Diagnosing Disease: Discrimination and Precarity in Emma Donoghue's *Frog Music* (2014) and Michael Nava's *The City of Palaces* (2014)

Georgia Ntola
(Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece)

Abstract:
This article discusses the representation of contagious diseases in Emma Donoghue's *Frog Music* (2014) and Michael Nava's *The City of Palaces* (2014). It argues that, in the two texts, disease is used to illuminate instances of discrimination and exclusion in the nineteenth century, thus inviting a consideration of the issue of (non)belonging then and now, as well as within neo-Victorianism. In particular, the article aims to show that the two texts utilise disease to shed light on the abjection of particular ethnic groups in the nineteenth century, and that in doing so they allude to contemporary issues of exclusion. Furthermore, the two texts employ disease to suggest connections between these abjected Others and the female protagonists, emphasising that the latter too are vulnerable to arbitrary violence from various figures of authority as a result of their sociopolitical disempowerment. Finally, the article raises questions about the ethics of mediating the experiences of marginalised communities through the perspectives of those with greater societal privilege and discusses the implications of this narrative strategy for neo-Victorian fiction and scholarship.

Keywords: abjection, *The City of Palaces*, discrimination, disease, Emma Donoghue, *Frog Music*, Michael Nava, neo-Victorian, precarity, vulnerability.

*****

Public health crises, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, can throw into sharp relief the intertwined effects of contagion and discrimination, as groups marginalised on identarian grounds are shown to be particularly vulnerable to societal exclusions, suffering from both the stigma surrounding infection and limited access to healthcare. Fictional portrayals of the experience of contagion can therefore serve as a springboard to interrogate the boundaries of social inclusion in the nineteenth century and now, as the earlier period saw significant medical advances that ultimately legitimised the institutionalisation of health-based discrimination. This article focuses on the representation of contagious diseases in two neo-Victorian novels, Emma

Neo-Victorian Studies
15:2 (2024/2025)
pp. 62-93

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

Donoghue's *Frog Music* (2014) and Michael Nava's *The City of Palaces* (2014), examining how both texts mobilise the discourse of contagion not only to explore historical instances of discrimination and exclusion but also to highlight their continuing relevance in our present moment and neo-Victorian cultural production. By situating epidemics within the context of unstable, burgeoning national identities – American and Mexican respectively – I show that the two works use contagious diseases as vehicles to reveal how the pathologisation of marginalised groups was underpinned by anxieties over ethnic and cultural difference that interrogate notions of belonging. While the members of the two communities may indeed suffer from smallpox and a variety of other diseases linked to poverty and poor hygiene, their system(at)ic association with disease serves to mark them as alien and undesirable in the societies they inhabit. Thereafter the focus shifts to how disease exposes female precarity by establishing both explicit and implicit parallels between those ethnically marginalised and the two heroines, Blanche and Alicia, to underscore women's analogous precarious positions in society. Finally, I consider the implications of the two novels' representations of disease for neo-Victorianism and its project of inclusion, asking what is achieved by the privileging of the female perspective in the novels as opposed to that of members belonging to the pathologised groups. Does neo-Victorianism perpetuate the discriminatory practices it condemns, or are there other reasons for its narrative (re-)silencing of marginalised communities?

1. Discrimination and Disease

Emma Donoghue's *Frog Music* is set during the 1876 outbreak of the smallpox epidemic in San Francisco, one of four such outbreaks the city suffered in the latter part of the nineteenth century, though by no means the deadliest. The novel gives a biofictional account of the real-life, cold case murder of Jenny Bonnet, a young woman regularly arrested for cross-dressing and other offenses related to nonconforming gender conduct (see Sears 2015: 64). Focusing on Blanche Buneau, or Beunon, a French erotic dancer and occasional prostitute whom, according to the historical record, Bonnet convinced to "leave prostitution and her exploitative lover" (Sears 2015: 64), the novel features a dual timeline, presenting the development of Jenny's acquaintance with Blanche until the moment of the murder, and simultaneously engaging with the aftermath of the murder. While Jenny, for

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

the most part, remains elusive in the novel, Donoghue fictionally reconstructs in great detail what is known of Blanche's life, such as her relationship with fellow Frenchmen Arthur Deneve and Ernest Girard (whom Blanche accused of Jenny's murder), and her and Arthur's infant son P'tit. The presence of smallpox in the novel intensifies the characters' struggles, insofar as it threatens their very lives, yet, I argue, it cannot be reduced to a mere backdrop to convey a sense of imminent threat. Instead, the smallpox epidemic proves as central to the plot as any of the characters or the murder mystery, since it helps illustrate Blanche's disempowerment both in her relationship with Arthur, effectively her pimp, and in society in general, playing a crucial role in her journey to self-awareness. Blanche's disempowerment is revealed through her affinity both with her son P'tit and with the Chinese immigrants, the most intensely repudiated ethnic group in San Francisco at the time, illuminating their precarious social positions in a falsely accommodating community.

Diseases of various kinds hold a more prominent place in Michael Nava's novel *The City of Palaces,* where the two protagonists become frequent witnesses of the struggles of Mexico City's poor. The novel spans the politically tumultuous period from 1897 to 1913, during which President Porfirio Díaz's corrupt totalitarian regime steadily declined until it was overthrown by the Mexican Revolution. The story follows the acquaintance and marriage of Miguel Sarmiento, a Mexican-born young doctor of Spanish descent, and Alicia Gavilán, a devout spinster of aristocratic ancestry whose face has been scarred by smallpox. Disease therefore has a personal resonance for Alicia, but the text also explores its consequences for the native Mexican poor through both Miguel's varied experiences as a physician and through Alicia's dedication to philanthropic work. As the plot unfolds, the couple becomes increasingly sensitive to the "hostility, prejudice, and brutality" the Indigenous population faces from Mexican authorities (Beezley and MacLachlan 2009: 2), a result of residual colonial ideologies of ethnic inferiority. The novel ultimately interrogates the relationship between such mistreatment and discourses of disease and contagion, testifying to the lingering trauma which colonialism has wrought on the Mexican psyche. In this article, I focus mainly on the first part of the novel, or 'Book One', which encompasses Miguel and Alicia's courtship and the early days of their marriage, as this section of the text is most concerned with disease and its socially disempowering effects.

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

The nineteenth century holds a notable place in the history of medical developments, marked as it was by medical controversies (see Santer 2014: 223) as well as ground-breaking discoveries. As Mary Douglas notes, the newly-generated awareness of the "bacterial transmission of disease" – or the germ theory that gradually came to replace the then dominant miasma theory of disease as the accepted cause of illness – "was a great nineteenth-century discovery", which not only "produced the most radical revolution in the history of medicine" by secularising it (Douglas 1966: 35), but also led to the institutionalisation of discrimination for the sake of public health. Germ theory fostered the awareness of contagion and, inevitably, awoke people to the necessity of its prevention, triggering numerous medical and scientific advancements in the second half of the nineteenth century which led to the establishment of the public health movement (see O'Brien 2018: 20). A correlation can thus be drawn between some of the measures policy makers of the period adopted in order to prevent the spread of disease and ideologies of discrimination, for, as Bruce Magnusson and Zahi Zalloua aptly observe, "contagion is rarely a value-neutral matter" so that "[d]esignating someone or something as 'contagious' involves ethico-political judgements" (Magnusson and Zalloua 2012: 18). Put differently, the fear of contagion has been used to amplify prejudice against disadvantaged populations, whose association with disease marks them as both physically and morally harmful, so that they are then further isolated in the interests of protecting the healthy portion of the population..

