

COVID Spatialities and Geographies of Care in the Virocene

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[W]hen we were recover'd, our Conduct had been more distinguish'd for Charity and Kindness in Remembrance of the past Calamity, and not so much a valuing our selves upon our Boldness in staying...

- Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 1722.

To be moved, we must care.

- Christine Harold, *Things Worth Keeping*, 2020

...to *care* is a political act.

- Abigail Neely and Patricia Lopez, 2020

When the lockdown was decreed and enforced in Metro Manila on March 15, 2020 due to the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) or Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19), the general perception among the metropolis' residents was that it would only be temporary, a month at most (Talabong 2020a). Since then, several denotations of community quarantine were put in place as a guideline to ostensibly prevent or at least limit virus transmission which was also seen by others as the policing of peoples' mobilities. The first lockdown as declared by the state went by a generic name of general community quarantine (GCQ), where residents were forbidden to traverse public spaces and were ordered to stay home only allowing the procurement of food, groceries, supplies of medicine and other basic necessities. Furthermore, there is a mandated small window of time where a member of a household can purchase these provisions. By midnight of March 17, 2020, tighter restrictions to movement under the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) was in place in the entire Luzon Island (Official Gazette of the Philippine Government, 2020). There is no public transportation, no unnecessary trips to other places other than supermarkets and drugstores, and no loitering in public spaces.¹ COVID-19 becomes a specter that hovers over Metropolitan Manila limiting the movements of people and commodities and, as argued by Matthew Hannah (2020), legitimized by the state through the impositions of community quarantines. Giorgio Agamben pointed to this scenario in *State of Exception* as the "dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics" (2005, 2).

The local and urban versions of the pandemic

The COVID-19 spike in cases in the beginning of April and in May² led to the declaration of the more stringent ECQ and modified ECQ where only one member of the household can leave the dwelling to buy food and medicine. A quarantine pass is needed to enter public establishments like groceries, supermarkets and drugstores while other commercial establishments remain closed. Abuses by the police and those tasked to enforce the community quarantine were reported as soon as the stricter ECQ was imposed towards the general population. Individuals were detained when "caught" in public spaces outside the window of time allowed to obtain basic necessities. The public space immediately becomes a fugitive landscape depending on the time of the day (Craib 2004, Harley 2001). Some individuals who were arrested for violating the recommended window of time, were on

their way home, carrying food and groceries after lining up for hours in the supermarket (Talabong 2020b). There were reports from social media of these ‘errant’ urban dwellers’ arrest and detention. Some were reported to have been detained for several hours leading to the spoilage of the fresh produce they bought just a few hours earlier. The labor force was ordered to work from home to prevent social interactions as these were presumed to cause the spread of the virus. Meanwhile, internet infrastructures doubled up but still failed to provide adequate online access to millions of Filipinos who had to navigate and transform their domestic sphere into a “work” sphere. Classes in all levels were suddenly obligated to shift to remote learning without regard as to whether students and their instructors have internet connection to access learning materials. In remote rural areas, school children who do not own a computer or cellular phone were the first casualties of this new planetary epoch called virocene (Fernando 2020). In most collegiate institutions, there were directives to give each student a grade of “Pass” as a humane gesture to acknowledge the challenges and difficulties that the COVID-19 landscape has brought to peoples’ social lives. However, the persistence of COVID-19 and its variants creates newer challenges to the beleaguered population and to the vulnerable groups especially the economic refugees of Philippine society.

Unlike the grim and dystopian scenario of one of the earliest accounts of the bubonic plague of 1665, described in vivid detail by Daniel Defoe in his novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* published in 1722, Filipinos at least had the advantage of having a “second life” via their access to the internet. While mental health has taken a hit from the claustrophobia and tension of constant co-habitation, several initiatives have taken shape to offer a quasi-support group to indigent Filipinos suffering collectively from the changed social relations as a result of the virus.

Communities come together during times of duress, even more so in the time of the pandemic. In Metro Manila, people help each other in tiny, often unacknowledged ways. Frontliners such as nurses, doctors and health professionals are not exempt from lockdowns from their own barangays. The economically privileged own private vehicles to drive to the health units, while others walk kilometers upon kilometers. Still others would use other alternative modes of transportation, like bicycles, to go to work and help the

ailing population. Several stories are posted on social media about private car owners giving lifts not only to frontliners but also to ordinary citizens who are stranded in public spaces. Social media also enabled various virtual groups to blossom and provide creative ways to cheer a distressed citizenry. *Tugon* is one such virtual group where artists and creative collectives share poems, videos, and helpful tips that range from creating DIY facemasks and face shields, to providing information where people can buy specific food, cheaper medicines, or provide maps that show shortcuts to certain paths and routes.

