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Life Expectancies: Late Victorian Literature and the Biopolitics of Empire

by

Jessica Leigh Davies

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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in

Rhetoric

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Barbara Spackman, Co-chair

Professor Charis Thompson, Co-chair

Associate Professor David Bates

Assistant Professor Donna Jones

Associate Professor Ramona Naddaff

Associate Professor Michael Wintroub

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## Abstract

### Life Expectancies: Late Victorian Literature and the Biopolitics of Empire

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By the end of the nineteenth century, the rise of evolutionary thinking had produced a radical new understanding of life as the underlying connectedness of all living beings. If only the fittest would survive, the problem was no longer about how to differentiate between species, as it had been for the philosophical tradition since Aristotle, but how to articulate differences within a species. This dissertation analyzes the complex relationship between biology, politics and power that emerged in late Victorian literature. I examine the ways in which biological thinking was never limited to biology itself, nor was it a metaphorical technique used to describe social relations or simply a way to transcribe a political discourse into biological terms. I argue that the difference between biology and politics completely collapsed, and that this indistinguishability functioned to expand and justify British colonialism.

Inspired by Michel Foucault's work on biopower, I demonstrate and expand his theory of nineteenth century biopolitics as a form of power that takes biological life as both its subject and object through a series of regulatory controls leveraged at entire populations. It is a power characterized not by the threat of death, but its ability to optimize and foster biological life. Reproduction, mortality, life expectancy, and the management of health and disease are just some of the biological processes that fall under the dominion of this disciplinary power, with sexuality emerging as a particularly dense transfer point in the investment of the life of the population. I trace this notion of biopolitics through late Victorian literature – through the novels of Oscar Wilde, Richard Marsh and H. Rider Haggard - in which the investment in thinking biologically about sexuality is clear. Yet my central argument is that biopower cannot operate without empire. The reality of empire and all of the technologies and categories of difference that were central to its expansion and justification – such as gender, race and class – were inextricable with the biopower that took sexuality as its subject and object. Colonialism is not a marginalized technology of nineteenth century biopower; biopower *is* colonial.

My dissertation expands the critical conversation about late Victorian literature beyond the psychoanalytic, postcolonial and new historicist methodologies that have characterized the debates to ask a different set of questions. It was not my methodology that determined the

questions, but a set of questions in the texts that suggested the most useful methodology for reading them. I pull insights from multiple fields of knowledge production beyond literature itself – including philosophy, post-colonial theory, anthropology, history, feminist theory, queer theory, and critical science and race studies. Beginning with Wilde, I trace sexuality as a discursive node of biopower that produces the homosexual “as a species.” I then link this project of “species-making” to the rise of biological racism that imagined colonial populations quite literally as insects, functioning as a justification for war and “extermination.” The final chapter analyzes the ways in which these “new species” provided the material for an imperial bioeconomy. I argue that this bioeconomy operated by imagining life in the colonies as expendable in relation to life in Britain, in order to produce wealth at home and regenerate the nation. These arguments trace a transnational itinerary through the discourses of decadence, degeneration, colonialism and imperialism, moving from and between Europe, Egypt, South America and southern Africa, to look several of the most aggressive components of the nineteenth century science of life: vivisection, mimicry and vaccination. I demonstrate that speaking about biological life simultaneously demands that we speak about the most profound set of differences – between nature and technology, humans and animals, and the differences we make real within our own species world. If categories such as race, sexuality, gender, class and empire mattered so much to the Victorians, they continue to matter now because biological thinking threatens to carry with it the trace of the violence of difference itself.

In memory of my mother and father

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Before my employment at STSC, I was a recipient of their Summer Research Grant, which paid for my trip to the Herrick Archive at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library at UCLA. I thank STSC for financing this research and my sincere gratitude goes out to the amazing staff at the Herrick. I will always be very grateful to them for their willingness to trust a newly acquired, unpublished Wilde notebook in my hands.

In the spring of 2007, I spearheaded an interdisciplinary conference called *What's Life of Life?* provoking a serious cross-disciplinary dialogue to investigate the ongoing problems raised by technologies of life and death. I will forever be grateful to my co-organizers who volunteered their time, energy, skills and ideas: Nima Bassiri, Scott Ferguson, Gabriela Jauregui, Ben Lempert, Jennifer Lum, Kelly Rafferty, Marques Redd, Chris Roebuck and Josh Weiner. It was a collaborative experiment and a monumental effort. I also appreciate the faculty who so generously agreed to participate in what must have felt like a risky proposition: David Bates, Judith Butler, Adele Clarke, Lawrence Cohen, Cori Hayden, Donna Jones, Sharon Kaufman, Catherine Malabou, Paola Marrati, Paul Rabinow, Joan Roughgarden, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Susan Stryker, Jennifer Terry and Charis Thompson.

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## Preface

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My motivation for studying biopolitics in Victorian literature developed out of the recent public debates that question the efficacy of humanities scholarship in relation to public life. Under the pressure of the current economic turmoil and the massive contraction of university budgets, there is a way in which the humanities have been singled out as perhaps irrelevant and subject to cuts. If the humanities threaten to recede into history, it is almost impossible not to feel the acute pressure of the intellectual marketplace as scholars rushed to defend the value of the humanities. Yet Stanley Fish has argued that the humanities should have no function in public life at all.<sup>1</sup> In particular, he singles out those of us in the humanities who link our work to “the goals of science and technology” as a “crassly careerist” strategy designed to attract funding.<sup>2</sup> Fish offers an alternative strategy:

It is not the business of the humanities to save us, no more than it is their business to bring revenue to a state or a university. What then do they do? They don’t do anything, if by ‘do’ is meant bring about effects in the world. And if they don’t bring about effects in the world they cannot be justified except in relation to the pleasure they give to those who enjoy them.<sup>3</sup>

What I see operating in Fish’s argument is less a critique of the intellectual marketplace and more an instance of “political anesthesia”: a condition which calls for those of us in the humanities to do nothing more in the world than just enjoy fiction.<sup>4</sup> I would counter that we are caught in an historical moment plagued by much more than economic pressures within the university. As we continue to face ongoing wars, neo-colonial policies, global epidemics, and genocide (just to name a few), I do not think the role of the humanities should be reduced to an opaque language of pleasure. My contention is that the humanities must provide an urgent critical lens to help “the public” understand what is at stake in the contemporary debates in which we find ourselves situated - as public intellectuals and private individuals. In particular, as scholars of Victorian literature, culture and empire, we may be uniquely positioned to remind “the goals of science and technology” that although the humanities may be threatening to disappear, the forms of violence unleashed through particular forms of biological thinking that emerged in the nineteenth century are in no danger of receding anytime soon.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Fish, “Will the Humanities Save Us?”. *The Opinionator Blog*, NYTimes.com, Jan. 6, 2008. For an extended discussion of this argument, see Fish’s *Save the World on Your Own Time*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> “Will the Humanities Save Us?”

<sup>3</sup> “Will the Humanities Save Us?”

<sup>4</sup> I borrow this phrase “political anesthesia” from Didier Fassin in *When Bodies Remember: Experiences and Politics of AIDS in South Africa*, trans. Amy Jacobs and Gabrielle Varro, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, p. xii.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the racist biology that defined early eugenics has persisted into our own century in thinly veiled forms under the sign of objective science. See Troy Duster, *Backdoor to Eugenics*, New York: Routledge, 2003.

For “biological thinking” was never limited to biology itself, nor was it a metaphorical technique used to describe social relations or simply a way to transcribe a political discourse into biological terms. We need to understand how the difference between biology and politics completely collapsed, and that this indistinguishability continues to operate under the sign of objective fact. In analyzing the debates around biological life, those of us who remain within “the humanities” must question these discursive forms and structures and their epistemological and ontological investments. I say that because biology, like literature, like pleasure, is not neutral or apolitical. As I hope to demonstrate, speaking about biological life simultaneously demands that we speak about the most profound set of differences – between nature and technology, humans and animals, and the differences we make real within our own species world. If categories such as race, sexuality, gender, class and empire mattered so much to the Victorians, they continue to matter now because biological thinking threatens to carry with it the trace of the violence of difference itself.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the rise of evolutionary thinking in Europe had produced a radical new understanding of life as the underlying connectedness of all living beings. Rather than celebrating this profound sense of interconnection – between and amongst species – biological discourse extended beyond the confines of evolutionary theory, permutating into multiple branches of political thought dedicated to new classifying systems and vertical rankings. If only the fittest would survive, the problem was no longer about how to differentiate between species - as it had been for the philosophical tradition since Aristotle - but how to articulate differences *within* a species. The troubling notions of difference that erupted in fin de siècle culture were in no small part produced by thinking biologically about social and political life.

Although late Victorian literature is just one discursive site of this production, it provides more than enough raw material to help us understand the profound transformations in the relationship between biology and politics. Yet most critics who write about the traffic between Victorian literature and science do not concern themselves with what I understand as biopolitics, for they often favor a discussion about Darwin and the evolutionary imagination.<sup>6</sup> I agree that Darwin’s work is unquestionably relevant in any discussion of Victorian science, especially because it continues to shape current philosophical, political and public debates around the social significance of biological difference.<sup>7</sup> However, I think evolution can be a severely limiting frame, becoming a language game in which critics leverage their Darwinian authority to ferret out pseudo-scientific claims, inadvertently “blackboxing” biological facts.<sup>8</sup> Although I often find

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<sup>6</sup> For three seminal studies, see Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991; and Robert Young, *Darwin’s Metaphor: Nature’s Place in Victorian Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> For a philosophical engagement with the social, political and biological ontologies of Darwinian evolution, see Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Two fascinating discussions of gender and sexuality amongst animals can be found in Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender and Sexuality in People and Animals*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004 and Marlene Zuk, *Sexual Selections: What We Can and Can’t Learn about Sex from Animals*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. Both Roughgarden and Zuk were quoted in a recent cover story called “Can Animals be Gay?” *The New York Times Magazine*, March 29, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Bruno Latour describes “blackboxing” as, “the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success. When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and

myself in an important strategic alliance with precisely those projects, appealing to “facts” to argue against dangerous politics is often a that strategy produces its own vertical ranking systems of who is authorized to speak. In that moment, we fail to analyze the dense network of power relations that take shape around the concept of life itself.

If we choose to take the risk of extending the debate beyond the boundaries of Darwin and evolutionary facts to a discussion of power relations, the work of Michel Foucault becomes a salient place from which to begin. Although he makes cursory references to evolution in both *The History of Sexuality* and his lectures at The Collège de France, biopolitics is not limited to Darwin or to any individual body. Foucault defines nineteenth century biopolitics as a form of power that takes biological life as both its subject and object through a series of regulatory controls leveraged at entire populations. It is a power characterized not by the threat of death, but its ability to optimize, foster, and “invest life through and through.”<sup>9</sup> Reproduction, mortality, life expectancy, and the management of health and disease are just some of the biological processes that fall under the dominion of this disciplinary power, with sexuality emerging as a particularly dense transfer point in the investment of the life of the population.

If Foucault’s theory of biopolitics has proven to be a helpful blueprint in this study, I also agree with Ann Stoler when she writes, “For a student of the colonial, reading Foucault incites and constrains.”<sup>10</sup> Many critics have argued that in privileging sexuality in his theory of biopower, the history of colonialism, the technology of wars and imperial conflict, and the economic material of race and gender that fuel it are presented as marginal concerns at best. Yet *The History of Sexuality* is a text that was never finished, with only hints in the lectures at The Collège de France about what was to come.<sup>11</sup> As I gathered together a set of late Victorian authors – including Oscar Wilde, Richard Marsh and H. Rider Haggard – I could see the investment in thinking biologically about sexuality, but I failed to understand how this biopower could work *without* empire. The reality of empire and all of the technologies and categories of difference that were central to its expansion and justification – such as gender, race and class – were inextricable with the biopower that took sexuality as its subject and object. Perhaps this is the moment in which Victorian literature can tell “the goals of science and technology” something about itself. For my argument is that colonialism is not a marginalized technology of nineteenth century biopower; biopower *is* colonial.

In an attempt to flesh out the contours of the global reach of biopower in the late nineteenth century, I pull insights from multiple fields of knowledge production beyond literature itself – including philosophy, post-colonial theory, anthropology, history, feminist theory, queer theory, and critical science and race studies. I admit that this methodology is promiscuous, but it was a trajectory that I insist the text themselves demanded. It was not my methodology that determined the questions, but a set of questions in the texts that suggested the

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outputs and not on its internal complexity. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become.” See *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage Books, 1990, p. 139.

<sup>10</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, p. 140.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended:*” *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, New York: Picador, 2003.

most useful methodology for reading them. As a result, what I have produced here is a series of arguments that move with and beyond Foucault.

Beginning with Wilde, I trace sexuality as a discursive node of biopower that produces the homosexual “as a species.” I then link this project of “species-making” to the rise of biological racism that imagined colonial populations quite literally as insects, functioning as a justification for war and “extermination.” The final chapter analyzes the ways in which these “new species” provided the material for an imperial bioeconomy. I argue that this bioeconomy operated by imagining life in the colonies as expendable in relation to life in Britain, in order to produce wealth at home and regenerate the nation. These arguments demanded a transnational itinerary through the discourses of decadence, degeneration, colonialism and imperialism, that moved from Europe to Egypt to specific regions of South America and southern Africa. Along the way, I found myself engaged with several of the most aggressive components of the nineteenth century science of life: vivisection, mimicry and vaccination.

The first chapter begins in the same place as Foucault: by tracing sexuality as a biopolitical issue, rather than a technology of repression. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues against the psychoanalytic notion that Victorian sexuality was repressed by asking a new set of questions: “The question I would pose is not, Why are we repressed? but rather, Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?”<sup>12</sup> Taking my cue directly from Foucault, in “Beyond the Closet: How the Homosexual Became a Species,” I pose a similar set of questions to queer theory and to Victorian studies via the work of Oscar Wilde. For *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) occupies a privileged position within queer theory, as a pivotal text useful for demonstrating the politics of the closet and the repression of desire. Although I share the political commitments of many of these theorists, I would argue that this collective conversation might suffer from its own framework. In the desire to argue for the right to desire, there has been surprisingly little space available to extend the discussion beyond psychoanalysis.<sup>13</sup>

The persistence of the psychoanalysis is puzzling, if for no other reason than the critique of the psychoanalytic “repressive hypothesis” frames *The History of Sexuality* - a text that many would agree is as privileged within queer theory as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Yet an unwillingness to explore sexuality without the rubric of the closet and repressed desire appears even in the critical work that reads the novel with Foucault. For example, in Eve Sedgwick’s seminal text *Epistemology of the Closet*, she considers the discursive production of homosexual identity, but offers no insight about the question she raises as to why, when she quotes Foucault, “the homosexual was now a species.”<sup>14</sup> In response to Sedgwick, I elucidate the ways in which homosexuality became synonymous with decadence, in a way that transformed notions of “the homosexual” into a degenerate and endangered species doomed to extinction. That part of the argument is designed to aid us in connecting the critique of repression that opens *The History of Sexuality* to Foucault’s discussion of biopower that closes it. In order to link that operation to the

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<sup>12</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> One text in particular has recently transfixed the debate: Lee Edelman’s *No Future*. Although the text provides a compelling critique of “the cultural obsession with the child,” or what Edelman calls “the absolute value of reproductive futurism,” it is a text that grossly limits the space of queer politics by refusing to pause anywhere other than the Lacanian real. See *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 67.

novel, I argue that there is a discourse of science that saturates *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that is not about the closet and repressed desire, but a struggle for control over biological life and survival. This struggle marks out the homosexual as a species, and one that is subject to a series of biopolitical risks, at the same time that this violence is extended to other populations that are also subjects and objects of biopower: women, the working class, and the Jews.

My argument hinges upon the infamous picture that is usually understood as a gothic emblem of narcissism, in which Dorian makes a Faustian pact by giving his soul to the canvas in exchange for the preservation of his beauty. I insist that the picture is not a representation of closeted desire, but a site of a self-vivisection, a dissection of Dorian's living body that turns into a parasite with a life of its own. Although vivisection and the method of experimental science is presented as the primary epistemological frame of the text, it has never been explored in criticism. I made an effort to link this language in the text to the work of Claude Bernard, the French physiologist who championed vivisection and the experimental method in the nineteenth century and inspired Emile Zola's essay "The Experimental Novel." I deploy those texts to insist that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* performs the experimental method in an experimental novel, as the picture becomes a vivisection that embodies the struggle over biological life.

These ideas about the connections between sexuality and science inspired me to travel to the Herrick Archive at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library at UCLA, to browse the collection of Wilde's personal photographs, manuscripts and notebooks to see whether these concerns might appear in any of the archival material. I was fascinated to discover an unpublished notebook that Wilde kept during his early years at Oxford, containing an extraordinary engagement with the scientific discourse of his day. Although he makes scientific references in his published notes, this new notebook is deeply concerned with the troubling relationship between science, philosophy, politics and ethics. Some of this is included in the chapter, yet I mention this notebook again here to offer it as a supplemental text that queer theory might greatly benefit from exploring further.

Inspired by Wilde's writing and Foucault's notion that somehow "the homosexual was now a species," I was compelled to consider the ways in which this discursive process of species-making might extend to other populations. I discovered Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897), a text that retains sexuality as a dense transfer point of biopower, but extends the species-making project to the population in the colonies. His novel is a gothic tale about a threatening "creature" that arrives in London from Egypt with the ability to transform into a man, a woman and a sacred scarab beetle. In the small collection of critical work about the novel, most argue that the ontological status of the creature is completely undecideable (man? woman? human? insect?), but eventually make a decision, despite the text's discursive resistance to that process. I suggest that instead of pinning down the creature's identity, we should identify its signature behavior: biological mimicry. For its ability to mimic is both a success and a failure; the creature can pass as a man, a woman and a beetle, but never as white. I argue that the ability of this creature to shape-change across genders and species primarily serves as a marker of its racial difference, as it can change morphology, but never color. I suggest that this is an example of biological racism (as Foucault described it) that produces a fissure in the category of the human, presenting the reader with a species that is both like and unlike our selves, simultaneously anthropomorphized and dehumanized.

“Between Beetles and Britain: The Biology of Colonial Mimicry,” is written in response to the post-colonial theory that has stripped mimicry of its biological signification. Most literary theories about the concept of mimicry and its relationship to colonialism don’t provide a vocabulary to talk about biology, even when the texts in question produce that language. Moreover, the recent explosion of work in the exciting new field of “animal studies” fails to work successfully across disciplinary fields, despite its explicit attempt to rethink almost every relation - the animal/human being just one amongst many. Although I appreciate any account that pushes the boundaries of the human, they often privilege philosophical abstractions over historical and/or biological trajectories and could also greatly benefit from an expanded engagement with feminist theory, queer theory, race studies and the history of science and colonialism.<sup>15</sup> Even when the engagement with the animal/human relation manages to pull from those fields, this methodology has proven difficult to replicate in literary criticism and Victorian studies<sup>16</sup>

In an attempt to thread these strands together, I trace the concept of mimicry through the footnotes of a genealogy provided by (but disavowed) in literary theory. I begin with Homi Bhaba’s seminal essay “Of Mimicry and Man,” which was inspired by Jacques Lacan, who based his theory on Roger Caillois’ Surrealist work on insects, who drew his source material from Henry Walter Bates: the nineteenth century naturalist credited with the discovery of insect mimicry in the Amazon. I chart this path to insist that we consider the biological signification of mimicry in colonial discourse because it alerts us to an underscoring form of racism that deploys biological notions of difference as a justification for war and the death it requires.

If these first two chapters are linked through the biopolitical technology of species-making, the final chapter considers the way in which populations of “new species” must be managed at the biological level of health and disease. “From Illness to Wealth: the Imperial Economy of Life” argues that the management of health and disease is a biopolitical colonial project tied to the wealth of the nation. I trace this operation through the work of H. Rider Haggard, whose peculiar brand of adventure fiction has enjoyed persistent attention from generations of readers since the publication of his popular series of novels about southern Africa

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<sup>15</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible,” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 and Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. by Marie-Louise Mallet and trans. by David Willis, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. For a series of essays that represent the turn to “posthumanism” see *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. by Cary Wolfe, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Donna Haraway is one theorist who has produced a remarkable body of work that manages to speak within and between these multiple disciplines. For just several examples, see *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003; *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, New York: Routledge, 1989; and *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991. For a series of Victorian studies essays that take seriously the question of the animal and the history of science and colonialism, but fail to clarify the philosophical and/or theoretical stakes, see the recent *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (PMLA) focused on animal studies and Victorian literature, March 2009. Vol. 124, No.2; *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007; Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987 and *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of Classifying Imagination*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

in the 1880's. I look at *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), one of the most widely read of these novels, alongside *Doctor Therne* (1898): a rarely read novel about a profiteering doctor who fails to vaccinate the population before the outbreak of a smallpox epidemic. If *King Solomon's Mines* is the tale of three gentlemen's heroic discovery of a secret diamond mine in Africa who import their wealth home, *Doctor Therne* is a novel about the threat of illness to that wealth which like life itself, must be protected and optimized. I argue that this circular logic binding the two texts hinges upon a white, British, heterosexual and bourgeois notion of recuperation – from illness to wealth – that works by quantifying and qualifying life in the colonies as surplus value: the price worth paying for imperial power.

This argument about the imperial economy of life is designed to offer a critical path that moves in a different direction than the new historicism that has characterized most contemporary Haggard criticism.<sup>17</sup> That choice was made in specific relation to these novels, only because Haggard himself was so invested in aligning his work with history. All of his novels explicitly gesture to the world outside of the text, as they are littered with historical references, maps, and footnotes. I'm concerned with this persistence use of history to explain his fiction, despite the fact that this range of discourses contain, comply and co-exist within a variety of political trajectories and commitments. Rather than using history to explain fiction, I'm interested in how history might explain, or expand, biopower as Foucault described it. For example, at the beginning of *King Solomon's Mines*, a treasure map appears that combines real places in southern Africa with the sexual and racial fantasies of ancient myth. While I was looking at it, I realized that this map also represents the same places that the British built concentration camps during the Second Boer War, in which thousands of Boers and black Africans died from the outbreak of virulent epidemics. So the map of the camps not only represents the imperial history of the Second Boer War, but the epidemiology of disease in southern Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. The fact that these maps superimpose sexual and racial fantasies with diamond mines, concentration camps and epidemics, signify so much of what Foucault argued about biopolitics, but it also amplifies the point that empire cannot be understood as one subset of biopower, because colonialism is how biopower operates.

Although this path was not pleasurable for me in the way Fish might insist it should be, I hope that this study will be useful for thinking about the complex relationship between literature, biology, politics and power. However, this work might have less to say about Foucault, colonialism and Victorian literature, and more to say to “the goals of science and technology.” Although I have always tried to position myself somewhere between the hysterical rush toward innovation and the paranoid dystopic vision that science and technology will be the death of us all, I do think studying nineteenth century biopolitical discourse should give us pause when we think that those horrors are simply a thing of the past. The ongoing fight over reproductive rights, the mapping of the human genome, cloning, genetic screening, HIV vaccine trials and stem cell research are only a few examples of “the goals of science and technology” which have

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<sup>17</sup> I should be clear that the precise methodology attached to what has loosely been called “new historicism” remains obscure, even within new historicist accounts. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt argue that, “the term has been applied to an extraordinary assortment of critical practices” and admit that “one of the recurrent criticisms of new historicism is that it is insufficiently theorized.” See *Practicing New Historicism*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 2.



no clear or predetermined future. All of them could become the historical deposits of racist, sexist and neo-colonial strategies participating in the rise of global poverty, disease and widespread death, or they could transform into something else entirely. Designed to open up interdisciplinary conversations within and beyond the humanities, this study maintains my position that humanities scholarship can absolutely “bring about effects in the world” if we make the effort.

## Chapter 1

### Beyond the Closet: How the Homosexual Became a Species

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The trial of Oscar Wilde was as dramatic as any final scene of a Greek tragedy. And if life imitates art, it also imitates science. One only has to glance at the transcripts to see that they are saturated with a veritable laundry list of sexual aberrations that could be a page ripped from *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Like any sexologist's case study, the trial produced a kind of sensational theater, as witness after witness was forced to testify to the truth of Wilde's secret life. In the end, he was convicted on sodomy charges and served two years of hard labor at Gaol. He lived his last days as an outcast in Paris until his death from meningitis in 1900.

If that story is familiar, it is because many people who examine Wilde's life remain transfixed by this tale as if it were synonymous with the story of the closet itself. In Neil McKenna's biography, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*, he writes on the first page of the forward:

For years, Oscar had a secret sexual and emotional life. He was a husband and a father, a poet and a playwright, a wit and a dandy, and a lover of young men. He was torn between the desire to proclaim the existence of his secret life and the need to conceal it. These conflicting imperatives fired Oscar's creativity and found expression in his writing.<sup>18</sup>

This is the story of the closet as the double life: husband/ father/ poet/ playwright/ wit/ dandy by day, "lover of young men" by night. This notion of the "conflicting imperatives" of proclamation and concealment are often imagined as both creatively generative and curiously fatal, as if gay men who live a double life will inevitably meet a tragic and untimely death. D.A. Miller argues that this image persists as part of a continuing public fascination with the closet that is not in fact sympathetic, but a fantasy of harm: "a gay is being beaten."<sup>19</sup> At the level of representation, it suggests that homosexual desire itself is fatal and projects the etiology of the violence of the closet back upon its subject. Nevertheless, the language of secrets, concealment and confession are the persistent terms in which we have been given to understand the dynamics of Wilde's trial and writing, while the structure of the closet continues to structure most of our interpretations of both his life and his death.

What strikes me in that conversation is that there is little discussion of the fact that it was not the public who put Oscar on trial, but Wilde himself who began the legal proceedings. After several years of demands from the Marquess of Queensbury that Wilde end his relationship with his son (Alfred Douglas), the Marquess left a note at the elite Albemarle Club: "For Oscar Wilde posing sodomite." Rather than tearing up the card, Wilde took Queensbury to court on libel charges. I think Wilde's decision raises a series of questions that actually challenge the intelligibility of the terms of the closet. In a formal sense, Wilde's libel charge suggests a denial of the content of the note, but the content of the note does not appear to be worth denying; to be

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<sup>18</sup> Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*, London: Century, 2003, p. xiii.

<sup>19</sup> The phrase "a gay is being beaten" is a reference to Freud's famous essay, "A Child Is Being Beaten." See D.A. Miller, "On the Universality of *Brokeback Mountain*," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 3, Spring 2007, p. 53.

called a “posing sodomite” is surely not the same thing as being called a sodomite. To be interpellated as a “posing sodomite” is to be called out for a public display of a certain kind of personality. It is not an accusation of a private sexual act. It is a misunderstanding to argue the Marquess wanted to make Wilde’s secret sexual acts known, because it seems to me that the problem was that Wilde was not secretive enough.<sup>20</sup> In many ways, the seductiveness of the concept of “the secret life” was really lost on Wilde, yet his dramatic response to such an absurd note from Queensbury suggests the very force of its violence. As Wilde later said in his trial, “Now, that is not the way to talk to me – ‘to pose as.’ I am not posing as anything.”<sup>21</sup>

After Wilde lost the libel trial, he was put on trial himself – not for “posing” as a sodomite – but for acts of sodomy, as the discourse inverted and demanded that he confess the secrets of the closet in every sordid detail. Alongside the myriad of witnesses, Wilde’s work was mobilized as evidence, conflating the author’s life with the text.<sup>22</sup> When Carson uses Wilde’s fiction as evidence, the language of personality is collapsed with sexual acts, as literature is conflated with the author’s life. Carson begins by suggesting that the “passage is open to the construction that the feeling between these two men was not a natural or a moral feeling” to “Have you yourself [Wilde] ever had that feeling toward a young man?” His conflation of Wilde’s writing with Wilde’s life and his persistence in attempting to “pin” Wilde “down to the actual words,” is both about the legal structure that demands a confession and about confession as a social imperative when speaking about sexuality. The content of the wanted confession becomes not so much a question of acts, but a desire for Wilde to confess to desire itself. What Wilde struggles with in this exchange is therefore not a repression or denial of his passions, but how to speak about them outside the terms in which they are given. Bringing Queensbury to trial must be understood as an act of refusal, not of sexuality or hidden desires, but of the structure of the closet itself. Perhaps it was that refusal – to hide *or* out himself, to deny *or* affirm the secret – that functioned as Wilde’s ultimate crime.

What then is at stake here if we interpret Wilde’s performance in court as a refusal of the terms of the closet itself? To begin to answer this question, let us reconsider Eve Sedgwick’s groundbreaking work, *Epistemology of the Closet*. She argues that along with the term “homosexual,” the closet was an invention of the last decades of the nineteenth century. Yet because of its discursive persistence, Sedgwick claims that an “epistemology of the closet is not a dated subject or a superseded regime of knowing.”<sup>23</sup> She follows Foucault’s insight that sexuality is placed in a distinctly privileged relation to our most prized constructs of identity, truth and knowledge in order to argue that the discourse of sexuality has the ability “to intersect

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<sup>20</sup> The Marquess was concerned that homosexuality “runs in the family.” It was rumored that his other older son had a sexual relationship with Lord Rosebery, who later became the Prime Minister after Gladstone’s resignation. Queensbury threatened to “thrash” Rosebery, but the Prince of Wales personally intervened, to the public embarrassment of Queensbury. Faced with another possible scandal with another powerful man and another one of his sons, Queensbury was horrified by what was construed as symptomatic of a biological problem. According to McKenna, “To have one sodomitical son might be regarded as a misfortune, to have two looked like heredity.” See *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*, p. 282.

<sup>21</sup> Merlin Holland, ed., *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde: The First Uncensored Transcript of the Trial of Oscar Wilde vs. John Douglas (Marquess of Queensberry)*, 1895, New York: Harper Collins, 2004, p. 70.

<sup>22</sup> See *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>23</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, p. 67.

and transform the other languages and relations by which we know.”<sup>24</sup> Sedgwick then calls for a reading of the “performative aspects of texts” because “the relations of the closet – the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit homo/heterosexual definition – have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts in general.”<sup>25</sup> Yet her own language is one of revelation – as the privileged project of literary criticism – which then mirrors the discursive structure of the closet itself. Literary criticism becomes implicated in the process of a kind of textual “outing” as the primary mode of knowledge production. The literary critic becomes the privileged reader with the power to reveal the secrets of the text in order to tell what it really means.

This is a strange position in which to find Sedgwick reading Foucault, for it is he who warns of the dangers of producing the language of revelation. Foucault argues that the putting into discourse of sex does not function as a kind of liberation from repression. It creates what he calls “the speaker’s benefit,” or the way in which talking about sex gives the speaker the appearance of a deliberate transgression that is really just a ruse of power. He goes on to explain:

This explains the solemnity with which one speaks of sex nowadays. When they had to allude to it, the first demographers and psychiatrists of the nineteenth century thought it advisable to excuse themselves for asking their readers to dwell upon matters so trivial and base. But for decades now, we have found it difficult to speak on the subject without striking a different pose: we are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive, and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we think we are making.<sup>26</sup>

If the relationship between sex and power is imagined as one of repression in a text, then the critic is enabled to enjoy the “the speaker’s benefit.” Our words are imagined as being spoken outside the reach of power, “defying” it and “subverting” it under the sign of revealing the past in order to bring about a different and perhaps more just future. Yet the notions of “repression,” “prohibition,” “nonexistence” and “silence” are the very terms that define the closet itself. And if Foucault is right – that the very moment in which we think we are participating in a politics of liberation is a “pose” that reproduces the very thing we oppose – perhaps we need another mode of analysis as literary critics.

I bring this to our attention especially in relation to Wilde, his trial and the strange status of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. So many critics have argued that the closet is the mechanism driving the narrative of the novel in a sublimated form, articulated through meditations on art, in part because there is a perception that Wilde’s own closeted sexuality bleeds onto every page.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage Books, 1990, pp. 6-7.

<sup>27</sup> For examples of this explicit formulation, see Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990; Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*, New York: Routledge, 1994; Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*:

Even critics that have attempted to move away from the idea of the secrets of sexuality remain invested in the idea of secrecy itself.<sup>28</sup> For example, Jeff Nunakawa writes, “Believe it or not, there is still a secret left to be told about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a secret no less open, only less sensational than the scandalous passions all but named in the novel that all but exposed the secret of its author’s own. Let’s face it, the book is boring: for all the thrill of *Dorian Gray*, long stretches of the story are almost unbearably uninteresting.”<sup>29</sup> I would argue that boredom is not “a secret” of the text, but rather one possible effect on the reader. And why Nunakawa insists on framing his discussion in the language of secrets suggests a persistent imperative to repeat those terms.

Others have suggested that “the secret” of Dorian Gray was never really a secret at all. According to Didier Eribon, the novel is a “mixture of a scarcely veiled affirmation of homosexuality and of a dissimulation in codes that are nonetheless nearly transparent and wouldn’t fool anyone.”<sup>30</sup> If there is no secret to reveal, then what kind of argument can we make about Wilde and his work? Sedgwick concedes that there may be a line of inquiry that the epistemological frame of her text does not allow. After tracing Foucault’s argument about the eruption of sexual taxonomies in the late nineteenth century, she writes:

True as his [Foucault’s] notation is, it suggests without beginning to answer the further question: Why the category of “the masturbator,” to choose only one example, should by now have entirely lost its diacritical potential for specifying a particular kind of person, an identity, at the same time as it continues to be true – becomes increasingly true – that, for a crucial strain of Western discourse, in Foucault’s words, “the homosexual was now a species.” So, as a result, is the heterosexual, and between *these* species the human species has come more and more to be divided. *Epistemology of the Closet* does not really have an explanation to offer for this sudden, radical contestation of the sexual categories; instead of speculating on its causes, this book explores its unpredictably varied and acute implications and consequences.<sup>31</sup>

At first, it is Foucault who is represented by Sedgwick as the one who is unable to properly explain the categorical shift from homosexual acts and identities to the question of the homosexual as a species. Yet by the end of the paragraph, it is she who admits to a certain aporia: “*Epistemology of the Closet* does not really have an explanation to offer for this sudden, radical contestation of the sexual categories.” Rather than pausing to consider why, she evacuates the biopolitical implications of Foucault’s argument and presses it back into the diacritical: “So, as a result, is the heterosexual, and between *these* species has come more and

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*Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities*, New York: Routledge, 1993; and more subtly in Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

<sup>28</sup> See Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995 and Jeff Nunakawa, “The Importance of Being Bored: The Dividends of Ennui in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Reading in Fiction*, ed. by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

<sup>29</sup> “The Importance of Being Bored,” p. 151.

<sup>30</sup> Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, trans. by Michael Lucey, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, p.182.

<sup>31</sup> *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 9, original italics.

more divided.” Although Sedgwick is quite right to insist that power is a force that divides along the axis of sexual categories and identities – often with violent results – she does leave us with an important problem. For Foucault insists that the nineteenth century is also one moment in which power is also a force that takes the question of biological life as its object.

I would argue that Sedgwick’s question – why “the homosexual was now a species” – is a serious one. Indeed we must wonder what it means to articulate sexuality in a biological register that is not about essentializing desire but biopoliticizing it. This question presents us with a mode of inquiry other than the politics of the closet: the relationship between language, sexuality and the dominion over biological life. I will argue that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not about secret desires, but a struggle for control over biological life and survival. I ask what it means that Wilde articulates biological life – not identity or performance – as the nexus of sexuality, possibility and violence. If sexuality continues to matter, it doesn’t only matter as an identity category that we deploy in the promise for political, social and legal liberation. It also raises important new questions about the relationship between science and sexuality that reach beyond the revelation of desire, which I will explore in “its unpredictably varied and acute implications and consequence.”

