

**Esposito, Biopolitics, and the Critique of the Immunity  
Paradigm in John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019)**

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**Abstract**

*This interdisciplinary study aims to explore the biopolitical function of immunity in society with a special reference to John Lanchester's recent dystopian novel *The Wall* (2019). It refers to Roberto Esposito's biopolitical interpretation of the concept of immunity and its relationship to community in which Esposito diagnoses the contemporary political culture with an "immunization paradigm". Having sketched the key principles of Esposito's biopolitical conceptualization of the notion of immunity in both its biological and political senses, the paper then investigates the possible areas of contact between his thought and the immunity paradigm represented in Lanchester's novel by 'the Wall'. It will be argued then that Lanchester's Wall stands as a concrete embodiment of what Esposito refers to as an "autoimmune pathology" with a number of featured symptoms, including an autoimmune view of the self and the Other, the decline of tolerance and the proliferation of the culture of barrier-making. Following Esposito, the study concludes that immunity, in its biological and social forms, is not inherently autoimmune, but rather the result of the pathologized relationship between immunity, identity and society. This pathological relationship, fueled by a constant and excessive fear of contamination by the Other that does not almost exist, results in the crisis of coexistence represented in *The Wall*.*

**Keywords:** Biopolitics, Border-Making, Esposito, Immunity, Lanchester

**المستخلص**

تسبر هذه الدراسة البيئية أغوار فكرة المناعة ودورها في المجتمع في ضوء السياسة الحيوية، بتطبيق ذلك على رواية «الحائط»؛ وهي رواية تنتمي إلى أدب المدينة الفاسدة، نُشرت في عام 2019 بقلم الروائي البريطاني جون لانكستر. وتقوم الدراسة على تفسير الفيلسوف الإيطالي روبرت إسبوزيتو لمفهوم المناعة في ضوء السياسة الحيوية، وعلاقة هذه المناعة بالمجتمع، إذ يشخص إسبوزيتو هذه الثقافة السياسية المعاصرة للمجتمع في إطار نموذج لإكساب المناعة. وتبدأ السطور الأولى للدراسة بعرض المبادئ التي يركز عليها تصور إسبوزيتو لفكرة المناعة بمعنيها الحيوي والسياسي، ثم تنتقل إلى بحث الجوانب التي يمكن أن يتلاقى فيها فكره مع نموذج إكساب المناعة الذي يتجلى بالحائط المادي المُشيد في رواية لانكستر. وتذهب إلى أن هذا الحائط يعتبر تجسيداً ملموساً لفكرة يسميها إسبوزيتو «المَرَضِيَّات ذاتية المناعة»، تتسم بعدة أعراض ظاهرة جلية، منها نظرة ذاتية المناعة للنفس والآخر، وغياب التسامح، وتفشي ثقافة وضع الحواجز بين الإنسان وأخيه الإنسان. وجرياً على فكر إسبوزيتو، تخلص الدراسة إلى أن ظاهرة المناعة، بثوبها الحيوي والاجتماعي، ليست ذاتية المناعة بفطرتها، وإنما هي نتاج علاقة أمراض قائمة بين المناعة والهوية والمجتمع، ويُدْكي جَدوة هذه العلاقة المرضية خوفاً مستطير من العدوى من الآخر، ولا يكاد يوجد هذا الآخر، وتفضي هذه العلاقة في نهاية المطاف إلى أزمة التعايش التي تتجلى في رواية «الحائط».

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** السياسة الحيوية، وضع الحواجز، إسبوزيتو، المناعة، لانكستر

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**Introduction: The Growing Demand for Protection**

The phenomena of constructing security barriers—either as physical or metaphorical structures—between nations, social groups and individuals have recently proliferated across the world. The increasing demand for security and immunity aligns with the growing perception of various vulnerabilities and external threats in today's globalized and multi-centered world, including viral infections, AI intrusions, migration waves, economic shortage and climate changes, to name but a few. With the ubiquity of new communication technologies and globalization processes, the sense of being under threat by external risks rises, and, consequently, the obsession with safety and immunization proliferates, which renders the immunity paradigm more demanding in contemporary societies. This growing demand for protection and security has been gradually transformed into a crisis of coexistence among not only different racial groups but also diverse classes within the same social group. Central to the current crisis of coexistence is the ontological perception of identity as being immune, immune against “what is not self,” self or other (Lewis 214). According to this ontological logic, the exclusion of the Other becomes fundamental to the protection and survival of the self as “one cannot be both one's self and an other at the same time” (214). As such, the self is constructed on a negative principle of immunity against and exclusion of otherness: “the identity of each individual is determined by being opposed to the identity of every other individual. The self radically excludes all otherness: individuals are individual substances which do not depend on others for their existence, and they are radically separated from these others” (214). Being pivotal to contemporary cultures and politics, the tripartite relationship between immunity, society and identity, understood both as individual or collective political bodies, has become the cornerstone of the biopolitical philosophy of the Italian writer Roberto Esposito who, according to Timothy Campbell (2006), remains one of the most undervalued philosophers of biopolitics in the English speaking world.

