

Italian Women Writers and Pandemic: New Voices of Empowerment

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Abstract: This paper examines how Italian women writers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, when Italy, the first country in Europe, was hit by the coronavirus outbreak in the spring 2020. I take as a starting point the general context of a male-dominated Italian literary society in which women writers are often marginalized. The article focuses on successful social media communities for book presentations and discussions between writers and readers, such as *Scrittori a domicilio* [*Writers to your Door*] and *Decameron. Una storia ci salverà* [*The Decameron. A Story Will Save Us*], launched by the collectives of female authors and journalists when cultural life in the country was paralyzed in the lockdown. It also investigates a significant contribution of Italian women writers to the intellectual reflection on the pandemic impact. In particular, I analyze articles and interviews, published or released by acclaimed writers Francesca Melandri, Nadia Terranova, Melania Gaia Mazzucco, Rosella Postorino, and Maria Rosa Cutrufelli. I explore some key issues that they addressed, such as the relation between emotional life and the absence of physical contact during the lockdown, time perception shifted by the coronavirus emergency, and changes of approaches to writing. The essay aims to demonstrate that during the pandemic Italian women writers gained an unprecedented level of recognition and visibility and found new forms of empowerment.

Italy was the first country in Europe to be overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic last spring. The life of Italians has changed drastically in a few days when on 9 March 2020 Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced a nationwide quarantine. The country has been under the strict lockdown until 18 May 2020, while hashtags #iorestoacasa [#istayathome] and #andràtuttobene [#everythingwillbefine] were spreading on social networks. The entire world saw unknown Italy: empty cities, military trucks carrying out coffins from Bergamo, Pope Francis praying in a deserted St Peter's Square under the rain, Italians singing together from the balconies.

A year after, the memory of that tragic days is still vivid, although the apocalypse has turned into a routine life under the restrictions and a slow vaccination campaign in the country divided into red and orange zones.

After the COVID-19 outbreak, many Italian intellectuals tried to reflect on the meaning of the pandemic for society and on its possible consequences.¹ Philosophers Giorgio Agamben and Umberto Galimberti, physicist Carlo Rovelli, writers Claudio Magris, Alessandro Baricco, Paolo Rumiz, and other prominent figures published their articles in newspapers, magazines, and blogs. The essay of the writer and physicist Paolo Giordano *Nel contagio* was immediately translated into more than thirty languages.²

The aim of this paper is to explore the responses of Italian women writers to the pandemic emergency. In particular, I am going to answer the following questions. Which role did the female authors play in the Italian literary society during the lockdown? How did they contribute to intellectual reflections on the pandemic? What were the main issues addressed in their texts and interviews? For the purpose of my research, I will analyze three cultural initiatives organized by Italian women writers and journalists in 2020. With regard to articles and interviews, I will focus on contributions of some acclaimed Italian female authors, such as Francesca Melandri, Nadia Terranova, Melania Gaia Mazzucco, Rosella Postorino, and Maria Rosa Cutrufelli.

The Italian literary system is still dominated by male intellectuals, writers, and literary critics. In this hierarchical paradigm, Italian women writers are often marginalized on different levels, including high school and university academic programs and researches in the field of Italian studies.³ Moreover, female authors are less likely to win the major literary award, the Strega Prize, and they occupy a secondary position in the contemporary Italian canon. For that reason, it seems important to focus on the female authors' contribution in the time of the pandemic.

During the lockdown, cultural life in Italy was completely paralyzed. Literary festivals and major events, such as Bologna Children's Book Fair and Turin International Book Fair, were postponed or canceled. Cultural operators had to find new virtual spaces on the Internet and took advantage of the digital technologies, and in this regard, female authors and journalists had a pioneering role. Before the nationwide quarantine was announced, symbolically on 8 March 2020,

¹ I examined Italian intellectuals' writings on the pandemic in this article (in Russian): D. Kozhanova, 'Literatura i pandemia: Italia', *Prochlenie*, 22 April 2020, <https://prochlenie.org/geo/30178>, (accessed 30 March 2021).

² See English translation: P. Giordano, *How Contagion Works: Science, Awareness and Community in Times of Global Crises. The short essay that helped change the Covid-19 debate*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020.

³ See A. Bazzoni, 'Canone letterario e studi femministi. Dati e prospettive su didattica, manuali e critica letteraria per una trasformazione dell'italianistica', in G. Mazzoni, S. Micali et al. (eds.), *Le costanti e le varianti. Letteratura e lunga durata*, Florence, Del Vecchio, 2021, pp. 139-162.

the International Women's Day, journalists Serena Uccello, Chiara Palumbo, Michela Fregona, Benedetta Pallavidino, and the book blogger Valentina Berengo launched an online literary project on Facebook group *Scrittori a domicilio* [*Writers to your Door*].⁴ Their aim was to organize virtual book presentations, which before the pandemic usually took place in the bookshops, and support the publishing industry impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions. The activities did not stop after the quarantine, and *Scrittori a domicilio* holds book presentations every day. To engage readers more actively, they extended social media presence: in addition to the Facebook group, which has almost 15,000 members, Facebook page, Instagram account, and YouTube channel were created.

On 11 March 2020, nine prominent Italian female authors (Michela Murgia, Chiara Valerio, Teresa Ciabatti, Helena Janeczek, Evelina Santangelo, Caterina Bonvicini, Valeria Parrella, Rossella Milone, and Alessandra Sarchi) launched Facebook page *Decameron. Una storia ci salverà* [*The Decameron. A Story Will Save Us*].⁵ The title was inspired by Giovanni Boccaccio's masterpiece in which a group of young men and women escapes the Black Death and shelters in the villa near Florence, telling stories. Actualizing the past, contemporary Italian women writers sought to create a virtual space where authors and readers could meet and talk about books, in spite of the pandemic. The page hosted numerous book presentations and turned into the center of cultural life, with more than 11,000 followers. *Decameron* became a platform for the first virtual festival of contemporary writing and publishing supported by leading Italian publishers, including Mondadori, Rizzoli, and Longanesi. Like *Scrittori a domicilio*, the project continued its activity after the lockdown, and now it organizes online presentations and discussions in collaboration with bookshops.

Italian women writers played an important part in intellectual reflections on the pandemic experience. Some of their contributions received huge acclaim not only in Italy, but also abroad, like *Lettera dal futuro* [*Letter from the Future*] of screenwriter, novelist and filmmaker Francesca Melandri. In March, French newspaper *Liberation* asked her to write a text about the lockdown in Italy, which was about to happen in France. When Melandri's article *Lettre aux Français depuis leur future* [*Letter to the French from their Future*] was published on 18 March 2020, people from different countries started translating it. On 27 March 2020, *Guardian* published a version for English-speaking audience, and after that, Melandri's essay became striking evidence of the occurring pandemic for readers across the world.

