



“Undoubtedly a race, but they are not human”: Immuno-politics and the Recognition of the Jew as Pathogenic Nonsel in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*

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Abstract

This article engages with the immuno-political juxtaposition of the healthy self and the pathogenic other to critically examine the representation of Nazis and Jews in Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus* (1996). Written as a postmemory narrative, *Maus* recounts the horrors experienced by the author’s father Vladek Spiegelman as a survivor of the Holocaust that claimed an approximate six million Jewish lives. Beginning with the years leading up to World War II, Spiegelman’s novel reimagines the discrimination, dislocation, and dehumanization suffered by Vladek and his family at various prison camps in Nazi-occupied Poland before being transferred to Auschwitz. Deploying an immuno-political reading of *Maus*, this article investigates how the Third Reich undertook a systematic extermination of the Jewish race by construing them as *immunological nonself* or pathogenic others. It further argues that Nazism’s fantasy of constructing a racially aseptic German identity by eradicating the Jews as vermin or parasites was reinforced by the late nineteenth-century eugenicist ideologies of racial hygiene. This article finally considers how policies of excessive immunization that was deployed by Nazi biopolitics against the Jewish community, as well as exercised by the Jews to survive the Holocaust, eventually assumed the form of an autoimmune pathology that culminated with the attempted destruction of the entire medico-juridical infrastructure of the German Reich on the one hand and the fostering of suicidal tendencies by the Jewish survivors on the other.

Keywords Autoimmune pathology · Auschwitz · Dehumanization · Holocaust · Immuno-political · Racial hygiene

Introduction: *Maus* and the immuno-politics of self and nonself

Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus* (1996) (the German word for *mouse*¹) contrives a rhetoric of dehumanization and mass extermination at the level of both story and illustration. Spiegelman bestializes the Jews and the Nazi officers in this postmemory

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retelling of the Jewish Holocaust by deploying the eugenicist language of racial hygiene to depict the Jewish race as a contaminating presence within the German body politic. Spiegelman's novel further represents the armed forces working for National Socialism as predatory agents of disinfection that are tasked with eliminating all Jewish presence from German-occupied lands between the years 1939 and 1945. The novel also graphically portrays the Nazis and the Jews as "cats" (Loman 2006, 552) (or disinfectants) and "mice" (554) (or pathogens) respectively, thereby augmenting the narrative with, what Roberto Esposito (2008) calls the immunological juxtaposition of the healthy self and diseased other. Drawing on the engagement between Foucauldian biopolitics and the biological immune system's role of protecting the *self* from *nonself* elements (Tauber 2017, 21), this article contends that the feline Nazi officers in *Maus* operate as the immunological apparatus of an essentialist German nation attempting to racially secure itself from the pathogenic presence of the Jewish people. The article hence deliberates the presence of an "immuno-politics" (Neyrat 2010, 31) that legitimizes the systemic segregation and eradication of an entire race perceived as "subhuman" (De Angelis 2005, 243). Consequently, in Andrew Loman's opinion (2006, 553), the bestialization of the "Jews as rodents" in *Maus* that require extermination further contributes to the anti-semitic metanarrative of self-purification that was construed by the Führer to immunize a healthy and pure German state from precarious outsiders. An immuno-political reading of *Maus* thereby not only provides us with a novel framework to situate the Jewish Holocaust, but it also discloses the intertwining, albeit ill-proportioned, destinies of the Nazis and the European Jews during, and even after, the interwar years.

Drawing on the work of Roberto Esposito, philosopher Frédéric Neyrat (2010, 31), in a seminal essay titled "The Birth of Immunopolitics", construes "immuno-politics" as simply offering a re-articulation of Foucauldian biopolitics by historicizing the entanglement between *the biological* and *the political* around contemporary developments in the biomedical field of immunology. While biopolitics, according to Michel Foucault (1977), pertains to the decision of state power to directly intervene on matters concerning the control, regulation, and governance of human population(s), including how human communities are asymmetrically and discriminatorily categorized along the components of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Foucault 1978, 139), immunology denotes the convergence of the two disciplines of "biology and medicine" (Pradeu 2019, 1), and focuses on studying the role of our immune system as a network of protective mechanisms "directed against pathogens" (1). However, although biopolitics and immunology appear to be disparate disciplines, they are actually driven by a shared and singular metanarrative: the protection of all that represents the self, against everything that deviates from such a conception of selfhood. This, as Richard De Angelis (2005) observes, is articulated in *Maus* through the persistent correlation that exists between the "verminization" (Holmberg 2016, 10) of the Jews and the segregationist biopolitics of the Third Reich that permeate the lives of Vladek and his family. Accordingly, both Esposito (2008, 46) and Haraway (1991, 204) explain that the immune system as a biopolitical ensemble operates as "a plan for meaningful action to construct and maintain the boundaries for what may count as self and other" (204) by constructing narratives of segregation along the axes of the healthy and the pathological. "Immuno-politics" (Neyrat 2010, 32), therefore, remains scaffolded around the close intersection of biopolitics, immunology, and the systemic activities of segregating and eradicating nonself elements (Pradeu 2012, 6). Subsequently, the politics of immunization, this article hypothesizes, accurately captures the interlacing between practices of self-protection and the elimination of *undesirable others* that characterizes the particular manifestation

of biopolitics within National Socialism as represented by Spiegelman (Esposito 2008, 112).

