Introduction

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This thematic issue of *Textus* is dedicated to the memory of Christopher Larkosh-Lenotti (1964–2020), a brilliant scholar who passed away unexpectedly last December in Providence, Rhode Island (US), leaving his family, friends and colleagues with a deep sense of bewilderment. In April 2020, he enthusiastically agreed to co-write the call for proposals on "Viral Transcultures on the Edges of the 'New Normal'" and initiated a vibrant collaboration leading to an enriching co-editing experience, at both the intellectual and human levels. We are incredibly grateful to his critical attitude and keen insights and we hope to wholly convey his voice.

When the call for papers was circulated in May, a couple of months after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, only a few studies on the topic had been published, both in Italy and abroad.[1] Since then, a proliferation of publications have contributed, from multiple perspectives, to the debate around the many socio-cultural, psychological, pedagogical, emotional, political, economical and linguistic issues at stake. Several national and international scholars are now investigating the contradictions inherent in the pandemic world(s), with a transdisciplinary and comparative approach, using old and proposing new theoretical frameworks, since different paradigms are required to cope with the numerous changes and contradictions.[2]

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[1] In May 2020, an interesting series of short blogs and opinion pieces by Cambridge University Press authors, called the *Cambridge Reflections Series*, was launched. http://www.cambridgeblog.org/category/cambridge-reflections-covid-19/, last accessed 10 April 2021.

[2] Academic publishers have worked to support research and the free circulation of

On the one hand, we have witnessed a reinforcement of divisive language and rhetoric, along with the rise of various forms of sensationalism, triumphalism and tribalism, especially in the online public and private debate; on the other hand, we have seen an increase in global solidarity and creative alternatives bridging the gap of social distancing. There has been a tendency to stress the horizontal impact of the threat at all levels of society, and, at the same time, the socio-economic divide and inequalities across the globe have proved stronger than ever. In a sense, the term "viral" has maintained its link to the world of computing and online sharing, although it has regained its original medical meaning, and the reality of viral transmission has reasserted its presence in our conceptual world as well as our biological environment. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, we are being confronted with an existential crisis, "a genuine conflict of global visions about society" (2021: 3-4), among libertarians, utilitarians, authoritarians, and New Age spiritualists.

The ideas of mobility, contact and contact zones are being renegotiated, which is leading to the creation of a new vocabulary, new metaphors, to talk about the complex relationships with the other, who nowadays can be our nearest neighbour. We all have to re-position ourselves in a world that has momentarily reinforced both its borders and its viral connections, and to rethink ourselves on the edges of the 'new normal' as individuals, communities, parents, lovers, travellers, teachers, researchers, politicians, social workers, healthcare professionals, etc. In the wake of such unpredicted

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knowledge. To name just a few: the launch of *The Covid-19 Pandemic Series* edited by J. Michael Ryan for Routledge, https://www.routledge.com/The-COVID-19-Pandemic-Series/book-series/CVIDPAN; the initiatives organised by Oxford University Press, https://global.oup.com/about/covid19?cc=itthe, including the *Covid-19 Language Hub*, the *Coronavirus Research Hub* and the *Behavioural and Societal Impact* section; the *Archive Covid-19 Collection* by Taylor & Francis Online, which has made relevant research articles on the topic free to access https://www.tandfonline.com/topic/covid-19/archive?startPage=&sortBy=Earliest_desc. Other useful tools for research are the *Covid-19 microsite*, also by Taylor & Francis Online, https://taylorandfrancis.com/coronavirus/#, the *Covid-19: Humanities and Social Science Perspectives Collection* https://www.nature.com/collections/fagddhfghf; the *Social Science Space* and the *Coronavirus microsite* among the initiatives of Sage Publishing, https://journals.sagepub.com/coronavirus. All links: last accessed 20 April 2021.

scenarios, this thematic issue of *Textus* aims to contribute – with no claim to being exhaustive – to the investigation of the processes that characterise our fragile transcultures and of the new issues arising in the macro areas of literature, language and culture, with a specific focus on English-speaking countries.

The authors of the following essays were asked to interpret first-hand responses to the first pandemic of the digital age,[3] and to address some of the most compelling and challenging questions emerging within and across our new viral transcultures, in a general context in which interdependency has acquired a controversial meaning. They provided a multi- and inter-disciplinary investigation of the narrative construction of the 'new normal' in literature, in the media and political discourse, in migrants' stories, in the old and new forms of fascist ideologies and their related translations, in the implications of teaching and learning online at all levels, and in the reshaping of borders and racial politics in contact zones.

