

# Blackness as Infectious: Racialized Plagues and Anti-Plagues in Anglo-American Works of Science Fiction

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## Abstract

With the outbreak of Covid-19, the virus has made increasingly visible a second pandemic spreading worldwide—that of racial discrimination—leading to higher mortality rates among people of color and unequal access to healthcare on racial grounds. In such times that many critics have called science fictional, the genre of science fiction can contribute to shedding light on the long-existing relation between fears of contagious diseases and notions of race and racism that predates Covid. Within numerous sf works and especially within what Priscilla Wald has called “outbreak narratives,” a common and problematic narrative trope establishes a connection between infectious diseases and fears of racial contamination, whereby black people are perceived as the main culprits of contagion. Therefore, the paper aims, on the one hand, to examine how this trope has been employed in numerous anglophone science fictional films and novels, and, on the other, to consider how Ishmael Reed’s Afrofuturist *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) manages to contrast this narrative by turning it on its head. In the novel, the infectious Jes Grew is seen not as a plague, but rather as an anti-plague, one that represents a tool of resistance and affirmation for African Americans against the attempts of a white supremacist group to marginalize African American communities and to stop the spreading of the life-affirming virus. Jes Grew, then, stresses the fundamental role and power of collective movements to spread “virally” in order to fight for social and racial justice.

## Keywords

Afrofuturism; Contagion; Ishmael Reed; Outbreak Narrative; Racial Justice; Science Fiction.

The outbreak of Covid-19 has made increasingly visible a second, connected pandemic of racial discrimination, with consequent higher mortality rates among people of color and unequal access to healthcare on racial grounds. In this context, pervasive phenomena of xenophobia and hate crimes could be witnessed all around the world and especially in the US, intensifying preexisting prejudices and stigmas against disadvantaged groups. These phenomena, engendered and enabled by systemic racism, have manifested themselves to the detriment of multiple marginalized communities, among them people of Latinx, African, and especially Asian descent. While the racialization of infectious diseases affects multiple social groups, this paper aims to shed light on phenomena of racism in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on the analysis of prior recurrent ways of depicting black people in association with discourses on contagion that have firmly established themselves in the American imagination, with the acknowledgement, however, that many of the tropes that connect black communities to epidemics are germane to other ethnic and racial minorities as well. In fact, Covid-19 has been proven to disproportionately affect African American communities in the United States. According to Yang Li et al., African Americans are perceived as a high-risk group in the US, which engenders a tendency to perceive them as potential carriers and spreaders of viruses (28), thus reinforcing anti-black bias. This is clearly exemplified by the high number of racially motivated murders of multiple African Americans as a result of police brutality during the pandemic. The concomitance of intensified anti-black violence and Covid-19 appears as “indicative of a deeply entrenched relation to Blackness as a social contagion” (Douglass 257). At the same time, however, this manifestation of systemic violence has triggered in response numerous protests both on the streets and on social media and has led to the heightened resonance of the Black Lives Matter movement’s advocacy for greater inclusivity, representation, and attention to the plight of marginalized black communities.

In this light, the paper aims to focus specifically on the relation between race, racism, and contagious diseases in representations of people of African descent in science fictional novels, stories, and film in order to highlight the recurrent associations between black people and infectiousness that predate and illuminate racist phenomena that have taken place during the Covid pandemic. To this end, the paper is divided into two sections. In the first one, I contextualize the trope that associates blackness with contagion within the framework of what Priscilla Wald defines as “outbreak narratives,” providing examples of how this trope is articulated in various works of science fiction, including Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), alien invasion narratives, and zombie narratives mingling horror and science fictional conventions. At the same time, while such representations often reveal the privileged white position of many science fictional authors and directors, as well as the frequent practices of discrimination against the racial

other, many authors, especially those belonging to marginalized social groups, have employed the genre to reveal its history of racism and counter it. For this reason, the second section of the paper examines how Ishmael Reed's Afrofuturist work *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) constitutes an example of works that, similarly to the Black Lives Matter movement's response to anti-black violence, speak back to the racialization of epidemiological fears, managing to subvert the negative connections traced between contagiousness and blackness.

