LITERATURE IN THE NECROPOLIS:
AN ANALYSIS OF DISEASE METAPHOR IN NEW ORLEANS

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Claire Hines. Literature in the Necropolis: An Analysis of Disease Metaphor in New Orleans.

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Over the three centuries of New Orleans's history, many have understood its recurring public-health disasters most notably from cholera, yellow fever, and HIV in a naïve, moralistic way as a sign of its intrinsically wicked population and as divine retribution for the city's immoral culture. If we consider this history through Susan Sontag's books, *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, and through sophisticated literary and cinematic representations of the plague-ridden city, we can see that this explanation of the city's health challenges is driven by the attempt to create meaning from disease to grapple with the mysterious, fear-inducing nature of death. Sontag concludes that metaphors which attribute disease to the moral failings of the afflicted are destructive, stigmatizing those who suffer from disease. The truth about illness is that it has no greater meaning at all. The real source of New Orleans's public health challenges is the overwhelming presence of water, an accident of geography.

After giving an overview of New Orleans history with disease and Sontag's insights on metaphor, the thesis analyzes seven novels and two films that take place in New Orleans and incorporate disease, assessing how equating disease with meaning impacts the reputation of New Orleans. These novels includes Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *The Goodness of St. Roch*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, Josh Russell's *Yellow Jack*, and Valerie Martin's *A Recent Martyr* and *Property*. The thesis analyzes Elia Kazan's film, *Panic in the Streets*, and Neil Jordan's cinematic interpretation of *Interview with the Vampire*.

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Introduction

Over the three centuries of New Orleans's history, many have understood its recurring public-health disasters most notably from cholera, yellow fever, and HIV in a naïve, moralistic way as a sign of its intrinsically wicked population and as divine retribution for the city's immoral culture. If we consider this history through Susan Sontag's book, *Illness as Metaphor*, and through sophisticated literary and cinematic representations of the plague-ridden city, we can see that this explanation of the city's public health challenges is driven by people's attempt to create meaning from disease to grapple with the mysterious and fear-inducing nature of death. In *Illness as Metaphor* and in a continuation of these thoughts in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Sontag concludes that metaphors which attribute disease to the moral failings of the afflicted are ultimately destructive towards those who suffer from disease, stigmatizing them for conditions out of their control. The truth about illness, Sontag suggests, is that it has no greater meaning at all. In fact, the real source of New Orleans's public health challenges is the overwhelming presence of water, an accident of geography.

After giving a general overview of New Orleans's history with disease and Sontag's insights on disease metaphor, I will analyze seven novels and two films that take place in New Orleans and incorporate disease to assess how equating disease with meaning impacts the greater connotation of New Orleanians and the city itself. Exact contemporaries, Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *The Goodness of St. Roch* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* were both published in 1899. A New Orleans native, Dunbar-Nelson's collection of short stories about New Orleans's struggle with disease is the only piece which equates the city's struggle with illness to its greater community and piety. Kate

Chopin, who first moved to the city in her twenties, uses disease metaphor to more classically associate disease with revealing an inner truth, which in her novel's case is an awakening to feminine independence and sexuality. Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* is a mid-twentieth century film, which uses disease as a metaphor for evil and criminality, propagating xenophobic and racist tropes that disease comes from an immoral elsewhere. Another mid-twentieth century work, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* uses an epidemic in New Orleans as a metaphor for the propagation of jazz music, highlighting the speed and uncontrollable nature of the music's proliferation, despite the pushback against music coming from the black, New Orleans community. Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* and Neil Jordan's interpretation of the film nearly twenty years later incorporate the idea of vampirism as a metaphor for disease. Anne Rice's 1976 novel equates vampirism more with the disease metaphor of cancer, eventually coming to a similar conclusion as Sontag that disease is without greater meaning. However, Jordan's film, which comes directly after the start of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, connects vampirism with AIDS. Josh Russell's *Yellow Jack* uses disease metaphor to reveal the inherently sinful nature of New Orleans. Valerie Martin has written two novels, *A Recent Martyr* and *Property*, about New Orleans with both pieces employing disease metaphor to reveal a hidden truth about the characters, or in *Property*'s case, about the nature of the plantation system.

Disease has been fundamental to New Orleans since its inception. Initial struggles with cholera and yellow fever were largely due to the presence of water in the city, which favored the propagation of these illnesses. In the case of HIV/AIDS, the inequalities of the people who constantly suffer from natural disasters perpetuate poor health outcomes

for chronic diseases. Despite these real issues rooted in the geography of the city and its poverty and racism, the plague-ridden nature of the city has long been blamed on New Orleanians and their supposed sinful nature. Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, House Speaker Dennis Hastert in an interview stated that in regard to sending federal aid to New Orleans that rather, "it looks like a lot of that place could be bulldozed" ("Hastert Questions Proposed Efforts to Rebuild"). When the COVID-19 outbreak launched in full-force in the Spring of 2020, New Orleans was one of the first cities to have a major outbreak in the United States. Ignoring the low number of viral cases at the time in America, multiple news sources proceeded to blame Mardi Gras for propagating the spread of the virus, implying that New Orleanians should not have indulged in the excesses of Carnival with a pandemic on the horizon (Canicosa).

The blame pushed onto New Orleans for its struggles with disaster and disease is a direct consequence of the sinful connotations associated with illness. When horrible things happen, it is human nature to want to blame it on immoral people, regardless of the truth. However, this phenomenon has led to disease metaphor, which causes very real negative social consequences to those suffering from illnesses. Furthermore, I postulate that because New Orleans has been a place which has historically suffered from disease, the consequences of disease metaphor thus apply to the city and its residents, contributing to the connotation of New Orleans as an immoral city.

Chapter One
The History of Disease in New Orleans

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cholera and yellow fever worked in horrible tandem, ravaging the New Orleans population. Both diseases prospered in New Orleans because the land was perpetually inundated with unsanitary water. According to infectious disease scholars, yellow fever entered the city most likely through the slave trade. "Yellow Jack" comes into contact with humans through the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which is endemic to West Africa, and therefore likely found New Orleans either from slave ships completing the Middle Passage or from similar ships travelling from the Caribbean ports (Campanella). There is some debate about this origin theory. For example, George Augustin writes that "yellow fever was essentially an American disorder, and that though the infection has to some extent become domiciled on the African shores, it is more than probable it was originally brought there from South America or the West Indies" (Augustin 94). Augustin also notes the theory that the disease originated in the West Indies and was subsequently carried to Mexico and throughout South America, where it was reported to be endemic by the time of the European discovery of the Americas (Augustin 95). Further, he adds that a disease like yellow fever called *Matlazahuatl* was named by the Aztecs in the eleventh century (Augustin 98). Thus, it is uncertain where, how, or why the disease originated, but its plague on humans in tropical climates has been long lasting and widespread, and it long proceeds the settling and development of New Orleans by France.

The vector for yellow fever, the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, only needs water to lay its eggs and blood to drink when hatched, making the swampy city of New Orleans the

perfect climate for virus-carrying mosquitoes to flourish. On the other hand, cholera is from bacteria that is passed through the feces of cholera victims. New Orleans made for an ideal environment for this unfortunate transmission because of its lack of sanitary drinking water. An excess of water from unsanitary streets easily made its way into the city's drinking water, leading New Orleanians to unknowingly consume infected water. The cholera epidemics largely impacted the poorest citizens, as they resided in the most compacted living quarters, making the deadly spread of such water even more efficient.

While yellow fever stuck all in New Orleans indiscriminately, the disease was spread according to a racial logic, a logic best understood through what was happening in 1791 in Saint-Domingue, a French sugar colony. In that year, the first successful slave rebellion, now known as the Haitian Revolution, began there. The revolution led to a mass exodus of white, French slave owners and a few of their loyal slaves from Saint-Domingue to Philadelphia, the largest city in the recently independent United States. Philadelphia had long been closely connected to Saint-Domingue, especially in economic terms. Even before the influx of refugees, twenty percent of all foreign ships arriving in Philadelphia were from Saint-Domingue, carrying coffee, molasses, and most importantly sugar (Clark *The Strange History of the American Quadroon* 12-13). While relations between the French colony and America were prosperous on the eve of the Haitian Revolution, when refugees from the island began pouring in after 1791, they spurred American fear. Not only were the refugees suspected of carrying yellow fever to Philadelphia when an outbreak started in 1793, they were also suspected of bringing their abolitionist fervor and of course, their infamous quadroons and the sexual deviance they represented (Clark *The Strange History of the American Quadroon* 22).

The stereotypical Domingois quadroon was introduced to American readers by the Moreau de Saint-Méry, a Haitian refugee who moved to Philadelphia in 1994. Moreau portrayed her as a hypersexual black woman of light skin, by name, one-quarter black. According to Moreau, such women preferred to be the mistresses of wealthy, white men rather than marry men who shared their African ancestry. The stereotype of the Domingois quadroon traveled to America after the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution and was presumed to thrive in New Orleans. While the relationship was criticized for its sexually impure nature, it also contributed to the power dynamics of the slave system in America, as "this fantasy of sexual triumph supplied an antidote to the terror inspired by the image of Haiti's virile black men poised to export their war on slavery to the American mainland" (Clark *The Strange History of the American Quadroon* 6). Therefore, while a lot of the hatred for the Saint-Domingue people in Philadelphia was blamed on the yellow fever they were presumed to be carrying, it did little to hide the racial underbelly of their disdain, indelibly linking yellow fever in America to race. The yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia led to hysteria in the northeast. Fleeing Philadelphians were "hunted up like felons" and "debarred admittance and turned back in others, whether sound or infected" (Carey 38). In one part of the city, which was tallied at having 21,000 inhabitants, 8,600 were reported to have left that summer of 1793 (Carey 50). Between August and November of that year, 4041 people were counted to have perished: almost 10 percent of the population (Carey 75, Sivitz and Smith). Clearly the Saint-Domingue refugees would not be welcome in Philadelphia for long and especially not their quadroon women.

According to Moreau de Saint-Méry, a Domingois who moved to Philadelphia in 1794, the quadroon women “live in the most obnoxious luxury in Philadelphia, and since this luxury can only be provided by the French and by former French colonials, the contrast of their condition with the misery of the mass of their compatriots is revolting,” clearly emphasizing the heightened tension caused by the quadroon women’s wealth in the face of a disease-ridden city (Clark *The Strange History of the American Quadroon* 23). By 1809, a different group of Haitian refugees arrived by way of Cuba to New Orleans. Over 3,000 of the total of 9,000 were free people of color, many of them light-skinned women. With their arrival, the stereotype of the hypersexual free woman of color became associated with New Orleans, “a site comfortingly located on the geographic margins of the young republic” (Clark *The Strange History of the American Quadroon* 6). They were supposed by many to be bringing with them their *infectious* racial and sexual deviance, thereby marking the supposed character of New Orleans in the popular imagination down to the present day.

Between 1796 and 1905, more than forty thousand New Orleanians died of yellow fever and thousands of cholera victims perished as well, giving New Orleans the nation’s highest death rate (7% in the late eighteenth century and 4.3% in the nineteenth) until the twentieth century. The city was even nicknamed “The Necropolis" due to its frequent battles with disease. With the mosquitoes highest prevalence in the late summer months, yellow fever “season” began in July and ended with the October cooling (Campanella). A survey made in 1905 asserts that in New Orleans, “the mortality was greatest in September” (Augustin 64). The number of dead fluctuated greatly. Of course, yellow fever largely skirted the wealthiest citizens in New Orleans, as every summer

when the fever began, “there was an exodus of the families of the well to-do, leaving the poor, as always, to bear the brunt” (Wilds 5). While only hundreds died of yellow fever during the summers of the 1830s and the early 1840s, 2,300 died in 1847, 8,000 in 1853, and 4,800 in 1858, making the total around 22,500 dead in just twelve years (Campanella). To give context to these shocking numbers, only about 120,000 people lived in New Orleans in 1850, meaning that almost 20% of the New Orleans population perished during those dozen years (Plyer and Gardere).

The New Orleans population was only sustained and grown gradually through its constant influx of immigrants and enslaved people. While yellow fever appeared less frequently in the early 1830s, cholera in a horrible pairing struck with great force in both 1832 and 1833, at one point killing 6,000 in only a month (Campanella). Again, to give context, only about 40,000 people lived in New Orleans in 1830, meaning that 15% of the population perished in that month (Plyer and Gardere).

There were many attempts to stop these outbreaks. Both La Société Médicale de la Nouvelle Orléans for Creole physicians and the Physio-Medical Society for American Doctors were founded between 1817-1819 to attempt to eradicate yellow fever and cholera. Unfortunately, both groups focused largely on the “miasmas” or bad air theory that the diseases spread through the foul-smelling air diffusely present throughout the city. City officials fired cannons into the sky, burned tar, poured “barrels of carbonic acid… into the stinking gutters,” and released sulfur fumes into sickrooms to cleanse the air, while physicians practiced bloodletting to eradicate the disease from the body (Campanella, Wilds 2). The effort to quarantine the sick also failed to quell the spread, as only the mosquito was the vector. For the evacuating wealthy, “the Chicago, St. Louis,

and New Orleans Railroad published an advertisement… [advising] to pack in [their luggage] six-inch-square cloths soaked in white carbolic acid" to stop the spread of the disease into other cities (Wilds 5). In 1834, the Medical College of Louisiana, later becoming Tulane University, was established to combat the city's incessant plagues. Despite the city's efforts, the cause of the epidemics evaded the medical community. When the Union overtook the city during the Civil War, greater sanitation greatly decreased the prevalence of disease in the city, only for the number of deaths to rise again after the war ended with two bouts of cholera striking the city in 1866 and 3,000 yellow fever deaths in 1867 (Campanella).

The media played a great role in attempting to hide news of epidemics in New Orleans. For example, when a ship carrying yellow fever entered the New Orleans harbor on May 24, 1878, there was no news of yellow fever deaths (despite there being many) until July 23rd. On July 22nd, the *New Orleans Times* even reported that there was "neither yellow fever or even severe malarial fever here" (Wilds 3). The reason for this concealment was profit. Whenever yellow fever was reported in New Orleans, all commerce in the city was shut down and quarantine commenced. A *Picayune* editorial discussed how "physicians declared that they had not encountered in an extensive experience in treating patients a single case of the yellow fever; although some of them sent away and kept away from the city members of their own families," showcasing how much public desire affected yellow fever reporting and the corruption that existed within the medical community itself (Wilds 16). This also calls into question how many yellow fever deaths were left unreported and therefore never counted in the total of yellow fever casualties. These lies however did not come without some legal consequences, as on

January 17, 1899, the *Baton Rouge Advocate* published a letter by Dr. MacKowen accusing the president of the city board of New Orleans of threatening physicians who attempted to report yellow fever cases (Wilds 19). All to say, yellow fever affected every aspect of New Orleans outside of public health, including media, politics, law, and the economy.

