1-1-2016

Authoring autonomy: the politics of art for art's sake in Filipino poetry in English

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AUTHORING AUTONOMY: THE POLITICS OF ART FOR ART’S SAKE IN FILIPINO POETRY IN ENGLISH

By

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts & Sciences

Department of English

2016
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Abstract

This study examines the autonomy of art as a governing principle in the artistic practice of Filipino poets in English. The Western modernist ideal of art for art’s sake was transplanted to the Philippines via the educational system implemented during the American occupation in the early twentieth century. As appropriated in colonial Philippines, what is historically regarded as a form of artistic resistance to the capitalist and rapidly industrializing society of the West is traditionally read as a withdrawal of participation by colonial and postcolonial literary writers from the political realm. The writer who subscribes to art for art’s sake supposedly fetishizes form in itself and simply has no stake in lived realities and no role in the production of a national literature. Authoring Autonomy interrogates the division between aesthetics and politics that occurs when the autonomy of art is presumed to be incompatible with the work of social transformation. It accounts for the potential and limits of autonomy as a form of critical intervention through studying the work of three Filipino poets: José Garcia Villa, Edith Tiempo, and Jose F. Lacaba. Drawing from the work of critics who have problematized the politics of aesthetic autonomy, including Theodor Adorno and Roberto Schwarz, this study examines how Filipino poets have authored autonomy in ways that comply with, disturb, or resist the status quo. It also includes a poetics essay and a collection of poetry, which articulate, both critically and creatively, my poetic practice as informed by my understanding of how autonomy is authored in ways that are cognizant of postcolonial conditions and anxieties.
Acknowledgments

Some of the poems in There Is No Emergency, often in different versions, were published in a number of journals and anthologies.


*Salt Hill* 27 (2011): “Five Lines”


*High Chair* 20.1 (2014): “Arrest”

*Kritika Kultura* 23 (2014): “There Is No Emergency”


The following poems were either published for the first time or reprinted in a chapbook titled *Two or Three Things about Desire* (2013), published by The Chinese University Press:

Alternate caption for image.”). *Two or Three Things about Desire* was part of a series of chapbooks released in conjunction with International Poetry Nights in Hong Kong 2013.

A limited run of a version of *There Is No Emergency* (2015) was released by the Youth & Beauty Brigade at the Better Living Through Xeroxography (BLTX) small press expo in Project 4, Quezon City, in December 2015.

I am the sole author of all the poems in *There Is No Emergency*, the creative manuscript included in this dissertation. It is common practice for an author to publish individual poems prior to compiling them into a poetry manuscript. It is also common practice to revise poems published individually when they are collected and published as a book. This dissertation is a hybrid dissertation, with critical and creative components. *There Is No Emergency* is included in this dissertation as its creative component. All of the publishers acknowledged here have granted me permission/authorization to reprint my own work in my dissertation. Copies of these permissions are compiled in the appendix of this dissertation.
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To assert the autonomy of art is to divest it of any capacity, stake, or role in the work of social transformation. While claiming an existence apart from society is itself historically conditioned, aesthetic autonomy, when invoked, suppresses the work of art’s connections to the social conditions from which it is forged and denies its implication in the praxis of life. Historically tied to modernity, the concept traces its inception to the freedom gained by artworks from sacral and courtly obligations through the rise of capitalism and the entry of art into the marketplace. Made possible by bourgeois society and a cornerstone of aestheticism, autonomy cements the divide between art and life by turning art’s apartness from life into art’s content (Bürger 48). What proclaims to be, on the one hand, a declaration of independence from structures of power, also manifests, on the other hand, as indifference to socio-economic and political realities. This detachment underpins the conflation of autonomous art with purposelessness. Despite its potential to illuminate “forgotten truths” and to “project the image of a better order” in bourgeois society, autonomous art also relegates the order that society lacks to an “ideal sphere,” which reifies the conditions it resists and “relieves the existing society of the pressure of those forces that make for change” (Bürger 11, 50). What the work of art draws from society is also severed from society once subjected to the work of art’s own laws, which ultimately operate in the service of its identity as an hermetic object.

In the Philippines, the transplantation of autonomy as a governing principle in artistic practice took hold in the University of the Philippines, an institution established by the Americans during the colonial era and the acknowledged birthplace of Philippine literature in English.¹ Literary production in English by Filipinos was incubated in the American public
school system, which, together with “bayonet treatment for at least a decade,” was imposed in the early years of colonization to ensure the pacification of the natives (Abad, Our Scene So Fair 45, 62, 77). In 1901, three years into the occupation, more than a thousand American schoolteachers, known as the Thomasites, traveled to the Philippines to transform English into the country’s lingua franca (Patke and Holden 63). By the 1920s, literature in English by Filipinos began to circulate more widely. The first anthology of “Filipino-English” verse, Rodolfo Dato’s Filipino Poetry, was released in 1924; the Philippines Free Press began to solicit contributions of creative work from Filipino writers in 1925; and the Bureau of Education’s Philippine Prose and Poetry, the prescribed textbook of Philippine literature in English in local high schools until the 1960s, was first published in 1927 (Patke and Holden 62-64; Abad, Our Scene So Fair 3-4). The same year saw the formation of the Writers’ Club at the University of the Philippines, whose members would make their mark in history as “the founding fathers of Philippine literature in English” (Veric, “Form and Discontent” 67). A statement released by the Writers’ Club founders in 1927 announced their “noble aim to elevate to the highest pedestal of possible perfection the English language in the Islands” and committed themselves, as “faithful followers of Shakespeare,” to the following “shibboleth”: “Art shall not be a means to an end, but an end in itself” (qtd. in Lopez 117).

These creative aspirations, bred within an educational system implemented to fortify the American occupation, have traditionally been read as proof of the success of the imperialist project. Steeped in Anglo-American literature in the classroom, young Filipino writers turned to the English language to write their own literary works, and to American and British authors for models of good writing. This shift is one outcome of controlling the “mental universe” of the colonized, an adjunct to already existing economic and military domination (Thiong’o 16-18). It
contributed to the systematic elevation of colonial culture as well as the displacement and
demotion of local languages in various arenas of Philippine life. The UP Writers’ Club, in
addition to appropriating the language of the colonizer, also internalized the modernist ideal of
art for art’s sake, transplanting an artistic response to the capitalist and rapidly industrializing
society of the imperial West to the agricultural economy of colonial Philippines. As deployed by
Filipino writers during the American occupation, autonomy, writes Bienvenido Lumbera,
becomes “an exhortation to break with the ideals of the Propaganda Movement and the
Revolution of 1896” (“Young Writing” 186). The independence it claims from structures of
power translates to a withdrawal of participation by the literary imagination from the political
realm; this, in turn, facilitates the transformation of Filipino writers into docile colonial subjects,
whose de-fanged discursive practices contribute to sustaining the reign of empire. Given this
logic, it is no wonder that the poet José Garcia Villa, one of the founding members of the UP
Writers’ Club around whom the art for art’s sake movement in Philippine literature was
consolidated, is considered “the apotheosis” of “an epistemic reengineering” under US colonial
rule (Chua, The Critical Villa 12). To be a Filipino writer who adheres to the autonomy of art is
to gloss over the historical conditions that give potency to autonomy as an apparatus of empire;
this lends credence to the perception that art for art’s sake has no place in the work of nation-
building in the aftermath of colonization, and no stake in the resistance to colonization’s
enduring afterlife, of which the Philippines’ utter subjugation to neoliberal globalization is only
one of many iterations.

The purposelessness associated with autonomy is reinforced in Philippine literary history,
whose dominant narrative is organized according to the divide between aesthetics and politics.
This “schism” in literary production goes by various names: “art for art’s sake” vs. “committed
writing,” the “formalist” vs. the “nationalist/materialist,” “establishment art and literature” vs. “people’s art and literature,” and “the Villa school” vs. “the Lopez tradition” (Garcellano 20-25).

The final pairing refers to the poet Villa and the critic Salvador P. Lopez, who debated the relationship of literature and society in the pages of local publications over a period of several years preceding the Second World War and Philippine independence from the United States (Chua, *The Critical Villa* 182). The former emerged as a spokesperson for aesthetic autonomy, while the latter espoused “a red-blooded literature” (Lopez xx).³ Such tandems, when used to designate strains in Philippine literary production, imply that aesthetics and politics are not only mutually exclusive but also adversarial realms; thus, for literature to activate its emancipatory potential, it must reside in one and reject the other.

This is evident in Lopez’s account of the Philippine Writers’ League, whose formation in 1939 was spearheaded by the same writers who ran the UP Writers’ Club in its early years.⁴ The League’s manifesto declares that it is the “clear duty of the writer” to participate in the struggle against “economic injustice and political oppression,” which are “the enemies of culture” (103). Lopez describes the contrast between these goals and those of the Writers’ Club over a decade earlier as a sign of the writers’ “growth,” attributing both artistic and political maturity to the abandonment of aesthetic autonomy as an ideal (118). Elmer Ordoñez similarly excludes art for art’s sake from his survey of the politics of Philippine literary production from the Commonwealth era to the period immediately after the 1986 EDSA Uprising. In his brief chronology of writers’ groups that have through the years defined the relationship of literature to society, the idea of autonomy surfaces only in the beginning, when he recounts the assemblies on the purpose of Philippine literature under the Commonwealth convened by the Philippine Writers’ League, which discussed the line between art for art’s sake and committed literature (i-
iii). The absence of art for art’s sake in the rest of his account suggests that it simply had no stake in lived realities and no role in the production of a national literature.

The disqualification of autonomy from the work of social transformation is also reproduced on the level of the literary text, where the division between aesthetics and politics is restated as the division between form and content. If art is autonomous, form seems to be the locus of its autonomy. It is not uncommon to implicate art in the work of social transformation by turning to its content and flagging the systemic inequalities that it dramatizes or those in the margins whom it makes visible and represents. In this light, the entry of American New Criticism into Philippine academia in the 1950s seems distinctly insidious. Its aestheticist ideology located the central commitment of the writer not in the world beyond the text but the text *in itself*, whose perfection was pursued through a systematized approach to craft that appeared objective and universal in its aesthetic values. Transplanted to the Philippines primarily by Filipino writers in English who were educated in American universities after the Second World War, New Criticism oversaw literary production shortly after the country was released from its status as a formal American colony. In the years following the Philippines’ achievement of national sovereignty, when decolonization and nation-building efforts were immediate concerns, it privileged form over content and directed the postcolonial writer’s attention away from the pursuit of transformative social critique. For this reason, Lumbera described the reign of New Criticism as “the absurd culmination” of the art for art’s sake movement in the Philippines, (“Young Writing” 186).

The fetishizing of art as a “self-sufficient craft,” writes E. San Juan, Jr., impaired the critical vision of Filipino writers, who were unable to recognize and confront “the colonial parameters determining the subordinate status of their writing practice” (245-46). Form, when
viewed according to these terms, is at best, a path, and at worst, an obstacle to social engagement. Edith Tiempo, considered the matriarch of the New Critical tradition of Philippine poetry in English, corroborates San Juan’s diagnosis when, in 1965, she expressed unease over the prevalence of apoliticism in Anglophone poetry; the Filipino poet in English, she observed, seems to reside in an “ivory tower,” “evad[ing] the responsibility of asserting for others, and speak[ing] only of his own esoteric insights” (“Philippine Poetry” 270, 272). Her anxiety as a poet who has grazed the limits of her own practice gives ballast to the contention that to dwell in the house of form is, in effect, to reside in solipsism and passivity, whose iterations, for the postcolonial poet, include political apathy or conservatism and antinationalism.

As a poet and creative writing teacher in the Philippines, I come from a literary tradition and work in a literary milieu forged out of historical traumas that understandably turn the incompatibility of aesthetic autonomy with political efficacy into a foregone conclusion. This dissertation is an attempt to retrieve the autonomy of art as a heuristic category, which springs from my skepticism over the reification of aesthetics and politics as separate spheres that occurs when art for art’s sake is not read against itself. Treated according to its own claims, it is routinely excluded from the work of social transformation because it is received as apolitical and ahistorical. Evacuated from and of sociality, autonomous works of art are presumably empty vessels that are ready for occupation by the reigning dispensation. Furthermore, the habitual conflation of the “political” in literary production with the literature of resistance, which foregrounds the emancipatory as a function of the literary, mystifies the role of literary texts that do not explicitly protest, testify, or provide commentary in shaping the world that resistant literature seeks to dismantle. The literature of complicity tends to evade scrutiny, neutralized by its relegation to the relatively innocuous zone of the apolitical, or merely referred to as a
generalized antagonist to critical art. By unpacking the politics of art for art’s sake in Philippine poetry in English, this dissertation seeks to reintegrate autonomy into the political arena by disclosing the stakes of its apparent detachment from it, and to account for the ways that this disinterested stance creates avenues for its co-optation by the status quo.

By investigating the politics of a historicized autonomy, I also intend to explore the possibilities and limits of politicizing autonomy, in which literary form is mobilized into a form of social engagement. Aesthetic forms “arise from particular places in response to particular social formations”; however, as forms, they also possess the capacity to “persist outside of the social orders from which they emerge” (Stasi 9). This “double nature” of aesthetic form is acutely felt by literary traditions forged under the regime of empire, of which Philippine poetry in English is an example. Since the advent of Anglophone literary production at the turn of the twentieth century, Filipino poets have struggled with a foundational compositional dilemma: the coherent integration of a borrowed form and local content. The specter of the appropriated form’s context perpetually haunts the Anglophone Filipino poet, and the desire to exorcise this context is manifested in the unremitting desire to indigenize the form. What emerges from the postcolonial poet’s negotiation of this double nature of aesthetic form, I think, is the potential to politicize aesthetic autonomy. Because Philippine poetry in English is written in the language of colonial violence and class privilege, historical traumas are, in effect, encoded in its form. This dissertation attempts to unpack the ways that this condition of form is problematized and harnessed by Filipino poets, who, in turning form into a social realm where historical and political realities are contested, also compose a version of aesthetic autonomy peculiar to postcolonial conditions and anxieties. By examining the varying degrees to which these poets author autonomy as a condition of possibility for a transformative literature, I take stock of
aesthetic autonomy as a viable critical stance, one that also sheds light on the limits of committed literature and its variants, which have tended to monopolize the domain of the critical.

To study the postcolonial politics of art for art’s sake is to see the boundary between politics and aesthetics as a complex and dynamic site that stitches the two spheres together rather than holds them apart. Peter Bürger illuminates the need to dwell in this divide as a site of crisis when he notes that the historical avant-garde shares the aestheticist negation of “the means-ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday,” yet it sees this negation not as an end in itself but as a means “to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art” (49). While the avant-garde desire to demolish the institution of art seeks to destroy aesthetic autonomy, “[w]hen art and the praxis of life are one, when the praxis is aesthetic and art is practical, art’s purpose can no longer be discovered” (51). Art’s relevance emerges only when the complete absorption of the aesthetic by the political is simultaneously a fervent aspiration and an ever-receding horizon; “the aim is neither an abstract negation of art nor a romantic reconciliation with life but… to sustain a tension between art and life” (Foster 16). In Jacques Rancière’s concept of the “aesthetic regime of art,” this tension is disclosed in the definition of art as “an autonomous form of life” (118). “Form” is the hinge on which the work of art swivels, moving away from life (as an “autonomous form”) and returning to it (as a “form of life”). Both a barrier and bridge between art and life, autonomy, in effect, becomes a productive wedge that generates art’s significance.

Theodor Adorno’s foundational analysis of aesthetic autonomy, which doubles as a deconstruction of committed art, provides a most instructive account of how “the most profoundly political work is one that is entirely silent about politics” (Eagleton 350). Works of art become autonomous by producing “law[s] of form,” which in turn conceal their origins as “products of social labor” (Aesthetic Theory 227). Extrapolating from the Kantian formulation of
the beautiful as “what is purposive without a purpose,” Adorno positions this suppression of sociality in dialectical relation to the realm of the social, for “without what is heterogeneous to [the work of art], its autonomy eludes it” (139, 6). This dialectic activates the idea that in standing apart from society, art becomes its interlocutor; the separation from life is precisely what engenders art’s purpose and permits it to conduct its critique and intervention: “by emphatically separating themselves from the empirical world, their other, [artworks] bear witness that that world itself should be other than it is; they are the unconscious schemata of that world’s transformation” (177). Works of art, by their mere existence, confirm the presence of what is there aside from society and, as such, mark the limits of society; as material testimonies that the “world itself should be other than it is,” they deem the world to be defective and lacking; and finally, through their autonomy, works of art declare themselves to be what society is not. As the source of the artwork’s radical difference from the given world, autonomy is also the premise of its radical politics, which, for Adorno, surpasses that of explicitly political art.

In his description of the modernist culture that Adorno advocates, Terry Eagleton acknowledges the false consciousness and impossible subversion embedded in autonomy that “posit[s] itself as independent of any conditions of material production”; however, “the fetishistic character of the work is also a condition of its truth, since it is its blindness to the material world of which it is a part which enables it to break the spell of the reality principle.” The illusion that art proposes is in the service of dispelling the larger illusion that there is no life outside capitalist ideology; thus, it is “an illusion of the non-illusory” (352). For Adorno, political art’s radicalism is inevitably blunted by its reliance on mimesis, which reproduces an existing (and therefore already corrupt) structure in the very act of clamoring for structural change. “The notion of a ‘message’ in art,” he says, “already contains an accommodation to the
world”; in contrast, what is “defamed as formalism” by those who fail to comprehend “what the shock of the unintelligible can communicate” produces an analog of a world other than what currently exists, “point[ing] to a practice from which [it] abstain[s]: the creation of a just life.” In other words, “by dismantling appearance, [autonomous works of art] explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance. The inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand” (“Commitment” 180-194). The capacity of art to negate the totality and totalizing power of the status quo is directly proportional to the degree to which it is able to remain estranged from and uncompromised by existing methods of meaning-making and the social orders from which they spring. Its resistance is interiorized; “by virtue of inner-aesthetic development, social development is reproduced without being imitated” (Aesthetic Theory 226). A corollary of this radical self-containment is the resistance of autonomous art to the interpretation it invites. “Artworks that unfold to contemplation and thought without any remainder are not artworks,” writes Adorno, whose dialectical thinking once again points to what lies outside the work of art in accounting for its components (121). The extent of an artwork’s autonomy is contingent on its ability to remain emphatically enigmatic.

When transported to the post- or neocolonial context, Adornian autonomy courts absurdity, especially when it makes the claim that “social critique must be raised to the level of form, to the point that it wipes out all manifestly social content” (250). According to Pascale Casanova in The World Republic of Letters, the idea of an autonomous literature, “a universal literature that is nonnational, nonpartisan, and unmarked by political or linguistic divisions,” is most prevalent in, if not invited by, countries belonging to the pole of greatest autonomy (43). Along this aesthetic sliding scale, in what Casanova calls places of greatest heteronomy, social
conditions cannot but permeate the reception, and by extension, the production of texts. When world literary space is imagined according to these terms, a “global division of cultural labor” emerges, in which, writes Paul Stasi, literary production from the periphery is assigned the domain of the political, while literature from the metropole occupies the realm of the aesthetic (11). The limitations of these designations, though obvious, nevertheless endure, and I think they can be productively countered by a refashioned Adornian autonomy cognizant of postcolonial realities. To facilitate this reimagining of autonomy, I turn to a potent idea of Roberto Schwarz, who writes, “[f]oreign debt is as inevitable in Brazilian letters as it is in any other field, and is not simply an easily dispensable part of the work in which it appears, but a complex feature of it” (50). In Misplaced Ideas, Schwarz characterizes the appropriation of the European novel by nineteenth-century Brazilian authors as a “foreign debt,” an analogy derived from the discourse of global economic relations. Consequently, he pronounces form, the locus of an autonomous aesthetics, to be itself a site of political subjugation, in which the Brazilian author “unceasingly affirms and reaffirms European ideas, always improperly” (29). Literary “impropriety,” in this case, is double-edged: it reiterates the disparagement of postcolonial texts as inferior imitations of Western originals, yet it also invokes the impertinence, if not violence, inherent in form, if it is to become a form of resistance.

What becomes imperative when Adornian autonomy intersects with Schwarz’s postcolonial postulate of form as foreign debt is an engagement with art for art’s sake that is firmly lodged in material realities and the larger histories of colonialism and empire. This dissertation embarks on such an endeavor through examining the politics of aesthetic autonomy in the work of three Filipino poets: José Garcia Villa, patriarch of modern and avant-garde writing and leader of the art for art’s sake movement in the Philippines; Edith Tiempo, key
proponent in the post-war decades of the dominant de-historicized New Critical mode in Philippine literary production; and poet, journalist, and screenwriter Jose F. Lacaba, whose entry into the life of activism in the years preceding the declaration of martial law is demarcated by the termination of his career as a poet in English, a language he abandoned in the early 1970s to write poetry solely in Filipino. Drawing from Craig Dworkin’s concept of “radical formalism,” which “pursues the closest of close readings in the service of political questions rather than to their exclusion,” I study how English-language lyric poetry by Filipinos formalizes their engagement with and critique of colonialism, nationalism, and the role of the Filipino poet in the work of social justice (Reading the Illegible 5). In this light, the poem in English as a literary form deployed by poets in the neocolony becomes a charged specimen of transnational cultural appropriation, whose hybridity is inextricable from mechanisms of coercion and exploitation. The poem in English serves as a site for pondering and problematizing agency formation at the heart of the postcolonial desire for a coherent national identity, as it wrestles with the force of homogenization inescapably enforced not only by imperial culture, but also by the nativist-nationalist essentialism that seeks to counter it.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of art for art’s sake as a dominant governing principle in Philippine literary production via the codification of creative writing as an academic discipline. As a poet and educator who, together with her husband, established the oldest creative writing workshop in the Philippines, Edith Tiempo is one of the most influential figures in establishing aesthetic norms in the literary practice of Filipinos, for which she was given the National Artist Award for Literature by the Philippine government in 1999. The Silliman University National Writers Workshop, which Tiempo and her husband oversaw for decades, is patterned after the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where the Tiempos were educated in the late 1940s. It is also known to
this day as the literary nerve center of New Criticism, which largely informs the tradition of Philippine literature in English. This chapter fleshes out the politics of aesthetic autonomy in the New Critical vein, by tracing the origins of the Silliman Workshop along the coordinates of American colonial education in the Philippines, American cultural diplomacy, and institutionalized creative writing in the United States. It studies how the autonomy of art, as a notion conflated with excellence in the craft of writing, has authorized the Silliman Workshop to perpetuate colonialist and classist ideas about language and literary production in the Philippines, which range from a dogmatic fervor for monolingualism in English in creative writing, to timelessness and universality as aesthetic values. It also unpacks certain aporias in Edith Tiempo’s expressed allegiance to art for art’s sake, which indicate a nascent emancipatory politics of literary form in her poetics. These aporias point to the potential to harness a belief in the autonomy of art to propagate engagement with, rather than detachment from, social transformation.