⁴ *Scrittori a domicilio* [Facebook group], <https://www.facebook.com/groups/667604810719292>, (accessed 31 March 2021).

⁵ *Decameron. Una storia ci salverà* [Facebook page], <https://www.facebook.com/videodecameron>, (accessed 30 March 2021).

The writer observes that the COVID-19 works as a time machine, because the present of the countries already hit by the pandemic, such as China and Italy, becomes the future of other nations. Melandri, like a seer, describes the future (the recurring phrase in the text is ‘you will’): ‘I am writing to you from Italy, which means I am writing from your future. We are now where you will be in a few days. The epidemic’s charts show us all entwined in a parallel dance’.⁶ Melandri provides a detailed account of the pandemic reality and reveals the harsh truth about the coronavirus, which is not ‘only the flu’, as many people continue to think. She demonstrates how our everyday routine and personal relations will be completely changed in the lockdown: we will read dystopian literature, spend all the time on social media, make appointments with friends in the supermarket queues, play music from balconies. Moreover, the global emergency will provoke psychological changes and make us see profound contradictions that we usually overlook in normal life.

In addition, Melandri foresees how the pandemic will affect the most vulnerable members of society, such as homeless people. As she points out, although the nation is united in the communal effort, the COVID-19 also exposes social inequality, since spending quarantine in a private house is not the same as living under the lockdown in an overcrowded apartment. The writer does not forget the female condition and prophetically argues that many women will be beaten during the lockdown.⁷

In her profound essay, a message of solidarity to the world, Melandri swings between the private and the public life, between big ideas and small things, and depicts an overview of how nations and single individuals deal with the pandemic crisis. The text is mostly based on the shared experience, but in the end, the writer invites readers to look beyond the near future, which she has described. ‘If we turn our gaze to the more distant future, the future which is unknown both to you and to us too, we can only tell you this: when all of this is over, the world won’t be the same’.⁸

One of the most acclaimed Italian female authors, Nadia Terranova, released interviews and wrote texts about the lockdown, using different genres, such as personal essay, short story, and reportage, often mixed with each other. Born in Sicily, she lives in Rome, in the neighborhood Pineto, a residential area not so far from the city center. She compares Pineto to the island and in

⁶ F. Melandri, ‘A letter to the UK from Italy: this is what we know about your future’, *Guardian*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/27/a-letter-to-the-uk-from-italy-this-is-what-we-know-about-your-future>, (accessed 31 March 2021).

⁷ According to Istat, in the period from 1 March to 16 April 2020, there have been 5031 calls (+73%) to the emergency number 1522 of the Department for Equal Opportunities, which aims to support victims of gender-based violence. See Istat, *Violenza di genere al tempo del COVID-19: le chiamate al numero di pubblica utilità 1522* [website], <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/242841>, (accessed 2 April 2021).

⁸ Melandri, *Guardian*.

that way connects her current home with the native land. There is also a connection on a linguistic level because the words ‘isola’ [‘island’] and ‘isolamento’ [‘isolation’] have the same root. This perspective helps Terranova to deal with tough circumstances of the quarantine: ‘E io, che sono isolana, chiusa dentro un’isola so di poter sopravvivere’ [‘An islander closed on the island, I know that I can survive’].⁹

The metaphor of the island is her key to describe the life of the area under the restrictions when the heart of Pineto’s ‘island’ is at everybody’s home. ‘L’isola di ciascuno si è rimpicciolita come non pensavamo possibile, ma il sentimento del quartiere è lo stesso’ [‘Everybody’s island became smaller in a way we did not think would be possible, but the sense of the neighborhood is the same’].¹⁰ The writer depicts how the resilient, united, ‘invisible’ community is going through the quarantine. People play bingo from different buildings, sing from the balconies in the evening, and the daily routine of residents in the apartment building is interconnected. Terranova points out that in quarantine we live simultaneously in different temporalities, in the present that embraces the past and the future since we constantly check social media but also use ‘old’ devices, such as landline and radio.

The same attention to the details of everyday life inspires another Terranova’s text. The writer narrates different family stories and, looking at the tragic circumstances with a hint of humor, demonstrates how our relationships with dear ones are changing in the quarantine. A Terranova’s cousin continues to work as a delivery rider during the lockdown to pay university tuition fees, and every week her mother orders a pizza to say hello to the daughter. Social life acquires a new hidden dimension online, when relatives and friends exchange practical tips on how to cope with the everyday routine in the lockdown. ‘Quando tutto sarà finito, faremo finta di niente con eleganza, come gentiluomini, e la prima cosa che si diranno i nostri sguardi, incontrandosi di nuovo, sarà che certe sconvenienti chat non sono mai esistite’ [‘When everything is finished, we will turn a blind eye with elegance, like gentlemen, and the first thing our meeting eyes will say to each other is that some improper chats have never existed’].¹¹

In Italian female authors’ writings about the pandemic, there are some key issues. The one is the relation between emotional life and the absence of physical contact during the lockdown, in other words, the connection between ‘spiritual’ and bodily dimensions, both fundamental for

⁹ N. Terranova, ‘Un’isola (felice) nella solitudine’, *Ponzaracconta* [web blog] (republished from *La Repubblica*), 26 March 2020, <https://www.ponzaracconta.it/2020/03/26/cronache-al-tempo-del-covid-19-14-qui-roma/>, (accessed 31 March 2021).

¹⁰ Terranova, *Ponzaracconta / La Repubblica*.

¹¹ N. Terranova, ‘Virus e tulipani. Quando tutto sarà finito, faremo finta di niente con eleganza’, *Linkiesta*, 4 April 2020, <https://www.linkiesta.it/2020/04/quarantena-coronavirus-nadia-terranova/>, (accessed 31 March 2021).

women's identity. The winner of the Strega Prize 2003 and the current president of its Directive Committee, Melania Gaia Mazzucco explored these topics in her text for *La Repubblica*. The writer confesses that during the lockdown she has to deal with the tyranny of the body, which is described as an immobile, almost inhuman object. Her body is thirsting for physical contact with any human being, although before it seemed so normal to kiss and hug somebody every day. For Mazzucco, this deprivation of touches causes 'mental deprivation', the incapacity to have feelings and emotions: 'Senza con-tatto¹², sono disorientata, spersa: mi sento disamata e incapace di manifestare l'amore. Scopro, sbalordita, che la parola può tacere, il corpo no' ['Without a contact, I am confused and lost: I feel unloved and unable to manifest love. Stunned, I discover that the word can be silent, but not the body'].¹³

In the text *L'amore senza abbracci* [*Love without Hugs*], Nadia Terranova reflects on how our sentimental and sexual life is changing in the time when every contact with another person is potentially dangerous and even lethal.¹⁴ Rosella Postorino, the winner of the Campiello Prize 2018, talks about the importance of a hug, a normal gesture of care and affection undermined by the pandemic. 'È come se il virus avesse ridefinito da capo le nostre relazioni, anche con le persone che conosciamo molto intimamente. Non sappiamo più fino a che punto possiamo spingerci. Il contatto umano è, molto più di prima, un rischio' ['As if the virus has completely redefined our relationships even with persons we know very intimately. We do not know anymore to what extent we can move. The human contact is a risk, much more than before'].¹⁵ The writer admits that she is afraid not only of the virus but also of this 'mutilated' life deprived of affection. Like Mazzucco, Postorino uses an inhuman metaphor and compares this life to a pure biological existence, when one just has to survive.

