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Alterity and the Literature Classroom (Or, I Look for the Other When I Teach)[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper builds on a plenary lecture that the author delivered in 2009, before an audience of college literature teachers in a big private university in Manila. The theme of the conference was the teaching of literature, and in his presentation he argues that the "otherness" of Philippine literature in English requires a deconstructive reading/teaching strategy that will move away from the universalist interpretation of its themes in order to pursue a specifying postcolonial analysis of its political "unconscious" (which references, by definition, the history of neo/colonial relations that, to begin with, made this tradition of writing possible). To the author, Levinasian alterity denominates a philosophical understanding that may alert the postcolonial literature teacher to the importance of carrying out such an interpretive project, because what it prompts and urges, in the end, is both a recognition of and a respect for the "absolutely other," the responsible relationship with whom is the very ground of subjectivity itself. Finally, the author offers a postcolonial reading of Paz Marquez Benitez's "Dead Stars" in order to illustrate the *generativity* of this approach, in the process laying bare the critical difference that conventional humanist readings of this famous and inaugural text are unable—or simply refuse—to acknowledge.

Keywords: Otherness, ethics, postcolonial, deconstruction, anglophone, Philippine literature

CHANGING TITLES

A few years ago, I was invited to present a plenary lecture in my alma mater, on the teaching of literature. When I arrived at the auditorium, I discovered that the title of my paper, as printed in the conference program, was something entirely different from what I had prepared. Suffice it to say that I did not give the title under which I was supposed to speak that afternoon, and someone in the organizing committee apparently decided on an epithet that seemed logical enough, given my reputation.

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While I continue to like the musical *La Cage Aux Folles*—from which that iconic song of homosexual pride, "I Am What I Am," comes—I must admit my discomfort at the solipsism and declaration of confident subjectivity that this "declarative" defiantly makes, especially since, right then and there, teaching and the literature classroom were the contexts within which such an avowal was supposed to take place.

The truth is, at this point I am all the more convinced, after twenty years in this business, that education in the humanities—particularly, in the literary arts—describes a sacred and privileged space teachers and students are enjoined to risk and perhaps even lose the self in, for the sake of true learning. Meaning: in the course of reading and experiencing the inner worlds of the imagination, as afforded by language and its attendant complexities, we in the literature classroom necessarily leave behind the safety of the familiar, the known, the commonplace, and the same, in order to confront, respect, and relate to strangeness, difference, otherness. It is through literature and its imaginative flights, its ability to endow us a point of view distinct from our own, to "incarnate" us, as it were, that we bring our sense of identity—our very self—to a state of beautiful crisis, from which we may emerge not only more aware and appreciative of the existence of others, but more importantly, as fundamentally different from or "other" to ourselves.

This paper is about the role difference, alterity, or otherness, plays inside my literature classroom. Its title, "Alterity and the Literature Classroom," can therefore be rephrased into: "I Look for the Other When I Teach." My interest in this topic isn't only because I—a physically capacious and strange-looking (and yes, to many, strange-sounding) gay man who is frontally and unapologetically himself each and every time he faces his students—am undoubtedly, and to all intents and purposes, an "other." Certainly, I am not endorsing here any ridiculous notion that gayness, strangeness, or even capaciousness on the part of the teacher should itself constitute a pedagogical virtue. In truth, my interest in alterity derives not so much from a personal grudge—or alternatively, a personal hubris—but rather from a philosophical position I have increasingly come to adopt, concerning the ethical responsibility we necessarily bear in relation to others. It is not completely a coincidence that such an ethical project would seem to go hand in hand with my own preferred method of reading—one that inquires into textual difference in the closest and most attentive way possible (thus far) in the discipline of literary studies. It is a method we all know as deconstruction, and like many critics or literary scholars who occupy a marginal position relative to the Western cosmopolitan center, I use it purposively in my teaching in order to interrogate the colonial and homophobic universalisms implicit in the established readings of certain canonical texts.

Alterity of course has also been explored as an ethical concept—and here we may bring up the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who has been one of its foremost thinkers. While this philosophical reading of the idea (and practice) of radical otherness *will not,* however, circumscribe this paper's interpretive enterprise, I mention it here to merely serve as an introduction to the appreciation and exploration of alterity as being, on one hand, a pedagogical preference for engaging in the study of minority literatures (like gay writing), and on the other as the pursuit of critical difference in the reading of literary texts—especially those that have been easily subsumed into the ontology of sameness (or "universality") that Levinas precisely cautions us against (such as those texts coming from traditions of anglophone writing across the world). Inasmuch as the frame and occasion for this paper is a lecture that I gave, a few years back, before an audience of college literature teachers in a private university in Manila—whose lack of familiarity with critical theory is probably representative of the pedagogical state of things in the country's educational system, at large—I will include here a description of deconstruction as the hermeneutic search for difference, as well as a summary of postcolonial criticism, particularly as it utilizes deconstruction as its primary interpretive procedure. Needless to say, crucial to this project is an understanding of postcolonial texts as sites for hybrid meaning—a signifying activity that typically gets elided in humanist interpretations of these texts' supposedly universal stories and themes. Finally, I offer a deconstructive analysis of the founding short story in the tradition of Philippine anglophone letters, in order to further flesh out these various ideas, as well as illustrate the important point that so much of the alterity of our literature in English—which is mostly the function of its syncretic and/or translational character—has yet to be recovered, surfaced, and read.

LEVINAS AND THE OTHER

The ethical dimension of otherness was most powerfully explored and clarified in the previous century by the Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, the subject is a subject only by virtue of its relationship with the other, to whom it is responsible, and to whom it must respond. The I, facing the other, cannot continue to believe that it is all that there is—that it is the pivot around which the cosmos turns—for seeing the other it quickly realizes that it is itself an "other" to another self. It is not consciousness per se but rather this relationship with the other that gives subjectivity its meaning and direction. As against the well-worn formula, Levinas asserts that to know is not the self's primary feature; to relate with another is (Zhou 13).

Suffice it to say that Levinas's notion of alterity emerges from his critique of Western metaphysics, which has not truly recognized otherness, for in its universalist (we may also say, humanist) pretense it invariably turns the other into the same.[2] This bias derives from the Cartesian concept of a self-sufficient and fully conscious subject, for whom the world and the other are mere objects of knowledge. We must remember that this is the same ontological process that has valorized the male, heterosexual, and European self, and demonized and, occasionally, even annihilated the female, homosexual, and non-European other in a variety of heterosexist, patriarchal, and colonialist discourses.

Alterity for Levinas thus denotes a concept of the other as being absolutely different from the self, irreducible to its intentions and interpretations. The other as such exists outside the self's representational scheme, and cannot be subsumed into either its value or cognitive systems. For Levinas, the other is utterly strange, utterly unfamiliar, utterly irreducible, to the self. Alterity, or radical otherness, cannot even be recognized let alone understood from the location of the same—which is to say, using concepts entirely familiar or native to the self. Whenever this supposedly happens—typically in humanist discourses on gender, race, sexuality, culture, and nationality—it is not the true or authentic other but rather only a "domesticated other," who is simply an anxious projection of the self, that is revealed.