With many different theories about the cause of both epidemics, it was difficult for the city to rally behind any one idea. It was often believed that immigrants brought and contributed to the many bouts of plague (a phenomena that carried over from Philadelphia). During the years in which most yellow fever victims perished, New Orleans had the greatest number of immigrants of any Southern city. 52,000 immigrants of largely German and Irish backgrounds moved to New Orleans in just 1851 alone, and 1853 was the worst year of fever in the city's history. The concept that disease was blamed largely on immigrants was enforced by the different names that yellow fever has been given throughout the centuries such as "Barbadoes Fever," "Palatine Fever," "Spanish Fever," and "Strangers' Fever" (Augustin 71–82). While the disease was blamed on the immigrants, it was largely new residents of New Orleans that succumbed to the virus. Notably in the last year of yellow fever outbreak in the city, the virus was blamed on Italian immigrants who "unloaded fruit ships from Central America" (Wilds 30.) While this theory was plausible, it only worsened the xenophobia in the city. Immigrants were initially more susceptible to the virus, for native New Orleanians could become "acclimated," a term to describe people who had the virus, survived, and were thus immune (Campanella). Native New Orleanians clearly had a greater number of years in the city to contract and acclimate to the annual bouts of fever.

It should also be noted that the blame of disease on immigrants was not only due to race, but also religion. For much of America's early history, the nation was devoutly Protestant and anti-Catholic. Because a large proportion of new immigrants to New Orleans were from Catholic countries such as Ireland and Italy, blame for the illness also connected to divine intervention. Catholics were seen as immoral people by the Protestant majority in America, so the fact that there were so many Catholics immigrating to New Orleans and dying from disease served as proof that their religion made them more susceptible to illness, further evidence of Catholic evil (Clark *The Strange History of the American Quadroon* 121).

The first unofficial reference connecting the mosquito to yellow fever came "by Benjamin Rush in his *Medical Inquiries and Observations*" in 1798 in which he writes of the yellow fever outbreak in 1797 in Philadelphia that "mosquitos were more numerous during the prevalence of the fever," but he never postulates that the mosquitos may have been the cause, only a correlation (Augustin 50). Dr. Nott, a Mobile physician, made the connection between yellow fever and mosquitos in 1870 in an address to the Board of Health of the City of New York, stating that "the children of parents who have lived a generation or two in the climate suffer comparatively little; they seem to become acclimatized against the poison of these insects as they do against the poison of yellow fever" (Augustin 46). Unknowingly and based on anecdotal information, Dr. Nott made the connection between insects and yellow fever. If his hypothesis had been further researched, it might have saved New Orleans from another thirty-five years of plague-ridden summers.

Dr. Carlos Finlay, an epidemiologist from Cuba, was the first to publish a study concluding that the virus came from the mosquito in 1882. Many refused to believe him, and the media was little help in spreading this news, as they tended to avoid dwelling on disease too much because it kept business, and even more importantly, travel to the city down. It took other prominent physicians such as Dr. Rudolph Matas, Dr. William Gorgas, and Dr. Walter Reed to come to similar conclusions in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to make any changes in terms of public health legislature (Campanella).

In New Orleans, a shift in thought began with "a meeting of the Orleans Parish Medical Society on February 23, 1901," which featured the report of Dr. Walter Reed on the mosquito theory and led to a series of investigations to test the validity of his findings in the city (Wilds 26). Over the next couple of years, these investigations continuously showed the relationship between the mosquito and yellow fever, and eventually led to public health initiatives to decrease the number of mosquitoes in the city. By the time of the last big yellow fever outbreak in 1905, New Orleans was prepared and used extreme methods to eradicate the presence of the bug, effectively ending the century-long fight with what had come to be called "Yellow Jack." It so happens that the early twentieth century realization about the mosquito coincided with the Progressive Era in which many city planning and engineering advancements were made (Campanella). In 1897, Louisiana held its first convention for the Institute of Hygiene, which led to the first clean water initiative in the state, which unknowingly helped the fight against yellow fever and cholera in the state as well (Augustin 1182). These ideological advancements led to the development of the New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board, in which drinking water

was purified and distributed, ending the previous roof-collected water systems that housed the yellow fever mosquito and cholera bacteria.

It was Dr. Reed's belief in Dr. Finlay's theory on yellow fever that led New Orleans to be the first to adopt mosquito control and sanitation measures in addition to ship fumigation and quarantine. In addition, during the last major outbreak of yellow fever in 1905, a manifesto was released to the New Orleans population, stipulating that citizens empty all containers of standing water, screen their own cisterns for mosquitos, place oil in all receptables that could not be emptied, sleep under mosquito nets, and fortify all entrances and exits with mesh (Augustin 1064). These efforts worked, and in 1905, the head of the New Orleans health board declared that while "the first victory over yellow fever was in Havana, the greatest [is] in New Orleans" (Wilds 33). By 1915, New Orleans's death rate dropped dramatically to 1.8% (Campanella).

The New Orleans battle against cholera and yellow fever raged for nearly two hundred years, and while better water sanitation gave the city a brief reprieve from disease, clean water did little to help the city sixty-five years later when the HIV epidemic ransacked the city. Unlike cholera and yellow fever, New Orleans's battle with HIV/ AIDS has no direct connection with water, but there is an indirect connection. As the lowest land in New Orleans is typically the least expensive due to higher likelihood of damage from flooding and catastrophic hurricanes, this is where the poorest New Orleanians reside. This constant displacement due to water worsens healthcare access and health-outcomes for these disadvantaged residents. By the year 1990 after ten years of known HIV/AIDS infections in the United States, New Orleans ranked in the top ten of cities with the highest rates of AIDS infections, having a rate of 23.8 per 100,000

residents. Presently, New Orleans has the second highest case rate of HIV infections in U.S. cities and fifth for AIDS case rates. Louisiana as a state ranks second in the country for highest rates of HIV/AIDs. These surprising statistics come down to a few factors. First, New Orleans has a higher rate of "risk factor" groups than many American cities in terms of homosexual men as well as intravenous drug users. Because these two groups are often ignored and villainized in society, especially until very recently, the funding by health officials and government agencies has been unacceptably lacking to help these groups. In addition, minority groups and those of lower socioeconomic status, both populations being disproportionately high in New Orleans, are at a greater risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. The city's frequent battles with natural disasters also makes sustaining extensive public health measures difficult amid city-wide chaos. It is the blatant disinterest of public health officials and government funding to help these stigmatized groups that has led New Orleans to have a disproportionate number of people suffering with this disease and unable to get proper treatment. In addition to this disinterest due to the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS, New Orleans itself has struggled with the stigma of its inherent immorality, making public health progress difficult (CDC).

To understand why New Orleans has been historically considered an immoral, deviant city, it is important to note the ground on which it sits: a swamp. Swamps carry with them a variety of connotations from their poor odor to their dangerous wildlife, and their generally unpredictable nature of their shift with rainfall. Although there are many areas where people live that pose threats, none compete on a metaphorical level with the evil within swamps, which directly clashes with the American and European ideas about

virtue. American culture considers the pinnacle of morality to be successful industry while colonial Europe and especially Southern planters greatly valued instilling order over untamed nature to be of greatest virtue. Both industry and order are the direct antithesis of swamps, as they are almost impossible to control with their tendency to flood and refusal to drain, making them terrors for successful industry. Thus, the swamp refused to conform to white ideals, fashioning it instead into a place where white anxiety runs wild (Wilson 3-5). This anxiety led swamps to become things of lore, representing chaos, death, and hidden evils. As there is no disconnection between New Orleans and the swamp, the city's infamous reputation is indelibly linked to the swamp and all it represents.

As New Orleans suffered far more often from epidemics than its urban counterparts in other parts of the country, the cause was blamed of course on its evil nature: the swamp. As disease and their viral or bacterial causes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were little understood, physicians and citizens alike understood disease through what their senses could understand. Miasmas or "bad air" was a popular theory of the time, holding that breathing malodorous air, which swamps released plenty of, caused disease. Going farther than just the theory of miasmas, Gayarré, "the father of New Orleans history," explains some of the other negative connotations of New Orleans based on its swampish soil. It was widely believed that the miasmas did not just cause disease, but the actual decay of the body and mind, driving the inhabitants of New Orleans to a state of sloth and debauchery (Wilson 9-10). Of course, these thoughts about New Orleans and morality extended to their plight with infection. A young Louisiana medical student concluded in 1878 that disease outbreaks "would drive a community to

treat the victims of a contagious or infectious disease as though they were criminals, nay worse" (Augustin 1176).

While New Orleans has without a doubt had many difficulties sustaining itself since its origin, these issues have less to do with an inherently wicked city and more to do with its damp geography. The area that New Orleans sits upon is surprisingly new land. The land around the Mississippi River only became solid about 4,000 years ago (after the Great Sphinx of Giza was already constructed). As glaciers grew and shrunk, sediment was transferred to the banks of what would become the Mississippi River and the land of New Orleans (Powell 4). The land is so new that in many ways it is still in its adolescent stages, not sure exactly where it will end up. Despite this, the land is incredibly valuable because it serves as an ideal place to receive and ship goods between the Atlantic Ocean and all the land that the Mississippi River passes through. This value was even recognized by Native Americans, who lived around the New Orleans area many years before the first Europeans arrived. Native Americans called the land where New Orleans sits "Balbancha," which translates to "place of many tongues," as the city was used for Native American trade between different groups who lived around the Mississippi River (Kaplan-Levenson). Although unlike Europeans, it is shown that Native Americans often moved from one area to another, as the land would change and become uninhabitable. Europeans were intent on staying in one place, thus creating the battle between swamp and man. Even the exact land that the city rests upon was not a thoughtful decision, but rather a quick attempt by France to grow more tobacco in their own colonies to avoid paying the outrageous taxes of their imperial rivals, saving themselves from even more

debt (Powell 7, 28). This quick thinking led to a very wealthy trading town with many expensive water problems.

It is quite ironic that Henry Latrobe and his father, who built the city's first municipal water system, both died of yellow fever during their effort in the 1820s (Wilson 6). This story underscores the entirety of New Orleans's battle in the sense that water appears to prevail. Just as New Orleans began to conquer cholera and yellow fever, global warming has begun to jeopardize its future with seemingly incessant hurricanes such as the recent Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Ida. When New Orleanians attempt to contain it, water contorts, shifts, and pushes right back. As Andy Horowitz writes in *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015*, "disasters come from within," meaning that Katrina did not happen randomly. Without every decision made since the founding of New Orleans in 1718, the infamous Katrina would never have happened, or at least not in the way that it did. And it is without a doubt that every decision made since the founding of the city, especially those that deal with public health, have been made around the city's immense battle with water. In 1905, the Orleans Parish Medical Society released a statement stating that "the election of our health officers should be forever eliminated from the domain of politics. The system which commercialism fosters must now be broken forever and the medical profession must take a firm stand… and New Orleans will rise to a higher, sturdier prosperity, because it will be built on the rock of truth" (Wilds 34). In effect, this statement made in the earlier 20th century about the victory over yellow fever reveals the crux of the New Orleans disease crisis: the mixture of agendas between politics, media, the economy, public health, and healthcare inevitably leads to poor health outcomes and the general corruption of healthcare.

The battles with cholera, yellow fever, and malaria directly stemmed from the problem of standing, contaminated water in the city. Modern health crises also relate to water in the sense that those with the least social standing tend to live in the areas with the lowest elevation, which are most prone to flood. The frequent and expensive battles with water fought by the poorest New Orleanians no doubt contribute to their worse health outcomes, especially with diseases like HIV and even the current battle with COVID-19. In New Orleans, health and water go hand in hand in the city's incessant battle to survive, yet this battle is constantly obscured by the flashy notion that disease is produced by a sick, sinful city and its moral consequences.

Chapter Two
The Disease Metaphor

Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and its Metaphors* serve as the principal critical theory surrounding disease metaphors in literature. She wrote *Illness as Metaphor* in the 1970s after receiving a breast cancer diagnosis with the purpose of proving that "illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness- and the healthiest way of being ill- is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (Sontag 3). This goal reflects the fact that disease has always been thought of in relation to metaphor. Sontag hypothesizes that disease metaphor arose mainly due to fear and ignorance. Even though everyone will experience it, "death is the obscene mystery, the ultimate affront, the thing that cannot be controlled" (Sontag 55). Therefore, metaphor arises out of a desire to explain disease and death, to make reason out of the random and indiscriminate. Disease strikes without regard for its victim, yet metaphorical renderings of illness seek to blame individuals or the community, answering the overlying question of "why me?" or "why them?" Sontag summarizes that "theories of illness are powerful means of placing blame on the ill. Patients who are instructed that they have unwittingly caused their disease are also made to feel that they have deserved it" (57). Of course, not all diseases have held the same weight in terms of metaphorical representation in literature. The most common diseases to be metaphorized are those "thought to be multi-determined (that is, mysterious)," as these unexplainable, fear-inducing affiliations are easiest to assign moral blame (Sontag 61). Before the invention of modern medicine, "considering illness as a punishment is the oldest idea of what causes illness," with plagues being "collective calamities, and judgements on a community." Hippocrates, the founder of modern medicine, even had to rule out God's

wrath as the cause of the bubonic plague (Sontag 133). Sontag battles against seemingly a cornerstone of literature by confronting disease metaphor although she is not alone in this effort. The first example of Sontag's stance can be seen in the Roman poet Lucretius, who wrote against the metaphor of health being a song, stating that "I speak of *harmony*. Whatever it is, / Give it back to the musicians" (Sontag 95). I will be using Sontag's arguments about disease metaphor to showcase how this style of metaphor has been used repeatedly in literature about New Orleans, which has contributed to the city's and its people's immoral reputation.

