

## Crisis and the Arts

In contemplating the COVID-19 pandemic, Lourdes Velázquez contends that the current situation forces us to reckon with human fragility, human impotence, limited techno-science efficiency, rekindling human good and solidarity, and the reigning presence of death. These points of reflection are premised on her argument about the role of philosophy in the time of pandemic, which she proffers is not meant to offer practical solutions to concrete predicaments but instead, to “give a sense of reality” from which we can think of configuring certain practices that tackle issues we need to face (Velázquez 95).

Making clear what philosophy can do in times of crisis could feel like making a case for its value in a situation that seems to require practicable means of resolving immediate concerns. The arts and humanities are no stranger to this utilitarian charge. The Humanities as an academic discipline has had to contend with its own crisis that includes, *inter alia*, doubts as to the significance of its scholarship, its lack of economic use, and its limited relevance in a world that is dominated by science and technology (Arndt). In practical terms, this incredulity translates to a continuously dwindling enrollment and diminishing funding support for academic programs that fall under the humanities umbrella in accordance with a corporatist, neoliberal, and market-driven education model that deems such academic endeavors as either irrelevant or superfluous. Of course, such a crisis in relevance is also driven by factors internal to the discipline itself particularly in its tendency toward hyperspecialization and insularity, which Clifford Siskin and William Warner contend can only be cured by a deliberate effort to “dezone” all academic fields in order to realize the compatibilities in explanation and understanding among tightly guarded disciplinary quarters. Whether external or internal, questions about the importance of the arts and humanities come up especially in times of great societal distress such as the current COVID-19 global health crisis.

This thematic issue of the *Philippine Humanities Review* confronts this question of how the arts and the humanities are important in the time of pandemic not by defensively announcing their unique contribution to curing the world of this

overwhelming disease, but by posing more questions as to the ways the world has been sensing and making sense of the situation. In a profound and diverse, even if at times particularized, articulation of life we have been forced to live in the last two years, the contributions in this issue speak to the narrowness of how the state and other big institutions have predominantly defined the COVID-19 crisis. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou argue that crisis situations are governmental opportunities to justify authoritative state and market control by limiting the narratives that define the crisis, stripping it of complexities and depth, and precluding alternatives that include dissent and critical appraisal of unfolding realities. To speak of the crisis is to create the crisis – to give it form, to make it real in a particular way.

The COVID-19 pandemic has so far resulted in more than 300 million cases and over five million deaths globally (World Health Organization). In the Philippines, the Department of Health has recorded more than three million positive cases and over 30,000 deaths as of January 2022 (Department of Health). The country has endured one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world, with tightened control over people's movements, restricted access to services, reduced avenues of dissent, heightened human rights violations, and curtailment of free speech (Diokno in See). This crisis has clearly revealed the vast inequality in society and the inadequacy of longstanding political structures and development models that have predominantly configured systems of governance. It is within these structural disparities that people would have to suffer personal, physical, emotional, and mental distress caused by social isolation and physical disconnection. The incessant assault on everyday existence is made worse by what some studies show as our inadvertent complicity with inhumane measures imposed by the state in the name of managing the spread of infection and assuaging our fragile sense of security (Dempsey). Quarantine protocols, physical distancing, and the prohibition of social gathering have become a metaphor for the "boundary-building" reaction that we have seemingly started to accept as a given. In a way, this is reminiscent of the zonal schemes in university education that have arguably reduced the potency of not only the humanities and the arts but the entire academic knowledge production in contributing to social progress and liberation. For even as we endeavor to protect our own welfare, we should also be alert to the danger of condoning discriminatory and unjust practices just so we prevent, along with the sickness and the virus, the unruly, unclean, and undesirable others from breaching our prized sense of safety. Awareness of this propensity to exclude others is necessary lest we become complicit in enforcing inequities which itself is a crisis as tragic as any other.

