

Unmasking the ‘New Normal’ and the ‘Vernacular of the Veracious’ during a Pandemic

AURELIO S. AGCAOILI

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII AT MANOA

Abstract

This paper argues that the deployment of a figurative language like the phrase “new normal” and many other verbal formulations during a pandemic is a form of power and control by political leaders. This deployment is calculated and calculating as it is meant to condition the minds of the masses that depend on the ruling political class for clarity, guidance, and some form of redemption. These “weaponized” words are presented as expressions of the veracious—essentially a vernacular of power—by persons of authority for a semblance of credibility. There are at least two versions of the veracious that are at play in the communities of infected people: (a) the official sense of what is true and (b) the hidden, unacknowledged “state of affairs” that is known only by the ruling power. The

unevenness of communication during the pandemic gives the state full control of the calculated and calculating message, leaving the recipients of the official message reduced to helpless consumers. In these Covidized days of our lives, there is nothing normal in the “new normal.” It is an abnormality. Likewise, the “vernacular of the veracious” is plain propaganda for the wrong reason and needs to be turned into a “new paradigm.”

Keywords: *conditioning, meme, new normal, new paradigm, propaganda*

The Vernacular of the Veracious and the Engineering of a Consensus

Words have their careers. Pliant, they can make us see the fabrication of a world, the sustaining of one, or the extinction of the one we are familiar with. They can gain currency and through them we can deal with life’s vagaries and vicissitudes. And like them, the “word-users”—the speakers of these words—can go obsolete as well. Either of these situations speak to us of one fact: that in sickness and in health, in life and in death, and in the face of the most brutal of our difficulties like this COVID-19 pandemic, the language of power, expertise, and privilege has taken center stage in this yet unfinished social drama of the collectively tragic. The

announcements, declarations, projections, and analyses of those in the know have given us assurances at a certain point, but the politicization by the entitled and the powerful of human language has given us reason to question whether we are in a dystopian world where doublespeak is the “new normal”¹ and where lies, when repeated, can become true.

Almost on cue, those synonymous phrases—“new norm” and “new normal”—gained currency, eventually evolving as slogans and memes that provide some form of an economized expression for governments to deploy at will while simultaneously controlling the content of information available to the public. Since the deployment of these phrases has been “conscious” but not “conscientious,” these phrases assume the form of a language game where the gamers are the rulers and the ruled. The rulers dictate and dominate the game, providing the rules as they deem fit and changing them at will when the rules no longer serve their interest and values. The other gamers, the ruled, have no role at all but simply consume the official language dished out by the rulers.

The utilization of the “new normal” as a code for “a new way of acting” in keeping with the values and interests of the rulers ensures the propagation and perpetuation of their

¹ See, National Economic and Development Authority, “Online Public Consultation on Defining and Preparing for the ‘New Normal,’” National Economic and Development Authority, last modified April 4, 2020, <https://www.neda.gov.ph/online-consultation-on-defining-and-preparing-for-the-new-normal/>.

own class. Of the three countries that succumbed to the pandemic with the highest numbers of death or disease for months, the US, Brazil, and India have these things in common: a denial of the virus, a dismissive attitude of what it costs economically and socially, and a false hope given out to people that it would go away.

To prepare the Philippines for this “new normal,” the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) came up with what it called “online public consultation” and asked the public to participate in defining what, indeed, is this new normal and how to prepare for it.² It appears that NEDA did not have at that time an operating definition of this term the government was using to shape the attitudes, behavior, and reactions of the masses. At around the same time, the World Health Organization deployed the phrase “new norm,”³ a phrase similar to “new normal” when dealing with a “standard.” In briefings, that world body has continued to unnecessarily use that phrase as it tries to redefine what the future holds for all countries affected by the pandemic.⁴

By this time, “new normal” became a catch-all term for a Darwinist take on the pandemic, with a stress on (personal

² National Economic and Development Authority, “Online Public Consultation on Defining and Preparing for the ‘New Normal’.”

³ World Health Organization, “From the ‘New Normal’ to a ‘New Future’: A Sustainable Response to COVID-19,” October 13, 2020, <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/news/commentaries/detail-hq/from-the-new-normal-to-a-new-future-a-sustainable-response-to-covid-19>.

⁴ World Health Organization, “From the ‘New Normal’ to a ‘New Future’?”

and collective) self-preservation and the ability to adjust to the difficult requisites of this new condition of life.⁵ In the Philippines, the phrase “new normal” has become a byword, a password, and a code. Every citizen of the country must learn it and take it to heart, where it should reside permanently. And almost by default, the unintended consequences of that language—its meaning as action, as activity, as performance, as deed—were enormous. For most cases, it meant death to so many; among the poor, it has been both death and misery and the impossibility of redemption.

The arc of the unfolding of this “language” of and from the pandemic almost followed the much-touted five Kubler-Ross stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.⁶ A sixth stage, meaning, has been proposed by Kessler.⁷ If we look at this narrative of catastrophe in the country, we see those stages at times overlapping with denial by the powerful—the ruling class—of what this COVID-19 was in 2020 and what it is in 2021, a year after. Almost always, the rest of the stages have become the lot of the underclass of a society marked by faith in the transcendent

⁵ Nilish Gupte, “Is it “New Normal” or is it “Abnormal”?,” <https://thriveglobal.com/stories/is-it-new-normal-or-is-it-abnormal/>, April 7, 2020.

⁶ Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss, Reprint Edition* (New York: Scribner, 2014).

⁷ David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019).

while simultaneously summoning their rage in the forms of iniquities in access to the country's resources; in the determined bargaining for a chance at life; in that dark entry into depression; and then that acceptance, as they have always done since the beginning of their centuries of colonized and oppressive existence. The promised *ayuda*, a cash assistance from the government's Social Amelioration Program (SAP) became a site of ineptitude and negligence.⁸ The terror and horror of being poor in a country run by the economic and political elites came in full view in these tragic government rituals of giving measly aid to its people.

In late January 2020, with Health Secretary Francisco Duque III not proactively endorsing a travel ban even when there were already twenty-three "suspected" flu-like symptoms under the careful watch of the Department of Health, the virus went on a rampage, first in the big cities where informal settlers live in squalor while the moneyed live in gated communities complete with security guards to check those who come in and out of the wealthy's homes. Some political leaders such as Senators Loren Legarda and Francisco Pangilinan called for the temporary banning of Chinese tourists coming into the country as a matter of prudence, the banning a means to stop the spread of the virus.

⁸ Glazyl Masculino, "Elderly Man in Bacolod Dies while waiting in Line for SAP Benefit," *The Manila Bulletin*, May 3, 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/05/03/elderly-man-in-bacolod-dies-while-waiting-in-line-for-sap-benefit/>.

Duque argued that it was more prudent to not ban the tourists because “(China) might question why we’re not doing the same for all other countries that have reported cases of the new coronavirus.”⁹ He prevailed and the virus spread like wildfire, mostly infecting the poor and leading to untold sufferings.¹⁰ By this, Duque began this vernacular career of the virus that in the end proved calamitous.

The vernacular of the veracious—this assigning of truth to oneself, a truth devoid of embodiment, context, and observable facts while it assumes a semblance of what could be true—is in fact a calculated technique of state power and governance. It is an intentional “management of information” accessible to the public. Herman and Chomsky termed this the “manufacture of consent,” a technique of governmentality that only deploys a portion of the full and big picture of collective life.¹¹ With this partial picture, the people—the citizens—do not have the capacity to imagine a different reality, a different version of truth that could run counter to the oftentimes skewed or self-serving version of the truth of the state and its agencies, or the state and its agents. This is called propaganda, an irrationally biased way of disseminating what ought to be known by the public—it is biased because it

⁹ Mara Cepeda, “Even with Coronavirus Scare, no Mainland Chinese Travel Ban for Now – Duque,” *Rappler*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/coronavirus-scare-travel-ban-mainland-chinese-not-for-now-duque>.

¹⁰ Masculino, “Elderly Man in Bacolod Dies.”

¹¹ Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacture of Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

is skewed toward the support and perpetuation of the interests of those holding the reins of power.

We have examples of the vernacular of the veracious in Harry Roque spinning that the estimate of the University of the Philippines was proven wrong.¹² The Roque spin included a reminder for observing health protocols like “social distancing,” which is itself a wrong phrase but has taken the form of another vernacular of the veracious. The better, more appropriate term according to scholars and public health care workers is “physical distancing.”¹³ The two terms are not synonymous at all, with physical distancing requiring a real physical distance of six feet away from the next person, while social distancing requiring the “distancing” of social connection for a time. During a pandemic, it might be healthier to sustain the social connection instead of the social distancing mode provided the physical distance is followed.¹⁴

As the pandemic reached almost uncontrollable numbers all over the world, with even the US lodging first in the number of infections and deaths for months, we saw the

¹² Aika Rey, “Roque Spins Again: ‘We Beat the UP Prediction... Congratulations, Philippines!’” *Rappler*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/inside-track/roque-spins-again-congratulations-philippines-up-coronavirus-estimate-proven-wrong>.

