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The Plague of Orientalism: Reading Kevin Chong in the Pandemic

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>
> —Kevin Chong, *The Plague*

Vancouver: spring 2020, the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The city and province, like much of the country and the world, is in lockdown. Storefronts on Robson Street have had their plate glass windows covered with sheets of plywood, presumably to deter B&Es. Graffiti artists start tagging, and Habitat for Humanity places large stickers requesting that the plywood be donated to their charity after use. More nefarious messages start appearing in March and April: "Beijing lies," "CCP virus," and (Chinese) "Premier Xi Jin Ping criminal." During the same time period, occasional hate crimes are reported; most egregiously, an elderly Asian man is knocked to the ground by a white assailant, the attacker uttering anti-Asian slurs related to COVID ("Elderly Man"). Such instances are not confined to Vancouver (Griffiths), nor to street-level invectives. US President Donald Trump is early on calling the coronavirus or the COVID-19 disease the "Chinese flu" and then the "Kung flu," and a Conservative Party of Canada leadership hopeful criticizes Canada's chief public health officer, Theresa Tam, for being loyal to China (Zimonjic and Cullen). At the same time, as long-term care facilities begin to see patients die of the disease and hospitals reserve beds for COVID-19 patients, other medical procedures

are postponed and visitors to patients are severely restricted (*Pandemic Experience*). These practices are not uncontroversial, as Laveena Munshi notes in a late 2020 review of the restrictions, making, as the title of her short commentary indicates, "[t]he case for relaxing no-visitor policies in hospitals during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic," and arguing that "it is prudent to consider whether visitor restrictions . . . should be relaxed to mitigate harms to patients and families" (1).

Such social and medical contexts respecting the COVID-19 pandemic may seem too "on the nose," too perfect a fit, for an essay on Kevin Chong's *The Plague* (2018), but a scene in the novel brings them together in a prescient, and also critical, fashion. Before turning to that scene, and outlining my argument, I want to entertain two counterintuitive or even, perhaps to some members of the Canadian literary academe, uncomfortable thoughts. First, that the precision of the graffiti (that is, mentioning the Chinese Communist Party and Premier Xi in particular) suggests that the authors of the slogans may be members of the Chinese diaspora critical of the authoritarian Chinese state (Jung). This is not to deny, I hasten to add, the upswelling in Vancouver of anti-Asian racism early in 2020: of fifteen hate crimes reported to police in April 2020, for instance, eleven were anti-Asian, and whereas there were twelve anti-Asian hate crimes in 2019, there were already twenty in the first four months in 2020 ("Vancouver's Chinese Cultural Centre Defaced"). By May 2021, Vancouver was described by *Bloomberg* as "the anti-Asian hate crime capital of North America" (Pearson). But to ascribe crude messages solely to anti-Asian racists is to marginalize the agency of members of the Chinese diaspora and, furthermore, to view that diaspora as monolithic. Street protests in Vancouver by the Falun Gong religious group have targeted, and continue to target, China as the origin of the virus, while media reports in the Falun Gong-associated *Epoch Times* in May 2020 associated the pandemic with mainland China and the CCP.[1] Second, with respect to hospital and long-term care facility visits, that it is not only that family members may transmit the coronavirus to patients (or the other way around). Some family members may not *want* to visit their aging relatives, who in turn may not want to be burdened with children or grandchildren putting on masks of false sympathy as well as of the N95 variety.

Jacques Lacan's warning that we not simple-mindedly ascribe sentiments of charity is salutary. Commenting on the legend of Saint Martin of Tours, who cut his cloak in half to give to a beggar, Lacan remarks, "But perhaps over and above that need to be clothed, he was begging for something else, namely, that Saint Martin either kill him or fuck him. In any encounter there's a big difference in meaning between the response of philanthropy and that of love" (*Ethics* 186). Unnecessarily provocative, tone-deaf in the present crisis? Or, I hope, contributing to the argument that, as Slavoj Žižek outlines in *The Plague of Fantasies,* every official act or gesture has its unconscious phantasmic support, its obscene underside. This is not, it should be stressed, to argue that we really want our relatives and neighbours to die from COVID-19. But rather, that our sentimental gestures and self-regard (expressed, for example, in spring and summer 2020 with pot banging "in support" of front-line medical workers) are *necessarily* accompanied by the neglect of those same relatives and neighbours. While Canada will look on at American mishandlings of the pandemic under the latter months of the Trump era in its typically smug way, a harder truth to swallow is that Canada has the worst record in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for proportional COVID-19 deaths in long-term care facilities during the pandemic.[2]

In Chong's *The Plague,* Vancouver is coping with an outbreak of a bubonic-like pestilence sometime in the 2010s. (The trope of "outbreak" to describe the plague in Chong's novel may be misleading—for, like the hermeneutics proposed in this essay, plagues are not spontaneous, but incremental, insidious, slowly detected and confirmed. This parallel between disease and interpretation is developed further in our text.) Beginning around Halloween and continuing until the following spring (the epidemic, we are told, "lasted four months and took over fourteen hundred lives" [Chong 14]), the novel is narrated by a doctor (Bernard Rieux), a journalist (Raymond Siddhu), and a social media influencer (Megan Tso). Soon after the onset, the city is isolated from the rest of British Columbia, with the SkyTrain stopping at the boundary with Burnaby and soldiers in the ports and borders. A secondary character, Romeo Parsons, is a celebrity-like mayor known for his good looks and social liberalism (he is a stand-in for former Vancouver mayor Gregor Robertson but also Canadian prime minister Justin

