SARI ALTSCHULER AND ELIZABETH MADDOCK DILLON

Humanities in the Time of Covid: The Humanities Coronavirus Syllabus

On March 12, 2020, the day after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, we began conceiving and collecting material for the crowd-sourced "Humanities Coronavirus Syllabus." Our aim was to provide tools for thinking and teaching about contagion, global health, and community in a time of closing borders, social distancing, and fear. We our drew inspiration from other crowd-sourced public syllabi like Marcia Chatelain's #fergusonsyllabus and Chad Williams's #charlestonsyllabus, which used social media to generate an immediate response to and resources for understanding a sudden crisis. While we were sure more general resources, especially in the social and natural sciences, would be rapidly forthcoming, as the simultaneously produced "Teaching COVID-19: An Anthropology Syllabus Project" (Brown, Jenks, Nelson, and Tilghman) and Alondra Nelson's #coronavirussyllabus suggested, we wanted to curate a set of literary, cinematic, historical, art philosophical, religious, and cultural resources-that is, humanities resources-for understanding the current health crisis and its history.

Our early sense that the humanities would be invaluable for thinking about the current health crisis has been borne out: the humanities have proved vital not only for humanities students and educators but also for healthcare workers and medical educators on the frontlines of the pandemic. The *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* dedicated its entire May 5, 2020 issue to narrative medicine (a subfield

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of the health humanities that uses narrative training to improve health-care)—an unprecedented move ("Theme: A Piece"). The issue's editor, Abraham Verghese, calls writing a neglected "vital sign." He explains: "we really are very good at recording the traditional vital signs, and we are superb at recording all the quantitative aspects of the conditions and the tragedies we see in the hospital. We are fairly silent about the other parts" ("Narrative Medicine"). As a doctor with graduate training in the humanities, Verghese should know. Suzanne Koven, a primary care physician and writer-in-residence at Massachusetts General Hospital, tweeted: "A whole issue of @JAMA_current devoted to narratives ... Who knew interest in storytelling and #medhum would surge during a pandemic? (We knew)."

Likewise, in medical schools, an extraordinary thing happened: in the first months of the crisis, some medical schools dramatically *increased* their offerings in the humanities. There is a pragmatic reason for this, of course—professors who teach narrative medicine, history of medicine, and health ethics are less likely to treat patients regularly. But, also, narrative, history, and ethics provide extraordinary resources for helping aspiring doctors and health professionals make sense of life and work in a time of crisis. Sarah Wingerter, Assistant Professor and Director of Narrative Medicine in the Pediatrics department at the Boston University (BU) School of Medicine, wrote one of us (Altschuler), reporting that BU requested that she teach more during this time. "Wouldn't it be interesting," Wingerter reflected, "if COVID-19 gives narrative medicine/reflective writing a boost into mainstream medical education?" Indeed it would.

Humanities perspectives are uniquely helpful during the COVID-19 crisis. As Catherine Belling writes, explaining the value of the humanities for health more generally, "the products of science and of the creative arts, and of the technologies that emerge from and facilitate the practices of both, all require the disciplines of the humanities in order to make sense, to be ethically enacted, to be rewarded or discouraged—to be understood as massively complex products of human knowledge of, response to, and action in the natural world" (23). The risks of sidelining the humanities are great. Borrowing Belling's terms, cordoning off disciplines like philosophy and literature "forecloses" the "possibility of questioning the epistemology, ethics, and language" of the pandemic, not to mention, we would add, the narratives, visual culture, and history that fundamentally shape cultural, social, and scientific understandings of the COVID-19 crisis (20). As Kirsten Ostherr opined in May 2020, the humanities can do "essential" translational work in a crisis like COVID-19 because "health cannot be attained and illness cannot be vanquished through biomedical or technical

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interventions alone. This pandemic has made the human fragility of our response infrastructure abundantly clear, and we need to understand how our decisions about whose life matters will shape the future to come."

As we write now in September 2020, Intensive Care Units fill to capacity, and healthcare workers are asked to choose between protecting staff and patients because of inadequate supplies of Personal Protective Equipment. We need health ethics training both to ensure equitable care and to help healthcare practitioners forced to make brutal decisions. As xenophobic and racist narratives about COVID-19 circulate, we need to highlight their formulaic plots that "affect survival rates and contagion routes," "promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors, and lifestyles," and "influence how both scientists and the lay public understand the nature and consequences of infection, how they imagine the threat, and why they react so fearfully to some disease outbreaks and not others at least as dangerous and pressing" (Wald 3). As we deal with a pandemic frequently referred to as "unprecedented," we must underscore the many historical precedents from which we can and must draw to understand our current moment responsibly. These kinds of training are extremely useful beyond the pandemic as well because they prepare people to identify endemic problems in healthcare like race, sex, gender, class, and ability biases that structure the health outcomes for entire populations.

We undertook this project because we believe the humanities offer an invaluable set of perspectives and skills for understanding the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is our hope that The Humanities Coronavirus Syllabus offers generative primary sources and critical materials to assist its users in this work. The goal of the syllabus is two-fold: (1) to provide resources for educators looking to retool syllabi in light of the current crisis, and (2) to provide a robust, interdisciplinary, humanities-focused resource for people looking to make sense of our current crisis. What follows is truly a collaborative effort, and we wish to thank the dozens and dozens of people who contributed to making this syllabus what it is.

