Mediated Vulnerabilities: Transforming Virginia Woolf's Characters in Corona Fictions

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Abstract

"We are all Mrs. Dalloway now", announced *The New Yorker* (2020), succinctly capturing the pandemic wave of interest in Virginia Woolf's works. Diverse audiences, writers and artists have turned to Woolf's writings on illness, survival and death, with a new awareness of their genesis in the aftermath of not only WWI but also of the global influenza pandemic of 1918-19 (cf. Outka 2019).

This article examines Corona Fictions, available in their digital form to the English-speaking global audiences – a special focus is given to transtextual and transmedia protagonists, originating in Woolf's works yet revealing reactions to the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on current research on the poetics of vulnerability (cf. Ganteau 2015) and postmodern transformations of Woolf's characters (cf. Latham 2021), this article argues that these pandemic works use Woolfian characters across different media to create mediated representations of vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

"We are all Mrs. Dalloway now", announced Evan Kindley in *The New Yorker* (2020), succinctly capturing the pandemic wave of interest in Virginia Woolf's works. Diverse audiences, writers and artists have turned to Woolf's writings on illness, survival and death, with a new awareness of their genesis in the aftermath of not only the First World War but also of the global influenza pandemic of 1918-19 (cf. Outka 2019, 139-141) that might have taken the lives of 100 million people. This article examines Corona Fictions, available in their digital form to

the English-speaking global audiences. These works "not only draw on everyday media and political discourse, but also on previous pandemic fiction" (Research Group *Pandemic Fictions* 2020, 322-323), as they recycle Woolf's texts. Contrasting transmedia storytelling with adaptation, Elizabeth Evans emphasizes that "transmedia elements do not involve the telling of the same events on different platforms; they involve the telling of *new* events from the same storyworld [italics in orig.]" (2011, 27). Accordingly, a special focus is given to transtextual and transmedia protagonists, originating in Woolf's works yet revealing current reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The coronavirus pandemic has simultaneously exposed whole communities to mutable, repeated and unpredictable stressors. Responding to new waves of the pandemic, governments have introduced lockdowns, unprecedented public health measures based on social distancing, isolation, home confinement and mass quarantines. Since its outbreak in November 2019, the pandemic has also globally intensified financial stratification, healthcare disparities and gender inequities. To measure and alleviate the psychological impact of the pandemic, social scientists have been adapting the theoretical models of resilience (cf. Masten 2021a; Godara et al. 2022).

Several objections have been raised, however, to the resilience framework. The term 'resilience' itself may be ambiguous, as it has been differently conceptualized as a personality trait, a process, an outcome, a perspective (cf. Godara et al. 2022, 265) in psychological and educational research since the early 1970s, when it was first coined by the psychologist Emmy Werner. In the 2010s, some researchers expressed concerns about the use of reduced resilience theories in neoliberal politics. For instance, the theories of resilience as a personal characteristic/ability may be seen as the "embedding of specifically neoliberal forms of governance" (Joseph 2013, 41), since they put stress on adaptability and responsibility of individual people, rather than on the systems and networks they inhabit. A few researchers even go so far as to equate resilience with the continuity of neoliberal policy itself and argue that it leads to a gradual dismantling of the democratic state (cf. Madariaga 2020, 3f.).

The pandemic models of resilience seem at least partially responsive to this criticism. Currently, resilience is broadly defined in psychology as the "dynamic process" (Godara et al. 2022, 264) or the "dynamic capacity of a complex adaptive system to respond successfully to challenges that threaten the function, survival, or development of the system" (Masten 2021a, 155). Though the focus is on the system, these models acknowledge that resilience may occur on the individual level as well. It then manifests itself as a recuperative ability allowing people to cope with adversities – the effectiveness of their adaptation depends on a number

of factors, from their worldviews and resources to the social cohesion of their community (cf. Godara et al. 2022, 270f.). Importantly, this personal resilience is frequently juxtaposed with negatively conceptualized individual vulnerability, or "vulnerabilities in susceptibility to adversity exposure" (Masten 2021b, 4).

Both resilience and vulnerability develop in specific cultural contexts. Hence, among the major strategies for promoting adaptation to the challenges of the pandemic, Ann S. Masten has listed various activities that restore, enhance and support "the power of human adaptive systems", including those that focus on "meaningful cultural practices and celebrations" (2021b, 7). In their recent work on Corona Fictions, Julia Obermayr and Yvonne Völkl (2022, 141) have demonstrated that cultural productions created during the Covid-19 pandemic may not only be used as coping strategies on the individual level, but they may also enhance social cohesion and resilience in audiences.

