



PROJECT MUSE®

Introduction: Immunity, Society, and the Arts

Stijn De Cauwer, Kim Hendrickx

Configurations, Volume 25, Number 3, Summer 2017, pp. 265-277 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2017.0019>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/662620>

Introduction: Immunity, Society, and the Arts

Stijn De Cauwer
University of Leuven

Kim Hendrickx
University of Leuven

Immunity as a Boundary Project

Few concepts possess as much multivocal resonance across different realms of thought and practice as the concept of “immunity.” Immunity is mobilized in the life sciences (including the biomedical sciences), social sciences, humanities, and the arts. Medical practitioners, ethnography-inspired scholars, cultural theorists, historians, philosophers, fiction writers, and artists all engage in different, yet often related, ways with the concept. Within all of these voices, immunity refers to the materiality of the human body and its proximity to other bodies, both human and nonhuman, while also referring to a more general way in which modern societies conceive of those bodies and enact them through biopolitical practices of difference. One might wonder whether the multiple layers of immunity are inherent in the concept itself or the result of a long heritage of borrowing and translating from an original source and single meaning of “immunity.” Can a concept really make sense across so many realms, or has the term fallen victim to conceptual inflation at some point? But how can one judge that? Such a judgment would imply that one offers a definite and original definition of “immunity.”

In making this special issue, we have sought no definite answer to the question of what immunity is, and we have taken care not to judge any use of the concept as “unwarranted”—at least not a priori. With respect to *what*, exactly, would one judge the “correct use” of a complex notion like immunity? Whether immunity is meaningfully mobilized as a concept can only be assessed, we feel, by looking at

where it leads our thinking and understanding. This, however, does not mean that the history of the concept does not matter. On the contrary, it is this history that indicates how the concept gained traction in modern culture and the imagination.

The concept of “immunity” acquired a very strong biomedical connotation throughout the twentieth century, and immunology has indeed become a subdiscipline in its own right within the biosciences. This encourages the presupposition that the concept originated in biomedicine, and that it has a single, precise meaning that can only be redeployed in other disciplines through figurative meaning. In that respect, it is interesting to know that the term “immunity” did not emerge within Western biosciences. The term originated as a legal term in Roman law, and was taken up in the medical world in the nineteenth century, as Ed Cohen describes in his book *A Body Worth Defending*.¹ The term “immunity” had gathered legal, political, and militaristic connotations for centuries before it was taken up in biomedicine. Cohen indicates the fusion of the idea of legal immunity with a militaristic notion of self-defense in the biomedical sphere as the beginning of modern biopolitics. The consequence of this was that the complex relation and interdependency of organisms and their environments was reduced to one specific kind of relation: aggression versus response.² When the first medical theories about immunology or bacteriology were developed in the nineteenth century by Elie Metchnikoff, Rudolph Virchow, Robert Koch, and others, the medical theories developed by these scientists were embedded within a specific sociopolitical worldview. Koch discovered the cholera bacillus in a context of increased foreign trade and colonial activities that brought along fears and anxieties about possible dangerous diseases in the tropics that could be carried back to German ports. Immunology as a medical discipline was developed in a political context in which there was increased anxiety about national identity, selfhood, borders, and boundaries.

The term “immunity,” then, had a history of usages, translations, applications, and connotations before it was taken up by Western biomedicine. Within biomedicine, the concept orients research practice and the elaboration of new theories, thereby gradually giving substance to a biomedical version of immunity and the emergence of the idea of an *immune system* as a specific reading of the

1. Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 1–31.

2. Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending* (above, n.1), p. 5.

human body in terms of self and other.³ The cultural and political practices that are informed by the idea of an “immune system” in turn form the basis of reflections in social, cultural, and political theory, where the concepts of immunity and the immune system become rearticulated, and where their history is retold alongside the history of modernity itself.

