Abstract

In this keynote given at the First National Queer Studies Conference, sponsored by the Center for Gender and Women's Studies of the University of the Philippines in November 2020, the author presents his reflections on the (anglophonic) conditions of possibility of this field of inquiry in a cultural location such as ours—one that is characterized by the cultural and linguistic simultaneities that the translational processes of coloniality and its aftermath must engender. After reviewing the social history of "queer" as a political category, the author discusses the implications of its translational fate in the Philippines, in the process offering new and radically specific possibilities of its enactment within both a postcolonial and a decolonial framework.

Keywords

LGBTQ, translation, bakla, anglophone, decolonial

LET'S GET REAL:
Queering the Queer in the Philippines

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MY TASK FOR this conference[1] has been kindly urged upon me by the organizers: I need to report on the state of the art of Queer Studies in the Philippines today.

I did not choose this as a topic, and I don't think I'd have chosen it if given a choice. It smacks not so much of something reportorial as of something magisterial, inaugural, and ceremoniously space-clearing. While it's an entirely sensible idea, especially given the fact that this is the very first national conference of its kind, I suppose I'm simply loath to take on the immense responsibility of articulating the nature and context of this thing that we are being asked to call Queer Studies.

The reason for my misgivings about such a task will therefore be the crux of my presentation: What exactly is Queer, what is Queer Studies, and what are the conditions of their possibility? Are these conditions even present or at least present enough in the Philippines so that these discourses can actually happen or take root here? What are the

characteristics of these "happenings," and how meaningful can they be in our case?

What—if Queer Studies per se isn't entirely likely or feasible—can possibly take its place? How may we characterize and explain what's currently occurring in the Philippines: mobilizings, organizings, cultural events, and knowledge production in general that are increasingly proceeding under the banner "LGBTQ" (or "LGBTQI+"—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, etc.)? How is this contemporary reality related to similar-sounding events from the recent past—the 1990s, for instance, when LGBT activist work started to pick up in the urban centers of our country?

A personal reckoning will provide a framework for historicizing our topic, especially as far as our country is concerned. In other words, inasmuch as I've been doing extensive work in this area—mostly academic and scholarly but also communitarian and activist—recalling several "key" moments in this ongoing project will hopefully prove useful in taking stock of where things stand, and of where we stand, in relation to the topic at hand.

Back in the early 1990s, when I was doing my master of arts thesis in comparative literature—on the history of Philippine gay culture, from the postwar era to that point[2]—the newfangled coalitional identity called LGBT was only starting to take shape and get invoked locally.

As spurred by the separation of lesbian-identifying feminists from the broader women's movement in the country, as well as by what at the time was an entirely lethal HIV/AIDS emergency—for which international funding was generously available, enabling grassroots movements and organizing among members of Metro Manila's gay and MSM (men who have sex with men) communities—this identity started becoming embraced as a form of political self-identification by more and more individuals in the activist movement, one whose primary initiatives involved lobbying for antidiscrimination legislation.[3]

Three decades in, this initiative still hasn't seen any fruition, even as the text of the bills that have been pushed in successive congressional sessions shows the elaboration and expansion of the discourse, with more and more letters getting tacked onto the acronym under which it has, hitherto, been championed: from LGBT to LGBTQ to LGBTQI to LGBTQIA+. This thickening of the activist alphabet soup is of course in keeping with what has also been

happening in the international scene, particularly in the United States (US).

On the other hand, in my own regional engagements in the field of gender and sexuality studies, I noticed that it was initially only the economically prosperous country of Taiwan, later followed by Singapore, that saw the word "queer" being referenced in both academic and activist work. This was largely due to the fact that, in the 1990s, so many young locals were receiving their degrees in the US, where they picked up the term and its attendant SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression) discourse, and upon returning promoted its use even if this did not necessarily reflect what was happening on the ground.