Chapter 2 focuses on the work of José Garcia Villa, whose cultish devotion to form throughout a poetic career begun in the 1920s and spent mostly in New York in the United States, has earned him the title of patriarch of the art for art’s sake movement in the Philippines. Villa’s explicit rejection of politics in his work, combined with his radical formal experimentation, contributed significantly to the dichotomy between aesthetics and politics that has defined and continues to organize Philippine literary history. In this chapter, I demonstrate how a close reading of Villa’s poetry discloses the subjectivity of the colonized as a textualized identity, one that exists, and is thus constructed and contested, in poetic form. Consequently, Filipino subjectivity, when regarded on the level of form emerges “as a process essentially in the relation of its whole and parts. Without being reducible to one side or the other, it is the relation
itself that is a process of becoming” (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 178). I examine how Villa deploys “strategic illegibility” (to borrow Dworkin’s term) in samples of his *ars poetica*, which calls attention to what I call the condition of translatedness of Philippine poetry in English. Villa’s illegibility activates the form of the poem in English as a “divided text,” which stages the lack of a democratic fusion of the English language and “the Filipino sensibility,” contrary to the claim that Anglophone literary production has domesticated the colonial tongue. In this light, Villa’s *ars poetica* is always already in translation, a placeholder for the actual poem yet to be realized, which embodies the Adornian negative dialectic that “every act of making in art is a singular effort to say what the artifact itself is not and what it does not know” (131). His poetry, which magnifies the provisionality of national identity as constructed in a language compromised by its colonial provenance, traces the outlines of sociality in the autonomy of art.

In Chapter 3, I turn to the English-language poetry of Jose F. Lacaba as a limit case of radical autonomy. Lacaba came of age as an activist during his early years as a journalist assigned to cover several events from the period now known as the First Quarter Storm, which directly preceded the declaration of martial law and the authoritarian regime of Ferdinand Marcos. Imprisoned for two years during the dictatorship, Lacaba attributes his incarceration not only to his work for the underground publication *Taliba ng Bayan*, but also to his pseudonymous publication of a poem titled “Prometheus Unbound” in a state-sponsored magazine. The controversy surrounding the poem provides a means to reconsider the poetry in English he produced and later abandoned for poetry in Filipino, a move conventionally received as a declaration of his allegiance to politics over aesthetics. Turning to “Prometheus Unbound” and “The Annotated Catechism,” another English-language poem by Lacaba, I explore how such poems throw into crisis the autonomy of the poem in English, as well as the nativist nationalism
that denies the emancipatory potential in the cultural appropriation of an apparatus deployed to enforce colonization. I highlight how both poems simultaneously deconstruct protest poetry, traditionally perceived to be the province of poetry in Filipino, and the largely “apolitical” poetry in English by Filipinos, whose preoccupation with form is its own end. In “The Annotated Catechism,” collage becomes a means to disrupt commonplace methods of ordering experience, not only in the New Critical tradition of Philippine poetry, but also the tradition of nationalist Philippine history. In “Prometheus Unbound,” the poem’s appearance as an autonomous text permits it to evade martial law censors and reclaim the exercise of free speech, as facilitated by a procedural constraint. The poem’s form enacts an alternative relationship between native and colonial languages, where the latter ensures rather than undermines the survival of the former.

The poets Tiempo, Villa, and Lacaba form a constellation that illuminates the tensions between aesthetics and politics embedded in Philippine poetic production, and inevitably, my own practice. The fourth chapter of the dissertation, which focuses on my poetics, channels the ideas discovered and developed in my author studies into the current literary landscape in the Philippines, of which I am a part. A question posed by Walter Benjamin propels my own meditation as a poet invested in formal experimentation and thus a believer in engaging with art as art. In “The Author As Producer,” he says that the question to be asked of art is not, “What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?” Instead, the more pertinent question is, “What is its position in them?” (222). This question, when taken in relation to the Adornian “double character” of art as autonomous and fait social, foregrounds the identity of art as a commodity and the market as the status quo in which it is produced and circulates. In this formulation, a critical stance toward the geopolitical realities that oversee the demands of the national and global literary markets for poetry is less a function of the attitude a poem espouses
than its *position* as a commodity in relations of production. This position assumed by the artwork, in effect, is the form that its autonomy takes, should it aspire after autonomy.

In Chapter 4, I problematize the commodity status of my “unfree verse” (to borrow from Joshua Clover) in today’s culture industry, as shaped by the institutionalization and professionalization of creative writing, both in and out of the Philippines. I raise questions of representation, particularly of national identity, in poetry by Filipinos in English, given its paradoxical position as marginal in what Goethe calls the “world market of intellectual goods” and elite (or elitist) in the local industry of Philippine letters. Because poetry labors in the shadow of both the market and the museum, I account for my growing investment in independent and grassroots publishing as a necessary and generative wedge against a fully professional and professionalized world of writing. For this reason, I am less inclined to talk about what my poetry manuscript, *There Is No Emergency*, which is also included in this dissertation, is about, than how it is (and how I believe it should be) turned into an object, a product, and a commodity to be circulated. Because I am a poet employed in a university to teach creative writing, it is in the interest of my academic career for poetry to become and remain a specialist’s endeavor, and for the poetry I produce to acquire a level of prestige bestowed by and thus legible to cultural institutions and industries. The specialized labor of composing this dissertation, however, has clarified to me that poetry’s capacity to intervene in the work of social transformation is contingent on (among other things) the effort to work against my own interests as a poet who is also an academic. In detaching from certain mechanisms that ensure the full professionalization and marketization of poetry, the poet committed to material autonomy is more prone to fall into obscurity. Perhaps, however, this resistance is also a viable opportunity for the Filipino author as producer to contribute to restructuring the given world, through poetry that strives to be ordinary.
Creative writing as an academic discipline entered the Philippines by way of a Filipino officer who served in the resistance movement during World War II. Like his colleagues and students at Silliman University in Dumaguete, Edilberto K. Tiempo, together with his wife Edith, was forced to retreat to the hills of Negros Oriental at the onset of the war. He worked as the historical data officer of the Seventh Military District, gathering intelligence for the United States Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). The data he collected, which tracked the movements and documented the atrocities of Japanese troops, was consolidated into a unit history and later proved to be relevant in the prosecution of Japanese war criminals (Casper 1554; Torrevillas, “Light on the Mountain” 224-225; Klein 12). After the war, Tiempo was given a scholarship to attend graduate school in the United States by the Presbyterian Board of Missions, which funded the American-run Silliman University. A teacher of literature and a writer, he was sent to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop of the University of Iowa in 1946, the year the Philippines gained independence from the United States. The following year, Edith received the same scholarship and joined her husband at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop (Alegre and Fernandez 409-10, 447). The Tiempos were thus the first Filipinos and among the first non-Americans to graduate from the oldest creative writing program in the United States. They, in turn, inaugurated the institutionalization of creative writing in the Philippines and in Asia (Torrevillas, “From Hybrid Seed”).

In 1951, the Tiempos established a creative writing program for undergraduate English majors at Silliman University (Pernia 47). In 1962, they launched the National Summer Writers’
Workshop, which is still to this day extremely influential in disseminating the aesthetics and pedagogy that they learned in Iowa. The Silliman University National Writers Workshop, as it is now known, is an annual three-week workshop that provides aspiring writers with the opportunity to study with a panel of acclaimed Filipino authors. Having built a reputation as “a rite of passage for the country’s finest writers,” it has given fellowships to over six hundred Filipinos since its inception over half a century ago, and counts among its alumni and teaching panel those who dictate “the shape, direction, and development of Philippine literature” (“About”). A coveted means of induction to the literary community, the Silliman Workshop is also known as a bastion of New Criticism, which dominates the tradition of Philippine literature in English. New Critical tenets were integral to the Tiempos’ transplantation of the American creative writing workshop to the fledgling postcolony. According to Merlie Alunan, the Tiempos have influenced Philippine literary production to such an extent that the latter half of the twentieth century and “a few more decades hereafter” can be called “the Tiempo Age” (373).

For their work as teachers steeped in New Criticism, the fiction writer Edilberto and the poet Edith are credited with cultivating excellence in the writing craft among generations of Filipino writers and teachers of creative writing. They are, however, also charged with propagating a purportedly politically impotent movement of literary criticism, in which the writer’s primary domain of responsibility is the integrity of the literary text in itself, as an aesthetic object and an organic whole. To their critics, the Tiempo school, which embodies institutionalized creative writing in the American New Critical mode, privileges aesthetics over politics. In downplaying the role of literature in social transformation, which, in postcolonial
Philippines, includes the work of decolonization and nation-building, it authorizes the production of apolitical and de-historicized, if not assimilationist and antinationalist, literature.

The charge is not without basis, but it is not yet thoroughly elaborated on by Filipino literary critics and historians. On the one hand, the New Critical belief in the autonomy of literature tends to function as a convenient shorthand to justify the routine dismissal of the Tiempo school as indifferent to socio-historical realities in general and the nationalist project in particular. On the other hand, the primacy of craft as the content of a creative writing education serves as a catch-all explanation for the lack of emphasis on social consciousness in the Tiempos’ pedagogy. Both arguments rely on the deadlock that pits aesthetic against political investments, and maintain that the Tiempos, for better or worse, privileged the former over the latter. However, when examined more closely, their foundational role in institutionalized creative writing in the Philippines serves as a generative site for dismantling this theoretical impasse. In looking at the pedagogy and imagined community of the Silliman Workshop, my goal is to flesh out the politics of the Silliman Workshop’s autonomous aesthetics. I turn to accounts by the Tiempos, their American mentor Paul Engle, and Filipino writers mentored by the Tiempos to situate the Silliman Workshop within the network of American colonial education in the Philippines, American cultural diplomacy, and institutionalized creative writing in the United States. These coordinates illuminate the colonial roots of the American creative writing workshop in the Philippines, and implicate the Silliman Workshop in what Renato Constantino calls “the mis-education of the Filipino.”

In his essay of the same title, published in 1966, Constantino argues that long after the Philippines achieved state sovereignty, the Filipino continues to be “a good colonial,” whose lingering subservience is ensured by an educational system instituted by the United States during
its tenure as colonial master and rigged to propagate American supremacy. Constantino’s call for “a truly nationalist education,” which was first made during the early years of the Silliman Workshop, draws attention to the need for educational institutions, in the aftermath of colonization, to recognize their compromised provenance; their contribution to nation-building, Constantino argued, would largely be dependent on their capacity to dismantle and repurpose the ways that they had functioned as conduits of colonial ideas. As the case of the Silliman Workshop will show, however, New Criticism, while providing a systematized approach to art that validates its study in an institutional setting, is also an effective apparatus for disabling the institutional self-critique that Constantino values. Accounts of the Silliman Workshop’s institutional history by its founders and those whom they trained suggest that the belief in the autonomy of the literary text sanctions the treatment of the literary space in which its production occurs as similarly autonomous. Couched in the rhetoric of benevolence and good will among individuals, the formation of the Silliman Workshop appears to have happened apart from or in spite of its historical origins in empire. Without engaging structural relations in narrating its own provenance, and later, its prominence as an institution that defines Philippine literary production on a national scale, the Silliman Workshop aids and abets the mis-education that Constantino rages against. Its pedagogy perpetuates colonialist and classist ideas about language and literary production, which are camouflaged, if not naturalized, in the name of personal bonds and in the service of craft.

The antinationalist and elitist literary practices sanctioned by the apolitical aestheticism of the Tiempo school give credence to the foregone conclusion often made by nationalist and historical materialist critics that the Tiempos’ New Critical pedagogy is beyond repurposing. While this dismissal is understandable, it once again reinforces the customary treatment of
aesthetics and politics as separate and oppositional. To complicate this logic, I think it is useful to call attention to how Edith Tiempo, one of my early mentors in writing poetry, struggles with the limits of autonomy when divorced from its sociality. The gaps in her thinking about her New Critical allegiances, which she at times noted, activate the possibility of treating the literary text itself as the site of social engagement. Specifically, some of Tiempo’s ideas about the English language as used by Filipino authors begin to imagine universalism in the postcolonial context as constructed (rather than \textit{a priori}) and arguably translational. In this light, her universalism is not antinationalist per se; rather, it has the potential to deconstruct the reliance on and serve as an alternative to the overt, if not overzealous, nationalism that dominates poetry when it is imagined to be an expression of national identity. The seemingly generative aporias in Tiempo’s thought, however, remained and still remain idle. She was ultimately dogmatic in her devotion to the text in itself, and the Silliman Workshop, to this day, maintains its co-founder’s commitment not only to monolingualism in English in creative writing, but also to timelessness and universalism as constant rather than historically contingent aesthetic values. The incipient politics of literary form in Tiempo’s poetics thus remains a missed opportunity for the Tiempo school to politicize the primarily aestheticist pedagogy of institutionalized creative writing in the Philippines.

**The Third World Comes to Iowa**

The institutionalization of creative writing, writes Mark McGurl recently in \textit{The Program Era}, is “as American as baseball, apple pie, and homicide. And yet there is evidence that after fifty years of standing more or less alone, this is beginning to change—evidence that writing programs are, like fast food and nuclear weapons and (perhaps more relevantly) mass higher education, beginning to proliferate abroad” (364). Among the countries he cites with graduate
programs in creative writing are Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, which prove that “the discipline is on the way to becoming a globally Anglophone phenomenon”; in addition, “recent programs in Israel, Mexico, South Korea, the Philippines, and elsewhere suggest an even broader reach” (364). This brief account of creative writing’s global spread makes several inaccurate claims, which I believe are rooted in the continuing invisibility of a historical fact: the American colonization of the Philippines. What McGurl characterizes as the fifty-year lag between the development of creative writing programs in the United States and elsewhere is not true. As early as 1951, a little over a decade after the founding of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, a creative writing program patterned after it was established in the Philippines. In his rundown of Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries with writing programs, the McGurl’s account lists the Philippines among the latter, disregarding the century-old existence of an Anglophone Philippine literary production. Philippine history not only disputes the claim that the creative writing program is a recent American export, but also demonstrates how the United States turned to the imperialist practice of deploying militarization and education as an integrated mechanism to control its colony.

During the American occupation of the Philippines, education was, first and foremost, a military strategy. The Philippine-American War produced a death toll of around twenty-two thousand Filipino soldiers and over half a million civilians between 1899 and 1902. Already debilitating by famine, disease, and fatigue, the Philippines could hardly defend itself from an invasion it initially perceived as assistance in its fight for freedom against Spain (Abinales 113-17, Constantino 22). General Arthur MacArthur supported the imposition of the American school system in the new colony “as an adjunct to military operations calculated to pacify the people” (Constantino 22). In line with President McKinley’s Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation, the
first teachers in the Filipino classroom during the occupation were American soldiers (21). In this way, the battlefield was relocated to the classroom, and military pacification was disguised in the noble enterprise of education. In 1901, over a thousand American teachers arrived in the Philippines, around half of them on board the ship Thomas (Racelis and Ick 4). Filipinos, who remained largely uneducated under Spanish rule, were granted access to education, but only in English, the language of their new colonial master.

“The Mis-education of the Filipino” accounts for the ways the public school system concealed the economic and political motives of American colonization. According to Constantino, it framed the American invasion as a benevolent gesture to save the country from Spanish rule and to introduce it to the “boons of liberty and democracy.” It presented free trade “as a generous gift of American altruism” and celebrated the American ability to manufacture goods that Filipinos could not produce yet could import duty-free and consume. It portrayed rural life as idyllic and quintessentially Filipino while deflecting attention from “the poverty, the disease, the cultural vacuum, the sheer boredom, the superstition and ignorance” in the countryside and the lack of genuine agrarian reform. It taught Filipinos to idolize American heroes and to view Filipino resistance leaders as “brigands and outlaws.” It even made Filipinos strangers to themselves: English, the language of instruction, “became the wedge that separated the Filipinos from their past and later was to separate educated Filipinos from the masses of their countrymen” (24-26).

English was the language of creative writing at the onset of its disciplinary codification, and it cemented the role of the educational institution, the chief site of Constantino’s idea of mis-education, as the primary habitat of Philippine literature in English. The first Filipino writers in English were campus writers who, in the early decades of American colonialism, were trained
under a curriculum in which literature in the local languages was entirely absent. This exclusion turned the Anglo-American canon, tailored specifically for the colony through selections that explicitly valorized colonial rule and promoted colonial values, into the sole resource for models not only of “good English” but also “great literature” (Martin 92, 95). As a Filipino officer who served the United States during the war, a product of American colonial education in the Philippines, and an Iowa-trained pioneer in teaching creative writing to Filipinos, Edilberto Tiempo is a clear-cut embodiment of the colonial subject shaped by both militarization and education. The American public school system in the Philippines had been around for decades when General MacArthur’s son Douglas became the commander of the United States forces in the Pacific during World War II. It was to his base in Australia that Tiempo dispatched the intelligence he gathered from southern Negros, which had become a center for intelligence operations in the Philippines (Torrevillas, “Light on the Mountain” 225; Alegre and Fernandez 410). After the war, Tiempo would travel to Iowa to study alongside many American war veterans who had returned to school under the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill (Bennett, “Creative Writing” 378).  

Rowena Tiempo Torrevillas, the Tiempos’ daughter and a writer whose work has chronicled the life of her family, amplifies the imbrication of American militarization and education in defining the course of her father’s development as a writer. She describes his arrival in Iowa to study creative writing as akin to a soldier’s homecoming:

My father had come in 1946, immediately after World War II, and he’d crossed the Pacific in a freighter. He took the train to Iowa City, arriving early one morning with his belongings in an old army duffel bag. He went straight to the campus, crossing the Pentacrest down to the Nissen huts by the river to the office of Paul Engle. For some reason I never wanted to know, he hadn’t eaten for quite some time, nearly a day. Paul finished up his paperwork at the office, then took Dad home with him and gave him lunch. When he lifted the first spoonful of soup to his lips, Dad said, he was embarrassed because his hand shook, as much from hunger as from the realization that he had survived
a war and come ten thousand miles to meet this man, to learn about writing from him. (“Blue Route” 91-92)

The Filipino who fought alongside the Americans during the war now stands on American soil, and he is welcomed like family by the American writing guru who takes on the role of his mentor. The context of military ties, which permits the paths of the two men to cross, recedes into the background. In its place, education binds the Filipino to the American, whose first act of charity, the giving of food, reveals the generosity that would also extend to the giving of knowledge. Torrevillas recounts with mythical flair that upon learning of her father’s desire to be a writer, the Presbyterian Board said: “Then there is only one place where you can go for what you need. Iowa. There is a man named Paul Engle, who can show you all you need to know about writing, at the University of Iowa” (“From Hybrid Seed”). Iowa is framed as the sole source of the knowledge Edilberto seeks, and the existence of Engle, the second director of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop (1941-1966), is disclosed as if it were a divine revelation. Removed from the brute force of American colonization, an American education appears to be an exclusive privilege that Filipinos are fortunate to enjoy.

The value of their education was not lost on the Tiempos, who went on to establish the Silliman Workshop, modeled after the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and inspired by the mentorship of Engle. Portrayed as a benevolent father figure and nothing short of legendary in Silliman Workshop lore, Engle looms large in relation to the Tiempos’ education in Iowa, and by extension, in the history of institutionalized creative writing in the Philippines. Edith Tiempo, the recognized matriarch of the tradition of Philippine poetry in English that fuses Romanticism and New Criticism, has spoken of her own writing as “pre-Engle and post-Engle” (Alegre and Fernandez 457). Torrevillas writes that in her family, Engle “was always referred to as ‘Paul Engle,’ never one name without the other, the way one might refer to ‘the Louvre’ or ‘Iowa
City” (“Blue Route” 85). Seen as an institution unto himself, Engle is a metonym for Iowa and its wealth of literary capital. He is in fact the acknowledged force behind the development of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop’s enduring reputation as the most prestigious writing program in the United States and in the world. His arrival in Dumaguete in the early 1960s to visit his former students and the Silliman Workshop was a veritable acknowledgment by the parent institution of its newly founded progeny.⁹

Decades later, Engle’s influence continues to be felt and framed as paternal to young Filipino writers. In her account of the 2008 Silliman Workshop, the writer Susan S. Lara recalls that several Engle writing maxims were invoked in discussion, and refers to the Tiempos’ mentor as “Dad Ed and Mom Edith’s literary father, and therefore our literary granddad.” Engle also appears in my own coming-of-age as a writer, in an artifact from 1995, when I attended the Silliman Workshop. In my copy of Edith Tiempo’s Beyond, Extensions, which she inscribed at the end of the workshop, Edith wrote, “What an explosive talent in your tiny frame! My old mentor in writing used to say, ‘You can’t grow hair on a billiard ball’—true, but you’re quite another matter, you’re a peach, lovely, quite befurred, no baldy, you!” Years later, I came across Engle’s penchant for analogies to explain the limits of creative writing instruction, one of which compares teaching the writer without talent to “trying to grow hair on a billiard ball” (Tiempo, Six Poetry Formats 90). Edith, I realized, had invoked Engle’s words to encourage me to write. I had belatedly discovered his part in one of my earliest experiences of literary validation.

Although Engle was a writer, his major accomplishments lie in his career in the bureaucracy, as an “artist turned administrator” and “administrator as artist,” whose platform was institutionalized creative writing (McGurl 172). The “literary granddad” of the New Critical tradition of Philippine literature in English is, first and foremost, an American bureaucrat. Engle
is described by Louis Menand as “a prodigious creative-writing proselytizer and cultural Cold Warrior.” He was “involved in Kennedy’s Cold War Cultural Front,” and he listed the “only poet on The National Council on the Arts” as well as the “American specialist for the Department of State” among his credentials (Glass 265). Engle was in fact unabashed in his belief in institutionalized creative writing as a form of international diplomacy. In the 1961 essay “The Writer and the Place,” he declares, in no uncertain terms, the value of internationalizing the Iowa Writers’ Workshop for this purpose, which he rationalizes through a display of nationalist fervor by way of regionalist pride:

The benefit to the whole United States of giving these articulate people from the far islands and continents of the earth a conviction that this country cherishes their talent (as their own countries often do not) is beyond measuring. For those seeking a true image of America, it is lucky that they come not to a seacoast city but to an interior town in the midst of the fat land that feeds the nation. Here they have a direct look at the daily life of the U.S.A. in its most typical manner. (7)

The American heartland, according to Engle, is the United States at its most authentic and ordinary, and at its most ordinary, the country embraces the free and creative expression of all people, wherever they are and whatever their nationality. The disciplinary function of the university over the writer is downplayed by his attention to the writing program as a “community,” where the writer is given “a place where he can be himself, confronting the hazards and hopes of his own talent” (5).

Art, says Engle, “may turn out to be the last refuge of the individual in our time.” As a “friend” and “patron” to the writer, the American university provides art with a place of residence. Invented in America, the writing program and its “curious extraordinary devices” are “part of the American way,” and in exchange for the freedom to explore the imagination that it affords the writer, the creative beneficiaries of America’s hospitality are urged to do what is “proper”: “to express our thanks to a country which has given freedom of voice to its own young
talent, and to that of many other nations… How can writers praise a country more than by saying: Look! In this place we have been free” (9-10). The combination of a demonstrative pronoun (“this place”) and the present perfect tense (“we have been free”) evokes a collective speaker who is simultaneously placed in and displaced from the United States: the tense suggests that freedom was a condition in the past that remains true in the present but whose future is uncertain. The statement subtly assumes the voice of visitors to, not citizens of, America, whose experience of its liberties is temporary. To grant the writers of the world entry into the Iowa Writers’ Workshop is to situate them in a microcosm of the Free World and the domain of the individual, which would inevitably produce, through debts of gratitude and loyalty, a crew of international ambassadors for the United States. The logic is reminiscent of Benevolent Assimilation, and the supreme benefit to be reaped from a writing program with an internationalist perspective is America’s global cultural ascendancy.