Small-scale local initiatives sprout that produce pandemic-oriented items—the idea is to flood the market with these items such as facemasks in order to prevent supermarkets from hoarding pandemic-oriented gears and sell them at exorbitant prices. There is a sense of community of living in the same bubble that encourages sharing and making sure everyone has basic necessities. These forms of solidarity are acts that reclaim the public space that was denied from the people because of these pandemic-directed lockdowns.

Caring Geographies

Various geographies of care persisted in multiple forms through the centuries.³ Exploring a Christian tradition in the Mediterranean East on pastoral power, Michel Foucault explained that “pastoral power is a power of care” (2009, 127). Like a flock, this form of care is posited on the notion that individuals in a flock are provided for and looked after. This type of state care still manifests in the era of the current virocene.

In his reflective piece linking COVID-19 with Peter Kropotkin’s mutual aid, Simon Springer (2020) argues:

In this moment of COVID-19, we are seeing how it is in fact reciprocity that is saving us from complete catastrophe, and we are beginning to understand that we have the ability to expand our circle of care beyond family and friends. Such activity is vital to the functioning of our societies and even our survival as a species. We would have never made it this far into the human odyssey without mutual aid. (2)

These forms of reciprocity root from the collective mindset where “skills, ingenuity, strength and innovation” are shared among human species (Springer, 3). In Italy, Sandro Mezzadra notes that “a sense of solidarity surrounds not only doctors and nurses, but also factory workers on strike to defend the health security offered via their working conditions” (2020). A geography of care or “caring geographies” sprouted and formed among various citizens undergoing the same or differentially similar experiences with COVID-19 and of the pandemic.

In the Philippines, some of the initiatives that started online provide virtual “road maps” to empower the people and form a critical mass of informed citizenry. Three initiatives provide and encourage active cartographic reportage by soliciting volunteer information from an active contingent of digital natives and civilians, and in turn, create a community of responsive and responsible individuals intent on creating and disseminating collected information and ground truthing to a wider population.

A Spatial Map of COVID-19

Andi Tabinas, a geographer and public servant working at the Department of Social Work and Development (DSWD), launched her #Spatially4U projects on COVID-19 to supplement the reports and statistics that were published by government agencies on the status of COVID-19 cases in the country. The COVID-19 PH dashboard features a graphical summary of COVID-19 cases and includes pie charts located in a map that allow users to visualize the distribution of deaths, recoveries, and active cases per province.

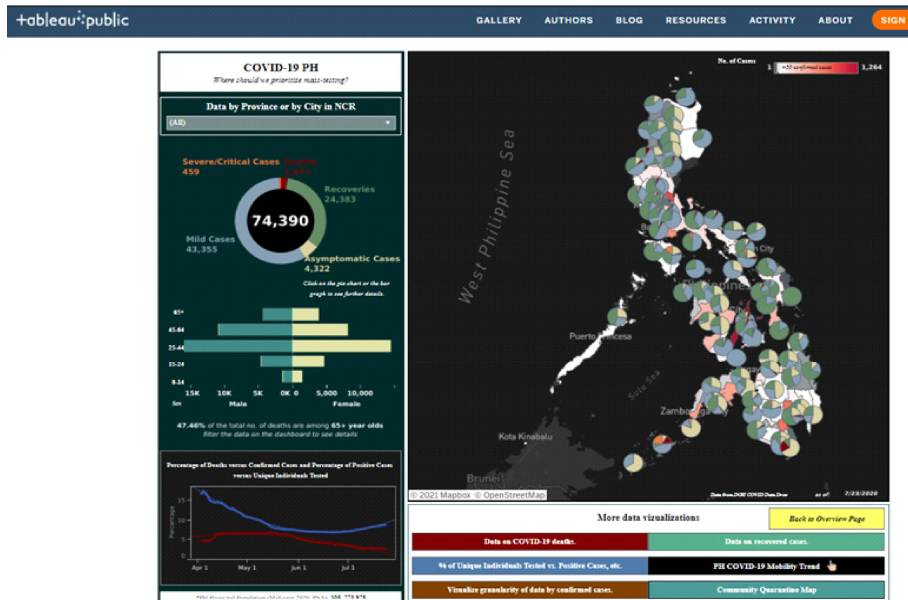


Figure 1: A screenshot of the COVID-19 PH dashboard published in Tableau Public.

