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### The Imperial Gothic: Contact Tracing Narratives of Disease, Disorder, and Race in Global American Literature

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Oberlin College

The Imperial Gothic:

Contact Tracing Narratives of Disease, Disorder, and Race in Global American Literature

By Emma Brownstein

English Honors Thesis

Advisor: Prof. Danielle Skeehan

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## Introduction

“As Jacques Derrida suggests in his essay ‘The Law of Genre,’ the critical desire for generic classification and clarity signals a fear of contagion: the law of genre depends upon the principle of impurity. Categorical generic distinctions aim to ensure the purity of certain individual works for the stature of related genres. Associated with the hackneyed, the feminine, and the popular, the gothic lacks respectability and hence must be quarantined from other literary forms.”

-Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America*, 5

Fear. Desire. Contagion. Quarantine. The gothic, if we take Teresa Goddu's words above literally, is not just a diseased and contagious literature, but also a literature of and about disease. At its most elemental, the gothic explores and reacts to bodily, familial, and political disorder occasioned by illicit proximities, clandestine juxtapositions, and literal or metaphorical contaminations. Narratives about disease and the diseased, disorder and the disordered, pollution and the polluted find a home in the gothic genre, “quarantined” away from more “credible” forms of literature. As Goddu suggests through her use of the concept of quarantine, gothic literature challenges literary order and thus the values and ideologies that canonical western literature supports. Quarantining the gothic keeps these revelatory and salacious narratives of social and political upheaval, illicit behavior, and inexplicable evil at a distance from representational canonical works and the histories and values associated with them. Just as with quarantining a sick person, relegating the gothic to the realm of popular culture prevents the genre from “disordering” the literary status quo. Yet, what ensues when quarantine fails? What transpires when the disorder characterizing the American gothic goes global? This thesis explores what happens when the American gothic breaks the geo-temporal boundaries of its own literary quarantine—that is, when the American Gothic expands into new territories forged by an American imperial project and mutates to thrive in its new environments. A globalized American Gothic, or what I will call

“Imperial Gothic,” emerges as a distinct subgenre responding to a new set of American anxieties that arise when borders and, consequently, quarantines are breached in the name of territorial expansion.

This thesis examines the intersections among gothic literature, empire, and contagion, and traces the emergence and evolution of a yet unexplored subgenre: the Imperial Gothic. Where early American Gothic narratives express anxieties about national stability and the republican subject, the Imperial Gothic explores anxieties that emerge when imperialism brings white Americans into contact with foreign commodities, environments, and bodies, ranging from foreign nationals, immigrants, and enslaved peoples, to Martians.<sup>1</sup> It demonstrates how viral threats to the body correspond to the nationalist conception of foreign threats against the imagined white body politic.<sup>2</sup> What emerges from this body of global and interplanetary literature is an “epidemiology of American imperialism.” As nineteenth and twentieth century authors diagnose the state of American empire, a range of symptoms emerge. The symptoms of imperial decline manifest as epidemics, contaminated “promised” lands, the viral consequences of capitalism, and the loss of the white citizenry’s imagined moral superiority. These symptoms represent examples of what Neel Ahuja has termed “bioinsecurity.” Ahuja explains that the immune system “...repeatedly re-creates the borders of the body through the constant cuts it makes across the microbiome,” a

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa Goddu. *Gothic America: Narrative History and Nation*. (New York: Columbia University Press 1997); Allan Lloyd-Smith. *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*. (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group 2004). Following the establishment of the United States in the late eighteenth-century and its growing global and hemispheric imperial ambitions throughout the nineteenth-century, American authors often turned to fiction to express anxiety about who and what was “American.” Issues of racial inequality, corrupt capitalism, the undomesticated, wild frontier, and plague and disease easily destabilized the optimism surrounding new American institutions. The American Gothic took hold of these threats and brought them to the literary forefront, turning American anxiety into consumable stories that both destabilized and affirmed the ideologies that justify the American empire.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson. “Introduction,” *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1983). Robert Bellah. “Civil Religion in America.” *Daedalus*, Vol. 134, No. 4, (Fall, 2005.) pp. 40-55. Karen Brodtkin. “Global Capitalism: What’s Race Got to Do with It?” *American Ethnologist*, (May 2000).

process that occurs at the national level when a perceived threat or contaminant breaches national borders.<sup>3</sup> The term bioinsecurity thus encapsulates how the individual body and the national body responds to events occasioned by imperial and territorial expansion. Contact between white American citizens and foreign bodies—imagined as racial and viral in the literature—produces a traceable epidemiology of imperialism.

While dark passageways, imprisoned heroines, and duplicitous patriarchal villains are staples of the classic Gothic genre, several additional tropes recur in the Imperial Gothic: trade and capitalism gone wrong, uncertain, or blurred identities, unknown deadly illnesses that spread through spatial contact zones, and the failure of both biological and national defense mechanisms.<sup>4</sup> I explore these tropes through seven primary sources with publication dates ranging from 1799 to 2018. These works include: Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799), Herman Melville's *Redburn* (1849), Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), Katherine Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), and Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018). Because one goal of this thesis is to demonstrate the mutability and development of the genre over time, these works range from the first wave of American Gothic to travel literature and science fiction. Though the texts vary in time and subject matter, they overlap in their propensity to question the effect of imperialism on the health of the citizenry and nation. Through examining these narratives, I argue the following: that the Imperial Gothic posits race and class as central to understandings of the imagined national self, that the establishment of the white home or domestic sphere is central to the function of empire, that space exploration is a colonial endeavor, and that empire becomes ill or diseased as it expands.

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<sup>3</sup> Neel Ahuja. "Dread Life: Disease Intervention and the Intimacies of Empire." Introduction to *Bioinsecurities: Disease Interventions and the Government of Species*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Goddu, 1997; Lloyd-Smith, 2004.

The term Imperial Gothic invites us to consider the gothic nature of empire building, as well as to explore the tensions between imperial ambition and the lived, bodily experience of settlement. In most imperial scenarios, colonizers establish dominance through the occupation of foreign territories and metaphysical cultural spaces. In fact, Diana Taylor describes the imperial scenario of discovery and conquest as “formulaic, portable, repeatable, and often banal because it leaves out complexity, reduces conflict to its stock elements, and encourages fantasies of participation.”<sup>5</sup> However, in the Imperial Gothic the land upon which this scenario is staged is anything but passive. In the Imperial Gothic, foreign lands fight back, threatening to destroy colonizers’ health and wellbeing by contaminating their bodies. Rather than replicating Taylor’s formulaic scenario of discovery, Imperial Gothic narrates colonial and imperial projects gone wrong and brings to light the nightmarish and bodily realities faced by those on the ground. For instance, Conevery Bolton describes the colonial “struggle to impose order and organization on new territories” as negotiated through “white settlers’ interactions with their physical environment” and “with their own bodies.”<sup>6</sup> In Imperial Gothic, empire is personal—it is negotiated through the body and the home, most often resulting in the destruction of both. This is the crux of Imperial Gothic: imperialism *is* the epidemic. Its viral nature “Gothicizes” or (un)settles the lands it infiltrates.

Drawing on scholarly work in American empire, nationalism, and global studies, critical race studies, and the medical humanities, I ultimately consider how the Imperial Gothic reflects, constructs, and supports American conceptions of global health, identity, and national space in an

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<sup>5</sup> Diana Taylor. “Scenarios of Discovery: Reflections on Performance and Ethnography.” *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 55.

<sup>6</sup> Conevery Bolton. *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land*. (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 16.

increasingly globalized world. For instance, studies on race and empire demonstrate that the American imperial project produced a new racial hierarchy by binding white populations together in opposition to newly racialized counterparts.<sup>7</sup> In turn, work in medical humanities shows how the white national body politic imagined non-white bodies as a physiological threats—as biological hazards to their health and racial sanctity.<sup>8</sup> In other words, white nationalism frames contact with foreign bodies in terms of bioinsecurity, which I introduced above. So, from this perspective it seems that imperial expansion ushers in biological—not just physical or ideological—dangers.