Several influential theorists such as Donna Haraway, Peter Sloterdijk, Niklas Luhmann, Jacques Derrida, Roberto Esposito, and Jean Baudrillard have adopted the term “immunity,” or immunological language and imagery, to analyze important aspects of modernity.⁴ Some of them use “immunity” as a theoretical framework to explain destructive tendencies of modern societies, while others argue that the development of diverse kinds of protective mechanisms, along with political discourse strongly colored by immunological imagery, are a central concern for modernity. At the same time, scholars in the social study of science and medicine, medical anthropologists, and researchers of health practices are showing an increasing interest in the way that different conceptions of immunity shape public opinions, practices, and official government policies concerning health and prophylaxis. This is all the more relevant now that we are relying more and more on clinical information and resources to shape their own “somatic selves” and manage their general well-being and resilience. In the field of literary studies, scholars are gradually discovering the prevalence of immunological imagery in diverse literary texts. In all of this scholarly work, “immunity” appears as a concept that is used in different contexts (legal, medical, political, social, literary) and that has attracted scholarly attention from different disciplines (philosophy, literary studies, sociology, anthropology).

As the guest editors of this special issue, we wanted to propose a small collection of papers that reflects the diversity of immunity and immunological imagery as non-neutral and non-innocent thinking tools with which modern subjects have been conceiving of themselves and transforming their biopolitical relations. This resonates with Donna Haraway’s take on the notion of the immune system as

3. For more about the issue of the “self” in immunological theories, see Alfred I. Tauber, *The Immune Self: Theory or Metaphor?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Jean-Jacques Kupiec and Pierre Sonigo, *Ni Dieu ni gène. Pour une autre théorie de l’hérédité* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2003).

4. Authors such as Isabell Lorey, Grégoire Chamayou, Ed Cohen, Johannes Türk, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Eula Biss have also adopted “immunity” as a concept or immunological imagery in their works.

an elaborate icon for principal systems of symbolic and material “difference” in late capitalism. Pre-eminently a twentieth-century object, the immune system is a map drawn to guide recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialectics of Western biopolitics. That is, the immune system is a plan for meaningful action to construct realms and maintain the boundaries for what may count as self and other in the crucial realms of the normal and the pathological.⁵

In this description, the immune system is a map used to navigate and explore the relation between self and other. Yet, the system cannot be pinpointed at any particular place in the body: it is everywhere and nowhere in particular. As a concept, it presupposes the capacity to distinguish between what belongs to the self and what does not. As such, the immune system is a constant boundary-making project, performing the relation between self and other, between the community and the “foreign,” or between an organism and its environment. Because of this, immunological discourse serves as a justification for drawing distinctions between groups of people and for implementing questionable policies and practices. It is for this reason that Haraway argues that immunity should be reconceived in a different manner: “Immunity can also be conceived in terms of shared specificities; of the semi-permeable self able to engage with others (human and non-human, inner and outer), but always with finite consequences; of situated possibilities and impossibilities of individuation and identification; and of partial fusions and dangers.”⁶ Similarly, Roberto Esposito claims that immunity has to be rethought, not in terms of a form of protection against threats from the “outside,” but more in terms of “relational filters between inside and outside instead of exclusionary barriers.”⁷

As Haraway observes, the immune system is a material-semiotic object that has attracted and still attracts a huge amount of fascination, triggering speculation and touching upon fears and anxieties about the boundaries of the self. On the other hand, it is an important domain of scientific research and a navigational tool to explore the relation between organisms and their environments in all its complexity.

5. Donna Haraway, “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse,” in *Siminans, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 203–230, at p. 204.

6. Haraway, “Biopolitics” (above, n. 4), p. 225.

7. Roberto Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics,” trans. Zakiya Hanafi, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 18:3 (2013): 83–90, at p. 88.

Immunity and Modernity

In the humanities, immunity has become an increasingly important notion for studying key concerns and practices of modernity, as well as for providing an explanation for certain destructive tendencies. Peter Sloterdijk describes the spheres of shared interiority that people develop to protect themselves against a threatening “outside.” In his *Spheres* trilogy and in books such as *You Must Change Your Life*, which he describes as a biography of what he calls the *homo immunological*, Sloterdijk claims that, besides the biological immune system, two complementary immune systems have been developed in the human sphere: socio-immunological systems such as the law or the military, and symbolic or psycho-immunological systems and practices that protect people against vulnerability and hardships.⁸ He regards the study of the latter psycho-immunological systems as necessary for the “survival of ‘cultures’ today” and the prime task for cultural theorists.⁹ Sloterdijk is aware that he adopts “a common meta-language borrowed from immunology” to describe systems of thought. To do this, he needs to expand what is generally understood by immunity: “I push the concept of immunity so far that it can include the treatment of insurance techniques, as well as juridical, therapeutic, medical and biological systems.”¹⁰ Immunity in this sense encompasses all of the different ways that people or societies try to cope with perceived threats, including more existential challenges, from religious practices or the utopian design of cities.

