

“UNTENANTED BY ANY TANGIBLE FORM”: ILLNESS, MINORITIES, AND
NARRATIVE MASQUERADES IN CONTEMPORARY PANDEMIC FICTION

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Abstract

In the current Covid-19 crisis, masks have become a ubiquitous sight in social situations. As visual signifiers of both protection and containment, they emblemize the very risk which they serve to prevent. Departing from the multiple functions of the mask in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” — a story published decades before the emergence of modern virology — this paper reads recent fictionalizations of pandemics as diagnostic tools of larger social, political, and cultural shifts. Taking Poe’s story as a programmatic blueprint, my interest is particularly in the correlation between (narrative) representation and political power in contexts of illness. Given that minorities are often disproportionately affected by, and blamed for, epidemics, my analysis targets not only the discursive and semantic strategies of “outbreak narratives” (Priscilla Wald), but the complicity of these strategies in notions of cultural difference. Through the trope of the mask, I argue, the nexus of “the visible and invisible” that Foucault sees at the heart of modern medicine can be reconceptualized along narratological lines. In addition to more detailed analyses of Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018) and Lawrence Wright’s *The End of October* (2020), my reading of pandemic fiction also relies on novels by Michael Crichton, Philip Roth, Louise Erdrich, and Emma Donoghue, among others.

1_World Wide Shut: Masquerades, Then and Now¹

“But remaining fresh in every memory, virus, plague, the march through airport terminals, the face masks, the city streets emptied out.” (Don DeLillo, *The Silence*)²

“Wearing a Mask Meant Something.” (Ling Ma, *Severance*)³

In the spring of 2020, when in many countries stores were closed, schools and universities moved their classrooms online, and international traffic had come to a near-complete halt because of Covid-19, journalists and academics were quick to turn to literary narratives of pandemics in order to facilitate making sense of the contemporary situation. Orhan Pamuk, for instance, re-reads Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1664) and Alessandro Manzoni’s *The Betrothed* (1827) to document a pattern of common human reactions to disease: “Throughout human and literary history what makes pandemics alike is not mere commonality of germs and viruses but that our initial responses were always the same.”⁴ One of the more widely referenced texts in this time — next to Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947), which was sold out at most major

bookstores in March⁵ — has been Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842).⁶ Published 43 years after Charles Brockden Brown published *Arthur Mervyn* (arguably the foundational American illness novel), and 42 years before Robert Koch established his famous postulates,⁷ which describe the criteria by which to manifest a causal relationship between microorganisms and diseases, Poe’s short story seems to have struck a timeless nerve. It not only verifies Pamuk’s claim that “[m]uch of the literature of plague and contagious diseases presents the carelessness, incompetence, and selfishness of those in power,”⁸ but, as I argue here, it also points to a multiplicity of entanglements between illness and narrative, and thus allows a reinvestigation of the nexus between signification, metaphorical language, and politics.

In the story, which is set in an unspecific location resembling medieval Europe, a political leader fails miserably — and fatally — in addressing an unparalleled pandemic situation. “The ‘Red Death’ had long devastated the country,” the story begins: “No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal — the redness and the horrors of blood.”⁹ Decades before viruses were discovered and modern bacteriology emerged, Poe’s fictional disease is highly contagious, apparently spread by airborne transmission, and proving fatal within half an hour, which encourages medical doctors Setu Vora and Sundaram Ramanan to categorize it as a type of “filovirus hemorrhagic fever,” such as Ebola and Marburg.¹⁰ When the population of the fictitious country has been decimated by fifty per cent, the political leader, Prince Prospero, decides to attempt an escape and invites one thousand loyal followers “to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys.”¹¹ Half a year into this quarantine, they decide to respond to the extraordinary “rag[ing]” of the disease outside by an exceptional form of entertainment: “a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence.”¹² Yet, in spite of the fortified walls and the isolation, the deadly pathogen enters the elite’s presumably secure space in anthropomorphic disguise. At first, no one notices the “new presence;”¹³ but when the guests become aware of it, they share common social reactions to plagues: rumors are being spread, panic arises, and the dominant attitude toward the intruder’s human shape is one of “disapprobation” and “disgust.”¹⁴

As in all cases of epidemic contagion, narrative plays a central role in the shaping of both the disease itself and its public management. For the characters, their discursive intervention is an attempt at containing the imminent threat by coding the carrier as abject — in Julia Kristeva’s sense of “one of those violent, dark revolts of being,

directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.”¹⁵ Furthermore, beyond the diegetic space, this narrative reflex demonstrates a common pattern of translating illness into alterity, and of discursively framing social reactions to it, which is evident not only in our current Covid-19 crisis, but also in a wide variety of contemporary novels on (fictional or historical) pandemics. In addition to outlining the functions of narrative within the framing of disease, therefore, my paper also attempts to offer a tentative inquiry into the genre of pandemic fiction.

In Poe’s story, the disease adheres to the convention of the masque and thus the social rules implemented by the elite government: it comes in disguise and mingles with the dancers. Because of a “nameless awe” that overwhelms the witnesses, no one follows the Prince’s orders to seize the “mummer” once he has been detected;¹⁶ instead, people shrink back and allow him to lead Prospero into the westernmost, black chamber, where their final confrontation ends in the governor’s sudden death. Notably, once they approach the figure, they find its costume “untenanted by any tangible form” and, “gasp[ing] in unutterable horror,” die, as well.¹⁷ The story ends with the complete annihilation of the secluded community: all the “revellers” perish; the time-keeping device of the ebony clock stops working, and the fires illuminating the scenery wear out.¹⁸ In the political power struggle, the disease turns out victorious, too: Prince Prospero is literally dethroned in the final sentence, as the Red Death gains “illimitable dominion over all.”¹⁹

Critics have often focused on the color symbolism of the abbey’s architecture, on the role of time, or on the aspects of class, especially in the context of the Covid-19 crisis.²⁰ Like Geoffrey Harpham, David R. Dudley, and others,²¹ however, I am more interested in the narratological and metaphorical layers of the story, and more specifically in the “Red Death” as a signifier of illness, its relational impact on the politics of pandemics, and the metafictional implications of the mask as a token of representation and performativity. For the purposes of this paper, I would like to use three particular aspects of Poe’s story as a conceptual framework for my argument on contemporary pandemic fiction: (1) its translation of the disease into imagery of (in)visibility, condensed into the symbol of the mask, which is closely interlinked with “the division between what is said and what remains unsaid” — and thus the epistemological amalgamation of perception, discourse, and knowledge that Michel Foucault later described

as the core principle of modern medicine;²² (2) the questions the story raises, in its association of illness with the body politic, with regard to constructing communities, restructuring social order, contextualizing principles of belonging, and the roles of minorities, and (3) the story's fashioning of an epidemic crisis by narrative strategies of mimesis, deception, unreliability, and — by extension — the larger intersections of these strategies with politics of “containment” in what Priscilla Wald has famously termed “outbreak narratives;”²³ all of which are — as I argue here — central aspects of the pandemic novel as a genre.

