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Quarantine Then and Now: Reflections on *Year of Wonders* and COVID-19

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In her *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* (2001), Geraldine Brooks offers important insights on quarantine, of which the COVID-19 generation desperately needs lessons. There is very little about COVID-19 that is unprecedented, and Brooks shows consonances between COVID-19 experiences on the one hand and events that happened three and a half centuries ago on the other. These are things that could as easily have happened this week as I write, things that demand recognition or risk repetition. As with much quarantine literature, one of the things *Year of Wonders* reveals is that there is little about the COVID-19 pandemic that is new, with the exception of its truly global nature. The 2020 fascination with the seemingly unprecedented nature of COVID-19 produced misleading and untrue evaluations of our historical experience with viruses. Indeed, a great deal of what the world is facing during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is well within our repertoire of experiences. Despite the fact that quarantine is something that humanity has experienced many times, even before having firm understandings of the microbial mechanisms that underpin the transmission of viruses, quarantine was a part of these experiences, and resistance to quarantine has seemed as predictable as sunrises.

To understand resistance to quarantine, it is useful to understand humanity's long and complicated relationship with disease, plagues, pandemics, and viruses. South Korea's Sungkyunkwan University Distinguished Chair Professor Jared Diamond has insightful observations on disease and its place in history. He notes that contemporary understandings of disease have shifted in recent years: "Many people fear that ecocide has now come to overshadow nuclear war and emerging diseases as a threat to global civilization" (7). At least that is how it appeared in 2005 at the time Diamond penned those words. Certainly the late 20th century was the era of nuclear terror, quickly followed by actual terrorism and its sibling, environmental terror. Indeed, it is the unpredictability of the disrupted natural world – particularly the weather – that has kept the environment on a par with terrorism as a central and often sensational news item in the 21st century. There were SARS and MERS and the Zika virus and others, but there was nothing to drag us back down the haunted corridors of our history with disease in our lifetimes on such a scale as COVID-19 has done.

Yet, viruses obviously are neither new nor isolated. According to University of Edinburgh Emeritus Professor of Microbiology Dorothy H. Crawford, while "there are about 5×10^{30} bacteria [on the planet . . .], viruses are at least ten times more common – thus making viruses the most numerous microbes on Earth" (17). Not only are they everywhere, but they have always been with us. Molecular microbiologist Trudy M. Wassen has noted that by the time the Earth was a mere 1.1 billion years old, "bacteria already existed. We know this from fossil stromatolites," which "are 3.6 million years old and can only have been formed with the help of bacteria that lived in those early times" (2). Because bacteria and viruses predate humanity by such an enormous temporal distance, it is hardly remarkable, then, that quarantine should have a history with humanity that far precedes COVID-19.

Resistance to quarantine also far precedes our current age. *Year of Wonders* is a fictional novel about a very real series of events and places that have important bearing on the COVID-19 pandemic. Eyam, the Derbyshire town of England that became known "the plague village," decided in

September 1665 (when the plague arrived) to self-quarantine in order to curb the spread of infection. England, like the rest of Europe and much of Asia, had already had experience with plague, and more than three centuries earlier in the 18 months between June 1348 and December 1349 in England, an estimated 50% of the population was wiped out – a horror not easily forgotten. The ambivalent hero of the Eyam takes form in Rector Michael Mompellion in *Year of Wonders*. As Brooks explains in a “Afterword” to the novel, Mompellion is a lightly fictionalized version of the historical rector, William Mompesson. The sacrifice of the few for the many here is remarkable, and the actions of the rector (historical) undoubtedly saved hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives. Based on her meticulous examination of the records of Eyam, Brooks captures well what was likely the response: the fictional narrator explains

that many people in the village did not love him for what he had done here during the long months of [their] ordeal. Some went so far as to whisper blame upon him for their great losses. To others, he was simply the bitter emblem and embodiment of their darkest days. (267)