Similarly, this article argues that Corona Fictions use formal and thematic experiments that respond to challenges brought by the Covid-19 crisis and may foster adaptive ways of coping with pandemic stressors and individual/systemic vulnerabilities on both cognitive and affective levels. In his book *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction*, Jean-Michel Ganteau delineates the poetics of vulnerability by examining diverse texts that respond to individual, economic, and political forms of vulnerabilities. Combining trauma studies and affect theory, he argues that a vulnerable text "*performs* trauma by imitating the symptoms of the disorder through repetition, rhythmical variation, strict focalisation, and above all recurring spectral visitation [italics in orig.]" (Ganteau 2015, 114f.). In this article, I will analyze the vulnerable protagonists of Corona Fictions, using several categories introduced by Ganteau (2015), from the ghost figure to the staging of characters to the selected markers of characters' vulnerability, including "repetitive language" (95), "internalised alterity" (96), negative affect (103), and their "capacity to fail in achieving [...] agency" (107). Importantly for my discussion, Ganteau's model focuses on the construction of vulnerability in cultural texts.[1]

Drawing on current research on the precarity-continuity dynamics in Woolf's oeuvre (cf. Detloff 2016) and postmodern transformations of Woolf's characters (cf. Latham 2021), I argue that the two selected global Corona Fictions use Woolfian characters across different media to create mediated representations of vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic. First, this article explores a hybrid combination of theatrical practices and quarantine filming, used by Lisa Peterson in her

1 For a discussion of how vulnerability is produced and politicized within neoliberal discourse see Butler et al. (2016).

video-theatre experiment *The Waves in Quarantine* (2021), which transforms the protagonists of Woolf's cross-genre novel *The Waves* into their transmedia equivalents. Then, I analyze parodic strategies applied by Talia Argondezzi and Anna Pook in their short story "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the rapid COVID test herself" (2022), using Woolfian characters to reveal systemic vulnerabilities.

THE (PANDEMIC) *WAVES*

In the uncertain spring 2021, the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in California released a daring fictional documentary *The Waves in Quarantine*, co-created by the director and writer Lisa Peterson and the versatile Broadway musical lead Raúl Esparza, who also acted as an associate director for this project. Streamed free on demand at the theatre website, this cycle of six videos – or "movements" as titled by Peterson, who wanted to embrace "the musical nature of the piece" (berkeleyrep 2021 [11:06-11:09 min.]) – was accessed by at least 17 000 global viewers from April 29 till June 30, 2021 (cf. Pfaelzer/Medak n.d.).

In Peterson's own words, this work is "opening the backdoor to the creative process" (berkeleyrep 2021 [12:20-12:26 min.]) by focusing on a team of actors that grapple not only with their own lives in the middle of the pandemic crisis, but also with Woolf's high Modernist novel *The Waves* (1931). However, this work is also transmedially haunted by the 1990 musical adaptation of *The Waves* created by Peterson and the composer David Bucknam for the New York Theatre Workshop – legendary in Broadway, yet not recorded as a whole. In 2018, this spectral musical was re-adapted by Peterson and the composer Adam Gwon for the New York Stage and Film – since *The Waves in Quarantine* reconstructs this process, it is a multi-layered palimpsest echoing with Woolf's works, its two musical adaptations, and spectral visions of their theatrical performances. After the stay-at-home orders were implemented in California in 2020, it also became a transnational and transatlantic project, with the theatrical team scattered across the US, working from California, Arizona, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York – and, in the case of the director of photography, even from Sweden. The pandemic left its imprint on the form of the documentary, as the actors were filming their own performances with digital cameras and iPhones.

