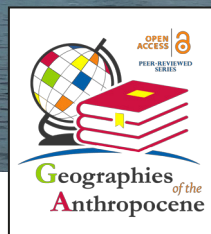


NARRATIVES IN THE ANTHROPOCENE ERA

Charles Travis, Vittorio Valentino (Editors)

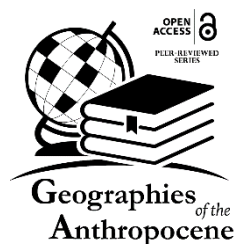
Preface by Kirill O. Thompson

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Narratives in the Anthropocene era

Charles Travis
Vittorio Valentino
Editors



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Charles Travis, Vittorio Valentino (Eds.)

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humanists, intersecting disciplines of Geosciences, Geography, Geoethics, Philosophy, Socio-Anthropology, Sociology of Environment and Territory, Psychology, Economics, Environmental Humanities and cognate disciplines.

Geoethics focuses on how scientists (natural and social), arts and humanities scholars working in tandem can become more aware of their ethical responsibilities to guide society on matters related to public safety in the face of natural hazards, sustainable use of resources, climate change and protection of the environment. Furthermore, the integrated and multiple perspectives of the Environmental Humanities, can help to more fully understand the cultures of, and the cultures which frame the Anthropocene. Indeed, the focus of Geoethics and Environmental Humanities research, that is, the analysis of the way humans think and act for the purpose of advising and suggesting appropriate behaviors where human activities interact with the geosphere, is dialectically linked to the complex concept of Anthropocene.

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13. Healing the Earth, transforming the mind: how the COVID-19 pandemic generates new insights through the Econarrative writing workshop

*Angela Biancofiore*¹

Abstract

In this chapter we will analyse how we can initiate a process of transformation in our ways of perceiving the relationships with living ecosystems in the context of the global health crisis unfolding in the Anthropocene era. More specifically, we will examine the narratives produced by the students at Paul Valéry University in Montpellier, France, in the frame of an international project of writing workshops (ECONARRATIVE) centered on the pandemic and ecology, held from January to March 2021, with the support of the MSH-SUD (Maison des Sciences de l'Homme) in Montpellier.

Keywords: Pandemic, Narrative, Ecocriticism, Transformative learning, Eco-anxiety

1. A global rite of passage: living a sense of loss in times of COVID-19

Now we begin to see some of the epistemological fallacies of Occidental civilization. In accordance with the general climate of thinking in mid-nineteenth-century England, Darwin proposed a theory of natural selection and evolution in which the unit of survival was either the family line or the species or subspecies or something of the sort. But today it is quite obvious that this is not the unit of survival in the real biological world. The unit of survival is

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organism plus environment. We are learning by bitter experience that the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself (Bateson 1972, p. 489).

At the core of the Coronavirus pandemic which started to spread across the whole planet in January 2020, humanity experienced a sense of loss: a loss of meaning, freedom, and social physical interaction. This experience entails nevertheless a great potential because we believe it can become a starting point for a radical change in our vision of the world.

With the outbreak of Covid-19 in January 2020, we entered a new era of high pandemic risk, which engendered a new way of being in the world. Scientists, who had been studying the multiple causes of climate change for years, now have raised the red flag. Dr Peter Daszak, President of the EcoHealth Alliance and Chair of the IPBES workshop, declared:

There is no great mystery about the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic – or of any modern pandemic, the same human activities that drive climate change and biodiversity loss also drive pandemic risk through their impacts on our environment. Changes in the way we use land; the expansion and intensification of agriculture; and unsustainable trade, production and consumption disrupt nature and increase contact between wildlife, livestock, pathogens and people. This is the path to pandemics. (IPBES 2020, see also Daszak 2020)

Humanity is living a *global rite of passage*, according to Joan Halifax (2021), we can genuinely experience that in our everyday life. The French ethnologist Arnold Van Gennep (1909), identified three phases in rites of passage:

1. Separation
2. Threshold
3. Integration

We experienced isolation, corresponding to the first stage in the rite of passage; we have been compelled to isolate ourselves in order to restrain the spread of the epidemic. Learning and many other activities take place online, cutting us off from our physical relationships with others. We communicate mostly through the visioconference platforms on the web, even though they cannot wholly replace the quality of direct communication between people.

