

PHANTASMATIC CONSTRUCTIONS: Language and Humor and the Interrogation of Identity in Contemporary Filipino Comic Plays

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways in which humor operates to interrogate and assert Filipino identity in the face of an ever invasive hyperreal intervention in Philippine contemporary life, in two contemporary comic plays, "Welcome to IntelStar" by Chris Martinez (2005), and "Psychedelia Apocalypse" by Nicolas Pichay (2007). In the former, a comic monologue foregrounds the "call center phenomenon" in the Philippines. Outsourced service is shown as a maneuver which loosely transplants English-speaking, 'American-sounding' workers within a global economic community, and one which now comically depicts these workers, in fact, as culturally mired subjects negotiating their identity constructions within their everyday lives. "Psychedelia Apocalypse" is a farcical depiction of an American film crew's apparently innocent entry into the Philippine highlands to shoot the Francis Ford Coppola film *Apocalypse Now*; as a result, they become embroiled in the intersections of Filipino history, current Philippine internal conflicts, and Philippine political feuds, thus highlighting the matrix of current Philippine culture and life.

In reading these two plays as shifting cultural texts, I seek to examine how the language of humor and the comic strategies used therein (especially citing the role of incongruity theories) respond to the creation, or to the evolution of a hyperreal Filipino identity, one that complicates the fixing of a national identity in the face of a culture that has long grappled with this question, given the Philippines' own colonial and hybrid culture. And while this paper focuses mainly on Filipino texts and

problematizes Filipino identity, it is significant to explore the Asian and Third World reverberations of the possibilities and problems of this cultural reengagement and reconsolidation of identity, examined now by way of language and culture.

Keywords: Philippine contemporary plays, language and identity, identity-construction, pastiche and parody

Let me begin briefly by noting that reading textual humor in Philippine cultural forms is almost always reserved for popular cultural forms in mediated forms, such as television shows, films, radio scripts; in comic strips and political joke work; and in popular native forms of the visual arts, such as the *sarsuwelas*, which are 19th century musical dramas mining comic situations as covert subversive vehicles of anti-colonial sentiments against Spanish and American rule, or the *comedias*, costume dramas that utilize the comic by presenting trickster characters that act as foils to romantic heroes and heroines in stories that are largely borrowed from European narratives.

I began with this observation because this paper is a foray now into the humor used by Philippine literary texts, which are heavily marked, in terms of their major genres—in fiction, both in English and Filipino, in poetry, and in drama—by a palpable social realism that seeks to present difficulties in Philippine life; and which ultimately revolve around an almost modernist query of how daily life unmoors the individual by setting them against the implacable uncertainties and mutabilities of unsympathetic institutions, thus rendering the Filipino a fractured entity, by way of his history and his everyday life.

Drama and the performance of social life

Drama as a genre is an appropriate vehicle for this interrogation of identity, as dramatic performance is “worked out within a specific social framework” (Shepherd and Wallis, 2004, p. 45). Citing Georges Gurevitch’s sociological approach to the study of the theatre, Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis underscored the analysis of “the study of actors as a social group”, and more importantly, of the study of the “functional relationship between the content . . . of plays and the actual social system” (p. 45) to explain how this drama features the playing out of the individual and collective roles that mark social ceremonies analogous to theatrical performance (p. 45). When seen in the light of drama as an entry into everyday life, this, on the one hand, could be understood as a view of what is explicitly performed

on stage, and how this mimics or transforms the “concealed or unconscious performances of everyday life” (p. 46). Martin Esslin does speak of a dramatic text as “mimetic action”; but he also points out that until this text is enacted or performed, this is literature, a narrative (Esslin, 1987, p. 24). Esslin adds that at its most primary level, a dramatic performance should be seen as a conveyance of information to the audience about actions that are mimetically reproduced (p. 16). This emphasis on meaning-making, on making sense of the performance and its elements as sign, is integral to drama because it is “unique among the representational arts in that it represents ‘reality’ by using real human beings and often also real objects, to create its fictional universe” (p. 29). This complements Esslin’s early views of drama as being particularly potent because its origins lie in ritual (cf. Shepherd and Wallis, p. 60), practices that define social organizations and which ascertain their survival (Shepherd and Wallis, p. 60). This aspect and origin of drama is definitive of what is essentially human — as ritualistic form, it gives rise to what human beings do, and it connects us most powerfully to “what humans supposedly are” (p. 59).

Another way to explain how drama makes sense of the everyday is to use Victor Turner’s concept of the social drama which encompasses not just the aesthetic, theatrical performance, but sets this alongside an array of human performances that address conflict situations, which usually has four main stages. There is, first, a “breach of regular norm-governed social relations”, followed by a “crisis” that tends to aggravate this breach. This is followed by “redressive action”, which may “range from personal advice to formal juridical and legal machinery... to the performance of public ritual...”, and this ends in the “reintegration of the disturbed social group, or of the social recognition and legitimation of irreparable schism” (Turner in Shepherd and Wallis, 2004, pp. 116-117). Like Esslin, Turner looks at applications of social drama in rituals, but sees these too in other mechanisms and behaviors aimed at performing functions in society. “Drama” therefore, takes on meanings that are more than the theatrical, but now overarch a range of activities in culture—“high and folk, oral and literate”—that are seen not only to arrest the gaps created by conflicts in society; and “all the varied phenomena of the redressive process, including aesthetic works, can be regarded as performance. . . .” (pp. 116-117).

Medina and Campano (2006) support this aptness of drama as a genre that potentially explores the creation of social and national identification as they aver how:

. . . drama is unique in providing an (interactive context wherein participants can comprehend and stretch the limits of their day-to-day realities through the embodiment of critical reflection and both rehearsed and improvised action. Participants at once inhabit and coconstruct [sic] a “make-believe world” parallel to their own lives. They develop characters and situations that are animated by multiple social positions, and they mediate their own experiences of the world with those of the various roles enacted in the drama. It is in this active negotiation that participants begin to critically reflect on the various positions and ways of knowing they bring as interpreters of the world. . . . Furthermore, in the imaginative space that is created through drama, participants have the opportunity to take action and “talk back” to dominant social, cultural, and linguistic practices that may devalue their own rich cultural resources and identities.... (<http://search.proquest.com/docview/196904543?accountid=141440>)

These two contemporary texts that I am examining in this paper are welcome entries into Philippine life, not because they do not delve on similar issues of cultural disjuncture, nor because they do not offer a similarly harsh critique of the loss of, or the resulting amorphousness of Filipino identity; but because we are able to track in these texts new, subversive strategies now deployed by way of humor, in context and in language, using the comic, not now as a point of trivial entertainment, but as very real tactics that interrogate and assert Filipino identity in the face of an ever-invasive hyperreal intervention in Philippine contemporary life. In these two plays, we look into the comic depiction of Filipinos who now grapple with their inscription and circumscription within a state of complex economic, cultural, political debacles that further the anomie of the Filipino, seen now as fighting against both social and personal fragmentation as a result of an economic/cultural/linguistic neocolonial status, born of the need for apparent global competitiveness.