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Throughout his oeuvre, especially his trilogy *Bios* (2004; 2008), *Communitas* (1998; 2010) and *Immunitas* (2002; 2011), Esposito contends that the key to understand and respond to the current crisis of coexistence and the problem of border-making is immunity. He is primarily concerned with the diagnosis of the symptoms of the developing immunity paradigm and its influence on both the individual and the community. In order to achieve this purpose, he explores the link between the process and the function of immunization in both biology and politics, claiming that the immunity paradigm has recently expanded from the sphere of infectious diseases to the political, judicial, technological and social domains (Esposito, *Bios* 52). Thus, relying on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, the paper adopts Esposito's biopolitical philosophy in order to investigate the relationship between immunity and society in Lanchester's contemporary dystopian novel, *The Wall*. The main argument developed here has twofold aims: first to explore Esposito's reading of the function of immunity in both the biological and political domains and, second, to employ Esposito's biopolitical interpretation to examine the crisis of immunity and coexistence recurrent in Lanchester's novel. It engages with Esposito's biopolitical interpretation of immunity to argue that the forms of cultural politics at play in *The Wall* rely on a purely defensive and antagonistic, rather than affirmative, notion of immunity, fueled by a perpetual fear of contamination by the Other and an autoimmune concept of the self. As such, it offers a biopolitical analysis of the immunization paradigm in Lanchester's novel, which is metaphorically represented by the titular's Wall as an apparatus of negative immunization, arguing for a more affirmative and less defensive immunological system, which allows for the development of alternative and less polarized forms of political identity.

### **(Auto)Immunity: A Biological View**

Esposito turns to the biological domain in order to rethink the concept of immunity and its relationship to society by drawing an analogy between the (mal)function of immunization in biological organisms and an immune system that operates on a societal level. Immunity, in simplified terms, is understood as a system of biological functions and processes within an organism that protects it against possible infections and external intrusions (Mutsaers 2). In that sense, the notion of boundary-making is essential to the function of the immunity system. That is, in order to safeguard an organism, the immune system functions to construct and maintain a barrier between the body and what threatens it, or more

precisely, “the vital systems of which it is a part and the outside... and this is what it means to (be immune) have an ‘identity’” (Lewis 215). Nonetheless, for Esposito, this boundary is intrinsically permeable and, in order to function properly, allows the infusion of difference or ‘otherness’ into the organism. Thus, difference and otherness are embraced by the organism as integral components of its protective mechanism, “as if one could not protect the identity of the self without incorporating a certain measure of otherness within it” (215). In natural immunization, therefore, the boundary that safeguards the entity from external threats does not indicate an entire isolation from the outside environment. Rather, it inherently operates according to an “aporetic” principle.

According to Esposito (2011), healthy immunity systems function on the basis of an aporetic premise which means that the immune system’s efficacy to protect an organism against an external threat is maximized through the embracement of what is pathological to it (*Immunitas* 7). He uses the example of biomedical vaccination to illustrate this aporetic nature of immunization in which the immune system becomes able to guard the body against possible infections of the same virulent disease only by “the inoculation of non-lethal quantities of the same type” which, in turn, “stimulates the formation of antibodies to neutralize pathogenic effects at an early stage” (7). In other words, the main biological principle of immunization is inherently adaptive in the sense that in order to safeguard a patient against a specific disease, a controllable amount of the same infectious agent, or antigen, is inoculated: “to vaccinate a patient against a disease, you have to introduce a controlled and tolerable portion of it into the organism” (Esposito, *Terms of the Political* 61). Natural immunization operates according to this adaptive principle in which “contact with pathogens stimulates the development of antigens” (Lewis 215). The inoculation of pathogens in the organism activates its antibodies through which the immune system, due to its “immune memory,” is able to defend it against any future infections with the same pathogens.

A contemporary example of the adaptive function of immunity is the COVID-19 vaccine in which immunization functions effectively by inoculating an antigen, a harmless dose of SARS-COV-2, into the body in order to provoke the body’s defense mechanisms against that very pathogen or its variants. The main reason for introducing the antigen (the force of dissolution) into the body is to motivate the body to imitate an infection and stimulate the immune system to respond. In cases where the immune system of the body fails to construct its defense mechanisms in this way, its immunity shield becomes subject to perpetual transgression

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and intrusion, before disintegrating altogether biologically and ontologically: “This is the moment of ontological disintegration and biological death” (Lewis 216). Thus, the enclosure of the forces of dissolution is not the reason for the breakdown of the immunity system as it is mistakenly perceived; but, rather, it is the only mechanism through which it becomes intact and effective. The problem, according to Esposito, is that modern immunitary procedures have misperceived the function of immunity to be autoimmune, pursuing extreme levels of immunization in which the ‘cure,’ i.e., difference and alterity, is denied as a lethal poison (Esposito, *Terms of the Political* 61), with deplorable results for the body it is meant to protect. Thus, it is argued after Esposito that what essentially brings about the collapse of the immunity system is the organism’s turning to “autoimmunity”.

