

Doc Chat Episode Twenty-Six Transcript

Pandemic Visions in Newspapers and Literature from Mexico (April 29, 2021)

KATE CORDES: Welcome, everyone. Welcome to the Doc Chat. I'm Kate Cordes, Associate Director for Reference and Outreach at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. And Doc Chat is a weekly program series from the New York Public Library's Center for Research in the Humanities, which digs deep into the stories behind the library's interesting resources, and highlights the ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Paloma Celis Carbajal, Curator for Latin American, Iberian, and US Latino Collections at the library is joined by Oscar A. Perez, Assistant Professor of Spanish at Skidmore College, and author of the forthcoming book: *Medicine, Power, and the Authoritarian Regime in Hispanic Literature*. Congratulations on that tremendous accomplishment. Paloma and Oscar will discuss an array of cultural expressions in Mexico during the influence of pandemics of 1918 and 2009 through newspapers and other digitized materials. Our guests will speak for about ten to fifteen minutes before we open up to conversation. During the program, please feel free to use the chat function to share your comments and thoughts, and make sure that you change your chat mode to 'panelists and attendees' so that everyone can join in the conversation. Once we begin the Q&A segment towards the end, please use Zoom's question and answer function at the bottom of the screen rather than the chat function to pose your questions. And if you wish to remain anonymous, just click that button before submitting your question. We would also like to know a bit more about you, so please fill out the poll that I'm about to launch and I will pass it over to Paloma.

[Silence]

Paloma, are you ready. You're muted, I think.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: Sorry. Thank you everybody for -- for filling in that poll -- filling out that poll, and thanks -- thanks, Kate. And thank you so much, Oscar, for accepting to -- to partner in this Doc Chat episode. So we will wait until people have finished answering the poll and then we will start the -- the -- our presentation.

OSCAR PEREZ: Yeah. I just wanted to say thank you, Paloma, for having me and -- and for inviting me to this [inaudible] these very interesting images that we have for the audience today.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: Oh, a pleasure. Thank you. So I think -- can I close the poll?

KATE CORDES: Yeah, go ahead. You're good.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: Okay. So let's start. So let's start with a -- a couple -- some images that we have put together. And we wanted to hear from you -- from -- from those that are -- are watching this -- this episode, what do you -- what do you see here? Please -- please -- you can put it in the chat. Comment in the chat. What -- what do you see here? When and where do you think these -- these images are from? What are people doing? What do you think these images are representing? And -- what do you find most intriguing or interesting about these images?

OSCAR PEREZ: And if you could write a couple of words, a sentence, something in the chat so we can start looking at these images and just seeing what -- what -- where does your eye go to, you know? What kind of things do you find interesting here? What kind of things do you recognize or not recognize? What do they -- are the things that look very foreign to you or very familiar to you? We started, like, getting some answers here in the chat. And so one of the things that we notice here is that there's the presence of masks, right? We already see it in number four. There is another comment that mentions the -- I believe it's the eyes. Number one. It references the United States as a source of disease. I'm -- I'm clearly making the connection between that figure -- that some sort of, like, human-like figure representing disease. Right? It's ugly. Again, the monster. No? This human-like entity with a personality that we can see being associated with -- with disease. Also, very interesting -- it's mentioning the war-like images and particularly number two. Right? So we are -- we're -- we're seeing the emergence -- also it's important -- of these war rhetorical language to talk about disease. And that would be very interesting to comment.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: So, actually, do -- do -- should we use that one to -- to move to our first one? We will -- we will -- so this is our intro and we want to look at these more closely and see -- what are the contexts in which -- in which these images appeared? So let's start with that number one.

OSCAR PEREZ: Yeah. So this one -- so it brings us to 1918. So this is the influenza pandemic of 1918, its arrival to Mexico. So you can -- we can see here that there -- there's a reference to the Spanish flu as -- as it was known for a long time. No? We -- we know that it's not -- it wasn't originated in Spain now. And there are other things that we mention here. Right? Or we see here. It's interesting to me to notice, particularly, the trend that comes from the north. Right? So, yes, in fact, many of the northern cities in Mexico were the first affected by it. But also, interestingly, the -- the flu -- influenza came to ports. So it arrived in Tampico, Veracruz, in Manzanillo, in these places that we don't see represented here that necessarily are not connected to this threat from the north.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: Before we continue, just want to stress out or note that all the images that we will be showing are from -- we have taken them from -- from Mexican newspapers, national newspapers, and our colleague, Kate, will be linking -- adding the links to

the chat so you know how to find them, too. So you already mentioned the headline "Spanish Influenza." Could you tell us a little bit more how that name came to be?