Neo-Victorian fiction's thematic preoccupation with discrimination brought about by contagion aligns with the genre's ethical drive. There has long been a critical consensus among scholars that neo-Victorian texts promote inclusivity, driven as they are by the wish "to denounce the injustice towards some of [the nineteenth-century's] ill-used or forgotten representatives, such as women, the lower classes or homosexuals" (Gutleben 2001: 10). To this effect, Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben assert that neo-Victorianism, especially as regards narratives of trauma, is essentially empowering, since it engages in the "actual creation" of characters "whom fiction or historiography has forgotten, those who have never had a proper voice, story, or discursive existence in literature" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 31). Consequently, the dramatisation of marginalisation on account of disease in neo-Victorian texts admits closer analysis. On the one hand, such literature of contagion illuminates the suffering of disenfranchised

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

populations and subjects, by giving them a voice and demonstrating their historical pathologisation through various socio-medical discourses. Insofar as novels interrogate to what extent such attitudes still persist, neo-Victorian fiction pushes for change in the present and may be indeed regarded as empowering. On the other hand, given neo-Victorianism's "self-analytic drive" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 5), the representation of disease and the narrative silencing of those designated as diseased may reveal not only contemporary society's but also neo-Victorianism's own potential biases. Both Donoghue's *Frog Music* and Nava's *The City of Palaces* prove fruitful case studies in this regard. Both texts illustrate, albeit in different ways, ethnic tensions exacerbated by the outbreak of disease and the subsequent fear of contagion, but also displace the narrative focus from the devalued groups to the female characters.

2. Abjected Communities and Vulnerable Subjects

In both *Frog Music* and *The City of Palaces*, disease illuminates long-term issues of non-belonging as it amplifies existing prejudices against ethnic groups and justifies attempts to exclude them from the process of national self-fashioning. The San Francisco Chinese of *Frog Music* and the Indigenous people of Mexico, known as 'Indians' in Nava's novel, signify inassimilable difference in their respective environments; as a result; they are stigmatised as threats to the collective health of the nation by being designated as contagious. The portrayal of such pathologisation connects nineteenth-century notions of exclusion on the grounds of difference to the shortcomings of contemporary multiculturalism, in the case of *Frog Music*, as well as to foreground colonial trauma and the divisions it creates, in the case of *The City of Palaces*.

The organism metaphor serves as a useful frame for examining the relationship between pathologised groups and their respective societies. Evoked repeatedly throughout centuries of human thought, the organism metaphor draws a parallel between the healthy, biological, human body and the homogeneous national body, a correlation that also lends itself to ideas of foreign invasion. Much as a healthy human body must fight off virulent particles to survive, so the collective body of the nation must supposedly expel those elements which threaten to destabilise and corrupt it, by resorting to an array of exclusionary policies. In Gerald O'Brien's words,

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

> [f]rom the perspective of the organism metaphor, the only way to protect the healthy social body is to ensure that probable disease-carrying elements are identified and do not penetrate the community/national boundaries, or, failing this, that such elements are isolated from the rest of the community. Thus policies related to institutionalization, segregation, imprisonment, deportation, surveillance, or even elimination of the unhealthy organisms are the forms of social control that most readily derive from the organism metaphor. (O'Brien 2018: 24)

O'Brien emphasises that the organism metaphor has been long and widely used in American society, culture, and politics in order to invite comparisons between devalued groups and pests of various kinds (O'Brien 2018: 19). Predictably, this rhetoric has been used to pathologise various immigrant groups, cast in the light of a sanitary and cultural menace alike, on account both of the supposedly exotic diseases they may carry over to the host country and of their general infiltration of the national body (O'Brien 2018: 21). While this applies to *Frog Music*'s figuration of the Chinese, the issue becomes more complex when it involves Indigenous Mexican peoples in *The City of Palaces*, whose cultures do not wholly align with the dominant, Spanish-imported culture of the country's colonisers. Non-immigrant marginalised groups, Nava's novel makes clear, have also been construed as literal or metaphorical disease-carriers on the grounds of "a perceived divergence from what is taken to be the normative national or social identity" (O'Brien 2018: 51).

In this sense, a clear connection can be drawn between inassimilable subjects and Julia Kristeva's well-known concept of the abject, namely that which disturbs "identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982: 4). By virtue of its disruptive transgressive nature, blurring the boundaries between the deviant and familiar, the abject needs to be expelled from the symbolic system for coherence to be restored, and that is effected in the novels through rigorous public health policies, reinforced by the rhetoric of stigma. Stigma has been defined as relational and socially constructed (Goffman 1963: 3), but what has also been stressed is its contingency on

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

> access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination. (Link and Phelan 2001: 367)

Donoghue's and Nava's novels represent their marginalised communities as invariably disempowered, profoundly Othered, and stigmatised on the grounds of fostering and transmitting disease. The Chinese and Mexican Indigenes' supposed role as agents of contagion is then used to legitimise their further exclusion from the social body.

The stigma of disease is thus attached to already disempowered and marginalised groups. Crucially, however, the latter's suffering is only complementary to that endured by the novels' white female protagonists, themselves protected from racial prejudice. The true extent of Blanche's and Alicia's disempowerment is only exposed because of their association with diseased abjected Others, thus belying the women's ostensible integration into their social environments. In that sense, the disempowerment and marginality as revealed by disease resonate with Judith Butler's notion of the differential distribution of vulnerability across different populations. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler posits that the fundamental interconnectedness of humans, as a result of embodied social life, renders subjects inescapably vulnerable to each other (see Butler 2004: 26, xiv). Such openness invites the possibility of violence and,

> a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt. This vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated *under certain social and political conditions*, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited. (Butler 2004: 29, added emphasis)

Accordingly, some populations are more readily subject to "arbitrary violence", depending on their socio-political status (Butler 2004: xii), which arguably includes their perceived 'health status'. Among the groups that Butler designates as particularly exposed to possible and actual violence are

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

"women and minorities, including sexual minorities"; hence social vulnerability is an essential part of subjects' political makeup (Butler 2004: 20). *Frog Music* and *The City of Palaces* support Butler's explicit linking of women and minorities as the groups most liable to suffer on account of their precarious social position.

Admittedly, inviting associations between marginalised groups and female protagonists to underscore the latter's oppression proves an ethically risky strategy. In a sense, Donoghue's and Nava's novels echo the controversial racial politics found in two key intertexts of much neo-Victorian fiction: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Mary Wollstonecraft's famous analogy between the subordination of women and the state of slavery pervades both of these texts, resulting in a dubious identification between Brontë's eponymous heroine and the suffering racial Other, which eventually "collapses into merely an appropriation of the metaphor of 'slavery'" (Meyer 1990: 250). Similarly, the parallels Rhys's text draws between the Creole Antoinette and the rebellious West Indian ex-slaves, whose emancipation the protagonist resents, amount to a reductive act of appropriation (see Erwin 1989: 154). In perpetuating this strategy of representation, *Frog Music* and *The City of Palaces* risk not only appropriating the experiences of Chinese immigrants and Indigenous Mexicans by pressing their traumas into the metaphorical service of the privileged, white female protagonists. They also elide the suffering of non-white women, whose experiences are not represented in much detail, obscuring the multiple axes of oppression informing these women's plight. Such approaches have been criticised by feminist scholars of intersectionality, such as Mieke Verloo, who emphasises that "an incorrect assumption of sameness or equivalence of the social categories connected to inequalities and of the mechanisms and processes that constitute them" may perpetuate an erroneous "'one size fits all' approach to multiple discrimination" (Verloo 2006: 223).

Donoghue's and Nava's texts adopt different approaches to this strategy. In *Frog Music*, although the apparent analogies between the Chinese immigrants and Blanche are regretted by the latter, they are not reflected on, reductively suggesting an identical suffering by both. In contrast, *The City of Palaces* stresses the dissimilarity of the Indigenous Mexicans' and Alicia's sociopolitical disempowerment even as it connects the two parties. Nava's novel affirms the relationship between Alicia and the Indigenous Mexicans

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

as a more positive one, since it provides the opportunity for a deep engagement with the Other through the protagonist's philanthropic endeavours.

