



## Rethinking the Humanities in a Post-Covid World

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**Abstract:** Even as the world seeks a way forward from the COVID-19 pandemic, we still find ourselves in profound uncertainties. Now more than ever, the humanities—with its varied modalities of inquiry—are called upon to offer perspectives on how we can emerge from this disruption renewed and forward-looking. This talk outlines the conceptual deployments of the notion of “crisis” in the humanities to assert how the field has long been viewed as the embodiment of “crisis” itself.

**Keywords:** Pandemic Literature; Humanities; Crisis; Post-COVID Writing; Recovery

### Introduction

This year’s theme: “(Re)imagining the Arts in the Post-Pandemic Recovery” is inescapable as it is necessary. By all measures, our lives have been upended when WHO declared on March 11, 2020 that the world is now facing a pandemic. In a highly globalized world, we soon realized that borders still prevail over our lives. One after another, air, land, and sea travel were halted and people around the world found themselves numbed by the anxieties brought about by the new pathogen. Our bodies had never encountered such immobility, confronted as we all were with the paranoia that the flesh that until now provided us with so much warmth and assurance could be a vessel of illness, contamination, and death.

Quarantine, lockdown, social distancing—was the new vocabulary that had taken over our daily lives. Incarceration became our salvation. Washing our hands have rendered us fearful of this part of our body more than ever. Indeed, the relational landscape of people changed intensely in so short a time. Families came together by imposing more rigid boundaries on who were in and out of their spheres. Suddenly, people had to be grouped into age categories—for instance, those who are more vulnerable from those who can withstand probable infection.

The pandemic also modified our sense of time as we spent days, weeks and months inside the confines of our homes. We were forced to slow down, do away with our routine that had long been equated with productivity. We had to think of new tasks and

distractions to while away the time. People’s “temporal agency” were denied of them. Yet, on the one hand, new “temporal strategies” were created to fight what was called as “enforced presentism” (Ringel, 2020). The future, thus, gained a new currency as people dealt with the painful everydayness of pandemic life.

At the university, foremost on our mind, was how we would bring our teaching to the conclusion of the term despite the anxieties and the grim prospect of an increasing mortality brought about by the COVID pandemic. It was enough that we had to abruptly migrate to online teaching but the other factors—the affective and social factors attendant to student learning soon revealed the fissures of the digital platform.

Personally, I had always viewed online teaching as a far off possibility in my profession. The faces of my students were what have marked my more than two decades of teaching. Having them all transformed into pixel images were enough to render what I thought was a solid career in teaching as fragile. I knew that what I was facing was an extreme challenge that demanded more from my experience of two decades than ever before. Suddenly what I thought I knew about teaching had to go through a lot of reexamination. I needed to identify the challenges, adapt and innovate.

But we did finish the term with as much compassion and understanding as we could muster. The next full term though became a more difficult battleground to deal with. As someone who has taught Literatures of the World for more than two decades, I relied on my staple texts to bring me some

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solidity and grounding during a very unsettling time. Among my teaching materials, it was Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, a Greek tragedy, that I resorted to. And this is on account of one basic reason: I had taught it long enough to know its minute parts as well as deliver it without much preparation.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is one of the greatest Greek tragedies ever written and which until now is being taught in the universities. Aristotle called it the perfect tragedy for the way its narrative is perfectly woven, with each of its part powered to the next scene and to the next to effect a *catharsis*—a spiritual release that brings about cleansing.

The story of *Oedipus Rex* is about an embattled king who faces a public health crisis in the city of Thebes. The plague in itself is recorded in the chronicles of old history but what seems to be striking in this play and one that seems to substantially resonate with the current pandemic is how we are all made to bear the suffering of our limitations. Both as ruler and citizens. A character named Teiresias, the blind seer, establishes dramatic irony in the play to build up one of *Oedipus'* greatest weaknesses. The king maybe all-knowing but he is blind to his own frailties. As readers, we are all made to witness how the most noble and intelligent of men is subject to the ravages of a plague—both physically and spiritually. And what seems to have taken a beating and makes a return to its most basic form is the idea of love for our fellow human beings. This love may be subjected to the most harrowing of twists and turns of human fate. Yet as the play reveals, it always retreat to our deepest core where it finds its undeniable home.

The Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* has been revisited by many artists and teachers in this time of the pandemic. In the US, theater performers were quick to resort to the play to search for clues as to how the embattled king can redeem an entire city. The play raises a mirror to the complex decisions rulers make in the past as it is in the present—even in the presence or absence of gods whose wisdom and generosity are supposed to aid us in overcoming life's travails.

Fragility, vulnerability, disruption, survival. These form part the glossary of pandemics. And of crisis itself. And this pandemic is offering all of us a chance to reflect on how literature, and the field it belongs to—the humanities, has always been

about crisis. Its natural state has always been that of crisis.

