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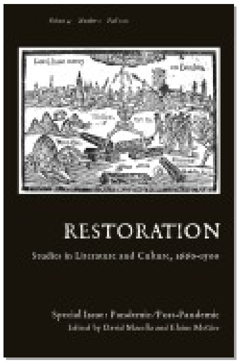

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Plague Literature and Pandemic Pedagogy[1]

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In spring quarter 2021, I taught a lower-division English course on "Plague Literature." Given the dominant mood of fatigue and despair during winter registration, I was surprised to see all forty seats fill. I had proposed the course to my department in March 2020, less than a week into the initial wave of shutdowns in the U.S. and less than two weeks after the cancelation of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies conference in St. Louis. Initially, I was worried that the topic would be passé by the time the course was offered, the COVID-19 crisis a distant memory. When September 2020 rolled around and proposals for this special issue were due, the spring and summer waves had passed; although the impacts of the pandemic were ongoing, it seemed possible to begin the process of retrospection. Prompted by opinion pieces like Robert Zaretsky's "The Author of 'Robinson Crusoe' was the Anthony Fauci of His Age" in the *Washington Post*, I conceived a progression of readings and assignments that would challenge our collective tendency to map the current pandemic too neatly onto past outbreaks of mass disease and death.[2] My course, I promised, would reject such "naïve and universalizing" gestures and model for students "a more relativistic, textured, and strategic presentism." I wanted to think with students about how our desire for relatable content might come at the cost of allowing literature to challenge our ways of thinking and being in the world.

Taken on these terms, the course was an utter failure. Battered by the winter wave of infections and deaths, devastated by the economic fallout, and exhausted from three consecutive terms of remote learning, students came to the course desperate to make meaning of their experiences. They connected insistently with the texts we read together, flattening the historical and cultural differences I had hoped to accentuate. Through their discussions and writing, however, I came to recognize how healing it was to see their own

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supposedly unprecedented moment mirrored in literature from other times and places. Ultimately, I set aside my initial agenda and created space for the group to reckon with the events of the previous year and a half.

This choice aligned with my developing commitment to trauma-informed pedagogy, an approach with which I became familiar out of necessity during this year of crisis. As neuroscientist Mays Imad explains, people experiencing chronic or acute stressors—like the fear, grief, social isolation, and financial insecurity that attend a global pandemic—enter survival mode at a physiological level. The limbic system overtakes functions usually performed with the help of the prefrontal cortex, a shift that has significant impacts on memory, cognition, and emotional regulation.[3] To mitigate these effects as they relate to teaching and learning, instructors can cultivate an environment that promotes mutual feelings of safety and trust, provides opportunities for peer support, and empowers students by recognizing and building on their strengths and experiences. These principles translate into some familiar practices: designing transparent assignments and assessment criteria, building class community through structured small-group work, and inviting students into collective decision-making processes with authentic stakes for the course trajectory. Even small choices like posting a daily agenda and incorporating movement breaks can create a sense of routine and predictability that helps students access the cognitive resources they need for learning. The scholarship of teaching and learning generally distinguishes trauma-informed strategies from trauma-related content, but my experience teaching plague literature in spring 2021 suggests a particularly significant role for historical literary studies in helping students move through what is sure to be a lengthy aftermath to the COVID-19 pandemic.[4]

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The first half of my course was designed to invite comparative thinking. We began by identifying the formal structure that Priscilla Wald terms the “outbreak narrative”: a set of tropes, common to both literary and journalistic accounts of contemporary epidemics, that encodes broader fears about globalization and the changing environment. In these stories, the pathogen is personified and imagined to be hostile to humanity. The malevolent microbe moves from the so-called developing world to the developed world, where it engages heroic scientists in a mythic battle for survival. These agents of technological modernity send their life-saving expertise back to the supposedly less advanced places where the disease originated.[5] Wald’s formulation provided a useful framework for our study of three recent fictional works about imaginary pandemics of apocalyptic proportions: Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018), Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014), and Carmen Maria Machado’s “Inventory” (2017).[6] While students found, per Wald, moments of neocolonial and anthropocentric thinking in these texts, they also identified powerful moments of resistance to the outbreak narrative and its hold on our collective imagination.

