent novel, *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* (2012). This meta-utopia, Griffiths suggests, is founded in his thinking of queer blackness, and that "Delany's "queer.black utopianism is epistemological, rather than a form of object study" (307).

utopian is a diagnostic through which we understand interpolation within an ideological regime, for utopia's "function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future ... so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined" (46). Since utopias are conceived as alternatives to the currently existing sociopolitical organizations, they can only be informed by those ideas, and hence utopias are necessary to understand the way in which we are conditioned. Thus, when Jameson refers to utopias as "barely audible messages from a future that may never come into being" (54), he situates things in the temporal relation, leaving secondary the spatial.

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz offers a more nuanced vision of the utopian impulse, finding it to be immanent to the everyday. Drawing on German philosopher Ernst Bloch, Muñoz finds that the utopian can be located within the quotidian actions of life (22). These pleasurable and optimistic moments that we engage in daily are, for Muñoz, models that can be abstracted to a vision of the utopian future, where these moments serve as impressions, or "invocations," to use Muñoz's terms, of "future collectivities" (25). Where Jameson reads utopia in purely abstract terms, Muñoz finds the individual practices of everyday life to contain within them the seeds for another and better place. Yet Muñoz explicitly casts his queer reading of utopia through the lens of an unreachable temporality. In the opening words of the book, Muñoz informs us that queerness "never arrives" but rather acts as "the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (1). The queer is the utopian, for Muñoz, and both are unable to become fully realized within the scope of his world vision. They remain glimpses of a

better world that we catch in fragmentary encounters, frayed artifacts from other worlds, never to become fully concretized.

For his part, Delany is far more amenable to the concept of heterotopia than he is to utopia: “[w]hat I start from is the fictive element, considered in terms of a series of questions. What would you like the *effects* of the government to be? What would you like the world to look like as you walk down the street? What unpleasant things could you tolerate in that world?” (*Shorter Views* 329). The occasion for this expostulation is a discussion of Delany’s novel *Triton* (1976), subtitled “An Ambiguous Heterotopia.”¹⁴³

The heterotopic imagination of Delany—a term he clearly draws from Foucault, although he does not mention the theorist during his lengthy discussion of the term in this interview¹⁴⁴—is based in “the inevitability of social difference” (Chan 181). Utopias fail because, in Delany’s view, they can only provide a macroscopic view of a society, one that cannot help but tend toward “hegemony” (*Shorter Views* 328), thereby obviating the possibility of a better place. Heterotopia serves Delany’s speculative purposes both

¹⁴³ The subtitle is a direct response to the subtitle of Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*, which was subtitled “An Ambiguous Utopia.” In the interview, Delany reveals that he added the subtitle to the novel after the first draft, as in between drafts he read Le Guin’s novel and felt the need to respond to it (321). The title too would later be changed to *Trouble on Triton* in 1995. Delany’s reasoning for his differences with Le Guin are explicitly ecological: he says that in *The Dispossessed* the harshness and scarcity of the landscape ultimately prevent the flourishing of a heterotopic vision. “When the landscape is as harsh and ungiving as the Annares’ and your laws are set up in ecological accord with it,” Delany argues, “you don’t *have* to worry too much about individuals—or groups—deviating too far from these laws. Those who deviate, the landscape itself, punishes—if not obliterates” (323). Here again Delany considers topology to be ineluctably linked to the character and quality of the socio-political content (and, on another level, the literary imagination involved). Le Guin constructs her ecology in such a way as to enforce her utopian vision. By changing the environmental conditions, Delany contends, the entire character of a topology changes with it and the possibility for a greater otherness becomes possible.

¹⁴⁴ Delany does, however, discuss the medical context of heterotopia: “It’s the removal of one part or organ from the body and affixing it at another place in or on the body. . . . A skin graft is a heterotopia. But so is a sex-change” (*Shorter Views* 342). Here again the vocabulary of speculative fiction and criticism ensnares bodies and landscapes.

because it is absolutely otherwise to what is now, but also because it originates in the lived space, not in the imagination of a singular subject-position. This vision aligns with Foucault's declension of the term, where heterotopias are "counter-sites" that are "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" ("Of Other Spaces" 24).¹⁴⁵ Likewise, Delany aligns utopic thinking with the engineer, and contrasts this with the more creative being proper to the heterotopia. While the latter "starts with a local problem, then looks around *among existing materials* for things to fix it with," the engineer "doesn't really feel she's started to work . . . until she's got an overarching principle to apply to the solution of the problem, which she then implements as carefully and accurately as possible by precise technical means" (*Shorter Views* 331, emphasis added). This description gets to the heart of Delany's spatializing logic: heterotopia is built from the surrounding ideas, while utopia is drawn from elsewhere, its scaffolding imported and erected (however ill-fittingly) overtop of the existing space.¹⁴⁶ Thus, although most critics discuss the utopian impulse in Delany's work (for example, Davidson 13, Hubbs 345, Muñoz 52, Nyong'o 747, etc.), keeping the writer's own

¹⁴⁵ Here Foucault makes a subtle but important distinction between "space" and "place." Space, for Foucault, is epistemological in character—it shapes how we understand bodies and motion. Thus, when he describes the contemporary era as "the epoch of space" ("Of Other Spaces" 22) over the nineteenth century's focus on time, we can understand how space is the quality that structures dwelling within the world. Place, meanwhile, signifies physically extant, bounded locales. Specific places exist within the categorical ordering of space. Thus, Foucault's title "Of Other Spaces" gains an added resonance: it is not simply about the construction of different areas within a wider horizon or ecology, but specifically locations or topologies that possess a different ontological character.

¹⁴⁶ Incidentally, then, Delany lines up precisely with Muñoz's reading of "potentiality," a "certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense" (9). Muñoz considers potentiality to be a key term for his reading of utopia, and Muñoz devotes an entire chapter of *Cruising Utopia* to Delany's memoir *The Motion of Light in Water* to depicting the temporal and spatial power of the quotidian queer utopia.

discomfort with the term is an important one in understanding his project, especially in regard to his fictional work on AIDS.¹⁴⁷

Delany adds another term into the mix when, in the opening disclaimer to his 1994 novel *The Mad Man*, he explains that the events of the novel are not realistic but rather a “pornotopic fantasy” (xiii).¹⁴⁸ He reiterates this point in an interview with Thomas L. Long, stating, “I suppose I ought to be flattered by some readers’ confusing it with realism. But, finally, it *is* a pornographic work. Its venue is pornotopia, not a realistic portray of life on New York’s Upper West Side, for all I have used that as the basis of what I wrote” (*Shorter Views* 133). Delany’s movement is interesting here: he states that Manhattan serves as the model or template for his pornographic world in *The Mad Man*, but then has charged its character with something that breaks it from a realist discourse. Thus, the confusion of these critics is perhaps understandable, for Delany is overlaying his fantasy landscape overtop of a recognizable and traversable urban ecology. The author describes “pornotopia” as “the place where pornography occurs the place where any relationship can become sexualized in a moment” (*Shorter Views* 133). It is a New York City overwritten, reinscribed as a place where queer contact is always on the cusp of realization. As Darieck Scott writes, pornotopia differentiates itself from utopia

¹⁴⁷ Indeed, while Guy Davidson notes at the outset of his article the same concerns Delany possesses over the concept of utopia, he frames his reading of *The Mad Man* solely through “the ‘future-oriented’ potential within eros,” and notes that “[t]he decidedly contemporary, gritty, and sometimes grim New York City setting of Delany’s novel does not, of course, constitute a utopia, per se” (14). It will be the aim of this chapter to challenge this temporally deferred project that Davidson sees here in favour of the present possibilities of the queer topology Delany is interested in constructing (and challenging).

¹⁴⁸ In spite of this description, and Delany’s assurances to his audience in the “Disclaimer” that the acts performed are not physically possible, Davis repeatedly characterizes *The Mad Man* as a “realistic” novel (164, 179, 184). Davis reasons that while “it’s true that all the material of the novel has *some* connection with sex,” ultimately “the connections are by no means always direct” (181).

by not imagining an emancipatory place, and instead positing an “asymptotic” movement toward that location, thereby performing a “working-backwards toward utopia” (*Abjection* 208). Likewise, Muñoz refers to Delany’s vision of pornotopia as “anti-antirelational” queer theory, depicting “pornographic communal rapture” in place of the (self)-destructive insular *jouissance* celebrated by theorists like Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman (14).¹⁴⁹ The pornotopia, the place of “*apocalyptic sexuality*” (Scott, *Abjection* 240) where the emphasis is less on the destruction than the paradigm-shifting revelation, helps to foreground Delany’s interests in thinking through a transformative topology.

Whether utopia, heterotopia, or pornotopia, Delany’s work, fictional and critical, is informed by a connection to using the inhabited space to construct a vision of queer possibility. Thus, I wish to shift the register of discussions about Delany’s AIDS fiction to focus on its “()topian” quality, its foregrounding of potential spaces in order to grasp the immanence of queer identities and relations, rather than thinking through some kind of idealized, suspended temporality. Indeed, my neologism ()*topia* is intended to

¹⁴⁹ Bersani and Edelman are primary thinkers associated with the “anti-relational” queer movement. In *Homos*, Bersani argues that “we should be questioning the value of community and, even more fundamentally, the question of relationality itself,” because, while visible LGBT communities are extant and politically active, Bersani adds that “it is also true that the improvement [of the lives of LGBT Americans] has left oppressive social structures intact, [so] we might wish to cultivate the *anticommunication* impulses inherent in homo-ness” (52, 53). Picking up on this idea of queerness as being innately oppositional, Edelman in his polemical *No Future*, asserts the figure of the queer as “outside and beyond ... political symptoms, the place of the social order’s death drive: a place, to be sure, of abjection expressed in the stigma” (3). More than just being a philosophical residuum of a liberal order, Edelman suggests that “queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure” (3). Edelman pushes the concept of queerness to its figural extreme, engaging implicit beliefs of discourses constructed around queer identities. Muñoz, for his part, pushes back against these theories, seeing in them the implication of “the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference,” to which race, gender, class, etc. are all derivations (11). Muñoz affirmation of “the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity” is a stark rebuke to Edelman, swapping out his no futurity for a utopian queer futurity. Muñoz selects Delany as one of his exemplars of this queer futurity, and indeed, in spite of the failures and difficulties of creating connections between people that I will explore in this chapter, Delany’s fiction as a whole can be characterized as dramatizations of relationality.

foreground not just the spatial approach that dominates Delany's writing about AIDS, but also its necessarily undetermined character. Space cannot be definitively u-, hetero-, porno-, or even dystopian for Delany because that space is constantly being configured and reconfigured under the deployment of discursive strategies. Space is the hypostatic point for thinking through questions of queer identity and community, and for countering the hegemonic rhetoric of infection that is deployed to signify both queer bodies and queer spaces as somehow innately sick. Rather than retreating from such rhetorical approaches, Delany attempts to deconstruct the internal logic that orders such readings, and redeploy them in an affirmative way. Susan Sontag ends *AIDS and Its Metaphors* with a call to action, asserting that "the metaphors [of AIDS] cannot be distanced just by abstaining from them. They have to be exposed, criticized, belabored, used up" (94),¹⁵⁰ and Delany's writings on AIDS attempt to explore such a plan of action by rethinking the way that bodies and spaces are affectively associated with one another. This is the essence of Delany's project on discursively engaging with the virus.

Delany's first AIDS work, the novella *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, can be thought of through the metonymic logic of heterotopia—in placing two narrative spaces ("present-day" Manhattan and fantastical Nevèryon) in parallel with one another, and locating spaces of crossover between the two, Delany is interested in the way that the boundary or border line illustrates the concept of containment. The novella is fired by characters in the "real" world and in the fictional Nevèryon who try to transcend their

¹⁵⁰ Treichler, while sympathetic to Sontag's project of challenging the metaphorical inflections AIDS is given, does not accept the ends of Sontag's goal, to do away with such metaphorical language: "[n]o matter how much we desire, with Susan Sontag, to resist treating illness as metaphor, illness *is* metaphor, and this semantic work—this work to 'make sense of' AIDS—must be done" (14).

spaces, escape the spatial logics and ideologies that imbricate them within the narrative of disease transmission. The fact that *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* is characterized by the failure to transcend, to cross over, to locate a vector of escape beyond the twin plagues afflicting these spaces is important to Delany's thinking, as it suggests that there is not a simple border that can be transgressed in order to flee into a space outside the virus. Meanwhile, in *The Mad Man*, Delany takes a different approach, reworking the supposedly "corrupt" spaces and "toxic" bodies that inhabit them toward demonstrating how a self-sustaining social system can flourish and thrive even in the midst of an epidemic outbreak. His pornotopian landscape is one that rejects the redemptive logics of a "pure," "healthy" rural space and a decayed, infection-prone urban space. Rather, Delany locates within the cityspace queer topologies whose rules do not conform to the larger, oppressive logics of heteronormative space.

For Delany, the image and the rhetoric of the borderline —between people, and between places—is the signature metaphor of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, and his self-consciously poststructuralist approach to writing about AIDS fictionally is directed at which boundaries have been erected toward damaging ends, which boundaries are impossible to surpass, and what spaces can exist (and flourish) within circumscribed spaces. The spaces of AIDS are lined with innumerable marks of boundaries permeable and impermeable, and Delany's work explores how fundamental they are to understanding AIDS discourse.

3.4 *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals: Crossing the Bridge of Lost Desire*

A major source of the fear in the first years of the AIDS epidemic stemmed from its unknowability. The syndrome was understandable only after it had begun to manifest, long after the virus had damaged the immune system beyond repair. By the time AIDS was visible, it was too late. As noted above, it was not until 1984 that HIV was publicly understood as the causal agent of AIDS; in those early years, that lack of a familiar scientific narrative invoked terror. If, as Wald aptly notes, “[t]he identification of a virus generated a viral narrative” (216), then the years prior to the isolation of the microbe offer a less rigidly organized narrative. Indeed, “occasionally referred to as the first AIDS novel” (Hirtle 319), Delany’s *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*¹⁵¹ is interested not in providing a fantastical outbreak narrative for AIDS, but something more ambitious. At the end of the novella, “Chip” (the real-life nickname of Delany and his quasi-fictional persona within the novella), muses on how AIDS, prior to the discovery of HIV, is a “microbiologically unagented terror” (335). The lack of a clear epidemiological causation in the first years of the crisis removes that familiar narrative of microbial infection and direction. It is that lack of structure that Delany is interested in exploring in *Plagues*, the way that homophobic and queer narratives attempt to map and navigate spaces that seem to be shot through with the dangers of infection.

¹⁵¹ Hereafter referred to as “*Plagues*.”

*Plagues*¹⁵² is a dense novella, weaving together sword-and-sorcery fantasy with contemporary naturalistic writing. The novella is bifurcated between the fantastical land of Nevèrjyon (and its capital city of Kolhari) in the midst of a mysterious outbreak of a plague, and a depiction of early 1980s Manhattan traversed and narrated by Chip in the enigmatic and uncertain first years of the AIDS crisis.¹⁵³ What links these two cities, ecologies, and genres (realism and fantasy) in the novel's narrative is the virus that is known only through its victims (urban gay men). Toward the end of the novella, Leslie K. Steiner (another of Delany's fictional personae who is a critic from the future metatextually commenting on the novella itself) argues that the reason for creating such a parallel between two spaces is "maybe he [Delany] wasn't *trying* to allegorize a political situation. Maybe he was trying to allegorize a feeling" (333).¹⁵⁴ Steiner's words suggest the novel is an affective project, attempting to understand the similitude of pain, loss, fear, and continuity in two vastly different spaces. What goes unsaid by Steiner, but which is just as clear, is the implication that space *does* matter in constructing these narrative worlds (ones which Delany, the archetypal postmodern writer, is clear to point out *are* authorial constructions [268]). How people navigate the space they inhabit, how they find it politically or socially altered in the midst of plague, and how disease and

¹⁵² *Plagues* is a story in the collection *Flight from Nevèrjyon*, the third of four books in Delany's Nevèrjyon series. For thorough accountings of the Nevèrjyon series, see Burnett, Johnston, and Kelso.

¹⁵³ Indeed, much of the Manhattan sections of the novels are lightly edited from Delany's own voluminous correspondence from the time. See *1984*.

¹⁵⁴ S.L. Kermit, another of Delany's fictional personae, as well as Leslie Steiner's interlocutor, criticizes this reading in the novel's most self-reflexive episode, arguing that Delany "doesn't capture—or 'document,' to use his word—the feel of the gay community between eighty-two and eighty-four" and referring to Kolhari as, contra New York, "*very* smalltown." Kermit sums up the preceding *Plagues* by calling it an "old, *old*, old story" without "a new—much less radical—thing *in* it! And I don't like it one bit" (326-7). In constructing his postmodern fictional ecology, Delany remains aware of its inherent limitations.

viruses serve to organize the limitations or boundary lines of spatial thinking, appear clearly throughout Delany's AIDS work.

Another of the links and doublings that connect Manhattan to Kolhari is the way in which space is biopolitically monitored and policed, as it is viewed as carrying the unknown diseases within its very architecture. A stoneworker in Kolhari lashes out at the Bridge of Lost Desire, a central throughway in the city, striking it repeatedly with a hammer. When stopped by the crowd, the stoneworker cries out, "I'm tearing it down ... this overground sewer! ... You can be sure, here is where you give it to one another, like a deadly secret you whisper in the dark from this one to that. Can't you see it? This is where it comes from, the plague!" (257). The stoneworker's failed assault on the bridge and his rationalization to the crowd intimately tie together the concepts of identity and place. The Bridge of Lost Desire—a site of sanctioned prostitution (258)—becomes a vector for social contamination and a breeding ground for physical disease. The space is both *queered* and *infected*, and the response to this is to destroy the space, remove it from existence and consign it to the memories of its inhabitants. On the following pages, Delany transposes this scene to modern-day Manhattan. Chip's friend Ted tells him about a movie theater where he cruises, in which:

he found written in red paint on the john wall:

AIDS PATIENTS CRUISE HERE!

[...]

It could have been someone who knew something and was trying to warn people.

It could have been somebody who just wanted to stop the cruising. Or it could have been someone who didn't get what he wanted there sexually and was just

bitching. But any way you read it, you didn't want to be there. (258-9)¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ A similar moment is recounted by Delany in a letter to his friend Robert Bravard "at the height of the most hysterical media coverage of the disease" (1984 16). Entering a tearoom in the Manhattan subway system, Delany finds that "somebody had come in and filled both the urinals and the commodes to the brim with plaster of Paris, which had now hardened into bulging swirls, rendering them unusable" (16). Delany

This anecdotal moment again yokes queerness and infection to specific places, anchoring them to a physical site. The virus is given a locus point, like standing pools of water, as a means of combatting the infection. On the Manhattan side of the novel's bridge the violence directed against space isn't quite so literal, but is about inscribing space in such a way as to justify its destruction by the forces of control.

The longest section of the novella details the travels of an Kolhari nobleman known as The Master, who is obsessed with a legendary, quasi-mythical architect Belham. The Master seeks to travel throughout Nevèryon in order to retrace Belham's steps and reconstruct the identity of the mysterious builder. The Master looks at the map he makes of Belham's supposed movements and refers to it as the "Great Work," marvelling at "[t]he logic, the order, the sheer reasonableness of it, in the lines that crossed the geographical signs for mountains and rivers and forests, was as beautiful as—I thought then—truth must always be" (277). It is in the graphic representation that The Master announces: "[t]here was Belham's life!" (277). Not just in its graphic representation of a life, but more specifically in its incarnation as a map, The Master associates Belham's life and identity with his movements. The Master's belief is that

is unsure whether this action is performed by "paranoid straights" or "some socially conscientious gays who thought ... they were protecting the health chances of their fellow gays in the community" (although he leans toward the latter interpretation), because the effect is ultimately the same—a destruction of place as the means of preventing the spread of the disease. Yet, as Delany notes when he checks in on the washroom a few days later, "[t]he only thing that seemed to have occurred is that those odd straights whose used the facilities for that daily ... leak on the way home from work had realized that the place was now not functioning. So the only users at all were from the gay community ... Not, I suspect, the intended result" (16). The attempted control of urban sites of contact as a means of controlling queer encounter (which is conflated with the spread of disease) backfires, turning the place into a place of only queer contact. These moments, fictional and real, demonstrate the logic that sutures queer bodies and spaces with emergent diseases to show the slippage between an illness that affects people to the people as the originator of that illness.

each new location will unveil more about Belham until he has managed to collect (and, subsequently, publish) the history. Indeed, The Master and his retinue travel across Nevèryon, moving backwards through Belham's life as though they were the stations of the cross, hoping "to comprehend the great and sweeping pattern of a great man's sweeping life" (278). In these moments, The Master suggests that the map of a territory and one's life are coterminous, and that space can incarnate and give shape to the identity of a person.

Of course, The Master's Great Work is derailed almost as soon as it begins. Upon arriving in the town where Belham was supposed to have died after a drunken fall, a villager tells The Master that the actual town had moved in the intervening period. Later reflecting on the incident, The Master realizes that "new trees would have grown up and old ones must have come down, so that the actual site would appear different, anyway, in just those details I'd hoped, til then, to recapture by presence" (280). It is here when The Master realizes that the affinity between landscape and person is not exact, and that the possibility of perfect representation or reworking is by necessity impossible. This revelation worries The Master, whose perspective is that a total spatial experience can forge a connection with people from the past. Like the thinking that suggests queer bodies and urban spaces share some insidious toxic quality, The Master is convinced that the territory incarnates the totality of Belham's life. As his project becomes an increasingly hopeless task, The Master laments that "where, before, I'd had supreme order, now I had incompleteness and imprecision superimposed on inaccuracy and error" (293). Racing then to the place of Belham's supposed birth, The Master is informed by a local that "I've heard [Belham] was born in practically every village in the south" (297).

The Master naively believes in the unchanging nature of space, that it holds an essence of identity that can be understood, and that the origin point is of primary importance to grasping a life. But as Belham's origin becomes fully obscured, The Master's project finally stalls out. He admits to himself that "Belham's ability to create wonders of abstraction and stone design from what *he'd* seen in [towns and villages] was just not the same as my little ability to re-create what even then I was becoming more and more wary of calling his 'life'" (298). The Master has, up until now, been a consummate metonymist, thinking of how the linking chains of contiguity bring him within the orbit of Belham and make his work, in a sense, of a similar quality. He admits in this moment that the fact that these acts are different, split by time, place, class, and characteristic, means that there are some boundary lines that cannot be crossed through substitution.

The confrontation with the impassibility of some borders is made literal in the final movement of the episode. Desiring to abandon his project and his loyal followers rather than admit to them that the project has collapsed, The Master tells himself that:

We were at the southernmost edge of what is called Nevèryon
I knew it:
We were at the southernmost edge of my map.
And that map *was* Nevèryon. (300)

Here again, as The Master conflates the representation with the thing it represents, his parallel sentences converge suddenly in the idea that the map is the territory, and that fleeing south beyond Nevèryon, he can maneuver beyond the space of his failures to which he feels bound. And yet before he can embark on this further journey, he is stopped by what he believes to be a monster hiding in the woods. Although neither he nor his companions ever see the creature, The Master is frightened enough to abort his attempts to escape Nevèryon and instead return to Kolhari. What is most interesting about

this encounter is how The Master narrates it. Instead of focusing on the monster itself, he decides to muse on the concept of what a monster is, explaining that monsters are formed from *discourse*—the rumours, gossip, and whispered talk that bubble up around a person’s actual life. The Master states that “[w]hat I had been pursuing was not Belham but the monster *called* Belham. And what my whole journey had taught me was precisely what *sort* of monster it was: it was made, as all such monsters are, of contradiction, supposition, miscalculation, impossibility, and ignorance” (300).¹⁵⁶ The Master comments that he “had encountered some monster god who roamed our borders, preventing such defections as I had foolishly hoped for” (302). Monsters, both literal and figurative, patrol and enforce the uncrossable boundary lines in *Plagues*. As Delany later commented to Thomas L. Long, this monstrous figure represents “the evil monster of desire,” a desire “of the reader to make [disparate facts and ideas] into a whole, to form them into a coherent entity” (qtd. in Long 348). Both The Master’s attempt to reincarnate the life of Belham through space, as well his musings of fleeing beyond the known borders of the world are strategies of escape, are failed attempts at transcendence. In both cases, The Master fails and is recalled to himself and his immanence. This lengthy portion of *Plagues* helps to articulate Delany’s concerns with the idea of coherently mapping an identity, of using knowledge of topology toward some kind of transcendent flight into another identity, a vector of escape.

¹⁵⁶ This structuring of description mirrors Delany’s claim in “The Rhetoric of Sex/The Discourse of Desire” that a rhetoric that challenges hegemonic discourse “is insistent, accurate, analytical, and articulate” (*Shorter Views* 56).

