Strange Technology: Fictocriticism and the Cyborg

Michaela Atienza

Michaela Atienza studied Anglo-American Literature at the University of the Philippines and English Literature at the University of Warwick. She teaches British Literature with the Department of English and Comparative Literature in UP Diliman. In addition to her work on fictocriticism, she also writes poetry and short fiction, and has been published in Expeditions *(2007),* Verge: The Unknowable *(2011), and the* Journal of English Studies and Comparative Literature *(June 2010).*

The Possibilities and Problems of a New Approach

Helen Flavell, who wrote her dissertation on the emergence of fictocriticism in Australia and Canada, begins her discussion with an apology:

> Since my thesis is not written ficto-critically the inconsistency suggested in writing about such a practice whilst remaining within normative academic writing convention is highlighted. … The methodology adopted by other studies of ficto-criticism is probably more consistent with ficto-critical discourse since the use of fictional techniques tends to keep the meaning of text much more open. … Nevertheless, there is a need for the kind of critical intervention into the ficto-critical practice

found here due to the dominance of certain discourses around the form. (6)

I speak through Flavell not only because I need to make the same apology (I present samples of my own fictocritical writing only to dissect them in the convention style), but because we are both exploring a potentially powerful mode of writing from within academic contexts: the doctoral dissertation in Flavell's case and the tenure lecture in mine. Anne Brewster takes this further and writes that "it is unproductive to discuss [fictocriticism] in purely literary terms or to seek to define it according to a specific style of aesthetics. The indeterminacy of the term is in part due to the fact that it precisely cannot be characterised by a particular set of stylistic features" (29). Brewster's anti-definition sets up fictocriticism as a complex term that stubbornly resists being theorized or described even as it struggles to find footholds in traditional venues, a problem I have addressed by defining fictocriticism anyway. I do this, however, fully aware that it is strange territory, and that it may not want – or need – to be mapped.

As its name suggests, fictocriticism is writing that combines the conventions of fiction and criticism. According to Anna Gibbs, it is writing that "uses fictional and poetic strategies to stage theoretical questions" (309), while Stephen Muecke describes it as "an experimental genre of writing" that "makes an argument with storytelling or poetry as its vehicle" (qtd. in Cross).

Although fictocriticism has enjoyed considerable popularity in Australia, gaining traction within the Australian academe in the 90s, it originated in Canada.[1] According to Flavell, the term first appeared in a 1986 article by Bruce Grenville, referencing the work of Canadian theorist and visual arts scholar Jeanne Randolph. Hoping to

challenge the conventions and binary strains of traditional art criticism, Randolph employed unexpected techniques in her work, sometimes to rather startling ends. For instance, instead of writing a critical essay in response to Sheila Ayearst's 1990 exhibit, *Verge*, Randolph surprised readers with a recipe for mincemeat in order to "diminish or reduce the act of art criticism to the feminised world of cooking" (Flavell 197-98).

In her article, "Writing and the Flesh of Others," Gibbs traces the origins of fictocriticism back to the work of the French feminists, including Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig, who "attempted both to theorise and to dramatise" women's experience in an attempt to subvert more dominant modes. Gibbs explains that it "was initially conceived as a strategic and site-specific intervention into a particular set of problems surrounding what it meant to be a woman writing within genres and modes shaped mostly by men" (309). Gibbs thus establishes historical ties to *écriture feminine* and draws on its grammar to flesh out fictocriticism, setting it squarely within a tradition engaged in writing that deviated from or directly challenged what were perceived to be patriarchal conventions. In doing so, she promotes it as a transgressive mode and as a means of intervention. However, Flavell presents fictocriticism as capable of enacting much more than a gendered resistance to certain modes of writing. Instead, she discusses its potential as a revolutionary mode which can bring about "not just the unraveling of meaning and the unified subject but the positive dynamic production and connection of new meanings and subjectivities" (40).

Meanwhile, Brewster sees the challenge posed by fictocriticism to meaning and authority as symptomatic of a particular historical moment: "In a climate of contestation with and negotiation of the histories we have inherited but

which no longer make sense to many of us or articulate our trajectories within and outside the academy, we have come to reject the fictions of completeness and resolution that academic discourses often rehearse" (30). Even more explicitly, Amanda Nettelbeck places fictocriticism "at the intersection of literature and postmodernism" (3), setting it up as the logical product of "the movement, in the cultural criticism of the last thirty years or so, towards something that is provisional in form, and that is avowedly self-conscious about the nature of textuality and authorship" (1). To lash fictocriticism to "feminist" or "postmodernist" labels, however, is to risk negating its project of "open-endedness, multivocality and non-linearity" (Brewster 30) and reducing the "diverse range of experimental ficto-critical forms" (Flavell 135).

