Infectious Reimagining:
An Introduction to Neo-Victorian Contagion

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> "He understood in that moment, before collapsing onto the bed in agony, that seeing the present in the past was the same thing as imagining the future." (Pamuk 2023: 510)

Though grounded in embodiment, contagion is also a prevalent metaphor we live by,[1] which shapes human thought, speech, and actions. Culture relies on conceptual metaphors for its conveyance and sustainment. As Susan Sontag remarks in *Aids and Its Metaphors* (1989), "one cannot think without metaphors" (Sontag 1991: 91); nor can one 'do' culture or the cultural memory-work of neo-Victorianism without metaphors. An inherently dual term, like neo-Victorianism, contagion conflates literal and metaphorical phenomena, generates physical risks alongside imaginative opportunities, and interlaces biopolitics and ideology. In metaphorical terms, neo-Victorianism evinces distinctly contagious propensities, spreading indiscriminately through popular as well as highbrow culture and repeatedly infiltrating literary and cinematic award shortlists. Various historical moments, such as the 1960s and the decades either side of our own fin-de-siècle, have witnessed upsurges in neo-Victorianism's cultural transmission and dominance akin to the spread of a mutating virus. At any moment a new variant strain may arise – from neo-Victorian burlesque performance, digital avatar, or cosplay costume to AI chatbot.[2]

This special issue explores the tropes of contagion in neo-Victorian works including novels, video games, and TV series in the aftermath of the global COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of the finalisation of *Neo-Victorian Contagion* for publication, concerns continue to grow about the Type A H5NI avian influenza or 'bird flu', with the USA alone having had to deal with "almost 1,600 outbreaks, forcing the cull of millions of birds"; additionally, the virus has "infected up to 70 people (including one fatality), with little indication

Neo-Victorian Studies
15:2 (2024/2025)
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DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.393

its spread is under control" (O'Sullivan 2025: n.p.). The end of January 2025 also saw the first case of bird-to-human transmission of the new viral strain recorded in Britain (UK Health Security Agency 2025: n.p.), while culling of infected farmed bird flocks remains ongoing in the British Isles, with infection rates also rising in Europe. Concurrently, the USA is struggling with a number of measles outbreaks in Texas and New Mexico, which experts link to a growing distrust of immunisation, with "rates of exemptions […] ticking upwards for MMR and other required vaccines" (Blasey 2025: n.p.).[3] Since the declared end of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2023, contagion more generally remains a real and persistent threat, much as it was for the Victorians, exacerbated once again by social factors such as poverty, poor housing conditions, population pressures, and unequal access to healthcare. It thus seems unsurprising that, both before and after the pandemic, many creative practitioners should look back to the Long Nineteenth Century – a period in which epidemics were rampant at home and abroad, including cholera, influenza, and even the plague – to reflect on postmodern societies' continuing vulnerabilities and challenges when faced with old and new forms of contagion.

These forms, of course, exceed just physical manifestations of disease, also embracing sociocultural and ideological ills metaphorised as forms of systemic 'sickness' and dangerous 'contamination' affecting the body politic and the biosphere. As Sontag asserts, "[i]llnesses have always been used to enliven charges that society was corrupt or unjust" and "to judge society not [just] as out of balance but as repressive" (Sontag 1991: 73, 74). Put differently, neo-Victorian contagion forms part of "a larger contemporary obsession with metaphors and modalities of contagion", expressed through recurrent cultural "patterns and prejudices" (de Bruin-Molé and Polak 2021: 2), with their own long history of evolution and 'viral' mutation. Consequently, neo-Victorian audiences are called upon to undertake detective work, decoding clues as to the multifarious literal or symbolic nature of diseases represented on page or screen.

Saverio Tomaiuolo's contribution, 'The (Neo-)Victorian Sherlock Holmes Paradigm' thus strikes one of the keynotes of this special issue by exploring how Holmesian-inflected neo-Victorian mysteries confront contamination threats to reimagined imperial Britain. In the three novels he considers – Tom Holland's *Supping with Panthers* (1996), George Mann's *The Affinity Bridge* (2008), and David Stuart Davies's *Sherlock Holmes: The Shadow of the Rat* (2010) – the investigators discover that, all too often, supposedly external perils turn out to have homegrown origins. Tamaiuolo

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.393

traces the Holmesian inductive approach to contagion – forcing discomfiting self-reflection and the revision of fundamental ideological assumptions in its proponents – back to Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Dying Detective' (1913), before outlining the paradigm's extension to real-world scientific practice before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Both literary and scientific applications, he notes, focus on the dangers inherent in the continuous flow and circulation of goods and people on which global capitalism and hence the wealth of nations depend.

Problematically, the Sherlock Holmes Paradigm also raises spectres of unjustified nativist and reactionary fears of contagion by outsiders or 'aliens', a kind of 'viropolitics' that all the contributions to this special issue engage with in one form or another, even if not naming it as such. The term appears to have first been applied in literary studies by Sandra Becker, Megan de Bruin-Molé, and Sara Polak in their edited collection entitled *Embodying Contagion: The Viropolitics of Horror and Desire in Contemporary Discourse* (2021). Priscilla Wald's preface to the collection only briefly defines the term as a form of Othering, namely as the "slippage between the material and the monstrous" (Wald 2021: xvi), while de Bruin-Molé and Polak's introduction – rather curiously – offers no definition. That is left to de Bruin-Molé's sole-authored chapter in the volume, in which she explicates the term as "the way [a particular] figure evokes metaphors of disease and methods for its containment within a socio-political discourse of otherness and consumption" (de Bruin-Molé 2021: 161). The critic thus draws a crucial link between strategic politicised Othering and capitalist economics.

While the concept's etymology remains unclear – currently 'viropolitics' is not included even in major dictionaries like the online *Oxford English Dictionary* – the term has been deployed in other disciplines, such as political psychology (see Hernandez 2021)[4] and political science. In the latter field, Jesús Ayala-Colqui draws on Michel Foucault's work on modernity's disciplinary regimes and "the anatomopolitics of the human body" to analyse the global COVID-19 pandemic and interventionist strategies of control in terms of governmental aims to preserve the wealth of the privileged, both individuals and nations, in what he terms "the valorization of private capital" (Ayala-Colqui 2020: 382, 377). This process "is only materially pertinent under capitalistic governmentality", though not "exclusive" to the latter since global capitalism now influences all forms of government (Ayala-Colqui 2020: 388). In other words, viropolitics connotes technologies of power that

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.393

ensure and enhance sociocultural inequality and differential precarity. The latter, of course, remain major focal points of neo-Victorian creative practice, criticism, and theory in their efforts to excavate marginalised perspectives, recover silenced histories, and promote historical accountability – even if only capable of affording symbolic redress to historical victims.

