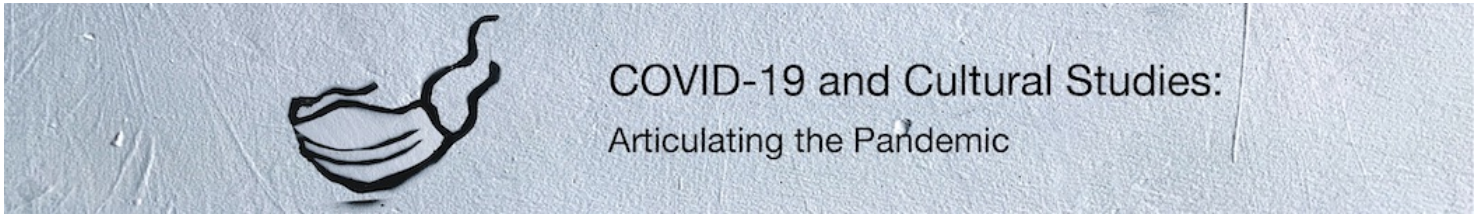


Plague Literature and Thinking through the Coronavirus

COVID-19 and Cultural Studies



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On June 13, 1947, Simone de Beauvoir wrote to her American lover, Nelson Algren:

"Since you are interested in Existentialism, please note that Camus, author of *The Stranger*, has just published an essential book, *The Plague*, where he deals with the Nazi occupation of Paris under the cover of a plague story in Oran. He describes the horrible epidemic, the loneliness of the contaminated city behind closed doors by fear of the spread of the disease; the fear, the courage. By this, he tries to think about life's meaning, about its purpose and how to accept it. I don't agree with everything, but he handles French beautifully, and certain parts are touching and speak to the heart." ([Lettres à Nelson Algren](#) [*Letters to Nelson Algren*] 43. Translation mine).

Few writers kept death at the core of their writing as did the French-Algerian Albert Camus (1913-1960), considered by many to be one of the greatest novelists and essayists of the twentieth century (Nobel Prize for literature 1957), who met his own passing in a road accident 60 years ago, on the Lyon-Paris Route Nationale 6. Of all Camus' novels, none described human confrontation—and cohabitation—with death so vividly and on such epic scale as *La Peste*, translated as *The Plague* in English (with more than [12 million copies](#) sold around the world; translated in 28 languages). Today, with the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, the book's representation of humankind's responses to casualties and fear is relevant on the literal as well as metaphorical level: in her letter to Algren, de Beauvoir highlights both readings: "a plague story in Oran" (literal) and thinking about "life's meaning, about its purpose and how to accept it" (metaphorical). Critics agree that the pestilence described in *The Plague* signifies the Third Reich and Camus' existential views (Vitaux 2010).

Writing in 1947, as the world emerged from the Second World War, Camus—through the voice of the enigmatic character Tarrou—insists that "the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good . . . ; that perhaps the day would come when . . . it would rouse up its rats again" (318), thus warning against people's propensity to rationalize the end of the threat. This prescient warning resonates today as governments gradually implement their deconfinement strategies and advise of the risk of a second wave of COVID-19. On June 15, 2020, the [World Health Organization](#)'s chief already reported a "resurgence" of the new coronavirus as 100,000 cases were registered worldwide each day over the past two weeks. In 1947 and nowadays, the "threat" is still fitting and makes it impossible to return to a form of "normal" life (even though "normal" has become hard to define).

The Plague is the story of a group of people, defined by their gathering together and resilience against the virus. It parallels the courage, fear, and hesitation that we read and hear in numerous stories about today's efforts to curtail and confront COVID-19. Through its narrator, Dr. Rieux, we can identify the thousands of doctors, nurses, and [frontline workers](#), in cities big and small, who feared the worst, missed their families while self-isolating, and worked furiously to save lives during the contamination peak; and those such as [Dr. Li Wenliang](#), the Chinese doctor, silenced after warning of the outbreak, and who has [subsequently died](#).

