Romantic Circles Praxis Volume: Political Ecology

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**Without Task: Abdication, Race, and Relation in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*[[1]](#endnote-1)**

“I formulated the project of escaping from project” –Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*

“How can we imagine pure immanence and radical potentiality without becoming blind to the extinguishments of forms of life that every actual world entails?” –Elizabeth Povinelli, “After the Last Man: Images and Ethics of Becoming Otherwise”

“How is it, Shadows! that I knew ye not?

    How came ye muffled in so hush a mask?

Was it a silent deep-disguisèd plot

    To steal away, and leave without a task

        My idle days?” –John Keats, “Ode on Indolence”

**The Sovereignty of “Man”**

After the frame, on the first page of the narrative proper of Mary Shelley’s 1826 novel *The Last Man*, the narrator and titular last man Lionel Verney opens his account with a strange reflection on the distribution of global space, in addition to a remark on Man as such:

I AM the native of a sea-surrounded nook, a cloud-enshadowed land, which, when the surface of the globe . . . presents itself to my mind, appears only as an inconsiderable speck in the immense whole; and yet, when balanced in the scale of mental power, far outweighed countries of larger extent and more numerous population. So true it is, that man’s mind alone was the creator of all that was good or great to man, and that Nature herself was only his first minister. England, seated far north in the turbid sea, now visits my dreams in the semblance of a vast and well-manned ship, which mastered the winds and rode proudly over the waves. (9)

England’s place is at the center and height of civilization, indeed at the very height of “Man.” Much later in the book, after the plague has decimated almost the whole country, Verney apostrophizes England with: “England, thou wert the triumph of man” (LM 323). And here at the opening, England’s place in the globe is explicitly determined not geographically but in terms of “the scale of mental power.” This scale of mental power, Verney then says, is the essence of what it means to be “Man”: “man’s mind alone was the creator of all that was good or great to man.” Indeed, it is precisely England’s outsized claim to “mental power” that allows it to assert its sovereignty and dominate both global commerce and nature alike, “master[ing] the winds” and sea, “subdu[ing]” the earth, with nonhuman nature as “only [man’s] first minister” (9); thus Man’s sovereignty is not only a political but an ecological matter. In the narrative’s opening, which is a “dream of sovereign extension,” we are told that Man is constituted by sovereignty and mastery and that this sovereignty (indexed by mental power) is not equally distributed across the divisions of humanity (Elmer 358). England is not only figured as a ship but a specifically “well-*man*ned ship”—the triumph of Man. From the novel’s title to the opening paragraph, to its final word, “Man” in *The Last Man* is a differentiated dream of sovereignty.

This operation of differentiation is inseparably bound up with race. The very idea of a “scale of mental power” that is distributed unevenly across the globe evokes various strands of scientific racism and racialized Enlightenment anthropology, from the sense of literal brain measurement and weighing on a scale according to race to the idea of the *scala naturae*, the great chain of being, a descending line with white European man at the top and all others below. This is the case, for example, in William Petty’s 1677 work *The Scale of Creatures*, which claims that “Europeans do not only differ from the aforementioned Africans in colour . . . but also . . . in the Internal qualities of their Minds” (cited in Linebaugh and Rediker 139). The word “scale” in relation to race also comes up in colonial planter and administrator Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica* (1774), which argues for white supremacy on the basis of “the system of created beings [being] perfect and consistent . . . this perfection arises from an *exact scale of gradation*, from the lowest to the highest” (484; emphasis added). Or closer to Shelley’s time, take the physician Charles White’s 1799 racist work called *An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man*, the title of which is important because it implies that the unity of the category of “Man” is constituted by an internal differentiation, or gradation, that is, fundamentally hierarchical and racialized. The very idea of Man implies this internally gradated scale where different groups of humans can co-belong to this supposedly universal category, which is structured by the hierarchy and exclusions built into its machinery. We might then think of race constructed in this way as the imposition of this scale, this temporal schema of human development or “gradation,” onto human difference with whiteness as the proper fulfillment or sovereign end of Man. The opening of Verney’s narrative evinces a “political unconscious of racialized British-Eurocentrism” that suffuses the rest of *The Last Man*—this paradigm not only determines the parameters and political ecology of Man in the novel but stages the scene of its own ruination (An 581–82).

That Shelley’s novel of universal apocalypse *The Last Man* harbors a critique of the idea of Man, of the Enlightenment, and of colonialism and empire, is not a new observation. An early and still powerful, if gestural, version of this argument was made by Barbara Johnson in her influential 1980 essay “The Last Man,” which reads the novel as an indictment of “a certain Western culture which can no longer take itself for the voice of humanity in its entirety” (10).[[2]](#endnote-2) For Johnson, the novel mourns this Enlightenment universalism of Man but also limns its destructiveness, what she calls its “lethal universality,” figured (or disfigured), of course, by the plague that consumes the world (11). In what follows, I wish to deepen the critical line of inquiry initiated by Johnson and others and explore how the novel invites us to imagine other ways of being by modeling the abdication of the racialized position of Man. In step with this abdication, *The Last Man* makes it possible to inhabit the negative space of other forms of relational life, though these other forms are only obliquely glimpsed and elicited in the diegetic space and time—which is also the prophetic space and time—of the narrative.[[3]](#endnote-3)

How does the novel delineate a form of life that is “postuniversal,” in Johnson’s words, but also not isolated in the particularity of an all too familiar individualism that detaches itself from any relation, political, ecological, or otherwise (10)? And where does Johnson’s interrogation of Enlightenment’s violent universalism via Shelley’s novel leave us today? By which I mean: where does this leave the “us,” the “we,” the possibility of community after Man, after the end of History that *The Last Man* portrays? This question takes on a deeper urgency and ominous resonance in the Anthropocene, the age of environmental crisis where “Man” (*anthropos*), or the idea of Man, has altered the very climate and earth system with his various projects and activity.[[4]](#endnote-4) As the contemporary discourse around the Anthropocene shows, the political question of the contested constitution of Man is always an ecological one, with differing conceptions of relation to the earth at stake. In fact, *The Last Man* also deals with a number of environmental issues like climate change, sea-level rise, seasonal disruption, and human-animal relations, but these specific ecological problems provide more of a backdrop to this essay, which is concerned with the political ecology of “Man” as a concept, as well as its alternatives: both what Man violently excludes and what would be otherwise than Man, undoing it. If both politics and ecology in their different ways deal with the question of relationality, it is normally assumed that politics is concerned with human relationality, and ecology with relational fields in the nonhuman world. It is the imperative of political ecology to question and undo this partition between the human and nonhuman in order to summon new forms of relationality and collectivity; but the abolition of this partition should also involve examining the production of nonhumanity or improper humanity *within* manufactured conceptions of the human—that which is necessarily excluded or degraded so that Man can be Man.

