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Chapter Four

Pandemic Love

Christina Romero Ivanova & Paul Cook

"It was the year they fell into devastating love. Neither one could do anything except think about the other, dream about the other, and wait for letters with the same impatience they felt when they answered them" (Marquez 68).

In *All about Love*, social activist and feminist philosopher Bell Hooks notes that men have traditionally been love's theorists and women its practitioners (170-71). In her analysis, Hooks takes apart societal ideals of love, showing how popular culture constructs and feeds these ideals, as well as women's and men's fixed roles in pursuing and being pursued in (and by) love. Traditionally, as in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the male protagonist, Florentino Ariza, is the pursuer of love and the female protagonist, Fermina Daza, is the one who is pursued. The story opens with Dr. Urbino, who is the man Fermina marries (to appease her father and as a measure to secure her future), and we come to understand his life in the context of his medical profession as a physician. The story then segues to his and Fermina's initial meeting, courtship, engagement, and eventual marriage. The reading then abruptly ends the narrative of married love with Dr. Urbino's accidental death, though flashbacks take the reader back to Dr. Urbino and Fermina Daza's marriage throughout the book.

The theme of unrequited love is central to Dr. Urbino and Fermina Daza's marriage, to Florentino Ariza's conjugal experiences, and to other characters' tales of love; this theme is perhaps most fully embodied by Florentino's persistence in seeking Fermina's reciprocal acts of love and attention. Florentino's motivation and resilience grow in his attempts to win Fermina's favor throughout their

long lives until finally, in old age, Florentino's love is reciprocated.

Literary history, film, journalism, contemporary fiction, and the historical record itself are brimful of stories about love and romance in times of large-scale societal breakdown, including pandemics and other public health emergencies. As we have all struggled to make sense of the new normal of COVID-19, contagion, masks and quarantine, so too have people across the globe been forced to adapt to changing circumstances and expectations of their romantic lives and togetherness in these unprecedented times. With COVID-19 still raging across the world, our present historical moment presents us with an opportune time to look back at this rich and evocative history, as many scholars, critics and commentators have already done in a variety of media.

Since the initial effects of the global pandemic first hit the United States in March of 2020, there has been an explosion of interest in popular media and on the web in how people's romantic, home, and family lives are faring during quarantines and social distancing. The podcast *Modern Love* got in on the conversation early with an episode from April 2020 on the way the coronavirus was affecting their relationships. Contributors told stories of loneliness, unrequited love, and virtual dates conducted through the lens of a webcam. One story focused on Cory, a man who met a professional wine buyer for a major New York City restaurant on the dating app Hinge. They made plans to have a wine date, but when the arrival of lockdown in March thwarted those plans, they arranged to meet via Facetime and were able to conduct a wine tasting virtually. Another couple who met and started dating on Valentine's Day 2020, saw the crucial early stages of their relationship sped up by the pandemic. "I thought of the moments of intimacy that you have at the beginning of a relationship and how we would lose that," says a Princeton, New Jersey woman of her long-distance relationship with her boyfriend in Munich, Germany. However, one month into texting and video chatting, she says, "We appreciate each other more because of this" (O'Keefe).

Another story tells of Audrey and Mark who spent five years in a long-distance relationship before moving in together just

as quarantine began in New York City. And another comes from American Catherine Down, living with her boyfriend in Paris, France. "Nothing says love in the time of coronavirus quite like dashing out in the middle of the workday on our last day before the big lockdown to the *marite* office so that I could be legally certified as my French boyfriend's concubine" (O'Keefe). In France, Down explains, concubinage affords certain rights and privileges, like allowing her to use her boyfriend's health insurance. This didn't "necessarily seem super-important," she admits, "until we were suddenly during a global pandemic. We figure if our relationship can survive quarantine, it can survive just about anything" (O'Keefe). By the summer, new terms like "turbo relationships" and "Zoom dating" began to enter our collective vocabulary as the rituals and time-honored strategies of dating were stretched and transformed, in much the same way as the pandemic shifted our experience of chronological time itself. In her article from *Mashable.com*, Rachel Thompson cites eHarmony relationship expert Rachel Lloyd who puts it this way:

Make no mistake, we are living in historic times, with a pandemic and the resulting lockdown having a profound impact on the way we live and love. What's really interesting, is the creation of so-called turbo relationships whereby couples who'd never usually move at such speed may have found themselves living together within weeks of meeting—and largely thriving. (qtd. in Thompson)

Just as the pandemic has shifted expectations and responsibilities surrounding work-life balance, family time and how we spend our leisure moments, so too has it sped up and slowed down the way we get to know each other romantically. Dating apps like Tinder and Bumble have reported increases between 10% and 30% in the length of users' messages, while at the same time would-be paramours have shown a marked preference for new video chat features (Owens and Bary).

While the global pandemic may have been a boon to the love lives of some people, for others the last several months have proven far more challenging. Tales abound of long-term marriages ending in divorce due to forced cohabitation and close(r) quarters. Journalist Ashley Fetters has spent the last

several months covering love in the time of coronavirus for several national media outlets, including *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*, where she is now a staff writer. Framing it in terms that mirror the plot of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Fetters writes, “Frightening, dangerous times—like a war, or the aftermath of a natural disaster, or a pandemic—can be occasions for people to reckon with their own mortality, with the fact that everyone gets just one precious life and has to decide what to do with it before it’s over.” Alexandra Solomon, a psychology professor who teaches a course called “Marriage 101” at Northwestern University, suggests that this reasoning may be contributing to couples fast-tracking conversations about the status and health of their relationships that they might otherwise not have had (qtd. in Fetters). “Crises end up being turning points,” Solomon says in her interview with Fetters. “We get clear on what matters” (qtd. in Fetters).

Other commentators have explored how the pandemic has affected those in long-term relationships who are cohabiting and trying to maintain a sense of normalcy in a maelstrom of chaos, uncertainty and change. Anne Marie Chaker, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, notes how the pandemic has put a tremendous amount of pressure on relationships, even strong ones. She writes, “Families are cooped up, with spouses trying to work while also taking care of their kids. Job losses, caring for at-risk elderly parents, arguments over what’s safe, and disagreements over school reopening are all taking a toll.” Citing Susan Myres, president of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, Chaker reports that divorce filings are expected to increase between 10 and 25% in the second half of 2020. Experts are chalking all of this up to the global pandemic.

Literary history is rife with fictionalized accounts of how the crisis brought on by pandemics can quickly clarify life’s fragile nature and prompt partners to make lasting decisions about their romantic futures together. In March 2020, just as lockdowns and social distancing measures began in earnest in most parts of the US, Daniel Defoe’s 1722 novel *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a fictionalized portrait of the all-too-real Great Plague that ravaged London in 1665, had sold so many copies that the Penguin Classics edition was temporarily out of print.

Jill Lepore, writing in *The New Yorker* around the same time, suggested that our thirst for pandemic literature and stories of widespread contagion reveals not so much our fear of disease, but our dread fascination with humankind reduced to its base, animal instincts. During a great plague, we all become rats. The greatest danger of pandemics is that we lose our access to knowledge, Lepore suggests, but this knowledge is preserved in literature, in books. As she puts it,

But, then, the existence of books, no matter how grim the tale, is itself a sign, evidence that humanity endures, in the very contagion of reading. Reading may be an infection, the mind of the writer seeping, unstoppable, into the mind of the reader. And yet it is also—in its bidden intimacy, an intimacy in all other ways banned in times of plague—an antidote, proven, unfailing, and exquisite. (Lepore)

Lepore’s essay covers an impressive array of pandemic literature, from *Oedipus Rex* and the *Decameron* to Albert Camus’s *The Plague*, Tony Kushner’s AIDS play *Angels in America*, and even Stephen King’s end-of-days novel *The Stand*. What links these disparate texts and indeed all plague literature together, according to Lepore, is how they ruminate on humankind’s abandonment of each other in times of great crisis: “The plague novel is the place where all human beings abandon all other human beings” (Lepore).

