

Fecha de recepción: 13 mayo 2024
Fecha de aceptación: 23 julio 2024
Fecha de publicación: 5 febrero 2025
URL: <https://oceanide.es/index.php/o12020/article/view/130>
Occánide número 17, ISSN 1989-6328
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37668/oceanide.v17i.130>

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Pandemic Mythologies in COVID (Short) Fiction: A Study of Escapism in "The Decameron Project"

≈ Abstract

The present article examines the escapist themes and narrative techniques in *The Decameron Project* (2020), a multi-authored short story collection inspired by the desire to relate the globalised experience of the COVID pandemic. Previous research on the collection has commended its representation of temporal stasis (Mussgnug 2021; Howell 2022), but consideration of its escapist endeavours has been minimal, when not wilfully overlooked (Pittel 2023). This paper typifies the collection's escapist ambitions in a twofold manner: on the one hand, some of the stories commit to an unbridled belief in humanity and its ability to come together in the face of hardship, a theme that is argued to constitute an escapist, pandemic metanarrative within the bounds of the collection; on the other, the article examines stories that escape the reality of the pandemic by introducing impersonal or alien focalisers, dehumanising the experience of living through the spread of the coronavirus by means of deploying narrative techniques to consciously remove affect and suffering from diegesis. These two approaches to escape considered, the article maintains that the collection's marriage of opposite compromises with what "COVID reality" entails reflects the surrealism, atemporality and disruption of normality that were located at the discursive centre of the COVID pandemic. Thus, and despite their seeming incongruence, the confluence of these two escapist dispositions is maintained to succeed at both representing, and allowing readers a sense of escape from, the pandemic experience.

Keywords:

COVID fiction; short story; The Decameron Project; escapism; pandemic narratives

≈ Resumen

El presente artículo ofrece un estudio de los temas y técnicas narrativas de corte escapista en *The Decameron Project* (2020), una colección de relatos de autoría múltiple motivada por el deseo de relatar la experiencia globalizada de la pandemia de COVID. El trabajo previo sobre la colección de relatos ha loado su representación de la estasis temporal (Mussgnug 2021; Howell 2022), pero el análisis de sus propósitos escapistas ha sido mínimo, cuando no intencionadamente desatendido (Pittel 2023). Este estudio tipifica las ambiciones escapistas del volumen de manera dicotómica: en primer lugar, se argumenta que algunos de los cuentos están contruidos sobre una creencia ciega en la humanidad y su capacidad de aunar fuerzas ante la adversidad, una temática que se arguye constituye una metanarrativa escapista en la colección; por otra parte, el artículo analiza historias que escapan de la realidad vírica introduciendo focalizaciones narrativas impersonales o alienígenas, y deshumanizan así la experiencia de la pandemia mediante el uso de técnicas narrativas que borran conscientemente los afectos y el sufrimiento de la diégesis. Habiendo considerado estas dos aproximaciones al escapismo, se defiende que el matrimonio de opuestos que vertebra la colección refleja el surrealismo, la atemporalidad y la disrupción de la normalidad que ocuparon el centro discursivo de la pandemia. Por ello, y pese a presentarse como aparentemente irreconciliables, se concluye que la confluencia de estas dos disposiciones escapistas consigue tanto representar la experiencia de la pandemia como ofrecer un escape narrativo a su público lector.

Palabras clave:

ficción COVID; relato breve; The Decameron Project; escapismo; narrativas de la pandemia

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, scholars have accounted for a significant rise in the production of *COVID fiction* (Giovannelli 2023), a neologism coined to refer to narratives influenced by and/or representing the experience of the pandemic.

The appearance of stories that reflect on the social and cultural specificities of living through the spread of the coronavirus can be easily linked to two of the primary purposes that art has served throughout history: on the one hand, to allow the expression of contemporary, lived reality for those immersed in it, helping them process it through something other than fact, or, as Nietzsche famously phrased it, “we possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*” (1968, 435; emphasis in original); and, on the other, to function as a coping mechanism or a form of escape, with the loci of fiction providing the safety that “real” spaces are perceived to lack, allowing “the expression of unconscious fantasy in a way that transforms it so that it can be understood” and, further, encouraging the feeling of communion with another person, a feeling that was often perceived to be absent in many pandemic realities: “reading [...] is at heart relational; our minds develop in consort with others” (Galgut 2018, 510).

