

Post-Pandemic Futures and the Affective Appeal of Immunity

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened up futures for debate in an unprecedented manner and on an unforeseen scale. This article explores how ideas of immunity structured debates about pandemic management strategies as a means of securing a post-pandemic future during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020. Building on queer theorization of temporality, the article asks how ideas of COVID-19 immunity derive their affective appeal and cultural legitimacy, and what is at stake in the imagined futures that unfold from such visions of post-pandemic immunity. The analysis focuses on two affective figures that circulated widely in public discourse in March–May 2020: the figure of the soon-immune nation and the figure of the immune individual. I unsettle these figures by contextualizing them through the histories of immunity politics around race, gender and sexuality. The analysis shows that the two figures have long affective histories entangled with nationalism, racism and discrimination. The article argues that these histories shape and curtail the kinds of post-pandemic futures that may be enacted and imagined through popular ideas of immunity.

Keywords: COVID-19, future, immunity, intersectionality, nation

Introduction

IN THE FIRST half of 2020, during what is now referred to as the “first wave” of the COVID-19 pandemic, news outlets in a number of coun-

tries discussed national governments' plans to develop immunity certificates. Simply put, such certificates would indicate those members of society who had recovered from COVID-19 infection, who were presumably immune to the virus, and who could thus re-enter societal life and carry out their communal duties (e.g., Bienkov 2020; Horowitz 2020). One such piece, published in the UK newspaper *The Guardian* on May 4 with the title "Health Passports 'Possible in Months'", outlined a potential collaboration between the UK government and the UK technology company Onfido to produce a complex system of immunity surveillance (Proctor & Devlin 2020). The proposed "health passport" would make use of a photo ID, an antibody or viral test result, and biometric facial recognition technologies at workplace entrances. Although the envisioned certificate was framed as a *health* passport – a rhetorical maneuver that reflected a WHO warning in late April 2020 that little was known about COVID-19 immunity (WHO 2020) – it was evident that the envisioned certificates mobilized long-standing cultural discourses of framing some individuals and communities as immune to communicable diseases. Moreover, the very idea of health passports has a long history with connections to racial hygienic and eugenic projects of identifying fit individuals (Weindling 2018).

Ideas of COVID-19 immunity certificates were part of a broader intensification of immunity discourse during the first wave of the pandemic. Indeed, *immunity* – and especially "herd immunity" – was one of the most prominent terms that consistently reappeared in news stories throughout the first months. This article interrogates this larger phenomenon – the reactivation and reformulation of cultural ideas of immunity around the pandemic – in order to understand the politics involved in attempts to imagine post-pandemic futures. The article traces how appropriations of immunity discourse enable imagining futures in a situation where the future seems unimaginable. It asks how ideas of COVID-19 immunity derive their affective appeal and cultural legitimacy as a means of envisioning a post-pandemic world, and how the layered histories of immunity discourse shape which futures emerge as desirable and which as unattainable. The article thus sheds light on the

entanglements of ideas of immunity and futurity at a specific moment – the first wave of the pandemic – as well as analyzes the implications of using particular ideas of immunity to imagine societal futures.

The article draws from and engages with *queer* in three senses. First, the pandemic itself is an inherently queer issue. As Jenny Björklund and Ulrika Dahl note in their last *lambda nordica* editorial, “if queer, as David Halperin [...] once noted, is ‘anything that is at odds with the normal,’ then living in a pandemic is certainly queer in many respects” (Björklund & Dahl 2020, 8). While pandemic measures, such as restrictions on face-to-face meetings between people not living together, have reinforced old ideas of family units and heteronormative, state-sanctioned forms of kinship, pandemic experiences are characterized by the crumbling of the sense of direction and the sense of uncomplicated belonging. Second, the article approaches queer as a temporal issue. It interrogates the normative assumptions of temporality that structure public discourses of the pandemic and asks how queer theorization of time can challenge those normativities. Building on the rich queer studies literature on temporality and future making, I analyze how the histories of imagining immunities structure the temporal organization of post-pandemic futures. Third, the article analyzes immunity discourse as an inherently queer concern because culturally prominent ideas of immunity mobilize normative assumptions of bodily boundaries and encounters between bodies. In all three instances, queer operates as “fluid and open-ended” (Björklund & Dahl 2020: 15), as an anti-normative orientation that may set into motion alternative possibilities.