***“Words mean nothing—”:
Chris Martinez’s Welcome to IntelStar (2005)***

Chris Martinez’s one act monologue *Welcome to IntelStar* is well worth examining as it is a Palanca award winner for drama, the Palanca awards being the Philippines’ most prestigious annual literary contest, making

the prizewinners literary watermarks of every successful Filipino writers' oeuvres. While this play has not yet seen production and its claim to fame rests on its Palanca award and its subsequent publication, *Welcome to IntelStar* is a very telling narrative of this new Philippine "call center phenomenon", a largely urban development, that Martinez, the playwright, affirms when he speaks of chronicling the city, of being a "voice" for it: "My voice is in the city. My rhythm is its heartbeat" (<http://cdmartinez.multiply.com/journal/item/50>).

Welcome to IntelStar (Wtl) is a comic monologue in which the narrating persona represents the face of the current boom in Business Process Outsourcing (BPOs) in the Philippines, that foregrounds this "call center phenomenon" in the Philippines, in which outsourced service is shown as a maneuver which loosely transplants English-speaking, 'American-sounding' workers within a global economic community. Business process outsourcing (BPO) "is the act of giving a third-party the responsibility of running what would otherwise be an internal system or service" (<http://www.mariosalexandrou.com/definition/business-process-outsourcing.asp>). BPO's look to cut costs for companies by handing the work to a third party, achievable because "labor costs are lower due to different costs of living in different countries". In exchange for the potential cost savings, the company in question must relinquish control over an aspect of their business, which explains why business process outsourcing is often reserved for non-critical, non-core type of work. (<http://www.mariosalexandrou.com/definition/business-process-outsourcing.asp>). While BPO's are engaged in service delivery for businesses in the United States and the Europe, which now utilize English-speaking Asian countries to lessen parent company expenses, to the ordinary Filipino, the work in BPOs is what is contemporarily referred to as "call center" work. It is seen as easy entry to lucrative employment if one is proficient in English. The play is set within the conference room of what could be any big business in the Makati central business district, the hub of Philippine urban business life. The whole play is in fact an introductory class for new call-center recruits, as much as it is an indoctrination to the alien culture of call centers. In fact, that the narrating persona "address[es] the audience who 'play' the part of her new batch of trainees" (Martinez, p. 3) should not only be seen as a dramatic device that makes for a ready part of the dramatis personae of the play. This could be construed, more subtly, as an indication not only of inclusion, but of the symbolic possibility that every Filipino could be a call center agent, or a BPO worker, by way of what the narrator/speaker hails as our "blessing":

. . . we Filipinos do not realize how blessed we are to be the only English-speaking Southeast Asian people who can perfectly fake an American accent. By the end of this year, there will be 100, 000 Filipinos working in call centers. It is our destiny to thrive in this business. It is our fate to be the call center capital of the world (Martinez, p. 7).

The humor of Martinez's play hinges most significantly on transformation on many levels. The narrating persona is herself transformed by her preoccupation with naming, and Filipino identity is marked by this. The narrator, whose Christian name is Ma. Leonora Teresa Grabador-Bayot, changes her name to the Western appellation Chelsea. It would appear that the former is simply longer than the latter; but in fact, the Filipino audience watching this would laugh more heartily, seeing in it a pastiche of identities with which one is made familiar. The qualifier "Christian" that I used earlier is not far from wrong, as the narrating persona's name is quintessentially Spanish-sounding; but more subversively, the name Ma. Leonora Teresa reverberates because it is the name given to a doll owned by a teenage romantic tandem in the Philippines in the 1970's, and therefore is a mark of kitsch and mass entertainment in Philippine society. The hyphenated surnames may point to pomposity, as it may to an amalgam of both colonial and native identification. Even more laughable is the idea that "*bayot*" in certain Philippine dialects means "homosexual". Chelsea, the pragmatic IntelStar employee, takes on a Westernized persona, and underscores its significance—"The first order of the day, I mean of the night, is to choose your American name" (p. 6)—as "[we] open each call with an introduction of ourselves" (p. 5). The change of persona is made as integral as the language instruction that will come later in the play, and this incongruous change of identity is achieved as easily as though one were donning on disposable clothes.

The heart of the play is the comic instruction on acceptable accents as part of the call center liaison work, a program Chelsea calls the "Accent Neutralization Program." This is not so much a language instruction program, as we shall later see, as it is an apparently innocuous instruction for the Filipino worker on American life and culture, as this program makes preeminent the ideological norms propounded by a Western hierarchy. Certainly, a significant part of this is the name change we raised earlier, an alteration that is presented as normal and easy within this corporate context:

You! What's your name? Teodoro Albarillo? You can be a Teddy. Or a Ted? No, this is much better: Todd! Todd! That's it! Todd *Not Toad*, Todd! (She singles out a girl this time.) You, Miss, what's your name? Jennilyn Grace Humbrado? Jennilyn Grace. To me, Jenny is okay. Lyn is okay. No offense, but when you put them together you sound like a Pinoy [Filipino] taxicab. You know, like RonaLyn Taxi, LynDonJohn Taxi or LynLanLanieLou Taxi. . . . For you, let's use Grace instead. . . . Or better yet, instead of Grace—we'll use Gracie. You like it? . . . Good for you, Gracie! (p. 6; my italics)

The ease with which Chelsea changes these Filipino names is deceptively done in aid of a professional image, but this necessitates an abandonment of a local identity in favor of a "neutral" one. This is apparent in the derision Chelsea has for the "Jennilyn Grace" name, which sounds like a taxicab name. What she is saying in fact is that this is a name that sounds chopped-up and put-together, in short, a mishmash of communal names that may refer to a cab owner's investors, family members or loved ones, thus harking to the penchant of businesses in the Philippines to mine the communal and the familial. And this Chelsea treats pejoratively as it is a value that has no place in a largely individualistic template she appropriates here (Todd, Gracie).

Note here the extent of this incongruity as Chelsea pursues this name change to its most ridiculous and most unexpected, blurring the lines of not only local/global identity, but even of gender. Chelsea now turns to a man whose name is even harder to remember:

You! What's your name? What? I beg your pardon? Again please? Ime Isuekpe? Ime Isuekpe? What kind of name is that? Oh, you're half-Pinoy, half-Nigerian. Oh I see. . . . Boy, this is a tough one, huh? Ime, do you want to be called George? You don't like the name George. (Pauses). Okay, how about, Scott? Scott is a perfectly good sounding name! You don't like Scott? . . . Well. . . what about Tyrone? You don't like Tyrone either? So, what do you like? (She gets shocked.) Chelsea?!! You want my name? I'm sorry but Chelsea is taken. . . you can be a Britney or Lindsay. Or. . . even a Stacy. But not Chelsea. Gosh! (p. 7)

Chelsea's reluctance to part with her professional name may not be so much because it has profound meanings that hint at her person, but only because

a name is now “property”, as much a fixture of corporate life as desks, or office implements are. We see how abnormally proprietorial she is about her name, given her disregard of the logic of its ownership.