In light of this, it becomes particularly relevant to ponder how the relational power of storytelling may be at odds with, or complemented by, its escapist potential. Until very recently, escapist fiction had been nearly always equated with genre fiction and, as such, disregarded by “serious literary criticism” on the basis that its fantasy of escape is construed through the replica of conventional genre norms and not an innovative contribution to storytelling. Even the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* echoes these very ideas, already hinting at the mainstream prevalence of the ties between popular culture, genre forms and the notion of escape: “While literary fiction is frequently rooted in the realities of everyday life, popular fiction tends toward escapism. Works can often be categorized in any number of popular escapist genres, such as romance, mystery, thriller, science fiction, or horror” (Cunningham 2024). These allegedly clearcut connections between escapist fiction and genre forms, however, are not without their criticism. Eric S. Rabkin, for instance, has maintained that the distinction between so-called “serious literature” and “escapist fiction” derives from two fallacies: “first, that ‘seriousness’ is better than ‘escape’; second, that escape is an indiscriminate rejection of order” (1976, 44). And indeed, COVID fiction often marries escapism with a longing for structure; the “order” readers escape to is often informed by, opposite, or directly equal to, the “real” state of the world that the pandemic was perceived to have maimed. The prevalent idea that “escape routes” assist us in the construction, in our minds, of that which “does not appear to us in the world” (Cohen and Taylor 1993, 225), often departs from the assumption that the order pursued by readers is not, cannot, or even should not, be a part of a “real” superstructure, be this order one where space travel exists, one where love is mystified into unattainable perfection, or one where dragons soar through blood-soaked skies. COVID fiction readily demonstrates that the structural cravings that the self may express through its escapist dispositions need not really concern the extra-structural, but may instead convey a deeper discomfort or desire that is indeed as structural as can be, with characters in pandemic narratives often conveying a need for structure itself to be restored, both diegetically and extradiegetically.

As early as 1975 Robert B. Heilman argued that the escape metaphor, together with the idea of escapism itself, had been

on the rise for much of the twentieth century. Considering this growing interest in the notion of escape across genres and forms, he wondered: “Has the Age of Anxiety been undergoing a metamorphosis into the Age of Claustrophobia or the Age of Paranoia? Do we sense needlessly enclosing walls everywhere? Or ominous forces surrounding us, hemming us in, imprisoning us, depriving us of freedoms with which we are, or believe we should be, endowed?” (1975, 441). If this subjective apperception of a prison – be it conceptual or otherwise – is indeed still present in some twenty-first-century literature, then its presence begs new questions: How does this sense of imprisonment impede or inform the affective turn that some have argued to characterize many literary texts after postmodernism? How much has the experience of surviving “trauma on a universal scale [...], the sudden shattering of our shared realities and sense of safety” (Shaw 2021, 179), made us more capable of overcoming what were regarded to be the “aesthetic impasses” of postmodernism, its “commodified forms” (McLaughlin 2013), to embrace the other and our shared humanity more sincerely, as some have argued the much disputed “post-postmodernist culture” to aspire to do (CGiles 2007; Kelly 2010; Baskin 2023)?

This paper sets out to read *The New York Times Magazine’s The Decameron Project* (2020) in light of these questions. *The Decameron Project* is a collection of stories conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic, an experience partly defined by the idea of captivity. The texts of the collection provide numerous examples of how the shifting currents of present-day society might shed light on the new approaches to the idea of escapism that literature affords the globalised subject. The stories of this New Decameron allow readers a sense of escape, be that escape from lockdown, the virus or the psychological distress of the pandemic. Much as it draws on Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* as its central image, overtly comparing the kaleidoscopic nature of its stories of illness with the fourteenth-century book, *The Decameron Project’s* escapist fantasies are unlike those of Boccaccio’s characters, and indeed, conspicuously contemporary. It should come as no surprise, then, that the collection has rarely received critical consideration for its escapist attempts, given its fixation with the present and consequent removal from any immediate form of escape through atemporality or alocality. Harald Pittel has argued that this difference between the two texts evinces a turn away from escapism in *The Decameron Project*, maintaining that “unlike the escapist tendency prevalent in *The Decameron*, most of the stories included in *The Decameron Project* aim to face the present crisis” (2023, 54). Much as the distinction is founded on a radical difference between the projects, I contend that the stories in this volume are no less escapist for their fixation with the present – which could itself be problematised – but rather express their escape fantasies differently, often finding solace in either their utter compromise with their belief in humanity or their detachment from the conscious, affective experience of the pandemic.

