



**WORKING PAPERS IN  
AMERICAN STUDIES**  
vol. 5

Hrvatsko udruženje za američke studije  
Croatian Association for American Studies

# Working Papers in American Studies, Vol. 5

**Izdavač / Publisher:**

Hrvatsko udruženje za američke studije / Croatian Association  
for American Studies, FF press

**Urednici / Editors-in-Chief:**

Jelena Šesnić, Sven Cvek

**Uredništvo / Editorial Board:**

Marko Lukić, Ljubica Matek, Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

**Lektura i korektura / Proofreading:**

Alex Hoyt

**Dizajn i prijelom / Design & layout:**

mood.works

**Fotografija / Cover photo:**

Augustine Wong (Unsplash)

Zagreb, 2021.

Ova je publikacija objavljena uz financijsku potporu Sveučilišta u Zagrebu.



Ovo djelo je dano na korištenje pod licencom Creative Commons Imenovanje-Nekomercijalno-Bez prerada 3.0 Hrvatska. Dozvoljeno je slobodno umnažati i redistribuirati djelo u bilo kojem mediju ili formatu, u neizmijenjenom obliku, pod uvjetom da se adekvatno navede autore i da se djelo ne koristi u komercijalne svrhe.

You are free to: Share, copy and redistribute this publication in any medium or format under the following terms: You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. You may not use the material for commercial purposes. If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material. You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

# Contents

<u>Editors' Preface</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>Stipe Grgas:</u> <u>Critique in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>Nicole Haring:</u> <u>Dependency and Obligation: Reading COVID-19 through</u> <u>a Feminist Lens</u>	<u>19</u>
<u>Andrea Jović: Imagine All Celebrities Challenging Capitalism:</u> <u>COVID-19 Celebrity Humanitarianism</u>	<u>43</u>
<u>Ana Kovačić:</u> <u>How to Do (Dangerous) Things with Words:</u> <u>Pragmatics of a Pandemic Context</u>	<u>62</u>
<u>Rudolf Sárdi:</u> <u>We Are the Stories We Tell: Pandemic Narratives and COVID-19</u>	<u>81</u>
<u>Contributors</u>	<u>105</u>

## Editors' Preface

The fifth volume of *Working Papers in American Studies* brings together a selection of works based on presentations delivered at the 2020 American Studies Workshop. Held at the University of Zagreb in September 2020, the workshop designated as its theme the cultural aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic and assembled in what was at the time a new, hybrid format, a plethora of international and national scholars. As this volume shows, the workshop manifested a particularly strong presence of doctoral students. We present the texts as an illustration of the early perspectives on the pandemic, currently in its second year and clearly inviting further considerations in terms of its manifold repercussions – health and medical, political, geo-political, economic, moral and ethical.

The editors gratefully acknowledge the support provided by the University of Zagreb for the publication of this volume.

Sven Cvek  
Jelena Šesnić

Stipe Grgas  
University of Zagreb

Original research article  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17234/WPAS.2021.2>

## Critique in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

After situating his commentary in the time of the pandemic, the author discusses the knee-jerk, immediate responses to the pandemic which he finds irritating. His reaction is triggered by what he believes are automatic responses that approach the times of COVID-19 with ready-made theoretical schemata. His immediate targets are the radical theorists who see capitalism as the culprit for the outbreak of the disease. In discussing this interpretative paradigm, the author argues for the need to make a distinction between capitalism and capital. In the conclusion, he offers the category of the uncanny as registering his own experience in confronting the time of the pandemic.

**Key words:** COVID-19, critique, capitalism, capital, hubris

### 1

Thinking back on the moment when I made the perhaps foolish decision to accept the invitation to deliver a plenary talk, which forms the nucleus of what follows, before an American studies gathering addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, I think it must have been on one of those days when the decrease in the number of people affected by the disease seemed to point to an overcoming of the affliction. Those were the days when one could almost believe that social policy, a caution we brought into our interaction with people and things, could deliver us from the pandemic. Since then, developments both in Croatia and elsewhere have proven that we were wrong. After

more than a year, the pandemic has not been contained. On the contrary, it has intensified to the extent that several newspapers have decided to insert a “coronavirus update” among their regular columns. Each abatement of the number of people who have been exposed to the disease is regularly followed by a surge. I have frequently felt the aptness of a metaphor used by a health specialist to describe pronouncements made by different people dealing with the pandemic: it is like judging marathon runners and their position after only thirty minutes of the race. One thing is for sure: we are still in the marathon, and I am writing this without a clear vision of its end.

Each day’s coverage of the pandemic, the latest disarray attending the distribution of the vaccine, not to mention the prognostications that deadlier future pandemics lie in store for us, all contribute to a sense of disabling frustration. That sense of disablement springs from a derangement of routine which shows our modes of understanding to be ineffectual. The rhythm of social and private life has been thrown out of kilter. It is difficult to attend to the chores of the moment while plans are constantly postponed or simply cancelled. Whether we follow the news or still manage to indulge in human conversation, the pandemic has wrought tectonic disturbances into our bodily and intellectual practices. The longer it lasts, the more difficult it is to place it within our existing modes of knowledge. COVID-19 taxes our ability to know and explain. The bafflement I feel before its onslaught, the fear and anxiety of our everyday world – the new normalcy, as some euphemistically call it – is truly frustrating. As far as I am concerned, that frustrating disablement is irritating in itself but becomes even more so when we are provided with pat explanations of the genesis of the pandemic and with remedies that will restore the world to what it once was.

## 2

Let me immediately state that I am not referring here to quacks, conspiracy-mongers, or pandemic deniers, on the street or in high office. These

do not even irritate me. My quarrel is with theorists and critics who define and set the standards for what we call thinking. What I find irritating is the presumptuousness of theorists who stand with their schemata at the ready and unflinchingly address any challenge that might befall us. Nothing seems to be able to disempower their intellectual prowess. I will try to give a name to this presumptuous stance, show what I consider its shortcomings to be, and attempt not to delineate an alternative but merely suggest that one might exist.

It was almost to be expected that Slavoj Žižek would be among the first to address the pandemic. The book *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (2020) is informed by Žižek's recognizable style and by his revolutionary posture. He perceptively registers the changes wrought by the pandemic but cannot refrain from proposing that the new condition holds the potential of transformation to a new communism. He is rehearsing an argument that he has developed when addressing other topics. Richard Horton, it is worth noting, in the general medical journal *The Lancet*, acknowledges Žižek as the first to produce a volume of thoughts on COVID-19. He remarks: "Beyond health, Žižek sees the possibility of 'releasement' – the use of 'dead time', 'moments of withdrawal', 'for the revitalization of our life experience'. Lock-downs have enforced solitude time to 'think about the (non)sense of (our) predicament'" (Horton). Taking into consideration all the brackets and their implications, one must pause and ponder about the kind of thinking involved here and ask whether Žižek performed an important service, as Horton has it, initiating "a global conversation about what we do with this moment." Žižek's engagement with the moment has been repeated by countless others. In an early review of the book, Yohann Koshy in *The Guardian* (April 23, 2020) asked "what reproduces itself more quickly, the coronavirus or the commentary?" (Koshy).

A year later, today we would stay clear of the implied jocular tone in Koshy's remark. The virus's speed of reproduction is hardly something to joke

about. However, if there will be a time after COVID-19 for scholarship, then those who choose to address the pandemic will not suffer from a dearth of material. Not only are we bombarded daily by coverage of its spread, statistics of people affected by or falling victim to it, explanations, prognostications, warnings, and fear mongering, but on top of all this, many prominent theoreticians have felt obliged to address the topic. Richard Horton's appreciation of Žižek shows how the Slovenian philosopher registers in certain medical quarters. As a rule, the channels of reception have taken a different route – that is, the pandemic as a medical issue has been addressed by humanistic-sociological knowledge. In his article “Six political philosophies in search of a virus,” Gerard Delanty considers “the implications from the perspective of political philosophy and social theory of the kinds of political epistemology that follow from the current crisis and the dark arts of epidemiological governance” (2). He describes six philosophies that he believes underlie the different responses to the pandemic. I will enumerate and summarize their basic tenets. First, there is utilitarianism, which Delanty connects with the strategy of herd immunity and its focusing on the common good. Second, he mentions the Kantian alternative professing the worth of human dignity instead of the elusive common good. Third, there is the libertarian option, which celebrates the individual and condemns any kind of communitarian policy. Fourth, we have those who adhere to Foucault and the order of governance, which includes the notions of the state of exception and of biopolitical securitization. The fifth philosophy espouses a vision of post-capitalism and radical politics. Based on behavioral science, the sixth is named Nudge Theory; it is less stringent and advises gradual adaptation. I enumerate these political philosophies not because of their intrinsic worth but rather to illustrate how, as a rule, social thought has a need to subsume practice under one or another paradigm of thinking. Simply put, existing tools are retained and reused in new circumstances.

Thus, the Fall 2020 issue of *Philosophy Today* was devoted to the question of philosophy in a time of pandemic. In their introduction to the issue,



Peg Birmingham and Ian Alexander Moore summarize what contributors had to say about the relation and contend that “philosophy should question moral certainties and simple oppositions, without however being too quick to provide solutions, especially at the level of policy” (813). They underline that “the most important thing to be learned is that the pandemic should not be examined in isolation” (*ibid.*). The very title of Andrew Benjamin’s contribution to the issue, “Solidarity, Populism and COVID-19: Working Notes,” signals this approach. It is an approach that leads him to the insight that “the virus registers in sites that are themselves structured by discrimination and disequilibria of power.” From this he derives a working hypothesis: “The relation between the non-discriminatory nature of the virus and sites of original discrimination opens up a range of possible responses” (834). Benjamin’s response is to describe COVID-19 as bio-political “precisely because it exposes the current state of the political set up to which life now is subjected. At the heart of which there are, to recall Arendt’s formulation, ‘the oppressed and exploited’” (837). Needless to say, social differentiation is the insight which motivates the analyses of Delanty’s radical politics group and its post-capitalist visions.

### 3

As can be expected, Marxist readings are at the forefront of the responses which explore the relation between the non-discriminatory nature of the virus and the sites of original discrimination. The latter can be provisionally defined as the capital relation. Consequently, critics who work within the Marxist tradition have a ready explanation of the pandemic as a byproduct of capitalism. Thus, John Bellamy Foster and Intan Suvandi in their article “Covid-19 and Catastrophe Capitalism: Commodity Chains and Ecological-Epidemiological-Economic Crises” maintain that Marx’s theoretical framework “allows us to perceive how the circuit of capital under late imperialism is tied to the etiology of disease via agribusiness, and how this has generated the COVID-19 pandemic.” Registering a development in health policy, they write: “As the revolutionary development in epidemiology rep-

resented by One Health and Structural One Health have suggested, the etiology of the new pandemics can be traced to the overall problem of ecological destruction brought on by capitalism” (Foster and Suvandi). In my opinion, these generalizations fall short of a satisfying explanation. The reason for this is that they designate a specific historical period as the breeding ground for the pandemic and do not realize or, to say it better, do not accept the fact that the problem of ecological destruction antedates capitalism and that the dynamic which impels capitalism is not contained within it. More will be said concerning this below.

As is to be expected, when Marxist critique discusses the handling of the pandemic crisis, it reverts to class analysis and the manifold social inequalities. Much of this argument gives a convincing description of the fit between, using Benjamin’s phrasing, the non-discriminatory nature of the virus and the sites of original discrimination. The resultant spatial discrimination of the pandemic can be mapped onto all social geographies, from the family habitat to the city, from the differences between states and regions to the severity of the pandemic on different continents. These differences are great fodder not only for the daily news but also for the prevailing politics of blame. The last year has seen the political use of the pandemic on different meridians. What I feel needs emphasizing is that the politics of the pandemic presupposes that COVID-19 is manageable, that it can be attended to by resources and know-how that are or will be at our disposal. At the moment of writing, I do not share these assumptions. Let me quote J. L. Nancy as Michael A. Peters references him in the article “Philosophy and Pandemic in the Postdigital Era: Foucault, Agamben, Žižek”:

We must be careful not to hit the wrong target: an entire civilization is in question, there is no doubt about it. There is a sort of viral exception – biological, computer-scientific, cultural – which is pandemic. Governments are nothing more than grim exceptions, and taking it out on them seems more like a diversionary maneuver than a political reflection. (qtd. in Peters)

Observers who “take it out” on politicians or governments underplay the severity of the pandemic, its ungraspable power, and its spread. In a paradoxical fashion, critical thought, blaming this or that policy, duplicates the positioning of politicians toward the pandemic. Both deem it something that can be handled. Neither one party nor the other puts to question their characteristic hubris.

What seems to be forgotten by radical critique is that capitalism is a specific historical configuration whose time is not correspondent with the time of viruses. In *Capital Marx* wrote: “World trade and the world market date from the sixteenth century, and from then on the modern history of Capital starts to unfold” (247). Put otherwise, the “modern history of Capital” as the epoch of capitalism is only one of its realizations. In Moishe Postone’s book *History and Heteronomy: Critical Essays*, I find an apposite remark:

the category of capital delineates a historical dynamic process that is associated with a number of historical forms. That dynamic is a core feature of the modern world. It entails an ongoing transformation of all aspects of social and cultural life that can be grasped neither in terms of the state, nor in terms of civil society. Rather, that dynamic exists ‘behind’ them, as it were, a socially-constituted compulsion that transforms the conditions of people’s lives in ways that seem beyond their control. (60 – 61)

Postone’s distinction between the category of capital and the historical forms it takes has a conceptual significance if our focus is on the compulsion which cannot be restricted to one historical phase. I propose this compulsion as a dynamic which antedates and survives capitalism. I do so because it helps us put the question of viruses in a broader context. Without that broader context, viruses and pandemics are viewed without their proper temporality. This broadening of our horizon is provided by a conception of time which is much more encompassing than the time of capitalism and which David Christian

has designated “big history.”

#### 4

Christian’s book *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (2004) poignantly shows how partial any political, military, economic, let alone national history is and how much it leaves out of its account. Of relevance to my argument, it is indicative that David Christian registers the presence of diseases in chronicling “big time.” More specifically, viruses, “which are so simplified that they cannot even reproduce without hijacking the metabolic systems of other organisms” (121), are in this mapping of time actants which significantly impact evolutionary developments. Christian also quotes Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan: “In the long run, the most vicious predators, like the most dread disease-causing microbes bring about their own ruin by killing their victims. Restrained predation – the attack that doesn’t quite kill or does kill only slowly – is a recurring theme in evolution” (250). Christian comments: “But just as disease viruses often evolve less virulent strains that can exploit their prey without killing them, so human rulers eventually learned to protect the farmers they exploited (much as farmers protected their own herds of livestock)” (*ibid.*). The way that viruses develop accordingly provides a parallel to the behavior of human beings.

However, viruses and diseases in Christian’s book are not only used as epistemological models but are shown to have had a more immediate impact on historical development. For example, regarding Silk Roads and sea routes linking the Mediterranean and South and East Asia, Christian remarks: “Disease bacteria travelled these routes as well as people, goods and techniques causing massive and recurring plagues as each region faced new diseases for which its populations lacked biological and cultural antibodies” (315). Christian quotes William H. McNeill’s observation: “In the first Christian centuries . . . Europe and China, the two least disease-experienced civilizations of the Old World, were in an epidemiological position analogous

to that of Amerindians in the later age: vulnerable to socially disruptive attack by new infectious diseases” (316). Maps of diseases and the spread of viruses are of course not stable “[b]ut increasing commercial activity, like the state, could also undercut growth, and it did so primarily by affecting pattern of disease” (330). The connection between commerce and disease patterns is particularly telling: “As regional populations came into contact with each other, they swapped diseases in exchanges that sometimes led to catastrophic epidemics that undermined state power and led to regional declines” (331). How this has intensified during the last phase of globalization is not difficult to surmise.

If we look at the age of exploration and conquest, the actant role Christian assigns to diseases is blatantly revealed. Christian observes:

But animal domesticates also swapped diseases with their human owners; thus cohabitation with domesticates, combined with the efficient systems of communication they provided, ensured that the populations of Afro-Eurasia were more disease-hardened than those of the other world zones. And the diseases of Afro-Eurasians may have been more useful to them in their attempts at conquest than their advanced naval and military technologies. For example, smallpox, as Alfred Crosby writes “played as essential a role in the advance of white imperialism overseas as gunpowder – perhaps a more important role, because the indigenes did turn the musket and the rifle against the intruders, but smallpox very rarely fought on the side of the indigenes.” (365)

In the following excerpt, Christian points to a specific historical period and shows how the registering of disease as a causal factor forces us to rethink its contours:

The swapping of diseases ensured that global integration was a destructive process for all the smaller world zones. By 1500 CE, exchanges of diseases within the more densely settled parts of Afro-Asia had increased overall im-

munities throughout Afro-Eurasia. But no such toughening had occurred in the Americas or even more isolated communities of the Australasian and Pacific world zones. (381 – 82)

These remarks are particularly pertinent to the story of the Americas, but it does not surprise, for example, that the use of disease in the genocide of the American native peoples is rarely mentioned in mainstream histories of the New World. A critique of those histories would have to address this oversight, but a critique suited to the exigency of our times will recognize how today's circumstances are different in both scope and intensity. Words like immunity or isolation take on different connotations amidst today's pandemic, while the geographies of the above description are outdated and out of sync with today's world.

## 5

Nevertheless, the notion of “swapping” between humans and the surrounding world continues to figure prominently in accounting for the genealogy of COVID-19. In the Report of the Rockefeller Foundation, we read that, years before the outbreak of the pandemic, scientists had warned about the “increased risk of zoonotic disease transmission” (Whitmee et al.). Particularly relevant are the following findings: “Nearly all of the most important human pathogens are either zoonotic or originated as zoonoses before adapting to human beings and more than three-quarters of emerging infectious diseases are estimated to be directly transmitted” (Whitmee et al.). The broader environment in which this transmission takes place points to what happens to nature subsumed by economic interests:

Half of the global emerging infectious disease events of zoonotic origin between 1940 and 2005 are estimated to result from changes in land use, in agricultural practices and in food production practices. The highest risk areas for the emergence of infectious zoonotic diseases occur where human population growth is high, ecologically disruptive development is under way, and human and wildlife populations overlap substantially. (Whitmee et al.)

If we keep in mind the notion of “big history,” we will not restrict the diagnosis to the second part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the present one but remember that land use, ecologically disruptive development, and production processes have been perennial features of the human relationship to the environment. That relationship has always been characterized by the above-mentioned compulsion. Put otherwise, capitalism is not the only culprit when it comes to assigning guilt for the degradation of our habitat that has spawned the latest pandemic. In my opinion, the issue is much more complex and disturbing in several ways.

The pandemic is disturbing in terms of critique, because many of the tenets of critique do not seem to show great concern or even sufficient attention to the fact that the pandemic may be creating a state wherein the very conditions that critics take for granted in their thinking may very well become a thing of the past. Much of critique irritatingly seems to be doing its work as though nothing out of the ordinary is happening. Klaus Benesch's observation about the humanities in general is to the point here: “the humanities have ceased to be critical at all and instead have championed knee-jerk responses (‘power, society, discourse’) for almost every social and cultural issue there is” (Benesch). Using Benesch's metaphor, I have come to the conclusion that capitalism has become a knee-jerk response to a vast and ever-expanding number of problems that theory and critique have taken up as issues that they can have a say in addressing. In an article in which he asks, “why has critique run out of steam,” Bruno Latour makes the following confession: “The mistake we made, the mistake I made, was to believe that there was no efficient way to criticize matters of fact except by moving away from them, and diverting one's attention toward the conditions that made them possible” (Latour 251). Focusing on conditions of possibility tames the challenge of the matters of fact. If the latter are a cause of worry and dread, then explanations which might even be able to expose the conditions that made these matters possible offer but little consolation.

## 6

I will conclude by briefly referencing the notion of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), as Kevin Aho uses it in his article “The Uncanny in the Time of Pandemics: Heideggerian Reflections on the Coronavirus.” Aho writes that the uncanny emerges “when this tacit sense of familiarity ruptures and things begin to reveal themselves as eerie and unsettled” (2). According to him, this “means the secure feeling of familiarity that we embodied prior to the pandemic was an illusion all along, that we are not and never have been at-home in the world” (3). Working with these Heideggerian notions, Aho provides a diagnosis: “In the midst of the pandemic, we are living through a kind of world-collapse, and this is altering the very structures that constitute our existence” (5). Quoting Heidegger, he writes: “With the uncanny, we are living through our own dying by experiencing ‘*the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all*’” (7). Amongst the different readings of the pandemic that I have perused, Aho’s use of Heidegger seems to me the most suitable for registering the moment of the pandemic in which I write and the doom-laden forecasts for the future. Neither one nor the other are cause for any kind of upbeat assessment.

