

What Literature Tells Us about the Pandemic: An Interview with Frederick Aldama

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Abstract

Literature can play an important role in shaping our responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It can offer us significant insights into how individuals treated the trauma of pandemics in the past, and how to survive in a situation beyond our control.

Considering the changes and challenges that the coronavirus might bring for us, we should know that the world we are living in today is shaped by the biological crisis of the past. This understanding can help us deal with the challenges in the current pandemic situation. Literature can show us how the crisis has affected the lives of infected individuals.

By exploring the theme of disease and pandemic, which is consistent and well-established in literature (Cooke, 2009), we come across a number of literary works dealing with plagues, epidemics and other forms of biological crises. Among the prominent examples of pandemic literature is Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947), narrating the story of a plague sweeping the French Algerian city of Oran. The novel illustrates the powerlessness of individuals to affect their destinies. Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) is another story depicting the spread of the Red Death, an uncontrollable epidemic that depopulated and nearly destroyed the world. The book is considered as prophetic of the coronavirus pandemic, especially given London wrote it at a time when the world was not as quickly connected by travel as it is today (Matthews, 2020). Furthermore, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842) is a short story on the metaphorical element of the plague. Through the personification of the plague, represented by a mysterious figure as a Red Death victim, the author contemplates on the inevitability of death; the issue is not that people die from the plague, but that people are plagued by death (Steel, 1981). Moreover, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) is another apocalyptic novel, depicting a future which is ravaged by a plague. Shelley illustrates the concept of immunization in this fiction showing her understanding about the nature of contagion.

Pandemic is also depicted in medieval writings, such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* illustrating human behaviour: the fear of infection increased sins such as greed, lust and corruption, which paradoxically led to infection and consequently to both moral and physical death (Grigsby, 2008).

In ancient literature, Homer's *Iliad* opens with a plague visited upon the Greek camp at Troy to punish the Greeks for Agamemnon's enslavement of Chryseis. Plague and epidemic were rather frequent catastrophes in

ancient world. When plague spread, no medicine could help, and no one could stop it from striking; the only way to escape was to avoid contact with infected persons and contaminated objects (Tognotti. 2013).

Certainly, COVID-19 has shaken up our economic systems and affected all aspects of our living. In this respect, literature can give us the opportunity to think through how similar crises were dealt with previously, and how we might structure our societies more equitably in their aftermath. Thus, in order to explore what literature tells us about the pandemic, the following interview is conducted with Frederick Aldama, a Distinguished Professor of English at the Ohio State University.

Keywords: Pandemic, Reality, Literature, Dystopian literature, Science Fiction

Biographical Note

Frederick Luis Aldama is a Distinguished University Professor, Arts & Humanities Distinguished Professor of English, University Distinguished Scholar, and Alumni Distinguished Teacher at the Ohio State University. He is the 2019 recipient of the Rodica C. Botoman Award for Distinguished Teaching and Mentoring and the Susan M. Hartmann Mentoring and Leadership Award. He was recognized as one of The Beat Comics persons-who-defy-easy-category of the year for 2019. He is the award-winning author, co-author, and editor of 48 books, including his first children's book *The Adventures of Chupacabra Charlie* (2020). In 2018, *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics* won the International Latino Book Award and the Eisner Award for Best Scholarly Work. He is editor and coeditor of 8 academic press book series as well as editor of *Latinographix*, a trade-press series that publishes Latinx graphic fiction and nonfiction. He is creator of the first documentary on the history of Latinx superheroes in comics (Amazon Prime) and co-founder and director of SÖL-CON: Brown & Black Comix Expo. He is founder and director of the Obama White House award winning LASER: Latinx Space for Enrichment & Research as well as founder and co-director of the Humanities & Cognitive Sciences High School Summer Institute. He has a joint appointment in Spanish & Portuguese as well as faculty affiliation in Film Studies and the Center for Cognitive and Brain Sciences. (<https://clas.osu.edu/people/aldama.1>)

Interview

RB¹: How can literature help us manage the current pandemic situation?

FA²: This is a great question, Ruzbeh, with a more-than-meets-the-eye answer. The common doxa among us lit scholars is that literature is transformative: the monadic self and plural selves. It's the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* fired up the Civil War sensibility. In a way, this is implicit even in the phrasing of your question that implies (as if in logical necessity or mathematical rigid deduction) its purported answer. Gregory Bateson calls these "double bind questions" where an answer is already boxed in by the question itself. Actually, it's the case of most questions posed in everyday human interactions; or what Eric Berne calls "transactional analysis." To wit: the Twitter Sphere.