“For three decades, Engle aggressively promoted the writer at the university as a symbol of liberal, democratic, capitalist free expression at home and abroad,” writes Eric Bennett (“Creative Writing” 381). As his portrait of Engle shows, the man combined his rhetoric with action; Engle was calculating in his efforts, which ranged from fundraising to media coverage, to make the Iowa Writers’ Workshop part of the massive campaign of the United States to package and disseminate American culture as a means to quell local Cold War anxieties and fortify the dominance of the United States in the global order. This legacy is openly embraced by the Iowa-based International Writing Program (IWP), founded by Engle and his wife Hualing Nieh Engle in 1967, which cites cultural diplomacy among its core missions. “Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy,” a 2005 report by the US Department of State (a major source of support for the IWP) that is available on the IWP website, is unequivocal in its goal to
instrumentalize art: “cultural diplomacy can enhance our national security in subtle, wide-ranging, and sustainable ways… America’s cultural riches played no less a role than military action in shaping our international leadership, including the war on terror.” Among many other positive effects, cultural diplomacy “helps create ‘a foundation of trust’ with other peoples, which policy makers can build on to reach political, economic, and military agreements” (1).

The Philippines is a logical yet invisible point of reference for unpacking the “positive effects” of American imperialism repackaged via cultural diplomacy in the arena of institutionalized creative writing. Its longstanding reputation as the staunchest ally of the United States in Asia is the outcome, initially, of outright invasion, and eventually, of cultural indoctrination begun during the American occupation. Its state affairs remain subject to US intervention; a cursory look at the history of military agreements between the Philippines and the United States reveals them to be consistently asymmetrical.11 These blatantly oppressive agreements operate alongside less sinister manifestations of US presence through American cultural commodities, such as popular music, books, television shows, movies, magazines, and so on, which Filipinos consume, pirate, enjoy, and love. In *Workshops of Empire*, however, Bennett refers to the Philippines only in passing as one of the countries from which Engle recruited students; he turns instead to accounts of Engle’s former students from Japan and Taiwan to illustrate the good will for the United States that an internationalized writing program could foster (101-02). Both *The Program Era* and *Workshops of Empire* cite the 1950s as the decade in which Engle pursued the recruitment of writers from abroad (McGurl 150; Bennett 101); the presence of Filipinos on American-funded scholarships to Iowa in the 1940s, shortly after the Philippines gained independence from the United States, goes unacknowledged. The Tiempos, who were in Iowa from 1946 to 1950, were in class with Flannery O’Connor, whose
fiction is one of the earliest examples of American literature produced within the context of institutionalized creative writing (McGurl 129; Nazareth). Engle’s mentorship of the Tiempos is arguably an early instance in, if not a starting point of, his evolution as a figure in whom literary and state interests converge; thus, Philippine literary production under his influence, specifically the New Critical tradition overseen by the Tiempos, should figure more prominently in any history of institutionalized creative writing as a form of cultural diplomacy.

This is underscored by some ideas from the Tiempo school that validate Engle’s faith in the capacity of an internationalized Iowa writing program to cast the United States in a good light, particularly among the intellectuals of other nations. For instance, “an accident of history” is how Edith, in a 1991 interview, describes the use of English in the Philippines: “I think it is a happy accident because English happens to be the lingua franca all over the world now, and so whatever we Filipinos write has the chance to be read and understood elsewhere” (Manlapaz and Evasco 20). Her account not only glosses over the deployment of English as an apparatus in the far-from-accidental project of American imperialism; it also puts a positive spin on the trauma of colonization. Informed, it seems, by her New Critical belief in organic unity, Tiempo further de-historicizes cultural indoctrination by naturalizing it. “[O]ne of the marks of intelligence in the organic world is the ability to adjust,” says Tiempo, and “it is a matter of pride that we are able to handle something that is not naturally ours” (20). Here, the capacity of the colonized to “adjust” to English, which “happens to be” the universal language, is evidence only of evolution and not enforcement. Although she recognizes that English “is not naturally ours,” alluding to its roots in colonial subjection, Tiempo downplays the historical conditions that led to this linguistic imposition; instead, she celebrates the Filipino writer’s ability to naturalize what is artificial.

Anglophone Philippine writing appears to spring organically, regardless of, and in a sense, apart
from economic and political violence. It is proof only of cultural riches; thus, literary production with a built-in capability for global circulation can only be a source of pride.

Remarks that whitewash American colonization are also present in a lecture delivered by Torrevillas as the first Director-in-Residence of the Silliman Workshop in 2010. The antiquated notion of the benevolent conqueror makes an appearance in her description of American colonial teachers and missionaries: “tall bespectacled men and women who heeded the call of an idea, to bring the Word across the world to those who would listen.” The Honors Program of Silliman University, founded by her mother and adapted by the State University of New York in the late 1970s, is “an idea that was born right here returned to the land of its linguistic and spiritual roots”; couched in filial imagery, the United States is extolled as the originary source and eventual destination of the elder Tiempo’s creation. What Constantino calls “[t]he myth of friendship and special relations” between the Philippines and the United States is recast in the relationship between the Silliman Workshop and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where “the distinction between the giver and the receiver has become blurred, because the gift has changed hands so often.” The Cold War politics that forged the link between the two institutions and their unequal stature in the global literary arena is lost in the rhetoric of benevolence and mutual exchange. “Truly, the world comes to Iowa, even as Iowa goes out into the world,” Torrevillas says toward the end of her speech, and the global literary center holds, made even more stable by the extent of its cultural generosity. Iowa, the source of creative “seeds,” remains the originator of culture, and the Silliman Workshop takes on the role of grateful beneficiary as reaper of a creative “golden harvest.”

The language of the second-generation Tiempo is mythical and expansionist. Her choice of metaphor is in fact the same one used in “Cultural Diplomacy” to spell out its objective: “to
plant seeds—ideas and ideals; aesthetic strategies and devices; philosophical and political arguments; spiritual perceptions; ways of looking at the world—which may flourish in foreign soils” (7). Expansion is portrayed as a natural occurrence, purged of history as well as economic and political interests. Torrevillas’s statements substantiate E. San Juan, Jr.’s claim that Filipino writers like the Tiempos “aborted the rise of any critical awareness of the colonial parameters determining the subordinate status of their writing practice,” which he attributes to “a certain self-satisfied fascination with art as a self-sufficient craft” (Working Through the Contradictions 245-46). As a venue where colonialist ideas are still expressed in earnest in the year 2010, the Silliman Workshop lends credence to a remark made by Engle in 1959 about Filipino writers, which subtly links, through parataxis, creative writing and American cultural diplomacy. Noting the presence of students from abroad at the writing program of the University of Iowa, he describes Filipinos, through a telling parenthetical, as: “many talented and such fine people, so very loyal to the United States” (“Who Paul Engle Was”).

That the Silliman Workshop evades the acknowledgment (let alone critique) of power in Philippine-American relations, a staple of nationalist teleology, endures in its own central metaphor for its imagined community: family. According to the Facebook event page of “Cities of Literature: An Exhibit on the Iowa/Dumaguete Connection,” held in conjunction with the Silliman Workshop in 2014, Filipino writers have referred to Iowa City as “their ‘blond Dumaguete’,” a rather unfortunate mixed metaphor on the fantasy of whiteness fulfilled through biological reproduction. The Dumaguete-based author Ian Casocot describes Dumaguete as Iowa City’s “literary twin.” The reference to family ties is not simply metaphorical: Torrevillas, the Tiempos’ daughter, was an IWP resident in 1984, and the following year, she began working with the Engles as an administrator of the IWP (“Blue Route” 86, 91). She retained the post for
almost two decades. *The World Comes to Iowa* (1987), which commemorates twenty years of the IWP, is co-edited by the Engle couple and Torrevillas, who still resides in Iowa City. The institutional is filial, from the “literary twins” Iowa and Dumaguete, to “literary granddad” Engle, to “Dad Ed” and “Mom Edith,” which was how the Tiempos wished to be called when they were alive and how generations of fellows and panelists continue to refer to them. The genealogy suggests that the Silliman Workshop is sprung only from the generosity and good will of individuals, impervious to geopolitics and, over time, to institutional politics. If the Silliman Workshop is conceived of as family, then it is held together by personal and not political bonds; it is by nature homogeneous and unified, and it is by culture steeped in affection and deference. The filial logic that camouflages the colonialist enterprise embedded in the institutional history of the Silliman Workshop is replicated in the logic that deflects criticism of its institutional power over the literature produced, circulated, awarded, and studied in the Philippines. It is awkward, at the very least, to cast a critical eye on the legacy of a literary figure one has been taught to call “Mom” or on the workings of a community one has been invited to regard as family. It is no wonder that writings on the Tiempos by those they mentored tend toward hagiography. To regard the Silliman Workshop as family, while inspiring affection and harmony, also naturalizes a culture of deference and loyalty in an institutional setting.

Consequently, the writer Alfred Yuson, a longtime panelist of the Silliman Workshop, takes pride in the patronage politics of its literary community: “The torch is continuously passed on from one Filipino poet or writer to another, as references and recommendations are generously given for whoever may be next in line in the circle of fellowship.” Writers are defined by inheritance, selected by esteemed predecessors who bestow upon their descendants the trappings that secure their reputations in the literary space. The writing community is a clan
of socializers, an “all-too-welcoming band of sisters and brothers happy to pass on and share their global networking experiences.” The metaphor of family, which authorizes a superficial claim to autonomy by a literary space already preoccupied with art for art’s sake, illuminates how the myth of friendship and special relations operates well beyond its initial colonialist intentions. Today, it thrives in the “padrino system,” which has become so prevalent that Yuson can easily invoke personalistic terms in dismissing its critics as “the faux anti-establishment fringe that feeds on envy and antipathy.” To demystify the bonds that keep the family together is to unmask the culture of patronage that, for better or worse, helps sustain the Tiempo Age of aesthetic education.

**New Criticism and the Instrumentalization of Literature**

When the Tiempos returned home from Iowa, the relationship between aesthetics and politics had already emerged as a central dilemma for Filipino writers, who debated the function of literature in the years that saw the Philippines attain Commonwealth status in 1935 and independence a decade later. Literary history tells us that the writers were divided; some believed in literature as an agent of social change, while others adhered to art for art’s sake. The latter found its leader in the expatriate poet José Garcia Villa, whose cultish adherence to form in his literary and critical production between the late 1920s and early 1950s garnered a following among Filipino writers. After the Second World War, the brutal, three-year occupation of the Japanese, and the birth of the Philippine Republic in 1946, aestheticism was defined primarily by Filipino writers like the Tiempos, who were exposed to New Criticism as students in the United States. They were among the many Filipinos who attended American educational institutions through grants and scholarships provided by the United States as part of its efforts to maintain
ties with the Philippines beyond the period of official colonization. Such allegiances were necessary to fortify US global supremacy, which was undermined by the success of the Chinese Revolution, the control of Eastern Europe by Russia, the Korean War, and the growing threat of the Hukbong Bayan Laban sa mga Hapon or Hukbalahap (a guerilla army initially forged by the Communist Party of the Philippines to combat the Japanese) to the new Philippine Republic (Lumbera, “Versus Exclusion” 181; Lumbera and Lumbera, Philippine Literature 179). New Critical aestheticism thus dovetails with American interests by virtue of its entry to the Philippines through education deployed as an apparatus for cultural diplomacy.

Appropriated by Filipino writers in English during the postwar years, New Criticism, writes Bienvenido Lumbera, emerged as “the critical orthodoxy” of local academia as well as “the absurd culmination” of the art for art’s sake movement in the Philippines (“Young Writing” 186). Developed by the Southern Agrarians, whose key spokespersons included John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks, New Criticism installed the literary text itself as the object of literary studies, an idea now regarded as a given in many literature classrooms. The extent of its influence is largely the result of its intervention in the teaching of literature, particularly through the production of textbooks such as Brooks and Warren’s Understanding Poetry (1938) and Understanding Fiction (1943). Understanding Poetry begins with the imperative that “one must grasp the poem as a literary construct before it can offer any real illumination as a document,” a revolutionary idea at a time when reading conventions focused on “paraphrase of logical and narrative content,” the “study of biographical and historical materials,” and “inspirational and didactic interpretation” (iv). It outlines the New Critics’ alternative pedagogy, now thought of as common practice in the teaching of poetry: “1. Emphasis should be kept on the poem as a poem. 2. The treatment should be concrete and
inductive. 3. A poem should always be treated as an organic system of relationships, and the poetic quality should never be understood as inhering in one or more factors taken in isolation” (ix). To the New Critics, poetry is communication, different from the discourse of information or science, yet similar to ordinary speech and grounded in human experience; it “represents, not a distinction from, but a specialization of, thoroughly universal habits of human thinking and feeling” (x).

In Iowa, Edith Tiempo first encountered the disciplinary rigor of the American New Critical classroom by being rejected from it; initially disallowed by Engle from attending the poetry workshop because “he must have felt [her poems] were hopeless,” she was told to read three books: Cleanth Brooks’s *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, his *The Well-Wrought Urn*, and his co-edited textbook anthology *Understanding Poetry* (Manlapaz and Evasco 23; Alegre and Fernandez 451). Her success as a student and excellence as a writer were contingent on developing her mastery of the poem as a verbal icon, which placed the postcolonial poet on a path preoccupied with universalism and timelessness, and disinterested in, if not divorced from, politics and history. A good student, Tiempo was able to familiarize herself with the Anglo-American tradition of poetry in the three books recommended by Engle, which proved formative to her creative writing education (Manlapaz and Evasco 23). The progress of her training as a poet was validated by Robert Penn Warren, who received her work positively during his visit to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Similarly, Cleanth Brooks expressed approval by publishing Tiempo’s “The Return” in the *Western Review*; it was her first poem to be published in an American literary magazine (Alegre and Fernandez 452). Tiempo had become, through her education, a New Critical poet, and in this she was not alone. In the 1954 anthology *Six Filipino
Poets, she and the five other poets are praised for their autonomous literary compositions, which “have no nationality; their allegiance is to literature, that is, to the advent of truth” (Casper xvii).

Filipino writers in English, for whom the university was home base, easily took to New Criticism in the 1950s. Lumbera attributes that attraction to its systematization of Villa’s art for art’s sake movement. The analysis of the autonomous artwork as a complex verbal icon provided a teachable method for reading literature, by draining it of messier contexts such as authorship, history, and material and sociopolitical realities; it also spawned a method of creative writing which had, as its ultimate aim, the construction of a linguistically complex literary text that merited the expert formal exegesis of the New Critics (“Versus Exclusion” 182). The New Critical tenets found suitable advocates in the Tiempos, who were writers and academics and thus promoted aesthetic autonomy with pedagogical efficiency. Edith’s formalist practice of teaching and writing was consistently committed to “subtlety and irony, paradox and yoked opposites, condensed and extended images, lyric grace above, and hard cold logic underneath” (“Limits – Or Chaos” 204). In fact, her first published essay, written in 1948, “The Metaphor: Its Choice and Use in a Poem,” already advocates aesthetic autonomy. A poem, she writes, “should stand on its own—proving itself, conveying its meaning by itself, relying on no pre-knowledge of background or other extraneous material to make itself fully understood” (24).

Organic unity is similarly privileged in her evaluation of applications to the Silliman Workshop, which are assessed based on the following criteria: “wholeness of work’s creative conceptualization,” “integrity of artistic articulation of creative concept into form,” and “depth of work’s transformative insight” (qtd. in Pernia 73). In Six Poetry Formats and the Transforming Image, Tiempo provides a veritable mathematical schema for what is labeled free-verse poetry and plots, with dogmatic fervor, how various poets calibrate “the relations of the various aspects
of a poem to each other and to the total communication intended” (Brooks and Warren ix). Citing “metaphorical structuring” and “heightened language and heightened sensibility” as the two indispensable features of poetry, she outlines how texts activate a combination of “external limits” (“rhyme, meter, and other traditional features like regular stanza pattern, special imagery and diction”) and “internal limits” (“thematic tension, understatement, ambiguity, indirection, and tone control, among others”) to produce, at best, “poetry well crafted,” or at worst, “prose” (Six Poetry Formats 9-11).

This systematized scrutiny of literature enjoyed the status of critical dogma for a time in the United States, but it was also subjected to severe criticism, which eventually led to its fall from grace. Terry Eagleton calls New Criticism “a recipe for political inertia, and thus for submission to the political status quo,” and notes that its “view of the poem as a delicate equipoise of contending attitudes, a disinterested reconciliation of opposing impulses proved deeply attractive to skeptical liberal intellectuals disoriented by the clashing dogmas of the Cold War” (50). Political impotence inheres in its fetishization of the aesthetic object. If it does not turn its back on society by treating the poem as a controlled environment where disunities are played out and resolved, in the least, it views historical pressures “as merely partial, no doubt harmoniously balanced somewhere else in the world by their complementary opposites” (50). Its theorizing of intentional and affective fallacies excessively regulates the interactions between reader and text, and its elucidation of a systematic and seemingly universal aesthetic turns the production and consumption of literature into elitist activities, reserved for academics and those whom they train.

In the Philippines, the provenance of New Criticism in American culture fortified the elite status of the Filipino writers who subscribed to it. Those steeped in New Criticism had
access to what was considered a stand-in for global cultural capital, and therefore possessed not just “national” but “international” literary competence; this conflated American with universal literary values, and gave cultural indoctrination a more neutral face as the pursuit of literary excellence (Lumbera, “Versus Exclusion” 182). Transplanted to the postcolonial context, the view of literature as autonomous, which conceals the historical conditions from which it is forged, not only suppressed its colonial roots, but also valorized the individual in pursuit of autonomy: “individual personality, the individual in conflict with society, the individual striving to create art, the individual’s ethical responsibilities not to class or party but to human freedom” (Barnhisel 741). Consequently, the dominant liberal ideology of the US, as mediated by New Criticism, extended the tenure of US colonialism in the Philippines through cultivating, in literary production, forms of antinationalism. The supreme purpose of the writer was neither collective nor panoramic, but singular and myopic: the achievement of organic unity in the well-wrought text. English, the language of the ruling class in the Philippines, was the language of choice for writers; Lumbera recalls that Filipinos with literary ambitions in the 1950s could not write in anything but English, since the majority of the magazines that accepted literary work were in English (Dalisay et al. 278). Writers were, in effect, steered toward literary production in the language that sustained the divide between “the monopolists of power and the people” and “separate[d] educated Filipinos from the masses of their countrymen” (Constantino 31, 24). Born and raised in the academy, the tradition of Philippine writing in English under the aegis of New Criticism became even more specialized and confined within the university. In turn, that institution further “classed” or solidified the power and prestige of English, whose most proficient and primarily middle-class users were entitled to use it imaginatively as facilitated by their university education.
These problems did not go unnoticed, and writers in the academy attempted to address them by undermining New Criticism’s hold on literary production. Founded in 1965, the University of the Philippines (UP) National Writers Workshop, for instance, provided a counterpoint to the Silliman Workshop. UP, established by the Americans in the capital in 1908, was by the 1960s a hotbed of nationalist revolt and dissension in the country. A preoccupation with craft could not but appear limited against the volatile political climate. Recognizing the need to broaden the scope of creative writing education, by 1969, the UP Workshop had fellows writing in Filipino in its lineup, and committed writing was the subject of discussion and debate. There were activists among both its panel of writers and fellows. In 1971, almost all the workshop manuscripts were politically charged (Ordoñez 35-36). The 1971 UP Workshop was held shortly after the violent demonstrations of the First Quarter Storm and before the 1972 declaration of martial law by President Ferdinand Marcos, which would lead to the arrest and detention of several writers in attendance. It is also notable for having the Tiempos among its roster of guest writers.

The lecture on poetry delivered by Edith Tiempo at the UP Workshop illustrates what seems to be the unbridgeable divide between aesthetics and politics when played out by the New Critical and socially committed camps of the Philippine writing scene. According to Luis Teodoro, Jr., Tiempo reprimanded “those who would inflict their ‘vomitings’ upon the reader without knowing what poetry should be.” Disturbed by the lack of attention to craft in explicitly politicized texts, she insisted that writing poetry “should not be an experience similar to going to the bathroom. ‘There is relief, but only temporarily’” (9). Several writers, including Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio and Resil Mojares, offered an alternative to Tiempo’s view, by suggesting that uncertain times could perhaps necessitate “disposable” poetry and that looking to the future
could be “an exercise in arrogance” when there were more pressing, immediate concerns. Tiempo, however, emphasized that poetry “should be able to last because it is founded on ‘universal values,’” and it was human nature, “this hankering for immortality, for things that would survive the flesh” (Teodoro 9).

Because Tiempo regards the literary text as a timeless aesthetic object and a well-wrought whole, its method of composition cannot be unstudied; it must be meticulous and exacting. Her words echo Engle, who saw harm in the Romantic “spontaneous outpouring of immediate feeling” and valued the workshop training that subjected “every word and every attitude… to constant scrutiny,” else the “moving cry” of the work “becomes only screaming” (“The Writer and the Place” 4). The more suitable venue for such a compositional process is the classroom, or a room of one’s own, and not the streets, especially when they are aswarm with social unrest. Already prone to apoliticism, Tiempo’s poetic practice turns antinationalist when monolingualism in English, decidedly not the language of the streets in the Philippines, is framed as a necessity in the service of craft. For the Filipino poet, whose linguistic resources are multiple, Tiempo regards commitment to a single language (English, in her case) as another form of discipline congruent with the pursuit of excellence in writing poetry. Although she spoke several local languages, some of them admittedly imperfectly, she was not one to recommend bilingualism as a writing practice, since it would compromise the progress of her writing in English: “I tell you art is a taskmaster, a strict taskmaster. You’ve got to devote yourself wholeheartedly to it. Whatever writing I do in the vernacular… might affect my writing in English. You cannot just compartmentalize the two and simply say I’ll shut that off while I do this. There might be others who can do that. But I just can’t do that” (Manlapaz and Evasco 21). For Tiempo, monolingualism is a feature of the Anglophone postcolonial poet’s devotion to art,
for “[o]ne cannot improve in one’s art unless there is continuity” (21). Her stance suggests that the multilingual reality of Filipino writers is detrimental rather than enriching to their creative work, and a bilingual or multilingual practice is a handicap to artistry.

In the Silliman Workshop, monolingualism, which Tiempo prefers, appears to be implemented as pedagogical policy. Despite over fifty years of existence, and unlike the workshops it has spawned, the Silliman Workshop continues to offer fellowships only to writers in English. Writers in Filipino, such as Romulo Baquiran, Jr. and Luna Sicat Cleto, gained admission to the Silliman Workshop by submitting translations into English of texts they had originally written in Filipino. The workshop discussions focused only on the translations, not the original texts.15 The English-only practice of a prestigious venue for studying creative writing is reminiscent of the notion in colonial education that the absence or exclusion of other languages ensures the student’s mastery of English. According to Vicente Rafael, the 1925 Survey of the Educational System in the Philippines identified the vernacular languages as the greatest impediment to fluency in American English of both Filipino teachers and students, who were perpetually engaged in translation. Fluency, and the new colonial subject it promised, could only be achieved if translation ceased, or was at least significantly reduced; thus, it was necessary to exclude the mother tongue from the classroom and treat it as subservient to the foreign tongue to both conquer the vernacular and master the English language (47-48). Monolingualism in the colonial classroom promoted the superiority of English over local languages, a status it maintains to this day. Among Filipinos, fluency in English remains a marker of class and cultural sophistication, as well as a desirable skill for economic mobility.