This approach differs significantly from existing, extremely important bioethical critiques of how early pandemic responses, such as ideas of immunity certificates or herd immunity through infection, aggravate inequalities affecting racialized minorities, nontraditional families, or people with disabilities (e.g., Kates 2020; Mills 2020; Phelan 2020). My analysis complements these concrete analyses of exclusions implicit in immunity discourse by focusing on the broader, and more evasive, affective and temporal orientations structuring ideas of COVID-19 immunity. Queer theorization of temporality allows me to ask how normative

assumptions of bodily and communal boundaries structure ideas of post-pandemic futures.

My analysis focuses on two affective figures that emerged in public discourse during the first pandemic months and circulated widely across national contexts: the figure of the immune nation and the figure of the immune individual. The article unsettles these figures by contextualizing them through the histories of immunity politics around racialized and gendered differences, and by tracing their affective entanglements with nationalist and eugenic imaginaries. The article argues that the popular appeal of ideas of COVID-19 immunity arises, to a considerable extent, from these unarticulated affective histories.

The article traces the two figures across Finnish, Swedish and English language media during roughly a three-month period from early March to late May 2020; in addition, the article engages with some relevant media texts from early summer. In early March, the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a pandemic and a large number of nations entered a national lockdown with different degrees of restrictive measures. By the end of the period, many of these countries had started lifting restrictions. The period constitutes a moment when the necessities of the pandemic present were replaced by attempts to imagine a post-pandemic future. The material I draw on represents mainstream media, mostly newspapers and news websites, in Finland, Sweden, the UK and the US, as well as widely read international news outlets. The analysis engages with texts that (1) discuss the idea of nations or populations as seeking immunity, or (2) situate individual immunity within the context of societal futures. However, the article does not provide a systematic comparison of different countries and does not engender comparative data. Instead, the method is to *think with* these media representations to unpack the connection between immunity, futurity, and the politics of risk and protection. The article uses media stories from different locations in the global north to point to patterns as well as differences in how ideas of immunity operate in attempts to envision post-pandemic futures. The article's primary orientation, then, is theoretical rather than empirical.

It should be noted that a lot has changed in the public discussion about immunity since May 2020, the end of the period addressed here. Ideas of COVID-19 immunity have evolved following reports of suspected re-infections: patients falling ill with COVID-19 more than once. The rise of COVID-19 infections in the last months of 2020 in countries that suffered badly in the early months of the pandemic, such as Italy and France, has also challenged visions of herd immunity. Likewise, the emergence of new virus variants has complicated ideas of COVID-19 immunity. Furthermore, the emergence of “long COVID” – months-long, potentially chronic complications among those who were infected during the first months – has questioned the culturally presumed connection between immunity and health. At the same time, the development of COVID vaccines and the launch of the first vaccination programs in December 2020 has shaped the terms in which COVID-19 immunity is addressed in public discourse. Yet, by focusing on the first pandemic months and the ease with which ideas of immunity resonated across cultural contexts, the analysis in this article is able to make visible some of the key dynamics through which ideas of immunity are turned into affectively powerful politics that promise futures to some individuals and communities but not to all.

Queering post-pandemic futures

Time is inherently political. How time is conceptualized affects the perceived connection between what has been and what may come, making some future trajectories appear as possible while rendering others as unachievable. Since the 1997 avian flu outbreak and the 2003 SARS outbreak, a considerable critical literature has emerged on the anticipation of pandemics. In the center of these analyses is pandemic preparedness, a normative temporal orientation that serves to legitimize a range of interventions and uses of resources to combat a not yet present disease (Caduff 2015; see also Armstrong 2017). Crucially, anticipation as a temporal orientation is highly affective, encouraging us to orientate toward futures and let the imagined future shape our living in the present (Adams, Murphy and Clarke 2009; Masco 2014).

With the emergence of COVID-19, anticipation of a pandemic has been replaced by a pandemic present, which, as anthropologist Anna Weichselbraun (2020) notes, offers temporal confusion rather than stability. Writing in April 2020, Weichselbraun describes the complex temporalities of the pandemic present as “corona chronotopes” characterized by “millions of fractured pandemic space-times” and a sense of constant shifting of the temporal landscape, as if people in different locations lived in different, fast-evolving temporalities. This unsettling of the sense of time reinforces uncertainties arising from the pandemic, which, in turn, intensifies the cultural appeal of post-pandemic imaginaries. Tellingly, commentators from all political orientations in the first months of the pandemic constructed those months as the moment when the direction of the future changed while also framing the “new normal” – life adjusted to the demands of the pandemic present – as promising a possibility of precarious stability. The cultural prevalence of immunity discourse and the figures of the immune nation and individual are affective responses to this moment of temporal disruption and the ensuing striving for post-pandemic futurity.