3. Disease in *Frog Music*: Xenophobia and Illusory Privilege

The main characters of *Frog Music*, Blanche, Arthur, Ernest, and Jenny, are all immigrants, having moved to San Francisco from France in search of a better future at different points of their lives, with Jenny emigrating there as a "barely two" year-old with her family in 1851 (Donoghue 2015: 348), and Blanche, Arthur and Ernest reaching the city together in the winter of 1875. Explaining why they chose San Francisco as their destination, Blanche admits to Jenny that "we came because we heard you can cock your hat as you please here […] and stayed for the same reason" (Donoghue 2015: 17). Such a claim echoes San Francisco's reputation in the nineteenth century. Established "virtually overnight" during the California Gold Rush of 1849 by treasure hunters from Europe, North and South America, Australia, China, and other corners of the world, the city quickly grew in size and gave its newcomers a sense of equality:

> [e]veryone came at once […] and they created a new society that included no long-established families or hereditary social status. Everyone was equal in the gold fields, because what mattered most was success in finding the elusive yellow metal. (Cherny 1994: 139)

This newly founded society of outsiders seemed to afford individuals freedom from potentially discriminating labels related to their social, national, or religious backgrounds,[1] so that working in the gold fields became a means for self-fashioning. The "elusive yellow metal" functioned as the great equaliser, homogenising experience and guaranteeing inclusion in the budding community – except in the case of the Chinese.

San Francisco's Chinese population, the largest of its kind in the nineteenth-century United States (see Cherny 1994: 131), attracted virulent xenophobia. Anti-Chinese sentiment originated in "a broader-based national ideology reconstituting American cities as white, English-speaking, and racially unified" (Craddock 1999: 355), creating a climate in which the Chinese were marked as racially inferior and inassimilable. The hiring of

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

Chinese workers in California's goldmines and on the construction of the transcontinental railroad at lower than standard rates provoked resentment as unfair competition in the labour market, while their physical appearance, distinctive dress, and cultural differences marked them as easily identifiable targets of racial prejudice (see Takaki 1989: 13). Meanwhile San Francisco's Chinatown, which constituted "a self-contained and alien society", conceptualised as a labyrinth by the rest of the population (Shah 2001: 18), served as a permanent reminder that the nascent San Francisco was not as racially homogeneous as the national standard required. Hence the Chinese became "pawns in the struggles of a developing city" (Klee 1983: 182) and its identity politics.

Chinatown featured prominently in the sociomedical discourses that pathologised the Chinese. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Nayan Shah explains, Chinatown and its residents became the object of scientific knowledge produced by the interrelated strategies of "scientific observation, standards of normalcy and deviance, statistics, and mapping" (Shah 2001: 19-20). Images of an overcrowded Chinatown, riddled with filth and disease, and graphic reports of cultural deviance were regularly circulated in the local press, eliciting a condemnation of the Chinese lifestyle by the public health authorities (see Shah 2001: 21-22). As a result, the Chinese district and its residents came to be regarded as carriers of "lethal contagion" and as inherently pathological, "the very *embodiment* of disease" (Shah 2001: 22, original emphasis), threating the healthy national body.

Donoghue has specifically linked her biofictional writing to inclusivity. In an interview with Michael Lackey, she remarks, "my original impulse was very much to represent the ones who had been left out—like the nobodies, women, slaves, people in freak shows, servants—the ones who are not powerful" (Lackey and Donoghue 2018: 121).[2] In *Frog Music*, she employs the 'nobody' Blanche's perspective to explore the systemic discrimination against the Chinese, which underpins urban efforts to contain the sanitary threat they supposedly pose. Published two years before President Donald J. Trump's first term in office, *Frog Music* uncannily anticipated an upsurge in violent, especially Republican rhetoric about the threats of 'invasion' and criminal contamination, which crystalised in Trump's repeated use of the Sinophobic term 'the Chinese virus' to refer to Coronavirus in 2020. Notoriously, such rhetoric resulted in a spike in anti-Asian prejudice and hate crimes in the US and the rest of the world, highlighting an unsettling

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

continuity in the strategic racialisation of disease. More recently, the resurgence of racist rhetoric against illegal immigrants from across the southern border with Mexico in the 2024 US election campaign rendered Donoghue's novel topical once again.

Throughout most of the novel, Blanche is portrayed as sympathetic to the Chinese, reluctant to endorse their mocking denigration or pathologisation. The novel is interspersed with incidents of Chinese men being put into wagons of the Board of Health or refused access to public transport (see Donoghue 2015: 27, 132). Jenny aptly identifies such practices as ideologically, rather than medically, motivated. Remarking that the smallpox epidemic has "given the authorities an excuse for playing the heavy with undesirables" (Donoghue 2015: 150), Jenny exposes the arbitrary nature of the discourse of contagion, echoing Magnusson and Zalloua's previously cited contention that "[d]esignating someone or something as 'contagious' involves ethico-political judgements" (Magnusson and Zalloua 2012: 18). Similarly, Chinatown, where Blanche and Arthur live, is described by the newsmen as "a laboratory of infection", and the stigma it carries as a locus of disease is acknowledged by Jenny's matter-of-fact observation that "when it's Chinatown, the health inspectors rush to conclusions" (Donoghue 2015: 26, 150). Blanche, for her part, is openly critical of such policies. She "irreverently" expresses her scepticism of the view that Chinatown is the epicentre of smallpox and ruefully notes that this "plague has brought San Franciscans to […] flinching from every smell, scrutinizing every face for danger, balking at sharing the same air" (Donoghue 2015: 26, 132). The latter observation in particular betrays Blanche's endorsement of San Francisco's cultural narrative of inclusion, implying an implicit acceptance of the Chinese residents as legitimate constituents of the city's motley ethnic fabric.

Nevertheless, at various times, Jenny, Arthur, and sometimes even Blanche lampoon the Chinese, reproducing stereotypical perceptions of their lifestyle or joking about their cultural beliefs, which suggests that they have internalised xenophobic discourse. One such incident involves Blanche and Jenny "giggling like children" at the Chinese worship of a "smallpox goddess" whom they try to appease "so she'll spare them and move on" by calling the smallpox blisters "beautiful flowers" (Donoghue 2015: 187). In this instance, mockery of the Chinese bonds the two women in what amounts to an identification with 'superior' Western science and rationality contrasting Oriental superstition. Disease in the novel thus designates the

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

Chinese as an inassimilable Other, either by illustrating the threat they pose to public health or as a marker of the supposed absurdity of their culture.

Although *Frog Music* seems primarily interested in exploring matters of gender and sexuality, its depictions of public and private denigrations of the Chinese also tackle issues of immigration and belonging in the United States. The latter remain as topical and unresolved today – not least due to Trump's resort to racist anti-immigrant and anti-China rhetoric before and after his re-election. By portraying the way in which the discourse of contagion was used in the 1870s to pathologise Chinese immigrants and legitimise their marginalisation in San Francisco, "the foreignest city in America" (Donoghue 2015: 189) where every ethnicity was ostensibly welcome, *Frog Music* problematises the illusory nature of belonging in contemporary multicultural societies. As Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley argued just three years prior to the novel's publication, neoliberal regimes in the twenty-first century have been more concerned with "how questions of 'culture' and autonomy are combined in the unstated division of subjects into *good diversity* […] and *bad diversity*" than with "accepting or celebrating diversity" (Lentin and Titley 2011: 7, original emphasis). In its invocation of San Francisco as the supposed epitome of cultural and ethnic integration, *Frog Music* returns to the nineteenth century to offer a thought-provoking reflection on the familiar present-day dichotomy between "*good diversity*", represented by the range of white immigrants in the novel, and "*bad diversity*", represented by the Chinese, exposing the strategies used to pathologise the latter and designate their undesirability, both then and now.

Frog Music portrays Blanche's journey towards self-awareness, as she turns from a "thoughtless pleasure-seeker" (Donoghue 2015: 389) to devoted mother, moving from a state of constant financial and sexual exploitation by the men in her life to becoming an autonomous self-reliant woman. A crucial part of this process lies in her growing disillusionment about the place she occupies both socially and domestically in her relationship with Arthur and his *ami intime*, Ernest, as she comes to recognise the extent of her own disempowerment. Jenny constantly asks probing questions that force Blanche to reappraise her life, "creat[ing] an awakening for the character" (Lackey in Lackey and Donoghue 2018: 129). Although Blanche herself never contracts smallpox, I contend that disease contributes significantly to her growing awareness since she becomes progressively more vulnerable due to her direct or indirect proximity to those deemed

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

pathological and abjected: her son P'tit and the Chinese community of San Francisco. In this respect, disease reveals the unequal distribution of vulnerability by demonstrating that the designation of certain subjects as pathological is highly contingent on power relations.