The novels I explore in this thesis exemplify imperialism as epidemic over time and function as benchmarks in the genre's genealogy as it travels from the first American capital to Mars to contemporary corporate America. I begin with Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799) because it is a foundational novel for both the American and Imperial Gothic.<sup>9</sup> In the novel, eighteenth-century Philadelphia, the center of American imperial and economic ambition, becomes a ghost town plagued by a Yellow Fever epidemic brought in through its ports. Given Brown's importance in spearheading the early American literary and gothic canon, the novel demonstrates that the Imperial Gothic is sown into the American democracy from the very beginning. I use *Arthur Mervyn* as a starting point to examine how the genre and its tropes change over time. From Brown, I move to Melville's *Redburn* (1849) to interrogate American empire's oceanic and epistemological expansion via early global capitalism into new contact zones. With Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), I return to the continental States to address how the Imperial Gothic responds to

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<sup>7</sup> Brodtkin, "Global Capitalism," 2000; Bolton, *The Health of the Country*, 2002; Allan Greer. "Settler Colonialism and Empire in Early America." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 3, (July 2019), pp. 383-390; Thomas Bender. "The American Way of Empire." *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring, 2006), pp. 45-61; Taylor, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Sari Altshuler. "The Gothic Origins of Global Health." *American Literature*, Vol 89, No. 3, (September 2017), pp. 557-590; Ahuja, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Goddu, 1997.

slavery and abolition. I find that it illuminates how national contradictions between liberty, enslavement, and morality destabilize the American imperial narrative. Moving into the twentieth-century, I use Porter's *Pale Horse Pale Rider* (1939) to demonstrate how militarism, patriotism, and nationalism alter perspectives on disease and empire. I next turn to Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1969) to explore the Imperial Gothic on an intergalactic plain and to investigate science fiction's role in transforming imperial ideologies. Finally, I end with Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018) which demonstrates how the conditions of twenty-first century globalization alter the stakes and the focus of the genre.

In the sections that follow, I trace the origins and transformations of Imperial Gothic. In many ways, Imperial Gothic might also be characterized as narratives of bioinsecurity catalyzed by the conditions of American imperialism. Empire responds to bioinsecurity with its own technologies, ranging from the cementation of domesticity to military violence. Unpacking these technologies of empire, I examine how they both serve and undermine imperial health—that is, how empire produces biological threats through its attempts to accrue power and that these biological threats ultimately undermine its own stability. My literary examples throughout demonstrate the failure of imperial responses to biological danger and likewise the failure of what we might call an imperial immune system. Instead, we see the epidemiology of empire and a sustained meditation on its diseased.



Part I  
The Bio-insecure Body in Imperial Gothic

The concept of bioinsecurity provides a framework to analyze the relationship between empire, nationalism, the body, and disease in the Imperial Gothic. Much like discovering a demon in the backwoods or a duplicitous villain hiding in the home's walls, biosecurity describes a scenario in which one's sense of safety is threatened. For Ahuja, empire uses media (broadly construed) to "activate the feeling of bodily risk" and generate "public optimism in the imperial state as protector of life."<sup>10</sup> The Imperial Gothic is just such a medium: it deploys contact narratives with foreign bodies and environments to generate feelings of risk.<sup>11</sup> That said, Imperial Gothic narratives tend to invert understandings of the foreign and of the threat. As Goddu writes, "Instead of fleeing reality, the gothic registers its culture's contradictions, presenting a distorted, not disengaged version of reality."<sup>12</sup> So, rather than biological threats residing within foreign lands and peoples, Imperial Gothic shows how they are carried along the routes of empire as national exports. The Imperial Gothic implicates American empire in the proliferation of disease and the introduction of bioinsecure conditions. In doing so, the genre presents an alternative view of the role empire plays in promoting healthful and moral conditions in the places it territorializes.<sup>13</sup> In this section, I explore the genre's parallel treatment of the body and the home through the lens of bioinsecurity and describe how it uses uncanny biological proximities to express gothic unease. The Imperial Gothic shows empire's uncanny proximity to disease and bioinsecure situations, not as a symptom of encounter but as a built-in technology. Fittingly, if we are to understand empire

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<sup>10</sup> Ahuja, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Goddu, 1997; Lloyd-Smith, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Goddu, *Gothic America*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> On the empire's promotion of healthful and moral conditions in territories: Ahuja, 2016; Bender "The American Way of Empire," pp. 45-61; Greer, 2019; Sandra Gustafson. "Histories of Democracy and Empire." *American Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 1, (March 2007), pp. 107-133.

as the virus, the home is likewise a technology of infiltration and occupation<sup>14</sup> and the establishment of homes in unknown lands is a cornerstone of the Imperial Gothic.

The foundation of “America” coincided with processes of deterritorialization, meaning U.S. national identity is inextricably linked to the imperial project and forged under threatening conditions. As Bolton writes, in the nineteenth century “new environments were understood...to hold bodily threat.”<sup>15</sup> Amy Kaplan argues that the home is central to navigating those threats, and writes that the “imperial project of civilizing, and the conditions of domesticity often become markers that distinguish civilization from savagery. Through the process of domestication, the home contains within itself those wild or foreign elements that must be tamed...”<sup>16</sup> For Kaplan, the home functions as a civilizing technology and, in doing so, incorporates into itself elements of the unknown or uncivilized to coopt and transform them in the name of expansion. It also structures the relationship between the individual or the family and the nation. The home’s borders are a lot like national borders. Following Kaplan’s logic, the home is not a site of security but one that is constantly navigating bioinsecurity. And if the home is a microcosm of the nation or empire, empire is fueled by a constant negotiation of bodily and ideological threat. That said, if we follow my understanding of empire *as* bioinsecurity, the home plants the seeds of biological threat rather than encountering them in the wild. This idea of the home as agent of disease rather than as refuge is uncanny indeed and central to Imperial Gothic. In many ways, the American subject is an Imperial Gothic one, too.

White Americans’ anxieties about bioinsecurity drove them to create various metrics through which to define themselves in relation to others within and beyond its borders. For

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<sup>14</sup> Amy Kaplan. “Manifest Domesticity.” *American Literature*, Vol. 70, No. 3, (September 1998), pp. 581-606.

<sup>15</sup> Bolton, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Kaplan, 582.

instance, Thomas Bender writes: “An essential part of American national identity is based on difference, on a tendency to define America as distinct from, even separate from, all that is foreign.”<sup>17</sup> Racial differentiation within the United States was equally important, and non-white Americans were seen as a biological threat.<sup>18</sup> As Katherine Verdery argues, “notions of purity and contamination, of blood as a carrier of culture, or of pollution are fundamental to the projects of nation-making.”<sup>19</sup> Verdery’s notion of blood as a carrier of racial, moral, and cultural superiority shows how central biology is to Imperial Gothic narratives. Following this racist logic, “biological exposure” brings with it a threat to the DNA of empire, not just the make-up of the individual.

Regardless of differentiation and categorization, as I argue above, imperial borders are always semi-permeable. They need to be in order to expand. And as these boundaries expand, they bring with them technologies that introduce and negotiate bioinsecurity. The setting of Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn*—eighteenth-century Philadelphia—provides an interesting example. It is the new nation’s capital and its busiest and most lucrative port. It’s the seat of a nationalist project and the gateway for an imperial one. When the city is hit by the yellow fever epidemic, its citizens saw it as a sign that the nation would fail and also understood the disease as a symptom of its imperial ambition: it arrived on ships coming from the Caribbean. Describing the situation in Philadelphia, Eve Kornfield writes: “As the disease, fear of contagion, and thus quarantines and cruelty seemed to radiate outward from the capital city over the course of the decade, Americans discovered physical as well as symbolic bases for their fears of America’s physical, moral, and political impurity.”<sup>20</sup> While not using the exact words, Kornfield identifies yellow fever as

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<sup>17</sup> Bender, 45.

<sup>18</sup> Bolton, 2002; Neel Ahuja, 2016. Calvin, Matt. “Race, Revolution, and the Sublime: The Gothicization of the Haitian Revolution in the New Republic and Atlantic World.” *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Volume 5, Number 1, (Spring, 2007) 1-29.

<sup>19</sup> Katherine Verdery. “Whither ‘Nation’ and ‘Nationalism’?” *Daedalus* Vol.122, No. 3, (1993), 42.

<sup>20</sup> Eva Kornfield. “Crisis in the Capital: The Cultural Significance of the Philadelphia’s Great Yellow Fever Epidemic.” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 3, (July 1984), 196.

introducing the conditions of bioinsecurity. *Arthur Mervyn* uses a virus—and the way it infiltrates the individual body—to discuss threats facing the nation. Should the U.S. seal itself off from foreign influence—both biological and ideological? To protect against the threat of another “invasion,” must it close its borders, much like individual citizens under quarantine? And what of its own imperial ambitions? An empire cannot function under quarantine. As an early example of the Imperial Gothic, the novel deploys disease to talk about empire. That is, it deploys a narrative of bioinsecurity to discuss the relationships among the body and the body politic, the home and the nation.

As shown in Philadelphia, ports are inevitably permeable sites of bioinsecurity. Likewise, oceanic voyages into unfamiliar lands inevitably present American imperial bodies with the challenge of acclimation to the unknown, eliciting feelings of bioinsecurity as they face the question of how they should relate to new territory.<sup>21</sup> Such voyages also bring U.S. diseases to new climes. As Bolton writes: “Confronted with the bodily consequences of their voyages into the new, American migrants embarked on a frustrating search for order in self and surroundings.”<sup>22</sup> In Melville’s *Redburn* (1849), we see just such bodily consequences. *Redburn* expands the American imperial domain into international port cities and addresses imperialism by examining early global capitalism in contact zones with foreign bodies. The novel portrays trade routes, port towns, docks, and sailors themselves as sites of vice, exploitation, and disease. But, in the words of Shelley Streeby, sailors also facilitate the “extension and protection of networks of U.S. commercial interests, investments, and military bases in addition to or instead of the annexation of lands.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Taylor, 2003; Bender, 2006. Toby Ditz. “Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia.” *The Journal of American History*, (June 1994), Vol. 81, No. 1, June 1994, pp. 51-80.