My discussion of post-pandemic is inspired by queer scholarship on futurity. While “anti-social” theorists such as Lee Edelman (2004) have challenged any alignment between queerness and future, the work of scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz (2009) has approached queer as future-oriented and futures as potentially queer. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz writes that “to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer” (Muñoz 2009, 26). Muñoz describes a “queer utopian hermeneutic” as “aim[ing] to look for queer relational formations within the social” and “not settling for the present” but instead “asking and looking beyond the here and now” (Muñoz 2009, 28). The possibilities of the utopian are also highlighted by Kaitlin Noss, who notes that “as we can see in the rapid and brutal execution of neoliberal visions, it matters whether and how we imagine the future or there will indeed be no alternative” (Noss 2012, 133). Building on Lisa Duggan’s work, Noss argues that critique is an important aspect of “future-orient-

ed work to ensure that our visions are committed to resisting the traps of our present moment” (Noss 2012, 133).

Visions of post-pandemic futures are shaped by the culturally prevalent understanding of time as linear and progressive – what Elizabeth Freeman (2010) has called “chrononormativity” and Jack Halberstam “straight time” (Halberstam 2005). While chrononormative time projects cultural expectations about monogamous intimacy and continuity of family on individual lives, it also shapes ideas of futures on a collective level. Freeman notes that chrononormativity connects “properly temporalized bodies” (Freeman 2010, 4) to future-oriented societal structures; that is, “people are bound to one another, engrouped, made to feel coherently collective, through particular orchestrations of time” (Freeman 2010, 3). For Tom Boellstorff, this suggests that “straight time is an emically salient, socially efficacious, and experientially real cultural construction of temporality across a wide range of political and social positions” that is “shaped by linked discourses of heteronormativity, capitalism, modernity, and apocalypse” (Boellstorff 2007, 228). This line of queer theorization helps to make visible how the trajectories imagined between pre-pandemic pasts and post-pandemic futures are political not only because of their explicit claims about desirable futures but also because of the temporal strivings that structure those future visions.

My analysis in the following sections draws on this theoretical work to unsettle futures built around ideas of immunity – ideas that, in the first months of the pandemic, often appeared as if they were inevitable. The analysis demonstrates how the layered histories of the figures of the immune nation and the immune individual are invoked – sometimes intentionally, often unintentionally – to insist that chrononormative, future-oriented temporality exists even in the middle of a pandemic.

The immune nation and its troubling histories

In March–May 2020, the politics of immunity were debated in strongly binary terms as a question of herd immunity versus lockdown. The figure of the immune nation operated as a rhetorical tool through which

the growing tensions between different ideas of communal protection were articulated. Sweden and the United Kingdom were portrayed in the international news headlines as departing from most European countries in that they appeared to embrace the idea of herd immunity. While the UK government retracted herd immunity as an official policy after public protest (Ghosh 2020), the Swedish national health organization Folkhälsomyndigheten, and the state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, continued to invoke the idea of Sweden as a nation that will arise from the pandemic with a newly acquired immunity – even if herd immunity was increasingly re-framed as the likely outcome of communal spread rather than an explicit strategy (Ulfvarson 2020).

The idea of a nation immune to COVID-19 draws on the concept of herd immunity usually associated with vaccines: when a large enough section of the population has developed antibodies, the virus stops spreading and those not yet infected will be protected. Many commentators argued that the logic of herd immunity, and the idea of shielding the vulnerable while the healthy and immune work to ensure the functioning of society, is appealing but misleading: it promises solidarity while reinforcing an ableist logic of strong versus vulnerable bodies (e.g., Ganguli-Mitra et al. 2020). Writing in the context of possible antibody tests in April 2020, bioethicist Peter Mills outlines how the juxtaposition of immunity/vulnerability could lead to “restoring freedoms for the seropositive while continuing to restrict (or even further restricting) the freedoms of the seronegative” (Mills 2020). According to Mills, “[t]his is biopolitics: the inscription and control of human bodies and life processes by the exercise of organised power” (Mills 2020). Furthermore, critics pointed out that in scenarios built around herd immunity, controlling exposure is difficult, as the lives of those at risk and those (presumably) not at risk are connected in a multitude of ways (Hanage 2020; Meyerowitz-Katz 2020).