Between the first and the second COVID-19 waves in Italy, inQuiete Festival of women writers took place in Rome from 24 to 25 October 2020. A collective of women who work in cultural sphere and publishing (Barbara Leda Kenny, Viola Lo Moro, Francesca Mancini, Barbara Piccolo, and Maddalena Vianello) founded the festival in 2017. The 2020 edition united women writers, journalists, philosophers, artists, and scholars and provided both virtual and physical space in which to reflect on the pandemic experience from a female perspective. There have been some

¹² In this case, Mazzucco plays with the structure of the word 'contatto' ['contact', 'touch'], which she divides into two words: 'con' ['with'] and 'tatto' ['touch'].

¹³ M. Mazzucco, 'Melania Mazzucco: "Baci e abbracci, il senso perduto del contatto"', *La Repubblica*, 19 March 2020, https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/19/news/melania_mazzucco-251728914/, (accessed 31 March 2021).

¹⁴ N. Terranova, 'L'amore senza abbracci', *La Repubblica*, 26 March 2020, https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/locali/2020/03/26/news/l_amore_senza_abbracci-252291242/, (accessed 1 April 2021).

¹⁵ P. Bottero, 'Rosella Postorino: "Ho più paura di vivere così"', *Sud e Futuri Mg*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.sudfuturi-magazine.it/2020/05/07/postorino-paura-virus/>, (accessed 1 April 2021).

discussions about the quarantine impact on female bodies. As the organizers argued, during the lockdown women had to deal with an increased amount of care work, so the need to find new creative strategies for the resistance emerged. Writer Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, philosopher Caterina Botti, psychoanalytic Manuela Fraire, and author and translator Flavia Gasperetti took part in the discussion *Dai corpi delle donne* [*From the Women's Bodies*].

Just before the spring lockdown started, Cutrufelli, one of the key figures in Italian women's writing and an active participant in the feminist movement, published a dystopian novel *L'isola delle madri* [*The Island of Mothers*]. In this book set in the near future, because of environmental crisis and climate change, the world is affected by a pandemic, 'disease of emptiness' (sterility), so people have to use biotechnologies to procreate. Cutrufelli portrays a female community of mothers, and for them the relationships become a form of resistance to biopolitical control. The writer urges to analyze the pandemic and quarantine experience from a feminist perspective and expresses concerns that in the lockdown, everything becomes virtual and intangible, even the female body.¹⁶

During the lockdown, many writers (not only in Italy) thought about how the coronavirus outbreak would change our approaches to writing and how the literature would reflect the pandemic. Very frequently, Italian authors talked about the impossibility of writing during the coronavirus emergency. What seemed to be a perfect condition for writers, turned out to be an obstacle for literary creativity. When the country was suspended between life and death, it appeared impossible not only to write but also to read fiction to escape reality, since everybody was immersed in coronavirus news on TV, radio, computers, and cell phones.

These issues were raised by leading Italian authors during the online edition of the Festival *Incroci di civiltà* (3-4 April 2020) annually organized by the Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Melania Mazzucco, one of the speakers of the Festival, acknowledged that the quarantine was not a fruitful experience, because writers' isolation had always been voluntary: 'La vita materiale, la vita nuda viene fuori con una prepotenza straordinaria, e in questo momento non potrei scrivere assolutamente nulla' ['The material life, the naked life emerges with an extraordinary high-handedness, and now I could write absolutely nothing'].¹⁷

At the beginning of the lockdown, Nadia Terranova could not read anything, except news, and stopped working on her novel; she wrote only essays on the pandemic for newspapers and

¹⁶ InQuiete festival, *Dai corpi delle donne* [online video], 28 October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-iKFwI4hWc>, (accessed 31 March 2021).

¹⁷ *Melania Mazzucco - Incroci di civiltà* [online video], 3 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DuYZfqKiVR0>, (accessed 2 April 2021).

magazines, but gradually returned to her book as well. Among others, she wrote some texts on how the coronavirus would be reflected by the literature. For Terranova, time has a crucial role in the interconnection between writing and the pandemic. In the previously mentioned article for *La Repubblica*, Mazzucco states that during the lockdown time for her became endless ('il mio tempo ha perso il metronomo e la misura' ['my time lost a metronome and a measure']¹⁸). Terranova reflects on our time perception shifted by the pandemic in the text *Tempo di mezzo* [*The Time in Between*].¹⁹ She argues that probably we should not consider the pandemic time as 'the time in between' because, adopting this point of view, we risk understanding nothing about the present and the future. It would be better, instead, to invent our own unity of time's measure and use this 'slabbrato presente' ['tore present'] to embrace our future and past turmoil.

The subtitle of the article *Come uscire dall'eterno presente che ci ha imposto il coronavirus* [*How to Get Out from the Eternal Present that the Coronavirus Dictated*] is also very important since Terranova connects the concept of 'eternal present' to the writing on the pandemic in the text *Cosa ne scriveremo* [*What We Will Write about It*]. She claims that coronavirus has already ended up in the literary works, even when it did not exist: there is a rich tradition of writings on contagion and imaginary dystopian societies. Terranova is sure that there will be a polyphony of direct and indirect COVID-19 narratives. However, the writer affirms that we will need time to reflect on these events, while in the pandemic we all live in the 'eternal present', which is a perfect time for news, but not for novels. The coronavirus, as 'vibrant matter'²⁰ (to cite Jane Bennett's concept), is already making its own narrative and, therefore, does not need authors' mediation.

For that reason, Terranova argues that especially novels, which do not describe the coronavirus emergency, will convey a profound sense of this pandemic, 'conterranno indizi su ciò che stiamo vivendo in un modo misterioso anche a chi li sta scrivendo o concependo' ['they will narrate hints about what we are living in a mysterious way even for those who are writing or imagining them'].²¹ In other words, authors will write about the COVID-19 without even noticing it, as we already do, reading familiar literary works from a different perspective. Now we find traces of the pandemic even in Gianni Rodari's masterpiece *Favole al telefono*, because telling stories to children remotely is one of the details of the coronavirus era.