At a huge gathering of scholars in Bangkok fifteen years ago, I remember that I was the one who *controversially* called attention to this fact, during a plenary roundtable discussion, in which I echoed the sentiment of many other participants mostly from the greater part of Asia (in particular, South and Southeast Asia).[4]

This was 2004 already, and as against what would appear to be the theoretical commonsense and—let's face it—globalist essentialism implicit in the keynotes and plenaries of invited speakers from the US and Australia, most local scholars participating in that conference agreed that if "LGBT" itself seemed far from self-evident and empirically true in our different locations in the world—what more this innovative new "anglocentrism" called Queer? I remember saying that, during this time in the Philippines, only politically minded visiting Filipino Americans (Fil-Ams) from the West and East Coasts would conceivably go around the archipelago referring to themselves as "queer," and that they would revert to being gay or lesbian after around a week or two of hanging out in Malate or Makati with their Filipino lesbian and gay—actually, more likely, *tibo* and *bakla*—friends.

What again is Queer, anyway? At this point, it might be useful to do a review of this category's recent social history.

As those who are ancient enough among us might recall, the currency of the term "queer" owes something from the AIDS crisis of the 1990s, when young gay people in the US, scared of the AIDS-identified label "gay," opted to call themselves "queer" instead.[5] Obviously, the increased homophobia this crisis spawned warranted a renewed militancy among gays (and later on, lesbians). Publicly, "queer" was mobilized to serve

AIDS activism throughout this decade, for it referred to an identity that did not crystallize into an easily identifiable type of sexual subject.

As theorized almost concurrently, "queer" doesn't refer to anything or anybody in particular, which is why it has proven desirable to "postidentitarian" critics. Back then, it was being touted among theory circles as an ambiguous category that described non- or anticonformity.

According to the theorists who promoted its use, "queer" can refer to any form and manner of sexual "strangeness"—bisexual, transgender, even "straight." Supposedly, it only vaguely alludes to homosexuality and, instead, evokes, according to Ellis Hanson, a whole spectrum of "sexual possibilities . . . that challenge the familiar distinction between normal and pathological, straight and gay, masculine men and feminine women."[6]

All told, the arrival of Queer Discourse into the scene of sexual and gender theorizing in the West has been taken to signal a disruption of all conventional understandings of identity, subjectivity, political action, and community. As a critical persuasion, it is heir to the decades-long poststructuralist theorizing and social mobilization that sought to denaturalize the various categories of selfhood and desire. The idea of it is that, since it cannot be defined exactly, it will stubbornly resist any and all forms of "normativizing."

Back in the mid-1990s, my sense about all this was, as I actually wrote in an essay titled "The Queer and the Bakla,"[7] despite their similarity as refunctioned pejoratives that can also pertain to extrasexual things, the most crucial difference between the two terms lies in the epistemologies that generated them: postmodern on one hand, postcolonial on the other.

As postmodern, the politics of queerness emerges from an antihumanist notion of subjectivity that decenters and disperses it. As such, its performative force tends to be—in the words of the critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—"universalizing," in that it potentially implicates everyone, being a relational category that is the constitutive other of dominant gender and sexual norms[8] (in other words, Queer is what heteronormativity precludes, that makes it possible to begin with).

By contrast, as postcolonial, *kabaklaan* is heir to models of gendered subjectivity that have an immemorial history in our islands and that have been syncretized across the colonial and postcolonial centuries. It was originally and is still enduringly a predominantly gender concept, which bespeaks a kind of "psychospiritual depth"—of being "woman-hearted"

or having a feminine *kalooban* on one hand and, on the other, in terms of sexual desire of being masculine-fixated, otherwise described in the literature as being slavishly fascinated with the "real man" or *tunay na lalaki*.[9]

So many years later, we have seen enough local mainstreaming of the word "queer" in our country that a conference like this can be so confidently named. This was something I actually anticipated in that aforesaid essay.

Allow me, at this point, to quote from it:

> I foresee that within the next few years a version of queer politics will find its way into the urban sexual cultures of our country. This is bound to happen as proven by the increasingly Western-inspired nature and context of the conceptual history of Philippine sexuality itself. As yet I do not know of any reasons why such an importation should fare any better than the other concepts which have already been implanted here in the last few decades or so. . . . In my study, I referred to this [as a] process of appropriation, . . . of "miscomprehension" and cognitive slippage: concepts from the West do not become understood all that fully hereabouts, and although they may appear to be circulating within much of local discourse (in that the actual words are being spoken and written within the different registers of our cultures), their significations slip helplessly away from their actual performances. This situation redounds to what many critics have observed as the uncanny ability of our cultures to resist implantation of concepts for which they do not have equivalents.[10]

I have reflected on this slippage or "nonconvergence" in many other places and using a variety of analytic lenses across the years. More specifically, I have referred to this as the deployment of a social constructionist approach to the study of gender, sexuality, and subjectivity itself. As I understand it, and going by my own experience, the genealogy for this approach stretches from social theory to cultural studies, and from feminist anthropology to indigenous psychology. Recently, I have found that the best way to at once complicate and clarify it is by situating

it within the question of interlingual cross-coding, which we may also call translation.