¹³ Harris Allen, Brent Ling, and Wayne Burton, “Stop Using the Term ‘Social Distancing’—Start Talking About ‘Physical Distancing, Social Connection’,” *Health Affairs*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20200424.213070/full/>.

¹⁴ Allen, Ling, and Burton, “Stop Using the Term ‘Social Distancing’.”

intertwining of power and language: the powerful sabotaging, oftentimes intentionally, the healing power of words, their capacity to uplift the human spirit now wretched, wrecked, and wreaked. Eventually, truth did not exist or if it did, there were but “bad versions” largely based on alternative realities. Almost assuming a clown’s language, those who were in the know in the US, beginning with President Donald Trump, played on false hopes and the clearly unscientific position that the virus was just a flu and that it would go away quickly. This denialism, an official position during his presidency, led to vaccine hesitancy among the populace who have believed in these anti-science pronouncements.¹⁵

The capacity of the dominant class to “engineer ascent” has been unmasked by Gramsci and Althusser, who have written about the hegemonic power of this class and its relentless ability to reproduce itself, deploy various apparatuses of the state for self-preservation, and secure power at all costs.¹⁶ In particular, Gramsci speaks about “invisible power,” sometimes referred to as the “third face of power,” to account, among others, for the unwelcome spread of power among members of a group, which are actors in the reproduction of class relations and use language and its possibilities to propagate their messages, mostly to

¹⁵ James Hamblin, “Trump’s Pathology is Now Clear,” *The Atlantic*, October 31, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/10/trump-covid-denial/616946/>.

¹⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

the class they rule. Their language is clothed with the capacity to conceal the contradictions of social life by highlighting only that which appeases, even if only in a fantastic way, the masses. Althusser goes on to re-check the consequences of hegemony and teaches us that the state's ideological apparatus reproduces the same delusions that have afflicted the dominated class in a divided society.¹⁷ The deployment of “new normal” to direct how people act, behave, think, and obey not only issues out of fear and threat as in the case of the Philippines, with the deployment of soldiers, the police, and security personnel even in the most remote areas. This double deployment—the deployment of the approved terminology of the Philippine state and the deployment of the agents of its repressive apparatus left the masses no choice.¹⁸ But the Philippines did not have a franchise of this double deployment during a state-imposed lockdown.¹⁹ India, South Africa, and Zimbabwe used its security forces to make people comply with the imposed lockdowns. Some of these countries even put generals in-charge of the enforcement of measures to control the

¹⁷ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. and ed. G.M. Goshgarian (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2014).

¹⁸ Karsten Noko, “The Problem with Army Enforced Lockdowns in the Time of COVID-19,” *Al Jazeera*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/4/2/the-problem-with-army-enforced-lockdowns-in-the-time-of-covid-19>.

¹⁹ Joseph Peter Calleja, “Duterte Deploys Military against Quarantine Violators,” *UCA News*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/duterte-deploys-military-against-quarantine-violators/87778#>.

spread of the virus. What was left in all these was the community, the people who were and continue to be at the end of the bargain.²⁰

COVID-19 and the Language Game

The psychology of upheavals almost always leads people into a catch-all language to give an economized understanding of what they do not understand. According to Berg, the language—terminologies, nomenclatures, slogans, mottos, anthems—would play on three pillars: reactionisms, nationalism, and populism.²¹ The control of knowledge—the monopoly at the hand of the state and its actors—is mediated by a kind of language controlled and formulated by producers of that monopoly. He argues that “the governmentality of illiberal regimes focuses on building a monopoly of knowledge not only in the political sphere but also across society in a concerted effort to shape citizen’s governability and manufacture consent for policies through epistemic control.”²²

The language game, understood by Wittgenstein as always-already an action itself, the action woven into the language, is “a form of life.” It is the action into which that

²⁰ Noko, “The Problem with Army Enforced Lockdowns in the Time of COVID-19.”

²¹ Daniel Berg, “Illiberal Propaganda: Political Discourse, Monopolies of Knowledge, and Governmentality in Orban’s Hungary,” Master’s Thesis, School of Public Policy, Central European University, 2017.

²² Berg, “Illiberal Propaganda.”

language is woven that gives the latter its meaning.²³ Austin supports Wittgenstein and tells us that the meaning of language is not in what it says it means but what the language gamers—the language users—do with the language, what they in fact do with it, what they perform with it, what talk they deliver with it.²⁴ In reference to the deployment of the “new normal,” the question is this: What does this exactly mean apart from the usual sense of the required health protocols? What contradictions does this phrase conceal? What grief—or misery and wretchedness—comes out of this normal that seems to be new but is, in fact, so old that it leads us back to histories of oppression and narratives of iniquities, neglect, and brutalities?

In an interview with Kessler by Berinato, Kessler said: “Understanding the stages of grief is a start. But whenever I talk about the stages of grief, I have to remind people that the stages aren’t linear and may not happen in this order. It’s not a map but it provides some scaffolding for this unknown world.”²⁵ The unknown world is the world marked by a new pandemic all countries have not known before. To date, there is no country that has not been touched by this scourge even if some have been able to get this under control or have

²³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001).

²⁴ John L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955, 1962*, eds. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

²⁵ Scott Berinato, “That Discomfort You’re Feeling is Grief,” March 23, 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>.

“suppressed” its transmission.²⁶ By August 2020, nineteen places have succeeded in suppressing the spread of the virus, with the majority of these places from the Asia-Pacific Region (Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, and South Korea) while the rest are spread all over the various other continents (Uganda, Togo, Latvia, Luxembourg, Uruguay, Finland, and Rwanda).²⁷

During a pandemic, as during times of grief, denial is an easy way out, a kind of default mechanism. Kessler, still working within the framework of Kübler-Ross’s five stages of grief, reminds us: “There’s denial, which we say a lot of early on: *This [COVID-19] virus won’t affect us.* There’s anger: *You’re making me stay home and taking away my activities.* There’s bargaining: *Okay, if I social distance for two weeks everything will be better, right?* There’s sadness: *I don’t know when this will end.* And finally, there’s acceptance. *This is happening; I have to figure out how to proceed.*”²⁸

But there is a broader psychology involved in denial during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the deniers categorized as either (a) political partisans, (b) medically uninformed, (c) purveyors and believers of conspiracy

²⁶ The Lancet COVID-19 Commissioners, Task Force Chairs, and Commission Secretariat, “Lancet COVID-19 Commission Statement on the Occasion of the 75th Session of the UN General Assembly,” *Lancet* 396, no. 10257 (September 14, 2020): 1102–1124, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31927-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31927-9).

²⁷ “Lancet COVID-19 Commission Statement.”

²⁸ Kessler in Berinato, “That Discomfort You’re Feeling is Grief.”

theories.²⁹ These categories, however, can overlap, as in the case of the US and other places, with political partisans that are not medically trained at the same time arguing that this pandemic is a hoax and that it would go away.³⁰ Donald Trump, the former President of the US, is famous for this view about the pandemic as a hoax.³¹ By October 31, 2020, *The Washington Post* had tracked that Trump had repeatedly said for forty times that the COVID-19 “will go away,” the repetition a calculation, a tactic of making the Goebbelsian “big lie” work.³² Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda of the Third Reich of Nazi Germany, orchestrated Adolf Hitler’s misinformation campaign under the guise of service to the Aryan nation. He used a calculated lie—the big lie—to create an illusion of truth to be consumed by the masses.

In the Philippines, the acceptance of the pandemic after a cavalier dismissal of its capability to infect hundreds of

²⁹ Nassir Ghaemi, “The Psychology of Pandemic Denial,” *Psychology Today*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mood-swings/202003/the-psychology-pandemic-denial>.

³⁰ Ghaemi, “The Psychology of Pandemic Denial. See also, Mario Parker and Josh Wingrove, “Trump Says Surging Virus ‘Will Go away Like Things Go away,’” *Bloomberg*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-05/trump-says-surging-virus-will-go-away-like-things-go-away>.

³¹ Christopher Wilson, “Trump Identifies Another Hoax: The Coronavirus,” *Yahoo*, July 13, 2020, <https://news.yahoo.com/trump-identifies-another-hoax-the-coronavirus-152649383.html>.

³² The Washington Post Staff, “40 Times Trump said the Coronavirus would Go away,” *Washington Post*, 2:31, September 16, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/34-times-trump-said-the-coronavirus-would-go-away/2020/04/30/d2593312-9593-4ec2-aff7-72c1438fca0e_video.html.

thousands of Filipinos seems to have morphed into a code with the repeated, almost Goebbelsian³³ deployment of the phrase “new normal,” with Goebbels reminding us that words are malleable and can be used to conform to a bigger idea for a grander political end.³⁴ At the start of the pandemic and as the summer months wore on, the constancy of that repetition led people to believe that the “new normal” is the way things are. But the reality was different: the masses of the people of the Philippines and elsewhere knew more of hunger than death, affirming that they are not afraid of the virus but are more afraid of dying from hunger. With the enhanced community quarantine in the Philippines, for instance, unemployment became a “new normal.” The lack of government assistance proved one thing: a wholesale government inefficiency—for everybody to remember forever.³⁵ With a government order for many local governments to impose a community quarantine, jeepney drivers lost their source of income and for weeks had to endure hunger until June 2, when a number of them organized a peaceful protest for the loss of their livelihood during the enforced community quarantine that the

³³ Fred Taylor (trans & ed.), *The Goebbels Diaries: 1939-1941* (New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1983).