The focus of Tomaiuolo's article on strategic (and misleading) Othering in the service of (neo-)imperialist agendas calls to mind the virulent fake 'truths' spread on right-wing media and social media, even when contradicted by hard facts and evidence. In this context, we might think of the horrific stabbings, on 24 July 2024, of three young girls in Southport, England, by the teenage Axel Rudakubana, precipitating riots in the town and elsewhere in the UK in response to circulated misinformation as to the perpetrator's supposed Muslim faith and immigrant status. Instead, Rudakubana, later charged under the UK's Biological Weapons Act 1974 (for the possession of ricin) and the Terrorism Act 2000, was born into a Christian family in Cardiff, Wales, and had been radicalised in the UK. Yet even when the assailant's initially withheld name and identity were released by the authorities, the rioting continued, implicating the social system, its failing guardrails, and the corrupted *sensus communis* as infected by misinformation gone viral. Interestingly, however, Tamaiuolo also proposes potentially more positive connotations to contagion, which may ameliorate such social aberration. In his view, the Arts and Humanities (and neo-Victorianism) employ the trope to create 'contact zones' of constructive exchange, self-reflection, and reengagement with historical actualities that break down isolationist barriers and help counteract the increasing polarisation of society. Tamaiuolo thus opens up critical space for reading contagion fiction not just as culturally revealing but also as socio-politically *productive*.

One especially productive text that may serve as an introduction to the global complexities of this special issue's thematics is Orhan Pamuk's *Nights of Plague* (2021), which explicitly deploys and develops the Sherlock Holmes Paradigm as well as the viropolitics trope. Although receiving a fair amount of review coverage and critical attention, Pamuk's mammoth novel (stretching to 683 pages of rather small print in Faber & Faber's English translation) has not yet been discussed within neo-Victorian frameworks. Due to the novel's likely significance to future discussions of neo-Victorian contagion fiction, *Nights of Plague* deserves further consideration here,

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especially as its concerns align closely with those highlighted in this special issue's contributions and the neo-Victorian texts they discuss.

Set at the contraction of the Ottoman Empire in 1901, Pamuk's text traces the state's biopolitical efforts to contain an outbreak of bubonic plague on the fictional Turkish island of Mingheria, intertwined with sectarian divisions, nascent nationalist ambitions, and global East-West strong-arm stratagems. Caught in the middle are Princess Pakize, daughter of the deposed Sultan Murad V, and her new bourgeois husband and quarantine expert, Prince Consort Doctor Nuri Bey, joining "a special mission to China" tasked with "counsel[ling] China's angry Muslim community against joining the surge of popular anti-Western uprisings" in order to placate European powers and prevent their further encroachments on Ottoman domains (Pamuk 2023: 8, 26). On the couple's journey, their ship picks up Stanislaw Bonkowski Pasha, the "Ottoman Empire's Chief Inspector of Public Health and Sanitation" (Pamuk 2023: 8-9), dropping him off at Mingheria. When soon thereafter, Bonkowski is murdered in mysterious circumstances – amid suspicions that he himself has "brought sickness and quarantine" to Mingheria (Pamuk 2023: 70; also see 334) – the couple's ship is promptly ordered back to the island by Sultan Abdul Hamid. With Nuri aiding the investigation into his colleague's killing and charged with helping to contain the growing epidemic in Bankowski's stead, the newlyweds become stranded on the island as ever stricter quarantine measures are introduced and Turkish and European powers' warships impose a joint blockade.

Nights of Plague eerily anticipates the COVID-19 crisis, even though Pamuk had begun writing the novel in 2016, well before the start of the pandemic (see Shulevitz 2022: n.p.). That catastrophe, of course, precipitated an upsurge in popular and academic interest in contagion fiction, with some of the high-profile texts in this vein, which appeared in the decade preceding the outbreak, proving uncannily prophetic like Pamuk's novel.[5] *Nights of Plague*'s depiction of initial attempts to keep the outbreak a secret;[6] the delay in quarantine imposition; the eventual travel and punitive lockdown restrictions (repeatedly disregarded by public officials like Sami Pasha, the island's governor, who continues to meet covertly with his Greek mistress); the rules' exacerbated impact on the poor; disinfection and social distancing regimes; the depopulated cityscape;[7] and constraints on religious observance and burial rituals – along with the outrage and resistance these measures provoke – all call to mind their recent real-world equivalents. As Bonkowski

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explains to Mingheria's governor, shortly before his death, "There is no remedy for the plague but quarantine and isolation!" (Pamuk 2023: 41). Meanwhile, Princess Pakize's position replicates her quasi-lockdown life of total seclusion in her deposed father's palace in Turkey prior to her marriage; as she remarks, "I am quite used to not being allowed outside!" (Pamuk 2023: 279). Similarly, references to "a benighted populace that rejects science" (Pamuk 2023: 158) recall twenty-first-century anti-vaccine activism and social media's endorsement of homemade remedies and other dubious 'preventatives' or 'cures' for contagion, which saw a marked increase during the COVID-19 pandemic.[8] Pamuk's novel further critiques past and present-day governments' implicit as opposed to declared priorities – one might think of the efforts of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's administration to reduce pressure on UK hospitals by having them discharge untested contagious patients into care homes at the start of the pandemic, contributing to huge losses among the country's elderly and most vulnerable. As Sami Pasha admits, albeit only to himself, "[t]he primary function of […] quarantine protocols was clearly to safeguard *the state* from disease, not Mingherians" (Pamuk 2023: 156, added emphasis), in effect rendering individual lives dispensable.

Yet *Nights of Plague* also foregrounds the Holmesian method of inductive reasoning to try and make sense of the "tremendous catastrophe" facing the islanders (Pamuk 2023: 59), the resulting increased authoritarianism, and feelings of powerlessness among the population. The royal princess and her consort spend their time together "[e]mulating the characters of her uncle's beloved detective novels" (Pamuk 2023: 186), the Sultan being an avid reader and admirer of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Doctor Nuri often wanders Mingheria's capital city of Arkaz – a name perhaps ironically punning on Alcatraz – "to see for himself the symptoms of the disease, the signs of the spreading outbreak"; he muses that "the spread of the disease seemed to coalesce with the actions of the killer"[9] and reflects on "the remarkable similarity between solving a murder and stopping an epidemic" (Pamuk 2023: 186-187). Later, the doctor expresses his conviction to the governor that the Sultan "wishes for us to find Bonkowski Pasha's true killer just like Sherlock Holmes would—that is, by examining the details of the murder and building a case based on evidence, not on beatings and torture" and by "solv[ing] this murder like Europeans would" (Pamuk 2023: 188).

