Imagination at work—enriching the potential

008 OP EXCURSUS ON THE IMMUNE SYSTEM: MELTING HISTORY, STORIES AND MICROBIOME DATA

A Nunez Casal. *Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK*

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The microbiome seems to challenge the tenet of a self-contained human nature by recognising the role of microbes along with ecological and lifestyle factors in the shaping of the immune function. Those features, in turn, are specially valuable and timely for critical debates in the social sciences and humanities around notions of biological identity and embodiment as well as for evaluating post-genomics with regards to a molecular-based 20th century biology.

In an attempt to map cross-roads for traffic to and from biology, geopolitics and philosophy, this paper develops a critical cartography of the immune system, to which I refer to as 'excursus on the immune system', by bringing together the two main elements that conform my research project:

- Empirical insights from Lady Montagu's journeys, who in 1718 imported the variolation technique from Turkey to the UK
- Ethnographic fieldwork of Dr. Dominguez-Bello's microbiome expedition in the Amazon (2011–2013) as part of the research 'Microbiomes of Homes across Cultures'

I will particularly focus on how the historical analysis of Montagu's diaries and my field notes articulate with health data resulted from microbiome research. I will also discuss how I supplement the aforementioned methods to secondary research methods, which include attending scientific conferences as both data collection and research training, informal conversations and formal interviews, discourse analysis of media reports and specialised scientific literature on the microbiome, and a digital ethnography of 'American Gut', a personalised microbiome project.

My preliminary results show that both the environment and microbes refigure immunity as a rather different object rendering notions of the self as bounded, universal and autonomous increasingly difficult to maintain. Moreover, the fact that the environment, not just genetics, produces differences among bodies, immunities and microbes highlights questions of (bio) inequalities as obligatory points of passage for contemporary social studies of science.