

## Reading After Trump, Episode 6 Paula Moya

Alex Woloch: Hi, I'm Alex Woloch

Kenny Ligda: And I'm Kenny Ligda.

Alex Woloch: And this is Reading After Trump. Our aim in this podcast is to initiate conversations with literary scholars, critics and historians about what literature can tell us about this political moment. The views expressed here are our own and don't necessarily reflect the view, policy or positions of Stanford University. So, we're really happy to welcome today Paula Moya, who is the Danily C. and Laura Louise Bell professor of the humanities at Stanford and my colleague in the English department. Paula is the author of, among other things, two very important books that will provide some grounding for the conversation today, and I'm just going to try to talk briefly about them.

So, learning from experience is a passionate argument about the possibilities of knowledge and knowing the truth, but also the way that truth is not easy to know, it's not transparently available and what Paula does is to make a case for linking together epistemology and identity. And one way to think about it is that there's almost an epistemological karma where of people whose identities have faced obstacles can see more about society through that. It's a book that argues for this specific epistemic value of marginal identities.

In a way, I think it's quite powerful for today, for the current political situation and Paula also published another book called The Social Imperative, which ... I mean, just simplify a lot and some ways takes that question of epistemology and identity, the relationship between how we know and who we are into the act of reading, sort of more closely into the question of literary writing. Part of what that books about is the kind of epistemic schemes that we bring to any reading and then the way that those schemes interact with and then can actually be developed and shaped through literary writing. So it's a different way to show the epistemological possibilities of writing. That's my thumbnail sketch.

Paula Moya: That's pretty good, I have to say I'm very pressed. I'm very happy to be here with both of you Kenny and Alex.

Kenny Ligda: Well, thank you. And I want to add, there's a significant emission, which was that a certain number of years ago when I had a dead-end job in publishing in Seattle, Paula called me from Stanford to tell me that I had been admitted to Stanford. And so Paula absolutely has a very special place in my heart.

Paula Moya: Good. I'm glad.

Kenny Ligda: So, thank you.

Paula Moya: Absolutely.

Alex Woloch: We can jump in and as the loyal listeners of this tiny podcast might know, our premise is that literature matters and can matter at the current moment and that literature and reading have something to say about the kind of unfolding political crisis. Maybe to just start, Paula, maybe to just ask you generally what authors or books you've been thinking about or turning to since the election? Whether for just your own reading or for in your teaching or in your research?

Paula Moya: Sure. I'd be happy to talk to that but I wonder if I might be able to just pick up a bit on how you introduced the two books that I have. Because I think what you pulled out of them perfectly encapsulates why we might want to think about what we read and how we read it in Reading After Trump. So, the interesting thing about the epistemological advantages of certain identities for instance, is that what I'm making an argument for is that people with maybe downwardly constituted identities, it's not that they just know more about anything, it's that they tend to know more about that formation that constitutes them in a downward fashion. And so this is why women are often much more attentive to those social dynamics that disadvantage them in the workplace, why people of color are usually, not always, but sometimes savvy are about racial dynamics.

Alex Woloch: And about the structures that-

Paula Moya: Specifically about the structures by which they are disadvantaged. It means that any given person can know more about that and not know more about something else. So that's the link. With respect to literature, kind of what I have come to really understand is that perception is structured by various interpretive schemas. We don't get any incoming stimuli without it being filtered through some kind of perceptual schema. And the role of literature is that literature both reflects and shapes the schemas through which we perceive the world. So coming to understand that meant that it really matters those racial representations. Not in a simple way but if you have nothing but stereotypical depictions for instance of a particular group, then most people who are not members of that group and even people who are members of that group are going to perceive themselves through those representations.

Now, I can get to the question you asked me, what novels am I reading. On one hand, I'm reading those novels that I find to give interesting complex and deep portrayals of people of color because I'm interested in

their lives. And then I guess more specifically now, I've been reading works of speculative fiction and just really drawn to it in a way that I never was as a young girl, but finding that it was giving me something. And so part of what was happening for me, I was asking myself why? Like what was it about speculative fiction that was drawing me and what was it about the particular kind of speculative fiction I was reading.

