



LIFE MATTERS

The Human Condition in the Age of Pandemics (An Introduction)

In December of 2019 a new illness was identified in the city of Wuhan, China. It resembled a flu, but caused fever and a type of pneumonia which was very difficult to control and could be lethal among older adults. The virus was quickly identified as a type of coronavirus and named SARS-Co2 but could not be contained by the Chinese authorities. Carried by international travelers who had visited Wuhan, it rapidly spread to the United States and through Europe, first wreaking havoc in Italy and Spain and then in the entire world (BBC, March 20, 2020). In March of 2020, when the virus had reached most countries, causing major suffering and death, the World Health Organization (WHO) called on national governments to take special measures to avoid contagion as much as possible. These measures included “preventing transmission amplification events, and preventing further international spread” (WHO, 27 February 2020). In March of 2020, WHO declared COVID-19, as the condition provoked by the SARS-Co2 virus was named, a pandemic (Ducharme 2020). WHO declared the end of the COVID-19 emergency on May 5 of 2023 (WHO, 5 May 2023), after at least thirteen million people had died from the SARS-CoV2 virus (UN, May 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic led not only to a drastic loss of human life worldwide, but also posed an unprecedented challenge to human existence and survival at the global level, probably

Gabriela Vargas-Cetina
Autonomous University
of Yucatan, Mexico
RIAS Associate Editor
and
Manpreet Kaur Kang
Guru Gobind Singh
Indraprastha University,
India
Issue Editors



<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1174-0357>



<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6375-1117>

the greatest test to humans in the post-World War-II history, causing devastating economic and social disruption. Thousands of people lost their jobs, often falling into extreme poverty as thousands of businesses folded. Suicide statistics skyrocketed; the count of isolation-related depression cases has never been higher, and mental health, especially among the youngest, has become imperiled. And although the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2021 and Israel's war on Palestine, in 2023, diverted the world's attention away from COVID, millions of people world-wide continue living under the constant threat of the virus, as registered by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation in October 2023 (World-wide pandemic recovery survey at <https://vizhub.healthdata.org/pandemic-recovery-survey/#overview>). New COVID strains keep researchers and vaccine specialists on their toes, while politics, both globally and nationally, impacts the availability, cost and even efficacy of the booster shots (Matta, Shanker, Sanjay Rajpal and K. K. Chopra, and V. K. Arora, 2021, Klobucista, 2022).

Beyond doubt, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone. As the world survey quoted above shows, the aftermath of the pandemic seemed to point towards a renewed focus on the fundamental truths of life, such as survival, livelihood, human dignity, and basic human rights. But in reality, COVID-19 awakened many demons. Governments leaning towards the old *divide et impera* cynically used regulations concerning isolation to pass laws that would otherwise cause riots in the streets (Agamben 2020). Scapegoating, xenophobia, and the intensification of hate discourses dangerously resembling those reverberating in Germany in the 1930s emerged during the pandemic and have continued in its aftermath. Intellectuals have been targeted by silencing policies worldwide. Importantly, the pandemic brought forth the manifestation of yet another face of privilege, glaringly showing through the pandemic's global statistics, that not all lives matter equally (Stiglitz 2020). Some social groups have proven to be more vulnerable, and governments protect some groups while caring less or even abandoning others, and after the massive vaccination campaigns of 2021 and 2022, which saved millions of lives, came along new, brutal wars, including the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and Palestine by Israel. These circumstances continue

to remind us that we live in a world widely divided by politics, privilege, and military objectives. Needless to say, the effects Stiglitz pointed out in 2020 continue to date: the pandemic has proven particularly detrimental to the elderly, to Indigenous nations, and to those living in utmost poverty. People without access to running water, refugees, migrants, or displaced persons also stand to suffer invariably both from the pandemic and its aftermath, which includes the current wars in Ukraine, the Middle East and several African countries. This issue of the *Review of International American Studies* aims to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our cultural milieu, and the pathways now opening (or closing) for humans and life.