The issue of relationality foregrounded by political ecology is obviously a stumbling block for *The Last Man*, for to whom or what can the only man relate? Indeed, the question of relationality, community, and the solitary individual cuts across Johnson’s essay on the novel, which, evoking Nietzsche’s notion of the Last Man, asks on its first page: “The human here is apparently something that says ‘we.’ And what if men were reduced only to ‘I’? Would the word ‘man’ still have the same meaning if there were only one left? Would the end of man take place before or after the death of the last man?” (3). The connection between the “we” and the end(s) of Man comes more fully into view when we recall that Johnson’s essay on Shelley was originally given as a talk at a conference organized in 1980 by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe on the work of Derrida called “The Ends of Man,” after Derrida’s 1968 essay of that name. This latter essay ends with a haunting three-word query putting the community of Man in question: “*But who, we*?” (136). Derrida’s question(ing) of the “we” is explicitly taken up by Black feminist theorist Sylvia Wynter in her exposure and disruption of the racialized coloniality inherent in the idea of “Man.”[[5]](#endnote-5) To simplify, for Wynter, the historically specific notion or genre of humanity of Western Man “over-represented” itself, conflating its ideas of Man (which in the nineteenth century takes the form of *homo oeconomicus*) with the proper human as such, creating a false and hierarchical “we.” What Wynter names “[Man’s] over-representation as if it were that of the human” necessarily involved both the “invention” and “subjugation” of racialized “Human Others” in order to “fuel” and to justify Europe’s sovereign “global conquests and expansion” (“Map for the Territory” 128–29).[[6]](#endnote-6) The reflexive questioning of the “we,” often by putting it in scare quotes, has become a kind of theoreme or theory meme, an almost obligatory move in many strands of critical theoretical discourse.[[7]](#endnote-7) This is for good reason, but in addition to bracketing the “we” to draw attention to its contingent formations and naturalized exclusions, it is also important to pay attention to what has been bracketed out by given notions of the “we” and of Man in order to disclose other forms of life, relation, and collectivity that move outside and against the paradigm of Man. The last section of this essay attempts to read for and think through images of these alternative forms, these omens of an “otherwise we-ness,” in *The Last Man*.[[8]](#endnote-8)

To arrive there, section two builds on the paradigm of *The Last Man* openedup by Barbara Johnson and others and examines how the novel’s critique of Man centers upon a hierarchically differentiated concept of Man as a sovereign who is constantly engaged in projects, labor, improvement, and tasks. Man’s sovereignty is indexed by these projects, as well as by progress into a future that is only seemingly open to possibility but in fact necessitates a reproduction of the world as it is, preventing other forms of existence from blossoming. This means the novel’s conception of Man faces an apparent paradox: on the one hand, (white, European, especially English) Man is the finished, highest *telos* of being, the summit of both humanity and earthly creation (“the triumph of man”); on the other hand, and at the same time, Man is constitutively open (indeed the *most* open) to possibilities that he actualizes through tasks and projects, which only reproduce Man and the world as structures.[[9]](#endnote-9) For example, later in the novel, when Verney addresses England as “the triumph of man,” he attributes this chauvinistic civilizational triumph to “thy children, their unwearied industry and lofty aspiration,” that is, their ambitious projects and tasks (LM 324).

However, this paradigm of (European) Man’s sovereignty established through a dialectic of project and progress collides with and is undone by the forces of abdication, inoperativity, interruption, and aimlessness that permeate *The Last Man*. This theme of abdication begins with the narrator’s relinquishment of authorship and authority to the Sibylline prophecy, which she transcribes and translates, and continues through the constant abdications of sovereignty, authority, and direction in the narrative to the plague that interrupts all futurity. Along the way, the novel creates apertures and overtures both in and outside its narrative for imagining other, relational forms of life that do not hew to the colonial and ontological protocols of Man or what Lisa Lowe calls the “colonial divisions of humanity” (7). One example of this life other than Man, a life without sovereignty, is evoked by the last man himself, Lionel Verney, who on the last page of the novel begs for a task that would afford him a teleological orientation: “I long . . . to have some *task*, however slight or voluntary, for each day’s fulfillment” (LM 470; emphasis added). Condemned to wander the ravaged and empty earth without task, both the last man and *The Last Man* disclose an image of what might be other than Man, an image that in its very isolation allows us to imagine a relational existence without ground or *telos*, after the end of History and in its ruins. In this way, the last man’s tasklessness embodies Georges Bataille’s famous concept of life after the end of History as a “negativité sans emploi,” which we might here translate as “negativity without task” (369).[[10]](#endnote-10)

After section two develops *The Last Man*’s notion of Man as a sovereign engaging in tasks, projects, and labors of improvement, section three examines a vexed scene with the novel’s only explicitly Black character to lay bare the racialized exclusions inherent in Man and to show how Verney refuses the opportunity to abdicate this sovereign position. Reading the scene of the plague’s transmission to Verney by a “negro half clad” by drawing on critiques of the human and the notion of flesh from work in Black Studies, I reframe this scene as the very heart of the novel’s incisive interrogation of Man. The final section then dwells with what the novel variously calls “other shapes,” “other spirits,” and “other forms of being” that refuse the overrepresented order of Man and open the door to something else. As one of Romanticism’s most important experiments in political ecology, *The Last Man* both plumbs the disastrous politics and ecology encoded in Man and finds other forms of common life sealed in the immanence of a kiss.

**Task Master**

That “Man” is a construct was understood and explored more thoroughly, and literally, by Mary Shelley than perhaps any other Romantic author (this is of course one of the many lessons of *Frankenstein*). In *The Last Man*, one way that the construction of Man is recapitulated is through the autobiographical microcosm of the last man Lionel Verney himself, who was orphaned along with his sister Perdita and grew up in a state he himself describes as “savagery” (LM 29). He gradually leaves this “savage” state and enters the subtly (and punningly) racialized “*paled* demesne of civilization” only when subjected to a sovereign, a “master hand” (27, 29; emphasis added). When their long-lost family friend Adrian, the prince and son of the abdicated and final King of England, comes to Cumberland, Verney almost immediately falls under Adrian’s refined and noble spell. Throwing off his “war against civilization,” Verney follows Adrian down the path of progress into civilization, which is progress into the domain of Man: “I now began to be human,” Verney writes (29). He goes on to compare his newfound claims to participate in both civilization and Man to nothing other than the primal scene of colonialism itself, 1492: “I felt as the sailor, who from the topmast first discovered the shore of America; and like him I hastened to tell my companions of my discoveries in unknown regions” (31). This is yet another indication that “Man” in the novel is not a universal category but a contingent, colonial one, whose conceptualization is inextricable from the divisions of 1492 and what Wynter calls its “new world view.”[[11]](#endnote-11) To become Man is to enter into a relation of coloniality and to assume whiteness. Man’s supposed universality is constituted by its exclusions, exceptions, segregations, and gradations of (especially racial) differentiation. Verney’s own trajectory throughout the novel follows the path of Man itself, from “savagery” to sovereignty to lastness, to being without task—and as Emily Steinlight writes of Verney, “As soon as he is last, he is no longer man” (71).