Trudeau, attractive white men who parlayed their affability into electoral politics). An anti-immigration rally and anti-racism rally are planned concurrently at the Vancouver Art Gallery, protests which become first a riot and then opportunistic looting of the shopping district. After the bifurcated protest-turned-riot, Parsons attempts to assuage citizens' anxieties with a speech that situates the pandemic in the history of settler colonialism as its own virus or plague, drawing on the thesis popularized by Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs, and Steel.*[3] Parsons' speech is quickly overshadowed by a sex scandal: "a twenty-eight-year-old woman claiming to be Parsons' biological daughter (her existence had been concealed from Parsons by her birth mother, who died when she was a child) described having sexual contact with the mayor earlier that year" (Chong 123). The mayor retreats into silence—he is cancelled?—and only emerges when a vaccine has been announced, seeking to rehabilitate his reputation after said moral lapse by volunteering with a community group; he visits a pandemic ward in a temporary hospital, holding the hand of a dying young child.

In what follows I seek to read a scene of that hospital visit in Chong's novel in three different ways. First, it can be interpreted as a medical allegory, in which a political leader's body comes to represent or exist alongside his power. This allegory has a certain history, extending to medieval Europe (as theorized by Ernst Kantorowicz), but also in a plague text by Daniel Defoe, or a painting depicting Napoleon, or in the present COVID-19 moment and Canada's own prime minister. And this allegory is insistently contradictory: the leader will assert his power by separating his body from the plague, and he will assert his power by associating his body with the plague. Second, the visit is read in the context of racialized pandemic violence, where the singularity of a scandalous politician, and of a plague victim's ethnic hybridity, stand in an uneasy relation (or, to be properly Lacanian, non-relation) to protest politics. Finally, the visit is circumscribed by instances of a novelistic discourse that itself "breaks out" in buboes-like utterances, meta-linguistic speech acts like trigger warnings and land acknowledgements which, external to the novel proper, are akin to how Juliana Chang characterizes the Lacanian unconscious: "a most foreign element, consisting of signifiers from the Other as the Symbolic order" rather than "embodying the subject's innermost truth" (23). The novel's framing of the hospital scene

introduces what Gabriele Helms, writing on an earlier Chinese Canadian novel (SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*), calls "historical interruptions," textual intrusions like the plague or like the immigrant. Such interruptions, Scott Toguri McFarlane argues in a text drawn on by Helms, "haunt" the liberal Canadian polity. I also consider, as a supplement to the hospital scene's interiority, the dualistic collective political action, which, like the plywood message boards, is also difficult to read politically: a protest in the novel that targets both immigration *and* anti-racism. That riot is situated in the novel again with a land acknowledgement and (yet more) messages on plywood. The plague (as well as *The Plague*), it turns out, is a matter of signifiers: of course, there is more than one novel called *The Plague* and, perhaps, plague should be read as both a noun (a medical event) and a verb (a way of reading).

The title of Chong's book is not the only way in which it mimics Camus' 1947 novel. Both are set in a coastal city that has been visited by a bubonic plague that first becomes apparent with the spectacle of dying rats, and both have, as a central narrator, a doctor named Bernard Rieux. Plot points are both similar and different: Chong's novel's other main characters, for instance—including Siddhu and Tso—are, like Rieux, of multicultural backgrounds (Rieux and Tso are East Asian, Siddhu is South Asian, although all are presented as assimilated into North America). Rather than a pontificating priest (as in Camus), here we have Parsons (a priest-like name), whose Western Buddhist mindfulness is more apropos for the secular, neoliberal "Lululemon" lifestyle that characterizes bourgeois Vancouver. The later novel's relation to Indigenous populations differs as well: while Camus mentions the Arab and Berber populations of Oran only in passing (a journalist is in town to report on "the living conditions of the Arabs" but this topic is then dropped [Camus 11, 65]), Chong embeds a land acknowledgement within the novel's opening lines: "The remarkable events described in this narrative took place in Vancouver (traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations) in 201_ and into the following year" (11).[4]

Plot points in Chong's novel parallel those of Camus'—including the hospital visit—but there are also differences. Whereas in Camus' novel the priest, Paneloux, is already working in the hospital, in our text Parsons is

drafted to attend a dying child by Rieux, "because," Rieux tells Parsons, "I don't think your idea of suffering is grounded in reality" (Chong 231). The scene is initially narrated with a sneer: describing the doctor and the mayor suiting up into hazmat gear, Parsons "seemed more worried about leaving his handmade Italian shoes in the change area than what he would see next" (232). The pandemic zone of the hospital is then described in a way that juxtaposes frivolity and social ills: "The ward resembled a tent city—or a peculiar art class" (232). Pol and medico sit down beside the bed of a four-year-old girl, Rose Oishi, whom we have already met, and who is dying:

> The mayor agreed not to leave his place at the foot of the girl's bed until she died. He made a call to his assistant to clear his schedule and then turned off his phone. . . . When [Rieux] returned, Parsons was alone with the child, holding her hand as she tossed her head from side to side on the pillow. . . . [After the child dies] Each time Parsons' eyes returned to the dead girl, the more they dimmed. Rieux did not need to tell him that this child was not responsible for her own death. (235, 236, 238)

Here we want to distinguish between three agendas or intentionalities. Rieux's is to force the glib mayor, quick to signal his virtue with anodyne references to social ills, to confront death, and more, the death of a child, evidently an innocent. Chong's is to render Camus' critique of Catholicism relevant for a secular society. This essay's is to seek out the contradictions or political unconscious of that textual apparatus. Some of these contradictions, explored below, include: how the novel figures the relation of the body to the plague (our bodies are and are not carriers of the plague for the simple reason that the plague is not simply a biological agent but an ideology); the metafictional status of the novel's textual irruptions and its ironizing of narratorial knowledge (language and the novel as signifying systems are themselves unreliable indices of knowledge); and a constitutive antagonism revealed in the Canadian body politic (that body "scaled" from the singular individual and family to the public spheres of politics and protest).

