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COVID-19: Pandemic Reading

In 1832, a global cholera pandemic reached US shores. Like COVID-19, cholera was a wholly new disease in the United States (although considerably deadlier), and it was, like the novel coronavirus, a poorly understood one that disproportionately affected immigrants and African Americans.[1] The cholera pandemic began immediately following Nat Turner's rebellion, which had triggered a wave of punitive laws against Black Americans. The early 1830s was, in other words, a time of brutal devastation for the African American community, particularly in the South. How, we might wonder, when faced with horrific violence, systemic injustice, and a descending global pandemic, could an enslaved fifteen-year-old Frederick Douglass do anything but despair? Crucially, he did not. Instead, Douglass's understanding of Nat Turner's murder, the racist legal retribution that followed, and the horrors wrought by cholera appear in the context of his awakening to the word *abolition*. Having heard the word whispered angrily by slaveholders, Douglass (1855: 165) turned futilely to a dictionary before gleaning from a newspaper, the *Baltimore American*, an understanding of the talismanic term born of the political and health crises of his time: "The insurrection of Nathaniel Turner had been quelled," he writes, "but the alarm and terror had not subsided. The cholera was on its way, and the thought was present, that God was angry with the white people because of their slaveholding wickedness, and, therefore, his judgments were abroad in the land. It was impossible for me not to hope much from the abolition movement, when I saw it supported by the Almighty, and armed with DEATH!" Nearly two centuries later, we find ourselves in strangely

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similar times. As a viral pandemic and an epidemic of racial violence collide, we, too, face undeniably world-changing events, rife with uncertainty. How are we to read this moment?

Both of this forum's editors have in the past identified and sought new ways of narrating, thinking, and reading in the face of health crises, whether by calling for new stories to be told or by calling attention to the analytical and epistemological creativity that has historically emerged during times of crisis.[2] This pandemic, however, was unprecedented in our personal experiences, and as our vision began to adjust to the dark realization of the uncertainty we were living through, we sought illumination from the insights of the scholarly work in which we are engaged. We imagined this forum as a place where scholars in the field of American literary and cultural studies could begin to engage in new ways of thinking and reading inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic.

One characteristic of crises like pandemics, however, is that they often result in seismic, difficult-to-foresee shifts in many areas of culture and society. The essays in this forum were already in production when the brutal police murder of George Perry Floyd Jr., a Black man who was cooperating and handcuffed, ignited massive protests throughout the United States and beyond. Before even the copyediting of the essays within was complete, our sense of crisis had shifted dramatically. What seemed in mid-April to be a single pandemic (COVID-19) had evolved into two: a viral pandemic that manifests and exacerbates structural inequality and a pandemic of institutionalized racial violence. The media is referring to Floyd's murder as "a tipping point," but it is far from the first such incident—indeed, it is horrifyingly typical. However, the brutality of the act captured on video by a sixteen-year-old young woman with a cell phone against the backdrop of a pandemic that, once again, disproportionately affects communities of color finally made the inequities and injustices that have plagued the United States since before its inception impossible to continue to tolerate for what polls tell us are a majority of Americans. As if we needed heavier handed symbolism about the entangled nature of these epidemics and the twinned nature of their devastation, Floyd's autopsy revealed antibodies for COVID-19; the knee of a policeman accomplished what the asphyxiating virus might have but did not (Budryk 2020).

The analyses we are now hearing in the mainstream media are not new. Indeed, similar analyses inspired curricular changes during the

culture wars, bringing the long-suppressed voices of authors and actors into classrooms across America, and, with them, insight into the structural violence of racial capitalism. But insights are only the beginning of change, and change is slow, notoriously precarious, and impelled, most often, by crises. As Jennifer C. James notes in her contribution to this symposium, "In national trauma, national mythologies become that broken thing: what we believed was true about ourselves as an entity is revealed as fraudulent." The insight is a revelation, of course, only for those sufficiently privileged not to have to confront the fiction of the mythologies every day. The revelation does not "characterize[] the way African Americans tend to respond to national trauma," James continues, as her "we" shifts. "Rather, our deepest fears about this country—what we in fact *know* about this country—are not ruptured or remade in these moments and are instead *confirmed*."