Educating and improving Verney becomes one of Adrian’s civilizing tasks, but we soon learn that Adrian has schemes and tasks for progress on a much larger scale. Verney mentions Adrian’s “theories for the *improvement* of man,” for example, and various “schemes” and projects for progress and general improvement (36, 43). Later, in terms reminiscent of the theories of perfectibility espoused by Shelley’s father William Godwin, Adrian discusses plans for improvement with Raymond and the astronomer Merrival; Adrian attributes his vision of the coming utopian perfectibility of man precisely to Man’s propensity for labors, tasks, and projects: “Man cannot repose, and his restless aspirations will now bring forth good” (219). Throughout the novel, almost to the bitter end, Adrian is engaged in increasingly futile tasks and labors that crumble before the onslaught of the plague—tasks, as Adrian puts it, “for ever and ever to be sought,” eternally to be sought because receding from actual fruition, and only renewing the world as it is (327). Still later in the book, Adrian stakes a final claim to tasks, crying: “to our tasks . . . to the last I will struggle” (398).

Lord Raymond, the figure based on Byron, also embodies a mania for tasks, especially projects for improvement and civilization. After he assumes sovereignty, we are told: “Raymond was occupied in a thousand beneficial schemes. . . . He was continually surrounded by projectors and projects” (106). These projects are nothing other than an index of Raymond’s sovereign power, his desire for domination both ecological (“the elements”) and political (“man”): “He looked forward to entire dominion over the elements and the mind of man” (117). Indeed both Raymond and Adrian take up the civilizing task of fighting with the Greeks in a war against the “barbarism” of the Muslim forces of Turkey, people who are described explicitly in terms of stillness and refusing the advancing progress of civilization.[[12]](#endnote-12) Crucially, Raymond envisions his civilizing war in relation to a futurity that is endlessly renewed and reproduced in future generations, always advancing in a testament to the glory and sovereignty of Man: “Other generations will arise, and ever and for ever will continue . . . to be gloried by our valour” (194). It is this endless progress that “exalt[s] the race of man and make[s] this little globe a dwelling of the mighty” (194). The fact that this exaltation of Man as a supposed “we,” a “race,” requires war against and the eradication of other, non-European groups of human beings (not to mention the earth itself) reveals a concept of Man caught up in the “over-represented” (Wynter) violent universalism that *The Last Man* adumbrates and ultimately unworks.

A passage from the end of Chapter 15 demonstrates more acutely the intimate connection between tasks, the idea of Man, and the reproduction of the world (that is, the world constituted by the exclusions inherent in the idea of Man, the world of Shelley’s day continued into ca. 2100). Verney observes a group of “enterpriz[ing]” young Etonian boys and attempting “to read the future man” through their youth, sees them as “the future governors of England; the men, who, when . . . our projects completed or destroyed for ever . . . were the beings who were to carry on the vast machine of society; here were the lovers, husbands, fathers; here the landlord, politician, solider” (227).[[13]](#endnote-13) It is precisely the youth and open possibility of the young Etonians that will afford them the futurity and the new “projects” that will simply reproduce the world as it is and “carry on the vast machine of society” (we might think of Lee Edelman’s work on the child and futurity here[[14]](#endnote-14)). Importantly, this same passage links this logic to the reproduction of Man: “Thus man remains, while we the individuals pass away” (228). The reproduction of the world—the sovereign world of governors and landlords and soldiers and the institution of Eton—and the reproduction and preservation of the being Man are co-constitutive (it’s no accident that Verney also quotes Edmund Burke in this passage). As we have seen, Man remaining, and remaining as sovereign, is powered by progress and advancement. “Advance,” Verney apostrophizes the young men repeatedly, “Advance! . . . May your progress be uninterrupted and secure; born during the spring-tide of the hopes of man, may you lead up the summer to which no winter may succeed!” (228).[[15]](#endnote-15) The conscious irony here of Verney addressing future generations in the past while writing from a position after the extinction of humanity is superseded by a doubled irony in the passage of which Shelley could only have been dimly aware: that is, the formulation of Man’s advancement, projects, and industry begetting a long winterless summer, an eerily prescient image of global warming’s coming endless summer in the Anthropocene, the age of Man.

The novel’s interest in improvement and its connection to the imbricated logics of tasks, futurity, Man, and the reproduction of the world are illuminated by the recent critique of improvement by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. Drawing on Wynter and others, Harney and Moten link the Enlightenment’s colonial and racialized idea of Man to the imposition of tasks of improvement that actually keep things in place: what they call “man’s perpetually stilled motion” in “eternally prospective completion-in-improvement” (84, 89). The idea of Man is constituted by the differentiation and subjection of certain racialized groups who are set aside as in need of being “endlessly improved . . . on their endless way to becoming Man,” a telos infinitely deferred (85). For Harney and Moten, this murderous anthropological paradigm of work, tasks, and improvement is also irreducibly a problematic of political ecology, as it leads toward the “destruction of the biosphere” and “socioecological disaster” (85, 88). The demand for improvement, which is essential to capitalism, is indeed first directed against the earth itself, as in discourses of land improvement and enclosure.[[16]](#endnote-16) So it is in this light that we should read the various discourses in *The Last Man* on tasks, projects, and schemes for improvement—tasks that index the sovereignty of (European) Man, who lords over the spheres of the political and the ecological and in doing so obscures their inextricability.[[17]](#endnote-17) The next section will further explore the dimensions of Man’s racialization through Verney’s encounter with a figure who is constitutively denied entry onto “the bright noon-enlightened highway of mankind” (LM 157).

**Sympathology**

Early in the third and final volume of *The Last Man*, Verney and his family are preparing to depart England with Adrian and the few remaining English survivors of the plague. After a visit to London, Verney returns to his home in Windsor to come upon the body of his young son Alfred, who has just died of the disease. Before he reaches Alfred, however, he has a strange physical encounter with an unnamed, plague-infected “negro half clad” (the novel’s only explicitly Black character), from whom Verney appears to contract the plague by breathing in the sick man’s breath. Given that Verney is the lone character to actually recover from the plague, the scene of his contracting disease—and thus his possible inoculation—would appear to be a crucial one, yet this extraordinary passage has proven difficult to make sense of. It is a grim scene, even for so bleak a novel as this, and one that has vexed commentators, who often gloss over it rapidly.[[18]](#endnote-18) But by engaging work in Black Studies that interrogates the racialized determinations of Man and the emancipatory possibilities of thinking otherwise (an engagement urgently needed in Romantic Studies more generally), it is possible to read this scene with the importance it deserves. That is, it becomes possible to see this narrative episode both as developing the novel’s critique of Man as a racialized and exclusionary mechanism (whose most paradigmatic exclusion is blackness) and also as opening the possibility of a form of relationality that is other than Man—a possibility ultimately rejected by Verney.

