

**Abstract** This essay probes literary representations of pandemic temporalities to argue that plague reshapes our sense and experience of time in specific ways: It opens contact with the epidemic past to restructure historical understanding and attendant forms of identity; it promotes utopian or cosmopolitan fantasies of shared vulnerability and future inoculation; it marks survivors with a kind of zombie consciousness in an unending, limitless present. Drawing on American works from Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799–1800) to Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939) to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1992–95), this essay situates their discussions of plague time within broader traditions stretching from Thucydides to Daniel Defoe to Albert Camus.

**Keywords** temporality, epidemics in literature, contagion narratives

**P**andemics alter our experience of time. We know this, after many months of COVID-19, unsure of when or whether our “normal” lives will resume, but we also sense intuitively, conditioned by our reading, that plague travels within or is somehow made comprehensible by recourse to temporal units of measurement. Daniel Defoe’s “plague year”; Alexander Pushkin’s “time of plague”; love or the production of scientific knowledge “in the time of cholera”; the lessons of “the cholera years.” The ease of fit between chronology and narrative, and the (limited) capacity of each to contain disorder, feels perhaps more natural than it should. So is the reflexive equation, in eschatological thinking, of plague time with the end of time (see Lynteris 2019). In any of these versions, plague time demarcates local histories but also closes temporal gaps by emphasizing “kinship of situation” and vulnerability (Sherman 1997: 242). The early American novelist Charles Brockden Brown only had to invoke a year in the subtitle of his novel *Arthur Mervyn: Or, Memoirs of the Year 1793* ([2 vols.,

1799–1800] 2008) for a contemporary reader to know it would be set in Philadelphia's yellow fever outbreak that year. From the first line of the novel's preface, Brown directly confronts an epidemic's capacity to reshape time, first and foremost on the level of historical understanding: "The evils of pestilence by which this city has lately been afflicted will likely form an æra in its history" (3). At the same time, Brown calls attention to the fever's "periodical visitations" (3), which had been almost annual in the few years between the novel's setting and its publication. Plague marks time by reshaping temporality, heightening anticipation. Would the fever reappear next year? Would it prompt "schemes of reformation and improvement" or reveal the limits of "human wisdom" (3)? Readers could only experience anxiety as they waited to find out.

If plague time restructures historical understanding, it reaches as well into all the forms of identity historical thinking confers. Debates about yellow fever in the early American republic—including arguments about what Noah Webster labeled the new nation's "epidemic constitution" (quoted in Apel 2014: 320)—defined what historian Thomas Apel (2014) calls a "Thucydidean moment" in which writers drew on an empiricist historical consciousness in an attempt to "avoid the fates of past republics" (317). Such a mindset, Apel shows, extended not just to political history but to medical history as well. Epitomized and inspired by the ancient Greek historian Thucydides's account of the Peloponnesian Wars (including the plague of Athens with which they coincided), classical historiography provided a useful template for early American writers, including Webster, who wanted to establish that America's fate would unfold according to observable fact and natural law. Historical precedent, in their reading, established rules by which they would frame moral, political, and even public health policy. If these rules were followed, the new United States might maintain its position as the culmination of civilization's progress. As Apel argues: "History allowed" Webster and his peers, including Brown's close friend and medical writer Elihu Hubbard Smith, "to imagine their own yellow-fever epidemics as part of sweeping [environmental] changes taking place over the entire surface of the Earth" (346). Their "Thucydidean moment" revealed to early Americans such as Webster that this exceptional new republic was precarious precisely because "they had not extricated themselves from history" (345). The predicament posed by plague time, that yellow fever and other disorders were versions of the same diseases that had brought past societies to ruin, provoked a solution less temporal than spatial: Webster

and his peers helped foster a distrust of cities that ultimately pushed Americans away from plague time—what he called “the melancholy period of [recurring] epidemics”—toward the manifest destiny of expansion into the American West (345).

Plague time doesn't merely reveal continuity with historical precedent; it occasions, in its repetitive or cyclical structures, a rupture in utopian fantasies of inoculation, through which history inserts itself as its own form of contagious disorder. Each time you think you've escaped a world in which plague exists, a new one materializes around you, with the seeds of plague built in. The first rule of plague time, as Albert Camus famously concluded his 1947 novel *La Peste*, is that the plague “never dies or disappears for good” (Camus 1991: 308). The rats will reassemble. This sense of history's permeability and even susceptibility to infection persists in more recent plague literature. “History is about to crack wide open” (Kushner 1993: 112), the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg warns near the end of the first part of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1992–95). Two centuries after yellow fever drove the national government from Philadelphia, Kushner delivers on this ghostly, ominous promise in spades. In *Angels in America*, nineteenth-century America's westward course of empire folds back on itself with the plague in tow: migration means an inevitable spread of traditions, ideas, sexual desire, and viruses, among other things. As Kushner's Mormon characters, a substantial portion of the dramatis personae, retrace their ancestors' westward expansion by returning to the very urban centers Webster warned about, we're reminded that those ancestors originally escaped the United States, in part, to protect their own outlawed sex practices.