³⁴ See David Irving, *Goebbels: Mastermind of the Third Reich* (London: Focal Point, 1996).

³⁵ Dan Olanday and Jennifer Rigby, “Inside the World’s Longest and Strictest Coronavirus Lockdown in the Philippines,” *The Telegraph*, July 11, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/inside-worlds-longest-strictest-coronavirus-lockdown-philippines/>.

government repeatedly extended for months. Officials promptly hauled them to prison and even filed a case against them³⁶ for violating community quarantine rules.

The morphing of the guidelines issued by the Philippine government on how to behave and how to help combat the spread of the virus became part of the new normal, with that almost doctrinaire repetition of the washing of hands, social distancing, and staying-at-home regulations, a calculated Pavlovian conditioning on radio, television, the newspapers, social media, and government pronouncements and virtual pressers.³⁷ As of August 22, 2020, the Philippines took the twenty-second slot in the highest number of infected people. On that same day, the US topped the list with more than five million cases.³⁸ How could there be normalcy in these deaths, the debilitating of peoples, and the destruction of communities? What, indeed, is new in this “new normal”?

³⁶ Nick Aspinwall, “Jeepney Drivers Face Charges Amid Heightened Protest Crackdown in the Philippines,” *The Diplomat*, June 12, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/jeepney-drivers-face-charges-amid-heightened-protest-crackdown-in-the-philippines/>.

³⁷ Daniel A. Gottlieb and Elizabeth L. Begej, “Principles of Pavlovian Conditioning: Description, Content, Function,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Operant and Classical Conditioning*, eds. Frances K. McSweeney and Eric S. Murphy (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 3–26.

³⁸ Paul Buffa, “Mapping the Global Spread of the Virus.” *National Geographic*, last updated May 21, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/graphics/mapping-coronavirus-infections-across-the-globe>.

The Uneasy Questions

Hermeneuts talk about the inchoate paradox in and of human language: in order to tell a truth, it must tell a lie. Art, as language, follows the same trajectory. In the case of the pandemic, a kind of suspicion sets in, with the phrase “new normal” the first in a long line of pandemic-oriented words that are all suspect like the onset of a “second wave” as announced by the Philippine Department of Health³⁹ only to take it back later on.⁴⁰

The descriptor “new” in the phrase is susceptible to distortion, forming and deforming, and corruption. Either way, we can get to the extremes: something is new when it was previously not present or did not exist, or it presents itself as something much better than the old one. The pandemic rests on the first instance, with the second a clear case of an illusion. In the Philippines, a country that has gone through nine years of Martial Law (from 1972 to 1981) out of the twenty-one years of a Marcos conjugal dictatorship (1965 to 1986) that dished out a “New Society” as its political formula to address the ills of a long-suffering people, the “new” in the “new normal” is an easy invitation to a lie or to

³⁹ Dona Magsino, “Second Wave of COVID-19 already ongoing in Philippines, says Duque,” *MSN*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/739013/second-wave-of-covid-19-already-ongoing-in-philippines-says-duque/story/>.

⁴⁰ Leila B. Salaverria, “No Second Wave yet, Palace, DOH Clarify,” *Inquirer*, May 22, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1279143/no-second-wave-yet-palace-doh-clarify>.

propaganda that deploys “big lying” as a tactic and a strategy to form the consciousness of people according to the wishes and distorted visions of the rulers. In other countries, there is this insistence on the need for people to follow the guidelines set by their own government’s health agencies, but there is not this almost knee-jerk use of “new normal” as if people need to be conditioned to follow every word the government says. The Marcosian “New Society,” with “critical collaboration” from some well-placed church leaders, led to thousands of lives lost or imprisoned, thousands more displaced, and thousands more disappeared.⁴¹ Marcos’s New Society eventually became a convenient excuse for kleptocracy and kakistocracy: with the kleptocrats making a comeback as soon as he was deposed and even until today and the kakistocrats parading like clowns and on the ready for the singing and dancing to entertain both the political leaders and the masses needing some diversion and distraction in this politics of “bread and circus,”⁴² with the bread missing, with rice meant for distribution rotting in government warehouses⁴³, and with the circus people busy planning for the next distraction. This *panem-et-circenses* tactic—a cheap and

⁴¹ William C. Rempel, *Delusions of a Dictator: The Mind of Marcos As Revealed in His Secret Diaries* (Boston, MA: Little Brown & Co, 1993).

⁴² Linda Ellis, “A Brief Look at the Juvenal’s ‘Bread and Circuses,’” *Medium* (blog), August 24, 2019, <https://medium.com/@lindaellisphd/a-brief-look-at-the-juvenals-bread-circuses-a5ffe5770dba>.

⁴³ Maila Ager, “4 Million Bags of Imported Rice Still at NFA Warehouses – Administrator,” August 28, 2019, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1158494/4-million-bags-of-imported-rice-still-at-nfa-warehouses-administrator#ixzz6ZInxvIXw>.

shallow appeasement of the public—worked in the beginning but did not last for both Imperial Rome⁴⁴ and the Philippines.

Two EDSA people’s peaceful revolutions—People Power I in 1986 and People Power II in 2001—deployed calculated promises of divine grace and political greatness, but all we have now are the fading images of Mang Pandoy⁴⁵ in his shack, the three boys watching their paper boats floating by the filthy Pasig River, and the promise of a new dawn that disregards family relations as the basis of good governance. Succeeding leaders after Marcos did not have the capacity to enchant: they rehashed each other’s calculating and calculated catch-all language. Their words—always deployed as weapons—are a case of a prison house that limits our understanding of ourselves, the world, and the capacity of many peoples of the Philippines to dream of greatness beyond the everyday, beyond the spectacular.⁴⁶ There has been this absence of a language that could re-inscribe a country’s purposeful act of making its citizens understand that the pandemic unfurled the chasm between those who have so much power and resources in the country, and those who have no means to live that missing

⁴⁴ Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture and Social Decay* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

⁴⁵ Perseus Echeminada and Paolo Romero, “Mang Pandoy Dies of TB,” *Philippine Star*, September 2, 2008, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2008/09/02/83082/mang-pandoy-dies-tb>.

⁴⁶ Frederic Jameson, *The Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972).

the SAP could mean only death, hence, the hours and hours of waiting for the meager cash transfer. As if on cue, there has been no place in the world that is spared of this pandemic, but there had been countries that responded with moral urgency to the needs of their own people. So many other countries did not have that grace to do the gracious thing for their own people.

The Philippine government's Social Amelioration Fund,⁴⁷ a cash aid program, quickly transformed into an *ayuda* by the hungry, displaced, unemployed, and vulnerable masses. The Spanish term refers to "aid" or "assistance" and is drawn from the country's Hispanic past, a tragic story of suffering that lasted for 333 years prior to the next stage of suffering of the Filipino masses under the new colonial masters, the Americans that coveted the Philippines, their coveting in pursuit of their mission of carrying the "white man's burden" and their "manifest destiny."⁴⁸ SAP as an acronym did not have the same imaginative and subversive power as the *ayuda*, the use of the term SAP intentionally erasing the real wretched condition of the displaced and the vulnerable—the "poorest of the poor"—when compared to the *ayuda*, with the giver on unequal footing as that of the

⁴⁷ VC Apostol and Laurence Go, "Ameliorating the Social Amelioration Program," August 9, 2020 <https://www.bworldonline.com/ameliorating-the-social-amelioration-program/>.

⁴⁸ Steffi San Buenaventura, "The Colors of Manifest Destiny: Filipinos and the American Other(s)," *Amerasia Journal* 24, no. 3 (1998): 1–26, DOI: 10.17953/amer.24.3.pgqm8361144r7716.

recipient. At this time, the 18 million poor have accepted their lot: in the face of hunger, there are no other choices except to queue up and accept the government's cash aid—a cash transfer amounting to between Php 5,000 to 8,000.⁴⁹ The replacing of “the SAP” into “ayuda” by the masses is a revolutionary act: they demanded from the government what the latter ought to provide them in the spirit of an imagined social contract by virtue of their being citizens of the country. They did not queue up as beggars.

The language of the ruling political elites has clearly been a prison house,⁵⁰ one that purposefully serves as an instrument in limiting the understanding of the ruled class on their miserable condition. The ayuda—a form of language—checked the government's ability to provide for its people and forced it to grow its conscience when it realized that millions of families would starve because of the pandemic. This time around an exhibit of Mang Pandoy would not be enough to proclaim the need to build a more equitable life for all citizens. The public procession of three boys gaming their folded paper boats for everyone to see on television would not spell the difference between government intent and real social practice of serving those who do not have access to public resources. And the promise of a “*walang kama-kamaganak, walang kaibi-kaibigan*” (there will not be a preference

⁴⁹ Maila Ager, “Poor Families to Get up to P8,000 Cash Subsidy from COVID-19 Bill,” *Inquirer*, March 23, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1247244/poor-families-to-get-up-to-p8000-cash-subsidy-from-covid-19-bill>.