### **The Decadent as Endangered Species**

Most studies of “decadence” begin by way of an apology about the impossibility of defining the term. Charles Bernheimer writes, “Indeed, after years of reading, studying, and teaching literary and artistic works commonly called decadent, I was still unsure as to just what made them classifiable as such. The content of decadence was so multifaceted that no clear outline was discernible.”<sup>32</sup> The idea that decadence is somehow elusive for contemporary critics is a problem tethered to the historical fact that it suffered from quite the opposite condition: the over-determination of meaning. We could look in many places for evidence of this, but Max Nordau’s notorious indictment of decadence in *Degeneration* (1892) provides one of the most symptomatic of accounts. A practicing physician and prolific writer, Nordau traces the roots of decadence to France and to Wilde specifically. He describes a “fabulous genealogy” of decadents as having “a predilection for disease, death and putrefaction,” promoting “sexual aberrations and lasciviousness,” being “pornographers,” mixing “sensuality with piety,” finding “pleasure in crime,” “delighting in eccentricities of costumes” and creating “a class of poetry to the worship of the devil.”<sup>33</sup> If he can only speak of decadence in what he calls “general terms,” Nordau insists that is because his “demonstrations do not require a plunge into this filth, and it is sufficient to point the finger from afar at the sink of vice.”<sup>34</sup> This “sink of vice” functions for Nordau as a discursive compacter of opaque categories, behaviors, characteristics and concepts by mobilizing a biological metaphor that gives us the contours of decadence with

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and the Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, ed. by T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, p.3.

<sup>33</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. from the Second Edition of the German Work by George L. Mosse, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993, pp. 296-297.

<sup>34</sup> *Degeneration*, p. 297.

no content. It really just hammers at an idea without any analysis and produces a discussion of objections with no concrete textual references. To borrow a phrase from Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean Luc-Nancy, “There is only an already acquired, already available truth to declare.”<sup>35</sup> I think if Nordau must “point the finger from afar,” it is because his process of critical disengagement masks its own violence and suggests a desire for purity and moral righteousness at the expense of its other.

At one point, this other becomes Wilde himself, as he is made exemplary of decadence: “The ego-mania of decadentism, its love of the artificial, its aversion to nature, and to all forms of activity and movement, its megalomaniacal contempt for men, and its exaggeration of the importance of art, have found their English representative among the ‘Aesthetes,’ the chief of whom is Oscar Wilde.”<sup>36</sup> Nordau’s description diagnoses Wilde with a binary logic that can only define decadence in opposition to culturally valued terms; nature, life, and ethics are opposed to artifice, disease, crime and deviant sexuality.<sup>37</sup> If decadents like Wilde embraced these tropes in order to revel in the possibilities of aesthetic, violent and sexual excess, this is imagined as completely contrary to the discourse of evolution that insisted upon plenitude and survival. If Spencer declared that evolution proved that “only the fittest survive,” then part of the problem with decadence might be that it imagines an inverse world in which life moves “against nature” and degenerates with no future.<sup>38</sup>

Critics have sometimes understood the relationship between decadence and degeneration as an imaginary link that transforms naturalism into a specifically cultural form, as styles or civilizations are imagined as having a “life history” which can decline or degenerate metaphorically.<sup>39</sup> This notion is made clear when Nordau quotes the French critic Paul Bourget:

The word decadence denotes a state of society which produces too great a number of individuals unfit for the labors of common life. A society ought to be assimilated to an organism. As an organism, in fact, it resolves itself into a federation of lesser organisms, which again resolve themselves into a federation of cells. The individual is the social cell. In order that the whole organism should function with energy, it is necessary that the component organisms should function with energy, but with a subordinate energy.

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<sup>35</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean Luc-Nancy, “The Nazi Myth,” *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1990, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 308.

<sup>36</sup> *Degeneration*, p. 317.

<sup>37</sup> Wilde’s work is sometimes categorized not as decadent but gothic, a genre often associated with the discourse of nineteenth century science and the materiality of the body as a source of horror. See Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History’s Nightmares*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999; Roger Luckhurst, ed., *Late Victorian Gothic Tales*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; and Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Yet my pursuit of decadence here is not an argument about the accuracy of genre theory, but a question about both the generative possibilities and potential violence that labeling itself performs.

<sup>38</sup> The phrase “against nature” is the official translation of what is often referred to as “the bible of decadence”: J.-K. Huysmans’ novel *À Rebours* (1880). However, in French the phrase is less specific and can be translated more generally to mean “against the grain.” For example, one could use the phrase to describe the way in which a fabric like velvet changes when it is rubbed in different directions. It is important to note that this novel, in conjunction with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, was also used as evidence against Wilde at his trial with the notion that it had a particularly important influence on Wilde’s work.

<sup>39</sup> See Whitney Davis, “Decadence and the Organic Metaphor,” *Representations*, vol. 89, 2005, p. 138.

And in order that these inferior organisms should themselves function with energy, it is necessary that their component cells should function with energy, but with a subordinate energy. If the energy of the cells becomes independent, the organisms composing the total organism cease likewise to subordinate the energy to the total energy, and the anarchy which takes place constitutes the decadence of the whole.<sup>40</sup>

Bourget's notion that the organization of the organism – built of subordinate parts to the whole – is a metaphor for society animates all of Nordau's text. This rather convoluted quotation is mobilized by Nordau to present the reader with a biological image of society, as a sort of genealogical tree of life, but one in which the most evolved organism is state power comprised of subordinate powers, or "federation[s] of lesser organisms" followed by "federation[s] of cells" until the individual is only ever a "social cell." A logic of sameness and repetition is built into both the syntax and the political order of the metaphor: "resolves itself," "again resolve themselves," "function with energy," "should function with energy, but with a subordinate energy," "inferior organisms should themselves function with energy," and "their component cells should function with energy, but with a subordinate energy." This excessive repetition at the level of syntax has a rhetorical function: to indicate that the political order of a vital society is exactly like an organism, to the extent that every federation/cell has the same responsibility and capability. Through the subordination of "inferiors," it guarantees that power is condensed at the top of the tree. Yet if just one of these social cells becomes "independent," that anarchic energy spreads through all of society. The notion that a single individual has the ability to contaminate everyone with any act of insubordination is a rather paranoid notion that is often present in degenerative thinking: "One drink at the wrong time, one generation without sunlight, one blow to the head, one masturbatory fantasy, and the whole hereditary line is doomed."<sup>41</sup>

That logic that attempts to condense power by suppressing all acts of subordination is extended in Nordau as he repeats the same language, but inserts a particular sort of "personality" into the organism:

Very true. A society in decadence 'produces too great a number of individuals unfit for the labors of common life'; these individuals are precisely the degenerate; 'they cease to subordinate their energy,' because they are ego-maniacs, and their stunted development has not attained to the height at which an individual reaches his moral and intellectual junction with the totality, and their ego-mania makes the degenerate necessarily anarchists – i.e. enemies of institutions which they do not understand, and to which they cannot adapt themselves.<sup>42</sup>

The potential threat of the insubordinate individual articulated by Bourget is now made wholly real by Nordau, as he grafts that description onto his own fin de siècle society and amplifies it. The insubordinate individual is now the "degenerate," and they have mass produced. The cause of degeneration is now also its symptom, as the degenerates are doomed to extinction because they "cannot adapt themselves." If Bourget thought the insubordinate individual would be the

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<sup>40</sup> *Degeneration*, p. 301.

<sup>41</sup> *The Gothic Body*, p. 77.

<sup>42</sup> *Degeneration*, pp. 301 -302.



death of a certain political order which allows society to function, Nordau inverts the perceived threat of the degenerate and places that violence back upon his privileged subjects: “Degenerates, hysterics, and neurasthenics are not capable of adaptation. Therefore they are fated to disappear.”<sup>43</sup> It is as if decadents become part of an endangered species threatened with extinction. In this final prognosis, Nordau collapses the structure of metaphor itself, as decadent texts become indistinguishable from decadent lives, performing the same conflation as Carson insisted upon in Wilde’s trial.

If the decadent is now an endangered species because of its inability to adapt, that kind of language seems to echo Darwin, but Nordau rarely mentions him. Darwin does make one appearance in Nordau’s tale of the tragic decadent (annexed in a convoluted footnote) in which Nordau writes, “Darwinism explains adaptation only as the result of the struggle for existence, and of selection which is a form of this struggle... But I do not believe that such an accident is the only source, or even the most frequent source, of such transformations.”<sup>44</sup> Nordau argues against Darwin’s idea of the evolutionary “accident” and insists upon the notion that “adaptation is most frequently an act of the will.” For Nordau, “adaptation is voluntary,” as if an organism freely chooses how it can respond to what he refers to as “feelings of discomfort.”<sup>45</sup> The struggle for existence then takes place in “the organs”:

If the organs possessed by the living being, and the aptitude these organs have acquired, are not sufficient to furnish the counteractions felt and wished for as necessary to those feelings of discomfort, the weaker creatures submit to their destiny, to suffer or even perish. More vigorous individuals, on the contrary, make violent and continuous efforts in order to attain their design, of flight, defense, attack, suppression of natural obstacles; they give strong nervous impulses to their organs to increase to the highest degree their functional capacity, and these nervous impulses are the immediate cause of transformations, giving to the organs new qualities, and rendering them more fit to make the living creature thrive. That the nervous impulse produces, as a consequence, an increase in the flow of blood, and a better nutrition for the organ in play, is a positive biological fact. In my opinion, then, adaptation is most frequently an act of the will, and not the result of qualities accidentally required.<sup>46</sup>

Suffering and death become an attribute of the weak, manifest by one’s own conscious volition. If one’s organs “are not sufficient to furnish the counteractions felt and wished for as necessary to those feelings of discomfort, the weaker creatures submit to their destiny, to suffer or even perish.” An “act of the will” is imagined as a matter of pure choice – to live or let die – produced by a particular set of conditions and then completely divorced from them.

That notion of free will and its grounding philosophical possibility seems to recede even more when it is raised as a biological imperative central to adaptation. When Nordau links blood, organs and “the will” together as the necessary condition for survival, its impossibility becomes abundantly clear. First, the “aptitude” of this “organ in play” and the necessary

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<sup>43</sup> *Degeneration*, p. 540.

<sup>44</sup> *Degeneration*, p. 261.

<sup>45</sup> *Degeneration*, p. 261.

<sup>46</sup> *Degeneration*, pp. 261-262.

“nervous impulses” that make a living being “fit” to “thrive,” render survival a question of virility. The “vigor” and “violent and continuous effort” an organism must perform in order to guarantee the flow of blood to the organ seems to me undeniably masculine and sexual. One need not think too hard to imagine which organ condenses “nervous impulses,” “play,” “the flow of blood” and “the will” into one. His metaphor of society-as-organism is imagined almost literally as a giant erection. What becomes perplexing within the rules of his own argument is that his logic actually suggests that decadents, who were previously declared to be moving toward extinction, should in fact be *the most* fit to survive. That is to say that if decadents have “resolved” themselves to “sexual aberrations and lasciviousness,” to being “pornographers,” and to mixing “sensuality with piousness,” one would think those qualities would require such a “vigor” and “violent and continuous effort” that they should almost guarantee “better nutrition for the organ in play.”

If survival for Nordau is about this peculiar understanding of abundance, then clearly decadent life should not be in jeopardy at all. Yet Nordau insists upon dooming the decadent species to extinction because, “Such is the inevitable and fatal idiom of peoples and civilizations where factitious life has replaced the natural life, and developed in man unknown wants.”<sup>47</sup> The problem for Nordau is no longer a question of the will and pure choice, but life versus artifice. As the reproduction of biological life is imagined as being replaced by the production of artificial life, once again we find ourselves in the same discursive register in which we began. The “factitious” life of the decadent produces a kind of unnatural homosexual desire thinly coded under the rubric of “unknown wants.” Nordau insists that the decadent life will inevitably end in untimely death, as he collapses what he imagines as an artificial life with the homosexual life. The reproduction of this “factitious” life is indeed generative, but for Nordau it is a force that ultimately kills.

If Nordau is ultimately worried about the abundance of decadence and its ability to spread and reproduce artificial life, it is located in what can only be understood as a marked revulsion of particular forms of art and writing that are always linked to his need to collapse the differences between biology, personality, sexuality and one’s work. The violence of this process is then projected back to its subject, as if that species is killing itself. Yet this suicidal notion is not enough for Nordau. He insists that:

It is the sacred duty of all healthy and moral men to take part in the work of protecting and saving those who are not already too deeply diseased. Only by each individual doing his duty will it be possible to dam up the invading mental malady. ... He must mercilessly crush under his thumb the anti-social vermin. Such is the treatment of the disease of the age, which I hold to be efficacious. Characterization of the leading degenerates as mentally diseased; unmasking and stigmatizing their imitators as enemies of society; cautioning the public against the lies of these parasites.<sup>48</sup>

Rather than attempting to protect and save the lives of a species that is presumably diseased and dying out, Nordau makes it a matter of the “duty of all healthy and moral men” to speed up the process. Degenerates are imagined as being “enemies of society” and “parasites”: pesky animals

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<sup>47</sup> *Degeneration*, p. 299.

<sup>48</sup> *Degeneration*, pp. 566-567, 560.

that are difficult to stamp out because they constantly reproduce. Through this process of the radical dehumanization – the making of the degenerate into “anti-social vermin” – transforms the insubordinate individual into a subordinate species so that it may be killed. What this process of radical dehumanization suggests is that the very abundance of a species does not guarantee its biological survival, but may in fact transform it into an object of violence.

Wilde had quite different ideas about evolution, ethics, life and death, which he explored in a series of notebooks written at Oxford in the early 1870s. Like Nordau, Wilde imagined society as an organism, yet for him, “The social organism resembles the bodily organism, but not the individual, but the generic type.”<sup>49</sup> It is my guess that the distinction Wilde makes between “the individual” and “the generic type” connotes the difference between an individual human and the human as a species. That distinction is then folded into Wilde’s notion of progress:

Progress: is simply the instinct of self-preservation in humanity, the desire to affirm one’s one essence, knowledge rendered active by emotion of self-preservation produces higher forms of civilization. Mankind has been continually entering the prisons of Puritanism, Philistinism, Sensualism, Fanaticism, and turning the key on its one spirit: but after a time there is an enormous desire for higher freedom – for self-preservation.<sup>50</sup>

Wilde’s understanding of progress here echoes Spencer, who attempted to reformulate evolutionism as a sort of natural social progressivism. The idea is that both living matter and human social institutions must inevitably evolve from simple to complex and from barbaric to civilized, which is a concept we can recognize as a rather standard Victorian imperial imaginary. Yet if Nordau feared that the human race might ultimately retrogress into a kind of sordid uncivilized animalism because it has been infected by the insubordinate individual, Wilde suggested the opposite: that “mankind” will progress *because* of the insubordinate individual. Not only must the individual “affirm one’s essence” and be “rendered active by emotion of self-preservation,” one must act outside the “prisons” of institutionalized social practices.

When Wilde claims that self-preservation is produced through instinct and desire rather than the will, he reworks central questions of agency and control. If “the will” (in the most basic sense) suggests deliberate control over thought and action, self-preservation-as-instinct becomes a question independent of reason. As Darwin pointed out, birds do not learn to build nests. And if self-preservation is instinctual, then the desire to “affirm one’s essence” which leads to an enormous “desire for higher freedom” is not so much a choice, but a longing, a wanting and a wish that is precisely beyond one’s control. As a result, Wilde seems to postulate a kind of hyperproductivity of the individual as “the key” to progress.

At other points, Wilde struggles with the ethical dilemmas raised by the metaphor of society as an organism and the conflation of evolutionary progress with morality. In a solitary section of an unpublished third notebook, he writes something rather perplexing: “In the idea of evolution, there is a kind of optimism, for evil is only non-adaptation.”<sup>51</sup> At first, that quote

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<sup>49</sup> Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand (eds.), *Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of the Mind in the Making*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 164.

<sup>50</sup> *Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks*, p. 110.

<sup>51</sup> Oscar Wilde (1876-1878), *Notebook on Philosophy*, unpublished work located at the Herrick Archive, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, UCLA.

almost sounds like Nordau, but Wilde never links adaptation with progress. There is not one privileged difference that emerges so that it can be widely adapted by a species. The individual is “the key” to progress only if individual differences are *not* adapted to “the generic type,” but allowed to exist - unsubordinated. Morality becomes less a question of the will, and more a result of the randomness of individual variation.

If evolution is optimistic for Wilde, it is because all that remains of Victorian morality is the sense that it is a regulating system and not a biological imperative of progress. Progress is split from morality as morality itself is imploded as a coherent system of judgment. Yet Nordau may have been correct - not in his prescription but in his description - of the conditions of life in a social system that operates within a moral imaginary. What I mean by that is simply the fact that if the conditions of one’s life lie outside the regulating systems of a society, the act of “preserving oneself” might be the very thing that put one’s life in danger.

### **Vivisection and its Vicissitudes**

Modern divisions of knowledge should not blind us to the ease with which educated Victorians assumed connections between subjects. Wilde is known for being an extraordinarily well-versed scholar, especially in philosophy, aesthetics and Greek. Yet his interests and abilities might be indicative of his method of thinking in general, made clear when he muses: “The Empiricists are like ants, slaves heaping up their stove, the Dogmatists like spiders spinning their own webs for themselves. The true method is that of the bee who selects from every flower.”<sup>52</sup> Wilde extended this image of the bee as a figure for a promiscuous method of thinking to an avid interest in the life sciences, which erupts in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The text gives a primacy to the life sciences as an epistemological frame quite early with the character of Lord Henry. According to Judith Halberstam, “Lord Henry appears as a kind of Frankenstein figure in this narrative and he sees Dorian as a live experiment in ‘natural science.’”<sup>53</sup> If “natural science” emerges as a topic of discussion in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Halberstam misses a crucial distinction that Lord Henry insists upon:

He had been always enthralled by the methods of natural science, but the ordinary subject-matter of that science had seemed to him trivial and of no import. And so he had begun by vivisectioning himself, as he had ended by vivisectioning others. Human life – that appeared to him to be one thing worth investigating.<sup>54</sup>

Lord Henry announces the movement from natural science to life science. Vivisection, or the dissection of living bodies, becomes a metaphor that suggests the lives of others can only be known through an intellectual operation that cuts through the skin. The secrets of death that are made visible by the corpse are replaced here by knowledge of the body while it remains alive, as Lord Henry evacuates thanatological knowledge in favor of vital knowledge. It is no longer a matter of a diacritical form of classification, but a “subject-matter” that gets at life itself. If the

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<sup>52</sup> *Notebook on Philosophy*.

<sup>53</sup> *Skin Shows*, p. 54.

<sup>54</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, New York: The Modern Library, 1998, p. 64.

practice of vivisection is a metaphor for understanding social life, we are presented here with the image of a surgeon fascinated by his object.

Lord Henry's fascination with vivisection can be placed in conversation with other debates that erupted about what constituted the proper object for research.<sup>55</sup> Although vivisection has a long scientific history, it was in the 1860's that it emerged once again in Europe, becoming synonymous with the famous French physiologist Claude Bernard. He loudly championed the cause:

After dissecting cadavers, then, we must necessarily dissect living beings, to uncover the inner or hidden parts of the organism and see them work; to this sort of operation we give the name of vivisection, and without this mode of investigation, neither physiology nor scientific medicine is possible; to learn how man and animals live, we cannot avoid seeing great numbers of them die, because the mechanisms of life can be unveiled and proved only by knowledge of the mechanisms of death.<sup>56</sup>

Bernard privileges the living body over the dead as the object of the experiment, but the very way in which he emphasizes life announces the inevitability of death. Rather than the Hippocratic oath in which life must be maintained at all costs, Bernard's practice of vivisection encapsulates death as its necessary conclusion. Clearly this is not a kind of utilitarian formulation in which one life is sacrificed to save many, for Bernard makes no necessary connection between the knowledge of "mechanisms" and the preservation of life. Although he claims that life is creation, he also says that life is death, meaning that a working organism is an organism engaged in the process of destroying itself. If death is a kind of inevitability built into the definition of life itself, knowledge and the progress of science become the justification for all experiments. This may in part be why Georges Canguilhem called Bernard's vision "an aggressive science," and claimed that Bernard "urged medicine to set out on the path of experimentation toward a future of domination and power."<sup>57</sup>

That triad of aggression, domination and power takes shape in part around the question of the relationship between humans and animals. Bernard articulates the distinction between "man and animal" as only one of analogy:

Experiments must be made either on man or animals. Now I think that physicians already make too many dangerous experiments on man, before carefully studying them on animals. I do not admit that it is moral to try more or less dangerous or active remedies on patients in hospitals, without first experimenting on dogs, for I shall prove, further on, that results obtained on animals may all be conclusive for man when we know how to experiment properly. If it is immoral, then, to make an experiment on man when

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<sup>55</sup> One might point to H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), a tale about a sadistic vivisectionist who attempts to turn animals into humans. Some critics have argued that Wells' novel was inspired by Wilde's trial. See Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986.

<sup>56</sup> Claude Bernard (1865), *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, trans. by Henry Copley Greene, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1975, p. 99.

<sup>57</sup> Georges Canguilhem, *A Vitalist Rationalist: Selected Writings from Georges Canguilhem*, ed. by François Deleporte and trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, New York: Zone Books, 2000, p. 276.

it is dangerous to him, even though the result may be useful to others, it is essentially moral to make experiments on an animal, even though painful and dangerous to him, if they may be useful to man.<sup>58</sup>

Bernard directly addresses the question of the ethics of experimenting on animals and declares that it is “essentially moral.” Yet the rhetorical boundary that separates humans from nonhumans in Bernard’s text is somewhat liable, for the results of any experiment on either will be the same, “if only we know how to experiment properly.” Yet human animals – articulated as the generic “man” – clearly retain their position at the top of a species hierarchy as a kind of self-evident conclusion, while particular nonhuman animals are specified as ideal for the practice of vivisection: “The animals most used by physiologists are those procured most easily, and here we must set in front rank domestic animals such as dogs, cats, horses, rabbits, oxen, sheep, pigs, barnyard fowl etc. ...”<sup>59</sup> What is interesting is that Bernard’s ranking system for animals is not based upon their imagined similarity or difference from humans, but the degree to which his specimens can be “procured” with ease. Presumably the animals he lists become experimental specimens simply because they are abundant, domesticated, and available to be cut up. **(Fig. A.1)**

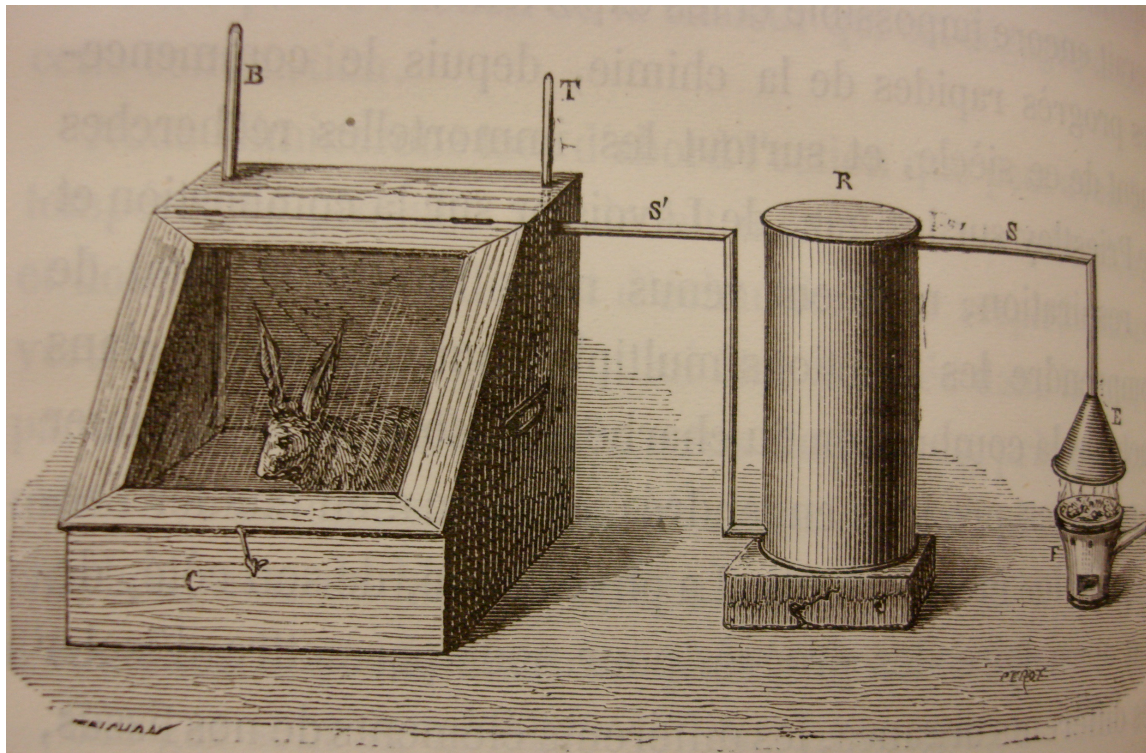


<sup>58</sup> *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, p. 102.

<sup>59</sup> *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, p. 115.

**Fig. A.1: *Session at the Vivisection Laboratory, 1889***

Rather than the image of the scientist as a kind of brave hero who must procure a wild beast for the sake of humanity, we are presented with the image of a vivisectionist of leisure who operates on whichever animal happens to be easily available. Yet the debate is framed by Bernard as a question of danger for humans, for it is “*immoral*, then, to make an experiment on a man when it is dangerous to him, even though the result may be useful to others,” while it is “*moral* to make experiments on an animal, even though painful and dangerous to him, if they may be useful to man.” (Fig. A.2)



**Fig. A.2: *Appareil pour l'asphyxie experimentale par les vapeurs de charbon***<sup>60</sup>

The problem of endangering animals in service of protecting human life was at the center of anti-vivisection discourse by the middle of the nineteenth century, but for Bernard, “No hesitation is possible; the science of life can be established only through experiment, and we can save living beings from death only after sacrificing others.”<sup>61</sup> If domestic animals are imagined as being always in some sense there to be sacrificed, human lives are in turn also subject to a hierarchy of safety and vulnerability cast in terms of access and confinement. Like the domesticated animal in the cage, the criminal in the prison provides a likely specimen for

<sup>60</sup> Claude Bernard, *Lecons sur les anesthésiques et sur l'asphyxie*, 1875, p. 42.

<sup>61</sup> *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, p. 102.

Bernard, but he refused to experiment on “patients in hospitals.” Bernard unpacks this idea further:

May we make experiments on men condemned to death or vivisect them? Instances have been cited, analogous to the one recalled above, in which men have permitted themselves to perform dangerous operations on condemned criminals, granting them pardon in exchange. Modern ideas of morals condemn such actions; I completely agree with these ideas; I consider it wholly permissible, however, and useful to science, to make investigations on the properties of tissues immediately after the decapitations of criminals. A helminthologist had a condemned woman without her knowledge swallow larvae of intestinal worms, so as to see whether the worms developed in the intestines after her death.<sup>62</sup>

Bernard’s first step is to claim that it is immoral to perform experiments on criminals in exchange for a pardon, implicitly suggesting that the terms of that deal is life itself. Presumably the prisoner risks his or her life for a pardon, not knowing whether one will survive the experiment. However, if the prisoner is already dead, Bernard argues that it is moral to perform an experiment “on the properties of tissues immediately after the decapitations.” The status of the body is then in question, for if the criminal is dead to the extent that he or she has been “decapitated,” the tissue is still alive and ripe for experiment. Yet the distinction between life and death is then further convoluted when he cites the example of the condemned woman, who “without her knowledge” is given the larvae of parasitic worms. Clearly this is an experiment on a living body in which the prisoner is given no terms and no deal. Bernard then loses all sense of any distinctions between living or dead bodies, criminals or patients, or even self and other: “Others have made analogous experiments on patients with phthisis doomed to an early death; some men have made experiments on themselves.”<sup>63</sup> Any sense of the boundaries of analogy finally implode, as he writes: “For we must not deceive ourselves, morals do not forbid making experiments on one’s neighbor or on one’s self; in everyday life men do nothing but experiment on one another.”<sup>64</sup> So if Lord Henry begins by “vivisecting himself,” and ends “by vivisecting others,” this is literally the “everyday” lab as Bernard described it.

If this traffic in the discourse of vivisection produced such an “aggressive science,” why would Wilde invoke it as the primary epistemology of his novel? That is a salient question, considering Bernard himself cautioned against what he called, “the perpetual confusion” between literature and science:

It would be out of place for me here to say more of the mistakes and misdirection of most of the studies of medical literature, characterized as historical or philosophical. I may perhaps have occasion to explain myself elsewhere on the subject; for the moment, I shall limit myself to saying that, in my opinion, all these mistakes have their origin in a perpetual confusion between literary or artistic production and scientific production,

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<sup>62</sup> *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>63</sup> *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, p. 102.

<sup>64</sup> *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, p. 102.



between criticism of art and scientific criticism, between the history of science and the history of men.<sup>65</sup>

Although Bernard wants to maintain strict distinctions between different fields and forms of criticism, it was Émile Zola – the self-proclaimed leader of French naturalism – who mobilized Bernard’s experimental science to write his essay, “The Experimental Novel.” Zola argues for a very particular relationship between scientific epistemology and literary production that relies upon the idea of the experimental method, which he develops in explicit relation to Bernard. Zola writes:

Claude Bernard demonstrates that the method followed in the study of inanimate bodies in chemistry and in physics, should also be used in the study of living bodies, in physiology and medicine. I am going to try and prove for my part that if the experimental method leads to the knowledge of physical life, it should also lead to the knowledge of the passionate and intellectual life represented by the novel.<sup>66</sup>

Zola’s “experimental novel” relies upon an analogical leap – from a scientific practice to a literary one – with the experimental method as its axis of symmetry. The scientific method that leads to the discovery of “the knowledge of physical life” is imagined as just like the literary method that produces “the knowledge of the passionate and intellectual life.” If this likeness is first articulated as a figurative analogy between science and literature, that relation quickly moves to a biological one that allows for complete substitution: “It will often be but necessary for me to replace the word ‘doctor’ by the word ‘novelist,’ to make my meaning clear and to it the rigidity of scientific truth.”<sup>67</sup>

Zola’s equation works according to a scientific logic of analogy rather than a literary one because in biology, two things are analogous to each other when there is a correspondence in function but not in structure or origin. If “doctor” can be substituted by “novelist,” it is because for Zola they have precisely the same function. To make this logic even more explicit, he remarks, “Our field is the same as the physiologist’s, only that it is greater. We operate, like him, on man.”<sup>68</sup> The analogical relationship that was previously deployed to produce sameness and substitutability, works here to produce a difference, as the “field” of the novelist “is greater.” It appears that if at first Zola borrows the “experimental method” from science to claim a kind of objectivity or “rigidity of scientific truth” on behalf of novelists, this appropriation eventually serves to safeguard the privilege of the author to finally make “man” known in all of his unreadable parts. It is the novelist alone who can “operate” on man – not just the body, but the interiority of the subject.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde reproduces the same discourse that we find in Zola’s essay:

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<sup>65</sup> *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, pp. 141-142.

<sup>66</sup> Émile Zola, “The Experimental Novel,” *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, New York: Cassell, 1893, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> “The Experimental Novel,” p. 2.

<sup>68</sup> “The Experimental Novel,” p. 50.

He [Lord Henry] began to wonder whether we could ever make psychology so absolute a science that each little spring of life would be revealed to us. As it was, we always misunderstood ourselves, and rarely understood others. Experience was of no ethical value. It was merely the name that men gave to their mistakes. Moralists had, as a rule, regarded it as a mode of warning, had claimed for it a certain ethical efficacy in the formation of a character, had praised it as something that taught us what to follow and showed us what to avoid. But there was no motive power in experience. It was as little of an active cause as conscience itself. All that it really demonstrated was that our future would be the same as our past, and that the sin we had done once, and with loathing, we would do many times, and with joy. It was clear to him that the experimental method was the only method by which one could arrive at any scientific analysis of the passions; and certainly Dorian Gray was a subject made to his hand, and seemed to promise rich and fruitful results.<sup>69</sup>

Lord Henry refuses the idea that experience is the pathway to knowledge and evacuates it completely of any moralizing force. The power of experience is imagined not as a corrective – we do not learn from the past – but as the force that produces an endless and inevitable repetition. If Lord Henry favors the experimental method, it is precisely because it splits knowledge of “the passions” from the questions of “the Moralists.” This passage then becomes a kind of meta-discourse on Zola, as he stages the experimental method within the experimental novel. It is not the novelist that is like the doctor, or the novelist that can know even more than the doctor, but the novelist who writes a character that occupies the position of the doctor and deploys his method. Yet the effect of this meta-discourse is not to further abstract the relation that Zola articulates between science and literature, but to stage it literally in the text to reveal the contours of its effects. In fact it was Bernard himself who first refused the figurative: “The larynx is a larynx, and the lens of the eye is the lens of the eye: in other words, the mechanical and the physical conditions necessary for their existence are satisfied only with the living organism.”<sup>70</sup>

## The Ontology of Desire

This reading of vivisection moves against many critics’ understanding of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a book located firmly within the figural, which is an interpretation that any decadent novel structured around a hidden picture might encourage. For example, Charles Bernheimer describes the picture as both aesthetic and semantic, and his comments are worth quoting at length:

I would argue that the particular associations that a speaker may have with the concept of decadence are not what is important and culturally productive about this concept. It is not the referential content of the term that conveys its meaning so much as the dynamics of paradox and ambivalence that it sets in motion. Its meaning is the injury of a kind of

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<sup>69</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in *A Vital Rationalist*, pp. 267-268.

meaning... Fundamental to the opening of this semantic wound is precisely the contaminating crossover ... the slippage from poetic metaphor to historical fact, from aesthetic dream to real life, from a book about decadence to decadent existence. Think of Dorian Gray slipping up to the attic to look at the picture that embodies the disintegration of his soul: the aesthetic crosses over into the real and takes on its temporality, whereas the real, by the magic of Dorian's wish not to age, takes on the timelessness of art. Significantly, once this semantic wound is cured, and Dorian is definitively differentiated from his portrait, not only does he die but the book itself ends. This, for decadence, is the consequence of dividing the aesthetic from the real.<sup>71</sup>

Bernheimer's interest in the figural here is not only a meditation on decadent aesthetics, but on metaphor itself. The "contaminating crossover" is between poetry and "historical fact," which he reads as a kind of "wound" to language and meaning, that directly substitutes the object for life. Only at the moment when Dorian is "definitively differentiated from his portrait," is "this semantic wound cured." The consequence of this "injury" becomes the consequence and violence of decadence itself. Bernheimer imagines Dorian's death not as an articulation of the violence aimed at the homosexual at the turn of the century, but as the inevitable result of "dividing the aesthetic from the real." Yet what if we imagine that the picture in *Dorian Gray* is never properly divided from the real? If the language of vivisection begins as a metaphorical epistemology for Lord Henry to understand social life, this metaphor crosses over into the real and contaminates the picture, as it literally becomes a kind of vivisection that Dorian performs on himself.

To demonstrate this process, let me first trace the narrative etiology of the picture. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* begins with a conversation between Lord Henry and the artist Basil Hallward. While gazing at Basil's picture of Dorian, Lord Henry demands that he must meet the young man. When Dorian enters into the story, Lord Henry gives a speech about youth and beauty that is one of the most famous quotations from the novel. He advises the young Dorian:

Our limbs fail, our senses rot. We degenerate into hideous puppets, haunted by the memory of the passions of which we were too much afraid, and the exquisite temptations that we had not the courage to yield to. Youth! Youth! There is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!<sup>72</sup>

From passages like this, critics have suggested that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is primarily a story about narcissism. William Buckler argues that, "ugly, self-deceiving, all devouring vanity leads the protagonist to heartless cruelty, murder, blackmail and suicide." Yet in the text itself "youth" is privileged in direct opposition to a bodily decay and organic death. That fact suggests that the picture is not a representation of an "all devouring vanity," but an articulation and the acknowledgement of an inevitable fatality of the organic body. In other words, the desire to remain forever young is not just about being pretty, but about a fear of dying and a desire to stay alive. As Wilde once said, "This passion for beauty is merely the intensified desire for life."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Decadent Subjects*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>72</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 26.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*, p. 92.

