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# Reclaiming the Universal: Postcolonial Readings of Selected Anglophone Poems by Filipino Poets[1]

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**ABSTRACT**

After giving a summary of postcolonial theory's understanding of universalism, the author of this article critically "re-functions" and re-contextualizes this concept within the history of postcolonial literatures, defining it as a textual "register" rather than just a theme. In this manner, he pursues the argument that the universalist trope can indeed be "postcolonially reclaimed"—a task that is carried out in his readings of a selection of well-known lyric texts written by some of the most important poets of the Philippines' anglophone tradition. Crucial to this project is the recognition of the multiplicity of postcolonial modes of writing, most of which do not self-consciously traffic in the particularities of ethnopoetic "local-coloring." Instead, they interpretively require—despite their seemingly self-evident accessibility and assimilability—a ruthlessly specifying, critical approach. This is an approach that seeks, first and foremost, to locate a text resolutely within the context of its production and intended consumption. Germane to this activity is the idea that the universal, once situated, is always specific. Suffice it to say that Philippine literature's many (mostly lyric) gestures toward "generality" and "abstraction" need to be seen in this historicizing light.

*Keywords:* Lyric, English, Filipino, colonialism, resistance, biographical

Postcolonial studies is an interdisciplinary field of research and analysis that examines the global impact of modern Euro-American colonialism. As a critical enterprise, it seeks to describe the workings of imperial power, to recuperate marginalized or "subaltern" voices, and to understand the complexities of colonial and postcolonial identity, "nationness," diaspora, globalization, among other things (Leitch 25).

Because of its interest in colonialism's cultural aftermath, postcolonial studies concerns itself with the question of representation—in particular, the ways in which Western representations of peoples from the Global South have simply served the

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interests of their makers. Postcolonial critics point out and critique the unequal power relations that have shaped such representations, which construct non-European peoples as the "Other," marginal term in a binary opposition in which the Western Self is the center or norm. A related line of inquiry is the question of how institutions of Western education spread, maintain, and naturalize the inequities of imperialism, precisely through these self-interested representations. For instance, the study and promotion of English literature—and the English language itself—have played a strategic part in ruling over colonized peoples (Leitch 26). The "ethno-knowledges" of Europe were taught—actually, imposed—as universalisms, and they constituted a kind of cultural colonization that created colonial subjects who were burdened with "double consciousness." Needless to say, these hegemonic discourses have generated consent among the colonized and, as a consequence, the call to dismantle all institutions of Western education has been made by a number of postcolonial critics.

Another area of postcolonial reflection is devoted to the extent to which "contact cultures" (of the colonizer and the colonized) have interacted (Leitch 25). This has resulted in the recognition of the hybrid or impure nature of the post/colonial "space." Thus, while nationalisms generally insist on the purity of their respective national cultures, this insight is challenged daily by the global flows of goods, money, information, technology, and their own diasporic peoples. The study of postcolonial cultures in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean has generally stressed their hybridity—which is to say, the complex interactions, translations, and antagonisms between "native" and imperial systems of signification.

According to its critics and practitioners, postcolonial writing manifests the following general characteristics: on one hand, it expresses a desire to recover an earlier, pristine, and "mythological" identity free of colonial contamination; on the other, it is critical of Western representations of the non-European as an exotic "Other" (Barry 194). Treating the issue of language as crucial and foundational, they insist that either the language of colonization is hopelessly contaminated and needs to be rejected or that this selfsame language is appropriable—meaning to say, amenable to indigenizing or hybridization.

By and large, postcolonial literature is becoming increasingly aware of its hybrid or transcultural quality, especially since it has supposedly passed through the stages of identification (when the postcolonial writer wholeheartedly assimilated Western cultural forms, believing them to be universally valid), counter-identification (when the postcolonial writer rejected colonial forms and norms, and attempted to return

to a myth of pristine nativity), and, finally, dis-identification (when the postcolonial writer refashions colonial knowledges, accepting them but critiquing them at the same time) (Childs and Williams 122-156). Postcolonial identity itself may be said to have followed these three phases, with the phase of dis-identification being unanimously taken by postcolonial critics as the inevitable condition of contemporary postcoloniality, which is characterized by cultural simultaneity and polyvalency—qualities that describe the typical situation in many parts of the Global South, in which individuals or groups belong to two or more cultures or speak two or more languages, all at once.

Given these different but related concerns, postcolonial criticism is tasked to critique the universalist claims by liberal humanist critics about literature—claims that denigrate or disregard cultural differences (social, regional, religious, gendered, class, national, etc.) in favor of supposedly timeless and universal standards. In this regard, postcolonial critics continue to insist that whenever a universal signification is claimed for a work, it is really white Eurocentric norms that are being promoted, to the detriment of the rest. Thus, the postcolonial critic seeks to dismantle the claims universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature and endeavors to show its limitations, especially its general inability to identify across boundaries of cultural and ethnic difference. This task entails critiquing Western representations of non-Western cultures, as well as demonstrating how Western colonial literature is often evasively silent on matters concerning imperialist exploitation and territorial expansion.

It seems necessary to point out that "postcolonial" remains an entirely useful rubric within which to understand the textual productions of Filipinos, especially where they are in English, a language that continues to occupy an ironic place in the lives of many in this corner of the Global South. This "qualification" seems particularly important, despite or precisely because of the emergence and increasing "popularity" of cosmopolitanism, a critical discourse sourced from a certain school of thought in social anthropology that has come to subsume the more "culturalist" aspects of globalization, of which it is generally uncritical (if not entirely celebratory). Cosmopolitanism pertains to the interdisciplinary academic "movement" currently gaining currency in increasingly cosmopolitan locations around the world, and at its heart is a social theory that attempts to address the question of modernity. The genealogy of this theory is undeniably Western—drawing, for its key concepts, from ancient Greek and Kantian discourses. This genealogy itself problematizes its "universalistic" claims and its most important idea—that of a supposedly universal attitude, a "competence" of cultural openness to be observed in all cultures and

their own respective potential "modernities"—not the least because this genealogy, in many parts of the world, has actually converged with the history of imperialism (Delanty 25-47).

In other words, the various cases of attitudinal or even affectual investments into acts of cross-cultural détente and/or "translation" by various peoples around the world may need to be distinguished from the cosmopolitanist imagination (as such) and flagged accordingly, especially when such investments have been and are being made by colonized peoples. Openness itself as an ideal cannot be made innocently normative across all cultural locations where it apparently manifests itself, for as we all too painfully know, the fact of imperialist subjugation has actually forced the colonized to translate themselves—their own lives, their own identities—into the cosmopolitan languages of their colonizers. While it is true that cosmopolitanist theorizing arguably addresses questions of global seriousness and import, as well as occasions national "self-problematizing" in view of increasing global pressures to connect and dialogue across cultural borders, the "politics" that this kind of sociology betokens must remain agonistic, precisely to the degree that it tends to assume that the playing field between Self and Other is now all of a sudden amicable and "equal." Despite its translatedness, insisting on the resistant and postcolonial—as opposed to cosmopolitanist—character of Philippine literature in English is not only more historically precise; it is also more politically and ethically "responsible."