It's important for us to note that Levinas's concept of the other is not comparable to the other of binary logic, in which the other is always already an opposite and inferior term, for it is defined completely by the dominant that subdues and indeed fully anticipates and assimilates it. Levinas thinks of alterity as being infinitely elusive, for it cannot be located inside the subject's own frame of thought. Meaning, it is absolute and unassimilable to the social and cultural signifying systems of the subject. The other does not oppose or annihilate the self; it is merely different from (that is to say, external to) it. In this way, the other may be said to present a presence that unsettles the subject's commonsense—that is to say, its sensible cartography—because it refuses to be absorbed into the subject's intelligible world.

Levinas explains that the other's presence is the revelation or the epiphany of a face, and it eventuates into an unearthly visitation that indicates the arrival of an uncontainable and ungraspable difference (Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 95). What this face presents therefore is an absolute otherness, an ultimate strangeness. Through the other's face, alterity makes a demand that the I relate to it well before the I can even begin to accept or decline such an admonition. And yet,

because the other is completely different from and independent of the I, it is completely beyond the I's ability to possess it. According to Levinas, not even murder can succeed in giving the I the power to possess the other's otherness.

It is only when the subject doubts, interrogates, and calls into question its sense of self, that it begins to welcome the absolutely other. As Richard Cohen, a scholar on Levinas's writings forcefully puts it,

> In relation to the other the self is reconditioned, desubstantiated, put into question. Put into relation to what it cannot integrate, the self is made to be itself, despite itself ... [O]ne is radically passive in a superlative passivity equal to the superlative alterity of the other person. (Cohen 1-10)

Hence, the profound impact of alterity lies in its ability to render the self as an other to itself. After confronting Levinasian otherness, the self cannot return to its previous awareness of itself. It becomes itself the same as and yet profoundly different from itself.

Where, you may ask, is the ethics in all this? As we have seen, the difference of the other comes to the self as an imperative, a command that situates the self into its unique selfhood. The self/other relationship is ethical precisely because the face-to-face encounter with the other undoes the self-absorption of the self and thus dismantles the dualistic hierarchy between them. We must remember that duality or binarism reduces the other into the subject's inferior and/or opposite negation. True alterity, on the contrary, relocates both self and other into a new relationship—and it is a relationship of mutual responsibility.

If responsibility to the other is what constitutes the subject or the I, then to refuse the responsibility would be tantamount to relinquishing subjectivity. In this light we must understand that, quite often, those who have been "othered" by the dominant discourses—for instance, the non-white Orientals, the queers, the non-Christian tribal peoples, etc.—may choose to relinquish their subjectivity, may choose not to be responsible, to the self that subjects (more accurately abjects) them.[3] This kind of refusal Levinas fully grants, as in a dramatic moment in his discourse he himself soliloquizes

> ... I refuse to recognize the role I would play in a drama of which I would not be the author or whose outcome another would know before me. I refuse to figure in a drama of salvation or of damnation that would be enacted in spite of me. (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 79)

By refusing the connection, or the "translation," the other—Levinas frankly acknowledges—is simply refusing to be assimilated.

In discovering the exhilarating possibility that the other can remain an other even as it relates with the self, Levinas gestures toward an alternative philosophy that is founded not on the ontological presumption of universal sameness, but rather on the ethical (meaning to say, the responsive and responsible) relationship between self and other. As he so eloquently asserts in an interview:

> Western philosophy coincides with the unveiling of the other in which the other, in manifesting itself as a being, loses its alterity. Philosophy is afflicted, from its childhood, with an insurmountable allergy: a horror of the Other which remains Other. It is for this reason that philosophy is essentially the philosophy of Being; the comprehension of Being in its final word and the fundamental structure of man. (Levinas, *En decouvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* 188; quoted in Davis 52)

Thus, in Levinas's hands, ethics "trumps" and dismantles Western metaphysics which, in always seeking the essence or universal substance that defines Being and totality, again and again fails to recognize the other as other.

THE OTHER IN MY LITERARY PRACTICE

What is clear, going by this clumsy and possibly reductionist summary of Levinasian discourse, is that an ethics—or even a politics—based on such a radical notion of alterity is probably going to be a tall order for most of us. Moreover, it may not be possible to pursue the project of Levinasian alterity to its fullest sense, especially where the reading of literary texts is concerned, precisely because reading per se presupposes interpretation—an activity in which the other is necessarily domesticated or "read" in the process of becoming intelligible, or being textually recognized, and thus needfully loses is radical nature. And yet, as a kind of "limit case" or even as a radical ideal, this kind of ethics can at best lead us toward an aspirational practice, whose objective is to acknowledge as well as undo the immeasurable damage wrought by all sorts of violent "imperialisms" upon the histories and lives of so many disenfranchised "alterities"—so many oppressed others—in the world.

I suppose I can say, right at the outset, that the most obvious indication of my commitment to further and stay true to the precepts of Levinasian alterity is my continued teaching of the literature elective, CL 184, also known as Gay Writings,

under the comparative literature program of the Department of English and Comparative Literature of the College of Arts and Letters. And yet, even within the aegis of what continues to be, in the nonsectarian University of the Philippines, an exceptional and highly specialized subject, I am careful not to domesticate or make "palatable" or "hygienic" the literary texts which my class and I will be discussing over the course of the semester.

For instance, I call the first group of readings in my syllabus "Mad, bad and dangerous to know," an epithet initially and still consistently associated with that tall and darkly handsome but perilously sybaritic bard, the Romantic poet George Gordon Byron (also known as Lord Byron). The pieces included here are stories, basically, from the *Ladlad* series[4] (which I coedited over the past decade), that have for characters gay individuals who are if not mildly eccentric then downright loony or even criminally insane. I can now say that it was probably a deliberate Levinasian decision, on my part, to put these texts first, because they readily upset the cut-and-dried notions and stereotypes most people have regarding gays, and do so in what must be some of the craziest, most disarming, and unsettling ways possible. In this manner, as I introduce my mostly "sheltered" students to the discomfiting alterity of gay literature, I deny them the garden variety homosexual, right at the outset. Instead, in Levinasian fashion, I sic on them the sickest and most alienating gay characters I can find, if only to shock them into an ethical responsibility to gays and hopefully other kinds of people with whom they have to share this world.

For example, in Jimmy Alcantara's two stories—"Red ang luha ni Michael" and "Blue and kobrekama ni Jake"—Ricky, the narrator, is a jobless interior decorator keeping house for his "husband," and out of loneliness and despair, "loses" it (in the first story he paints the entire house red; in the second he adopts a baby, which turns out to be a battery-operated doll). Murphy Red's "Simpleng taytel, kumplikadong kwento" is peopled by substance-abusers and drunks who occasionally bugger each other to show affection. One such individual, the narrator, experiences a Kafkaesque twilight coming home from what seemed like one endless pot session, and, in a queer version of the existential quest, comes to kneel before and to worship the lowly and pestilential fly on the dung-heap of a public market.

