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Borderless Flows in Federspiel's *Die Ballade Von Der Typhoid Mary*

Abstract

Jürg Federspiel's novel *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary* (1982) offers a fictionalized account of the notorious heroine's life that ultimately sympathizes with her plight as an immigrant who faced exclusionary cultural barriers. Drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" and recent approaches developed by material ecocriticism theory, my essay reinterprets this work from an environmental humanities perspective. The interpretation focuses on the interconnection of discourses related to disease, food, and pollution flows. Exploration of these themes leads to the conclusion that Federspiel's work was prescient in its parallel engagement with both immigration issues and the emerging environmental concerns of its time. Since global migration today is increasingly understood to have climate change as its proximate cause, the novel deserves renewed attention for the insights it offers into the intersection of environment, transnational mobility, and class divides. Beyond illustrating the social tensions present in America during the Gilded Age and in the 1980s, it presents perspectives on historical conditions that remain relevant to debates about migration today.

Keywords

Material ecocriticism, slow violence, environment, pollution, disease, postmodernism

Borderless Flows in Federspiel's *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary*

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The opening scene of the novel *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary* (*The Ballad of Typhoid Mary*) by Swiss author Jürg Federspiel is horrific. An eerie ship, the *Leibnitz*, arrives at Ellis Island in January 1868 “so leblos wie ein Scherenschnitt” (*Ballade* 9) ‘It was like looking at a cutout in silhouette’ (*Ballad* 1). On board, the few surviving passengers are terribly ill and every surface of the vessel is covered with stinking bodily fluids. Described by Federspiel in a tone of neutral reportage, this spectacle displays conditions familiar to us in the 21st century from news coverage of the European migration crisis, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, and the implementation of “zero tolerance” immigration policies in the U.S. What happens next is equally familiar: authorities take aside Maria Caduff, one of the orphaned minors, and lose track of her in the chaos of debarkation.

Published in 1982, *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary* is a gripping detective story that reflects emergent awareness about the concatenating impacts of urban concentration, globalization, and pollution. The Gilded Age world it presents is one in which landscapes are increasingly subjected to human control while natural forces remain perilously unpredictable. Its fictive narrator, who claims to be a physician and the son of a doctor who investigated the original Typhoid Mary case, checks readers’ emotional response to the subject matter with fact-laden prose, intellectual irony, and an air of scientific detachment. At the outset he tersely observes that “Wenn man sich in diesem unserem 20. Jahrhundert, eine Überbevölkerung und deren Folgen vorstellen will, so könnte die LEIBNITZ jener Zeit als Modell dienen” (*Ballade* 10) ‘Anyone trying to imagine the prospect of overpopulation in our twentieth century might well take the *Leibnitz* of that time as his model’ (*Ballad* 2).¹ This acerbic remark points to the underlying relationship between environmental concerns and material flows. The movement of people in swarm-like crowds, consumer goods profligately traded, and unchecked waste constitute flows that all have human origin. Yet as the novel progresses, the unsettling effects of these streams make clear that even culturally sophisticated societies that may be considered complex lack the means to address the public crisis precipitated when a natural flow erupts, like the one that will spread *Salmonella typhi* bacteria. Humans as vectors are responsible for the epidemic, but they are also its unwitting victims.

¹ This comment reflects concerns about overpopulation that figured prominently in environmental discussions following the Club of Rome report *The Limits to Growth* in 1972 and publications over the following decade.

Given the extent to which climate change now is intensifying global migration, audiences today will certainly read *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary* with sensitivity to the obstacles faced historically by immigrants in the cultural barriers devised to exclude them. My interest in revisiting the novel as a text about the intersection of migration and environmental issues concentrates on what we can learn from its representation of the dynamic and physical character of flows as they relate to human networks. This interpretation foregrounds an underappreciated paradox of postmodern materiality that is fundamental to Federspiel's work. A prime example of metafiction, the novel nonetheless critiques postmodernism's tendency toward solipsistic discursivity through its descriptive emphasis on material texture. Indeed, it exemplifies the type of hybrid writing that Serpil Oppermann identifies as ecological postmodern fiction, which he sees as "both metafictional and ecological in its self-conscious process of representing the fictional and natural worlds" (3).