<sup>22</sup> Bolton, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Shelly Streeby. “Empire.” *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glen Hendler, (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 96.

Mercantile imperial expansion, therefore, facilitates the emergence of bioinsecure locales wherever America has financial interests. The sailors “corrupt” the places they land by creating a vice-based economy but also by literally bringing infection. The sailors are both the parasites and the infected in this framework. As a narrative about bioinsecurity, *Redburn* deploys the concept of corruption—of bodies and morals—to talk about the physical and ideological debts of empire. It is an example of Imperial Gothic in that it uses “illicit proximities” to talk about the corruption of U.S. national identity *and* U.S. individuals as corrupting forces.

Notions of infection in the Imperial Gothic also manifest in portrayals of the connections between race and place. In antebellum America, people commonly believed that place produced different races. As Bolton writes, white Americans in this time period theorized that “Whites were thus in danger when they moved into regions of southern heat—a danger that threatened not simply each individual person, but the structure of racial differentiation.”<sup>24</sup> This belief indicates a collective recognition of the fluidity of race despite the ideological firmness of constructed boundaries defining whiteness.<sup>25</sup> The association of land or region with race presented those traveling to and settling in the southern regions of empire with an ontological threat to their existence: what if, by traveling to the south to reap economic gains, they turned into the very racial other they sought to exploit?

While Bolton refers to this phenomenon as a fear of acclimation, we might also understand it as an anxiety about bioinsecurity. For instance, he writes:

...racial and individual identity were vulnerable: the changes unleashed in new territory threaten the coherence and clarity of physical differentiation demanded by the racial economy of antebellum America. ‘Whites’ became brown in the sun of

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<sup>24</sup> Bolton, 232.

<sup>25</sup> On the boundaries defining whiteness: <sup>25</sup> Bolton, 2002; Calvin, Matt. 2007;” 2000; Greer, 2019; Rosemary Marangoly George. “Domestic.” *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Second Edition, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, (New York: NYU Press, 2007); Ed White “Early American Imagined Communities.” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (March 2004), pp. 49-81.

the Far West, while the violence and rape of the slave system created 'blacks' whose skin, hair, and features failed utterly to speak that identity.<sup>26</sup>

The vulnerability—or *permeability*—of racial identity caused by place and interracial sexual violence exposed the weaknesses in the racial, geographic, and ideological order that stabilized the empire's borders. Such, in fact, is the premise of Francis Harper's yellow fever plagued novel, *Iola Leroy* (1892). In this novel, yellow fever symbolizes and externalizes the universally corrupting nature of slavery, which is particularly notable considering that the American economic empire was built and expanded by the institution of slavery.<sup>27</sup> *Iola Leroy* demonstrates that racial exploitation and imperial expansionism create bioinsecure conditions. The permeability of supposedly secure, racial categories destabilizes naturalized understandings of whiteness central to national ideas about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That said, racial categories are technologies of imperial order.<sup>28</sup> Harper mobilizes both slavery and yellow fever to show yet again how empire—and its technologies for establishing order (in this case race)—is the virus.

The tension between imperialism's technologies for expanding and securing power and the instabilities brought on by these same practices underscores the Imperial Gothic. To put it another way, empire's desires produce empire's fears: imperialism produces bioinsecurity even as it seeks to regulate bioinsecure conditions. Imperial Gothic puts these uncanny contradictions into play in plot lines about disease, infection, and corruption, essentially deploying viruses to diagnose the state of empire.

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<sup>26</sup> Bolton, 230.

<sup>27</sup> The transatlantic slave trade provided the resources to construct America's economic, cultural, and ideological foundation as per: Dorothy Roberts. *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty First Century*. (New York: The New Press, 2012); Stephanie Smallwood. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Walter Johnson. *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> See footnote 26. Definitions of whiteness are interconnected with national ideas about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and are shown to operate as imperial technology by promising such values to those who fit the mold of the white supremacist citizenry.

## Part II

### Manifest Domesticity and the Contaminated Home

In many Imperial Gothic novels, the home becomes a site of diagnosis. As an important technology of empire, the home promotes domestic and national security through both the biological and social/ideological reproduction of whiteness. The failure of the domestic would usher in a domino effect impacting the individual, the family, and the nation. This section returns to Amy Kaplan's concept of manifest domesticity in order to explore its relationship to Imperial Gothic and narratives of bioinsecurity. Manifest domesticity describes the interdependent relationship between American continental expansion and the establishment of the feminine domestic unit. Kaplan's theory demonstrates that the home creates boundaries between the external and internal as land acquisition continuously reconfigured national boundaries. In simple terms, Kaplan argues that "a sense of the foreign is necessary to erect the boundaries that enclose the nation as home."<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the home is "the site from which the nation reaches beyond itself [...] while impelling the nation outward to encompass the globe."<sup>30</sup> For Kaplan, white homemakers are inevitably agents of imperialism.

Kaplan's concept of manifest domesticity invites us to consider how the American home might be a locale ripe for bioinsecurity. If the home securitizes the nation as it expands, attacks to the home represent attacks to the nation. Any corrupting influence entering the home creates bioinsecure conditions. Margaret Humphrey explains the ensuing panic, writing that "you think your home is safe, but these hitherto unseen contaminants or unappreciated, dangerous beasts are threatening your family with death and disease."<sup>31</sup> Yet, in many ways, the home under threat is

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<sup>29</sup> Kaplan, 582.

<sup>30</sup> Kaplan, 586-7.

<sup>31</sup> Margaret Humphreys. "No Safe Place: Disease and Panic in American History." *American Literary History*, Vol. 14, No. 4, (Winter, 2002), 852.

empire's strongest driving force. It establishes the moral justification for expansion while cementing a sense of unity and shared identity among those attacked.<sup>32</sup> Again, empire creates the conditions of its own demise and then weaponizes them, a contradiction the Imperial Gothic problematizes.

Returning to *Arthur Mervyn*, we can see the contaminated, insecure home at work. In many ways, it is a novel about home invasion at different scales. As the protagonist, Arthur, enters Philadelphia at the height of the 1793 yellow fever outbreak, he infiltrates a number of homes likewise infiltrated by disease. When Arthur himself falls ill, he seeks refuge in yet another home but quickly learns that "Every bed in the house has probably sustained a dead person. It would not be proper, therefore, to lie in any one of them."<sup>33</sup> In a gothic inversion, the bed, arguably one of the most intimate places of comfort and security in a home, becomes a grave. Rather than serving as a site of rest and reproduction, each bed breeds infectious contamination and death. Like the archetypal gothic villain, yellow fever has entered the residence and destabilized spatial order—that is, the space the people forge their sense of national belonging and security. The relationship between the disordering of the home and the disordering of the capital show the linkages between the home security and national security.

Before the outbreak, the fearsome and unknown existed at a great distance for Arthur, in part because his home existed at a great distance from the more permeable boundaries. Upon arriving in the international port city of Philadelphia, Arthur is shocked to realize his proximity to bioinsecure spaces. On the state of Philadelphia's homes, he reflects: "Hitherto distress had

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<sup>32</sup> On the positive correlation between threat to the nation and the development national unity: Edward Mansfield and Jack Synder. "Democratization and War." *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 3, (May - June 1995), pp. 79-97; Alys Eve Weinbaum. "Nation." *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Second Edition, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, (New York: NYU Press, 2007); Margaret Humphreys, 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Brown, 153.



been contemplated at a distance, and through the medium of a fancy delighting to be startled by the wonderful, or transported by sublimity. Now the calamity has entered my own doors, imaginary evils were supplanted by real, and my heart was the seat of commiseration and horror.”<sup>34</sup> The commonly held belief that yellow fever arrived in Philadelphia with white refugees and their Black captives fleeing the Haitian revolution adds a layer of nuance to Arthur’s musings. At the time, Philadelphia politicians and doctors “urged greater enforcement of quarantines, especially against the radical refugees from French Haiti who had recently poured into Philadelphia.”<sup>35</sup> Many citizens believed that the enslaved and forcibly transported Haitians might bring Black revolution with them.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, there is correlation between the rise of the Imperial Gothic and the age of revolutions. As Matt Calvin notes, “the rise of the popular Gothic romance at the turn of the nineteenth century coincided with the publication of the biographical and historical narratives of the Haitian Revolution.”<sup>37</sup> Gothic rumors and stories circulate affirming characters’ fear of Haiti. For instance, Mervyn hears that an enslaved man was assassinated “in the open street and resigned himself without a struggle to the punishment which the law had provided for such a deed.”<sup>38</sup> White Philadelphians understand Haiti as a site of biological and social disease and conflate the revolution’s dismantling of racial hierarchies with the destabilization of U.S. national order. The same place that undermines white supremacy infects the white, American national body. Consequently, the biological and racial hegemony of the body politic is put at risk. Thus, the attempted quarantines and blockage of Haitian refugees is a response to bioinsecurity and a

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<sup>34</sup> Brown, 134.