¹⁸ Mazzucco, *La Repubblica*.

¹⁹ N. Terranova, 'Tempo di mezzo. Come uscire dall'eterno presente che ci ha imposto il coronavirus', *Linkiesta*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.linkiesta.it/2020/03/coronavirus-italia-stare-a-casa-imposizioni/>, (accessed 2 April 2021).

²⁰ J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 2010.

²¹ N. Terranova, 'Come ne scriveremo', *Il Foglio*, 20 April 2020, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/cultura/2020/04/20/news/come-ne-scriveremo-313902/>, (accessed 2 April 2021).

In conclusion, I argue that during the coronavirus outbreak Italian women writers, often silenced and marginalized in the contemporary canon, gained an unprecedented level of recognition and visibility. They launched successful cultural events and projects in the digital environment and made a significant contribution to the intellectual reflection on the pandemic experience. Therefore, Italian female authors in the COVID-19 emergency managed to create new virtual communities and find new forms of empowerment.

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DI TERRA E DI MISTERO BY TUTI: PLACE AND IDENTITY IN TIMES OF COVID

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Introduction

Never before in history has a pandemic been experienced in such a social manner; through social media in fact, community-centered approaches have been at the core of coping mechanisms adopted by a modern society that has had to face its limits and fears yet again. Italy, as Europe's first epicenter of the viral epidemic in 2020, struggled to not collapse under the weight of pandemic-related gruesome consequences. Quarantines, restrictions, and forced confinements – anachronistic concepts, which were known of before only from books, documentaries, or dystopic novels – left individuals dumbfounded and have deeply altered the fabric of society. Space has shrunk, while time has dilated.

Because they were particularly isolated due to social distancing, artists from all fields took advantage of communication technologies to reach their audiences. As did 26 national and international writers who united under the Garzanti Publishing House to share their personal interpretations of this delicate and poignant, yet frightful, point in time: after all, a book is a “time capsule that will allow humanity to preserve a record of this moment for a hundred years to come” (Mauri 2020: 7)¹. The title of the choral volume, dedicated to Luis Sepúlveda (1949-2020), *ANDRÀ tutto BENE. Gli scrittori al tempo della quarantena* (2020)², echoes the message of hope that Italians sung and shouted from their balconies, thus spreading it in social networks worldwide and emphasizing their *italianità* (Italianness). Indeed, the motto became a collective ritual that linked private and public identities and was reinforced through social media since “via messaging applications, microblogs, personal profiles, walls, and newsfeeds, a constructed identity is being created, monitored, curated,

¹ Where not otherwise specified, translations are by the author of the paper.

² First published as an e-book (available since April 9th 2020) – a format that “allowed these stories to travel immediately and all over the world” (Mauri 2020: 6) – the volume is a charity project. All profits from authors, the publisher, distributors, and online stores are donated to the “Papa Giovanni XXIII” Hospital in Bergamo (Book trailer at: <https://www.garzanti.it/libri/ritanna-armeni-andra-tutto-bene-9788811816423/>). This is not the only choral project of this period; see, for instance, PERMUNIAN, Francesco (ed.) (2020). *Piccola antologia della peste*, Vicenza, Ronzani Editore; VENTURELLI, Claudio, GORI Manuela (eds.) (2020), *Momenti sospesi. Raccolta di Poesie e Racconti ai Tempi dei Covid-19*, in edit.

shifted, and shared by the more than 2 billion identified active social media users” (Mashall 2020: 96).

Drawing upon theories of place-identity and place attachment, the present paper aims at investigating the relationship between place and identity in times of Covid-19 in one of the short stories of the volume, “Di Terra e di Mistero” (Of Earth and of Mystery), by Ilaria Tuti (1976-)³, an emerging writer of Friulian origins. This individual experience and interpretation of reality is transformed into a collective stance that depicts a twofold re-discovery: that of the Self and of a social identity.

1. Exploring space: The making of a place

In “Di Terra e di Mistero”, an autobiographical account of a day spent in confinement during the Covid 19 pandemic, the autodiegetic narrator offers readers wide-ranging reflections, which will be analyzed by dwelling on the multisensory nature of spatial exploration.

The writer’s journey takes place in the garden that epitomizes Tuti’s epistemic reading of this historical junction: as an open-air area near a house, albeit limiting since it is a physically circumscribed space, the garden becomes a portal through which the mind escapes from reality⁴. In this liminal dimension, where ‘emotions recollected in tranquility’ open the gates of memory, present and past, as well as familiar and foreign spheres, individual and collective identities, stances of deprivation and donation seem to merge. While the abstract concept of space, detached from cultural interpretations, may be void of meaning, a place acquires as many meanings as people associate to it because, in the making of places, individuals attach qualities to the constituent elements of a place. In line with the transactional view of settings then, place could be considered a meaningful product of the interaction of a person with space. As a result, it actually becomes an organizing principle of an individual’s past experiences and their subjective interpretations (Speller, Lyons, and Twigger-Ross 2002: 26).

³ Along with some short stories, which were published on magazines and in anthologies, Tuti debuted in 2018 when she introduced the character of Teresa Battaglia, a sixty-year old ill detective, into the center of three of her novels: *Fiori Sopra l’Inferno* (2018), *Ninfa dormiente* (2019), and *Luce nella notte* (January 2021). In 2020, she explored the stories of Carnic carriers during WWI in *Fiore di Roccia*.

⁴ Some authors chose the home (Armenti, Bellomo, Biondillo, Buticchi, Dalton, Festa, Galiano, Gazzola, Gramellini, Sundas, Truzzi), garden (Caboni, Tuti), or other spaces, such as paintings (Tuzzi) or simply the outdoor area (Vitali) as settings; others chose the interplay between closed and open spaces (Auci, Basso, Bosco, Frontani, Gnone, Sánchez). Some writers preferred letters as form of communication – thus, merging various places: from Bovincini to Noiville, journalist of *Le Monde*, and Noiville’s reply to Bovincini and the Italians; from Carrisi to two children; from Lahiri to the Italians – or poetry (Vichi), but the majority opted for the short prose genre.

Therefore, the concept of place, that is space endowed with value (Tuan 1977: 6), is to be interpreted both physically and psychologically. In accordance with a sense of place – one of the three readings⁵ of the making of places from a sociological point of view – a place “is remarkable, and what makes it so is an unwindable spiral of material form and interpretative understandings or experiences” (Gieryn 2000: 471).