On the other hand, Nicolas Pichay's story, "Dear Kuya Cesar," brings the idea of insanity closer to home: his character, the letter-sender, is literally madly in love with a faithless man, whose house he sets on fire (at least, in his twisted imagination). Honorio Bartolome de Dios presents a murderous tale in "Lalaki," and thus subverts the conventional wisdom: gays are not weak and harmless. Pushed to the extreme, they can strike just as mercilessly as any other knife-wielding avenging angel. The

one-act play *Last Full Show* by Chris Martinez, presents the frightful intersection between danger and gayness inside an eerie and benighted movie house, in which ghouls and monsters prey on unsuspecting human males (as well as on one another). Finally, from the recently launched *Ladlad 3*, Mykel Andrada's intimate story, "Boy Scouting," offers an utterly discomfiting picture of an all-boys high school, in which beautiful and sexually precocious sissies get to have their pick of their cute and horny jock classmates. Indeed, calling such a colorful cast of characters "different" constitutes nothing if not an understatement, for what these characters are is over-the-top weird.

DECONSTRUCTION AND OTHERNESS

Difference or otherness is, of course, not just a philosophical concept; more urgently it is an inescapable condition of our being. Simply because we are temporal and space-bound embodiments, we are necessarily different from—we are necessarily incongruent with or "other to"—one another. As we know, *difference* is a key term in poststructuralist theory as well, in which it denotes the relational and indeterminate play of meaning inherent in language. It is for these reasons—the spatial/temporal as well as the linguistic—that contemporary critical theory's emphasis on difference has lent itself well to a slew of sociopolitical advocacies, most of which are concerned with the "difficult" questions of embodiment (like class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, among many others).

Indeed, because of the ascendancy of poststructuralist theories of reading—in particular, deconstruction—we who engage in the business of literary analysis are supposed to appreciate the idea of otherness (or difference) in a more radical way. As we know, deconstruction is the chief preoccupation of poststructuralism, which is a theory of reading and interpretation that emerged among the French intelligentsia as a reaction against the mechanistic tendency and systems-focused approach of structuralism. Nonetheless, deconstruction does pursue the structuralist insight on the constitutive role that language plays in creating reality, only it takes this notion to its utmost conceptual implication: since everything is constructed by and in language—which is to say, since everything is mediated linguistically—then there is no certainty, truth, or center that is not already constituted by the unstable and deconstructible system of relational and differential signs, that is language. And because language is a self-contained system of unmotivated signs, words float free from the concepts they designate, or the realities to which they refer. Meaning is therefore always slippery and fluid, disseminated unpredictably, plural, multiple,

and shifting. Moreover, with all meaning being relational, words or categories are therefore always contaminated by their opposites that define and/ or "found" them.[5]

Needless to say, deconstructive reading is all about alterity or the other. In particular, deconstruction, which is the "careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text" (Johnson 3-13) is precisely the kind of close reading that demonstrates how a text, founded on the indeterminacy that underlies all language, and therefore riven by contradictions from the inside, differs inexorably from—is utterly other than—itself. According to the contemporary philosopher Simon Critchley,

> Deconstruction opens a reading by locating a moment of alterity within a text ... What takes place in deconstruction is a highly determinate form of double reading which pursues alterities within texts ... (28)

We must remember, however, that deconstruction does not eliminate the possibility of meaning; rather, what it does is to invalidate claims concerning the univocal domination of any one mode of signifying over others.

We may note that deconstructive readings that attend exclusively to questions of linguistic indeterminacy come across as being admittedly pointless, apolitical, formalistic, self-indulgent, and nihilistic, in comparison to those strands of poststructuralism that deconstruct traditional binaries governing discussions of the body, desire, and subjectivity. Thus, nowadays, deconstruction is being deployed most excitingly and usefully in conjunction with feminism, postcolonial, gay and lesbian, and other forms of cultural studies, in order to address the questions of oppressive difference. By stressing the undecidability of textual meaning, deconstruction undermines any and all totalitarian theoretical systems that claim to be universal. And by assuming the indeterminacy of texts, deconstruction dismantles the binary oppositions of formalist thought and installs in their place the free play of meanings. Practically speaking, deconstruction hence is "reading the text against itself," in order to lay bare its unconscious, its unseen self-difference or textual alterity—which is to say, the significations its overt textuality glosses over, or refuses to acknowledge. We may also say, in this regard, that deconstruction seeks to carry out an "oppositional reading," with the aim of revealing how the text inexorably betrays itself, by being other than what it supposedly is. In other words, deconstructive analysis uncovers the text's internal inconsistencies—the disunity that underlies its apparent unity. In pursuing this aim, the deconstructive process often latches upon a detail of the text which looks unimportant or merely incidental at first blush, and then uses it to re-read the whole text.

In the pursuit of literary alterity, I ask my students to interpret texts against their own obvious or avowed claims, in order to expose what they have repressed, but which must continue to haunt them. However, predictably enough, my use of deconstruction in the classroom is always "purposeful": simply put, I do not see the point of "reading against the grain" when this admittedly tedious enterprise will not even serve—following the Levinas admonition—any ethical goal. As should be relatively well-known to my readers by now, my interpretive advocacies over the past few years have basically been two: postcolonial and antihomophobic. I will not be able to elaborate on both, and so for the rest of this paper I will simply sketch out certain features of postcolonial theory and criticism, and the critical difference or alterity that they evince—and effect—when they are brought to bear on the subject of Philippine literature in English. Thereafter, I will offer a postcolonial deconstruction of Paz Marquez Benitez's "Dead Stars," popularly acclaimed by many critics as the first successful short story in English written by a Filipino.

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND PHILIPPINE LITERATURE

As many of us already know, postcolonial discourse—or rather, given its inherent contentiousness, postcolonial *discord*—is an interdisciplinary field that studies the global impact of European colonialism, from the fifteenth century to the present. As a set of related but often disputatious theories and methodologies, its aims are to describe the mechanisms of colonial power, to recover marginalized "subaltern" voices, and to theorize the complexities of colonial and postcolonial resistance, identity, nationness, diaspora, globalization, and language, among other, equally important concerns (Leitch 18).

Generally speaking, postcolonial discourse seeks to challenge the universalist claims by liberal humanist (very often, formalist) critics about literature—claims that demean, dismiss, or sublimate cultural, social, regional, class, and national differences in favor of supposedly objective, neutral, timeless, and universal standards. Every time a universal reading is claimed for a work, postcolonial critics will be quick to point out that it is really white, Eurocentric norms that are being endorsed, to the detriment of all other forms of lived difference, all other kinds of alterity.

