



Esposito's affirmative biopolitics in multispecies homes

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Abstract

Drawing on Roberto Esposito's conceptualization of 'affirmative biopolitics', this article examines the relationship between bedbugs and humans in the Glasgow neighbourhood of Govanhill. Through an analysis of ethnographic field notes and interviews with people who live in the area, this article traces their experiences from first encounters. The trajectory of this experience shows a shift from a desire to immunize their homes through total annihilation of the creatures to the more pragmatic position of learning how to live with them through an orientation toward 'shared vulnerability'. This case study raises interesting questions for biopolitical theory: how can we conceive of affirmative biopolitics when the limitations of species being are evident, and is it possible to conceive of a multi or even interspecies munus or obligation?

Keywords

affirmative biopolitics, auto-immunity, bedbugs, Esposito, munus, shared vulnerability

Confronted with the presence of bedbugs, the governmental and public view in Govanhill is mobilized through the logic of negative biopolitics/thanopolitics: that bedbug life (zoe) should be sacrificed to protect human life (bios). However, the operations of killing bedbugs have a set of wider effects. The widespread use of pesticides have deleterious environmental and local impacts which cause harm to human life. Drawing on Esposito's biopolitical theory, this could be considered auto-immunity; as attempts to protect life generate harm, thus rendering the protective or immunizing act suicidal. The ways in which participants in this study changed their position evidences a disruption in

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this process which opened new possibilities for living with creatures that were previously thought impossible. This is explored through Esposito's affirmative bio-politics or politics of life, where the struggle for life creates new possibilities. Green and Ginn's (2014) theorization of 'shared vulnerability' affords a deeper understanding of this shift. This trajectory of thought extends the anthropocentric concerns of biopolitical theory in a shift towards a more than human affirmative biopolitics in the frame of a multispecies munus or obligation.

The first section of this article provides an overview of Esposito's affirmative biopolitics, paying attention to the need to move away from an anthropocentric view of the munus. This is followed by a brief overview of methods which leads to an abductive analysis of the experience of three research participants who live with bed-bugs. The application of Esposito's affirmative biopolitics within the context of everyday life makes the ethical problems of multispecies living accessible for analysis. This ethical perspective of the multispecies munus can disrupt the suicidal tendency of negative biopolitics.

Affirmative biopolitics

Esposito's biopolitical trilogy (2008; 2009; 2011) follows an argument that commences with a critique of Hobbes in *Communitas* and concludes with a proposition of affirmative biopolitics based on Deleuze's Spinozism in *Bíos*. This is a genealogy of biopolitics organized around the concept of *communitas* as the relational condition of life that is not dependent on identity. His etymology of community separates the 'munus' which is the shared obligation, gift or duty with 'cum', i.e. with. The munus 'links all of us in a reciprocal non-identity' (Esposito, 2009). The com-munus is a 'debt that binds us'. This is a community without borders, limits or definition. This view moves away from the unitary individual or collective subject towards contingent relations which are always in negotiation. Esposito states that the munus is always experienced as a loss and, thus, it is this nothing that requires 'excavation'. This is a rejection of the unitary subject produced by modern liberal thought:

Community is nothing other than the border, or transition, between this immense devastation of sense and the necessity that each singularity, each event, each fragment of existence must be in itself meaningful. It refers back to the character, both singular and plural, of an existence freed from any presupposed, or imposed, or postponed sense; of a world reduced to itself, able to be simply what it is: a planetary world, without direction or cardinal points. A nothing-else-than-world. And it is this nothing in common which is the world that associates us in the condition of exposition to the hardest absence of sense and, at the same time, to the opening of a sense yet to be thought. (Esposito, 2009: 35)

Esposito also describes the munus as a wound, which he frames not as pathology but as an opening to new possibilities. His definition simultaneously holds the threat and injury of loss with the necessary exposure which affords new relations. As such, he warns against a 'reductive and simplified image of community' (Esposito, 2013b: 26). He describes the desire to fix identity as a form of immunization against this loss. He argues

‘that immunization was born so as to protect life from its communitarian drift into chaos’ (Esposito, 2013b: 114). Greg Bird argues that Esposito’s formulation challenges the common logic employed in identity politics, where emancipation is premised upon the idea that one can become an owner of their identity. This is a product of one of the governing mechanisms of modern liberalism, which he calls the ‘dispositif of the proper’ (Bird, 2016). In this ‘dispositif’, emancipation can only occur when members overcome their alienation by appropriating their identity and that of community itself. This, he suggests, produces a double negative which reduces difference to sameness, and results in a further set of inclusions and exclusions. This is evident in Govanhill where long-standing residents express the desire to protect their environment from change generated by the introduction of difference in the form of migrants.