We began the essay quoting the novel's presentation of Rieux's agenda and its own uncertainty over that agenda; this pull-quote deserves a bit more attention:

> The mayor, Rieux believed, had also invoked the history of smallpox in the region gratuitously. He had invoked *au courant* ideology to explain an unprecedented event because he wanted to blame the affluent ones for their disease instead of considering

> its randomness. (The authors of this chronicle do not necessarily agree with Rieux's interpretation of the mayor's intent.) (Chong 232)

Rieux's accusation or supposition is that Parsons has weaponized reconciliation discourses, "gratuitously" serving his own ends—indeed, it betrays the political naïveté all too common to scientists and medical practitioners, all too evident in *our* pandemic, when they show surprise that ordinary citizens do not follow their guidelines for mask-wearing or vaccine-taking. Using what became a keyword of the COVID-19 pandemic—"unprecedented"—suggests an exceptional nature of the plague. Tellingly, it is this *political* motivation on Rieux's part that then leads to recruiting Parsons into a stint in the plague ward (rather, this is not so much political as, perhaps, moral: Rieux seeks to teach the mayor a lesson). The narrative dissensus or irruption that follows Rieux's accusation constitutes a textual motif that is simultaneously postmodern (in the self-conscious sense of reflecting on the narrative, demonstrating that there is no one dominant authorial voice—the same questioning, it should be added, that arguably leads to the contemporary skepticism towards institutions, science, politics, and the academy) and also the retrofitting of that 1970s or 1980s literary trope to a twenty-first-century pandemic.

To better understand this postmodernist reading, consider two other textual irruptions bookending this scene. First, in a gesture akin to the embedded land acknowledgement, we have a trigger warning: "The authors of this piece . . . have, up until now, refrained from describing the deaths of children. They were not consequential to the stories of the figures we've followed. . . . We therefore kindly invite those who might feel most sensitively about this material to either skip the remainder of this chapter or read it at arm's length" (234). Then, on the final page of the chapter, immediately after describing Rose Oishi's death, Rieux reflects on how his not having had children meant a parent's love "was still an abstraction for him. Parsons, by contrast, had children. Rieux already knew that. But he would have known just by looking at Parsons' face then" (238). That is to say, Rieux would *not* be triggered either by the description of a child's death or indeed by an actual death. But here it gets tricky, does it not? I said earlier that Parsons is seeking to rehabilitate his political career after a sex scandal involving a sexual affair

with his daughter. Perhaps Parsons should have had a trigger warning before meeting that daughter.

I want to come back to what is going on textually (the trigger warnings and metafictional devices) but first I would like to compare this scene with two others from Western culture that offer instances of what we might call the leader's two bodies. First, in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year,* in which he narrates, apropos of the 1665 London plague, that "my Lord Mayor had a low Gallery built on purpose in his Hall, where he stood a little remov'd from the Croud when any Complaint came to be heard, that he might appear with as much Safety as possible" (177). Then, in March 1799, during his Egyptian campaign, Napoleon visited his plague-stricken soldiers in Jaffa, Palestine, going so far, according to some accounts, as to touch some patients' buboes so as to dispel rumours of their infectious nature. This visit was famously captured by Antoine-Jean Gros in his 1804 painting *Bonaparte visitant les pestiférés de Jaffa.* So we have two, or three, examples of leaders distancing (or not) their bodies from those who are or may be suffering from a pestilence. These instances illustrate what has been made famous by the medieval historian Ernst H. Kantorowicz in his book *The King's Two Bodies*: that a ruler may have an actual, corporal body, and also one that is more ineffable, regal, or mayoral. This mixed embodiment is represented by Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau, who during the early weeks of the 2020 pandemic, when his wife was infected, gave press conferences with reporters two or more metres distant: one body can still issue diktats and fatherly advice, while the other is potentially viral. This is to argue, then, that by considering this range of bodies and histories, we can detect a constitutive fissure or antagonism in the theory of the leader's two bodies: Napoleon, and Chong's Romeo Parsons, seek to prop up the stature of their *governing* body (albeit Napoleon was only a general at this time) by endangering their *mortal* body, while London's Lord Mayor, and Prime Minister Trudeau, seek to *protect* their mortal body while exercising their mayoral/prime ministerial body. ("Exercising" in the sense of performatively relying on that body to, in the case of the Mayor, listen to complaints from citizens, and, in the case of the PM, issue press statements and take questions.)

