

Epidemiological plots and the national syndrome

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Abstract

When mass demonstrations against state-sanctioned violence ‘play dead’, they deliver collective judgements on the failure of justice. In this article, I discuss the epidemiological plot, a crisis genre motivated by the idea that the state can be cured through its own processes. This plot is preoccupied with defending the state against viral invasion, moral and medical, and by coercing consensus around what and whom can be included within it. I expand on this in a reading of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), where a medical-sociological consortium forms to annihilate a foreign threat to national health: vampirism. I suggest that *Dracula*’s exhaustion of its compliant reader through its proliferation of data offers an analogy for a normative and mainstream socio-scientific literacy that serves, increasingly, as a condition for full participation in public life. I move from this to consider entanglements with the time of judgement in Ashon Crawley’s *The Lonely Letters* (2020), arguing that these circumvent the progressive historicism of national timekeeping.

Keywords

crisis management, epidemiology, judgement, nationalism, postcolonial justice

Introduction

In June 2020, twinned experiences of mass death joined up in international demonstrations against state-sanctioned violence. COVID-19 had underscored domestic and international fault-lines of crisis management, and Black Lives Matter centred anti-black brutality as the common and founding history of Euro-US imperialism. After the murder of George Floyd, ‘I can’t breathe’ ricocheted from a North American semi-periphery into global demonstrations of playing dead. ‘I can’t breathe’ became the bending of a bent note: the preservation of names, the care taken with final words, and the freezing of time, repeating what Elizabeth Freeman calls a ‘performance [that] turns toward rather than away from the timelessness’ (2019, p. 85). These coexisting and overlapping crisis responses saw congregations playing dead in an aesthesis of urgency that exceeded the

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possibility of achieving a just end within existing legal structures. ‘I can’t breathe’ is a protracted, collective judgement on the failure to find, invent, or implement a cure. Where else is there to go, when the time of justice is exhausted?

These demonstrations confound institutional forms of narrative-making, conservatively understood as the assembly of documentation and the promise of a just resolution that adheres to existing laws, within the limited continuum of international justice and national civil rights. Against this, solidarity across multiple vectors of discontent has forced a confrontation with the continuities of the present – not as a crisis, but as business as usual. This solidarity asks what sense of shared life is possible in this situation. It challenges the common sense of public reality made permissible by the nation’s professional practitioners: not just its government and military leaders, but its congress of expert opinions – lawyers and doctors, judges and scientists, and corporate interlopers. It is not so much that these demonstrations say that there is no progress to be made; rather, they challenge the temporal parameters of balancing the scales in national scenes of justice-making. In these demonstrations, the emphasis on justice is suspended for the sake of spectacular, temporary and prosaic forms of judgement. They make visible the limits of justice in demonstrations of judgement that exceed what is possible in the arbitration of the present. These limits exceed the national; this moment of solidarity took on the world-system and its local manifestations, and refused to concede to an image of the national as a syndrome that might be managed through its own processes. This articulates a difference between management and cure: between the limitations of what can be done within these processes, which hold off delivering a cure.

The scale of this refusal matters because in the situation of mass contagion, the possibility of justice is held in the promise of cure; in lieu of a cure, crisis management buys time. This play-off between management and cure has its own plot, couched in a genre that emerged in the early nineteenth century, between literary fiction as a trustworthy site for documenting human experience and the development of sociological enquiry that borrowed empirical methods from the natural sciences. I call this genre the epidemiological plot, and I give a sense of what I mean by this through a reading of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897/2003). Stoker’s version of the vampire myth converts the English aristocrat of John Polidori’s ‘The Vampyre’ (1819/2008) into Transylvanian nobility, and closes the distance of Polidori’s third-person gaze into a claustrophobic collection of documentation, where the reader is asked to participate directly and laboriously in the stitching together of plot. The novel is held together by phonograph transcripts, newspaper cuttings, legal letters and personal correspondence. Unlike Polidori’s short story, the subject of Stoker’s novel is not the vampire, but the formation of a consortium of professionals that work together to defend a breached national border against an invasive, mysterious syndrome: *vampirism*. The plot is generated by the efforts of this group to convert this unknown monster from a syndrome of national decline to a success story of collaborative rehabilitation. In doing this, the consortium reaffirms a consensus around who and what can be included in a healthy national community. The quest to manage vampirism is a proxy negotiation over the state’s terms of citizenship and belonging through the identification of a threat, and the professionalisation of crisis response.

