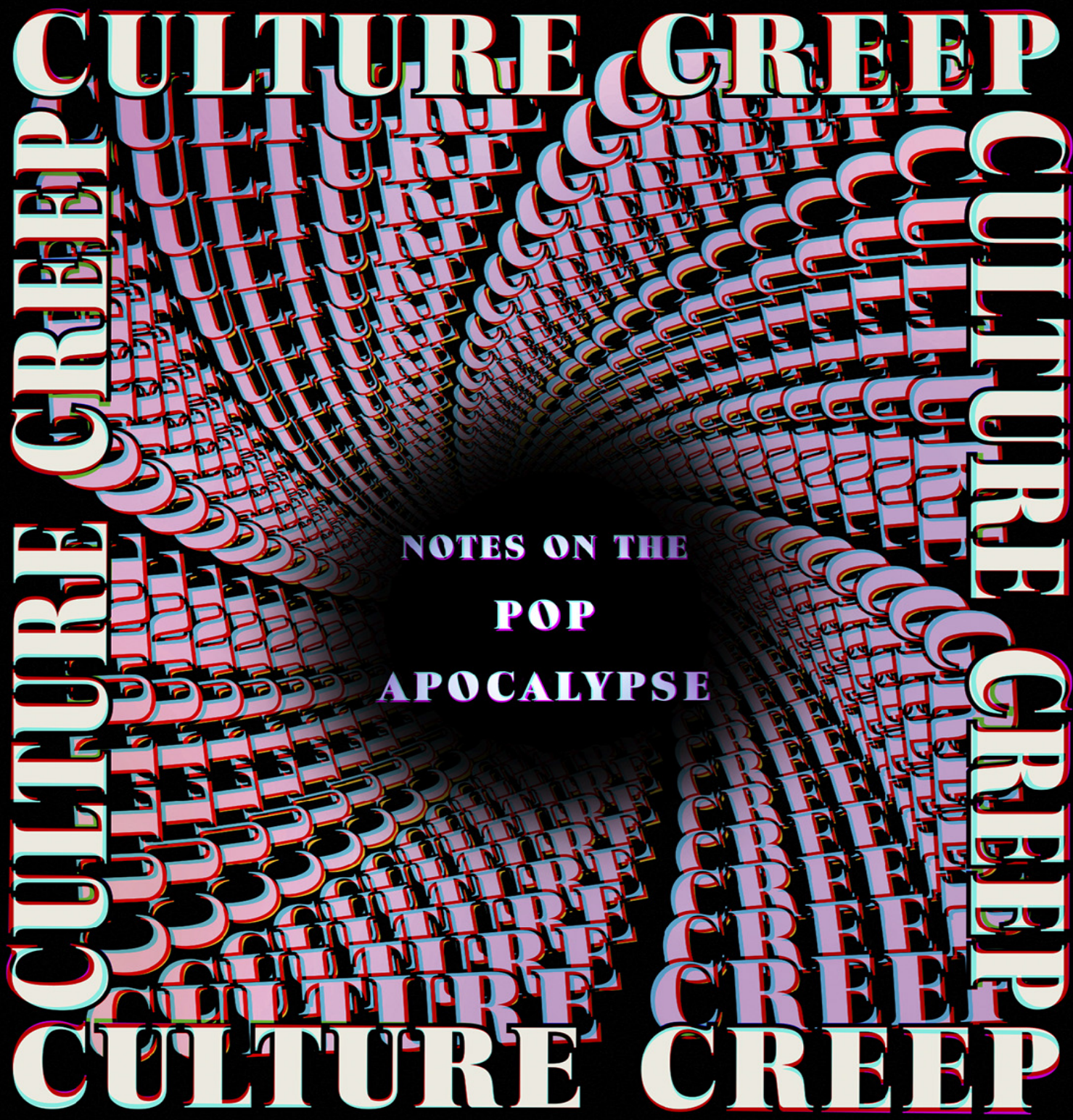
"This book reframed my entire adolescence. I highly recommend you read it." —LING MA