This article argues that Spiegelman's two-part graphic narrative (published by Pantheon Books in the years 1986 and 1991 respectively²), which was later compiled into a single work in 1996, offers a retrospective account of the Jewish Holocaust by encapsulating the organized discrimination and subsequent massacre of the Jews through the paradigm of Espositoan immuno-politics (Dillet 2018, 3; Neyrat 2010, 31–32). Thereupon, Spiegelman's *Maus*, this article demonstrates, depicts how Nazism adopts the two main immuno-political components of self-protection and the destruction of nonself (Tauber 1994, 42–43) to substantiate the *ethnic cleansing* of the Jewish community during World War II (Bloxham et al. 2012, 87–88; Esposito 2008, 4). It further locates the implementation of such an immuno-political order in the related discourses of nineteenth-century eugenics and racial hygiene that had allowed the National Socialist Party to envision the possibility of a pure and healthy German national identity that must be eviscerated of unwanted and parasitical elements (Proctor 1988, 26). Nevertheless, the immunizing fantasy of Nazi biopolitics of ensuring "absolute security" (Neyrat and Lapidus 2011, 106) by preserving the biological, genetic, and historical purity of the Aryan race inevitably transposed into a politics of death that was instantiated by the horrors of the Shoah.³ This is epitomized by Spiegelman's father Vladek's recollection of his time at Auschwitz and the various other prison camps that had been installed across the Third Reich (also called the German Reich) during the Second World War. Moreover, Nazism's immunological death drive, Spiegelman shows, is also extended to the devastating repercussions of the war faced by the survivors of the Holocaust, whose accumulated trauma led to many of them taking their own lives in a performance of over-immunization. This peculiarity is enacted by Art Spiegelman's own mother Anja herself, which, as Angela Ricks (2021, 82) notes, is almost despondently recollected by the author in the novel through the embedded narrative of a previously published comic strip *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* (Spiegelman 1986, 100–101).

This article, therefore, delineates Spiegelman's representation of Nazi immuno-politics as operating under a twofold presumption that remains mutually reinforcing. The preservation of the ethnic purity of the German people, and their Aryan origins, must conversely accompany the systematic eradication of the racially inferior Jew, whose presence in and around German-occupied lands presents a perpetual threat of racial contamination (Esposito 2008, 175). Finally, this organized dispossession of the Jews in the form of a barbarically conducted antisemitic pogrom exposes the threat of autoimmune pathology at the heart of severe immuno-political practices of exclusion, whereby any attempt at radical over-immunization through the eradication of external threats, as conducted during the Nazi regime, imminently nosedives into a pathological condition of self-elimination. Such an autoimmune turn in *Maus* is marked by events that portray the immunological apparatus "turning against itself" (Clark 2007, 9) in a gesture of what Paul Ehrlich termed as "horror autotoxicus" (Haraway 1991, 222–223). As per Ed Cohen (2017, 29), autoimmunity is characterized by a "negative and self-destructive corollary of the enduring immunological binary and describes a situation that occurs when the essential bifurcation between self and not-self falters", leading to the immune system attacking its own components. In biopolitical terms, Jacques Derrida contends (2003, 94), such autoimmunitary processes translate to "strange behaviours where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, 'itself' works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its 'own' immunity". This is illustrated in Spiegelman's graphic novel by the news of Hitler's ensuing suicide following the discontinuation of the (Jewish) extermination program and his so-called *final order* in the shape of the Nero Decree that, instead of insuring the German self against the Jewish other,

mandated the destruction of German infrastructural foundations, beginning with setting the extermination camps on fire and then bombing all the military blocks in and around them (Spiegelman 1991, 81), in order to prevent the allied forces from co-opting them for retaliatory purposes⁴ (Esposito 2008, 111; Ono 2014, 54).

Antisemitism and racial medicine

Art Spiegelman's graphic narrative *Maus* is considered one of the most rousing survivor testimonies of the Jewish Holocaust that took an estimated six million Jewish lives between the years 1939 and 1946 (Seltzer 1998, 534). As a postmemory narrative (Hirsch 2012, 3) — with illustrations that represent the Germans and Jews as cats and mice respectively — the story of *Maus* recounts the actual events in the life of Spiegelman's father Vladek through a series of personal interviews. Marianne Hirsch (2012, 5), in her book *The Generation of Postmemory*, explains “postmemory” storytelling in terms of “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before”. According to Hirsch, the re-articulation of the Holocaust in *Maus*, by “the son who did not live through the war, but whose life, whose self, was shaped by it” (9), captures precisely this intergenerational frame within which Spiegelman's life is depicted as entangled with that of his parents, and especially his father Vladek. Vladek's recapitulation of the *Nazi experience* in the novel begins from the early 1930s with his life as a bachelor in a Polish town named Czestochowa which he soon leaves after marrying Spiegelman's mother Anja, finally settling down with her in Sosnowiec as a factory owner. The first six chapters of the work, published as *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986), reconstruct Vladek's account of his family's trials and tribulations during the early days of the German Reich till his and Anja's eventual arrival at Auschwitz in 1944. Subsequently, *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began* (1991) explores the violence, torture, terror, and dehumanization suffered by Spiegelman's parents at the concentration camps before ultimately being released following Germany's defeat in the Second World War. This article examines *Maus*'s depiction of the Jewish Holocaust as operating around a rhetoric of racial immunization that is manifested in the related practices of antisemitism (Esposito 2008, 117) and ethnic cleansing (Rushing 2016, 127).

