Post-Millennial Perceptions and Post-Pandemic Realities

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Living Dystopian

Edited by

Pradipta Mukherjee

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INTRODUCTION

PRADIPTA MUKHERJEE

To be living now is to be living dystopian. It is a living, despite living. Surviving the vorpal veer of the virus in the juvescence of the year 2020 we were forced to come face-to-face with the reality of how diminished our lives and their wake had become in the scheme of things; and how much more miniscule the ripples set off by our deaths.

Sitting disconcerted and numbed before the proactive television in the early months of the pandemic rush, feelings coursed through us like shadows on a sundial. From unbelief to fear, from horror to resignation, from righteous indignation to reductive theorisations: the flickering needle of human emotions gyrated like the speed gauge of a racing car.

Truly, everything that could do had fallen apart. However, this falling apart had been a long time coming. The aim of this volume is to institute a study of this long, slow build-up of post-millennium anxiety, angst, and atrophy and how it shaped the tip of the worldwide thrust of the pandemic.

Governments had fallen out with the people. The people had fallen out with the rule of law. Medicine was at odds with civic policy and economies were sustained on a diet of corpses. Everywhere, it seemed the ceremony of democracy was being drowned.

The revival of dystopian literature and films in the last couple of years was an indication of the general desire for models of how to better understand the realities we are experiencing now. In intellectual and artistic spheres, the events of the last year have caused an unprecedented ferment, to which the plethora of literary miscellanies and anthologies triggered by Covid-19 stands testimony. But, have we been too hasty in our perceptions, too impatient in our prognostications? Has it only exposed the Achilles heel of our post-millennial academism by foregrounding haste over perspective, and critical foreclosure over commitments to the minutiae of day-to-day existence? Living dystopian has never been more colourful and disquieting.

In the opening essay of the volume, Douglas Lanier attests to the waning faith in the cultural currency of Shakespeare and Shakespeare performance by invoking the example of two novels—*The Postman* (1985) by David Brin and *Station Eleven* (2015) by Emily St. John Mandel—in the preamble

to his incisive enunciation of the study of Shakespeare performance in a larger reparative framework. Though the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021 was devastating for conventional stage productions, practitioners were ingenious in crafting new ways of performing Shakespeare amidst severe restrictions. Lanier's essay explores Shakespearean performance during the pandemic: not only new formats of performance that emerged, but also the economic, socio-political, ethical, and ideological issues that they raised. Lanier argues in favour of Covid Shakespeare having a reparative function for its audiences, although he is mindful of Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick's pointed reminder about the limitations of academic critiques.

Bashabi Fraser's essay nurtures the twin ideas that as a product of its times, like a seeded plant drawing nourishment from the soil, literature can and does reflect both the wisdom and the myopia of its climes; and the attendant idea that it is thus a repository of visions and wisdom gathered over the traversing of the space-time of a millennia and more. Fraser insists that literature holds the power to shock, warn, assuage, and inspire in equal measure as it demands that we cast our eyes back to the past in order that our future comes into better view. She surveys the post-apocalyptic scenes painted by the imagination of writers as diverse and disparate in outlook and historical positioning as Mary Shelley, Albert Camus, and Cormac McCarthy and mines them for the reassurance of resilient hope and faith in humanity. Fraser attests to the power of literature in fashioning a better, more hospitable planet, both environmentally and in terms of forging a more tolerant and emancipated civilization.

Alex Taek Gwang Lee's essay studies the role of the pandemic as a catalyst for socio-economic reconstruction. It analyses how the phenomenology of demographic decline across the world has effected institutional changes and the redistribution of labour power. Lee's contention sees the global capitalist mobility of resource, capital, and labour as the origin of the spread and worldwide provenance of the virus. He, further, posits the interesting analogy of a zombie modernity, the consequence of an accelerationist and formless accruing of capital as part of a "baroque" system that leaves the labouring human subject as a rootless, mythless entity, much like a zombie—an effluent of technological progress.

The mad race of modernity and the unmindful urge to attain more than is needed has robbed the human world of its true beauty, peace, and harmony. These malpractices, which impair the healthy growth of society under seemingly impartial governance in welfare states, are not new phenomena. According to Arti Nirmal these phenomena have always been there to some degree, but their impact and manifestation has increased manifold after the Industrial Revolution, capitalism, and colonialism.

Unfortunately, the notion of utopia, the desire to establish a perfect society where law, order, equality, justice, honesty, and good governance may prevail, was perhaps thwarted with the death of Thomas More. Its counterpart, dystopia, is what, Nirmal suggests, characterises the present age more befittingly. Nirmal observes how dystopian fiction, with a view to offering a faithful picture of contemporary society, emerges as a speculative literary genre that explores conflicting sites in sociopolitical structures and geopolitical spaces. Nirmal traces the convention of dystopian literature from its inception in Europe with the French Revolution in 1789, through its later iterations in the works of George Orwell, Frank Kermode, and numerous others from time to time in different ages. Drawing on these preliminaries, Nirmal seeks to comprehend the dystopian vision of Indra Sinha in his novel *Animal's People* (2007). Concerning the monumental industrial disaster of 1984 in Bhopal, Sinha's text is seen to voice the sufferings and angst of the victims who are mere human capital for the corporate multinational companies. Her essay attempts to study the complex issues of human rights abuse, democratic deficit, neoliberal formulations, environmental disaster, and the role of the West in reducing humans to "animals."

Epidemics have been deadly in both literature and real life. While most contagions have caused diseases of the skin, lungs, or kidneys, an illness causing sudden blindness may result in the worst chaos of all. Corona virus too brought along with it other forms of damage to the eyes in the waning second wave, namely, the black, white, and yellow fungus that results in permanent blindness. Hem Raj Bansal's essay aims to study José Saramago's (1922–2010) novel *Blindness* (1995) to answer a few pressing questions: along with blindness of the eyes, he wonders, can there be metaphorical blindness of humans? Does losing eyesight also mean losing sight of various life-enhancing human values? Could human beings survive a pandemic of blindness? Bansal's essay attempts to trace a woman's extraordinary courage to live as a blind person in an isolation ward with blind people. As the only character not to lose her vision in the pandemic, she fights against various odds, and braves killing a gang leader who would not only rape women but also steal from people in all the other wards in the institution. Finally, Bansal observes that the novel does not sync well with modern medicine where injections save us but with divine grace as people recover their vision after passing through the nightmare.