### **Indeictious Blackness in Science Fictional Outbreak Narratives**

The genre of science fiction appears as an especially useful vehicle through which to shed light on the relation between fears of contagious diseases and racial anxieties associated with black people that has been made more visible by the Covid pandemic. In fact, science fiction has a long history of reflecting upon fears of contamination in response to various epidemics through the ages. Furthermore, the genre has employed epidemiological threats as metaphors for multiple types of anxieties both in movies such as, for example, Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011) and Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* (1995), and in novels such as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), George Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949), Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014). Science fiction also provides a ripe terrain for analyzing how traditional narrative patterns associated with fears of contagion have conditioned cultural perspectives and practices through the years. In particular, the genre can contribute to thinking through what critics have been increasingly calling science fictional times. In this context, the pandemic can be considered as a science fictional "novum," that is a phenomenon or relationship that departs and differs from the author's and the reader's reality (Suvin 64), introducing thus a novelty that leads to social, cultural, and economic transformations at various levels. For instance, Lance Morrow suggests that with a plague mentality the boundaries between real life and science fiction get blurred: "People begin acting like characters in the first reel of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. They peer intently at one another as if to detect the telltale change, the secret lesion, the sign that someone has crossed over, is not himself anymore, but one of them, alien and lethal" (92).

In fact, just as epidemics require humans to confront the otherness of viruses (Thomas 143), science fiction has also extensively dealt with a separate and yet surprisingly related kind of otherness. Despite an apparent lack of black representation in early science fiction, racial issues and blackness are often implicitly present as a narrative subtext through either racial coding or allegories (Nama 2). In particular, Ed Guerrero has noticed the representation of race, otherness, and nonwhiteness to be particularly abundant in fantasy, sci-fi, and

horror genres, a fact that he explains by pointing to, among other factors, the dependence of science fiction on notions of difference and otherness in the form of monsters and aliens to move the plot forward (56–57, qtd. in Nama 3). The connection between fears of contagious diseases and representations of blackness in the science fictional genre is often expressed through the “outbreak narrative,” which Priscilla Wald has defined as “an evolving story of disease emergence” (2) appearing in diverse media—from journalistic accounts and epidemiological discourse to science fictional novels and movies. The outbreak narrative “follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks through which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment” (Wald 2), stressing at once the necessity and danger of human contact and exchange. Outbreak narratives, Wald suggests, “promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors, and lifestyles, and they change economies” (3). In fact, in these narratives the fear of viruses is most often tied to that of the alien, the stranger, the other characterized in racial terms. As Donna Haraway has noted, this dynamic whereby the “colored” body of the racial other is conceived as the source of infections, pollution, and decadent emanations was already in place in colonizing contexts (223). Such mentality has endured throughout the years and persists still today as the recent Covid-19 pandemic has made more visible, producing an “us vs. them” kind of rhetoric. In this context, marginalized groups are considered infectious due to their presumed primitive conditions, uncleanliness, and amoral practices. However, as Wald remarks, this kind of association obfuscates issues connected to poverty, displacing them onto the danger of what are perceived as primitive practices (8). Thus, it contributes to justifying the stigmatization of multiple groups—from Jewish, Latinx, Asian, and African people to immigrants from various parts of the world—and to translating social differences into dangerously biological ones.

In this context, anxieties tied to contagion have intensified with the emergence of discourses on globalization. In fact, the increased exchange, commerce, and contact between different areas of the world have shrunk distances and have made geopolitical borders blurrier and more porous. As Dahlia Schweitzer suggests, while “the traditional understanding of contagion hinges on the dangers of close contact, underscoring a literal threat to bodily boundaries, [...] contagion can also be seen as a metaphoric threat for larger, national boundaries” (43). Not only are contagious diseases a threat to individual bodies, but they also threaten the body politic of Western nations. This perceived threat, then, invites biopolitical intervention on the part of governments to regulate and control both social behavior and borders, often with anti-immigrant policies, in order to fight against potential foreign microbial and racial threats of contamination. The concern invested in monitoring and protecting national borders is especially

