
Narrating a Global Crisis from Guayaquil in Real Time: Early Literary Responses to the COVID-19 Outbreak in Latin America

LUIS A MEDINA CORDOVA

King's College London, London, UK

This article identifies and provides initial insight into the early literary responses to the COVID-19 outbreak in Latin America. It focuses on the case of Guayaquil, the epicentre of the pandemic in Ecuador, to examine how writers responded to the health emergency in real time by using online platforms. I argue that, while the virus was spreading, the death toll was rising, and the lockdown was at its most severe, a body of writing deeply engaged with the crisis was taking shape in digital outlets. Its study enables a uniquely contextual understanding of the global crisis from a Latin American perspective.

Keywords: coronavirus testimonies, COVID-19 literature, Guayaquil COVID-19, Latin American literature, online pandemic writing, quarantine stories.

From the first infections to the peak of the death toll's curve and the timid returns to normality after the lockdowns declared across the globe, stories have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. But unlike other instances when global crises have formed the backdrop to literary creation, this time social media, messaging apps and other online platforms have enabled authors to articulate literary responses to the health emergency in real time. In Latin America, a body of writing derived from – and in dialogue with – the isolation, self-distancing measures, xenophobia, violence, illness and death that societies experienced during the pandemic has taken shape in the form of tales assembled and shared via Twitter, fictions recorded on smartphones to be circulated as WhatsApp voice notes and testimonies written on Facebook walls and other digital outlets. The social, political and cultural meanings of these early literary responses to COVID-19 are yet to be uncovered.

This article identifies and provides initial insight into some of the ways in which Ecuadorian authors used digital means to engage with the pandemic as it was taking place. Focusing on the case of Guayaquil, the epicentre of the pandemic in Ecuador and one of the Latin American cities hit hardest by it, I argue that the study of online quarantine stories, coronavirus testimonies and survival poetry can provide us with elements for articulating a uniquely contextual understanding of what happened globally from a Latin American perspective. Moreover, it also enables an exploration of the

contributions of literature in communicating and coming to terms with the social fears and anxieties about the pandemic while raising questions about the need to rethink hegemonic discourses on the meanings of literature after an event that will reshape the global economy. My purpose here is to offer a first approach to the early Ecuadorian literary responses to the COVID-19 pandemic but also to lay the basis for future strands of national, regional and global enquiry.

Guayaquil provides a compelling case study to see how writers immediately engaged with the pandemic, as Ecuador's business capital was quickly overwhelmed by its impact. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Ecuador was reported on 29 February (COE, 2020). By 4 June 2020, the Andean country had reported 3486 fatalities directly attributed to the virus and another 2221 deaths suspected to be related to the virus, with the vast majority of confirmed cases (44.3 percent of the 40,966 national total) and casualties (1430) concentrated in the Guayas province, the capital of which is Guayaquil (MSP, 2020). The official figures, nonetheless, underestimate the extent of the emergency: local media reported that, under normal circumstances, Guayas averages 2000 deaths per month but it reported 6703 deaths in the first half of April alone (El Universo, 2020a). Guayaquil, a city with 2.7 million residents, saw the capacity of its healthcare system and mortuary services rapidly exceeded. By the end of March there were people dying in their homes, and improvised coffins and corpses abandoned on the streets and sidewalks of the city became a common sight that circulated globally via photographs on social media.

Writers quarantined in Guayaquil responded to the emergency as it was unfolding. They took to online channels to provide first-person accounts of their experiences, creating testimonial texts that offer intimate insight into Guayaquil's reality during the peak of the crisis. Solange Rodríguez (Guayaquil, 1976), for instance, published a letter to her late father:

Father, how fortunate I am because you passed away one year ago and I didn't have to identify your body in a pile of nameless black bags, checking tags to see if I could find you. It's so good that nobody lost you. How lucky I am for not having had to see your body, your beloved body that cherished beauty, starting to rot before my eyes. I'd have had to cover you with a square bed sheet so I wouldn't see you or take you out of the house in shame. (Rodríguez, 2020; author's translation)