Meanwhile, Kushner's prophetic protagonist, Prior Walter, encounters in dream/hallucination/vision some prior Prior Walters, his ancestors, including one who died in London's 1665 plague (the same epidemic that gave Defoe's 1722 book *A Journal of the Plague Year* its name). Prior's ancestors, like the Pitts's Mormon progenitors, make cameo appearances to suggest both our “kinship of situation” (Sherman 1997: 242) with the past and a utopian possibility that the past might ultimately be willing to release us. This promise balances tenuously against the figure of Roy Cohn, the play's villain, who functions as the contagious carrier of mid-century Cold War anticommunist nationalism, a one-degree-of-separation link between the McCarthy and Reagan eras. All of this historical detritus, much of it toxic, piles up at the end of the twentieth century in the midst of the AIDS crisis, regarded by Reagan's “moral majority” as a plague sent to punish the

wicked and cleanse the earth on the eve of a new millennium. As Kushner and his critics have noted since the play was first staged, *Angels in America* presents historical time (via vexed engagements with Walter Benjamin) as cumulative wreckage piling up and spilling into the present (see especially Savran 2003). The play also engages directly with the same utopian temporalities that apocalyptic thinking afforded nineteenth-century westward-moving sects like the Mormons. “The world’s coming to an end,” the disillusioned Mormon housewife Harper Pitt frets at one point, but in her millenarian way of thinking, the end times have both utopian and dystopian potential: “Maybe seeds will be planted, maybe there’ll be harvests then, maybe early figs to eat, maybe new life, maybe fresh blood, maybe companionship and love and protection, safety from what’s outside . . . or maybe . . . the troubles will come, and the end will come, and the sky will collapse and there will be terrible rains and showers of poison light” (Kushner 1993: 18). This ambivalent, “intimate apocalypticism,” in Stanton Garner’s (1997: 183) terms, allows Kushner to turn the past’s debris into “a way of imagining the future and seeking meaning for the present.”

For Kushner, all of time is plague time, much as, for Camus, all of existence is a form of quarantine. Kushner’s (1994: 144) tempered liberalism allows for the notion of “painful progress”; his utopian hope for healing seems only possible outside history. In lines eventually dropped from recent editions of *Angels*, the closeted gay Mormon Republican character Joe Pitt laments the passing of an older version of Mormonism: “a nineteenth-century socialist romanticist conflation of government and society, law and justice, idea and action, irreconcilables which only meet at some remote horizon, like parallels converging in infinity” (Kushner 1993: 34–35). Can we equate that infinitely remote horizon with utopian temporality? If so, it seems significant that this is precisely how Kushner makes use of Mormon history: as one of several strands in America’s contaminated history that might allow his liberal utopianism to inoculate itself from the nation’s more pernicious impulses. This inclination to make Mormonism both usable and useful comes to a head when Joe Pitt’s mother, Hannah, in a later scene, uses the Mormon origin story (from which Kushner derives much of the play’s most striking iconography) to model a form of cosmopolitan thinking, utopian perhaps, that appears to obtain in the play’s epilogue.

What will COVID-19 reveal about America’s “epidemic constitution,” to reach back to Webster’s phrase? Kushner’s plays, recently

and successfully revived on Broadway, feel newly relevant in a pandemic moment whose presiding figure, the less than historically minded Donald Trump, turns out very literally to be the protégé of Roy Cohn and the inheritor and amplifier of Ronald Reagan's own apocalyptic worldview. But we might also take instruction, as advocates of social distancing so often have in recent months, from the influenza epidemic of 1918. Katherine Anne Porter's novella *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), for instance, illustrates the ways plague time operates in terms that might feel familiar to anyone who spent much of 2020 indoors or behind a mask. Its greater lesson may turn out to be one about the performativity and temporality of survival. The novella follows the experience of Miranda, a young newspaper writer living in Denver during the Great War, evidently modeled on Porter herself. She generally distrusts the war effort, is vaguely aware that the flu is spreading (at least in other US cities, then gradually in hers), but focuses above all on youthful pleasures: dating a young soldier named Adam, dancing in dance halls, avoiding schmucks in the newspaper offices pushing war bonds, smoking cigarettes even though she knows they're unhealthy. Everything in Miranda's world is prospect: "Are you in the mood for dancing?" Adam asks, and Miranda answers: "I'm always in the mood for dancing," especially when they have to put it off. An empty, unwritten future makes up a good deal of "the simple and lovely miracle of being two persons named Adam and Miranda, twenty-four years old each, alive and on the earth at the same moment" (156).

