

Corona Fictions Anthologies

On the Compilation of Hispanophone and Francophone Corona Fictions During the First Lockdown

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After the World Health Organization (WHO) characterized COVID-19 a worldwide pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Adhanom Ghebreyesus 2020), stay-at-home policies to mitigate the spread of the then-novel coronavirus and protect health care systems were imposed in many countries of the world for two months (from mid-March to mid-May 2020) on average.¹ This first (of several) COVID-19-induced lockdown became “a unifying experience for billions of people across the world” in the following weeks (“Word of the Year” 2021; “Covid-19” 2020).² During this new collective experience of staying “at home unless [there was the] need to go out for certain reasons, such as going to work, buying food, or taking exercise” (“Lockdown” 2022), two tendencies could be observed in the realm of cultural reception and production.

First, already at the beginning of this lockdown, a rapid increase in the reception of fictional narratives relating to communicable diseases was measured: on the video-streaming platform Netflix, for example, movies such as *Outbreak* (1995) were among the most-watched movies in March 2020 (Clark 2020), while *Contagion* (2011) was “spreading like [...] a virus” despite not being available on any of the major streaming services in the United States (Mann 2020). Next to these cinematic pandemic fictions (Research Group Pandemic Fictions 2020, 323–24), a new interest emerged in existing written pandemic fictions, such as *Il Decamerone* (1349–53) by

- 1 More than 100 governments imposed what were referred to as lockdown measures by the end of the same month in order to interrupt infection chains and subsequently relieve healthcare systems (e.g., Dunford et al. 2020; Ritchie et al. 2020). The measures implemented ranged from school closures and travel restrictions to the complete closure of entire sectors of the economy and also included contact restrictions and curfews for specific population groups (“Lockdown” 2022).
- 2 The term ‘lockdown’ and its Spanish equivalent ‘confinamiento’ were even elected Word of the Year 2020 at the end of the year (“Confinamiento” 2020; “Covid-19” 2020; “Word of the Year 2020” 2021).

Giovanni Boccaccio and *La peste* (1947) by Albert Camus, which were broadcast for collective consumption on the radio and through online readings.³

Second, many authors and filmmakers—professionals and amateurs alike—began producing their (written and audiovisual) fictional narratives relating to the COVID-19 pandemic during this period, drawing on everyday media and political discourse as well as on previous pandemic fictions. These cultural productions—subsumed under the generic term of ‘Corona Fictions’ (Research Group Pandemic Fictions 2020, 322–23)—approach and negotiate the COVID-19 pandemic from a variety of perspectives and use different media formats and genres for this purpose. The Corona Fictions produced during and in the wake of the first lockdown show an inclination toward short and collaborative formats and genres, such as a turn to music videos (Obermayr and Hobisch 2023), to series (on the web and on television; see Mateos Pérez 2021), and to the publication of (prose fiction and poetry) anthologies.⁴ These tendencies in the early audiovisual and written productions of Corona Fictions can be attributed to the demands of our social media-driven world, which prefers quick media (Friedman and Schultermandl 2016, 4) formats and genres, on the one hand, and to the sense of community that is created and strengthened by working together (although mostly remotely) on a common music, film, or book project, on the other (Hobisch et al. 2022, 194–98; Völlk and Obermayr 2023).

Based on these observations, this article examines the following research questions:

- a) What functions do Corona Fictions anthologies fulfill according to their editors?
- b) What are the common characteristics of Corona Fictions anthologies?
- c) What general lessons beyond their interpretation as aesthetic artefacts do these anthologies and their content teach us?

In order to answer these questions and to illustrate transnational and translingual tendencies in the making of these Corona Fictions anthologies, exemplary data from French- and Spanish-speaking cultural areas will be examined. A sample of four francophone and four hispanophone anthologies including contributions from the Global North (including Canada, France, Spain, and the United States) and the Global South (including Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay) was chosen for this study. These Corona Fictions anthologies were all designed (and some even already published) in the spring of 2020 during the first COVID-19-

3 For example, during the first lockdown, participatory public lectures of *Il Decamerone* and *La peste* were organized on social media platforms (e.g., #Décaméron-19, #lirelapeste) as well as on the radio (e.g., Austrian radio station fm4).

4 Corona Fictions in Romance languages are collected in an open-access bibliographic database (Hobisch et al. 2021–).

induced lockdown. In total, the corpus comprises 152 texts in prose, poetry, and drama, some of which are accompanied by images: 61 in French and 91 in Spanish.

After an initial introduction addressing the general forms and functions of anthologies, the focus will be on the self-description of the Corona Fictions anthologies by their respective editor(s). Then, the chapter will turn to their characteristics in view of their topics, genres, and narrative situations gathered through qualitative and quantitative text analysis, which reveals that the anthologies often give voice to groups largely unheard in the initial phase of the crisis, such as children, mothers, migrants, and senior citizens. Finally, against the background of the results, the chapter discusses the added value of the anthologies emanating from the first COVID-19-induced lockdown for other disciplines.