In literary studies in particular, postcolonialist critics typically reject the claims to universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature, and seek to show its limitations, especially its general disdain for cultural and ethnic difference. Thus,

they critique Western representations of non-Western cultures, demonstrating in their deconstructive readings how Western colonial literature is often disturbingly "silent" on matters concerning the imperialist violence of territorial expansion and economic subjugation. Postcolonial theory and criticism also emphasize questions of cultural difference and diversity in literary works, referencing the typical postcolonial situation in which individuals or groups belong to two more cultures or speak two or more languages, all at once. Finally, postcolonial critics endorse perspectives that perceive states of marginality and alterity as important transformative forces in global literary and cultural productions (Barry 178-82).

At heart, the story of Philippine literature in English is far from singular, for it is the story of many other postcolonial literatures, as well: across the colonized hemispheres, postcolonial writers, afflicted with double consciousness, and troubled by their ambivalent cultural identities, carry out their various decolonizing projects in their works. Like their counterparts elsewhere in the formerly colonized world, they aim to adjudicate between oral and textual forms, recuperate lost histories, and imaginatively "restore" communities threatened by colonial extinction.

Obviously, universalist theories of literary appreciation—for example, in our case here in the Philippines, impressionistic cross-hatchings of Romanticism and New Criticism—elide the differences and alterities across cultural locales, while purely nationalist and/or nativist approaches, by contrast, can only fail to comprehend the many cultural links among literary traditions in those colonies and neocolonies that, up to now, continue to grapple with the unfinished aftermath of imperialist conquest. Postcolonial criticism, painfully alive as it is to questions of sameness and difference, and intensely deconstructive at heart, is therefore the best conceptual "place" from which this critical inquiry can commence.

Needless to say, language is a crucial issue in postcolonial literature and in the identity politics that underwrites it. The simple fact just can't be transcended: colonized peoples who speak (and write) in the language of colonization necessarily confront the problem of consciousness, and therefore, of identity. From the available accounts, we may conclude that, by and large, postcolonial literature is forged from the painful experience of confronting the desire to recover lost precolonial identities, the impossibility of actually doing so, and the task of constructing some new identity on the basis of that impossibility (Childs and Williams 14). And because postcolonial history is still unfolding, definitively answering the question of postcolonial identity cannot yet be performed. Indeed, the enunciation of the postcolonial "sense of self," like the enunciation of any identity, will necessarily be confounded by the irreducible

difference between the speaking and the spoken subject: even in the most personal and intimate utterance, no pronoun ever fully captures the spatially situated, temporally complex, and empirical specificity of the subjectivity it attempts but ultimately fails to "make present."

As postmodern and postcolonial theories have cogently argued, identity is a fictional positioning in language, a discursive construction, a dynamic process of identification that, precisely because it is linguistic, is ever-shifting, relational, and never fully realized (Hall 115-29). Indeed, for many postcolonial writers, identity is nothing if not a "self-arrogated fiction" made necessary by an awareness of historical exigency, a choice of identification with a norm that is as much personally expressed as socially ascribed. As such, these writers can only experience identity as a historical irony that situates them uncertainly between the past and the present, and sets them on a nostalgic, "mythopoetic" quest for a powerfully felt but irrecoverable "origin."

And yet, the global fate, across the centuries, of an imperial language like English may prove particularly instructive in our attempts to understand the complexity of postcolonial identity. While the English language traveled and was imposed in many places around the world, it nevertheless quickly diversified into a heterogeneous range of "contact languages" (which some postcolonial critics, referring to the literatures of the British Commonwealth, have called "englishes."[6]) It's now an academic commonplace that, in its global spread, Standard English has been repudiated, recontextualized, situated, and appropriated over and again, through such diverse and "creative" means as neologistic vocabularies, transformational grammars, altered syntaxes, the use of vernacular rhythms, and many other devices and strategies. Postcolonial anglophone writers, raised and educated in mostly multi-lingual contexts, now typically argue that English is not the exclusive property of the English, and that, indeed, the various peoples that English had once colonized quickly domesticated and tamed it for their own purposes, turning it into an ally in their revolt against colonial-mindedness—in the words of the Indian-British writer, Salman Rushdie, "carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers."[7]

By now, postcolonial theories routinely explain that, as regards this question of linguistic appropriation—here the abrogation of Standard English, and its recontextualized usage across anglophone localities—postcolonial subjects' attitudes toward the imperial language may be seen to mirror the processes of identity-formation itself: (1) identification; (2) counter-identification; and (3) dis-identification.[8] With identification, the colonized subject accepts the labels given him by colonialism, and yet refunctions them as good and affirmative. We can

perhaps refer ourselves to the works of our first "users" of English, who innocently spoke and wrote in it. The obvious weakness of this position is that it remains frankly trapped within the hierarchy put in place by colonialism. With counter-identification, the subject may be seen to reject the terms of the debate, and to deny its basis. This is the path taken by many nationalisms, which turn their backs on all things foreign, and embrace the fiction of a precolonially pure nativity. The Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o memorably exemplifies this response.[9] While starting out as a writer in English, he later decided not to speak or write in this "imperial medium" anymore, because he believed it to be the primary tool of colonial mental domination. His subsequent writings in his native Gikuyu tap into the oral tradition of *Nommo,* which had precisely been dismissed and denigrated by the colonial structures of the British system of education.

The weakness of this position of simple "reversal" is clear: it assumes that oppression is always synonymous with the medium of oppression, and that a language brought from one place cannot express the experience of another (meaning, that language and culture are inseparable). Obviously, languages are not reducible to fixed dictionary denotations, but are constructed and transformed through the cultural processes of usage, adaptation, transformation, translation, etc. In recent years, linguists have already qualified the familiar argument that conflates thought and language, for even as words do determine the shape and "meaning" of ideas it's not as though there can be ideas without words to begin with. (Ideas do not cause words any more than words cause ideas; from each other they are simply indistinguishable.) And how are words acquired if not in contexts of communication, if not socially? This takes us to the realization that language and the perception of "social reality" are inextricably linked not because the former causes the latter to "exist" in the mind where it thereby becomes meaningful, but because the former cannot exist separate from the latter. In fact, there would be no words inside the mind—there would be no mind at all—without there first being the situation of language being used, without social discourse. We are able to understand not because we have meaning (or a template for meaning) "living" inside our heads, but because we have participated in a discourse, because we have engaged in a social—which is to say, meaningful—relationship (Ashcroft 112-45).

In trying, then, to explain how postcolonial writing can signify anticolonial things despite being written in the language of colonization, postcolonial critics are quick to remind us that the written text is a social discourse, an act of communication between author and reader. Its meaning is constituted from this relationship—this necessary sociality—and thus is always a form of "social transaction" between its participants. Postcolonial texts are always discourses or "social situations," and

what makes them ultimately unique as texts may well be their necessary and intense engagement with this fact; which is to say, the emphasis they place on their problematic states of being, the plurivocal and agonistic nature of the situations within which they are being written and read.[10] Instances of postcolonial meaning are not exclusively determined by the language in which this meaning is couched; the context in which such meanings take shape and are communicated plays a more determinate role than the simple denotation of their respective words. And so, English per se does not condemn its postcolonial user to an irredeemable colonial-mindedness: what matters is the intricacy of its usage and, certainly, the purpose or "service" to which this usage is pressed. As far as questions of this sort are concerned, postcolonial critics now tell us that it is the necessarily syncretic and transcultural situation of postcolonial writing/reading—nay, it is the necessarily syncretic and transcultural postcolonial situation itself—that matters most of all.