Not all these paths are life-producing or life-nurturing, as John T. Matteson and Giorgio Mariani remind us in their articles. The issue of existential homelessness, which resonates loudly with the personal and even collective experiences many of us had during the covid pandemic, is explored by John Matteson in his essay “Love, Labor, and Loss: The Trans-Atlantic Homelessness of James Baldwin.” Matteson delves into the complex themes of love, labor, and loss in the life and works of James Baldwin, particularly focusing on Baldwin’s transatlantic experiences. Baldwin’s diverse identities—as a Black man, a gay man, an intellectual, and an American abroad—impacted his sense of self and belonging. Matteson reflects on Baldwin’s critique of America’s mythologies, emphasizing the nation’s struggle with its own invented self-image and the consequences of such blindness. The essay elucidates Baldwin’s role as a post-modern Jeremiah, tirelessly working to dispel illusions and reveal the fractures within American society. It examines Baldwin’s dual consciousness, shaped by his experiences abroad, leading to a “cosmopolitan loneliness” and a perpetual quest for a true spiritual home. Matteson argues that Baldwin’s sense of exclusion was not solely based on race but encompassed various dimensions of identity, emphasizing the inherent complexities within the concept of being “American.” Matteson highlights Baldwin’s concern for the economic foundations of exclusion and the pressure of Americanness tied to the relentless pursuit of success.

Gabriela Vargas-Cetina
Autonomous University
of Yucatan, Mexico
RIAS Associate Editor
and
Manpreet Kaur Kang
Guru Gobind Singh
Indraprastha University,
India
Issue Editors

Examining Baldwin's reflections on masculinity and race, the essay delves into his novel *Giovanni's Room*, where Baldwin explores themes of sexual purity and historical blamelessness within the context of the White American psyche. It explores the theme of America's perceived innocence and its impact on various aspects of society, including racial attitudes, foreign policy, and sexual repression. The conclusion emphasizes Baldwin's commitment to exposing the flaws of exclusion, rooted in humankind's inability to confront reality honestly and a loss of the capacity to love, leading to a profound sense of social alienation and existential loneliness. There is a possibility of societal redemption through love and a rediscovery of common ground.

The White American psyche of exclusion that Matteson underscores was seen playing out during the COVID pandemic in terms of access to hygienic environments and availability of healthcare. Statistics related to the number of infected and the number of casualties among the marginalized groups are a disturbing but sad reflection of racial attitudes in America. It reinforces the manifestation of the face of privilege and the harsh reality of some social groups being more vulnerable, and the fact that not all lives matter equally.

Appropriately taking our minds to the post-COVID world we now live in, in his article for this *RIAS* issue, Giorgio Mariani reflects on peace as an artifact of contemporary military might: today, "peace" seems to be understood as the absence or desisting of always-possible armed hostilities, and not as a state that could be conceptualized as natural or self-sustaining. The case of the Russian war on Ukraine shows that both Russia and Ukraine believe that being ready for and waging war are the sure and only pathways towards peace. Politicians, from those who subscribe to NATO to those advocating Russia, want us to accept this definition of peace as the absence of war. This conclusion makes it urgent for us to re-think our views on the current, terrible wars and crime-related violence, which is affecting more civilians than military effectives. Against the political status quo, we must reconceptualize peace as separate from war, and not as one of its results or extensions. In the age of nuclear weapons, we must come to understand that national borders cannot be any lon-

ger the limits of our conceptual maps, lest we miss the chance to improve the world in which we are living and build a better one. These two articles are a good introduction to the following section, where authors do deal with either COVID-19 or similar pandemics.

Djelal Kadir provides us with a glossary, inspired by medical terminology, offering us possible alternatives when trying to name those new afflictions of personality and intellect which we acquired during and have continued to develop after the COVID-19 pandemic. Kadir has coined terms to name many of our contemporary maladies and conditions, including the obsession with social media, living of our lives inside the online multiverses, our inescapable exposition to warmongering, and the looming fear of viruses that the pandemic has left in its wake. The article is written tongue-in-cheek (obviously!) but addresses actual afflictions for which we are yet to have names; the causes and the effects are real, and certainly we must look at ourselves with humor and hope for future cures of the body and the soul.

In a more sociological vein, Tomasz Burzyński analyzes the importance of patient empowerment narratives on the anti-vaccine movements in the United States. Drawing on what he considers anti-vaccination movements—a form of “lumpenliberalism” that puts individual choice and emancipation above the interest of the collectivity—he highlights the character of biomedicine as not only a form of knowledge and a combination of biology and technology (as it has been characterized in former sociological work), but also approaches it from a functionalist perspective. In the 21st century, after the experience of grassroots social movements opposing vaccines and vaccination, it becomes clear that biomedicine is not only a knowledge system in itself, but also a social system that rests on a set of social expectations and public perceptions.

