

CATALINA CARIAGA

Oakland: Extreme Headache Series

Writing in the time of Pandemic and Racist Attack

On March 11, 2020, our unit in Business/Finance at U.C. Berkeley Law laid out plans for an alternate in-person work schedule as the Covid-19 pandemic became urgent in the Bay Area. By March 15th, our unit was immediately dispersed to work at home with our laptops and HDMI cords. The Shelter in Place mandate was issued by the Alameda County on March 16th. In just a few short days we scrambled to work at home on a daily basis.

Since I collect and write on vintage typewriters, I was invited to join a collective of typewriter enthusiasts to write one typed page a day during the pandemic. The blog is called One Typed Page at: <https://onetypedpage.wordpress.com>. Each day the typewritten pages are posted on the Wordpress website curated and hosted—but not edited—by Daniel Marleau of the Typewriter Review. My first post was March 25th. Since then, I have written at least one typed page every day. I think we are on our 210th day. I only wish there were more women's voices on OTP—and I have been trying to encourage women to submit.

My purpose was to write about Maxwell Park—my neighborhood in Oakland, CA. I felt that writing daily would be fruitful for future poems. Mostly, I write as if in my personal journal. I do not go back and fix typographical errors—which avoids any sense of self-censorship. In my daily walks, work at home, yoga, and sheltering in place in our home with my college age son, husband and two cats, I have much to observe and write about. I have to limit my exposure to media news (fake and all) of current events. Trying to stay local as much as possible.

The Extreme Headache Series is a collection of type, poetic gesture, text, digitized art on cards and envelopes that I found stashed in drawers. Instead of writing formal poems, I found myself typing small constricted bits of text on envelopes and cards no bigger than two by three inches. I am not sure what the impulse was to start this way. Perhaps I was exploring the thinking of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Among Cha's films, installation art, book and writings, her lesser known letter art has been preserved by Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), some of which can be viewed in the BAMPFA online archive.¹ Also, I was reflecting on the artist, designer, educator and cultural worker of the 1960's, Corita Kent. She was an Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) nun who rubbed elbows with the likes of Andy Warhol. After I received my first communion in 1964, the IHM nuns decided to report to their classrooms without their dark indigo blue medieval habits. In short, the nuns came to school in civilian street clothing, reflecting the progressive reforms of Vatican II. The next week, in short order, the Cardinal of Los Angeles promptly dismissed and removed all IHM nuns from their schools in the archdiocese and replaced them with nuns of other orders. The purpose of that action was to cut the legs out from under any hint of Liberation Theology in California—and the United States. My particular school was assigned Carmelite nuns with their long dark medieval brown wool scapulars and ten decade rosaries. Perhaps the Cardinal was threatened by the coming of age of one too many feminists in indigo blue habits. A majority of those IHM nuns eventually left the convent and their vows—and those women continued their social activism and cultural work in their respective communities. Corita Kent moved to Boston and her prolific visual pop art helped to fuel the civil rights movement and protests against the Viet Nam War. In 1985 she created the iconic "Love" stamp. The U.S. Postal Service sold 700 million of those stamps. She succumbed to cancer in 1986.

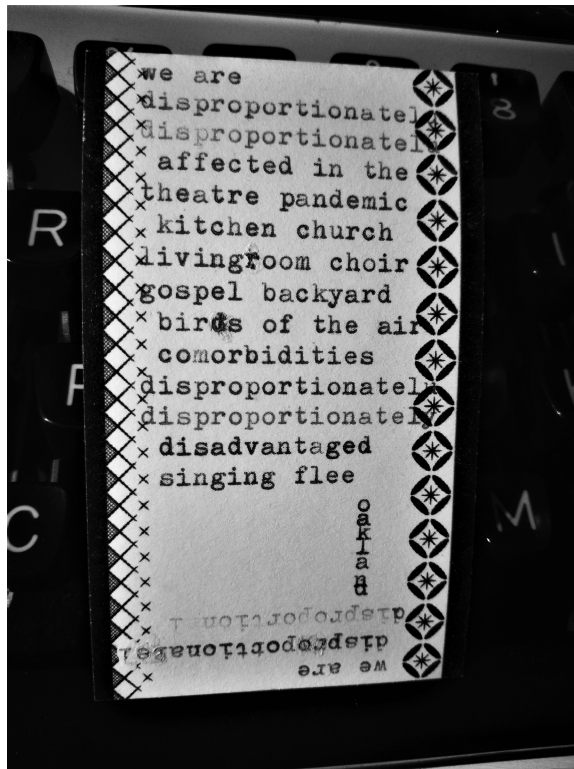
Anything I write is photographed on my Android smart phone, then digitally enhanced. The result is an extreme close-up of typewritten text reflecting the pressurized personal view of a global pandemic and current events