It is from this psycho-emotional state that I have tried to piece together a commentary on the pandemic. In this state, extant protocols of critique prove to be useless. However, I hold that the making-sense power of critique should be employed even if it registers the incapacity to make sense. In the time of the pandemic, this might be its only procedure. Staying always open to the emergent and the new, authentic critique must acknowledge the possibility of being defeated by this emergence. Epistemological humility, therefore, must be a compulsory antidote to the epistemological hubris which, compulsively subsuming reality to its tenets, can miss the urgency at hand.



## Works Cited

- Aho, Kevin. "The Uncanny in the Time of Pandemics: Heideggerian Reflections on the Coronavirus." *Gatherings: The Heidegger Circle Annual 10*, 2020, pp. 1 – 19, [Academia.edu/43289276/The\\_Uncanny\\_in\\_the-Time\\_of\\_Pandemics](https://Academia.edu/43289276/The_Uncanny_in_the-Time_of_Pandemics). Accessed 18 June 2021.
- Benjamin, Andrew. "Solidarity, Populism and COVID-19: Working Notes." *Philosophy Today*, vol. 64, no. 4, Fall 2020, pp. 833 – 37, doi: 10.5840/philtoday2020114363.
- Birmingham, Peg, and Ian Alexander Moore. "Philosophy in a Time of Pandemic: Introduction." *Philosophy Today*, vol. 64, no. 4, Fall 2020, p. 813, [doi.org/10.5840/philosophy/2020113360](https://doi.org/10.5840/philosophy/2020113360).
- Benesch, Klaus. "Is Truth to Post-Truth What Modernism is to Postmodernism? Heidegger, the Humanities, and the Demise of Common Sense." *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2020, doi: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.15619>.
- Christian, David. *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*. U of California P, 2004.
- Delanty, Gerard. "Six political philosophies in search of a virus: Critical perspectives on the coronavirus pandemic," LSE 'Europe in Question' Discussion Paper Series, May 2020, [lse.ac.uk/European-institute/Assets/Documents/LEQS-Discussion-Papers/LEQSPaper156pdf](https://lse.ac.uk/European-institute/Assets/Documents/LEQS-Discussion-Papers/LEQSPaper156pdf), pp. 1 – 24. Accessed 18 June 2021.
- Foster, John Bellamy, and Intan Suvandi. "Covid-19 and Catastrophe Capitalism: Commodity Chains and Ecological-Epidemiological-Economic Crises." *Monthly Review*, vol. 72, no. 2, June 2020, [monthlyreview.org/2020/06/01/covid-19-and-catastrophe-capitalism](https://monthlyreview.org/2020/06/01/covid-19-and-catastrophe-capitalism). Accessed 18 June 2021.
- Koshy, Johann. "Pandemic! By Slavoj Žižek review – the philosopher provides his solution." *The Guardian*, April 23, 2020, [www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/23/pandemic-by-slavoj-zizek-review-the-philosopher-provides-his-solution](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/23/pandemic-by-slavoj-zizek-review-the-philosopher-provides-his-solution). Accessed 18 June 2021.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1. Penguin Classics, 2010.
- Horton, Richard. "Offline: After COVID-19 is an 'alternate society' possible." *Lancet*, vol. 395, no. 10238, May 30, 2020, p. 1682, doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31241-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31241-1).
- Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam, From Matters of Fact to Matters of

Concern.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, Winter 2004, pp. 225 – 48.

Peters, Michael A. “Philosophy and Pandemic in the Postdigital Era: Foucault, Agamben, Žižek.” *Postdigit Sci Educ*, Apr. 29, 2020, pp. 1 – 6, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7190280/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7190280/), doi: [10.1007/s42438-020-00117-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00117-4).

Postone, Moishe. *History and Heteronomy: Critical Essays*. UTP Books, 2009.

Whitmee, Sarah, Andy Haines, Chris Beyrer, et al. “Safeguarding Human Health in the Anthropocene Epoch: Report of the Rockefeller Foundation – *Lancet* Commission on Planetary Health.” *Lancet*, vol. 386, no. 10007, Nov. 14, 2015, pp. 1973 – 2028, doi: [10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)60901-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)60901-1).

Žižek, Slavoj. *Pandemic: COVID-19 Shakes the World*. OR Books, 2020, [doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv16t6n4q](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv16t6n4q).

# Dependency and Obligation: Reading COVID-19 through a Feminist Lens

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it not only a deadly virus that has spread rapidly across the globe, causing a global pause, but also a mirror that made persisting inequalities in society visible on a greater scale. The virus has exposed a set of social, racial, gender, and economic inequalities, specifically in the US-American context. Besides the media coverage of case and death numbers, economic shut-downs, and the prospects of vaccinations, the precarious situations of many were made public. It is the aim of this paper to investigate a specific collection of female narratives from *The 19th News* that described the severe social and economic consequences of the pandemic on women across the United States. By applying Judith Butler's (2020) notion of nonviolence in combination with social reproduction feminist theory, the concepts of vulnerability, dependency, and obligations will be in the center of the analysis. Furthermore, the paper aims to investigate the intersections present in the female narratives and, hence, to demonstrate their relationality and interdependency by providing a critique of neoliberalism.

**Key words:** COVID-19, nonviolence, social reproduction feminism, vulnerability, dependency

## Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit at the beginning of 2020, the daily lives of numerous people around the globe changed from one day to the next. The public sphere became the danger zone where a Nano virus was (and still is) invisibly taking over and forcing everyone to retreat to their houses.

The romanticizing of this unexpected social and public interruption at the beginning was soon disrupted not only by the danger of the rising number of COVID-19 cases, but also by the new challenges of working and studying remotely and by additional care-taking duties. These new circumstances affected society disproportionately, and once again, inequities were made transparent along the lines of race, class, and gender. Rising female unemployment, additional care-taking duties, rising domestic violence, and greater exposure to the virus due to occupations in the health sector and in so-called “essential jobs” are visible outcomes for women around the globe (United Nations 2–3).

Past pandemics, such as those of the Ebola and Zika viruses, have already demonstrated how their consequences disproportionately affected the most vulnerable of society globally, specifically women. Both pandemics affected first and foremost women’s health due to the high infection rate and the danger for women, particularly pregnant women. The lack of prevention measurement and the inadequate actions throughout those pandemics put women in Africa and their unborn children at particular risk, as the study of Bennett and Davies (2016) revealed. Additionally, women in Africa also suffered enormously in terms of their socio-economic situation where jobs were lost, and as a result, livelihoods were threatened. Although a report by the United Nations et al. entitled *Recovering from the Ebola Crisis* was published in 2015, Bennett and Davies have pointed out that hardly any work has been conducted on the effects of gender inequality on women’s livelihoods in the Zika and Ebola pandemics and urged in their work that more research examining the effects of gendered inequality of public health emergencies needs to be conducted. This lack of adequate research and policy recommendations to implement sustainable policies and political responses was demonstrated once again by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bandiera et al. 3).

To shed light on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women

around the globe, a variety of media outlets as well as social media platforms have mediated female narratives to highlight the severe consequences of the pandemic on gender equality and to display the complex nature of the female experience in current capitalist structures. Notions of vulnerability, dependency, and obligations with regard to structural conditions and societal perceptions were uncovered by presenting a diverse collection of female voices around the globe and particularly in the United States, which will be the focus of this article. *The 19th News*, a non-profit US-American nonpartisan newsroom reporting on gender, politics, and policies, published throughout 2020 on the consequences of the pandemic for women in the United States. One article from August 2, 2020, titled “America’s First Female Recession,” highlights the specific consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on women living in the United States. Chabeli Carrazana featured four personal stories of women from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds living in the United States in her analysis of the economic and social consequences the pandemic had on their livelihoods and on US-American women in general. As this news outlet provides a space for female narratives to raise awareness and contribute to the political discourse, the article by Carrazana functions as the primary source in this paper.

In the spirit of the feminist notion that “the personal is political” it is the aim of this paper to examine the personal stories and to critically engage with the questions of dependency and obligation by drawing extensively on Judith Butler’s understanding of vulnerability and her concept of nonviolence in combination with approaches of social reproduction feminism. By using these narratives to exemplify how the pandemic has made transparent the social, racial, and economic inequalities in the United States, the purpose is, however, neither to generalize the US-American female experience in the pandemic, nor to use the narratives as the ultimate truths for the livelihoods of their respective female identities with all their intersections, but rather to provide a space in which to value and investigate these female narratives in all their contradictions and commonalities. Consequently, this will allow us to

interpret them as mosaic pieces of a complex and ambivalent grand narrative of women living in the United States which needs to be deconstructed and analyzed to reveal the existing similarities and differences. Guided by Butlerian thought and social reproduction theory, this paper's objective focuses on investigating the intersections that the individual female narratives represent and, thus, on demonstrating their relationality and interdependency by providing a critique of neoliberalism.

### **Four Women and the Pandemic**

The article features four different women living in the United States during the pandemic and experiencing its effect on various levels and to different degrees. It begins by describing situation of Ellu Nasser, a 42-year-old consultant who was bound to work remotely from home and to take care of her two sons, while her husband was on the frontline fighting the virus as a doctor. Her narrative vividly describes the constraints the pandemic put on her: "‘If you come in, I will lose my job,’ she told her 6-year-old in desperation, trying to keep him away. Her husband was the hero. He was saving lives. She was the terrible mom – ‘the worst mom ever,’ her sons told her – and the terrible worker" (Carrazana). Since her husband could not cut his hours, she was the one to take over the caring responsibilities despite her own career chances. As a white, privileged woman and due to her husband's financial stability, Nasser was able to quit her job after three months of trying to juggle all of her new duties, including home schooling, working remotely, and household chores. She took up the unpaid work at home for the sake of their children and her own mental health.

Nasser's story is followed by the account of Cristina Augirre Sevillano, a 50-year-old Cuban immigrant in the United States who previously worked as a housekeeper at a resort in Florida. After the pandemic spread across the States, Augirre Sevillano lost her job due to the closure of the resort and with it her health insurance, as well as the decent pay she was earning after years

of working there. Disadvantaged by her lack of English skills and her limited economic resources, Augirre Sevillano was forced to take on a job as a fruit packer in a highly precarious situation. In her new job, she had no health insurance and experienced a great lack of safety measures, which quickly exposed her to the virus and made her severely sick without health coverage. In addition to her own hardship, her daughter, who was living with her at the time, lost her job, as well, due to the country's shutdown. Suddenly, both women were out of work and facing economic as well as health risks. Eventually, Augirre Sevillano recovered from the virus, but states in the interview that "this has been the worst year we've had to endure" (Carrazana).

Augirre Sevillano's story is followed by an investigation of changes to the childcare situation caused by the pandemic and describes the experience of the owner of a childcare facility. Diana Niermann, CEO of *Kozy Kids Enrichment Center*, had to shut down the center in mid-March 2020 but, with government support and investments into safety measures, was able to reopen in June 2020. Niermann describes how only 17 out of the 92 children returned and most of her staff had already found jobs elsewhere or left the sector altogether due to the unpredictable future. Reminiscing not only on pre-COVID-19 times, Niermann also deliberately points out the low pay of child-care workers ("Child care doesn't pay very much. We need to switch that" [Carrazana]). Child-care facilities are essential components of today's capitalist societies as they are major contributors to the economy by providing space and care for children, so that their parents can contribute their work to the market, yet still as part of social reproduction, payment and appreciation are lower than for work towards economic production, which Niermann indicates in her remarks.

The final story in the article features Mara Geronemus, who opened her own law business doing work remotely for clients across the United States. Supported by her husband, she was not only her own boss but was also deeply involved in networking with other working moms and functioned

as chair of the board of her children's private Jewish faith school. As the pandemic hit the country, she experienced a slow "collapse of the card house," as she describes it. She was forced to cut her hours in order to manage the additional child-care duties and support for her children's schoolwork. In her rather privileged position, Geronemus had the option to make the economic sacrifices for the sake of her family and her mental health, but still asks the rhetorical question at the end of the interview: "Can you have it all?" (Carrazana).

The four narratives in the article are examples selected to emphasize what the title already indicates – *America's first female recession*. Carrazana presents these personal stories to mediate the complexities of female experiences by presenting different livelihoods. Although she was certainly not able to present the whole spectrum of women's experiences by featuring more privileged white women in the article, the message is nevertheless significant. At first sight, these narratives might come across as individual livelihoods, some more fortunate than others, but upon closer examination, their interrelation and interdependency become visible. As examples of constructed cultural perceptions, these women, due to the pandemic, faced structural disadvantages that made transparent the social, economic, and racial inequalities present in capitalist societies. Furthermore, the scale of the health crisis underlined the importance of examining the interrelation between social reproduction and production that exists in capitalist societies – in this case, in the United States. To do so, the following analysis investigates the notions of vulnerability, dependency, and obligation, as well as the obligation of care, and the question of grievability and the urge for equity as presented in the four narratives in *The 19th News*.

### **Vulnerability**

It is argued in this paper that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed particular vulnerable groups to severe dangers and consequences, and therefore, the notion of vulnerability and the classification of vulnerable groups



needs to be briefly examined. Couser (2004) highlights in his discussion of vulnerability and, particularly in his mediation of “vulnerable subjects,” the relational aspects of the concepts. According to him, the conditions that declare subjects vulnerable include extreme youth or age, physical or mental illness and impairments, and belonging to culturally or socially disadvantaged groups (xii). All these conditions are perceived in relation to heteronormative matrixes of capitalist systems which then classify persons as old or young, physically or mentally ill or impaired, and defines who belongs to a culturally or socially disadvantaged group.

The relationality that is present in Couser’s understanding of vulnerability can also be found in Butler’s (2016, 2020) discussions of the concept. Yet Butler (2016) proposes a more complex and ambivalent understanding of vulnerability and expands the perception of vulnerability to all beings to various degrees. She argues that, as much as the concept can be affirmed to have an existential condition due to the fact that everyone is subject to accidents, illness, and attacks that can make one quickly vulnerable, vulnerability is also “a socially induced condition,” which is responsible for the disproportionate exposure to suffering, specifically for those whose access to food, medical care, and shelter is often precluded (“Vulnerability” 24). Thus, Butler argues concretely that “vulnerability emerges as part of social relations” and makes two general claims regarding this assumption. Firstly, “vulnerability ought to be understood as relational and social,” and secondly, vulnerability appears “in the context of specific social and historical relations” (“Vulnerability” 4).

Furthermore, it is significant to point out that, by defining one group as vulnerable and to render the group’s members as “vulnerable subjects,” a binary is constructed which hence indicates that there are other, invulnerable groups. The vulnerable group also receives the status that forces them to claim protection. Since the developed binary is complex, the responsibility to take protection is ambivalent and poses problems. Thus, this construct not only encourages binary thinking but also creates the perception that groups

are already constituted as invulnerable or vulnerable. With this construction, a hierarchy between the paternalistically powerful and the vulnerable is created (Butler, *Nonviolence* 71). As Butler clarifies, “it is, of course, possible to claim that such a distinction is descriptively true, but when it becomes the basis of a moral reflection, then a social hierarchy is given a moral rationalization, and moral reasoning is pitted against the aspirational norm of a shared or reciprocal condition of equality” (ibid.).

Thus, it is inevitable to acknowledge that the danger of such vulnerability politics lurks in “fortifying hierarchies that most urgently need to be dismantled” (Butler, *Nonviolence* 72). Therefore, Butler’s observation as well as Couser’s clarification leave one with the necessity to highlight the hierarchal nature of the concept of vulnerability. However, this acknowledgment must not be viewed as opposing the importance of its nestling in human rights and ethical care questions, particularly for feminist thought, but rather as an act of emphasizing and problematizing the ambivalent nature of the construct of vulnerability (Butler, *Nonviolence* 72).

Important in the context of this paper is the emphasis on relationality as part of vulnerability. One is never solely vulnerable but rather vulnerable to a person, a social structure or a situation because of the reliability on them and the interrelation created thereof. In terms of the pandemic, the presented female narratives embody this vulnerability and confirm Butler’s argument that “one is vulnerable to the social structure upon which one depends, so if the structure fails, one is exposed to a precarious condition” (*Nonviolence* 46). All four women have experienced this exposure during the months of the pandemic. Due to school closures, working place restrictions, and general shutdowns of caring facilities and other centers, social structures were disrupted and the women’s vulnerability was made transparent and had a significant impact on their lives on various levels given their different livelihoods, yet their commonalities can be found in the vulnerability that was revealed.

One of the female interviewees describes the situation as the “collapse of the card house” (Carrazana), which metaphorically describes how the pandemic has demolished her private and professional life. It also indicates on a broader scale the disclosure of structural deficiencies with its inequalities across lines of race, class, and gender in neoliberal systems. The metaphor accurately expresses how the “house,” however, was already constructed to fall, with its shaky arrangement and precarious foundation made of cards. The slightest interruption can cause a house of cards to collapse, and therefore, it is far from a secure rescue space. Using this metaphor for the experience of the pandemic, the narrator indicates how her situation (and that of many others) was doomed to crumble with the smallest interruption and thus points to the systemic flaws of the current capitalist system that quickly renders one vulnerable and reveals the importance of systemic changes. As Butler points out, one “depends on someone, something or some condition in order to live” (*Nonviolence* 46); however, when this condition disappears, one is “vulnerable to being dispossessed, abandoned, or exposed in ways that may well prove unlivable” (*ibid.*). The “collapse of the card house” has caused the women’s lives to be proven unlivable to different degrees.

### **Dependency and Obligation**

What this global pandemic has also shown in the most forceful way is that, as Butler argues, “no one is born an individual . . . we are all regardless of our political viewpoints in the present, born into a condition of radical dependency” (*Nonviolence* 40–41). The virus breaks up the notion of individuality, an occurrence which was long overdue and exposes us to the reality of the interdependence of life. Individual actions have always had tremendous effects on others, yet this particular global pandemic demonstrates in its deadliest way how the individual is actually vitally linked to the collective. This interconnectivity, furthermore, highlights “global vulnerability” (Butler, “COVID”). Certain groups are more vulnerable than others; this fact constructs the current crisis of capital, caste, and the planet which this pandemic

has made transparent (Butler “COVID”).

Individualism is a social construct, and, as Butler has argued, “no one actually stands on one’s own; strictly speaking, no one feeds oneself” (*Nonviolence* 41). As Disabilities Studies have shown, pavement is inevitable for one to move along the street and thus expresses the interconnectivity not only of humans with each other and with non-humans, but also the dependency understood as a reliance on material and social structures, as well as the environment that enhances the possibility of life (Anderberg 189). Thus, the construction of liberal individualism neglects the acknowledgement of materialistic and structural circumstances that are necessary to confirm the notion of individualism and hence subvert the entire concept. Butler again shows the ambivalence of the individualistic idea by demonstrating the dependency that is inherent in everyone’s life (*Nonviolence* 42).

Linking Butler’s understanding of dependency to the global pandemic and the women’s stories, it is evident that all four women were relying on certain structures and systems in place which were essential for their lives to operate as they did. However, the degree of this dependency on certain structures is also closely linked to their social class. The first and last women, for instance, were able to afford child-care facilities and so relied heavily on them to advance their own careers as both parents worked full time outside of the home. Their financial means, then, also made it possible for the women to reduce their hours and finally stop their paid work altogether when the pandemic was at full swing due to their husband’s financial stability through their jobs as doctors. Although the pandemic made both women rely heavily on their husbands’ financial support and forced them to step back from their personal careers, the decision was economically possible for them. Nevertheless, the consequences left their marks on the women, as their identities are heavily defined by their professions.

After quitting her job, Nasser states that “for exactly one day, the relief was overwhelming. Then, worry” and highlights thus how her personal choice put her on an emotional rollercoaster that was directed by economic privilege on the one hand, and personal aspiration on the other, which she sums up in the following remarks: “I kept wondering, ‘How long will the personal choices I made around COVID-19 hurt me permanently? . . . I would like to be working for 25 more years. That’s joy for me. My work is not separate from who I am as a person. It’s a simultaneous feeling of guilt that we are able to do it . . . and sadness that this is the situation we were in” (Carrazana). This statement demonstrates that Nasser views her profession outside of the home as a significant part of her identity, whereas her role, and now her new main occupation, as the caregiver of her children, is not mentioned as a vital part of her being. Thus, Nasser makes the prominent capitalist distinction between social reproduction and economic production.