In living through a pandemic it is but natural to revisit earlier texts that deal with epidemics and pandemics. Nishi Pulugurtha's essay in this volume looks at Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Masque of the Red Death," which depicts the failure of authority figures to properly, adequately, and

humanely respond to disease and disaster that afflicts people, a reality that is all too familiar in the time of Covid-19. Poe himself had survived the cholera epidemic of 1832 and Pulugurtha's paper examines his story as a narrative that speaks of pestilence, suffering, and disease. Poe's description of the disease that afflicts people in this story is fictional, but the resonances with the world we live in at the moment and our reactions to what is happening around us are remarkable. Pulugurtha shows us that, as one reads the story, two important ideas surface, ideas that find contemporary resonance: the impossibility of subverting the ends of nature and the way those in power and authority behave. What emerges in Pulugurtha's essay is the identification of a common ground regarding texts that deal with epidemics/pandemics and the inherent similarity of the human response depicted in them.

Madhuchhanda Ray Choudhury's essay on James Patterson and Michael Ledwidge's novel *Zoo* (2012) offers a new lens for viewing eco-dystopias. Choudhury outlines how the novel depicts a nightmarish world where changes in the biosphere due to radiation emanated from excessive cell phone usage have caused a pandemic in the animal kingdom. As a result of this pandemic, different species of animal herd together and launch lethal attacks on humans, wiping out half the population of the globe. Given this focus of the novel, Choudhury opines that it can be viewed as an exploration of the ramifications of dwelling in the Anthropocene epoch. The Anthropocene is a geological term coined by biologist Eugene Stoermer and chemist Paul Crutzen in the year 2000 for the epoch in which human activities began shaping and altering our planet. While eco-dystopias have often concentrated on the catastrophic impact of climate change, the novel *Zoo*, according to Choudhury, opens up a new angle for interpreting this sub-genre by focusing on the inadvertent but disastrous impact of human technological progress on the animal kingdom. Moreover, her essay also explores the dark aspects of the Anthropocene epoch by studying the negative side of viewing humans as "planet shapers." Furthermore, the struggle of the protagonist, scientist Jackson Oz, to convince the larger academic community and the government of the cause and the imminent disastrous impact of the changes in animals is uncannily prescient, notes Choudhury, of the response of the Trump administration to the warnings issued by scientists in 2019 and early 2020. Finally, Choudhury argues that Jackson Oz's solution for ending the animal pandemic, namely the shutdown of all industrial activities, electricity, cell phone usage, and use of vehicles, to clear the air, also foreshadows the global lockdown in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Avirup Ghosh's essay addresses the question of alterity as represented in Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* (1969). The novel probes the thin dividing line between science fiction and reality as we know it. A belligerent extra-terrestrial microbe called the Andromeda Strain invades the earth's biosphere making the scientists who are studying it wonder about life forms that are completely different from life on earth. The story is built around several points of suspense. One is given to wonder how the microbe functions and how devastating it could be potentially. However, this is followed immediately with the inevitable question as to how it could be obliterated, or at least, contained. We are provoked to consider the sheer plausibility of an organism entering from outer space and affecting life on earth. According to Ghosh, the novel stops short of a dystopic account of the strain's rampage, because the scientist-protagonists are able to contain it, and its deadliness decreases. Ghosh goes on to point out how the work initiates a discourse about human scientific hubris and the potential threats lurking unknown in the universe. Ghosh also attempts to rethink the notions of alterity and otherness in the novel through the lens of the Covid-19 pandemic within the current trend of revisiting earlier science fiction works to trace in them prophetic themes, like strains of dormant microbial presence.

Gerri Kimber uses an idea from the French writer Colette's posthumous autobiography, seamlessly drawn from a lifetime of her personal writing by Robert Phelps in 1975, as a cue in her essay to mull over the fact that although there are days when solitude is a heady wine that intoxicates one with freedom, there are other days, like the days of solitude enforced upon us by the global pandemic, when it is a bitter tonic, and still others when it is a poison that makes one beat one's head against the wall. Kimber attests to the universality of these reactions to the pandemic from disparate global locations. She points out that for those working in academia, this was a professional utopia arriving at the most dystopian of historical moments. Suddenly, confined to one's home, academics found that they had eons of time to breathe, to write, think, ponder, and research—all the things that they had ever craved for. However, as Kimber points out, none of these tasks could actually be performed, because the lives of academics, like the rest of society, were overcome with fear, worry, and anxiety. At the inception, when the Covid virus had started making headlines in January 2020, Kimber was preparing for a five-week research trip to the National Library of New Zealand in Wellington from her home in the South of France. By the time her work was concluded, the world was already reeling from the first wave of the disease. Although Kimber made it back home just in time, before the world bristled with the grid of lockdowns, her life in "the time of Covid"

was a life altered, as she narrates in her essay.

John McCourt's essay references a set of diary entries he published daily on Facebook from Italy over the first three months of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring and summer of 2020. Written with passion, concern, and a sense of intellectual immediacy, McCourt's impromptu responses on social media to the ever-morphing medico-political situation across Europe, situated as he was at the time on the frontline in Italy, are recollected and put into perspective in this testimonial essay. Cavils and critique, warmth and pathos animate his original diary entries and their re-evocation in this essay. He warns against the false prophets of the information infestation on the internet, not unlike biblical apostles like Matthew and Paul. McCourt's words are a force that through the dark fuse of the times drives that grain of light, of hope.

