“After the Plague: Race and Survival in Jack London’s The Scarlet Plague”
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In our twenty-first century landscape, biological threats emerge, plunging the global community into both panic and desperation. Part of this desperation and panic reveals itself in age-old practices, where the disease comes to be associated with particular racial/ethnic groups, attributing death and illness to this particular group of individuals. For instance, much discussion about the spread of Enterovirus 68 places the blame on this illness to the influx of undocumented children from Mexico and Central America. If they had not entered the country, the “logic” insists, then “American” children would not be infected. At the same time that this virus strikes, the global community also grapples with the re-emergence of Ebola, and with the entrance of individuals into the country from “hot zones,” discussion has centered on closing the boarders, suggesting that this act will seal off contagion from our shores.

What is particularly frightening about such narratives is the sense that people who are undeserving of contracting these illnesses perish, suggesting that what lies at the root of some of these fears is entrenched notions of race and survival. One such narrative that plays on these fears and preoccupations is Jack London’s 1912 novel The Scarlet Plague. Set in a post-apocalyptic, twenty-first century America, the novel chronicles life sixty years after the arrival of Red Death, which has not only leveled the world’s population, but in doing so, has also erased civilization, leaving the survivors to return to a primitive barbarism that marked earlier centuries. For the main character Granser, who was once an English professor at Berkeley, the plague’s greatest devastation is that it has turned the world “topsy-turvy,” leaving the barbarous classes on top and plunging civilization into a permanent “outer darkness.” Granser believes that his nostalgic backward glance will compel his grandsons to rebuild the new civilization—according to the old stratifications—as an antidote to future outbreaks. However, their inability to carry forward this vision, along with the problematic nature of the solution, renders this return of the Saxon a failure.