During the pandemic, many of us experienced *loss* and *grief*: the loss of a loved one, or the loss of paid work engendered by the crisis and lockdown.

These are painful events which in many cases produce a loss of meaning, instability and a fear of the future. The absence of direct contact with others and the rapid transformation of social relationships, had a significant impact on our inner *ecology*: research shows a rise in psychic fragility and an increase in both suicide rates and suicide attempts (Gunnell et al., 2020).

Furthermore, we were able to experience the *second stage of the rite of passage*: the *threshold*. People experienced the end of lockdown with no certitude that they would return to “normal life”, because the spread of the pandemic is still very present worldwide.

We are in a situation of global uncertainty: this is a position that is diametrically opposite to the will to control the entire ecosystem, which characterizes human attitude in the Anthropocene era. The threshold stage nevertheless corresponds to disillusion, and it can drive a new deeper understanding: we are not the masters of the world, rather, we live in close relationship with all living beings. Therefore, the loss of one species has a significant impact on all living beings.

The action of a tiny virus has put the entire planet on alert: this is a profound teaching for us on interdependence, the essential feature of living.

At the time of writing, the coronavirus has resulted in almost 3.5 million deaths around the world and, what is even more difficult to bear, many people have passed away without saying goodbye to their loved ones. However, the deep understanding of inter-being springing out from this extremely difficult situation for humanity, is capable of transforming our relationship with the *more-than-human-world*. According to David Abram,

Right now, the earthly community of life—the more-than-human collective—is getting a chance to catch its breath without the weight of our incessant industry on its chest. The terrifying nightmare barreling through human society in these weeks has forced the gears of the megamachine (all the complex churning of commerce, all this steadily speeding up “progress”) to grind to a halt—and so, as you’ve likely noticed, the land itself is stirring and starting to stretch its limbs, long-forgotten sensory organs beginning to sip the air and sample the water, grasses and needles drinking in sky without the intermediating sting of a chemical haze (Abram 2020).

The time of rest for human activities, the silence generated by stopping traffic or slowing down machines, have favoured the emergence of another kind of attention towards the non-human.

Through these circumstances, we have been better able to contemplate non-human beings and, in return, those fellow beings can see us; at the age of Anthropocene, we can develop an *ecology of knowledge* leading us to change our view and extend the boundaries of our attention (Biancofiore

2020). When we become deeply aware of the vital links between humans and other species, and between humans and the ecosystems they are involved in, we understand that the survival of humanity depends on the nature of its relations with the living world.

As Gregory Bateson reminds us, it is not enough to consider the survival of a species individually, but always within the context of its own ecosystem. Otherwise, the species which wants to survive alone to the detriment of other species, will itself inevitably disappear.

In his book *Manières d'être vivant*, Baptiste Morizot (2020) underlines the fundamental role played by interdependencies: when we explore how they function, we understand what we ourselves are made of. We are intimately formed by our interdependencies, and if we look deeply, we can perceive, through the story of evolution, the connexion between us and a sponge.

In the same way, when we observe the role of viruses in the development of mammals' DNA, the COVID-19 pandemic will no longer be perceived by us as a bad science fiction movie, but rather as one notable event in the history of our evolution as a species connected with other species. The pandemic reminds us of our own vulnerability, in opposition to the idea of control and omnipotence that has haunted Western thought for centuries.

Through the mad long rush to exploit the Earth, coronavirus calls upon us to remember that we are the most widespread species on the planet, and that we are thus increasingly exposed to epidemics, the function of which is to re-equilibrate the relationships between species within living ecosystems (Courchamp, 2020).

Moreover, deeply understanding the links of interdependence means realising that we are not alone on Earth and that it is urgent to bring other species, “familiar aliens”, our relatives through the complex history of evolution, *into the field of our attention*. Widening the circle of *care*, moving the lines of concern, and understanding within the term “care” the ethical dimension that Socrates gives it: *Epimeleia heautou*², the care of oneself does not imply a selfish posture: when we take care of ourselves, we take care of others and the planet. *Taking care of oneself* implies taking care of all Ecologically Significant Species and Community Properties (ESSCP) which allow us to live. In a sense, we can find in this ecological action a

² “Epimeleia” signifies a sense of worry, such that in the phrases “epimeleia heautou” (“souci de soi-même”), the self is a source of concern. “Le souci de soi-même” is a posture of concerned attention for oneself as well as a practice of working on oneself (see Foucault 2005).

political concern; we are definitely able to say that – at the same time – we also take care of the city (the community of citizens and the body politic).

