



Book Pandemic emotions



Covid-19 Ad memoriam: What we remember and what remains
Laëtitia Atlani-Duault
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There have been various efforts to capture public experiences and views during the COVID-19 pandemic, most frequently through surveys about perceptions of the risk of getting COVID-19, willingness to accept a COVID-19 vaccine, and attitudes towards government handling of the pandemic—from its policies around lockdown, school closures, and physical distancing to vaccine mandates and travel restrictions. But what was less captured in the multitude of pandemic surveys were records of the experiences and waves of emotions felt during the COVID-19 pandemic, written or recorded by citizens themselves.

Among the projects that have aimed to capture these experiences, *Everyday Life in the Covid-19 Pandemic: Mass Observation's 12th May Diaries*, for example, builds on the Mass Observation initiative launched on May 12, 1937 to document everyday life in the UK. Through the diaries of 5000 contributors writing on May 12, 2020, the project captured people's experiences and emotions about the pandemic with valuable insights for future pandemic preparedness. These accounts were

published as a book and editor Nick Clarke's introduction talks about *Everyday Life in the Covid-19 Pandemic* as aiming to paint "a portrait of the emotional worlds of the pandemic". He writes about the different "moods of the pandemic" and lists anxiety, fear, gratitude, grief, guilt, and hope, each

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of which merit a chapter heading in the volume. Another initiative, the Global Listening Project, ran 36 group and 60 individual listening sessions in 2022 across six major cities—Abuja, Bangkok, New Delhi, New York City, Paris, and São Paulo—listening to stories of daily life during the COVID-19 pandemic, which then informed a 70-country survey to understand the global scale of the sentiments heard in the six cities. And, in New York City, USA, the New York Public Library launched a *Pandemic Diaries* series, which collected individuals' audio recordings about their pandemic experiences, while the Gotham Center for New York City History initiated the Zip Code Memory Project, which was a more focused effort listening to and engaging local populations in the postcode areas hardest hit by the pandemic.

Through collecting people's stories, experiences, and emotions during the pandemic in France, social anthropologist Laëtitia Atlani-Duault's *Covid-19 Ad memoriam: What we remember and what remains* is an insightful contribution to these various efforts. Research Professor at Université Paris Cité/IRD and the founder of the Covid-19 Ad Memoriam Institute at the Université Paris Cité,

Atlani-Duault and her team collected personal and collective testimonies of the pandemic from March, 2020 as events unfolded. These accounts were submitted through the project's online platform. The book is presented like an exhibition and features cartoons by the French political cartoonist Plantu (Jean Plantureux), intertwined with written testimonies and photographs by Olivier Foulon of objects that highlight representative aspects of life during the pandemic. The objects were collected by the Museum of the Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (Mucem) in Marseille.

The cartoons, which had been posted on public hospital walls during the pandemic, captured poignant moments: scientists contradicting themselves as information evolved; an image of the Last Supper saying "I said, no more than six at the table"; and images of crowded hospital settings with a nurse or doctor on the edges asking "and me, when will I be cared for?" The photographs of objects include a mask printed with a subway map, a food collection box, a vuvuzela trumpet and bells used to cheer health-care workers, a travel exemption certificate elaborately scripted in calligraphy, a votive candle, a weekly to-do list, and scrapbooks, among others.

The intimacy and honesty of the testimonies that accompany each image are moving. The thoughts and feelings, although situated in France, resonate with many of the sentiments collected in other settings, albeit playing out differently at an individual level depending on the personal situation and political context. Some of the accounts in *Covid-19 Ad memoriam* highlight fear, anxiety, or anger:

"...like everyone else I was scared when the first lockdown was announced...All control and sense were gone, and I felt empty. The emptiness was strangely worrying,



© Olivier Foulon/Covid-19 Ad Memoriam Institute

Crumpled travel exception
Collection of the Covid-19 Ad Memoriam Institute

and that's when I had my worst thoughts...You need a lot of willpower to cope."

"11 March 2020—the date will be etched in my memory forever. I'd just left my mother in the old people's home, and I was told that visits were now banned...I was angry about it for months—especially as my mother died during the second lockdown...for old people, loneliness and lack of freedom were worse than fear of the virus."

Other people express more positive feelings and gratitude:

"To me, quite frankly, the lockdown was a blessing in disguise. It wasn't that way for everyone, but to me it was like a gift...A gift of time."

"I'm now twelve, nearly thirteen... The crisis made me grow up, I used computers more, I thought about things and I realised life wasn't all just fun and games....but when we saw people on their balconies in the evening clapping for the doctors and nurses, we felt better—life wasn't over."

Each of these sentiments reflects the range of emotions that were heard during the Global Listening Project's six city listening, and captured in its 2024 report, *Loneliness, Trust and Hope: The Lives of Young People Emerging from the COVID-19 Pandemic*. One of the striking trends across the findings from the different settings was the volatility of emotions over the course of the pandemic: the ups and downs, the fear and anxiety sometimes evolving into anger; other people felt gratitude, and most held out hope. But as the pandemic waves subsided, the reality of not going "back to normal" was realised and stirred new emotions of anger and resentment among some people. A 2022 study found that when people in France who had been vaccinated against COVID-19 were asked whether they were relieved, regretted, or were angry to have had their vaccination, relief was high (90%) in January, 2021, but as the

year went on regret and anger increased, particularly after the health pass (document of vaccination to allow access to public spaces) was introduced.

The difficulties of facing life beyond the pandemic also feature in the book. One of the contributors to *Covid-19 Ad memoriam* experiencing long COVID wrote:

"I felt like I had aged 30 years in the space of a week. The prescribed treatment had no effect. The only answer: REST. How long for? No idea...I've now had long Covid for eight months. COVID HAS STOLEN MY LIFE."

Another person longed for some words of apology for how the COVID-19 response was handled:

"Whereas sincere words of apology would be soothing, hearing them congratulating themselves today on getting through the crisis and boasting how well they managed it simply reopens the wounds. This promise of a 'return to normal life' is just trickery. For those who lost someone dear during this period, to Covid or anything else, those who were separated from their loved ones without being given the slightest prospects, those who saw their jobs and even their lives so unfairly wrecked, there can be no return to normal life. The consequences are indelible."

Sentiments like these documented in France's *Covid-19 Ad memoriam* echoed globally. The Global Listening Project 70-country COVID-19 project found that positive assessments of government performance were not tied to COVID-19 burden of disease and death. The qualitative data instead suggest that citizens' assessments of government performance were based on whether the response measures were perceived as fair and whether government was seen to be concerned about people's overall wellbeing. There was also a strong sentiment that publics had no voice

during the pandemic, although their behaviours determined the outcome of the pandemic. As citizens in Japan noted in a Global Listening Project roundtable, when asked why the Japanese Government had such a low public rating score for pandemic performance despite having kept COVID-19 cases and deaths very low, their response was "that success was not because of the government. That success was because of us. It was due to our behaviours." As one young man noted in Bangkok during a Global Listening Project session, "Leaders must be able to listen to others, especially experts and advisors in specialised fields. But they must also listen to the real situations and real problems of people."

The testimonies and emotions reported in the brilliantly curated *Covid-19 Ad memoriam* need to be in the hands of leaders as valuable insights and guidance to consider before the next crisis.

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I am the co-founder and Chair of the Board of the Global Listening Project.

Further reading

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The votive candle

Émilie Girard, "Bougie Saint Raoult", donation from the collection "Vivre au temps du confinement", Mucem, 2020