In my teaching practice, I promote not so much cosmopolitanist as postcolonial readings of our literature in English, precisely by thinking of all these different issues and questions raised by postcolonial discourse. This is a literature, after all, that does not make any important sense when decontextualized from the colonial history that made it possible to begin with. And yet, I do not necessarily jettison all talk of universalism, since I make the crucial distinction between its occurrence in Western literature on one hand, and our own postcolonial anglophone literature, on the other. I commence this task by first of all defamiliarizing my students' received understanding of this literature—an understanding steeped in the universalist fictions and myths promoted by the dominant formalist schools of (Western) thought that still predominate the pedagogical scene in our educational system, and I do so by recounting for them the following interesting incident...

It was sometime in 1997 or 1998, and the second Philippine-British Literary Conference, sponsored by the British Council Office in Manila, was taking place in a lovely and modestly appointed hotel in Cebu City.[2] Patterned after the British Council "Seminar on the Contemporary British Writer"—held every summer for a

fortnight in Cambridge, England—this conference brought together established writers from the United Kingdom and the Philippines and, as with the original Cambridge seminar, they were tasked to read from their works and to share their thoughts on literature and culture before an audience of literary aficionados (in Cebu, as in the rest of the Philippines I suppose, they were mostly journalists and teachers). The prospective cross-cultural exchange between Anglo and anglophone writers in this little-known corner of the world was admittedly an interesting addition to the original concept. I can confidently say that the two British writers, who were flown in for the gathering, did not disappoint in the end: they were both eloquent, witty, and feisty women who read generously and beautifully from their beautiful works.

NVM Gonzalez, then newly proclaimed as a National Artist for Literature, led the group of illustrious Filipino writers. He read from a couple of his early Mindoro stories and, for his "reflections," he shared his vivid memories of growing up in the midst of the ash-covered *kaingin* fields of this island province, the affectional home of many of his most memorable fictions. By contrast, his counterpart, the more "senior" of the British guests—and one of the first winners of England's prestigious Booker Prize—read an excerpt from an early novel, and I remember it was a particularly sardonic little passage about a frighteningly intelligent, cynically self-absorbed and rather ornery psychiatrist, rushing to see his wife at a maternity clinic, for she has just given birth to their first child, who she hopes will finally improve things between herself and her "emotionally distant" husband. In any case, the husband walks past a cemetery on the way to the clinic and, thinking that a posy of cheerful blooms is customary on this occasion, he casually gathers flowery odds and ends from the wreaths of a newly buried stranger, binds them together with a ribbon into a lovely little bouquet, which he later bequeaths to his teary-eyed, hopeful, and finally happy spouse. Too wry to bear the unfolding melodrama, he excuses himself from the drippy scene soon enough, and the wife is left to cherish the unforeseen and truly touching gift. As she tenderly regards this fragrant and dappled token of love, she sees, to her horror—and ours, listening raptly to this impressively witty narration that slow and humid afternoon—the funerary dedication to a departed loved one, inscribed on the underside of the silken ribbon's spiraling length.

A rather mean little tale, and because its beak-nosed and salt-and- pepper-haired teller told it so wickedly well, we in the audience were left speechless. As happens when Filipinos find themselves in the presence of foreign guests, during the open forum someone from the audience, meaning perhaps to elicit a compliment, directed a question at this esteemed senior writer. Basically, it asked her to give her appraisal

of Philippine literature, now that she'd had the chance to "encounter" it. She was taken aback by this query, and looked a bit reluctant as she held the microphone to give her reply. Sheepishly, she remarked that, based on what she heard, it would indeed appear that, in contrast to her own, this literature didn't seem to profess too much irony. This left many in the suddenly hushed audience visibly troubled, but not for long, for dear old NVM Gonzalez, perking up from his brown study, immediately took exception, picked up his own microphone, and practically barked—if I remember it right—something that goes like: "I beg to disagree, madam. What can be more ironic than someone like me writing in your language?" At this point, the suddenly recoiling madam, shocked by the impertinent depth of her own ignorance, apologized and very serenely declared: "There you go. Thank you, kind sir. I have been put soundly in my place." At this point everybody started nervously laughing.

And yet, Gonzalez's response is no laughing matter. And how instructive indeed it is for us, who very often forget the discrepant truth of it all: the fact that Filipinos have a literature in English at all is a monumental incongruity indeed! It is an incongruity that emerged out of an unfinished historical tragedy about which our writers no longer seem to wish to remind themselves, for quite often they write so earnestly and unironically in the language that this tragedy brutally and lovingly endows—and yet, as Gonzalez's retort made so resoundingly clear, none of this means the tragedy's effects no longer matter. Philippine literature in English need not faithfully adhere to irony as a singular trope of choice for, look, it's already devastatingly ironic from the very beginning.

What's interesting isn't only that Gonzalez reminded us of this incontrovertible fact but that, from the way he broached it, he would seem to imply that while Filipino writers in English may not need to be keenly pursuing irony as an aesthetic purpose when they write, commentaries and criticisms of this discrepant literature may nonetheless not forget its necessarily ironic "doubleness" or "split vision" without becoming ruinously misleading, benighted, and fallacious. According to Gonzalez, the truly urgent irony in Philippine literature in English isn't merely a question of textuality but, rather, of textuality's constitutive and agonistic relationship to contextuality—which is to say, to history.

Of course, come to think of it, it's inconceivable that this writer didn't really know where exactly she was—didn't for a minute know how different this literature was, or who or "what" NVM and the other Filipino writers in attendance were, in relation to the identities of those Anglo-American (or even anglophone) writers that a famous British writer like her would naturally be familiar with. Of course, she didn't really need to be reminded any of this by NVM. Just now, I'm thinking that her choice to

disremember—or, at least, pretend to not know—what she inescapably knew must have simply been her way of being courteous, put on the spot as she suddenly was by the request from someone in the audience to give her impression regarding the literature that she had just "heard."

But NVM simply had to do it, I suppose. He simply had to call her bluff and make it known to her that he knew what she was doing—knew her choice to evaluate this literature unapologetically, from the perspective of her own literature, isn't really a form of compliment in the end, because it is informed, and indeed it can only be informed, by that plainest and most undeniable of facts: history has deemed that, despite their use of a common language, she and NVM (and all other Filipino writers in English) are not and cannot ever be the same, and that it is devastatingly (actually, painfully) ironic that most Filipinos can even begin to forget that. It was we, the Filipino audience who were present when this discomforting incident took place, who needed to hear what NVM had to say. Finally, this British writer, while unwittingly providing its occasion, was entirely external to this realization.

I'm thinking, then, of the unfinished task of Filipino writers to make English signify effectively—and convincingly—the most basic local realities they are seeking to represent, given the increasingly hybrid and multi-lingual conditions that they find themselves working in. In other words, spurred by NVM's demurral, I dare say that English in our literature remains an ironic language—ironic because, historically, it shouldn't even have been an option to begin with; and ironic because the everyday reality of most Filipinos isn't monolingual (or monocultural) at all. And so, the challenge of making English carry the weight of our people's intensely transcultural and syncretic situation remains altogether daunting.

Needless to say, this weight is nothing if not the weight of translation, and Filipino literature in English is nothing if not translational. The universal as an aspiration, as a register, and as an idea, is one such thing that has been translated by and in our writers' works. Thus, my task when I teach Philippine literature—in particular, Philippine poetry in English—is to postcolonially interpret the seemingly universal themes, images, and textual gestures in them by translating them back into the specific conditions and situations that framed and engendered them. Since postcolonial criticism assumes formalist appreciation and transcends it, it will be possible to accomplish this specifying form of textual analysis by perhaps inquiring into the germane biographical facts of the text's maker as well as the interpretive variables that exist in the culture within which the text's postcolonial interpretation is supposed to take place.

