

Diseased Bodies Entangled: Literary and Cultural Crossroads of Posthuman Narrative Agents



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From ecto-parasites in the hair follicles to the microbiota in the gut flora, the human body is composed of diverse nonhuman species, illustrating what symbiotic adaptation is, and which often goes unnoticed due to our limited perception. The entanglement of nonhuman matter “in everything bodies are, experience and do” pinpoints the difficulty of “putting” it “under the spotlight” (Macnaughton 31). If we are so imbued with nonhuman bodies around and within us, then how are we supposed to disentangle ourselves and understand their agency? The posthuman and material-ecocritical senses of agency might provide an answer to this question, which is crucial to our contemporary understanding of pandemics, especially considering how zoonotic diseases hold a pivotal place in the “geopolitical-biopolitical medical surveillance” (Wilbert 7) systems of the twenty-first-century global communities.

Underscoring the constant reconfigurations among the human and nonhuman actors of such diseases, this paper takes disease-carrying agents as material-textual bodies with narrative capacities. In doing so, it relies on posthuman theories which deconstruct the dualistic worldview of Enlightenment humanism and offer a non-hierarchical ontology among planetary systems, things, and beings. We examine the complex and dynamic web of these agents in literary and mediatic works like Ndemc Creations’ *Plague Inc.* (2012) and *Plague Inc.: Evolved* (2014), Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (2011), and Nicola Griffith’s *Ammonite* (1992), portraying narrative capabilities of non/human beings as nonlinear assemblages of effect. These assemblages, we argue, enhance posthumanist understandings of ethical, ontological, and epistemological positions of (un)contaminated bodies that narrate themselves in myriad ways “through the mutual accommodation of . . . heterogeneous components” (DeLanda 144).

Sometimes read as gods’ “language of displeasure” (Wald 11), contagious diseases ‘communicate:’ they spread, and they speak, most often in ways that are “not possible for epidemiologists [without] the disembodied, all-knowing . . . gaze” (Dahiya 520n1). Such omniscience can only be available for the human in literary or media narratives, recalling Priscilla Wald’s observation on the transgressive kings in *The Iliad* and *Oedipus Rex*, who must read the language of the plagues to decipher the wrath of the gods and correct their wrongdoings. Forcing the kings or the sinful population “to assume responsibility for their actions,” the plagues in Antiquity “illustrate[d] the relationship between the group and an anomalous individual” (Wald 11). Nonhuman narrative agency in the posthumanist sense, however, is not a direct translation of human intentionality, conveying literal or metaphorical messages, but explicates how communicable diseases confound our primary visions of ourselves as self-contained entities by making the porosity of our bodies palpable, exhibiting the agency of matter and the inextricability

of the human from the nonhuman. In other words, the disease-carrying agent demotes the human from its position of the only determiner of causality and the only narrator.

Such demotion is strongly exemplified in Ndemc Creations' mobile game *Plague Inc.* and its sequel *Plague Inc.: Evolved*, recalling Wald's conceptualization of contagion as both "epidemiological" and "foundational" (2). The games, manifesting themselves as narrative bodies, activate a conversation between the player and the disease-carrying agent within an always-already entangled dynamic web of the more-than-human world. The task is to eradicate humanity by selecting a pathogen ranging from viruses, bacteria, fungi, and parasites to nano-viruses and bioweapons, so the players can empathize with the microorganism, see the map as an omniscient entity, and rewrite the narrative again with their choices, which blend with the games' agency. As every pathogen acts and intra-acts differently with the population, climate, and the player's decisions, it creates a different narrative pattern depending on the player-gameplay interaction. The players must overcome a wide range of actors, varying from the treatment potentials of the developed countries to geographically isolated areas where it is difficult to spread the virus. They must also calculate whether and when to activate the pathogen's resilience against cold or hot climates, or if they should spend the collected DNA points on a certain symptom, which might help or prevent dissemination. In a nutshell, they need to "determine how to solve [the] puzzles, which mutate depending on the disease type, difficulty level, and chosen location of patient zero" (Mitchell and Hamilton 591) to guarantee disease transmission all over the map.