Esposito describes this desire for protection as a by-product of the paradigm of immunity, which seeks protection from contamination. However, he argues that the cross-contamination of wounds is crucial in the movement of life. For Esposito, community is not a coalition of subjects but the visceral exposure of contingent relations. Moreover, it is the desire to fix the subject and protect it from this contamination which shuts down community. To this end the preservation of identity is a totalitarianism which seeks to close the wound of the *munus*. He uses the example of the Nazi project as one which sought to protect a perceived pure life from contaminants which might have destroyed it, and in doing so negated one form of life in favour of another. He states: ‘Nazism constituted the catastrophic apex of this reversal of biopolitics into its opposite, thanatopolitics’ (Esposito, 2013b: 115). This frequently used example evinces how the drive to intervene to preserve life becomes a thanatopolitics of who or what is allowed to live. Esposito goes on to offer a model of affirmative biopolitics that challenges the negative, thanatopolitical ends of Agamben’s account. He uses the example of mother and foetus as an ‘opening to difference’ of one body to another which ‘contradicts the immunitary logic of self-preservation’ (2008: 108). He later (2015) develops these ideas, drawing on Simondon’s (1992) theory of individuation¹ which proposes an immanent vitalism, focused on the process of becoming not the being of subject. Through Simondon’s thought, Esposito articulates the body as a ‘floating bridge’ (2015: 81) which connects with objects which also have ‘subjective components’. In doing so, he embraces the potential of metastability, where metastability can be characterized as the infinite potentiality that can never be exhausted, which is ‘embedded—like code—in all manifestations in actuality that are selectively unfolded pending in what relational assemblage any emergent thing stands’ (Faucher, 2013: 127). Esposito’s *munus* is a metastable entity, thus it is not reducible to a subject – it is always in flux, and loss and possibility are immanent to each other.

Thinking with the immanent vitalism of Simondon (1992) and Deleuze and Guattari (1983; 1987), Esposito avoids the nihilism of Agamben’s thanatopolitics. He reads immunity as an interval between the thing and what it is not. He recognizes the polarity of the immunitary paradigm, between protection and negation, where the risk of destruction is constitutive in movement. His thinking presents a radical challenge to modernist thought that builds on the stable unit of the subject. It challenges what it means to be human and, more than this, how life can be defined. This line of thinking radically unsettles conceptual categories which stabilize the differences between species, matter and life.

Unlike others who draw on similar post-foundational thinking (Bennett, 2010; Haraway, 2010), Esposito's reliance on etymology keeps him close to anthropocentrism. A reliance on phenomenological unity can be discerned in Bird's (2016) discussion of the *munus* which focuses on the constitution of human life as 'Homo approprians'. Bird asserts that in order to arrive at a shared world, 'Homo approprians' must be 'disrupted, incapacitated' (2016: 202). This may challenge the dominance of 'approprians', but it does not go far enough. What about the 'homo'? A movement towards an interspecies *munus* which recognizes material, virtual and more than human relations requires the disruption of the human. To push the implicit post-humanism of Esposito's *munus*, both must be disrupted. The insights from his biopolitical trilogy, extended into his later works, lead to the conclusion that doing justice to living involves 'taking into consideration other living species, such as animals, plants, and non-organic materials, even technics itself' (Neyrat, 2010: 134). While Esposito does outline the impersonal work of the body in both *Bíos* (2008) and *Persons and Things* (2015), he tends not to move far from an implicit understanding of the 'body' as a human body. In his introduction to *Persons and Things*, he signals that the 'human body does not coincide with the person or the thing, it opens up a perspective that is external to the fracture that one projects on the other' (2015: 14). Furthermore, drawing on Sloterdijk, Esposito claims we 'need to break through the barrier that has divided the world into opposing species' (2015: 83). Esposito concludes his discussion with a sense of optimism around this 'radical novelty' which resists and transgresses normative binaries, and calls for a 'renewal of the vocabularies of politics, law and philosophy' (2015: 88). Although he brings an idea of the more-than-human body into the fray of political science, he stops short of developing a vocabulary or model which might be useful in the field. Nor does he address the ethical questions that emerge when the human subject is radically decentred.

The limitations of theorizing such an extreme relativism are widely noted, particularly by scholars of the left. Hornborg proposes that blurring the distinction between subject and object, and ascribing agency to non-sentient entities make it impossible to challenge 'global power relations' (2017: 95). This criticism exposes the most persistent limitations of post-humanism. However, as Sklair (2017) notes, the problem with such views is that they argue for more of the same: models of resistance and reform of capitalism and the state which are now 'threadbare'. Thinking with Esposito offers another way to make sense, a different form of resistance. The metastability of Esposito's *munus* are the grounds of both subject and not-subject which can help make sense of the dynamics of complex unfolding relations which involve humans and more-than-human, material and animals. In looking at a politics of life, Esposito draws attention to the actions which influence relations, possibility and experience which are not a result of sentient agency but occur and affect nevertheless. Thinking with Esposito does not neutralize power relations, but calls them out in all their multiple forms for scrutiny.