And what I was realizing is that a lot of times these works like, for instance, Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl*, they were addressing contemporary issues but they were working them out in worlds that were in some sense far from my own. So, they were worlds that were a little bit different but you could see how they were sort of spinning out in an imaginative way some of the problems that we were confronting ourselves. Or for instance, Octavia Butler, which I hope we're going to talk about today in *Kindred*, for instance, how she was imagining what it might feel like to feel caught in a structure that in order to survive and in order for your children to survive, you might have to actively collaborate with. To work that out in fiction is just I find incredibly interesting, it's like doing an experiment.

Alex Woloch: I was just thinking that there's something fundamentally experimental and also it's a genre that's about epistemology in a way that would be of interest to you given the kind of theoretical frameworks that you've developed. The other thought I had about speculative fiction is the term's interesting. It does feel like in our adult life it's become more of a robust term even as the genre of science fiction and speculative fiction have kind of moved into the academy more organically.

Paula Moya: Well, I think they have moved into the academy as more people have been turning to those genres as a way of addressing issues that are difficult to address in everyday conversation or in your own life.

Alex Woloch: Including more writers.

Paula Moya: Yes, definitely. For instance, climate change. It's hard to tell exactly what's happening and for a long time experts were telling us, yes you just had this hurricane but we don't know if it was caused by climate change. Once since you felt like this was coming but you didn't know exactly how to play it all out and then the worry starts. You start worrying about climate change and you start worrying about certain dynamics that you're seeing in the society and you start thinking well, what happens if this continues to go on. I remember thinking that in a lot of times what speculative fiction does is it plays out the most dire possibilities for you and allows you to see maybe how it might go.

In fact, there's a foundational science fiction, kind of a novella called, *If This Goes On* by Robert Heinlein. That's how I feel about all of this fiction. It's like, oh my god, if this goes on, this is how it's going to end up. Why we want to read that is a bit of a mystery to me actually.

Kenny Ligda: It does make it especially alarming when things from the real world begin to ... For instance, a book that I recently read because you recommended, Octavia Butler, is *Parable of the Sower*, which features prominently wildfires across California and like as we're walking over here to the studio, there's actually like the smell of smoke in the air because we're having these late season catastrophic fires.

Paula Moya: What the *Parable of the Sower* really illustrates is the complete and total breakdown of society. It's a little unclear exactly why but one of the reasons I think is climate change, maybe overpopulation, not enough food and what exactly happens and what are the cleavages in society when society breaks down. A particular interest of mine with regard to Octavia Butler is that, I often say like, I like reading all this stuff but a lot of them aren't very smart about race. What do I mean about that? I mean that some of the authors haven't thought well enough or they don't know enough and they don't represent in a complex and interesting and accurate way how people actually behave when faced with what they actually think about race whereas Octavia Butler like she's really, really good at it.

And so you can go into her books and you can see her represent a whole variety of kinds of people. It's not like all white people are bad, all black people are good. She shows the mixing and the tendency of people to sometimes turn against their own and all of that but it's just a smart portrayal and helps us see ourselves through the fiction.

Kenny Ligda: I seem to recall you saying that say like if you look at *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is a fantastic book but it does have ... The way that deals with race. I think you remind me.

Paula Moya: Yes. I like *The Handmaid's Tale*, it's another great, great novel but she does something, which I think ... You have a world in which there are people have a lot of different, associate with a lot in different races and then you have a breakdown of society. But maybe you as an author are not real comfortable with that, you don't know quite how to handle it or something and so maybe what you do is you just like send all those pesky people of color off to the margins of the story and then you don't have to deal with them, which is kind of what she does. She creates authoritarian theocratic society in which women's ability to reproduce becomes a very valued characteristic of them, but like all of the Jews are sent to a homeland, basically has created homelands for all of the people of color and they're sent off and then you don't ever hear about them anymore.