If you have *Oedipus Rex* and other great literary and artistic works like Giovanni's Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353), Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Year of the Plague* (1720), Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842) and Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947) harking back to the olden times (or beyond), it would probably be safe to assume that the stories and narratives and all the artistic works that emerge from the last two years will usher us into a post-covid world.

In an article entitled "New Ways of Surviving: Writing Through a Global Pandemic," Tiana Clark describes how the early days of the pandemic has left her with no interest whatsoever with writing and reading. And yet as the days passed and as her emotions went through the grind of sorrow, loss and, at times, hopelessness, she gradually sensed a return of energy. At first, it felt heavy. But after a certain kind of vigor lifted her from the dread of each day, writing became a sort of renewal with life.

### Humanities in Crisis Reassessed

The pre-pandemic period saw the humanities as losing its traction among the young people as they are forced to choose the more economically profitable degrees and programs. Institutions were cutting down the humanities' budget mercilessly. In some parts of the world, countries like Japan has taken a more severe approach to the crisis. The Japanese government released a decree stating that the decision to instruct universities and colleges to review their humanities programs was seen as a way to make the students more competitive in meeting the pressing needs of the society. The letter written by Education Minister Hakuban Shimomura likewise strongly suggested that universities should take "active steps to abolish [the social sciences and humanities]" or convert them to academic opportunities in the natural sciences.

As John Traphagan reported on this development, "26 of its (Japan's) 60 national universities that offer courses in the humanities and social sciences had either closed or reduced their faculties in these areas." And this was back in 2015.

The premiere state universities, like the Tokyo University, of course, defied the edict. They



found it preposterous an idea that a society should be deprived of an humanities education just so they could take part in the labor force—as if the core values found in a liberal arts education are not useful in our understanding of the world. But other universities and local colleges had already stopped recruiting students to its programs.

This course of action is not new to us here in the Philippines. Although not as drastic maybe, we have responded to the challenges of making the humanities palatable to industries and render our students productive members of the economic sectors. There had also been proposals for the merging of certain departments to gloss over the supposed unlucrative aspect of the humanities.

But the COVID-19 pandemic has caused some shift in this kind of thinking. So tectonic has been the effect of the COVID-19 disruption on all of the aspects of our lives that we are, in fact, just beginning to reckon with the magnitude and profundity of the phenomenon.

Already there are studies from the higher educational institutions in most parts of the world asserting that the humanities will need to play a huge role in the post-covid world recovery. This recognizes that we are only at the beginning of our understanding of how COVID-19 puts into question the mode of existence of contemporary societies.

In one of the write ups of the journal “Inside Higher Ed,” Professor of English Kirsten Ostherr argues that the humanities are essential services, and that they are a “vital part of the pandemic response through immediate, translational, front-line work.” She relates her own personal academic journey as an example of the growing appreciation for the humanities in this time of the pandemic. Moreover, Professor Ostherr claims that her work in the master of public health degree was enriched by her reading of researches done in the field of humanities. This seems to have completed the picture of the necessity to fulfill the needs of the body as well as of the mind and heart in the time of the pandemic. Thus, as Prof Ostherr’s argues:

Humanities scholars can contribute to the current pandemic: by engaging in long-term, big-picture research that brings humanities questions to bear on public health. This kind of work provides critical

historical and cultural context and can broaden the perspectives of public health and medical trainees.

In other works that advance the importance of the humanities in the post-covid recovery, many studies look to the field as shedding light on the key ethical considerations of scientific issues. Some concrete examples of these are outlined in an issue of *The Guild*. Universities are at the forefront of initiating research projects that investigate the significance of the pandemic as it creates different frontiers of knowledge. For instance, the University of Glasgow and Groningen University attempt to assess the impact of the pandemic on the psychological makeup of the public. Relatedly, these projects emphasize how the shift to the digital space may encourage new venues for individual creativity to flourish. In a related field, medical humanities also reveal a rich blend of the humanities and medicine especially as it may relate to subjects that may range from bioethics to human loss (Montondo, 2020). This can give way to a more profound appreciation of human suffering that is anchored on principles of respect and compassion.

In an article pointedly entitled “Calling on the Humanities in the Midst of a Pandemic,” the humanities is viewed as offering a wealth of insights into human suffering and triumph through time. These ideas are embedded in the works of philosophers, religious thinkers, historians, novelists, and poets. Their works are merely within our easy access and can offer us the solace we so badly need in these time of enormous uncertainties. And yet the urge to resort to the humanities is not only to feed the imagination and spirit. In more practical terms, they inform us of ways by which the humanities can provide real-life context to public health policy-making. The field can enhance the policymakers understanding of human experiences during illness such as suffering, empathy and compassion.