Here it becomes clear that recent ecocritical perspectives can provide insight as to how the complex interplay of social, cultural, and environmental forces in the novel should be interpreted. As Oppermann explains, "Ecological postmodern fictions raise the issue of how reality is discursively constructed and sustained, how discourse shapes our perceptions of the world, and how it governs the way we think about reality" (6). For the present purpose of interpreting the social realities charted in Federspiel's work, my analysis draws on several theoretical perspectives for orientation. One is the notion of "slow violence" proposed by Rob Nixon, who turns our attention to the impact of environmental degradation on individuals marginalized by society. My analysis also embraces the concept of trans-corporeality forcefully articulated by Stacy Alaimo in her discussion of the physical, political, and ethical dimensions of the "material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world" (2). Additionally, my reading seeks to engage with the interpretive approaches of new materialism, which ask us to pay attention to elements such as dirt, urban textures, and practices of cleanliness in order to discover instances in which we can witness material agency at work. In making these connections, I am suggesting ways in which it is productive to see how current perspectives relate back to antecedents in theoretical debates and social discourses that originally informed Federspiel's work.

Our observation of these forces produces deeper understanding about intimate human interactions with the nonhuman world. We see the material elements as having catalytic effect, indeed as advancing Federspiel's prescient critique of global-environmental transformation. Such a close reading, however, brings us face to face with the complexity Alaimo confronts—the realization that "a recognition of trans-corporeality entails a rather disconcerting sense of being immersed within incalculable, interconnected material agencies that erode even our

most sophisticated modes of understanding” (17). In the interest of tracing similar complexities in Federspiel's novel, my interpretation begins with an examination of its narrative texture that brings the text into conversation with ecocriticism. The discussion then moves to a consideration of the text's twin tropes of disease and flows that foregrounds the theoretical and social context in which the work first appeared, while registering affinities between those discourses and recent theory. The conclusion of the essay then proposes that we read Federspiel's representation of these matters in the novel in terms of practices of social resistance.

Narrative Texture, Slow Violence, and Material Ecocriticism

Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary appeared at a time when debates about postmodernism were beginning to lament its tendencies toward valueless relativism and incoherent pastiche. Reminiscent of fiction by American novelists like E. L. Doctorow and Tom Wolfe, Federspiel's novel flirts with postmodern fragmentation as a vibrant aesthetic mode, while nonetheless employing narrative strategies that untypically steer the reader toward ethical considerations. Balancing postmodern disconnection with a sensitivity to how systemic forces operate as an interconnected whole, Federspiel allows visible and invisible flows to shape the narrative, with the result that complex webs of human/non-human entanglement appear. The visible flows present in the form of migration, consumption, and public health dynamics correspond to rationalizing efforts by society to control human movement that purport to be rational. Invisible flows, on the other hand, surface throughout the text in Federspiel's descriptions of Maria's furtive life and her struggles to achieve security, which is reinforced by the narrator's insistence on calling her alternately Maria (the fictional immigrant) and Mary (a dual reference to the person she becomes in America and the historical Typhoid Mary who served as the basis for the novel). In the present essay, I use both names to underscore the way in which this figure is variably identified in passages from Federspiel's text, where these names function in a manner that calls attention the contingency of identity in a manner consistent with postmodernism sensibilities.

The divide between the visible and invisible realms has larger implications when we align these categories with the understanding of social justice issues proposed by Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Nixon defines slow violence as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). Given the intractable nature of environmental problems, he advocates for new modes of representation. As Nixon powerfully argues,

In an age when the media venerate the spectacular, when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is

strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? (3)

Rarely given the opportunity to speak for herself in the novel, and then often only in broken English, Maria is a suitable subject for the class-sensitive representations Nixon envisions. Her existence motivates the exploration of social change, resource inequality, and environmental precarity performed in *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary*. Federspiel follows her as an individual who leaves Europe at a historical moment when the cumulative effects of famine, subsistence, and political turmoil were motivating emigration, staging her arrival in the post-Civil War U.S. when immigration was becoming a contentious issue.