The latest version of the COVID-19 dashboard (Figure 1) features a graphical summary of COVID-19 cases classified into mild, severe, and asymptomatic, including deaths and recoveries as of July 23, 2020. The located pie charts in the map indicate the share of each class to the total count of cases for all provinces with COVID-19 reported cases. The dashboard also disaggregates cumulative cases of COVID-19 by age and sex to illustrate the vulnerabilities of specific population groups to SARS COV-2 infection. Additionally, the interactive tools in the dashboard allows viewers to filter data by province (in the entire country) or city (available for the National Capital Region only). The data were derived from the Department of Health (DOH) but the dashboard collates the information and combines them with existing data to present a new map that was kept and updated as new data arise.

Aside from her exemplary contribution to communicating information on COVID-19 to the public, Tabinas is also recognized among the community of volunteer mappers in the Philippines for her advocacy on mental health awareness and community care. Her project Mental Health

AWHEREness focuses on mapping health and support services for people needing help on their mental health but are hesitant to reach out for assistance or afraid of disclosing their mental health concerns to their friends or family (Map the Philippines 2020). The data is accessible to the public with access to the internet, and the tool is open for data contributors and volunteers. On the aspect of psychosocial support, Tabinas launched a project called Hear; Here. Similar to the map of mental health facilities and services, Hear; Here's interface is a webmap that allows users to place a pin on their location (by approximation) and to anonymously submit messages of encouragement and support for people dealing with mental health issues.

Because not all lines are straight

Established in 2018, MapBeks is a community of volunteers that aim to promote the “representation and inclusion of the LGBTQI+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex +) in various mapping platforms” (MapBeks n.d.). Mediated by online tools, it has introduced several mapping projects that facilitate free and open access to spatial data on HIV testing facilities, legal services, COVID-19 testing labs, animal care services, and LGBTQI+ safe spaces. The Philippine LGBTQ+ Safe Spaces Map was created as an online interactive map that indicates places and establishments that are considered as friendly or safe by members of the LGBTQI+ community (MapBeks n.d.). In addition, MapBeks also launched MapBeks' Stories, an ongoing crowdsourcing initiative that features the experiences of anonymous individuals in various situations, including romantic encounters as well as bullying and discrimination (see MapBeks Github webpage <https://github.com/mapbeks/MapBeks-Stories>).

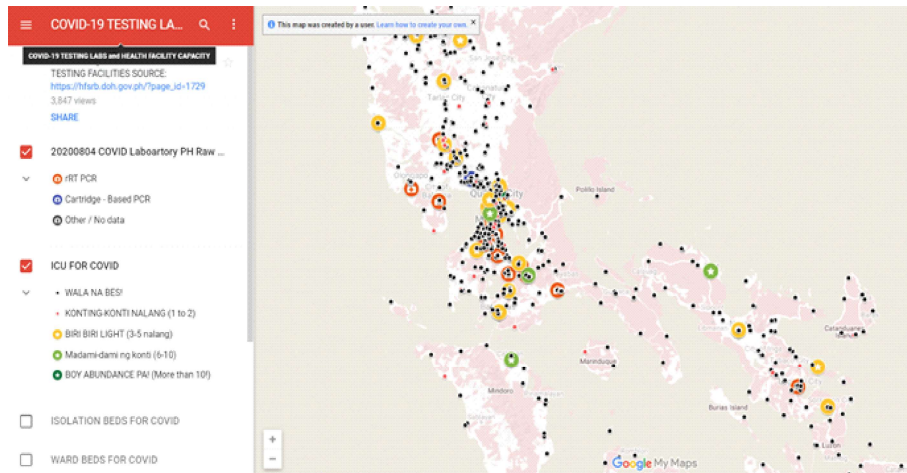


Figure 2: A screenshot of MapBeks' interactive map of COVID-19 testing facilities and health facility capacities, updated in August 2020.