These turns are nourished by a tension that traverses many of the stories in *The Decameron Project*, resulting from their desire to marry the ideas of escapist fiction and their understanding of what a piece on the virus should do with the specificity of the cultural and epidemiological context of COVID-19. They are imaginative and bend the turbulent reality of the pandemic, and yet commit to self-constraint to faithfully allude to it, becoming in the process both committed to a certain magical realism where contemporaneity and real living remain the central

subject matters, while also being infected with an escapist desire to rebuild and rethink the world's perceived-to-be-broken order. "The more one examines into life and the motives of it", wrote Arthur Christopher Benson in 1915, "the more does one perceive that the imagination, concerning itself with hopes of escape from any conditions which hamper and confine us, is the dynamic force that is transmuting the world" (1915, 11). "The virus was like a revolution in the brain, like a brand-new argument", writes Andrew O'Hagan (2020, 95), as though phrasing a reply to Benson from the twenty-first century. This revolution takes different forms in the collection but remains utterly faithful to fiction's escapist potential, with stories being repeatedly used as a form of escape and community-building within diegesis (Toibín 37, Kushner 103).

To dissect the contemporariness of the collection's approach to writing the disease, the present article proposes a bipartite classification of the narrative decisions made by the authors of *The Decameron Project* to convey the idea of escapism or allow readers a sense of escape. On the one hand, one may find characters who escape their pandemic reality through the belief in "humanity" as a metanarrative and their full compromise with a sense of morality that is perceived to have come to the fore in a context of global illness. On the other, we find the stories that resort to the abstraction from that very humanity, depersonalising or even dehumanising the narration to treat human conduct as an object of detached scrutiny. The sense of escape at the heart of these narrative decisions, however, does not convey a frivolous disregard for actuality or desire to remove it from diegesis, but often, as shall be analysed in what follows, a desire to better understand it. Art's purpose is, as per *The Decameron Project's* own introduction, "the reveal of the ever-present real that's hidden, paradoxically, by information," for "reality is easy to miss [... when] looking at it all the time [... and plagued by] too upsetting [stories] to think about it directly" (Galchen 2020, xvi). If, as has been argued, the collection construes the pandemic as a context of time suspension, where past and future become blurry and potentially inscrutable (Mussgnug 2021), then its hyper-saturated, traumatic present might become a moment where the very shifts that traverse contemporary society are amplified and accelerated.

What the two approaches to escape that I have outlined seem to reveal is that *The Decameron Project* is concerned with offering not only alternative orders and escape routes for its characters, but also a faithful exploration of topics that represent the shifting currents of the present and inscribe the experience of the pandemic in its sociocultural context. The collection, thus, aims at presenting readers with the conjunction of medical and fictional narratives, of pain and hope; with the celebration of the knowledge that "for every story about tragedy or the mind-numbing experience of identical days/weeks/months, there has been a story of unexpected opportunity or a moment of deep meaning" and yet, too, with the acknowledgement that "some narratives have challenged others" producing "radically different stories about shared experiences" (Kumagai and Baruch 2021, 1095). The classification of escapist themes that ensues, reflecting on two opposite tendencies, is not but an interpretative contribution to the realisation, often heightened by the context of the pandemic, that challenging times may produce competing narratives on how to look at a fractured world and, in the face of such ontological and epistemological fracture, suffuse it with new meaning.

Pandemic Mythologies: Escaping through Belief and the Ethical Mystification of the Global Response to COVID-19

At the close of Tommy Orange's "The Team" the narrative voice reflects on the collaborative effort made by the human species during the pandemic: "It was the Teamwork being done by the whole new world, all those not directly affected, to watch and wait, to stay put, it would be a marathon, all this isolation, but it was the only way the Team could make it, humans, the whole damn race" (2020, 58). In Kamila Shamsie's "The Walk" a group of neighbours come together after lockdown in a moment of profound communal connection: "Everyone waved, everyone was delighted to see one another and made a great show of keeping a distance, even when they weren't. [...] It was the closest thing to a street party this neighborhood had ever known. [...] In that moment, the world felt like a better place than it had ever been – generous, safe" (27). Orange's and Shamsie's decision to focus on human beings' ability to come together in the face of hardship is shared by many of the contributors and constitutes a conscious turn toward a specific COVID-19 mythology, an answer to the question Ingrid Gessner formulated in her discussion on the collection: "How are we making sense of the new pandemic reality? How will we remember it?" (2022, 11). This answer, expressed here in literary form, reveals an almost romantic compromise with humanity and its ability to do good for the sake of others. And indeed, this response can be easily found beyond Orange's story or the collection, to the point of being at the heart of much media coverage of the pandemic, with the idea of humanity "coming together" fuelling the collective imagination of the events in much cultural, political and public discourse. In one of Zadie Smith's essays in *Intimations*, one of her characters reflects on how the pandemic may just strengthen the bonds that keep her neighbourhood together: "Thing is, we're a community, and we got each other's back. You'll be there for me, and I'll be there for you, and we'll all be there for each other, the whole building" (2020, 35). Many accounts of what living through the spread of the coronavirus felt like, both fictional and nonfictional, are construed on an identical sense of unbridled hope in humanity's propension to form communities and act on a sense of moral responsibility, and the collection at hand is not oblivious to this tendency. Such a belief in human empathy and its redeeming powers, as I shall contend in what follows, may be interpreted to be a form of escapism in itself; a doxastic compromise with the universality of quarantine and the idea of humanity coming together that diverts attention away from the suffering and psychological commotion that resulted from the spread of COVID-19.