The fictional rector also has his own doubts about his behavior and laments that he may have been

wrong, most shockingly wrong, in what I asked of this village. Because of me, many are dead who might have saved themselves. Who was I to lead them to their doom? I thought I spoke for God. Fool. My whole life, all I have done, all I have said, all I have felt, has been based upon a lie. Untrue in everything. (280-1)

He is grateful to all who have helped him, but, ultimately, the quarantine he initiated does not sit well with him. He wonders,

how could we repay the kindness of those who received us, if we carried the seeds of the Plague to them? What burden would we bear if, because of us, hundreds die who might have lived? . . . Dear friends, here we are, and here we *must* stay. Let the boundaries of this village become our whole world. Let none enter and none leave while this Plague lasts. (102)

Quarantine clearly is not easy, and it stresses everyone.

Quarantine weighs on the villagers not because of the isolation itself but because of what the act of quarantining implies about freedom. The narrator makes this clear, explaining “it is hard to say why the oath weighed upon me, for it was perhaps only a half dozen times a year that I ventured beyond the limits in which we had now confined ourselves” (115). It is the perceived choicelessness and restriction of agency that are the biggest threats here. Moreover, quarantine is riddled with paradoxes.

Quarantine is difficult, and it reveals paradoxes about human nature. On the one hand, human nature and nonhuman nature are very similar. We, like other creatures (sentient and – disturbingly – nonsentient) flee from danger. This is something COVID-19 revealed early. Humans are as susceptible to becoming very scared and to hiding in safety just like any other frightened animal. A flock of birds will take flight at danger and will stay away until it is safe to return. Mudskippers will vanish into the sand when threats appear and will stay away until it is safe to return. Humans too disappear into their homes when facing corporeal (perhaps mortal) danger, and we stay there until it is safe to return (if we’re smart). On the other hand, we are social creatures, and we just don’t like having to hide out in our homes away from people for longer than necessary – hence, resistance.¹

There are, of course, many kinds of resistance to quarantine, ranging from idiotic fear founded on unbiased premises to reasoned responses founded on facts and first-hand data. The extraordinary Shanghai lockdowns of the spring of 2022 offer pertinent contemporary first-hand data. It is a quarantine that Sandro Jung (the editor-in-chief of this very journal) lived through: “it was a strange feeling to work out of quarantine for almost three months . . . but I was well looked after on the compound,” he explained (See Jung, Works Cited). Serenitie Wang’s experiences, which she describes in a CNN article, seems to have been less palatable: “the sound of thousands of people snoring, grinding their teeth, tossing and turning and groaning and grunting in their sleep gave this [experience of quarantine] the feel of a safari.” Isolated for seventy days in a facility with 50,000 beds, Wang experienced “embarrassingly intimate” exposures and found it hard to keep positive about the whole thing. She explains as follows:

Much as I tried . . . to look on the bright side, it was hard to fully banish my mental anxiety. My routine had become monotonous, I missed home, and felt icky from not having showered for days. It was like I was trapped in a maze, barred from leaving despite feeling fine.

It is only natural that resistance might grow out of such fatigue. Resistance to quarantine among right-wing supporters of populist leaders is different: it grows out of what Priscilla Wald describes as a sense of despair, a sense that “human beings’ . . . efforts to defend themselves against the threat of illness [are futile] in the daily interactions made global by contemporary transportation and commerce” (4). When fatigue and despair meet, the flame of reason is extinguished. When the sense that quarantine practices can be “far from infallible” (Slack 29), as was the case Paul Slack describes for the very plague about which Brooks writes, people lash out in fear and anger. As it was for some of the people quarantined in Shanghai in 2022, so too for those quarantined in Eyam in 1665: “we were all of us like wounded animals, our hurts so raw and our fear so great that we would lash out at anyone” (Brooks 243).