Lastly, dis-identification signifies the simultaneous acceptance and critical interrogation, transformation, and/or appropriation of the concept (or, indeed, the language) provided by colonialism. We can say that Philippine literature in English literally "embodies" dis-identification, thus: written in English, yet stubbornly and inevitably Philippine. The existence and persistence of postcolonial literatures like ours only affirm the fact that meaning doesn't reside in concepts or in languages per se, but is always—in the words of a famous postcolonial critic—a "situated accomplishment." Dis-identification is nothing if not a synonym, then, for interculturation and "hybridization," and as far as anglophone writing goes, postcolonial thinkers have explained that this verbal and textual process can be either subtle and "organic" (as when proper and local nouns from the specific culture in question are inserted unobtrusively inside otherwise Standard English constructions), or it can be more blatant, as in the form of audibly torturous and overt "creolization," in which even the basic structures of English are put in the service of expressing local rhythms, sensibilities, tonalities, etc. (Ramazani 14). Of course, recurring to the subject at hand, we must remember that the hybridity of postcolonial literature is not only in terms of language, but also of literary form itself.

HYBRIDITY AS ALTERITY

And yet, it is precisely postcolonial theory's notion of hybridity that has not been fully utilized in many postcolonialist studies, which suppress its radical otherness by assuming it to be simplistically volitional on the part of the writers under scrutiny—a matter of expressivity or intention, thus. Implicit in many such critical

works is the assertion that these authors were all self-consciously furthering a panoply of postcolonial causes—needless to say, were all thoughtfully and willfully hybridizing or “cross-fertilizing” the tradition of the Western “Anglo” Muse with their own traditional cultures’ Native Muses. If we were to strictly adhere to this conceptualization of hybridity as willful resistance, then postcolonial writing is truly resistant—and truly postcolonial—only if it obviously evinces the kinds of linguistic and formal deformations that are commonly associated with the audibly “ethnopoetic” productions of minority writers in the First World. Literature that is written by Third World writers, so long as it is couched in Standard-sounding English and so long as it cannot be so easily ethnographically “placed”—because, for instance, it uses more common than proper nouns, and thereby thematizes more “universal” than “particular” concerns—simply isn’t hybrid or “other” enough, and therefore has no place in this humanist and purely “voluntaristic” schema.

As postcolonial discourse explains it, hybridity may be seen as inevitable and largely constitutive of the colonial dynamic itself. For its foremost theorist, Homi K. Bhabha, hybridity is yet another exemplification of the “ambivalence” that intimately characterizes the colonial enterprise. As Bhabha reminds us, colonialism is a question not only of Europe’s juridical and forceful territorial expansion into the rest of the world, but also, more importantly, of the discursive or representational project imposed by the European powers upon the colonized, that constructs their identity as inferior and therefore needing tutelage and amelioration. And yet, precisely for this reason, this identity can only exist in relation to the colonizer’s, which it maintains and which maintains it, and the same dynamic may be said to obtain the other way around. As such, both the colonizer and the colonized are anxious positions in this relationality, and are caught up in a mutually constitutive economy of fantasy and desire. Their respective senses of self live inside the “differentiating order of otherness”; meaning, the Other against which they define themselves in fact resides inside them as their founding repudiation (Bhabha 45). Thus, they can only simultaneously hate and crave it, revealing an ambivalence that is uneasily if only partially assuaged by fetishistic attachment. As the compulsively reiterated fetish of the colonial stereotype illustrates, even as the colonizer may outwardly revile or fear the colonized natives, in the very act of reviling or fearing he silently acknowledges and actively desires them (Bhabha 75).

On the other hand, mimicry is another manifestation of the ambivalence of colonial presence. It is predicated on the colonized subject’s required and qualified resemblance to the colonizer: “a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 86). Colonialism, as a civilizing project, expects and coerces its subjects to

imitate its norms, and yet, what this imitation effectively produces is nothing if not a mockery of the new order of things, for it can only be a caricature that exposes colonial authority as itself “unnatural” and inauthentic. Inasmuch as the mimic who performs her colonial identity remains distinct from the identity which she mimics, she becomes the Other that is almost the Self. In this sense, she embodies the disfiguring and partial presence of colonialism, and questions its originality and self-identity.

Finally, Bhabha sees hybridity—the interculturation that colonial encounters induce—as the necessary outcome of the non-convergence between colonial power’s intentions and the affects of those who receive them. In every new encounter, colonial authority repeats itself as different from the culture it seeks to subjugate. Each repetition of its differential and discriminatory discourse undermines the very claims of this discourse to a natural and singular originality: power repeats and imitates itself over and over, and is diluted, compromised, and hybridized at every turn. As Bhabha eloquently puts it: “In the very practice of domination the language of the master becomes hybrid—neither the one thing nor the other” (Bhabha 33). Thus, all colonial impositions, including the linguistic and the literary, become resignified by the “other” culture, split between their claims and their performances, recontextualized and syncretized from the very moment of contact with the colonized. Colonial power isn’t then monolithic or absolute as a system, for it is necessarily fractured and transformed in its relationality with its subjects, over whom it exercises both a coercive and an empowering mystique. The various hybridities of identities, languages, practices, and images that result from the forceful implementation of colonial norms only demonstrate the imperfect workings of colonialism’s hegemonic discourse that transforms and is transformed in the very fact of its incumbency.

Proceeding from this more “poststructural” conceptualization of hybridity, we can conclude that even the so-called colonially indentured process of identification—and the literature that this “initial” stage engendered—is hybrid, and therefore, potentially subversive. Moreover, the distinction between the organic and blatant forms of linguistic “creolization” may need to be rethought as well, for as deployed—as used—by non-native writers, English in the colonies and neocolonies is necessarily, from the very beginning, a hybrid form of English, and thus, a kind of “creole.” It’s very interesting to note, for instance, that before Filipino poets in English turned to the vast and more obvious postcolonial affordances of free verse, their attempts at metered English poetic forms—like, for example, the Shakespearean sonnet—had been characterized by the failure to exhaustively sustain the accentual-syllabic

measure, probably because accent or stress, being highly peculiar to specific locales, is a practically non-transferable cultural trait. Thus, despite the preponderance of Western referents in our early anglophone poems' representational "contents," the forms they were immured in nonetheless already revealed a palpably different, mockingly mimicking, and postcolonially hybrid quality. What's interesting is that we need only modulate or "adjust," just a little, the angle from which we read—or, shifting to a more auditory analogy, we need only prick up our ears and keen our hearing a little more attentively—and the bulk of our literature in English indeed starts looking (and sounding) like one strange and opulent production shrill with the mocking gestures of theatrical mimes.