Operationalizing the abstraction of an interspecies 'munus' in a live context is challenging as there is an inevitable contradiction in any attempt to isolate a flow in order to fix meaning, I have therefore adopted a genealogical approach. Scholars focused on flow from Nietzsche (2005) through Foucault (1972), including Esposito, have adopted a genealogical approach. Genealogy follows data seams and affords abductive analysis (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012), which does not focus on linear causes and effects but

on entangled relations. The site of this study is an area in which I have undertaken a number of social research projects (Lynch, 2011; 2015). Although these projects were not without impact, the focus on human relations side-lined the important material, environmental, more-than-human factors. Therefore, the research reported in this article involved gathering ethnographic and historical data of human and more-than-human participants. Participant observation meant 'being with' (Ingold, 2014) the streets. Using sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009), I followed emergent seams of interest, a significant one of which was the issue of bedbugs. People with whom I made contact on the street invited me into their homes to discuss their experience, this interest snowballed as they told me of other people who also lived with these creatures.

This article draws on the experience of three households. Participants are anonymized as: MA, a recent European migrant; AC, a Glaswegian who recently moved to the area; and DB, a long-standing resident. Their stories anchor the variety of factors through which Govanhill has become a place where bedbugs have taken residence. This analysis of human/bedbug relations is developed through insights from Esposito's affirmative biopolitics and concept of the wound, alongside insights from post-human scholarship. The following discussion explores life with bedbugs as an exposure to the wound, the immunitary attempt to close the wound, and the ethics of encounter as 'shared vulnerability'. This affords a means of living within the wound which resists thanatopolitical closure.

The politics of life in multispecies homes

The development of life science through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries attended not just to the extension of human life through medicine but to increased human comfort through practices of sanitation involving the use of chemicals. This technology afforded a new level of control by humans over other forms of life. As a result of this, dirt has become associated with bare life (zoe) and cleanliness with human politicized life (bios). Bedbugs have, by most accounts, always lived alongside humans as a source of discomfort. However, from the 1950s, humans with access to newly developed chemicals could immunize themselves against their bites through bug extermination. This decision over which life is allowed to live and who can make such a decision is fundamental to negative biopolitics/thanatopolitics. As a result of this particular thanatopolitical endeavour, bedbugs, in the 'West', have become a thing of the past, associated with Victorian squalor and poverty.

The thanatopolitical discourse on bedbugs became evident in my discussions with the people I met in Govanhill and in the media accounts of the so-called 'bedbug infestation' in this neighbourhood. That people are forced to live with bedbugs was generally treated as a negative impact of structural inequality. Some people whom I interviewed made explicit connections between poverty and bedbugs. Often this negative discourse was premised on explicitly racialized terms when referencing Roma incomers. Others proposed the inverse, that the failure by policy-makers to acknowledge the impacts of the impoverished lifestyles of the incoming Roma people oppresses them. Both perspectives concur with the view that to question bedbug extermination on moral or rational grounds is unthinkable. As a result, the local authority established a dedicated pest control team to

deal with these and other 'pests' through chemical extermination practices. This environmental team, based in Govanhill, provides a free service which involves spraying flats which report the presence of bedbugs with insecticides, setting bait boxes and administering chemicals where there are reports of rodents.

I was first introduced to the 'bedbug effects' through 'unplanned' conversations that I had on the streets in Govanhill. I recognized that this was a highly significant aspect of life in the area and therefore explored these initial conversations further through the more detailed discussions in the homes of individuals and families. These households were willing not only to talk with me and allow me to see their homes, but also allowed me to meet the bugs themselves. What was immediately striking in all accounts was that the second-order affects generated by sharing residence with bedbugs were more potent than the first-order affects of their presence. First-order affects are those generated by first contact, therefore, they are not filtered by any interpretation based on either additional knowledge or cultural inflection. These are observations of presence before emotional or rational judgement. Second-order affects are a stage removed; a response to the first order that is drawn from cultural attitudes, and association, or from reason. Second-order affects precipitate tangible experience, they extend from the first order but entangle other factors, depending on the situation. The first affect of human/bedbug contact described were bites which appear on some people as red dots, on others as more noticeable itchy spots. All the participants discussed in this article first assumed this rash was an allergy or, when observed in children, a childhood ailment. As such, this interpretation did not cause undue distress but was simply a problem to be addressed. The knowledge that what they were seeing and/or experiencing were the bites of bedbugs transformed a nuisance bite into a more horrific experience.