If power still represents itself here as the threat of death, this insight becomes generative rather than degenerative because it leads directly to Dorian's pivotal wish that will soon give life to the picture. He says:

How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful. But this picture will remain always young. It will never be older than this particular day of June. ... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that – for that – I would give everything!<sup>74</sup>

Dorian decides to give his soul to the canvas in exchange for a preserved body. After uttering the pivotal prayer that inverts the relationship between the body and its representation, Lord Henry's desire to vivisect life is transferred to Dorian, as he says, "You filled me with a wild desire to know everything about life. For days after I met you, something seemed to throb in my veins."<sup>75</sup>

Dorian's first attempt to satisfy this "wild desire" consists of an adventure to the East End of London, which functions as a kind of laboratory for his life experiments. He tells his story to Lord Henry:

I felt that this grey, monstrous London of ours, with its myriads of people, its sordid sinners, and its splendid sins, as you once phrased it, must have something in store for me. I fancied a thousand things. The mere danger gave me a sense of delight. I remembered what you had said to me on that wonderful evening when we first dined together, about the search for beauty being the real secret of life.<sup>76</sup>

Here the perception of danger produces desire, as terror is eroticized and "sordid sinners" hold out a promise of "sordid sins." In this world of new found objects, the East End functions something like a shopping mall of sin, as Dorian fancies "a thousand things."<sup>77</sup>

If Dorian initially functions as one of Lord Henry's objects to vivisect, one of the first objects Dorian "fancies" for himself is a Jew:

A hideous Jew, in the most amazing waistcoat I ever beheld in my life, was standing at the entrance, smoking a vile cigar. He had greasy ringlets, and an enormous diamond blazed in the center of a soiled shirt. 'Have a box, my Lord?' he said, when he saw me, and he took off his hat with an air of gorgeous servility. There was something about him, Harry, that amused me. He was such a monster. You will laugh at me, I know, but I

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<sup>74</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 54.

<sup>75</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 54.

<sup>76</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 54.

<sup>77</sup> Dorian's choice of the East End and the city itself as an experimental site is not random. By the 1890's, the rise of "urban exploration" had already provided an extensive discourse on the lurid affairs of the East End, which came to be known as "deepest, darkest London." In the work of sensationalist journalists like Henry Mayhew, the East End was associated with a myriad of perceived social ills, including prostitution, opium and poverty. See Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

really went and paid a whole guinea for the stage-box. To the present day I can't make out why I did so.<sup>78</sup>

Like the “monstrous” city of dreadful delight, the Jew is a composite figure of disgust and fascination, combining “hideousness” with the avatars of aristocratic decadence. He smokes a “vile cigar,” displays “greasy ringlets” and “a soiled shirt,” at the same time that he wears “the most amazing waistcoat,” sports “an enormous diamond” and composes “an air of gorgeous servility.”

This particular description suggests a particular affinity between the decadence of homosexuality and theatrical nature of the Jew. Hannah Arendt argues that, “the vice of Jewishness” and “the vice of homosexuality” became “very much alike indeed at the fin de siècle.”<sup>79</sup> She quotes Proust: “Judges assume and are more inclined to pardon murder in invert and treason in Jews for reasons derived from ... racial predestination.”<sup>80</sup> Both the Jew and “the invert” are imagined as biologically predestined for crime, just as Dorian is attracted to the Jew and enters the theater almost by instinct: “To the present day I can't make out why I did so.”<sup>81</sup> Rather than persecute and prosecute this predestination, Arendt argues that society is “constantly on the lookout for the strange, the exotic, the dangerous, finally identifies the refined with the monstrous and gets ready to admit monstrosities – real or fancied.”<sup>82</sup> This othering of both the Jew and the homosexual as simultaneously “refined” and “monstrous” does not function to exclude them, but becomes the very condition of their acceptance in the social order and guarantees their power. Yet this acceptance and power demand a precarious language game, in which Jews and homosexuals could not “confess their identity openly, and yet could not hide it either.”<sup>83</sup> The structure of the closet has no function here, as membership of both the Jew and the homosexual depended upon the fascination of their “monstrous” difference, at the same time that that difference could not be spoken in terms coherent to everyone. Arendt claims that Jews and homosexuals become “masters at sign language.”<sup>84</sup> In Wilde's text, Dorian clearly reads the sign language of the Jew that signifies both self and other – a figure cloaked in the accoutrement of the aristocrat that he recognizes as his own, but seething in “hideousness.”<sup>85</sup>

Dorian passes this Jew, who guards the gates to the “real secret of life” that Dorian seeks inside the theater. Soon he discovers these secrets embodied in the actress Sibyl Vane. Dorian later describes her to Lord Henry in the language of objects, as “the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life.”<sup>86</sup> She is literally the object of his desire, but this is not the classic objectifying male gaze toward the woman on the stage, but the look of a botanist: “Her body swayed, while

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<sup>78</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 55.

<sup>79</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1958, p. 80.

<sup>80</sup> *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 81, original ellipsis.

<sup>81</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 55.

<sup>82</sup> *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 82. For more on about the relationship between monstrosity and crime, see Foucault's *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, trans. by Graham Burchell, ed. by Arnold Davidson, François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, New York: Picador, 1999.

<sup>83</sup> *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 85.

<sup>84</sup> *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 85.

<sup>85</sup> *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 85.

<sup>86</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 57 and p. 92.

she danced, as a plant sways in the water. The curves of her throat were the curves of a white lily.”<sup>87</sup> Clearly Dorian’s trip to the theater is not just a brush with “low culture” but with horticulture. Sibyl’s human qualities are evacuated in favor of a fascination with her flower-like self, which Dorian makes clear when the Jew tries to take him backstage and he refuses. He confesses to Lord Henry: “It was curious my not wanting to know her, wasn’t it?”<sup>88</sup>

Dorian’s botanizing in the theater eventually becomes tiresome, as if he suffers from what Michael Pollan might call “flora-ennui.”<sup>89</sup> Dorian’s passions indeed wane one particular evening when her performance becomes intolerable: “The staginess of her acting was unbearable, and grew worse as she went on... It was not nervousness. Indeed, so far from being nervous, she was absolutely self-contained. It was simply bad art.”<sup>90</sup> Sibyl attempts to explain her disastrous performance to Dorian and says:

You had brought me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection. You had made me understand what love really is. My love! My love! Prince Charming! Prince of Life! ... I hate the stage. I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire.<sup>91</sup>

So it seems that Sibyl can “mimic a passion” she does not feel, but cannot act out one that is real. She imagines the same “contaminating crossover” between art and life that Bernheimer suggested, as a kind of “wound” to language and meaning. Yet the problem for Dorian is not that Sibyl has come to life off stage, but that she has become absurdly fake on stage. This is because the theater for him is not the space of pure artifice, but already a contaminated crossover between art and life; it is a form of cultivated nature, a greenhouse where the flowers grow. This echoes the formula that appears in the famous horticulture chapter in *À Rebours*: “This admirable artistry had long enthralled him, but now he dreamt of collecting another kind of flora: tired of artificial flowers aping real ones, he wanted some natural flowers that would look like fakes.”<sup>92</sup> If Sibyl is suddenly excessively fake on stage, it is “bad art” because she has transformed herself into “artificial flowers aping real ones” rather than “natural flowers that would look like fakes.”<sup>93</sup> It is as if Sibyl’s excess paradoxically empties her of life and ultimately annihilates Dorian’s desire. In his own words: “You have killed my love.”<sup>94</sup>

Clearly there is violence in this decadence, but it is not the consequence of the separation between the semantic and the real, but the failed cultivation of nature. If women are supposed to be masters at anything, it would be the practice of maquillage and self-fashioning, but Sibyl is

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<sup>87</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 93.

<sup>88</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 60.

<sup>89</sup> “Flora-ennui” is when the “singular beauty of a flower in bloom can no longer pierce the veil of black or obsessive thoughts in a person’s mind, that mind’s connection to the sensual world has grown dangerously frayed.” See Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World*, New York: Random House, 2002, p. 64.

<sup>90</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 94.

<sup>91</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 98.

<sup>92</sup> J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Robert Baldick, London: Penguin Books, 1959, p.97.

<sup>93</sup> This formula in Huysmans’ text has been interpreted in more complicated and perhaps much more promising forms. See Barbara Spackman, “Interversions,” in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. by Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff and Matthew Potolsky, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

<sup>94</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 98.

just “bad art.” Although women and their bodies have been historically linked with nature represented as a kind of excess, the logic here links them with an excess of artifice. Like the widespread cultural disgust at women who wear too much make-up, the female body is declared to be grotesquely artificial and not natural *enough*. As a result, Dorian abandons her and she dies: “They ultimately found her lying dead on the floor of her dressing-room. She had swallowed something by mistake, some dreadful thing they use at theaters. I don’t know what it was, but it had either prussic acid, as she seems to have died instantaneously.”<sup>95</sup> The status of Sibyl’s death – suicide or accident – is in question here, but Dorian decides he is directly responsible: “ ‘So I have murdered Sibyl Vane,’ said Dorian Gray, half to himself, ‘murdered her as surely as if I had cut her little throat with a knife. Yet the roses are not less lovely for that.’ ”<sup>96</sup> Like a fresh cut flower in a vase, only in death can Sibyl return to her proper artistic position.

That night after the theater, Dorian returns home to gaze at the picture only to discover a physical change, a “touch of cruelty in the mouth.”<sup>97</sup> As he continues to stare, the picture literally looks back: “It was watching him, with its beautiful marred face and its cruel smile. Its bright hair gleamed in the early sunlight. Its blue eyes met his own.”<sup>98</sup> It is as if the sadistic gaze of the surgeon has turned upon itself, as subject and object become one. Although we might think that these moments in the text are a paranoid or hallucinatory product of Dorian’s moral conscience, the text gives us the discourse of science to suggest something quite different:

For a moment he thought of praying that the horrible sympathy that existed between him and the picture might cease. It had changed in answer to a prayer; perhaps in answer to a prayer it might remain unchanged. And, yet, who, that knew anything about Life, would surrender the chance of remaining always young, however fantastic that change might be, or with what fateful consequences it might be fraught? Besides, was it really under his control? Had it indeed been prayer that had produced the substitution? Might there not be some curious scientific reason for it all? If thought could exercise its influence upon a living organism, might not thought exercise an influence upon dead and inorganic things? Nay, without thought or conscious desire, might not things external to ourselves vibrate in unison with our moods and passions, atom calling to atom in secret love of strange affinity?<sup>99</sup>

In this three-partite sequence of possible causality, Dorian’s logic moves from prayer, to fate to thought. Where he ends up is not with the language of imagination or fantasy, but a question

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<sup>95</sup> This description of Sibyl Vane’s death holds out the possibility that she quite literally died from her own make-up. Despite the fact that prussic acid is fatal in even small doses, Victorians used it for medicinal purposes to cure everything from hysteria to headaches. The fact that it is described here in connection to “some dreadful thing they use at theaters,” suggests that the prussic acid could be an ingredient in her stage make-up. Actresses sometimes added prussic acid to beauty products because it was rumored to have age-defying properties and many women died as a result. In this case, the working class actress is imagined to be either ignorant of this effect or desperate enough to continue to use it. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 111.

<sup>96</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 111.

<sup>97</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 101.

<sup>98</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 103.

<sup>99</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 119-120.

about “the scientific reason for it all.” Dorian’s question – “If thought could exercise its influence upon a living organism, might not thought exercise an influence upon dead and inorganic things?” – suggests that thought itself can collapse the absolute difference between the living organism and inorganic matter.

Although this may appear to be a bizarre logic, it edges quite closely to what Zola and Bernard argued:

The end of all experimental method, the boundary of all scientific research, is then identical for living and for inanimate bodies; it consists in finding the relations that unite a phenomenon of any kind to its nearest cause, or, in other words, in determining the conditions necessary for the manifestation of this phenomenon.<sup>100</sup>

Yet we must remember that “the relations that unite” this “phenomenon” and “the necessary conditions for the manifestation” seem to be Dorian’s repulsion/attraction to the Jew and his attraction/repulsion to a woman. Both relations and conditions produce a change that gives rise to a new life. Desire becomes ontological; it is the catalyst for the physical change itself. It makes sense then that Dorian analyzes the organic change in the picture accordingly with the objective gaze of the experimental scientist. Unlike the absurdly fake body of Sibyl Vane, he is curious about the picture and wants to know it. While Lord Henry “had begun by vivisectioning himself, as he had ended by vivisectioning others,” perhaps Dorian begins by vivisectioning others and ends by vivisectioning himself.

Dorian soon realizes that the picture has indeed altered in response to his wish. As long as he lives, the picture absorbs signs of decay that would otherwise mar his living body, but the picture has a second function that exceeds Dorian’s prayer: “A sense of infinite pity, not for himself, but for the painted image on the canvas, came over him. It had altered already, and would alter more. Its gold would wither and grey. Its red and white roses would die. For every sin that he committed, a stain would fleck and wreck its fairness.”<sup>101</sup> The implication is clear: the physical alteration of the picture not only preserves Dorian’s youth but makes his immoral acts into a material image embodied by the picture. At first this structure appears conventionally Victorian rather than Decadent, in the sense that one’s moral interior becomes inevitability visible on one’s physical exterior, as if a moral life makes a beautiful face and a life of vice transforms the self into the grotesque. Yet there is already a sense that the picture is not entirely synonymous with the self, as it comes to have a life of its own.

If the picture can be said to be alive, it needs to be understood as a biological entity and not a metaphor. Its existence depends on Dorian’s survival, while Dorian’s longevity is made possible by the picture. The picture may be a kind of “visible emblem of conscience,” but it also functions as a visible emblem of what we might call symbiosis, in which two organisms live together for their mutual benefit. To picture this, consider this drawing of *Naegleria amebas* caught in the process of eating. (**Fig. A.3**)

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<sup>100</sup> “The Experimental Novel,” p. 3.

<sup>101</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 103-104.





**Fig. A.3: Naegleria**<sup>102</sup>

They are symbiotic in that they eat tiny living organisms and particles of dead and decaying matter. They reproduce by fission when they reach a certain size. The division results in two daughter cells, which can also grow, feed, and divide. Wilde was fascinated by the notion that the beginnings of beauty and sensuality that mark human life could be linked to such creatures: “The splendor and grace of swift limbs, the grave beauty of girlish foreheads, the physical ecstasy of sensuous life – do we love these things less because the germ of man is to be found in the formless protoplasm of the deep seas, or in the hideous sluggishness of the Lower Amoebae?”<sup>103</sup>

When Dorian becomes entangled with the picture, the body of the picture sustains his life while it simultaneously reproduces new life that is not human by feeding off the living corpse that is the picture. This symbiotic relationship is not mimetic in any kind of conventional way:

Often, on returning home from one of those mysterious and prolonged absences that gave rise to such strange conjecture among those who were his friends, or thought they were so, he himself would creep upstairs to the locked room, open the door with the key that never left him now, and stand, with a mirror, in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and ageing face on the canvas, and now at the

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<sup>102</sup> This drawing is by Tore Lindholm and Åbo Akademi, while the image itself can be found in Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan, *What is Life?*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 138

<sup>103</sup> *Oxford Notebooks*, p. 125.

fair and young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamored of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. He would examine with minute care, and sometimes with a monstrous and terrible delight, the hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead, or crawled around the heavy sensual mouth, wondering sometimes which were more horrible, the signs of sin or the signs of age. He would place his white hands beside the coarse bloated hands of the picture and the failing limbs.<sup>104</sup>

The mirror in this passage is not the picture, but a mechanical tool he adds to the scene. When he compares his face to the picture, he uses the mirror as a kind of magnifying glass or microscope to “examine” the difference. It is that very difference that gives him “a sense of pleasure” and a “monstrous and terrible delight.” And once again, the site of the grotesque conflates signs of sin as the corruption of beauty with signs of ageing as evidence of dying. If Dorian is obsessed with looking at the picture, it is not just the gaze of a narcissist; it is a scientific analysis of an inverse and symbiotic relation. The subject and object of knowledge have completely collapsed, as Dorian vivisects his own life on the living canvas. This implosion of boundaries is not only one of self and the other, but of the limits of law, morality, the laboratory and biography.

Dorian eventually loses control when he realizes that he no longer has dominion over the life of the picture. As Dorian admits to Basil, “There is something fatal about a portrait. It has a life of its own.”<sup>105</sup> Alone in his attic, Dorian looks at the picture and realizes:

Now it was to hide something that had a corruption of its own, worse than the corruption of death itself – something that would breed horrors and yet would never die. What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas. They would mar its beauty and eat away its grace. They would defile it, and make it shameful. And yet the thing would still live on. It would always be alive.<sup>106</sup>

At this point the biological status of the picture as a living thing is no longer in question: “It would always be alive.” If Sibyl’s life was a life that no longer chose to live, the life of the picture is one that simply will not die. Moreover, the relationship between Dorian and the picture inverts the idea that he is biologically predestined for criminal acts, and suggests that criminal acts can literally change biology.

Those changes then suggest that the picture has become too generative, as Dorian’s dominion over biological life has been usurped by the power of the picture itself to reproduce.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>105</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 132.

<sup>106</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 134.

<sup>107</sup> The horror of excess and a “thing’s” ability to breed is the exact language we find in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The doctor’s creation is usually referred to as a thing and not a being, until he asks that Frankenstein create a female companion for him. At first Frankenstein agrees, until he imagines: “Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror...I thought with a sensation of madness

The relationship between Dorian and the picture is no longer only symbiotic, but parasitic: “What the worm was to the corpse, his sins would be to the painted image on the canvas.” Both parasites and sins are imagined as having the capacity to destroy, while at the same time they have the capacity to regenerate. Much like the case of the condemned woman eating worms in Bernard’s text, this implosion of the boundaries between life and death, self and other, human and non-human are that to which the parasite gives rise. In the words of Hugh Raffles: “The parasite takes us closer to the making of difference, not simply to the patrolling of borders, but to the situated emergence of the human that takes place in conjunction with the making of the animal ... ‘the non-man produced within the man,’ the parasite, the corrosive trace of the animal inside.”<sup>108</sup>

If the parasite always leaves a “corrosive trace of the animal inside,” this is perhaps the Jew, that “monster” Dorian Gray fancied from the beginning. Raffles goes on to argue that, “More destructive – and more insinuating – was the association of the Jew with the shadowy figure of the parasite, a figure that infests the individual body, the population, and, of course the body politic”.<sup>109</sup> He suggests that the parasite appears as “an expression of contempt for the persons who fawn on the rich and for people who profit from labor at the expense of those who sweat.”<sup>110</sup> This is precisely the depiction of the Jew (not unlike Nordau’s description of the degenerate) that Wilde’s text produces, as the Jew “fawns on the rich” by enticing Dorian into the theater and is figured almost as a kind of pimp for Sibyl Vane, determined to personally introduce her to Dorian: “He [the Jew] seemed determined to take me behind, so I consented.”<sup>111</sup> If the parasites have “defiled” both Dorian and the painting, is not only because the Jew (transformed into a non-human other) has invaded Dorian’s body, but because Dorian is faced with the fact that he is too much like the Jew. Judith Halberstam argues:

The Jew’s monstrosity is precisely a function of the same characteristics that mark Dorian as monstrous. The Jew is a parasite upon art, according to the text; he makes his living from theater, he has pecuniary interests in whether Dorian might be a theater critic, and he sells theater for profit. Art for anything but art’s sake, art as functional, is punishable in this text.<sup>112</sup>

As an aristocrat, Dorian too profits “from labor at the expense of those who sweat,” at the same time that the picture’s role is far from art for art’s sake. The picture becomes the locus for the contamination of the boundaries between self/other, Jew/homosexual, female/male, human/nonhuman, organic/inanimate and the living body/corpse. For Dorian, it is that contamination that he imagines as a scene of pleasure and delight, defilement and shame.

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on my promise of creating another like to him, and, trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged.” See Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1996, pp. 114-115.

<sup>108</sup> Hugh Raffles, “J is for Jews,” from an unpublished manuscript of *The Illustrated Insectopedia*, forthcoming from Random House, March 2010, p. 6. For more on the philosophical stakes of the parasite for studies of the posthuman, see Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. by Lawrence R. Schehr, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

<sup>109</sup> “J is for Jews,” p.5.

<sup>110</sup> “J is for Jews,” p.6.

<sup>111</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 60.

<sup>112</sup> *Skin Shows*, pp. 83-84.

## Over Dead Bodies

If this switch in dominion over life lies first at the linguistic level, it manifests itself at the narrative level in the chapters that follow, as Dorian's fear moves away from a curiosity about the biological status of the picture to the realization that he has no control over its capacities. This insight transforms into a desperate desire for a dominion over lives that are not his own. The first instance of this is an encounter with Basil, in which the artist demands to see the picture that he painted so many years before. Rather than a horror at the thought of exposure, Dorian feels, "a terrible joy at the thought that someone else was to share his secret."<sup>113</sup> His private vivisection will finally be made properly public. Basil is shocked to discover:

The surface seemed to be quite undisturbed, and as he had left it. It was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror had come. Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosy of sin were slowly eating the thing away. The rotting of a corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful.<sup>114</sup>

The contamination comes "from within," while the phrase "leprosy of sin" collapses the moral into the biological. If the picture is a kind of parasite, sin itself becomes a kind of rapidly reproducing bacteria.<sup>115</sup> The fact that Basil imagines that bacteria is what "eats away" the picture, is telling because bacteria have a mimetic relation to the cells of other living things, just as art is said to have a mimetic relation to life. This kind of *mise en abyme* of mimesis is precisely what Basil fears in the opening pages when he refuses to exhibit the picture at a gallery: "My heart will never be put under their microscope."<sup>116</sup> If initially the idea that the gaze of viewers in the gallery is a detailed and destructive gaze of a scientist is only metaphorical for Basil, in this scene it becomes literal. Clearly the picture is not a reflection, but a biological entity that is alive and replicates itself.<sup>117</sup>

The productive and destructive qualities of the bacteria seem to bring about the first signs of fear: "The mad passions of a hunted animal stirred within him."<sup>118</sup> This sense of becoming prey is imagined as being produced by the picture itself: "Dorian Gray glanced at the picture, and

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<sup>113</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 173.

<sup>114</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 178.

<sup>115</sup> The Norwegian physician Gerhard H. Armauer Hansen first observed *M. leprae* bacteria in tissue specimens from leprosy patients in 1873. The following year, he proposed that the bacteria caused leprosy.

*M. leprae* infection occurs primarily in human beings, but the bacteria also have been found in armadillos, chimpanzees, and mangabey monkeys. Researchers still do not know exactly how the bacteria are transmitted, but most evidence suggests that people become infected by inhaling it. However, some cases have reportedly resulted from skin-to-skin contact.

<sup>116</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 12.

<sup>117</sup> It was no wonder then that bacteria occupied a strange status that was further complicated within the vivisection debate, in which it was suggested that, "It would not surprise one if they [anti-vivisectionists] some day object to the destruction of bacteria as cruelty to animals." Quoted in the 1899 *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 33: pp. 375-376.

<sup>118</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 179.

suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by the image on the canvas, whispered into his ear by the grinning lips.”<sup>119</sup> Dorian’s fear turns to a hatred for Basil, who is imagined as the hunter. The picture is anthropomorphized, having the ability to speak and influence Dorian, “to whisper into his ear” with “grinning lips.” It is precisely because Dorian has failed to maintain dominion over the biology of the picture – which is both himself and not himself – that he experiences this “whisper” as the sign of his loss of agency. This perception results in a scene of graphic violence: “Dorian rushed at him [Basil], and dug the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man’s head down on the table, and stabbing again and again.”<sup>120</sup> Dorian manages to murder Basil with the precision of a surgeon, as if the death of the creator will be the death of the portrait’s dominion over Dorian’s life, circumventing the fact that Dorian’s own desire is part of its ontology.

Dorian finally turns away from the picture and back to the corpse:

The thing was still seated in the chair, straining over the table with bowed head, and humped back, and long fantastic arms. Had it not been for the red jagged tear in the neck, and the clotted black pool that was slowly widening on the table, one would have said that the man was simply asleep.<sup>121</sup>

The corpse of Basil is now a kind of specimen – “the thing” – that simply waits to be dissected on the table. And like the anesthetized animals in Bernard’s lab, “the man was simply asleep.” The fact that Dorian expresses no remorse might take its cue from Bernard himself: “A physiologist is not a man of fashion, he is a man of science, absorbed by the scientific idea which he pursues: he no longer hears the cry of animals, he no longer sees the blood that flows, he sees only his idea and perceives only organisms concealing problems which he intends to solve.”<sup>122</sup> Although Dorian is clearly “absorbed by the scientific idea which he pursues,” this does not lead to a vivisection, because Basil is dead. Then there is no autopsy, and only a refusal of the corpse as the space of knowledge.

Dorian is not interested in dissecting the corpse; he wants it to disappear. He appeals to Alan Campbell, a friend from his past and a man of science, for this very task:

You are the one man who is able to save me. I am forced to bring you into the matter. I have no option. Alan, you are scientific. You know about chemistry, and things of that kind. You have made experiments. What you have got to do is to destroy the thing that is upstairs – to destroy it so that not a vestige of it will be left.<sup>123</sup>

If there was a “scientific reason” that gave birth to the biological catastrophe of the picture, Dorian looks to science once again as a kind of salvation. This redemption will certainly not be found in the corpse, because he wants no sign of it left, for if discovered, it could put Dorian in

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<sup>119</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 179.

<sup>120</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 179.

<sup>121</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 180.

<sup>122</sup> *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, p. 103.

<sup>123</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 190.

prison. The corpse is not imagined as a sign of a moral failure or a scientific curiosity, but a juridical problem from which to be absolved.

In order to convince Alan to destroy the body, Dorian appeals to him with an argument against the hypocrisy of the ethics of scientific experimentation:

All I ask of you is to perform a certain scientific experiment. You go to the hospitals and dead-houses, and the horrors that you do there don't affect you. If in some hideous dissecting-room or fetid laboratory you found this man lying on a leaden table with red gutters scooped out in it for the blood to flow through, you would simply look upon him as an admirable subject. You would not turn a hair. You would not believe that you were doing anything wrong. On the contrary, you would probably feel that you were benefiting the human race, or increasing the sum of knowledge in the world, or gratifying intellectual curiosity, or something of that kind. What I want you to do is merely what you have often done before. Indeed, to destroy a body must be far less horrible than what you are accustomed to work at.<sup>124</sup>

Dorian suggests that dissecting a dead body is far worse than chemically altering it: His argument is intended to reveal the hypocrisies of scientific justification, articulated under the sign of “benefiting the human race, or increasing the sum of knowledge in the world, or gratifying intellectual curiosity,” that nevertheless participate in violence, with the dissection of corpses being the most horrible.

Yet it is not Dorian's indictment of the hypocrisy of the scientist that prompts Alan to agree to perform his request, but the contents of a mysterious note:

The same look of pity came into Dorian Gray's eyes. Then he stretched out his hand, took a piece of paper, and wrote something on it. He read it over twice, folded it carefully, and pushed it across the table. Having done this, he got up, and went over to the window. Campbell looked at him in surprise, and then took up the paper and opened it. As he read it, his face became ghastly pale, and he fell back in his chair. A horrible sickness came over him. He felt as if his heart was beating itself to death in some empty hollow.<sup>125</sup>

Clearly this note is a form of blackmail. The text hints that there is a secret that exists between these two men, but we are never given its precise content, here or elsewhere. The blackmail note is presented as the form of a secret with no content: “Whether or not a quarrel had taken place between them no one ever knew.”<sup>126</sup> We are only told that after the demise of their friendship, Alan “seemed to become more and more interested in biology, and his name appeared once or twice in some of the scientific reviews, in connection with certain curious scientific experiments.”<sup>127</sup> If Alan turned to biology at the moment he turned away from Dorian, that move is precisely what makes him of interest to Dorian once again.

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<sup>124</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 192.

<sup>125</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 193.

<sup>126</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 188.

<sup>127</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 188.

After Alan completes his work, Dorian notices, “There was a horrible smell of nitric acid in the room. But the thing that had been sitting at the table was gone.”<sup>128</sup> The text could leave the content of this process as empty as the blackmail note, but it moves into an entirely empirical discourse. Alan gives the following list of requirements that reads like a chemist’s lab sheet:

**Total Estimated Time:** 5 hours

**Materials:**

unspecified chemicals  
long coil of steel and platinum wire  
gas-fire with asbestos  
two iron clamps<sup>129</sup>

Working backwards, it is fairly easy to reconstruct what happened in the attic. We know in the end that Dorian’s “fetid laboratory” smells like nitric acid, a toxic liquid that is corrosive and can cause severe burns. According to the laws of chemistry, if the heat from the fire was conducted along “the coil of steel and platinum wire” and attached to the corpse with the “two rather curiously-shaped iron clamps,” the reaction with the nitric acid could in fact be strong enough to destroy a body. This fact places us firmly in an empirical and not a fantastical frame, as this scene does not follow the rules of science fiction, but recalls Zola’s “Experimental Novel.” As I said before, if Zola’s argument functions on the level of metaphor – Wilde applies this experimental method to the novel, performing the experimental method within the experimental novel.

Yet this is hardly the text’s final experiment. Because Alan Campbell kills himself shortly after helping Dorian, the murder of Basil remains unknown to the public. Dorian continues to frequent gentlemen’s clubs and the parties of the leisure class, until one evening the same passion to travel to the East End that gripped him in the beginning returns in the final chapters. Dorian’s return is prompted by “a mad craving for opium” in hopes that it will provide a cure that was left unsatisfied by the chemist:

‘To cure the soul by means of the senses and sense by means of the soul!’ How the words ran in his ears! His soul, certainly, was sick to death. Was it true that the senses could cure it? Innocent blood had been spilt. What could atone for that? Ah! For that there was no atonement; but though forgiveness was impossible, forgetfulness was possible still, and he was determined to forget, to stamp the thing out, to crush it as one would crush the adder that had stung one.<sup>130</sup>

If the physical reality of the dead body has disappeared, the psychological memory has not. The desire “to crush” the memory of “the thing” repeats the exact language of the murder itself, and that repetition at the level of syntax suggests that Dorian is haunted by an inability to forget both the violence and the body as evidence. He wants to kill the memory, “to stamp the thing out, to crush it as one would crush the adder that had stung one.” If what he wants to forget is “the mad

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<sup>128</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 197.

<sup>129</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 195.

<sup>130</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 210.

passions of a hunted animal” that had “stirred within him” and caused him to murder Basil, here he projects those desires onto another animal and imagines he has the ability to crush the only poisonous snake found in Great Britain. Yet because he is both the subject and object of his experiment, he resorts to the same method as Claude Bernard: anesthesia.<sup>131</sup> Perhaps if Dorian cannot crush the snake, he will self-medicate.

Deep inside the opium den, Dorian encounters James Vane, a sailor and the brother of Sibyl Vane, who has sworn revenge upon Dorian for his sister’s death. When James hears Dorian referred to with Sibyl’s pet name “Prince Charming,” he attacks Dorian in the street:

... He felt himself suddenly seized from behind, and before he had time to defend himself he was thrust back against the wall, with a brutal hand round his throat. He struggled madly for life, and by a terrible effort wrenched the tightening fingers away. In a second he heard the click of a revolver, and saw the gleam of a polished barrel pointing straight at his head, and the dusky form of a short thick-set man facing him.<sup>132</sup>

Once again Dorian is “seized from behind,” yet just when we think that this will be his final moment, James spares Dorian’s life:

Dim and wavering as was the wind-blown light, yet served to show him the hideous error, as it seemed, into which he had fallen, for the face of the man he had sought to kill had all the bloom of boyhood, all the unstrained purity of youth. He seemed little more than a lad of twenty summers, hardly older, if older at all, than his sister had been when they had parted so many years ago. It was obvious that this was not the man who had destroyed her life.<sup>133</sup>

Faced with death, the picture functions to protect Dorian’s life rather than threaten it; he survives because the picture has preserved the youth of his face by stopping the mechanism of time that would render age visible.

Yet Dorian’s fear of impending death continues to haunt him, as James Vane refuses to believe what he has seen. Several nights later, Dorian notices, “pressed against the window of the conservatory, like a white handkerchief, he had seen the face of James Vane.”<sup>134</sup> This persistent tracking of Dorian could be attributed to a passionate desire for retribution for his sister’s death, or perhaps a thinly veiled erotics of “the rough trade,” unmistakable in the figure of the working class sailor, who takes him from “behind” and “thrust[s]” him against the wall.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Wilde had a knowledge of the workings of anesthesia, which he mentions in his notebooks in direct relation to Bernard’s experiments that collapsed the differences between plants and animals: “Unity of the principle of plants and animals shown by (1) the identification of ‘sarcode’ with vegetable protoplasm or ‘chlorophyll’. (2) Claude Bernard’s experiments that plants can be put under the influence of anaesthetics.” See *Oxford Notebooks*, p. 111.

<sup>132</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 216.

<sup>133</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 217.

<sup>134</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 226.

<sup>135</sup> “Rough trade” often refers to one’s sexual attraction to a partner imagined as dangerous or potentially violent, often represented as working class laborers with bodies produced by the physical demands of their work. James Vane is earlier described as, “thick-set of figure, and his hands and feet were large, and somewhat clumsy in movement. He was not so finely bred as his sister.” See *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 70.



Both of these are implicated in the text, yet James' hatred of Dorian is specifically described as a kind of instinct: "He [Dorian] was a gentleman, and he hated him for that, hated him through some curious race-instinct for which he could not account, and which that reason was all the more dominant within him."<sup>136</sup> The sexual implications of this scene are then enveloped by an evolutionary imaginary transformed into the discourse of social Darwinism and class difference, as James is imagined as acting out of instinct rather than premeditation.

The sight of James' face lingers in Dorian's mind until the next morning, when he convinces himself that the image in the window "had been merely fancy."<sup>137</sup> He feels relieved and drives across the park to join a shooting party with his friend, Geoffrey Clouston. The movement of an animal startles Dorian:

Suddenly from a lumpy tussock of old grass, some twenty yards in front of them, with black-tipped ears erect, and long hinder limbs throwing it forward, started a hare. It bolted for a thicket of alders. Sir Geoffrey put his gun to his shoulder, but there was something in the animal's grace of movement that strangely charmed Dorian Gray, and he cried out at once: 'Don't shoot it, Geoffrey. Let it live.'<sup>138</sup>

If the hare was often one of Claude Bernard's objects of choice for his "aggressive science," here Dorian inverts that impetus and sympathizes with the animal.

Dorian-the-physiologist suddenly seeks to protect a life that is not his own, as if his connection with the animal lies in a shared acknowledgement of the precariousness of life in the thicket and in the social world of humans. Yet Geoffrey refuses to spare the life of the hare: " 'What nonsense, Dorian!' laughed his companion, and as the hare bounded into the thicket he fired. There were two cries heard, the cry of a hare in pain, which is dreadful, the cry of a man in agony, which is worse."<sup>139</sup> The structure of that sentence repeats the classic hierarchy of the species, as the "the cry of a man in agony" is always "worse" than the sound of the suffering of an animal, while simultaneously suggesting that hunting animals is exactly the same as hunting humans because both are killed with the same shot. Dorian then anticipates his own death in the death of the man in the thicket: "The dreadful death of the unlucky beater, shot in the thicket like a wild animal, had seemed to him to prefigure death for himself also."<sup>140</sup> Through the analogy between hare and beater – the "unlucky beater" who has been "shot in the thicket *like* a wild animal" – Dorian's concern for his own life perhaps stems from the realization that both species are vulnerable to the hunt.

Yet Claude Bernard made a very different analogy between vivisection and hunting:

... We might say that an experimenter, in this instance, is like a hunter who instead of waiting quietly for game, tries to make it rise, by beating up the locality where he assumes he is. We use this method whenever we have no preconceived idea in respect to

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<sup>136</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 75.

<sup>137</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 228.

<sup>138</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 229-230.