Niklas Luhmann also argued that all social systems develop immune mechanisms to cope with what does not belong to the system and to face possible challenges and conflicts. According to him, attempts to secure a “social immunology” have intensified since the eighteenth century.¹¹ These immune mechanisms do not have the aim of preserving the “structure” of a social system, but they function by producing contradictions that call for a resolution, whereby useful changes are adopted into the system. As examples of such

8. Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), pp. 9–10. Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres vol. 1—Microspherology: 1*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011); *Globes: Spheres vol. 2—Macrospherology: 2*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014); *Spheres vol. 3: Plural Spherology: 3*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2016).

9. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life* (above, n. 8), p. 9.

10. Peter Sloterdijk with Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, *Neither Sun Nor Death*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), p. 221.

11. Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz Jr. and Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 382.

immune mechanisms, Luhmann mentions the law—which is not surprising, given the legal origins of the very notion of immunity—and the economic principle of the calculation of costs.¹² However, Sloterdijk objects to the fact that Luhmann conceived of systems in an isolated form first and only secondarily in relation to other systems.¹³ The function of social immune systems in this sense is mainly to retranslate all “otherness” into the terms of the system, which Sloterdijk finds to be a questionable way of theorizing immunity.

Roberto Esposito theorizes immunity in relation to community. Etymologically, both terms contain the word *munus*, which could be translated as duty or obligation, but also as gift. *Communitas* or community refers to the obligations and responsibilities we all have toward others, but these obligations will ultimately threaten any form of self-identity. If *communitas* is what binds us in mutual obligation and responsibility, *immunitas* or immunity is what relieves us from this burden. In Roman law, the person who was immune was freed from certain duties. Esposito describes the relation between community and immunity in the following way: “If community breaks down the barriers of individual identity, immunity is the way to rebuild them, in defensive and offensive forms, against any external element that threatens it.”¹⁴ In order to protect the members of a community, or to avoid large outbursts of violence, an element of negativity is introduced into the community. A limited amount of negativity—for example, a limited amount of violence exercised by the state—is allowed to preclude large-scale outbreaks of violence that would threaten the community. However, and this is crucial in the analysis of Esposito, beyond a certain threshold, this element intended to protect the community, like a vaccine, will eventually turn against itself and harm the development of the community. Like an autoimmune disease, what is supposed to protect the community against the excessive demands of communal life will ultimately become a threat to the community.

In a very different manner, Jacques Derrida also emphasized self-destructive or autoimmune tendencies in his way of using the notion “immunity” in his work. He analyzed diverse phenomena, such as religion, democracy, reason (in the theories of Husserl), and certain policies introduced in the United States in the wake of 9/11, in

12. Luhmann, *Social Systems* (above, n. 11), pp. 374, 381–382.

13. Sloterdijk, *Neither Sun Nor Death* (above, n. 10), pp. 150–151. Roberto Esposito has made a similar objection to the way social immune systems are theorized by Luhmann. Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), pp. 45–51.

14. Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics” (above, n. 7), p. 84.

terms of autoimmunity. Democratic systems, for example, always contain an element of vulnerability that threatens them: it is always possible to democratically elect a party that would end the democratic system. But trying to protect the democratic system from this threat—Derrida gives the example of the cancelling of the elections in Algeria in 1992 because the Islamist party FIS was expected to win—means harming democracy itself.¹⁵ However, what Derrida describes as autoimmunity protects against too much immunity: “In this regard, autoimmunity is not an absolute ill or evil. It enables exposure to the other, to what and to who comes.”¹⁶ Autoimmunity is a double bind, both a threat and a chance. Michael Naas clarifies that “‘autoimmunity’ appears to name a process that is inevitably and irreducibly at work more or less everywhere, at the heart of every sovereign identity.”¹⁷ If autoimmunity is at work “more or less everywhere,” does not the immunological imagery risk losing its specificity and its added value as descriptive or analytic terminology? As W. J. T. Mitchell observes, “Derrida’s image of autoimmunity, and of the immune system more generally, seems to be stretched to the breaking point.”¹⁸ But he also remarks this was precisely Derrida’s point, namely to show that the idea of “immunity” as such has always consisted of connotations from different domains.