Several stories in *The Decameron Project* help build this pattern of belief. As though global seclusion had altered our fundamental dispositions and reminded us of some ethical principle long lost, the characters in Rachel Kushner's "The Girl with the Big Red Suitcase" go from "[treating their] castlemates as bad objects of amusement [...] to cozen [their] own distress" to having them become "like relatives, people you didn't choose but must love" (2020, 102). In Victor Lavalle's "Recognition" much as one of the characters objects to these ideas and complains that "[t]he screens give the illusions that we're all still connected [...] but it's not true" (8), the supernatural moment at the heart of the story still focuses on a moment of unexplainable connection during lockdown, "like seeing a member of my family" and metaphorically draws on the idea that we all stood before the virus under the

same conditions and harbour within us the ability to see the human in others (2020, 9). This compromise with the idea of community is also informed by the nature of trauma itself. “Trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common cultural backgrounds can”, writes Kai Erikson. “There is a spiritual kinship there, a sense of recognition, even when feelings of affection are deadened and the ability to care numbed” (1991, 459). The experience of coming together, however, is not the only possible response to sharing trauma at the global scale, nor is it a guarantee that this sense of community, should it be perceived and attested to in any regard, will become a prevalent force in the narrative imagination of the subjects’ traumatic and post-traumatic realities. In narrative specifically, the compromise with the idea of community in the face of hardship is not entirely unrelated to the idea of escapism. Historical treatises on the matter of psychological escape have often paid mind to religion and belief as the primary means by which human beings fulfil their escapist dispositions (Inge 1940, 387–8). Faith in humanity as a global community, capable of unprecedented forms of organisation and collective policing, becomes in this context a form of belief analogous to those of religious creed, if only grounded on late postmodernism and the digital, networked setting that framed the pandemic. And indeed, it has even been argued to have replaced the divine itself: “Our Western society largely rejects the idea of God. The virus crept into the center of a deserted sanctuary” (Vanautgaerden 2020, 345).

The collective experience of trauma, further, can become “so widely shared [...] that it supplies the prevailing mood and temper of the group – dominates its imagery, governs the way members relate to one another” (Erikson 1991, 461). If the apperception of the hypothetical community that resulted from the shared experience of COVID is uniform, then this uniformity can itself be interpreted as a form of escape through delusion, removing personal and social difference in favour of a homogenising – and, in its homogeneity, also comforting, intelligible – outlook on humanity. We believe “in unison” not because our experience is uniform, but rather because this univocality allows “for some ray of hope to lighten the all-pervasive gloom” (Jaidka 2011, 11). The collection, however, does not approach belief blindly. Much as it embraces a certain naïveté at times, committing to the idea that the pandemic has somehow fostered empathy at the global level, it remains conscious of the possibility that the post-pandemic future will remain as consumed by capitalist and ostracising logics as the world prior to the pandemic was perceived to be. Thus, when the future enters the narration or becomes the object of speculation, as is the case in Etgar Keret’s “Outside”, it often causes the characters’ belief in humanity to crumble. In his story the pandemic is over, but people have lost all interest in leaving their enclosed realities and going back to the order that the characters in other stories yearn for so desperately, and so the police and armed forces intervene and begin ordering people out (2020, 85). Once this happens, people are shown quickly finding their way back into their dehumanising, late capitalist habits, losing sight of the lessons that the pandemic had allegedly taught the species to rejoin the individualistic forces of the everyday. We may read:

Near the ATM sits a man wearing dirty clothes, and there’s a tin cup next to him. You do remember what you’re supposed to do in this situation. You quickly walk past him, and when he tells you in a cracked voice that he hasn’t eaten anything

in two days, you look in the opposite direction, avoiding eye contact like a pro. There’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s like riding a bike: The body remembers everything, and the heart that softened while you were alone will harden back up in no time. (2020, 87)