Those material agencies and meaning-making strategies form an amalgam giving each storyline its unique outcome, affected by "situated activity inflected by personal, social and cultural factors" (Bradford 56). The gameplay is, therefore, a cluster of human and nonhuman agents: the decision-making strategies employed by the player, informed by his/her background, require at least some basic knowledge of geography, climate, biology, and economics, thus making the disease both a ludic and a narrative experience of the embodied self. Both narrative and interactive, the games balance strict control and a preset storyline with freedom, which produces "signs," not simply "representing" them (Mitchell and Hamilton 591), paralleling an emergent relationality. As the player changes the severity, lethality, and infectivity of the disease, leading to new narrative patterns, the game thus "recirculates and rewrites elements of an increasingly coherent semiotic repertoire" (Mitchell and Hamilton 588), which is part of the intra-active human-nonhuman relationships. The omniscient view that the contamination map provides enables the player to observe the pace of the spread, the magnitude of its effect, and the incidence rate of the disease, while the biohazard symbol facilitates the track of the "speed, scale, and ubiquity of pandemic threat" (Mitchell and Hamilton 588). The disease thus becomes a narrative agent central to the interactions between the player and the game design, the entanglement of which reveals a set of material-discursive practices at work. In other words, it relates how individual actants of geography, climate, bacterial/viral bodies, the signals on the screen, the storyline, and the invisible population are "entangled" and "intra-relating agents" of the narrative choreography (Barad, *Meeting ix*).

Among the intra-active agencies within the game are also pathogenic calibration, which denotes “gene expressions that determine the interaction between humans and contagion” (Servitje 86), and epidemiological mapping, which is independent of neither the set of concrete data from the physical and medical sciences nor the social, cultural, or economic knowledge practices of local and global communities. The calibration and mapping function like an apparatus, which “becomes inverted as players work against humanity rather than for it” (Servitje 86). This inversion analogy, suggesting “a dynamic set of open-ended practices, iteratively refined and reconfigured” (Barad, *Meeting* 167), demonstrates both literal contagiousness of material entities with which we are constantly in touch (like mobile phones or tablets) and the metaphorical “connection” of the disease “to the virality of social media” (Servitje 86). Therefore, the games reveal a learning opportunity, allowing the players to (re)consider and (re)evaluate “the biopolitics of outbreak narratives” with their fingertips on the games’ nonhuman components such as their “narrative, mechanics, graphical representation, and hardware interface” (Servitje 86).

Along similar lines, Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* highlights how “natures-cultures-technologies are always already mixed up and mixing up—intra-acting—in . . . technonatures or socionatures” (Wilbert 7). Although it is an “outbreak narrative” in itself, as Wald would contend, it is the final scene of the film that speaks volumes and narrates “the precise origin story of the pandemic” (Dahiya 520n1). The character of Beth Emhoff, one of “the prime suspects for being patient zero—the first to be infected—along with the three unnamed characters in London, Hong Kong, and Tokyo,” is easily the scapegoat as a corporate executive celebrating her success in a casino in Macau, who “stops in Chicago for a tryst with an old flame before returning home to Minneapolis” (Weisberg 2). As Matthew Beaumont notes, “this is a dirty stopover” (84). Beth’s “cosmopolitanism and promiscuousness,” as Beaumont asserts, that is, “her thoughtless consumption of fossil fuels and selfish recourse to casual sex” signal the primal cause of the outbreak because they “prove to be a killer combination” with “moralistic” and “misogynistic” undertones (84). This “red herring” fallacy leads the viewer to leave behind the other unnamed characters who were also potential index patients, “provok[ing] [the audience] to question whether Beth is liable for spreading the lethal disease and if she warrants sympathy” (Weisberg 2). Soderbergh wittily plays to the species-based prejudices of the viewer, clearly aware of the human tendency to seek linear causality between disease and morality, hinting at the potential stigmatization that accompanies contagions.

As is often the case with real-life pandemics, the invisibility of the disease-carrying agent and its entanglement with the nonhuman environments within and around us prevent our understanding of relationality and emergent ontologies. Unable to grasp at once what such relationality means, humans often fail to acknowledge that “things (or matter) draw their agentic power from their relation to discourses that in turn structure human relations to materiality” (Iovino and Oppermann 4), which means individual agents do not follow or precede one another in existence but are inextricable.