Experiences and places are indeed closely intertwined (Tuan 1977; Bott, Cantrill and Myers 2003; Norsidah and Khalilah 2015); the senses through which human beings explore reality therefore play a pivotal role in the reading of places and imbue space with meaning.

1.1 Smell and Touch

The incipit of the short story focuses on an olfactory element – “Petricore. / Pietra e icore, il sangue minerale che la mitologia greca racconta scorrere nelle vene degli esseri immortali” (Tuti 2020: 295)⁶, i.e. petrichor, the peculiar smell of rainfall on dry soil – that ignites the mechanisms of memory through sensorial associations. In evoking remote times and atmospheres, the abstract smell seems to physically set its roots in the soil of the garden, which has now become a forest, as it was neglected due to the many daily commitments. Tuti returns to nature: the garden thus becomes a window on present reality and on her and the community’s past. On one hand, the scent of rain and soil allows the author to plunge into her childhood; on the other, the rediscovery of the garden entails deeper meanings and experiential references. If, in the ‘normal’ flow of time, nature could have been discarded (the garden remained uncultivated, as some sort of accessory element of everyday life, especially after her father’s passing), in the ‘abnormality’ of the pandemic, in which individuals find they have no apparent control over their lives, the writer feels the need to tame or reorganize nature. However, the nostalgic and somewhat comforting odor clashes with the lingering smell of her father, who used to take care of the garden. As noted, “odors lend character to objects and places, making them distinctive, easier to identify and remember” (Tuan 1977: 11). Hence, “c’è voluta una pandemia per farmi camminare di nuovo tra queste fronde, per riconsegnarmi il mio tempo” (295)⁷, and ultimately to take her back to her father’s realm.

The senses of rootedness, insideness (Relph 1976), and attachment (Knez 2005) emphasize the deep bond between people and space, leading scholars working in the fields of

⁵ Together with a sense of place, power behind places and place-professionals is to be found (Gieryn 2000: 468-471).

⁶ Trad. “Stone and ichor, the mineral blood that, according to Greek mythology, flows in the veins of the immortal beings”.

⁷ Trad. “It took a pandemic to make me walk among these branches again, to give me back my time”.

environmental psychology and social geography to develop the concept of place-identity. Following the first elaborations on this idea as initially proposed by Proshansky (1978), three different approaches of place emerge: place as self-extension, settlement-identity, whereby “place can be congruent with the values, attitudes and behavioural dispositions of the self”, and place-attachment that is the “affective bond that people can establish with some places” (Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira 2012).

“So di fumo e di polvere, e dell’erba che mi tinge i palmi” (296)⁸, writes Tuti, after describing her attempts to clear the greenery. In the simplicity of the action, she concentrates on physical exertion, which is reminiscent of typical jobs of the agricultural community, and is surrounded by nature, thus almost becoming one of its components. The human being / nature parallelism becomes a trope in this short story: both entities are suffocating and need room to breath: “Forse sfronderemo le nostre esistenze, così come ora io sfrondo il verde perché respiri, affinché quanto di buono trovi spazio per svilupparsi grandiosamente” (Tuti 2021: 297)⁹. This work philosophy, where labor is one of the founding strategies for overcoming fears and worries, is culturally associated with the people of these territories and the “cult of ruined hands”: “La fatica non permette alla paura di farsi avanti, né accorda terreno ai turbamenti. Il lavoro manuale concede una tregua alla mente, dà spazio al corpo togliendolo ai pensieri ricorrenti” (Tuti 2020: 297)¹⁰.

1.2 Sight & Sound

The primacy of sight over the other senses in space exploration is confirmed by long-lasting traditions of prose production and especially travel writing, which entrusts descriptions with countless narrative functions. Nevertheless, studies on soundscapes (Schafer 1994) have highlighted the importance and complementarity of sound analysis in the creation of place depiction, in that sound dramatizes spatial experience (Tuan 1977: 16). In Tuti’s short story, some clear dualisms emerge: the breathing – suffocating dichotomy that describes the individual-nature parallelism is mirrored in the voice – sound couple: “Questo è il momento del dolore e del lutto, del silenzio respiratore, ma verrà anche il tempo in cui la vita riprenderà a scorrere vivace e rumorosa nelle strade (Tuti 2020: 299)¹¹. All sounds connected to daily

⁸ Trad. “I smell of smoke and dust, and of the grass that dyes my palms”.

⁹ Trad. “Maybe we will prune our existences, just as I now prune the green to allow it to breathe, so that the good finds the space to develop grandly”.

¹⁰ Trad. “Fatigue does not allow fear to come forward, nor does it grant ground to disturbances. Manual labor grants a respite to the mind, gives space to the body by detaching it from recurring thoughts”.

¹¹ Trad. “This is the time of pain and mourning, of breathing silence, but the time will also come when life will resume lively and noisy in the streets”.

activities are muted. Sounds, time, and lives seem to be frozen in their becoming, including factories, “un punto di riferimento dinamico e vitale per intere comunità ora è muto e immobile” (Tuti 2020: 300)¹².

The Virus or the Pandemic – the *other*, the enemy – have a twofold function: a depriving one, by taking away the ability to breathe and “i riti consolatori della morte e della vita” (the consoling rites of death and life, Tuti 2020: 298); and a giving one, since they infuse ‘breath’ into time, that “dilata le giornate” (dilates the days, Tuti 2020: 296).

Tuti’s gaze scrutinizes nature while lingering on inanimate as well as animate objects; live creatures such as a robin, fish in the pond, or a butterfly. The latter becomes a pretext to mention the theory of convergent evolution, that sustains the inevitability of change without any waste, and to pose one of the two questions that are presented in this story to the fictional reader: “Anche noi terremo ciò che ci fa bene e ci libereremo del nocivo?” (Tuti 2020: 297)¹³. The author expresses her awareness of the crucial importance of this historical period and of the need to find a new paradigm for interpreting reality.

Place & Identity: Individuality to collectivity

In all her works, Ilaria Tuti delves into place identity by presenting her knowledge, feelings and everyday experience in Friuli¹⁴, be it fictionalized or real, which denote her emotional and affective bond with the region. While ‘place’ is generally perceived as the conceptualization of space in terms of individual identity, place identity could also be considered “a substructure of the social identity of the self, consisting of aspects of self-concepts that are based on the idea of belonging to geographically defined groups” (Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira 2012: 37).