So, African-Americans, I don't even think Latinos get mentioned. It's basically a all-white society and on one hand maybe that's the case but that doesn't really help us understand the kinds of dynamics and cleavages that probably would actually happen, where we to be in an authoritarian theocratic society.

Alex Woloch: My follow-up question is, I mean, particularly for writers of color, are there elements of racism, racial inequality or the history of race that lend themselves particularly well to science fiction or to speculative fiction? What is it that the genre can tell us or what is it that turns writers that are interested in this question potentially to these genres?

Paula Moya: Well, if you think about for instance the experience of a person who becomes enslaved in Africa, so maybe who was captured and then put into chains and then kept in a holding pen and then put on to a ship and sent across an ocean to a completely different world where they take away your name and they subject you to the most humiliating and degrading kinds of treatment, half of the people that you're with die. I mean, this is alien abduction. It's alien abduction. And so I think the kind of tropes of science-fiction allegorize and metaphorize actual events and smart authors see this, know this and play with this. Or the experience of say the Aztecs when the Spanish came over and conquered and ended up killing a lot both through just war but also through disease, that's a different kind of experience of invasion.

For instance, I taught this course in spring. I co-taught it with a graduate student in MTL, Jonathan Liao and we paired the War of the Worlds with the Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico. Because I really wanted the students to see that the parallels between what it would have been like to be [Mashika 00:13:13] back in the, I guess, 15th century and what it would have been to have these odd-looking people. Like, how do you even make sense of that? Much of that Aztec Account of the Conquest was trying to make sense of these people who you're not sure where they come from, if they're gods and how you're supposed to interact with them.

Alex Woloch: Yeah. It's interesting because I think the conventional view of science fiction is that the basic point of it is it's a different world, it's a world outside of ours but there's also ways that science fiction can actually be very much about the world that we're in. I mean, histories that might not be surfaced are always visible.

Paula Moya: I think that all science fiction is about the world that we're in. It's just sort of setting aside and putting far away so that we can look at it by alienating it. You're literally alienating it or alienating the situation.

Kenny Ligda: [Bohes 00:14:10] has this quote like, "I'm beginning to believe in distortion because it seems to be the only way to make people see."

Paula Moya: Yes, right.

Kenny Ligda: The book that we have on the table here is Parable of the Talents. We asked about a book that you've thought about since the election or during the election, why did this one particularly come to mind?

Paula Moya: Parable of the Talents is the second book in a planned trilogy by Octavia Butler. The first one was Parable of the Sower and in Parable of the Sower you see the breakdown of the society and you see a mixed-race group of people walking up the California coast trying to find safe haven. By the time you get to Parable of the Talents, they have found a place to be and they've developed a little small community that they call Acorn. And the protagonist of that book, Lauren Oya Olamina, she's founded this religion called Earth Seed. And so they're there, they're living according to the beliefs, which the basic belief is God is change. And they're living close to other communities and something happens to a neighboring community that really puts them on notice that they're at risk of being invaded.

There was a passage in there that when I read it, I just screamed out loud. I was like, "Oh, my god." Now, mind you, I was reading this for the first time before the 2016 election, so there was a way in which it sounded too much like she was projecting forward into the present day and she knew what was going to happen.

Alex Woloch: The novels were written what?

Paula Moya: They were written in the Reagan era. So, she was writing about Reagan.

Alex Woloch: Right.

Paula Moya: That's what's kind of interesting. Is that we're seeing some of those ideas come back. She was writing in the '80s and reflecting on that time and it's pretty clear that, that's what she was doing, some of the scholarship has shown that. But some of the ideas that were put forward in that era have come right back down to us so, I don't know if you want me to read this or?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah, could you read the passage?

