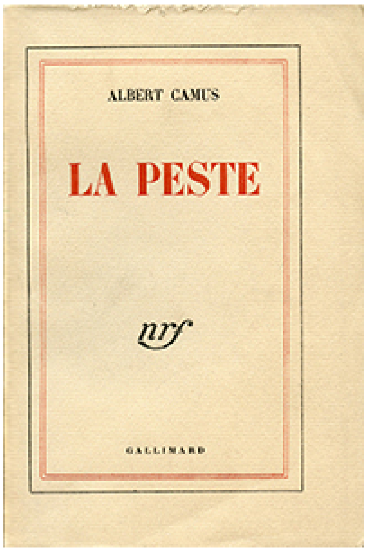
Reading Camus' 'The Plague' in 2020: A Dispatch from Lyon, France, by Jennifer Orth-Veillon and John Tyrrell

"It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not."

20th-century French writer Albert Camus chose these lines penned by Daniel Defoe as the epigraph for his novel, *The Plague*. It may come as a surprise that they hail from Defoe's 1719 fictional work *Robinson Crusoe,* about a slave trader who escaped after, in an ironic turn of events, he was taken prisoner and became stranded on a remote island for 28 years. Defoe's 1722 book, *A Journal of the Plague Year,* which is based on real historical events and a family member's diary kept during the 1665 Great Plague of London, would seem the more logical choice. Camus studied Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* along with other pandemic narratives as he conducted research for *The Plague,* but he decided ultimately that his plague story should be introduced by a statement emphasizing imprisonment rather than illness.

Albert Camus

When Camus began writing *The Plague* in 1942, he planned on calling the germinating novel, "The Prisoners."[1] The Germans had begun their invasion of southern France and the Allies had landed on the coast of North Africa. At the time, Camus was convalescing in southeastern France after another bout of tuberculosis, an illness he had battled since childhood.[2] He was blocked from returning home to Algiers and his wife, Francine. While most consider Camus a French author, he saw himself as Algerian and the forced separation from his terra mater undoubtedly stoked the novel's dominant themes of isolation, exile, and separation. "The Separated" was also among the working titles.



Original 1947 The Plague edition by Gallimard.
Editions Gallimard

The struggle of individual imprisonment was nothing new to Camus. In 1942, he published his absurdist story *The Stranger,* which chronicles the downfall of Meursault, a man who is convicted and sentenced to death not because he killed an innocent Arab on the beach but for not crying at his own mother’s funeral. In that same year, his philosophical essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” appeared, which lays out his basic theory of the absurd. Like Sisyphus who continues to push the rock up the mountain despite its inevitable fall, humans will always search for meaning. What counts is not so much the struggle to push the rock up, but the walk back down the mountain while contemplating renewal.

The Plague marks Camus’ shift in focus from the individual and the absurd to the collective and what he calls the literature of “revolt.” Around the beginning of 1943, he wrote:

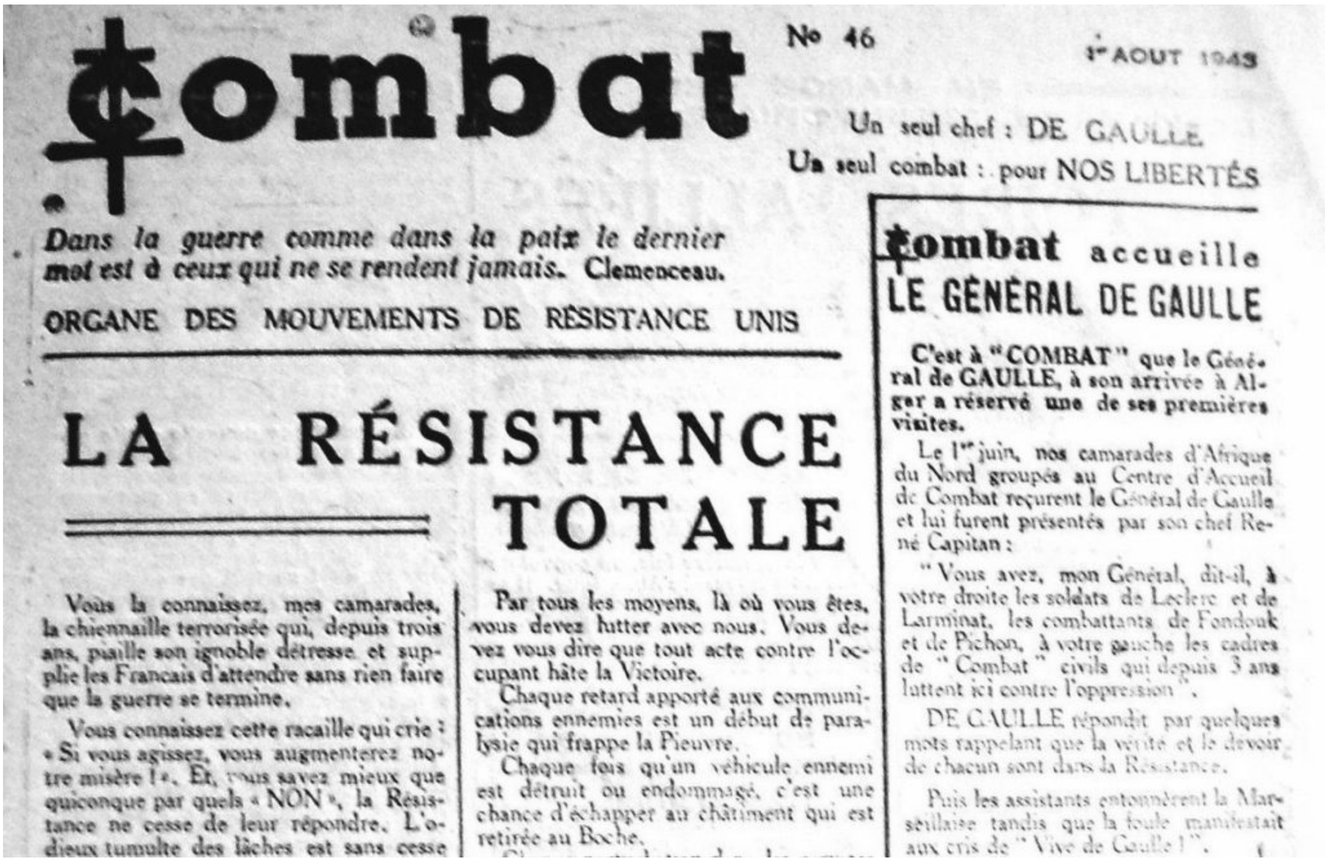
I want to use the plague to express the way we have all suffered from suffocation and the atmosphere of threat and exile we’ve all experienced. At the same time. I want to extend this interpretation to the notion of existence in general. The plague will give an image of those who shared the reflection, the silence of moral suffering.[3]

Cover of the French 1947 special edition of The Plague. Cover design by Mario Prassinos. Editions Gallimard.

The Plague tells the story of a bubonic plague outbreak that strikes the French-Algerian town of Oran, decimating the population. It begins with sick rats coming out to die in the streets. When the rats disappear, the disease moves on to infect humans. At first, most of the inhabitants, with the exception of the character of Dr. Bernard Rieux, refuse to believe that the disease is dangerous. Rieux works tirelessly not only to save sick victims, but also to mobilize a movement against the plague by calling on others to help in the fight against it. As the city closes its gates, Tarrou, Grand, le Père Paneloux, Rambert, Castel, and Othon are among the characters who risk their lives to care for the victims of the unrelenting epidemic.

In 1943, Camus joined the French Resistance as an editorial writer for one of the most influential underground publications, *Combat,* and became its editor-in-chief at Liberation. He wrote moving articles inciting citizens to resist and then detailed the shock of the painful return of

Jews and political prisoners who had been deported to concentration camps. Despite the fact that, in aiming for universality, Camus erased the most explicit references to the Second World War, the French recognized themselves in *The Plague*. As such, in 1947 the book became known as *the* novel about Nazi occupation, the Holocaust, the Resistance, and Liberation.[4] When Camus signed a copy of *The Plague* for his friend and fellow resistor, Madame Jacqueline Bernard, he wrote “To J., survivor of the plague.”[5] She was deported to Ravensbrück concentration camp in 1944 and that same year her husband died on the way from Paris to Auschwitz.



Combat

No 46

1er AOUT 1943

Un seul chef : DE GAULLE

Un seul combat : pour NOS LIBERTÉS

Dans la guerre comme dans la paix le dernier mot est à ceux qui ne se rendent jamais. Clemenceau.

ORGANE DES MOUVEMENTS DE RÉSISTANCE UNIS

LA RÉSISTANCE TOTALE

Vous la connaissez, mes camarades, la chiennaille terrorisée qui, depuis trois ans, piaille son ignoble détresse et supplie les Francais d'attendre sans rien faire que la guerre se termine.

Vous connaissez cette racaille qui crie : « Si vous agissez, vous augmenterez notre misère ! ». Et, vous savez mieux que quiconque par quels « NON », la Résistance ne cesse de leur répondre. L'odieux tumulte des lâches est sans cesse

Par tous les moyens, là où vous êtes, vous devez lutter avec nous. Vous devez vous dire que tout acte contre l'occupant hâte la Victoire.

Chaque retard apporté aux communications ennemies est un début de paralysie qui frappe la Pieuvre.

Chaque fois qu'un véhicule ennemi est détruit ou endommagé, c'est une chance d'échapper au châtiment qui est retirée au Boche.