2_Invisible Visibility: The Mask of the Medical Gaze

According to Michel Foucault, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw groundbreaking developments not only in medical research and knowledge, but in the processing of this knowledge “through gaze and language”: “the relationship between the visible and the invisible — which is necessary to all concrete knowledge — changed its structure.”²⁴ By uncovering previously invisible realms, e.g. in pathological anatomy, the clinic institutionalized a medical gaze in “a structure, at once perceptual and epistemological”, of what he calls “invisible visibility.”²⁵ Poe's agent of disease — the “mummer” — works in similar ways. Just as the “the hidden element” of clinical anatomy, in Foucault's terms, “takes on the form and rhythm of the hidden content, which means that, like a *veil*, it is *transparent*,”²⁶ the embodied disease in “The Masque of the Red Death” adopts a visible shape reflecting its own effects: “[t]he mask which concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have had difficulty in detecting the cheat.”²⁷ The agent, however, is not described or seen entering: instead, it comes into effect through an indirect but sudden cognitive — and contagious — process when the guests “become aware of the presence of a masked figure which had arrested the attention of no single individual before.”²⁸ Even though — in Prospero's performative act of resistance against the pandemic through a masque — every attendant partakes in the masquerade, it is the particular representation of the “red death” that suddenly renders this figure visible. The trope of the mask thus defers (in Derrida's sense of *différance*, the simultaneous differentiation of signifiers and deferral of meaning) the identification of the disease in an ironic reversal of signification: whereas everyone else's mask is a token of “grotesque” and “delirious” disguise²⁹ — and thus a signifier of difference — the

pathogen of the “red death” operates by metonymic semblance. Like Foucault’s transparent “veil,” it conceals itself merely as its prospective result by displaying the very symptoms it causes and thus as a simulation of its own results.³⁰

Most pandemic fiction features masks, if at all, in the strict sense of medical safety. Emma Donoghue’s *The Pull of the Stars*, for instance, published in 2020, addresses the 1918 influenza pandemic through the autodiegetic voice of Julia Power, a young nurse in Dublin. The novel’s scenario is eerily parallel to the time of its publication, when readers in self-isolation felt highly familiar with the description of “the whole world” as “a machine grinding to a halt. Across the globe, in hundreds of languages, signs were going up urging people to cover their coughs.”³¹ The masks that Julia Power wears every day — and especially “the sense of protection offered by that fragile layer of gauze”³² — highlight their shielding function and defy contemporary complaints about the discomfort or constraint. The latter is emphasized, for instance, in John O’Hara’s 1935 short story, “The Doctor’s Son”: “Doctor Myers at first wore a mask over his nose and mouth when making calls, and so did I, but the gauze stuck to my lips and I stopped wearing it [...]”³³ Similarly, the characters in Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018) are handed “two sets of N95 face masks and latex gloves” to protect them from “breathing in fungal spores,”³⁴ and people in Lawrence Wright’s *The End of October* (2020) are advised not to “go out in public unless vitally necessary, and, if [they] do, wear a mask and sanitary gloves.”³⁵

Yet Poe’s case is notably different. Whereas, in most contemporary Western cultures, masks outside the medical context have come to be associated with disguise, disingenuity, and deception,³⁶ they have also served “transformative, protective, empowering” functions in “rites of passage and curative ceremonies” as well as “funerary rites” across the globe.³⁷ In Poe’s story, the mask conceals its wearer, allowing him to enter the crowd unrecognized, but the principle of concealment does not originate with him: instead, by joining the eponymous “masque,” which is characterized by grotesque costumes both “beautiful” and “terrible,”³⁸ he merely plays along with a social order that is already firmly in place. In fact, even the revulsion with which the courtiers later react to the intruder is already well established among the other costumes: “There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions [...] and not a little of that which might have excited disgust” (302). The similarity between the revelers and the pathogen underlines the performative functions of the mask: it “calls attention,” as John Emigh puts

it in a more general context, “to the often ambiguous play between self and other involved in its alchemical procedures.”³⁹ This effect is multiplied by the story’s title: the “masque” — as an event homophonous with “mask” — is not only the festivity at which the disease appears (“masqued” as death), and from which it benefits, but it can equally be read as an event planned, caused, and organized by the “red death” in the first place. Furthermore, as Hubert Zapf has noted, this “linguistic ambivalence between the genitivus subjectivus and the genitivus objectivus” blurs the distinction between the red death and the human community: “the two sides are interrelated in a mutually defining and conditioning way.”⁴⁰ Thus, as an external agent mingling with the insiders in accordance with their regulations and appearances, the masked figure not only embodies strategies of the in/visibility of discursive power, but it ultimately dissolves, in quite literal ways, the boundary between identity and alterity, inside and outside, or Self and Other.

In representational terms, therefore, the mask of the “red death” serves an interesting function: it enables the disease to avoid detection until it is too late for the masqueraders to escape — thus also resisting Foucault’s medical gaze, evading diagnosis and the risk of being deactivated. It does so, however, not by deception or misinformation but — much like Poe’s “Purloined Letter” — by an open display of the actual signified. The only reason this mask of authenticity (or the ‘real’) can remain invisible for long enough is its very visibility: amidst an abundance of similar disguises, the signifier of disease does not stand out. Like a virus successfully invading an organism by applying proteins compatible to its host cells without alerting the immune system, the pathogen of the red death gains “illimitable dominion over all”⁴¹ by mimesis. Simply imitating the predominant (cultural) conventions, it succeeds in destroying them, not because it conceals itself, but rather because the masqueraders have donned costumes of the abject, and disguised themselves as Others in a perfect simulacrum of the desired (but imaginary) representational power over the illness.⁴² The mask thus diegetically enables the erasure of the inauthentic signifiers while transdiegetically calling attention to the very process of signification itself.

3_Biomedical and Social Dimensions of Othering: Minorities, Migration, and Genre

The representational implications of Poe's mask point to a crucial function of pandemic fiction, which serves not only as historical chronicle and seismograph of society's challenges under the pressure of medical crisis, but also as a laboratory of human interaction, exchange, and the crossing of boundaries. If his use of the term "avatar" in the story — as a manifestation of a deity in incarnate form — still evokes the historical understanding that diseases were brought upon humanity as punishment by metaphysical forces,⁴³ the story's implications actually discard this subtext and instead unfold the full representational symbolism of the word's contemporary meaning: an avatar as a virtual stand-in capable of bordercrossing, interaction, and inciting change.⁴⁴

Highlighting the "multiple linkages [...] between communicability and communication,"⁴⁵ Rüdiger Kunow argues that, in the context of communicable diseases,

[b]iological mobility is not in itself meaningful; rather, it produces effects that insistently demand to be made so. This desire for meaning and representation is nourished by the fact that the actual moment of biological communication, the moment of transmission from one person to the next that is called 'infection' remains for the most part invisible to the eye of the beholder.⁴⁶

Accordingly, in its cultural work, biological mobility relies on "the permeability and porousness of bodies, individual and national."⁴⁷ Striking a similar note, Ingrid Gessner traces the manifold ways in which disease narratives create social and political hierarchies.⁴⁸ Since our bodies depend on distinctions between "Self" and "Other" for biological persistence, a translation of these mechanisms into the political realm is a plausible move — but it depends on texts (literary, journalistic, or scientific) to actually perform the rendition. "The task of our immune system," Gessner writes,

is to protect the body against infection by microbes (bacteria, fungi, parasites, viruses) and tumor cells. To ensure this it constantly discriminates between 'self' and 'foreign.' The system is specific and it is 'remembering.' Once overcome, viruses leave their 'scripts' in the body, making it immune against attacks by the same kind of intruder.⁴⁹

In other words, defining the Other is a matter of survival, yet, like Poe's masked pathogen, the invisibility of any epidemic's cause usually collides with the human desire to perceive, control, and contain it. The uncertainty over agency, first manifesting itself in rumors and conspiracy theories, propels cultural narratives of alterity which echo the biomedical response of 'defending' cells (or selves) against 'intruders' from the outside. The individual body becomes the body politic, the crossing of borders becomes

an image of potentially fatal encounter, and like Poe's Prospero, whose cultivation of interiority and seclusion among "friends" is shattered by the unexpected infiltration of the disease, individuals and societies seek to "seize [...] and unmask" the unknown antagonist.⁵⁰ When the first case of Covid-19 reached the United States on January 20, 2020, President Donald Trump referred to it repeatedly as a "foreign" or "Chinese virus."⁵¹ The "Spanish Flu" of 1918 did not originate in Spain, tuberculosis is not "an evil, invincible predator,"⁵² as Susan Sontag emphasizes, and AIDS is not divine punishment for moral transgressions,⁵³ but in times of crisis, people increasingly lean on (and co-construct) narratives of origin, of cause and effect, and of containment.

