In February of 2003, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome came to Toronto, Canada. The viral outbreak claimed the lives of several people, and was noted for its high transmissibility; health care workers who came into contact with infected persons were particularly at risk, and the months of the “SARS crisis” were marked by hospital closures and quarantine procedures. While the biological impact of SARS on human life is undeniable, its social and economic impacts were equally significant; Toronto became, in the words of one newspaper writer, “a city of pariahs”, seeing its important tourist and conference industries crippled almost overnight (National Post April 2nd 2003: A1). The threat of SARS loomed so large in people’s minds that suburban Ontarians declined to receive family guests from Toronto during the outbreak, and Americans in New York imagined “thousands of people dying in Toronto” (BBC June 25th 2003: online). Comparisons abounded between SARS and the 1918 Spanish Flu, the Ebola virus, and HIV-AIDS (McIlroy 2003, see also Washer 2004).

The damage that a virus like SARS can do to the economy of Toronto reinforces the notion that it is, like Hong Kong, a “global city”, a place which emphasizes cosmopolitanism and movement, where transnationalism is as much the rule as locality. The response

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to SARS equally implicated Toronto’s global profile, collapsing local, provincial, national and international bodies of governance and commerce. Finally, Toronto’s globality is implicated in discussions of its vulnerability to so-called emerging diseases such as SARS, with their uncertain epidemiologies and initially-weak containment procedures.

This paper presents a reading of Canadian newspaper and magazine media concerning the SARS outbreak in Toronto as it unfolded. Seventy-eight Canadian newspaper articles were reviewed in full. I approached the articles initially with two interests in mind: how was SARS conceived of (explicitly or implicitly) by the writers as a social agent, and how was language of ethnicity, globe and place employed in discussing its social and moral importance?

I argue that responses to emerging diseases such as SARS may reveal social anxieties about immigration, urbanization and cultural hybridity. I interpret these anxieties partly through the work of Mary Douglas, who writes of the association between border-crossings and pollution (2002), and of Emily Martin, who dissects modern metaphors of body, disease, immunity and the state (1994). Data and theory, taken together, reinforce the notion that the biology and sociology of a pathogen cannot be easily disentangled: diseases act as agents within the processes of globalization and demographic transformation, processes which are intimately connected to social change. Just as biological transformations (such as the attenuation of virulence or the extinction of a viral species) are partially reflections of socially-instituted processes (such as vaccination or sanitation), our response to biological pathogens is not only technical, but moral and political as well.

The City of Toronto employs the discourses of diversity and associated cosmopolitanism to attract investment, tourism and concessions from higher levels of government; the municipal government boasts a “Culture Division” which is responsible for several high-profile PR efforts such as the “Live with Culture” campaign (City of Toronto 2007). These two short phrases deserve to be unpacked, because Toronto’s self-promotion as a cultural as well as an economic centre contains some very clever uses of language. The use of the word culture, long a bedevilment of anthropologists, here erases the distinction between culture as a class commodity (“high culture”) and culture as a universal human attribute: the Culture Division takes as its mandate the operation and administration of many museums, historic sites, performing and visual arts centres; financial [sic] support for cultural activity and individual artists; encouraging public art projects in both private and public developments” and aims to promote “the development of art, culture and heritage. (City of Toronto 2007: online, emphasis added).

The phrase “Live with Culture” contains homonyms which themselves seem alive with a creative tension: does it mean that Toronto is bursting at the seams with culturally-marked activities, live performances, or does it indicate that Torontonians cohabit with culture – a word which here indicates both sophistication and otherness – in ways that residents of other locales do not?
These nuances of self-promotion are part of what Appadurai would call Toronto’s “work of the imagination” (1996), a process of cultural reproduction he asserted was universal, but which became especially evident as a result of global migration flows and the formation of diaspora communities. In Toronto, the invention and performance of a hyper-multicultural self serves a similar purpose of identity formation: Toronto is, in this view, not merely an appendage of Canada, but a node of connection which mediates between Canada and the immense economic and social power of the Global Flow – the abstracted, rapid movement of people, capital, commodities and ideas that demarcates a vague historical moment called globalization.

It should go without saying that this positive image of Toronto is contested, from without and from within. Some Canadians refer to Toronto as “Hogtown” or “The Big Smoke”. Some also see Toronto as symbolic of the heartless, bureaucratic nature of Central Canadian power centres vis-à-vis the western and eastern provinces, for example in the songs of the famous Canadian folk singer, Stan Rogers: “Ontario, you know / there’s a place I’d rather be / your scummy lakes and city of Toronto don’t do a damn thing for me / I’d rather live by the sea” (Rogers 1976).