American literature and other cultural forms have, of course, been used to uphold national mythology—the stories we tell ourselves about how and why the world works as it does—but they also reveal mythology's fissures, its contestations, its brokenness. Literary and cultural forms expand and examine national mythology's modes of representation, extrapolate from them, tease them apart, position their contradictions explosively side-by-side, and speculatively imagine otherwise. For these reasons, the narrative, representational, and speculative aspects of literature and culture are uniquely useful for considering the experience of a pandemic and the lessons that might be gained.

The essays in this symposium follow literary and cultural routes to chronicle a journey into the precarious experience of a pandemic, the uncertainties it has generated, and the insights it has begun to produce. We begin with James's contribution, which traces the arc of the symposium through her discussion of the temporality of what she calls "racial dread," in which uncertainty and anticipation suspend—or collapse—time in ways that make it impossible to look away from the structural violence that is visible in its everyday form to those who can never afford to look away. In the uncertainty of now, we must ask ourselves whether we will seize the memory flashing up, as in Walter Benjamin's famous formulation, in a moment of danger or collectively succumb to the temptation of a privileged "return to normal." For Kelly L. Bezio, the memory of past migrations and mobilities, constrained or forced, is uncannily reproduced in laborers who, finding

themselves classified as "essential workers," are drawn disproportionately from historically marginalized populations and for whom the "imprisonment" of sheltering at home is a luxury they cannot afford. Kirsten Ostherr calls for representational as well as medical interventions into the pandemic, since techniques of visualization designed to educate the public about an invisible threat reproduce racist and xenophobic conventions from past outbreaks "with direct and deadly consequences." A literary version of the makandal—an amulet with curative and toxic properties—opens the possibility of such representational intervention for Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Kate Simpkins, who draw on the genealogy of the amulet in the revolutionary figure of François Makandal to show how it exemplifies the materiality of signification, hence the transformative power of words.

In its capacity to recombine familiar elements, the makandal mimics, and exposes, the metamorphic power of a deadly communicable disease. Kari Nixon shows how the transformation that turns a person into an asymptomatic—or "healthy"—carrier embodies a fundamental dilemma of public health, particularly in the United States, when protecting the community's health entails invasion of privacy and enforced constraint. At issue is the calculus of social being with its precarious balance between the human desire for sociality and the unequal dangers we pose to each other. She suggests that an understanding of the way different groups negotiate that balance might be a first step in bridging the profound political chasms of our moment. Jane F. Thrailkill similarly asks us to think from within a much-discussed category of the pandemic to which everyone will belong if they live long enough—old age—in order to imagine the fundamental precarity of existence. Doing so, she muses, might begin to elucidate how other categories of difference translate into differential precarities.

For Bryan Waterman and Robert Peckham, that precarity surfaces in the temporal collapse that characterizes plagues. Like James, Waterman considers the sense of temporal recursion occasioned by "plague time," which is, for him, a radical break that is continuous with other plagues but disconnected from the temporality of non-plague life. We emerge from plague time like ghosts, haunting a world we once thought we knew. Peckham, by contrast, shows how the imbrication of the temporalities of pandemic and protest in Hong Kong elucidates the strategies through which China threatens to turn Hong Kong's future into its past.

The question of how to respond to pandemic uncertainty is the subject of the final three essays. Although the pandemic disrupted the efforts of a graduate class at Emory University to reimagine their research for public audiences when it halted their collaboration with a local theater, it ultimately offered opportunities for creative thinking. The experience showed the students—Sophia Leonard, Víctor Velázquez Antonio, and Makenzie Renee Fitzgerald—and their professor, Benjamin Reiss, the important role public humanities can play in such a crisis. For his part, Michael Bérubé embraces uncertainty, turning to Octavia Butler's Parable novels to find in her postapocalyptic speculative fiction what he calls "an extraordinary, brutal account of social disintegration and racialized violence that nevertheless refuses to abjure the audacity of hope." From the smoldering ashes of environmental devastation, hopeful audacity is the creative spark that turns the effort to survive into a visionary project of world-building. In the forum's final essay, Rachel Adams begins from how crises such as a pandemic make visible the "fragile webs of interdependency that bind us unevenly to one another," to meditate on the care networks that sustain us and the need—and opportunity—to rewrite our narratives of care in ways that embrace rather than disavow our dependencies and interdependencies.