Throughout American history, health-related fear of others has been closely intertwined with nationalities, immigration, and cultural alterity. In what Alan M. Kraut calls a "double helix of health and fear," "preexisting ethnic prejudices and public hysteria in the face of disease often created a wholly false linkage between illness and specific immigrant groups."⁵⁴ This pattern is not merely echoed by the genre of pandemic fiction, but it is also diagnosed and often contested in fictional approaches to medical crises. Philip Roth's *Nemesis* (2010), for instance, both illustrates and criticizes the discriminatory impact on minority groups. The novel exposes the antisemitism and "violent aggression against Jews that was commonplace" during the 1944 polio epidemic in Newark. Yet the fear of Others is a two-way street: within the Jewish community, the dominant narrative is that "it had to be the Italians" who caused the outbreak.⁵⁵ Similarly, the nineteenth-century typhus outbreak in Andrea Barrett's *Ship Fever* (1996) is blamed on the "filthy and stupid and good for nothing" Irish immigrants who allegedly spread the disease in North America.⁵⁶ Migrants, people from different neighborhoods, religious or cultural minorities become instant scapegoats during times of crisis. This may also explain why Miranda, in Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, is obsessed with whiteness during the fever dreams induced by influenza in 1918: "What is this whiteness and silence but the absence of pain?"⁵⁷ In the privileged position of a survivor who bears the familial legacy of the Old South, historical violence erupts again in telling imagery of color.

One remarkably different perspective is presented in Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* (1999), which highlights lines of contagion between Native Americans and immigrants in the United States. On and near Spirit Island, Minnesota, in 1847, an Anishinaabe community falls victim to "the white man's disease"⁵⁸: a smallpox epidemic

introduced via French-American traders. However, in contrast to the other pandemic novels discussed here, the Anishinaabe do not blame the “visitor” for bringing the disease.⁵⁹ Instead, they generously care for all patients, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, and even though “fear abounded in the settlement,”⁶⁰ the novel’s focus is on the social and spiritual health as well as the endurance of the Anishinaabe community. The novel also does not follow generic conventions of framing epidemics by dystopian elements: from a Native American point of view, the apocalypse has already happened through the European invasion, so — like many Indigenous examples of what Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice terms “wonderworks”⁶¹ — Erdrich’s text instead translates Indigenous futurity into an optimism based on “other ways of being in the world.”⁶²

Most novels on pandemics, however, heavily borrow from the genres of the apocalyptic or dystopian novel. From Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) to Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), and from Chris Adrian’s *The Children’s Hospital* (2006) to Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014), elements of violence and terror often foreground the vulnerability of democratic structures and human rights in post-pandemic times. These overtones of apocalypse also dominate Don DeLillo’s most recent novella, *The Silence*, in which a power failure or “selective internet apocalypse” happens in New York on Super Bowl Sunday, 2022.⁶³ Even here, pandemic imagery accompanies the apocalyptic overtones through the threat of “living weaponry”: “Germs, genes, spores, powders.”⁶⁴

The political fallout of disease and the role of the abject become particularly evident in the contemporary surge of zombie apocalypse narratives, such as Max Brooks’s *World War Z* (2006), Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011), or AMC’s extremely popular series *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022). There are also alternative approaches to the zombie pattern, such as Helen Marshall’s *The Migration* (2019) and Kira Jane Buxton’s *The Hollow Kingdom* (2019), which focus on historical meta-contextualization and humor, respectively, but more often than not, the zombie apocalypse provides easy catharsis by reducing social tensions to Manichaeic categories of “good” vs. “evil” and by ideologically justifying even the most violent battles against the (apparent) Other. While a detailed discussion of the overlaps between pandemic fiction and the zombie apocalypse would extend beyond the scope of this paper, the multiple facets of dystopia

clearly underscore the political reverberations of disease with regard to minorities and cultural Others.⁶⁵

4_Authenticity and Representational Control: Narrative Patterns of Pandemics

Beyond the generic aspects of Othering, narrative not only records but in fact constitutes disease, as Priscilla Wald, Ingrid Gessner, and Elizabeth Outka have convincingly shown.⁶⁶ As Wald reminds us,

[w]hen epidemiology turns an outbreak of communicable disease into a narrative, it makes the routes of transmission visible and helps epidemiologists anticipate and manage the course of the outbreak. In that transformational capacity, the epidemiological narrative is, like the microscope, a technology, and it is among the epistemological technologies that delineate the membership and scale of a population.⁶⁷

By “outbreak narratives,” Wald primarily refers to the manifestations of the ways in which “an evolving story of disease emergence” is turned into cultural narratives, which have consequences not necessarily induced by the disease itself: “They affect survival rates and contagion routes. They promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors, lifestyles, and they change economies.”⁶⁸

Even if fictional texts are not primarily what Wald has in mind in her analysis of scientific and journalistic outbreak narratives, their strategies are often remarkably similar: The “outbreak narrative” frequently adopts “a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks throughout which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment.”⁶⁹ As for “The Masque of the Red Death,” many critics have focused their attention on “the puzzle of the narrator,”⁷⁰ who cannot be homodiegetic, since everyone inside the abbey dies in the end. Leonard Cassuto, for instance, argues that the narrator, who makes himself known in three instances by first-person pronouns, has to be someone present at the masque, yet who also lives to tell the tale. “The teller of the tale,” Cassuto concludes in his famous argument, “is Death himself.”⁷¹ I agree with David Dudley that the narratological paradox does not have to be dissolved,⁷² but I also want to highlight, for programmatic reasons, the relevance of Poe’s narrative strategy within this particular pandemic text for the genre of pandemic fiction at large. Through the detailed account of the secluded chambers, the narrator tricks readers into believing he has inside knowledge; at the same time, various instances of opacity and evasion

make him “unreliable” by both Wayne Booth’s and Ansgar Nünning’s definitions of the term.⁷³ Making the process of his telling overt (“as I have told”) and thus suggesting credibility, the narrator simultaneously dodges factual descriptions by projecting observations onto anonymous others in the general subjunctive mood: “there are some who would have thought”⁷⁴ something, or “it may well be supposed that no ordinary appearance could have excited such sensation.”⁷⁵ Most crucially, the appearance of the disease is accompanied by heavy narrative uncertainty: it is only “perhaps,” as the narrator emphasizes twice, that the guests “become aware of the presence of a masked figure [...]”⁷⁶ The narrator accepts no responsibility for the tale: like the rumors spread by the guests within the abbey, his (or her?) own story, while detailed and decorated, ranks low on factuality.

Contemporary pandemic fiction, by contrast, often establishes narrative authority either through reliable narration, frequently by what Gérard Genette classifies as instances of variable “internal focalization.”⁷⁷ Homodiegetic and autodiegetic narration, as in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* (1799), Geraldine Brooks’s *Year of Wonders* (2001), Helen Marshall’s *The Migration* (2019), and Emma Donoghue’s *The Pull of the Stars* (2020), invite empathy, highlight the first-hand experience of epidemic diseases and their social fall-out, and render more relatable the elements of “fear and dread” that characterize epidemics, according to Christian McMillen.⁷⁸ Even heterodiegetic narrators, which predominate in Louise Erdrich’s *The Birchbark House* (1999), Chris Adrian’s *The Children’s Hospital* (2006), Jim Crace’s *The Pesthouse* (2007), Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014), and John Ironmonger’s *Not Forgetting the Whale* (2015), usually prove reliable and thus offer apparently more detached, multi-perspective explorations of pandemic situations, suggesting a larger perspective and often adding the impression of authenticity and control.

Michael Crichton’s *The Andromeda Strain* (1969) is an illustrative example of the way the narrative technique provides a guise — or mask — of factuality to the evolving story of pandemic threat. After an unknown pathogen has exterminated an entire village in Arizona, a team of biomedical scientists — antagonized by military and political forces — attempts to prevent its dissemination and identify its source. Like an epidemiological whodunit, the novel traces the origins of the (extraterrestrial) microorganism in an underground laboratory of color-coded levels reminiscent of Prince Prospero’s colored chambers in Poe’s story. In this gradual unfolding of knowledge, the

chapters are interspersed with facsimiles of classified documents, transcripts of military phone calls, lists of binary code, CT scans, drawings, hand-signed memos, scanned images, and electron-density maps in a textual and paratextual representation of authenticity.⁷⁹ In addition to simulating factuality for effects of suspense and relatability, this strategy not only suggests institutional control and the primacy of science and empiricism, but the narrative omniscience also persuades readers by an invisible and subtle stance of objectivity and thus representational authority. As in actual outbreak narratives, particular ideologies and biases are clad in narrative masks of knowledge and thus reinforced by the fictional text's 'behind-the-scenes' promise of authenticity. The fact that the characters who save the world in Crichton's scenario are exclusively white American males may not be too surprising in 1969, but as the following case studies illustrate in more detail, the impact of the narrative strategy — as a form of ideological masquerade — on the politics of pandemic fiction continues to be strong well into the twenty-first century.

