Abstract

In this keynote for an online teacher training summit sponsored in 2022 by the Philippine Cultural Education Program of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, the author reflects on the question of nationalism in relation to the challenge of mainstreaming the teaching of queer literature in our schools. In particular, he attends to the intersectionality between queerness and cultural and/or institutional nationalism, which he scrutinizes from the perspective of postcolonial and decolonial theories, as constitutively enlivened by the radically protean interests of anti-heteronormative politics. His reflection ranges from the saliency of deploying the idea of cultural translation in the way that we use anglophonic categories of gender and sexuality in our reading and analysis of classroom texts (a postcolonial task), to the decolonial recuperation of "egalitarian" and presexological ideas of gendered being and becoming, as urged upon us by a thoughtful consideration of our enduring oralities, the bulk of which remain eminently accessible to us through the mother-tongue reading (and teaching) of such extant folkloric "texts" as our archipelago's plenitude of epics, myths, riddles, proverbs, and tales. All told, this keynote seeks to propose a specifically Philippine queer unpacking or deconstruction of the dominant form of nationalism that still holds sway in our educational system as a whole.

Keywords

nativism, anti-heteronormative, translation, anglophone, sugidanon

CRITICAL NATIONALISM AND QUEER DECOLOÑIALITIES IN THE PHILIPPINE LITERATURE CLASSROOM[1]

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ALLOW ME TO begin with a realization, which is also an acknowledgment, and a thanks: To my mind, the subject of this training summit, sponsored by our country's government, under the auspices of the National Commission on Culture and the Arts, resumes and complements the work that I've carried out across the last four years.

The Philippine Work Package of GlobalGRACE: Global Gender and Cultures of Equality,[2] which I directed, aimed to support the vocations of young queer creatives in the Philippines.

As a whole, GlobalGRACE functioned as an international arts consortium that sought to uphold gendered cultures of equality around the world, primarily in the Global South. It was administered through Goldsmiths University of London, as funded by the United Kingdom Research and Innovation, using its Global Challenges Research Fund.

Between 2018 and 2021, our Work Package, which we called Making Life Lovable, promoted through workshops and virtual residencies creative forms of scriptural, performative, and audiovisual literacies among young Filipino LGBTQs.[3] Their artistic productions are currently available as open access material—poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and a variety of digitally archived artworks in a curated online exhibition—and also as books,[4] published by the University of the Philippines Press in 2020 and 2021.

To my mind, what we actually did in our Work Package was to support and affirm the initiatives, both personal and community-oriented, of young Filipino queer creatives, both locally and nationally. I think that, all told, the work that we've done in GlobalGRACE has been less about originating and more about identifying, nurturing, and connecting collective ways of being and becoming—"cultures," yes, which are bodies of meaning-making practices of gender inclusivity, of lovable life, of livable love, and of justice, across our various localities, here in our corner of the Global South.

We decided that creative production, particularly writing, would be the focus of our Work Package, because as humanities educators we knew the value and power of being able to tell and "own" our stories about ourselves. As personal allegories or "myths," these stories evince transfigurative force, describing both the world and us to ourselves, inspiring us, providing us a guide on how best to live our lives, on how to follow our bliss, reconciling us to the inevitabilities of existence, and situating us in the grander scheme of things. Needless to say, it's important that we teach our young people how to choose, how to tell their stories, well.

The simple truth is that literacy is essential to our contemporary life, for it fecundates compassion and enables empathy across fissures of existential and human difference that occur outside our direct experiences, outside our own immediate "life-worlds." In this way, we can say that literacy complicates and expands what Otherness, what the Other, can mean and be (indeed, soon enough, the more profound our literacy becomes, the more we may come to see that the Other is already an inextricable part of the self). The more we read or the more art we experience, the more we can create, the more we can write—which is to say, the more capacious our imagination becomes, which in turn fortifies and extends our aptitude for complex perception and paradoxical thinking, as well as for cross-identification.[5]

What artistic literacy requires is a sense for language, which is a sense for form, and its realization through the procedural composition—the deliberate and felicitous ordering—of words, or whatever elements there are in the art practice in question. In planning our activities, we believed that queer creatives are acutely alive to the discrete sensualities of form, being that they are, of necessity, acutely alive to the truths of their own antinormative embodiments and desires. Of course, because creation is self-expression, it is also by the same token self-realization: the textualization of one's own subjectivity, one's own experience and consciousness, through which one can be and become.

Fostering creative literacy, helping cultivate and finesse the compositional skills of queer creatives empowers them to tell their favored stories mythically—with resonance, complexity, and depth—and to realize and affirm themselves through words, through the intricacies of form, and thereby to live their lives mindfully, proudly, and unafraid. And we need to say that it is good that this is magnified by the publication and dissemination of their works, which will help in promoting the progressive awakening of our national education system as far as the question of gender-inclusivity is concerned.

