From left to right: Charlson Ong, Luna Sicat Cleto, Dean Francis Alfar, J. Neil C. Garcia, Gabriela Lee, Eliza Victoria, and Jaime An Lim

Lines of Flight: The Practice and Limits of Realism in Philippine Fiction

A Forum

Panelists: Luna Sicat Cleto, Dean Alfar, Charlson Ong, Jaime An Lim, Eliza Victoria, and Gabriela Lee.

Moderator: J. Neil C. Garcia

The following is a transcription of the University of the Philippines Press panel discussion that took place at Raffles Makati, on the first day of the Philippine Readers and Writers Festival, sponsored by National Bookstore, on August 26, 2016.

JNG: In literature, realism is the production of "reality effects" in texts—a specific form of referentiality that seeks to faithfully *point to* the nature of the world and of human life. While seemingly universally self-evident, as a representational process, literary realism—critics now tell us—is indicatively Western. It is rooted in the "dominant mood" of nineteenth-century Europe, and was premised upon "a rationalist epistemology that turned its back on the fantasies of Romanticism." The social, political, and scientific events of its time and place all contributed to shaping it. As such, realism is a staunchly secular vision that emerged in the West when empiricism and materialism were in full sway, when the mechanistic paradigm rendered reality explainable in terms of causalities and determinations, when individualism had been rationalized in terms of rights, and when the economic system of capitalism had effectively reified many aspects of human life. Owing to the ascendancy of critical theory, we now understand that the "real" in realism is, of course, merely a convention—an effect of a signifying system that permits this kind of referential logic in literary representations.

Historians have concluded that literary realism is analogous to journalism in the sense that like a news report, it aims to achieve "objectivity" in its rendering of scenes. In Victorian England, the better-known realist novelists of this period, in fact, worked in journalism, in the main. Realism can be seen as a precursor of documentaries in this sense, and like this contemporary mass media genre, it treated the lives of the socially downtrodden, as well as the difficulties being faced by the bourgeois class in Europe and America. Moreover, literary realism draws from psychological science, operationalizing its insights into human behavior, motivation, and emotions, which it attempts to render in all their complexity. Realist fiction regards people as the locus of complicated forces and influences, and it deploys the technique of internal monologue in order to reflect this "truth."

A realist fictional text, therefore, dwells more on inner transformation than outer plot, registering its movements as changes in the main character's perception and understanding. Unlike Romantic novels—in which emplotment was both obvious and orderly—the narrative arc of realist novels traces trajectories that are not easily apparent. Further examining realism in formal terms, we easily notice that the omniscient point of view—that was the norm in Romantic writing—in this fictional mode gives way to the selective omniscient or even the first person perspective. Often, in these instances, the narrator proves himself to be far from reliable. Realist stories are also commonly framed within bigger narratives—a technique that further distances the reader from the story's external events. This complication of narrative logic serves to further imitate reality, which is, by definition, difficult, intractable, and shifting.

I would like to ask our speakers, by way of an introduction, to describe their respective journeys as writers—in particular, as fictionists. I would also like to ask each of them to answer the following questions: Are you or aren't you a realist? What exactly does the "realist" or "non-realist" (or "speculative") description entail in terms of the topics, characters, "worlds," plots, and themes that you work with when you write?

LSC: Mabato ang daan ng naging landas ko sa pagsusulat. Parang hindi, di ba, kasi pinalad akong magkaroon ng ama na nagsusulat—at isa siyang magaling na fictionist. Mas matinding hamon 'yon

kasi ayaw mong maging alingawngaw o anino lamang. Ayaw mo rin na susugan 'yong idea na awtomatiko nang naipapasa ang talent dahil sa genetics. Pierre Bourdieu likened the artist to the family idiot and maybe he said that because art isn't financially rewarding, kahit na it's backbreaking work actually. Nakita ko ito firsthand sa karanasan ng tatay ko, naging emotionally isolated rin siya sa amin (in my version of things) dahil nauuna ang pagsusulat niya Sa Lahat. Ito na rin siguro 'yong dahilan kung bakit hindi ko naman talaga pinangarap na maging manunulat, sa totoo lang, noong bata ako. May talent ako noon sa sining biswal, at 'yon ang inakala kong magiging ikid ng buhay ko, ang magpinta lang, o gumuhit. Bigyan mo ako noon ng papel at lapis, parang kapalit na noon ang camera. Bukod sa napaligiran kami noon ng mga libro (sari-saring mga nobela at short story collections), hindi ipinagdamot ng aking ama na basahin namin ang mga 'yon.

Tila alam niyang makatutulong rin iyon sa amin. Karaniwan lang kaming angkan na nakatira sa Quezon City: nagtuturo ang aking ama sa unibersidad at accountant ang aking ina. Praktikal siguro ang dahilan ng tatay ko nang sinabi niyang hindi ko ikababuhay ang pagpipinta lamang (siyempre), at maaring nasindak ako sa bigat ng aking pasiya nang sabihin niyang kung hindi ako sigurado na mahusay na mahusay ako sa aking kakayahan (siyempre hindi!), ay huwag ko na lang ituloy … 'Yong ellipsis na 'yon ang nagpreno sa aking huwag nang magtuloy sa pangarap na maging pintor. Nag-aral ako ng Journalism sa UP, na bandang huli'y napagawi sa Film. Nakalangoy naman ako sa kurso dala nga ng hilig ko sa pagbabasa at kakayahan sa pahayag.

Nakilala ko ang gurong si Prof. Luis Beltran, kilalang journalist. Natutuhan ko sa kanya ang ekonomiya ng mga salita, at ok na sana kaso dinapuan ako ng bagot, nasisikil sa itinatakda na "stick to the facts," at maging accurate sapagkat ang katotohanan ng ibinabalita ay mahalaga. Isang araw, sumama ako sa isang kaibigan na mag-sit in sa workshop ni Rene Villanueva sa TELON. Natatandaan kong natuwa talaga ako sa pakikinig ng dramatic reading, at bago ko pa namalayan, sumasali na ako sa pagsulat ng mga monologo, eksena, character studies. Nakatuklas ako ng anyong para kang nasasapian kapag in character ang sinusulat mo, lalo na kapag naitanghal iyon at nadarama ng audience ang nangyayari sa tanghalan.

Sa dula ko natutuhan ang basics ng fiction writing. Character, plot, dialogue. Buto ng dula ang scenario, parang notecards sa pagsusulat ng fiksiyon. Dumaan rin ako sa yugtong sinubok kong tumula, at napasama ako sa mga workshops ng KATHA at ng Linangan sa Imahen, Retorika at Anyo. Hindi man ako naging makata ngayon, napakahalaga ng natutuhan ko sa pagkakaroon ng metaphorical eye. Kung natuto ako sa pagmamapa ng kuwento sa dula, at nagkaroon ako ng unawa sa pananalinghaga sa tula, sa gabay naman ng screenwriter na si Armando Lao ko natuklasan ang panahunan (tense), narrative voice, at imaginary present. Sa cinematic language, mas blurry 'yong signposts ng panahon, ang viewer ang bahalang magbalasa ng "kuwento" ng "panahon." Aniya, maraming literary devices ang pelikula, hindi lang natin alam na iyon pala iyon, at magkahawig ang konsepto ng auteur at awtor. Tinuruan niya kaming basahin ang wika ng imahen sa panonood ng mga pelikula. Noon, nabalahaw ako sa nobela kong *Makinilyang Altar*. Nawala iyon nang magka-epiphany sa paghawak sa time. Hindi iyon kailangang maging chronological, ni hindi nga kailangang maging totoo lagi. This insight was so valuable then to my work because it helped me to distantiate the material from the speculative and the real. While the real served as a touchstone for authenticity, the speculative helped me to find better ways to tell the story.

Mahalaga iyon kasi kung hindi ko ito nauunawaang lahat through practice bilang isang fictionist, aakalain kong tatatlo lamang ang panahon: nakaraan, ngayon, at bukas. Aakalain kong ang mga imahe'y naroon lang, at hindi na matuto sa kanilang semiotika. Aakalain kong ang tula'y nasa pahina lang. Binuksan sa akin ang posibilidad ng mga probabilidad ng panahon—*maaring* nakalipas, *maaaring* bukas, at *maaaring* ngayon. At ganito rin 'yong patakaran pala maging sa setting. Nasulat ko ang *Mga Prodigal* halimbawa, na nangyayari sa Dubai, nang hindi kinailangang makarating mismo doon. Nakataya ang believability ng signposts ng panahon at tagpuan, pati ang mga tauhan, sa ekspertong pakikilaro ng manunulat sa totoo at posibleng mangyari. Kaya lamang, dahil pinili kong magsulat sa Filipino, kung minsan may bagahe (at alagwa iyon) ng reponsabilidad sa kultural at materyal na realidad.