There is also some danger in focusing only on its transgressive potential. As such, I would like to explore the deliberate positioning of fictocriticism by several of its proponents as a writing *against* academic or critical convention, which is in turn painted in a variety of strokes. Schlunke and Brewster suggest that there may be an "underlying irritation" with such conventions (393), citing evidence from Kristen Davis, who writes "You wanted an abstract, a paper, a dissertation, a publishable work. I got stuck on the first line" (qtd. in Schlunke and Brewster 393). Gibbs approaches this transgression in a manner more suited to academic writing, linking fictocriticism to "the invention of ways of writing that intervened in the more or less dispassionate, distancing, putatively objective forms of critical and theoretical writings" (309).

In "Reflections on Academic Discourse," Peter Elbow discusses several stylistic conventions of the academic essay which help create "an intellectual stance of disinterested objectivity" (144-45). Elbow detects "a certain

rubber-gloved quality" in much academic writing and dredges up what is normally repressed in supposedly "author-evacuated" [2] academic texts: "that discourse is coming from a subject with personal interests, concerns, and uncertainties (even professional academics sometimes feel uncertain)" (141). Fictocriticism can collapse this remoteness or critical distance by acknowledging these "personal interests, concerns, and uncertainties." It is capable of not merely reversing the "evacuation" of the author, but playing up, performing, or baring all the uncomfortable detail that this process entails:

> The personal voice is used. It is intensity, performance, and shifting temporalities; a mode which stages the embodied imperatives of sociality, of the relationship between writer, text and audience. "I look at my watch. I am sitting in the first carriage. I often write in a mode. I want to show." This plethora of "I"s. ... These are unreliable "I"s. They are calls to acknowledge a position – white, mortgagee, academic, artist. (Schlunke and Brewster 394)

This reversal undercuts the dominance of academic writing in another way. Academic texts exhibit a considerable degree of mastery over their subject matter. This manifests in "the omnipotent academic voice from on high which presents itself as objective and masterful, and which excludes – in the process – life and experience" (Flavell 24). However, this mastery is seen by several fictocritical writers as illusionary, part of a "fantasy of autonomy and control" (Ross qtd. in Flavell 162). Brewster, too, addresses "the fictionality of their narratives of knowledge and the myths of authority and hierarchy which these knowledges rehearse" (29). The revolutionary power of fictocriticism seems to have as much to do with breaking

down this fantasy as it does with providing new modes of expression.

To this end, fictocriticism employs distinctive narrative voices, as well as points of view not typically found in academic criticism. In his essay "The Fall," Stephen Muecke creates a dialogue between first and second person in order to shed light on the contrast between concept and percept drawn by Gilles Deleuze:

> Perceptions are so flimsy, and memory so unreliable. Can I piece together your face, in my mind? It is just a flash, then gone. ... I have rung and said this cannot go on, we will meet, one last time .... We will have a picnic in the Botanic Gardens. I will greet you, and as you offer your face for the cheek-kisses my gaze will insist, and then our kiss will bury itself in the storm of sensations I was talking about. Concept/percept, who cares? (109-110)

Gibbs points out that such experimentation enables the writer to "eschew omniscient modes of narration and 'grand narratives' in favor of first-person or multiple partial perspectives and an emphasis on local and singular stories and fragmented forms" (309-310). Fictocriticism is thus able to destabilize the positions of both reader and writer, encouraging them to question the ways that knowledge is formed, and meaning made. Such strategies help break down the distance between primary and secondary texts, which Flavell suggests is a "binary division on which academic discourse relies" (14).

Several fictocritical pieces – Brewster's "The Poetics of Memory" and Zoe Sofia's "Dr. Zeo's Artrageous A-Z of Technosex," for instance – also rely heavily on postmodern techniques such as collage and fragmentation, sometimes

manifesting in abrupt shifts in scene, tone, or topic. "In their discontinuities they point to different models of narrativity ... and allow us to exist in a space of debate and dialogue without foreclosing on the struggle for meaning and without striving for taxonomic closure" (Brewster 30). Some fictocritical texts perform the very themes that they address, allowing the reader to experience the text rather than simply be fed ideas. In "Textual Spaces," for instance, Muecke plays with typography: "The two columns of text, the differing 'voices' with their typographically literal 'in-between space' refuses the reader 'the possibility and solace of producing a fully enlightened and imperialist subject' " (qtd. in Kerr 117). In "The Erotics of Gossip," Hazel Smith draws from articles on legal issues surrounding gossip, collaging and dramatizing these to create a courtroom parody in which a Mary Gossip stands accused: "My approach to writing was discontinuous and mixed genre, and I cross-cut continuously from narrative to exposition, to speech, to poem. ... I juxtaposed multiple addressers and addressees, across time and space, including – most pervasively – the voyeuristic listener, to convey the inter-subjective and dialogic process of gossip" (407).