What Rafael calls “translation,” which had no place in colonial education, Tiempo refers to as “compartmentalization,” which works against the craft of the postcolonial poet. Neutralized
as an aesthetic value, monolingualism in English, the key to linguistic fluency, also enables mastery in the discipline of creative writing. As a pedagogical tool, monolingualism in English is not only colonialist and outdated; in the multilingual field of creative writing in the Philippines, it is also simply inadequate. The Silliman Workshop, a “National Writers Workshop” by official designation and an institution that takes pride in the national scale of its impact on trends in literary production, is thus remiss in its obligation to match the range of its pedagogical capacity with the extent of its influence. It tends only to literary production in the undisputed language of the elite, in a setting where writers in English interact only among themselves. Such exclusivity contributes to normalizing the prime position of English not only in the domain of education, but also creative writing. The resulting prejudice is evident when Edilberto Tiempo, in an interview conducted in the 1990s, remarks that Anglophone Filipino writing of the previous fifty years is far better than writing in the vernaculars: “to begin with, those writing in English… are graduates of universities in the Philippines as well as those who have studied in the US and elsewhere” (Nazareth). The prestige of English as the language of intellect and imagination is so entrenched that its superiority over the local languages is received as inherent rather than constructed. Thus, in the same interview, Torrevillas regards reductive thinking as the outcome of writing in Filipino: “I have found, without being overly pejorative, that the concerns of many of the nationalistic writers tend to be simplistic or oversimplified once they’re written in the native language” (Nazareth).

**Repurposing Autonomy and Universalism in a Postcolonial Context**

The colonialist and classist ideas propagated by the New Critical Tiempo school illustrate how it contributes to the mis-education that Constantino believed to be rampant in the Philippine
educational system, which worked against the achievement of a national culture. A lecture delivered by Edith Tiempo in 1976, however, suggests that her commitment to aesthetic autonomy can also be read as a form of critical engagement with, rather than outright opposition to, the nationalist project. In “Literature as a Maker of National Myths,” Tiempo warns against “performing for the state in the production of national values and national guides for conduct”; she links instrumentalizing literature in this manner to “self-preservation in the immediate scene” rather than “the foundation for a humane and enduring culture,” in which literature transcends its initial context and assumes a “permanently human and universal application” (46-47). Her remarks, at the time they were made, seemed to address Filipino writers in the employ of Marcos, who had put the country under martial law and whose New Society saw the detention, disappearance, and death of many dissenters. While her references to timelessness and universalism reiterate her formalist stance, they also reject the complicity of literature in a nationalist agenda implicated in the oppressions of the state.16 What comes off as antinationalist is thus neither colonialist nor purely aestheticist; instead, it illuminates the nation itself as a hegemonic category, whose fractures and excesses disappear under the homogenizing power of national myths. Art for art’s sake, in standing apart from society, becomes a means to interrogate what society endorses with zeal and without enough scrutiny. One such case is the pursuit of a national culture, whose rightness in the context of decolonization can be refashioned to justify a totalitarian postcolonial regime.

This invites a postcolonial reconsideration of New Criticism, which various studies have already revisited to counter its reception as the intellectual outpost of political apathy, conservatism, and modern American capitalism.17 The American New Critics themselves were well aware of being read as exclusively literary in their investments, and in the “The Present
Function of Criticism,” Allen Tate seeks to invalidate “the rival claims of formalism and history, of art-for-art’s sake and society” (19). Identifying the “movement variably known as positivism, pragmatism, instrumentalism” as New Criticism’s antagonist, he argues that to read literature critically, as a form of knowledge in itself rather than a historical document or vessel of information, is to undo and potentially reconfigure the dominant intellectual expression that buttresses the vulgar utilitarian attitude of the middle class and the bourgeois, consumerist activities of modern capitalism. Echoing I.A. Richards, Tate contends that “poetry would ‘order’ our minds” (8-13). The sociality of aesthetic autonomy is itself already embedded in Brooks and Warren’s imperative that one must approach a poem as a literary text “before it can offer any real illumination as a document” (italics mine). To engage with a poem as a poem is not an end in itself. Thus, to approach literature in formal terms is to treat it as neither “a transparent expression of its historical context” nor “an entirely autonomous form,” but to access the form of knowledge it generates as a critical response to its political and cultural context (Jancovich101).

In the Philippines, a few critics have attempted to account for the calibrations made by Edith Tiempo to make her deployment of New Criticism pertinent to Philippine conditions of literary production. For instance, in his introduction to a selection of Tiempo’s critical essays, Isagani Cruz makes the hyperbolic claim that the Tiempos “situat[ed] themselves firmly within the dominant tradition of socially conscious and politically subversive Philippine literature established by Francisco Balagtas and Jose Rizal” (240). Charlie Samuya Veric, in articulating Tiempo’s “poetics of in-betweenness,” tempers Cruz’s pronouncement and suggests that Tiempo undermines New Criticism by asserting that “successful form itself is the context” (62). While this integration of form and context, which constitutes the sociality of autonomy, is not absent from American New Criticism, I think it is arguably most seamless and perceptible in the
postcolonial literary text, especially when produced in the language of the colonizer in the local literary milieu, and therefore alongside literatures in the local languages.

A poem in English, when written by a Filipino, in itself already indexes the history of American colonization as well as the economic and social stratifications of Philippine society, which also fall along language lines. The very form of the literary text in English flags the policies and prejudices that install English at the top of the linguistic hierarchy. Because it invokes the multilingual reality of its postcolonial context, the poem in English, when written by a Filipino, is intrinsically translational. To engage a postcolonial literary text as translational is to pay “closer attention to [its] formal—and linguistic in primis features” with an eye toward “multilingual concerns” and “a critical praxis able to relate those aesthetic features to real-world issues” (Bertacco 3). Thus, hermeticism is not the inevitable outcome of the New Critical investment in aesthetic autonomy. The political is formal: a writer’s preoccupation with form is potentially a form of political engagement.

I think this politics of form is incipient in Tiempo’s work. It registers in her concern over the seeming lack of social consciousness in Anglophone poetry by Filipinos, even as she extols the virtues of monolingualism in English in creative writing. Tiempo may have called English “a happy accident” in a 1991 interview, but in an essay published in 1965, she also recognizes it as “an uneasy endowment” (“Philippine Poetry” 273). Owning up to a common charge made against the tradition built largely under her supervision, she observes that Filipino poetry in English “seems to feel safer dealing with the ‘inner man’… when it does not require the definition of specific pain that is felt in the national marrow and seared into the national flesh” (269); in effect, “the poet evades the responsibility of asserting for others, and speaks only of his own esoteric insights” (270). It is not the lack of a social conscience that drives a poet to lyric
privacy, which makes no claims about national identity or collectivity; rather, Tiempo surmises, it is the recognition that “if he adopts the language he must also try to assimilate the way of thinking that has begotten it” (269).

Political reticence, in effect, becomes a sound, albeit unsatisfactory, recourse for the poet in English, whose tongue can neither completely undo nor convincingly deny its complicity in colonization: “the poetry has to pay dearly… it may probably become more ivory-tower than it should be,” says Tiempo (272). At the same time, she tentatively acknowledges that the role of Philippine literature in English in the development of a national literature is suspect. For being written in the language not only of the colonizer but also the ruling and middle classes, Anglophone literature is an outsider to the domain of national literature, which literatures in the local languages occupy without question, given the foundation of postwar nationalism on the “conjoining of the nation with the lower class” (Claudio 49-50). Filipino writers in English, in this context, are by default conjoined with the privileged. It would thus seem incongruous to write in English and assume the lyric persona of the representative rather than the individual. The former requires a suspension of disbelief that language politics in the Philippines simply makes impossible to achieve.

When Tiempo converts this incongruity in life into an aesthetic problem, she poses it as the need to resolve a fundamental incongruity in the Filipino poet’s art: the use of a foreign language to write native content. In the 1954 essay “The Use of English in Philippine Creative Writing,” Tiempo recognizes the inherently translational character of writing in English and, by extension, the Filipino author’s burden to produce what might be called a divided text, one written in English yet evocative of the “ideal version” that has “defied projection of its peculiar ‘feel’ or ‘taste’ in English,” which Filipino readers nevertheless might glean (8). In this light, she
assigns the success of Manuel Arguilla’s fiction to a combination of transliteration, translation, and standard (American) English (5-6). By thinking of English as deployed by the Filipino writer as inherently translational, she not only disrupts the primacy of standard English as the well from which Anglophone literary production draws, but also foregrounds the instability of language as a nexus of colonial and class relations. Seeing English reflexively is the springboard from which to disrupt its operations as the language of the privileged and to problematize the political reticence she observes in the work produced in the language.

This regard for English in Philippine literary production as translational, if mobilized in the Silliman Workshop, shows the potential efficacy of its primarily aestheticist pedagogy to complicate what it means to write poetry as an expression of national identity, which tends to be dominated by poems in the local languages, as well as poems that thematize (over)zealous nationalism and nativist essentialism. To study how the postcolonial poet crafts English, while negotiating a multilingual context in which the elite and imperial status of English endures, calls attention to national identity as constructed and contested in the very fabric of a global lingua franca. To imagine the possible forms that the Anglophone postcolonial poet’s divided text can assume, in turn, undermines the given-ness of English as a veritable “universal” language. The universal becomes an exclusionary and imperialist apparatus when regarded as always already formed rather than perpetually in construction; the former requires deference to existing terms for inclusion, while the latter thrives on the proliferation of new terms to include. To reject the universal altogether at times results in “a too-protectionist approach to assertions of identity”; recuperating it, however, entails attentiveness to the universal “as a horizon rather than a foundation” (Anderson 266, 281). Judith Butler notes that this dynamic universality is realized through “the difficult labor of translation, one in which the terms made to stand for one another
are transformed in the process.” Rethinking the universal in linguistic terms, Butler imagines it to be persistently multilingual. As the outcome of ceaseless translation across multiple languages, the universal becomes “that which is yet to be achieved” and “may never be fully or finally achievable” (130-31). Butler’s logic not only indexes the unquestionable place of (postcolonial) particularity in the pursuit of the universal, but also situates the transformation of the universal in the realm of language in itself. This translational approach to universalism undermines the necessity ascribed to conventional fluency in English, which defers to an existing rigid standard. In favoring perpetual transformation realized across multiple languages, it carves out a space for the Filipino poet to imagine and write in a provisional, translational English.

In “The Use of English in Philippine Creative Writing,” however, Tiempo curtails the potential for a translational universalism to be developed from her observations about English-language use by Filipino writers. She reverts to the treatment of autonomy sans sociality when she says, “[t]he problem is not the more superficial one of translating a vernacular version into English; it is not a problem between one language and another, but between a language and a material foreign to each other” (7). Removed from its postcolonial multilingual context, English is once again neutralized, converted into a purely aesthetic tool to be applied to “native” content, which appears to be non-linguistic raw material. When the literary text in English is not regarded as translational, the range of its identity and construction as a divided text, which discloses and reflects on its allegiance to the ideal colonial subject as well as the educated and economically privileged, is diminished. The use of English, in this way, is de-politicized and aestheticized; that it requires a writer who exhibits fluency and for whom translation is already resolved is received primarily as a fact in order to enter field of creative writing, rather than as a marker of class privilege or symptom of continuing deference to the terms of an imposed culture. The ideal
literary text is still the undivided text, in which English is used as (or as if it were) a first language, by an author who thinks and imagines directly in English. Fluency in English uninflected by its postcolonial context is what Tiempo ultimately holds up as an aesthetic value when she describes teaching at Western Michigan University in 1963 as “more rewarding,” since “[the students] didn’t have second language devices, patterns and so forth” (Alegre and Fernandez 415-16, 449). The inclination to isolate English from its multilingual context perhaps explains why Tiempo’s implicit invitation for the poet to engage more explicitly with political and social issues “does not include an adjustment in the style or mode of writing” (Barretto-Chow 395). This casts doubt on Gémino H. Abad’s contention that the Filipino poet has “colonized” and “remolded” the English language “to our image” (Our Scene So Fair 192). While Abad concludes that naturalizing English implies the realization in language of national identity, perhaps it is indicative of something less grand: the proficiency in standard English of the Filipino poet. The “naturalized English” of the postcolonial poet is less the outcome of engaging with the language as translational and more the result of acquiring fluency in a universal standard.

J. Neil Garcia assigns a potentially emancipatory function to the “predominantly universalist character” of Philippine poetry in English, shaped in no small part by the Silliman Workshop, which he describes as “couched in Standard-sounding English” that “cannot be so easily ethnographically ‘placed’” (xviii, xvi). This body of writing is unappealing to postcolonialists and nationalists alike, he contends, for it appears lacking in postcolonial particularity (often manifested via linguistic deformation, fragmentation, creolization, and other such devices) to the former and blatantly assimilationist to the latter. Nevertheless, that the texts are written by Filipinos is reason enough to read them as potentially disruptive to
neocolonialism, which is both cause of and resource for resistance. Garcia imagines the poet in English who writes “with unflappable confidence, with virtual mastery, with no apology, with such fabulous verbal temerity in the language of colonization” as a more viable and less “colonially suspect” alternative to explicitly ethnopoetic work, which defers to the West’s conception of its postcolonies by fetishizing its Otherness (xix-xxi).

By positing the universal as an alternative to the exoticized, Garcia illuminates an arguably compelling form of resistance to the trite and mercenary path of local color. Nevertheless, Garcia’s opposing camps (the “universalizers” and “ethnopoeticizers”), even at their most self-reflexive, belong to the fluent poet in English (one internalizing the standardization and the other deliberately bastardizing it), who assumes the role of the colonized striking back at the colonizer, the Filipino spokesperson for the periphery who asserts agency in the “universal” or “international” arena. In situating the universalizers of Philippine poetry as the literary periphery in relation to the global literary scene, however, the argument glosses over their dominant position in relation to the local literary scene. The class, prestige, and power that underpin Anglophone literary production in the New Critical mode even function as enablers for its practitioners to be “literarily” mobile and representative of the Filipino outside the Philippines. Meanwhile, back home, writing in English continues to reside in its ivory tower. The universal approach to writing in English reasserts the demand for fluency in the language of the privileged and itself becomes a privilege of a select few.

Tiempo seems resigned to this reality when she notes that to be “carefully universal and neutral” or not “too indigenous” seems to be the more effective path to congruity of language and content, and by extension, to “good poetry,” in which human situations illuminate truths about the human condition. Thus, it is “the only procedure under the present circumstances”
available to the poet (“Philippine Poetry” 270-72). Translation submits to fluency, and the native defers to the foreign, for between indigenizing language and universalizing content, Tiempo believes it is the latter that makes the good poem. The invitation to rethink the lack of sociopolitical specificity leads only to its affirmation as an aesthetic value in producing a “true” work of art, “which may be considered as such anywhere by commonly accepted artistic standards” (“The Use of English” 10). Although Tiempo wonders if the Filipino poet will ever transform English to “make it wholly and naturally flexible to his purpose,” she relinquishes the possibility to the far future; in the meantime, rather than tamper with one’s methods of writing in English, in the attempt to forge a connection with the local audience, “[t]he serious poet’s resort is to look for an audience elsewhere that would understand and listen” (“Philippine Poetry” 272). The ruse of literary excellence, which normalizes the dominant standards of Anglo-American tradition, turns the alienation of local readers into a necessary sacrifice in the name of good poetry, the trade-off for potential access to an international audience.

Universalism, in this sense, imagines a distant rather than proximate addressee; the universal subsumes the local in theory, yet alienates it in practice. The Tiempo school concretizes this through the way the Silliman Workshop positions itself in the local literary landscape and selects its participants. Located in the Visayas, the Silliman Workshop contributes to decentralizing the hold of “imperial Manila” on Filipino artistic practice; its cosmopolitanism even bypasses Manila altogether via its direct link to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Its use of English resists the language of the capital, Tagalog-based Filipino, and its hegemony over local languages. Still, as a private enclave for Filipino writers in English, the Silliman Workshop is inaccessible even to writers in the Visayan languages in its immediate area. It has also in recent years included international fellows and invited international authors to be on its panel of writers,
which suggests a greater interest in interaction with players in the international rather than the local literary scene. The universalism that Tiempo values, whether applied to the literary text or to the operations of the Silliman Workshop, is tacitly equated with a global literary community whose lingua franca is English. Filipinos, let alone Filipinos without fluency in English, are hardly part of this international scene, whether as consumers or producers.

It seems unlikely that the American fiction writer Flannery O’Connor would make an appearance in navigating the field of creative writing in the Philippines, yet she is a surprisingly appropriate reference to illustrate the kind of New Critical conservatism that continues to oversee the Silliman Workshop, despite the instances in Tiempo’s thought which gesture toward a recalibration of its tenets when applied to the Philippine setting. As mentioned earlier, the Tiempos were in class with O’Connor in Iowa, and Edith recalls that O’Connor had a thick southern accent, which proved to be a challenge to her peers. Students had to read their work aloud in class, and no one could understand what O’Connor was saying when she read her work. “They begged for Paul Engle to take away her manuscript and read it himself,” said Edith. “From that time on,” added Edilberto, “I stopped apologizing for my Philippine accent” (Nazareth).

That O’Connor is described as speaking English with an accent implies an “accent-less” English that is the American standard, which turns all those who speak otherwise into outsiders to the language, even if they are Americans themselves. O’Connor’s accented English, which diminishes her insider status as an American citizen in an American university, contributes to the legitimization of Edilberto, whose accented English is no longer a definitive mark of foreignness, since it can also afflict an American peer. However, both the American and the Filipino defer to Engle, the professor in the classroom as well as the arbiter and mediator of standard American English, which the student can potentially acquire through the disciplinary training of a
university education. As implied by the request of his students, it is literally through Engle’s voice that O’Connor’s story becomes intelligible and acceptable in the institutional setting.

O’Connor’s accent did not extend to her fiction, described as consistently told in the effaced or limited third-person point of view by narrators who spoke standard English, “even when relaying the interior lives of characters who talk and think in southern dialect”; there are no first person narrators, who “would have spoken in a thick rural Southern dialect that few readers would have understood or had the patience to decipher,” and characters spoke dialect “only in limited and easily digestible doses in dialogue” (Pollack 550-51). In other words, she was a good student, schooled by institutionalized creative writing toward fluency in an accent-less English.

In multilingual Philippines, the “threat” of writing in an accented English is even more palpable. In enforcing a universal standard, institutionalized creative writing follows the demands of the global market; the Philippines, after all, is a major supplier of workers in the business process outsourcing industry, where Filipinos are trained to “sound American,” or at the very least, not sound like themselves. The preservation to this day of monolingualism in English in the Silliman Workshop upholds Tiempo’s explicit dogmatism rather than pursues what she detected to be the limits to her traditionally New Critical allegiances; it is less an invitation for accents to proliferate and more a suggestion to leave all accents outside the door. Furthermore, the annual published announcement of successful workshop applicants, which lists not only the writers’ names but also their university affiliations, continues to perpetuate the notion that literary production in English belongs to the privileged, by implying that higher education is a requirement to be an Anglophone writer. It reiterates the insider status of Philippine writing in English in relation to the university, where proficiency in English is endorsed without question as a vital skill across all disciplines for students to function effectively in school, and eventually,
in the workforce. In the English Department of the University of the Philippines, where I teach creative writing, it is not unusual for students to be praised “for their grasp of the language” even if their work is relatively predictable or cliché; conversely, it is not unusual for the imaginative work of students to go unnoticed because of their “clunky language” or “terrible grammar.” Even in the field of creative writing, where more self-reflexivity regarding language politics is to be expected, fluency is conflated with talent (which privileges private-school educated, middle-class students), while imagination goes unrecognized in the mess of grammar. I myself am torn when confronted with such students: I am guilty of feeling excessively relieved and thrilled when reading a student submission whose primary asset is minimal grammatical errors; I also tend to assume that the only way to develop a fairly imaginative piece written in awkward language is to revise it toward fluency.

How can Philippine literary production in English undo the elite status of English as the language of the privileged? Is it possible to write imaginatively in English without being schooled in standard (American) English and obliged to know the (universal) rules before breaking them? Lumbera addresses the creative writing institution itself and urges academia to go beyond “correctness” as a value in the writing classroom. Recounting a short story that he found moving when it was discussed at the UP National Workshop, where he served on the panel of writers, he observes that the story would be considered “unacceptable,” whether in the creative writing classroom or the literary pages of magazines “because of its grammatical lapses and the looseness of its construction” (“Young Writing” 187). In academia, he notes, “all too often, we have repressed a young writer’s expressive freedom and authentic voice by insisting on the same kind of correct English that one finds in the writings of American and British writers. Our demand in the use of English has been nothing less than the English of writers born into the
language” (188). The example of O’Connor’s own accent in the American classroom qualifies the assumptions in Lumbera’s statement, but his point remains clear: the disciplinary power of the classroom creates, for the Filipino writer, a relationship with English defined exclusively by fluency, at the expense of other potentially meaningful kinds of relations.

In the era of American colonial education, despite efforts to the contrary, the Americans were confronted by English with an accent. The 1925 Survey of the Educational System in the Philippines, says Rafael, noted that fluency was far from being realized in the Philippines, citing, among other things, the preponderance instead of a “Filipinized English” that could be heard in the pronunciation, the cadence, and the accent of English when uttered by Filipino tongues in recitation. “The mother tongue insinuates itself into the foreign one… Two decades of colonial education in English has thus produced not the hegemony of English but its transformation into a language foreign to the Americans themselves” (48-51). Rather than read this effect of colonial education as proof of mis-education, an opinion both colonialists and nationalists share (the former for failing to impose fluency in English and the latter for the very act of imposing fluency in English to begin with), Rafael entertains the possibility of “another form of life” that it offers, “steeped in the history of the colonial, [yet] also escap[ing] it (45). Turning to Nick Joaquin’s “The Language of the Streets” and Tagalog slang, in which “popular practices of translating the foreign [operate] beyond the confines of schooling and condemnations of nationalist criticism,” he imagines a possible answer to mis-education which simultaneously embraces and resists it is to be found in the streets. Slang functions as an unpoliced, proliferative, and potentially empowering language and a source of “literary promise” for its capacity to activate “translation as play”; because it is “liberated from the task of reproducing hierarchy [among languages],” it
offers “another way of experiencing the nation, whether in its colonial or post-colonial state” (53, 61-62).