The history of pandemics teaches us that the lives into which we will emerge once the pandemic has subsided will be radically different from the ones we left in February 2020. A crisis of the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic challenges our existing ways of thinking, including how we inhabit the world, how we connect with others, what we eat, and where and how we work. The magnitude of imagining new worlds and of thinking analytically and creatively about matters that were not on our radar just a few short months before is something at

which the humanities excel. The collectively authored syllabus below aims to bring those resources to the fore and to make them easily accessible in a time of emergency and beyond. The crowd-sourced nature of the project also invites users to connect diverse ways of understanding and imagining global events and their histories. A humanities approach is one in which such connections—drawn across time, geography, media, and competing paradigms—enable new perspectives and new possible futures to become visible, especially in a time of crisis.

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Rent (2006), Chris Columbus

The Host (2006), Bong Joon-Ho

The Witnesses (2007), André Téchiné

Blindness (2008), Fernando Meirelles

The Happening (2008), M. Night Shyamalan

Pontypool, (2008), Bruce McDonald

The Crazies (2010), Breck Eisner

Contagion (2011), Steven Soderbergh

Perfect Sense (2011), David Mackenzie

Rise of the Planet of the Apes (2011), Rupert Wyatt

We Were Here (2011), David Weissman

How to Survive a Plague (2012), David France

Love for Life (2012), Gu Changwei

World War Z (2013), Marc Forster

Dallas Buyers Club (2013), Jean-Marc Vallée

Pride (2014), Matthew Warchus

The Normal Heart (2014), Ryan Murphy

Train to Busan [Busanhaeng] (2016), Sang-ho Yeon

Pride and Prejudice and Zombies (2016), Burr Steers

Grain [Buğday] (2017), Semih Kaplanoğlu

It Comes At Night (2017), Trey Edward Shults

Annihilation (2018), Alex Garland

BPM: Beats per Minute (2018), Robin Campillo

Dying to Survive 我不是神 (2018), Wen Muye

TV/STREAMING SERIES

Angels in America (2003.) HBO.

Cordon (2014). VTM.

Chernobyl (2019). HBO.

H+: *The Digital Series* (2012–2013). Bryan Singer. YouTube.

The Hot Zone (2019). National Geographic.

The Last Ship (2014-2018). TNT.

The Leftovers (2014–2017). HBO.

Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak (2020). Netflix.

Geoffrey Rice (7 May 2018). 1918 Influenza Presentation (Videotape).

Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Health (New Zealand).

The Strain (2014). FX.

Survivors (1975-1977, 2008-2010). BBC.

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RELEVANT SYLLABI

Please see the web version of this syllabus for links to our growing collection of syllabi.

RESOURCES

- "A Journal of the Plague Year: An Archive of COVID19" https://covid19. omeka.net collaboration between many universities and organized by Arizona State University.
- Corona Times [collaboratively authored blog] https://www.coronatimes.net/ Crowdsourced #coronavirussyllabus (all disciplines), created by Alondra Nelson
- Twitter thread: #coronavirussyllabus https://twitter.com/alondra/status/1238148640268603394
- Google doc: #coronavirussyllabus https://docs.google.com/document/d/ 1dTkJmhWQ8NcxhmjeLp6ybT1_YOPhFLx9hZ43j1S7DjE/edit
- Duke University Press's temporarily free books: "Navigating the Threat of Pandemic Syllabus" https://www.dukeupress.edu/Explore-Subjects/Syllabi/Navigating-Pandemic-Syllabus
- Jaggers, A. and M. K. Czerwiec, ed. Covid-19 Comics, GraphicMedicine.org
- Lewis, A. David, ed. *Covid-19 Comics: Free and Open Repository of Novel Coronavirus Comics Resources.* Caption Box, March 2020. Covid19comics. captionbox.net
- New York Times list of pandemic thrillers: https://twitter.com/secondshelfbks/status/1236751567812001792
- Twitter list of novels by women with disease-spreading plots: https://twitter.com/secondshelfbks/status/1236751567812001792
- NPR playlist of "soothing music": https://www.npr.org/2020/03/13/815457669/isle-of-calm-stream-6-hours-of-soothing-music
- National Library of Medicine's Global Health Event Archive of COVID19: https://archive-it.org/collections/4887? fc=websiteGroup: Coronavirus %20disease%20(COVID-19)%20outbreak&fbclid=IwAR1BXqw9K2odSu J04SX39tkWbAiWF6yjHKbsKAWNaRYcEwAswQ5iDLDTfkI
- Public Books, list of University Presses with free content available as of April 2020: http://www.publicbooks.org/public-books-database/
- Charles Louis Richter's *Twitter thread* on response to 1900 outbreak of plague in Hawaii
- Teaching COVID-19: An Anthropology Syllabus Project, edited by Nina Brown, Angela Jenks, Katie Nelson, and Laura Tilghman; https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-IRVbz1nsBQJHcaCVh8QLRBiwj3cFT_bXSwmTNs_Hf0/edit#heading=h.fbubynqned6z