Combat accueille LE GÉNÉRAL DE GAULLE

C'est à “COMBAT” que le Général de GAULLE, à son arrivée à Alger a réservé une de ses premières visites.

Le 1er juin, nos camarades d'Afrique du Nord groupés au Centre d'Accueil de Combat reçurent le Général de Gaulle et lui furent présentés par son chef René Capitan :

“Vous avez, mon Général, dit-il, à votre droite les soldats de Leclerc et de Larminat, les combattants de Fondouk et de Pichon, à votre gauche les cadres de “Combat” civils qui depuis 3 ans luttent ici contre l'oppression”.

DE GAULLE répondit par quelques mots rappelant que la vérité et le devoir de chacun sont dans la Résistance.

Puis les assistants entonnèrent la Marseillaise tandis que la foule manifestait aux cris de “Vive de Gaulle !”.

Cover of underground French Resistance publication that Camus edited, Combat.

Almost 75 years later, it could be said that Camus’ vision of *The Plague* gaining a more universal significance has found renewed focus with COVID-19. For Camus, the pandemic virus symbolized not just Nazism but was supposed to serve as an allegory for any omnipotent force that imprisons people and inflicts human deaths in arbitrary ways. Since February of 2020, *The Plague* has made the bestseller list in countries such as South Korea, Italy, and France, and, in some places, has sold out on Amazon. When reading it, it's impossible not to wonder how someone writing in 1942 could have foreseen so accurately how things would play out in 2020. The general disbelief and denial of the severity of the virus, the unwillingness of government authorities to enforce prophylactic measures, the hoarding of goods, profiteering, quarantine, lack of medical supplies—these themes play out in *The Plague* as they do today.

Albert Camus

While these comparisons are striking, some of the less-sensational parallels of today's crisis with *The Plague* delve into the heart of the book's deceptively simple message – it is a story about acquiring a sense of love and duty for all humankind that functions outside of personal, moral, religious, or ideological motivation. It's about breaking out of a certain kind of individual imprisonment and isolation to combat a collective imprisonment and isolation.

Le métier d'homme, le devoir d'aimer, and abstraction

Two major terms from Camus' lexicon give shape to this concept: *le métier d'homme* and *le devoir d'aimer*. *Le métier d'homme,* loosely translated as "humankind's profession," means that all humans have a job, tailored to each individual, that involves combating misfortune in the world to reduce suffering. What drives *le métier d'homme* is *le devoir* *d'aimer*, the "duty of love" not just to one's partner or family but also to humankind. Camus said, "love is the right and duty of each human" and "the only duty" he knows is "that of love."[6] It is only this conception of love and duty without moral or material motivation or compensation that can heal plagues, imagined or real.

At first glance, *Le métier d'homme* and *le devoir d'aimer* appear to be simple concepts that any decent human being should be able to enact humbly. However, throughout *The Plague*, Camus demonstrates that this becomes nearly impossible in times of massive catastrophe due to the third major term from Camus' lexicon—*abstraction*. Different abstractions allow the citizens of Oran to avoid confronting the horrible reality of the plague's spread and impact. At its most simple, abstraction means turning the concrete into the immaterial or ideal, and it's the different forms of abstraction that individuals employ—both wittingly and unwittingly—that become obstacles to the city's efforts in countering the plague. As long as they create abstractions, humans cannot love or do their duty in preventing the suffering of humankind.

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The rest of this article will be devoted to dissecting the different ways the characters of *The Plague* generate abstraction while comparing these with a few ways different, real actors in today's world have avoided confronting the most severe impacts of COVID-19. The authors—Jennifer Orth-Veillon and John Tyrrell— both residents of Lyon, France, who can't go further than one kilometer from our homes for more than one hour a day, are seeking to resist the abstraction of this pandemic in textbooks (years from now), or on social media (minutes from now). To that end we have interviewed two real people close to us who have, against the odds, won their own personal battle with abstraction and helped, or rather loved, humankind during this crisis.[1]

Abstraction and *The Plague*

In 1955, eight years after the publication of *The Plague*, the French journal *L'Express* published an article by Camus entitled "Le métier d'homme" in which he presents his recurring idea of "humankind's profession." He speaks of the human need for meaningful work, without which "life suffocates and dies," a theme he explored in *The Plague* through the actions of Doctor Rieux. In the article, he also addresses humankind's "duty to love" ("devoir d'aimer"), which drives Rieux, and undoubtedly motivates today's health care professionals as they work tirelessly and selflessly to protect lives against the onslaught of an invisible and deadly adversary. As a nurse in Lombardy, Italy, expressed to New York emergency-room doctor Helen Ouyang in early April when the city registered 47,440 cases, the merits of the profession can't be understated. "Please, don't give up," she wrote. "Our jobs are difficult but are the most beautiful ones."[2]