The second half of the course built on and complicated this comparative foundation. As we moved in reverse chronological order through the twentieth, nineteenth, and long eighteenth centuries, we read literary texts that sometimes invited and sometimes frustrated the desire for identification. I provided contextual materials to help students grapple with the unfamiliar and even alienating aspects of these works. For instance, most students in the class had come of age at a time and in a geographic and socioeconomic context in which AIDS was treatable. To understand the atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and victim-blaming in which Susan Sontag wrote the essay "AIDS and Its Metaphors," we watched a 1987 CDC informational video that provided an eye-opening glimpse of the initial stigma and terror surrounding the disease.[7] Students knew even less about the 1918 flu epidemic, the subject of modernist novelist Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (1939). As we studied Porter's quasi-autobiographical account of her near-death from the flu, students gathered news clippings and photographs from the *Influenza Encyclopedia* that helped shed light on particular moments from the book.[8] In this online digital archive, students found eerily familiar black-and-white images of masked crowds and headlines about anti-mask protests, as well as advertised "cures" that they found alternately amusing and horrifying. Just as they viewed ads for the health properties of whiskey as evidence of the progress of medicine over the past century, students likewise took a kind of comfort in distancing themselves from the understandings of disease transmission that they found in Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and diarist Samuel Pepys's reflections on the 1665 bubonic plague outbreak in London. I helped situate these texts within particular knowledge formations by sketching the competition between miasma and contagion theories in the period preceding germ theory.[9] Throughout these discussions, we located the literary texts within historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts with important differences from our own moment; at the same time, we surfaced enough similarities to the present to temper our impulse toward easy disidentification or a sense of superiority grounded in teleological narratives of scientific and social progress.

In framing these works for my students, I also emphasized the differential impact of collective and historical trauma on oppressed groups.[10] For example, when the class discussed Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799), which chronicles the 1793 yellow fever outbreak in Philadelphia, we noted the anti-blackness in Brown's portrayal of the frontline workers who kept the city running at the epidemic's peak. Students easily related this history to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on U.S. communities of color, members of which are more likely to hold jobs considered "essential" and to be exposed to higher risk. Undoubtedly, this connection resonated differently for individual students in their own intersectionality. For some students, it may have helped them to identify their own privilege, while for others, it could be potentially triggering. Mindful of the range of potential responses, I primed our discussion with a mini-lecture connecting Brown's racially charged representation of nurses and undertakers to the history of African American political organizing in Philadelphia. I drew the students' attention to the influential publications and institutions that arose from this moment and pointed to some of the writings of Black Philadelphians of the era available in our library's digital collections. By highlighting stories of resistance, endurance, and solidarity in the face of violence and oppression, I tried to reframe trauma-related content to support empowerment and resilience.

For the final project, students wrote an opinion piece arguing for the merits or pitfalls of studying the literature of historical epidemics. The assignment prompt provided links to several op-eds about plague literature and the COVID-19 pandemic published in traditional journalistic outlets as starting points for their thinking. Students were not limited to the op-ed genre, however; they were invited to present their argument in any form, provided that they cited five of our readings from the second half of the course.[11] In essays, works of fiction, podcasts, blog posts, and opinion columns formatted playfully to mimic the editorial pages of major newspapers, students reflected on what they had learned from studying past pandemics. Several argued that the readings had given them a valuable perspective, allowing them to understand some of the troubling phenomena they had witnessed—the spread of misinformation, growing mistrust in institutions, increased religious and political polarization—as predictable human responses to fear and isolation. While some projects focused on individual and group behavior under duress, others addressed the structural inequities that distribute danger and suffering unequally. For instance, students compared the masked revelers in Edgar Allen Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) to attendees of Kendall Jenner's mask-less, A-list birthday party during the fall 2020 coronavirus surge in Los Angeles, highlighting how privilege can confer a sense of invincibility and exceptionalism.[12] As one writer pointed out, the guests at Jenner's festivities took the risk by choice, while frontline workers like caterers and drivers did so out of economic necessity. Other pieces focused specifically on mobility as a privilege: just as those with the means to do so fled Pepys' London and Brown's Philadelphia for their country homes, many of the celebrities singing John Lennon's "Imagine" in Gal Godot's widely lambasted Instagram video had evidently relocated to vacation houses to wait out lockdowns in spring 2020. Then and now, these students found, wealth and class disparities can exacerbate the damage caused by predictable threat responses, transforming acts of individual self-interest into wide-reaching harms.

While many writers addressed specific social issues on which comparative work gave them purchase, others took a more theoretical approach, reflecting on the benefits and drawbacks of historicist and presentist perspectives. One argued that transhistorical comparison was indulgent and even dangerous, a distraction from the ethical demands of the present. Another expressed concern that comparing epidemics could be a dangerous way of bringing cultural baggage from one situation to bear on another, reproducing biases and misconceptions about past events in the present. I was delighted to see these students engaging at a meta level with the project of the course itself.