As we who are educators only too clearly understand, gender-inclusivity is inseparable from any discussion of social equality, and it constitutes a vital aspect of all our students' well-being. The simple truth is that gender is one of the primordial—one might say, irreducible—ways any of us may experience being a person, may experience being fully present and alive, in this world.

Our final activity, which we held last December 2023, was on online teacher training seminar on Philippine queer literature.[6] Among other things, with this seminar, we aimed to pursue a form of educational intervention—one that would make productive use of the archive that our Work Package had assembled.

My personal hope was that the seminar modules that we presented to our participants last December would help, in some way, to extend and propagate the literary and artistic literacies that our workshops and residencies had generated. Our teacher training seminar, like this conference now, was designed to offer lifelines to Filipino queer learners in our schools, who need to be empowered to believe in the value of their own truths, of their own desires and longings—their own embodied self-understandings, their own lives. What a difference it will make to young people to learn, through insightful stories, essays, and poems, inside the safe space of their "second home"—the classroom—that the differences in their embodiments, in their desires, are entirely beautiful, irreplaceable, and precious things, and that they lie at the heart of their inalienable dignity as persons.

Like that seminar, our conference today will hopefully also serve to enrich the content and form of our teacher-participants' syllabi and reading lists, providing them concrete and reliable ways of encouraging a more context-specific and holistic appreciation of the written word and its power to cultivate empathy and compassion among students, regardless of their gender and/or sexual self-identifications.

In other words, I am most gratified by and thankful this opportunity—to further ponder the situation of gender-inclusive pedagogy in our country, and to offer my own insights and suggestions, focusing on the area of Philippine queer literature. Needless to say, I see this keynote as being of a piece with the advocacy work that I've been carrying out for quite a number of years now—come to think of it, right from my earliest days as an instructor at the Department of English and Comparative Literature of UP Diliman.

We already understand, going by the important lessons that feminism has given us in the last century, that the question of gender in/equality needs to be appreciated *intersectionally*—meaning, across and within a variety of issues and concerns, all of which may be said to simultaneously obtain, even while as critics or even as teachers we may need to focus on each and every one of them, by turns, if only to be thorough and methodical. There are, thus, representational and thematic "interimplications" that we need to tease out when we read and teach a work of queer art, inasmuch as the queer question is necessarily as complex—as layered, as fraught, and as overdetermined—as the realities and truths of the queer subjects to which such a work ultimately pertains.

Of course, we also need to remind ourselves what the category "queer" means and the ways we can productively deploy it. For us, defining this crucial word must begin with the realization that our use of English in our country and, indeed, in our classrooms is a situated accomplishment: It is nothing if not an instance of what linguists have technically called Philippine English.[7] What this means is that while their words may appear globally uniform, there are indeed "englishes" rather than just one English, and the meanings of these seemingly self-evident words as they operate in our cultures are specific to our cultures, precisely; as such, their referents are to realities that are particular to our lives as Filipinos living in the Philippines.

As we can imagine, back in the day, when "gay" and "lesbian" were first used by Filipinos in their speech and writing, these words as they understood them did not pertain to entirely newfangled ideas but indeed largely signified the already existing identities of the *bakla* and *tibo*, and so on and so forth. In our own cultural moment, right here and now, queer—along with trans, bi, pan, nonbinary, etc.—can also be said to manifest that same translational and therefore necessarily hybrid quality.[8] As we shall conceivably be utilizing it in this training summit, queer largely functions as a translational shorthand for the complexities of gender and sexual identifications that Filipino youth cultures, well connected through global (mostly anglophonic) information technologies, are increasingly making in our time.

As we are likely to hear again in this conference, the intersectional approach[9] urges us to see that queer literature's formal qualities and pleasures are necessarily embodied inside and indeed intersect with themes, values, and valuations that are inescapable in our overall appreciation of any work of art. Treating the text not only as the paradoxical union but also as the crosscoding of form and content will not negate the kind of formalist appreciation that our traditional literary pedagogies have trained us to perform. On the contrary, this approach will complicate and enrich this methodology by situating this kind of artistic appreciation in a network of representational questions that relate to the fullness of *textual complexity*—and just how personally, historically, and culturally grounded it is. Moreover, to enhance and qualify the formalist celebration of the virtues of organic unity, the intersectional approach will be mindful of the differences that must remain despite or precisely because of the harmonizing imperatives of art.

I would like with my presentation to enrich this intersectional method by contextualizing it within what I believe is urgently relevant to our educational situation right now. I have in mind the idea of calling the general approach that we need to take when we teach gender-inclusive forms of Philippine literature and art to our students a Critical Nationalist Perspective.[10]

I am choosing to highlight this approach in this keynote because this is an approach that can easily lend itself to various forms of intersectional analysis, even as it locates these inside the geopolitical and historical exigencies within which we, as well as our Filipino learners, are imbricated. That our conference is happening institutionally, through the sponsorship of our national government's leading office for artistic and cultural management, only lends credence to the germaneness of this perspective. It is at once in cautious recognition and as a hopefully generative critique of this institutionality that I am offering this pedagogical intervention.