Peterson has added a telling subtitle to her work, which is indeed "an experiment in 6 movements", combining several layers of metatheatrical and metafictional dimensions – including Woolf's novel. The ground-breaking nature of *The Waves in Quarantine* resonates with Woolf's avant-garde masterpiece: referring to the protean generic nature of *The Waves*, Woolf called it a "playpoem" in her

diaries (Woolf 1982, 203). Woolf's hybrid fictional work is divided into nine sections, each opened with italicized vignettes, depicting the course of the sun and its mercurial effects on the coastal landscape. The "novel" simultaneously traces the movements of the sun and the lives of seven characters. While Bernard, Jinny, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, and Susan reveal their own experiences and worldviews in a series of extended monologues, Percival – the seventh character who dies as a young man in India – is silent, though his memory has never ceased to haunt his friends. While the six characters are individualized in the course of *The Waves*, Woolf introduces echoes and repetitions in their monologues, which reveal unexpected similarities. For example, Rhoda and Neville undergo analogous symbolic experiences in their childhood: they are unable to walk past apparently ordinary obstacles, a puddle and an apple tree. While Rhoda grapples with depersonalization: "I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me" (ead. 2011, 49), Neville associates the suicidal death of an elderly man with "the implacable tree with its greaved silver bark" and is "unable to pass by" (ibid., 17). In the following parts of *The Waves*, both characters recall these situations as emotionally charged with an existential fear. Due to these parallels, many critics interpret the novel as a poetic portrayal of group consciousness, or different facets of individual consciousness. Recently, Madelyn Detloff (2016) has proposed that "the oscillation between precarity and continuity" is the main theme of *The Waves*, since this fiction "exposes the self's simultaneous dependency on and isolation from others around it" (Detloff 2016, 53).

Consciously drawing on the ambiguous and oscillatory status of Woolf's characters, Peterson focuses on the process of creating their transmedia versions by actors preparing for their roles. Each transmedia character consists of a recognizable Woolfian inner core and several other layers. Consequently, it may be analyzed within Susana Tosca's (2022) recent model as "a network of floating traits, features, and relations" (213) to reveal which traits are foregrounded or backgrounded (Evans 2022, 222). The zoom conversations of the actors have been recorded, transcribed, scripted and reworked into a film collage (cf. fig. 1), in which – as Esparza explains – "we speak each other's words at certain points" (berkeleyrep 2021 [16:47-16:50 min.]). Christine Froula (2021) notes that the "improvisatory concept [of *The Waves in Quarantine*] arises from an innovative doubling. Living and working in isolation in their far-flung worlds, its six actors move fluidly between playing themselves, playing the six personae of *The Waves*, and playing both at once" (48). Movement 2 "Those We Love" indeed portrays the actors and their corresponding characters as two sides of the same coin. For a brief moment a card appears on the screen: it has the names of Woolf's characters printed on the front: "Jinny & / Louis & / Susan & / Neville & / Rhoda & / Bernard" while the

back of the card is covered by the actors' names: "Carmen & / Manu & / Nikki & / Darius & / Alice & / Raúl" (Peterson 2021 Movement 2 [00:21-00:24 min.]).

Yet, this work goes beyond doubling (or even re-doubling) – particularly in the spectral figure of Percival/David. The inner core of this character, Woolf's Percival, has transtextual connections not only with his literary predecessor from Arthurian legends but also with Woolf's brother Thoby Stephen. Peterson has added other layers to Percival's transmedia version: as will be shown, Percival/David shares parallel characteristics with Woolf herself, Raúl/Bernard, and Adam Gwon.

Woolf's absent Percival was based on her brother Thoby who died of typhoid after the Stephens visited Greece in 1906. When Woolf was finishing *The Waves* in summer 1922, she composed in her notebook a poignant farewell to Thoby, possibly a draft epigram for the novel that had not been published (cf. Silver 1983, 235-238). Written on the reverse of Woolf's reading notes, the crossed-out section twice repeats "and, brother, forever now hail and farewell" in Latin, the final line from Gaius Valerius Catullus's *Carmina 101*, in which the poet addresses the "silent ashes" of his brother (2005, 202f.). Given Woolf's distance from the Victorian mourning culture, with its excessive grief displays, funeral extravagances, and pompous commemorative praises, Catullus's elegy offers an alternative model of valediction, rooted in the stoic and secular vision of existence. It also provides a closure to the writer's relationship with her brother based on intellectual cooperation and rivalry: it was Thoby who introduced the girl Virginia to Greek culture, discussed with her Shakespeare's plays and Latin poetry.