The Accent Neutralization Program also provides a background to American everyday life, as Chelsea introduces the American map and American time zones, again in aid of IntelStar as “. . . a dedicated service company, and since our customers are from the US, we should be where they are not by actually traveling to the US but by putting ourselves in the right mindset” (p. 13). And the “right mindset” is that of “serv[ing] them the best that we can. We should be able to adjust to their time, to match their waking hours and energy, to be there with them” (p. 13). This attitude of servitude is one that is satirized throughout the play; and it is one that marks an already problematic colonial Filipino identity throughout its history.

In continuation of this attitude is an instruction on “protocols”, all to showcase professionalism on the job. The “protocols” are themselves reminders of neutrality—from professional attire to the medium of office communication which is English. Chelsea states in the play: “Everybody is required to use only English in any form of communication, verbal or written. . . .” (p. 12), to work ethic governing tardiness and absences. More importantly, Chelsea details protocol used “to handle queries about [our] business” (p. 14). She emphasizes how the call center agent should be ready with a standard answer to queries about “where they are located” (p. 14), and “should never divulge” the information that the agent is from the Philippines. To counter this, the ready answer is “We are centrally located”, a line as important as knowing the right intonation and accent. As Chelsea puts it, “centrally located — whatever that means” (p. 14) is as much a strategy for cloaking that we shall speak of when we refer to pronunciation, as it is a tactic of neutrality in maintaining the illusion of homogenized, “neutral” space. This is not so much just an erasure of the Philippines as alien place [“... they’re not supposed to know that we are on the other side of the globe” (p. 6)], as it is the maintenance of the illusion that “we are centrally located in the US” (p. 6). The world, therefore, is one humongous United States. Chelsea adds to this neutral demeanor when faced with curious, or worse still, irate calls: “maintain your composure”, transfer the call to your supervisor if you cannot handle the call, apologize to your caller, “never hang up on your caller. Just let him vent. Do not butt in as he verbally abuses you. And try to apologize when there is an opportunity to do so” (p. 15).

What the Accent Neutralization Program does is not only to introduce new pronunciation to Filipinos to make them sound undetectable as Filipinos

to Western callers; this “cloaking” is also a ruse that presents a parody of language instruction, and a parody of what she persists in calling the “neutral American accent” (p. 8). Here we have an example of a typical Chelsea lesson:

Did he?	Didee?
Does he?	Duzzy?
Was he?	Wuzzy?
Has he?	Hazy?
Is he?	Izzy?
Would he?	Woody?
Wouldn't you?	Wooden chew?
Hasn't he?	Has a knee?
Don't you?	Done chew?
Can't you?	Can chew?
Could you?	Cujoo?

(p. 8)

Chelsea adds another table of words to this:

Did you eat?	Jeet?
No, did you?	No, joo?
I don't know, it's too hard.	I dunno, stoo hard.
Could we go?	Kwee gou?
Let's go!	Sko!

(p. 10)

Chelsea talks about this as being “quite tricky, but you'll get used to it” (p. 11) [Everybody now let's all say “Jeet?” “No, joo. . . and that “sometimes it takes more than just reading it, it also takes a little bit of attitude, you know? (imitates a rapper's hand motions.)” “I dunno, stoo hard, man. Stoo hard!” (p. 11). ““Kwee gou' sound[s] a bit Korean but that's just how it is. . . .” (11) In all of these, we find not so much a legitimate pronunciation lesson that clarifies lexical structures, as we are confronted by language use that panders to a specific English users' group, what Chelsea refers to as a “neutral Californian accent” (p.7); but which in fact is anything but, and is rather a merging of many American linguistic contexts.

The comic transformation of the Filipino speaker in the globalized professional milieu is one that occurs on at least two levels: the mutation into virtual Americans happens as the Filipino takes on a pseudo-American identity for work purposes (“... if you can’t ‘be’ an American, you can always sound like one. And that’s good enough. . . ” [p. 7]). This creation of “ersatz” Americans is aided too by mediated technologies that make this cloaking possible. Using the telephone, over cyberspace, one is able to pursue and to maintain this transformation in the period for which his or her services are needed; and this is exactly what we find happening in Chelsea herself at the end of the play.

This guise of neutrality is one that Braj Kachru in his essay “The Alchemy of English” (1990) acknowledges as possessed by the English language. He states that:

English does have one clear advantage, attitudinally and linguistically: it has acquired a neutrality in a linguistic context where native languages, dialects, and styles sometimes have undesirable connotations. Whereas native codes are functionally marked in terms of caste, religion, region, and so forth, English has no such ‘markers’, at least in the non-native context” (p. 322).

But we have seen that this emulation of “neutrality”, such that it redounds to the deployment of English unmarked by native accents and “undesirable” connotations — an “unblemished”, “official” English, so to speak — that this is a myth. In a parallel study conducted by Beatrice Smith of Ghanaian workers at outsourcing companies, she reports that the rise of “outsourcing workspaces” in “‘less developed’ economies” challenge the notion that the transfer of the benefits of globalization and the functional, skill-based literacies is unproblematic and neutral. In fact, she states that far from these, “... the literacies that enable participation in these locations have *damaging consequences for individuals and societies when work and the language-mediated practices associated with dominant economies are unproblematically transferred into these settings*” (<http://search.proquest.com/docview/216920072?accountid=141440>; my italics).

More significantly, Smith raises a more complex subject of identity-construction in the light of this globalized work: “Identities constructed and shaped by work practices also paradoxically framed the dimensions of desire”. Much like Chelsea and the creation of a pan- American locale, which brings with it all the apparent benefits in terms of wages, Ghanaian

workers were marked by "desire". The fact that they re-create America in the small physical spaces they inhabit (in this case in Ghana, but which could well have been Manila or Mumbai) "brings the outside world into the physical work space as employees sit in Ghana and solve problems related to, for instance, health care delivered to a client in Peoria, Illinois" (<http://search.proquest.com/docview/216920072?accountid=141440>). Smith rightly wonders whether these Ghanaian ". . . women wonder what Peoria looks like or do they work on data as though they were disinterested subjects. . . ." The Ghanaian workers find that their re-creation of America breeds

. . . yet another consequence, unintended no doubt, of the proximity to the United States that emanates from processing transactions at CCS. . . the enculturation that goes with the work and the manner in which it fuels or reshapes desire for women's constructions of life in the United States. [Ghanaian] women talked repeatedly about learning the geography of the United States, learning names of cities and states, and learning about the things that Americans visit health-care facilities for--many of which the women themselves do not or cannot have. As one woman put it, 'The dream of everyone at CCS is to go to America one day.'
(<http://search.proquest.com/docview/216920072?accountid=14140>)

Smith, quoting Arjun Appadurai, argues that "a consequence of globalization for peripheral economies is that labor in outsourcing has now become another 'work of the imagination' as it offers 'new' resources for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds" (<http://search.proquest.com/docview/216920072?accountid=14140>).