Here, I propose reading these responses as epidemiological plots to show how measures taken to manage the spread of contagion grant emergency powers to consortia of

experts. This extension of emergency powers centres the institutional time of the state as the prerogative of national progress in plots where national values determine the scale and distribution of justice, and permits civic violence on behalf of national interests. The epidemiological plot also recruits its own public by cultivating the reader as a fellow member of the consortium. It assumes compliance with its terms: the protection and defence of national borders by any means necessary. It also highlights the dissonance between the partiality of national interests (which need to be managed) and the abstract promise of the state as a general cure.

While it is true that crisis responses expose both the narrowness of national interests and the mechanisms of disaster capitalism – as well as how this combination upholds the abstraction and mythologising of state power – I will not rehearse this well-trodden ground here. I am more curious about moments that interrupt the nation's continued reinvention of itself as a body to be rehabilitated. These moments do not happen in the legal machinery of justice, which always routes its imagined community back to the protection and defence of national interests. Instead, these moments disturb the processes of professional truth-making dramatised in *Dracula*. In the second part of this article, I move from *Dracula* to Ashon Crawley's *The Lonely Letters* (2020a) as an example of a cure without a plot, made up of whatever can be seized in moments of exhaustion. In Crawley's 'agnosticostal' rendering of Pentecostal spaces and Blackpentecostal practices, moving through flesh and spirit and speaking in tongues, there is not much to follow and no figure or structure to venerate (2020b). Nor is there an embodied contagion. Time might be the problem, or at least a persistent anxiety to record its passing. Crawley's quasi-fictional letters to a silent interlocutor whose responses are never shown demonstrate a practice of being 'caught up in the cause of justice' without cultivating a relation of dependency with the law, or by appealing to the strength of the state (Crawley, 2016, p. 2).

Instead, Crawley foregrounds the power of everyday judgement. Judgement comprises a different entanglement with ordinary time, but one that encounters this time as already unnatural and halfway on its way to somewhere else, stuck between zones, dead time, slow time, time that is frenzied and time at tempo, languid and compromised. Judgement not only takes place in these disjunctions; it can mediate their association. If demonstrations of playing dead ask, 'where else is there to go?', their wager is also that there is a here-and-now to be experienced in this temporal density, without the promise of standard values. This shares something with what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls 'a dream of justice' among a group of abolition activists on a bus leaving a Methodist church parking lot, whose riders decided 'through struggle, debate, failure, and renewal', that they must 'seek general freedom for all from a system in which punishment has become as industrialised as making cars, clothes, or missiles, or growing cotton' (2007, p. 2). This activism displaces a consortium of citizen-jurors into collectives of poet-judges who are 'acting out, in the details of modest practices, the belief that "we shall overcome"' (p. 2), sharing more than just common interests.

The epidemiological plot

What I am calling the epidemiological plot unfolds in the time of progressive historicism, the default position of national timekeeping. In this time, history is made by passing

through successive stages of development, each stage overcoming the inadequacies of the last. This model of history corresponds closely to Ernst Haeckel's theory of biological recapitulation: that during the course of development, an organism must pass through its ancestral forms before reaching a more developed stage of being. Building on Charles Darwin's theory of variation by chance (tychism), and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's theory of progressive evolution (agapasticism), Haeckel looked at odd details of human embryos – gills and tails – to identify evolutionary lineages that extend between human and non-human species.

Knowing what we have been also requires knowing what we are. Stephen Jay Gould writes: 'recapitulation also provided an irresistible criterion for any scientist who wanted to rank human groups as higher and lower'; it 'served as a general theory of biological determinism' whereby 'all "inferior" groups – races, sexes, and classes – were compared with the children of white males' (1981/1996, p. 144). Used to insist on the evolutionary supremacy of white people, recapitulation reproduces an adjacent colonial fear: miscegenation, the mixing of racial types. Bulwarking this fear is a biological argument about the contamination of bloodline. Maintaining racial purity requires developing immunity against infectious, deviant and degenerative bodies. The epidemiological plot relies on a standardisation of authentic and normative 'good' (the uncontaminated, the non-diseased, the healthy) through a set of narrative techniques that inveigle a literate bourgeois and empirically minded public into consensus around its terms of entry.