<sup>139</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 229-230.

<sup>140</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 235.

a subject as to which previous observations are lacking. So we experiment to bring to birth observations which we in turn may bring to birth ideas.<sup>141</sup>

Bernard's analogy is between the experimenter and the hunter, in which the hunter is also the beater: "instead of quietly waiting for game, tries to make it rise, by beating up the locality." There is no sense of any kind of shared vulnerability between experimenter and specimen, man or animal. The experimenter-as-hunter is only a catalyst, a method when "previous observations are lacking," who simultaneously has the power to both kill and "bring to birth." Bernard's notion of the experimenter reserves all dominion over life and death for himself.

Yet Dorian, still reeling from his observation of the hunt, rushes to the stables to view the corpse of the beater. When the body is uncovered, it is not in fact a beater but James Vane: "A cry of joy broke from his lips. The man who had been shot in the thicket was James Vane. He stood there for some minutes looking at the dead body. As he rode home, his eyes were full of tears, for he knew he was safe."<sup>142</sup> Once again we are reminded that the difference between the hare and the human collapses, for hunting Dorian was precisely what James was doing in the thicket. Yet this knowledge does not produce a "cry of pain," but "a cry of joy," as Dorian's discovery of the corpse marks the certitude of his life rather than a sign of its precariousness. The corpse of both the animal and the man do not finally produce a sense of shared vulnerability, but safety and the preservation of life.

Barely escaping the hunt alive, Dorian decides to spare more life to further protect his own. If Sibyl Vane was the first specimen to alter the picture, he looks again to a woman for his final experiment. He tells Lord Henry:

It is not a story I could tell to anyone else. I spared somebody. It sounds vain, but you understand what I mean. She was quite beautiful, and wonderfully like Sibyl Vane. I think it was that that first attracted me to her. You remember Sibyl, don't you? How long ago that seems! Well, Hetty was not one of our own class of course. She was simply a girl in a village. But I really loved her. I am quite sure that I loved her. All during this wonderful May that we have been having, I used to run down and see her two or three times a week. Yesterday she met me in a little orchard. The apple-blossoms kept tumbling down on her hair, and she was laughing. We were to have gone away together this morning at dawn. Suddenly I was determined to leave her as flower-like as I had found her.<sup>143</sup>

Clearly the biological etiology of the picture is book-ended by working class women who match the same "flower-like" description, in which "flower-like" speaks to a fascination with both botany and virginity. Dorian's logic seems to reason that if the picture came into the world through an immaculate conception, an immaculate conception will surely end its life, as he is "determined to leave her as flower-like as he had found her." Unfortunately for Dorian, it is a flawed logic; when he decides to "spare" Hetty, it has no reverse effect on the picture:

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<sup>141</sup> *The Experimental Method*, p. 157.

<sup>142</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 237.

<sup>143</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 239.

The thing was still loathsome – more loathsome, if possible, than before – and the scarlet dew that spotted the hand seemed brighter, and more like blood newly spilt ... it seemed to have crept like a horrible disease over the wrinkled fingers. There was blood on the painted feet, as though the thing had dripped – blood even on the hand that had not held the knife. Confess? Did it mean that he was to confess? To give himself up, and be put to death? He laughed. He felt that the idea was monstrous.<sup>144</sup>

Dorian's chaste impulse has only further contaminated the morbid picture, "like a horrible disease over the wrinkled fingers." Sparing Hetty appears in the picture as if it was another murder: "like blood newly spilt." There is no longer any sense that what is pictured has any mimetic relation to Dorian's life, as the life of the picture has literally exceeded the frame altogether: "There was blood on the painted feet, as though the thing had dripped – blood even on the hand that had not held the knife." If this excess of the picture leads to a refusal to confess – as something both laughable and "monstrous" in itself – it is because the confession, like the sparing of life, will only produce more contamination.

Dorian declares: "A new life! That was what he wanted."<sup>145</sup> In a decision shot through with biopower, he decides that the picture must die so that he can live. He reaches once again for a knife: "It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and, without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace. He seized the thing, and stabbed the picture with it."<sup>146</sup> Stabbing the picture is an act that seeks to literally kill his past. This final cut repeats the language of Dorian's past: the biology of the picture ("this monstrous soul-life"), the murder of Basil ("the thing") and the "hideous[ness]" of the Jew. There is then an ellipsis in the text, as the next line we read tells us only of the sound of a final cry: "There was a cry heard, and a crash. The cry was so horrible in its agony that the frightened servants woke, and crept out of their rooms."<sup>147</sup> This moment announces the death of the subject that is twofold: the subject of the sentence ("There was a cry heard") and by implication the subject of the text (Dorian himself). For what we are left with on the last page of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is in fact a corpse:

When they entered they found, hanging upon the wall, a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who he was.<sup>148</sup>

If Dorian's attic has long functioned as a laboratory, this is not an autopsy scene but the image of a body that died during the experiment. The only specificity of the specimen indexes Dorian's class status, symbolized by the rings on his unrecognizable hands. Although we might think that this moment functions to restore order to the text through an aesthetic realignment – as if the sin,

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<sup>144</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 252.

<sup>145</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 251.

<sup>146</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 253.

<sup>147</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 253.

<sup>148</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 254.

vice and evil attached to the leisure class are finally rendered visible and put in their proper place – we could also say that this is simply the inevitable conclusion to any vivisection. As Bernard said, “the mechanisms of life can be unveiled and proved only by knowledge of the mechanisms of death.”

## Biopolitical Risk

If this study has attempted to move beyond the closet and the questions of identity and performance that such an epistemology demands, it is because we need to understand that alongside the violence of secrecy, concealment and confession, sexuality is a biopolitical problem that raises important questions about life and death. Those questions are tied to the epistemology of the life sciences in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* because the text not only proliferates life, but participates in the widespread death of almost everyone: Sibyl Vane, Basil Hallward, Alan Campbell, James Vane and Dorian himself. That fact leaves us with a troubling concern: In a world that functions according to biopower, how does one survive? And if “the homosexual was now species,” is it doomed to extinction?

There is one survivor in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: Lord Henry, our original vivisectionist. Against the grain of conventional Victorian morality, he does not appear to survive because he is an emblem of virtue, for he revels in a philosophy vitiated of all moral conscience. Let us look at the end of the passage with which we began:

Human life – that appeared to be the one thing worth investigating. Compared to it there was nothing else of any value. It was true that as one watched life in its curious crucible of pain and pleasure, one could not wear over one’s face a mask of glass, nor keep the sulphurous fumes from troubling the brain, and making the imagination turgid with monstrous fancies and misshapen dreams. There were poisons so subtle that to know their properties one had to sicken of them. There were maladies so strange that one had to pass through them if one sought to understand their nature. And yet, what a great reward received! How wonderful the whole world became to one! To note the curious hard logic of passion, and the emotional colored life of the intellect – to observe where they met, and where they separated, at what point they were in unison, and at what point they were in discord – there was delight in that! What matter what the cost was? One could never pay too high a price for sensation.<sup>149</sup>

For Lord Henry, the vivisection of human life has the highest value of all. Yet he never actually experiences anything he so eloquently describes. His passion is not the lived life but the “watched life,” as he makes notes and observes, vivisectioning others and infecting them with a desire for knowledge that sets experiments in motion. Yet Lord Henry’s vivisection always remains at the level of metaphor, as he is the catalyst for the unleashing of desire in the text that lets others desire for him.<sup>150</sup> As a mode of survival, it is certainly not presented as an ethical model or political ideal for living one’s life, because in many ways Lord Henry is already

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<sup>149</sup> *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 64.

<sup>150</sup> See “The Importance of Being Bored.”

symbolically dead. The only life he has is the life of one always-already removed from vulnerability, enveloped in the image of the scientist as disengaged, at a distance and safe from the precariousness of being in the world that fascinates him most.

That said, a useful insight that we can take away from Lord Henry's opening speech is that biological survival in the text depends on one's relation to biopolitical risk: the "curious crucible of pain and pleasure," the "sulphurous fumes," "subtle poisons" and "monstrous fancies and misshapen dreams" that fill the contours of life in a sexual, social, political and all too human world. Yet Dorian's death does not result from a secret narcissistic devotion or a punitive literary response to the violence he has unleashed upon others. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is unquestionably a text that refuses to apologize for one's passions. There is no confession, apology or forgiveness, and never a promise of freedom or liberation from anything. There is a way in which all of the deaths in the text are in some way inevitable – as the inevitable conclusion to a work subjected to biopower – because the particular subjects in the text are simply more subject to them. Certain people die under a rhetorical sign of inevitability, at the very moment that life itself becomes the subject and object of power. So it is finally a question of species, sexuality, and violence - cast in terms of preserving the individual. Saying all of that is of course a risk in itself, as the terms of these debates need no longer be circumscribed only by the politics of the closet and the notion of repressed desire. Perhaps our own theories need to expand and adapt, as Wilde suggested, "In history what we are to look for are not revolutions, but evolutions."<sup>151</sup> Although the problem is that a biopolitical analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* leaves us with a remainder that is not an ideal, a mirror, an ethical model or a queer theory left firmly in tact. Yet I'm unconvinced that a kind of theoretical purity was ever the goal. To engage with the horrors and promises of science, the logics of misogyny and anti-Semitism, the seductions and pleasures of decadence, and this strange notion that "the homosexual was now a species," is to be made vulnerable to a literature that raises complicated questions around bioethics without giving us any comfortable answers.

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<sup>151</sup> *Oxford Notebooks*, p. 154.

## Chapter 2

### Between Beetles and Britain: The Biology of Colonial Mimicry

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A rare beetle recently resurfaced at Wicken Fen - a place where it hasn't been seen for more than fifty years.<sup>152</sup> According to "beetle expert" Tony Drane: "It is fantastic that this rare species has been rediscovered at Wicken Fen. It has probably never been away, but has survived undetected in low numbers."<sup>153</sup> Much like the popular image of the cockroach that can withstand a nuclear war, this beetle is imagined as having survived the natural catastrophes of history. Yet this insect's survival is imagined as imperceptible, as if this kind of discovery is possible everywhere, if only we could see it.

This rare beetle had a brush with celebrity in the past, as it was first made famous in a story recounted by Charles Darwin. In his biography, he details an encounter from his early days as a student at Cambridge:

But no pursuit at Cambridge was followed with nearly so much eagerness or gave me so much pleasure as collecting beetles. It was the mere passion for collecting, for I did not dissect them and rarely compared their external characters with published descriptions, but got them named anyhow. I will give a proof of my zeal: one day, on tearing off some old bark, I saw two rare beetles and seized one in each hand; then I saw a third and new kind, which I could not bear to lose, so that I popped the one which I held in my right hand into my mouth. Alas it ejected some intensely acrid fluid, which burnt my tongue so that I was forced to spit the beetle out, which was lost, as well as the third one.<sup>154</sup>

The power Darwin displays here is nominal, as his rather mysterious methodology and supreme ability to taxonomize the beetles "got them named anyhow." Although Darwin manages to name his discovery, his desire seems to get in the way. In a desperate attempt to hold onto his precious specimen, he imitates an animal in the wild - tearing off bark, clutching beetles with his hands and incorporating them in his mouth - destabilizing the boundary between human and non-human behavior.<sup>155</sup> Yet the "acrid fluid" secreted by the beetle is itself a form of mimicry that imitates the taste of a poisonous creature. So Darwin-the-predator is left empty handed when his prey burns the very tongue that would name it.

Although this anecdote suggests that Darwin could demonstrate something important about the relationship between bugs and Britain, it turns out that his taxonomy is not very useful,

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<sup>152</sup> Located in the center of England between Birmingham and Norwich, Wicken Fen is one of the most important nature reserves in Europe and the most species-rich site known in Britain.

<sup>153</sup> Paul Eccleston, "Rare Crucifix Beetle Resurfaces in Wicken Fen," *Telegraph.co.uk*, May 16, 2008.

<sup>154</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin, 1809-1882*, New York, 1969, p. 62.

<sup>155</sup> Cannon Schmitt reads this passage in Darwin's autobiography and drew my attention to the relationship between desire and scientific objectivity. See "Victorian Beetlemania," in *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007.

yet his “zeal for beetles” remains provocative. For Darwin was not the only Victorian to express such a fascination, as insects became attractive subjects precisely because of their apparent distance from humanity, becoming powerful ideological tools as the authority of science grew. “Endowed with an utterly alien morphology, insects highlighted the inherent tensions between animality and humanity.”<sup>156</sup> This fascination with entomology pushed beyond the borders of science and into the practice of private collecting. When the wealthy English patron of naturalists Dru Drury died in 1804, his impressive collection of insects sold for an enormous sum, with the most money dedicated to the purchase of a giant scarab beetle found by a surgeon in Africa. The ornithologist John Audubon announced that, “The world is all agog...for *Bugs* the size of *Water Melons*.”<sup>157</sup>

This image of a giant African scarab reappears at the end of the century in Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle*: a gothic tale about a threatening creature that arrives in London from Egypt with the ability to transform into a man, a woman and a sacred beetle.<sup>158</sup> Although *The Beetle* sold more copies than *Dracula* when it was published, critical work on the novel is almost as rare as the beetle seen at Wicken Fen. The work that does exist routes the novel through a rather predictable set of problematic Victorian issues: anxiety surrounding the figure of the New Woman, British masculinity, gender inversion, class mobility, and colonial and sexual conquest. Yet all of the debates about the novel share a collective concern about the ontological status of the creature. Due to its remarkable ability to shape-change across genders and species, it gives rise to an equally remarkable list of possible names for it in the criticism: “the liminal man-woman-goddess-beetle-Thing,” “the beetle-creature,” “beetle-as-signifier,” “the Beetle-Woman,” “The Woman of Songs,” “the Beetle,” “the avatar,” and “the foul-smelling creature.”<sup>159</sup> I would argue that this exhaustive list produces a catachresis. It is as if both the book and the creature represented within it are imagined as figures that function improperly, in that they use proper names to describe that which does not properly belong to them. As a result, this particular body of criticism can be said to mime the language of the text itself. Although each critic produces their own taxonomy, when read together, the differences in each ontological decision has the effect of reproducing the very ontological uncertainty within the novel itself.

I think what these efforts suggest is an obsession with identity that manifests itself as a kind of compulsive taxonomy. What is striking to me is this obsession with identity fails to identify the creature’s signature behavior: biological mimicry. This oversight is especially compelling given the privileged status of the concept of mimicry in literary and post-colonial

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<sup>156</sup> J.F.M. Clark, *Bugs and the Victorians*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009, p. 7.

<sup>157</sup> *Bugs and the Victorians*, p. 8, original italics.

<sup>158</sup> Many nineteenth century novels are littered with coleoptera references - from the beetle collecting of the Reverend Farebrother in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* to the defining question of Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* as to whether Jim should be seen as a butterfly or a beetle. Even Oscar Wilde name-drops the insect in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when Lady Narborough pretends to listen to the Duke’s description of a Brazilian beetle he has added to his collection. For a contemporary representation of the Victorian fascination with entomology, see A.S. Byatt, *Angels and Insects*, London: Random House, 1992.

<sup>159</sup> See Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; Roger Luckhurst, “Trans-Gothic, 1882-97,” in *Victorian Gothic: Literary and Cultural Manifestations in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys, New York: Palgrave, 2000; Victoria Margree, “‘Both in Men’s Clothing’: Gender, Sovereignty and Insecurity in Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle*,” *Critical Survey*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2007, pp. 63-64.

theory. For a British novel with its sights on Egypt that presents us with a narrative about racial passing, hybrid bodies and the fissure between being and appearing, one would think that mimicry would be the most obvious frame from which to begin a discussion. However, most theories about mimicry in literary criticism don't provide a vocabulary to talk about biology, even when the texts in question produce that very language. I insist that we consider the biology of mimicry in colonial discourse because it alerts us to an underscoring form of racism that deploys biological notions of difference as a justification for war. I will argue that what we can see in *The Beetle* is a colonial discourse that delineates particular humans as insects at the same time that it anthropomorphizes those very beings into hyperbolic colonial others. That is the logic of biological racism; it simultaneously dehumanizes and anthropomorphizes to produce a species that is both like and unlike the human. It is clear to me that the only ontological certainty of the creature in the novel is its radical racial difference in relation to a British subjectivity that is always imagined as white.

The stakes of this argument invoke a history that reaches far beyond the British Empire. In thinking of that, Julian Wolfreys warns against a too hasty reading that the creature in the novel is just a bug: "Recalling Nazi definitions of Jews as 'vermin' should act as more than enough of a *caveat* against the too hasty reading."<sup>160</sup> His point is quite clear if we consider the gas chambers in which Jews were literally "exterminated" with the same chemicals as insecticide.<sup>161</sup> Yet Wolfreys also argues against completely humanizing the creature because it performs a kind of anthropomorphism that functions to make "the creature appear even more monstrous" in the most debased form.<sup>162</sup> Although Wolfreys is quite right to refuse to read the creature as entirely insect or completely human, in the process he prohibits thinking about the anxiety around biological mimicry that mobilizes the racism in the novel in order to bind the bug to the human. In order to chart this movement, I will trace the etiology of mimicry through a path in reverse. Beginning with Homi Bhaba's seminal essay "Of Mimicry and Man" I will trace its development through Jacques Lacan and Roger Caillois, until I reach Henry Walter Bates: the naturalist who discovered biological mimicry in the forests of the Amazon in the 1850's.

While on this path, I will elucidate the fact that Victorian naturalists rushed to find new specimens (often in foreign lands) at a moment that coincided with the height of British colonization. Foucault claims in his lectures at The Collège de France that it was only during this moment that the justification of colonial wars and the killing they necessitated was imagined for the first time as a biological problem:

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<sup>160</sup> See Julian Wolfreys' introduction to Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*, Toronto: Broadview Edition, 2004, p. 34, original italics.

<sup>161</sup> The Nazis poured crystals from the cans of Zyklon B – a hydrogen cyanide insecticide developed for delousing buildings and clothes – through the ceiling hatches of the shower rooms filled with prisoners. See Hugh Raffles, "J is for Jews" from an unpublished chapter of his forthcoming *Insectopedia*.

<sup>162</sup> There are many examples of this form of anthropomorphism in relation to colonialism. See Deborah Deenholz Morse, " 'The Mark of the Beast': Animals as Sites of Imperial Encounter from *Wiuthering Heights* to *Green Mansion*," and Mary Elizabeth Leighton and Lisa Surrige, "The Empire Bites Back: The Racialized Crocodile of the Nineteenth Century," in *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*.



We can understand, first of all, the link that was quickly – I almost said immediately – established between nineteenth-century biological theory and the discourse of power. Basically, evolutionism, understood in the broad sense – or in other words, not so much Darwin’s theory itself as a set, a bundle of notions (such as: the hierarchy of species that grow from a common evolutionary tree, the struggle for existence among species, the selection that eliminates the less fit) – naturally became within a few years during the nineteenth century not simply a way of transcribing a political discourse into biological terms, and not simply a way of dressing up a political discourse in scientific clothing, but a real way of thinking about the relations between colonization, the necessity for wars, criminality, the phenomenon of madness and mental illness, the history of societies with their different classes, and so on.<sup>163</sup>

What is also crucial to understand in Foucault’s description is that this process is not one of mapping biology on top of politics, or fashioning (“dressing up”) politics as science, but an instance of the total collapse of one into the other to the extent that they become indistinguishable. So it was not so much evolution as Darwin described it, but “a bundle of notions” that fueled this “real way of thinking” about relationships, one of which I will argue is mimicry.

Foucault then argues that this total collapse between science and politics takes the form of what he calls biological racism:

From this point onward, war is about two things: it is not simply a matter of destroying a political adversary, but of destroying the enemy race, of destroying that [sort] of biological threat that those people over there represent to our race. In one sense, this is of course no more than a biological extrapolation from the theme of the political enemy. But there is more to it than that. In the nineteenth century – and this is completely new – war will be seen not only as a way of improving one’s own race by eliminating the enemy race (in accordance with the themes of natural selection and the struggle for existence), but also as a way of regenerating one’s own race. As more and more of our numbers die, the race to which we belong will become all the purer.<sup>164</sup>

It is here that it becomes clear that biology is racialized and race is biologized – as a central justification of colonial war. The political enemy can now be killed precisely because it marks a difference within the species. This new enemy is formulated discursively as a threat not only to one’s political or economic power, but to the purity of one’s race and its ability to regenerate itself and the future of the nation.

If that is what biological racism means, I do not think the colonial war in Egypt is a peripheral concern of the novel, nor is the creature an individual body divorced from the Egyptian population that Britain had marked out as the enemy. That is the fundamental reason the creature can never really pass in society as anything other than “an Arab” once it arrives on British soil. Although the creature can violate certain categories of identity (gender and

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<sup>163</sup>Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, ed. by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana and trans. by David Macey, New York: Picador, 2003, pp. 256-257.

<sup>164</sup>“*Society Must Be Defended*,” p. 257.

sexuality) by mimicking them, it can never change color. Its racial identity remains exposed, as if that is the origin of something like “its true nature.” As a result, the text produces a discourse of biological difference – between colonized bugs and proper British subjects - that is racialized in order to justify killing an enemy that no longer looks like the same species. In the end, the threat of this insect-other in the novel is not only its mythological resilience, but its profound danger to the regeneration of a proper British, bourgeois normative heterosexuality, always marked as white.

## A Genealogy of Mimicry

Thinking about mimicry is nothing new in the history of Western philosophy and literary theory. The term is derived from the Greek word *mimesis*, often considered indistinguishable from mimicry, as both terms are generally used to denote the imitation or representation of nature, especially in aesthetics. The word itself refers to the physical act of miming or mimicking something, while the definitions of the verb hinge on multiple forms of imitation: 1) to imitate speech, expression or gesture, to ape 2) to imitate in order to ridicule 3) to imitate an appearance in order to deceive. What these definitions reveal concerns both strategy and effect, as subject and object of those effects are put into question. As Cary Wolfe has asked, “Who or what is miming, and who or what is mimed? Who is ‘like’ and who is ‘same?’”<sup>165</sup>

A fascination with the relation between appearing and being is obvious in the nineteenth century. Not only was this fascination cast in terms of animals and nature, but in the widespread interest in the ability to influence the human mind to mimic a desired behavior. Forms of psychological influence, such as hypnotism and mesmerism, suggested to leading social theorists of the period that imitation was a foundational human behavior. This may in part be why critics reading *The Beetle* fail to mention mimicry and instead highlight the ability of the creature to mesmerize others.<sup>166</sup> According to Roger Lockhurst, “This text is a trance text through and through.”<sup>167</sup> Although the mesmeric qualities of the creature in the novel are explicit, evidenced by its ability to bend others to its will, I think these qualities function more as a mark of racial difference than a sign of its power. There is a way in which the discourse of mesmerism works alongside the discourse of mimicry as a kind of linguistic support system.

If mimicry has a more privileged position in the novel, I am not the first to point out its primacy in the context of colonialism in the nineteenth century. Homi Bhabha argues that colonial discourse demands that the colonized subject mimic the markers of proper Englishness – things like clothing, hygiene, language acquisition and the dogma of Christian morality. He points out that this strategy is a form of regulatory and disciplinary speech designed to make the Other resemble the self, yet that kind of coercive power demands that the resulting similarity must also express its difference. He writes:

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<sup>165</sup> Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 180.

<sup>166</sup> Alison Winter has traced the history of mesmerism and showed the ways in which the boundaries between science, spectacle, seeing, believing, self and other remained ambivalent in the nineteenth century. See *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

<sup>167</sup> “Trans-Gothic, 1882-97,” p. 159.

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of difference that is itself a disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance, which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers.<sup>168</sup>

If the Other is, “a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite,” this colonial subject is cast as a poor imitation of the European original. Perhaps that is why Bhabha later writes: “To be anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English.”<sup>169</sup>

Colonial discourse imagines itself as having the right to demand resemblance only in order to “visualize” its own authority through difference. Yet despite this visual display made into the image of the colonizer, Bhabha argues that, “Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask.”<sup>170</sup> For him there is no essential identity of the Other that the colonizer covers over in its own image, for there is only what Bhabha calls a, “*partial presence*, which is the basis of mimicry, [that] articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority.”<sup>171</sup> Here there appears to be at least two forms of difference: the one that colonial power demands - “the difference that is the same, but not quite” - and the difference mirrored back that functions as menace: “the cultural, racial and historical difference.” This “partial presence” performs a double function that works to both secure colonial authority and threaten it at the same time. That double function accounts for its endless repetition, as the sign of both power and its failure.

Bhabha’s insight is a generative way in which to think about the ambivalent demands that constitute colonial discourse, but what is missing from his description of mimicry is the biologizing of difference that mobilizes the term itself. Although Bhabha seems to think of mimicry divorced from its biological connotations, the texts he deploys in his essay as discursive evidence of colonial strategy are saturated with biological racism. In one of the opening block quotations of the essay, Sir Edward Cust refers to the colonial subject as “the creature so endowed,” while Edward Long is quoted as saying, “Ludicrous as the opinion may seem, I do not think that an orangutan husband would be any dishonor to a Hottentot female.”<sup>172</sup> Bhabha himself later mentions the stereotype of the “Simian Black,” without unpacking the notion of degeneration at work in its formulation.<sup>173</sup> For a critic so deeply invested in exploring the

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<sup>168</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” *The Location of Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 86, original italics.

<sup>169</sup> “Of Mimicry and Man,” p. 87, original italics.

<sup>170</sup> “Of Mimicry and Man,” p. 88, original italics.

<sup>171</sup> “Of Mimicry and Man,” p. 88, original italics.

<sup>172</sup> “Of Mimicry and Man,” p. 85 and p. 91, respectively.

<sup>173</sup> “Of Mimicry and Man,” p. 90.

psychic imaginary, he seems to annex the aspect of that imaginary capacity that draws its material from biological thinking.

Bhabha's disavowal of the biological thinking in full view in front of him is not only obvious in his source material, but emerges as a primary structure in the theoretical genealogy that mobilizes his entire argument. He takes his cue on the first page of his essay from Jacques Lacan's theory of the mimetic foundations of identity outlined in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Lacan traces the ontological structure of the world as imaginary, characterized by misrecognition and the narcissistic failure of the mirror phase. For him, the structure of the human mind in the imaginary is violent; for Bhabha, the violent imaginary described by Lacan is colonial. Yet Bhabha turns a blind eye to the biological thinking and evolutionary discourse that structures Lacan's discussion, specifically in relation to mimicry. Let us look at the way Lacan begins his analysis in "The Line and Light:"

The function of the eye may lead someone who is trying to enlighten you to distant explorations. When, for example, did the function of the organ, and, to begin with, its very presence, appear in the evolution of living beings? The relation of the subject with the organ is at the heart of our experience. Among all the organs in which we deal, the breast, the faeces, etc., there is the eye, and it is striking to see that it goes back as far as the species that represent the appearance of life.<sup>174</sup>

Not only does Lacan reproduce the colonial discourse of enlightenment and "distant exploration," he explicitly ties the problem of the eye to the question of evolution, species and "the appearance of life." And in this realm of the visible, he looks to nature and the world of invertebrates as his primary example of how "everything is a trap."<sup>175</sup> He writes:

Let us take an example chosen almost at random – it is not a privileged case – that of the small crustacean known as *caprella*, to which is added the adjective *acanthifera*. When such a crustacean settles in the midst of those animals, scarcely animals, known as bryozoaires, what does it imitate? It imitates what, in the quasi-plant animal known as the bryozoaires, is a stain – at a particular phase of the bryozoaires, an intestinal loop forms a stain, at another phase, there functions something like a colored center. It is this stain shape that the crustacean adapts itself. It becomes a stain, it becomes a picture, it is inscribed in the picture. This, strictly speaking, is the origin of mimicry.<sup>176</sup>

What we can see here in Lacan's origin story is a familiar ontological problem. He offers a disclaimer that this example is "random" and "not a privileged case," but gives it a very specific name anyhow: "*caprella*, to which is added the adjective *acanthifera*."

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<sup>174</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981, p. 91.

<sup>175</sup> *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 93. It is important to note that crustaceans are invertebrates that belong to the arthropod group (animals with an exoskeleton and segmented legs) that includes spiders, centipeeds, millipedes and other insects.

<sup>176</sup> *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 99, original italics.

Yet Lacan's specificity presents us with a series of articulations that appear to announce their own indeterminacy. Before we can wonder what the crustacean imitates, I wonder whether Lacan thinks briozairens are animals or not? And if they are these so-called "quasi-plant animals," what is their relation to their environment? These questions become even further convoluted when he argues that the crustacean is not imitating the briozairens, but "their midst," or what he calls "a stain." The stain then has at least two definitions: "at a particular phase of the briozairens, an intestinal loop forms a stain, at another phase, there functions something like a colored center. It is this stain shape that the crustacean adapts itself." So the first definition of the stain is formed by an "intestinal loop" that is part of the briozairens, while the second definition is simply the color left behind. Yet the crustacean is not imitating the stain – the "intestinal loop" itself or the color that remains, but "adapts itself" to the "stain shape." I think this origin story of mimicry is no longer about imitation, but about a biological adaptation, a kind of becoming-stain of the crustacean. If "when it becomes a stain, it becomes a picture," representation itself is imagined as biological. That is why he moves so quickly at the end of the paragraph from the crustacean in the midst to the subject in the picture: "And, on this basis, the fundamental dimensions of the inscription of the subject in the picture appear infinitely more justified than a more hesitant guess might suggest at first sight."<sup>177</sup>

If this question of biological adaptation is so apparent in Lacan's text, it is even more compelling that Bhabha misses it, especially when he frames his essay with the following quote from Lacan:

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.<sup>178</sup>

Biological mimicry is no longer just a question of representation, but is extended to a tactic of war and survival. Yet it is this technical sameness that Bhabha edits out, when the very phrase in Lacan's quote that could bring our attention to that fact is missing in Bhabha's reproduction of it. For the original quote in Lacan reads: "The effect of mimicry is camouflage, *in the strictly technical sense.*"<sup>179</sup>

This "strictly technical sense" of understanding mimicry comes from a rather strange source: Roger Caillois, a social anthropologist and Surrealist who wrote a short text about the relationship between "mimicry and man." Lacan is quite explicit in this regard: "I have already referred to what Caillois says about this [the origins of mimicry] in his little book *Méduse et compagnie*, with that unquestionable penetration that is sometimes found in a non-specialist."<sup>180</sup> Caillois explores the insect world to try and understand it as a subject of a difference that is almost the same (as the human world), but not quite. He describes a series of examples – including butterflies, bees, ants, beetles, the lantern fly, and the preying mantis – in which instances of mimicry have no adaptive quality in service of biological survival, but function

<sup>177</sup> *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 99.

<sup>178</sup> "Of Mimicry and Man," p. 85.

<sup>179</sup> *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 99, my italics.

<sup>180</sup> *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 99.

more like art. As Lacan points out: “Caillois assures us that the facts of mimicry are similar, at the animal level, to what, in the human being is manifested as art, or painting.”<sup>181</sup> Yet Caillois reveals that he is less interested in art or insects than in reimagining the evolution of the human through the history of our mimetic capacity, symbolized by the mask. He claims that, “It is a fact that all mankind wears or has worn a mask.” And he uses this point to suggest a new theory:

At this point I dare to put forward a new hypothesis: peoples belong to history and civilization the moment they give up the mask, when they reject it as a vehicle of personal or collective panic and strip it of its political function. But even thus debased to a simple accessory at a carnival or a fancy-dress dance, it is still disturbing and fascinating. Its power held in check, on a rein, but it has not gone. At present all I wish to emphasize is that the question of the mask is neither episodic nor localized: it affects the whole species.<sup>182</sup>

Caillois’ hypothesis suggests that to wear a mask marks oneself as belonging to a different time and political order. If only those who “give up” and “reject” the mask can properly “belong” to “history and civilization,” it seems that humans must reject mimicry, symbolized by the mask, in order to evolve. That must be why “the question of the mask” indeed “affects the whole species.”

If Caillois has set up a division – between those who reject the mask and those who do not – are those who continue to wear masks properly human? In order to answer that question, he returns to the relationship between man and insect. He points out that both have “the strange privilege of living in societies,” yet he claims that insects are “automatic” and “repetitive,” while humans have the capacity to invent. Although insects can adapt, humans have “the ability to create tools” outside and beyond their bodies, which leads to “unlimited development.” Yet this ability to progress is predicated on rejecting the mask, the sign of the human’s relation to the insect, as the entry to history and civilization is defined as the ability to create machines and “make weapons.” Otherwise, the human will suffer the fate of the insect: “The unvarying castes of ants and termites, with their queens, soldiers and workers, all with their life’s work dictated to them by their anatomy.”<sup>183</sup> The idea is that insects are limited by their bodies, trapped in a cycle of repetition and a biologically determined occupational hierarchy, while “the individual” human becomes civilized and a part of history at the moment he finds freedom through his own creations. Ultimately for Caillois, the human ability to create war-machines is the definition of freedom.

### **Bates, Bugs and Natives**

If the racial imaginary of Caillois’ text is only implied via the discourse of progress and civilization, it becomes increasingly obvious if we consider his source material. Although

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<sup>181</sup> *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 100.

<sup>182</sup> Roger Caillois, *The Mask of the Medusa*, trans. by George Ordish, New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1964, pp. 106-107.

<sup>183</sup> *The Mask of the Medusa*, p. 125.

Caillois' theory emerged in the 1950's, his scientific evidence was based on the texts of nineteenth century naturalists and dominated by the work of Henry Walter Bates, who is credited with giving the first account of biological mimicry in animals. Bates was an amateur entomologist and naturalist-explorer whose fascination with insects began when collecting beetles in the Charnwood Forest near Leicestershire. In 1848, he decided to extend his pursuit with a journey to the Amazon with his colleague Alfred Wallace. Bates prepared himself for the trip by viewing rare plants and animals in private collections and public museums - including "the insect room" inside the British Museum. The idea was to produce "want lists" so he could send specimens back to London, where an agent could sell them for a commission. Bates returned triumphantly in 1859 with over 14,000 species (mostly of insects), of which 8,000 were new to science.

While sorting almost a hundred species of butterflies into similar groups based on appearance, inconsistencies began to arise. Some appeared superficially similar to others, even so much so that Bates could not tell some species apart based only on wing appearance. He noted that some species showed very striking coloration, and flew in a leisurely manner, almost as if taunting predators to eat them. He reasoned that these butterflies were unpalatable to birds and other insectivores, and were thus avoided by them. He extended this logic to forms that closely resembled such protected species, mimicking their warning coloration, but not their toxicity. This discovery brought Bates wide acclaim, and many of his specimens were eventually displayed in London's Natural History Museum.<sup>184</sup>

Batesian mimicry is the specific discovery that Caillois discusses at length.<sup>185</sup> However, he discusses Bates only to discount his theory by attempting to find exceptions to its rules. Although Bates' discovery has never been scientifically refuted, Caillois has to argue against it because his whole point is that mimicry is not about protection and the survival of the species, but a form of art found in nature. Although Bates fails to give Caillois the scientific evidence he desires, he does take at least one cue from Bates:

The same colour-patterns of the wings generally show, with great regularity, the degrees of blood - relationship with the species. As the laws of nature must be the same for all beings, the conclusions furnished by this group of insects must be applicable to the whole organic world; therefore the study of butterflies - creatures selected as the types of airiness and frivolity - instead of being despised, will some day be valued as one of the most important branches of Biological science.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> See *Life Through a Lens: Photographs from the Natural History Museum 1880-1950*, ed. by Susan Snell and Polly Tucker, London: Natural History Museum, 2003 and John Thackray and Bob Press, *The Natural History Museum: Nature's Treasurehouse*, London: The Natural History Museum, 2001.

<sup>185</sup> For example, he writes: "It is a fact that some butterflies imitate others, which are distasteful to predators, in order to benefit from the latter's immunity to attack. The shape, pattern and color of the wings are mimicked and thus the butterfly comes to resemble its model perfectly. It is usually only the females that do this; they are more important for the survival of the species. This type of mimicry is called 'Batesian.'" See *The Mask of the Medusa*, p. 66.