Yet, we cannot simply dismiss the personal fears and anxieties that hound each of us as we *doomscroll* through any available piece of information that might provide a semblance of certainty. Salanga's *Linggatong*, the lone poetry piece in this issue, succinctly captures such a state of perplexity, where answers appear to lead not to any point of finality but to a more dizzying cornucopia of information and misinformation, facts and fantasy, science and myth. Through the invocation of local lore, Elyrah Salanga-Torralba rehearses our moments of weakness. Losing one's *gana* (drive, will, zest), for instance, is perhaps a feeling that everybody can relate to given that we have all been made to confront the cruelty of uncertainty since the start of the pandemic. In Salanga's playful reference to folk belief, losing a fundamental aspect of our soul, much like the mysterious disappearance of tiny objects in our homes, could have easily been blamed on creatures that rule the fringes of the elemental world if not for the realization that what we think we have lost was merely temporarily obscured by our own reluctance to see ourselves as worthy bearers of endless possibilities.

Shifting the ways we see things is probably an effective means of making progress in our endeavors amid challenging times. At least in the particular case studies of Marvin Ray D. Olaes and Honeylet L. Alerta, treating the present crisis as an opportunity to examine and redesign pedagogy in their respective areas of concern (Public Speaking and Comparative Literature) leads to a deeper dissection of the deficiencies in the education system. Beyond their area-specific analysis, both appeal

for a radical embrace of technological, curricular, and philosophical change in teaching so that any move in the name of educational progress is premised on correcting socio-political imbalance and social inequity. Re-viewing what education means is also touched on by Flaudette May Datuin in her essay but with a focus on the arts. However, she goes beyond advocating programmatic recommendations in the field and instead, chooses to go the route of interrogating assumptions about art in general in order to resolutely declare how art is, yes, “useless” but unquestionably “vital.”

In citing this postulation by Peter Thompson, Datuin questions the valuation of human endeavors in quantifiable and, inevitably, commodified terms. Art, at its core, is a rejection of the pragmatist predilection for constructing immediate answers to present questions. In turning to the practice of “wayfaring,” Datuin intimates that what art provides is an opportunity for slowness – taking one’s time to look back and dwell on the path one has taken. Being slow is probably indulgent given the sense of immediacy and state of emergency that configure crisis situations, but isn’t it vital to stop for a bit and reorient oneself to avoid getting lost in the maelstrom? Datuin provides us a pause, a way of slowing down to capture that moment of reorientation. In referencing the correspondence between crisis and critique in modernity as propounded by Reinhart Koselleck, she lets us in on the discomfiting notion that art and humanities education, being “in and of the world,” is not for reflecting realities but for producing them. We would like to add, as a way to extend the claim, that what art actually produces are possibilities or possible realities. The arts and humanities, indeed, promote critical thinking. If the practice of critique is a way to insist that other possibilities exist aside from what we have been dealt with, then it affords us the chance to take back control of how to more productively and progressively make sense of the present crisis.

*How does one make sense of a crisis?* is what Amihan B. Ramolete addresses in her recollection of another catastrophe that has left an indelible mark in College of Arts and Letters’s (CAL) recent history. The fire that razed the Faculty Center (FC) or Bulwagang Rizal in 2016 is a painful reminder that permanence is but a fantasy and all things, however precious, could disappear in an instant. In her 11<sup>th</sup> month as the dean, Bonifacio-Ramolete had to muster all her courage and strength in order to “address the crisis and other challenging situations.” She credits her theatre training for giving her clarity and direction during this misfortune; the old adage “the show must go on” gained an entirely new resonance for the KAL community in view of the tragedy. Despite the overwhelming loss, Bonifacio-Ramolete still managed to see hope and optimism not least due to the people that chose to rise above the adversity – the students, staff, faculty, and all those who lent support in those trying times.

The value of sharing a vision with and drawing strength from others is also at the heart of Roselle Pineda et al.’s “iteration-text,” a creative and theoretical exploration of conversations among the members of *Doculektiv*, a project that seeks to archive and curate the unfolding of collectivities and emergence of relationships in creative work and artistic practice. Readers will witness in the excerpted conversations among the collaborators the organic intertwining of embodiment and meaning making, of clarities and conundrums, of reason and feelings as they navigate the complex and restrictive environment created by the pandemic with its unique implications for cultural workers and their community partners. Defining a collective as “individuals in a group who are amenable and committed to voicing one idea,” Pineda et al., instancing Judith Butler, confront the precarity we inherit from the “falling away” of systems that are supposed to protect and ensure our welfare and well-being. The unravelling of these structures allows us to see the need to imagine and implement new ways of doing and being in order to create a future that is more equitable, more sustainable, and more caring of others.