Fictocriticism also makes use of imagery and metaphor. In "Carrying the Song," Sue Gillet writes: "Mute, tongue-tied, voices force themselves against the pores of my skin, will their opaque densities into elegant, arrow-smooth wisps seeking a route out of this heavy body" (146). Gillet uses imagery to evoke emotion, strengthening her discussion of femininity and empowerment in Jane Campion's film *The Piano*. The fictocritical text may also rope in characters to present or dramatize certain points. Studying the anxiety of influence in the work of Katharine Burdekin and Philip K. Dick, Lucy Sussex imagines an encounter between the two writers: "the dramatic possibilities of a meeting between Burdekin and Dick could

not be explored in the medium of social realism" (296). In Sussex's essay, "Kay" and "Phil" meet and wander into a scene from Burdekin's *Swastika Night*: "to experience her book [they] have to enter a fictional world" (298).

Scholarly conventions such as citation are often employed alongside poetic or descriptive language, either through footnotes and block quotations, or using more informal signal phrases. This is another means of diminishing the remoteness of critical texts. Muecke, for instance, refers to Deleuze by quoting a friend: "You refer me to a website: Deleuze on Spinoza, his 1978 lecture: 'Sadness will be any passion whatsoever which involves a diminution of my power of acting ....' Carry that idea over into writing, you say, and we will always find a way to unblock creative flows" (109). Later on, Muecke's references become even more intimate: "Deleuze is impatient with people who believe they can make a novel out of everyday perceptions" (109).

Gibbs points out that "the writer's subjective relation to the problem at hand is often explicitly discussed and anecdotes ... are frequently used to stage the question under investigation" (310). Because it shares a singular, personal experience, rather than stating a general truth, the anecdote becomes an especially useful tool to enrich analysis: "one common effect of this was the collapsing of the 'detached' and all-knowing subject *into* the text, so that his (or your) performance as writer includes dealing with a problem all contemporary writers must face: *how the hell did I get here*?" (Muecke 108). By focusing on the singular and allowing for "moments of weakness, failure and doubt," fictocriticism assumes the impossibility of capturing the complexity of experiences or social phenomena in general or definitive terms, and instead hints at this complexity by looking at parts or aspects, rather than the whole (Flavell 30-31). It is

capable of skirting definition and exploring meanings rather than trying to pin them down, of staging an engagement with, rather than a "mastering of" these local texts, a move which bell hooks sees as countering the imperialist attitudes driving much criticism: "By calling on the reader to enter realms of the unknown with no will to colonize or posses, critical fictions offer alternatives to an imperialist paradigm which constructs the text as territory to be conquered, taken over, irrevocably altered" (qtd. in Flavell 80). Such claims play up fictocriticism's treatment of texts as being less tyrannical than that enacted by conventional discourse. In fact Brewster, borrowing from Muecke, exploits its positioning as a non-normative writing practice and plays it up as "undisciplined" (29). Fictocriticism has thus been established as having "revolutionary" potential that is meant to address, challenge, or deviate from a dominant tradition of academic writing.

I see the appeal of fictocriticism as renegade writing, or as writing that departs from prevailing modes that can indeed be difficult or alienating. I am interested in how the objectivity and supposed mastery of academic writing can be undercut or undermined, and I am intrigued by the prospect of writing that posits provisional knowledge instead of definitive truths or claims. However, I want to avoid falling into the trap of binary thinking that Jeanne Randolph was trying to escape in the first place. I would like to frame fictocriticism in more positive terms, focusing not simply on the ways it deviates from the academic writing tradition (which I hope to exploit as much as question), but on its fusion with another form of writing. The impetus for this project was, after all, a rather simplistic question: "What if my dissertation could make people laugh, or cry, or feel something?" This is not to say that I succeeded, only that my research was driven by a creative impulse as well as a

critical one. It is Amanda Nettelbeck who best encapsulates the potential of such a convergence:

> Fictocriticism might most usefully be defined as hybridized writing that moves between the poles of fiction ("invention"/"speculation") and criticism ("deduction"/"explication"), of subjectivity ("interiority") and objectivity ("exteriority"). It is writing that brings the "creative" and the "critical" together – not simply in the sense of placing them side by side, but in the sense of mutating both, of bringing a spotlight to bear upon the known forms in order to make them "say" something else. (4)

My goal is to explore this mutation and the ways in which it might allow us to say "something else."

That fictocriticism can combine Brewster's notion of "undisciplined writing" with established academic conventions makes it an appealing approach to Philippine speculative fiction, which seems trapped in its attempts at self-definition and self-description. Discussions taking place around the genre in the Philippines have shifted from its marginalization in relation to realism, to an acknowledgement that it is slowly maturing, and even becoming sought after by both publishers and readers. In 1984, Samuel Delany called for a new framework to study science fiction, which he felt could not be read in the same way that realistic or "mundane" fiction was being read (298). There have been similar calls for new approaches and frameworks through which to study Philippine speculative fiction. As an "open-ended, multivocal, non-linear mode of writing" (Brewster 30), fictocriticism provides an opportunity to take up that challenge. I hope to explore the possibilities that fictocriticism holds for the study of Filipino speculative stories, using the case of the cyborg as a focal

point or testing ground. In this paper, I provide two samples of fictocritical writing ("The Novum" and "Getting the Machine)," as well as a brief commentary on each piece.