<sup>186</sup> Henry Walter Bates, *The Naturalist on the River Amazons: A Record of Adventures, Habits of Animals, Sketches of Brazilian and Indian Life, and Aspects of Nature Under the Equator, During Eleven Years of Travel*, London: John Murray, 1873, p. 243.

This idea that “the laws of nature must be the same for all beings” seems to animate Caillois’ philosophy as much as Bates’ popular account of his travels in *The Naturalist on the River Amazons* (1873). His text reads more as a mixture between literature and lurid anthropology than naturalist science. Bates invites this kind of reading when he declares, “...There is no need for poets to invent elves and gnomes, whilst Nature furnishes us with such marvelous little sprites ready to hand.”<sup>187</sup>

On page after page in *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, we can see the traces of lines of thought in Caillois, Lacan and Bhabha. The text is littered with anecdotes that give evidence to the kind of colonial mimicry and discursive ambivalence that they describe. In the opening chapter, Bates identifies a particular unwillingness on the part of the natives to adapt. He writes: “The inflexibility of character of the Indian, and his total inability to accommodate himself to new arrangements, will infallibly lead to his extinction, as immigrants, endowed with more supple organizations, increase, and civilization advances in the Amazon region.”<sup>188</sup> Yet this same doomed Indian population appears in a new light only a few pages later, when Bates describes the following encounter:

A young Mameluco, named Soares, an Escrivaõ, or public clerk, took me to his house to show me his library. I was rather surprised to see a number of well-thumbed Latin classics, Virgil, Terence, Cicero’s *Epistoles*, and Livy. I was not familiar enough, at this early period of my residences in the country with Portuguese to converse freely with Senhor Soares, or ascertain what use he made of these books; it was an unexpected site, a classical library in a mud-plastered and palm-thatched hut on the banks of Tocantins.<sup>189</sup>

Bates is indeed “rather surprised” to discover a Mameluco who is so “well-thumbed” in some of the founding texts of Western civilization. Although curiously it is Soares who understands a language that is not original to Brazil, while Bates admits that he is “not familiar enough” with Portuguese “to converse freely.” Yet is it not immigrants, like Bates and according to Bates, who are supposed to be “endowed with more supple organizations,” who will be the ones to bring “civilization advances in the Amazon region?” Not only does Bates fail to speak Portuguese, a language that is itself the deposit of a colonial conquest, but his inability to converse halts his ability to measure and understand the extent to which Soares has been “civilized” through European texts.

If the extent to which the native Indians have become “civilized” remains an open question, Bates later takes it upon himself to educate them about their own natural environment. He describes the following scene:

To amuse the Tushaúa, I fetched from the canoe the two volumes of Knight’s *Pictorial Museum of Animated Nature*... In a short time others left their work, and then I had a crowd of women and children around me, who all displayed unusual curiosity for Indians. It was no light task to go through the whole of the illustrations, but they would not allow me to miss a page, making me turn back when I tried to skip. The pictures of the elephant, camels, orang-

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<sup>187</sup> *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, p.3.

<sup>188</sup> *The Naturalist on the River Amazon*, p. 39.

<sup>189</sup> *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, p. 65.



otangs, and tigers, seemed most to astonish them; but they were interested in almost everything, down even to the shells and insects.<sup>190</sup>

This sense that the Indians express little curiosity or desire for knowledge is a theme that permeates Bates entire text, yet here they are quite suddenly fascinated, not by the knowledge of nature, but by representation itself. And the way Bates describes this scene makes Knight's volumes sounds like an illustrated children's book, infantilizing the natives, as he takes up the role of a colonial father figure.

Yet he is shocked when his audience has the ability to recognize their own environment in the pages:

They recognized the portraits of the most striking birds and mammals which are found in their own country; the jaguar, howling monkeys, parrots, trogons, and toucans... But they made few remarks, and those in the Mundurucú language, of which I understood only two or three words. Their way of expressing surprise was a clicking sound made with their teeth, similar to the one we ourselves use, or a subdued exclamation, Hm! hm! Before I finished, from fifty to sixty had assembled; there was no pushing or rudeness, the grown-up women letting the young girls and children stand before them, and all behaved in the most quiet and orderly manner possible.<sup>191</sup>

Here Bates civilizing lesson is complete. He shows the Indians the wild animals that populate their environment in order to demonstrate the difference between those creatures and themselves. That is the moment when the Indians speak, producing exclamations that resemble the expressions of the European. This sudden outbreak of language is followed by a series of behaviors that are also aligned with European culture: "no pushing or rudeness" and "the most quiet and orderly manner possible."

Yet once again, it is revealed that the Indians fail to learn this lesson properly. Although they clearly have some ability to mimic the curiosity, language and behavior of the European explorer, this mimetic ability also moves in the opposite direction toward animals. Bates writes: "The Indian idea of a holiday is bonfires, processions, masquerading, especially the mimicry of difference kinds of animals, plenty of confused drumming and fifying, monotonous dancing, kept up hour after hour without intermission."<sup>192</sup> **(Fig. B.1)**

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<sup>190</sup> *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, p. 223.

<sup>191</sup> *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, p. 224.

<sup>192</sup> *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, p. 261.

QuickTime™ and a  
decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

### **Fig. B.1: Masked Dance and Wedding Feast of Tucuna Indians<sup>193</sup>**

Although the Indians have holidays, as do Europeans, their special days include the mimicry of animals, characterized both by costumes and the “monotonous” behavior so indicative of the insect world described by Caillois. Bates continues to describes these holidays in some detail:

Most of the masquers make themselves up as animals – bulls, deer, magoary storks, jaguars, and so forth, with the aid of light frameworks, covered with old cloth dyed or painted and shaped according to the object represented. Some of the imitations which I saw were capital. One ingenious fellow arranged an old piece of canvas in the form of a tapir, and made, before the doors of the principle residents, such a good imitation of the beast gazing, that peals of laughter greeted him wherever he went. Another man walked about solitarily, masked as a jabirú crane (a large animal standing about four feet high), and mimicked the gait and habits of the bird uncommonly well.<sup>194</sup>

Here the mask appears, as both the symbol of mimicry and the sign of a refusal to be civilized. Yet this description is not about the Indians becoming animals, but making themselves into a picture, “covered with old cloth dyed or painted and shaped according to the object represented.” If Bates lesson with the *Pictorial Museum of Animated Nature* was designed to encourage the

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<sup>193</sup> *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, p. 380.

<sup>194</sup> *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, p. 265.

Indians to mimic the European classroom, now the mimetic ability of the Indians has gone completely array, as they mimic not only the animal, but the picture itself.

It is at this point that the Indians become a menace, in Bhabha's sense of the word. Bates writes:

One year an Indian lad imitated me, to the infinite amusement of the townsfolk. He came the previous day to borrow of me an old blouse and straw hat. I felt rather taken in when I saw him, on the night of the performance, rigged out as an entomologist, with an insect net, hunting bag, and pincushion. To make the imitation complete, he had borrowed the frame of an old pair of spectacles and went about with it straddled over his nose.<sup>195</sup>

Clearly this "lad" has made Bates into a joke for "the infinite amusement of the townsfolk," as Bates loses what Bhabha called the "narcissistic demand of colonial authority." Colonial power and scientific authority are revealed as only a costume and a masquerade, condensed in the image of the appropriated spectacles, as a sign of European knowledge and technology.

If Bates comes face to face with his own image as farce, he attempts to manage this menace by imagining that the Indians are just like insects: the creatures that both fascinate and pester him in the jungle. He writes:

The action of the wasp would be said to be instinctive; but it seems plain that the instinct is no mysterious and unintelligible agent, but a mental process in each individual, differing from the same in man only by its unerring certainty. The mind of the insect appears to be so constituted that the impression of external objects, or the want felt, causes it to act with a precision which seems to us like that of a machine constructed to move in a certain given way. I have noticed in Indian boys a sense of locality almost as keen as that possessed by the sand-wasp.<sup>196</sup>

If Bates describes the insect as mechanical, it is because the insect has no interiority and "seems to us like that of a machine." This sense of instinct as an automatic, mechanical reaction is juxtaposed with human uncertainty, much in the same way as Caillois outlined the difference between insect and man. It is as if these Indian boys are empty of all mental processes other than a mechanical instinct determined by a constellation of external images and objects to which they react without knowledge or reason. For Bates, there is nothing behind their mask. Is that why Bates thinks they love pictures and make such good mimics?

The inevitable conclusion of this racist imaginary in which Indians are just like insects is revealed in the final pages of Bates text, as he returns to the exact location from which he began his journey so many years before. He writes:

The people became more 'civilized,' that is, they began to dress according to the latest Parisian fashions, instead of going about in stockingless feet, wooden clogs, and shirt sleeves; acquired a taste for money-getting and office-holding; became divided into parties,

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<sup>195</sup> *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, p. 266.

<sup>196</sup> *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, p. 182.

and lost part of their former simplicity of manners. But the place remained, when I left in 1859, pretty nearly what it was when I first arrived in 1850 – a semi-Indian village, with much in the ways and notions of its people more like those of a small country town in Northern Europe than a South American settlement. The place is healthy, and almost free from insect pests.<sup>197</sup>

This description of the village of Pará invokes the discourse of colonial mimicry, as Bates articulates a “desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.” For he is relieved to find the people more “civilized,” evidenced by their European dress, refined manners, and desire for money and political office. Yet the civilizing process must never be entirely complete, as the town is “pretty nearly what it was” when he first arrived. And although this “semi-Indian” town is now “more like” Europe than South America, that similarity (that is the same, but not quite), is determined by the fact that Pará is “almost free of insect pests.” In that sense, the extent to which the colonized Other is civilized seems to have a direct relation to the absence of insects.

### **Ontological Uncertainty**

It is clear in this genealogy of mimicry that that it announces a fissure between being and appearing, but it is one in which the mimicry of the colonized Other can never really mask one’s racial identity. This is precisely the way in which the creature in Marsh’s tale is slowly revealed: a series of narratives that function to produce a profound sense of ontological uncertainty that is designed to ultimately reveal a radical racial difference between white heterosexual bourgeois British subjectivity and the colonized creature in question.<sup>198</sup> For *The Beetle* opens not with the image of a bug, but with the plight of the urban poor, staged as a narrative of degeneration. This first section is narrated through the voice of Robert Holt, a “penniless, homeless tramp” who becomes the mysterious creature’s first target and instrument in a convoluted plot to strip a great British statesman of his power. Holt crosses the city of London and seems “to be leaving civilization behind.”<sup>199</sup> As his fatigue and hunger increase, evolutionary time seems to invert in a city space that is said to be “crumbling to decay.” Drenched by the rain, with little ability to see, he is reduced to the status of an invertebrate – described literally as being in a “backboneless state,” as he suffers from “the agony of dying inch by inch.”<sup>200</sup> Rather than dying on the street, Holt is suddenly filled with a “preternatural perception” to see every detail of a house standing before him: “An instant before, the world swam before my eyes. I saw nothing. Now I saw everything, with a clearness which, as it were, was shocking.”<sup>201</sup> As a larvae-like creature imbued with supreme night vision, he is then seized with a “frenzy” and a “frightful craving,

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<sup>197</sup> *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*, pp. 254-255.

<sup>198</sup> Rather than presenting a summary of the novel here, I prefer to let the text unfold in the way in which it is written, presenting a story of ontological transformation.

<sup>199</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 45.

<sup>200</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 46.

<sup>201</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 47.

which was as though it shrieked aloud.”<sup>202</sup> All sense of rationality that is usually attached to human reasoning seems to evaporate, as he reaches inside the window of the house to escape the overwhelming drives of basic survival, as he describes the damp as “liquefying the very marrow of his bones.”<sup>203</sup>

When Holt enters the house before him, he realizes he is not alone. It is at this point, that the question of the ontological uncertainty of the creature is brought into focus:

On a sudden I felt something on my boot, and, with a sense of shrinking horror, nausea, rendering me momentarily more helpless, I realized that the creature was beginning to ascend me legs, to climb my body. Even then what it was I could not tell, – it mounted me, apparently, with as much ease as if I had been horizontal instead of perpendicular. It was as though it were some gigantic spider, – a spider of nightmares; a monstrous conception of some dreadful vision. It pressed lightly against my clothing with what might, for all the world, have been spider’s legs. There was an amazing host of them, – I felt the pressure of each separate one. They embraced me softly, stickily, as if the creature glued and unglued them, each time it moved. Higher and higher! It had gained my loins. It was moving towards the pit of my stomach. The helplessness with which I suffered its invasion was not the least part of my agony, – it was that helplessness which we know in dreadful dreams. I understood, quite well. That if I did but give myself a hearty shake, the creature would fall off; but I had not a muscle given at my command.<sup>204</sup>

All of a sudden, the reader, alongside Holt, is put in the position of not knowing. The creature may be described as “a monstrous conception of some dreadful vision,” but we only have an articulation of a sensation – not a visual – that is described hypothetically: “what might...have been spider’s legs” that attach to him “as if the creature glued and unglued them.” Yet even the hypothetical is truncated at the level of syntax through the copious use of long dashes, as if speaking and knowing are simultaneously disrupted. This scene is further complicated as the creature overpowers Holt through the power of mesmerism and the force of sexual violation: his inability to move and “the helplessness with which [he] suffered its invasion.” As Winter has demonstrated, those discourses were often intertwined and conflated, as the mesmerists demonstrated how one person could ‘penetrate’ another with his ‘vital principle.’<sup>205</sup>

If both Holt and the reader have been left in the dark until this point, suddenly there is light:

As the creature mounted its eyes began to play the part of two small lamps; they positively emitted rays of light. By their rays I began to perceive the faint outlines of its body. It seemed larger than I had supposed. Either the body itself was slightly phosphorescent, or it was of a peculiar yellow hue. It gleamed in the darkness. What it was there was still nothing

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<sup>202</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 46.

<sup>203</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 47.

<sup>204</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 51.

<sup>205</sup> *Mesmerized*, p. 21.

to positively show, but the impression grew upon me that it was some member of the spider family, some monstrous member, of the like of which I had never heard or read.<sup>206</sup>

Now that Holt can see, we would think this would be a moment of revelation. Yet this scene only provides the contours of a “monstrous” morphology, “gleaming” without really illuminating.

Faced with the creature, Holt loses consciousness and awakens to an image that violates any coherent sense of gender, species, or evolutionary age:

I saw someone in front of me lying in the bed. I could not at once decide if it was a man or a woman. Indeed at first I doubted if it was anything human. But, afterwards, I knew it to be a man – for the reason, if for no other, that it was impossible for such a creature could be feminine. The bedclothes were drawn up to his shoulders; only his head was visible...His age I could not guess, such a look of age I had never imagined. Had he asserted that he had lived through the ages, I should have been forced to admit that, at least, he looked it. There was not a hair upon his face or head, but, to make up for it, the skin, which was a saffron yellow, was an amazing mass of wrinkles. The cranium, and, indeed, the whole skull, was so small as to be disagreeable suggestive of something animal. The nose, on the other hand, was abnormally large; so extravagant were its dimensions, and so peculiar its shape, it resembled the beak of some bird of prey. A characteristic of the face – and an uncomfortable one! – was that, practically, it stopped short at the mouth. The mouth, with its blubber lips, came immediately underneath the nose, and chin, to all intents and purposes, there was none. This deformity – for the absence of chin amounted to that – it was which gave the face the appearance of something not human, – that, and the eyes. For so marked a feature of the man were his eyes, that, ere long, it seemed to me that he was nothing but eyes.<sup>207</sup>

This description is filled with a series of attempts to categorize the creature that fail. First, Holt decides the creature is human, as he sees “someone” in the bed. Yet he can’t determine whether this someone is a man or a woman, which leads him to doubt “if it was anything human.” So the ability to determine the creature’s gender is then what guarantees it the status of being human. Although Holt declares, “afterwards, I knew it to be a man,” there is no body of evidence; it is covered by “bedclothes.” Perhaps that is why the gendered pronouns that designate ownership and personhood disappear by the end of the paragraph; “his shoulders” and “his face” become “the skin,” “the cranium,” “the whole skull,” “the nose,” “the mouth,” as if Holt is describing a specimen at the Natural History Museum. The fact that the specimen looks so old that it embodies “the ages,” recalls how Caillois described the insect: “In the case of insects, every worthwhile adaptation, every modification which has value over thousands of centuries, is incorporated and preserved in the organism.”<sup>208</sup>

Up to this point, there has been a sort of parallel between Holt and the creature, only in so far as they are both described to some degree as insect; Holt has become “invertebrate” while the creature is spider-like. Holt’s proximity to the insect seems to be a result of the creature’s

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<sup>206</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 51.

<sup>207</sup> *The Beetle*, p.53.

<sup>208</sup> *The Mask of the Medusa*, p. 126.

mesmeric abilities, but also measured in relation to “civilization” and the conditions of poverty within the city of London. However, Holt’s humanness never seems in question, for his “invertebrate” state is a metaphor to describe his mind and body, rather than a biological transformation. If the ontological status of the creature remains incoherent – in terms of gender, sexuality and species – all we know for sure is that it is not white. Let me demonstrate. While Holt remains in a mesmerized state, the creature commands:

‘Undress!’ When he spoke again that was what he said, in those guttural tones of his in which there was a reminiscence of some foreign land. I obeyed, letting my sodden, shabby clothes fall anyhow upon the floor. A look came on his face, as I stood naked in front of him, which, if it was meant for a smile, was a satyr’s smile, and which filled me with a sensation of shuddering repulsion. ‘What a white skin you have,—how white! What would I not give for a skin as white as that,—ah yes!’ He paused, devouring me with his glances.<sup>209</sup>

The creature stares at Holt’s naked body, but the desire it expresses is not for sex but for skin: “What would I not give for a skin as white as that.” What this scene suggests is the stability of the racial difference between Holt and the creature, while its “foreignness” is articulated as an intense desire to be white.

The creature immediately insists that Holt put on a cloak, as if to cover the skin the creature wants but cannot have. Holt looks inside a cupboard: “It was full of clothing, – garments which might have formed the stock-in-trade of a costumier whose specialty was providing costumes for masquerades. A long dark cloak hung on a peg. My hand moved towards it, apparently of its own volition. I put it on, its ample folds falling to my feet.”<sup>210</sup> The creature uses its mesmeric ability to force Holt to masquerade, to cover his white skin, even his feet, in the garb of a “foreigner.” Rather than the colonized Other mimicking the British citizen (as Bhabha might say), here we have the British citizen, evacuated of all agency, forced to “go native” and masquerade as the colonized Other.

The creature forces Holt – through his mysterious mesmeric abilities - to seek out the home of Paul Lessingham, “the greatest living force in practical politics.”<sup>211</sup> The creature demands that Holt travel to Paul’s home and steal a set of love letters from the politician’s fiancé, Marjorie Lindon. As the creature gives this command, it begins to describe Paul:

He is straight,—straight as the mast of a ship,—he is tall,—his skin is white; he is strong—do I not know that he is strong—how strong!—oh yes! Is there a better thing than to be his wife? His well-beloved? The light of his eyes? Is there for a woman a happier chance? Of no, not one! His wife!—Paul Lessingham!”<sup>212</sup>

Masculine ideals of strength and height are described through a symbol of colonialism— “straight as a mast of a ship” – and inextricably tied to whiteness. Once again, this white image is the force of the creature’s desire, yet this time it is not for the skin itself, but for the power the

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<sup>209</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 55.

<sup>210</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 55.

<sup>211</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 63.

<sup>212</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 64.

colonizer would guarantee his wife. Moreover, this desire to become Paul's "wife" throws into question the gender identity of the creature, which is then folded into Holt's second interpretation of the creature before him: "But the most astonishing novelty was that about the face there was something which was essentially feminine; so feminine, indeed, that I wondered if I could by any possibility have blundered, and mistaken a woman for man..."<sup>213</sup> Clearly the creature is perceived as insect-like, human-like, masculine and feminine, but never white.

By the end of Book 1, apart from the creature's radical racial difference, all possibility of ontological certainty has evaporated. Alongside the fact that the creature appears to possess the ability to transmute gender, sexuality and species, one can not help but notice phrases littered throughout the descriptions in the text that perform a very particular mimetic function: "as if," "like, yet unlike," and "the same, yet not the same." Although the creature can change its form and appearance to disrupt ontological categories, the uncertainty of those phrases suggest that the creature never fully arrives in any fixed position – male, female or beetle – as tales of metamorphosis and shape-shifting often do. Although "likeness" announces similarity, it simultaneously produces a difference, for being "like" something is emphatically not the same as actually being that thing.

Judith Butler makes a similar point when she analyzes the popular Aretha Franklin song: "After all, Aretha sings you make me feel *like* a natural woman, suggesting that this is a kind of metaphorical substitution, an act of imposture, a kind of sublime and momentary participation in an ontological illusion..."<sup>214</sup> If the creature is indeed characterized by a series of such ontological illusions – announcing those illusions *as* illusions – it serves only to confirm that the ability to mimic is the sign of the creature's ontological difference from the white British subjects in the text. Those illusions then become a sign of its racial difference (which is certain), and not a radical narrative about ontological illusion in general. As the text moves on, we will see that the creature is humanized just enough to racialize it, but remains enough like an insect to justify killing it.

## **Heterosexuality and the Protection of the Nation State**

If the first book establishes the profound ontological uncertainty of the creature, but articulates its desire for whiteness and political power, the second book introduces the romance plot and the figure of the scientist. Narrated through the voice of Sydney Atherton, an esquire, scientist and inventor, his story introduces the reader to a conventional heterosexual romance plot: Sydney loves Marjorie, but she loves Paul, while the heiress Dora Grayling loves Sydney, but he doesn't know it. Although this straight romance plot can be understood as a formal device that provides motivation for the characters and a cohesive narrative for the reader, it appears side by side with the discourse of war, in a way that binds white heterosexuality with the protection of the nation.

Following a ball in which Marjorie rejects Sydney's advances, he is filled with rage from rejection and infused with jealousy over her devotion to Paul. He rushes to his laboratory:

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<sup>213</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 61.

<sup>214</sup> Judith Butler, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions," *The Judith Butler Reader*, ed. by Sara Salih with Judith Butler, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 133.



So swallowing a mouthful and a peg, I went into my laboratory to plan murder - legalized murder—on the biggest scale it ever has been planned. I was on track of a weapon which would make war not only an affair of a single campaign, but of a single half-hour. It would not want an army to work it either. Once let an individual, or two or three at most, in possession of my weapon-that-was-to-be, get within a mile or so of even the largest body of disciplined troops that ever yet a nation put into field, and,—pouf!—in about the time it takes you to say that they would all be dead men. If weapons of precision, which may be relied upon to slay, are preservers of the peace— and the man is a fool who says that they are not! - then I was within reach of the finest preserver of the peace imagination had ever yet conceived. What a sublime thought to think that in the hollow of your own hand lies the life and death of nations, —and it was almost in mine.<sup>215</sup>

In the wake of unrequited love, Sydney transforms his jealousy and rage into a lust for weapons and war, or what he calls “legalized murder.” He equates war and killing with the law because it “preserves peace,” suggesting that the discourse of peace can be both a justification and an instrument of war. For Sydney, the notion of peace seems inherent to war and becomes a question of preserving the nation, which Sydney imagines as being literally in hands. As to what precisely lies there, he tells the reader:

I had in front of me some of the finest destructive agents you could wish to light upon — carbon-monoxide, chlorine-trioxide, mercuricoxide, conine, potassimide, potassium-monoxide, cyanogens — when Edwards entered, I was wearing a mask of my own invention, a thing that covered ears and head and everything, something like a driver’s helmet — I was dealing with gases a sniff of which meant death.<sup>216</sup>

Clearly Sydney’s weapon is not a machine, but some kind of gas or bomb — a “pouf” — that kills a population, rather than an individual. And if he must wear a mask, it is to protect his white skin — “ears and head and everything.”

If we remain unconvinced that this weapon has anything to do with the insect-like creature that appeared in the first book, he makes a direct connection for us in the next few pages. Sydney attempts to fascinate Dora with a description of his weapon, and confesses what impedes his project:

What really stands in the way of things of this sort is not theory but practice, - one can prove one’s facts on paper, or on a small scale in a room; what is wanted is proof on a large scale, by actual experiment. If, for instance I could take my plant to one of the forests of South America, where there is plenty of animal life but no human, I could demonstrate the soundness of my position then and there.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 102.

<sup>216</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 102.

<sup>217</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 118.

Like Claude Bernard, Sydney wants to experiment on the living bodies of animals, declaring that method as the only way to prove his theory will work beyond the “small scale in a room.” He then imagines the forests of South America as an enormous laboratory, “where there is plenty of animal life but no human.” To declare that the forests of South America contain no human life is surely a powerful act of disavowal, in which the biological life that exists there must be imagined as somehow not entirely human.

It is within this context of weapons and war that the creature suddenly appears in Sydney’s lab:

I took off my mask, - feeling that the occasion required it. As I did so he brushed aside the hanging folds of the hood of his burnoose, so that I saw more of his face. I was immediately conscious that in his eyes there was, in an especial degree, what, for want of a better term, one may call the mesmeric quality. That his was one of those morbid organizations which are oftener found, thank goodness, in the east than in the west, and which are apt to exercise an uncanny influence over the weak and foolish folk with whom they come in contact, - the kind of creature for whom it is always just as well to keep a seasoned rope handy. I was, also, conscious that he was taking advantage of the removal of my mask to try his strength on me, - than which he could not have found a tougher job. The sensitive something which is found in the hypnotic subject, happens, in me, to be wholly absent. ‘I see you are mesmerist.’ He started. ‘And I’m a scientist. I should like, with your permission - or without it! - to try an experiment or two on you.’<sup>218</sup>

Once again we are presented with a scene that appears designed to reveal, as Sydney removes his mask and becomes face to face with the creature. Yet all that this encounter between Sydney and the creature seems to do is function symbolically to oppose the supernatural, mesmeric power of the east to the scientific power of Britain. Science becomes the space of both reason and resistance, as Sydney is able to circumvent the creature’s mesmeric ability. And because the creature is rendered powerless in the lab, Sydney attempts to usurp its power by vitiating it of agency - “with or without your permission” - and threatens it with death by experimentation.

When the creature suddenly disappears, Sydney’s experimental lab becomes more like Freud’s office, as each main character pays Sydney a visit and confesses their story. Sydney-the-scientist becomes the space of all knowledge: of mesmerism, the occult, chemistry, history, politics, war, romance, and family dynamics. Not only does he now have access to the psychological interiority of the characters in the novel, he appears to know the most about the details that exceed the pages. Perhaps this is why the creature reappears and tells Sydney its own story of an insect family romance. It reveals that it is a “a child of Isis,” or the Egyptian priestess that according to myth can assume the form of a Scarabaeus sacer, or scarab beetle, after death. Like any therapist, Sydney paraphrases his understanding of this myth, but the creature responds with a peculiar demonstration:

As he replied to my mocking allusion to the beetle by echoing my own words, he vanished, - or rather, I saw him taking a different shape before my eyes. His loose draperies all fell off him, and, as they were in the very act of falling, there issued, or there seem to issue out of

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<sup>218</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 105.

them, a monstrous creature of the beetle tribe, – the man himself was gone. On the point of size I wish to make myself clear. My impression, when I say it first, was that it was as large as the man had been, and that it was, in some way, standing up on end, the legs towards me. But, the moment it came in view, it began to dwindle, and that so rapidly that, in a couple of seconds at most, a little heap of drapery was lying on the floor, on which was a truly astonishing example of coleoptera. It appeared to be a beetle. It was, perhaps, six or seven inches high, and about a foot in length. Its scales were of a vivid golden green. I could distinctly see where the wings were sheathed along the back, and, as they seemed to be slightly agitated.<sup>219</sup>

The transmutation begins with the creature mimicking Sydney's speech, but it echoes his words to mock him. As the creature repeats the word "the beetle," it transforms into the material and biological form that the word represents right in front of Sydney's eyes. This demonstration suggests that words, and their repetition, are literally shaping biological material. Yet because it is performed as a mockery of the colonial voice, it simultaneously announces a truth beyond appearance. This beetle holds onto the traces of a human, as a member of a "tribe" the size of a human.

Rather than attempting to kill the creature, Sydney captures it alive:

All the while I was casting about in my mind as to what means I could use to effect its capture. I did think of killing it, and, on the whole, I rather wish that I had at any rate attempted slaughter, – there were dozens of things, lying ready to my hand, any one of which would have severely tried its constitution; – but, on the spur of the moment, the only method of taking it alive which occurred to me, was to pop over it a big tin canister which had contained soda-lime.<sup>220</sup>

Like Darwin and his contemporary entomologists, apparently Sydney also has a kind of "zeal" for beetles, as his desire to capture the creature trumps his desire to kill it. He seems to regard the creature as a potential scientific specimen, wanting to take the creature alive so he can experiment upon it. For the creature is clearly not wholly human or entirely insect, suggesting a kind of hybrid species - between the animal life in the jungle and human life in the east.

Yet Sydney stumbles and the tin falls to the floor, as the creature increases in size. In what is designed to function as the final revelation about the body of the creature in the text, we are presented with the following description:

... Within eighteen inches of me, that beetle swelled and swelled, until it had assumed its former portentous dimensions, when as it seemed, it was enveloped by a human shape, and in less time than no time, there stood in front of me, naked from top to toe, my truly versatile oriental friend. One startling fact nudity revealed, – that I had been egregiously mistaken on the question of sex. My visitor was not a man, but a woman, and, judging from the brief glimpse which I had of her body, by no means old or ill-shaped either.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 150.

<sup>220</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 150.

<sup>221</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 152.

Here Sydney conflates nudity with truth, while sex is declared a fact. Yet we must remember that Sydney's voice is one among many, as the reader is presented with four different books written in four different voices that tell four different versions of the same story. That constellation of unreliable narratives, placed alongside a syntax that works through a series of failed analogies, this suggests that perhaps this revelation that the creature is a woman might be suspect. For the text consistently demonstrates that what the creature looks like is only ever a ruse.

The fact that the sex of the creature might not really be a fact is one of the key features of the creature's mimetic ability, yet there may be a strategic reason that Sydney sees the creature as a woman at this point in the text. I think there are several forces compelling that norm, first of which is to heterosexualize desire - between the creature and Holt, the creature and Paul, and the creature and Sydney. Second, if desire is heterosexualized, Sydney mobilizes the system of male dominance that secures heterosexuality as a way to contain the power of the creature. If the creature is a woman, he can express a desire for it, yet the desire he expresses functions to vitiate the creature of its power as it retreats in shame. Sydney tells us: "I was not only witless, I was breathless too, - I could only gape. And, while I gaped, the woman, stooping down, picking up her draperies, began to huddle them on her anyhow, - and, also, to skedaddle towards the door which led into the yard."<sup>222</sup> Sydney is left somewhat speechless, "gaping" at the naked body he perceives as a woman. Yet this creature, which has previously demonstrated such a penchant for transmutation, sexual aggression, appearing, disappearing, and mocking, picks up its clothes from the floor and "skedaddles towards the door?" It seems that it is the act of calling the creature "a woman" demands that it perform the modesty and passivity associated with Victorian ideals of femininity, even in a monstrous form. If we take Sydney as his word - that this creature really is a woman - it functions to reinscribe the ideological work of normative gender and compulsory heterosexuality. For that reason, I insist that the creature in the novel is not necessarily "really a woman" and fails to materialize the regulatory ideals of gender, and by extension sexuality - despite Sydney's effort to claim otherwise. The creature is indeed a "truly versatile oriental," able to mimic gender, sexuality and species, with some forms more convincing than others.

### **Mimicry, Mimesis and the Violation of Materiality**

The third book of the novel is written in the voice of Marjorie and returns us once again to the heterosexual romance plot, yet her character is written as a kind of icon of the Victorian "New Woman." She pushes against the limits set by a male-dominated society, standing up to her father who opposes her marriage to Paul out of political loyalties to his own party. The future of the British ruling class is in part measured by Marjorie's marriage prospects, but she expresses her own personal desires, or rather lack of desire, for the suitor her father prefers: "Sydney Atherton has asked me to be his wife. It is not only annoying, worse, it is absurd."<sup>223</sup> However, for a character that represents the "New Woman," one of her reservations about

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<sup>222</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 152.

<sup>223</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 192.

Sydney is strikingly conventional. According to Marjorie, he can not be loyal to one woman, for “He prefers, like the bee, to roam from flower to flower.”<sup>224</sup>

Marjorie’s conviction that Sydney is a noncommittal “bee” seems to haunt her, as one night alone in her room she hears a buzzing sound:

The buzzing was distinctly audible. It was like the humming of a bee. Or, - could it be a beetle? My whole life long I have had an antipathy to beetles, - of any sort or kind. I have objected neither to rats nor mice, nor cows, nor bulls, nor snakes, nor spiders, nor toads, nor lizards, nor any of the thousand and one other creatures, animate or otherwise, to which so many people have rooted, and, apparently, illogically dislike. My pet - and only - horror has been beetles.<sup>225</sup>

Marjorie’s distaste for the bee as a metaphor, transfers to a literal but “illogical dislike” for beetles. She distinguishes her reaction to beetles from her response to other animals that often incite anxiety, suggesting that she possesses the faculties of logic and reason, with just one exception. Yet just like Holt, Marjorie loses rational control, becoming “speechless” and sensing that her “brain must be softening.”<sup>226</sup> Against her own volition, she rips off her clothes:

I had on a lovely frock which I had worn for the first time that night; I had had it specially made for the occasion of the Duchess’ ball, and - more specifically - in honor of Paul’s great speech. I had said to myself, when I saw my image in a mirror, that it was the most exquisite gown I had ever had, that it suited me to perfection, and that it should continue in my wardrobe for many a day, if only as a souvenir of a memorable night. Now, in the madness of my terror, all reflections of that sort were forgotten. My only desire was to away with it. I tore it off anyhow, letting it fall in rags on the floor at my feet. All else that I had on I flung in the same way after it; it was a veritable holocaust of dainty garments, - I acting as relentless executioner who am, as a rule, so tender with my things.<sup>227</sup>

If the creature stripped away Holt’s clothing to see his white skin, here Marjorie’s clothes carry a different valence as they fall to the floor. Her “lovely frock” is the product of class privilege and state power, in that only a person of a certain standing could have a dress “specially made” to attend both a ball and a speech made in Parliament. For clothes do not simply cover her body, but allow her to picture her future self. The removal of her gown literally erases her image of herself as the future wife of a powerful politician and the destruction of her self-image is experienced as a kind of murder - “a veritable holocaust of dainty garments.” Moreover, Marjorie has no agency in this scene, as the reader knows that it is the creature who is mesmerizing her and “acting as relentless executioner.”

What is at first described as a set of illogical fears - of beetles, nudity and murder - is then substantiated as a sexual violation:

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<sup>224</sup> *The Beetle*, pp. 193 and 194, respectively.

<sup>225</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 205.

<sup>226</sup> *The Beetle*, p.206.

<sup>227</sup> *The Beetle*, p.206.

As I cowered beneath the bedclothes I heard the buzzing sound above my head, - the sudden silence of the darkness had rendered it more audible than it had been before. The thing, whatever it was, was hovering above the bed. It came nearer and nearer; it grew clearer and clearer. I felt it alight upon the coverlet; - shall I ever forget the sensations with which I did feel it? It weighed upon me like a ton of lead. I cannot pretend to say; but that it was much heavier than any beetle I have ever seen or heard of, I am sure... I was incapably of movement, - dominated by something as hideous as, and infinitely more powerful than, the fascination of a serpent. When it reached the head of the bed, what I feared - with what a fear! - would happen, did happen. It began to find its way inside, - to creep between the sheets; the wonder is I did not die! I felt it coming nearer and nearer, inch by inch; I knew that it was upon me, that escape there was none; I felt something touch my hair. And then oblivion did come to my aid.<sup>228</sup>

If what Marjorie feared “would happen, did happen,” that fact gives a logic to her fear and justifies it as a very real physical and sexual threat that edges on death. Exactly what happens in the bedroom remains somewhat elusive, yet Hurley agrees: “While the text refuses to specify the precise nature of the Beetle’s atrocities, it clearly points to some gothic version of rape, inflicted upon male and female bodies alike.”<sup>229</sup> Even if the precision of this scene is vague, the stakes of this encounter are clear: the creature is a threat to the sanctity of white British womanhood, which is bound up with both the political future of the nation and biological survival.