Cecile Oumhani takes us on a journey that is both personal and civilisational, moored to France, but alive to the driftage of ideas worldwide. She invokes the sounds of memory—more insistent than the ticking of clocks in a nightmare, or the fleeting moments of sunlit sleep where the birds sing—and the silence of modern-day reflection as "twenty-three-hour-long days" drive people to discovering old habits like reading, reminiscing, and retelling the experiences of joy and pain that have shaped us. Oumhani uses the example of the Second World War and reactions to it to understand the public and private impact of the pandemic that has been raging since March 2020. A medical and biological crisis morphs into an ethical, political, and spiritual one. A thorough examination of the human condition emerges in Oumhani's writing as she looks at gestures of forgetting, selfishness, denial of freedom, and cruelty in an acutely personal idiom, as a set of global symptoms that the Covid-19 virus has alerted us to, made us aware of.

As India, and within it the state of West Bengal where she was domiciled, shivered and swooned under the rampaging assault of the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, Pradipta Mukherjee in her testimonial essay surveys media reports, as an opening gambit, on a worsening situation as contradictoriness in terms of state policy, inhumanity, and the arrogance of ignorance took a grip of the nation. This assay of a dystopian clime in the media leads her to contemplate the stellar contributions of art and artists in such moments of global medical crises, like the bubonic plague, christened "the Black Death," in medieval times in Europe and the Spanish flu in the early twentieth century. Balancing the minutiae of the pandemic advance in India with powerful images drawn from the repertoire of visual and literary cultures of medieval, early-modern, *fin-de-siècle*, and early-twentieth-century Europe, Mukherjee presents her witnesshood of this calamitous

moment in human history through evocations of great artists—Peter Brueghel the Elder, Pablo Picasso, Edvard Munch, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, Salvador Dalí—and poets like Rabindranath Tagore, John Donne, Thomas Nash, and Thomas Gray. Mukherjee's range of visual correlatives as she tries to make a tryst with the dark nature of human suffering and helplessness also includes cinema, with Ingmar Bergman and Roger Corman getting particular mentions.

Rumpa Das essays a fictional futuristic memoir of an old woman who shares vignettes of her lived experiences during the coronavirus pandemic with her eight-year old grandson, fifty years after the catastrophic events that she experienced as a teenager. The vision of an eighteen-year old young girl whose school-leaving exam and dream of pursuing higher studies away from home in another state are cut short by the pandemic encompasses the full range of human predicament as the deadly virus is seen to have affected nature, society, and human interactions and aspirations. The pandemic deaths and the vanishing of familiar faces in the neighbourhood are conflated with fatalities from the Black Death, Ebola, and the dark portraiture of deadly contagion in the works of artists like Albrecht Durer and Franz Hals, and the AIDS Memorial Quilt. All these become part of the matrix of memory that the narrator presents as a bricolage. The horror of living in a world where nature heals itself as well as upstages human endeavours as pandemics or cyclones is evoked poignantly throughout the account. The teenage protagonist witnesses death as a daily occurrence and watches helplessly as dear ones are snatched away. These days are reimagined and inscribed in the narrative of the same woman, fifty years after the pandemic, in a different land, a different time, and a different frame of mind.

Biswarup Mukhopadhyay, himself a consultant ENT and head-neck surgeon, takes a bold and humane perspective in his essay that breaches disciplinary boundaries. Instead of identifying the Covid-19 pandemic as a medico-biological emergency, as was normal, he visualises it as a socio-political crisis. He notes cogently how the current pandemic induced by the coronavirus is a unique experience for the entire world. According to him, people were clueless against the onslaught of this unknown enemy. Mukhopadhyay pointedly reminds us how, driven by the fear of the unknown, people started suspecting friends and family members, and in order to protect themselves reacted in bizarre ways that were unbecoming of their status as informed and responsible citizens. Mukhopadhyay's account places a finger on the fear of estrangement and alienation in people as being the origin of acts of social irresponsibility. This was a time when the healthcare system was stretched to the limits at the peak of the pandemic

waves, when, as Mukhopadhyay notes, there was hardly any distinction between haves and have-nots in society. Mukhopadhyay's essay responds sceptically to the euphoria of the arrival of the vaccine, which was accorded the status of a saviour. He reminds us that even the vaccine was not universally accepted, as it was treated with suspicion, fear, and rejection among a sizeable number of people. Mukhopadhyay's essay pleads for more humility on the part of the scientific and political establishments as the world tries to rise to the magnitude of the challenge posed before it by such crises as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Cornelius Crowley assumes the mantle of authorship in this millennial promissory—an anticipatory, experimental text that vacillates between the futuristic and the antiquarian, part fiction, part analysis, part panegyric on the pleasures of loss that accrue at the end of a millennia of fatalism, part postmodern by-play with the authority of texts via quotation—in order to bring the imbalance, gratuitousness, momentariness, and suddenness (all symptoms) of the Covid-19 virus into the very act of writing. Expertly honing the traits of the virus-infected, virus-inflected lives of individual and society and nudging us wryly with the "tweaking-twiddling-diddling" of modern expression, Crowley constructs a matrix of words and experiences from which what is possible are not escape or solutions, but like the endless extension of contagion, only fresh re-entry.

Neal Hall's poetic intervention, which first coaxes and then challenges the boundaries of the essay form, is an unrelenting exposure of human self-centeredness, even in—especially in—times of utter distress and darkness such as the current pandemic situation. Concurring with Giorgio Agamben's notions regarding the use of the state of exception by political regimes to accrue even more power and economic capital during periods of medical emergency, Hall is unsparing of politicians, religious leaders, and cultural commentators who perpetrate the most horrifying assaults on human freedom and free will by assuming the most humane of facades and insisting upon the most logical of measures. In this sense Hall's poetry is truly hermetic. Literary hermeticism originated in nineteenth-century poetry and the poetic theory of Novalis and Poe as used by the French symbolist poets, particularly Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry, and Rimbaud. In the twentieth century, Italian poets like Arturo Onofri and Giuseppe Ungaretti carried on the tradition. The cryptic brevity, rapier-like thrusts of metaphor, and involution of Hall's lines echo that of the Italian hermeticists. Like them, Hall's voice and its articulation are forced upon him by the intense control over human experience of history and its expression by the powers that be, not unlike the totalitarian, self-aggrandising power exerted by the Fascist regime in the interwar period in Europe. The hermetic strain in

Hall's writing insists upon the intimate relationship of reading, its community-making power, and the capacity of language to respond to the most brutal challenges of history.