Within the aforementioned theoretical and narrative framework, the sense of belonging to Friuli, a region in the Northeast corner of the Italian peninsula, unfolds through elements of linguistic but also territorial, and, mostly, cultural commonalities. This multidimensional collective identity presents five typical traits that were described by ARLeF (Agenzie Regionâl pe Lenghe Furlane). The previously mentioned gardening recalls the first feature: Friulians are “a peasant people, therefore attached to the earth, close to nature; organized in solid family structures and small village communities; hardworking, but also gifted with

¹² Trad. “A dynamic and vital point of reference for entire communities is now silent and motionless”.

¹³ Trad. “Will we also keep what is good for us and get rid of the harmful?”.

¹⁴ Several intellectuals wrote about or from the Friuli Venezia Giulia region; just to mention a few: Caterina Percoto (1812-1887), Ippolito Nievo (1831-1861), Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907), Umberto Saba (1833-1957), Italo Svevo (1861-1928), David Maria Turoldo (1916-1992), Novella Cantarutti (1920-2009), Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975), Carlo Sgorlon (1930-2009), Amedeo Giacomini (1939-2006).

entrepreneurial skills; traditionalist and true to their word”. Industrial productivity, which is typical of the area where the writer lives, is another element of observation because “il contagio ha cambiato anche il panorama” (Tuti 2020: 300)¹⁵; the author therefore turns her gaze beyond the limits of the garden to find an unnatural stillness.

Secondly, Friulians are “a Christian people: therefore believers, inserted in the great Catholic tradition, endowed with the virtues of simplicity, humility, austerity, and the ability to endure the trials of life with patience and firmness”. Tuti’s reference to Pierluigi Cappello¹⁶ is associated with this aspect – “Una cultura contadina e artigianale che sapeva sostenere con umiltà ma con occhi ben dritti e asciutti lo sguardo della vita e della morte” (Tuti 2020: 298)¹⁷ – whereby the example of older generations now needs to be replicated by the young. As noted by Tuti, though, “[...] appartengo a una generazione non abituata a lottare in massa per la vita; la morte, fino a qualche settimana fa, era un dramma che si compiva nell’intimità della famiglia, mentre ora si è presa il palcoscenico di un’intera nazione, e si replica in altre” (Tuti 2020: 299)¹⁸. The private and public, as well as national and international, spheres thus lose their clear boundaries. Drawing on the semantic field of war, the writer takes up the feelings of captivity and battle that are so frequently associated with the coeval period.

Thirdly, Friulians are “a Nordic people: and therefore strong, serious, slow, taciturn, disciplined, with a sense of organization and collectivity, but with a background of existential sadness that finds comfort not only in industriousness, but also in wine, and expression in choral singing. Fourthly, a frontier people: placed in a position exposed to risks, tempered by a very long history of invasions, raiding and battles; but also with the possibility of opening up and relating positively with neighbors from other cultures, of mixing with them, of welcoming them and being welcomed by them”. Lastly, “a migrant people: the imbalance between population and resources has always forced a number of people to leave their homeland, to seek work and survival in other countries. In the pain of leaving, love is strengthened, and in the discomforts of distance, an idealized image of one’s country is consolidated. In the communities of arrival, the *fogolârs* are recreated and the language and traditions are maintained”. These last three aspects are summarized by the author’s attitude

¹⁵ Trad. “The contagion has also changed the landscape”.

¹⁶ Cappello (1967-2017), Italian writer and poet who extensively portrayed this land. For more on the author see FABBRO, Franco, RIEM NATALE, Antonella, D’AGOSTINI, Marco (eds.) (2019), *Pierluigi Cappello. Un poeta sulla pista della luce*, Udine, Forum.

¹⁷ Trad. “A peasant and artisan culture that knew how to sustain the gaze of life and death with humility but directly with dry eyes”.

¹⁸ Trad. “I belong to a generation that is not used to fighting en masse for life; until a few weeks ago, death was a tragedy that took place within the intimacy of a family, while now it has taken the stage of an entire nation, and is repeated in others”.

towards others – intertextuality plays a fundamental role in strengthening invisible ties between spaces and times: the flood of 1998 is connected to the trucks that carried the coffins of the deceased from Bergamo to be cremated in Friuli; the 1976 earthquake, the *Orcolat*, that deeply affected Friuli and its people, is linked to the 2019 earthquake in Croatia, where the Italian region sent fifty Civil Protection volunteers. Overall, the writer rules: “Sopravvivere, a volte, è semplicemente stringere mani in una lunga catena” (Tuti 2020: 299)¹⁹. This sense of unity is resumed by exploiting intertextuality and taking up Aldo Moro’s words binding individuals to their present, with no way to escape, and giving them the courage to walk together.

Tuti’s account is evidence of how place attachment is established between individuals and their affective bond with several places: the garden, the neighborhood, the region, and the nation; an existential insideness (Relph 1976) that stems from immersion in a place that feels like home not just for an individual, but for an entire community. Moreover, by referring to a conversation with the writer Sarah Savioli, the function of culture and writers as tools capable of reviving society is emphasized.

Final remarks

Tuti’s story is a journey in time and space, even if there is no physical movement outside the garden, where invisible threads are created between several dualistic aspects. This pandemic overturns the rites of life and death and simultaneously leads the female character, i.e. the author, into a process of self-discovery by emphasizing a twofold function of the pandemic: deprivation and giving. Tuti elaborates this movement among dichotomies – outer/inner, body/mind, voice/silence, breathing/suffocating, ordinary/extraordinary – with self-awareness and her peculiar ability to reflect on her homeland, Friuli, and her origins. The author’s perceptions and reading of the physical environment contribute to her process of identity formation and turns this period of crisis into an opportunity for self-reflection. While place is indeed a constituent of self-identity, this individual stance takes this concept further, as it explores the same beliefs of a collective identity. In doing so, Tuti’s autobiographical narration actually evokes themes and values with which the majority of Friulians identify themselves: hard work, sacrifice and strength and, last but not least, their deep bond with their land. The protagonist / author, who feels like a prisoner in space and time, focuses on macro- and micro-events of local history, thus finding her personal solution to the present situation by

¹⁹ Trad. “Sometimes, surviving simply meaning joining hands in a long chain”.

fleeing into nature. The alteration of both enclosed and outer spaces – factories and plants – is just a mirror of her process of identity adjustment.

Tuti's deterministic thinking, which reinforces the bond between human beings and nature, is embedded in the final lines of the story:

“L'icore scorre anche dentro di noi, dopotutto. Apparteniamo alla terra e al mistero.

È un pensiero confortante.

Un respiro profondo. Andiamo avanti” (Tuti 2020:302)²⁰.

Nonetheless, the author's second question remains unanswered, as the potential answer is entrusted to time: “Mi chiedo se d'ora in avanti le distanze tra essere umani saranno colmate dalla paura e dal sospetto, o se saremo capaci di gettare tra noi le radici di nuove connessioni emozionali” (Tuti 2020: 297)²¹.