Gros' *Bonaparte visitant les pestiférés de Jaffa* holds other interests for the purposes of this essay. Darcy Grigsby points out the irony that while the

painting is often seen as a visual example of the orientalist gaze made famous by Edward Said, the feminized, voluptuous, half-naked men in the painting are actually French soldiers. The logic here is instructive for the present situation: for just as an orientalist painting can be interpreted as such without the stereotypes of Arab subjects, so too, I argue, the 2020 graffiti in Vancouver can be read as anti-Asian, and racist, *even if the work of Falun Gong sympathizers.* What is germane to Grigsby's analysis are two further points she makes: on the one hand, the importance in contemporary accounts of the juxtaposition of the elegantly clothed Napoleon and his semi-nude men, and on the other hand, the notion of contagion carrying moral, or ideological, values, as well as the biological. Gros' painting establishes ethos with clothing. "Napoleon's integrity is manifested by the discreteness, the very boundedness, of his body," Grigsby tells us, adding that, "[t]ightly encased in his flamboyant but closely fitted French uniform, [Napoleon] stands in startling contrast to the naked and loosely covered plague victims as well as the robed Arabs" (9). In this context, Napoleon's hand touching a half-naked patient is itself almost the only bare skin on his body: the touch cannot help but be erotic.[5] Here we can also think of Mayor Parsons' fussing over his "handmade Italian shoes" before he changes into the drapery of a hazmat suit. That is, Parsons is like Napoleon in his fashion sense, but unlike him in his loose garb. The setting at the patient's bedside is the same and different too. We have already learned how Parsons was holding Rose Oishi's hand, but this is very much a family scene (both parents are present, although they come and go), whereas the Gros painting is rife with homoerotic tension, with no women clearly present.[6]

But let us return to our novel's relevant scene. The dying child whom Parsons and Rieux visit, Rose, is the daughter of Jeffrey Oishi, a judge, and Lisa Randall-Oishi. The characters first of all reproduce a judge and his family in Camus' novel (the Othons) and, significantly, *multiculturalize* the same. In an interview (see "Clint Burnham Interviews Kevin Chong"), Chong used the video-game term "Easter eggs" (elements of a narrative only made legible retroactively or with insider knowledge) to describe some of his novel; an example of this would be an initial description of Rose that both speaks to our discussion of race and turns out to be an inaccurate, and inadequate, prognostication: "The girl had skin the colour of a pecan,

wide-set Asian eyes, and rippling curls. Tso foresaw a lifetime's worth of conversations for her in which she would have to offer her ethnic pedigree or risk being labelled difficult" (Chong 106). Our retroactive reading of this passage, then, qualifies Tso's dour pronunciation but not in a way that suggests it is wrong to assume a future of microaggressions. And not only because it turns out that Rose will, before the novel's end, die. But also because such a death, read in 2020, is also a racialized death. Finally, the child, as the offspring of miscegenation, offers a crucial further hybridization, in that such a process can be thought of as the patent opposite of the incestuous bond entertained by Mayor Parsons with his daughter. Parsons is thus touching not only a plague-stricken child (Chong combines Gros and Camus, as it were) but one whose very *bios* repudiates his endogamy.

We can also consider this scene of the individual or singular (the mayor) with the novel's rendering of collective political action: simultaneous anti-immigration and anti-racism rallies that descend into violence. Siddhu has left his newspaper job and is covering the event for the "GSSP" blog. The novel prefaces an account of this bifurcated riot with a historical survey of rioting in Vancouver, including the 1907 Anti-Oriental Riots, those from the Depression, the 1971 Gastown riots, and hockey and music concert outbursts: these more recent riots, the narrator concludes, "were the types of riots reserved for a sleepy provincial city in an economically developed country" (116).[7] The novel's riot, in its splitting between "European-Canadian" protestors (who are led by a Proud Boys-like cohort) and a larger, anti-racist contingent, reminds present-day readers that protest is not simply the purview of the left—as has been ably confirmed in 2020 with anti-mask and anti-lockdown protests in the US.[8] The novel's genuinely political protest, however split, then itself hives off into the familiar Vancouver activity of "shopping while rioting." After protestors throw Molotov cocktails and start punching each other,

> [t]he police buffered the two groups, minimizing the violence between them. The crowd of non-protestors seemed to disperse during this confrontation. Siddhu realized that it had merely moved down Robson Street, away from the police detail, and toward the shops. Siddhu was too far away to hear the glass smashing. Cellphone photos posted that day showed people in face masks stuffing their backpacks with electronics and handbags, others carrying stolen clothes by the rackful. For this segment of the crowd, the demonstration was a pretext to steal, a distraction from the spectre of death. (117-18)

A political reading of such contradictions in the Canadian polity vis-à-vis the ethnic polis has a certain history in our literary criticism. The splitting of the protest is not merely formal, for it also stages a conflict between those who seek to maintain or return to a Eurocentric country and those in favour of a more equitable society. This antagonism can be roughly, if crudely, staged as one based on racialization: between white bodies and brown bodies. McFarlane aptly forecast the past quarter century of debate over race in Canada in his 1995 essay "The Haunt of Race." Drawing on the then-new discourse of Derridean "hauntology," he already saw that liberal attempts to incorporate writers of colour into Canadian institutions (what he calls "revision") were doomed to fail:

> There has been a subtle movement away from a faith in there even being a process of revision in which we can all share equitably. There is too much of the unnameable looming, pressing and the goal of revision continually encounters its other. The spirit of revision is haunted, and the recent shift in anti-racist politics stages this haunting. As a strategy, revision is being supplemented by historical interruption. The question that hangs: If "our" cultural institutions cannot and should not try to represent "the people" through funding and programming that reflects a "Canadian" identity, upon what basis should they operate? (26)

Writing on SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe,* Gabriele Helms references McFarlane's critique, arguing that "dialogic struggles" in the novel contributed to "a fictional oral history that functions as a strategy of revision 'supplemented by historical interruption,'" interruptions which in turn stage the Chinese Canadian subject (64). But McFarlane's hauntology, his conception of the "historical interruption," can also help us understand not only the persistence of racist politics in Vancouver (and Canada), but how Chong's novel narrates a pandemic. First, consider how the bifurcation or splitting of the political continues with Mayor Parsons' conciliatory speech after the riot(s). Parsons mentions that after the riot, "there was a great upswell in civic pride as people helped repair broken windows. Kind messages were scrawled on the plywood boards that covered up broken shopfront exteriors. The messages all boiled down to this: 'Not all Vancouverites are vandals—not all of us are rioters'" (120). The cleanup and message writing reference, first, the aftermath of Vancouver's 2011 Stanley Cup riot, when citizens descended on the city's downtown the day after the riot, picking up broken glass and writing heartfelt messages on the window hoardings

(Smith). But, as if to illustrate textbook Freudian ambivalence, the 2020 reader in Vancouver cannot help but be reminded of plywood boards that appeared on Robson Street storefronts in March and April as the city went into lockdown, and which were soon defaced with racist messages blaming the coronavirus on China.