The enhanced connection with our humanity and sense of ethics that the pandemic was argued to have brought forth returns to its neoliberal ways soon after the restoration of global order. The human events taking place during the spread of the virus become some manner of simulation; the escape fantasies that our belief in each other served, on their part, futile and inconsequential. In this regard, Keret’s tale may be contended to function as an allegory of Suzane Keen’s views on narrative empathy: when in need, we turn to stories; when no longer in need of them, what we perceived to be their ethical imperatives may dissolve into the tapestry of globalised existence, and it is so that many of narrative’s teachings and the empathetic dispositions it may encourage fail to significantly transform our approach to the other. “A novel-reader may enjoy empathy freely without paying society back in altruism”, writes Keen in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007, 168). If the devotion to the idea of a global community of quarantined, empathetic beings is a narrative construction that exists beyond the collection, as I have argued, used by pandemic subjects to escape an otherwise too-crude reality, then this piece of fiction could itself be made to face Keen’s criticism.

Another instance of this occurs at the heart of Karen Russell’s tale, at whose close the narrative voice wonders if the bonds forged between characters at this moment of crisis would ever last:

The world they’d left was the one they returned to: trembling, rainwet, lush, trashed, alive.

On the other side of the bridge, would they all stay in touch? Send one another holiday cards? Form a text group? Not likely. Already, Valerie could sense them segregating again. Hourly and salary. Southeast and Northwest. People with jobs and homes and destinations, and people like Ben. [...] And yet they’d shared a nightmare. A miraculous escape. (2020, 157)

These texts showcase a generalised concern with the fact that the belief in humanity that sprang from the experience of the pandemic is as passionate and committed as it is fleeting. Even though “narrative imagination is an essential preparation for moral interaction” (Nussbaum 1997, 90), the comfort of escapist fiction may prove inconsequential, freezing subjects in a perennial state of ethical training. *The Decameron Project*’s belief in community and connection readily betrays its own idealisation, its own futility, the possibility that it may function as no more than a need of the mind in the face of (super)structural commotion – and thus, too, as a reminder of how un-transformative the stories we believe in can become once our commitment to their teachings has waned. In Yiyun Li’s “Under the Magnolia”, the main character comes across a man in search of someone named Jeannie and wonders: “Was he meeting Jeannie for a date? They would have to take their masks off, she thought, to make a good impression. And how could they trust each other if they took off their masks?” (2020, 80). The paradoxical juxtaposition of the ideas of connection and community that traverse the collection, on the one hand, and the moments of profound distrust, suspicion, or even fear of

other people's infectious potential, on the other, promptly reveals community's workings *qua dogma*. Belief is handed in irrationally, suspended entirely or denied out of fear. There is no absolute evidence that the pandemic has, will, or might make people "better" and yet when characters commit to the belief that such a thing be true, they are oftentimes met with great challenges, be those posed within their own stories or, intertextually, by the other tales in *The Decameron Project*. One of the most explicit of these turns away from blind belief in humanity might take place at the close of Mia Couto's "An Obliging Robber," where she writes: "the illness [...] is called indifference. They would need a hospital the size of the whole world to treat this epidemic" (2020, 200).

It is unclear, however, whether this fleeting compromise with humanity as a metanarrative is founded on a desire "to exceed interpellation through [pandemic narratives'] capacity to persuade" or if it aims, instead, at promoting "creative appropriations and resistances" (Davis and Lohm 2020, 32). In other words, if the collection's ambivalent turn to belief in people's ability to do good is the result of (a) a desire to genuinely re-present the experience of the pandemic, defined by communal resistance in the face of the tides of pathological self-centredness and excessive positivity that have been associated with the new century (Han 2015); or (b) a literary product explicitly designed to advance a particular narrative on the pandemic, influencing readers into assimilating its blind belief to become, quite plainly, "better people". This is a question that shall remain unanswered. Perhaps there is no conscious choosing, no authorialist claim to be made on the texts' intentions, but rather a mere embrace of the collection's manifold sense of possibility: its faith in stories' ability to reflect, to persuade, to resist and to reconstruct, however (un)faithfully, the pain that underlies its crisis-narratives. For, "like viruses, narratives have a way of spreading and mutating, potentially infecting its audience with all sorts of confused notions and skewed information" (Pedersen, 411). And *The Decameron Project*, methodically permeated by a sense of compromise with the ideas of humanity, community and connection, is certainly not oblivious to its contagious potential.

