

## Chronicles of a Pandemic

### Introduction to Part 2 of the Curare Corona Diaries

This is the second and last part of the Curare Corona Diaries that we, the *Curare* editorial team, started to collect shortly after the WHO declared a novel coronavirus disease to be a global pandemic. We launched a call for (auto-)ethnographic Corona diaries and asked contributors to record what was happening in their environment during the beginnings of the pandemic. We hoped for a unique opportunity to generate ethnographic material that would make it possible to reconstruct collectively, in retrospect, what happened in the early days of the pandemic and what, back then, in the midst of a moment of crisis, we could not comprehend. The situation in different countries was and is developing differently. Countries closed their national borders; lockdowns were implemented with greater or lesser severity; in many places, the military or police forces acted as guardians of hygienic order; and novel calls for solidarity emerged, too. We wanted to generate comparative perspectives on this large spectrum of responses to the pandemic in order to understand what was happening in similar yet very diverse ways in countries across the globe.

The retrospective interpretation of what has happened has already become quite controversial in the public sphere: how was the situation handled in different countries, by whom, and who had a say? What were the different consequences of the Corona policies, of acute crisis management in highly uncertain times, and for whom? Which lessons can be drawn for the future? To answer these questions, daily ethnographic accounts like those we have collected, recorded during the first weeks of the pandemic, are of vital importance.

In the Curare Corona Diaries Project, participating “correspondents” from different countries observed their own everyday life and that of others and reported to the editorial team, sometimes daily, sometimes weekly, sometimes on an irregular basis. Correspondents followed media coverage, saved media documents, and recorded sub-

jectively what was happening around them. Most importantly: they recorded their reactions and those of their relatives, friends, colleagues, and neighbors on a regular basis as things were evolving, and not retrospectively. To us, such first-hand accounts seem vital for the future, so that parts of the “indexicality” of the process can be reconstructed later.

This is why we framed the Curare Corona Diaries project in Malinowskian terms as diaries “in the strict sense of the term”. We were looking for daily protocols that were based on the state of knowledge, practices, and experience of the very moment in which they were written, short or long. We were open to situative descriptions of all kinds, descriptions of one’s own behavior and the behavior of others, notes of conversations, critical reflections, and fragments of thoughts. The form of the diaries was also very much open: they could have the character of a collage, they could contain only texts, but also other media such as pictures, videos, screenshots, drawings, etc. In sum, we hoped for diaries that would resemble anthropological field diaries, even if the authors were not trained anthropologists. This allowed for ambivalences, paradoxes, uncertainties, confusion, and messiness. What ideas were circulating about the cause and effects of the novel coronavirus? How did different people and groups assess the risk of infection or disease? Which worries were associated with the pandemic? Which moods and affects developed in the diarists and the environment they recorded? What were and are ideas about how to counter the virus? Which preventive measures, be it in the form of behavior or drugs, were and are recommended? Which therapeutic measures emerged, based on what kinds of knowledge and evidence? What were the different theories of healing on a daily basis? How did everyday practices in different countries and settings change, i.e., regarding hygiene practices, greeting behavior, change of daily working routines, etc.

As medical anthropologists, we were highly intrigued not only about the degree to which public health and (bio)security measures affected everyday life in specific countries, regions, and homes, but also about which possibilities of social, political, and collective action were generated or impeded. What new forms of solidarity have emerged? What political actions have been made impossible? Were forms of civil disobedience to security and confinement measures emerging, and for what reasons? What was the economic impact of biosecurity measures, not only on national economies, but also on household and grassroots economies? Based on what evidence or data, or lack thereof, have public health measures been taken in different countries or regions?

And of course, we were also interested in what one could call the “sinister” side of events, erupting almost daily: rumors, scapegoating, the uncanniness of social relations, the blaming and shaming that comes with contagion. What were the affects and effects that might have been more difficult for diarists to grasp, due to feelings of embarrassment for themselves or their communities? Just to give one prominent example: early on in the pandemic, Chinese or people identified as Asian were suspected of spreading the virus, and we didn’t expect this to be the end of such false claims. “Follow the crisis” was the mode we proposed. After all, we all were and still are participating in a historical process that challenges our understanding of participant observation and of anthropological knowledge production more generally. Writing a diary in the strict sense of the term, so we hoped, would allow us to record what happened in the midst of a global crisis that was nevertheless developing and evolving very differently across the globe. We were looking for diarists documenting the “ongoing accomplishment” of the crisis or rather the many crises. During the Curare Corona Diaries Project, which ran for several months, from March to August 2020, more than 100 authors from over 25 different countries participated as diarists – far too many to be hosted in a Curare special issue. That is why we decided to publish the unabridged diaries we received, for which the authors granted permission to publish online. For pragmatic reasons, we choose the infrastructure of *boasblogs.org*, but we view the published Curare Corona Diaries 2020 as an archive

created ad hoc and thus as an invitation for further exploration. Now, two years after our call, this archive offers a time machine, a way to immerse oneself in the by now already forgotten, invalid, or normalized events and practices of the incipient pandemic. The ethnographic potential of the diaries unfolds in their comparative and multi-perspective synopsis.