For this paper, I will proffer a few examples of possible postcolonial readings of a handful of poems by some of our poetic anglophone tradition's most illustrious names. I will focus, in particular, on those texts that are seemingly devoid of postcolonial ethnic "particularity," and for this reason appear or sound—to the general and uncritical reader—unproblematically "universal." I will further the argument that Filipino poems written in the register of the universal, though seemingly "at home" in the American-endowed English language and all the enticements it offers, lend themselves to a postcolonial reading that reveals how complicated and uneasy this interpretive arrangement—its intentions, affects, and rhetorical effects—truly is. This is because the universal, in the hands of the postcolonial subject, is nothing if not a translated or translational universal, and for this reason it cannot be remotely coincident—or even performatively comparable—with the universal of the colonizers.

This way, I will attempt to show that deconstruction's well-known insight holds water, once again: the true opposite of the Self isn't the Other—which is so utterly different as to be unrecognizable and, thus, finally immaterial—but, rather, the Proximate—the "nearly Selved" Other that is all the more menacing precisely because it is simultaneously knowable and unknowable. Indeed, we can say that the more oppositional forms of postcolonial writing are not easily contained in their extraordinary foreignness, but rather subvert and reinscribe transgression from the "homeliness" within. In other words, it is precisely those "universal" sounding texts by postcolonial writers that can offer, against the unfinished depredations of imperialism, the most incisive forms of radical critique.

It's interesting to note that, writing in the 1960s, the American-trained poet and critic Edith L. Tiempo observed that, thus far, Filipino poets working in English had largely ignored indigenous and sociological material and had instead appealed to universal themes, imagery, and references in their works (Tiempo 617-621). To her mind, this could only be because the English language, half-a-century into its incumbency in the islands, constituted an "uneasy endowment" that effectively prevented Filipino "apprentice" poets from addressing more local and ethnically informed concerns.

While to herself Tiempo's observation was actually not a put-down—because being a self-confessed and proud New Critic, universal poeticizing is precisely her cup of tea, after all—nevertheless, this kind of observation continues to be damningly made about the corpus of Philippine poetry in English in the present time, and unlike other postcolonial poetries in English, Filipino poetry has not merited much

critical attention from both within and outside the Philippines. Other than the palpable absence of Philippine voices in anglophone postcolonial studies as a whole, this is probably because its predominantly universalist character has been taken to mean, by the more famous postcolonialists teaching in Western universities, that it isn't different, ethnographically distinct, and interesting—or even, "correct"— enough.

On the other hand, on the local front, it's also true that since the period after the Second World War, there has existed a nationalist animus against writing in English in whatever genre in the country. What has seemingly worked against poetry in English in particular is that it is said to escape social relevance and to languish, in the words of a nationalist critic from the 1960s, "in the nonexistent kingdom of the universal" (Hosillos 338). Despite recent efforts to anthologize and market Philippine anglophone poetry both here and abroad, this century-long tradition has largely been ignored by contemporary literary scholars, whether postcolonially identified or not, whose studies invariably focus on anglophone work that evinces various species of linguistic distortion, stylistic and/or thematic syncretisms, and "ethnopoetics"—all unproblematically taken as forms of hybridity within the increasingly globalizing body of "new literatures" in *englishes*.

Let us pursue the domiciliary analogy in its conventional form: postcolonial poets writing in the language of colonization may be seen as guests residing in the house of English, which obviously isn't their original home. Their situation is therefore one of uncomfortable "unhomeliness." And yet, it's clear that, by the tragic irony of colonial history, they now have to live in this new house, which admittedly exercises its own powerful claims on their imaginations, on their affections, even as it continues to remind them of their loss of original innocence, their "existential" displacement. They write in English—and yet do so not as residents but as "guests"—behaving as Others in the house of the English Self. They deform, fragment or sabotage the traditions of English poetry, infuse it with alien rhythms, twist its structures, disrupt its sense and sensibility, adulterate its music, refract its optics, register, in each and every utterance, the fact of their double alienation from both their old and new identities. In other words, by writing in English, they may be said to insist on the fact that they exist pendulously in the chasm between the antipodes of the "purity" of a precolonial past and the "contaminations" of a colonial present. Readers of this kind of poetry will most likely never mistake it for anything other than creolized, mestizo, ethnic, minority, and yes, most unmistakably "postcolonial."

And yet, is behaving like an Other, like a perpetual guest in the house of English, the only postcolonial option there is? Is not this stance of deliberate and voluntary

Otherness precisely more colonially suspect, for it continues to obsess about the imperial West to the degree that it stubbornly preserves it as a linguistic and/or aesthetic point of reference? We can perhaps conclude that, like other forms of counter-identification, this kind of blatantly exotic and exoticizing "ethnopoetics" is simply an instance of "Orientalism in reverse," inasmuch as its unremitting fascination with poetic difference is, in effect, underwritten by a desire to be affirmed and acknowledged as different, as Other, by the colonizing Self of imperialism, whose attentive "imprimatur"—that is to say, whose funding, awards, recognitions, publishing opportunities, and the like—it secretly craves and seeks. By hewing to a strict rhetoric of predictable difference, ethnopoetic postcolonial literature may be seen to, in a manner of speaking, continually "exoticize itself," all for the sake of an enraptured Western normativity, which fully accounts for it and thereby easily neutralizes and "contains" it.

What happens when an anglophone poet starts to write with unflappable confidence, with virtual mastery, with no apology, with such fabulous verbal temerity in the language of colonization that she can dare to speak and write as a Self—which is to say, she can dare to traffic in common rather than proper nouns, and yes, to articulate universals in it? Is this kind of poetry colonially benighted, helplessly co-opted, much too accommodating and "assimilationist"? Going by the old simplistic nationalist paradigm of assimilation/rejection, the answer to this question would most probably be: yes.

But when we begin to rethink the ambivalence of colonialism—that it animates at the same time that it subjects, that it is whole at the same time that it is fractured, that it is formidable at the same time that it is vulnerable, that it is present at the same time that it is absent—and when we begin to reconsider the representational process of colonization itself and to redefine literary interpretation not as a matter of authorial intention but as a socially dynamic transaction between texts and contexts, then the picture that emerges will be less stark. It begins to be possible to imagine a different kind of resistance,[3] one that is subtler and more ironic, for it appears, to all and intents and purposes, quite blandly innocuous and "same" and, yet, when viewed from a slightly "ironic" angle, is actually different, precisely because of the irreducibly different situation from which it springs. And this subtly "mimicking" difference, precisely because less blatant and more intensely hermeneutical, will be a harder difference to fetishize, tokenize and contain, because the "gap" it posits is plainly historical—a problematic and highly generative gap that, we may even say, effectively unmasks motives and shuts out the idly ignorant from participating in the interpretive activity itself.

In order, perhaps, to better understand how something that seems perfectly "universal" and similar to the colonial can in fact be particularly different and can function so fervidly against it, we need to remember that colonial power—its doctrines, edicts, knowledges—has needed to be translated in the native setting to become effective as a means of domination. Since no translation is ever exact or seamless, we can conclude that translations are "imitative composites" of the "source" and "target" texts. This is simply another way of saying that all cultural translations, all cultural imitations, are hybrid (and what is an anglophone literature if not a literature in translation?) Thus, if the signifiers and signifieds of imperialism, imperfectly translated, are practically caught and "immobilized" between the impossibility of their avowed imperatives and the overwhelming mysteriousness, the alterity, of the context within which they seek to make sense, then it only stands to reason that texts subsequently written by the colonized in them are probably not really written in them at all. Thus, the idea of the universal, as imitated by our poets in English, isn't quite the same thing that it is as European writers have imagined it.