Social reproduction is understood as biological reproduction (e.g., pregnancy, breastfeeding), the reproduction of the labor force (e.g., unpaid household work, caring tasks), and the performance of paid caring labor (e.g., paid domestic workers) (Teeple Hopkins 131). Economic production, on the other hand, is understood as paid labor outside of the home. Fraser (2017) has eloquently described that not only has the work of social reproduction been separated from that of economic production since at least the industrial era, but the former has also been associated with women and the latter with men remunerating “‘reproductive’ activities in the coin of ‘love’ and ‘virtue,’ while compensating ‘productive work’ in that of money” (23). And by doing so, an institutional basis for modern forms of women’s subordination was created by capitalist societies. This separation further led to the importance and value of social reproduction being obscured as it was associated with women. Ironically, official economies are dependent on the very same process of social reproduction whose value is being rejected (Fraser 23–24). By stressing how her paid work is an essential part of her identity, Nasser emphasizes the importance of production in capitalist societies on individual livelihoods,

particularly those of the middle and upper social classes.

Similar to Nasser's narrative is the story of Mara Geronemus, who reminisces in the interview about how to move on with the pandemic when her daughter had over 200 unfinished school assignments at the end of the year and her husband is not likely to give up his career: "My husband is not quitting his job, he's not leaving the hospital. My kids are not dropping out of school. So, what gives? Probably my work" (Carrazana). However, unlike Nasser's statement, Geronemus does not stress explicitly how her profession constitutes part of her identity, but rather indicates that her profession is seen as being at the end of the family's list of priorities and that she views only paid work outside of the home as work. The hierarchy described in Geronemus's story presents a contradictory image where her work outside of the home is viewed as the least important within her kinship structures, yet her work as a caretaker inside the home is devalued and represented as the final resort for her caused by the pandemic. By not defining care and household work as work, the narrative recalls the popular capitalist notion that only paid work is defined as real work without realizing that, without social reproduction, current capitalist structures would not be maintained. To problematize this popular assumption, social reproduction feminist scholars have directed attention "to the interaction between unpaid and paid labor, positioning these as different-but-equally-essential parts of the same overall (capitalist) system" (Ferguson 3).

When now contrasting the above-mentioned two stories with the second woman in the article and her dependency on certain structures, the significant differences between the women's narratives are omnipresent. Previous to the pandemic, Augirre Sevillano, as a housekeeper, already occupied the social reproduction sector by doing paid housework, and thus her work was already less valued in capitalist society. She also relied on her economic rewards and health-care coverage provided by her job. During the pandemic, she experienced a great loss of these when the hotel had to close. Losing

health insurance, however, was not an issue for the other women due to their economic stabilities. Dependence on job-related social benefits was particularly precarious during the pandemic and forced numerous workers in the United States to relocate on the labor market, often taking on less protected jobs (Matilla-Santander et al. 226), as seen in Aguirre Sevillano's story as well. Due to her economic instability, she was forced to work as a fruit packer and was quickly exposed to the virus without health insurance. As the stories described earlier illustrate the women's financial dependence on their husbands due to their own withdrawal from the paid labor market, Aguirre Sevillano's story demonstrates how the pandemic has affected citizens significantly differently across class lines.

The fourth narrative in the article brings in an interesting angle to the discussion of dependency. As a child-care facility owner, Niermann was usually in charge of providing structures and care facilities upon which society relied. As the pandemic forced her to close her facility, not only was she put under economic stress, but many of her workers left, as well, due to the already fraught situation in their field. Yet, with her financial means, Niermann was able to overcome the struggle and opened up her facility as soon as it was secure enough. Thus, similar to other women presented in the article, Niermann's social class and financial means enabled her to overcome this sudden crisis with comparably little damage; whereas Aguirre Sevillano's story describes how the pandemic has left her in a more precarious situation than before as she could not rely on any financial resources due to her previous insecurity.

The complexity of dependency caused by the pandemic is apparent, and the analysis of the four narratives has revealed this in its multidimensions. Yet, not only were the women individually dependent on certain structures, but the pandemic also unmasked how capitalist structures overall are dependent on social reproduction, which is predominantly unpaid and carried out by women. Women in general have always done the majority (75%)

of the world's unpaid domestic and care work, which is a significant component of the success of capitalism (Ferguson 9). When the pandemic spread across the globe, women were once again targeted to make up for the lack of care facilities, and thus their share of unpaid social production increased in order to support the economy. The interdependency of social reproduction and economic reproduction as a key component for the persistence of capitalist structures and their inherent inequalities were unmasked by the pandemic. The problematization of this interdependency is crucial to understanding how current capitalist systems are operating and how inequalities can be combated by challenging neoliberalism.

As a critique to the rise of neoliberalism, Butler raised the question of a “global obligation” even before the pandemic spread around the globe. Her suggestion is built on serving all the inhabitants of the world – animals and humans alike – and is therefore “about as far from the neoliberal consecration of individualism as it could be” (*Nonviolence* 44). This discussion has regularly been dismissed as naïve, but with the shifting global dynamics caused by the virus, the notion has gained importance again. Since the pandemic has exposed “a global vulnerability” (Butler, “COVID”), the urge for social solidarity has become apparent. Furthermore, Butler’s “counter-fantasy” (*Nonviolence* 42) aims at highlighting the interdependency of global systems, which the pandemic has made even more clear. Thus, global obligation is necessary to value this interdependency in order to create more just systems for all. Butler argues that “only by avowing this interdependency does it become possible to formulate global obligations” (*Nonviolence* 46) and hence demonstrates the inevitable connection between the two notions. Furthermore, global obligation should be demanded from all oppressive and unjust dynamics and systems:

including obligations towards migrants; toward the Roma; those who live in precarious situations, or indeed, those who are subject to occupation and war; those who are subject to institutional and systemic racism; the indige-



nous whose murder and disappearance never surface fully in the public record; women who are subject to domestic and public violence, and harassment in the workplace; and gender nonconforming people who are exposed to bodily harm, including incarceration and death. (44)

Butler's detailed discussion of obligations is significant for the understanding of the pandemic's effects on society which have disproportionately affected people across lines of race, class, and gender. Social, racial, gendered, and economic inequities have been made transparent and thus expose the need to conform to Butler's suggestion of global obligations to avoid similar drastic scenarios in the future. Furthermore, the above-mentioned female narratives stress Butler's demand as well. Their individual livelihoods reflect Butler's observation and thus emphasize the ambivalence of individuality while supporting Butler's challenging of the notion. As the narratives have also demonstrated, a need for change is inevitable in order to avoid yet another crisis that disadvantages the most vulnerable and creates more vulnerability. Therefore, Butler suggests that a "new idea of equality can only emerge from a more fully imagined interdependency, an imagining that unfolds in practices and institutions, in new forms of civic and political life" (*Nonviolence* 44).

### **Obligations of Care**

The notions of dependency and obligation also raise the question of care, which was omnipresent in the women's stories, but also in the pandemic in general. From the beginning of the pandemic, the question of caring duties was mediated in public discourse (e.g., news coverage, documentaries, podcasts, blogs). Caring paradigms were shifting due to the influence of the health threats. Nasser's and Gorenemus's accounts highlight the shift in caring duties, as well. Both women were expected to take care of their children at home, assisting them with their schoolwork, while simultaneously maintaining their personal professions. Their partners, on the other hand, were not expected to step in and fill this gap, but rather continued their professions

outside of the home and so the situation left the two women with no other choice but to cut their hours for the sake of their families and their personal health, as the extra caring duties put constraints on their mental health. Gorenemus describes how she stayed up all night to finish her work after she had taken care of her children and their schoolwork all day and how she cannot imagine continuing this cycle for much longer: “I haven’t pulled all nighters since law school. . . . We can’t spend another school year or another month doing things the way we did it between March and June” (Carrazana).

The pandemic has stimulated the discourse around the issue of care and thus pointed out its flaws in the perceptions and obligations of care that were previously considered to be a normative assumption in society. Suddenly, care-taking facilities were shut down, grandparents were advised to reject spending time with their grandchildren for safety measures, and younger people were advised to take over every day errands for older generations in order to prevent them from being exposed to the virus in the public sphere. These sudden dynamics and changes have tremendously disrupted the current systems of care and brought inequalities and particular normative gender perception to the forefront. Women, who globally occupy lower-paid job positions (Kimmel, 248), were predominantly the ones to make the sacrifices to step in and to perform the extra care-taking duties.

Adrienne Rich has already addressed the aspect of social burden of care duties on women in the patriarchal structure in 1986 in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Rich eloquently highlights that “the physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens” (52). This social burden, as Rich calls it, has been strengthened by the pandemic, and the responsibilities have fallen predominantly on the mothers once again, as these personal narratives have demonstrated. The responsibilities are viewed to conform to gender binaries and heteronormative assumptions of gender due to their constant repetition of its performance in cultural spheres. Thus, caring re-

sponsibilities are assigned to women, and breadwinning characteristics are assigned to men, and this dualism is declared as the norm. As Sears puts it, “heteronormativity naturalizes and eternalizes culturally and historically specific forms of sexuality, framing particular household forms and divisions of labor as products of human nature and as necessary foundations for a healthy human society across time” (172).

Aligning with heteronormativity, caring duties and the obligation of care are central aspects in the narratives. In Augirre Sevillano and Niermann’s stories, the question of structural care occurred. As a housekeeper, Augirre Sevillano cared for others in her profession and, thus, carried out paid social reproduction, but once the pandemic forced the facility where she worked to close, the system did not care for her and she was left without work and insurance. In addition, she found herself also caring for her daughter, who was out of work as well. The entire situation left her with no other choice than to take on a job that exposed her to the virus and thus made her vulnerable to the situation. Her body was exposed to a deadly threat because of her necessity to survive economically.

Butler argues that, “to be a body differentially exposed to harm or to death is precisely to exhibit a form of precarity, but also to suffer a form of inequality that is unjust” (*Nonviolence* 50). Based on this argument, Augirre Sevillano’s situation symbolizes the unjust structures that the virus has made apparent and challenges the understanding of care as an individual practice targeted at other individual humans and non-humans (e.g., animals, the environment). Her story indicates that many are also left with no care by social structures, such as health insurance and/or paid leaves of absence that would have enabled them to cope better with this pandemic. Hence, the urge for global obligations with regard to care of all humans and non-humans has been made apparent. Augirre Sevillano’s story should not and must not be viewed in isolation as an individual series of unfortunate circumstances, but must urgently be read through a social reproduction feminist lens.

The current globalized financialized capitalism recruited women into the paid workforce and enhanced a disinvestment from social welfare, which resulted in rising inequalities and a “dualized organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it, privatized for those who cannot” (Fraser 25–26). The privatization of social reproduction, Fraser mentions in her analysis of our current capitalist regimes, can be linked to Niermann’s narrative and her role as a child-care facility manager during the pandemic. The modern ideal of the “two earner family” (26) demanded caring facilities and the expansion of paid social reproduction, which turned care work into yet another good on the market. As part of social reproduction, however, the sector did not receive the same economic rewards and value as compared to economic production, which leads back to the gendered and racialized nature of social reproduction (Mohandesi and Teitelman 45). When the pandemic spread, caring facilities had to shut down and thus shifted the caring responsibilities back to the domestic sphere. The normative order that is present in our current “two earner family” was hence disrupted, and social reproduction conditions for capitalist production fell back to previous orders, where caretaking duties were carried out at home, predominantly by women. Yet, as a significant component of current structures, Niermann received a loan from the Paycheck Protection Program that helped her to conform to the safety regulations and to remain open. As a strong believer in “good, quality care,” Niermann quickly re-opened her facility to continue to provide her service to the public to help maintain the economy. However, the pandemic has taken its toll on society, and only 17 out of 92 children returned, a result of parents out of work, no longer able to afford privatized child care.

### **The Question of Grievability and the Urge for Equity**

As the previous section has discussed, the question of obligation of care has also demonstrated the lack of structural care and the obligations that the current neoliberal systems assign to individuals in order to make up for systemic deficiencies. Butler’s understanding of “the force of nonviolence”

aligns with this and provides an approach to investigate the questions of grievability and the inevitable urge for equity which the pandemic has made transparent. Particularly Augirre Sevillano's experience and the work sector she is occupying exposes the "larger operation of biopower that unjustifiably distinguishes between grievable and ungrievable lives" (Butler, *Nonviolence* 56). The necessary exposure and the lack of safety measures that Augirre Sevillano encounters at her job as a fruit packer reflect the unequal understanding of whom to protect in a global health crisis. Hence, the narrative illustrates that the question of grievability of one's life is not merely a philosophical and moral discourse but rather becomes inherently political. Therefore, Butler's urge for the force of nonviolence provides an essential argument in the discourse and rightfully challenges the notion of violence with regard to solely bodily harm. According to Butler, nonviolence is needed to create a society where all lives are grievable and are thus equal, which eventually prevents systemic inequalities that are unequally harmful to all beings. A nonviolent framework would dismantle violent structures that expose one to vulnerability and threats to one's life, as seen in Augirre Sevillano's story. All living beings would be granted equal value (Butler, *Nonviolence* 58). It would be a principle that structures the "social organization of health, food, shelter, employment, sexual life, and civic life" (Butler, *Nonviolence* 59).

Previous to the pandemic, Butler had already remarked that "in this world some lives are more clearly valued than others, and that this inequality implies that certain lives will be more tenaciously defended than others" (*Nonviolence* 28). The current pandemic has stressed this observation, when not all had the means and rights to stay at home in order to avoid contracting the deadly virus. Not only were doctors and people in the health-care sector heavily exposed to COVID-19, but also workers on the production lines, such as Augirre Sevillano when she was a fruit packer, where she got infected after only a few days of working. The limited hygienic measures in a number of occupations in comparison to the high standards and great means in others demonstrate the rampant inequality present in current structures.

Augirre Sevillano's story reflects what Butler theorizes in her understanding of nonviolence, stressing the need to "recognize pervasive forms of inequality that establish some lives as disproportionately more livable and grievable than others" (*Nonviolence* 17).

Following the aspects of grievability and equality, in her remarks on the pandemic, Butler raises the question of what it means to shelter in connection with the notion of nonviolence. She argues that the discourse on sheltering in "a place, in a home" was strongly influenced by the notion of the bourgeois household ("COVID"). The perception that every human (and non-human) has a shelter where they can remain to safeguard themselves from a virus is dictated by the assumption that everyone possesses this kind of place. Butler asks, "What if there is no shelter? Or what if the shelter is a space of violence? What if the shelter does not allow for sheltering from the virus, such as a prison?" ("COVID").

Similar to Butler (2020), Žižek also discusses the class division that the pandemic has brought to the forefront and challenges the assumption of a global possibility for safe isolation as well. He juxtaposes in his analyses of the pandemic the situation of workers outside and inside the home and how their livelihoods are necessarily intertwined and dependent on one another in order to function: "Many things have to take place in the unsafe outside so that others can survive in their private quarantine . . ." (Žižek 26). This new dimension of class division resonates with Butler's investigation and is seen in the female narratives as well. Whereas two out of the four women had the possibility to work remotely from a safe shelter, one was urged to risk her health entirely by entering an unsafe work environment, and one could not carry out her job at all in the safety of her home.

While some had the opportunity to remain sheltered in a house, others, due to the lack of an actual shelter or an economic need to leave it, were made vulnerable to the current situation based on persisting inequalities.

Combating these inequalities, Butler argues for a nonviolence framework particularly because this framework will not make sense without a commitment to equality (*Nonviolence* 28). Nonviolence relies on “a sustained commitment, even a way of rerouting aggression for the purpose of affirming ideals of equality and freedom” (Butler, *Nonviolence* 27) and is therefore an inherent feminist approach which urges one to value the intersections, interdependencies, and the relationality of beings, materials, and structures. Following Butler’s train of thought, the pandemic has made transparent the inequities rooted in current neoliberal systems. The female narratives discussed here have supported and vividly described the consequences of these systems and have thus stressed the urge for equity reflected on their personal level but also on the collective level.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this analysis of the female narratives presented in *The 19th News* has made evident that the pandemic has exposed persisting cultural assumptions that construct inequalities whose acknowledgement is long overdue (Butler, “COVID”). The shutdown of institutions such as schools and child caring facilities has highlighted the persisting gendered nature of social reproduction. Without women stepping down from their role in the paid labor market and retreating to unpaid labor, predominantly in the home, capitalist structures would have collapsed further. Thus, this analysis has demonstrated that it is urgent to “understand that the relationship between wage labor and capital is sustained in all sorts of unwaged ways and in all kinds of social-spaces – not just at work” (Bhattacharya 92). Consequently, reading the COVID-19 crisis through a social reproduction feminist lens is essential to challenging the status quo and questions political and social structures that are created to benefit a few and oppress many.

Hence, these women’s stories have provided an exemplary collection of lived narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Carrazana has created a

magnifying lens with this article that urges one to reflect upon the pandemic from a feminist standpoint. Furthermore, Butler's notion of nonviolence in combination with the mediation of social reproduction feminism has proven to be a productive approach to challenging the current structures that were exposed in the women's stories. In the longstanding feminist tradition of valuing personal narratives, storytelling practices and life narratives are crucial insights into the understanding of individual livelihoods positioned in political and social structures. Global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic cause interference and thus alter these narratives – which makes it even more crucial to examine and investigate them through a feminist lens. These narratives can function not only as a decisive starting point to challenge neoliberal notions of individualism but also as evidence “to accept interdependency as a condition of equality” (Butler, *Nonviolence* 47).

### Works Cited

- Anderberg, Peter. “Where Does the Person End and the Technology Begin.” *Disability, Space, Architecture – a Reader*, edited by Jos Boys, Routledge, 2017, pp. 189–93.
- Bandiera, Oriana, et al. *The Economic Lives of Young Women in the Time of Ebola Lessons from an Empowerment Program*, 2018, World Bank, [openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/31219](https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/31219). Accessed 2 Sept. 2021.
- Bennett, Belinda, and Sara Davies. “Zika and Ebola Had a Much Worse Effect on Women: We Need More Research to Address This in Future.” *The Conversation*, 2016, [theconversation.com/zika-and-ebola-had-a-much-worse-effect-on-women-we-need-more-research-to-address-this-in-future-64868](https://theconversation.com/zika-and-ebola-had-a-much-worse-effect-on-women-we-need-more-research-to-address-this-in-future-64868). Accessed 2 Sept. 2021.
- Bhattacharya, Tithi. “Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory.” *Social Reproduction Theory – Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, edited by Bhattacharya, Pluto P, 2017, pp. 1–20.
- Butler, Judith. “Judith Butler: On COVID-19, the Politics of Non-Violence, Necropolitics, and Social Inequality.” *Versobooks.com*, 2020, [www.versobooks.com/blogs/4807-judith-butler-on-covid-19-the-politics-of-non-violence-necropolitics-and-social-](https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4807-judith-butler-on-covid-19-the-politics-of-non-violence-necropolitics-and-social-)



[inequality](#). Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.

- . "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–31, [facweb.northseattle.edu/mjacobson/SPECIAL%20TOPICS%20IN%20PSYCHOLOGY/Subjectivity/PerformativeActs.pdf, 10.2307/3207893](#).
- . "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance." *Vulnerability in Resistance*, edited by Butler et al., Duke UP, 2016, pp. 12–27.
- . *The Force of Nonviolence : An Ethico-Political Bind*. Verso, 2020.
- Carrazana, Chabeli. "America's First Female Recession." *The 19th Newsroom*, 2 Aug. 2020, [19thnews.org/2020/08/americas-first-female-recession/#:~:text=we%20were%20in.%E2%80%9D-](#). Accessed 2 Mar. 2021.
- Couser, Thomas G. *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing*. Cornell UP, 2004.
- Ferguson, Susan J. *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction*. Pluto P, 2020.
- Fraser, Nancy. "Crisis of Care? On Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism." *Social Reproduction Theory – Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, edited by Tithi Bhattacharya, Pluto P, 2017, pp. 21–36.
- Kimmel, Michael S. *The Gendered Society*. Oxford UP, 2011.
- Matilla-Santander, Nuria, et al. "COVID-19 and Precarious Employment: Consequences of the Evolving Crisis." *International Journal of Health Services*, vol. 51, no. 2, 11 Jan. 2021, pp. 226–28, doi:10.1177/0020731420986694.
- Mohandesi, Salar, and Emma Teitelman. "Without Reserves." *Social Reproduction Theory – Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, edited by Tithi Bhattacharya, Pluto P, 2017, pp. 37–67.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Virago, 1986.
- Sears, Alan. "Body Politics: The Social Reproduction of Sexualities." *Social Reproduction – Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, edited by Tithi Bhattacharya, 2017, pp. 171–90.
- Teeple Hopkins, Carmen. "Mostly Work, Little Play: Social Reproduction, Migration, and Paid Domestic Work in Montreal." *Social Reproduction Theory – Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, edited by Tithi Bhattacharya, Pluto P, 2017, pp. 131–47.
- United Nations, et al. *Recovering from the Ebola Crisis*, 2015, [www.undp.org/publications/](#)

[recovering-ebola-crisis-full-report](#). Accessed 2. Sept. 2021.

