

Introduction

The Relevance of Camus's *The Plague*

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[T]here's no substitute for finally sitting down and reading the 1947 novel "The Plague," by Albert Camus. Its relevance lashes you across the face."¹

Camus's classic narrative *La Peste* (*The Plague*)² is a timely philosophical read in an era when a deadly pandemic rages worldwide. An allegory rich with suggestion, it rewards an imaginative reader with innumerable meanings as our own lived experiences mirror the novel. We witness protesters who argue for individual freedom and the autonomy to defy government-imposed regulations. They openly clash with followers of science who recommend shared actions of self-sacrifice to mitigate the spread of infection. Choosing either to act in one's own interest or to sacrifice for the good of all has become a haunting theme of American life in which the "richest nation on earth" experienced the highest number of cases and deaths in the world while under the leadership of former president Donald Trump as well as through the first

¹ Metcalf, "Albert Camus' 'The Plague' and Our Own Great Reset," March 23, 2020.

² Camus's *La Peste* was published in French in 1947, and as *The Plague*, in English, in 1948.

year, 2021, of the administration of President Joe Biden.³ Political divisions over wearing masks, social distancing, police killings, Black Lives Matter, the January 6, 2021, assault on the United States Capitol, and recommended or mandated vaccines sow discord at a time when solidarity could have united the United States to lead the world against the pandemic. Instead, misinformation campaigns have stoked opposition among the populace and away from the virus. “We’re all in this together,” was repeatedly uttered by Dr. Bernard Rieux, Camus’s narrator. How seldom did we hear that call for unity from the podiums of power, for example, the leaders of America, Brazil, and India (the three countries with the highest death counts in the world)? After two years into the coronavirus pandemic with over 1 million deaths in the United States and over 6 million worldwide, we might ask ourselves, do we measure up to Camus’s optimistic assessment of human behavior under duress? Do we collectively meet the minimum threshold of ethical behavior posed by Camus who wrote, “What’s true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves”?⁴

His Life and Work

Albert Camus was born on November 7, 1913, in Mondovi, Algeria. As a *pied noir* (black foot), he was the second-generation offspring of European colonists who settled in North Africa from 1830 until the 1960s, when indigenous independence was regained after the Algerian War of 1954–1962. Unlike Arab and Berber inhabitants, he was born a French citizen: a unique status. He was described by one scholar, Stephen G. Kellman, as both “a stranger in his native land” and “a ragged interloper among the literary sophisticates of Paris.”⁵

³ Bassett and Linos, “Trump Gave Up on Fighting the Virus,” July 14, 2020. See also World Health Organization (WHO) Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard, July 4, 2022.

⁴ Camus, *The Plague*, 125.

⁵ Kellman, “On Albert Camus,” 4.

His father, killed in World War I in 1914, prompted his Spanish mother (born deaf) to relocate him and his older brother (born deaf-mute) to an apartment in Algiers where they lived with three other persons without electricity or running water. Diagnosed with tuberculosis at age seventeen, a transmitted disease for which there was then no cure nor satisfactory treatment, he was forced to leave home and live in self-imposed quarantine with an uncle. A lycée professor influenced him to study philosophy, particularly the ancient Greeks and Nietzsche. Forced to abandon his love of swimming and aspirations of becoming a professional football player, he relinquished the position of goalkeeper for a local team, later remarking, “What little I know on morality, I learned it on football pitches and theater stages. Those were my true universities.”⁶

Beginning in 1933, he studied philosophy at the University of Algiers and completed his studies (equivalent to a master’s degree) in 1936 with a thesis on Plotinus. First married in 1934 and divorced in 1936, he wrote theatrical works and traveled Algeria as an actor. He visited Paris for the first time in 1937, where he wrote for several socialist newspapers, and in 1940 moved to Paris to become editor-in-chief of *Paris-Soir*. As the buildup to World War II intensified, he attempted to join the army but was rejected due to his illness. As Germany invaded Paris, he fled to Lyon, married again in 1940, and by 1942 had published *The Stranger*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *Caligula*. He and his wife moved to Oran where he taught in primary schools, but due to a recurrence of tuberculosis, he moved again in 1942 to a mountain village in the French Alps where he began writing *La Peste*. Stranded in France, he was separated from both his wife and mother who were back in Algeria. In 1943, he returned to Paris to edit the underground newspaper *Combat* as part of the French Resistance. In 1944, he met Jean-Paul

⁶ Mezahi, “Goalkeeper, Philosopher, Outsider,” November 7, 2013. Speculation is that Camus might have become a professional football player.

Sartre, André Gide, Simone de Beauvoir, André Breton, and, since he was already well-known, easily assimilated into the group of French intellectuals living in Paris. In Paris after the war in 1945, his wife gave birth to twins, and in 1946, as a celebrated writer, he visited the United States and Canada, delivering a speech at Columbia University and publishing a series of essays from *Combat* entitled “Neither Victims nor Executioners.”