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At various points, the two men confront their opposing ideological positions, both on the murder investigation and on the epidemic's containment. Nuri espouses a more progressive attitude, based on 'soft' power and an honest ethics of care. In contrast, Sami Pasha represents a diehard reactionary authoritarianism and manipulative political expediency, readily sacrificing individual rights for what he deems the greater good (albeit of the realm and those in power rather than first and foremost the island's general population). The men thus discuss

> the relative merits of studying the available evidence to reach a conclusion (inductive reasoning), a process which […] they referred to as "the Sherlock Holmes method," versus those of applying a through and comprehensive political logic to establish the identity of the culprit from the outset and locate supporting evidence accordingly (deductive reasoning). (Pamuk 2023: 224)

Disconcertingly, however, Sami Pasha's method, resorting to antiquated forms of interrogation, forcibly extracted confessions, and brutal punishments, appears rather more effective in repressing contagion, in terms of both literal infection and political dissent. Without recourse to authoritarian strictures, as also employed during the COVID-19 crisis, progressive modernity proves at best woefully inefficient, at worst abjectly helpless in the face of a full-blown epidemic.

References to Sherlock Holmes and the Holmesian method recur throughout Pamuk's novel.[10] In Nuri's recalled first meeting with the Sultan, the doctor explains the new British 'invention' of epidemiology that dispelled the miasma theory of cholera, concluding that with proper maps to record cases of the disease, "an epidemiologist could uncover the mystery behind an outbreak without examining a single patient" – at which the Sultan exclaims, "Just like Sherlock Holmes!" (Pamuk 20023: 195). Yet on Mingheria, the quarantine committee's plague maps fail to deliver the desired containment or reveal "the mystery" of how the outbreak originated or might be stopped, much as the death statistics some Western governments published on a regular basis did little to stem the tide of COVID-19. Elsewhere in the novel, the links between epidemiology and detection are further elaborated. After recounting another murder, the poisoning of a health official initially thought

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to have contracted the plague, the narrator refers to the doubled Othering of those infected, noting "the fact that plague victims were so often treated as if they had committed a crime, and that those infected were confined almost like prisoners to the isolation facility in the Castle's prison wing" (Pamuk 2023: 224). Hence the novel underlines Nuri's implication in a repressive disciplinary regime of social control that treats illness, like criminality, as a form of *deviance* – pertinently designated by Mariaconcetta Constantini and Saverio Tomaiuolo as both "a semantic and structural pivot of neo-Victorianism" (Constantini and Tomaiuolo 2015: 9).

Disease and disease control are exposed as tools of disciplinary power that actively engage in Othering and exploit Otherness for sociopolitical purposes, in other words, a form of viropolitics. Nuri's initial conversation with Bonkowski aboard ship proves revealing in this regard, highlighting as it does the strategic politicisation of disease not just as a means of internal policing (e.g. of ethnic self-determination movements) but also of intercultural competition for world hegemony. Nuri praises Bonkowski's "victory over the plague in Smyrna" as

> ["]a fitting riposte to those who would call the Ottoman Empire a 'sick man.' We may have yet to eradicate cholera, but there has not been a serious outbreak of plague in Ottoman lands in eighty years. They used to say, 'The dividing line of civilisation that sets Europe and the Ottomans two hundred years apart is not the Danube, but the plague!' But now, thanks to you, that line has disappeared, at least in the fields of medicine and quarantine studies."
>
> "Alas, the plague has now been detected on the island of Mingheria," said Bonkowski Pasha. "And with exceptional virulence too. […] [I]t is only natural that you should not have been aware, […] for they are keeping it secret. […]"
>
> "I have been following the effects of the epidemic in Hong Kong and Bombay, and reading the latest reports."
>
> "The situation is much graver than what is being written," said Bonkowski Pasha […]. "It is the same microbe, the same strain that has killed thousands in India and China and it is the one we saw in Smyrna too." (Pamuk 2023: 14-15)

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The pejorative description of the Sultan's realm as a diseased dying body, like the denigration of the Ottoman civilisation as 'lesser' (since implicitly contaminated), reveal the West's strategic deployment of disease metaphors to deny the Ottoman Empire equal standing as a global power.

Significantly, however, Nuri and Bonkowski follow Western precedent in projecting the origins of the plague elsewhere, namely onto 'Othered' Asia, specifically China and India. As the novel's narrator (eventually revealed to be Princess Pakize's great-granddaughter) explains, the period's dominant British, French, Russian, and German powers "believed that plague and cholera spread to Europe and the rest of the world from Mecca and Medina", and blamed Muslims, especially Hajj pilgrims, for having "brought these diseases to the West" (Pamuk 2023: 77). Hence, she concludes, "the sources of the world's plague and cholera epidemics were China and India, while their distribution center was considered to be the Hejaz Province of the Ottoman Empire" (Pamuk 2023: 77), containing Islam's most holy sites.[11] Yet the narrator proceeds to qualify this assessment by pointedly noting that some of the "[d]octors and quarantine experts", especially "younger Muslim doctors", held "that Western powers exaggerated this contention for political purposes and used it toward the intellectual, spiritual, and military humiliation of the peoples and nations of the world outside of Europe" (Pamuk 2023: 77). Not coincidentally, some islanders believe that the plague was introduced to Mingheria "deliberately to cause harm and wrest the island away from Ottoman rule, just like Crete" (Pamuk 2023: 339). In effect, Pamuk raises the sceptres of scapegoating and the use of disease and disease control to assert, maintain, and strengthen global hegemonies.

Based on implicit assumptions of Western Christian societies' superiority and advanced development, a similar phenomenon, of course, was also seen during the recent pandemic, when wealthy 'First World' nations dominated vaccine development and production (though often trialled in developing countries), subsequently restricted access to and hoarded new vaccines, and distributed them unequally, not according to greatest need but according to which nations could pay the most. For some parties, the COVID-19 crisis thus became little more than a capitalist opportunity to create new markets and maximise profits from suffering. Yet at the same time as blaming China for the pandemic – most famously in US President Trump's renaming of the disease as the 'China virus' – Western nations also insisted that global supply lines were kept open for their own populations' benefit, e.g. as regards

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DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.393

the procurement of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and testing kits from China. *Nights of Plague*, then, adopts the typical anti-imperialist stance of neo-Victorianism in deconstructing the West's metanarratives, self-serving fictions of humanitarianism, and aspirations of economic dominance, while also satirising commonplace Islamophobia, past and present. Here too Pamuk's novel of contagion uncannily foreshadows current events, with Western powers making drastic cuts to aid budgets while ramping up military spending that supports the profitable military-industrial complex and technology sectors, which seek new opportunities to trial mass surveillance, data collection, and AI target generation systems. Not coincidentally, for most of the novel, Mingheria's bombardment by both Western and Turkish war ships remains a prevalent threat hanging over the island.