---. *The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*, 9 April 2020, [www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406](http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406). Accessed 2 Sept. 2021.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World*. New York Polity, 2020.

Andrea Jović  
University of Zagreb

Original research article  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17234/WPAS.2021.4>

## **Imagine All Celebrities Challenging Capitalism: COVID-19 Celebrity Humanitarianism**

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent lockdowns and restrictive measures, the levels of anxiety, depression, and precarity soared in an already depleted “bio-proletariat” (Fleming 9). Among the many who have sought to offer people comfort have been celebrities. Gal Gadot and several other celebrities sought to send a message of strength through a rendition of Lennon’s song “Imagine,” and Madonna shared her political commentary on COVID-19 from her luxurious bath. A similar phenomenon subsequently occurred during the Black Lives Matter protests, with the “I Take Responsibility” celebrity video. However, this essay will argue that these initiatives do not contribute to social change but perpetuate the same injustices. Following the writings of Ilan Kapoor and Anand Giridharadas, it will be argued that these celebrity videos do not challenge the systemic issues revealed by the pandemic, the most prominent ones being the insufficiency of public health systems and the precarity of capitalist economy. It will be shown that “celebrity humanitarianism” not only perpetuates neoliberalism, but also participates in it precisely by drawing attention away from actual change and glossing over the privatization of the commons. As Kapoor argues, this leads to the creation of a post-democratic landscape where self-branded spectacle has replaced public debate and collectivity has been reduced to atomized niche identities which enjoy all the benefits of interpassivity, of relegating their agency to someone else or using agency only to practice consumerism. Ultimately, the essay will explore the idea of withdrawal as a tactic to

challenge capitalism.

**Key words:** COVID-19, capitalism, neoliberalism, celebrity humanitarianism

## Introduction

In 2020, the world witnessed an unexpected and frightening event – the outburst of the COVID-19 virus – which has changed everyday life dramatically. In attempting to understand the magnitude of the crisis, numerous scientists and political figures have offered their viewpoints and advice. However, a significant voice during the pandemic was that of celebrities. This essay will attempt to answer the question of why their voice is relevant and what purpose it serves.

The essay will draw on Ilan Kapoor’s and Anand Ghiridaradas’s analyses of the interconnectedness between neoliberalism and charity work performed by well-off public figures. As both authors point out, rather than striving to actually improve living conditions, charity work “is produced by late global capitalism to escape its traumatic kernel (inequality, unevenness, social marginalization)” (Kapoor 11). In other words, charity work reproduces the capitalist realist inability to imagine an alternative to capitalism, focusing on cosmetic improvements which gloss over the reality of severe inequalities rather than challenge them. It also reduces citizens to *homines oeconomici* – self-investing entrepreneurs responsible for their own well-being – which are somehow imagined as detached from social conditions. The aim is to show that the celebrity humanitarian response to the COVID-19 pandemic is similarly cosmetic and neoliberal, focusing only on superficial messages of false camaraderie and strength, rather than on the real problems of the pandemic and post-pandemic world. Another, concurrent humanitarian initiative, related to the Black Lives Matter movement, will also be analyzed to demonstrate a similar tendency to avoid heavy topics and systemic problems. Ultimately, a solution will be proposed which, while seeming counterintuitive, has subver-

sive potential. Amidst the urge to act, do, and be enterprising, the option of withdrawal and offering no answer to capitalist demands will be contemplated, which may confound capitalist realism even more than an outright refusal to take action.

### **A Brief History of Philanthropy**

First, a brief history of the idea of humanitarianism and voluntary organizations shall be presented to better understand how the current set-up emerged. The late historian Peter Dobkin Hall draws attention to the fact that the idea of humanitarianism and a clear delimitation of the profit and non-profit sector are in fact quite a modern phenomenon. To describe how these concepts rose to prominence, he drafts a history of philanthropy that reaches back to the very settlement era in America, tracing its roots to the English settlers who brought along the self-governing practices present in England (Hall 33). Since the early colonies were neither populous nor enterprising, the main recipient of any charity was the government, and the foundation of private organizations and trusts was discouraged. However, with the rise of trade and the introduction of the market economy, this system of “mutual responsibility” started to wither away (34).

With rising numbers of poor and uneducated citizens, it was expected of public institutions to procure the funds to support them. However, inspired by the English Enlightenment movement, the Boston minister Cotton Mather called for charitable associations to take on this duty, “advocating ‘friendly visiting’ of the poor, the use of voluntary associations for mutual support, and philanthropic giving by the rich to relieve the poor and support schools, colleges, and hospitals” (ibid.). Mather’s ideas would prove to be a major influence on Benjamin Franklin, who was inspired by the burgeoning associations of new middle class merchants and artisans. Franklin first joined the Freemasons and then successively founded an organization for young men named the Junto (“which served as a model for young men’s and mechanics’ societies throughout the colonies”); “a volunteer fire company; and

a circulating library—as well as the privately supported academy which eventually became the University of Pennsylvania” (ibid).

However, after the War of Independence, as the newly founded country strove to establish its political institutions, charitable associations were regarded as a threat to the government. For example, in his Farewell Address, George Washington explicitly warned against such associations because they “serve to organize faction, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force; to put in the place of the delegated will of the Nation, the will of a party; often a small but artful and enterprising minority of the community” (“Washington’s Farewell Address 1796”). They are likely, he declared, “in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people, and to usurp for themselves the reins of government; destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust domination” (ibid.).

Charitable associations at the time presented an aporia. There was a disjunction between the idea of individual freedom, which, if associations were banned, citizens had no way of expressing at a level that could be influential, other than at the elections. Yet associations such as these posed the threat of disrupting the equality of all men by giving more power to a small number of people within any association.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the landscape had been completely altered. In the states of New England, the formation of private associations was encouraged by tax exemptions. In most other states, however, the activities of non-profit organizations were restricted, and they were required to prove their “redistributional and noncommercial intent as a condition for tax exemption” (Hall 37). Thus, non-profit organizations flourished in the Northeast and upper Midwest.

Alexis de Tocqueville documented the state of America in the 1830s,

praising the inclination of Americans to form voluntary organizations, but distinguishing between the organizations of wealthy citizens and those formed by ordinary citizens to help each other. Tocqueville points out that “the affluent classes of society have no influence in political affairs. They constitute a private society in the state which has its own tastes and pleasures” (157). The wealthy members of the society “have a hearty dislike of the democratic institutions of their country” (Tocqueville 158). Speculating on the future of such organizations, Tocqueville believed they would turn into “administrators of a vast empire” (565) who exercise their power through private institutions.

Tocqueville’s predictions were quite true, as the moneyed elites of the Northeast were able to extend their cultural and political influence, becoming also pools of capital and the place of birth of investment banking. By the 1850s, all suspicion of such associations was gone and the elites turned to them rather than to electoral politics. Thus, “electoral politics became firmly grounded in associational forms, and economic activity was increasingly carried out through incorporated associations, while social life for Americans rich and poor became increasingly defined by participation in religious and secular associations” (Hall 39).

This period also saw the foundation of the private research university, a secular institution whose research was intended to help nation building and the economy. Hall explains that

the private research university was a capitalist institution in every sense of the word: it sought to amass intellectual capital, by hiring faculty internationally and making huge investments in the libraries, museums, and laboratories essential to carrying out pathbreaking research; financial capital, through aggressive fund-raising, adroit financial management, and the systematic cultivation of relationships with the nation’s wealthiest men; and human capital, by issuing degrees that were nationally and internationally recognized and nurturing continuing relationships among alumni after graduation. Perhaps

most important of all, the private research university sought to create institutional capital, by placing itself in the center of a network of powerful entities essential to national economic, political, social, and cultural integration. (45)

The same trend continued into the twentieth century, when grant foundations were shaping policies and university research, while by the 1930s corporate donations became tax-deductible. The non-profit sector experienced a boom after the Second World War, when many organizations were founded to take advantage of federal funding and to serve as private agencies for the implementation of government policies. (51)

A similar change in the character of organizations has been noticed by Robert Putnam. Taking the example of bowling, Putnam interprets the decline in performing certain sociable activities as opposed to engaging in pure spectatorship. His analyses point to the concepts of interpassivity and loss of citizenship, which will be discussed below, and indicate that membership in organizations has fully lost its social dimension and is instead, focused on the political and economic facet (148–180). Thus, with the benefits and influence they enjoy, organizations have become “if not extensions of government itself—an intrinsic part of the *organizational field* of public governance” (Hall 53). Organizations have assisted the privatization of public services and the devolution of democratic governance. The same civil institution that was supposed by Tocqueville to be the token of democracy now poses a serious threat to it. It is within such a context that celebrity humanitarianism operates today.

### **Neoliberalism and Celebrity Humanitarianism**

The humanitarian consolidation of the private and the public, as well as the individualization of responsibility, played well with the rise of neoliberal capitalism. Thus, Wendy Brown defines neoliberalism as “an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices,



and metrics to every dimension of human life” (30). In other words, neoliberalism marks a significant shift from the classical liberal viewpoint according to which market metrics cannot, or are not to, govern the social. In neoliberalism, the market logic is extended to all domains of human life, which come to fully conform to neoliberal ideas of competition and self-investment.

Brown argues that neoliberalism is ultimately dangerous because it threatens to erase democracy. This is due to a number of factors. Firstly, while neoliberalism is often presented as inimical to the state, believing it should stay out of economic competition and allow free market mechanisms to do all the work, Srnicek and Williams argue that the state actually plays a key role in neoliberalism. As also mentioned by Brown, unlike classical liberals who firmly believed in the naturalness of markets, neoliberals are aware that markets cannot spontaneously self-regulate. For this reason, the state has been repurposed to create markets and sustain them through defending property rights, enforcing contracts and anti-trust laws, repressing dissenting voices, and maintaining the stability of prices (Srnicek and Williams 53). Consequently, the relationship of the state towards the people changes, since “neoliberalization . . . transforms the state itself into a manager of the nation on the model of a firm” (Brown 35). This move obliterates the political dimension of life, which leads to the disappearance of the idea of citizenship engaging in a public debate for a common purpose. Thus, the idea of the people disappears and is replaced by a set of *homines oeconomici*, always expected to compete and self-invest. *Homo oeconomicus* “cannot think public purposes or common problems in a distinctly political way” (Brown 39). Ultimately, as Brown points out, the final consequence may be a complete loss of democracy.

A similar process is noticed by Ilan Kapoor, who ties the contemporary invasion of the economic into the political with his concept of “celebrity humanitarianism.” Kapoor uses this term to denote a contemporary state in which famous philanthropists have taken over the role of democratic institutions purporting to act in the name of the common good, while in reality

only performing charitable acts to increase their own privileges. The term encompasses three different forms of charity work – that done by individual celebrities like Madonna or Angelina Jolie; corporate charity work such as that of Bill Gates or George Soros; and the work of charitable NGOs. While this paper focuses on the charitable work of individual celebrities, Kapoor believes that all three forms are guilty of supporting neoliberal capitalism and avoiding any discussions of systemic problems. Although all the examples that Kapoor analyzes entail some sort of economic advocacy by the celebrities, it will be shown that even instances in which celebrities are trying to offer emotional support share the characteristics of celebrity humanitarianism and are problematic for similar reasons.

Kapoor follows Brown's critique of the conflation of the public and the private, and the transfer of political power to wealthy organizations or individuals. He calls this depoliticization: "the removal of public scrutiny and debate, with the result that issues of social justice are transformed into technocratic matters to be resolved by managers, 'experts', or in this case, humanitarian celebrities" (Kapoor 3). Thus, issues like education, wages, and resources cease to be matters of public interest and are best left to experts to figure them out. As Donini argues, "humanitarian assistance and the globalization of the capitalist model are not unconnected," and charity work serves to gloss over capitalist inequalities (261).

Although it purports to be progressive, celebrity humanitarianism actually conforms to Bill Gates's (1995) idea of friction-free capitalism, the mindset that capitalism is the perfect way of governance and only requires additional tweaks to work better. It puts forth the dubious idea that "the winners," as Anand Ghiridaradas calls them, can be the "partisans of change" (5). On the contrary, "the winners" put themselves in the position of leading social change for the sole purpose of making sure that the changes that occur will not endanger their privileged position. As Ghiridaradas elaborates, "By refusing to risk its way of life, by rejecting the idea that the powerful might

have to sacrifice for the common good, it [today's elite] clings to a set of social arrangements that allow it to monopolize progress and then give symbolic scraps to the forsaken—many of whom wouldn't need the scraps if the society were working right" (ibid.).

Take, for example, George Soros. Soros is hailed as one of the greatest contemporary philanthropists, whose Open Society Foundations give millions of dollars for causes such as human rights, free journalism, and justice. Yet, the main source of Soros's wealth are hedge funds, "private pools of funds that invest in traded instruments (both cash securities and derivatives); can employ leverage through various means, including the use of short positions; and are generally not regulated" (Cole et al. 8). Hedge funds are an opportunistic financial tool, popular for the lack of legal constraints placed upon them and the lack of responsibility entailed, and are managed from tax havens. Ultimately, Kapoor warns that, "since hedge fund managers are interested only in quick, short-term returns, they frequently harm the long-term interests of people, governments, or companies" (9). This happens because hedge fund owners, for example, put pressure on low-performing companies, which have to find ways to improve, which most commonly means lower wages or poor job security, so as not to be bought out. Thus, while Soros is donating for the benefit of citizens, his source of wealth is actually a harsh capitalist instrument that destabilizes the job market and decreases the quality of life, which his do-gooding impulses attempt to cover up.

As the public sphere becomes depoliticized, there is an increase in interpassivity. The term interpassivity was first coined by Robert Pfaller and later picked up by Slavoj Žižek (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 32–33), in whose interpretation it denotes letting go of a responsibility and giving it to the Other. He uses the example of the Chorus in ancient Greek tragedies – the Chorus is the medium through which the audience expresses its empathy and concern for the hero and even if the audience is not following the show or is engaged in obscene acts, *objectively*, as Žižek points out, they are carry-

ing out their duty of offering compassion to the protagonists. Mark Fisher also uses the term to denote how late capitalist art which purports to criticize capitalism relieves us of the duty to criticize it. Discussing the Pixar animated movie *WALL-E*, Fisher explains how the movie performs our anti-capitalism for us so that we may continue to “consume with impunity” (12). In a similar vein, citizens have given up their role as contributors in decision-making and delegated their duty to technocrats and celebrities. When citizens decide to participate in political processes, it is mostly through donations to various charities. Thus, Kapoor concludes that depoliticization has reduced citizenship to consumerism (72). Arguably, the same phenomenon can be observed in the celebrity response to the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Celebrities and COVID-19**

The year 2020 has brought about the coronavirus pandemic, shaking the capitalist economy to its core. As lockdowns were spreading, the levels of anxiety, depression, and precarity soared in an already depleted “bio-proletariat” (Fleming 9). Numerous workers lost their jobs; others had to find ways to balance working from home and taking care of their children, who were also taking classes from home, and essential workers were overwrought, caring for many patients in undercapacitated facilities. As a token of support for their fellow citizens and of hope for a return to the old normal, many citizens decided to show resilience by engaging in symbolic acts such as clapping their hands on their balconies or playing music for their neighbors. One such occurrence inspired a handful of celebrities to offer their support to the public.

The Hollywood actress Gal Gadot was inspired by a video of an Italian trumpeter playing John Lennon’s pacifist anthem “Imagine” on his balcony to create her own version of the song. Gadot, along with a plethora of other celebrities, published the video on 19 March 2020, the same day that Italy surpassed China in the number of COVID-19–related deaths (Gadot).

Another celebrity who also joined the COVID-19 humanitarianism is Madonna. The famous humanitarian shared her ruminations on the on-going crisis from her lavish bathtub (“A great equalizer”).

While Madonna’s video was extravagant, with the singer soaking in pink water strewn with flower petals, Gadot and her fellow celebrities recorded their videos in a DIY fashion, in black and white, with their phones, in their homes or outside in nature. While their down-to-earth approach may be perceived as a gesture of equality, a sign of being one of the people, Kapoor warns that “this performance of the authentic and ‘ordinary person,’ appears as little more than a ploy to ingratiate [themselves] with [their] public, thus once again putting [themselves] at the centre of the story” (25). Moreover, a parallel could be made between the perception of migrants in liberal societies described by Žižek and the view celebrities have about ordinary people.

In his book *Violence*, Žižek takes the example of the Italian author Oriana Fallaci to debunk multiculturalism’s latent racism. In her later works, Fallaci openly attacked Islam, believing Europe was too subservient to it, afraid that the assertion of European cultural identity would be perceived as racist. While this stance may be interpreted as racism, Žižek believes it should be looked at from a different point of view. The problem, as Žižek sees it, is that “She failed to see how this ‘respect’ is a fake, a sign of hidden and patronising racism. In other words, far from simply opposing multiculturalist tolerance, what Fallaci did was to bring out its disavowed core” (*Violence* 115). In a similar way, this celebrity appreciation for common people is a covert sign of privilege and a patronizing relationship towards the masses. “This virus had affected the entire world, everyone, doesn’t matter who you are, where you’re from, we’re all in this together,” says Gadot (00:16–00:29), but this is not exactly the case. Similarly, when Madonna claims “we are all in the same boat” (00:52–00:53), this is an obvious untruth. At one point in the video, Madonna states, “What’s terrible about it is it’s made us all equal in many ways, and what’s wonderful about it is that it’s made us all equal in many ways”

(00:31–00:39).

Madonna's ambiguous statement comes quite close to what Žižek defines as the core of neoliberal ideology. The neoliberal ideology essentially functions as the Lacanian Thing: the Real, or the core of inequality, simultaneously attracts and repulses; it is the object part of subjects,

The Lacanian formula for this object is of course *objet petit a*, this point of Real in the very heart of the subject which cannot be symbolized, which is produced as a residue, a remnant, a leftover of every signifying operation, a hard core embodying horrifying *jouissance*, enjoyment, and as such an object which simultaneously attracts and repels us – which divides our desire and thus provokes shame. Our thesis is that it is precisely the question in its obscene dimension, in so far as it aims at the ex-timate kernel, at what is in the subject more than subject, at the object in subject which is constitutive for the subject. (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 204)

Madonna's statement, coupled with the lavish scenography, depicts this farce of equality, revealing the prospect of the erasure of privilege as an absolute loss of identity and at the same time a source of perverse pleasure, enjoyed from the safety of privilege.

Unsurprisingly, the videos made by these celebrities follow the logic of neoliberal individualization and obfuscate the fact that we are all in this together, yet some are doing better than others. Although made in response to the pandemic, they make no overt statements about the fragility of capitalism, about unemployment, or about precarity, but focus on easily digestible, harmless messages.

### “I Take Responsibility”

During the pandemic, the world witnessed another celebrity inspirational video which similarly conforms to a neoliberal logic. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States was shaken by another scandal. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, an African-American man suspected of being in possession of a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, was pinned to the floor by three police officers and suffocated to death. His murder was just a new addition to an ever-expanding list of black victims of police violence. In 2014, after being stopped in the streets and searched for petty offenses, which often included humiliation and sexual assaults, Eric Garner was murdered on a Staten Island sidewalk. The same year, 18-year-old Michael Brown was gunned down in Ferguson, and in March of 2020, Breonna Taylor was shot and killed in her apartment. Following Floyd’s murder, despite the raging pandemic, revolted U.S. citizens hit the streets in nationwide protests under the catchphrase Black Lives Matter. The right-leaning media quickly accused protesters of excessive violence and radical socialism. Yet, as with COVID-19, a set of celebrities also expressed their support for the BLM movement by filming a video entitled “I Take Responsibility.” A number of upset celebrities demanded justice for black people and urged everyone to take responsibility “for every unchecked moment,” “for every time it was easier to ignore than to call it out for what it was,” for “every not so funny joke” (00:11–00:19). In the climax of the video, *Breaking Bad*’s Aaron Paul makes a dramatic plea, “And killer cops must be prosecuted, they are murderers. We can turn the tide. It is time to take responsibility. Call out hate. Step up. And take action” (01:43–01:59).

Intriguingly enough, “calling it out for what it is” proves to be very hard for this video. The word “racism” is not mentioned a single time in the video, and the adjective “racist” is uttered only once, when Stanley Tucci disavows “racist hurtful words” (01:00–01:01). It can, however, hardly be said that this phrase accurately depicts the amplitude of violence inflicted on African-Americans by the police. Similarly, while Paul’s passionate demand should come across as an invigorating battle-cry, it merely conforms to the

neoliberal ideology. As Kapoor mentioned, it focuses on “photogenic aspects” of the issue, mentioning racism in words, jokes, and stereotypes rather than the brutal reality of murder (3). In truth, the demand is fully in line with the neoliberal idea that individuals are responsible for their own life rather than seeing it as a broader part of the community and web of power.