In explaining this translational perspective, we must of course begin with the obvious, which is the grounding assumption that visibly organizes most of our discursivities (including those that this conference itself is visibly sponsoring): LGBTQ discourse is being conducted in the anglophonic register in many places around the world, which is a fact that merely reflects trends in technological and cultural globalization as a whole.

Let us ask ourselves the most logical question, hence: What does it mean when we render opaque the cultural specificity of the language in which we have been inquiring, especially when the location in which it occurs and to which it pertains is not monolingual or monocultural but rather culturally hybrid, syncretic, and helplessly mixed?

Because I'm also a teacher of Philippine literature in English as well as an anglophone creative writer—of both poetry and nonfiction prose—I suppose it makes sense that I should eventually bring up this question, the linguistic situation in our country being inescapably translational, by which I mean that it is constitutively and interlingually mixed.

I have come to see, reflecting on the ground on which I have been standing in all these years, as a writer, scholar, and teacher at the Department of English and Comparative Literature of the University of the Philippines, that to write in English in the Philippines is to engage in cultural translation, which necessitates both "mimesis" or representation and "poiesis" or invention, the resultant text being mostly a hybrid of both and therefore finally irreducible to either.[11]

This first realization quickly led to a second one: Something is always lost, something is always gained, in the translational exchange, equivalency being an illusion that translation practices can either dissimulate or visibly flag. Practically speaking, a translation can either "foreignize" or "domesticize" the target text.[12]

The latter approach aims to read seamlessly in the target language, while the former seeks to disrupt linguistic uniformity by allowing for the intrusion of the local and the untranslatable into the resultant articulation. Needless to say, at this point in my reflection, it easily dawned on me that, for the sake of uniformity and what I believed would be a kind of "general intelligibility"—as well as by force of habit and obligation, given that my profession in our esteemed University of the Philippines is as an English

teacher—in practically all my "English" writings, I had mostly been opting to domesticize rather than foreignize my descriptions and narrations of, as well as ruminations on, local realities.

Allow me to say, at this point, that I don't think critical anglophone writing, even or especially in LGBTQ academic discourses in the Philippines and conceivably elsewhere, registers enough awareness of this translational process—as can be seen, for example, in their marked preference for uniformly English articulations.

We need to acknowledge that English is a language that still occupies an ironic or at least "self-conscious" place in the lives of many Filipinos, despite the fact that we already have our own anglophone world, as attested to by our century-old literary tradition in English. Orality is immemorial in the archipelago, while literacy, which remains uneven and in many ways problematic even in our own time, is coextensive with the introduction of American-style public education and the language in which it has been couched.

The Philippines' anglophone tradition represents local realities by translating them, both in the technical and cultural senses of the word. As translational, Philippine literature in English negotiates the plurality of cultural and linguistic registers and ideas of local realities and encodes them in/as English. As my work itself all too typically exemplifies, this encoding tends to be more "domesticizing" than "foreignizing"—meaning, rather than code-shift and *ethnicize* my use of English, I, as a typical Filipino anglophone writer, generally tend to prefer the universal over the particular, opting for a uniformly sounding "English" articulation, whose referential specificity inheres not so much in the actual text as in the context in which it is produced and consumed.[13]

As a consequence of this translation practice, to my mind one of the most crucial tasks of the critic of Philippine literature in English is to *postcolonially interpret* its seemingly universal and self-evident themes, images, and gestures by translating them back into the specific conditions and situations that generated them.[14]

Because most Filipino writers in English prefer to compose their sentences in standard and readily intelligible ways, critics wishing to fully make sense of their utterances are compelled to carry out the extratextual labor of "contextualizing," which will flesh out more fully the meaning of those utterances. Of course, these same critics should recognize the fact that any anglophone translational project represents local realities

only partially. Needless to say, the local will resist becoming entirely converted and will persist. In other words, invention or poiesis itself puts translation's mimetic claim into crisis.