Brooks captures in her semi-fiction the very real ambivalence quarantines evoke. It is a kind of tug-of-war between wanting to adapt to and at the same time to resist quarantine. The narrator Anna Frith describes the need to accept the new normal and explains of one of the townspeople that “the sooner she accustomed herself to the inconveniences of the new era the better” (13). Complicating matters in the seventeenth century is the fact that quarantines are done with what might properly be understood as a kind of faith, since there was no real understanding of how the disease actually worked. There is little understanding of the cause – specifically, the fact that the plague is carried by the fleas on rats. The irony of the children handling dead rats is hardly lost on the reader: “Can you believe it,” one of the characters asks the narrator of her two children: “the two of them were playing with these loathsome pests as if they were poppets. The woodpile’s full of them, seemingly. All dead, thanks be for small mercies” (72). A narrative moment later, Anna explains that “the damp after the heat brought fleas beyond any infestation I remember,” and that “the fleas feasted on my tender children, leaving them covered in madding welts” (73). They die not long after. It is the lack of understanding about how the disease works and how to prevent it that causes irrational actions. A contemporary and shocking reflection of how ignorance and misinformation incites irrational behavior is Mr. Donald Trump’s suggestion that people drink household detergents to combat COVID-19.

Roberto Marchesini meticulously enumerates and distills the enormous catalog of misinformation that people have spewed out in response to the Covid-19 pandemic:

the most fanciful conjectures have been made about absurd conspiracy theories, such as the concealment of the effects of 5G technology, the bacteriological war between the United States and China, the manufacture of an engineered virus that escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan, the implementation of the epidemic by a pharmaceutical company to get rich through the sale of the vaccine, the pandemic as pretext to establish a world dictatorship, the governmental excuse of prophylactic control to eliminate individual freedoms, world speculation by the financial elites, and even the arrival of aliens. (13).

Covid-19 has not exactly brought out our best behaviors, and it has lain bare our ecophobia, has shown us in the plainest of terms the terrifying reality that we, like other animals, hide when danger appears, leaving nature (and this is the truly terrifying part for us) to take over: “the theme of nature taking up the spaces abandoned by the human being,” Marchesini explains, “[is] in line with the descriptions of the ecological transformations that took place in Chernobyl, [and it] returns in many videos shared on social media showing deer, badgers, wolves and bears walking peacefully through the city streets” (ibid, p. 15). Belonging to the larger “the world without us” or “life after people” genre, the images Marchesini describes are part of what I described in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (2018) as an “ecophobic vision of Nature that will finally conquer humanity, reclaim all of the world, and remain long after we are gone” (66).² The resilience of nature is far from new, and Brooks charts a rather more optimistic biophilic response of 17th century Eyam about a sapling that appears in the middle of a road: “for hundreds of years, the people of this village pushed Nature back from its precincts. It has taken less

than a year to begin to reclaim its place. In the middle of the street, a walnut shell lies broken, and from it, already, sprouts a sapling” (11). Nature here is a thing struggling to survive, not a thing threatening *our* survival.

Questions and concerns about survival are at the very core of literature about quarantine. In *The Plague Cycle: the Unending War Between Humanity and Infectious Disease*, Charles [Kenny](#) explains that “the earliest written sources suggest that people have long appreciated the risk of contagion and understood the [survival] benefits of exclusion” (83). “Staying away from infected people and keeping infected people away,” he explains simply, “is a reasonable [survival] strategy” (82) or, as [Brooks](#) puts it, “stay clear of any whom you know to be sick” (214). [Brooks](#), while not trivializing or minimizing quarantine and distancing, manages to find at least some humor in it, describing how “one walks, if one must walk, in the very center of the roadway to avoid the contagion seeping from dwellings. Those who must move through the poorer parishes cover their faces in herb-stuffed masks contrived like the beaks of great birds. People go through the streets like drunkards, weaving from this side to that so as to avoid passing too close to other pedestrians” (60). In our own century, these are matters with which we are familiar.