La Peste was published in 1947 and translated into English the following year. He continued to write, to travel to other countries—including Algeria where he expressed disapproval of oppressive French colonialist policies—and to see performances of his dramatic works on stage. In 1951, he published *The Rebel* to negative reviews, broke off his friendship with Jean-Paul Sartre, and rejected the label “existentialist.”⁷ He repeatedly took political stands against oppressive governments, including France in the 1950s, when he tried to find a way to negotiate Algerian freedom amid anticolonialist uprisings.⁸ Conflicted by a complicated social dynamic of sympathy for the Algerian cause but also identification with his French lineage, he failed to satisfy both the Left—particularly those sympathetic to communism—and the Right. Yet the complexity of his views continues to provide opportunities for present-day readers to study his words and actions more carefully: to credit him for meeting his literary and humanitarian goals while withholding praise for what we judge, in retrospect, as failures and omissions. A pensive short story published in 1957, “The Artist at Work,” captured the “good luck” and rise in popularity of a painter who, like Camus, vacillated between solidarity and solitude as he came to lose prestige and influence.⁹ That same

⁷ See also Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel That Ended It*.

⁸ Kabel and Phillipson, “Structural Violence and Hope in Catastrophic Times,” 5.

⁹ For a detailed chronicle of critics of Camus's *The Plague*, see Krapp, “Time and Ethics in Albert Camus's *The Plague*.”

year, Camus accepted the Nobel Prize in Literature whereupon he wrote in his journal, “Strange feeling of overwhelming pressure and melancholy.”¹⁰ He died in a car crash at age forty-six on January 4, 1960. An unfinished manuscript found with him at the scene of his death was later published in 1994 as *Le Premier Homme* (*The First Man*).¹¹

Then and Now

As winter turns into spring of an unspecified year in the 1940s, Camus’s narrator, Dr. Bernard Rieux (whose identity is revealed only at the end of the novel), leads us through dire events in Oran as it is voluntarily shut off from the outside world. Oran is cast as a “treeless, glamourless, soulless” town of 200,000.¹² Beginning with the first dead rat on April 16 and ending the following February with the ceremonial opening of the town gates, Rieux tracks time, the promise of a curative serum, and corpses. Death rates climb through the hot summer and into the fall. At first counted by the week—at 16, 24, 28, 32, 40, 100, 302, then nearly 700 per week—administrators switch to counting them by the day to report “lower” numbers (reaching 92, 107, then 130 deaths per day) in order to forestall panic. The narrative chronicles the progression of deadly bubonic plague through the town as its inhabitants deny the obvious, struggle to comply with orders of quarantine, and cope with denial, fear, isolation, and loss of loved ones. The invasion of the plague bacillus is unexpected, unwanted, and uncontrollable: exemplifying for Camus the inevitable human condition of “the absurd” and man’s helplessness in the face of it. The

¹⁰ Kellman, “On Albert Camus,” 6. From Camus, *Notebooks 1951–1959*.

¹¹ Camus, *Le Premier Homme*, was first published in French in 1994 and in English in 1995.

¹² Camus, *The Plague*, 6.

response of Rieux is not to succumb, however, but to fight, thereby finding meaning in resistance. He cites his duty, urges others to decency, and invokes their shared concern for humanity. The novel raises issues of truth, honesty, ethics, the problem of evil, faith, the pathology of illness, death, the absurd, freedom, love, heroism, and time.

One might trace the relevance of the novel along at least three notable lines: (1) the narrative's depiction of a range of human reactions to the absurd, (2) its historical weight within the context of plague literature and pandemic fiction, and (3) its fictional triumph over the facts—the numbers, the data, and the daily developments—in chronicling a story of diverse individuals thrown together by fate who succeed in pulling together, acting in solidarity, and surviving the worst conditions of the plague. This story of plague could have easily resulted in a shallow, documentary-style work of nonfiction or a dry, didactic philosophical tome that, either way, ended on a less optimistic note. An alternative informed reading, on the other hand, casts the relevance of the novel in terms of three additional features conceptualized as what the novel lacks, namely (4) any significant description of women as fully functioning human beings—female caregivers, doctors, workers, wives, partners; (5) depictions of Algerian and Arab characters who represent the majority indigenous population; and (6) an awareness and analysis of class differences, only minimally represented in the text by starving, rioting, destructive mobs. On this competing interpretation, Camus's novel is relevant for revealing the long-standing hierarchical power structures of the privileged that maintained systemic inequalities and oppression of the less powerful, non-male, non-white, non-European, poor, and vulnerable populations. As a result, some readers of *The Plague* find Camus's advocacy of solidarity, cooperation, and hope a form of "naïve idealism" that ignores pervasive structural differences and ideologies that continually harm those who are truly suffering and dying, particularly during a pandemic. On this reading, according

to critics Kabel and Phillipson, Camus's book fails to inspire social change.¹³

The unraveling of our own story parallels that of Oran. Some say we began to mark "Covid time" as early as December 2019, with March 11, 2020, as the official pronouncement of pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) due to a novel coronavirus that emerged from Wuhan, China, to blanket world populations in sickness and death.¹⁴ For over two years, government agencies and concerned citizens have tracked daily statistics of contracted cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. "The United States continues to have the highest cumulative number of cases and deaths globally . . . despite the widespread availability of vaccines in the country" and now lags behind in vaccines in comparison to much of the rest of the developed world.¹⁵ Reporters chronicled the experiences of front line medical workers in overcrowded hospitals. Families awaited a plan, a cure, and finally, a vaccine, while politicians and pundits posited an "existential crisis" to describe our world in peril.¹⁶ Under the new administration of President Biden—which began on January 20, 2021—vaccines-in-arms came to exceed 3 million per day while simultaneously more transmissible variants of the virus began to spread. Citizens cautiously sought a return to "normal" but medical epidemiologists doubted that even if at least 60–70 percent of the country's population received at least one vaccine, it could escape the reach of the virus when other countries were unable to attain sufficient vaccines or control recurring outbreaks. What the vaccine has done, however, is severely limit

¹³ Kabel and Phillipson, "Structural Violence and Hope in Catastrophic Times," 4.