NOTES ON THE POP APOCALYPSE

ALICE BOLIN

AUTHOR OF *DEAD GIRLS*

CULTURE CREEP

NOTES ON THE POP APOCALYPSE

ALICE BOLIN

MARINER BOOKS

New York Boston

Contents

Introduction

True crime watchers will have noticed a thematic creep in the genre's subject matter in recent years. Dead girls are out. Cults are in. Trust me, I've seen all the documentaries. I can tell you about Heaven's Gate, Scientology, NXIVM, Love Has Won, Children of God, Peoples Temple (of Jonestown infamy), the Branch Davidians, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. You have to pay me good money to watch a serial killer show these days, but I can't get enough of cults.

When I was a kid, cults seemed like nothing more than groups of wacked-out weirdos providing novel, horrifying news stories that took over headlines once or twice every decade. I never thought that the Christian church slowly annexing my Idaho hometown might not be so different. With this new glut of programming, it's clear that cults are subtler and more pervasive than I ever imagined. During all the true crime documentaries I watched to procrastinate while writing this book, the stories about cults started to speak to me as an essential part of American life going back to the Puritans, those

Christian radicals who colonized Massachusetts in the seventeenth century. They sublimated their fears of the unfamiliar land's wildlife, weather, and indigenous inhabitants to stories about Satan, demons, and witches, seeing everything through a lens of spiritual warfare that Fundamentalist Christians of today have hardly built on in four hundred years.

Conservative Christian sects are the sources of some of the most powerful strains of cult thinking in the U.S. today, especially since the invention of social media and American politics' descent into chaos, but it would be a mistake to think this phenomenon exists only on the political and religious fringe. Psychologists generalize cults as regimes of thought control, often switching out the loaded term "cult" for "high-control group" or "high-demand religion." These are authoritarian organizations that subordinate everything in members' lives to a single leader or idea. They use jargon, shibboleths, and dog whistles to redefine the boundaries of reality and re-create the world in the group's image. They seek to replace members' identities with ones that exclusively reflect membership in the group. Experts make distinctions between the destructive cults we are most familiar with and ones that are more loosely affiliated or benign, but they do not sidestep the fact that workplaces, mainstream religions, corporate brands, and subcultures can behave like cults. Instead, they encourage us to examine how our lives are shaped by groupthink and indoctrination.

I see some cultiness in the pop culture fandoms I have taken part in even casually, which are communities obsessed with layers of insider knowledge, rules of comportment, demands for loyalty that often cause feuds and schisms, and a sense that whatever drama is gripping the subculture is the most important issue to the world at large. When you log on to a fan discussion board, whether for *Star Trek*, *Animal Crossing*, or Britney

Spears, your fan self is cordoned off from your normal self, so that even if you think about the community all the time, you might be embarrassed to talk about it in your everyday life—outsiders just don't get it. The internet has provided us with tools for this compartmentalization, especially in its anonymity, so that you might start to see the actions of your fan self as being performed by some separate entity, a hive mind you submit to within the bounds of the community. This can allow you to do things while acting as your fan self that you would never do otherwise, like the abusive brigades and pile-ons fandoms sometimes mount on perceived enemies.

There are other reasons the internet has formed such a fertile field for spreading cult thinking, beyond providing a potential charismatic leader with a virtually unlimited supply of marks. The fracture into siloed communities is a reaction to the overwhelming hugeness of the internet itself. This is an appeal of all cults, that they shrink down reality to a manageable size, especially when feats of infrastructure and information have made our world more accessible, populated, complicated, and bewildering than ever before. Cults do this by limiting members' choices, something modern humans supposedly enamored of their personal freedom strangely crave. The internet is the ultimate venue for the tyranny of choice: there are nearly unlimited videos to watch and pictures to look at, topics to learn about, people to talk to, products to buy. It has fulfilled the dream of the ideal consumer who has total agency to consume as they please, an unencumbered individual perfectly expressing their monumental human will. As attractive as this dream is, we should know by now that it is not what we want. All the decisions are exhausting. Some part of us longs to cede control and have someone else tell us what to do.