5_ “Serious Diseases Can Masquerade as Something Common and Relatively Harmless”⁸⁰: *The End of October* (2020)

When, after several years of research and writing, Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* was published in April 2020, the author himself was stunned by the parallels to the evolving Covid-19 crisis. Upon opening the newspapers, Wright told an interviewer in March 2020, “I feel like I'm reading chapters from my own book.”⁸¹ Indeed, *The End of October* bears remarkable similarities to the situation in the spring and summer of 2020, including the hoarding of groceries, the rise of conspiracy theories, the failure of American political leadership, the need for ventilators and antibody therapy, the shut-down measures, and the violation of quarantine rules.⁸² Blending elements from the political thriller, dystopian and apocalyptic fiction,⁸³ the novel develops a plotline across eight months, in which the disease — a highly lethal hemorrhagic fever quite similar to Poe's “red death” — flings the world into chaos and war. Its protagonist is the epidemiologist and “hard-boiled atheist”⁸⁴ Dr. Henry Parsons, who serves as deputy director for infectious diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta and is married to a kindergarten teacher named Jill. He finds himself in charge of tracking, researching, and battling Kongoli, a “totally novel virus” (86) named after the place of its first outbreak — an “Indonesian detention camp for Muslim homosexuals.”⁸⁵

The novel's politics seem inconspicuous at first: Henry is from a diverse family of Hungarian refugees, who fled from Soviet violence in 1956, and some of the novel's most sympathetic characters are African American (Captain Vernon Dixon of the USS Georgia, or Jill's student K'Neisha) or Indigenous (such as Henry's eight-year-old adopted Cinta Larga son, or the Nez Perce guide on one of their wilderness trips in Idaho). Beyond this apparent embrace of multiculturalism, however, the novel abounds with stereotypes and common lines of antagonism. In addition to Henry's nemesis Jürgen Stark, a "most dangerous" German-American virologist and animal rights activist, who "would have made a wonderful Nazi,"⁸⁶ it is primarily Russia and Islam that fuel the novel's various conflicts as arch-enemies of the American body politic. From the first chapter on, the outbreak of the disease is closely tied to Islam, not only because of its first reported cases in Indonesia — "the world's most populous Muslim country"⁸⁷ — and because even Henry calls it "the Muslim flu"⁸⁸ but because it coincides with an Islamist terrorist attack on Rome that cost over 600 civilian lives, and which is celebrated around the world not only by al-Qaeda and ISIS, but also by unsuspecting Muslims such as Tariq Ismail, a British pilgrim in Mecca.⁸⁹ The ignorance and chaos of Indonesia, which cause the pandemic in the first place, are explained by religious fervor and corruption,⁹⁰ and other Muslim countries — such as Saudi Arabia and Iran — are equally described as primitive, fanatic, economically greedy, and violating human rights. Even Henry's Saudi friend Majid asserts that "the soul of Arabia" is the desert, "a big nothing": "you have to understand that to really know who we are."⁹¹ Most importantly, the event that triggers the uncontrollable worldwide outbreak of Kongoli is the *hajj*, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, which is described through the lens of the abject, especially in the graphically rendered ritual slaughtering of sheep.⁹² A peaceful religious ritual is translated, in *The End of October*, into a superspreader event that blends Islam and bloody death into the explosive mixture of "ethnic prejudices and public hysteria" that Alan M. Kraut sees at the heart of discrimination in pandemic times.⁹³

The other notable opponent on the political map is Russia, "the main source of evil in the world,"⁹⁴ according to Matilda "Tildy" Nichinsky, a high-ranking government official in charge of homeland security. For the largest part of the novel, readers are led to believe — not least through Tildy's focalization, whose "allegiance to truth" is emphasized repeatedly⁹⁵ — that the virus was engineered and deliberately released by

Russia to aim “at the very heart of America — democracy.”⁹⁶ While this turns out not to be true in the end, Russia does send Novichok assassins⁹⁷ and conduct cyberattacks on American infrastructure, so its opposition to “Western society” and even “modernity”⁹⁸ is firmly established.

Masks occur frequently in the novel, and they serve either as protective medical devices (e.g., when Jill meets K’Neisha’s mother⁹⁹) or as clever instruments of deceit. When Henry needs access to information and equipment in Saudi Arabia, he disguises himself as a Muslim — not without feeling guilty that “[h]e, who hated deception of any sort” had now become “a deceiver.”¹⁰⁰ Most frequently, though, and in a way that is particularly telling in connection with Poe’s “Masque of the Red Death,” disguises are used by the Russians to conceal their actual intentions. When reflecting on the “predatory” nature behind Putin’s smile, Tildy explicitly sees “the mask fall”¹⁰¹ and exposes the deadly Russian threat underneath. One CIA director calls Russia “a third-rate country masquerading as a superpower,”¹⁰² and both of these masquerades are presented as highly dangerous to Western civilization.

As in all pandemic fiction, these ideological policies are reinforced by the novel’s genre conventions and narrative strategies. Like Michael Crichton’s *Andromeda Strain*, *The End of October* is a biomedical whodunit whose hero dictates the (largely male, white) ideology of the story. Its dystopian plot — rendered by a heterodiegetic narrator on the covert end of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s spectrum of perceptibility¹⁰³ — unfolds in a three-act structure, in a world that is extremely familiar to contemporary readers, including Netflix, FaceTime, Wolf Blitzer on television, *The Hunger Games* trilogy, a powerful “Twitterverse,” QAnon conspiracies and radio host Alex Jones, as well as a broad variety of non-fictional celebrities, including the “counterterrorism czar” Richard Clarke or Henry’s “friend,” the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Dr. Carlo Urbani.¹⁰⁴ Through detailed descriptions of laboratory equipment and diagnostic methodology, and by connecting frequent encyclopedic excursions into the history of epidemiology to Henry Parson’s own quest, Wright establishes an alliance of trustworthiness between his protagonist and famous scientists such as Louis Pasteur, Edward Jenner, or Yoshihiro Kawaoke, a Japanese virologist at the University of Wisconsin.

In this universe, Kongoli is eventually exposed as an ancient “ancestor of the entire influenza family”¹⁰⁵ which survived in the permafrost of the Russian Arctic until climate change re-released it. In the end, Russia — after believing that Kongoli was the

product of American labs — releases one of “the most lethal pathogens ever known”¹⁰⁶ in response, the Ustinov strain of the Marburg virus. The country thus successfully lives up to its villainous reputation. The world tumbles into biological warfare, but Henry Parsons — the successful “disease detective”¹⁰⁷ who is equally victorious in battling both Kongoli and readers’ suspicions — manages to reunite with his children (albeit not his wife, who falls victim to the Russian Marburg attack) and survives on board of the submarine USS Georgia. Even if it turns out that Dr. Parsons, too, has been guilty of engineering viruses and exterminating large numbers of people in the name of military strategy, readers’ trust in, and forgiveness for, the novel’s hero has been firmly established by the narrative. As in Poe’s story, the pathogen — of a particular ideological bias — has entered the palace of the pandemic thriller in the mask of narrative reliability, a mask that is particularly efficient because, again as in Poe’s tale, it adheres to the very conventions it infiltrates while depicting precisely what readers are likely to fear most. Thus, by the time the novel ends on Henry’s assessment that “we did this to ourselves”¹⁰⁸ by biological weapons and scientific hubris, its rich contributions to anti-Muslim and anti-Russian xenophobia have been fully authorized by the narrative masquerade of authenticity and control.