Parehas akong umiigib sa balon ng realismo at ng spekulatibo. Realist akong manunulat in the sense na kailangang kapani-paniwala ang hubog ng mga tauhan, lalo na ang mga pasiya, kilos, winiwika ng mga ito; may verisimilitude ang tagpuan, panahon, nakikilatis ang awtentikong karanasan na naging batis o sanggunian ng teksto. Speculative o non-realist na ako pagdating sa pagkahubog ng isang "imaginary present." Ang katangiang ito actually ang pinakanakakatuwa sa pagsusulat ng fiksiyon. Isang anyo ito ng pagtakas, ng "pagbubuong-muli." Maaari ngang isipin na kaya rin natin sinusulat ang mga kuwento'y sapagkat nasunog na ang tulay ng nakaraan, ngayon at kasalukuyan—at ang kawalan na iyon ang binubuno ng mga salita.

DA: Good morning. I grew up as a lover of fantasy, things that are peculiar. I read everything I could but there came a point in time when I ran out of books to read. So my kiddie self raised my kiddie fist to the sky and said one day I will write books that I would like to read. When I was older I started to write what is now known as speculative fiction, which is an umbrella term used for non-realist fiction that includes the genres of fantasy, science fiction, horror. And I wrote a story called "The Kite of Stars." It was published in *Strange Horizons.* A few months later, it was anthologized in the latest edition of *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*—in the table of contents, it's Neil Gaiman, Stephen King, Dean Francis Alfar, Ursula Le Guin. For me, it meant that the kind of writing that I valued was recognized. And a Filipino, more importantly: it meant if I could do it, then other Filipinos should be able to do it as well. We all need to produce. And we need those stories to be both wonderfully written and have a variety of themes, a variety of concerns. There is the misconception that speculative fiction or genre writing is lightweight, that it is not necessarily of value. When I was much younger, I really bought into this false dichotomy of realism vs. speculative fiction. Because at that time I was so focused on getting spec fic read and recognized. I wanted spec fic to be taught in schools. Well fast forward, it is recognized. It is being taught in schools. But realism and speculative fiction are not opposites. They are both denizens of the country called "Story."

It becomes a matter of, as an author, what is the best way for you to tell *your* story? What matters is how we tell it, how it is received, and what truths we can impart.

JNG: How are we going to have an argument? You're basically saying that we should all just embrace one other and sing "Kumbaya …"

GL: Yes!

DA: Because in this day and age we should all try to see the bigger picture …

JNG: But we invited you all here so we could have an argument!

DA: Hold on. In this day and age we are living in a place and time of fear, we fear for lives, we fear for our future. We need writing. We need realist writing. We need speculative fiction. We need to be able to create order from the chaos that's happening. Realism and spec fic can do that. We need to engage people. We need to get them reading, we need to get them thinking. And it is writing that will do that, that has always done that. If, here and now, because of our politics and our political realities we are a nation divided, then I would prefer in my speculative fiction that we are a nation united. Amen.

JNG, EV, and Audience: Amen!

CO: Kung napapansin niyo, kami ni Jimmy Lim ang nasa gitna. At wala kaming gadget. We're being flanked by the enemy. I'll answer some of the questions. I'm probably a realist writer, because I don't tend to create parallel universes when I write. On the other hand, I'm not very comfortable also with these categories. I have stories that are not conventionally realist. Recently, a teacher asked to use a story of mine for an introductory class in magical realism. It's a story titled "Season of Ten Thousand Noses," which I wrote almost as a history lesson. It's about the burning of the Parian. Do you know the burning of the Parian? Some of you might not even know that. I think it's a big deal in our history that these things happened. There were pogroms, there were burnings of ghettos, but very few people know about them. They had been swept under the rug. So I wanted to write a story about that, for younger people, and it became that story.

And then I also wrote a story called "Widow," that could be timely these days. I wanted to write a story kasi, given all the hullabaloo about the refrigerated cadaver of Marcos, they said, ang yumaman lang dito 'yong embalmer niya. So I wanted to write a story from the point of view of the embalmer. And it ended up being a story called "Widow."

And then again my first novel, *An Embarrassment of Riches*, has been described by a researcher online as dystopic, which is why I was invited once to speak on dystopic writing. They called it the only dystopian novel in and about the Philippines. It has been called many things by many critics. I started the book about 1993 and hoped to finish it at least by 1998 in time for the Philippine Centennial celebrations. Wala pang contest noon. So I wanted to write a book about the Philippines a hundred years after the revolution. But I couldn't. The times then were like ngayon. You didn't know what the headlines would be the next day, what the President would say, who would be killed. I'm a Martial Law minor; I grew up under Martial Law, and then EDSA, and all that. And that period of our history was exciting, brutal, maraming pinapatay, it was like a state of war between the RAM and the Left. So I didn't know how to go about it. Things were so strange, so I had to create, in a way, a parallel, a shadow nation that I could use as a kind of template. So anyway, it ended up being *An Embarrassment of Riches*, and I called this country "Victorianas"—the fictional island where the action is set, a "shadow Philippines," or at least that's how I wrote it. So I think in the end it's really about wrestling with the material. How do you deal with material in front of you, and you have to find a way, and that was the way I thought could do it. I didn't really care what might happen after I wrote it, but anyway, it won at the Philippine centennial awards.

And then after that, I thought I'd do a more conventional historical novel because again … we've talked about realism, but we don't even have history in much of our literature. Where are our historical novels? I can't even name one off the top of my head. So I wrote *Banyaga*, which is really a hundred years from the nineteenth century. And I used immigrant boys. And they became patriarchs of clans and to me it's also the Southeast Asian

story. Both *An Embarrassment of Riches* and *Banyaga* represent the immigration story. And by the way, what happened with *An Embarrassment of Riches,* I think, if you read it, a lot of the issues that it discusses, are becoming urgent again. Like our issues with China. Almost prophetic in a sense. So I guess writing is really about thinking things through.

DA: Kasi spec fic writer ka talaga. (Laughter.)

CO: No. It's really thinking things through, no matter what form you want to use. You need to ask yourself: are you thinking clearly or fuzzily? So you have to think through your own logic. And then after *Banyaga* I wanted to write crime fiction—again, since we don't have a lot of crime fiction—and so I wrote *Blue Angel/ White Shadow*, which I think is not a bad book of crime fiction, (chuckle), if I may say so.

DA: You may say so.

CO: I think there are so many forms that we haven't really explored yet, speculative or ano pa man. There are just so many things to do, so many fictional structures that haven't been explored by our writers.

JNG: Are those forms mostly realist forms?

CO: Yes.

JNG: Not enough crime fiction, which is realist, right?

CO: Yes, but you can have a crime fiction that is not purely realist. It doesn't have to be.

JNG: Ah, yes. *Trese*, for example.

CO: I'm just saying, marami pa tayong hindi nae-explore, di ba? There's so much to be done, and to me historical writing is still important, and we have barely scratched the surface. And now I'm doing a thriller, with a lot of religion and a lot of sex. Priests and prostitutes, my favorite characters. So I'm doing a thriller now—think it will be that, or I hope, anyway. And I also got dragooned into writing a horror movie—obviously, something speculative. On the other hand, it's also true that you can write realistic fiction without saying anything real …

DA: Agree.

CO: Case in point: movies. My favorite movie is *The Godfather*, and it's fiction. In 1960, I think, that was the first time there was a US congressional hearing on the Mafia that was televised, and Mario Puzo saw it and then he asked for the congressional records; he got them and then wrote a book based on that. But then when he was asked, o sino si Vito Corleone, he said, "My mother. And if you knew her you wouldn't ask why." So mothers are always there.

DA: There you go.

CO: On the other hand, and dami nating mga biopic dito, for instance, *The Kingpin of Tondo* or whatever, na you know are absolute nonsense. So again, it's not really the form, but your intention, and how you deal with the material. And I think at some point, the spirit of the material will almost decide where you should go, how you should write. Again, maybe, this is just me being exclusive.

DA: Again, snobbery. Mag-aaway tayo.

CO: Mamaya, mag-aaaway tayo. But again for now I think the universe of letters is so vast and there's so much that we haven't done yet, although it's my belief that realist fiction is being read by intelligent people. About who reads non-realist fiction? Well, you'll have to ask them.

DA: Ok, them's fighting words. I'll be back.

JNG: You will have your turn later; let's allow everyone to speak first.

DA: Hmpf.