⁵⁰ Jameson, *The Prison House of Language*.

for one's relatives or for one's friends in my administration) that had to end in another people power that would shame the promiser remained meaningless. Pareng Erap, the president of the poor and the masses, was a wordsmith but did not have an ounce of truth in the words he spoke. His code to win the approval of the masses—"Erap para sa mahirap" (Erap for the poor)—was the illusion of truth; when checked against the facts, this lie would demonstrate the stuff that he is made of: a plunderer—and an insatiable one.⁵¹

In the larger context of our lives, a context that involves our political communities, words can become currencies. They can buy us freedom or they can lead us to the prison house of the mind, of human understanding, of perspective, or worse, of lies and deception. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic-oriented words, terms, and phrases have become codes that, depending on how these are thrown our way, can either open up new possibilities or shut out options in life. Captured by what the Philippine government termed as "community quarantine," "new normal" served as a mantra in government pronouncements on radio, television, other forms of social media, and virtual presses.

⁵¹ Addie Pobre and Cathrine Gonzales, "Looking back at EDSA II: The Political Paths of Estrada and Arroyo," *Rappler*, January 17, 2012, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/look-back-edsa-ii-joseph-estrada-gloria-arroyo>.

As a mantra, “new normal” has been used to instill discipline: to make people wear face masks and face shields, keep their distance from the next person, cover their mouths when they sneeze or cough, observe curfew, or remain at home. But it was also used to justify government abuse of power and to instill terror among the populace. The poor people who were violators of the curfew and “social distancing” were promptly hauled to prison or placed in the holding cells of *barangays* (or villages). The president even said that the violators could be shot dead.⁵² From all these, we know who has the power over words and to invent a different reality for the consumption of the suffering masses.

Quarantine versus Lockdown

Medieval plagues of the fourteenth century gave us the idea of quarantine as a measure to flush out the cause of the plague.⁵³ But farther back into human history, the act of quarantining people to control the spread of the plague or highly transmissible diseases like the bubonic plague among a large swath of Europe, which led to the estimated death of one-third of that continent’s population, can be traced to the Jews of the Old Testament, which was then restated in the New Testament. The term quarantine was not used at that

⁵² Lynzy Billing, “Duterte’s Response to the Coronavirus: ‘Shoot Them Dead,’” April 16, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/16/duterte-philippines-coronavirus-response-shoot-them-dead/>.

⁵³ See, John M. Eager, *The Early History of Quarantine: Origin of Sanitary Measures Directed against Yellow Fever* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1903).

time, but the acts described were those of separating people from the healthy ones in the hope of suppressing the transmission of the cause of the disease.⁵⁴ There are two possible complementary sources of the medieval term: one coming from the Italian “*quaranta giorni*” (forty days)⁵⁵ and the other from the Venetian “*quarantena*” (forty days), which are both drawn from the Latin “*quadraginta*” (forty) and the medieval Latin “*quarentina*” (forty days).⁵⁶

While other countries like China approached the pandemic by imposing a 76-day lockdown in Wuhan to contain the spread of the virus, other countries used the term quarantine, with its origins in the more contemporary forms of doing quarantine as used in the earlier pandemics of the twenty-first century.⁵⁷ A quarantine, used for individuals and communities, is meant “to keep someone who might have been exposed to COVID-19 away from others.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Mackowiak, Philip, and Paul S. Sehdev. “The Origin of Quarantine.” *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 35, no. 9 (November 2002): 1071–72. <https://doi.org/10.1086/344062>.

⁵⁵ Dan Koeppel, “A Brief History of Quarantines,” *The Wire Cutter*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/wirecutter/blog/history-of-quarantines/>. See Also, Johanna Mayer, “The Origin of the Word ‘Quarantine,’” *Science Friday*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.sciencefriday.com/articles/the-origin-of-the-word-quarantine/>.

⁵⁶ Mayer, “The Origin of the Word ‘Quarantine.’”

⁵⁷ David N. Sundwall, “Quarantine in the 21st Century: To be Effective, Public Health Policies must be Inclusive,” *American Journal of Public Health* 109, no. 9(September 2019): 1184–85. DOI: 10.2105/ajph.2019.305224.

⁵⁸ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “When to Quarantine,” September 10, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/quarantine.html>.

“Lockdown,” on the other hand, has its history in prisons. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, this referred to the sealing of a particular locality to stem the spread of the virus. Not used as a technical public health term, it could refer to “anything from mandatory geographic quarantine (which would probably be unconstitutional under most scenarios in the US), to non-mandatory recommendations to shelter in place (which are totally legal and can be issued by health officials at the federal, state, or local level), to anything in between (e.g., ordering certain events or types of businesses to close, which is generally constitutional if deemed necessary to stop the spread of disease based on available evidence).”⁵⁹

The lockdowns of many countries resulted in the radical reduction of noise produced by people, as reported by seismologists working in hundreds of seismology stations around the world. Writing on this phenomenon of the world going silent, Basu said that “[w]hen lockdown started in March, the world went instantly, strangely silent. City streets emptied. Joggers and families disappeared from parks. Construction projects froze. Stores closed.”⁶⁰ Basu referred to the silence of the world—a seismic silence—as a silence

⁵⁹ Per law professor, Lindsay Wiley of the Washington College of Law, in Brian Resnick, “Italy and China Used Lockdowns to Slow the Coronavirus. Could We?” March 10, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2020/3/10/21171464/coronavirus-us-lockdown-travel-restriction-italy>.

⁶⁰ Tanya Basu, “Lockdown was the Longest Period of Quiet in Recorded Human History,” July 23, 2020, “<https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/07/23/1005574/lockdown-was-the-longest-period-of-quiet-in-human-history/>.”

caused by the radical reduction of noise pollution and “a drop in the anthropogenic noise.”⁶¹ The scientists tracked the reduced noise of the world moving from Wuhan, China, as it imposed a lockdown, and then in Italy, as it did the same.⁶² Italy, with a population of 60 million, went on a national lockdown on March 9, 2020.⁶³ Lockdowns originally meant the keeping of prisoners in their cells to avoid further erosion of public safety.⁶⁴ As the pandemic raged on in the Philippines particularly in the bigger cities like Metropolitan Manila, the political leaders grew comfortable with the use of lockdowns as they sealed off portions of the local government units.

The New Normal is Not New: It is Old

In 1966, “new normal” was a pair of words used by Robert Heinlein, a novelist (of scientific fiction), in his “wor(l)ding”⁶⁵ of an imagined utopian community, a

⁶¹ Basu, “Lockdown was the Longest Period of Quiet in Recorded Human History.”

⁶² Lauren Fagan, “Seismic Silence: COVID Reduced Human Sound, Underground,” July 25, 2020, <https://www.sustainability-times.com/in-depth/seismic-silence-covid-reduced-human-sound-underground/>.

⁶³ Lisa Schnirring, “Italy Expands COVID-19 Lockdown to Whole Country,” March 9, 2020, <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2020/03/italy-expands-covid-19-lockdown-whole-country>.

⁶⁴ Steven Poole, “From Barges to Barricades: The Changing Meaning of ‘Lockdown,’” *The Guardian*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/02/changing-meaning-of-lockdown>.

⁶⁵ I have proposed a phenomenon of “word becoming world” and called this “wor(l)ding.” The inspiration comes from the hermeneutic reading of Ellen van Wolde of the First Eleven Chapters of the Christian Sacred Text, the Bible. See *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies of Genesis 1–11* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

settlement of earth people in Luna, the moon. Adam Selene, a human alter ego of a powerful computer in the lunar settlement of earth-people, addresses the lunar people: “Citizens, requests may reach you through your comrade neighbors. I hope you will comply willingly; it will speed the day when I can bow out and life can get back to normal — a new normal, free of the Authority, free of guards, free of troops stationed on us, free of passports and searches and arbitrary arrests.”⁶⁶

The popularization of the “new normal” in this COVID-19 pandemic was intended to instill among the population the various means by which the virus could be stopped from spreading.⁶⁷ But that is one part of the story. Even with the new normal—and because it is normal and it is new—many people did not heed the call to use preventive measures including social and physical distancing and the wearing of face covers. One of those who flaunted this is President Donald Trump of the US, holding rallies and other gatherings in airport tarmacs, other open spaces, and closed venues.⁶⁸ All of these intentionally disregard one fact stated by Dr. Nirav D. Shah: “The virus favors gatherings” and

⁶⁶ Robert Heinlein, *The Moon is a Harsh Witness* (New York: Ace, 2018), 194.

⁶⁷ Lisa Lockerd Maragakis, “The New Normal and Coronavirus,” John Hopkins Medicine, last updated August 14, 2020, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/coronavirus-new-normal>.