Looking at the past and to the future, the realm of American literature also comes to shed light on our contemporary human condition. Digging stories from American literature, Navdeep Kahol seamlessly combines the themes of pandemics and war. She reminds us of past pandemics and how their ravaging effects can be glimpsed through novels and essays. In 1918 a new influenza virus rapidly spread across the US. Hundreds of American soldiers who were preparing to leave for Europe, to fight in WWI, became

Gabriela Vargas-Cetina
Autonomous University
of Yucatan, Mexico
RIAS Associate Editor
and
Manpreet Kaur Kang
Guru Gobind Singh
Indraprastha University,
India
Issue Editors

ill. After the first recorded outbreak at Fort Riley in Kansas, outbreaks were recorded in six other states, mostly affecting soldiers. The flu was given the code name, “the Spanish lady,” in order to keep knowledge of it from the enemy on the European and Asian fronts, and the affliction became known as “the Spanish flu.” Once across the ocean, the flu rapidly spread first to France and then to the rest of Europe and Asia, causing one of the worst pandemics the world has ever experienced (Fujimura 2003). Kahol analyzes the short, largely autobiographical novel *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, published in 1939, by Katherine Anne Porter, where she chronicles the effects of the Spanish flu on herself and her social milieu. Porter has left us, Kahol explains, a first-person witness account of the sheer social chaos and emotional despair in which the flu pandemic left thousands of people in the United States. The novel is named after an African American spiritual song which had the verse “Pale horse, pale rider done taken my lover away,” which the protagonist asks her lover to sing with her. Kahol characterizes Porter as a romantic writer who left us a historical and artful mirror in which to see ourselves reflected after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another romantic figure we can glimpse against the backdrop of epidemics and pandemics is Yellapragada SubbaRow. Through his work on phosphorous and the abatement of anemia, he contributed toward improving human health, thus making people less prone to diseases. SubbaRow was an Indian-born biochemist who showed some promise as a scientist in India but did most of his research in the United States. With the help of his wife’s father, who funded his voyage to leave India, he managed to travel to America and become a researcher at Harvard, where he eventually got his PhD. He left Harvard to work at Lederle Laboratories, where he continued his work on anemia and folic acid, also participating in the development of drugs for the treatment of cancer (Nagendrappa 2012). According to Avani Bhatnagar, who contributes an important chapter to this *RIAS* issue, SubbaRow was a romantic who did not think as a businessman, but rather as a man who was contributing to the improvement of human health at large. He could not find in himself the tycoon who beco-

mes rich from the commercial value of his discoveries, but only the philanthropist who felt that he owed himself to the world.

Resonating with our post-COVID contemporary realities, Giacomo Traina reviews Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer*, published in 2015. Traina describes how the novel's character sees himself implicated in the erasure of the defeated when telling the stories of wars. The novel's main character is a communist double agent working for the Vietnam regime in charge of following the former South Vietnamese army abroad. He travels to California, and at some point, is hired by a Hollywood executive who is making a movie about the involvement of the US army in Vietnam. Nguyen uses his character to criticize the way in which the Vietnamese people are portrayed in American movies, and the many forms in which their history is systematically erased. Towards the end of the novel, he also finds himself tortured by his best friend, who is using CIA interrogation methods. The methods of war are global, and local troops everywhere are from around the globe, and so are the war's victims. Traina's sense of irony at this passage reminds us of the heterogeneous membership of combatants in today's wars. Some members of Al Qaeda, Hamas, and other groups of the global Muslim Jihad, were either born in Europe or the Americas, sometimes having embraced Islam in their adulthood, or were trained in foreign armies before joining Islamic terrorist groups. Also, volunteers from across the globe, including the Americas, have enrolled as volunteer soldiers in Ukraine.

After all these gloomy perspectives, fortunately, we can count on literature to show us pathways towards hope. One such path is Buddhism. Anita Patterson and Daphne Orlandi write on an iconic American literary figure, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was exposed to Asian cultures, and particularly to Buddhism. This ancient philosophy infuses his work and, Patterson argues, has greatly influenced the work of his contemporary authors and of those who followed later. She intricately weaves together the threads of Emerson's affinity with Buddhism, its influence on Wright's haiku-inspired poetry, and the broader implications for the 20th-century philosophical traditions and literary developments.

Perhaps it is partly thanks to Emerson's prestige, which made Buddhism widely accepted as a philosophy and religious

Gabriela Vargas-Cetina
Autonomous University
of Yucatan, Mexico
RIAS Associate Editor
and
Manpreet Kaur Kang
Guru Gobind Singh
Indraprastha University,
India
Issue Editors

viewpoint that continued to be esteemed through the decades that, in the twenty-first century, the influence of Buddhism has moved from the philosophical to the practical realm. Yoga and meditation, disciplines associated with Buddhism, have become very popular in the Americas and beyond. It is worth mentioning, in the context of this issue of *RIAS*, that during the COVID pandemic meditation and mindfulness apps experienced an unusual growth of users, the numbers of which fell when the life-threatening character of the infection subsided (Wetsman 2022).