evident in early films promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO). As Kirsten Ostherr suggests, the main preoccupation manifested in these films lies with “the boundaries of visibility” (1-2). The preoccupation about invisible viruses spreading among the population, she argues, is tied to other forms of invisibility linked with aspects of racial and gender identity. In order to track and control how both invisible forms of otherness spread across borders, they need to be made concrete and visible. The main strategy employed within the movies promoted by the WHO consists in associating movements across geopolitical borders with the viral breach of bodily boundaries, connecting invisible contagion with external physical, national, and ethnic markers signifying otherness. Emphasis is placed in such movies on how the mobility of people and viruses is facilitated by the development of modern technologies, which paradoxically are also presented as a potential solution to epidemiological threats. In particular, films such as *The Eternal Fight* (1948) promote a narrative suggesting that contagion spreads from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, conceived as sources of multiple diseases, to Western Europe and the United States, presented as vulnerable to foreign infections (Ostherr 19). This kind of narrative thus reinforces racist assumptions that associate marginalized people of the Global South with disease and infection without acknowledging the power dynamics that engender social and economic inequalities in those regions of the world.

Considering specifically how racialized contagion narratives in science fictional novels and films have represented black people, it is possible to find numerous examples of what can be labeled as a “blackness as infectious” trope (Lowe 96). Indeed, as Isiah Lavender III suggests, contagion as a metaphor responding to racial anxiety is often construed and discussed in terms of black/white relationships, while at the same time representing a “diversity of subjective black positions, experiences, and identities that have been politically, historically, socially, and culturally differentiated” (156). This kind of trope appears already in place in the eighteenth century, when blackness was often considered a disease.<sup>1</sup> It further developed throughout the nineteenth century in pseudoscientific racial discourses and can be found at the very foundations of the science fictional genre in Mary Shelley’s *Last Man* (1826). Her work, considered to be one of the first examples of science fictional novels, depicts a global pandemic decimating the human population. Within the apocalyptic dimension of the novel, the spread of the plague seems to reflect heavily racialized power dynamics. In fact, one of the main characters, Lionel Verney, contracts the illness from a black man, who is viewed as a threatening spreader of the disease. Shelley depicts the encounter between Verney and the black infected victim by describing the character’s reaction as one of horror mixed with impatience, which could ambiguously refer both to the danger of potential infection and to the physical contact with a racialized other:

I threw open the door of the first room that presented itself. It was quite dark; but, as I step a pernicious scent assailed my senses, producing sickening qualms which made their way to my very heart, while I felt my leg clasped, and a groan repeated by the person that held me. I lowered my lamp and saw a negro half clad, writhing under the agony of disease, while he held me with a convulsive grasp. With mixed horror and impatience I strove to disengage myself, and fell on the sufferer, he wound his naked festering arms round me, his face was close to mine and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals. For a moment I was overcome, my head was bowed by aching nausea, till, reflection returning, I sprang up, threw the wretch from me, and darting up the staircase entered the chamber usually inhabited by my family. (Shelley 265)

The black man appears here as an embodiment of the plague itself. The image of the infectious man and Verney's response to him seemingly reinforce racial ideologies and anxieties of the nineteenth-century colonial British context, especially considering how this is the only moment where a black presence is introduced within the plot. And yet, despite his fleeting presence in the novel, as Young-Ok An has noted, the infected man proves to be central to the plot, propelling it forward in the role of the "agent who brings the plague to the forefront" (596).

Fears of contagion are also often represented in science fiction through narratives about alien invasions. These types of stories appear as especially suitable metaphors for virus outbreaks considering how epidemiological discourses have often militarized the spread of diseases through bodies, presenting them as invasions on the part of invisible enemies breaching and penetrating national borders. Indeed, Laura Diehl argues that "[a]s the concept of a microbial parasite was extended to a race parasite, the language of bacteriology—bad blood, infection, invasion—converged with the language of national defense—border patrols, resistance, immunity" (85). While alien invasion narratives have been often read as bearing various allegorical meanings in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and political leanings (Wald 160), explorations of race in particular are often displaced onto racially coded aliens threatening to contaminate and corrupt vulnerable (white) human beings by insinuating themselves among them and gradually assimilating them, reflecting a fear of the crumbling of distinct identities and of racial contamination.<sup>2</sup>