In pushing for the vital fusion humanities and the sciences, the Harvard professor Stephen Greenblatt is quoted in *The Guild*: “A plague...tests us in unique ways. It ruthlessly takes the measure of our values, calls into question our familiar assumptions, shines a pitiless light on our social and political and religious order.”

All this defense of the humanities inadvertently show how the field is innately tied to

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the notion of crisis for the way “it instigates new perspectives, new ways of seeing.” Furthermore:

A crisis normally marks a turning point, whether in the course of a disease or in the life of a nation, a social institution, or a person. Crises can force unexpected changes and present opportunities for intervention, reform, or even revolution. They can bring restoration and renewal, or, if things go bad, collapse and death (Williams, 2021).

In a recent book entitled *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in an Disenchanted Age* (by the University of Chicago and released just in August 2021), authors Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon achieve a scholarly feat as they inject a historical perspective to the long-standing debate known as the crisis in the humanities.

Central to the book is the claim that the Humanities as it is in crisis now is nothing new. The humanities have always seen themselves as responding to crisis even as the knowledge they generate in turn may deepen the issue at hand. In a “disenchanted age,” the humanities claim to be the source of meaning, but they likewise augment the need to differing views to come to fore in debates intensify or clarify issues and problems. According to its book review, crisis is both the driving force and the false consciousness of the humanities. It has made “crisis” as it central project (Meranze 2021).

And if we are going to transpose this “permanent crisis” into our very midst (Philippines), what we are waking up to now is not just the tail end of the pandemic. As what has already been referred to yesterday by our National Artist Virgilio Almario, the country is facing one of the most critical turns in its history. We are being called to a deep reflection of how a more virulent pandemic can take over our lives if we will not heed the lesson of past. If we allow a leader whose worldview is that of trying to whitewash the past. If truth will be allowed to be exchanged for power.

Like Virgilio Almario, I was also part of the EDSA revolution back in 1986. I was only in my second year of college, barely I was out of my teens. I had just begun a serious study of literature and feeling the promise of the humanities to change my

inner creative landscape. I stood there on the thoroughfare of EDSA, feeling the pulsating change of time, and knowing that something significant was about to happen. I could remember the anticipation, the quiet waiting, as the people power was about to push an autocratic regime to its end.

Thirty-six years forward, we are once again being asked to explain away our lives as another narrative is being enforced upon us. This crisis of narratives is one that we should be vigilant about. This is not our fate. This is not a divine ordination.

In a recent facebook post, I made in reply to an article written by well-known political analyst on the failure of the EDSA revolution. I responded by saying that revolutions defy completion. And that we can only think of the historical notion of the “long duree” or the “long duration” to understand that there are things taking place that are not naked to our visible eye.

Revolution is about the need to change ossified and nonresponsive systems. Revolution is about finding ourselves always in a state of crisis.

We are not in a normal situation nor times. And “normality” as a discourse erupts as a notion that intends to legitimize the prevailing social order prior the pandemic. Precariousness, austerity, and inequality seems all of the sudden desirable when governments and corporations lobby and call “going back to normality” or “going back to work” without guarantees of any kind.

At this point: I cannot help but return to Oedipus. We must surpass Oedipus and understand that the origin of the plague is not divine, but mundane; as mundane as COVID-19 itself. In any case, we must play the role of a rebellious Oedipus to renege with all strength the script which the oracle of industries and political structures has in store for us: that is to break with the abstract suggestion, that unsaid dispositive (as posited by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben) which attempts to present the very mundane sovereignty of commodity and capitalism as an eternal and inexhaustible order.

How do we finally envision a post-COVID world? The words with which we now forge our lives carry more possibility than ever. As we anticipate parts of the world coming into full strength once more, we need to make an inventory of the societal and cultural challenges where growth areas can be

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gleaned. Technology and science will probably have a greater presence in many industries and sectors, but humanities will play a critical role in defining future skill sets that put a premium on the lived experience. Critical and contextual thinking, empathy, resiliency, and creativity are values that made many of us survive the COVID-19 pandemic (Edmond 2020). And they will be sought after substantially as we navigate a new future. That future will honor the world we have known but will never be able to return to. What we hope to enter into is one that will heed the lessons of this pandemic—with an inclusive ethos—and be more prepared for worse crises in the future.

To forge a new world, then, is to accept our responsibility in the field of knowledge production. Literature, philosophy, technology, migration, folk wisdom, medicine, oral history, performance, and narratives: These are capillaries of humanistic thought that are vital in deeply studying the *condition humaine*. As we witness the more advanced parts of the world come to light from the somber year with their vaccination programs, we again wait for our turn for things to brighten up. History tells us that we will in due time. And that we will make sense of all these in narratives that are vigorous and that honor, most of all, human solidarity.

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