Authorial intrusions, which I earlier compared to buboes that irrupt on a plague patient's body, continue throughout the novel, as signalled in this paper's epigraph discussed above. To such tropes can be added more contemporary trigger warnings and land acknowledgements. In addition to the content warning about the depiction of Rose Oishi's death, we also have trigger warning as a metaphor:

> Siddhu took a car2go to the edge of the Grandview Highway until he reached a set of electronic roadwork signs placed a few blocks before the spotlights, fences, and guard towers. They were typical roadwork signs that warned drivers of a stoppage ahead and asked them to take an alternate route. They were like trigger warnings that cautioned locals who wanted to pretend that nothing had changed to avoid going farther. (155)

Land acknowledgements themselves also metastasize in the novel. In addition to the opening gesture, we have two reported acknowledgements: first, when Romeo Parsons gives his speech after the riot ("'First off, I want to thank the people of our city for their time,' he began after the land acknowledgment" [119]), and later, when Janice Grossman, an arts impresario, begins a theatre event ("'This space was created by a cataclysm,' she said shortly after giving the land acknowledgment" [253]).

This sense of the "plague of *The Plague*," or the notion that "plague" at once constitutes the (metastasizing!) semantic content of the novel and its formal appurtenances, is a necessarily allegorical reading. But here we have to be careful that we do not fall into what Fredric Jameson, commenting in 2019 on Camus' original novel, calls "bad allegory" (*Allegory* 9), or a simplistic, one-to-one correspondence (such as, in Camus, the plague as a stand-in for Nazism). But there is also a tenor-vehicle interchangeability to the postmodern allegory, as Jameson observed three decades earlier in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992), where he spoke of

> the most peculiar indirections characteristic of allegory in general: the laterality with which the levels, like the hollow nutshells of the shell game, must be conveyed. If you

> want to say something about economics, for example, you do so with political material. . . . On the other hand, if you want to say something about politics . . . it is by way of economic raw material. (67)

This helps us sort out the relation between the textual "irruptions" in Chong's novel, and moves beyond privileging said textuality (which was the category error of the first generation of postmodernist critics in the 1980s, I reckon). For just as we can see the textual devices as figuring the plague, so too the other way around, and the plague in the novel "stands in" for its textual arrival—that is, not so much that the novel begins with the arrival of the plague in Vancouver, but rather that the plague begins with the beginning of a narrative about Vancouver. Indeed, Jameson goes on in the same discussion (of conspiracy films like *Videodrome* and *All the President's Men*) to entertain the possibility of a flattened allegory, or "the squaring of the circle of this allegorical law: a political film that deceptively looks like a political film, a representation that seeks to convey some conception of political relations by way of overtly political material" (67). By this reading, if what the plague in Camus' novel allegorizes is, in fact, a plague or pandemic (which is why so many of us were reading Camus in spring 2020—*not* to learn how societies deal with Nazi invasions), then perhaps, too, the textual irruptions in Chong's novel are not so much allegories for the buboes, but . . . for the vaccine? That is, and let's just stay with land acknowledgements, for they are the most salient gesture in Canadian liberal discourse today, can we not venture the proposition that a land acknowledgement constitutes a kind of vaccine against more meaningful decolonization?[9]

The hospital visitation scene and its framing—including the "trigger warning" and the struggle over interpretation among the authors—signifies the metatextual symptom of the same devices in the social (trigger warnings and land acknowledgements being utterances—vaccines—that often seek to relieve libidinal and colonial anxieties). This is not to argue, I hasten to add, that people suffering from trauma are not triggered, or that land acknowledgements do not have a specific history within Indigenous protocols.[10] But trigger or content warnings are also in danger of becoming little more than anodyne (and wordy) versions of movies' or video games' rating systems. Too, hearing a Mohawk activist acknowledge the territory on which he is speaking in Vancouver (as I did at an anti-pipeline rally

organized by the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs in 2015) is very different from hearing a non-Indigenous professor or politician mumble through and mispronounce the names of the Squamish (Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw), Tsleil-Waututh (səl̓ilw̓ətaʔɬ), Musqueam (xʷməθkʷəy̓əm), and Kwikwetlem (kʷikʷəƛ̓əm) First Nations. This is to make the argument that trigger warnings and land acknowledgements are what Lacan and Žižek call "empty gestures" (the canonical example is "your money or your life!"; see Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts* 209-14), which are always accompanied by a "forced choice"—in the first case, that yes, texts have violent content, and in the second, that yes, we live under neo-colonial conditions. And even this extended consideration does not exhaust—nor foreclose—the possibilities and resonances of the role of trigger warnings and land acknowledgements in Chong's novel.