OSCAR PEREZ: Yeah. So -- so this is kind of like a very interesting story that historians have talked about in -- in length. And one of the things that is important to notice here is that -- so we're in the context of the end of World War I, right, so media in the countries that participated in World War I was being controlled -- or very closely watched -- by military authorities. So they didn't have a lot of freedom to report these kind of negative news that would demoralize people. No? Spain was not part of World War I, so the -- the -- the media in Spain reported about the emergence of this disease and since the coverage was wider, many of the people that started seeing this coverage started associating the influenza with Spain, but it wasn't necessarily because it came from -- from Spain. Right? So the story is much longer and -- and many historians have talked about this, but it's interesting to see how media affects the way we perceive, at least in this case, influenza.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: And as you have mentioned, this is the end of -- of -- of World War I. It's also the end of a major internal conflict in Mexico, and that's the Mexican Revolution. We're in the last stage of that -- of that internal conflict, armed conflict. So the next -- the next image will make it much more obvious and I'll let Oscar explain it.

OSCAR PEREZ: Yeah. These two images are very interesting to me. Yes, it is very important to know that -- that this is -- we are at the end of a civil war in Mexico. This is the revolution that was started in 1910. It -- we are kind of getting to the end of it, but it sets a very -- not -- not the best context for dealing with a pandemic. In this case, infra -- medical infrastructure in the country was decimated by the war, so it was very hard to contain the -- the disease when it arrived. The -- the authorities -- the government at this time tried to do it, but not very successfully. And then it brings us to these two images. And the first one, as we can see there, is -- speaks a little bit about the tools that the government had to control the pandemic. In this -- we're at the beginning of the 20th century, so we didn't have any vaccines. We didn't have any effective medicine. So the most -- the tools that this government had to control it was basically based on hygiene measures. Public health measures based on hygiene. So what is that? Isolation, quarantine, cleaning measures. Right? Disinfecting. So we can see those two things at play here. So we -- on the one hand, we have this institution where some of the people affected by influenza were housed, where the government tried to identify -- quickly identify them and then isolate them. And then in the bottom one, we see people cleaning and doing some -- some -- some activities related to hygiene principles. So that's -- that's -- that's a very interesting interplay of -- of strategies that we're seeing here.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: I -- I -- I was also looking at the -- at the image in the bottom. That seems like a street stall. It could be a food stall. It could be -- and if you pay attention, there's also a little bottle which could have been the disinfectant. Right? It was -- that was one of the devices. Right? Clean and disinfect. And the disinfectants of the time were formaldehyde and -- and creolin. Creolin, right? It was the word -- comes from tar. It's a -- some derivation of tar.

Yeah. Derived product of tar. So -- so this is -- this is an excellent example of how -- those -- you can teach history through connections to what are -- are reality. Something that feels so -- so -- so close to us right now, such as the pandemic, to open it to talking about other things such as Mexican -- the Mexican Revolution, World War I. How these things are interconnected. How it played out in the -- in the spread of -- of the disease throughout the world, too. And one thing before we move to the next slide was I wanted to draw your attention to the seal that you see at the top where the title of the newspaper is, El Democrata. These -- these have been two front pages -- the previous one and this one and the next one are front pages of these national newspapers. And we have taken them from two databases, mainly. The Latin American Newspaper -- Newspapers from 1804 to 1922. You can access it if you have a library card. But also the National Library of Mexico -- and that's why you see the seal that says "National Library of Mexico" has in their digital collections a very, very -- good collection and digitized collection of newspapers -- historical newspapers. Where -- that's where this -- this image from El Democrata was pulled. So moving to the next slide, can you talk -- the -- the -- our audience has already mentioned the masks. Right? So something that is so, so familiar to us. So can you tell us more details about this image?