In *Nights of Plague*, the disease epidemic and quarantine, leaving the islanders isolated and entirely reliant on themselves, eventually precipitate Mingheria's unexpected declaration of independence. Initiating a period of anarchy, the nationalist revolution sees political detainees as well as those held in isolation released, so that soon the streets "were swarming with hardened criminals, rapists, murderers, and plague-infested prisoners, as well as those suspected of having caught the disease" (Pamuk 2023: 502). Once again, contagion discourse constructs problematic equivalences between agential deviance and inadvertent infection. Biopolitics merges into viropolitics,[12] with Pamuk using the plague "to expose the infirmities of [the island's] body politic" (Shulevitz 2022: n.p.). The Mingherian body politic undergoes several rapid contortions: from Ottoman absolutist rule, through the short-lived presidency of Commander Kâmil (from whose death throes of plague this introduction's epigraph derives), the equally brief theocratic regime of Sheik Hamdullah, and Princess Pakize's short rule as constitutional monarch, to the return to authoritarianism under Mazhar Effendi, former spy master, later First Minister, and then President. Ironically, *Nights of Plague* thus implicates epi/pandemics in undermining reformist democratising movements by heightening – and justifying – authoritarian governmental tendencies, even once disease outbreaks eventually ebb off.

We may expect an increasing resort to viropolitics by critics working on neo-Victorian narratives that focus on contagion and epidemiological catastrophe, especially from deconstructive or postcolonial perspectives interrogating master narratives, and by writers mining the same veins. Not least, as Cynthia J. Davis remarks, "[a]s a metaphor, contagion proves

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.393

particularly seductive to narrators of cross-cultural encounters" (Davis 2002: 831), as well as theorists thereof. Indeed, defining viropolitics as the manifestation and perpetuation of overt and implicit regulatory forms of governmentality, "intertwined" with "*regimes of knowledge, economically encoded materialities* […], *power apparatuses and processes of subjectivation*", Ayala-Colqui stresses that the phenomenon is further "bound up with" both "gender governance" and "colonialized governance of race" serving capitalist exploitation (Ayala-Colqui 2020: 380, original emphasis). Although he applies viropolitics, or the "updating and repurposing of such power technologies", to the particular COVID-19 crisis, his definition evinces clear relevance to other contexts before and after the recent pandemic. It seems no coincidence, for instance, that Pamuk's narrator in *Nights of Plague* should note the variance in applications of nineteenth-century quarantine at the heart of empire and in colonised territories: "even as the British announced, back home in London, that isolating and imposing cordons was 'pointless,' they still relied on those same methods in Bombay, using the army to enforce them" (Pamuk 2023: 140).

Alessandra Olga Grazia Serra's 'Viral Monsters: Frankenstein's Creatures in TV Series and Neo-Victorian "Contagious" Re-Writings of the Canon' explicitly foregrounds viropolitics as the other major keynote of this special issue in her analysis of two neo-Victorian television series: John Logan's *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) and Benjamin Ross and Barry Langford*'s The Frankenstein Chronicles* (2015-2017). Serra investigates the role of contagion – and the resulting exclusionary Othering of the 'contaminated' – in fermenting countercultural resistance to an inequitable social status quo (analogous to Mingheria's declaration of independence in Pamuk's novel). Repeatedly linked to disease, the scientifically Othered and 'reborn' monstrous protagonists of both series subversively use their imposed difference to expose the amoral heart of the Victorian establishment that exploits its poorest and most vulnerable citizens even beyond death. The novels' viropolitical discourse reveals the workings of an inhumane capitalist system that regards less privileged individuals – and hence those most vulnerable to disease exposure and infection – as dispensable tools to bolster the power of the ruling classes, including scientists and self-appointed social reformers. In Serra's reading, plagues and epidemics merely become another means to perpetuate capitalist predation of designated Others.[13]

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Further contributions to this special issue describe a parallel trajectory to arrive at comparable conclusions, likewise engaging with viropolitics, although not employing the term itself. In 'Diagnosing Disease: Discrimination and Precarity in Emma Donoghue's *Frog Music* (2014) and Michael Nava's *The City of Palaces* (2014)', Georgia Ntola focuses on the especially disastrous impact of disease control measures on those subjected to intersectional discrimination, such as women and ethnic minorities. Both neo-Victorian novels' prescient depictions of containment efforts cast a spotlight on systemic social inequalities, exacerbated by the rise of nascent nationalism – whether American or Mexican – reliant on xenophobic self-differentiation from 'alien' Others. Ntola argues that disease outbreaks tend to render stigmatisation and abjection less objectionable, even acceptable as mainstream political tools. Her analysis thus resonates uncomfortably with the current shifting world order that tends ever more towards an 'us' versus 'them' mentality, a polarisation already evoked in Tomaiuolo's and Serra's articles. Crucially, however, Ntola further reflects on the risks of exploring such issues from neo-Victorianism's own would-be colourblind position of privilege. The continuing dominance of white-centred narratives and white practitioners in neo-Victorian creative production, criticism, and canon-formation, she suggests, reveal the field's own viral tendencies towards colonising appropriation and inadvertent exclusionary politics. Ntola's article therefore also acknowledges the crucial role assumed by metaphor in exposing critical blind spots within the neo-Victorian project.

Sarah Beyvers's '"The Plague swept through here": The Negotiation of Victorian Anxieties about Contagion and Class in *The Order: 1886* (2015) and *Dishonored* (2012)' shifts the focus to two neo-Victorian video games, analysing how they implicate players in – or render them 'contaminated' by – the exploitative sociopolitical agendas exposed in their playthroughs. The article's implicit engagement with viropolitics becomes evident in the critic's unpacking of the games' pursuance of authoritarian, even exterminatory disease discourse and control to sustain hegemonic power bases, while exacerbating precarity for the marginalised. The games' medium-specific features confront players with the implications of different kinds of embodiment in the gameworld and, by extension, in the extradiegetic world also. Indeed, with the continuing rise of weaponised hate speech in right-wing politics on both sides of the Atlantic, Beyver's article echoes present-day predications of nations' health, wealth, and integrity on combatting purported

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.393

insidious or invasive threats posed by derogated Others, whether political enemies,[14] asylum seekers, migrants,[15] or global competitors. As players critically engage with the gameworlds' social problems, they face only limited options: to become complicit agents of a murderous 'diseased' regime, become counteragents rejecting their viropolitical roles, or admit their own powerlessness in changing the status quo and its systemic inequalities.