²⁰ Trad. “The ichore also flows within us, after all. We belong to the earth and to mystery. / It is a reassuring thought. / A deep breath. Let's go on.”

²¹ Trad. “I wonder if from here on the distances between human beings will be filled with fear and suspicion, or if we will be able to lay the roots of new emotional connections between us”.

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Poetry and the Pandemic: How Filipina Writers Persist

Louyza Maria Victoria H. Vasquez

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The Philippines is deep into its second extreme lockdown, which the government calls “Enhanced Community Quarantine” or ECQ. We are not allowed to go out except to get essentials and supplies. When the first case arrived here last year, we were on ECQ from March 14 to June 1. Millions have either lost their jobs or earned less. After a relatively low infection rate, we are back to where we started—an ECQ that is on its second week, with no signs of a government plan of mass vaccination.

To say that this affects the writing practice is an understatement and a privileged one at that. The pandemic continues to attack the poor in our country in ways those of us who are in relative comfort of our homes will never understand. Yet, the Filipina poets I have interviewed persist not just in sustaining a writing practice (or at other times, gesturing towards it) but also going beyond their vocation and participating in efforts toward social justice.

I interviewed a total of five women poets: Isabelita Reyes, Isabela Banzon, and Conchitina Cruz are my colleagues at the English department in the University of the Philippines, while Pauline Lacanilao and Angela Fabunan were classmates in grad school. I had four main questions for them:

1. What was your writing practice during lockdown? Has this changed from how you wrote pre-pandemic?
2. What are the challenges you’ve encountered?
3. Have you been writing about the pandemic at all?
4. Have you published any of what you have written during lockdown?

The interviews were conducted in person and over Facebook Messenger in March 2021.

Writing Practice and Challenges

For Isabelita Reyes, the lockdown provided extra time to write and yet, it wasn't really time she needed but the headspace. She found her routine disrupted and in the early days of the lockdown, she obsessively monitored the news first thing in the morning for at least three hours before getting any work done. Whatever mental space is left for poetry happens in the evenings, when everything's quiet. Yet, her days bleed into one another and sometimes she is not sure what day of the week it is.

Isabela Banzon, meanwhile, found herself escorted to her son's house in the South, a good two hours away from where she resides. As she is 65 and a senior, Isabel is not allowed to leave even for groceries. She had just retired from teaching in February of 2020 and had plans to travel and finish a manuscript. She suddenly found herself in Alabang, helping out with her daughter-in-law's food business and doing homework with her grandchildren. She would joke, whenever I'd check in with her, that she had become a dishwasher and a nanny. All this time, there was no poetry.

After six months of staying in her son's place, Banzon was finally allowed to go back to her apartment. She spent time reading again and was able to write one poem last year--a collaboration with fellow retired faculty member, Heidi Abad. They wrote a sonnet together via email, writing one line each after the other. So far, in 2021, she has written one poem and is at the beginning stages of a lyric novel.

Conchitina Cruz, in answer to the first and second questions, says:

"I don't have a writing routine, am not a good multi-tasker, which means I'm almost always working and almost always not writing. I try to take advantage of the academic clock—I write during breaks. The pandemic made things worse, of course. Like many families, mine was (is) affected economically by the pandemic. Which means I've had to take on more work and work double/triple/quadruple time to help cope with this exacerbated precarity. So, I haven't written much. Wrote intensely for a few days during holidays and that's it."

Her new role as an administrator has also taken some time away from writing. Cruz, in the past years, has devoted more energy on working with social justice groups, such as the

Rural Women Advocates. Though precarious, especially during a pandemic, she would go to protest actions usually held on campus.

For Pauline Lacanilao, her writing practice has had “peaks and valleys.” She says:

“Lockdown has been long. And like the memes that joke about how people have gotten in and out of shape four times during quarantine, my writing has also fluctuated. At the very beginning, I was productive. I still had a lot of freelance gigs, I was in the homestretch of grad school, and I had enough hope and energy (and maybe momentum?) to be creative. After my freelance opportunities shut down, my work had me furloughed, and I anticlimactically graduated (masters) via FB Live, most of my energy went toward surviving—making sure there was food in the house, that the space was clean and livable, that my family was healthy. I guess these tasks require their own creativity. Either way, writing was not a priority. At the end of 2020, however, I got a second wind. I wrote a children’s book to commemorate my nephew’s first birthday, I started handmaking zines, and I decided to self-publish a book of poems I’ve been sitting on for years. I’m glad I had a burst of energy (and the time and space to complete a few projects over the holidays), because now that I’m pregnant, the pendulum has swung back towards self-preservation. I think about a lot of things I want to write. But I can’t muster the energy to sit up and do it. I had peaks and valleys pre-Covid, but the valleys are much deeper and long-lasting now.”

Lacanilao was part of the shortlist for a *Gaudy Boy* book prize, announced early last year. Despite this, she has had a hard time getting her current manuscript out. She adds:

“The crippling anxiety of having to survive in the midst of a deadly pandemic, a financial crisis, the government’s obsession with its own despotic power rather than the well-being of its people, and the global awakening to (and simultaneous denial of) white supremacy—is all consuming. I’m exhausted from grief and fear. It’s hard to care about crisp language and striking metaphors when people are dying.”

This echoes Isabelita Reyes’ need for that mental space and in Lacanilao’s case, this space where poetry can only be possible outside of every day mourning. It also calls attention to what a lot of artists struggle with: a form of survivor’s guilt, where the awareness of suffering makes poetry and art seem rather foolish.

For Angela Fabunan, a Filipina-American poet who is currently based in the Philippines, her practice changed with a physical move: “Now, working full-time remotely has changed my writing practice so that I work in the mornings before my shift from 1-9pm. Pre-pandemic I was writing at night, if I was writing at all, since my work full-time, in-person work was from 830pm-5pm. I didn’t have much time to write then because of the commute from my boarding in QC to my workplace in Roxas Blvd. I lost my pre-pandemic work when I travelled back to Olongapo, since the work was in Manila. In the in-between times when I was unemployed, I was writing only intermittently, though I was revising constantly. I found that I was writing more in the mornings, leaving the rest of the day for my own time with family. When my current work came, I found it suited perfectly. So, in a way the pandemic turned my writing practice upside-down, from writing at night to writing in the morning.”