However, Kachru (1990) also asserts that English is a "language of power and opportunity" (p. 322), and as such, "has thus acquired a new power base and a new elitism" (p. 323). We see this IntelStar "accent neutralization program" as an instance of the way by which "the domains of English have been restructured", and have provided "power bases [that] have called into question the traditionally accepted, externally normative standards for institutionalized varieties" (p. 324). The English that is presented at the core of this workplace program is indeed comical; but it is part of the institutionalized neo/colonial English variety, that "ha[s] its own linguistic and cultural ecologies or sociocultural contexts, [and] [t]he adaptation to these new ecologies has given non-native Englishes new identities" (p. 324).

In playing with the morphological changes in this lesson, what this really states is that a Filipino/Asian is unacceptable to Western callers/clients. The stigma of otherness necessitates the radical effacement of a Filipino linguistic, and cultural identity.

Aside from being a parody of language lessons, this play is also particularly deceptive as it naturalizes the subject position of Filipinos/Asians. Chelsea earlier spoke of "protocols", a series of instructions to deal with "difficult" calls, and she proceeds to speak of her own experience with irate calls:

'... I remember this call I got from this man from Indianapolis three days ago. He sounded like a middle-aged black guy. From the beginning of the call he was already sounding furious. . . .

I go, 'Hi! This is Chelsea. City and state please? Then he goes, 'Indianapolis, Indiana.' I go, 'I need the fucking number of Papa John's Pizza and Pasta.' Then I say, 'Is that the one on 1st Street? . . . No, you stupid bitch, it's along La Cienega Boulevard. Near the mall! I go, I apologize for that. Let me search that for you. . . one moment please. . . Thank you for waiting, but we don't have listing of Papa John's Pizza and Pasta along La Cienega Boulevard. He goes, What do you mean you have no fucking listing? It's been there for twenty fucking years, you stupid bitch. So like a good call center agent, I just let him vent. He continues, Fucking Hindu! You're a goddamn fucking Hindu bitch, aren't you? . . . Stupid Hindu bitch! Papa John's Pasta and Pizza has been on La Cienega Boulevard since I was a kid. Now don't go telling me it's not there when I know for a fucking fact that it fucking is! . . . he pauses. So I grab that opportunity to apologize. . . I'm really sorry but we don't have a listing for Papa John's Pizza and Pasta along La Cienega. . . . Well, fuck you! You just ate up my phone bill, I'm on a fucking cell phone and I'm not going to pay for this call, you stupid cow-worshipping bitch! (Martinez, pp. 15-16)

We note how Chelsea displaces the working persona that suffers abuse here, by underscoring the "international", "global", and therefore anonymous and neutral; and she does this by negating one's psychical, emotional state. She comments:

At the end of the day, it's all just part of the job, you see. It's just a job. I shouldn't get hurt and I shouldn't take it personally. I mean, he doesn't know me. He can't even see me. How can he even hurt me when he's on the other side of the planet? And I how can I be a Hindu, If I was born and raised a Catholic? . . . *If you ever get hurt, remember, they're just words--- words mean nothing. . . .* (p. 17; my italics)

Here, indeed, "words mean nothing" except as a babel of sounds that make it possible, specifically, for an economic enterprise to succeed, and globally, for neocolonial structures to be perpetuated in an Asian/Filipino context.

Basil Bernstein (2000), in discussing the linguistic socialization of the young, posited four interrelated contexts which he deemed were contributory to it. He talked of a "regulative context", which signals authority relationships that provide awareness of the moral order; an "instructional context" in which we find the "objective nature, of objects and persons", in which we note skill acquisition. But there is, too, an "imaginative or innovating context", where the learner "experiments and re-creates his world on his own terms, in his own way". And finally, it is in the "interpersonal context" on which affective states are focused (p. 453). Bernstein believes that "call center language becomes an 'elaborated code having its basis in individualized roles realizing context-independent universalistic meanings'" (p. 453), which operates by suspending the imaginative/innovative and the interpersonal contexts, thus creating an irregularity in the "critical orderings of a culture or subculture." This is seen in the apparent atrophy of Chelsea's, and perhaps every other Filipino BPO worker's cultural differentiation and emotional identity. Bernstein adds that a lack of "sensitive understanding of the required contexts" is itself a "potentially damaging experience" (p. 455).

The furtherance of this alienation, that is a consequence of this highly regulative/instructive context detrimental to the interpersonal and imaginative contexts of linguistic socialization, is seen most keenly in the double marginalization of other Filipinos in the play. First, Chelsea narrates another encounter that constitutes what she calls a "difficult" call. This time, she comically presents a Filipino old woman as a misplaced busybody who calls the call center up as a curiosity: ". . . there's this other call that I just got three weeks ago, it was sort of funny but you'll learn a lot from this story. I got a call from an old Filipino lady in San Diego. She had this thick Tagalog accent. . . ." (Martinez, p. 17).

Chelsea proceeds to deal with her, until she is surprised by the woman's charge:

"How can I help you in California, ma'am? Then she says, "Are you also a Filipino? I was shocked! But I regained my composure and go, I'm sorry but due to security reasons, I cannot disclose that information. She goes, You are! You are a Pinay. It's true what my *kumares* told me. Dial 411 and a Pinay will answer you. I can hear it in your voice. You are a Pinay. How is everything back there in the Philippines? Then I go, I'm sorry but due to security reasons, I cannot disclose that information. So I am right? You are from the Philippines. . . . We are centrally located. *Uy, eto naman*, it's just the two of us! . . . What is Manila like these days? I haven't come home for 20 years *na*. I miss all my family back there. . . . Just talk to me. Make me *tsismis*. . . . Much as I wanted to hang up on her, I couldn't. . . . *Sige na nga, hija*. Never mind. I just wanted to see if what my friends were telling me is true, And it is. Dial 411 and a Filipino will answer you. . . . (pp. 17-18).