Year of Wonders is a novel about quarantining and social distancing. We hear echoes from three and a half centuries ago about social distancing, about coping with isolation, about shunning “outsiders,” about demonizing certain groups, and about fear. During the COVID-19 pandemic, two meters has been the minimum social distancing standard; in *Year of Wonders*, it is three: “We placed ourselves so that some three yards separated each family group, believing this to be sufficient distance to avoid the passing of infection” (190). During the COVID-19 pandemic, people have been unable to



Figure 1. Mama Enza Nolletti in a care home with family and friends outside. Photo used with permission of Bianca Nolletti.

attend funerals, go to weddings, or visit friends and family in hospitals or care homes [Figure 1](#). The lucky ones have given us sad scenes of family members bundled up outside and signaling gestures of love through windows; the unlucky have had to endure loved ones dying alone, the only comfort being in the beliefs that the deceased may be in a better place, that they might now be able to understand the broader picture, and they might be watching over us, like guardian angels. In *Year of Wonders*, part of coping with quarantine, as one character explains, similarly means believing in some kind of afterlife: “I feel that Mother watches me still, and Father, and my brothers, too. It brings me comfort to believe that they do, and my life here feels less lonely for it” (175). Yet, for others, a part of what constitutes coping means something very different.

The shunning of outsiders and the blatant xenophobia characterized not only Trump’s response to COVID-19 but indeed characterized the responses of many countries as they shut their borders, and this coping mechanism displays a fear and loathing of the Other that has patterned quarantine responses historically. In *Year of Wonders*, it takes a particularly virulent turn in the scapegoating of what we could call homeopathic curers in the novel. Seen as a witch, Mem Gowdie is verbally and physically abused. “Your blood will drive this sickness from my mother’s body,” one villager screams (88). The crazed villagers murder her and her daughter. Later, the narrator and rector’s wife learn of the arts in which the Gowdie mother and daughter were so well versed:

We learned much about how to ease common ailments and injuries, and though we were loath to turn aside from our main work, somehow we found ourselves sought out for the kinds of preparations the Gowdies so readily supplied. After a little time, we began to learn some of what they had known: that a compound of mullein and rue, sweet cicely and mustard oil makes an excellent syrup for quieting a cough; that boiled willow bark eases aches and fevers; that betony, bruised for a green plaster, speeds mending of wounds and scrapes. There were some satisfactions in this work, bringing as it did comfort, ease, and the healings of small hurts. (165)

These recognitions come too late, and the Gowdies – good and genuinely concerned and helpful people though they are – are scapegoated, reviled, and murdered. One thing [Brooks](#) makes clear here is that anyone indeed will suffice for scapegoating. When the narrator’s stepmother, Aphra Bront, is caught stealing things from neighbors and selling bogus materials to ward off infection, the villagers throw her into a cistern of “slops and droppings” (244), whose “stench was caustic, scouring the throat and chest” (245). It is nothing shy of torture:

The muck lapped, brown and frothy and alive, high against the limestone—at least high enough . . . that Aphra would have had to tilt her head to keep the slops from splashing in her mouth at the slightest movement. Yet since the manure on which she stood was only semi-solid, it was impossible to be still, for to keep from sinking deeper meant constantly scrambling for handholds in the slimy rock wall. While her muscles ached from the effort, and her chest burned from the rank air, Aphra must have used every shred of her will to keep her consciousness, for had she succumbed to a faint she would have smothered and drowned. (245)

She remained in the cistern all night, and “the woman they dragged out of that pit and brought to the village green the next morning was not Aphra but a gibbering, broken thing” (245) – and all because of fear.