⁶⁸ Jill Colvin, “Trump Revels in Packed Michigan Crowd Amid Book Fallout,” *AP News*, September 11, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/d242a3d0a5bd4dbfd75f99c709408b01>.

that “It does not distinguish between happy events like a wedding celebration, or sad farewells, like a funeral.”⁶⁹

The repetition of the new normal produces a consciousness that things are fine—they are not. What we have is an altered life, disrupted even, not new at all, and never normal. The endpoint in going through this pandemic is the return to a normal life, not a new normal.⁷⁰

In 2009, during an economic crisis in the US, economists invented the term “new normal” at PIMCO.⁷¹ El-Erian writes that the context was to warn against “the prevailing (and dominant) market and policy view that post crisis industrial economies would revert to their more recent means.”⁷² He continues: “Our use of the term was an attempt to move the discussion beyond the notion that the crisis was a mere flesh wound, easily healed with time. Instead, the [economic] crisis cut to the bone. It was the inevitable result of an extraordinary, multi-year period which was anything but normal.”⁷³

El-Erian and his colleagues at PIMCO assumed a “low-growth equilibrium” of the global economy after the

⁶⁹ Madeline Holcombe and Holly Yan, “Most Americans Probably Won’t be Able to Get a Covid-19 Vaccine until Mid-2021, CDC Director says,” CNN, September 17, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/world/2020/9/17/covid-vaccine-americans-mid-2021.html>.

⁷⁰ Holcombe and Yan.

⁷¹ Mohammed A. El-Erian, “Navigating the New Normal in Industrial Countries,” The Per Jacobson Foundation Lectures of 2010, in International Monetary Fund, Washington, D.C., October 10, 2010, 12–13.

⁷² El-Erian, “Navigating the New Normal in Industrial Countries.”

⁷³ El-Erian, “Navigating the New Normal.”

Economic Crisis of 2007–2008, and thus, the global economy has become “normal” again, its normality novel. Cliffe repudiates El-Erian and his group and writes: “The ‘New Normal’ never was, isn’t, and should be replaced by the ‘New Abnormal’.” He continues: “In reality, the situation is far from ‘normal’, and the attempt to characterise it as such has been deceptive, disingenuous, and dangerous.”⁷⁴ He tells of the constitutive elements of that quality of being normal—of having gained “normality,” saying that “[n]ormality suggests that the Crisis is behind us, and that we again understand what’s happening and that we can make predictions.”⁷⁵

Applied to the pandemic, the use of “new normal” to refer to the condition of a community ravaged by the virus paints a happy picture without any basis in reality. When people are hungry and express a fundamental fear of dying from hunger and not from COVID-19, something does not add up in this calculated conditioning of the masses. The use of face shields, for instance, could not be taken to be a case of the “new normal.” The constant washing of hands with alcohol or with soap and water is not the new normal. The physical or social distancing requiring people to be at least six feet away from the person closest to you is not the new normal. What is the new normal is the public return of

⁷⁴ Mark Cliffe, “The New Normal that Never Was,” *Voxue*, May 19, 2016, <https://voxeu.org/article/new-normal-never-was>.

⁷⁵ Cliffe, “The New Normal that Never Was.”

people's public faces, of a regular hand washing that does not border on the paranoid, or physical and social intimacy with one's familiars. "We will not die of Covid-19. Instead, we will die of hunger."⁷⁶ The Philippine government's calculated use of "community quarantine" instead of "lockdown," a terminology used in Wuhan, China, and then eventually in many parts of Europe including Spain, France, United Kingdom, and Italy, suggests a calculation of consequences and intended results.⁷⁷

Name-Calling as a Weapon: "China Virus," "Kungflu," and "the Spanish Flu"

A journalist's error in reporting about the 1918 influenza pandemic became "normalized" and those not in the know of that humungous error continue to call that pandemic the Spanish flu. The fact is that it is not Spanish at all and did

⁷⁶ Two renderings I was able to document were in Tagalog and Ilokano, with the Tagalog, in a number of variations, expressing the same idea this way: "*Hindi kami mamamatay sa Covid-19. Mamamatay kami sa gutom,*" and the Ilokano, "*Dikam matay iti Covid-19. Matay kami iti bisin.*" See *CNA Insider*, "Starving in Philippines' Coronavirus Lockdown: A 16-Year-Old's Story," YouTube video, 6:58, posted by CNA Insider, September 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhDHGgo4yZg&fbclid=IwAR1apqheFieRD3o8y5R8mlpIIDwjC3H51f3DL27Bo6ITK5WUqQ0TpLvyFE>. See also, Cliff Venzon, "Philippines to Ease Lockdown as Hunger and Unemployment Surge," *Nikkei Asia*, May 29, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Philippines-to-ease-lockdown-as-hunger-and-unemployment-surge>.

⁷⁷ "Community Quarantine," not Lockdown, says the Philippine Government. See also Alasdair Sandford, "Coronavirus: Half of Humanity Now on Lockdown as 90 Countries Call for Confinement," *Euro News*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/02/coronavirus-in-europe-spain-s-death-toll-hits-10-000-after-record-950-new-deaths-in-24-hou>.

not originate in Spain. There are no clear facts yet as to the novel coronavirus, but to call it the China virus or the Chinese virus might stand in the way of us understanding what ought to be the correct medical strategy to “combat” the pandemic, the act of combatting essentially drawing from the tropics of war, conflict, and battle.⁷⁸

The story of COVID-19 being dubbed “China virus” or “Chinese virus” by US President Donald Trump hits at the core of why names are important and the reality the names suggests.⁷⁹ After consulting with his advisers, Mr. Trump decided to take back his reference to the coronavirus based on its origin not making “a big deal out of it” and where it “originates.”⁸⁰ The US President justified his use of the term “Chinese virus” (or China virus) this way: “Cause it comes from China. It’s not racist at all, no, not at all. It comes from China, that’s why. I want to be accurate.”⁸¹

The consequence of Trump’s trope about COVID-19 as a China virus resulted in acts of racism particularly directed

⁷⁸ Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017).

⁷⁹ Austa Sumbichian-Clausen, “Trump’s Use of the Term ‘Chinese Virus’ for Coronavirus Hurts Asian Americans, Says Expert,” March 25, 2020, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/diversity-inclusion/489464-trumps-use-of-the-term-chinese-virus-for>.

⁸⁰ Maegan Vasquez, “Trump says He’s Pulling Back from Calling Novel Coronavirus the ‘China Virus,’” *CNN*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/24/politics/donald-trump-pull-back-coronavirus-chinese-virus/index.html>.

⁸¹ Maegan Vasquez and Betsy Klein, “Trump again Defends Use of the Term ‘China Virus,’” *CNN*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/17/politics/trump-china-coronavirus/index.html>.

against Asian Americans.⁸² There is a catastrophic problem in the deployment of the term “China virus”: the collapsing of everything Chinese—the country, the people, the people in America who immigrated to the US or local born Americans of Chinese descent, and the Chinese government that runs the show in responding to the pandemic.

By July 2020 or about three months after Trump’s reference to the COVID-19 as this “China virus” and another term, “Kungflu”⁸³, there had been 2,100 incidents reported of targeting Asian Americans particularly the Chinese Americans in the US. This rise in Asian American hate incidents correlates with Trump’s use of these two terms.⁸⁴ Words used during a pandemic take on a crucial role: they either mediate untruths or the clarity of the situation that the people need to know. In a country divided by race and other sociological, historical, economic, and demographic variables, words cannot be used as if these were from barns, drinking bars, or the streets. When words come out of the mouth of leaders, these take a variety of shades, nuances, meanings, polysemic as these are when they become

⁸² Heller Cheung, Zhaoyin Feng, and Boer Deng, “Coronavirus: What Attacks on Asians Reveal About American Identity,” *BBC News*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52714804>.

⁸³ The Guardian Staff, “Donald Trump Calls Covid-19 ‘Kung-Flu’ at Tulsa Rally,” *The Guardian*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/20/trump-covid-19-kung-flu-racist-language>.

⁸⁴ Erin Donaghue, “2,100 Hater Incidents Against Asian Americans during the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *CBS News*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/anti-asian-american-hate-incidents-up-racism/>.

tropes⁸⁵—when they become figurative, metaphorical. “China virus” and “Kungflu”—figurative as these are—unfurl for us a hidden lifeworld in the mind of the utterer and hint at that power of words that can help us imagine a better language-mediated world out there or within us or destroy us by reducing us to an object of someone else’s scorn, hatred, racism, or white supremacist tactics. Stull reminds us that language “allows us to move through our lives,” aiding us in carving our piece of earth under the sun while at the same time helping us to shape our worldviews about the many things that ought to matter in our lives.⁸⁶

Reflecting on the power of words as used in medicine and healthcare, Khullar tells us: “The words we choose to describe illness are powerful. They carry weight and valence, creating the milieu in which goals of care are discussed and treatment plans designed. In medicine, the use of metaphor is pervasive.”⁸⁷

Here we see a vocabulary of military warfare in the “combating” of illness and in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, a deployment of as many war-oriented words as we can: the fighters, the frontliners, the battle to be

⁸⁵ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays on Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1986).

⁸⁶ Bradford T. Stull, *The Elements of Figurative Language* (New York: Longman, 2002), 2.