Bird-Viewing Humanity: The Dehumanisation of Pandemic Pain through Narrative Focalisation

A second tendency in these short stories showcases a radically different form of escapism than the one outlined in the previous section. Opposite the unbridled belief in humanity that has been shown to traverse the collection, some of its narrative moments focus instead on the coldness of impersonality, deploying unconventional focalisation techniques to devoid their stories of affect either partly or completely. Margaret Atwood's "Impatient Griselda" provides what might be the clearest example of this tendency to bird-view the entire species from a position of depersonalisation, detachment and abstraction. Atwood's story recounts the moment when a group of extraterrestrial beings try to tell a story – a modified take on Boccaccio's tenth tale from *The Decameron*: "Patient Griselda" – to a group of humans they have abducted. Not only does Atwood resort to science fiction to do this, drawing on the conventions of a genre that has historically been considered typically escapist, but she uses, too, the point of view of a radical other to approach the distinctiveness of the human condition, revealed in all its strangeness in a moment of utmost crisis. Her use of the image of the alien is not arbitrary and ties in with the understanding of the pandemic as a time when the very idea of humanness, deeply rooted in globalised social

structure, was perceived to be at its most precarious. Her feminist rewriting of the original has been interpreted to "[highlight] the misogynist tone of Boccaccio's tale and problematize [...] some issues that have intensified in the pandemic era, such as domestic violence", as well as question "human binarism" (Angeletti 2023, 30-31). Her postmodernist, intertextual reference to Boccaccio's story, however, does not only serve the purpose of problematising gender as a structure from an alien point of view but also, I contend, that of granting readers an approach to their own pandemic experience that is sanitised, unaffected and dehumanised by virtue of Atwood's choice of focaliser. At the end of the tale, this extraterrestrial figure states that it hopes that the plague will be over soon "to get back to [...] its normal life" (2020, 76), as though trivialising, or even mocking, the readers' own yearning for normality. Further, the choice of the extraterrestrial ironizes the dichotomy between the familiar and the alien, problematising the fact that the virus is, by definition, an external agent, and yet also an enemy that "is not at all alien", for it "can only exist and reproduce inside our bodies" (Vanautgaerden 2020, 347). Turning to impersonal focalisation in this context, then, may become a way to relativise and exorcise the pain of such an intrusion by turning the primary foreign element of the story into its only focaliser, tainting the events with a generalised sense of strangeness.

If interpreted as a symbol for strangeness and abnormality, the extraterrestrial may be argued to stand for the pandemic context itself. This reading is reinforced in several ways in the story: first, since the unfamiliarity of the alien is absolute, it may represent the specific eeriness of an unknown threat which, much like COVID, affects humanity directly both despite and because of their ignorance; secondly, because it is holding humanity hostage and spoon-feeding them stories to help them cope with their distress, the same way many first-world citizens turned to art in search of comfort during lockdown; and thirdly, because it is implied to be reshaping the way we look at culture altogether, a shift that has been typified as "typically pandemic" in Enrico Terrone's "The Death of Art by Covid-19" (2020) and one that is made manifest in the story through the turning of Boccaccio's "Patient Griselda" into a new embedded narrative where Griselda is not dehumanised into fulfilling the role of the inordinately passive, accommodating wife. At the end of the tale, the alien host asks its guests if they are satisfied with the ending, but the answer, albeit implicitly negative, is omitted from the printed page. What remains is merely a self-content gesture in the form of the alien's own affirmation that "I have told this [story] well, I believe – well enough to hold your attention" (2020, 76).

In their Lacanian reading of Atwood's tale, Stephanie Downes and Juliane Römhild maintain that even though "we only witness [the story's central] encounter with an alien 'Other' from the perspective of the alien, [...] it is clear that the encounter is an anxious one for the humans involved" (2022, 53). "Impatient Griselda", they argue, "destabilises the adjective 'normal' itself" as it condemns characters to the profound unwisdom – as thus defined in diegesis – which results from their "inability to know or anticipate the future" (2020, 54). Normality has been described as "a frame which individuals use to make sense of their circumstances" (Misztal 2016, 105), with the "normals" being "those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue" (Goffman 1963, 5). If normality as a frame and normality as a quality had both been momentarily suspended and rethought by virtue of the pandemic's disruption of

order and expectation, then the different shapes that the escape fantasy takes in these stories may be diagnostic not only of a want to reconfigure the world via fictional means, but of a need to conceive of a fictional structure where a sense of “normality” is at work at all. The tales’ compromise with strangeness, then, may become a gesture toward the establishment of a “new (ab)normal” where the unexpected, the unknown and the uncanny govern over the epistemological framework that is “the norm”.