The Novum

The following section is an example of fictocritical writing which was conceptualized as an alternative introduction to speculative fiction.

Darko Suvin says we live in the zero world of the "empirically verifiable" (30). On the coordinate system, zero occupies an awfully small space; the point representing zero is surrounded by a vast otherness. It is difficult for some of us to stay put in such a limiting world, and it is far too easy to fall – or break – out. The slightest shift in any direction by even the weakest of speculative forces could remove us from zero and tip us into these other worlds, which stretch into infinity. Speculative stories seem to hinge on such moments of displacement. To wake one morning, for instance, to find that your left eye has been removed and replaced with a robotic model is to experience a true moment of disruption, particularly severe if the details of its manufacture are displayed rather prominently, blinking bright green in the corner of your vision, like so:

WELCOME USER.
SERIAL NO. GCQDDWWHDCPC
IN CASE OF MALFUNCTION
CONTACT BEA (632) 726-3174

These are difficult words to read, not simply because they are tiny and because they are blinking, but also because they do what they promise. Adam Roberts explains that "a piece of futuristic, extrapolated technology is most often the technological novum that distinguishes a story as SF in the

first place" (147). The term "novum" is Suvin's, who in turn borrowed it from H.G. Wells (James 20). Whoever it was that branded the "strange newness" of scenarios like this, gave it a name lovely and alien, bottling the estrangement in stories that distorted the once-familiar even as they continued to subscribe to the rules of logic and the rigor of science. Speculative fiction, though broader and more inclusive than science fiction, also thrives on this newness.

"Novum," though its implications are dawning on you rather slowly, conveniently accounts for the difference between zero and all else. Though you might insist on bridging this gap by invoking pyschosis, residual sunspots, the proverbial "bad dream," the impetus that has knocked you out of zero is clearly a piece of technology, which Roberts points to as signifying both displacement and familiarity: "SF technology – a ray-gun, a spaceship, a time-machine, a matter-transporter – provides a direct, material embodiment of alterity; and it is exactly because our lives are already surrounded by so many instances of near-miraculous technology ... that this novum speaks so directly to us" (146-147). His dynamic of strangeness and familiarity is playing itself out rather faintly in your case. There is no swelling, there is no gash across your forehead, no metallic cold. Just skin and lash twitching slightly. Your eyes feel just like your eyes; the left feels like the right has always felt. The only observable difference is that a corner of your visual field is now twitching, too, dislodging – fractionally, but with a mechanical relentlessness – windows, people, words. Roberts reads strange technology as signaling and signifying difference, but begging further study are its other consequences, which evade language. How might we read a shriek caught in the throat, the silent body with its hands prodding uselessly at its eyes, the birth of new expletives during moments of trauma, or utter silence?

Providing a direct, material embodiment of alterity, in other words, is tricky business. You have, by definition, turned into something else. You have joined a long tradition of cyborgs that have been literalizing the coming together of man and machine for quite some time, utterly reliable as potent symbols for technology's impact on human life. The cyborg is an organic body transformed by technology, and the robotic prosthesis which facilitates this change makes a most excellent novum: "This," agrees your friend Leo when you tell him about your eye later in the day, "is some advanced shit."

"It's broken though," you remind him. You tell him you think you can hear your eye clicking, and that it sounds like someone is tapping on the lid of a jar with their fingernail. You tell him about the words blinking against your quivering bedroom wall.

"What do you mean, *broken*?" Leo looks put out, but his disappointment is understandable. He does not read much science fiction, after all, and is predictably unaware of the cyborg's double-edged significance: its portent of both dissolution and annihilation, and its promise of preservation or, more controversially, enhancement (Booker 211). He has failed to recognize that the strange newness of your eye, while not necessarily painful, is eating into something. He has perhaps been taken in by that seductive "fantasy of empowerment" (Booker 211), or what Zapata refers to as a "celebration of the power of the prosthesis" (193). Leo, who has been brimming with rabid futurist excitement ever since you uttered the word "robotic," would have you call the number on the screen. But his excitement is by no means unusual. Note Chris Winter's as he talks about robotic eyes and computer chips: "This is the end of death. ... all we think, all our emotions and creative brain activity will be able to be copied on to silicon. This is immortality in the

truest sense – future generations will not die!" (qtd. in Hacking 215). These technologies focus the reader's anticipation of the future – consider Winter's palpable exhilaration, above, the spark in Leo's eyes as he asks what your new implant does, and his frustration at the fact that it seems to do nothing but blink.