Marjorie’s encounter with the creature proves to be a pivotal moment. When she finds Holt in the street the next day and takes him in, she begins to piece together the story with Sydney. All three of them venture to the house in which the novel began, to seek out and kill the creature in question. Although Sydney brings a revolver with the idea of killing the creature and protecting Marjorie, he leaves her alone in the house during a misguided chase. Rather than immediately encountering the creature, she discovers a carpet:

On the floor there was a marvelous carpet, which was apparently of eastern manufacture. It was so thick, and so pliant to the tread, that moving over it was like walking on thousand year-old turf. It was woven in gorgeous colours, and covered with - when I discovered what it actually was covered with, I was conscious of a disagreeable sense of surprise. It was covered with beetles! All over it, with only a few inches of space between each, were representations of some peculiar kind of beetle, - it was the same beetle, over, and over, and over. The artists had woven his undesirable subject into the warp and woof of the material with such cunning skill that, as one continued to gaze, one began to wonder if by any possibility the creatures could be alive. Half involuntarily, I drew my foot over one of the creatures. Of course, it was nothing but imagination; but I seemed to feel it squelch beneath my shoe. It was disgusting.<sup>230</sup>

At first glance, this seems like a typical orientalist description in which the myth of ancient Egypt is literally materialized in the carpet: “moving over it was like walking on thousand year-

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<sup>228</sup> *The Beetle*, pp. 206-207.

<sup>229</sup> *The Gothic Body*, p. 124.

<sup>230</sup> *The Beetle*, p.229.

old turf.” When Marjorie realizes it is covered in repetitive images of beetles, this is also fairly common, as beetles were a popular image for many design patterns in the late nineteenth century.<sup>231</sup> Yet the mimetic relationship between the image of beetles to living beetles, in which the carpet could be understood as a copy of the real, is thrown into question when Marjorie wonders, “if by any possibility the creatures could be alive.” Critics, such as like Luckhurst, argue that this is a “hallucinatory scene” that demonstrates Marjorie’s special “access to vision” and explains the creature’s interest in her.<sup>232</sup> Yet the relationship between the woven images and the living beetles seems to remain suspended. I say that because if this is a strictly visual scene, that cannot account for her visceral experience of squishing the beetles with her shoe.

Marjorie’s suspicion that what looks like an artistic image might in fact be alive, is repeated as she enters the bedroom of the creature and encounters one last image:

In the middle was a picture, - whether it was embroidered on the substance or woven in it, I could not quite make out. Nor at first, could I gather what it was the artist had intended to depict, - there was a brilliancy about it which was rather dazzling. By degrees, I realized that the lurid hues were meant for flames, - and, when one had got so far, one perceived that they were by no means badly imitated either. Then the meaning of the thing dawned on me, - it was a representation of a human sacrifice. In its way, as ghastly a piece of realism as one could see.<sup>233</sup>

Although Marjorie describes the image as “ghastly,” its ability to accurately represent a human sacrifice is excellent: “one perceived that they were by no means badly imitated.”

Yet this conventional relationship between the real and the copy that characterizes mimesis is once again questioned, as Marjorie looks closer:

On the alter was a naked white woman being burned alive. There could be no doubt as to her being alive, for she was secured by chains in such a fashion that she was permitted a certain amount of freedom, of which were horribly suggestive of the agony which she was enduring, - the artist, indeed, seemed to have exhausted his powers in his efforts to convey a vivid impression of the pains which were tormenting her... As I continued staring at the thing, all at once it seemed as if the woman on the alter moved. It was preposterous, but she appeared to gather her limbs together and turn half over.<sup>234</sup>

Like the beetles on the carpet, this image also seems alive, drawing Marjorie’s attention to the physical signs of pain and torture as the woman moves. It also recalls the previous scene in

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<sup>231</sup> Many French art nouveau designers of the early twentieth century incorporated beetles into their designs – including René Lalique and Halnert Dys. Yet Christopher Dresser, Britain’s first independent industrial designer, produced wallpaper and textiles as early as the 1850’s with images of insects that were intended “to look alive.” See two of Dresser’s most famous collections in *The Art of Decorative Design* (1859) and *The Rudiments of Botany: Structural and Physiological* (1862).

<sup>232</sup> “Trance-Gothic,” p. 161.

<sup>233</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 230.

<sup>234</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 230.

which Marjorie stared into the mirror and imagined herself as the wife of a powerful politician. This time she is faced with a mirror image of “a naked white woman being burned alive.”

This is explicitly coded as her future in the hands of the creature, as once again it appears, this time from within the image itself:

A thin, yellow wrinkled hand was protruding from amidst the head of rugs... I stared, confounded. The hand was followed by the arm; the arm by a shoulder; the shoulder by a head, – and the most awful, hideous, wicked-looking face I had ever pictured even in my most dreadful dreams. A pair of baleful eyes were glaring up at mine.<sup>235</sup>

The body of the creature emerges from the rugs and is revealed piece by piece, confusing the boundary between the organic body and artistic image, as if the rugs were a kind of biological camouflage, or perhaps “the midst” described by Lacan. This final image implodes any distinction between hallucination, artistic mimesis and biological mimicry, as the ability to transmute both biological and artistic materiality becomes one more mimetic ability of the creature. The text leaves the reader caught in this *trompe-l'oeil*, as Marjorie’s narrative promptly ends.

## Hysterics and Heroes

The fourth and final book is written in the voice of Augustus Champnell, a “confidential agent” whom Paul seeks out to aid him in finding and destroying the creature. Much of this book is devoted to revealing the contents of Paul’s past that has been central to the mystery driving the plot of the novel. Yet the story that is designed to explain everything remains as unreliable as all of the other accounts, as Paul admits in advance: “... I have hesitated, and still hesitate, to assert where precisely, fiction ended and fact began.”<sup>236</sup> Nevertheless, he tells Champnell of his trip to Cairo at the age of eighteen, where he was seduced by a mysterious woman who eventually captured him and revealed herself to be a priestess of the cult of Isis. She demonstrates to Paul that she procures white victims to torment, mutilate and rape for her Egyptian rituals, including the sacrifice of “a young and lovely Englishwoman.”<sup>237</sup> Rendered powerless, Paul images the priestess as a bug he can squash: “There was something so unnatural, so inhuman, that I believe even then I could have destroyed her with as little sense of moral turpitude as if she had been some noxious insect.”<sup>238</sup> His desire that the priestess be “some noxious insect” reaches its full apex when “she” transmutes into a beetle in front of him, repeating the exact transformation the creature performed for Sydney in his lab. Paul tries to kill “her,” but “she” escapes by transmuting:

On a sudden, I felt her slipping away from between my fingers. Without the slightest warning, in an instant she had vanished, and where, not a moment before, she herself had

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<sup>235</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 231.

<sup>236</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 242.

<sup>237</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 244.

<sup>238</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 241.



been, I found myself confronting a monstrous beetle, – a huge, writhing creation of some wild nightmare. First the creature stood as high as I did. But, as I stared at it, in stupefied amazement, – you may easily imagine, – the devilish thing dwindled while I gazed. I did not stop to see how far the process of dwindling continued, – a star raving madman for the nonce, I fled as if all the fiends in hell were at my heels.<sup>239</sup>

In the process of escaping Paul’s death grip by transmuting and shrinking, the creature literally materializes his desire by becoming “some noxious insect.” Paul’s captor is no longer a human female that has rendered him powerless, or in his words “trick[ed] me of my manhood.” “She” is now just a beetle, and killing it carries “as little sense of moral turpitude” as stepping on a bug.

Eventually all three British hero figures – Paul, Champnell and Sydney – join forces to find the creature and Marjorie, who have now gone missing. As the language of the text becomes more and more affirmative of the creature’s racial identity and ties to Egypt, its gender is once again affirmed as undecideable. According to Sydney, “What I say, – I believe that that Oriental friend of yours has got her [Marjorie] in her clutches, – if it is a ‘her’; goodness alone knows that the infernal conjurer’s real sex may be.”<sup>240</sup> From this point on, characters in the text become less and less able to speak, as gender (and by extension sexuality) become more and more mutable. Paul comes “nearer to a state of complete mental and moral collapse,” and starts “approximating to the condition of a hysterical woman.”<sup>241</sup> We find out that the creature has cut off Marjorie’s hair and dressed her in men’s clothing, and that she was only able to write her account after “something like three years under medical supervision as a lunatic.”<sup>242</sup> There is a way in which all along the creature – through its ability to mesmerize – has also had the ability to render particular characters powerless and speechless, in a way that effects their gendered and sexual identities.

Yet Hurley has argued that the hysteria of the characters in *The Beetle* mirrors what she calls the “hysterical narrative strategy” of the text, which is one that deploys “textual euphemism, elision, or indirection in representing and naming sensational, perverse sexualities, despite the texts nonetheless unmistakable sexual and perverse content.”<sup>243</sup> This idea of an “hysterical narrative strategy” is also a useful way in which to account for the strange gaps, pauses and dashes that consistently characterize the syntax, but Hurley produces a teleology of identities and ontologies that the text does not support:

Its hysteria, however, is instantiated by much more than sexual trauma. The Beetle-Woman’s unspeakability results as much from her racial difference and her species fluctuablity as her metamorphic sexual identity (particularly as this identity violates norms of femininity). The text veers back and forth in attempting to account for the gothicity of the abhuman body, identifying first its raciality, then its femininity, then its variable sexuality, then its morphic fluidity, as the marker of abhumaness.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 245.

<sup>240</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 245.

<sup>241</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 292.

<sup>242</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 319.

<sup>243</sup> *The Gothic Body*, p. 125.

<sup>244</sup> *The Gothic Body*, p. 125.

I would argue that the “unspeakability” of the creature does not result from its racial difference, for its racial difference is the only thing that is clearly and consistently maintained. Many characters in the text are subject to feminization (the creature, Paul and Holt), masculinization (the creature and Marjorie), variable sexuality (almost everyone) and even species fluctuability (Holt as he becomes “invertebrate”). Racial difference is not the “first” identification; it is the only firm identification that separates the creature from the British subjects it threatens.

As the story spirals toward a conclusion, the question of who survives and who dies is subject to the same hierarchy of difference. The first to die is Holt, who the three other men find in, “a Limehouse slum, vampirically sucked dry of vital fluids by the Beetle; a physical rendering of his psychic enslavement.”<sup>245</sup> Although Holt is white and British, being a member of the urban poor and too weak to resist the mesmeric force of the creature, his death is not described as a tragedy, but as a relief: “‘Thank god!’ cried Lessingham. ‘It isn’t Marjorie!’” The relief in his tone was unmistakable. That the one was gone was plainly nothing to him in comparison with the fact that the other was left.”<sup>246</sup> Holt’s dead body becomes both the sign of the creature’s threat and the promise that Marjorie is still alive. And her life, unlike Holt’s, is valuable to the nation, as Champnell reminds us: “Miss Marjorie Lindon, the lovely daughter of a famous house; the wife-elect of a coming statesman.”<sup>247</sup>

After a series of criss-crossed telegraphic and telephonic messages successfully executed by the three remaining gentlemen, western technology triumphs over the mesmeric power of the creature, as it is apparently destroyed in a train crash:

Scattered all over it were pieces of what looked like partially burnt rags, and fragments of silk and linen. I have those fragments now. Experts assure me that they are actually neither silk nor linen! but of some material – animal rather than vegetable – with which they are wholly unacquainted. On the cushions and woodwork – especially on the wood work of the floor – were huge blotches, – stains of some sort. When first noticed they were damp, and gave out a most unpleasant smell. One of the pieces of woodwork is yet in my possession, – with the stains still on it. Experts have pronounced upon it too, – with the result that opinions are divided. Some maintain that the stain was produced by human blood, which had been subjected to a great heat, and, so to speak, parboiled. Others declare that it is the blood of some wild animal, – possibly of some creature of the cat species. Yet others affirm that it is not blood at all, but merely paint. While a fourth describes it – I quote the written opinion which lies in front of me – ‘caused apparently by a deposit of some sort of viscid matter, probably the excretion of some variety of lizard.’<sup>248</sup>

In the examination of the crash, the notion of western rationality attached to science and the law, comes face to face with contradictory material evidence; everything is and is not what it appears to be. What looks like silk or linen may in fact be “animal.” What looks like a stain may be blood, viscid matter and/or paint. What this scene may in fact be evidence of is not the death of

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<sup>245</sup> “Trance-Gothic,” p. 161.

<sup>246</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 303.

<sup>247</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 289.

<sup>248</sup> *The Beetle*, pp. 318-319.

the creature, but the origins of mimicry as we must remember Lacan described it: “It is this stain shape that the crustacean adapts itself. It becomes a stain, it becomes a picture, it is inscribed in the picture.”

### **Colonial War, Regeneration and the Insect Threat**

If everything is and is not what it appears to be, even the death of the creature may in fact be a ruse. As Champnell tells us, “What became of the creature who all but did her [Marjorie] to death; who he was – if it was a ‘he,’ which is extremely doubtful; whence it came; whither he went; what was the purport of his presence here, – to this hour these things puzzle.”<sup>249</sup> Although the question of the creature’s life and death remain a “puzzle,” the text offers one last clue. Champnell reports:

During a recent expeditionary advance towards Dongola, a body of native troops which was encamped at a remote spot in the desert was aroused one night by what seemed to be the sounds of a loud explosion. The next morning, at a distance of about a couple of miles from the camp, a huge hole was discovered in the ground, – as if blasting operations, on an enormous scale, had recently been carried on. In the hole itself, and round about it, were found fragments of what seemed bodies; credible witnesses have assured me that they were bodies neither of men nor women, but of creatures of some monstrous growth.<sup>250</sup>

This mysterious “explosion” cannot help but recall Sydney’s weapons of mass destruction – the “pouf” - in which “lies the life and death of a nation.” If he wanted to test his weapon “where there is plenty of animal life but no human,” the reader must wonder if he has not changed his location from the forests of South America to the desert of Egypt, where the dead bodies are “neither of men nor women, but of creatures of some monstrous growth.” The idea that this might be the product of Sydney’s invention is further suggested when we find out that he has married Dora, who funded his work, and is now “one of the richest men in England.”<sup>251</sup>

The rest of the characters also survive and go on to live out their political promise. Marjorie inherits her father’s estate after he dies and is, “recognized as the popular and universally revered wife of one of the greatest statesmen the age has seen.”<sup>252</sup> Curiously, there is no mention of this “reverenced wife” ever becoming a mother, which is strange in a narrative circumscribed by such a conventional heterosexual romance plot tied to state power. Yet biological reproduction in the text is not linked to anything properly human or even to the future of Britain. The ability to reproduce is not regenerative for the nation, but imagined as a threat - tied to the creature in the desert - as the last words of novel eerily suggest: “It cannot be certainly shown that the Thing is not still existing – a creature born neither of God nor man.”<sup>253</sup> In the end, the creature in question is certainly not Christian or entirely human, while its racial

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<sup>249</sup> *The Beetle*, p. 320.

<sup>250</sup> *The Beetle*, p.320.

<sup>251</sup> *The Beetle*, p.321.

<sup>252</sup> *The Beetle*, p.319.

<sup>253</sup> *The Beetle*, p.322.

identity insists that it is enough like an insect that it will always threaten to regenerate and return despite human efforts to exterminate.<sup>254</sup> Much like the rare beetle found at Wicken Fen, perhaps it will survive undetected in low numbers.

The novel itself seems to occupy a similar undetected position, falling out of print for years and only recently made available again. Perhaps this reappearance of *The Beetle* in literary criticism is an important opportunity for us to see more than just a troubling analogy between Egyptians and bugs in the imaginary space of a novel. What I have tried to argue is that *The Beetle* does not transcribe a political discourse into biological terms, or “dress up” a political discourse in scientific clothing. The Egyptian is imagined as being enough like an insect – biologically – that killing it is justified as a kind of “legalized murder” that persists into the future. That is the discourse of biological racism and it provides “a real way of thinking about the relations between colonization and the necessity for wars.” Although it is the ability of the creature to mimic and implode the naturalized categories of gender, sexuality and species that allows it to survive, camouflaged by a stain that cannot be ontologically understood, that ability to remain undetected secures it as a threat, perceptible only by the sign of its racial difference.

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<sup>254</sup> Guillermo del Toro’s *Mimic* (1997) is a horror film that mobilizes this idea that the ability of bugs to survive will always triumph over human attempts to destroy the population. In order to stop a Manhattan plague carried by cockroaches, an entomologist creates a mutant breed of insects to kill the cockroaches and stop the epidemic. Although the insects are engineered to die after one generation, they manage to both survive and speed up evolution by learning to mimic the human form. The film is noteworthy for many reasons, one of which is that there is a profound absence of any racializing narrative.

## Chapter 3

### From Illness to Wealth: The Imperial Economy of Life

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H. Rider Haggard's peculiar brand of adventure fiction made him much more than just a wealthy writer. With the publication of *King Solomon's Mines* in 1885, he inaugurated the cult of the best seller, tapping into the British public's fascination with the colonies in a way that transformed the genre of travel writing into something else entirely.<sup>255</sup> Critics have argued that Haggard's fiction borrows from autobiographical events at the same time that the plots are intertwined with historical facts. Peter Berresford Ellis claims that, "Haggard's settings are of real places and real people."<sup>256</sup> Moreover, Haggard's "historical" novels have their own history of inspiring generations of readers: "It is not to be doubted that [Haggard's] South African romances filled many a young fellow with longing to go into the wild spaces of those lands and see their marvels for himself."<sup>257</sup>

This conflation between the novel and "real places and real people" is precisely what Haggard went to extremes to produce. Let me give an example. There is a treasure map that appears near the beginning of *King Solomon's Mines*. It depicts a region of southern Africa - a "real place" - but consolidates this geography with sexual and racial fantasies as a path to a fabled diamond mine.<sup>258</sup> Apparently Haggard created this artifact in reality too. He copied the map in his novel onto linen and artificially aged it and had it inked.<sup>259</sup> On his way to meet with his publisher, he met a woman on a train who was reading *King Solomon's Mines*. Haggard showed her the linen map in his lap and then exited the train, "leaving the old lady quite dumbfounded."<sup>260</sup>

As critics, perhaps we should pause here and consider what is at stake in this notion that Haggard's fiction is of "real places and real people." For that claim is not just one that belongs to Haggard and the "big and little boys" to which he dedicates his novels.<sup>261</sup> The effort to conflate Haggard's novels with imperial history is a frame that is deployed in almost all of the critical work, perhaps leaving some of us feeling like the lady "dumbfounded" on the train. I wonder how we might explain the resilience and persistence of this discourse and how it can contain, comply with, and coexist within a range of political agendas. One way to approach that question is to identify one of the rather unique features of Haggard's fiction: what Laura

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<sup>255</sup> See Steven Coan's introduction to Haggard's *Diary of an African Adventure Journey: The Return of Rider Haggard*, New York: New York University Press, 2001.

<sup>256</sup> Peter Berresford Ellis, *H. Rider Haggard: A Voice from the Infinite*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 9.

<sup>257</sup> Wendy R. Katz, *Rider Haggard and the Fiction of Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 1.

<sup>258</sup> I will return to this map in detail later.

<sup>259</sup> Lindy Stiebel, "Creating a Landscape of Africa: Baines, Haggard and Great Zimbabwe," *English in Africa*, Vol. 28, no. 2, October 2001, p. 123.

<sup>260</sup> "Creating a Landscape of Africa," p. 132.

<sup>261</sup> The full dedication at the beginning of *King Solomon's Mines* reads: "This faithful but unpretending record of a remarkable adventure is hereby respectfully dedicated by the narrator ALLAN QUATERMAIN to all the big and little boys who read it."

Chrisman has called “fictional blatancy.” She argues that, “It is rare for a fictional text of imperial discourse to engage so directly, on a thematic level, with the embarrassment – and symbolic recuperation – of political economy.”<sup>262</sup> And what the text makes blatant in its representation of political economy is the desire to make identical a series of conflicting and binary oppositions: capitalism and anti-capitalism, irrational and rational, the ideal and the material, and the ancient and the contemporary. I agree that there is often little need to search for something like the “split voice” of colonial discourse in Haggard’s texts, because he reveals it for us on almost every page. This “blatant” language that renders the usual oppositions the same leaves almost no work for the literary critic to do, other than to flesh out the historical realities to which Haggard constantly directs our attention.

One unfortunate effect of a critical strategy that insists only upon historical connections is that it leaves little space and time for close reading, as if the meaning of the language in the text is so obvious that it works in a way that is self-evident. But if we look closer at Haggard’s fiction and consider Chrisman’s notion of “symbolic recuperation,” it becomes quite clear that the technology of “recuperation” is both political economy and what we might call bioeconomy.<sup>263</sup> I will argue that the imperial policy operating in Haggard’s fiction is indeed a question of political economy, but it operates by quantifying and qualifying the economic value of life in Britain as opposed to life in the colonies. British life must be protected and optimized to secure the future of the nation, while lives in the colonies are imagined as a kind of surplus value: the price worth paying for imperial power.

This bioeconomy seems to be overlooked in the much of the criticism, yet Foucault’s insights can provide a useful starting point. If for Foucault the regulation of sex and illness under capitalism were central to the making of the European bourgeois self, reading Haggard closely demonstrates that the questions of race and colonialism were co-constitutive forces, deeply embedded with the question of state power and imperial policy. This is an important insight for readers of both Haggard and Foucault. Although Foucault could provide a helpful blueprint to aid us in understanding the complex features of discursive production and the technologies of colonial rule, critics have suggested that imperial policies were actually a rather minor concern in much of his work.<sup>264</sup> Ann Stoler argues:

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<sup>262</sup> Laura Chrisman, “The Imperial Unconscious? Representations of Imperial Discourse,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 507.

<sup>263</sup> I’m using this term “bioeconomy” as particular aspect of biopower in reference to Nikolas Rose’s definition. He makes a distinction between what he calls the “generation of biovalue” and bioeconomy. In the first case, he points out that humans have “put vital properties of the natural world in service for themselves from their inception” and turned these “properties into technologies.” His example is that humans have long harnessed the milk producing capacities of cows. Yet for Rose, the term bioeconomy means something different. It refers to the way in which vital properties and biological life converge with the economy to emerge as a space to be governed, to be “mapped, managed and understood,” that makes life itself the target of programs that increase the power of nations. See *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 33.

<sup>264</sup> After the English translation and publication of “Society Must Be Defended,” it was revealed that Foucault had thought quite a bit about racism, colonialism and imperial policy. Yet for my purposes here, I am interested in tracing the peripheral lines in *The History of Sexuality* to think about how much of that was already there.

For a student of the colonial, reading Foucault incites and constrains. Volume 1 of the *History of Sexuality* is an uncomfortable reminder of how much empire and its colonial landscapes have remained in the peripheral vision of even critical European history – much less more conventional historiographies of race... Students of colonialism should be spurred to work out Foucault’s genealogies on a broader imperial map because of this glaring absence alone. But that crucial element of *The History of Sexuality* that does speak to the imperial world of the nineteenth century has been largely ignored.<sup>265</sup>

I agree with Stoler that Foucault “incites and constrains” thinking about colonialism. She points to the moments in *The History of Sexuality* that “speak to the imperial world” to argue against Foucault’s notion that sexuality was “originally, historically bourgeois.” Her insistence that we consider the making of the bourgeois self in relation to both sex and race - with imperial policy center stage – is a salient point at which to begin thinking about Haggard.

It seems to me that Haggard’s fiction is all about the making of the bourgeois self as a process inextricably tied to an imperial policy that takes shape around the management of illness and health – in no small part determined by sexuality, gender, class and race. I will trace this bioeconomy in Haggard’s transnational itineraries in two novels: *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) and *Doctor Therne* (1899) - a rarely discussed tale about smallpox and the debate around compulsory vaccination that was raging in Britain at the end of the century.<sup>266</sup> It shares a similar fictional blatancy with *King Solomon’s Mines* in that it is a narrative about a British doctor who profiteers in a bioeconomy for his own political power and financial gain. The point will not be to flesh out these texts with history as an explanatory strategy, but to map a set of biopolitical power relations that reveal the connection between the making of the bourgeois self, the management of health and disease and imperial policy. In thinking about these concepts as inextricably tied, it will become clear that political economy can not be separated from an imperial economy of life, in which life itself becomes exchanged in a bioeconomy designed to the regenerate the nation.

## Mapping Biopower

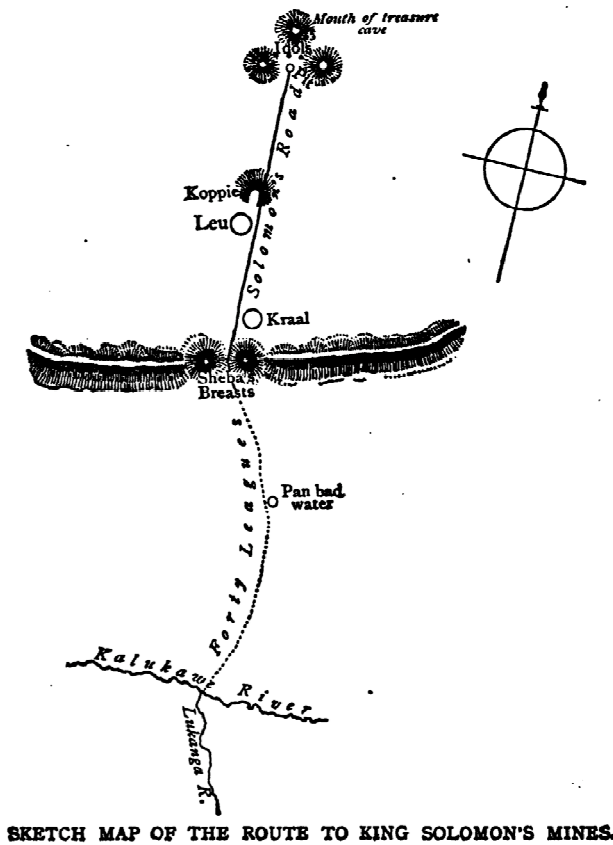
If Haggard and his readers are so interested in maps, we might consider the words of Franco Moretti: “A good map is worth a thousand words, cartographers say, and they are right: because it produces a thousand words: it raises doubts, ideas. It poses new questions, and forces

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<sup>265</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, pp. 140 -147.

<sup>266</sup> The critical work on *Doctor Therne* is extremely spare. Most of it is limited to book reviews from the period: “*Doctor Therne*” *The Spectator*, Dec. 10, 1898, p. 867; “New Novels (Dr. Therne; The Open Question; The Refiner’s Fire in the Wilderness of this World; Moonfleet; A Woman of Impulse; The Child Abel; Senex; The Hospital Secret; The Secret of Kyriels),” *The Athenaeum*, Dec. 24, 1898, pp. 891-892; and “*Doctor Therne*,” *The Lancet*, Vol. 153, Issue 3933, Jan. 14, 1899, p. 111. The only recent commentary is from a short essay criticizing Bernard Shaw’s opposition to vaccination via Haggard’s novel. See Anthony Daniels, “The Cure for Bernard Shaw,” *New Criterion*, 2007, p. 4.

you to look for new answers.<sup>267</sup> If maps are powerful analytic tools, Haggard's are particularly fascinating because of their "fictional blatancy;" it is difficult to ignore the imperial cartography of Africa that he literally draws for us in the opening chapter. (**Fig. C.1**) The map promises to lead the three Englishmen to the fabled diamond mines of Kukuland somewhere in southern Africa. As the story goes, the original map was drawn by a Portuguese trader who died of hunger on the "nipple" of a mountain named "Sheba's Breasts." Deprived of mother's milk, he imparts the knowledge of his journey to secure the diamond mines for future generations of male explorers, tearing a piece of linen from his clothing upon which to draw a map in his own blood.



**Fig. C.1: Haggard's Map**<sup>268</sup>

Critics insist that this map combines real places with the sexual and racial fantasies of ancient myth. Lindy Stiebel argues that Haggard's map contributed to the popular myth of Great Zimbabwe as the site of King Solomon's Ophir, built for the Queen of Sheba: "This was at the time a potent myth which, coupled with the discovery of diamonds and gold in southern Africa, caused spectators to flock to these parts as iron filings to a magnet."<sup>269</sup> This magnetism is sexual, as Rebecca Stott points to the way in which the female body is completely transfigured

<sup>267</sup> Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900*, London: Verso, 1998, pp. 3-4.

<sup>268</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines*, Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1958, p. 26.

<sup>269</sup> "Creating a Landscape of Africa," p. 123.



into two-dimensional space and superimposed as the image of a feminized Africa.<sup>270</sup> This sexual imagery of Africa also overlaps with racial and economic implications. According to Ann McClintock, “the map... hints at a hidden order underlying industrial modernity: the conquest of the sexual and labor power of colonized women.”<sup>271</sup>

This collective analysis of the map elucidates the way in which it consolidates mythical sexual and racial fantasy with imperial history, but for others it might recall another space and time: the concentration camps that the British built during the Second Boer War. (**Fig. C.2**) If we look at this map of the camps and then trace Allan Quartermain’s journey through Africa in *King Solomon’s Mines* – including the map and the narrative signposts – these are cartographies of the same spaces and places. Yet the map of the camps not only represents the imperial history of the Second Boer War, but the epidemiology of disease in southern Africa at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>272</sup> When the black African and Boer populations were incarcerated in the camps, there was a way in which the concentration of people in close proximity, mixed with bad sanitation and an influx of people from other places, led to devastating outbreaks of disease.<sup>273</sup> Owen Coetzer describes the situation: “On the free state farms, before the war, doctors were relatively unheard of. But then disease was relatively unheard of as well.”<sup>274</sup>

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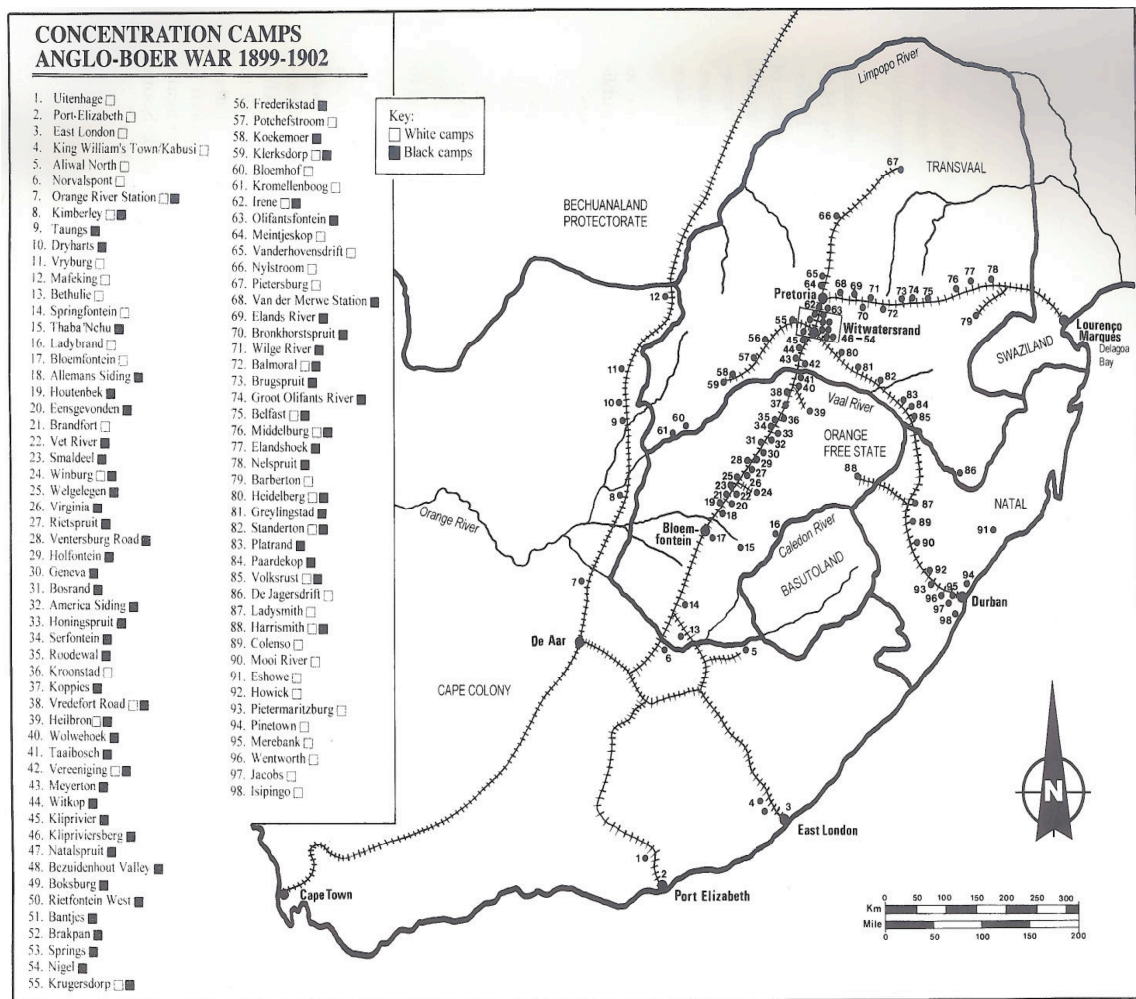
<sup>270</sup> Rebecca Stott, “The Dark Continent: Africa as Female Body in Haggard’s Adventure Fiction,” *Feminist Review*, No. 2, Summer 1989.

<sup>271</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 3.

<sup>272</sup> The concentration camps came into being at the end of 1900 during the guerilla phase of the war. As part of the scorched-earth policy, the British burned homes, destroyed farms and stock and rounded up the remaining Boers and black Africans – specifically women, children and elderly men - and incarcerated them in camps hastily erected along the railway lines. Although at the time the British called them “refugee” camps, they were part of a military tactic to disrupt lines of communication between civilians and soldiers in order to circumvent the sharing of sustenance and information. Although the camps varied considerably in the quality of the administration and in living standards, there were common denominators in the causes of mortality: namely the outbreak of disease. See Owen Coetzer, *Fire in the Sky: The Destruction of the Orange Free State, 1899-1902*, Weltevreden Park: Covos-Day Books, 2000 and Elizabeth Van Heyningen, “Women and Disease: The Clash of Medical Cultures in the Concentration Camps of the South African War,” in *Writing a Wider War: Rethinking Gender, Race and Identity in the South African War, 1899-1902*, ed. by Greg Cuthbertson, Albert Grundlingh and Mary-Lynn Suttie, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002.

<sup>273</sup> For a fascinating account of a similar relationship between sanitary science and “reconcentration” camps in a colonial context, see Warwick Anderson’s work on the Philippine-American War (1898-1902) in *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race and Hygiene in the Philippines*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

<sup>274</sup> *Fire in the Sky*, p. 158.



**Fig. C.2: Concentration Camps of the Second Boer War<sup>275</sup>**

In 1902, the British began to publish statistics on the camps, which provided detailed records of the prevalence of disease and the mortality rate. This kind of effort is what Foucault referred to as “a regulatory control: a biopolitics of the population.”<sup>276</sup> Power focused on the

<sup>275</sup> From Fransjohan Pretorius (ed.), *Scorched Earth*, Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2001, p. 8.

<sup>276</sup> Although I’m following Foucault, it is important to mention at this point that my discussion of “the camp” here is not the same as Giorgio Agamben described it:

Historians debate whether the first camps to appear were the *campos de concentraciones* created by the Spanish in Cuba in 1896 to suppress the popular insurrection of the colony, or the ‘concentration camps’ into which the English herded the Boers toward the start of the century. What matters here is that in both cases, a state of emergency linked to colonial war is extended to an entire civil population. The camps are thus born out of ordinary law (even less, as one might have supposed, from a transformation and development of criminal law) but out of a state of exception and martial law.

