

book review

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Gouws, A. and Ezeobi, O. (eds) (2021)
Covid Diaries: Women's Experiences of the Pandemic
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COVID-19 threw our worlds into disarray. Edited by Amanda Gouws and Olivia Ezeobi, *Covid Diaries* is a timely collection of reflections of women's diverse experiences of the pandemic. The collection, recognising women's intersectional positionalities across race, age, class and geopolitical location, among other things, recounts the lived experiences of women, foregrounding their voices and reflecting the myriad of experiences of the pandemic that may hereto have remained untold.

As Gouws and Ezeobi point out in the Preface, the collection is intended to give voice. The stories are told as an 'act of resistance, as an act of affirmation and as an act of survival' (p viii). The stories indeed do this. In addition, the stories also reflect perseverance, resilience, care, love and concern for the self and others. They speak powerfully to a political and feminist ethics of care and relationality in multiple and diverse ways. As such, the volume flags how practices of care, through collegial, friendship, familial and other networks of connection, sustain people through challenging times.

The collection is arranged in five sections. Section One captures the anecdotes under the theme of 'The political is personal'. This section showcases how the larger social and political events, decisions, (in)actions, inequalities, and so on impact on our personal lives. It does so through the contributors reflecting on how COVID-19 has impacted on their/others' lives from their respective disciplines as political scientists, housing activists, (environmental) historians, philosophers, (visual) arts and so on. Reflecting on COVID-19 from a disciplinary perspective to the personal surfaces the dire poverty that shapes life for the majority of poor South Africans, such as a lack of access to housing and what this means for women under lockdown, when we were all meant to stay put in our houses and homes. Yet, under lockdown, many

women faced the risk of eviction from their homes. As Soraya Beukes (p 13), a legal expert on housing, notes in her chapter:

Women were at the coalface and explained that they were not working, unable to pay for rent, food or electricity but they were constantly harassed to pay or face eviction. Women would break down as they explained to me that this is social housing that the government has linked to mortgage bonds and they were threatened with evictions by public officials administering social housing in the Western Cape Province.

The collection also flags the problematics of what the 'home' entails in the context of 'safe' spaces for women, the elderly and the ill. As Nina Teasdale (p 32) suggests:

the 'home' is both complex and contradictory for all of us – a 'multidimensional space', a space of safety and comfort, as well as a space of fear, loneliness and in some cases, violence and abuse. Our experiences of 'home' are thus not only far from universal, but far from equal.

The chapters in this section further reflect on birthing – albeit dissertations or babies – love, friendships, family and other networks of care and community. The importance of friendship in this time is exemplified by Amanda Gouws (p 10):

When we went down to stage 4 of lockdown, we were four women friends who went for a walk every Sunday morning, discussing the latest Netflix series, or Trevor Noah on Comedy Central, or our analysis of the pandemic, or the small joys of baking, cooking and knitting, from behind our masks. It made the world feel more real, even if just for an hour or two.

A richness of global community and relationality was also evident in the anecdotes relayed by Reanne Olivier, reflecting on the experiences of black women in North America during COVID-19, widespread protest against racial injustices and how black women across diverse geopolitical spaces have rallied together. As she points out: 'There has been a rise of social media accounts and groups created by black women for black women that provide resources on health related matters as well as the introduction of intimate one-on-one and group Zoom meditation calls' (p 37).

Section Two is collated under the theme of 'The personal is political'. It captures stories of loss – through isolation, the loss of connectedness to others and the loss of loved ones through death – as well as anecdotes on (mental and physical) well-being, agency, disruption, the complexities of daily life amid a pandemic, fear, anxiety, support and care. The stories emit vulnerability, pain, joy and love, and left us as readers deeply affected. One such story is that of Jenna Crosley, which poignantly articulates the anxiety resonating with many of us during lockdown: 'Do not go outside, you will get sick. If you get sick, you will die. Do not leave the house. Do not walk. Do not go for a run. Go to the shops, go directly home, do not pass begin, do not collect two hundred rand' (p 101).

Section Three deals with the theme of 'A women's work is never done'. As the theme suggests, it deals with the multiple roles that women often juggle, that is, their roles

as professionals, mothers, partners and caregivers, and under lockdown, the additional role of teacher. While the stories speak to the juggling of the varying demands made on the contributors and their resultant fears, anxieties, guilt and even more guilt, they also speak to the importance of creating space and spaces for recharging and finding one's equilibrium, and the importance of self-care, which is vividly encapsulated in Ezeobi's 'A room of my own' and also evidenced in the words of Govender: 'Carer: care for thyself!' (p 141).