Creating a Strange Newness: A few words about "The Novum"

"The Novum" was written as a modified case study, anecdote, or thought experiment, inspired by Marc Augé's airport-dweller, Pierre Dupont. It attempts to turn scholarly conventions into opportunities for narrative exploration. In this section, imagery, character, and point of view are used to enact a speculative moment which stages the intrusion of strange technology into both the body and the text. Instead of the third person, however, the use of the second person brings the reader *into* the text, heightening the sense of displacement: "this direct addressing of the reader ... sets a frame for reading and establishes a rapport, or relationship between the reader and narrator/author" (Flavell 80). The result is a dialogue between existing criticism (presented in a more traditional, seemingly distanced academic voice that analyzes the intrusion of the prosthesis into the organic body) and the unfolding of this speculative moment as experienced by a cyborg who is not equipped to deal with its own transformation. This creates a collision between worlds that mimics the dynamic between "zero" and "unreal." The shifts between self-assured objectivity on one hand, and confusion on the other, force a direct experience of "strange newness" instead of relying on a formal definition to settle matters. Instead of demonstrating complete authority, the writing of Suvin, Zapata, and Roberts, must be considered in light of a speculative

scenario existing beyond the pages of both fiction and criticism.

Earlier, I mentioned the contention fictocriticism has with "the omnipotent academic voice from on high which presents itself as objective and masterful, and which excludes – in the process – life and experience" (Flavell 24). I address this by creating an alternative to the "evacuated" analysis of the cyborg. The use of the second person becomes even more crucial in this regard, because it invites (or forces) the reader to occupy the cyborg's position, creating *within* the critical essay an embodied cyborg "you" capable of experiencing fear, confusion, or trauma, instead of an empty cyborg symbol that simply does what the critic says it is supposed to do. By documenting the immediate physical reaction of the "you," I wanted to highlight the gap between criticism and writing on cyborgs and technology, and the experience of strangeness or alterity which these attempt to explain.

More importantly, the insertion of the novum into what is partly a critical analysis renders it doubly intrusive. The robotic eye is no longer a fictional device, but an intruder in the space of the critical essay, which is expected to follow certain conventions in order to achieve objectivity, mastery, and critical distance. Helen Flavell's apology indicates how deeply these conventions and expectations are entrenched in the writing practices of those working in the academe. Because of this, even minor changes to the format – what Elbow refers to as "violations" (141) –register as significant disruptions. However, I see all this as an invitation for play and experimentation: the academic text's adherence to convention renders it a tenuous system quite easily thrown out of whack, making it an ideal "zero world." The infiltration of "evacuated" prose not by an "I" but by characters, dialogue, images, references to everyday

life, and most significantly a robotic eye, is capable of effecting an even more jarring displacement than can perhaps be achieved in fiction.

The character of Leo, meanwhile, functions as a sounding board for the "you." More crucially, he provides yet another means of viewing or processing strange technology. Like the "you," Leo cannot grasp the introduction of the novum the way the academic voice does. For instance, he sees the prosthesis as an enhancement, completely ignorant of its more complex and sinister implications. I hoped to play off the expertise of the academic voice, providing a sharp contrast in Leo's blatantly rudimentary grasp of SF or speculative concepts, which manifests in his excitement and disappointment, his cursing, and his tactless insistence on "dialing the number."

Getting the Machine

This section takes place after the cyborg has decided to call the blinking number. It draws primarily on Isabel Yap's short story, "Sink," in which Margo, a grieving mother, acquires the services of a mysterious Salesman in Greenhills, who then reconstructs her dead son Jake by investing robotic parts with human memories.

In Western science fiction, the cyborg is a figure without a mother. The making of the cyborg enacts what Margaret Homans, referring to artificial life in general, calls "the circumvention of the maternal" (qtd. in Rieder 99). In favor of a male creator – or in some cases, a corporation – this process displaces the mother as giver of life. By dialing the number in the corner of your eye instead of returning your own mother's calls, you have set up a curiously appropriate parallel scenario: imagine your mother waiting for you to call, just as the call is being made to someone else.

This accident of circumvention might simply be a nagging and unsurprising curiosity about strange technology and its infringement on your body. It might also be a more deliberate circumvention of the *explanation* that you owe your mother, one that you remain incapable of putting together: No, Mom, it might go, the words flashing in the corner are not simply a hallucination, the fallout from a "peanut allergy," or "food poisoning," or "drugs."

Nevertheless, your phone call seems to speak of – and to – the notion of origin. Without knowing it, Homans has named and anticipated your moment of choice: to pick up the phone, to dial the number that has been plaguing your vision for days, and to stay on the line as the ringing begins and continues and stops. There is in fact a half-second or so of pure poetry in which you hear your own breath catch, echoed in the receiver and supplanted by the click of a feeble machine that scratches out: *You have reached our main office. Please stay on the line while we connect you to an operator.*

The message is delivered in a strange, hollow tone. Each time it ends, a snatch of music plays for roughly thirty seconds, before the message comes on again. This cycle has been repeating itself for about ten minutes – ample time to wonder whether or not to commit to the dangerous business of inquiry. To pry into the mystery of your eye is to risk uncovering a convoluted history of manufacture and a diminished humanity. In his discussion of the hybrid metaphor, Brian Stross writes about "untangling" the various strands that make up the hybrid's ancestry (259). What Stross doesn't mention is how dangerous the undertaking is, how high the stakes are for the hybrid in question, and the possibility that the subject may not survive the analysis. Each second you stay on the line,

therefore, chips away at an obscurity that should perhaps remain intact.