<sup>35</sup> Kornfield, 196.

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, 2007; Altshuler, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Brown, 93.

fruitless attempt to preserve the status quo. This vignette of failed quarantines and, therefore, failed preservation of white sanctity is the Imperial Gothic at work, as it articulates the alarming fragility of the empire's technologies.

As *Arthur Mervyn* goes on to describe the horrors of the plague city, we see how the destabilization of the home as a site of security alters characters' internal and psychic states. The insecurity within reflects the insecurity without. Brown writes, "The usual occupations and amusements of life were at an end. Terror had exterminated all the sentiments of nature... None could be found to remove the lifeless bodies. Their remains, suffered to decay by piecemeal, filled the air with deadly exaltations, and added tenfold to the devastation."<sup>39</sup> Contaminated remains litter the streets and infection saturates the air. Philadelphians read the plague as a symptom of the new nation and its burgeoning commercial empire's "disease." Indeed, the disease does spread—from individual homes to the country, and from the national "home" to New York and Baltimore, and other coastal cities, stunting the process of early American nation-making and suggesting an ominous outlook on the health and future of the empire.<sup>40</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth-century Americans would continue to read the state of nation and empire symptomatically, conflating diseased bodies with a diseased body politic, and the contaminated domestic home with a corrupt national home. As discussed in the previous section, in *Iola Leroy*, Francis Harper mobilizes yellow fever to talk about the corrupting forces of slavery. However, she also interrogates understandings of the domestic sphere as the purview of white women and draws parallels between the systemic barring of Black American freedom and citizenship and denial of kinship ties fostered within domestic arrangements. Moreover, she suggests that this exclusion is a cause of the epidemic and resulting experiences of bioinsecurity.

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<sup>39</sup> Brown, 129.

<sup>40</sup> Kornfield, 1984.

In this sense, the Imperial Gothic reflects tensions between abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates by challenging white supremacist assumptions about both the home and national security.<sup>41</sup> The novel challenges the racist ideology that enslaved Black people contaminate the home by drawing the connection between the epidemic and the exclusionary norms governing the home and nation. For instance, as yellow fever rages and slavery reigns, the home still operates as a technology of white social and biological reproduction, and a space from which Black women are barred. However, *Iola Leroy* presents Black access to domesticity and home ownership through Marie's marriage to a plantation owner and her consequent change in status to mistress of the estate. Harper presents a scenario of a rare admittance of a formerly enslaved Black woman into the home, a plantation manor, specifically. Crucially, Marie is white-passing; however, the local population sees her presence as a corrupting one and a challenge to white supremacy.

How others respond to Marie and her home reveals the tension in Marie's transition and change in access to space:

In a few days Marie returned as a mistress to the plantation from which she had gone as a slave... A few male companions visited him occasionally, admired the magnificent beauty of his wife, shook their heads, and spoke of him as being very eccentric, but thought this marriage the great mistake of his life. But none of his female friends ever entered his doors when it became known that Marie held the position of mistress of his mansion, and presided at his table. But she, sheltered in the warm clasp of loving arms, found her life like a joyous dream.<sup>42</sup>

Harper frames Marie's return to the plantation as a transformation that is associated with the space of the home. With her departure from the estate, she departs from the status of slavery. When she reenters the home, she is ontologically changed and the house is hers. However, despite Harper's accentuation of Marie's changed relationship to the home, the white southerners see Marie as

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<sup>41</sup> See footnote 28 and 26 for discussions on white supremacist assumptions and ideologies.

<sup>42</sup> Harper, 67.

something that corrupts Eugene. In more extreme cases, they completely avoid her and her home. The neighbors take particular issue with Marie's seat at the table, indicating disdain toward her status change from serving to presiding. They refuse to cross into her space through her doors, which function as the point of connection between internal and external. They treat her home as an extension of herself, and both are quarantined as if they are contagious. That said, even if Marie is socially quarantined, her access to a home of her own provides her with a sense of security she has dreamed of. In the home, she is "sheltered in loving arms," which reflects the home's association with safety, happiness, and well-being.

Marie's domestic transgression destabilizes the ideological foundations of the nation.<sup>43</sup> Marie represents national anxieties about access, equity, and inclusion in the American values: since the home is a site through which national values are produced, as the logic goes, it should be occupied by those who belong in the white, American conception of citizenry. Marie's position is taboo because she is occupying space understood to be the purview of white women. To them, she actualizes the destabilizing possibility of a Black, though white-presenting, person being given the privileges of a white person. The antebellum fear of racial mixing amplifies the fragile nature of the boundary between the domestic and the foreign because of the uncertain racial identity of the nation as home.

The novel has two instances of diagnosis and immune response to bioinsecurity. The first is Marie's new status in the mansion. The second is Marie's Daughter Iola's own reaction to her Black racial background, which Marie kept secret from her from birth. When the neighbors diagnose the problem of Marie, they act with a quick immune-like response, re-enslaving her the moment her husband dies from the yellow fever. The white population ousts her from her domestic

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<sup>43</sup> See footnote 27.

role to maintain homeostasis in the American body politic. They are responding to a perceived sense of bioinsecurity. Specifically, the bodily presence of a racial outsider within the southern plantation mansion—as its mistress rather than its captive—threatens the racial order of nation and empire.<sup>44</sup> Iola’s rhetoric before she is made aware of her racial background likewise evidences this immune response. For instance, when faced with abolitionist ideas in the North, she says “I think one winter in the South would cure you of your Abolitionism,” demonstrating the discursive idea that abolitionism is an illness plaguing the country.<sup>45</sup> Her use of the word “cure” reflects the ideology behind bioinsecurity that societal ills are parallel to diseases affecting the well-being of the nation state. In this lens, eliminating national issues is the same as eliminating biological issues. By this logic, bioinsecurity originates within the nation-state, an uncanny proximity characteristic of Imperial Gothic concern.

Additionally, Iola’s transition to enslavement touches on the gothic trope of unstable identity and realizing that the “contaminant” resides within the self.<sup>46</sup> She embodies the racial fluidity so feared by antebellum America. Though her racial makeup was established at birth, her parents kept her Black heritage a secret from her, and she lived the majority of her life as a white woman with the privileges that come with whiteness. She therefore lives the horror of acclimating to Blackness, as her racial identity and corresponding rights suddenly change, and represents the nightmarish possibility of becoming Black after years of living as a white person. Iola’s racial revelation however challenges the ways that domesticity has been naturalized as white. A Black woman resided in plantation manor, went to a prestigious boarding school, and spoke with affinity

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<sup>44</sup> The plantation functions as an amplified imperial technology to produce racial order because of its interconnectedness and proximity with the slave economy, which makes perceived disorder in the plantation particularly alarming in the Imperial Gothic.

<sup>45</sup> Harper, 84.

<sup>46</sup> Goddu, 1997; Lloyd-Smith, 2004. Kari Winter. *Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change: Women and Power in Gothic Novels and Slave Narratives, 1790-1865*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

about the southern caste system. Her relatively seamless belonging in the antebellum South illuminates the home's penetrability and perhaps foreshadows its shifting role as the nature of empire, colonization, and occupation change over time. The Imperial Gothic encapsulates this shift over time as imperial technologies like the plantation breakdown and reemerge in altered, though familiar, forms to suit the relevant needs of empire.

Moving forward nearly one-hundred years, the significance of the home for twentieth-century American empire shifts. Technological advancement and globalization allow the individual to become a truly global citizen, rather than stationary and bound to the region in which they were born.<sup>47</sup> National borders are all the more permeable due to travel and the rapid increase of global cultural and economic exchange. To explain this shift in paradigm, Zygmunt Bauman argues that part of modernity is the shedding of structures and systems that limit the efficiency of global capitalism and the globalizing world. He argues, "We are witnessing the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement. In the fluid stage of modernity, the settled majority is ruled by the nomadic and extraterritorial elite."<sup>48</sup> The modern literary rejection of the home as a structure that stabilizes the capacity of the American empire is in part rooted in changing needs of the empire. In manifest domesticity, the home mobilized the ideological and reproductive wing of white supremacy for the sake of settlement and occupation. By virtue of global capitalism, American empire has shifted to prioritizing mobility as a way of maintaining international control rather than domesticity. The home is still a technology of empire, and is represented as such in the Imperial Gothic, but its functionality depends on its mobility and reproducibility.

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<sup>47</sup> Zygmunt Bauman. "Foreword: On Being Light and Liquid." *Liquid Modernity*. (Malden, Polity Press, 2000); Mary Hickman. "Diaspora Space and National (Re)Formations." *Eire-Ireland*, Volume 47, Issue 1&2, (2012).

<sup>48</sup> Bauman, 13.

