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Long Literary Covid: Archive of the Digital Present (ADP) and Reflections on the Meaning of Data About Pandemic Literary Events

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How did the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying social restrictions and lockdowns impact literary activities and events across Canada? Out of this question developed the research project called "Archive of the Digital Present for Online Literary Performance in Canada (COVID-19 Pandemic Period)," or ADP for short—which entailed collecting data (information and audio-visual documentation) about pandemic literary events, and developing a searchable database designed to be used for reflection, study, and analysis of this unique period of literary history as it unfolded, largely on social media and virtual telecommunications platforms. This article focuses on the important and complex task of collecting data about pandemic literary events in Canada. We describe the processes of data collection and presentation and reflect on some of the possible meanings of data that arose through the process of attempting to structure information about ephemeral events gleaned through public digital platforms. As we describe the process of collecting, structuring, and curating data about pandemic literary events, we consider the import of affect and emotion in a disembodied, digital historical era, and what it means when events of literary expression and human encounter are born and continue to exist as digital data. We argue that data becomes an important locus of affective structures and textures of the pandemic by identifying some of the key generic forms that emerged through the affordances of online pandemic event platforms, and by theorizing some of the qualities of pandemic temporality and how they trouble attempts to conceptualize this period in literary historical terms.

Quel a été l'impact de la pandémie de COVID-19 et des restrictions sociaux et verrouillages qui l'ont accompagnée sur les activités et événements littéraires à travers le Canada ? C'est à partir de cette question qu'est né le projet de recherche intitulé « Archive of the Digital Present for Online Literary Performance in Canada (COVID-19 Pandemic Period) », ou ADP en abrégé, qui consistait à collecter des données (informations et documentation audiovisuelle) sur les événements littéraires pandémiques et à développer une base de données consultable conçue pour être utilisée à des fins de réflexion,

d'étude et d'analyse de cette période unique de l'histoire littéraire telle qu'elle s'est déroulée, en grande partie sur les médias sociaux et les plateformes de télécommunications virtuelles. Cet article se concentre sur la tâche importante et complexe de la collecte de données sur les événements littéraires pandémiques au Canada. Nous décrivons les processus de collecte et de présentation des données et réfléchissons à certaines des significations possibles des données qui sont apparues au cours du processus de structuration des informations sur les événements éphémères glanés sur les plateformes numériques publiques. En décrivant le processus de collecte, de structuration et de conservation des données sur les événements littéraires pandémiques, nous examinons l'importance de l'affect et de l'émotion dans une ère historique numérique désincarnée, et ce que cela signifie lorsque des événements d'expression littéraire et de rencontre humaine naissent et continuent d'exister en tant que données numériques. Nous soutenons que les données deviennent un lieu important de structures affectives et de textures de la pandémie en identifiant certaines des formes génériques clés qui ont émergé grâce aux possibilités des plateformes d'événements pandémiques en ligne, et en théorisant certaines des qualités de la temporalité pandémique et la façon dont elles troublent les tentatives de conceptualisation de cette période en termes d'histoire littéraire.

Introduction

How did the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying social restrictions and lockdowns impact literary activities and events—poetry and fiction readings, spoken word performances, book launches and public book clubs, author interviews, and the like—across Canada? This question developed into a full-fledged research project called "Archive of the Digital Present for Online Literary Performance in Canada (COVID-19 Pandemic Period)," or ADP for short—which entailed creating a searchable database that may be used for reflection, study, and analysis of this period of literary activity through access to metadata about, and audio-visual (AV) documentation of, the events themselves. Further questions preoccupied us as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold: What did the pandemic do to organized literary events, and what did the transitions required to continue gathering and listening to literary performance feel like and mean to organizers and participants? Such questions were pressing to Wiener, as a graduate student used to attending literary events, and to Camlot, as a literary practitioner and director of a literary research network involved in shifting and organizing literary events of his own (18 online instantiations of the Words and Music Show, several major literary Symposia and performance events, 50+ virtual literary listening practices, talks and workshops), over a period of two years, from March 2020 to 2022.

The ADP project was conceived as a set of interrelated initiatives designed to allow researchers and literary practitioners to examine the effects, impact, and meaning of social constraints that arose from the pandemic for literary activities. The data collected about events held during the pandemic period and presented through an open access database and directory—the primary collaborative endeavour—would be enhanced by oral histories and written questionnaires, in which event organizers, literary practitioners, and audience members shared stories and experiences about these events, and by critical analysis and theorization of some of the aesthetic, cultural, and phenomenological import of the forced virtual environments that situated pandemic literary gatherings for experiences of literary listening, performance, and community.

The development of the database and directory, and its online presentation, was a major preoccupation for nearly two years, as Camlot worked with Systems Development Librarian Tomasz Neugebauer, Library Developer Francisco Berrizbeitia, and a team of students to design and build the site. The student team assembled to build the ADP directory and website included computer science students Ben Joseph (Simon Fraser University) and Brijesh Lakkad (Concordia), who worked on full stack development; Sukesh Gandham (Concordia), who worked on data visualization; computational arts and design student Alexandre Bustamante (Concordia) and library and information sciences student Eva Lu (Victoria University in the University of Toronto), who

conducted extensive user-focused testing that informed their graphic user interface design of the ADP site (ADP 2024); as well as Wiener and an additional team of students who worked on finding, collecting, and curating the data displayed on the site. In addition to Wiener, the data collection team included Concordia students Theodore Fox, Frances-Grace Fyfe, Maia Harris, Olivia Hornacek, Jade Palmer, Diya Dekhar-Powell, Aaron Obedkoff, Alexandra Sweny, and Shakiya Williams.

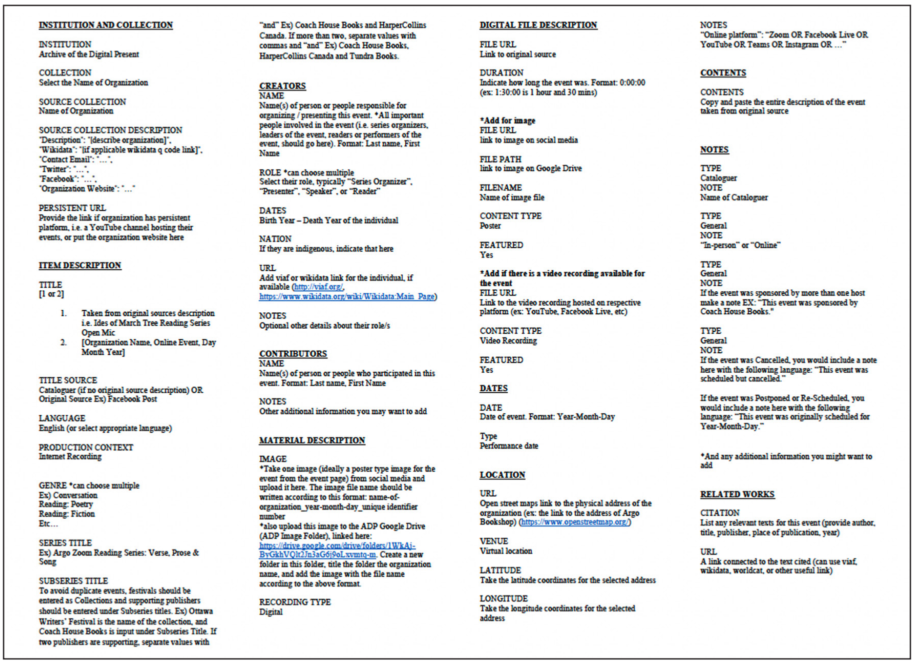
Our article will focus on this last aspect of the ADP project, the important and complex task of collecting data (specific kinds of information) about pandemic literary events. The concept of "raw data" as it is explored in Lisa Gitelman's edited collection *"Raw Data" Is an Oxymoron* informs our thinking about data and how we approached curating our dataset. Most simply, Gitelman and Virginia Jackson define data as "units or morsels of information that in aggregate form the bedrock of [our knowledge]" (Gitelman and Jackson 2013, 1). They emphasize, however, that while "[d]ata inform what we know about the universe … [d]ata do not just exist … they have to be 'generated.' Data needs to be imagined *as* data to exist and function as such, and the imagination of data entails an interpretive base" (Gitelman and Jackson 2013, 1–4). In other words, data forms the basis of our knowledge, but it is not neutral, objective, or ever "raw" in the sense of its being something that pre-exists its structured conceptualization by a user. Rather, data must be imagined and interpreted to *become* "data" or to form a dataset (Gitelman and Jackson 2013, 1–5). Gitelman and Jackson's work stresses the need to reflect on how distinct disciplines of knowledge imagine their objects of research, give them contours and form as data, and "how different data sets harbour the interpretive structures of their imagining" (Gitelman and Jackson 2013, 5). In reflecting on our project to collect data about pandemic literary events held in Canada, we asked ourselves, what is at stake in how we imagined our data? How and why did we shape and structure our data in particular ways? How is our dataset structured around certain kinds of desire to interpret and imagine the meaning of literary experience during the pandemic period? In this article, we will describe our processes of data collection and presentation and reflect on some of the possible meanings of data as we have imagined it in a research project that has aimed to create an online presentation (what we are calling a *digital archive*) of traces that document literary events from the period. We chose to make the data we collected openly available and to present it in what we felt would be interesting and compelling ways, not only to make this information openly accessible, but also to give shape to it so that scholars from a wide range of disciplines might engage with it according to their own concerns, and so that the literary practitioners whose online activities we were documenting might re-encounter the events they pursued in relative isolation through new suggestive contexts and networks of relation.