As Wendy Brown explains it using the term “responsibilization” or “the moral burdening of the entity at the end of the pipeline,” the individuals, perceived as human capital which must at all times invest in itself, are detached from the broader community and thus are not instructed to challenge the broader structures (132). Similarly, the video also encourages the individual to self-invest but does not promote leftist messages which challenge the capitalist regime such as the Defund the Police campaign. The video only tackles uncontroversial topics, but does not ask some of the question activists have put forward:

Why have the police been endowed with the arbitrary capacity to regulate the lives of the racialized poor in US cities? Why do they have expanding and unfettered access to the bodies of poor people in general and poor people of color routinely? How and why are poor people criminalized for occupying public space? Can the problem of police violence actually be solved with the addition of more police (even better trained, more diverse, or better monitored) as many police departments and federal proposals suggest? How have these issues been addressed in other global contexts? And finally, what alternate definitions of security might we imagine? (Camp and Heatherton 2)

Celebrities again champion “safe” and marketable topics, shying away from anything too politically controversial (Kapoor 36).

### **What is the best response?**

In *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek proposes that the proper response to the humanitarian urge to act is withdrawal, as interventions merely conceal the



violence enabling them:

The threat today is not passivity, but pseudoactivity, the urge to “be active,” to “participate,” to mask the nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, “do something”; academics participate in meaningless debates, and so on. The truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw. Those in power often prefer even a “critical” participation, a dialogue, to silence—just to engage us in “dialogue,” to make sure our ominous passivity is broken. (217)

Žižek elaborates by using the example of José Saramago’s novel *Seeing* (2004). In this novel, citizens participate in democratic elections, but cast blank votes. Even after the elections are repeated, the majority of votes are blank. This leads the government to suspect a democratic crisis and forces them to take radical, repressive steps. Žižek explains that the ominousness of the citizens’ position stems not from rejecting the status quo, which still implies one’s intellectual awareness of it and a formulated stance of resistance, but from an unintelligible position outside of the dialectic of acceptance and refusal, which questions the idea of decision-making as a whole.

A similar stance is predicated in Giorgio Agamben’s reading of Herman Melville’s novella *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853), on which Žižek relies as well. In Melville’s story, subtitled *A Story of Wall Street*, Bartleby is a legal scribe who one day decides to stop writing. Asked by his employer to perform any task, Bartleby replies with an ominous formula, “I would prefer not to” (12). This utterance excites Agamben, as it embodies pure potentiality.

Following Aristotle, Agamben defines potentiality as “the existence of non-Being, the presence of an absence” (179). Aristotle believed that potentiality does not disappear once it passes into actuality, but is rather fully preserved, an attitude which is different from his predecessors who held that potentiality disappears once it passes into actuality. Agamben notices a strong political charge in the idea of potentiality, which brings about a feeling of con-

tingency that could de-naturalize ossified political structures. If all that exists at the same time possesses the potentiality not to exist, then the whole reality becomes undetermined and opens up a space for freedom. Simultaneously, this move reintroduces potentiality into the past, where the potentiality not to be is now free to erase all traditions.

Such is the move of *Bartleby's* formula, which withdraws from writing, as well as the law. *Bartleby* does not overtly refuse the employer's request; he inhabits a queer space between acceptance and refusal, an "abyss of potentiality," from which his unintelligible utterance confounds the norm (Agamben 183). This is why, as Jessica Whyte notes, *Bartleby* is interesting to Agamben: "in his intransigent passivity, *Bartleby* eschews both the reduction of politics to a system of rules, which must be copied endlessly, and the revolutionary attempt to found a new constitution, which would be insufficient to break out of the cycle of instrumental violence that sustains the legal order" (109–10). In a similar vein, Žižek argues that any overt disobedience is easily understood by the power structures and coopted as its integral part. What can truly be unsettling is silence.

Agamben believes *Bartleby* is a Christ-like figure who comes to redeem the potentiality in the past, yet White correctly warns that *Bartleby's* act is solitary, and as such, has limited repercussions. Yet, his singular act is important, as it drafts a politics of desubjectivation which, if taken up by many, could lead to a refusal of communal identities and works, of "subjectivity produced by the governmental apparatus," and, consequently, to new politics (Whyte 166).

Thus, *Bartleby* could teach celebrities an important lesson on accepting radical Otherness and abandoning one's own position as a subject of tradition, knowledge, and expertise. In other words, the ethical message of Melville's text is that, in order to create a truly new and more just world, one must not only give up one's privileged position, but one's subjectivity as a whole.

Bartleby's message addresses both celebrities, who rather than urging to intervene, might do better by stepping back and considering the broad context in which their charitable work is being performed, but also the interpassive consumers of this spectacle, whose refusal of it would open venues for new thought. As Žižek also concludes at the end of his book,

[w]hat is at stake in this "destitution" is precisely the fact that, *the subject no longer presupposes himself as subject*; by accomplishing this he annuls, so to speak, the effects of the act of formal conversion, In other words, he assumes not the existence but the non-existence of the big Other, he accepts the Real in its utter, meaningless idiocy; he keeps open the gap between the Real and its symbolization. The price to be paid for this is that by the same act he also annuls himself as subject, because – and this would be Hegel's last lesson – the subject is subject only in so far as he presupposes himself as absolute through the movement of double reflection. (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 263)

### Conclusion

This essay has attempted to show how the neoliberal capitalist regime is conducive to celebrity humanitarianism, which perfectly aligns with its ideas of responsabilization and individualization. The most privileged ones position themselves as the flagbearers of change, which enables them to safeguard their privilege. In doing so, they are supported by interpassive audiences contaminated with capitalist realism who willingly disavow their democratic duties to fulfill the capitalist claim to individual responsibility.

Ultimately, the essay argues that, regardless of the occasion, most celebrity humanitarian endeavors have in common the fact that they shy away from controversial issues, focusing on increasing the star's brand image and staying in the domain of uncontroversial and bland topics. Unsurprisingly, such an approach cannot yield any meaningful change.

## Works Cited

- “A great equalizer’: Madonna splashes out COVID-19 thoughts from her bathtub.”  
Global News, [globalnews.ca/video/rd/a85900ee-6d3d-11ea-83b0-0242ac110003/?jwsourc=cl](https://globalnews.ca/video/rd/a85900ee-6d3d-11ea-83b0-0242ac110003/?jwsourc=cl). Accessed 14 March 2021.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford UP, 2007.
- Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos. Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. Zone Books, 2015.
- Camp, Jordan T., and Christina Heatherton. “Introduction: Policing the Planet.” *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter*, edited by Camp and Heatherton, Verso, 2016, pp. 1 – 14.
- Cole, Roger T., Greg Feldberg, and David Lynch. “Hedge funds, credit risk transfer and financial stability.” *Financial Stability Review*, Special Issue on Hedge Funds, no. 10, April 2007, pp. 7-17, [core.ac.uk/download/pdf/6612217.pdf](https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/6612217.pdf). Accessed 14 March 2021.
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2009.
- Fleming, Peter. *Resisting Work: The Corporatization of Life and Its Discontents*. Temple UP, 2015.
- Gadot, Gal, et al. “We are all in this together... .” *Instagram*, uploaded 19 March 2020, [www.instagram.com/tv/B95M4kNhbzz/?utm\\_source=ig\\_embed](https://www.instagram.com/tv/B95M4kNhbzz/?utm_source=ig_embed). Accessed 25 March 2020.
- Gates, Bill. *The Road Ahead*. Penguin, 1995.
- Giridharadas, Anand. *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2018.
- Hall, Peter Dobkin. “A Historical Overview of Philanthropy, Voluntary Associations, and Nonprofit Organizations in the United States, 1600 – 2000.” *The Non-Profit Sector: A Research Handbook – Second Edition*, edited by Walter W. Powell and Richard Steinberg, Yale UP, 2006, pp. 32 – 65.
- “I Take Responsibility.” *YouTube*, uploaded by ITR, 11 June 2020, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhbydhzQUzU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhbydhzQUzU). Accessed 14 March 2021.
- Kapoor, Ilan. *Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity*. Routledge, 2013.
- Melville, Herman. *Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall-Street*. 1853. HarperCollins ebooks, 2009.

- Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon and Schuster, 2000.
- Srnicek, Nick, and Alex Williams. *Inventing the Future: Folk Politics and the Left*. Verso, 2015.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Barnes & Noble Books, 2003.
- “Washington’s Farewell Address 1796.” *Yale Law School*, [avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/washing.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp). Accessed 14 March 2021.
- Whyte, Jessica. *Catastrophe and Redemption: The Political Thought of Giorgio Agamben*. SUNY P, 2013.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso, 2008.
- . *Violence*. Profile, 2008.

## How to Do (Dangerous) Things with Words: Pragmatics of a Pandemic Context

The goal of this paper is to establish a new view of the performative aspect of speech acts, taking into account the pandemic context. Austin's speech acts are defined either as something expressed to present information or as something that also performs an action. I posit that media language during various health crises changes pragmatically, shifting its strength from the locutionary aspect (what was explicitly asserted and meant) to illocution (what was done) and perlocution (what actually happened as a result). The pragmatic notion of a speech act is now intertwined with discourse and cultural studies and takes into account the extralinguistic reality – i.e., the pandemic. The main contribution here is to state that media discourse becomes an active participant and has the power to act performatively. The new pragmatic context during a period of a global pandemic comprises media discourses as producers and the general audience on the receiving side. Such a discourse has implicit performative power, since it deliberately does not focus only on the assertive aspect of providing information, but provides less information than needed in order to implicitly act as a source of ambiguity that invokes panic and produces various cultural decodings of such messages. I will examine typical examples of such ambiguous news texts on the most popular news website in the United States and review standard functions of ordinary language to be able to compare them to a new level of discourse in a pandemic context.

**Key words:** speech act, news, perlocution, COVID-19, performatives, J. L. Austin

### Margins and Centers

The most visited news website in the United States, according to [statista.com](http://statista.com) and [similarweb.com](http://similarweb.com), with 175 million unique monthly visitors and ranking as number one in the news and media category, is Yahoo! News on the website [yahoo.com](http://yahoo.com). This is a website that originated as a part of Yahoo!, a digital and mobile media company operating under Verizon (“Verizon Media”). Yahoo.com and its various subsites are visited by about 700 million people per month, and Yahoo! is available in 30 languages (“Yahoo Statistics”). When the Yahoo! homepage is opened, various subsections can be found there, including Mail, Coronavirus, News, Finance, Sports, Life, Entertainment, and more. The homepage is arranged in such a way that many headlines bombard the user at every visit. The headlines are from various subsections, as well as different sources, and if a reader clicks on one of them, that subsection is displayed. The headlines are presented as pieces of news, and upon opening the homepage, the reader is not immediately aware from which section of the website the headline comes. Since February 2020, these headlines have been mostly about the coronavirus pandemic, and as I have uncomfortably noticed, they have been anything but just informative, which is what one expects primarily when reading the news. The ensuing anxiety has led me to explore the pragmatics of these texts and to inquire into how they operate and what effect they might have on the reader.

A piece of text may be seen as a pragmatic unit, a speech act. The term speech act was introduced by J. L. Austin in 1962, and it is his work that I will be focusing on and drawing upon in this article. In a series of lectures he delivered at Harvard University in the 1950s, Austin went from distinguishing between constative utterances, which state something true or false, and performative utterances, which *do* something when uttered, to a new, more general, theory of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary speech acts. Austin realized that, whenever we utter something, it can have the forces of two or even all three of these types of speech act. For instance, if someone says, “I’ll shoot you,” they have performed a locutionary act of uttering a meaningful

sentence in the English language while simultaneously performing an illocutionary act of threatening as well as a perlocutionary act of alarming someone. In Austin's words: "Thus, for example: '*In saying I would shoot him I was threatening him.*' '*By saying I would shoot him I alarmed him*'" (121). Another example that illustrates the difference between these types of acts is distinguishing "the locutionary act '*he said that . . .*' from the illocutionary act '*he argued that . . .*' and the perlocutionary act '*he convinced me that . . .*'" (102).

Whenever we say something, we are performing a locutionary act, and at the same time, an illocutionary act. In Austin's terms, to state something is every bit as much to perform an illocutionary act as, say, to warn or to pronounce; it is on a level with arguing, betting, and warning. In saying, "I state that this is so-and-so," we are performing an explicit illocutionary act of stating. Austin distinguished between explicit performatives and implicit ones, the former being the ones that had an explicit performative verb within them (*I warn . . . , I order . . .*) and the latter being those that could be reformulated into an explicit performative (*This is dangerous = I warn you that this is dangerous*). The illocutionary force of an utterance was what Austin was mostly focused on, but here, I am more concerned with the performative force that utterances can have.

When he talks about perlocution, Austin notes that when we say something, we normally produce certain consequential effects regarding the feelings, thoughts, or actions of others, and that this may be done intentionally or unintentionally: "since our acts are acts, we must always remember that the distinction between producing effects or consequences which are intended or unintended; and (i) when the speaker intends to produce an effect it may nevertheless not occur, and (ii) when he does not intend to produce it or intends not to produce it it may nevertheless occur" (105). Austin continues to elaborate on this difference between illocution and perlocution when we use language or perform utterances and says that we also perform illocutionary acts, such as informing, ordering, and warning, which are utterances that



have a certain (conventional) force, but that we also perform perlocutionary acts when we bring about or achieve something by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even surprising or misleading (108). As he puts it, “We must distinguish the illocutionary from the perlocutionary act: for example we must distinguish ‘in saying it I was warning him’ from ‘by saying it I convinced him, or surprised him, or got him to stop’” (109). He does point out that some effect must be produced in certain senses by illocutionary acts if they are to be successfully performed (115) but this is different from the characteristic effects produced by perlocutionary acts, whose response achieved (or the sequel) can also be achieved by non-locutionary means; for example, we may alarm someone by pointing a gun at them. The illocutionary act *takes effect* in certain ways, i.e., it leads to changes in the natural course of events, but this is distinguished from producing consequences (perlocution). Some perlocutionary acts always have sequels rather than objects, specifically those where there is no illocutionary formula; thus, I may surprise you or upset you or humiliate you by a *locution*, even though there is no illocutionary formula such as the following: “‘I surprise you by. . .’; ‘I upset you by. . .’; ‘I humiliate you by. . .’” (117).

Austin was mostly confined to utterances in speech or conversations; however, he noted that this was only due to simplicity (113 n2), and he does mention written utterances on a few occasions: “the utterance (in writing) of the sentence” (57); “In written utterances (or *inscriptions*)” (60). Moreover, he says that what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation and that the intents and purposes of the utterance and its context are important (100). I argue that we may observe a piece of written news, an article, as a speech act, or rather, as a pragmatic unit consisting of several speech acts. These speech acts are performed by the authors of the news articles who are communicating with the readers, primarily trying to state the facts or inform on important pieces of news. In Austin’s terms, “to state is every bit as much to perform an illocutionary act as, say, to warn or to pronounce” (133). Austin goes on to inspect whether an utterance

that is a statement is liable to be true or false (or as he calls it, happy or unhappy) and finds that statements indeed “*are* liable to every kind of infelicity to which performatives are liable” (135), meaning that, if we state something and we do not have the authority to do so, or all the information to make such a statement, or the thing to which we refer does not exist, then that statement is void. Austin also emphasizes that it is important to take the speech situation as a whole and that, “once we realize that what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act” and that “in stating we are or may be performing perlocutionary acts of all kinds” (138). Thus, news articles written (“uttered”) in a specific speech situation (on a news website), with the purpose of stating facts or informing the readers, can be viewed as speech acts (with illocutionary force) and as such, produce certain effects (perlocutionary force) on the readers.

The distinction between attempt and achievement in speech acts is important when we observe the news discourse. We expect the news to inform us, to be impartial, to provide full and truthful information. Indeed, when analyzing examples of news on the Yahoo! News website, most of them use locutionary acts and illocutionary acts of quoting, stating, reporting, and informing, and to some extent, warning, criticizing, or advising. However, how the information they contain is presented and what effects it can have on the readers who are the receivers of the message, is another matter, that of perlocutionary force. According to van Dijk, there are principles according to which news reports are organized; these include relevance, importance, and recency. Even though news stories are stories, they are different from everyday stories that people share and which follow a chronological pattern. A news story begins with the headline and lead which are essentially a summary containing the most important information of the discourse. “Then the story in a news report is delivered in installments – the most important information of each category comes first, followed by the less important information of each category” (194). Van Dijk continues to elaborate:

If the most important information should be contained in the headlines and leads, this is what most readers will usually focus on, and we might even say that this is what they will take away from the piece of news they read. Indeed, according to Ziming Liu, our reading of digital sources is fragmented, discontinuous, and shallow, and this leads to lower comprehension. The digital environment influences how we read. In Liu's own words, screen-based reading behavior is characterized by spending more time on browsing and scanning, keyword spotting, one-time reading, nonlinear reading, and reading more selectively, while less time is spent on in-depth reading, concentrated reading, and decreasing sustained attention. While people today spend more time reading than they did in the print-only past, the depth and concentration associated with reading has declined. (88)

Taking all this into account, we may observe the headline and the lead as one speech act, the one with the most force, and the rest of the article as another, one with less force. We will notice then that there is a discrepancy between these two forces and between the messages that these two speech acts convey. We also expect when reading the news that we will get the most important information at the beginning.

We also expect the news report to be true. This is especially important, and if we observe the news article as a speech situation composed of various speech acts with the illocutionary force of informing or stating, we may subject those speech acts or statements to the truth or falsity test, considering not just the information or facts they contain, but also the context and manner in which they are presented or delivered. Austin says that facts come in as well as our knowledge or opinion about facts and that the intents and purposes of an utterance, as well as context, are important (142). We may state something and we may exaggerate it, which may be acceptable in certain contexts. We may also leave something out or mislead with our statement. This would certainly be inappropriate and considered false in the context of a news report or statement. Indeed, something stated, although it contains (some) facts, may not be the right or proper thing to say in certain circumstances, to a specific

audience, “for these purposes and with these intentions” (144), or simply, whether a statement is true or false will depend not only on the meanings of words but “on what act you were performing in what circumstances” (144). When we deal with performative utterances, we deal with the illocutionary force, in the case of news articles of stating (and informing), but as we will see, the intended performative of stating (or informing) is not always successfully achieved, or perhaps the intention was not just that of stating (or informing) to begin with.

With this in mind, I will now analyze ten articles available on the yahoo.com website, where they were presented as news about COVID-19. These articles were accessed from the homepage, and when accessed, they belonged to (i.e., were linked to and available in) the subsections Yahoo News and Yahoo Life, even though some of them were actually from other resources. They could be accessed by regular browsing and visiting the homepage in the period from July until September 2020.

The first example begins with the headline: “COVID patient didn’t recognize body after double transplant” and begins with the following lead: “A Chicago woman who last month became the nation’s first COVID-19 patient to undergo a double lung transplant said Thursday that she woke up days later, unaware about the surgery and unable to ‘recognize my body’” (“COVID patient”).

In this example of a speech act, we have the illocutionary force of informing/stating, perhaps of warning (about a dangerous consequence of the disease), but also the perlocutionary force of causing worry and alarming, because a reader might believe this is something that generally happens to COVID-19 patients. Later, upon reading carefully the rest of the article (the second speech act), one learns that only two people in the United States had undergone such an operation and that they were both doing fine. One does not learn much more about the cases, not even the percentage of such pa-

tients in the overall affected population, which is a case of manipulation by omission. According to Austin, “The truth or falsity of statements is affected by what they leave out or put in and by their being misleading” (143).

Example 2 has the following headline: “New research suggests COVID-19 can spread via aerosol transmission – and might affect tall people more.” Its lead reads: “A new survey has found more evidence to suggest that people can become infected with COVID-19 through aerosol transmission, which could be prevented by wearing a mask” (“New research”).

Later, it is stated that taller individuals appear to be at a higher risk and that individuals over 6ft tall seem to have more than double the chance of having a COVID-19 medical diagnosis or testing positive. However, we also learn that the findings were posted on the preprint website medrxiv.org, and have not yet been peer-reviewed, meaning that they have not been verified by experts. Here we have illocutionary acts of stating, warning, suggesting and/or reporting, as well as the perlocutionary acts of alarming and frightening. The progression of information is what creates the discrepancy, because at first it seems like the article is stating the facts and reporting verified information, but later it becomes clear the information has not been verified. If the most important information should be contained at the beginning of the article, why are we only learning at the very end that this piece of “alarming” information has not been verified?

Example 3 is an article reporting on pets falling victim to the virus. Headline: “Buddy, the first dog to test positive for COVID-19 in the US, has died.” Lead: “Buddy the German Shepherd has died. He was the first pet dog in the United States to test positive for COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus” (Rodriguez).