Treated callously by the employment agents who hire her out, regarded as a menial servant by dismissive employers, and described with clinical detachment by the doctors who interrogate her, Mary seemingly has no choice but to submit to exploitation. Painfully she learns that superficial appearances are crucial to her survival: she must dress impeccably, concoct culinary credentials, and exit swiftly to avoid questions when unfortunate events occur. Pragmatically, this behavior constitutes a survival strategy of passing. Often Mary works in intolerable circumstances where physical abuse is rife. These conditions reinforce the social disparities of late capitalism by silencing worker complaints, limiting cross-class socializing, and perpetuating negative discourses about the immigrant underclass. Meanwhile, incidental descriptions (e.g., about building design) reveal practices of spatial class segregation that limit interaction between the rich and poor. The many gaps left in the tale of Mary's life underscore the existential disruptions that result from these divisions. Recreating the moment when increasing demand for sophisticated cuisine prompts the widespread hiring of private cooks by the upper class, Federspiel takes the opportunity to explore social ills exacerbated by human mobility that relates directly to the systemic flows of human trafficking, unequal resource distribution, and above all disease.

To decipher the complex nature of these flows, the interpretive perspectives of material ecocriticism prove useful. The novel's plot traces the path of Maria/Mary's life by mapping her mobility—one of the primary examples of flows in the text. These flows are both symptoms of the systemic linkages of channeling forces (be they biophysical, social, or other) and manifestations of the entropic energies that threaten to disrupt those systems.² As such, tensions exist inherently between the centripetal or concentrating processes of circulation and the centrifugal

² For an example of the human dimensions of flows, see the United Nations Population Division's "International Migrant Flows."

or fluid chaotic forces they unleash. The flow of bacteria, for example, can be impeded by health practices like handwashing that are routine today, or accelerated as in Mary's time by the simple lack of knowledge about how human touch channels disease.

In *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary*, refined dietary regimes function as a marker of upper-class privilege and wealth. The stratified concentration of comestibles depends on an ever-widening system of transportation lines while public markets multiply pathways for pathogens. Elaborate food consumption becomes ritualized within the socially exclusive settings of wealthy households, but it also spreads, as the novel shows, via the growing number of restaurants. Discerning employers urge Mary to prepare more vegetables and salads to replace traditional dishes, with fatal consequences. Meanwhile, the hierarchical division of labor between the upper and lower classes does not produce a means of containment for disease. On each shopping excursion, she comes into contact with the public, opening another unseen conduit between the divided worlds of the rich and poor. Yet even as she contaminates everything she touches, Federspiel's narrator attempts to rationalize her impact in terms of a covert protest against wealth inequality. That perspective is reinforced through the appearance of Chris Cramer, who becomes Mary's life companion when he invites her to his squalid living quarters. An avid reader of Horatio Alger stories promising material success that stands as the inverse to Mary's unfortunate life story, Cramer dreams of social justice and scrapes by as a petty thief.

With characters like Mary and Cramer, Federspiel problematizes the simple choice between good and evil, because these fictional figures exist on the margins of society where normal expectations of order seem to have been suspended. As typhoid spreads wildly from New York's exclusive Oyster Bay enclave to Boston and Maine, what remains predictable is that an underlying dynamic that pits social control of the material world against the disruptive entropy of physical conditions associated with Mary's presence. What is at stake in Federspiel's account is ultimately the question of whether humans can apprehend simultaneously both the vast system scales and the particularized material world. Such knowledge might prevent catastrophe, if it brought capacity for foresight.

Material ecocriticism theory proves helpful in conceptualizing what form this knowledge might take, because it is invested in attending to how physical things in their manifold dimensions may be understood to create semiotic meaning. First and foremost, it calls attention to the distributed agency of non-human forces, valuing the material world in its highly dispersed physical form as having semiotic significance. In addition, material ecocriticism offers methodological approaches to reading texts that recognize that things in the world are storied matter that therefore must be interpreted with care. As Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann explain, material ecocriticism "is the study of the way material forms—bodies,

things, elements, toxic substances, chemicals, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, and biological entities—intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories” (7). Approaching *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary* from this perspective, we can conclude that the seemingly excessive attention Federspiel gives to the physical world Mary inhabits has significance in terms of what it tells us about vast social disfunction instantiated concretely in the random, gritty details of the scenery. Hence, when Federspiel comments on the “agony” of New York City in comparison with Mary’s time, the reader understands in visceral terms how thin the veneer of civilized urban life remains:

Es gibt Bilder aus jener Zeit, die bei weitem das übertreffen, was ich in den siebziger Jahren unseres Jahrhunderts an Dreck, Müll und Fäulnis während eines Müllabfuhrstreiks gesehen habe, und es muß eine Prachtentfaltung des Zerfalls gewesen sein, als die umfassende Elektrisierung die Stadt zu beleuchten begann. (*Ballade* 103)