I am realizing now that this is a classic corporate bait and switch, where the powers that be provide a distressing array of choices and then generously decide for you. If we look closer, we might notice that business interests, despite their avowed belief in consumer freedom, have been engaged in aggressive methods of thought control since the 1960s. In the postwar era, advertising executives teamed up with social psychologists to devise ways to manipulate basic human drives for acceptance, purpose, sex, and status to precisely implant desires for consumer goods in the brains of the public. This horrifying application of social science research formed the origin of the modern field of marketing—and the marketers have only gotten more brazen since. With the smartphone and the social internet came the golden age of "persuasive design," which encompasses features that make applications as addictive as possible, like the infamous "infinite scroll" that is now a part of nearly every social media experience, where a user never gets to the end of a page or a logical stopping point but is instead encouraged to browse forever.

This convergence of religious, technological, and business thought is not some coincidence. We can think of "cult" as a business model that corporations have adopted from spiritual leaders and metaphysical scammers—Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard is supposed to have said the only way to make a million dollars is to start your own religion. Cult capitalism approached its zenith with the transition to the branding economy in the early 1990s, when the most successful companies on earth transformed from organizations that made and sold products to symbols that marketed products. Naomi Klein wrote in 1999 in *No Logo*, still the definitive dissection of the branding economy, about the spiritual quintessence that corporations attempt to project with their brands, an über-personality larger than any product or service. One can see the branding

revolution expressing a pseudo-religious devotion to the tenets of capitalism, a belief that technological revolution will not cause the system to break down, as haters like Karl Marx predicted, but instead make the exchange of capital more lofty and sacred, ascending from speculating on physical products to ineffable ideals. There were material as well as philosophical reasons for the abstract turn in the economics of the 1990s, namely the globalization of trade and the newfound supremacy of finance, which allowed companies to take advantage of cheap labor in the global south to sell products they were no longer responsible for creating. And high finance's conquest of the world was facilitated by a breakthrough in communication technology that would allow virtually every computer on earth to be connected in a "world wide web."

Social media is now so completely soaked in the principles of the branding economy that we are encouraged to see even our small social media pages as constructing a "personal brand." The Italian feminist Silvia Federici writes about women who "remake" their bodies through plastic surgery and other cosmetic enhancements as engaging in a process of "self-valorization," a means to celebrate themselves and bolster their egos "in a world where at every turn we face competition and constantly undergo an experience of devaluation." Our social media narcissism fulfills a similar need, asserting our value and propping us up amid the assault that late capitalist work and the disintegration of the social safety net have mounted on our humanity. Decisions about aesthetics, voice, and audience on social media come so naturally to us that we instinctively filter our personalities into something recognizable, memorable, and appealing for our followers. Crafting a personal brand is like founding a mini cult of personality, as we become authoritarian leaders commanding a domain where our taste and sensibility

reign supreme, attracting followers who listen to us, praise us, and, ideally, give us money.

The intricate structure of the social web takes the form of concentric ripples of influence, with each of us attracting our own followers but also joining the followings of celebrities, subcultures, and franchises, which are in turn subordinate to the platforms that sell them to us. The huge ideological cults swallowing the rest are the values of late capitalism—competition, branding, deregulation, rent seeking—and our faith in the miraculous power of computers themselves. I typed "capitalism is a death cult" into Etsy and was served up pages and pages of coffee mugs, stickers, and t-shirts with the phrase on it. Amazon wouldn't let me search the phrase at all. Both results feel indicative of something: how our resistance is either proscribed or assimilated in cult capitalism, always dead-ending in a corner of the maze, where even our rage against the machine becomes just another way to feed the machine.