Debasish Lahiri in his essay tries to posit a position contrary to the major stance of current dystopia studies that tries to visualise "dystopia" as a manifest reality with events, natural or human-engineered, of cataclysmic proportions. Lahiri argues in favour of a "quiet" dystopia that is almost imperceptible to formal scrutiny, a phenomenon, he suggests, that is the stuff of unremarkable days. This phenomenon, Lahiri further argues, can lie as the simmering innards of a society that is otherwise perceived as progressive or "normal." In his essay Lahiri draws on the paintings executed by the legendary post-impressionist artist Vincent Van Gogh, at Auvers-sur-Oise in France, during the last month and a half of his life, May to July 1890, absorbed through his own fictional rendition of the painter's artistic clime, as a resource in trying to demonstrate the workings of what he identifies as "spectral dystopia."

In his essay on the trajectories of intellectual and emotional driftage recorded by poets in their pandemic testimonies in the collection *Singing in the Dark: A Global Anthology of Poetry Under Lockdown*, Angshuman Kar attempts to chart the multiple ways in which poetry can respond to and inhere the oscillation between despair, hope, fear, and angst that any cogent and cognisable response to the difficult history of the last couple of years can come up with. Referencing translated poetry from several vernacular Indian languages—such as Hindi, Tamil, and Odia—and original work in English by Indian poets, Kar deftly foregrounds the emotional undulations induced by the privation of lockdowns and the desperation of migrant labourers on arduous trudges across the length and breadth of the country. The essay, however, endeavours to depict a collective spirit of hope and resilience that poetry naturally offers even in the worst of times. The life force of poetry and art is seen as resuscitating an ailing nation, an ailing world.

There is a certain law of genre (to borrow a phrase from Derrida), the law of a dystopian genre, that emerges from the constellation of texts in this volume. Its design is similar to Theo Angelopoulos's film *Ulysses' Gaze* where it is poetically claimed that God's first creation was the journey after which came doubt, and then nostalgia. From the travails of a modern-day thespian peregrination outlined in Douglas Lanier's essay on the metamorphosis of Shakespeare performances during the Covid-19 pandemic to the reliving of spectral dystopia on Van Gogh's canvas in Debasish Lahiri's essay and the resilience of first anger and then hope in Neal Hall's and Angshuman Kar's interventions, the testimonies, personal

accounts, and academic essays in this book illustrate a triptych of the dystopian moment we are passing through: the necessity of undertaking a journey, however perilous, the harbouring of honest doubt that such a voyage of discovery can ever be completed or its findings trusted, and finally a nostalgia for everything that has been destroyed or menaced by the pandemic-induced dystopia—institutions, cultural memory, humanity itself.

The Greek word *nóstos* gave us the word "nostalgia." One cannot, therefore, reduce the nostalgic to the commonplace meaning of a hopeless romantic rewriting of the past. Nostalgia inherits from *nóstos* the notion of homecoming. What animates the "journey" in the essays in this volume is the return, knowing that we want to keep the journey going as much as we can, because any sense of return always remains with us. In this, the collective thrust of these contributions could assume that the narrative of the journey and the polity of doubt come together as the nostalgic return to an end that is historically postponed. This is not a dark anthology, although it grapples with the darkness and difficulty of dystopia.

Finally, *Living Dystopian* does not confine itself to a claustrophobic scrutiny of the passing moment but touches new horizons. These horizons emerge in the philosopher's attempt to obtain a narrative where experience and meaning gain value beyond the limits of time itself. In this respect one great philosopher, Hans Georg Gadamer, sheds light on another, Edmund Husserl, while discussing the idea of phenomenology. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer explains that "every experience has implicit horizons of before and after, and finally merges with the continuum of the experiences present in the before and after to form the one flow of experience" (216). Given that time moves with us as much as we move with the passing of time, the image of the horizon strikes us as an apt analogy to explain our attempt to bring together the experiences we "receive" in time, in this volume.

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DYSTOPIA:
ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES

CHAPTER 1

SHAKESPEARE AND COVID: PERFORMANCE IN A PANDEMIC

DOUGLAS LANIER

In David Brin's 1985 novel *The Postman* the nomadic protagonist Gordon wanders through a post-war dystopian United States. What is left of the nation is now a collection of disconnected rural communities, living out a hardscrabble existence and threatened by the rise of a neofascist militia that has taken root in the absence of any social structure. To scrounge meals, Gordon performs scenes from Shakespeare (specifically *Macbeth*), providing his audiences with entertainment and, more importantly, a link to their collective past, a slender thread of cultural continuity. Gordon is no idealist, at least not at first—he just wants a bite and a bed in exchange for a play. But in the course of the novel, his faith in the power of community building after disaster grows into political activism as he seeks to rebuild fallen cultural institutions, most notably the Postal Service. At one point, Gordon pretends to be a postman, representative of a distant reborn state, at first just another one of his acts for a meal. But slowly his improvised lie takes on a kind of reality, a means by which the isolated communities of the broken United States can reimagine themselves as a nation. Writing thirty years later, Emily St. John Mandel takes up the same idea of performing Shakespeare in the grim aftermath of a global apocalypse. In her 2015 novel *Station Eleven*, that apocalypse springs from a pandemic of what is called the Georgia Flu that kills much of the world's population and leaves civilisation devastated. Kirsten, the novel's protagonist, wanders with an itinerant troupe of performers called the Traveling Symphony, trading Shakespeare performances (and musical concerts) for food and shelter. Mandel's vision of the value of the company's performances, however, is far less sanguine than Brin's in *The Postman*. Mandel signals her pessimism in the novel's opening scene, in which before the pandemic Kirsten's idol, an elderly actor named Arthur, is performing King Lear and falls dead of a heart attack mid-performance, the harbinger of many deaths to come.