As well as registering *fin-de-siècle* anxieties over imperial degeneration and the evolutionary effects of miscegenation, the emergence of the epidemiological plot can also be understood as part of a broader rivalry between the realist novel and the development of sociology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wolf Lepenies historicises this conflict as a 'competition over the claim to be the rule of life appropriate to industrial society' (1988, p. 13). Sociography competed with literary realism 'over claims to offer adequate reproduction of the "prose of everyday circumstances"' (p. 13). On the other side of this were the natural sciences, whose methods the social sciences imitated, eradicating feelings and 'abandon[ing] inspiration in favour of science' (p. 13). A growing suspicion of literary stylisation corresponded to the ambitions of literature and men of letters to compete with the realism of sociological enquiry, and to the ambitions of sociology to match the natural sciences' hostility to stylisation in favour of 'simple facts'. What resulted from this competition were hybrid forms – literary sociography, scientific fiction and quantitative methods in the social sciences – while the more descriptive natural histories of Georges Buffon and Lamarck fell out of favour.

A recent example of this collusion between progressive historicism and the epidemiological plot has been the UK's development of a COVID-19 vaccine. The quest to develop the vaccine required collaboration across a number of different research centres within the UK, and the international sharing of data in open access databases. This has required new and speculative forms of collaboration 'outside existing structures', in microbiologist Sharon Peacock's words (2021), as well as an increased workload for a workforce of scientists and technicians unprepared to serve at the forefront of a global pandemic. The peculiar dissonance of describing Britain's response to the pandemic as a success story has been tempered only by a few references to the importance of gathering diverse data sets in future. This, while the disproportionate black and brown death rates

fall from public memory, and the distribution of the vaccine rehearses imperial trade routes. Des Fitzgerald has figured this phenomenon as ‘viral nationalism’, when ‘a moment of biological and political crisis effloresce[s] into a distinctive form of border-fever’ (2021, p. 5). The vaccine quest attached itself to wartime metaphors of sacrifice and resilience, and reinscribed a national body politic as the prime beneficiary of any future vaccine. Propping up this national narrative were the closing of public spaces and furloughing of service workers; the mass rollout of the vaccine within the UK was accompanied by the spectacle of pubs reopening and stadiums filled to capacity. The vaccine promised a universal and science-driven consensus around investing in a cure through genomic investigation, and part of this consensus has been guided by the managed desire to repopulate these deserted public spaces.

Imagining the UK’s crisis management as a success story means privileging vaccine development as the principal mode of virus management, and national health as the primary site of mitigation, upholding forms of assessment that make vaccine nationalism both possible and common sense (Eaton, 2021). A ‘cultural politics of heredity’ continues to determine the development and distribution of biomedicine and health globally, and a symptom of ‘the intertwining of . . . biology and law within a new era of ethnonationalist state projects’ (Fitzgerald et al., 2020, p. 1161). In this ethnonational contemporary, processes of racialisation are part of the production of progress as synonymous with historical time. The vaccine story has unfolded through various strands of plot gathered together to create a sense of transformation. Science steps in to save the species as well as to save the sense that the species should be saved; the reason the species should be saved is because it is capable of producing a vaccine to protect itself against destruction.

This circuitous psychodrama has a precedent in late nineteenth-century mappings of cancer that imagined modernity as a contaminant, and which posited cancer as a ‘disease of civilisation’ and ‘pathology of progress’, as Agnes Arnold-Forster (2020) has argued. While there were attempts ‘to explain why “civilised” races might be more prone to cancer than their “barbarous” counterparts’, Arnold-Forster argues that cancer was characterised as a problem of lifestyle and ‘the civilised *way of living*’ (p. 181). This conflation of a declining national body with new epidemiological maps of colonised territories registered the shifting relationship between empire and public health towards the close of the century, as well as modernism’s nascent concern with western civilisation as both contagiously degenerative and in need of a cure.

This is by no means out-of-step with a recapitulation model of progress if it is understood that the post-Westphalian right to sovereignty is secured by a nation-state’s imagined ability to manage its own degeneracy. Liberal and communitarian futurisms share an interest in positing an analogous, if not ontological, relation between historical and evolutionary forms of transformation. History moves through stages of socio-political organisation, and historicism is the labour of capturing the recapitulation of past forms as part of a process of progressive social evolution. Darwin’s theory of natural selection as the survival of biological traits corresponded, for Marx, to class struggle as the selection of socio-economic forms of organisation. For Sean Sayers, this means that neither Marx nor Darwin repudiate teleology, but render it ‘in naturalistic terms that are consonant with modern natural science’ (2019, p. 59). Sayers makes the case for Marx as a

thinker of historical emergence, where unities of commons exist first as possibilities, and then develop into reality as ‘different groups come into contact with one another [and] more concrete and developed forms of relation begin to grow and to acquire an increasingly determinate form’ (p. 52). Historical development is blind (causal), but it is also moving towards a future of increasing collective autonomy, and has to be in some sense purposeful.