But Ruzbeh, let me take a step back and a pause to reflect a little more deeply here about what literature can and can't do in general and during our present global pandemic. To this I ask: In which way(s) does literature affect people's lives? How long and how deep is its influence? Does the literary *impression*, say, become a material, physical, bodily reaction, an inclination or even an order to behave in such and such a way? In other words, does literature dictate behavior in any way and to any extent, in a passing way or in a long-lasting fashion? Does literature have an impact in the individual and therefore in society? Is this impact, if it exists, the same everywhere? Does literature impact rural areas the same way it impacts urban areas? How does literature impact the people who do not read at all or perhaps read one or two books a year? And lastly, but very importantly: what is literature?

Our present situation is characterized by being overwhelmed nationally by the global pandemic. This situation is extremely complex. The reactions to the pandemic are very varied, contradictory—and, as we've especially seen in the U.S. opposite to common sense and science. With the Cheeto-in-Chief running the country, we saw the political weaponizing of an anti-science irrationalism. The result: 300,000 plus Covid-19 deaths.

Again, I ask (and tinged with greater desperation): Can literature have an impact on this? Can literature change irrationality and violence and eventually transform such situations in which those behaviors thrive into the opposite behaviors of understanding and empathy? If so, how? Because to "manage" is to plan, to fix provisional steps and goals while always keeping in mind the ultimate goal of the planification process. How can the predicted "management" capacity of literature become such a logistic of a very specific nature? Once again, in a word: what power does literature possess? What is its nature?

In May 1967, the much beloved and wise Argentinean author, Julio Cortázar, published a letter in the Cuban journal *Casa de las Américas* (and in Argentina's *Primera Plana*) that asks for authors to practice a certain patience when thinking about writing the great novel about the Cuban Revolution; that this patience would give author's the requisite distance to see all of the aesthetic shaping devices that could be used to create a modern day epic that would *make new* readers' perception, thought, and feeling about this radical moment in time. Patience, he advised: your Homer will be among us someday. Years later Toni Morrison brought a similar anti-sentimental approach to her writing and teaching of writing, drawing analogies to the carpenter who seeks to create the perfect chair and the need to "know about wood, trees, the body [. . .] the industry," and

only then pick the right wood for the color and quality. For both Cortázar and Morrison, the job of the fiction author is a job of careful craftsmanship. And for this to happen, there has to be certain distance between the author-as-craftsperson and the present moment for them to see clearly the different ways to sculpt and shape narratives in ways that lead to it being “neither bloodless nor bloody, and yet alive,” as Morrison states.

In other words, Cortázar and Morrison discuss certain necessary spatio-temporal conditions for possibility of literary creation; that not all conditions—moments—in society allow for such and such forms of creation. In this sense, then, for both of these literary giants, it’s not literature that impacts society, but society that impacts literature; that certain social conditions allow and give impulse to literary creation in such or such direction(s), and other conditions that block it.

In light of this, I might rephrase your question, asking: what will society do to provide a certain pause and distance to the tremendous weight of today’s global pandemic today to allow authors to create fiction that will *make new* our perception, thought, and feeling about our everyday life?

RB: Does the current pandemic situation highlight the significance of dystopian literature reflecting some truth about our world?

FA: This is a great question, Ruzbeh, and takes me back to Morrison’s notion of the author as craftsman. As you and I both know well, there’s sci-fi and there’s *sci-fi*. There are those pop-corn sci-fi narratives (alphabetic, audio-visual, visual-textual) that we chomp down to feel a momentary prandial pleasure then quickly forget. Think: *Bird Box* or *John Carter*. These among many other examples are pop-corn sci-fi whereby the creative counterfactual thinking used to distill and reconstruct from the building blocks of reality contemporary falls short of *making new* our potential as human beings to exist in truly different ways.

But there are those carefully crafted sci-fi narratives that hold us in awe. They take us somewhere entirely new—and take us back to their storyworlds again and again. Think: Mary Shelly served this up to readers of *Frankenstein* (1823), Edwin Abbott Abbott’s *Flatland* (1884), Jules Verne with *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), and Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* (1961). Think of the wildly imaginative new storyworlds and ontologies dreamed up by Ursula LeGuin, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, and Jaime and Beto Hernandez, for instance.