Fear makes people behave badly and is integral with quarantine. It encourages compulsions, such as compulsive sanitizing, as we are seeing today. Fear also encourages paranoia. Brooks describes how the survivors are simply scared: “those of us who were left feared each other and the hidden contagion we each might carry. People scurried, stealthy as mice, trying to go and come without meeting another soul” (217). “Fear,” the narrator explains, “was working strange changes in all of us, corroding our ability for clear thought” (227). With COVID-19, however, one of the broader global effects of the fear of proximity is a more severe set of economic effects. Indeed, as [Diamond](#) has noted, “globalization makes it impossible for modern societies to collapse in isolation” (23). Nicole [Shukin](#) similarly explains that “pandemic discourse speculates in the coming of an event that threatens to precipitate the collapse of the global economy and a hard reckoning with materiality” (185). It is fear that is at the root here: “pandemic speculation at once works to biologically unify and culturally divide a global human community through fear” (186).

One of the ways that the cultural division takes place is through the renewed nationalism that quarantine fears inspire. Priscilla Wald explains that “the effort to contain the spread of a disease may involve international cooperation, but is cast in distinctly national terms” (51). It is not that the safeguarding of national boundaries is new. Wald shows as much, noting that the 19th American

language of quarantine emphasized the need to safeguard national boundaries against the penetration of communicable diseases conceived as foreign imports carried in by sailors, travelers, and especially immigrants. But quarantines could not address the problem of the healthy carrier already within the borders and the microbes that were everywhere. (122)

The difference is that the borders of the past are not the same as the borders of the globalized present. For the people of Eyam, “Those few . . . who had taken themselves off to live away from others in caves or rude huts, certainly had escaped infection. So much we knew: proximity to the ill begat illness” (231). And there are certainly clear and present potentials for the use of violence in maintaining isolation, one character imploring “Do not joke, sir, for on the turnpike north of London, I encountered an angry mob, brandishing hoes and pitchforks, denying entry to their village inn to any who were traveling from London” (61). It is all, however, very local in 1665.

When a world that has nine million people in the air at any given time shuts down, on the other hand, there will be much more intense consequences: according to the ICAO (the International Civil Aviation Organization), “passenger totals dropped by 60% with just 1.8 billion passengers taking to the air during the first year of the pandemic, compared to 4.5 billion in 2019” (see Raillant-Clark, Works Cited). Globalization, as people such as Jared Diamond understands, threatens our own demise. Written long before the COVID-19 pandemic, Diamond’s words are haunting: “for the first time in history, we face the risk of global decline” (23). It is our very connectedness that is the issue. It is our very connectedness that is the cause of having to disconnect and quarantine. We are more connected than ever before and on a grander scale, and this has profound implications for how the course of the pandemic evolves. It is not only virtual connectedness that is unprecedented: as Shukin puts it,

in a world that has become compressed by the movements of immigrants, laborers, refugees, tourists, and a transnational business class, it is not only interfaces and encounters between different ethnic and cultural groups that dramatically proliferate but also interfaces and encounters between humans and other ‘communicable’ species. (183)

Zoonotic viruses such as COVID-19 is an interspecies exchange, and “interspecies exchanges that were once local or ‘place-specific’ are experienced as global in their potential effects” (ibid). The costs of quarantine are clearly different today than in 1665.

It is one of the explicit goals of *The Year of Wonders* to examine the parameters of quarantine. The questions driving this novel, Brooks explains, are in “the story of the quarantine and its costs”:

What would it be like . . . to make such a choice [to order the self-quarantine of a village] and to find out that in consequence, two-thirds of your neighbors were dead within a year? How would faith, relationships, and social order survive? (305)

While the costs in the twenty-first century are social and economic, in 1665, the costs involve faith in a much more concerted way. There is an agonistic relationship between a desire to see it at times in spiritual terms (as divine or demonic) and at other times in natural terms: “Why, I wondered, did we, all of us, both the rector in his pulpit and simple Lottie in her croft, seek to put the Plague in unseen hands? Why should this thing be either a test of faith sent by God, or the evil working of the Devil in the world?” (214–15). On the other hand, it is also in Nature that the people in the fictional Eyam of the novel sometimes locate the blame for the plague: “Perhaps the Plague was neither of God nor the Devil, but simply a thing in Nature, as the stone on which we stub a toe” (215). To see it as natural, however, throws a wrench in their system of faith, “For,” the narrator explains,

if we could be allowed to see the Plague as a thing in Nature merely, we did not have to trouble about some grand celestial design that had to be completed before the disease would abate. We could simply work upon it as a farmer might toil to rid his field of unwanted tare, knowing that when we found the tools and the method and the resolve, we would free ourselves, no matter if we were a village full of sinners or a host of saints. (215)