For all these theorists, the notion of immunity encompasses the diverse attempts that are made to draw a mark between self and other, communal and “foreign,” normal and pathological, order and disorder in times of crisis and anxiety about the coherence of the self and the community. Yet, theories of “immunity” also radically question the ways such divisions are marked and rendered operative. The fascination with immunity derives from the fact that it connects the biological and the political, health concerns and the law, and the body and society.

Immunity in Science and Technology Studies (STS)

In parallel to the work of theorists of modernity, social scientists—including sociologists, anthropologists, and scholars in the field of science and technology studies (STS)—began investigating immu-

15. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 30.

16. Derrida, *Rogues* (above, n. 15), p. 152.

17. Michael Naas, “‘One Nation . . . Indivisible’: Jacques Derrida on the Autoimmunity of Democracy and the Sovereignty of God,” *Research in Phenomenology* 36 (2006): 15–44, at p. 18.

18. W. J. T. Mitchell, “Picturing Terror: Derrida’s Autoimmunity,” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Winter 2007): 277–290, at p. 281.

nity empirically as a hybrid of discursive and material practices. One of the first and most famous monographs is Emily Martin's *Flexible Bodies: The Role of Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS*.¹⁹ In this book, Martin historically traces the shifts in how immunity is conceptualized, mobilized, and referred to by a diversity of actors, from scientists to laypersons and machines (electron micrographs). She analyzes drawings, scientific journals, advertisements, and business models. Her research leads her to the dominant role of "flexibility" as a concept that shapes American culture from immunology research to outdoor training programs for corporate employees. Like the theorists mentioned above, Martin deploys the notion of immunity in her work to connect and interrogate various practices within a culture. Moreover, immunity is not simply an arbitrary or convenient metaphor chosen by the author, but a concept that is actively deployed and articulated within various realms of culture and practice. In more recent STS literature, immunity is mobilized as both a concept and an "object" at the intersection of the life and the social sciences. STS is a field of study stemming from ethnographic approaches to science and laboratory practice.²⁰ It approaches both science and technology as social-material practices where scientific objects and knowledge about these objects are coproduced. Under the flag of STS, medical anthropologists, sociologists, and life scientists take a constructivist stance: immunity is a biomedical reality because of (and not despite) the fact that it is carefully constructed through scientific experiments, biomedical techniques of visualization, vaccination programs, and other social and political practices. The process of construction is what gives scientists and other actors a hold on dispersed bodily processes that are not immediately visible. It enables them to work with, modify, and control a multiplicity that is conceptualized under a single term: immunity or the immune system. Therefore, objects, materials, and technologies play an important role in STS analyses, and they are granted the same analytical attention and agency as human actors. Immunity, then, is directly or indirectly thematized and studied through concrete scientific practices and technologies that make immunity visible or that "enact" immunity as a biomedical reality. A recent special issue of *Body & Society* on "the new biologies"

19. Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies: The Role of Immunity in American Culture from the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

20. See, for example, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); and Karin Knorr Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge: An Essay on the Constructivist and Contextual Nature of Science* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981).

proposes STS and cultural studies approaches to epigenetics, the microbiome, and immunities (in the plural!).²¹ Immunology and the politics of immunity are the subject of two case studies on epidemics, and a critical and materialist reading of Ed Cohen's *A Body Worth Defending*. As the introduction to the issue states, the collection of papers is an exploration of contemporary biology through new materialistic approaches that try to converse across the life sciences, social sciences, and humanities.²² As such, the issue is part of a wider movement seeking new interdisciplinary alliances to think the social and the biological together while avoiding the reductionism of classical sociobiology.²³

This Issue: Immunity, Society, and the Arts

The contributions in this special issue of *Configurations* are complementary to recent studies situated at the intersection of the life sciences and the social sciences, while revisiting key theorists on immunity and its relation to modernity.²⁴ Next to articles that deploy theories of immunity to biopolitical concerns and practices such as official government policies (the articles by Bird and Short, and Hausman), this issue wants to explore another important interstitial space where the concept of immunity is adopted to generate new insights: the intersection of cultural theory and the arts, and especially literature. Immunity is becoming increasingly valuable for the study of literature and the visual arts, from artists who have attempted to picture immunity mechanisms to those who want to problematize the prevailing immunity discourses. Especially in science-fiction literature and film, immunological challenges have been part of the classic repertoire of subject matter: from invading aliens, to pestilential viruses and other diseases, to parasitic creatures threatening hu-

21. Lisa Blackman, ed., special issue, "The New Biologies: Epigenetics, the Microbiome and Immunities," *Body & Society* 22:4 (December 2016).