Gregory Moore goes one step further in his reading of Nietzsche’s ‘ironic distortion’ of biologism, suggesting that in the nineteenth century, evolution could not replace Judeo-Christian teleology *tout court*: scientists’ ‘faith in progress was an essential means of reassuring themselves that whatever the short-term suffering, there was a meaningful goal to be achieved, that evolution was a process leading inexorably towards moral and intellectual improvement’ (2002, p. 9). The contingency of variation is a more insecure starting position than combining natural selection with biological purpose. The latter offers a place for progressive history to go, and it means that some form of natural law is assured as embedded in the process of biological progress.

Assuming the embeddedness of natural law in theories of historical and biological progress means that the process of progressive historicism can justify the management or administration of emergency uses of force. Justice, in this limited sense, is a mechanism for the negotiation/selection of legal constraints. But what exactly happens in these spaces of negotiation, or as Arto Laitinen puts it, these ‘intermediate phases’ between different historical stages (2017, p. 245)? To rehearse the oscillation between Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida: can justice be found between law-positing and law-preserving violence (Benjamin, 2004), or resolve the relation between the singular and the universal by ‘appealing to force from its first moment’ (Derrida, 1992, p. 10)? In organisations of ordinary time that privilege progressive historicism, consensus is prefigured. In the following section, I explore the prefiguration of consensus in a reading of *Dracula*. The text seeks to cultivate its reader as a sociological worker, required to do the work of assessing plot and investing in the narrative momentum to manage the text’s syndrome: vampirism.

***Dracula’s* prefiguration of consensus**

Dracula was published in the decade when, in Saree Makdisi’s words, ‘the realist novel enters its modernist crisis’, and Stoker effects his own ‘modernist breakdown’ of nineteenth-century literary realism (1998, p. 9). Expected from the outset to participate in the novel’s demanding labour of assessing evidence, the reader of *Dracula* might be too distracted – exhausted, even – by the volume of documentation, the changes in perspective, the jumps in time, and the gaps in the plot to question the allegiance they have been asked to share with the consortium. The novel’s awkward resolution lies somewhere between contamination and vaccination, and it is unclear whether or not a cure has been found, or to what end. The vampire moves beyond his metaphorical function as embodiment of national syndrome to deliver his own judgement, loitering menacingly in the bloodlines of his human antagonists, and exceeding their combined expertise. In their efforts to annihilate the vampire, the consortium invents a medical syndrome that keeps the borders between vampire and human porous and indeterminate. *Dracula* is not just

an allegory for a late nineteenth-century fixation on national degeneration as a result of colonial misadventure; it also challenges the reproduction of the nation as a public that should (or can) be kept healthy.

What is the epidemiological plot, aside from a plot which foregrounds the management of some mass syndrome? First, the epidemiological plot does not figure progress as transformation, but as cure. It is generated out of the stabilisation of binaries (illness and good health, contaminant and remedy, alienation and integration), and privileges an equilibrium model of social change. Second, the epidemiological plot relies on a consortium to evaluate, measure and ensure this equilibrium. Third, the epidemiological plot cultivates its reader as a sociological worker, training this reader-worker to believe in both the necessity and the possibility of a cure, and to participate in the labour of assessing the threat. Stoker's novel registers a transformation of narrative-making at a particularly fragile juncture of British imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century, where practices of policing, state-funded mapping and medical intervention fortified national borders and cultivated consensus around national security.

Vampirism, like COVID-19, is infection, illness and physical type, crossing social metaphor, physiological symptom and raciology. The novel's plot follows an international consortium deciphering and eventually defeating a life-obliterating force, the eponymous vampire, a premodern Transylvanian monster with an unspecified but nonetheless lethal and enduring grudge against Anglophone modernity (Arata, 1990). The narrative is motivated by its characters' fears of miscegenation, contamination and national decline, adjacent anxieties which the genre permits the narrative to register as one and the same problem: the vampire. Horror's dramatic axis is composed of the shadow worlds that emerge alongside familiar and often domesticated ones, that may or may not be relied upon to protect their inhabitants. In *Dracula*, this protection relies on a model of community that asserts the domestic veto power of the nation and its parochial processes of decision-making with regard to who does and does not count as part of its extensions of temporary or permanent citizenship. The group that works to piece together information about the vampire is composed of a solicitor and his wife – Jonathan and Mina Harker – a psychiatrist, John Seward, an aristocrat, Arthur Holmwood, a rich American businessman, Quincey Morris, and a Dutch polymath, Abraham Van Helsing. This consortium model initially centres England as a vulnerable and breached space in need of protection, where America and Holland, rising and fallen empires respectively, step in to help on the mission. This consortium is reliant on imperial collaboration and foreign expertise, the latter in the form of labour that can be incorporated and made useful to securing national borders. As the plot goes on, the consortium participates in criminal activities to track down the vampire, most notably breaking into his house; these uses of emergency powers outside the law are justified in the quest to eradicate the threat.