Chelsea's presentation of the old woman negatively marks the latter as "inferior", as her accent is not "neutral", but instead is "thick" and Tagalog-inflected. Also, in attending to the woman, the phone call only ends up being an act of botched nostalgia. It doubly alienates the old woman by denying her an attempt to reconnect with the homeland, and to Chelsea or any Filipino call center worker on the other line, a possible representative of this part of the old woman's self-identification with a Filipino identity ("I haven't come home for 20 years"). With Chelsea negating a communal affirmation, the Filipino old woman was not paid back with her own coin. This exchange is a confrontation between the remnants of Filipino values of closeness, fellow-feeling, ties to homeland and home on the part not only of Filipinos, now, but of Filipino expatriates, doubly removed from this national identity. When Chelsea literally evades the feelers sent out by the old Filipina, she uses "statements that purport to represent reality" ("... I cannot disclose that information...", "We are centrally located..."), but which are statements too that are skewed to effect "some linguistic mismatch... a construction that makes a false connection" (Bolinger, p. 107). Chelsea's literal replies to the old Filipina, that her professional code does not authorize her to disclose her nationality, is an ideal statement that ought to have been trustworthy because of its presentation of impartiality; but "the

reality is too often an ambush that defeats the framers' intent by diverting it into a verbal bypath that was not foreseen" (p.107). And in this case, with Chelsea's literal denial of what she was as demanded by her job band comes too a repudiation of anything that marks her as Filipino. Moreover, this, as we earlier noted, slices through any possible patriotic amity that she and the Filipina immigrant caller could have shared, this killing off of any possibility of creating a mediated, imagined community. And while this furthers the comic irony of this play, this is comedy that is so painful it almost makes us wince.

IntelStar conflates a new linguistic colonialism based on the deployment of the literal and ironic use of market language. Language itself becomes a symbolic denomination, as it is a "money activated language" (Calvet, p. 89). The flaunting of English as lingua franca is ostensibly made by way of accent reduction/neutralization in order to attract a foreign clientele that will be lulled into thinking that they are assured of the knowledge and the competence of service staff who are the same as they are. This "deception" intersects with a larger postcolonial history of the Philippines, especially in terms of a specifically American engagement in the last one hundred and ten years, from the McKinley project of benevolent assimilation at the beginning of the 20th century, and America's attendant cultural/ political reeducation of the Filipinos.

Note that at the end, the blackly comic and ironic response that Chelsea makes punctuates the play, and serves both as a defiant stance against what she represented throughout the play, and as a wry self-reflexive criticism of her new identity as an agentive entity pushing global anomie in this BPO concern. In making a bitter, purely Filipino remark at the end of her entirely English instruction ("*Tang-inang trabaho 'to. Madaling araw na, nag-iingles pa rin ako*"; "what a son-of-a-bitch job this is! It's dawn, and I'm still speaking in English") (Martinez, p. 19; my translation), Chelsea reverts back to her Maria Leonora Teresa Grabador-Bayot persona, the Filipina who now breaks away from the linguistic tyranny of the elaborated code that she perpetuates in this lecture/monologue. In denigrating the length of her "immersion" in a "neutral" corporate communication situation, Chelsea realizes her own cooptation in this new system that propounds a "national aesthetic. . . where no one who is anyone betrays where he or she comes from when they speak" (Lippi-Green, p. 146). With this emphatic vulgar comment as ending to the play, we also realize that this serves as the only reaction to the slew of comments and revelations she makes in the play, as hers is the only perspective made valid in the text, and is the only perspective to which

we are made privy. And while she articulates both the imposition of the language of the call center by way of the accent neutralization program, and the larger economic and cultural imperatives of it throughout the play, in the end, she is made to succinctly take on the voice, and the reaction, of every Filipino who ends up working in this new globalized business.

The Psychedelia of "ascending peculiarity": Nicolas Pichay's "Psychedelia Apocalypse" (2005)

"*Psychedelia Apocalypse*" by Nicolas Pichay is another Palanca literary award winner, taking first place for the full-length play in 2005 (Pichay, p. 104). In the same year, it was produced as part of a set of comic plays eponymously named "Komedi" by the Dulaang UP, the official performing group for theater of the University of the Philippines (http://kal.upd.edu.ph/dsct_index.php?p=102), which is among the most respected theatre groups in the Philippines.

"*Psychedelia Apocalypse*" is a farcical depiction of an American film crew's apparently innocent entry into the Philippine highlands to shoot the Francis Ford Coppola film *Apocalypse Now* in the late 1970's; as a result, they become embroiled in the intersections of Filipino history, current Philippine internal conflicts, and Philippine political feuds, thus highlighting the matrix of current Philippine culture and life. The play is eponymously titled, as in ten scenes and an epilogue; the play is a series of introductions and intersections of events set within the Philippine film set of this foreign film. *Apocalypse Now* becomes an operating sign in this comic play, as it is activated not only as a literal setting for characters of the play, but as a meaning that complicates other struggles for identity among these native and foreign characters.

Each scene is an introduction of characters, native and foreign, who are about to play a part in the shooting of the film, or characters who are already part of the film from the beginning. Scenes 1, 2, 3, 4 present us with the introduction of these disparate characters; and Scenes 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 are episodes which focus on the comic discoveries and interactions of these characters that reveal their almost surreal displacements, and whose motives and identities are all entwined and affirmed or refuted by the hyperreal state of the *Apocalypse* film set. Hyperreality is the "efface[ment] of the contradiction between the real and the imaginary" (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 74). For Jean Baudrillard, the hyperreal is a condition born of the "the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium such as advertising or photography", asserting that

the “nesting’ of media and translation of reality through so many media screens is responsible for [Ed: close quotation marks are missing here] “the collapse of reality into hyperrealism” (p. 74). The multiple reproduction of reality through media makes unstable this very reality because reality has been replaced by a simulation of things, thus leading to a collapse between the real and simulacra — “Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible.” (http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/Anthro/Anth206/jean_baudrillard_and_hyperrealit.htm).

Scene 10 and the epilogue are a curious counterpoint between the ideological discourse of the *Apocalypse* as film, centering the monolithic might of the United States against the unacceptable anti-capitalist/anti-democratic ideologies of communist regimes, in this case, like Vietnam, a binary that is complicated by the fact that *Apocalypse* is peopled by characters who are not Vietnamese, thus challenging questions of identity here. They are in fact engaged in a new battle to reclaim a new kind of territory, and the film is not now ersatz depiction of the American attempt to reclaim a Southeast Asian land and free it from its pervasive leftist ideologies. Instead, the film reckons here with native/indigenous displacement, with hybrid identities, or with similar ideological leanings compounded by a national history of American colonization, and thus, with national resentments held against these colonizers.

