

My COVID-ized PhD Finish: An Overview¹

Jhoanna Lynn B. Cruz

1. INT. 2nd FLOOR LANDING OF THE HOUSE-DAY

Jhoanna is sitting at a small folding table, reading the script from her laptop. She looks at the camera occasionally to emphasize certain points.

Jhoanna

Good afternoon, I am Jhoanna Lynn Cruz. For this practice-led PhD, entitled *Writing Lesbian: Pushing against Boundaries through Nonfiction in the Philippines*, I completed a creative work folio comprised of three parts: a memoir, an opinion column, and an origami zine. Through these forms of nonfiction, I endeavored to explore how my lesbian identity could be embodied in my writing through my efforts to push against conventional ways of writing nonfiction in the Philippines.

The memoir, entitled *Abi Nako*, or *So I Thought*, is composed of eighteen stand-alone chapters, which I call essays. For this folio I included thirteen chapters that I wrote during the PhD. I also included the title essay, which I had written before the PhD to give evidence of how I used to write, as well as elucidate the overarching concept of my memoir, which revolves around the meaning of the Cebuano expression *abi nako*, translated idiomatically as “or so I thought,” referring to my false expectations around my move

¹ My entire ECQ lockdown was spent working furiously towards the finish line of my offshore PhD in RMIT University, Melbourne. The pandemic made this process much more difficult, but ironically, it was exactly this focused, deadline-fueled writing that also saved me from lockdown madness. Here I share excerpts from the video recordings I had to create as part of my final examination requirements. I am a triumphant COVID PhD. Nanalo tayo!

to Davao City. For my creative presentation video, I perform an excerpt from the chapter, “In the Fellowship of the Martyrs,” which I think is the piece that demonstrates most clearly how I have tried to push against the constraints set up by how I was taught to write “creative nonfiction” in the Philippine literary system. Through this braided essay, I was also able to link my writing about personal memories with my political advocacy.

I wrote my weekly opinion column *Lugar Lang* in the local Mindanao newspaper, the *Mindanao Times* from August 2016 to October 2018. It appeared in the editorial page, alongside other columns that discussed current sociopolitical issues. The essays were from 800 to 1,000 words, and by the time I decided to quit writing it because of online persecution due to my critical stance against the local and national government, I had written 113 issues. I include only twenty-one pieces in my folio, particularly the ones that demonstrate how I “memoirized” the opinion editorial essay and how I “dressed them up” in other forms, like a legal document, a dramatic monologue, etc. In my performance video, I excerpt a piece I wrote in the conventional way and set it beside one I dressed up as a speculative story to highlight the difference in my approach to the space.

After I completed and revised the full draft of my memoir and quit my column, I freed myself to create the third part of my creative work portfolio. By this time, my dissertation was also taking shape; I was beginning to interrogate the literary context in which I was writing. In that period I began to refuse to submit to the usual academic pressure to write a piece that could be published in traditional venues in the Philippines. So I was able to challenge myself to write against everything I had learned about how to write an essay. I dared myself to write a nonlinear essay, one that had no clear beginning and end, one that may not be identifiable as an “essay” because of the way it behaves. I figured that if I wanted to write a narrative that keeps folding into itself, it had to be in

origami form. But I needed the help of an artist who could design and create the origami, a challenge that the lesbian comic book artist Emiliana Kampilan graciously accepted. Thus, “Doors” was created collaboratively. I include photos of the pages/faces of the origami zine in my folio. In my performance video I show how the zine might be folded and unfolded.

I wish I could have exhibited these three artifacts of my creative work folio today. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic took over the world. The Philippines has been in strict lockdown since March 15. I have been stranded in Manila since. I hope, however, that the “soft copies” of the artifacts and my creative work performance video will suffice for this examination as evidence of creative outcomes I have produced for the PhD. Thank you very much.

2. INT. MALACAÑANG-NIGHT

(From the transcript of Duterte’s March 24 speech)

Wide shot: Duterte sits at the head of the long table, surrounded by his IATF people. Bong Go sits at his right side, shuffling papers constantly.

Medium close-up on Duterte when he speaks, open laptop in front of him. Duterte is staring blankly at one spot beyond the laptop, reading from a teleprompter not visible on the screen. Only the president’s flag on his left behind him is in frame.

PRES. DUTERTE

I ask the entire country for your patience, understanding, and utmost cooperation. With your support, I am confident that we will emerge triumphant. Nothing is more formidable and resilient than the Filipino spirit.

Matindi ang kalaban. But we will not surrender.