Forms and Functions of Anthologies

Anthologies commonly regroup a collection of (written) texts or text passages by different authors, who a specific community (literary, philosophical, scientific, etc.) deems to have had a considerable importance within a specific epoch, for a certain genre, or on a particular topic. The history of anthologies, however, has not been studied in great detail. In the *Handbuch Kanon und Wertung: Theorien, Instanzen, Geschichte* (2013; 'Handbook Canon and Assessment: Theories, Instances, History'), however, Stefanie Lethbridge describes literary anthologies as collections of texts of at least three authors on a specific topic, genre, or epoch. Their characteristic features are (a) the retrospective selection of texts from a larger text pool and (b) their subsequent composition as a collection. (c) Anthologies are cheap and usually (d) compact print products that first make texts accessible and then (e) become legitimate within institutions, such as schools and universities. Their primary and best-known purpose is thus to function as instruments of canonization; anthologies are sometimes even regarded as equivalent to the canon (Lethbridge 2013, 179–82).

As Gabriele Rippl and Julia Straub point out in their contribution to the same handbook, the choice concerning which literary work a culture, society, or community canonizes depends to a large extent on what the group in question considers to be of high value over a prolonged period of time. These values are generally based on the opposition pair 'center vs. margin,' which, in turn, is determined by social parameters (e.g., political constellations and gender politics) and literary factors (e.g., aesthetic programs and genre traditions). Accordingly, the values and norms of a culture, society, or community may shift over time, and canons are never rigid and permanent selections of texts that stand the test of time. Rather, canons are constantly changing, as they are subject to historical and cultural processes. Thus, a canon always reflects the norms and values of a powerful group and may, in turn, be used as an instrument of power, since it serves as a standard or filter for the admis-

sion or exclusion of new texts (Rippl and Straub 2013, 112). Concerning the canonization of literary texts, the processes of inclusion and exclusion were long ignored. Only in the early 1970s, revisionist debates about literary canons emerged, increasingly questioning the mechanisms of exclusion, in particular with respect to works by women and ethnic minority writers (Rippl and Straub 2013, 110).⁵

Similar to the process of canonization, the process of anthologization is influenced by the values of the actors involved in this process. The Greek origins of the term—consisting of ‘anthos’ (‘flower’) and ‘legein’ (‘to collect’)—indicate the distinctiveness of the literary ‘flowers’ collected within them. Every anthology assesses and selects its content in full awareness of the omission of other texts. The selection criteria depend on the focus the editors set for each anthology: they can be of a thematic or formal-aesthetic nature, can give a historical insight or overview, and/or concentrate on a specific genre. Due to practical reasons, anthologies usually collect short literary forms.

Corona Fictions Anthologies

In countries implementing a stay-at-home policy in the spring of 2020, the collective lockdown came along with the closure of cultural sites, such as museums, theaters, and cinemas, and the cancellation (or postponement) of performances, such as concerts, exhibitions, and book tours, leaving artists of different fields without work and/or income for a considerable period of time. In the midst of this unprecedented cultural standstill, it seems only natural that artistic communities as well as ordinary citizens sought for other modes of expression to capture, and cope with, this unprecedented and purportedly unique event.⁶

In the literary realm, next to countless ‘lockdown diaries’ (Fleury and Gateau 2022; Obergöker 2020; Rosier 2020; Völkl forthcoming), several dozens of poetry and prose anthologies were conceptualized.⁷ Arranged under the theme of COVID-19, these collections of short texts were produced either as soft-cover publications, as pdf books, or on websites within weeks and months of the first lockdown. Such a rapid anthologization may come as a surprise, since the composition of an anthology—as indicated above—usually is the work of retrospective selection and collection.

5 See, for example, Lerner (1986 and 1993) on why female thinkers have been marginalized and erased for centuries in Western patriarchal societies.

6 For an overview of the impact on different art sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic, their thriving at all times of crises, and the possible future of the arts and artists, see Daniel (2021).

7 Please search for ‘anthology’ in our project’s database for the latest number of anthologies (Hobisch et al. 2021–).

The prospective approach in times of the COVID-19 crisis can be explained by the almost simultaneous and worldwide lockdown and the unprecedented nature of its implementation. This new and shared collective experience instigated the editors of the Corona Fictions anthologies to either launch their book project with a public call for contributions or with a request to colleagues and fellow citizens of various backgrounds to contribute to their anthologies. In fact, each editor/editorial team followed at least one of three self-proclaimed functions when conceptualizing their anthology: (1) they aimed at *documenting and preserving* this exceptional collective experience, which was perceived as a 'historic moment' in Western history as early as March 2020 (Redacción Infobae 2020); and/or (2) they wanted to *support and empower* writers and readers alike in their ways of coping with this unprecedented experience; and/or (3) they wanted to *inspire* new and concrete ideas for a post-pandemic world, thereby *preparing* for possible futures. The respective paratexts (Genette 1997) mention the three functional categories either in their epitexts (e.g., in the call for contributions, on a website, or in an interview about the publication) or in their peritexts (e.g., in the preface or in the title, as in the case of *Imaginer l'après* [Collectif 2020], meaning 'imagining what comes after' the lockdown or pandemic, which were largely perceived as coinciding at that point in time).