Given our country's simultaneously neocolonized and postcolonial condition, we cannot neglect the continuing salience of nationalism and the various ways we can unpack and strategically utilize it. Needless to say, in various regions of the Global South, the nation is not a critically mooted or exhausted concept. Rather, it continues to wield enormous political force that inspires devotion and is still seen by many democratic and popular struggles as the most potent battle cry for resistance.

As in many other underdeveloped countries, nationalism in the Philippines isn't a unified discourse. Rather, there currently exist Philippine "nationalisms" of varying persuasions and sorts—from the institutional to the counterinstitutional, from the official to the grassroots and communitarian, from the top-down to the bottom-up, from the millenarian to the secularist, etc. It's not entirely accidental that many, if not most, of these nationalisms are uninterested in the reality of queer suffering, precisely because their conceptualizations of the nation, being founded on the hierarchies of heteropatriarchy, in many ways structurally require it.

What we are perhaps most familiar with, however, is "nativist nationalism."

This kind of nationalist devotion is, in the main, an institutional discourse that promotes the reductionism of Filipinoness—a supposedly transhistorical essence that, while having its origins deep in the shadows of the precolonial past, has nevertheless endured more or less unchanged across the ages. This amounts to the promotion of the myth of transcendental sameness, whose purpose is—among other things—to obfuscate the real divisions that had cloven the inhabitants of these islands then, and that continue to cleave them now, primarily through the brutal imperatives of state violence and/or indifference. Among these are the sexual and gender divisions that coloniality has instated, if not exacerbated, in our country—divisions that we may collectively call heteronormativity. It is, of course, in the character of nativism to be *presentist*—casting the past entirely in the terms of the hierarchies that enable it.

Faced with the fact, from one administration to the next, of systemically inept and corrupt governance—as well as the mass privation and suffering that it perpetuates—nativist nationalists in the fields of the arts and the human sciences carry out the invariably personally profitable mission that has been entrusted to them by the state: to offer a variety of populist distractions and dreams that will entice the public to avert their gaze away from the realities that afflict them, who are thereby encouraged to seek their redemption from fanciful (needless to say, simplistic) visions of their glorious and enduring past.

The allure being proffered by this form of state-sponsored discourse is the claim that the national essence existed in its pure form and is entirely recuperable as such—and that once recovered, it has the power to mollify and reconcile all the divisions and acrimonies of the present, unifying them under the banner of an inclusive and all-embracing nature—as though the multiple ruptures of history had never happened. Thus, nativism performs a fascistic project of sameness (among other things, let us not for a moment forget, a heteronormative sameness) upon the variegated undiscipline and differences of both the present and the past, assuming their mutual traffic and intelligibility.

Of course, even as nativist nationalism is spurious as an intellectual activity, we must recognize that it has had its use, especially in regard to the all-too-important task of disprivileging the hierarchies that modernity (which is the same thing as coloniality) has instated. However, this simplistic reversal of colonialism's orders of privilege—admittedly the initial decolonizing moment—must move toward a more serious appraisal of definitions, toward an increasingly reflexive responsiveness to contexts, and thereafter to a constant complication of the interpretive task. We must remember that, after all, radical knowledge isn't merely about the overthrow of norms. Finally, the value of transgressive knowledge is that it interrogates the very terms by which normative power defines the subjects it by turns enables and subjugates.

In our case, perhaps, it has proven difficult to resist the mystique of nativist nationalism, not the least because its simplistic Self/Other logic is being continually endorsed by practically all-religious and educational dispensations. Our position, if we wish to perform criticism on our own literary and cultural practices, must, rather than participate in institutional nationalist and/or nativist discourses, endeavor to generate and offer more and more complicated forms of what I would like to call "critical nationalist knowledge." Simply put, I take this to be a specific form of anticolonial, more accurately decolonial, knowledge.

To my mind, critical nationalism involves attending to the following questions and tasks.

First, critical nationalism criticizes Philippine institutional nationalism for its many excesses. We need to point out, for instance, that this form of nationalism is produced and championed by the patriarchy-loving elite, whose interests it serves, and whose bourgeois and heteronormative narrative it tells, at the expense of subaltern narratives coming from the nation's many marginalized (including queer) subjects. Also, we need to recognize that its mythmaking project to recuperate a "lost, precolonial identity" is in fact underwritten by a persistent colonial desire to be affirmed by Euro-America, whose approval it continues to seek.

Next, critical nationalism situates the issue of literary and cultural production within the context of neocolonialism and its unequal relations, which themselves constitute a modality of an expansionist (now global) capitalism. In this regard, we need to recognize the material and social dimensions of the continuing pauperization of the Global South (to which we as a country belong), including the abuse of its human labor, as well as the dissident cultural practices of its various peoples in response to these depredations. Related to this task is the need to always remember the salience of the class question in our criticism of our texts, even as such a question can only make sense *intersectionally* with other social and cultural questions, mostly pertaining to material embodiment.