We may summarize the postcolonial principle of hybridity thus: once situated, no knowledge is ever absolute. After the initial encounter, the ensuing mimicry of colonial norms by the natives, and the hybridity that this mimicry produces, render impure and inauthentic the colonial presence—its identities, edicts, and discourses. This process eventuates in the formation of countless possible subjectivities, which may be seen to eventually exceed and transvaluate the binary logic of the Sign itself. Thus, looking at the point of imperialist contact as a "primal moment" of disfigured and "deformed" translation—as a contract characterized by a hybrid, imperfect, or "mixed" confluence of intentionalities and affects—enables us to redefine the conditions of domination into the very source, the very "ground of resistance." And going by this reframing of the question of postcolonial agency—away from the purely volitional to the structural and/or discursive—we may now re-examine the so-called assimilationist or "colonial-minded" texts that emerged during the period of identification from the perspective of their "mocking mimicry," whereupon they may be shown, using a more complex set of contextual methods of reading, to signify something diametrically opposed to how traditional nationalists have pejoratively read them.

**I Have Begrudged the Years**
by Angela Manalang-Gloria

Perhaps the years will get me after all,
Though I have sought to cheat them of their due

By documenting in Beauty's name my soul
And locking out of sight my revenue
Of golden rapture and of sterling tears,
Let others give to Caesar Caesar's own:

I have begrudged the dictatorial years
The right usurious to tax me to the bone,
Therefore behold me now, a Timon bent
On hoarding each coin of love that should be spent
On you and you, and hushing all display
Of passionate splendour lest I betray
My wealth, lest the sharp years in tithes retrieve
Even the heart not worn upon my sleeve. (Abad and Manlapaz, 67)

**Old Maid Walking on a City Street**
by Angela Manalang-Gloria

She had a way of walking through concupiscence
And past the graces her fingers never twirled:
Because her mind refused the heavy burden,
Her broad feet shoveled up the world. (Abad and Manlapaz, 69)

Angela Manalang-Gloria[4] was one of the first Filipino anglophones to clearly achieve a measure of mastery over the new medium and its attendant literary forms. Her attempts at traditional verse and her working with closed forms like the Petrarchan sonnet were invariably failures in the formal sense, for they only rarely succeeded in sustaining the requisite accentual syllablic meter (the iambic pentameter, for example). The most likely explanation for this is the fact that of all the elements of a language, it is accent or stress that is possibly the least "portable" of all.

Without the ability of pronouncing English words properly—which is to say, following the "correct," OED-sanctioned accent—our poets, like other anglophone poets, were logically unable to deploy the various accentual meters with the required and strictly culture-bound regularity. This perhaps explains why much of anglophone poetry, in the Philippines and elsewhere, is in free verse. Unfettered from the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables that all Anglo-American closed forms require, free verse is the system of versification that suits its postcolonial difference best, since it is the form that lends itself most easily to irregular patterns of accentual variation.

But Gloria's poems were glorious indeed, in all other ways. Her sonnet, "I Have Begrudged the Years" (written in 1940) and its companion piece, the one-stanza

"Old Maid Walking on a City Street" (written in 1950), both beautifully demonstrate the deployment of the "universal" as a trope of postcolonial appropriation—one that is so confident, consummate, and homely that it barely registers its own nature as a postcolonial trope, precisely.

To be specific, in the sonnet, Gloria is practically untrammeled in her allusions, dragging in figures from Graeco-Roman history and even the Shakespearean dramatic corpus without compunction or apology, and yet it is her utter verbal and formal mastery—the grandeur of this poem's exquisite achievement—that bids us to be mindful of the kind of postcolonial labor she exerted to reach this level of skill. On the other hand, the story of this poem's dramatic monologue is perfectly localizable, despite its being potentially transculturally valid. The speaker, arguably a woman, is an artist who "document[s] in Beauty's name [her] soul," suffering the pangs of regret as she looks back on her affectionless life. This persona is arguably a representation of the poet's own autobiographical self.

This poem's preference for solitude and for erotic non-disclosure is strangely qualified by the theatrical convention that it invokes—literally, a performative convention, signalized by the words "each coin of love that should be spent/ on you and you," calling to mind a typical Filipino oratory being enacted by an earnest pupil inside the colonial classroom, extending her arms left and right toward the audience, as she recites the English lines that have been painstakingly consigned to bookish memory. The sonnet's sestet is also an interesting example of Gloria's own appropriation or "qualification" of the borrowed form, for what it essays is not the expected unified statement of the Petrarchan convention, but rather an unexpected logical turn, a complex movement away from the initial idea of acceptance, "Therefore, behold me now, a Timon bent/ On hoarding each coin of love…" This turn comes in the form of an afterthought, that all the efforts at self-control and asceticism may easily, after all, be undone, and the "wealth…/ the heart not worn upon [the] sleeve" may suddenly be revealed and made plain to all the people concerned.

A counterpoint to this sonnet is the one-stanza poem, "Old Maid Walking on a City Street," whose quatrain structure is perceptibly cloven between its two independent clauses, so juxtaposed as to be mutually illuminative. The first clause provides a curt explanation for the persona's unmarried state: it is apparently a matter of choice, the decision long ago arrived at, to heed but finally to transcend (to "walk through") the call of desire and its vanities ("the graces her fingers never twirled"). The second is an equally brief but evocative description of what she presently enjoys, in lieu of "the heavy burden" that she long ago chose to give up: the freedom

of being able to walk as her own person on one hand, and of being able to experience life as depth, which is to say full of secret joys and pleasures that require uncovering, "Her broad feet shovel[ing] up the world." One of the charms of this small poem is precisely in the tenderness that attends that otherwise unflattering and familiar image of a big-footed spinster stomping frightfully on any city sidewalk. This time, however, those same big feet have become her foremost asset—which is to say, the source of her metaphorical beauty.

And so, no matter how perfectly British-sounding and "universal" Gloria's pitch-perfect lyric poems may be, the fact of the matter is that it was not a British or American but a Filipino poet who wrote them. While ascertaining the representational links between this poem's seemingly Western imagery and allusions and the poet's specific experience or situation in the Philippines may prove more difficult than it would be had their texts been, for example, more locally nuanced, ethnographically detailed, and syncretic, what finally matters is that, for the postcolonial critic who truly wishes to dis-identify from the defeatist polarities of colonial thought, those links, no matter how tenuous, can only be there and they must simply be found. After all, as is the point of most postcolonial interventions into the by-turns aesthetic and political process of representation: in the end, postcolonial critique does not seek to determine whether a representation is original or merely imitative, or whether it is "truly anti-colonial" (that is to say, good) or not. Rather, the important questions of postcolonial inquiry are ultimately, and commonsensically, consequential: Who is doing the representing, how, and to what ends?

Certainly, we must think of our attempt to postcolonially reclaim our "universal" poetry in English—primarily by situating it securely and unmistakably in the peculiar social localities that engendered it—as nothing if not a participation in the urgent and pungent business of consequence. The question presents itself: Why bother to "reclaim" our universal poems in English anyway? The possible answers are, to me, rather straightforward. First, because we need to imagine that resistance to (neo)colonial domination is possible, still and all, despite or precisely because this domination is increasingly constitutive of the means we have at our disposal to "resist" it with. Second, we simply cannot allow our poetic utterances in whatever language to become fettered to an obsequious inchoateness, ghettoized in an exotic particularity, or exiled from the native-language prerogative of making fully confident and universal claims. And lastly, we must insist that, having been written by fellow Filipinos, these poems are finally, unapologetically, inalienably ours.