Sontag describes how the mythization of disease has led the labeling of an illness to be deeply demoralizing. With the foundation of disease metaphor being to assign blame to the diseased, "any disease that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally, contagious" (Sontag 5). Therefore, people labeled with a diagnosis often feel shunned by not only their community, but also close family and friends. In the field of health sociology, this phenomenon has been well-studied, especially in the realm of mental health. Illness is understood to cause stigma because "like crime, sickness is a form of deviance, or departure from group-established norms," which leads to the poor treatment of the ill by society (Freund, et al. 126). This notion that the very labeling of a disease leads to worse outcomes has been discussed through disease metaphor. In Stendhal's 1827 novel, *Armance*, a mother refuses to utter the diagnosis of tuberculosis to her ill son in fear that the label of his affliction would lead to his prompt death (Sontag 6). The metaphor that it is not the disease, but the diagnosis, that leads to death has carried over to real medical practice. In Italy and France today, it is advised for doctors to inform the patient's family, not the patient, of their

cancer diagnosis to avoid the label being a physical and mental burden on an already ill body (Sontag 6). The mythicization of disease therefore has real consequences and "as long as a particular disease is treated as an evil, invincible predator, not just a disease, most people with cancer will indeed be demoralized by learning what disease they have." Sontag's solution is put simply: "De-mythicize it" (6).

The metaphor of disease comes from the human effort to not only understand, but also avoid death. Sontag argues that the mythization of disease "is a measure of how much harder it has become in advanced societies to come to terms with death" (7). Especially today, doctors are expected to provide miraculous cures. Their knowledge is considered paramount, absolute, and in a way, mystical. Medicine is viewed like magic. However, this notion is false; much of the mechanisms of physiology are still unknown, and medicine is largely an act of trial and error. As death is not accepted, "dying people are best spared the news that they are dying, and that the good death is the sudden one" (Sontag 7). Death is considered an abomination to life, despite it being the most constant presence to the living. Therefore, because death is little accepted nor understood, everything around it becomes mystified. In addition, diseases, which spread and cause death in an unknown way, are further metaphorized. While well-understood diseases like cardiovascular disease are understood to be a mechanical failure, cancer and other mythicized diseases are "ill-omened, abominable, repugnant to the senses" (Sontag 7). A disease thought to lead to a quick death is far more acceptable than a slow one, which allows for a confrontation with death itself. Famous educator Alice Trillin coined the phrase "The Land of the Sick People" to describe her experience with cancer, emphasizing how once ill, the sick become separated from the healthy in society (699).

Sontag makes similar claims noting that some diseases "[turn] the patient into one of 'them'" (126). Illness and especially the mysterious illness divides and stigmatizes, leading to the development of outrageous metaphors to make sense of the unexplainable nature of disease and mortality.

Naming notably has much power when it comes to mystifying a disease. Tuberculosis was coined "consumption… as early as 1398," showcasing how the disease consumed the individual's body before death. Cancer comes from the Latin *cancer*, meaning "crab," which was meant to define how the veins of a tumor resemble the legs on a crab. However, the word later came to represent how metastatic cancer creeps like a crab throughout the body (Sontag 9-10). However, both diseases were defined by the idea of consumption, as an early definition of cancer was something that "consumes slowly and secretly" (Sontag 9). The two diseases were not separated until 1882 when tuberculosis was discovered to be bacterial, leading to the metaphors of both diseases to truly separate (Sontag 11). The name of a disease is meant to define some aspect of its nature. The various names of yellow fever were previously mentioned, serving to attempt to define where epidemics begin. However, it is also worth noting the words that arose from disease. For example, *lépreuse* still means "a moldering stone façade" in French, which only arose from leprosy being so feared that it became a metaphor for imperfection (Sontag 58). Sontag also notes that from pestilence came the word pestilent, which means "according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*… 'injurious to religion, morals, or public peace'" (Sontag 58). While seemingly harmless definitions, the labels and associated words surrounding disease directly stem from disease being made into metaphor.

Much of *Illness as Metaphor* differentiates between the metaphors of tuberculosis and those of cancer, showcasing how disease metaphors are created, propagated, and impact society. Tuberculosis is characterized by extreme contrast with moments of intense illness and alternative times of abnormal vitality while cancer is depicted as a steady, progressive deadening of life. Tuberculosis in the mythical conception "is thought to produce spells of euphoria, increased appetite, exacerbated sexual desire" while cancer is steadfastly de-sexualized and feared (Sontag 12). The words describing each disease emphasize this differentiation. A person with tuberculosis is "consumed" while someone with cancer "'shrivels' (Alice James's word) or 'shrinks' (Wilhelm Reich's word)." Consumption is described as galloping while cancer has stages, not gaits (Sontag 14). These differences showcase how tuberculosis is considered quick and less painful with moments of euphoria while cancer is slow and excruciating. In summary, "the dying tubercular is pictured as made more beautiful and more soulful; the person dying of cancer is portrayed as robbed of all capacities of self-transcendence, humiliated by fear and agony" (Sontag 16). Even the location of cancer was considered shameful. While pulmonary tuberculosis (the most common variety) impacts the lungs, a pure lifeforce, cancer tends to impact less "virtuous" parts of the body such as the breast, colon, rectum, prostate, cervix, and bladder (Sontag 17). These aspects of both diseases are used as metaphors in literature, creating art out of illness.

While both tuberculosis and cancer are usually painful and can be very deadly without treatment, the depictions of each disease in literature are shockingly different despite their high death rates. Charles Dickens in *Nicholas Nickleby* describes tuberculosis as a disease which "'refines' death" (Sontag 16). Tuberculosis is used as a

metaphor synonymous with excess passion and love. In Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, Milly Theale is prescribed love as the cure for her tuberculosis, and upon discovering that her love interest is engaged to her friend, she succumbs to the disease (Sontag 21). In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Little Eva, as she dies of tuberculosis, asks her father "to become a serious Christian and free his slaves," showcasing the virtuous, innocent nature assigned to the disease (Sontag 41). Instead of signifying some greater purity and vitality, cancer rather manifests in those who repress passion. In Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Ivan dies of cancer after living a life of selfishness, connecting cancer to the common trope of "characterological resignation" (Sontag 23). In the 1952 film *Ikuru*, a civil servant learns that he has terminal stomach cancer and decides to atone for his average life by fighting against the bureaucracy he served through work in slum neighborhoods (Sontag 42). In W. H. Auden's poem "Miss Gee," it is written about cancer that "Childless women get it, / And men when they retire;/ It's as if there had to be some outlet/ For their foiled creative fire" (Sontag 49). Auden's work again showcases the common metaphor that cancer is caused by repression and regrets. The differences between cancer and tuberculosis metaphors showcase how disease metaphors can take on a positive or a negative light depending on the fear and connotations surrounding these diseases. Despite the horrific, painful deaths that both diseases cause, their public consideration differs, impacting the stigma surrounding each illness.

Both cancer and tuberculosis are considered diseases of passion, that is, either excessive (TB) or repressed (cancer) with the metaphor of disease being that "the character causes the disease" (Sontag 46). The metaphor surrounding tuberculosis became so literal and popular that it became a sign of high society to have the

consumptive look. Sontag asserts that in the nineteenth century "it became rude to eat heartily. It was glamorous to look sickly" (28). French composer, Camille Saint Saëns wrote of this phenomenon in 1913, stating that "Chopin was tubercular at a time when good health was not chic… It was fashionable to be pale and drained; Princess Belgiojoso strolled along the boulevards… pale as death in person" (Sontag 28). Aristocrats were able to showcase their power and wealth through their sickly external appearance, which was considered to represent a greater intellect, sexuality, and vivacity. The disease metaphor romanticized tuberculosis so much so that "sickness was a way of making people 'interesting'- which is how "romantic" was originally defined" (Sontag 30). Shelley wrote to Keats (both poets and sufferers of tuberculosis) that "consumption is a disease particularly fond of people who write such good verses as you have done" (Sontag 32). Even the cure for tuberculosis played into the romantic and artistic metaphor surrounding the disease. "There were special places thought to be good for tuberculars: in the nineteenth century, Italy; then, islands in the Mediterranean or the South Pacific; in the twentieth century, the mountains, the desert- all landscapes that had themselves been successfully Romanticized" (Sontag 32). These locations and the goal of healing allowed artists to escape from their everyday life and focus on their art, further propagating the myth that tuberculosis unlocks creativity. It was also thought that tuberculosis was caused by a creative gene with evidence coming from "the families of Keats, the Brontës, Emerson, Thoreau, Trollope" (Sontag 38). It was believed, in essence, that tuberculosis and cancer happened to specific individuals due to their specific character traits.

While celebrating some diseases and stigmatizing others may seem preposterous in the age of modern medicine, society today continues to do just that albeit with different

illnesses. In the twentieth century, the celebration of certain mental illnesses began. Those who suffer from depression, bipolar disorder, psychosis, substance abuse, and even suicidal ideation are considered more artistic than those without. The cultural phenomenon of the "27 Club" has become popularized, which chronicles how many artists die at the age of 27 from living recklessly with mental illnesses. The group consists of many notable figures such as Jimi Hendrix, Amy Winehouse, and Kurt Cobain. This celebration and idolization of mentally ill creatives exactly mimics the fetishization of those with tuberculosis. Sontag points out that the "metaphor of the psychic voyage is an extension of the romantic idea of travel that was associated with tuberculosis…it is not an accident that the most common metaphor for an extreme psychological experience viewed positively- whether produced by drugs or by becoming psychotic- is a trip" (35). Of course, today cancer is still stigmatized, and many cancer patients today find themselves in "The Land of the Sick." That is, isolated from those too uncomfortable with illness and mortality. However, HIV/AIDS has taken precedent as the disease most maliciously stigmatized and the character of those with the disease subsequently vilified.

In Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, she begins by celebrating the fact that cancer has lost some of its stigma with better prognosis through new treatments and thorough screening, but notes "that societies need to have one illness which becomes identified with evil and attaches blame to its victims," and that illness in today's society, of course, is AIDS (103). Much of the reason why AIDS and HIV are vilified is due to already stigmatized groups largely contracting the disease. In America, HIV is more common among certain "risk factor" groups, which include homosexual men and intravenous drug users. As sex between men and illicit drug use is considered delinquent

behavior, these groups contracting a terminal illness was considered as appropriate punishment for their immorality. For many, the real burden of the disease lies in the "social death that precedes the physical one," as contracting HIV is thought to expose sinful behavior, which explains why so many HIV+ people keep their diagnosis secret (Sontag 122). Like cancer, AIDS is considered a difficult, honorless death, unlike tuberculosis (Sontag 125). Like yellow fever, AIDS is also inextricably linked to racism and xenophobia, as it has been hypothesized that the disease is zoonotic, that is transferred from animals to humans, in Africa through the consumption of monkeys with SIV (Simian immunodeficiency virus). Regardless of the original development of HIV, this theory has allowed for "a familiar set of stereotypes about animality, sexual license, and blacks" (Sontag 140). In addition, AIDS also brought religion back into the disease metaphor, which had been previously lost during the advancements of the Scientific Revolution and the Age of Enlightenment. Many conservative, religious leaders made the connection between the disease and sin. For example (and there are many), Jerry Falwell, a Baptist preacher, stated "that 'AIDS is God's judgment on a society that does not live by His rules'" (Sontag 148). Like cancer, AIDS is "a metaphor for what is feared or deplored" (Sontag 155). Just as tuberculosis caused a cultural revolution, HIV also propagated a "return to what is perceived as 'conventions,'" with the end of the sexual revolution (1960s-1980s) and a return to monogamy, religion, and traditional conservatism (Sontag 166).

Taking the history of disease metaphor into account, it becomes clear why New Orleans has long been considered an immoral, promiscuous city. New Orleans's constant battle since its inception with yellow fever, cholera, and, in recent decades, with

HIV/AIDS has been used in literature to make points about the city's morals. The classic disease metaphor showcases "disease as a punishment for wickedness" and "even if the disease is not thought to be a judgment on the community, it becomes one- retroactively- as it sets in motion an inextricable collapse of morals and manners" (Sontag 40). For example, *The Decameron*'s description of a Florence plague serves only to highlight the unethical behavior of the city's populace (Sontag 40). Under the shadow of well-known disease metaphors, New Orleans's constant struggle against disease places the city in the mind as sinful based on the mythicization of disease. It is also typical of the disease metaphor to blame any illness of foreign peoples. One early example being the massacres of Jews that took place in Europe during the bubonic plague, which stopped after the end of the pandemic (Sontag 70). New Orleans's constant influx of immigrants fueled xenophobic discourse, which connects to Sontag's conclusion that disease metaphors insist that "disease invariably comes from somewhere else" in the eyes of communities (Sontag 135).

The concept of the disease metaphor directly influenced New Orleans's immoral reputation. As "disease imagery is used to express concern for social order, …the modern metaphors suggest a profound disequilibrium between individual and society" (Sontag 72). New Orleans was seen as a place without moral balance, rather as a place of ostentatious excess, and disease therefore arose out of this societal imbalance. Cities have often been related to disease metaphors, especially in the nineteenth century when large cities began to become more common. Cities were seen as a cancer due to their unnatural growth and poor living conditions, leading to disease being "the synonym of whatever was 'unnatural'" (Sontag 73). These anti-industrial disease metaphors were also

propagated by miasma being the most popular theory of disease transmission, as cities especially before public sanitation smelled much worse than rural areas (Sontag 130). The diseases in New Orleans are seen "as a sign of evil, something to be punished," "judgements on a community," and most specifically for New Orleans and generally for the HIV/AIDS epidemic "retribution for the licentiousness of a community" (Sontag 81, 133, 134). Sontag asserts that people understand "any catastrophic epidemic as a sign of moral laxity or political decline" (142).

Sontag makes general statements about the American love and fascination with the apocalypse, which directly correlates to the many apocalyptic-like diseases and disasters in New Orleans history. She describes America as deeply evangelical in the sense of belief in radical endings and beginnings. New Orleans, despite its reputation of debauchery, is deeply rooted in religion since its founding, as seen by the Ursuline nuns. Therefore, "the sense of cultural distress or failure" caused by constant disease and disaster "gives rise to the desire for a clean sweep" and radical change (Sontag 174). With the overabundance of discussion that the below sea-level, diseased New Orleans will never last "has come the increasing unreality of the apocalypse," which can be seen with the laissez-faire handling of disasters by citizens and city officials (Sontag 175). The idea of New Orleans's impermanence contributes to its allure and its mythicized metaphor.