Document and Preserve

The anthology *Bitácora del virus: Palabras del reposo* (Virus Logbook: Words of Rest) was edited and published by Virginia Giacosa and Lila Siegrist in Rosario, Argentina, in mid-April 2020. This Spanish-language anthology comprising thirty texts arose from the idea that this collectively experienced crisis constitutes a historical moment that shall not be forgotten: "Bitácora del virus arises from the necessity to start thinking about this historic moment we are living" (Redacción Infobae 2020).⁸ In addition to writers, journalists, and poets, the Argentinian editors also invited health professionals, artists, teachers, and academics to contribute to this collection. Their aim was to give room to their ideas and emotions as well as to disseminate their sharp, intimate, lively, and vibrant thoughts in the lockdown-caused "time of rest or quietness." Hence, this publication, metaphorically designated as "logbook," in its title keeps track of the particular challenges at the beginning of the pandemic crisis, through which the whole world navigated almost simultaneously. Instead of providing any concrete answers to how to manage the crisis, the editors rather left room for questions, such as how the role of the state and public policies impact on the private sphere; how identity is reconfigured during this exceptional experience; or how each human subject inhabiting planet Earth is affected by this very particular threat (Redacción Infobae 2020).

8 All translations of texts in languages other than English are by the author of this chapter.

Among the first published Corona Fictions anthologies are the 23 texts of the online collection *Récits infectés* (Infected Stories) launched by the Montreal-based editorial team Léonore Brassard, Benjamin Gagnon Chainey, and Catherine Mavrikakis.⁹ With this collection, the editors sought to preserve the “pandemic spontaneity” in particular, as the writings were composed in barely three weeks and published in early June 2020. They invited renowned authors, such as Régine Robin, Marie-Célie Agnant, and Ouanessa Younsi, to narrate their perception of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on them. Their texts render the tragic, comic, utopian, and disastrous dimensions of the crisis not by rationalizing them but rather by emulating its affective power on the individual and the collective in language. Their stories “make us feel the way ‘crises’ act on us; they blur the boundaries between human bodies, the bodies of texts, and social bodies” (Brassard et al. 2020; Sarrazin 2020).

Confines: antología en tiempo de riesgo (Limits: Anthology in Times of Risk) was published in Argentina in August 2020 by Carlos Aprea and Roberto Pasquali and comprises 28 poems written by renowned authors. The focus on poetry is justified in the preface by emphasizing the notion that language shapes our reality and that things only begin to exist through the act of naming them. Poetry is considered an extraordinary form of expression, since it condenses language to an infinite point in order to name things as precisely as possible (Aprea and Pasquali 2020, 8–9). While the publication of newly-written and unpublished texts is a common denominator for all Corona Fictions anthologies, this one stands out against the others mentioned in this chapter, as all contributors belong to the ‘risk group’ of senior citizens. Additionally, Aprea and Pasquali included not only Argentinian authors but also authors from countries such as Italy, Spain, Uruguay, France, the Netherlands, Peru, and Cuba. They chose these selection criteria in order to represent the pandemic crisis from their specific and diverse perspectives: “The request was that poems and texts should be written recently, that those invited should be very close to or within that age group now called ‘at-risk population.’ The aim was to gather, within the limits of time and networks, voices from different geographies and experiences” (Aprea and Pasquali 2020, 9).

Support and Empower

The anthology *Delirios de cuarentena: Ficciones de 20 autores en la pandemia del 2020* (Quarantine Delusions: Fictions of 20 Authors in the 2020 Pandemic) regrouped 23 texts and was published in May 2020 by the Spanish editor Carolina Corvillo.

9 This anthology was published online (<https://recitsinfectes.com/>) shortly after the end of the first Canadian lockdown. It initially comprised 24 texts, of which the poem by Marie-Pier Daveluy was removed some time after the initial publication, but it may still be accessed through the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine.

In her preface, she explains the intentions behind the collection: on the one hand, reflecting the aims of Aprea and Pasquali above, the short fictional stories tried to “name” the overwhelming strangeness accompanying this time of collective lockdown; on the other hand, they also sought to “tame” this experience: “Short stories to name and tame the strange, that which overwhelms us, from the point of view of fiction and entertainment” (Corvillo 2020, 7). In view of this second aim, Corvillo understands the act of storytelling as a cathartic process: denominating the things around us and also the feelings within us is an effective way to recognize ourselves as helpless in the face of destiny, but also a way of taking control of our personal destinies at the same time (2020, 3).

This *supporting and empowering* function is also clearly stated in the anthology *La vida en tiempos del Coronavirus* (Life in Times of the Coronavirus), which originated from a writing contest launched by Guadalupe Avalos and the Norwegian publishing house Nordlys Publicaciones, where it was also published. As explained in the preface, the contest was started because many people used writing as a means of calming themselves, of creating, healing, or ordering their thoughts: “The period of confinement makes many people use the written medium to unburden themselves, to create, to heal, to put their thoughts in order” (Avalos 2020, 11). In response to the call, the jury received 163 texts, of which ten by writers from Spain, Mexico, Italy, Colombia, the United States, France, and Norway were included in the collection released in August 2020 (Avalos 2020, 11–13).

Inspire and Prepare

Although somewhat overlapping with the previous aims, the last three anthologies rather fall into the third functional category of *inspiration and preparation*, as their stories engage with future and/or futuristic versions of the world. Such a future-oriented perspective can be deduced from the subtitle of the French-Canadian collection *Résidence: Imaginer l'après* (Residency: Imagining the After-World). Its seven texts originated in the context of an artist “residency at home” (Collectif 2020, 3) during the first lockdown in the spring of 2020 and were published by an editorial collective. The idea behind their anthological endeavor was to engage in an exercise of projection (Collectif 2020, 45). The instruction for the texts’ creation was to produce pieces of prose or poetry inspired by the idea of that which comes “after” the lockdown or the pandemic.¹⁰