Correspondingly in *The Waves in Quarantine*, the deceased composer and lyricist David Bucknam recurs as "David" in his music, photographs, and hand-written scores. In Movement 1 "Memory", Raúl/Bernard "accidently" shows the audience David's image just after he displays on the screen Woolf's most frequently reproduced photo (taken in 1902 by George Charles Beresford, when the writer was in her twenties). In the subsequent Movements, we learn that similarly to Woolf, David committed suicide – and Movement 4 "Absence" becomes a meditation about their decisions, deaths and people they left behind. Bucknam was a mentoring figure for Esperza and Gwon – and hence they continue his artistic endeavour: Raúl impersonates Bernard, as David did in 1990; Adam restores his musical scores and writes additional music. There are also strong emotional ties – Raúl/Bernard confesses that as a young man he was in love with David, and his feelings became intertwined with Woolf's novel that he was then reading.

In its multiplying form, *The Waves in Quarantine* imitates the ephemeral nature of the theatre: with each performance gone in the very movement of its unfolding. As this work gravitates towards *mise-en-abyme*, the audience may

discover yet other parallel characters, frames and embedded stories – as in the scene of Carmen/Jinny's dance, in which her silhouette is accompanied by a pair of female dancers, evoking the narrated past moment, in which Rhoda and Susan danced together (cf. fig. 2), or when Woolf's works briefly emerge on the screen, from the collection of her autobiographical writings *Moments of Being* to the feminist essay-lecture *A Room of One's Own* to volumes of her letters.

By portraying a group of contemporary actors who take on the roles of Woolf's characters, Peterson was able to span a whole spectrum of vulnerabilities and reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic, since "[t]he networks in the fiction represent the protagonists' common humanity through their common susceptibility" (Wald 2008, 54). In *The Waves in Quarantine*, each actor's persona both illuminates a specific vulnerability of their Woolfian inner core and projects its contemporary image.

Several scenes focus on the vulnerabilities of characters resulting from isolation – both as an intrinsic part of human existence and a temporary phenomenon enforced by lockdowns. In Movement 5 "The Sun Cycle", the outsider Manu/Louis takes a solitary winter walk through a deserted Jersey City to the banks of the Hudson River, accompanied only by the choral songs based on Woolf's vignettes describing the coastal landscape transformed by the changing position of the sun. As the sun is hidden behind clouds, a depressed Manu/Louis returns to his quarantined household – his joy at Raúl/Bernard's call and invitation is laced with Louis's fear that he does not truly belong to the circle of his friend and the loneliness experienced by Manu's persona as he moved across the country at the beginning of the pandemic. In the case of Alice/Rhoda, the actress first interprets Rhoda's isolation as her personal trait and wonders "[t]here is an isolation in Rhoda that could be madness. Or… maybe she just has the clearest eyes" (Peterson 2021 Movement 2 [04:42-04:52 min.]). However, as the lockdown continues, Alice's persona comes to a different reflection: "Uh… but… this isolation? There's kind of a beautiful thing, uh, you know. Like this never happened to me before. I've never been through this before, but also this is everybody. This is happening to everybody" (Peterson 2021 Movement 3 [06:37-06:57 min.]), observing that isolation is both an unprecedented experience in her own life and simultaneously a universal phenomenon for all people affected by the pandemic. Yet, a different facet of isolation is revealed by Carmen/Jinny, since Jinny represents embodied experience and perception in Woolf's novel: "My body goes before me, like a lantern down a dark lane, bringing one thing after another out of darkness into a ring of light" (Woolf 2011, 101). Carmen's persona feels alienated in the electronic simulacrum of personal connections created within social media and mediated by smartphones – she confesses "I've been mourning quite, quite some

time, even before the pandemic", and then creates a vivid image of a people gaping at their phones in a subway train: "We're all doing this, you know with our phones – 'WAAAAAAA' [pokes out her tongue and imitates writing on a phone screen]. You know just looking at that on the subway, we're like, you know, looking at our phones all the time and… and we're not connecting" (Peterson 2021 Movement 6, 06:30-06:50 min.]). Carmen/Jinny's diagnosis echoes the current debates on the negative impact of social media on personal relationship and social cohesion while her embodiment allows for subtle exploration of new conditions associated with the pandemic, from "screen fatigue" to "touch starvation" that were reported by major newspapers (Leder Mackley/Jewitt 2022, 17, 18) and other media.