Hindi tayo susuko. Tayo ay lalaban.

Yes, things will not be easy. [But] we Filipinos are tough. Mas malakas ang Pilipino sa anumang hamon. Now, we all must do what we can and must. Para sa ating bayan.

I look forward to the day that we Filipinos can finally claim victory [in] this war and emerge as a stronger and more united Filipinos and Philippines. Maraming salamat po. Usbon nako, ayaw mo'g kahadlok. Tagalugin ko: Huwag kayong matakot. Nandito 'yung gobyerno ninyo para kayo pagsilbihan at totoong pagsilbihan.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

3. INT. LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

Jhoanna is hugging her two children, Sachi and Raz, as she prepares to catch a flight to Manila. She has only one medium-sized piece of luggage.

Jhoanna

Take care of yourselves, okay? I'll be back in April. Reply to my messages! I love you!

4. NEWS VIDEO CLIPS:

“President Rodrigo Duterte issued Proclamation No. 929 which: (a) declared the whole Philippines under a State of Calamity for a period of six (6) months from 16 March 2020; and (b) imposed an Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) throughout the island of Luzon (which includes Metro Manila) from 12:00 a.m. of 17 March 2020 to 12:00 a.m. of 13 April 2020, both effective unless earlier lifted or extended as the circumstances may warrant.”

“The Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) over places considered to be COVID-19 high-risk areas, such as Metro Manila, Central Luzon, Calabarzon, Cebu, and Davao City, is extended until May 15.”

“The General Community Quarantine for Metro Manila was extended to June 30, and the GCQ for Cebu City was upgraded to an Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). Airports will remain closed for domestic and international flights.”

“Online classes suspended in some universities beginning March 17 until April 14, 2020, due to COVID restrictions.”

5. INT. BEDROOM. NIGHT.

Jhoanna at the desk, pounding at her laptop. The clock says 9 p.m.

6. SAME:

Jhoanna at the desk (wearing a different set of clothes), pounding at her laptop. The clock says 3 a.m.

7. SAME:

Jhoanna at the desk (wearing a different set of clothes), pounding at her laptop. The clock says 6 a.m.

END MONTAGE.

8. INT. MALACANANG VIRTUAL PRESSER. DAY.

Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque is at the podium.

Roque

This means we did not hit, we will not hit 40,000 by the end of June, which is only a few days . . . what, two days? One day? Ah, today is the last day na pala! Ano bang sinasabi ko? Wala na po, panalo tayó! We beat the UP prediction po, we beat it! So, congratulations, Philippines! Let's do it again in July. So we are winning.

9. EXT. IN FRONT OF A CLOSED CARINDERIA. DAY. A METAL BARRICADE SEPARATES THE SIDEWALK FROM THE ROAD.

A man is standing with his arms raised open, as in a crucifixion, facing the carinderia.

V.O.: O, o, o, sigé, subukan mo!

V.O. (various voices from the crowd): Utol, dapa ka na, 'tol! Wala pong baril iyan! Huwag po!

Police officer in fatigues points his gun at the man who is still standing with his hands raised. Two other police officers in fatigues approach the scene. Another police officer is recording the scene in his mobile phone.

Man

Sigé, iputok mo! Bakit? Anong problema ko sa iyo? Ano?

Police

Dapa! Putang-ina mo! Mamaya malalaman mo problema mo!

Man puts one hand down and reaches for his small sling bag. Two shots ring out. Man leans on the metal barricade. Takes his bag and throws it on the road beyond the barricade.

Police

Huwag kayong lumapit. Huwag kayong lumapit ha. Itawag mo ng ambulans. Walang lalapit! Huwag kayong lumapit! Walang lalapit!

One other police officer goes to the bag, examines it with his foot. It looks empty.

Man falls to the ground, as if crumbling.

V.O.: (woman screaming) Bakit n'yo siya binaril? Walang baril iyan! Dapat kinapkapan n'yo muna! May tama po iyan. Dating militar po iyan. Nagkaroon ng war shock. Jeric, sunduin n'yo na si Ate. Dali!

**10. EXT. WALL WITH A MURAL THAT SPELLS OUT “S A _
(SPACE)_ N G” IN A SEMI-CIRCLE.**

Jhoanna approaches it, stands in the space, forms a Y with her arms, and smiles while her partner Camille takes her photo.

Camille

Why are you smiling? If it's sayang, you should be sad!

11. INT. 2ND FLOOR LANDING OF A HOUSE. DAY.

Jhoanna is at her folding table, reading from her laptop, shooting a video for her PhD final examination.