Similarly to *Imaginer l'après*, the future-oriented idea for the anthology *Les femmes écrivent le monde de demain* (Women Writing the World of Tomorrow) emerged directly

¹⁰ The texts are accompanied by videos and sound works available at <https://www.prisede-parole.ca/residence-de-creation-imaginer-lapres/>.

from the lockdown experience. During the first lockdown, the Collectif Sororistas—a group of 150 women from France and other francophone countries—perceived a rapid disappearance of women from the public sphere: “Very quickly, women seemed to disappear from the screens and the front pages of newspapers that talked about the world of tomorrow” (2020, 4). With this in mind, they launched a competition aimed at collecting narratives drawing an essentially feminist vision of the future (as indicated by the collection’s title). The instruction for the contributors was to project themselves ten years into the future, to December 31, 2030, and to imagine in a “free narrative” how both personal and collective aspects will have developed since the lockdown of 2020. From the 589 submissions, the jury chose twenty texts for the anthology, which came out in December 2020.¹¹ These stories “speak of our anger and our desires, of nature scorned, of the death that threatens, of the children that we forget, of the battles we wage here and there, for another world, a world of equality, of creation, a world less bureaucratic and more daring” (Collectif Sororistas 2020, 6).

The last anthology in this category is a Canadian government report titled *La COVID-19 et la santé et le bien-être des Autochtones: nos histoires sont notre atout et témoignent de notre résilience* (Richmond et al. 2020a).¹² The report was published in December 2020 and consists of ten autobiographical stories written by “Indigenous scholars, practitioners and learners” (Richmond et al. 2020b, 6). Although a government report, it qualifies as a Corona Fictions anthology because all of its autobiographies are structured teleologically and told from an already existing endpoint, therefore narrating (parts of) a life with a specific purpose (see Brockmeier 2001). The story-based approach, which according to the editors provides “a means of humanizing COVID-19 to the broader research and policy community” (Richmond et al. 2020b, 6, 46), facilitates insights into how the COVID-19 crisis impacted the health and well-being of Indigenous communities. Due to their relational and holistic understanding of life, the stories included are regrouped around the theme of relationships—with the self, the family, and the community, but also with the land, with balance, and with self-determination. Indisputably, this volume represents a combination of all three functions of anthologies. First, it documents existing inequalities in Indigenous communities, which have been magnified by the pandemic crisis, while at the same time illustrating the possibilities of personal and community resilience. Second, because “there is little community-specific or nation-based epidemiologic data available to

¹¹ The winning stories are also available as spoken-word podcasts at <https://www.sororistas.fr/concours-2020/le-podcast-2020/>.

¹² As an official government report published by the Royal Canadian Society, the whole collection is also available in English under the title *COVID-19 and Indigenous Health and Well-being: Our Strength is in Our Stories* (Richmond et al. 2020b).

Indigenous leaders to inform their community responses to the pandemic" (Richmond et al. 2020b, 10), it shows how "Indigenous self-determination, leadership and place-based knowledge have successfully protected Indigenous communities in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic" (Richmond et al. 2020b, 7). Third, the report aims at extending "Indigenous data sovereignty" (Richmond et al. 2020b, 45) not only to better support community members in the future but also to share their insights on the resilience of the Indigenous peoples beyond their community borders.

Predominant Topics, Genres, and Narrative Situations

In order to obtain a meaningful overview of the characteristics of the collections, I conducted a quantitative survey of the Corona Fictions anthologies. In a first step, a close reading of all 152 anthologized texts was essential. In the course of this text-oriented approach, I created a spreadsheet and filled it with author-specific and text-specific information. While the author-specific information included the name and country of origin of the authors, the text-centered information, generated through classic narratological text analysis on the basis of Gérard Genette (1980), consisted of thematic, formal, and linguistic details of each text: text title, narrative situation, general literary genre (epic, drama, poetry), and subgenre (e.g., blog, dialogue, utopia), main subject and other subjects, spatio-temporal setting and structure as well as information on the writing style and specific stylistic devices (especially in poetry). Moreover, texts were scrutinized for explicit references to the COVID-19 pandemic and the function of the virus (e.g., expository, historiographical, moral, dramatic function according to Grimm [1965]).¹³

After this initial process, the extracted data was revised and rectified where necessary (e.g., due to typographical errors and mixing languages). The data of the closed-ended categories concerning explicit references to the pandemic, general literary genre, and narrative situation were then statistically evaluated for this article with a basic frequency analysis (see Jannidis 2010), and then cross-evaluated and cross-interpreted with the entries of the open-ended categories. For a better overview, the following three subchapters examine topics, genres, and narrative situations, revealing that the anthologies regularly put an emphasis on the inclusion of texts by and about group-specific voices that remained largely unheard in the political and media discourse during and surrounding the initial phase of the pandemic.

13 While only a few categories, such as narrative situation, general literary genre, and explicit reference to the pandemic, permitted closed-ended answers from a given list of answer options, most categories required or allowed for open-ended answers.

Topics

The first question that arises when examining Corona Fictions anthologies is whether all of their texts really do refer to the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the 152 anthologized texts studied, 30 % (46 texts) do not explicitly allude to the outbreak of the pandemic in spring 2020, whereas 70 % (106 texts) mention it explicitly with terms such as 'coronavirus,' 'pandemic,' 'COVID-19,' and/or 'lockdown.'