In this article, however, I am interested in the affective work that the figure of the soon-immune nation does. This affective work takes place through the promise of temporal movement forward embedded in

the figure of the immune nation. The idea of herd immunity posits the search for communal immunity as a commitment to futurity while rendering lockdown measures as halted in time and unable to reach toward a post-pandemic future. This is illustrated by a short piece published in *The Economist* on May 16. The article accounts how “Sweden resisted the temptation” of the (presumably) backward-looking logic of lockdown – a portrayal that frames public health decisions as a matter of emotional struggle and moral weakness (*Economist* 2020). The text channels the viewpoint of the former state epidemiologist Johan Giesecke, who describes herd immunity explicitly as future-oriented temporal politics: “Sweden chose this path because it looked at the longer term, says Johan Giesecke . . . Full lockdowns are stop-gap measures, he says, and European governments rushed to put them in place without plans for what would replace them” (*Economist* 2020). Queer scholarship has demonstrated that such invocations of future-oriented temporality are normative as well as affective: resisting the affective pull of futurity is perceived as stubborn and unnatural (e.g., Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005). In the middle of a public health crisis that has unsettled our sense of a future, insisting on a linear “path” toward a post-pandemic time is affectively beckoning. However, not all movement is good: “rushing” and “stop-gap measures” presumably lead to a failure to effectively move toward a post-pandemic future.

Crucially, these affective temporal politics of herd immunity are entangled with long histories of imagining nations through immunity discourse. As has been documented extensively in research literature, the concepts of immunity and nation are historically linked (Brown 2019; Cohen 2009; Esposito 2011). In these histories, national borders are seen as bodily boundaries – the skin of the nation – while the vulnerabilities of bodily boundaries are perceived as a threat to national safety and coherence. This connection is a central reason why immunity is so often conceptualized through military metaphors (Haraway 1991, 203–230). The idea of herd immunity is entangled with the idea of a nation having an immune system. In many news stories on national COVID-19 policies in the material covered here, it is almost as if coun-

tries such as Sweden, or the UK in the early stages of the pandemic, had their own immune system and were thus able to shake off what happened elsewhere (e.g., Stewart & Busby 2020). Correspondingly, lockdown policies, and the attendant closing of national borders, were framed in the context of countries such as New Zealand as a way of protecting the immunologically vulnerable nation (e.g., Jones 2020).

The entanglement of immunity and nation carries a troubling history, which shapes the kinds of post-pandemic futures that can be imagined through the figure of the soon-immune nation. In the long tradition of immunity discourse, the immunity of the nation is constantly threatened by the porousness of boundaries. Within this logic, people seen as other are often perceived as immunologically susceptible and thus as potential carriers of disease into the nation (immigrants), or as the weak link of the national immune system (indigenous people). The rich historical research literature on the role of immunity discourse in the United States illustrates this logic. For example, Laura Diehl (2013) traces how during the heyday of eugenics in the US, immigrants seeking to enter the country were assumed to be infested with contagious disease, so that strict border control was equaled with protecting the health of the nation. Diehl notes how *fin-de-siècle* “[n]ewspapers and popular ‘scientific’ journals promptly pathologized Jews as more susceptible to diphtheria, insanity, typhus, cholera, diseases of the nervous system, and sexual dysfunctions” (Diehl 2013, 87), and how from the 1950s onward communism was conceptualized as a public health threat, invigorated by ideas of communists as “opportunistic infections, crafty agents that attacked defective immune systems to spread their malignancy” (Diehl 2013: 100). Likewise, Christian McMillen notes how Native Americans became seen as susceptible to and thus carriers of tuberculosis: “[w]hen Indians began dying and TB started to emerge as a regular feature of agents’ and physicians’ reports, racial, or hereditary, susceptibility was a common explanation” (McMillen 2008, 618). The racialization of vulnerability is not, however, always quite this straightforward. As Paula Treichler (1999) shows in the context of the HIV epidemic in North America, while gay men were portrayed as immuno-

logically vulnerable during the early years of the epidemic, the disease itself became portrayed as a foreign intervention and threat to national immunity through the stigmatized figure of Patient Zero, a French-Canadian flight attendant who had travelled across the world. While these examples reflect the politics of immunological vulnerability in North America, ideas of weaker populations and vulnerable races also structured, for example, early twentieth-century public health agendas and scientific discourse in Europe and Scandinavia (Keskinen 2019; Meskus 2009; Weindling 2018).