In his biopolitical analysis of the nature and function of immunization in contemporary culture, Esposito notes a shift from natural immunization to an excessive form of immunity that is pathological and destructive: autoimmunity. Autoimmunity is a biomedical pathology in which a body attacks its own organs and disables its biological functions as a result of an excessive defense mechanism, “a situation in which the immune system operates so powerfully that it produces detrimental effects for the body it is supposed to safeguard” (Mutsaers 65). While a healthy immune system protects the body against diseases by attacking foreign intrusions, an autoimmune body malfunctions and mistakenly destroys its own cells and tissues as being foreign themselves, even in the lack of actual infections or threats. Common autoimmune diseases include lupus, type 1 diabetes, multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis (“Autoimmune Disorders”). For example, in type 1 diabetes, the immunity system attacks the body’s pancreas as foreign, destroying its cells that are responsible for producing insulin. Autoimmunity, thus, indicates a pathological deficiency in an organism’s immune system in which it functions so excessively that it causes harmful effects to the body it is meant to protect. The value of Esposito’s biopolitical thought lies in his manipulation of the malfunction of immunity in biological organisms to reconsider the crisis of autoimmunization affecting all areas of human life today: “just as in the most serious autoimmune illness, so too in the planetary conflict presently under way: it is an excessive defense that ruinously turns on the same body that continues to activate and strengthen it” (*Bios* 148). As in biology, and as a result of the pressing need for safety, a society’s immune system can become autoimmune.

In the sociopolitical domain, autoimmunity is used to refer to a symptom of the excessive immunization paradigm. That is, in autoimmune societies, the demand for security and safety becomes so excessive that it threatens to damage the society's immune system rather than protecting its integrity. The problem for Esposito is that this excessive demand for immunization is developed in such autoimmune societies in the face of lacking external threats (Esposito, *Immunitas* 113). This perpetual fear of contamination by an external threat that almost does not materialize progressively becomes pathological, resulting in excessive measures of defense strategies that are characterized by intolerance and sectarianism. As in an autoimmune organism, social autoimmunity is the immediate result of the pathologization of politics by deploying the idea of constructing an (excessive) preventive immunization system to protect human life (Esposito, *Bios* 147–8). According to Esposito, this excessive quest for security becomes chronic and pathological in the sense that it threatens to destroy not only the 'alleged' external enemy but also the sociopolitical body it is devoted to protect. Thus, he identifies this chronic demand for protection to be "the autoimmune illness of contemporary political culture" (147–8), manifested today in various forms of excessive defense procedures such as borders-making, gun cultures, class stratification, in/out-group communities, to mention but a few.

Commenting on Esposito's pathologization of contemporary immunity measurements, Mutsaers (2016) provides the example of the American "gun culture" through which the American people try to immunize themselves against armed violence, and are paradoxically harmed by their own weapons and thus by their own 'immune system' (97). More recent examples of the autoimmune measures include the west's perpetual War on Terror culture, the global rise of border walls (such as the USA-Mexico border and the Gaza-Israel Iron Wall), and xenophobic anti-migration measures. The trope of the wall as a security procedure also features prominently in many contemporary narratives, ranging from Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) to Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia* (2008; 2011). In the latter, for example, Towfik anticipated in the most dystopian tone the rise of the culture of walled and gated communities that enclose and 'immunize' the rich residents of Egypt's North Coast against the intrusion of the desperate poor masses of Shubra. Such 'security' measures align with Esposito's interpretation of autoimmunity as a result of the increasing fear of contamination in today's culture, constituting what he refers to as 'the most acute point of an autoimmunitary turn of contemporary biopolitics' (Esposito, *Bios*

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147). The symptoms of this autoimmunity crisis are manifold in *The Wall*.

### Symptoms of Autoimmunity in *The Wall*

There is a parallel between Esposito's interpretation of the biopolitical function of social autoimmunity and the construction of the Wall in Lanchester's novel. *The Wall* is a contemporary dystopian novel which explores the post-Brexit society's struggle for a form of (bio)political immunity against the Change, a sweeping shift in sea levels caused by global warming and climate change over centuries (Lanchester 110). The Change has forced people across the world to flee their flooded homelands in search of a safe haven against this environmental catastrophe. Consequently, the British government constructs a "ten thousand kilometers long" Wall (34) along the coastline as a frontline immunity shield to protect the country against the hazardous ecological catastrophe as well as the possible intrusions of the desperate foreigners who, because of resource scarcity and drowned homelands, aspire for protection and safety on the inside of the Wall. Moreover, in order to guard the Wall and defend it against the possible attacks of the 'Others,' the country's civil law obliges 'every citizen' to spend a service period of two years as a 'Defender'. Told from the perspective of a young Defender, Joseph Kavanagh, Lanchester's novel progressively questions the validity of the Wall as a bio-political immunity system in protecting the country against external threats. Lanchester's message is clear from the outset: despite its seemingly strong position, the Wall is vulnerable, inflected by an 'autoimmune illness' that, instead of providing the cure, weakens the sociopolitical body it is meant to defend:

a country which entrenches rather than opens out, which retreats into a fantasy of 'splendid isolation' rather than meaningfully engaging with others, and which ultimately showcases the moral corruption of post-Brexit Britain that, among many other things, is also in denial about climate change. (Berberich 121)

Lanchester's Wall embodies the world's current obsession with over-immunization and fascination with the culture of border-making that Esposito accentuates in his biopolitical critique. Clearly, the growing sense of a perpetual impending threat from the outside is so pervasive in *The Wall* that it brings about a crisis of autoimmunity. After the Change, although its impact does not fully materialize in the novel, the country turns into a "besieged fortress," to use Zygmunt Bauman term (2001), through which no one is allowed and every outsider is seen as a threat.