Considering the texts without overt pandemic references, a look at the subject categories reveals that they are concerned with reflections on personal feelings (e.g., loneliness and fears), the concepts of time and space, as well as social and ecological values regarding the notion of freedom or living in harmony with nature. While some of these texts' topics may point the readers to the COVID-19 pandemic, their inclusion in a Corona Fictions anthology brings this specific connection into the foreground. Thus, it will also be clear in the future under which circumstances these texts were produced.

Further insights into the prevalent topics addressed in the Corona Fictions anthologies were gained through a word frequency analysis of the text titles. This analysis was carried out independently for the 61 French and 89 Spanish titles and supports the large and explicit treatment of the pandemic within the anthologies.¹⁴ The most frequent title words are visualized in the respective tag clouds (Illustration IV.1).¹⁵ The frequency and thus importance of each tag (i.e., title word) is represented by the font size—the larger the font, the more frequent its occurrence (while the colors do not bear any specific meaning).

Next to terms directly connected to the pandemic such as 'covid,' 'virus,' and 'pandemic' (Fr. 'pandémie'; Span. 'pandemia'), there are those terms referring to the salient topic of 'life' (Span. 'vida') 'during' (Fr. 'pendant') the 'period' (Fr. 'période') or 'time' (Span. 'tiempo') of the COVID-19-induced 'lockdown' (Span. 'cuarentena'). Although the English term 'lockdown' usually translates to 'confinamiento' in Spanish, the term 'cuarentena'—initially referring to a preventive forty-days' quarantine—has been widely used synonymously in Latin American countries to designate the lockdown situation (see Pineda 2021). One can also distinguish terms referring to specific 'groups' (Fr. 'communauté') affected by the stay-at-home policies, such as 'women' (Fr. 'femmes'; Span. 'mujer') and 'Indigenous peoples' (Fr. 'autochtones'). Additionally, from the tag cloud of the anthologized text titles, a preoccupation with certain subjects emerges, such as 'death' (Span. 'muerte'), 'hospital(ization)' (Span. 'hospital'), and the feelings of being 'caged' (Span. 'jaula') or 'ashamed' (Fr. 'honte').

¹⁴ Two of the hispanophone texts are untitled.

¹⁵ In both languages, recurrent words were eliminated through a stopword list (Span.: a, de, del, el, en, la, los, o, que, un, una, y; Fr.: 19, à, d', dans, de, des, du, elle, en, et, il, l', la, le, les, ou, pour, sur, un, une, y).

Illustration IV.1: Tag clouds of francophone and hispanophone titles



Created by Yvonne Völk, using Voyant Tools, dev. Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell, 2003–2022.

The tag clouds also show that the corpus introduces some topics which in pandemic fictions as well as in COVID-19-related media and political discourse remained rather marginal, if not unheard. The words ‘autochtones,’ ‘femmes,’ and ‘mujer’ point at the inclusion of topics and voices of women and ethnic minorities.¹⁶ The visibility of these issues can, of course, be attributed to the fact that Corona Fictions anthologies explicitly dedicated to these groups were included in the (rather small) data sample. For example, in *La COVID-19 et la santé et le bien-être des Autochtones*, the autobiographical stories were written by Indigenous researchers (from PhD candidates to professors) from universities across Canada, addressing their personal and collective experiences in their respective communities during the first few months of the pandemic. Further, *Les femmes écrivent le monde de demain* was composed by women writers only, who, in their stories, imagine what will have happened in France and the world by the end of 2030. Most of their texts stage female characters of different age cohorts and of different social milieus. Stories like “La nouv-elle” (The New-She) (Galland 2020) and “Le printemps des femmes” (The Female Spring in reference to the Arab Spring of the early 2010s) (Girsch 2020) depict the biographies of two ordinary French women, who have become the first female state presidents by 2030. In “L’altermondialisme des femmes insomniaques” (The Alterglobalism of Sleepless Women) (Gury 2020), a female scientist and professor of sociology explains the key sociological events ten years after the COVID-19 outbreak, while in “Eldorado à quatre chiffres” (Four-Digit Eldorado) (Wenker

16 In Corona Fictions, women appear as narrators and protagonists alike, whereas in previous pandemic fictions, women seem to be more passive minor characters or entirely excluded (see Hobisch et al. 2022, 204).

2020), a Muslim migrant recounts her trajectory from her country of origin to a Greek refugee camp, where she has been stuck since the pandemic outbreak and which represents the opposite of the Eldorado she had hoped for.

Genres

The topics of the anthologized texts are expressed in one of the three main literary genres of prose fiction, poetry, and drama. The majority of the French and Spanish texts pertain to the literary genre of prose fiction; between a third in the hispanophone and a fifth in the francophone corpus to the genre of poetry; and only a few percent to that of drama. The high number of Spanish poetry texts is connected to the fact that the poetry collection *Confines: antología en tiempo de riesgo* is one of the four hispanophone anthologies analyzed.

Literary scholars commonly also group texts into subgenres. In the Corona Fictions anthologies, these subgenres include anecdote, blog, dialogue/interview, diary, dystopia, utopia, email, interior monologue, speech, reflection, account, short story from everyday life, slam poetry, and rap. Among this wide range of subgenres, some (sub)genres even overlap, such as blog diary and narrative poetry. Notwithstanding, the most common subgenre (approx. 40 %) is the everyday story, depicting all possible kinds of topics enmeshed with daily (lockdown) life from the stance of a great variety of group-specific voices.