The New Critical commitment to form and the pursuit of the universal that Tiempo advocated in her writing and pedagogy are not by default unable to cultivate the literary potential that Rafael sees in a more fluid and non-hierarchical intermingling of the foreign and the local in language. The sociality of autonomy and a translational approach to universalism can facilitate an Anglophone writing practice and corresponding pedagogy steeped in perpetual translation. To account for the Tiempos’ complicity in mis-education, and to explore how their legacy can be a means to rethink and refashion the very notion of mis-education, are necessary tasks to expand the range and relevance of writing in English by Filipinos, and to complicate what it means to provide a nationalist education. The Silliman Workshop is not the only source of validation for both emerging and established writers in English in the local literary scene, yet it is a literary gatekeeper many times over, as evident in the degree-granting programs, award-giving bodies, university and mainstream presses, and creative writing classrooms that privilege and replicate the aesthetics and politics it systematized. Long after the Second World War and into the twenty-first century, the Tiempo Age endures, and its well-wrought text continues to be the dominant standard for and formula of literary production. While I think it is within reason to expect institutions to reinvent themselves, it is also not unusual for them to sustain rather than interrogate the ideas to which they owe their cultural capital. For this reason, I also think that the imaginative possibilities for writing in English beyond the Tiempo Age lie not within but outside the institutions of creative writing.
The Poet is the Author of the Citizen:

Art for Art’s Sake and the (Un)Translatable Filipino Subject in the Poetry of

José García Villa

The vocabulary of the Filipino expatriate poet José García Villa (1908-1997) is littered with the prefix un-. In Villa’s lexicon, familiar is unstrange, intact is unbroken, proud is unhumble, erect is unbowed, and day is unnight. He speaks of the “labor, of, un-oneing,” “Unbody, and, end, only,” “my, undream, of, death,” and “My, tongue, unBabeled,” (italics mine) (Doveglion 81, 86, 88, 112). To affix un- to a word is to negate what it signifies without erasing its sign: strange remains visible in unstrange, although its absence is what unstrange means, a nuance not as detectable in a synonym such as familiar. Villa’s “un-words” exude the contrarian spirit for which he is known; they also call attention to relationality in the system of language, and magnify flux in the production of meaning, which turns noticeably unstable when the attachment of un- to a noun does not invoke its definitive opposite, or a clear sense of its lack. What is an undream? What does it mean to be unBabeled?

Villa’s habitual use of the prefix un- is only one manifestation of his lifelong fixation with surface effects in writing. When taken in combination with other features in his work that promote artificiality, it reveals his unwavering conviction in poetry’s task to foreground the materiality of language. “Progress in the arts is never a progress in subject matter but progress in form,” he proclaims, and it is this belief that defined the trajectory of his artistic career (“The Best Filipino Poems of 1939-1940” 226). The bulk of Villa’s work can be plotted according to different phases of formal experimentation, from his invention of reversed consonance in his first poetry collection published in the United States, Have Come, Am Here (The Viking Press, 1942),
to his notorious comma poems in *Volume Two* (New Directions, 1949), to his adaptations/collages in *Selected Poems and New* (McDowell, Obolensky, 1958). These books, produced in New York where Villa spent most of his life, take to heart the modernist dictum to “make it new” by striving to keep language perpetually strange. It is primarily for his formal inventiveness that Villa is credited as having “almost single-handedly founded modern writing in English in the Philippines” (San Juan, “Articulating a Third World Modernism” 171).

Villa’s syntactical experiments were not without critics. In both the American and Filipino literary scenes, skeptics regarded his work as amateurish, excessively poeticizing, and unnecessarily obscure. To Filipino critics, the self-indulgence in his fetishization of form was exacerbated by his explicit rejection of all things political in his work. Villa is recognized in Philippine letters as the patriarch of art for art’s sake. His conviction that aesthetics and politics are completely separate spheres was notably unsympathetic to the pursuit of a national culture in the years following the Philippines’ shift to Commonwealth status in 1935, when writers and artists actively problematized the dynamic between art and society (Patke and Holden 70-71). By implication, he seemed to endorse assimilation to colonial culture. Villa’s rejection of politics in his artistic practice was not only evident in his poetry, which was steeped in the universal and purged of national and ethnic identity, but also in his critical writing, which imposed his singular attention to form on works produced by Filipinos in the Philippines.

His uncompromising aestheticism has undoubtedly validated the tendency of Filipino writers and critics, especially, to conflate an investment in formal experimentation with political apathy or conservatism, if not blatant antinationalism. Expressing his distrust of “modernist/postmodernist departures being bandied about by some young avant-garde Filipino writers nowadays,” J. Neil Garcia claims that “to champion the non-mimetic and the ‘fractal’
and/or fragmentary would be tantamount to celebrating the cultural deracination and subjugation that already harrowingly afflict us as a people.” In his critique of non-mimeticism in Philippine literary production, of which Villa was a progenitor, Garcia asserts that it foregrounds a primarily Western notion of “the fragmented or incongruent subject” that is both “too luxurious” or “too ‘redundant’” a concept to engage with fruitfully; in effect, it undermines the necessary efforts to consolidate and fortify an already “beleaguered ‘sense of national self’” of Filipinos, whose identity is already fractured by the trauma of colonial history (“Translation and the Problem of Realism” 664, 683-84). The blanket dismissal of Villa’s post-millennium counterparts as irrelevant or anathema to the nationalist project is symptomatic of the routine exclusion of aesthetic autonomy, because of its attention to art as art, from the arena of social transformation in the form of nation building. It reiterates the dichotomy of art for art’s sake vs. committed literature, a prevailing principle to organize Philippine literary history, and ultimately it echoes Villa’s own philosophy, which draws an impermeable line between aesthetics and politics.

In reading Villa against himself, I aim to read against the binary that excludes the autonomy of art from the work of intervention in the social realm. I think Villa’s exploration of poetic form makes him a productive, though unwitting, interlocutor of Philippine literary production’s role in forging national identity, which, in turn, demonstrates the sociality of art for art’s sake. Simona Bertacco underscores the textual as a coordinate in the fulfillment of the colonial enterprise when she observes that seizing and occupying territory were “performed textually” via such apparatuses as maps, treaties, settlers’ journals, and novels (4). If the colonized subject is forged out of the texts written by the colonizer, then a viable site of anticolonial struggle “could not but be the texts themselves—this time read and written by the
formerly colonized subjects” (Bertacco 4). As a Filipino poet less interested in writing about than writing itself, Villa explicitly, though often unintentionally, flags the subjectivity of the colonized as a textualized identity, one that exists, and is thus constructed and contested, in poetic form. In this light, instead of dismissing Villa as unengaged with national identity for refusing to thematize it in his work, I think it is useful to view this refusal as a deterrent to the habit of bypassing the critical engagement that occurs in form. Without the distraction of content that pins down the “Filipino-ness” of the poem, Villa draws attention to form as “the abstract of specific social relationships,” or that which emerges from the “transformation of social questions into properly literary or compositional ones” (Schwarz 53). His experiments with the very fabric of language, which make the text in itself visible, serve as an extended meditation on the Filipino poet’s relationship with English, whose ubiquity in Philippine discourse testifies to the lingering effects of American colonization and the continuing hold of the United States on the lives of Filipinos.

Through samples of his ars poetica, arguably the pinnacle of art for art’s sake for turning poetry itself into its own subject, Villa deploys “strategic illegibility,” to borrow Craig Dworkin’s term, which, in turn, exhibits what I call the condition of translatedness of Philippine poetry in English. Formal strategies that thwart the appearance of fluency in English foreground the materiality of language and present the poem as a “divided text,” which refutes the democratic fusion of the English language and “the Filipino sensibility” implicit in the claim that Anglophone literary production has indigenized the colonial tongue. Rhetorical moves that point to the poem as a material object call attention to the text itself as a mutable site where national identity is composed and recomposed. In poems like “When, I, was, no, bigger, than, a, huge” (poem 134), a divine poem from his comma series in Volume Two (1949), and “A ,,Composition,”
(1953), a later uncollected poem first published in the Philippines, Villa stages the perpetual displacement of the poem in the process of composing it. His ars poetica is, so to speak, always already in translation, a stand-in for the actual poem that has yet to be; consequently, the poems are distinctly unstable texts that oscillate between illegibility and readability. As an analog of the postcolonial Filipino subject, Villa’s ars poetica, in textualizing national identity, magnifies its provisionality and its perennial struggle to write itself both against and in a language compromised by its colonial provenance. The self-reflexivity of Villa’s texts exposes the sociality of autonomy and demonstrates how the preoccupation with form itself engages rather than ignores questions of national identity.

**Aesthetics Without Politics: Villa’s Art For Art’s Sake**

In over a century of Philippine poetry in English, Villa is unquestionably the poet most visibly ardent in his devotion to poetic form and adamant in his desire to sequester art from politics and history. An expatriate poet, he commenced his bi-located artistic practice when he left the Philippines for the United States in 1930. His physical absence did not deter him from exerting influence on Philippine literary production and reception. It was in the Philippines that he published his first book of poetry, *Many Voices* (Philippine Book Guild, 1939), and subsequent books from local publishers included collections that drew material from and repackaged the books he released in the United States. His annual “roll of honor,” begun in 1927 and sustained for over a decade, until the onset of World War II, listed what he thought to be the best Filipino poems and stories of the year and articulated his criteria for evaluating literary merit (Chua, *The Critical Villa*) 2. Published in various local magazines, these essays served as his pulpit for preaching the primacy of individual genius and art for art’s sake, with which his name
would eventually become synonymous in the history of Philippine literature. For enjoying some measure of success, particularly during the 1940s, as a poet in the international (American) literary scene, he was considered a source of national pride. He received the National Artist Award, the highest honor the Philippine government bestows upon its artists, in 1973, one year after the dictator Ferdinand Marcos placed the country under martial law.

Villa may be a *national* artist in name, but his body of work is uncompromising in its universalism, eschewing markers of ethnicity and nationality. “*I do NOT write about the Filipino, I write about MAN,*” he declared. Steeped in the Anglo-American literary tradition, he embraced the global at the expense of the local: “I disbelieve in a Filipino literature as a special type of literature: *a national literature is valid only insofar as it is world literature*” (“Best Philippine Short Stories [of 1934]” 110). This outlook has not prevented his nationality from figuring significantly in the reception of his oeuvre, whether by Filipino or American critics. In the Philippines, in particular, his universalism appeared to be in stark contrast to the vision of the state, which forged a direct link between literature and the nation. From the 1940s to the 70s, like many former colonies and newly independent nations, the Philippines was committed to a national agenda of “sustainable development, social change and redistributive justice, and cultural self-preservation” (Hau, “Rethinking History” 42). Literature was seen as a potent apparatus that could contain and construct Filipino culture, and the state turned to it to fulfill the pedagogical imperative to promote the “nationalist ideals of virtue, patriotism, and self-sacrifice” and “foster national consciousness among the Filipino people and make ‘good' citizens of the Filipino youth” (Hau, *Necessary Fictions* 1-3). Among writers, who examined their role in the twin projects of decolonization and nation-building, the great debate on the function of literature

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emerged, with Villa and the critic Salvador P. Lopez as spokespersons for art for art’s sake and committed literature, respectively.

The “Villa-Lopez controversy” was battled out from 1938 to 1941 in various publications, including the Vanguard, the National Review, the Graphic, the Literary Apprentice, the Leader, and the Herald Mid-Week Magazine (Chua, The Critical Villa 182). Lopez was unequivocal about the task of literature to intervene in society: “of all the ends to which [the writer] may dedicate his talents, none is more worthy than the improvement of the condition of man and the defense of his freedom” (Literature and Society 189). Villa, in contrast, insisted on a rigid divide between aesthetics and politics: “I do not believe the economic readjustment of society to be the function of literature… the thing to remember is literature is literature” (“The Best Filipino Short Stories of 1937” 178-79). Implicit in his tautology is the inherent desire, says Theodor Adorno, of art for “identity with itself, an identity that in empirical reality is violently forced on all objects as identity with the subject and thus travestied” (4). The hegemony of mimesis renders this identity invisible and reduces the text, in Villa’s words, to “economic or political tracts” in the service of “social propaganda” (“The Best Filipino Stories of 1937” 180). Purging literature of what distracts from its singular identity as literature, Villa turned to universalism, favoring subjects such as the solitary artistic genius and the relationship of God and man, and advocated aesthetic autonomy.

For Villa, the ultimate aim in writing poetry is to achieve and “essential ‘I’,” that is, “to reach that point where Man and God are in kinetic and heroic balance: where the progression itself is the ordering and adhering into Identity” (“Guggenheim Fellowship” 132). His metaphysics, when played out in his poetry, is disconnected from the Catholicism he was born into and which many Filipinos practice; the divine is hardly an authority to be worshipped but a
foil for the poet’s “I” to resist, measure up against, absorb, or transcend. His work is also utterly devoid of country and citizenship. Disinterested in the idea of the poem as a tool to mobilize the masses and emancipate the collective from collective suffering, Villa privatizes both suffering and one’s liberation from it. Revolution, he says, takes place in “the internal personality of man” (“The Best Filipino Short Stories of 1937” 179). Its effects occur not in society but in the work of art, which is realized when the artist (the “man” in whose evolution Villa is most invested) subscribes to “the impersonal principle of art.” Referencing T.S. Eliot, whose ideal artist separates “the man who suffers” from “the mind which creates,” Villa’s envisions the artist as one who maintains a “superb indifference to subject matter” and “pay[s] attention to the medium and to form, not to the ego” (Poetry Is 8-9).

This fidelity to the pursuit of form as the ultimate aim of writing is what prompted Lopez to describe Villa as “the patron-saint of a cult of rebellious moderns” (Introduction 7). The poet initiated and instigated a shift in Philippine poetic production through poetry that fiercely distanced itself from the work of his peers, who were “schooled in Victorian and Romantic poetry and accustomed to didacticism, allegorization, formal traditionalism, and sentimentality of poetry in the Philippine languages” (Chua, “Colonialist or Critic” 176). Villa was unabashed in his scorn for “the devotees of the sunset, the utterers of piety and easy surface sentiment, the adorers of mottoes and rhymed platitudes, the invokers of invocations, the social justicers and the tumtummers” (“The Best Filipino Poems of 1939-1940” 224). In launching his revolution against the tradition of Philippine poetry, however, he was staunch in his conviction that it was a necessarily hermetic endeavor, sealed off from politics, history, and society.

Although there are recent efforts that read Villa against his professed apoliticism, generations of Filipino writers have for the most part corroborated Villa’s self-presentation in
examining his work and regarded it with varying degrees of severity. In his introduction to *Chorus for America: Six Philippine Poets*, which was published in the United States in 1942, the same year *Have Come, Am Here* was released, the expatriate poet and novelist Carlos Bulosan said that “[w]ith one exception, this volume is primarily concerned with poets who are conscious that they are forging a weapon to create a new society” (xi). The unnamed exception is Villa. At around the same time, Lopez disputed Villa’s insistence on impersonality in art by describing the poet’s work as “amorphous compositions of a literary nihilist who recognizes no demands save only those arising from his narcissistic preoccupation with himself” (148). In other words, poetry without a stake in the social realm was not impersonal but self-serving. Almost seventy years later, E. San Juan, Jr. linked Villa’s narcissism to bourgeois individualism, characterizing the absence of ethnic and national traces in the poet’s work as the product of his “entrenched mentality of aristocratic individualism sprung from a tributary feudal social formation” (“Vicissitudes of Neocolonial Art-Fetishism” 18).

Villa’s avowed apoliticism and its attendant universalism, it seems, turn him into an aesthete easily co-opted by or actively submitting to the status quo, which only proves the limitations of art for art’s sake. The insistence on poetry that is not “Filipino” but “universal” caves in to, rather than stands apart from, imperialist culture. Far from the democratization that the term implies, “universal” is arguably a euphemism for “American,” given the widespread propagation of American culture and values as a result of US domination in the global economic order. This hegemony is most pronounced among those literally subjected to American colonization and schooled in the colonizing culture as the superior culture, if not the only culture there is. Villa’s claim of universalism, in this light, is proof of assimilation at its most complete, for it not only goes unrecognized, but also disguises itself as autonomy. Furthermore, “by
emphasizing formal poetic innovation,” says Timothy Yu, “Villa sought to gain access to the US modernist canon, a task that must have seemed incompatible with his status as a respected Filipino writer or as a prose chronicler of Filipino life” (43). This speculation, based on the poet’s conspicuous shift from conventionally lyrical works infused with local color to a more experimental and universal poetry, does not simply call attention to careerist motives that inform artistic practice. More significantly, it points to validation from one’s former colonial master as an enduring desire for which the postcolonial subject labors, a power dynamic oddly neutralized, if not concealed, by the national pride in Villa’s short-lived success as a poet in the American literary scene.

Perhaps the most concrete proof that Villa’s aestheticism was not only un-removed from the social realm but also prone to co-optation occurred when he received the National Artist Award from the Philippine government in 1973, a year into the United States-backed regime of Marcos. The most prestigious honor accorded by the state to artists was awarded to Villa at a time of widespread repression of human rights and the systematic elimination of Filipinos resisting the dictatorship. Artists were among the thousands deemed to be enemies of the state and detained, tortured, or murdered by the military, which Marcos had turned into his personal army. Villa, as the national honor made clear, was regarded as an ally by the state, despite his expressed belief that literature had no stake in the political realm and was irrelevant to the formation of national identity. His artistic practice was governed by principles that translated to an absence of investment in the political unrest besetting the country under Marcos; this, in effect, made him a safe choice for the award. He was also in the United States, literally removed from the particularities of life in the Philippines. Aesthetically revolutionary yet politically impotent, Villa’s de-historicized poetics, practiced from afar, was compatible with
authoritarian rule. His formally adventurous and universal poems were barely attempted by other Filipino writers, comprehensible only to university-educated readers, and incompatible with the socially committed writing advocated by some of his contemporaries. In the award citation, the poet is praised as “one of the finest contemporary poets regardless of race or language” whose concerns are universal (“the meaning of self, man’s combat with God, the passion of love”) and who “inhabits a timeless world” (Citation xii). Under the Marcos regime, the state-sanctioned version of a national artist is one who transcends nation and exists outside of history. It is not difficult to see the gains for totalitarian rule in celebrating writers who profess both detachment from politics and commitment to the autonomy of art. Such claims are most boldly made from a position of privilege that renders economic and social injustice invisible and unexamined, and therefore leaves it undisturbed. That Villa preaches from the pulpit of art for art’s sake while enjoying the security of state sponsorship and approval underscores not only his participation in the maintenance of the status quo, but also the extent of his obliviousness to, or perhaps his denial of, his complicity.29

In 2009, a century after the birth of Villa, San Juan asked: “Aside from his technical innovations, not always appreciated or accepted by the arbiters of the Anglo-American mainstream canon, in what way was Villa a rebel, a dissident writer, who challenged the standards of his day and initiated a new, radically innovative aesthetics and world view?” (“Vicissitudes” 9) Although the question is as good as rhetorical, its token nod to Villa’s “technical innovations” is couched in syntax that leaves some room to consider the possibility of its radicalism. Filipino critics, whether admirers or skeptics, often frame the poet’s formal experimentation as proof of his mastery of the English language; the difference lies in their assessment of the ends to which this mastery is deployed. To believers in Villa’s work, this
technical facility is, by default, a form of radicalism. Luis Francia, in his introduction to *Doveglion: Collected Poems* (2008), a selection of Villa’s poetry whose release coincides with the poet’s birth centenary, reads Villa’s masterful use of an “imperial language” as the achievement of postcolonial transcendence for having conquered the colonial tongue, proving “how linguistic ownership had nothing to do with borders” (xxviii). To skeptics like San Juan, however, to be skilled in the craft of writing in English is not indicative of a radical worldview. In the case of Villa, whose linguistic innovations result in obscurity, his skill is superficial and self-serving, used only to produce an exhibitionist display that declares nothing beyond his expertise as a wordsmith. This criticism, which was lodged against Villa by his Filipino contemporaries, also hounded him in the United States, where other poets marked him as “represent[ing] a modernist style of pretentious experimentation” (Yu 53).

In 1932, several poems published by Villa in the *Philippines Free Press* elicited parodies from his contemporaries, such as Horacio de la Costa and Leon Ma. Guerrero, which the magazine also published; in 1933, Maud Parker, in a letter to the editor, described Villa’s “Six Poems of Love” as “modern slush” (*The Critical Villa* 253-54). The same year, when Villa’s syntactically unpredictable “Poems for an Unhumble One” was published in the *Philippines Free Press*, the magazine’s literary editor wrote a piece which ran alongside it titled “Villa Joins Cult of Incoherence,” providing somewhat unflattering commentary on “these alleged poems” (257). Lopez, who is similarly severe in his criticism of the same work, cites the Romantic poet John Keats in particular to remind Villa that the “higher vision” that the poet seeks can be achieved “by no violent disruption of syntax and grammar” (147). Dismissing formal innovation as an infatuation with novelty fueled by literary ambition, he goes on to instruct poets who publish their work to reject “the cult of unintelligibility,” to which Villa belongs, and instead
“communicate something to the reader, be it sense or nonsense, pain or pleasure, information or simply a mood, an atmosphere, or a refreshment” (148).

Over half a century later, Gémino H. Abad offers a generative though flawed argument against the charges posed by Lopez against Villa. Abad, whose groundbreaking trilogy *Man of Earth* (1989), *A Native Clearing* (1993), and *A Habit of Shores* (1999) anthologizes close to a century’s worth of Filipino poetry in English, assigns a central role to Villa in his narrative of the counter-colonization and indigenization of English by Filipino poets. He asserts that “the Filipino poet before Villa wrote in English; Villa wrought from English” (*A Native Clearing* 22). This transformation in Philippine poetry hinges on the change in preposition from *in* to *from*, which signals the reclamation of agency by the colonized subject. This is achieved through overpowering the language of subjugation to create “a native clearing within the adopted language where its words are found again to establish and affirm a Filipino sense of their world” (*Our Scene So Fair* 4). While Abad believes that a national literature is determined by the nationality of its producers, he also grants that “English had to be naturalized, as it were, and become Filipino—nothing short of a national language” (14).\(^3\) Thanks to the individual genius and distinct imagination of the Filipino poet, this task has already been fulfilled. Oscillating between liberal-humanist expressivism and nativist-nationalist essentialism in his triumphantist account, Abad contends that local Anglophone writing “seeks to recover a country we have lost, but that country now is within ourselves, as it were, a spiritual terrain… our writers have colonized English, by which I mean that it has been remolded to our image” (192).

As Abad’s pivotal figure in whom the shift from writing *in* English to writing *from* English occurs, Villa seems poised for rehabilitation from the commonplace notion that his work resides outside the domain of the nationalist project. Abad, however, reneges on this promise
implicit in his claim when he excludes Villa from the roster of Filipinos who are able to reclaim agency by creating “a native clearing” in their work. The early criticism of technical innovation for its own sake reverberates in his reference to “Villa’s hermetic and narcissistic gems of verse” (Our Scene So Fair 10). Despite considering Villa the fulcrum at which Anglophone Filipino poetry changed its course and claimed English for itself, Abad regards Villa’s poetry as the outcome of an “alienated sensibility” with no ties to Filipino culture. Describing the poet as “a casualty of the colonial experience,” he reiterates the perception that identity politics is absent in Villa’s aesthetic experimentation (A Native Clearing 22). The void that this absence creates turns his poetry into a vessel occupied by and assimilated into colonial culture. The attempt to rethink Villa’s apolitical aestheticism is short-lived, and Abad ultimately restates the dichotomy between art for art’s sake and committed literature. That Villa’s poetry remains solipsistic, monologic, and thus irrelevant to the indigenization of English as pursued by Filipino poets contradicts his designation in Abad’s literary history as the first poet to write from English. This inconsistency acknowledges Villa’s relevance to Philippine literature yet also flags his contribution as relatively illegible, which results in the ambivalence of the poet’s position in Abad’s narrative. It prompts the question: how and why is Villa the starting point of “remold[ing] [English] to our image” if he has in no way forged a “native clearing” in the colonial tongue?