This reading can be applied to multiple science fictional stories, novels, and movies. For instance, in Jake Finney's *Body Snatchers*, serialized in 1954 and adapted into multiple movies, the pod people seemingly function like viruses taking over control of human bodies. The same dynamic appears in John W. Campbell Jr.'s novella "Who Goes There" (1938), which has also inspired movie adaptations among which, most notoriously, *The Thing* by John Carpenter (1982). Both the movie and the novella appear to display a sense of anxiety concerning racial purity, portraying the alien form as a

contagious virus that attempts to survive by attaching itself to humans. Carpenter's movie, picking up on the novella's underlying racism, stresses this aspect even further by ending the film with the suggestion that 'the thing' inhabits the body of a black scientist passing as a human, thus presenting him as a dangerous, impure other, while also echoing white fears of black people passing as white. As Lavender suggests, Carpenter effectively represents the kind of "paranoid vision anchored by Campbell's novella where passing, blood contamination, and racial purity are convincingly twined together through contagion as a race metaphor" (138). In this context, *Outbreak* (1995), directed by Wolfgang Petersen, is another pandemic movie in the sci-fi realm that, while not presenting aliens as sources of disease, similarly associates the virus with what is characterized as a 'primitive' African village in Zaire with poor hygienic conditions. From Zaire, the virus spreads all the way to the US threatening the 'civilized' Western world. The film is based on Richard Preston's nonfiction work *The Hot Zone* (1994), which provides a narrative for the outbreak of Ebola from Africa to other areas of the world, presenting the continent as the vector of emerging infections (Wald 34). Indeed, as Dahlia Schweitzer suggests, "Ebola—arising from the depths of Africa to threaten the world—has become the perfect disease metaphor, complete with its not-so-latent racism" (26).

Just as in the case of Ebola, AIDS has also been frequently associated with black people, and specifically with Haitian communities, which have a long history of having epidemiological theories directed against them. The "blackness as infectious" trope takes a particular shape in the context of Caribbean history as it is generally found in association with practices tied to the African diasporic religion of Voodoo and with zombie narratives, which have played a large role in Haitian politics both in the context of the country's independence and in response to US external pressures. In fact, while zombies have been often taken to embody conformism and dehumanization in connection with the capitalist economy (Shaviro 282), the undead creatures originally tied to Haitian Voodoo beliefs also seem to respond to anxieties of contagion and infection. This appears especially true considering how the zombie's liminal status as at once dead and undead resembles and echoes that of viruses, which have also been conceived as entities that blur the lines between life and nonlife (Laurence 16). Furthermore, zombies are also tightly connected to fears of specifically racial contamination. As Gerry Canavan suggests, behind the zombie imaginary lies the "construction of a racial binary in which the (white) citizen-subject is opposed against nonwhite life, bare life, zombie life—that anti-life which is always inimically and hopelessly Other, which must always be kept quarantined, if not actively eradicated and destroyed" (433). In fact, both zombies and Voodoo have been associated

with the political dynamics of Haiti and with the fear that black political empowerment might prove to be infectious. Such fear has appeared repeatedly in the Haitian context in connection to Voodoo and epidemiological fears. In particular, Barbara Browning argues that the eighteenth century had already witnessed fears about maroons poisoning plantation food and water supplies by contaminating them with a Voodoo powder (98). This narrative made a reappearance in the late twentieth century in relation to the AIDS outbreak, which has been often posited to have spread from Haiti through Voodoo medical practices (Schweitzer 158). Browning (99) argues that such notion has been particularly popularized by Wade Davis in *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985), which hypothesizes the recipes necessary within Voodoo practices for turning someone into a zombie and whose film adaptation translated the author's insights into racialized zombies infecting unwilling victims. Even an article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, written by William R. Greenfield and titled "Night of the Living Dead," speculated that HIV might be spread through Voodoo rituals employing human blood (Luckhurst 181).