In the Philippines, literary (or more accurately, cultural) criticism must be more supple and capacious than what official or institutional discourses have thus far written and propagated about Filipino nationness, for, ultimately, its objective is to understand and improve the condition of all the different communities and individuals that constitute the lived realities of the Philippines' national becoming, even or especially when it means questioning and challenging the normative grounds of its existence. The critical nationalist enterprise must avoid speaking of the "national" in crudely folkloric terms, since the Filipino nation is located not just in our past but also in our present and, certainly, our future. After all, as Stuart Hall explains it so cogently, cultural identity is not a given but rather a representational process that stretches across these differences: It is "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past."[11] That the present is only made livable, that the future is only made imaginable, by our understanding of our past is precisely why it's so crucial not to allow the telling of the story of our past to be dominated, to be named or described, by any one monolithic interest (for instance, as we have seen in the work of our nativist scholars, the elitist and the heteronormative).

Finally, other than inviting us to attend more forcefully to the continuing urgency and significance of the nation, in our part of the troubled world, the theoretical imperative of critical nationalism also urges a rethinking of concepts and methodologies. Recognizing the Eurocentricity of much of modern history, as well as its heteronormativity, we must ask ourselves whether an overreliance on Western critical theory, while initially enabling of minoritized positions in the West, necessarily has to be the situation everywhere else.

In other words, while we must strive to engage with a postmodernist critique of Western philosophy and its complicities with colonialism, we must not abandon the untranscendable distinctions between the Global North and the Global South. Nor should we situate all the debates of colonialism within the terms of European continental thought and sacrifice the study of all history to a theory of language or discourse alone.[12] Not everything poststructural, postfoundational, or postmodern can be seriously entertained by us, to be sure. Simply put: We must recognize that the deconstructive decentering of all categories of thought can often be inimical to the assertion of the very concepts that prove vital to the struggle of many of the world's countless disenfranchised and (neo)colonized peoples.

I have recently come to see that it is precisely in this regard that decolonial—as opposed to simply postcolonial—theory comes in. We are all, by now, familiar with postcolonial discourse and the powerful critiques it has leveled against the universalist fictions of Eurocentrism—critiques that remain useful for us, especially as we engage in the theorizing and interpretation of our own literary and more broadly cultural anglophonicities. Ironically, while postcolonialism, as promoted in Anglo-American academe by such figures as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, critiques coloniality, it does so from within the epistemic ground of modern (which is to say, Eurocentric) philosophy, deploying its postfoundational categories and typically deconstructionist procedures in the project of decentering norms. By contrast, as championed by Global South thinkers, whose historical reckoning of the imperialist problem traces it back to the Renaissance expansion of Christian theology and capitalistic practice away from Europe and into the New World, decolonialism proposes not just a critique but also an "epistemic reconstitution."[13]

The theory and practice of decoloniality seeks cognitive justice for the "epistemicides" that has been wrought on knowledge systems in the Global South, and seeks to displace coloniality by working outside the categories of modernity (which is nothing if not coloniality's obverse), considering, imagining, and enacting all the ways of thinking and communicating that modernity has suppressed, rejected, or demeaned. These include other temporalities, other cosmologies, other ways of being, becoming, living, and loving, along with other economies (such as communal reciprocity), that the salvific project of colonialism has silenced, disavowed, and demonized. It is decolonial theory's insight that, all over the nonaligned world, the political process of decolonization largely failed precisely because it did not perform this necessary epistemic task—of undoing the mental infrastructures of colonialism that are built into the structures of modernity itself. Which is to say: It did not reject modernity profoundly and thoroughly enough, instead merely accepting all its "languages" and presuppositions.

It is with these epistemological demurrals that decolonial discourse recognizes, first and foremost, the historical incongruence between locations: In the Global North, postmodern theory decenters liberal humanism's individualist subject and deems it incoherent, while in the Global South, anticolonial discourses (chiefest of which continues to be nationalism) still must affirm an alienated subjectivity—an identity that the former's anti-essentialist theories inevitably preclude.[14]

Decolonialism rightly insists that postmodernism is peculiar to the history that generated it, and that it is, in fact, a highly elitist and parochial development in relation to the rest of the world. As such, it need not be seen as the standard for all kinds of theorizing, after all. Hence, decolonial politics seeks to escape from and dismantle the colonial matrix of power, its binaristic and more recently relativistic structures of knowledge, by critiquing them, on the one hand, and on the other by engaging in a politics of world-making. This amounts to a decolonial enactment, one that seeks a resurgence, a re-emergence, and a re-existence, of and by decolonials, in the political fields of knowledge production, the environment, the economy, gender and sexuality, and race, among others.