In all, *The End of October* visibly connects a dystopian pandemic to both Islam and Russia, returning to both a reductive post-9/11 Islamophobia and to what Alan Nadel has famously termed the “containment culture” of the Cold War, in which “insecurity was absorbed by internal security, [and] internationalism by global strategy [...]”¹⁰⁹ In the context of our current pandemic age, this resort to familiar enemies is in line with much of contemporary popular culture (including TV series such as *Homeland*, *The Americans*, *House of Cards*, or *Designated Survivor*), but it does not sketch an optimistic future for minorities and anti-discrimination policies in the U.S.

6 “The Masks Seemed to Preclude Any Conversation”¹¹⁰: Ling Ma’s *Severance*

Whereas the dystopian scenario of *The End of October* plays out in a highly recognizable present or near future, Ling Ma’s *Severance* offers an alternate history, or uchronia: A disease named “Shen Fever” hits the world in the summer of 2011, coinciding with (and ending) the Occupy Wall Street movement, and luring readers into a familiar world of President Barack Obama, not-yet-president Donald Trump, KFC, and Starbucks as well as appearances by composer Giorgio Moroder and photographer Thomas

Struth.¹¹¹ Candace Chen, the autodiegetic narrator, is a Chinese-American photographer whose day job — in a Times Square office in New York — involves the distribution of Bibles printed in China. Born in Fujian province, she is brought to the U.S. at the age of six by her parents, who have escaped from Chinese corruption and poverty, and adapts to Salt Lake City in Utah in a “quick, almost effortless assimilation.”¹¹² After moving to New York, where she meets her boyfriend Jonathan, she fully embraces a world of “Fendi handbags” and “Montblanc pens.”¹¹³ In spite of her minority status, the protagonist is clearly coded as a representative of what a character calls “the millennial generation”: with a sense of entitlement and “different values from most of America”¹¹⁴ — but she also spends her time “imagining different lives,” most importantly through her anonymous photo blog “NY Ghost.”¹¹⁵ When the Shen Fever breaks out, she is pregnant and, as one of the last people to leave New York, joins a group of eight survivors who follow an eccentric, cult-like leader, Bob, to an abandoned mall in the suburbs of Chicago.

The structure of twenty-six chapters and a prologue is non-linear, skipping back and forth between the novel’s present in 2011, the time when Candace lived in Utah, and her early years in New York. Unlike the fast, newsfeed-like style of Wright, this plot is largely driven by memories. Also in contrast to the factual and historical excursions of *The End of October*, *Severance* does not offer illusions of containment or control. The only information on the disease — beyond Candace’s experience and perception — is provided by a two-page CDC leaflet. Instead of a suggested scientific objectivity, a subjective feeling of being lost in the world prevails with the fixed internal focalization of the autodiegetic narrator: we simply follow an immigrant artist through the disintegration of her world.

Given that both Chen and Ma share the immigrant experience, the nuanced take on the pandemic’s impact on minorities is hardly surprising. Through Chen’s perspective, both the plausible motivation of immigrants (“for better opportunities” and to escape from corruption¹¹⁶) and their work ethic (“to prove their usefulness to the country that had deigned to adopt them”¹¹⁷) are foregrounded. At the same time, the rift between “white people” and other ethnic groups remains visible — and is humorously challenged. As Eddie, a Hispanic cab driver puts it: “now that all the white people have finally left New York, you think I’m leaving? [...] New York belongs to the immigrants [...]”¹¹⁸

The disease that disrupts this familiar society is transmitted by breathing in fungal spores, and, originating in China, it is spread through the global trade of goods, “mov[ing] fastest in coastal areas that see a lot of trade, a lot of shipping, imports.”¹¹⁹ Infected patients experience symptoms of “memory lapse,” speech loss, and later “fatal loss of consciousness,” but in the extended period of illness, the “fevered,” as they are called, fall into a non-violent, zombie-like state and endlessly perform daily routines, such as reading, folding t-shirts, or even driving cabs.¹²⁰ Just as its transmission “through the shipment of goods from China to the States”¹²¹ evokes global capitalism as a root cause, the disease’s phenotype turns people into “capitalist cog[s]-in-the-machine,” as literary scholar Chelsea Haith puts it.¹²² Capitalism’s metaphors are indeed a leitmotif in the novel, from the message of greed in children’s books such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to the fake designer clothes in Hong Kong.¹²³ In the flashback sections, it is Jonathan who represents a critical, anti-capitalist stance, but the protagonist contradicts him: “In this world, money is freedom. Opting out is not a real choice.”¹²⁴ It is also telling in this context that the group of survivors — while frequently killing the “fevered” in order to secure resources¹²⁵ — takes up settlement in a shopping mall (with a nod to George A. Romero’s zombie classic *Dawn of the Dead* [1978]), but their shelter ultimately turns out unsafe, as well.

As a “disease of remembering”¹²⁶ caused by globalized trade markets, Shen Fever symbolizes what Gary Cross has termed “consumed nostalgia”: the “longing for the goods of the past that came from a *personal* experience of *growing up* in the stressful world of *fast capitalism*.”¹²⁷ Indeed, the protagonist frequently wonders if “nostalgia has something to do with it.”¹²⁸ Just as her first night at the mall is closely intercut with her parents’ first night in the United States, however, the original meaning of nostalgia — as a “longing to return home”¹²⁹ — erases any majority’s sense of entitlement and links the migrant experience to survival. Whereas Lawrence Wright’s Kongoli is a token of abjection, used both to call out human hubris in the face of nature’s power and to justify American xenophobia toward Muslims and Russians, Ma’s Shen Fever also uses the generic conventions of the postapocalyptic dystopia — including looting, killing, and the failing of infrastructure¹³⁰ — but its symbolism is much more complex, and ultimately more disturbing, in its diagnosis of contemporary society’s ailments.

As in *The End of October*, and yet in almost diametrically opposite ways, the narrative technique of *Severance* contributes to this diagnosis. At the literal center of the

novel, chapter 13 of 26 contains a brief, seemingly authentic memo issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on “Shen Fever FAQ.”¹³¹ Like the authorizing simulacra of official documents in Michael Crichton’s *The Andromeda Strain* and the historical archive in *The End of October*, this chapter adds to the names of brands, celebrities, and institutions in reinforcing the story’s reality effect. What makes it different from the other two texts, however, is the narrator’s acknowledgement elsewhere — in the context of the Hong Kong economy — that “[n]owhere else did the boundaries of real and fake seem so porous.”¹³² Almost like a disclaimer, this statement can be read as a metafictional reflection on the novel’s own narrative style, which is further underlined by the narrative situation. Candace Chen gives voice to the immigrant experience, which adds credibility to her story as a survivor. Her frequent admissions of her own unreliability, however, caution readers against any notion of authority and instead — like Poe’s “perhaps” — highlight the unstable correlation between illness and representation.¹³³ In the end, right after emphasizing that “[t]hat is the true story of how I left New York” the next sentence withdraws this certainty: “And yet. It’s possible that there is another true story.”¹³⁴

Again, like in Poe’s story, the unreliability of the narrator does not weaken the narrative’s political impact of her statements, it simply acknowledges that there is no objective position from which to address illness and disease. Accordingly, masks occur frequently in *Severance*, too, mostly in their function as “protective tools”¹³⁵ — but also as tokens of capitalism (in the case of “epidemic fashion” and tourist accessories¹³⁶) and, notably, as reverse signifiers of disease. While they prove useless as a “fever-preventative” device, they actually distinguish the healthy from the sick: “it was a visual shorthand that I was fully cognizant, that I understood the distinction. Thus I always wore a mask outside, to mark myself as unfevered.”¹³⁷ Finally, the “end” itself also dons a disguise. It “passes as ordinary”¹³⁸ and seems optimistic, since Candace and her unborn baby survive. Her car breaks down after she flees from the mall, so in view of Chicago’s skyline, she “get[s] out and start[s] walking”¹³⁹ — but, in the same way that the survival of Poe’s narrator is embedded in an existential paradox, Ma’s ending insinuates that there may be “another true story” yet again: she could well be fevered herself. Even if the construction is different from Poe’s through the homodiegetic narrator, the technique of the masquerade is quite similar: instead of adopting — as *The Andromeda Strain* and *The End of October* do — a veil of authenticity

and reassurance, the open admission of unreliability, like the wearing of a mask that metonymically represents its wearer's effects, ultimately allows for a more honest and thus credible depiction of a world spun out of control.