⁸⁷ Druv Khullar, “The Trouble with Medicine’s Metaphors,” *The Atlantic*, August 7, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/08/the-trouble-with-medicines-metaphors/374982/>.

won, the casualties, the collateral damage, and as in the case of the lockdown in the Philippines, the police and military checkpoints.

Here is a pandemic that is also a case of war; either countries and their citizens succumb to the war or come out of it victorious, purged, cleansed, and ready to reboot and inaugurate a new life. The return to the “old normal” is a possibility—even a goal for a number of countries that went through so much because of the pandemic.

That “old normal” has provided many communities with the landmarks of the familiar—with the convenience and comfort they have always known. That old normal has its own logic, one that can bring calm and order to the chaos of the pandemic. Unlike the “new normal,” the “old normal” demands a vernacular of veracious that does not reiterate the vocabulary of war, of class divide, of societal chasm, and for some countries, of racism and discrimination.

The “New Normal” as Mind Virus Itself

With the US touted as one of the most technologically advanced countries of the world succumbing to the contagion, a number of experts have issued a clarion call for the country to be prepared for the next pandemic to come after COVID-19. Yong has argued that “COVID-19 is merely a harbinger of worse plagues to come. The U.S. cannot prepare for these inevitable crises if it returns to normal, as many of its people ache to do. Normal led to this.

Normal was a world ever more prone to a pandemic but ever less ready for one.”⁸⁸ There is thus this ethical duty to prepare for the next pandemics to come. The key is the preparation—or better yet prevention. Yong continues: “To avert another catastrophe, the U.S. needs to grapple with all the ways normal failed us. It needs a full accounting of every recent misstep and foundational sin, every unattended weakness and unheeded warning, every festering wound and reopened scar.”⁸⁹

The US National Security Council prepared a strategic plan to address a possible pandemic in the country and elsewhere. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been pandemics during the eight-year presidency of Barack Obama and the “Playbook for Early Response to High-Consequence Emerging Infectious Disease Threats and Biological Incidents.”⁹⁰ The 69-page plan detailed what needed to be done, provided tactics and policy decisions, and gave recommendations in securing funding for the many action plans that needed to be implemented. Completed in 2016 under the Obama Administration, the

⁸⁸ Ed Yong, “How the Pandemic Defeated America,” *The Atlantic*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/coronavirus-american-failure/614191/>.

⁸⁹ Yong, “How the Pandemic Defeated America.”

⁹⁰ Victoria Knight and Kaiser Health News, “Obama Team Left Pandemic Playbook for Trump Administration, Officials Confirm,” *PBS*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/obama-team-left-pandemic-playbook-for-trump-administration-officials-confirm>.

strategic plan was abandoned by the Trump Administration even as they scrambled to put together a national plan.⁹¹

There is something wrong in the constant deployment of the “new normal” in the Philippines. Each day, there is a constant repetition of this from the Department of Health in its virtual presses and parroted by the mass media particularly radio, television, and other social media online broadcasting.⁹² The constant barrage of the phrase—like a meme for brainwashing and functioning like the “New Society” meme of the Martial Law portion of the Marcos Regime from 1972 to 1981—lost its novelty especially when the Philippine government came up with mixed messages on how to combat the pandemic.

One of the mixed messages of the “new normal” is that there are two standards for community quarantine rules: one for those in power and another for the masses, with those in power easily going through checkpoints and barricades, visiting places where they were not supposed to go despite the imposed lockdowns, or holding a *mañanita* when get-togethers were seen as super-spreaders or means

⁹¹ Dan Diamond and Nahal Toosi, “Trump Team Failed to Follow NSC’s Pandemic Playbook,” *Politico*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/25/trump-coronavirus-national-security-council-149285>.

⁹² The basis of my observation was the beginning of the spike of the number of infected by around February and until the early days of June 2020. I was in the country during these months and went through all the quarantine procedures as everyone else.

through which the virus spreads more quickly.⁹³ Brodie suggests that the “new normal” is itself “a mind virus that thrives on your belief that its memes are True. People defend the memes they’re programmed with like they were protecting their lives! It’s the mind virus’s paradise: it has co-opted your intelligence and problem-solving ability in order to preserve itself.”⁹⁴

Brodie argues that mind viruses “are infectious pieces of our culture that spread rapidly throughout a population, altering people’s thoughts and lives in their wake.”⁹⁵ He exemplifies that these “include everything from the relatively harmless examples, such as miniskirts and slang phrases, to those that seriously derail people’s lives.”⁹⁶

There are good viruses and there are bad viruses, the good ones providing some kind of “microbiome” in the mental ecology of people. In this microbiome analogy, these “pieces of culture” do not pose a problem to us when we like them, when we think that they are of use in the pursuit of our own personal purposes. But there is a caveat: these viruses in our mental make-up like the viruses in computer technology “can program us to think and behave in ways

⁹³ Michael Beltran, “The Philippines’ Pandemic Response: A Tragedy of Errors,” *The Diplomat*, May 12, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/the-philippines-pandemic-response-a-tragedy-of-errors/>.

⁹⁴ Richard Brodie, *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme* (New York: Hay House, 1996), 33.

⁹⁵ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, xiv.

⁹⁶ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*.

that are destructive to our lives.”⁹⁷ In so many ways, when the tools of surveillance, control, propaganda, censorship, doublespeak, and misinformation become the operative principles of governance and public administration, the end result is there for the picking by those in power: the manufacture of consent.⁹⁸

The career of the phrase “new normal” has been a long one and has lasted until today, more than half a century later. Its first documented use is in the novel *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*⁹⁹, a story much like those of narratives written by Orwell particularly his story on Farmer Jones being deposed by his animals and the latter’s dream of living together with no human beings oppressing them¹⁰⁰ and another story on a dystopic world of totalitarianism where the everyday rule is surveilling the people, controlling them by propaganda and doublespeak, and making them toe the official line of the Big Brother by censoring their thoughts.¹⁰¹

The big problem in this career of the “new normal” is that it has become a password for those in power, for those who have the means to control the population, and for those who can use fear to control the minds of critics and

⁹⁷ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*.

⁹⁸ Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*.

⁹⁹ Robert Heinlein. *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2018).

¹⁰⁰ George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (New York: New American Library, 1956).

¹⁰¹ George Orwell, *1984* (London: Penguin, 1950).

those who think differently; hence, the deployment of terror, the opening of the gates of holding cells, the killing of those who dare challenge those with misconceived notions of being the masters of a country. The “new normal” as a justification for what the Big Brothers do in the interest of public safety and order and public health is itself an abnormality. It is not normal and it is not new. There is nothing new in this “new normal.” It is itself that which is not normal—an abnormality.

In New York City during the pandemic, Reyes describes the feeling of being caught up in the presumed condition of the “new normal” and the move of the leaders of his city to open itself up from the lockdown: “the tentative move to reopen [New York City] was greeted with some trepidation. Could it be that things were indeed coming back to ‘normal’? Indeed, what was the new ‘normal’? This now included wearing masks everywhere, including public transportation, maintaining a ‘social distance’ of six feet, and avoiding shaking hands or physical contact.”¹⁰² Reyes’s New York City could be the ordinary Filipinos’ Manila, Cebu, Davao. The fear of the virus is everywhere, the abnormal feel of the “new normal” palpable.

A list of descriptors that do not reveal what New York City—and this applies to all big cities including those in the Philippines—went through is long: going out only for

¹⁰² Virgilio Reyes Jr., “Coming Out of Lockdown in the City that Never Slept,” *Positively Filipino*, July 29, 2020, <http://www.positivelyfilipino.com/magazine/coming-out-of-lockdown-in-the-city-that-never-slept>.

essentials, the loss of physical intimacy, the meeting of people on computer screens, the routine staying indoors, the ordering of food online, the solitary rides on elevators, the warning signs and virus spread prevention rules on the walls of a laundry place.¹⁰³

At the end of the imposed lockdown in his New York City, Reyes leads us back to what was normal before the “new normal” in the place of big commerce: “Wall Street was again our destination, but this time the streets were more populated, though not in their former numbers. The fact that one could take a pizza on a table outside the restaurant, order out a burger or a coffee and sit out in the company of other people in a park seemed to indicate that life was coming back to a ‘new normal.’ Lights would still be dim on Broadway, but cinemas and restaurants would be opening soon, with certain new restrictions or parameters. It seemed inevitable that some businesses would be closed for good and that employment would be taking new, distinctive forms. The high rates of unemployment reverberated in our ears.”¹⁰⁴ The Big Apple is not only in New York: it is everywhere, in all cities forced to give its share in suppressing the spread of the infection, cities that succumbed to chaos, death, and inaction for weeks, places that in their former selves were hubs of human activity, the engines of economic life, and the center of human mobility.

¹⁰³ Reyes, “Coming Out of Lockdown.”

¹⁰⁴ Reyes, “Coming Out of Lockdown.”

