Afterword

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With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself returning in my thinking, reading, writing, and teaching to the classical understanding of plagues as messages from the gods that something was out of order in the social world. The pandemic has highlighted many aspects of the social world in the United States (and elsewhere) that are out of order, including structural racism, socioeconomic inequities, climate change and environmental devastation, and inadequate and unjust health-care systems. The authors of these essays, of course, did not need a global pandemic to spotlight those concerns, but the pandemic has made clear the imperative to address them and has forced us, through necessary adaptations, to take the time to think differently about our habitual practices in our work as scholars and teachers of literature and culture.

The word *crisis* has its origin in medical terminology—from medieval Latin, by way of Greek *krisis,* "decision"—a turning point in the illness in which the patient either recovers or dies. The pandemic has been a crisis of crises. Even as it has brought each of the social, economic, and environmental crises more sharply into view, it is itself a kaleidoscopic expression of their consequences. Each of those crises is a contributing factor in turning an outbreak into a global pandemic. The conversation in which these essays are collectively engaging is one I have been hearing informally as SARS-CoV-2 has circulated among us: What can we contribute specifically as professors of literature and culture through our scholarship and our pedagogy? And what have we learned through this experience that might change our practices both on the page and in the classroom?

While those are standard questions that surface routinely in our circles, the pandemic, as these essays suggest, has brought them into focus with a stark clarity reminiscent of what Walter Benjamin describes, in his lyrical meditation "Theses on the Philosophy of History," as memories flashing up "at a moment of danger."[1] The intensified insight that has surfaced with the pandemic has shown the need for institutional change, from the governance structure of the university (as in Michael Bérubé's essay) to the habitual practices in our classrooms. Note, for example, Barbara Fuchs's description of

> one of the most sobering moments in [her] research [that] came when [she] realized that the questions of form and genre that preoccupy a critic were in

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> this case literally matters of life and death: as the unions argued over whether streamed theater counted as theater or film, the health insurance of hundreds of artists hung in the balance, given that they needed to work for a certain number of weeks per year in their respective modes to qualify for the benefits that Equity and the Screen Actors Guild provided exclusively to those working on their own turf.

Each of the crises addressed in these essays is a Benjaminian "moment of danger," as, of course, is the pandemic. "In the midst of an era when an older social order is crumbling and a new one is struggling to define itself," Henry A. Giroux points out, "there emerges a time of confusion, danger, and great restlessness. The present moment is once again at a historical juncture in which the structures of liberation and authoritarianism are vying to shape a future that appears to be either an unthinkable nightmare or a realizable dream."

The danger of such moments for Benjamin works in both directions. The insight of the flashing memory poses a threat to the power structure that maintains its hold by obscuring the structural nature of its power. But it is a fleeting insight, with forces aligned to maintain the obscurity: "In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it."[2] I am concerned when I hear the wish echoing all around me that we "go back to normal." That wish is the siren song of the comforts of habit, and it is especially strong for those privileged enough for the norms to seem comfortable. As these essays make clear, "normal" is what got us here, and the challenge now is to move forward through change and not to "go back to normal," however tempting that may sound.

Andrew Gilbert concludes his essay with a lesson learned when a board game—Pandemic—suddenly became all too real: "Perhaps a study of both real and imagined/virtual play will illuminate the truth in the other—the lifelike quality of games and the game-like qualities of life." An essay I found myself coming back to throughout the pandemic made a similar prediction two decades prior to the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic. In a piece published in *Science* in 2000, "Infectious History," the Nobel laureate microbiologist Joshua Lederberg predicted, "The future of humanity and microbes likely will unfold as episodes of a suspense thriller that could be titled *Our Wits Versus Their Genes*."[3] As the pandemic unfolded, I found myself musing, like Giroux, that we were characters in that "dystopian novel," but just as Gilbert stresses his role as the player as well as a character within the board game, we need to remember that humans are the authors of Lederberg's thriller as well as characters within it. Of course, the authorship is disproportionate, with responsibility and risk distributed largely in inverse proportions. But it is imperative to recognize a pandemic as the result of human actions and neither the language of the gods nor the result entirely of chance.