While participants said that their internet research had led them to images of people with extensive rashes, they reported the bites themselves more as a nuisance. From the bedbug perspective, a degree of care was shown. Their saliva has anaesthetic and anti-septic qualities which minimize the risk of pain or harm to the host (Benoit et al., 2016). As a result, participants said that the bites had not disturbed their sleep or caused infection. Knowledge that the bugs were present in the home alerted participants to other environmental effects of bedbugs, such as traces of blood on sheets and a black mould-like substance on the crevices of their bedframes and boards. These material traces, which had until this point gone unnoticed, with knowledge of their source appeared to cause more distress than the rash. MA literally shrieked as she recalled the realization that these creatures were living in her house:

I was sitting in my gown and I thought something is eating me and I just grabbed and there was a bedbug and there is just this, really don't believe that there is bedbug in your house. There's just a sense of HORROR you really feel. NOOOOOOOOO, IT CAN'T BE – NOT IN MY FLAT. (MA)

DB was conscious that there were some insects in her bedroom but the discovery that these were bedbugs caused her such alarm, she fled her house:

I cannot remember how or why but I Googled it and found that it was bedbugs. Then I looked at our headboard and it was infested. I absolutely freaked out. I just grabbed the kids and ran out of the house. (DB)

The substance of this horror became clearer when participants described these tiny creatures as an invasion of their most intimate space. MA notes revulsion at their 'fed' bodies with the awareness that they are shining with the blood of herself and her children.

You get the sense of horror – you know. I know they are sitting behind the chest of drawers and I have to move it away and kill them all. I am like just thinking they will be sitting in some corner all fed with their shiny bodies, it's too much to take. (MA)

Her expression of abjection revolves around the breaching of the boundaries not only of her physical space but also of her body. She is repulsed by this connection. This is the abjection expressed by Kristeva (1973), who builds on Douglas's (1966) social construction of dirt as a boundary breach. Body fluids, faeces, urine, blood and vomit are evidence of the breakdown of the integrity of the body, testing the divide between it and everything else. Horror is the breakdown of the boundary between the self and other. 'These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty on the part of death' (Kristeva, 1973: 3). Kristeva argues that filth becomes politicized as it is not a lack of cleanliness that causes abjection but what does not respect borders, rules, and identities (Wolkowitz, 2007: 18). The presence of the bugs destabilizes the security of the perceived lines which distinguish human from bug, a threat which for many had a much more profound effect than the material exchange of human blood and bedbug saliva. There is certainly an anxiety about dirt and its associated shame, but this sense of horror goes beyond dirt, it is a fear of a perceived threat to the integrity of the body. This is the horror of exposure to Esposito's wound as a site of contamination. MA reflected that this fear was not rationale: 'I don't know – it's something apparently many people have, this fear of bugs or snakes or something, it's just because they are so deeply ingrained in our psyche that they are dirty' (MA). The expression of the associated shame was channelled through gender, class and ethnicity, as MA expressed it succinctly:

Maybe it's that I should be more of a housewife, I'm not clean enough, I'm not working hard enough to get my house into shape. For me, it's just I always see myself being criticized by this bedbug. It's all about, you know, these posh women see this Eastern European with bedbugs in her house and it's just that control over your life. (MA)

Coming into contact with the bugs was therefore a threat not only to bodily integrity but also to identity and agency. Aspects of identity already pressurized by societal norms of class, race and gender were exposed by the presence of the bugs, reinforcing the deleterious implications. This concern of not being 'in control' speaks further to the breaching of boundaries. Implicit in this contributor's comment is an idea that more affluent long-term residents have more control and are more able to guard their boundaries. It is therefore no surprise that this shame precipitated a reluctance to talk about the bugs

publicly. DB got beyond this silent shame and exposed the reality that bedbugs make no distinction on the lines of class and ethnicity:

After the meeting several people came to me and said they had been struggling with them and were glad I had raised it. It's the fear of other people knowing and thinking that you are dirty. One of the women was on the board of a charity, so they are quite respectable, so you would think they would be on the phone and getting it dealt with but they had kept it under wraps because of the shame. (DB)

As a result of this shame, DB sought to internalize the immunization mechanisms to shelter herself and her family and restrict their social contact with others:

It was a pretty horrendous time, there was a lot of crying, you know, what has my life come to? How is this happening to us? It was a horrible, horrible, time. It meant that the kids couldn't have friends coming over . . . we stopped having people over for dinner, so that did go on for a long time. (DB)

DB is not Eastern European and lives in a more affluent street, her anxiety was based in her belief that she had become contaminated and therefore a threat to others. She did not have the associated anxiety of MA's gender and ethnicity concerns; instead she reported a failure: 'how is this happening to us?' She adopted an approach of self-immunization as she withdrew from contact with others to avoid contagion. This is a shutting-down of the *munus*, a withdrawal from social contact with dual motivations of shame coupled with the moral responsibility to avoid contagion.

Entomological literature on the social impacts of bedbugs highlights comparable emotional distress and poor mental health which exacerbate existing conditions of social and material isolation (Goddard and de Shazo, 2012). In contrast, AC, who had previously lived in South America with many different insects, did not express abjection:

I used to stay in Santiago in Chile; it was kinda like this area. I'm not bothered by creepy crawlies . . . to me they [bedbugs] are like annoying but harmless, you are not going to die from them . . . they are not like a poisonous spider, they are a nuisance. (AC)

Unlike MA and DB, AC interpreted first-order affects using a different register. Her previous experience of dangerous insects appeared to generate a more flexible boundary. Her sense-making was based on a communal worldview which included insects: a multi-species *munus*. She did not view the bedbugs as a threat to her identity and therefore did not seek immunity. She was, however, pressured by family to rid her house of the bugs as both her and her partner's parents' response was one of horror and shame.