Many of the diaries we received were ad hoc affective and very personal descriptions; their *raisons d’être* were important in their own right. The vast diversity of the diaries on *boasblogs.org* is a tribute to the importance of daily chronicling in uncertain situations around the world. Some of the diaries, however, went beyond “simple” everyday descriptions and already held fragments of an anthropological analysis that became intriguing to us as an editorial team. We thus started to look for interesting “patterns” in diaries we had published on *boasblogs.org*. We searched for those passages in the texts that already resembled anthropological interpretations of the highly diverse pandemic situations in different parts of the world from which “our” authors reported. In early 2021 then, nine months after the first wave, we asked some contributors to turn back to their original diaries with hindsight. Their own diary, so we hoped, could become a source that would allow them to systematically reflect – with temporal and analytical distance – on important aspects of the pandemic, the control strategies, and their consequences that had already been treated in the diary records. They were for example: racism and foreign bodies, disability, novel modes of solidarity, forms of self-isolation or isolation, care of the elderly, media and the state, and ethnographic research during pandemic times and restrictions of movement.

The following issue is the result of a process of distancing. Authors agreed to work with their own diaries, retrospectively, trying to find ways out of the immediacy of the pandemic situation and into highly different Corona worlds.

CAROLE AMMANN addresses the challenges associated with her move from Switzerland to the Netherlands with her family during the pandemic and the impact that the domestic merging of personal and professional spheres has had on her planned anthropological fieldwork and the originally planned data collection. In doing so, she

reflects on how moments of uncertainty, disorientation, and vulnerability were integral to life and how the pandemic reinforced pre-existing inequalities on a local and global scale.

ANDREA BRAVO DIAZ's review of her diary entries focuses on the contrast between early responses and public health interventions in urban Ecuador and the Ecuadorian Amazon, particularly in Waorani territory. Against the backdrop of colonial history, she reflects on the relationship between the state and indigenous communities and shows how the government's silence about most illnesses and deaths among indigenous communities reinforces inequalities in health.

YOU-KYUNG BYUN, as a member of the South Korean minority in Germany, addresses the changing attitudes toward and practices around face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic against the backdrop of anti-Asian racism in Germany. In doing so, she compares the experiences of people in different Asian communities in Germany and traces the development from initial ridicule of and discrimination against Asian people, who were often more familiar with wearing masks for health purposes than people in Germany, to an increasing acceptance of mask wearing in Germany, as well. Her contribution provides a detailed insight into everyday racism against people of Asian descent, which existed before the pandemic as well, but increased a lot during it.

FRANCESCO DIODATI looks at the experience of home care for the elderly during the first phase of the pandemic in Emilia-Romagna, a region that actually has a well-equipped health care system, especially in terms of support for the chronically ill. His accounts of daily life show how pre-existing relationships were relied upon during the pandemic and provide a detailed insight into the family care system, highlighting the role of reciprocity in filling the gap left by institutions and public care services. DIODATI also shows how the pandemic situation has further exacerbated already existing social inequalities in care.

EKABALI GHOSH retrospectively seeks to understand how and why the pandemic upended various aspects of her young, urban life in Kolkata. An important part of her reflections relate to the political situation in her home state of West Bengal and the rise of the global right.

ZUZANA HRDLIČKOV's diary is set first in Sierra Leone, where she lived with her family at the beginning of the pandemic and from where in the following months she moved back to her homeland, the Czech Republic, after 15 years abroad. Looking back, she reflects on her fears while waiting for COVID-19 to arrive in Sierra Leone and her experience of evacuation and on the notion of refuge that she associated with her home country and that led her to an intense process of coming to terms with her own identity and the conditions of global mobility.

JOP KOOPMAN focuses on the issues of solidarity and polarization that arose in Dutch society during the pandemic. He shows different examples of emerging solidarity in Amsterdam and, based on observations of media and demonstrations, analyzes which groups are involved in the polarization process and reflects on how this process can be counteracted.

JULIA LEMONDE reports on the situation in Australia, offering a critical analysis of government policies and the justifications used to force the public to follow measures to contain the spread of SARS-CoV-2. She analyzes her diary entries from the perspective of Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality and the theory of social construction. She shows how the population was successively managed and directed, and in doing so, questions the government's stated reasons for implementing the protective measures.

The Curare Corona Diaries project has been possible only due to the engaged participation and work of diarists and collaborators alike. Once again, we would therefore like to thank all authors for their participation in this project, Erhard Schüttpelz for inspiration, Katharina Sabernig for another cover picture, Daria Ledergerber and Leonie Schäfer for their precious editorial assistance, and Peter Gillessen, Fabian Lüke, and Annette Steffny for their technical support and careful work on the website.

KATRIN AMELANG, CLEMENS EISENMANN, JANINA KEHR, HELMAR KURZ, MIRKO UHLIG, and EHLER VOSS