Dear Fellowship Selection Committee,

It is my pleasure to apply for the Post-Doctoral Teaching Fellowship in British Literature, 1630-1940. I recently completed my PhD in English at the University of Pennsylvania after having defended my dissertation, *Prophylactic Fictions: Immunity and Biosecurity*, under the direction of Michael Gamer, Lance Wahlert, Emily Steinlight, and Toni Bowers. Situated at the intersection of literary studies, the history of medicine, and disability studies, my research brings together a diverse archive of literary and scientific documents to consider the historical development of vaccine skepticism and anti-vaccination movements.

*Prophylactic Fictions* traces a prehistory for what I term *inoculation insecurity*, by which I mean a constellation of political and cultural anxieties surrounding the legitimacy, safety, and efficacy of a developing medical procedure used to preserve the health of its subject in advance of infection. I read a collection of pamphlets, poetry, plays, essays, and novels that witness the evolution of this procedure from early eighteenth-century variolation (inoculation by smallpox matter) to late eighteenth-century vaccination (inoculation by cowpox matter). The culture wars inaugurated by Edward Jenner’s revolution of preventative medicine through vaccination grappled with the right of the government and the medical establishment to literally puncture the bodies of its citizens on the grounds that England was “threatened,” be it by French radicalism or by foreign bodies and objects crossing English borders. Bringing to bear this rich archive on readings of canonical novels like Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* resituates them at the locus of intense debates about the relationship between the body (individual and social) and the state.

Attention to the transitions in the co-constituent domains of medicine and literature during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveals how inoculation’s preventative function has never been purely a biological issue. At stake was not only the changes in medical technology and practice but the professionalization and institutionalization of medicine itself. My project recalibrates the axes by which we tend to narrate the history of medicine: vaccine skepticism was not simply a refusal of medical innovation but a direct challenge to the state’s cooptation and misuse of medicine in the name of “national security.” *Can and should the state be able to monitor, regulate, or even make compulsory health interventions based purely on the need to prevent imagined threats?* Literary and cultural production in this period captures the conflicting ways in which health threats were recognized, contained, and mitigated.

Most of the work I have published thus far has sought to bridge what C.P. Snow has called “the two cultures” of the sciences and humanities. My piece for Digital Defoe, “Defoe Before Immunity: A Prophylactic *Journal of the Plague Year*,” is taken from the first chapter of my dissertation, and was recently awarded the William Patrick Day prize by my department for the best graduate essay of the year. It focuses on the seemingly inexplicable immunity of the novel’s
narrator, H.F., which I argue exemplifies eighteenth-century struggles with disease causation, prevention, health security in the wake of Mary Wortley Montagu’s importation of Turkish variolation. Beyond my dissertation, I have also contributed to many online publications, among them REMEDIA: The History of Medicine in Dialogue with its Present, Disability Studies Quarterly, and Medical and Health Humanities, with essays more geared toward accessible public scholarship on the medical humanities, the history of medicine, and disability studies, the latter of which underpins my two other current projects. One is an essay on the ableism of immunology’s dominant self/nonself paradigm, which will appear in a forthcoming collection, Interdisciplinary Approaches to Disability (I aim to expand this essay into a longer meditation on immunology’s understudied relationship to disabled embodiment). The other is a book project, which will hopefully emerge from my research at [X], particularly with the help of resources at [X].

My investment in fostering conversations across disparate fields continues to animate my pedagogy. In 2016, I taught one of the inaugural Junior Research Seminars. Tales of Contagion from Plague to Public Health explored the mutating representations of illness from the early eighteenth-century novel to contemporary film. With many double majors and minors in the sciences enrolled, I tailored my syllabus to include eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific writings and plague iconography alongside the course’s two central novels, Defoe’s A Journal of the Plague Year and Stoker’s Dracula. My students close-read these documents in terms of their normative assumptions of health and its “proper” management proffered by texts like Cheyne’s The English Malady (1733) and Davy’s Researches, Chemical and Philosophical: Chiefly Concerning Nitrous Oxide (1800). This course serves as the foundation of my current undergraduate seminar, Contagion, which examines the evolution of what Priscilla Wald has called the “outbreak narrative” from early eighteenth century novels to epidemic disaster films like Soderbergh’s Contagion or Fresnadillo’s 28 Weeks Later. For my teaching at Penn, I was named finalist of the Penn Prize for Excellence in Teaching by Graduate Students and awarded the prestigious University of Pennsylvania School of Arts and Sciences Dean’s Award for Distinguished Teaching.

To broaden my experience with other student communities beyond those at Penn, I also taught a lower-division writing course on the research paper at the Community College of Philadelphia with mostly underclassmen enrolled in pre-health or pre-science tracks. I structured my syllabus around the concept of medical debate and controversy. For a unit on cancer and chronic illness, I put together Susan Sontag’s Illness as Metaphor with Frances Burney’s “A Mastectomy” and Audre Lorde’s The Cancer Journals. Using Sontag’s 1978 polemic about the “punitive and sentimental fantasies” about TB and cancer, I had my students think about how Burney and Lorde might resist Sontag’s call for purging illness of metaphor. All three authors write from a marginalized position as women with breast cancer, yet each demonstrate how the social cannot be dissociated from the scientific or medical. I hope to not only work with majors in English but facilitate interdisciplinary learning for students in the sciences.

Given the period range of this fellowship, I hope to be able to fill multiple departmental teaching needs. I look forward to opportunities to teach surveys of eighteenth and nineteenth century British literature, but also courses at the intersection of literature and science, and introductory courses in disability studies and medical humanities. In particular, I would love to teach the Literature and Medicine course in your offerings, as well as either of the British Novel courses.
My portfolio is enclosed, but please let me know if you would like any further information or materials. I welcome the opportunity to speak with you in person or by Skype. I can alternatively be reached by email at laut@sas.upenn.edu. Many thanks for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,

Travis Chi Wing Lau