Rodríguez's account, featured on the website *Pie de Página*, not only offers an insider's look into a Guayaquil where survivors struggle to find the bodies of their late relatives in overflowing morgues. It also lays bare how the pandemic fractured the city's regime of subjectivity. Roitman and Mbembe (1995: 324) refer to a regime of subjectivity as 'a shared ensemble of imaginary configurations of everyday life' to argue that crises produce a type of violence issuing from 'the lack of coincidence between the everyday practice of life and the corpus of significations or meanings available to explain and interpret what happens'. Rodríguez's letter reflected in real time how life in Guayaquil suddenly transformed into something unrecognisable to its inhabitants, that is, an unprecedented experience where previously unthinkable actions (such as leaving the corpses of loved ones on the streets) became a material reality. Literary testimonies like Rodríguez's called for new understandings of the city and the world where the city develops.

Because they contribute to shaping the ways of seeing and understanding local, national and global contexts, the narrations of the COVID-19 crisis inhabit the ways

in which societies articulated their collective and subjective responses (Worldmaking in the Time of COVID-19, 2020). But they also played a role in addressing the emotional toll of the pandemic on individuals and communities by taking advantage of the instantaneity and wide circulation capabilities of digital media. The work of Ángela Arboleda (Guayaquil, 1969) is an example of this. Amid the outbreak, Arboleda started a series of night-time tales that she would select from her repertoire of unpublished short stories, narrate orally and record to circulate as voice notes over WhatsApp. Her project, entitled *Sueños súbditos*, was her response to the insomnia and unrest that she experienced while quarantined in her Guayaquil home, a response that she hoped would help others in similar circumstances (El Universo, 2020b). In this sense, the audience was not limited to Arboleda's hometown, as WhatsApp messages can travel widely and lockdown exposed millions around the globe to sleep disruption, increasing daytime stress, anxiety and levels of depression.

The *Sueños súbditos* series, now fully available on YouTube, taps into classic ideas of literature as oral storytelling and resonates with the virality of the COVID-19 outbreak for its spreading potential. At the same time, it provides a literary approach to helping cope with the feelings of isolation, fear and anxiety inspired worldwide by the pandemic. For Arboleda (2020), smartphones can provide intimate experiences between authors and audiences, as she imagined herself 'climbing up to the person's ear' to whisper the story through the voice note. In her project, narration and storytelling became a real time contribution for social and personal wellbeing in a time when innovative solutions to the emotional challenges brought about by the pandemic were needed the most.

The 'survival poetry' of the Quito-based artist and writer Jaime Núñez del Arco (Guayaquil, 1984) also gives literature an emotional value in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Away from his immediate family, Núñez del Arco suffered the loss of his father and had to take care of his grieving mother from a distance as he was 'dealing with mounting anxiety and borderline depression' (Núñez del Arco, 2020). The poetry he published inspired by this experience, featured on the website Arts of the Working Class, assigns therapeutic significance to literary expression, as the author considers that 'art is another symptom' of the virus (ibid). But his work also self-consciously frames Guayaquil within a system in which, emergency or not, the city occupies a position away from the spotlight of global cultural recognition by arguing that the cultural industry of Guayaquil has been 'hanging forever in the ICU' (ibid). In this light, Núñez del Arco's work invites a reflection on the ways in which the body of writing that emerged during the quarantine challenged global literary dynamics. It is not only that the early literary responses to the COVID-19 outbreak circumvented the editorial processes of publishing houses by taking over online channels. They did it by experimenting with immediate literary forms that can question the centrality of the time-consuming novel, the preferred object of study of literary enquiries concerned with the representation of the world as a whole. Better suited to responding swiftly and circulating globally in the face of worldwide events, these forms signal the need for a reconfiguration of international literary markets after a pandemic that has reshaped the global economy and for rethinking the meanings of world literature in a post-COVID-19 world.

The case of Guayaquil is but one example of the wide range of literary activity that developed and thrived during the global health emergency. Writers across Latin America provided testimonies and reflections on their COVID-19 experiences while they were experiencing them alongside their audiences. As we move forward into new configurations of normality around the world, identifying, archiving and analysing this body of writing can afford us a unique opportunity for contextually understanding what drove

the transformations we are seeing now, as well as the transformations we are yet to witness.

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