Some of our initial data-oriented questions were these: How many shows *did* go on despite pandemic restrictions? Who organized them? Who participated in them? When did they occur? Where did they take place (or where were they hosted, if they were virtual events)? What forms or "genres" of literary events were held online during the pandemic? What was the nature of these events? What did they feel like or mean to participants? These questions led to our articulation of some of our project's core data categories as we began to consider collecting metadata that helps describe and organize information about as many Canadian-based pandemic literary events as we could locate to describe. The premise underlying the search for such information was that literary readings and events represent a significant form of cultural communication, dissemination, circulation, and community-building. The data we were seeking would allow us to understand what literary activities occurred in Canada between March 2020 and March 2022, with additional information about the *who*, *when*, *where*, *how*, and even sometimes *why* these events happened. After we determined our core data fields, our first search revealed hundreds of events and helped us to understand the scale of the search ahead of us. We then turned to the SpokenWeb metadata schema that currently structures the Swallow metadata ingest system. This database system is used by SpokenWeb researchers to describe entities and contents of audio-visual collections documenting literary events and activities in Canada since the 1950s (see SpokenWeb 2020; SpokenWeb 2024). This extensive schema, developed to create metadata about literary recordings of different kinds, includes multi-field categories for rights statements, details about creators and contributors, material and digital specifications of analog and digitized assets, extensive description of the contents of the AV assets, among many other fields.

The SpokenWeb metadata schema had some useful fields for our purposes, but many fell outside our data imaginary for the ADP project, and thus were not appropriate to our data-collection purposes, or to the kinds of things (entities, events) we hoped to describe. This is the case because the SpokenWeb schema was conceived with actual collections of audio-visual materials, often held by university archives and special collections, in mind (McLeod 2023, 302–304; Camlot, Neugebauer, and Wiercinski 2019). The material assets and digital files that constituted such archival collections may have (in many cases) needed extensive archival description, demanding research of different kinds, but the basic nature and provenance of those collections, and their location and extent, were established and set before the cataloguing of those collections began. The SpokenWeb metadata schema designed for use in describing collections of AV assets deposited in archives needed to be reconceived for a data-collection project that aimed to locate, salvage, structure, and describe digital traces of events that were scattered across multiple sites and platforms. The data imaginary for

AV assets already deposited and held in institutional archives would be different from one that aimed to discover and structure information that would once have existed as nebulous constellations of digital text, image, video, and sound circulating as posts across social media networks.

Our repurposing of Swallow, a backend built for metadata management of historical research collections that stores metadata as unstructured JSON, made it possible to quickly generate and modify our cataloguing interface and adjust our ADP metadata schema in a manner that suited our data collection vision and practices. This flexibility was useful for the iterative design and feedback process we pursued in the development of our dataset and its online presentation. To adapt that schema and database to our data-collection and, later, web-development purposes, we devised a crosswalk between the Swallow-system schema and key fields we would require for creating and structuring the data of this project (**Figure 1**). The ADP schema went through numerous versions with slight changes responding to the nature of our data sources, and our ideas about what we might do with our data (how we might facet it), as our cataloguing, development, and design projects went forward.



INSTITUTION AND COLLECTION

INSTITUTION
Archive of the Digital Present

COLLECTION
Select the Name of Organization

SOURCE COLLECTION
Name of Organization

SOURCE COLLECTION DESCRIPTION
"Description": "[describe organization]",
"Wikidata": "[if applicable wikidata q code link]",
"Contact Email": "…",
"Twitter": "…",
"Facebook": "…",
"Organization Website": "…"

PERSISTENT URL
Provide the link if organization has persistent platform, i.e. a YouTube channel hosting their events, or put the organization website here

ITEM DESCRIPTION

TITLE
[1 or 2]

1. Taken from original sources description i.e. Ides of March Tree Reading Series Open Mic
2. [Organization Name, Online Event, Day Month Year]

TITLE SOURCE
Cataloguer (if no original source description) OR Original Source Ex) Facebook Post

LANGUAGE
English (or select appropriate language)

PRODUCTION CONTEXT
Internet Recording

GENRE *can choose multiple
Ex) Conversation
Reading: Poetry
Reading: Fiction
Etc…

SERIES TITLE
Ex) Argo Zoom Reading Series: Verse, Prose & Song

SUBSERIES TITLE
To avoid duplicate events, festivals should be entered as Collections and supporting publishers should be entered under Subseries titles. Ex) Ottawa Writers' Festival is the name of the collection, and Coach House Books is input under Subseries Title. If two publishers are supporting, separate values with "and" Ex) Coach House Books and HarperCollins Canada. If more than two, separate values with commas and "and" Ex) Coach House Books, HarperCollins Canada and Tundra Books.

CREATORS
NAME
Name(s) of person or people responsible for organizing / presenting this event. *All important people involved in the event (i.e. series organizers, leaders of the event, readers or performers of the event, should go here). Format: Last name, First Name

ROLE *can choose multiple
Select their role, typically "Series Organizer", "Presenter", "Speaker", or "Reader"

DATES
Birth Year – Death Year of the individual

NATION
If they are indigenous, indicate that here

URL
Add viaf or wikidata link for the individual, if available (http://viaf.org/, https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Wikidata:Main_Page)

NOTES
Optional other details about their role/s

CONTRIBUTORS
NAME
Name(s) of person or people who participated in this event. Format: Last name, First Name

NOTES
Other additional information you may want to add

MATERIAL DESCRIPTION

IMAGE
*Take one image (ideally a poster type image for the event from the event page) from social media and upload it here. The image file name should be written according to this format: name-of-organization_year-month-day_unique identifier number
*also upload this image to the ADP Google Drive (ADP Image Folder), linked here: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1WkAj-ByGkhVQlt2Jn3aG6j9oLxvmtq-m. Create a new folder in this folder, title the folder the organization name, and add the image with the file name according to the above format.