Arthur's death is hardly redemptive. After the pandemic Kirsten searches for information about Arthur's past in the dystopian detritus. It is revealing of Mandel's scepticism about the cultural legacy Arthur represents—Shakespeare, the theatre—that all Kirsten finds is evidence of Arthur's character flaws, especially his sense of privilege.

These two novels raise questions about the topic this essay addresses, performances of Shakespeare in this, our own year of pandemic dystopia. How does one perform Shakespeare live under these compromised circumstances? Why would one even want to do so? Given the severe limitations of performance during Covid, what could such performances hope to accomplish? And how—if at all—might the kinds of performances cobbled together in the midst of Covid influence the future of Shakespeare onstage after this plague year has passed? Brin and Mandel invite us to imagine Shakespeare being performed even after a complete social collapse, and so as we are starting the process of imagining a post-Covid cultural world, now is a good time to assess how and how well Shakespeare survived a year of lockdowns and social distancing. Second, these two novels envision the power of Shakespeare in dystopia quite differently. The thirty years that separates *The Postman* and *Station Eleven* marks a waning of faith in Shakespeare as an icon of cultural continuity or shared meaningfulness. The scepticism Mandel evokes is in the ascendant, and for good reason too. The past half-century of criticism has shown how Shakespeare has too often been used in the service of heteronormative, racial, and colonial oppression that we have been right to challenge. In my remarks here, then, I will be asking whether Shakespeare performance in our Covid year has reckoned at all with that corrosive social legacy. That said, however, I will be making what may seem to you as a strangely upbeat assessment of Shakespeare performance in the shadow of Covid. The larger frame for my analysis is indebted to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her understanding of literature's capacity for reparativity. In her late work, she assess frankly the limitations of academic critique, and she sets against it what she calls "reparative reading."[1] Reparative reading is interested in uses of texts to address—and perhaps partly to ameliorate—the traumas suffered by marginalised, oppressed, or stigmatised social groups. My current research concerns what I call "reparative Shakespeare," that is, the ways in which Shakespeare has been used to redress—always partially and problematically—the psychic injuries suffered by prisoners, refugees, veterans, queer youth, the homeless,

[1] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–52.

the elderly, the physically or mentally disadvantaged, and the racially or economically marginalised. Covid Shakespeare, I want to observe, has sought to have something of this reparative function for its audiences. As I discuss the examples that follow, I want to keep a sympathetic eye on their reparative ambitions and potential, even as I also engage in a bit of wary academic critique.

First, however, a few words about Covid and the theatre. No ghost need come from the grave to tell you that the pandemic utterly devastated those who work in live performance—and not just because of tragic losses among actors to the virus. Theatre companies were already under financial pressure from competing media and struggling to cope with dwindling arts subsidies. The sudden inability to perform live before audiences because of distancing restrictions—and the extension of restrictions over more than a year—has been nothing short of catastrophic for the performing arts.[2] In the United States, for example, where government support is meagre in the best of times, Covid has rung the death knell of many stage companies. Estimates are that as many as half of state Shakespeare theatres and festivals will now be permanently closed even after the pandemic passes. It is important to measure this loss in more than merely economic terms. Lost too in this Covid year has been contact between performers and audiences, and spectators with each other, at a time when we have most suffered the effects of isolation, vulnerability, and grief. Contemporary theatre has made its hallmark its very liveness. It has stressed how performers and spectators, present to each other in a single space and time, constitute a particularly intense form of communal solidarity, an experience not offered elsewhere in an age of digital, disembodied media. It is that very experience, the potentially reparative and politically progressive experience of heightened liveness to each other, that Covid made impossible, and because it has driven so many theatrical companies to ruin, Covid may continue to have effects upon the theatre for years to come. Indeed, the pandemic we have all

[2] Wikipedia has devoted an entire page to the "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the performing arts." Available at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impact_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_on_the_performing_arts. Accessed 1 May 2021. See also Greg Guibert and Iain Hyde, "Analysis: COVID-19's Impacts on Arts and Culture," *COVID-19 Weekly Outlook*, 4 January 2021. Available at www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/COVID-Outlook-Week-of-1.4.2021-revised.pdf. Accessed 1 May 2021; and Richard Florida and Michael Seman, "Lost Art: Measuring COVID-19's devastating impact on America's creative economy," *The Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution*, August 2020. Available at www.brookings.edu/wp- content/uploads/2020/08/20200810_Brookingsmetro_Covid19-and-creative-economy_Final.pdf. Accessed 1 May 2021.

just lived through will figure as a moment of profound rupture in the history of twenty-first century stage performance.

My interest here is in what often interests the writers of dystopias, which is the ways in which cultural legacies manage to hang on through disasters and beyond, sometimes in new forms, sometimes in reclaimed or repurposed forms from the past. Certainly dystopia involves the loss of civilisation, but it also involves the survival of civilisation (or some piece of it) through acts of improvisation, experimentation, ingenuity, and reinvention. The performances I will highlight here often partake of these DIY qualities while at the same time they register the darker emotions that Covid has conjured up: our sudden experience of the fragility of society and of our own bodily vulnerability; the angst of isolation and the longing for a feeling of community; the desire for a means of expressing powerfully sadness, rage, fear, loss, solace and hope; and a means for reflecting upon the meaning of this, our year of living precariously, and the opportunity it may afford to remake society and ourselves on the other side of the pandemic. My focus will be on Shakespeare performance during the pandemic, but by focusing on Shakespeare, I don't want to leave unacknowledged the theatrical work by contemporary writers during this period, work that has often been exceptionally creative and vital. Nor do I wish to imply that Shakespeare has been a privileged vehicle for Covid-era performance because of his putative universalism. In the past year, what Shakespeare provided actors is a way of reasserting the cultural potency of theatre in the face of dire circumstances. Shakespeare offered players a familiar, authoritative, malleable property capable of speaking even to this dystopian moment, a property not incidentally without the burden of copyright. Shakespeare provides what he so often does at moments of media revolution: an instant imprimatur for new modes of performance. These new modes of Shakespearean performance—all dependent upon new media—aimed to create a makeshift substitute for the kind of presence live performance seeks to provide. What they end up creating is a simulacrum of theatrical liveness and presence that, simulacrum though it may be, keeps the flame of live stage performance burning, albeit dimly in the darkness.