All this stems from the fact that, once situated, no colonial imposition, no imported concept, no foreign knowledge or cultural practice, ever stays self-identical or absolute. And the curious thing is that none of this needs to be meant or schemed by anyone at all: given the transcultural quality of colonial (and postcolonial) life, hybridity just is.

Consequently, in our case, postcolonial criticism may be seen as an interpretive project that seeks to surface not only the willful resistances and dissidences, but also the "critical difference," the irreducible specificity—needless to say, the alterity—implicit in even the most "universal-sounding" postcolonial writings. Given the homogenizing project of imperialism on one hand, and the predictable anticolonial recourse to exotic otherness on the other, this subtle self-difference or specificity may now be recognized not merely as evidence of multicultural diversity in postcolonial societies, but as forms of interpretive demurrals, instances of "textual subversion."

"DEAD STARS (AND STRIPES)": A POSTCOLONIAL READING

In the case of Philippine literature in English, postcolonial inquiry will conceivably involve the performance of critical readings that will particularize its seemingly humanist and thus universalist expressions and aspirations. Only in this manner can Filipino anglophone writers and their texts be usefully situated within the radical translations and mistranslations, the multiple reifications, the agonistic negotiations, recontextualizations and appropriations, needless to say the hybridity and/or alterity that constitutes the colonial and/or postcolonial world. Thus, the task of the postcolonial literature classroom is to propose a method of literary interpretation that is, first and foremost, a contextual and culture-sensitive activity, in which we

the "interpreters" need to self-consciously situate the text we are reading within the "discursive power field"—the history and the sociality—that the text simultaneously enables and is enabled by.

This is another way of saying that the task of postcolonial criticism is nothing if not a deconstructive one, for it will seek to explain the silences and opacities of the text—to present its absences, to say what it doesn't quite say, to articulate the network of meanings it presumes and is presumed by. Once again, this mainly implies a form of critical elucidation that seeks to discover the text's repressed alterity, and particularize the seemingly universal meanings encoded therein. Using this critical approach, we may therefore say that no matter how American-sounding and "universal" a Filipino text—for instance, Benitez's famous story, "Dead Stars" (1-17)—may be, the fact of the matter is that it was not an American but a Filipino writer who wrote it. And while ascertaining the representational links between this story's seemingly Western words and sounds and its author's specific experience or situation in the Philippines may prove more difficult than it would be had its text 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 criticism does not seek to determine whether a representation is original or merely imitative, or whether it is "truly anticolonial" (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" literature 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 nativist/nationalist query presents itself: Why bother to "recuperate," particularize, and "politicize" our universal-sounding works in English anyway? Why insist on recovering this form of colonially imbricated and highly dissimulated alterity? 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 literary and creative utterances in whatever language to become fettered to a discomfited and 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 literary texts are finally, unapologetically, inalienably ours.

And so, these complications aside, how exactly does one uncover the difficult otherness behind—how exactly does one deconstruct—Benitez's "Dead Stars"? In her acclaimed study of Filipino literature, Caroline Sy Hau, provides us an intriguing clue: she notes that the problem of decolonization and freedom has primarily been understood, in the context of Philippine nationalist pedagogy, as a problem of ascertaining the absolute "truth" before the "correct" action can be taken, a cognitive and ethical project which is obviously bound to fail because what it seeks is transcendence from all "historical and material conditions of knowledge and action"(250-54). Certainly, this manner of framing the nationalist problem of consciousness is likewise premised on essentialist (need we say, humanistic) notions of a transcendental Filipino agency—the embodiment of knowledge and an ethical "best self," who is presumed to be capable of successfully carrying out such a task.

Hence our task begins by resisting the lure of transcendental reading by precisely spelling out the dominant humanistic interpretation of this classic Philippine story, even if such an interpretation is offered on supposedly nationalist grounds: namely, that it is essentially a love story, a sad and wistful one at that, which involves the amorous triangle of the self-conscious, fair-skinned, stiff, and city-bred Esperanza and the dusky, vital, and "spirited" country-girl Julia Salas, vying for the affection of the indecisive and temperamentally "cool" lawyer-in-training, Alfredo Salazar. This reading will probably dwell a little on the setting—a middle-class neighborhood in Manila sometime during the period of the Philippine Commonwealth, a respectable parish church, a seaside coconut plantation, a backward lakeside town—all charmingly captured by the writer using quaint expressions (most memorably, "neighboring"), and occasional dabs of local color. And then, finally, the standard humanist reading will dilate upon the title's surprisingly scientific and boldly universal metaphor—"dead stars"—that wonderfully encapsulates the story's insight concerning the primordial conflict between illusion and reality, as well as the plaintive regret that haunts us when we realize too late that our life, and our love, have implacably passed us by.

A postcolonial reading of this story begins by moving away from such a timeless and placeless interpretation of a putatively timeless and placeless story. Rather than indulge in a universal meditation on the human condition, a postcolonial

reading—as we already mentioned—will seek to "ground" the text in the specific historical and cultural determinations that engendered it. The central enigma in the story is Alfredo, who is undoubtedly its main character (since this is a third-person omniscient narration, deciding on whose story it is does require this kind of elucidation). In particular, we cannot help but be interested in the obvious question of his mysterious indecisiveness, a trait that is certainly not merely incidental or ornamental to his being, for indeed, this is the very reason this story is the kind of story that it is.

The text yields several possible answers, and yet none of them entirely satisfies. Going by the story's own portrayal, we can probably describe Alfredo as calm and collected, somewhat reptilian, unhurried, lax, laid back, languid, bloodless, wan, endlessly boring, timid, Apollonian, spineless, proper to a fault, and in the words of the story itself, "thin-faced," "dreamy-eyed," "tall and slender," "indolent," "easy," "thin-blooded," "[hardly] masculine," and "graceful." Alternatively, the story hints that not only is Alfredo a man who is feeling older than his age; he also is, despite his chronological maturity, strangely incapable of honest self-reckoning, of speaking his own "inmost" mind—as we can see from the way he can't quite unbosom his feelings to Julia, or even just describe to her the dilemma he is currently in (he can only articulate it as a nonspecific conflict between "doing what one wants," and "doing what one has to do"). And yet, it's quite possible that the story does explain the mysterious "affliction" that is Alfredo's reticent timidity, and we may see a glimpse of it in that very interesting "moment" between Alfredo and Julia, on the afternoon that they take an excursion to that breezy little coconut plantation situated beside a postcard-pretty beach (Benitez 13):

> "I should like to see your home town."
> "There is nothing to see—little crooked streets, yunut roofs with ferns growing on them, and sometimes squashes."
> That was the background. It made her seem less detached, less unrelated, yet withal more distant, as if that background claimed her and excluded him.
> "Nothing? There is you."
> "Oh, me? But I am here."
> "I will not go, of course, until you are there."
> "Will you come? You will find it dull. There isn't even one American there!"
> "Well—Americans are rather essential to my entertainment."
> She laughed.