At this point, allow me to turn to Carlos Angeles's famous poem from 1954, "Gabu," which the critic Isagani R. Cruz has used (in a critical paper from the 1990s) in order to demonstrate the fruitfulness of his own understanding of the postcolonial approach.

**Gabu**
by Carlos A. Angeles

The battering restlessness of the sea
Insists a tidal fury upon the beach
At Gabu, and its pure consistency
Havocs the wasteland hard within its reach.

Brutal the daylong bashing of its heart
Against the seascape where, for miles around,
Farther than sight itself, the rock-stones part
And drop into the elemental wound.

The waste of centuries is grey and dead
And neutral where the sea has beached its brine,
Where the split salt of its heart lies spread
Among the dark habiliments of Time.

The vital splendor misses. For here, here
At Gabu where the ageless tide recurs
All things forfeited are most loved and dear.
It is the sea pursues a habit of shores. (Abad, *A Native Clearing* 119)

In his commentary, Cruz subjects the critical works of three important Filipino poets/critics to a comparative analysis and uncovers an astonishing, almost counter-intuitive fact: in their readings of this poem: none of these poets/critics remained mired in the bliss of their New Critical ignorance for long, inasmuch as their more recent ruminations on poetry may be seen to already reveal a less Eurocentric, more locally situated, postcolonial consciousness (50-61). Following the standard postcolonial procedure, toward the end of his analysis, Cruz criticizes the universalist theories of literature internalized by even our own critics and writers.

While Cruz himself does not say it in these terms, one of the most interesting insights we can infer from his piece is that the universals of humanism are nothing if not specific forms of a limited and culture-bound knowledge (which is to say, they are not universal at all). Always, anywhere in the world, the particular is the insuperable ground on which universal claims are made, and the only reason European

humanist knowledges ever appeared universal to begin with was that—yes, along with other postcolonial critics, let us not be bashful about saying it—these knowledges enjoyed the distinct advantage of being backed up by an army.

It's interesting that Angeles's poem is not as "postcolonial" as it could have been. But for the proper noun that denotes location—"Gabu"—the poem describes the hauntingly figurative ocean scene in rather general, "common" terms. Indicating the name of the particular seaside village or town near Aparri in northern Luzon—where Angeles was presumably born and raised[5]—is just about the only ethnopoetic gesture this poem makes, for the rest of its text is pretty "standard" as far as the writing of English lyric poetry of that period goes, from the verse structure, to the rhyme scheme, to the choice of imagistic and "poetic-sounding" words. But for the presence of the word "Gabu," this poem's language registers no other "discordant" notes in the imperially English symphony to which it would seem to wish to belong. Cruz juxtaposes his postcolonial reading of this poem that specifies its Philippine *groundedness* against the groundless, universalist musings of its early commentators, and it is significant that the presence of the place-name "Gabu" is really the only entry-point to a postcolonial reclaiming that he offers.

Clearly, we need to supplement Cruz's limited critical methodology, for the absence of Philippine-specific proper nouns in a Filipino poem written in English need not disqualify it from a postcolonial reading. We must maintain that the hybridity of our poetry in English is an inescapable feature of the situation from which it emerges, and evidence of this doesn't always have to be inscribed visibly in the text, but necessarily attends the writing and reading contexts that frame it. Because a postcolonial interpretation is not a Romantic interpretation, we don't have to dump the onus of establishing postcolonial relevancy on the author's famously hunched shoulders alone. On the contrary, the search for relevancy is precisely the task of the postcolonial interpretive enterprise itself, whose interest—we must always remind ourselves—is unrepentantly political from the outset. And because a postcolonial interpretation is not a New Critical interpretation, inquiring into the biography of the author—into the "community" (gender, religion, sexuality, class, etc.) to which she belongs, as well into the political and historical forces that condition and/or challenge the postcolonial reading—is an entirely permissible (and desirable) activity. Nonetheless, the reading of poetry remains an intensely hermeneutic undertaking, especially given the "thickness" of its figurative and rhetorical indirection. The postcolonial criticism of our anglophone poems continues to be hypothetical (and interpretively generative), thus, and is not remotely like a positivist search for and a "de-coding" of one-to-one correspondences between poetic

signifiers and extra-textual referents. Simply put: poetry is *poiesis*, despite or precisely because of its peculiar brand of metaphorical and transformational mimetism.

Faced with an unnamed beach in a postcolonial poet's work, the postcolonial critic's immediate task is, among others, to try to localize this beach in the physical and imaginative worlds that its author has inhabited. This may mean piecing together a particular poetic mode of analysis that inquires into the complex relationship between tropes and biographical referents in a given poet's idiolect and oeuvre. It goes without saying that it is the elucidatory task of postcolonial critique to elaborate on what is implied and what is evoked in poetic compositions, and this could mean, now and then, locating the nonspecific imagery in any given Filipino poet's work—a task that logically involves looking into the "locales" and the textual, inter-textual and extra-textual influences that this poet draws her material and poetic "inspiration" from.

After all, we cannot seriously require poets to pointedly specify and be detailed in their lyrical utterances all the time, otherwise we shall end up requiring a defensive kind of poetry that tries to anticipate and preempt its prospective criticism—a "correct poetry," perhaps, but probably not a very "delightful" or "rewarding" poetry, in the end. Just now, a wonderful irony presents itself in this emergent area of "postcolonial poetics": after recognizing the particular contexts within which "universal" utterances can occur, being an interpretive rather than a compositional procedure, postcolonial poetics may even be seen to "allow" the poetry it chooses to interpret to be anything it wants to be. While the universal norms in Western humanism are misguided precisely to the degree that they are supposed to be transcendent of—and therefore not "referrable" to—the situation that gives rise to them, with postcolonial poetic criticism, the universal, being an interpretable and context-bound figure, emerges as a truly poetic option—one compellingly experiential, culturally resonant, and rife with poetic "possibility"."

Then again, we need to consider the likelihood that critically locating and specifying the cultural and social referents in our anglophone lyric poetry is only to be expected, inasmuch as the lyric tradition that our poets have hybridized from the colonial literary archive would appear to be the verbally terse, elemental, and non-discursive kind. Simply put: most of the poems our poets write in English follow the Western tradition of lyric writing that is both musical (on the level of sound and structure) and functions as the poet's private or "personal" expression of the sensibility that fuses image and concept (that is to say, statement). And yet, what

makes this "personalism" distinctly our own is that it is this same ideology that arguably prevents the writing and publishing of candidly autobiographical writings in our culture. It's possible to argue, then, that following the dictates of this personalist discourse, the lyric poetry our anglophone poets have tended to write is only logically couched—most of the time, anyway—in the relatively reticent and coded "safety" of generalities. In this sense, the seemingly universalist "caginess" of our lyric poetry emerges as a function of cultural hybridity, yet again.

**Race with Seagulls**
by Bienvenido N. Santos

Father, at whatever address you now reside
spare me the embarrassment of hearing you again.
Frankly, I have known better performers who stride
anthills not mountains like you and carry their pain
with the grace of ants, who have had their share of blind
spells and quick visions, who are good at pretending
their eloquence is a gift of silence, the kind
that touches like a salve and soothes without healing.