Early in the novel, it is revealed that Blanche and Arthur have placed their infant son in the care of a baby farm, but upon finding out how horridly P'tit has been treated, his mother impulsively takes him back to where she and Arthur live. The neglect P'tit was subjected to has left the boy grotesquely underdeveloped, looking and acting like "a one-year-old newborn", a fact which frequently evokes revulsion in Blanche (Donoghue 2015: 119; also see 120, 150-151). Furthermore, shortly after bringing him home, Blanche realises that Arthur deems the boy nothing but an inconvenience for inhibiting his father's bohemian hedonistic lifestyle, in effect abjecting P'tit, who significantly bears a non-name, simply a contracted version of 'Petit' or 'Little One' in French. Not only do his stunted appearance and behaviour evoke an atavistic horror at the blurring of developmental stages of childhood, but he also serves as an unsettling reminder to Blanche and Arthur of being both Self and Other as immigrants who always, in some sense, remain misfits, never entirely belonging in their adopted new home. That they have hitherto been content to expel P'tit from their reality suggests an attempted repression of this recognition.

The boundaries of Self and Other, however, are more liable to collapse for Blanche, who, as the boy's mother, is more acutely reminded of that "pre-objectal relationship" between mother and child, which according to Kristeva informs abjection (Kristeva 1982: 10). When it comes to Blanche, P'tit's presence brings about a radical destabilisation of her entire selfhood. In assuming her maternal role towards him, Blanche becomes intimately implicated in the infant's existence, so that she too gradually assumes the mantle of the abject in her relationship with Arthur.

P'tit's undesirability is underscored by intimations that he might have smallpox. Importantly, it is Arthur who first observes "the rash of red spots in both the tiny armpits" (Donoghue 2015: 125), thus marking P'tit as a potential threat. Although P'tit does not actually have smallpox, Arthur himself contracts the disease only a few days after the boy's arrival. This development leads both Arthur and Ernest to resent Blanche, who, instead of nursing Arthur as expected of her, keeps away from him, intent on safeguarding P'tit from contagion, once more affirming the mother and son's

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

interconnectedness (see Donoghue 2015: 179). Ernest even goes as far as to blame P'tit for infecting Arthur, stressing that Arthur showed the first symptoms shortly after the infant's arrival (see Donoghue 2015: 179). The novel thus exemplifies the arbitrariness and power dynamics that characterise the process of designating subjects as contagious. Although Arthur is the actual ailing party, Ernest, through his unconditional support of him, assumes his friend's patriarchal power over Blanche, legitimating the father's discursive pathologisation of P'tit, and by extension of Blanche herself for bringing the boy home. Interestingly, Blanche conceives of herself as pathological after provoking Arthur's anger and, as she believes, his attempt to murder her the night Jenny dies, at one point thinking that she "can't let [her hosts] guess that it's she who brought the contagion trailing invisibly behind her from the City" (Donoghue 2015: 37). Disease proves the catalyst for Blanche's abjection and, eventually, for the couple's estrangement, precipitating a chain of events that ultimately leaves Blanche destitute.

Blanche's cast-out status on account of P'tit is underlined by a series of implicit links drawn throughout the novel between her and the Chinese, in order to highlight the ways in which their shared immigrant status renders them vulnerable. Blanche, though, is initially oblivious to this commonality, harbouring a misguided sense of belonging and ethnic superiority in San Francisco's multi-ethnic society. Her certainty of her legitimate place in her adoptive community derives mainly from her extreme pride in the whiteness of her skin, reinforced by permanently switching from her birth name, Adèle, to the stage name of Blanche that she held as a circus rider in Paris (see Donoghue 2014: 194). In effect, upon arriving to America, Blanche sought to reinvent herself by emphasising her whiteness as "a location of structural advantage, of race privilege" (Frankenberg 1993: 1) that will promote her inclusion. As the sociologist Ruth Frankenberg asserts, whiteness "refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced, and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination" (Frankenberg 1993: 6). According to this view, the concept of whiteness emerges as context-based and fluid, while always implicated in discourses of unequal power relations, as made manifest in *Frog Music*: initially, through the ways in which Blanche uses her whiteness to gain an advantage in the sex trade, and later by the revelation of its inconsequentiality in guaranteeing her protection. Blanche's whiteness becomes an essential aspect of her erotic performances, used to fashion the alluring persona of

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

Blanche la Danseuse, known for her "translucent pallor", and to invite associations with corrupted innocence which, she claims, satisfy the "complicated cravings" of her clients (Donoghue 2015: 65, 5-6). Furthermore, Blanche alleges that her whiteness entitles her to higher payment compared to Chinese sex workers in the city (see Donoghue 2015: 189), evincing a clear belief in a racially-inflected hierarchy of labour.

The complexity and precarity of Blanche's identity as an immigrant woman is illuminated by her ties to Chinatown, where she lives for most of the novel. As Blanche recalls, upon arriving in San Francisco, she and Arthur "naturally washed up in Chinatown, where the rents were low and patrolmen hardly ever penetrated the warren of passageways […] so folks live more or less as they like" (Donoghue 2015: 26). Within a year of arriving in Chinatown, Blanche manages to purchase the building they live in, which is, not coincidentally, located in Sacramento Street. Shah explains that in the 1850s, Sacramento Street served as the core around which many Chinese businesses gradually gathered, their numbers rising through the years, so that the street eventually came to be known as *Tongyan gaai*, meaning 'Street of the Chinese' (Shah 2001: 20). Purchasing a building in a street with such a distinct ethnic history not only cements Blanche's link to Chinatown, but also affirms her perceived superiority over the Chinese, Irish, Scottish, and Scandinavian immigrants who inhabit her building, which constitutes a tangible symbol of her own social rise and economic prosperity (see Donoghue 2015: 32-33). Buying the building is a source of immense pride for Blanche, a proof that she is successfully surviving in the city's competitive environment, while it also allows her to assert herself against Arthur and Ernest's exploitative patronising conduct (see Donoghue 2015: 224-225). Tellingly, after Jenny's murder, when Arthur has left Blanche, taking P'tit with him and hiding their son from her, the building in 815 Sacramento Street figures in her mind as a safe haven she can return to, "the one thing she hasn't lost" (Donoghue 2015: 208).

Nevertheless, Blanche finds out that, in her absence, Arthur has sold her building to one of Blanche's Chinese lodgers, Low Long, an event that becomes the catalyst forcing Blanche to acknowledge her cherished notions of ethnic superiority as mere illusions. After Low Long presents himself, deed in hand, as the new owner of the building, Blanche attempts to intimidate him into giving the building back to her, wondering whether there are "police in the City who'd defend a Chinaman's claim – defend it against a white

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

woman's" (Donoghue 2015: 214). In this moment of doubt, Blanche begins to grasp that her position is more similar to Low Long's than she cares to admit, as they are both, potentially, equally suspect in the authorities' eyes by virtue of their common immigrant status. In this confrontation, the building briefly becomes a contested site that reveals that Blanche and Low Long are ostensibly interchangeable, both immigrants who attempt to claim a part of the city for themselves to secure what remains an essentially precarious position. Seconds later, "the fight goes out of Blanche", and she relinquishes her claim to the building (Donoghue 2015: 214).

Her loss of the property is a direct consequence of Arthur's vindictiveness towards Blanche, an attitude occasioned because of disease. And it is on account of the same disease that anti-Chinese sentiment erupts in the city and renders Blanche more vulnerable still. Near the end of *Frog Music*, Blanche finds herself alone in Chinatown during a (fictional) Sinophobic riot, apprehending "for the first time that all that anti-coolie nonsense may be more than that" (Donoghue 2015: 379). Throughout the novel, Blanche has consistently underestimated both her own precarious position and that of the city's Chinese immigrants: during the riot, several Chinese laundries are burnt, possibly resulting in loss of life, and all of Blanche's belongings are stolen by a gang of male rioters, leaving her penniless (see Donoghue 2015: 379-382).