¹⁴ "WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks," March 11, 2020.

¹⁵ The United States had recorded more than 52 million of the world's 281 million cases and 820,000 deaths of the world's 5.4 million. WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard, December 31, 2021. According to *The Washington Post* coronavirus data on December 31, 2021, 62 percent of Americans were fully vaccinated (73.4 percent partially vaccinated) in spite of vaccine availability since April 2021, lagging far behind dozens of other European and Asian countries, including Britain.

¹⁶ Mark Leibovich, "For A.O.C., 'Existential Crises' as Her District Becomes the Coronavirus Epicenter," May 4, 2020.

the death toll, particularly in America.¹⁷ Not so in other parts of the world. On May 19, 2021, India reported the highest number of deaths in one day worldwide—4,500, surpassing the highest number of 4,400 in the United States on January 20, 2021.¹⁸ Photos revealed dozens of Covid-infected bodies floating down the Ganges River due to shallow graves unable to hold them.¹⁹ After a long respite from conflict in the Middle East, fighting between Hamas and Israel posed the dual threat of war injuries and spread of the virus in Gaza.²⁰ With severe shortages and unequal distribution of vaccines—“only 0.3% were in low-income countries, while richer countries administered around 85%”—some countries are not expected to obtain vaccines until 2024.²¹

It should be noted that the numbers of both cases and deaths are assumed to be severely underreported in the United States as well as elsewhere, due to lack of testing and transparency of reporting. In May 2021, one study estimated an actual number of 912,345 deaths—compared to a then reported 578,555—in the United States alone.²² The uneven distribution of medical treatment, ventilators, vaccines, and proper burials worldwide has been criticized as evidence of the “catastrophe” of Covid that “makes indigenous peoples acutely vulnerable to the ravages of the virus, further deepening their material, physical and spiritual plight and collective loss.”²³

¹⁷ On May 18, 2021, the seven-day average dropped to 589 from a high of 4,000 per day in January. But as of October 2021, it once again reached heights of over 2,000 per day; see *The Washington Post* Coronavirus data, November 14, 2021. By December 31, 2021, the highly transmissible Omicron variant rose to an average of 344,543 cases per day, but deaths stabilized at 1,551 per day; see *The Washington Post* Coronavirus data, December 31, 2021.

¹⁸ Slater, “In India, the Deadliest Day,” May 19, 2021, and “India Sets Pandemic Record with More Than 400,000 New Cases,” May 1, 2021.

¹⁹ Pandey, “India’s Holiest River Is Swollen with Covid Victims,” May 18, 2021.

²⁰ Hendrix and Balousha, “Gaza Struggles with Twin Crises,” May 22, 2021.

²¹ Petrequin, “EU Leaders Agree to Donate 100 Million Doses of Vaccines,” May 25, 2021.

²² “Estimation of Total Mortality,” Institute for Health Metrics (IHME), May 13, 2021.

²³ Kabul and Phillipson, “Structural Violence and Hope,” 13.

Camus Sets the Stage

Consider the speech delivered by Camus at Columbia University on March 28, 1946, during his only trip to America, entitled, “La Crise de L’homme” (“A Human Crisis”)—judged by one scholar as providing us with a “blueprint” to a number of Camus’s works, including *The Plague*, *The Fall*, *The Rebel*, and *First Man*.²⁴ Fresh from postwar France, the thirty-two-year-old Camus represented “his generation” of young French citizens as he addressed American academics sitting comfortably in a packed auditorium in New York City.²⁵ Few listeners had undergone the unspeakable horrors of World War II, survived the occupied rule of Hitler, been stripped of freedoms that resulted in being held prisoner in one’s own country—trapped in one’s home, separated from loved ones—as if attacked by a veritable plague. After the novel was published in 1947, Camus acknowledged its allegorical nature as a chronicle of Nazi invasions of Europe, but, as many authors in this volume have argued, it was so much more: it offers us relevance beyond its original place in time. It opens a lens that probes deep and wide; it portrays any person in any town at any unspecified time anywhere that becomes “victim” to the brutality of “the executioner” (referred to by Camus in his speech as “the brutes taking charge in the four corners of Europe”). Recall that in 1946, Camus also published a collection of essays from *Combat* entitled, “Neither Victims nor Executioners.”

As Camus came to write in *The Plague*, through the words of Dr. Rieux’s friend, Tarrou, who was adamantly opposed to capital punishment and violence: “on this earth there are pestilences and

²⁴ Kaplan, *Looking for the Stranger: Camus and the Life of a Literary Classic*. Kaplan was a panelist following the May 9, 2016, reading of Camus’s 1946 speech by actor Viggo Mortensen in the same Columbia University auditorium of Camus’s appearance seventy years prior. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaFZJ_ymueA. All quotes are taken from this video.

