

1-28-2021

We Need New Myths: Art-making in the Pandemic and What Follows

Laleh Khadivi

University of San Francisco, lKhadivi@usfca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jips>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Social Justice Commons](#)

Citation Information

Khadivi, Laleh (2021) "We Need New Myths: Art-making in the Pandemic and What Follows," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Scholarship*: Vol. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jips/vol4/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Scholarship by an authorized editor of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

We Need New Myths Art-making in the Pandemic and What Follows

Laleh Khadivi
MFA in Writing, University of San Francisco

I don't have to tell you what happened. We've all been on the same planet for the last several months and though the details vary person by person, family by family, nation by nation, the general experience has been the same: all of the sudden we were asked to go home and stay still.

From the moment I picked up a pencil to make a world, when I was 23 or 24, I have written, thought and dreamt of motion. When the Coronavirus pandemic struck I was doing just that, considering migration and its effect on the human psyche by binge watching a series of videos by a Syrian refugee named Mahmoud Bitar. In 2016, I came across his YouTube videos and marveled at the power of storytelling. He was 16 and in flight from war torn Syria. When he typed in the word 'asylum' into Google, the word Sweden showed up and he oriented himself, without family or friends, in the direction of Sweden. The videos chronicle a dangerous and lonely odyssey, vicious dog attacks, detours through Egypt and Libya for work, and finally, after 21 attempts, arrival in Sweden.

The motion in Bitar's documentaries is unrelenting, until it relents, the journey intoxicating until the sobering realities of arrival. I tuned in because he was funny and courageous enough to make illuminating episodes out of harrowing episodes. At the start of the Syrian exodus the headlines and op-eds were information, not stories. Here, on YouTube, with Bitar we had human narration at its best. After a few weeks in Sweden, one clip shows him running up to a tree with Euros blowing quietly from the branches. "Ah" he says opening his empty plastic bag "the Euro tree is ready, look how much fruit!" He picks to his heart's content and then turns to see a tree without money "The dollar tree is not ready yet. Oh well." He was changing the story. What we thought of as traumatic, intensely disturbing and catastrophic was here revealed with humor, with a new perspective that captured truths only storytelling can tap into.

As the highways grew empty and the skies clear of planes, I knew the world's migrants were still on the move. They had no choice, stuck in the same limbo they'd been in for months and years. I knew that the virus did not hamper their determined hope and yet my imagination was not with them any longer. I went to a place born of quiet and depth began to think about myths, myths born of a culture's shared nightmares and dreams and sense of themselves. In the stillness of a world long accustomed to great and increasingly thoughtless movement a great disturbance was taking place, revealing cracks as fissures and fissures as deep crevasses. What had been long ignored, raced over or through or past – the raging inequality of the homeless encampments, the public health disasters of diabetes and heart disease, the police brutality of our not-so-post genocidal state, the quality of our water, our air, our forests and oceans – rose before like an angry Cerberus, demanding proper recognition. We could not turn away, run

away, or fly away from, at least for now and yet I understood soon we would move again, as climate refugees, political refugees, economic refugees most of us will be on the move, one way or another. To understand ourselves during this upheaval, to ease the tensions of displacement and arrival, to redefine *other* and *home* we would need new myths.

Storytelling, as Bitar reminds us, continues to be a necessity of the human spirit. Amitav Ghosh, in his beautiful, urgent book, *The Great Derangement*, goes as far to say that the storyteller must imagine a future in which we can live, and he challenges contemporary writers to include and amplify the present and coming crises of climate change in their fictions, television shows and movies. He is somewhat appalled that it isn't already happening. These days, I am too.

For many years I read student work that painted a bleak picture of the future. It is one thing to continually churn out dystopian images and songs and plays and books that capitalize on our current failures and shortcomings and simply project them into the future. It is another thing all together to sit with the imagination and think of the future as a space of possibility. Not perfection or utopian idealism, but possibility.

The role of myth in human societies has always been the same. At its most basic form, myth is a way to structure the imagination of a people. According to popular thinkers like Yuval Harrari, any gathering of humans less than 185 people and social cohesion can be achieved by gossip alone. Above 185 and there is the need for the unifying story, the tale that binds the variety of minds into singular beliefs that confirm *yes this is who we are* and *this is what we are doing here*.

Given our numbers, we will need many new myths to guide us, many new paintings to serve as beacons, many new TikTok videos to show us to ourselves and many new anthems to lift our spirits or help us mourn. As I consider these ideas I think fondly of the myth I am most obsessed by, and that is the myth of the many, the different, the various, living together on a crowded planet that is going to demand our co-operation. In another video Bitar made shortly after he arrived in Sweden when he was most nervous about his new country and the mixed welcome of his hosts, he walks down a crowded street and asks people sitting in outdoor café's if they are willing to pay extra taxes so Syrians can move to Sweden. A young man in sunglasses says yes, of course, we have been taking so much from you and your country and your region, oil and minerals, for so long, we should now be able to have you here and share what wealth you have helped us gain. This is part of a new story. Not the old story of 'tribes' claiming their land and detesting the displaced who are hungry for safety and stability. Not the old myth that cultures cannot merge. Not the old myth of the tired immigrant, met with hostility, discrimination, disgust. It is not the story of all Swedes, but one person is enough to begin the idea of the myth Bitar captures, the story of a borderlessness compassion, of human grace, of generosity and patience. These are not the stories that find a home in the nightly news or the headlines of your favorite online publication, or even in the politician's mouth. This is the story only the artist, the human being awake and

observant of their moment on earth, can tell. In this great period of instability and unknown, we have our work cut out for us.