Furthermore, this immunizing undercurrent of decontaminating German territories from “parasitic” (Esposito 2008, 18; Neocleous 2002, 231–232) Jewish presence, this article argues, is medically reinforced by segregationist practices of racial hygiene adopted by the Nazi doctors (Proctor 1993, 346–347). In other words, the deployment of immunizing practices, in the form of racial profiling and the genocide itself, mimics the fundamental mechanisms of our biological immune system, which, similar to the Nazi killings of the dehumanized Jews, dispels microbial pathogens as other or “nonself” (Clark 2007, 6–7; Tauber 2017, 33) through the twin processes of recognition and elimination. As Roberto Esposito emphatically mentions in *Bios*:

[For the Nazis] anti-Semitism [was] like disinfections. Keeping lice away [was] not an ideological question—it [was] a question of cleanliness. And after all, it was Hitler himself who used an immunological terminology that is even more precise: [Hitler said that] The discovery of the Jewish virus is one of the greatest revolutions of this world. The battle that we fight every day is equal to those fought in the last century by Pasteur and Koch. (Esposito 2008, 117)

However, despite the fact that Hitler's antisemitic pogrom during World War II eventually takes the shape of a politics of discrimination that is articulated through, what Neyrat (2018, 7) regards as the biomedical language of immunology, the pogrom's initial rationalization, both scientific and ideological, Robert N. Proctor argues, emanates from early nineteenth-century notions of eugenics and racial hygiene that considered Jews to be mixed breeds and thus a genetically inferior race (Haque et al. 2012, 477; Proctor 1988, 114). Coined by the German biologist Alfred Plotz in the year 1895, racial hygiene refers to a late nineteenth-century movement in German social policy that proposed to ensure the welfare and quality of the German race through the control of human breeding, the regulation of miscegenation, and the social and medical relegation of bodies with "a weak constitution" (Proctor 1988, 15). Nevertheless, such hypothesized improvement of a biological species, this article demonstrates, inevitably presupposes an immunological intolerance, and hence hostility, directed towards those corporeal forms or aspects of selfhood deemed undesirable and thus must be pruned out from the national body. Proctor (1988, 29–30) thereby reiterates how Nazi racial hygiene adopted the general principles of eugenic practices — which broadly involved the biological enhancement of a species or the genetic improvement of an entire race — to sanction the torture and death of a whole religio-cultural population.

Both biology and medicine, reinstated by Eurocentric racial preconceptions, hence play important (and mutually reinforcing) roles in the foundation of National Socialism (Proctor 1988, 64) and how it is represented in Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel. *Maus* begins with an epigraph listing Hitler's claim that "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human" (Spiegelman 1986, 3). The fantasy of a pure Aryan state here is not simply hypothesized as a political belief (Neyrat and Lapidus 2011, 108), but is reinforced in the Führer's statement, through the flagrant sub-humanization — and eventual pathologization — of the Jews, who, along with the likes of homosexuals, gypsies, and Marxists, had served as common markers of racial deviance during the Third Reich (Proctor 1988, 7). However, the earliest evidence of organized antisemitism in the novel is found in the Nazis' attempt to only symbolically cleanse all cities of Jewish presence by depriving them of legal subjecthood, that is, through denaturalization. Subsequently, public campaigns concerning the revision of individual documentation in the novel immediately follow notices of mass relocation (Spiegelman 1986, 82) and the transfer of "all Jews over 70 years old" (86):

Fellow Jews, on Wednesday August 12th, every one of you, young and old, male and female, healthy and sick, must register at Dienst stadium.... There's no cause for alarm — It's only a matter of inspecting your documents and stamping them. This will protect you as citizens of the area. (Spiegelman 1986, 88)

This attempt to socio-symbolically erase the Jewish community through the denotation of individual Jews, from subjects of the state to stateless individuals, becomes a necessary step in their eventual dehumanization. Subsequently, only after the Jews are stripped of all social and legal rights, and hence transformed into what Giorgio Agamben (1998, 114–115) calls "bare life" — that is, a form of life without any social, political, and religious meaning — are they considered for systematic extermination (without any legal consequence) as *nonself* and *anti-life* with respect to the totalitarian body politic of Nazi Germany. In point of fact, Agamben's identification of the "realm of bare life" (120), as exemplified by the persecuted Jews in *Maus*, shares structural analogies to the paradigm of the "extermination camp" (132), the presence of which, as per the Italian thinker, appears to be symptomatic of modern totalitarian states such as Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia.

The potency of this discriminatory eugenicist ideology, operating via the racial stereotyping of the Jews, remains pervasive even in Spiegelman's own representation of his father's experiences. Spiegelman presents his father as parsimonious and miserly, albeit economically resourceful, with a notable penchant for gold, all characteristic of the archetypal construction of the Jew. Indeed, Philip Smith (2019) compares Spiegelman's portrayal of Vladek to Shakespeare's characterization of the Jewish merchant Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice*. He notes that Vladek is depicted by the novelist as "distrustful, manipulative, miserly, and... is plagued by psychosomatic illness, hoards money and other items... [and] like Shylock... obsesses over... the concept of transactions and trade" (Smith 2019, 201), which is evidenced by his skill at bartering objects and valuables. Complaining about his frugal behaviour, Vladek's second wife Mala too brands him as "cheap!!!" declaring that "it caused him physical pain to part with even a nickel!" (Spiegelman 1986, 131). And after his father's insistence that Mala is after his inheritance, Spiegelman himself concedes, somewhat ironically, that "in some ways [Vladek is] just like the racist caricature of the miserly old Jew" (Spiegelman 1986, 131), closely echoing one of the Polish officers' markedly stereotypical (and racially embroiled) declaration, after Vladek and Anja are imprisoned in Bielsko (an event that is recounted later in the same chapter), that "you Jews always have gold" (Spiegelman 1986, 156).

