



## Chronicles of a Pandemic

### Introduction to Part 1 of the Curare Corona Diaries

On March 18, 2020, shortly after the WHO declared a novel coronavirus disease to be a global pandemic, we, the Curare editorial team, launched a call for (auto-)ethnographic Corona Diaries in the strict sense of the term, which would record what was happening in peoples' environments. More than 100 authors from over 25 different countries participated in the project. This overwhelming interest exceeded our expectations. We were unable to include all the diaries in our planned special issue of Curare. So, we decided to publish the diaries in full length on *boasblogs.org* and a selection of the diaries in the present (2020) and the forthcoming (2021) issue of Curare. For readers to be able to trace the editorial process and understand its outcomes in print and on *boasblogs.org*, we present our call, which circulated on several listservs and was subsequently adapted as an email to interested authors, here:

*The editorial board of "Curare. Journal of Medical Anthropology" is planning a special issue on the current corona pandemic. For this purpose, we are collecting ethnographic material written down as (auto-)ethnographic diaries, which record what is happening in one's own environment. This is perhaps a unique opportunity to generate ethnographic material that makes it possible to reconstruct collectively, in retrospect, what is happening right now and what we cannot comprehend at this moment of crisis. The situation in individual countries is developing differently, and countries are increasingly closing their national borders, which makes it interesting and important to look from a comparative perspective at what is happening in similar and different ways in individual countries.*

*The retrospective interpretation of what has happened will probably be quite controversial in the public sphere when it later comes to assessing how this situation was handled and the consequences of crisis management, as well as drawing lessons for the fu-*

*ture. This kind of daily ethnographic recording will be all the more important for this discussion.*

*Therefore, we are looking for correspondents from different countries who observe their own everyday life and that of others, who follow media coverage, save media documents, and record everything in a diary. Most important: We are looking for records of your own reactions and those of your environment on a daily basis and not retrospectively, to ensure that parts of the "indexicality" of the process can be reconstructed later. We are looking for diaries "in the strict sense of the term" (cf. Bronislaw Malinowski). You don't have to be a trained anthropologist. Important for us is the daily or almost daily protocol based on the current state of knowledge, practices, and experience. This protocol does not have to be long – short and very short notes are also okay. They can be descriptions of situations, descriptions of one's own behavior and the behavior of others, notes on conversations, reflections, fragments of thoughts. The diary can be kept like an anthropological field diary and therefore can have the character of a collage and need not but may contain not only texts, but also other media such as pictures, videos, screenshots, drawings, forms, etc.*

*The diaries should leave space for ambivalences, paradoxes, uncertainties, confusion, messiness. They should focus on everyday life, i.e., on ordinary affects (Kathleen Stewart) under extraordinary circumstances. As a medical anthropological journal, we are mainly interested in medical aspects of this crisis and their social embeddedness. What ideas are there about the cause and effects of the corona virus? How do you and your environment assess the risk? Do you and your environment have any worries associated with the pandemic, and if so, what are they? What is the mood of you and your environment? What are your current ideas about how to counter the virus? What types of prevention in the form of behavior or drugs are recommended? What therapeutic measures are recommended and which are taken? In other words: what are the theories of healing on a daily basis? The diaries should focus not only on expectations and ideas, but*

also on practical everyday affairs, i.e., hygiene practices, greeting behavior, changes in routines, etc.

As medical anthropologists, we are of course also intrigued by how the public health and (bio-)security measures taken in individual countries, regions, and homes affect not only everyday life, but also the possibilities of social and political action or collective action more generally. What novel forms of solidarity have emerged in your environments? What political actions are rendered impossible? Are forms of civil disobedience to security and confinement measures emerging? And for what reasons? What is the economic impact of the biosecurity measures, not only on national economies, but also on household and grassroots economies? On what evidence or data or lack thereof are public health measures taken in “your” countries or regions?

And of course, we are interested in the sinister side of events, because they may erupt any day or week in the coming course of events: rumors, scapegoats, the uncanny side of contagion in blaming and shaming. Please write down things you observe, even if you feel they are irrelevant or an embarrassment for you and your community. We have already heard for example of Chinese people being suspected in the US of spreading the virus, and we should not expect this to be the end of such false claims. Of course, we will not spread any of these rumors, but we ask you to consider them in your protocols if they occur.

Regarding the media: It is not necessary to save all the media coverage. It is rather a matter of paying attention to which reports you encounter yourself, which are pointed out to you, which have meaning for you and which for others. And then it would be good if you could store these reports, in a form that allows the source to be traced – for example as a PDF in which you write down the source, for example a URL, and the date of access. But you don’t have to be encyclopedic or strive for completion in any sense – it is neither possible nor a goal for our enterprise. Documentation should be for documenting your experience and observations, that is all.

It is primarily a matter of collecting ethnographic material. The texts sent to us will be circulated among the Curare corona editorial team. How we will interpret and reconstruct the material is still open at the moment, but we want to make it available to a public. Of course, only what you want to be published will be published – anonymously if you wish. And we will

have to think of protecting other people’s rights as well, as in any ethnographic text.