Rosalind Crocker's contribution, '"This contrived *Quarantine*": Local Lockdown as Heterotopia in Sheri Holman's *The Dress Lodger* (2000)', likewise explores the punitive impacts of disease control measures that exacerbate intersectional discrimination. Crocker reconsiders the novel's depiction of the 1831 cholera epidemic in Sunderland in the light of Foucault's concept of heterotopia and offers a presentist comparative reading of the recent COVID-19 crisis to expose collective health crises' potential for the enactment of bureaucratic and governmental violence against the poor. The critic identifies parallels between bodily and urban topographies under epidemic conditions, both penetrated and assailed by hostile forces conceptualised as external invaders, with societies' reliance on globalised trade – Sunderland being a major Victorian shipping port – again providing gateways for contagion. In line with Ayala-Colqui's earlier cited linking of viropolitics to the "colonialized governance of race", Crocker also unpacks the imperialist strains of such problematic figurations of disease, especially in the pathologisation of poverty itself as the source of contamination. In the novel, the progressive Dr Henry Chiver, much like Pamuk's Nuri, seeks to achieve a quasi-panoptic surveillance over the city's quarantined population. However, he also uses the corpses of the poor, illicitly procured from body snatchers or seized under the guise of acting on behalf of the city's Board of Health, in furtherance of his own professional ambitions, so that the medical authority figure becomes associated with deviance.[16] Crocker's piece, then, reveals how containment and lockdown discourse provide convenient cover for personal profiteering and other forms of criminality, and unsurprisingly, also give rise to conspiracy theories concerning authorities' true agendas, e.g. as regards suppressing social reform movements.

At the end of Holman's novel, the collective ghostly chorus of Sunderland's exploited and sacrificed poor erupts in an act of vocal counterinsurgency, condemning self-serving medical 'ethics' and implicating the reader in the consumption of abjected suffering bodies and lives. This risk

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.393

of deriving unethical pleasure from suffering, of course, attends all narratives of contagion. Creative practitioners' negotiations of this risk contribute to neo-Victorianism's inherent temporal doubleness and self-consciousness, which undermine any complacent security in the degree of progress made since the Long Nineteenth Century. As Jill Lepore aptly points out, while "[t]he great dream of the Enlightenment was progress", akin to the dream of the Long Nineteenth Century, "the great dread of epidemic is regress" (Lepore 2022: n.p.). This proves especially topical in light of how today's discourses of disease continue to resort to invective Othering for both official and popular forms of discrimination and dehumanisation, frequently recycling nineteenth-century tropes.

The final two contributions thus focalise the third keynote of this special issue, moving beyond counter-cultural resistance to explore alternative engagements with disease that reject Othering and instead foreground a reparatory ethics of care. In doing so, however, both critics also revisit the prevalent *lack* of such ethics in reimagined contexts of contagion and pursuits of isolationist politics, all too often used to perpetuate social injustice against marginalised individuals or communities.

Christian Gallichio's 'Nationalistic Contagion in Dacre Stoker and J. D. Barker's *Dracul*: or, "the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck"' considers the co-authored *Dracul* (2018), a Gothicised biofiction opening with Bram Stoker's mysterious childhood affliction, as a subversive inversion of the well-established foreignness-as-contagion trope. Bram's nanny, Ellen Crone, a victim of Dracula's vampirisation, becomes another (viropolitical) counteragent, using her supernatural abilities to cure rather than pollute Bram. In adult life, Bram, along with his siblings, helps Ellen find and reassemble the dismembered body of her lover, dispersed by Dracula around the globe. *Dracul* thus traces a reciprocal enacted ethics of care – across both national borders and the human/abhuman divide – that may finally lead to the vanquishing of the threat posed by the vampire count. Accordingly, Gallichio's presentist reading of the novel offers a counter-discourse to the isolationism of the COVID-19 pandemic that swept the globe just two years after the novel's publication. Gallichio argues that, instead of a defensive sectarian localism based on social separation and containment, *Dracul* advocates for cosmopolitanism and globalism as the means of pooling crucial knowledge to find an effective remedial response to transnational threats of contagion that respect no borders. The real dangers to the health of the

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individual body and body politic, then, lie in nativist and racist disavowals of the essential interconnectivity of peoples and nations and their shared humanity.[17]

The final article, Jeanne Ellis's 'Short-Storying Neo-Victorian Contagion: The 1847 Typhus Epidemic in Andrea Barrett's "Ship Fever"' likewise centralises an ethics of care, restoring full humanity and grievability to denigrated Others. Ellis contends that Barrett's 1996 short story critiques the British government's callous dismissal of nineteenth-century Irish lives as filthy contaminants – deemed to count far less than those of the citizens of mainland Britain or Canada, where the destitute immigrants seek refuge from the Great Famine. Akin to Holman's Sunderland as discussed by Crocker, Ellis reads the quarantine station at Grosse Isle as a heterotopia of deviation,[18] which seeks to contain the spread of typhus from the so-called coffin ships to the mainland. Yet it also exposes the colonial authorities' reluctance to spend sufficiently to save those deemed worthless, thus replicating the inhumane conditions in and withholding of proper alleviation from famine-stricken Ireland. These viropolitical tensions are mediated through the dual narrations of Lauchlin Grant, a progressive doctor battling official indifference to Irish suffering, and the Irish refugee and typhus-victim turned nurse, Nora Kynd, who selflessly cares for Lauchlin as he himself succumbs to the disease despite the much better, preferential care accorded him on account of his class. 'Ship Fever' intertwines the fictional protagonists' developing personal affinity – through caring for one another and other afflicted patients – with various historical factual materials in a complex 'web of affinities', which both evokes George Eliot's concept of intricately interknit lives in *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and interweaves the storied past with the extradiegetic present-day. Ellis argues that the compressed short story form provides a particularly suitable means to convey the disastrous restrictions of under-funded quarantine and the resulting overwhelming of healthcare resources and capabilities. Hence Barrett's 1996 short story, like so many other neo-Victorian texts discussed in this special issue, takes on a prescient cast when revisited post-pandemic.

In 'Ship Fever', Kynd's perspective provides a counter-agential node of resistance to the viropolitical discourse of the refugees' dehumanisation. However, it is Laughlin's legacy of a committed ethics of care that points the way to a better, more inclusive, and more humane future built on genuine empathy that rejects Othering for interconnection. Hence contagion

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narratives, like real-world pandemics, also afford learning opportunities, reminding audiences of our shared humanity and vulnerabilities. As Lu Liu and Marjorie Faulstich Orellana stressed in their reflections on the often politically and socially divisive COVID-19 crisis, while still ongoing,

> [t]hough the public narrative centers around conflict and contradiction, most people have experienced some form of kindness during the pandemic. As we learn more about the contagiousness and lethality of the coronavirus and its variants, we see how strongly interconnected we are and how much we need the benevolence and mercy of others. The pandemic, therefore, has opened new possibilities for us to perceive and rethink "interconnectedness," experience care in new ways, and *learn acts of kindness*. (Liu and Faulstich Orellana 2022: n.p., original emphasis).

Whether protagonists in neo-Victorian contagion fiction undermine the system from within, by refusing to participate in or perpetuate invidious viropolitics, or apply the Holmesian paradigm to expose official malpractice, abuse, or lack of care in disease control, the threat of contagion thus also encompasses unexpected positive potentials.