These examples of social stereotyping of Jewish identity are primarily depicted by Spiegelman's novel in two distinct ways: through the recognition of the Jew as the pathogenic other and through Spiegelman's use of animal imagery. As early as the second chapter of the novel, Vladek recalls the appearance of segregationist banners in Sosnowiec proclaiming Jew-free towns and cities, as well as the circulation of stories by travellers about "Jews beaten with no reason, [and] whole towns pushing out all Jews" (Spiegelman 1986, 33). The recognition of the Jew as a precarious other, capable of undermining the "immanence"⁵ (Devisch 2013, 12; Hutchens 2005, 5–6) of a pure-blood Aryan State, as Spiegelman portrays from the very beginning of Vladek's narrative, had been one of the mainstream agendas of Nazi immuno-politics during World War II. This is reiterated again when Vladek notices blatant discrimination in the way Jews are treated in German camps after being taken a prisoner of war at Nuremberg. He complains that compared to the "Polish prisoners, [who] get heated cabins, the Jews are left to freeze" (Spiegelman 1986, 53). And "while other prisoners get two meals a day, we Jews get only a crust of bread and a little soup" (53). The performance of racial "stigma"⁶ (Goffman 1963, 12) against the Jews reaches its culmination when Vladek, on his way to meet the Hungarian smugglers who would help him and Anja cross the Polish borders, is confronted by a group of racist Polish children in the streets of Sosnowiec.

I had to pass where some children were playing
 "A Jew! A Jew! Help Mommy! a Jew!" They ran screaming home.
 The mothers always told so: "Be careful! A Jew will catch you to a bag and eat you", so they taught their children. (Spiegelman 1986, 149)

This gross mythification of the Jew as an urban-folk monster that abducts children not only momentarily disorients Vladek in the novel, but also provides another instance of how the entire Jewish community had been completely otherized as constitutive of subhuman entities and social parasites⁷ (De Angelis 2005, 243; Nielsen 2012, 149–150) capable of harming and corrupting those that are considered, under Nazi biopolitics, as actual human beings: i.e., German pure-breeds (Proctor 1993, 347).

Immunology and the politics of recognition

The politics of recognition and persecution (of Jewish identity) depicted throughout *Maus* bears a striking resemblance to the functions of T and B lymphocytes or white blood cells (WBCs) of the immune system, both of which are instrumental in the destruction of foreign matter that enters our bodies, by recognizing “antigen presenting cells” (Tauber 1994, 79). As a matter of fact, prior to destroying pathogenic matter, these two types of lymphocytes together act as a system of recognition of all nonself elements. While B cells release antibodies that bind with specific harmful antigens⁸ (Clark 2007, 33), T lymphocytes directly attack any cell that appears altered in form and constitution⁹ (49). However, both of these mechanisms are only triggered when the immune system encounters cells that present themselves as *different* or *deviant* as compared to the normal non-pathogenic cells of the body. As a result, historian of science Alfred Tauber (1994, 76) declares that within immunology both self and nonself are biomedically constructed “in the context of a unique signature of identification”. Identity, based on the distinction between self and nonself or norm and deviance, thereby operates as the very basis by which cells are either tolerated by the immune system or completely obliterated. While this normal/altered metanarrative underpins all immune responses by which unwanted elements are filtered out of the embodied self, in the domain of Nazi anthropology, it becomes the major justification behind the immuno-political surveillance and extermination of Jews on the grounds of racial hygiene. This is somewhat substantiated by Vladek in the chapter “Prisoner of War” when he claims that during the war the Jew (as a threat to the state) “could be killed by anyone in the streets” (Spiegelman 1986, 61) as long as he was an inhabitant of German-occupied territory. And again, later on, he recalls that “in the Polish car they could smell if a Polish Jew came in” (Spiegelman 1986, 140), thus underlining the terrorizing network of identification, both legal and even sensorial, that had pervaded the entire Reich during the war.

Alternatively in the chapter titled “Mouse Trap”, Vladek discloses the fact that he felt “safer in public while wearing a coat and boots, like a Gestapo wore when he was not in service” (Spiegelman 1986, 136). He even recalls being ignored by German officers while on a train to Sosnowiec after they mistake him for a Pole (Spiegelman 1986, 140). Similarly, when accused of being a Jew by the children on the streets, he easily convinces their approaching parents that he isn’t one by disguising his Jewish identity. Not only do these instances of racial misrecognition critique the biological essentialism around racial medicine by portraying how Jewishness, at least as part of the Führer’s program, was more a matter of appearance-centric stigma, and hence “ideological interpellation¹⁰” (Althusser 1971, 174), than genetic orientation. But they also offer close biomedical analogies to how various harmful viruses (such as Group A *Streptococcus* and *T. pallidum*) avoid immune detection by “blanketing their *surfaces* with molecules that resemble our own” (Wu 2019), thereby masquerading their nonself quality. Biochemist Anaamika Campeau considers such evasive strategies adopted by viruses to be “unusual but effective” explaining that “the microbes plaster themselves with pieces of cells the immune system sees all the time [as self] and knows not to attack” (Wu 2019). These modes of immunological recognition, misrecognition, and (later on) elimination are perfectly captured throughout *Maus* by Spiegelman’s use of animal imagery.

