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ESSAY

Poetics in the Time of Pandemic. There is Always Going to be a *Before* and an *After*

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the impact of lockdown in Sydney on artists and creatives. We share our personal story of how we imagined our lives would be before COVID-19 and the changes we observed after entering in pandemic mode. Intertwining images taken with a mobile phone and text, we offer our observations on the evolving new language that appears around us in supermarkets, on walls and on the footpath: signs determining social interactions and affecting behaviour. We also touch on the idea of how writing can bring us home and make us feel closer to our languages and countries of origin. We underline theatre's importance to tell stories from the time of the pandemic, when governments have been found wanting due to lack of care of the most vulnerable, in particular First Nations peoples. We reflect on the need for reinvention, accepting change, reassessing our human values and making present our links to the natural world. As the pandemic takes us from one stage to the next, we suggest that creativity is the one possible space that offers relief and hope and opens up possibilities to make sense of our new reality while contributing to a collective sense of humanity.

Keywords

Theatre; COVID-19; Signs; Poetics

Introduction

This paper is a personal reflection on the effects of COVID-19 on our lives as two mature aged professionals, living in Sydney, working in education and the arts. It poses a number of questions and presents some observations on the evolving changes we are experiencing. We wake up every day with many impossible questions, from the most profound to the simplest,

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on hold, while we navigate this existential and philosophical crisis and share moments of collective anxiety. From early March 2020, I (Liliana) began collecting images using my mobile phone that I felt were expressing community sentiment, signs of support reminding those alone that we were all going through the same experience. Government and business quickly developed a clearer and specific set of signs to be implemented widely and consistently across the city. We reflect about notions of space and place as two cultural constructs that touched us deeply when movement is restricted and our lives are under surveillance. Theatres are closed and jobs in the education sector competitive and scarce. As storytellers we value the sharing of stories, and in this way, we can be part of a process of healing contributing to a sense of collective health, a way of quietening our spirits and minds while we wait attentively, for the next moment.

Our *Before*



A poster on an under path in Enmore, NSW; © Liliana E. Correa

I am a writer and educator and after years of jumping from one teaching gig to the next, I have finally earned my accredited professional precariousness. My partner is a theatre director who was ready to explore the next stage of his professional and personal life.

Our 'before' was a constant chasing of the next teaching contract, the next play, the next project. We both learned the preciousness of sustenance and absence, movement and place.

I am Argentinian and he is a Bunuba man from The Kimberley, Western Australia. 2020 was going to be our year to escape the Sydney scene and finally do something for ourselves together. We often spoke of our yearning to return to that *other home*. Reconnecting and deepening ourselves in culture, community and language, and walking together on our respective countries. We saw ourselves in a small coastal town south of Buenos Aires, riding our bikes to the bakery every morning, sipping *mate* and volunteering at the local primary school. But we also imagined time spent in country in The Kimberley, camping, fishing, hunting, painting and sitting with the old people.

Our *After* Begins at Home

Enter the protagonist COVID-19 and overnight our dreams of a nomadic existence—travelling from the Atlantic to the Pacific as desire would take us—was now an impossibility. The great Australian expectation of freely travelling within the country and overseas came to a grinding halt. Despite being accustomed to uncertainty due to the precariousness of our respective careers, this time is different, moving from stage to stage as part of a larger narrative with an open ending has created a sense of double precariousness as well as demarcating strict physical borders right now impossible to transgress. For very different reasons, since our early twenties, my partner and I have led unconventional lives. Moving from one place to the next became intrinsic to our inner sense of survival, but we also learned to change and adapt, letting go when we had to without resistance. We both believe that in order to survive we must change.

Life is Never Simple for the Dislocated



A café in Coogee, NSW; © Liliana E. Correa

Personally, the national lockdown raised many more perplexing questions about those closest to me in my home country. When will I share a meal with my brothers again? When will I be able to take my kids back home? Will my 94-year-old father wait for me? Each time I landed home I surrendered to the whole of who I am. My relationship to my language deepens, and my yearning for touching, smelling, tasting, and wondering the streets of my city is fulfilled. Over there, there is no need for translation or transliteration or any sort of interpretation. The lockdown clearly demarcating two distinctive spaces, ‘over there’ and ‘over here’ but only one possible place to inhabit. In both these spaces I feel deep emotional links, I can name both spaces as ‘home’ but can only pertain to one and only in one I truly belong. With such uncertainty about flying back to Buenos Aires any time soon, my only way home was through my imagination. I decided to approach an Argentinian friend, she is a writer and a teacher, to collaborate on a writing project. Each time we see each other, mediated by our mobile technologies, we discuss literature, we exchange stories, and we talk about politics and family. I see the tall and skinny poplar trees through her kitchen window, or the way light plays on the walls of her library on those early Argentinian winter mornings. I feel a vicarious pleasure each time we meet and, in this way, just for those few hours a week, I am back to my language and my home, regaining a sense of cultural place through story. This is my poetics in time of pandemics.