Lanchester cleverly uses the trope of the Wall as a metaphor for an isolated, autoimmune Post-Brexit British society, where its obsession with over-immunization furiously threatens its immunity shield, i.e., the Wall. The dynamic underlying the novel's narrative structure is an autoimmunity paradigm which is reinforced by a constant fear, 'The others are coming,' as described by a member of the Elite—the group that governs and funds the country—in a dystopian tone:

In many hotter places of the world, in particular, the Change is still continuing, still reshaping landscapes, still impacting people's lives. Men and women fled from it, fled from its consequences, tried to make new lives for themselves, to scramble for new shelter, to climb to higher ground, to find a ledge, cave, well, an oasis, a place where they could find safety for them and their families. But,' he said, his tone changing again, and now he really did sound like a member of the elite, a man used to giving orders and breaking bad news, 'the Change did not stop. The shelter blew away, the waters rose to the higher ground, the ground baked, the crops died, the ledge crumbled, the well dried up. The safety was an illusion. So the unfortunates must flee again and they have begun, again, in numbers, like the numbers from many years ago when the Change first struck. Big numbers, dangerous numbers. So that is the first thing I'm here to tell you. The Others are coming. We have had years of relative peace and calm, but the time is now over. You will be busy. (105)

The Elite member's declaration that "The Others are coming" is symptomatic of the crisis of autoimmunity recurrent in *The Wall*. To begin with, the construction of the Wall itself as a preventive defense mechanism is the most serious of these symptoms. It emblemizes the "pathological extremeness" of the prevailing immunity paradigm in post-Brexit Britain which is marked by processes of alienation and decline of tolerance. Externally, like the immune system of the biological body, the Wall is erected to shelter and protect the country against the Change. Yet, in fact, it separates it from the rest of the world. The Wall's role in isolating the country functions against the natural path of immunization which becomes effective only through openness to difference. It pathologizes the country's relationship with the external world by constructing "a militaristic defense against the foreign" (Esposito, *Immunitas* 16). More importantly, this pathological relationship brings about a "fundamental crisis of coexistence" (Mutsaers 101) which is epitomized by many symptoms in *The Wall*: the rejection of the Other,

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the ongoing marginalization of particular social groups, and the autoimmunization of individual identity. These symptoms cast a xenophobic character on the autoimmune society behind the Wall, with the widespread fear of “aliens in our midst” (Bird 175), resulting in more discriminatory and racial attitudes towards those who are identified as ‘Others’.

In the autoimmune society represented by *The Wall*, identity (either of the individual or collective social body) is constructed around an autoimmune view of the self. That is, one’s internal harmony, balance and integrity can only be immunized by excluding any outside effect that might threaten to dissolve such integrity. This view of the self as an autoimmune entity aligns with the function of the Wall itself as an autoimmune defense mechanism, which in the words of Gregory White (2023) becomes part of the West’s construction of ‘whiteness’: “a projection onto the non-white world of difference and otherisation in order to augment an ideological effort to craft a white ethnonational space” (11). The Wall turns into an ideological border, a space of othering, which gains its validity and power from the ontological autoimmune view of identity. Thus, the ecological crisis of the Change grows into an ontological one. As such, the function of the Wall is gradually transformed from an immunity shield against the Change into an ideological space of ‘Othering’ where future coexistence and tolerance seems impossible. As Kavanagh remarks,

they come in rowing boats and rubber dinghies, on inflatable tubes, in groups and in swarms and in couples, in threes, in singles; the smaller the number, often, the harder to detect. They are clever, they are desperate, they are ruthless, they are fighting for their lives, so all of those things had to be true for us as well. We had to be clever and desperate and ruthless and fight for our lives, only more so, or we would switch places. I didn’t want to die fighting on the Wall, but if it came to it, I would rather that than be put to sea. (Lanchester 36)

Kavanagh’s reflection reveals a deeper understanding of the relationship between immunity and the concept of the Other. In *The Wall*, immunity outruns the actual threat which it has been initially intended to fend off, i.e., the Change, and turns its defensive mechanism towards the Other. This means, as Esposito claims, in such an autoimmune society, immunity, “instead of adapting the protection to the actual level of risk, [the “self-protective syndrome”] tends to adapt the perception of risk to the growing need for protection—making protecting itself one of the

major risks” (*Immunitas* 16). Instead of regulating the level of immunity to the actual potential of threats, there is a tendency in the autoimmune society represented in *The Wall*, as well as contemporary political culture, to overplay the idea that risks of all kinds are imminent and pending: “The Others are coming”. Even in the absence of actual threats, the Others in Lanchester’s novel are personified by a wide range of vulnerabilities that are perceived by the collective social body to breach Brittan’s Wall: the Change, immigrants, viral diseases, to mention but a few. This means that the threat against which the Wall is meant to protect, i.e., the Other, is actually created by an excessive demand for security rather than an actual menace. Thus, it is argued that the Wall has become, both physically and metaphorically, central to the relationship between immunity and the Other in the sense that it is the Other, along with the supposed threat it imposes, that gives the Wall and the immunity paradigm it supports its validity. However, it is worth mentioning that, although the immunity paradigm at play “shapes the underlying grammar of the novel’s use of the term ‘Other’” as Kirsten Sandrock (2020) claims, the relationship between immunity and the Other is not inherently autoimmune, but rather is the pathological effect of over-immunization (164).