These threads of the biopolitics of space, the ideas of transcending one's place and identity, and the attention to failure are all brought together at the end of *Plagues*. Alarmed at the spread of the plague, the ruling class of Kolhari plans a massive Carnival as a distraction. Ostensibly designed as a celebration for Gorgik the Liberator, a slave-turned-warrior whom the government promotes to a municipal sinecure,¹⁵⁷ the real reasoning is “to get [the people's] minds off this unbearable plague!” (216). The intention is clear: awareness is threatening, can turn the discontented of the city toward collective action against Kolhari's governmental forces. And so the Carnival acts as a kind of immunity of forgetting, attempting to overwrite the fear of plague with a story of (empty) triumph. The Carnival is situated along the Bridge of Lost Desire; beneath it, however, “[i]n [the] oldest, central section of our city” (324), a secret ritual that acts as a counter-festival is planned. Various members of Kolhari (including, among other recurring characters, The Master) come together beneath the bridge to witness the “Calling of the Amnewor,” an ancient ritual that involves summoning an old, pagan god.¹⁵⁸ This practice, performed by a nameless Wizard, opens with the claim that “[f]ailure signs our beginning ... [and f]ailure will sign our end” (321). What separates the ritual below from the party above is the “realization of that failure,” the conscious understanding of the inability to cure the plague or fix what will occur (321). The Carnival along the bridge

¹⁵⁷ Although Gorgik does not appear in *Plagues*, he is often the protagonist in other Nevèryon stories. Insofar as there is a “main character” in this series, it is Gorgik.

¹⁵⁸ Within Kolhari, the official religious icons are various nameless gods. It is only older gods that are given names. As the (middle-aged) Child Empress Ynelgo notes to one of her attendants, “[t]hese nameless gods have created a barrier of silence that has imprisoned these malignant and alien deities and demons till their callings have been stripped of terror” (228). These prophylactic gods are meant to insulate against not the terrors themselves, but the ability to conjure up the terrors through their significations. Delany is drawing a clear parallel between the nameless gods and the discourse of governmental silence around the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.

and the ritual beneath it act as mirrors of one another, geographically and conceptually—they inhabit the same space, but one performs an act of performative forgetting, and the other of conscious remembrance. This is central to Delany’s notion of ()topia: the space is shaped by the rhetoric deployed toward it. While the Carnival is used to make people forget about the threat of the plague, a kind of narrative forgetting, those below the bridge ritualize that inability to escape or transcend a threat.

The Calling of the Amnewor is a highly formalized series of actions. The audience is placed in a dark chamber facing a throne, upon which is seated a desiccated corpse. This skeleton is not, the Wizard makes clear, some kind of sacrifice, but rather the medium by which the Amnewor will make contact with the living audience, whose Call will “animate ... however marginally ... this symbol of our mortality which we have enthroned for the night” (321). Behind the audience, the Wizard informs them, is the monstrous, chimeric form of the Amnewor, whom the Wizard repeatedly implores the audience not to gaze upon, lest they be devoured by the old god. When the Amnewor successfully calls to the skeletal figure, it rises from its death and begins a halting march toward its audience, guided by a mute girl wielding a staff and wearing a mask to protect her from the annihilatory gaze of the god (323). At the outset, this ritualization seems straightforward: the Wizard refers to the animated corpse as the attendees’ “champion,” and links it analogically to the triumphant Gorgik who above is likewise marching to his destination at the city’s central castle (320, 321, 324). The similitude between the audience and the corpse, who was once like them, is called forth to confront the Amnewor, as only the dead “can face the Amnewor from vanquishing distance” (321).

All of the above proceeds on the unspoken but implicit assumption that the Amnewor is a representation of death. Yet as the Wizard narrates to his audience (both present and reading), “[t]he Amnewor is, you know, a god of edges, borders, and boundaries” (323).¹⁵⁹ While the Kolharian ritualists may already be aware of this fact, the naming of the Amnewor as a border god changes the tenor of the entire scene. The Amnewor is not the god of the border between life and death, for “she does not care what distinctions she guards, or how we sex her in homage to the concept of distinction itself. She only cares that distinctions exist” (323).¹⁶⁰ In the Wizard’s self-creating narration, the positions shift, and the passive Kolhari audience, which seemed to be allied with the corpse against the looming god, is now caught between the god and this more palpable figure of death. As the deceased warrior reaches out to the audience, the Wizard tells them that “*you* are the border he must pass, transgress, obliterate with some terminal motion to become one with what animates him,” while the Amnewor is what, “indeed, guards *you*” (323). Were the audience to look away from the shambling *memento mori* in front of them, then “[y]ou will be defeated” as corpse and the border-concept of the

¹⁵⁹ The Wizard adds that “[y]ou may have even encountered her [the Amnewor], reeking and putrid on some overhung night, as you tried to get from here to there, all at once too intensely aware of what the separation between them meant” (323), which makes clear that the being encountered by The Master in the woods (a story that takes place several decades before the ritual) was some iteration of the Amnewor.

¹⁶⁰ Likewise, although as mentioned earlier the ritual takes place in the central hub of Kolhari, the Wizard claims that even “this displacement to the center she [the Amnewor] has not much changed her nature; for no matter how Nevèryon expands, even as it reaches out to encompass death and the stars, she’ll still prow and linger along its rim” (323). This Derridean moment suggests that the border and the boundary line are more than just geographical properties, that distinctions and borders can be erected anywhere and called forth at any time. Darieck Scott discusses the concept of namelessness and godliness in Delany’s fiction at length, noting that “Delany’s nameless god[s] [are] a way of figuring the endlessness of meaning’s deferral. . . . But we the readers know, especially because we are *reading* the word ‘nameless’ across a number of texts, that nameless is but another name and cannot escape this play: what namelessness would then suggest is the flailing quality of what it attempts and how it must fail” (“Divinities” 715). This reading highlights again the sense of flight that characterizes all of *Plagues*.

Amnewor would merge into one seamless whole. The living people become boundary lines that must be upheld. This significant shift in the dramatization of the ritual dissociates the audience from their champion and places them in a different, stranger position. Up until this point, *Plagues* has detailed the way spaces and bodies are consigned as carriers of plague, and how attempts to transgress these barriers are met with failure or incomprehension, and the ritual has seemingly reproduced this fact by allying the living humans with their dead compatriot against the unknowable Amnewor. At this point, however, the Kolharians shift, become representatives of the border that the now-alien deathly figure must not cross.

The ritual ends with the revived corpse, unable to pass by his gazing audience, crumpling into a pile of detritus at their feet. The Wizard announces this event a moment of hope:

[t]hat he fails (again, and again, and again) to transgress the boundary you represent, between the possible and the probable, the imprecise and the precise, the dying and the dead, the surmised and the certain, that (once more) he does not join with the absolute outside which, you are sure though you have never seen her, controls you unto life and death means there is some hope that we need not close forever and absolutely with the power of our own despair, that some informative contradiction remains to be untangled, which may define our distance between our lives and the plague. (325)

The Wizard's revelation that this Calling of the Amnewor has been a performative act of failure, of mobilizing borders against the complete collapse of signifiers into their meanings, that there remains some kind of hope to challenge the possibility of death's dominion, is perhaps a minor one. But as the Wizard notes in the final lines of his ritual, "it is the discrepancy, the contradiction, the gap between what you recall and what you can say . . . that vouches safe our hope, that indicates the possibility of something more, just as, at this end, its total articulation . . . signs, again, our failure" (326). It is the

possibility of the roots of discourse—the words utilized to make up such pronouncements about queer identity and space—are never univocal, that there is always some space for maneuverability, for rewriting and resignifying to take place. Boundaries heretofore have represented impediments to community, contact, care, and understanding. Yet at this moment—the densest and most resonant episode of *Plagues*—the boundary is what circumscribes the plague’s sovereignty. Failure, then, is not simply an act of negation, but also an act of prolonging, of making the possibility of a better, more just connection a reality. For, as *Plagues* continually dramatizes through its spatial and temporal dislocations, one can never truly get outside of one’s place. Delany is suggesting that the attempts to maneuver outside of the inhabited space in order to gain a sense of perspective are doomed to failure, but those failures are cause for speculation, and for hope.

Plagues ends with characters from Manhattan and Kolhari encountering one another. Chip, while walking through Riverside Park (the site of John Marr’s first few excited encounters with homeless men in *The Mad Man*),¹⁶¹ encounters Noyeed, another of the recurring cast of the Nevēryon series, and a man who has managed to successfully

¹⁶¹ True to the doubling nature of the novella, this final moment recalls an earlier one in *Plagues*, where Chip’s friend Ted is crossing a bridge and finds himself amid “some kind of carnival” (259), suggesting the bleed-over between contemporary Manhattan and fantastical Kolhari. The bridge magically provides connections across cities separated by space, time, and reality. On the bridge Ted encounters the Kolhari citizen Noyeed, and asks him if he is “worried about the plague,” then tells Chip that “I know you’re supposed to call it an epidemic. But I swear, almost every time I ask anybody what they think about AIDS, they look at me and say: ‘Age? What do you mean, “age”?’” (259). In opting for a general term of “plague” instead of the more contemporary terminology of AIDS, Ted unwittingly opens the dialogue up to the crossing-over Kolhari citizen (as the denizens of that city have no medical terminology for their enigmatic disease, and refer to it solely as “the plague”). More intriguingly, as Ted continues to speak to the silent stranger, he asks him to leave the carnival and instead join him at “a ceremony. Or a program. . . . It’s the Calling of the Amnewor” (259). Ted finds this moment eerie: “is that the weirdest thing? I don’t know where the words came from” (259). Ted’s unwitting knowledge of the ritual suggests that it has a relevance not just for the citizens of Kolhari, but everyone living under the plagues.

flee from the fantasy world and into the “real” one. While in all previous encounters with Noyeed the character has been mute, he is able to now-haltingly speak and attempts to narrate his long journey from Kolhari to Manhattan: from attending the Calling of the Amnewor to his flight (via dragon) from Nevèryon to Manhattan. When Noyeed pauses in his reflection because his English is too poor, Chip encourages him to “[t]ell me in your own language I’ll understand” (346). Chip’s narrative is then suspended for a prolonged explanation by Noyeed, who lyrically recounts his egress from Nevèryon. At the end of his story, in the novel’s final line of dialogue, Chip asks him “how do you find our strange and terrible land? Have you heard that we have plagues of our own?” (350). Their conversation breaks off there, and in the novel’s final lines, Chip notes that “he looked at me across the fire, turned to the river ... then looked at me again. And I would have sworn, on that chill spring night, he no longer understood me” (350). The conversation between Chip and Noyeed is initiated by discussing disease, and it ends at disease as well. While the novel’s closing tableau of two men near in proximity but separated by language underscores the ambiguity of the moment, there is, in this dialogic encounter, the possibility of some forging of a communal relation between the two. Although the shared language of Chip and Noyeed falters and vanishes, the possibility of its return remains, for it ends with inhabitants of different worlds sharing the same space. *Plagues*, written as it is during the first few years of the AIDS epidemic, is not a narrative of optimism, but asserts that fantastical escape is not what is needed during the time of an epidemic, when bodies and spaces are signified as being somehow contaminated.

Concluding an interview for *Camera Obscura* magazine in 1988, Delany remarks on how, despite the label of “fantasy,” his Nevèryon series is just as concerned with

relevant questions of history, social organization, and identity, as more “literary” genres. He notes that “I would only warn the buyer [of the collection] that anyone who expects fantasy to escape them in any way, simply through its particular order of mimesis, will be bitterly disappointed” (*Silent Interviews* 162). Fantasy does not insulate one from the effects of history, historiography, and the attempts to render a social reality in writing. Despite the non-mimetic landscape of Nevèryon, Delany is determined, in his fiction, to demonstrate that such questions organize and structure ways of thinking about space and community. In *Plagues*, Delany has constructed two parallel worlds, populated by similarities: a mysterious illness, a disinterested, conservative governmental structure, and a series of figures looking for some kind of escape, some means of gaining a perspective on the events to which they are subject. Neither Nevèryon nor Earth is the utopian escape that would make this work a fantasy. In creating two parallel epidemics, in two worlds abutting each other, Delany is focused not on a kind of escape—a *Flight from Nevèryon*, as the title of the larger collection implies—but the ways in which political and social connections are shaped through shared, overlapping space and experience. Delany is not interested in fostering a fantasy of escape, not because these borders are too strong but because there is nothing *beyond* those borders. Instead, understanding the necessity of inhabiting a space and reworking the discourse therein is vital to articulating a vision of community. The prefix that introduces ()topia is constantly rewritten, and it is necessary, then, to understand that space in order to assert an affirming prefix. While the affect of *Plagues* is one of uncertainty and fear, it is also about the importance of space in Delany’s thinking. In the years following the publication of *Plagues*, Delany’s fiction will attempt to push on with this work begun in the first text.

3.5 *The Mad Man* and the Ecology of Queer Space

If *Plagues* serves as a document to the feelings of fear and ambiguity during the early years of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, *The Mad Man*, composed ten years later, demonstrates a shift away from such pessimism in Delany's writing in the intervening years. *The Mad Man* is a sprawling, 500-page tome detailing the life of John Marr, a queer black graduate student of philosophy in New York City, working on a thesis about Timothy Hasler, a (fictional) young, brilliant philosopher murdered under mysterious circumstances in the 1970s. Marr's intellectual odyssey parallels his sexual odyssey. Much of the novel details his growing interest in oral sex, urolagia (piss-drinking), and coprophilia (shit-eating), particularly with the homeless men of Manhattan (his interest is initially piqued by Hasler's detailed descriptions of his own liaisons with homeless men in his diaries). *The Mad Man*, described by Jeffrey Allen Tucker as a transgressive form of novel that consistently crosses the boundaries between the "literary" (the *bildungsroman*, the philosophical novel, the academic satire) and the "paraliterary" (the pornographic book, the sprinklings of science fiction and fantasy throughout the text),¹⁶² serves Delany's method of "decentering" the discourse around AIDS and queer identity (252-53). Pushing Tucker's argument further, I want to suggest that the transgressive nature of *The Mad Man* extends into the way that Delany thinks through and figures spaces that are marked as "queer." His attempt to underscore the

¹⁶² Delany has expressed at length his interest in "paraliterary" genres of writing (sf, pornography, comic books, etc.) and argued for their importance. He describes paraliterature as "*a material practice of social division*" (*Shorter Views* 210), one that exposes the class-based attempts to police culture in through the canonization of the "literary" and exclusion of the "paraliterary." For a more in-depth discussion of Delany's concept of the paraliterary, see his interview with *Para*doxa* magazine (*Shorter Views* 186-217) and his essay "The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism" 218-270).

value of queer space highlight the threats that face it, and demonstrates how space is integral to forming queer community.

Like *The Master in Plagues*, John Marr enters into the world of academia with a naively ambitious plan to write a “grand Hegelian project” titled “*The Systems of the World*” which he envisions as “a six-hundred page tome on psychology, history, reality, and metaphysics, putting them once and for all in their grandly ordered relation” (13, 10). Delany’s gently mocking presentation of graduate student precociousness is also a depiction of the traditional, rigidly ordered idea of philosophy as affixing positions between experiences (like the vast topics Marr enumerates above), creating an organized machinic system. Indeed, during Marr’s occasional trips to the porno theaters of Times Square, looking for fleeting sexual contact, he considers the acrimony between queer subjects (such as the transgender patrons who share the theater with him) and the heteronormative denizens of the city: “[w]e are guilty that we are not them—are not those boys destined to run the systems and cities of the world They, on the other hand, are terrified, lest through some inexplicable accident, some magic happenstance of sympathy or contagion, they might become us” (155). Here Marr explicitly align the operators of political power as the inheritors and organizers of the systems of the world. Those in charge of politically managing—and policing—space are those who are specifically opposed to the persistence of the queer spaces that appear on the margins.¹⁶³ Marr goes

¹⁶³ In a similar thematic key, Christian Ravela reads these systems of the world as a “trope [which] works as a cipher that frames the narrative in terms of the classical *bildungsroman*’s central ideological concerns—the subject’s development in relation to a social order” (97). Ravela focuses specifically on the liberal-humanist concept of the subject that the *bildungsroman* produces; his reading is central to understanding the notion of which bodies are considered the rightful inhabitants of space and which are consigned to the margins and in (or as) the waste.

on to state that “the boys for whom society is made (as well as the city fathers a few of those boys will manage to become) would prefer that none of them [transgender people, and queer people more generally] existed” (155). Those Hegelian systems of order that manage the world become an increasingly unattractive prospect for Marr as he progresses through the novel, learning instead about more queer, spectral kinds of tracing systems.

But there are subterranean systems, ones that seem to escape official discourse. The driving “mystery” of the novel are the circumstances behind the murder of the young genius Timothy Hasler¹⁶⁴ somewhere in the vicinity of the gay bar “the Pit” (135).¹⁶⁵ The enigma baffles Marr’s straight-laced thesis supervisor, Irving Mossman, and proves of almost obsessive interest to Marr and Hasler’s poet friend Almira Adler. Yet when Marr finally goes to the Pit, he is provided with the answer to Hasler’s murder in a straightforward manner. This anticlimactic resolution to the “murder mystery” is summed up when Marr discloses to Mossman that: “[i]t was just a manner of asking the right people the right questions. To a lot of people, it wasn’t a secret at all. Only to the official forces—the police, people like that. It’s a matter of getting yourself in *the right systems*” (487-8, emphasis added). This description sums up, broadly, the progression of *The Mad Man*: Marr’s development from the believer in the rigid ordering of the world to an

¹⁶⁴ Various scholars make note of Hasler’s real-world models. Reed Woodhouse describes Hasler as “a conflation of Wittgenstein, Foucault, and Delany himself” (213), while Scott finds in Hasler reflections of “Foucault, Pasolini, and Hofstadter” (*Abjection* 226). Davis, meanwhile, recognizes as the inspiration for the Hasler character the Anglo-American linguist Richard Montague, “a young . . . gay philosopher, murdered in 1971 by persons unknown” (181). The sheer variety and breadth of philosophical fathers speaks to Delany’s omnivorous knowledge as well as his interest in showing how these various approaches to *doing* philosophy can open up approaches to the world.

¹⁶⁵ The novel would, in fact, win the Lambda Literary Award for “Best Gay Mystery” in 1996 (Ravela 96; Davis 181). As Davis rightly notes, “*The Mad Man* doesn’t *read* like a mystery” (181).

understanding of the plurality of modes of social organization and understanding how they operate.

As in *Plagues*, space is tightly organized and surveilled in *The Mad Man*.

Delany's term for the archons of Manhattan's space are the "city fathers" (*Mad Man* 155). These abstracted forces—who never appear in the flesh in Delany's works, but only as stormclouds on the horizon—constantly endeavour to circumscribe queer identity through the rigorous policing of space. In *The Mad Man*, this occurs through the continuous closure of gay clubs as a response to the AIDS crisis. That novel's protagonist, John Marr, narrates how the city fathers shut down the gay nightclub the Mineshaft, as well as the St. Marks Baths because of gay activists providing live demonstrations of safe sex.¹⁶⁶ "They weren't just showing you how to put on a condom," Marr recounts, "[t]hey were doing live, active, hands-on sexual demonstrations," which "outrage[s]" the city fathers, and leads to these closures (179-80).¹⁶⁷ The logic behind this moment of closure extends beyond just the idea that spaces of queer congregation are possible vectors of spreading HIV—it suggests that queerness is itself linked to the disease, and that its continued public existence is a threat, even when promoting

¹⁶⁶ The Mineshaft, as Ira Tattelman notes, was an "exclusively gay sex club" that opened on Washington Street in the 1970s ("Staging Sex" 300, 305). The St. Marks Baths, meanwhile, established in 1913, "became exclusively gay" in the 1960s and served as a "hotbed of a revolution in public sex that crystallized for many homosexual men the very essence of what it meant to be gay in America in the late 1970s and early 1980s" (Peters, qtd. in Tattelman, "Meaning at the Wall" 399). In each case, Tattelman's analyses highlights the communal character of the club, writing of how the space "unified everyone who was there" ("Staging Sex" 305).

¹⁶⁷ While Marr urges the necessity of safe sex education in queer communities, he is himself rather distanced from some of its practices: "For all my sympathy with [safe sex activists]," he writes in a letter, "let me note that their particular option—condoms, no fluid exchanges—while I feel it is just as valid as mine, still, is *not* mine; indeed, it's not a lot of people's" (*Mad Man* 180). Or, as he puts it more bluntly to his friend Pheldon, "A blowjob with a condom? ... That sounds about as exciting as sucking off a pencil eraser" (179).

prophylactic sexual encounter. Indeed, as Marr remarks, “the etiology of AIDS is astonishingly similar to the etiology of homosexuality itself in the conservative view, that sees it as a disease, i.e. a sickness that can be carried asymptotically for years, until eventually it appears as a sudden and deadly weakening of the system that leaves one a victim of every possible evil contractible” (174). Delany here aligns the discourses of homophobia and AIDS to demonstrate the ways in which lives are circumscribed by discursive controls.

In Marr’s long letter to his supervisor Mossman’s (soon-to-be-ex-) wife Sam, he describes the gay nightlife area of Manhattan, commenting, “[i]t’s meaningful that, with the Strip below it, Hell’s Kitchen a block to the west, the theater district just to the east, and midtown Manhattan above it, this particular area has no name of its own” (148). The gay space lacks a name of its own, even though it does not want for an identity. It is space, in all its presence, even if it lacks a rigid designator. Here again, Delany foregrounds a ()topian rhetoric—the space undergirds the names that are placed upon it. This lack of legitimation within the unofficial discourse of New York City is significant for Marr because it suggests that queer space is almost always being overwritten. Indeed, as he notes a couple of sentences later, the space usually *is* called by a name, but only a relative one: “[o]utsiders tend to call it by any of the names above—‘Theater District,’ ‘Hell’s Kitchen,’ ‘The Strip’—depending from which area they approach it” (148). At the level of signification, the queer space of the city exists as a purely relational entity, its existence absorbed into the directional maps from which people approach it. Yet this directional approach brings for those passers-by the “feeling, as they pass into it and out of it, that something is *nominally* wrong” (148, emphasis added). The queer space of

Manhattan transfigures the borrowed monikers applied to it, grafting it into these spaces while still being marked as somehow different.¹⁶⁸ Queer space is a hypostatic supplement to the understood Manhattan geography, both clearly defined and ghostly in absent name. “[I]t doesn’t really *have* a name,” Le Veuve tells Marr, “[o]r, at least, it doesn’t seem able to keep one when it gets one” (149). Yet in spite of the ephemerality of its name, the place persists. Delany’s queer Manhattan may lack clear geographic markers, may drift between the boundaries, but it is still tied to a specific spot. Parallel lines erupt from within the island, making it a space clearly defined and transversed.

Just as space in *The Mad Man* is coded as being contaminated, queer bodies are continually pathologized throughout the novel. During Marr’s research into Hasler, he discovers that the philosopher was “the most self-tortured of hypochondriacs” (92). Held in the grip of “strange mental and physical jactitations that ... convinced him he was about to be the victim of a brain tumor, heart attack, stroke, or fatal neurological condition” (92), Hasler has nothing physically wrong with him, per medical discourse. These annual doctor’s diagnoses do nothing to dispel his fears; indeed, they only add to them. As Hasler notes in his diaries,

[T]his is as if, from three times a week to three times a day, my body puts me under immediate sentence of death. It sends out signs and signals, little pains in the chest and ribs, tiny glitches in the perception, small dizzinesses, headaches ... which my mind has no other choice but to interpret as the most direct and inexorable statement from an authority in the very heavens: “Within the next ten to twenty seconds, your heart will cease to beat—and you will *die!*”
[...]

¹⁶⁸ Humorously, Marr notes how even the members of Manhattan’s gay scene cannot affix a name to this space. His friend Mark Le Veuve explains that “eight or nine years ago, a bunch of regulars at the bars here started calling it the Minnesota Strip—because that summer four or five farm boys turned up hustling at the Pit who started out in ... Minnesota. But that name only lasted a season” (149).

Then it...doesn't happen.
 But that doesn't prevent the horror accompanying it. (94-95)

For Hasler, the fact that his body does not get the reprieve of death's cessation means that his paralyzing fears become indefinitely prolonged. Here we have the obverse of desire's eternal recession (or the desire for death): a continuous shock of imminent death or disability without the payoff. Hasler is left in a limbo of a body perpetually on the verge of death. Although Hasler dies years before the first reported case of HIV, and although Marr contends that "daily fears of dying don't soak my sheets with sweat every night" (106), this perpetual precipice is meant to link Hasler to Marr and those under the threat of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s—they all live under the sign of a disabling fear, one that lies outside the purview of medical discourse. Hasler's condition and the omnipresent fears of HIV/AIDS permeating queer Manhattan life in the 1980s produce rhetorics of disabled bodies, which become melded, in Delany's conception, with intersecting movements in relation to queerness and ecology. These complex discursive interweavings create the conditions for the erasure of queer bodies and spaces within Manhattan, and *The Mad Man* pushes back against this approach by turning these negative signifiers into possibilities of queer identity and community formation.