One of the earliest Covid Shakespeares to appear after the March 2020 lockdown were performances of individual Shakespeare sonnets. The most notable was the "#ASonnetADay" postings by the actor Patrick Stewart. Bringing his pop cultural cachet as Jean-Luc Picard, the Shakespeare-loving *Star Trek* captain, Stewart aimed to read a single sonnet per day, each released as a recording on Twitter. In his first posting, Stewart explained the rationale behind the project:

> When I was a child in the 1940s, my mother would cut up slices of fruit for me (there wasn't much) and as she put it in front of me she would say, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." How about, "A sonnet a day keeps the doctor away"? So . . . here we go: Sonnet 1.[3]

Treating the pandemic as a return to wartime austerity, Stewart presents Shakespeare's words as healing, part of a folk medical regimen and a vicarious return to the pleasures of domestic care.

His postings are strikingly intimate—the performances suggest we're getting access to the private man, in his own spaces, with his own pets, with titbits about his schedule intermingled. And Stewart is no mere completist. At several moments in the series he refuses to recite a sonnet because, he tells us, he finds it distasteful or even offensive. The "Sonnet A Day" project displays many of the elements of Covid-era Shakespeare performance. It takes advantage of social media—YouTube, Facebook, Zoom, here Twitter—for distribution to a potentially worldwide audience. These performances foreground their do-it-yourself quality, since they cost very little to produce and demand very little technical expertise; all one needs is an iPhone or laptop, some basic software skills, and a social media account. These performances too convey a sense of intimacy with their audiences with their relentless close-ups and direct address to the viewer, and our visual access to the domestic spaces of the speakers. Because of the nature of the medium, they privilege the voice and face over the body, and so they stress the Shakespearean text over action and *mise en scène*.

Others were quick to follow Stewart's example, producing sonnet series of their own. The Royal Shakespeare Company began producing its "Sonnets in Solitude" series in May 2020,[4] featuring present and former members of the company reciting sonnets from homes; some of the performances highlight the sonnet's connection to themes of desire, abandonment, isolation, and death, something Stewart typically steers away from. The YouTube collective "The Show Must Go Online" has recently begun its own sonnet series, taking the thematic approach of the RSC one step further.[5] Its series features actors in spaces that provide some lightly

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[3] Sir Patrick Stewart, Twitter post for 22 March 2020, available at twitter.com/sirpatstew/status/1241871592700993536?lang=en, accessed 1 May 2021.

[4] Royal Shakespeare Company, *Sonnets in Solitude* series, available at www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLSIxo_5qCKQjrXHGJvVQ7ppaBkH5D8P2b, accessed 1 May 2021.

[5] This online sonnet series is available only to Patreon supporters of "The Show Must Go Online" YouTube channel. The series had reached sonnet 34 as of 2 May 2021.

fictionalised frame for the sonnet, pushing from the poetry in the direction of a short dramatic monologue.

In parallel with Stewart's therapeutic reading of sonnets are various series of Zoom performances of complete Shakespeare plays. Within days of the initial March 2020 lockdown the "Shakespeare Happy Hours" series appeared, created by two theatre companies, the Seven Stages Shakespeare Company of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and the Rude Grooms Company of Queens, New York.[6] At first improvised as one-off Shakespeare performances on Zoom, the project grew over the next five months into performances involving actors from around the United States and abroad and eventually encompassing the entire Shakespeare canon, along with a smattering of other early modern English plays. "The Shakespeare Happy Hours" series provided an early model for myriad other Zoom performances of Shakespeare over the following year. The Zoom format allowed for something akin to a public table read or a staged reading, with a digital pass-the-hat in the form of pleas for donations. Over the course of the series, the productions experimented with ways of overcoming the limitations of the Zoom medium. As we know, Zoom projects individual talking heads in little boxes isolated from one other, making it difficult for us to imagine that the actors are occupying the same fictional space, particularly when the actors are speaking from their own personal bedrooms or living rooms. As the series progressed, the actors began to use Zoom's capability to create virtual backgrounds, creating a shared visual space for the characters that enhanced the sense of dramatic illusion and, in the process, established a mood or time frame. Creation Theatre's April 2020 Zoom production of *The Tempest* took this development a step further.[7] In its innovative production, all the scenes were filmed before virtual backgrounds, placing the action on a cruise ship, an island, and a shabby cabin that stood for Caliban's cave. Clever choreography allowed, for example, Trinculo's bottle to seem to pass from his frame to Caliban's frame, or for Ferdinand and Miranda to share a kiss across Zoom boxes. The production was also notable for its portrayal of Prospero, who was presented as a sinister techno-wizard in a Steve Jobs

[6] Available at www.youtube.com/c/ShakespeareHappyHours/videos, accessed 1 May 2021.

[7] This was a live online-only performance, but several reviews include screen captures and detailed descriptions of the action. See, for example, Benjamin Broadribb, "'A vision of the Island': Immersion meets isolation in Creation Theatre's *The Tempest*," "'Action is Eloquence," *Rethinking Shakespeare* blog, 21 April 2020, available at medium.com/action-is-eloquence-re-thinking-shakespeare/a-vision-of-the-island-immersion-meets-isolation-in-creation-theatre-s-the- tempest-935bb01a44fam, accessed 1 May 2021.

turtleneck, directing the action from a lair filled with TV monitors, the very incarnation of the surveillance economy.

Interestingly enough, the production intercut the play's action with moments where we in the virtual audience flashed onscreen as we were called upon to help Ariel accomplish his various magical tasks. That is to say, the play highlighted both the sinister and the reparative capabilities of the medium.