Recalling the previous subchapter, we have seen that whole anthologies give room to, for example, female and Indigenous views on the pre-pandemic, the pandemic, and the post-pandemic world. Other topics addressed and voices heard are those pertaining to elderly people and children as well as intersectional perspectives; even animals are given a voice at times. As was noted in the subchapter analyzing each anthology's self-description, *Confines: antología en tiempo de riesgo* brings together poems composed by female and male authors above the age of sixty. Some of their contributions distinctly adopt the perspective of an older narrative voice or retired narrator, as in the case of "Pulmón" (Lung) by Gustavo Wojciechowski (2020). The stanzas of this narrative poem follow the diary form and are segmented by dates. Between April 28 and May 1, 2020, an elderly I relates his short check-up stay in the hospital of Buenos Aires because of respiratory problems. Other anthology texts with senior voices include, for example, Régine Robin's (2020) autobiographical reflection on how the French lockdown measures (e.g., completing forms to leave the house), the rhetoric used by French politicians and media (e.g., war rhetoric, infantilization of citizens, and censorship), and people's reactions to them (e.g., panic buying and a climate of denunciation) reminded her of her Jewish childhood in World War II Paris. These experiences during the first lockdown of 2020 triggered Robin's wartime trauma described in her account, which is indicated by its title: "La réactivation d'un traumatisme de guerre: Paris confiné" (Reactivation

of a Wartime Trauma: Paris Confined). In the short story “El daño de la pena” (The Damage of Sorrow) by Nicanor García Ordiz (2020), the focus lies on the perspective of an old miner from the Spanish coal mining region of Léon, who, delirious from coronavirus disease, ‘relives’ his past, evoking pain, poverty, and starvation, and resorting to alcoholism as a means of drowning his sorrows and regrets.

Children’s voices are put in the foreground, for example, in the dystopian story “Le syndrome de noix de coco” (The Coconut Syndrome) (Husetowski 2020). In this dialogue, a mother tells her young son about the deconstruction of prevalent gender stereotypes by an adverse drug reaction in all COVID-19-vaccinated men, which caused men to grow breasts, leaving many unable to work, while women had to take over more and more male-dominated areas of the labor market. Another example is the short story “La visite” (The Visit) (Bender 2020), which represents everyday life during the pandemic from a little girl’s point of view. During the lockdown, she dreams of seeing and hugging her grandparents again, only to discover on the day of their reunion that they have become so afraid of touch that the little girl stays “still and undecided. The distance that remains to be covered—that remains for us all to cover—has suddenly become so great again” (Bender 2020, 23).

Finally, the inclusion of anthropomorphic animal voices is notable. In the short story “La rumba del encierro” (Rumba of the Lockdown) by Arlen Buchara (2020), for example, the cat Rumba stands in for her carer, who—for this anthology—should have written a text about the lockdown, which is alluded to in the title with the Spanish term for ‘prison.’ Like the rest of the world, the cat carer and author appears to have been overwhelmed by the confinement and has reached the end of her nerve. As Rumba notes in her narration of the daily occurrences: “For days, she has been walking around the house, walking on the walls, smoking in the sun, writing down ideas in Word or on paper, reading news, listening to podcasts, feeling anxiety, joy, guilt, crying over nothing, laughing out loud at the most stupid jokes. For days now, she has been sitting at the computer in front of the window trying to write this text” (Buchara 2020, 51). In stark contrast to the title of the story—‘rumba’ also stands for ‘celebration’ or ‘party’ in Latin America—the lockdown experience, especially the lack of human closeness and warmth, is everything other than a joyful interlude. In this context and not without reason, the story ends with a sensual dream of the cat carer, in which she is again hugging and kissing other people without being afraid.

Narrative Situation

The category of narrative situation distinguishes between a heterodiegetic and a homodiegetic narrator, with the former being located outside of the narrated world and the latter within it. The analysis of both (francophone and hispanophone) corpora revealed that approximately a quarter of all the texts feature a heterodiegetic narrator and three quarters a homodiegetic one.

The large number of homodiegetic narrators in Corona Fiction anthologies is not surprising, since they are composed of many narrative poems as well as autofictional texts such as diaries, interior monologues, and everyday stories, in which the homodiegetic narrator and the protagonist are identical (i.e., autodiegetic narrator).¹⁷

Most examples previously mentioned are told by homodiegetic narrators from a first-person perspective. There are, however, four francophone texts in which the homodiegetic narrator blends into the perspective of a collective 'we.' The two poems from *Imaginer l'après*, "nous fraierons cash" (We Mill Cash) by Éric Charlebois (2020) and "le corona-vers" (Covid-Verse/Covid-Worms) by Véronique Sylvain (2020) envision how we as a people will be living in the post-pandemic world. Sylvain, for example, plays with the triple sense of the French term 'vers' meaning 'verse,' 'toward,' and 'worms,' thereby referring to the probing concerns presented in column-like (or rather worm-like) verses about the if and how of a continued existence of humanity, as human beings increasingly seem to become one with technology. Also, the poem titled "Alliéées" (Female Allies) by Lola Cros (2020) takes on a collective female perspective underlining the importance of female networks against patriarchal structures and positions in the struggle for an egalitarian future. The fourth text, "Quand il y aura moins" (When There Will be Less) by Clara Dupuis-Morency (2020), appropriates the perspective of a pair of siblings. In a simple and repetitive style, the children evoke the new hygienic rules during the lockdown and how they are disappointed by the promises of the adults repeating: "When the virus will be less widespread, we will be able to touch again, we will be able to grasp things from outside again." Instead of waiting for the viral spread to decrease, they start to act on their own initiative and literally escape this new strict world with the help of a friend.

