

## **Virtual readings, workshops keep writers connected during coronavirus times**

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When sheltering-in-place became a part of our new normal, it became imperative for readings and workshops to integrate technology in order to thrive. This time last year, I didn't know what Zoom was and now it is my social lifeline. Pre-pandemic, if I wanted to go to a poetry reading it meant getting dressed and driving which is oftentimes an adventure in itself.

An hour event could easily become a two to three hour investment, depending on traffic, parking, and casual conversations. I think one of the things I thought I would miss is the casual conversations. But I discovered that the warmth and care most poetry reading facilitators have in person, transcends technology and after a while it is easy to forget that we are in a Zoom gathering, screen to screen. There have been days where I literally felt like I had travelled to a couple of different locations.

For someone with an absolute aversion to driving, Zoom has helped diminish the exhaustion of a long distance commute. This summer I was able to attend a virtual six-week writing workshop, Poet-try 9, taught by Stephanie Barbe Hammer author of *Delicious Strangeness: A Pocket Guide to Magical Realism*, *The Puppet Turners of Narrow Interior* and *How Formal?* Hammer was actually in another state while guiding and encouraging us. She even attended readings outside of the workshop that participants were involved in. A couple of different technology platforms were used and through our writing, sharing and conversations, we all bonded and became as close as if we were in the same room.

I also had the opportunity to participate in a four-week workshop taught by Xochitl-Julisa Bermejo, author of *Posada: Offerings of Witness and Refuge* and co-founding member of *Women Who Submit*. Bermejo's facility with Zoom created an enriching experience on many levels. She showed movie clips and poems as a springboard for writing assignments. Breakout rooms were used to create smaller groups where we could have in-depth conversations and develop a bond beyond the four-week experience.

A successful reading or workshop is not something that comes from just showing up and knowing the right buttons to push. Thankfully, I have not attended an event that has been Zoom bombed – another expression I wouldn't have known a year ago; there are sites that have basic guidelines on how to avoid it. While, rules are important, so is creating the opportunity for free flowing conversation and interactions. If mics are always off and rules are too strict, it can feel more like a mandatory meeting rather than an artistic gathering.

I was happy to be able to attend a variety of events this past summer and I was virtually visiting a few readings a day. This was in addition to work and community organization meetings. It didn't take me long to experience Zoom fatigue. So, while a whole new

world of connections is now possible it is important to decide where you want to be a consistent member. Commit to those events first to help avoid sensory overload.

If you have been on hiatus because of Covid-19 it is time to dive back in. If you are running a writing workshop there are so many tech tools. What many venues have discovered is that attendance increases because of the convenience. People can even come from different states and reconnect. At one point, a local poet began attending a Zoom workshop I was facilitating even though she was living in Japan.

If you have been unplugged – it is time to plug back in to the writing circuit. I am not sure what will happen when we no longer have to shelter-in-place but it is my hope that it will be a hybrid of in-person and tech. This time next year – who knows?

*Romaine Washington is a poet, writer and educator and author of Sirens in Her Belly.*