Patterson elucidates Emerson's early encounters with Asian cultures, especially Buddhism, during his formative years. She details Emerson's exposure to Buddhist ideas through Victor Cousin's lectures in Paris and explores the significance of Eugene Burnouf's contributions to the study of Buddhism in the 1830s. Patterson suggests that Emerson's interest in Buddhism during this period laid the groundwork for his later philosophical development.

Moreover, she examines Emerson's doctrine of correspondence in connection with the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination. She discusses Emerson's ambivalence towards Buddhism, citing his aversion to what he perceived as an "over-rational quality" in it. She contends that, however, this perspective may have influenced Emerson's appeal to the intellectual quality underlying Buddhist thought. Patterson also highlights Emerson's explicit identification of Buddhism with Transcendentalism in his 1842 lecture, linking it to his belief in a universe where virtuous actions yield beneficial effects. There is an exploration of Emerson's recurring themes of selflessness and the nonego, with references to specific passages in his works that resonate with Buddhist concepts.

Patterson highlights the debate surrounding Wright's haiku-inspired poetry, questioning whether he departs from his earlier social and political concerns. She argues that understanding Wright's poetry requires contextualizing it within a twentieth-century Emersonian pragmatist tradition, involving scholars such as Cornel West, James Albrecht, and Douglas Anderson. The discussion emphasizes the East-West intercultural exchange, including John Dewey and Ralph Ellison, as crucial influences on this tradition. The latter part of her analysis delves into Richard Wright's engagement with Buddhism through the works of British haiku scholar

R. H. Blyth and Emerson's influence on Wright's haiku-inspired poetry. The analysis scrutinizes a specific poem, "I am nobody," suggesting multiple interpretations, including a pragmatic affirmation of Emerson's individualistic ethic. Patterson concludes by discussing how Wright's pragmatist poetics and interest in Buddhism shed light on Emerson's neglected contribution to T. S. Eliot's modernism in *The Waste Land*.

In the last essay of this collection, we find another article related to Emerson and Transcendentalism. Daphne Orlandi explores dissent's historical significance in shaping America, focusing on its role in religious and political movements, including migrations and the War of Independence. The essay then examines the link between dissent and Transcendentalism, questioning its portrayal as a source of American dissent, especially in Emerson's works. Orlandi argues that Emerson's reformative ideas, primarily aimed at individual transformation, also intend broader societal impact.

Highlighting the relevance of Emerson today, she notes ongoing scholarly debates on individualism and societal change. She underscores Emerson's emphasis on self-reliance and the reformist nature of Transcendentalism. She then delves into Emerson's reform theory, exploring the intersection of individualism and societal improvement. Despite focusing on individual growth, she argues that Emerson envisions a dynamic relationship between self-reliant individuals and society. Orlandi discusses key essays illustrating Emerson's evolving thoughts on reform and emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between individual development and societal change.

The conclusion highlights Emerson's belief that true self-reliance involves commitment to societal betterment. He envisions self-reliant individuals as intellectual powers contributing to enriching life for all. The essay positions Emerson's philosophy as a transformative force for significant social change when applied collectively.

We believe that this issue of *RIAS* is a good gauge through which we have taken the pulse of the American Studies scholarly community while we all recover, bodily, emotionally, and intellectually, from what the COVID-19 pandemic meant to us all. We can see the fears, duress, resilience, ingenuity, and reflections that it brought on, awoke and propitiated. Hopefully we are now

Gabriela Vargas-Cetina
Autonomous University
of Yucatan, Mexico
RIAS Associate Editor
and
Manpreet Kaur Kang
Guru Gobind Singh
Indraprastha University,
India
Issue Editors

ready to think of alternative futures beyond mortal pandemics and lethal wars. Cultural Studies, including *RIAS*, can help us see that glimmer at the end of the long tunnel where the pandemic put us and from which it is taking us so long to fully exit.

Gabriela Vargas-Cetina and Manpreet Kaur Kang
Issue Editors

Abstract: The world has recently experienced the ravages of the COVID-19 epidemic and new, terrible wars. The pandemic and the wars now being waged show us how fragile human life is on our planet. The facts that the COVID-19 virus came originally from one or more animals that are part of the human food chain, and that the viruses themselves are forms of life very different from plants and animals, have altered our perception of our place in the world. Wars fought in this changed biological context have also shown how precarious the balance of power is in what we have come to see as a global humanity. Scholars in the fields of Humanities and Cultural Studies have risen to the occasion by focusing on the cultural effects of biological and war-time violence-related catastrophes. In this issue of *RIAS* focusing on the Americas and their influence on the world, we look at the implications of pandemics and wars, and human reactions to similar threats in the past, such as the pandemic of the Spanish flu which decimated soldiers during World War I. And once again, literature comes to our rescue in the time of heightened angst, showing us paths of the mind already present in American literature that may nudge us in a better direction. Existential homelessness, Buddhism, and meditation, also appear here as "life matters," and that in the double sense: they are both *matters* of life and *signals* that life, and especially human life, must matter.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, war, IASA, *RIAS*, introduction