Fears associated with Voodoo practices have been dramatized in multiple zombie movies. Both *Black Moon* (1934) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), for instance, reflect anxieties of white women being corrupted and infected by dark Voodoo practices. Robin R. Means Coleman argues that both movies reveal fears of white people taking on "black" traits specifically through infection rather than through imitation (Means Coleman 55). These kinds of zombie narratives gradually evolved into the current form of mass zombie outbreaks mingling horror conventions with science fictional ones. In fact, Schweitzer argues that "the postapocalyptic outbreak narrative fuses the science fiction element of plausibility with the horrors of a world gone mad, combining the outbreak narrative's proclivity for viral infection with our fetish for postapocalyptic visions" (156). Vivian Sobchack has also addressed the uneasy blurred distinction between horror and science fiction in certain hybrid films that come to locate themselves in a "no-man's-land" (27), and among which Canavan also includes zombie movies (433). Even outside the Haitian context, narratives about zombies, typically resulting from infection rather than from deliberate creation, often reflect racial fears. For instance, in Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) England is teeming with people who have turned into zombies due to the outbreak of a lab-created virus. In one specific scene of the movie, one of the main characters is shown a zombified black man who has been chained so as to see the full effect of the virus. Once freed, the black zombie infects his captors with his contaminated blood, reinforcing the association between POCs and the spreading of infection.



### Turning the Trope on Its Head: Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*

Despite the frequency of the “blackness as infectious” trope, numerous are the authors who have employed science fictional elements to contrast this narrative and who have addressed it in a critical manner. Among them, African American author Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* is an Afrofuturist work that manages to subvert and turn the racist discourse of contamination on its head. In fact, Jes Grew, a recursive, “psychic epidemic” (MJ 5) starting in the US and spreading across the world, is presented not as a plague, but rather as an “anti-plague” (MJ 6) that enlivens rather than kills the body. Furthermore, Jes Grew represents a symbolical tool of resistance and affirmation for African Americans. Indeed, the virus appears to constitute a vehicle through which to spread black culture. Perceiving the anti-plague as a threat to the order of society and potentially as the “end of Civilization as We Know It” (MJ 5), a white supremacists group called the Wallflower Order desperately attempts to stop the life-affirming, dance-inducing, infectious virus in order to marginalize African American communities.

Jes Grew's roots are to be found in African culture, specifically ancient Egyptian rituals, arriving in the Americas with the first slaves. The virus is especially linked to African American traditions of music, dancing, and artistic expression, through which its main symptoms manifest themselves. In this light, Reed appears to play with the notion of what Browning defines as “infectious rhythms,” which “all spread quickly, transnationally, accompanied by equally ‘contagious’ dances, often characterized as dangerous” (12). At the same time, however, the author subverts this notion by presenting the contagiousness of black culture as energizing, emancipatory, and liberating. In fact, in describing his symptoms, one of the Jes Grew carriers in the novel argues that “he felt like the gut heart and lungs of Africa's interior. [. . .] He said he felt like ‘deserting his master,’ as the Kongo is ‘prone to do.’ He said he felt he could dance on a dime” (MJ 10). This statement stresses how Jes Grew infects people with a desire for freedom, while fomenting movements of cultural revolution.

In this perspective, it is no coincidence that the anti-plague is also tightly connected with Voodoo practices and beliefs derived from Haitian culture, which have particularly influenced the US coastal South, where part of the novel is set. In fact, the Jes Grew outbreak begins in New Orleans, which has been the destination of multiple migration movements from Haiti since the revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, culminating with Haiti's independence in 1804 (Hurston 318). These movements have also led Haitian Voodoo culture to emigrate as well, being changed and adapted to a new context as a consequence of its contact with US southern culture. In fact, the trick defined in the novel as “the Human Seed,” consisting in lying underground for eight days, seems to echo the Haitian Voodoo practice of zombification, comprising a psychomedical practice involving live underground burial (Browning 25). These kinds of Voodoo

practices are defended and embraced by the main protagonist, Papa La Bass, a Neo-Hoodoo houngan—a priest of the Voodoo religion—who attempts to put a stop to the machinations of the Wallflower Order.