For this presentation, I aim to speak to my dissertation, not of it. What a difference that preposition made to how I approached this task. Initially, I didn't know what else I could add to what I had already written, and which you have read anyway. But in the same spirit of this entire PhD journey, this final presentation/examination is requiring me to change the way I think about how final PhD presentations go. In the Philippines, we call this a “thesis defense,” a term I never felt any love for, even though I had done it three times in my other degrees and have sat in more than a hundred undergraduate defenses in my thirty years of teaching. “Defense” makes the process seem adversarial; it makes the student feel like she is under attack and thus needs to defend herself and her work to the death. I am not here to do that. In Filipino, that idiomatic expression “to speak to” would translate to the verb *patutuohan*, literally to attest to; the root word is *tutuo*, meaning true. Thus, what I really want to do in this presentation is to speak truth *to* it, not defend it. To speak to my dissertation, I will focus on what I have learned about my practice and how it shifted as a result of doing this PhD.

In November 2018, two years into the PhD, I went to Penang for the George Town Literary Festival as the Philippine representative.

I got a bit lost while exploring the heritage town and found a wall that had the letters “S A <space> A N G” painted in a semicircle.

It was a secret message to speakers of Bahasa. And expectedly, many tourists miss it, not understanding the language, and looking for the more iconic street art.

I stood in the space and formed a Y with my body, to spell out “SAYANG” for a photo.

In Filipino, the word *sayang* means “regret” or “It’s a shame.” I smiled for the photo because *sayang* in Bahasa Malay means “sweetheart” or “darling.” And in Bahasa Indonesia, it is a verb that means “to care for.” How the word evolved into “regret” in Filipino is a mystery.

I walked away from that mural thinking of the space between. I imagined other letters that could be used to fill that space in Filipino languages:

[K, *sakang*, bow-legged; G, *sagang*, to dodge; L, *salang*, to present, or the crime of; P, *sapang*, that creek; W, *sawang*, to be sick and tired of, also that boa constrictor.

With prefixes, M, *samang*, to join; R, *sarang*, closed.]

What a fertile space, this. A space that can convey various meanings depending on who is filling or reading it. A space of possibilities. In that moment, I glimpsed the space I am occupying as a lesbian writer, but I didn’t understand its significance then.

I surface the memory here because I realize now that that moment is an apt metaphor for what I have learned about my practice through this PhD research. After fifteen years of intermittent writing practice, I felt lost in the Philippine literary landscape despite my earnest efforts to design the proper “itinerary”

by following the prescribed steps of the literary system (i.e., joining writers workshops, revising work according to feedback from the mentors, and thus getting published, winning awards). This sense of lostness led me to Mindanao, which was not exactly in my professional itinerary but provided me a new space in which to revive my writing practice. I was determined to fit myself into that space. Even more, I wanted my presence there to mean something.

12. INT. MALACAÑANG. NIGHT.

Duterte sits at the head of the table. He is wearing an N95 mask that he keeps touching and adjusting. He is also wearing a mini air purifier like a necklace. Only a microphone is in front of him. Only the president's flag on his left behind him is in frame. He speaks with labored breathing and a croaky voice.

<from transcript of Duterte's April 24 speech>

Duterte

Ang utos ko sa kanila patayin—patayin kayo? O di patayin ninyo sila. Lahat na. Tapusin na natin ito sa panahon ko. I have two more years. I will try to finish all of you.

...

Alam mo ganito. Itong mga p***** i***** . . . Y*** p***** i** mo, hindi pa mamatay itong mga p***** i***** 'to. Narinig ninyo 'yun? I was mumbling.

Basta. I am just putting notice to everybody dahil itong komunista, itong komunista malaki ang gastos natin. Do you know how much we spend? Sa isang putok lang, marinig mo man 'yan. *Brrrrttt*. Isang putok niyan 35 pesos. T*** i** ninyo. 'Yung 35 ilang *brrrrttt, brrrrttt*. Ilang sundalong *brrrrttt, brrrrttt* 'yan?

...

'Yan ang history ng COVID. You will always be a part . . . Someday, if we will write a narrative of the COVID, nandiyan talaga kayo sa isang chapter sa—p***** i** para sa inyo. And see how you punish the Filipino people for your ideology.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

13. EXT. DAY.

Various rallies against the Anti-Terror Law showing protesters practicing social distancing.

14. News headline:

“Duterte signs draconian anti-terrorism law in the Philippines on July 3.”