This commitment to the idea of abnormality and narrative unpredictability, however, is not exclusive to Atwood’s story. Indeed, three of the collection’s narratives resort to an overtly dehumanising (or, in Atwood’s case, posthuman) tone in their approach to pandemic life. Thus, to the aforementioned “Impatient Griselda” one may add Liz Moore’s “Clinical Notes” and Charles Yu’s “Systems”. All three of these stories use focalisers that deprive their texts of the human perspective. This shift in point of view, be it toward the coldness of impersonality or toward an imagined, extraterrestrial other, hints at a desire to condense and relativise human experience into intelligibility or predictability – and potentially, too, universality.

Absolute or relative omniscience is sometimes found elsewhere in the collection, often as a tool that allows the authors to provide some form of construed, universal insight on the behaviour of humanity during quarantine. We may read, for instance:

There was only one topic of conversation, but many different subsets of it. They meandered between the quotidian and the apocalyptic, walking along the straight, eerily silent expanse of a main avenue, until the scent of the sea rendered them silent. [...] The food vendors, the dune buggies, the kite-sellers, the couples sitting together on the sea wall, the carloads of families seeking the one place where Karachi’s urban snarl turned into a smile: all missing. (2020, 26)

This excerpt from Kamila Shamsie’s “The Walk” paints a picture of pandemic life as something knowable and reducible to behavioural patterns, or else describable through the elements that were once commonplace and are now missing. The pandemic’s ontological configuration, further, becomes one centred around absence: the elements that constituted “normality” gone, all that remains is a lack so recursive and unchanging that it may be typified as “the normal abnormal”.

Embracing the “normal abnormal”, thus, often leads authors to reposition abnormality in diegesis, as does Atwood, or to dehumanise “conventional narration” into reflecting the strangeness of the pandemic. Liz Moore’s “Clinical Notes” follows the latter precept. It is narrated in cold omniscience: the narrative voice presents human struggle amidst the COVID-19 pandemic as though it were a report, inventorying observations and human decisions from an analytical and hyperrational stance. We may read: “Unknowns: Infectiousness of virus. Disease course. Time from exposure to symptom manifestation. Typical expression of disease in adults and children. Short-term and long-term effects on both. Typical trajectory. Lethality” (2020, 45). What is missing from Moore’s narration is not only certainty, but also any form of direct acquiescence that her characters are experiencing emotion. The sickly three-year-old’s mother, who “will take the baby to the hospital [...] [...] packs a bag” (48), writes Moore, purposefully omitting any remark on the woman’s expected (and, one may argue, “normal”) distress. The characters’ empathetic dispositions – which supported the belief in humanity that functioned as the backbone

to some of the collection’s stories, as I have argued in the previous section – is entirely removed from diegesis by Moore’s narrative focalisation. This choice connotes the experience of the pandemic as one of depersonalisation; one where, despite widespread belief in our communal efforts to stop the virus, many could not truly connect with narratives destined to bridge the distance between quarantined subjects. This is further reinforced by the fact that the story closes on a moment of uncertainty, with the mother watching the baby, trying to determine if the invisible presence of the virus is threatening her son from within (2020, 50). Given how scientific reports have begun to appear attesting to a significant increase in depersonalisation during the pandemic (Ciaunica et al 2022), stories such as the one at hand may be interpreted to have conveyed these forms of psychological distress through the language of the crisis-narrative, using narratological techniques like impersonal focalisation to reflect this psychological response in the face of collective trauma.

A similar movement away from a human point of view is featured in Charles Yu’s “Systems”, where the reality of the experience of the corona-crisis is abstracted into a generalising “them” that is meant to encompass the globalised experience of the pandemic. Yu’s tale is recounted as a series of third-person sentences and Internet searches: “They need each other” opens Yu’s story (2020, 173), already hinting at the ethical imperatives that many of these stories embrace as an inalienable part of pandemic mythology. These reflections, thus, are not entirely disconnected from the committed belief in community that I have ascribed to the collection at large. Some of the universal statements that feature later in the narrative, however, showcase a more abstracted and detached tone, closer to Atwood’s: “They have patterns [...]. They have weaknesses [...]. They have systems [...]. They go in the air boxes and in those boxes are smaller boxes and smaller boxes and many of them crawl inside a box and sit there and share the air” (Yu 2020, 174). At the end of the story, an eerie “us” enters the narration to conclude that humans “are like us. They have codes. Codes of symbolic sequences. They encode information and spread it” (2020, 181); and, soon after, in a return to the wholehearted belief in humanity and the ethical possibilities it affords, Yu writes: “Community is how it spreads. Community is how it is solved” (2020, 181).