Although Agamben only briefly mentions the British concentration camps – as “a state of emergency linked to colonial war” – he annexes the biological question of disease in favor of an emphasis on the juridical and institutional function of the imperial state. See *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 166.

“species body” and its biological process - including mortality, the level of health, and “all the conditions that can cause these to vary.”<sup>277</sup> Yet as more and more “refugees” died, British doctors argued that it was not a result of imperial policy in southern Africa, but a question of their biological susceptibility:

A very important factor in the production and propagation of disease is the susceptibility of the Afrikaner Dutch to almost every infection. This is particularly noticeable in regard to measles. Europeans enjoy a certain immunity from measles acquired by the frequency of epidemics at home, and it seems as if the Dutch by their long sojourn in South Africa and the isolation of their dwellings had practically lost this immunity. When the measles attacks a susceptible population it is one of the most fatal of diseases, and that the Dutch have lost that degree of immunity possessed by Europeans is abundantly shown by the extremely malignant type the disease assumes in the camp.<sup>278</sup>

This notion that the Afrikaner Dutch are more susceptible than Europeans “to almost every infection” is partly rooted in the medical concept known as “the virgin soil epidemic,” in which a population is decidedly more susceptible to disease from a lack of exposure. It is as if vulnerability results from a kind of geographic quarantine – in this case from Europe. The fact that the Afrikaner Dutch have been “isolated” on “virgin soil” throughout their “long sojourn in South Africa” is imagined as a loss of both immunity and proper European identity – at the biological level.

It is this same rubric of convalescence and colonial susceptibility that saturates *King Solomon’s Mines*. Yet by the time Haggard publishes *Doctor Thorne* on the eve of the Second Boer War, epidemics are imagined as an explicit threat to the British Empire and its ability to recuperate both health and wealth. As we shall see, Haggard makes that point blatant in *Doctor Thorne* when he journeys to Mexico and discovers a town ravaged by smallpox. Yet the example is given so that he can connect his experience in Mexico to the outbreak of smallpox in kraals in southern Africa, which is a two-part narrative designed to convince the reader to support compulsory vaccination laws in England. Yet rather than matching up maps and novels here to suggest some kind of historical cause and effect relationship, I want to superimpose these texts because they provide a visual and conceptual map of the colonies as the object of biopower. And in Haggard’s case, these maps are literally built from the material of race, sex, gender, class, colonialism and imperial policy.

Let me explain. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault charts the movement from sovereign power, in which the power over life and death was conditioned by the defense of the sovereign for his own survival, to a shift in which power represents itself as exerting a positive influence on life. The locus of sovereign power was death, or what he calls “the right to kill” or “let live,” which was secured and maintained through a metaphoric of blood. Foucault argues that, “... Power speaks through blood: the honor of war, the fear of famine, the triumph of death, the sovereign with his sword, executioners, and tortures; blood was a reality with a symbolic

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<sup>277</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage Books, 1990, p. 139.

<sup>278</sup> Quoted in “Women and Disease,” pp. 191-192.

function.”<sup>279</sup> Surely this is one way we can read Haggard’s map written in blood, as it traces the path of the three Englishmen, immune from disease with swords in hand, as they fight military battles under the sign of the British Empire.

Yet Foucault goes on to argue that there was a “parallel shift” in the right to death, a kind of “reverse” in which power takes life as its object. He claims that death now had a “vital” force that moves beyond the individual body to extend to entire populations: “Wars are no 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 in the name of life necessity...”<sup>280</sup> Foucault argues for this shift in terms of a “reverse,” but he is careful to delineate that sovereign power – the right to kill and the metaphors of blood - do not simply disappear with the rise of biopower. Although both regimes of power were distinct, “In actual fact the passage from one to the other did not come about (any more than did these powers themselves) without overlappings, interactions, and echoes.”<sup>281</sup>

His evidence for this superimposition of sovereign power and biopower is racism:

Racism took shape at this point (racism in its modern, ‘biologizing’ statist form): it was then that a whole politics of settlement (*peuplement*), family, marriage, education, social hierarchization and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health and everyday life, received their color and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race.<sup>282</sup>

Racism and the old metaphors of blood are what link the making of the bourgeois self – “settlement, family, marriage and education, social hierarchization and property” – to a biopolitics that is tied to the health of the nation. Health - as a technology of state power - is designed to protect “the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race.”

What is productive about revisiting this aspect of *The History of Sexuality* is that it allows us to consider the way in which the superimposition of sovereign power and biopower might work together to shore up the making of the British bourgeois self in *King Solomon’s Mines* and *Doctor Thorne*. When read alongside each other, they literally and figuratively map out the explicit colonial discourse of a biopolitics that links the sexist and racist logics that fuel imperial policy and the management of health and disease. It is a colonial biopolitics that carries with it the traces of sovereign power, but brings our attention to the way in which the technologies of war and death are intimately tied to the protection and optimization of life in Britain.

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<sup>279</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, p. 147.

<sup>280</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, p. 136.

<sup>281</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, p. 149.

<sup>282</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, p. 149.

## The Evolution of a Gentleman

Much has been written about *King Solomon's Mines* concerning the racist and sexist discourse that permeates the text. If science is mentioned at all, it is usually relegated to a discussion of social Darwinism, understood as a concept in which human history is mapped against the model of an evolutionary tree, in a way that becomes imagined as “naturally” teleological and hierarchical, with white European men at the top. Anne McClintock argues that “... The image of the natural, patriarchal family in alliance with pseudoscientific Darwinism, came to constitute the organizing trope for marshaling a bewildering array of cultures into a single, global narrative ordered and managed by Europeans,” which “guaranteed that Enlightenment individualism belongs only to propertied men of European descent.”<sup>283</sup> Although I agree with McClintock that “pseudoscientific Darwinism” often functions to shore up the bourgeois position of “propertied men of European descent,” in *King Solomon's Mines* there is a different discursive register that operates throughout the text. Alongside the pseudoscience, there is a biopolitics that is blatant in its attempt to qualify specific forms of life: whether they will be optimized and reproduced, killed or let die. This constant process of qualification is performed under the sign of protecting the life of the nation and is articulated through both the notion of the hierarchy of races and through a eugenic understanding of race purification through reproduction. Both discourses work together to “marshal in” the “gentlemen” of *King Solomon's Mines*.

If McClintock is interested in charting pseudoscience, she is right to insist on the central connection between the growing population of Britain and colonial emigration to Africa. She echoes the scientific metaphors of the time when she writes: “In the public and political debates of the late nineteenth century, the swelling superfluidity of women and men was figured as a malady and contagion of the national body politic that could be countered by leeching off the bad fluid and depositing it in the colonies.”<sup>284</sup> She goes on to say that the increase in the population in England – “the swelling superfluidity of women and men” - leads to a scarcity of land that destabilized the security of the gentry as a system of social order. Although McClintock is interested in the relationship between land tenure, patrilineal inheritance, and the promise of the colonies as a place to carve out one's fortune, she repeats nineteenth century medical language - “malady,” “contagion,” “national body politic,” and “leeching off the bad fluid” - without pausing to consider its meanings or effects. However, she does return to the language of science later, when she suggests that Allan Quartermain writes his story “for prophylactic reasons, as an act of biological hygiene.”<sup>285</sup> She links the prophylactics of the text to the opening pages, in which Quartermain has suffered an attack from a confounded lion and is “laid up” in Durban en route back to England. For her, there is a way in which writing the book promises to return Quartermain to health, home and manhood, once again as a kind of “symbolic recuperation.”

If Quartermain's infection seems to be a small point in this process for McClintock, it does not remain so in the novel. The text moves from the physical body of the white patriarch restored in the colonies to the familial bond with Quartermain's son Harry, a medical student at home. He imagines his son at work, “cutting up dead bodies” and wants to “put a little life into

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<sup>283</sup> *Imperial Leather*, p. 44.

<sup>284</sup> *Imperial Leather*, p. 237.

<sup>285</sup> *Imperial Leather*, p. 240.

things” for the young doctor.<sup>286</sup> Yet Quatermain’s explicit goal in writing the novel for his son is not only to entertain him, but to provide a kind of manual for becoming a gentleman:

Am I a gentleman? What is a gentleman? I don’t quite know, and yet I have had to do with niggers - no I’ll scratch that word ‘niggers’ out, for I don’t like it. I’ve known natives who *are*, and so you’ll say, Harry, my boy, before you’re done with this tale, and I have known mean whites with lots of money and fresh out from home, too who *ain’t*. Well, at any rate, I was born a gentlemen, thought I’ve been nothing but a poor traveling trader and hunter all my life. Whether I have remained so I know not, you must judge of that. Heaven knows I’ve tried.<sup>287</sup>

Quatermain answers his question “What is a gentleman?” by mapping out a social order determined by race and class, yet what constitutes the membership to each race and class sounds complicated and certainly not as amusing as Haggard intended. Quatermain admits that he does not “quite know” the answer to his question, but grounds his definition according to a system of analogies through negation; a gentleman is not a “nigger,” or a “a native,” or those “mean whites with lots of money and fresh out from home.” However, even that system needs revision, as Quatermain decides to “scratch that word ‘niggers’ out,” despite having already written it quite clearly in black and white. His attempt to distance himself from the “mean whites” becomes further convoluted as he engages in a tacit relationship with the reader, using the italicized *ain’t* as if every reader must know what he is talking about. By the end of the paragraph, what all this discursive production and revision suggests is that there is nothing “natural” or “fixed” in this messy teleology and hierarchy; to be “born a gentleman” is not necessarily to *be* a gentleman. What is important to recognize here is that the social hierarchy that surrounds masculinity, race and class is not a discourse that could be described simply as social Darwinism. Although the basic structure could be said to be pulling a branch from that tree, there is nothing about Quatermain’s series of categories suggests they are predetermined or the natural result of evolution. They sound malleable and in need of constant and vigilante attention to guarantee that they will be produced and maintained.

This management and maintenance is articulated as a man’s duty alone, as women occupy a very specific role in Quatermain’s list of reasons to write the book:

Fourth reason and last: Because I am going to tell the strangest story that I know of. It may seem a queer thing to say that, especially considering that there is no woman in it, except Foulata. Stop, though! There is Gagoola, if she was a woman and not a fiend. But she was a hundred at least, and therefore not marriageable so I don’t count her. At any rate, I can safely say that there is not a *petticoat* in the whole history.<sup>288</sup>

Quatermain expels white women from the text – “not a *petticoat* in the whole history” – but must “Stop, though!” to remember that black women - Foulata and Gagoola - are central characters. The absence of white women is indeed “strange,” as Ann Stoler has convincingly argued that it

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<sup>286</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 12.

<sup>287</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 12.

<sup>288</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 12, original italics.

was white women who did the majority of the policing of desire, sexuality and interracial relations in the colonies.<sup>289</sup> Their absence points to the way in which the novel suggests that sexuality and miscegenation are not problems of desire as much as discursive sites of biopolitical intervention. As we will see later, both black women die under the sign of a eugenic logic. Gagoola's life is categorized as not human but animal, as Quatermain literally does not "count her" as part of the population. And although we will learn later that Foulata is young and beautiful and therefore "marriageable," her marriageability becomes a problem for the state, as miscegenation threatens the racial purity of the nation. In Quatermain's words, "... We white men wed only with white women like ourselves. Your maidens are fair, but they are not for us!"<sup>290</sup>

What Haggard sets up in the preface is a biopolitical template for the son/doctor. As blatant as Quatermain is about the contradictions imbedded within his systems of hierarchy and justification, it is those very contradictions that suggest the need for constant and vigilante attention – as a man's duty alone. If Quatermain can compel Harry's attention in service of becoming a proper gentleman in this way, presumably it will aid him in his success as a doctor, making him better fitted to pursue the technology of sanitation, the task of national hygiene, and the restoration of the race. The fact that this process begins literally over the corpses of two black women, which are then visually represented by the beheaded female body on the map, suggests that both Quatermain and Harry are deeply implicated in "the cutting up of dead bodies," as the biological material of both science and imperial policy.

## **Masculine Recuperation**

If McClintock claims that Quatermain writes the story "for prophylactic reasons, as an act of biological hygiene," medical themes do not erupt only in the preface. Convalescence in particular is articulated as a form of masculine recuperation. The story of the adventure begins with Quatermain on an elephant hunt that results in him "getting the fever badly."<sup>291</sup> Following his recovery, he boards a ship destined for Durban and meets Sir Henry Curtis and Captain Good. Both men offer to pay Quatermain a large sum of money to accompany them on a search for Solomon's Mines. His ability to survive the fever has a direct relationship to the riches gained through imperial adventure and conquest, which is a theme that will be repeated for most of the male characters that survive.

Yet this masculine ability to recover from illness is explicitly linked to the desire to recuperate wealth that is imagined as lost, as the problems around land tenure and inheritance in Britain is the impetus for the entire adventure. Sir Henry discloses that he is in Africa in search of his younger brother George, who ventured there with "the wild hope of making a fortune" after being left destitute after their father's death. It is the life of this missing brother, a future gentleman of England and the property that he deserves, which functions as the justification for risking their lives to journey to the mines. And Quatermain agrees to accompany them in order to secure his own family line: "That before we start you execute a deed agreeing, in the event of

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<sup>289</sup> See *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*.

<sup>290</sup> *King Solomon's Mines*, p. 144.

<sup>291</sup> *King Solomon's Mines*, p. 13.

my death or disablement, to pay my boy Harry... a sum of 200 pounds a year for five years, by which time he ought to be able to earn a living for himself.”<sup>292</sup> Sir Henry regrets depriving George of his property guaranteed to him through birthright, while Quartermain seeks to make himself into a gentleman who can provide for his son, rather than a self-described “poor man” who has “lived through about seven generations of my class...”<sup>293</sup> So for both men, the quest for diamonds and vast wealth occurs under the sign of reinstating a class status that they have experienced as having been lost, entitling them to its recovery. In that equation, Africa becomes a place of both fantasy and raw material, promising the great fortune that will secure a future generation of gentlemen in England as a remedy for the riches they have been deprived.

This notion that Africa is the place to risk one’s life to produce and reinstate the bourgeois self is transmitted through a complicated series of stories passed down between white men. Sir Henry claims that he first heard the story of the treasure from a man called Evans: an amateur anthropologist who “takes the trouble to collect traditions from the natives, and tries to make out a little piece of the history of this dark land.”<sup>294</sup> Evans describes an “ancient civilization” with a treasure that “old Jewish and Phoenician adventures used to extract from the country long since it lapsed into the darkest barbarism.”<sup>295</sup> Sir Henry reports that Evans heard the story from Isanusi, a female “witch doctor” who claimed that a branch of the Zulus live over the mountains where, “there lived amongst them great wizards, who had learnt their art from white men when ‘all the world was dark,’ who had the secret of a wonderful mine of ‘bright stones.’”<sup>296</sup>

What is clear to me in this convoluted series of tales is that Evans has mined the “natives” for information about their treasure, at the same time that their secret is imagined as originally belonging to white men. And if white men made up the “ancient civilization” of “old Jewish and Phoenician adventurers,” the Phoenician reference must be based on the notion of a racial family resemblance to “white” Egyptians. As for the Jews, it appears that Haggard was in agreement with the common notion that they resemble Zulus, based on the assumption that the origin of the Zulu’s was a mystery. McClintock tries to elucidate this bizarre theory that the Zulu’s must have “sprang from Arab stock,” suggesting that their customs and ceremonies must resemble those of the Jews. In that scenario, “Arab stock,” Jews and Zulu’s seem to have grown from the same branch of the evolutionary tree, linking the racism toward black Africans and non-white “Arabs” with anti-Semitism. McClintock makes that point quite clear when she argues that, “Haggard’s anti-Semitism, of a piece with his antipathy to mining capitalists and his conviction that imperialism should be in the hands of landed gentry, placed Jews in a region of racial belatedness that they shared with the Zulus.”<sup>297</sup> So Jews, like Zulus, have no real claim on the “bright stones,” as both groups represent the fall “into the darkest barbarism.”

This racialized history of the decline of civilization is then inverted in the series of stories about the racial progression symbolized in the map. It is as if the moment European explorers begin to map the road to the treasure cave, the text moves closer and closer to the top of the tree:

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<sup>292</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>293</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>294</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 21.

<sup>295</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 22.

<sup>296</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>297</sup> *Imperial Leather*, p. 247.



the landed white male gentry. Yet the question of who has the right to the treasure becomes an imperial contest between the colonial nations of Europe – namely between the British, the Dutch and the Portuguese. Several years after hearing Evans story, Sir Henry witnesses the discovery of the diamond fields in southern Africa and begins to imagine Solomon’s Mines may in fact exist. Around this time, in the same fashion as Quartermain’s heroic recovery from illness, Sir Henry catches an “attack of the fever.” While ill, he meets José Silvestra, a Portuguese adventure who “could speak broken English,” and is “a quite different type of man to the low fellows I had been accustomed to meet.”<sup>298</sup> Decidedly Portuguese, but enough like the British for Sir Henry to befriend him, Silvestra suddenly departs to “become the richest man in the world,” while Sir Henry stays behind to recover from his fever. Soon Silvestra returns, and once again, we find another European suffering from a fever:

Yes, José Silvestra, or rather his skeleton and a little skin. His face was bright yellow with bilious fever, and his large, dark eyes stood nearly out of his head, for all his flesh had gone. There was nothing but yellow parchment-like skin, white hair, and the gaunt bones sticking up beneath. ‘Water! for the sake of Christ, water!’ he moaned. I [Sir Henry] saw that his lips were cracked, and his tongue, which protruded between them, swollen and blackish.<sup>299</sup>

Silvestra most likely suffers here from *bilious remittent fever*, a type of malaria characterized by reddish yellow or saffron skin. Yet the term “bilious fever” was often used as an epithet to suggest that one had a “weak constitution.” To call out Silvestra as having this particular fever implies there is something in the Portuguese “constitution” that makes him unfit to recover from both the fever and complete his quest for the diamonds. Yet Silvestra survives just long enough to impart his secret to Sir Henry, revealing “a Boer tobacco pouch of the skin of the Swart-vet-pens” that contains the map to the fabled mines, written on “a bit of torn yellow linen.”<sup>300</sup> He says that it belonged to his “ancestor” (José da Silvestra) who died en route to the mines, but managed to produce the map by “using his blood for ink.”<sup>301</sup> So the map is hybrid material, made of the biological matter of animals and different human populations, while at the same time the “bit of torn yellow linen” signifies Silvestra’s “yellow parchment-like skin.”

There is a way in which every story and every map is designed to benefit the British imperial project, especially when money is at stake; even Isanusi seems to “freely” give up her secret knowledge of the “bright stones.” These stories imagine a mythic landscape by rewriting political and evolutionary history, in a way that begins and ends with white people. That circular logic is perhaps in part why Quartermain becomes more fascinated by the housefly than the African ape:

He is an extraordinary animal is the house fly. Go where you will find him, and so it must always have been. I have seen him enclosed in amber, which must, I was told, have

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<sup>298</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 23.

<sup>299</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 24.

<sup>300</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 25.

<sup>301</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 27.

been half a million years old, looking exactly like his descendent of today, and I have little doubt that when the last man lies dying on earth he will be buzzing round...<sup>302</sup>

This commentary on the housefly reworks the relationship between adaptation and survival. There is no suggestion that the housefly will survive because of a series of successful adaptations, rather it is precisely the opposite: the housefly will survive because of its refusal to adapt at all. That is why the insect enclosed in amber that is “a million years old” looks “exactly like his descendent of today.” What this housefly passage clarifies is that for Haggard, biological survival is not always imagined in terms of social Darwinism or any permutation of evolutionary discourse. Most often biological survival in *King Solomon’s Mines* depends upon one’s access to wealth, which the text grants to the British alone. How else can we explain the strange ability of Quartermain and Sir Henry to miraculously recover from their fevers, when the young Silvestra and his ancestor died so quickly?

Perhaps it is the notion of entitlement that secures this reworking of evolutionary history and the fortune for the British. When the men finally discover the diamonds in the end, they declare:

There we stood and shrieked with laughter over the gems which were ours, which had been found for *us* thousands of years ago by the patient delvers in the great hole yonder, and stored for *us* by Solomon’s long dead overseer, whose name, perchance, was written in the characters stamped on the faded wax that yet adhered to the lids of the chest. Solomon never got them, nor David, nor da Silvestra, nor anybody else. *We* had got them; there before us were millions of pounds worth of diamonds, and thousands of pounds worth of gold and ivory, only waiting to be taken away.<sup>303</sup>

They have survived the perilous journey to the mines not because they were “fitter” than the Egyptians, Jews or the Portuguese who came before them – “Solomon never got them, nor David, nor da Silvestra” - but because they owned them all along: “the gems...had been found for *us* thousands of years ago,” “stored for *us*,” “*we* had got them.” Despite the momentous effort to reach the mines, it seems predetermined that the “bright stones” always belonged to the British gentleman.

Although the social identity of a gentleman must be constantly produced and maintained, the wealth that secures it is always there from the beginning just waiting to be discovered, as if the contest over Africa was always already won. In order to make that operation possible, McClintock argues that, “the necessary labor power of black diggers to extract the diamonds is rendered invisible.”<sup>304</sup> I agree that the passage grossly minimizes the labor and colors it white, as if the diamonds are simply “found” rather than painstakingly mined by black Africans.<sup>305</sup> Yet the passage does something more: it splits labor from ownership, which is one of the central

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<sup>302</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 67.

<sup>303</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 225, original italics.

<sup>304</sup> *Imperial Leather*, p. 247.

<sup>305</sup> The mortality rates in southern Africa related to mining exceeded those of war, famine and disease. The highest rates were among blacks working on the diamond fields, especially during the siege of Kimberley. See “Women and Disease,” p. 190.

components of industrialized capitalism and British imperial policy in the colonies. The only work left for the British to do here is the effort it takes to expand the wealth that already belongs to them. That work becomes a series of colonial and imperial wars that both kill and optimize life that operates in the service of a racially pure nation.

## Prophylactic Medicine

If the beginning and end of *King Solomon's Mines* map out the process of recuperation – from fever to inheritance – the middle chapters provide a kind of prophylactic medicine that makes this process possible. They draw lines between those who die and those who will survive, in service of securing the future wealth of Britain. The bulk of the text details the three gentlemen's journey to the mines, marked by a series of colonial encounters and a brutal war, but the massive killing that both seem to require is intimately bound up with the management of illness and the qualification of lives imagined in relation to their value to the nation. In this way, immunity to disease has a very intimate relationship to the British claim on the "bright stones."

As the three gentlemen prepare for their journey to the mines, Quartermain has a distinct set of priorities, all of which are prophylactic. First, he must procure a team of oxen for travel:

Then I bought a beautiful team of twenty salted Zulu oxen, which I had had my eye on for a year or two. Sixteen oxen are the usual number for a team, but I had four extra to allow for casualties. These Zulu oxen are small and light, not more than half the size of the Afrikander oxen, which are generally used for transport purposes; but they will live where the Afrikanders will starve...<sup>306</sup>

Although "small and light," Quartermain imagines that these Zulu oxen "will live where the Afrikanders will starve," because the Afrikander breed was known to be particularly vulnerable to disease.<sup>307</sup> Alongside this politicized and racialized epidemiology of oxen, Quartermain has a second reason for choosing this particular herd:

What is more, this lot were thoroughly 'salted,' that is, they had worked all over South Africa, and so had become proof (comparatively speaking) against red water, which so frequently destroys whole teams of oxen when they get on to a strange 'veldt' (grass country). As for 'lung sick,' which is a dreadful form of pneumonia, very prevalent in this country, they had all been inoculated against it. This is done by cutting a slit in the tail of an ox, and binding a piece of the diseased lung of an animal which has died of the sickness. The result is the ox sickens, takes the disease in a mild form, which causes its tail to drop off, as a rule about a foot from the root, and becomes proof against future attacks. It seems cruel to rob the animal of his tail, especially in a country where there

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<sup>306</sup> *King Solomon's Mines*, p. 38.

<sup>307</sup> After carrying Boer farmers and families to escape British rule in the 1830's, Afrikander oxen were almost completely exterminated when huge numbers died of rinderpest (viral disease of cattle) during the first Boer War.

are so many flies, but it is better to sacrifice the tail and keep the ox than to lose both tail and ox, for a tale without an ox is not much good except to dust with.<sup>308</sup>

Haggard chooses these oxen for one reason: he knows they are immune to disease so they will survive. And immunity must be made into a visual emblem displayed on the body, hence the missing tail that “becomes proof against future attacks.” While the question of cruelty – What does it mean to deprive an ox of its tail? – is annexed not because inoculation will allow the ox to live, but because it will retain its use-value for the British imperialists: “it is better to sacrifice the tail and keep the ox than to lose both tail and ox, for a tale without an ox is not much good except to dust with.”

This primacy of medical knowledge and the removal of body parts in service of the imperial project are laid bare in the passage that directly follows the inoculation of the oxen. Quatermain tells us:

Next came the question of provisioning and medicines, one which required the most careful consideration, for what one had to do was to avoid lumbering the wagon up, and yet take everything absolutely necessary. Fortunately, it turned out that Good was a bit of a doctor, having at some period in his previous career managed to pass through a course of medical and surgical instruction, which he had more or less kept up. He was not, of course, qualified, but he knew more about it than many a man who could write M.D. after his name, as we found afterwards, and he had a splendid traveling medicine chest and a set of instruments. Whilst we were at Durban he cut off a Kafir’s big toe in a way that was a pleasure to see. But he was quite flabbergasted when the Kafir, who had sat stolidly watching the operation, asked him to put on another, saying that a ‘white one’ would do at a pinch.<sup>309</sup>

Although Good is unqualified, he is presumably good enough to “cut off a Kafir’s big toe.” There is a way in which this gentleman can be mediocre (at best) in Britain, but without doing any work at all, the space of the colonies transforms him into an expert. If he can “more or less keep up” in Britain, in the colonies he suddenly knows “more about it than many a man who could write M.D. after his name.” Moreover, this all occurs for the enjoyment of the other British adventurers, “in a way that was a pleasure to see.” Although this anecdote is designed to amuse the reader, to what sadistic “pleasure” this could possibly refer is opaque, other than gesturing to the pleasure these men might take in witnessing the primacy of western science and medicine used to cut up a living body in the colonies. As for the “Kafir” who insists that “a ‘white one’ would do in a pinch,” it sounds like something between a joke, a desire and a threat.

As the men move toward the mines, their survival and future wealth depends upon dead bodies. Although Quatermain declares that, “I believe it was only by force of will that we kept ourselves alive at all,” I would argue that it is a series of deaths that guarantee the survival of the British imperialists. The first deaths they encounter are not a result of war, but again of “weak constitutions.” Ventrovögel’s end arrives when he freezes to death because, “Like most

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<sup>308</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 38.

<sup>309</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 39.

Hottentots, he can not stand the cold.’<sup>310</sup> As the men continue to the top of the mountain, they discover the corpse of the first Portuguese, “the Old Dom, José da Silvestra.” What is striking in this moment is that the description of the body preserved in ice matches the face of death that we saw in the much younger Silvestra in the opening chapters:

The corpse was that of a tall man in middle life with aquiline features, grizzled hair, and a long black mustache. The skin was perfectly yellow, and stretched tightly over the bones. Its clothing, with the exception of what seemed to be the remains of a woollen pair of hose, had been removed, leaving the skeleton-like frame naked.<sup>311</sup>

This repetition of the description of bilious fever is now explicitly and directly attached to this notion of a weak Portuguese constitution. Unlike the housefly preserved in amber, the ice preserves an image of a Portuguese man who fell sick and died, leaving the British immune to death.

The remaining men make it over the mountains and into the ancient land of the “Kukuanes.” In a convoluted and incredibly violent war, in which the British help overthrow the Kukuanes and their “evil King Twala,” Quatermain admits that the bloodshed “is out of my power to tell.”<sup>312</sup> Yet he manages to tell it anyway, for what follows reads less like a series of battles and more like genocide. This is actually referred to at the end of the war, when the “rightful King Ignosi” is reinstated to power:

I remarked that Ignosi had swum to the throne through blood. The old chief shrugged his shoulders. ‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘but the Kukuana people can only be kept cool by letting the blood flow sometimes. Many were killed indeed, but the women were left, and others would soon grow up to take the places of the fallen.’<sup>313</sup>

There is a notion put forth here that the Kukuana people must be killed in order to regenerate. The massive number of killings is literally a kind of bloodletting of the Kukuana nation, promising to be therapeutic for a population that has “caught the fever,” as they “can only be kept cool by letting the blood flow sometimes.”<sup>314</sup> There is a sense that their population has been purified by the bloodshed of the war, leaving behind only those who will strengthen the race. This theory is consistent with what Athena Vrettos describes as the late nineteenth notion, “that

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<sup>310</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 79.

<sup>311</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 83.

<sup>312</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 181.

<sup>313</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 197.

<sup>314</sup> The practice of bloodletting was used to “treat” a wide range of diseases, becoming a standard practice understood to alleviate almost any ailment. The benefits of bloodletting only began to be seriously questioned in the second half of the century, when many physicians in England lost faith in the general value of bloodletting. Although many still considered it beneficial in some circumstances, for instance to “clear out” infected or weakened blood. See Harris Coulter, *Divided Legacy: A History of the Schism in Medical Thought*, Washington DC: Wehauken Book Company, 1975.

was precariously poised between an apocalyptic rhetoric about ‘racial suicide’ and an evolutionary optimism about intellectual and technological progress.”<sup>315</sup>

This logic designed to justify genocide as a form of regeneration is particularly problematic in relation to women, mostly because it is unclear as to whether there are, in fact, any left. As Quartermain warned us in the beginning, there are “no women” in the text apart from two - Foulata and Gagool – who are both left to die in the mines. After nursing Good back to health from a fever, Foulata accompanies him to the mines, is stabbed by Gagool and dies saying: “I love him [Good], and that I am glad to die because I know that he cannot cumber his life with such as me, for the sun cannot mate with the darkness, nor the white with the black.”<sup>316</sup> If Foulata is “glad to die,” it is in the service of preserving the purity of the British race, as the rhetoric of miscegenation becomes synonymous with the rhetoric of disease; any mixture of color becomes a mark of ill health.<sup>317</sup>

As for Gagool, after she shows the men the secret door to the treasure chamber, they leave her to die next to Foulata. Yet she was always already figured as dying, for she is described as not properly human and already sick, before the war even begins:

... I observed the wizened monkey-like figure creeping up from the shadow of the hut. It crept on all fours, but when it reached the place where the chin sat, it rose upon its feet, and throwing the furry covering off its face, revealed a most extraordinary and weird countenance. It was (apparently) that of a woman of great age, so shrunken in size that it was no larger than that of a year-old child, and it was made up of a collection of deep yellow wrinkles. Set in the wrinkles was a sunken slit, that represented the mouth, beneath which the chin curved outwards to a point. There was no nose to speak of; indeed, the whole countenance might have been taken for that of a sundried corpse had it not been for a pair of large black eyes, still full of fire and intelligence, which gleamed and played under the snow-white eyebrows, and the projecting parchment-coloured skull, like jewels in a charnel-house. As for the skull itself, it was perfectly bare, and yellow in hue, whilst its wrinkled scalp moved and contracted like the hood of a cobra.<sup>318</sup>

Clearly Gagool is imagined as not-quite human: a “monkey-like figure” who “crept on all fours,” “covered in fur” with a head resembling “a cobra.” This is a familiar image of degeneration that appears in several of Haggard texts, in which African women are imagined as hybrid figures: both old hag and ape.<sup>319</sup> Once again we see a strange circular logic in which Gagool simultaneously represents the end of the human lifespan and the origin of the species; she predicts the future (racial suicide) and records its past (the monkey). Rather than a sign of her

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<sup>315</sup> Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 148.

<sup>316</sup> *King Solomon's Mines*, pp. 226-227.

<sup>317</sup> For more about the intertwining of the discourse around miscegenation and the rhetoric of illness, see *Somatic Fictions*.

<sup>318</sup> *King Solomon's Mines*, p. 121.

<sup>319</sup> This description of Gagool is strikingly similar to the figure of Ayesha in Haggard's *She*: “Smaller and smaller she grew, and smaller yet, till she was no larger than a baboon. Now the skin was puckered into a million wrinkles, and on the shapeless face was the stamp of unutterable age.” See H. Rider Haggard, *She*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 294.

ability to survive, she is the emblem of disease. This is because disease is often linked to race in the discourse of degeneration, and also because in the novel the language used to describe Gagool replicates much of the descriptions of both Silvestras' deaths from fever. If the Silvestras journeyed to the mines but did not survive, the similarity in the precise language of the descriptions suggests that both fever and racial degeneration are contagious. How else could we explain the strange acceleration of disease and the aging process in the younger Silvestra that matches Gagool so closely? Perhaps that is why, in the end, the descriptions correspond in both symptoms and color: "his lips were cracked, and his tongue, which protruded between then, swollen and blackish."

If the two women in the novel are left to die in the cave, the ability of the women to regenerate the Kukuana race seems to be questionable – at the very least at the symbolic level. Yet as many critics have pointed out, the female capacity to reproduce in the text is usurped and reimagined as a male birthing ritual, with the men's exit from the cave functioning as a thinly veiled metaphor.<sup>320</sup> The men who survive along with the treasure become both the symbol of the appropriation of African wealth and the reproductive capacity of women. If there remains any question as to that point, we might pause to remember the British gentlemen witnessing the chant of the Kukuanas: *What is the lot of man born of woman? ... Death!*<sup>321</sup> Presumably it is only when these three white men gain proper control over both African riches and biological reproduction that their eugenic vision can take shape to optimize the health and wealth of the British empire.

In the end, the prophylactic strategy of the text that produces British immunity and racial purity is proven to have worked, as the men emerge safely from the cave and discover Sir Henry's brother George to be alive, having been laid up for years with a leg injury. Following this moment when British health and masculine inheritance is fully restored, the gentlemen leave one last "souvenir" of the link between science and imperialism – Good's eye-glass - which they give their "true friend and sturdy old warrior, Infadoos."<sup>322</sup> Although Infadoos is "delighted, foreseeing that the possession of such an article would enormously increase his prestige," it is only for the amusement of the British gentlemen: "Anything more incongruous than the old warrior looked with an eye-glass I never saw. Eye-glasses don't go well with leopard-skin cloaks and black ostrich plumes."<sup>323</sup> This scene functions to further underscore medicine and western science as masculine, expert, modern and British, leaving Infadoos feminized in his cloak and plumes and reduced to a child like state "after several vain attempts" to "screw it [the eye-glass] into his own eye."<sup>324</sup> The fact that this eye-glass might "increase his prestige" is nothing compared to the wealth the three men will enjoy when they return to England, to the point that they have riches to spare: "Afterwards we discovered the eye-glass was a spare

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<sup>320</sup> McClintock argues that, "This dark triangle both points to and conceals entrances to two forbidden passages: the 'mouth of the cave' – the vaginal entrance into which the men are led by the mother, Gagool – and, behind it, the anal pit from which the men will eventually crawl with the diamonds, in a male birthing ritual that leaves the black mother, Gagool, lying dead within." (*Imperial Leather*, p. 3). For different permutations of McClintock's argument, see also Scott's *The Dark Continent* and Sandra M. Gilbert, "Rider Haggard's Heart of Darkness," *Partisan Review*, Vol. 3 1983.

<sup>321</sup> *King Solomon's Mines*, p. 131, original italics.

<sup>322</sup> *King Solomon's Mines*, p. 249.

<sup>323</sup> *King Solomon's Mines*, p. 249.

<sup>324</sup> *King Solomon's Mines*, p. 249.

one.”<sup>325</sup> If the imperialists have turned into philanthropists, this trinket of appreciation seems to be less about helping their “true friend” and more in the service of displaying their conspicuous wealth.