What I wish to underscore at this point is the difference between creative writing and criticism. While this "postcolonial reclaiming" is something that we as critics are expected to perform for literary or creative texts—in order to elucidate them—the question we can ask is if critical or broadly "interventional" texts are or should be entitled to the same kind of "generosity."

My sense is that critical interventions, unlike literary or creative writing, are by definition supposed to be more self-reflexive, particularly in regard to their presuppositions. Thus, while anglophone creative writers are not expected to be all that conscious that they are performing cultural translations when they write, this very same indulgence may not be so readily granted the anglophone critic or theorist, one of whose primary tasks is to examine his or her own logical premises when he or she writes.

How do we become more aware—and register the awareness—of the semantic and therefore cultural transactions that are entailed by our use of English as a medium of cultural analysis in our various anglophonic contexts? How do we pursue translation's mimetic imperative in the gendered sense when writing in English compels us to, for example, dualize gender identities and concepts, whereas in many locations in our region of the world, languages are not even pronominally gendered to begin with?

An all too crucial case in point: an immense irony or slippage takes place when one translates the Tagalog pronoun *siya* into either "he" or "she." How realistic can our verbal representation of our people's social relations be when we split them into the grammatical male and female pronouns, even when we fully well know that this isn't how they themselves refer to each other in their speech?

We need to recognize the fact that despite the anatomical dimorphism of modern biomedicine—on which the homo/hetero binary rests—as translated into the Philippine linguistic context, this binary is far from coherent and simplistically assured. While native Filipino cultures recognize the man/woman duality, this duality is not ontologized to the degree that it is in the West, in which language itself, long technologized into script and archived millennially into books, founds and promotes the

opposition, whose subsequent biomedicalization has simply served to discursively solidify it all the more. This corporeal binarism is, as we know, what premises the sexological thinking that in the history of Western sexuality gave birth to such taxonomical categories as homo/hetero and to the transgressive politics that this pathologizing subsequently spurred, as embodied in the categories Gay, Lesbian, Bi, Trans, and Queer themselves.

Obviously, recognizing the translational character of gender and sexuality studies—of LGBTQ work—in our various anglophonic contexts requires the rejection of the universalist accounts of Western biomedicine.

However, it entails something more. The interlingual position urges us to adopt a "moderate nativist" perspective in our critical interventions, that bids us not only to critique essentialism but also to always site or locate our analyses, as well as consider the persistence of residual indigenous valuations of gender that modify—that is to say, syncretize—any newly implanted gender or sexual order.

In the Philippines today, bakla signifies a syncretic notion that incorporates both local and translocal conceptions of gender transitivity and homo or "same" sexuality. Despite the modernizing ideologies of gender and sexuality that have been implanted in our culture through the imposition of anglophonic education, bakla continues to preserve, within itself, residues of its "prehomosexual" past—for instance, the notion that kabaklaan is simply a matter of "confusion" and "indecisiveness," which are, in the first place, the oldest and even strictly genderless denotations of the word bakla.

Just like the literacy on which it is premised, the sexualization[15] of the Philippines has, in other words, been far from unproblematic or complete, and local valuations of gender have simply served to hybridize the newly implanted sexual order. What this stubborn *genderizatio*n of concepts of sexuality tells us is that the sexualization of Filipinos, while increasing and expanding in its virulence, has thus far not been entirely uniform or complete. Suffice it to say that a century of literacy training and "sexologization" has not wiped out our customary and immemorial understandings of (gendered) identity, especially among the great masses of our people, whose education has not been very thorough, profound, and/or anglophone.

In other words, hereabouts, the more intensely literate, educated, Western-trained, English-speaking, urbane, urban, cosmopolitan, and

upwardly mobile you are, the more "homo/hetero" you consequently become (which is to say, the more "homo/hetero" you consider yourself to be). While "homo/hetero"—"gay/straight," "bi," "lesbian," etc.—do circulate as terms that many of us identify with, we must remember that, in many cases, we understand these words *translationally*—which is to say, qualitatively different from their original denotations. In most cases, "homo" or "gay" is understood by us as being the same as bakla, "womanish," or *binabae*, while "hetero" is conflated with the "real man."