22. Blackman, introduction to "The New Biologies" (above, n. 21), pp. 3–18.

23. See, for example, Tim Ingold and Gisli Palsson, *Biosocial Becomings: Integrating Social and Biological Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Maurizio Meloni, "Biology without Biologism: Social Theory in a Postgenomic Age," *Sociology* 48:4 (2014): 731–746; Jörg Niewohner, "Localizing Biology through Co-Laboration," *New Genetics & Society* 34:2 (2015): 219–242.

24. The papers for this special issue were presented at the international conference Immunity and Modernity: Picturing Threat and Protection, which took place at the University of Leuven from the 27th to the 29th of May 2015. The conference was organized by the department of Literary Studies, the research group MDRN and the Centre for Metaphysics, Religion and Philosophy of Culture of the University of Leuven.

man life. Here, the consequences and possibilities of encounter and exchange between different forms of life are a rich resource for the development of plots and situations. It is no coincidence that Haraway uses the fiction of Octavia E. Butler as an example of texts in which other and better ways of conceiving immunity are explored, though Jon Short and Greg Bird question her reading of Butler's text in their article in this special issue. In literature, cinema, and visual arts, our fears and fascination surrounding the immune system, as well as the problematic ways in which immunity is used for social and political discourse, are presented, questioned, and problematized. The arts are a site where our (mis-)conceptions of the immune system can be navigated and rethought.

Only in light of recent theoretical interest in immunity has it become clear to what extent immunity has been an important topic in literature. Recently, scholars have shown the importance of immunity for several important writers, from Friedrich Schiller to Thomas Mann.²⁵ Moreover, research on immunity and literature reveals another aspect of the history of immunological thinking, in addition to the legal and biomedical history of the term immunity. There is also a long history, going back to ancient Greece, of thinking about the principle of immunization in the sense of inoculation with a small dose of a poison as a form of protection. As Johannes Türk has shown, many authors have described the very practice of writing in terms of inoculation. An element of negativity is elaborated and explored in a literary manner, thus functioning as a kind of vaccine against future ailments or challenges. Schiller, for example, regarded the role of pathos in tragedies as an inoculation with fate in order to protect people against its inevitable future blows. Türk traces this conception of literature as a form of inoculation back to Thucydides.²⁶ A striking example of this can be found in the beginning of Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. Benjamin, who was facing imminent exile, not knowing when or if he would see his hometown of Berlin again, explains that he had often in his life experienced the process of inoculation as something salutary. By writing about what is most likely to cause feelings of homesickness, images of his childhood, he wants to protect himself against

25. For example: Johannes Türk, *Die Immunität der Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2011); Laura Otis, *Membranes: Metaphors of Invasion in Nineteenth-Century Literature, Science, and Politics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Stijn De Cauwer, *A Diagnosis of Modern Life: Robert Musil's Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften as a Critical-Utopian Project* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2014).

26. Türk, *Immunität* (above, n. 25), pp. 19–28.

future outbreaks of homesickness while in exile.²⁷ Writing is thus conceived as a practice of affective-imaginative inoculation.

This special issue will critically assess the value of “immunity” as a concept in the humanities, more specifically in studying socio-political issues, health policy issues, and the relationship between the arts and society. The different contributions all show the relevance of “immunity” as a theoretical concept in the humanities. In the article by Bernice Hausman, the concept is used to look at the tension between “somatic individualism” and biosecurity concerning vaccination policies. It is used to analyze Canadian immigration policies in the article by Jon Short and Greg Bird. In Marjolein Oele’s text, it is adopted to philosophically reflect on the placenta. Finally, Emmanuel Rota, Monica Jansen, and Ronald de Rooy use it to develop new and original readings of literary dynamics. The theoretical frameworks, however, are never taken for granted, but always adopted with a critical reflection on their limitations and possible problematic aspects.

The issue opens with an article by Bernice L. Hausman: “Immunity, Modernity, and the Biopolitics of Vaccination Resistance.” Hausman starts from vaccination as a hallmark practice of modernity and a foundational practice of the immunitary paradigm. If vaccination enacts biosecurity and modern biological citizenship, then what does resistance to vaccination mean? Does it imply a step backward with respect to modernity and rationality? By studying vaccination controversies in the United States, Hausman shows that vaccination resistance performs a form of somatic individualism that relies on a different conception of immunity and practices to deal with illness and the pursuit of health than those adopted in state biosecurity policies. These practices, in turn, rely on a different kind of partnership with mainstream medicine rather than the rejection of it.

