Bio and Abstract- Joseph Albernaz

**Bio**:

Joseph Albernaz is Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. His work focuses on the literature and thought of Romanticism, with particular interests in ecology, political theology, and critical theory. In addition to articles on figures such as Clare, Wordsworth, Hölderlin, and Hans Blumenberg, he is working on a study of ideas of community in the Romantic period and its afterlives entitled *All Things Common*.

**Abstract**:

This essay finds both a critique of the sovereign paradigm of “Man” and an adumbration of other modes of relationality in the political ecology of Mary Shelley’s novel *The Last Man*. After outlining how the novel’s notion of Man is a mechanism of differentiation through work, projects, and tasks, it reads the plague at the heart of the book as interrupting and exposing this entire paradigm of sovereignty. Turning to concepts and theorists from Black Studies (like Sylvia Wynter’s work), “Without Task” offers a new reading of the key scene where the last man contracts the plague from the novel’s only explicitly Black character. I find in this encounter both the offer and refusal of a mode of relationality other than the racialized figure of Man: a shared vulnerability of the flesh, a common unsovereign life. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the possibility of another relationality can only arise if the sovereignty of Man is abdicated. A coda then briefly reflects on reading Shelley’s plague novel in the time of COVID-19.