CO: Readers now are swimming in new media, movies, so I think that sort of determines what people read. It can't be helped. Our reality is really virtual, much of it is cyber anyway, and it will be determined by the platforms that are going around. You have Lav Diaz doing ten-hour movies, who's going to watch that you might ask? And yet, surprisingly, mayroon din naman.

DA: People without bladders.

CO: So I think it's sort of open season kung ano 'yong gusto ko mong gawin.

JAL: Good morning. I would like to start with something about why people end up as writers. I've spoken with a lot of other writers and somehow there are commonalities. There are events that are almost true for all writers. Number one, they got interested in stories very early. This is because there was a storyteller in the family.

DA and GL: Yes!

JAL: That could be a mother, that could be a yaya. In my case, it was my elder sister. So all the stories they took up in class, she would retell to us. And we were all excited. We would listen. Instead of being noisy, unruly, we would settle down and listen. And we were really serious. We were taken up by the stories. For us, the stories were real. And we enjoyed them. And that is the love that started there, because later on, when we ran out of stories and the stories ended, we had to look for other stories. And the next thing is, you have to read early.

DA: Yes.

JAL: I noticed that nowadays children generally have to be ten years old to be able to read. I was reading when I was in Grade 2.

DA: Earlier.

JAL: Cebuano was very close to English, I thought, because it is syllabic. You say "Bi-sa-ya" and that's it, "Bi-sa-ya": they're all expressed in syllables. English is practically the same. And so I was reading early, something that Dean also mentioned, and then of course there was the availability of a library …

DA: Yes.

JAL: And a bookstore. Do not underestimate the value of early exposure to books. Sometimes you don't think that this is very crucial. But it is. So bring your kid to the library, and just let your kid wander around, discover the place, because that child is going to develop the love of reading. And he's not going to stay put with just the garden variety *Pepe and Pilar* material. The child is going to move on. Even if you have to go through Emilie Loring, that sort of thing. Love stories, crime stories, whatever. Give the child a chance to read because eventually, the child is going to find that the old material is repetitive. The child will

want something else. And then the child will grow. And his taste will become more sophisticated. You give the child a chance to really explore the riches of literature. And once that child learns to love reading, he is also going to try his hand at writing his own stories. Believe me. Even if the first stories are terrible, that's fine. Because that child is going to grow. And even without you knowing it, and without investing in a four-year course you have created a writer. I don't know if he's always good, but at least if the child could write, that's better than not being able to write, right?

DA: Kaso nga lang, hindi na siya doktor.

JNG: The child will be miserable and poor.

DA: Kasi hindi doktor.

GL and EV: PhD!

JAL: I don't know. Well, money is not always the last measure—

DA: Yes!

JAL: Of success or happiness. So I went through that route and when I was in elementary school I was buying books. How many elementary school students do you know would buy books? Usually they would buy clothes, toys, and food, and whatever, but not books. When I had a chance as a kid, I bought books. And the books that I bought were not for kids. Boccaccio's *Decameron.* Some of the stories there are very bawdy, but I did not know that. And then the other book that I bought at a drugstore was a paperback and it is one of my favorite books up to now. Ray Bradbury's *The Golden Apples of the Sun*. It's science fiction. But you know back then I didn't even know it was science fiction.

DA: Wonderful.

JAL: The stories are so haunting. Haunting. You know there's this boy, for example, who does not grow old. Can you imagine living from year to year to year, and remaining young? The parents who adopted him would grow old and so the boy would try to escape because now they would realize there is something strange about the boy, the boy who is always young. And so his life is about this "Hail and Farewell." That's the title of the story,

and I thought, "oh my God, this is so sad." I was only a young boy, but I empathized with the sadness of the boy who could never be at home with his parents. He had to leave them because they grew old and he remained young. You know, that kind of story—from *The Golden Apples of the Sun.* If you get a chance, get a copy. But I did not end up writing speculative fiction.

DA: That's okay, I still love you.

JAL: I'm considered as a realistic writer, partly because of my sensitivity, I think. I have the natural inclination for realistic fiction, I like realistic stories. But another reason was because of my training and exposure. In college, who were my early Filipino models? I read Kerima Polotan, who wrote about ethical dilemmas among middle-class couples. I liked NVM Gonzalez, who wrote about kaingeros in Mindoro. I liked Bienvenido N. Santos, who wrote about old-timers, pensionados living in America. I liked Edilberto T. Tiempo, who wrote about American and Filipino soldiers during the Second World War. Their writings would be considered realistic; they were realist writers. So they were my early models. And the same thing with the foreign authors. Chekhov's "The Lady with the Pet Dog," Hemingway's "A Clean Well-Lighted Place." So they are also realist writers. You could say that was my training. And because I liked their writing, I thought I would try to write in the same way. So essentially I looked for inspiration from the world around me. I don't explore too much about what is outside my world. Perhaps I am just lazy. I just look around, and there are already many stories.

DA: All around.

JAL: And so my technique would be linear, very predictable, point A to point B to point C, and there are no abrupt jumps, no drastic introductions of impossible materials. So no telegrams, no emails, just stories. Just the flow of the narrative. I find it easier that way. Not too imaginative, but I am also old. That explains probably my preference for realistic fiction, because I think speculative fiction is a young person's genre … Although you might think that we have exhausted the possibilities of reality in fiction. Not true, not true at all. We've barely even touched the tip of the iceberg. If you pursue the realist mode in writing,

you'll discover that there are still a lot of other stories that need telling. Come to think it, however, I also use the speculative mode when I write stories for children.

DA: Yes.

JAL: Like my story "Encanto" … I do have to say that when I wrote it, I did not realize that this story would be speculative, because in our town, encantos or fairies are real. And so I thought it was part of my reality. And even ghosts, for the longest time, I tell you, I thought they were real.

DA: They are, right?

JAL: And when I go out, I'm always afraid that something might happen to me, because there's a dark shadow behind the tree. They are real. And so even if we say later on that they are elements of speculative fiction, for some time, I thought they were real. Superman? He's part of my reality. He lives in the US! And I thought actors never died, because they appeared in movie after movie after movie.

DA: Tama.

JAL: I mean, I was a very gullible child. But I have admit I would like to try writing more speculative fiction—this time, for adults.

DA: Yes!

JAL: You'll be surprised. I think this old man still has a trick or two.

Chorus: Yipee!

DA: I'll write a realist story. Trade tayo.

JAL: Ok. But anyway, like I said in the beginning, if you have kids of your own, one way to encourage them to read and write is to expose them to stories, tell them stories. Make them fall in love with stories and they will look for stories, because stories are really exciting.

So thank you very much.

EV: I wanted to start with a question: Isn't all fiction speculative?

Yes, but what do you speculate on?

With speculative fiction you speculate on what happens when you change the rules of the world. Like extending the

"what if." *What if you're a nun and you fall in love?* This is a good premise already for a realist story, but what if you extend that? What if you deepen the question to push past what science informs us, past what our senses show us? *What if you're a nun, and you fall in love, and you explode?* Now you have speculative fiction.

What if you find a dead body inside your house? This could definitely happen, and if you answer this question through fiction, you'll have a thriller or a mystery story. In my novel, *Dwellers*, I decided to deepen the question. *What if your soul or your "essence" has the power to jump from one body to the next, and the body that you jump into has a house, and in that house is a dead body?* Does this dead body now belong to you? If the body is a house, how will you investigate this house? How will you investigate yourself? So it becomes not just a mystery story, but an exploration of body politics, gender, faith, the nature of the soul, and the fallibility of memory—themes I indeed ended up exploring in this work.

In realist fiction you find the extraordinary in the ordinary, but in the kind of stories that I write, I place them side-by-side. I just want to see what will come out from that kind of equation.

Reasons why I write like this: I grew up with stories that science and our senses may not accept, but which my family accepts as absolute truth. In our household, the "speculative" becomes real.

My mother's family comes from the Cagayan Valley, from Tuguegarao, and they have a lot of stories from that town. Their neighbor is a witch. My uncle was almost taken by a sirena. All of these stories, these fantastic stories, were told in a matter-of-fact way, and it's no surprise that such tales—that juxtaposed fantastic topics with a matter-of-fact tone—eventually entered my fiction.