Today, *The Plague* can also tell the story of a different kind of scourge: that of a destructive, hyper-materialist world in which people are lost to social injustice and isolation. (For example, the devastating loneliness and [staggering death toll](#) of senior residents in long-term care homes during the coronavirus lockdown in Canada and France. Daily newspapers like [La Presse](#) and [Le Monde](#) decried a tragedy behind closed doors and reported the failures of the public health system). In Camus' novel, the group of people gathered around the epidemic represent humanity's response to calamity. Each takes a turn to act and tell it, although it is mainly the doctor, Rieux, who battles the pestilence with his work, medicine, the way Camus tried to battle injustices, later fascism, with his words and writing.

But why does *The Plague* speak so loudly to us now? Camus illustrates a way of abandoning our selfish quest for "harmony" to instead fight for justice and life. Closer to today, [Oscar de Profundis](#) (2016), an apocalyptic science-fiction novel by Catherine Mavrikakis—an influential contemporary Francophone writer from Québec—examines the overt injustices that separate the rich and the poor in a chaotic Montréal caught in a pandemic around 2050. The plot illustrates two types of characters: Oscar de Profundis, the decadent, the music star who immerses himself in culture, reads Oscar Wilde, is fascinated by Charles Baudelaire's poem "De Profundis Clamavi" ["From the Depth I Cried"]. He sees the catastrophe from far away (he is the prototype of the privileged). On the other hand, Mavrikakis portrays the homeless who cannot afford the lockdown and end up dying in harrowing conditions. This scenario reverberates with what the COVID-19 crisis has revealed in New York, for example, or [in Brazil](#), which reported on June 17, 2020, a national record of nearly [35,000 new coronavirus cases](#) in a 24-hour period.

Mavrikakis' novel also emphasizes two clashing attitudes: the indifference, the idea that « le monde aille à sa perte » ["the world is going towards its end"], and rebellion and engagement. Are we not all caught between despair and action when facing menace and peril? In different ways, certainly. In an interview Mavrikakis states that « [m]ême si je suis du côté de la révolte, j'ai l'impression d'être une décadente, quand même » ["even if I am on the side of the revolt, I have the feeling that I am a decadent in spite of all"] ([La Presse](#)). Not only does *Oscar de Profundis*, published in 2016, anticipate today's pandemic and the social inequalities it has triggered (access to medical care vs. death by lack of health insurance; [sumptuous confinement of some](#) vs. [impoverished people](#); the privilege of [the rich vs. the persecution of the poor](#) in lockdown); the structure of the book weaving Oscar's luxurious lifestyle in downtown Montréal and the painfully deprived existence of communities in the suburbs, is itself an illuminating tale of shared experiences, uncertainties, and hesitation.

One side-effect of the coronavirus pandemic has been a fresh wave of interest in literary plagues. Sales of Camus' *The Plague* have surged as Catherine Camus, the writer's daughter, has recently [told The Guardian](#). The novel appears to be relevant to today's readers as they adjust and search for meaning in their uncertain realities. The characters' brutal hopefulness in the face of illness—both the literal illness and its metaphorical interpretation as the rise of oppression, fascism, the horror of Vichy's France collaborating in mass murder—gave *The Plague* [political relevance](#) even before the coronavirus crisis. ([The novel has resurged](#) during the AIDS epidemic and the Ebola outbreak). However, if Camus's novel can be read as a distinctive allegory—that of the German occupation of France (1940-1944)—today's pandemic raises a much more complex challenge: not only decoding what the current crisis stands for (deciphering an allegory), but understanding what the health crisis tells us about our power and violence in a global context. George Floyd's murder in the United States provoked [protests](#)

[around the world](#). COVID-19 lockdowns have surely made the global mood more combustible. Camus' and Mavrikakis' novels emphasize historical solidarity in fighting against the plague in Oran and Montréal; today's protesters around the world, united by the cry that Black Lives Matter, show that the coronavirus pandemic catalyzes much wider calls for action and global conversations. After all, fiction can reconnect us to tragic reality, but reality surpasses fiction.

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