from the window of my home in Oakland. To be honest, I am digitally challenged. My son loses patience with me. Many years ago, I worked in the advertising industry in San Francisco, and we referred to the Excedrin headache commercial as the penultimate teeth and gum camera pose exhibiting extreme headache pain. (Yikes, I think I cannot use the term “Excedrin” in the title because it is a trademarked brand.) These pieces should give you a headache if you resort to reading them. If I write about topics such as food or custom, I try not to fall into the trap of ethnic tropes. I have been struggling with the recurring news of violence against Black people and systemic racism that we can no longer abide. I cannot write about Oakland without noting the disparities between those who are prosperous and those who are systematically denied access to prosperity.

In these past few months I have come to realize that over the years, when I have written about mental illness and bi-polar affective disorder (which has been strong in my family line over many generations), I was really writing about race. And conversely, when I wrote about race, I was really writing about mental illness. Altered states of shame, denial and alienation surrounding mental illness and skin of color will always problematize gesture and narrativity in my poetics. Fissures abound. Is it a coincidence that we are approaching the fiftieth-year commemoration of Franz Fanon’s death in 1961? He certainly put one and one together. Racism is a mental illness.

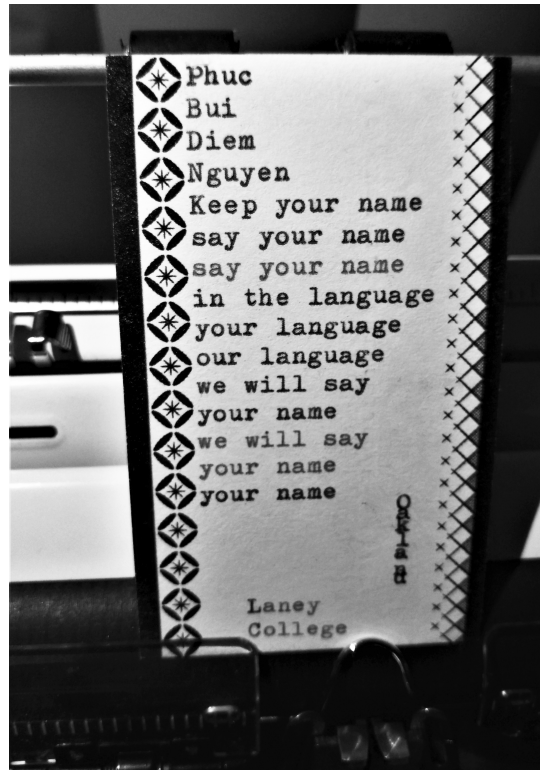
Finally, in hindsight, is there a dialectical conversation between my extreme headache pieces and the huge murals that have almost overnight sprung up with paint and wood canvassed windows of uptown and downtown Oakland? My son and I walked up and down Broadway and Telegraph taking pictures of this brave movement of artists. In my mind, I like to think that my gestures of text play contrapuntally against the bold brushstrokes of Pinay artist Cece Carpio. We all have our cultural work to do. The human struggle these days starts with one letter in front of another, one at a time.

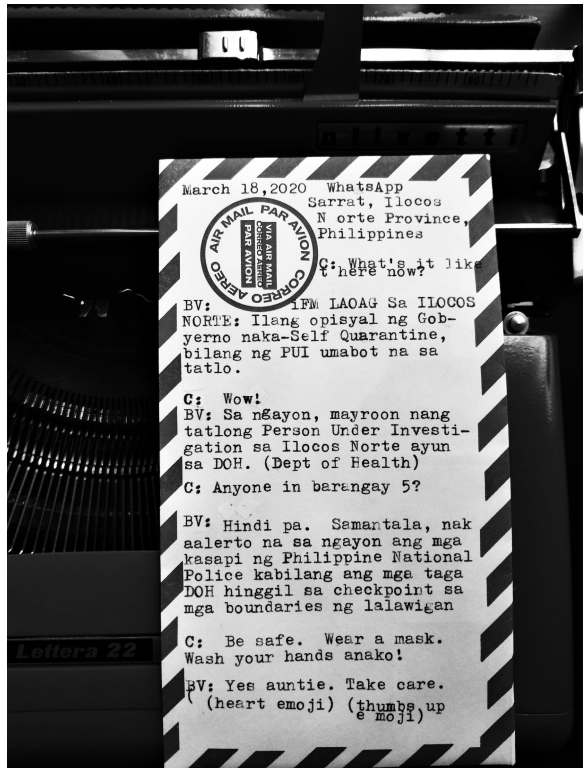
¹ <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf238n986k/>