Like vulnerability, immunity, too, has been racialized. Again, historical research on racialization and infectious diseases in the US vividly illustrates this dynamic. A case in point is the persistent myth of black immunity: the assumption that those with roots in Africa are immune to disease as well as to pain and suffering. For example, documenting the history of the idea of black immunity to yellow fever, Rana A. Hogarth (2017) notes that the idea arose from observations that enslaved people in Charleston during the 1748 outbreak were unlikely to fall ill (possibly because they were exposed to yellow fever prior to arrival in North America). The belief in black immunity had catastrophic consequences during the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia, when black Americans were asked to nurse white families and not leave the city, but in fact were no more immune than others. Hogarth shows how the idea lived on even when contradicting evidence emerged, and how a number of mutually contradictory versions of black immunity as involving innate factors as well as adjustment to climate continued to coexist (Hogarth 2017; see also Anderson 1996 for the mutability of ideas of racialized immunity). In terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chelsey Carter and Ezelle Sanford III argue that these histories of racialized immunity structured early responses to COVID-19. They maintain that the idea of black immunity engendered the mistaken perception that the virus spread slowly and caused relatively mild symptoms among black communities (Carter & Sanford 2020).

The appeal of nationally framed trajectories

These histories of imagining immune and vulnerable populations structured public discourses and debates about national responses to COVID-19 in March–May 2020. In such discourses and debates, epidemiological curves, diagnostic and antibody test roll-out, and reports of antibody rates, were often framed as if both the pandemic and pandemic response followed a natural, nation-centered logic (e.g., Giordano 2020; Rourke 2020). The comparisons of nations resonated with the idea of COVID-19 immunity as a national characteristic. This framing is culturally appealing because it links ideas of national coherence, embodied differences, and a promise of futurity.

First, as the *Economist* article in the previous section shows, the imagined national immunity is not only physiological but also psychological, associated with rationality and mature, independent consideration – the ability to “resist the temptation” of past-oriented lockdown (*Economist* 2020). In this, the idea of the soon-immune nation draws on discourses of idealized, white masculine individuality projected on the nation: the nation as self-sufficient, rational, and non-emotional. Feminist, queer and critical race scholars have demonstrated that ideas of rationality and maturity are deeply political, reflecting long histories of portraying marginalized groups – women, ethnic, sexual and gender minorities, working class communities – as incapable of controlling their emotions (Schuller 2017). This dynamic of rationality/emotion is highly affective: it invites the readers to side with the presumably rational and disregard the emotional as short-sighted and stuck in the past. That is, the rhetoric of rationality attached to the figure of the soon-immune nation operates as a promise of futurity.

Second, the affective appeal of the soon-immune nation is reinforced through the apparent coherence of the nation it promises. As the histories of race and immunity traced in the previous section suggest, the future promised by the figure of the immune nation is structured on a complex set of exclusions, including historically layered racialized and ableist hierarchies that posit some bodies as strong and others as weak. The figure of the soon-immune nation sidesteps and erases intersectional differences

within the nation through the idea of togetherness in crisis – a common feature in governments’ public discourse across countries in the period covered here – and engages in politics that enact post-pandemic futures as falsely homogenous. As Muñoz (2009) has shown, what kinds of pasts are invoked and what kinds of embodied differences are recognized is crucial for broadening the scope of how futures can be envisioned and desired. For this reason, the historical roots of connecting nation, race and immunity are pivotal to how post-pandemic futures emerge as imaginable in discourses around national pandemic strategies and trajectories.

The affective appeal of the future visions promised by the figure of the soon-immune nation became obvious over a period of a few weeks in late April and early May, when countries that had chosen (some degree of) lockdown started debating possible exit strategies that would change the perceived halted temporality of lockdown. In these few weeks, the idea of herd immunity as an exit strategy became increasingly appealing, suggested by newspaper headlines such as “Is Sweden’s corona strategy better after all?” in Finland, which had closed much of social and public life (Naakka & Viljakainen 2020). Likewise, headlines such as “Sweden stayed open during the coronavirus pandemic: Is it a model for the future?” in the US reflected longstanding American political traditions of protesting against state intervention in individual choice (Davies & Roeber 2020). Some of the optimism about herd immunity waned by mid-May, when the first antibody tests from Spain, Sweden and other heavily affected countries showed that, despite all deaths, only a small segment of the population had measurable COVID antibodies. However, within those weeks in late April and early May, the herd immunity strategy seemed widely appealing.