The purpose of metaphors is to simplify or elucidate something complex. For example, comparing the human body to a battlefield or political structure to the body serves to make simpler what is complex, but it hurts and distorts the reality of the diseased state. Making diseases into a metaphor for immorality brings with it "an

invitation to self-righteousness, if not to fanaticism," changing the way people treat the ill or view entire cities, as is the case in New Orleans (Sontag 84). Sontag simplifies the disease metaphor as "a vehicle for the large insufficiencies of this culture: for our shallow attitude toward death, for our anxieties about feeling, for our reckless improvident responses to our real 'problems of growth,' for our inability to construct an advanced industrial society that properly regulates consumption, and for our justified fears of the increasingly violent course of history" (Sontag 88). Fears about disease lead to the claims that "the survival of the nation, of civilized society, of the world itself is… at stake-claims that are a familiar part of building a case for repression" (Sontag 173). To simplify and understand disease, the disease metaphor has in turn made illness more socially complex. The metaphors lead to stigma and fear of people with diseases as well as the places in which the disease arises. One major purpose in the pursuit of literature is to explain the human experience. There is no doubt that disease and dying are both naturally a part of life and since they are feared and foreign, many authors have attempted to employ metaphors to make sense of disease. This is an impossible task. While diseases can be explained scientifically, there are no moral grounds for disease, which brings no comfort to the healthy nor the sick, leading to the further propagation and belief in metaphor. New Orleans history is full of natural disasters, diseases and otherwise, which inevitably will lead to mythicization about the place and the people within. However, outside of the text, these metaphors have very real consequences for New Orleans.

Chapter Three

Disease, Religion, and Femininity in Late Nineteenth Century New Orleans Literature

In early New Orleans, female piety and disease were closely interwoven because of the actions of the Ursuline nuns. The Ursuline nuns were a group of women who originated in Italy with the goal of teaching women and girls a Catholic education, as they would be the first teachers to their children. This movement spread to France especially in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation and the French Wars of Religion (Clark "Ursulines"). The Catholic desire for missionary work was largely initiated by the Protestant Reformation to maintain Catholicism against Protestant conversions. This led to groups such as the male confraternities of the Jesuits and Capuchins to spread around the world including to French-held Louisiana. In Louisiana specifically, disputes between the Jesuits and Capuchins stunted their conversion efforts, which were primarily targeted at Native Americans (Clark "Battle on the Bayou: Jesuits & Capuchins"). The Ursulines also wanted to spread Catholicism to the New World but were not favored by France over their male counterparts. With the failure of the male confraternities and the hospital in New Orleans desperately needing staffing (commonly done at the time by religious groups), a group of Ursuline nuns were sent from France to New Orleans in 1727. The Ursuline nuns were far more successful than their male counterparts, which was partly because the nuns were equally as willing to convert enslaved Africans, as they were Native Americans (Clark "Ursulines").

In 1730, the Ursuline nuns established a female congregation called the Ladies Congregation of the Children of Mary. By the late 1730s, more than one third of all free and marriageable women were members of the congregation (Clark "By All the Conduct

of Their Lives" 769). By 1744, the group grew to include 85 women and girls, which was about two-thirds of free women living in New Orleans at the time (Clark *Masterless Mistresses 73*). A key element of the congregation was taking care of the sick and dying. When a member of the congregation took ill, another member was responsible for visiting that person and leading them through prayer. Members were directed to extend this treatment to all in their community. The congregation also performed last rites for the dying in New Orleans. This religious community would have been fundamental in helping New Orleanians through their many struggles with illness, "transforming sickness and death into opportunities for spiritual growth and a demonstration of community solidarity" (Clark "By All the Conduct of Their Lives" 790). Unlike common stereotypes that depict New Orleans women as morally deviant, the reality is that most women living in New Orleans were especially pious. While frequent bouts of disease in New Orleans led to associations of the city with immorality and evil according to Sontag's understanding of disease metaphor, this understanding is especially false considering the religious foundation in the city.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson, who was born and raised in New Orleans, wrote powerful prose, which showcases the reality of living in nineteenth century New Orleans. Many of Dunbar-Nelson's early short stories focus almost exclusively on life in New Orleans, which of course, was an experience she was intimately familiar with. Dunbar-Nelson was especially familiar with the tensions between race and class in New Orleans, as she was born to a black seamstress, who was raised as a slave, and her father, whom she never met, was reportedly a white sailor (Green 113). Her experiences in childhood and young adulthood allowed her intimate access into the realities of working-class life in the city,

leading her fiction to be a wonderful analysis of everyday New Orleanians. It should also be noted that many of the early understandings of New Orleans life are written by women, which is another phenomenon that can be understood through the Ursuline nuns. One of the missions of the Ursulines was female education for the purpose of teaching Catholicism, but this goal also created a unique society in New Orleans in the sense that an unusual number of women and even more unusual for the time, enslaved women, were literate. There have even been studies done which showcase that in some periods, there were more literate women than men living in New Orleans (Clark *Masterless Mistresses 115*). This precedent of educating young girls regardless of race and class set the precedent for Dunbar-Nelson's literature.

Dunbar-Nelson's *The Goodness of Saint Roch* is a showcase of much of her early work's goal of highlighting the reality of New Orleans life for the average citizen. The title of this collection of short stories published in 1899 is telling of her aim for these stories. The original title for the collection was *The Goodness of Saint Rocque and Other Tales*, which was later edited to the correct spelling of "Roch" in subsequent editions. Dunbar-Nelson's unique spelling of Roch is the only known instance of this specific spelling, serving as a clue to her desire to manipulate the classic interpretation of the Saint into something new, and possibly, more New Orleans (Green 114). Saint Roch was a Catholic priest who lived in fourteenth century Italy and France and was granted sainthood for his miraculous curing of plague. Of course, Saint Roch became an important Saint for New Orleanians in particular because of their frequent problems with disease and death. A New Orleans priest, Father Thevis, famously invoked Saint Roch during the yellow fever epidemic of 1866-1867, vowing to build a chapel in Saint Roch's

"honor if none of his parishioners died from the fever that year" (Green 114). His prayers worked with none of his congregation passing from that year's bout of fever, and the chapel was thus built in 1871, where it is still visited by those in search of blessings for good health (Green 114). Tara Green specifically focuses on Saint Roch's alternative meaning with him also being the patron saint of bachelors, or those men living on the social outskirts of society. She extrapolates that these two meanings go hand in hand, as "the condition of alienation is as all-encompassing and ultimately as life threatening as a plague" (Green 114). Further, it could be understood that plague and the connotations of disease itself may also lead for a person or society to be alienated and experience social death. Dunbar-Nelson's would have been aware of the correct spelling of Roch, given that an entire neighborhood surrounding the chapel and cemetery were referred to as Saint Roch, yet she chooses *Rocque* instead. Her stories are clearly centered around the meaning of the Saint, but they are derivatives of his original significance, understood specifically through the lens of the New Orleanian reality of plague and social death, leading to an alternative spelling.

Dunbar-Nelson's first short story and the title of the collection, "The Goodness of Saint Roch" is the introduction to how New Orleanian culture specifically alters the original meaning derived from the saint. The story is essentially a love triangle between three young Creoles, Manuela, Claralie, and Theophilé. Theophilé, who "was Manuela's own special property," expressed interest in Claralie instead of Manuela (Dunbar-Nelson 4). Manuela hastily travels down St. Roch Avenue, where she enters a small house inhabited by "a little wizened yellow woman, who, black-robed, turbaned, and stern, sat before an uncertain table whereon were greasy black cards" (Dunbar-Nelson 5). The lady

known as “the Wizened One” then gives Manuela a charm to wear around her waist and is told to burn a candle at St. Roch’s chapel and pray to win the heart of Theophilé. Manuela follows these instructions and soon Theophilé begins visiting Manuela, sending her gifts, asking her to dance, and ultimately marrying her. The story ends with the line, “if you believe in him and are true and good, and make your nouvenas with a clean heart, he will grant your wish” (Dunbar-Nelson 8). Clearly, Dunbar-Nelson deviates from the traditional Catholic understanding of Saints and the concept of miracles given by God. “The Wizened One” is not the typical Catholic priest either. The mystical nature of the story captures how voodoo and Catholicism mix within the culture of New Orleans. The woman is turbaned and holds cards, almost like a fortune-teller, yet she is also black robed and calls upon the powers of a Catholic Saint. Dunbar-Nelson in this preliminary chapter displays how the meaning derived from Saint Roch is entirely unique to New Orleans. The Saint’s powers of healing extend far beyond the typical nature of disease and alienated bachelors, extending to establish a sort of rightness within society itself.

The second chapter, “Tony’s Wife,” is the first to incorporate illness, pushing against the concept that disease is metaphor. Just like Sontag’s piece of literary analysis, Dunbar-Nelson also pushes against the idea that disease is a form of social justice. The story follows an immigrant couple, Tony and his wife, who own a shop in New Orleans. Tony, originally from Italy, and his wife, a German, showcase the diverse array of ethnicities present in the city. Tony abuses his wife, who is never mentioned by name and thus socially dead (Dunbar-Nelson 13). In a show of classic disease metaphor, Tony develops debilitating gout, and “in proportion as his gout increased and he bawled from pure physical discomfort, she became light-hearted, and moved about the shop with real,

brisk cheeriness" (Dunbar-Nelson 13). His illness therefore serves as both punishment for his abuse of his wife and a preventative for future abuse, as his disease-state limits his mobility and therefore his ability to injure his wife. According to Sontag's philosophy this is a classic form of disease metaphor in which the disease serves as a punishment for a person's immorality. Tony's gout best aligns with Sontag's conceptualization of cancer in the sense that the disease exposes an internal evil or a person's lacking. This understanding is strengthened when the doctor, notably named Æculapius after the Greek god of healing, tells the wife that Tony is "empty as a shell… he cannot live, for he has nothing to live on" (Dunbar-Nelson 14). This description harkens almost exactly to examples that Sontag uses to showcase how cancer has been metaphorized in literature in the sense that cancer patients are punished for their selfishness, emptiness, and lack of self-transcendence by a slow, painful death. It is notable that Dunbar-Nelson names Æculapius, as he would be the Greek version of what Saint Roch represents to the Catholic faith. Through this mention, Dunbar-Nelson again showcases the multi-faceted understanding of religion in New Orleans because of the diverse life within the city. However, Dunbar-Nelson contradicts this initial understanding of disease when Tony's brother, John, arrives just before Tony's death. The wife brings a priest, Father Leblanc, to marry them officially before he dies. While the woman is referred to as Tony's wife throughout the short story, it becomes apparent that they were never officially married. Tony refuses because if they were married, his wife would get all his money. When Tony dies, his brother takes his money and the shop while his wife is kicked out penniless. In a shocking conclusion, Dunbar-Nelson reveals the true unfair nature of disease, rather than illness as a just punishment.

In contrast to “Tony’s Wife,” “When the Bayou Overflows” more directly uses the disease metaphor of tuberculosis to showcase the morality of New Orleans in comparison to other parts of America. In this short story, the son, Sylves, leaves his mother and girlfriend, Louisette, for Chicago to make money in the cigar business over the winter. The two women are fearful, as to them, Chicago is “a name to conjure with for wickedness” (Dunbar-Nelson 50). Clearly, Dunbar-Nelson means to play off the common assumption that New Orleans is inherently evil by stating that New Orleanians view Chicago, a classically “American” city, with equal views of licentiousness. Despite the women’s fears, Sylves departs for Chicago with the promise of bringing Louisette a ring of engagement upon his return. Sylves writes letters to the women often, which express his wonder at how the “cars went by ropes underground, and where there was no Mardi Gras and the people did not mind Lent” (Dunbar-Nelson 52). It is specified that Sylves’s letters were written in perfect French, and he was “taught at the parochial school” (Dunbar-Nelson 53). Both details paint the picture of Chicago as an irreligious, cold, and modern place, whereas Sylves and his New Orleanian roots represent piety, culture, and traditional education; all of which directly contradicts the view of New Orleans in popular understanding. At the end of winter, Sylves takes the train home, but just before his arrival, he was “too cold… and he took the consumption” (Dunbar-Nelson 53). Just before his passing, his friend describes how Sylves spoke of his mother, Louisette, the bayou, and the diamond ring he was to propose with. Sylves is thus painted as the classic tuberculosis or “consumption” metaphor, as he is depicted as someone filled with too much passion, romance, and purity for the cruel nature of the world. Sylves’s death after facing the wickedness of Chicago serves to underlie Dunbar-

Nelson's thoughts about the true nature of New Orleans: it is a pure, religious place filled with love of both family and culture. Sylves dies without the goodness of New Orleans when faced with the wicked reality of Chicago, or what might as well be the rest of America. With this disease metaphor, Dunbar-Nelson subverts the classic idea that New Orleans is far more immoral than other American cities.

The shortest story in the collection, "The Praline Woman" exposes the perpetuity of disease in New Orleans, again invoking the miracles of Saint Roch. "The Praline Woman" is the most uniquely formatted story, as it is exclusively the monologue yelled by the woman selling pralines by a "quaint little old chapel on Royal Street" next to Jackson Square, as the Cathedral bell can be heard at the beginning of the narrative (Dunbar-Nelson 91). It is worth noting that while the piece is not directly religious, reminders of religion are scattered throughout. In one moment, the praline woman asks why a person passing by is wearing black to which she gets the answer that the person's "boy daid" (Dunbar-Nelson 92), which begins the praline woman's tangent about her own children's deaths. Her son passed, despite burning a "candle in St. Roch", and her daughter also died of yellow fever (Dunbar-Nelson 92). Through this moment, Dunbar-Nelson reveals the failing of Saint Roch to heal her son, yet she still embraces religion, as seen when she "crosses herself" and says "hail, Mary, full of grace" upon the ringing of the Cathedral bell (Dunbar-Nelson 91). Dunbar-Nelson showcases how integral religion is to the city of New Orleans with or without holy miracles like Saint Roch. The Praline Woman's feelings towards specific ethnic groups are also important. She criticizes "lazy Indian squaw" and the "lazy I'ishman" (Dunbar-Nelson 91, 92). Native Americans lived in New Orleans long before the French ever arrived while the Irish would have been far

more recent arrivals in the nineteenth century. The Praline Woman's dislike for both groups proves the racism and xenophobia that lies within the roots of the city, connecting to Sontag's claim that disease always "comes from somewhere else" (Sontag 135). The Praline Woman showcases the link between disease, religion, and xenophobia in New Orleans, exposing both the pious nature of the city and one of the roots of its history with racism.