I read a lot, growing up. My mother bought a bunch of books, a complete set of encyclopedia, so that's what I first read. She also had a lot of books from college. There was one called *The Complete Development of Philippine Literature in English Since the 1900s.* It's a green volume, and it has all these stories from NVM

Gonzalez, Nick Joaquin, Gregorio Brillantes, Tuvera. So I grew up reading all of these stories also. And I guess when I ran out of stories to read, I wrote my own. Having read all these stories, the question at the back of my mind, up to now, has always been, *What else can I contribute? What new insight can I tap into, and share?*

I guess with speculative fiction, or genres, it becomes like a shared language for readers, especially if they follow certain beats. I read in the *Guardian* this thing that I really liked, that the greatest barrier to sharing culture sometimes is culture itself, so genre becomes a language to open doors to readers. For example, maybe you're talking to a teenager who doesn't want really to talk about poverty or totalitarian regimes, and then you're like, "Oh I have this novel which is about a contest, and it's *Hunger Games*." So that's a way to introduce them to these topics that maybe, at face value, they wouldn't want to read about or talk about. Or you may be someone from outside of Filipino culture. You may not be drawn to Filipino culture per se. But you may want to pick up, let's say, *Mythspace* by Paolo Chikiamco, which is a space opera, but features aswang. So you may have the beats of the space opera, you have the fight scenes, space ships, the prophecy of the chosen one and you can use that to introduce readers to important topics that you find important.

And I guess to react also to what was mentioned that there are still so many topics that we haven't tapped yet, I remember talking to a friend who's spoken to a reader who reads only a certain portion of Filipino literature, so it becomes like a sort of Filipino literature bingo, like, May sapa ba diyan, may kalabaw, may magsasaka, and you're like, that's not the only kind of stories that we have, so it's really important. While I do enjoy that kind of literature, I'd have to say that these are not the only stories that we can or should tell.

DA: Yes.

EV: Think about how certain people view the world. Some people take in stimuli, and then they write them as they are, but some people add something extra. Look at how Einstein and the scientists saw the world, and interpreted the world, and

how they talked about their theories. They talked about them through thought experiments and explanatory stories, basically. What if you move so fast, so close to the speed of light that time slows down? If you want to talk to a layperson, a non-expert, you need to talk to them in terms of stories to make them understand how you see the world. Scientists have stories that are backed by theories. Fictionists have stories backed by an honest interpretation of the human condition. Realist or non-realist, these stories need to come from a place of honesty.

GL: When I started writing, I didn't write fiction. I actually wrote poetry. I came in to this particular writing life because of two things. One was because I couldn't be a doctor. The other thing I realized I was good at because I was also not very good at math and science was that I knew I was good in reading. I was lucky though that my parents were very much willing to let me experiment on things and think about what I wanted to be and were never really strict about that. It also helped that much like the rest of the panel, my mother is a storyteller. In particular she's a visual artist and she writes storybooks. So I grew up in a house that very much privileged the creation of art and of storytelling.

One of the things that influenced my writing was really personal experience, and I think that's really important, to stretch yourself and try out new things because you don't know what kind of stories are going to come out of it. I discovered that writing to a certain extent is also about community. It's about people who are around you and help you to be a better writer. So looking for that kind of community, I found it when I studied in UP. But I studied poetry. I had fantastic poetry teachers, Sir Neil among them, and I wrote my thesis on poetry and writing poetry, but on the side, I enjoyed writing fiction but I never took it seriously.

And so I graduated and I had to look for a job. I went looking for a job. And then Dean Alfar gave me a job. And uh …

JNG: Did he pay you well?

EV: Naghesitate siya.

DA: We're on the record here.

GL: I was paid in experience. (Laughter.) And money, too. At least may ganun. But one of the things that I learned from Dean, he knew that I wrote but he didn't know that I wrote fiction. And so when the first call for speculative fiction came up in 2005, he said, Why don't you submit a story? And I did. And it didn't get accepted the first time around. Okay, so I said it's not for me talaga. Too bad, I'm going back to writing poetry. And then he came up to me later on and said Gabby actually we have space for two more stories, and I want yours to be one of them.

And then I realized later on when it first came out and I saw the book, I realized that this was something that eminently suited the way I saw the world, which was kind of slantwise, kind of strange, and kind of, again I think of what Eliza said earlier, extending the "What if …" The what-if was already for me something that you could explore in poetry, actually. But here in speculative fiction—I didn't even know it was speculative fiction until the anthology came out—to me that was just story. I realized that this was another way of engaging the world that I live in. This was another way of me trying to understand the world that I live in, but you use a different lens, and a different way of seeing things, and trying to engage with it. And so to me that was when I got hooked.

And one of the other things that influenced me was when I studied abroad. Studying abroad also kind of broke down all those rules, and said genre is a label and if that's what you want to call your story, go ahead and call your story that, but for us we're concerned with what is it you're trying to say—Is it the best way of executing this story in the manner that you want to tell it? And to me that was such a novel way of looking at things, kasi I didn't have the checklist anymore, of ah 'yong character mo ba ito 'yong ginagawa niya? Ito ba 'yong rules nung ano mo? But rather is this the best use of technique? Is this the best use of language? One of the things also that helped me in that particular stage and still helps me right now is because I studied poetry I pay attention to the use of language because poetry is such a precise craft, and you have to pay attention to every word that you choose. And in fiction, normally some fictionists use the excuse na mahaba naman iyan eh, pwede mong itago.

But the truth is each word is important, and where you place them is still important. And the value of the meaning changes when you change the meaning and the placement of words. And to me that was such a valuable lesson that poetry taught that I still carry up to now, writing fiction. But I've always thought this way—I never thought that there were boundaries and I never thought that to be labeled one is to immediately cancel out the others. I think that every story is important. What we should be paying attention to is the manner of the telling, and the message that it's trying to convey. Because once we get to the meat of it, all stories are just talking about the way we see the world.

EV: Yes.

GL: And if we accept that particular premise, that means that whatever the genre is, the story should be important, and should at least be given the chance to be read.

JNG: Thank you for your rather exhaustive summations and introductions. Let me explain that I thought of this topic because I believe it is a timely one. I believe—I know—that so many of our young writers have given up on realism, and are happily writing different kinds of speculative fiction. This is clear, going by what's being increasingly written in Creative Writing classes, and going by the entries to the fiction category in such contests as the Palanca Awards, for example.

The thing is, not everything is hunky-dory in this picture, because it's not entirely clear that these young writers have tried realism seriously—and consistently—enough to actually be able to mindfully (or credibly) give up on it, or whether speculative forms of fiction are simply what they have been exposed to and therefore prefer to read (and write). Moreover, while speculative fiction may have more adherents among the young than realism, institutionally the latter still dominates the scene, receiving accolades and recognitions, while the former still mostly gets affirmed in "indie" and non-institutional ways. While we would like to believe that we are all citizens of "the Republic of Letters"—and that we are all denizens of this country called *Story*—we may still need to question this mode called realism, which we may need to "provincialize," because it arguably is a

culturally specific way of telling a story (or indeed, of seeing a world). As such it is constrained by narrative conventions and expectations, many of which—as a number of you have pointed out—may not be even be appropriate to our cultural situation.

While initially understood as being strictly a question of formal accomplishment, realism is now seen by many literary critics as a signifying practice that exceeds surface technicality. As such it is comprised of discursive strategies that encourage the reader to believe in the text's referential power. Over and above the technical features of this mode of writing, there are certain "conditionalities" that are required for realism to work. First, the world must be an abundantly "describable" location. Next, it must be possible to fully name and communicate something about this world. And then, words must be deemed as capable of imitating—but not literally producing—the real. And then, both the message and the style must be as unobtrusive or "imperceptible" as possible. Finally, the reader must believe what the author is saying.

Clearly, these requirements cannot be easily assumed by us, especially as regards the usefulness of an always already perceptible and self-consciously deployed textual literacy in a residually but powerfully oral culture, whose realities aren't entirely describable, nameable, or even "capturable" in literary (that is, *scriptural*) language, and whose linguistic situation is dizzyingly mixed and multifarious right from the start.

And then, the last condition proves most salient, indeed: basically, for realism to be possible, both reader and author must share the same "attitude"—needless to say, must share the same language and the same cultural ground, the same *habitus* that deems this form of imitation as realistic, precisely. Given the multiple "divides" in Philippine society, the uniformity of any "reality effects" in a literary or *writerly* tradition that is not even evenly legible or "available" to the majority of its citizens (who don't really read) obviously cannot be stabilized or assured.

On a related note, as we have appropriated it in our tradition, realism is routinely confounded by the inescapability of and almost perfunctory recourse to translation. Think of

Rizal's novels, which supposedly lie at the very wellspring of the realist canon in our literature, and their scenes that should have realistically happened in Tagalog, but that Rizal willfully translated into Spanish. Or think of the touchstone works of our great anglophone fictionists—for instance, NVM Gonzalez, whose characters are typically peasants conversing in perfect "standard" English in the middle of the ash-covered loam.

In a manner of speaking, writing realistically—at least, in English—in our country will always be "speculative" or transformational, precisely because it will inevitably require verbal and cultural translation (which is about approximation/speculation, at its very best). If this is so, then the tradition of speculative writing in our country becomes suddenly much larger—and older.