This analysis shows how perspectives of humanized life (*bios*) can transform benign relations into horrific encounters. The threat of boundary breach influenced emotions and identity more powerfully than the material presence of a rash. For MA, encountering the bedbugs enhanced aspects of her identity as a woman and a member of an ethnic minority which translated into the stereotype. The presence of the bedbugs appeared to dissolve DB's sense of identity as she struggled with a change she felt she could not

control. While AC experienced a sense of loss through the bedbug residence in her home, she did not perceive the bugs' presence as a boundary threat. The bedbug entry into these local communal environments of the home led to second-order affects which were much more dependent on social and cultural norms than on their direct material effects on human bodies. This is an affective meshwork (Morton, 2010) where different affects come into a productive correspondence through which subjects are both generated and dissolved.

Esposito's (2009) articulation of *com-munus* as a division/sharing between or in-common aligns with this meshwork of forces or affects in correspondence. Within this weave, there are attractions and repulsions which operate both on the micro level of skin and saliva particles, and with the virtual force of norms which flow through human sense-making. The collisions and collusions of these entities are the flux of the *munus* as wound. Exposure to this is the force of abjection as those who expressed such horror were confronted by the insecurity of the boundaries which they believed secure. The immunizing response by those horrified was to shore up their borders by eliminating the threat. In contrast, AC's account suggests that she was more comfortable with fuzzier boundaries. The biosecurity benefits of 'borderlands' rather than 'borderlines' is noted by Hinchliffe et al. (2013) in their study of avian flu. They argue that rather than drawing clear protective lines which keep out perceived bacterial invaders, it is more effective to develop 'immunocompetence'. This is the 'ability to live with a variety of other organisms that are always in circulation' (2013: 537). AC did not view the bedbugs as a devastating security breach, therefore did not resort to a violent immunitary response. As will be discussed below, this immunizing act towards bedbugs has had unintended effects that ricochet far beyond human/bug relations in Govanhill.

The violence widely adopted to destroy the bedbug threat mostly comes in the form of chemicals. Chemicals were first employed for human use with the advent of modern biotechnology. That is, as a facet of human mastery, based on technological and biological progress. The stream of insecticides developed from the early 1900s, organophosphates, pyrethroids, nicotinoids and now bendiocarbs, have altered human/bug relations over the last century. They are used in agriculture to ensure that creatures cannot feed on crops intended for human use. The term 'insecticide' – insect killer – speaks directly to the negative biopolitical technique; the killing of one form of life for the protection of another. These killer chemicals are used to delineate the border of the *munus* and guard against intrusion, however, their extended effects indicate how immunization flips into what Esposito terms 'auto-immunisation' and the tendency towards suicide. This draws attention to the impossibility of the desired homeostatic immunity or idea of a *munus* which can flourish within sealed borders. The history of insecticides evidences how the immunitary act of extermination, which intends to seal the wound, opens another.

Participants who had tried in vain to rid their houses of bedbugs with shop-bought chemicals welcomed the local government, environmental health officers' more thorough approach. However, every contributor reported that as soon as they returned to their house, they started to worry about the impact of the insecticides on themselves and their children:

They come in with all of their white gear, they spray everything, so we had to get out of the house – they just came in and sprayed it all so when I came back, there was all of this white

residue all over everything, the furniture, everything . . . I don't know whether or not it's poisonous. (AC)

The sight of the men in masks and white suits indicated that these chemicals came with risks. DB was concerned that repeated exposure to chemicals had played a part in her own and her husband's health issues, both of which developed subsequent to multiple chemical treatments. She said:

We had rounds and rounds of spraying. My husband, who has not had asthma since childhood, now uses an inhaler and it is maybe a bit of a jump, but I was recently diagnosed with a nerve-wasting disease. It's a very slow progress but it has been quite rapid and at the back of my mind I cannot help but think that the chemicals have had an adverse effect. (DB)

Despite the fact that the bugs returned, DB decided that the use of chemicals risked causing more harm and therefore declined any further spraying, defying the logic that these creatures should be killed without question. Other thanatopolitical tendencies of insecticide extend into multispecies streets and worlds.

Despite their disappearance from life in the West since the mid-1900s, bedbugs have been around for at least 3000 years (Benoit et al., 2016). However, unlike the many species which have vanished in what has been called the 'Sixth Extinction' (Kolbert, 2014), bedbugs have been returning with renewed vigour, not just in Govanhill, but across continents. The chemical trail of human/bedbug life is one of resistance; first to chlorinated hydrocarbons, then organophosphates, and then pyrethroids (Gordon et al., 2015). Bedbug adaptability has outflanked each new generation of toxin and has resulted in the current bedbug resurgence. Their presence grew 4500% in Australia between 2000 and 2006 (Doggett et al., 2012). In Toronto, there were 46 reported instances in 2003 (none prior), jumping to 1500 between March and October 2008; New York had 537 reports in 2003 and 10,985 in 2009 (McDonald and Zavys, 2009). Most entomologists describe this as a global epidemic without hint of hyperbole. Bai et al. (2011) claim that it is the human activity of insecticide use which has precipitated the evolution of bedbugs into an even more resistant life form. Human attempts to destroy these bugs have in fact facilitated the evolution of super-resistant bugs. The attempt to close the wound, through the killing of these bugs for the preservation of human comfort, has had the reverse effect.