Here is the event, in Verney’s first-person—or rather, last-person—narration:

I threw open the door of the first room that presented itself. It was quite dark; but, as I stept within, a pernicious scent assailed my senses, producing sickening qualms, which made their way into 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, writing 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 close to mine, and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals. For a moment I was overcome, my head was bowed by aching nausea; til, reflection returning, I sprung up, threw the wretch from me, and darting up the staircase, entered the chamber usually inhabited by my family. A dim light shewed me Alfred on a couch; Clara trembling, and paler than whitest snow, had raised him on her arm (336–37).

The macabre scene unfolds in a kind of dark netherworld. Verney’s actions seem instinctive, but the resulting picture is that the “negro half clad,” literally *bare* life, is denied entry into the Kingdom of Man. His half-clothed state and the language used to describe him (“wretch”—a favorite epithet of Frankenstein for his creature) indicate Verney’s judgment of his nonhumanity before he physically throws the man off. We don’t know the Black man’s name, his language, his situation, his relation to any person or place in the world, nor where he comes from or how—he is simply dropped off there by the narrative, as if transported from another world. He is in the house but out of place: an instance of pure deracination. It’s not clear in the novel whether the global slave system has been abolished in the late twenty-first century (it appears not), but in the year of the book’s publication, 1826, this Black character would certainly have been associated with enslavement (slavery was not completely abolished in the British Empire until the 1840s). Further, as Siobhan Carroll has noted, Verney’s depiction of his house, with its “dark[ness],” “pernicious scents,” sounds of groans, and general horror, closely resembles contemporary descriptions of slave ships (12).[[19]](#endnote-19)

Peter Melville is right to remind us that the context of this scene is that of home and family—Verney has rushed into his home, looking for his wife and child.[[20]](#endnote-20) It appears that at least part of Verney’s violent rejection of the dying man stems from his judgment of the incongruity of blackness and domestic sociality, from which blackness is not only barred but seen as an interference. As Saidiya Hartman writes, “In short, the slave exists out of the world and outside the house” (169). Indeed, what if this passage evinces not so much a “lapse . . . of sympathy” on Verney’s part, as Melville argues, but rather demonstrates the normal operation of sympathy as it is structured to (not) work upon those not viewed as human, those not part of what the novel calls “the family of man,” or any family at all (Melville 835; LM 261)?[[21]](#endnote-21) This reading would allow us to see this episode as exposing the cracks in the false “we” of Man that the novel ruins, a “we” from which blackness is constitutively excluded but also to which blackness here presents some alternative, otherworldly, fleshly embrace.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Let us look at this scene in closer detail. What is the nature of this particular encounter, so different from other encounters in the novel where Verney reacts to the diseased and dead without fear and even sometimes with care? Verney perceives it to be a violent struggle, describing himself as being “clasped” and “grasp[ed],” and responds accordingly, recoiling in disgust and forcefully “thr[owing] the wretch from me.” In the chapter just before this scene, the plague had been directly associated with the notion of “flesh,”[[23]](#endnote-23) and likewise here Verney sees the Black man not as a coherent body or person but as a mass of decaying flesh, with the pun on “wound” intensifying the sense of festering decay: “He wound his naked festering arms round me.” Yet one might also see this collision of flesh from the dying man’s perspective, from the (non)place of exclusion, as the demonstration of and invitation to an altogether different entanglement outside of Man and Man’s sovereignty, a sharing of woundedness indexed both by the plague and by blackness (and their mutual identification).[[24]](#endnote-24) This embrace is an insistence on inextricable relationality even as Verney seeks to “disengage [him]self” from their precarious enmeshment. Following Alexander Weheliye’s recent theorization of flesh inspired by Wynter, Hortense Spillers, and others, we can think of the flesh here as a wound or “vestibular gash in the armor of Man, simultaneously a tool of dehumanization and a relational vestibule to alternate ways of being” (44).[[25]](#endnote-25) The possibility of differentiating these two antithetical and simultaneous meanings of the flesh—as brutally violent reduction versus an antechamber to a new common life—depends in part upon whether vulnerability, the wound or “gash” in Man, is distributed to certain “others” as a sacrificial burden to bear or whether it is shared and generalized (indeed the very word “plague” derives from Latin *plaga*, which can mean both a “strike” and the “wound” or “gash” such a strike causes). The former is the case in this scene, as Verney chooses disengagement over entanglement.

Verney falls down upon on the “sufferer,” and they become one in an almost-kiss and exchange of corrupted breath: “He wound his naked festering arms round me, his face close to mine, and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals. For a moment I was overcome, my head was bowed by aching nausea.” For a fugitive moment of contact and contagion, Verney is dispossessed of his individuated body and consciousness and is “overcome,” losing the ground underneath him and feeling “aching nausea.” These symptoms of vertigo indicate an experience with what Jared Sexton calls “that wounded, disseminative vertigo that is blackness” (“On Black Negativity”). Verney loses all bearings in meeting with one who is abandoned, barred from bearings, and barred from Man. Yet after this brief moment, “reflection” returns to Verney, and he separates himself by “disengage[ing],” rejecting and abandoning the dying man. He regains orientation, and rushes off to find his dead child Alfred, held by his niece Clara, whose whiteness is notably emphasized: “paler than whitest snow.”

Instead of perceiving the encounter as a violent struggle, as Verney does, being attentive to the action of the dying man as an embrace and a kiss on the mouth (the intense homoeroticism of this scene is too often unremarked[[26]](#endnote-26)) helps outline the relational and “alternate ways of being” that Weheliye sees flesh pointing towards and that *The Last Man* opens onto. Read this way, Verney’s failure is not in his refusal to see the Black man as included in Man but his refusal to “unMan” himself (to repurpose a verb Verney himself earlier uses[[27]](#endnote-27)), his refusal to abdicate the sovereignty of Man and affirm some shared fleshly entanglement with a (non)person marked by slavery. Another passage from Sexton prompts a final reflection on this critical scene from the novel:

In a world structured by the twin axioms of white superiority and black inferiority, of white existence and black nonexistence, a world structured by a negative categorical imperative—“above all, don’t be black” (Gordon 1997: 63)—in this world, the zero degree of transformation is the turn toward blackness, a turn toward the shame, as it were, that “resides in the idea that ‘I am thought of as less than human’” (Nyong’o 2002: 389). In this we might create a transvaluation of pathology itself, something like an embrace of pathology without pathos. (“Social Life” 23)

Given that pathology is in the first instance concerned with the understanding of disease, Sexton’s comment is remarkably apt for a novel about universal plague and for the scene I have been discussing in particular. What would it mean for Verney to have been able to affirm an “embrace of pathology” in the novel, to perform an act not of sympathy but what we might call sympathology? Perhaps it would look like not simply aiding the dying man but staying on the floor, staying entangled, sharing the damage of the plague as mutually vulnerable beings and inhabiting and generalizing this vulnerability in a common passivity; it might look something like death, or what William Blake called “self-annihilation.” This negative image in the novel (which is, recall, a prophecy), what *doesn’t* happen, adumbrates the opening for the affirmation of the “less than human” (Sexton quoting Nyong’o) and thereby other than Man: the life that is cast off on the ground, without work and task, and “unsovereign.”[[28]](#endnote-28) Having a glimpse of what is other than Man is in fact something upon which Verney constantly speculates, as we’ll see in the next section.

