

Transcript: In Conversation with Laura Marris

Sandro Galea:

Hello everybody. Welcome to our latest Public Health Conversation Starter. This is a series of discussions we're having with thinkers who provide a critical perspective on the work of public health. Today I had the privilege of welcome Professor Laura Marris. She's a writer and translator who serves as a visiting assistant professor of creative writing at the University of Buffalo and is teaching artist at Just Buffalo Literary Center. Her writing has appeared in a range of writing places, including the Paris Review, Daily Yale Review, New York Times, and other places. Her work has been supported by fellowships from MacDowell and from Robert B. Silvers Foundation.

In 2022, University of Chicago Press published her book, *States of Plague: Reading Albert Camus in the Pandemic*, which she wrote with Alice Kaplan. This book explores the COVID pandemic through a lens of Camus's novel. Their perspective is particularly apt for the moment. I really enjoyed this book and reflecting on it, and I thought it would be really fun to have a chat with Professor Marris today. I'm really delighted that she's with us today. Professor Marris, Laura, if I may, welcome. Thank you for joining.

Laura Marris:

Thank you so much for having me.

Sandro Galea:

So, first of all, your book is terrific. I really enjoyed it. I, like many people, actually did read Camus during the pandemic and learned from it. But let's start first by talk about you. Can you just tell us a little bit about your background and how you sort of came to be doing what you're doing today?

Laura Marris:

Yeah, so I actually got my MFA in Poetry from BU in 2013, so it's very nice to be back in this series. But I began translating shortly after I finished that degree, and was really lucky to kind of get involved, first of all by translating this quite long novel for the NYRB by Louis Guilloux called *Blood Dark*. And Guilloux is actually a friend of Camus's. And so after I finished that project and did a few other things, eventually I sort of started to hear rumors that there might be room for some new re-translations of Camus and especially of *The Plague*, which really hadn't been done since Stuart Gilbert's version, which came out very shortly after the novel did.

And so I never expected that I would end up translating *The Plague* during the pandemic. That was not planned, that was an accident. But I really came through translation partly as a way of apprenticing myself to other writers. But I think particularly when I was writing about translating *The Plague* in a pandemic, I did a lot of thinking

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about the more than human world. And I think it was also a moment when a lot of people were paying attention a little bit to the ecosystems around them more than they necessarily had been when they were commuting into work every day.

And so that all came together in my mind. And so I think it allowed me in states of Plague to write a little bit more of an eco-critical perspective on Camus. And that also, now that I think about it, related back to my father who was a community scientist and did a lot of bird surveys and things like that. So there was sort of a personal kernel. He used to carry me around during the Christmas Bird Count before I could really walk. So all of that was sort of in my history when I started thinking about Camus and eco-criticism and what that might be like to write.

Sandro Galea:

Well, I want to get back in a second to people being more aware of their ecosystem, but let's go back to Camus for a second. For those who are actually not familiar with Albert Camus, can you just talk through a little bit about who he was and sort of why his book came about?

Laura Marris:

Yeah. So Camus was born in 1913. He grew up in Algiers for a pretty poor family. His father died before Camus was one-years-old, so he never really got a chance to know him. And then he grew up with a mother who was disabled. She was deaf and really didn't speak very much. So he writes a lot about later in life growing up in this house that was very poor, but also really silent. And so eventually he became a writer through teachers who mentored him. Specifically, his earliest teachers really took an interest in him, and eventually he was able to pursue a teaching degree. He thought he would become a high school philosophy teacher or something like that. And ultimately, unfortunately, it was his tuberculosis diagnosis that prevented him from doing that. They barred him from taking the exam because he had contracted TB when he was 17. So he was someone who in a way was ostracized himself by disease from a particular career that he had wanted to follow. So instead he ended up becoming a private tutor. And as World War II began, he was actually in Oran tutoring Jewish students who had been kicked out of school, and he also was living with his wife's family and he had a relapse of his tuberculosis. So his doctors recommended that he be sent to France to the Massif Central, which is this kind of high mountainous area where they thought the air would be good for him. And so he was actually sent away to a sanatorium and missed the last boat back to Algeria as the Allies retook North Africa. So he ended up becoming separated from his wife for the duration of World War II.

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And so during the time that he was writing *The Plague*, he began to write it when he was in Oran, and then he continued working on it as he was in the sanatorium. And ultimately as it was coming out, he was just beginning to kind of reconnect with his wife who he'd been separated from for the entirety of the war. So that was kind of the space that he was in as he was working. The space of being isolated from his family, but also kind of working for this underground resistance newspaper *Combat* in Paris.

So he took a very active role in the French resistance while he was separated from his wife and from Algeria, but he did not like living in Paris. And he also did not living in Oran, so he had these two cities in his mind as he was working. And I think that kind of became part of the parallel that helped shape the book.