The issue opens with Giovannelli's essay on "Predicting the 'New Normal': Teleconnection and the Regime of Social Distancing in E.M. Forster's 'The Machine Stops'" through which the author re-reads this visionary dystopian narrative tale in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic by imagining and depicting a futuristic world-state where each citizen is confined to an underground cell and is only allowed to (tele)communicate through an advanced technology network. Moreover, people are required to comply with drastic measures of social distancing in a seemingly prolonged state of health emergency and 'new normalcy'. As Giovannelli shows, Forster's experiment with critical dystopia is conceived of as an allegorical mirror *of* and *for* our times that also prompts contemporary readers to figure out forms of creative re-positioning, resilience, and fruitful interaction, along a path that extends its boundary to a pre- or post-pandemic condition and towards mutuality and exchange.

Buonanno's essay, titled "Hidden Lives on the NHS Frontline: Reading Healthcare Workers through Gender and Race in Black

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[3] See, for example, the research conducted by the sociologists and demographers at Oxford's Leverhulme Centre for Demographic Science, led by Dr Ridhi Kashyap, "Covid-19: Inside the Info Wars", 4 March 2021, https://www.research.ox.ac.uk/Article/2021-03-04-covid-19-inside-the-info-wars, last accessed 10 April 2021.

and Asian British Women's Writing", likewise deals with literary texts and sheds light on the works of black and Asian British women writers who challenge the invisibility of minority healthcare workers in the social fabric of the UK. Rooted in multiple diasporic histories and the long legacy of empire at the intersection of race, gender and class, writers such as Maeve Clarke, Bernardine Evaristo, Jackie Kay, Winsome Pinnock and Meera Syal have filled the gaps of silenced histories and reclaimed the fundamental role played by black and Asian female nurses and hospital staff in a changing post-war Britain. Cutting across various genres, such as drama, the novel and semi-autobiographical short fiction, their powerful narratives seem even more timely now that the pandemic has opened a window onto troubled contact zones, such as hospital wards and emergency units, where the high number of casualties among ethnic minority medics and nurses in the UK, as a result of the virus, has highlighted the vulnerability of minority ethnic healthcare workers in the country and raised public awareness about their largely ignored presence within key British institutions.

The representation of the National Health Service is examined by Antosa and Demata in their essay "Get Covid Done: Discourses on the National Health Service (NHS) during Brexit and the Coronavirus Pandemic", in which government communication and news media in Britain are presented as a crucial discursive figure of British national identity both during the months preceding the Brexit referendum of June 2016 and in the early months of the diffusion of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. By providing a wider critical context that frames the construction of British nationalism, Euroscepticism and populism in the last few decades leading up to Brexit, the authors analyse a number of leading front-page articles from the right-wing *Daily Mail*, whose influence on the most conservative sectors of British society has always been pervasive. Particular attention was paid to the linguistic, as well as interdiscursive and intertextual, strategies that show how discourse on the NHS is part of a hegemonic construct that aims at building a certain vision of national identity. The authors focus their research on the frequent use of war metaphors, adopted by the *Daily Mail*, which portray the pandemic as an act of invasion in order to increase a sense of danger to the homeland and to construct consensus and solidarity against a common enemy.

A critical discourse analytical perspective is also adopted by Aiello in her study on "The Instrumentalisation of the Face-Mask in (De)legitimising Discourse: A Critical Study of User-Generated Online Content at the Onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic in the US", in which the author assumes that face masks have become politically and ideologically charged symbols in the American context by embodying discourses of inclusion and exclusion, the self and the other. To this end, the author examines the discursive strategies employed in popular user-generated memes and tweets that advance pro- and anti-mask stances and were shared in the first months of the pandemic in the United States. Her research findings are noteworthy in the way in which they reveal a tendency for pro-mask content to enact positive self- and negative other-presentation via nomination, predicational and (de)legitimisation strategies based mainly on moral evaluation, while anti-mask memes seek legitimisation via emotive effects, the invocation of the *topos of threat* and casting doubt on the intentions of institutions.

Online narratives are also the object of Guido's essay entitled "Relexicalisation and Decategorialisation Processes in Migrants' ELF-Mediated Online Narratives in the Disembodied Time of the Covid-19 Pandemic", in which the author discusses the online communication strategies – encompassing interactions with no audio-visual support via Whatsapp and email – activated by a small sample of Nigerian migrants living in Southern Italy during the outbreak of the pandemic. Her inquiry and her case-study data demonstrate that the migrants' linguaculturally marked use of syllabic notations, acronyms, emojis and phrasal verbs triggers processes of semantic relexicalisation and morphological decategorialisation that undermine in many ways what so far has been regarded as the universal trends in language evolution governed and bounded by natural principles of economy. Guido's analysis also shows that such modes, though propositionally conveyed as written language, actually retain the analogical immediacy of spoken discourse through which migrants express their anguish at feeling caught in a situation of distress and even greater marginalisation.