²⁵ Renewed attention to the speech is the focus of Robert Emmet Meagher’s 2021 publication, *Albert Camus and the Human Crisis*.

there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences."²⁶ Foreshadowing the main themes of resistance against an oppressor, disease, or injustice by inspiring solidarity among men and women who come together in a common fight, Camus added, "I grant we should add a third category: that of the true healers."²⁷ Surely this explains why Camus chose a physician, Dr. Rieux, as the main character and narrator:

Nonetheless, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.²⁸

In his 1946 speech, Camus outlined four symptoms of "the human crisis" resulting from human indifference and passivity within a world of violence, "mistrust, resentment, greed, and the race for power": (1) the rise of terror consisting in an uncertain future that begets fear and anxiety, solitude and unhappiness; (2) the impossibility of persuasion, that is, the failure of reason and passion to trump irrationality and indifference; his example is a concentration camp victim "who cannot hope to explain to the SS men who are beating him that they ought not to"; (3) the growth of bureaucracy where paperwork replaces persons; and (4) a "cult of efficiency" where "real men" are replaced by "political men" who engage in destructive abstractions (like Nazism) in which harmful instincts are "elevated to the status of an idea or theory."²⁹

²⁶ Camus, *The Plague*, 254.

²⁷ Camus, *The Plague*, 254.

²⁸ Camus, *The Plague*, 308.

²⁹ All quotes taken from the video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaFZJ_ymueA.

The remedy for “the human crisis”—Camus’s suggested “lesson of those years . . . of blood spilled”—is an end to “the cult of silence” in the face of “the reign of abstraction” and a rediscovery of “the freedom of thought” needed “to resolve any of the problems facing the modern conscience.” This consists of freely seeking “the common good” in “communion among men” and in forming a “brotherhood of men struggling against fate.” For the sake of justice, Camus argues, we must eliminate lying, violence, slavery, and terror.

It is too easy in this matter to simply accuse Hitler and to say, “Since the beast is dead, its venom is gone.” We know perfectly well that the venom is not gone, that each of us carries it in our own hearts.

Consider that at the end of *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux ominously “remembered” to himself:

He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.³⁰

On a positive note, Camus shares Dr. Rieux’s reasoning for chronicling the story of the plague in fictional Oran with another direct link to his speech that serves to explain why he himself was motivated to write his own fictional account, *La Peste*:

³⁰ Camus, *The Plague*, 308.

Dr Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favor of those plague-stricken people: so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quite simply what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.³¹

This conclusion, in the face of the incomprehensible and insurmountable absurd—man's suffering, evil, and death—reflects a change in Camus's writings when he moved beyond advocating that one merely face the absurd, alone, like Sisyphus, to instead combat it by forming "a brotherhood of men":

[I]f there is one fact that these last five years have brought out, it is the extreme solidarity of men with one another. Solidarity in crime for some, solidarity in the upsurge of resistance in other. Solidarity even between victims and executioners.³²

We, too, witness a monumental human crisis enacted in real time. Our full story is yet to be written but one might conclude that ultimately nearly 81 million Americans (51.3 percent of the votes cast) denied Donald Trump a second term in favor of Joseph Biden and Kamala Harris, and that the state of Georgia elected two Democrats to the U.S. Senate to split the numbers 50-50 with Vice President Harris becoming the deciding majority vote. In keeping with campaign promises, Biden met and surpassed his goal of 100 million vaccines within his first one hundred days in office and signed economic relief into law for economically disadvantaged citizens. No such political accounting surfaces in Camus's story while it is integral to understanding ours. The highest number of American

³¹ Camus, *The Plague*, 308. Interestingly, there is a second chronicle within the narrative as well: that recorded by Tarrou.

³² Camus's *Notebooks 1951–1959*, cited in Birdsall, "Albert Camus' *Jonas, or the Artist at Work*," 8. See also Camus, "The Artist at Work," 1957.

citizens voted in a safe election that insured the country's turn toward fighting the pandemic rather than ignoring it or calling it a "hoax." President Biden acknowledged both the dead and grieving as he held the first communal memorial for the nation on the eve of his inauguration. Camus would have called this a form of resistance and a form of solidarity. He would have empathized with victims lost to the virus while valorizing the healers, particularly health care personnel and other essential workers, for whose ordinary, everyday deeds of decency and healing he reserved the term "heroic."

Range of Human Reactions to the Absurd

Camus's characters adopt a variety of stances from the extremes of exploitation (Cottard) and religious fervor (the Jesuit priest, Father Paneloux) with a host of options in-between: the narrator, Dr. Rieux, who seeks to cure but cannot; Rieux's new friend and confidant, Jean Tarrou, who organizes squads of workers to fight the disease; the visiting journalist, Raymond Rambert, who longs to escape and return to his lover in Paris; the heroic yet nondescript office clerk, Joseph Grand, who diligently tallies the dead; other doctors, citizens, and the family of Monsieur Othan, particularly his young, innocent son—recipient of a long-awaited serum—who dies a painful death nonetheless. Rieux's inability to cure the sick moves him to lead others to volunteer, work, organize: to do something—anything—against an invading, unwieldy, arbitrary killing force. Doing nothing constitutes complicity with the enemy.