In the mid to late twentieth century Imperial Gothic, rather than serving as a refuge from corruption and harm, the home represents a threat to the body politic and is at odds with biological security when an alien virus threatens to destroy life on Earth. In *The Andromeda Strain*, the home is incapable of protecting individuals from disease, and Crichton even frames domestic life as a factor that prevents individuals from making decisions that objectively benefit empire. He presents a study that concludes that “married individuals performed differently from single individuals on several theoretical ‘right’ decisions, made by computer on the basis of data given in scenarios... The data indicates that married men choose the correct decision only once in three times, while single men choose correctly four out of five times”.<sup>49</sup> Men who are bound to the home and domestic life are quantifiably less rational than their unmarried counterparts. Significantly, an unmarried protagonist successfully saves America from the alien virus through his decision-making, suggesting that distance from domestic life is essential for protecting biosecurity.

Not only does Crichton frame domesticity as antithetical to rationality, but he alludes to the frivolousness of home as protector by setting the first alien virus outbreak in a small, residential suburb. The scientists tasked with the job of visiting the site of the outbreak observe: “‘Piedmont, Arizona. Population forty-eight, and not much to look at...Here’s the general store; the gas station—notice how clearly you can read GULF—and the post office; the motel. Everything else you see is private residences. Church over here.’”<sup>50</sup> The town has not much at all connecting it to the outside, technologically and culturally advancing world. Piedmont is primitive. Outside of a few essential store fronts, the town is purely residential. The complete annihilation of the town warns of the dangerous intergalactic frontier against the old-fashioned home. Piedmont’s unconnected residences cannot withstand a new age, alien threat, while the scientists swoop in to save the day,

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<sup>49</sup> Crichton, 110

<sup>50</sup> Crichton, 26.

combatting biological aliens with the power of cutting-edge scientific technology. *The Andromeda Strain's* juxtaposition between Piedmont and the intergalactic and scientific is a juxtaposition between the traditional and domestic and the modern and globalized. By representing Piedmont as a failure, the novel warns against the outdated and represents a shift in the Imperial Gothic's conception of the home and the residential. The entrance of advanced technology, in other words, introduces a new form of imperial technology that better suits the empire of the modern, scientific age.

In the Imperial Gothic, *how* the home functions as a technology of empire changes over time. That said, the threat of bioinsecurity and the failure of the home to truly protect its inhabitants remains relatively consistent. In this section, we've seen many of these failures: yellow fever finds a way into the capital and the home, Marie is not truly safe within her home and her neighbors find ways to subjugate her regardless, and domesticity supposedly prevents men from making rational decisions. The tension between the praxis of manifest domesticity and the recurrent gothic revelation that the home is not truly safe is an uncanny element of the Imperial Gothic. The home as protector is bound to fail, which necessitates the construction of new protections and technologies for immunity. When a virus penetrates the bodies external barriers—the skin or the mucous layer that lines the throat and lungs, for instance—the body responds with another wave of immune processes. Fevers, sneezing, coughing, and vomit occur to flush out the biological invader. The imperial body is no different. How empire responds to an initial breach in biosecurity is the question I address in the next section.



Part III  
The Military and the Imperial Immune System

The Imperial Gothic introduces multiple narrative approaches to imagine the national response to bioinsecurity and the failure of imperial technologies. The primary response is to reconstruct physical and ideological boundaries. For instance, horrified Philadelphians in *Arthur Mervyn* quarantine dead bodies and board their doors. Or, in *Iola Leroy*, racist southerners refuse to enter a black woman's home to avoid acknowledging her status. When contamination breaches one defense mechanism, a new shield must be constructed to take its place. Because bioinsecurity effects both the physical and ideological elements of national security or "health," reconstructions logically occur in both realms as well. When pestilence is ubiquitous, as it was in early Philadelphia, people associate self-preservation with quarantine and avoidance of all other people.<sup>51</sup> The panic in Philadelphia follows a framework put forward by Margaret Humphreys, in which "The crossing of boundaries is essential to the creation of panic. When the edge of safety cannot be defined, people react in ways that are not necessarily rational—cording off suspect populations; creating artificial boundaries that create the illusion of safety; fleeing somewhere, anywhere."<sup>52</sup> In this section, I return briefly to Brown to establish the origins of Imperial Gothic's defensive response to breaches in safety and then explore the development of those responses over time when the imperial immune system fails

When yellow fever penetrates the city in *Arthur Mervyn*, Philadelphians implement a greater degree of isolation and quarantine to protect themselves. For instance, Brown writes, "Some had shut themselves in their houses, and barred themselves from all communication with

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<sup>51</sup> Kornfield, 1984.

<sup>52</sup> Humphreys, 847.

the rest of mankind... The chambers of disease were deserted, and the sick left to die of negligence.”<sup>53</sup> However, distancing fails to protect Philadelphia. When people realize yellow fever has entered their city and their homes, they initiate a new immune response. Their panic causes residents to lose sight of their collective identity and leads them to act in ways that prioritize self-preservation. To reference Humphreys, they lose sight of the edge of safety and bar themselves away from everything—including family and household members.

As white Philadelphians avoid the external world at all costs, the streets become littered with disease, death, and decay. Black Philadelphians bore the primary responsibility for removing the bodies and sources of disease and appear exclusively in *Arthur Mervyn* as drivers and managers of hearses. For instance, Brown writes, “Presently a coffin, borne by two men, issued from the house. The driver was a negro, but his companions white. Their features were marked by ferocious indifference to danger or pity.”<sup>54</sup> This passage, one of the few explicit mentions of a Black person in the entire novel, associates Black bodies with dead bodies. Not only does the Black driver not have the luxury of isolation, but death and pestilence have desensitized the character, as if he has seen too much to be in a state of panic like the white people indoors. The reference to Black hearse drivers racializes the contaminated streets: whiteness is located inside the home and Blackness facilitates the movement of diseased bodies, existing in a liminal zone between life and death. The racialized understanding of the outside world as biologically dangerous fuels white isolation from the outside world, the citizenry’s secondary immune response in the event of breach.

While *Arthur Mervyn* presents a scenario of an immune response that is highly individualistic, Katherine Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939) explores the consequences of a national, militarized response to threat. Given that bioinsecurity emerges with threats to national

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<sup>53</sup> Brown, 129.

<sup>54</sup> Brown, 140.

wellbeing, it naturally responds to attacks against the nation in the context of war in the twentieth century.<sup>55</sup> *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* offers an examination of the U.S. military as a perpetrator of disease during WWI. The novella inverts the idea that the army preserves American bodies and values by demonstrating the physical and psychological harm it causes.<sup>56</sup> In other words, the novel portrays militarization as a failed imperial immune response, much like an autoimmune reaction. Through its parasitic endeavors in foreign affairs, the military brings contaminants into the nation rather than protecting against them.

In the context of war, the need to protect women and children justifies military endeavors that simultaneously preserve the domestic through defense while expanding the international grasp of the empire through the violent subjugation of foreign nations, resource, and power acquisition, and militourism.<sup>57</sup> Though the public believes the deadly virus was brought to America via covert German soldiers in *Pale Horse Pale Rider*, the afflicted adopt Black cultural customs in their desperation. At the peak of her illness, Miranda begins to sing “Pale horse, pale rider, done taken my lover away,” and when she asks Adam if he had heard the song before, he replies “I heard Negroes in Texas sing it, in an oil field.” She echoes his sentiment, stating that she “heard them sing it in a cotton field.”<sup>58</sup> The use of the slave hymn equates her suffering to that of the enslaved. This equation racializes her physical state, implying that the disease reduces her status from someone protected by whiteness to the most otherized tier. Miranda’s exposure to disease racializes her position in society, as if her environment and situation has altered her

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<sup>55</sup> This claim is supported by my construction of bioinsecurity in sections one and two.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Jeffords. “War.” *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glen Hendler, (New York: NYU Press, 2007); Mansfield, 1995.

<sup>57</sup> Mansfield, and Synder, 1995; Teresia Teaiwa, “Reflections on Militourism, US Imperialism, and American Studies.” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 3, (September 2016), pp. 847-853: Teaiwa defines militourism as the phenomenon by which military intervention leads to the tourism industry, which in turn conceals histories of militarized violence and enables American tourists to participate in fantasies of militarized conquest and domination.

<sup>58</sup> Porter, 189.

ontologically.<sup>59</sup> The idea that disease might bring the average white woman—and thus the white domestic sphere—into proximity with slavery, threatens the racial order of empire, as discussed in section one. The military destabilizes the health of the empire, which positions it as more of a harmful, autoimmune response than an effective reaction of the imperial immune system.