In addition to the “symbolic sicknesses” of air pollution, greediness and the arrogance of power, the promiscuity and cosmopolitanism of the big city can itself be expressed as a danger to health. In a 1985 manual published by the City of Toronto for health care workers, the difficulties of caring for an ethnically diverse population are addressed, including concerns as to whether people “know that they are not allowed to keep livestock in the city” (City of Toronto 1985: 33).

There is a sacred power inherent in the Global Flow, a river of wealth and sophistication that may be tapped into. Cities such as Toronto, New York, Hong Kong and London, as social networks, have arguably become specialists at accessing this Flow, not only through their financial clout but through the performance of certain values. The sacred, however, often has an intimate relation with the profane. Mary Douglas, in Purity and Danger, demonstrated that the object which is both sacred and abominable often achieves this status through a contravention of categories, a crossing of borders (2002). By escaping the mental construction of order crucial to human social life, sacred and abominable things become dangerous to that social life; however, they also represent vital power.

Among the Lele, at the time Douglas studied them, the wilderness outside the borders of the village fulfilled such a role of a sacred and abominable thing: it was full of danger, including presumably reservoirs of human pathogens and parasites, and yet it contained the resources necessary for human life and prosperity (ibid). Wild energies, which could potentially cure or kill, could therefore be released through the crossing of the boundary between village and bush. Perhaps for many it is the global city that represents power and contagion, a coursing of febrile life-force into which one ventures to find one’s fortune; perhaps in turn anxieties about promiscuity and contagion dog hopes for globalization and cosmopolitanism, closely enough that even a relatively minor threat from an emerging disease can bring them to the surface.
Toronto’s SARS outbreak: the Mediascape

All of the articles in this sample deal with Toronto, due to the sampling strategy employed, but nineteen articles dealt explicitly with the contested image of Toronto during the SARS crisis: as economic engine, global city and hyper-urban dystopia. The contest portrayed was one of recognition and representation, centred on World Health Organization [WHO] declarations, political set pieces designed to demonstrate Toronto’s continued safety and prosperity in the face of financial devastation, and the private economy of rumours. SARS was not only an epidemiological event, but also a guiding metaphor or stage upon which the latent conflicts over Toronto’s significance inside and outside of Canada were brought out and performed.

During the outbreak, the media portrayed a very antagonistic relationship between the city of Toronto and the WHO, sometimes with nationalist overtones and sometimes with more of a sense of self-criticism. Toronto was variously described as the “biggest outbreak outside of Asia” (BBC July 5th 2003: online), as the centre of the epidemic, as “safer from SARS than any place in the world” (National Post April 12th 2003: A12), as having a suspiciously high death rate compared with the world average, and as having “excellent case surveillance” (these last two in the same article; National Post April 4th 2003: A15). The World Health Organization, as well as several state governments, issued advisories stating that travel to Toronto was dangerous and inadvisable, and several articles describe anxieties about when these advisories might be lifted. Featured in these articles were statements by government officials decrying the advisories and in one case explicitly blaming the Chinese government for not alerting international authorities sooner concerning the outbreak (National Post April 4th 2003: A14). A lengthy article praising public health official Dr. Basrur highlights the doctor’s assertive representation of Toronto’s interests to the WHO, an expression of “Toronto’s outrage to the world” (Barber 2003: F3). On the other hand, Toronto was often represented as recalcitrant or incompetent in the face of the emergency; in one article, the writing emphasizes how Toronto is answerable to international authorities who “demand more information” from the city to prove that it is safe (Globe and Mail May 24th 2003: online).

Another domain of the media discourse on Toronto concerned the mood and character of its residents. Toronto is portrayed as being overwhelmed by a “dark cloud” formed from the convergence of global events, with its inhabitants risking mass depression as a result (Humphreys 2003: A1, Toronto Sun April 6th 2003: 42). Her citizens are described as “a city of pariahs” (National Post April 2nd 2003: A1), as living in “Pariah City” (Globe and Mail May 1st 2003: online) or a “frightened, black-flagged city… a medieval pariah on par with disease-ridden Shaanxi [sic], China” (Barber 2003: F3). Mayor Lastman fought the current in one article by asserting that Toronto’s “successful battle was evidence of the kind of people Torontonians are” (Moore 2003: A1).