It is not until the New Year that hope begins to return to the inhabitants of Oran, although Dr. Rieux remarks, "it is doubtful if this could be called a victory."³³ The story takes on new relevance

³³ Camus, *The Plague*, 271.

and meaning as we, too, lived sequestered-in-place in our respective homes and communities—waiting: for adequate testing, for the death toll to drop, for social distancing requirements to ease, for a possible “next wave,” for businesses and schools to remain open, for ample doses of a vaccine, and for the normalcy we once knew. *The Plague* teaches us to neither covet nor expect what we so casually took for granted. As we progress through long, drawn-out stages of our own twenty-first-century “plague,” the passing of time reveals new problems such as loss of employment, hunger, eviction, lack of internet access for children to attend school remotely, and the disproportionate susceptibility to contracting the disease if one is a person of color, an “essential” worker forced to continue laboring in an unsafe environment, an “undocumented/unauthorized non-citizen,”³⁴ poor, or someone lacking health insurance. As with the growing spread of the disease in Oran, crises we experience multiply over time. Covid “variants”—such as the deadly Delta and highly contagious Omicron variants of 2021—pose new threats to health and welfare, just as the extension of vaccines to young children and a third “booster” shot offer a glimmer of hope to the weary. Millions of anti-vaxxers, however, complicate recovery for all.

The Narrative's Historical Weight

Consider how Camus crafted the novel in its historical and literary contexts. Numerous commentaries have been written during our current pandemic to motivate readers to appreciate the novel's plot and details. For example, Clay Jenkinson gleans commonalities with other plagues from a study of pandemic literature dating back to the Justinian Plague of 541 CE, the Black Death (1348–1352), the Great Plague of London (1665–1666), the Third Plague Pandemic beginning in 1894 (China, Australia, India), and the Spanish Flu

³⁴ Aguilera, “Another Word for ‘Illegal Alien,’” July 22, 2016.

(1918). These documents record a pattern of human reactions of denial, flight (for the wealthy), suffering of the poor who are often essential workers unable to flee, legitimate strategies to mitigate the spread of the disease (government laws, quarantine, social distancing, masks), confidence men and conspiracy theories, economic fallout, and a rush to normalcy that often causes prolonged infection and death.³⁵ Kim Willsher notes that the novel is loosely based on a cholera epidemic in Algeria which reportedly killed a large proportion of the population in 1849, almost twenty years after French colonization began.³⁶ Sean Illing suggests, “The beauty of *The Plague* is that it asks the reader to map the lessons of the pandemic onto everyday life. The principles that drive the hero, Rieux, are the same principles that make every society worthwhile—empathy, love, and solidarity.”³⁷

Alain de Botton credits Camus with both exposing the absurdity of one’s life which can end at any moment, for any reason, as well as encouraging an internalization of human vulnerability that necessitates loving our fellow man.³⁸ Robert Zaretsky suggests that the lessons learned from Camus are complex wherein “ordinary” characters can function as role models who exemplify “resistance against the inhuman force of the plague,” but it is the ignorance of the politicians and powerful that are the real threat (although, in the end, not a reason for despair, given Camus’s faith in man).³⁹ Simon Critchley argues that basic anxiety about vulnerability and death—experienced acutely during a pandemic—can actually function as a “vehicle of liberation.”⁴⁰ Ronald Aronson offers the observation that “there is nothing political about his plague, while our situation is profoundly so. . . . our plague takes place through

³⁵ Jenkinson, “Why We Should Be Reading Albert Camus during the Pandemic,” May 26, 2020.

³⁶ Willsher, “Albert Camus Novel *The Plague*,” March 28, 2020.

³⁷ Illing, “This Is a Time for Solidarity,” March 15, 2020.

³⁸ Botton, “Camus on the Coronavirus,” March 19, 2020.

³⁹ Zaretsky, “The Unwilling Guide: Camus’s *The Plague*,” Summer 2020.

⁴⁰ Critchley, “Our Fear, Our Trembling,” April 11, 2020.

the social and political madness of Trumpism. . . . its viciousness, its sense of grievance, its cult of personality, its proud rejection of science and reason.”⁴¹ No comparable critique of Oran’s leadership appears in *The Plague*.

Orhan Pamuk cites Daniel Defoe’s chronicle of seventeenth-century London, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, as “the single most illuminating work of literature ever written on contagion and human behavior.”⁴² That work influenced Camus, but it is worth noting that while Defoe’s narrator ends his chronicle bemoaning “all manner of wickedness among us,”⁴³ Camus cautiously celebrates the cooperation that sustained the doctors, workers, and the general populace. Moreover, Defoe notes the contributions of women as nurses, their tribulations as mothers, the many burdens of caregiving relegated to women: all of which are absent from *The Plague*. Other epidemic literature that preceded *La Peste* includes *History of the Wars* by Procopius (542 CE, The Justinian Plague), *The History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides (431 BCE, The Plague of Athens), Giovanni Boccaccio’s 1353 *Decameron* (fourteenth-century Black Death in Italy), and *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (seventeenth-century bubonic plague in London). The closest factual description of plague in Algeria to that fictionalized by Camus is that referenced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that occurred in 1946, just when Camus is writing *The Plague* (in France).⁴⁴ Clearly he was able to pick and choose how to craft his version, resulting in an uplifting testament to men’s strength united against an enemy, fighting a foe.

⁴¹ Aronson, “Camus’ Plague Is Not Ours,” April 14, 2020. For a philosophical overview of Camus’s oeuvre, see Aronson, “Albert Camus,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* as well as the previously mentioned *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship*.

⁴² Pamuk, “What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us,” April 23, 2020. Pamuk is the winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature and is currently writing a novel set in 1901 based on the Third Plague Pandemic.

⁴³ Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 143.

⁴⁴ Bertherat et al., “Plague Reappearance in Algeria after 50 Years, 2003,” October 2007.