Frog Music here seems to resort to a misleading homogenisation of the multiple oppressions both parties face. The strikingly brief portrayals of female Chinese in the text reinforce this problematic: the women remain opaque, represented only as prostitutes financially and sexually exploited by men, a trait they share with Blanche.[3] Blanche's outcast status is spelled out by a white male figure of authority the Detective investigating Jenny's murder, who, in a conversation with Blanche, denounces "[her] kind", the French immigrants who came to San Francisco during the Rush, as "the scum of the world, putting up their freak show" in the city (Donoghue 2015: 414). Clearly, neither Blanche's whiteness nor her ethnicity have earned her acceptance into the deeply xenophobic American society, and she is finally able to see beyond San Francisco's deceptive promises of inclusion, again cementing her kinship with the Chinese.

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

4. Disease in *The City of Palaces*: Trauma and Female Precarity

In contrast to Donoghue's novel, *The City of Palaces* renders the threat of disease far more immediate. Disease is attributed to the Indigenous population, rather than to an immigrant group, and Alicia, the female protagonist, is herself afflicted with smallpox at a young age. The novel provides a vivid account of the denigration suffered by the country's Indigenous people, the so-called 'Indians', who were regarded as "a long-standing fixture of Spanish colonialism that was defined in law and formed part of the social lexicon" (O'Hara 2009: 2). As Matthew D. O'Hara explains, the bias against the 'Indians' dated back to colonial times, when the authorities of New Spain, i.e. colonial Mexico, established a hierarchy of classification for the population based on the concept of "*calidad*", which encompassed class as well as race (O'Hara 2009: 5, original emphasis). According to O'Hara, *calidad*, a term closely associated with caste,

> signified 'social race,' for it included and conveyed a much larger bundle of markers than 'biological race' or descent, including markers such as occupation, social reputation, and personal networks that evoke contemporary notions of ethnic identity or class position. (O'Hara 2009: 5)

Nava's novel makes clear how much power such socio-ethnic distinctions continue to hold in nineteenth-century Mexico by making numerous detailed references to the main characters' social and ethnic backgrounds as well as illustrating the disdain with which the destitute Indigenous Mexicans are regarded. Hence, Mexico's ruling elite, which endorses and crudely emulates European customs, easily embraces the handsome, blond, and green-eyed Miguel, on the grounds of his being descended from "[p]ure Spanish stock" and not having "a drop of Indian in him" (Nava 2020: 17). Similarly, the Gaviláns, the old, aristocratic family to which Alicia belongs, are still deemed to be prestigious enough to be members of the elite despite the loss of their property, as their titles date back to Mexico's colonial period (see Nava 2020: 23).

In contrast, the Indigenous people are regularly treated with contempt, an attitude criticised for its hypocrisy by the level-headed Miguel. Early in the novel, Miguel is surprised to note that his cousin, Jorge Luís, berates a café for employing an Indigenous waitress with whom the latter man shares

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

"nearly the same shade of brown" skin; nevertheless, he concedes that this paradoxical attitude is common to many members of the city's upper-class 'mestizo' community (i.e. of mixed ethnic ancestry), to which Jorge Luís belongs (Nava 2020: 22). Even the sight of the Indigenous poor population is offensive to public propriety, as demonstrated when Miguel observes a peasant turkey herder, scantily dressed in soiled rags, being accosted by a policeman and promptly removed from public view to a side street (see Nava 2020: 19-20).

In particular, what marks the native Mexican waitress and the turkey herder as undesirable and repulsive is their dirty appearance. Filth is described as a distinctive characteristic of Mexico City's Indigenous poor, an inescapable condition that fosters and transmits disease, thus necessitating the Indigenes' control and segregation from their 'betters'. To emphasise this imperative, Dr. Liceaga, the city's Director of Public Health, graphically expounds to Miguel on the conditions in which "the ignorant, benighted, and stubborn race of Indians" exist:

> They cling to their filthy habits and customs, living like animals in tenements that have never seen the disinfectant of sunlight or soap. They empty their bowels and bladders in the streets, fill rain gutters with their wastes, and anoint their sick children with holy oil instead of bathing them occasionally. They are the human equivalent of our sewers, and like our sewers, they must be flushed out and cleaned. (Nava 2020: 86)

Liceaga goes on to claim that "*we* are at war against disease and in that war, every weapon must be deployed" (Nava 2020: 87, added emphasis). While the doctor does not elaborate on whom "we" – as a marker of collective identity – refers to, he arguably uses the term to encompass himself and Miguel, both in their capacity as enlightened doctors and, more importantly, to align them with the respectable citizens of Mexico City. As members of the civilised community responsible for securing Mexico's welfare, the doctors are charged with defeating and reforming the degraded population metonymically designated as a "disease". Miguel's appointment as head sanitation inspector of "some of the city's worst" neighbourhoods (Nava 2020: 87) reinforces the chasm between these two populations. As a doctor sent to identify the sources of disease in the area and enforce hygienic

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

practices among the lowly Indigenes, Miguel joins the state initiative of control, disciplining the lower classes and making them conform to the desired national standard. In this sense, his presence in the neighbourhoods perpetuates the long-standing power imbalance between the Mexican elite and its degraded Others.

Liceaga's vehement denunciation of what he regards as the Indigenous population's abnormally dirty habits relies on the idea that filth taints places and persons which ought to be kept clean, such as the streets, rain gutters, or babies' bodies. By extension, it also invites an identification between filth and the Indigenes themselves, as having no legitimate place in a city struggling to regain its health. The doctor's views echo Douglas's hypothesis that dirt is "matter out of place", that which unsettles "a set of ordered relations" (Douglas 1966: 36). According to Douglas, however, perceptions of dirt are entirely subjective (see Douglas 1966: 2), contingent on the encoded social meanings projected on material that destabilises a given system. Such a view bears obvious resonance with Kristeva's definition of the abject and effectively elucidates the social position of the Indigenes in Mexico City: as presumed bearers of filth and disease, they represent an anomaly in Mexican society trying to define itself as civilised and coherent. A reading of the novel's Indigenes as the repudiated abject thus illuminates the deep division that colonialism has inflicted on Mexican identity.

Put simply, the actual cause of Mexico's pathological condition is the country's bloody colonial history and its legacy. Near the close of the novel, a character echoes Liceaga's war metaphor when she describes the state of being Mexican as living "in the friction of being half-civilized and half-barbaric, the one half always at war with the other" (Nava 2020: 334). Her metaphor powerfully articulates the traumatic rupture which the colonial experience has inflicted on the Mexican psyche. The Indigenes in this sense represent the supposedly inferior part of Mexican identity, a shameful, ineradicable reminder of the country's history. That history is perpetually repressed, hidden behind the Eurocentric ideal of respectability that the Mexican upper classes grotesquely try to uphold by dehumanising the Indigenous population held responsible for all the dirt and disease that plagues Mexico City, the country, and, ultimately, Mexican identity. Disease thus serves as a form of traumatic recall, signalling the uncanny return of the long-repressed: each new surge of sickness afflicting poor and rich alike testifies to the unresolved trauma that gnaws at the Mexican self. Only if this

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

shameful part is acknowledged, confronted, and embraced as an integral aspect of Mexican identity can the city and the country be truly 'cured'. As Miguel realises at the end of the novel, "[u]ntil Mexico accepted the past that its Indians represented, it would have no peace, and without peace the future of Mexico, like Mexico City itself, would be constructed on a swamp" (Nava 2020: 370).