The bestialization of the different ethnic categories serves a variety of purposes in *Maus*. Firstly, it articulates racial distinctions such as Jews, Germans, Poles, Americans, and the French through animal archetypes. On this note, De Angelis writes that the “entire metaphorical foundation on which *Maus* is based relies on the ability of the reader to see

past the mice and cat heads... and mentally translate them into the faces of actual Jews and Germans” (De Angelis 2005, 230). In this way, De Angelis’ schema imitates the very process by which human beings racialize people from other communities as inhuman or animals. For example, a German newspaper quoted as an epigraph at the beginning of *Maus II* openly declares that the Nazis saw both Jews and mice “as dirty filth covered vermin” (Spiegelman 1991, 1–2), thereby justifying the immediate need for the eradication of both. Likewise, the use of Zyklon B to kill the Jews remains highly symbolic, given that the deadly poison was initially developed as a pesticide (Loman 2006, 553) to fumigate trees. Second and more importantly, the animal imagery in *Maus I* and *II* reconfigures the Nazis’ dehumanization of the Jews through the predator–prey dynamic of the cat-mouse relationship. Andrew Loman traces Spiegelman’s chief inspiration for *Maus* to a comics anthology called *Funny Animals* for which the artist was asked to contribute. Additionally, Spiegelman himself reports that while attending classes taken by filmmaker Ken Jacobs, he was introduced to “cartoons with cats and mice romping around as well as to some racist cartoons from the same period” (553). But instead of co-opting the cat (as assailant) and mouse (as victim) trope to represent racism in America, which he had initially intended to do, Spiegelman “realized that [he] had a metaphor of oppression much closer to [his] own past in the Nazi project” (551).

However, the representation of Nazis as predatory cats, Poles as hypocritical pigs, and Americans as loyal human-friendly dogs differs drastically from Spiegelman’s pestilential treatment of the Jews as mice. For, while cats, dogs, and pigs embody significant cultural symbols in numerous societies, mice are usually universally represented as parasites that destroy crops, carry diseases, and cause foundational damages to property, without providing any socio-economic utility (Gräslund 2002, 173; Lobban 1994, 73; Park 2016, 46–47). Within the domain of Nazi immuno-politics, mice, and by extension Jews, therefore, symbolize anti-life. The animalization of the archetypal Jew as a disease-spreading rodent in Spiegelman’s work thus evokes both epidemiological metaphors of contamination, impurity, and infection, as well as the immunological desire to remain clean and protected from any pathogenic contact (Neyrat and Lapidus 2011, 109–110). Jean-Luc Nancy explicates this desire of the Nazi government for a clean, aseptic, and Jew-free social identity as a form of immanentism. Evocative of Peter Sloterdijk’s spheres of immunization that aim to protect human societies through forms of enclosure (Elden 2012, 8; Mutsaers 2016, 58), immanentism, according to Nancy “refers to the ways in which communities, people, or ethnicities are conceived as entities united around their unalienated character, culture or norms” (Devisch 2013, 40). Furthermore, both Nancy and Emmanuel Levinas argue that political practices of immanentism do not simply imply cultural homogeneity, but also involve rigorous activities of violent discrimination against any community or ethnicity that does not conform to the notion of a pure identity, “thereby leading to the possibility of elemental evil” (Devisch 2013, 39; Moyn 2005, 99) in the shape of immunological eradication. Thirdly, the bestialization of the Jews in *Maus* invariably reduces them into “bare life” (Agamben 1998, 109). Agamben (9–10) defines bare life as the withdrawal of sociocultural markers of identification from a human body, rendering it de-human, politically excluded, and without any symbolic value. This is demonstrated by Spiegelman in *Maus II* when he depicts a volatile critique of Mickey Mouse, as a cultural symbol, from a German newspaper clipping:

Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed.... Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every honourable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the

ideal type of animal.... Away with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross! (Spiegelman 1996, 164)

Thus, when Spiegelman curiously enquires his father in a sequence from the chapter “Auschwitz: Time Flies” in *Maus II*, asking him “Did you ever talk with any of the guards [at Auschwitz]?” Vladek, in a disheartened manner, responds “Ach! We were below their dignity. We were not even men” (Spiegelman 1991, 54). This is again exhibited at the end of *Maus II* when Vladek and his friend Shivek finally relocate themselves outside the dehumanizing space of Auschwitz following the denazification of Polish territory. Far off from the immunizing gaze of the German Reich, both Vladek and Shivek gleefully throw away their striped camp uniforms after finding new clothes in a deserted house, and are portrayed as feeling newly reborn as human beings: “[Shivek:] Look I found clothes upstairs. We can throw away the stripes. [Vladek:] There I am starting to feel human again” (Spiegelman 1991, 111). In an attempt to rationalize the immuno-political basis behind the Holocaust, the likes of Agamben and Esposito reason that the only way to fully apprehend the totalitarian ethics of the Shoah (the Hebrew word for the Holocaust), and the Final Solution, is to confront the biopolitical character of the National Socialist Party and their immunizing fantasy of preserving and protecting the Aryan race as superior and essential to human evolution (Agamben 1998, 123–124; Esposito 2013, 80). As a result, during the Nazi regime, this care of biological life and the recognition of selfhood (what Foucault calls biopolitics) inevitably coincide with the politics of death and extermination (what Esposito explains as thanatopolitics) through the harrowing practices of ethnic cleansing, both of which remained scientifically rationalized by the eugenicist ideologies of racial superiority. The immunological liquidation of the Jews as nonself under Nazi biopolitics, therefore, becomes an act of necessity that appears to safeguard the integrity of the Reich as well as lends itself to the supposed evolution of the human species as a whole. Spiegelman’s portrayal of how the possibility of a pure Aryan state remains closely intertwined with the racial erasure of an entire Jewish people definitely certifies the *raison d’être* of the politics of immunity undertaken by Nazi biopolitics. This is illustrated in Spiegelman’s novel through the widely contrasting appearances of the acquiescent (and pest-like) Jews as mice and the equally intimidating Nazi officers (playing the role of disinfectants) as cats, both of whose core racial attributes are undoubtedly reinforced by their strategic animalization. As Thomas Doherty (1996, 70) remarks: “occupying a landscape that crossed George Orwell with Max Fleischer, where Nazis were snarling cats [and] Jews forlorn mice... *Maus* redrew the contractual terms for depictions of [virility, meekness, and violence around] the Holocaust in popular art”. While such marked differences in disposition and attitude easily enable the reader to draw an immunological juxtaposition between the victor and the victim, it also foregrounds the power differential that existed between the two communities, which in turn facilitated the simultaneous enactment of a biopolitics of life and a thanatopolitics of death (Esposito 2008, 6; Neyrat 2010 33). This interplay between life and death, or protection and destruction, whereby one becomes the possibility for the other, is also the overriding rationale behind the functioning of the biomedical immune system. Consequently, Roberto Esposito explains that within the immunological language of the German Reich, the Jews:

are in turn and simultaneously bacilli, bacteria, parasites, viruses, and microbes... and certainly the characterization of the Jews as parasites is part of the secular history of anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, such a definition acquires a different valence in the Nazi vocabulary [where] the Jews didn’t resemble parasites; they didn’t behave as bacteria — they were bacteria who were to be treated as such. (Esposito 2008, 116–117)