The chemical facilitation of super-bedbugs is just one affective strand of the biopolitics of insecticide extermination. There is no doubt that our extensive use of toxins has generated further breaches. The early organophosphates and DDT that not only brought relief from bedbugs but changed agriculture were recognized as harmful 70 years ago. Carson's (2000 [1962]) seminal text, *Silent Spring* brought the legacy of harms from the use of toxins into full view. However, 56 years after its publication and the demise of hundreds of thousands of species, the battle to restrict their use continues. Ficam W, the current bedbug poison of choice of Glasgow City Council's environmental health services, is a bendiocarb. Bendiocarbs have been voluntarily withdrawn from production in the USA since 2001 (Zepeda-Arce et al., 2017). The substance is graded as being of mild to moderate toxicity. It is harmful to creatures such as birds and is particularly toxic to

honey bees and other pollinators. The extinction of pollinators is of grave concern for the future of food production (Gill et al., 2012; Cressey, 2017). Furthermore, the industrial waste from organophosphates and pyrethroids is linked to ocean pollution (van Dooren, 2014). The widespread toxic pollution caused by chemical production and use is a significant factor in the decrease in biodiversity which is underway across the planet (van Dooren et al., 2016). Notwithstanding the questionable ethics of destroying other life forms, this decrease in biodiversity and the increased toxicity are having an impact on soil, access to water and food supplies.

The demise of pollinators and ocean acidification, which have resulted from human activity which aims to improve human life, now threaten human survival in specific geographies (van Dooren et al., 2016). This is a worrying consequence of human attempts to draw borderlines and control the munus. In depicting the munus as a 'wound', Esposito (2013b) acknowledges the movement of life as a painful disruption as well as a point of encounter with difference and potential for innovation. The boundaries where differences meet are unstable, unpredictable, destructive and almost always uncomfortable and yet essential to the movement of life as it unfolds. Campbell (2006: 16) states that central to Esposito's affirmative biopolitics is the belief that if one life is harmed, all are, as the 'opening to an affirmative biopolitics takes place precisely when we recognize that harming one part of life or one life harms all lives'. This aligns with environmentalist, Aldo Leopold's (1949) warning of the dangers of assigning worth to plants and animals based on their human utility. He states that the health of the 'biotic community' depends on all its members, even those which are deemed destructive by humans. His thinking adds to an evaluative schema on thanatopolitical decisions between life that is worth living and life that is not.

The ethical questions which flow from recognition that the motion of prospering life inevitably includes destruction have been discussed by scholars negotiating the interplay of more-than-human encounters. Ginn et al. (2014) describe this as 'awkward flourishing'. This concept does more than recognize that there is always destruction, as it problematizes the binary relationship between human/animal victims and human/animal perpetrators. They state, 'Rather, flourishing involves many species knotted together, often imbricated in human landscapes or economy, working with and against other multispecies assemblies' (2014: 115). In another article, Green and Ginn (2014) set out the need for an ethics of 'shared vulnerability'. This recognizes the biotic relations which traverse species being, and acknowledges the immanent relatedness of prospering life and destruction. This 'shared vulnerability' might be imagined as living within the 'wound' as a site where contamination becomes possibility.

Participants' narratives strongly indicate a move towards a more nuanced relationship with their bedbug residents. Notwithstanding the depth of initial abjection, to varying degrees, participants' views on life with the bugs changed with the knowledge they gained through living with them. Each recounted a growing awareness of the impacts of the extermination methods. DB, who fled her house during her first encounter with the bugs, grew exhausted with relentless boiling and steaming, and worried about the more serious harms associated with the repeated exposure to chemicals. Destroying the bugs led to harm to participants and their families which, in balance, was not worthwhile. DB offered this analysis of her changing attitude:

I think the thing is, and I will be honest that it seemed like we were getting them regardless, you know, I was being super-clean and everything was immaculate and everything was steamed within an inch of its life, and it got to the point, not that I became slovenly, but I let things slide because it was a case of every time the guy came, you had to take all the books off the bookshelves, they had to be boxed up, all our clothes had to be boil-washed, so this happened so many times that we ended up not taking them out. But at some point, I must have disconnected with it, I am just not engaging with it. You know, it's a collective thing, people upstairs have got it, we are probably passing it back and forth. (DB)