While oppositional intellectual work in the Global South must remain wary of essentialism, especially as it is invoked by neocolonially complicit institutional discourses, and as it pertains to accounts of the purely "native" past, we nevertheless must not let this concern deter us from allowing more and more localities, individualities, and collectivities in our societies to speak and carry out their own representational projects—to declare their own "lived experiences," in the furiously unraveling interstices of the here and now.

To complete these preliminary notes, allow me to briefly describe how this critical nationalist and decolonial approach might be made to operate in our literature classrooms. While my experience as a teacher urges me to speak about teaching anglophone texts, I am well aware of the fact that literary teaching in the tertiary levels in our country can now be conducted bi- or even multilingually, with featured texts being written in languages that learners might be fluent in.

In pursuing the goals of the kinds of critical nationalist and decolonial analysis that I've outlined here, what I routinely perform in my literature classes is to approach our anglophone writers' works using the critical lens of translation. Needless to say, this procedure begins with the postcolonial realization that for us and for our literature, English continues to be an ironic language—ironic because, historically, we shouldn't have had anything to do with it, to begin with; and because for most Filipinos, the realities of everyday life cannot be characterized as being simply monolingual (or monocultural) at all. And so, the challenge of getting English to represent our thoughts about our own present-day lives and bear the burden of our increasingly transcultural and syncretic circumstances remains altogether difficult and intimidating. Needless to say, this burden is the burden of translation, and our anglophone tradition is nothing if not translational.

Because our anglophone literature is translational, we can say that it traffics in and manages a multiplicity of the linguistic registers and cultural ideas of Philippine reality while encoding them in/as English. This process wouldn't be as uncomplicated as it would otherwise be if only our writers were not inclined toward composing verbally harmonized, homogeneous, and "universal" texts, and instead wrote clearly ethnopoetically, with an ear to sounding lexically distinct and culturally particular. And yet, the postcolonial perspective precisely urges us to see that the universal as we dream of, aspire to, and speak in and about it is simply one such cultural "meaning" that has been picked up and translated by and in our writers' works. The vision of the universal, after all, is always in fact particularly grounded, even as allowing ourselves the right to engage in this kind of "dreamwork"—in and through our literatures and the other arts—must constitute one of the primary steps toward cognitive decolonization.

My task, then, when I teach Philippine literature is to *historicize* and *postcolonially specify* its seemingly placeless and timeless themes, images, and textual gestures by translating them back into the spatiotemporal conditions and situations that framed and engendered them. We may take this form of criticism as recognizably postcolonial, and, as such, it assumes formalist appreciation at the same time that it supersedes it. This specifying form of textual analysis is typically accomplished by inquiring into the germane biographical facts of the text's maker, as well as the interpretive variables that exist in the culture within which the text's postcolonial critique is being carried out. Allow me at this point to mention that this is the interpretive procedure that I follow in teaching the early queer poems, seemingly unproblematically universal on first reading, of the late national artists Nick Joaquin and Rolando Tinio (titled "6 P.M." and "A Parable," respectively).[15]

Hence, the postcolonial idea of translation bids us to recognize that the practice of English in the Philippines has been, from the moment of its arrival or bestowal (some might say, imposition), nothing if not a creole or hybrid practice. This quality is just as true even when our usage of this language evinces only the most *subtly ethnicized*—because mostly standardized or "universal"-sounding—qualities. The simple truth is that our literacy (and our literature and criticism) in English, immensely antedated and therefore functionally animated as it is by our immemorial orality, and permeated by a layering of our cultural differences, cannot help but be, for the most part and in a number of important ways, *translational*—deformed and transvaluated as it must helplessly be across both oral and scriptural systems, as well as across speech varieties and textual forms.

Recently, as against the mostly postcolonial procedure that engaging with our anglophone texts as translation exemplifies, I've been attracted to the more patently "decolonial moment" of bringing into the classroom discussions of our oral traditions, which is where I wish to end this keynote.

In a presentation I gave at the very first national queer studies conference, sponsored by the Center for Women's and Gender Studies of UP Diliman more than a year ago,[16] I already reflected on the importance of recognizing the powerful influence that orality continues to wield in the ways we are socially organized in our culture, in which modernity's sexual and gender norms have needed to be translated not just interlingually, from Spanish and English into our local languages, but also intersemiotically, across the oral and scriptural divides.

As is true with all translations, the modernizing of our gender system bears residues of the intercultural transformations that necessarily attend this process, resulting in new and hybrid forms of subjectivity and agency. I think it will be very interesting, and useful, for us as teachers to include the first-language reading and analysis of our mythological lore, particularly its epics, legends, and tales that can still be made to speak to the truths of our ancestors' nondualistic vision. This recourse to our premodern knowledge systems isn't simply nativistic nostalgia: Rather, I believe that it is a vital part of the decolonizing project that we need to perform in our classrooms if we wish to engage fully with the issue of gender in/equality.