My sense is that, here as in many other parts of Asia, modern and contemporary discourses of gender and sexuality have not amounted to a complete supersession of their cultures' existing categories for gendered personhood but simply demonstrate the same kind of translation/hybridization that extraneous concepts necessarily undergo the moment they find currency in a particular setting.

What this means is that, for example, in the Philippines, narratives of kabaklaan continue to remain as a "common ground" across the Gay, Bisexual, and male-to-female Transgender identities that must now increasingly emerge from the new global discourse of LGBTQ politics. Eager as we are to jettison the bakla in favor of these anglophone categories, if we are serious and responsible as scholars and critics of our culture's gender and sexual understandings, and if we are *siting* our work firmly in our local communities, we need to get real and recognize the fact that for the lives of the subjects we are studying, the unfinished cultural history of kabaklaan remains a formative, affective, and life-determining force.

While the translatedness of LGBTQ critical and political discursivities in the Philippines is something that Filipino LGBTQs themselves may not be conscious about, it makes sense to suggest that they should study this cultural transformation more self-consciously, if only to have some say in its possible directions and deployments.

On the other hand, on a more practical note, anglophone critics working in LGBTQ academic and even activist discourse may need to heed the lesson coming out of the experience of many Philippine anglophone writers, whose "domesticized" and universal-sounding translations require critical elucidation—and critical retranslation—in order to be properly explained and rendered more fully culturally grounded and intelligible.

Because we as critics are supposed to be more self-reflexive in our work, we should flag, in our very utterance, the reality of the translational labor that we are carrying out, not only by limning the specificities of the anglophone contexts we are coming from and working in but also by indicating and performing these contexts in the very texts that we are producing.

Other than attend to the problems of interlingual translation—across the languages of English and our many native tongues—we, of course, also need to think about the "intersemiotic" translation across orality and textuality, which is a cultural transition that remains uneven—and unfinished—in our case. I have already referred to this when I earlier mentioned the gendered nondualism inherent in our languages' pronominal system. This is a nondualism that grounds all vernacular utterances by Filipinos, and so you can only imagine what it implies and why global debates about pronouns within the Trans, Queer, and Nonbinary communities must remain quaint for most Filipinos living in the Philippines. (It's interesting but telling, for instance, that the audibly Fil-Am-specific problem of "Filipinx" didn't quite catch on among social media users in the Philippines).

Let me share what I believe to be germane insights that I have gleaned from my reading of the *suguidanon*. These are transcribed chanted epics that come from the Panay Bukidnon people, the complete corpus of which the UP Press is currently in the process of publishing.

Epics are a form of myth, and their basic theme, as with all myths, is that there is an invisible reality that supports the visible world. Mythology, in this sense, is fundamentally mystical in character, rendering into images the amorphous essence of all things through which it can be experienced and known. We may then see myth as a creative and "imaginal" field whose referent, in the ultimate sense, is transcendent. Its purpose is to enable us to experience the world that opens to us the spiritual dimension that enfolds it. Myths make us realize the mystical presence in everyone and in everything, for according to their deepest insight, we have all been poured out of the creator's eternal Self; we are all manifestations of the one divinity.[16]

But mythology also evinces other functions. Like science, myth describes for us the various shapes and textures of reality; unlike science, however, it more easily accedes to the realization that what is real is ultimately unknowable. And then, we may also say that myths serve

a didactic or pedagogical purpose, as well: They provide individuals residing in their specific communities guides or "manuals" on how to live under whatever conditions. Finally, myth also serves to legitimate the social order as it exists. It's in this sense that myths are culturally bound as well as place-specific: They are entirely the products of their own time and circumstance. The problem of literalism is precisely its reduction of myths to this literal level, this *sociological* function, to the neglect of the rest.

These functions are in full evidence in the suguidanon, which are descriptive not so much of the Panay Bukidnon's ancient world as expressive of their abiding aspirations. Chieftest of these is the vision that not only recognizes duality but also—and more importantly—yearns to transcend it. Indeed, in these ancestral stories, the "skyworld" and the "earthworld" are not divided but actually interpenetrate one another, their creatures freely trafficking across the nonabsolute and proximal realms of the present and the nonpresent (either the past or the yet-to-be), as well as the abode of the deities and supernatural forces. Resurrection is the passageway between the chasm of the living and the dead, and it happens often enough in these stories.