The entire Movement 3 "The Female Gaze" focuses on gender disparities and the actresses' interpretations of gender aspects of their Woolfian characters. Each persona represents through a song – based on excerpts from Woolf's novel – a different vision of female identity: Nikki/Susan has a close connection to nature "I think I am the field, I am the barn, I am the trees. I think sometimes I am not a woman, but the light that falls on this gate, on this ground" (Peterson 2021 Movement 3 [00:35-00:56 min.]), Alice/Rhoda focuses on the famous lines from Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, referring to the necessary material basis of women's creative pursuits, Carmen/Jinny defies the pervasive Victorian cultural ideal of womanhood, shouting "Jinny! She's so FEROCIOUS, I love that! I feel empowered" (Peterson Movement 3 [03:47-03:54 min.]). The personas also express different vulnerabilities: Nikki/Susan grapples with motherhood: "Man, being a mum at quarantine is no joke. I basically have no time to myself" (Peterson 2021 Movement 2 [01:00-01:04 min.]), Alice/Rhoda has doubts about her identity "I do not know if I feel like a woman. Or if Rhoda does" (Peterson 2021 Movement 3 [05:48-05:52 min.]). Nikky/Susan's vulnerabilities represent the rising burden of the female contribution to domestic chores during the pandemic with Woolfian phrases turned into song lyrics: "Yet more will come, more children; more cradles, more baskets in the kitchen and hams ripening; and onions glistening; and more beds of lettuce and potatoes. Until I am glutted with natural happiness" (Peterson 2021 Movement 6 [08:29-08:37 min.]). Though Carmen/Jinny's persona also performs some household work, her struggles focus rather on the vanishing boundaries between her work and private life, brought about by the demands for her social media presence: "I don't do social media, hardly ever. Because… I dunno, I'm for some reason incredibly private about my life. And, and yet I know it's, it's part of what I'm supposed to be doing? You know, all the sudden it's now my job, it is…" (Peterson 2021 Movement 3, [06:08-06:26 min.]). In *The Waves in Quarantine*, the vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic – such

as those arising from isolation and gender inequity – overlap with pre-existing identities and contexts, creating a complex representation of the pandemic social world.

DALLOWAY-ESQUE SUPERSPREADER

On January 25, 2022, and the exact day marking the 140th anniversary of Woolf's birthday, Anna Pook and Talia Argondezzi published a short story "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the rapid COVID test herself", with a parodic nod to Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. This publication date seems carefully chosen, since Pook announced their story with a tweet "What a laugh! What fun! To co-write this piece with @TaliaArgondezzi for @mcsweeneys. And what an impossible task it is to parody a genius. Happy birthday Virginia Woolf. And apologies in advance" (Pook 2022). The story appeared on the website of McSweeney's, an independent non-profit publishing company based in San Francisco. A social media preview was illustrated with an image that combines a spectral figure of the writer with the notion of multiplicity/replication, since Woolf's iconic 1902 photograph is juxtaposed with three samples of the 15-minute Covid-19 antigen self-test (cf. fig. 3). Shedding light on the origins of her other popular pandemic fiction "Vaccine Side Effect, or Have You Just Been Alive for 40 Years?", Argondezzi (2021) confessed: "I started writing satire right at the beginning of the pandemic because I wanted to cheer myself and other people up, which is a filthily earnest thing to say, but it's true, so it's encouraging to hear when it worked" (par. 'On the audience's reactions'). Both authors focus on parodic and satiric aspects of their Corona Fictions, emphasizing the intended mood-enhancing function of their text. According to mock bios accompanying this story, it was a result of transatlantic French-American cooperation: while Pook (n.d.) describes herself as "a writer and translator, living and working in the suburbs of Paris", emphasizing that "[s]he has never worn a beret. Not even ironically", Argondezzi (n.d.) – in fact, the Director of the Center for Writing and Speaking, Ursinus College – informs with a self-deprecating humour that she "is grateful they let her teach English and writing at Ursinus College", in Collegeville, Pennsylvania. Their story is freely available in its original digital form to global audiences.

Pook and Agondezzi's fiction belongs to a growing number of works that responds to Woolf's iconic *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf's 1925 novel focuses on one day of Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class middle-aged woman, whose life is interwoven with several other characters. The most extended subplot shows Septimus Warren Smith, a traumatized working-class veteran, supported by his wife

Lucrecia. All other characters – including Sally Seton and Peter Walsh, with whom Clarissa was romantically involved in her youth, as well as her husband Richard and friend Hugh – meet at Clarissa's party, where one of the guests, Dr. Bradshaw brings the news of Septimus's suicide. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf had significantly developed her unique version of the stream of consciousness, in which she masterfully reproduced the mechanism of associative memory. Monica Latham (2021) has described the rich texture of Woolf's fiction as "Dalloway-esque" and has demonstrated how "these narrative, thematic, stylistic and syntactic Woolfian features are used, imitated, extended, transformed or updated" (355) in contemporary postmodern literature. She enumerates among Dalloway-esque characteristics, such elements as "the passage of time, the workings of memory, the meaning of death, the traumatic haunting experiences that lead to diverging choices of life or death" (ibid., 363).