Greg Bird and Jon Short use the concept of immunity in relation to immigration policy in “Cultural and Biological Immunization: A Biopolitical Analysis of Immigration Apparatuses.” Inspired by Haraway and Esposito, the two authors delve into the history of Canadian immigration policy, in which they discern two historical and political periods: the crude immunization stage and the sophisticated immunization stage, respectively. Using Esposito, Bird and Short analyze how the Canadian state imposes a specific kind of “community” based on exclusionary criteria with respect to migrant workers.

27. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, et al. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 344.

If criteria of exclusion were based on race, ethnicity, and national origin in Canada's crude immunization stage, then the more sophisticated exclusionary system from the early 1970s until the present replaces these categories with a points-based system designed to differentiate between skilled and unskilled laborers, leading to discrimination of the latter. Following Esposito, Bird and Short focus on a central question throughout these historical changes: how does the (bio-)political construction of a community by means of immunitary protection mechanisms discriminate between *lives* that are worthy of protection and care and those that are not?

In "Is Immunity a Historical Concept? Medical and Juridical Immunity in the European Enlightenment," Emmanuel Rota questions the historical claims made by Esposito and others about the development of "immunity" as a notion. Esposito argues that Foucault's notion of biopolitics is semantically inadequate in explaining the connection between life and politics, proposing immunity as a more suitable term. For Esposito, immunity connects the spheres of life and the law. Rota, however, claims that though this might indeed be a semantic solution, it is not a historically sound one. By the time the biomedical world started to develop theories about the immune system, immunity in a legal sense had already become outdated and questioned by legal scholars, which renders the alleged transition from legal to biomedical immunity problematic. Rota makes his claim by looking at the lack of immunological terminology in *I Promessi Sposi* by Alessandro Manzoni, a novel that deals with several biopolitical concerns. He doubts that the diverse, uncoordinated practices that scholars such as Esposito refer to are coherent enough to speak of an "immunity paradigm."

Marjolein Oele introduces us to what she calls "placentology" in "Openness and Protection: A Philosophical Analysis of the Placenta's Mediatory Role in Co-Constituting Emergent Intertwined Identities." Oele offers an intriguing account of the paradoxes that emerge when we conceive of the placenta in terms of "self" versus "other," and when we take recourse to the concepts of "mimesis" and "representation" when trying to understand which collection of cells (pre-embryo and pre-placenta) instructs the other, thereby establishing a primacy of one being over another. Avoiding both dualisms and their logical opposite holism, Oele takes inspiration from Peter Sloterdijk and Luce Irigaray to conceptualize the placenta as a *zone of emergence* that configures the relations between new and existing life. Rather than a no man's land, the placenta creates both place and new life. Actively fending off the mother's defense

systems, the placenta poses a challenge to the immunitary logic of self-preservation, and it engenders perspectives to think differently about identity and difference, with the former born out of the latter. At this point, the philosophical exploration of the placenta, or "placentology," inspires political reflection on the meaning and practice of openness and hospitality, "of which our bodies are the living traces," in the words of Oele.

Finally, in "Immunity and Community in Italian War Novels Set in Afghanistan," Ronald de Rooy and Monica Jansen make use of Esposito's theories on immunity to analyze two recent Italian novels set in war-torn Afghanistan: Melania Mazzucco's *Limbo* and Paolo Giordano's *The Human Body*. Life in the "security bubble" of the Italian military base in Afghanistan is problematized as the desire for, but also the impossibility of, total immunity. De Rooy and Jansen read the biopolitical concerns in these novels as characteristic of a post-9/11 "return to the real," with a focus on reconstruction and affect.

These contributions show some of the intriguing applications of, and reflections about, the concept of immunity in the humanities. Its multivocal resonances do not resolve but continue to build up dissonant tensions. Rather than deciding upon the one and only "proper" meaning of the term, this special issue brings immunity to the fore as a site of inquiry, generating new approaches to biopolitical phenomena in society and literature, as well as much-needed further reflections on the diverse historical usages immunity itself as a concept.