To answer the question is to read Villa against himself, and entertain the possibility that art for art’s sake as he practiced it has a stake in social transformation. There are, after all, indications that Villa does not view art as indifferent or escapist, nuances that are easily obscured by his own artistic hubris. “I do not mix my politics and economics with my art,” he declares, yet this is prefaced by the admission that “I am inclined to the Left politically and economically” (“The Best Filipino Short Stories of 1937” 178). If, as Villa insists, art exposes what is invisible
to “the untutored,” then he believes it is the task of art to deny facile interpretation (“Villa’s Letter of Defense” 301). If art derives its validity from the revolution of “internal personality,” then Villa recognizes and values its capacity to advocate change. He may locate the site of revolution in the self, turning inward rather than taking to the streets, but like his more explicitly nationalist and politically committed contemporaries, he believes art to be revelatory and transformative. This commonality makes it reasonable to re-evaluate the perception that Villa’s preoccupation with form is without politics, existing outside the purview of national identity and doomed to co-optation by the status quo.

A useful approach to recuperate his formalism from the realm of apoliticism is to regard the charge of obscurity that Villa’s fixation on surface effects tends to elicit as a point of entry to rather than a dead end in reading his work. Instead of dismissing the poet’s formal experimentation as merely illegible, what if it is strategically illegible? In this light, Villa’s form emerges as a crucial site for the production of meaning, if not the very means by which the politics of his poetry is expressed. Craig Dworkin’s lens of “radical formalism” provides a means to navigate what has been dismissed as Villa’s incomprehensibility. Radical formalism, he writes, “pursues the closest of close readings in the service of political questions rather than to their exclusion.” In effect, “it refuses to consider the poem as a realm separate from politics, even as it focuses on ‘the poem itself’” (5). The approach acknowledges the autonomy of art by foregrounding the integrity of the poem as a literary text and holding it accountable for what it conceals and discloses. This illuminates the writerly craft that goes into orchestrating the reader’s experience of the text. It also dissolves the routine reading habit of dividing form from content, for form is content, and the poem itself becomes visible as the realm at which the aesthetic and political converge. Turning to poetry that employs what he calls “strategic illegibility,” Dworkin
investigates, among other things, “what is signified by its form, enacted by its structures, implicit in its philosophy of language, how it positions the reader” (4-5). To engage with the components that comprise the illegibility of the text is to grant visibility to “writing as politics, not writing about politics” (Andrews 50).

In disclosing that form is a site of critical engagement, strategic illegibility also flags the circular logic that occurs when form is excluded from historicity by those who then dismiss it as ahistorical. Lopez, for instance, who insists on the production of literature that is grounded in and responsive to society, is surprisingly at ease with treating colonial forms appropriated by Filipinos ahistorically. He glosses over the compromised provenance of Anglophone literature by Filipinos when he writes, “There is nothing in the Filipino soul that cannot be transmitted through the medium of English and which, when transmitted, will not retain its peculiar Filipino color and aroma” (240). Other critics, though not as overzealous, still treat form as a relatively unproblematic site for translating Filipino subjectivity. Absolving Filipino writers in English of the need to contend with their use of the colonial tongue, Abad pronounces writing from English, the denouement in his trajectory of Anglophone Philippine literature, as the here and now of literary production. J. Neil Garcia qualifies Abad’s claim of a “naturalized English” when he asserts that representational writing in English by Filipinos is by default “translational,” both an expression of the hybrid postcolonial self and a form of resistance against the primarily Western concept of “the fragmented or incongruent subject” (“Translation and the Problem of Realism” 664, 683). Like Abad, however, Garcia vouches for the unique capacity of the Filipino writer to domesticate English while handling it transparently. Both critics ultimately relegate form to the background when they locate engagement with national identity in a pointedly “Filipino” content and context to be found in or drawn out from the literary text in English.
In contrast, Villa’s strategic illegibility demands an attentiveness to form that resists the ease with which it is treated as an unproblematic and therefore unproblematized site in translating Filipino subjectivity. Roberto Schwarz provides the vocabulary to dispel this practice of regarding form merely formally when refers to the appropriation by a colonized subject of a literary form from the colonizing culture as “foreign debt” (50). The term embeds form in material realities, and assigns an economic relationship to cultural borrowing. In this relationship of power, the lender functions as the point of origin of cultural resources, the site of their invention and proliferation, while the borrower is the belated beneficiary of such inventions, beholden and subordinate to the originary source. Formulating the relationship between “the West and the Rest” in these terms is not unusual, and it is often what informs assessments of postcolonial texts which appropriate forms popularized by the West as derivative, or what motivates the propagation of nativist or essentialist ideas as a means of asserting agency. Although there are important distinctions that should be made between cultural borrowing and actual economic debts, it is useful for now to exploit the capacity of Schwarz’s analogy to shed light on Villa’s form as a viable site of analysis rather than a dispensable or secondary component in studying literary texts along the coordinates of history, culture, and political economy. The analogy embeds asymmetrical relations (be it between colonizer and colonized, or elite and proletariat) to which some literary forms owe their proliferation within literary form itself.

If form is a kind of foreign debt, whose power to maintain rather than disrupt uneven development is a reality poor nations like the Philippines know only too well, then the poem in English, as appropriated by Filipinos, is not a neutral or disinterested conduit through which Filipino subjectivity could be coherently conveyed. By “lending” the poem in English to the
Philippines, American colonialism propagated the superiority of the medium by which it “bestowed” knowledge and modernity upon Filipinos. The spread of English granted the Philippines access to Anglophone intellectual and literary traditions, yet the liberatory potential of the language is dulled by its exclusionary powers, as an apparatus deployed to pacify and indoctrinate. This was true during the period of official colonization, when the imposition of English in the public school system systematically displaced and denigrated local languages; it remains true to this day, when English continues to be the language of the educated and the elite in the Philippines. Regardless of subject matter, a Filipino writer in English always already inscribes the trauma of colonization in every text he or she writes.

The Politics of Form and the Postcolonial Condition of Translatedness

Although the American (neo)colonial experience is inescapably encoded in the Filipino poem in English, the text in itself is often invisible as a site where national identity is constructed and contested. Schwarz’s logic, in resisting the ahistoricism to which form is prone, lends visibility to Villa’s formal experimentation as a translation of the social relations and tensions produced by colonialism into literary form. This alternative reading is counterintuitively aided by Villa’s universalism, which relieves his poetry of the cultural and ethnic specificities that tend to relegate form to the background in discussions of national identity as played out in literary texts. If, in Villa’s poetry, “Filipino-ness” is formalized rather than thematized, then his illegibility emerges as a rebuttal to lyric expression that exhibits proficiency in standard American English, which has become the tradition of Philippine poetry in the colonial tongue. The development of Philippine literature in English is tied to the achievement of this fluency, as Ricaredo Demetillo, a contemporary of Villa, writes: “These brown-skinned Filipinos who now mangle the English
language with their barbaric accents and broken phrases, defying all rules of grammar, have in them the latent powers that can produce a Shakespeare, a Keats, a Ruskin, and a Hemingway” (1). Over sixty years later, Garcia confirms progress in the direction of Demetillo’s vision when he celebrates the “unflappable confidence” and “fabulous verbal temerity” of Filipino poets in English whose deployment of the language does not stray from conventions of proficiency. Suspicious of linguistic gestures that display postcolonial particularity, he sees the turn to fluency as a means to diminish the risk of performing the native for the colonizing gaze (Introduction xix-xxi).

Villa’s work does not venture into creolization, code-switching, or other such methods of more explicitly ethnopoetic work that Garcia cautions against, yet it deviates from what Lopez insists is or should be a commonsensical approach to writing poetry: “a method no more mysterious than the use of idiomatic, graceful and harmonious English” (147). English, as deployed by Villa, has prompted the critic to quip, “Villa seems fearful lest in writing good, correct English he might forget to write literature” (149). The poet’s idiosyncratic use of English, while indicative of his literary modernity as one schooled in the practices of the Western modernists and avant-garde, also raises the specter of English mangled by colonized subjects unschooled in the colonial tongue. To be unshackled linguistically from colonial subject’s position of disenfranchisement is to acquire proficiency in English, which indicates that one has laid claim to and naturalized the language. That Villa’s mastery of the language is beyond question only magnifies the oddness of his choice to deny the display of fluency in his poetry. Villa, however, was openly skeptical of proficiency as a key component in ensuring the integrity of a literary work. Throughout his life, he invoked beauty as his artistic aim, yet his poems do not translate this to conventional fluency in and mellifluousness of grammar. Instead, he pursued
this ideal through efforts at linguistic artificiality. “Art, you know, is not natural,” he says, explaining why he favors versification that does not align itself with the natural pauses of speech (“The Best Poems of 1931” 63). Speaking of “the grace of the embodied expression,” another aspiration in poetry, he is quick to clarify that “this is not to mean a command of grammar—correctness has nothing to do with poetry” (269).

Such remarks insinuate ambiguity into other statements made by Villa that seem to bewail the lack of fluency in English in poems by Filipinos. For instance, he notes that “[t]he reason why Filipino writers are at a disadvantage in the writing of English poetry—is that, they have no oneness with the English language” (“Villa on Filipino Poetry” 313). In the conclusion to “The Condition of Philippine Verse,” he writes, “Is there any prospect for a poetry in English by Filipinos? My answer is in the negative. A very great block, the block of the English language itself, exists between the Filipino and the poetry he wants to write” (298). Because Villa is known for his condescension, these pronouncements can easily be read as colonialist and classist indictments of Filipino writers, who lack the fluency to qualify for entry into the elite circle of literary producers in the English language. The latter statement in particular, which caps an essay that catalogues yet again what he believes to be the deficiencies of his poet-contemporaries, such as “intellectual tenuity,” “emotional incompetence,” “sensory inefficiency,” and “tuberculous grammar lameness,” reeks of his trademark air of superiority (“The Condition of Philippine Verse” 295-298). The different phases of Villa’s formal experimentation, however, seem not to brandish how he, as a poet, has overcome “the block of the English language” that drives a wedge between the Filipino poet and his or her poem, as his artistic arrogance would lead readers to expect; instead, his poems seem to depict and deliberately instigate the block itself. This is evident in the incomprehensibility attributed to the idiosyncratic syntax of “Poems of an
Unhumble One,” and it is at its most extreme over a decade later in his notorious comma poems from the book *Volume Two*.

In his preface to “Poems for an Unhumble One,” Villa uncharacteristically forges a link between his interest in foregrounding the materiality of language and the material conditions that determine the given-ness of conventional fluency in English as a value in poetry. To rationalize the eccentric syntax of the poem, he cites the rejection of “bourgeois [sic] ratiocination” or what he rephrases as “the process of ordinary logic” as his motive. He turns to the following as examples of what he rejects: “The girl was sad and she wept,” “There was no moon; it was a dark night,” “It was so hot, I removed my coat” (“Poems for an Unhumble One” 255). The mundane content of his samples emphasizes that the object of his critique is not the substance but the structure of the statements. In Villa’s work, syntax is the status quo the poem resists and the site where the poem assumes the role of society’s interlocutor. By framing his subjection of the English language to grammatical impairment as a strategy to avoid bourgeois logic, the self-proclaimed apolitical poet situates power relations in language itself, turning poetic form into a social realm. Language is not treated as a transparent carrier of meaning, and form becomes a zone where power structures are exposed, fortified, and undermined. His turn to illegibility seems to suggest that what gets in the way of the Filipino poem in English is English as it has been received by the Filipino poet, which complicates the task of the Filipino poet in negotiating the compromised provenance of the language in which he or she writes. In casting doubt on fluency in English as an ideal that a poem seeks to embody, Villa loosens a hinge, so to speak, at which art and economy are conjoined, and implicitly (and most probably unintentionally) interrogates the value in artistic practice of what has long been installed as important in the pursuit of social and economic mobility. His art’s rejection of English as it is deployed in life can
thus call attention to the material conditions that place English on top of the linguistic hierarchy and “repudiat[e]… the tyranny of the commonsensical whose conservative ethos is propagated by the reigning disposition” (Veric 67). Villa’s insistence on the artificiality of English not only disputes the triumphalist claim that Filipino poets in English who exhibit fluency in the language have counter-colonized it, but also locates the Filipino poem in English in the ideal of fluency’s negative: the aftermath of the destruction of English as we know it. This logic places the development of the postcolonial poem in English on a route that runs counter to the English of globalization and corporate standardization.

Villa’s illegibility, in effect, enacts the upheaval he advocates. His metaphysical lyrics in *Volume Two* are notable for the relentless subjection of their otherwise conventional syntax to a visually conspicuous intrusion. With the exception of words that end a sentence (and are thus followed by a period, question mark, or exclamation point) and the occasional use of a dash or colon, every word in every poem in the entire collection is followed by a comma; there is no space between any given comma and the word succeeding it. Aside from enforcing the disappearance of the lyric “I,” as “I” becomes a word among words and each word becomes a thing among things, Villa’s form consistently thwarts the possibility of a comfortable relationship with the English language, exposing the easy conversion of syntax to meaning as a fiction and relegating the reader’s experience of his work to only the most surface of readings. The surface effects keep his language impenetrable and distract the reader from internalizing the available affect in his poems.

This illegibility unwittingly registers the “split vision” of the postcolonial author, for in dismantling English as it has been received by the Filipino poet, Villa also repeatedly discloses the condition of translatedness that governs English-language use by the Filipino writer. To call
attention to this condition is to flag the limits of representation in the colonial tongue. Literature written monolingually is already incongruous with Philippine reality; with over 170 languages, of which a dozen have at least a million speakers, the Philippines is literally polyvocal (Patke and Holden 33). When the literary text is monolingual in English, this incongruity is inflected with estrangement. In smoothing over the commingling of languages, the Filipino poet in English, whose labors as poet and translator are contemporaneous rather than consecutive, re-stages the exclusionary powers of English as a language of power and prestige. Walter Benjamin views translation as a mutual transformation, altering the languages of both the original and translated texts. In striving not to transmit information (which breaks apart form from content and equates a text with its paraphrase) but to enact the “mode of signification” of the original (which focuses on reconstructing structures of thinking), the translation defamiliarizes its own language and renews the original by inaugurating its “afterlife” and thus its “continued life” (“The Task of the Translator” 71). However, the condition of translatedness in postcolonial Anglophone literature exceeds Benjamin’s egalitarian vision, for English in the Philippines is historically an agent neither of kinship nor mutual transformation among languages but of displacement and erasure.

Emily Apter observes that for postcolonial writers whose mother tongue is different from their literary tongue, “there is a translational violence seething inside the act of writing. The writer’s consciousness resembles a theater of war in which words are accused of betrayal, squatting, spying, fraying sense, or performing as ‘irascible intermediaries between the object and its image’” (106). The history of violence embedded in an imposed and eventually adopted language makes it inescapably duplicitous; sans obliviousness to history and the social inequities that saturate contemporary daily life, to be Filipino and write in English cannot but come with “a
kind of nagging consciousness of colonial subjection—a squirming sense of being a subject in someone else’s sentence” (Abad, Our Scene So Fair 5). It seems, as a colonial subject and Anglophone writer during the early 1930s, Villa already detected duplicity in his experience of the English language, and he located the degree zero of betrayal in the fabric of language itself. That he neither hoped nor claimed that oneness with the English language lay in the future of the Filipino suggests that the prospect of postcolonial agency as forged out of the poem in English is perpetually compromised by the simultaneous absence and presence of a distinct border of resistance to the homogenizing force of the colonizing culture. The illegibility that he stages in his language activates mindfulness of the postcolonial condition of translatedness, and situates English-language poetry by Filipinos in the gap between Abad’s “writing in” and “writing from” English, where language is neither familiar nor foreign, neither borrowed nor owned. National identity, as textualized in this zone, is rendered translatable and untranslatable: Filipino subjectivity in the poem in English is perpetually unstable, on verge of visibility, both prone and resistant to erasure, and under negotiation.

A strain in Villa’s work that registers these tensions embedded in his strategic illegibility is his ars poetica. Arguably the pinnacle of art for art’s sake and thus an unsurprising component of Villa’s oeuvre, ars poetica is poetry that turns itself into its own subject: both a genesis and a genesis story, it creates itself as it narrates its creation. Jahan Ramazani notes that while the solipsism of ars poetica seems “to cut itself from the world,” its self-scrutiny and exposure of “its own ‘conditions of production’,” which “often provid[e] metaphoric ground for illuminating other, extraliterary worlds,” may also be the means to reinstate it in the social realm (53). By turning inward and narrating what it finds there, ars poetica activates its allegorical function, which permits it to exert pressure on what lies beyond it. Furthermore, as poetry that deliberately
thematizes and theorizes itself, ars poetica is concerned with the identity of the poem as a poem. This makes it particularly appropriate as an aesthetic analog of identity in the realm of the social; what it reveals about its “internal personality” as well as the process of its “ordering and adhering into Identity” (to use the Villa’s terminology in thinking about Man), which foregrounds the poem as a site of instruction, may yield a generative engagement with the question of national identity (“Guggenheim Fellowship” 132).

Because it discloses the method that goes into a poem’s making, the artist is inevitably present in ars poetica. At odds with Villa’s adherence to impersonality, the text writes in itself the self who writes it; as ars poetica, the poem in English is as much about the Filipino poet as it is about itself. By blurring its point of origin even as it professes to be an originary narrative, ars poetica superimposes its being with its becoming. Embedded in this flux of relations, Villa’s ars poetica oscillates between epistemological certainty and ontological provisionality, revealing a “poetics of emergence and becoming” and “a mode of subjectivity-in-process” (Ponce 81).

Although Villa imagines the task of his poetry to be the achievement of the ideal coherence of identity, “to arrive at the essential ‘I’, the ‘I’ that is not the grammarian’s ‘I’, but the ‘I’ more than the individual, surpassing him and yet him—the very force and dignity of man,” these poems disclose the frustration of this aspiration (“Guggenheim Fellowship” 132). Due to slippages of and in language, the ideal of a coherent identity for both the text and its maker unravels rather than culminates, and the poem as intended remains unrealized. Lapsing into rather than transcending grammar, Villa’s poems are stand-ins for the poem-to-be, translations in lieu of their originals. As sites of composition that result in displacement, these poems situate their identity in the flux of uncertainty. As analogs of national identity, they disclose their
condition of translatedness as “a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalizing citizens” (Apter 6).

Among Villa’s comma poems from Volume Two, “When,I,was,no,bigger,than,a,huge” is easily distinguishable as ars poetica. Minus the comma after every word, the poem is fairly straightforward, featuring elemental imagery and enacting both tension and resolution between the human and divine. The poem narrates its own origin through narrating the origin of the poet who makes it:

When,I,was,no,bigger,than,a,huge,
Star,in,my,self,I,began,to,write,
My,
Theology,
Of,rose,and,
Tiger: till,I,burned,with,their,
Pure,and,Rage. (Doveglion 82)

Imagined to be shamanistic and celestial, the poet asserts his indivisibility through tautology (comparing the “I” to itself in the opening lines), self-generated visionary apparatus (“in,me,an,/Eye,/there,grew: springing,Vision,”), and self-governance by rejecting divinity outside the self (“I,knew,the,Lord,was,not,my,Creator!—Not,He,the,Unbegotten—
but,I,saw,/The,/Creator,/Was,I”). By coming into divinity, the poet enacts a passion akin to Christ’s, but unlike Christ, whose narrative is sequential (he dies and is resurrected), the poet thrives in the simultaneous unfolding of incompatible stages:

“I,began,to,Die,and,I,began,to,Grow.” (84). The paradox asserts the extraordinariness of the poet, who never dies and always grows, suspended in and enjoying the generative properties of beginnings. That the poet reigns supreme is this poem’s epistemological certainty, conferring upon the poet the titles of “Unbegotten” and “Creator.” Unlike other poems of Villa, this poem rejects identity formation according to relation, and the “I” insists on a becoming that does not
entail engaging in combat with God. Although provisionality resurfaces in the oxymoronic performance of decay and growth in the body, it only serves to underscore the poet’s singular identity: uncontested and exempt from natural processes, his power grows hyperbolic and attains ubiquity.

When read as a conventional lyric, “When, I, was, no, bigger,” tracks the poet’s achievement of an “essential ‘I’.” What undermines the ontological stability the poet who speaks professes to have is the syntactical illegibility enforced by the incessant interruption of the comma, which occurs in all the poems of *Volume Two*. While thematizing its making, “When, I, was, no, bigger,” makes a spectacle of its unmaking, destabilizing the identities of both poem and speaker. The commas unremittingly inflict damage on the lyrical adhesion of the sentences. Under duress, the sentences break down as they form; the meanings generated by syntax may be evident but they are not intact, as the commas displace relations and insinuate alternative combinations of words. The traditional lyric voice and its seemingly posthuman counterpart, the robotic voice mechanized by the democratic emphasis the commas place on each word, compete for attention, and the speaker is relentlessly translated from one voice to the other. In the course of securing Villa’s ideal of singularity, the poem lapses, through the impairment of syntax, into provisionality, and the speaker, whose formation as a poet is narrated, is “un-formed” by the poem as it is broken down to parts of speech; he is literally undone by the poem he writes.

As a stand-in for the Filipino poet in this ars poetica in English, Villa, the poem’s author, performs on the page the limits of consonance between the colonizer’s tongue and the realities of the colonized. In this context, Villa’s adherence to poetry unmarked by “Filipino identity” becomes a productive omission. Conventionally mimetic lyric poetry, particularly when steeped
in local color, maintains the illusion of seamless compatibility between language and experience. Villa rejects this illusion by foregrounding the materiality of language and exacerbates the illegibility of his poem by draining it of markers that indicate ethnic and national identity, which can “fix” the poem in a particular experience outside of the experience that is the poem in English. In simultaneously registering multiple versions of itself, the poem is perpetually caught in the flux of translation and displaced by alternate versions. To experience the Filipino poem in English in this manner deters forgetfulness of the incongruity between the poem in English and the plurilingual reality in which it exists. This, in turn, is a reminder of the need to demolish English as we know it if there is to be genuine structural readjustment in the way the postcolonial poet linguistically orders reality. Given this veritably impossible task, the Filipino poem in English needs to be in a constant state of revision, rendering indeterminate the Filipino subject that emerges from it. The poem in English writes, unwrites, and rewrites Filipino subjectivity as it writes, unwrites, and rewrites itself.

This struggle is further amplified by Villa’s deployment of “When,I,was,no,bigger” as a pedagogical tool to explain the purpose of the commas in his poems. In “A Note on the Commas,” which serves as Villa’s preface to Volume Two, he describes his technique as the textual equivalent of Seurat’s pointillism; the commas “regulat[e] the poem’s verbal density and time movement: enabling each word to attain a fuller tonal value, and the line movement to become more measured” (Doveglion 78). “When,I,was,no,bigger,” is one of two poems, each with a version including and excluding the commas, used by Villa to illustrate the significance of his comma use, even though he also authorizes those bothered by his innovation to “ignor[e] the commas if they find these in the way” (78). Villa is prescriptive in the version he desires his readers to prefer. The “tampered version” (sans the commas), he observes, is faster to read and
“the effect of the poem is flat” (78). In his discussion of the links between materiality and spirituality in Emily Dickinson’s poems, Don Gilliland examines poems with existing variants, noting that “Dickinson’s recognition of the transcendent brings with it, and invites the reader to join, an awareness of the Poem as an abstract entity with an existence apart from its manifestation in pen and paper” (44). Villa’s pedagogical variants, while similarly owning up to the presence of the Poem that endures apart from its material versions, also insist on the Poem as inextricable from the syntax that appears on the page. What transcends the textual is inescapably configured by the particulars of the textual.