Alhough at first glance, Pook and Argondezzi's story seems like a light reading, this fiction carefully imitates and parodies some "Dalloway-esque" elements and adapts them to the pandemic settings. They imitate Woolf's experimental technique, oscillating between the narrative of ordinary events and the complex workings of the human mind: while "stroll[ing] to the corner pharmacy, herself, for some rapid COVID tests" (Pook/Argondezzi 2022, par. 2), Clarissa analyzes the post-pandemic situation and eulogizes over her ordinary experience of shopping. The short-fiction satirizes Woolf's synesthetic passages that combine kinaesthetic, aural, and visual impressions: "Clarissa tripped in her buoyant, light-heeled way to the pharmacy; soft peals of laughter drifting through the automatic doors; the pharmacy lights dazzling, positively fluorescent" (ibid., par. 3).

Throughout their text Pook and Argondezzi extend 'Dalloway-esque' strategies by employing the viral poetics of repetition and multiplying, signalled with a metafictional comment "the phone greeting repeated like a prayer, like viral RNA replicating in a host cell" (ibid., par. 7). For instance, the authors echo Woolf's memorable exclamations, reflecting Clarissa changing mood, from an enthusiastic praise of a bright and fresh morning, "What a lark! What a plunge!" (Woolf 2015, 1) to a disappointed sigh, "What a waste! What a folly!" (ibid., 41) referring to the life course of her friend Peter Welsh. In Pook and Argondezzi's pandemic narrative, the trajectory of Clarissa's mood goes from an overwhelming joy of "How glorious! What delight!" (Pook/Argondezzi 2022, par. 2), stemming from the prospect of organizing the party preceded by rapid testing (though, as the narrative voice ironically observes these home tests have only "58.1" accuracy) to a frustrated grumbling, "What a farce! What a curse!" (ibid., par. 11) when the protagonist discovers that tests are out of stock not only in the nearby pharmacy but also in internet stores.

In "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the rapid COVID test herself", the characters are reduced to staged caricatures of their Woolfian predecessors: Clarissa is a middle-aged housewife, who copes with post-pandemic reality by planning a party while the shell-shocked soldier Septimus evolves into a burned-out pharmacist, traumatized by his 'frontline' healthcare job. In contrast with the careful multiplying of characters used in *The Waves in Quarantine*, Pook and Argondezzi's short-story does not engage deeply with its hypotext. For instance, there are no signs that a modern Clarissa may be a survivor of Covid-19 in parallel to Mrs. Dalloway whose heart was affected by the Spanish flu. Similarly, Smith's dramatic suicide is reduced to a parody of a job resignation: "It was all too much! Septimus flung himself vigorously, violently, past Clarissa, through the open pharmacy door, crying, 'I quit!'" (Pook/Argondezzi 2022, par. 8). The most extensive and nuanced use of Woolf's fiction may be observed in the spectral figure of Evans. In Woolf's novel, he is the friend and commanding officer of Septimus who was killed in WWI and who recurs in Smith's hallucination. In the short story, Evans became for Septimus not only his supervisor but also "Evans whom he'd loved" and "Evans who had volunteered to man the pharmacy phone, never dreaming it would destroy him" (ibid., par. 7) – as the authors developed the romantic bond between two men, only coded in Woolf's novel due to oppressive censorship of non-heteronormative themes in the interwar UK. This emphasis on Septimus's queerness is contrasted with a subdued portrayal of Clarissa's lesbian/bisexual identity (cf. Barrett 1997, Wood 2018) – both her former love interests appear only once in the story: "But what of Peter; he was still frail from his bout of consumption; should one take risks on behalf of others? Yet perhaps the chance of stealing another kiss from Sally Seton in the garden outweighed the dangers?" (ibid., par. 12). However, in the closing, after several futile attempts at obtaining the antigen Covid-19 tests, Clarissa evolves into a female superspreader, a femme fatale, organizing an event, in which many people may be potentially infected: "'Fuck it,' Clarissa Dalloway thought. 'Let's throw the year's first great superspreader'" (ibid., par. 13). Since Clarissa's decision comes just after her imagined reunion with Sally, it may be read as a challenge to socio-cultural norms parallel to Woolf's defiance of heteronormativity in her 1925 novel.