The recreation of the film set in the Philippines makes this a neocolonial enterprise that duplicates another neocolonial engagement being shown in the film itself. The film becomes a literal intersection not only of characters, but also of motives, cultures, memories, languages and identities. The film set, we are told, is a “large, Vietnamese temple overrun by jungle vines and thick foliage. . . .” (Pichay, p. 16). It is in this stereotype of native, un-American, un-Western chaos that we find the grounding of the play, initiating in the very first scene the reverberating valuation of Vietnam/the Philippines, which we hear throughout the play. The assistant director looks for Francis Coppola, the director of the film, and says: “Mr. Coppola. . . Mr. Coppola. . . please, where are you? I know that everything’s late, the set doesn’t work. . . But please, Mr. Coppola, we really have to talk. . . .” (p. 16). While the simulated “jungle” and the set itself is already seen through a Western gaze, it is this valuation that becomes preeminent in the play. However, on a large scale (Coppola’s perspective, for instance), and for the characters of the play, the set is in fact an economic site. This is given credence by Dungdungan’s presentation of himself and his plight, as he stays in the periphery of the set and listens to the assistant director’s complaint.

Dungdungan is a Filipino from an indigenous tribe in the highlands of Luzon who now sells trinkets, and functions as a trickster in the play, fooling people into buying his fake native merchandise such as necklaces that double as amulets. He views himself as a most amusing, if not prurient, merchandise as he emulates being the “man-in-the-barrel”, creating laughter by eliciting the carnivalesque humor of the taboo, as this plays on the surprise of seeing a naked man when the barrel is removed. Dungdungan looks at himself as both merchandise and vendor, getting everywhere to sell everything. In doing so, he says of himself : “... *Ay Apo!* I am Dungdungan. I am everywhere. And *bilibitornat*, I also have a super power” (p. 17), which he attributes to magic snake bones. More than this fantastic claim, it is his narrative’s logic that fools us:

My mother gave me this before she went to Taiwan to work in a garlic farm. *Wen Apo!* A garlic farm. *Kung kumakain ako ng adobong aso* (When I eat stewed dog), I feel sentimental--- *naaamoy ko kasi ang nanay ko. Kasi naman, ang nanay ko, amoy aso. . . .* (I could smell my mother. . . my mother, she smells of dog) (p. 18; my translation).

Dungdungan parodies his roots here while also identifying with it, when he speaks of himself as a dog-eater, raising this pejorative label and using it as a factual description. But this is also done with a skewed nod to the disgust this will certainly evoke in non-Filipinos/ Westerners. But more pathetically, when he speaks of his mother as a displaced Filipino who, like many who have joined the economic diaspora, has had to work overseas to make a living, his identification of himself relies here on misdirection, making us laugh by evoking nostalgia toward maternity. But what he really wishes to underscore is the pride in, or the sardonic bitterness toward his native roots.

Like Dungdungan, other Filipino characters are drawn to the Apocalypse film set mainly for work: Kim is a Filipino woman who arrives with Joe the American Vietnam veteran, in the hope that she would land a role in the film; in return, she becomes Joe’s concubine. While this plays well with the role of the subservient Asian female, Kim readily disabuses Joe of this:

Joe looks at her like a wet puppy.
 Kim: Don’t look at me with those eyes. *Nagmumukha kang pusit.*
 (You look like a squid.)
 Joe: C’mon. Give me a break. I’m hurting here.
 Kim: Joe. . . Joe, Joe, Joe, Joe, Joe. . . . How many . . . times

must I remind you. I'm no run of the mill, old-fashioned
Thomasite-educated Pinay whore. . . . (p. 20; my translation).

Impong Negro (Old Blackie), is another *Apocalypse* extra-wannabe, “[he] play[s] a Vietnamese in this movie. . . . Or is it a Filipino? *Di ko na maalala* (I can’t remember anymore). *Para bang* I’m a rebel disguised as a woman (p. 25).” If Kim is comic because she is feisty, Impong Negro shows the very thin line between sanity and senile dementia, as he confuses the Vietnamese war film with a real war waged by Filipinos against Americans, in which the latter took the bells of Balangiga as war booty in the early 1900’s. Impong Negro is at once acting the part in the film, as he also puts himself in the act of preparing for war. Impong Negro mistakes the set as a confusion of historical victimizations: he believes Kim is a former sweetheart who was killed in the war, and who died as she choked on American chocolates (p. 26); he remembers his mother who was “killed and gang-raped”, [mistaken] for a Japanese during the liberation of Manila (p. 26). The old man is an amalgam of pathos and courage; he suffers as both a virtual casualty of war as an *Apocalypse* extra, and as a paranoid anti-American Philippine guerilla fighter.

Roger, the leftist New People’s Army fighter, and Dingdong, his Muslim companion, are another set of characters drawn to the *Apocalypse* film set. They are depicted in an even more surreal fashion, as in a drug-crazed haze, they mistake the jungle set for real Philippine jungles where they fight with government troops. Dingdong thinks they are in the Mountain Province, but Roger urges him to use his common sense, saying they are in the mountains of Quezon in the South. Both in the wrong, they see Dungdungan, whom they mistake for a “leprechaun”, and Roger says, “*Kaya pala di tayo makaalis-alis dito*” (This is why we could not seem to get out of this place) (p. 28; my translation). This confused conflation of local and alien beliefs, such as merging the belief in an Irish supernatural creature with a Filipino *tiyanak* (an infant responsible for luring and misleading unwary travelers) is just the first of many such misguided ideas. Roger, Dingdong, and later Dungdungan, as well as Impong Negro, all suffer from an almost literal displacement: at many points they are unaware of where they are, and are unmoored from place, which interrupts, and indeed, undoes the conveyance and transmission of “the sense of place and the sense of self” (Jenkins, 2003, p. 53). The initial effect is certainly comic, as when Roger, for instance, in thinking of Dungdungan as a leprechaun, assumes they are now lost in Ireland. Dungdungan complicates things when Roger asks “what this place is called” (p. 29), the former calls it Vietnam, which is not literally wrong,

but not right either. Dungdungan, who earlier prides himself as a highland native, subsumes what Joe the American thinks he is, a Montagnard, "people indigenous to the mountainous area of south Indochina, which now goes by the name Vietnam" (http://nzdl.sadl.uleth.ca/cgi-bin/library?e=d-00000-00---off-oipc--00-0-----0-10-0---0---odirect-10--4-----0-1l--11-en-50---20-help---00-0-1-00-0-0-11-1-outfZz-8-00&cl=CL1.9&d=HASH5d_01516d59_abceff79ebcb&x=1). In doing so, he belies his own ethnic identity, and merges with it problems not only of rightful space, but of language too:

Ka Roger: Ikaw, leprechaun, huwag mo kaming niloloko ha.

Dungdungan: Di ko kayo niloloko, manong. At hindi ako leprechaun. Isa akong . . . Montagnard.

Ka Roger: Kung Vietnam ito at isa kang Montagnard, bakit marunong kang mag-Tagalog.

Dungdungan: Bakit, mayroon bang nagta-Tagalog?

Ka Roger: Ikaw. . . .

Dingdong: Ako. . . .

Dungdungan: Kayo ang nanloloko. Vietnamese ang salita natin. Sige, magsalita ka.

Dingdong: "Ang mga Muslim lamang ang di sumuko sa sinumang mananakop sa bansang Pilipinas."