One work that I found particularly moving simultaneously performed and questioned the act of comparing one's own experience to those found in literature. Dani Waltman's five-poem sequence "Unprecedented Times" was packaged as a submission to the fictional *Quarantine Literary Review Journal*.[13] Each poem starts with an epigraph from one of the course readings; the juxtaposition of texts produces a profound sense of irony, black humor, and melancholy. The piece "Only Half," for example, is inspired by the shopping list that Miranda, the protagonist of "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," compiles for her friend Towney as she prepares to leave the hospital where she has convalesced for weeks.

“Only Half”

> “‘One lipstick, medium, one ounce flask Bois d’Hiver perfume, one pair of gray suede gauntlets without straps, two pairs gray sheer stockings without clocks—’
>
> Towney, reading after her, said, ‘Everything without something so that it will be almost impossible to get?’” (Porter 262)
>
> I bought a kiddie pool from Target. I spent the hot summer days in the beginning lying in said pool and contemplating the things I had missed. I bought canvases and paint from Michaels. I spent the next few weeks doing nothing but non-stop painting. I painted a sunset, a beach, a ribcage, a dismantled person held together by vines. I painted until my hands hurt and then I painted some more. I bought a midi keyboard from Amazon. I taught myself how to read chords and play them as I sang. I played the same four Hozier songs to the point that I heard them in my sleep. I played with my relative pitch, and memorized half of the music scale, but only half.
>
> I filled my glass full of water, but only half.

In Porter’s novel, the color gray is associated with liminality; Miranda’s self-imposed uniform following her illness symbolizes her sense of existing in a space between life and death. Likewise, Dani’s poem highlights the in-betweenness of the summer months on the academic calendar. The poetic speaker’s laundry list of summer 2020 purchases is a catalog of failed attempts to replace experiences missed during the shutdown. In this sense, it reflects closely the way Miranda uses consumption to fill the void left by her lover’s death. Miranda’s demand that each item be “without something”—lacking some standard feature, like the straps on gauntlets—reflects her own sense of lack. Towney’s incredulous response helps us to see Miranda’s attempt at retail therapy as half-hearted and intentionally self-defeating; likewise, Dani’s speaker takes “half” measures, such as learning only half of the musical scale. The increasingly graphic imagery of the poetic speaker’s paintings, the obsessiveness with which she pursues her hobbies until they hurt her body and haunt her dreams, mimic the disturbing fever dream in which Miranda spends much of Porter’s novel. The poem’s final twist on the old truism about the “glass half full” mirrors and responds to Miranda’s distaste for the sunny platitudes that dominate conversation on the home front and mask the realities of living with the horrors of war and pestilence. This poem, and the others in Dani’s collection, engage in a sophisticated and strategic form of presentism that moves beyond simplistic connections between past and present, fiction and reality.

I only fully appreciated the degree of emotional work students were doing in partnership with these texts when I read the final reflections they submitted alongside their op-ed projects. Many students noted that the course readings and small-group discussions had validated their feelings and experiences and helped them to feel less alone. One pharmacist in training pointed to Pepys and Defoe as writers who had helped him to recognize his own desensitization to suffering and death as a normal psychological response; in extending himself grace and forgiveness for this numbness, he found he was able to rekindle his sense of care for those around him. A biology major discussed her frustration with people who refused to comply with public health measures such as masking and social distancing; through our readings, she had come to recognize these behaviors as reflections of the profound human need for interpersonal connection and intimacy. For these students, engaging with plague literature helped them deepen their emotional and imaginative capacity as scientists and aspiring members of the medical community.

While I was elated that the students had experienced personal affirmation and cultivated empathy through our readings and discussions, I was also acutely aware of how uncomfortable I would have been reading these reflections a year or two earlier. Before the pandemic and my initiation, of necessity, into trauma-informed teaching practices, I would have assumed that a literature class which students found therapeutic must be one that encouraged solipsism and lacked rigor. Indeed, one student's reflection gave voice to some of those same reservations. He wrote frankly about his initial disappointment with the low difficulty level of the course, as measured in pages read and written. Over the ten weeks of the term, however, he had come to question the value he had always placed on learning outputs like lengthy term papers. By the end, he concluded that his elevation of such products over more personal and intangible forms of intellectual growth was a symptom of the capitalist work culture we had seen critiqued by writers like Ma. My own journey over the past two years has yielded similar insights. Teaching in an environment reshaped by crisis has helped me recognize the inherent difficulty—and value—of emotional work and challenged me to examine my foundational assumptions about teaching, learning, and the meanings and uses of historical literary study.