It also shows how the corporate grip is tightening around our actions online, with the blandness and propriety demanded by advertisers enforcing a system of self-censorship more prudish than the authoritarian film and TV codes of the middle of the last century—TikTok users, fearing their videos will be repressed at the first indication of controversy, commonly speak in an arcane and childish kind of code, referring to sex as "seggs" and murder as "unaliving." Capitalism appears to be undergoing an escalation common to the cult life cycle, where leaders must continually up the stakes to maintain control. We should take caution from the Puritans, who were so convinced of the righteousness of their spiritual project that they eventually executed nineteen people for witchcraft. Cults comfort their followers with delusions of their own importance, but they also control them through paranoia and

terror, which is why their leaders almost always start to talk about the end of the world.

When I was a kid in the ’90s, there was a craze for stories of the Christian apocalypse, spurred on by the popular Evangelical book series *Left Behind*, which described the struggle of nonbelievers left on earth during Armageddon. Americans have a dissonant relationship with changes to the old order. The founding of this country is treated like a happy and even sacred break with the past, ringing in the modern era of governance and the flowering of democracy and free enterprise. But Americans are also conservative and terrified of the future, dogged by an unspoken feeling that our ride on the hegemonic gravy train cannot last forever. It is easy to see why doomsday religion reached a fever pitch in the first years of this century, when our Evangelical president launched a new holy war against Muslims in the Middle East, euphemistically casting his mission as spreading a mystical substance known as “freedom.” You know another word for “apocalypse”? “Millennium.”

Apocalyptic thinking has continued to dominate the first two chaotic decades of this century even in the secular world, where we are haunted by visions of a catastrophe where nuclear weapons or climate change destroy all life on Earth. A popular school of wishful thinking encourages us to envision an apocalypse resulting from global consumer culture and technological hubris averted by the invention of some miraculous tech breakthrough, re-creating on a catastrophic scale the familiar scenario where marketing creates a problem for its product to solve. And computers have provided us with new ways of talking about the end of the world, too, inviting us to

choose either the doomsday of the singularity, when superintelligent robots seize power, or the rapture of human consciousness being uploaded to the data cloud.

In these twin visions, technocapitalism serves as the heir to the old-time religion of Puritans. The grandiosity of their idealism reveals a ruling class who has gotten too comfortable with catastrophe. Disaster capitalism has been one of the most profitable modes of business in the new millennium, with corporations following the apocryphal Churchill dictum to "never let a crisis go to waste." They do this by providing services consumers are forced to use to ameliorate the conditions of disaster, like the billions Amazon and the videoconferencing software Zoom made during the COVID quarantines. Corporations also use crises to extend their control, having cover for their corruption—like with price gouging under the guise of inflation—and an opportunity to create a new world order where they are even more firmly insinuated into our lives. Considering how enthusiastically corporate interests have benefited from the worst crises of our time, I have no doubt they will continue to profit from ushering in the apocalypse if we allow them to. Doomsday cults may imagine a Judgment Day of disaster, plague, monsters, and rivers of blood, but this does not mean that they want to prevent it. In fact, their organizing belief is an eager anticipation of the day when the Messiah comes to destroy this wicked world.

In 2021, the most perennially online doomsday cult, QAnon, staged an alarming rupture of the boundary between the internet and real life. QAnon is a loosely organized fascist internet conspiracy group who believe that President Donald Trump was sent to rid the American government and then the world of the cabal of corrupt child molesters who control global wealth and power. QAnon followers believe in a coming day of reckoning, the

Storm, when Trump would be reinstated as president and arrest the corrupt actors in the deep state, the Democratic Party, and liberal Hollywood. These beliefs led directly to the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, when angry Trump supporters tried to overthrow the results of the presidential election. You see, it can be hard to distinguish a passive belief in a coming sea change from an instruction that you form the wave. This is the dual power of the apocalypse when charismatic leaders invoke it: it paralyzes most people in their tracks, but it motivates others to extreme, irrational action, usually conforming to Yeats's construction that "the best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." Maybe that's what I'm worried about, that all the ink I've spilled here is just hemming and hawing. I've been dragging my feet while those inoculated with cultish certainty and purpose are leaping unafraid into the future.