Finally, the newspaper stories emphasized how Toronto’s economy was both sustained by and vulnerable to global processes such as the emergence of highly transmis-
sible infectious diseases. Some articles lamented the loss of a major international cancer research conference due to SARS fears, one that would have brought thousands of scientists from around the world to Toronto (National Post April 3rd 2003: A1). Toronto’s international music festival suffered many cancellations, and cancelled hotel reservations numbered in the hundreds (National Post April 4th 2003: A14). Newspapers also reported on the response to these economic damages: both Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and Ontario Premier Ernie Eves visited Toronto’s Chinatown to proclaim it safe and open for business, and Mayor Lastman, later echoed by representatives of the Imperial Oil corporation, encouraged Toronto residents to increase spending in order to make up for lost international revenues (Lawlor 2003: online; Globe and Mail April 23rd 2003: online; Globe and Mail May 2nd 2003: online).

The articles above serve as an introduction to some of the social tensions brought to the surface by the SARS virus as socio-biological agent, an agent with enough lethality to force widespread action and provoke widespread anxiety, and therefore encourage a confrontation with other latent anxieties and with outstanding social contradictions which complicate action. Within this general framework of Toronto as a discursive battle-ground between Canadian and international authorities, between urban and suburban, between the West and the “disease-ridden” third-world of rural China, I also discovered themes relating to immigration, citizenship and otherness, the politics of human-animal relations, and anxieties about Canadian-American difference.

Thirteen newspaper articles explicitly discussed the Toronto health-care system in the context of the SARS crisis. McIlroy’s “1918 Redux” pointed out that an overwhelmed health infrastructure marked both the SARS and 1918 influenza outbreaks (2003). The conservative National Post emphasized the efficacy of safety measures taken in the more privatized American system versus the collapsing Canadian system (April 10th, 2003: A19); elsewhere, public health officials are quoted, defending the Canadian system as “an international model” (April 12th, 2003: A12). Hospital closures due to quarantine may have recalled to mind permanent closures that affected Ontario hospitals in the 1990s: cancer patients whose surgeries had been delayed were reported as fearing that “the government [had] forgotten about them” (Toronto Sun, April 6th 2003: 41), and in comparing SARS to the Walkerton outbreak one doctor asked, “when do you trust again in basic infrastructure?” (ibid: 42). The public health system was elsewhere described by the president of the Canadian Medical Association as having failed “the test” (Kennedy 2003: A4), and he urgently prescribed increased government spending on public health; “Canada not prepared for disaster”, reads the headline of the same article (ibid). In counterpoint, an advertisement in the April 12th 2003 edition of the National Post proclaimed “Vitamin C against SARS” and offered to share “what the WHO [World Health Organization] won’t tell you”, due to their presumed affiliation with pharmaceutical manufacturers (A7).

Relationships between human and non-human animals, whether the latter are food animals or unwelcome vermin, are one type of “hybridity” that evokes strong notions of pollution and danger. Given that SARS, like influenza, is likely to have animal reservoirs, it
is unsurprising that a discussion of its origins, one that interests itself in who is to “blame” for the outbreak, would address the topic of human-non-human interactions. The image of rural Chinese farmers living in close contact with disease-carrying animals is a powerful one (McIlroy 2003, Faulkner 2003), as is that of a cockroach infestation which may have been responsible for a large SARS outbreak in a Hong Kong apartment complex (National Post April 9th 2003: A16; see also Ng et al. 2003). Nothing better expressed “Toronto’s outrage to the world” than the resentment felt at being considered “a medical pariah on par with disease-ridden Shaanxi [sic], China” (Barber 2003: F3). Conversely, when Prime Minister Chrétien wished to restore confidence in Toronto’s economy, he dined at a Chinese restaurant in Toronto’s Spadina Street district (National Post April 11th 2003: A13); Ontario Premier Ernie Eves likewise reassured newsreaders that “it’s time to dine” with “our Chinese community” (Lawlor 2003: online). Overseas, the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong brought out antagonisms between the globalized city and rural neighbour Guangdong Province where the animal reservoir might be located, prompting calls for new standards of animal husbandry and slaughter (BBC April 23 2003: online), as well as popular rumours in Hong Kong concerning the food preferences of rural Cantonese people: people suggested that the Guangdong outbreak may have been started by the killing and consumption of an endangered species of turtle (Ann Herring, personal communication).