The final scene of *Contagion*, however, reveals the intricate dynamics between material and discursive practices as it exposes how the multinational corporation AIMM Alderson, Beth's employer, causes deforestation, leading to the displacement of bats, which, in turn, approximate an industrial pig farm upon losing their habitat. Dropping the remains of the fruit it is chewing onto the pig farm, a bat clearly transmits the MEV-1 agent to a piglet that ingests the dropped fruit. That same piglet, chosen for slaughter, is moved in a wired cage to the casino restaurant, where the local chef seasons it and prepares a pork meal. When Beth, the business executive, wants to meet and thank the chef for the meal, the chef simply wipes his hands on his apron, and the film ends when Beth and the chef pose for the camera smiling and holding hands. It is within those two minutes that the viewer can understand how human cultural practices are always already enmeshed with nature: the human-induced dangers such as deforestation and loss of habitats for many species circulate both human and nonhuman bodies, putting their lives at risk and reducing the likelihood of survival for many species, especially humans. As bats and other forest species have stronger adaptation capabilities to co-host several forms of nonhuman bacteria and viruses, they mostly outlive humans in such dystopic scenarios, thus creating narratives from the gaze of the nonhuman.

Although Soderbergh's narrative seems to shift the blame from Beth Emhoff to the Chinese chef, who is another easy target of scapegoating for reasons of racial and ethnic discrimination, it is the dynamic relations of the humans with the nonhuman bodies that cause the outbreak, not a single person or animal. Breaking away from the common tendency to seek linear causality between phenomena, events, and agentic bodies, the narrative thus reminds us of Barad's observation: "subjects and objects do not preexist but rather emerge from their *intra-action*" ("Erasers" 444). The film thus creates a narrative of such emergent subjectivities, with an emphasis on the intersections of race and gender stigmatization, as well as that of class, as in the case of the Chinese villagers' kidnapping of Dr. Leonora Orantes, the WHO official, in a desperate search for the vaccine that is otherwise unavailable to them. Soderbergh's narrative also reappoints the human as one of the many agents within material-semiotic enmeshment and explicates what it means to be entangled, which can be summarized, again, in Barad's words: "To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair" (*Meeting ix*). Thus, *Contagion*, especially in its final scene, not only portrays the dynamic relations between materiality and discourse but also helps the viewer (as members of *Homo sapiens*) face their so-called superior position by outlining what narrative agency would look like in nonhuman bacterial or viral agents.

Viewing *Contagion* in this light, one cannot help remembering Gregory Bateson's evaluation on the enmeshed and interdependent characters of ecosystems: "If," Bateson writes, an "organism ends up destroying its environment," then this organism "has in fact destroyed itself" since its "likelihood of survival [in such a relation] will be that of a snowball in hell" (451), especially if that organism is *Homo sapiens*. Humans' limited apprehension of and crippled relation to nature,

predicated on a false belief in possessing an agentic throne due to having advanced technology, bring about their cataclysmic end. As in the exploitative practices of the AIMM Alderson, which destroy habitats for many species, causing wild and disease-carrying nonhumans to get closer to urban zones, irresponsible human activities bring a planetary demise.

Bateson's suggestion of symbiotic adaptation of beings in a system is also significant because it echoes the posthumanist array of material ecocriticism, which views nature as *loquens*—an eloquent body that shares with humans many of the characteristics that were once considered to be uniquely human. This symbiotic adaptation highlights the incessant communication between earthly bodies and their material-semiotic, human-nonhuman, and natural-cultural enactments on one another, as illustrated by the extra-terrestrial planet, Jeep, in Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite*. A re-discovered planet ready to be (re)colonized and exploited by the Durallium Company, Jeep shares its name with its endemic virus, which infects everyone and kills all men and some women who resist welcoming it into their bodies. As the "Company's guinea pig" (Griffith 14), the protagonist Marghe Taishan, an anthropologist, contacts both native communities and the virus, thus getting enmeshed with othered alien bodies in her new habitat. Throughout her journey, space remains "[not] as a neutral backdrop against which events unfold," reminding us of Barad's spacetime-mattering, since "space and society [in Jeep] are mutually constituted and that space is an agent of change, that is, it plays an active role in the unfolding of events" (*Meeting* 224). Coexisting nominally, geographically, and physically, the planet and the virus both lead Marghe to biological and mental reproductions. She oscillates between assimilation and integration, along with power and powerlessness in her encounters with new alterities and 'alien' naturecultures, while revisiting the ideas of belonging, being, and becoming by herself and with other bodies.