Indeed, focusing on the thing itself must surely be better. Perhaps Anna Frith's implicit claim here is that focusing on anything but the plague is a distraction, a counterproductive diversion that will ultimately only lengthen the need for quarantine. Perhaps, too, this diversion is comparable to absurd conspiracy theories about COVID-19 having been produced in a Wuhan laboratory or of vaccines and masks being some part of a grand government scheme to control people. Such distractions – whether in 1665 or 2020 – are ironic because in their implicit resistance to all the horrors of quarantine, they end up merely making it all worse.

Resistance to quarantine is as old as the practice of quarantine itself, and quarantine literature has important lessons for us – unless we wish to keep repeating history, over and over again. Geraldine Brooks offers these lessons two decades before COVID-19 in her novel about events that happened 350 years earlier. To see COVID-19 as “unprecedented” (a word annoyingly integral to 2020 and to much of the pandemic history that followed) is patently absurd. Recognizing history and the historical resistances to quarantine would have helped a lot in the early stages of COVID-19. Since the pandemic continues even as I write, these are lessons we still do well to heed. Brooks helps us to recognize the varieties of resistance to quarantine, to understand how and why these resistances develop, what kinds of ambivalent feelings quarantine produces, and how misinformation has traced the path of quarantine historically. Ultimately, quarantine is about survival, and among the many ironies of quarantine is how it seems to jeopardize what we have come to understand as the very basics of surviving and being alive – things such as the freedoms to socialize; to visit friends and family in hospitals or care facilities; to attend weddings, funerals, Bar Mitzvahs, or rock concerts; and so on. Another irony quarantine reveals is that the survival instinct is utterly selfish: it is about us, not them, whoever “them” turns out to be. For Trump, it was the Chinese; for the people of Eyam, it was the Londoners mainly. Always on the table with this xenophobic survival instinct is violence, since fear is intimately entangled with quarantine. Ultimately, there are many, many resonances between COVID-19 quarantines and quarantines of the past, quarantines from which we do well to take lessons. Perhaps what makes contemporary quarantines so threatening, however, has less to do with the epidemiology of COVID-19 than with the global scope of our responses. If there is anything “unprecedented” about COVID-19 quarantines, it is surely the sheer scale of it all.

Notes

1. Parts of this paragraph appear in slightly different form in my “Humanizing Corporeal Spectacle,” (2022).
2. This paragraph appears in slightly different form in my “Camus, Roth, Covid-19.” (2021a). It bears mentioning here also that there are implications to personifying Nature as a spiteful antagonist in for the long-haul, capable of waiting it out for what will be an inevitable victory over us. No less is it counterproductive to personify viruses. One of the reasons that it is important to be wary of anthropomorphizing viruses and their agents is that so doing distorts the epidemiological problems and solutions and, as I have stated in my “Global Poltergeist” (2021b), this virtually guarantees a skewed understanding of human/nonhuman animal relations in which the nonhuman becomes the antagonist, the demonized agent of harm to the human. In the remarkably prescient chapter entitled “Biomobility: Calculating Kinship in an Era of Pandemic Speculation” in her book *Animal Capital*, Nicole Shukin explains that

while biomobility is suggestive of a radical ontological breakdown of species distinctions and distance under present conditions of global capitalism, it also brings into view new discourses and technologies seeking to secure human health through the segregation of human and animal life and finding in the specter of pandemic a universal rationale for institutionalizing speciesism on a hitherto unprecedented scale” (183–4)

Disclosure statement

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