As she assessed the different forms of discomfort, her boundaries changed. Letting 'things slide' could be viewed as a slackening of her initial tight security, moving from rigid border to borderlands. Similarly, MA's changing language indicates a changed attitude as her discourse afforded them personalities and expression: '... if you have mattresses with grooves where they can sit. Wherever they have a nice nook to hide, they will be there' (MA). This anthropomorphizing of the bugs is a radically different response than the zero-tolerance extermination reaction of first encounter where she depicted the creatures as 'aliens'. Ginn's (2013) study on human/slug relations shows how his respondents' detachment from these creatures allowed them to destroy them; in this Govanhill situation, participants have had to pass through detachment as it became evident that destruction was not a viable option. This involved, although inadvertently, recognition of shared vulnerability. For these participants, developing relations with the bugs disrupted the negative biopolitical norms and provoked a different problematization. Their responses challenge the thanatopolitical drive and its auto-immunitary tendencies and, as such, are acts of resistance. This was not the active resistance they expressed initially, of digging in and defending their home through the destruction of bedbug intruders, and the installation of the hard border of the home. This was a passive resistance, a resistance to the social norms which required their homes to be bedbug-free. This involved an opening up towards acceptance that their home was a shared space, a multispecies environment, which required management more than violence.

This tolerance of discomfort precipitates further ethical questions. Some might ask, why should they tolerate bedbugs just because they do not have the financial resources to leave the area? In other words, they are situationally forced to live with bedbugs because they are living in impoverished, dirty conditions. Structural inequality and systematic discrimination create these 'sub-human' conditions that violate the basic rights of the privileged human (*bíos*) to secure a clean, sanitized, and thus bedbug-free place to live. Environmental science makes a convincing case for unequal distribution of detrimental impact associated with anthropogenic harm to the ecology of the planet. Those living in economically disadvantaged geographies are more likely to experience the detrimental unintended consequences of negative biopolitics as it manifests in climate change, pollution and chemical resistance. While weather events such as Hurricane Katrina do not discriminate, the recovery of the less wealthy is much slower than that of the affluent (Moore, 2015). Arguably the situation described in this article in Govanhill is yet another example of such structural inequality as more affluent people who find bedbugs in their property have the option to move. However, to frame a solution to the problem in this way would be to miss the bigger issues at stake and to miss the opportunity to learn from

this disruption of thanatopolitics. Esposito (2012; 2013a) argues that the thanatopolitical drive cannot simply be reversed. However, it can be challenged through a process of disruption. He states the ‘problem [of thanatopolitics] has to be tackled on two levels: by disabling the apparatuses of negative immunization, and by enabling new spaces of the common’ (Esposito, 2013a: 88). This expresses the need to disrupt the logic and practices that promote auto-immunity in order that new relations might form. Such a disruption, described by Bird and Short (2017), is an action which can be both ‘liberating’ and ‘isolating’. It also generates a raft of ethical questions.

The multispecies munus

Environmental justice campaigners and scholars (Sklair, 2017) propose that humans, particularly those in wealthy countries, should live differently as the lifestyles of the wealthy, which include increased travel, high levels of consumption of material goods and high levels of meat consumption, are having detrimental impacts on the ecology which sustains human life. The extent of our impact on the geology of the planet has led to calls for a new geological epoch, the ‘Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000). The various warnings issued relate to soil erosion, ocean pollution, global warming and extreme weather events. These all call for humans to consider the implications of current lifestyle norms in order that they are changed. The adjustment made by participants towards the borderlands of ‘shared vulnerability’ was certainly informed by such reason. As bedbugs are not known vectors of disease and as the poisons used to kill them are harmful, often in ways which are not known until after years of use, common sense dictates that keeping the bedbugs at bay rather than complete extermination is the sensible option. However, there is another more profound ethical issue which relates to the problems which affirmative biopolitics exposes. If all life matters and the protection of the subject is impossible; where the subject exists only as a metastable entity; if intervention which aims to heal inadvertently ruptures in new unthought-of ways, then how is it possible to act?

Carey Wolfe, a scholar of post-humanism, highlights the problem of the ‘principle of unlimited equivalence’ (2013: 56) that he reads in Esposito. Where all life is valued equally, there is no way of differentiating, between ‘condor and child’ as ‘ethics is a non-contingent view from nowhere’. On what basis is action possible if at one end of the immunity pole there is a risk of protection, which flips into a stifling thanatopolitics and, at the other end, there is no principle which supports action? Understanding the participants’ experience through Esposito’s affirmative biopolitics has something to offer this debate. This does not come in the form of a more-than-human deontology but in an ‘ethics of encounter’ (Edmunds, 2011). Such an ethics focuses not on moral abstraction but on the material and virtual effects which operate in discrete contexts. This provides not a view from ‘nowhere’ but a unique view within the context of the specific situation, or munus, where life is affectively unfolding.