Griffith thus shatters binaries in *Ammonite* first by excluding the male sex from Jeep and then by blurring subject/object, nature/culture, and human/nonhuman dichotomies. The virus, which poses an environmental threat to the well-being of men and the earthly continuation of heteropatriarchy, stands as the ultimate nonhuman other, subverting the worldly systems. It replaces those systems with vivid unforeseen multiplicities and feminist reproductive futurities. The elimination of the male sex underlines the false fixation of the dominant anthropocentric vantage on sexist, speciesist, xenophobic practices based on a set of so-called superiorities in contemporary Western culture. Having "fluid instead of rigid boundaries" (Farwell 97), Jeep—in its two senses—narrates the explorations of porous bodies and landscapes that constantly interact and intra-act with (but not oppose) one another. With their own agentic properties, these bodies and landscapes are in a state of perpetual emergence, as everything in between active and passive.

"Meeting" each other "halfway" in a new spacetime, as Barad would call it, Jeep's and Marghe's tales "emerge from the intra-action of human creativity and the narrative agency of matter" (Iovino and Oppermann 8). The reader can observe "*this* shared creativity of human and nonhuman agents" (Iovino and Oppermann 8) in *Ammonite*, first with Marghe's attempts to preserve her earthly, supposedly pristine, uncontaminated body, and then with her viscous becomings with the virus. These becomings resemble the labor pains of a new identity formation,

which is “a contingent and contested ongoing material process” (Barad, *Meeting* 40-41). In such “dynamic intra-relationship with the iterative (re)configuring of relations of power,” as Barad contends, “identities are mutually constituted and (re)configured through one another” (*Meeting* 40-41). Therefore, as none of us can, Marghe becomes unable to escape a new identity formation. Beyond contacting it, she connects with and ‘becomes with’ the Jeep virus, thus giving birth to her new transcorporeal self, which, when infected, possesses virus-sharp senses and illustrates a new form of parthenogenesis.

This newly emergent transcorporeality shatters the stereotypical stigmas of the dualistic human. The collection of Marghe’s embodied self and consciousness transgresses the borders of her skin and mind as her viral becoming has turned her into a new entity. As she senses that her body does not belong anymore to her human self and mind, she experiences the porosity of her body. She “did not want to return to her body. It was no longer entirely hers. The virus lived in it now, in every pore, every cell, every blood vessel and organ. . . . [S]he would never be sure what dreams and memories were her own, and which were alien. *She belonged to Jeep*” (Griffith 195; emphases added). In Marghe’s viral becoming, this material-semiotic assemblage of skin and consciousness refers to a sense of uncleanness, an experience of being infected and possessed. “That is why she feels “[u]nclean” (Griffith 195). Her partner, Thenike responds: “Unclean? No. Your body is *changing*, just as it does *every time* you get sick and another little piece of something else comes to live inside you. . . . Is this unclean? No. It’s life. *All life connects*” (Griffith 195; emphases added). This expression is where nonhuman matter comes to shape the narrative as it articulates how we get constantly reconfigured in our everyday experiences with nonhuman microorganisms. Ammonite thus invites us to reconsider our so-called hegemonic story-telling nature as there exist multiple reformulated materialities that manifest their tales, and hence, reconfigured senses of realities.

As these literary and mediatic manifestations of the nonhuman in *Contagion*, *Plague Inc.*, *Plague Inc.: Evolved*, and *Ammonite* showcase, everything, regardless of its species, molecular structures, or anthropocentric taxonomy, has its own polymorphous layers of onto-epistemological textuality. If everything, from the biosphere to its human and nonhuman inhabitants, is interconnected, these narratives of the nonhuman attest to a set of intersectional crossroads, where there is a strong and complex cluster of dynamic relations between matter and narrativity. The nonhuman agentic bodies hold their own narrative voices, which always already blends with that of the humans, creating a fusion of stories in an intricate web of relationalities that co-emerge as they intra-act with and on one another.

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