Fabunan has been productive, having several works published online in 2020 and a forthcoming book of poems from UP Press this year. Yet, curiously, the lack of feedback from peers is what she feels is missing in her practice now. She shares:

“I think the biggest challenge of 2020 was just coping with writing alone. I could no longer workshop my poems in person, and there’s something about workshops, even informal ones with friends, that lets ideas flow organically. I’ve attended some informal workshops during the pandemic, and it works, but it’s so different. The lack of in-person gatherings, I’ve found, made all interactions online somewhat business-like and focused, rather than a bit looser and a meeting place of ideas. I think it’s because there can’t really be side comments, no room for spontaneous rolling on the floor laughing, and I think that cannot be replaced by online meetups. However, the upside of it is that everyone is online now, and since everyone is online, there’s a bigger audience for work to really be thoroughly critiqued, which is nice.”

All five poets have seen their lives disrupted, both career and home, that of course it will affect their writing (or lack of it). Despite these challenges, all have been attempting to write poetry no matter how irregularly.

Writing about the Pandemic

Reyes says she has not been writing about the pandemic directly because she does not know how to not make it cliché, to not sound like a victim. She adds that most of the stuff she has read that have come out about Covid-19 sounded more like pity-parties and she prefers to steer clear of the topic.

Banzon also cannot write about the pandemic, as she does not consider herself a topical poet. Yet, her work now does reflect the emotions of the times, as they are mostly about grief. She has also been trying out forms and fragments that can be seen as “chaotic,” which for her characterizes the current environment.

For Cruz, the poetry manuscripts she has in progress are not necessarily about the pandemic per se, but are still, as she says, “situated in this context.”

Lacanilao feels similarly about her work. She says, “I write about fear and grief a lot, which is pretty much my entire experience of the pandemic.”

Fabunan is the same: “I haven’t been writing about the pandemic, but it’s informed my writing in themes such as shellshock and loneliness.”

It is interesting that all five writers are unable to directly poeticize the situation, perhaps needing that psychic distance as everyone is still deep within collective trauma. There can be hardly any processing when the priority is daily survival.

Publications and Projects

When asked whether they have published what they have written during lockdown, most of the poets interviewed, except for Fabunan, answered in the negative. Reyes is working on a long overdue manuscript. Banzon has not published but is also working on a new book of poems. Cruz had “one commissioned thing” out late 2020 and she also has a pending academic work that saw “pandemic-related delays.” She adds that she has not been publishing poetry and says, “I’ve had a weird relationship with publishing poetry for quite some time now, so that’s just how it is.”

Lacanilao, as part of her freelance work, published “commercial work” such as features and essays for magazines. She adds: “But in terms of my “art”—absolutely no one has picked it

up. Because I finished a lot of the work pre-Covid, I think publishers might think it's irrelevant to the moment. So I'm publishing it myself."

Fabunan has been the most productive poetry-wise, with two publications of poems she wrote during lockdown released in online journals.

My Practice

There was no way I could think about poetry in the initial days of lockdown. The immediate fear was for my family to run out of food and supplies, aside from getting sick. For a while there, those of us in the academe thought we might be out of a job, despite education seen as a necessity. And there were initial reports of unrest, so security was a real issue. I did what others did: distracted myself from the news by baking bread, suddenly having a mild interest in plants in the garden, and watching K-drama.

When I have fear, I go to a place where I cannot emerge right away. I shrink because I don't want to call attention to myself, the way *you* (I) call attention to *yourself* (myself), your mind and the interior world that one escapes to when writing poems. Like Lacanilao, I could not sit and meditate when people around me were hungry and dying.

I eventually attempted writing a few weeks into the ECQ. Because it was National Poetry Month in America, I wrote a series of poetry prompts for all days of April called "Enhanced Community Poetry," which I published for my personal network on Facebook. But the weird thing that came out of that was instead of helping me get into the headspace for poetry, I became more focused on the quality of the prompts, so there were only three drafts that were written, with one a collaborative effort (I solicited lines from my network). Those were published also on Facebook by a group of women writers who created a journal specifically for women writing about Covid. They called the literary journal *King Ina Corona* (April 2020).

Unlike the poets interviewed, I have not been able to write about anything but the current situation. I would start off with an image or a line and not intend to write about the pandemic but it just keeps going there. Yet, I hardly had a regular writing hour, which is not too far from my practice pre-pandemic. Since becoming a mother, it has been harder to find those pockets of quietude, moreso now with an active 5-year old who does remote learning.

This year, however, I have vowed to get a move on the things I want to write, projects to pursue. I was about to leave the Philippines for a Ph.D. in the U.S. last year, but Ms. Corona happened. Because I'll be an older student (I turned 40 recently), there is much pressure to produce but everyday news also cripples me. I made a conscious decision to leave social media if only to avoid crying all the time. Happy to say I've been writing in this year's NaPoWriMo and save for one hectic day, have not missed so far.

My main worry, aside from this new, aggressive strain of Covid, is my son's social and emotional growth. That takes up the majority of emotions I could not otherwise reserve for poetry.

How Filipina Writers Persist

As evidenced by the poets who shared their lockdown writing practices, the continued upheavals surrounding the pandemic with no signs of resolution and government action have made the equally demanding work of creative and care a constant questioning and negotiation. Though not as productive as they would like, our women writers still persist in raising a family, being aware of and fighting against social injustices, growing a baby, working shifts, cooking and housecleaning, and basically, just surviving. Despite poetry demanding full attention, these Filipina poets manage to write here and there, multi-tasking, fitting in some spaces, knowing that as soon as this is over, the real work begins.

To end this presentation, I wanted to share with you some of the lines I solicited from Facebook friends. I asked them what they would remember, years from now, about the whole experience of Covid and lockdown, and here are their responses:

Enhanced Community Poetry Day 15 / Enhanced Community Quarantine Day 35

I remember the last sunset we lingered in outdoors filled me with dread, the light dying into a beautiful, overwhelming end.

I remember the safety of home.

I remember longing for the warmth of a simple embrace.

I remember the last waves I rode--despite the harsh sun, the thirst and hunger--and it sustains me in times I'm landlocked.

I remember the aching loss of physical touch.

I remember the smell of the ocean breeze as it slaps my face with its salty winds as if calling me and warning me at the same time of nature's beauty and power.

I remember the feeling of isolation.

I remember not remembering the crowd's safety, the sound of humanity living life, the smell of my city, the smile of another.

I remember time halting to a long, wily stop; like a train arriving at a terminal station, its wheels groaning from the weight of plying the world latitudinally.

I remember calling in sick to work, thinking there would always be work to go to.

I remember how we gave each other strength and courage, the collective caring and standing up against the rising tide.

I remember being isolated and yet connected more than ever, being distanced and yet called ever nearer.

I remember seeing crying faces on my television screen and suddenly my dinner tasted like guilt.

I remember how at the beginning of the year I hoped it would be better than the last and wondering if I tempted the fates with wanting that.

I remember being on the most picturesque beach, torn between its beauty and the dread of being stuck there at the same time.