The ethics of the *care of the Self* was broadly developed by Michel Foucault which does not consider it through an individualistic dimension; on the contrary, it constitutes the starting point for a work on the Self, the first step that opens up the possibility of transformation. The work on the self appears necessary in order to touch the truth, which is not an abstract truth limited to pure knowledge. Rather, it is a truth that helps the subject inhabit the city and living ecosystems.

Today, in the era of climate change and biodiversity loss, a new thought is emerging a *new narrative* which is not coming from nowhere: the framework of this story was progressively woven over the centuries of our co-evolution, it is the *choral inter-specific poem* celebrating a new alliance between humans and non-humans, in a non-dual perspective.

Radical oppositions have brought multiple misunderstandings and great suffering in the context of our relationship with the living: life and death, human and non-human, animate and inanimate, man and animal... A deep ecological thought can not be founded on sharp oppositions coming from a dualistic and mechanistic vision of reality: in fact, from an ecological point of view, death can no longer be considered the opposite of life for the simple reason that it has always played an important role in the dynamic relationships of interdependence.

Death sculpts the living, as Jean Claude Ameisen stated (2018). A deeply ecological view integrates the role of death into the life of a species, including that of humans. The philosophy of the absurd (Camus) considers the universe as chaotic and meaningless; however, death gives the very sense to our lives because we are literally “made” of all these beings that lived before us.

On the other hand, from an ecological point of view, we cannot consider ourselves as “thrown into the world” (“*geworfen*”, see Heidegger 1996), because we are capable of acknowledging the significant role of all the connections that allow us to be alive, and then we realize that we are entirely embedded in the web of Life.

When humans separated animate matter from the inanimate (see Descartes’ philosophy on this subject), they separated themselves from the web of life and started to see the Earth as a stock of raw materials that could be used at will. However, if we relocate humans in the context of ecosystems, this new insight allows us to concretely move the boundaries of concern.

Within this perspective, we are able to extend and actualise the ethical thought of Emmanuel Levinas, who referred to alterity as the *human face calling us*, the presence of others in our own skin; thus, we can expand the idea of *alterity* and include within it the immeasurable fellow beings living in the biosphere. Animals, mountains, lakes, oceans, rivers: their presence concerns us as they participate in our *eco-mental space* (Bateson). It is just an illusion to imagine that we can feel well if we pollute a river or if we destroy a mountain: in reality, our ideas of domination and exploitation of ecosystems have a direct impact on the environment and on our own well-being.

In other terms, there is an *ecology of ideas* as well as there is an *ecology of ecosystems*, an inner ecology that is no less important than outer ecology, because the influence of ideas, feelings and emotions is tangible in the process of transformation of the planet: the *disenchantment of nature* initiated by Descartes drove the legitimization of the structural violence of our relationships with the living. Finally, we need to make peace with the Earth, recognizing the significant role played by all beings in the web of life; however, to restore a peaceful relation with the Earth means making peace with ourselves and with others, welcoming and identifying our own emotions, thoughts and feelings. In other terms, a person who is dominated by fear or anger will not be respectful towards the entire ecosystem and will be more inclined to over-consumption (see Egger, 2020).

Today, we can come out from an unhealthy relationship with the living, built on extractivism: this is the first step on the path in order to establish new interdependencies based on “diplomatic” links between species (Morizot, 2020), founded on care of oneself and care of others: through this approach we can definitively acknowledge differences, *the multiple ways of being alive*.

With the slowdown of human activities, a space has opened up for us that allows us to look at the living from another point of view: the silence, the cessation of activities were necessary to the upsurge of a renewed perception during pandemic and lockdown; many people have listen for the first time the song of the birds. Many wild animals, deer, foxes, have appeared in urban neighbourhoods emptied of human business.

Animals, too, have noticed something totally new: a new silence, a strange slowdown: during the lockdowns and curfews, we had the opportunity to become more familiar with non-human languages; in fact, if we observe animals respectfully and discretely, we can learn that they, too, are capable of empathy (Darwin [1872] 2012).