Paula Moya: Okay. What's happening here is that Lauren, she's sort of musing in her diary about the destruction of a neighboring settlement by an armed gang of men who came in wearing belted black tunics with big white crosses on their chests. She's writing and she says, "I couldn't help wondering though

whether these people with their crosses had some connection with my current least favorite presidential candidate, Texas senator Andrew Steele Jarret. It sounds like the sort of thing his people might do, a revival of something nasty out of the past. Did the Ku Klux Klan wear crosses as well as burn them? The Nazis wore the swastika, which is a kind of cross but I don't think they wore it on their chests. There were crosses all over the place during the inquisition and before that during the crusades.

"So now we have another group that uses crosses and slaughters people. Jarret's people could be behind it. Jarret insists on being a throwback to some earlier simpler time. Now does not suit him. Religious tolerance does not suit him. The current state of the country does not suit him. He wants to take us all back to some magical time when everyone believed in the same God, worshiped him in the same way and understood that their safety in the universe depended on completing the same religious rituals and stomping anyone who was different. There was never such a time in this country. But these days when more than half the people in the country can't read it all, history is just one more vast unknown to them.

"Jarret supporters have been known now and then to form mobs and burn people the stake for being witches. Witches in 2032. A witch in their view tends to be a Muslim, a Jew, a Hindu, a Buddhist or in some parts of the country, a Mormon, a Jehovah's witness or even a Catholic. A witch may also be an atheist, a cultist or a well-to-do eccentric. Well-to-do eccentrics often have no protectors or much that's worth stealing and cultus is a great catch-all term for anyone who fits into no other large category and yet doesn't quite match Jarret's version of Christianity.

"Jarret's people have been known to beat or drive out unitarians for goodness' sake. Jarret condemns the burnings but does so in such mild language that its people are free to hear what they want to hear. As for the beatings, the tarring and the feathering and the destruction of heathen houses of devil worship, he has a simple answer. 'Join us, our doors are open to every nationality, every race. Leave your sinful past and become one of us. Help us to make America great again.'"

When I read that, I was like, "Oh, my god. I just can't believe it." I think Steven Bannon read this novel and he told Trump this is what you need to say, let's make America great again. That phrase recurs one more time but it was sort of ... Again, I was reading this while Trump was a candidate and watching him stand up there and advocate, beating up protesters and saying, in my day we would have taken them out and beat them up, so that really resonated with me.

Alex Woloch: And I would say it's hard, I think it's hard for anyone to read this passage now or our listeners probably hearing it and not have a shiver go up your

spine. It feels to me like there's two questions we're throwing out. One is that question about what is it that would make readers want to turn to the things they're worried about or afraid of and read books that expand and they're amplified. And the other is how we think about the strangeness of this book that has these paragraphs that couldn't have had the exact meaning that it has for us now and now time has passed and things have happened and they're just there now in the text in this incredibly powerful and strange way.

I don't know that we'll come up with total answers to either of these questions but they seem like very compelling questions. And in some ways this is just like the perfect example of like what we're thinking about with this podcast, which is that literature will, the way we read it, is going to change for certain texts and certain meanings can be unleashed or activated. I mean, the phrase "Make America Great Again."

Paula Moya: This is why I'm only half kidding when I say that it's possible that some advisor, specifically, a white supremacist advisor of Trump. And I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say that Steven Bannon is a white supremacist given everything that he says and his associations and all that. Actually, might have read this novel as a work of speculative fiction. Because, what she was doing in these books, was sort of spinning out how people might actually respond to each other when faced with a breakdown society. Like, who's going to group together and who's going to take advantage of the chaos. How are people going to react. All you have to do is read history to see how people react, really.

Kenny Ligda: It speaks to what you're saying about her being smart about race in part. Like the way that people will tend to congregate around racial lines.

Paula Moya: Yeah. It's no mistake that the group that she's with is basically a very heterogeneous and mixed group but they often run into distrust from people with whom they come into contact who maybe are homogeneously white or something like that. But to come back to this question, I was like, what is the value or what is the pleasure or what is the ... Why, why, why do we read this stuff. So dark.