In our GlobalGRACE Work Package, we defined decolonization as a dynamic process that moves from identification to counteridentification to disidentification.[17] This final movement is a praxiological stance in which the binaries of colonial thought that had previously been, by turns, fully embraced and passionately (and nativistically) disavowed are now at the same time recognized and rejected, picked up and subverted, recontextualized, and inverted or critically exhausted from within. Decolonization understands and historicizes nativism as the production of enabling myths and embraces the project of forming a national culture, which is not—as Frantz Fanon had insisted—"an abstract populism…

[detached] from the ever-present reality of the people," but is rather "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence."[18] It's important to remember that this "people's culture" is not nativistic, because by being historically grounded, it is, by definition, translocal and constitutively mixed.

The necessarily complex tasks of decolonization need to recognize and work through these responses in the continuing project of liberation. To decolonize gender is, therefore, to acknowledge and inquire into the translational exchange between modern binaries of sex and sexuality and traditional notions of gendered expression and embodiment, which these binaries have never exhausted nor entirely superseded in the postcolonial space. We need, as humanities teachers in our country, to guide our students into understanding the truth and the implications of this syncretic and translational situation by prompting them, in and through our lessons, to inquire into the residual oralities that remain in evidence in our lives.

We may, for example, look to such transcribed oral forms as the *sugidanon* of the Panay Bukidnon people, whose complete corpus of epics is currently being published, in the original ancient Kinaray-a as well as its modern translations into Hiligaynon, English, and Filipino, by the UP Press,[19] for evidence of the nondualistic logic, the complex epic vision, of our ancestral past. In sum, this is a vision that recognizes oppositions, but by blurring and "interimplicating" them, it may also be said to ultimately yearn past and beyond them, toward the idea of union and accord.

To wit: In their respective adventures, the sorceress-heroines Matanayon and Malitong Yawa transform themselves into gallant datus in order to fight for their own dignity in the face of a lascivious usurper. This kind of folk gender-transitivity may be seen as confounding the customary division between male and female, suggesting that it's not as chasmic as it otherwise is in the literacy-based and therefore categorical epistemes of the West, in which transitioning from one gender to another requires not just affective investment but also biomedical and legalistic intervention. In like manner, in these heroic tales, sky and earth (as distinct "worlds") are not actually divided but vitally implicate and permeate one another, their denizens traveling across the nonabsolute and neighboring realms—of the present and the nonpresent (which could either be the past or the yet-to-be), as well as the residences of the deities and supernatural forces and the homes of ordinary mortals. Even the ontological crack between the living and the dead is navigable through the sacred gift of resurrection. Significantly, since time in this enchanted world is experienced in terms of seasons and cycles, resurrection is something that happens over and again in these ancestral stories.

Finally, in the sugidanon, evil and good can be rethought and re-experienced as indistinguishable, too, once you pitch your inner vision past the surface of the apparent into the secret and implicit depth. There is, for example, the monstrous sorceress Amburukay, whose "baleful" actions are revealed, later on, to have emerged entirely out of her motherly kindness. In a similar fashion, there's only wholeness and harmony—and not antagonism—between the body and the spirit, as is evident in how these tales understand and dramatize the "truth" of human sexuality: namely, that it is nature's golden and entirely beautiful bequest. Astonishingly, this "sex-positivity" is an insight that we may glean from the story of the ignoble theft, by the otherwise gallant hero Labaw Donggon, of Amburukay's glittery strand of preciously beloved pubes—an ironic *violation* that gives this grisly and fearsome-looking "baddie" her own memorable "hero's journey," at the same time that it launches one of the sugidanon's primary protagonists on his legendary quest.

Looking more closely at this particular story, we can argue how Amburukay's golden pubic hair embodies the pre-Christian idea of an entirely natural and precious sexuality, inasmuch as anything golden or *bulawan* was superlative and perfect for the *tumandok* (another name for the Panay Bukidnon). In the epic-series' second book, in her quest to recover it, she engages in an interesting ritual of humorous, if slightly masochistic, self-intimacy: She squats on a rock by the river delta and ceremoniously slaps her vulva, which is supposed to produce a certain sound in avid response if the stolen hair is indeed located somewhere up that particular waterway. It may be difficult to imagine this now, from our perspective as Christianized lowlanders, but yes, in our archipelago, there was a time when sexual matters could indeed be described so openly—and funnily—in the chanted epics and tales that both carried communal wisdom and functioned as the primary means of entertainment.

Picking up, hence, from a discussion of the sugidanon, as literature teachers, we can lead our students to examine more closely our culture's gender (*lalaki/babae*) dualism: how, on the one hand, it is not ontologized in the pronominal systems of any of our native languages and, on the other, that it is in fact nuanced, qualified, and challenged by the existence, across our archipelago, of indigenous terms for gender-crossers. In the past, there were of course the highly esteemed and shamanistic identities of the *bayoguin*, *bido*, and *asog*, along with the *binabaye* and *binalake*. Nowadays, we have the names *bakla*, *bayot*, *agi*, *bantut*, *lakin-on*, etc.—pejoratives that refer to identities whose minoritization simply followed the sustained vilification of femininity, and of women, in our culture.