Black Bird-
Watching black
watching 8:46
eight minutes
forty-six se-
conds watching
Oscar, George
watching breath
OAKLAND watching
Breonna sleeping
watching Ahmaud
jogging watching
the WORLD is
watching Cooper
shares the same
enslaved name as
Christopher
black bird-
watching
watching
watching







March 18, 2020 WhatsApp
Sarrat, Ilocos
Norte Province,
Philippines



C: What's it like
here now?

BV: I FM LAOAG Sa ILOCOS
NORTE: Ilang opisyal ng Gob-
verno naka-Self Quarantine,
bilang ng PUI umabot na sa
tatio.

C: Wow!

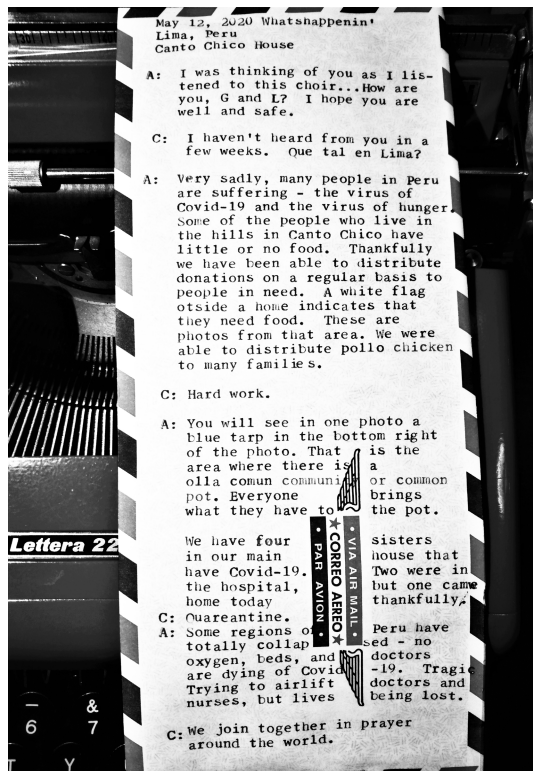
BV: Sa ngayon, mayroon nang
tatlong Person Under Investi-
gation sa Ilocos Norte ayun
sa DOH. (Dept of Health)

C: Anyone in barangay 5?

BV: Hindi pa. Samantala, nak-
aalerto na sa ngayon ang mga
kasapi ng Philippine National
Police kabilang ang mga taga
DOH hinggil sa checkpoint sa
mga boundaries ng lalawigan

C: Be safe. Wear a mask.
Wash your hands anako!

BV: Yes auntie. Take care.
(heart emoji) (thumbs up emoji)



May 12, 2020 Whatshappenin'
Lima, Peru
Canto Chico House

A: I was thinking of you as I listened to this choir...How are you, G and I? I hope you are well and safe.

C: I haven't heard from you in a few weeks. Que tal en Lima?

A: Very sadly, many people in Peru are suffering - the virus of Covid-19 and the virus of hunger. Some of the people who live in the hills in Canto Chico have little or no food. Thankfully we have been able to distribute donations on a regular basis to people in need. A white flag outside a home indicates that they need food. These are photos from that area. We were able to distribute pollo chicken to many families.

C: Hard work.

A: You will see in one photo a blue tarp in the bottom right of the photo. That is the area where there is a olla comun community pot. Everyone brings what they have to the pot.

We have four in our main house that have Covid-19. the hospital, but one came home today thankfully.

C: Quarantine.

A: Some regions of Peru have totally collapsed - no oxygen, beds, and doctors are dying of Covid-19. Tragically, doctors and nurses, but lives being lost.

C: We join together in prayer around the world.

VIA AIR MAIL
CORREO AEREO
PAR AVION