Such textual moments, I have been arguing, exemplify more than the standard postmodern metafictional "questioning stance towards their common use of conventions of narrative, of reference, of the inscribing of subjectivity, of their identity as textuality, and even of their implication in ideology" (Hutcheon 106). But let's not too quickly discard that thirty-year-old characterization, for surely a Chinese Canadian rewrite of an existentialist novel can have some claim for the kind of postmodern pastiche that Linda Hutcheon and Fredric Jameson (1991) were pointing us to in the 1980s. Why, that is, do the authors feel the need to register their disagreement with Rieux's judgmental attitude towards Parsons' motivations—which is to say, why is it necessary for the novel at this point to mobilize such a postmodern trope?

By way of answering that question, which has been haunting this essay, we can read the hospital scene in Chong's novel in a way that reveals the antagonisms in contemporary politics between neoliberal governance and multicultural polity. That is, for all the "successes" of Asian Canadians on Canada's West Coast, political elites remain white supremacist in body and policy,[11] while, in contrast to this ruling monad, "irruptions" consistently plague popular bodies, figured on the one hand as the pandemic (COVID-19 or the novel's plague), and on the other hand through miscegenatory struggles over race (thus Rose). Of course, Chong is neither the first nor the only writer to observe such antagonisms. What then is particularly

noteworthy about his novel's treatment of neoliberal Vancouver, how the text disentangles white supremacism and libidinal-colonial anxieties, I argue, has to do with how it stages that white supremacism as fundamentally not all that different from liberal (or even radical, abolitionist) multiculturalism. Chong's *The Plague* confirms the Lacanian argument that not only is racism and ethnic hatred predicated on the "theft of enjoyment" but the more dispiriting conclusion that the anti-racist's enjoyment is not all that different from the racist's (see George and Hook). We see this thesis argued in two ways. First, consider the novel's juxtaposition of the two demonstrations, which not only shows that the anti-immigration white nationalists depend for their enjoyment on the spectre of official, liberal multiculturalism, but also that the anti-racist left's enjoyment is similarly predicated on the right winger's malfeasance. The novel indicates that this reading of juxtaposed pleasures is less liberal "false equivalence" than one that is true to Vancouver's histories, which, as noted, include both racist encounters and outbursts after hockey games or during rock concerts (see also Barnholden).

For a second example of complications of racial enjoyment, the reader might consider how real-life Vancouver mayor Gregor Robertson's sex scandal, while less egregious than his novelistic avatar's (mere adultery rather than incest), involved his dating an Asian woman. As with my earlier comparison of Rose and Parsons, here, again, the "real-life" scandal was that of a white leader who was unduly exogamous (miscegenatory), whereas the novelistic character was excessively endogamous (incestuous). And the very eroticization of Asians in Vancouver—the queer phenomenon of so-called rice queens, for example—indicates that such predilections, like textual irruptions, do not challenge white supremacy.[12] Rather, such exoticization is arguably accompanied by that legacy, as in Daniel Gawthrop's memoir *The Rice Queen Diaries*, where he delineates his grandfather's role in the internment of Japanese Canadians in the 1940s shortly before descending (ascending?) into erotic details of his encounters with Japanese Canadian lovers, including Yukio, who is alternately "a samurai warrior" wearing "a white bandana with red-and-black calligraphy" and "a fully clothed Tokyo urbanite in a starched white shirt and black tie . . . faithful torchbearer of a workaholic culture" (22).

But let us bring together these tropes of the sexual and the textual, the racial and the viral, with a diagram that, it is hoped, can help to conceptualize Chong's novel, and its interpretation during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

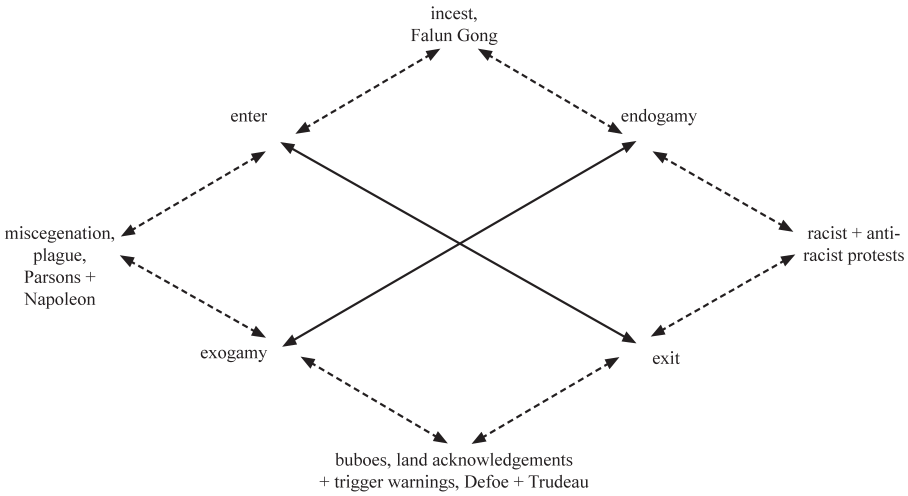

Figure 1. Antinomies in *The Plague*: a semiotic rectangle.