Nonetheless, these realizations can urge us to consider how conceptual and ethical affordances may still be said to exist in our culture, in which we may still imagine and perform a plenitude of gendered embodiments that complicate if not surpass dualism itself. For us, gender, after all, is *kasarian*, whose root word, *sari*, already contains the promise of such plurality: on the one hand, as a signifier for type, kind, or sort, it is not even, strictly speaking, only always about genitality. On the other, when repeated, *sari-sari*, it deconstructs binarity by invoking ideas of plenitude, difference, and multiplicity. Despite or precisely because of our use of anglophone categories and pronouns in our speech and writing, we must recognize the translational persistence of these age-old understandings that residually come to us from our more gender-egalitarian, definitely *not* heteronormative, past.

Allowing our students to appreciate the complexity of our own culture by getting them to decolonially see its uneven and unfinished transitions across orality and literacy, tradition and modernity, and pre- and postcoloniality offers them the opportunity to frame their own questions about gender and sexuality in historically and culturally specific terms. This is a framing that can endow them with a sense of cultural pride, on the one hand, and a sense of historical belonging on the other, for it locates our own identities in a living conversation with the narratives of our immemorial past.

Finally, and as a possible safeguard or "charm" against romanticizing our indigeneity, studying our folklore can also prove to be instructive of the less desirable and socially problematic oral "habits of thought" that may be seen to persist in our own troubled time.

On the one hand, it may get us to appreciate the nondualistic energies that inform our ancestral stories, in which social conflicts and dichotomies are recognized but also superseded for the sake of the realization of an underlying harmony. This is an insight that may be gathered, for example, in a number of episodes in the sugidanon, in which the conflict between hero and aggressor is resolved divinely and peacefully by the mediation of the supreme matriarchal deity, the grandmother goddess Laon Sina, who invokes the lost memory of their shared ancestry, which restores the equal dignity of both and indeed occasions a reconciliation.

As suggested by the works of our own eminent critics, didactic, agonistic, and "folk" (or communal) traces of oral forms may be said to powerfully endure even in our more "modern" literary and artistic texts—from novels, to poetry, to films. Because culture itself consists of attitudes and "habits of interpretation," the work of these critics bids us to entertain the possibility that aspects of orality's psychodynamics[20]—among others, the provisionality of memory, the "negotiability" of categories, the resistance against the procedure of abstraction, and the protraction of tactile and personalistic values that prevent intuitions of meritocracy from taking root—may themselves also be seen to animate the character of our national reality, whose hybrid cognitive state derives from the residual but entirely powerful effects of oral consciousness.

And so, on the other hand, there are also orality's vexing legacies: our periodically revisable memory; the ease with which we can push categorical decisions aside in favor of regionalist or sentimental loyalties; our public yearning for heroic figures that manifests itself in our obstinately personality-oriented politics; even the populism that eschews careful and deliberate forms of critical thinking, proliferates information dumps and fake news, and finds its home in the secondary or tertiary orality that approximates and conditions the distracted obliviousness of cyberspace (and all its "hypertextualities"). These are nothing if not the manifestations, or "symptoms," of our residually oral present, whose wellspring is our powerfully oral and, in various syncretic ways, unfinished and continuing past.

We need to remember that orality served its purpose well among communities in our archipelago because the "world" in which it existed was not remotely a nation in the modern sense: Its idea of collectivity was not so much imagined as ritually performed—each and every time the villagers gathered around the chanter to listen to the public performance of these tales, whose referents were identifiably themselves. Oral subjectivity emerged out of a personalistic and mostly cohesive society, where interrelationships were directly mediated through elders and clan leaders, and where meanings were of necessity ritualistically performed and shared.

The particular "givens" of such a world, needless to say, no longer patently exist in our time now. Indeed, by contrast, our own present-day collective truth—which we call the nation—finds its cogency in its being imaginatively proposed across gulfs of diversity and numerousness. In its modern form, the nation has flourished through the private and public experiences of literacy—from constitutions and nationally endorsed narratives to newspapers and novels—negotiated as these have been through the emergence and eventual hegemony of print capitalism and all the imaginative and national-language-based literatures it has spawned.

The literate mind is, hence, necessarily individualistic. Once again, we need to remember that reading/writing requires and deepens solitude and iterates the self to itself, instating and congealing its ontological separateness from others. The grand abstraction that is the nation can be envisioned as a fraternal community precisely through the individual's imaginative faculty called empathy, which immersion in acts of literacy increasingly develops and bestows.[21]

If reverting to communality as an oral form of fellowship or solidarity is no longer entirely possible or desirable in our time—in which our lifeworld is coming to be, more and more, the entire world, in and of itself—then we must use our literacies to achieve our enduring ideal of equality, still so poignantly and beautifully captured in the Filipino concept of *kapwa*, which our translations into our lives' present-day textualities have the power of detribalizing and allegorizing across and for the sake of each of our embodied differences: *the self inside the other, the other inside the self.*[22]

Then as now, there is, arguably, no truer, no more humane equality, than this.