What can you say about that?

To the fictionists in English: if you are indeed enacting verbal and cultural translations in your works, then to what kind of translation practice are you inclined? Do you promote equivalence rather than difference—opting for a "domestication" of the foreign (for instance, "sour pork broth" instead of *sinigang na baboy*)? The former endorses the idea of commensurability across cultural experiences and promotes a seamless reading experience premised on the illusion of sameness; the latter insists on the irreducibility of cultural realities, and indeed registers the source text's "foreignness" in the target text itself. What do you believe might be the advantages of the translational practice that you prefer?

LSC: My stand on the value of translation is this—I'd go for using the original term like sinigang na baboy and letting the reader figure it out for herself, because I think she can gauge the meaning through context clues. Pangarap kong mabasa ang *Makinilyang Altar* ng iba pang mga mambabasa, na labas sa ating bansa, kaya pinasalin ko iyon sa Ingles. 'Yong pakiramdam na ito matagal ko nang napapansin sa sarili—'yong parang ang liit ng sapa, tapos ang likot ng buntot at hasang mo at gusto mong makalangoy sa mas malawak na katawang-tubig. Mapalad ako at tinanggap ni Marne Kilates ang proyekto. Alam ko ang kalidad ng trabaho

ni Marne, at dahil isa siyang makata, alam kong malalim ang kanyang pagpapahalaga sa wika. May footnotes originally ang salin niya, para ipaliwanag ang mga salitang tulad ng bisor, dirty ice cream, etc. Naipabasa ko rin ang draft ng salin ni Marne kay Andrea Pasion-Flores. Pinayuhan ako ni Andrea na hindi na kinakailangan ang footnotes, at ang reference niya dito 'yong experience niya bilang a Singapore-based literary agent. I followed her advice. May mga bahagi sa draft ng salin na dala pa rin ang bagahe ng pagkokompara sa wikang lirikal ng orihinal. Sa salin ni Marne (Kilates), napanatili naman niya ang lumbay ng personang si Laya, pero kung minsan sumusungaw sa dialogo ang asiwa ng timpla ng wika. Parang radio drama ang dating, kung magiging tapat. Pero 'yon ang nakasulat sa Filipino, e. Mas naidiriin pala kapag *sinalin* 'yong melodrama. 'Yong pamagat ng akda ay ginawang literal na salin. Ayaw sana ni Marne ang title, mas gusto niya ang, "At the Altar of the Typewriter" dahil hindi idiomatic ang *Typewriter Altar.* In the end, pinaubaya na lang ni Marne sa akin 'yon, which I appreciate. The translation process went fine, but the review process was not as smooth as I hoped it would be. If it's any consolation to the younger writers, kami rin ay may mga rejection slips na natatanggap. The review process was a study in contrast. 'Yong isang reader, gustong-gusto ang salin habang 'yong isa'y hinding-hindi. The press director did not elaborate their reasons, she only said that they needed to break the tie, but it took another year bago ko nalaman na hindi na sila interesado sa proyekto. Eye-opener 'yon para sa akin on many levels. Una, kailangan talagang ilaban ng awtor na isalin ang akda niya, at itaya iyon. Sana nga automatic na itong kasama kapag nakapasa ang isang manuskrito sa isang university press (or any publishing house for that matter). Ikalawa, na-realize ko sa experience na iyon na if we are up against the world (kasi nga we have to compete with other authors globally) we must do our best to write it well, and to translate it well, and not to look at ambition as a bad thing. Kung walang aspirasyon o pangarap, bakit ka pa nagsusulat? Ikatlo, sana ang review process ay mas transparent, at mas nag-uusap ang publisher at author para mapaganda talaga ang akda niya.

DA: I prefer to render the names of things in the original language, then provide a context for readers to understand what I'm saying. There will never be 100 percent correspondence translating across cultures. It really depends on the needs of the story. But in the end, what matters more to me is uniqueness of cultural experience, whether writing in the realist or the speculative mode.

EV: I've always wanted to ask English fictionists: in your head, and in the world of the story, do your characters actually speak English? They don't, in my case. They speak Filipino (or, in certain stories, an otherworldly language), so I see my English-language fiction as translation. I used to italicize Filipino terms in my English-language fiction (*dinuguan*, sinigang na baboy, atbp.), but I also italicize words to emphasize, so it looks strange on the page. Now my practice is just to translate everything—for a seamless reading experience, as you mentioned.

This is tricky, because if this is all translation, then you can't apply the grammar rules of English. We often read this cliché, grammar-dependent pronouncement after a character's recent death: *She is a teacher. No, I'm sorry. She was a teacher. Was. Was. Was. I'm still getting used to this.* If you're speaking Filipino, you won't have the same problem, at least not immediately. Same with gender pronouns: "*I'm taking him out to dinner." "So you* are *dating a guy!"* If they're speaking in Filipino, the character can continue being cryptic about his sexual orientation, because Filipino pronouns are not gendered.

I'm still problematizing this. I also write fiction in Filipino (though rarely), and I love how it frees me from all of these translation problems!

GL: As for me, I think in English—it's the language that I find most comfortable for me to express myself. I think that there's never been any overt decision in terms of self-translation. What I do take care in rendering in my writing is the milieu, whether it is a reimagining of the world around me or a completely secondary world, what I prioritize is the translation of the space and the place. I can use all the Filipino words in my (admittedly limited) vocabulary, but if I don't believe in the space, and if I don't believe in the project, then the story doesn't go anywhere.

JNG: Needless to say, "realistic" is not the same thing as "real," and going by your presentations it's clear you all have—you all start from—the "real" in your works. In Luna's and Jimmy's case the real is relevant or urgent personal experience, both their own and other people's, as they remember, imagine, or research it. The real in Dean's case would seem to be the charmed country of childhood, its elemental hurts, fascinations, and joys. Charlson's real is history, especially its nagging questions and silences—a concern that's particularly interesting, as we know, because history is itself necessarily narrated, isn't it? Eliza's real is pretty interesting, too, because it is constituted of questions, sourced from knowledge systems other than fiction, that could nonetheless serve as the jumping-off place for fictional explorations. It's the same for Gabby, more or less, although because she started out as a poet language to her is "real" as well, which she painstakingly minds, other than just the story per se.

Allow me to raise this question, then. Given the fact that you all agree that reality is important, what you can say about the various ways—many of them resolutely ironic and "distantiating"—speculative or non-realist writing handles or approaches it? In particular I would like you to weigh in on the following commonly heard accusation: Are the various speculative flights from realism nothing more than escapist gestures? In other words: Are speculative writers simply in denial of the complexities and difficulties of contemporary life?

LSC: Iba ang game plan ng mga nagsusulat sa Filipino pagdating sa pagpili ng anong uri ng realidad ang itatanghal. Tingin ko na-stereotype na rin ang maikling kuwento at nobela sa Filipino na binanggit sa checklist ng sapa, kalabaw, bukid. Totoong may mga ganoong kuwento na dinakila, at magpahanggang ngayon ay itinuturo bilang mabuting ispesimen ng kuwentong Filipino. Pero dapat hindi doon tumigil sa pagkaunawa natin sa kayang gawin ng maikling kuwento, prosa o nobelang Filipino. Ayaw kong ituring na parang nagtuturo kami ng ambahan (pasintabi, hindi ko intensiyong isawalang bahala ang anyo't tradisyon na ito) at fineafeature na lang sa mga dokumentaryong nilikha ng NCCA. Hindi naman dapat alienated ang mambabasang Filipino sa sariling panitikan. Kaya lang, batay sa napagmamasdan

kong mga paraan ng pagtuturo ng panitikan at kakulangan ng talas para ituro ang panitikan na umaayon sa panahon at pangangailangan ng kontemporaneong Filipino, tila parang napakalaking pagsalunga(t) ang itaya pang sumulat sa Filipino sa panahon ngayon. Hindi ko rin sinasabi na dapat kalimutan natin ang mahuhusay magkuwento sa Ingles. Ang sinasabi ko, lawakan natin ang nalalangoy natin sa pagbabasa at sa pagsusulat.

Gusto kong banggitin ang ambag sa realismo ni RM Topacio Aplaon, na masasabi kong nagpapatunay na ang tunay na talent ay laging matatalunton, basta't hindi napapupurol ang paraan ng pagbasa at pagtuklas. Pinatunayan ni Aplaon na wala sa edad ang sopistikasyon at maturity ng pananaw pagdating sa pag-angkin ng isang mundo, isang karanasan na bagama't paulit-ulit nang nakikita'y maaring maging bago pa rin, dahil sa kapangyarihan ng kanyang paghawak sa panahunan, tauhan, imahen, talinghaga. Ang mga touchstone na ito para sa akin ay hindi kukupas sa alinmang panahon.