2. The pandemic is a period of sowing: another vision of the Earth

If we look deeply at this period of suffering and worldwide disease, we can perceive the emergence of something new, a possibility of making a shift in our behaviour, in our way of seeing the world. According to the Italian writer Erri De Luca,

Despite the multiple bereavements, the hecatomb in retirement homes, I believe that we will remember this time as a fertile period, a period of sowing. [...] This pandemic is only the first one, it inaugurates a new era, it is not an accidental occurrence. I do not consider myself either an optimist or a pessimist. I only witness the present (De Luca, 2020b).

In another article, the Italian writer perceives a kind of punishment, reminding us of the laws of *contrappasso* (similar to the condemnation of souls in Dante's *Inferno*), through an action either resembling or contrasting with sin (De Luca 2020a): people affected by Covid-19 need oxygen in the same way the living ecosystem stifled by human activities does.

The pandemic disrupted intense human activities as governments introduced restrictions and slowdowns: a relatively short downtime in the production system rapidly generated various signs of recovery throughout living ecosystems.

“Saturday belongs to the Earth”, according to the Holy Scriptures, De Luca reminds us. This order has been ignored, and therefore the Earth has been deprived of its time of rest. This is why we can say that a pandemic is a *period of truce* for our ecosystems, an open invitation to make peace with the Earth.

The beauty of nature is not bare scenery, for the Italian writer. Rather, it is a state of temporary balance between tremendous energies such as eruptions, earthquakes, hurricanes, fires...and pandemics. In this challenging time, we have been able to perceive a stunning overthrow: for the first time, the economy, always considered the supreme authority, has been replaced by public health, which was perceived as a matter of primary interest for many countries all over the world.

Normally, a public health issue is not a priority: if we take the widespread use of asbestos in the Susa Valley (Italy) into account, or the severe pollution of the city of Taranto, public health has always been addressed as a secondary question. If the killings caused by environmental destruction were considered collateral damages of legitimate activities, they are rather *war crimes committed during peacetime* (De Luca, 2020a).

The pandemic, with its slowdown in social relations and activities, has compelled us to look inside in order to take care of ourselves. The eco-mental space, in Bateson's words, plays a major role, as our ideas and values have a significant impact on living ecosystems:

When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise 'What interests me is me, or my organization, or my species,' you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. You decide that you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is a part of your wider eco-mental system - and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience (Bateson, 1972, pp. 489-490).

Through these challenging times, we are learning, from our experience of the global climate crisis, that a species which destroys its own environment destroys itself, according to the critical thought of Gregory Bateson.

3. Working on ourselves: the econarrative writing workshop

In January 2021 we offered the 3rd year students doing a BA in Italian Studies a writing workshop on the relationships between *pandemic and ecology* in the context of the international project ECONARRATIVE³. In a sense, we intended to encourage them to express themselves in Italian about their experience of the lockdown and curfew, within the setting of a hybrid course, with both in-person classes and e-learning. This was a way of working on ourselves within the group of students, creating a space for generating new insights.

Together with a trainee teacher, Soukhaina, we proposed different kinds of documents: videos and texts on the link between the pandemic and ecological crisis, and a selection of articles by writers, journalists, and scientists who reflected on how humans and non-humans were experiencing

³ ECONARRATIVE (*Narration as a factor of resilience and care in the face of health and ecological crisis*) is a project centred on various narrative workshops on pandemic and ecology; it involves schools and universities in 5 countries (Tunisia, Italy, Sweden, France and Chile) and is supported by the MSH-SUD (Maison des Sciences de l'Homme) in Montpellier, France. For more information, please visit the website: <https://www.mshsud.org/recherche/equipes-projets-msh-sud/235-econarrative-3>.

the COVID-19 pandemic. The writers we chose included Erri De Luca, Paolo Di Paolo, Franco Arminio, Mariangela Gualtieri, Massimo Recalcati, Mauro Corona, and Giovanni Gugg. The texts we read during the workshop had a significant impact on the texts produced by the students because the reading created an atmosphere within the group that focused the collective attention on one main issue; to *change the point of view* of the narrator, we also proposed the film, *Le grain de sable dans la machine* by Alain de Halleux. Once the students had watched the film, Soukhaina (the trainee teacher) asked them to write as if they were the coronavirus itself sending a message to humans!

Immediately after a video or the collective reading of a text, students were invited to write their vision of the pandemic in resonance with the documents proposed: afterwards, their writings were read aloud (there were, at the same time, both distant and on-campus students) and were briefly commented without underlining language errors to avoid a climate of self-censorship. For this reason, we preferred to send the linguistic corrections to the students by email.