There are pictures from the time that surpass by far what I saw in the way of garbage, rot, and filth during the 1968 garbage strike. Once citywide electrification began to illuminate the streets at night, there must have been a gorgeously lurid revelation of decay. (*Ballad* 111)

Such observations accumulate over the course of the novel to build a critique of privilege by attending to aspects of city life that would otherwise be overlooked. The pervasive decay tells a powerful story about the slow violence of city life that has resulted from the failure of city planners, health officials, and politicians to address basic living needs. While material ecocriticism does not require an explicit ethical response to such matters, Federspiel’s textured descriptions are not entirely neutral. Indeed, the novel’s postmodern materiality checks discursive relativism by bringing attention to what is normally hidden from view, thus stressing its significance without overtly passing judgement.

From Toxic Bodies to Social Structures and Flows

Often considered Federspiel’s most significant work, *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary* recreates the tale of a single individual who would have remained obscure had she not been the hapless carrier of a deadly disease.³ In reality, Mary

³ Contemporary reviewers consequently concentrated on the historical perspectives of the novel and its general critique of America, taking largely for granted way in which Mary and her world are skillfully constructed by Federspiel to create the appearance of authenticity; see Batchelor,

Mallon (1869-1938) was an Irish immigrant. However, in Federspiel's story, she comes from Switzerland and the narrator embellishes her biography with projected details from his own life as well.⁴ Arriving in America at perhaps age twelve, Maria/Mary has little control over her fate, apart from possessing practical cooking abilities. As she matures, her efforts to parlay this skill into a secure future are stymied by the trail of death that follows in her wake. In Federspiel's text, the fragmentary account of her individual story is made compelling through textured descriptions that reveal the powerful force of underlying flows, in particular as they relate to human mobility, food and material consumption, and disease transmission, which will be discussed here in terms of their broad interconnections through flow systems. She is, in effect, a prime example of the trans-corporeality that Alaimo explores in considering "the all too familiar idea that human bodies are toxic" (17).

Published when AIDS was just surfacing in public consciousness (Bayer and Oppenheimer 9), Federspiel's novel describes a situation that provoked a hysteria with inescapable parallels to the later public response to AIDS. To its credit, the work supplies a trenchant fictionalized account of the state of early public health efforts, which relied largely on conjecture and quarantines. More than one of Mary's employers hire her on the malevolent suspicion that she will end of the life of a burdensome family member. All the same, Federspiel questions Mary's forced incarceration by telling his story from the perspective of a physician, Howard Rageet, who oscillates in his thinking between medical rationalism and humanitarian concern. Certainly, the rudimentary epidemiological forensics available in Mary's time allowed for no such equivocation, as the story demonstrates. Once the bacterial cause of typhoid is identified, the famous sanitation engineer Dr. Georg Soper appears in the novel to track down Mary, who is then held without proof of guilt, denied legal counsel, and only released when she promises to no longer cook for a living. When she violates that condition, she is confined for life to a cottage on North Brother Island.

Interwoven narrative strands involving the narrator's self-critical reflections serve to reinforce his pseudo-rational persona and further mark the text as exemplary of metafiction.⁵ As a writer, Federspiel worked in multiple genres and in the same year as the novel published a collection of journalistic essays and poems about contemporary New York City life, *Wahn und Müll*. The title itself seems to echo the English translation of Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, which at the time Federspiel was in the U.S. had cachet in intellectual circles familiar to

Burkhard, Cantini, Howard, Krättli, Krättli and Weder, Meier, Prescott, Rae, Turner, and anonymous reviews in the works cited section.

⁴ The narrator introduces himself as a pediatrician whose family had immigrated from the Swiss canton of Graubünden, explaining his personal interest in Mary's story as related to her origins in that mutual *Heimat* (*Ballade* 13-14).