It is precisely in this manner that Nazism encapsulates the realization of immunological biology (Esposito 2013, 73). This is once again corroborated by Agamben (1998, 114) who maintains that the Jews existing under the Third Reich constituted a “privileged negative referent of the new biopolitical sovereignty”, and whose extermination was hence necessary in order for regular life to flourish (Neyrat 2010, 33). Agamben’s (1998, 73) interpretation of the Jew as “homo sacer” or the excluded subject of sovereign life, therefore, closely parallels both the Jew’s status as the immunological nonself that eventually had to be dispensed with in order for a pure Aryan state to be constituted as such (Foucault 2008, 111). Vladek’s narrative in *Maus* nonetheless helps us recount how a significant section of the Jewish people were able to reverse such a predicament of absolute extermination, and eventually rehabilitate to a more immunologically tolerant and symbiotic (Mutsaers 2016, 48) biopolitical order that considers them self and not, other.

The autoimmune turn in Nazi immuno-politics

The totalitarian fantasy of “absolute security even under conditions of state terror” (Neyrat and Lapidus 2011, 106) that was fostered by the National Socialist Party discloses a paradox at the centre of modern biopolitics: the simultaneous presence of the desire to preserve life and the necessary enactment of death. The project to build a racially pure and socially homogeneous space of immanence that is life-affirming to one community thus entails the necessary disinfection and liquidation of *other populations* estimated as exterior to the construction of an ethnically uniform identity. The Nazi Final Solution, therefore, encapsulates the Espositoan contradiction behind the articulation that pits the abjection of potentially dangerous communities, such as the Jews, as a negative by-product of Hitler’s conceptualization of an aseptic Aryan nation-state. This is illustrated in Spiegelman’s novel through the ways in which the Jewish community is systemically segregated, dislocated, and slowly recast as prisoners of their own land. As Vladek recalls in a chapter titled “Mauschwitz”, “they took from us our papers, our clothes... [and] threw to us prisoners’ clothings” (Spiegelman 1991, 225–226). Nazism’s production of an antisemitic thanatopolitics, therefore, remains inseparable from their eugenicist project to establish an Aryan state that is decontaminated from any parasitic Jewish presence. Such is depicted in Spiegelman’s brief, but shocking, description of the genocidal mechanisms at work in Auschwitz, which portrays the extermination camps as precisely the graveyard upon which the Nazi hyper-state was projected to be founded:

They brought Jews... too many for their ovens, so they dug those big cremation pits... Those that finished in the gas chambers... got pushed in these graves... [and] the others had to jump in the graves while they were still alive. Prisoners that worked there poured gasoline over the live ones and the dead ones. (Spiegelman 1991, 67)

However, the failure of Nazi biopolitics to prioritize life over dehumanization and death, which had been its original intention (through self-preservation), inevitably led to a situation whereby it ends up hypothesizing its own self-destruction. This is denoted by the conversion of protection strategies deployed by the Nazis, initially into policies of immunization, and then into a self-eliminatory death drive. Such a drastic cascading of a politics of immunity into radical over-immunization, according to Esposito and Haraway, is indicative of the autoimmune turn in twentieth-century biopolitics, whereby any attempt on the part of the State at excessive defence, in an instance of “horror autotoxicus... ruinously turns

on the same body that continues to activate and strengthen it” (Haraway 1991, 222–223): “The result is an absolute identification of opposites: between peace and war, defense and attack, life and death, they consume themselves without any kind of differential remainder” (Esposito 2008, 148).

Esposito’s borrowing of the autoimmune trope from biomedical writings on immunology, accordingly, draws a potent parallel between a malfunction in the biological immune system and immuno-political agency. Autoimmune disorders indicate an overactive immune system “which becomes so strong that it turns against the very mechanism that it should defend and winds up destroying it” (Esposito 2013, 6). As per Warwick Anderson and Ian R. Mackay (2014, x), autoimmunity results in the misrecognition of the body’s own tissue as disease-causing nonself. In a similar manner, immunological biopolitics, entrusted with the preservation of life, “drives modern politics into its totalitarian tailspin” (Esposito 2013, 7–8), and eventually anticipates the eradication of that which it is supposed to protect. This occurs at the end of the Nazi Regime when, cognizant of the approaching British, American, and Soviet troops, the German Reich orders the demolition of the entire juridico-medical apparatus used for the Final Solution, which Spiegelman’s father recollects as beginning with the “setting fire to the [concentration] camps and bombing the [military] blocks” (Spiegelman 1991, 81).