Sandro Galea:

Let's talk about language for a second. Someone who operates and writes in a language as my second language, I'm always intrigued by language. I'm particularly intrigued by translation. I've read a little bit of both about the sort of thinking behind translation. Can you talk us a little bit through how the act of translating a book like this shaped your interaction with the ideas in the book and in the moment?

Laura Marris:

That's a really good question. I would have a very different answer for any other translation project that I've done. I think because this one happened during the COVID pandemic, I was working on the translation and I began it right before the lockdown happened. So every day I would go up and work at my desk and translate another piece of the novel, and I would come downstairs in the evening and I'd be like, "It's interesting I just translated this passage about a paper shortage," and my husband would say, "It's in the news. There's a paper shortage happening right now."

But, yeah, the language of the book really brought me to appreciate Camus in a way that I hadn't before because he has this real alternation between the more philosophical passages of the novel where there's a kind of processing of the witnessing that's been happening. And there are scenes of action and scenes of really horrific illness that are taking place in the book.

And then Camus will kind of have passages where the characters step back and think about smaller things in the city in this way that daily life is still woven in. Often Camus will turn to the weather. So there are these really beautiful lyrical descriptions of the weather in the novel. And to me, they kind of became almost like monuments. So when a really horrific scene of illness takes place, often the next place Camus will look is to the sky. And so I started to think about how perhaps the sky sort of was a place to put some of those feelings in a way that the weather might remind, and come back and

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disappear. Because at the time, Camus was writing a lot of the historical accounts that he was citing, really associated weather with plague, warm weather especially. And so I started thinking about that and relating it to kind of my own weather in the city where I was living.

But mostly when I was working on this translation, because it was a re-translation, I wanted to restore that kind of lyrical edge to Camus's prose, which I felt like had been a little bit softened. Stuart Gilbert's version, it's sometimes a little bit polite and there's a real darkness to the lyric in Camus. It's this kind of way of looking at the world where really painful things are happening, and being able to channel that pain into a kind of imagery. And so I was really trying to be conscious of that. And also just to pick up on the really... Where you can tell there's an incredibly bureaucratic scene where he's talking about having to go to all the offices. The doctor in the novel has to go to all the offices of different bureaucrats to try to get anyone to pay attention to this public health crisis that's beginning to unfold in the city. And in those passages, Camus will make his language extra bureaucratic, and it's almost like baroque bureaucratic. And so I wanted to follow those sort of shifts as well.

Sandro Galea:

So I read *The Plague* again during the pandemic, and then I also ended up reading Orhan Pamuk's *States of Plague*. And it was mostly through both these fictional works, I found it sort of shaped my thinking about the plague we were living through, and perhaps a little bit disheartened by how many similarities there were between fiction and reality, and sort of the sense that we're reliving this. And making the same mistakes that these novelists conjure. And I'm just curious about your reflections on the novel and the reality you were living through? This must've been surreal to see, as you were saying, you were giving the example of the paper, and I suppose what you learned about the moment, about the real lived moment through then being so immersed in a fictional rendering that has so many accuracies and reflections?

Laura Marris:

It's so interesting because for such a long time, *The Plague* was really read as an allegory. People did not think of it as a realist novel. And I think especially in conversation with Alice Kaplan, it came to feel much more realist to us, which reveals some problems and flaws as well. But I think, yeah, living through the pandemic with this novel, I mean, at times it was a little bit like someone trying to explain something to you as it's happening, but I found a lot of comfort in it also.

And I was very lucky. I had the privilege to stay home and work on this because that was the contract that I had. So in many ways, working on this while living in Buffalo,

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there was a lot of disparities between my ability to stay home and a lot of my neighbors were not. And so I was very conscious of all of that. But I think that the novel, especially the way Camus describes the really tiny aspects of transmission, the kind of revolution in the blood that happens when the plague begins, his sense of immunity and creating an immune response as a potential kind of communal memory of what's happened. All of those threads in the novel became really powerful to me as I was working on this during quarantine.

Sandro Galea:

It really heightens, right, one's reflection is almost necessary in a time of quarantine, in a time of plague. Tell me a bit, as you mentioned that your co-author, professor Alice Kaplan, how did that come about? How did it come about the two of you came to this book together?

Laura Marris:

Yeah, so I was actually Alice's student.

Sandro Galea:

Oh, really? Okay.

Laura Marris:

Undergraduate at [inaudible 00:13:53]-

Sandro Galea:

[inaudible 00:13:53] personal connection, that's wonderful.

Laura Marris:

Yeah. Yeah. She was a professor and a mentor of mine, and then she's a Camus scholar, and so she was teaching *The Plague* during the pandemic as well. And we had gone back and forth about the translation as I was working on it. And then actually her editor at the University of Chicago Press, Alan Thomas, asked her if she might like to write something about *The Plague* and if we might like to collaborate, and so that's kind of how it came about.