⁵ For a discussion of metafiction, see Waugh.

him and drew attention to how culture constructs protocols for dealing with insanity and physical illness similar to what the novel does with waste. *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary* itself follows a long literary tradition of European literature critical of America that was particularly salient in Germany during the Reagan era.⁶

Tracing flows of transient workers, comestibles, and fluid contaminants, the novel contrasts the apparent disorder of the invisible lower-class sphere with the illusory order of the visible upper-class world. Such order finds itself heavily dependent on controlled flows that have predictable quantity, quality, and timing. Regulations, social rules, and legal policies reinforce divisions between these two spheres in the urban environment, where even the architecture of elegant hotels and residences define exclusionary spaces for the social and political elite that keep them physically separate from the poor. Federspiel, who lived in both Switzerland and the U.S., clearly draws in his writings on a deep knowledge of contemporary American social divides witnessed in New York City circa 1980.

On the whole, the novel sympathizes with marginalized outcasts and thus expresses skepticism about the figures who exercise control over them—government officials, policemen, and doctors. Despite the superficial appearance of order, however, the ability of these authorities to regulate migration, consumption, and disease proves ineffective in stemming unwanted flows. Federspiel's narrative, as will be seen, reveals instead that much in the social system is intractably corrupt. In this regard, the flows represented in the text correspond to the situation of late multinational capitalism diagnosed by Fredric Jameson in his seminal 1983 essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." Here Jameson observes that the defining feature of the postmodern condition is "the effacement in it of some key boundaries or separation, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" (112).⁷ The erosion of boundaries, be they cultural, social, or environmental, sets loose unpredictable flows.

Notwithstanding its Gilded Age backdrop (which might suggest an approach of aesthetic realism), the narrative of *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary* amplifies distinctly postmodern sensibilities that question the ethics of late capitalism by illustrating its failures. Readers initially witness the uncomfortable blurring of cultural boundaries in terms of emergent disease vectors. When the

⁶ Federspiel (1931-2007) authored diverse works that include *Orangen und Tode* ('Oranges and Death,' 1963), *Massaker im Mond* ('Massacre in the Moon,' 1963), *Museum des Hasses: Tage in Manhattan* (*Museum of Hate*, 1969), *Träume aus Plastik* ('Dreams Made of Plastic,' 1972), *Die beste Stadt für Blinde und andere Berichte* ('The Best City for the Blind and Other Reports,' 1980), *Die Liebe ist eine Himmelsmacht* ('Love Is a Force of Heaven,' 1985), *Kilroy* ('Kilroy,' 1988), *Geographie der Lust* (*Laura's Skin*, 1989), *Melancholia Americana* ('American Melancholia,' 1994) and *Mond ohne Zeiger* ('Moon without Indicators,' 2001).

⁷ On postmodernism, see also Lyotard, whose work would have been known to Federspiel.

Leibnitz's sick and dying passengers arrive on American shores, they are duly routed to Castle's Garden for processing by emigration officials—a terrifying ordeal for orphaned children. At this point, Maria is surreptitiously removed by Dr. Dorfheimer to his own home, an act that violates quarantine containment and widens the flow of disease. Fed, clothed, and sheltered in a place of lavish abundance, Maria is swiftly invited into the world of consumption when her supposed benefactor instructs her to look in the housekeeper's room for "ein Katalog von Sears & Roebuck, da kannst du ankreuzen, was du haben möchtest, und wir werden es kommen lassen. Oder wenn du willst, gehen wir morgen zusammen einkaufen" (*Ballade* 30) 'a Sears & Roebuck catalog, you can make an *x* next to whatever you'd like to have and we'll have it shipped over here. Or, if you prefer, we could go shopping together tomorrow' (*Ballad* 25). From allusions to *Alice in Wonderland* and the abrupt departure of the housekeeper, who suspects Dorfheimer to be a pedophile rather than charitable patron, readers quickly deduce that affluence hides dark secrets.

Soon after Maria volunteers to cook, the doctor succumbs to typhoid. As for the mysterious girl, readers are told "Sie verschwand in der Menge mit kleinen scheinbar zielbewußten Schritten" (*Ballade* 39) 'She disappeared in the crowd, walking with small, seemingly purposeful steps' (*Ballad* 37). Thus, a cycle of risk begins that is often repeated in the novel with many plot twists: Maria/Mary surfaces at a seemly opportune moment, serves dutifully as a culinary or personal attendant, then vanishes into the city's underground currents while her patrons die in agony. To those around her, she seems perhaps indistinguishable from mere matter. Eventually she is hired by mysterious employers to care for a child with Down syndrome. They appear to hope that Mary will infect the girl, though that result does not occur. Instead, the question of whether she is innocent or knowledgeable of her role as an angel of death becomes all the more pressing—and kept open by Federspiel throughout the story. As the tale unfolds, the narrator toys all the more with the boundaries related to intentionality and guilt, especially the fine line he treads between fact and fiction, observing that "An die wirklich existierende Mary glaubte niemand" (*Ballade* 144) 'As for the real Mary, no one believed in her' (*Ballad* 158). A fictionalized phantom even in her own lifetime, Mary is treated in the novel as a figure between human, nonhuman, and discursive realms. Thus, in this way, she comes to epitomize postmodern indistinction.