If this is true, then what might that suggest about the nature of finding romantic love during a pandemic? And how might our current global crisis differ from those of the past, particularly as it pertains to the way humans find love? The next section attempts to address these questions by focusing specifically on romantic love.

Romantic Love

“To sustain our fantasy, we substitute romance for love”
(Hooks 170).

In her work, Hooks repeatedly conceptualizes romantic love as “romantic lore” that exists primarily as a cultural construction, a byproduct of our immersion in mediated representations of love and romance (170). As Hooks suggests, this idea

of love—a fairytale kind—has duped many individuals into a belief system fed by movies, magazines, television shows and marketing that aim to have us believe in perfect love scenarios, stories that include perfectly matched soulmates who meet, fall in “love,” and live happily ever after until death intervenes, as it always will.

Love in the Time of Cholera also emphasizes romantic love—if not overtly, then through the protagonist Florentino Ariza’s immediate attraction and developed love rhetoric to Fermina Daza. To answer the question, *How do symptoms of pandemic diseases parallel with symptoms of being in romantic love?* we analyze Florentino’s symptoms of nausea, loss of sleep, loss of concentration, and sleep deprivation that occur during his time pining for and seeking Fermina’s love and attention, which mimic his symptoms of digestive troubles. These are paralleled in the novel’s portrayal of love, which also parallels with the cultural lore that we have heard of as people falling in love and being “lovesick.”

Interestingly enough, Fermina and Florentino are mismatched lovers who idealize love in completely different ways, and the pathways they each choose, journeying through the years is filled with imperfect love experiences that each have in their lives, as well as an imperfect love they have for one another. In the novel, love seems to be enacted and accomplished as experiences of the soul. Moore suggests that love should not be considered so much for what it *does* but for what it *is*: “It may be useful to consider love less as an aspect of relationship and more as an event of the soul” (*Care* 78). Each character experiences love as soulful, though not necessarily as a glowing, joyful experience.

Individually, Fermina and Florentino envision love significantly opposite of the other, which is problematic to the idea of love as blissful perfection. Florentino is idealistic in his sensibility of love, as he practices a continuum of romantic gestures through the years of his obsession with Fermina, while Fermina is sensible and logical in her ideals about love, choosing security above romance in her marriage to Dr. Urbino. Fermina and Florentino’s differing notions on love create an invisible dichotomy in which their opposing behaviors are

resistant toward idealized love and at various times throughout the novel are repulsive. However, toward the end of the novel, their ideologies of love shift, and each character begins to take on the other’s perspectives: Fermina begins to consider Florentino’s romantic motives and behaviors and becomes swept up in the romantic haze, fulfilling the ideal of romanticized love more deeply. Florentino begins reflecting on his many conjugal experiences and realizes true love’s logic and stability, relying less and less on his former romantic gestures of writing poetically for Fermina as he embodies a truer, more stable love persona by scripting from the heart.

Florentino eventually matures in age and in his ideals on love and life. However, throughout the novel, we observe persistence as a crucial theme in Florentino’s symbolic pilgrimage toward eventually discovering and understanding what love truly is. Throughout his years of pining for Fermina’s love, he becomes the “solitary hunter” who seeks to find a replacement kind of love while simultaneously seeking Fermina’s attention and love through the years (Marquez 202). His journey is labyrinthian, or as Moore puts it,

Love keeps us on the labyrinthine path. If we can honor love as it presents itself, taking shapes and directions we would never have predicted or desired, then we are on the way toward discovering the lower levels of soul, where meaning and value reveal themselves slowly and paradoxically. (*Care* 85)

Florentino continues the love path which winds and complicates his emotional mindset; his journey eventually allows him to discover love’s true stability and nature. Fermina continues to resist his notions of love, yet he persists despite foils that repel his efforts. In this sense of the culturally produced lore of romance, the woman leads as the man follows (Hooks). A question can then be asked of pandemic love: How are some love practices more carnal in nature? How are these kinds of love practices paralleled with the isolation, despair, and reality of a pandemic culture? As we saw in the brief review of literature, the pandemic has sped up, slowed down, and ended relationships; how has it affected our understanding of carnal love?