Not everyone responded positively. Even early criticisms by Jean-Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes found fault with Camus's moral message overwhelming his aesthetic concerns.⁴⁵ More recent readings further problematize Camus's intentions, style, and overall effect on generations of readers and critics. Scholars influenced by the writings of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and other race theorists fault Camus for ignoring the indigenous population of Algeria, its struggle for autonomy, and the pervasive inequalities a colonized country bears: all of which were apparent to the author. As he engaged in various political pronouncements and publications in real life, he omitted them from his fictional account of Oran. He is criticized for deliberately evading the topic of French colonial oppression and violence, "erasing" the Algerian uprising and resultant 1945 massacre of at least 20,000 Algerians, and "masking" the indigenous peoples' fight for freedom.⁴⁶ For some critics, Camus silences the voice of the North African "subaltern" who fails to see herself reflected in the text; that is, "Individual travails overshadow the decimation of Arabs by the plague."⁴⁷ More pointedly, as argued by Robert Solomon in a 2008 essay, "In *The Stranger* the Arabs who make up most of the population don't have names, but in *The Plague* they don't seem to have deaths either."⁴⁸ Camus is accused of choosing to write a "classic imperialist discourse that, directly, overtly, and with complicity, accepts the racist hierarchy that all European countries imposed on other parts of the world."⁴⁹ Solomon added, "Camus describes Algeria here as in *The Stranger* as if it is nothing but a European colony."⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Krapp, "Time and Ethics," 655.

⁴⁶ Kabel and Phillipson, "Structural Violence and Hope in Catastrophic Times," 4.

⁴⁷ Kabel and Phillipson, "Structural Violence and Hope in Catastrophic Times," 5.

⁴⁸ Solomon, "Facing Death Together," 174.

⁴⁹ Kabel and Phillipson, "Structural Violence and Hope in Catastrophic Times," 6.

⁵⁰ Solomon, "Facing Death Together," 174.

Fictional Triumph over Fact

The shift toward critical readings of the novel lies in the difference in time periods—ours and that of Camus—as well as what is considered to be Camus's outdated response to “the executioner,” oppressor, or purveyor of injustice. Scholars Kabel and Phillipson write, “The anti-fascism that was important for Camus in occupied France is largely immaterial to Algerian politics. His advocacy of assimilation in Algeria predated and continued after the ‘demise’ of fascism.”⁵¹ In effect, he grew out of step with the times—his own—with an exhortation to “universal humanism” that was said to exclude the indigenous population and conceal “his parochial colonialist politics,” thereby rendering his “hope” for the future “romanticized.”⁵² More awareness of what is missing, eliminated, and structurally barred from the novel results in reading the novel's advocacy of solidarity as incomplete, hollow, and empty.

LeBlanc and Jones, however, offer a 2002 reading of *The Plague* in which they see Camus offering an alternative narrative model that moves beyond “conflict models of discourse” to one in which “the binary logic of the conflict between France and Algeria” is rejected and “far from embodying and promulgating a colonial mentality, his second published novel actually anticipates post-colonial critiques of French control of Africa.”⁵³ They argue, “The intersections of religion, art, and politics in his work problematize models of political discourse and open a way to think about the place of narrative and story-telling and their meaning for being at home with ‘others’ and the self, in community, in a place.”⁵⁴

Specifically with regard to the inequities seemingly perpetuated by Camus's neglect of the Arab population, David Carroll tracks

⁵¹ Kabel and Phillipson, 5, refers to Tony Judt, *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 87–135.

⁵² Kabel and Phillipson, “Structural Violence and Hope in Catastrophic Times,” 6, 14.

⁵³ Kellman, “About This Volume,” ix.

⁵⁴ LeBlanc and Jones, “Space/Place and Home,” 209.

the origins of the earliest and most intensely negative claims against the novel to a 1970 book by Conor Cruise O'Brien to which Camus never had a chance to respond.⁵⁵ Carroll defends what he insists is Camus's clear and consistent anticolonialist stance with ample documentation from both his fictional and political writings. In explaining the complexity of Camus's strategic choice of Oran—"his least favorite Algerian city," Carroll offers evidence of contrasting procolonialist writings of Camus's literary predecessors, particularly from 1938.⁵⁶ Carroll's incisive historical and textual analysis provides evidence that cannot be denied: "The charge that 'Camus and his friends' did not find colonial racism and oppression repugnant and that he did not denounce them and see a link between colonial and Nazi racism and violence simply does not hold up to scrutiny."⁵⁷ Carroll's analysis also considers the literary fact stressed by Camus himself, namely, that the novel was fictional and allegorical and thus necessarily resistant to historical-political accuracy. Carroll emphatically argues that Camus was not only anticolonialist but also an Algerian who did not ignore his fellow Algerians. Moreover, Camus had always advocated multireferentiality, that is, multiple readings of "the plague"—for instance, Stalinism in addition to Nazism as a form of unacceptable political oppression (much debated by fellow French intellectuals of the day). Previously, O'Brien had questioned Camus's intentions on this matter, claiming that the author only intended "the plague" to refer to Nazism. Perhaps this entire controversy surrounding Camus's portrayal of Oran's citizens as colonialists would be moot if characters had just been given non-French names.

⁵⁵ Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian*, 49 and ff.

⁵⁶ Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian*, 45 and ff. For instance, René Lespès, in his *Oran: étude de géographie et d'histoire urbaine* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1938), considered Oran a model city in Algeria *only because of* one hundred years of French occupation.

⁵⁷ Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian*, 53.