Here, the frailty of the collection’s commitment to the idea of community becomes apparent. Yu’s story implies that it is only through our tightly woven networks that COVID managed to spread; and yet, too, that it is only by tightening them up even further that we will manage to overcome the pandemic in any way that truly matters. This message, however, comes from a position of utter alienation. The narrative voice is presented as one that speaks from outside the reality of the human experience. The conclusion that it arrives at, on its part, is connoted as a rational one, entirely deprived of the emotional distress that resulted from living through the COVID crisis. The story’s closing gesture toward community, placed after its depersonalising inventory of detached facts about the corona-crisis, is tonally aspirational, like an as-of-yet-unfulfilled wish; an exercise in making up for the absence of meaning, carried out by embracing the belief that “coming together” will return order to the chaos that the virus had introduced. Escapism through focalisations such as these is not necessarily redemptive, nor need it be disconnected from the thematic patterns that have been laid out in the previous section. Indeed, Yu’s story closes by merging the two features, having its third-person, omniscient, inhuman narrative voice prophetically (and somewhat optimistically) state that “they will keep

going. [...] The systems will be the systems. But some of them may change the systems” (2020, 181–2). The comforts of escapism through narrative abstraction, it follows, need not equal a frivolous attempt to flee the complexity of pandemic living. And, since escape and disregard need not be conjoined, stories such as Yu’s, Moore’s or Atwood’s may remain as concerned with the desire to better the pandemic subject as do those where the idealisation of global trauma becomes fantastic, unswerving or overtly prophetic.

Conclusions

Through my analysis of some of its stories, I have proposed that *The Decameron Project* features two complementary escapist tendencies. The first is characterised by a thematic commitment to the belief in humanity’s ability to come together in the face of hardship. In the context of the collection, this functions as a pandemic metanarrative, “a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience” (Stephens and McCallum 1998, 6), but one that, in true postmodernist fashion, cannot traverse the collection unquestioned. Other stories, conversely, resort to narrative dehumanisation and unconventional focalisation to allow readers a sense of escape, removing the human element from the stories to reflect on, and in so doing anaesthetise, the strangeness of the pandemic experience. This dichotomy need not imply that the two modes are entirely incompatible; instead, as I have shown, such stories as Charles Yu’s “Systems” play with these two dispositions simultaneously, occupying an exemplary position in the configuration of the collection’s creative vision.

Through their complex relationship with belief, some of the tales in *The Decameron Project* contribute to the construction of a specific COVID-19 mythology, founded on the idea that the pandemic had evinced a form of universalising, shared vulnerability with the ability to – at least partly – erase social difference. Belief in these universalisations, as has been shown, may constitute yet another form of escapism: it allows readers a sense of escape from the heartlessness and crudity of lived reality, providing them with a narrative that is purposefully oblivious of the inequality that still traversed social life during that period and that oftentimes serves its escapist purpose precisely because of that wilful obliviousness. Such a compromise with a fictional sense of structure, together with the belief in the ubiquitousness of “the pandemic experience”, also connects with the characters in the collection as they express themselves in diegesis, where they recurrently display a need to retrieve some form of normality from the inner and outer chaos of their experience.

The disruption of normality at the heart of these turns in pandemic fiction was indeed contextually brought about, but was also nourished by the shifts pertaining to affect, trauma, mental health, technological ostracization and structural inequality that had already been gaining momentum for decades before the COVID outburst. By twisting the rules of what it meant to comply with superstructural, globalised living, the pandemic instituted what I have labelled “a state of normal abnormality”: an order where strangeness rapidly became the new expected living standard, “the new (ab)normal”. This “new (ab)normal” was both deeply committed to humanity, on the one hand, and anaesthetised from overexposure to human suffering, on the other. The concept itself and the conflation of opposites it proposed, be it idealised through belief in our ability to help each other in the face of species-wide struggle, or through the sanitation

of the pain via impersonal or depersonalised focalisation, is the overarching theme of *The Decameron Project*. The collection’s commitment to reflecting its many incongruences, as the inside of the hardcover edition’s dust jacket suggests, may convey nothing but a certain belief in literature’s potential to reconcile the seemingly unbridgeable, especially at times when life appears unprecedentedly hostile: “When reality is surreal, only fiction can make sense of it” (*The New York Times Magazine* 2020).

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- Título:
Mitologías pandémicas en la ficción breve de la COVID: Una aproximación al escapismo en *The Decameron Project*
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