Neo-Hoodooism derives from Hoodoo, which Reed defines as what “might be called Vodoun streamlined” (*Shrovetide* 10). Helen Lock suggests that Hoodoo constitutes the version of Voodoo developed in the southern United States, while Neo-Hoodoo is a term coined by Reed consisting in a recovery of Voodoo as translated into the context of literary aesthetics (69). If Voodoo has always been a syncretic religion, mingling Catholicism with aspects of various African religions, it became even more so when it reached US southern shores. Reed further traces the connection between Voodoo and New Orleans culture by suggesting the similarities between the former and the tradition of New Orleans’s Mardi Gras, both of ancient origins, polytheistic, and involving drumming and dancing, ritual masking, and costuming (*Shrovetide* 11). It could be argued that *Jes Grew* itself, closely tied to Haitian religious and cultural beliefs, possesses the same carnivalesque nature that characterizes Mardi Gras. As Bakhtin contends, “[a]ll the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities” (11). Indeed, *Jes Grew*, by moving people to “deserting the master” and defying the hegemonic order, could be said to be endowed with a similar carnivalesque spirit that allows it to overturn established hierarchies and values. Furthermore, just as the carnival is “hostile to all that [is] immortalized and completed” (Bakhtin 10), the cyclical return of *Jes Grew* “has no end and no beginning” (*MJ* 204), representing the persistence of hope and of continual revolutionary energy. In this context, the temporal trajectory of *Jes Grew* defies that of traditional outbreak narratives, which generally end with the definitive containment of the virus. Further, not only does the virus unsettle the hegemonic Western myth of progress that conceives history as teleological and unidirectional, but it also questions the exclusive validity of Western medical science by presenting Papa La Bass’s Voodoo and Neo-Hoodoo knowledge as valid and legitimate. Neo-Hoodooism, conceived by Reed as a literary mode (Schmitz 127), embraces the same features of improvisation, subversion, and spontaneity that characterize both Voodoo and *Jes Grew*.

The connection with Haitian religious practices is reinforced in the novel through one of its subplots, which, taking inspiration from historical events, addresses the US occupation of Haiti between 1915 to 1934. In the novel, the invasion is motivated by a hope of “allaying *Jes Grew* symptoms by attacking their miasmatic source” (*MJ* 64), thus suggesting a tight connection between the Haitian fearfully contagious revolutionary energy and *Jes Grew*. Furthermore, the novel also dramatizes the kind of reception that Haitian culture has often received through sensationalistic journalism:

What was this about doughboy zombies? The tabs were becoming outrageous; as if the scandals of Hollywood weren't enough they were playing up this matter on Haiti. Recently 1 of the reporters had sneaked into a big house chamber and emerged with a picture of a woman undergoing execution—ghastly but fun. The picture showed a zombie Marine surrounded by men in white coats. (MJ 52)

By contrast, Reed attempts to reappropriate and complicate Haiti's representation, stressing how the country resists any attempts to conquer it, becoming a "world-wide symbol for religious and aesthetic freedom" (MJ 64) and political freedom as well. *Mumbo Jumbo* also dramatizes the efforts on the part of the US to silence information about what is called the "Holy War" (MJ 140) against Haiti: "You see this was to be a mystery war and I would imagine that after the Americans withdraw, it will be completely deleted from the American 'History Books'" (MJ 133). In this sense, as Nama suggests, "[f]orgetting' is thus inextricably linked with 'disinfecting'— stamping out memories of black agency and revolution" (96), where Jes Grew works to spread African culture against cultural and historical amnesia, manifesting thus its revolutionary potential.