Notes

1 I delivered this paper as a keynote for the online training summit Kabaro: A Gender Awareness and Sensitivity Training Summit, on the theme "Looking for Safe Spaces: Gender Equity and Equality in the Philippine Academe," sponsored by the National Commission on Culture and the Arts – Philippine Cultural Education Program on August 11, 2022.

2 From this project's website, we have the following overview: "Global Gender and Cultures of Equality (GlobalGRACE) is a 51-month programme of research and capacity strengthening funded by the UKRI's Global Challenge Research Fund (GCRF) delivered through the Arts and Humanities Research Council. GlobalGRACE employs arts-based practices and multi-sensory research to investigate the production of cultures of equality and enable gender positive approaches to wellbeing internationally." From "Learn More," GlobalGRACE, accessed September 12, 2022, https://www.globalgrace.net/more-about-project.

3 The complete online archive of this Work Package's output—literary texts and digital art pieces by young Filipino queer artists—may be found on www.pinoylgbtq.com.

4 These books are: J. Neil C. Garcia, ed., *Busilak: New LGBTQ Poetry from the Philippines* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2020); and J. Neil C. Garcia, ed., *Lamyos: New LGBTQ Fiction from the Philippines* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2021).

5 The imaginative ability to shift reference points and crossidentify away from the familiar and comforting truths of one's own "lifeworld"—for instance, away from the familial toward the national—must be what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak means (at least, in part) when she says that the goal of education in the humanities should be the "uncoercive rearrangement of desires": In

referring to her own work training teachers in impoverished communities in rural Bengal, she is after all doing her share in helping the "millennially oppressed" *dalit* ("untouchables") acquire the skill of literacy and all the epistemological affordances it will entail. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004), 526.

6 I was the convenor of this online seminar on the teaching of Philippine queer literature, which took place from December 9–10, 2022. Its participants were college and senior high school teachers coming from across the country. The online archive of this seminar may be accessed through this link: https://www.pinoylgbtq.com/seminar-teaching-philippine-queer-lit.

7 Ruanni Tupas and Peter Sercombe, "Language, Education and Nation-Building in Southeast Asia: An Introduction," in *Language, Education and Nation-Building: Assimilation and Shift in Southeast Asia*, ed. Peter Sercombe and Ruanni Tupas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

8 J. Neil C. Garcia, "Let's Get Real: Queering the Queer in the Philippines," in *Likhaan 16: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature*, ed. Jose Dalisay Jr., ed. (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Institute of Creative Writing, 2022).

9 I am borrowing intersectionality here and refunctioning it in a literary sense from the now well-known feminist concept that confounded the earlier single-issue approach taken by mainstream white feminism to the problem of gender inequality. For an explanation of this concept, see Brittney Cooper, "Intersectionality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 385–406.

10 My earliest articulation of "critical nationalism," in the sense that I deploy it in this keynote, may be found in various essays in the following collection: J. Neil C. Garcia, *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics: Essays and Critiques* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2005).

11 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222–237.

12 Benita Parry, "The Institutionalization of Postcolonial Studies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 78–80.

13 See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

14 This has been the point of many of the critics of the postmodern-inflected varieties of postcolonial discourse. See Aijaz Ahmad, In *Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 43; and Kumkum Sangari, "The Politics of the Possible," *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987):157–86.

15 J. Neil C. Garcia, "Reclaiming the Universal: Postcolonial Readings of Selected Anglophone Poems by Filipino Poets," *Humanities Diliman* 11, no. 2 (2014): 1–30.

16 J. Neil C. Garcia, "Let's Get Real: Queering the Queer in the Philippines," Keynote Address, National Queer Studies Conference, Center for Women and Gender Studies, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City, October 26, 2020.

17 This threefold model was first proposed by Michel Pěcheux in relation to the "collusion/resistance" question of language and ideology. See Michel Pěcheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology*, trans. Harbans Nagpal (London: Macmillan, 1982).

18 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 43.

19 The first book of this epic series came out in 2014. See Alicia P. Magos, chief researcher and senior translator, *Tikum Kadlum*, Sugidanon (Epics) of Panay, Book 1 (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014). The latest book came out in 2022. See Alicia P. Magos et al., translator and researcher, *Humadapnon (Pagbalukat ka Biday)*, Sugidanon (Epics) of Panay, Book 8, Episode 2 (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2022).

20 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982), 74.

21 The relationship between the historical reality of the nation as an imagined community founded on the idea of "horizontal comradeship" and print capitalism and mass literacy is of course the primary contribution of Benedict Anderson to the historical study of modern nationalism. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983; revised edition, 1990).

22 Rogelia Pe-Pua, *Handbuk ng Sikolohiyang Pilipino*, Volume 1 (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2018), 212.