

**Presented as part of the Online Workshop
Covid and the Woman Writer
30 April 2021**



Poetry and the Pandemic: How Filipina Writers Persist

Louyza Maria Victoria H. Vasquez

April 9, 2021

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.