Meanwhile, the disease she carries crosses all social boundaries, heedless of status. It quite literally flows upward from the lower to upper classes through the asymptomatic Maria/Mary, hence running counter to the economic down-cycling flows of capitalist society that dominate the novel's descriptions of urban life. Fear of disease—a common and spurious argument against immigration—is countered by Federspiel's appeal to human empathy for the characters, which in larger terms expresses a systematic critique of the way in which wealth ends up producing the

very poverty and disease that the rich fear above all. Emotions that have bearing on social attitudes are manifested in the novel through the sympathies the narrator Rageet feels for his subject, whom he eventually regards as a kind of double. Maria/Mary, after all, is an orphan seeking a better life in America. Her own desires for consumption are awakened by exposure to lifestyles of the well-to-do, though she seems less driven by material success than by the sheer desire to survive. Food preparation becomes her route to security and a path for assimilation—she does everything in her power to become part of the community in order to be a cook. As Federspiel writes, “Die Küche war zwar ihr Königreich, aber doch nur ein privates. Sie lernte auch bald die Straßen der näheren Umgebung kennen, all die Leute, auch ihre Namen, und bald kannte man das Mädchen Maria mit Namen, auch wenn sie meist nur mit Kopfschütteln oder -nicken antwortete” (*Ballade* 37) ‘The kitchen may have been her kingdom, but it was a private one. It did not take her long to find her way around her immediate neighborhood, and to get to know the people, and their names as well, and soon she too was known to others as Maria, even though she rarely answered their questions with more than a nod or a shake of the head’ (*Ballad* 35).

Everywhere in the crowded parts of the city where she lives, rag collectors move used goods down the social ladder from the rich to the poor in a ceaseless flow of material. Through the narrator, Federspiel questions this process, asking “Wozu hat ein Lumpensammler Lumpen gesammelt? Wohl kaum für die Textilindustrie zum sogenannten Recycling. Nein, er hat die Lumpen an noch Ärmere verhökert.” (*Ballade* 32) ‘Now why would a ragpicker pick rags? Surely not in order to deliver them to the textile industry for recycling. No, he hocked his rags to people who were even poorer than he’ (*Ballad* 28). Later, in Maria/Mary’s recipe for preparing oxtail soup, a similar down-cycling of ingredients occurs. Once the essence of the ingredients is extracted, “die Knochen können hierauf streunenden Hunden oder nahestehenden Bettlern überlassen werden” (*Ballade* 68) ‘The bones can be thrown to stray dogs or given to the beggars you know and like’ (*Ballad* 70).⁸ Wealth, if it benefits the poor at all, does so literally through the trickle-down effects of marginally compensated household employment. Meanwhile, as the scientifically-minded narrator observes, “Das infizierte Individuum scheidet in seinen Fäkalien Millionen lebensfähiger Typhusbazillen aus, welche gewöhnlich die Ursache der Ansteckung durch Getränke und Eßwaren darstellen, häufig auch übertragen durch Fliegen und andere Insekten” (*Ballade* 45) ‘The infected individual’s feces contain millions of viable typhoid bacteria. These, after being transferred to food and beverages, frequently by flies and other insects, are the usual source of infection’ (*Ballad* 45). In isolation, these instances seem

⁸ These comments are attributed by the narrator to Mary’s companion Chris Cramer, who is eventually identified in the story as an anarchist implicated in the Haymarket riot.

unrelated, but in aggregate they reveal the significance of flows as a defining feature of communal life. The non-human elements possess their own agency, spreading as they do with deadly consequences. These pathogen flows make a mockery of superficial cleanliness and fundamentally undermine the illusion that individual human will has meaning in the midst of unseen epidemic diffusion, such as might occur with the spread of typhoid or AIDS.