In a formulation I have echoed in my work throughout the pandemic, Lederberg contends that while "new strategies and tactics for countering pathogens will be uncovered by finding and exploiting innovations that evolved within other species, . . . our most sophisticated leap would be to drop the manichaean view of

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microbes—'We good; they evil.'" Such attribution, he explains, overlooks the relationship humans have with our beneficial microbes and the immunological strategies with which we could more productively prevent or at least mitigate the effects of outbreaks. It also obscures the role of humans in creating the conditions that produce them. "Perhaps," he continues, "one of the most important changes we can make is to supercede [*sic*] the 20th-century metaphor of war for describing the relationship between people and infectious agents. A more ecologically informed metaphor, which includes the germs'-eye view of infection, might be more fruitful."[4]

Lederberg's suggestion is a lesson worth taking to heart with regard not only to pandemics but also, more broadly, to climate change and the many other environmental crises we face. It is, for that matter, well worth considering why the war metaphor is so proliferative with regard to all these crises rather than the ecological metaphors of interdependence and cooperation. The point is that language matters; how we talk about something both reflects and influences our understanding of it. And that is surely a lesson literary and cultural critics are well positioned to teach. The essays in this special issue are very much in the spirit of Lederberg's contention. Like Gilbert's observation that a board game can offer insight into the structures of power in our world and, in the process, teach us strategies we need to address a real-world problem, Lederberg reminds us that we inhabit and experience our world through the stories we tell about it, but those stories are subject to change.

The germs'-eye view puts the interconnectedness of our environment on display. It shows us where the vulnerabilities are: how microbes exploit the inequities of our world, taking root in the susceptibilities among populations created by socioeconomic inequities and inadequate health-care systems—as Lennard J. Davis and Jerry Zee illustrate with such clear and poignant force in their essays—and hitchhiking on the rapid transportation systems that circulate goods and people in our global economy. A germs'-eye view puts on display the consequences and priorities of the privileged and empowered within a global system. Lederberg is speaking the language of the humanities and social sciences as well as the sciences when he shows how we might change our vocabulary and our stories in order to change our perspectives, hence our world.

The essays in this special issue meditate on some of the changes literary and cultural critics can make in our scholarship and pedagogy. As Christina Katopodis notes at the beginning of her essay, drawing on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "We have an astounding opportunity for change in the wake of a crisis: we can turn from the banking model of the past [students' passively taking in faculty expertise] to an ecological one, adopt a habitable pedagogy that teaches students how to live in a rapidly evolving world and solve its problems to make our planet habitable for future generations." We—literary and cultural critics—can, that is, teach them that humans know the world through language and stories; we can teach them to recognize where those stories come from; and we can work together to consider how we might change them, as Kelly L. Bezio describes in her essay on the relevance of a mid-nineteenth-century work, *Our Nig*, for the contemporary moment. I have found that our students have numerous ideas about the world in which they want to live and refreshingly original ideas about how to get

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there. Benjamin offers an important reminder, however, of how difficult such changes are to make—the temptation to fall back into conformity—hence our need for vigilance: to work, as these essays advocate, against the enticement of a "return to normal," especially in the areas we can control, our classrooms, our scholarship, and, as Bérubé insists, the faculty governance of our institutions.

There is a particular crisis I have not mentioned. The "crisis in the humanities," which was getting considerable airtime prior to the pandemic, may seem less urgent in light of the other crises I have outlined. After all, declining enrollments and a precipitous drop in majors surely pales in comparison to a raging pandemic, a continuing recession, gun violence, climate change, resource exhaustion, catastrophic weather events, and an increase in the hovering threat of fascism across the globe. The steep decline in enrollments and majors that precipitated the most recent declaration of a crisis in the humanities coincided with the 2008 economic downturn and the widely articulated concern that a humanities major was not "useful" for job prospects in a declining job market. In retrospect, I find myself wondering where that narrative began and whom it serves. Surely if what we teach were really irrelevant, we would not see concerted efforts to supervise and censor our classrooms; surely critical race theory and gender, sexuality, queer, and trans studies would not provoke the anger and anxiety to which these concerted efforts bear witness.

Both Lederberg's piece and the essays in this special issue make clear how the work literary and cultural critics do in our scholarship, our classrooms, and our institutions is intricately connected to the strategies of power that structure the world. Literary and cultural studies offer students the tools to think about how language, images, and stories shape lived experiences. They provide an opportunity to examine individual and collective beliefs, to challenge the status quo and perhaps to think otherwise. The changes we have had to make in our various pedagogies since the onset of the pandemic were often difficult and frustrating, but they have thrown into relief many of the conventions of our fields and institutions and of what we communicate through our habitual practices in our classrooms, our assignments, and our modes of assessment. This unsettling applies as well to the scholarly and evaluative conventions of our fields and institutions. These essays remind us that every "crisis" is a turning point and that a turning point is also an opportunity for change. Perhaps that is one of the important insights that has surfaced with the flash of memory in this moment of danger on which these essays have seized along with their urgent appeal, implicit and explicit, not to "return to normal."

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Notes

1 Benjamin, "Theses," 255.
2 Benjamin, "Theses," 255.
3 Lederberg, "Infectious History," 290.
4 Lederberg, "Infectious History," 292, 293.

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