But instead, Verney separates himself and survives. He does appear to contract the plague in this scene,[[29]](#endnote-29) but as an inoculation rather than a fatal case. Verney refuses to embrace pathology, refuses to join what is (forced to be) outside of Man, and rather than helping or joining the Black man, throws him off and, moreover, feeds on his dying life by using the literally abject man (“threw . . . from me”, cf. Latin *ab* + *iactus*) as a sacrifice for his own immunization; they do not share the wound or the vulnerability of flesh in common dehiscence. Not only is the unnamed Black character not fully included in the proper category of Man but his not being Man is precisely what allows Verney to be Man. Verney (again, almost literally) parasitically feeds off his disease, subjection, and abjection; he becomes inoculated and able to reproduce himself even as the world around him disintegrates. In this way, the scene is a microcosm of the more general constitutive exclusions of Man that the novel probes and stages. Alongside the already radical interrogation of Western humanism, colonialism, and imperialism in *The Last Man*, a trajectory brought out by Barbara Johnson and others, reading the novel in dialogue with recent work in Black Studies thus further radicalizes our understanding of the limits and the outsides of Man. In addition, such a reading offers another understanding of this crucial hinge of the whole novel—namely, reframing the question as to why Shelley had the last man, the one character to survive the plague, contract it from the only character explicitly racialized as Black. This analytic bears on Romanticism’s political ecology more generally in fundamental ways; it prompts a rethinking of the category of ecological and nonhuman relationality according to “racial blackness” as the “paradigmatic figure of the nonhuman”—a paradigm consolidating precisely in the Romantic era—which as such aligns with all “earth’s vulnerable inhabitants,” and the earth itself (Karera 46, 52).[[30]](#endnote-30)

**Eternal Fruition**

While the first two parts of this essay delineated the novel’s idea of Man, the last section argued Verney’s refusal to unMan himself took the form of his refusal to embrace the pathology of the plague and the dying Black man. Embracing and inhabiting the plague would mean acceding to the forces of interruption that the plague both figures and ushers in.[[31]](#endnote-31) The plague is a shifting figure in the book, conjuring both the “lethal universality” of Man (Johnson) and what interrupts this structure of universality (in this way it recalls Derrida’s discussion of the *pharmakon*, or indeed, Weheliye’s conceptual framing of the flesh). The plague, whose movement is often described in eerily Enlightenment-like terms of advancement and progress,[[32]](#endnote-32) is what short-circuits the reproduction of the world. It undoes the logics of sovereignty, tasks, progress, and futurity and, on another level, exposes their violently differentiating mechanisms and effects. Yet the plague is only the most prominent harbinger of the forces of negativity—interruption, inoperativity, abdication, aimlessness, ruination—that pervade *The Last Man*. In fact, it is possible to delineate a dialectic of abdication among all of the taskmasters and project mongers of the novel, in addition to one on the second-order level of the novel itself. First of all, the main characters’ relation is set in motion, before they meet, by the last King of England abdicating the throne in the year 2073; the young would-be king Adrian then renounces any claims to the throne, amounting to an abdication; Raymond, whose very name suggests kingship over the world (cf. *roi*, *re*, *rey* + *monde*, *mundo*, etc.), renounces sovereignty over England on the cusp of achieving it, then later actually does assume the sovereignty of the Protectorship (called a “task” (150)) only then to abdicate the throne and give up on “his various projects” (149); yet another sovereign, Ryland, assumes then abdicates the Protectorship. Indeed, the end of Man is consistently described as the end of sovereignty.[[33]](#endnote-33) Even near the end of the novel, with the plague finally gone and almost everyone on earth dead, Verney describes the plague itself in terms of abdication: “She [the plague] abdicated her throne” (426). In *The Last Man*, sovereignty cannot hold itself in place, and its continual ruination gestures toward the unsovereign life and community the novel invites its readers to consider.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Alongside the acts of abdicating sovereignty, there are also several images toward the end of the novel, both figurative and literal, of relinquishing the rudder, reins, or pilotage, of giving up direction and directionality, of refusing to have a goal, telos, or task. “We took our hands therefore away from the long grasped rudder,” Verney sighs after leaving England (413).[[35]](#endnote-35) At an earlier moment of despair, he enjoins “man” to abdicate his sovereignty as the “lord of creation,” and to embrace dispossession: “Lie down, O man . . . give up all claim to your inheritance” (316).[[36]](#endnote-36) Then there is, of course, the last man, Verney, whom I designated at the beginning of this essay as a paradigmatic figure of tasklessness. Even while relinquishing the hope for improvement (“I form no expectation of alteration for the better”), in the novel’s final paragraph Verney longs in vain “to have some task” (470). Although his tasks have been abdicated for him, Verney remains trapped in the paradigm of Man, and trapped in isolation; his solitary wandering recalls Frankenstein’s isolation at the end of the latter novel, not least as Frankenstein on his deathbed cries: “My task is unfulfilled” (*Frankenstein* 177).

The novel therefore prompts us to think about the logic of abdication, of sovereignty, of tasks, direction, and progress, and by extension the abdication of Man himself—or the idea of Man itself. But what comes after Man, after History, after sovereignty? For whom, after all, is the last man writing? This impossible audience is of course the central structural problem of the book, one that occurs intermittently to Verney himself. He speculates on possible future readers on an earth with no future, settling upon either surviving remnants of humanity or, more evocatively, a totally other form of life, an alternate way of being, something he calls at one point a “race spiritual” (399.) With the demise of humanity and Man around him, Verney becomes consumed with the possibility that there is a mode of being, a possible “we,” that is not Man. And despite its march toward annihilation, *The Last Man*’s prophetic mode is constantly demonstrating that things can be otherwise, even those formations that “seemed eternal” like Man, History, World, Nature—even climate, the seasons, and the sun, all of which are disrupted in some fashion in the book—can be seen, configured, experienced, shared, and inhabited differently (412). Verney mocks the astronomer Merrival for invoking beings after Man without being able to “describe the unknown and unimaginable lineaments of the creatures who would then occupy the vacated dwelling of mankind” (290); yet Verney himself variously gives thought to “other spirits, other minds, other perceptive beings, sightless to us” and to “other forms of being” who have altogether different forms of “communings” (341; 420). At another moment, he harbors the thought that “humanity is not extinct; but merely passed into other shapes, unsubjected to our perceptions” (413). These “other shapes” of life would be “unsubjected” to the perceptions and paradigm of Man, with “unsubjected” suggesting beings not subjected to any sovereign, and perhaps, coming after the subject itself.