As with this nurse, Dr. Rieux's task – performing his "duty to love" – gives meaning to his existence. However, no lofty aspirations brought him to his calling. By his own admission, he entered his profession "abstractedly," as it was a desirable career "that young men often aspire to." Subsequently, as a young doctor, he was exposed to the hard realities of human suffering and death. The injustices he witnessed outraged him, challenging his capacity to see his patients abstractedly. Indeed, it was his inability "to get used to seeing people die" that spurred him on. But later, faced with plague in Oran, he found a new purpose for the abstraction of reality in allowing him to take on an unprecedented number of critical patients. He observes that "an element of abstraction, of a divorce from reality, entered into such calamities." However, he finally comes to the conclusion that he can never completely let down his guard and give way to abstraction, as he proclaims, "when abstraction sets to killing you, you've got to get busy with it." For

Rieux, fighting his own abstract view of the plague becomes almost as difficult as fighting the plague itself.

Somewhat like Sisyphus, Rieux rarely wins the uphill battle with the plague. While a few make what he views as miraculous recoveries, most succumb to a violent end as the plague attacks in horrific ways. Their buboes ooze, their fevers soar. As the plague continues its rout, a group of men let go of their abstractions and join Rieux in helping the communal effort. The journalist character, Rambert, decides to stop illegally planning his escape from Oran to join his lover in Paris. Since the outbreak, he has tried bribing officials and finally resorted to engaging the services of some shady characters to smuggle him out. For him, the plague was not about the arbitrary deaths of thousands of humans, but about his individual sadness. When he abandons the quest to escape and instead joins the rescue teams, he admits to Rieux "I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business." Rieux tells Rambert that he didn't blame him for wanting to pursue happiness with his lover. At this moment, it's easy to forget that Rieux has been separated from his wife too. "But it may be shameful to be happy by oneself," Rambert confesses.

Rieux and his friends fight the plague—and their abstractions of it—until cases diminish and an effective serum is found. About a year after the first case appeared, the gates of Oran reopened and the citizens flooded the streets and cafés to celebrate. It is just then that Rieux is shattered by the sickness and death of his friend Tarrou, who has contributed greatly to the efforts. As Tarrou dies, Camus resists imposing an emotional reaction on his readers, yet the impact of the episode on Rieux is clear. Unable to be of any use to his friend, the doctor nonetheless remains steadfastly at his side, recording the details of their interactions during Tarrou's final hours. The tragedy of this death, all the more poignant for having occurred as the plague was receding from the town, finally forces back the protective shield of abstraction which had permitted Rieux to carry out his duty so assiduously and for so long. It is the first moment since the onset of the epidemic in the town that he puts aside the others who are sick to stay with his friend. And it is the moment where the reader is presented with the real human cost of the ravages of the plague, free from all abstraction.

The next day, when Rieux receives the telegram informing him of his wife's death, it is hard not to wonder how he will carry on. Yet we know he will, as will the suffering. Rieux admits that "He'd been expecting it, but it was hard all the same. And he knew, in saying this, that this suffering was nothing new. For many months, and for the last two days, it was the selfsame suffering going on and on."

Abstraction and COVID-19

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, abstraction has also been an important coping mechanism. For the general public, abstraction comes in the form of harsh realities in hospital wards reduced to news headlines and data points on graphs.. For front line medical professionals, it's the daily struggle to manage the waves of emotion resulting from unprecedented sickness, death, and deprivation of contact with loved ones. Like Rieux, some of those doctors and nurses have found that allowing the mask of abstraction to slip can be desirable in the face of such monumental difficulties. Italian E.R. doctor Andrea Duca said, "I realize now that keeping the emotions outside of me can help to manage the shift and the stress, but I need to be human to keep working."[3]

However, opening the floodgates to those emotional realities can also have devastating consequences. New York E.R. Doctor Laura Breen tragically took her own life following weeks of fighting the virus in others, and had even recovered from it herself. According to her father's account in *The New York Times*, "She had described to him an onslaught of patients who were dying before they could even be taken out of ambulances." He said, "She tried to do her job, and it killed her."[4]

If ongoing mitigation measures are successful, it's likely that the vast majority of the global population won't contract COVID-19, or even have direct experience of it via immediate family and friends. This means that for most of us our experience will remain an abstraction, limited to what we see and hear on TV, radio, websites and social media in the form of soundbites, statistics, graphs, and their various interpretations through each channel's unique prism. As Camus suggests in *The Plague,* "we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogy of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away."

Today, the bad dream plays out on screens at home and on mobile phones, adding a further stage of disconnection with reality. Many are looking hopefully towards a better future post-pandemic, in terms of improved health systems, sustained reductions in urban pollution, or more flexibility in remote working for example. The mass-scale abstraction of the pandemic, however, could prove to be a hindrance to such positive outcomes. If COVID-19 doesn't directly touch a person's life, it's easy to ignore its reality, deny its impact and believe that there's nothing that needs fixing.