Forgive me for saying this, father, you are old
and repeat yourself as you did in the story
about your chance meeting with God, the jokes he told
at his expense and how debonair, how very
very friendly, laughing so loud tears filled his eyes
and death, drawn by the noise, looked in, quickly withdrew
on seeing you, guessed who you were in your disguise,
my father, who else, actor, mask maker, he knew,
as everyone does who has caught your act for free.

Besides, nobody listens now—I must push on
before the seagulls get there ahead of me
and leave me nothing more substantial than a bone. (Abad, *A Native Clearing* 33)

Literary evidence of the cultural difference that the arrival of English in the Philippines made is clearest when we inquire into those early anglophone texts that interrogate cherished mores, customs, and norms—and it's easy to see that it is English that made such unspeakable "temerity" possible. Other than Gloria's own memorable and even shocking efforts—for example, the paradox-loving poems "Soledad" and "Revolt from Hymen," about the rejection of feminine decorum and the valorizing of physical virginity, respectively—an example that comes to mind is the decidedly strange poem first published in 1971, "Race with Seagulls," by the

fictionist Bienvenido N. Santos.[6] The poem, written as a letter, is a mock-elegy of sorts, spoken by the grown-up child of a father who has apparently died, or at least resides far away, and it isn't the feeling of grief or nostalgia but rather gleeful spite that the persona, in this perverse apostrophe, discloses: "Father, at whatever address you now reside/ spare me the embarrassment of hearing you again." The father is depicted to be so distasteful, terrible and duplicitous ("actor, mask maker") that even "death . . . quickly withdr[aws] . . . on seeing [him]." The filial cruelty reaches its climax in the poem's parting tercet, its "envoi," as it were: in these lines, the speaker reduces the father to a piece of wave-tossed carrion, upon which the seagulls will be feasting and which these ravenous birds will soon be reducing to insubstantial bones. A chilling conclusion, to be sure, but entirely telling of the crucial role that the new language, and its "distancing" effects, played in enabling Filipino writers to question the traditional values—here, of filial piety and familial devotion—that they, for some reason or other, deem personally questionable.

**Six P.M.**
by Nick Joaquin

Trouvere at night, grammarian in the morning,
ruefully architecting syllables—
but in the afternoon my ivory tower falls.
I take a place in the bus among people returning
to love (domesticated) and the smell of onions burning
and women reaping the washlines as the Angelus tolls.

But I—where am I bound?

My garden, my four walls
and you project strange shores upon my yearning:
Atlantis? The Caribbeans? Or Cathay?
Conductor, do I get off at Sinai?
Apocalypse awaits me: urgent my sorrow
towards the undiscovered world that I
from warm responding flesh for a while shall borrow:
conquistador tonight, clockpuncher tomorrow. (Abad, *The Likhaan Anthology* 56)

Another (similar) case in point is Nick Joaquin,[7] who is of course better known for his prodigious prose—his voluminous and outstanding works in fiction and nonfiction, to be more specific—but who did, early in his career as a writer, pen quite a few successful poems, most of which were allegorical and representationally ambiguous. In the curious poem from 1937, "6 P.M.," however, we are presented a rather specific portrait of a Manila journalist/editor—a professional identity to which Joaquin

experientially had a lifelong claim—leading a "double-life," the threshold or gateway between which is this fateful and reverential hour at dusk, during which the persona transitions from being a "grammarian" to being a bardic lover or "trouvere." This French word is of course a mere euphemism, for what the poem in fact attests to is the ubiquitous reality of the indulgence in casual—possibly contractual—sex, which the speaker, a representative of Manila's innumerable daytime "clockpunchers," enjoys. As the poem's text puts it, he frequents known sexual districts in the "sin city" that is post-War Manila—chronicled in feature articles by Joaquin himself (270-77), and referenced in this poem by metonymic but entirely resonant names—and it is in these places where he borrows from the evening's "warm responding flesh" an "undiscovered world." Certainly, this kind of frank admission of this kind of life was made all the easier by the fact that Joaquin, an undomesticated bachelor[8] (and practicing journalist) to his dying day, couched it in English, whose intellectual and emotional history precisely permitted such candidness.

When Filipino middle-class women poets started writing about their own lives in English, they brought a palpably cosmopolitan sensibility to bear on their own conservative upbringings, and critiqued precisely the traditional values that underwrote such. Celebrated as an aesthete and prized for her finely crafted feminine lyrics, the once-upon-a-time Parisian Virginia Moreno[9] wrote exquisitely fashioned poems that interrogate and attempt to redefine the character of the Filipino woman.

**Order for Masks**
by Virginia Moreno

To this harlequinade
I wear black tight and fool's cap
Billiken, make me three bright masks
For the three tasks in my life.
Three faces to wear
One after the other
For the three men in my life.

When my Brother comes
make me one opposite
If he is a devil, a saint
With a staff to his fork
And for his horns, a crown.
I hope for my contrast
To make nil
Our old resemblance to each other
and my twin will walk me out

Without a frown
Pretending I am another.

When my Father comes
Make me one so like
His child once eating his white bread in trance
Philomela before she was raped.
I hope by likeness
To make him believe this is the same kind
The chaste face he made,
And my blind Lear will walk me out
Without a word
Fearing to peer behind.

If my lover comes,
Yes, when Seducer comes
Make for me the face
That will in color race
The carnival stars
And change in shape
Under his grasping hands.
Make it bloody
When he needs it white
Make it wicked in the dark
Let him find no old mark
Make it stone to his suave touch
This magician will walk me out
Newly loved.
Not knowing why my tantalizing face
Is strangely like the mangled parts of a face
He once wiped out.

Make me three masks. (Abad, *A Native Clearing* 145)

This specificity is implied in the text, despite or precisely because of its "universal" tenor—as we have precisely been rehearsing in these various postcolonial "reclaimings," the universal is itself a register of postcolonial writing, bespeaking the mastery and confident "owning" by the postcolonial writer of the semantic world afforded by the language of colonization. And so, in her famous lyric from 1954, "Order for Masks," Moreno dares to unmask the traditional subject-position allotted to her by first of all identifying herself as a function of three different feminine "roles," all of which are defined against a powerful masculine presence: the father, the brother, and the lover. In all these roles, the persona importunes

Billiken, a good-luck charm as well as a pagan and elf-like deity-doll (addressed as a jester, or a mask-maker in this case), to craft for her various "disguises," all custom-fit and tailor-made exactly according to the requirements of the unequal relationship: obsequious and docile-looking, comfortably distinct and non-threatening and, finally, loving and mysterious and desirable, in that order. Of course, Moreno's radical critique here doesn't only lie in this text's gestures of paganistic myth-making (supplanting the Catholic Philippines' orthodox Christian God with a wish-granting "voodoo" god), along with its brave unmasking of the heteropatriarchal situation—which is to say, its being able to describe more or less accurately the state of things for many tradition-bound Filipino women. This poem's force, enabled doubtless by the language in which it is cast, is rather in the insight it proffers regarding feminine agency: even though she is trapped in various roles and forced to wear various subjugated masks, her "truth" remains entirely her own. In other words, in a fundamental sense, she eludes all such regimentations.

Finally, an interesting poem, written in English, by the Tagalog-identified National Artist, Rolando S. Tinio,[10] provides us an example of how Filipino poets in English have treated the homosexual theme—which is to say (in the beginning, at least), intensely metaphorically. Fellow National Artists Jose Garcia Villa and Nick Joaquin had arguably done the same thing in their poems earlier on, using comparable cryptic strategies, but for the purposes of this presentation, I will be taking up Tinio's memorable and intriguingly titled poetic effort from 1964 because of its evidently "universal" features.