OSCAR PEREZ: Yes, definitely. I mean -- and -- and I wouldn't have a lot of information about this particular character. So historians have referenced this image -- historians of medicine in Mexico have referenced this image because it's -- it -- it kind of is very familiar to us at this time. And I find this image very interesting, more for what we don't see than for what we see here. And there are two things that we don't see that are not completely shown here. And one of them is that this is a -- a measure that was not widely used as a public health measure in -- at this time. So masks were not one of the tools that the government used to control the pandemic. Right? It wasn't -- it wasn't widely used in Mexico. It wasn't widely used in many places. Masks were used in -- in settings like hospitals and sanatoriums by healthcare professionals but not by regular people. So this is one of the things that we see here. And instead, for example, the use of handkerchiefs were -- was very common. Like, people had them and the government recommended -- one of the measures that the government recommended was to use it every time people cough or every time they need to use it for something. So everybody should -- was supposed to be carrying a handkerchief. The other thing that we don't see here is that this is referencing a whole economy of the pandemic. So they -- there were a lot of products that were sold at this time in order to control the pandemic beyond the official measures. Right? There was a parallel economy that included medications, remedies, other artifacts that people could use to -- most of them were not proven as effective, but there was -- there was a market for these things.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: And the interesting thing is if you go to those databases that I mentioned and you make -- you do a search for influenza or -- or pandemic from -- of the time, what you get the most -- the most results are from those commercial advertisements of selling, I don't know, blankets in prevention -- to not be cold. Right? Being cold makes you catch the flu so that idea of staying warm. So colds, blankets, of course, many tonics as -- as Oscar has mentioned, and it would go as far as using it purely for commercial purposes as -- for selling

tequila, for example. There's -- there's an ad that you can find in there. But let's look to more -- speaking of these -- these resourceful ads and many products that were offered, let's move to something more contemporary -- somewhat contemporary to us. And an example of that is this, which is another page of a national newspaper, La Jornada, from May 2 of 2009.

OSCAR PEREZ: Yeah. So we have jumped 90 years into the future from the last pandemic and we are here now at the influenza pandemic, the H -- H -- H1N1 pandemic that had the epicenter in Mexico in 2009 and one of the things that we see here is that basically the mask come back. This time, from the very moment -- so the -- the government was a little hesitant to recognize that there was actually a pandemic going on at this time in Mexico. But once it recognized that the pandemic was going, among the first measures that it recommended, the same day that they said, yes, this is a pandemic, these are the things that people need to do. And one -- those things, it was the use of masks. So it was very much part of the public health measures that the people had to follow, and people -- and because of this clear messaging, I believe, people were less hesitant to wear masks at this time. One of the things that happened, too, is that media was welcoming to this idea and often show images like this. In this case, what we're seeing is an effort to highlight the -- how masks can be used to express individual identities. Right? So each of these person shows them -- their -- their own qualities and artistic expression and creativity through the mask. So, in a way, it's countering the idea that somehow wearing a mask is a restriction of freedom and it goes against expressing our own individual selves. Right? So this is -- this is -- this is one of the reasons why this image is so interesting, I think.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: And as a sign of, again, about resources. This -- this image -- this article -- newspaper was taken from another database and that's Press Display. Here is -- here's an example, a screen shot of how it displays in your -- in your -- in your screen. You can see that the internal page number 3, which is the one that we were talking about, is on your right. And on the left we have the front page of that day. So it's a very -- a very useful resource to see what was mentioned in the front page if this was not front page news, and where did it appear later on. This is a facsimile of -- of how the -- the newspaper appeared exactly in print. That's why it's black and white, too. So moving onto -- now that we have seen these examples of news coverage of these two pandemics, let's see an excellent example that you were very -- that you teach also in your classes, Oscar, of how reality influences creative works such as literature.

OSCAR PEREZ: Yes. This is -- this is a -- this is a fascinating novel. It's a very short novel. I recommend anyone that hasn't read it, I recommend thoroughly to read it. It has been translated into English, so the English translation is available. And it's a -- it's a novel by Mexican author Yuri Herrera, who portrays this city affected by a pandemic. We don't know which city this is or what kind of -- this is affecting this place, but there are many elements that make it a recognizable space, very much connected to the pandemic of 2009. So one of the things that we can see in this novel is that the way media and newspapers in particular reported and conveyed information about the pandemic is very much present in this novel. For example, in this bottom part, we see this -- this comes from the news article, a speech by the Secretary of Health in Mexico. In the first -- the first time that they recognize that this was a pandemic. This