In *Nights of Plague* too "the epidemic act[s] as a catalyst for change" (Shulevitz 2022: n.p.), not just as regards Mingheria's self-determination. Even before the revolution, Doctor Nuri reflects on how epidemics' facilitation of authoritarianism provides unforeseen opportunities for progressive social engineering and urban renewal:

> Burning down grimy, impoverished neighborhoods during outbreaks of cholera has been regarded in some cases as a chance to clear docks and city centers of loiterers, vagrants, and petty criminals, and an opportunity to engage in a little urban planning—opening up new, modern areas within cities, and creating public parks to benefit the health of all citizens. (Pamuk 2023: 157)

Moreover, this process can work both ways, up-down as well as down-up, empowering even marginalised stakeholders, as Naomi C. Schoenfeld

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demonstrates via the real-world example of San Franciso's homeless population during the COVID-19 pandemic. When an outbreak struck a major shelter, after the city's declaration of the 'shelter-in-place' ordinance on 16 March 2020, "panic among local leaders and advocates for people experiencing homelessness [PEH]", precipitated a move away from "congregate shelters" to more individualised and "more dignified […] housing options" via "what became known as the San Francisco Shelter in Place Hotel Program" (Schoenfeld 2022: n.p.). In the wake of this solution, initially conceived as just a temporary disease control measure, the city adopted what Schoenfeld terms "new *viropolitical* processes" – the simplification of complex bureaucratic procedures and budgetary mechanisms – that effected "a once-in-a-generation expansion of resources" in "supportive housing" capacities (Schoenfeld 2022: n.p., original emphasis). PEH and their advocates flipped the viropolitical discourse of stigmatisation into a constructive "*viropragmatism*" by "leveraging the acute risk of the virus to address the chronic risks of homelessness" (Schoenfeld 2022: n.p., original emphasis), and reconfigure contagion as an opportunity to effect structural change for the better. Paradoxically, contagion realigned the city's approach to the problem of homelessness from a concern with risk and control to a focus on care and dignity. As Schoenfeld sums up this renegotiation, formerly discounted "PEH […] *c[a]me to matter* through a politics of contagion" (Schoenfeld 2022: n.p., added emphasis).

Neo-Victorian narratives likewise make marginalised, excluded, and ex-centric nineteenth-century subjects "*matter*" to today's audiences "through a politics of contagion". In the process, such works model constructive tools – Holmesian inductive scepticism, greater empathy, a commitment to a more inclusive and democratised ethics of care – that counter and contest the insidious, even 'pestiferous', viropolitical discourse inherited from the Long Nineteenth Century and gaining new momentum today. Hence narratives of contagion, especially in neo-Victorian guise, are always in some sense paranoid of ulterior objectives encoded in disease and containment discourse and its investment in myriad forms of Othering.[19] Interestingly, however, this tendency *predates* the COVID-19 crisis, as the pre-2020 publication or release dates of many of the works analysed in this special issue make clear. Meanwhile, the recent pandemic provides a useful lens through which to reassess these texts and confirm their continuing relevance to our historical post-truth moment.[20]

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Where does neo-Victorian contagion fiction proceed from here, then? We may expect the focus on viropolitics to assume increasing prominence in future reimaginings of nineteenth-century epidemics and pandemics, alongside more detailed theorisations and applications of the concept in neo-Victorian criticism. The still under-explored concept of the 'Virocene'[21] will probably also begin to feature more widely, along with attendant considerations of the links between economic and ecological vulnerability and oppression. Additionally, critics may start to concentrate on less frequently depicted nineteenth-century diseases than those discussed in this special issue, e.g. yellow fever, polio, tuberculosis, rabies and, of course, sexually transmitted diseases, especially syphilis – some of which are currently seeing a real-world resurgence. It seems likely that Gothicised 'deviant' figurations of doctors, scientists, and medical experts will continue to proliferate in line with concerns about advances in genetic engineering and human enhancements (possibly including enforced adaptation to environmental degradation and climate change), while also reflecting present-day anxieties about lapses in research ethics or medical errors, shortfalls, and malpractice in diseased patients' care. Foreseeably, all these topics will garner further creative and critical interest in the light of funding pressures on scientific research, struggling national health systems, ongoing health scandals (e.g. the infected blood scandal in the UK), and the perceived profiteering by the pharmaceutical industry – elaborating on the common strand of contagion's links to capitalist exploitation examined in many of the articles in this issue. Another promising theme for exploration relates to the ingrained racial politics of disease control, past and present, comparable to the already much-mined vein of the role of gendered politics in nineteenth-century treatments of hysteria and insanity. Perhaps in due course, this journal will dedicate a further special issue to the theme of *Neo-Victorian Viropolitics in the Virocene*.

A more specific innovation, of which we may also expect to see more, might be termed 'neo-Victorian pandemic futures fiction'. *The Disinvited Guest* (2022) by the prolific crime, mystery, and Young Adult fantasy writer Carol Goodman,[22] which appeared while the COVID-19 pandemic was still in progress, provides a pertinent example in point. The novel imagines another unspecified pandemic in the near future, complete with isolation strictures, mask-wearing, social distancing, and self-testing kits. Ada, the best friend of the writer-narrator Lucy Harper, remarks, "Who would have thought

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we'd be back in this mess again?" (Goodman 2022: 11). However, Goodman's depiction of the transition from the Anthropocene to the Virocene only renders such recurrent 'messes' more than likely. Three couples related by bonds of family and friendship flee for safety from contagion to the privately owned Fever Island, off the coast of Maine, the inherited family property of Lucy's wealthy husband Reed and his sister Liz, accompanied by Reed's childhood friend, the caretaker Mac. Reed explains that the island "was a quarantine site in the nineteenth century", initially "built in 1832 during a cholera epidemic" and later, in 1848, housed typhoid-infected Irish passengers from the coffin ships (Goodman 2022: 13), akin to Grosse Isle in Barrett's 'Ship Fever'.[23] Meanwhile Fever House, the grand summer retreat where the group waits out the pandemic, was the site's former fever hospital, where Reed's "five-times-great-grandfather", whose name he bears, "was one of the doctors who treated hundreds of patients, most of whom died" (Goodman 2022: 13). In due course, Lucy discovers the 'lost' 1848 diary of her husband's forebear, Dr Nathaniel Reed Harper, extracts of which are interpolated into Lucy's own narrative.

Nathaniel's diary exposes the unimaginable horrors of the coffin ships and the woefully underfunded, inadequate care only grudgingly provided by officialdom for the starving refugees and typhus sufferers. Their mass deaths are reduced to statistics to be "rattled off" by Dr Fleming, his senior colleague, with Nathaniel recording that "I could barely take in the multitudes or believe so many had died" (Goodman 2022: 74), before he witnesses their abjection and existential extremity for himself. The first ship's captain, whom Harper encounters, dismisses the signs of the passengers' scurvy with the claim of having "r[u]n out of limes halfway through the journey", eliciting sarcastic outrage from the doctor:

> "Did you run out of food as well," I asked the portly captain, observing that he did not show any signs of deprivation, "or did you just keep it all to yourself?"
>
> The captain bristled at my insult and began defending his treatment of his passengers' rations of oatmeal and biscuit.
>
> "They were half starved when they came abroad," he said. "I'm a seaman not a nursemaid." (Goodman 2022: 78)

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The ironic, medically inflected language – "deprivation", "treatment", "nursemaid" – only serves to underline the refugees' subhuman Othering as not meriting genuine care or safeguarding from hunger or disease. In similar vein, Dr Fleming contends that "[a]ny relief program" in Ireland "would have caused irreparable harm to the natural order of free trade" and would have rendered the poor reliant "on aid that could not be sustained" (Goodman 2022: 99). Again, capitalist imperatives, safeguarding private and national wealth, override common humanity.