Recapitulation influenced theories of criminal pathology. *Dracula*'s epidemiological plot pitches an eighteenth-century Romantic, aristocratic solo genius against a nineteenth-century bourgeois research consortium (the Count is an excellent letter writer, while Van Helsing records himself on his phonograph). Gould notices that the amateur vampire hunters Jonathan and Mina Harker describe Count Dracula, indirectly and directly, as “‘of criminal type’”, his features corresponding to Cesare Lombroso's description of criminal phrenology, for whom criminals are ‘evolutionary throwbacks in

our midst' (Gould, 1981/1996, p. 153): aquiline nose, big and bushy eyebrows, and pale and pointed ears, an aberration on the border of a species that has already left him behind. The Harkers' mutual consensus on Count Dracula's atavism – stemming in part from his racialisation as Eastern European – is legible to their colleagues because it is positioned in a broader historical-evolutionary shift from a less advanced stage of human development to a more advanced one.

The consortium rehabilitates national values by distributing a parochial form of justice, managing disparate and muddled observations through a pooling together of medical theories, past and present. As Martin Willis notes, these include a combination of folklore, contagionism, miasmatism, sanitary science and germ theory. In 1890s Britain, Willis argues, the intertwining of miasmatism and germ theory in particular 'achieved an ongoing connection of disease to immorality that had always been present in sanitary science' (2007, p. 314). This intertwining of theories for the sake of finding a treatment enables the consortium both to secure the boundaries of national belonging and to define the parameters of moral conduct. This anticipates vampirism becoming a term 'for sexual predation, or the calculating, carefully targeted exploitation of sex appeal', as David Trotter notes (2020, p. 42). The effort to correct this viral exploitation is played out most dramatically through the group killing of the contaminated, promiscuous Lucy Westenra, the consortium's primary test subject.

The novel's form is an extended performance of sociological consensus. The narrative is composed of correspondence between members of the group, their journal entries, phonograph transcriptions, relevant newspaper cuttings and invoices, compiled by an anonymous editor. This editor admits their power of curation over the organisation of the narrative immediately, while resigning any interpretative or descriptive intervention. As Godfrey Frank Singer notes in his study of the epistolary novel, this was also Samuel Richardson's technique in *Pamela* (1740), where the author 'pretends to be but the arranger of existing material that has fallen into his hands' (1933, p. 170). Stoker demonstrates his own act of literary recapitulation, resurrecting the realism of the epistolary novel in an unreal form, as if to say that this denial of editorial investment is not to be trusted, if only by dint of this generic mutation from realism to realist horror.

Before Jonathan Harker's first journal entry, 'leaving the West and entering the East' (Stoker, 1897/2003, p. 7), a short, untitled paratext sits across from the first chapter:

How these papers have been placed in sequence will be made manifest in the reading of them. All needless matters have been eliminated, so that a history almost at variance with the possibilities of later-day belief may stand forth as simple fact. There is throughout no statement of past things wherein memory may err, for all the records chosen are exactly contemporary, given from the standpoints and within the range of knowledge of those who made them. (D, 6)

This disclaimer creates another character: the reader as sociological worker, recruited as an extension of this research consortium. The note levels an immediate expectation of trust between reader and editor, where the work of the reader is to assess these records, rather than to interpret them. 'Made manifest' implies a latent direction of events, as if this sequence were both self-explanatory and inevitable. The circumlocution of the first sentence is thrown into relief by the admission that there is information external to this

narrative that has been disregarded, and which has not made it into the selection that composes what follows. This editing, the 'eliminat[ion]' of 'needless matters', is justified in the name of history. This organisation of documentation into a particular sequence, it is to be assumed, has been necessary to give the text credibility. 'Later-day belief' here reads as a euphemism for scientism, the 'simple fact' that comes after superstition. The note ends by repeating its assumption of readerly trust.