was in April 2009. So we can see many elements in this speech, things like, well, this is epidemic. These are the recommendations from the government. Things that you should not be doing is, like, kissing, saying hi with, like, your hand. You should report if you are not feeling well. You should stay at home. You should cover your nose and mouth. These -- these recommendations have translated into a literary form in the top, which is a quote that comes from the novel. And you can see that the author very much is referencing what is happening in -- in reality in this [inaudible]. And often uses same words, right, that -- that we can see in newspapers. So is very interesting to see and to make the -- the comparison and contrast.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: As -- as Oscar mentioned already that the bottom image, or the top images are the front -- the cover of -- of the book, of Yuri Herrera's book in English. First in Spanish, the original, then a translation in English. In the chat you'll have the links to find those books through our catalogue. But also Press Display, as I said, has the -- the -- you can -- the archives, for [inaudible], but also the same -- La Jornada Newspaper has its own archive, its historical archive for free. For those of you that don't have access to Press Display, you can still find the -- these for free online. The La Jornada content. So let's now, since we are out of time, unfortunately, let's open the -- the -- the floor to questions from those that are -- that are watching. Should I stop sharing, Kate, or --

KATE CORDES: I'm muted. You can keep that up. Let's start off with a question and then, everyone, you can add your questions to the Q&A button at the bottom. I'd like to start by asking a question about, how Paloma or Oscar -- how you would incorporate some of these historical newspaper clippings into a classroom. How would a teacher find a way to do that?

OSCAR PEREZ: Well, I think there are many ways to do this. What I think that teachers can do, for example, is to do what we just did in this last slide. So compare and use creative works like this novel that are some short stories that talk about this -- this pandemic, films that might be talking about this pandemic, and then make the connection with the news, newspapers. Students can go and -- and find historical information, articles about this, and know more about this. Another -- another idea, for example, is if you -- if you can see in one of the previous slides, we had this creative expression through masks. So maybe, perhaps, students could use this -- this idea or -- or -- [inaudible] to push the students to -- to feel what it -- what it -- a little bit this creative expression through this mask. Perhaps do workshops or -- or -- or -- or -- or ask them to do some sort of a -- a -- a exercise that mimics what we see here for example.

KATE CORDES: Thoughts, Paloma?

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: Oh, sure. I -- I was reading an article, super interesting article that was focused -- that was a study about how the media -- what -- what are the metaphors that the media uses to refer to the pandemic? And it was about this 2009 pandemic, but it could be used for any of the -- any pandemic. Right? Especially ours now and how it's still -- since it's something that we're still living. And how it has been used. What are the different ways that some -- that media refers to it? Right? So an invasion. Right? Sometimes we hear it as an

invasion, a war against the virus. All these other uses that could help you also understand the different takes that -- that -- that the journalists are -- are -- are showing us on the [inaudible].

OSCAR PEREZ: And that is key. I mean, language is very important. It -- looking at how these ideas and topics are communicated, I think, gives a lot of opportunities in the classroom.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: And one thing we forgot to mention was that, despite using all these newspapers and clippings, let's talk about, in Spanish, it doesn't mean that you can't use them in classes that not necessarily speak Spanish or those -- because there -- there -- what we look --

[Silence]

-- so much information out of the visuals and the dates, of course, of -- of -- of when it was published. So -- so that's another thing that we wanted to encourage, to start using --

[Silence]

-- so --

KATE CORDES: I lost you for a second, Paloma.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: Oh, sorry.

KATE CORDES: Question from -- from Julie. How can we draw parallels or encourage students to draw these parallels on their own between historical pandemics and today in a nuanced way?

OSCAR PEREZ: Yeah. This is a -- this is a very good question because one of the things that is so -- so -- I mean, we can see a lot of resembles to the ways we -- we think about this current pandemic in these images. Right? So many of these images are very familiar. But it is important, I think, to highlight this particular context and the differences, too. This is not -- it is not the same thing. We're not talking about -- these are very two complex historical moments. And -- and going back and looking at these articles and reading what people say about them, how they say, how they talk about these topics, it's -- I think it's very enlightening for them to see the -- the differences in how we talk about our current pandemic.