Alex Woloch: I certainly like your term worry. I mean, you think about fear, fear is one thing but it's like if it's a worry, if it's ... Like our experience of thinking about climate change, there's a kind of nagging worry, which is very unpleasant. Like, that doesn't seem like you'd want to turn to a book that would just give the worried more space to breathe.

Paula Moya: Well, it's kind of like Paolo Bacigalupi's, *The Water Knife*, that's about drought like severe drought, he's really good. I think there's a couple of things going on here. One is treating it a little bit as a talisman, right. So, if

I read about it, then I will master it. I can get a handle on it and then maybe it won't happen. I'm being very honest about it.

Alex Woloch: Well, that might be a pleasure of representation like to see something represented as, in some ways to see it for that moment make coherent.

Paula Moya: Yes.

Alex Woloch: You can see it, you're outside of it.

Paula Moya: Right. And as long as you're outside of it and you're perceiving it as opposed to living it, then it still set apart from you. I think the other pleasure is actually what it actually does teach us about ourselves right now. That it is a way in which we can examine social dynamics and it does have that warning. One of my favorite signs that I saw a picture of from the women's march that took place the day after the Trump inauguration was a hand lettered sign that said, "Octavia warned us." It's like, well, let's see what this might be and then let's think about what we could do to prevent going in that direction, so that not if this goes on. What do we have to do to stop it now, how do we not let that happen. So, that's another reason I think that we read this stuff and why authors write it.

Alex Woloch: I'm thinking about the election and Paula I know when you conceive your course after the apocalypse, it was pretty well before the election. I remember talking to you very early on in the Republican primary season and you had a very laser sharp focus on the kind of white supremacist grounds of Trump's candidacy. I mean, when it was still very uncertain that he would-

Paula Moya: Win?

Alex Woloch: That he would take over the Republican Party let alone become our president. So, might have been in the mix for your thinking about this course but in fact these interests in this genre precede the 2016 election, at least by a little bit.

Paula Moya: By a lot.

Alex Woloch: The question is, you put together the course, you bring in Jonathan, you're going to co-teach it and then it's almost like, again, a perfect experiment because in reality you were teaching that in the ... Was it in the winter or?

Paula Moya: No, we taught it in spring.

Alex Woloch: Spring. So, a couple of months after the election.

Paula Moya: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: So, the question is just how did that change the course or how did the students, particularly the students who were coming into the course, was it relevant? I mean, maybe it was not that important.

Paula Moya: Well, I like to tell people that when I conceived of this course, which I was calling after the apocalypse, I didn't expect to be teaching it after the apocalypse. God forbid. But in classes, I really try to stay away from explicit discussions of politics. I don't talk about Trump in class. I don't do it because I don't know what the students political affiliations are and I understand well that you don't reach people by making them feel threatened. You don't change any minds by putting them under threat. One has to be open and inviting of discussion so I didn't teach Parable of the Talents in that class, I did teach Parable of the Sower. It brings up a lot of these issues that in order to engage with the novel, you have to engage with these issues.

So, it allows us to talk not about labels, Republicans versus Democrats, but let's look at how these dynamics are happening, what these behaviors are, what people are doing, how they're represented in the literature so we can get at those without putting anybody under threat. In that sense, I did over the course of the quarter get a sense of where these students were locating themselves politically. They did most of them tend to be more on the liberal side but not all of them.

Kenny Ligda: I'm wondering, so the classroom especially puts pressure on the connection between literature and politics. I guess somehow you've just told me but I wonder if there were more thoughts or guidance you could give on that. Because it's not like the literature classroom is the place to discuss politics but politics are never absent from our judgments of literature or what we focus on in literature.

Paula Moya: I think the literature classroom is absolutely the place to discuss politics but not politics in the sense of party affiliation, but politics in the sense that at its base, how people behave politically describes their relationship to the world and to others. I mean, whether you believe in democracy. I sometimes wonder whether Trump believes in democracy. You don't hear from his rhetoric any support of that way of being in the world. If you think about politics in that sense like how people's orientation to and how they believe they should interact with others, it's absolutely at the core of literature. Part of what I'm doing and choosing the works of literature that I do choose are because I think they have something interesting to say about it. Not that they tell us how to think but that they open up the questions in a way that make us think deeply about, what does it mean to treat someone that way.