This, to me, is the most interesting part in Benitez's story. Here, Julia tells Alfredo that he wouldn't like her hometown (going by the description, most likely, Sta. Cruz, Laguna) because "there isn't even a single American" residing in it. As we also heard, to this frank and humble statement Alfredo's pithy—because unexpectedly humorous—retort is that, yes, Americans are "essential to [his] entertainment."

With this single, often overlooked exchange, the text of Benitez's famous story—popularly acknowledged as our anglophone fiction's inaugural text—shatters the illusion of universalist placelessness that the dominant humanist interpretation of this story proffers, and pinions its world smack dab in the Philippines's American colonial period, a "sanitized" and propagandistic glimpse of which we may behold from that short, American-made filmic travelogue, *Manila: Castilian Memoirs*, produced sometime in the 1930s, and available for public viewing on YouTube.[11] (This is a clip that I would normally allow my students to watch as a preparation for the teaching of the early "apprentice" years of Philippine literature in English.)

What this unobtrusive conversation between Alfredo and Julia reminds us is this: Americans in their newly acquired territory in the Far East were everywhere the boss—they were everywhere the "alpha male" in the "American Manila," indeed in the entire Philippines, of Benitez's famous story.[12] This was that exceptional period in Philippine history when Filipino men, even the most educated and economically well off, weren't and indeed couldn't be fully virile or potent, as Alfredo arguably isn't, afflicted as he mysteriously is by some kind of indecisiveness and what can only be called a form of colonial malaise, which is comparable to but finally different from the "sexual lassitude" suffered by European modernism's famous "Alfred"—T. S. Eliot's effete, spiritually exhausted, erotically timid, somewhat whiny, balding, and sexually infantile Prufrock, whose rambling, willfully distracted, yet famously amorous speech I typically allow my students to actually hear, by playing for them the poet's own memorable audio recording of this piece.[13]

Why bring up Eliot at all? Does postcolonialism have anything to do with him, or at least with the modernism of which he was a most illustrious figure? Well, strangely enough, as it turns out, it does, and not just in one way. First, as surprisingly revealed by the work of Tatsushi Narita (523-25), in 1898, the 10-year-old Eliot took an interest in the newly independent Philippines, whose flag he even clumsily drew, for an editorial cartoon of his mock periodical, *The Fireside*. And second—still according to Narita's research—Eliot as a 16-year-old more than once visited in 1904 the Igorot village in the Philippine exhibition of the St. Louis World Fair, and this experience inspired him to write the story "The Man Who Was King," which later

got published in the school magazine of Smith Academy, St. Louis Missouri. And third, and most importantly, postcolonial studies does after all tell us that modernism was, in Europe, "a major act of cultural self-definition" in the face of the threat of the Empire's disintegration, its impending loss of territories brought about by the emergent nationalisms and decolonizing movements that were flaring up in the colonies. Thus, the artistic ensemble of modernism was, in many ways, a re-assembling of the Empire's "jeopardized geography," which resulted in the production and incorporation of "primitive" images as well as the adoption of alter/native, nonlinear structures in the arts. The purpose of this ensemble wasn't so much a critique as a "renovation of bourgeois ideology," and this can be proven by the fact that, very quickly after its inception, modernism moved from the fringes to the center of European modernity, and became institutionalized as the European way of life.[14]

What's interesting is that when Third World artists started appropriating the liberating possibilities of an "international, oppositional, and revolutionary modernism" sometime in the early twentieth century, they were in fact tapping into a movement their own histories and "indigenous traditions" had helped invigorate and propel. Inasmuch as European modernism is intimately implicated in the systematic pillage and catalogue of non-European cultures by imperial power, modernism's importation into and "adaptation" by the Third World describes what may be called an ironic and rather unfortunate repatriation. Ultimately, the center of gravity of modernism is the Western bourgeois subject, whose consciousness has sought to accumulate, assimilate, and reify through aesthetic stylization the various contradictory realities and objects of European imperial culture—realities and objects that were literally "captured," documented, and inventoried from the Third World and deposited into the imperial Archive, meaning to say, Europe's many libraries and museums. Thus, we may conclude that "modernism is inconceivable without the Archive"—an Archive that was systematically assembled through the violent and unequal relations of colonialism (Sangari 83).

And so, we see that the difference between Alfredo Salazar and Alfred Prufrock is nothing if not power itself. While Eliot's poetic persona arguably represents Europe's beleaguered and diminished male subjectivity, we must remember that the reason for this psychic diminishment, as I earlier mentioned, was the unstoppable disintegration of Europe's empires during the advent years of the twentieth century. According to postcolonial theory, modernism itself was the aesthetic gesture, by Europe's artists, to acknowledge as well as address the cultural fragmentation of their world, something they believed they could do precisely because they had

seen evidence of alternative cultures and "worlds" in Europe's various archives and museums, where colonialism's plunder of artifacts and lives from the colonies was stored and exhibited.

Alfredo Salazar's timidity (that is to say, his famous indecisiveness and *katorpehan*) is, by contrast, a simpler thing to explain: it is nothing if not the subjugation of native agency by the colonizers' initially brutish but finally hegemonic exercise of force. (At this point of the discussion, I usually tell my students to call to mind, once again, the specter of all those marching American soldiers falling into formation and parading on the grounds of the Fort Santiago in the film clip we just saw. Most of us may have forgotten already, but yes: Filipinos resisted and were brutally conquered and subdued by the United States of America during the bitterly fought but largely unlamented Filipino-American War of 1899-1902, during which nearly half a million natives, combatants and civilians, children and adults, men and women alike, perished.)[15]

I know what you may be thinking: is it possible that Benitez, writing in 1925, had in fact read Eliot's strange and memorable love song, first published in 1915,[16] from which she possibly borrowed not only the name but also the "essential character" of her patently hybrid story's emasculated and spiritless Alfredo? My answer to this historical riddle is: I wouldn't put it past her. We must remember that Benitez was one of the first Filipino graduates under the American educational dispensation, and that if she could have known about and used a tidbit from Einstein's special theory of relativity[17] (which asserts that the observed independence of the speed of light on the observer's state of motion fundamentally affects the notion of simultaneity—meaning, present and past are relative and positional, in the same way that the stars that produced the fanciful twinkling lights that just now we see on clear moonless nights may have actually already expired in actuality), then it is perfectly possible that she was capable of hearing about and/or actually reading (and enjoying) Eliot's dramatic monologue about the existential castration of the "male European self" in the beginning of the twentieth century.

