



Madeleine Dobie & Thomas Dodman //

This collection of essays in *Synopsis* grew out of a course on pandemics in francophone history and culture that we offered in Columbia's Department of French and Institute for Comparative Literature and Society in fall 2021. The unprecedented experience (at least in our community) of teaching in the midst of a pandemic compelled us to lean into the history and historiography of contagious diseases and their impact on culture. To lean in, in this sense, also meant 'zooming out' (wordplay intended) and situating our own experience of remote learning, social distancing and personal protective equipment within a long history of human adaptation to microbes. Disease and illness tend to hover in the background of historical narratives and in the biographies of artists and intellectuals. Placing them at the center of a course highlighted the many ways in which they have shaped not only science, medicine and public health but also, more broadly, the human

relationship to the body and its representation in literary genres ranging from autobiography to lyric poetry.

The course explored the history of epidemics and medical confinement in France and the French empire (or countries formerly colonized by France) from the plague that beset Marseille in 1720 to recent outbreaks of Ebola in West Africa and our own navigation of COVID-19, considering how disease, contagion, quarantine and confinement have been understood and represented in medical treatises, news media, personal narratives, fiction, film and visual depictions such as paintings, illustrations and cartoons. It was organized around five case studies, each centering on a different contagious disease examined in its historical context. Each of the pandemics we considered (bubonic plague in 17th and 18th-century Europe; cholera as a bi-product of nineteenth-century urban development and industrialization; colonial vaccination campaigns; AIDS as a catalyst for social activism; and contemporary diseases, such as Ebola and COVID-19, which are interwoven with globalization and its impact on the natural environment) raises a distinct set of moral, political, social and historiographical questions, though there are also significant connecting threads such as the linkage between epidemics and the othering of certain population groups; the intersection of colonialism, revolution and warfare with disease, the introduction of new medical protocols, and the gradual emergence of biopolitics as a framework for the relationship of individual to state. In our discussions, we alternated between recognizing our own predicament in the face of COVID in the writing of historical precursors, such as Daniel Defoe in the 1722 *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and measuring the vast distance that separates our twenty-first century north-American experience of contagious disease from other historical or global contexts. The course confirmed that contagious diseases have always had a literary dimension in the sense that they are 'breeding grounds' of narrative, metaphor and allegory. The specificity of literary texts in this regard is their capacity to condense and catalyze ethical and political reflection on health, medicine, the body and the self, personal autonomy and interventions by the state.

The four contributions to this collection reflect the diversity of the student projects completed in conjunction with the course. Two examine the disease and medicine as driving forces in the history of colonialism and race. Sam Millner's piece considers the yellow fever epidemics that traveled between Saint-Domingue and Philadelphia in the 1790s through the lens of biopolitics and racial capitalism. He considers how Philadelphia's response to this epidemic, widely seen as a crucial chapter in the history of public health in North America, rested on notions of racially specific immunity that were extrapolated from that of plantation slavery. In the deployment of Black people as 'frontline' workers he sees the beginnings of a still continuing history of medical exploitation and neglect. Eleanor Grabowski's contribution turns to a recent French novel about the life and career of the epidemiologist Alexandre Yersin, who discovered the plague bacillus yet failed to become a household name in the guise of his mentor, Louis Pasteur. Patrick Deville's award-winning novel *Plague and Cholera* retraces Yersin's travels through various outposts of the French empire in East Asia, situating him within the cross-currents of early twentieth-century scientific and colonial history. Grabowski, however, asks how this fictional biography is positioned in relation to colonial medical history and to what readership it is addressed. She highlights Deville's reliance, in his depiction of Indochina, on the exotic tropes of the colonial geographic

imaginary and considers why French novels about far-away locations continue to draw literary accolades. The contributions by Lillian Rountree and Rosa Geoghegan center on writers who were themselves afflicted by infectious diseases. Rountree considers the nineteenth-century French writer Alphonse Daudet's posthumously-published diary *La Dolou*, an exceptionally detailed and intimate account of syphilis, the disease that ravaged Europe and the Americas for generations yet has largely remained in the shadows of cultural history. Rountree considers why, although Daudet described his symptoms in painstaking detail, he did not seem able to name it as syphilis, reading in this silence a pattern of cultural reticence toward sexually transmitted disease. Geoghegan compares the work of the British Romantic John Keats, who died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five in 1821, to that of Hervé Guibert, who died of AIDS at thirty-six in 1991. Both writers were acutely aware of their mortality and fascinated by the temporal structure of literature, notably the paradox of writing in the moment but for posterity. Yet these two writers approached the body and illness in markedly different ways. Where Keats sublimated physical suffering in a quest for literary immortality, Guibert placed the queer body and the symptoms of AIDS at the center of his work, merging his aesthetic vision with political activism.

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Image: Two world maps against a black background with the words 'Everywhere' and 'condom'; an advertisement for safe sex by Pierre Emm [Meunier] for ACT-UP, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Colour lithograph. Source: The Wellcome Institute.