In a global city like Toronto, especially one whose specific globality is closely associated with Asia, the spectre of Said’s “orientalism” (1978) takes on a nuanced form, as a public spectacle of liberal multiculturalism. It cannot be so simple as establishing Asia and Toronto as mutually exclusive categories, even if one wanted to: Asia is in Toronto, and Toronto is probably in Asia in some form (though evidence of this is beyond the scope of this paper). The city is transnational, which is the source of its fortune and its troubles, but it is also Canadian. On one hand, the intransigence of Chinese authorities, who declare SARS to be a “state secret” (The Vancouver Sun April 2nd 2003: B6), or the electronic tagging of Singaporean SARS patients, may be performed in the media to demonstrate Asian authoritarianism contra Canadian liberalism. On the other, media stories dramatize Toronto’s struggle with the WHO for recognition (including the tidbit that international officials are “demand[ing] more information” from the recalcitrant city), as well as the invocation of law against breachers of quarantine orders (The National Post April 5th 2003: A14, The Globe and Mail April 12th 2003: online). Likewise, Chinese food practices are acceptable and promoted to consumers within Toronto’s Spadina Street delicatessens, but dangerous and unacceptable in rural Guangdong.

It is easy to imagine how these tensions could heighten anxiety while simultaneously robbing it of the concreteness necessary for coping on the part of the reader. Peter Washer, in his analysis of UK SARS coverage, cites a theory of media discourse which holds that news media frequently offer stark, frightening images immediately followed by reassurances, and in doing so secure consent from their publics for state programs (2004: 2566). Newspapers in the global city, however, with their panoply of short contrasting stories and overlapping, contested points of view, may not operate so smoothly.
Conclusion

Toronto could be described as a city of villages, referring to its incorporation of multiple, semi-discrete neighbourhoods which can meet most of one’s economic and social needs, and which possess distinct characters, ill-defined centres, and porous borders. In this it is of course comparable to many other “global cities” such as New York or London. Therefore, when an observer pulls back and attempts to analyze the whole of the global city at once, they are confronted with a dense thicket of happenings, of overlapping signals and signs. As much as it is a place, the global city is also a space in which places converge and multiply, a microcosm of the world beyond the nation-state, within the nation-state. It excites starkly contrasting emotional responses, sometimes all within the same individual. The global city is where “It” is Happening. It has all the restaurants, the nightclubs, the high-budget musical theatre productions, the biggest concerts, the tallest buildings, the broadest wireless internet coverage, the most international of the international airports. It has the darkest alleys, the smoggiest summers, the most desperate poverty, the loosest morals, the least caring citizens.

The neighbourhood in the global city is a contradiction. The Global Flow, the power inherent in flexible motion itself, by definition dictates that the global as a space of being is always Elsewhere. Locales may have differential access to the global but none can claim to be the site of the global. I argue, using the SARS media discourse as an example, that the very gap between the expectation of a clear centre of things and the reality of confusing signs creates anxieties in search of an object, and a consciousness that – under certain conditions – takes on the character of the apocalyptic, what Barkun calls a “politics of ultimacy” (1998: 459), where extreme positions face each other down in an all-or-nothing confrontation. Apocalyptic consciousness can be seen in the attempts to “anchor” SARS to HIV/AIDS or the 9/11 terrorist attacks; in the stark images of a collapsing public health system through whose defences viruses run like wild-fire; in the myriad images of Hong Kong citizens wearing masks (an image reminiscent in its cyborg quality of World War II-era images of the gas mask). Its ominous, omnipresent quality (the “dark cloud” over Toronto) represents the object of anxieties robbed of an object through the interpenetration of identity (in the form of transnationalism) and the disintegration of old categories of Other (such as the Asian-as-foreigner). Anything the global city says about its Others can easily come home to roost: Toronto may attempt to lay blame at the feet of the Chinese state for the extent of the outbreak, and yet in doing so it tars a portion of its already-wounded economy.

Disease is an excellent candidate for fantasies of apocalypse because it connects aspirations for global movements and prosperity so closely to corresponding anxieties concerning a loss of identity and boundaries, the transgression of which (following the theory of Mary Douglas) result in social imaginaries of pollution and danger. The economic threat posed to Toronto by the SARS virus may have been due, in part, to our expectations that everything will be bigger at the centre of things.
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