In *The Plague*, Camus says that discussing humans as being good or bad citizens in times of crisis misses the point. Rather "they are more or less ignorant." He suggests that "the evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding." It follows that to counter ignorance and gain this all-important understanding, people require information. But it needs to be correct information. This is challenging when facts depend on the way they are collected, and truth is subjective depending on the channel through which it is transmitted. In his story, Camus describes the "epical or prize-speech verbiage" employed by the media beyond the walls of Oran when describing the situation within. This grates on Dr. Rieux because it fails to capture the reality of the “small daily effort” made by so many to sustain the lives of the afflicted.

It’s possible to imagine that some Italians reacted in a similar way to the sensationalist reporting in British media in early March when COVID-19 began to exert its deadly grip on Northern Italy.[5] Fast forward to April, when the infectious tide rose to similar levels in the UK, and the tone of reporting in popular newspapers was muted in comparison. At times, it leveraged the distraction of Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s own battle with the virus to keep the worst domestic horrors from the front pages.[6] It appears that it’s only a sensation when it’s happening to someone else.

Meanwhile, one debate currently raging in our communities and news media concerns the medical efficacy of wearing masks to protect ourselves and others from COVID-19. This might be missing the point, however. Camus goes straight to the heart of the matter, recording an exchange in which Tarrou hands a mask to Rambert the journalist, who immediately asks if it is really any use: “Tarrou said no, but it inspired confidence in others.” Our leaders frequently speak of community responsibility and the vital role that everyone has to play in mitigating the worst impacts of COVID-19. Staying at home and following social distancing guidelines is vital, but for any who share Camus’ view, the action of wearing masks is equally of value. It requires investment in modifying behavior to extend greater respect and understanding to those who share this world, its streets, and places of work and play. How people behave – whether or not they wear a mask, for example – has a very real impact on the level of safety or anxiety felt by others.

RESTEZ CHEZ
VOUS, C'EST TOUT
TACOSLAND
KEBAB FAIT MAISON
100% VEAU
QUAI DE BONDY

In Lyon, a sign reads "Stay home, that's all." Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon

In the high-score, high-stakes world of COVID-19 statistics, the relative differences of individual country's approaches are laid bare. Every commentator has a different take, but it's hard to claim that a country like South Korea has a lower infection rate because it lacks the freedoms of western liberal democracies. Sweden, for example, has achieved remarkable results. Some observers credit this to the heightened sense of social responsibility that saw Stockholm city centre foot traffic reduced by 70% without any enforced lockdown.[7] As COVID-19 takes its permanent place in the world's ongoing reality, time will tell whether people are willing to invest in their communities through the wearing of masks and other perhaps inconvenient new behaviours as we seek to, as Camus suggests, "inspire confidence in others." Such communal social responsibility is the manifestation of Camus' “duty to love,” and its value should be embraced more than ever in trying times.

For individuals to grasp the importance of behavioral change and their wider social duty, it’s vital to break through abstraction and connect meaningfully with them. It’s here that the power of personal stories is paramount. The story that Camus told in *The Plague* is a fiction, but there are many narratives today that mirror its events, and it is those that must be elevated. By doing so, we can reveal the truth of Camus’ words when he says of the contagion, “it doesn’t always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away.” And we can begin to better understand our shared duty of love.

We have come to know two individuals whose stories are relevant and valuable in the context of Camus’ discussion of abstraction in *The Plague* and our city’s experience with COVID-19. Yasmina Bouafia and Walid Feda are two French citizens who, against great odds, demonstrate “le métier d’homme” and “le devoir d’aimer.”

Yasmina Bouafia, 6eme Arrondissement, Lyon

“With *The Plague*, Camus has given us the copy that we have cut and pasted into today’s Covid-19 France,” claims Yasmina Bouafia, a 38-year-old French-Algerian woman living in the Charpennes neighborhood in the southeastern city of Lyon. Yasmina’s parents are Algerian, but she and four of her nine siblings were born in France. “It’s hard to find an Algerian of my generation who hasn’t read *The Plague.”*

Yasmina Bouafia serves Algerian mint tea. Courtesy of Yasmina Bouafia.

The pandemic has shed light on an aspect of Camus that she hadn't previously grasped in his work. Camus, although he became known as a French writer, had always considered himself Algerian, despite having joined the French Resistance, and eventually settling in France after Algeria won its independence in 1954.. Almost all of his writings spring from his place of birth, and when he was forced to relocate to France after the Algerian War, he chose to live in the south of France because the intensity of the sunlight there most resembled that in Algeria. Yasmina, born in France, to a family steeped in Algerian tradition, has always considered herself French.