And it was really... I think the conversations I was able to have with Alice, we were sort of writing these chapters back and forth between France where she initially was when the lockdown started, and then New Haven and Buffalo. It was really a very sustaining conversation during that time to be able to kind of share my impressions of the novel with her, because even though a lot of people were reading *The Plague* during the

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pandemic, I think I still felt I wanted to talk to people about that experience. And so beginning with Alice, we were able to kind of have a larger conversation with the people who were reading Camus during the pandemic and reading *The Plague* during the pandemic. And a lot of that kind of work ended up becoming parts of the book.

Sandro Galea:

Let me go to the book for a second and ask something specific. So in the book you write of Dr. Rieux, the central character in *The Plague* as follows. You write, "Rieux gets to live, but he doesn't get any second chances at happiness. It's left to him to be the chronicler, the memory worker. He remains on the shore of what happened so that he can pass on the knowledge and in memory of the disease and of people he lost." And you say, "I feel for this Orpheus stranded on the living side of the ecological memory, and yet his work is necessary, his labor is necessary." So in some respects, when I read that, I felt like COVID left us all actually like Dr. Rieux, stranded on the shore of what happened.

So I'm just curious, what do you learn from this about how we better engage in the work of memory than chronicling what has happened in this extraordinary, terrible, tragic experience that we all went through? Lessons of COVID are not forgotten?

Laura Marris:

Yeah, I'm so glad you asked that question. I do feel even now that a lot of people around me want to forget COVID, really want to move on from it. Even though this is still unfolding. And I think that to think about memory is something embodied, is something that people are very uncomfortable with. And especially I think in American society, there's a real resistance to living alongside grief or having grief be part of daily life.

There's a lot of pressure to kind of have this veneer that things are fixed now and we're moving on, and it's okay. And I understand the impulse, but for me, I think that I do have this kind of through Camus, gained an understanding of the importance of realizing that all of the things in the book that are happening, when I read it as allegory as a college student, I didn't realize that those things could happen to me.

That these plagues are not just in the histories, that they are part of the world and part of our life in this world. And so I think the chroniclers, and especially in this novel where Rieux, he's such a character of memory. And this is sort of a spoiler, but throughout the novel, he's sort of stripped of these personal attachments that might have allowed him to have a long happy life and forget the plague. But I think there's something important about that in Camus conception of disease, because he was himself a TB patient. And so he was always wondering if his own disease would relapse. And so to

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me, that personal connection makes Rieux's character all the more moving to me. And people sometimes ask me about the end of the novel where there's this sort of monument put up for the victims of the plague, and there are fireworks and they're opening the gates of the city.

And I've had readers speak to me who are kind of angry about that, that there's this sense of celebration. But I think Camus really beautifully locates it when he describes all the people who return on the trains, the first trains that are allowed to enter the city. And some have these incredibly joyous reunions, but some are going home to people who have died who they've had no news from.

And in the end of the novel, Camus really locates his character, Dr. Rieux in the last place where he had a conversation with a friend who had died, kind of watching this celebratory scene from the outside, but not being part of it. And so part of that is the position of witness, but part of that I think is Camus giving weight to the legitimacy of holding onto the grief and trying to understand it going forward and not just having this cycle of crisis and forgetting.

Sandro Galea:

Let me read down just one more piece. This is and from your last essay in the book. And you write, "You can't inoculate yourself against something if you don't recognize it as disease." And then you note how during the COVID pandemic it surfaced what you call "latent infections lurking within America's memory." And I think this include institution racism, disparateness to healthcare, poverty, hunger, etcetera. So what role do you think art like work, writing of your book, what role does art play in helping us see these sicknesses so that we can actually address them as a society?

Laura Marris:

I think it depends on the artist. I think art has a responsibility to see clearly, but I think sometimes the responsibility of art is to create joy, is to immerse people in imagination as deeply and vitally as possible. But I think that in the case of making art during the pandemic, it felt like something that was an invitation for community, and an invitation to kind of air concerns.

And something that provided a space for people to come together around something that might allow them to have a new perspective, to make the experience of being alone in quarantine, maybe be slightly less lonely. Even though there's so much loneliness in this novel, the fact that Camus wrote about it.

When I read that in quarantine, I felt a sense of relief that Camus had understood this and written it down before. And so that's kind of why I thought of this book as sort of this very beautiful and very brutal, but ultimately kind of a companion. And I think that

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that's maybe the best answer of what art could offer, is it offers a companionship to some piece of your imagination that might otherwise not have the space to come to the surface.

Sandro Galea:

That is actually beautiful. My last question, so what gives you hope for the future?

Laura Marris:

My students. The students certainly in this moment, give me hope for the future. I've really wanted to talk to them about COVID, and sometimes we do, but I think watching them use the tools of writing to speak to their concerns of the day and watching them use their skills in the world is a really beautiful, hopeful thing. So I have a lot of hope for the next generation.

Sandro Galea:

Professor Marris, Laura, thank you for joining us. Thank you for translating Camus, make it more accessible, and thank you for writing this wonderful book. Thank you for the work you do.

Laura Marris:

Thank you so much for having me.