These city centers have another name now: cities of grief. In an interview by the *Harvard Business Review*, Kessler affirmed that some of the things that people feel in the experience of a lockdown and in the pandemic, is grief. He says: “We feel the world has changed, and it has. We know this is temporary, but it doesn’t feel that way, and we realize things will be different.”¹⁰⁵ This change is not normal: it is the loss of what is normal, what the things used to be and that the deployment of that phrase “new normal” will not make things different but might make the outcomes worse. Kessler reminds us that these are abnormal times: “The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we’re grieving. Collectively. We are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air.”¹⁰⁶

‘Weaponizing’ Words

In these days of the COVID-19, the truth has become so fragile. And with “comorbidities” like political interests, the stranglehold of the powerful, the diabolical expertise of “ministers of propaganda,” and the greed of commerce, men and women profiteering from medical supplies and drugs, truth is now retreating. The almost irrational disposition of loyal sycophants and servants of rulers of countries, for instance, has helped in the distortion of truth,

¹⁰⁵ Berinato, “That Discomfort You’re Feeling is Grief.”

¹⁰⁶ Berinato, “That Discomfort You’re Feeling.”

and the rapid deployment of negative terms such as “fake news” and “alternative truth.”¹⁰⁷

An advertisement in the US presented a mask with the accompanying text: “This is a mask. Wear it. This is not a political statement.”¹⁰⁸ Wrongly referred to as the Spanish flu because of a journalist’s error, the 1918 pandemic decimated populations, and brought many communities to their knees.¹⁰⁹ The term “flu,” a short form of the English word “influenza,” came from the Italian “*influenza di freddo*,” a disease “influenced by the cold (weather).”¹¹⁰ There was much to learn everywhere including in the US that at that time had begun to change its collective into something we now call “mass,” with mass travel, mass transportation, mass gathering, and that frenzy of industrial production that needed lots of human hands, production systems that brought about mass production of goods, and mass consumption as well. The campaign today is in the same language as that of those years ago from 1918 to 1919: the

¹⁰⁷ Alex Dackevych, “A Brief History of Fake News,” *BBC News* video, 1:38, January 22, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/stories-42752668>. See also, Jim Acosta, “How Trump’s ‘Fake News’ Rhetoric has Gotten Out of Control,” *CNN*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/11/politics/enemy-of-the-people-jim-acosta-donald-trump/index.html>. See also, Nikko Dizon, “Aquino Backtracks from ‘Alternative Truth’ Stand,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, September 15, 2015, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/721994/aquino-backtracks-from-alternative-truth-stand>.

¹⁰⁸ Holly Ellyatt, “‘Pretty Surreal’: How Trump’s ‘Fake News’ Rhetoric has Gotten Out of Control,” *CNBC*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.cnb.com/2020/07/22/us-coronavirus-masks-position-is-surreal-to-the-rest-of-the-world.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Gina Kolata, *Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus That Caused It* (New York: Touchstone, 2001).

¹¹⁰ Kolata, *Flu*, 6.

use of masks, the prohibition of mass gatherings, school closures, the need to “socially” or more appropriately “physically” distance.¹¹¹ Two metaphors were deployed during that time: (a) the pandemic as teacher and (b) the pandemic as destroyer—it teaches while it destroys.¹¹²

The ‘Second Wave’ Battle in the Philippines

In this weaponizing of words, phrases, and/or terms associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, we forget that much of what we say are inferential, with inference being at the heart of every metaphor,¹¹³ not similitude as wrongly understood. Metaphors are conceptual not merely verbal; they are based on “cross-domain correlations of our experience”; they are “understood and reasoned about via multiple metaphors”; and they are not “arbitrary” or “historically contingent”; but (a) “shaped to a significant extent by the common nature of our bodies” and (b) “the shared ways we all function in the everyday world.”¹¹⁴ These are where these pandemic-oriented words fall: tropes. These are figurative language of our Covidized experience, and

¹¹¹ Becky Little, “Mask Slackers’ and ‘Deadly’ Spit: The 1918 Flu Campaigns to Shame People into Following New Rules,” History, last modified January 4, 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/1918-pandemic-public-health-campaigns>. See also, Nancy Tomes, “‘Destroyer and Teacher’: Managing the Masses during the 1918–1919 Influenza Pandemic,” *Public Health Report* 125, no. 3 (2010): 48–62. DOI: 10.1177/00333549101250S308.

¹¹² Tomes, “Destroyer and Teacher.”

¹¹³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 244.

¹¹⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 244–45.

they must become figurative to capture the complexity of this human experience that many people have not seen or gone through before. Literal language could not capture this complexity. The cross-domain correlations of our collective tragedy marked by trauma must be retold into a narrative that opens a world for us to enter into and begin that act of understanding.

Medicine and the business of providing care in a health care system are not immune to the tropes of daily life, with metaphors as one of the most fundamental in these tropes. The use of “war” to combat sickness, for instance, is an unquestioned approach for addressing the health needs of a person.¹¹⁵ But war as a form of aggression does not do justice to the bigger issue about health, the biomedical model of health based on the very idea of curative medicine involving drugs, laboratories, operations, and some other hospital or clinic-based techniques. Narrative medicine, for instance, leads us back to the urgency of establishing and seeing the connection between the narrative life of people needing health care and the “medical” issues attending to their seeking the intervention of the healthcare professional.¹¹⁶ The images are too familiar to those involved in the frontline services in taking care of the sick.

¹¹⁵ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988).

¹¹⁶ Rita Charon, “Narrative Medicine: A Model for Empathy, Reflection, Profession, and Trust,” *JAMA* 286, no. 15 (2001):1897–1902. doi:10.1001/jama.286.15.1897.

We hear from these frontliners the stories of the dead wrapped in sheets and readied for either the incinerator or the gaping earth. The dead are just too many. Even as the US topped the number of the infected and the dead for months, Sweden's data talks of more deaths per capita than anywhere else in the world.¹¹⁷ If this happens to the technologically advanced and economically developed countries, what happens in underdeveloped or developing countries are unimaginable.¹¹⁸

Everywhere, as countries grappled with the rise of the numbers of those infected, the millennials and the Gen Z population worked in the frontlines, doing personal services to the well-off and those who can afford alternative lifestyles, and took the brunt of taking care of the infected. Unlike the older population with some disposable incomes and savings, these groups of people took the pressure of providing for their daily needs, of cobbling together some sources of income to pay for their education and student loans, or to help support their families. Unable to stop working and practice the required physical distancing all the time, they become increasingly exposed to a sick and

¹¹⁷ Gideon Meyerowitz-Katz, "Herd Immunity is a Fatal Strategy We Should Avoid at All Costs," *The Guardian*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/17/herd-immunity-is-a-fatal-strategy-we-should-avoid-at-all-costs>.

¹¹⁸ Daniel Mahler and Christop Lakner, "This is the Effect COVID-19 will have on Global Poverty, according to the World Bank," *We Forum*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/impact-of-covid19-coronavirus-economic-global-poverty/>.

asymptomatic population. Research on the correlation between economic vulnerability and the ability to cope with any of the calamities both natural and manmade tells us of another layer of a disaster: the younger population with no savings are reduced to a no-choice situation: they have to continue working, to be on the ready to get exposed, to man the frontlines, to serve those who are more moneyed.¹¹⁹

Power and Control

The reality of the pandemic is that it gave rise to six complexities or shocks to the capitalist order¹²⁰: (a) an assault on humanity; (b) the destruction of the petty proprietor; (c) the restoration of gender hierarchies; (d) the attack on democracy; (e) the use of an environmental crisis to save capitalism; and (f) the use of the crisis to attack China.

All over the world, there have been a variety of government, oftentimes dubbed “official,” responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. One blatantly contradictory position is the case of the US with that country leader, President Donald Trump, famously talking about the virus as “a hoax”

¹¹⁹ Rebecca Renner, “Millenials and Gen Z are Spreading the Coronavirus—but not because of Parties and Bars,” *National Geographic*, September 17, 2020.

¹²⁰ Vijay Prashad, “Six Complexities of These Pandemic Times,” September 4, 2020, <https://mronline.org/2020/09/04/six-complexities-of-these-pandemic-times/>. The six shocks on capitalism (or complexities) are: (a) an assault on humanity; (b) the destruction of the petty proprietor; (c) the restoration of gender hierarchies; (d) the attack on democracy; (e) the use of environmental crisis to save capitalism; and (f) the use of the crisis to attack China.

and the fact that “it will go away” like a miracle.¹²¹ Government scientists, epidemiology experts, and infectious diseases experts were sidelined, creating a situation where there is no clarity in the government response and leaving the American public confused. The confusion caused by the lack of a “unified message”¹²² about the pandemic as required by a basic US government document, “Playbook for Early Response to High-Consequence Emerging Infectious Disease Threats and Biological Incidents,” has resulted in the embarrassing performance of the country in arresting the disease. Trump’s goal of “controlling” COVID-19 information was meant to consolidate his power especially in the face of a re-election year. Meghan, drawing from the political power of human language, talked of the “control of information” working in a parallel way as the “control of a territory,” with the one having control over information that can control the balance of power.¹²³

¹²¹ Oliver Milman, “Seven of Donald Trump’s most Misleading Coronavirus Claims,” *The Guardian*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/28/trump-coronavirus-misleading-claims>.