RECORDING TYPE
Digital

DIGITAL FILE DESCRIPTION

FILE URL
Link to original source

DURATION
Indicate how long the event was. Format: 0:00:00 (ex: 1:30:00 is 1 hour and 30 mins)

*Add for image
FILE URL
link to image on social media

FILE PATH
link to image on Google Drive

FILENAME
Name of image file

CONTENT TYPE
Poster

FEATURED
Yes

*Add if there is a video recording available for the event
FILE URL
Link to the video recording hosted on respective platform (ex: YouTube, Facebook Live, etc)

CONTENT TYPE
Video Recording

FEATURED
Yes

DATES

DATE
Date of event. Format: Year-Month-Day

Type
Performance date

LOCATION

URL
Open street maps link to the physical address of the organization (ex: the link to the address of Argo Bookshop) (https://www.openstreetmap.org/)

VENUE
Virtual location

LATITUDE
Take the latitude coordinates for the selected address

LONGITUDE
Take the longitude coordinates for the selected address

NOTES
"Online platform": "Zoom OR Facebook Live OR YouTube OR Teams OR Instagram OR …"

CONTENTS

CONTENTS
Copy and paste the entire description of the event taken from original source

NOTES

TYPE
Cataloguer
NOTE
Name of Cataloguer

TYPE
General
NOTE
"In-person" or "Online"

TYPE
General
NOTE
If the event was sponsored by more than one host make a note EX: "This event was sponsored by Coach House Books."

TYPE
General
NOTE
If the event was Cancelled, you would include a note here with the following language: "This event was scheduled but cancelled."

If the event was Postponed or Re-Scheduled, you would include a note here with the following language: "This event was originally scheduled for Year-Month-Day."

*And any additional information you might want to add

RELATED WORKS

CITATION
List any relevant texts for this event (provide author, title, publisher, place of publication, year)

URL
A link connected to the text cited (can use viaf, wikidata, worldcat, or other useful link)

Figure 1: Version 16 of the ADP-Swallow crosswalk document showing fields selected and adapted from the SpokenWeb metadata schema for collection of data about pandemic literary events.

We devised a pared-down version of the SpokenWeb schema adapting some of its 40+ data fields to our purposes. One major question we had was how to catalogue what would be (we came to realize) hundreds of collections (defined as such by the

organizations that ran events) under the more general umbrella of the "Archive of the Digital Present." This was highly irregular compared to how Swallow crosswalks were usually constructed. Typically, the institution, for example, Concordia University, represented the highest level under which a single collection, such as the Sir George Williams Poetry Series, would catalogue individual items (an item often representing an event, a recording, or a physical archival object being described). As we imagined our dataset encompassing not just one organization running events, but potentially all those organizations hosting events across Canada during this period, some of which were not necessarily tied to one university institution (like, for example, bookstores such as Argo Books, literary festivals such as the Winnipeg International Writers Festival or Anskohk Indigenous Literature Festival, magazines or presses like *Room Magazine* or Linda Leith Publishing, libraries like the Yukon or Toronto Public Libraries, and so on), this required us to adapt our Institution and Collection fields. We moved "Archive of the Digital Present" into the highest-level category of Institution, under which we were able to create several collections, each collection representing a single organization (**Figure 2**).

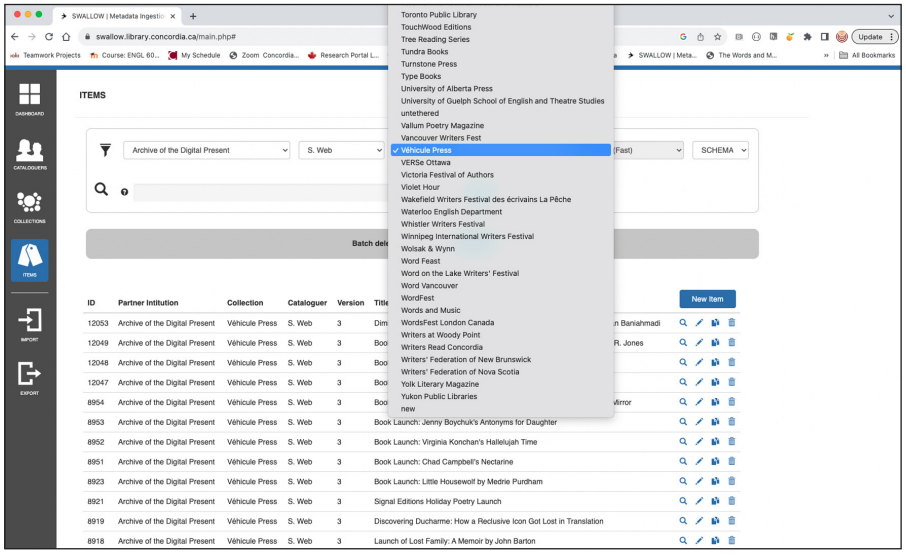


Figure 2: Screenshot of institution, cataloguer, collection drop down menu.

In cases where more than one organization was involved in hosting a single event, for example, for festivals where there were multiple publishers involved, or events that were co-hosted by several organizations, we devised the following system. To avoid duplicate events, festivals would be entered as Collections and supporting publishers would be entered under Subseries titles; for example, Ottawa Writers' Festival would be the name of the collection, and Coach House Books would be input under "Subseries Title." In cases where events were organized by more than one host, we used the Notes field for a "General" note to indicate which organization(s) co-hosted the event.

As a digital archive seeking to derive its data primarily from social media, we structured our crosswalk document and determined how we would use each field according to principles of preserving the nature of the digital assets through data collection and description. Dealing with digital traces of events that we feared would be taken down (Facebook event posts, event banner images, text describing events, evidence of who attended or read in events, etc.), we used the "Material Description" field (which is capable of storing an image file, usually used for pictures of material assets like open reel or cassette tapes) to preserve a "poster image" as a visual icon of each event we were cataloguing. This image was often the image file used to advertise an event on social media. Sometimes it was simply a screen capture of a visually interesting element of a posting for an event. We also stored each selected image in a Google Drive folder that could be located via a file path recorded under "Digital File Description," a data category that also includes fields with a link to the social media page where we retrieved the image, a link to the social media page of the event itself, information about the duration of the event, and a link to the recording of the event if it was available online at the time the metadata was being created. We used the "Content" field to preserve the description of the event as it was presented on the social media page. The "Creator" and "Contributor" fields were used to document all the main organizers, readers, performers, speakers, or participants involved in the event as we could derive from information on the social media post. For each individual we used tags indicating their role(s) in an event (for example, "Series Organizer," "Speaker," "Reader," etc.), alongside standard data such as birth or death years, Nation (if they are Indigenous), Viaf or Wikidata links if available, and any additional notes deemed relevant about an individual.

Location was an interesting field to catalogue. How do we indicate the location of an event that happened virtually? We wanted to capture the fact that we were cataloguing organizations hosting literary events broadly across Canada, and yet once they moved their events into digital spaces, location became difficult to define. Does the event exist only in the digital space? Is it localized through the host's laptop, identifiable with their IP or street address? Or is the location of the event identified with the various devices and addresses of all performers and participants signing on to the event remotely? We wanted to avoid metadata that invaded the privacy of individuals by storing their home addresses, yet we wanted to capture the geographical variety informing the events we were cataloguing. We decided to handle the Location field in two ways. First, we indicated that an event happened virtually with a label identifying the venue as a virtual location, and in the Location "Note" field, we recorded that it occurred on an online platform. If the information about the specific platform used was available,

we listed it, for example, "Online platform: Zoom." Second, in the "URL" field, we provided a URL taken from Open Street Maps that linked to the physical address of the organization that hosted an event, and we added the corresponding coordinates in the "Latitude" and "Longitude" field. For example, if Argo Books (a bookstore located in Montreal) organized and hosted an event on Zoom, we provided the address and coordinates of the bookstore in the location field. Using the location field in this way allowed us to capture the fact that these events were happening online due to actions taken by members of organizations from specific places in Canada. For hybrid events (that took place both in person and online) we included a "General Note" in the "Notes" field stating it was "In person" AND "Online." With this location data, we were able to generate a map visualization of the host location cities and the number of events that took place there, which allows users to explore and navigate from the map to metadata about specific events by clicking on the name of a city or place directly in the visualization (**Figure 3**).