An “other-orientedness” as critical disposition might appear counterintuitive in the face of crisis situations that naturally draw out from us a self-preservationist stance. But nurturing a deliberate concern for others amid difficulty is to recognize the reality that we cannot survive, and thrive, on our

own. The notion of *kapwa* – a shared sense of self – at this juncture not only surfaces as a relevant Filipino value but a counter-hegemonic position that confronts the dehumanizing course of our response to the crisis. Going back to one of Velázquez’s points earlier, the pandemic leads us to acknowledge that there is still human good in the middle of misery and there is a need for solidarity if we are to come out of this debacle not entirely unscathed but definitely stronger and more enlightened.

Martha Nussbaum elaborates on the dangers of retreating from this vital relating with others and the world when we feel that they have let us down – when society has “fallen away” – causing us great pain and disillusionment; when we are tempted to say: “‘I’ll live for my own comfort, for my own revenge, for my own anger. And I just won’t be a member of society anymore.’ Which really means, ‘I won’t be a human being anymore’” (in Moyers 6). The greater tragedy of the pandemic lies in our decision to keep to ourselves and ignore the pain of others thinking that we are only rightfully protecting our security. This also spells the triumph of totalitarian demarcations of what the crisis is, what to do, and how to be in these trying times. The varying ways by which the contributions in this thematic issue traverse the personal and social exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic hopefully compel us to make a stop and examine where the actions we have adopted or accepted in controlling the virus are taking us, and if, indeed, this is the direction we wish to follow. We recite once again Salanga’s verses here to enact a possibility of becoming contrary to the rigid fence-building, relational distancing, and self-seeking isolation that hew to a regimental mindset which often only privileges the powerful: *Kailangan nang baliktarin ang isip/Upang makauwi*. The destination is perhaps “home,” a place of comfort and care, one that offers respite and recuperation. But an end-point, if ever that is possible, that is built on openness to relational permeability, mindful collaboration, fluid connections, and collective action – *things* that we need to rediscover, recover, and protect as these are what preserve our sense of humanity.

Jayson D. Petras, PhD  
Roberto G. Paulino, PhD  
Alwin C. Aguirre, PhD  
The Editors, *Crisis and the Arts* Issue

## WORKS CITED

- Arndt, David. “The Two Cultures and the Crisis in the Humanities.” *Forum on Public Policy*, vol. 2007, no. 1, 2007, <https://www.forumonpublicpolicy.co.uk/2007-no1>.
- Butler, Judith, and Athena Athanasiou. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Polity, 2013.
- Dempsey, Owen Philip. “Xenophobia during the Pandemic: A Lacanian Perspective.” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, vol. 15, issue 9, Sept. 2021. Wiley, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12631>.
- DOH Covid-19 Bulletin #677. Department of Health, 20 Jan. 2022, <https://doh.gov.ph/covid19casebulletin677>. Accessed 20 Jan. 2022.
- Moyers, Bill D. *A World of Ideas*. Public Affairs Television, 1988.
- See, Aie B. “Rodrigo Duterte is Using One of the World’s Longest COVID-19 Lockdowns to Strengthen His Grip on the Philippines.” *Time*, 15 Mar. 2021. <https://time.com/5945616/covid-philippines-pandemic-lockdown/>.
- Siskin, Clifford, and William Warner. “To Halt the Crisis in the Humanities, Higher Ed Should Rethink Its Classification of Knowledge (Opinion).” *Inside Higher Ed*, 4 Nov. 2019. <https://www.insidehighered.com>.
- Velázquez, Lourdes. “The Role of Philosophy in the Pandemic Era.” *Bioethics Update*, vol. 6, no. 2, July-Dec. 2020, pp. 92–100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bioet.2020.08.001>.
- WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard. World Health Organization, 20 Jan. 2022, <https://covid19.who.int/>. Accessed 20 Jan. 2022.