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, the texts in the Corona Fictions anthologies are told from a great variety of narrators, situated on the spectra between young/old, female/male, indigenous/foreign, rich/poor, and human/animal. Yet another narrator of Corona Fictions is the homodiegetic narrator in disguise of the virus or the pandemic itself. The 'viral' or 'pandemic' autodiegetic narrator appears in "Les années aquarelle" (Watercolor Years) by Loredana Cabassu (2020) and "Yo soy pandemia" (I am a Pandemic) by Tomás Quintín Palma (2020). In "Les années aquarelle," an anthropomorphic coronavirus gives a speech to the public in the course of its Nobel Prize award ceremony in the year 2030. This speech reconstructs how the pandemic outbreak transformed the world for the better. It describes how, like a drop on a watercolor painting, the virus changed people's awareness concerning inequalities of gender (as well as race/ethnicity and class) and led to a new kind of

¹⁷ The slightly higher percentage of homodiegetic narrators in the Spanish anthologies can also be attributed to the greater number of poems, which typically deploy the conventional literary figure of the 'lyrical I' or lyrical subject.

cooperation, making the world a better and more egalitarian place for all to live in. In “Yo soy pandemia,” the coronavirus thematizes its loneliness in the course of the lockdown and how it plans on leaving the quarantine in order to ‘meet’ other people. The short narration ends with a slightly altered replica of the famous 1970s ballad “Soy rebelde” (I am a Rebel), a melancholic song about a solitary person searching for happiness, friendship, and love. Instead of ‘rebelde,’ though, one reads ‘Pandemia’: “I am Pandemia because the world has made me this way / because no one has ever treated me with love / because no one has ever wanted to hear me” (Quintín Palma 2020, 28).

Lessons from Corona Fictions Anthologies

As powerful world-making and self-making tools, narratives process knowledge about all areas of life and hold performative powers giving form, structure, and meaning to the contingent events of our lives (Nünning and Nünning 2010, 12). In short: “We tell stories to live” (Atay 2022, 202) and one can add ‘to feel,’ as “[n]arratives are [also] particularly conducive to affective worldmaking. Their use of plot development and character perspectives invites readers into the emotional storyworlds of novels, short stories, auto/biographical pieces, narrative poetry, newspaper articles, myths, and narrative films” (Schultermandl et al. 2022, 28).

Accordingly, the narrative texts within Corona Fictions anthologies also represent more than just literary compositions. Explicitly and implicitly, they deal with the COVID-19 pandemic from manifold perspectives and in diverse (sub)genres, yielding insights into the COVID-19 crisis on psychological, sociocultural, and historical levels. Moreover, the prospective approach to anthologization made the Corona Fictions anthologies active mediators and thereby (co-)creators of the pandemic discourse alongside everyday media and political discourse on the pandemic crisis (see Research Group Pandemic Fiction 2020, 324). In other words, the anthologies and their contents—written, selected, arranged, and compiled within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic—contribute to the (co-)creation, storage, and dissemination of the discourse on the pandemic, thereby contributing to the ‘crisis-making’ while influencing the collective perception of the crisis. In this sense, we can draw lessons from them beyond literary studies, for example, for the fields of psychology, sociology, history, and cultural memory studies, which will now be addressed. For this purpose, it proves instrumental to consider the anthologized texts separately as ‘products of narration or narrative acts’ and as ‘acts of narration.’

As the Corona Fictions project has demonstrated in another publication (Obermayr and Völk 2022b), written and audiovisual Corona Fictions (as products of narrative acts) provide numerous illustrative examples of the lockdown effects on the human psyche, which are consistent with the results of psychological and sociologi-

cal studies after the first lockdown. These studies emphasize that restricting the vital human need for physical contact through distancing policies led to a sharp increase in levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and stress, on the one hand, and to a decline in mental health, resilience, and social cohesion, on the other. The particular value of the Corona Fiction anthologies is that they mediate the manifold pandemic experiences during the first lockdown from individual perspectives, stressing the many ills and few joys of this time. The abundance of homodiegetic and autodiegetic narrators is all the more significant bearing in mind the context of creation of the anthologies: originating within and with reference to the pandemic crisis, the texts staging a ‘narrating I’ or a ‘narrating we’ “place[] the subject in the center and, moreover, allow[] the reader a direct insight into the emotional and mental world of the protagonists” (Obermayr and Völkl 2022a, 138). The fact that many narratives (at least allegedly) draw on personal experience in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic endows them with authenticity. Representing varying degrees of ‘pandemic life,’ including the depiction of a panoply of emotional responses to it (e.g., Slavoj Žižek’s [2020, 49–52] five pandemic phases of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance; see Obermayr and Völkl 2022a), the anthologized texts render a humanized perspective (see Richmond et al. 2020b, 6) of this unprecedented crisis. What is more, they facilitate an intersectional comprehension of the emotional responses through the depiction of experiences of individuals and communities marginalized on multiple levels. This “testimonial [...] function” (Obermayr and Völkl 2022b, 165) of the anthologized texts mostly aims at *documenting and preserving* the manifold experiences of the initial pandemic phase in spring 2020.