About the same time as "Shakespeare Happy Hours" was taking shape, in the UK there developed a second major Zoom Shakespeare series, "The Show Must Go Online," created by actor/director Rob Myles starting in March 2020.[8] Like the "Shakespeare Happy Hours," "The Show Must Go Online" would eventually produce the entirety of the Shakespeare canon in live Zoom performances, but Rob Myles's approach was rather different. His virtual "company" consisted of actors drawn from a variety of countries and backgrounds, brought together into a rotating collective via Zoom. Over time, the participants in "The Show Must Go Online" became ethnically diverse, and the productions featured more and more interesting experiments with casting, particularly with gender reversal. It is not clear whether this diversification of casting was encouraged by the way in which the Zoom medium reduces our focus on the body or by the attention to issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, or perhaps some combination of both. What is clear is that from the start Myles intended the project to be international in casting and audience. His opener to the shows, "Good evening, good afternoon, and good morning, wherever you are in the world, and welcome to The Show Must Go Online," underlines his intention that his YouTube productions have an international scope. Interestingly, Myles's productions did not evolve strong shared

[8] Available at www.youtube.com/c/RobMyles/videos, accessed 1 May 2021. Myles has been interviewed several times about the project and its aims. See, for example, Greg Stewart, "Interview: Rob Myles on The Show Must Go Online," *Theatre Weekly*, 15 April 2020, available at theatreweekly.com/interview-rob-myles-on-the-show-must-go-online/, accessed 1 May 2021; Ronan Hatfull, "'All the world's a stage': A conversation with The Show Must Go Online's Rob Myles," *Action is Eloquence: Rethinking Shakespeare* blog, 21 May 2020, available at https://medium.com/action-is-eloquence-re-thinking-shakespeare/an-interview-with-rob-myles- of-the-show-must-go-online-1687f2bb5333, accessed 1 May 2021; and Emma Brimelow, "The Show Must Go ONLINE: An Interview with Rob Myles on Modern Day Theatre's Perseverance Through a Global Pandemic," *Words Matter Blog* (York St. John University), 4 November 2020, available at https://blog.yorksj.ac.uk/englishlit/the-show-must-go-online-an-interview-with-rob-myles-on-modern-day-theatres-perseverance-through-a-global-pandemic-by-emma-brimelow/, accessed 1 May 2021.

production concepts like those of the "Shakespeare Happy Hours" or Creation Theatre. Some actors wore street clothes, others performed with makeshift props and costumes, and all performed against the real backgrounds of their homes and offices. Even so, "The Show Must Go Online" tended to be more vocally accomplished than other Shakespeare Zoom performances, and they were pointedly full-text. The productions involved rehearsals (to which online patrons would get limited access), and over time they became more technically polished, with bespoke music and some limited special effects. Of interest, then, is the growing tension between the desire to create a production that offers the intimacy of Zooming from home, and a production that offers the gloss of professional stage performance.

Of special interest among these Zoom productions is the Sofa Shakespeare series,[9] the brainchild of San Diego actor Julia Giolzetti. Giolzetti's ingenious approach is deceptively simple: assign to a random assortment of actors—primarily amateurs—one-minute segments of Shakespeare plays to perform in any fashion they like, the only stricture being that they must recite the Shakespeare text as written. Giolzetti then edits these recorded clips together into a full-length production she then posts on YouTube and Facebook. This is, in effect, a crowd-sourced performance, where variations in style and the DIY, makeshift quality of individual contributions are precisely the point. The trailer for the Sofa Shakespeare production of *Romeo and Juliet* gives a taste. What emerges from this approach is a communal creative enterprise, a testament to the performers' inventiveness in bringing Shakespeare to life using what means they have at hand. Some of the best individual clips explore common ground between the assigned passages and the experience of lockdown. Sofa Shakespeare bears a family resemblance to the Tabletop Shakespeare project pioneered by the British experimental theatre group Forced Entertainment. The Tabletop Shakespeare series involved telling the tales of Shakespeare's plays using common household items—a salt shaker, a

[9] Available at www.youtube.com/channel/UCEEBpH-4FzVqlQ_5O-EAALg/videos, accessed 1 May 2021. See also Pat Launer, "Sheltering at Home for Bard Lovers: Julia Giolzetti's Global 'Sofa Shakespeare' Project," *Times of San Diego*, 7 April 2020, available at timesofsandiego.com/arts/2020/04/07/sheltering-at-home-for-bard-lovers-julia-giolzettis-global-sofa-shakespeare-project/, accessed 1 May 2021; and Pam Kragen, "All the world's a stage for San Diegan's viral Sofa Shakespeare project," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 24 April 2020, available at www.sandiegouniontribune.com/entertainment/theater/story/2020-04-24/all-the-worlds-a-stage-for-san-diegans-viral-sofa-shakespeare-project, accessed 1 May 2021.

beer bottle, a spoon—to represent the characters. (Though they were originally conceived in 2015, Tabletop's productions of the entire Shakespearean canon were recorded during the lockdown and can be found on YouTube.[10]) As Forced Entertainment's artistic director Tim Etchells explains it, the intent is to domesticate Shakespeare without losing the compelling power of his narratives, to reduce the distance between the epic, antiquated nature of Shakespeare's tales and the world of mundane domestic objects and spaces where we live so much of our lives. This too is the effect of Sofa Shakespeare. One watches a Sofa Shakespeare production on two tracks at once: on the one hand is a kaleidoscopic production of Shakespeare, with the text holding the ever-changing performance styles together in a whole; and on the other hand is the inventiveness and resilience of performers making art amidst difficult conditions, a sort of poor Shakespearean theatre. Even though some of the performances are intentionally comic, the overall effect is not parodic so much as unexpectedly earnest and joyful, a celebration of Shakespeare as a shared cultural space. Interestingly Sofa Shakespeare had international reach in its participants; the project and several of its Indian participants were covered in the Indian press in 2020.[11]

Most of the productions I have mentioned so far involve amateur or quasi-professional companies, many of which exist only on the internet. For the most part, professional theatre companies have been slow during the pandemic to take advantage of the opportunities digital performance of Shakespeare might afford. This springs partly from the challenge of monetising online productions, and partly from the longstanding reticence about the digital medium of Shakespeare companies, who prefer to privilege live, face-to-face performance. As the year wore on, however, that reticence began to soften, and professional companies began to release recordings of their performances online, at first for free in order to maintain the public's taste for stage productions, and later in the form of various pay-to-view schemes. This was the case, for example, with Shakespeare's Globe and the National Theatre in London, the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Blackfriar's Theater in Virginia, and the Ashland Festival in Oregon. One effect of Covid, then, was to erode the unwillingness of professional companies to make their catalogues of recordings available to the public; it remains to be

[10] Available at www.youtube.com/user/ForcedEntertainment/videos.