KATE CORDES: I have a question about the historical resources in Mexico from the 1918 influenza. What other forms of mass communication or popular communication were used besides newspapers to communicate to the populace about effective measures or -- or -- or to combat things like a -- like using, I don't know, Paloma mentioned tequila as some kind of disinfectant? Things like this. Where else did it show up?

OSCAR PEREZ: Well, newspapers were the social media of the time. Right? So newspapers were the -- the main element to communicate with the public to talk about what was happening. People were very much aware of this and there were many numerous local and national newspapers published in the morning, published in the afternoon. So that's definitely the -- the main way to -- to look at this -- this time. Other things we can see in -- in public events, announcements, perhaps, in -- in certain situations or certain places where people will gather. No? Which was a little harder because one of the things that the government did very early on with this pandemic is to ban any large gatherings. So any of these events where people -- they even tried to close the trains that went from the ports to the cities to stop the spread of it. So it didn't work because, precisely, very familiar to us, there were many economic concerns about those kinds of measures and how it was going to affect the economy. But I would say newspapers -- newspapers is kind of the -- the main way.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: There were some official channels, but that was not necessarily for the general public. It was more for the doctors or -- but remember that -- that Mexico is coming out of civil war.

KATE CORDES: Right.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: So their infrastructure is pretty devastated after a decade of a civil war. So -- but there is mention of -- of the official publications of guidelines for hygiene and [inaudible] that would be -- yeah, like little -- very, very -- like pamphlets with -- manuals of how -- the measures to prevent the -- the disease. But there wasn't that much at that point.

KATE CORDES: There -- there's a comment in the chat about -- about the role of teachers teaching -- teaching people about the -- about the rules and about -- about public health also as other networks of communication were employed.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: And that's -- that's -- those -- those printouts that the government had made were for teachers, for professors, for those that would be able to spread the word to the rest of the communities, too.

KATE CORDES: And as you noted with the -- the example of the contemporary novel being influenced by journalistic language around the pandemic, were there also instances in the 1918 pandemic of -- of cultural productions, novels, plays, anything like that being influenced by -- by newspaper articles?

OSCAR PEREZ: Well, not that I know of. And this -- it's very curious because this pandemic caused -- it was estimated that between 300,000 and 500,000 people died in the span of three months. So it arrived in October. By January the pandemic was over. So you would think that there would be more presence in cultural productions, but it's not very easy to find. We're -- we're in a moment with cultural productions were definitely influenced by the revolution. So everything that was being produced at this time had to do with these years of the revolution and

the intention of writers and all these creative people was definitely there. It's -- it's -- it's interesting, though, that it's not more present.

KATE CORDES: Right.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: I would -- I would think that maybe looking more carefully into -- in the -- the -- there's novels that, as Oscar said, there's an entire genre of novels and literature on the Mexican Revolution, novella revolucion Mexicana. So there might be many mentions. And I remember some of them by what I've read, but not only focused on the pandemic necessarily. And as -- as Oscar has mentioned, there were so many deaths during that same time that, when they bundled -- when -- when the mention of the statistics of how many people died during the Mexican Revolution, they're both -- they can't be separated because it was happening at the same time.

KATE CORDES: That is true. A bit of a mea culpa here. I let us go over our official time, so I'm sorry to -- to cut us short, but I will just make a note that links to these collection items and the resources we've discussed here, Paloma and Oscar, along with a video of this and a transcript of the episode will be published on the library's blog which we will send out to all registrants. Previous episodes can be found there as well. And the -- the easiest way to find blog posts is to subscribe at the research@nypl channel, the blog, which I will put in the chat in a second. Also say Doc Chats are held on every Thursday at 3:30. There it is in the chat. Next episode is the library's very own Carmen Nigro and Annie Polland, President of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, who -- they will be examining photos taken by inspectors of the New York City Tenement House Department and they will discuss reformed regulation and social conditions in Depression Era NYC. So you can register at the link that I just dropped in the chat and you can look for future Doc Chat event pages on our calendar as well. So please stay in touch and keep an eye out for the link to the blog. And thank you so very much to Paloma and Oscar, and we'll keep an eye out for your book as well, so --

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: Yes.

KATE CORDES: -- thank you so much, both of you.

PALOMA CELIS CARBAJAL: Thank you, Oscar. Thank you, Kate.

OSCAR PEREZ: Bye, everyone.