This is the first of this book's three central subjects: cults, corporate thought control, and the end of the world as we know it, although I see it less as the apocalypse and more as the old world dying while the new one struggles to be born. The basic appeal of cults and prophets is that they provide us with answers about what will happen next. All humans fear the future as a container for our own deaths, a vision so distressing that many of us would rather imagine the end of the world than one that will go on without us. I, too, have been grasping for certainty about the future the entire time I have been writing this book, between the years of 2019 and 2024. It has been a maddening challenge to write a book of cultural criticism during this volatile time, and I have revised these essays over and over to accommodate the

daily current of news about elections, disease, war, tech, climate disaster, and corporate scandal.

I turned in this draft the day before the 2024 election, and I am reluctantly revising it now, the day after, having learned that Trump was elected to serve another term as president. It was the third consecutive presidential race with Trump as the Republican candidate, and once again swing state polls had been too close to call. Trump's candidacy this time around has been marked both by an increasingly bizarre public presence and an escalation of openly fascist rhetoric, with the former president frequently threatening to deport millions of people on his first day in office. He ran against Vice President Kamala Harris, who was thrust into the race when President Joe Biden dropped out in August, forcing a clash between the notorious sexism and racism of this wing of the Republican party and a woman who is the child of Indian and Jamaican immigrants.

The Harris candidacy reflected a best of times, worst of times situation for American women. Late polls seemed to indicate that she was being buoyed by support from women outpacing that of men by double digits, particularly older, rural, white women. It seemed like there were the rumblings of a renewed feminist movement centered on outrage at the reversal of Roe v. Wade, with women uniting not just around abstract notions of equality but an actual political demand, the right to safe and legal abortion. At the same time, though, this was only possible because the country's right wing became so emboldened that they played their ace in overturning Roe. And Democrats retreated rightward on immigration, trans rights, and fracking this election, in (as it turns out) futile efforts to appeal to those same older, rural, white women. America-first feminism has been an unspoken strain in the Democratic party for years, but it seemed especially stark this year, when

many treated regaining abortion rights for American women as contingent on immediately shutting down discussions about, for instance, the women and children being killed by American bombs overseas. Now that Trump has won, the narrative of the election is the exact opposite of that feminist fairytale: a rejection of feminism and identity politics, a new swell of backlash from resentful men.

The Harris campaign was a fascinating case study in the strange byways feminism has been down in this millennium. We went from a nationwide regression in the early 2000s centered on ogling teenage pinups to massive stars like Beyoncé openly calling themselves feminists ten years later. After that came the first humiliating defeat when Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election and, only a year later, a reckoning about sexual abuse in Hollywood with #MeToo that would become the most consequential American feminist movement so far this millennium. Even with #MeToo, though, the movement suffered from a resistance to stating any political demands beyond "stop rape." Feminism grew increasingly indefinable from the advent of the Second Wave in the mid-1960s, culminating with pop stars reclaiming the word in the 2010s. Theirs was the feminism of glib t-shirt slogans like "Feminism Is the Radical Notion That Women Are People." The word functions as an identity—a brand—a collection of individual feminists rather than a collective movement. At this point it is difficult to distinguish it from a celebration of womanhood, something we may see as harmless until we remember all the ideological baggage that concept is weighted with, such that Christian nationalist troll Matt Walsh made an entire transphobic "documentary" called *What is a Woman?*

I wish that I could say that with the overturn of Roe, pop culture feminism has given way to a movement with real electoral strength and concrete demands. Instead, women are revealed once again as less a united political class than an occasional coalition—indeed, the antifeminists have proven themselves more organized, passionate, and politically effective currently. The idea that privileged women are coming to the rescue is a pipe dream; a feminism that does nothing but prop up privileged women's choices is bankrupt. Where we go from here, and the fate of feminism in this century, is the second subject of this book.