Here we stand



Early signs Haymarket, NSW. March 2020; © Liliana E. Correa

In this here and now, we returned once again to the ordinary day to day concerns of domestic life, but these concerns were no longer ordinary but extraordinary. Strangely everything appears as 'normal' as it had always been but at the same time completely different, layered with new rhythms, new boundaries and new preoccupations, further from our individual worries. We are also beginning to think about our collective health, a sharp awareness about the other next to us, our individuality forced to shift focus and pay attention to the collective.

En Estado de Luto

Theatre plays a crucial social, political, cultural and spiritual role in our society but for too many years now successive governments in Australia have misunderstood the power of the theatre and the arts, preferring to concentrate financial support on industries that are considered more productive, more important or more serious. Theatre, in those rare moments when it is given any attention at all is viewed at best as an entertainment and at worst, a frivolous past-time, an amusement, an antiquated curiosity.

This lack of respect was never more evident than following the lockdown in March. The arts were amongst the industries hit hardest, overnight theatres across the country went dark, hundreds of performances were cancelled, many small to medium companies collapsed entirely and the long term survival of thousands of actors, directors, playwrights, producers, stage managers, lighting, sound, set and costume designers and arts workers was thrown into chaos and uncertainty. At this point, everything was put on hold and we felt, as they say in Spanish, *en estado de luto*, in a state of mourning for the loss of theatre. By nature, the arts industry is temperamental, not for the faint hearted, and to achieve success in an increasingly competitive profession, artists need determination and perseverance, unswerving self-belief, connections and networks, luck, a good reputation and talent and opportunity to develop new work and continue to practice and grow skills. Storytelling is truth telling. The word 'theatre' comes from the Greeks and it means 'the seeing place.' It is a place where we 'see' the truth about ourselves; who we are, how we live

and what it means to be human. This truth can only be expressed aesthetically through story. Only when ideas are expressed poetically through image and symbol, do they begin to explore the depth and reality of our existence and bring a deep understanding and meaning to our lives.

The theatre does not tell us who we are and how we should live, but rather asks questions of us to find the answers for ourselves. An audience enters into a contract with the theatre when they see a play. They agree to bear witness to the world of the play, there is an exchange. During the pandemic that fundamental exchange between the theatre and the audience became silent. But the absence of theatre does not mean the silencing of its makers. One inhabits the space of the artist as a life choice. The word vocation is probably considered old fashioned today but only the most successful artists live out that sense of calling. One does not stop acting, painting, writing or dancing when work is unavailable, or even when we do other types of work to cover the cost of living. People in the theatre are incredibly resourceful. For instance, in an attempt to sustain the life of the theatre, many artists around the world turned to the internet to create concerts, plays, poetry readings, arts forums, etc. These events gave us at least a small glimmer of hope that the arts and potentially the theatre, could continue to exist, even if it was presented in a form completely foreign to itself. Ultimately, however, the theatre's power lies in the simple fact that it is happening now, in this present moment not at any other time. This mysterious, intangible, fleeting exchange between a group of people in present time is a phenomenological experience and technology mediated spaces can never replace that. The pandemic has forced us to reflect in a much deeper and broader sense about the value of our profession and our commitment to our practice. For example, we are concerned about the very real danger of losing a generation of young theatre artists who may never have the opportunity to work and develop their careers. COVID-19 has exposed already existing inequalities in relation to the arts. Lack of funding, resources, opportunities and a general sense of respect have all contributed to a feeling of neglect and discrimination. Now, more than ever, we need the theatre to tell the stories of our time, to make sense of and bring meaning to what is happening to us when many things we assumed about life are no longer true.

The Theatre is Dead ... Long Live the Theatre!



Non gendered Sydney Uni footpath; © Liliana E. Correa

On our daily walks, we noticed a set of new symbols around us, an evolving lexicon, as weeks went by becoming more sophisticated, personalised and clearer. Visual and sound cues popping up everywhere, not only from government departments, but spontaneous messages from anyone to anyone, an emerging graffiti onto virtual and real walls, commanding a different exchange of communication and behaviour. Social media caught up with this much faster and earlier than government advertisements, second by second all social media platforms were inundated by conspiracy theories, personal stories and jokes and recipes on how best to keep the virus at bay. All these signalling comic relief and hope, and at the same time feeding our

anxiety with the establishment of precise clear inner and outer borders, from the individual, physical body to the geographical space from state to state and land to land.

Catching public transport or going to the markets on the weekend amongst many other mundane activities of daily blessed urban life have taken a turn, a Covid turn.



Evolving signs, Camperdown Royal Price Alfred Hospital NSW. July 2020; © Liliana E. Correa

After the first week of government announcements in early March, images such as the one above marking where to stand, were scarcely found around bus stops and not yet evident in other public spaces such as shops or cafes. As weeks passed and creativity kicked in, business began to find ways of reassuring consumers by implementing a number of different measures to avoid complete closure.



Paddy's Markets, Sydney; © Liliana E. Correa

Security guard, appears: shouting and gesturing waving arms. No pictures! No pictures! Come in please. Numbers are recorded on a log book and a wrist's tag is attached to us, making sure that the restricted number of patrons allowed in are accounted for.