JAL: Realism as a mode of representation pays privileged attention to contemporary society and life. This has been the prevalent mode for sometime. I don't think it has become outmoded, despite some speculations to the contrary. For as long as we still consider the world around us as important, then any literary representation that recognizes its own continuing importance is still workable and relevant. Can you imagine a world where all books deliberately ignore the immediate world and focus instead on an alternative reality in another universe? That, of course, is the ultimate nightmare. The poet and critic Gemino H. Abad has come out with several anthologies of Filipino short stories in English spanning several decades: *Upon Our Own Ground, 1956–1972*; *Underground Spirit, 1973–1989*; and *Hoard of Thunder, 1990–2008*. From his comprehensive survey, you can already chart the relative fortunes of the realist and the non-realist story. In fact, in his Introduction, Abad observes that among the stories in his anthologies, there are non-realist stories, stories of the marvelous and the supernatural, but he observes that the dominant form in Philippine fiction is still realistic. Despite the growing popularity of speculative or non-realist fiction in the

Philippines, I believe the enduring dominance of realist fiction will continue in the foreseeable future.

Incidentally, you might think that the non-realist or the speculative mode of writing is a very recent Filipino literary development. Not so. It was already very much around before the formulation of this Western term, if you consider the magical nature of our ancient legends, cosmological accounts of the universe, folktales, myths, and epics with their talking animals, flying carpets, and levitating datus. To appreciate the magical nature of our folk literature, we only need to revisit Damiana L. Eugenio's comprehensive folklore series.

An important current trend in Philippine writing is the growing popularity of modern speculative fiction. *Wikipedia* defines speculative fiction as "a broad category of narrative fiction that includes elements, settings and characters created out of the imagination and speculation rather than based on reality and everyday life. It encompasses the genres of science fiction fantasy, science fantasy, horror, alternative history, and magic realism." It may feature "mythical creatures and supernatural entities, technologies that do not exist in real life like time machines and interstellar spaceships, or magical or otherwise scientifically inexplicable elements." How do we explain this development?

Some of our friends on this panel are non-realist writers or writers of speculative fiction, and they have already mulled his question with more substance. But allow me to give my five-cents' worth—my own attempt at a "speculation." Like everyone else, writers are susceptible to the influence of popular culture from abroad. Western books and movies are ever present in the national consciousness of readers and movie-goers. And writers as well. Just think of the popular recent releases: *Game of Thrones*, *The Hobbit*, the *Harry Potter* books, *The Lord of the Rings, Cloud Atlas, The Hunger Games, Ender's Game, The Time Traveler's Wife*, etc. They are all over the place. I think Filipino writers are inspired by this exciting field of the imagination, so they try their hand to participate in the global speculative conversation.

Speculative does not automatically mean escapist. It depends on how the speculative is developed. For instance, it can be developed as a possible future of the world, given the state of contemporary realities. Think of such books as *Brave New World, The Handmaid's Tale, 1984,* and *Fahrenheit 45*—all of them far from being merely trivial flights of fancy.

DA: The best, or most engaging, speculative fiction is anchored in truth. We may create a secondary world with mindboggling realities but still, it needs to be anchored in some emotional truth. Speculation is not merely an escape. It is a strategy to cope with the real world, an effort to question events and circumstances and see if things could be different. We ask the question, "What if?" and we provide stories that explore answers.

EV: I was in Hong Kong very recently, and I met up with a friend, Crystal Koo, who also writes, and she teaches literature also. And I asked her, so what do Hong Kong teenagers write about? And she said, life in Hong Kong is very fast, right. It's very natural to see people running to the trains, and when the train is late by five minutes it ends up on the front-page of their newspapers, and so on. And the teenagers, in her class, they write slow stories, very inward-looking. So I'm thinking, maybe that's their escape. You have a very fast city life, with hardly any room for personal contemplation in a way, and that's what your commit to the page.

I'm thinking with young writers now, what they find important may seem frivolous to us, but it means the world to them. So I think that it's still important in class to treasure that, to honor that. As they grow older, what's important in their lives will change also. And I'm pretty sure they will become more socially aware. And then their stories, as well as their craft, hopefully will improve.

Personally, in my writing, I want my stories to be well-written and entertaining, but I also want them to be thought-provoking, without being didactic or preachy. I want people to read my stories, and enjoy them, but I also want my readers to think. Speculative fiction, it's just a different lens, really, to look at the world. And you can't completely escape the world, the

way you can't completely escape your culture, your family, your humanity, your own body.

GL: To borrow and bastardize C. S. Lewis, the only people who should be concerned with escapism are jailers guarding prisoners. Otherwise, all fiction is escapist, speculative. There is no other way to imagine contemporary life as being anything other than speculative—many of the ways in which we relate and communicate and experience life has been imagined by science fiction writers in the '60s and '70s and onwards. "Cyberspace" as a practical concept was first articulated in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, a cyberpunk novel from the 1980s. In fact, I'd argue that SF writers *confront* the complexities and difficulties of contemporary life simply because it highlights and extrapolates experiences from the disparate elements of the present. The horrors of war, the fear of famine, the terrible things that people do to each other—these are all highlighted and emphasized in SF. When people read widely and deeply, whatever stories they encounter, I think that the genre boundaries blur even more, because at the end of the day, what matters is the immersion, the experience.

JNG: Let us now venture into potentially perilous territory. As has been the experience of so many of our writers (and artists) across a tumultuous century, realism is not always the easiest—or the safest—strategy or mode to use in one's work. The question is, should realism necessarily be the preferred vehicle for protest and/or "resistance" in our own time? What can you say about the idea that speculative writing can, in the face of repressive regimes, in fact function as a "strategy of circumvention" for socially engaged writers? Have you ever availed yourself of this strategy in your work? Conversely, can one be a staunchly speculative writer and still espouse a politics or be an advocate for something?

JAL: Of course, either way. Protest is a function of rhetorical strategy. Protest is bodied forth in a sliding scale from outright to subtle. You can deal with protest directly in realist fiction. Or you can deal with protest indirectly through allegory, irony, metaphor, etc. in non-realist fiction. In Abad's anthology *Underground*

Spirit, which covers stories from 1973 to 1989, some Filipino writers resorted to such strategies of circumvention. As Abad pointed out in his Introduction, "because of the ever-present danger of arrest (torture, imprisonment, disappearance), writers during the Marcos dictatorship (1972 to 1986) were driven to other forms or guises of the short story: fantasy, fable, ghost story, parable, science fiction, tale."

DA: The burden of the political should not be placed on every story in existence. But certainly, fantasy, science fiction, and horror have been used to comment on political situations by authors here and abroad. We can project a utopia, for example, to counter the dystopian feeling of the current times in our country. We can create fantasy worlds where women are not treated as inferior, in hopes that one day, it will come true. We can write horror to deal with the real monsters in our society. Speculative fiction can advocate for the political just as realist fiction can. Spec fic classics, such as Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," are particularly resonant in the context of extrajudicial killings. But we need to recognize that not all stories need to be so. Stories that spark a sense of wonder are just as vital.

EV: Definitely. As I mentioned earlier, speculative fiction just gives you a different lens to look at the world. It's a way, an instrument, to talk about topics that people may be tired of thinking about, and talking about. Recently I was part of the Virgin Labfest, my entry was called *Marte.* It's about OFWs on Mars. People can be sick of talking about the plight of poor migrant workers—my father was an OFW when I was younger—they're overworked, they're underpaid, they get abused. How can you talk about abusive labor practices without alienating people? How can you engage them? Speculative fiction, genre fiction, has always been seen as a vehicle for entertainment, but entertainment can also educate. So for that piece, I changed the lens, I moved the OFWs away from Dubai, UAE, Hong Kong, and placed them on Mars. So we have a new conversation, and we can listen to each other again.

I'm not going claim that I'm an activist for migrant workers, because that's unfair to the people who draft laws, who reach out to OFWs and help them escape that life, but I want to use my fiction to educate (especially since I see that my readers are mostly in their early twenties, or younger). My latest novel *Wounded Little Gods* touches on eugenics. Who the hell wants to talk about eugenics? But perhaps if I package it in my fiction, even high schoolers won't tune me out.