Thus, at this unique time in the wake of the work, when readers accumulate lived experiences of their own during an unprecedented pandemic and are acutely aware of systemic injustices, new commentators and critics should be given wide berth to find additional “layers of meaning” in the words on the page as well as names and phrases that do not appear.⁵⁸ As informed readers and critics, we continue to question the author’s literary and philosophical intentions, choices, and omissions in order to judge for ourselves. The essays in this volume begin that discussion in the twenty-first century, mid-pandemic.

Strategically, Camus chose fiction to convey facts. *The Plague* is *not just fiction*, since it is based on haunting facts from the historical past; nor is it *merely literary journalism*, as it attends to newsworthy details of everyday life in a storytelling setting.⁵⁹ It may function as *escape fiction*, but our escape is illusory as we ourselves—living in a pandemic reproducing the restrictive conditions like those of bubonic plague in 1940s Oran—identify with the actions of fictional characters like those we witness in real life: in the media, on the streets, in hospitals, on Zoom, within our own families. Our lived experiences—the starting point for phenomenologists seeking to chart the theoretical—map onto Camus’s narrative, confirming Simone de Beauvoir’s similar intuition to choose to write fiction over philosophy. Her mode of existentialist writing, with an “emphasis on the particular and the concrete, from which philosophical propositions may be drawn, invites the use of fiction as a medium for philosophical discovery, especially at the ontological level.”⁶⁰ A similar observation might be offered of Camus, namely, “there is no question but that Camus’s philosophical concerns were best captured in literary form.”⁶¹ Even in English translation, Camus’s

⁵⁸ See Gray, “Layers of Meaning in *La Peste*.”

⁵⁹ Hartsock, *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*.

⁶⁰ Fullbrook and Simons, “Simone de Beauvoir,” March 25, 2020.

⁶¹ Sherman, *Camus*, 3.

prose is vivid, powerful, and arresting; it is often so pleasing that one risks becoming too absorbed in his words, similes, and metaphors, thereby forgetting the horrors of plague. Simple and direct, Camus elevates the words of everyday sights and sounds to an aesthetically high level of creative endeavor. Perhaps the frustrated writer, the clerk named Grand, said it best when he insisted, “It’s only artists who know how to use their eyes.”⁶² Borrowing from Defoe—in an epigraph intended to appear at the beginning of *The Plague*—Camus also chose fiction to convey what he imagined might have happened in a town called Oran: “It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another as it is to represent anything which really exists by that which exists not.”⁶³

New Perspectives

This collection of essays invites contemporary thinkers to reflect—in light of Camus’s original fictional narrative—upon the progression of the coronavirus as it spread worldwide, felled millions of victims, and posed moral challenges to us as individuals, governments, and global societies. Conversely, readers are encouraged to reread and reconsider Camus’s fiction in light of contemporary life. Authors range from fields as diverse as philosophy, French and comparative literature, English, history, gender and women’s studies, medicine, medical ethics, feminist bioethics,⁶⁴ and medical humanities. Informative and provocative essays were penned at different times over the duration of one year, 2021, within an atmosphere that posed a dangerous and lethal level of political discourse: one of falsehoods, denials, and “alternative facts.” This anthology seeks to explain what constitutes

⁶² Camus, *The Plague*, 136.

⁶³ The quote is from Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719): the epigraph is missing from the 1948 and 1975 Stuart Gilbert translations of the paperback Vintage publication.

⁶⁴ See also *The American Philosophical Association Feminism and Philosophy Newsletter*, “Special Issue: Feminist Responses to COVID-19 and Pandemics.”

the timeliness and timelessness of Camus's fictional plague by drawing on contemporary commentary, prevailing scholarship, and personal observations, interpretation, and (aesthetic) judgments.

First, Steven G. Kellman interrogates the social context of our time in “*The Plague and the Present Moment*” when American protesters resisted both oppressive government tactics against their civil liberties and expressed demands for racial justice. These actions—during the 2020 presidential election—parallel the Algerian population's war for independence in the 1950s and 1960s. The dissimilarity to Oran's naturally occurring plague—for which no one was held morally responsible—highlighted the autocratic and punitive practices of former president Trump, who exacerbated an already urgent medical situation by denying its importance and calling it a hoax. Both the novel and the 2020 pandemic raise questions about human behavior that ranges from the heroic to the unethical, conspiratorial, and criminal.

The absence of women on the front lines of fighting the plague in Camus's Oran raises the specter of medicine as a masculinized and exclusionary profession at odds with our own contemporary situation. In “Present in Effacement: The Place of Women in Camus's *Plague and Ours*,” Jane E. Schultz notes that the mid-twentieth-century context of Algerian society is dominated by Camus's choice of nearly all male characters in the novel: leaders like Dr. Rieux, doctors, workers, and even patients. Women are relegated to marginal roles: maternal, spousal, or desired and distant lover. In contrast, the history of nursing illuminates the role of women who function as risk takers and caregivers in a profession in which they labor as active agents of change and comfort.

Camus's treatment of the arbitrariness and contingency of life—the absurd—leaves us, like many characters in Camus's novel, searching for order and purpose. Andrew Edgar examines the underlying foundations of this loss of control in an essay entitled, “The Meaning of a Pandemic.” Invoking Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* from

1955, Edgar contrasts various coping strategies in human behaviors that either acquiesce to the absurdity of existence or find meaning in the challenge the absurd inevitably presents. The influence of phenomenology, particularly the work of Heidegger, informs a reading of *The Plague* that elucidates the current pandemic.