The final subject is more submerged: a hidden narrative of the five hardest years of my life. You know what happened in 2020: COVID, work went online, didn't see my family in a year and a half. In the first few days of 2021, I suffered second and third degree burns on my legs when I slipped while holding a pan of hot water. It was the worst pain I've ever experienced, and I would experience it day after day, in the cold showers they made me take to wash my wounds and the twice-a-day bandage changes. I was in bed for a month and off work for six weeks. "Burns are very traumatic," my doctor told me impassively in the days after my injury. She was right, and I would have daily flashbacks to my burn in the kitchen or the shower that lasted for a year.

At the end of 2022, my mom suffered a stroke during heart surgery and had to be in intensive care for a month, where she got pneumonia and was intubated. She spent the first three months of 2023 in a rehabilitation hospital, regaining use of her left side and learning how to walk again. I was terrified, but it was a strange privilege to watch her brilliant brain

unscrambling itself. In her early days in the hospital, she would speak to us and the staff in the many languages she knows, including Russian, German, Swedish, and French, in addition to imitating Cartman singing “O Holy Night” on *South Park* and ominously quoting long passages from the Bible. Her linguistic skill came in handy when she was on the ventilator, because she would finger spell to us in American sign language, the alphabet to which the rest of my family and I had to frantically cram on YouTube.

Then, in March of 2024, after my mom had made a full recovery, my godfather and favorite uncle was found dead at the age of sixty-five. He was an eccentric lawyer with a gentle, hilarious charm who I had always adored, from when I was five and he would show my brothers and I *The Simpsons* episodes he had taped from the TV. We waited over two months for the results of the autopsy, which revealed that he had died from the effects of alcohol abuse, a problem he had kept all but hidden from us. Maybe his drinking got worse during the pandemic. Maybe it was just his bachelor lifestyle, drinking and smoking too much and going to the doctor too little. In my eulogy, I talked about his generosity, all the gifts he had given me in the three and a half decades I knew him, from a photograph of a solar eclipse when I was seven years old to a Martin guitar when I was thirty-four. People told me at the funeral how proud he was of me and how much he loved me, but it didn’t make me feel better. He loved me, and then he died, and the amount of love for me on this earth diminished dramatically all at once. Otherwise, where did the love go?

When I list this all out, these years seem eventful. In my memories from the COVID era, though, I mostly remember the negative space, the depression that swallowed up time between emergencies. I picture myself in bed, zoning out to YouTube or playing video games or scrolling endlessly on

my phone. In the past five years, I have spent more time staring at a screen than ever before in my life, a life whose chief activity has been staring at screens. One of the most difficult aspects of the plague years has been the reluctance to count our own losses or seek sympathy from others around us, since our friends and neighbors are going through the same hardships as us, if not worse. Streaming entertainment and smartphone distractions became a way to turn away from a pain that would be unseemly to indulge in. We tell ourselves we should be grateful—after all, it could always be worse.

I have sought escape everywhere, and this book was often what I was trying to get away from, but the regimens of self-improvement, the nostalgia fuel, the endless streams of entertainment, and the immersive worlds of video games have thwarted me, becoming the very subjects of its essays. Writing has helped me to get some of this out of my system, as I try to understand what happened to me in this strange string of years. I harbor hope that finishing this book will mark a new season in my life, forcing the end of an era that has been so isolating and difficult.

But I am also wishing for the end of an era for all of us, and not just the end of the COVID era. It's time to end the long twentieth century, a period of stagnation exemplified by how many of us would rather treat nostalgic entertainments as a sensory deprivation tank than face a future currently staring us down. People will realize before long that these diversions are not a fair exchange for the radical transformation an unrestrained capitalist class is making to our communities, lifestyles, work, and climate—the drastic change in weather patterns that we have already experienced is one of the losses we haven't been able to count yet. If I take hope from anything in my experience of writing this book, it's that the distractions don't work, at least not forever. No matter what, I am eventually shunted back to the inescapable

nature of reality, which exists as a single moment spinning like a gyroscope between distorted dreams of the past and future.