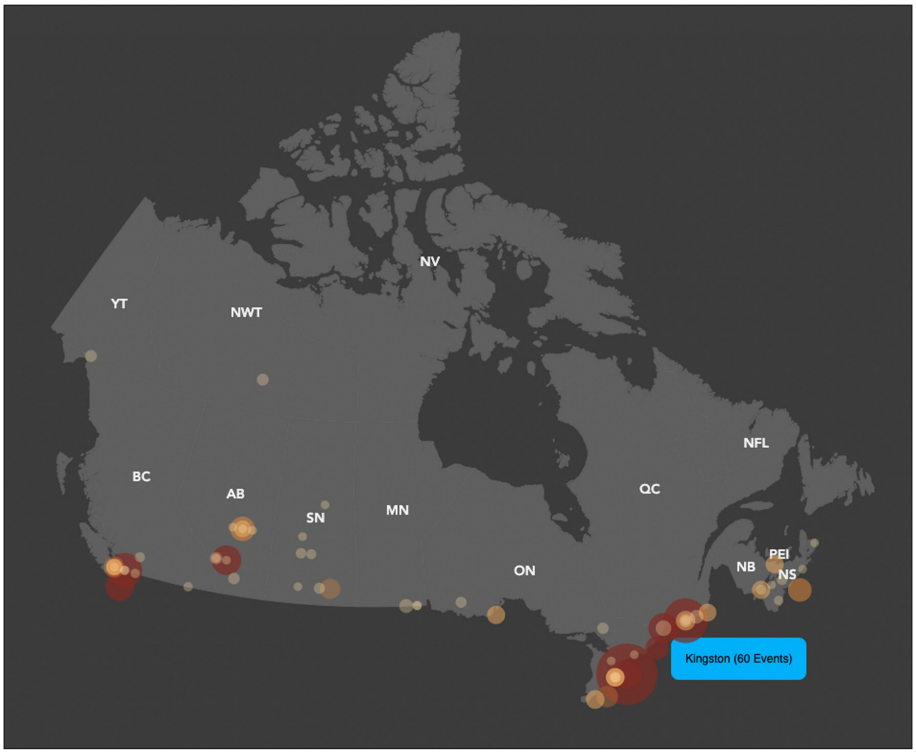


Figure 3: Screenshot of map visualizing number of events by geolocation.

Finally, we used the "Dates" field to record the date(s) of the event, and the "Related Works" field as a kind of bibliography space allowing us to cite any noteworthy publications featured in the events, such as books launched, or works read from.

We used WorldCat OCLC data for the bibliographical entries and stored the relevant WorldCat link to each cited item in a "Related Works" URL field.

With the crosswalk prepared, the data entry could begin. We worked on filling in the data about the events that we had already discovered during an initial search conducted by Wiener for events posted on various social media platforms (especially Twitter [X] and Facebook). This social media search had already revealed over 70 organizations and many hundreds of events. Social media platforms would prove to be the primary source for our data collection project. This initial search also provided the starting point for an expanded list of organizers to be approached. First we asked a select number of organizers to fill out a survey concerning the number and nature of events organized, and then engaged with them as focus groups to gather feedback on our chosen data categories and web design work. We then pursued a process of iterative development, moving from draft to prototype design to focus group session to analysis, documentation, and refinement of requirements. The establishment of requirements led to the production of wireframes and descriptions of functionality related to searching and faceting by metadata fields, visualizing and exporting search results, and to the functionality and look of the interface itself. Our findings from this development process led to the decisions about data structuring and presentation manifest in the ADP, along with the preparation of documentation and plans for how to maintain and update the tool, made public on GitHub. As the ADP dataset grew, intensive work was underway in user-design testing, full-stack development, and approaches to design, style, and data visualization for the website to present all the data we collected about pandemic-period literary events. (Details about the design and development projects have appeared in several articles published on the *SPOKENWEBLOG*; see Bustamante and Lu 2022; Camlot et al. 2022).

As we know well from our experience in data curation and structuring for the SpokenWeb research program, metadata—which is most succinctly defined as data that provides information about other data—is often the source, in practice, of some of the most important research questions we can imagine, about scope and definitions, ontological concepts and categories, and about the concepts and methods we use to describe, grasp, and analyze the very entities, literary events, and activities that are at the core of this mode of literary historical research. The task of creating metadata about pandemic literary events and the digital data they generated evokes recent discussions of metadata for transmedia resources and environments. The "data" of pandemic literary events were produced and experienced in diversified media environments, often as "dynamic, open-ended, non-linear interactions between

people, communication modes and technologies" (Vukadin 2019, 10). Our reflections on the meaning of data in relation to this research object—pandemic period literary events—will focus on concepts of data structures and their implications for the abstraction and erasure of affective qualities of historical events, and data temporalities, two areas that have been especially suggestive for us as we have developed the working ADP site.

Data structures of feeling, or how does our data feel?

In *Data Feminism*, Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein take up the question of affect, emotion, and embodiment in relation to data. Their feminist principle is to elevate emotion and embodiment, to value the knowledge that comes from "people as living, feeling bodies in the world" (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020, 73); they do so in stark juxtaposition to what they characterize as a rational, scientific, objective viewpoint detached from the body and from feeling. D'Ignazio and Klein's conception of data as affective and embodied may be situated within earlier arguments against the idea of data as detached from human and cultural contexts. For example, Johanna Drucker considers how realistic approaches to data assume that phenomena are observer-independent, and within this framework "[d]ata pass themselves off as mere descriptions of a priori conditions" (Drucker 2011, 1). She argues rather that data are not "given" (Drucker 2011, 3), but always interpreted and constructed, or "taken" (Drucker 2011, 3). She asserts then that "[b]y recognizing the always interpreted character of data we have shifted from data to capta, acknowledging the constructed-ness of the categories according to uses and expectations of which they are put in service" (Drucker 2011, 12). She claims that *capta*, meaning "taken," is therefore a more appropriate term than *data*. For Drucker, radically restructuring our thinking about data in this way can allow for a "subjective—even affective—display of information" (Drucker 2011, 26).

More recently, Matthew Lavin, responding to Drucker, argues that Drucker makes an important conceptual intervention into how we think about data, but suggests we need not do away with the term (Lavin 2021). He argues that rather than replace *data* with the term *capta*, we should instead think of data as situated. He claims that Drucker is correct in emphasizing that data is taken not given, yet he traces a more nuanced etymological narrative for the term *data*, showing that the term itself does not necessarily imply "given." He asserts that since we can use the term *data* and think of it as *taken*, we should rather approach our thinking about data in the sense that, for example, D'Ignazio and Klein do in *Data Feminism* (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020). Lavin

argues that D'Ignazio and Klein approach data as situated; grounded in their feminist principles of embodiment, they effectively use the term *data*, with necessary modifiers and qualifiers that emphasize how data is constructed.

D'Ignazio and Klein consider a central question, "Should a visualization be designed to evoke emotion?" a question about which they claim "[t]he received wisdom in technical communication circles is emphatically 'No'" (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020, 74). This idea that quantitative data and emotion should be held apart is not uncommon. As historian of science Theodore Porter puts it, "Quantification is a technology of distance" (Porter 1996, ix, quoted in D'Ignazio and Klein 2020, 74). D'Ignazio and Klein note how Porter's idea of distance "is closely related to objectivity because it puts literal space between people and the knowledge they produce. … The more plain, the more neutral; the more neutral, the more objective; and the more objective, the more true—or so this line of reasoning goes" (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020, 76). D'Ignazio and Klein cite data visualization master classes that hold up spreadsheet data as "an ideal for the communication of quantitative data, [as] 'Clarity without persuasion'" (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020, 76). And then they aptly argue against this kind of stark removal of affect from quantitative data. They counter that "persuasion is everywhere, even in spreadsheets, and—as feminist philosopher Donna Haraway would likely argue—especially in spreadsheets" (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020, 76). In the 1980s, Haraway was among the first to articulate this problem of the perceived neutrality and objectivity of data and their visual display.