In the final chapter, Sir Henry and Captain Good return to England to cash in their treasure and celebrate their heroic conquest of Africa. To represent this, in a letter to Quartermain, Sir Henry mentions, “the pair of buffalo horns you gave me look magnificent; and the ax with which I chopped off Twala’s head is stuck up over my writing table.”<sup>326</sup> The display of African “trophies” is a symbol of masculine conquest and victory, but they also blatantly represent the beheading of a king, who always “bound onto his forehead” a “single and enormous uncut diamond.”<sup>327</sup> The symbols of wealth and sovereign power literally hang above the “writing table,” yet Quartermain’s response to the letter overlaps the symbol with biopower: “I really think I must take Curtis at his word, and sail to England, if it is only to see my boy Harry and look after the printing of this history, which is a task I do not like to trust to anybody else.”<sup>328</sup> So what we are left with in the end of *King Solomon’s Mines* is a proper gentleman, who must return to England to “print the history” and transport the work of national hygiene to the next generation.

## Doctors and Decadence

If *King Solomon’s Mines* maps out the movement between sovereign power and biopower and the connections between imperial policy and masculine recuperation, there is a way in which *Doctor Therne* seems to pick up where *King Solomon’s Mines* left off. The prophylactic concerns in relation to wealth that were prevalent in *King Solomon’s Mines* are extended in *Doctor Therne* and linked directly to the relationship between imperial policy in the colonies and the life of the nation state. Written in the voice of a medical man turned Parliamentary leader, *Doctor Therne* takes the reader out of Africa and back to England to confront the outbreak of smallpox and the debates around compulsory vaccination.

Once again, there is a sense that this text is about “real places and real people.” Although the practice of immunology was nothing new in the 1890’s, vaccination against smallpox was one of the most important public health innovations of the nineteenth century. Yet the opposition to vaccination was the constant historical companion to the practice itself. Even amongst those who were convinced of the benefits of compulsory vaccination, there was an extraordinary range of opinion and argument about the specific processes, the different types of vaccine and from where and how it should be created, secured and supplied.<sup>329</sup> The leading opponents based their campaign largely on the familiar contention that smallpox was not infectious but a ‘filth’ disease, and that compulsory vaccination put patients at even more risk of developing all kinds of dangerous infections. In 1898, a new set of vaccination laws were passed that modified previous acts and gave conditional exemption to conscientious objectors. While

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<sup>325</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 249.

<sup>326</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 249.

<sup>327</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 116.

<sup>328</sup> *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 256.

<sup>329</sup> “Foreign Bodies,” p. 39.



this debate was proceeding in Parliament, it took place against the background of the last major epidemic of smallpox to occur in Britain. The city of Gloucester had almost completely abandoned vaccination, until 1896 when an outbreak of smallpox in one area spread rapidly. By March of the same year, the Gloucester Union decided to enforce the requirements of the existing vaccination acts and the number of vaccinations in the city rose swiftly.

This history of the opposition to compulsory vaccination and the outbreak of epidemics have raised many pressing questions about liberalism and the state's relation to citizens.<sup>330</sup> Yet *Doctor Therne* is concerned with something slightly different: the making of the bourgeois self through the management of health and illness. This management is not tied exclusively to the individual body, but to the doctor's ability to manage the population, in much the way Foucault described it. As we shall see, the text is explicitly pro-vaccination, but it makes that argument via the narrative of a doctor who publically supports anti-vaccination for his own financial and political gain. In that sense, the making of the bourgeois self in the text could be imagined to be at odds with the health of the nation, yet because the text is written in the form of a confession, that narrative structure is just a ruse. The scope of the confession and its rules of self-examination only extend so deep, and function to project responsibility elsewhere: onto the colonies, the poor and the Jews. This all occurs under the sign of protecting the health of the British nation – from decadence and disease - now something that has “to be managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum.”<sup>331</sup>

Like *King Solomon's Mines*, Therne's story begins with a tale of diminished class status, interrupted inheritance and illness - all of which threaten to degenerate rather than recuperate life. Dr. Therne tells us that he comes “from a family of doctors,” in which his grandfather “succeeded” but “lived beyond his means.”<sup>332</sup> His father has a similar story, but smallpox is presented as the cause of his ruin:

In attending a case of the smallpox, about four months before I was born, he contracted the disease, but the attack not considered serious and he recovered from it quickly. It would see, however, that it left some constitutional weakness, for a year later he was found to be suffering from tuberculosis of the lungs, and was ordered to a warmer climate.<sup>333</sup>

Unlike the imperialists of *King Solomon's Mines*, Therne's father never recovers from his disease. Despite the fact that tuberculosis is listed as the final cause of death, here it seems to be simply a force that finishes what smallpox started. And it is this combination of “constitutional

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<sup>330</sup> See Allan Conrad Christensen, *Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Contagion: 'Our Feverish Contact,'* London: Routledge, 2005; Nadja Durbach, *Bodily Matters: The Anti-Vaccination Movement in England, 1853-1907,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2005; Ruth Harris, *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law, and Society in the Fin de Siècle,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989; and Stanley Williamson, *The Vaccination Controversy: The Rise, Reign and Fall of Compulsory Vaccination for Smallpox,* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007.

<sup>331</sup> *The History of Sexuality*, p. 24.

<sup>332</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *Doctor Therne*, West Vally City: The Waking Lion Press, 2006, p. 3.

<sup>333</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 3.

weakness” and tuberculosis that leads to both death and poverty: “When he died there was scarcely enough left to pay for his funeral in the little churchyard.”<sup>334</sup>

Although Therne is the descendent of this long line of medical men who have fallen in class status, he insists on a career as a doctor because “I knew also that successful doctors make a lot of money. Ground down as I had been by poverty from babyhood, already at nineteen years of age I desired money above everything on earth.”<sup>335</sup> The distance between poverty and wealth is the locus of Therne’s desire, yet lust for money is articulated as something historically constituted:

I saw then, and subsequent experience has only confirmed my views, that the world as it has become under the pressure of high civilization is a world for the rich. Leaving material comforts and advantages out of the question, what ambitions can a man satisfy without money? Take the successful politicians for instance, and it will be found that almost every one of them is rich.<sup>336</sup>

Wealth, “high civilization” and politics become inextricably tied within Therne’s logic, which will be unveiled at the end as the tripartite cause of his demise. In the process of becoming a rich Member of Parliament, Therne works as a profiteering doctor who publically supports anti-vaccination, but privately opposes it. He simultaneously becomes rich and guilty, as his opposition to vaccination causes a devastating outbreak of smallpox in Dunchester.

The idea that luxury and decadence have a causal link to the spread of smallpox was a notion put forth as early as 1798, when Edward Jenner argued that same point:

The deviation of man from the state in which he was originally placed by nature seems to have proven to him a prolific source of disease. From the love of splendour, from the indulgence of luxury, and from his fondness for amusement, he has familiarized himself with a great number of animals which may not originally have been intended for his associates.<sup>337</sup>

For Jenner, there is a slippery slope - from “the love of splendour,” “the indulgence of luxury” and the “fondness for amusement” – to the biological origins of smallpox as a disease resulting from being “familiarized... with a great number of animals.”<sup>338</sup> But if the disease is imagined as stemming from living a decadent life in close proximity to animals, the cure for it comes from the same place. What Jenner discovered in his leisure time was that a little bit of cowpox was enough to prevent smallpox in humans. This biological material from animals was precisely

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<sup>334</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 3.

<sup>335</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 4.

<sup>336</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 4.

<sup>337</sup> From Edward Jenner (1798), *An Inquiry into the Cause and Effects of the VARIOLE VACCINAE, a disease discovered in some of the Western Counties of England, particularly Gloucestershire, and known by the name of the Cow-pox*, quoted in *The Vaccination Controversy: The Rise, Reign and Fall of Compulsory Vaccination for Smallpox*, p. 81.

<sup>338</sup> The origin of smallpox is a contentious debate, but “the most common accepted sequence of events is that smallpox emerged as a disease of some species of animal in Africa in prehistoric times, was somehow transferred to human beings and eventually found a route to the Far East.” See *The Vaccination Controversy*, p. 8.

what made people nervous about the vaccine, as one “couldn’t be sure what other ‘bestial humors’ the medical gentlemen might be injecting into your child’s body along with the ‘vaccine matter.’”<sup>339</sup>

Following Jenner, if we think back to *King Solomon’s Mines* and consider Quartermain’s promiscuous contact with so many “exotic” animals (elephants, antelope, oxen etc.), coupled with the British men’s conspicuous desire for diamonds, Haggard’s sudden nervousness in *Doctor Therne* around decadence seems to function as a retrospective warning.<sup>340</sup> For *Doctor Therne* is “Dedicated in all sincerity (but without permission) to the Members of the Jenner Society.” If Haggard admired the Jenner Society, perhaps it was because he shares the belief that excess desire – for “trophies” and wealth – threatens to degenerate the nation, quite literally in the form of disease. Although Therne becomes quite rich at one point in the story, he declares:

No South African mines or other soul-agonizing speculations for me; sweet security was what I craved, and I got it. I could live with great comfort, even with modest splendour, upon about half my income, and the rest of it I purposed to lay out for future benefit.<sup>341</sup>

This notion of modesty and saving for “future benefit” is a central moralizing premise that the bourgeois gentlemen must perform, in opposition to the blatant “love of splendour” and “the indulgence of luxury” that characterizes the decadent classes. The difference between the bourgeois gentlemen and the decadent is not a question of wealth, but a moral difference measured in terms of the ability to provide a “future benefit” - for the self and the health of the nation.

What is striking is that Haggard’s way of mitigating the problem of too much wealth and too much disease is as exactly as McClintock described it earlier: “leech off the bad fluid and deposit it in the colonies.” Dr. Therne declares:

This country is too full; there is scant room for the individual. Only intellectual Titans can force their heads above the crowd, and, as a rule, they have not even then the money to take them higher. If I had my life over again – and it is my advice to all young men of ability and ambition – I would leave the old country and settle in America or in one of the great colonies. There, where the conditions are more elastic and the competition not so cruel, a hard-working man of talent does not need to be endowed with fortune to enable him to rise to the top of the tree.<sup>342</sup>

As Therne acknowledges that it was his decadence that led to his ultimate demise, he imagines the social structure of the colonies – “where the conditions are more elastic and the competition not so cruel” – to have both a tempering and evolutionary force. Like Good in *King Solomon’s*

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<sup>339</sup> Quoted in *The Vaccination Controversy*, p. 102.

<sup>340</sup> There is some uneasiness around the explorers’ fixation on the diamonds that is explicitly articulated in the text. For example, Umbopa reminds them: “... The diamonds are surely there, and you shall have them since you white men are so fond of toys and money.” *King Solomon’s Mines*, p. 111.

<sup>341</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 96.

<sup>342</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 4.

*Mines*, “a hard-working man of talent does not need to be endowed with fortune to enable him to rise to the top of the tree.”

## Surplus Value

If decadence has drained England of career prospects, it follows that Dr. Therne must depart for Mexico, offering his “medical services in return for the passage.”<sup>343</sup> Yet rather than “rising to the top of the tree” in the Spanish colony, Therne is disgusted at the lack of hygiene and proximity to animals when he enters the country through the coastal city of Vera Cruz: “Whenever I think of it, however, the first memories that leap to my mind are those of the stench of the open drains and of the scavenger carts going rounds with the *zaphilotes* or vultures actually sitting upon them.”<sup>344</sup> To escape “the stench,” he sets off for Mexico City and meets his future wife: Emma Becker, “a blue-eyed and fair-haired American from New York.”<sup>345</sup> Thieves in the mountains attack their caravan, but they manage to escape to San Jose, only to discover a town ravaged by a smallpox epidemic:

Presently we were within three paces of this arcade, and as we rode up an aged hag drew a blanket from one of the prostate forms, revealing a young woman, over whom she proceeded to pour water that she had drawn from a fountain. One glance was enough for me. The poor creature’s face was shapeless with confluent smallpox, and her body a sight which I cannot describe... ‘Malignant smallpox!’ I muttered, ‘and that fool is trying to treat it with cold water!’<sup>346</sup>

Therne’s horror is both from the site of smallpox on the young woman and the behavior of “the aged hag” who is treating her. Once again we are presented with Haggard’s familiar figure of the hag, yet this woman is imagined as degenerate not because she is sick or resembles an animal, but because she practices something like “backwards” medicine: “that fool is trying to treat it with cold water.”

Haggard inserts a strange footnote at the end of the page to make that point absolutely blatant to the reader:

1. Readers of Prescott may remember that when this terrible disease was first introduced by a negro slave of Navaez, and killed out millions of the population of Mexico, the unfortunate Aztecs tried to treat it with cold water. Oddly enough, when, some years ago, the writer was traveling in a part of Mexico where smallpox was prevalent, it came to his notice that this system is still followed among the Indians, as they allege, with good results.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 5.

<sup>344</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 5, original italics.

<sup>345</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 6.

<sup>346</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 18.

<sup>347</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 18.

This “historical” footnote links the origin of smallpox in Mexico to the arrival of an African slave, rather than to the wider system of Spanish colonization.<sup>348</sup> Yet Elizabeth Van Heyningen links the outbreak of widespread disease in both Africa and South America in the nineteenth century not to a hypothetical “patient zero” figure, but to the “virgin soil epidemic.”<sup>349</sup> However, Haggard does more than just obscure the origins of smallpox as explicitly African; he declares that the spread of the disease in Mexico is due to the “unfortunate Aztecs” who “treat it with cold water.” So his logic is that smallpox is a problem because colonized people failed (and continue to fail) to manage it properly, evidenced in the sarcastic tone of that last sentence.<sup>350</sup>

What follows Therne’s encounter with smallpox in Mexico is once again a tale of European immunity and indigenous susceptibility, yet this time it is a direct result of the failure of the local population to vaccinate. Forced into quarantine with the rest of the inhabitants of San Jose, Therne recounts a story about another doctor, a “philanthropic American enthusiast,” who arrived in San Jose years before “to vaccinate it.”<sup>351</sup> Although he was “a good doctor,” the story does not end well:

The end of the matter was that the local priests, a very ignorant class of men, interfered, declaring that smallpox was a trial sent from Heaven which it was impious to combat, and that in any case vaccination was the worse disease of the two. As the *viruela* had scarcely visited San Jose within the memory of man and the vesicles looked alarming, the population, true children of the Church, agreed with their pastors, and, from purely religious motives, hooted and stoned the philanthropic “Americano” and his guard out of the district. Now they and their innocent children were reaping the fruits of the piety of these conscientious objectors.<sup>352</sup>

Here we see the opposition between religion and science extended to the question of life and death, in which the local inhabitants of San Jose are represented as “ignorant” and at fault for their own deaths.<sup>353</sup> They are imagined as excessively devoted to religion, as “true children of

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<sup>348</sup> In the footnote, Haggard is most likely referring to William H. Prescott, the American author of *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843). He wrote about the sixteenth century Spanish conqueror - Pánfilo de Narváez – and linked the arrival of “Navaez” and his slaves to the outbreak of smallpox in Mexico.

<sup>349</sup> “Women and Disease,” p. 191.

<sup>350</sup> This notion that proper medical care is not practiced in the colonies is similar to the discourse around the spread of disease in the camps during the war. Van Heyningen argues that the conflict between the British doctors and the Boer women “was not entirely the result of the war but arose partly from the confrontation between different traditions of healing.” As a result, the British authorities considered the Boer women “benighted, superstitious, ignorant, and culpably careless in sanitary matters.” Clearly this idea that the affected populations of Africa and Mexico cannot properly manage disease is an imperial notion that is both raced and gendered. See “Women and Disease,” p. 193.

<sup>351</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 21.

<sup>352</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 21, original italics.

<sup>353</sup> This kind of discourse has been remarkably persistent in our century. In the rush to account for the spread of diseases in the so-called “Third World” countries, the resistance of local populations to western science is often deployed as an explanation. For an incredibly detailed and provocative description of this discursive production, specifically around the spread of AIDS in South Africa, see Didier Fassin, *When Bodies Remember: Experiences and Politics of AIDS in South Africa*, trans. by Amy Jacobs and Gabrielle Varro, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

the Church,” at the expense of their own lives. It is as if these “children” have adopted the religion of colonial Spain and transformed it into a Mexican superstition about the “viruela.”

Because Therne and Emma “are not religious people,” presumably they understand science perfectly. Yet Emma has been vaccinated, while Therne has not: “Terrified as I was about smallpox, and convinced as I have always been of the prophylactic power of vaccination, I could never force myself – until an occasion be told of – to submit to it.”<sup>354</sup> His unwillingness to “submit” to the “prophylactic power of vaccination” is itself a form of superstition according to the rules of the text, yet that inconsistency goes unacknowledged. For example, Therne becomes acutely concerned when Emma assumes they have both been vaccinated:

... To my alarm, it excited her philanthropic instincts, her great idea being to turn the *hacienda* into a convalescent smallpox hospital, of which she was to be the nurse and I the doctor. Indeed she refused to abandon this mad scheme until I pointed out that in the event of any of our patients dying, most probably we should both be murdered for wizards with the evil eye. As a matter of fact, without medicine or assistance we could have done little or nothing.<sup>355</sup>

Rather than a critique of philanthropy in general, Therne’s alarm at Emma’s “instincts” devalues her “philanthropic instincts” as a “mad scheme” and implies that her labor is irrelevant: “without medicine or assistance we could have done little or nothing.” Therne’s sexism is then grafted over with his own superstition about the superstitious constitution of the locals: “most probably we should both be murdered for wizards with the evil eye.”<sup>356</sup> This superstition about “the evil eye,” a belief that Therne assumes the local people hold, is transfigured as a more dangerous threat to them than smallpox. In response, Emma agrees to let Therne pay off the guards so they can escape quarantine, marry in Mexico City and return safely to England.

One might wonder at this point about the extent to which these scenes played out in Mexico have any direct relation to Africa or to the concentration camps of the Second Boer War, which I mentioned earlier. If the connection, up to this point, has only been implied, Therne suddenly thinks of Africa at the moment when smallpox is ravaging the city of Dunchester:

Among some of the natives of Africa when smallpox breaks out in a kraal, that kraal is surrounded by guards and its inhabitants are left to recover or perish, to starve or to feed themselves as chance and circumstance may dictate. During the absence of the smallpox laws the same plan, more mercifully applied, prevailed in England, and thus the evil hour was postponed. But it was only postponed, for like a cumulative tax it was heaping up against the country, and at last the hour had come for payment to an authority whose books must be balanced without remittance or reduction. What is due to nature that

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<sup>354</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 18.

<sup>355</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 20, original italics.

<sup>356</sup> The “evil eye” is a belief that some people can bestow a curse on victims by the malevolent gaze of their magical eye. The most common form attributes the cause to envy, with the envious person casting the evil eye unintentionally with varied effects upon the victims. These affects range from bad luck to causing disease, wasting away, and death.

nature takes in her own way and season, neither less nor more, unless indeed the skill and providence of man can find means to force her to write off her debt.<sup>357</sup>

Therne identifies quarantine as an ineffective and dated African technology that can only ever “postpone” death. This happens because “nature” is articulated through economic metaphors, anthropomorphized as a foreboding debt collector, who “at last the hour had come for payment to an authority whose books must be balanced without remittance or reduction.” Survivors of smallpox in quarantine doom the nation as “a cumulative tax it was heaping up against the country.” Life itself becomes excess capital. It is as if there is an inevitability to death in the colonies – a kind of surplus value to be paid to nature– that does not exist in England. There life must be saved like Therne’s fortune: “for future benefit.”

### **Vectors of Contagion**

If biological life is tied to the future of England, the rest of the novel functions to illustrate the proper colonial strategy to protect and optimize that life, articulated through a narrative about the catastrophic failure to enforce vaccination. Upon their arrival in Britain, Therne sets up a medical practice in Dunchester, “where the name of Therne is still remembered.”<sup>358</sup> He becomes embroiled in a series of malpractice trials that leave him destitute. Yet poverty, rather malpractice, becomes the locus of immorality:

Now it is that I came to the great and terrible event of my life, which in its result turned me into a false witness and fraud, and bound upon my spirit a weight of blood-guiltiness greater than a man is often called to bear. As I have not scrupled to show I have constitutional weaknesses – more, I am a sinner, I know it; I have sinned against the code of my profession, and I have preached a doctrine I knew to be false, using all my skill and knowledge to confuse and pervert the minds of the ignorant... But if I have sinned, how much greater is the crime of the man who swore away my honour and forced me through those gateways? Surely on his head and not on mine should rest the burden of my deeds...<sup>359</sup>

Poverty is aligned with immorality – “I am a sinner” – as this confession announces Therne to be guilty of bearing “false witness” and “confus[ing] and pervert[ing] the minds of the ignorant.” Although he is guilty of “sins,” they are imagined as only rhetorical acts. For he remains innocent regarding their etiology because he has “constitutional weaknesses.” Unlike the Portuguese “constitution,” Therne’s predetermined biology becomes his alibi, as he confesses to a crime only in order to project responsibility elsewhere.

The “head” upon which “the burden” of Therne’s “deeds” rests is revealed to be Steven Strong: a wealthy man who pays for his release from prison, spearheads his career, secures him a

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<sup>357</sup> *Doctor Therne*, pp. 108-109.

<sup>358</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 24.

<sup>359</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 23.

place in Parliament and leaves Therne his fortune.<sup>360</sup> Despite the fact that Strong makes Therne into a wealthy and powerful man, he is depicted as the cause of the catastrophic deaths in Dunchester that destroy Therne's reputation and political career. This sense of impending doom is built into the descriptions of Strong from the beginning:

He was a curious and not very healthy-looking person of about fifty years of age, ill dressed in seedy black clothes and a flaming red tie, with a flat, pale face, a pugnacious mouth, a bald head, on the top of which isolated hairs stood up stiffly. I knew him by sight, for once he had argued with me at a lecture I have on sanitary matters, when I was told that he was a draper by trade, and, although his shop was by no means among the most important, that he was believed to be one of the richest men in Dunchester. Also he was a fierce faddist and pillar of strength to the advanced wing of the radical party.<sup>361</sup>

Although Strong is described here as a political "pillar of strength," his name is also an obvious misnomer that highlights through irony the signs of illness his body displays. This sense of ill health is emphasized by the fact that Strong opposes Therne's lecture on sanitation, just as the image of "the great unwashed" became associated with smallpox as early as mid century.<sup>362</sup> The "filth" of poverty is then grafted onto the figure of Strong, despite the fact that "he was believed to be one of the richest men in Dunchester."

This representation is striking for many reasons, one of which is that Strong's opposition to sanitation is inconsistent with the position of the anti-vaccinationists whom he is supposed to represent. According to most historical accounts, those who opposed vaccination insisted on sanitation (and quarantine) as a moral alternative.<sup>363</sup> Yet this series of linkages between "the unwashed" and smallpox, Strong's wealth and his ill health, is condensed into the figure of the Jew, for one of the "fads" that Strong and his wife support is "the most harmless of crazes, the theory that we Anglo-Saxons are the progeny of the ten lost Tribes of Israel."<sup>364</sup> If anti-Semitism produces the link between Strong and "filth," Therne himself becomes soiled when he enters into a kind of Faustian pact with the devil, symbolized by Strong's "flaming red tie." In a

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<sup>360</sup> It is compelling that Therne is rescued by a wealthy anti-vaccinationists, for they were usually working class and often imprisoned themselves as a result. This formulation of class in relation to the vaccine question then appears in the novel as the inverse of many of the historical narratives about the anti-vaccination movement in England. Yet the text does briefly reference the working class and the poor as the core of Therne's supporters when he is elected to Parliament: "... In Dunchester there existed a large body of voters, many of them employed in shoe-making factories, who were almost socialistic in their views. These men, spending their days in some hive of machinery, and their nights in squalid tenements built in dreary rows, which in cities such people are doomed to inhabit, were very bitter against the upper classes, and indeed against all who lived in decent comfort." See *Doctor Therne*, p. 74.

<sup>361</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 41.

<sup>362</sup> *The Vaccination Controversy*, p. 28.

<sup>363</sup> See Hervé Bazin, *The Eradication of Smallpox: Edward Jenner and the First and Only Eradication of a Human Infectious Disease*, trans. by Andrew and Glenise Morgan, San Diego: Harcourt Science and Technology Company, 2000.

<sup>364</sup> "The Ten Lost Tribes of Israel" refers to the ancient Tribes of Israel that disappeared from the Biblical account after the Kingdom of Israel was destroyed. Many groups of Jews have doctrines concerning the continued hidden existence or future public return of these tribes. *Doctor Therne*, p. 47.



series of persuasive flourishes, Strong convinces Therne agrees to publically oppose vaccination to further his career as both a doctor and a politician.<sup>365</sup>

Therne then absolves himself of agency in his role in the smallpox epidemic, and projects all responsibility onto Strong. When Therne's daughter Jane dies from smallpox because he refuses to vaccinate her in order to prove to the public that he is a staunch anti-vaccinationist, he blames it on Strong: "If Stephen Strong had not tempted me Jane would have been vaccinated in due course, and therefore, good friend though he had been to me and though his wealth was mine to-day, I cursed the memory of Stephen Strong."<sup>366</sup> There is a way in which we could understand the transaction between these two men to be the following: that Therne has paid for his wealth with the life of his daughter. Yet it is not the memory of her death that he "curses;" it is the memory of Strong, as the force of immorality moves in the direction of the Jew and the "unwashed" poor that he symbolically represents.

The causal link between Jews and the poor as vectors of contagion is made explicit near the end of the novel, after smallpox breaks out in a poor suburb of Dunchester. The neighborhood is the seat of Therne's political power and home to one of the families under his care, whose children infect Jane when she visits for humanitarian reasons. Therne declares in retrospect:

Could I have foreseen the results which were to flow from an act of kindness, and that as this family had indirectly been the cause of my triumph so they were in turn to be the cause of my ruin, I would have destroyed the whole street with dynamite before I allowed them to set foot in it.<sup>367</sup>

The lives that Therne is said to care for as a doctor and a leader in Parliament are the very lives that he would not hesitate to "destroy" to foster and protect his own family and career. This sentiment suggests that the discourse supporting compulsory vaccination that was aimed at the poor was not about saving their lives, but a concern about their ability to infect the rest of the nation. Unlike the surplus value of life in the colonies and the doomed health of the excessively rich Jew, poverty in England threatened to spill over economic boundaries and contaminate the bourgeoisie.

## **Patient Zero**

If the Jews and the poor are depicted as vectors of moral and biological contagion, this "filth" is linked to the colonies in the composite figure of patient zero. Patient zero, or the shadowy figure who is designed to represent the origin of the outbreak in Dunchester, functions as a discursive node that signifies all of the chains of causality in the text. One hot day, Therne visits the same poor suburb and stops to rest in front of a park. This particular park is one that

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<sup>365</sup> The text emphasizes Strong's red tie in almost every description of him. For example, "There was no possibility of mistaking his flaming red tie," appears again on p. 45.

<sup>366</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 122.

<sup>367</sup> *Doctor Therne*, pp. 99-100.

Therne designed himself while in Parliament: “an acre of land presented by myself, as a playground and open space for the use of the public.”<sup>368</sup> This public space that he built as a service to his constituents becomes the site of infection. Therne first sees patient zero from a distance:

It is a strange and dreadful coincidence, but by some extraordinary action of the mind, so subtle that I cannot trace the link, the apparition of this man out of gloom into the fierce light of the sunset reminded me of a picture that I had once seen representing the approach to the Norwegian harbour of the ship which brought plague to the shores of Scandinavia... Like this wanderer that ship also came forward, slowly indeed, but without pause, as though alive with a purpose of its own, and I remember that awaiting it upon the quay were a number of merry children.<sup>369</sup>

This first glimpse of patient zero is a double image: a man walking at sunset who coincides with Therne’s memory of a picture of a ship that brought plague to the children waiting on the shores of Scandinavia. This scene foreshadows this “wanderer” to be patient zero, as Therne has a kind of dread at first sight. Yet he can’t “trace the link” between the man and the ship, perhaps because there is an aporia at the center of his double vision. The analogy between the ship and “the wanderer” only works in so far that it suggests that both bring “plague,” but the origin of the disease is completely obscured. If the ship in Therne’s memory brings plague to a Norwegian harbor, we must ask what any epidemiologist would want to know: from where has the ship sailed? If Scandinavia remains an important signifier, it is because it is an identity that links patient zero with Strong through an emphasis on color rather than location: “Once again I met the Spectre I derided, a red-headed, red-visaged Thing that chose me out to stop and grin at.”<sup>370</sup> If patient zero is “red-visaged” because he suffers from smallpox, he must be “red-headed” because he is Scandinavian. Yet Scandinavia is not necessarily imagined as the origin of smallpox, because the passage implies that patient zero was infected in Scandinavia and has now wandered to England. Moreover, all of Haggard’s references to the color red recall the Jew as much as Scandinavia; patient zero is described as having a red and “fiery” appearance, just like Strong’s “flaming red tie.”<sup>371</sup>

If the identity of patient zero is symbolically linked to the Jew, his ability to infect is tied to his poverty:

Clearly he was one of the great army of tramps for his coat was wide and ragged and his hat half innocent of rim, although there was something about his figure which suggested to me that he had seen better days. I could even imagine that under certain circumstances I might have come to look very much like this poor man, now doubtless turned into a mere animal by drink.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 104.

<sup>369</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 104.

<sup>370</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 107.

<sup>371</sup> There may be much more to say about this configuration, considering there was an increased interest in Scandinavian folklore across Europe, when they discovered one of the first Viking ships in Norway in 1880.

<sup>372</sup> *Doctor Therne*, pp. 104-105.

Once again the locus of immorality is poverty. Although Therne imagines that “under certain circumstances” he could resemble “this poor man,” perhaps because Therne grew up in poverty, the difference between the two is cast in familiar bourgeois terms. Through hard work Therne has risen the circumstances to which he was born, while this poor man is destitute as a result of an alcoholism that has “turned” him “into a mere animal by drink.” Therne’s gaze projects the poverty and disease of this wanderer away from himself, as he sits on the bench immune from infection, as smallpox and alcoholism transform the body of patient zero into an animal.

Perhaps it is this constellation of images of poverty, animals and disease that trigger Therne’s memory of the horrors he saw in Mexico:

As he passed he turned and made a grimace at me, and then I saw his dreadful face. No wonder it had looked red at a distance, for the *erythema* almost covered it, except where, on the forehead and cheeks, appeared purple spots and patches. Of what did it remind me? Great heaven! I remembered. It reminded of the face of that girl I had seen lying in the *plaza* of San Jose, in Mexico, over whom the old woman was pouring water from a fountain, such a fountain as that before me, for half unconsciously, when planning this place, I had reproduced its beautiful design. It all came back to me with a shock, the horrible scene of which I had scarcely thought for years, so vividly indeed that I seemed to hear the old hag’s voice crying in cracked accents, ‘*Si, senior, viruela, viruela!*’<sup>373</sup>

The face of patient zero is superimposed with the image in Therne’s memory of the girl, the hag and the fountain in Mexico, as he realizes “half unconsciously” that he has reproduced the “beautiful design” of that same fountain. This English fountain with a Mexican design, built to serve “the public” becomes a haunting sign of the epidemic overseas, as Therne hears the elderly woman’s voice echo in his mind, “*Si, senior, viruela, viruela.*”

Following this memory, the tramp suddenly jumps in the fountain and “rains moisture from his wide coat” as he “grabs child after child.”<sup>374</sup> It is at this moment that Therne’s memories of Mexico and the picture of the ship arriving in Norway collide with the scene he watches in the park, through what are now familiar avatars: the face of smallpox, the fountain, the water, and the infection of children. And if all roads lead back to Mexico, this scene once again invokes “the evil eye” as if the hag looks down upon Dunchester through time, bringing disease and death from the colonies to England. Yet Alan Dundes has argued that in most cultures disease caused by the evil eye can be cured by getting wet.<sup>375</sup> Perhaps that is the reason Therne assumes that the people of San Jose believe in the evil eye in the first place; that is why the hag washes the young girl. Therne “half unconsciously” invokes the same superstition here but inverts cure with cause, denigrating “the superstitions” of Mexico and privileging European medicine.

If the pro-vaccination argument in *Doctor Therne* is in service of protecting the nation from the disease of the poor, the Jew and the colonies, the closing of the novel express this final

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<sup>373</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 106, original italics.

<sup>374</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 106.

<sup>375</sup> Alan Dundes, “Wet and Dry,” *The Evil Eye: A Casebook*, ed. by Alan Dundes, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992.

triumph. As Therne watches his daughter die of smallpox, he secretly vaccinates himself. As more and more people in Dunchester die around him, he is asked to address a meeting of electors regarding the epidemic and his opposition to vaccination. Ernest Merchison, his daughter's fiancé, who is outraged at her death and attacks Therne, interrupts Therne's speech:

Then with his right hand suddenly he caught me by the throat, with his left hand he gripped my linen and my garments, and at one wrench ripped them from my body, leaving my left breast and shoulder naked. And there, on the arm where every eye might read them, were those proofs of my infamy which he had sought. I swooned away, and, as I sank into oblivion, there leapt from the lips of the thousands I had betrayed that awful roar of scorn and fury which has hunted me from my home and still haunts me far across the seas. My story is done. There is nothing more to tell.<sup>376</sup>

This final struggle is not between Therne and Merchison, or even Therne and his political career. Therne's naked shoulder is revealed not as "proofs" of his "infamy," but as evidence of British immunity through the power of western science. That is the reason Therne survives, but he no longer has any use-value to the state, as he is "leached off" like "bad fluid" to the colonies, as the "scorn and fury" "hunts" and "haunts" him from his home "far across the seas."

### **The Imperial Economy of Life**

What I have tried to demonstrate with this transnational itinerary through *King Solomon's Mines* and *Doctor Therne* is that imperial policy in Haggard's fiction is a process of recuperation – of the wealth and health of Britain - that links political economy with bioeconomy. These texts operate by quantifying and qualifying the economic value of life, as the social hierarchies determined by race, class, gender and sexuality fuel an imperial and colonial contest that operates through the management of health and disease. This process produces the British bourgeois subject as masculine, white and healthy, ready to work and regenerate the state. This British life must be protected and optimized to secure the future of the nation, while other lives are imagined as surplus value: the price worth paying for imperial power.

If this is indeed one way in which we can understand Haggard's fiction, what does it mean now if we say it is about "real places and real people?" I remain unconvinced that fleshing out the text with "history" is the only way to add to the conversation about Haggard's "fictional blatancy." Yet there is one "historical" footnote that may be helpful, torn from the pages of the nostalgic diary Haggard kept during World War I. In January of 1915, he reflected on the public reception of his work:

How often have I been vituperated by rose water critics because I have written of fighting and tried to inculcate elementary lessons, such as that it is a man's duty to defend his country, and that only those who are prepared for war can protect themselves and such as are dear to them. 'Coarse! Bloody! Brutal! Uncivilized!' such has been the talk. Well, today have I done any harm by inoculating a certain number of the thousands who are at

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<sup>376</sup> *Doctor Therne*, p. 131.

the front with these primary facts, even though my work has been held to be so infinitely inferior?”<sup>377</sup>

I disagree that Haggard’s work provides only “elementary lessons.” Although his novels lack subtlety regarding “a man’s duty to defend his country” and “protect themselves,” the biopolitical landscape that he maps for his readers is far from “blatant.” It raises pressing and persistence concerns that move beyond the problematic role of history in reading literature and demands that we “rose-water” critics take seriously his blueprint for “inoculating a certain number of the thousands.” This process of inoculation must be understood as both metaphorical and literal, qualifying and quantifying those who shall live and those who will die. If Haggard’s fiction must live beyond its pages, perhaps it should alert us to what is at stake in an imperial economy of life.

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<sup>377</sup> *The Private Diaries of Sir H. Rider Haggard: 1914-1925*, ed. by D. S. Higgins, London: Cassell, 1980, p. 22.

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