GL: All writing is political. One's stories can carry with it one's beliefs and opinions and politics. What SF does is it provides a different, alternative lens in viewing what is otherwise a massive and overwhelming info-dump. For example: Orson Scott Card is a terrible human being, but *Ender's Game* is a fantastic meditation on the nature of politics and political discourse during a time of war. It asks the important questions: who should be responsible for the destruction of another life? Who bears the guilt of war—the politicians making the decisions or the soldiers carrying them out? Add to that the personal journey of Ender as he moves from innocence to experience, the classic *bildungsroman*, and you have a novel that plays on the anxieties of a society that feels both responsible for its own actions and at the same time, fearful of retribution. Except that, you know, this takes place in a futuristic military camp in space, with technology that far outstrips what we have now, and subverts the entire humans vs. aliens space battles that were a staple in military science fiction. But the questions and concerns are still valid, I think, for the way we live now.

JNG: Fantasy is a very popular subgenre in the non-realist canon, and this is the case not just textually but also *transmedially*, on both the local and global fronts. In an interview with a local magazine during his visit here a few years back, Neil Gaiman gushed about our country's rich mythological worlds, and issued a subtle challenge to our young writers to tap into them (or else he would). What can you say about Filipino works of fantasy that do tap into our native myths? Are there better or more "effective" ways of going about this project? While Gaiman

obviously didn't have any experiential claims to know about this important misgiving or caveat, nevertheless we do need to ask ourselves: Might there be ethical questions to the "mythopoetic" use of regional folkloric material—especially when the users are Manila-based and from the middle class?

DA: There will always be a struggle and a negotiation between cultural ownership and appropriation, between promoting and exoticizing our own. We need to respect the cultural contexts and history of our sources when we borrow from the myths and stories outside of our own experience. We can use these as a springboard, to creatively construct something new, but there will always be the root of it.

JAL: The use of our own mythologies as the basis of Filipino works of fantasy is not only logical but also desirable. We don't want to be known simply as copycats, making our local versions of *Star Trek* and *Superman*. However, the use of regional folkloric material by just anybody may raise the question of authenticity, knowledge, and ownership. The material is not just any story but an important part of the cultural identity of an ethnic group. There is something fraudulent about somebody freely singing somebody else's song as though it were his own.

I would encourage the lumad writers to write about the materials because otherwise I think it's sort of preempting them. You take their stories, you tell their stories, and you tell the world you are the owner of the story and you're not, you just heard it. But that's my point of view. Probably it's just a personal opinion, I would like the lumad writers to have the chance to tell their own stories. I think this is a very delicate question. It's like if you are in the US, you are a white writer, and you write the story of a black person. How authentic is your story? I mean it boils down to that, eventually. Are you just capitalizing on something that is popular? And you have things like this big case of an American poet who was rejected so many times, he was forced to take a pseudonym, a Chinese woman's name, and the poem was Chinese-themed, and the poem was accepted and was included in the *Best American Poetry* of the year. Actually he admitted it, he thought poets of color had it easier than white male poets.

When people found out that this came from a white man and not from a Chinese woman, they got angry because they felt that he was capitalizing on something that he did not really earn.

JNG: Yellowface.

JAL: For a Chinese woman writing as a Chinese woman, there already exists a history that she has to overcome, a history of discrimination and oppression …

EV: Sexism.

GL: Patriarchy.

JAL: All of these things. But the white writer did not suffer, he did not go through all that, and as if through a sleight of hand, by using a mask, he got the reward without the pain. I mean it could be interpreted that way.

EV: I grew up in Bulacan, with maternal roots in Cagayan, so when I do tap into folklore and myth, I tap into the stories I know. If you're a writer who's going to appropriate something outside your own region or culture, it's important to remember context. You have to be extremely circumspect. Where is your information about the culture or the myth coming from? Is it reliable? Is it fair? Are you writing the story from a place of empathy—or are you writing it from a position of power? Come to think of it, these questions should be asked by every writer, but even more so by the writer who plans to step into a life he or she has never lived, has never even brushed against.

GL: I think that there's a difference between adaptation and appropriation. This is something that, I believe, has been discussed in the ongoing conversations regarding diversity in SF. As a Filipino, I think I have every right to use what is available to me, and what is interesting to me, in order to tell a story. My loyalty, first and foremost, is to the story. Am I telling it the best way I know how? If it needed research, did I do my research? Was I faithful to the core concepts? Am I respectful to the sources, and can I stand by my creative choices? That's how stories survive: by being adapted, by being passed on.

If I wanted to write an academic essay about myths and legends, then I'd write that. But I'm writing fiction, and fiction

is about imagining a "What if?" scenario and pursuing it. Otherwise, if we're just going to put up walls and boundaries and borders between them, if we're just going to keep on saying "No, you can't have this, it's mine," as if anyone can just claim entire pantheons for themselves, then there's no point in imagining anything. We might as well just stop ourselves—and stop people like Rick Riordan (he's not Greek, so why does he have the right to retell Greek myths?) and Neil Gaiman (he's not South African, so why is he allowed to adapt the story of Anansi, or play around with different pantheons in *American Gods*?) and even Budjette and Ka-Jo's *Trese* series—because of this perceived demand for fidelity to a singular source, which may or may not even exist.

JNG: Many of us may have problems—or "disenchantments"—with realism, but at least as a dominant literary mode it has been rationalized, its ideal qualities inventoried and generally agreed upon and understood. What about non-realist or speculative fiction: How exactly do you determine excellence in this mode of writing? What are its formal or technical "touchstones," and how might one productively deploy them (for instance, in the business of curating and/or editing manuscripts)?

JAL: If not verisimilitude, then a thoroughness in the construction of the imagined world, action that begins somewhere and ends in some manner of completeness and satisfactory closure, characters that behave consistently according to their inner nature and motivation, etc. In other words, more or less the same things I look for in realist fiction.

DA: In terms of the literary, the basic elements are the same: narrative techniques, character, plot, setting, world-building, language, tone. But with spec fic, there are also the specific genre tropes that define the type of story. Science fiction, for example, needs to explore some scientific notion or scenario, whether hard or soft scifi. But ultimately, spec fic needs to engage readers and draw them deep into the unreal worlds. Because it needs verisimilitude, it needs to be anchored on truth, whether that truth is a personal truth or a speculative one.

EV: The formal or technical "touchstones" for speculative fiction are similar to the "touchstones" for realist fiction, except that the speculative fiction writer has to work harder to make the reader believe that the story he or she is telling is true. How will you build this never-before-seen world without relying on "info-dump," or paragraph after paragraph of description and exposition? One of my pet peeves in fantasy or science fiction is when characters explain certain aspects of their world to each other. Why are you explaining what a mandrake root/time machine/wormhole is? You are sorcerers/scientists/adventurers who live in this world—you should know this already! Obviously, they're talking about it for the sake of the hapless reader, but how can you write the scene in a way without making it seem contrived?

GL: It's the same as with any other piece of writing: Does it make sense? Was the writer able to wield the elements of fiction together in order to sustain the story? Is it better/worse than other stories that have followed similar beats, or paths? As with any other genre, writing SF requires that the writer must be familiar with the tropes or conventions of the field, has a clear vision or project that was pursued throughout the text, and is able to maintain the suspension of disbelief necessary in all forms of fiction. I think in addition, for SF, we need to be more aware of the world-building as well—does the world you're creating make sense to the reader, who does not live in that world, but who wants to enter it?

JNG: Finally I want to bring up the question of language, which the presence of Luna in this panel all too powerfully sets in bold relief. At the end of it all, we simply must flag the fact that the choice of language is entirely determinative of so many things in our literature—calling forth questions about its inception and reception, which of course bring up (the) usual and inevitable regional, national, and class concerns.

While we can easily accede to the idea that we may not need to challenge or reject realism outright (simply because the exciting depth and full range of its possibilities have not been sufficiently explored in our literature), nevertheless, as it is practiced and taught, especially in English Creative Writing

classes, it seems to be obviously culturally circumscribed, its fictional worlds much too limited (and diminished). I know that the situation may indeed be different, or even opposite, in the history of fiction in Filipino, but the fact is, unlike in the generation of anglophone writers like Kerima Polotan Tuvera, Juan Gatbonton, NVM Gonzalez, and Aida Rivera Ford, nowadays many realist stories being written in English (especially by the younger authors) are narrated in the first person. As a realist formal strategy—that betrays a cultural fetish for authenticity on one hand, and intimates the rise of "antifiction" fiction on the other—this narrative method renders these stories experientially limited, especially as it is wielded by the soft and sheltered hands of English-proficient, mostly city-bred, and middle-class young Filipinos. Admittedly, while these writers normally can't be expected to immerse themselves in the realities of the rural and urban poor, it's very troubling to think that, going by the evidence of their literary output, many of them may just be oblivious and entirely self-satisfied in their own little corners of the Philippine reality, and not remotely care about what's happening to the rest of the country.

Might commonly endorsed writing protocols—for instance, "Get Real"—in our Creative Writing programs have something to do with this trend? Should it be time to rethink—or even, reject—this artful but dangerously solipsistic imperative?