What do we make of the relationship between affect, emotion, embodiment, distance, and data, when considering the dataset for the ADP, a dataset that emerges from a period that saw the necessary distancing of bodies and the disembodiment of the literary event as it moved to digital environments? Our data tracks how bodies, physically separate but connecting through digital media and online streaming platforms, "came together" for literary events. Much of the data we collected captured information about online events that happened at the height of COVID-19 restrictions, which required physical distancing. We turned to social media to collect digital traces of events that were themselves digital, assembling and creating the *sense* of an archive out of pandemic-period digital ephemera.

What happens to affect and emotion in a disembodied, digital historical era? What does it mean when the event of literary expression and human encounter exists as digital data itself, when the bodies involved connect only through computers, cellular phones, wireless internet? We are *not* left with neutral, plain, or objective data. On the contrary, data becomes one important place where we may find the affective

structure and texture of the pandemic. Digital data rendered in multiple forms and formats became the technology of connectivity, sociability, and a medium of shared affect, rather than a technology of distance. Social media platforms are themselves disembodied forms of sociability. We can read affect and emotion in posts that exist as digital data points. We can see and hear and feel each other in an online livestream or Zoom room. Still, what we were seeing, hearing, and feeling in those moments of online connectivity was digital data. Our voices, faces, and bodies were transduced from discrete sonic samples and visual pixels, and then were fed through social media platforms as visual, textual, and audio-visual data. We collected, indexed, structured, and partially visualized traces of that online literary period and those visual traces of events became our dataset.

Further, in the Connections visualization—one of the three visualizations available from the main page of the ADP site—one can see our attempt to model a network of contributors and their relations to events (**Figure 4**). This visualization captures our imaginary, so to speak, concerning connectivity manifest in the data we collected. This network visualization (developed by Neugebauer and Gandham) is constructed with two types of nodes: event titles and names of contributors (organizers, performers, etc.). As Neugebauer explains, "the edges connect the two types of nodes to each other, and they signify the participation of the contributors in the events, and the visualization uses edge bundling to bring those edges that represent a participation in events hosted by the same organization visually together" (Neugebauer 2023, personal communication). The visualization is interactive, allowing the user to click on any of the nodes to retrieve the full set of metadata for that node's contributor or event. The small sample shown, filtering out and displaying just the five contributors who participated in the largest number of events during the period captured in our data, evokes the vast networks of connectivity between individuals through events that exist in the entire ADP dataset, but that exceed the capacity of an interactive graph presented on a website and displayed on a standard sized computer screen. In this screenshot of the Connections visualization, a cursor selection of the individual Brandon Wint triggers a fan of bright orange lines that reveals his participation in a range of events (12 Tree Reading Series readings, December Flywheel, Poetry for the Moment, VerseFest 2020, Reimagining Disability, etc.) during the pandemic period, while the connections to pandemic events of the remaining four individuals (DiRaddo, Camlot, Ferrier, Coyote), whose names are shown in dark ochre, are traced in faint lines until one of their names will be selected in turn.

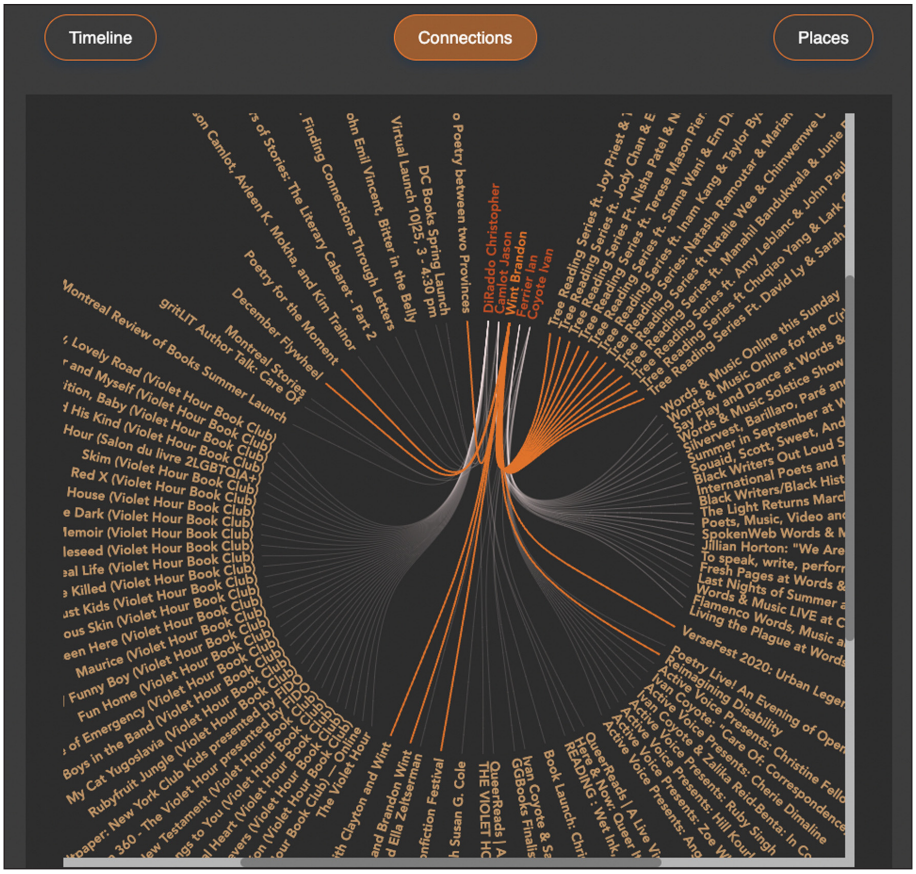


Figure 4: Screenshot of connections data visualization model on the home page of the ADP site.

The Connections data visualization developed and implemented on the ADP site is presented as one among many possible access points on the site's interface into the metadata, in this case, allowing users to perform searches within the ADP site of some of the most degree-central contributors (the contributors who were involved in the most events). This is just an evocative sample of what can be done to explore the implications of networked connections as they played out between literary contributors and the events they participated in during the pandemic. As Neugebauer explains:

> Future work with visualization of this data set would include the full contributor-event network structured as a downloadable file that can be imported directly into analysis and visualization tools such as Gephi, allowing researchers to study and filter the network according to their research questions. Emergent properties of the network, in other words, those properties that only exist when the network is considered as a whole, can be studied, such as the detection of communities, or clusters of interconnected nodes. (Neugebauer 2023, personal communication)

Neugebauer's rhetorical movement in his description of data analysis technique between "the detection of communities" and "clusters of interconnected nodes" evokes the superimposition of affect with data we are trying to convey. Where a node refers to a basic point of intersection and connection within a data network, these points of connection are understood as markers of "communities," people organized into acknowledged clusters by shared feelings, attitudes, and reciprocal acts of affection and care. When we look to individual data points in the larger collection, an AV recording of an online event, for example, we find expanded traces of the embodied, emotional resonances of the period. These recordings, like the metadata we have curated, the new structures we imagine for them, and the social media feeds from which they come, are data functioning on a continuum between what is often described as quantitative and qualitative data.

What were the genres of the pandemic?

Movement across this continuum is perhaps most evident in relation to categories of generic form identifying the types of literary events that took place during the pandemic period. One might peruse our data and develop arguments about why, out of the 2,800 or so events categorized so far, so many of them were dialogical forms of speech genres, such as "Conversations" (1,221), "Workshops" (263), "Interviews" (126), or readings with Q&A sessions (184). One could easily imagine a generic argument that online literary events of the dialogic mode were needed to provide forms of interpersonal engagement and community to substitute for what was missing from our lives due to conditions of isolation. One might just as easily argue that the use of these modes are manifestations of larger economic, social, and technological trends towards a general sense and experience of "glocality"—the collapse of global economies, events and standardized products and processes with local sites and experiences. As Martijn Groenleer and Daniel Bertram have observed, this somewhat counterintuitive understanding of the global and local as functioning parts of each other rather than as opposites redefines globalization as a "shrinking of the world by connecting places" (Groenleer and Bertram 2021, 94). An explicit experience of such geographical contraction through connection was accelerated by the conditions of the global pandemic. Pandemic genres of intimate dialogue and local encounter as realized through the media formats of global web-based telecommunications networks transmit a sense and awareness of the intensity of such acceleration, thus locating an experience of the collapse of local and global sites and spaces as a symptom of a peculiar temporal period, that of the contemporary moment of the pandemic.