The same applies to the contemporary plotline. Ada's husband Crosby, an inner-city hospital administrator who has deserted his post (just as his wife forsook her nursing duties in the same facility's emergency department), selfishly raided the hospital dispensary before his departure. Hence Fever House is "fully stocked with medical supplies", and the island's residents have "enough drugs for every eventuality" (Goodman 2022: 30). Yet these stockpiles likely leave poorer city dwellers, unable to escape to private island sanctuaries, facing crucial shortfalls in medication, accentuating their exposure to the threat of infection and disease. Lepore claims that the "destruction" wrought by epidemics in literature, especially in American fiction, "often comes with a democratic twist: contagion is the last leveller" (Lepore 2020: n.p.). Yet this does not always hold true. In Goodman's fictional future crisis, as Jude L. Fernando notes of the real-world COVID-19 pandemic, "a minority of the world's population—comprising wealthy, well-connected, or otherwise privileged groups—has been able to use its elevated socioeconomic status to occupy (relatively) environmentally safe locales" (Fernando 2020: 637). In keeping with the neoliberal economic model that promotes self-interest over common welfare, pandemic "vulnerabilities […] are borne disproportionately by socially, ecologically and racially marginalized communities" (Fernando 2020: 637). This gives an added twist to Mac's earlier ironic reflection on the story of a young servant girl, executed by drowning for reputed witchcraft during Fever Island's early settlement: "Since when do the haves lack the ways to justify their crimes against the have-nots?" (Goodman 2022: 15). Hence like many of the neo-Victorian works covered elsewhere in this special issue, *The Disinvited Guest* links differential chances of pandemic survival to wealth and privilege or lack thereof. In much these terms, Lucy later muses on the peacefulness of Fever House: "It's a quality of quiet I've rarely heard but instinctively know is the

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kind bought with money" (Goodman 2022: 39) – much like the splendid isolation from which the new arrivals benefit.

For Lucy, the health crisis raises especial trauma, as she nearly died of COVID-19 during the last pandemic, so that she is haunted by a feeling "that the death I'd avoided ten years ago has been waiting here for me all along" (Goodman 2022: 9). Fever Island becomes a heterotopia that collapses multiple historical timeframes: the current pandemic the couples flee, the previous twenty-first-century pandemic (during which the Turner parents died of COVID-19 and Reed's then-girlfriend Becky died in an apparent accident on the island), and nineteenth-century cholera and typhus epidemics. Additionally, Fever Island evokes the ghosts of earlier violence and suffering during the island's settlement. The site turns into an uncanny contact-zone between the past and present, living and dead, evoked through both physical quarantine locations and the haunting period diary. Eventually, the past imprinted on the place appears to precipitate new accidents and violent deaths in the diegetic present by way of traumatic reenactment, so that the island itself turns from salvational sanctuary into a kind of perverse coffin ship. Yet the doctor's diary also juxtaposes official cruelty and indifference with the humane compassion and ethical care provided by Nathaniel, the so-called "Grey Nuns" who "dedicated their lives to serving the sick and poor" (Goodman 2022: 85), and the mysterious stowaway Liadan, whom Nathaniel rescues and who joins in his endeavours. Accordingly, Goodman's neo-Victorian pandemic futures fiction recoups the various keynotes of this special issue.

As suggested in the dying moments of Commander Kâmil, Mingheria's revolutionary hero, in *Nights of Plague*, "seeing the present in the past was the same thing as imagining the future" (Pamuk 2023: 510). Goodman's *The Disinvited Guest* quite literally imagines the pandemic future by reading the narrative present through the past, specifically the 1848 typhus epidemic, clearly advocating for interconnection in place of divisive pathologisations of difference. In revisiting nineteenth-century contagion, neo-Victorian narratives thus also strive to imagine alternative, more inclusive shared futures, opportunities for societal reform, and the dismantling of entrenched inequalities, as they conduct crucial *future-oriented* memory-work. Aptly, Aline Reis Calvo Hernandez asserts that "political memory", in the context of viropolitics, "is not a mere recovery of past memories, but the composition of irruptive narratives in time/now"

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(Hernandez 2021: n.p.) – a point equally relevant to the Janus-faced, at once retrospective and forward-looking neo-Victorian project. If sometimes the actualisation of constructive change only proves possible at individual or incremental level, at least a beginning has been made.

Notes

1. I am, of course, 'riffing' on the title of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) here.
2. See, e.g., 'Victorian Era' (Mai_dreamy6: N.d.: n.p.). No doubt, eventually, even Victorian-themed AI sex dolls will join the pantheon of neo-Victorian products on the market.
3. Meanwhile veterinarians report a "just as concerning" comparable trend in vaccine resistance among pet owners (Haeder 2025: n.p.), raising the spectre of a dangerous resurgence of rabies also. Note, however, that antivaxxers' targeting of pet owners was already reported in 2018, well before the pandemic (see Haynes 2018: n.p.).
4. Aline Reis Calvo Hernandez applies the term 'viropolitics' to "the viral capacity" of Brazil's right-wing Bolsonaro government to spread extremist views through society like a "'contagion'", concurrent with the pandemic, and compares the political activism provoked in response to "'[a]ntibodies'" (Hernandez 2021: n.p.). Regrettably, however, Hernadez's article is currently not available in full English translation.
5. See, e.g., *Publisher Weekly*'s list of '13 Essential Pandemic Novels' from April 2020, just over a month after the World Health Organization declared the global pandemic. The list, overwhelmingly focused on novels by US writers with US settings, includes seven novels with 2012-2019 publication dates, plus two – Mike Chen's *A Beginning at the End* and Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* – published in 2020 itself (see PW Staff 2020: n.p.). However, the list only cites one neo-Victorian text, namely Stewart O'Nan's earlier *A Prayer for the Dying* (1999). More specifically, Andrew Milner focuses on an emergent canon of what he terms "viral science fiction", identifying five main "types of pandemic fiction": "post-apocalyptic survivalism, time-travel stories, political allegories, techno-thrillers, and, finally, scientifically plausible sf" (Milner 2022: 7, 9).
6. At one point the narrator explains that the Ottoman "quarantine establishment" was as much, if not more, concerned with "stop[ping] the news of […]

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outbreaks spreading" (Pamuk 2023: 107) as with their containment – so as not to adversely impact the empire's geopolitical standing.