Bios: Gabriela Vargas-Cetina is Full Professor and Researcher at the Faculty of Anthropological Sciences of the Autonomous University of Yucatan, where she coordinates the Laboratory of Sound and Acoustemology. She studies organizations and has done fieldwork in Canada, Italy, Mexico and Spain. She is interested in music and the arts, including their creation, production and presence in the digital world, and on the politics of representation in anthropology. Her publications include the book *Beautiful Politics of Music: Trova in Yucatan, Mexico* (U of Alabama Press, 2017) and the collection *Anthropology and the Politics of Representation* (U of Alabama Press, 2013). Her current fieldwork in Andalusia focuses on religious and musical organizations.

Dr. Manpreet Kaur Kang is Professor of English at the University School of Humanities & Social Sciences, and also the Director of Students' Welfare at Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi. She holds a PhD from Panjab University and her areas of interest include American Literature, Writing of the Indian Diaspora and Gender Studies. She has

*Life Matters:
The Human Condition
in the Age of Pandemics*

RIAS VOL. 16, FALL-WINTER Nº 2/2023

a teaching and research experience of thirty one years, which includes teaching at the graduate and undergraduate levels. She was a Shastri Fellow at the Department of English, University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. 2009-10. She has four books and twenty research papers to her credit and is the Editor of a journal. She has been presenting papers at National and International Conferences regularly and has been mentoring PhD and MPhil scholars. She is the current Secretary, MELOW (Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the World) and a member of the IASA Executive Council.

WORKS CITED

- Agamben, Giorgio. *A che punto siamo? L'epidemia come politica*. Quodlibet, 2020.
- British Broadcasting Corporation. "Coronavirus: Europe now the epicentre of the pandemic, says WHO." *BBC News*, 13 Mar. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51876784. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.
- Ducharme, Jamie. "The World Health Organization Declares COVID-19 a 'Pandemic.' Here's What That Means." *Time Magazine*, 11 Mar. 2020, time.com/5791661/who-coronavirus-pandemic-declaration. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.
- Fujirama, Sara Francis. "Purple Death: The Great Flu of 1918." *Perspectives in Health*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2003, Pan American Health Organization, www.paho.org/en/who-we-are/history-paho/purple-death-great-flu-1918. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.
- Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. *Pandemic Recovery Survey, October 2023*. vizhub.healthdata.org/pandemic-recovery-survey/#overview. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.
- Klobucista, Claire. "A Guide to Global COVID-19 Vaccine Efforts." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2022, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/guide-global-covid-19-vaccine-efforts. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.
- Matta, Shanker, et al. "COVID-19 Vaccines and New Mutant Strains Impacting the Pandemic." *Indian Journal of Tuberculosis*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2021, pp. 171-173, doi:10.1016/j.ijtb.2021.03.010.
- Nagendrappa, Gopalpur. "Yellapragada SubbaRow, The Man of Miracle Drugs." *Resonance*, June 2012, www.ias.ac.in/public/Volumes/reso/017/06/0538-0557.pdf. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.
- Stiglitz, Joseph. "Conquering the Great Divide. The Pandemic has Laid Bare Deep Divisions, but It's Not Too Late to Change

Course." *International Monetary Fund*, 2020, www.imf.org/Publications/fandd/issues/2020/09/COVID19-and-global-inequality-joseph-stiglitz. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.

United Nations–Department of Economic and Social Affairs. "14.9 Million Excess Deaths Associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 and 2021." *United Nations*, 2023, www.un.org/en/desa/149-million-excess-deaths-associated-covid-19-pandemic-2020-and-2021. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.

Westerman, Nicole. "Meditation Apps Also Experience Post-Pandemic Falloff." *The Verge*, 19 Aug. 2022, www.theverge.com/2022/8/19/23312891/meditation-apps-user-data-headspace-calm. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.

World Health Organization. "Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report–38." 27 Feb. 2020, www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200227-sitrep-38-covid-19.pdf. Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.

World Health Organization. "Statement on the Fifteenth Meeting of the IHR (2005) Emergency Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic." 5 May 2023, [www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-pandemic](http://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic). Accessed 12 Nov. 2023.