The debates in Finland illustrate this appeal. In April 2020, in order to lift the lockdown, the Finnish government announced that they would follow a hybrid strategy: open up society gradually while increasing testing and tracing. This led to a public and political debate about whether the government in fact wanted to follow what was portrayed in Finland as the “Swedish” herd immunity strategy, especially as an authoritative report solicited by the government framed a second wave of COVID-19

in the fall as inevitable (Happo & Tiessalo 2020). Likewise, several doctors and public health officials doubted the ability of testing and tracing to reach most cases and saw a steady progression of the epidemic and a gradual building of herd immunity as an easier way out (Hämäläinen & Kemppinen 2020). While these arguments appealed to rationality, they relied on temporally invested premises: that the present and the future are connected through a straight and steadily paced trajectory, and that pausing will inevitably prevent a future. In Finland, these debates reached a temporary and short-lived moment of closure when prime minister Sanna Marin declared on May 15 that the government did not seek herd immunity through infection and that “the epidemic should not spread in Finland” (Huhtamäki & Nalbantoglu 2020).

These moments of fracture in political visions of halting time through lockdown show how normative the future-oriented temporality of the nation is and how difficult it is to imagine a communal future outside that framework. Again, the work of queer scholars is helpful as it shows how the appeal of nationally framed futures draws on exclusions. When the nation as an entity is equated with the promise of a post-pandemic future, things that contradict the nation are posited as undermining futurity. This includes lives, activities, and modes of solidarity that do not follow the logic of chrononormativity, and that may instead engage in spiraling, folding, ruptured or parallel temporalities of being and connecting (Freeman 2010). Chrononormativity also underlies the prioritizing of speed in visions of herd immunity: future is understood to be a result of a series of steps that need to be reached as swiftly as possible. Thus, in the first months of the pandemic, when COVID vaccines still seemed like a long shot, proponents of herd immunity often dismissed the prospect of immunity through vaccination. However, speed is political: it reinforces an ableist and capitalist imaginary of ideal, maximum performance – an imaginary that has proved highly appealing in public discourse across decades.

Finally, it is important to note that national imaginaries have also been mobilized and reinforced in arguments for lockdown. As Des Fitzgerald (2020) shows in the context of the UK, the highly affective,

often aggressive calls to stay home – or, more forcefully, “stay the fuck at home” – resonate with the insular, anti-immigration rhetoric of Brexit. As Fitzgerald convincingly argues, the rhetoric of “going home” and that of “staying home” become entangled and gain force through their troubling resonances. This suggests that the very project of imagining futures during a pandemic tends to prioritize conventional frameworks, such as the nation, that are invested affectively with rhetoric of security, control, and the promise of expelling threat.

The immune individual

One instance where the national seems to slip to the background is the emergence of the figure of the COVID-19 survivor: the one who conquered the disease and is now free to move around society and help build a path toward a post-pandemic future. Yet, the national and the personal are conceived of in relation to one another, as herd immunity relies on a large enough number of (sufficiently) immune individuals. This is the central logic of immunity passports, which grant some individuals privileges within the national community and deny other individuals those same privileges. Crucially, the immune citizens are expected to commit to the idea of synchronized, national time, and the worthiness of citizens is evaluated on how well they adjust to these temporal demands.

In the public discourse during the first months of the pandemic, several categories of immune individuals emerged. One category consisted of the asymptomatic, who would not even have known they were ill if it were not for a diagnostic or antibody test; it was as if COVID-19 barely scratched the surface of their lives. In early media discourse, these figures often carried an aura of physical strength and vitality. Another category consisted of those who were severely ill, perhaps even on a ventilator in intensive care, but who pulled through. A very special category consisted of physically frail elderly patients who recovered against the odds. Plenty of stories about elderly survivors appeared in the media in the early months of the pandemic across national contexts. The figure of the elderly survivor is built around a metaphorical understanding of immunity as not only physiological but also mental. For example, a

104-year-old American woman is described by her family as a “fighter” who has “always had a positive attitude in life” that has given her “an underlying strength to conquer things” (Molinari 2020), and a 102-year-old Icelandic woman is portrayed by a family member as “tough” and “a very positive person” who has survived the Spanish flu and two bouts of tuberculosis (United Nations 2020). While these accounts are heart-warming, they show how individual immunity, like national immunity, carries assumptions of moral strength. Individual immunity emerges as perseverance and a personal temporal commitment toward a future.