**A Parable**
for B.

Like most of us, you wish for death:
Like the Sybil of Cumae caged in glass,
Without desire for the past of things,
Without power to hold them at a distance.

We suffer from excess of knowledge:
Each instant starts at a mythic crossroad.
We stand to choose the particular way
We wish our tragedy to take.

So we stumble on public parks
And stop at the feet of statues asking
Cryptic questions about strange beasts.
So we dash along the bend

Where highways meet, and enter cities
Unrolling streets for us to tread,
And in the night perform ablutions
To clear our hands of all our choices.

And still, in sleep we make our rounds,
Descending labyrinths all doors,
Making entrances of exits.
Hell is an endless promenade.

As in a gothic garden live
With statuary in marbled white:
They loom above your head, those heads
Drilled with holes, as if the eyes

Fixed inward and gazed themselves to stone.
Memory is full of Gorgons,
The plague that cries deliverance.
Theban Magus, teach us to pluck

The inner eye: this trick of mirrors,
Bright as the burst of pomegranates. (Abad, *A Native Clearing* 336)

Offhand, we can say that this is a highly allusive and textually elusive poem, which is nonetheless self-aware about its "cryptic" nature. We can surmise as much, going by "A Parable," a title that immediately cues and urges one toward a nuanced and "layered" interpretation, as well as by the lack of clear textual clues concerning the poetic speaker's particular cultural and historical location. Tinio wrote this poem in the 1960s, well before he experienced a change of nativist heart and turned into an eloquent champion of Tagalog.

Like the previous poems in this paper, Tinio's text can only be read from the perspective of its "postcoloniality." Which is to say: its historical reality as an ideological consequence of American colonialism on one hand and, on the other, its ironic potentiality to secrete and promote forms of "anticolonial signification"— its ability to move beyond, critique, or "post" the colonialism that made it possible to begin with. All of Philippine literature in English is, after all, postcolonial by definition—"postcolonial" not so much because it emerged from the period of American occupation and continued to flourish after the Philippines' formal independence from the American empire (which did not, to be sure, mean the end of its subjection to such, but merely signalized its passage into the state of neocolonial servitude that it still presently languishes in), but "postcolonial"

because, while written in the language of colonization, it nonetheless cannot be assumed to be ideologically circumscribed by this fact.

As we have earlier reminded ourselves, the language that the Americans brought with them and used to convert and pacify the minds of their subjects—in the various regions of their newly acquired colony in the Far East—was quickly transformed in its encounter with the intractable cultures that most certainly pre-existed it. The transformation was a function of the situation in which this language was acquired by America's colonial subjects—a situation whose effects necessarily exceeded whatever colonial power may have anticipated about it. This "qualitative difference" is not, however, always verbally marked. Much of Philippine poetry in English actually sounds pretty "universal" offhand, but a historical reading of it quickly particularizes this register in the lived experiences and situations of its specifically located writers and readers. In other words, put in its context, even the most universal-sounding anglophone poem written by a Filipino reveals the specific situation that gave rise to it and that called it forth into postcolonial expression. That it is a homosexual speaker (and, possibly author) who expressed himself through the language that pathologized—by sexologically naming—him, only renders this instance of postcolonial difference particularly poignant and remarkable.

Tinio's poem, devoid of Philippine place names and proper nouns, and couched in the classical idioms—all those references to Greek mythology—certainly qualifies as one such text. And yet, the representational project it engages in cannot be remotely self-evident, precisely because it is a postcolonial poem. As such, we need to think of it as a translation, which makes it an inherently complex and problematic articulation, whose "situatedness" is constitutive of what it actually is. In seeming anticipation, its author decided to give it a title that plainly gestures toward the intense interpretive labor its reader will need to carry out in order to begin to understand it. This is a labor that seeks out—that reads for—signs of homosexual "presence" in the cryptohomosexual text, and it is analogous to the labor of seeking and reading for signs of the gay city that coexists within the heteronormative one—an aspect or "quality" of urban living that sexual minorities, deprived of institutional support for their manner of loving, must experience and personally "navigate" in distinct and allegorical ways.

The poem, dedicated to an anonymous "B.," is spoken in the first person plural "we," which implies a shared identity between the "I" and the "you," who is presumably the "B." in the dedication. The shared identity is defined right away as a function of a mysterious death wish, and in invoking T.S. Eliot's reference to the Sybil of Cumae, a once-beautiful seeress whose spurning of a powerful god reduced her to

an ampulla-encased prophetic eye, the speaker attributes this wish to the helpless remembering of the past (which effectively persists in all its spitefulness in the present), as well as the endless envisioning of a future that the speaker, speaking for both himself and the "you," is helpless to change or prevent from happening.

The certainty of the inescapability of this self-repeating life amounts to nothing if not a tragedy, and the remembering of it is the burden of this "inner sight"—is, by poem's end, practically indistinguishable from this form of torturous introspection. The entire poem is devoted to metaphorically "summarizing" this tragic life, primarily through the use of images and tropes that are painted across the poem's text in rather broad and almost blurry strokes. Cursorily reading the text, we do get suggestions of gay urban existence: cruising in public parks, traveling to unfamiliar cities, meeting and encountering strangers (who are evidently dangerous, because they are "beasts"), as well as the inevitable sense of dirtiness that afflicts the speaker at the end of the day—a "contamination" that needs to be washed away but can't really be since, even in sleep, even in the speakers' dream-life, the tragedy plays itself out over and again. It is interestingly at this point that the poem's text provides us with that particularly riveting and altogether telling detail—the intriguing passage, "making entrances of exits," here merely half-heartedly acknowledged as a dream-image. This, of course, is a shockingly frank metaphorical shorthand for anal sex, and its unobtrusive presence in this poem's text spectacularly opens it up to an unashamedly gay reading.

And so, yes, Tinio's "A Parable" is a Filipino gay poem—possibly one of the earliest in the country's anglophone tradition, written in the 1960s, by one of its best poets, who wrote it after completing his graduate studies in the U.S., a place whose worldliness and cosmopolitanism—as with other Filipino gay authors, like Jose Garcia Villa and Severino Montano—doubtless emboldened him. And yes, its sensibility is pretty urbane, going by its easy recourse to classical imagery and allusions, its confident aspiration after "universalism," and its depiction of the gay city as coinciding with the traditional one—for, indeed, anywhere can be a cruising ground for anonymous homosexual encounters, if one could "read" the codes well enough.

The sensitive nature of its topic should explain not only its encoded and highly figurative language, but also the existential anguish, the harrowing guilt (a "Memory… full of Gorgons") its speaker recognizes, owns up to, and ultimately wishes to escape from—by asking the Theban magus, the mythological seer called Tiresias, who had lived life both as a man and as a woman, to divest him (as well as the addressee with whom the speaker identifies) of this regretful and tormenting "inner

eye, this trick of mirrors/ Bright as the burst of pomegranates." This exotic mythical fruit is, of course, rather famous and memorable for the following reason: it was the oral ingestion of its seed that condemned the goddess Persephone to spend so many of her fitful days in hell. The last image of a "burst of pomegranates" is thus especially telling: the pomegranate is a seed-filled fruit, which is associated with the idea of worldly sensuality (and so, we may take it as the opposite of immortality). As the famous myth would seem to put it, it is by gorging on this fruit that one shuts oneself out from salvation (and is thrust into hell). And yes, the image of a solid pulpy fruit bursting into a fountain of seeds can possibly strike us as particularly kinky.