In the last short story of the collection, "Titee," Dunbar-Nelson further nurtures the idea of a pious New Orleans in addition to solidifying how prevalent disease was in the city. Titee is a young schoolboy who would forgo meals, saving them to give to an elderly homeless man. When Titee went missing, a search party found him with a broken leg, still carrying his dinner that he was on the way to give to the old man. His mother emphatically cried upon discovering her son that "he has the fever!" (Dunbar-Nelson 113). Despite clearly the broken leg causing her son to be unable to return home, she still initially thinks his predicament must be caused by fever, further showcasing the fear of disease that perpetually grips the city. Dunbar-Nelson's choice to end this collection on such a sweet tale of generosity between a young boy and an elderly, suffering man captures her view of the city as one of generosity and community. Despite the assumptions of New Orleans immoral, deviant nature, Dunbar-Nelson's short stories casts it as a pious community in sharp contrast to the city's reputation. Dunbar-Nelson's collection serves as an insider's perspective into the reality of the New Orleans community against its perception in the common imagination

Unlike Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Kate Chopin, who also wrote about New Orleans in the late nineteenth century, was not a native New Orleanian. Like Edna Pontellier, Kate

Chopin only moved to New Orleans after marrying a Louisianian (Toth 127). By the time Chopin published her most famous novel, *The Awakening*, in 1899, she had been living away from New Orleans for nearly twenty years. However, she used the city as the background for her feminist bildungsroman. It is notable that both Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin published their works with disease metaphor in New Orleans within the same year, making them exact contemporaries. While *The Awakening* was criticized in its day for being shallow and sexual, it is now honored as an early novel describing "a woman's education" (Toth 123). Chopin spent just "nine years in New Orleans in her twenties," which were "dramatic and formative" just like Edna Pontellier (Toth 122). The concept of a female sexual awakening or female independence at the time was extremely taboo, but Chopin bravely tackles the topic anyways with very few ahead of her as precedent. Chopin using New Orleans as the place for this sexual awakening makes sense given that the city was where she experienced much of her young adulthood, but it also secondarily connects the city to all it represents in terms of passion, sex, and desire. Chopin employs New Orleans's reputation as a place of deviancy to showcase truths about female sexuality, which was seen as distinctly deviant at the time. While the novel could have taken place anywhere, Chopin chose New Orleans due to all it represents. In addition, because of the Ursuline nuns, New Orleans was for many years a place with unusually high female literacy, which also connects the city to a sense of female agency. Because of New Orleans's deviant reputation and history of female education, the city serves as the perfect setting for Chopin's female bildungsroman.

Just a few pages into *The Awakening*, Chopin introduces disease when Mr. Pontellier confronts Edna about their children possibly having fever. After checking on

the children after his night out with friends, Mr. Pontellier reports to Edna that "Raoul had a high fever and needed looking after" (Chopin 11). Despite Mrs. Pontellier assuring him that the child had been well all day, Mr. Pontellier countered that he "was too well acquainted with fever symptoms to be mistaken," emphasizing that "the child was consuming" (Chopin 11). Mr. Pontellier's knowledge of fever clearly marks him as a native New Orleanian, who would be quite familiar with the mark of disease. His insistence that the child's condition should be the worry of Edna alone also exemplifies the inequality of sexes within marriage. Pontellier criticizes Edna for her poor job at caring for the children, emphasizing that it was her main task as a wife and mother. Edna soon thereafter begins to cry. In that moment is one of the first times she acknowledges "an indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish" (Chopin 12). Through this interaction, Chopin employs one of the basic ideas of disease metaphor in the sense that disease reveals something innately true that was previously hidden. Her son's ailment reveals to Mr. Pontellier Edna's failings as a mother, but to Edna, his condition first begins to expose to her the feelings of oppression in her role as wife and mother. It is upon these initial feelings of oppression all launched from her child's illness that Edna begins to revolt against the constraints of traditional womanhood.

Dunbar-Nelson and Chopin both employ disease in their narratives, but they are entirely different in how they employ disease as metaphor. Dunbar-Nelson is far more focused on the importance of community and religion against the threat of disease. In contrast, Chopin uses disease metaphor to first reveal the feminist themes of the novel. These differences in thought and objective in using New Orleans as their setting are

reflective of the author's different experiences in life with Dunbar-Nelson being a New Orleanian while Chopin lived in the city only for a brief stint in distant young adulthood. Their experiences would lead to their different interpretations of disease within the city with Chopin seeing disease as revealing of the truth and with Dunbar-Nelson viewing disease as creating a generous, religious community. However, both 1899 works serve as early examples of disease metaphor being used in the context of New Orleans by women.

Chapter Four
Xenophobia and Jes Grew:
New Orleans Disease Metaphor in the Mid-Twentieth Century

Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* is a classic 1950 film noir, which was shot on the streets of New Orleans. The plot is based on an interaction at the beginning of the film in which a man, newly arrived in New Orleans, becomes sick and is shot dead by criminals for gambling money. It is then discovered that the dead foreigner had pneumonic plague, a similar disease to bubonic plague, except that it affects the lungs. The head public health officer and the chief of the New Orleans police then lead the search to find the people that killed him before they spread his illness across the city and the world. The black and white film is often eerie with lots of shadow, long pauses, and tense conversations. There are also clear protagonists in the health officials and police and antagonists with the criminals and immigrants in the film. It is worth noting that neither Kazan, nor the writers of the film, were from New Orleans, and therefore their depictions of New Orleans would be more based on reputation and fantasy than the reality of the city. The purpose of using New Orleans as the setting for this movie was clear, as the parts of the city shown were often shot to appear seedy and dirty. Kazan exploits New Orleans's reputation as one of deviancy to create a narrative of goodness triumphing over a city cradling evil, which is only revealed through disease. This concept is a classic disease metaphor explained by Sontag in that disease occurs where there was immorality to begin with.

Exploiting one of the pillars of disease metaphor in that disease must come from somewhere else, *Panic in the Streets* exposes the xenophobic notion that immigrants bring disease, rather than the reality of the biology of microorganisms. The man who

brings the pneumonic plague into New Orleans is described as having just got off a boat into the country that night (*Panic in the Streets* 01:57- 02:12). Having the person who brings the plague to the city be a recent immigrant continues the metaphor that Sontag asserts in which people see disease as a sort of unnatural other, and there it must come from some foreign elsewhere, despite the reality of disease being ubiquitous in society. When the authorities discover the dead man in the water, they describe him as "some kind of foreigner" despite him having no markers to differentiate him from a citizen (*Panic in the Streets* 05:30- 05:45). They also seem very calm and unconcerned about the fact that the man had been shot to death. All these descriptions give the sense that this man would mean nothing to the city if not for his disease. The immigrant man's history remains a mystery, including why he traveled into the United States (*Panic in the Streets* 40:00- 42:43). The sole purpose of the character is to bring plague into the country, marking him as the evil "other" that brings disease.

The film employs the typical disease metaphor that illness strikes only those with some constitutional fault. Every character that contracts plague and dies in the film has some moral flaw. The first to die is of course the immigrant, named Kochak, who dies after not paying his gambling debts. He is presented as never missed nor mourned, merely a problem due to the disease he carries. Next, the Greek restaurant owner's wife, Rita, dies (*Panic in the Streets* 57:43- 59:45). She is also an immigrant, which marks her as less valuable in the film. All characters portrayed with any value, power, or appeal in the film are white Americans. Besides being an immigrant, she also lies to the doctor and chief of police about whether she had seen Kochak in the restaurant, which of course leads her to contract the disease and perish (*Panic in the Streets* 50:00- 51:00). Her deceit

to the authorities reveals her immoral character, which in reality has no impact on health, so she specifically dies. Her death represents the moral disease, which strikes only those deserving of their own demise: a classic trope in disease metaphor. Poldi is the last to fall ill and dies when his criminal partners throw him off the balcony (*Panic in the Streets* 1:23:30- 1:24:00). This can also be seen as a righteous death, as Poldi is again another immigrant criminal, who helps kill his own cousin. His sickness and violent death can be interpreted as a just end. All these illnesses occur in people perceived as immoral, not to mention immigrants, which carries over with the idea that disease both affects the "other," never oneself or one's own, and also that those who contract disease are in some way deserving of their ailment. This thought is further solidified when Blackie tells Poldi that, "you don't need a priest, you need a doctor" when Poldi asks to confess his sins, expressing regret at killing his cousin (*Panic in the Streets* 1:18:00- 1:19:00). Poldi contemplates his crimes on his deathbed, showcasing disease as a tool to reveal hidden immorality.

Panic in the Streets often employs antiquated concepts related to disease such as the miasma theory, which for centuries was believed as the main way in which disease was transferred. The miasma theory is the theory of "bad air" in which disease was considered to be transferred through a poor smelling environment. This theory holds up somewhat, but the reasoning was faulty. Disease is more likely to be spread in densely packed areas, which before common sanitation would often smell unpleasant due to human waste. The film is often shot in damp, dirty areas of New Orleans, and the people displayed (except for the protagonists) were dressed shabbily and generally dirty. The imagery gives the idea that New Orleans is a dirty, poor, and crowded place, where

disease would easily run wild. There is also the seemingly random inclusion of Blackie stating, “what’s that smell in here” when he goes to meet with Poldi, who has just taken ill (*Panic in the Streets* 51:45- 52:00). Blackie noting an odd smell in the room when he sees Poldi reflects the idea that disease can be sensed through smell. Blackie also tells Poldi that he should move to the country to get well because it is healthier than the city (*Panic in the Streets* 1:20:00- 1:20:34). This, again, is an old remnant of miasma theory, and until the early twentieth century many of the wealthiest people in New Orleans would flee from the city to the country during the yellow fever months to avoid the unpleasant air that was thought to cause illness. This notion again reflects the common metaphor that disease exists in cities, where crime, sin, and immigrants in the nativist view run rampant, while the country represents the notion of purity and health.

While clearly dated and blatantly xenophobic, *Panic in the Streets* presents a crisp picture of the root of disease metaphor, which does often stem from immigration anxiety in addition to ascribing evil to illness. The film paints New Orleans as a dark, dirty place where evil, and the subsequent disease it harbors, flourishes. It is only the white, American (and not even particularly New Orleanian) doctor and police chief, who are able to save the city. This storyline is typical of the disease metaphor, as it makes viewers feel simultaneously that disease could never impact them because of their morality in addition to others deserving infection. Ascribing this moral meaning to disease brings a sense of acceptability to illness that otherwise has no greater meaning. Kazan’s presentation of disease metaphor wholeheartedly goes against Sontag’s idea that disease has no meaning, showcasing further Sontag’s belief that disease metaphor harms those suffering from disease by ostracizing them. Kazan’s interpretation of disease metaphor

also contradicts Dunbar-Nelson's interpretation of disease, which she more associated with strong community and piety in New Orleans while Kazan uses disease to expose criminality within the city. Besides the grimy backdrop, New Orleans, its people, and culture hold little value in contributing to the story besides providing a morally ambiguous setting, further showcasing how New Orleans is viewed as deviant due to its history of disease.

Unlike *Panic in the Streets* use of disease metaphor, Ismael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* employs disease as metaphor for the black cultural revolution of Jazz music, rather than using disease as a vessel for racism and xenophobia. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a novel set primarily in 1920s New York, which describes the spread of jazz music and black culture during the Harlem Renaissance. The 1972 novel uses an extended metaphor of a virus for jazz and the African American aesthetic generally. This plague, which quickly encompasses American culture, is described as first proliferating in New Orleans before extending throughout the rest of the country. *Mumbo Jumbo* is an incredibly unique conceptualization of the disease metaphor, which typically deals in making meaning out of a disease. In contrast, Ishmael Reed figures the spread of a virus named "Jes Grew" as a metaphor for the spread of jazz and the culture surrounding the music. Much of the novel is set in New York, not New Orleans, and deals primarily with finding the sacred text of Jes Grew, the Book of Thoth, for different groups to either solidify Jes Grew or stamp it out of existence forever. However, the first few chapters of the novel showcase the rise of Jes Grew in New Orleans. Ishmael Reed employs New Orleans as the birthplace of the viral Jes Grew, highlighting the city's simultaneous history of plague and black culture.

Ishmael Reed introduces Jes Grew to the novel through the corrupt New Orleans mayor. The mayor reclines in his office with a "local doo-wack-a-doo and voo-do-dee-odo fizgig" woman on his lap (Reed 3). She is a classic flapper, drinking his bootlegged gin and smoking a cigarette, and with the description of "voo-do," can be assumed to be a black woman. The mayor gets a phone call, informing him that "what was once dormant is now a Creeping Thing" in reference to the spread of the Jes Grew virus (Reed 3). Describing jazz as previously dormant, Reed introduces the cultural movement as a virus, and the visual image of the music creeping through the city also provides the imagery of viral spread secretly from person to person. The first introduction of the virus is ironic because it showcases a clearly corrupt mayor drinking illegally acquired liquor with a flapper in the office yet expresses shock at the spread of jazz. It is also ironic that the mayor is portrayed as being romantically involved with a black flapper, yet still villainizes Jes Grew and black culture. The scene paints the shock at the new outbreak of Jes Grew as ridiculous and the city of New Orleans as corrupt and morally loose.

The comparison between disease and music is apt because they clearly both have the ability to change social life. Before Jes Grew is further clarified as a cultural movement, it is warned that "if this Jes Grew becomes pandemic it will mean the end of Civilization As We Know It" (Reed 4). Just like how pandemics completely change the priorities and mindset of a civilization, Reed implies that the jazz movement will have a similar effect on society's culture. These fears of permanent social change are revealed after the mayor expresses concern that his political campaign will suffer if it is known that there is another Jes Grew "flair-up" in New Orleans (Reed 4). The catastrophic nature of disease in every aspect of life including political life is linked to the propagation

of Jazz in America, further showcasing the intensity of the movement to create social change and unrest.

Reed carries the disease metaphor into a mock medical physical exam on Jes Grew patients. When the mayor asks a doctor about the status of Jes Grew, the doctor clarifies that the disease "is a *psychic epidemic*, not a lesser germ like typhoid yellow fever or syphilis. We can handle those" (Reed 4). This clarification is the first clue in the novel that Jes Grew is not like a regular disease because it is a condition of the psyche. It is notable that the doctor mentions yellow fever as one of the diseases that New Orleanians are no longer concerned with given the horrific history of yellow fever for the first two centuries of the city's colonization. It was just about ten years before 1920 that the last yellow fever outbreak in the city struck. The comparison between yellow fever and Jes Grew showcases the intensity of the new movement. When asked "how [the patients] knew" of Jes Grew, the doctor responds that they first "examined his output, and drinking water to determine if we could find some normal germ" (Reed 5). By stating that they first looked for normal disease causes, Reed continues to equate Jazz with a severe disease. Specifically looking at drinking water relates to New Orleans's long struggle with cholera because of water sanitation struggles. The mayor proceeds to ask what the patient saw, how he felt, and what he heard to which he receives the answer that "he saw Nkulu Kulu of Zulu, a locomotive with a red green and black python entwined in its face, Johnny Canoeing up the tracks," that "he felt like the gut heart and lungs of Africa's interior. He said he felt like the Kongo: 'Land of the Panther.' He said he felt like 'deserting his master,' as the Kongo is 'prone to do.' He said he felt he could dance on a dime," and that he heard "shank bones, jew's harps, bagpipes, flutes, conch horns, drums,

banjos, kazoos," declaring the disease as black in origin (Reed 5). The doctor proceeds to define Jes Grew as concentrating on "no class no race no consciousness," showing no preference to its victims like a disease (Reed 5). Then suddenly the mayor and doctor also begin to show symptoms of Jes Grew, proving the speed and uncontrollable nature of the movement.