There are other ways, too, that today’s sci-fi *makes new*. Given that folx of color have largely been absented (and willfully) from speculative narrative spaces, when a director like Robert Rodriguez comes along and creates *Alita* (2019) we experience something radically different to the business-as-usual tradition of dystopic sci-fi world building. I just finished writing an article on this so it’s fresh in my brain. As *Alita* unfolds, Rodriguez constructs tellurian storyworld spaces that draw centrally on cultural, historical, and architectural elements of the hemispheric Américas. His sci-fi affirms deeply Latinx subjectivities—a radical departure from the speculative narrative spaces that either erase or hyper-exoticize and ornamentalize BIPOC.

And, today more than ever I see today’s BIPOC fiction authors waking us to old *and* new ways of existing in mind/body, socioeconomics, politics, and eco-geographics. I think readily of Carmen María Machado, Junot Díaz, Nalo Hopkins, Ted Chiang, Alexander Chee, Nana Ekua Brew-Hammond, Hasnathika Sirisena, SL Huang, Charles Yu, and Yuri Herrera, Fernando A. Flores, and Zoraida Cordoba.

Today’s new gen speculative creators of color build a whole range of story worlds: from those filled with robots and high-tech, to those that reflect on new ways to relate to one another, to our communities, and to our planet; all while waking us to current toxic racist, masculinist, sexist, neoliberal practices. They choose to build storyworlds to revise yesterday, present an alternate present, or reimagine the future. For authors like African American N. K. Jemisin (*Broken Earth* trilogy), Waubgeshig Rice (*Moon of the Crusted Snow*), William Alexander (*Ambassador* series), Rebecca Roanhorse (*Trail of Lightning*), and Malka Older (*Infomocracy*, *Null States*, and *State Tectonics*), there needs to be a total reset for us to see critically our current destructive patterns: intersectional oppression and trauma. In their respective post-apocalyptic storyworlds, vitally reimagined indigenous (pre-Columbian and African) mythologies and affirmative intersectional identities can blossom anew.

RB: How is the current reality matching up to dystopian fiction?

FA: If I might answer this by switching hats from scholar to creator of fiction, Ruzbeh. For me, graphic narratives (comics and kid’s books) prove to be a generative space for the speculative reconstructions of today’s experiences and subjectivities—especially for Latinxs. For instance, I wanted to create a story that touched on today’s caging of Latinx children along the US/Mexico border. However, I wanted it to be an adventure story that drew on the powerfully speculative oral stories Latinxs have heard growing up in the Southwest and Puerto Rico: speculative storyworlds with Chupacabras. Working with illustrator Chris Escobar, I created *The Adventures of Chupacabra Charlie* (2020) that follows the adventures of a learned, vegetarian, adventure-seeking Chupacabra named, Charlie. His and Lupe’s epic adventure involves the saving of little ones from cages. And, in my forthcoming *Labyrinths Borne* (with Juan Argil), I imagine a future after The Event where all but the teenagers have perished; all of the adults contract a disease that swiftly invades and destroys their bone marrow. I choose here to build a storyworld space that imagines the vital creative, intellectual energy of teens, including the protagonist, Luna, who turn to science, philosophy, and literature as a way to positively transform the planet.

RB: How can dystopian fiction give us a vision for future situations similar to the current one?

FA: Again, not all sci-fi (dystopian or otherwise) is made alike. I can say with certainty that there are some extraordinarily talented BIPOC builders of speculative storyworlds that wake us to new ways to experience and see a way out of our planetary quagmire, gelatinous mess: pandemics of disease, hunger, disenfranchisement. The global social tissue is being ripped apart. Those who use bring a creative, mindful use of their counterfactual capacity to today can and do imagine better ways for us to think, act, and feel tomorrow—where human and planetary organic life forms can productively and creatively to create in stunning and remarkable new ways a future we all want.

RB: A pantheon of writers, including Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves, emerged from the First World War, reflecting sacrifice of a generation and of something devastating. Now is it the time of emerging writers from the pandemic?

FA: Ruzbeh, I already began to answer this when I brought up Cortázar and Morrison, ending by asking us to think deeply about what kind of society we need to shape with our boots on the streets to allow for the full (anarchic) expression of fiction. Literature and the arts suffocate under prescription, coercion and limitation—the weapons used to assassinate all the arts. There should no slipping into the comforts of arm-chair activism if we are to uphold the dictum: all anarchy in art.

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Endnotes

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² Frederick Aldama