Dungdungan: O, Vietnamese na Vietnamese.

Dingdong: Brother, marunong akong mag-Vietnamese!

Ka Roger: Ako nga! "Lansagin ang Diktaturang Estados Unidos-Marcos!"

Dungdungan: O, kitam! Kung tutuusin mga Pilipino kayo, ang galing n'yong bumigkas ng Vietnamese!

(K.R.: You, leprechaun, stop fooling us!

D: I am not fooling you, brother. And I am not a leprechaun. . . . I am a Montagnard.

KR: If this is really Vietnam, and you are a Montagnard, how come you could speak Tagalog?

D: Why, is anybody speaking in Tagalog?

KR: Why, you are.

Ding: I am.

D: Now you are the ones playing tricks on me. We are speaking in Vietnamese. Go on, say something.

Ding: Muslims are the only ones who never surrendered to any colonizer of the Philippines.

D: Gee, that is so Vietnamese.

KR: Let me have a go at it. Down with the US-Marcos dictatorship!

D: See, for Filipinos, you speak Vietnamese mighty well!)
(pp. 29-31; my translation).

Later in this encounter, Dundungan ends up tricking Roger and Dingdong into buying his fake magic beads that he says are instrumental in being able to speak any language. Dingdong tells him he has long wanted to go to Mecca; and Dundungan affirms that with the use of the amulet, Dingdong could speak in Arabic, or in Mandarin or Cantonese, should any of them wish to speak with Mao (p. 31).

This amorphousness of place, whether arrived at in truth or in jest, ends up being the catalyst for a transformation of linguistic identity too. Claire Kramersch (1998) explains that:

there is a natural connection between the language spoken by members of a social group and that group's identity. By their accent, their vocabulary, and discourse patterns, speakers identify themselves and are identified as members of this or that speech and discourse community. From this membership, they draw personal strength and pride as well as a sense of social importance and historical continuity from using the same language as the group they belong to (pp. 65-66).

Roger, Dingdong, and Dundungan, in presenting language ownership as porous and unfixed, albeit as a ridiculous and unbelievable instance in this play, make of themselves individuals of indeterminate identities, given that the identities they assume--- Filipino, Vietnamese--- are played with so

cavalierly in these scenes. Kramersch's point on the membership in a language group rendering "historical continuity" to the members of that group, inversely avers the actual historical disjuncture and disconnect that Roger, Dingdong, and Dundungan suffer from; precisely because the looseness of their grasp of place, in space and time and language, renders them able to assume false selves here, and worse, to be unable to recognize what their true identity is.

When Roger and Dingdong catch up with Dundungan who ran away with their money, Dundungan asks for forgiveness and says that he really is in that set only because he is looking for his carabao (water buffalo) Gambi, who was taken by the Americans to use in the film. Here again, Roger is unable to tell the Philippine jungle from the American set, and says, "*Pero mukha itong Vietnam* [This looks like Vietnam] (Pichay, p. 38). And Dundungan allies his fake amulets to the sham that is the American film set:

Iyan ang kanilang anting-anting. Nagagawa nilang magpalit ng anyo. They can form and shape us in any image they deem fit. Ako ay Ifugao, pero sa kanila Montagnard. Ikaw ay mandirigma, ngunit sa kanila, isang rebeldeng sagabal na kailangang patayin. (And that is their magic. They are able to change their form. . . . I am an Ifugao, but to them I am a Montagnard. You are a warrior, but to them you are a rebel who is a hindrance they should kill.)

. . . Mukha itong Vietnam, ngunit kung uugatin mo. . . Voila. Isa lamang makinarya. . . (This looks like Vietnam, but if you really look at it. . . it is only a machine. . .)

You are inside the belly of the beast. In short a bit player in one big f***** Hollywood movie. . . .

Sa kanila, tayo ay ang "the Other". Yan ang turo sa amin ng mga Belgian nuns. (To them, we are the other. That is what the Belgian nuns taught us) "Thus, we are always inside somebody else's idea of ourselves" (p. 39; my translation).

The film as simulacrum has particular meanings here--the set is not just a fakery of the setting of the American war in Asia; it repeats, in other, more disturbing ways, the psychical struggles and conflicts, and hurts of the Filipino as colonial subject. This is seen particularly in Impong Negro,

and in Roger and Dingdong, who continue to advocate the armed struggle against the Americans as colonizers. Here, they are doing so under the guise of another subject people, as Vietnamese, and in the end this “blended”, strangely hybrid identity is as unrealistic as the roles they play as film extras. Roger and Dingdong “rig the set with explosives” (p. 43), as the Vietnamese would; but their motive is confused even by them, as seen when Roger says, “*Dito natin maipapakita kung sino ang bida. Punta sa puwesto. Sa hudyat ko, pasabugin natin ang mundo nila*” [We are going to show who’s the hero here. Go to your places. At my signal, let’s blow up their world] (p. 43; my translation). Here Roger speaks using the grammar of cinema, using hero, and set scenes and markers, to pursue this armed engagement against the United States. This may seem absurd, but no less absurd is the unintended emphasis on this colonial struggle being resurrected when Joe the American veteran, speaking with the “unspeaking” character of Marlon Brando, states the same American war propaganda used in the Philippines, as in Vietnam:

Without us, the communists can easily take over and where will these heathens be? Where will you be, you fucking Filipinos? Without us, you’d still be wearing those g-strings and living on trees!

I want America marching into some country and killing those who can’t stand us.

If you are not with us, then you are against us! (pp. 42-43).

In the last scene, the film as a hyperreal parallel of this colonial struggle comes to a head, as Joe, now an extra in the film, is supposed to “be tortured by the gooks. . . and then make a heroic last stand to save the girl of my dreams. . .” (p. 48); when in reality this is exactly what Roger and Dingdong and Dungdungan all wish to do to him. As the film becomes a pastiche of heroism, as the fight between the Filipinos and the American moves away from actual encounter, Dungdungan calls “sentimental bullshit” (p. 53) a parodied fight showcasing the efficacy of their amulets. Now they are functioning as national and native totems indicative of national identity: they use Dungdungan’s beads, as Joe ends up having one of his own, “a devouring American eagle tattooed on his back” (p. 53). This seems to be the end of the fight; as the “whole set is rocked with explosions, the temple collapses. . . .” (p. 53), Joe appears to win, and maintains the colonial master’s denigrating valuation of the Philippines/Vietnam. He says, “This country is fucking weird. Nothing works. Everyone’s late, holds unbelievable expectations and is as stupid as a carabao” (p. 53). And while he appears to hold the upper

hand, Gambi, Dungdungan's carabao hears him, "and gores him to death" (p. 53), and the play ends.