For, despite his malady, Hasler finds ways of pushing against his affliction: namely, sex and philosophy. Yet these two ideas should not be thought of as distinct from one another,¹⁶⁹ but as integrally linked. Hasler mentions in his diary that "the only thing

¹⁶⁹ This approach describes how Marr's reticent supervisor Mossman approaches writing about the philosopher. He splits Hasler's life in two, planning to write a biography of the philosopher while Marr's dissertation is to look only at the intellectual side of Hasler's life (26). Yet even this policing of facets of identity is too much for Mossman: he confesses in a letter to Marr that he is giving up on the Hasler biography after reading about the man's queer sexual desires, stating "[w]hat compassion can I have for a

that has been able to halt these endless rehearsals of death ... is philosophy,” while his crush on an undergraduate student—and the sexual release he gets from thinking about him—“left him without a hypochondriacal attack for three wonderful days” (94, 97). Rather than privileging either side of a mind/body dualism, Delany shows how both are necessary curatives to Hasler’s hypochondria. The philosopher’s fears freeze his mind and body by placing them under apprehension of immediate dissolution, and his salvation from these phobias is through indulging in the pleasures of intellectual and physical work. These two tasks even mutually reinforce each other—Hasler’s desire for his student gives him the peace of mind needed to complete an article (97).

Thus, as Marr comes to learn in his own awakening, Hasler cannot be sectioned off into intellectual and private being, as Mossman intends. Rather, Hasler’s intellectual gifts are nurtured by the exploration of his sexual desires. This clearer picture of who Hasler is changes Marr’s relationship not just to his own work (freed from his dissertation paralysis, he publishes several articles for non-academic magazines on Hasler’s life, philosophy, and speculative fiction), but also his increasing engagements with sexual practices. Marr rejects the rigid, map-like systems of the world and takes on Hasler’s interconnected sex-and-writing approach. As such, Marr’s life begins to mirror Hasler’s own.

Timothy Morton, in his influential essay on “Queer Ecology,” explicitly aligns the discourses of ecocriticism and queer theory along their shared interest in intimacy (281), explaining that “[t]o contemplate ecology’s unfathomable intimacies is to imagine

man who, once a week, bought a bottle of cheap wine, went out and hunted up an old black wino in the park, the two of them getting blitzed together, till he got the wino to urinate in his mouth?” (47).

pleasures that are not heteronormative, not genital, not geared to ideologies about where the body stops and starts” (280). This identification of queer eroticism as overflowing the boundary designators (of the individual body and the sectioned landscape) aptly characterizes the detailed pornographic scenes of *The Mad Man*. Marr’s first, extensive sexual encounter with the homeless denizens of Manhattan is with a man who refers to himself only as “Piece O’ Shit” (30).¹⁷⁰ Marr’s romantic and sexual partner in the final part of the novel is a man named “Leaky” Sowps, in reference to his sexual gratification from urination—in his own words, “[p]issing on black guys is a real thing with me” (341).¹⁷¹ Tony, another of Marr’s lovers, says of his sexual proclivities: “I guess, somehow, getting into shit, eating it and stuff, bein’ low-down and all, that’s like getting closer to being dead. Making it more natural, more ordinary. It’s warm, ordinary, pleasurable. It makes life easier” (326).¹⁷² In a rhetorical pushback against the coding of queer bodies as contaminated and pathological, Delany dramatizes particularly non-normative forms of sexual intercourse, highlighting the exchange of manifold bodily

¹⁷⁰ Mary Catherine Foltz reads Marr’s experiences with Piece O’ Shit as indicative of the ways sexual pleasure with waste becomes productive and powerful; Delany’s ethical approach is to “do something different with shit” (43). For instance, she describes how what attracts Marr most to Piece O’ Shit is his Yoni rings, which “collect the drippings from the penis and other excretions from the body; therefore, a cheesy substance can be found by the lover willing to venture into the walls of the penis.” Thus, in Marr’s and Piece O’ Shit’s lovemaking, the latter “builds a penis that becomes both a vagina and a breast (a goat’s breast!) that produces the substance that becomes cheese” (49). Waste is never an end in itself, but becomes the site of radically new queer space.

¹⁷¹ An incredulous Marr believes that Leaky is a nickname, but the man avers, “[t]hat’s what my old man named me” (341). Although he previously used the name “Larry” with social workers, he becomes annoyed when they “write it down ‘Lawrence.’ So finally, I decided, what the fuck. My name *was* Leaky, so that’s what I’d tell anybody who asked me. It sure ain’t ‘Lawrence!’” (341). Names hold power in the ordered systems of the world, as seen in the attempt to affix Leaky with a traditional first name. Just as with the nameless queer space in Manhattan, Leaky’s subjectivity precedes any attempt to name him. This is not to say that names hold no power in Delany’s literary world—they are, in fact, a significant aspect of discursive power—but they are not static terms.

¹⁷² The academic Marr informs Tony that his description “would . . . have been worth a whole chapter in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*” (326).

fluids and materials, and sees them not as grotesque, but downright rejuvenating. After a sexual encounter with Leaky, Marr narrates his feeling of total bliss: “there’s another, psychological peace, which, were I religious, I’d describe by saying it feels like you’re doing what God intended you to do, *occupying the space God intended you to occupy*. Perhaps it’s the feeling of desire—not want, or need, or yearning, but desire itself—satisfied” (388, emphasis added). In this significant moment,¹⁷³ Marr ties together, like his forebear Hasler, sex with philosophy, using the two to articulate a poetics of place, a feeling of a sustainable relationality that allows a positive sex to flourish. In the sex that Marr participates in (particularly with Leaky, with whom he ends the novel in domestic bliss [492]), in spaces public or private, a new *periplum* is drawn, one that safely ensconces (albeit perhaps only temporarily) its navigators.

The Mad Man at once reproduces a space where sexual encounter is brimming in every social interaction (Scott, *Abjection* 208) but also an attempt to rescript the dominant ideas of what constitutes sexual pleasure and intimacy. Leaky articulates this idea most eloquently when he tells Marr

I still eat mine [cum], too—unless I’m givin’ it to somebody else to eat for me...that I like enough to give it to. Piss, shit, cum, snot, cockcheese—all that stuff ... That’s like a present that comes from inside you. Inside your own body. I mean: how am I gonna give somebody somethin’ more personal than my own cum, my own piss, my own spit, my own shit? (374)

¹⁷³ Scott and Davidson both highlight this moment as well as a key part of the novel’s understanding of queer relationality. Scott comments that “the loop of desire” for Marr is, at least momentarily, closed, that the relentlessly futural orientation of desire has been somehow short-circuited (*Abjection* 239). Davidson, meanwhile, cautions that “it would perhaps be unwise to take Marr’s experience of ontological plenitude at face value,” but that we can locate “a collective extension of the individual experience of satisfied desire, a bridging of the notionally private experience of sexual feeling and the public experiences of urban identity and interaction” (23). Spatial themes are implicit in both critics’ readings, underpinning the ways that desire’s momentary arrest has created a place (domestic, utopian, or something else) that can be not only inhabited by Marr, but shared with his lover Leaky.

Ravela notes the complex affective economy occurring in this passage: Delany makes no attempt to “romanticize” these bodily excretions, to “associate them with anything but abjection, waste, and ultimately social death,” but that they are still presented as “the stuff of gifts” and therefore “the most intimate gesture” (109).¹⁷⁴ In addition to Ravela’s reading, I would suggest that it is through these acts of bodily exchange that the novel’s characters regain their sense of purpose: Hasler is snapped out of his existential dread by his sexual activities, while Marr is finally able to creatively work around his dissertation writer’s block through his own affairs. Delany depicts these acts as *regenerative*, as communal, modifying the terms of the toxic discourse about queer bodies and AIDS, using them not as symbols of degeneration or impending sickness, but as highly literal acts of recuperation.

Mary Catherine Foltz refers to *The Mad Man* as Delany’s attempt to construct an “excremental ethics,” locating the “pleasures of reveling in the flotsam of late capitalism”

¹⁷⁴ One can detect the register of Georges Bataille in such an arrangement. Bataille’s fascination with the place of waste with respect to the notion of economy occupies much of his intellectual work. In “The Notion of Expenditure,” Bataille explores the realm of contemporary bourgeois capitalism and its distinction from previous modes of socioeconomic structure. He notes that modern bourgeois capitalism rejects the notion of expenditure as part of the economic cycle of accumulation, that the bourgeoisie is “characterized by the refusal in principle of this obligation. It has distinguished itself from the aristocracy through the fact that it has consented only to *spend for itself*, and within itself” (*Visions of Excess* 124). This circumscribed method of accumulation without expenditure points inevitably toward fascism for Bataille—the structuring of a “*homogeneous*” society in which “*heterogeneous*” elements, what Bataille terms “*unproductive expenditure*,” is classified and denigrated as waste (*Visions of Excess* 142). Shannon Winnubst provides a valuable reading of Bataille’s notions of economy and waste as they relate to modalities of power. In her fascinating reading, Winnubst locates within Bataille’s understanding of the model of economic accumulation an anxiety of futurity: “[t]he reduction of our lives to the order of utility forces us to project ourselves endlessly into the future” (183). Bataille describes the realm outside of “utility,” of adherence to economics of scarcity, as “the domain of the sovereign” (qtd. in Winnubst 185). In applying these ideas to *The Mad Man*, we can perhaps extend Bataille’s thinking on the subject to think not just of the sovereign subject, but the community who unfold a heterotopic space inside the borders of consumer capitalism.

(45, 43).¹⁷⁵ This ethical dimension that Foltz sees as undergirding the novel is an essentially ecocritical one, although she does not dwell on this topic: the sewage system that modern urban society is literally founded upon, the one that transports excreta to some unthought other space, is a process that “is ruining our freshwater systems and depleting the fertility of the earth” (42). Waste either goes away, or, when it cannot be ignored, it accrues within the cityspace itself—the city becoming the space of waste and trash, like the homeless bodies that proliferate in Delany’s fiction. Rather than fleeing to the untouched countryside, Delany—through his character John Marr—seeks not only the pleasures of these supposed wasted, diseased figures, but also companionship and community with them. The junked urban space of 1980s Manhattan, ravaged by AIDS, becomes for Delany the foundation of a subterranean topography of queer desire and connection.

The extremes of erotic pleasure that are derived throughout the course of *The Mad Man* are attempts to rethink the network of pleasures and the ordering of desire. This discourse, too, is tied to space. When Marr attends a “Wet Night” at the gay club the Mineshaft (an orgiastic night of beer-fuelled piss-drinking), he literally loses his shirt in the excitement. Fruitlessly looking for it after the night’s festivities, Marr is told by the bartender that he is out of luck: “[a]nything that’s in there, it goes out as garbage” (123).

¹⁷⁵ Intriguingly, Foltz’s analysis does not make reference to Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection. Kristeva famously writes of the abject as “[t]hese body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border” (3). The abject is what limns subjectivity in Kristeva’s reading, is the detritus against which a sense of identity is both revoked and is constantly troubled and haunted. Yet in Delany’s universe, these bodily excretions are not abject, are not cast as horrifying or disgusting, but rather as beneficial, shareable, and erotic. The powers of horror hold no dominion in Delany’s pornotopia.

This philosophy is taken by the marginal homeless men whom Marr becomes increasingly associated with: after a liaison with Crazy Joey, he tells Marr that “[t]he world’s your fuckin’ toilet . . . And don’t you forget it!” (275). In Delany’s narrative, however, this pronouncement is not meant as a nihilistic abrogation of communal engagement; quite the opposite, Joey means this as an empowering thing to say. For the various madmen to which the novel’s title refers, these products of garbage and waste have a powerful ecological and erotic meaning. Waste becomes both a self-conscious act of purgation and a means of engaging with the cast-offs of a late capitalist society (whether this be products such as piss and shit, or the homeless men with whom Marr forges a community).¹⁷⁶ In *The Mad Man*, Delany rejects a recuperative ecological perspective that damns the urban space as a site of corruption (due to queer intimacy) and the space of rehabilitation as being the untouched pastoral landscape. Rather, it is by digging into the queer spaces of the city, ones that have been scripted as corrupt and slated for destruction by the manipulators of the systems of the world, that the queer ecological perspective can come into focus most clearly.

This critique of space and identity is most intense later in *The Mad Man*. As John Marr digs deeper into Hasler’s life and work, he secures an interview with the renowned poet Almira Adler, who was also a close friend of Hasler’s. The entire episode is rich in detail that helps to explore the centrality of place and identity to Delany’s thought. Marr encounters Adler, who is staying at the house of a friend, reading “in a

¹⁷⁶ Delany discusses the possibilities of the “junk city” in his guest lecture at McGill University. He notes that there is a reversibility to the ideological framing of junk, but suggests that “we *live* in Junk City—and it’s a very rich town” (*Shorter Views* 331).

small New York backyard” before immediately correcting himself that “no, this was not a yard: it was a brick-walled garden,” signaling a shift from the prosaic to the uncommonly cultivated “natural” space. Indeed, Marr notes with some wonder that “[i]t’s an odd feeling to walk into a garden and realize that the six-foot mobile slowly below the hook sticking out over the shrubs is a *real* Calder, that the four-foot painted plaster sneaker collapsing elegantly beside the rhododendrons is a *real* Oldenburg” (284, 285). These observations demonstrate that Adler’s space is not only a natural one, but a space specifically cultivated to achieve a highly curated, artificial sense of “natural beauty.” Furthermore, the first thing Marr notices about Adler is that she “wore a silver-gray sweater against a chill that simply wasn’t to be felt in such an enclosed space at this time of year” (284). Marr’s immediate perceptions underscore the sense of displacement he (a young, poor graduate student in Manhattan) feels in relation to the aristocratic Adler. When Marr comments on the pristine beauty of the backyard, Adler remarks, “[i]f all New York were like this, I might move here” (286).

As Marr and Adler discuss Hasler’s life and relationship to the poet, Adler evinces obvious discomfort with Hasler’s homosexuality. “Sex in general was something Tim and I didn’t discuss—very much,” Adler informs Marr, “I’m sure he felt it was a kindness to me, and frankly, it was a kindness from him that I accepted that reticence,” and that she “was never very accepting of Tim’s sexuality” (288, 289). Instead, Adler notes that her discussions with Hasler revolved around “[p]oetry . . . and philosophy” (288), which, given Hasler’s confession earlier in his journal that it is sex and philosophy that help him overcome his anxiety, seems somewhat ironic, especially as Adler

pointedly tells Marr that she intentionally never read Hasler's journals that she had kept in her possession (287-88).

What ties these disparate threads together is the way that Adler begins to link sexual identity with health and place. When Adler first meets Hasler, during a poetry reading that brings her from her native California to New York City, she recalls "thinking that Tim was a marvelous sign for the health of the whole society" (290). Significantly, at this first meeting, Adler is unaware that Tim is gay. As their friendship blossoms, Adler invites Tim to her summer home at Big Sur in California, explaining to Marr that "The Sur is *such a wonderfully therapeutic landscape*" (291, emphasis added). When Adler is informed of Hasler's queerness (by another of her gay friends), she refuses to allow Hasler to invite his friend Pete (mistakenly believing him to be Hasler's boyfriend). When Marr pushes Adler as to why she did not allow Hasler to bring Pete, she divulges that she thought "I was protecting him from his own perversions," then immediately adds that "Breakers' Point is beautiful, *it's healthy*, it's inspiring" (292). The presence of queer sexuality in what Adler terms as a naturally healthy space promises encroaching corruption. Landscape and identity collapse, in Adler's thinking, as mutually constitutive. Thus, while she notes that most of her friends are gay (289), she only likes to have them visit her individually because then she and her cultivated, natural space can help to heal them. As she puts it to Marr, "I suppose that I had somehow incorporated [Breakers' Point] into my vision as a place where these poor, wonderful, brilliant—but, I was sure, deeply wounded—creatures could come, *and I would hold their sickness at bay*, by refusing to let any sign of it within the grounds" (292-93). Adler reads the "natural," beautiful landscape of Breakers' Point, unblighted by the noise and pollution of the urban

space, or indeed by any other sign of human social intersection outside of her own choosing—she notes that “Breakers’ Point doesn’t *have* any neighbors—at least, not within hollering distance! That’s one of the things that’s so wonderful about it” (293)—as a space where it is possible for queer sexuality to be healed, for some normalizing vision of heterosexuality (or blissful asexuality) to subsume the desires she sees as unclean. By contrast, the presence of a queer couple within the grounds threatens to toxify this sacred space, morphing it from a refuge of urban decay and its attendant metaphors into a replication thereof. Indeed, Adler contrasts her rhapsodic descriptions of Breakers’ Point with a description of the Pit, the gay bar outside which Hasler was murdered: “[i]t was an evil place, full of evil young men trading on the desires of pathetic older men” (288).¹⁷⁷

The Adler of the present-day, at the time of her interview with Marr, expresses contrition over her prejudices, in part blaming herself for Hasler’s death (Hasler cuts his trip to Breakers’ Point short because Pete was not allowed to come, and it is during his return to New York that summer that he has his fateful encounter at the Pit). Yet what this episode of *The Mad Man* does is clarify the discourse of associating bodies, sexualities, and spaces. Hasler is repeatedly coded as sick and in need of healing by Adler, and the environment of wealthy, cultivated nature will provide this necessary tonic. Hasler himself may not be HIV-positive, nor even alive during the time of AIDS, but this episode goes to underscore just how queer bodies are coded as somehow poisoned, and

¹⁷⁷ It should be noted that Adler herself never goes to the Pit, and this is a second-hand description she receives from her gay friend Roger. She adds that “I was perfectly furious at Roger for talking about [the Pit] that way, because I really felt that if Tim *had* gone there . . . to reduce it to such absurd and moralistic terms was to preclude ever finding out actually what went on!” (288-89). Considering the way that Adler reduces and moralizes the space of Breakers’ Point, such a similar reaction does not appear out of character.

how such scrutiny and rhetorical attack will only have increased during the AIDS epidemic.

Of course, this is not to suggest that everything about Delany's New York City in *The Mad Man* is indicative of an optimistic fantasy. As he notes in his interview with Long, "[p]ornotopia' is not the 'good sexual place.' (That would be 'Upornotopia' or 'Eupornotopia.')

It's simply *the* 'sexual place'—the place where all can become (apocalyptically) sexual" (*Shorter Views* 133). Delany remains skeptical of the situation of any kind of prefix to a ()topia, for even an affirming one signals a freezing of potentiality into a signifier. Space is constantly being recoded and rewritten by various agents and affects. Even within the queer space of Manhattan, borders and boundaries exist that are not wise to cross. The clearest example of this in *The Mad Man* is the gay bar the Pit, the site of Hasler's murder (and the same place that Crazy Joey will die in the book's climatic sequence, an intentional doubling of the Hasler incident). As the name suggests, the Pit is possessed of an abyssal quality: while the Mine Shaft's name suggests eventually hitting a kind of erotic paydirt, the Pit conjures up only the image of a daunting depthlessness. When Marr asks the Pit's owner about Hasler's death, she tells him, "[d]own here we don't have too long a memory It's probably better that way" (349-50). Meanwhile, a bartender tells Marr about the "parking-lot trick," the protocol to dispose of any murdered Pit patron: "[y]ou take them outside into the parking lot out back—*then* you call the police" (351). The bodies that the Pit devours are regurgitated, decentered from their place of death into the no-place of a back-alley parking lot (outside of the Pit's property boundary line).

The two murders of the novel—Hasler’s in the 1970s and Crazy Joey’s in the 1990s—are perpetrated in the Pit, and both occur for the same reasons. Hasler’s homeless lover, Michael Kerns (known to Marr as “Mad Man Mike,” the leader of the homeless circle whose sexual activities he joins), and Marr’s lover Joey each arrive at the Pit, whose “philosophy,” according to its bartender, is “hustling. . . . That’s all it’s here for” (353). As Ravela remarks, “The Pit’s sexual economy is predicated on a logic of scarcity” (101), one anathema to the productive exchange of waste that Marr and his circle of lovers take part in. Mike and Joey, who each show up and violate the hustling codes of the Pit by “taking it out and flashing it around” (469), incite the murderous rage of two different hustlers who see the strict capitalist logic of buying-and-selling as being violated by the men who are trying to give it away for free, and attack them. Hasler is accidentally stabbed by a hustler, Dave Franitz, while another hustler targets Joey and kills him for violating the club’s protocol of sexual exchange. William Haver thus understands the Pit as the space where “two mutually incompatible economies . . . pleasure [and] production” come to a cataclysmic head (361). The nakedly capitalist hustler ethos of the Pit is unable to incorporate the homeless members whose communal circuit of desire is valueless (the men parody the exchange economy by “selling” one another for a penny, and when Marr attempts to pay more for Leaky, he is told, “[j]ust a penny—you can’t sell a person for no more than that” [*Mad Man* 415]);¹⁷⁸ the specific sites that are incarnated within the cityspace of Manhattan are still subject to barriers that cannot be melded, the capitalist spaces of heavily policed queer desire and the

¹⁷⁸ See Ravela for a detailed discussion on the ways that Delany critiques and parodies economic exchange in late capitalism (particularly 101-104).

“interclass” (Delany, *Times Square* 111) queer circuits cannot seamlessly bleed into one another. Space is at a premium in Delany’s pornotopic New York City, and the transgression of its boundaries is harshly sanctioned. Indeed, Ronnie Apple, a frequent Pit-goer, ironically eulogizes Crazy Joey by stating: “[w]e come to places like this, to pursue our clean and costly pleasures ... and *they* come to soil it all, pollute it with pain and rage and lust” (478). Ronnie here resorts again to the association of the queer body with pollution and uncleanness, this time drawing a further distinction between the older, middle-class, “clean” pleasures that the johns of the Pit seek, and contrasting it with the “soiled” homeless interlopers who have no desire or means to participate in the game of exchange being played nightly.

The Mad Man does not offer a kind of transformative, transcendent vision of queer sex within Manhattan; it is not about Manhattan as an unambiguously queer site. Indeed, as Davidson notes, “Delany gestures towards the dark and disturbing intonation of much of the novel, something that has been passed over in some of the best critical accounts, which emphasize instead the novel’s cheery optimism” (19). *The Mad Man* is not Delany’s attempt to allegorize Manhattan out of existence, into some idealized plateau of queer sex, but rather to map those sites where radical queer relationality are most evident, and to narrate them fully. By having his characters circle the Pit in a repetitive fashion, drawn into its maw in episodes that shatter the optimistic sheen of the homeless men’s community, Delany illustrates the ways in which community is always contingent, always fragile, and not always transferable into any space.

This caution also extends to the people who are able to exist within this queer interclass community which Delany creates. For all of the novel’s construction of

alternative spaces of queer desire, and its attempt to push back against the toxic discourse that surrounds (and attempts to construct) the bodies of queer men in New York City, there is a significant moment where the fantasy seems to break down. In spite of the Disclaimer that opens *The Mad Man*, wherein Delany writes that the following events depict “a set of people, incidents, places, and relations among them that never happened and could not happen for any number of surely self-evident reasons” (xiii), there is not a single depiction of anal sex. This is when the novel shifts out of its “pornotopic fantasy” scenario. The novel’s opening lines are Marr’s assurance to the audience that “I don’t have AIDS. I am surprised that I don’t,” while, in the novel’s closing moments, Marr repeats this assertion to the audience (7, 492). Marr announces that one reason he may not have AIDS is because his sexual excursions have been “since 1980—all oral, not anal” (7). While characters with AIDS appear at the margins of the text, the only character with AIDS who has a significant role within the novel is Marr’s first homeless lover, Piece O’ Shit. After Marr’s first sexual interaction with the man, several years elapse before the two encounter each other again. When they do reconnect, it is during the night, and they engage in another liaison and then fall asleep outside. Marr is later awakened by a truck’s headlights that illuminate the homeless man’s body, and he sees that he is covered in Kaposi’s Sarcoma (193-94). “[S]eeing the lesions on him,” Marr attests, “was like being hit,” and he fantasizes momentarily about waking Piece O’ Shit up to berate him, before a police officer appears and Marr is forced to run away (194). He then notes that “I never saw Piece O’ Shit again,” but goes on to speculate that “I think it was AIDS with Kaposi’s. I think he’s dead” (197). Referring back to his first encounter with Piece O’ Shit, who does not self-identify as queer, Marr then ruefully adds that “if

he made it to a hospital and anybody bothered to ask him, I believe he died swelling the statistics of heterosexual cases Whatever he thought he was excused from, it's yet another lie that will kill people who are not him" (197). This moment is a significant one in the book because it is the only time a character who is definitively HIV-positive appears to have sex, and it is represented as a moment of horror (though Marr's friend Pheldon tries to reassure his friend that "[s]ome people are saying . . . you can't get it through oral sex" [196]).¹⁷⁹

The significance of this passage is sharpened considering it follows on the heels of Marr's account of a revelation he undergoes, his "most mystical of mystical experiences," whereby, after spending a prosaic day cruising in a gay theatre, he "no longer had any fear at all of the disease" (171, 172). Marr's explanation is an ambiguous one, linking his fear of AIDS to his fear as a child of the discourse of homosexuality popularized by psychologists like Erich Fromm in the 1950s, who pathologized the condition. Marr escapes the hold of this destructive rhetoric by "looking at the people I was doing it with, many of whom seemed no less happy than anyone else, [so] I began to ask that most empowering of questions: Could all these people around me be both crazy and damned?" (173). The extant queer community negates the isolation, the twin conclusions of queer men as both morally and psychologically compromised, pushing back against these power relations. Marr adds: "[w]hen one is dealing with the satisfaction of an appetite, you relegate the Erich Fromms *et alia* to the place where one

¹⁷⁹ The final pages of the novel, after the conclusion of the narrative, are a reprinting of a 1987 *Lancet* article entitled "Risk Factors for Seroconversion to Human Immunodeficiency Virus Among Male Homosexuals," which details that "[t]he absence of detectable risk for seroconversion due to receptive oral-genital intercourse is striking" and "[a]voidance of anal intercourse must be the principal focus of efforts to reduce risk of the male homosexual community" ([505]).

stores those abstractions that don't particularly relate to the systems of the world around you. I did that. And I ceased, somehow, to be terrified" (173). The space that exists—that pre-exists any act of Romantic creation by a singular will—serves as a buffer against the various forms in which discourse is used to demonize queer desire. Whether it is the psychoanalysis of the 1950s or the medicalized rhetoric of the 1980s, the existence and persistence of queer bodies within the spaces that they create and maintain acts, for Marr, as a barrier not to keep people out, but to hold together a community in the face of such an attack.