Edmund’s critique of James’s (1977) thesis on the blindness of humans leads him to conclude that feelings are the route through which shared experience is possible. To use his example, we might not share the dog’s idea of a bone, but we can share in its enthusiasm. An ethics of encounter therefore surpasses James’s call for tolerance based

on acknowledgement of human blindness, as this positions us as spectators, instead, an ethics of encounter is participation with the other, an act which blurs the boundaries between subjects and results in their undoing. This boundary work resembles the disruptive action of Esposito's affirmative biopolitics. It is a distribution which does not belong to the subject. It is a becoming with/cum. This is an active process not a passive acceptance as that position belongs to James's spectator. This ethics of encounter is evident in the narratives in a number of ways.

First, as discussed above, participants' experience was driven by exposure as the limits of their spatial and sensory boundaries were breached. Their narratives describe boundary work, as they wrestle to contain and navigate what they described as an invasion. Second, feelings were the operative register which drew them in as participants. The encounter was first experienced through horror. This intensity of exposure generated an awareness of limits and, while it initially precipitated a desire for immunity, it simultaneously located participants within the boundary between secure and recognizable limits and intimacy with insects. They could not refuse, so occupied was this exposure beyond the limits of their corporeal and spatial boundaries. Edmunds (2011) discusses the 'being with' as participation in feeling with the other. This was evident in terms which MA used to describe them: 'huddled together', 'sitting', 'waiting', 'full'. Her use of such terms may anthropomorphize the bugs but in doing so implies her attempt to feel with them. She cannot know what sense, if any, the bugs make of these experiences but she occupies the possibility of feeling alongside them.

This encounter acted to regenerate 'connections between judgements and feelings' (Edmunds, 2011: 140), which resulted in not simply a shift in perspective but an undoing which carried forward into new ways of being. Drawing on Simondon and Deleuze, Esposito states, 'Humans are not a being as such but a becoming that carries together within itself the traces of a different past and the prefiguration of a new future' (2008: 88). Becoming in the Deleuzo-guattarian sense is not a teleological movement towards an extended present but places much more emphasis on the undoing of the present and a future yet to be known. In this respect, DB's relief was not so much an epiphany about her place in the world but a release which came from entering a flow which she could not control. She acknowledged that her own perceived limits had been exceeded and this had not led to the destruction which her earlier sense of horror intimated. She is in correspondence with something more than her sense of self. She is not the author, as the other has an unpredictable part to play.

Although a detached view might describe these experiences as simple tolerance, attention to the narratives suggests otherwise. The fear of auto-immunization as documented in these cases where killing the bugs = killing (harming) myself inadvertently led these people to arrive at a position of 'shared vulnerability'. The passive resistance of relaxing the tight borderlines, referred to earlier, involved active navigation of a dynamic affective situation. These encounters marked a move towards greater experimentation. Some noted that participating in the interview was an aspect of this process. They described talking to neighbours whom they might have avoided previously and further questioning the logic of extermination by chemicals as the only feasible option. In these three situations, participants sought more information on bedbug life to inform themselves on how to maintain this precarious situation without giving up or becoming

consumed by the need to destroy all of the bugs. This recognition of ‘shared vulnerability’ was certainly not a place of comfort but it was a place of possibility as they became open to new ideas which challenged their norms. They adopted a process of protection that required participation and adaptation, not the absolute of extermination. This required stepping out of the centre and recognizing that control over other forms of life is costly, undesirable and counter-productive. While no one would have described bedbugs as a ‘gift’ in Esposito’s terminology, the participants came to realize that they could not be refused. Bedbug life became woven into their life, influencing their behaviour and choices. Their homes were multispecies environments not human fortresses.

Participants’ direct experience and growing knowledge of the wider impacts changed the stakes. Their focus was no longer on optimum comfort but on the longer-term health of themselves and their children. In this shift, the presence of bedbugs was no longer a problem of how to exterminate them but how to live with them. Their narratives depict an affective community, a *com-munus* not based on identity or ownership but on the shared experience of forces which different colliding bodies exert on each other in the movement of becoming life. Affirmative biopolitics hosts both the destruction within the movement of life and the possibility of the yet to become.

In the time of the Anthropocene, the calls for humans to develop different types of relations with other life forms and environments are increasingly audible. These narratives show how it is possible for people to live within the wound, acknowledging, not denying, their exposure, and making decisions based on a situated ethics of encounter. However, they also show how difficult this is. Esposito describes the polarity of the immunitary paradigm, while these narratives show the possibility of shifting position, they also imply that such an altered view occurred in the absence of choice. This is a chilling prospect for human life in multiple arenas where immunitary practices continue to have deleterious effects. This situation also presents an opportunity to think differently about what is valued and how public discourse might benefit from a shift towards greater deliberation. Instead of immediate condemnation of bedbugs, a public discourse which contemplated the implications of chemical destruction more effectively might more readily change the stakes and mitigate the horror and shame.

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Note

1. Simondon has only one essay published in English, which is Gilbert Simondon (1992) 'The Genesis of the Individual'. There are a growing number of works which develop his thinking, see Pascal Chabot (2006), and David Scott (2014).

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