This pathological relationship between immunity and the Other becomes apparent in Kavanagh’s ambivalent view of the Other before and after his banishment to the sea. Before his exile, Kavanagh’s view of the Others reflects an autoimmune notion of identity: “like most sayings about most things, this is partly true, partly not. Yes, the Wall is the Wall and the Others are the Others and a twelve-hour-shift is a twelve-hour-shift” (Lanchester 119). Before becoming an Other himself, Kavanagh views the helpless Others who attempt to breach the Wall as formidable enemies, invaders who perceive the country’s “desire for security, for safety, for peace [...] as a selfish desire. A selfish, self-interested turning away from the world...You can’t argue with people who want you to drown, to be overrun, to be washed away. You can’t argue! There’s nothing you can tell them to change their mind” (112). Life for Kavanagh at this stage is a matter of survival: it is ‘Us’ or ‘them’. Unfortunately, the Wall is breached by a number of ‘Others’ during his watch, and he and several others, including his girlfriend Hifa, the Captain and several other Defenders, are condemned to deportation from the country and put out to sea. After his banishment, Kavanagh’s ontological perception has been disrupted and his autoimmune view of identity changes radically as he now becomes one of the “Others”:

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I'd been brought up not to think about the Others in terms of where they came from or why they were, to ignore all that – they were just Others. But maybe, now that I was one of them, they weren't others anymore? If I was an Other and they were Others perhaps none of us were Others but instead we were a new Us. It was confusing. (203)

Kavanagh's sense of confusion and ambivalence raises doubts concerning the validity of the immunity paradigm established and cemented by the Wall. These doubts are substantiated especially after his deportation. The 'Defender' of the Wall is demoted to being an 'Other' only because he has been unable to defend the Wall against the hopeless Others. Before being put to sea, he and his comrades are stripped of their citizenship, "one by one, they are brought to the medical centre and put under general anaesthetic while their chips are removed. No biometric ID, no life. Not in this country" (Lanchester 182). The removal of their chips denotes that their citizenship is revoked and that they no longer belong to Britain officially or even emotionally. Denied any symbol of belonging to the nation, those new 'others' become citizens of nowhere. The 'Others' can easily become 'us'. Thus, Kavanagh's perception of the Others has dramatically changed, seeing himself and the Others "as equal members of humanity, namely, as 'us'" (Yigit 1362). Now, for him, the Others are no longer invaders, but desperate fellow humans, deprived of all options, desperate to find a new living space:

I'd never really thought [...] (about) what their lives had been like before or after the Change, and the journeys they had to make to get here [...] I could just about imagine burning sand, a huge yellow sun close overhead, salt water stinging in cuts, the weak being left behind, the bitter tastes of exile and loss, the longing for safety, the incandescent desperation and grief driving you onwards. (Lanchester 80)

Therefore, the Wall, constructed to afford security and protection, progressively becomes a symbol of disintegration and dissolution. It gives Kavanagh and his comrades nothing but the delusion of safety, turning them into even more alienated and miserable subjects. Instead of providing protection and safety to Kavanagh as a member of the community, it has ultimately become deficient. Like AIDS, the most excessive form of immune deficiency, the immunity system enacted by the Wall disrupts not only his social status but also his sense of identity, as Esposito claims: "What is affected by AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome] is not only a health protocol but an entire

ontological scheme: the identity of the individual as the form and content of its subjectivity. . . . The disease destroys the very idea of an identity-making border: the difference between self and other, internal and external, inside and outside” (*Immunitas* 162). Esposito thus asserts that autoimmunity has transformed the paradigm of self-protection to self-destruction as the function of immunity becomes one of survival and conflict rather than growth and expansion.

In that sense, Esposito’s biopolitical reading evokes a number of questions about the nature and function of immunity in *The Wall*. The quintessential question is how the society represented in Lanchester’s novel can constitute a system of immunity that is tolerable and effective? More importantly, how appropriate is the biological notion of autoimmunity and Esposito’s biopolitical interpretation of it for diagnosing the political autoimmune crisis recurrent in *The Wall*? Particularly, how does the Wall contribute to the stratification of society, providing immunity for certain groups rather than others, instead of preserving its integrity as a whole? Thus, following Esposito, it is then argued that the crisis of political immunity apparent in *The Wall* is the result of the pathological relationship between immunity and society, resulting in a ‘community of immune others’.

### **Behind The Wall: A Community of Immune Others**

Elaborating on the tendency of the autoimmunization of sociopolitical relations, Esposito endeavors to explore the intrinsic relationship between “*communitas*” and “*immunitas*” and the etymological root that both terms share: the “*munus*”. He defines the *munus* in two different but interrelated senses: either as “an office—a task, obligation, duty” (Esposito, *Immunitas* 5), or a gift to be repaid “the gift that one gives, not what one receives” (*Communitas* 5). First, as a communal obligation, the *munus* obliges all individuals to fulfill various services to the *communitas*, including “public roles, duties, gifts, favors, taxes, tributes (to the dead), rites, sacrifices, public offices and the like” (Cohen 40). Second, it is a gift that, once given, obligates the recipient to reciprocate (Esposito, *Communitas* 5). This reciprocal relationship of obligation imposed by the *munus* (as a gift to be returned or a communal duty to be reciprocated) is the major principle upon which a cohesive society (*communitas*) is formed. The problem for Esposito is that it is the lack of the *munus* in autoimmune societies that breeds groups of ‘*im-mune*’ individuals.