That this revelation occurs prior to Marr's rendezvous with Piece O' Shit suggests that even within the pornotopia that *The Mad Man* creates, the physical presence of AIDS, the signifiers written onto Piece O' Shit's body, threaten the coherence of the fantasy. While the novel is devoted, as Tucker argues, to pushing against the hysteria that underpins the discursive analysis of AIDS and its potential avenues of transmission (263), it is notable that the ()topia Marr traverses for so long does not literally involve characters with AIDS, but only discursively adjacent figures.

Marr's final encounter with Piece O' Shit is a difficult moment to analyze, because of the host of baggage attached to the idea: obviously Delany is not arguing for any kind of ignorance of medical opinion, since he stresses again and again in his critical work that detailed "monitored stud[ies]" of the virus and its transmission are necessary for combatting the hysterical discursive elisions that crop around AIDS. His statement that "[r]etroic *can* control discourses—but only if it is insistent, accurate, analytical, and articulate" (*Shorter Views* 37, 56) underlines the necessity of relying on scientific veracity to challenge superstitious, homophobic pronouncements. Yet *The Mad Man* is a

self-admitted fantasy, a place where the physical consequences of certain sexual acts are bracketed. Davidson glosses the pornotopia as “like utopia ... at once a real place (the real Upper West Side) and a non-place (a site of impossible sexual relations)” (17). Yet even within the supposedly non-representational elements of this space, certain boundaries cannot be fully transgressed. So while Marr does not apparently contract AIDS from his sexual contact with Piece O’ Shit, the terror and despair that inflect this scene,¹⁸⁰ as well as the absence of any major character with AIDS in the novel, suggest that there is a limit point to the queer topology, that challenging the association of AIDS with queer sexuality and space is the main objective to the book, and that engagements with the syndrome itself cannot as easily inhabit such an idealized space. While Delany is dedicated to challenging the narratives of immunity that are used to condemn queer individuals and spaces, Marr remains immunized from the threat of AIDS within the fantastical pornotopia.

Samuel Delany’s writings on AIDS, from *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* in 1984 to *The Mad Man* in 1994, represent space as a necessary component of community without reducing it to being coterminous with identity, and his works think through how space is manipulated, transformed, and organized when the mainstream discourse around queer identity is understood through a deadly viral infection. While critics often think of Delany as a utopian writer, the temporal delay, that promise of futurity implied in the name, does not seem to fit the urgency of his project. And indeed, in his two lengthy fictional works on the topic, he lays his emphasis not on the temporal, but the spatial, the

¹⁸⁰ Marr later notes in his letter to Sam that suicide “was one of the things I’d considered most seriously when I’d first been certain I had AIDS” (234).

()topia, the accent falling not on the temporal prefix but the embodied root. In *Plagues*, he parallels 1984-era Manhattan with his bustling fictional city of Kolhari, and sets them side-by-side, traversable through the Bridge of Lost Desire. The import of this organization is to construct that allegory of feeling, to contextualize the potential affinity between afflicted communities, to create parallel spaces where queer bodies are not totally isolated. Although the dominant theme of *Plagues* is the failure to transgress boundaries, Delany deconstructs the logic of escape to demonstrate the importance of immanence. Meanwhile, *The Mad Man* is concerned with tracing the circuits of queer communal identity and space, and with twisting the toxic discourse that codes the queer body and the queer urban space as hopelessly corrupt. The joyous bodily exchanges that John Marr, Leaky, Piece O' Shit, and the other members of this loose group of interclass allies perform both mocks the hysterical coding of bodily matter as tinged with disease, and also mobilizes a rhetoric of "positive abjection," using the weapons of the city fathers and other moral authorities against them. If the border becomes a dominant image of AIDS discourse, the prophylactic barrier that must be enforced between healthy and sick, Delany does not try to reject the border as an outmoded concept, but reorganizes the rhetoric of borders, expanding it to locate other afflicted peoples, or reinforce it as a space where queer male sexuality can flourish. Gods and monsters, institutions and Freudian fathers may seek to enforce rigid boundary lines, but Delany's restlessly deconstructive works show how his queer *periplum* will always manipulate those boundary lines, shift their meanings and project a queer topology to be explored, a ()topia whose prefix remains wholly open to some kind of new potentiality.

Chapter 4

4 The Apocalyptic Community: The End of Immunity at the End of the World

“[C]ommunity, in its infinite resistance to everything that would bring it to completion (in every sense of the word *achever*—which can also mean to ‘finish off’), signifies an irrepressible political exigency, and that this exigency in its turn demands something of ‘literature,’ the inscription of our infinite resistance”

(Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*)

“New York, I love you but you’re bringing me down”

(LCD Soundsystem)

In each of the preceding chapters, encounters with viral outbreaks serve as the means of thinking through what constitutes a community or collectivity. This final chapter will explore further this notion of community through an examination of Colson Whitehead’s novel *Zone One* (2011). Set in the aftermath of a catastrophic zombie outbreak that very nearly destroys the United States (and the rest of human civilization), Whitehead’s novel seemingly tells the story of “a return to normalcy” (Sorensen 560), a snapshot of the aftermath of an outbreak in which the late capitalist *status quo* is reassembled, in which the individuals and small bands of survivors come together and are remade into a recognizable social organization. In effect, Whitehead’s novel is centered around the interrogation of what a community is, how it can be constituted, and how the prospect of narrative immunity works in relation to such groupings. *Zone One* is ultimately about the breakdown of a comprehensible, familiar social collectivity of American late capitalism, as it is predicated on the idea of an individualistic immunitary principle that prevents a “true” community from ever coming to occupy the center of such relational encounter. *Zone One* explores the way in which contemporary late

capitalist society has reached its end stage as a cohesive community, how it fragments under an increasingly literalized series of infectious metaphors. What comes to supplant the immunitary collectivity of twenty-first century America is, ultimately, beyond the storytelling purview of Whitehead and his pseudonymous protagonist, Mark Spitz. Whitehead demonstrates just how integral the idea of immunity has become to narratives about late capitalist, twenty-first century life, and so Mark Spitz is unable to look beyond into the coming community.¹⁸¹ *Zone One* provides a particularly self-conscious commentary on the concepts of infection and immunity that dominate narratives, and how, if we are ever to reach some utopian sense of community that exists outside of the immunitary paradigm, we will not be equipped with the narratological tools to make sense of such a socius.

4.1 Virus/Viral: Competing Ideas of Infection

The twenty-first century is enchanted with the metaphor of the virus, which finds an almost universal applicability to the social situations characterized by increased interdependence, networking, and connectivity. As Jasbir Puar and Patricia Clough note, “[t]he ‘viral’ has come to describe a form of communication and transmission in and across various and varying domains: the biological, the cultural, the financial, the political, the linguistic, the technical, and the computational” (13). This idea is replete in theorizations of the “postmodern,” that there is a kind of viral character to late capitalism and the intensely networked sociality of twenty-first-century digital life. Indeed, there is the sense that the viral is a kind of non-actual entity, something that describes a state of

¹⁸¹ I borrow this term from Giorgio Agamben’s aphoristic book of the same name.

affairs rather than a biological process. As Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker write, “[i]n the informatic mode, *disease is always virtual*” (122). The viral has become a persistent metaphor in attempts to think through the possibilities of connection, influence, and contact. The tension between the conceptions of “virus” and “viral” are productively explored by Zach Blas, who signifies the “virus|viral” relationship as one of similitude but not complete similarity (29). Blas argues that “[w]hat a virus is and does cannot be extracted into the quantifier viral just as the qualities of the viral cannot be reduced to the virus” (30). Essentially, the usage of “viral” in the present stage of technologically focused, late-stage capitalism is not merely an analogy, but a conceptual expansion of the ideas of the virus to encompass the ideas of capitalism and technology. As Blas notes, “[c]ontagion in the viral sense is not even self-replicating or mutating” (32), but a kind of reference to the intimate connection between networks in the digital age and the interweaving of subjectivities according to the whims of networking. In effect, the viral has mutated from the originary concept of the biological virus to come to describe the ways in which subjects within a globalized capitalist society are meant to relate to commodities, to technology, and to one another.

For Tony Sampson, this omnipresent recourse to the analogy of the infectious agent is a kind of “molar virality,” which he defines as “the organizational tendencies of analogical thinking that forcibly bring singularities into unified relation with each other. This relates to, for example, the universal application of epidemic models across a range of contagious phenomena” (5). In essence, Sampson suggests that this continual analogy deployed nowadays in the term “viral” points toward a means of reducing everything down to straightforward relations of infection and immunity. For Sampson, this method is

one of social control, “a mode of domination over multiplicity, order over complexity, generality over difference” and is therefore “endemic to new biopolitical strategies of social power” (9, 5). Sampson thus detects perhaps the limit point of the biopolitical interweaving of politico-legalistic models of infection and immunity with biological understandings of bodies. In this notion of virality, all relations become potentially new vectors of contamination. This is perhaps most clearly recognizable in the adoption of the term “viral marketing.” This way of thinking creates a plane of similitude where everything has the potential to “go viral,” to become infectious or to link together groups of people in such a way as to render them dependent upon connections.

And yet, as Sampson notes, one of the primary problems with this analogical model that is exemplified in molar virality is that it is not really viral at all. “The problem for viral marketers,” he writes, “is that contagion appears to be all but out of control” (95). The analogical principle of viral infection that is simplistically summarized in the equivocatory phrase “*like a virus*” is ultimately quite unlike what it professes to be. Sampson highlights a number of issues with the adoption of biological infections to modes of social exchange. Two seem particularly relevant to this discussion: first, that “[v]iral marketing is an imperfect crime, because the identity of the criminal needs to be circulated along with the act itself” (Goffey and Fuller, qtd. in Sampson 75). Since viral marketing is always attached to some kind of product, the marketing strategy will inevitably, no matter how ingenious or gnomic, make clear its source.¹⁸² Viruses do not

¹⁸² Sampson’s chief case study to highlight this point is the “Lonelygirl15” series of videos appearing on Youtube, an early example of a video that “went viral” and became a popular sensation. Ultimately, Sampson notes, “the video blog was designed to promote the work of a couple of budding Internet moviemakers” (64).

disclose themselves to the cells they hijack, but a viral video must ultimately give way to a sellable product. Likewise, Sampson continually emphasizes the difference between the genetic manipulation of a virus and the ephemeral character of the meme. While the idea of memes working like viruses became a popular analogical relation, popularized by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976),¹⁸³ the fatal flaw for Sampson is that genes are material, and memes are not, that “*the meme is missing*. . . . [T]he memetic unit of imitation, unlike the gene, has yet to be located” (70). Ideas may filter across social networks, but they do not fundamentally change the makeup of the body. At its heart, the problem that Sampson detects with the notion of molar virality is that it is *not viral enough*, that its seeming connection between biological infections and affective or social connections is a superficial one. Sampson’s point is that attempting to reduce, to analogize, connectivity through a super-metaphor of virality illuminates neither the activity of social networks nor the pathology of the virus. The metaphor ultimately buckles.

Sampson’s response is to see an alternative form of social activity that can be expressed through the logic of virality, what he terms “molecular virality,” which can be “located in the accidents and spontaneities of desire” (6). This second form is, like a positive biopolitics, one that emphasizes singularity over a Leviathan-like subsumption into one massified whole. Drawing on an explicitly Deleuzian paradigm, Sampson argues that a way of rejecting the biopolitical mechanisms of affective manipulation in a late

¹⁸³ In *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins defines memes as “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (192). He writes that “[c]ultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission,” and sees the adaptability of ideas, concepts, and cultural forms to operate along Darwinian principles of inheritance, and suggests that “longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity” are the qualities that enable certain memes to persevere over generations of human evolution (189, 194).

capitalist structure operates through a scheme of “nonimitation,” whereby one seeks to “become disconnected from the affective grip of these associative chains,” suggesting that the expression of this would be through a “suppression of empathy: a refusal to engage in the transmission of affects, emotions, and feelings of others” (190).

Nonimitation is not an apathy, but a “pure antipathy” that is not an attempt to disengage from the ineluctable socialities in which subjectivities find themselves, but rather an “antisocial relation with ... a ‘neighbor who is in touch’” (190). Affect becomes a key locus of biopolitical manipulation in the contemporary late capitalist period, and so providing an affective blockage point to this spread is a way of preventing the molar codings of bodies according to corporate and/or political interests. As Sampson notes, this is not to rearticulate an antiquated model of precarious connectivity and impregnable immunity, but rather that the nonimitative approach will “sooner or later, support ... novel social inventions that move away from the harmonious mainstream of organized molar states toward a potential molecular revolution” (191). Rather than apathy, a surrendering and deadening of affect, a passivity that allows the spread of molar virality to steamroll over subjectivities and code them into domineering arrangements, Sampson adapts Gabriel Tarde’s model of “*antipatheia*,” or “antifeelings that may fend off the unwanted and mostly unconscious epidemics of viral love,” and which will, in time, “grow into revolutionary contagions too big to be constrained by any molar organization” (192). Sampson sees human beings as parts of “a continuous flow of decoded (deterritorialized) social monads, or singularities” (8), and this attempt to block out and prevent the overdetermined spread of molar virality will eventually spark some kind of process of connection and organization not predicated upon the rapacities of capitalism,

but on a positive desire. In place of a rigidly networked and policed society, Sampson implies, there is the potential to move toward a more expansive kind of community.

4.2 The Coming Community and the End of Immunity

Sampson places a particularly positive intensity on the concept of the singularity. Noting that “[t]he singularity is not a given body; rather, it is a topological constraint, or degree of freedom that is yet to come” (88), singularity seems to exist beyond the horizons of individual subjectivity and the narrower focus of the politics of the individual. This prominence of the singularity puts Sampson’s thinking alongside those who conceptualize of community as a concept not coextensive with “society,” “collectivity,” or “civilization,” but something more abstract and liberating, a concept that can be utilized to provide an alternative direction to thinking through subjectivity, politics, relationality, and ontology. And indeed, the concept of community has become a particularly rich site of theorization for decades now.¹⁸⁴ In his famous analysis of “imagined communities,” Benedict Anderson notes that community is a “deep, horizontal comradeship” that forms the bedrock of political nationalism (7). The thought of community underpins the political, and breathes into it a sense of purpose. Yet the community is not necessarily something extant, but futural: not an origin, but a horizon line, something that wavers in the future rather than instantiates the past. This thinking of community as that which is to come, rather than that which has already occurred, is useful to think through its relationship to narrative immunity.

¹⁸⁴ While my analysis will focus specifically on Roberto Esposito and Jean-Luc Nancy, they are very consciously indebted to the work of antecedents such as Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida, among others.

Most significant to thinking through community for the purposes of this project is Roberto Esposito, as he relates this theoretical concept in opposition to immunity, and thus casts the community in explicitly biopolitical terms. In *Communitas*, Esposito examines the etymological root common to both “immunity” and “community,” exploring the importance of “*munus*” to his philosophical project. The term, as Esposito declines it, has multiple definitions associated with duty, such as “*onus*” and “*officium*,” and their denotations of public office and obligation. Its third meaning, “*donum*,” is what attracts Esposito, for its relationship to the other terms is more enigmatic. Noting that “*donum*” means “gift,” Esposito asks “[i]n what sense would a gift ... be a duty” (4)? Yet noting that this gift refers only to the one that is given, and never the one that is received (139), Esposito demonstrates that there is an “obligation that is contracted with respect to the other and that invites a suitable release from the obligation” (5). Instead of an act that is closed off by the repaying of the debt, Esposito suggests that the holding in-common of an unpayable obligation is what constitutes a community. In this sense, then, a community is not “a body ... a corporation ... in which individuals are founded in a larger individual” (7), but a shared sense of absence that suspends the idea of a whole and self-present identity from the very outset. Community can be detected in the shared lack of totality common to every person. Indeed, the point, for Esposito, is that subjectivity begins in such a lack, such an absence that cannot be re-opened. Esposito dramatizes the revelation of community as a kind of “exposure,” stating that community “doesn’t keep us warm, and it doesn’t protect us; on the contrary, it exposes us to the most extreme of risks: that of losing, along with our individuality, the borders that guarantee its inviolability, with respect to the other” (140). Community is that which threatens the

coherency of identity, risking that disintegration of the boundaries that are needed to keep the cohesive shape of the individual existing within a society of individuals.

If *community* represents a state of being-in-debt, then *immunity* stands in for that constitutive opposite around which Esposito constructs his biopolitical philosophy. “[H]e is called immune,” writes Esposito with reference to the Latin origins of the term, “who has to perform no office” (*Communitas* 6). The immune person is exempt from this ontological debt; rather than being opened to that shared lack, the immune person constitutes herself as removed from that precarious exposure, nested within a cocoon of completed self-identity. Modern politics, suggests Esposito, is animated by the rejection of “this unacceptable *munus*,” of an attempt to rearticulate a relation to the world not shaped by a sense of shared vulnerability and potential interpenetration (12). Immunity, therefore, possesses an innately political character, a shaping of subjectivity amid the dangers of an obligatory lack. For Esposito, this political character of immunity becomes ingrained into the Western political project at the time of Thomas Hobbes.¹⁸⁵ Hobbes, per Esposito’s gloss, sees the one thing that human beings have in common to be “the capacity to kill and, correspondingly, the possibility of being killed” (26). Because of this innately antagonistic relationship, the only solution for Hobbes is an attempt to annihilate (or at least suspend) this relationality. Hobbes’s social contract, the creation of the

¹⁸⁵ In this sense Esposito distinguishes his biopolitics from Giorgio Agamben and relates more closely (although not exactly) with Foucault. Agamben, as discussed in Chapter Two, sees all of Western politics since the Greek city-states to be founded on an immunitary differentiation of *zoe* and *bios*, of bare life and political life. Timothy Campbell’s critique of Agamben highlights the “flattening of the specificity of a modern biopolitics in favor of a metaphysical reading of the originary and infinite state of exception that has since its inception eroded the political foundations of social life” (xxii). While Campbell’s critique is apt, Agamben’s philosophical project appears to fully embrace metaphysics rather than retreat from it; indeed, as I endeavour to demonstrate in Chapter Two, such an ahistorical reading of biopolitics has its uses when considering narrative immunity.

commonwealth of the Leviathan, then, is the abnegation of the community. As Esposito puts it, “the contract does not coincide with the gift, nor does it derive from it. Rather, it is its most direct negation The sovereign exchange between protection and obedience corresponds to this power . . . to undo: to preserve individuals through the annihilation of their relation” (29). Hence, the image of the Leviathan as a single body, a singular will exercised on the multitude. “By their individual submission to a central power,” writes Ed Cohen, “it overwhelms them all” (59). In place of the community of obligation comes the commonwealth of a powerful political structure. Yoked together under the will of a sovereign power, immunity is incarnated within the Hobbesian model (and as something that will inform political projects in the West for centuries to come) as a particular kind of freedom. Such a relation forms the Hobbesian definition of liberty, which is referred to in *Leviathan* as “Libertie, or Immunitie from the service of the Commonwealth” (qtd. in Cohen 59). Freedom in this sense is a negative freedom, a freedom-from¹⁸⁶ the duties and obligations involved within a political power structure.

What is so pernicious about this Hobbesian model of the immunitary commonwealth, predicated upon a social contract indemnifying individual liberty above all else? Certainly, as Esposito himself admits, the community against which Hobbes opposes himself is a chaotic morass, a dangerous exposure, “of suddenly falling into the nothing of the thing” (140). The subsumption beneath a general will creates an order, a

¹⁸⁶ This concept of liberty is most famously elucidated by Isaiah Berlin, who refers to this idea as “negative liberty,” or “the area in which the subject . . . is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons” (169). Such a conception of freedom, Berlin notes, was privileged by British political philosophers beginning with Hobbes, and equally influential in the works of John Locke, Jeremy Bentham, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill (170). This idea is in contrast to what Berlin terms “positive liberty,” or “the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master” (178).

structure, for which the community seems unable to account. Yet this immune principle that flowers in Hobbes's thinking as the centerpiece of a shared freedom becomes increasingly the means of an insulating and annihilatory relationship with respect to life. Immunity, as Esposito sees it, privileges the idea of "life" above the concept of the living; ergo, "[l]ife ... sacrificed to the preservation of life" becomes the direction in which this immunitary biopolitics ineluctably tends toward—a final and apocalyptic autoimmunity.¹⁸⁷ In this sense, the immunitary paradigm is a rejection of death by attempting to exile it outside of its sense of self. This is the very opposite of community, which Jean-Luc Nancy, following Heidegger, sees as predicated upon the necessity of death. He argues that "[d]eath is indissociable from community," that the experience of the finitude of an individual's being is not experienceable by that individual, but by the others in which something is shared (9). Ergo, community is marked by death, it is "revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to others" (15). It is community's exposure to death, the shared obligation in which the borders of self dissolve and are communicated to others, that founds itself. Immunity is designed to reject that acceptance of death within its borders—it exiles death's power beyond its borders.¹⁸⁸ The immune paradigm, the possibility of retreating from the obligation of communal relationality, therefore increasingly is taken as the idea of subjectivity and freedom within Western political projects, and this sovereignty is what must be defended

¹⁸⁷ Amplifying this point, Jean-Luc Nancy goes on to claim that "[a] community is the presentation to its members of their mortal truth (which amounts to saying that there is no community of immortal beings: one can imagine either a society or communion of immortal beings, but not a community)" (15).

¹⁸⁸ Foucault articulates this same point when he argues that, for biopower, "death is power's limit, the moment that escapes it" (*History of Sexuality* 138).

and protected above all else. Biopolitical projects, ranging from the ultra-individualism of neoliberal capitalism, to the genocidal hyper-immunity of the Nazi regime, are the many offspring of this central idea of immunity working within the political.¹⁸⁹ To push back against this immunitary character, to locate an “escape or release from the individual subject” (Esposito, *Communitas* 15) is therefore the project of these theorists of community, an attempt at thinking beyond the increasingly policed borders that come to characterize immunitary biopolitics.

Yet this is not to suggest that community implies some kind of idyllic relationship, a kind of meta-being or mystical totality. Throughout *Communitas*, Esposito emphasizes that it is fruitless to understand community as “a mutual, intersubjective ‘recognition’ in which individuals are reflected in each other so as to confirm their initial identity” (7).¹⁹⁰ Such an originary identical nature would justify the exclusion and expulsion of what is considered to be non-identical as a threat to the stable character of the community. Likewise, Nancy warns of “the retrospective consciousness of the lost community,” the mythologized vision of a formerly extant utopian space of community that has since vanished due to the vicissitudes of politics. This “lost, or broken, community,” whether it be illustrated as “the natural family, the Athenian city, the

¹⁸⁹ Nancy discusses how “[c]apital negates community because it places above it the identity and the generality of production and products,” while the Nazis sought to “annihilate community in the delirium of an incarnated communion” (75, 35). For a more in-depth discussion of Nazi biopolitics and its relation to the paradigm of immunity, see Chapter Two.

¹⁹⁰ Nancy will echo Esposito’s critique of such a utopian view of intersubjectivity, writing that “[t]here is a myth of the dialogue: it is the myth of the ‘intersubjective’ and intrapolitical foundation of the *logos* and its unitary truth” (76). For Nancy, this belief in an intersubjective relationality is merely a disguised vision of an originary myth of unitary totality, a monologic substance from which all differences diverge and can ultimately be reduced to. Intersubjectivity masks the logic of similarity behind its superficial depiction of singular connectivity.

Roman Republic, the first Christian community” and so on, “always ... is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds and in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, indeed the living offering, of its own immanent unity, intimacy, autonomy” (9).¹⁹¹ The issue with such an idealized nostalgia, Nancy cautions, comes about through those descriptors of such vanished communities as “tight, harmonious, infrangible” and “immanent”—they are depictions not of a singularity, but of a static and reductive identity, an originary space where everything was once constitutively the same, before differences rent such beautiful unity and foisted a defensive immunitary character into the world. Thinking about community requires pushing back against the concept of sameness, of a shared quality or property that binds everyone together. Community consists of a more audacious and expansive connection.