When the flu arrives, Porter makes plain how dramatically plague time differs from war time. War has finite fronts; you're either fighting, waiting to be "sent over shortly" (156) or a "stay-at-home" (171), filled with feelings of missing out. War time follows discernable regulation: Young soldiers like Adam are given wristwatches to help them conform to military time and to rewrite their masculinity—previously contingent on unregulated time, whereas wristwatches had been for sissies (155). Six months in, Adam feels he has "been in the army all [his] life" (160). Plague time has different effects. Unlike the war, the flu virus might pop up simultaneously and at a moment's notice across the country or around the globe; rather than making men feel left out it leaves everyone worried about being let in. When the virus hits you, suddenly something shifts: "Simply knocks you into a cocked hat," as Adam puts it (158). Miranda's experience is somewhat typical: the sickness appears at first to be reaching out from the historical past, literally throwing up roadblocks to trip up her movements around town:

“It seems to be a plague,” she says, “something out of the Middle Ages. Did you ever see so many funerals, ever?” (158). Her reaction anticipates Camus’s narrator, Dr. Rieux, for whom the very word “plague” conjures up scenes from ancient Greece, China, Italy: “nights and days filled always, everywhere, with the eternal cry of human pain” (40). In Camus’s novel, Rieux calms himself by listening to the mundane urban noises that still surround him: “There lay certitude; there, in the daily round. All the rest hung on mere threads and trivial contingencies; you couldn’t waste your time on it” (41). Later, Rieux consoles himself that the dead were “[s]natched suddenly” from their “long, silent communion with a wraith of memory,” having had “no time for anything” (77). Similarly, in Porter’s story Miranda places her faith in the workaday routine, “run[ning] from one dizzy amusement to another” (158), until her nagging headache, which started with the war, begins to intrude on the very language of Porter’s story as Miranda’s consciousness starts to slip away.

Porter’s story confirms our sense that plague time connects us to the long historical past. In its narrative voice, however, the novella presents a striking alternative to the kind of realist narrator Defoe had invented for *A Journal of the Plague Year* ([1722] 1992). Defoe’s narrator, who claims to recall a plague he had survived as a much younger man, attempts to contain the fever using calendar time, tracking its spread through regularly published bills of mortality, even as he distrusts the accuracy of such quantifying efforts. As Stuart Sherman (1997: 238) argues, Defoe’s narrator, bewildered at times, longs most of all for the “chronology implicit in the title’s first term”: *journal*. By contrast, Porter offers a modernist narrative that aims for verisimilitude by capturing time’s distortion under the plague’s pressure. Miranda, infected, soon finds her attention falling short; “twilight gaps” open up before her, hours collapsing into minutes, as she tries to keep possible futures at bay. “I don’t want to love,” she tells herself, “there is no time and we are not ready for it and yet this is all we have—” (173). The narrative perspective becomes increasingly distracted. Out on a date, Miranda loses herself in eavesdropping on another couple at a nearby table. What she hears makes for a long, meandering paragraph of inane chatter (179–80). And then she’s out. The story only continues once she wakes up some time later.

Miranda’s fevered blackouts foreshadow her sense that her life, after pandemic, will be like returning from the grave, a resurrection, undead. But she worries less about Biblical precedent than she does about living through a present marked by futures that can’t come

soon enough—or at all. Quarantined in her boarding house, she waits, in terms that still resonate with our experience of self-isolation a century later: for a doctor or Adam to return with her prescription, for an ambulance, for a hospital bed to open up and accommodate her. The hospitals and ambulances are “all busy,” Adam explains to Miranda’s anxious landlady, even as so many other routines have ceased, suspending time. The whole town has shut down: theaters, shops, and restaurants have all closed, “and the streets have been full of funerals all day and ambulances all night” (184). Before Adam ships out with his company, he and a fevered Miranda think of all the things they’d “meant to do” (187–88) in their unfinished lives, from grand ambitions (be an engineer) to the mundane (swim together). Once Adam is gone, most of Miranda’s next month is spent only semiconscious in fever dreams. She eventually recovers amidst celebrations of armistice but also to news that Adam has died of the flu in a camp hospital. She marks her survival by consumer ritual, sending for an extensive list of cosmetics, perfumes, and accessories to help her disguise what she can only experience as her corpse. “Lazarus come forth,” she calls to herself, then answers: “Not unless you bring me my top hat and stick” (207). The vocabulary of popular entertainment here, together with her cosmetics shopping list, underscores her recovery’s performative dimensions: “I’m coming forth” (207). Rather than making her a witness to her own faith healing, her movements suggest a sort of zombie consciousness, an effort to pull herself together and perform normalcy. When she imagines herself visited by Adam’s ghost, it feels “more alive than she was,” but the future they had imagined in their brief time together has evaporated. In “dazed silence,” she considers her future without him, stung by plague time’s “last intolerable cheat”: “Now there would be time for everything” (208).

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