The prefix “*im-*” in the word “*immunitas*” also refers to a person who is exempt from duties or has received privileges (Esposito, *Bios* xi). Thus, unlike its biomedical sense, the term ‘immunity’ in the sociopolitical context is not used to refer to protection and safety but

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rather to privilege and exemption. It designates those individuals who are released from this reciprocal obligation, “the obligation of the *munus*, be it personal, fiscal, or civil” (*Immunitas* 5). In that sense, the immune individuals are those who have no offices to perform and are exonerated from the array of possible social practices, responsibilities and obligations to the community, such as taxation, prosecution, military service, or legal culpability (Cohen 40; Esposito, *Bios* xi). In other words, an immunized person is removed to a place outside of the “social circuit of reciprocal gift-giving” or the community (*Immunitas* 5). Thus, the lack of the *munus* in autoimmune societies is a symptom of the pathologized relationship between immunity and community, where immunized individuals are protected from the ‘expropriating features’ of the community: ‘If *communitas* is that relation, which in binding its members to an obligation of reciprocal donation, jeopardizes individual identity, *immunitas* is the condition of dispensation from such an obligation and therefore the defense against the expropriating features of *communitas*’ (Esposito, *Bios* 50). In such autoimmune societies, “*communitas* affirms the *munus*, whereas *immunitas* negates it” (*Terms of the Political* 59). For Esposito, then, it is the lack of the *munus* that paves the way for what he describes as ‘a community of immune others,’ a community of those who have nothing to share in common, like the Elite of *The Wall*.

In *The Wall*, the Elite form a community of immune individuals. They are placed outside the “common law” of reciprocal relations or the *munus* that obligates every citizen to spend a two-year service period in watching the Wall and defending it against the Others. In addition, they use the Wall as an apparatus of exercising their power and maintaining hierarchy over the Defenders who are beguiled into ruthlessly guarding what they have been told to consider their own territory. In the words of David Newman (2016), borders like Lanchester’s Wall are publicly conceived “as a means of perceived defense from outside influences” but are ultimately created by elites not just to keep out those deemed undesirable but also to control people within its own territory (53). Commenting on the ongoing biopoliticization of borders construction, Eugene McNulty (2022) also explains that “borders are not facts of nature but rather mutable constructs, historical artefacts bearing the traces of their political particularities” (28). As the narrative unfolds, Kavanagh and his fellow Defenders gradually realize the Wall’s ‘political particularities,’ that they are tied to the Elite’s apron strings and that the Wall is being used mainly for political exploitation, appealing to a shared

experience that ultimately tears the nation apart instead of bringing it together:

They tell us that everyone goes to the Wall, no exceptions. Somehow, though, when I saw the politician, I knew for the first time that that couldn't be true. This man had clearly never been on the Wall. He had never been a Defender. [...] No one ever admitted to not going on the Wall, but we all suspected that there were rich and powerful people who got out of it. (Lanchester 109)

Kavanagh's critique of the role of the Elite provides a clear example of the crisis of political immunity and pathologized social relations in the post-Brexit autoimmune society where only a class of citizens receive personal privileges and pay no tributes or perform any services on behalf of the *munus*. While the rest of the country is mostly trying to survive and to protect the country against external risks, the Elite hide behind the huge Wall, both physically and metaphorically, in pursuit of their own well-being and advantage only. For instance, only they still have access to the country's natural resources like oil although it is scarce due to the ecological crisis (Lanchester 27). They seek immunization against not only external risks but also other members of their community. Now, the crisis of coexistence recurrent in the novel strikes both natives and foreigners alike. Again, the 'Us' is easily turned into 'them'.

Thus, instead of fulfilling its role in preserving the integrity of the social body, the Wall, like the deficient immune system, gradually turns into an autoimmune system of segregation and division. The autoimmune social structure prompted by the Wall subdivides the *communitas* it is meant to preserve into three "small, micro-communities, opposed by definition to each other" (Esposito, *Communitas* 55): The Elite, the Defenders and the Help. This autoimmune social order positions the Elite at the top of the social ladder, the Defenders as average citizens, and the Help at the bottom. The Elite becomes obsessed with immunizing their sociopolitical status, interests and whatever else "is considered to be properly their own" (Esposito, *Terms of the Political* 43). By contrast, forced into a compulsory service to defend the Wall against the intrusion of the Others, the Defenders' lives become miserable and irritated by the constant fear of being banished to the sea if an Other succeeds in breaching the Wall: "for every other who [gets] over the Wall, one Defender [will] be put to sea" (Lanchester 11). The desperate Others, who flee their homelands in search of a secure haven on the inside of the Wall, become the Help: "They're always caught and offered the standard choice...being euthanised, becoming Help or being put back to sea" (47).

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Within this autoimmune social structure, the Help is lower than the average citizen, almost considered as mere pawns of the Elite, or domestic servants “allotted by the governing authorities if you can pay for their living costs” (56). The few ‘Others’ that do successfully manage to climb the Wall and enter Britain awaits a life behind the Wall in which they will be treated as less than human beings. Behind the Wall, a lifelong enslavement awaits them.