The novel does little to limn these “other shapes” of—or than—humanity, other than suggest the fact that they could exist, and, in foregrounding the force of inoperativity and abdication, the fact they would be unsovereign, without task, detached from the sovereign imperatives of progress and the colonial, racial apparatuses of division that marry such imperatives. To close, I will suggest one final image of a taskless, unsovereign, relational life other than Man that the novel bequeaths to readers. Mere pages from the end, the last man wanders through the deserted city of Rome and takes in its museums and monuments:

I gazed at each statue, and lost myself in a reverie before many a fair Madonna or beauteous nymph. I haunted the Vatican, and stood surrounded by marble forms of divine beauty. Each stone deity was possessed by sacred gladness, and the eternal fruition of love. They looked on me with unsympathizing complacency, and often in wild accents I reproached them for their supreme indifference—for they were human shapes, the human form divine was manifest in each fairest limb and lineament. The perfect moulding brought with it the idea of colour and motion; often, half in bitter mockery, half in self-delusion, I clasped their icy proportions, and, coming between Cupid and his Psyche’s lips, pressed the unconceiving marble. (465)

In quite Blakean language, Verney experiences these statues as presences that have “the human form divine” and human “lineament[s]” but are not Man. He partakes in some strange communion with the figures, losing himself in a Rousseauian “reverie” as he and the statues gaze upon one another. The statues themselves seem to be perpetually, purely in relation, dispossessed from themselves and “possessed by sacred gladness, and the eternal fruition of love.” What is “eternal fruition”? Given that “fruition” denotes the realization of some potentiality, trajectory, project, or task, “*eternal* fruition” indicates the absolute nonpresence of any task. That which is always, eternally in fruition has no need of a projected task or process of coming *into* fruition; it simply is. The statues thus enflesh a common, taskless existence. Their “supreme indifference” is indifference to the world of differentiation itself, the world of tasks and progress, of improvement, deferral, and futurity: the world of Man.[[37]](#endnote-37) As the pun on “unconceiving marble” suggests, the statues have no child gestating or project into futurity; there is no work or task to be fulfilled, no condition to be improved, nothing to be accomplished or realized, because existence is always already “eternal[ly]” in fruition, immanently what it is—let be. The name for this release, this immaculate nonconception, is love: “the eternal fruition of love.”[[38]](#endnote-38)

We might see in this immanent nonrealization an illustration of Anne-Lise François’s subtly ecological—more explicit in her recent work—ethics of nonproductivity, “(non)fulfillment,” and “freedom from work” in her book *Open Secrets* (58, xvi). If there is an ethics and a form of relationality modeled, however forbiddingly, by the statues’ embrace, it is clearly not grounded in any notion of sympathy. Verney rebukes the statues for their “*unsympathizing*” air, desiring some form of recognition that their presence—a presence immanent in itself yet alien to the world—will not yield. The statues’ refusal of sympathy, and their simultaneous modeling of a kind of immanent commonality and love that is without sympathy and “without pathos” (Sexton), return us to the earlier scene that demonstrated the exclusions built into the paradigm of sympathy: Verney’s encounter with the “negro half clad,” to which this scene bears striking parallels. In both episodes, Verney “los[es him]self” in communion (here in “reverie,” earlier being “overcome” without “reflection”) only then to dissever himself from relation and react violently. Just as in the earlier scene he felt the Black man “clasp” his body and perceived it an assault, responding angrily, the same verb returns here as Verney himself “clasp[s]” the statues in fury, “reproach[ing] them” with “wild accents” and “bitter mockery.” And similarly here as before, there is a ghost of a kiss. Where earlier Verney exchanged breaths with the dying man, their mouths close in the offer of a kiss, here Verney attempts to infiltrate and join the endless kiss of Cupid and Psyche: “coming between Cupid and his Psyche’s lips, [I] pressed the unconceiving marble.” Each of the two kisses promises contact with a presence that is not Man, but these promises, ciphers of another life, dissolve before the last man in different ways. Verney pulls away from the first kiss from the dying man, siphoning his life for inoculation, while he is closed off from the statues’ futureless kiss, still retaining his desire to be Man (and rebuking the statues for being otherwise). The last man in this way wishes to remain the last Man; Verney is unwilling to accede to a life without task, to some other kind of relationality with other beings and with the earth. Yet this refusal lets a question linger: what if the wholly “other shapes” we desire are already immanent, right in front of us, in the form of a kiss that harbors the eternal fruition of a life both alien and common?

*The Last Man* invites us to think of a different image of humanity that is not beholden to the sovereign solitude of Man, and in this way, to quote Wynter again, to “collectively give humanness a different future,” opening new configurations of a common “we” (“Unparalleled Catastrophe” 73). This image other than Man would harbor a different ecology, a different relation to the earth—one not grounded in sovereignty, mastery, or tasks of improvement. Like the statues’ eternal fruition, this form of life is immanent, already realized in the relationality that constitutes every fleshly entanglement (however powerfully and violently denied). The numerous environmental catastrophes in *The Last Man* are an essential part of its explicitly prophetic vision, an intimation of how the hierarchically differentiated and racialized construct of Man would produce what Verney calls a “funereal earth” (LM 440), but what is now called the Anthropocene, a “new geological epoch . . . built from slavery and colonialism (Lewis and Maslin 320). It is the novel’s indictment of itself and its world that it can easier imagine the extinction of humanity than the end of the idea of Man. Yet *The Last Man*’s experiment in political ecology is not only a critique but the adumbration of something else.

One of the wagers of this essay has been a preliminary attempt to place Mary Shelley in dialogue with current theoretical discourses, especially in Black Studies, on the “abolition of Man” and the “dethroning of Man and uttering new forms of life” (Weheliye 138; Walcott 192). Continuing to do so can help reframe Romanticism, not only by sharpening our attention to the constitutive exclusions and erasures of Romanticism’s world (which is our world) but also by revitalizing the speculative habits inherent in Romanticism’s critique of Enlightenment and, more generally, its critique of the proper. Following this path would be one way of taking up Verney’s final inscription, an overture to a coming community written on a building to no one or to no Man: “Friend, come! I wait for thee!” (LM 456).[[39]](#endnote-39)

Disentangling the extinction of humanity from the abolition of Man involves imagining and inhabiting other forms of life, though not as a *task* to be actualized but a reexpression of something already immanent: some trace of the common, the flesh, the earth, that the world keeps us from seeing, in part by setting us to our tasks (but who, “us”?). *The Last Man* presents one image of humanity, Man, and narrates its downfall—but the book is cast as a prophecy, which is less a prediction than it is a warning.