It has been from her position as an outsider that she has been able to help women in Algeria improve their health. Two years after giving birth to her twins, she divorced her husband and found herself almost exclusively responsible for raising her five children under the age of 11. Uncertainty and stress about her family's future caused Yasmina to reach a weight that threatened her well-being. Through a combination of meditation, nutrition, and exercise, she regained her health, and went on to create a foundation co-sponsored by French and Algerian organizations, to help women in Algeria combat the rise in obesity and its related problems. Gyms, yoga studios, and nutritionists are easy to find in France, but in Algeria, they are rare and inaccessible to most women. Even though she is unable to go to Algeria now, she stays in contact with the women in her program, who have, Yasmina admits, struggled since being confined to their homes due to COVID-19. She tells them they have to hold out at least until September when she will be able to help them again in person.

Reading books like *The Plague* in the time of COVID-19 have allowed us to believe more in fiction than in reality, she says. She’s taken to watching the British series, “Black Mirror,” and sees parallels in the way technology has taken over during the pandemic. Technology, she intimates, has made an abstraction out of the world and replaced real experience: “There’s no more kissing, no more hugging, no more face-to-face meetings.” Reality happens through the “black mirror” of our phones and screens.

Yasmina, worried about technology’s influence over reality, believes the screens and the media are masking stories many don’t want to be told. “I feel like the media is in competition for whoever tells the most sensational story, even if it has to do with pseudoscience.” For example, it’s rare to hear stated a truth that she believes most politicians don’t want to admit: months ago, President Macron’s government consistently crushed and criticized the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vest) Movement that involved working and middle class citizens protesting what they saw as the unfair decline in their standards of living. These people included nurses, farmers, truck drivers, and grocery store employees. They are the same people who, despite the dangers of contracting COVID-19, have been asked by the French government to continue working as they are considered “essential” to the nation. Their weekly protests throughout France have been forbidden, which probably “suits the government.” “The values have reversed,” she says.

She cites another underrecognized issue in Algeria. Many people in Algeria work, as she describes, “day to day,” meaning they leave for work in the morning in order to make enough money to eat in the evening. With the stay-at-home order, they can’t leave their houses. This is especially difficult during Ramadan. In one particularly hard hit commune, Blida, military service members have been delivering meals to struggling families at night to break the fast, a response made possible by donations of food from over 1,000 households.[1]

Algerian Ramadan specialties prepared by Yasmina Bouafia. Courtesy of Yasmina Bouafia.

In France, Yasmina has managed her family’s food budget by dipping into her savings. As a single mother of five children, she benefits from a reduced lunch fee at the school cafeteria. Even if her children don’t eat much at night, she is reassured that they had at least one good meal with meat and vegetables during the day. With the children at home, her food budget has more than doubled and she worries about providing proper nutrition on a daily basis. In addition, she is limited from buying the necessary quantity of food since it is impossible for her to go out each day with all of her children and she doesn’t own a car. In France, it’s not permitted to go outside without a government-issued justification citing for example exercise, shopping for necessities, or seeing a doctor. There is also a one-parent-to-child obligation. Each time Yasmina went for a walk with her children, the police stopped her and ordered her home. Her older sister decided to move in with her to help ensure the children’s outings could continue.

Instead of taking her sister’s help as a cue to let down her guard, Yasmina decided that the extra pair of hands at home would finally allow her to do what she felt was her “human duty.” While her sister watched her children, Yasmina went to the local chapters of the Salvation Army to prepare meals for the poor and homeless. She wore gloves, a mask, and protective clothing and declined to help distribute due to risk of infection. However, she reported each day to the centers until she severely sprained her ankle, forcing her to walk with crutches and stay home until the injury healed.

The task of fasting has become a greater challenge during Covid-19 due to the fact that Muslim families and friends can’t visit each other during the day. This is especially painful in the early evening as the fasting draws to a close and they prepare to eat for the first time in over twelve hours. Yasmina explains, “In the Maghreb culture, we are used to taking a walk to visit family and friends after eating the evening meal and we talk late into the night. It’s a time to reunite with people. Now I have to eat alone.” Most of Yasmina’s children are too young to fast during the day and her evening Ramadan ritual has felt less celebratory as she eats in isolation.

A few days ago, her children surprised her. As if they had inherited their mother’s selfless, benevolent impulse, they surprised her as she prepared their breakfast – they announced that they had all decided to join her in fasting for the day. And, in spite of a few grumbles, they made it to sundown. Instead of the traditional Ramadan soup, *chorba,* or orange-flower blossom pastries, her youngest begged to go to McDonald’s, which is one of the restaurants that hasn’t stayed open for take-out or delivery. “If McDonald’s were open, I would have definitely taken him,” said Yasmina, still flabbergasted by her children’s resolve.