To end this short lesson on the "deconstructive teaching" of Philippine literature in English, I would like to say that this kind of postcolonial reading is just one out of many that I aspire to perform every time I teach Philippine literature in English. It doesn't always happen that the reading I intend and eventually carry out can be this intertextual—or even this audio-visually interesting. As I hope to have shown, however, Philippine literature in English is a literature whose otherness we need to confront, come face to face with, relate, and be responsible to, for it is an otherness

that, by virtue of the unfinished colonialism that bequeathed it, continues to constitute and determine our historical being. Indeed, we may argue that this story possibly registers this awareness on an allegorical level, as well: the story effectively thwarts and renders foolishly nostalgic and untenable the romance between the Hispanized, modern, but spiritless Alfredo with the native, earthy, and vigorous Julia precisely because such an atavistic return to origins has become literally impossible, given the interventions of colonial history.[18] As the example of Benitez's story illustrates, what we need to deconstruct, other than the literary text itself, is the dominant universalist interpretation that represses, sublimates, and renders "unconscious" the great colonial irony—that is to say, the historical "anomaly"—that underwrites all of Philippine literature in English. (In other words: even before meditating on the metaphor of dead heavenly bodies, maybe we should remember, rue, and do right by the literal and historical death of our freedom first.)

And so, to conclude: I have attempted, in this paper, to link up the philosophical and hermeneutic notion of alterity with the teaching of Philippine postcolonial literature in English, primarily as a matter of interpretation. Implicit in this endeavor is the belief that there is immense pedagogical value to be gleaned in the idea of exploring the process in which texts—as I specifically rehearsed it here, an iconic short story that is said to have inaugurated an entire literary tradition—can and should be read within the purview of an explicitly ethical project, whose primary objective is to reveal, recognize, and relate with radical difference, especially where it isn't supposed to be found (such as in the "universal-sounding" texts of our anglophone literary tradition).

As I have attempted to suggest here, while problematic as an interpretive procedure the aspirational practice of alterity as an ethics prods us to think about how otherness as difference typically gets suppressed in humanist readings of literature. To be specific: the ethical notion of alterity has encouraged me to reflect on how, as a gay teacher of local gay and/or anglophone literatures, this concern (which we can think of as Levinasian, although not exclusively so) can be pursued—as well as advocated—by engaging in antihomophobic and postcolonialist readings of seemingly universal literary texts, especially as they have been written by Filipinos. In describing what such readings are about, and what they might entail, I have explored in this paper some of the ways in which deconstruction can be used as a method to carry out this interest (in uncovering textual alterity). I have also examined the idea that Philippine literature in English is postcolonial by its very nature, and that as such it bears a necessary otherness in relation to the colonialism that made it possible. This is an otherness that presents itself as proximally "same": the reason it is difficult to

detect it is that it lends itself easily to humanist habits of reading, being hybrid rather than exotically different. The multiple translations and hybrid moments that characterize this literature are indexical precisely of this suppressed alterity, as my deconstructive reading of a famous text coming from the Philippine anglophone tradition has hopefully shown.

Finally, recurring to a previous point I made earlier on, allow to me assert, once more, that my own subjective position as a stubbornly "queer" (that is, simultaneously gay and strange) teacher does not strike me as a pedagogical requisite. But then again, as this paper has attempted to articulate—and as I hope to have demonstrated, using Benitez's story as a "special" case in point—an interpretive preference for difference and contrariety, especially in the literature classroom, may, in the end, redound to the same kind of strategy, and ironically lead to the same "ethical" result: that rare and blessed blossoming of wisdom, whose other name—Levinas might just as well have deduced—is compassion.[19]

ENDNOTES

[1] A draft of this paper was presented by the author as the plenary lecture of the Carolina U. Garcia Centennial Conference on the Teaching of Literature, 18 November 2009, University of Santo Tomas.

[2] For this section on Levinasian alterity, I draw mostly from Zhou,13-19.

[3] While critiques of Levinas' work on the ethics of alterity (for example, Treanor's) point out its transcendentalism—for instance, that it completely overlooks empirical observations and valorizes the philosophical position coming out of the Judeo-Christian (Western) metaphysical tradition—as the work of Zhou illustrates it can in fact lend itself to specific cultural situations, especially those that Westernization has affected, often deleteriously. See Treanor, 4-10.

[4] The series, *Ladlad: An Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing*, edited by myself and Danton Remoto, and published by Anvil Publishing, had a total of three volumes, which came out in 1994, 1996, and 2003, respectively.

[5] A useful review of these key poststructuralist ideas may be found in Barry, 145-60.

[6] In particular, I refer here to: Bill Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

[7] This Rushdie quote may be found in Ramazani, 8.

[8] This three-fold model was first proposed by Michel Pecheux in relation to the "collusion/resistance" question of language and ideology. See Pecheux.

[9] The very last book that Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote in English was not a book of fiction, but rather a compilation of critical essays, titled *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*.

[10] For more on this point, see my *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics: Essays and Critiques,* 60-105.

[11] The clip's url is: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOI6rc38Qic (accessed in July 12, 2009). When I show it to my students, I point out that Esperanza probably looks like one of the "beautiful Spanish mestizas" in this clip, and that her horror at the scandalous indiscretion of her family's middle-aged maid, Calixta, probably derives from the same middle-class sense of moral shame that necessitated the construction of that interesting "deposit box" for unwanted babies at the old Hospicio de San Jose.

[12] The same video clip includes an impressive footage of the "31st American infantry parading on the field" just outside the old Intramuros. Hence, this short documentary, made for propagandistic purposes in the early 1930s, filmically demonstrates the fact that the Philippines was indeed colonially annexed by the United States (many present-day Filipino students do need to be told this, and to think more about it, I have found).

[13] Yet again, YouTube proves to be an invaluable tool, in this regard. Eliot's own reading of his famous poem may be found in http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAO3QTU4PzY (accessed September 9, 2012).

[14] For a cogent summary of the postcolonial argument concerning modernism, see Kumkum Sangari, "The Politics of the Possible," in *Cultural Critique 7*: 157-86.

[15] The American General Franklin Bell himself estimated that around a sixth of the population of Luzon died as a consequence of the American colonial government's unrelenting military campaigns against the Filipino revolutionaries. See Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited* (Quezon City: Tala Publishing Services, 1975), 244-45.

[16] This famous poem was first published in the June 1915 issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. A few years later, Eliot included it as part of a twelve-poem chapbook. See Eliot, 2-6.

[17] Albert Einstein's paper presenting the claims of this theory was first published in 1905, under the title "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies." For a summary of this as well as subsequent theorizings—by Einstein and other physicists—see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special_theory_of_relativity (accessed 20 July 2009).

[18] This allegorical reading—that equates the character of Alfredo with the crisis and transition of a multiply colonized Philippines caught between the traditional and native past (Julia) and the modern and Americanized present (Esperanza)— is the same reading that Jennifer M. McMahon offers toward the end of her book, *Dead Stars: American and Philippine Literary Perspectives on the American Colonization of the Philippines* (2011). This broadly symbolic reading (87-97) does not, however, perform the kind of specifying interpretation that I have offered here, that links up the crucial question of Alfredo's indecisiveness with the colonial emasculation of native agency as well as with the modernist intersectionality, represented most trenchantly by Eliot's early work and the aesthetic-defining poem which quite possibly gave this memorable character his name.

[19] I must insist, compassion (meaning ,"to suffer with"), and not love, which as an affect and an ethics tends to be—as Barthes so memorably taught us—entirely solipsistic and self-referential, in the beginning as in the end. See Barthes.

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