Very significantly, as the suguidanon's different books aver, even the distinctions of gender and "enmity" prove to be mutable, traversable. Femaleness shifts into maleness if it must, as the sorceress-heroines Matan-Ayon and Nagmalitong Yawa both do, transforming themselves into gallant datus in their respective adventures, fighting for their own dignity against the covetous usurper. And the enemy or the "other" is actually inextricably part of the familiar or the "same"—shockingly, its blood relation—if only you allow yourself to look more closely. Finally, evil can be good, too, once you intuit past the surface of the apparent into the hidden and implicit depth. In like manner, there's really no conflict between the body and the spirit, as can be intuited from the way these stories perceive and present the "truth" of human sexuality: namely, that it is nature's entirely beautiful—indeed, its precious and altogether golden—gift.

This last insight is embodied so clearly in the series' second book, in which the cave-dwelling monster-villainess, Amburukay,[17] sets out to recover her golden pubic hair, which the thieving hero, Labaw Donggon, had plucked from her sleeping body to use as a replacement chord for his beloved heirloom *kudyapi*. As this epic would have it, throughout her story,

Amburukay must engage in her own heroic journey, characterized by an interesting ritual of humorous, if slightly masochistic, "self-intimacy": For ten successive mornings, 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 and sexually anxious lowlanders, but yes, in our archipelago, there was a time, back when we were all *lumads*, when "genital" matters could indeed be described so openly—and funnily—in the chanted epics and tales that carried communal wisdom and functioned as the primary means of entertainment.

What's important to realize here is that this singular piece of pubic hair embodies the pre-Christian idea of an entirely natural and precious sexuality. For the Panay Bukidnon, anything golden or *bulawan* is superlative and perfect, and the fact that they could imagine pudendal hair in these terms reveals to us not only the complete absence of erotophobia but also their society's deep affirmation of female being (including, if not especially, sexuality), embodied in the complex and paradoxical character of a she-monster who proves herself morally superior to the hero and undergoes her own heroic quest and who is, in truth—as the book would finally reveal—a kind and benevolent mother to her two adopted daughters.

Perhaps the most interesting idea in these epics is that of the *tuos* or sacred pact, a crucial element in these heroic tales, which propels their plots forward. Pacts are embodied in this preliterate world not in any written contract but rather in actual tangible things that are thereby invested with spiritual potency and incalculable worth: In one book, it is a bell-topped bamboo; in another, it is a gold pendant. In the absence of writing and the kind of categorical mentality it occasions, this ancient and oral people have found a way of signifying and pinning down memory: through the worldly (and yes, ungendered) objects that signify beyond their physical forms and whose radiance suffuses their everyday reality. Most certainly, the act of investing meaning into their world is of a piece with this people's reverential attitude toward nature, which they know is animated by the same Spirit dwelling inside themselves.

Given this form of "mystical mnemonics," we are reminded of the psychodynamics of oral consciousness,[18] which is situational, sympathetic,

and participatory rather than abstract and individualistic. As opposed to being categorically absolute, oral thinking is immediate, practical, "close to the life-world," and at once "copious" and voluble. Of course, what these self-same qualities tell us is that oral cultures are living and dynamic social formations in their own right. Despite being nondualistic and, in that sense, preanalytical, orality is a mode of consciousness that is eminently capable of generating—as well as nurturing—its own profound forms of thought. It describes a kind of subjectivity that is shared rather than solipsistic and that commits itself to complex or paradoxical forms of action and thought, which apprehends disparities and dualities and seeks to embrace them both.

Recalling our peoples' oralities, we can see that the insight of harmony and nonduality—of Humanity and Nature, the Worldly and the Divine, the Male and the Female, the Light and the Dark, the Self and the Other—remains a priceless and important bequest, especially now that we are seeing many of these stories and epics becoming transcribed, textualized, and translated, therefore becoming newly abstract and "categorical" for our own time. In the face of a fractious and divided country, and of a fractious and divided world, presently caught in the grip of an enormous public health crisis, these are insights that can only urge us toward more and more empathy; these are ideals that we all need to embrace and to champion more and more.