The social structure developed in *The Wall*, which is prompted by the Change and protected by the Wall, reveals that the eco-biological crisis has abundant effects on the sociopolitical atmosphere at play. This intertwinement between the biological and political senses of immunization shifts the scope of negative immunization to involve not only the desperate foreigners but also to the fellow natives. Both of the Defenders and the Help are dehumanized as ‘Others’. This extreme form of othering results in an autoimmune social order, which, according to Moritz Jesse (2021), “seems to suggest that there are no first and second rank citizens anymore. Rather, there are only immune British citizens and ‘others’ who are less than human beings” (24). In that sense, the natural biological catastrophe of the Change exposes the crisis of political immunity in *The Wall* where the Elite avoid service to the Wall and continue to enjoy the privilege of safety and protection from the Defenders who, in turn, feel they are “just bricks in the wall” (White 17), fighting against an external enemy that almost does not fully materialize. Reflecting on his utter disdain and contempt toward this autoimmune social order, Kavanagh provides a stark image about the difference of the quality of the lives of both the Elite and the Defenders:

He was a baby politician, an infant member of the elite. He still had his training wheels. I may have been sleep deprived, I might possibly still have been a bit drunk, but I fell for a moment into a reverie, a kind of guided dream, in which I imagine baby members of the elite being born from chrysalises, already wearing their shiny suits, their ties pre-knotted, their first clichés already on their lips, being wiped down of cocoon matter and pushed towards a podium, ready to make their first speech, spout their first platitude, lose their virginity at lying. They’d be made to do that before they were given any food or drink or comfort, just to make sure it was the thing they knew first and best, the thing which came most naturally. (Lanchester 103)

Lanchester skillfully uses the ecological crisis of the Change to expose the West's hypocritical attitude towards issues of immunization and the Other. According to White (2023), the construction of the Wall itself is not reasonable as it is built to defend the country against an external threat that never becomes actual, a threat that does not exist: "Once Kavanagh and Hifa are at sea, on the watery side of the wall, they and their companions do not meet with large numbers of people after all" (20). After being disposed to the sea, Kavanagh and his comrades confront the Captain who has been exiled for his 'betrayal' of the nation by helping a group of the desperate Others to get over the Wall. Criticizing the culture of barrier-making which has become central to the immunization procedures of many Western countries today, the Captain insists that the Wall exposes the hypocrisy of the west in dealing with the Other:

The thing we most despised about you, you people, is your hypocrisy. You push children off a life raft and wish to feel good about yourselves for doing it. OK, fine, if that's what you want to do, but you can't expect the people you push off the side of the raft to think the same. To admire your virtue and principal while we drown. So, no, I'm not going to be like you. I'm not going to lie, I'm not going to be a hypocrite, and I'm not going to say I'm sorry. (Lanchester 178)

Kavanagh's exile and the Captain's appeal provoke Lanchester's deeper critique of issues of immigration and climate change refugees. To use Mohsin Hamid's (2019) invocation, "Humans are in motion across time as well as geography. Why must we be divided, the migrant versus the native?" In the same vein, Esposito's project is not an attempt to denounce immunity but rather it endeavors to formulate immunity in its affirmative potential. His task is twofold: to undermine the apparatuses of negative immunization and, simultaneously, to promote the affirmative dimensions of immunity tolerance. This task underpins Esposito's biopolitical thought through which he contends that community and immunity are linked and juxtaposed to each other by the *munus*, as "object and content of the other" (*Immunitas* 9). This core distinction does not indicate an antagonistic relationship between community and immunity. Rather, it designates a tolerant notion of immunity that "breaks down the barriers of individual identity" (2013, p. 85) constructed by the autoimmune illness. In this interaction, the *munus* is divided and shared out in such a way that each member of the community is compelled to share with the other. In that sense, the view of the self as an autoimmune entity exempt from any obligations to the community or the Other is

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dissolved, and the incompatible relationship between immunity, identity and society is replaced with a new perspective in which the other is perceived as “the form the self takes where inside intersects with outside, the proper with the common, immunity with community” (Esposito, *Immunitas* 171). Thus, it is through this principle of embracing otherness that Esposito outlines the values of his affirmative model of immunization:

If [*communitas*] binds individuals to something that pushes them beyond themselves, then [*immunitas*] reconstructs their identity by protecting them from a risky contiguity with the other, relieving them of every obligation toward the other and enclosing them once again in the shell of their own subjectivity. Whereas *communitas* opens, exposes, and turns individuals inside out, freeing them to their exteriority, *immunitas* returns individuals to themselves, encloses them once again in their own skin. *Immunitas* brings the outside inside, eliminating whatever part of the individual that lies outside. What is immunization if not the preventive interiorization of the outside, its neutralizing appropriation? (*Terms of the Political* 49)

### **Esposito: Towards Affirmative Biopolitics**

Although, as discussed earlier, the Wall stands as an illustration of the operation of immunity as a negative paradigm indicating “a militaristic defense against the foreign,” Esposito’s biopolitical analysis opens also a new avenue for considering an affirmative process of immunity designating “a hospitable relation to the other” (Lewis 222). Throughout his oeuvre, he utilizes the case of the relationship between the mother and the fetus to illustrate his conception of immunity as an affirmative rather than negative process. Under normal conditions, the mother does not get rid of the fetus she is carrying because of its genetic foreignness bestowed upon it by the father, but instead embraces and protects it due to her “immune tolerance” (Esposito, *Immunitas* 170). Tolerance in Esposito’s affirmative philosophy is an integral component of the process of natural immunization: “if tolerance is a product of the immune system itself, it means that, far from [...] rejecting [what is] other-than-self, it includes the other within itself, not only as its driving force but also as one of its effects” (167). By contrast, in cases of immune system disorders, the mother rejects the fetus as a foreign object which, consequently, brings about abortion. Kavanagh’s deportation by his nation as a foreign organ is

similar to the mother's rejection of her embryo: both identify their "fetus" as a potential threat.