So, that's what the Handmaid's Tale does for us. What makes it okay and what situations is it okay to kill someone for not believing in your religion. Like, this is what the Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico did. Is that an okay way to be? And so I'm posing those questions to my students and not to say you have to answer it this way, but this is what might happen if you take this answer.

Kenny Ligda: Well, maybe a question that I wanted to ask earlier. This may be related is, when there's a novel like Parable of the Talents that seems to really be speaking to us in the present, what's the difference between what special purchase does it give us as a work of fiction as opposed to op-eds or sociological-

Alex Woloch: [crosstalk 00:28:53] even news.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. Classic, really difficult question.

Paula Moya: So, literature as opposed to like a sociology paper or?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah. What's the special ...

Paula Moya: What purchase?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Paula Moya: Well, I think that literature can make us care in a way that sociological tract doesn't do. We know well that people's minds are not changed by getting more information especially when someone can come along and cast doubt on that information as fake news. People are much more swayed by emotion than anything else. That's partly why these racial appeals work so well is because they appeal to fear. What literature can do, can interact with a person's sense of their self and they can make them feel in certain ways that might then make them think about things. I know that you've had this experience because you're a lover of literature and I'm sure you have to Alex. Books can change your life. Not everybody, you have to actually read one.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Paula Moya: If you read it and you really form a kind of relationship with it, it can make a huge difference. That's not to say that sociology isn't important, I read quite a lot of sociological information because I do understand the importance of having data and historical information. And any historical writer worth her salt and I would count Octavia Butler as a historical writer, she's drawing on history even to project a world into the future.

Does a lot of research. They are accountable to facts. They have to be accountable facts to play with them.

Alex Woloch: I just want to backtrack to channel thoughts I had with Paula's comment about this open question about whether Trump believes in democracy. To first flag that as actually a very profound question. It's not one that's asked exactly that way that often and it's very strange to pose that question about somebody that's ran for president and is now president. I think it's worth pondering that and so I want to kind of just catch that question and maybe there'll be other podcasts where we can return to it. And the follow-up thought I had is, how is democracy or how is the democratic values expressed through literature. And the first example that came to my mind was Walt Whitman and something like, it's a problem.

So, the Democratic Spirit is there, just in the breaking of the lines and in the kind of pantheistic copiousness of Whitman's verse, which is what makes it great poetry, but it's also what makes it a problem. It's a whole new complicated aesthetics. That was where my mind went but I think it's not self-evident that literature is democratic.

Paula Moya: Definitely not.

Alex Woloch: And it's quite complicated to think about what it would mean for literature to be democratic. How we sort of think of that value in and through literature.

Paula Moya: Absolutely. Walt Whitman is a perfect figure in this case because he has those long lists and then he projects himself into all of these different identities. I'm the woman here, I'm the worker there, I'm a slave there. To 21st century racially literate eyes, that can sometimes seem a little superficial and a little naive to imagine that you can just like flip in and out of those identities and experiences. But going back to the impulse, literary critics and readers of Whitman generally agree that there's an important to democratic impulse in Whitman and he was one of the very first to do that. And so it's important to mark that and honor that.

But it's kind of like why I like Toni Morrison's, *A Mercy*, which is a novel that I teach a lot, so much. She has in there a narrative structure that has at least seven different focalizers, are people who orient the text so that the world whether or not it's being written in first person or third person, you perceive the world through the perceptual apparatus, through the world of sense of seven different characters. What's interesting about that ... She does a good job with it.

What's interesting about that is that you see what is ostensibly the same world through these different worlds of sense and you understand that

there's much more that make up a kind of shared social world than anyone's perception of it. To me that narrative structure enacts a kind of democratic impulse that Whitman was pointing to but maybe wasn't quite able to do or just didn't do. I'll put it that way. I don't know whether he was able to do it or not.

