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Research Statement

Chemist and novelist C.P. Snow, in his 1959 Rede Lecture on “The Two Cultures,” famously declared that “the intellectual life of the whole of western society” has become one of divisive polarity between two groups he terms respectively “literary intellectuals” and “scientists.”¹ Between these poles lies a “gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding.”² Differences in disciplinary formation, methodology, discourse, and worldview have widened this gulf so significantly that “creative chances”³ for exchanges between these groups have become virtually impossible. As scholars like Sharon Ruston have provocatively demonstrated, science and literature were powerfully intertwined during the period prior to the professionalization and specialization into separate fields of what we would call contemporary science. My research contributes to the recovery of this intertwining as a means of not only promoting the value of the humanities in our current political and educational climate but also to underscore science’s inseparability from humanistic thinking.

Prior to graduate school, I was invested in thinking through the role of spectacular and monstrous embodiment in gothic texts. This investment in the excessive capacities of the body shifted as I was introduced to methods in the history of medicine and disability studies, the latter of which offered powerful critiques of health and ability as normativizing concepts that privileged certain bodies over others. Rather than simply focusing on representations of bodies in literary texts, I found myself increasingly interested in the ways that science and literature shared models of thought and asked similar questions in similar ways about how bodies should function. Methodologically, my work reads scientific and medical writings in dialogue with literary works to uncover the links between their imaginings of the body and the human.

My current dissertation project, *Prophylactic Fictions: Immunity and Biosecurity*, traces a prehistory for *inoculation insecurity*, a term I use to capture the fluid responses in literary and scientific writings to the development of inoculation as a preventative health practice. The concept of immunity, from its Roman legal origins as *immunitas* (i.e. exemption from civic duty), has always been a political issue regarding the role of the citizen in relation to the state. However, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, immunity became naturalized through developments in medical theory and practice, which increasingly insisted upon the relationship among healthy nations, healthy constitutions, and healthy citizens. Arguing that the “symbolic and material linchpin” of Western modernity is a paradigm of immunity, Roberto Esposito marks in this period a pivotal shift for immunity from a passive to an active condition. Resistance to or “security” from disease became achievable by the lancet. Yet the deliberate introduction of infectious matter into the body was by no means innocuous in the eyes of the public. The stakes of what matter and how that matter was administered became, for many, a matter of life and death. *Prophylactic Fictions* tracks how inoculation, alongside other preventative health projects, found its way into the

¹ Snow, C.P. *The Two Cultures and Scientific Revolution*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1961. 4.

² Ibid. 4.

³ Ibid. 17.

burgeoning apparatuses of population security aimed at mitigating and preventing mounting risks to citizens' wellbeing.

Despite the historical interrelationship between inoculation and security, only recently has scholarship in security studies and in philosophy's "immunological turn" begun to flesh out the implications of that interrelationship. Missing from this primarily presentist scholarship are perspectives from the history of medicine and literary studies. *Prophylactic Fictions* historicizes the cultural processes by which immunity and inoculation were incorporated into discourses of risk and precarity beginning in the early eighteenth century. Close-reading of the literary and medical writings surrounding inoculation reveals the ways in which bodily vulnerability and its management have been imagined and reimagined in narrative forms that predate contemporary disaster scenario modeling now so crucial to national security planning. Pro- and anti-vaccinators widely employed popular cultural forms like the gothic to exploit what they perceived to be the insecurities of English health. Control over this narrative of bioinsecurity enabled a control of the greater public.

The "post-truth" moment we currently inhabit has given a particular urgency to my project. I take inspiration from the V21 Collective's thinking about "strategic presentism," which characterizes pedagogical and research methods that resist cordoning off the past from the present in favor of revealing how the past remains powerfully at work in the movements and energies of the present. The same terms of the historical debates over vaccination continue to be mobilized in anti-vaccination movements. We see in this historical archive precursors for the contemporary battles over fact and fiction. Presentism for me is not so much a refusal to understand the past on its own terms but a politically pressing need to reconsider the value of the past in understanding the present. As Emily Steinlight has remarked, "we have always been presentist."

My second project, *Disability Before the Norm?*, takes up a long-standing fascination with Whig politician William Hay and his 1754 essay, *Deformity: An Essay*. Theorizing his own visual impairment and spinal deformity, Hay offers a prescient meditation about disability gain in a period well-before the rise of the "norm" in the nineteenth century. Hay's *Essay* reads as a provocative conduct manual that in many ways undermines any attempt to solidify concepts of the norm or the natural precisely because of its awareness of the very vacuousness of these terms. Writing at a transitional moment when science was beginning to replace religious models of disability as monstrosity or portent, Hay coopts the essay form to make a case for the value of disability embodiment in the face of a culture pervaded by disability caricature and mockery.

Like with normalcy, Disability Studies has long had the habit of demonizing medicalization for its reduction of disability to biological inferiority. This move toward the social model of disability as produced by disabling environments and conditions flattens medicine as an oppressive monolith that only seeks to intervene in disabled lives with the purpose of repairing, eliminating, or preventing disability all together. Such a reductionist view of medicine cannot account for how a figure like Hay values medical treatment while still articulating an argument for disability flourishing. Employing what I call a "critical disability history of medicine," I challenge conventional readings of Hay's *Essay* as a self-defeatist resignation to the inevitable objectification by medicine. Cases like Hay's offer necessary prehistories for ongoing debates within disability communities between medical intervention and disability pride.