15. INT. MS TEAMS MEETING.

Brief video recording excerpt of the PhD final examination of Jhoanna.

END MONTAGE

16. INT. 2ND FLOOR LANDING OF A HOUSE. DAY.

Jhoanna at her folding desk, with her laptop in front of her, recording her PhD presentation.

Jhoanna

In my title, *Writing Lesbian: Pushing against Boundaries through Nonfiction in the Philippines*, I assert that to write lesbian means to push against boundaries, which I identify in my dissertation as boundaries set up by the Philippine language, culture, and literary system, as well as constraints in the way nonfiction is taught and written in the Philippines.

Then in preparing for this final presentation, I realized that in fact, the first boundaries I needed to push against were my own. If I hadn't succeeded in breaking down my resistances through creative and scholarly effort, I would not have completed this PhD. In my first semester in the program, students were reminded that this PhD is not therapy. No, it isn't. It is better than therapy. It is philosophy.

I am enthused that after thirty years of teaching and at age 50, I have become what they call in Australia an "Early Career Researcher"! And I have fifteen years left in academe before retirement to make good use of my contribution to knowledge in the field of Lesbian Studies. COVID permitting.

17. INT. MALACAÑANG. NIGHT.

Duterte is at the head of the table. He is wearing an N95 mask. He keeps touching and fiddling with his watch.

<from the transcript of Duterte's August 25 speech.>

Maski na sabihin pa ninyo mamatay ako bukas, it cannot—it cannot solve the problem of the country.

...

Kasi pagharap namin sa Diyos and tanungin ka na, "O ikaw Rodrigo, anong ginawa mo?" Sabi ko, "Ginawa ko man lahat."

18. INT. 2ND FLOOR LANDING OF THE HOUSE. DAY.

Jhoanna at her folding desk, with her laptop in front of her, recording her PhD presentation.

Jhoanna

In the spirit of doors closing and opening, which I playfully explored in my origami zine project, “Doors,” the year I began this PhD, 2016, my mother died. And just like my grandfather’s death, which opened the door of creative writing for me, my mother’s death freed me to write certain sections of my memoir the way I did. The door that closed on my relationship with my mother in the physical world opened another one on the page, where I could tell my truths without fear of her disapproval. It thus expanded the scope of the narrative of my memoir—what I had thought was going to be about how I rebuilt my life in Davao City after my marriage had failed began to delve into how I could rebuild myself from the ruins of my childhood. If she hadn’t died, this would have become a different book. For instance, I would not have been able to write large sections of the essay, “How to Deal with a Secret or Two” and the whole essay, “Do Not Resuscitate.” Both of these pieces show various ways by which I have pushed against constraints in the way I was taught to write essays. On a deeper level, they were also how I gave myself permission to push against the idea of mother and her control over me.

In a similar manner, I would not have been bold enough to try my technique of playing dress-up in my opinion column if I had not let my domestic partnership die at the time it did. My former partner used to investigate all my writing and then interrogate me about it. I was threatened by her suspicions and enervated by having to defend myself against her accusations. So just like the “dutiful daughter” of the patriarchy described by Adrienne Rich, I wrote within the bounds of safety—what was allowed without threatening my lesbian relationship. For my very life, from which I drew material, to be the thing that inhibited the development of my writing was such an irony. Even though this aspect is biographical, I would not have made this connection if I were not doing this PhD. In the past, while it was clear to me that my heterosexual marriage prevented

me from writing my lesbian stories, I didn't see this connection as clearly in the lesbian relationship I had at that time. While I did not exactly sacrifice my lesbian relationship for my writing the way I did my heterosexual marriage, its demise opened the door to my more daring assays in nonfiction. This wasn't officially part of my research problems or methodology, but it certainly is a research finding! And only in this presentation did I realize that I couldn't even call myself lesbian during that relationship because she didn't allow it.

Doing this presentation after handing in my written dissertation gave me an opportunity to reflect on what I have done. *What have I done?!?* Or as a popular Filipino love song demands, *Masdan ang ginawa mo!* Look at what you've done!

CLOSING MONTAGE OF STILLS.

Audio: "Ikaw" (*kundiman*) Play only this stanza:

"Pag-ibig, masdan ang ginawa mo

Winasak ang abang puso ko

Tulutan ang samo ko lamang sa iyo

Bihagin ang dalagang ito." (fade out)

19. Jhoanna's testamur/diploma

20. COVID statistics for 30 August 2020:

Total: 217,396

Active cases: 56,473

Deaths: 3,520