Reed also references religion often when first describing Jes Grew. When the mayor was first contacted about the epidemic, he was asked to go to St. Louis Cathedral, which was specifically described as where "HooDoo Queen Marie Laveau was a frequent worshiper; its location was about 10 blocks from Place Congo" (Reed 3). The Cathedral is also described as being "converted into an infirmary" for Jes Grew patients (Reed 3). The Cathedral and the church's location in the city serve as a notable starting point for the beginning of the jazz movement. Just as disease must often deal with religion, as it pertains to the understanding of life's greater purpose, Reed is relating religion to Jes Grew in terms of its importance to life. Mentioning Congo Square and Marie Laveau in relation to St. Louis Cathedral, the most notable religious space in the city, obviously connects black culture to religion, which therefore connects the creation of Jes Grew to religion and black culture. Congo Square served as a celebratory place where slaves would congregate and is considered the location of the origin of jazz music. Marie Laveau is a much-celebrated nineteenth century practitioner of voodoo in New Orleans with voodoo being a cornerstone of maintaining African culture and identity amid slavery and social death. Reed connects religion to his disease metaphor when one of the mayor's first questions about Jes Grew was asking where the priest is after the doctor informs him that Jes Grew "belongs under some ancient Demonic theory of disease" (Reed 4). It turns

out that the priest had also come down with the ailment, “shouting and carrying on like any old coon wench with a bass drum” (Reed 5). Through connecting the religious aspects of disease metaphor with Jes Grew, he emphasizes the life-altering nature of the jazz movement in America in that it is as fundamental to the nation as spirituality and health itself.

While the first few pages of *Mumbo Jumbo* fixate on casting jazz through the metaphor of disease, Reed suddenly emphasizes that Jes Grew is not a plague, rather an “anti-plague” (Reed 6). He assures that unlike typical diseases, Jes Grew “enlivened the host,” makes “the air as clean as they had ever seen it,” and “is characterized by ebullience and ecstasy” (Reed 6). Again, mentioning religion, he notes that other plagues were caused by “the wrath of God; but Jes Grew is the delight of the gods” (Reed 6). Thus, Reed separates Jes Grew from disease, but still highlights its importance to life like any plague would be. The religious importance of Jes Grew continues when Reed writes that “Jes Grew is seeking its words. For what good is a liturgy without a text,” noting that the only way that jazz can be permanently preserved is through a religious text describing Jes Grew. While disease is emphatically unlike jazz music, Ishmael Reed uses the metaphor of Jes Grew to establish the importance of black culture and jazz music to society and showcase how quickly the movement spread. Reed makes a point to note that “Jes Grew carriers came to America because of cotton,” insinuating that it was because of slavery that jazz music was created (Reed 16). The metaphor is powerful in establishing the picture of how a culture can spread and impact every facet of a society because plagues change society in also a life-shattering way. In a clever combination of New Orleans traits, Reed uses the city’s history of disease to explain how the city birthed and

propagated a black cultural movement throughout the country. In the last description of New Orleans in the novel, it is described how as morning comes “the streets are littered with bodies where its victims lie until the next burgeoning” of Jes Grew that night (Reed 17). Reed combines the city’s celebratory reputation, its history with disease, its religious roots, and the complex black culture in New Orleans to cleverly explain the propagation of jazz music, which moved out of the city with such ferocity that it created a pandemic of black creativity in America.

Chapter Five
Vampirism as Disease Metaphor in *Interview with the Vampire*

Born and raised in New Orleans, Anne Rice wrote her first and most famous novel, *Interview with the Vampire*, in 1976 about the city she had left for nearly twenty years. Rice was intimately familiar with the leading pillars of the city, experiencing both religion and death from a young age. She was raised in a devout Irish Catholic family, but she left the church in early adulthood. Her mother died when she was only fifteen from alcoholism complications, and five years before she published *Interview with the Vampire*, her daughter passed from leukemia at the age of five (Britannica). Her first novel and many of her subsequent works obsess over the questions that religion seeks to answer such as the greater meaning to life and the constitution of morality and immorality. She asks and answers these questions through using vampirism as a metaphor for disease. Rice seems to agree with Sontag about disease, concluding that vampirism, a metaphor for illness, is meaningless. The novel's plot centrally revolves around Louis's questioning of the meaning of mortality and vampirism after the morally deviant Lestat turns him into a vampire. Rice uses vampirism as a sort of metaphor for disease, as many classic tropes of disease metaphor also apply to her use of vampires. There are many clear comparisons that can be made between vampirism and disease. Both states spread between people via blood transmission and lead to social ostracization. In a city that is known for its combination of sin, piety, and death, Rice uses New Orleans to investigate profound questions regarding life's meaning and morality through the popular format of vampire novels.

Twenty years after the novel was published, Neil Jordan released the film adaptation of the story featuring a young Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise in 1994. The film

closely follows the plot of the novel, but there are a few subtle changes. Louis loses his wife and child in birth in the film, which leads him to spiral into a great depression in the film. In the novel however, Louis loses fervor for life after his brother reveals that he has been given instructions from God and when Louis does not believe him, he subsequently falls downstairs and dies. Louis feels responsibility for his death and thus begins to live "like a man who wanted to die but who had no courage to do it himself" (Rice 11). Louis is in a state of complete apathy for a human life when Lestat finds him and changes him into a vampire. Both the movie and the novel follow Louis through his self-hatred at his desire to take human life and his subsequent questioning of the value and meaning of life.

Louis and Lestat have in many instances a sort of homoerotic relationship. While their relationship is never openly defined, it is revealed from the very beginning to always be more than friendship with Louis admitting that Lestat's actions towards him "made me think of a lover" (Rice 18). The action of drinking blood is often portrayed as sexual, and Rice's portrayal of this supernatural phenomenon is no different. Louis and Lestat even change a child into a vampire together, Claudia, to begin life as an immortal pseudo-family. The relationship between Louis and Claudia also is showcased as both parental and sexual, despite her having perpetually the body of a child. Struggling with this dichotomy, Louis describes looking at Claudia as to "gaze up into my paramour's eyes," yet later rejects her as such, stating that "she's no paramour of mine" (Rice 274, 281). Rice uses the reputation of New Orleans as a backdrop to question fundamental ideas about sin, religion, and sexuality. However, the major difference between the novel and film are a function of the twenty years between them: A novel with male

homosexuality in 1976 will be understood very differently than the film in 1994 because between the two works released, there erupted the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Following a New Orleans literary tradition, Rice crafts *Interview with the Vampire* in a Gothic style. While difficult to overtly describe, Gothic literature combines tropes of sexuality, the paranormal, isolation, and melodrama with common questions of morality and evil. Rice follows in the Gothic New Orleans literary canon, following authors like Lafcadio Hearn, William Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams (Hagood). In his comparison between New Orleans and its colonial mother, Paris, Louis offers the following insight on the difference between the two cities:

> It was the mother of New Orleans, understand that first; it had given New Orleans its life, its first populace; and it was what New Orleans had for so long tried to be. But New Orleans, though beautiful and desperately alive, was desperately fragile. There was something forever savage and primitive there, something that threatened the exotic and sophisticated life both from within and without. Not an inch of those wooden streets nor a brick of the crowded Spanish houses that had not been bought from the fierce wilderness that forever surrounded the city, ready to engulf it. Hurricanes, floods, fevers, the plague - and the damp of the Louisiana climate itself worked tirelessly on every hewn plank or stone façade, so that New Orleans seemed at all times like a dream in the imagination of her striving populace, a steam held intact at every second by a tenacious, though unconscious, collective will. (Rice 203-204)

Thus, it can be seen how Rice would fashion New Orleans as a realm of Gothic intrigue. It is a place that desperately searches for solidity in a place that is always

changing in response to its natural surroundings. The place itself is a fashioned imagining by the population that resides there, making it the perfect Gothic location to deal with questions about purpose and life's meaning. It is clear through New Orleans's perpetual struggle with disease that Rice means to employ the common disease metaphor that illness brings out hidden truth. Thus, the fact that New Orleans is unable to hide its flaws because of its climate being prone to disease and disaster means that the hidden truths of humanity are more visible, making it an ideal location for Rice to extrapolate on the sanctity of human life and ask questions about morality. She uses the city's promiscuous reputation, which stems from connotations derived from its battles with disease, to address questions of homosexuality. Moreover, "pedophilia looms in a most disturbing way" (Hagood 288). As New Orleans is seen as a place where evil thrives and is unable to hide, Rice uses the setting to explore uncharted topics that the "transgressive sexuality associated with the city" allows (Hagood 288). The city's history with disease also plays a role in its Gothic tradition, as Rice "traces the development of undead figures back into the past, from whence the Gothic always comes," using the disease metaphor to link life with death (Hagood 288).

Further connecting disease with questions of morality and New Orleans, Rice often employs religious themes throughout the novel, and the film also utilizes religious imagery. The beginning of the film opens with the music of a church choir, setting a religious tone to a plot revolving around the supernatural and sexuality (*Interview with the Vampire* 00:39-03:00). In similar fashion, Rice sets up the plot of the novel by revealing that it was Louis's brother's death after revealing his visions from St. Dominic and the Virgin Mary that led Louis to become a vampire. While Louis did not kill his

brother, their argument over the validity of his visions, which told him to "sell all our property in Louisiana, everything we owned, and use the money to do God's work in France," shortly thereafter led his brother to fall down the stairs to his death (Rice 7). Thus, Rice figures Louis becoming a vampire as a direct consequence of his lack of faith and more specifically, his "egotism" at believing that his own brother could never be a saint or chosen by God to see visions (Rice 9). The religious imagery continues throughout the film with a pointed moment being when Louis and Claudia flee the city to Paris (*Interview with the Vampire* 1:08:00).

As New Orleans burns with Lestat, various crosses are seen burning with the city, representing cleansing of sin and evil within the city. Fire is a popular motif in Christianity, representing the burning fires of hell, a righteous purification. Rice also employs fire to represent a cleansing of evil. Louis often calls to religion when attempting to understand his existence as a vampire. He visits a cathedral at one point in contemplation, remarking that "God did not live in this church; these statues gave an image to nothingness, I was the supernatural in this cathedral" (Rice 143). Using vampirism as a metaphor for disease, Rice and Jordan explore questions of morality and existence that often come in the face of disease. In times of illness, people look towards religion for closure and insight into the meaning of mortality. The use of religion throughout the novel emphasizes the notion that vampirism is a metaphor for disease, and also highlights the fact that New Orleans is as steeped in religion, as it is known for its sinful culture.

The metaphors between vampirism and disease are layered throughout Rice's novel, making Louis's ponderings on the value of life and morality a disease metaphor.

Early on in Louis's interview, he states that "I was talking about the plantations. They had a great deal to do with it, really, my becoming a vampire" (Rice 5). While Rice rarely focuses on slavery, her mentioning that it was the plantation system that led Louis to contract the illness of vampirism directly ties the disease to questions of morality. As mentioned, it was Louis's refusal to entertain his brother's visions to sell their property and plantation projects and move to Paris to fulfill God's work there that led to his brother's death. His death caused Louis to feel extreme guilt, spiraling into depression and "[living] like a man who wanted to die but who had no courage to do it himself" (Rice 11). It was only in his drunken apathy for life that Lestat approached Louis, deciding to turn him into a vampire. This conversion directly relates to Sontag's explanation of the disease metaphor in the sense that in traditional disease metaphor, illness only occurs in people with some fundamental trait and typically a flaw. Louis fails to believe his brother and his faith, and his guilt leads him to live a life of sin and apathy, which causes him to be targeted to become a vampire. This is similar to Sontag's discussion of how people who develop cancer in literature often have moral lacking, failing to positively contribute to the world around them.

Beyond how Louis is first targeted to become a vampire, the novel centers around his questioning of life's meaning after becoming a vampire, questioning similar to those with an incurable disease. Louis reflects that while his transition "was not inevitable," he "can't say [he] decided" either (Rice 14). This reflection mirrors the thoughts of many affected by disease in the sense that one often feels guilt at what they could have done to prevent the disease such as healthier lifestyle choices or more frequent screening, yet the development of the disease itself is not truly under their control. There is an inherent

conflict between the concept of agency with disease and the notion that it is completely out of human control. The thought that there is an element of agency to disease creates the metaphor, as it implies that it is a person's choice either by subconscious moral flaws or purposeful immoral choices that leads to illness. In a similar manner to those with incurable diseases, Louis remarks that "it was only when I became a vampire that I respected for the first time all of life" (Rice 81). He adds that he felt "like an adult who, looking back on his childhood, realizes that he never appreciated it. You cannot, as a man, go back to the nursery and play with your toys, asking for the love and care to be showered on you again simply because now you know their worth" (Rice 82). These reflections are eerily similar to those who are diagnosed with terminal illnesses in the sense that in coming to terms with death, one has a new value for life. Far different from the traditional literary vampire, Rice introduces the now popular concept of the moral, self-loathing vampire, which takes on far more resemblance to the disease metaphor than the evil other.