For Yasmina, Camus’ novel is valuable because it isn’t about Algeria. It’s not about France either. “It’s a novel about humankind.” As she explains, this is what Camus meant by “métier d’homme.” Yasmina isn’t helping Algerians or French. She’s helping humans.

Walid Feda, 1er arrondissement, Lyon

“The most negative word of 2020 is positive,” pronounced Walid Feda, owner of the Lyon neighborhood convenience store, Panier Sympa (The Friendly Basket).

Walid Feda, owner of Panier Sympa convenience store in Lyon, waits for customers. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Since high school, Walid has read *The Plague* several times, reflecting his lifelong interest in major global pandemics in history. Every 100-400 years, he reports, the world faces something like COVID-19, be it Bubonic plague, cholera, or the Spanish flu. Still, he never thought such a thing would affect him at all, either positively or negatively.

In his shop, Walid sells the basics— fresh fruits and vegetables, canned goods, sodas, chips, candy, cold beer, bleach, toilet paper. He also sells more high-end goods like expensive champagne, aged cheeses, vintage wines, and cured meats. In normal times, both the bourgeois and working-class flock to Panier Sympa on Sunday afternoons or as the sun goes down, when regular supermarkets are closed. His store is never overcrowded, but there's always at least one person purchasing something and a few others hanging around the fruit and vegetable stand at the entrance as permanent fixtures. On summer nights, the smell of exotic spices wafts through the neighborhood and we know that Walid is not only cooking things to sell – he is also preparing meals for his friends and neighbors, free of charge.

RUE TOURRET
PANIER SYMPA

Walid’s storefront in Lyon. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Walid was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. His mother was a schoolteacher and his father civil engineer and well-known intellectual. They were both outspoken community leaders against the regime and, as such, their lives were threatened. When he was 10, Walid and his parents were granted asylum in France and settled in Lyon. Walid was educated in international schools in Lyon and Dubai, and after gaining a degree in computer science in Lyon, he returned to Dubai where he led several technological and commercial enterprises. When he met his wife in India, his business was doing well, and together, they had three children—two boys and a girl, and lived between India and Dubai. When his wife fell ill with breast cancer in December 2007, they made the decision that she should pursue her treatment in Lyon, where cancer treatment facilities were cutting-edge. In 2008-9 the subprime crisis and the Arab Spring hit his businesses hard and they folded in Dubai, Bahrain, and China. With his children, he moved back to Lyon. His wife still sick, he used his remaining money to open the convenience store because, as he told himself, “people always need to eat.” The store limped to modest success until 2014 when his wife’s cancer returned and she died, leaving Walid alone with his three children. He floundered economically and emotionally. Luckily, his parents agreed to help with the children and he found himself back on his feet again in late 2018.

Things were starting to look up until March of this year when the rapid spread of COVID-19 imposed a lockdown of citizens. Considered by French law as an “essential” business for the health of the nation, Walid has been allowed to remain open. However, he knows that his sales of foodstuffs are anything but essential. “The seniors in our neighborhood see me as security,” he says. “They come here once or twice a week to buy a few things but really they come to talk. For some, I bring them their groceries. If I close, I’m scared they will fear the worse and succumb to their isolation. I look after them.” Walid explains that he orchestrated placing a local woman in an assisted-living facility just before the pandemic because no one could take care of her. He calls and checks on her each day to make sure that the new Coronavirus hasn’t invaded the facility and that she remains in good health.

Finally, he’s remained open not because he offers essential food, but because he offers a service for those who are in danger in falling outside of what the French nation considers legal. For some time, Walid has helped asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants process governmental documents related to obtaining French legal status. Among the bleach bottles and disposable hand wipes stacked in the back of his shop, he’s set up a card table and chairs. A pot of hot tea and cups sit among the scattered papers along with a few empty beer cans. Prior to Covid-19, he had cases that helped fill the occasional monotony of afternoons before the shop’s business picked up in the evening. Today, however, he has a steady string of customers. The French government has decided to extend visas to all immigrants awaiting decisions regarding their permanent status. While this may appear to be good news, it presents a lot of unknowns—not only on the part of the immigrants, but also on the part of those who are sometimes unaware of the new rules. For example, if a pharmacist is not aware of the visa-extension law, they may not understand that the client still has the right to a lower price for medicine. This gets especially complicated when the immigrant in question doesn’t speak French or English.

In the back of his shop, Walid helps two men from Afghanistan with their papers. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

Nowadays, Walid accompanies these people to pharmacies to argue in their favor, and helps them fill out paperwork that guarantees the extension of their rights on French territory. “They have legal status that not everyone knows about. That’s why I have to be there,” Walid explains. “My religion is my humanity. So, no matter where they are from, I help them. It’s more important to do something good for humanity.”

Walid charges no fee for this service. “It’s my heart, my humanity that does this.”