By teaching the reader how to read his eccentric punctuation, Villa intends to fortify the singular identity of each comma poem, declaring it to be the best possible version of itself; however, his strategy of including a comma-less version of “When,I,was,no,bigger,” to prove his point, similar to the apophasis he falls into when he reinscribes God in every poem that denies relation to him, also shatters the illusion of singularity, turning the comma poem into one of two identities that the poem could assume. His goal may be to train the reader to prefer one version to the other, but the mere presence of two textual variants of the same poem discloses the multiple possibilities inherent in process of transformation that texts undergo to arrive at their finished products. It also grants visual form and thus literalizes other identities often eclipsed, erased, and forgotten in codifying a text into its published, public version. Although Villa attests to an ultimate end of Identity (in the uppercase) arrived at in poetry through the linear narrative of progress, his pedagogical intervention undercuts what he professes to believe.

“When,I,was,no,bigger,” presented in two versions, literally becomes a divided text. The existence of variants reveals the singular poem to be elusive, a poem-to-be of which the variants
are translations; as translations, the variants are necessarily imprecise and unstable placeholders, incongruous with what they inevitably displace.

Sikranth Reddy, in discussing Wallace Stevens’s “digressive ars poetica,” demonstrates how Stevens’s “poetics of change” deconstructs the “poetics of purpose” informing the production of manifestos, noting that the poet “fashions his world from lower-case lefts and rights… [which] reconfigure themselves depending upon the momentary operation of a moving center” (26, 24). Reddy reworks the commonplace move of conflating uncertainty with indecision, clarifying the integrity of transition as a viable stance against the tyranny of certainty with which the manifesto is often coupled. While Villa denies the stake of art in politics with a manifesto-like ferocity, what aligns him with Stevens as read by Reddy is the potential for a generative political stance in his unwitting deconstruction of the “ordering and adhering into Identity” that he strives to stage in his poetry. Questioning the habitual treatment of language as transparent perpetuated in mimetic poetry, Villa, in comma poem after comma poem, disrupts the graceful unfolding of representation, and subjects the Filipino poem in English to the flux of uncertainty. In his ars poetica, as exemplified by “When,I,was,no,bigger,” the indeterminacy of the poem’s identity as a poem also points to the condition of translatedness integral to the compositional process of the Filipino poet, which lends visibility to poetic form as a site where national identity is constructed and contested. To call attention to English as deployed by the Filipino poet as translational is to flag the poem in English as a form where the enduring exclusionary powers of English are inevitably exercised. In this light, Villa’s invocation of Paul Valéry’s idea that “The execution of the poem is the poem” in defining poetry to his students seems particularly instructive (Poetry Is 6-7); if a poem is its execution, then the poem, when executed in English by the Filipino poet, retells the translational violence that ensures the
endurance of the imposed tongue.

**The Poet as the Author of the Citizen**

One of the last poems published in Villa’s lifetime proposes a means to convert the translational violence inherent in Anglophone poetry by Filipinos into a site of postcolonial agency. In 1953, Villa published a poem that not only deviates from his usual ethnically unmarked and impersonal lyric “I,” but also explicitly comments on the relationship between the poem in English and the construction of national identity. The year before “The Anchored Angel,” known as his last published poem, appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* in London, “A ,,Composition,,” appeared in the far more obscure *Literary Apprentice*, the campus-based journal of the University of the Philippines’s Writers Club. The poem maintains Villa’s metaphysics, his reliance on religious and elemental imagery, and his fixation on the ideal “I” that synthesizes Identity and equals if not surpasses divinity. Several formal features, however, signal its departure from the poet’s signature style. The text takes the form of a long poem, unlike his mostly short lyric poems. It is broken up into numbered sections clearly intended be read in relation to each other. It combines verse and prose, another stylistic technique virtually absent in Villa’s body of work. Its title arguably frames it as an ars poetica. An unfortunate omission in *Doveglion: Collected Poems*, the poem is notable for framing Villa’s self-reflexivity, a prominent feature of his formally experimental poetics, in the context of being and becoming a Filipino, a move unheard of in his oeuvre.

“A ,,Composition,,” invokes the text’s identity as a made thing. In emphasizing the materiality of the text, the title turns the poem into its execution: what follows, as it unfolds, becomes the composition that the title promises. The use of double commas in place of quotation
marks underscores this materiality, anticipating a text that defamiliarizes the compositional process. The first section immediately establishes what Villa has long withheld in his poetry: he identifies himself and his place of birth. At last, the poet in the poem enters history and claims nationality:

My name is José, my name is Villa.
I was born on the island of Manila, in the city of Luzon.
My true name is Doveglion.
My business is ascension. (59)

In theorizing its composition, the poem narrates the geographical point of origin of its author, equating the poem with the poet: the poem assumes corporeality and the poet textuality. The text and author mutually translate and become translations of each other. The first line is a statement of fact whose reliability Villa immediately disrupts in the next line, which inverts referents, identifying Manila as “the island” and Luzon as “the city” rather than the other way around. Signaling the poem’s resistance to received logic, the geographical inaccuracy begins to rewrite the coordinates that determine identity. The succeeding line asserts that Villa’s “true name” is not his legal name, which binds his identity to ethnicity and nationality, but his nom de plume, “Doveglion.” As a poet, Doveglion’s worldly “business” is the spiritual endeavor of “ascension,” which, Villa clarifies in a footnote, refers to “man’s inner development,” secularizing the religious reference while heightening the mythological status of the poet (59).

The rest of the poem is unlocked by the logic of its opening. While the location of his birth identifies him as a citizen of the Philippines, Villa declares allegiance to another country: the Country of Doveglion, “a strange country,” he says, for “[b]oundaries it has none—yet boundaries it has” (59). Not found on any map and thus removed from geopolitics, this country is self-determined, made by and named after the poet. The name “Doveglion,” a portmanteau of “dove,” “eagle,” and “lion,” embodies the mechanism that governs the country’s ontology. The
individual words (and the images they invoke) continue to be recognizable even as the coined term, together with the new creature borne out of their combination, collapses their boundaries. He proceeds to delimit the population of this country, which excludes “subhumans” and includes “Earth Angels, true humans” as well as “Heaven Angels,” who have left God and Heaven to be in the Country of Doveglion instead (59).

It is this community, the poet says, which “claim[s] my citizenship,” a declaration which perhaps turns the poem into the most concrete manifestation of Villa’s commitment to the revolution of man’s internal personality as well as his most direct confrontation of the question of national identity (59). The poem declares the global order that assigns humans to nations and locks nations in power relations primarily defined by the circulation of capital to be a construct rather than a fact of human existence. His primary strategy to argue for the negotiability of this given logic transpires in the text in itself, where the poet transforms when his pseudonym supplants his legal name. “Countries should learn to move,” Villa says in the fourth section; if they do, the land of his birth “is not real country: it is commerce, agriculture, politics: a husk country” (60). As “an allegory of naming and inhabiting,” “„A Composition„,” proposes a “modality of acquiring a style of citizenship by claiming a vocation. Vocation equals identity” (San Juan, “Articulating a Third World Modernism” 209). Deeming economics, governance, and history as immobilizing and thus unsatisfying conditions to live in, Villa locates his identity in what he considers a site of dynamism and movement: his artistic practice. This vocation authorizes Doveglion to construct a new country.

How Villa arrives at the notion of textualizing citizenship is captured in a draft of “„A „Composition„,” dated September 19, 1951. The second section of the draft opens with the sentence, “My country is Villa – and the Country of Villa is a Great, Brave, Dazzling Universe.”
The word “Villa,” which appears twice, is crossed out both times and replaced by “Doveglion.” The “Country of Villa” is the Philippines, a fact corroborated by his citizenship, which, despite his many years of residence in the United States, is Filipino. It is also a fact whose restrictions he rejects not through the legal pursuit of a change in citizenship, but through the writing process: with a stroke of his pencil, he crosses out the word “Villa” in favor of “Doveglion.” The decision is made possible by and in the realm of an ars poetica, in which the composition owes its existence to its poet and the poet is realized through the composition: the poet Doveglion creates the country that creates him. Doveglion is a citizen not of the Philippines or America but of the poem of his creation. Country becomes synonymous to poem, and both are what the poet creates. On the one hand, Doveglion’s vision seems to be an exercise in futility: the nom de plume is illegible and invalid in the world of territories plotted in maps, in which the (im)mobility of citizens is determined, authorized, and monitored according to the nationality attached to their legal names. On the other hand, the country of Doveglion is a strategically illegible form of resistance to the given world. In demarcating the limits of the geopolitics by claiming an existence outside of it, it exemplifies what Adorno describes as autonomous art’s emphatic separation from the world to “bear witness that that world itself should be other than it is” (177). Consequently, the identity one receives through the channel of one’s legal name is not the be all and end all of identity. In favoring his pseudonym over his given name, Villa discloses another coordinate of identity and the habitat that validates its existence.

The relocation of identity to the country forged out of the mutually determining relation of poem and poet produces an agency unheard of in the space policed according to ethnicity and nationality. In the Country of Doveglion, Villa divests himself of his identity as a “colonized subaltern” residing in the United States, who “existed in a limbo of indeterminacy, neither citizen
nor alien” (San Juan, “Articulating a Third World Modernism” 209). Similarly, he sheds the “Filipino identity” he is presumed to have by way of his of nationality. The move is anarchic and absurd, for Villa can never be replaced by Doveglion, which emphasizes the hegemonic definition of identity according to the facts contained in legal documents such as birth certificates or passports. At the same time, the poem itself is proof of the existence of an alternative conception of identity, since it not only suggests its possibility, but also realizes it. If this particular ars poetica conflates the poem with the poet, then the Country of Doveglion, the country that consists of the poet, is the poem on the page. Both the signified and the signifier, the country is what the words point to and the words themselves. What Villa values in his poetry, he narrates and thus fulfills in the poem. “Movement” and “Mystery” are key features of this country, made possible by the interplay of the “I” and God in a simultaneous hierarchy and partnership, a realization of the “kinetic and heroic balance” Villa so desires (“A,,Composition,,” 60).

What springs from this generative dynamic is a country of celestials attuned to Doveglion in all his permutations: “my rigors, my perils and fervors, my hazards and possibles, my graces, my invisibles” (59). It is an imagined community cognizant of the provisionality of identity, accepting its contradictions, complexity, and multiplicity. In another solipsistic turn, the community is soon revealed to be a community of one, for Doveglion does not simply rule the country. When he calls the soul “my grand dominion, my grand possession,” he equates it with the country; thus, its inhabitants are the parts that make up the whole who is Doveglion himself, and, by extension, what he calls “the ,,I,, I write about”:

The I of Identity, the eye of Eternity, is the ore-I, the fundamentalizer I. The I that cannot discontinue itself: the truefarer amazer I. The voyager, ransomer and parablist I: the I that accosts and marauds eternity—the convenantal I. This is the ,,I,, I write about, the true and classic I, the I of the Upward Gravity. (60)
The conflation of the “I of Identity” with the “eye of Eternity” emphasizes a visionary ontology outside of history. A proliferation of epithets further perpetuates mystery and movement and enlarges the “I,” who, in being poet, poem, soul, and country, is already multiple. Expansion endures without resolution: it is an “I” “that cannot discontinue itself” and is therefore perennially unfinished (60).

Although Villa admits in the seventh section that the “I can have only a temporal flower, for the I is housed in temporal soil,” the endless generation of its forms which expresses the provisionality of identity becomes an emancipatory force, undermining temporality (61). The cause of this subversion, unsurprisingly, is already within the visionary “I.” Villa reveals that “this is Art only that can be the permanent flower,” for “Art is the flower Within the flower” (61). Stubbornly committed to an essential being, Villa names art the “Core” of identity, yet having already shown the proliferating signifiers and incarnations of identity, of which art is but one manifestation, the core is rendered an unfixed mark, if not dissolved altogether. The indeterminacy is also realized by the reader, each time the country that is the poem that is the soul that is the poet is seen and spoken. The country realized by Doveglion’s poetic utterance extends to every reader who reads the poem and speaks its words. Given the various bodies the poem temporarily occupies, identity becomes provisional, which the “I” acknowledges in the tenth and final section when he says he is without biography.

In an interesting twist, however, the poem ends by echoing part of the opening section, but with the addition of the poem’s final line:

My name is José, my name is Villa.  
My true name is Doveglion.  
Doveglion is the author of José García Villa. (61)
To invoke José Garcia Villa is to return to the world of ethnicity and nationality, a world of “surveilled and disciplined terrain” (San Juan, “Articulating a Third World Modernism” 207). The conclusion reveals that this ars poetica is not only about the making of the poet and the various incarnations named thus far, but it is also about the making of the national who resides in the realm of geopolitics. If, on many occasions, Villa draws the line and excludes national identity as a coordinate that defines the self, “A ,,Composition,” undoes the boundary by explicitly accommodating national identity in its genesis and genesis story. Implicating himself in the nationalist agenda, Villa asserts that his metaphysics of identity participates in the formation of national identity. Here appears Villa’s revolution of internal personality: his poetics of becoming is also his politics of becoming. He does not remain Doveglion and reside solely in his visionary cosmology; he returns to and in fact ends as José Garcia Villa, but only as constituted by Doveglion. The poet is the author of the citizen. By declaring that the poet produces the national, the Country of Doveglion that is the poem itself serves as an empowering space in which the citizen thrives in mystery and movement, unbounded and thus able to proliferate in forms. This is in contrast to existing pressures to keep identity singular, which range from global mechanisms that discriminate, restrict movement, and deny access to well-being on the basis of citizenship, to the nativist essentialism to which nationals at times resort and thus risk the reductiveness of generalized experience in the difficult labor of forging solidarity and alliance.

The Country of Doveglion that is “A ,,Composition,” is Villa’s own artistic sovereign state. It pronounces the Filipino to be, first and foremost, a textual identity, one that is written by Doveglion. The poem’s intervention takes the form of claiming authorship of its (Filipino) citizens, for which José Garcia Villa is a stand-in. In textualizing Filipino identity, the poem also
points to its identity as a poem in English, which exposes the fact that the form of the Filipino text is literally configured in the terms of an imposed tongue. In this light, the line “Doveglion is the author of José Garcia Villa” is a double-edged sword, for the country that is the poem, while claiming emphatic separation from the geopolitical world, is not fully separate from it, not when its building blocks, so to speak, are the language of the colonizer. The poem and, by extension, the poet and the citizen are locked in the condition of translatedness, where the triumphant claim that the postcolonial subject has remolded English in her image collides perpetually with the Benjaminian conclusion that “All language communicates itself” (“On Language” 63). Villa points to this condition when he says, “I might as well not be Filipino at all—I write, I eat, I sleep, I dream, I brush my teeth all in English,” (qtd. in Chua, “Villa in Print” 154). The phrase “might as well not be Filipino” (italics mine) implies that the Filipino subject is, to a certain extent, translatable to English, but also, that the translation always falls short. In effect, the poem in English, and the Filipino identity it textualizes, is always provisional and under construction, a negotiable translation and placeholder for the poem-to-be. To disclose the dynamic of translation peculiar to the Filipino poem in English serves as “a significant medium of subject re-formation and political change” (Apter 6). Poetic form translates the pursuit of national identity into a compositional problem, turning the text in itself into a dynamic site of social engagement. In combining the sovereignty that the national is presumed to seek with the self-generated agency that the artist already possesses, “A ,,Composition,,” textually enacts the provisionality of the Filipino subject, who oscillates between translatability and untranslatability.

In their assessment of contemporary Southeast Asian writing in English, Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden identify the struggle of literary production “to define and evolve an incipient sense of local traditions” as part of the transition of former colonies into modern nation-states.
“This incipience remained uncertain about whether to be co-opted into the agenda of nation building or to resist it in the spirit of romantic alienation or modernist autonomy” (205). While the binary formulation easily relegates Villa to the latter, a reconsideration of the sociality embedded in the autonomy Villa espouses not only politicizes art for art’s sake, but also dissolves the binary that excludes it from meaningful participation in social transformation. Rather than uphold Villa’s “romantic alienation” and “modernist autonomy” as completely indifferent to national identity, it is possible to view these features as functioning within and informing it. As Villa’s ars poetica shows, it is possible to engage formally with the beliefs and presumptions of the nation-building project. His strategic illegibility poses a challenge to the postcolonial Filipino poet to employ the English language with unwavering skepticism, to subject language to interrogation not simply by speaking about it but by speaking it, by (de)constructing it from within.

Villa’s artistic practice continues to be a counterpoint to the representational poetics that has come to dominate the Philippine literary landscape. Garcia valorizes this tradition for its efforts toward coherence: it strives to make the hybrid postcolonial self legible in poetry, and, by extension, to integrate the fragments that compose the Filipino nation in the face of threats to its unity, such as economic and social stratification, a string of colonial masters, and neoliberal globalization. Echoing the dismissal by Villa’s peers of his stylistic experiments, undoubtedly a precursor of current literary production that favors linguistic indeterminacy and textual self-reflexivity, Garcia regards avant-garde practices by Filipinos as fetishizing colonial presence and “flatten[ing] out the global language in order to more affectively possess its historical referent, which is nothing if not global capitalism itself” (“Translation and the Problem of Realism” 665). He affirms the individual genius, perhaps even the shamanistic prowess, of traditional poets who
write the way they do because “they instinctively know how” and “already understand” the incompatibility of self-reflexive writing with postcolonial realities (683-4). However, I think that Villa’s work, when revisited, once again demonstrates how non-mimetic texts in English by Filipino authors, as forms of resistance to the referential, attempt to dispel the tendency to forget the unreliability and to trust in the transparency of language in general and English in particular. In this light, the translational quality that to Garcia is a key feature of Anglophone Philippine literature becomes a deliberate rather than incidental player in the poetry he criticizes. Consequently, the non-mimetic poem is a participant, if not an ally, in the labor of imagining the nation, which it approaches by confronting the peculiar conditions from which national identity is forged. These self-reflexive texts make most evident the condition of translatedness in Philippine literature in English, and make most visible the enduring linguistic colonization and its attendant exclusions that absorption in English in the form of referential writing tends to downplay, overlook, or forget. In actively reinventing the methods of linguistic formulation, poetry turns into a potential site of resistance to unexamined and therefore unmediated cultural infiltration, as well as a site for perpetually remaking the Filipino subject. The text in itself intervenes in the social realm, for as Villa writes, “Art is the reality of life transformed into the condition and reality of art” (Poetry Is 6).

As “foreign debt,” the poem in English as deployed by Villa illuminates stark differences between cultural and economic borrowing. Unlike actual foreign debt which unequivocally impoverishes a nation, foreign debt in literature by way of appropriated literary infrastructure need not (cannot) be repaid or returned; once used, it can be passed on, reused, and repurposed. Villa’s fixation on the form of the poem in English not only foregrounds the materiality of language in general, but also the provenance in empire of the Philippine poetry in English in
particular, which keeps the asymmetrical relations that facilitate the circulation and reputation of forms perpetually visible. This, in turn, invokes the need to recognize power relations as a complex feature integrated into the form of the literary text. If the irreversible damage of economic foreign debt turns negotiable when foreign debt is transposed to the cultural arena, then it is possible to imagine the built-in translatedness of Anglophone Philippine writing as a site not simply of reiterating but negotiating colonial violence, while also cognizant of the need to write simultaneously in and against English, which poetry that treats language as transparent tends to bypass. The examples of Villa’s ars poetica are consistent in showing how identity, as textualized, is never fully formed and unchanging but instead in a constant state of translation.

The provisionality that Villa and his successors foreground embodies the contradictions that construct the postcolonial subject. A textual identity translated in English is inescapably decentered and fragmented rather than stable and coherent; founded on the unstable ground of an absent and elusive original, it is persistently constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Villa’s poems retell, again and again, their lack of oneness with the English language, a condition that need not be treated as disenfranchising and that can be imagined as generative. The indeterminacy that such poetry enacts, as a stand-in for national identity, implies that both poetry and national identity are always in progress; similarly, the nation itself is an “unfinishable” project, “always made and unmade and remade” (Hau, “Rethinking History” 60). To remain in the flux of becoming is to stay constantly in the state of opportunity, rehearsing and attempting and constructing various iterations of identity. Such work, in directing its attention to the how rather than the what of identity, invites a more complicated narration of national identity as a process that necessarily gestures toward but never arrives at finality.
Recombinant Poetics:
The Radical Autonomy of Jose F. Lacaba’s Poems in English

In 1970, Filipino writer Jose F. Lacaba (1945-) published work he became well known for as well as work he vowed never again to do. As a young journalist for the Philippines Free Press, Lacaba covered a succession of heated and violent demonstrations in Manila in the first quarter of 1970. His first-person accounts chronicled the clashes between students and workers on one side and the police and military on the other, over issues such as unequal distribution of wealth, government debt, peso inflation, rising unemployment, militarization at the expense of public education, and the continuing intervention of the United States in state affairs (Days of Disquiet 12). The essays were eventually collected in a book titled Days of Disquiet, Nights of Rage: The First Quarter Storm & Related Events (1982), now considered a classic in the genre of the Philippine essay and an indispensable resource of information on the period known as the First Quarter Storm. As the year 1970 came to a close, Lacaba, also a poet, published what he described as “my swan song in English, a long rambling poem about the crisis facing the country and the social upheavals that seemed to be on the horizon” (“Why I Stopped” 59). The poem goes unnamed, yet his description fits “The Annotated Catechism,” a long poem which appeared in the Philippines Free Press in December 1970. Lacaba went on to publish one more poem in the language in 1973, but he has since written poetry only in Filipino, remaining true to the decision he made around forty years ago. His reputation as a writer (he is a poet, essayist, journalist, screenwriter, and translator) hinges primarily on his body of work in Filipino.

Lacaba cites his English-language journalism as directly responsible for his choice to stop writing English-language poetry (“Why I Stopped” 58). His coverage of the First Quarter Storm
placed him in the unruly streets of Manila and plugged him into the pulse of the country’s social unrest. The experience was crucial to his formation as a political activist, for which he would be imprisoned from 1974 to 1976, during the martial law regime of Ferdinand Marcos. It prompted a rethinking of his writing practice, including his use of the language imposed on the Philippines under US colonial rule. Rejecting English is a pragmatic recourse for the writer who commits to the projects of decolonization and nation-building and regards the effort as inseparable from class struggle. Lacaba’s decision to write poetry solely in Filipino, in this light, is a pointed response to the divisive effect of an imposed tongue on a colonized people. By implicating his poetry in the work of social transformation, Lacaba denounces the notion of poetry’s autonomy, evident in the prominence of lyric privacy and political complacency in the tradition of Philippine poetry in English.