What community offers us, Esposito suggests, is an escape from the entropic insularity of the immunitary, a possibility of thinking through a relationality that is not predicated upon a desire for similar identity or a hostile reaction to difference. Community is that salve against immunity sought by the critics who have taken the biopolitical concept of immunity as their topic of analysis. Cohen, for instance, highlights the contingent nature of how the politico-legalistic character of immunity came to be applied to biological organization:

[i]magine what might have happened if [Elie Metchnikoff] had not been so focused on either the individual organism as a milieu interieur or the dynamics of aggression and response which underwrote his political ontology, evolutionary

¹⁹¹ Nancy further suggests that “at every moment of its history, the Occident has given itself over to the nostalgia for a more archaic community that has disappeared” (10), implying a similar approach as Agamben in viewing the occulted immunitary character of Western political organization.

worldview, and laboratory experiments. He might then have described the dynamics through which complex organisms systematically mediate their relations with the others with whom they must concur by using immunity's etymological opposite, 'community,' since community foregrounds the co-constitutive dynamics of living. Imagine what might have happened if 'community' had achieved the same biological status that immunity did. (281)

In a similar vein, Eula Biss ends her *On Immunity* by thinking through the ways that immunity is itself a communal characteristic, "a shared space—a garden we tend together" (163), suggesting that immunity possesses a communal character when thinking about human beings as beings-in-common as opposed to individualistic monads.

Thinking through the political implications of these contrasting ideas of immunity and community has fired the projects of philosophers and theorists; I wish to think through their association in the literary sphere. I have been arguing throughout this project that the narratological aspects of these sf novels dealing with viral encounter possess a kind of immunity to them at the level of narrative: that the narration, in its imparting of events, in making sense and constructing a temporality out of infection and its progress, is employing a kind of narrative immunity. The narrative voice is immunized from the threat of the contagious, becomes the means of conveying a sense of a subjectivity in the face of contamination. Thus, while many of these novels depict outbreaks and their aftermaths as examples of apocalyptic endings and the potential founding of a new, utopian collectivity, how are these visions of the future narrated to us? Do they still contain that immune character within the narrative? And if we are trying to envision a way of pushing back against the encroachment of the biopolitically immune figure, then how can narrative do it? At its most basic level, how is it possible to narrate that community so sought after by those opponents of immunitary biopolitics?

Certainly, Nancy sees the notion of community as a problem of writing. In his essay on “literary communism,” Nancy translates his contrast between the immanent communion and the transcendent community into literary terms. For Nancy, myth is the language of immanence. Myth is the language of origins, of hypostatic identities, of a traceable line between a beginning and an ending; myth offers a vision of a totalizing and self-present system. By contrast, Nancy suggests, “literature” is that which “interrupts itself,” interjects on any project of completion in order to leave an opening or a gap—and it is that self-interruption that “makes it literature (writing) and not myth,” that “suspends its own *mythos* (that is to say, its *logos*)” (72). The implicit immunological character of Nancy’s schema is readily apparent: myth professes a kind of impenetrability, a cohesive system that is able to build off of itself and construct a division between the self and the non-self, what belongs within the myth and what exists outside it. Literature, by contrast, that which disrupts its own cohesion and reliable transmission in favour of a kind of communicability, presents itself as forming a kind of relation to that which is not present within itself, a continual deferral of any kind of teleological endpoint. Thus, Nancy’s point that “community [is] formed by an articulation of ‘particularities,’ and not founded in any autonomous essence that would subsist by itself and that would reabsorb or assume singular beings into itself” (75). The literature of community, for Nancy, is a literature that remains open, in spite of the precarity involved in such a task, a literature that continually risks exposure rather than retreats within its demarcated borders.

In thinking through the concept of community, then, we gain an understanding of its importance to the biopolitical practices of immunity as well as to the practice of literature. Nancy detects the outline of community within the act of writing—“the

experience of community as communication ... implies writing. We must not stop writing, or letting the singular outline of being-in-common expose itself” (41)—but how does that writing, that narration, encode or depict such a representation of a coming community? To explore these questions and ideas further, I turn once more to the literature of viral outbreak, and its depiction of the post-apocalypse: of an epochal end and of what may persist beyond the edges of such a cataclysm. Viral apocalypse offers a particular means of thinking through the community that is to come, and the narrative capabilities in which we have the power to render them. To explore this idea further, it is necessary to look at one of the most familiar iterations of the viral apocalypse in contemporary popular culture: the zombie outbreak narrative.

4.3 The Age of the Zombie

In her examination of *Zone One*, Kate Marshall refers to the zombie as “critical and cultural theory’s great cliché” (531). And indeed, the ubiquity of the zombie within contemporary popular culture has been well-remarked upon: “[t]hat the zombie is ubiquitous in popular culture cannot be disputed: From popular literature and comic books to video games and performance art, in smartphone applications and in homemade films, zombies are all around us” (Christie 1).¹⁹² Whitehead himself appears largely uninterested in the wider cultural fascination with the zombie, remarking in an interview that “I wrote *Zone One* because I wanted to fulfill my own curiosity—which goes back

¹⁹² Indeed, almost every critical text on zombies includes this disclaimer about their ubiquity: “[i]n these dark, anxious years, the undead are having their day in the sun. None more so than zombies: the contemporary vision of the walking dead horde has, without doubt, become the nightmare image of the day” (E. Williams 72); “[i]n a 2000 interview with Ulrich Beck, one of our leading social theorists, the language of sociology and horror was combined in what he has come to term ‘zombie categories’ The (un)dead, it would seem, have come a long way, baby, indeed” (McIntosh and Leverette vii), and so on.

decades—about the creatures” (Fassler n. pag.). But the concept of the reanimated dead has a particular resonance when thinking through the concepts of narrative immunity and its relationship to literature in the age of biopolitics. Thus, in order to set up the stakes of the notions of community and narrativity that inform Whitehead’s novel, it is first necessary to provide a brief excursus on the zombie and why it remains such a pop cultural touchstone.

Much like the wider social phenomenon of virality, the zombie¹⁹³ mythology is everywhere, constantly posited and adapted to dramatize narratives of social relations and anxieties. It is a mobile and manipulable cultural signifier. Yet it has a specific and often ignored provenance. As noted by Kevin Boon, the zombie is unique among the monstrous archetypes of twentieth-century Western popular culture because, unlike figures such as vampires, werewolves, Frankenstein’s monsters, and so forth, “the zombie proper emerges from religious and cultural origins of the African diaspora” (5).¹⁹⁴ Zombies comes from Haiti, where they were seen as “neither sick nor cannibalistic; they were victims of an exotic religion, used as slaves, forced to submit to the will of a zombie master” (Kee 9). This master is known as the “*bokor*” (McIntosh 2). As Joan Dayan makes clear, these ideas of possession and control, and the concept of the zombie, were legacies of colonialism and slavery during the French control of the island (36). The zombie came to the attention of the American public due to the American

¹⁹³ Wade Davis suggests that the word “zombie” derives from “the Angolian Kimbundu term *nzumbe*, which means ‘ghost’ or ‘spirit of a dead person’” (qtd. in Bishop 47).

¹⁹⁴ While almost every critic of the zombie in popular culture makes note of its Haitian origins, Kyle Bishop puts forth the argument that “the zombie is a fundamentally *American* creation” (12), suggesting that the figure’s appearance and vicissitudes within Western popular culture divorce it from its historical roots.

occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 (Kee 9), particularly through the publication of William A. Seabrook's sensationalist "travelogue" *The Magic Island* in 1929. In a short section entitled "...Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields," Seabrook defines the zombie as "a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life—it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive" (93). Although the chapter ends with Seabrook speaking with a scientist who dispels his superstitious illusions by telling him that the "sorcery" practiced by these evil magicians is much more plausibly the usage of a drug which induces a coma and renders people susceptible to suggestion, Seabrook's book had an immediate impact on American cultural consciousness. In 1932, a stage play entitled *Zombie*, adapted from Seabrook's writings, was performed in Manhattan (see Kee 14). More famously, that same year Victor Halperin directed the low-budget horror film *White Zombie*, starring Bela Lugosi. The movie depicts a newlywed white American couple on honeymoon in Haiti, where they run afoul of a sinister magician named Murder Legendre (Lugosi), who uses his powers to provide an unscrupulous plantation owner with zombified labourers. Decades of American (and British) popular culture would return to this idea of the colonial plantation, the ominous racialized image of the undead, and the threat it posed to the white travelers who crossed into these eerie domains.¹⁹⁵

In this initial figuration, the zombie stands in as a pure engine of capitalist exploitation, the very "image of alienated, crushing, mindless labour in capitalist society"

¹⁹⁵ Examples include *Ouanga* (1935), Halperin's sequel to his earlier *White Zombie*, entitled *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936), *The Ghost Breakers* (1940), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), and the British horror film *Plague of the Zombies* (1968).

(McNally 260).¹⁹⁶ This early pop culture version of the zombie literalizes the anxieties of capitalist and colonial exploitation, turning the alienated labourer into an abjected creation of ceaseless toil. Mimi Sheller describes the zombie of Haiti as “the ultimate representation of the psychic state of one whose body/spirit is consumed,” becoming nothing more than a “degraded form of labour” (145), while David McNally emphasizes that “Haitian zombies ... are mindless labourers, people reanimated from the dead who lack everything—identity, consciousness, memory, language—save the brute capacity for labour” (259). Hence, in such stories the zombies themselves are not malicious actors, but monstrous emanations of the will of the *bokor*, who taps into dark magic in order to work his will.¹⁹⁷ Zombies in these stories are tragic creations, pathetic bodies that have been so entrapped within the cycles of exploitative labour that even in death they are denied escape from the fate of labour. As McNally notes, “[w]hat capital does to workers, therefore, is exactly what witches are said to do when they create a zombie: ‘to reduce a person to body, to reduce behaviour to basic motor functions, to reduce social utility to raw labour’” (142-143).

And yet, even in this more magical setting, the hint of contagion still lingers over the notion of the zombie. Chera Kee, in her historical examination of early zombie texts,

¹⁹⁶ There is also, obviously, a highly racialized dimension to the zombie. The very title of the film *White Zombie* implies a threatening difference from a “normal” zombie, and many critics discuss the issues of the zombie-as-racial-other in culture (Kee 16, Degoul 27, McIntosh 5). While a more thorough discussion of race and how it relates to *Zone One* or virality is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is an idea that Whitehead touches upon in the novel, with the late revelation of Mark Spitz as being a black man. For a lengthy and fascinating discussion of contemporary zombie stories and race, see Chapter Three of David McNally’s *Monsters of the Market: “African Vampires in the Age of Globalisation”* (175-252).

¹⁹⁷ Chera Kee examines the racial politics underpinning such early American popular narratives of the zombie, noting that “black zombies were often background and filler, and it was the ‘black’ magic of Haitian Voodoo, utilized by zombie masters, that openly threatened white femininity” (15). Indeed, in *White Zombie* it is Lugosi’s Murder Legendre who practices black magic and threatens the film’s heroine.

notes that the United States had a fascinated fear of Haiti, whose fight for independence from the colonial French empire during the nineteenth century had resulted in decades of violent conflict. Thus, “Haiti came to represent a sort of self-destruction that could someday spill over into the rest of the Americas” (12). The zombie narrative therefore becomes a particularly vivid illustration of the fear of corruption and destruction, of a faltering nationhood and a faltering sense of self.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, the plot of *White Zombie*, hinted at in its title, is about the horror of the infection of this controlling slavery not on the black men who labour in Haiti’s plantations, but on a white woman. The fear of such a narrative is that the space of such abnegation is expanding, or that those meant to be exist outside the remit of such infection have unwittingly entered its domain.

The more familiar image of the zombie comes from the filmography of American director George A. Romero (1940-2017), most notably his trilogy of films *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and *Day of the Dead* (1985),¹⁹⁹ which significantly revised the conception of the zombie.²⁰⁰ Instead of the undead being bodies controlled by a *bokor* for nefarious purposes, the zombie infection in Romero’s films (and the slew of zombie narratives directly influenced by him) is mysterious, global, and

¹⁹⁸ Kee cites David Skal, who asserts that *White Zombie*’s 1932 release, during the height of the Great Depression, meant to reinforce and explore “the nightmare vision of the breadline” (qtd. in Kee 17). Thus, even in its first depictions in American popular culture, the zombie is tied to fears of an economic system in crisis.

¹⁹⁹ Romero would later return to his work on zombies, directing three additional films: *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007), and *Survival of the Dead* (2009), although these films have had less of an impact on the canon of zombie popular culture than his initial works.

²⁰⁰ Interestingly, Romero did not initially consider his creatures to be zombies. The word is never used in the film, and the shooting script of *Night of the Living Dead* refers to the creatures as “ghouls,” a more general cannibal-monster (McIntosh 8; see also McNally 260; Abbott 31). Romero himself in an interview stated that “I never thought of them as zombies. In *Dawn [of the Dead]* I used the word because everyone was calling them zombies. ... I said wow, maybe they are. To me they were dead neighbors” (qtd. in Abbott 32).

undifferentiated. It affects rich and poor, black and white, male and female alike, turning them all into the more recognizably monstrous shamblers seeking to devour the flesh²⁰¹ of the still-human. In moving from the resurrected labouring body to the shambling, ludic masses, there is an implicit shift in economic focus: “[t]he present-day obsession with the ... abject figure of the zombie, might be taken as a symptom of an economy in which the dominant financial logic of capital accumulation appears to not require laboring bodies at all” (Cvek 3). Post-War Western culture and its increasingly post-industrial service economy consequently affect the depiction of its undead, turning them from agonized labourers into mindless, insatiable consumers.²⁰²

The zombie has, in more recent decades, come to serve a far more visible, prominent concern. As Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz elaborate: “the plague zombie is a twentieth-century phenomenon, a new monster emerging at the moment when modern science was unmasking the mystery of pestilence” (135).²⁰³ This type of zombie, the epitome of which can be seen in Danny Boyle’s film *28 Days Later* (2002), represents the threat of the “viral zombie” (Boluk and Lenz 135): a fast, spreading pandemic whose threat to the human race is not one of gradual breakdown, but of an aggressive, all-consuming force that will change them entirely. If Romero’s zombies served as mere

²⁰¹ The popular zombie mantra of “brains!” is not part of Romero’s original conception. The idea was developed by writer-director Dan O’Bannon in his 1985 film *Return of the Living Dead*.

²⁰² Evan Calder Williams makes an interesting point regarding the concept of zombies as hungry, noting that their consumption is, in fact, a kind of “anti-hunger”: “they don’t need to eat, yet it is what they do above all else” (88). While Williams’s is clearly drawing attention to the metaphor of capitalist consumption as fruitless and non-productive, I think we can also consider it as a kind of nostalgic compulsion as well. Nostalgia will be a major theme in the following pages, and it is interesting to see that, in this genre, the undead are just as susceptible to nostalgia as the living.

²⁰³ It should be noted that Boluk and Lenz identify *Night of the Living Dead* as the beginning of the viral zombie narrative type, in spite of the fact that the cause of the epidemic, while ambiguous in the movie itself, is imputed to radiation caused by the explosion of an interstellar probe.

figments of a ravaged and apocalyptic landscape, then the viral zombie of today foregrounds the deformed face of the infected once-human.²⁰⁴

Sven Cvek makes the interesting note that “[w]hat is palpably absent from post-folklore US zombie narratives is the equivalent of the *bokor*, the voodoo magician responsible for zombification. Instead, in his place we find some vague reference to a mysterious epidemic, a pharmaceutical or military experiment gone wrong” (8). In the absence of this pivotal figure, I contend that it is the virus itself that has come to represent the *bokor*; instead of being the method of infection, the mysterious and infernal power we impute to virality grants it the supernatural appearance of a summoner. Boluk and Lenz refer to the glut of zombie stories as indicative of the “personified virus” (135), and I think this apt description in turn grants a method of looking at the virus as a figure which we recognize. Lacking that “religious awe that suffuses the language” (Wald 163) of microbes in science and in early writing such as Jack London’s, the zombie grants a familiarity to the virus, providing it a body with which we can identify it. In effect, the zombie story grants us a means of identifying with the virus, seeing it as analogous to humanity’s progressive, linear narrative as a part of our story. It is this fundamental misrecognition that sets the stage, in *Zone One*, for both a placid recognition of the virus, and for the destructive epistemic revelation that the virus is something other entirely.

²⁰⁴ While Whitehead never provides an explanation for the origin of the zombie outbreak, the narrative voice repeatedly refers to it as a “plague” that is transmitted through the bloodstream (18, 33, 60, and *passim*). Indeed, while this plague is never referred within the text as a virus, one of the keyphrases in in the Library of Congress catalogue page of the novel mentions “[v]iral diseases” ([viii]).

Zombies have proven to be a durable metaphor, applicable to almost any scenario, a handy allegory due to its essential blankness.²⁰⁵ As such, critics have come to read the zombie as a representation of everything from capitalist exploitation of labour (McNally) to hyper-consumerism, the racialized Other (Kee), ecological revenge (Marshall), posthuman potentiality (Christie and Lauro), and so forth. This vision of the zombie has proven to be an enduring one, and its adaptability is omnipresent as a tool in popular culture. Outside of specific fictional narratives about zombies, it has also taken on a particular resonance with regard to critical concerns. It is often utilized to discuss the waning of late capitalism. McNally notes that, “[a]s banks collapsed and global corporations wobbled, and millions were thrown out of work, pundits talked of ‘zombie banks,’ ‘zombie economics,’ ‘zombie capitalism,’ even a new ‘zombie politics’ in which the rich devoured the poor” (1). In his book titled *Zombie Capitalism*, Chris Harman discusses the idea of the post-Great Recession bank as a “zombie bank,” or an image of “financial institutions that were in the ‘undead state’ and incapable of fulfilling any positive function, but representing a threat to everyone else” (11-12). Likewise, Henry Giroux writes that “[t]he twenty-first century zombies no longer emerge from the grave; they now inhabit the rich environs of Wall Street and roam the halls of the gilded monuments of greed such as Goldman Sachs,” rendering an image of American socio-political hegemony as one of “hyper-dead” that “provides an apt metaphor for a new kind

²⁰⁵ In philosophy of mind, for instance, the term zombie is used to describe “a person who has no qualia, but is nonetheless similar to normal people in various ways” (Mandik 32). Philosophically, then, zombies are deployed not as flesh-hungry monsters, but as uncanny echoes, beings that have some fundamental quality of humanity absent from them for purposes of a thought experiment. This usage demonstrates both the latitude to which zombies come to be employed as well as an example of something fundamentally lacking in their existence.

of authoritarianism” (2).²⁰⁶ The disconnection of the zombie from its colonial, folkloric roots and its adaptation to American popular culture as a reanimated corpse without any specific labour-function²⁰⁷ makes it a malleable one, susceptible to adaptation in almost any realm and available for almost any kind of critical reading. In this sense, the zombie, like the grammatical figure discussed in Chapter Two, seems to operate as a kind of deictic figure, a central emptiness that is animated and defined only in its contextual relations.

Seemingly deictic, but not quite. Unlike the purely empty grammatical signifier that Benveniste and Agamben discuss, the zombie’s one consistent characteristic is its pure materiality, its physical embodiment no matter if animated by sorcery, infection, or some unknown alien agent. The zombie materializes and literalizes the power of infection, its palpable effects upon the body, the way that it undergoes uncontrollable change. Thus, no matter what kind of allegory is transplanted overtop of these corpses, that material persistence remains present. What shapes narratives about zombies is the emphasis they place upon the body, upon its material *presence*. Zombies are not just omnipresent—both within the pop culture landscape as well as the fictional areas in which they roam—but are *ever-present*, a kind of relentless focus on the *now*. It is this

²⁰⁶ As Alix Ohlin notes in her review of *Zone One*, the organizers of Occupy Wall Street suggested that protestors dress up for Halloween “as a corporate zombie! ... they see us reflecting the metaphor of their actions” (n. pag.).

²⁰⁷ McNally critiques this separation of the zombie from its roots in alienated labour and capitalist exploitation. He notes that the popularized figure of the omnipresent, post-Romero zombie “invisibilis[es] the hidden world of labour and the disparities of class” (260). In this sense, McNally also attempts to use the zombie as a figure to explore the limit points of global capitalism; while my examination of *Zone One* will head in a more theoretical, less politically oriented direction, it is worth citing McNally’s focus on the zombie’s innately political nature and its flattening through popular culture.

idea that allows Whitehead to utilize the zombie in such a way in his thinking of what a community will look like, and how it can be articulated.

4.4 Apocalyptic Blueprint: Richard Matheson and the End of Narrativity

Whitehead cites Romero's original trilogy of *Dead* movies as his major inspiration in writing *Zone One* (see Fassler n. pag.). And yet, while the book shares several affinities with these films, I find a greater resonance to exist between *Zone One* and the text that influenced Romero: Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend*. Romero himself remarked that his film was primarily inspired by *I Am Legend*, in which human civilization is annihilated by a microbial infection that kills or transforms its victims into vampiric creatures. In particular, Romero was interested in Matheson's depiction of "one civilization replacing another" (Abbott 31), and how "people respond or fail to respond to [cataclysmic change]. That's really all [the zombies] ever represented to me" (qtd. in E. Williams 90-91). Here, Romero foregrounds what is most important in the zombie narrative: the collapse of a society, the ability or inability to narrate what comes after that collapse, and a potential vision of what a supplanting collectivity may look like. The central premise of both *I Am Legend* and *Night of the Living Dead* is thus a sense of America's exhaustion, and the society's total collapse. I thus would like to provide a brief analysis of Matheson's novel in order to set up the ways in which Whitehead's later novel follows the blueprint of a post-apocalypse and the rise of the infected dead in order to think through themes of community, immunity, and their relationship to narrativity.

In this genre-defining post-apocalyptic narrative, Cold War hostilities have led to nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union, and among the world-changing fallout is a highly infectious bacterial plague that turns its victims into blood-craving nocturnal creatures. Seemingly the only survivor of this event is Robert Neville, a man whose immunity to the “*vampiris*” bacilli (as he terms it [75]) leaves him with the burdensome task of exterminating the hordes of vampires that infest the California suburbs in which he dwells. Thus, Matheson’s book is perhaps the first to truly shift the idea of the reanimated dead away from magic and toward microbial infection, and making its conflict the relation between contamination and immunity.

And indeed, Robert Neville is a paradigm of narrative immunity. He is, to borrow the title of the 1964 film adaptation of the novel, the last man on earth. This is, he reveals late in the novel to a woman who turns out to be infected, because of an incident during the Second World War in which Neville, while stationed in Panama, was bitten by a vampire bat. Neville speculates that “the bat had previously encountered a true vampire and acquired the *vampiris* germ . . . But, by the time the germ passed into my system, it had been weakened in some way by the bat’s system . . . as a result, my body built up an immunity to it” (132-133). Apparently unique in his encounter with this infected bat, Neville’s body is able to immunize itself against the threat of the disease and allow him to live through the contagion, while his survival skills allow him to persist against the beings that have been transformed. The contingent circumstances behind Neville’s resistance to the *vampiris* bacteria once again bring up a common feature of zombie narratives: that there are no innate qualities to survival, no special disposition as in Jack London’s musings on the immunity of the white masculine body. The threat of the

microbial infection is universal. Yet this also signals the universality of the narrative: because there is nothing special behind Neville's immunity other than pure chance, Neville is meant to represent a kind of everyman, an average figure that is meant to stand in for humanity—or, more precisely, hegemonic American masculinity—as a whole. The zombie apocalypse narrative is a story that distills down qualities of humanity, and therefore needs a representation of humanity as a microcosm. Neville becomes that narrative device, and the narrative's focalization through him can therefore be read as the immune narration of a universal human figure.

What is interesting about Neville's post-apocalyptic narration is just how *uninteresting* it is. Neville's life is one in which the horror and despair of the apocalypse (including witnessing the death of his wife, her reanimation, and his subsequent re-killing of her) has given way to a kind of static boredom. As Neville himself comments, “[h]orror he had adjusted to. But monotony was the greater obstacle, and he realized it now, at long last” (101). He spends his “dull gray afternoons” (1) dutifully reinforcing his fortress-home, stocking up on supplies, and raiding vampiric spaces with the hopes of killing and burning the bodies of any dormant monsters he finds, while at nights he pacifies himself against the taunts of the vampires that crowd outside his domicile by reading biology textbooks, listening to classical music, and getting drunk. In the absence of any kind of social outlet, Neville expertly establishes a routine to keep himself going. The most notable aspect of this post-apocalyptic limbo is how standard the procedure becomes. “For him the word ‘horror’ had become obsolete. A surfeiting of terror had made terror a cliché” (134). Neville appears as someone burnt out on affective engagement, his sensorium overwhelmed and leaving him in a state of dull repetition.

While he often rages against his predicament and its feelings of hopelessness—musing at one point “[w]hy go through all the complexity when a flung-open door and a few steps would end it all?” (18)—he maintains his daily schedule to the best of his abilities, existing on in spite of the plethora of evidence that the human world has definitively reached its end-point. Boredom, or an affective nullity, becomes another key characteristic of this schematic zombie story, and a necessary one to access the world after its collapse: boredom becomes the affective correlative of immunity, a way of anesthetizing the protagonist against the emptiness of existence.

