

Special Issue Call for Papers: Fictions of the Pandemic

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Extended Deadline for Submissions: 1 August 2024

For this special issue, *MFS* invites contributors to consider and problematize the role of literary scholarship in apprehending, producing, and critiquing fictions of the pandemic. “Fictions of the Pandemic” pursues the imaginative structures, disputed narratives, cross-pollinating conspiracies, and contested discourses emergent from the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the recognition of the novel coronavirus in late 2019, various interconnected fictions of the pandemic have circulated in the public sphere, from the idea of universally shared trauma to the promise of technological solutions. These fictions have been countered in turn by the realities of entrenched racial and class disparities and of global vaccine apartheid. Meanwhile, new characters have emerged as the ambivalent subjects of this historical conjuncture: the essential worker, the antimasker, the long-hauler, the COVID minimizer, and the masked minority. Likewise, the dominant plot points, narrative frameworks, and even genres of fictions of the pandemic have shifted (from the romance of revolutionary change to the tragedy of eclipsed horizons) as we move from the acute phase of coordinated global response to COVID to the chronic phase of capitulation to the virus as a normalized and never-ending event.

We propose that the COVID pandemic necessitates a thoroughgoing rethinking of literary objects and literary methods. What kind of object is “pandemic fiction,” given the slipperiness of the COVID response itself: alternately criminal or progressive, inadequate or an overreaction, depending on where you sit on the Zoom chessboard? What is the work of critique when reactions of suspicion, paranoia, and denial—about the gravity of the pandemic, the motives of policymakers, or even the actions of one’s neighbors—feel owned by the right, seemingly to relegate progressive scholarship to gestures of hope, faith, and repair? How do we, as thinkers of the present and explainers of the future, reckon with a world in which our critical practices are so evidently entangled with and defined by our others? What stories did we tell during the pandemic, and why? Whose stories can we tell now, and whose are verboten? What kinds of questions should we have asked, and why didn’t we ask them? What fictions of the past, present, and future have we had to forgo or forget in light of COVID-19? And in what ways might we, as literature scholars, be exactly the right, and wrong, constituency to pursue these questions, given dueling investments in the reparative potential of narrative, on the one hand, and widespread skepticism about the radicality of close reading, on the other?

Contributors are invited to pursue any of the above questions and other related topics, including:

- Counterfactual thinking and theorizing in the pandemic-era; narratives that imagine the (lost) pasts and futures that-would-have-been in the absence of COVID-19; questions of periodization
- Real-time collaborations in fiction-writing and fiction-reading (such as Wattpad, Scribbr, Booksie, and similar sites)

- Critique and post-critique in an era of conspiracy, denialism, suspicion, cruel optimism, and in light of pandemic affects such as doubt, melancholy, relief, fury, jealousy, and grief
- Infrastructural aesthetics, architecture, and the built environment given transformations in work from home, the real estate market, and evolving relations to public space; the literary registration of infrastructural decay
- Technologies and artifacts of the pandemic; objects such as masks, tests, vaccines, and ventilators, as well as software applications for infection surveillance, video communications, and the circulation of information in both its original and “mis” variants; the narratives of “UX” that frame their ideal anticipated user and inevitable obsolescence
- The suppression and minimization of pandemic narratives by mainstream media, global publishing houses, and literary agents
- Reading the atmospheric and affective traces of the COVID-19 pandemic in fiction that does not explicitly deal with the pandemic
- Transformations in the “pandemic fiction” genre before and after COVID; teaching fictions of the pandemic; pandemic-era transformations, innovations and upheavals in literary pedagogy; the aesthetics of pandemic fiction; ecocritical and health humanities approaches to fictions of the pandemic

We seek surprising, ambitious, theoretically-rich, and provocative responses to this CFP. Essays that creatively introduce elements of fiction, fictionality, or generic hybridity into their analyses of fictions of the pandemic are also welcome.

Essays should be 7,000–9,000 words, including all quotations and bibliographic references, and should follow the *MLA Handbook* (9th edition) for internal citations and Works Cited. Please submit your essay via the online submission form at <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/mfs>. Queries ahead of submission may be directed to Roanne Kantor (rlkantor@stanford.edu) and Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan (rts@rice.edu).