MapBeks created a publicly accessible map of COVID-19 testing laboratories and health facilities via Google My Maps based on the official list of licensed COVID-19 laboratories of the DOH (Figure 2). It also includes information on hospitals and health facilities such as availability of ventilators and bed capacities for both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients. Each point in the map represents one facility, and symbolized using unique combinations of color and size to represent hospital capacity in terms of numbers of available beds or ICU facilities. The choice of words and phrases like “biri biri light” and “Boy abundance” are culled from gay parlance in popular culture. These were deliberate strategies to make the map more accessible to laypersons and also an act of queering the science, art and politics of map and map-making practices.

To date, MapBeks has received multiple grants from various local and international organizations, including the Humanitarian Openstreetmap Team (HOT) Community Microgrant in 2020 for their UNMAPPEDPH project that aims to enrich the spatial data of built structures in 24 towns in the Philippines in partnership with the LGBTQI+ community and other mapping volunteers (Pista ng Mapa 2020). Mapbeks is also a recipient of the Jesse Robredo Foundation's Be Like Jesse Youth Grant for their project Mapping

of Remote Communities in Maguindanao (Jesse M Robredo Foundation, 2020). Despite these initiatives, it is still worth noting that LGBTQI+ lives remain precarious. The lockdown brought by the pandemic limited their mobilities and has engendered unsafe, toxic, even abusive environments abetted by an un-caring mindset that values patriarchy-based heteronormativism.

By way of conclusion

In his discussion of pastoral power drawing from old Christian traditions, Foucault mentioned pastoral care for individuals in a flock “with a purpose for those on whom it is exercised, and not a purpose for some kind of superior unit like the city, territory, state, or sovereign (2009, 129). This could not be truer in the efforts of cartographers, volunteers, allies and the civil society in looking after each other. While the violence of the pandemic from the larger global community to the localized experience and encounter with COVID-19 continue to grow, multiple geographies of care emerge from this virocene that result in the materialization of mutual aid and solidarity across multiple scales. In spite of the limitation of mobilities decreed by the state to prevent the spread of the virus, several initiatives manage to open possibilities for citizens to provide information, data and statistics to better reflect spatial realities. The information becomes a gateway for individuals and communities to be empowered during these virulent times. Three initiatives in the Philippines spearheaded by geographers tap on Filipinos’ predilection for online platforms. Digital and web maps were created by MapBeks, Andi Tabinas, and the Ministry of Mapping projects to inform Filipino indigents of the location, presence, and availability of medical infrastructures for health access. Likewise, statistics were translated into geovisualized images to convey the rate of infection, recovery, and the hotspots for Covid outbreaks in the country. The people, especially those with access to the internet and digital platforms, reciprocate by reporting and documenting local- and personal-scale Covid stories as ground truthing interventions. Likewise, mapping initiatives to locate and identify community pantries were undertaken by cartographers at the risk of being branded as communist sympathizers stemming from the red-tagging of community pantries by the military. This mutual cooperation had aided in informed decision-making among the citizenry. Caring geographies is about the

resurgence of reciprocity (Springer 2020) among individuals, communities and collectives which thrived (and have been known to thrive in the past) even in eras that inflict violence to the planet's inhabitants.

NOTES

¹ The Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) released a document called "Omnibus Guidelines on the Implementation of Community Quarantine in the Philippines" that not only lists terminologies for various quarantines, as well as guidelines and protocols, but also post-pandemic scenario.

² New cases of COVID-19 infection reached a record-high 538 patients on March 31, 2020 (Santos 2020). By June 2, 2020, there were nearly 19,000 confirmed cases of the disease in the whole country (WHO-ROP 2020).

³ Foucault said of pastoral power: "it goes in search of those that have strayed off course, and it treats those that are injured" (2009, 127).

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IMAGE SOURCES

Figure 1: A screenshot of the COVID-19 PH dashboard published in Tableau Public. Image source: <https://public.tableau.com/profile/spatially4u#!/vizhome/COVID-19PHDashboard-Analysis/Dashboard>

Figure 2: A screenshot of MapBeks' interactive map of COVID-19 testing facilities and health facility capacities, updated in August 2020. Image source: https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?fbclid=IwAR30bR7ONULreHI85mTFLbgQx6LKqj-dZTu6rKBlhnx_gZQyFY9rT0FW92w&mid=1hgkZqX3VRwlzjXnFyifLSZr1xCLLpXfh&ll=14.535353447650637%2C122.34786849780971&z=8