The illocutionary force here is the one of reporting and stating. This information is worrisome (perlocution) and implies that pets can be infected

with and *die from* the virus. Later in the article, however, it is stated that Buddy died from something else:

On the morning of his death, Buddy was throwing up clotted blood in the kitchen. Vets discovered from blood work that he almost certainly had lymphoma and the family knew nothing could be done, according to the magazine. Buddy's family and doctors were unable to confirm whether it was the lymphoma or the virus that ultimately took his life. The family's surviving dog, Duke, tested positive for antibodies but was never sick. (Rodriguez)

This diverges from the initial proposition that pets who are infected with COVID-19 die from it. Some pets who are infected do die, but we do not learn of the exact numbers or the context of such events.

Example 4 presents numbers in an alarming way with both the headline and the lead. Headline: "COVID-19 deaths spike 27% even as new cases decline." Lead: "Even as the U.S. has seen moderate declines in new COVID-19 cases, the nation experienced a sharp rise in deaths related to the disease last week, according to a new government document reviewed by Yahoo News" (Wilson).

The title and the lead report data (illocution) but in an alarming way, using loaded lexical items such as *spike* and *sharp rise* (perlocution). Upon superficial reading, we might infer that the death rate has increased to 27% even though there are fewer cases. Upon further and closer reading, we learn that a senior leadership brief dated July 31 said there were 7,631 deaths in the week ranging from July 24 to July 30, a 27.1 percent increase over the previous seven days. The document, which was prepared by the Departments of Health and Human Services and Homeland Security, cited a case fatality rate of 1.7 percent over the past seven days. This is substantially different from what is reported and insinuated by the first speech act.

Example 5 is the one that might cast some light on how conspiracy theories develop. Headline: “The White House Begg Governors to Help Sell a COVID-19 Vaccine.” Lead: “Over the last several weeks, President Donald Trump has approached the White House press podium with one resounding message: The coronavirus vaccine is just around the corner and it will soon make its way to Americans across the country” (Suebsaeng and Banco).

The next paragraph reads: “But behind closed doors, Trump’s closest advisers, including those officials working on the White House coronavirus task force, are increasingly concerned about public confidence in the vaccine process. Now, White House officials are leaning on the nation’s governors to help promote the vaccine’s safety and efficacy” (Suebsaeng and Banco).

The illocutionary force of reporting/informing or maybe even warning the general public in this case, is shifted toward the perlocution of convincing or startling the reader that something’s *cooking behind closed doors*. If the vaccine is safe and efficient, why would the governors need to be begged to sell it (title)? Later, we learn that the administration is persuading them to *promote* it.

Then there is example 6, in which COVID-19 is mysterious and one pregnant woman has *survived* it. Headline: “I got COVID-19 while pregnant after months of strict isolation, and my case remains a medical mystery.” Lead: “I spent months strictly isolating before I tested positive for the coronavirus in June, when I was 19 weeks pregnant. Since then, I’ve struggled to understand the mystery of my infection. I now count myself among the fortunate survivors of this virus, but I feel little lasting relief” (Peterson).

The illocutionary force is that of reporting or informing about a specific case; however, the perlocutionary force conveyed is that of casting doubt, creating insecurities and alarming the public because the case is a *medical mystery*, implying that, if the medical experts cannot decipher this disease, what hope do we have? Also, *strict isolation* is emphasized in the title and lead,

despite which the woman was infected, which casts doubt on this verified epidemiological method of preventing the virus's spread. If one continues to read the article, they will learn that the woman and her husband were under constant surveillance of their family physician and had such mild symptoms that the doctor, a medical expert, did not even consider a test to be warranted and treated the couple accordingly. However, due to the global situation, the woman was worried and asked for the test anyway and received a positive result. This positive result and her perception of it were what caused her anxiety and difficulties, not the course of her illness, which was reported as mild. Despite this, the couple are dubbed as *survivors* in the lead, which would imply a serious struggle (there was none). In the article, the author continues to muse over the possible sources of her infection emphasizing the mystery but cites no scientific opinions or research to corroborate this *mystery*. The entire article is written from one woman's point of view, someone who is not a medical expert, and no experts are weighing in on this case, which she, a laywoman, proclaims a mystery, and only due to the fact that she herself was not able to locate the source of her infection.

The focus of example 7 is on children, an especially sensitive and emotional topic. Headline: "The First Data On Kids, COVID-19 And Race Is Here — And It's Not Good." Lead:

The coronavirus pandemic in the United States has been marked by stark racial and socioeconomic disparities. Black and Latinx adults in this country are more likely to get the disease. They're more likely to die from it. The same holds true for lower-income earners. There has, however, been relatively little scientific evidence on how this all breaks down in children — until now.  
(Pearson)

The headline and the lead have the illocutionary force of reporting and warning; however, the perlocution is again that of alarming. Using the terms *not good*, *stark*, and *die* draws attention and creates a negative and grim tone.



If one were to read only the headline and the lead, one would think that it is race that plays a role in the severity of the disease and that children of color are somehow, due to their race, biologically more prone to getting the disease and dying from it, while there is no scientific evidence for that. Income is mentioned as something casual, the focus being on race. However, in the remainder of the article, it becomes clear that these differences are not due to biology, which is clearly stated in a quote of a medical expert, but rather to socioeconomic and cultural differences. Furthermore, the reported research was done on a small number of children (1000) in one area of Washington D.C. and the researchers say they cannot extrapolate their data to what is happening nationally but can only guess that there is a similar trend. The children are reported as having relatively mild symptoms.

Example 8 is an article whose headline reads: “You’re Twice as Likely to Die of Coronavirus If You Live Here, Study Says.” Its lead:

There isn’t a single state in the U.S. that hasn’t experienced hardship and tragic loss at the hands of the COVID pandemic. As outbreaks spread from cities to rural areas across the country, it became clear that no area was safe from potential infection. But do different places affect how a brush with the deadly disease will play out? According to a new report from NPR, **you’re twice as likely to die of coronavirus if you live in a large city.** (Mack)

The boldface was used in the lead, thus emphasizing the message. Also, the present tense is used. The illocutionary force of this speech act is reporting and informing; however, by using boldface and loaded wording, the perlocution of alarming is achieved. A reader living in a large city might read this information and take it as is. Is there any hope for urban dwellers? If the study says so, it must be true. Reporting on numbers and statistics can be tricky and especially manipulative to suit one’s needs. In this case, if readers continue to explore the article, they will learn, for example, that “New York City was an

early epicenter in the pandemic in the U.S. – and at that time, there was also less of an understanding of how to treat the virus, which led to more deaths” (Mack). Furthermore, an epidemiologist is quoted as saying: “People live far apart, are less likely to see each other, but we have events that bring us together. And the cases follow that” (Mack). By this, he meant that there were more cases – and consequently, more fatalities – in large cities because more people lived in those areas, and at the beginning of the pandemic, they had little knowledge on how to prevent the spread.

The final two examples involve articles published on the same day, using similar language and loaded terms. The two articles quote the same medical expert and were written by the same author, Leah Groth. On yahoo.com, in the section yahoo!life, on September 23, 2020, the two articles were published with the following headlines: “The New COVID Symptom That is Alarming Even Dr. Fauci” and “These 21 States See an Alarming COVID Spike.” The leads are, respectively:

Over the course of the last nine months since COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China, we have continued to learn more about the highly infectious virus, responsible for the deaths of over 200,000 Americans. One of the scariest things about coronavirus, is that even those with mild symptoms – or none at all – are experiencing long-term damage as a result of their infection. And, recent studies have pinpointed that some of that devastation is occurring in the heart. On Wednesday morning, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, testified before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and explained why he is so concerned about two troubling new studies. (Groth)

On Tuesday, the first day of fall, America hit a grim milestone in the COVID-19 pandemic, passing the 200,000 mark of lives lost as a result of being infected with coronavirus. While the number of infections, deaths, and fateful testing positivity rate started dropping in many states across the nation over the summer, health experts have continued to warn that fall and winter could bring a host of new complications—including the introduction of cold

and flu season, the falling temperatures bringing people indoors, and children and young adults returning to school—all of which could easily result in an upward trend. And, according to the latest statistics from Johns Hopkins University we are already starting to experience it. (Groth)

It is clear from the headlines and leads that the illocutionary force is that of reporting and warning the public of new findings, all corroborated by the latest research. However, upon reading the remaining portions of the articles, we learn that *alarming* is used quite liberally, thus actually creating a perlocutionary force of alarming, provoking panic in the reader. We are doomed, one might think. If the medical experts are panicking, all hope is lost. The articles do not use the illocutionary force of alarming – they do not state explicitly “be alarmed” or “be warned” – rather, they are merely reporting on this, but they do use the adjective *alarming*, which is a loaded term and thus creates the aforementioned perlocutionary force. The headlines and leads are full of loaded terms – e.g., *scariest things*, *long-term damage*, *devastation*, *troubling*, *grim*, *fateful*, and *host of new complications*. The remaining portions of the articles reveal that, in the case of heart damage, the experts still do not know what the long-term effects will be and it could go either way, the patients could recover completely and have no problems at all or they could have some damage, but there is still a lot to learn. In other words, there are no conclusions yet, only scientific research which is ongoing. In the case of the rising numbers, we learn that the spike in the number of positive cases was not as unexpected due to it coming weeks after Labor Day and after many students had returned to colleges and universities. This trend is certainly not desirable, but using loaded terms to simply report on numbers after they have been expected contributes to the spread of panic.

As can be seen in these examples, instead of just informing and stating the facts in a condensed way in titles and leads, the part of the news mostly read when skimming and scanning, these utterances very often misrepresent the facts and using loaded terms, which when read, can alter the readers’ per-

ception of reality and stated facts, and as a consequence, can change their behavior. This is especially problematic in a viral global pandemic, in which the behavior of individuals is particularly important for curbing the spread of the virus. If mistrust is generated through news pieces, which should be impartial and informative, it is hard to expect people to follow the rules and guidelines to curb the virus's spread served to them through the same media.

In June 2020, a paper on the topic of how people respond to the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic was published in preprint. The researchers focused on Reddit and Wikipedia to quantify user activity. They collected a

heterogeneous dataset that includes COVID-19 related news articles and Youtube videos published online by mainstream information media, relevant posts, and relative discussion of geolocalized Reddit users, as well as country-specific views to Wikipedia pages related to COVID-19 for Italy, United Kingdom, United States, and Canada. (Gozzi et al. 2)

By studying news articles and videos, they could estimate the exposure of the public to the COVID-19 pandemic through traditional news media, and, by studying users' discussions and response on social media (through Reddit) and information seeking (through Wikipedia page views), they could quantify the reaction of individuals to both the COVID-19 pandemic and news exposure. They also mentioned that previous studies had shown that social media, internet use, and search trends were useful in analyzing health-related information streams and monitoring public reaction to infectious diseases. They found that about 60% of adults in the United States consulted online sources to gather health information (2) and that traditional and social media were integral parts of people's perception and opinions which have the potential of triggering a change in behavior, which in turn influences pandemic spreading. Their findings confirmed the central role of media, showing how media exposure is capable of shaping and driving col-

lective attention during a national and global health emergency. They say that the timing and framing of information disseminated by the media can actually modulate the attention and ultimately the behavior of individuals (4). They conclude that, since people are highly reactive to the news they are exposed to, especially in the beginning of an outbreak, the quality and type of information they are given might have critical effects on risk perception, behaviors, and – most importantly – the unfolding of the disease (6).

In the case of the aforementioned article reporting on people living in large cities and being twice as likely to die of COVID-19 infection, we see how the information is presented differently in the first part and second parts of the article, which we can observe as different speech acts. There is a discrepancy between these utterances. If the intention is reporting, the illocution and perlocution should coincide. The utterance should be delivered in an impartial manner, thus achieving the effect of the reader feeling informed, not alarmed. Of course, even presenting information in an impartial manner without the overuse of loaded terms and devices (e.g., boldface) may invoke the reaction of alarming in some readers; however, news reports should at least strive for the ideal, to be impartial and informative and not add fuel to the fire in the time of a global pandemic. In the aforementioned article, if the information had been presented in a neutral way, a reader might have concluded that more cases and, consequently, more fatalities in large cities would be expected because more people generally live in those areas, and at the beginning of the pandemic, people had little knowledge on how to prevent its spread, but now they know more, and these numbers of fatalities may be reduced by using appropriate measures. Furthermore, the reported study was conducted in late June; thus, it would have been more appropriate to use the past tense when reporting, because the conditions have changed since then. The perlocutionary force might have matched the illocutionary force of informing in that case, and neutral language could have been used for that purpose to merely report on the data on one study conducted in June. In this case, we again see how an alarming effect is achieved by contrasting the con-

tent of the first and second speech acts. Whether or not this was intended does not matter because the consequences and effects are there. In Austin's terms, by uttering locutionary or illocutionary speech acts that were not uttered for that specific purpose, we can still produce effects or consequences which are intended or unintended – what the speaker (in this case author) intends to produce with their utterance may or may not happen, and even when they do not intend to produce a certain effect, that effect may still be achieved.

In an article published in *Nature* in 2009, John M. Berry said that in the next influenza pandemic, whether it happens now or in the future, the single most important weapon against the disease will be a vaccine. The second most important will be communication (324). In the case of news articles, the illocutionary acts of stating and informing should be an ideal to strive for, but as we have seen, they are not always successfully produced, because due to the way in which these speech acts are performed and the context in which we find them, the perlocutionary forces of alarming and intimidating are very much present, thus creating distrust and making readers feel anxious and change their perception and behavior. These pieces of news, presented in such a way, may make us click more. They may produce more visits to the websites, but they also create insecurities in readers who no longer trust anything in the sea of (mis)information, including the relevant expert guidelines and facts, which could save lives. We must ask ourselves what the real price is, the one we as a society are paying in terms of the outcome that these “unhappy” news articles have on the course of the pandemic. With all this in mind, we would be well advised to carefully choose our locutionary and illocutionary forces in news articles and employ them not to create distrust or alarm people unnecessarily in an effort to generate more clicks, but rather to provide them with the most important information that can help them and in turn all of us.

### Works Cited

- Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford UP, 1962.
- Barry, John M. "Pandemics: Avoiding the Mistakes of 1918." *Nature*, vol. 459, no. 7245, 2009, pp. 324 – 25, doi:10.1038/459324a.
- Gozzi, Nicolò, et al. "Collective Response to Media Coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Reddit and Wikipedia: Mixed-Methods Analysis (Preprint)." 2020, [arxiv.org/pdf/2006.06446.pdf](https://arxiv.org/pdf/2006.06446.pdf). Accessed 23 Sept. 2020.
- Liu, Ziming. "Digital reading: An overview." *Chinese Journal of Library and Information Science* (English edition), vol. 5, no. 1, 2012, pp. 85 – 94, [scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1067&context=slis\\_pub](http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1067&context=slis_pub). Accessed 23 Sept. 2020.
- van Dijk, Teun A. "News, Discourse, and Ideology." *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, edited by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch, Routledge, 2009, pp. 191 – 204.
- "Verizon Media Terms of Service," [www.verizonmedia.com/policies/us/en/verizonmedia/terms/otos/index.html](http://www.verizonmedia.com/policies/us/en/verizonmedia/terms/otos/index.html). Accessed 23 Sept. 2020.
- Watson, Amy. "Leading news websites in the U.S. 2020, by unique visitors." *Statista*, 2020, [www.statista.com/statistics/381569/leading-news-and-media-sites-usa-by-share-of-visits/](http://www.statista.com/statistics/381569/leading-news-and-media-sites-usa-by-share-of-visits/). Accessed 25 Sept. 2020.
- "Yahoo overview," [www.similarweb.com/website/yahoo.com/#overview](http://www.similarweb.com/website/yahoo.com/#overview). Accessed 23 Sept. 2020.
- "Yahoo Statistics and Facts," [market.us/statistics/web-search-engine/yahoo/](http://market.us/statistics/web-search-engine/yahoo/). Accessed 23 Sept. 2020.
- Primary Sources**
- "COVID patient didn't recognize body after double transplant." *yahoo!news*, 31 July 2020, [news.yahoo.com/covid-patient-didnt-recognize-body-223531539.html](http://news.yahoo.com/covid-patient-didnt-recognize-body-223531539.html). Accessed 31 July 2020.
- Groth, Leah. "The New COVID Symptom That is Alarming Even Dr. Fauci." *yahoo!life*, 23 September 2020, [www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/covid-symptom-alarming-even-dr-172229219.html](http://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/covid-symptom-alarming-even-dr-172229219.html). Accessed 23 Sept. 2020.
- . "These 21 States See an Alarming COVID Spike." *yahoo!life*, 23 September 2020, [www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/21-states-see-alarming-covid-140737681.html](http://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/21-states-see-alarming-covid-140737681.html). Accessed 23 Sept. 2020.

- Mack, Zachary. "You're Twice as Likely to Die of Coronavirus If You Live Here, Study Says." *yahoo!life*, 23 September 2020, [www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/youre-twice-likely-die-coronavirus-235737549.html](http://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/youre-twice-likely-die-coronavirus-235737549.html). Accessed 23 Sept. 2020.
- "New research suggests COVID-19 can spread via aerosol transmission – and might affect tall people more." *yahoo!news*, 29 July 2020, [news.yahoo.com/research-suggests-covid-19-spread-via-aerosol-transmission-134041673.html](http://news.yahoo.com/research-suggests-covid-19-spread-via-aerosol-transmission-134041673.html). Accessed 30 July 2020.
- Pearson, Catherine. "The First Data On Kids, COVID-19 And Race Is Here — And It's Not Good." *yahoo!news*, 5 August 2020, [www.yahoo.com/huffpost/first-data-kids-covid-19-race-154351535.html](http://www.yahoo.com/huffpost/first-data-kids-covid-19-race-154351535.html). Accessed 23 Sept. 2020.
- Peterson, Hayley. "I got COVID-19 while pregnant after months of strict isolation, and my case remains a medical mystery." *yahoo!news*, 5 August 2020, [news.yahoo.com/got-coronavirus-while-pregnant-months-181557384.html](http://news.yahoo.com/got-coronavirus-while-pregnant-months-181557384.html). Accessed 23 Sept. 2020.
- Rodriguez, Adrianna. "Buddy, the first dog to test positive for COVID-19 in the US, has died." *yahoo!news*, 30 July 2020, [news.yahoo.com/buddy-first-dog-test-positive-140928140.html](http://news.yahoo.com/buddy-first-dog-test-positive-140928140.html). Accessed 30 July 2020.
- Suebsaeng, Asawin, and Erin Banco. "The White House Begg Governors to Help Sell a COVID-19 Vaccine." *yahoo!news*, 23 September 2020, [news.yahoo.com/white-house-begg-governors-help-082301932.html](http://news.yahoo.com/white-house-begg-governors-help-082301932.html). Accessed 23 Sept. 2020.
- Wilson, Christopher. "COVID-19 deaths spike 27% even as new cases decline." *yahoo!news*, 3 August 2020, [news.yahoo.com/cornavirus-documents-27-percent-death-spike-cases-decline-140439071.html](http://news.yahoo.com/cornavirus-documents-27-percent-death-spike-cases-decline-140439071.html). Accessed 3 Aug. 2020.



Rudolf Sárdi  
Mediterranean School of Business  
South Mediterranean University Tunis

Review article

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17234/WPAS.2021.6>

## We Are the Stories We Tell: Pandemic Narratives and COVID-19

It is stating the obvious that the connection between fiction and pandemics runs impenetrably deep. The aim of the present paper is to provide a retrospective account of the import of pandemics (especially that of the plague at various points in history) in some notable works of literature and to survey its plausible kinship with new currents in the post-pandemic cultural and literary environment. In doing so, the essay strives to subject to critical assessment Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and Camus's *The Plague*, where a mysterious pandemic is directly evoked. Additionally, the essay seeks to disclose the hypothetical "viral" subtexts of contagious diseases discernible in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, written at a time when the Spanish flu of 1918 – 19 began to take its toll. In the last section, the essay will introduce a series of possible themes and genres which are likely to have a bearing on the literary scene as a direct consequence of the current pandemic.

**Key words:** pandemics, modernism, genres, anxiety, body metaphor, virus/viral

“Disease – the dark side of life, hell on earth – is the recurring nightmare of much great fiction” (Healy 1). Since the early days of literature, there has been an artistic response to a variety of health crises crossing different

modes of literary production in both the Western and the non-Western world. The literary representation of infectious diseases, plagues, influenza, and smallpox are part of a long literary tradition. The current COVID-19 pandemic can be read as a sinister reminder of the material chaos of human existence, and hence as a means to set the wheels of artistic creativity into motion by generating a discursive narrative about the present mental, psychological, ethical, and intellectual implications dominating our socio-cultural landscape.