What the novel shows us is that anxieties over plagues and pandemics stage the body as both personal, or singular, and social, or political (reminding us of the interchangeability of levels in Jameson's theory of allegory). The plague enters our body and worries us about its borders—even as we enjoy other forms of being entered (there are some great eating scenes in a hotel dining room in the novel). Then, we worry about/enjoy that which leaves our bodies—from words and slogans at protests to pustules (in the novel) or microdroplets (those new incarnations we have learned about over the past year). What the novel is staging, that is, is a series of antinomies and combinatorial logics that are mapped here with the aid of the well-known semiotic rectangle, devised by Greimas and made famous in the Anglo-American world by Jameson (Greimas vi-xxii). The two terms "enter" and "endogamy" are antinomic or mutually exclusive; then, we have

their negations or opposites: the exit, and exogamy. In the novel, and its interpretation, such concepts are staged at the level of the body, and the nation, but also metaleptically in the novel's discourse. So at the top of the diagram we have that which combines the entrance and the endogamous: incest (Romeo Parsons' scandal) but also Falun Gong (or the possibility that anti-Chinese graffiti in pandemic Vancouver was an internecine struggle within China). Then, on the left, we have the combination of that which enters, and is exogamous—so enters from the outside. This is signified by the interracial congress of Judge Oishi and his wife Lisa Randall-Oishi (and their child Rose), but also the plague itself *and* the political acts of Parsons and Napoleon in touching the plague victims. For if we circle to the bottom position—that which is neither a matter of entering (but the exit) nor endogamy (so exogamy), we see on the one hand the irruptions, from the body (the buboes) but also the text (land acknowledgements and trigger warnings stage a shift from one level of discourse to another—they are metalinguistic or phatic—with a further possibility of the land acknowledgement as vaccine), and on the other hand that the refusal of Defoe's "Lord Mayor" or Trudeau, via a practice of "the leader's two bodies," to touch their constituents is a matter of "leaving" them alone—they leave, it is an exit. They have two bodies. Finally, on the right side of the diagram, that which is again an exit, but endogamous, is where we entertain the thesis that both racist and anti-racist protestors are simultaneously *leaving* or exiting their neoliberal role as passive citizens (which is so traumatic that they have to return to that role, and go riot-shopping—both in the novel and in Vancouver's "actual" history) and concerned with endogamy, with the social body. This last might seem unduly harsh (or, again, positing a false equivalence), but I think the unfortunate name of an important political group, "No one is illegal," says more than it intends.[13] Even as the organization advocates for immigrants' and refugees' rights, a more radical position might be to say "everyone is illegal"—for "no one is illegal" cedes too much power to the state. In a Lacanian sense, every protestor is a hysteric, asking the master to make things right. At the time of this essay's revision, in March 2021, the *Washington Post* reported that right-wing protestors in the US were demanding to "defund the CDC"—the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—appropriating the "defund the police" slogan of Black Lives

Matter protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Kevin Chong's novel may not have predicted the virulence of vaccine skepticism, but it did predict the entanglement of anti-Asian racism and pandemic paranoia. We should be grateful for this reminder, and we should heed the novel's lessons.

What are those lessons? They are all, I have argued, about a kind of doubling or layering: Chong's novel repeats or pastiches Camus' and can be both read as a commentary on today and reread in light of the 2020 pandemic. Just as protest can take anti-racist and racist turns in the novel, so too responses to COVID-19 both racialize the pandemic and rely on that racism. The theory of the "King's two bodies" is both affirmed and negated by the real world (Trudeau) and the novel (the hospital scene). Chong's novel is a body that erupts in buboes-like land acknowledgements and trigger warnings, helping us to understand those symptoms of present-day political discourse. But the ideological function of literature should not be overestimated; unlike land acknowledgements, the novel is not a vaccine.

NOTES

1 For Falun Gong media see Bellemare et al.; the author of this essay also observed Falun Gong protests alleging CCP pandemic conspiracies in March 2021. In a recent article in *The Atlantic,* "MAGA-Land's Favorite Newspaper: How *The Epoch Times* Became a Pro-Trump Propaganda Machine in an Age of Plague and Insurrection," Simon van Zuylen-Wood has laid out the growth of *The Epoch Times* as a far-right media presence in North America. And it is not only the overseas Chinese who resist easy stereotype; as Shuyu Kong remarks, one should "take care not to treat immigrants from mainland China as a monolithic whole with a single ideology. In fact, many diasporic media firms and media practitioners, including those formerly trained in mainland China, can be highly critical of the Chinese Party-state" (160). Too, the easy alignment of immigrant and plague can also be flipped, as suggested in David L. Eng and Shinhee Han's *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*, where a passing comment in Danzy Senna's novel *Caucasia* that for Asian Americans, whiteness may be "contagious" ("I wondered if whiteness were contagious," qtd. in Eng and Han 33) supports the argument that "assimilation into mainstream culture may involve not only debilitating personal consequences; ultimately, it also constitutes the foundation for a type of national melancholia, a collective national haunting, with destructive effects" (38). This is to suggest, then, that assimilation qua contagion subvents racial melancholia and other pathologies.

2 See Picard: "As of September 30 [2020], Canada had recorded 9,262 COVID-19 deaths, and of that total, 7,609 were in residential care homes. That's 82 percent—twice the average of the thirty-seven OECD countries" (21).

3 See Chapter 11, "Lethal Gift of Livestock: The Evolution of Germs" (195-214), where Diamond argues that "[t]he importance of lethal microbes in human history is well illustrated by Europeans' conquest and depopulation of the New World. Far more Native

Americans died in bed from Eurasian germs than on the battlefield from European guns and swords" (210). See Jaschik for a summary of debates on Diamond's work, especially with respect to questions of race.

4 By "within the novel proper," we mean within the novel's narration, as opposed to such paratexts as the acknowledgement page, author's bio, etc. Still early in the book, the narrator comments on the alienation of Vancouver's citizens from each other: "Among the city's Indigenous peoples, its immigrant groups, its sex workers and LGBTQ population, collective traumas were experienced but barely heard by the rest of the city—including the figures in this narrative" (14). This introduces an important cleavage, between the novel's assimilated characters (Tso is a globe-trotting cosmopolitan, Rieux is alienated from his Cantonese heritage, Siddhu is a suburban homebody) and other immigrant groups.