Yet as *I Am Legend* progresses, Neville comes to understand that the appellation of “the last man on earth” is a very specific one, for as he learns in the novel’s final movement, a new community has developed in the aftermath of the *vampiris* bacteria. Although infected by the microbe, radical new drugs have allowed these beings to arrest the degeneration into single-minded bloodlust, to, in the words of one of these new beings, “live with the germ now” (144). While Neville inoculates himself against the end of the world through daily routines and rituals of violence, the drug-amplified beings are “helping to set up society slowly again” (144). And this is a society, a community, that cannot possibly include Robert Neville among its membership. He is, as one of the new beings terms him, “the last of an old race” (156), a specter of a bygone civilization.

This new vision of dominant life on earth that supplants humanity is one that is announced in the most positive of valences. Neville is informed of this in the most positive announcement possible, in a letter specifically addressed to him by Ruth, one of these new humans whom Neville meets. Ruth’s letter informs Neville of this new society, and forgives him for his violent attacks on her fellow infected: “I know now that you

were just as much forced into your situation as we were into ours,” she writes to him (143). Later, when soldiers of this new society attack Neville’s house and capture him, pulling him “[i]nto the world that was theirs and no longer his” (154), Ruth comes to visit him in his prison cell and inform him of the aims of the vampires’ attempts to re-establish a new society by destroying the dead vampires, whose “brains,” unlike those treated by the drug before death, “are impaired” (155). Ruth describes her society as “like a revolutionary group—repossessing society by violence” (155), destroying the anti-social elements of the apocalypse in order to return the world to a sense of normalcy. Among these aberrations is Neville, who cannot exist alongside them. Ruth then gives Neville pills to allow him to commit suicide before being executed by the new society. In this way, Matheson announces this new, post-contagious community in as explicit and positive a way as he can, granting them a spokesperson in Ruth, who calmly explains their provenance and goals. In doing so, Matheson makes the coming community almost exactly like the one it succeeds. Ruth repeatedly draws parallels between the actions of her people and Neville’s own: when Neville attempts to justify his murder of the vampires by saying he did so “[o]nly to . . . to survive,” Ruth responds “[t]hat’s exactly why we’re killing” (155). Indeed, aside from the fact that these people are infected with a disease, one which they are able to successfully manage with drugs, there appears to be almost no difference between them and those of Neville’s “old race.”

Nevertheless, there is no possibility of Neville being integrated into this new community—“[h]e knew he did not belong to them; he knew that, like the vampires, he was anathema” (159). Even though Ruth highlights the similarities between them, Neville cannot be granted access to the coming community. And it is a fate that Neville appears

to accept with equanimity. Noting that “[n]ormalcy was a majority concept,” and that therefore he is “the abnormal one now,” Neville swallows the poison provided by Ruth in order to escape the ordeal of an execution (159). Neville cannot surmount the prejudices and binary thinking of infection and immunity, cannot give way to the more fluid notion of subjectivity that is implied through the carefully maintained equilibrium of human subjectivity and bacterial infection. Such beliefs are genetically hardcoded into Neville’s very blood.

And in his final moments of life, Neville locates something outside of the boredom and fear that has characterized his existence since the *vampiris* outbreak: a joy in monstrosity.²⁰⁸ Neville realizes that the new vampire society fears him, that “[t]o them he was some terrible scourge they had never seen, a scourge even worse than the disease they had come to live with” (159). This feeling fires Neville with a pleasure he has not experienced within the scope of the novel heretofore: recognizing what he represents to the new community, Neville finds the idea “amusing,” and notes “[a] coughing chuckle filled his throat” (159). It is at this point that Neville understands that he is the “legend” of the novel’s title, the mythological figure of death and destruction excised from the new community in order to found its break with the past. Neville is cheered by this, animated

²⁰⁸ The striking ending of the novel is one that its manifold film adaptations have never managed to capture. The first adaptation of the novel, *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), comes closest, with Neville (played by Vincent Price) hunted down and killed by the new humans. As he dies, Neville hurls epithets at these new creatures, saying that they are “Freaks!” Both *The Omega Man* (1974) and *I Am Legend* (2007) drastically alter the ending of the source material by having a group of human survivors exist in enclaves. In both films, Neville (played by Charlton Heston and Will Smith, respectively) sacrifices himself while battling the infected beings to allow the other human beings time to escape to a safer haven. In each case, Neville’s blood is taken by these survivors to be used as an immunizing vaccine against the infection. These latter films employ the narrative of sacrifice that Matheson’s original novel plays with in order to reinscribe a plotline of heroic immunity and perilous infection. In both, Neville is valorized as a heroic figure protecting humanity from predatory monstrosity, the very antithesis of Matheson’s work.

in a way that he has not previously been. Part of the reason for this is that, in his sacrificial death, Neville becomes indelibly inscribed within the foundation of that community—he rhapsodically sees himself as “[a] new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever” (159), interpolated into the fabric of the new community through his total negation. Neville’s glee derives from his realization that his physical death immortalizes his persistence within the coming community. This is the final signal that this community will not truly break from that which had preceded it.

I Am Legend is a noteworthy novel for its involvement in pathologizing the undead being, turning it from an emanation of sorcery to one of microbiology, and for the ways it scripts a narrative of post-apocalyptic immunity. It is a narrative about the end of human civilization, and its replacement by something that comes afterward. And yet, in his vision of a post-human society, Matheson ultimately creates too affirmative, too clearly defined a vision of the future that is to come. Its proximity, its similarity, to the society that has come before defuses its possibility of being something radically different from that which came before, the society that climaxed in nuclear war and the monomaniacal murdering of Robert Neville. Indeed, Neville appears so joyful at the end because he is aware of the continuation of his project beyond the scope of his life, aware that in becoming the sacrificial victim of the *vampiris* community, his immunitary paradigm will continue to haunt them from that “fortress of forever.” In order to get beyond the position of narrative immunity, then, all narrative access to that future community must be constitutively denied. Any positive glimpse of such a society leaves

it open and vulnerable to the infection of immunity, thereby negating its potential to constitutively break from the notion of immunity that acts as the dark heart of modernity.

This rather lengthy digression into *I Am Legend* is relevant, not only because of its substantial influence on the zombie genre, but also because of the clear thematic resonances it shares with *Zone One*, specifically as they pertain to thinking through notions of immunity and community during and after the apocalypse. Whitehead, like Matheson and Romero, is intrigued by the idea of a civilizational collapse and what comes to succeed human existence on earth, and how the remnants of that society narrate their ends and this new beginning. In this vision of a coming community, the question of immune narrativity is vital: how can the narratological tools we use, so indebted as they are to ways of immunity, be utilized to describe something that is not just a repetition of the same? Whitehead takes many of the same elements as Matheson's novel: the "average" protagonist, the deadened affect that characterizes the style of narrating the apocalypse, and the possibility of something coming to replace humanity. Where he differs from Matheson, however, is to suggest that if whatever newness to come is not to just be a repetition of the old cycles of humanity, it cannot be beholden to the same rules and style of narration. Whitehead continually interrupts and arrests narration in the post-apocalypse, following Nancy's idea of literary communism. The power and hope of a community that escapes the immunitary trap is where narrative fails to pursue it.

4.5 Outbreak Optimism: Post-Apocalyptic Affect

Set in the aftermath of a worldwide zombie pandemic euphemistically referred to as "the interregnum" (48), *Zone One* depicts an America attempting to restart itself. The federal government—now situated in Buffalo—begins a project of recolonizing the

nation by setting up settlement camps throughout the country, a project entitled the “American Phoenix” (75). At the vanguard of this resettlement is the titular *Zone One*: Manhattan Island, which is meant to be the crown jewel of this revived America. The protagonist of the novel is “Mark Spitz,” a pseudonymous character who acts as a “sweeper,” part of a team of civilians sent to exterminate any lingering zombies on the island in the hopes of making the space safe for human inhabitants once more. Set over the course of three days, *Zone One* follows Mark Spitz through this post-apocalyptic American landscape that is attempting to reorganize and resurrect itself. Whitehead’s use of this familiar setting is to interrogate what it means to envision futurity and community, and how narration comes to inform the very contours of such endeavours. Thus, *Zone One* is a novel of failure, about the failure to imagine an alternative future and failure to narrate something truly different.

Mark Spitz provides a clear organization of what time means in this post-apocalyptic America: “[n]ormal meant ‘the past.’ Normal was the unbroken idyll of life before. The present was a series of intervals differentiated from each other only by the degrees of dread they contained. The future? The future was the clay in their hands” (81). This temporal categorization appears to offer the key to the novel’s structure, and I will return to it in the following pages. Most immediately, it is possible to detect the American Phoenix project as predicated upon a repetition of the past, a continuous evocation of a nostalgic normality intended to comfort the survivors of the apocalypse. The idea of the past as an “unbroken idyll” suggests its compression into a static vision of life oriented by its ahistorical perception, rent through only by the eruption of the zombie threat. Considering that this novel was written in the aftermath of the Great Recession of

2008, the satirical element is evident enough: the liberal-capitalist paradigm is incapable of envisioning anything other than a continuation of this trajectory in spite of its spectacular failure, of the atrophying of politics to the point where the potential for some kind of alternative articulation is impossible to imagine.²⁰⁹ As a complement to these ideas, we can also see how the immunitary biopolitics comes to foreclose the possibilities of narration in the aftermath of such an event, of how narrative can only replay hopes for a flight into the comforts of the past.

In his study of the literary trope of apocalypse, Frank Kermode comments that “[b]efore the End there is a period which does not properly belong either to the End or to the *saeculum* preceding it” (12). Yet in *Zone One*, much of the humour derives from the fact that this interstitial period attempts to evoke that preceding era as faithfully as possible. Almost every aspect of the American Phoenix project is meant to evoke a sense of familiarity with the pre-apocalyptic world of globalized capitalism, of return to that epoch. Indeed, the very name of “American Phoenix” suggests a cyclicity to history that will bring what is past back into the present. The official anthem of the project is titled “Stop! Can You Hear the Eagle Roar? (Theme from *Reconstruction*)” (135), which underscores once again the aspects of a nation rebuilding itself and also emphasizes, through the image of the eagle, the particularly American character that this renewal takes.²¹⁰ And the familiar aspects of pre-apocalyptic life are continually described within

²⁰⁹ Indeed, this is clearly one of the novel’s primary inspirations. Ohlin, in her review of the book, notes that New York “is the beating heart of the crimes under protest, and it is the heart of Colson Whitehead’s satirical zombie novel, *Zone One*” (n. pag.). Sorensen, likewise, remarks that “the collapse of the global financial markets” is one of the major world events that the novel works through (560).

²¹⁰ Throughout the novel, the narrator uses the word “reconstruction” to refer to the American Phoenix project and the colonizing of Zone One (see 9, 48, 135, 209, 290, et al.). It is possible to read this as an allusion to the post-Civil War period of American politics (usually placed between 1865-1877), which

the narrative as “returning”: the narrator notes how “[b]uzzwords had returned, and what greater proof of the rejuvenation of the world, the return to Eden” than such infectious marketing strategies (66)? Likewise, Mark Spitz muses that it is “[h]ard to believe that reconstruction had progressed so far that clock-watching had returned, the slacker’s code, the concept of the weekend” (9). The concept of return appears to be the entire ethos of the American Phoenix: “[t]here had been laws once; to abide by their faint murmuring, despite the interregnum, was to believe in their return. To believe in reconstruction” (48). The use of “interregnum” to refer to the zombie plague further underscores this idea of capitalism itself as a sovereign figure, an ephemeral idea that transcends the corporeality of the human survivors. The American Phoenix asserts the omnipotence of the capitalist project, Zone One re-establishes the dominion of capitalism over the space of the world. The zombies momentarily interrupt that narrative, but are unable to permanently derail it, and the seeming end of the zombie threat promises that return of the familiar structures of life.

As with Robert Neville in *I Am Legend*, the predominant affect in *Zone One* seems to be that of a lack of excitement in the wake of the apocalypse. Yet these manifestations appear in subtly different ways throughout the novel. The most common one is the intermingling sense of boredom and optimism that suffuses the great majority

describes a period of flourishing civil and economic rights for African-Americans, such as the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, the founding of the Freedmen’s Bureau, and the election of many African-Americans to federal and state political office. The ultimate failure of the Reconstruction Era, symbolized in the contested 1876 election of President Rutherford Hayes, who in return for his being ratified as president signalled an official end to the project of Reconstruction and the re-institution of a legalized white supremacy throughout the American south, is significant for *Zone One*. For a comprehensive examination of the Reconstruction Era and the various historiographies that have attempted to narrativize this time period, see Foner.

of the survivors of the plague, the labourers of the American Phoenix project, called (somewhat derisively) “pheenies” (16). As Mark Spitz notes at the beginning of the novel, “[i]t had been a humdrum couple of days, reaffirming his belief in reincarnation: everything was so boring that this could not be the first time he’d experienced it. A cheerful thought, in its way, given the catastrophe” (9). Mark Spitz here claims two different approaches: a boredom with the present and an affirmative, optimistic belief in “reincarnation,” in the possibility of the future.²¹¹ The future is the space of possibility; the present remains a kind of void, a waiting for that better future to come into existence and assert itself.

This dual affective disposition: a boredom with the present and a hope for the future, seems to be the affect of Wald’s outbreak narrative. Wald focuses on the “formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment” (1, 2). Her focus on this generic

²¹¹ Of course, a critique often levelled against utopian narratives is that they are, in their absence of conflict, boring. Jameson, in his reading of the utopian impulse in sf, remarks on how “a fear already implicit in the conception of art in the ... Utopian texts we have touched on, a fear that will develop into a gale-force wind in the anti-Utopians ... is simply the fear of boredom” (*Archaeologies* 184). The utopian vision where “the political has withered away” and the dialectical force of history has stopped in some teleological happy ending (185) would seem to be the same shape as the American Phoenix project, and would imply Zone One as a kind of utopian space in itself. The difference, I contend, between the vision provided by the American Phoenix (and critiqued by the narrative voice throughout the novel) and the negative utopian vision the novel provides has to do, ultimately, with capital. The American Phoenix is predicated upon a return to a late-capitalist economy, whereas the alternative proffered at the novel’s end is one wherein the commodity form that underpins capitalism has vanished. In Jameson’s discussion of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), he writes that, as More is writing prior to the ascendancy of capitalism to become the dominant economic mode of the world, he is able “to fantasize [capital’s] removal from social life in his new Utopian vision,” and comments that utopian narratives written in a capitalist hegemony offer “various substitutions—stamp script, labor certificates, a return to silver, and so forth, none of which offer very convincing Utopian possibilities” (17). It is the ability to entirely bracket off the power of capital in society formation that allows for a Utopian vision, and this is why, in spite of that affective sense of boredom, the American Phoenix cannot be considered properly utopian.

narrative that influences not only popular culture representations of contagious outbreaks, but medico-scientific ones as well, demonstrates the way in which society takes its cues from its viruses. As she herself states, “[c]ontagion is more than an epidemiological fact. It is also a foundational concept in the study of religion and society, with a long history of explaining how beliefs circulate in social interactions” (2). The part of Wald’s outbreak narrative that I would like to focus on closest is its final proposition—the promise of closure of which she speaks, the way in which the story ends with “containment.” Indeed, Wald does note that “[t]he outbreak narrative is conventional and formulaic, but it is also always evolving” (28),²¹² but the idea of a definitive endpoint to the outbreak, and the belief in the persistence of the human individual and society beyond that closure of the outbreak narrative seems implicit within such a generic definition. There is, therefore, a sense of familiarity and boredom to the outbreak narrative; the possibility of an extinction-engendering outbreak does not appear to exist within the borders of that familiar story.

Lauren Berlant’s theorization of “cruel optimism” helpfully underscores how affect becomes the site of biopolitical control, and sets out an idea of affect that acts as the locus for immunity in the twenty-first century. Arguing that “[a]ll attachments are optimistic,” that they necessarily involve a desire to ecstatically transcend the subject (23, 3), Berlant suggests that optimism turns “cruel” when it becomes “a relation of

²¹² Wald does note that the HIV epidemic apparently defies the logic of the outbreak narrative by virtue of the fact that “it could not be contained” (27). Yet more recent discussions of HIV/AIDS, such as Tim Dean’s *Unlimited Intimacy*, which investigates the subculture of “bug-chasers”—people who willingly infect themselves with HIV—demonstrates that, in some ways, HIV has become more manageable, and correspondingly, people’s affect toward it—at least in some social enclaves—has changed from fear and disgust to something more complicated.

attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to be either impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic” (24). Cruel optimism is “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (24), a condition of being ensnared within promises of “the good life” (11) that are unachievable or suffocating. Cruel optimism is a poisoning of the utopian wish, for that connection to an object (or concept, or person) is the very thing preventing “the expansive transformation for which a person or people risks striving” (2).²¹³ Thus, the American Phoenix project is a kind of literalization of Berlant’s theory, an attachment to an illusory vision of a better future that ends up blinding its adherents to their actual conditions of existence and its precarity.

This idea is most noticeable in the American Phoenix project and its vision of a future that is qualitatively undifferentiated from the novel’s past (and our present), a nation of pure liberal capitalism. Such a concept is most clearly (and humorously) illustrated in the tribulations of the sweepers charged with cleaning up the zombie-infested buildings in the financial district of Lower Manhattan. Despite the height of these buildings, the sweepers are prohibited from throwing the bodies of killed zombies out the windows; rather, they must carry them down the stairs and leave them on the pavement for the sanitation crews. The reason for this is because “Buffalo wanted the city habitable for new tenants The new era of reconstruction was forward-looking, prudent, attentive to small details that will dividend in the years to come. The word came

²¹³ Intriguingly, Berlant describes cruel optimism as “deictic” (27), in the same way that I have previously examined both the grammatical term and the way it applies to zombies. The absence in deixis, its blank space inflected by its situation, has a particularly enticing relevance for thinking of how immunity works within narrative, as that prophylactic space.

down: No more assaults on the windows of the fair city” (75). The idea of Manhattan as a pristine and untouchable city that will become again what it once was, and therefore needs to ignore the incursion of the flesh-hungry living dead into its midst, makes clear the aim of Whitehead’s satire: even in the aftermath of a world-historical disaster, liberal capitalism is incapable of envisioning a future outside or alternative to its trajectory. The city must remain the same as it was before the plague, attractive to prospective buyers and businesses. Indeed, this idea is amplified by the protests of the sanitation crews against the sweepers’ habit of throwing zombie bodies out of skyscraper windows: “[d]efenestration unduly aggravated their job. It was disrespectful. It was unhygienic. Frankly, it was unpatriotic” (75). The yoking together of disposing of zombie bodies to both hygiene and nationalism demonstrates the biopolitical capitalism of the American Phoenix ideology, its relationship of health to nationhood.

This idea of the cruel optimism of a static capitalist society is most relentlessly parodied when the survivors of Zone One do turn their eyes to the future generations of America. The future is incarnated in the quasi-mythical figures of the “Tromanhauser Triplets,” children who have fired the imaginations of the survivors throughout the United States. The legend involves a woman, Doris Tromanhauser, who is pregnant just as America succumbs to the zombie plague. Doris lives long enough in seclusion to be rescued by government forces, give birth to triplets, and then die. In the wake of such events, the legend of the Tromanhauser Triplets “spread through the Northeast settlements,” and becomes a kind of totem of “an ebbing of the plague” (51). Indeed, more than that, the triplets become representative of what the narrator calls “localized hope,” a regeneration myth, proof of the rejuvenation of society (52): while Mark Spitz

notes how the Chinatown in Manhattan will never be the same for him or people of his generation, that it is being prepared for the Tromanhauser generation, “the repopulating engine of babies, the unborn” (53, 56). The figure of the Child, being “[c]harged . . . with the task of assuring ‘that we being dead yet live’” (12) becomes such a focalizing point of hope, a synecdoche for the possibility of the regenerated future that is identical to the neoliberal present, and as such, the Tromanhauser Triplets are elevated to the level of near holiness.

One of the most relentless parodies of this inability to narrate the new comes in the form of the pre-packaged nostalgia of “reproductive futurity” so thoroughly critiqued by Lee Edelman in *No Future*. In that book’s introductory chapter, significantly titled “The Future is Kid Stuff,” Edelman interrogates the ideological investments which underpin the notion of “the Child” as the image of the future.²¹⁴ For Edelman, such investments are representative of what he titles “reproductive futurism,” that which limns the very horizons of political thought itself (2). As Edelman explains, the structure of (specifically American) politics is organized around the idea of the Child as the figure of the future, that being which will both inherit the work of the present socius and carry forward its works, and therefore “the Child [is] the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” (4). The Child becomes, then, the “disciplinary image of the Imaginary past” (31),

²¹⁴ In another evocation of this ideology, *Zone One* constantly literalizes this usage of childhood as a signifier for a future that is generically the same as the past. When provisional government representative Ms. Macy shows up in *Zone One*, she suggests an idea for a new mural in one of the buildings checked by the sweepers: “I’m thinking kids . . . Pictures of pheenie kids in the camps, cavorting and pitching in. Pressing seeds into the soil and sharpening machetes. No machetes—kid stuff. Smiling and laughing and doing kid stuff. They’re the future, after all. That’s what this whole thing is about, the future” (207). Mark Spitz puts a particularly cynical spin on things when he wonders “what did these folks do all day but try to think up better ways to hone the future” (98).

the figure invoked in order to manage and organize the shape and direction of the politics of the present. As Edelman notes, the Child as a figure works as “an erotically charged investment in the *rigid sameness of identity* that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism” (21, emphasis added). Thus, the Child operates as a figure not only of inheriting the future, but of maintaining that belief in the realization of a (heteronormative) identity that carries on into the future. The future is micromanaged and focus-grouped into a particularly corporatized vision of the neoliberal present, with all the baggage that that involves.²¹⁵ Edelman’s talk of the “sacralization of the Child” (28) takes on an almost literal embodiment within *Zone One* in the Triplets as they become the hope not just for the continuation of the present, but the redemption of the society affected by such a major interruption in the narrative.²¹⁶ The terminology employed here, with its reference to manufacturing and engines, suggests a particularly mass-produced vision of the future that is the same as the neoliberal present, a story of a return to the same without seeming care for the problems that this causes.

²¹⁵ There is an implicitly immunizing narratology to the Child throughout Edelman’s text. This is particularly evident in his discussion of the film *Philadelphia* (1993). Discussing the film’s final scene, a recorded flashback to the childhood of Andrew Beckett, who dies of AIDS, Edelman notes that this image of childhood pushes “not only against the intolerant world that sought to crush the honorable man this boy would later become, but also against the homosexual world in which boys like this eventually grow up to have crushes on other men. For the cult of the Child permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls, since queerness . . . is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end” (19). Edelman notes that *Philadelphia* thus utilizes “the disciplinary image of the ‘innocent’ Child performing its mandatory cultural labor of social reproduction” (19) and to this point I would add that the child in this moment also is deployed as an immunizing factor against the negative tonality of queerness that Edelman examines throughout *No Future*.

²¹⁶ Only Mark Spitz seems to be distanced from the jubilation of reproductive futurity; the narrator registers Mark Spitz’s contempt when it notes that “Mark Spitz was pulling for them, rooting for them, or whatever it was that one did when the world was ending and a statistically meaningless fraction of the planet’s extant population encountered a slightly larger daily portion of misfortune. He didn’t want to get too invested” (51).

And yet, Whitehead ultimately denies the possibility of the Tromanhauser Triplets as the redemptive figures of the post-apocalyptic world: later in the novel, word reaches Zone One that the settlement camp of Bubbling Brooks, the location of the triplets, falls to a zombie horde. When asked about the fate of the Tromanhausers, all Ms. Macy can say is “I know one got out” (237). While the implication of one of the triplets surviving the attack potentially implies the continuation of faint hope, the spectacular power of triplets, of that “rigid sameness” being carried out not only linearly, but horizontally, seems shattered by the downfall of Bubbling Brooks. The Tromanhauser Triplets become the totemic representatives of the potential future and its reassuring sameness; the survival of only one of the children only reinforces Mark Spitz’s pessimistic philosophy: Bubbling Brooks “had done what all refuges do eventually: it failed” (239). In the fall of the camp and the destruction of two of the three triplets, the suggestion may be that the future is no longer “kid stuff,” is no longer the refuge and province of the specularized Imaginary figure that will inherit the good deeds and structures of the present, but an alien world whose inhabitants cannot be envisioned.

Such connections between the Tromanhauser Triplets and the idea of reproductive futurism are not lost on critics of the novel; Leif Sorensen makes note of the mural and the Triplets as dramatizations of Edelman’s thinking within the context of the novel (see 566-570). Yet I think it is possible to push this idea further: more than just Imaginary investments within a futurity of biopolitical order, the specular children represent an example of narrative immunity *par excellence*. There is a power invested in the children of the mural and in the Triplets that extends beyond the scope of the survivors of the collapse: they are unsullied by engagements with the narrative caesura that the zombies

stand in for in Whitehead's universe. The power of the children as investments is that they are a way of casting into the future a stake of familiarity, of representation that extends beyond the time frame of the present and its narrative entanglements. Essentially, what the survivors do with the children is project a futural immunity, one that bypasses the power of the zombies in order to fixate on a recognizable community to come. The Child becomes the ultimate bearer of narrative immunity, its power being mobilized as an end-run around the narrative blockage of the zombie threat. The Child expresses the belief not only in the future that will of an identical character to the past, but also a kind of narrative immunization against the threat of the zombies: there will be children, just like their parents, to continue the work of society-building. In this sense, the outbreak narrative is further closed off by the evocation of reproductive futurity, the most shining example of the American Phoenix's (cruel) optimism.