Nava has confessed that his research for *The City of Palaces* spanned twenty years, born of his interest in the Otherness endemic to his own Mexican American identity (Olivas 2014: n.p.). In light of this admission, *The City of Palaces* emerges as symptomatic of Latin American thought's long-lasting concern over identity, behind which, John A. Ochoa asserts, "lurks the dark specter of failure" that "has achieved a monumental standing" in Mexican history (Ochoa 2004: 4). He conceptualises failure as both threatening and useful, since it can "afford the opportunity of laying bare the seams, the unseen continuities of form and history", forcing "a mode of self-examination and of exploration" (Ochoa 2004: 5) in line with neo-Victorianism's typical self-reflexivity. Building on Ochoa's ideas, I interpret the presence of disease in Nava's novel as one such failure, which nevertheless proves to be empowering insofar as it enables individual (though not general) introspection and the re-evaluation of history. The various diseases said to originate from the Indigenous Mexican population in *The City of Palaces* suggest a pervasive inability to reconcile the different aspects of Mexican identity, a failure accentuated by each successive divisive surge of disease. The novel's nineteenth-century setting thus serves as a mediator between the colonial period and the present. Nava's disease narrative urges reflection on the continued implications of the former period for the latter, as well as for the future of Mexican identity – today further complicated by the contagious 'filth' of the international drug trade and drug cartels that supposedly threaten not just the health and well-being of Mexico's body politic but also that of its northern neighbour.

As mentioned earlier, disease represents a more immediate threat for Alicia, who, unlike Donoghue's Blanche, does contracts smallpox, which leaves her seriously disfigured. Nava's novel showcases how the disease conditions female subjectivity, with the risk of infection exacerbated by the gender inequality inherent to Mexico's patriarchal society, due to differential healthcare that highlights the precarity of the female body regulated by patriarchal norms. Hence the text seems to suggest that even noblewomen,

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

despite their undisputed class privilege, are not safe from deeply entrenched discriminative practices that disempower them on the grounds of gender. Miguel initially reasons that Alicia should have been protected by a vaccine already available at the time she contracted the disease but discovers that none of Mexico City's noblewomen were vaccinated due to reactionary gender norms. When he queries why the city's doctors never insisted on vaccination, one noblewoman responds:

> 'Dear old Don Octavio? […] *Mais non!* He was a traditional doctor. He never laid a hand on me except to take my pulse and even then my mother and a maid had to be present. That he should penetrate me with a needle was unthinkable.' (Nava 2020: 25, original emphasis)

This alarming account is later echoed by Alicia herself, who tells Miguel that her family "would never have allowed [their family doctor] Don Ignacio to take the liberty of injecting anything" into her, adding that the doctor's diagnosis was based on her mother telling him "where [her daughter's] pain was" and being given the medicine to administer to Alicia (Nava 2020: 114, 110). Miguel's narrative voice, brimming with rational indignation, self-consciously echoes the twenty-first-century readers' condemnation of such sexist medical backwardness.[4]

As in the case of *Frog Music*, Nava also uses smallpox to highlight Alicia's relationships with Mexico's Indigenous people and emphasise her precarity via their analogous abjection in Mexican society. Alicia's life changes when, aged just thirteen, she falls in love with Anselmo, an Indigenous groom working at her family's residence, and starts an affair with him. Anselmo confesses to Alicia that he and his family were forced to leave their native Coahuila and come to Mexico City to find work because their land was appropriated by the government, a common policy of the Díaz regime at the time. Describing the event, Anselmo laconically tells Alicia that "[t]he sheriff came with some papers. My *papá* said we had to leave" (Nava 2020: 35, original italics), an account which, in its matter-of-fact brevity, suggests the powerlessness of the Indigenous population when faced with corrupt government decrees. Anselmo's family have no constitutional right to resist and can only comply, surrendering their land on the government's orders. Unsurprisingly, the ill-fated romance between the two young people

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

is doomed from the outset; when the affair is discovered, Anselmo, whom Alicia's family scornfully regards as merely "an Indian from the slums", is promptly dismissed, his displacement another reflection of his powerlessness based on ethnic difference (Nava 2020: 36). Hidden away from society, Alicia gives birth to a daughter in the foundling home, where she contracts smallpox, as does her baby, who dies of the disease soon afterwards. The smallpox leaves Alicia extensively scarred, "ruin[ing] her face and her prospects" (Nava 2020: 25), and forces her to only ever appear in society wearing a veil or a mix of creams and powders, exposing her to pitying or malicious remarks.

Alicia's facial scars not only signify her personal trauma at the loss of her Indigene lover Anselmo and their daughter, but also the cultural trauma of the ethnic divisions enforced by colonialism. In this respect, Alicia functions as what Laurie Vickroy terms a "representative" character whose "body becomes a historical marker to unspeakable experience" as it bears the traces of "social conflicts and wounds" (Vickroy 2002: xiii). Meanwhile her daughter's death from smallpox becomes heavily symbolic of the deadly hostility between the Indigenes and the elite, precluding any chance of reconciliation. Therefore, the smallpox scars on Alicia's face, brought about by her relationship with Anselmo, cement her connection to the 'Indian' population, to whom she remains lovingly devoted through her philanthropic work. As the novel records,

> [h]er deformity relaxed the suspicion of the poor toward people of her class because in their eyes her scars rendered her as poor, in her way, as they were in theirs. There was never any question of her being one of them – she wasn't and would never be – but in time they trusted her enough to be who they were in her presence, a wounded and vibrant people, the truest Mexicans of Mexico. (Nava 2020: 16)

Disease and its effects forge a strong bond between Alicia and the Indigenes, who acknowledge that although she has not suffered like they have, her own social existence has still been powerfully impacted by the disease that conditions their respective lives, albeit to different extents. Admittedly, Alicia never suffers dispossession and displacement, but her gender relegates her to

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

a feminine passivity and powerlessness that likewise leaves her unprotected against the disease's ravages and social abjection.

Alicia's life in Mexican society is strictly regulated by patriarchy both before and after her smallpox ordeal. Having facilitated her disfigurement, patriarchal norms continue to dehumanise her through the objectifying male gaze of the marriage market, which deems her physically unattractive and unfit for the role of wife and mother. Alicia's disfigurement obstructs her commodification in the social economy, which abjects her as a female anomaly, manifested by the ways in which different men respond to her scarred face. Importantly, it is always upper-class males that associate her disfigurement with her (lack of) marriage prospects. Even Miguel, for all his medical training and eventual affection for Alicia, is repulsed upon seeing her bare uncovered face for the first time, believing that her disfigurement would not allow him to "fulfil [his] conjugal duties were [they] to marry" (Nava 2020: 39-40, 65). Another telling example involves the husbands of Alicia's three sisters, all affluent self-made men who have used their notably unhappy and dysfunctional marriages to legitimise their own upward social mobility. Shortly after Miguel and Alicia's engagement, the three men coarsely interrogate Miguel regarding his true motivations for this "odd union", justifying their curiosity by saying that Alicia "is hideous" and does not even possess an independent fortune, instead being financially supported by them (Nava 2020: 102).

The comments made by her brothers-in-law amount to a negation of Alicia's subjectivity. The men's views are indicative of what Butler designates as the derealisation of the Other, whereby "certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, [and] they fit no dominant frame for the human", thus exposing the derealised Other to the reality of inexhaustible violence (Butler 2004: 33-34). Put differently, Alicia cannot feature anywhere within a system that objectifies femininity by reducing it to its aesthetic and economic value; therefore, she is rendered "interminably spectral" within this social arrangement (Butler 2004: 34). Such spectrality, Butler argues, legitimises all violence done against it, for "[i]f violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated" (Butler 2004: 33). Patriarchal authority would continue to violate Alicia should she remain a spinster, rendering her entirely dependent on her brothers-in-law, as her mother points out:

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

> 'My dear […] A woman alone has no place in the world. Your brothers-in-law will undoubtedly wrest control of your inheritance, paltry as it will be, and appropriate it to their own uses. You will end up living on their sufferance.' (Nava 2020: 54)

In an attempt to help Alicia escape her precarious state, her mother forces her daughter to dress up and attend a ball to attract potential suitors who might wish to profit from the family's aristocratic status. Alicia's appearance at the ball powerfully showcases her abject status in her society: gazing upon her face, free of a veil, but still "[b]uried under layers of creams and powders, lips and cheeks rouged", Miguel is reminded of the face painted on a corpse by the undertaker (Nava 2020: 58). Miguel's simile is telling here, for according to Kristeva the corpse is "the utmost of abjection" (Kristeva 1982: 3). In this sense, Alicia's public appearance only makes her liminality and outsider status more visible. Prevented from reintegrating into Mexico City's objectifying society, Alicia maintains her vulnerable status, until her marriage to Miguel restores her to the respectability due to a married woman. Importantly, theirs is an egalitarian marriage founded on affection and mutual esteem, circumventing – at least in the domestic realm of their home – the objectification other women of her class endure in marriage.