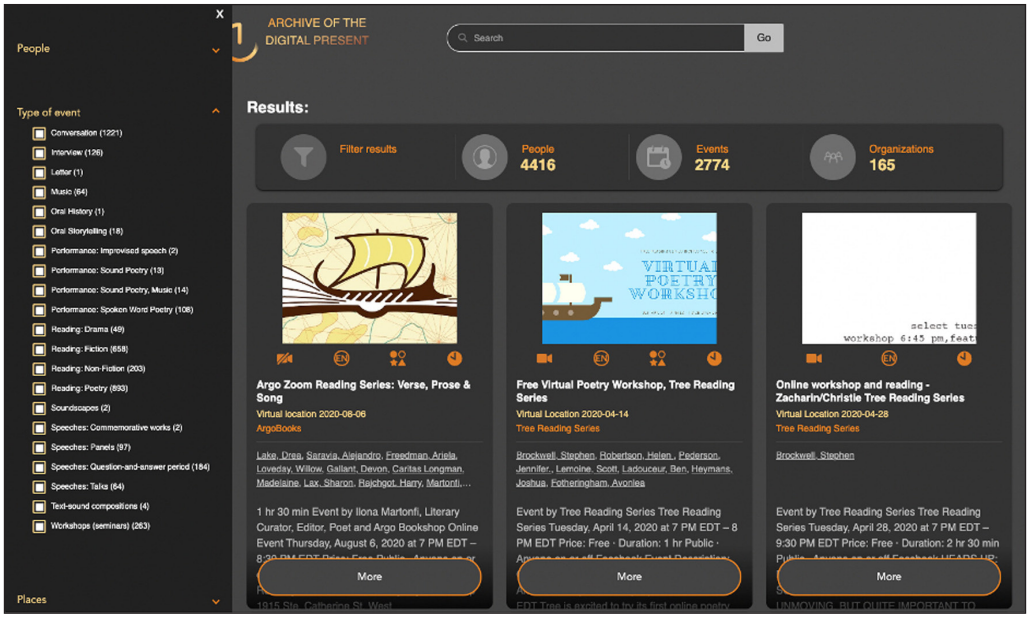


Figure 5: Screenshot of faceting by type of event.

As Theodore Martin has argued in his theoretical exploration of the concept of the "contemporary" (we will return to Martin, shortly): "genre shows us what differentiates the present from the past as well as what ties the two together" (Martin 2017, 7). Insofar as the ADP also functions as a directory to audio-visual data, it gives us some insight into this question even beyond our categorizations of events (**Figure 5**). The question of pandemic genres is much too large to explore here, other than with a few preliminary observations. There are at least two other ways to think about the question of genre within this frame. One may ask, what were the literary genres of the pandemic? For example, what made it seem important for Metatron Press in Montreal to mobilize and organize a Zoom-hosted group-reading of Diane Di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*, in its entirety, during the first weeks of lockdown in Quebec (Metatron Press 2020)? What forms of COVID fiction and poetry were written and shared online? What genres of poetry were most commonly selected by poets to read? But beyond these questions of textual genres, we should also ask how best to describe the genres of the literary pandemic as afforded by and manifest in the telecommunications platforms that enabled literary dissemination during the pandemic period, as with the example noted above of the genres of an accelerated sense of pandemic glocality. What is a Zoom reading? What are its generic features? To paraphrase Martin in the context of our chosen research object, how do the generic features of a pandemic literary event perform a differentiation between the past and pandemic present and perhaps communicate the ways in which those two periods are tied together (Martin 2017, 7)?

Again, we will not engage in extensive analysis of what we understand to be the predominant genres of the pandemic but will simply observe, with the examples of Di Prima and the Zoom-platform reading in mind, that they seem to combine elements of the epistolary (as found in *Revolutionary Letters*) and the apostrophic (as found in the ode as a lyric genre), insofar as they require a speaker to imagine an absent interlocutor, a rapport with a present audience for their words, with even greater urgency than a poet reading at a lectern in a hall filled with actual people, and yet with a tone of one-to-one connection that one normally assumes from the conceit of intimate conversation. The framing of the Zoom reader is close up, the demeanour is empathetic (as if searching for or imagining contact with eyes they cannot see), the affect is welcoming and caring (**Figure 6**). If one collapses these tendencies of the epistolary and the apostrophic ode together into a pandemic Zoom reading, one approaches something akin to the direct address we became accustomed to in children's television shows of a certain era (maybe even in some today) like *Mr. Rogers' Neighbourhood*, *Captain Kangaroo*, *The Friendly Giant*, *Sesame Street*, *Electric Company*, and the child-run show coincidentally called *Zoom* (that ran from 1972 to 1978 on PBS and was revived in 1999), where the protagonists were comfortable breaking the fourth wall in order to speak directly to you, the child viewer, in a manner that consoled the addressee by using direct address, and by articulating some of the explicit factors informing the situation of communication and action that has been unfolding or is about to unfold.

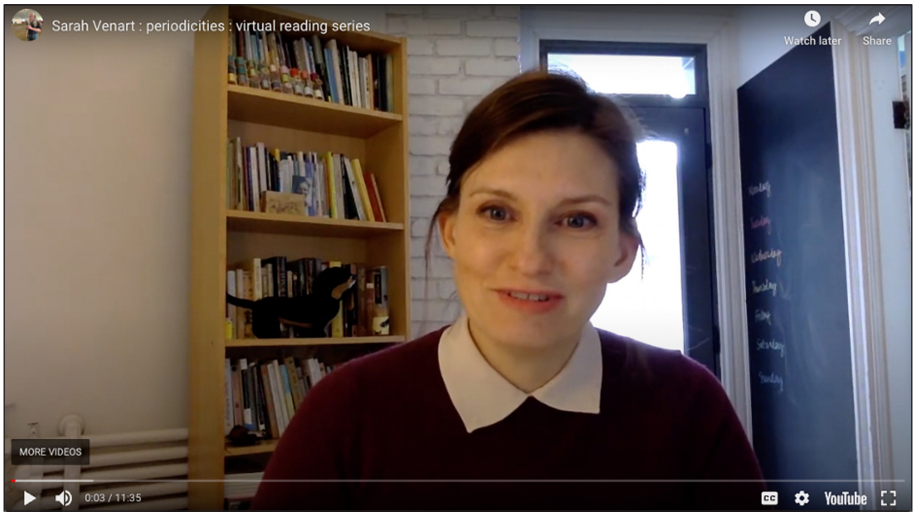


Figure 6: Screen capture of S. E. Venart delivering prefatory remarks for a poetry reading streamed on YouTube via the Periodicities Virtual Reading Series, 3 January 2021 (Venart 2021).

In the case of the pandemic-period online streaming or Zoom reading, it is not so much that the imagined interlocutor is infantilized or patronized as if they are a child, but rather that they are addressed as one trapped in a situation that cannot be changed at present, but that will (one imagines) eventually be superseded by a different situation, as adulthood necessarily supersedes the unavoidable situation of childhood. The temporal limbo of the pandemic, combined with the kinds of mediated encounters it required, suggested telecom sociality as a kind of Warholian screen test, filled with intimate disclosures previously unrevealed, and with a self-reflexive awareness of the possibilities such displays and encounters might imply. This feeling of social vertigo and transformational potential was especially strong when one was in the midst of it, suggesting "we might reimagine a new way of looking, and hearing, and sensing, beyond our own image" (Cesare Schotzko 2020, 286). This last quote is from a critical reflection by T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko on the "hidden intimacies in Zoom exigencies," written in the fall of 2020, so about six months into the pandemic. As an early attempt to theorize the implications of (in this case, theatrical) performance over Zoom, Cesare Schotzko's essay very clearly, urgently, and hopefully expresses the sense of transformational possibility arising from mediated encounter under conditions of isolation.