All of this hope is particularly ironic given the fact that the American Phoenix appears to have very few immediate plans for dealing with the zombie outbreak. "No one used the word 'cure' anymore," the narrator explains, "[t]he plague so transformed the human body that no one still believed they could be restored" (78). Having given up on trying to cure the infected, the goal of the American Phoenix seems to ultimately be a waiting game. Upon the discovery of "kill fields," spaces filled with deceased zombies who had not been destroyed at human hands, "Buffalo sent down word of their think-tank scuttlebutt: the plague had finally, inevitably, exhausted what the human body could endure. There was a limit to the depredations, and that meant a limit to the devastation" (136). Such discoveries "hastened the start of many a reconstruction operation," and herald that "surely this is the American Phoenix rising" (136). The kill fields reassure the

survivors, telling them that the scaffolding of civilization remains untouched, that the return can be effected. Ultimately, the plan appears to be to wait out the zombie infection, to let the disease take its course rather than intervene in it aside from the actions of the sweepers to clear out the zombies that remain. In other words, the American Phoenix opts for a *laissez-faire* solution, allowing the Invisible Hand of fate to dictate the progress of the world. Such belief in the power of the killing fields, with whose discovery “one had reason to dust off the old optimism” (136), suggests again a belief in the naturalness of the global capitalist system, the impossibility of thinking otherwise, and in the assurance that it will return things to the way they were, a comforting nostalgia.

4.6 “that was the problem with progress—it made you soft”

In contrast to the unwavering hope for the future that most of the survivors possess, Mark Spitz differentiates himself by a far more cynical realism with regard to his situation.²¹⁷ In place of the hope for a return to a future that looks remarkably like the present, Mark Spitz possesses an “affective blankness” (Sorensen 580). This lack of affect, this seeming boredom with the utterly changed world, represents the particular kind of narrative immunity that *Zone One* engages in: an affective immunity against the

²¹⁷ Mark Spitz’s specific rationale for why he has survived the pandemic when so many others perished or transformed is an interesting one: it is not his exceptionality, but rather his utterly ordinary character that guarantees his preservation. Throughout the novel, Mark Spitz explains that his survival depends upon his unexceptional existence: “[h]e was their typical, he was their most, he was their average,” and later, “[h]is aptitude lay in the well-executed muddle, never shining, never flunking, but gathering himself for what it took to progress past life’s next random obstacle” (10-11). Like Neville, Mark Spitz is a representative of an average humanity, a remnant that survives the collapse. Yet while Neville’s survival is due to a unique, albeit completely accidental, factor, Mark Spitz’s survival is because there is nothing at all about him that is unique. It is this necessity for an average human representative that fuels Spitz’s high-metafictional self-reflection. Reflecting on this moment, Spitz reasons that his survival is assured because “[h]e was a mediocre man. He led a mediocre life exceptional only in the magnitude of its unexceptionality. Now the world was mediocre, rendering him perfect” (183). And thus, “[h]e had suspicions, and every day in this wasteland supplied more evidence: He could not die” (182).

possibilities of envisioning and seeking out a picture of the future. The Triplets represent most clearly the attempts to buy into a hope for the future, and Mark Spitz's ethos is placed in particular contradistinction to such a position. His credo throughout the novel is "[i]f you weren't concentrating on how to survive the next five minutes, you wouldn't survive them" (32). The temporal window that Mark Spitz allows himself is one of a gritty determination to encounter obstacles without succumbing to fantasies of a literal cruel optimism. Blankness is the way to kill the possibilities of a future that will constantly be frustrated by the appearance of the zombies, who are incapable of being narrativized, of entering into a coherent narrative structure in Whitehead's universe. A bored resignation and focus on the present is the attempt to mediate against the deceptive possibilities of a future.

This weariness toward return is most clearly explored through the history of the nickname "Mark Spitz." The reader never discovers Spitz's real name; he is always called Mark Spitz, in reference to the famous Olympian swimmer who happens to be white. What is revealed slowly over the course of the narrative is how Spitz acquired this name and its racially charged implications. It is only toward the end of the novel that it is revealed that Mark Spitz is a black man,²¹⁸ and that the nickname of Mark Spitz derives from an incident in Connecticut during which he and a few other survivors were trapped

²¹⁸ Although Whitehead slyly refers to Spitz's race earlier on the novel. When the nickname first comes up, the narrator remarks that "[t]he name stuck. No harm. Affront was a luxury" (26), suggesting that there is something insidious about the application of the name to the character. More significantly, the narrator notes that Spitz's fellow sweeper Gary "was not reluctant in sharing his bafflement that Mark Spitz had not been cut down in the first week, when the great hordes of unadaptables had been exterminated or infected" (30). While ostensibly Gary's surprise derives from Mark Spitz's self-described mediocrity, Whitehead is subtly referring to the horror film cliché in which black characters are the first to die at the hands of the monster, while at least some white characters persist on to the end of the narrative.

on a bridge teeming with zombies. While the other two safely plunge into the river below, Spitz refuses, electing to stay on the bridge and singlehandedly eliminate the undead. “When he told them later that he couldn’t swim,” the narrator adds, “they laughed. It was perfect: From now on he was Mark Spitz” (182). When Spitz later recounts this story to his sweeper colleague Gary, he explains that the main thrust of irony in the moniker comes from “the black-people-can’t-swim thing” (287). While Gary professes bafflement at such a stereotype, Mark Spitz remains skeptical, noting that “[h]e found it unlikely that Gary was not in ownership of a master list of racial, gender, and religious stereotypes, cross-indexed with corresponding punch lines as well as meta-textual dissection of those punch lines” (287-288). This leads Mark Spitz to a deeper meditation on what it is, exactly, that the American Phoenix resurrects along with its vision of a liberal-capitalist utopia. “Would the old bigotries be reborn as well,” he muses, “when they cleared out this Zone, and the next, and so on, and they were packed together again, tight and suffocating on top of each other? Or was that particular bramble of animosities, fears, and envies impossible to re-create?” (288). While the rhetorical structure of the question leads to some possibility of there being a break, a rupture from the structure of the past that had been the society which succumbed to the zombie plague, Mark Spitz instantly disavows such utopian thinking: “If they could bring back paperwork ... they could certainly reanimate prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns” (288). The post-apocalypse is therefore no refuge from the iniquities of the past, no utopian break from the sordid history that impelled the catastrophe; so long as those imbalances remain, be they racial, economic, or otherwise, they will eventually metastasize into the dominant structures of that immune-community once more. It is a

destiny that Mark Spitz definitively rejects when he thinks about how “[t]here were plenty of things in the world that deserved to stay dead, and yet they walked” (288). The solutions proffered by the American Phoenix project, by the attempt to return to the *status quo*, are revealed, through Mark Spitz, not to be just cozy recollections of a past within memory, but also a system replete with structural and social inequalities. This revelation helps make clear the cruelty of the American Phoenix optimism.

Thus, Mark Spitz maintains a pessimistic, almost nihilistic vision of the future, displayed in an affective lack that is not the boredom of the other survivors, but an apathetic connection to the structures of social organization. Spitz’s blankness seems to derive from a sense of anhedonia. The term, per the OED, refers to the “[i]nability to feel pleasure” (“Anhedonia”). A clinical term, “anhedonia” is seen as an aspect of Major Depressive Disorder, characterized by the DSM as “diminished interest in pleasure in response to stimuli that were previously perceived as rewarding during a pre-morbid state” (qtd. in Treadway and Zald, 538). Interestingly, this is a feeling that Whitehead himself claims to suffer from. His essay recounting his experiences in the 2011 World Series of Poker for *Grantland* magazine is titled, significantly, “Occasional Dispatches from the Republic of Anhedonia.”²¹⁹ Whitehead’s essay valorizes the anhedonic, turning himself into that fictional nation’s representative at the World Series of Poker in Las

²¹⁹ In an echo of his author, Mark Spitz spends “Last Night,” the time at which the zombie plague goes pandemic and ruptures the world, inside a casino (although in Atlantic City instead of Las Vegas). Like Whitehead, Spitz marvels at “the artificial habitat that is the modern casino. They did not want. It was all inside” (82). In this sense, *Zone One* appears to suggest a hypothetical follow-through to Whitehead’s musings in “Republic of Anhedonia”: the world will end, and eventually its effect will ripple through the seemingly impenetrable barriers of the capitalist temple.

Vegas²²⁰: “[w]e have no borders, but the population teems. No one has deigned to write down our history, but we are an ancient land, founded during the original disappointments, when the first person met another person” (n. pag.). If not intended to be a record of the successes of the anhedonic (Whitehead is eliminated from the competition during the third day), then his essay is meant to register the existence of the anhedonic, the numbing sensation at a world of narcotized satisfaction.

After his defeat at the card table, Whitehead attempts to provide a moral that the World Series of Poker revealed to him:

I learned a lot of things during my long, bizarre trip. About myself, and the ways of the world. One, do not hope for change, or the possibility of transcending your everyday existence, because you will fail. Two, if people put their faith in you, you will let them down. And three, everything is a disaster. In short, nothing I hadn't known since childhood, but sometimes you can forget these things when engulfed by a rogue swell of optimism, which happens, if infrequently. (n. pag.)

The entropic perspective of anhedonia allows for a perspective well-suited for inhabiting a world characterized by an obsession with *chronos*, a hoarding of that kind of time.

Poker presents the vision of a sudden change, an interruption in the proceeding flow of events, the ceaseless tide of the “Wave of Mutilation” (n. pag.). Anhedonia is not about seeking pleasure, but about redemption, about breaking the spell of time. Yet in the end, Whitehead is distanced from the possibility of such salvation, lost amid hermetic moments in time and the zombies that characterize these spaces.

²²⁰ Intriguingly, Whitehead describes the hotels in which the World Series of Poker takes place in terms of apocalyptic and temporal imagery: he depicts one hotel as “[a] real Logan’s Run building,” and then imagines a kind of apocalypse beyond its walls—“outside the walls, my world was ruined, the Library of Congress half-buried in sand”; inside, by contrast, is hermetic, sealed off, protected. In his non-fiction, too, Whitehead rehearses this idea of an apocalyptic space that is immunized against by a completely flat and affectless present, a narcotization against the damages of time’s arrow.

Yet in spite of Mark Spitz's seemingly present-oriented cynicism, his disdain for "pheenie bullshit" (32) then, and his attempts to focus on "the next five minutes," he cannot divorce himself from an almost constant remembrance of all that came before. As such, the majority of the novel is comprised of flashbacks to the protagonist's life prior to the Last Night as well as his nomadic escapades during the interregnum. In the opening pages of the novel, Mark Spitz is distracted from his patrol when he "succumb[s] to a reverie" and is nearly devoured after being ambushed by a group of skels. That "pandemic of pheenie optimism" (16) cannot help but infect even the most hard-bitten of survivors. Indeed, Whitehead overtly pathologizes the late capitalist society that has collapsed. Thinking back to the Last Night, Mark Spitz's main concern is "Sunday night's recurring epidemic: Back to work" (84). Likewise, Mark Spitz's place of employment, the social media outlet of a Starbucks-like coffee franchise, is described in specifically mutating terms: "[o]ne storefront divided into two, a dozen brick-and-mortar locations metastasizing into an international franchise" (184). Musing on a popular sitcom, Mark Spitz considers himself "[i]nfected by reruns ... [he] had been hypnotized by the show himself, nestled inside its eighteen-to-thirty-four demographic whose underdeveloped cultural immune systems rendered them susceptible to the series' shenanigans" (73). The past becomes the province of virality, reaching out with its creature comforts in order to infect one with the affect of a nostalgic vision of the future, a shallow and materialist optimism.

What sets Mark Spitz apart from the rest of his peers is not his disavowal of the past, but rather his awareness of its essential past-ness. The American Phoenix think-tanks pathologize memory in the neologism "PASD," which stands for "Post-Apocalyptic

Stress Disorder” (66). Noting that “[e]veryone suffered from PASD” (67), Whitehead clearly puns on the homophony between PASD and past—a connection made explicit in the following pages where Mark Spitz misunderstands the agonies of a collapsed soldier. When an army recruiter tells him “it’s his past,” Spitz is confused, until the recruiter clarifies: “[h]is P-A-S-D, man” (69). PASD undercuts the optimistic sheen to which the American Phoenix idealizes nostalgia, and therefore these memories become medicalized. Mark Spitz is able to return to these memories, inhabit them, but he does not succumb to them in the way the pheemies do. The activities of the previous life are gone forever, and unlike the living dead they will never be resurrected. Mark Spitz is not fired by an optimism but by a nostalgic affection for that which is forever past. The past is something to be mourned, to return to, but without any expectation of its triumphant rebirth. While the other characters, so focused on the majesty of the American Phoenix, succumb at the novel’s end to the surge of zombies, Mark Spitz is able to turn off his reveries: “[n]ot enough memory, with his survival programs running, for his PASD. His past” (314). Whereas the past becomes pathological for the other characters, Mark Spitz is able to disconnect himself from it, to fully inhabit the temporal frame of the present that characterizes the zombie apocalypse.²²¹

²²¹ A further similarity between the two texts is their narrative mode: both *I Am Legend* and *Zone One* are narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator, and focalized through the characters of Neville and Spitz. The effect is a further immunization; as Kate Marshall aptly notes, “[r]ather than housing this narration within dialogue ... the narrative voice [of *Zone One*] maintains its third-person distance. Mark provides a third-person narration of his own experience from within the third-person narrative frame of the novel” (534).

4.7 When the Straggler Awakes

Whitehead's chief addition to the zombie mythology is to create an apparent distinction in the classification of zombies. The great majority of zombies are referred to as "skels" (short for "skeletons") and are representative of the typical undead figure: shambling, implacably hungry for the flesh of the living, only ceasing when their brain has been definitively destroyed. Yet there exists a second type, termed "stragglers" by the humans, whose mode of existence appears to be entirely different and relatively benign. Unlike skels, stragglers "did not move They were a succession of imponderable tableaux" (60). Indeed, stragglers do not even appear to succumb to the temptations of the flesh, remaining motionless and unresponsive even when in close proximity to human beings. Instead, stragglers remain frozen in a single location; if moved, they return to that space. "The general theory," the narrative explains, "contended that the stragglers haunted what they knew" (64), fusing themselves to a singular space. The stragglers appear to imbue meaning into the spaces they "haunt" (60), becoming visible signatures of the effect of space, of memory, on the body. Stragglers make manifest the importance of memory, of returning again and again to places of import. As the narrator remarks, "[t]heir lives had been an interminable loop of repeated gestures; now their existences were winnowed to this discrete and eternal moment" (62). Thus, while the skels may be representatives of the empty, meaningless present, the stragglers seem to embody a melancholic connection to a meaningful past. It is no wonder, then, that "while the regular skels got referred to as *it*, the stragglers were awarded male and female pronouns" (102). In the stragglers, the survivors of the apocalypse see echoes of themselves, looking to reclaim and make manifest some image of the past.

Indeed, the Lieutenant in charge of Zone One has a particular affinity for the stragglers, repeating his admiration for them throughout the novel. “Personally, I like them,” he tells Mark Spitz, “I think they’ve got it right and we’re the ninety-nine percent that have it all wrong,”²²² later he tells Omega Unit that “stragglers ... know what they’re doing. Verve and a sense of purpose. What do we have? Fear and danger. The memories of the ones you’ve lost” (121, 196). Unlike the phoenies attempting to revivify the past, the stragglers, as the Lieutenant sees them, are “always inhabiting the perfect moment. They’ve found it—where they belong” (196). The stragglers seem to exist in an ever-present state of melancholy, an understanding that the past is gone, never to return. This devotion to loss, and the rejection of a foolhardy attempt to incarnate what has vanished in the open space of the future, makes these figures so attractive to the Lieutenant.²²³

Mark Spitz, who admires the Lieutenant, likewise possesses the same kind of disposition toward stragglers as the military officer. Spitz tries (in vain) to prevent Gary from executing a straggler they encounter in one of the office buildings (100-101), and later daydreams about being a straggler himself. During a patrol of Zone One, Mark Spitz happens across a long-abandoned chain restaurant, which prompts an extended reverie about his childhood and his family’s frequent trips to the place. Spitz muses on how “[c]lassic rock had greeted them every time,” and his disappointment that the décor of each restaurant is identical (190). Although he had never encountered this particular

²²² Keeping with the post-Great Recession context in which this novel was written, this is an obvious echo of the Occupy Wall Street protests, and its most famous slogan, “We are the 99%.” Yet here the concept is flipped: the 99% are the monstrous, and the 1% is the idealized and humanized figure.

²²³ It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the Lieutenant commits suicide later in the novel. This is what Mark Spitz refers to as the “forbidden thought” (283), the attempt to bridge the gap between the meaninglessness of human endeavour and the idealization of the undead.

iteration of the restaurant before, Spitz notes that “[h]e had been here before and not been here before. That was the magic of the franchise” (191). Mark Spitz finds comfort in the homogenization that the restaurant offers, its suggestion of a repeated time-space that can be rolled out in an undifferentiated fashion. When he enters this restaurant, at once familiar and totally new, he feels himself become “a ghost. A straggler,” and then, following up on this thought, wonders where he would possibly go if he were a straggler. He decides, ultimately, that “[m]aybe he’d come here” (192, 193). What is interesting about this passage is how nostalgia is identified and understood as a constructed process—Mark Spitz refers to this restaurant as “[h]is introduction to the nostalgia industry” (189)—but at the same time this does nothing to blunt its affective hold, both living and dead. The purpose of this extended vignette demonstrates the importance of rescuing something from time, of trying to prevent moments from being lost in the flood of temporality. Indeed, when Mark Spitz later tells the Lieutenant that “I’m here because there’s something worth bringing back,” the officer terms such a rationale “straggler thinking” (270-271). Stragglers are mired in the past, nostalgically connected to a moment in the past that defines them, that gives them a dimension of humanity. Both Mark Spitz and the Lieutenant, therefore, recognize in this subset of zombies not just a physical resemblance, but the spark of some humanity, the possibility of some form of shared identity.

Yet unlike the Lieutenant, Mark Spitz’s convictions are not quite so unshakeable: following the Lieutenant’s suicide, he comes to see the stragglers not as “the Lieutenant’s sentimentalized angels, dispensing obscure lessons through the simple fact of their existence,” but rather understands them as “vermin that needed to be put down” (280,

281). This lesson comes a little too late, however. While on patrol, Mark Spitz's sweeper team, Omega Unit, encounters a fortune teller's shop, complete with a straggler, and Gary attempts to entertain Mark Spitz and team leader Kaitlyn by engaging in a parodic palm reading session with the zombie. "Madame Gypsy, can you help us see the future?" Gary asks it. After engaging in a pantomime of psychic encounter, Gary tells his companions that "[t]hey say every thing is going to be all right" (283, 284). Once again, the assurance of a bright and hopeful future is evoked, with the straggler acting as a parodic medium to this invocation of phoenie optimism. Yet as soon as Gary lets go of the straggler's hand, "she grabbed his hand and chomped deep into the meat between the index finger and thumb" (284). The narrative of comfort and familiarity, of recognition, that the stragglers seem to offer the survivors, the representation of a kind of mirror or similitude, an extension of human desires and memories, turns out to be a fatal misrecognition. The immobility and docility of the stragglers is a mistake; their actual purpose or motive remains occluded from human understanding. It is no coincidence that the straggler who breaks the pattern and strikes back is a fortune teller: she makes clear the future of the human race in her actions that disrupt the familiar lull to which the sweepers have become accustomed. As the narrator warns earlier in the novel, "[t]he plague didn't let you in on its rules; they weren't printed on the inside of the box. You had to learn them one by one" (107). This lesson demonstrates the desire for connection, for a way of looking at the past that the human beings desire to locate in the zombie stragglers, and how this error of connection kills Gary and heralds the doom of Zone One, and possibly humanity as a whole. If the past is identified as normal, as the place where recognition can be located, then the sudden shift of the stragglers from ostensible

dormancy to violent presence represents the final rebuke to the nostalgia that tinges every action of the American Phoenix project.

It is apropos, then, that the ending to *Zone One* is both an apocalyptic ending and a narrative beginning. The novel, characterized to this point by stasis, suddenly erupts with the apocalyptic violence only hinted at before. The seemingly safe place of Zone One is completely overrun by skels (and the newly mobile stragglers), and the settlement collapses almost instantly. The American Phoenix project is revealed as hollow, an exercise in “PR,” according to the Buffalo representative Ms. Macy, who lets slip the far more serious straits the human survivors find themselves in: “[w]e don’t even have food for the winter” (311). This attempt at reconnecting with a vanished present proves to be the ultimate kind of cruel optimism, blinding the inhabitants of Zone One to the reality that it really is “the end of the world,” that “[t]he last months had been a pause, a breather before the recommitment to annihilation” (318). And in spite of the apocalyptic events of these final pages, Mark Spitz cannot help but find himself “smiling because he hadn’t felt this alive in months” (311). As the zombies seemingly come to life, so too does Mark Spitz, casting off that affective blockage that characterizes the time of the American Phoenix, the anaesthetic time that has no vision of a future except for a return to a desiccated present. Affect flourishes as the world ends, as the last vestiges of a static and exhausted immunity falls away forever. As Manhattan is definitively lost, Mark Spitz finds himself holed up, in classic zombie-movie fashion, in an abandoned building, surrounded by hordes of the living dead. It is here that Spitz corrects his earlier assessment of ending, noting that “[t]he world wasn’t ending: it had ended and now they were in a new place. They could not recognize it because they had never seen it before”

(321). Spitz, like Robert Neville before him, finds himself outnumbered and surrounded by the marker of the end of humanity, and is affectively charged by this encounter. Yet unlike Matheson's novel, there is no positive evocation of a utopian new beginning, a representative able to announce the citizens of the new world and reveal to Neville the terrible effect of his violent crusade. For Whitehead the state of things can be declined only negatively, through an inability to access that which is.

The zombies in this final movement of the novel are described in overtly marine imagery: "[t]he ocean had overtaken the streets ... Except it was not water that flooded the grid but the dead," a "sea of the dead" and a "black tide," a "deluge [in which] everyone was drowning" (302, 322, 312). The zombies are no longer defined by their individuality or their resemblance (either physical or affective) to human beings, but have become an irrepressible surge, a thrusting forth of the new society that will take the place of the exhausted and static humanity, that Wave of Mutilation that Whitehead considers in his essay on poker. Accompanying such a shift is Mark Spitz's recognition that "[t]hese were not the Lieutenant's stragglers, transfixed by their perfect moments These were the angry dead, the ruthless chaos of existence made flesh" (321). The flatness, the affective lack displayed by the zombies have become replaced by a ferocious activity, a liveliness unseen by any of the novel's human characters. Like Neville, Spitz opts to make a definite choice, to leave his (temporarily) secure abode and venture out into the mass of zombies in the seemingly vain hope of making it off the vanquished island. In the novel's final paragraph, Spitz makes the proactive choice that he has suspended throughout the entire novel: "[f]uck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead" (322). The

inertia that froze Mark Spitz on the Connecticut bridge, that ensured his survival against the hordes of zombies because of his averageness, vanishes at the end. He can no longer be the inert figure of a static humanity—he makes his choice, opting to swim, to act rather than react in this new land of the dead. The novel ends at this point, beyond which the reader cannot venture with Spitz. While the prospects of his survival appear bleak, the narrative’s endpoint is here less because of Spitz’s impending death²²⁴ than because of the impossibility of the immunizing principle of inertia continuing on. Both in terms of affect and action, Spitz shakes off his anhedonia, and commits, truly, to his principle of existing in the immediate present. It is when the narrative kicks into action that it vanishes, no longer able to sustain itself from the infective possibility. *Zone One* ends here because, were it to continue, it would be transformed into something it is not, something that the narrative cannot sustain or accurately depict. Like Mark Spitz, the narrative frees itself from its inoculating cocoon to enter into an experience that it is no longer possible to ably describe. Whether Mark Spitz escapes, is devoured, or joins that coming community of zombie life, it is impossible for the narratological tools predicated on immunity to explore.

²²⁴ After all, he may survive. In the 2004 “rom-zom-com” film *Shaun of the Dead*, the ragtag group of survivors bluff their way past an army of the dead and into their safe haven of a pub by adopting the posture, gait, and appearance of the dead, complete with the characteristic groaning. The ruse is only temporarily successful, but the protagonists are able to make their way past the throng of the dead. This moment, while meant to be comedic, suggests that it is, indeed, affect that determines zombification more than any kind of physical infection. Mark Spitz, who is so often identified with the stragglers, may be able to make his way through the swathe of zombies in this way.