Alex Woloch: It's great.

Kenny Ligda: Well, it just seems significant. This isn't reflected very much in the narrative structure of Parable of the Talents but it's interesting that there's one kind of very sci-fi element in this book aside from being in the future, which is that the main character is a sharer. Like she has this sort of like super human vulnerability or ability where she feels other people's pain automatically without being able to control that. And then this book does have I think three narrators. That seems to me a fundamental question that makes literature appealing is that it asks us to think about the world from other people's point of view. I do wonder if it's something that ... If it's something that's always been kind of championed in literature, you can think of a lot of literature that's more kind of authoritarian and temperament.

Paula Moya: I do think that some literature actually is anti-democratic, that is say authoritarian and temperament and it actually would ... We would do well to be able to identify those narrative structures that support that way of being versus others. In the same way that people have different perceptual schemas, different perceptual schemas are actually embedded into the structure and the metaphors and motifs of a book. And you can point to them and show how they are either ... That's a huge part of the argument of my last book, The Social Imperative, is that you can sort of read the ideology of the text off of its form and not just its content but its actual form. And how the form and the content work together against each other.

Alex Woloch: An extreme version of that is certain essays by Bakhtin where he's making the case that the genre of the novel as such is democratic and more democratic than every other genre. And to some degree, every other genre is pretty undemocratic, it's monologic. Like it ultimately has one voice and like ... One of the ways he defines a novel is it's the genre that's hetero classic, that's dialogic, that's sort of built into its very essence like-

Paula Moya: I've been hugely influenced by a Bakhtin and it's Bakhtin that has allowed me to see this. The only modification I would make is that I think since the novel became so hegemonic, many other forms have become novelized. So that you sometimes have poems that do bring in different voices. It's a little harder partly because they're usually shorter but you can't see that. So, I think as a novelization of other genres rather than that they become novels.

Alex Woloch: Right.

Kenny Ligda: We're the limit cases of this. If you think about just like your day in walking through San Francisco or something like that, you're going to encounter way more people and way more perspectives than could ever really fit in a novel. I mean, a novel does have certain limits about how democratic, how multivalent it could be. I'm trying to think of what the kind of extreme cases of this have been. Ulysses is obviously something that's coming to mind.

Paula Moya: You're exactly right. There is a novel that I like a lot and that I am writing about in a couple of different essays. That the first version of which I realized it was almost a perfect illustration of Alex's theory, *The One Versus The Many*. Because what it was, I read it and I realized it was kind of hard to track all the way through initially and it was in part because there was no obvious protagonist. There were many, many, many protagonists and so my immediate thought was like, oh, my god, this is like a novel full of minor characters. They all have a case. Having read Alex's work was very helpful to me in allowing me to see that.

And so the author of the novel Helena Maria Viramontes in the novel, *Their Dogs Came with Them*, she had to make a few modifications, not huge, but just enough to pull out a few characters more broadly and then have one to sort of see it all the way through. We need that as novel readers. We have been trained to expect certain things and if we don't get it then it ceases to look like a novel to us.

Kenny Ligda: In Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, towards the end of the novel says, "I think it's undemocratic to focus on one character, so now I'm going to treat everyone equally." But that's towards the end and the novel does ... It sort of falls apart. Because you can only do it for so long.

Paula Moya: Yeah, it's hard to maintain that.

Alex Woloch: We might have covered this and it's sort of circling back to the beginning but maybe as the last question, although we could keep going. Just thinking about your books, *Learning from Experience* and *The Social Imperative*. I don't think either of them really treats science as science fiction text or speculative fiction. So-

Paula Moya: So why am I doing this now?

Alex Woloch: No. Just how would ... How much do those models hold or do they hold in different ways with this kind of new genre that wasn't so much in then mix, definitely not with *Learning from Experience*.