Section Four showcases anecdotes dealing with 'Motherhood and care'. While some of the previous sections dealt with the theme of motherhood to some extent, Section Four provides a stark focus on the contributors' roles as mothers, being mothered, as daughters and as *umakoti* ('newly wedded woman'), and what this means. Chapters in this section foreground the impact that mothering can have on health and well-being, the difficult and toxic relations that we sometimes have when mothered, and the dire impact that our role as the ever-'dutiful' *umakoti* can have on our health, especially in the time of a pandemic. The stories told here, as elsewhere, resonate powerfully at an affective level.

The last section, Section five, recounts stories under the theme of 'The body on the frontline'. This section relays how COVID-19 and lockdown have impacted on the body – from the body taking ill, to how lockdown has placed restrictions on the body (with whom or how we interact, deteriorating health, and raising fears around security), or how lockdown has provided freedom for certain bodies (recognising privilege and freedom of space) and how illness has prepared us for COVID-19.

Covid Diaries reflects the heterogeneity of women's situated experiences of the pandemic and, in this case, speaks to some of the specific contexts of the Global South and South African materialities. The book's strength lies in the way it foregrounds how our different positionalities generate similar but different experiences. The stories reflect commonalities of the fear, anxiety, pain and anguish we have faced in the face of the pandemic. They also show how systemic inequalities continue to impact on women disproportionately. The collection does not shy away from the fact that some women have been privileged due to current and material inequalities, and how class and other advantages facilitate comfort, safety, support and other benefits during the time of COVID-19. Yet, the stories all reflect an understanding and recognition of this privilege and the responsibility that comes with it, as articulated by Adams-Jack: 'groups of children would stop by my house for something to eat. I shared with them and the women who occasionally asked for something to contribute to making a meal or for something to eat' (p 167). Underscored in the chapters is also the gratitude that contributors express for additional time with their loved ones and for being able to pause and reflect, to make a difference in the lives of others, and to care for others.

The golden thread in the book, also outlined by the authors in their introduction, is care and how an ethics of care requires responsibility and responsiveness, what some have called 'response-ability'. As this book illustrates, and as much other current writing has done, COVID-19 has amplified inequalities in global and local contexts. It has also illuminated so powerfully how the 'lack of care' we have for each other and towards the planet is a key part of the current human and global crisis we face. The book raises many care challenges, yet it is also a tribute to the networks of care that sustain women and are what are required to sustain the planet and all species who inhabit it.

Geopolitical location is one important lens through which to read women's experiences of COVID-19. The edited volume provides a reflection mainly from a South African perspective. This is understandable and also valuable given traditions of global under-representation of Global Southern and women's narratives, or the representation of such experiences by others in privileged positions, as has been long argued by post-colonial and African feminists. Indeed, the book, as explained by the editors, emerged out of frustration with the representation of gendered experiences of the pandemic by predominantly men and Global Northern voices.

Yet, *Covid Diaries* will appeal to a broad and global readership, both within and outside of academia, who are interested in how the pandemic has impacted in intersectional gendered ways on everyday lives. Readers will find resonance with (some of) the experiences shared, while other experiences might make us pause, reflect, be affected and feel compassion and care for those who may experience the pandemic differently from ourselves. It is an accessible read, with the different styles and genres adding to the creativity and strength of the publication. Arguably, the style of the book, and the way it touches the reader, is a significant strength. Not only does it bring diverse readers, but such text also makes academic contributions, speaking to the growing move towards re-conceptualising scholarship in response to the challenge of transformation in higher education and growing recognition of the re-calcifying coloniality of the academy. In South Africa, spurred on by Fallist¹ activists since 2015, there has been a strong feminist decolonial discourse that questions the patriarchal and colonial logics of extractive and representational research, arguing against the Cartesian binary in which affect, embodiment and an ethics of care are erased. Drawing on a wide range of post- and decolonial, feminist new materialist, and other bodies of intersecting critical thought, scholars in South Africa have increasingly been working with more caring and 'care-ful' relational pedagogical and research practices (see, for example, [Bozalek et al, 2018; 2020](#)). *Covid Diaries* includes poets, visual artists, academic scholars, practitioners of psychology, social workers and many others who share their subjective narratives through diverse lenses, drawing on their situatedness to explore the intersectional gendered impact of COVID-19. Arguably, texts like this also shift the terrain of the academy through collaborations across disciplines and modalities, and towards a more 'care-ful', ethical set of explorations. As [Gouws \(2021\)](#) so poignantly concludes at the recent launch of the book: 'hearing it in your own voices ... it's too moving'. Indeed, this is a book that moves one, that affects one, that inspires a relational ontology, empathy and care, and that perhaps also suggests the value of alternative paths of justice scholarship in these contemporary challenging times, both beyond and with COVID-19.

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Note

¹ The #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall movements, which began in 2015, collectively termed 'Fallist' in current times, also included groupings of queer and feminist activists who were particularly active in arguing for the intersectionality of sexual and gender justice goals within the larger decolonial movement.

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