¹²² Diamond and Toosi, “Trump Team Failed to Follow NSC’s Pandemic Playbook.” The 69-page basic document was a response to previous pandemics to possible future ones. It was prepared by the National Security Council and finished in 2016 during the presidency of the Barack Obama. The Trump administration dismissed this playbook, resulting in the deaths of so many Americans.

¹²³ Rod Mengham, *On Language: Descent from the Tower of Babel* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 174.

The dominance of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) in the Philippine response to the COVID-19 pandemic reduced the very text of the disease to a sense of technical control, an incomplete, limited, and self-serving strategy in understanding the link between what we know and what we need to do. Within the context of Habermasian interlinked strategies of (a) technical expertise and know-how, (b) symmetrical communication, and (c) the emancipatory obligation for action as subjects,¹²⁴ the ethical duty is the granting of more democracy to citizens who deserve the goods of social life as defined by the social contract. It is not pity they need; it is the just distribution of the resources that guarantee that they do not perish during the pandemic, that they will have the chance to better their life as those of the entitled and the privileged. The fact that this pandemic has demonstrated that in many countries where flawed democracy is the rule rather than the exception, there is not just a great divide but a great chasm. The US has not been inoculated from this great chasm, with a president saying much different from his country's experts and health professionals. Here is a case of asymmetry in communication, with the communication partners in unequal footing, with the government on top of everything and dictating everything that must be done, and deploying the police and the military to keep the peace and maintain

¹²⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

order.¹²⁵ This reductionist take on the pandemic has been evident in many countries including the Philippines.

Distractions from Hunger

Roque, the spokesperson of President Duterte, justified the Manila rehabilitation with the introduction of white sand extracted from a mountain in Alcoy, Cebu and further ground to create a “Boracay feel” to (a) help improve the public’s mental health and (2) distract them from the global health crisis.¹²⁶ Waxing romantic in the light of the hunger of the masses, Roque argues in this light: “Right now, Manila Bay is known for its sunset, probably the best sunset in the world. With the white beach there, it will be one of the most picturesque sceneries in the whole world.”¹²⁷ And then he talks about his delight in walking along the beach and the “peace that it brings in our minds”¹²⁸ when we walk along a white-sanded place like

¹²⁵ Nick Schifrin and Layla Quran, “How Authoritarianism has Spread since the Coronavirus Pandemic Began,” PBS, August 4, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-authoritarianism-has-spread-since-the-coronavirus-pandemic-began>.

¹²⁶ Tita Valderama, “Unsettling Justifications for the ‘Boracay’ on Manila Bay Project,” *Vera Files*, September 7, 2020, <https://verafilms.org/articles/unsettling-justifications-boracay-manila-bay-project>.

¹²⁷ Argyll Cyrus Geducos, “White-Sand Manila Bay to Help Improve Pinoy’s Mental Health Amid Pandemic—Roque,” *Manila Bulletin*, September 5, 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/09/05/white-sand-manila-bay-to-help-improve-pinoy-mental-health-amid-pandemic-roque/>.

¹²⁸ Geducos, “White-Sand Manila Bay to Help Improve Pinoy’s Mental Health Amid Pandemic.”

the Manila Bay that needed more mangroves for rehabilitation than white sand mined from Alcoy, Cebu.

101 East, a documentary series arm of Al Jazeera, has “(investigated) the price of chasing the American Dream” and has written about the Philippine frontliners in the fight against COVID-19. It says: “An estimated 150,000 Filipino nurses work in the US, earning up to 30 times more than they could back home.” But even as they chase this “stateside” dream, they “work long hours, some juggling multiple jobs to support their families.” But that is not the end of the story: “Others are exploited, intimidated and forced into indentured labour.” And then in New York, the East Coast hotspot of the pandemic, “Filipino nurses are on the front lines of New York’s COVID-19 crisis, some losing their lives as they battle to keep Americans alive.”¹²⁹ Even as other countries welcome the nurses educated and trained in the Philippines, this very country is suffering from insufficiencies in caring for their own people infected with the virus.

Coming into the Present: More Social Connection Not Social Distancing

In Berinato’s interview with David Kessler, the proponent of the meaning as the sixth stage of grief after

¹²⁹ *Al Jazeera*, “Filipino Nurses: New York’s Frontliners,” July 16, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/101east/2020/07/filipino-nurses-york-frontliners-200716112741058.html>.

acceptance, Kessler reminds us of the need to be in the now, to be mindful of the presentness of things, of events, of these tragic realities attended by the pandemic. The full awareness of the now matters.¹³⁰

One of the conceptual problems that clouded our understanding on a global scale of the approaches that we had to bear in mind is the use of “social distancing,” which, among others, required a physical distance of six feet (or translated as two meters in other places). In that fuzzy use of the phrase, there is the collapsing between the social and the physical, forgetting that social distancing may involve isolation in both the physical, psychological, and societal sense. Health scholars and professionals revisited this concept and rejected the idea that physical distancing and social distancing are equivalent. The argument is that in this time of the pandemic, people are more in need of these social connections that are necessary for being emotionally and socially linked with others as part of the social support system that they need. It is not, therefore, the aspects of the social that needs to be distanced but only the physical.¹³¹

The flipping of the inexact phrase “social distancing” to mean the amount of physical space that ought to be maintained between people and recasting it “to mean what

¹³⁰ Berinato, “That Discomfort You’re Feeling.”

¹³¹ Reza Aminnejad and Rosa Alikhanj, “Physical Distancing or Social Distancing: That is the Question,” *Canadian Journal of Anesthesia* 67, no.10 (2020): 1457–58, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1007%2Fs12630-020-01697-2>.

it says” as “physical distancing” and the framing of the public response to “physical distancing, social connection,” teaches us what we need to do with urgency: that we need to have the appropriate psychological dynamics to maintain our resilience in the face of the social and economic costs of this pandemic.¹³²

Word to the People’s Pain, putting an End to a Double Pandemic

The bard has reminded us about the healing power of words if they do not wound and cause pain and suffering to those who both give and receive them. The thing is the reality behind a name, a label, a nomenclature, a terminology to be deployed for some reason known perhaps only to the one deploying. “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose/ by any other name would smell as sweet.”¹³³ Kompridis’s sense of disclosing-possibility—a reflective disclosure—leads us to the how of how we can address the nexus between this pandemic and the critical reflection that we need to have.¹³⁴

¹³² Lisa Bonsall, “Should We Say ‘Physical’ Distancing instead of ‘Social’ Distancing?,” *Nursing Center* (blog), July 21, 2020, <https://www.nursingcenter.com/ncblog/july-2020/physical-distancing-instead-of-social-distancing>.

¹³³ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II (New York: Spark Publishing, 2002), 81. Here we come to know that Juliet is talking to Romeo and reminding him that names matter, but what matters most is the reality behind those names.

¹³⁴ Nikolas Kompridis, *Critical Theory Between Past and Future* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

Countries that buy into the logic of peace and order to address the COVID-19 ought to think twice if that were the right recourse to this pandemic that is grievously unjust because it has taken the lives of so many people. Pandemic populism too will not solve our problems resulting from the long-term effect of the widespread infection.¹³⁵ There is the fallacy of the populist promise as can be seen in Brazil, India, and the US, three of the countries that have registered the most infections and deaths because of the COVID-19.¹³⁶ But still, where the pandemic is raging on there is this rise of populism as well with people unable to see the connection between facts and the search for relief from the trauma of the spreading disease.

In the end, the way to unmask the calculated and calculating official tropes relating to the pandemic is to peel off the layers of motives, of dreams of power and control, and of desires for more power and control. The removal of the layers of officialdom in these pandemic-oriented words and uncovering of the hidden malice in them will help in exposing the deployed veracities that remain as the vernacular of populist power. The malice in these words has

¹³⁵ *The Guardian*, “The Guardian View on Pandemic Populism: Leads to Sloppy Lawmaking,” *The Guardian*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/29/the-guardian-view-on-pandemic-populism-leads-to-sloppy-lawmaking>.

¹³⁶ Yasmeen Serhan, “The Pandemic isn’t a Death Knell for Populism,” *The Atlantic*, August 22, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/08/populism-will-survive-the-pandemic/615358/>.

another aim: the control of the population, the sustaining of authoritarian rule, and the deployment of superficial expressions of democracy to mask their despotic ambitions and dreams. There is only one way to address the false vernacular of the veraciousness invented by the ruling political and economic elites: more democracy, more transparency, and more respect for human language, a human language that imprisons but also frees. Berg, in his work on language and illiberal regimes, cites Euripides in *Orestes*, thus: “When with honeyed words but evil mind/Persuades the mob, great woes befall the state.”¹³⁷ The World Economic Forum has proposed a new take on this global experience of the tragic. It is not the “new normal.” Instead, the global experience of the pandemic ought to be regarded as an occasion to make all peoples and countries sit down and act together and view this as a “new paradigm”¹³⁸ for cooperation and collaboration in addressing the pressing issues affecting all peoples, all countries, all nations.

¹³⁷ Berg, “Illiberal Propaganda.”

¹³⁸ Chime Asonye, “There’s Nothing New about the ‘New Normal’. Here’s Why,” *We Forum*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/theres-nothing-new-about-this-new-normal-heres-why/>.

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