Paula Moya: I guess what I sort of realized is that the same interest I have in Toni Morrison's, *Sula*, is the kind of interest I bring to all of the rest of these books. Toni Morrison famously writes often in answer to a question or a series of questions. Now, generally in any novel, there's a whole bunch of questions that get asked and answered, but there's often one with which she starts. And so the question that motivated *Sula* was, she writes this in an interview. She says, "Now, what does it mean when you say you are someone's friend? What are the lines you do not step across?"

So then she goes on to write a novel about friendship but there's many more things going on in there, so it's like a speculative exercise that she is involved in. Where she asking herself a question that matters to her, I don't know why it matters to her, maybe she had fallout with a friend and it doesn't end happily. Because *Sula* oversteps a boundary with Nel, she sleeps with Nel's husband, not okay. But Nel oversteps a boundary with *Sula* too at one level like Nel fails to understand that the person that she ... For one thing, she fails to forgive *Sula*. She fails to understand that *Sula* did not intend to do her that harm and she never understands that the person she's missing is *Sula* and not her husband and that's probably because she thinks she's supposed to be missing her husband.

She finally gets it at the end through a series of things that shift her perception and so they don't get to be friends. It's like a dystopic ending. I think that's what it is. I don't need the novel to end happily, I need the novel to help me see what the questions are and the variety of ways that they could be answered and in the case of *Sula*, it's like, if this goes on like if you don't stop and understand what's really at stake here, then guess what, you're going to lose your friend.

Alex Woloch: Great answer. We could wrap up. Kenny what do you think?

Kenny Ligda: No. I'm going to ask one really hard question.

Paula Moya: Okay.

Kenny Ligda: I think after the election, I think for a lot of people who study literature, there's this sort of moment of doubt of like, why am I studying literature? I remember Auden says about the state of the world in the 1940s is basically like the poet is sort of like at the bedside of the dying patient, of the dying world just humming. And if someone said to the poet, "Stop humming and do something." "I don't know what I would say to that.", Says Auden. I'm wondering if you've had that thought in recent months or how the role of literature strikes you.

Paula Moya: Well, I guess I would go back to the sense that I have that literature helps us understand ourselves and our place in the world and how we're

supposed to interact with others and that's crucial particularly in these kinds of moments. I'm not sure I've got the right key answer here but I think I've become even more convinced of the importance of what I do in this situation. That literature is one of the best venues to explore complicated questions. Because you can really get into the weeds of these issues and we need deep thought and we need non-binary, non-simplistic thinking now more than ever. It's binary thinking, simplistic thinking, good-bad kind of thinking that is getting us into trouble right now. I think the world is, things happen, they have many causes, we can't blame anyone group, any one person and we need to be able to learn to think more complexly and literature trains us to do that.

I just came back from an alumni gathering where I met up with a young woman who graduated with a degree in Chicano Studies. She has her own immigration law firm now and she's working with people to help them try to gain asylum. She's working with DACA students and ... I mean, it's a tough job. If you want to have a tough job right now, try being an immigration lawyer who's working with Mexican-American or Mexican people. She says that as things get harder, she's being forced to get more creative. How do you learn creative complex thinking? And it was such amazing thing for me to see her because what she had come down to see us, to visit us at CCSRE and to say, "You all really helped me. I'm doing what I need to do, what I want to do and it's because I was here at Stanford and got this education."

Kenny Ligda: That's nice.

Alex Woloch: I'm glad you asked that question. So, great. We'll wrap. Okay, thank you.

Kenny Ligda: You've been listening to Reading After Trump, Conversations in Literature and Politics. This is a production of the Stanford English department in collaboration with the office of the vice provost for teaching and learning. Reading After Trump is created and hosted by Alex Woloch and Kenny Ligda. Sound engineering and editing is by Catherine Wong, except where messed up by Kenny Ligda. Music is by Brett Yarnton.

How did we do?



If you rate this transcript 3 or below, this agent will not work on your future orders

[Rate this transcript](#)