JAL: I think your personal excitement, if it's really there, would be communicated and they might get wind of that. So you have to be interested in what you're teaching. Some teachers, really, they have no business being in the classroom. They just collect their salary, and that's the most dulling experience, if you're under a teacher who does not love the subject matter. And then I think it is important to recognize the interest of your students. Look at their current level of proficiency. For example, if they don't understand the language, say English, very well, don't give them very difficult or highly symbolic stories; stick to something that is very simple, on the surface, the meaning is right there, that they can see. Don't give them Eric Gamalinda just yet. I think you start with this decision. Just give them something that is of

interest to them, and then capitalize on their level of proficiency, their current interests, and then you can move on to something more difficult at the end of the semester.

DA: I write in English because I grew up reading and speaking in English. And while writing only in English may seem limiting, the question is actually easily answered by the very nature of speculative fiction itself: we speculate. We go beyond the boundaries of our immediate surroundings and experiences. We question our limitations and create new worlds to explore the answers in. We are not all immersed in the realities of the urban poor, but we can research and imagine a Philippines in the far-flung future when we are an entire nation of scavengers—and take it from there. While young writers tend to turn inward, as they mature they will tend to look around, away, and beyond themselves.

EV: I think I'd begin by asking these young writers themselves why they decide to write these, as you say, "experientially limited" stories. Maybe it isn't because they don't care, but because they are overwhelmed, or scared, or tired. God knows the world is a wearying place. I think before we demand them to be socially aware, we should first see if they are even *aware* of their own thoughts and feelings and their place in this world, if they have the strength to constantly interrogate themselves.

GL: As one of the young faculty who teaches fiction, okay, one of the things that I actually enjoy from students are stories that take their reality and make it new in some way or form. One of the things I tell my students obviously, I cannot experience what you're experiencing right now, una sa lahat, kasi mas matanda na ako sa inyo. Pangalawa, 'yong reality ko when I was in college is probably different from your reality right now. For example, everyone's on their phones. And when you ask them, my first instinct is always, nagbubulakbol ka 'no? And then it turns out that they're actually looking for definitions, for things that I say, or looking at other things that can inform what they say in class, for example. So okay, it's knowledge-gathering pala, and it helps them craft the ideas they will eventually say in the classroom or whenever we have discussions, and to me that's always helpful.

The second thing is, and this is one of the eternal frustrations that I think student writers have, is that nobody listens to them. And so the best that I can do as a teacher is to give them a range. And then to find, from this particular range, what they're particularly interested in. I think there's always a moment of emulation, because that's the way we learn. We copy the people that we like to read or the stories that we respond best to. Certainly that was how I started. And a lot of student writers, I think, are in that particular stage. And I think it's unfair to tell them immediately, "This is terrible," without giving them the chance to experience things. Because I always think there's a curve. And I think that, to tell young people that just because you're not writing in one way doesn't mean that it's bad writing.

I think that socially conscious writing can, and should be part of one's writing life. In fact, just by being sensitive to the world one lives in, one will already build one's social consciousness, which is reflected in one's writing. And as storytellers, the choices we make—the language, the genre, the politics—will always play a part in crafting a story.

LSC: Mahalaga na alam ko—at hindi ito sapilitan dapat—na mahalaga pa rin nating basahin sina Lazaro Francisco, Macario Pineda, Rosario de Guzman Lingat, Marcel Navarra, Wilfredo Pa. Virtusio at marami pang iba. Hindi lang naman Filipino at Ingles ang mga wika natin, di ba? Mayroon tayong mga wika sa Waray, Sugbuanon, Ilokano, Hiligaynon, at madalas nakakalimutan natin iyon. At siya nga pala, ang katumbas ng speculative sa Filipino ay sapantaha.

Pag sinabi nating sapantaha, ay parang nahuhulaan o nakukutuban mo. So related siya sa prophecy, pero hindi katulad noong halimbawa ng mga futuristic visions na may mga robot—mahirap sumulat pala ng ganoon sa Filipino kasi hindi kapanipaniwalang magiging technogically advanced tayo, or makakarating ang isa sa atin sa buwan … Totoong masalimuot, pero nagpupursigi pa rin kami—sa pagsulat na iyon, at doon sa path na iyon, kasi ang paniniwala namin, katulad ng sinabi ninyo, we need to expand our universe.

Sayang nga lang at hindi natutuklasan ng karamihan ang kahusayan ng mga naunang sumulat ng sapantaha tulad ng ginawa ni Macario Pineda sa *Ang Ginto sa Makiling*, o ang mga kuwento ng katatakutan/domestikong drama ni Rosario de Guzman Lingat. Tingin ko kailangan ring baklasin ang stereotipong nasa sosyal na realismo lamang ang lipad ng kuwento o nobela sa Filipino. Bakit kailangan maliit lamang? Noong panahon na nagsulat ang aking ama kasama ng kanyang mga kasabayang sina Ave Perez Jacob, Efren Abueg, Dominador Mirasol at Edgardo M. Reyes, ang mga realistikong kuwento nila tungkol sa mga aguador, tungkol sa mga atsoy, tungkol sa mga aping manggagawa, ay reaksiyon din dahil ang mga nilalabas ng *Liwayway* at popular na magasin ay mga kuwentong pag labas mo ng pintuan ay makakakita ka ng bayong ng ginto, o mga duwendeng nagsasalita. Speculative ang mga iyon, 'di ba, o mas angkop sigurong tukuyin na eskapista, at sa kasaysayan ng kuwento sa Filipino, "nauna" sila sa uri ng realismong tumutuligsa sa lipunan. Kaya inis na inis ang mga manunulat na tulad ng aking ama dahil nga ang hirap hirap na nga ng buhay, dekada '60 na noon at malapit nang mag-Martial Law, tapos puro duwende at kapre ang pinupuntirya ng maraming kuwentista. Mabuti na rin at pinulot ng mga manunulat sa SIGWA tulad nina Ricardo Lee, Fanny Garcia, at Levy Balgos de la Cruz, ang mga tematiko't mga diskursibong mga tanong.

Ito ang dahilan kaya hindi pa rin kumukupas ang mga istorya na nakaugat sa ating katotohanan o sa ating mga realidad. Babanggitin ko lang 'yong isang maikling kuwento na nabasa ko. Kasama ito sa anthology na ipinasa namin sa UP Press. Ito 'yong "Hasang," na sinulat ni Jolly Lugod. Ang premise niya ay nasa coastal village nakatira 'yong mga mangingisda. 'Yong asawa doon ay labis na nalungkot sa pagkalunod ng kanyang anak na batang lalaki, kaya bawat gabi ay lumulusong siya sa dagat, hanggang sa tubuan siya ng hasang. Sa dulo ng kuwento, 'yong babae ay maglalaho at sasama doon sa anak niyang lalaki. Noong una kong nabasa iyong kuwento, sabi ko, Grabe, ang galing-galing ng manunulat na iyon. Buong-buo 'yong kuwento't damang-dama mo 'yong pang-araw-araw na buhay ng mga

mangingisda. 'Yong description, halimbawa, ng alat sa dila—may nangyayari kasi sa balat mo sa labis na paglusong sa dagat, iyong mga ganoon, mahirap siyang hanapan ng kahambing o isalin sa Ingles—kailangan precise, at kuhang-kuha ito ni Lugod.

Sa huli't huli, ito siguro ang mga pinakaimportanteng isipin ng nagtatangkang sumulat. Unang-una, kailangang magwagi siya sa digmaan ng wika. Ikalawa, kailangang buo ang kanyang kuwento, anumang kategorya iyon. Kapag napagtagumpayan niya 'yong dalawang tests na ito—hindi naman siguro test, kundi kahilingan—may istorya na nga siya. Ang kuwento, akala ng marami, ay ang dali-daling isulat. Actually, ang hirap-hirap niyon—tinutulay mo ang hamon para matandaan ng mga tao na may kuwento ka, sa pagsalok sa pang-araw-araw na buhay at dalumat, ngunit para maging memorable ang kuwento, humihigit dapat sa pang-araw-araw ang saklaw ng dalumat. At walang ibang paraan para magawa iyon maliban sa pagiging ispekulatibo. Ito ang challenge na lagi naming binubuno bilang mga manunulat sa Filipino.

Kaya ang paanyaya ko sa mga kapuwa ko ring denizens, citizens sa repubika ng kuwento, ay tuklasin din natin ang isa't-isa. Idadagdag ko pa na kinakailangan din nating umalpas paminsan-minsan, at lumabas sa ating bayan.

Ang dami-daming mga kuwento sa mundo.