Reyn Ono (2014, 53) writes that, faced with the humiliation of impending defeat, the Führer had ordered for “the complete [and strategic] destruction of all German infrastructures on March 19, 1945” so as to prevent the Allies from reengineering them against the interests of the Nazis. However, as Ono puts it, the Führer’s self-destructive policies towards the end of the War, famously referred to as the “Nero Decree” (53), not only inflicted substantial damage to Germany’s existing transport systems, communication facilities, and industrial establishments. But it also concluded with Hitler’s own suicide, which was an attempt on the Führer’s part to escape capture and immunize himself from a more mortifying death (Ono 2014, 54; Trevor-Roper 1971, 206–207). In the words of Esposito, “Hitler understood that the only way for an individual or collective organism to save itself definitively from the risk of death is to die. It was [also what he] asked the German people to do before he committed suicide” (Esposito 2008, 138). The inhuman regime of totalitarian terror and hostility with which the Third Reich had subjected the Jewish *other* for over half a decade thereby ultimately concluded, as per Esposito, by paradoxically devouring the corporeality of the Führer himself.

Spiegelman’s novel also explicates the traumatic circumstances under which his mother Anja had committed suicide, around twenty-three years after the events at Auschwitz (Ricks 2021, 83). Spiegelman recalls the suicide in a short comic strip (embedded within the narrative of *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History*) titled *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* (1972) which begins with his brief confession that “In 1968, when I was 20, my mother killed herself. She left no note” (Spiegelman 1986, 100). He further cites Hitler (along with postpartum depression) as one of the possible reasons behind Anja’s death (Spiegelman 1986, 103). The author’s tragic account of Anja’s suicide intriguingly reflects how, after having safely protected themselves from the Nazi onslaught at the extermination camps, it became a common theme for survivors of the Holocaust to take their own lives, in the subsequent years, due to the enormity of residual trauma. Accordingly, Yoram Barak et al. in an article titled “Increased Risk of Attempted Suicide Among Aging Holocaust Survivors” write that because the survivors of the Holocaust “define their war experiences as being the most significant stressors of their lives”, they remain “at [an] increased risk of attempting suicide” (Barak et al. 2005). David Lester (2005), who in his work *Suicide and the Holocaust* attempts a documentation of Jews who had escaped the Reich but had

later on resorted to killing themselves, ascribed such a phenomenon to the experience of concurrent depression. In contrast, the likes of Miri Scharf and Julia A. Golier et al. postulate “war-related trauma” (2007, 615) and PTSD or “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” (2003, 133), respectively, as the two other major causes of suicides committed by Holocaust survivors. Subsequently, although not elucidated explicitly in the two volumes of the book, Anja’s psychological condition in her final years tentatively reflects a diagnosis that lies at the intersection of both depression, caused by the death of her first child, Ritchie, and her alienation from her second child, Art, and post-war trauma occasioned by multiple counts of enforced captivity and torture. Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* thereby reminds us that the autoimmune gesture of voluntary self-elimination continues to remain a possibility, for all parties involved in immunitary practices of preservation and defence, even when self-protection has been successful to a certain degree. This occurs due to the intensive burden that is put on immunological defences, as illustrated by Anja and to a degree even Vladek, rendering the protective mechanisms of the self pathologically overactive and subsequently forcing it to “immunize against its own immunity” (Derrida 2003, 94). Given the critical gravity of the atrocities and visual horror of the Holocaust that is recounted in *Maus*, such an autoimmune logic of fatal self-elimination, as discussed in this article, maybe, remains the only fitting paradigm for articulating the genocidal immuno-politics of antisemitism: both for the Nazis and the Jewish community.

Conclusion

This article carefully unpacks the immuno-political dichotomy of, what Alfred Tauber (2017) calls, the healthy self and the pathogenic other that informs Art Spiegelman’s representation of the Jewish Holocaust in his 1996 graphic novel *Maus*. Recursing to the works of Roberto Esposito and Frédéric Neyrat, the article critically reflects on the author’s father, Vladek Spiegelman’s, recollection of the discrimination and dispossession suffered by the Jewish community during the Nazi regime to underline the deep engagement between contemporary biopolitics and immunological thinking (Esposito 2008, 19; Neyrat 2010, 31). The horrors experienced by Vladek and his wife, Anja, in multiple detention centres and finally the concentration camps at Auschwitz, as described by Spiegelman, further offer a commentary on the genocidal mechanisms deployed by the Nazis to systematically denaturalize and then eradicate the Jewish race. Elaborating on Nazism’s eugenicist desire for an aseptic ethnic identity, this article reads the antisemitism contrived by Nazi biopolitics as emerging out of advances made in the domain of nineteenth-century racial hygiene (Proctor 1988, 61). The article, therefore, explains the close entanglement of the biopolitics of self-protection as espoused by the National Socialist Party with a “politics of death” (Esposito 2013, 11) or “thanatopolitics” (Esposito 2008, xxiii) that marks the Jewish people as the ineluctable casualties of a pogrom of racial immunization. Finally, this article delineates Nazism’s immuno-political aspirations of preserving a pure Aryan identity, through the eradication of the Jewish nonself, as culminating in an autoimmune turn. This is portrayed in *Maus* through the organized destruction of the medico-juridical apparatus — by the Nazi officers themselves — that was originally devised by the Third Reich to mass exterminate the Jews as parasitic others.