Disease in *The City of Palaces*, then, testifies to the enduring presence of colonial trauma in Mexican society, while also illustrating the social vulnerability constitutive of both denigrated 'Indians' and women, according to their different positionalities. By marking this group as pathological to society, disease legitimises the exclusion of the Indigenous population while simultaneously pointing to the violence done by male power structures to female subjectivity.

5. Coda: Representing the Diseased in Neo-Victorian Texts

Published during the global COVID-19 pandemic, *The City of Palaces* evinced a disconcerting prescience: like smallpox in the novel, the Coronavirus diseases in the real world foregrounded social and ethnic inequalities, with poorer non-Western countries struggling to gain equitable access to vaccines and frontline workers, especially BAME healthcare professionals or those in 'essential' low-paid jobs, facing greater risks of exposure and infection. Exemplifying Alicia's interconnectedness with

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

Indigene Others, the smallpox scars on her face could thus also be read as an indictment of the way that disease outbreaks past and present continue to reinforce unequal power structures and forms of politicised pathologisation.

Although *The City of Palaces* engages more self-consciously than *Frog Music* with neo-Victorian biopolitics, Nava's novel too ends up re-silencing the ethnic Othered group. In both texts, the trials of the marginalised, albeit narrated sympathetically, are mediated by an external narrator's focus on the white female protagonists with whom the ethnically Othered share certain affinities. Moreover, *Frog Music* and *The City of Palaces* focus on subjects associated with former European empires, i.e. the French Empire and the Spanish Empire respectively, both predecessors of the British Empire and United States hegemony in Western networks of power. This privileged perspective serves to relegate non-white groups to subaltern status once more – a move seemingly at odds with neo-Victorianism's commitment to re-voicing silenced or lost nineteenth-century subjects.[5] What, then, does the association of these Othered groups with disease, combined with voicelessness, suggest about neo-Victorianism's self-avowed politics of inclusion?

The issue of (non)belonging resonates with ongoing debates within neo-Victorianism about the field's fluid temporal and geographical boundaries. In recent years neo-Victorian scholars have increasingly drawn into focus texts set in a variety of global and transnational locations that transcend the field's early Anglocentric specificity, as *Frog Music* and *The City of Palaces* also do. At the same time, however, critics have expressed reservations about this omnivorous trend and its controversial implications – of neo-Victorianism spreading contagiously and threatening to engross all works of historical fiction related to the Long Nineteenth Century – often noting "the colonizing potentials" of the label 'Victorian' (Ho 2012: 10; also see Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 1).[6] Metafictionally, this makes the disease narrative highly appropriate and relevant to neo-Victorianism, especially as disease, whether smallpox or COVID-19, does not respect national boundaries.

While *Frog Music* and *The City of Palaces* lack the explicitly self-reflexive apparatus of many canonical neo-Victorian novels such as John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) or Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), their deployment of disease and contagion tropes still invites self-conscious engagements with the past. In

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

Frog Music, Blanche eventually discovers the shocking truth of Jenny's murder: in another example of pernicious biopolitics, Arthur orchestrated Jenny's death to discipline Blanche's lesbian desire for her friend and violently reassert patriarchal control over women's bodies. Similarly, in Nava's narrative, the two protagonists, alongside the novels' readers, come to learn about the biopolitical impact of Spanish colonisation and its aftermath on Mexico's Indigenous people. As the main protagonists are essentially engaged in the recovery of bodies and their histories, either through seeking the causes of their demise or by attempting to heal and protect them, Donoghue's and Nava's novels may be seen as "acts of memory" that "re-member" the past (Mitchell 2010: 4, 7), using Othered, disease-marked, and abjected bodies as vehicles to achieve this.

Through their biopolitics, then, both novels alert their audiences to discursive relations of domination unfolding within the texts or the textual unconscious. Nevertheless, both the white Irish Donoghue and the Mexican American Nava seem unwilling to ventriloquise the disempowered and dispossessed, although there may be ethical reasons for this decision.[7] Not least, as James Harold points out, "[m]embers of historically powerful groups [...] have a long history of appropriating the stories and traditions of less powerful groups, and this has produced real harms – economic as well as social" (Harold 2003: 252). Hence it is understandable that Donoghue in particular, as a white author, would refrain from using the perspective of a Chinese character, although other neo-Victoria writers, like Rose Tremain in *The Colour* (2003), have made different choices.[8] Yet to avoid appropriating their voices, Donoghue relegates the Chinese to the periphery of the narrative, reducing them to props lending the story verisimilitude and showcasing the white heroine's own marginality. A comparable case can be made for the representation of Indigenous Mexicans by Nava in spite of his own Indigene ancestry (see Olivas 2014: n.p.). *The City of Palaces* privileges upper-class characters, like Alicia and Miguel, whose perspectives mediate all information about the Indigenous population. In this respect, the two texts appear to affirm Gayatri Spivak's (in)famous assertion that "[t]he subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 1988a: 308), as the Irish Donoghue and the third-generation Mexican American Nava face the moral dilemma of either infusing subalterns with a voice and consciousness that risks their usurpation, potentially erasing the cultural specificity of people and events depicted, or else consigning them to "a total unrepresentability" (Spivak 1988b: 17). If not

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

re-voiced, the marginalised groups are spared the neo-colonisation of their perspectives, but they also remain inaccessible and subaltern.

While *Frog Music* and *The City of Palaces* do not manage to resolve this moral impasse, the narratives' exploration of the pathologisation of marginalised groups interrogates the latter's (still) ambiguous belonging as legitimate neo-Victorian subjects – and anticipates future creative and critical works that more fully re-voice and rewrite them into the canon.[9] Donoghue's and Nava's novels, then, prompt reflection on the issue of neo-Victorianism's purported viral colonisation of historical fiction set in the nineteenth-century, as well as on the process of neo-Victorian canon formation. For if, as critical readers, we apply the label 'neo-Victorian' indiscriminately to all historical fiction concerned with the nineteenth century – in effect, performing the twin acts of colonisation and infection – we also engage in an inadvertent process of abjection, whereby those works which do not fit neatly within the already established, critically accepted definitions of 'neo-Victorian' ought to be jettisoned since they disturb "identity, system, order" and "[do] not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982: 4). Concurring with Antonija Primorac and Monika Pietrzak-Franger that "[t]he spread and internationalisation of the debate outside the Anglosphere [...] offers an exciting possibility of comparing and contesting local tendencies and global impulses in neo-Victorian literatures and wider cultural studies" (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 13), I maintain the necessity of reflecting on what may be lost by abjecting those works that ostensibly disturb the order and logic of neo-Victorian discourse. In this respect, the emphasis in *Frog Music* and *The City of Palaces* on cross-cultural interconnectedness (via contagion and pathologisation) may be instructive for a global neo-Victorianism. While the process of association between disease and forms of Otherness may invite contestation on occasion, the texts also underline the positive effects of an affective engagement with the Other through the bridging trope of shared precarity. In this sense, a widening of neo-Victorian fiction's scope may lead to a deeper understanding of the Long Nineteenth Century informed by the awareness of a continued interconnectedness between diverse and seemingly unrelated geographical and cultural sites, between past and present, between the Victorians and ourselves.