Carnal Love

"Our relations with nature and culture all have a sexual dimension to the extent that they involve our bodies and senses, our desires and pleasures, our creativity and procreancy" (Moore, *Education*, 189).

Through the span of years in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Florentino and Fermina are separated by Fermina's marriage to Dr. Urbino and by Fermina's logical choice to remain distanced from Florentino. Over the course of the novel, we observe Florentino's savage journey of lust as he prowls through affair after affair, which occupies his time as he attempts to fill his love void. The question of *how pandemic love brings about altering egos and free repressed identities* is one that could explain this prowling kind of behavior exhibited by Florentino's love crave. The "hunting" for love and attention in which Florentino engages, both as the hunter (as he observes and obsesses over Fermina and seeks out different women with which to sexually engage) and the prey (as some of the hundreds of women with which he sexually engages seduce him) is emphasized through Florentino's sexualized action, and these remind the reader of humanity's carnal nature and the rejuvenating nature of sex: "Sex brings living beings into the world, but it also invites the vitality and exuberance of sheer life. Sex is infinitely more than the biological because it is one of the most potent and creative manifestations of the soul" (Moore, *Education* 189). In the same way, Hooks agrees that sex has the capacity to provide pleasure and connectedness in a relationship, writing that "Shared sexual passion can be a sustaining and binding force in a troubled relationship, but it is not the proving ground for love" (175). Sexual fulfillment does not necessarily provide emotional connection or help to create a healthy relationship, as Florentino learns as his sexual conquests ultimately do not fulfill his desire to be with Fermina.

In Florentino's pursuit of Fermina, as he seeks her reciprocal love, he engages in affair after affair with women of different ages and types: married, single, young, older, attractive, unattractive, thin, and large women. Ultimately, Florentino engages in a conjugal relationship with a 14-year-old girl, essentially committing statutory rape. The question that looms

in the backdrop of these "hunting" experiences—the engagement in sexual acts to tame the hunger Florentino feels because of his unrequited love for Fermina is *Are these extravagant behaviors brought on by the pandemic?* Cholera, as a pandemic plague, looms in the novel's backdrop as the reader travels with Fermina and Florentino as they experience travels to different settings in which sickness and death are vividly present. Corpses floating in a river, Fermina's balloon ride gazes upon bloated corpses in the village, cholera's symptoms that weave in and out of the pages of the novel as Dr. Urbino treats patients—all these scenes demonstrate cholera's heavy impact and ominously signal shifting identities, unethical relationships, and dark behaviors.

Unethical Love and Rape

According to the Harvard Medical School Center for Primary Care, "Rates of sexual violence increase during states of emergency, including natural disasters, active conflict, and health crises" (Walker). This quotation leads us to investigate the question of *What kinds of behaviors do individuals engage during a pandemic?*

In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Florentino engages in hundreds of sexual relationships with various women. During the span of time in which he becomes hyper sexually active, Florentino is unethically involved with Americana Vicuna, a fourteen-year-old girl who succumbs to his flirtatious motives and comes to idolize him. The novel highlights and romanticizes statutory rape (Brancato, para 11) sexual fetishes, and grooming as Marquez describes Florentino's actions of having treated Americana as an infant: "She was no longer the little girl, the newcomer, whom he had undressed, one article of clothing at a time, with little baby games: first these little shoes for the little baby bear, then this little chemise for the little puppy dog, next these little flowered panties for the little bunny rabbit, and a little kiss on her papa's delicious little dickey-bird" (Marquez 295).