Walid has remained open for business and, no doubt, he has helped many, but his business has paid an enormous price. “My debit and credit cards are maxed out,” he reports. “My bank has blocked me. I use the cash I make from shop purchases to buy stuff to replenish stock. I let my oldest son work here so he can have some pocket money and feel independent.” The French government has promised to help struggling businesses during COVID-19, but only those who were doing well before the crisis will get immediate and substantial aid. Walid was just getting back on his feet after recovering from his wife’s death when the pandemic exploded. He fears the worst. With three children who will all encounter the rising costs of French higher education in the next few years, he hopes he and his family will be spared. His oldest son has his eye on an aeronautical engineering school and, besides his work in the shop, fixes smartphones for pocket money.

When we asked Walid if he would respond to a few interview questions, he requested a few days to reflect. After this time, he produced a narrative of eleven handwritten pages. Here is, fittingly, the abstracted version of some of his most pertinent reflections on Camus:

Today, we are living in a historical moment of our lives. In the world, we are observing certain ideological and political discriminations within our own communities and even families. The virus is forcing us to come back to a notion of family again by enclosing parents with their kids. Are we seeing that our relationships have become more virtual, making us express even our gratitude to the ones we love only on screens? When I come home from work, I want nothing more than to hug my kids, but I have to take off my clothes and shower first. My clients come into the shop – we have always been friendly, shaking hands or giving the French “bise” – a kiss on each cheek. Now, behind masks, we nod heads coldly. But, at the same time, my actions for others come from my solidarity and my responsibility is to my humanity.

The Rats Will Rise Up Again

French writer Roland Barthes took issue with *La Peste* in 1955, claiming that Camus’ use of allegory muted rather than exposed the catastrophic reality of the Holocaust.[8] But only reading *The Plague* as an allegorical mirror of the COVID-19 masks its fundamental message about humans helping humans. By not speaking directly about real events, *The Plague* allows for this more universal meaning, which is especially relevant for today’s COVID-19 world.

Outside of Lyon, France, quarantined Yellow Vest protestors hang their symbols outside their windows. Photo by Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

If we believe that *The Plague* can only stand for political totalitarianism or health crises, we will have too quickly dismissed one of the essential functions of the book, which is to provide a blueprint for both identifying and overcoming the kind of abstraction that prevents us from performing our “métier d’homme” and our “devoir d’aimer.” With *The Plague,* Camus has created a neutral space from which the rise of catastrophe and collective resistance against it can be staged. Walid and Yasmina are but two of thousands of individuals who have played their part and we can only hope that more faces and names like theirs are revealed as the COVID-19 crisis marches on, and indeed the next one lies in wait. Because Rieux, in the last lines of *The Plague* warns that these kinds of fights are far from over:

> *And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.*

Notes:

[1] http://www.aps.dz/regions/104503-association-kafil-al-yatime-de-blida-distribution-de-30-000-aides-alimentaires-a-la-fin-du-mois-sacre

[1] http://www.gallimard.fr/Footer/Ressources/Entretiens-et-documents/Histoire-d-un-livre-La-Peste-d-Albert-Camus

[2] For an explanation of the way France had been divided into the northern zone and the southern zone during WWII, see https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/france

[3] Camus, Albert. *Carnets*.1942-1943

[4] Agnès Spiquel, https://www.livreshebdo.fr/article/une-relecture-de-la-peste-par-agnes-spiquel

[5] Jacqueline Bernard. “The Background of *The Plague:* Albert Camus’ Experience in the French Resistance.” Volume 14, 1967 *Kentucky Romance Quarterly,* Issue 2.

Pages 165-173 | Published online: 09 Jul 2010 Taylor and Francis

[6] Albert Camus. *Les carnets.* 1942-1951

[1] For a description of France’s restrictions see this article in *The Local*

[2] Read more of Helen Ouyang’s harrowing article about her experience in her *The New York Times* article, “I’m an E.R. Doctor in New York. None of Us Will Ever Be the Same.”

[3] Quoted in Ouyang’s article, listed in footnote 2

[4] See article on Dr. Breen, “Top E.R. Doctor Who Treated Virus Pateints Dies by Suicide” in *The New York Times*

[5] For more on the UK coverage of Italy, see the article published on itv, “Italy’s soaring coronavirus death toll and Covid-19 panic buying in the UK dominate Monday’s headlines”

[6] For more on the coverage of Johnson’s illness see the article “How the newspaper front pages reacted to Boris Johnson in intensive care” published on *Yahoo News.*

[7] For more on Sweden, see “Sweden disputes accusations of lack of coronavirus action” in *The Local.*

[8] Barthes, Roland. "*La Peste*: Annales d'une épidémie ou roman de la solitude." *Œuvres complètes*. Ed. Eric Marty. Vol.1. Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1999, p. 540.

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