Biologically, the figure of the immune individual is misleading because it is based on a popularized idea of immunity as an either/or question. Biomedical research has shown that immunity in many diseases is gradual: it wanes off slowly from a higher to a lower level of protection instead of being switched off overnight (Carlsson 2020; Leung et al. 2018). Immunity is also partial and situated. Infection with one pathogen might provide a degree of protection, called *cross-protection*, against another strain (Isakova-Sivak et al. 2017; Jang & Seong 2013; Oikkonen 2018). For this reason, instead of a “strong immune system” celebrated in cultural discourse, a person may embody different immunities towards different pathogens. Immunity is also multiple, as it takes shape through constitutive entanglements between species and organisms, such as gut microbes, or DNA left by others – a uterine twin, one’s own child, an organ donor – within our bodies (Shildrick 2019). Furthermore, immunity takes shape in relation to other bodily processes, such as ongoing infections or illnesses. These complexities have challenged the idea of the individual as an autonomous immunitary entity (Diehl 2013; Shildrick 2019). In public discourse around COVID-19 survivors, these complexities tend to disappear. The idea of survival also disguises the potentially complicated immunological changes that prolonged COVID-19 infection may have left in those patients that have negotiated the effects of the virus for months, developing long COVID (Callard & Perego 2020).

Like the immune nation, the figure of the immune individual was often invoked in the media in the period studied here. Those recov-

ering from COVID-19 were seen as a sign of hope, a demonstration that a post-pandemic future is possible. But as with the immune nation, the appeal arises from a troubling history: the idea of a healthy citizen who exists for society resonates closely with the imaginaries of eugenics and racial hygiene. The ideal healthy citizen fills the eugenic agenda of improving the strength of the nation by committing to a shared, prosperous future physically, mentally as well as symbolically (Levine 2017; Stern 2015; Weindling 2018). While the figure of the COVID-19 survivor in the media has been multifaceted, as it has also included unlikely survivors such as the very old or those with underlying conditions, the repeated invocations of mental strength and future-orientation resonate with the discourses of the good eugenic citizen. Like the eugenic citizen, the figure of the immune individual is associated with communal and national continuity.

At the same time, portrayals of *asymptomatic* COVID-19 survivors – the patients who slid through the infection without noticing it – highlight ambiguities inherent in the idea of the immune individual. The history of the asymptomatic patient is deeply racialized and gendered, as the case of Mary Mallon shows (Wald 2008, 68–113). Mallon was an Irish immigrant who worked as a cook on Long Island in the US at the turn of the twentieth century. She turned out to be the first known “healthy carrier” of typhoid, and infected families she worked for without demonstrating any symptoms herself. Public health authorities viewed her as dangerous to community and seemed unable to understand why Mallon refused to commit to a national, hegemonic, chrononormative temporality. The figure of the asymptomatic COVID-19 patient draws on these histories of seeing healthy carriers as an invisible communal risk and thus in need of being managed – in the case of COVID-19, through technological fixes such as diagnostic tests and protective masks. But the figure of the asymptomatic COVID-19 patient also embodies hope, as they are the genetically and immunologically privileged who have somehow escaped the symptoms. These mobilizations of hope and the troubling histories of personalized strength render the figure of the asymptomatic COVID-19 survivor ambivalent. Consequently, the figure has been framed both as

a means of reaching herd immunity faster (Heldmark 2020) and as an indication that restrictions are needed to prevent the asymptomatic from infecting others (Mahbubani 2020; Shukman 2020).

The affective appeal of personalized COVID-19 immunity also arises from ideas of straight, white, competitive and independent masculinity. As we saw above in connection to the immune nation, such ideas are associated with disembodied rationality and future orientation. While many of the elderly COVID-19 survivors celebrated in the media have been women, a specific gendered framing has emerged around some male politicians and prominent public health actors with high public profiles. This is in alignment with prevalent expectations around male leaders during the first months of the crisis (Thomson 2020). Judging by both Swedish and international media coverage during the first months of the pandemic, the figure of Anders Tegnell seemed to engender considerable admiration, as he was represented in many accounts as manifesting rationality and intelligence implicitly associated with solipsistic masculine strength (e.g., Callaghan 2020; Delin 2020). Often pictured during the first months leaning against a wall in a relaxed manner or holding a coffee cup, the portrayed figure of Tegnell appeared to carry an aura of almost natural immunity to disease, even without knowledge of his actual COVID-19 status. This is not just Tegnell, however. As Felicity Callard (2020) points out, similar ideas of masculine strength and personal immunity are present, for example, in a *Spiegel* portrayal of a German pathologist with presumably superior personal immunity dissecting the bodies of COVID-19 victims (Blech 2020). In addition to gendered meanings attached to such media portrayals, these figures of apparent natural strength stand in dramatic contrast to portrayals of some lives and bodies during the pandemic as marked by inherent vulnerability arising from disability or chronic illness (Goggin & Ellis 2020).