Sexual games, which were directed by Florentino (Marquez 114-15), signify his own gratification and consumption, and relate to Hooks' emphasis of culture as a culture of greed. Further, Hooks notes that "This is the outcome of living in a

culture where the politics of greed are normalized" (Hooks 115). Fiorentino's greed is evidenced by his predatorial identity which leads to overindulgence and statutory rape of a young girl, Americana. His sexual greed leads him from hunting among adult women to prey upon a youth, which he fully pursues. He progresses from friend to lover and engages in the sexual relationship with Americana and performs the role of teacher and caring adult to her parents during the day and the role of older father/lover to Americana in the evening as he consumes her love and attention in his secret abode. Using Hooks' notions that greed and consumption alter our views on love, and we treat love as consumable (116), we view Fiorentino's character as highly problematic because of his greed to seek sexual gratification from a child. Fiorentino's identity, which shifts from being a romantic dream weaver to hunter and sexual consumer, allows him to eventually assault a maid whom he impregnates, hushes with providing her a home, but then abandons, treating her as expendable and sex as an accessible commodity (Marquez 318).

Another disturbing example of Marquez's marginalization of sexual violence in the novel is the scene in which we observe Leona, a woman who Fiorentino pursues but whose heart he does not win, talking with Fiorentino. Marquez informs the reader of Leona's rape experience by an unnamed man: "Lying there on the rocks, her body covered with cuts and bruises, she had wanted that man to stay forever so that she could die of love in his arms" (258). In this brief scene of recounting Leona's memory, Marquez not only romanticizes the sexual violence but from the survivor's perspective in a mindset of craving her rapist.

We are reminded that love is an action—a determined force that can bridge the gap between years of individuals' separation such as in Ferrina's and Fiorentino's experiences (Hooks). In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, we observe their years of experiences with love during a pandemic as years of change and shifting identities but also years that allow for growth in emotional maturity and resilience. Through years of experiencing

hundreds of sexual conquests, Fiorentino finally realizes that love is more than a feeling; it is a determined decision. Love is more than flowery words and romantic gestures, it is endurance. Through years of marriage to her husband Dr. Urbino—as she endured a non-romantic relationship, Ferrina finally realizes that love can involve romance and letting go of logic. As Luetke, et al. note, widespread crisis such as a pandemic can either hurt relationships or strengthen them. In the novel's case, love is strengthened, endures and persists in the time of pandemic.

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Chapter Five

"A Serious and Painful Beginning:"
Boccaccio's *Decameron* in the Age
of Coronavirus

Katherine Clark Walter

On March 7, 2020 Teresa Franzese died at home from Covid-19 while her family members remained under compulsory house quarantine. Her brother expressed their horror when several days later both the local hospital and funeral home refused to remove her body or provide funeral services. He streamed a video, urging viewers to share widely, that voiced the family's grief and frustration: "we are ruined...Italy has abandoned us" (Reuters, "Italy has abandoned us: Brother trapped with sister's body in coronavirus shutdown").

Weeks later, as the UK and the United States followed Italy's trajectory of widespread Coronavirus infection and the effects of social isolation, Americans moved from envisioning the unfolding of pandemic to living it. Some were on the front lines of risk and hardship, while others sheltered in place in a more secure situation. Many wrestled with worry and apprehension about the future. As Covid-19 took a daily claim on lives, and people came to realize that the disease would cast a long shadow over the coming months if not years, debates about the origins and nature of the virus and the right steps to take to stop it dominated media headlines.

A relentless disease, social isolation and conflicted leadership: these aspects of the Coronavirus pandemic have invited comparisons with the 1830's cholera, 1918 Influenza, and AIDS epidemics, but they resonate still earlier in the history of pandemics in Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, an account of the Black Death of 1348 in Florence. The breakdown of even the consoling rituals of grief for Teresa Franzese's family