The uncertainty bred by crises teaches us that the problem with our tried-and-true interpretive practices is that they too frequently strive, with some smugness, to explain everything. Writing from within the crisis, neither we, nor our authors, have this luxury. We could wait for the crisis to pass—when we would presumably know the end of this story—but something would be lost. The old bravado might return. In that postpandemic time, we will probably strive to tidy the narrative, even though in doing so we risk foreclosing the possibility of the unexpected in the past, present, and future. The pandemic and the protests have revealed to us both things we knew to expect (racism, pandemic disease, police brutality) and also things we did not, especially how inadequate our reading strategies were at preparing many of us for such eventualities and the shape they would take.

Here we find some solidarity with pandemic readers past. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example, begins her essay on reparative reading with a conversation she and her activist-scholar friend Cindy Patton had in the 1980s, as the two grappled with how to narrate and understand HIV/AIDS midpandemic. They weighed the "sinister rumors about the virus's origins," as well as various aspects of structural

violence that shaped and were fomented by the health crisis: "that the lives of Africans and African Americans are worthless in the eyes of the United States; that [certain populations] are held cheap where they aren't actively hated . . . that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes" (Sedgwick 2002: 123)—a list that remains depressingly unchanged today. Patton finds herself dissatisfied with the scholarly impulse to demonstrate such truths again and again. Even if we could show, once and for all, that these things are definitively true, she asks, "what would we know then that we don't already know?" (123). Sedgwick admits there is a certain pessimism in the question—and it's one we feel now, too—but, more urgently, Patton's question presses us to consider what we should do when our ways of reading and knowing no longer feel adequate—when the *only* thing that feels effective is to be out in the streets. Those insufficiencies, Sedgwick's framing suggests, are especially evident in crises and no time more so than in a pandemic.

For Sedgwick, literary and cultural analysis still has something to contribute, and her answer is reparative reading, although we are disinclined to prescribe Sedgwick's vision as *the* remedy for our readers. We are still too early, too much inside it, to offer such proclamations, nor is it within our critical inclinations or styles to do so. Instead, we invoke Sedgwick here as a fellow-traveler in pandemic time, as a critic who likewise recognized the analytical creativity that crisis makes not only possible but necessary. If our critical modes have gotten us into habits that now seem too limited, unhelpful, or even damaging, what would it look like to seek other ways of narrating and knowing and to make more room for what we cannot anticipate?

This openness both to narrative and epistemological humility and also to generative analytical creativity is not a luxury but a necessity as we write, just three months after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. By the time you are first able to read this forum, it will be well into 2020. We feel our own paranoid tendencies rising: you will already know so much more than we do now—about COVID-19, about the state of racial justice and reparation in America, about the 2020 presidential election. How many years we will have lived in those days and months. It prompts us to ask: how ought we to read in the middle of our entangled epidemics, and what kinds of reading and knowledge-making are useful *now*? Thus, we begin this forum with a note on humility—informational, narrative, epistemological; rarely are we able to see so clearly how much we do not yet know, do not yet

understand, and have yet to learn, and how much we need to make different sense of what we already know.

Are we finally ready to learn the lessons Douglass offered us almost two centuries ago? As he broadened his reading from the dictionary to the newspaper, Douglass moved from insufficient theoretical definitions to a more vital and dynamic understanding of language as it unfolded through historical circumstance and lived experience. This new framing expanded his reading both of what was happening and of what was possible. We end here as we began, by drawing attention to how the epidemic framing of systemic violence and a global pandemic helped Douglass see a fuller potential in the word *abolition*. Are we—especially white Americans—ready to follow Douglass, not only to imagine new ways of reading but also to find new ways of acting on the many meanings of words central to our national narratives like *abolition* and *reparation*?

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Notes

1 For the classic analysis of cholera in the United States, see Charles E. Rosenberg's *The Cholera Years* ([1962] 2009). As Rosenberg explains, in 1832, Black and immigrant communities were hit hardest by the pandemic (59). In Philadelphia, almost two times as many African Americans fell ill, "probably," Rosenberg writes, noting the nineteenth century's structural racism, "a reliable, if informal, index to the poverty in which the North's free Negroes lived. Whether he was free or slave, [white] Americans believed, the Negro's innate character invited cholera" (6). Black Americans were, thus, disproportionately punished for "failing to comply with sanitary regulations" and seen as available test subjects during the pandemic (60).

2 For these calls, see Priscilla Wald's *Contagious* (2008) and Sari Altschuler's *The Medical Imagination* (2018).

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