That there remains much in the Philippines' anglophone literature that needs to be unpacked in this allegorical and complex manner is easy enough to accept: the arrival of English into the country made it possible to verbalize, if only carefully, "inconvenient" and "difficult" realities that this language had itself at once instituted and undermined. In other words, while it was American modernization that introduced a sexological form of consciousness that admittedly stigmatized Filipino homosexuals,[11] in the same breath it was what provided them a discourse and an identity around which they may rally, but only—initially, at least—subtly and *dissimulatingly*. Moreover, Tinio's poem is one example of how the cosmopolitan lyric utterances of Filipino poets in English—which can either be vividly mimetic or permeated with so much allegorical opacity—are not really as "universal" as they may initially sound. Read in light of the cultural situation (in this case, repressive and religiously conservative) that framed them, these texts' various expressions of cosmopolitan-sounding, "universal" insights are grounded firmly in the exigencies and particularities of the Philippines' troubled history.

Upon closer examination, then, this poem's collective "we" isn't universal. Situated in its time and place, the poem's subject-position is, rather, that of the historically located Filipino homosexual, whose colonial shaming and abjection as psychosexually deviant and sinful this poetic articulation registers all too painfully but by the same token embraces as a possible place from which to speak, from which to "be." Finally, we can say that the "postcolonial difference" to be intuited in this work derives from the Philippine locality of the experience that spurred it—a locality that transformed the language and resignified the colonial homophobic values it carried, precisely because this language became the medium through which a postcolonial gay subjectivity could, paradoxically, come to exist.

From this limited selection, I hope to have demonstrated the complexity of the postcolonial approach, which doesn't neglect formalist interests, but enriches them

and renders them more meaningful, precisely because through this reading strategy they become entry-points into deeper forms of postcolonial reflection. Despite the absence or paucity of clear ethnic markers in the texts themselves, we can reclaim the universal in the poems written by our poets in English by basically proving that their various gestures of nonspecificity or even seeming "Westerness" are in fact conditioned by the particularities of our historical and cultural locality—by the specificity of our situation as postcolonial and neocolonized subjects, whose "dis-identifying" and appropriative use of English includes the temerity to unapologetically explore its forms and endowments, all for the purpose of illuminating our own realities, here in the country of our deepest and most difficult affections.

## ENDNOTES

[1] I read this paper at the national conference, "Language and Literature: Teaching Terrains, Research Routes, and Learning Landscapes," jointly sponsored by the College English Teachers Association and the Council for Department Chairpersons in English, SMX Convention Center, SM Mall of Asia, 12 September 2013.

[2] I recounted this story and first performed a postcolonial reflection on it in my monograph, *At Home in Unhomeliness: Rethinking the Universal in Philippine Postcolonial Poetry in English*.

[3] All this constitutes, of course, the postcolonial theory of hybridity most famously proposed by Homi L. Bhabha. See, for example, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 45.

[4] Angela Manalang Gloria was born in Guagua, Pampanga, in 1907. She finished high school in St. Scholastica's College and enrolled in the University of the Philippines for a pre-law degree in English. In the University of the Philippines, she was literary editor of *Philippine Collegian* and graduated summa cum laude. She wrote many of the poems that she entered into the 1940 Commonwealth Literary Contest while convalescing from tuberculosis. These poems proved controversial, and caused a debate among the judges, and finally it was determined that she would need to edit some of the more sexually explicit references in them before they could be published. Her beloved husband, Celedonio, was killed by the retreating Japanese in 1945. A widow for the next half century, Manalang-Gloria continued to live the rest of her years in her house in Tabaco, Albay, where she died in 1995 (Abad, *Man of Earth*, 389-92).

[5] Carlos Angeles was born in 1921 in Tacloban City, Leyte. He enrolled in various universities, and was a member of the University of the Philippines Writers Club for a time. He was in pre-law when World War II broke out. He worked in government in various capacities, serving as press assistant in the Garcia administration, and as a public relations manager of PanAm Airlines. His first collection of poems, *a stun of jewels* (Manila: Alberto S. Florentino, 1963), received first prize at the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards as well as the Republic Cultural Heritage Award. He died in the United States in 2002. (Abad, *A Native Clearing*, 616-17).

[6] A poet and a fictionist, Bienvenido Santos was born in Manila in 1911. He graduated from the University of the Philippines in 1932. A scholar under the Philippine Pensionado program, he pursued an M.A. in English at the University of Illinois, Columbia University, and Harvard University. He served as public information officer under the Philippine government in exile in Washington D.C. He received the Guggenheim Fellowship, a Republic Cultural Heritage Award, prizes from the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards, and an American Book Award. He was also the recipient of honorary doctorate degrees from UP, Bicol University, and Wichita State University. After he retired, he became a Visiting Writer and Artist at De La Salle University in Manila. He passed away in 1996. (Abad, *Man of Earth*, 400-05).

[7] National Artist Nick Joaquin—who also went by the nom de plume, Quijano de Manila—was born in Paco, Manila in 1917. He didn't complete his secondary education, but by the age of 17, he published his first poem in the *Tribune*. Subsequently, his stories got published in magazines like *Herald Midweek Magazine* and *Philippines Free Press*. He entered St. Albert College in Hong Kong, a seminary under the Dominicans, but left in 1950. He resumed his literary career in Manila and became a major and much-published writer in a number of genres: drama, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. In 1976, he was conferred the title, National Artist in Literature. He passed away in 2004. (Abad, *Man of Earth*, 384-85).

[8] A bachelor who was also a confirmed homosexual, as a recent interview with Joaquin's family has now finally officially acknowledged. See De Vera.

[9] Virginia R. Moreno was born in Tondo, Manila in 1925. She completed a Bachelor in Philosophy degree as well as a Master's degree in English in UP, where she taught in the English and Humanities departments. She received writing fellowships and grants in the United States and resided for a time in Paris as a commissioner of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). She retired from UP after serving as director of UP Film Center. (Abad, *A Native Clearing*, 642-643).

[10] A poet, dramatist, and essayist, Rolando S. Tinio was born in Manila in 1937. He graduated from the University of Santo Tomas with a Bachelor of Philosophy degree in 1955 and finished an MFA in English at the State University of Iowa in 1958. His thesis was a collection of poems titled *The Careers of Orpheus*. He won a prize for his poetry in the 1973 Palanca Memorial Awards. He passed away in 1997, several months before he was declared a National Artist in literature. (Abad, *A Native Clearing*, 651-52).

[11] One of American neo/colonialism's most invidious and enduring effects is the socialization of Filipinos into Western modes of gender and sexual identity formation. This process has been instituted and "naturalized" through a variety of biomedical discourses (public hygiene, guidance and counseling, psychology, psychiatry, feminism, AIDS, among many others), and it has resulted in the entrenchment of the "homo/hetero" dichotomy as the key organizing principle in the now-heavily-freighted sexual lives of educated Filipinos, many of whom reside and work in the Philippines' expanding urban centers, where Westernized knowledges are increasingly the norm. I have written about the history of this process of "sexualization"—that informs "cryptohomosexual" texts like Tinio's—in other places. For a more recent example, see my "Villa, Montano, Perez: Postcoloniality and Gay Liberation in the Philippines" (2010).

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