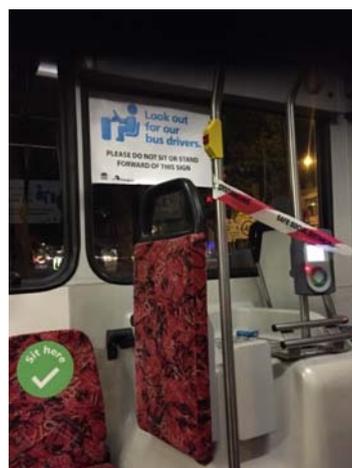
In supermarkets such as Harris Farms, the evolution of signs and hand sanitation was interesting to witness from one week to the next. Its management adapted and improved its sanitation stations, building consumers' confidence and creating a COVID-19 safe shopping environment.



Harris Farms signs, Sydney; © Liliana E. Correa



Eddie Avenue, Sydney; © Liliana E. Correa



348 Bus to Leichardt, NSW; © Liliana E. Correa



August 2020; © Liliana E. Correa

Government signs are now clearer and more specific, adding to the single ‘stand here’ a number of other signs that are by now common and expected in every public shared space.

Every day we stayed alert to the next health report, the newest government guidelines, the announcement of the latest death toll and the number of infected people here and around the world. Evolving signs make us aware of the invisible presence of a predator setting the rules of engagement of our new reality.



Central Station tunnel, Sydney; © Liliana E. Correa

The city quietened down and there was a change in streets’ rhythms, places and spaces of gathering and entertainment silenced. One of the first things I noticed very early during stage 1 was the heavy policing in unexpected places like supermarkets and the beach. As a young woman growing up in Argentina in the time of the dictatorship, I was forced to sharpen my senses to the ominous presence of danger that was embodied in police brutality and the military abuses. But after many years of living in Sydney I learnt to normalise the police presence, and the absence of uniforms from daily news reports, there was no military presence on the streets of my new city, which gave me a sense of lightness. However, my migrant’s privileges are always overshadowed by the systemic state violence suffered by Australian’s First Peoples (read: Policing

of communities, intervention in the Northern Territory, removal of children, youth in detention and youth suicide rates, low literacy etc).

It was during lockdown in Sydney that George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis and the Black Life Matters (BLM) movement resonated deeply with the Aboriginal communities in Australia. Also founding voice across the world, mobilising ordinary people of all races, creeds and colours who truly believed that for all lives to matter then black lives must matter. The ugly face of white supremacy, brutality and silence was again exposed for all to see. Armed with hand sanitiser, face masks and abiding social distancing rules, we, like so many others defied the government and we marched.



BLM, Sydney. A masked city has lost its' mask. © Liliana E. Correa



BLM, Sydney. There should not be any numbers. © Liliana E. Correa

From the Amazon to the Kimberley, First Nations have been fighting the virus of racism. COVID-19 is one more added disease, establishing further levels of injustice and complexity into the lives of most vulnerable people. This pandemic has exposed a lack of preparedness and insufficient support from governments to protect and arm First Nations communities against the virus.



BLM, Sydney. Same story Different Soil. © Liliana E. Correa

There is kindness in our communities and COVID-19 has also exposed our humanity, our need for the closeness of others, our vulnerabilities and our capacity for reinvention. Several community-based organisations such as the Addison Road Community Centre are supporting international students by providing them with emergency food hampers. A restaurant in Glebe has a handwritten note on its window saying it is offering free meals. A protagonist requires an antagonist. If the virus is mandating the main narrative of this collective story, we have to write our own counternarrative and reclaim our voice. We cannot be passive.



King Street, Newtown Sydney; © Liliana E. Correa



The Green Mushroom, Glebe Sydney; © Liliana E. Correa

In Conclusion

Movement and the idealisation of a transient life, freely travelling from one country to the next, from one state to another are now on hold. In a deeper and more pressing manner we have to re-imagine ourselves and value this place of stillness and reflection. Reassessing our purpose in direct connection with our natural world has exposed our human frailties. The myopic view of governments has exposed the unpreparedness of even the richest countries in the west. The pandemic introduced us to a new lexicon and commanded new behaviour due to the establishment of distancing regulations. At an affective level we are becoming closer, neighbourhoods have grown friendlier, there are street lanes where people are sharing food, cooking or shopping for the elderly. The virtual of everything is becoming the norm, from birthdays to funerals; from now on our human connectivity is technologically mediated. If before we had an option, after COVID-19 we don't. Tradition is the illusion of permanence and the natural world has an intelligence far beyond the imagination of humans. Our intelligence pales in comparison. We have built this world on the notion that our human achievement will last forever, that our society will continue to grow and prosper, confident that this is the only way to live. COVID-19 is forcing the world to recognise that our relationship to our own collective health, the health of animals and the health of the environment is not separate. We are learning to become more aware of our interconnectedness.



Valhalla on Glebe Point Rd. Sydney; © Liliana E. Correa

There will be a new life that comes out of this. Let's hope it's a kinder, smarter, more selfless, integrated life where the support and respect for human, animal and environmental health is paramount.