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Marie-Luise Kohlke and the anonymous readers of this article for all their valuable suggestions and feedback during the stages of the reviewing process.

Notes

1. San Franciso further acquired a reputation for tolerance of eccentricity, homosexuality, and diverse religious expression (see Cherny 1994: 131).
2. Curiously, although Lackey's interview with Donoghue discusses *Frog Music*, the Chinese as history's "nobodies", along with disease and smallpox, go wholly unmentioned.
3. The novel's identity politics only become more nuanced in the lack of depiction of any Chinese woman owning a business or real estate property, as Blanche's Prussian madame and Blanche herself respectively do, implicitly acknowledging white privilege.
4. Disease here exposes nineteenth-century ideals of chaste, passive, and infantilised femininity as literally lethal, with ostensibly benign medical men endangering instead of protecting women's lives. Nava's novel thus invites reflection on the ethics of contemporary medical practice and its possible perpetuation of female precarity through patriarchal constructions of femininity.
5. Helen Davies observes that "[a]n association between 'voice' and social agency is clearly at work" in neo-Victorianism, so that investing voiceless subjects with a voice may free them from the constraints of "the traditional master discourse of history, a narrative which privileges patriarchy, heteronormativity, eurocentricity [*sic*] and the able-bodied" (Davies 2012: 2, 3). Able-bodiedness, of course, not only asserts itself as the healthy counterpart to physical (and/or mental) disability, but also to disease-impaired bodies.
6. In particular, Ho cautions that, if 'the Victorian' is read as encoding the idea of empire, even when applied to non-British/non-Commonwealth-related works, "neo-Victorian studies may be seen as implicated in its own 'Victorian' project to colonize *all* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century, regardless of geographical or cultural differences" (Ho 2012: 10, original emphasis). This idea is echoed by Mark Llewellyn and Ann Heilmann who argue that "the replacement – or displacement – of the term 'neo-Victorianism' into international and global contexts" may suggest "an overarching narrative that erases the specificities of cultural memory and inculcates a homogenisation of heritage" (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013: 26). Though taking these concerns

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

into account, Antonija Primorac and Monika Pietrzak-Franger defend the notion of a global neo-Victorianism as a means of "embrac[ing] the plurality of attitudes, contexts, and mindsets from which the long nineteenth century and its neo-Victorian incarnations can be viewed" (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 4).

7. Voicing these subjects, e.g., might amount to collusion in the appropriation and potential misuse of these subjects' experiences and traumas (see Ho Lai-Ming 2019: 45; Kohlke and Gutleben 2020: 22).
8. Set during New Zealand's West Coast gold rush, Tremain's novel involves a romance between two immigrants, a white female and a Chinese male, both of whose perspectives are voiced in the text.
9. The recent publication of critically and commercially successful, anti-imperialist literary texts such as Sara Collins's *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* (2019) and R. F. Kuang's *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022) has shown that nuanced explorations of the intersection between neo-Victorianism and, respectively, Black and Asian identities are not only possible, but also necessary. Equally, recent scholarly works, including the 2019 *Neo-Victorian Studies* special issue on *Neo-Victorian Asia*, edited by Ho, and the 2022 edited collection *Black Neo-Victoriana*, by Felipe Espinoza Garrido, Marlena Tronicke and Julian Wacker, have begun to unpack the manifold tensions inherent in neo-Victorian rewritings of subaltern perspectives.

Bibliography

Beezley, William H. and Colin M. MacLachlan. 2009. *Mexicans in Revolution, 1910-1946: An Introduction*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.

Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning*. London: Verso.

Cherny, Robert W. 1994. 'Patterns of Toleration and Discrimination in San Francisco: The Civil War to World War I', *California History*, 73:2, 130-141.

Craddock, Susan. 1999. 'Embodying Place: Pathologizing Chinese and Chinatown in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco', *Antipode*, 31:4, 351-371.

Davies, Helen. 2012. *Gender and Ventriloquism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction: Passionate Puppets*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

Donoghue, Emma. 2015. *Frog Music* [2014]. London: Picador.
Douglas, Mary. 1984. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* [1966]. London: Routledge.
Erwin, Lee. 1989. '"Like in a Looking-Glass": History and Narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 22:2, 143-158.
Frankenberg, Ruth. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness.* Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
Gutleben, Christian. 2001. *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel.* Amsterdam: Rodopi.
Harold, James. 2003. 'Flexing the Imagination', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 61:3, 247-257.
Heilmann, Ann, and Mark Llewellyn. 2010. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Ho, Elizabeth. 2012. *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire*. London: Bloomsbury.
Ho Lai-Ming, Tammy. *Neo-Victorian Cannibalism: A Theory of Contemporary Adaptations*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
Klee, Linnea. 1983. 'The Regulars and the Chinese: Ethnicity and Public Health In 1870s San Francisco', *Urban Anthropology*, 12:2, 181-207.
Kohlke, Marie-Luise, and Christian Gutleben. 2010. 'Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century', in Kohlke, Marie-Luise, and Christian Gutleben (eds.), *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering.* Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 1-34.
——. 2020. 'Taking Biofictional Liberties: Tactical Games and Gambits with Nineteenth-Century Lives', in Kohlke, Marie-Luise, and Christian Gutleben (eds.), *Neo-Victorian Biofiction: Reimagining Nineteenth-Century Historical Subjects*. Leiden & Boston: Brill | Rodopi, 1-54.
Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (trans. Leon S. Roudiez). New York: Columbia University Press.
Lackey, Michael, and Emma Donoghue. (2018). 'Emma Donoghue: Voicing the Nobodies in the Biographical Novel', *Éire-Ireland*, 53:1 & 2, 120-133. [DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2018.0005]
Lentin, Alana, and Gavan Titley. 2011. *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age.* London: Zed Books.

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

Link, Bruce G., and Jo C. Phelan. 2001. 'Conceptualizing Stigma', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 363-385.

Llewellyn, Mark and Ann Heilmann. 2013. 'The Victorians Now: Global Reflections on Neo-Victorianism', *Critical Quarterly*, 55:1, Special Issue: *The State, or Statelessness, of Victorian Studies*, 24-42.

Magnusson, Bruce, and Zahi Zalloua. 2012. 'Introduction: The Hydra of Contagion', in Magnusson, Bruce, and Zahi Zalloua (eds.), 2012a. *Contagion: Health, Fear, Sovereignty*. Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 3-24.

Meyer, Susan L. 1990. 'Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*', *Victorian Studies*, 33:2, 247-268.

Mitchell, Kate. 2010. *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian AfterImages*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nava, Michael. 2020. *The City of Palaces* [2014]. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Amble Press.

O'Brien, Gerald V. 2018. *Contagion and the National Body: The Organism Metaphor in American Thought*. London: Routledge.

O'Hara, Matthew D. 2009. *A Flock Divided: Race, Religion, and Politics in Mexico, 1749-1857*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Ochoa, John A. 2004. *The Uses of Failure in Mexican Literature and Identity*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

Olivas, Daniel. 2014. 'Three Questions for Michael Nava regarding his new novel, "The City of Palaces"', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 31 March, n.p., https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/three-questions-michael-nava-regarding-new-novel-city-palaces/ (accessed 31 January 2021).

Primorac, Antonija, and Monika Pietrzak-Franger. 2015. 'Introduction: What Is Global Neo-Victorianism?', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 8:1, Special Issue: *Neo-Victorianism and Globalisation: Transnational Dissemination of Nineteenth-Century Cultural Texts*, 1-16.

Santer, Melvin. 2014. *Confronting Contagion: Our Evolving Understanding of Disease*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sears, Clare. 2015. *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Shah, Nayan. 2001. *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988a. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Nelson, Cary, and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 271-313.

——. 1988b. 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in Guha, Ranajit and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds.), *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 3-33.

Takaki, Ronald T. 1989. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown, and Company.

Verloo, Mieke. 2006. 'Multiple Inequalities, Intersectionality and the European Union', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13:3, 211-228.

Vickroy, Laurie. 2002. *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction.* Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press.

DOI: 10.5281/nvs.v15i2.395