Dracula's opening paratext – the declaration of an editor's disinterested organisation and the curious handing over of the power of assessment to the reader – is a closed circuit: the arrangement of these papers will make sense because the reader will make them make sense. The paratext cannot guarantee that it will be read; left to its own devices, there is the danger that it will become stuck in time, an unanswered call, dependent on an external source for authentication. That said, its trustworthiness is guaranteed by the economy of its style. This constructs the narrative as a bibliographic resource, dividing the labour of progressive historicism between the curation of the editor, the accounts of the characters, and the reader's labour of assessment. The paratext requires the reader only to weigh up the evidence to be presented (to assess), rather than to intervene in its construction as fact (to interpret), positioned as part of the jury, not as judge.

Stoker's use of the epistolary parodies realism's preoccupation with cultivating a reader complicit in establishing fiction as 'simple fact', one who will conform to the text's idiosyncratic rendering of narrative time as historical time. The various contradictions and loose ends of the documents gathered together indicate the fragility of scientific method in the ongoing trialling of hypotheses about the vampire, and in managing the threat he poses. The mutation of realism to horror forces the management of contagion into the realm of improbable and unverified folklore. In lieu of scientific rigour, the subject of the text moves from the vampire to the process of mitigating vampirism. Vampirism, in turn, does not function as a simple metaphor for national borders, but is produced as a scientific object of investigation through the shared desire of the characters for a conclusion based on established fact. What is privileged is not the supposed subject of investigation, but the development of a research group invested in the cause of progress: they are doing what they are doing and working together because it will help history move forward. The consortium configures modes of conduct formed by progressive historicism: the determination of a historical subject, knowledge exchange, gathering a consensus of accounts, and compiling these accounts into a complete text. What Singer describes as *Dracula's* 'sense of completeness' is an orchestrated ruse that establishes a consensus around conduct by the various negotiations made between its characters as well as the contract that the reader is explicitly required to enter into when beginning the text: to take responsibility for understanding why the sequence of documentation appears as it does, an executive lure held out in lieu of a cure.

The epidemiological plot prefigures progress as the ongoing, ameliorative process of rehabilitating the emergent subject of progressive historicism out of past forms of social organisation: the professional bourgeoisie. *Dracula's* sense of historical process is organised around the elimination of 'needless matters' and the formation of consensus around this elimination. This consensus emerges through the need to account for why certain actions are taken to mitigate particular forms of harm, for the sake of reaching a new stage in history. The epidemiological plot relies on a selective mechanism as the basis of

national progress: history as the eradication of unwanted or dysgenic material. Stoker uses the novel's composition as its own technology of selection, a site for the preservation of traits, the rehabilitation of 'good' cultural forms, and the elimination of bad ones. It becomes a technology of standardisation. Vampirism is produced as an epidemiological deviation from a standard value of good health, and this deviation is what makes its story of national health both possible and imaginable. *Dracula's* unsettling of sociological realism shows the orchestration of these interests and their anticipated attachments, tied to a vision of progress organised around rehabilitating the national body politic through the invention of a new modern subject: the sociological worker in a consortium.

The Lonely Letters and ecstatic congregation

In the consensus to act as detectives of everyday life, and to share the labour of emergency governance, *Dracula's* civil society exists in a state of paranoia. I have argued that the epidemiological plot registers dependency on the cure as the just end to an unjust present while permitting emergency forms of crisis management, and cultivates the reader as a sociological worker in the labour of assessing, rather than interpreting, evidence. I return now to some of the questions that populate this article: what sense of the possible can political community organise around after progress? If to hope for a cure is to fall for the promise of justice not only within existing structures of law, but also national figurations of historical time, then when can a cure take place, and in what form? In Michael Denning's recent and emphatic reading of Antonio Gramsci's interest in the orchestra, a multiplicity is 'united through the friction of individuals' through the 'horrible cacophony' of establishing consensus (2021, p. 43). This means learning the technicality of instrument (how I play) alongside how to negotiate with others (how we play). It imagines conduct as the working-out of social permission through the everyday dissonance of getting it wrong. It moves from a consensus of shared code to a consensus of shared arrangement, and retrieves the social power of adjudication from the agreement that national legislation should constitute the commons.