It is important to consider the impossibility and undesirability of an undertaking to envisage, particularly at an early juncture of the pandemic, a “coherent” body of COVID-19 literature; the response to it would be too varied, impetuous, and incomplete. Nevertheless, with such a disclaimer in mind, this essay will attempt to highlight some of the emergent literary and critical work in response to the disease, eschewing a conclusive statement regarding its future directions. The magnitude of the literary reaction to the coronavirus is likely to make it demanding for the scholar to tackle its implications to any significant capacity without “reconstruct[ing] diseases and diseased bodies in their social and historical contexts, and, through examining the culture’s fictions about them, to elucidate representations of them in poems, pamphlets, and on the stage” (Healy 11–12).

The recurrence of a range of pandemics has been the *sujet* of much great fiction, which has often foregrounded the socio-culturally constructed justifications of disease and the major role literature could assume in the process. Similar to the scholarly discussions about the AIDS epidemic, the ongoing global events can be espoused as an epidemic that implies how our entire social order bears resemblance to an infected body. To my mind, Susan Sontag’s description of “the struggle for rhetorical ownership” of illness (93) can be interpreted by considering the sick body as an overloaded political site, and our explanation about it represents vital consequences and lessons to learn both for individuals and for social groups. It will be shown that “[e]pidemics

by their very nature demand political responses and provide a good opportunity and rationale for intervention into the lives of others, for the re-ordering of bodies” (Healy 3) and the re-establishing of order.

Although several literary examples have been used throughout the centuries to illuminate how humanity’s reactions to diseases have been incorporated into fiction, the present essay will speculate that – contrary to the popular opinion that original insights in COVID-19 fiction will be hard to create – our pandemic-impregnated culture shall contribute to the development of new genres, modes, and moods of expression, partially recognizing the fiasco of modern medicine and espousing instead the complex realities of human experience. While both fiction and non-fiction have been written about epidemic outbreaks and contagious diseases, it must be emphasized that the suitable paradigms established in connection with plague literature – highlighting affinities between the Great Plague of 1664–65 and the current pandemic – are clearly anachronistic to the postmodern reality of the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> To my mind, writing any fictional account about the horrifying aftermaths of COVID-19 is much more than an intertextual project: it has begun to take center stage as a *phenomenon of culture* situated in an intersecting area of discourse, which invites multidisciplinary and boundary-crossing theoretical approaches. In a manner similar to early modern English literature, “the postmodern condition is experienced in the academy today as a registering of doubt in relation to old epistemological frameworks” (Healy 236).

It must be stated at the outset that the ambiguity surrounding the murky literary terrain is partly generated by the social and emotional con-

---

<sup>1</sup> In his seminal book, entitled *Bills of Mortality: Disease and Destiny in Plague Literature from Early Modern to Postmodern Times*, Patrick Reilly identifies the dynamics between the fact of the plague and the constructs of fate that deadly diseases generate in literary texts ranging from Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* to Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*.

sequences provoked by the disease, which might “effectively disintegrate the fabric of civilized society” (Healy 60). In a vein not dissimilar to the Jacobean and Elizabethan periods in English literature, which were known to be preoccupied with morbid aspects of dying and death, it seems that the *Zeitgeist* of our new historical era is encumbered with the anxieties a pandemic should inescapably produce.<sup>2</sup> Here, the word “anxiety” is fraught with ominous and disconcerting associations, the cause of which, alongside humanity’s fragile existence and scarce medical and pharmacokinetic knowledge about the current disease and its recently released antidotes, lies in the fact that earlier epidemic outbreaks and contagious diseases with external bodily manifestations were authentically fictionalized in narrative prose.

Literary critics and latter-day doomsayers, roaming the information superhighway, have made sibyllic utterances about the specifics of a postapocalyptic landscape; yet it is imperative that one should, within a more plausible structure, develop an understanding of how to engage with new literary genres, forms, and themes during and after the pandemic. It is inevitable that the magnitude of the literary response to COVID-19 will be addressed by a diverse choir of voices. Instead of attempting to create an order in this diversity, this essay attempts to look at how the pandemic is likely to impact some aspects of literature in a “single planetary society,” where all the barriers have vanished and the “unification of the world has passed the point of no return” (Toynbee 42). To demonstrate how earlier authors captured the impact and the moods of pandemics in elusive ways and indirect settings, it will be made clear that the metaphorical depiction of the pandemic, with its ephemeral

---

2 Healy provides an incomplete list of examples of the morbid aspects of dying in late Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas, where “evil, sin and vice are so closely associated with miasmatic environments, vile smells, disease and dirt in late Elizabethan and Jacobean drama and satire” (36). In Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, for example, King Harry warns of “the filthy and contagious clouds / Of heady murder, spoil, and villainy” (III. iii.114–15); and in *King John*, Salisbury cries, “Away with me, all you whose souls abhor / The uncleanly savours of a slaughter-house; for I am stifled with this smell of sin” (IV. iii.111–13).

details, can provide a more lasting influence on the psyche and human relationships.

To achieve this goal, this essay seeks to accentuate the role of pandemics in history and their emergence as a literary theme, a body metaphor, a political and social rhetoric, and a linguistic construct. Humanity's early reactions to COVID-19 will be considered in light of the plague narratives in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Daniel Defoe's *The Journal of the Plague Year*, and Albert Camus's *The Plague*; additionally, it will embrace the challenge of demonstrating how the Spanish flu of 1918, comparable in size and consequences to COVID-19, has been used (to a much lesser degree than its predecessors) as a representative example to reflect on the lives and literary output of Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot, both of whom were personally affected by the destructive malaise to such a degree that the atmosphere of influenza and illness faintly penetrate the textures of their major works. These early examples of pandemic-impregnated literature will lead me to consider the largely hypothetical directions of literary genres and themes in a post COVID-19 era.

Aladár Sarbu rightly claims that “[m]yths survive for a long time after they had outlived their original usefulness” (114). One would not have been labelled imprudent to claim, prior to the current pandemic, that humanities in general are endangered, and the statements made to this effect, at the very least, present a mournful portrait. It can be safely made explicit that the present woes of the study of humanities are in no way attributable to an earlier popular myth, known as the death of the Gutenberg Galaxy, which gained popular currency through Marshal McLuhan's prophetic book bearing the same title in 1962. McLuhan discusses media as part of a broader cultural and societal change, which generates a “secondary oral tradition” (45) and causes books to disappear. Contrary to McLuhan's prediction that visual, individualistic print culture would come to an end through what he called “electronic interdependence” (78), one cannot but realize with a modicum of incredulity that paper consumption per capita in America exceeds 700 pounds in a year.

In the end, we have seen that, despite McLuhan's prediction, the book did not die, but human existence in turn had to cope with yet another great adversity.

In the present context, myth is treated as source material for literature functioning as a guide to the underlying structures of human experience and serving as a mold or substratum to help us create an order to which we can all safely relate. It seems pertinent to consider myth as an important resource of literature, resonating vigorously in T. S. Eliot's description of Joyce's "mythic" method, according to which the use of myth is "simply a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177). The roots of our desired order during these trying times can be detected in Matthew Arnold's critical work, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), in which he subjects his society to scrutiny in nineteenth-century England, which he knew like the back of his hand; he believed that the only way for his society to eschew anarchy was to endorse the dissemination of culture, which he defined with a great deal of superiority as "the study of perfection" (22).

In one of his vatic statements in the *Financial Times*, Yuval Noah Harari, author of the bestselling *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, optimistically argues that all recent epidemics in the world have been professionally eliminated. To this effect, he points out that "[w]hen choosing between alternatives, we should ask ourselves not only how to overcome the immediate threat, but also what kind of world we will inhabit once the storm passes. Yes, the storm will pass, humankind will survive, most of us will still be alive – but we will inhabit a different world" (17). While Harari's projection may turn out to be wide of the mark, his predictions are nonetheless reassuring as they portray not only an ideal picture of how all of us are craving to see a virus-free future world, the author also identifies the impulses behind the odd tableaux of life, which will be checkered with annoyances, such as the "soap police" and the "under-the-skin surveillance." Fear-provoking as Harari's version of the new world order sounds, some solace can be found in a "global plan" (Ha-

rari) that bridges the gap between nationalist isolation and global solidarity. Aside from Harari's journalistic gimmicks and self-styled status as a latter-day Cassandra, one should concur with the idea that all the various traits of human nature – encapsulated in the Modern Everyman, the archetypal human – emerge at the time of any crisis with their best coping mechanisms – moral or immoral, demonic or angelic, selfless or altruistic, and so forth. One thing is for certain: since time immemorial, human beings have responded to crises in similar fashion; hence all the minute details which create a visible kinship between pandemic literatures written centuries apart from one another.

Even the earliest writings in English-language literature invite the reader to dwell upon the primordial fear of humans toward infections. History has provided humanity with a colorful display of calamities, during which humanity had to fight with an invisible world of organisms. With later advancements in science and biology, the organisms remained invisible or unseen to the naked eye, but the mechanisms of disease transmission were clearly seen and understood (Riva et al.). At the outset, human beings associated these lethal maladies and their sudden outbreak to magic, superstition, the evil eye, or the wrath of gods, offenses against divinities, and the like.<sup>3</sup> Humanity's long-held beliefs in the supernatural or religious origins of pandemics were later counterweighted by better-informed societies which placed the roots of pandemics on secular grounds. While early Greek literature (Homer's *Iliad*, for example) emphasizes the possible repercussions of immoral or iniquitous

---

3 In the Bible, which has been considered as a book of perennial guidance since its inception, the plague ominously appears as God's wrath against humanity or as a warning sign to mend people's ways. Exodus 9:14: "or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth." Samuel 4:8: "We're doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness." Psalms 89:23: "And I will beat down his foes before his face, and plague them that hate him." See also: Numbers 11:33 and Isaiah 9:13. This causal relationship between man's sinful nature and God's wrath in the form of a disease can be found scattered throughout the Holy Scripture.

behavior, it is later refuted on the grounds that the “plague did not discriminate between the good and the evil but brought about the loss of all social conventions and a rise in selfishness and avarice” (Riva et al.).

Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1353) makes for an interesting case study: his young storytellers manage to while away their confinement by narrating drawn-out, erotic, and bawdy tales to one another in an enchanted garden of earthly delights. It stands out (aside from its known literary merits as a major influence on Western literature) as a quintessential collection of stories that observes the oral tradition of storytelling, which enjoyed its vogue particularly in the Middle Ages. In addition to some facetious aspects of Boccaccio’s *chef d’oeuvre*, it must also be borne in mind that most of the tales were instrumental in the development of the novel as a genre by elevating prose to become a primary vehicle for literary works. Some of the tales stand out due to their philosophical complexities, which renders *Decameron* the central work in shaping a European humanist literary culture through mediation between cultures (classical and medieval, Latin, French, and Italian) and religions (Christian and pagan).

One fascinating aspect to which Boccaccio resorts is that the self-imposed quarantine for the characters is an opportunity to laugh and stay merry while confining themselves (both literally and figuratively) from the outside world, where the plague is wreaking havoc. Most importantly, however, the veritable panacea is tucked away within the stories, because “by its very nature narrative is reassuring” (Jenkinson). It is stating the obvious that the power of storytelling for the individual and the world at large transcends many limitations as it helps to lift anxiety related to a previous trauma. Such storytelling, primarily due to the modern contrivances surrounding us, would seem somewhat absurd in our age as we attempt to restore order internally (both inside the quarantine and in the psyche of modern man); nevertheless, similar patterns are re-enacted today with the rising interest in television series, which serve as a contemporary alternative to Boccaccio’s traditional ways of



recounting the stories. Besides the grimmer aspects of the plague, *Decameron* has become a prominent text in sculpting the vernacular that was later picked up by the masses in Italy. Added to the much-admired magnetism of Boccaccio's text (its occasional lewdness and enduring poeticism) is his crowning achievement – and, of course, that of Dante and Petrarch – in fixing the form of the Italian literary language through his use of the Tuscan vernacular, which appealed to the populace of the time.

In Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), “[m]any families, foreseeing the approach of the distemper laid up stores of provisions sufficient for their whole families and shut themselves up, and that so entirely, that they were neither seen or heard until the infection was quite eased” (75). The novel, which provides an accurate account of the bubonic plague in Marseille in 1720 and recounts events of the Great Plague that struck London six decades earlier, also serves as an exemplum that only after the radical times of crises are over will creative human potential begin to burgeon and embrace the mind's contemplations of its past tribulations. Commentators on plague writing often present conflicting views as to whether the plague or any lethal pandemic can invigorate artistic creativity. Jennifer Cooke considers the plague as an impairment of one's creative genius in writing so much so that even “traditional forms of informative writing” collapse. She writes that “under its [the plague's] conditions, language is tired, lacking the descriptive vitality which would take it beyond a mere factual listing of occurrences. The physical and emotional effects of fighting plague enervate and enfeeble language itself” (Cooke 35).

In this relation, Patrick Reilly states on a more positive note that “however unsettling a graphically detailed narrative of horrors *Journal* may be, it is also an edifying tale of survival and, implicitly, of triumph” (13). Defoe's work has provoked a resurgence of interest in plague-impregnated literature during COVID-19, which is partly due to the fact that our response to pandemics can be a source of inspiration for new works during the cur-

rent pandemonium. Margaret Healy also supports this argument by stating that plague writing can be seen as an artistic egress for those who are affected by its horrors: “On a more upbeat celebratory note . . . a number of English critics have accorded plague a positive, enabling function in relation to art: ‘art—in the face of the greatest horrors (plague, the slave-trade, the death-camps)—may be obliged by indirections to *find directions out*’” (15 – 16, emphasis added).

Therefore, it goes without saying that, according to Reilly and Healy, pandemics can serve as productive and even entertaining topics themselves. Works inspired by an epidemic outbreak are unlikely to immediately engender high-quality literary prose narrative, which authentically documents events, as the oozing lacerations caused by the trauma do not *instantaneously* allow for the creative mind to fictionalize real-life events in stimulating ways. Horrid as the term “oozing lacerations” might sound in the present non-medical context, it is important to note that lacerations as opposed to wounds or cuts more pertinently represent the corporeal manifestations of the pandemic due to their irregular sizes and shapes – very much akin to the volatile and irregular circumstances under which the virus spreads or affects one’s immune system. Cooke draws a striking parallel between the manner of dying and one’s inability to produce written work: “The choked lungs and coagulated veins of the pneumonic and septicaemic strains of plague which obstruct the usual free flow of blood have a penmanship counterpart in the common enough metaphor of writing as a process of flow and its clogging as writer’s block” (33).

On one last note to the novel, it is important to remember that Defoe completed his *Journal* in hindsight. He provided his readers with an instant book, amassing statistical data, reminiscences, gossips, anecdotes, and eyewitness accounts, as the author was too young at the time of the calamity to note down particulars of the event. It is interesting to observe that the social and political fabric between Defoe’s *Journal* and COVID-19 share numerous

affinities. Defoe's narrator (identifying himself only as the mysterious H. F.) remarks that catching the plague would cause the most serious of repercussions in human relationships, as a warning mark would be installed at the doors of the infected. The theme of stigmatization in literary texts is a recurring phenomenon, which often presents itself through metaphorical usage. Jennifer Cooke accentuates that

time and again, plague is wielded as a political or rhetorical weapon in the service of social discrimination or stigmatisation; it is mobilised to critique regimes, dictators or minority groups. Used in this way, plague is frequently accompanied by the powerful 'body metaphor', which renders a state, nation, or people the 'body' that can be labelled 'sick' or 'healthy', thus making it, with plague alongside, a convenient vector for political and social rhetoric.  
(2)

Such political rhetoric is discernable in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth-Mark" (1843), where the dermatological anomaly represents imperfection to be rectified, while the letter 'A' of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by the same author is generally understood to stand for adultery, among several other plausible readings. While neither the birthmark nor the attached letter on Hester Prynne's dress are contagious in the virological sense of the word, they do spread a set of virulent ideas about one's perception of womanhood, which will make a character pilloried and shunned. All in all, it must be stressed that *A Journal* is an important work of literature, for it highlights that in addition to sharing stories as a means to connect with one another, it can also facilitate the healing process through the act of constructing a new narrative, which deliberately recoils from discussing the fear-inducing minutiae that literally plagues the city.

*The Plague*, written by Albert Camus in 1947, about the inconspicuous appearance of a lethal virus, which works its way virulently through the human population of the Algerian coastal town of Oran, features a scenario

reminiscent of the current pandemic with economic restrictions, quarantine, lockdowns, and various forms of isolation. Since its publication, the novel has been overburdened with myths, prophecies, and a plethora of speculations – which have or have not stood the test of time and has understandably become a highly venerated work of art at the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. Camus’ description of the plague-ridden, treeless, dreary, and soulless city of Oran is similar to the apocalyptic landscapes one would detect all around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Gasoline was rationed and restrictions were placed on the sale of foodstuffs. Reductions were ordered in the use of electricity. Only necessities were brought by road or air to Oran. Thus the traffic thinned out progressively until hardly any private cars were on the roads; luxury shops closed overnight, and others began to put up “Sold Out” notices, while crowds of buyers stood waiting at their doors. (63)

General readers have somewhat mistakenly interpreted the author’s intent of writing *The Plague* as an extended metaphor to address any contagion that might ravage society and take a deadly toll. Camus had experienced first-hand the onslaught of Nazi troops in Paris in 1940, which obviously enabled him to detect affinities between physical and psychological infection. It seems unlikely that Camus – who had suffered from tuberculosis himself and understood the virulence of illness as a juggernaut force – chose to degrade the corporeal manifestations of the plague to a metaphor. While I do not reject the idea that *The Plague* cannot be read as a conscious manifesto of Fascism, Nazism, or any form of dehumanizing totalitarian regime, it seems more pertinent to the present line of argumentation to disencumber the novel from any obvious ideological burdens, that is to say, to remove it from a given historical context. Stephen Metcalf is right in claiming that “Camus was uninterested in self-mythologizing as he was in anatomizing the fascist mentality. The Nazis were not evil because they occupied an extreme position on the political spectrum but because they were enemies of *life itself*” (Metcalf). Even though Camus knew

full well the magnitude of human catastrophe that the plague had the ability to cause, he was convinced, through his unique blend of humanist and existentialist philosophy, that the all-legitimizing abstractions and moral theories spreading in the world are the reason behind what he recurrently describes as an absurd death sentence, in the shadow of which human beings live. It might not be fallacious to allude to how Camus himself described what the plague was to symbolize years before the inception of his novel: “I want to express by means of the plague the suffocation which we have all suffered and the atmosphere of threat and exile in which we all lived. I want at the same time to extend that interpretation to the notion of existence in general” (qtd. in Foley 52).

Able to transfigure human bodies and put an end to life, the plague in Camus is also capable of drawing attention to a discernable kinship between the fictional events described in the novel and the current real-life pandemic. In the early days of the plague, the citizens of Oran are depicted as members of a society who display as much apathy and as little forbearance for “collective” suffering as those individuals of COVID-19 who self-interestedly believed that their pain was exclusive and all too unique to be experienced by others. Identifying the plague or any pandemic as a common concern of humankind is an important element of the novel, as one is eventually let off with the caveat that any attempt to evade death by fleeing the city is rendered pointless and equal to the horrors humankind must bear in the face of life’s absurdities. Nevertheless, the novel emphasizes that rebelling against death should be interpreted as a noble and profound struggle even if all attempts are in vain. In one way or another, *The Plague* is imbued with the author’s conviction that optimism must persevere even in times of collective suffering and hopelessness. Camus describes the plague in cold aloofness toward human bathos by enumerating sheer facts, figures, medical reports, and authority measures in order to create an air of dispassionate authenticity. The novel’s climax, which is marked by the death-throes of Othon’s son, brings all the characters together at one point of time only to concede that the plague and

its harrowing effects constitute a common concern for humanity.