The autoimmune trope is also substantiated in the novel through the suicide of Spiegelman’s mother Anja, which results as a consequence of the traumatic leftover

of protective over-immunization. Anja's suicide, therefore, critically expounds on the much unexplored aftereffects of the Holocaust on its survivors (Lester 2005, 9), who had participated in a politics of immunity and self-protection of their own. The rhetoric of autoimmunity in Spiegelman's *Maus*, therefore, not only functions to elaborate on the hazardous consequences of Nazi immuno-politics that involved the eventual transformation of racial self-preservation into the systematic obliteration of the Jewish race. But it also reflects on the immunitary strategies — such as tact, perseverance, and the capacity to tolerate corporeal torture — adopted by the persecuted Jews in order to survive the Nazi Holocaust. However, similar to the predicament of National Socialism, the surviving Jews, too, fail to escape the pitfalls of over-immunization, falling prey to severe symptoms of depression, trauma, and post-traumatic stress in the years that follow, both of which lead to their delayed, but eventual succumbing to, the logical spiraling of immunitary life into the inevitable abyss of autoimmunity. An immuno-political study of the Shoah or the Jewish Holocaust through a reading of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* thereby offers us a deeper insight into the biopolitical aims of Nazism as an ideological establishment undergirded by eugenicist fantasies and practices of racist abjection. The investigation further entangles the collective destiny of the Jewish people, both victims and survivors, around the hopes and desires of National Socialism in a way that an escape from it remains close to impossible. While the immunological drive for self-preservation via the extermination of the ethnic other is portrayed by Spiegelman as restrained, to a certain degree, at the end of the war, this article shows that the remnants of a prevailing autoimmunity in *Maus* prolong the destructive and debilitating impulses of a genocidal immuno-politics, by turning them inward in a gesture of self-elimination that not only violently consumes the remains of Nazi socio-political foundations, but also slowly devours the trauma-ridden lives of the surviving Jews.

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Data availability No data set was required for this study.

Declarations

Ethics approval This study did not involve human or animal participants.

Competing interests The author declares no competing interests.

Endnotes

¹ *Maus* is a German word and a cognate of the English word mouse. It is also evocative of the German verb *Mauscheln*, which is etymologically related to the names *Mauschel*, *Moishele*, and most importantly, *Moses* (Levine 2006, 21–22). As per Michael Rothberg (2000, 208), the term *Mauscheln* also refers to the special way in which the Jews spoke the German language in a “unique, singing manner”. Accordingly, Sander Gilman claims that, as indicated by Hitler's racial mentor, Julius Streicher, “one can recognize Jews and Jewesses immediately by their language, without having seen them” (208) due to the specificity of their speech style.

² Publication history of the *Maus* manuscripts can be traced back to frequently serialized issues of the graphic novel that were published in *Raw* between the years 1980 and 1991, a comics and graphics magazine edited by Art Spiegelman himself, along with his wife Françoise Mouly. The first six chapters of the book appeared in 1986 as *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History*. Subsequently, the rest of the chapters were compiled into *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*, which was published in 1991, five years before the entire collective volume also appeared in published form (150 Years 2011).

³ Giorgio Agamben, referring to the term Shoah, “claims that the Jews used a euphemism to describe the destruction [of the Holocaust]. In scripture, “Shoah” often alludes to the notion of divine punishment. This is the term that Primo Levi used when discussing the attempt to explain the destruction as a punishment for our sins” (Michman 2021, 233). The word “Holocaust” on the other hand means “a burnt offering” (233) in Judaism denoting a form of sacrifice and is thus directly associated with the notion of crematoriums.

⁴ Roberto Esposito (2008, 11) notes that “But if death as such constitutes the motor of development of the entire [Nazi Sovereign] mechanism — which is to say that it needs to produce it in ever greater dimensions, first with regard to the external enemy, then to the internal, and then lastly to the German people themselves (as Hitler’s final orders make perfectly clear) — then the result is an absolute coincidence of homicide and suicide”. Also, Ono (2014, 53) writes the following about Hitler’s suicide: “In his bunker under the Reich Chancellery, Hitler faced the impending doom of the Allied assault. Indeed, many, including Albert Speer questioned Hitler’s sanity. Thus, faced with the limited options of the defeated, Hitler issued the Führer order for the complete destruction of all German infrastructures on March 19, 1945. Famously referred to as the ‘Nero Decree,’ Hitler’s scorched-earth policy hastened Nazi Germany’s path to catastrophe” (53).

⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy equates “immanence” with the immunitarian way of life where the self is enclosed and protected from a hostile outside. Nancy’s work offers a critique of such a subject-oriented ontology, rather conceiving, as a result, a social ontology whereby the self emerges from an originary community (Hutchens 2005, 15).

⁶ According to Erving Goffman (1963, 12) “The term stigma, then, will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting” and which subsequently reduces in our minds the person with that attribute into a tainted and discounted individual. “But it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usual-ness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself” (13). The Jews are thereby stigmatized as *thoroughly bad*, or *dangerous*, or *weak* because they do not fall under the conception of the human individual as formulated by the Nazis, and not because they are either racially or biologically inferior by themselves.

⁷ “In his book *Mein Kampf*, Hitler described the Jew as a parasite, a sponger who, like a pernicious bacillus, spreads over wider and wider areas according as some favourable area attracts him” (Nielsen 2012, 45).

⁸ “The job of B cells is to produce a blood protein called an antibody, which hunts down and helps destroy foreign invaders swimming around in body fluids” (Clark 2007, 10).

⁹ William R. Clark (2007, 10) explains that T cells “promote an itchy, painful process called inflammation, which provides a powerful defense against all sorts of microbial invaders... T cells also help B cells make antibodies”. Also, “Killer T cells [specialized T cells] ... can detect when a cell has been invaded by a virus. The infected cell looks different: ‘altered self’ is the term immunologists commonly use.... To a killer T cell, cells from another person implanted in your body look sort of like your cells, but not really like your cells. They look different” (47–48).

¹⁰ Interpellation is described by Louis Althusser (1971, 174) as a function of *ideology*. A mechanism by which individuals are indoctrinated into subjects. The transformation of the Jews into pathogenic nonself and racially inferior others, as portrayed by Spiegelman, occurs primarily through bio-politically legitimized practices of interpellation, further sanctioned by the eugenicist language of racial hygiene.

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