Luckily, there is precedence in our stories, which provide a few strategies for evasion. Consider how the narrative in "Sink" precludes the untangling of strands, aligning with Margo's efforts to eschew knowledge of her son's origins: "How they'd made him, and what they used to do so, she did not try to find out" (21). Her perspective elides the details of how or out of what Jake was made, and this prevents the reader from knowing as well. How attractive elision seems to be in the creation, writing, and reading of the cyborg, and how convenient that the necessary measures are embedded in the narrative itself. Nanotechnology creates the cyborg but also facilitates this elision, making all the wiring disappear, untraceable by both parent and reader. It upholds Margo's illusion by providing a shorthand that shrouds and explains away the how's and why's of her son's existence (or his construction). Margo means to shield Jake from the truth about his cyborg ancestry: "*He doesn't need to know*," she insists (18). But this is perhaps more a gesture of denial and self-protection, one that – having your make and model inscribed upon your body and thus being on the uncomfortable edge of knowing – you more than understand. After all, to acknowledge that a child is nothing more than a truly impressive piece of machinery is to acknowledge a larger, darker truth.

This poses a problem: given the danger of inquiry, the threat of such sinister truths, and the ease of erasure, why stay on the line?

It seems that the spectre of the maker looms large. It is incessant by way of reminder, after all, and superimposed onto your field of vision in tidy green footnotes. Moreover, the recording is oddly soothing. A woman is speaking. She

continues to chant, *you have reached the main office*. She speaks in short, clipped syllables, and her voice lilts in odd but not entirely alien ways. Her words and yours beat and blink together in uncanny sync until the music comes back on, and then stops again.

"I wonder where the main office even is," Leo says, staring at the number. "726-3174… sounds like a San Juan number."

"So?"

"So, where would you go to get cheap robotic parts in San Juan?"

Up to this point, you have imagined the red eye of the answering machine beating in the dark somewhere ominous but unspecified, a void in both imagination and geography. The vagueness is comforting, in a way, since it allows you to occupy a position between elision and your own need for answers. Leo's suspicion holds weight, given the role of Greenhills and Quiapo as centers of the local shadow economy, but it also gives the void that you have been nursing specific dimension, slowly eliminating vagueness, as a real-life place of origin begins to take shape in your mind. Such areas are best described in list form. Stalls sell DVDs, designer handbags, speaker systems, furniture, curling irons, sports equipment, summerwear, ski masks, action figures, healing crystals, cameras, religious images, fireworks. The list goes on, as Yvette Tan demonstrates in her short story collection, *Waking the Dead*: "Everything from books and clothes on the first floor, to advanced cybernetic electronics and – it was rumored – weapons on the second, and hobby kits and pirated movie microchips on the third" (42).

Samuel Delany explains that the practiced SF reader settles for – or even prefers – a *shadow* of an understanding. This "provide[s] the little science-fictional *frisson* that is the pleasure of the plurality of the SF vision" (297). The strangest thing that happens when one is scouting Greenhills via Tan or Yap is that this *frisson* is muted. SF technology is smuggled into a list of merchandise that is already available for purchase in the present, readers staking out the familiar catalogue before they even realize it has been infiltrated by futuristic technology. Tan and Yap both catalogue items as their characters walk up and down the rows of stalls. You have seen the "high-powered keychain laser lights" and the "wrinkle-depleting eye creams" (18) that Margo waves away, you have passed Tan's "small stalls and back alley shops" (BE 42) and, oddly, it is the concretization and coming together of such familiar minutiae that makes your skin crawl, creating *frisson* even though or perhaps precisely because at the other end of your phone call is a place you may know well. To stay on the line is to animate this space slowly, rack by rack, drawing not on imagination but from immediate memory. You nod along as it is rendered in a language of possibility that seems more familiar than strange. Margo heads to Greenhills on the assumption that "you could find anything" here (18), while the Salesman promises his customers "Solutions for Anything" (19).

Tan and Yap are operating within a type of buffer zone between zero and unreal that may be the key to explaining your eye, should you continue to trace its lines of origin. That anything can be bought, sold, or installed in such spaces heightens their potential to anchor local speculative stories. Thus, these are logical points of entry for strange technology into local markets, bodies, and texts. That Margo steers clear of this line of inquiry, however, suggests something rather dubious about cyborg

genealogies like yours, already complicated because your machine history is overlaid with a constructed human history (or vice versa). Because the spheres of legitimate and illegal exchange are not distinct or separate, customers straddle the unstable boundary between new and secondhand, authentic and fake, local and imported. These spaces obliterate the limits imposed by tax and copyrights; however, this same laxness implicates products as derivative, secondhand, or pirated, muddling your cyborg origins even further. The flaws in your anatomy, no longer genetic in nature, would seem to indicate that you are the product of botched construction or programming, one of a thousand other serial numbers generated by some hidden cause.