In the coming years of collective recovery and, likely, recurrent disruption, those of us who work with students will need to continue deepening the radically compassionate teaching practices that have helped us to weather this storm. At the same time, the emotional labor of caring for students in crisis exposes us to the occupational hazard of secondary trauma, which compounds the individual and collective trauma we are already experiencing as we hold families together without the necessary child- and elder-care supports, mourn milestones missed and time lost with friends and loved ones, tend to our own and others' vulnerable bodies, and grieve our dead. One technique for coping with this kind of traumatic stress, however, is to find a sense of purpose and connection to others.[14] Perhaps we can give ourselves this gift by embracing the potential our materials of study hold, not only as objects of critique, but as interlocutors that reach across centuries to help us and our students process, heal, and find hope.

Notes

[1] I wish to thank Jennifer Maclure, Mark Whalan, Chelsea Smith, and Danny O'Quinn for reading list suggestions that helped to shape my syllabus; Laurel Bastian, Chelsea Phillips, Jane Wessel, and an anonymous reviewer for generative feedback on drafts of this essay; the Teaching Engagement Program at the University of Oregon for providing evidence-based guidance for supporting students through the COVID-19 pandemic; and the students in English 205 for the perseverance, patience, grace, and insight they brought to our time together.

[2] Robert Zaretsky, "The Author of 'Robinson Crusoe' was the Anthony Fauci of His Age," *Washington Post*, July 21, 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/21/author-robinson-crusoe-was-anthony-fauci-his-age.

[3] Mays Imad, "Leveraging the Neuroscience of Now," *Inside Higher Ed*, June 3, 2020, www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/03/seven-recommendations-helping-students-thrive-times-trauma; see also Janice Carello, "Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning Principles," https://traumainformedteachingblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/titl-general-principles-3.20.pdf. On putting trauma-informed principles into action, see Mary Raygoza, Raina León, and Aaminah Norris, "Humanizing Online Teaching," https://digitalcommons.stmarys-ca.edu/school-education-faculty-works/1805/, and the University of Oregon Teaching Engagement Program, "Teaching in Turbulent Times Toolkit," https://teaching.uoregon.edu/resources/teaching-turbulent-times-toolkit.

[4] See, for example, Janice Carello and Lisa D. Butler, "Potentially Perilous Pedagogies: Teaching Trauma Is Not the Same as Trauma-Informed Teaching," *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 15, no. 2 (2014): 153-168, https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2014.867571.

[5] As a point of entry into Wald's work, we watched the lecture "Contagious: The Outbreak Narrative, Coronavirus, and Why We Need to Change the Story," (lecture, Deakin Science and Society Network, Victoria, Australia, April 27, 2020), www.youtube.com/watch?v=84YSHG00zeQ&. The concept is developed more fully in Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

[6] Ling Ma, *Severance* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018); Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014); Carmen Maria Machado, "Inventory," in *Her Body and Other Parties: Stories* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press,

2017), accessed on *Literary Hub*, https://lithub.com/inventory.

[7] Susan Sontag, “AIDS and Its Metaphors,” *The New York Review of Books*, October 27, 1988, www.nybooks.com/articles/1988/10/27/aids-and-its-metaphors; Centers for Disease Control, “AIDS: Your Choice for Life,” Wellcome Library on *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jl0X9VDs308&t=1019s&ab_channel=WellcomeLibrary.

[8] Katherine Anne Porter, “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Three Short Novels* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), 179-264; J. Alex Navarro and Howard Markel, eds., *Influenza Encyclopedia*, www.influenzaarchive.org.

[9] Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, edited and abridged by Jack Lynch, http://jacklynch.net/Texts/plagueyear-abridged.html; Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, www.pepysdiary.com.

[10] Imad, “Leveraging the Neuroscience of Now.”

[11] In addition to Zaretsky, “The Author of ‘Robinson Crusoe,’” I pointed students to Kyle Harper, “Ancient Rome Has an Urgent Warning for Us,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/02/15/opinion/ancient-rome-covid.html; Orhan Pamuk, “What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-orhan-pamuk.html; and Laura Spinney, “The Covid Novels Are Arriving. And They’ll Be a Warning to Future Generations,” *Guardian*, August 7, 2020, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/07/covid-novels-warning-future-generations-first-world-war-spanish-flu-1918.

[12] Edgar Allen Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death,” *Project Gutenberg*, 2020, www.gutenberg.org/files/1064/1064-h/1064-h.htm.

[13] The author is identified and her work excerpted here by express permission.

[14] Imad, “Leveraging the Neuroscience of Now.”

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