**Coda: COVID-19**

“‘All the world has the plague!’

‘Then to avoid it, we must quit the world’” –*The Last Man*, 242

On the last day of February 2020, I received an email letting me know that this Romantic Circles Praxis volume on Political Ecology, with my essay on Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, was kicking back into gear for publication. This same day, Feb. 29th, 2020, was the day of the first reported death in the United States from coronavirus, or COVID-19 (though it would later be discovered there had been at least two earlier undetected deaths). This essay was finished in the summer of 2019 essentially as is, and while I have decided not to make any substantial or timely changes to it in light of the current moment, the pandemic seems to demand some extra reflection from readers of *The Last Man*. It is certainly eerie to return to my own essay and to Shelley’s monumental novel of twenty-first-century plague, in mid-May 2020, as COVID-19 ravages on into what looks to be a grim summer and year ahead. Though long overshadowed in popular consciousness by *Frankenstein*, *The Last Man* was quickly thrust into the news in the early days of the pandemic, mentioned prominently in *The New York Times*,[[40]](#endnote-40) *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. It seems poised to be *the* novel for the novel coronavirus, expected to teach us something in a time when “all the world has the plague” (LM 242). But like prophecy, literature does not give easy lessons and always exceeds any time or conditions that would await its proper arrival. Of course, and despite the “all” encoded in the *pan* of pandemic, all the world does *not* have the plague—infection and fatality numbers in the United States show huge racial disparities, with Latinx, Indigenous, and especially Black people disproportionately suffering. The racial parameters of who counts as Man continue to enforce a differential vulnerability, with some protected and others sacrificed as a kind of social inoculation. Perhaps, as Sexton suggests in a different context, this world itself is the pathogen for such a situation[[41]](#endnote-41)—all the world does not *have* the plague, rather this world, “this waste world,” *is* the plague (LM 293).

Somewhere in the flurry of intellectual commentary on COVID-19 that has rapidly emerged, it was pointed out that the virus’s name derives from the arch-symbol of sovereignty: *corona*, meaning crown. Corona is indeed the crown, but only the crown, of the preexisting politico-economic regimes of sovereignty and governance that ever more brutally set tasks for those workers it deems essential, which is to say dispensable. These tasks must be done, without any real overarching changes, so that this world can reproduce itself and its hierarchies—so that it can “*go on*,” in the words of the U.S. president, the supposed sovereign, who [tweeted](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1237027356314869761) on March 9th, 2020:

“So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of CoronaVirus, with 22 deaths. Think about that!”

I am fascinated by the ampersanded zeugma here, which encrypts a whole world logic: “Nothing is shut down, *life & the economy go on*.” Maybe the real question is how to break the zeugma between “life” and “the economy,” the zeugma that governs everything. How to make everything refuse to “go on”; how to expel sovereignty and economy from enclosing and hierarchically differentiating, or gradating, fleshly life; how to desert, leave, destitute, quit, abdicate the whole complex, this world and age of Man. What community, or what “other forms of being” and “communings” would come after (LM 420)? Relation is still possible with physical distancing, when not touching can be care; and flickers of other communings are showing up in emerging mutual-aid networks, organized rent strikes, and calls for a debt jubilee and general strike. We might think of such a strike—“strike,” the original meaning of *plaga*—as a refusal of tasks and an affirmation of a taskless common life. Another cipher of the shadowed future could be detected in the graffiti message showing up in different places of late, posing a simple question: “The Economy, or Life?” This graffiti might be answered by another graffiti message, one left by the last man to those to follow—“Come friend, I wait for thee!” (LM 456).

-May 2020



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1. I thank Michael Krimper for helpful comments on a draft of this essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Later important readings of the colonial contexts of *The Last Man* include those of Alan Bewell and Paul Cantor. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. As readers of the novel know, the frame of *The Last Man* casts the story as an early nineteenth-century discovery of ancient prophecy that takes the form of a late twenty-first century narrative by the last man. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I take up the discourse around the Anthropocene (and the debate around its name) in more detail in a review essay on Donna Haraway published in *Qui Parle* 27.1 (2018), and in an essay “Fragmentary Domesticity: Wordsworth’s Image of the Common.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “To me Derrida’s most radical essay was . . . ‘The Ends of Man.’ At the end he asks, ‘But who, “we”?’ The *referent-we* of man and of its ends, he implies, is not the *referent-we* of the human species itself. . . . The above is *the* single issue with which global warming and climate instability now confronts us and that we have to replace the ends of *the referent-we* of liberal monohumanist Man2 with the ecumenically human ends of the *referent-we* *in the horizon of humanity*” (Wynter, “Unparalleled Catastrophe” 23–24). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “The invention of the global category of Human Others on the basis of the institutionalized inferiorization and subjugation of those [racialized] human beings . . . was indispensible . . . to the over-representation of this ethno-class or Western bourgeois genre or mode of being human, as if it were that of the human itself” (Wynter, “Map” 128–29). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Examples of this move are countless. For a recent one relating to Anthropocene debates, see Kathryn Yusoff: “To be included in the ‘we’ of the Anthropocene is to be silenced by a claim to universalism that fails to notice its subjugations” (12). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I take “otherwise we-ness” from J. Kameron Carter, who opposes to it the “appropriative and expropriative, a thieving and exclusionary ‘We-ness’” of Man: “Man is a figure of ontological and planetary terror, as Calvin Warren powerfully argues. The terror of Man both produces and targets the nonhuman or the less-than-human mass(es) figured as the Racial Other” (n.p.). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This conceptualization of possibility and reproduction emerges from my collaborative work with Kirill Chepurin on Hans Blumenberg, possibility, and modernity. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. In his text on negativity without task, Bataille is responding to Alexandre Kojève’s idea of the End of History, a concept famously later picked up and reworked by Francis Fukuyama, who added a rather Shelleyan twist to the title of his 1992 work *The End of History and the Last Man* (Bataille himself discusses the theme of the “last man” in *Inner Experience*, though this is unremarked by Fukuyama). Despite these twentieth-century permutations, it is important to remember that the End of History is a quintessentially Romantic-era problematic, originating with Hegel. See also Jerome Christensen, *Romanticism at the End of History*.