According to Kathleen Higgins, those impacted by plague or pandemic are naturally afflicted with common psychological symptoms of grief following loss, but also with a sense of anticipatory grief that might be diminished or overcome by means of collective action. In “Grief and Human Connection in *The Plague*,” Higgins casts this sense of expected dread as contributing to one’s sense of isolation, exhaustion, and apathy. We, however, like Camus’s more heroic characters, can extract ourselves from loss and progress toward healing by working together toward common goals that benefit all.

The erosion of the physician’s role as healer when faced with a fast-spreading disease in the absence of any prevention or cure is analyzed by Edward Weiser through a comparison between Dr. Rieux and contemporary medical practice in “Examining the Narrative Devolution of the Physician in Camus’s *The Plague*.” Much like the situation in Oran, the current pandemic thwarts medical successes which physicians routinely seek and expect. Comparisons between Dr. Rieux and today’s physicians serve to highlight the achievements of medical practice in spite of its limitations.

Cynthia A. Freeland presents Camus’s exploration of the multifaceted problem of evil—evidenced as great human suffering—in her essay, “Horror and Natural Evil in *The Plague*.” She probes “zoonotic villains” such as rats and bats which function like monsters (reminiscent of *Dracula*) as well as Camus’s use of natural phenomena like the incessant winds that rattle Oran. These non-humanmade causes inspire dread, placing the novel in the category of “natural horror” to which Dr. Rieux must respond.

Particular words uttered by both patients on ventilators as well as Black Lives Matter protesters in the streets open a path to interpreting the tragedies of Covid-19 and Camus’s plague. An essay

by Margaret E. Gray, “I Can’t Breathe’: Covid-19 and *The Plague*’s Tragedy of Political and Corporeal Suffocation,” recalls the last words spoken by George Floyd on May 25, 2020, that inspired mask-wearing protestors to take to the streets by the thousands in the name of justice. The act of breathing, particularly when thwarted, prevented, or denied, functions as a trope for freedom and life—in opposition to oppression, death, and sociopolitical tyranny.

Not everyone faces “modern” death equally, whether in Oran or today’s world.⁶⁵ In the essay, “Modern Death, Decent Death, and Heroic Solidarity in *The Plague*,” Peg Brand Weiser argues that the “difficulty” in Oran of “modern death” as described by Camus is still with us today in that Americans neither faced death *together* in any form of solidarity under the Trump administration nor faced death individually in any traditional “decent” manner (as proposed by the character Tarrou), that is, comforted by family or friends. One reason is overwhelming fear of death—what neuroscientists call “existential anxiety”—that can motivate human behavior toward either selfishness or an ethics of care. As a result of lived experiences of the pandemic, a sense of “heroic solidarity” has perhaps finally been achieved that moves us from despair to hope, confirming Camus’s faith in humanity.

Conclusion

Within a year of its publication, *The Plague* had been translated into nine languages; current translations number at least twenty-eight. It is currently a worldwide bestseller with its British publisher, Pelican/Penguin Classics (now part of Viking Penguin, Penguin Random House, publisher of the original 1948 translation by Stuart Gilbert), struggling to meet demand. A second English translation by Robin Russ appeared in November 2001, with a commentary

⁶⁵ See Warraich, *Modern Death: How Medicine Changed the End of Life*.

by Tony Judt noting the relevancy of reading the novel just after the September 11th attack on New York and the Pentagon.⁶⁶ A new translation for the original English publisher (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.) by Laura Marris was begun before the current pandemic and arrived in print in November 2021; she argues that “while Camus was writing for the moment, he was also writing for the future. He knew that his book would be needed again, long after his death, in a context he couldn’t predict or imagine.”⁶⁷ Indeed, an entirely new field of pandemic bioethics has begun.⁶⁸

Readers are invited to engage with Camus’s text in new and innovative ways, allowing the fictional flow of events and imaginary human actions to triumph over the facts of the matter, the undeniable truths of our current state of affairs. The plague never really ends; it lies dormant while time passes and while we choose—or not—to address the persistent inequalities and sufferings of a world under siege. Remedies require solidarity and sacrifice, but we can imagine a future when the elimination of exterminators and the safety and health of *all* victims are realized. “Perhaps with the lockdown we will have some time to reflect about what is real, what is important, and become more human,” observed Catherine Camus, seventy-four-year-old daughter of Albert Camus, early in the Covid-19 pandemic (March 2020).⁶⁹ Camus may not have provided the most complete account of how to achieve “a brotherhood of man,” but he starts us down a path of self-awareness toward inclusivity and justice when he warns us early on, “no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Judt, “On ‘The Plague,’” November 29, 2001.

⁶⁷ Marris, “Camus’s Innoculation against Hate,” April 16, 2020. Marris and Alice Kaplan have coauthored a book of essays, *States of Plague: Reading Albert Camus in a Pandemic* (2022).

⁶⁸ See Pence, *Pandemic Bioethics* (2021) and Schwartz, *The Ethics of Pandemics* (2020).

⁶⁹ Willsher, “Albert Camus Novel *The Plague*,” March 28, 2020. Catherine Camus first read the novel when she was fourteen, two months before the death of her father at age forty-six by car accident in 1960. Catherine Camus is editor of *Albert Camus: Solitude and Solidarity* (2012).

⁷⁰ Camus, *The Plague*, 37.

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