It seems that nanotechnology is not the only device that explains and creates the cyborg while evading the details of its manufacture. The Salesman is merely a distributor with "some engineer friends in Quiapo" (21). The stall leads to an obscure back room which in your mind leads nowhere in particular; the market bottoms out into a true unknown, out of which is issuing a plea to stay and wait *while we connect you to an operator*. Perhaps, you think, this eternal loop of song and speech is simply a chance to put down the phone.

The Salesman, to his credit, has done some fine surface work that need not be taken apart. Jake is procured, programmed, and delivered, arriving at Margo's doorstep looking every bit like the son she has lost, "down to the mole on the sole of his right foot, the scar on his knee from when he'd cut it against some corals on their last beach trip" (21).

Then again, to read Jake as commodity is to pose a threat to much more than an individual subjectivity, not

merely circumventing the maternal. It wouldn't take much; an able phrase re-codes the family itself: "mother" becomes "owner," "son" becomes "product," the "family" becomes an economic unit. Following this line of thinking, one might cite Margo's new routine: "There were lessons to prepare for Jake, and dinner to cook, and afterward she had to account for the monthly installment she was still paying the Salesman" (17). One could then claim that Margo's transaction turns motherhood into an act of maintenance; one could rob her of that biological maternal bond; one could relinquish Jake's creation to the Salesman and his unnamed friends.

One would find, however, that Margo is stubborn: "*It doesn't matter*, she thought, when she opened the door to their tiny apartment, and Jake crashed into her knees, by way of greeting" (17). She insists on the illusion of Jake's humanity even as she betrays her awareness of its fragility. She celebrates his birthday. She gets him a dog. She ignores his failing mechanism: "He wasn't growing anymore. ... She didn't mind so much, as long as Jake was back beside her." Although he seems to be a product without a proper human history, Jake takes on human qualities beyond physical appearance, most significantly that of being loved by a human mother. The Salesman may have supplied the machine, but it is Margo that renders it – or that renders *him* – human. It might be argued that technology, loved and bathed and fed and spoiled and mourned, is simply taking on the extraordinary "power and vitality" of objects within capitalist systems of exchange (Roberts 150), but the implications of such a claim seem rather severe. By this logic Margo is not "commodifying her son," but "*reifying* a new purchase," and is thus easily excised with a few short phrases, a well-chosen definition for "reification," perhaps, that swiftly amends "motherhood": this "raising of 'things'

to the status of living objects, this granting to commodities power over us" (Roberts 150).

However, the maternal bond left intact would not only blur the distinction between human and machine but nullify these categories, irrelevant in the story's final scene, in which Margo sits on the beach, watching her son step into the water: "If he went in any deeper, he was almost certainly going to break" (24). The limits of Jake's machinery are painfully clear, but it is also at this point that the line between human and machine is most indistinct. The Jake that wades into the ocean is no automaton; he is, in every relevant sense, her son.

It's possible then – one could concede – that all this is moot, as Margo insists: "The nights when she could press her ear against Jake's tiny chest, and listen to his artificial heartbeat, were infinitely better than the nights without him at all" (21). Perhaps there is, as Stross suggests, an alternative to that maddening drive to untangle hybrid threads: "Such cultures were totally new creations, interweaving the 'parent traditions' inextricably ... the way salt relates to sodium and chlorine – that is, having their own characteristics that are different from those of their constituents and not being reducible to the sum of their parts" (260). Perhaps it would indeed be better to let nanotechnology and shadow markets do their work in obscurity, stepping back instead of waiting on the phone, still live with the voice of the woman on the other end. *Stay on the line*, she says, machine once more, sitting in a dark corner of the market with her endless red eye and her looping invitation to wait and see what it is to be of this place, drowned out by the chorus of vendors and buyers shouting over each other.

Meanwhile, the words – *SERIAL, MALFUNCTION, BEA* – continue to flash in the corner of your eye, as the recording plays on. She is asking you to wait for the operator. The music comes on again just as you lower the phone, but this time, the muted, distant song is broken by a sharp, new voice that suddenly calls out a greeting.

Sparing the Mother: A few words about "Getting the Machine"

"Getting the Machine" weaves together two main threads: a discussion of motherhood and technology in "Sink" and an account of the cyborg's attempts to contact the manufacturer of the robotic eye. By shifting between analytical and fictional elements (e.g., the dialogue with Leo and the descriptions of the answering machine), I attempt to establish spaces such as Greenhills, Divisoria, and Quiapo as both real-life economic fixtures and imagined science-fictional spaces, in order to stage the cyborg's slow and potentially traumatic coming to terms with its problematic origins. At the same time, the section stages an exploration of the mother/son relationship, which the cyborg both preserves and threatens. This tension hinges on the figure of Margo, whose love might be read as a manifestation of reification. Raising Jake as a human boy may demonstrate reification at work, but Margo's insistence on ignoring the distinctions between boy and machine may invalidate this reading.

