

The Experiment of the Tropics: Poems by Lawrence Lacambra Ypil**Christian Jil R. Benitez**

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If blurbs are to be trusted, the promise of *The Experiment of the Tropics* is rather rousing: the back cover flaunts the book's poetic process, "braiding the music of anthropology with the intimacy of the lyric," as the poet "explores history's archives and excavates a city, both real and imagined..." to arrive at "a meditation on the nature of a city and its longing, and the starting capacity of poetry to cut into the violent but redemptive parts of history." Which is to say: the book is an attempt to interrogate history, particularly that of urban space, most particular in its critical choice of the poem as a mode of inquiry—a feat which is not uncommon for contemporary Filipino poetry in English, but whose forms of realizations are, of course, arguable.¹

Lawrence Ypil's *The Experiment of the Tropics* renders such a possibility of the historiographic in the poetic through a recourse to his hometown of Cebu in its early twentieth century state as captured by photographs found in the archives of the Cebuano Studies Center at the University of San Carlos. Such particularity of material which serves as Ypil's source for his ekphrasis immediately implicates his poetry in a vaster historiographic endeavor: that of the nationalist project, all the more acute in accounting for spaces outside Metro Manila, given the present political climate. However, instead of merely utilizing the urbanity as rehearsed by the Cebuano to let poems and personas come up and out as to play the identity politics rampant in contemporary Filipino poetry in English,² Ypil turns to a time not of his own, "the early part of the US occupation of the Philippines (1900–1946)" (64) and seizes its perceived aleatory quality from Ypil's present as the poetic opportunity to possibly rewrite the history of American colonial history in the Philippines from the specific vantage point of Cebu.

"The trouble with a photograph," Ypil writes in a poem, "is that there is always a somewhere-else story" (46). And because his poetics revels in this catastrophic multitude, the result is a language that can only be dissonant, as the articulation

of being a subject to coloniality is resisted to be tempered anymore. But this does not simply mean exotic inclusions among the poetic lines of names of tropical fruits and other island souvenirs in italics; instead, Ypil turns to a language that is most plain that one must be wary of its seeming subservience. An instance: “A Game Occurs” is a poem where Ypil describes the photograph found halfway through the book, which features a group of young Filipino boys circling and stooping over an object covered by their shadows (28). This unidentifiable quality of the said object, its very uncertainty, is what permits Ypil the most opportune time—that of leisure, whose roots and ends in his poem are claimed to be the randomness of chances themselves: “Watch the boys look first at the ball, and then at each other,” Ypil instructs, only to ask, “Who’ll kick the ball? Where is the goal? Who is the captain of the team?” (15)

Ypil’s language is noticeably even, almost scientific, a clear departure from his earlier lyrical attempts.³ However, as much as this language can be regarded as what delivers the anthropologic in Ypil’s writings, it must also be cherished for its ironic poeticity: for what manner can better render the vestiges of American colonialism through Filipino poetry written in the language of the same colonizers than through a mode that embodies the very alienation inevitable to the poet in relation to his poetry and to the very language by which he chooses to deploy it? In the first of the poems titled “The Nature of a City,” Ypil renders urban life most palpable not only through his clinical catalog but also as language that is as hollow as the routinely timed:

The nature of a city depends on the direction its people are moving. In the morning, *towards*. By evening, *away*. The wealth of a city depends on the density of this movement and its speed. There is conflicting evidence to suggest that the slow pace of traffic moving away from the center of the city at six in the afternoon, past the pharmacy at the corner into the wide industrial roads that cut through the fields of fallow over six small bridges and six thin rivers into the smaller and smaller towns until one gets to a house with the light left on in the kitchen is the best indicator of a city’s development or demise. It takes bringing something into the heart of a city, then back out into its tributaries, to raise the price of one’s possessions. (12)

Such handling of language, however, can only double its estrangement, especially when deployed in lineated verse that festers across the entire collection, with the white spaces scattered across the page making concrete the gap between the colonial language and the colonized subject. As such, the poet stakes on lineation as a strategy most necessary, a disruption that occurs not merely to dislodge

NOTES

1. A foremost example would be, of course, Charlie Samuya Veric's *Histories* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015), whose titular concern is embodied in the book's "vernacular poetics," that is, "poetry that highlights the common, the ordinary." Another example would be Conchitina Cruz's *There is no emergency* (Youth & Beauty Brigade, 2015), included in her dissertation as its creative component on her critical study of the formalist tradition in Filipino poetry in English, particularly to its orientation to the autonomy of art. Reading through these two collections, one can intuit the range of interpretations in contemporary Filipino poetry in English as to how poetry can be performed to be historiographic: while Veric rather vulgarly poeticizes on the everyday—regressing, it must be noted, to the lyrical mode that can be arguably likened to poetics bearing the same formalistic markings of the institutions Veric claims to critique (see Benitez 2018)—Cruz exaggerates the seeming autonomy of poetry from the everyday, as to ironically render poems that inevitably record their historicity, being "turned into an object, a product, and a commodity to be circulated" in the current literary economy (Cruz 16).
2. Compare to Mookie Katigbak-Lacuesta's *Hush Harbor* (University of Sto. Tomas Publishing House, 2018), which features poems that perform ekphrasis through personification. When asked regarding the relation of her poetry to other art forms, Katigbak-Lacuesta notes that in her ekphrastic poems, "[she] was taking on the role of various personas—Juan Luna, Fernando Amorsolo, even Carlos Bulosan and Jose Garcia Villa; all of them were artists, some of them were writers—each one contributed to the Filipino artistic experience whether as ilustrado or diaspora writer. At the time I was writing it, I was looking for an authentic Filipino-ness—I kept asking myself, 'what is the true Filipino story?'—and these poems and personas came up and out" (Pascual).
3. In his foreword for Ypil's debut poetry collection, Simeon Dumdum Jr. notes Ypil's attention to the aural: "[T]he first poem, 'The Discovery of Landscape,' can jump into any anthology, no matter the caption, and come out of the jostle a winner. It has subtle rhythm, or music, if you like ('The risk of the big wish'). The words are so set as to become gems, and such is their light that, in describing birds, for instance, they have an all but mathematical accuracy in denoting both the birds' number and location ('Clear measure / Of the flock on the far tip')" (ix).

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