[11] See Vikram Phukam, "Shakespeare in the era of social distancing," *The Hindu*, 20 March 2020, available at www.thehindu.com/entertainment/theatre/shakespeare-in-the-era-of-social-distancing/article31121102.ece, accessed 1 May 2021; and Prachi Sibal, "Coming soon, to a couch near you," *Midday Mumbai*, 21 March 2020, available at www.mid-day.com/mumbai-guide/things-to-do/article/Coming-soon-to-a-couch-near-you-22688249, accessed 1 May 2021.

seen whether this access will be temporary or permanent. In any case, alongside this avalanche of pre-Covid, pre-recorded content there has been a ramping up of online educational materials produced by professional companies. Many companies now produce regular Zoom chats with actors, directors, and academics. Just to name a few, there is Shakespeare Hour Live!, produced by the Shakespeare Theater in Washington DC; the Public Shakespeare Initiative series produced by the Public Theater in New York City; and the Talking Back! series produced by the Ashland Festival. These series address a much wider range of topics than companies typically produced before (in part because they were under pressure to regularly produce content). Especially notable is that these series took up questions of diversity and social justice with greater frequency and urgency than ever before. These conversations bore fruit in several interesting online productions: in summer 2020 the Public Theater in New York, for example, staged a radio play version of *Richard II* with an all-black cast that directly engaged with the Black Lives Matter movement;[12] in April 2021 the Public staged a bilingual radio adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* that brought together Latinx and black actors and addressed American ethnic tensions.[13]

When the pandemic first hit, a few of the smaller professional companies were quick to produce new online content. One of the most interesting of these was the Barn Theatre's "Bard from the Barn" series, produced from April to October 2020. Actors from the Barn Company (based in Cirencester, UK) created three series of short films for YouTube,[14] centred around individual Shakespearean monologues (thereby complying with lockdown restrictions). What makes these shorts distinctive is that they are all set in the dystopian present of the pandemic, and the monologues are presented so that they address our collective state of mind during lockdown. Titus Andronicus, for example, becomes a suburbanite driven mad by Covid rage; Nell Quickly's tale of Falstaff's death is transformed into a health worker's sad account of a Covid patient's demise; Prospero's epilogue to *The Tempest* serves as a melancholy voiceover as an actor wanders through an empty theatre and looks out over the empty stalls. The "Bard from the Barn" series' handling of Henry's heroic "once more into the breach" oration from *Henry V* provides an especially apt example.[15] As the speech

[12] Available at publictheater.org/media-center/series/richard-ii/richard-ii/, accessed 1 May 2021.
[13] Available at publictheater.org/productions/season/2021/romeo-y-julieta/, accessed 1 May 2021.
[14] Available at www.youtube.com/c/thebarntheatre/videos, accessed 1 May 2021.
[15] *Bard from the Barn*, series 3, episode 22, posted 13 October 2020, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JOSorA7uQc&t=39s&ab_channel=BarnTheatre,

is given in voiceover, we watch a young woman rise from sleep and don a uniform as she wanders through her flat decorated with theatre posters. Driving through night-time streets, she arrives at a grocery megastore where, with Henry's stirring words ringing in her ears, she starts the weary task of wrangling carts and stocking shelves. It slowly dawns upon us that she is a theatre actor unemployed by the pandemic, forced to work in a menial job to make ends meet (and one irony is that this film about that very circumstance gives this actor work). Perhaps this short now reads mostly as dark irony, about the ignobility forced upon those with "noble lustre in your eyes," but if we think back to the earliest days of the pandemic when going to the grocery seemed potentially life-threatening, this short records poignantly the weary act of "summoning up the blood" to brave the once ordinary world. The ways in which the Barn Theatre's series made Shakespeare's words immediately relevant to the pandemic were ingenious and often brilliant, a wonderful example of using Shakespeare to speak to (and of) our condition under lockdown. A very different approach to Shakespearean monologues was taken by the Perchance Theatre of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, in its "Power of One" series.[16] Perchance's innovation was to film monologues by company members in picturesque outdoor locales throughout eastern Canada. A handful of the shorts resonate with the natural setting and present circumstances, most notably Joan Dicker's recitation of "the wind and the rain" from *Twelfth Night* in Dicker's native Inuit language.[17] But for the most part, the Shakespearean speeches are conceived as a means for temporary escape from the pandemic rather than as a confrontation with its grim realities, and those speeches are thereby coupled with drone shots of lovely natural landscapes into which the spectator is whisked. It's telling, for example, that after Caliban complains of Prospero's mistreatment and of the noises of the island, we see him swimming away in a majestic shot of Woody Point, Newfoundland.[18] The slogan of the project, "be patient, for the world is

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accessed 1 May 2021.

[16] Available at www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLXXca8_n8KtTPkYdpAPFTcDGmeR2BIxFd, accessed 1 May 2021.

[17] "Twelfth Night with Joan Dicker at Nain, Nunatsiavut," *The Power of One* (Perchance Theatre), posted 5 January 2021, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YfC_wQvR1A&list=PLXXca8_n8KtTPkYdpAPFTcDGm eR2BIxFd&index=15&t=34s&ab_channel=PerchanceTheatre, accessed 1 May 2021.

[18] "The Tempest with Jodee Richardson at Woody Point, Newfoundland and Labrador," *The Power of One* (Perchance Theater), posted 12 January 2021, available at