Like militarization, the systematic exclusion of foreign bodies through travel bans and economic isolation is a reaction of the imperial immune system when exposed to external threat. This reaction develops in the Imperial Gothic during the modern era of economic and cultural globalization and appears in Ling Ma's *Severance*. The novel's Shen Fever that infects and zombifies all but a handful of Americans "traveled [to New York City] through the shipment of goods from China to the States."<sup>60</sup> With China identified as the fever's starting place, the U.S. passes legislation on travel and immigration as a first line of defense against the proliferation of disease in America. Candice, the protagonist, recalls a New York Times headline that reads: "The travel ban of visitors from Asian countries had passed. It would go into effect immediately."<sup>61</sup> Despite the travel ban, the fever spreads quickly through the east coast and ultimately through the nation, completely decimating the continental US. The failure of the ban to protect the populace is another example of disease's endemic relationship to empire. Given that cargo ships transported the fever via trade routes from US Special Economic Zones in China, the uselessness of exclusionary legislation attributes some level of fault to imperial economics. In this lens, the greediness of global capitalist expansion, the modern era's form of imperial conquest, creates an opening for disease to permeate the nation.<sup>62</sup> In other words, Ma attributes a level of hypocrisy to

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<sup>59</sup> Acclimation is discussed on page 12-14 of this thesis.

<sup>60</sup> Ma, 20.

<sup>61</sup> Ma, 215.

<sup>62</sup> Bender, 2006; Streeby, 2007.

America, using the trope of bioinsecurity to suggest that its imperial greed will lead to its downfall.

Much like the port towns of Melville's *Redburn*, Ma's formulation of imperial greed illuminates the modern Imperial Gothic's understanding of industrial locales as dangerous contact zones for acquiring and spreading disease. The Imperial Gothic intertwines these moments of contact with American imperial pursuits because of the nation's strategy of structuring the global economy to assert control. For instance, Bender asserts the imperial nature of America's global capitalism by writing: "In eschewing territorial control and favoring an empire of commerce and finance, the United States was perhaps prescient. Certainly, it helped to shape the global economy and culture that it dominated for most of the twentieth century."<sup>63</sup> American empire uses finance and global capitalism as tools to dominate and assert control over foreign domains. When these tools create openings for disease to permeate the nation in moments of physical connection through trade, the Imperial Gothic warns that the empire's technologies for advancement threaten as much as they strengthen.

Ma foreshadows the outbreak of Shen Fever by exploring Chinese manufacturing zones employed by the American imperial economy. When Candice visits China to tour a manufacturer's printing factory, she reflects: "The American businessmen will come to visit these countries and tour their factories, inspect their manufacturing processes, sample their cuisines, while staying at their nicest hotels built to cater to them."<sup>64</sup> She observes the dominating nature of American capitalists, probing the commodities and consuming local luxury goods. When considered with the fact that the Shen Fever emerges from one of these manufacturing zones, the Imperial Gothic's uncanny association between imperial domination and biological threat appears. The international

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<sup>63</sup> Bender, 45.

<sup>64</sup> Ma, 85.

factories and shipping routes through which American businessmen build a global capitalist empire are the same sites through which disease finds its way to America. The commodities demanded by American consumers lead to their physical devastation. Consumers and capitalists enable the transport of disease through their supply demands. Therefore, the immune response of closing national borders is hypocritical, as it assumes that contamination is a symptom of foreigners entering the nation rather than the empire's own economic, and therefore imperial, interests.

Though *Severance* problematizes modern American global capitalism, the Imperial Gothic implies that the American imperial economy has been causing breaches in biosecurity from the early mercantile era. I return to *Redburn* to offer a sense of the genealogical origins of *Severance*'s portrayal of bioinsecurity and capitalism in the Imperial Gothic. In *Redburn*, a sailor falls ill and dies "from his excesses in Liverpool, the malady which had long fastened its fangs in his flesh, was now gnawing into his vitals."<sup>65</sup> Melville describes the sailor's illness in the same rhetoric of gnawing, nibbling, and consuming as he describes nefarious people in the port towns. In Liverpool, Melville describes "a variety of land-sharks, land-rats, and other vermin, which make the hapless mariners their prey. In the shape of landlords, bar-keepers, clothiers, crimps, and boarding-house loungers, the land-sharks devour him, limb by limb."<sup>66</sup> This parallel demonstrates the paradigm of infection operating through ports. Sailors facilitate the emergence of corruption wherever America seeks to assert mercantile dominance. The sailors—figured as liminal figures residing at the shifting, permeable borders of nation and empire—bring back and spread the corruption and disease they encounter in their travels. These infected sailors inevitably return to their homes and bring their corrupted bodies with them.

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<sup>65</sup> Melville, 298.

<sup>66</sup> Melville, 149.

Though *Redburn* does not delve into Redburn's return to New York and any consequences thereof, it can be imagined that the sailors in some way act as carriers of infection, bringing any disease and morally gray habits back to the nation. The concept of carrying disease from colonized regions of the world back to America produces the Imperial Gothic's fundamental uncanniness: imperial expansion and biological destruction go hand in hand. The Imperial Gothic confronts the reader with the possibility that American expansion, a process in which settlers parasitically feed on the resources of foreign land, leads to the destabilization of the nation's health. This scenario also destabilizes the driving ideology of the American empire's "entitlement to unrestricted access to land and markets" as natural and inconsequential.<sup>67</sup>

The sailors' function as transporters of biological matter coincides with their function as the engines of global capitalism. Melville identifies the necessity of sailors in constructing and fortifying the global economy, writing:

They go and come round the globe; they are the true importers, and exporters of spices and silks; of fruits and wines and marbles; they carry missionaries, ambassadors, opera-singers, armies, merchants, tourists, and scholars to their destination: they are a bridge of boats across the Atlantic; they are the premium mobile of all commerce...<sup>68</sup>

To be the "true" importers and exporters in the global economy signifies the sailors' essential role in the empire's economic operations. It is their profession to act as connective tissue, a bridge across the Atlantic, between domestic and international economies. In doing so, they facilitate the empire's economic reach. They transport goods as well as missionaries, opera-singers, merchants and scholars, thereby enabling the religious, political and cultural ambassadors of the empire to establish an international presence. Given that the first stages of America's transition from

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<sup>67</sup> Bender, 48.

<sup>68</sup> Melville, 151.

domestic to international imperialism required “the extension and protection of networks of U.S. commercial interests, investments, and military bases in addition to or instead of the annexation of lands,”<sup>69</sup> the continued strength of the empire in ever-changing domains relied on the sailor’s occupancy of capital markets. The ships and ports therefore act as economic *and* biological contact zones; the sites central to economic exchange and imperial capital growth also exchange the biological threats so detrimental to individual and national health.

Viewed through a gothic lens, it is unsurprising that disease rests within the liminal figures of the seas and coasts. What is notable about the Imperial Gothic is that the continuation of imperial strength depends on these diseased, liminal actors: the stabilizers of the empire are also the destabilizers. Often, the builders and breachers of the national immune system are either the same or related entities. The contaminated home, mercantile sailors, soldiers fighting for national security, or global capitalists certainly grow the power of empire, but they become direct carriers of disease. The contradictions and overlaps between the defensive and destructive, the fortifiers and permeates, the healthy and the ill create the Imperial Gothic’s definitive uncanniness.

American empire’s understanding of its own defensive (and destructive) immunology overlaps with its militarized protection against biosecurity. This overlap informs the Imperial Gothic’s changing portrayal of militarized response to biological danger over time. On the level of the citizenry, the propensity to refortify protective boundaries through the home and exclusion of minorities is an individualistic defensive measure. The instinct for self-preservation when faced with foreign invaders occurs at the scale of individual homes and bodies. Though the state of the home represents the state of the empire, it is not the sole entity responsible for its physical and ideological preservation. Militarization on the national level also serves as a defensive *and*

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<sup>69</sup> Streeby, 96.



offensive measure against bioinsecurity. Martial law, mandated quarantine, direct offensives, and the patriotism associated with the American military are modes of suppressing and combating destabilization.<sup>70</sup> The national relationship to epidemiology intertwines with the military and its corresponding imperial function to violently cement control in other nations. Ahuja illuminates this connection, writing:

As public health officials and medical researchers investigated the ways in which disease was transmitted invisible to the human eye, ecological models of disease explicitly explored problems of settlement, urbanization, and networking across colonized space. Enmeshed in processes of territorial, economic, military, and biological expansion, disease ecology gave a specific form to the matter of the immune system that stressed its constant emergence through interspecies entanglement.<sup>71</sup>

Concepts of immunity coincided in development with imperial expansion in colonized space. Imperial contact with new species and beings is highly influential to how public health scholars and researchers understand disease. Significantly, scientific understandings of disease are informed by imperial operations like settlement and urbanization, which are often carried out by the military or through militarized violence.

While Ahuja reveals the overlap between imperialism, militarism, and immunology, it is worth emphasizing that most functions of the American military are imperial. Early American colonization relied on the militarized elimination of Indigenous people and the forced acquisition of land.<sup>72</sup> Allan Greer argues that the American imperial logic of elimination regarding Indigenous communities “encompasses material as well as discursive aspects; massacre, removal, assimilation, and immigration are part of its repertoire, and so too are various forms of racism,

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<sup>70</sup> Ahuja, 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Ahuja, 12.