5 A contemporary critic, Grigsby notes, draws our attention to the "single outstretched hand" that has been "made 'nude' by the removal of a glove" (15).

6 It should be noted that Grigsby does not subscribe to Kantorowicz' "two bodies" theory floated earlier, arguing instead that Gros valorizes "Napoleon's rational authority in the face of panicked imaginations," in accordance with Jan Goldstein's account of "contemporary medical models of 'moral' contagion" (39-n23); Grigsby also quotes a reviewer of the Salon in which Gros' painting appeared, who asked, "Sir, are these Egyptians who have the plague? No, they are Frenchmen. Have they taken on the air and character of the country [of Egypt]?" (6). See also Goldstein, whose article "Moral Contagion" begins by quoting Freud during his 1885 visit to Paris, referring to political agitation as a "psychical epidemic" (181). Moral contagion and social epidemics qua tropes were mainstays of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century sociological theorists, including Gabriel Tarde, Gustave Le Bon, and Émile Durkheim. See also Borch, and Cavalletti.

7 As Michael Barnholden's *Reading the Riot Act* documents in its first chapter ("Anti-Asian Riots"), the city's early years included anti-Chinese and anti-Japanese riots in 1887 (against Chinese encampments in Coal Harbour and on Carrall Street) and 1907 (against businesses and rooming houses in Chinatown and Japantown). Interestingly, the immigration of 1,100 Japanese and Chinese workers in July 1907, claims Barnholden, was due to an outbreak of the bubonic plague in Hawaii. See also Ikeda's "A Brief History of Bubonic Plague in Hawaii."

8 Indeed, when I attended an Indigenous rights protest in October 2020, I was asked at first by organizers if I meant to be at an anti-mask protest on the other side of the Vancouver Art Gallery (the perils of being interpellated as a middle-aged white man!). When this essay was in revisions, the Trump-incited march on the US Capitol took place, on January 6, 2021.

9 For a working out of the logic of land acknowledgements, please see my poem "No poems on stolen native land" in *Pound @ Guantánamo* (2-5). I should acknowledge that both reviewers of this article were troubled by this comparison (perhaps for them it was a Jamesonian "bad allegory"). There are two relevant points of dispute, it seems to me. First, that the medical or biological action of a vaccine is not comparable to the performative politics of a land acknowledgement. But consider the two ways in which the COVID vaccines work. The mRNA-style Pfizer or Moderna vaccines and the "adenovirus" vector virus of the AstraZeneca or Janssen vaccines all contribute to the building of a "protein spike"—the vector virus "produces the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein," whereas the mRNA "is essentially a recipe, telling the cells of the body how to make the spike protein"

("Covid-19 Drugs and Vaccines"). The host body then fights off that protein, thereby developing immunity. Is a land acknowledgement not precisely that "spike protein," a small dose of anti-colonial utterances for which the host body (politic) develops an immunity, no longer thinking it needs to move to more substantial material or symbolic decolonization? Too, as with the need for second (and third?) doses, or annual flu shots, land acknowledgements are needed again and again. The second objection to my metaphor is that while yes, it is true, the land acknowledgements in the novel are scripted *pro forma* utterances by settlers, we should acknowledge that Indigenous protocols of the same do important, and more significant, work. Here I think it is important not to fall into an updated version of the "noble savage" paradigm where Indigenous actors are unproblematically thought to be free of political or other constraints (just as I argued against viewing Asians in Canada monolithically). First, and this is a point that Patricia Barkaskas has made in discussion of land acknowledgements, *even in the most empty gesture of an acknowledgement* by a going-by-the-numbers settler politician or professor, we cannot predict how that utterance will be received by an Indigenous person—it may, indeed, change the context for a given setting. Second, land acknowledgements by Indigenous figures should not be solely read as anti-colonial—rather, they are also a working out of nation-to-nation protocols *between* different First Nations and other Indigenous polities.

10 For a further discussion of land acknowledgements, see Robinson et al., "Rethinking the Practice and Performance of Indigenous Land Acknowledgement"; Linda Roland Danil, in a brief (Lacanian) account of trigger warnings, argues that they function in a similar way to questions of national security—locating threats outside the (national or personal) body.

11 There has only been one Asian or indeed non-white mayor of any of British Columbia's major cities—Vancouver, Victoria, Burnaby, Surrey, Kelowna, Kamloops, or Nanaimo—Peter Wing, mayor of Kamloops for three terms beginning in 1966 (Wing was the first mayor of Chinese descent of a North American city and the first locally born mayor of Kamloops; see "Former Kamloops Mayor Dies at 93"). The one South Asian premier of the province, Ujjal Dosanjh, was drafted into the position after Glen Clark's scandal-plagued NDP government suffered a leadership crisis in 2000. Dosanjh's government lasted only fifteen months.

12 This essay was edited during the aftermath of the shootings in Atlanta, in March 2021, of workers at three spas. The victims at Young's Asian Massage were Delaina Ashley Yaun, age 33; Paul Andre Michels, 54; Xiaojie Tan, 49; and Daoyou Feng, 44. The victims at the Gold Spa were Hyun Jung Grant, 51; Suncha Kim, 69; and Soon Chung Park. The victim at Aromatherapy Spa was Yong Ae Yue, 63. (Hawkins et al.)

13 Please see noii-van.resist.ca/

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