Ashon Crawley gets to this in *The Lonely Letters*, asking if it is possible to share ecstatic moments without committing to the possessiveness of identity, and whether this might engender forms of cure without an end, 'like intimacies that happen even if they are disclaimed and renounced', as he writes elsewhere (2020b). This, after he has loosed himself from religious commitment, a lapsed member of the Pentecostal church, documenting his ongoing connection with spiritual aesthetics through memory and rehearsal. *The Lonely Letters* falls somewhere between theory, memoir and letter, a quasi-fictional epistolary sequence punctuated by the sound effects of routine breaks and bar ends. These are arranged in a secular generation of ecstatic congregation, a form of solidarity repeated throughout the letters in temporary acts of judgement, where solidarity is a wager on shared relevance, 'an event of the coming to matter of things', situated and, in the broadest sense, local (Savransky, 2016, p. 25).

Like *Dracula*, Crawley's text begins with a note to the reader that declares an informal memorandum of understanding. It starts in the autobiographical mundane – sitting in a corner desk in Emory University's Woodruff Library, taking up a reading suggestion

from an unnamed friend. Through the echo of the scene – a scholar, a library, a desk, a table, a friend – a tendril of intimacy reaches out that at once encloses and expands the possibility of relating to the text: the bracketing of the year into academic timekeeping ('the summer of 2006, or maybe the early fall semester') and the unlikelihood of the reader sharing this privileged site of scholarship ('I was in a master's program') are met by an act of drawing in. That is, it does not deny the specificity of composition nor attempt to generalise for the sake of cultivating a reader, but moves through it on the off chance that something might resonate.

The practice of drawing out and being drawn in that follows from this preface starts with a suspended connection: someone seeing 'something familiar in me that he'd not ever named' (LL, 16), and the other's hesitation to act on it. Initially, this missed opportunity is coded through queer desire. The letters begin with this moment of hesitation and go on to explore other forms of unnamed recognition that forge temporary community, and this community emerges through acts of holding off or raising up, a reflex or rejection that facilitates a form of participation drawn out across the space of paragraphs or several letters, and an exchange that creates its own environment of reciprocation. The letters are a one-sided conversation that states 'the desire for friendship as a way of life' as its opening gambit (LL, 11). They are dispatched at irregular intervals ('It's been some time'), and punctuated by self-conscious asides ('but I'm rambling'): the acknowledgement of missing and being missed, while the space of the letter becomes a place to practise thinking across temporalities of diversion and distraction.

The letters move between the apophatic and the hyperbolic: from saying the saying of nothing, to saying something so emphatically that its meaning has to shift and split. Instead of asking the reader to assemble these modulations into coherence, the author's insistent address to the absent, code-named interlocutor draws the reader into the middle of a conversation for which they only have half the information they need to make sense of it. The difference between the lack of information here and *Dracula's* paratextual admission of elimination is that this absence offers a space in the text where the reader can arrange an imaginary response. They are offered the power to play – to skip past and circle back, to move around and out of the text – rather than forced to make sense of its compilation:

Dear Moth,

I hear you, I do. I understand that you think I'm not necessarily being fair to mystics but that's not the case at all. (LL, 24)

Dear Moth,

What I'm saying is we breathe, and in the fact of our breathing, we experience – not optimism per se but – the plural event of possibility as beyond exhaustion. We keep going. (27)

Dear Moth,

You said it was beautiful, that you believed me, but didn't say much else. (137)

Dear Moth,

Yes, sorry for forgetting to respond to that part of your message but yes, I really dug what Wynter said about Aretha too. (161)

Dear Moth,

What I thought I needed to say was this: (168)

The letters begin with the acknowledgement of what has come before, and they stay with it. This staying with, or keeping on, allows the writer to demonstrate their understanding of the absent letters that sit between the gaps between theirs, clarifying something that was said, questioning why something more has not been said, apologising for forgetting to respond properly. They indicate sometimes writing at speed, prepositions and pronouns left out, or slowing down to make space for not hearing back. These changing speeds generate a sense of a presence on the other side who wants to be heard and read, and to hear and read.

This shared desire is disturbed by the possibility of not being able to demonstrate and reciprocate through the medium of letter writing, because there is always a chance that someone will lose concentration or put off replying because something else comes up, or that details will be lost or misplaced during the process of composition. This mode of address demonstrates the effort of working out a way of relating, generating enough material to elicit a response, acknowledging the strategy, pulling back and holding off, then going towards again. The form of the letter permits the circularity of relation to be registered as a modulation rather than repetition, a tone moving between registers, alteration that does not anticipate transformation on either side. *The Lonely Letters* keeps going without seeking a way into the routes of progressive historicism. To return to Denning and Gramsci, it circumvents the fanaticism of a technical relationship between conductor and orchestra by refusing that this relation should determine its horizon of justice.