As the political scientist Robert Crawford observes in his discussion of the cultural dimensions of AIDS (1994), “health is an important symbolic domain for creating and recreating the self” (1347). Crawford concludes in the instance of AIDS that from the perspective of dominant culture, “Serious affliction also poses a danger to social order. The disorientation of the individual is simultaneously a disordering of social relations: social roles are not performed, obligations are not met, medical care may be costly, and the sick may require extensive care giving, especially by family members. The ‘deviance’ must be controlled” (1358). When science finally advances to a stage of knowledge where Mary can be definitively identified as a typhoid carrier by Dr. George Soper, she cannot be cured and is forced into isolation as a perceived deviant.

Although typhoid spread is one of the most acute flows represented in the novel, the point Crawford makes about dangers and social order applies to other instances as well. The invisible poor in *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary*, like the heroine, have little claim to self, while the rich lack the ability to self-control hedonist impulses. Although Mary appears healthy and often moves unseen, as a typhoid carrier she has no ability to control a flow of germs that endangers others. The manner in which that movement or transmission occurs is through the multiple flows that Federspiel traces in the novel—human migration, food and material consumption, and indeed all contact and interaction across the porous boundaries between social classes.

Comestible Flows and Unseen Practices of Social Resistance

Yet both before and after this point, as the narrator in *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary* explains, Maria tries desperately to avoid exclusion and is repeatedly drawn back into work as a cook as a means of ensuring her own physical and psychic survival. Ostracization, shunning, and quarantine are ancient practices for controlling real or perceived dangers, including the passage of outsiders across borders. Such behavior has long been directed toward immigrants in the West, and it continues robustly today. As Federspiel reveals in his account of Mary's life, her marginalization begins with social taboos that only later align with rational medical practices. Taboos, as Mary Douglas explained in her seminal 1966 study *Purity and*

Danger, depend on social rituals. Among symbolic practices, food sharing is a universal human ritual and highly regulated in all cultures. The fictional character Mary/Maria masters the ability to pass herself off as part of the world in which she aspires to live through cooking, thus overcoming obstacles posed by social taboos by navigating their conventions. Nonetheless, these abilities cannot alter the material fact that she is and always will be a deadly disease carrier. Consequently, her story as vividly retold by Federspiel invites the reader to reflect about serves as a warning that unreflecting rhetoric that casts immigrants in terms of contamination to society. Such rhetoric not only crosses into xenophobia, it also raises the specter of the dark prejudices Crawford found in discourses about AIDS and of the conditions for taboo formation that Douglas critiqued in her anthropological research. Moreover, the theoretical perspectives that we have brought into conversation with this novel stress the gravity of such antagonistic rhetoric as well—the impact of social erosion diagnosed by Jameson, of toxicity affecting human bodies elaborated by Alaimo, and of slow violence called out by Nixon.

For the eponymous heroine of *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary*, work as a cook represents the possibility of overcoming adversity and becoming assimilated into society, where she might realize her aspirations for higher social status. She instinctively resists containment, slipping through the cracks so often she begins to seem more the subject of rumor than a real person. Her fluidity as a figure in the novel who frequently changes her appearance underscores the tension between embodied materiality and pure speculation. As Federspiel grapples with the difficulties her fragmented biography poses for his story, he represents her life in unconventional, self-reflexive narrative form. Rather than employing a sequential plot, *Die Ballade von der Typhoid Mary* tells its story with large gaps in historical chronology. To compensate for apparent inconsistencies, it inserts statements by the narrator, Dr. Howard J. Rageet, that conspicuously insist on the truth of the tale.

Casting himself as a truth seeker, Rageet moves away from his identity as a physician to become her advocate and takes up the sort of role Alaimo envisions when she observes that “Environmental justice activists chart the material connections between particular places and particular communities, whereas medical models circumscribe individual bodies as such” (82). Rageet repeatedly assures readers that “Die Typhoid Mary ist keine Erfindung” (*Ballade* 45) ‘Typhoid Mary is not an invention’ (*Ballad* 44). Indeed, Rageet abandons his posture of grounded rational objectivity as a physician to embrace the inventive capacities of poetry.⁹ Immediately after Rageet introduces himself, he indulges in a digression about ballads, explaining:

⁹ The rhetorical posturing here parallels the account Federspiel gives of a visit to the museum of forensic medicine, where he introduces himself as a poet (“Der Mensch als Puzzle” 868).