Furthermore, *Mumbo Jumbo* also highlights notions of corporeality and matter. In this context, "mattering" stands both for the relevance of the message that is delivered by the novel in terms of the significance of visibility, resistance, and resurgence of marginalized African American communities, as well as in terms of the process of making concrete, visible, and embodied the permeability of and interconnectedness among bodies through infection, both literally and metaphorically. Jes Grew can be considered in light of Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, which points toward the porosity of bodies receptive to external matter. Jes Grew matters by making visible and concrete the centrality of African American culture, as well as making visible the symptoms of the invisible, immaterial anti-plague, which spreads through the bodies of both white and black people, crossing both corporeal as well as racial borders. The mattering of Jes Grew then is about interconnectedness, communication, affirmation of bodies and the ideas expressed through those bodies. Most of all, the anti-plague points toward a celebration of the overspilling of boundaries and of the creation of viral networks. In this sense, *Mumbo Jumbo* appropriates the tools of the outbreak narrative, which tracks and makes visible the movement of communicable diseases and their consequences (Wald 39), while reversing its latent racism. Just like Covid-19, Jes Grew exposes the interconnectedness that ties people together, as well as the hierarchical and unjust power dynamics that viruses make more visible. Indeed, while pandemics lead to loss, uncertainty, and anxiety, revealing issues of social and racial inequality, they can also give rise to instances of solidarity, alliance, and cooperation among peoples in response to crises. The word "contagion" itself derives from the Latin *contagio*, meaning to "touch

together.” The term’s etymology thus stresses how viruses reveal the dangers of contact as well as the necessity of coming together and forming shared bonds. In particular, one of its earliest usages, which appears still relevant when considering the spread of *Jes Grew*, is connected to the circulation of ideas and attitudes in terms of revolutionary ideas considered contagious and dangerous. As Wald argues, “[t]he circulation of disease and the circulation of ideas were material and experiential, even if not visible. Both displayed the power and danger of bodies in contact and demonstrated the simultaneous fragility and tenacity of social bonds” (12-13).

*Jes Grew* is spread in the novel through radio networks. Its diffusion through technological devices highlights the relevance of trespassing and transgressing boundaries through technological communication on the part of African Americans in order to fight off the efforts of the Wallflower Order to, in turn, use technology to halt *Jes Grew*. In fact, Hinckle Von Vampton, a member of the Wallflower Order, devises a plan to eradicate the epidemic involving an imaginary technology called the “Talking Android,” which is supposed to infiltrate the black community and disrupt it from within, functioning as an “antibiotic”:

The 2nd Stage of the plan is to groom a Talking Android who will work within the Negro, who seems to be its classical host; to drive it out, categorize it analyze it expel it slay it, blot *Jes Grew*. A speaking scull they can use any way they want, a rapping antibiotic who will abort it from the American womb to which it clings like a stubborn fetus. In other words this Talking Android will be engaged to cut-it-up, break down this Germ, keep it from behind the counter. (MJ 17)

Not finding a black person willing to take on the role of the Talking Android, Von Vampton then has his accomplice Hubert “Safecracker” Gould impersonate it by wearing blackface. The figure of the android or the robot appears highly evocative in this context. In fact, it has historically been employed in racially coded ways, the term “robot” itself, invented by Karl Capek, originally being intended as a metaphor for slavery. As Lavender suggests, “with the image of a white person in blackface posing as an android, *Mumbo Jumbo* makes an unconventional connection between a traditional sf motif and African American iconography” (165). The concept of a racialized android as embodied by the Talking Android is used by Read to comment on and critique the way in which black people have often been conceived as mechanized tools to be used and exploited. As the author himself has once commented in an interview, “[e]verybody is making a fortune out of blackness [. . .] blackness as a technology, as a way of making money [. . .] Blacks, the creators, are the natural resources” (Zamir 1149).

However, in response to the Wallflower Order, *Jes Grew* equally employs technological means, appropriating them and reclaiming them,

in order to contrast the white supremacists' efforts to silence African American culture. The way the anti-plague spreads through radio networks is compared to "Booker T. Washington's Grapevine telegraph" (MJ 13). By tracing a connection between the way the virus moves and the antebellum communication systems mentioned by Washington in *Up from Slavery* (1901), Reed stresses the revolutionary potential of subversive networks. In this light, *Mumbo Jumbo* has been aptly considered an Afrofuturist text. Indeed, the work adheres to Mark Dery's definition of the genre as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology" (180). Science fiction itself, from which Reed borrows numerous features—elements of outbreak narrative, the figure of the Talking Android, and the novel's Afrofuturist connection with technology—is considered by the author as potentially "more revolutionary than any number of tracts, pamphlets, manifestoes of the political realm" (MJ 18). Science fiction then appears capable of revealing, addressing, and countering racial prejudices and assumptions embedded in and spread through popular narratives.