The Zoom-recorded literary events of the pandemic document a kind of video of manners (like a novel of manners), in which figures bewildered by their present situation attempt to articulate yet unknown alternatives to the system of capitalism, to the practices, jobs, institutions, and leisure activities that have been instrumental in defining their sense of reality until this time. Without the functioning environs of that reality, one need no longer be in style with the times, which, as Kent Puckett puts it, means "to subordinate oneself to the rules of the moment, … in the hope of achieving identity with a set of historically situated rules and conventions" (Puckett 87, cited in Martin 2017, 33). It is not just that one can wear pyjama bottoms and mask one's environment with a blurring filter or an image of any place one wants, but that these seemingly minor possibilities represent major shifts in the drama of the subject's interpolation into the pervasive norms that give society meaning as a lived reality. That is a brief account of a potential approach to the genre of pandemic events through consideration of our digital dataset across the continuum. As Hariette Steiner and Kristin Veel have observed, our sense of time during the pandemic was often felt as a disruption of the rhythm, pace and sense of time spent engaging with others because our interactions were "overwhelmingly subject to the processing of audio-visual data … not always working smoothly, in a timely manner, so to speak" [Steiner and Veel 2021, 92–93]. The AV-recorded event may be approached as a hinge of the present,

between past and future, and thus might serve as an interesting site for the theorization of pandemic time and periodization, among other pandemic temporal qualities, such as latency and delay (of data rendering and viral symptoms, for instance; see Steiner and Veel 2021).

Pandemic time and periodization

We do not wish to conflate two legitimate senses of data in this context, one being *everything* that happened online and that left digital traces for us to find, the other being the curated dataset we developed out of that larger, messier pool of data. But our movement between these two categories of data, suggesting that they exist on a continuum and are not, ontologically, truly distinguishable except for expository, analytical, or imaginative purposes, is indicative of the nature of the historical period and environment we are exploring within the frame of "the digital archive" as conceived in a broader sense.

As media theorist Wolfgang Ernst has suggested, "The classical archive is preserved time. But the digital archive has no intrinsic macrotemporal index. … It operates at a microtemporal level instead" (Ernst 2013a, 82). From Ernst's perspective, the encoding of sound and video into samples and pixels, into digital data, represents a newly mediated way of representing time, and introduces the potential of microtemporalities that introduce "a new form of temporality in competition to the historical event" (Ernst 2013b, 142). Like Ernst, we are interested in thinking about the relationship between manifestations of time implicit in the historical media that capture cultural events (digital data), and ideas of time that inform our methods in cultural history. One of Ernst's points on this subject is that tensions exist between how the idea of time works and is structured in our historical narratives of cultural events, and how it works and is structured in the media we use to capture, organize, and present the events we study.

This problem of time posed by a digital archive such as the one we have developed underscores our troubling of the distinction between quantitative and qualitative data in our account of the affective qualities of our dataset. From our perspective, this tension highlights how the ADP is a useful case for exploring digital forms of data as a conceptual problem, as much as it is a set of data to be used to prove something about the reality of the pandemic period. Indeed, the data as it is currently presented through the ADP website will not always be available in that exact online manifestation, given the funding required to sustain such websites, and the inevitable changes and updates that will be required by the data, content management, search and faceting

systems used to curate the data online. The "raw" metadata will continue to be stored in Swallow and deposited for access and use by other researchers in places like the Federated Research Data Repository (FRDR) for as long as possible, and it is important to recognize that each such configuration of the data about pandemic literary events we have collected will inform the tensions between *those* structuring forces, and the cultural and narrative meanings we will want to ascribe to such data at different points in time. As there is no guarantee that the data collected and the method of structuring and presenting that data with the ADP site will last in their currently intended structures, the ADP manifestation of this data may also be understood as an ephemeral event in its own right, structuring myriad other digital traces of events for a time, and then releasing them to new forms of meaning or obscurity, in the future.

As a literary historical project, the ADP moves into the time of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions as if it may be categorized as a period of literary history that demanded adaptations in how literary works were shared, and how literary activities might be pursued under different conditions. We proceeded in structuring and collecting our data with this basic literary historical assumption in mind. We cordoned off a two-year period of time we called "the pandemic period," and we collected as many events as we could find on social media and organized them by date and other categories relevant to literary researchers (author, time, place, genre, etc.). (The decision to collect data for a two-year period and not three [2020–2023, for example] was itself influenced by where we were situated temporally in relation to the pandemic as it was still unfolding. Camlot applied for funding to collect data and develop the ADP site in January 2021. The funding was received in August 2021. The two-year frame represented the researcher's sense and hope that the pandemic and its social effects would be winding down by the spring of 2022. It was also informed by the need to propose a feasible plan to a granting agency at that point in time, and by the funding envelope of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Development Grant program that could be applied for to fund data collection and site development.) We approached this as a period that could be represented on a timeline, in relation to other forms of literary historical periodization, whether macro, such as the literary-historical periods (medieval, renaissance, Victorian, Modern, etc.) that have been so important for structuring departments of literary studies as a discipline; or smaller (if not quite micro) periodizations, such as "the fin-de-siècle" or the postmodern period, which may yet include periodizations such as post-45 (Malinowski 2023), post-9/11, etc.

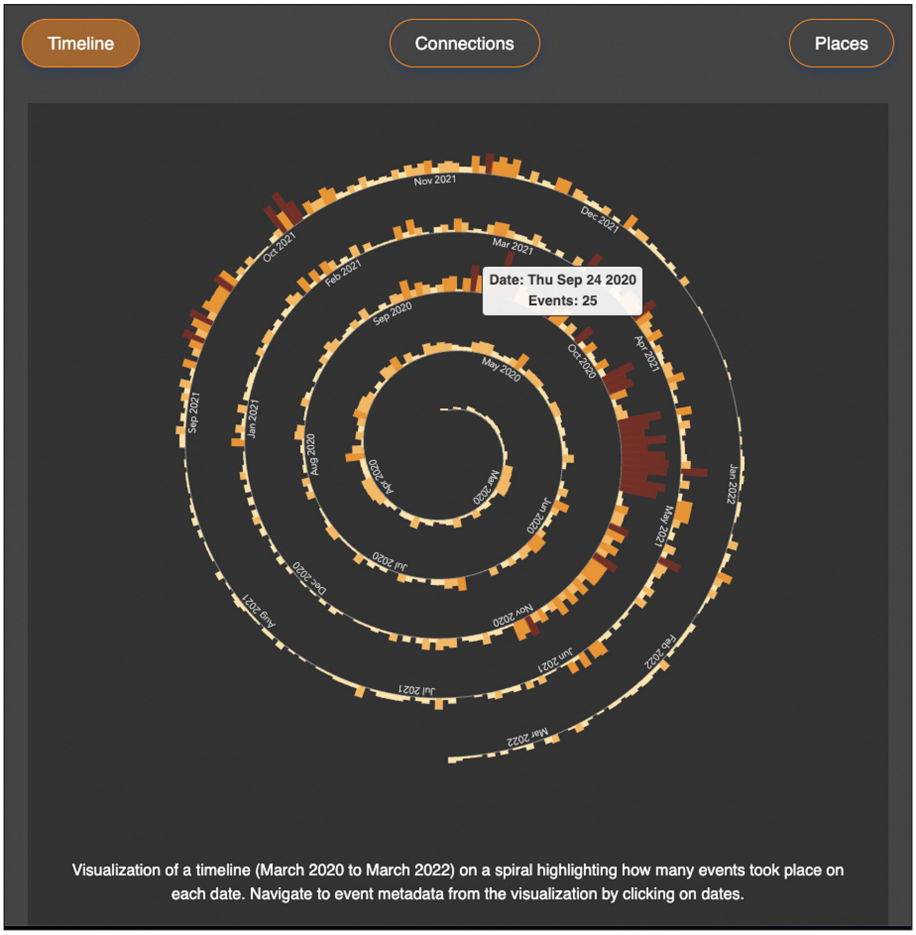


Figure 7: Screenshot of condegram (spiral histogram) of literary events each day.