Diese Einführung soll einer Ballade gelten, die vom Leben und Sterben eines bildschönen weiblichen Wesens namens Mary Mallon alias Typhoid Mary erzählt. Der hierzulande nicht besonders bekannte Johann Wolfgang Goethe hat der Ballade formal viele Möglichkeiten zugestanden, und deshalb habe ich mir erlaubt, der vorliegenden biographischen Erzählung diese Bezeichnung zu geben. Ich beschreibe ein Leben, das—in noch kindlichem Alter—traurig begann, Tiefpunkt um Tiefpunkt überschreitend, und ein stummes, keineswegs lyrisches Ende nahm. (*Ballade* 13)

These notes are intended to provide an introduction to a ballad about the life and death of a beautiful creature named Mary Mallon, alias Typhoid Mary. Johann Wolfgang Goethe (who is not very well known in this country) granted a wide range of possibilities to the ballad form, which is why I've taken the liberty of calling my little biography a ballad. I am describing a life that began sadly—at a still tender age—then passed through low point after low point till it came to a silent and by no means lyrical end. (*Ballad* 6-7)

The flexibility and cultural cachet of the ballad form attract Rageet, because they create space for digressions that have rhetorical and emotional intensity. Meanwhile, Mary/Maria's interactions with others in connection with food (the prime vector for typhoid's spread), begin to be experienced by Rageet as perversely seductive. Deadly though these human exchanges become, they produce aesthetic pleasure that the narrator equates with poetry: "die Gemüsefrauen gaben ihr Ratschläge für Rezepte, die sie sich anhörte, als wären's Gedichte einer Sprache, die sie nicht kannte" (*Ballade* 38) 'The women behind their vegetable stalls gave her cooking tips. She took it all in as if she were learning poems in a foreign language, and listened openmouthed to the women' (*Ballad* 36). Her daily routines of shopping for ingredients provide opportunities for exchanging recipes and generate valuable forms of social capital.

As the end of the story approaches, Rageet (himself suffering from a terminal disease and facing death) writes a poem in honor of his heroine that admonishes readers *à la* Robin Hood to steal from the rich; in essence, he advises them to avenge the slow violence that has been perpetrated on Maria. As the novel suggests, her predicament as a disease vector is to a large extent the result of the systematic forces of inequality that have determined her life. To explain the ultimate tragedy of Typhoid Mary's life, the concluding lines express passionate longing for a sense of homeland:

Hinterlaß ein Zeichen. Eine Botschaft. Ein Wort.
Erfind eine Kreuzung von Vogel und Blume.
Und dem ersten Kind, das morgen den Weg kreuzt,

schenkst du den Taglohn und lächelst es an.
Hinterlaß ein Zeichen: Um die Welt eines Tages,
nach hundertelf Jahren, wiederzufinden als Heimat. (*Ballade* 107)

Leave a mark. A message. A word.
Invent a cross between bird and flower.
Give a day's wages to the first child
that crosses your path, and smile at her.
Leave a mark. So that a hundred eleven years from now,
you'll rediscover the world as your home. (*Ballad* 117)

These lines finally give Mary voice, at least within Federspiel's narrative. That presence testifying to the material trace of Mary affirms her existence, elevates her above mere matter, and memorializes her as a fellow human being. In the final pages of the novel, Rageet has died as well. The reader is supplied with a report ostensibly from his daughter to explain the discovery of his manuscript. The novel's last page contains yet another text, a document supposedly found in the narrator's files: a lavish menu for a Vanderbilt scion, proposed by Mary. Laid out in symmetrically centered format, written mostly in French, and crafted as artfully as a poem, it would have been quintessentially deadly had it been served (*Ballade* 154). Its extensive, international and multi-course menu overflows with celebrity and exotic dishes including Consommé Rachel, Timbales Napolitaines, Escalopes de bass Henri IV, Sauté de filets de grouses Tyrolienne, Pouding à la Humboldt, and Gelée d'Orange Orientale. Reading this text as what Iovino and Oppermann call "storied matter" (7), we can recognize that this opulent menu might well be construed as Federspiel's literary postmodern and environmental form of resistance to the exclusionary practices epitomized by the Gilded Age—a society in which the veneer of civilization was dangerously thin when it was crossed by the paths of immigrants in search of life and livelihood.

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