The play's satirical bent sardonically unmasks the "ascending peculiarity" of the disjunctures and inequalities of Philippine life and history. The attempts of Pichay's play to document a war waged by Americans against and within Vietnam, incarnated in a Philippine film set, is mimesis gone haywire. Mimesis as an Aristotelian "discernment of likeness" is seen by Stephen Halliwell to be an active act of making connections and of interpretation, in as much as the recognition of likenesses gives us an understanding of what reality might be (Shepard and Wallis, p. 213). In this play, however, the film set functions to highlight the mimetic illusion, rather than the mimesis itself. The mediation of war through film, that is, through the lenses of a camera, does not just reproduce a historical approximation of the engagement of the US in this Asian war. The apparent documentary value of the films is shattered by the fact that *that* war in Vietnam, so painstakingly set up and copied here [where *here* refers to the film and to the Philippines as the set], painfully alludes to a longer, more festering war the Philippines continues to wage with this former colonizer. The Filipino characters in the film, whether they were part of the film or were "lost" in it, break this illusion of the authority of this narration of the US-Vietnam war to reiterate their own nationalist struggle. That they do so completes the play's satire which now documents not Coppola's cinematic vision of historical truth [ironically, he meant *Apocalypse Now* to show the violent lies of the war]. What it does instead is to present, by way of its mimetic illusion, the "failure and corruption of the present as abnormal" (Cook, 1964, p. 493). Mimetic illusion piled on as a multi-layered conflict between and among characters, on personal and ideological grounds, provides this "psychedelia" that distorts reality by way of their engagement with violence--the film's premise of territorial and national violence quickly dissolves into the more real, more palpable violent encounters among characters that we earlier discussed. We are able to mine the comic in these episodes because these stand in incredible contrast to the grand narrative of war that the film sets out to depict. And whether the personae in the play are emplaced in it by virtue of the media event that is the filming of *Apocalypse Now*, or end up drawn to it by other illusory conflicts, we are drawn to laughter not only because of the ridiculousness and the incongruity of the wars that they personally wage, wars that end up in no real victory, but because of the very displacement to which they are privy. They are, in the end, not just displaced in that they do not belong to the film set, but are in fact place-less. The "false" Vietnam of the set could logically have been construed as the Philippines/ or in the Philippines, but

appears not to be. And the dilemma of the Filipino is that s/he is forever imagining the Philippines of the past, present and future, desiring to go back to the Philippines, or desiring to possess the Philippines. And not in any of these is the Filipino successful; s/he is thus unmoored and remains identity-less by and with this encounter with America. The chink of possibility in the play's end is not in the actual location of the Filipino self in this mediated place; but it is hinted at by extension in the end, in which we find the actual and symbolic dislocation of Joe the American by Dungdungan's beast of burden, the carabao.

And while the laughter at this abnormal emplacement born out of violence is both euphoric and desperate, the other origin of laughter here comes from the same violent source. The violence against language makes meaning-making itself illusory in this play, as at many points communication turns into indirection; as when we listen to characters speaking about actual delusions [Impong Negro], or when characters recount ridiculous stories [Dungdungan], or when characters use language to mislead another [as Roger and Dungdungan do to Joe the American]. But language in the play is mainly indirect and circuitous, the linearity of narrative abandoned to simulate the terror and the panic and the illogic of a state of war. And while this itself is not funny, ultimately the caricature of normalcy, whether real or linguistic, becomes what is laughable in Pichay's play.

Phantasmatic construction of identities

In reading these two plays as shifting cultural texts, I sought to examine how the language of humor and the comic strategies used therein respond to the creation, or to the evolution of a hyperreal Filipino identity, one that complicates the fixing of a national identity in the face of a culture that has long grappled with this question, given the Philippines' own colonial and hybrid culture. And while this paper focuses mainly on Filipino texts and problematizes Filipino identity, it is significant to explore the Asian and Third World reverberations of the possibilities and problems of this cultural reengagement and reconsolidation of identity, examined now by way of language and culture.

Identity is defined "as the systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectives, and between individuals and collectives, of relationships of similarity and difference" (Jenkins quoted in Schneider, 2003, p. 239). In reading Martinez's *Welcome to IntelStar*, we are made privy to an almost forcible wresting and reshaping of national

identity by way of the agentive entity in Chelsea, who is herself a “subject. . . constituted . . . [and] is a consequence of *certain rule-governed discourses* that govern the intelligible invocation of identity. . . .” (Butler, 2000, p. 176; my italics). Agency becomes a potent attribute because “it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible” (p. 176); and indeed, this is what we saw Chelsea defiantly critiquing at the end of the play, when she ceases reproducing, at least for a while, the signifying practices of a neo-imperialistic business empire that overtly privileges Western identity. Chelsea’s act of cursing her work in Tagalog/Filipino is subversive entry into many levels of cultural atrophy that marks the apparently beneficial BPO job.

The contemporary Filipino confronts and is confronted with a phantasmatic construction of the self because “identities are not normally stable and reshaping or clear-cut: creating and recreating one’s identity is a constant dynamic process . . . [it] requires constant rethinking and repositioning of oneself in the light of changing parameters in one’s surroundings, possibly to be followed by the substitution of one symbolic form of expression by another” (Schneider, p. 240). In Pichay’s play, we see how the use of farce, and pastiche-parody “serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized . . . configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic, a failed copy, as it were” (Butler, p. 177). While Butler speaks of this reconfiguration in gender terms, the political parody of war and colonial engagements challenge the apparently solid realities of historically-derived national identities; whereas, “nations are mental constructs, imagined communities which are constructed discursively and that the discursive constructs of nations and national identities primarily emphasize national uniqueness and intra-national uniformity” (Wodak quoted in Schneider, p. 250). Pichay’s characters belie these readily available and convenient national constructs perpetuated in ordinary life or in film as a portrayal of “ordinary life”. Instead, the characters we meet in Pichay’s play question, mock, and complicate the ways by which we readily swallow these national myths of selves.

Identity construction in these plays is problematized by comically presenting Filipino, and by extension, Asian identity as porous, diffuse, and unfixed, especially in a world marked by hyperreal structures. We have seen how the determination of group identity is subversively arrived at by the disavowal of one’s cultural location and the promotion of a global one, in which the constructions of selves are so multiplied, and complexly achieved; and the affirmation of local possibilities of intervention, precisely through those

practices of repetition, constitute identity (p. 178). In these plays, we see these repetitions revolving around plays with and of language and history that continue to mark and burst the cultural domains and practices. We see new configurations in these contemporary works.

Note:

I am grateful to Mr. Manny Casalan, managing officer of the Dulaang UP, for information on the production of *Psychedelia Apokalipsis* at the University of the Philippines.

The author, Nicolas Pichay, did mention that *Psychedelia* was produced earlier by the Cultural Center of the Philippines (cf. Pichay email interview), but attempts to get the actual date of this by correspondence was unsuccessful.

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