Digital contents analysis has apparently impacted the proliferation of many studies on the novel coronavirus pandemic and its related narratives as examined within Zorzi's essay on "Challenging Dominant Perspectives on Science: Scientific Uncertainty in the

Discourse of Popular Online News Sources", which provides an enquiry into the role of language in constructing scientific information and its related un/certainty. More specifically, the author aims to investigate the extent to which uncertainty is linguistically represented in relation to the ongoing global health emergency in mainstream media, and whether this representation stands in contradiction to the importance of uncertainty in science. In order to answer these key questions, Zorzi focuses on the media coverage of two debated topics during the pandemic, namely the use of the drug hydroxychloroquine to prevent and cure Covid-19 and the tests to find a coronavirus vaccine. To this end, she carries out an analysis of a small corpus comprising online news articles from four major UK – and US-based news providers: the BBC, CNN, the Daily Mail and Fox News. These topics were chosen because scientific uncertainty is particularly relevant to their unfolding and media coverage, pointing to a lack of consensus and conclusive answers to the global need for treatment and immunisation.

Linguistic contributions to the development of this thematic issue of *Textus* follow with a focus on the pedagogical implications of the present-day emergency that has forced teachers at all levels to cope with an enormous amount of self-e-teaching, as well as with providing materials, lessons and support via previously unexplored channels. Interestingly, Leproni et al. openly discuss this topic in their essay on "Web-Building Connections: A Best-Practice Example of Using International Resources in Online Intercultural Didactics for Teachers", in which they report on the results of a university project carried out within the fifth-year Laboratory of English Language for Primary Education in Roma Tre, held from March to June 2020. During this Laboratory, students were involved in two international projects: *Storytelling for L2 Teaching*, carried out with the University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia, Spain, and *Hands of the World – Can You See What I Say* (HOTW), an award-winning eTwinning project developed by the University of Dundee, Scotland. In facing the present context of uncertainty and disorientation, the Laboratory was conceived of as a unique opportunity to enhance language competences, to construct an *intercultural communicative language learning/teaching* and to provide students with methodological skills and examples of how

to engage their pupils in intercultural projects using e-learning and distance learning.

Re-imagining intercultural communities of learners and teachers on the basis of a critical and non-coercive pedagogy was also one of the topics strongly suggested by our guest editor Christopher Larkosh-Lenotti. In recent years, he felt the academic urgency of interrogating and unveiling the signs and symbols of what he defined as a form of resurgent or incipient fascism. Prompted by this irrepressible feeling, Larkosh-Lenotti wrote the essay included in this issue and entitled "On Fascism and its Translations, and its Many Unhappy Returns in the 'New Normal'", in which he shifted from speculation on the cultural and ideological problems with translating the two terms "fascism/Fascism" to an analysis of the development in the resurgence of far-right ideology in nominally democratic societies, in the West and beyond, as well as of complex outbreaks of viral information and oppositional discourse in the 'new normal'.

In line with Larkosh-Lenotti's academic attempt at deconstructing fascism through his studies, Holleran's essay on "*COUP*: Translating Radical Literature under a New Fascism" also examines the immediacy of that deconstruction and how it manifests in the translation and editing process of *COUP: Anthology-Manifesto*, a radical response to the 2016 impeachment of Brazil's former president Dilma Rousseff that appeared in English for the first time in *Barricade: A Journal of Antifascism and Translation,* in June 2020. Crucially, the author retraces the editorial process for the English translation along with the first great wave of the Covid-19 pandemic that hit the United States, revealing in stark relief the reality of income inequality and white supremacy rampant in the country, and late capitalism's inability – and unwillingness – to properly address it. Prominently, Holleran further analyses the political implications of translating *COUP* by examining how antifascist translation techniques can be employed in practice, and how the material conditions of the 2016 coup and the 2020 pandemic affected, respectively, the processes of writing and translating.

This issue of *Textus* ends with a virtual dialogue, eagerly sought by Christopher Larkosh-Lenotti, between the editors and Pier Paolo Frassinelli, an Italian scholar and professor of communication and media studies at the University of Johannesburg. The interview,

titled "Borders, Media and Racial Politics in the Age of Covid-19: A South-South Dialogue", addresses some of the challenging questions that are still igniting the international debate on borders, media and racial politics in the age of Covid-19, such as the affordances of digital media and the irreplaceable role of embodied and socially embedded forms of human interaction, the resurgence of different forms of authoritarianism that precede the 'new normal', the proliferation of geopolitical, symbolic, linguistic, cultural and other immaterial but nonetheless powerful borders, etc. By seeing conflict as part of a transformative pedagogy and central to the human experience, Frassinelli highlights the productive role of the "ethics of care" in the reconstitution of forms of sociality and community across borders and in the process of community building and other new forms of political subjectivity.

Acknowledgements

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