Nurturing the vital human need for contact, Corona Fictions as well as all other kinds of “stories can function as companions,” as Ahmet Atay argues (2022, 202). He explores his personal use of narratives in pre-pandemic times, in particular of mediated narratives in times of less technological progress and of reduced human contact (mainly during holiday and summer seasons spent abroad). Thus, Atay comes to understand that in those isolated and lonely times he “depended on books, films, and television to survive” (2022, 203). He also deduces that this behavioral pattern of turning to stories prepared him well for the lockdown in the spring of 2020, as narratives “provide continuity and connection, but [...] are also a way to escape, to feel less isolated and lonely” (2022, 204). Atay also points out that television series such as soap operas can serve as a support to mark the days and keep them apart during the monotony of the lockdown routine. Moreover, the patterns, fashions, songs, and stories of old movies may provide comfort and stability. This functioning of “mediated narratives [and narratives in general] as companions, friends, lifelines, and ways to experience the world” (2022, 201), amounts to the endeavor of the anthologies’ editors to *support and empower* their audiences with their collections. In the collected texts, readers can recognize themselves and become aware of other destinies at the same time. Since Corona Fictions anthologies were published in many parts

of the world (and also in languages other than French and Spanish), they, moreover, allow transnational and transcultural insights into individual and collective well-being and coping mechanisms during the initial phase of the pandemic. Perceiving alternative ways of dealing with the pandemic lockdown may thus not only function as *support and empowerment* but also as an *inspiration* for individual and collective coping strategies. This means that next to the ‘testimonial function,’ Corona Fictions—as products of narration—perform a “therapeutic function” (Obermayr and Völk 2022b, 165) when entailing positive effects on those who consume them.

The ‘therapeutic function’ also operates on a second level. Shifting to the perspective of Corona Fictions as acts of narration, actively contributing to the anthologies may have also served as a coping strategy for the contributors. In other words, as “a way to [either] escape” (Atay 2022, 201) or to better manage the crisis situation, as is, for example, underlined in the preface of *La vida en tiempos del Coronavirus* (Avalos 2020, 11). This positive effect of narration on the human psyche has been confirmed by psychological research as a therapeutic tool to activate resilience (see Obermayr and Völk 2022a, 131). However, not just the act of narration itself but also the (virtual) coming-together for a joint book project seems helpful in times of social and physical distancing measures. In order to thrive as human beings individually and collectively, we need both physical and social contact (see Obermayr and Völk 2022b). Writing a text for an anthology, similarly to collectively writing a novel or producing TV and web series, draws attention to solidarity—to sticking together in times of crisis, to standing up for each other, and supporting each other, as most of the world’s governments urged their citizens to do in the wake of the pandemic crisis.

Since Corona Fictions anthologies are contemporary cultural products, they also bear a future-oriented ‘testimonial function’ or ‘commemorative function,’ since some of the anthologies purposely followed the aim of *documenting and preserving* the present. Accordingly, at some point in the future, they may become historically relevant as ‘memory containers’ (Assmann [1999] 2006, 114). With and through them, future generations may gain, for example, knowledge about the varying hygienic practices, norms, and values in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and our individual affective reactions to them as well as about ensuing shifts in the social fabric. Or, as the US-American, Berlin-based novelist, essayist, and artist Andrea Scrima (2020) describes in the introductory chapter of the English Corona Fictions anthology *Writing the Virus*: “It’s our belief that these pieces of writing, composed in unusual times and under considerable pressure, will endure as documents of a particular period of history, testimonies to states of mind we will quite possibly have forgotten as we turn our attention to the new challenges facing us.”

In other words, Corona Fictions anthologies not only represent individual and collective testimonies of the present, but also prepare the cultural memory of the future. Hence, the Corona Fictions anthologies constitute an important cultural heritage from which future generations may learn about the perceptions, fears, and

hopes of today in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. However, which of the anthological texts or contributions will enter the literary canon—and win the constant battle for interpretative sovereignty, so to speak—is a question that only the future will answer. It largely depends on the interests of future generations and their authorities (e.g., their will to forget or to come to terms with the pandemic crisis), because “a canonical text [...] embodies the normative and formative values of a community, the ‘truth.’ These texts need to be heeded, followed, and translated into lived reality. This requires [...] interpretation” (Assmann [1992] 2005, 94–95).

Conclusion

The massive increase in the production and, subsequently, the compilation of narratives in different forms and genres in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak was not a surprising phenomenon, considering that human beings use narratives to make sense of themselves, the events around them, and the world at large. In this respect, the Corona Fictions anthologies analyzed in this article demonstrate how the early mitigation measures—especially the first lockdown— influenced cultural production processes, sociocultural practices, as well as individual and collective well-being. While intended as means of *documentation and preservation, support and empowerment, and/or inspiration and preparation*, the anthologies also succeed in presenting the simultaneity of the pandemic effects in a multi-layered and comprehensive way. Their mostly short, episodic, and fragmentary texts illustrate the extent and aftermaths of the immediate pandemic mitigation measures in different areas of the world and in different parts of society. By introducing a diverse and partially intersectional range of group-specific voices that remained largely underrepresented in dominant pandemic crisis discourses, the Corona Fictions anthologies (co-)create, store, and disseminate living conditions, experiences, and hopes of children, mothers, migrants, and senior citizens at the beginning of the pandemic crisis. Thereby, these anthological texts also serve contemporary and future understandings of the COVID-19 crisis on psychological, sociocultural, and historical levels.

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