The power of collective action through technological media, exemplified by Ishmael Reed in his depiction of Jes Grew moving through radio networks, is clearly demonstrated in the context of the Covid-19 outbreak by the protests that have taken place in response to police brutality and to the killings of numerous black individuals prior to and during the 2020 pandemic. Indeed, while it should be noted that black people continue to be killed disproportionately at the hands of police officers, Black Lives Matter, the movement that includes a wide range of black liberation organizations, has played an important role in ushering changes in law enforcement policies and organization. Furthermore, it has contributed to drawing attention to unethical and racist police practices, as well as to the unjust racial dynamics and systemic racism that Covid has made more visible by affecting POC communities in larger measures. Indeed, Daniel S. Goldberg argues that "[e]pidemics illuminate stratifications, particularly among axes of power and social capital. Unsurprisingly, these demarcations often seem to intensify preexisting stigmas against marginalized and disadvantaged communities" (340).

In this context, social media have contributed to facilitating mobilization and organization of groups and protests, to educating the general public on racist police brutality, to giving representation and visibility to affected black communities, as well as to gathering funds for the cause through online donations. Especially in view of the restrictions enforced during the height of the pandemic, social media have served to cross physical limitations and connect people for a common purpose (Olson 4). For example, as Colin Klein et al. suggest, Twitter has played an especially crucial role in divulging information and in organizing

protests by virtue of the immediate and flexible mode of communication it facilitates. Furthermore, the images and video footage of acts of police brutality captured and shared through cellphones have also contributed to providing proof and testimony to the racist and violent behavior of police officers. While online activism must be complemented by more traditional expressions of dissent, technological means can constitute powerful instruments for addressing racial injustice. Rob Nixon, for instance, while recognizing that “the new media offer no panacea” (279), argues for the necessity of combining “activist staying power with new media agility” (277). Indeed, he suggests that “[i]n volume and velocity, the new media have made available testimony on a previously unimaginable scale” (278), a testimony that can fortify coalitions and collaborative effort to spread information about racial injustice and provide tools to address and counter it.

### Conclusion

As the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted, epidemiological fears of the otherness represented by viruses often carry along with them fears about racial alterity that affect in grievous ways communities of POCs. Outbreak narratives reveal how the tendency to racialize contagious diseases has a long history that is clearly articulated in numerous science fictional works of literature and film. In view of the fact that narratives have the power to condition, shape, reinforce, legitimate, and, conversely, undermine cultural perspectives and practices, it appears of the utmost importance to tease out the racist implications that many works about contagion and infectious diseases bear. While the “blackness as infectious” trope still appears to circulate widely in contemporary society, works like *Mumbo Jumbo* effectively deconstruct the premises of this stereotypical and dangerous representation by appropriating traits of the outbreak narrative and subverting them. In particular, Ishmael Reed’s work reveals how science fiction provides a powerful asset through which it is possible to counter the harmful tropes of the outbreak narrative that have been popularized through the ages, showcasing how the way we represent the world and the way we represent contagious diseases matters. Finally, through his representation of Jes Grew, Reed informs the reader of the power of revolutionary collective action, protests, and movements. Jes Grew urges the readers to respond to plagues, both literal ones such as that of Covid, and symbolic ones, such as that of racial discrimination, with anti-plagues, as in the case of the Black Lives Matter movement that spreads “virally” beyond political and geographical borders in order to fight for social and racial justice.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Rush (1746-1813), known as “The Father of American Medicine,” conceived blackness as a form of disease, specifically arguing that black people’s skin was a sign of leprosy.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that some scholars have argued that the interpretative tradition of reading the alien as the racial other itself might be considered as potentially racist, reconfirming racial fears and generalizations about racial alterity. Andrew Butler, for instance, has argued in his discussion on the movie *District 9* that, while the intent might be to critique relations among members belonging to different races, the association between non-white communities and aliens might reinforce the very dynamics that it critically explores (104).

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