The comparisons between vampirism and disease continue, as Louis attempts to understand his newfound life. Louis struggles to find purpose in life as a vampire just as those with terminal illnesses endeavor to enjoy life with such a dramatic shift. Louis remarks to his mentor Armand, "who else would show us a particle of love, a particle of compassion or mercy? Who else, knowing us as we know each other, could do anything but destroy us? Yet we can love each other" (Rice 317). Those who develop serious diseases are often ostracized from society, finding solace in those who also are in their same condition. Louis comes to this same realization in his friendship with Armand, realizing in this new condition, it will be impossible to live within the accepted realms of

society. Shortly after Louis burns the theater of vampires, he remarks that "I was incapable of plans. I had made only one real plan in my life, and it was finished" regarding enacting revenge for Claudia's death (Rice 316). Again, Louis's belief that vampirism prevents the development of a future is a similar concept to the idea that life ends with a disease diagnosis. Despite Louis being able to make unlimited plans with his immortality, his belief in the fact that his future is over with the end of his healthy human life reflects that vampirism is a metaphor for disease. Speaking with Armand about the meaning of life as a vampire, he concludes that "I can now accept the most fantastical truth of all: that there is no meaning to any of this" (Rice 239). Interestingly, Rice uses the classic disease metaphor that immorality and sin lead to illness, yet she also makes the same conclusion that Sontag does: disease has no meaning. Considering her daughter's recent death from cancer, Rice appears to be deciphering through classic metaphors of disease and death to find some clarity. Louis does something similar, as after Claudia's revenge, he goes to the "Louvre that night to lay down my soul, to find some transcendent pleasure that would obliterate pain and make me utterly forget even myself" (Rice 318). Looking for answers and clarity on his life, Louis looks to art, just as Rice does with *Interview with the Vampire*.

The film adaptation of *Interview with the Vampire* also clearly relates vampirism with disease although considering the recent HIV/AIDS epidemic before the movie was developed, the comparisons are far more like HIV than they are like cancer in the novel. The film begins with a shot of the bustling streets of San Francisco, followed by an upward tilt of the camera to where Louis looks out of a window over the streets (*Interview with the Vampire* 1:50-3:00). The interview in the novel also takes place in

San Francisco although the location is less of a focal point in the literature. San Francisco has been known since the 1960s as having a prominent homosexual community, so for Rice, this choice in location may have been to introduce the challenge to traditional, heterosexual sexuality. However, in the film, continuing to make the interview in San Francisco would have the additional connotation that the city was at the center of the HIV/AIDS crisis that largely affected gay men. Beginning the film with this camera panning from the bustling street to the solitary window with Louis has an eerie feeling that not only is something evil watching, but that that thing walks among the crowd, unnoticed. This fear is the same worry unlocked in the HIV crisis: that anyone could have the disease and spread it anonymously. This creates Rice's "vampire as metaphor for Otherness, whether that is an LGBT person or HIV positive survivor… harkening back to the disease-obsessed nineteenth century" (Amador). The vampire represents those who are ostracized by disease, sexuality, or any other social isolating factor, making the supernatural being the perfect subject to question social constructs of morality.

The film employs classic tropes of disease that specifically relate to the experiences of those with HIV/AIDS. When the interviewer inquires what Louis does for a living, he simply answers, "I'm a vampire" (*Interview with the Vampire* 03:40-03:47). This experience of becoming the disease that one has is an unfortunate reality that many with incurable diseases suffer with. However, in light of the recent HIV/AIDS epidemic, this response connects to the notion that once a person is diagnosed with HIV, their entire social existence ceases, instead now revolving around their disease. The connection that the disease is sexual and specifically homosexual is emphasized in the way in which the film portrays Louis's transition into a vampire. In a notable difference between the film

and novel, Louis spirals into depression after the loss of his wife and child in childbirth in the film while it is due to the death of his religious brother in the novel. Lestat first bites Louis after finding him at the docks with a prostitute (*Interview with the Vampire* 08:00-09:00). The change in events that leads to Louis's transition shifts from religion in the literature to sexual deviancy in the film. After losing his traditional family, Louis falls into sexual deviancy seen as typical in New Orleans, which then leads to the beginning of his homoerotic relationship with Lestat. This concept that sin brings disease is also used in Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* with many of the initial people who contracted the plague being criminals. This notion adds to the false belief that New Orleans's trouble with disease is caused by the city's sinful people. The initial bite that Lestat gives Louis is shown in the form of a tender, romantic embrace, not at all resembling a murderous attack. This romantic, homosexual display in addition to Lestat and Louis exchanging blood to complete the vampiric transition would insinuate at the time of the film's release that vampirism is a metaphor for HIV/AIDS. While both Louis and Lestat are sinful either in life like Louis or in the vampiric afterlife like Lestat, Claudia's transition to a vampire appears to represent Sontag's notion that disease has no greater meaning at all, as children represent absolute innocence. As Claudia is stuck at the same age that she turned into a vampire, "her body remained that of an eternal child" despite her mind maturing into adulthood (*Interview with the Vampire* 51:20-51:30). This phenomenon represents the notion that while disease hastens death, the irony is within the fact that disease stagnates the present reality, as the future becomes more difficult to imagine under the strain of disease.

Both the film and the novel often reference plague in New Orleans, further emphasizing the importance of disease in the city. In comparing the difference between Europe and New Orleans, Louis explains that "never in New Orleans had the kill to be disguised. The ravages of fever, plague, crime- these things competed with us always there, and outdid us" (Rice 169-170). Disease in New Orleans is so rampant that it actually creates a community, which is accepting of those with diseases, as it is easy to blend in. This notion sounds eerily familiar to the concept of people with diseases choosing to live with and be close with others who have their same disease, as they will feel less socially ostracized. Rice implies that New Orleans is a sort of haven for those who are outcasts, as there are so many. When Louis and Lestat turn Claudia into a vampire, they find her next to a dead woman, her mother, who presumably died of the plague or possibly yellow fever (Rice 75). A similar scene occurs in the film, with Louis finding Claudia after following and consuming a trail of rats, making bubonic plague the more likely suspect. It is also notable that burning tar is littered around the area with plague, a nod towards the belief in miasma theory at the time (*Interview with the Vampire* 36:19-38:00). After Lestat finds Louis drinking from Claudia, he proceeds to dance with her dead mother in both novel and film (Rice 75, *Interview with the Vampire* 38:10-39:25). This disturbing scene represents the thought that New Orleans has little respect for life and morality amid so much death and sin, which is a common assumption of those believed to have limited time.

The theme of fire constantly is showcased in the film both in homage to the miasma theory and in an ode to the religious metaphors related to fire. The first fire is the one that Louis begins over his family's plantation (Rice 57, *Interview with the Vampire*

29:00). This can be seen as a cleaning of past sin and of Louis's life before vampirism. Fire is often used as a metaphor for cleansing of the impure in literature, and it was used in the past as a treatment for miasma, or foul-smelling air, that was considered to have been the cause of plague. Fire also occurs when Claudia and Louis attempt to leave Lestat for Paris (Rice 157-158). The fire, which spreads throughout New Orleans, is seen intermingled with crosses in the film in a possible showcasing of attempting to purify an immoral city or even a physical representation of hell encompassing a sinful people (*Interview with the Vampire* 1:08:00). The final fire occurs when Louis enacts revenge on behalf of Claudia's death, burning the theater of vampires (Rice 312, *Interview with the Vampire* 1:41:15-1:42:57). Here the fire represents a just death and a proper physical hell for those who only seek to cause pain and destroy. However, When Louis, Claudia, and Madeleine go to set aflame Madeleine's doll shop so that she may leave her human life behind, Claudia remarks "'Fire purifies…'" to which Louis responds, "'No, fire merely destroys'" (Rice 277). Rice challenges the traditional throughout her novel. She challenges traditional thoughts about vampires, disease, homosexuality, and even typical literary tropes such as fire. The concept that fire purifies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was fundamental to health at the time, yet Rice inserts doubt into this primitive metaphor.

While Rice appears to somewhat reject the classic interpretations of metaphors like disease and fire, she does use the swamp as a metaphor in the very literal sense. Swamps and by proximity, New Orleans, are known for their ability to conceal and especially hide evil. When Claudia tricks Lestat to drink from the already dead, they deposit his corpse in the swamp (*Interview with the Vampire* 1:03:06-1:04:06). As

swamps are used as a metaphor to hide evil, Lestat is fittingly buried there. As it was thought that foul-smelling air caused disease, it was often assumed that the swampish nature of New Orleans led to the frequent bouts of plague. Rice's use of the swamp to bury Lestat is symbolic of the miasma theory of disease and the evil of illness thought to be connected to the swamp.

Chapter Six
Modern Disease Metaphor in the Late Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries

Yellow Jack reveals the fascinating story of daguerreotype photography used in mid-nineteenth century New Orleans during the height of yellow fever outbreaks to capture the final moments of disease sufferers. The daguerreotype was a very early version of photography, using copper and mercury (Russell 16). While photographing the dead or near-dead is disturbing in its own right, Russell overlays Claude Marchand's haunting profession with his madness and pedophilic relationship. New Orleans is depicted as a place where wrongs go unpunished, and each person is more corrupt and malicious than the last. Thus, the disease-ridden nature of the city leads for the hidden evils of man to be uncovered, using the disease metaphor that disease strikes those who deserve it due to their hidden (or blatant) immorality. Underneath this unnerving plot, Russell layers in moments of artistic ponderings, questioning the value of art in light of such disturbing subject matter. Using disease metaphor to uncover painful truths, Russell's 1999 novel, *Yellow Jack*, exposes the corrupt reality of human nature especially around grasping the concept of death.

Throughout the novel, death is treated with a general apathy that verges upon disrespect. During Marchand's first memorial daguerreotype, he captures a deceased wife and mother, overhearing her son and husband "discuss the weather while they replaced the woman in her coffin" (Russell 49). While the profession of providing closure to grieving family members seems noble, Russell frequently portrays Marchand's work with bizarre apathy. This tone implies the comfort that New Orleanians have with death because of the incessant nature of plague. However, it also suggests a depravity and heartlessness in New Orleanians. If considered through the lens that disease reveals truth,

Russell suggests both a normalcy in death as well as a selfish outlook on death by the citizens. Marchand reflects that “New Orleanians were just as numb as I. They looked at portraits of relations living and dead with the same emotion,” again reiterating an unusual acceptance of disease and death in the city (Russell 73). He further elaborates that some even relish the plague season, stating that while many citizens left the city during the hot, plague months, “a few remained to enjoy hedonistic freedom- burglars looted houses, men sent their wives and children away for safety’s sake and then strolled the streets with their mistresses. There were summer parties with young women dressed in cakes and puddings, men stripped and sliding naked along floors slicked with wine” (Russell 173). The disease metaphor is clear: illness brings out the concealed realities of a population. Through this description, Russell proposes that disease allows normally concealed sins to run wild, elucidating part of the reason why New Orleans has developed such a depraved connotation. Unlike many other parts of the country, for months out of the year, a substantial number of New Orleans’s population left the city. Therefore, Russell poses the thought that it was the more conventional population that left while the unsavory members stayed in a sort of depraved paradise. There is also the unfortunate reality that many stayed in New Orleans not for the morally deviant environment, but for profit. At one point Marchand remarks, “‘we shall be rich’” since yellow fever had yet to take a strong hold of the city (Russell 181). As the novel progresses, Marchand bounces between severe discomfort and melancholy about having to take memorial photographs to feeling elated at the prospect of wealth from the frequent deaths. The moral quandary of Marchand’s profession drives him slowly to madness, revealing how disease functions in literature to reveal sins otherwise concealed.

Russell employs a disease metaphor in order to reveal the many layers of corruption working within New Orleans. Through layers of political schemes and media outlets intertwined, Russell sculpts a portrait of a New Orleans shrouded in blatant deceit. Depending on the political leader in power, the French and English news sources are in constant contradiction with one another. While the French newspapers reported on many yellow fever deaths, "the English editions… claimed news of the epidemic was a hoax, a lie, an attempt to slander the mayor" (Russell 22). Creating political meaning out of disease is a common side-effect of disease metaphor in that the line of thinking assumes that disease of unknown origin can be successfully contained. Thus, the constant deceit from political leaders to hide the realities of disease is born, as it is easier to inflict blame than to accept the uncontrollable nature of disease. Political rumors subtly scatter the text, including buzz that "hundreds were dying every day, their bodies burned at night by the mayor's henchmen to hide the epidemic," making the sensation of chaos within the city palpable (Russell 72). Notably unlike Dunbar-Nelson's understanding that disease strengthens New Orleans's sense of community, Russell concludes that disease fragments human morality, devolving the city into rumors and deceit. The belief that disease is political leads to "both the council and the papers [wanting] to keep the outbreak as hushed as possible" despite the astounding deaths, implying that the city cares more about politics and business than human life (Russell 220). A doctor even notes that "we need money for medicine, but if the mayor gives us money he'll be admitting that Mister Jack is here" (Russell 147). Russell posits that there is some truth to the often-employed metaphor that disease uncovers truth through New Orleans's struggles with plague revealing corruption and the uncomfortable truth of human interest in profit over life.

However, Russell insists that the corruption spurred by disease goes beyond the highest levels of power, infiltrating all levels of society. To avoid the consequences of quarantine, Marchand "watched a woman bribe the man whose job it was to nail yellow cards to doors he had on a list- a pie and a single coin kept the card from hers" (Russell 151). Thus, New Orleans is painted as a city with no regard for order, creating a society in which true human nature exists untouched by social conventions. Even the most respected citizens during a plague, medical professionals, are described as corrupt. After Marchand clearly notices that a recently deceased man shows every sign of perishing from yellow fever, a doctor notes that "'my colleague claims malaria… we all do what we can to make history cleaner'" (Russell 174). The concept that physicians would lie for the sake of altering history displays that reputation and political reputation are not beyond those tasked with saving lives. Through all these layers of corruption, Russell reveals the ability of disease to unearth indecency hidden under a façade of morality. This aspect of disease metaphor leads to the understanding of New Orleans as an inherently immoral place, rather than merely having a climate more prone to fever.

One unfortunate consequence of the corruption associated with disease metaphor is the connection between disease, xenophobia, and classism. There is constant blame of yellow fever on immigrants throughout the novel. It is even noted that "every fall and winter featured numerous calls for bans on immigration - the Irish were a favorite scapegoat" (Russell 221). Disease being associated with otherness is a common disease metaphor. Thus, xenophobic rhetoric is commonly connected to pandemics, as it is more mentally feasible to blame an outsider than to acknowledge fault in one's own group, or even worse, no group or person to ascribe culpability. Underprivileged groups without

resources to flee the city during summer months were also frequently blamed for propagating disease, as it was these groups that most often succumbed to yellow fever. Despite their inability to flee the diseased summer months, “the large percentage of fever deaths among the poor were constantly offered as proof that they were to blame” (Russell 221). It is a distinctly capitalistic phenomenon to blame the suffering of the poor on their inferior character. The belief that the poor innately have some internal flaw, which causes them to appropriately experience poverty, is the same thinking that applies to the disease metaphor, allowing blame to be easily ascribed to the poor for being ill due to some personal flaw. While illogical given that they are unable to leave the city shrouded in sickness, it is believed that poor people have a moral flaw, which not only leads to their poverty, but also makes them deserving of disease. Xenophobia and classism are elucidated by the disease metaphor that illness always is deserving and comes from elsewhere.