7_“Reality is Easy to Miss”: Instead of a Coda

In pandemic novels that address historical diseases — such as yellow fever in Brown's *Arthur Mervyn*, smallpox in Erdrich's *Birchbark House*, polio in Roth's *Nemesis*, and the “Spanish” influenza in Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, O'Hara's “The Doctor's Son,” and Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* — minorities are often disproportionately affected, but in spite of social rifts and tensions, bodies (both individual and collective) are restored, and sometimes even healed, as per historical record. In the case of fictional pathogens, however, the case is not always that simple. In light of the close connections between physical bodies and the body politic, the coalition between fictional outbreak narratives and the dystopian (or even postapocalyptic) genre is unsurprising. As Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* and Ling Ma's *Severance* exemplarily illustrate, pandemic fiction performs important cultural work by exposing and/or inquiring into dominant social hierarchies, and by highlighting the function that narrative plays in these structures of power. Reality effects and mimetic strategies abound in recent pandemic novels, but whether they serve as stabilizers of a status quo (as in *The End of October*) or as subversive interventions (as in *Severance*), they clearly underline the “interdependency of aesthetic form and ideological context,” as Ingrid Gessner puts it,¹⁴⁰ or the potential of narrative to frame and shape medical crises. “Reality is easy to miss,” Rivka Galchen writes in her introduction to the *New York Times Magazine*'s COVID-19-related *Decameron Project* (2020), “maybe because we're looking at it all the time.”¹⁴¹

For centuries, pandemic fiction has served as a seismographic indicator not only of people's anxieties over invisible pathogens and their effects on the body, but of the massive social and political shifts that national and international health crises may bring forth. The fear of bodily disfigurement and dysfunction is deeply engrained in our evolutionary programming for survival, so that, as literary metaphors, they have universal appeal. Where bodies weaken and fail, and antibodies take up the fight, the body politic is necessarily also affected. Especially in Western societies, the fabric of democracy is vulnerable to fraying, if not through wear and tear, then certainly under the pressure of

steady attack. In order to infect a body, a pathogen enters — like Poe’s Red Death — invisibly and in perfect camouflage, like a masked guest at a dance. When the mask falls and the threat is identified, the intrusion has already taken place — and often, as in Prince Prospero’s case, it is too late for countermeasures, particularly in cases of a novel pathogen, for which a cure or vaccine has not been developed. For this development, science requires facts, differentiated inquiry, the knowledge of contextualization, and the historical archive, in order to succeed. As the microcosmic layout of Poe’s story manifests, the same is true for communities and nations: ignorance, denial, the failure of leadership, narcissism, and violence lead to high death tolls and political collapse. When I was writing the first draft of this conclusion in January 2021, the Capitol in Washington D.C., had just been attacked in an unprecedented sequence of events, incited and applauded by a President whose legacy consists of continuous practices of lying and blaming others, as well as a deadly failure of leadership. As I am preparing the manuscript for publication in mid-June, the current pandemic has cost over 600,000 American lives so far — approaching the U.S. death toll of the Civil War as the nation’s deadliest military conflict.¹⁴² If, nearly two hundred years ago, Poe’s story reflected on the fall of an empire, in which the Other “had come like a thief in the night”¹⁴³ to erode and destroy the nation from within, the narrative masquerades of pandemic fiction have much to teach us about the health of our democracies, far beyond their reverberations with an agent called SARS-CoV-2.

Endnotes

- ¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Ingrid Gessner and Carmen Birkle for their advice and feedback on an earlier draft of this paper, as well as to the anonymous readers whose productive comments have helped me to streamline and polish my argument.
- ² Don DeLillo, *The Silence: A Novel* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 88.
- ³ Ling Ma, *Severance* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018), 256.
- ⁴ Orhan Pamuk, “What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us,” in *The New York Times*, April 23, 2020, accessed July 8, 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-orhan-pamuk.html>>.
- ⁵ Kim Willsher, “Albert Camus novel *The Plague* leads surge of pestilence fiction,” in *The Guardian*, March 28, 2020, accessed October 26, 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/28/albert-camus-novel-the-plague-la-peste-pestilence-fiction-coronavirus-lockdown>>.

- 6 Abhinav Chakraborty, “Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Red Death’ in the Times of Coronavirus,” in *LiveWire*, March 19, 2020, accessed October 26, 2020, <<https://livewire.thewire.in/out-and-about/books/edgar-allan-poes-red-death-in-the-times-of-coronavirus/>>; see also Maya Phillips, “The Rich Can’t Hide from a Plague. Just Ask Edgar Allan Poe,” in *Slate*, March 26, 2020, accessed October 26, 2020, <<https://slate.com/culture/2020/03/edgar-allan-poes-masque-of-the-red-death-is-an-allegory-for-the-age-of-coronavirus.html>>; Jacqueline Martinez, “In Review: The Relevance of Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Masque of the Red Death’ in the Era of Covid-19,” in *The Prospector*, March 31, 2020, accessed October 26, 2020, <<https://www.theprospectordaily.com/2020/03/31/in-review-the-relevance-of-edgar-allan-poes-masque-of-the-red-death-in-the-era-of-covid-19/>>.
- 7 Robert Koch, “Die Ätiologie der Tuberkulose (1884),” in *Robert Koch: Zentrale Texte*, ed. Christoph Gradmann (Berlin: Springer Spektrum, 2018), 133–138.
- 8 Pamuk, “Great Pandemic Novels.”
- 9 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death,” in *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Norton, 2004), 299. Many critics have focused on the autobiographical impact of Poe’s circumstances, such as the cholera epidemic in Baltimore in 1831 (see Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* [New York: Cooper Square, 1969], 187) the nationwide yellow fever epidemic of 1841 (Setu K. Vora and Sundaram V. Ramanan, “Ebola-Poe: A Modern-Day Parallel of the Red Death?,” in *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 8.12 [2002], 1521–1523, here: 1522), or the fact that his wife Virginia suffered from tuberculosis, including gruesome incidents of ‘bleeding from the mouth’ (Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar Allan Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* [New York: Harper Perennial, 1992], 47).
- 10 They even suggest that the disease, were it real instead of fictional, should be named “Ebola-Poe” (Vora and Ramanan, “Ebola-Poe,” 1522).
- 11 Poe, “Masque,” 300.
- 12 Poe, “Masque,” 300.
- 13 Poe, “Masque,” 302.
- 14 Poe, “Masque,” 303.
- 15 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.
- 16 Poe, “Masque,” 303. One may find fault with the gendered pronoun here, but the Red Death is denoted by a male personal pronoun throughout the story.
- 17 Poe, “Masque,” 304.
- 18 Poe, “Masque,” 304.
- 19 Poe, “Masque,” 304.
- 20 On architecture, see, for instance, Kermit Vanderbilt, “Art and Nature in ‘The Masque of the Red Death,’” in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 22.4 (1968), 379–389; H. H. Bell, Jr., “‘The Masque of the Red Death’: An Interpretation,” in *South Atlantic Bulletin* 38.4 (1973), 101–105; or Brett Zimmermann, “The Puzzle of the Color Symbolism in ‘The Masque of the Red Death’: Solved At Last?,” in *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 10.3 (2009), 60–73. For time, examples include Jean-Paul Weber, “Edgar Poe, or the Theme of the Clock,” in *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1967), 79–97; Edward William Pitcher, “Horological and Chronological Time in ‘Masque of the Red Death,’” in *American Transcendental Quarterly* 29 (1976), 71–75; or Paul Haspel, who intriguingly links the role of the clock to Poe’s anxieties about race