    Bataille’s concept of *negativité sans emploi* also gave rise to a series of important theoretical reflections on the possibility of a community that would be inoperative (Nancy), without work (Agamben), and without project (Blanchot); Romanticism plays an essential role in this discourse on community, one I trace in my book *All Things Common* (in progress). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In her essay “1492: A New World View,” Wynter investigates how the event of 1492 led to the creation of “the new symbolic construct of Race” as a tool to “legitimate . . . sovereignty” (11). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Raymond wishes “to eradicate from Europe a power which, while every other nation advanced in civilization, stood still, a monument of antique barbarism” (175). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. That Eton is an all-boys school (as it is today) is significant. While this essay will focus more on the question of race in the novel (which has been less often discussed), gender obviously figures into the paradigm of Man in important ways. Verney’s sister Perdita longs for a sovereign task at one point (“Would that I also had a career!”), only to be told later by Raymond that his civilizing task “is no woman’s work” (162–63; 193–94). On “apocalypse and gender” in *The Last Man*, see Chapter 5 of Steven Goldsmith’s *Unbuilding Jerusalem*. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. For a recent reading of the Shelleys incorporating queer theory and ecology, see Colin Carman’s *The Radical Ecology of the Shelleys: Eros and Environment*. Carman discusses the ecology of kissing in *The Last Man*, a key topos for this essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. At another point Verney explicitly associates the reproduction of Man with the word “task”: “Some from among the family of man must survive, and these should be among the survivors; that should be my *task*—to accomplish it my own life were a small sacrifice” (261; emphasis added). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. On connections between logics of improvement and enclosure and logics of property, race, and coloniality, see Gary Fields’s *Enclosure* and Brenna Bhandar’s *Colonial Lives of Property*. Since the logic of improvement is part and parcel of enclosure, it is thus closely tied to proletarianization and the emerging notion of a “work ethic”; and while the racializing force of improvement is more obvious in relation to the improvement project of colonialism, even within Britain, those commoners who needed to be improved into workers were often described in racializing terms. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. As Chris Washington writes in his insightful chapter on *The Last Man*: “Shelley, in the later sections of the novel, targets and takes down humans’ notion of their own sovereignty over the world and its inhabitants” (77). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. One notable exception is Peter Melville’s “The Problem of Immunity in *The Last Man*,” which analyzes the scene in detail and argues contrary to received opinion that Verney does not actually contract the plague from the dying Black man. Melville makes an interesting epidemiological case, but this reading also seems too against the grain given that Verney declares himself to have gotten the plague in the paragraph immediately following the scene. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See Carroll for another reading of this scene and for the racialization of air and atmosphere in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century global context of slavery. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Melville: “[The Black man] exist[s] in opposition to the family circle (obstructing Lionel’s access to it)” (835). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. When Verney later has become the last man, he pens a mournful paean to universal “human sympathy,” but even here divides humanity into colonial categories like “wild and cruel Caribbee” and “merciless Cannibal” (449). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. On (anti-)blackness and the “we,” see Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake* (7) and Stephen Best’s *None Like Us*: “Whatever blackness or black culture is, it cannot be indexed to a ‘we’—or if it is, that ‘we’ can only be structured by and given in its own negation and refusal” (22). Frank B. Wilderson III’s Afro-Pessimism takes this the furthest in the claim to “shi[t] on the inspiration of the personal pronoun *we*” (143). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. “She [plague] has invested [man’s] form, is incarnate in his *flesh*, has entwined herself with his being, and blinds his heaven-seeking eyes” (316; emphasis added). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Regarding decay, contagion, and pathology, Moten notes that “blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay,” though this is also connected to an “impossible, pathological sociality” (177, 210). On “racial pathologies” and the convergence of “race-science” and “race-medicine” in the eighteenth-century British Empire, see Suman Seth’s insightful *Difference and Disease*. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. I am indebted also to Alex Dubilet’s discussion of flesh in his unpublished “Acosmic Immanence.” [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. While the “negro half clad” is described as male, the state of undress, position on the floor, almost featureless description, and homoerotic embrace suggest a drift toward what Spillers, in her foundational essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” sees as the “ungendering” that characterizes the flesh. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. “The joyful welcome of my boys, the soft gratulation of Clara, the pressure of Adrian’s hand, contributed to *unman* me” (241; emphasis added). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. On the enslaved person as (paradoxically) without task and without work, cf. Agamben: “The slave . . . is the human being without work who renders possible the realization of the work of the human being” (23). On slavery and the “unsovereign,” see Sexton’s “The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign,” drawing on Nahum Chandler’s *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. “The seeds of mortal disease had taken root in my bosom” (LM 337). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Compare Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, whom Karera’s article cites, on the “embrace” of blackness as conditioning the embrace of the earth and the nonhuman, and vice versa: “Terrestrial movement toward the nonhuman is simultaneously movement toward blackness, whether blackness is embraced or not, as blackness constitutes the very matter at hand” (“Outer Worlds” 217). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Cf. Johnson: “The Plague is what man’s measures can neither foresee nor master . . . [it] is that which at once stops all systems of meaning from functioning and that against which those systems are necessarily erected” (10). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Cf. numerous phrases like “the swift advance of the disease” (288), the “progress of the plague” (339), etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. “Now is man lord of the creation? Look at him—ha! I see plague! . . . Man, the queller of the elements, the lord of created nature, the peer of demi-gods, existed no longer. . . . Farewell to kingly pomp and warlike pageantry; the crowns are in the dust” (LM 316, 320). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. On Romanticism’s engagement with alternative, groundless forms of sovereignty, see Kir Kuiken’s *Imagined Sovereignties*. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Cf. “the reins hanging loosely in his grasp, [he] left the choice of the path to the instinct of his horse” (418) and “given up all pilotage” (423). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Importantly in this passage, Verney intuits the relation of the notion of “man” as sovereign “lord of creation” to the colonizing imperative: “Of old navies used to stem the giant ocean-waves betwixt Indus and the Pole for slight articles of luxury. Men made perilous journies to possess themselves of earth’s splendid trifles, gems and gold. Human labour was wasted—human life set at nought” (316). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. For a similar logic of indifference and nonproductivity in Shelley’s contemporary Friedrich Schelling, see Kirill Chepurin’s “Indifference and the World: Schelling’s Pantheism of Bliss.” [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. In an article discussing the importance of Shelley’s reading and translation of Spinoza for *The Last Man*, Eileen Hunt Botting links Shelley’s notion of love (in the novel and a poem where she writes “I wed eternity”), with its emphasis on “immanence and embodiment,” to Spinoza’s philosophy (1137). Along these lines I also want to acknowledge Columbia PhD student Diana Newby’s brilliant dissertation chapter on Shelley’s Spinozism in *The Last Man*, which I was able to read and learn from while finishing edits on this essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Compare in *Frankenstein* the creature’s haunting final inscription, scratched in stones and trees, left for Victor Frankenstein: “Come on, my enemy” (174). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. For example, Eileen Hunt Botting’s “Mary Shelley Created 'Frankenstein,' and Then a Pandemic,” *New York Times,* March 13, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/opinion/mary-shelley-sc-fi-pandemic-novel.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Sexton: “No, blackness is not the pathogen in afro-pessimism, the world is. Not the earth, but the world, and maybe even the whole possibility of and desire for a world” (“Social Life” 27). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)