In the novel, the plague passes, the city of Oran is liberated, and the only concern for the citizens is to come to an understanding of what has happened. Even if *The Plague* is sometimes seen through the microscopic lens as an allegory of the French experience under occupation, there is no denying that lesser-known writers of what Grace Dillon calls “indigenous futurism” (12) believe that “[many] speculative fiction stories, whether set in space or in a postapocalyptic future, derive their plots from a colonial perspective” (Walsh 116). In formerly colonized countries, such as Algeria, but much more so in Sub-Saharan Africa, the apocalypse had already dawned on humanity, as pandemics – both literal and metaphorical – have imposed their own restrictions on different populations, repressed people’s feelings, and created an air of permanent fear.<sup>4</sup>

I believe that reading plague-related literature of the past is not only to look for the devil in the grim details as mental charts are drawn up to highlight the analogies between “them” and “us.” Instead, one should also read these books in a larger context: the fact alone that the novel did not die is an indication that humanity must continue to act in solidarity to conquer fear and anxiety associated with the incomprehensibility that pandemics trigger. Indeed, many works of pandemic literature offer catharsis and relief in their denouement; since most of the texts are rife with the realities of the pandemic and apocalypse conditions, it only comes naturally that humanity will theorize alternative social structures and mull over the possibilities that literature offers in the way of narrating personal accounts and consider the

---

4 It might be relevant in the present context to consider the metaphorical dimensions of the plague. Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, “The Masque of the Red Death” is a fine elaboration of the plague *topos* by including a mysterious masked man in the narrative, who appears as the embodiment of the plague. Prince Prospero’s “masked ball of unusual magnificence” (197) is a reminder of the ubiquity of death and of the equality of all men in that state. Poe’s modern and literal manifestation of the *danse macabre* is a way to indicate that people do not die from the plague, but that “people are plagued by death” (Riva et al.).

historicity of the pandemic an emotional and aesthetic projection of hitherto constrained emotions.

The works of Boccaccio, Defoe, and Camus, which were tangentially dealt with in the foregoing analyses, reiterate a prescient warning for generations to come by providing a truthful account of humanity's plausible reaction in similar future crises; at the same time, it becomes clear that scientific thinking alone falls short of being the sole cure to fight the plague or come to terms with its devastating enormity. Cooperation among human beings and the expression of solidarity are something of a humanized *vade mecum*, which seek to guide one away from the rigid boundaries of science alone. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Wells' *Doctor Moreau*, or Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter," though featuring fictional characters, are prototypes of the mad scientists who not only mishandle laboratory experiments out of malice or naiveté, but also endanger humanity like illnesses or epidemics. In earlier times, human reactions to infectious diseases, followed by the devastating defeat of medicine and scientific progress, varied widely (ranging from emotional, to cognitive, to psychological and behavioral responses), but one commonality that bygone eras and our present-day calamities have is a deeply rooted fear of death regardless of how much science understands about contagions and their spread or how effectively governments put measures in place to curb the death toll. On this note, it seems wise to say that science, as has been demonstrated throughout Covid-19, can either be a glimmer of hope or a destructive force, which causes societies to collapse under the weight of the rapidly changing information emanating from the impact of the media.

In his article on the relationship between virus and viral, Zach Blas states that our current societies can be aptly characterized through the emergence of viral theories, which constitute the "major trope of the postmodern condition" (29). Furthermore, he makes a stimulating observation as he tackles a "dizzying array of viralities" proliferating in the world:

The viral emphasizes a *break, or rupture, between fiction and reality that is hazy, fluid, unstable*. Imitations of the virus, commonly labeled “viral,” are more like creative openings into fictions or poetics of the virus. These framings of the virus are unhuman, and unhuman politics is a framing for the examination of the overlappings, differences, and irreducibilities—mediations—of the virus and the viral. (30, emphases added)

Reading for the pandemic in the time of modernism allows the inquisitive scholar to glimpse at a patch of land that has been suspiciously left fallow over the past one hundred years. Elizabeth Outka’s pivotal book, entitled *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* and (puzzlingly) published just before the COVID-19 outbreak, sets its sights on the literary world during and after the Spanish flu of 1918 – 19 and has for its governing principle the same fluidity and rupture in her fresh approach to works widely subjected to earlier criticism. Studies generally suggest that World War I left England and much of Europe in a physically and emotionally immobilized condition, disfigured by social turmoil, civil unrest, decimated families and a *Weltanschauung* that can hardly be described as Panglossian.

Consequently, it is stating the obvious that some modernist texts abound in alarming images of shattered lives as well as psychologically unhinged and alienated characters, who have lost their virility to reproduce and their *joie de vivre* to return to the existential plane they used to inhabit. Any association with the unspeakable horrors of the war are ceaselessly quoted as the veritable *raison d’être* behind the deranged psyche of humanity in the interwar period. Outka’s take on the works of some emblematic representatives of modernist literature is original in the sense that it investigates the modernist mystery of why the deadly Spanish flu, despite its massive, inexorable force, made so few appearances in the British, Irish and American literatures of the period. It is believed that a conspicuous literary and critical silence ensued after the pandemic, the reason for which might have to do with Cooke’s assumption that the pandemic “alters the ability of people to speak of the hor-



ror of their experiences” (33). It is only now that scholars become conscious of the fact that assumptions about modernism in English and American culture and literature change when the devastation of the pandemic begins to generate a discursive narrative. Outka calls it “the era’s viral catastrophe” (2) and claims that the erasure of the pandemic from later critical assessment is often senselessly outweighed by military conflicts. She comments as follows:

When we fail to read for illness in general and the 1918 pandemic in particular, we reify how military conflict has come to define history, we deemphasize illness and pandemics in ways that hide their threat, and we take part in long traditions that align illness with seemingly less valiant, more feminine forms of death (2).

In spite of the fact that the Spanish flu came to a halt, its traces can be found everywhere in the literature and the culture of the time through subtextual evocation. Outka believes that these traces are intrinsic to the pandemic’s literary representations, paradoxically captured in gaps, silences, atmospheres, fragments, barrenness, and hidden bodies (2). Through her analyses of the works of T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf, the author rejuvenates an already existing pandemic canon, which bears the hallmarks of isolation, fear, and disruption. Outka is right in claiming that all these hallmarks are an expression of the horrific aftermath of the Spanish flu, which both Eliot and Woolf present through the changing moods, eerie atmospheres, and bodily disfigurements in their iconic works. Outka is mindful not to hastily plump for the conclusion that either the pandemic or World War I is categorically and unilaterally responsible for giving rise to the most recognizable elements of modernist style; yet, she cogently argues how the influenza was a primary factor in contributing to the decaying cultural atmosphere of the time, which she describes through the notions of disorientation, alienation, and fragmentation. In her scrupulously detailed close-reading of *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), she stresses that reading these texts with-

out the aforesaid historical framing is impossible. Outka perceives the consequences of influenza, its lasting neurological damage, and its psychological distortions. In her reading, *The Waste Land* is “infuse[d] with the miasmatic residue” (Outka 145) of the influenza, while *Mrs. Dalloway* portrays Woolf’s innovative rhetoric in remapping London through illness and showing how language and our perceptions of reality can be shaped by the disease.

While Eliot never manifestly mentions the pandemic in the text, he represents the pandemic in *The Waste Land* “as a powerful record of [its] enduring emotional costs, as well as a record of denial that surrounded it even as the culture remained mired in the guilt, suffering, and fear it produced” (Outka 144). His decision not to name the pandemic in the poem is attributable to his credo meticulously expounded on in his “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), where he emphasizes the significance of “impersonal poetry.” In it, he says that “the progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (qtd. in Cianci and Harding 132). In other words, the poet’s emotions and passions must be depersonalized; he must be as impersonal and objective as a scientist. Outka aptly comments that Eliot’s poem “A Note on War Poetry” is key to understanding his artistic creed of excluding personal elements from poetry. Some of Outka’s arguments in relating the fragmentary aspects of the poem to the pandemic are disturbingly expressive: fever, infection, delirium, threat of drowning, burials, resurrections, silence, and lethargy are all part of the pandemic landscape.

*Mrs. Dalloway* can also be read as a novel on influenza despite the apparent lack of direct references to it. While Woolf focuses on the suffering and the plight of two individuals (Clarissa and Septimus), the ubiquity of illness seems to loom large in the background. Outka aptly claims – and in doing so, she emphasizes the “hazy, fluid and unstable break between fiction and reality” (Blas 30) – that Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness technique is seldom if ever associated with the spreading of the influenza, though the central role of the fluidity of the narrative engenders the virus to reach the novel’s

every nook and cranny from a textual point of view. The structure in which the narrative is embedded creates the ideal form to represent the pandemic's presence. Clarissa is depicted as an obvious influenza survivor, who succeeds in living a comfortable life, but harbors deep secrets in her past, while Septimus has suffered a dual tragedy in his life, which leaves an imprint both on his body and his mind. Outka explains that

[t]he war . . . left lasting physical and mental scars on bodies. The 1918 virus, through other means, not only did long-term damage to the body's systems; it could also produce profound psychological damage (as Woolf and her doctors knew well). This damage was not simply from the trauma of the near-death experience (which is largely the trauma Clarissa seems affected by) but from neurological effects ranging from delirium to psychosis. (105)

To my mind, the broken world of England gravitates toward a wasteland of illnesses caused by the influenza outbreak. My approach to include this significant addition to my analysis on the prospects of post COVID-19 literature was to demonstrate how writing or simply intimating bodily or mental illnesses can serve as an agglutinative device in structuring the plot, peopling the narratives with characters and voices (the latter being the case in point concerning *The Waste Land*), with whom readers can easily identify; however, most importantly, these texts of shattered lives show how the pandemic experience can serve as a subtle yet formidable subtext of artistic expression. Furthermore, my own analysis and an incomplete précis of Outka's monograph also engage with the context of the present paper. In short, Eliot's recognition that multiple voices featuring different social strata can commodiously coexist in a broken literary world and Woolf's narrative and thematic gift of paving the way for the middlebrow Septimus and the upper-class Clarissa to cross paths at the novel's closure all show that both writers – alongside a handful of other modernist figures – epitomize the spirit of solidarity of the modernist vanguard much before the COVID-19 outbreak. Reading her engaging (though slightly speculative) study about the faint echoes of the Spanish flu

in modernist literature, one cannot help wondering what aesthetic forms will engulf literature that emerges from the current pandemic onward.

Early at the outset of COVID-19, the question of how the pandemic will affect literature, literary trends, and themes, as well as the vantage ground upon which literature has perched for centuries, was contingent on bafflement, ludicrous hypotheses, and (as it seems now) forlorn hope. Literary texts are likely to gain creative inspiration from the circumstantial realities most human beings undergo at this juncture of history. In a similar vein to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, which is often classified as “literature of crisis,” one might find it fitting to conclude that formal similarities, ideological kinships, and spiritual connections among different types of writing produced during historical moments of crises will be detectable in future literature (Payne and Barbera 21). In terms of classification and genre, literature dealing with COVID-19 and its aftermath will be problematic to append to a fixed, already existing label lest literary scholars should either establish novel categories or force the new fictional products into an iron-bound Procrustean bed. Literature is likely to give rise to works in disfigured or altered frames, while attempts to revivify the obsolete and the conventional might also be on the rise. Regardless of the inconsistencies in finding one single mode of literary expression, it can be intuited that all new forms of written expression will endorse the complex realities of human experience, inviting the reader “to reflect on the ancestral fear of humans toward infectious diseases” (Riva et al.). Anachronistic to the postmodern reality of COVID-19, earlier modes of narration fall short of emphasizing the newness and the singularity of our times.

In his highly controversial manifesto on ushering in postmodern fiction in the early sixties and the hurriedly foretelling the exhaustion of literature, John Barth assertively discusses the “used-upness” (17) of earlier novelistic forms and confirms that metafiction is one way for the novelist to respond to this predicament. “Barth was certainly right to proclaim in his essay that this

state of exhaustion was no cause for despair, and recent literary history has vindicated the claim that the exhausted possibilities of the novel have proved a source of vitality in fiction” (Currie 161). In a similar manner to Barth’s purported exhaustion of literary realism, our current quest for new forms, content, and genres will eventually triumph despite the fact that readers are prone to believe that literary themes at the time of the pandemic have petered out. Yet, as Barth’s criteria of predictive accuracy about the exhaustion of literature turned out to be faulty, it seems that the post-pandemic period will bring fewer novelties than one might surmise; instead, it will continue producing works in a similar, postmodern vein, with its trajectory left radically unscathed by the aftermaths of the COVID-19 pandemic. Literature will continue offering a motley assortment of genres and subgenres, including fictionalized autobiographical memories, instances of conspiracy literature, ecological fiction, and an ever-growing number of SF texts. In her exploratory article on the new artistic and cultural landscape to unfold after the pandemic is over, Nadia Anwar provides a list of plausibly emerging literary genres and themes, which she believes will help literature thrive, replenish, and develop into a new, timeless, transcultural, spontaneous, and original epoch of creative thinking. Even though Anwar’s article makes for compelling reading, it is certainly too slim on critical theory to constitute a solid basis for justifiable arguments.

It has been set out at the beginning of this essay that its findings would not be recklessly conclusive in providing inadequate evidence or *disclosing* (mark the coincidental resonance with the Greek word “apocalypse”) doom-laden visions of the world or minatory prophecies of humanity’s greatest quandary. Earlier literature, at the time of seventeenth-century plagues and even later, when the Spanish flu hit Europe, has ably demonstrated that the pestilence would cause mayhem outlasting its indomitability. It has been convincingly argued that the narratives written during crisis with a focus on the post-apocalyptic aftermath have endeavored to facilitate an exploration of what humanity might be like without the support of civilization. Should our

current societies weather the storm without the redeeming power of some form of culture (be it mainstream or subaltern), it can be safely predicted – along with the somewhat *passé* qualms formulated by Matthew Arnold – that civilization might lapse into anarchy in the Hobbesian sense of the word.

In order to prevent the eruption of social upheaval, mob rule, racial segregation, the rise of the restless proletariat, and the extolment of demagogues, literature might, *inter alia*, represent humanity's egress from the ruthless indifference one could experience at the onslaught of COVID-19. If the inverse should happen, urban population density is likely to lend itself to the pandemic and suffer all its consequences. In almost the same breath, it must be emphasized that the devastation that follows the pandemic is both to be loathed and welcomed at the same time. Class and racial barriers are demolished (consider, for example, the Black Lives Matter movement and its global spread), and the coveted oneness in a "single planetary society" (Toynbee 44) should ideally come into existence; however, it must also be loathed as such destruction might as well bring civilization, as we know it, to a standstill. No matter what guise literature happens to don, its primary function should be in its ability to produce genuine works of art, retain the humanity's moral fiber, respect its subject-matter and raise serious issues of an enduring nature. One should be ready to make one's peace with the platitudinous holy cow of our time, namely "solidarity" that transgresses boundaries, unites people and ideas, reconciles, and commiserates.

For readers of literature, what may call for herculean resilience is to accept that in the post COVID-19 era, the systematically fashioned relationship between reality and literature might change. The change, substantial as it is, will be perceptible in how the reader embarks upon the consumption of a literary product, elements of which might reflect their own abject reality of loss, isolation, agony, and solitude. One should be mindful not to leave unnoticed the topicality of Kurtz's eerily sonorous howl in *Heart of Darkness*:

“the horror, the horror.” Joseph Conrad’s imperial romance is equipped with a multiplicity of meanings, none of which is more suggestive than the dying Kurtz’s clarion call he issues for the sake of humanity’s continued existence beyond his physical and spiritual horrors. Despite the ordeal humanity has intimately got to know since January 2020, inspirational lessons, added to the bitterest ones, have been learned. The stories that have been devoured during confinements, quarantines, and travel restrictions clearly delineate how literature can shape what it means to be human, because, after all, we are the stories we tell to overcome the pandemic and reassess our own core values.

### Works Cited

- Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*. Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Barth, John. *The Literature of Exhaustion; and, the Literature of Replenishment*. Lord John P, 1982.
- Blas, Zach. “Virus, Viral.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 1/2, 2012, pp. 29–39. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/23333434](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23333434). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
- Cianci, Giovanni, and Jason Harding. *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*. Cambridge UP, 2007.
- Cooke, Jennifer. *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Currie, Mark. *Metafiction*. Routledge, 2016.
- Defoe, Daniel, and Louis Landa. *A Journal of the Plague Year: Being Observations or Memorials of the Most Remarkable Occurrences*. Oxford UP, 1990.
- Dillon, Grace L. *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. U of Arizona P, 2012.
- Eliot, T S. *Ulysses, Order, and Myth*. Dial, 1923.
- Foley, John. *Albert Camus: from the Absurd to Revolt*. McGill-Queen’s UP, 2008.
- Harari, Yuval Noah. “Yuval Noah Harari: The World after Coronavirus.” 20 Mar. 2020, [www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75](http://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.

- Healy, Margaret, et al. *Discourses of the Plague in Early Modern London*. Centre for Metropolitan History, 1993.
- Jenkinson, Clay. "Learning to Deal with the Coronavirus Through Literature." 20 Mar. 2020, [www.governing.com/context/Learning-to-Deal-with-the-Coronavirus-Through-Literature.html](http://www.governing.com/context/Learning-to-Deal-with-the-Coronavirus-Through-Literature.html). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
- McLuhan, Marshall, et al. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the Making of Typographic Man*. U of Toronto P, 2017.
- Metcalf, Stephen. "Reading Albert Camus' The Plague in the Time of Coronavirus." 23 Mar. 2020. *Los Angeles Times*, [www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2020-03-23/reading-camu-the-plague-amid-coronavirus](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2020-03-23/reading-camu-the-plague-amid-coronavirus). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
- Nadia, Anwar. "Literature in a Post Covid-19 World," [www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/690944-literature-in-a-post-covid-19-world](http://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/690944-literature-in-a-post-covid-19-world). Accessed 14 Mar. 2021.
- Outka, Elizabeth. *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*. Columbia UP, 2020.
- Payne, Michael, and Jessica Rae Barbera. *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Masque of the Red Death and Other Tales*. Franklin Library, 1981.
- Reilly, Patrick. *Bills of Mortality: Disease and Destiny in Plague Literature from Early Modern to Postmodern Times*. Peter Lang, 2015.
- Riva, Michele Augusto, et al. "Pandemic Fear and Literature: Observations from Jack London's The Scarlet Plague." *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Oct. 2014, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4193163](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4193163). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
- Sarbu, Aladár. *The Study of Literature: An Introduction for Hungarian Students of English*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2008.
- Sontag, Susan. *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.
- Toynbee, Arnold, and Jane Caplan. *A Study of History*. Rev. and abrid. ed, Thames and Hudson, 1988.
- The English Standard Version Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments with Apocrypha*. Oxford UP, 2009.
- Walsh, Karen M. *Geek Heroines: An Encyclopedia of Female Heroes in Popular Culture*. An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, 2019.



# Contributors

**Stipe Grgas** is Professor Emeritus of American Studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. Before 2005, he taught for more than twenty years at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zadar and was a guest lecturer at English departments of other Croatian universities (Rijeka, Split). He has published four books – two on Irish topics and two on American literature and culture – edited two, and written more than a hundred scholarly articles. Besides literary issues, he has worked in the interdisciplinary field of human spatiality and cultural studies. His most recent work explores the overlap of economics and literature. These themes have been the focus of his lecturing in postgraduate courses. He has been a guest lecturer abroad and has been awarded two Fulbright scholarships (Yale, Cornell).

**Nicole Haring** is a PhD candidate at the Center for Inter-American Studies at the University of Graz, Austria, working on gender studies and cultural gerontology. She holds two master's degrees, one in education (English & Geography) and one in English and American Studies, both from the University of Graz. Recently, she has finished a Fulbright scholarship at the University of Oklahoma (2019–2020) and was the holder of the Elisabeth-List-Fellowship for Gender Studies at the University of Graz (2020–2021). Currently, she holds the DOC Fellowship from the Austrian Academy of Science (2021–2024) to work on her dissertation project on intergenerational storytelling in education.

**Andrea Jović** is a PhD student of literature, performing arts, film, and culture at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. Her dissertation deals with literary representations of work to understand how literature can help denaturalize it and imagine a post-work world. Her research interests include contemporary literature, political theory, post-work theory, xenofeminism, and queer theory.

**Ana Kovačić** is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Food Technology and Biotechnology, University of Zagreb, where she teaches English language for specific purposes. She graduated from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Zagreb in 2009, after which she worked as a teacher of the English language at the 11<sup>th</sup> Gymnasium in Zagreb and taught English for

specific purposes at the Faculty of Transport and Traffic Sciences in Zagreb as well as the Faculty of Agrobiotechnical Sciences in Osijek. She has also proofread and edited scientific papers in English published in the journal *Poljoprivreda/Agriculture*. Currently, she translates from and into English various general, scientific, and professional texts, especially in the field of medicine and, and is interested in language teaching at the academic level, translation studies, linguistic theories, discourse analysis, and cultural studies.

**Rudolf Sárdi** (b. Budapest, Hungary, 1981) earned his doctorate in Modern English and American Literature at the Faculty of Humanities of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, in 2014. He currently lives in Tunis, where he is Associate Professor at the South Mediterranean University and Visiting Lecturer at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of the University of Tunis. His current research focuses on transmediality and narrativity in the cinematic novel. He has publications in various peer-reviewed international journals and has attended more than 20 conferences worldwide. He speaks Hungarian, English, Portuguese, and French. His book, entitled *Journeys Across Vladimir Nabokov's Unexplored Textual Zones: Mysteries of the Otherworld*, is forthcoming.