4.8 Writing Your Way into the Future

The novel's end seems to mark, then, a complete cessation of human being on the planet, a final and irrevocable collapse to the zombie contagion. Mark Spitz remarks at one point that "[t]he plague had a knack for narrative closure" (160). This finality extends to critical appraisal of the novel, which notes that "[a]gainst the late-capitalist fantasy of a future that consists of an endless reproduction of the present, Whitehead offers the shocking possibility of an absolute ending" (Sorensen 561). I find that Whitehead's considerations of narrative's relation to apocalypse and community to be more nuanced than this. Whitehead does not completely foreclose the possibility of writing from engagement with the coming community—but he does disconnect this writing from the possibility of narrative. In one of the novel's most important passages, Mark Spitz reflects on his pre-Zone One days working as a salvager in Connecticut. His job involves removing abandoned cars from bridges, and he is paired with a mysterious woman who titles herself "The Quiet Storm," another survivor of the horrors of the interregnum. The Quiet Storm uses a tow truck to maneuver the abandoned vehicles into patterns that are clearly discernible, but whose meaning is utterly inaccessible to everyone who views them. The incomprehensibility of these vehicular shapes takes on a specific power for Spitz and the narrator: "[w]hile the other wreckers, indeed all the other survivors, could only perceive the wasteland on its edge, the Quiet Storm was in the sky, inventing her alphabet and making declarations in a row of five green hatchbacks parked perpendicular to the meridian" (289). Physical perspective comes to dominate this rendering of apocalypse, as the survivors think of the zombie apocalypse in terms of its horizontality, perceiving an edge, a linearity with recognizable boundaries. The Quiet Storm, by

contrast, looks on with an angel-eye view, witnessing the catastrophe not in terms of a temporal projection but an event, one that requires new patterns, new modes of thinking in order to properly understand them. Indeed, the car-pattern comes to take on a particularly linguistic conception as the narrator delves further into Spitz's reverie: "[t]he grammar lurked in the numbers and colors, the meaning encoded in the spaces between the vehicular syllables" (289). The question then becomes who this language is directed toward, and the narrator ponders that these shapes are "aimed at—what? Tomorrow? What readers?," and later reiterating "[w]hat readership did she address? Gods and aliens, anyone who could look down at the right time, from the right perspective" (289, 290).²²⁵ The juxtaposition of the future (tomorrow), with the immediate follow-up question of "what readers?," suggests the impossibility of the future inhabitants of the United States, those primed by the American Phoenix project to live out a future that is structured like the past, to be any better at reading these glyphs than anyone who is in the present. When Mark Spitz asks the Quiet Storm "[w]hat's that supposed to mean," she replies that "[w]e don't know how to read it yet. All we can do right now is pay witness" (289, 290).

²²⁵ There is an interesting engagement with the necessity of writing and interpreting in the face of apocalypse. Jacques Derrida, in "No Apocalypse, Not Now" (1984), argues that humanities scholars are necessary to debate the concept of apocalypse (in this case, the fear of nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s). Derrida suggests that "[w]e can therefore consider ourselves competent because the sophistication of the nuclear strategy can never do without a sophistry of belief and the rhetorical simulation of a text" (24). For Derrida, the apocalypse is always, in some sense, an act of writing, and therefore those who are trained in the act of textual interpretation and close reading are apt for the job of exploring apocalypse and the writerly impulse at its heart. He adds that "the nuclear epoch is dealt with more 'seriously' in texts by Mallarme, Kafka, or Joyce, for example, than in present-day novels that would offer direct and realistic descriptions of a 'real' nuclear catastrophe" (27-28). Within the context of *Zone One*, then, the Quiet Storm's poetic rendering of an unreadable language becomes the more "real" attempt to explore the idea of the end of humanity and the coming of a new community, toward whom this writing is directed, than either the facile fantasies of the American Phoenix or Mark Spitz's fatalistic pragmatism.

Mark Spitz begins the novel hoping to master the abilities of comprehension that seem to elude his fellow survivors. Thinking of his time as a boy first encountering the overwhelming island of Manhattan, he believes that “[t]here was a message there, if he could teach himself the language” (7). By the novel’s end, however, there is a shift away from the hope of understanding to the project of bearing witness to alterity. Here, then, is the rupture with the reproductive futurism, the immunizing promise of a future premised on a nostalgic past: the Quiet Storm is writing for an audience not yet in existence, not yet capable of thinking through or inhabiting the world in a way alternative to what has led to this cataclysm. It is not the case that one must render the apocalypse through narrative immunity, an attempt to preserve against the threats of a contagious existence. This language exists beyond the possibility of decoding; it is an asemia indecipherable to those trained by the models of late capitalism into specific cycles of thinking toward a static future. Indeed, the narrator claims that the Quiet Storm “wrote her way into the future” (290), that she will attain a kind of durability that will outlast the vain optimisms of the American Phoenix project because it is a gift directed toward futurity, a futurity depicted as being radically different from anything that the survivors are capable of envisioning. In summation, then, one cannot encounter or understand what that vision of the future would be, because there is no method of grasping what that future would look like. The glimpse of this alternative language, this one that speaks into the future, is where hope exists in *Zone One*, in the possibility of a radically alternative future that does not collapse into an overdetermined morass of viral encounter and capture, of a space segmented into a different conception of time. The Quiet Storm’s top-down perspective also suggests a rendering of time that does not proceed along the past-present-future axis

of linearity that is so constraining to thinking outside of viral contamination, the temporal logic that dominates the characters of the novel. The Quiet Storm's occulted language is meant to be seen from above, all at once, as a kind of event, from some perspective foreign to the affairs of humans, as in Gods or aliens. Bearing witness to an alternative logic, language, and temporality is the best that can be afforded, the closest image Whitehead is able to conceive of as an escape from the logic of viral ubiquity and immunizing entropy.

By the invocation of "Gods and aliens" as the potential "readership" of the Quiet Storm's future-writing, Whitehead breaks from the trap that Matheson falls into. The zombies are not, like the *vampiris*-infected people, a positive representation of the coming community. While they may indeed be the beings to inherit the earth, it is just as possible that they are some transitional stage, some movement away from anthropocentric dominion. Whitehead refuses to depict what society it could be that would decipher the Quiet Storm's writing, that would be the inheritors of this linguistic gift. To do so would expose them to the possibility of an immunitary definition: they *are* this, they *are not* that. Instead, Whitehead offers no access to this future collectivity, because such an existence would be impossible to put into the narrative language of immunity to which we have become accustomed.

At the end of his essay "The Politics of Utopia," Fredric Jameson memorably claims that "[u]topias in fact come to us as barely audible messages from a future that may never come into being" (54). The rendering of utopia within a narratological paradigm offers us a vision of a future that, although "non-existent," is also "non-fictional" (54). It is an attempt of imagining a picture of the future in order to develop a

contiguity between a present and the possibility of a future that has jumped the tracks, that has developed alternatively from this space of the present. Colson Whitehead inverts this formula, and *Zone One* represents an attempt to send a barely audible message into that unexplored future. Utopia, for Whitehead, can only be defined negatively, identifying what it is not and demonstrating the way that such an illusory vision of utopia is bound to fail. The American Phoenix project of the post-zombie America represents such a negative utopia, an image of the future that is nothing more than a longing for the nostalgia of the past, a representation of the complete exhaustion of the liberal imagination in regard to community and collectivity. And such an imaginary utopia as a rejuvenescent liberal-capitalist America is doomed to fail, destined to drown beneath the unending waves of zombie bodies that crash against the shores of Manhattan. For Mark Spitz, the novel's anhedonic narrator, such a definitive wiping of the slate is the only way to ensure that something other than the stultified sameness of the capitalist order that the space *Zone One* is meant to exalt can come into being. The coming community, the possibility of utopia, is one that cannot be directly narrated, for such an approach threatens it with the possibility of instantiating the immunitary paradigm that leads inevitably to an autoimmunizing biopolitics. To make a move toward that idealized *cum-munus* that Esposito reads as the opposite of immunity, one must be divested of the narrative strategies involved in such apocalyptic and utopian fantasies. In order to break with immunity, it is necessary to break with the strategy of descriptive narration. Thus, the vehicular grammar of the *Quiet Storm* is present, is recognizable as a patterned system, has a rationale behind it, but remains elusively unreadable to the characters of Whitehead's world. The *Quiet Storm*'s language is that which is held out to the coming

community, the debt carried forward into the future equipped to discern that barely audible message of the exhausted present.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have endeavoured to sketch out the ways in which the concepts of viral infection and immunity operate on generic and narratological levels. I am interested in the way that the discourses of biology, virology, and immunology gain discursive influence in the way that they unfold in speculative narration. Likewise, I have sought, throughout this project, to articulate the manifold means that this dialectical relationship between infection and immunity can be narrated: there are a series of intertwining and conflicting ideas about who and what can be considered inoculated or contaminated. As I have tried to demonstrate, the purpose of this project is to push back against the notion that there is a single outbreak narrative (or immune narrative); rather, these narratives are informed and shaped by a series of temporal, ideological, and subjective displacements, each of which changes the trajectory of such narrations of infection and immunity.

In these closing pages, I wish to briefly comment upon a few potential paths that could further develop the aims of this project. One area of future study can focus on is the role of the *infected* narrator in speculative fiction. In each of the four chapters, I have examined texts featuring narrators commenting upon, but not affected by, disease. My rationale for this focus is that I believed analyzing stories featuring narrators who are themselves physically unaffected by viruses would make clearer the narratological character of immunity. Yet, this is not to suggest that all narrators are necessarily immune, nor that the concept of “narrative immunity” cannot apply to narrators or characters who have been afflicted with a contagious illness. Indeed, there exists

voluminous cases of speculative narratives about viral outbreak from narrators whose contact with contagion changes their understanding of their identity.

A particularly potent example of such an event occurs in Greg Bear's novel *Blood Music* (1985), which presents the reader with the by-now familiar narrative of an apocalyptic viral pandemic. What sets *Blood Music* apart from other such fictions is that this apocalypse does not announce the end of the human race, but its ascension to a "higher" form of existence. The novel is focalized through several characters, but it begins with the research scientist Vergil I. Ulam and his romantic quest to cultivate a "smart virus." Recently fired from his job as a microbiologist at the genetics engineering firm Genetech, Vergil decides to take his research with him, injecting himself with his own experimental lymphocytes rather than leave them to be disposed of by his erstwhile employers. Despite the sudden influx of these unpredictable microbes into his body, Vergil acts largely unconcerned by this change—as he explains to his friend Edward Milligan, his immune system "will take care of it. Like police" (63). In the weeks following his act, Vergil undergoes a remarkable transformation: his own cells talk to him. Termed "noocytes," ("from the Greek word for mind, 'noos,'" Vergil helpfully explains [74]), these experimental "smart cells" refigure his entire body, upgrading his physical and mental capacities, and cataloguing his entire personality within each cell's genetic memory (this is important, as the noocytes eventually liquify Vergil's body in their attempt to spread across the globe).

Blood Music possesses the common beats of a viral outbreak story—from the initial contact, to the sudden catastrophic spread, to the frantic attempts by scientists and epidemiologists to identify the contamination's origin and halt its circulation. While

Bear's novel appears from the outset to be a familiar bio-thriller, it diverts from this path quickly and in intriguing ways. The most generative aspect of *Blood Music*, however, comes from the depiction of the human body's intrusion at not just the cellular level, but the narratological. As Vergil explains to Edward, his neologism for these smart cells "just popped into my head" (74). As the virus reshapes Vergil's body and mind, it is also able to intrude into his own sense of narration. Later, as Vergil sits alone in his room, his engages in a dialogue with his own cells:

--Yes, I am everything now.

Explain

--What? I mean, explain what?

Simplicities

--Yes, I imagine it's tough waking up. Well, you deserve the difficulties. Damn very old DNA finally waking up.

SPOKEN with other

--What?

WORDS communicate with *share* body structure *external* is this like *wholeness WITHIN* *totality* is EXTERNAL alike

--I'm not understanding, you're not clear.

Silence inside for how long? Difficult to tell the passage of time; hours and days in minutes and seconds. The noocytes had screwed up his brain clock. And what else?

YOU *interface* *stand BETWEEN* EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL. Are they alike

--Inside and outside? Oh, no. (76)

The passage's content (as Vergil and the noocytes attempt to discover a common language) is disorienting, but it is particularly interesting the way Bear maneuvers between the levels of dialogue between Vergil and the cells and his own internal narration. Vergil's own sense of "self" is pulled in three separate directions, between the voices of the noocytes (his own reconfigured cells), the voice of his "self" engaged in a (non-verbal) dialogue with the noocytes, and the voice of his "self" as interior monologue. Bear is interested in thinking through the ways that not only subjectivity is

altered by viral encounter, but the ways in which narration is affected in such a transition. Vergil is alienated from his sense of self and his body, and this opens up the possibility of a dialogic encounter, an interlocution with a seemingly stable and unified identity. For Bear, there is the possibility of reorienting the scope and shape of self.²²⁶ This paradigmatic example of posthuman narrative also foregrounds the way in which viruses and immunities are necessarily rethought and the concept of narration re-figured around such new subjectivities.

A second major avenue I can see in pursuing this project further is to offer a clearer analysis of gender. It is no accident that the four chapters of this project examine male authors and feature male narrators (or, in the case of Burroughs, a masculine narrative voice, at least). One of the goals of this project was to demonstrate the way that “masculinity” is not a stable or unified concept—that it is riven by racial, sexual, class, and temporal distinctions; like viruses, the term continually mutates in the landscape of American speculative fiction. The “strenuous,” virile heteronormative white male

²²⁶ Bear’s virus writing has been subject of both intense critique and high praise. Laurel Bollinger notes that *Blood Music* still trades on the fears of viral infection and invasion, and that “Bear creates a mind/body split carried to a radical extreme,” suggesting a subjectivity abstracted from embodiment (392). Likewise, in Heather Schell’s feminist reading of the rhetoric of viral infection, she posits a “germ theory of history” whereby conservative notions of race, gender, sexuality, and so forth are transmitted through the rhetorical language of biology in narratives about viral outbreaks, and cites Bear’s novel *Darwin’s Radio* (2000) as a representation of this kind of theory (815). Ruth Mayer, in her study of bio-thrillers and rhetoric, challenges Schell’s assertion, noting that there is a “resemanticization of the viral” in contemporary fiction, and that there is a “more dramatically positive turn in Bear’s writing than in in [sic] virus thrillers” (17n.7). Likewise, Lisa Lynch contrasts Bear’s novels with more straightforward bio-thrillers, suggesting that “Bear asks his readers to reconsider the sort of intensive, militarized anti-epidemic operations that medical thrillers such as [Richard Preston’s] *The Cobra Event* naturalize as desirable” (78). Stacy Alaimo presents perhaps the most positive reading of Bear’s virus narratives, noting that the “messy, multiple, material origins of this posthuman” transcription of human subjectivity through viral encounter “may suggest an environmental ethics that . . . reconfigures the human as a site of emergent material intra-actions inseparable from the very stuff of the rest of the world” (*Bodily Natures* 156). In Alaimo’s ethico-environmental analysis, Bear’s viral fictions offer a way of thinking simultaneously about bodily and ecological cohabitation (it should be noted that, with the exception of Bollinger, each of these critics primarily focus on *Darwin’s Radio* and its sequel, *Darwin’s Children* [2003], rather than *Blood Music*).

typified in the naturalist fiction of Jack London and the black, queer cosmopolitanism of Samuel Delany, for example, possess few shared characteristics. But what yokes these differing representations together is how the idea of the immune masculine observer is able to represent and construct an identity and an ecology for such a new community. Masculinity (in whatever form it takes) operates as a kind of principle of immunity in these fictions, a necessary element in the dialectical operation of founding a new community. And yet, these authors are all still informed by an understanding of masculinity in which their characters are enmeshed and which empowers these narrations. I find that the dialectics of immunity and community, of infected and uninfected bodies, are mediated through a highly gendered lens in American fiction. In American speculative literature of the twentieth century, our window into the biomedical paradigm of virality, and its concerns about immunity and community, sickness and health, the ecology of territory, can all be understood within how masculinity is represented and how it does (or does not work). If there is a sense of “toxic masculinity” in popular parlance, then there is also, as I have attempted to read it, a corresponding “immune masculinity,” a narrative structuring of masculine identity that is sealed off from the full effects of contagion.

Such an idea has been well documented in feminist theory. Elizabeth Grosz puts it best when she writes that “in the west, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or an absence, but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping fluid the deep-seated fear of absorption, the association of femininity with contagion and disorder, the undecidability of the limits of the female body ... are all common themes in literary and cultural representations” (203). By contrast, masculine

embodiments are viewed as being more impenetrable, solid in the face of contagion. And indeed, the concept of gender is heavily biopoliticized. Jemima Repo notes that, just as Foucault located sexuality as a discursive technology inaugurated by biopower, so too can we find gender as a similar technology.²²⁷ The historical contours of biopolitics shape and condition gender, exploring the ways that conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity are not only under fluctuation, but specifically tied to the orders of biopolitical management and control. This immune narrative voice, the one capable of diagnosing and conveying the movement of infection, allows for another method of considering the ways in which biopolitics works. I turn here toward Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges," which she defines as "embodied objectivity" (*Simians* 188). While Haraway is speaking particularly about a kind of feminist critical-scientific practice that emphasizes understanding the materiality of bodies and objects (or "actors" [197]), I believe that we can see the narratively immune masculine voice as a kind of embodiment in itself: in announcing itself as immune, it projects a specific kind of body, and thereby allows an examination of this form to occur. And so, while I have tried to think through the ways in which masculinity explores itself in relation to viral outbreak and a sense of immunity, a further step in this project would be to put these texts into an explicit dialogue with more feminist-oriented examinations of this dialectic of infection

²²⁷ Repo begins her genealogy of gender with the note that the term shifted from the more general usage for typology to a more embodied analysis in the 1950s, when psychiatrist John Money and his colleagues rejected the idea of gender developing from biological sexual characteristic, insisting instead that "gender had little to do with the physical body—it was learned after birth" (33). Such a challenge to the established epistemology of sex and gender, suggests Repo, was quickly woven into a biopolitical hegemony: "[r]ather than challenging the sexual order of things with their new scientific arguments, however, the doctors' idea of gender was used to justify surgeries on children with ambiguous genitalia in the name of social health and order. Gender was therefore invented as much as a mechanism for normalizing, disciplining, and governing sex" (4).

and inoculation. After all, as Anne-Marie Thomas explains, “the virus figures so powerfully in science fiction written by women, particularly those women writers who see their goal as problematizing traditional notions of gender” (145). Viral and immune narratives offer a far greater space to explore the dynamics of gender than this project has been able to encompass.

Indeed, even a cursory examination of significant sf about contagious outbreak reveals a wealth of feminist texts. Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) plays with this idea of masculinity and infection long before the heyday of viral literature. Additionally, many writers think through the interrelated concepts of gender identity and infection. Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975), for instance, depicts the dimension of “Whileaway,” where a plague has wiped out all men, leaving only women behind. James Tiptree, Jr. (the pen name of Alice Sidney Sheldon) likewise explores the interrelations of gender and infection in her short stories. In “The Last Flight of Dr. Ain” (1969), a scientist obsessed with the environmental havoc of human beings unleashes a deadly plague as a tribute to “mother Earth.” Octavia Butler’s *Clay’s Ark* (1984) deals with an extraterrestrial plague that infects a group of people in the desert of the United States’ West Coast, and who begin to be transformed from mutually hostile strangers into a inchoate family unit whose rewritten DNA changes their sense of subjectivity and collectivity. Geoff Ryman’s *The Child Garden* (1989), meanwhile, depicts a futuristic London where all children are infected with viruses meant to boost their physical and mental acuity. Milena, the young protagonist, is immune to these viral upgrades, and Ryman weaves together discourses of immunity, gender, and sexuality in narrating subjectivity. Joan Slonczewski’s *Brain Plague* (2000) explores the concept of “smart

microbes” that greatly increase the mental capacities of their hosts. This small and by-no-means exhaustive sample demonstrates the ways that approaches to gender and virus literature are not solely examined through a masculinist lens.

Perhaps the most significant speculative text that interrogates the intersections of gender and narration through viruses and immunities is Nicola Griffith’s *Ammonite* (1992), which tells the story of the planet Jeep and its viral ecology. Discovered by the ominous (and omnipresent) Durallium Company, Jeep is colonized, only for the colonists to discover too late that there is an endemic virus (also known as “Jeep”) that kills off all males on the planet while leaving the majority of infected women alive.²²⁸ Marghe Taishan, an anthropologist working for a government agency in cahoots with the Company, is, some years later, sent to survey Jeep. Griffith immediately attempts to combat the typical dualism of destructive disease and immunizing inoculation. As Marghe plans her descent onto Jeep, she is ordered to take a vaccine that will ostensibly protect her from the Jeep virus. Yet her colleague, Sarah Hiam, asks her to think about it in another way, describing the vaccine as “a counterweapon. It’s control. Imagine: mass vaccination of the women down there. If they need the virus to reproduce, then they’ll die” (19). Griffith’s narrative attempts to decouple the associations of viruses with destruction and immunity with a sense of self-protection. Viruses can be utilized toward alternative expressions of identity and community, and the immunizing power of vaccination can be a threat to such a self-sustaining ecosystem.²²⁹

²²⁸ The protagonist, Marghe, notes that the mortality rate for males (both indigenous Jeepians and humans) is one hundred percent, while “[e]ighty percent of Company’s female personnel recovered” (14).

²²⁹ The novel opens with a visceral depiction of how such immunization can work, when Sarah reads Company’s official procedures of post-contact inoculation to Marghe: “isolation, the removal of all the

This revelation turns out to be precise once Marghe finds herself planetside. Marghe is captured by an indigenous Jeep group known as the Echaridhe. While she manages to escape, she loses access to Company's vaccine, and becomes consumed with fear that the virus will destroy her. With the aid of Thenike, an inhabitant of Jeep who convinces Marghe that "she might stand a better chance of living if her mind was not fighting her body, if she was struggling toward the possible, toward staying alive, rather than the impossible, to keep the virus out" (199), Marghe is able to adapt to the planet's unique ecology. On Jeep, the virus is a fact of life, and the narratives of self-contained immunity must be jettisoned. Instead, Marghe discovers that "Jeep the world, Jeep the virus would become part of her now" (199). In naming both the planet and the infection by the same term, Griffith is drawing attention to the fact that the contagious agent is also the ecological system in which Marghe and the species who live on Jeep find themselves enmeshed. The virus does not simply destroy, it maintains sociality.

Once Marghe has accepted the Jeep virus as part of her, Thenike remarks that "the poisons fed to you as part of the vaccine are out of your system now ... the virus has cleaned you" (235). She is able to fully engage with the viral culture of Jeep. In particular, Marghe is able to take part in rituals, such as "pattern singing" and "deepsearch," the latter being a person's ability to "access the memories of her ancestors" through a trance, and which acts as a "ritual of naming, of conception, of bonding" (125, 224). These are all ways in which, facilitated by the virus, the women of Jeep are able to both "remember" their past and embody their future (212). They are ways of narrating

subject's blood, marrow, lymph and intestinal flora and fauna and its replacement with normal healthy tissues; reimmunization of subject with bacterial and viral agents commonly found in Earth-normal human population" (2-3).

oneself and one's community outside of the immunizing mythologies of the Company. As Thomas claims, "[w]ords are the vector for Marghe's descent into deepsearch" (156), making clear that the virally inflected practices on Jeep are ways of establishing an alternative approach to narration.²³⁰ *Ammonite* offers a narrative that uses speculative considerations of viral contamination to allow for a narrative focused on gender identity.

Bear and Griffith are both critically and commercially popular and enduring sf writers, and I turn to them in this conclusion not to suggest that they have been overlooked in the literature on viruses, but to point to how such major figures fit well into further consideration of the notion of narrative immunity and the ways that this idea can be extended and complicated. Narratives of viruses and immunities have long been encoded into the DNA of sf, and trajectories that focus more specifically on posthuman narration and genealogies of gender offer exciting pathways for this project to continue.

One of the most elegant phrases espousing the speculative ideal that I have encountered comes at the closing of Bruno Latour's polemical treatise *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991). Having spent this volume exploring the ways that the ostensibly rigid categories of subject and object melt away into a universe of "quasi-objects," hybrids that bridge these insufficient epistemic containers, Latour ends by suggesting that "[o]thers will be able to convene the Parliament of Things" (145). This rich phrase, pointing toward the ontological vista opened up when we dispense with outmoded models of thought and identity, offers a perspective of looking at the world anew. The

²³⁰ Thomas suggests that the Jeep practice of deepsearch can be understood as a form of "Kristeva's conception of 'semiotic' language, which [Kristeva] associates with poetry, music, and feminine thought" (156).

virus—that prince of hybrids, neither alive nor dead—and the concept of immunity—its comingling of myth and embodiment, self and other—offer powerful means of calling such a parliament to order. Speculative fiction is essential for thinking through the ways such parliaments of things can be conceived, and whether they will be used to tell narratives of immunity, or open outward to more expansive visions of a narrative community.

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Curriculum Vitae

Name: Riley McDonald

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: Trent University
Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
2008-2011 B.A.

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
2011-2012 M.A.

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2012-2017 Ph.D.

Honours and Awards: Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
Bombardier Doctoral Canada Graduate Scholarship
2013-2016

Related Work Experience Course Instructor
The University of Western Ontario
2016-2017

Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2012-2016

Publications:
“The Frame Breakers”: Thomas Pynchon’s Post-Human Luddites. *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2014, pp. 102-121.