- (“Bells of Freedom and Foreboding: Liberty Bell Ideology and the Clock Motif in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Masque of the Red Death,’” in *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 13.1 [2012], 46–70). Considering class, see Phillips, “The Rich Can’t Hide,” and Elisabeth Bronfen, *Angesteckt: Zeitgemässes über Pandemie und Kultur* (Basel: Echtzeit Verlag, 2020), 118. Bronfen’s argument (“Poes Entrüstung zielt auf die Ungerechtigkeit einer Klassengesellschaft ab, in der verantwortungslose Reiche meinen, sich durch ein frivoles Unterhaltungsprojekt vor einer Epidemie schützen zu können,” 118), however, seems to fall victim to a populist equation between diegetic and extradiegetic spaces and thus reduces the much more complex interrelations of Poe’s narrative strategies to blunt social critique.
- 21 Harpham reads the “red” death as a “read” death and focuses on the narrator as a strategy (Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982], 117), and Dudley foregrounds the story’s “narrative booby trap” of placing the narrator both inside and outside the abbey, and, in terms of temporality, “simultaneously in Prospero’s time, Poe’s time, and the reader’s time” (David R. Dudley, “Dead or Alive: The Booby-Trapped Narrator of Poe’s ‘Masque of the Red Death,’” in *Studies in Short Fiction* 30 [1993], 169–173, here: 172, 170).
- 22 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1994 [1973]), xi, ix–xii.
- 23 Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.
- 24 Foucault, *Birth*, xii.
- 25 Foucault, *Birth*, 165.
- 26 Foucault, *Birth*, 166.
- 27 Poe, “Masque,” 303. The specific resemblance between disease and death in the story also shows remarkable parallels to Foucault’s argument that “death is disease made possible in life” (Foucault, *Birth*, 156): “It is not because he falls ill that man dies; fundamentally, it is because he may die that man may fall ill” (Foucault, *Birth*, 155).
- 28 Poe, “Masque,” 302.
- 29 Poe, “Masque,” 302.
- 30 It is interesting to note in this context that the light, provided by flames mounted on tripods in the corridors “that projected [their] rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illumined the room” (Poe, “Masque,” 302) — a structure reminiscent of Plato’s cave allegory, as Hubert Zapf observes (“The Entropic Imagination in Poe’s ‘The Masque of the Red Death,’” in *College Literature* 16.3 [1989], 211–218, here: 215) — is the last to go: visibility endures longer than human life or even time, but it does not triumph or persist in the end.
- 31 Emma Donoghue, *The Pull of the Stars* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2020), 12.
- 32 Emma Donoghue, *The Pull of the Stars*, 16.
- 33 John O’Hara, “The Doctor’s Son,” in *The Great Short Stories of John O’Hara* (New York: Bantam Books, 1956), 1–28, here: 16.
- 34 Ma, *Severance*, 20, 19.
- 35 Lawrence Wright, *The End of October* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), 185, see also 20 and 100.
- 36 Cf. David A. Napier, *Masks, Transformation, and Paradox* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), xxiii.

- 37 Efrat Tseëlon, "Introduction: Masquerade and Identities," in *Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, and Marginality*, ed. Efrat Tseëlon (London: Routledge, 2001), 1–17, here: 6; Napir, *Masks*, xxiii.
- 38 Poe, "Masque," 302.
- 39 John Emigh, *Masked Performance: The Play of Self and Other in Ritual and Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), xvii.
- 40 Hubert Zapf, "Entropic," 213.
- 41 Poe, "Masque," 304.
- 42 Hubert Zapf has even read the red death as a "super- or metamask," which "emerges out of nowhere [...] to become representative of the principle of all other masks": it "is shown in the end as concealing nothing at all, because the Red Death is revealed, in the final confrontation with the other masqueraders, as consisting of nothing but its mask" ("Entropic," 216).
- 43 Cf. Christian W. McMillen, *Pandemics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5; Ingrid Gessner, *Yellow Fever Years: An Epidemiology of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2016), 53.
- 44 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an "avatar," as of 2008, is "[a] graphical representation of a person or character in a computer-generated environment, esp. one which represents a user in an interactive game or other setting, and which can move about in its surroundings and interact with other characters" ("avatar, n." *OED Online*, September 2020, Oxford University Press, accessed October 26, 2020, <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13624>>).
- 45 Rüdiger Kunow, "The Biology of Community: Contagious Diseases, Old Age, Biotech, and Cultural Studies," in *Communicating Disease: Cultural Representations of American Medicine*, eds. Carmen Birkle and Johanna Heil (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013), 265–287, here: 268.
- 46 Kunow, "Community," 268.
- 47 Kunow, "Community," 268–269.
- 48 Cf. Gessner, *Yellow Fever Years*, 29.
- 49 Gessner, *Yellow Fever Years*, 41–42.
- 50 Poe, "Masque," 300, 303. Philipp Sarasin et al. also note that the trope of the "immigration" of bacteria resulted in a semantic merging of biological threat and the cultural Other. See Philipp Sarasin et al., "Bakteriologie und Moderne: Eine Einleitung," in *Bakteriologie und Moderne: Studien zur Biopolitik des Unsichtbaren, 1870–1920*, eds. Philipp Sarasin et al. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 39.
- 51 Bob Woodward notes that in mid-March 2020, Trump "blamed China and President Obama and continued to accept no responsibility" (Bob Woodward, *Rage* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020], 284).
- 52 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 71, 7.
- 53 See also David S. Barnes, *The Making of Social Disease: Tuberculosis in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Trevor Hoppe, *Punishing Disease: HIV and the Criminalization of Sickness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).
- 54 Alan M. Kraut, *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the Immigrant Menace* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 9. For the nexus between health and fear, see also Mark Honigsbaum, *The Pandemic Century: One Hundred Years of Panic, Hysteria, and Hubris* (London: Hurst and Company, 2019).
- 55 Philip Roth, *Nemesis* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 25, 38.

- 56 Andrea Barrett, *Ship Fever* (Stuttgart: Klett, 2020 [1996]), 19.
- 57 Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (New York: Signet, 1962), 155. The homodiegetic narrator also focuses on the “white shadow of the screen” in her room (155), her “white blanket” (155), the “white iron bed” (155), various “men in white” (155), the “pallid white fog” (155), and the “white tarantulas” of her hands (157).
- 58 Louise Erdrich, *The Birchbark House* (New York: Hyperion, 1999), 158.
- 59 Erdrich, *Birchbark*, 142.
- 60 Erdrich, *Birchbark*, 143.
- 61 Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), 152.
- 62 Justice, *Indigenous Literatures*, 152.
- 63 DeLillo, *The Silence*, 27.
- 64 DeLillo, *The Silence*, 81. The transformative event in *The Silence* remains obscure, however, and even if DeLillo ended up deleting all references to Covid-19 in the final version of the text, the subtext of a pandemic situation is still evident, as the quote I have used for an epigram demonstrates. For the backgrounds of the novel, see Ijoma Mangold, “‘Wie leben wir jetzt? Ich weiß es nicht’: Don DeLillo’s neuer Roman *Die Stille* spielt nach einem Stromausfall in New York,” in *Die ZEIT*, Nr. 43, October 15, 2020, 49.
- 65 For the zombie apocalypse, see, for instance, Kyle W. Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010); Kelly J. Baker, *The Zombies Are Coming: The Realities of the Zombie Apocalypse in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: Blue Crow Books, 2013); Greg Garrett, *Living With the Living Dead: The Wisdom of the Zombie Apocalypse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Sarah Juliet Lauro, ed., *Zombie Theory: A Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
- 66 Wald, *Contagious*; Gessner, *Yellow Fever Years*; Elizabeth Outka, *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
- 67 Wald, *Contagious*, 19.
- 68 Wald, *Contagious*, 3.
- 69 Wald, *Contagious*, 2.
- 70 Dudley, “Dead,” 169.
- 71 Leonard Cassuto, “The Coy Reaper: Unmasque-ing the Red Death,” in *Studies in Short Fiction* 25 (1988), 317–320, here: 318.
- 72 Cf. Dudley, “Dead,” 172.
- 73 Ansgar Nünning, “Unreliable Narration zur Einführung: Grundzüge einer kognitiv-narratologischen Theorie und Analyse unglaubwürdigen Erzählens,” in *Unreliable Narration: Studien zur Theorie und Praxis unglaubwürdigen Erzählens*, ed. Ansgar Nünning (Trier: WVT, 1998), 3–40.
- 74 Poe, “Masque,” 301.
- 75 Poe, “Masque,” 303.
- 76 Poe, “Masque,” 302.
- 77 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 189.
- 78 McMillen, *Pandemics*, 4.