Some of you have asked if they can write in their mother tongue because of the intimacy of a diary. This is of course fine and we encourage this intimacy of expression; but for a publication, we might have to think about a translation. We publish texts both in English and German.

We cannot say anything about the duration of the project at the moment. We will start it first and see how things develop. “Follow the crisis” is the mode we propose. After all, we are all participants in a historical process that challenges our understanding of participant observation.

We aim to bring together various diary entries in an upcoming special issue of Curare. Since we have received an overwhelming response to our first call on March 18, 2020, we will in addition offer to publish many of the diaries later on [boasblogs.org](http://boasblogs.org) – of course only with your permission. We will keep all contributors updated on this opportunity.

But the diaries must be distinguished from a blog. The idea of the Curare corona diaries project is to write a diary in the strict sense of the term, to record what happens in your understanding of the crisis as it develops on your local (and global) basis. This is about ethnographers and anthropologists and some others documenting the “ongoing accomplishment” of the crisis or rather crises. Our understanding is that a blog or a daily published diary entry is NOT a diary, because that would mean writing for the public and with and against and within the public, but that a diary (in the strict sense) or a fieldwork diary is an irreplaceable genre of experience, observation, and reflection that we should cherish in its own right, and that we want to give it a chance. Apart from this assumption, there are no limits and no rules as to what you may write.

Before the diaries are published, all authors can look back on their diaries and decide what to do with the texts. There are several options for this:

- 1) The diaries can be published completely or in extracts.
- 2) The complete or selected entries can be published under your own name or anonymously.
- 3) You can decide that the complete or selected entries should not be published, but may be evaluated and cited anonymously by the Curare corona editorial team.
- 4) You can decide that no entry may be published and no entry may be evaluated by third parties. We

*will, of course, delete everything that the authors want to have deleted.*

*In case of publication, each author will be responsible for making all data in his or her text anonymous in such a way that all the people described are sufficiently protected or have given their permission.*

*Please send us your diary entries daily or at least at brief intervals in a text document, which you will add entries on a regular basis (e.g. every two days, once a week or so), so that we can see who is on board and how the project develops. Please describe yourself and your situation at the time you started the diary at the beginning of the document. Who are you, what is your profession, how did you get into the current situation, with whom are you staying, etc. If you link in the diaries to articles on the Internet, we recommend that you save the respective pages with URL and date of access. You can also use screenshots and include them in the diary. Please always use the same sender address when you send us the documents and always start with your full name in the subject line in the same way. Please send your entries to the following email address: cura-recoronadiaries@agem.de. If you have any questions, please write an email to: curare@agem.de – if we do not answer, please ask again.*

*Independently of your participation in the Curare Corona Diaries Project, you are welcome to write alternative or additional contributions to the “Witnessing Corona” blog that we have just started in cooperation with the Global South Studies Center Cologne and the blog *medizinethnologie.net*. In this case, please send your contributions to: *witnessingcorona@boasblogs.org*.*

*The future is unwritten, but at least we can write down the present. And let’s hope for the best. We are looking forward to your participation.*

After about 2 months, the activity decreased significantly; many had already finished their diary and from many the gaps between contributions became longer. Therefore, we ended the collection on June 30, 2020.

In our original call stemming from March 2020, we deliberately did not ask for anthropological analysis of the pandemic situation, but for “simple” everyday diaries. Many of the diaries we received were indeed ad hoc affective and very personal descriptions, their *raison d’être* was important in its own right. The 2020 and 2021 Special

Issues of Curare dedicated to the Corona Diaries pay tribute to these ad hoc contributions while also providing a platform to take reflections further. In the first of the two special issues, we present a text written by four graduate students at the New School for Social Research in New York: Juliana Beecher, Lee Brando, Vaida Norvilaitė, and Sonia Yuhui Zhang. They were part of a group of nine who participated in the Curare corona diaries project and while doing so experimented with writing alone/together. For the present issue, they have selected parts of their diaries, which can be read in full on *boasblogs.org*, reflecting on bodily and intellectual techniques that were more or less newly developed during the pandemic or at least unusual before it: the process of writing together while in isolation, the wearing of masks, the practical negotiation of social distancing, and daily hygiene procedures. Each section has a different author, but includes ethnographic material from fellow diarists. Rather than following the much-too-often invoked lone wolf scenario in anthropology, they brought their individually written, shared, and collectively discussed diaries into the form of a collaborative auto-ethnography, as they spell out in their introduction.

The Curare Corona Diaries project has been possible only due to the engaged participation and work of diarists and collaborators alike. We would therefore like to thank all the authors for their participation in this project. Furthermore, we thank Erhard Schüttpelz for inspiration, Daria Ledergerber and Leonie Schäfer for their precious editorial assistance, and Peter Gillissen, Florian Lueke, and Annette Steffny for their technical support and careful work on the website.

For the present issue, Katharina Sabernig provided us with a photo of her knitted coronaviruses for the cover, and Regina Uhlig created a drawing that illustrates the New York Diaries. Many thanks to them as well.

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