This is judgement without the promise of progress, in forms motivated by asynchronous movement. Crawley's account of Blackpentecostalism is that it is 'an aesthetic practice that was sent and is about being sent' (2016, p. 5). There is an analogy here between the body and writing – I was *here* and now I am *there* and still *here*. The congregation emerges through this modulation, out of considering the simultaneous defamiliarisation and coming-towards that emerges out of letter-writing, which means that 'I'm writing to you but also, mostly and most fundamentally, writing to me':

We begin songs in one key, kinda like how we dance and shout, trying to withhold energy until the vamp, the drive. And then finally, we let them have it, we exert all that we have within us. Modulation occurs in some songs, making audible migration and movement and motion, modulation as that sonorous refusal of stillness and being stilled (though of course, being stilled is merely another 'movement'). And the audience sits until they can't sit anymore, the modulations moving them so much, so the audience stands and is moved and amazed and surprised and enraptured by the heights achieved that were not initially imagined. (LL, 165)

This scene does not go anywhere. It is the ‘changing, moving – the transitioning – from one tonal center to another’ (LL, 165). This transitioning is facilitated by the practice of judging where best to move, but not requiring this ‘being affected’ to deliver justice. The movement between these tonal centres creates a particular rhythm with history, where past forms are modulated rather than exceeded, outdone or surpassed. The subject is dispersed into the ‘sonic zones’ of the practice space, ‘every voice a bit of a fugitive, on its run away from regulative function and form’ (LL, 166).

Is this cure or cult? Does this reader miss the comparative *knowingness* of sociological labour and the security of a team, faced instead with the uneasiness, even embarrassment, of the space in the text left empty for a preacher to fill? Or, to follow Clive Nwonka, when reduced to a banal kind of relatability, does a possible relation with this empty space risk leaving a space open for ‘the neoliberal aestheticisation of black death’ (2020, p. 13)? I want to stay with the possibility of modulation as a cure without plot, returning to the figure of judgement with which this article began. Writing on Amiri Baraka, Dhanveer Singh Brar rejects Simone White’s appellation of him as a ‘poet-legislator’ in the latter’s *Dear Angel of Death* (2018). He writes, ‘I would prefer to think about him as an adjudicator, issuing fiery wild judgements under constant revision’ (2021a, p. 6). This distinction is important, because ‘judgements can always be contested’:

The congregation can always question the judgement, or actually the congregation isn’t necessary for the judgement to function. There’s a counter-play, there’s a folding back and forth. In a sense, you can think about the preacher not as leading a flock, but the preacher as an emanation of the collective desire of the flock. (Brar, 2021b).

In *The Lonely Letters*, Crawley creates a space for an absent judge-preacher, removing the requirement to be cultivated into the desire of a particular plot. The relation is reversed. These practice spaces are their own kind of cure, allowing the temporary relief of symptoms, and produce an image of a world outside the syndrome. Where *Dracula*’s plot leads the reader through historical tunnel vision to produce a world in which living without the threat of vampirism is no longer thinkable, *The Lonely Letters* does not resolve itself by conceding to this progressive narrowing towards justice. This matters because becoming attached to the plot of justice, to the possibility of curing contagion in some projected future while implementing emergency measures to manage it in the present, means being routed back to the national as a space of recapitulation. This means that any possibility of general justice is already compromised. Crawley’s ecstatic congregation is entangled in the time of judgement in spaces of half-empty correspondence, arranging ordinary time so that new forms of social permission can be experienced collectively, after the constraints of progressive historicism.

Conclusion

I started this article with international demonstrations of playing dead, which declare that overlapping contemporary crises exceed the boundaries of national management. Their reverberations have challenged forms of emergency governance that seek to recapitulate state interests. I have argued that the epidemiological plot is a way of narrating the

national as a body politic in need of rehabilitation. This plot enables the continued emergence of historical-evolutionary subjects who might best undertake this labour of rehabilitation. In the epidemiological plot of COVID-19 where neoimperial nations emerge triumphant in the race to produce a vaccine, the problem is not the production of the vaccine, but that vaccination manages the crisis. *Dracula's* exhaustion of its compliant reader through the proliferation of data offers an analogy for a normative and mainstream socio-scientific literacy that serves, increasingly, as a condition for full participation in public life. Against this, I considered Crawley's invitation to arrange cures without plots, where the time of justice is suspended for the time of judgement, in a move from legislation to adjudication. This troubles the horizon of a normative cure for a social reality so deeply entangled in the infrastructure of colonial-capitalism. It displaces a sense of shared life 'after' the syndrome, configuring community in the here-and-now.

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