Kavanagh's banishment particularly reveals that there is a parallel between the malfunction of immunity in the biological and sociopolitical domains. In both cases, the autoimmune body—understood as a biological organism, individual entity, or social group—undermines its own completeness by rejecting what is different to it. By becoming autoimmune, it functions against its very own nature, i.e. incompleteness. The immune system is intrinsically open to everything other. This very characteristic of incompleteness is what enables the immune system to function properly. The misperception of immunity as a permanent autoimmune state gives rise to the possibility that the body might misrecognize some of its organs (as seen in the case of abortion as well as Kavanagh's deportation to the sea) as alien and menacing and hence to be rejected. While the biological body might misrecognize its own cells as foreign and then attack them, the government in *The Wall* also misrecognize its own people as Others and pushes them out to the sea. Like the pathologized autoimmune system, the country turns into a hostile environment to both its citizens and foreigners alike.

Esposito's elaboration on a positive immunity model, evidenced in the biological sphere by the mother-fetus relationship and in the political domain by the circulation of the *munus*, indicates that immunity does not necessarily degenerate into a crisis of coexistence. His affirmative biopolitics challenges the traditional perception of immunity as an impermeable and exclusionary barrier between the self and the Other. It alternatively calls for a notion of immunity that is tolerant and open to difference and acceptance of the Other. His goal is to eliminate immunity's negative principle, i.e., the rejection of the Other, because, as he argues, immunity is not the antithesis of difference, but rather it stimulates and embraces difference in order to survive. In that sense, immunity is perceived as "a filter for contact and communication" with the external environment (Esposito, *Living Thought* 261). More importantly, when used as a metaphor of sociopolitical critique, this adaptive principle of embracing otherness contests the prevailing interpretation of the immune dynamic as a separating barrier between the self and the outside world. In Esposito's biopolitical philosophy, this barrier is permeable, acting as "a sounding board for the presence of the world inside the self" (169). Thus, contrary to the militaristic interpretation of the immune process, Esposito's conceptualization is based on an affirmative principle in which:

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nothing is more inherently dedicated to communication than the immune system. Its quality is not measured by its ability to provide protection from a foreign agent, but by the complexity of the response that it provokes. . . this is perhaps the only—certainly the first—experience of the stranger in relation to but also in the very constitution of the proper. . . . Each body is already exposed to the need for its own exposure. This is the condition common to all that is immune: the endless perception of its own finitude. (*Immunitas* 174)

Negating the militaristic understanding of immunity as a process of excluding the other, Esposito's affirmative biopolitics is based on the premise that the survival of community can only be achieved by embracing its elements of otherness: "to survive, a community, every community is forced to introject the negativity of its own opposite, even if that opposite remains a contrastive and lacking mode of the community itself" (49). In that sense, Esposito re-conceptualizes the function and dynamic process of social immunization in terms of an adaptive form of identity, where the principle of communication with the others is essential to the survival of the community itself.

### Conclusion

Much of Esposito's philosophy is informed by the biological notions of (auto)immunity he adopts to symptomize contemporary political culture with an autoimmune pathology. He contends that the proliferation of contemporary preventive immunization measures, such as anti-migration policies, erection of national barriers, and class stratification, reflect a permanent fear of 'contamination' by the Other. With the increasing sense of risks due to technological advances and globalization interaction, this fear has actually grown out of control, threatening to destroy the body politic they are supposed to protect. His biopolitical interpretation of the current autoimmunity crisis is generally based on three main premises. First, the tendency in contemporary culture towards the intense biologisation of the sociopolitical life is extreme, turning the task of the preservation of bio/political life into a battle for survival rather than communication and growth. Second, this growing biopolitical character of contemporary cultures, especially in its autoimmune form, brings about their dissolution. Because of contemporary society's immunitary obsession, preventive (and excessive) defense measures become detrimental to the social body itself. Finally, he contends that the immune process is not inherently autoimmune, but rather 'aporetic,' functioning properly by giving entry, in a calculated way, to all forms of otherness

and different forces of dissolution. The research revealed that many symptoms of the autoimmune pathology diagnosed by Esposito's biopolitical interpretation correspond to the process and function of immunization in Lanchester's novel.

In *The Wall*, the immunity paradigm permeates every aspect of sociopolitical life, especially after the Brexit crisis in response to an intense demand for protection and security. With the growing sense of fear of the possible impacts of climate change and natural catastrophes, the government erected the Wall as a preventive defense mechanism against the Change. However, instead of protecting the country and preserving its integrity, the Wall turns into a symbol of dissolution and fragmentation. In addition to isolating the country from the rest of the world, it divides society into rival groups: the Elite, the Defenders and the Help. While the Defenders and the Help strive to survive, the Elite enjoy political immunity and pay no service to the community. More importantly, the Wall, like a deficient immune system, generates and maintains a fixed, impermeable barrier between the Self and the Other. As its failure in protecting the country and providing security for Kavanagh and his fellow Defenders indicates, it functions against the natural principle of immunization which is inherently open to difference and change. It has been argued that the Wall, along with the immunity paradigm it creates, does not fulfill its promise of protection and safety mainly because it fails to embrace difference and otherness. It locks the country and its citizens up in a closed world of rivalry and conflict.

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