This tangent discussion of the suguidanon and orality has a point, and it has very little to do with nativist nostalgia (even as this may be a propitious side effect). In the main, I would like to encourage all of us who are working on gender and sexuality studies in our country to pay attention to how persistent and unfinished the regime of folk or oral thinking in our respective fields of study is, and to consider how, because of it, we may need to more carefully recalibrate and modulate—which is to say, translate—our literacy-based assumptions and categories and even the methodologies that they imply.

If the male/female dualism is not structurally ontologized among our people on the level of language—which is to say, on the level of thought—and if we are not entirely burdened by the biomedical history of anatomized dimorphism, then how may we reimagine our "queer" and "trans" politics? How much more realistic would our research and writings be if, alongside or within our use of a pronominally gendered English, we have our own gender-unitarian local languages to invoke, tap,

mobilize, and radicalize, in order not only to report on how things are but also to gesture toward how things should be? In the spirit of nonduality and simultaneity, why can't the self-identifying "trans," "gay," "bi," "lesbian," or "queer" among us also in the same breath be confidently and unapologetically bakla, *bayot*, *bantut*, tibo, or *agi*, especially if we in fact have passed through headily vernacular childhoods in our own corners of this country of all our difficult affections?

In sympathy with this call to think in complex and paradoxical ways, bakit di tayo mag-codeshift when needed, especially since ang situation naman ng nakararami sa ating mga beks at tibs is bi- or multilingual? Bakit di natin pag-aralan ang heteronormativity at busisiin nang maigi if there is only one heteronormativity or if there are many? Kasi, feel ko na aside from Heternormativity proper, which is Western, literacy-based, and biomedical, and which is the matrix that feminists like Judith Butler have already expertly unpacked,[19] meron ding other "heteronormativities," all under quotes, kasi di naman tayo sure kung dapat nga silang tawagin that way. Feeling ko, merong versions of the male/female dichotomy in other cultures na di naman heteronormative when you think more deeply about them, because their distinction between two "structural" genders is customary and not binary, complementary and not oppositional, their performative force oral-provisional rather than scriptural-absolute.

Feel ko lang, these are the "heteronormativities" na maaari nating i-claim at i-queer, using our own self-consciously translational languages. We can come up with a more nuanced and locally responsive "Trans Theory," for example, when we begin with an examination of our own hybrid "heteronormativity," in which, owing to orality's psychodynamics, the difference standing between "man" and "woman" is not necessarily chasmic, somatically self-evident, and inarguable but rather always already navigable and negotiable, through a native oral discourse of gendered interiority, which has a way of nuancing and "qualifying" embodiment, and whose plenitude permits the possibility of "gender complexity" that isn't—and this is important—the same thing as transgenderism (since it is not premised on biomedical dimorphism and all its "treatment" implications).

Think of the richly generative idea of *kalooban* (with its two-hundred-something derivatives)[20] on one hand, and on the other consider what the "unitarian" quality of our languages is telling us: Since there is no

verbal and therefore cognitive marker for male and female persons in our pronominal speech, in our case there may be no ontological gender barrier or boundary to transit or transition across at all. Imagine how liberating and "egalitarian" this kind of "trans" perspective might be, inasmuch as it relocates the issue of gendered personal realization away from the pharmacotherapeutic and medicosurgical (which always already implicates class, by the way) toward something more accessible, expressive, creative, affective, possibly spiritual, and democratic—something deeply personal and communal all at once.

Trans activism in the West has sought to counter biologism with psychologism, forgetting both are simply obverse sides of the same biomedically heteronormative coin. By contrast, if we are to insist on the affordances for gender expression implicit in our native discourses of personal and communal depth and in our gender-unitarian languages, we will not be falling into the same sexological trap and will locate possibilities for gendered embodiments that derive from the richness of our own cultural heritage.

We are not unique in this; many other non-Western cultures have their own nonbiomedical "trans" traditions to draw from (for instance, in India and Nepal, and among indigenous Americans). In a recent interview, Butler once again reminds us that gender is not an essence but rather "a historical category . . . and . . . we do not yet know all the ways it may come to signify, and we are open to new understandings of its social meanings."[21] It is time we remember, inquire into, and celebrate our cultures' own old and evolving gender significations, respecting and hailing their specificities without mindlessly subsuming them into easy global-sounding identities and terms whose histories are not really our own.