All this horrible corruption, deceit, xenophobia, and classism stems from one common human experience: fear. Russell captures the underlying panic and fear beneath the exterior of cruelty. Ridiculous rumors such as “that looking into a mirror that had recently held a Fever sufferer’s image would transmit Yellow Jack” (Russell 84). These baseless claims emphasize the extent to which fear leads to metaphor. In an effort to feel in control of a pandemic, falsehoods run rampant to allow for peace of mind. Often mocking the various strategies to avoid disease, Marchand notes “[passing] a group of boys wearing veils like a gang of short brides, a new method for fighting off the Fever’s night vapors” (Russell 167). The sarcastic tone with which Marchand references these methods reveal the desperation of New Orleanians to do anything, however unfounded, to

combat yellow fever. Marchand continues to note the changing fever protocol, observing that at one point "masks were back in fashion to fight off Fever" (Russell 188). Yellow Fever is not transmissible between people and is spread only through the bite of a specific species of mosquito. Therefore, all these strategies will do nothing to quell the spread of the disease, yet new protocols are continuously developed and propagated in order to grasp a sense of power over illness. This belief in human power over illness is at the center of the disease metaphor, allowing for blame to be put on immigrants, the poor, politicians, and the conceived depraved population of New Orleans. All these factors lead to a sense of control over the illness in the sense that the illness is caused by the immoral behaviors of others and not due to unknown disease pathology.

While *Yellow Jack* centers around Claude Marchand's photography of the dead and dying in New Orleans, the entire novel is oddly centered around sexuality that is often quite perverse. Russell's use of sex both serves to highlight the morally ambiguous nature of New Orleans, setting a dark licentious tone to the novel, as well as to highlight Marchand's immoral nature. Claude begins a pedophilic relationship with Vivian when she is between the ages of ten and sixteen before she dies giving birth to his child. Claude also throughout the novel has a sexual relationship with a voodoo-practicing, octoroon woman, Millicent. Claude seems to just as frequently have sexual encounters with Millicent and Vivian, as he appears to photograph the dead. Therefore, there is a clear contrast throughout the novel between death and the act that grants life, yet each sexual encounter is almost always forbidden. Vivian is not only a child, but for much of the novel is engaged to be wed. Millicent is a black woman, and another woman that Claude has sex with is married. The contrast between attempting to make beauty out of death and

finding passion in often illicit sex are conflicting and uncomfortable. Through such dark moments, Russell seeks clarity about morality in a place known for its sin, using the disease metaphor as the catalyst for revealing uncomfortable truths.

As a novel about photography, Russell spends time focusing on the philosophy behind art, especially when capturing something classically ugly such as death. The purpose of art generally is to explain human existence through abstract lenses, coming to conclusions about the truth of living. Russell does this by using the disease metaphor within the novel and through Claude Marchand's own photography using disease metaphor as well. Marchand reflects on what defines beauty, articulating that "when a man is content he lives inside a faceted gem; even the ugliest things are refracted into bright beauty- the pretty little caramel-haired girl dumping a chamber pot into the street, the round bellies of rotting dogs dead from the poisoned sausages set out to kill rats" (Russell 70). In short, Marchand believes that it is the mental perspective of the viewer, which decides if art is beautiful, even when viewing art that is generally unsavory. However, Marchand often changes his opinion, possibly a side-effect of his growing madness from mercury poisoning, later stating that "death is ugly and ugliness does not merit replication" (Russell 84). Perhaps the most honest truth of all that disease metaphor reveals is the discomfort with which humans perceive death despite people like Marchand being so close to the natural phenomenon. Because of its uncontrollable nature, death is extremely unsettling. Art seeks to quell fears of death, but as Marchand puts it, "no number of favorite toys could revive a dead child" (Russell 154). Disease metaphor wants answers for the suffering and death that illness inflicts, but there is no comfort there, as there is nowhere and no one to shift blame. Illness is indiscriminate even against the

youngest and most innocent of victims. Through Marchand's commentary, Russell appears to conclude that there is no art within death, there is just plainly death.

Similarly to Russell, Valerie Martin uses disease metaphor to reveal hidden truths in her novels about New Orleans. Valerie Martin, raised in New Orleans, has written many novels with only two, *A Recent Martyr* (1987) and *Property* (2003), taking place in the city. Notably, both novels employ disease metaphor, showcasing how strongly Martin believes that disease has affected the nature of the city. Martin herself describes growing up near a swamp as "beautiful in a scary way," noting how it has helped her in writing both of "beauty and terror" (Miller 310). Both novels deal centrally with dynamics of power, and most specifically female power dynamics. This concept of disease metaphor being used to understand feminine power is employed in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. In *Property*, this dynamic is between a plantation owner's wife, Manon, and her slave, Sarah, who is forced into a sexual relationship with Manon's husband. While Manon and Sarah are both oppressed by Manon's husband, Manon chooses to attempt to assert what power she has as a white woman over Sarah. In *A Recent Martyr*, this power dynamic is between Emma and Pascal, who she is having an affair with, and between Claire and her religious faith, which she is struggling to interpret into a meaningful existence. These power dynamics all experience transitions during a plague of yellow fever and cholera in *Property* and during bubonic plague in *A Recent Martyr*. Thus, Valerie Martin utilizes disease as the vessel for deciphering and resolving complex dynamics of power to showcase truths about ancient systems of oppression.

In *Property*, Manon and Sarah leave the plantation to go to Manon's sick mother's bedside, their relationship is tense, but they are seen as somewhat equals as

subordinates to Manon's husband. Although once they enter the disease-stricken New Orleans and Manon's mother dies of her illness, the true inequality of their relationship is revealed, ending any chance of their joining forces against the husband. Her mother's final words to her were that "'you neglect your duties and so you have no control in your own house'" regarding her knowledge that her husband has had a child with Sarah (Martin 69). These final words of disappointment before her mother's death send Manon into a furious spiral, desiring to assert dominance over Sarah, who while helpless over the situation with her husband, Manon still wants to blame for her suffering. Seeking a similar power dynamic that her husband has with Sarah, Manon sexually assaults Sarah, breastfeeding from her. Through exploiting an act of absolute intimacy, just like her husband does through rape, Manon "denies the possibility of any shared sense of oppression between the two women" at their lack of agency against her husband (Miller 311). Martin uses the power of the disease metaphor to reveal the underlying tensions and divergence between women and female slaves in terms of oppression. Upon entering plague-ridden New Orleans, it becomes clear that these women despite their bond in oppression will never align because of the overarching search for white supremacy and power within the institution of slavery.

A Recent Martyr details an interesting love triangle between an adulterous couple, Emma and Pascal, and a young nun, Claire, hoping to become a saint. Emma longs for passion and genuine love after a loveless marriage, finding such trills through self-centered and utterly atheist, Pascal. Claire wants to give her life to God, hoping "to be a saint," but struggles with finding a path to achieve this goal, constantly questioning her ability to give herself wholly to faith (Martin 135). Claire also believes herself unworthy

of God's choosing, as she feels that she is too deserving of it, "appalled at [her] own arrogance" (Martin 84). Pascal appears to love both women. He lusts after Emma, indulging in dangerous sexual fantasies, and he has a strange fascination with Claire because of her stark, unwavering faith, which he cannot fathom himself. Emma, although somewhat jealous of Pascal's attraction to Claire at first, also finds herself gravitating towards the religious girl, as she finds similarity in Claire, as she is also looking for a great passion to fulfill her life but is coming up short.

These three complex relationships are put through trial, as a plague resembling the bubonic plague spreads through New Orleans. Martin employs disease metaphor to decipher the root of these power dynamics and find truth to the search for absolute, life-affirming passion both in religion and in sexual relationships. Both Emma and Claire have a strained relationship because of Emma's jealousy over Pascal's infatuation with Claire and Claire's judgment over anyone who could entertain a relationship with Pascal, whom she despises. Yet directly after Emma "came down with a mysterious illness that lasted four days," she goes to the park with her daughter, seeing Claire alone reading in the park. The two women start a conversation, finding surprising enjoyment in each other's company. As they walk down to the river, they notice "dead and dying bodies of thousands of rats" (Martin 78). Soon after people begin to die of a similar disease as the rats: the beginning of a bubonic plague in the city. Just after Emma recovers from her illness, she finds a connection with Claire, who she had previously resented. Together, both women witness the beginning of the plague. These events connect both women and their relationship to disease, foreshadowing how the plague will transform them.

Both Emma and Claire's search for all-consuming love and passion either from Pascal or from God is interrupted by the enforcement of a quarantine due to the bubonic plague. Claire at one point describes her hesitance of fully giving herself to God due to her own sense agency, stating that she believed God "wanted more than her service. He wanted her entirely; He wanted her soul for His own and His desire was not diminished by her fear of being owned" (Martin 100). While refusing to tell Claire, Emma feels the same about her circumstance with Pascal stating, "I was entirely desired, and willing to be so, yet afraid" (Martin 100). These doubts came to a head when the quarantine was enacted, as "Claire and [Emma] lived inside the proposed quarantine area and Pascal did not" (Martin 130). Claire and Emma work together at the hospital for weeks to take care of the ill, finding an ease and comfort with one another. Pascal breaks through the quarantine line spontaneously one day when he spots Claire, declaring his "care for [her]," which she wholly rejects (Martin 150). He then calls Emma to tell her that he has broken quarantine for her. When they reunite and begin having violent sex, Emma realizes suddenly how painful the experience is becoming, asking him to stop. He continues to rape her until she passes out. He later denies any wrongdoing. After this event, Emma leaves Pascal, seeing him as a sadist who never truly cared for her. For Claire, the plague allowed her a realization of her goals and a greater peace with God, as she had developed an "intense following" in the congregation due to her work at the hospital being seen as miraculous (Martin 173). For both women, they found clarity in the human passions, which had before overwhelmed them. Emma realized the abusive nature of her relationship with Pascal, and Claire found a purpose and comfort through her service to God, which she had before questioned. Martin employs the disease

metaphor that disease has the ability to reveal hidden purposes and realities that were otherwise concealed in normal human fodder.

After Emma returns from visiting Claire's grave, who dies a martyr after she is attacked on her way back from the convent, she reflects on the power of New Orleans. She expresses a love for "the attraction of decay, of vicious, florid, natural cycles that roll over the senses with their lushness" (Martin 204). She updates that while "the plague continues, neither in nor out of control... we have been promised a vaccine that will solve all our problems" (Martin 204). Emma ends the novel with the thought:

> "Our city is an island, physically and psychologically; we are tied to the rest of the country only by our own endeavor. The river from which we drink drains a continent; it has to be purified for days before we can stomach it. We smile to ourselves when people from more fashionable centers find us provincial, for if we are free of one thing, it's fashion. The future holds a single promise. We are well below sea level, and inundation is inevitable. We are content, for now, to have our heads above the water" (Martin 204).

Martin ends with the rejection of disease metaphor in the sense that disease metaphor insists that there is something that can be done to combat disease or disaster. Typically, this would mean through living a moral, meaningful life, yet Martin promises that the inundation of New Orleans is inevitable just based on the reality of its location. This notion rejects a greater meaning to human suffering and disease, concluding that disease is an unfortunate reality that has the power to shape a people and a place, but it is not a metaphor.

Conclusion

New Orleans's frequent, horrible battles with disease have led the consequences of disease metaphor to not only affect those suffering from disease, but also the city as a whole. Because disease is metaphorically associated with hidden evil, the continuous epidemics that plagued New Orleans contributed to the city's sinful reputation. It was believed that these plagues were a punishment for a city trenched in immorality. However, the far more likely outcome of a city constantly entrenched with illness would be increased piety and community, making it possible for New Orleans to continue to persevere in the face of so many natural disasters. This concept of a pious New Orleans is best understood through Dunbar-Nelson's interpretation of disease in *The Goodness of Saint Roch*. Her short stories relay how disease has led New Orleanians to strengthen in the face of disaster, finding solace and vitality through community and religion. The author to best capture Sontag's conclusion that disease has no meaning is Anne Rice. Through Louis's contemplation on the meaning of vampirism, Rice eventually concludes that vampirism, a metaphor for disease, has no greater significance at all. Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* most directly equates disease with immorality in addition to race, religion, and nationality. Kazan's portrayal of disease in New Orleans showcases most directly that illness only comes from the evil other with only criminals and likely Catholic immigrants contracting the plague in the film. This narrative not only perpetuates the idea that New Orleans is crime-ridden and immoral, but it also preserves the xenophobic and racist notion that disease comes from non-white and non-Christian countries.

The most truthful understanding of New Orleans's continuous battle with disease is that it has been due to an overabundance of water, rather than immorality. Because New Orleans is inundated with water, it allowed for yellow fever and cholera to become perpetual problems from the eighteenth century until the early twentieth century. The reason why the city continues to lead in United States cities for diseases like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and even the more recent COVID-19 is because of health inequalities. These inequalities are further exacerbated by the most vulnerable citizens living in the most low-lying regions of the city that are often devastated by yearly natural disasters like hurricanes, flooding, and tornadoes. Constant displacement and rebuilding undoubtedly results in poor medical compliance, health education, and medical accessibility, leading to poor health outcomes.

While yellow fever and cholera are firmly in the city's past, problems with water continue to grow. With the effects of climate change, water creeps into the city, looking to overtake it. Natural disasters come with more frequency and strength than ever before. The dreaded plague is clearly not in our distant past either. However, the city continues to rally behind the New Orleans Saints. This year, Mardi Gras and St. Patrick's Day festivities resumed with as much fervor and celebration as ever before. The mask mandate was lifted the day after Mardi Gras. The Lower Ninth Ward, horribly hit by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, is rebuilding after tornadoes again devastated the land just weeks ago. The city refuses to go away quietly or be bulldozed at the whim of heartless politicians. The battle between water and New Orleans continues to grow more expensive, and federal money for COVID-19 testing and treatment has just run dry. The metaphor relating illness to evil harms a community perpetually struggling to stay above

water, a community desperate to survive against the attacks by water, disease, and its own government. Against all odds, the Necropolis lives and celebrates another day below sea level. However, this Sisyphean task that New Orleanians have dedicated their lives to should not be subjected to the distorted nature of metaphor.

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