Pook and Argondezzi's story also offers a satiric portrayal of several systemic vulnerabilities exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The lack of effective educational strategies results in inadequate attitudes and behaviours, from Septimus's "mask shoved under his chin to better expel viral aerosols throughout the pharmacy" (ibid., par. 6) to Hugh's alleged vaccine skepticism. The inefficient healthcare and medical resources led to the burn-out of healthcare workers vividly portrayed in the figures of Septimus and Evans while the ubiquitous bureaucracy

hampering immediate responses to the crisis is metonymically captured as "the seventeen-page form, with receipts" (ibid., par. 9) necessary for the insurance coverage of a Covid-19 test. However, the most persistent vulnerability remains the lack of systematic knowledge about the virus, as Clarissa sighs "what a shambles – an utter mess, as if after two years they'd failed to learn anything about COVID testing. The cases rising, falling, swirling, exploding" (ibid., par. 9). This short Corona Fiction resonates well with the uncertainty of the early 2022 year, oscillating between the hope for the end of the pandemic and the fear of its new waves and Covid-19 variants.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored two Corona Fictions, inspired by Woolf's works – both transform their Woolfian protagonists and re-locate them into the contemporary times. However, these works focus on different aspects of vulnerability, manifested on personal and systemic levels. While the fictional documentary *The Waves in Quarantine* offers a moving and nuanced portrayal of individual vulnerabilities related to isolation and gender inequality, the short fiction "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the rapid COVID test herself" becomes a caricature of the insufficient strategies adopted by the healthcare and governmental systems.

Since these vulnerabilities are mediated by the use of Woolfian characters, they become more accessible to diverse audiences on both affective and cognitive levels. As both Woolf and her works have iconic status in the contemporary global culture, readers and viewers are familiar with the basic frameworks and protagonists of her works – some audiences may have also encountered adaptations, biopics and fictions inspired by Woolf's oeuvre. While reading and watching these Corona Fictions, they may take comfort in returning to a well-known work or focus on the first artistic portrayals of the current pandemic – or enjoy them both simultaneously, since the unprecedented aspects of the current pandemic are inscribed into transmedia or transtextual contexts that are recognizable and familiar to the majority of their audiences.

The experimental character of Peterson's work results from her use of digital technologies: the vulnerabilities revealed by actors' persona are doubly mediated: first, by the use of Woolfian characters and second, by the re-scripting of the actors' statements. This video-experiment situates some experience that has been recently equated with the pandemic – loss, isolation, suffering – into a larger existential framework, provided by Woolf's works. Although the short story "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the rapid COVID test herself" reduces its

transtextual protagonists to caricatures, it also transforms them into the pandemic figures of essential workers, ghosts and superspreaders, offering a sound critique of systemic vulnerabilities. By applying these very different strategies, the authors of the analyzed Corona Fictions transform Woolf's complex protagonists into contemporary figures and depict them in their humanity as exposed to the pandemic stressors, as well as personal and systemic vulnerabilities. Finally, due to their free dissemination and participatory nature, these fictions may offer new adaptive coping strategies to global audiences.

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IMAGES

Figure 1: Recorded and transcribed Zoom conversations have been scripted and reworked into a film collage

Top row, left to right: Carmen Cusack (Carmen/Jinny), Manu Narayan (Manu/Louis), and Raúl Esparza (Raúl/Bernard/Associate Director). Bottom row, left to right: Darius de Haas (Darius/Neville), Nikki Renée Daniels (Nikki/Susan), and Alice Ripley (Alice/Rhoda) in Berkeley Rep's production of The Waves in Quarantine, directed by Lisa Peterson. Source: Photo courtesy of Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

Figure 2: The Waves in Quarantine *gravitates towards mise-en-abyme, as in the scene of Carmen/Jinny's dance. Carmen Cusack (Carmen/Jinny) in Berkeley Rep's production of* The Waves in Quarantine*, directed by Lisa Peterson*

Source: Photo courtesy of Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

Figure 3: A social media preview of Anna Pook and Talia Argondezzi's short story "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the rapid COVID test herself", illustrated with samples of the Covid-19 antigen self-test and Virginia Woolf's iconic photograph taken in 1902 by George Charles Beresford

Source: McSweeney's Twitter @mcsweeneys.