In line with this thought, and in parting, allow me to reflect on Queer once more, but this time in a different grammatical sense. As a transitive verb, "queer" has been understood as a strategy of reading and interpretation that seeks to surface the dissonances and incoherencies of both traditional and oppositional genders and sexualities, so as to trouble their univocal claims that oversimplify and reduce what are irrefutably complex and shifting realities and truths of personal and collective being and becoming.

As used in the reading of cultural texts, hence, "to queer" may be taken in the same spirit as "to deconstruct," with the view of pursuing

different strands of antierotophobic critique in the project of textual interpretation.

It is precisely with this idea in mind—of critical self-interrogation or deconstruction—that I have chosen to subtitle my keynote "Queering the Queer." By pointing out the Queer signifier's translational fate in anglophone worlds outside the US and Australia—in particular, in our culturally and linguistically diverse country, in which traditional models of subjectivity, even if only residually, persist, and in which the biomedical and hence literacy-based dimorphism underpinning sexological thinking and Western heteronormativity continues to be confounded by lingering oral forms of nondualist gender ideology—I am inviting us all, scholars in our respective fields of inquiry, in this, the very first conference of its kind, sponsored by no less than our country's one and only national university, to (in the words of National Artist Franz Arcellana) "get real."

And so, yes, mga fellow mumshies at papshies: It's time to gently nudge—or slap—ourselves awake from the uniform English sentences we have all been too blissfully, all too obliviously, all too neocolonially dreaming in.

Let us all queer the Queer by disrupting its monolingual narratives and revoking its monocultural assumptions. Let this conference indeed be the first of its kind.

In keeping with this signifier's originally transgressive and "antinormative" energy, in our own social advocacies for equality, tsugiin natin ang mga ilusyon natin tungkol sa Queer Globality, and let us take every care to localize and specify our use of this and all the other "allied" words of our profession (and vocation)—to make them carry the weight of our situatedness, of our circumstances, of our dreams. Gawin natin silang mga sisidlan ng ating mga buhay as we actually, complexly, syncretically, and deliriously live them.

Let us use the tools that translators have when they translate on one hand, and on the other, as with all other global importations, let us mobilize the Queer in our work as a self-reflexive and contested term, with enabling but entirely provisional and heuristic properties.

Allow me to end with an image of two Ifugao *bulul* figures, male and female rice "deities,"[22] carved anonymously in the Cordilleras sometime in the 1800s. Notice how formally synchronous and complementary they are, the indicators of their duality recognized yet transfigured, pared down, and sublimed humbly away.

While colonialism and its hierarchies are, even if largely as translations, already with us, while our linguistic and cultural worlds are becoming more and more layered and mixed, and while we all must live in our own time, our hope is that we may still be able to hold on to and be inspired by what tenaciously endures about our identities as postcolonial subjects, which our many spoken languages still, thankfully, allow us to remember: Even as our embodied differences constitute everyday truths about who we are, as our ancestors understood all too clearly, underlying these truths—superseding these differences—is the inner Oneness of our common humanity, which is also our common divinity.

Notes

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8 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: Regents of the University of California Press, 1990), 48–50.
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10 Garcia, *Slip/pages*, 94.
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15 J. Neil C. Garcia, "Nativism or Universalism: Situating LGBT Discourse in the Philippines," *Kritika Kultura: A Journal of Literary/Cultural and Language Studies* no. 20 (March 2013): 48.
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20 Albert Alejo, SJ, *Tao Po! Tuloy!* (Quezon City: Office of Research and Publications, Ateneo de Manila University, 1990), 1–15.
21 Alona Ferber, "Judith Butler on the Culture Wars, JK Rowling and Living in 'Anti-intellectual Times,'" *The New Statesman UK Edition*, September 22, 2020, https://www.newstatesman.com/uncategorized/2020/09/judith-butler-culture-wars-jk-rowling-and-living-anti-intellectual-times.
22 Taken from Tribal Art Asia, "Ifugao Tribe: 'Bulul' Standing Statue Pair #10," accessed September 12, 2022, http://www.tribalartasia.com/IFUGAO%20BULUL%20STATUES/AUGUSTBULUL2015/IFUGAO-PAIR-PUBLISHED.html.