In the previous section, my attempt to play with the tone and voice of the academic essay functioned mainly to expose gaps between criticism and experience. In this section, I attempt to take this further by exploring the dramatic or narrative potential of the distanced, "rubber-gloved" quality of the academic voice. I have tried to fuse fiction and criticism in order to create a space between the

term or concept (as it might be presented in the academic essay) and its enactment or role in fiction. One might make a claim about a reified cyborg boy, or one might write a story about him, but what happens if the claim itself is invested with narrative significance? Could it be embedded with the same doubt and hesitation as that of the cyborg on the phone? Could it raise the stakes?

To address these questions, I decided to portray the academic voice as thinking its way through a dilemma. I also attempted to chip away at its authority and objectivity by allowing it to explore or even evade the implications of its own claims. Creating an if-then scenario (i.e., "Then again, to read Jake as a commodity is to pose a threat to much more than an individual subjectivity…") would allow me to broach or present the claim without actually making it. This decision accounts for the explicitly provisional language that characterizes the arguments that are made both for and against reification towards the end of the piece. These arguments are in turn undercut using sections of the original story. That the discussion of reification is repeatedly interspersed with these lines from "Sink" frames and destabilizes readings of the maternal relationship as a "performance of reification," mobilizing (and in fact buying into) Margo's insistence that such assertions "do not matter." Bound to the narrative of the cyborg "you," such readings can be interpreted as an ultimately unnecessary act that would rob a child of his mother, and a mother of her child. In this way, fictocriticism can dramatize a resistance to the equation of cyborgs to products and protect the relationship between Margo and her son, challenging – but not completely refuting – the "circumvention" which has left the Western cyborg without a mother. In addition, the insistence of the critical analysis plays off a struggle with knowing (experienced by both Margo and the cyborg "you") and dramatizes a second tension: the speculative

impulse which pushes us to ask, and a shrinking back from the answers that await us.

Conclusion

Philippine speculative fiction is attempting to set itself apart from its Western progenitors, even as it continues to draw on them for inspiration. It is a relatively young genre still trying to assert and understand itself, primarily by defining and delineating its characteristics. Fictocriticism presents an alternative to these efforts, "explaining" speculative fiction by recreating its inherent strangeness within the space of the critical essay and mobilizing the very qualities of the speculative story – the moment of displacement, the device of the cyborg eye, its implications on the human subject, and the complexity of its origins – in order to shed light on the story's use of technology. It sets familiar narrative techniques alongside academic convention and critical discussion in order to explore fictions and figures, yielding new narrative possibilities as well as new ways of seeing.

Fictocriticism enables the writer to emphasize the instability of the cyborg's position, by staging its initiation and coming to terms with mechanization, alongside critical insights which claim to explain this process. This brings key issues to the fore without employing a purely objective voice "from on high." By fostering a dialogue between criticism, narrative, and everyday life, fictocriticism calls attention to the gaps between these different modes. This results in stylistic and tonal shifts – from all-knowing objectivity, to wonder, to utter confusion. Using characters such as the "you" and the outsider, Leo (and perhaps, in time, the academic voice itself), fictocriticism also dramatizes various attitudes towards technology, prostheses, and cyborgs. Fictocriticism is also valuable

because it can engage the reader in ways that traditional essays cannot – evoking emotion, giving the reader characters to sympathize (or disagree) with, and constructing a critical analysis in which something is at stake.

Most importantly, it allows us to broach ideas while also providing opportunities for resistance, creating moments in which the cyborg "you" – and in some cases, the academic voice itself – cannot comprehend, disagrees with, or problematizes aspects of the criticism. This forces us to see knowledge as provisional rather than given. As Helen Flavell writes, "ficto-criticism is informed by a growing realisation that knowledge is partial and contested, and that the dominant academic generic form is inadequate to incorporate the tensions arising from the anxiety of speaking for and about the other" (33-34).

A cyborg quite different from its incarnation in both stories and criticism emerges from this fictocritical experience. It is not a symbol or a trope that can be fully understood or explained; instead, it is presented as an unstable entity that exists both inside and beyond the text, and that is still coming to terms with itself. Because fictocriticism is capable of writing such experiences as complex, problematic, and irreducible, it has great potential as a "space for possibility" (Schlunke and Brewster 393-394) for many young Filipino writers struggling to understand a genre they themselves are helping to build.

Notes

[1] According to Helen Flavell, its practice in Australia has been attributed to the work of Stephen Muecke and Noel King, who supposedly pioneered the term in their 1991 essay, "On Ficto-Criticism." This essay has in turn been instrumental in the work of fictocritical writers like Alison Bartlett, Amanda Nettelbeck, Heather Kerr, and Simon Robb.

[2] Elbow cites Clifford Geertz as having used the terms "author-evacuated" and "author-saturated" in *Works and Lives*.

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