When we chose to visualize the period, we selected the condegram, a spiral histogram, as the best available shape for this purpose, because it aesthetically captured a sense of time during the pandemic as both moving and staying still, of time passing, yet of nothing changing (**Figure 7**). This basic decision in visualization represents a first conceptualization of how to use our data to represent pandemic time. The visual rendering of numbers of events that took place over time unavoidably summons memories of other time-event data from the period, namely daily, weekly, and monthly data reports about COVID-19 cases, deaths, and eventually, of vaccines issued. In retrospect, the data released in regular reports, with graphs showing trends, ominous spikes, and hope-inspiring dips, were not just informative of what was happening in time, but were a definitive structuring force that shaped our conception of the pandemic as a period (Government of Canada 2023).

The site was designed using a "dark mode" background and elements that integrated "web design trends of the 2020–2022 period, and that also reflected the overall mood of the pandemic period" (Bustamante and Lu 2022), with the aim of instilling a sense of design obsolescence, of fixing its aesthetic to a very specific historical moment (**Figure 8**). As Alexandre Bustamente, the designer of the site, notes,

> The [main page] icon created for the ADP explores an animation that makes reference to a clock marking the time, and the colour scheme achieved reflects the autumnal melancholy of a period in which silence and decay of the disease, and the measures surrounding it, loomed over the world. (Bustamante and Lu 2022)

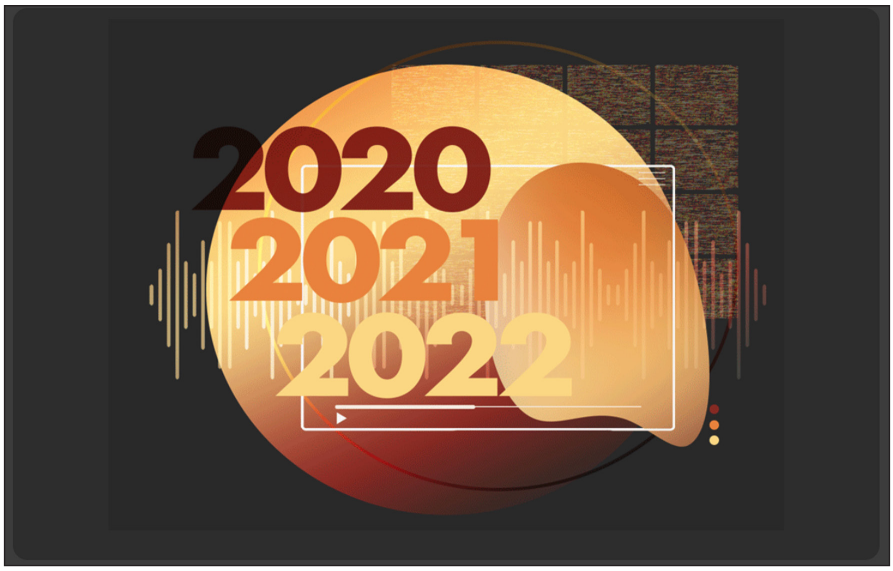


Figure 8: Main page video image of ADP 2020-2021-2022.

Aesthetically, the ADP was designed to convey the idea of pandemic time as akin to life in a relentless and perpetual digital present.

Like the temporal category of "the contemporary," as Theodore Martin has theorized it, the pandemic period is discernible in several ways: as a category of history, as a problem of critical thought and imagination, and as "an index of the social transformations," in this case one wrought by a virus in the context of global capitalism (Martin 2017, 19). That said, we do not wish to equate the historicity of the pandemic period with that of the contemporary. In many ways, it is quite different from the conceptual problem of historical contemporaneity Martin considers. Different because it was partly experienced (and is increasingly, historically imagined) as a distinctive pull in the fabric of the contemporary. A disruption of the functioning machine of

global capitalism. A significant staunching of the regular flow of time, if not a cessation of time altogether. A transformation of the experience of everyday life in ways that brought into view the contours of the day through regular repetition (as in a Groundhog Day situation) and of life through the ever-present risk and reality of contagion and death. So, the pandemic period as a historical category, as we are thinking about it, is not equivalent to the contemporary, but it shares some of that concept's definitional ambivalence, and is, like the contemporary, useful to approach "not as a self-evident historical period but as a conceptual problem" (Martin 2017, 5).

The pandemic period arises out of present, real-time experience of that time as historically significant time unfolding, but it is also a critical concept that must be imagined before it can be conceived. The data we have curated represents a collection, structuring, and online presentation of one instantiation of such an imagining that combines preconceptions of periodized historical time, and an experience of the present as already historical. This creates a particular kind of awareness of one's position of critique. Our goal here has been to approach the pandemic period as a methodological problem that challenges our first critical categories concerning data, media, form, period, historicity, and temporality (Martin 2017, 20).

The pandemic as object of study thus required us to double down on the goals of critical theory to become critics of everyday life (and death) within global capitalism by recognizing the necessity of writing (to use a well-known phrase from Foucault) "the history of the present," meaning, using a current situation as the starting point from which to pursue a historical account, a genealogy, that helps explain it (Garland 2014, 367–368). To develop a diagnosis of the pandemic period from a literary historical perspective, for example. This endeavour presents significant difficulties for a reason that has been well articulated by numerous theorists: because the present doesn't stand still (Martin), because presence resists being clearly demarcated as we lack distance upon it (Derrida), because we can only intuit but not really conceptualize its contours (Lauren Berlant) (Martin 2017, 17). Like "the contemporary" as Martin theorizes it, the pandemic period is discernible in several ways: as a category of history, as a problem of critical thought and imagination, and as "an index of the social transformations" (Martin 2017, 19), in this case, one wrought by a virus in the context of global capitalism.

It is difficult to imagine the pandemic period as a solitary historical category, even though it was felt (albeit with significant local differences) on a global scale as a shared aberration, suspension, disruption of what came before, and what is still coming. The pandemic period as we have defined it from March 2020 to March 2022 may be absorbed as a fragment (a micro period) of the decade that (according to Martin) functions as the postmodern category of periodization par excellence. It may come to stand in for

and define the third decade of the twenty-first century—the 2020s, the decade of the pandemic. It may be framed as an aberrant period of its own, like other historical plague years. Or it may be the event that works to disrupt such units of periodization in ways that will have consequences for historical thinking going forward. These methods of conceptualization and categorization do not preclude each other, but they suggest different ways of recognizing the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for the problem of historicization, and for the use of the data we keep and shape about it.

Most likely, the pandemic period will become part of a larger abstract definition of the twenty-first century as a period. Decades and centuries are forms for containing and abstracting the chaotic particulars of what occurs in time. The Archive of the Digital Present has been developed as an attempt to curate the digital traces of shared experiences of the pandemic period within a literary frame. It was conceived, designed, and built as an event for reflection on the affective, generic, and structural significance of digital data for a digitally mediated period of history, and as a digital trace, itself, that documents the assumptions and desires informing a need for meaning and understanding of that time as a discernible, time-specific experience of literary expression, circulation, and reception. Its data will never be complete. The dataset will be made available for others to download, explore, and reconfigure with the possibility of revealing new connections and drawing new conclusions about this period of literary history in relation to other social and cultural trends of the period as manifest through other datasets. The links that direct a visitor to videos of events that occurred during the pandemic remain alive for the time being. The website presenting our data and directory exists online at present and will persist there for some foreseeable future.

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Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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