The texts produced during the workshop were published by the students themselves in a blog created on the Moodle platform (using the tool “glossary”). In this way, each student could publish his/her own text and read those by the others. This was an aspect that has proven highly effective within this specific pedagogical tool because the sense of sharing helped the students to no longer feel alone in their own suffering or sadness coming from pandemic and the changes it brought about.

The Italian writer Paolo Di Paolo highlighted that, during the pandemic, many people all over the world were writing 21st century humanity’s “global novel” in a time of great trial.

In their writings, the students focused on the *past* (the announcement of the pandemic and the first lockdown); the *present* (distance learning, the situation in France and the rest of the world, their personal situation, and changes); and the *future* (further education perspectives, their job, their relationships, and the situation of the planet as a whole).

The reflections were oriented on various issues such as personal life, family and friends, the situation of the country, and the life of the entire planet. Three different dimensions could thus be distinguished: *individual*, *group*, and *system*.

Table 1 – *The dimensions, individual, group and system, in the context of the past, the present and the future. Source: author.*

	Past	Present	Future
Individual	Memories of previous life, parties, culture, regrets	Isolation, solitude, Stress, anxiety attacks, lack of relationships, lack of cultural events, loss of orientation about their studies, loss of motivation	Change of view, reorientation, Reappraisal Search for new values for personal well-being
Group	Relationships with loved ones, friends, and other students, view of society, Definition of ‘normality’	Loss of contact with teachers, Lack of festive moments, Absence of moments of sharing, constraints of lockdown and curfew, Opposition between generations	Imagining alternative operating models on a social level, Less exploitation, more solidarity Living together, social well-being, Commitment to work which gives meaning Building a sense of purpose

System	The state of the planet The loss of biodiversity	Economic crisis, health crisis, ecological crisis, Breakdown of the systemic state of balance.	Defence of biodiversity, Building new relations with animals, plants Enhancing respect for living ecosystems
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By analysing the texts produced during the workshop, we were able to distinguish three main tendencies which highlight how students experienced the pandemic and lockdown:

1. *Taking care of oneself*: recognizing one's own suffering and vulnerability, the difficulties of isolation, after the initial moment of astonishment;

2. *The emergence of new insights*: a shift in point of view, or a reappraisal, can arise in times of incertitude and loss of bearings. A new understanding that expands the boundaries of attention: the understanding of inter-being;

3. *Change of habits and postures*:

- a. Building a quality of the presence to oneself, to others, to environment which involves opening up, resiliency, fulfillment, and fostering empathy and compassion for oneself and for others;

- b. Switching into self-confinement, addictions (more specifically: Internet Addiction Disorder, IAD), depression, withdrawal, frustration, physical disease, or sleep disorders.

Different kinds of reaction towards the pandemic could be observed among the students who participated in the workshop: the announcement of the lockdown by President Macron in March 2020 has remained etched in their memory. This official speech provoked a variety of responses: many students felt relieved because they could take time for themselves, others saw the breakdown in their social life and were unable to bear the solitude. The difference in reactions was generally determined by the relationship with the family: when parents could offer a place of refuge, the family home, lockdown was a less challenging experience; students who decided to live through the confinement alone experienced loneliness and, in some cases, the loss of physical contact with friends generated a true psychic suffering.

Many students expressed in their texts the difficulty of coping with social isolation: “the human being is a social animal”, wrote Maëli, quoting Aristotle.

However, in certain cases, isolation bore fruit: Nordine lived through the difficult 55-day period spent in isolation in his small room, his gaze turned inwards. The suffering produced new insight and inspired a new vocation: to be teacher, because it is “a sacred job”:

This is my thought for my teachers who have felt the emotions of their students; teachers with whom we previously only shared a classroom have become a source of motivation for us; teachers who wrote a little phrase full of kindness at the top of their mail, just a few words reminding us how the work of a teacher is a sacred job: they were able to instill in us the strength we needed, and I thank them immensely.

The sense of concern that certain teachers demonstrated towards their students during lockdown was a source of motivation: in particular, Nordine was able to find a job at the end of confinement and has become an animator for children in an elementary school in Montpellier. Paradoxically, after an initial period of deep suffering, for him the pandemic and lockdown represented a source of flourishing enhancing his self-reflection and fostering the motivation to act. In this sense, through the econarrative workshop, we discovered that for some, the pandemic was a real source of *empowerment*.