<sup>72</sup> Greer, 2019; Taylor, 2003; Roxane Dunbar-Ortiz. *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

legal instruments of dispossession, and historical narratives denying violence.”<sup>73</sup> In the Imperial Gothic, the trope of the military as an imperial actor occurs in Ray Bradbury’s *Martian Chronicles*, in which the military colonizes Mars. The novel satirizes American imperialism by defamiliarizing it in an intergalactic setting, which consequently reveals the absurdity of colonization and the parasitic nature of settlement.

When colonizing Mars, the men arrive fully prepared for military combat. For instance, Captain Block comments, “If there’s something hostile about Mars we certainly want the next rocket to be well armed.” His next in command answers, “So are we. We got a regular arsenal with us.”<sup>74</sup> Bradbury demonstrates the interlocking nature of colonization and the military. The colonizers operate with the assumption that colonization necessitates military violence, thereby conflating imperialism and militarism. The colonizer’s intense military preparation subverts the narrative of peaceful settlement often perpetuated by empire and expresses the inherent danger of the colonial project. By carrying out the will of the American empire, the settler astronauts willingly put themselves in a situation dangerous enough to necessitate an arsenal and agree to annihilate anything that stands in their way. Expansion and physical danger are one in the same, which fosters the distinctive gothicism of the Imperial Gothic.

The military’s role in space exploration furthers the military industrial complex and the expansion of land and resource acquisition to an extraterrestrial plain.<sup>75</sup> The military’s imperial nature is prevalent via its economic function. In addition to the military industrial complex, the military’s role of land acquisition and resource hoarding is notable in the imperial economy. On the commodification of space exploration, Alan Marshall explains: “Throughout the Space Age

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<sup>73</sup> Greer, 384.

<sup>74</sup> Bradbury, 48.

<sup>75</sup> Susan Jeffords, 2007: Jeffords defines the military industrial complex as “the emergence of a permanent, economically profitable armaments industry...capable of exerting undue influence over government policy.”

many officials in the US public sector, as well as many entrepreneurial minded space writers, have set their minds on the utilization of extraterrestrial resources. Some industries on Earth owe their existence (or a substantial amount of their revenue) to the utilization of space resources.”<sup>76</sup>

Bradbury certainly reflects the view of space as a valuable economic resource by having the early Mars colonizers express their capitalist motivations for settling on the planet. References to industrial efforts are fairly constant throughout the narrative. For instance, at one point, a mayor explains to a priest that “They're a couple thousand Black Irish mechanics and miners and day laborers in First Town who need saving.”<sup>77</sup> This brief exchange demonstrates that the first few thousand Mars settlers harvest the natural resources of the planet and create economic possibilities. There are also references to settlers that ponder “Is there a job for me?” immediately upon arrival, and one that “had been working in one of the new colonies for ten days straight.”<sup>78</sup> Economic industrialization and the acquisition and exploitation of resources is ever present in the colonial narrative, thereby attributing an economically positive yet demented consequence of the military’s genocide of the Martian people by chickenpox.<sup>79</sup> The history of chickenpox and genocide on Mars color the economic success of the settlement, implying that fatal disease is foundational to the imperial project’s success. Having a new nation built on an Indigenous graveyard rings true to American history.<sup>80</sup> By including this history, the Imperial Gothic reveals empire’s reliance on militarized colonization and weaponized bioinsecurity to accrue power and stability.

Defensive and offensive measures taken by the military both prevent and cause contamination in the Imperial Gothic. The colonization of Mars in *The Martian Chronicles* is a

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<sup>76</sup> Alan Marshall. “Development and imperialism in space.” *Space Policy*, Vol. 11, No. 1, (1995), 41.

<sup>77</sup> Bradbury, 125

<sup>78</sup> Bradbury, 109, 102.

<sup>79</sup> Bradbury, 70.

<sup>80</sup> Greer, 2019; Taylor, 2003; Roxane Dunbar-Ortiz. *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014); Bender, 2006; Bolton, 2002; Gustafson, 2007.

scenario in which military colonizers as parasitic. The men who “discover” Mars worry about the Martians: “Maybe they won’t be too happy to see us. Maybe they’ll try to drive us out or kill us.”<sup>81</sup> They are aware that they are unwelcomed foreign invaders. In describing how they fear the Martians will respond to them, they employ language that is reminiscent of an immune response intended to kill or expel harmful particles, thus identifying their similarity to parasitic entities. The consequences of the earthlings' arrival on Mars further expresses the contaminating nature of the human settlers. The human colonizers effectively cause a genocide by bringing chickenpox to Mars, an ailment the Martians’ immune systems were unequipped to fend off. Their presence on the planet kills the host, enabling them to populate and expand by leeching the resources of the new land.

The imperial narrative can be read through the Imperial Gothic lens because of how it represents the American colonizers as disease to Mars and consequently destabilizes the scenario of discovery that is so informative to the American conception of entitlement. Significantly, “the rockets were American and the men were American and it stayed that way.”<sup>82</sup> *The Martian Chronicles* clearly gestures toward the American violent and exploitative treatment of Indigenous people and space for the sake of acquisition. For instance, Greer describes the colonizer view of the Indigenous, writing: “When it came to Indigenous lands and the processes of colonization in the wake of the American Revolution, there was little room for ambiguity: once territory entered the settler sphere, it was supposed to be fully subject to American sovereignty and a settler regime. Indigenous peoples were utterly excluded.”<sup>83</sup> The colonization of Mars performs the scenario formulated by the earliest of colonizers. To Taylor, the scenario is “formulaic, portable,

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<sup>81</sup> Bradbury, 54.

<sup>82</sup> Bradbury, 119.

<sup>83</sup> Greer, 383.

repeatable,” making the script of “discovery” and colonization recognizable regardless of context. The scenario is effective for imperial pursuits because it “bridges past and future as well as the here and there. It’s never for the first time, and never for the last, yet it continues to be constantly reactivated in the now of performance, explaining why ‘we’ have a right to be there.”<sup>84</sup> The American colonization of Mars replays the imperial conquest of America itself. The Imperial Gothic recreates the colonial scenario in the estranged intergalactic environment, which accentuates the problems, contradictions, and hypocrisies of American imperialism and its enactors.

Further, the genocide committed by the American colonizers and their positioning as foreign contaminants colors their subsequent expansion into Mars. Bradbury writes: “They came to the strange blue lands and put their names upon the lands. Here was Hinkston Creek and Lustig Corners and Black River and Driscoll Forest and Peregrine Mountain and Wilder Town, all the names of people and the things that the people did.”<sup>85</sup> The takeover of the strange lands parallels the journey of a virus through the body of their host. Once the immune system is neutralized, the expansion can begin and the viral or bacterial colony can grow. The imposition of their names on the Martian landscape, a script of discovery commonplace in American narratives,<sup>86</sup> can occur because disease (which can apply to both the chickenpox, literally, and the settlers, metaphorically) has decimated the land and the Indigenous people of Mars. This problematic undertone destabilizes the ontological positioning of the American empire, and so the Imperial Gothic begs the moral question of just how glorious the imagined American empire can be if its enactors are equivalent to a genocidal disease.

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<sup>84</sup> Taylor, 54, 58.

<sup>85</sup> Bradbury, 159.

<sup>86</sup> Taylor, 2003.

As exemplified by *The Martian Chronicles*, the military's purpose of protecting the interest of the empire and nation state is both represented and challenged by the Imperial Gothic. *Pale Horse Pale Rider* offers a compelling perspective on the contradictions of the American military and the biological consequences thereof. In the literal, physical sense, the trench fever of WWI was brought to America from the front lines.<sup>87</sup> Miranda's coworkers, who, significantly, are news reporters and therefore responsible for cementing collective ideology for the imagined American community, express the belief that German soldiers brought the fever.<sup>88</sup> They say "it is really caused by germs brought by a German ship to Boston, a camouflaged ship, naturally, it didn't come in under its own colors. Isn't that ridiculous?"<sup>89</sup> The reporters' sentiment holds several implications about bioinsecurity, war, and empire. It demonstrates the belief that the enemy nation perpetuates contamination. The spread of the information that Germany infiltrated the borders and spread the epidemic bolsters the narrative of a duplicitous other threatening the sanctity of the continental US that justifies military interventionism. The described situation functions as a gothic caricature—the evil other sneaks into the home and causes problems. Through providing an impetus for international military engagement, this narrative also preserves the notion of bioinsecurity by equating the physical harm to the citizenry to the overall state of the nation.

Additionally, the Imperial Gothic equates the enemy and the virus. Ahuja illuminates the parallel between rhetoric describing defense against diseases and foreign enemies in the early 20th century, writing: "In 1905, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Jacobson v. Massachusetts* that a state does have the right to enforce compulsory vaccination, quarantine, or other public health protections... As the phrasing of the decision compares bacterial and viral species to military

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<sup>87</sup> Frederick Holmes, MD. "Trench Fever in the First World War," (University of Kansas School of Medicine, 2006).