- 79 Michael Crichton, *The Andromeda Strain* (London: Arrow Books, 1969), 90, 134–143, 31, 171, 227, 110, 105, 252.
- 80 Wright, *The End of October*, 20.
- 81 Lenny Picker, “No Greater Threat: PW Talks with Lawrence Wright,” in *Publishers Weekly*, March 9, 2020, 44.
- 82 Wright, *The End of October*, 147, 149, 110–111, 180–185. In this context, Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014) also deserves attention for its uncanny predictions of 2020 situations, and elements such as hospital overflow (22), the invocations of the Spanish Flu of 1918 (60), and the hoarding of toilet paper (23) seem to have become stock items of any pandemic novel.
- 83 The latter include the looting of stores (274), the rise of black markets (195), the lack of food (203), the collapse of governmental structures (252), violent crime (300), orphan gangs (274), the breakdown of material and digital infrastructures, the loss of cloud data (275), and even cannibalism (364).
- 84 Wright, *The End of October*, 232.
- 85 Wright, *The End of October*, 86, 141. It is also uncanny in light of the Covid-19 crisis evolving after the publication of the novel that at one point Henry Parsons even assumes that “it could be a coronavirus like SARS or MERS” (30).
- 86 Wright, *The End of October*, 359, 361.
- 87 Wright, *The End of October*, 94.
- 88 Wright, *The End of October*, 136.
- 89 Wright, *The End of October*, 60–61, 102. When Tariq dies as one of the earliest victims of Kongoli, it seems like poetic justice in light of his solidarity with the Islamist terrorists.
- 90 Wright, *The End of October*, 19. There even is “a fatwa against the [measles] vaccine” (13).
- 91 Wright, *The End of October*, 112.
- 92 Wright, *The End of October*, 96.
- 93 Kraut, *Silent Travelers*, 9.
- 94 Wright, *The End of October*, 107.
- 95 Wright, *The End of October*, 183.
- 96 Wright, *The End of October*, 39.
- 97 Wright, *The End of October*, 304. In the wake of the actual attack on Alexei Navalny in August 2020, this particular method of attacking or killing opponents (in the novel) has an uncanny ring of truth.
- 98 Wright, *The End of October*, 253, cf. 360.
- 99 Wright, *The End of October*, 203.
- 100 Wright, *The End of October*, 103.
- 101 Wright, *The End of October*, 39.
- 102 Wright, *The End of October*, 107.
- 103 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1983), 97.
- 104 Wright, *The End of October*, 213, 197, 155, 223, 69, 333, 120, 339, 53.
- 105 Wright, *The End of October*, 353.
- 106 Wright, *The End of October*, 354.

- 107 Wright, *The End of October*, 20.
- 108 Wright, *The End of October*, 376.
- 109 Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 14.
- 110 Ma, *Severance*, 248.
- 111 Ma, *Severance*, 45, 212, 139, 272, 45, 135. The characters also drink Corona beer (33), which, in hindsight, seems somewhat ironic for a novel on a pathogen from China.
- 112 Ma, *Severance*, 181.
- 113 Ma, *Severance*, 217, 218.
- 114 Ma, *Severance*, 35.
- 115 Ma, *Severance*, 42, 41. “The ghost was me,” she emphasizes: “Walking around aimlessly, without anywhere to go, anything to do, I was just a specter haunting the scene” (41). When the city is later emptied by the pandemic, she still upholds this routine, moves into the office (262) and “documents the deserted city” (255) on the blog.
- 116 Ma, *Severance*, 186, 43.
- 117 Ma, *Severance*, 189.
- 118 Ma, *Severance*, 261.
- 119 Ma, *Severance*, 200.
- 120 Ma, *Severance*, 19, 28, 62, 68, 258, 278.
- 121 Ma, *Severance*, 20.
- 122 Chelsea Haith, “Pandemics from Homer to Stephen King: What We Can Learn from Literary History,” in *The Conversation*, March 16, 2020, accessed January 9, 2021, <<https://theconversation.com/pandemics-from-homer-to-stephen-king-what-we-can-learn-from-literary-history-133572>>. Jiayang Fan also calls it a “consideration of capitalism, immigration, and zombies” (Jiayang Fan, “Ling Ma’s *Severance* Captures the Bleak, Fatalistic Mood of 2018,” in *The New Yorker*, December 10, 2018, accessed January 9, 2021, <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/ling-ma-severance-captures-the-bleak-fatalistic-mood-of-2018>>.
- 123 Ma, *Severance*, 89, 100.
- 124 Ma, *Severance*, 206.
- 125 Ma, *Severance*, 70.
- 126 Ma, *Severance*, 160.
- 127 Gary Cross, *Consumed Nostalgia: Memory in the Age of Fast Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 10 (emphasis original).
- 128 Ma, *Severance*, 143.
- 129 Qtd. in Cross, *Consumed Nostalgia*, 7. Ma’s novel also seems to pick up on the fact that the term ‘nostalgia’ was coined by a Swiss doctor and first used in a medical context. The bond of a common minority identity is emphasized when Candace talks to Eddie: they both “lowered [their] mask[s]” (259).
- 130 Ma, *Severance*, 274, 146–147, 203, 238, 252. Reviewers have focused on the “typical apocalypse story” (Jessica Baumgardner, “Where Is My Mind?” in *Women’s Review of Books* 35.5 [2018], 6–7, here: 6), but Fan also notes that the use of dystopian fiction is a “trope” fulfilling the genre’s “tendency to produce protagonists meant to stand in for society at large” (Fan, “Ling Ma.”).

- 131 Ma, *Severance*, 149; an excerpt of this memo is introduced on page 19.
- 132 Ma, *Severance*, 100.
- 133 The lack of quotation marks throughout the text makes it difficult to trace sources and speakers, and even Candace herself admits on several occasions that her relation of the events is not entirely accurate. “The truth is,” she says in the Prologue, “I was not there at the Beginning” (7) – One of the instances in which the speaker can only be identified later in the text is in chapter two, when it seems as if the narrator is speaking, but it is actually Bob (27).
- 134 Ma, *Severance*, 278.
- 135 Ma, *Severance*, 20; see also 64 and 208. Two years before Covid-19, Ma is remarkably specific about N95 respirator masks, which “reduce the chance of transmission” (149) and become ubiquitous in the novel’s society (209). During the New York fashion week, models present “face masks” (211), Occupy protesters are often also “not wearing their masks” (214), and even Candace “didn’t like the way it made my mouth hot and suffocated, a bacterial cesspool” (236).
- 136 Ma, *Severance*, 152, 210.
- 137 Ma, *Severance*, 256.
- 138 Ma, *Severance*, 9.
- 139 Ma, *Severance*, 291.
- 140 Gessner, *Yellow Fever Years*, 29.
- 141 Rivka Galchen, “Introduction,” in *The Decameron Project*, ed. The New York Times Magazine (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), xiv.
- 142 Aaron O’Neill, “Number of military fatalities in all major wars involving the United States from 1775 to 2021,” Statista.com, April 12, 2021, accessed May 1, 2021, <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1009819/total-us-military-fatalities-in-american-wars-1775-present/>>. Compare also to: Olivia B. Waxman and Chris Wilson, “How the Coronavirus Death Toll Compares to Other Deadly Events from American History,” in *Time*, September 22, 2020, accessed January 11, 2021, <<https://time.com/5815367/coronavirus-deaths-comparison/>>.
- 143 Poe, “Masque,” 304.