Other students, in particular the girls, showed a clear tendency to take care of themselves: once they had recognized their vulnerability and the difficulty of the situation they were confronted with, they developed a form of attention to their own well-being: “I sunbathe on my balcony, I use a beauty mask on my face, I go for a walk”. These different attitudes towards the pandemic illustrate different types of *grounding* in order to cope with these difficult times.

Friends and relatives, in many cases, provided genuine well-being:

“I called my friend on the phone everyday at 6 p.m.” (Thémis).

“I spoke on the phone with my father every two days because he lives in Italy...” (Alessia).

Family relationships provided the students with real help and support, despite the fact that, in certain cases, some mentioned quarrels in their texts, sparked by the confinement. Some *rituals* were introduced during the

pandemic: young people who felt the need to have reference points of sorts in everyday life started to do sport regularly thanks to social networks that broadcast online exercise classes for a large community of web users. Some students underlined the use of social media by older people to mitigate feelings of loneliness.

The opportunity to offer to oneself a moment of soothing at the heart of a shattering event was a real source of well-being: in particular, contact with nature provided nurturing moments; one of the adopted *rituals* was *to take a nature walk* which can provide an intense experience of *awe*, if we open our senses to the living ecosystem and the beauty of natural forms and landscapes. Today many meaningful studies illustrate the importance of this topic (see Carson, 1987; Piff *et al.* 2015; Ricard, 2019).

Among the students, Vishakha wrote that she found her intimate relationship with the earth by making compost for the first time on her balcony. She learnt how to make compost and she managed to do it with the organic waste from her meals; in other terms, she was seeking a daily interaction with the earth to find a source of healing.

As the first part of the workshop, we offered the students texts and videos as elements for thought and sources of inspiration to orient their attention to the relationships between humans and the ecosystem. In this way, we were able to explore the origin of the pandemic which is linked, according to many researchers, to deforestation and increased contact between wild animals, deprived of their natural environment, and farmed animals and humans.

One student even stated that “human being is the virus”: a *loss of confidence in human beings* gradually emerged from the students’ texts, to a such degree that we were able to notice, through the writings, a form of *anger* against older generations who have exploited the planet to the point that they have provoked this disaster.

Furthermore, Clara T. wrote the stunning phrase: “debt of life”, meaning that young people now feel that they have been condemned by adults to pay a heavy price because they will never get their twenties back.

Generally, students expressed a tragic vision of the situation: they are fully aware, more than many adults, of the world they inherit, and they want to ask a lot of questions. Frequently, a pessimistic view appeared in the writings (“humans cannot change, despite pandemics”), although sometimes an optimistic perspective emerged (“we are going to cope thanks to our endurance and our capacity for resilience and solidarity”). Every student, during the *econarrative workshop*, went through *various stages of understanding* with regards to the links between the pandemic and the

ecological crisis, so this new realization, in some cases, was even able to transform their intimate relationship with the living ecosystem.

One student went so far as to describe his “imprisonment”: he felt “self-confined” and could no longer find any motivation to go out, do sport, see friends, or go to the university. He could not achieve his plan to go and study abroad and this broke his spirit; he then gradually sank into an addiction to video games, even though he was aware of the psychological damage related to this excessive use of the computer.

4. From a loss of meaning to the quality of presence in the world

The choral “novel” by the students has unfolded gradually before our eyes: they showed a desire to write, as well as to read other students' writings (something that was actually made possible thanks to the “glossary” activity we created in Moodle). Many students testified to a *moment of growth*: “for me, every day is a conquest” said a student, in a trembling voice, during the discussion after the writing session. And she added: “At this moment, I am growing very fast”.

In some cases, the psychic suffering caused by the loss of bearings and the absence of social interaction with friends generated a path to realization: when no distraction was possible, when normal life collapsed, young people experienced a “loss of presence”: “what will I do? What kind of studies will I choose? My projects don't match the present time anymore.”

This first moment of *astonishment* can lead to a crossroads (see on this point Worms' essay *Sidération et résistance*, 2020): either we make the choice to act, to pull ourselves together, to take a fresh and constructive look at ourselves and others, or we sink into ill-being, indifference, and depression.