Ideas of male-coded strength seem to persist even when the body of the decision maker or expert turns out to be more susceptible than thought. When the British prime minister Boris Johnson, known for having dismissed the seriousness of the pandemic, was hospitalized and moved to intensive care, the former prime minister David Cam-

eron was quick to characterize Johnson as “a very tough, very resilient, very fit person” (Honeycombe-Foster 2020). Yet, personal, solipsistic immunity is ultimately fragile. This is made visible by the case of the then US president Donald Trump, known for visiting hospitals, factories and campaign events without a mask despite mask-wearing policies. Trump’s performance of an autonomous, strong, naturally protected leader somehow above the risks of infection was premised on others following safety measures, including, for example, through testing those who came in contact with him (Brueck 2020). The fragility of this performed immunity was demonstrated every time someone close to him caught the virus (Brueck 2020), and materialized in his own COVID infection in October 2020.

These examples suggest that the figure of the immune individual promises futures that are structured by the privileges and disadvantages they arise from. The concept of *immunocapital*, developed by historian Kathryn Olivarius (2019) in the context of US societies structured on slavery, is useful here. Olivarius shows how immunity to yellow fever enacted differences between immune and non-immune white people, the latter of whom were considered an unreliable workforce or undesirable spouses. At the same time, it enacted differences between immune and non-immune enslaved people, with slave-owners capitalizing on enslaved persons’ immunity. In an article in the *New York Times*, Olivarius (2020) links the concept of immunocapital to how personal immunity to COVID-19 is inherently a means of producing economic value for someone. One part of this dynamic is the healthy and wealthy individual who is able to profit from their own ability to continue to engage in business in the middle of the pandemic; another part is the underpaid worker – many of whom come from racialized and minority communities – who is forced to perform immunity to survive financially while becoming the means through which others can work from the safety of their homes. Olivarius’s observations highlight how the figure of the immune individual draws on and reinforces complex mechanisms of inequality and privilege. Crucially, the futures the figure promises cannot be separated from these politics of injustice.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the attempts to imagine a post-pandemic future during the first months of the pandemic relied heavily on two figures: the figure of the immune nation and the figure of the immune individual. The article has argued that these figures fit within cultural imaginaries so easily because they resonate with histories of structural racism and eugenics, as well as ideas of disembodied, masculine rationality. The analysis has suggested that invocations of these past imaginaries engender a sense of straightforward procession toward a post-pandemic future. Drawing on queer theorization of time, I have traced how the future-oriented temporal trajectories promised by the two figures mobilize normative assumptions of time as progressive and premised on speed. This leaves out a multitude of temporal experiences and alternative political visions that find value in pausing or spiraling, or in engaging with the past in a reflexive manner.

The article has suggested that it is paramount to scrutinize the affective appeal of immunity as cultural discourse. What is achieved and who benefits when futures built on the idea of immune nations or immune individuals are posited as inevitable? It is crucial to question not only the problematic idea of solipsistic immunity inherent in figures such as the immune nation and the immune individual but also the temporal normativity of the visions of post-pandemic immunity they enable. By rethinking the connections between pasts and futures in different ways, post-pandemic futures could be opened for exploration and reimagining. As Muñoz (2009) and Noss (2012) maintain, futures are foreclosed only if we accept the normative parameters within which they are publicly imagined. In the context of COVID-19, myriad formations of kinship, solidarity and intersecting differences – including their varying engagements with time – need to be recognized in order to envision post-pandemic futures that are capable of accounting for a multitude of embodied experiences.

One way (though by no means the only way) of rethinking futures could be found in reconceptualizing immunity. This could include exploring immunity as networked, emerging not from within our

bodies but from the social, embodied networks we are part of. Such networked immunity is very different from herd immunity. While networked immunity would be collective, it would be a conceptually open, grassroots phenomenon rather than a monolithic unity imposed from above. Immunity could also be addressed as partial, that is, as a matter of degree rather than absolute essence. If immunity is approached as a never-ceasing embodied process that involves changes over time, assumptions of solipsistic immunity give way to immunity as temporally situated. Finally, immunity is an interspecies issue. While the roots of pandemics in zoonosis have often been highlighted, immunity, too, involves entanglements and interactions between organisms – events that take place constantly within, on, as well as outside our bodies. What post-pandemic futures would emerge from such redefinitions of immunity? What kinds of collective politics of futurity could find space in these visions?

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