<sup>88</sup> Anderson, 1983.

<sup>89</sup> Porter, 162.

enemies, it invokes the specter of disease as cause for emergency intervention.”<sup>90</sup> Just as an invisible disease penetrates the body and causes harm, the German soldiers penetrate the national border and cause harm, thus necessitating defensive measures.

In contradiction to my previous two deductions, the reporters’ understanding of the arrival and proliferation of disease from the front lines gestures toward the responsibility of the US’s imperial actions in the domestic outbreak. According to the United States Department of State Office of the Historian, “Germany’s resumption of submarine attacks on passenger and merchant ships in 1917 became the primary motivation behind Wilson’s decision to lead the United States into World War I.”<sup>91</sup> America’s entry into WWI was motivated by the necessity to protect international trade opportunities and national bodies traveling to foreign places, thereby exerting US influence. In other words, America’s entry into WWI was motivated by the preservation of its international hold on power and influence, a fundamentally imperial impetus. By entering the war to protect these interests, the American homeland becomes vulnerable to the germs transported from the front lines, whether by the imagined disguised Germans or by American troops themselves. In other words, the protection of the empire through military action makes the empire more fragile by increasing contact with the corrupt, foreign other. *The Imperial Gothic* brings the contradictions of military “protection” against the bioinsecure to the forefront, questioning and subverting nationalist perspectives on war, safety, and national health.

*Pale Horse, Pale Rider* questions the role of the military in protecting the national body more than it supports it. It associates the war with Miranda’s illness. Her symptoms coincide with the nation’s participation, as “She had a burning slow headache, and noticed it now, remembering she had waked up with it, and it had in fact begun the evening before...she tried to trace the

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<sup>90</sup> Ahuja, 2.

<sup>91</sup> “U.S. Entry into World War I, 1917.” *U.S. Office of the Historian*.

insidious career of her headache, and it seemed reasonable to suppose it had started with the war.”<sup>92</sup> The parallel in timelines discursively identifies the war as an infectious entity harming the physical well-being of the citizen. Given that a soldier on leave likely passed the fever to Miranda, the war is both a literal and metaphorical threat to health. Metaphorically, the war has a negative effect on the national psyche. Miranda tells Adam: “It frightens me; I live in fear too, and no one should have to live in fear. It’s the skulking about, and the lying. It’s what war does to the mind and the heart, Adam, and you can’t separate these two—what it does to them is worse than what it can do to the body.”<sup>93</sup> The war effort meant to protect American imperial interests has the ultimate effect of infecting the bodies, minds, and hearts of the people, thus perpetuating bioinsecurity rather than preventing it. The demonstrated failure of the US military to protect the health of its citizens affirms its fundamental role as a protector of imperial and economic interest.

If the military does not protect the national body, what does? The Imperial Gothic begs the question and suggests no clear answer. In fact, the Imperial Gothic suggests that the majority of protective measures against bioinsecurity are bound to fail. The walls of the home breakdown easily when challenged from the outside; the sanctity of race, body, and morality are tainted in the contact zones necessary to fuel the imperial economy; the military disintegrates the protective front against the foreign. The repeated sequence of the Imperial Gothic—the onset of bioinsecurity, the construction of protective boundaries, and the failure thereof—illuminates the underlying fear haunting imperial America: bioinsecurity and the empire’s continuity are inextricably linked

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<sup>92</sup> Porter, 148.

<sup>93</sup> Porter, 177.



## Conclusion

To return to Goddu and the law of genre, this thesis has illustrated the Imperial Gothic's escape from quarantine and its contamination of American literature during two-hundred years of the imperial project. The Imperial Gothic lurks behind any literary portrayal of imperial grabs for power and stability. Whether in the form of land acquisition, global economic domination, or the fortification of borders and barriers nationally, in the home, or between Black and white, citizens and non-citizens, the Imperial Gothic reveals the inherent bioinsecurities of imperialism. The revelation of the intrinsic perpetuation of danger in imperial endeavors instills American empire with doubt as it harms the very bodies it seeks to protect. Yet, this thesis has demonstrated that the Imperial Gothic mutates over time, implying the continuation of the cultural contradiction that drives the genre: the empire is strong through expansion and protects its constituents, but the empire weakens and leaves its constituents vulnerable through expansion. Time changes the context and specificities of the contradiction, but the underlying generic principle of bioinsecurity verses faith in the nation as protector persists.

This thesis was born out of my observation of the increased gothicism of the everyday during and after the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020. Though I was not able to detect the Imperial Gothic at the time, I certainly noticed the overarching tropes of this thesis in how the nation and individuals responded to the pandemic. It felt like my Brooklyn home was facing as much biological threat as Philadelphia during the Yellow Fever outbreak. We sanitized grocery bags and packages with lucrative Lysol and avoided outsiders at all cost in an attempt to preserve the sanctity of the home. We wore masks on sanity walks to fortify the barriers between ourselves and others because NBC told us to. Anyone who refused to mask was an ideological and physical enemy to be avoided. In the moments I breached my solitude for a maskless meeting with a friend, I felt like

a gothic villain betraying the home by carrying foreign particles in my body. I kept my illicit affairs a secret, moving only when the guards (my parents) were asleep, and I could sneak in the shadows.

Outside the more or less secure home (made insecure only by the occasional breach by groceries or rebellious daughters), the streets were latent with violence and danger. Like in *Severance*, global capitalism via Wuhan, China was held responsible for the pandemic's origins. Anti-Asian sentiments led to hate crimes and violence following rhetoric of the "Chinese virus" and the nationalist decision to blame China for America's failure to prepare for and address the virus. Asian women were pushed off subway platforms and Asian men were stabbed in Chinatown.<sup>94</sup> Asian Americans were ousted from the protective boundaries of social citizenship, a reminder that race and belonging are, and have always been, fluid. Plus, the Black Lives Matter protests across the country and the highly militarized police response presented a dystopian reality in which the centralized state identified protestors as antigens to be suppressed.<sup>95</sup> The imperial immune system functioned as systematically and violently as ever.

The next step in the Imperial Gothic's lineage is still being written, but given the outright gothicism of the COVID-19 era, I anticipate there will be a wealth of literary material questioning and challenging the empire's responses to bioinsecurity. Even today, the Imperial Gothic makes its way into the headlines. The reporting on the Ukraine conflict, for instance, is rife with Imperial Gothic undertones. The narrative of Vladimir Putin, the archetypal villain, sending troops to perform "military exercises" at the edge of Ukraine for weeks before invasion stresses the significance of protective borders against foreign invaders, while the actual onset of war represents

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<sup>94</sup> Nicole Hong and Jonah Bromwich. "Asian-Americans Are Being Attacked. Why Are Hate Crime Charges So Rare?" *The New York Times*, (March 2021).

<sup>95</sup> Kim Barker, Mike Barker, and Ali Watkins. "In City After City, Police Mishandled Black Lives Matter Protests." *The New York Times*, (June 2021).

the failure thereof.<sup>96</sup> The frivolousness of Biden's tariffs against Russia destabilizes the power of global capitalism as a tool to cohere international power.<sup>97</sup> Putin's rhetoric of reclaiming territory through occupation and violence positions the war as an act of brutal imperial conquest.<sup>98</sup> Meanwhile, the rhetoric surrounding Ukraine's largely civilian-led defense creates an image of a desperate and unpolished, though admirable, indigenous effort to protect their homeland.<sup>99</sup> The media is reading the war through the lens of imperial warfare with an ominous possibility of nuclear war looming in the background.<sup>100</sup> Nuclear war is bioinsecurity, as it threatens the mass eradication of bodies, nations, environments and, correspondingly, commodities and capitalism.

The present is highly gothic, and imperialism is shifting to a new era with new constraints brought forward by the pandemic and by the imminent war in continental Europe. The Imperial Gothic's next stage will be concerned with these events and how they destabilize empire. The present and the future is ominous, with talk of World War Three dominating in the news and researchers discussing the potential consequences of global nuclear war. The Imperial Gothic of the past feels increasingly relevant. Perhaps the American empire will end up colonizing Mars like Bradbury imagined. In any case, the fundamental gothicism of imperialism will allow the Imperial Gothic to mutate, like a virus adapting to a body's best immune response, regardless of place, time, context, or planet.

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<sup>96</sup> Bill Chappel. "Russia holds massive military exercise with Belarus, raising concerns in Ukraine." *NPR*, (February 2021).

<sup>97</sup> Simon Constable. "Why Sanctions on Russia Won't Work." *Time*, (February 2022).

<sup>98</sup> Robyn Dixon. "Ominous rhetoric gains ground in Russia as it forces founder in Ukraine." *The Washington Post*, (April 2022).

<sup>99</sup> Andrew Kramer. "'Everybody in our Country Needs to Defend.'" *The New York Times*, (February 2022).

<sup>100</sup> Nate Silver. "How To Think About The Risk Of Nuclear War." *FiveThirtyEight Politics*, (March 2022).

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