Two students wrote a text together on working from home and the way in which each one set it up (for example distant learning): having a daily work rhythm helped the students to cope, even at the heart of the storm of emotions and contradictory informations arising throughout this unprecedented health and social situation.

“We are now experiencing what caged animals live all the time”, stated one student: it seems that a new *inter-species fraternity* has emerged through the writings: “Life is a cycle and you receive what you give”, another student wrote; actually, some students were able to seize this fundamental truth: what we do to the ecosystem we do to ourselves. We are

not far from the idea of *ecological Self* elaborated by Arne Naess, namely a Self which is aware of all the inter-species relationships it is made of.

The students' writings revealed the clarity of their vision on the ecological crisis and Anthropocene: humanity has crossed now critical boundaries in its exploitation of the planet, and we urgently need a new vision of Earth in order to change our behavior. *Inner ecology* is fundamentally linked to *outer ecology*: if we are not well, we tend to consume, shop compulsively or pursue goals that are not in harmony with our ecological Self, and this inevitably implies the destruction of other living beings.

The econarrative writing workshop enabled students to share their own suffering: one student explained during the interview in the context of our inquiry: “for me, this was a moment of freedom because we were allowed to express ourselves freely”. This was the opinion of many of the students who participated in the workshop: at the heart of the lockdown, this educational device generated a *space of freedom* enabling students to realize that they were not alone in their suffering from the current situation. The resonance generated by the collective blog of the workshop allowed everyone to be inspired by others' writings even though *each* student could express his/her *unique* way of living the situation. Concretely, by sharing the individual experience of the pandemic, the writing workshop had the capacity to foster empathy among the students.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the students had the courage to expose their personal feelings individually thanks to the non-judgmental atmosphere that was set up during the sessions. Maëli emphasized the power of the imaginary in this difficult situation: “I have a dreamy nature, and this helped me so much during lockdown. I know now that what matters most is our mind, and the way we see reality”.

In a sense, we realize that a work on the self was made possible through the writing workshop: we traveled together along part of a road in search of truth, an existential, personal, and concrete truth which is not limited to the sphere of abstract knowledge. In other words, a truth that has a direct impact on the self and others. A work on the self that flows from an ethics of care of oneself (see Foucault, 2005).

If we are able to care of ourselves, we can care of others and of the planet; therefore, it is vital today to understand the importance of an inner transformation that will generate the change in our relations with other fellow beings provided by multiple forms of intelligence. It appears necessary today to recognize the richness of these various forms of life on Earth and on which our own survival depends: an albatross is capable of

finding its way over the great expanse of the ocean, a salmon can swim upstream, a bee performs a complex mapping dance... an algae has acquired the capacity for photosynthesis and can release oxygen...

The sense of wonder in the face of all the diversity of our biosphere generates an attitude of reverence in the presence of each form of life: according to an old Native American saying, we can see the result of our actions in seven generations to come; young students, those who were “20 years old in 2020” have realized that their actions will be decisive for the future of the Earth and humanity: “we are the first generation to undergo the effects of climate change and the last with the power to act” stated Vishakha.

The econarrative workshop’s writings are infused with fear, apprehension, and courage. At the same time, both vulnerable and robust, the students showed their fundamental capacity for resilience and their will to broaden and deepen their understanding within a society which pretends that things will return to what they were before the pandemic. The educational device of the workshop enhanced the consistency of the class, and the writing process was able to foster a sense of purpose in a world that had suddenly become unfamiliar.

According to Arundhati Roy (2020), throughout history, pandemics have always brought a great change: despite a feeling of frustration, loss and crisis, we can decide to make this exceptional event a “portal”, an opportunity for us to change in the perspective of a transformative education.

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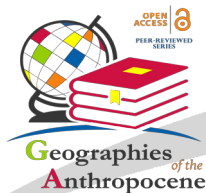
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"The Anthropocene has still the rank of a scientific hypothesis. Yet, it has already sedimented in our imagination with its stories of climate change and mass extinctions, global pandemics and energy crisis, technofossils and oceanic plastic, social justice and new minerals that are changing the face (and the bowels) of the planet. Investigating this imagination from multiple angles, *Narratives in the Anthropocene Era*, brilliantly edited by Charles Travis and Vittorio Valentino, is an indispensable tool for situating these stories into the conceptual horizon of the environmental humanities".
(Serenella Iovino, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

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