7. The narrator depicts Sami Pasha's sense of estrangement from the city he governs at the height of the pandemic: "Governor Pasha thought the city looked like some other place altogether. The strange sensation was completed by the emptiness of the streets. No one walked side by side or in groups of more than two anymore" and "half the stores were shut now" (Pamuk 2023: 320).
8. This anti-science backlash was perhaps most memorably encapsulated in President Donald J. Trump's musings "about whether disinfectants could be used to treat the virus in humans" as he asked his health officials "whether there is 'a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning'" (Dale et al. 2020: n.p.).
9. In effect, Nuri here resorts to the same "strong tendency" evident "in late Victorian (popular) medicine to anthropomorphize bacteria" – in this case the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* – by attributing to them a malign intentionality" (Jens Lohfert Jørgensen qtd. in Cade 2021: 106).
10. For further references to Sherlock Holmes, see Pamuk 2023: 225, 254, 275, 284-285, 449, 461, 518, 540-542, 544, 552, 646, and 679.
11. Wright's earlier mentioned, albeit not neo-Victorian *The End of October* likewise focuses on the threat of infection posed by the Hajj to Mecca, as the epidemiologist protagonist and a Saudi prince seek to impose quarantine measures on the holy city.
12. Following the death of the republic's first president, the soldier-hero Commander Kâmil, the Islamic conservatives accede to power and promptly step up the efforts of their predecessors to "to subjugate and drive away the island's Greek population" to ensure a Muslim majority on Mingheria (Pamuk 2023: 538).
13. This prevalent metaphorising strategy in neo-Victorian narratives of contagion is not without risks, comparable to the "ethical issues" that plague both trauma fiction and what T. J. Lustig and James Peacock term "the syndrome novel" (Lustig and Peacock 2013: 10). In particular, these problems arise "when the syndrome is employed as a metaphor for some other condition—late capitalist alienation, for example", since "[m]aking an illness into a literary metaphor risks denying the reality and the suffering associated with TB or cancer, AIDS or DID [Dissociative Identity Disorder]" (Lustig and Peacock 2013: 10), or, for that matter, any other disease, whether or not communicable.
14. One trenchant example from recent world politics concerns the anti-Palestinian rhetoric of some of Israel's right-wing government, following the literal

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terrorist invasion of the state by Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups on October 7, 2023. Defence Minister Yoav Gallant's claim that Israel was "fighting human animals" (Gallant qtd. in Goldenberg 2024: n.p.), e.g., echoes the common interlinking of tropes of animalisation and metaphors of disease in xenophobic anti-immigrant discourse, which defensively designates "migration as a *natural disaster* (hence the pervasive *flood* imagery), an *invasion of enemies*, an *epidemic*, or the *spread of disease-carrying, parasitic organisms*" (Mussolf 2011: 10, original emphasis). It should be noted, though, that Palestinians too resort to medicalised metaphors, likening Israel's occupation to an invasive "cancer that is slowly killing our people" (qtd. in Eldin et al. 2024: 12).

15. The US Republican party's anti-immigrant discourse before and after the 2024 election provides a topical example. On 19th February 2025, CNN reported that "[t]he Trump administration is expected to issue a public health order as soon as this week labeling migrants at the US southern border as risks for spreading diseases" (Alvarez 2025: n.p.). Part of an indiscriminate immigration crackdown, this declared health emergency measure recalls the previous Title-42 order (a 1944 wartime law) issued during the COVID-19 pandemic that "sealed off the border to asylum seekers" during Trump's first term in office (Alvarez 2025: n.p.; also see Namkung 2025: n.p.). Such politics have a distinct neo-Victorian flavour, drawing as they do on a well-established American "anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy" that reaches back to the nineteenth century whereby foreign incomers "have been stigmatized as the etiology of a wide variety of physical and societal ills (Markel and Stern 2002: 757; also see 758).
16. This even extends to one of Henry's own patients, the infant child of the teenage prostitute Gustine, upon whom the doctor forces himself as she has nothing else to trade but her body and her assistance in his graverobbing schemes to obtain Henry's services for her ailing son.
17. The headline to Lepore's article issues a clear warning in this regard: "In the literature of pestilence, the greatest threat isn't the loss of human life but the loss of what makes us human" (Lepore 2020: n.p., original italics).
18. Canada's onetime "main immigration gateway" that also "served as a quarantine station for the Port of Quebec from 1832 to 1937", the island is now designated the "Irish Memorial National Historic Site", offering "quarantine station tour[s]" (Government of Canada N.d.a: n.p.) and inviting visitors "[a]s in the past, [to] experience the medical inspection in the disinfection building" (Government of Canada N.d.b: n.p.).

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19. Nonetheless, as indicated by Ntola's article, among other contributions, neo-Victorian creative practice also remains implicated in the very processes of Othering it contests. Classed, raced, gendered, sexually orientated, non-normative bodied, neurodiverse, criminal and diseased Otherings – with all their intersectional discriminatory implications – continue to dominate neo-Victorian works, serving profit motives as much as more laudatory agendas of historical conscience-raising, social justice, or the commemoration of nineteenth-century subaltern lives and voices.
20. Not coincidentally, Shulevitz describes Pamuk as "truly a novelist for the post-truth age" (Shulevitz 2022: n.p.).
21. Jude L. Fernando defines the Virocene as "a historically unique moment of interaction between humans and eco-systems", locating "[t]he novelty of this epoch […] in the intensity of virogenic activity as an embodied force of nature, and in how this confronts and questions the capabilities and resilience of current political and economic models" (Fernando 2020: 636-637), founded on neoliberal global capitalism. His article thus adds a distinct ecological dimension to viropolitical discourse. In particular, the critic links the COVID-19 pandemic to a shift from the Anthropocene to the Virocene, crediting the coronavirus crisis with having "reinvigorated" the search for "ways of decoupling" both "human and non-human wellbeing from the determinants of capitalism and racism" (Fernando 2020: 637). Similarly, Rodanthi Tzanelli suggests that "the Virocene is more generally about the infectious nature of crises", ranging from "climate change" and "capitalist malfunctions" to "racist and gender violence", as well as disease outbreaks; hence the Virocene can also be read as "*the outcome of a meta-crisis*" (Tzanelli 2021: 7-8, 18, original emphasis), both humanly precipitated and experienced.
22. While several of Goodman's novels are clearly neo-Victorian, including *The Ghost Orchid* (2006) and *Return to Wyldcliffe Heights* (2024), her work has so far received scant critical attention within neo-Victorian studies.
23. Indeed, "Grosse Ile" is specifically referenced in the first extract from the nineteenth-century fever doctor's diary discussed below (Goodman 2022: 74).

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