Among Lacaba’s books are four collections of poetry: *Mga Kagila-gilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran* (*The Amazing Adventures*) (1979), *Sa Panahon ng Ligalig: Tula, Awit, Halaw* (*In the Time of Unrest: Poetry, Song, Adaptation*) (1991), *Edad Medya* (*Middle Age*) (2000), and *Kung Baga Sa Bigas: Mga Piling Tula* (*As Rice Grains: Selected Poems*) (2002). As definitive sources of his poetry curated by the author himself, these books present a body of work in Filipino characterized by plain speech, populated by ordinary folk doing ordinary things, and attentive, in its lyric intimacy, to a world fraught with social inequities and governed by an authoritarian regime. The poems are reader-friendly, their syntax uncomplicated and their plots, whether narrated or implied, immediately comprehensible. Meter and rhyme, when employed by Lacaba, do not undercut his conversational tone, only heighten its mellifluousness. Lacaba has so far not included any of his poems in English in his books, save for “Prometheus Unbound” (1973), the last English-language poem that he published. Salvaged by the author from the realm
of literary ephemera, to which the rest of his poems in English have been relegated, “Prometheus Unbound” is the final poem in Lacaba’s two most recent collections of poetry, Edad Medya and Kung Baga Sa Bigas. The double inclusion suggests the author’s desire not simply for the poem to be read (rather than remain uncirculated and inaccessible), but for it to be read as affiliated with his poems in Filipino. Its position as literally the last word in both books suggests Lacaba’s belief that it can carry the weight of codifying and concluding what he seeks to realize in his work. At the same time, “Prometheus Unbound” recalls the poet’s past as a bilingual poet, and indexes the early poems cordoned off from his oeuvre by the decision to become monolingual.

As one of two poems that mark the end of Lacaba’s poetry in English, it invokes, by way of historical proximity, “The Annotated Catechism,” Lacaba’s penultimate poem in English, which had originally been written as his farewell to the language. The two poems, the announced swan song and the actual one, one archived by Lacaba and the other left uncollected, jointly insinuate ambivalence about his decision to abandon English, which has otherwise been executed with finality.

As final exhibits of what the poet deemed necessary to relinquish when he came of age as an activist on the streets of Manila, “The Annotated Catechism” and “Prometheus Unbound” throw into crisis the seeming autonomy of English-language poetry by Filipinos, as well as the nativist nationalism that forecloses the possibility of an empowering literary appropriation of the colonial tongue. Arguably excursions in psychogeography undertaken by the postcolonial poet as aspiring flaneur, the poems are pressured to confront the public space in which they seem to have no place. English is used to write the experience of walking in and around Manila, an act that itself is a form of public speech, exercised during the fiery marches of the First Quarter Storm, and later, silenced by the curfew and surveillance of martial law. That “The Annotated
Catechism” and “Prometheus Unbound” continue to be Lacaba’s final poems in English frames them as outcomes of an autonomous poetics, testaments to the inadequacy of writing in English to support the level of political engagement that Lacaba wanted to achieve in his work. As samples of aesthetic autonomy, these “products of social labor,” according to Theodor Adorno, “are subject to produce their own law of form,” which in turn, “seal themselves off from what they themselves are” (Aesthetic Theory 227). That Lacaba nevertheless incorporates a trace of his poetry in English in his archive casts doubt on the supposed uselessness of hermeticism, as well as its conflation with poetry written in the colonial tongue. The presence of this trace instills purpose in what Lacaba has otherwise deemed purposeless and disavowed. Adorno, extrapolating from the Kantian formulation of the beautiful as “what is purposive without a purpose,” posits that “[i]nsofar as a social function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness” (139, 227). Autonomy, in these terms, is not anathema to efforts toward social transformation but the condition of possibility for art to conduct its critique and intervention. 

This is what I have in mind when I reconsider the oppositional relationship between Lacaba’s poetry in English and the social engagement that he demands of his work. I contend that Lacaba’s poems demonstrate the sociality of autonomy despite (in the case of “The Annotated Catechism”) and because of (in the case of “Prometheus Unbound”) the use of a language considered incongruent with the pressing tasks of activism and mobilization. Neither staunchly political nor purely aesthetic, the two texts turn poetic form into a form of social engagement. Flaunting their radical difference from protest poetry in Filipino, they heighten the elitism already imputed to English through formal strategies that privilege artifice and obscurity, qualities often associated with art for art’s sake. The poems, however, are also radical departures from the dominant Romantic-New Critical aesthetic overseeing the production of Philippine
poetry in English, which, at its most dogmatic, fetishizes the poem in itself and regards the realization of organic unity as the sole and paramount concern of the individual creative genius.

“The Annotated Catechism” turns to collage to enact and exacerbate the fundamental incongruity between the language of the poem and the streets in which it is set. The resulting discontinuities, which recast Manila in multiple coordinates of time and space and according to multiple discourses, construct an alternative model of narrating history that draws from the techniques of poetry. Collage becomes a means to disrupt commonplace methods of ordering experience, not only in the New Critical tradition of Philippine poetry in English, but also the tradition of nationalist Philippine history. In “Prometheus Unbound,” the form of a poem in English serves as both facade and conduit of an anti-Marcos slogan in Filipino, encoded in the poem through a procedural constraint. The poem’s appearance as an autonomous text is precisely what permits it to evade the censors of martial law and reclaim the exercise of free speech. Its form, which lends visibility to the dissent once in full display on the streets but driven underground by the dictatorship, proposes an alternative relationship between native and colonial languages, where the latter facilitates the survival of rather than imperils the former.

As outcomes of collage and procedural constraints, “The Annotated Catechism” and “Prometheus Unbound” may be described as “divided texts” that actively stage their own unraveling. The laws of form they generate foreground the materiality of language and effect disorientation, which run counter to the narrativizing logic and pursuit of a coherent whole that lend poetry in the New Critical vein, as appropriated by Filipino poets, its artfulness and fortify its political reticence. Their polyvocality formalizes the tensions between English and Filipino; consequently, the poem itself surfaces as a site at which the colonial and class antagonisms that underpin linguistic hierarchies are configured and interrogated, not concealed or
unacknowledged. It is through form that Lacaba’s work radicalizes the autonomy that pervades Philippine poetry in English, with which his poems are affiliated by default. It is also through form that they transgress prevailing relations of production and become allegories of and participants in social transformation. As a limit case for activating the sociality of an autonomous poetics, Lacaba’s resistant poems simultaneously reject separation from the political and social spheres, and refuse to be seamlessly absorbed or subsumed by them. The double duty they perform neither overstates the capacities of poetry to intervene in society nor glosses over language itself as a domain for forging resistance to the given world.

The Language of Radicalization

The language in which Lacaba was immersed as he covered the protests in Manila in the early 1970s was not the language of his early childhood. Born to a Cebuano-speaking father from the province of Bohol in the Visayas and a Tagalog-speaking mother from Pateros in Manila, Lacaba spent the first ten years of his life in Cagayan de Oro in Mindanao, with Cebuano as his first language. Upon the family’s relocation to Manila and following, a few years later, the death of his father, the language of the home eventually shifted to Filipino. Raised by a mother who taught Filipino in high school and college for a living, Lacaba grew up surrounded by grammar books and canonical texts in that language. He also consumed, on his own, popular culture (radio shows, movies, and comic books) in Tagalog (“Why I Stopped” 53). Meanwhile, in school, from the elementary to the university levels, the medium of instruction was English. Lacaba, through a scholarship, attended the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila University, where he was “a poor scholar in a school for the very rich elite, who spoke English even to their maids” (58).
These biographical details are not unfamiliar to postcolonial subjects, who experience the hierarchy of languages as a series of displacements. The erasure of Cebuano as the language of Lacaba’s domestic life underscores the dominance of Tagalog in the construction of Filipino, the national language, as used in the nation’s capital. As the language of popular culture, (Tagalog-based) Filipino is conflated with mindless entertainment, while English, the language of education, is synonymous with the production and acquisition of knowledge. The division between high and low culture dovetails with not only linguistic but also class divides: Filipino is the language of the masses while English is the language of the intelligentsia and the elite. An English major in college, Lacaba began publishing poetry and prose in English, yet he also wrote poetry in Filipino, in which he sought to articulate an urban sensibility informed by both his consumption of popular culture and his Western modernist education, while also deviating from the archaism of traditional Tagalog poetry. He was associated with the Bagay Poets (Object Poets), a group of students and teachers who wrote poetry in Filipino in Ateneo (“Why I Stopped” 56-57). 39

Despite his bilingual poetic practice in a milieu that privileged the use of English, Lacaba saw himself as largely apolitical during his years as an undergraduate. This changed when he dropped out of college and worked as a journalist for the Philippines Free Press, where he was assigned the student beat. On the heels of the youth whom he was tasked to shadow, he found himself in the streets of Manila, where student activists, together with militant peasants and workers, were engaged in a “cultural revolution,” waged to “politicize the masses” and revolt against what they identified as the three fundamental causes of national abjection abetted and enforced by the Marcos government: imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism (Days of
The mass actions in early 1970 testified to the burgeoning of the national democratic movement and provoked Lacaba’s transformation into a committed writer.

His political awakening is chronicled in his coverage of the demonstration that ushered in the First Quarter Storm. As he stood in the crowd amassed outside Congress, where Marcos delivered his State of the Nation Address, Lacaba removed his press badge, thus relinquishing the designation that distinguished him from the militants and protected him from the violence of the police. “I wanted to find out what treatment I could expect from authority in this guise,” he wrote (64). Collapsing the boundary between himself and his subject, Lacaba ran alongside the militants as they confronted or retreated from the police, assisted injured demonstrators, sought temporary refuge amid the riots in the homes of sympathetic Manila residents, and wove in and out of the city’s dark alleys to evade authorities. Soon, what began as camouflage for the journalist on assignment became a way of life. Looking back on another demonstration during the First Quarter Storm, he observed how the riots forced citizens out of their apathy: “no one who did not belong to the camp of the enemy could remain a bystander; anyone who was not a minion of the state became instantly an activist, even if only for a moment” (19). Lacaba beheld the militants who were his contemporaries as “the avant-garde” (59); in citing an aesthetic term, he restated its military origins, echoing the Leninist regard for the Communist Party as “the avant-garde of the revolution” (Puchner 40, 77). Initially a mere witness to the militants’ passion and rage, he later became their comrade.

Recounting a huge demonstration on Plaza Miranda in February 1970, Lacaba writes, “for many a youth who sat entranced like children discovering the alphabet, the giant teach-in was the first introduction to those mysterious words: imperialism, feudalism, fascism” (Days of Disquiet 22). The process of radicalization is described as akin to and in part about learning a
new language. It overhauls one’s understanding of the world, an upheaval made possible by a new set of terms. To be schooled in the parliament of the streets is to become fluent in the particular speech of its dissent. In one rally, Lacaba reports, the crowd yelled at a senator onstage who addressed them in English: “Tagalog! Tagalog!” (71). In a meeting of various militant groups, those who spoke in English rather than Tagalog “had to open with an apology” (99). English, a language prized inside the Filipino classroom devised by the American public school system, was apparently out of place in the public spaces where citizens were galvanized into protest. It was not the language of the placards raised or the slogans chanted during demonstrations. It was not the language of the streets, the veritable stage on which the First Quarter Storm unfolded.

Reassessing his own use of the language, Lacaba clarified that his motive for writing journalism in English was practical; journalists who wrote in Filipino were paid less than their counterparts in English. Writing poetry, however, was inconvertible to income, and therefore free from the compromises required to make a living. This fact allowed him to determine his ideal audience, which he imagined to include “the washerwoman who did our laundry” as well as “the ambulant vendor from whom we bought our sweetened soya snacks.” English was not the language of the working class, whom he wished to address. Furthermore, “when I wrote poetry in English, I had the feeling that I was talking to myself, and about myself,” he said; “but when I wrote in Filipino, I could write about anything, about exploitation and oppression and imperialism and all the big stuff, but also, yes, about my dandruff and my pimples and my personal angst” (“Why I Stopped” 57-59). English, based on Lacaba’s experience, drove a wedge between not only the poet and the masses, but also the self and the other. Lacaba saw the poetry that he produced in the language as narcissistic and solipsistic, preoccupied with private, if not
petty, individual concerns. It seemed unable to situate the self within, among, and in relation to a public, and thus unable to communicate a sense of the self as political.

As established in previous chapters, it is not unusual for Philippine poetry in English to be described in a similar fashion, which Filipino poets in the imposed tongue have themselves advocated, owned up to, or accepted as a matter of course. From the 1930s to the early 1950s, José Garcia Villa, around whom the art for art’s sake movement in Philippine literature was consolidated, was most active in his espousal of poetry sans history. Villa contributed significantly to the promotion of literature “as an expression of a profound selfhood rather than as a reflection of actual historical reality”; this redefinition devalued literatures in the local languages, which were nationalist in orientation, steeped in the traumas and perils of consecutive colonization by Spain and the United States (Chua 12-13). By the 1950s, New Criticism had reached Philippine academia, and it drew attention away from the text as implicated in its milieu and trained the writer’s sight instead on perfecting the text in itself, through a systematized approach to craft that appeared objective and thus “universal” in its aesthetic values. Commitment to craft neutralized the writer’s indifference to social issues. In 1964, Emmanuel Torres asserted that it was inescapable for Filipino poets in English to write “as individual persons with individual experiences and an individual cluster of responses toward certain events of a universal kind that happen to them”; to inject national particularity into a body of poetry that turned to English and American traditions for its models was “to be heavy handed about it” (“Literature as a Catalyst” 18-19). Apoliticism was so prevalent a feature of Philippine poetry in English that in 1965, Edith Tiempo admitted to the “ivory tower” in which the poet resides; preoccupied with individual concerns, the Filipino poet in English speaks only for himself or herself (“Philippine Poetry” 270, 272). Anglophone poetry seemed for the most part untouched
by the resurgence of nationalism, the First Quarter Storm, the declaration of martial law, and the arrest, torture, and murder by the military of many Filipinos, including writers and artists, which occurred in the years covered by the Torres-edited *An Anthology of Poems 1965/1974*. In his review of the anthology, the leftist critic Kris Montañez noted that “the dominating voice, or psyche, in these poems is that of the personal, not an abstract personal voice but one clearly bred by the conventions, sensibilities and hopes of a self-assured middle class” (88).

It is telling that for Philippine poetry in English, what counts as “a watershed of sorts” is the anthology *In Memoriam, Benigno S. Aquino, Jr., 1932-1983: a poetic tribute by five Filipino poets* (1984) (Maranan). Featuring poetry by the founding members of the Philippine Literary Arts Council (PLAC), the collection is a response to the assassination of Aquino, a former senator and severe critic of the regime, who returned to the Philippines from exile in the United States with the intent to rally the opposition against Marcos. Sparking outrage even among the politically reticent bourgeoisie and the upper crust of civil society, the Aquino assassination revitalized and reorganized the dissent that eventually led to the Edsa uprising and the dictator’s ouster in 1986. It took a decade of martial law (which had officially been lifted in 1981) and the height of expressed indignation against the regime by Philippine society at large for *In Memoriam* to appear. Of the five poets in the anthology, four (Gémino H. Abad, Cirilo Bautista, Ricardo de Ungria, and Alfred Yuson) were known to be apolitical at best; Bautista was even “lionized” by the regime “as the voice of aestheticism unencumbered by political ideology” (Maranan). Although the mere existence of the PLAC anthology seems to assert poetry’s stake in the political, the poets themselves counter this claim. In their introduction, which describes their poems as the “explosion of the authors’ poetic genius as it was mysteriously affronted, challenged, and seduced by Aquino’s death. We… wrote not as partisans in a partisan game but
as witnesses to a universal drama” (1). The potential for a radical departure from or rethinking of the autonomy ascribed to poetry in English is diminished by the poets’ insistence on their ahistorical individualism. Refusing to be regarded as politicized by the assassination, they instead claim to have aestheticized Aquino’s death and converted it into a catalyst for realizing poetic genius.

That the tradition largely confirms the bourgeois individualism that Lacaba detected in his poetry in English only attests to the capacity of cultural indoctrination as a colonial apparatus to operate in perpetuity, beyond the supervision of colonial rule. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, reflecting on African literature written in the languages of European colonial powers, notes that the colonizer’s quest to control the wealth of the colonized, which it pursues through military force and political dictatorship, is completed by controlling, through culture, the colonial subject’s psyche and imagination. The systematic enforcement of a “deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture” as well as the “conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer” create a docile colonial subject, whose internalized inferiority and alienation from his or her own culture cultivate deference to the colonizer (16-18). The Kenyan writer famously abandoned writing in English in favor of Gikuyu as a gesture to subvert the cultural control that underpins the colonizer’s project of economic and political domination. The linguistic turn fits into the arguably nativist stage identified by Frantz Fanon in his outline of the evolving nationalist consciousness of colonized writers. In Fanon’s narrative of development, the writer progresses from a period of assimilation, in which one demonstrates fluency in the colonizer’s culture, to a “combat stage,” in which the writer becomes “a galvanizer of the people” and translates the fruits of intellectual labor into mobilization. Mediating between the two stages is the writer’s attempt to resurrect the dream of a precolonial culture and the authentic indigenous self it promises.
despite the colonial reality that renders what is already an illusion all the more inaccessible (158-59). As the prelude to militancy in Fanon’s linear formulation, nativism is indispensable to the work of asserting national sovereignty, even as it flirts with colonialist fantasy by performing the native subject that the colonizer constructs and subjugates.

Lacaba’s own linguistic turn also implicates the resistance to colonial domination in class struggle. In the Philippines, where fluency in English is the province of the educated and elite, writers in the language are likely to come from these ranks. Docility is forged as colonial interests intersect with class privilege. While fostering deference among all colonial subjects, the “superior” culture is accessible only to a fortunate few. The exclusive access to imperial culture not only denigrates national identity, but also thwarts national collectivity, through a cultural hierarchy that bolsters the class divide. In his address to the first congress of the newly established writers’ organization Panulat para sa Kaunlaran ng Sambayanan (Writing for the Progress of the Nation), or PAKSA, in 1971, founding chairman of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) Jose Ma. Sison stressed the function of literature not only to represent the needs and aspirations of the masses, but also to raise their consciousness. Quoting heavily from Mao’s “Talks at the Yenan Forum,” Sison denied the existence of art for art’s sake, framed art as a property of class and thus a conduit of class interests, and inscribed literature in revolution, as a weapon for educating, unifying, and mobilizing the masses to fight for themselves (242-43). The language of revolution is, without question, “Pilipino.” It is also not limited to the national language, but includes the local languages, the mother tongues, of the revolutionaries. Proletarian literature is by necessity written in the language(s) of the masses, and these languages are in turn enriched by the proletarian literature produced in them (249-50). In choosing to write poetry
solely in Filipino, the language of the masses, Lacaba breaks ranks, so to speak, moving away from the class to which he belongs by education.

This decision is a clear indicator of Lacaba’s alignment with the burgeoning local movement that saw literary production as cultural work in the service of social struggle. The national democratic movement, spearheaded by the CPP and its military arm, the New People’s Army (NPA), waged a revolution forged out of Marxist, Leninist, and Maoist thought that was both national (against foreign exploitation) and democratic (against the reign of the oligarchy) in character (Days of Disquiet 21). Founded in 1968, the Party had a few hundred members in 1972, the year Marcos declared martial law; in 1986, the year of the dictator’s ouster, membership had swelled to around 35,000. By necessity illegal for its investment in armed struggle and the “protracted people’s war,” the CPP logically assumed a leadership role in the struggle during martial law, which drove other forms of opposition underground, the Party’s domain (Rocamora 9). The revolutionary movement was “the most visible and viable challenge to the Marcos government” from the late 1970s to the early 1980s (Hau 244). For this reason, the kind of literature it produced and prescribed is instructive in describing what constitutes socially engaged or protest literature in the martial law era.

Montañez, whose The New Mass Art and Literature can very much serve as a handbook on writing in the national democratic framework, locates the bastion of revolutionary art in the countryside, the main site of struggle for genuine land reform. According to Montañez, poverty, the illiteracy of the peasant masses, the vulnerability to attack of guerilla fronts, and the mobility of the guerillas are among the rural material conditions that require revolutionary literature, whose authors include workers, peasants, cadres, and their allies, to be quickly produced and easily disseminated (11, 31-32). Given the tasks of consciousness-raising, recruiting, and
mobilizing converts to the national democratic struggle, the theme of transformation is therefore central to revolutionary literature. “Just as the new poetry deals with the struggle to transform the material world,” writes Montañez, “so also does it deal with the internal struggle of the revolutionary forces in the course of transforming themselves” (15). Similarly, the “paradigmatic plot” in narrative forms, from the dagli (short-form prose) to the novel, focuses on political awakening that evolves into political action; it tracks the journey of “an individual who comes from the worker, peasant or petty bourgeois class” who “undergoes social iniquities, enlarges his understanding of society and social change through participation in the mass movement, and decides towards fulltime involvement in the urban mass movement or armed struggle in the countryside” (17-18).

While the explicit deployment of literature as propaganda implies its treatment as a means absorbed by the fulfillment of an end, Montañez suggests otherwise. In “Panunuri sa Sining at Panitikan ng Digmang Bayan” (“Critique of the Art and Literature of the Revolution”), written to provide, within the movement, an assessment of its literary production, he identifies key problems that beset writing within the national democratic struggle. Most of the concerns are overtly political: the misrepresentation of the national democratic agenda, inaccurate or reductive portrayals of the masses, and the limited range of subjects and themes that articulate the mass movement and armed struggle. A fourth and final problem, however, concerns the unwieldy confluence of form and content, which he links to the lack of artfulness. Rather than prioritize politics over aesthetics, which, according to Montañez, is the practice of any society that is not a classless society, revolutionary art should create unity of aesthetics and politics (“kaisahan ng pulitika at sinig”). Poor handling of form is evident, for example, in a poem that is no different from a manifesto, a story that seems like an essay, or text-heavy comics (“ang tula’y walang
iniwan sa manifesto, ang kwento’y tila sanaysay, ang komiks ay nagdidilim sa letra’’); it is also manifested in songs whose melodies are incongruent with the sentiment of the lyrics or vice-versa (103-106). Montañez thus gives importance to aesthetic decisions in realizing the revolutionary potential of art. That a text is not always already acceptable because of its clear and correct political stance, makes apparent the corollary possibility that a text is not always already unacceptable because of its attentiveness to form. Montañez, in fact, applauds the proliferation of forms, as seen in the usage of traditional and indigenous forms alongside modern ones, as well as the active production of literature in Pilipino and the local languages (104).

Because bourgeois cultural production steeped in art for art’s sake is perceived to be antithetical to social engagement, it is likely to generate forms already presumed to be irrelevant in the realm of revolutionary literature. However, in acknowledging formal range as a positive development in national democratic literary production, Montañez accommodates the possibility of appropriating forms not instinctively recognized as revolutionary as part of the effort to find ways to achieve the unity of aesthetics and politics and to harness the revolutionary capacity of art. This can, in effect, include forms perceived to fall in the realm of an autonomous poetics. Adorno emphasizes the value of autonomous art as an unlikely ally in the labor of restructuring society when he asserts that such art’s separation from life is precisely what engenders its purpose and permits it to conduct its critique and intervention: “by emphatically separating themselves from the empirical world, their other, [artworks] bear the unconscious schemata of that world’s transformation” (177). Because art that truly resists the world as it exists is neither authorized nor co-opted by the consensus, it is by necessity illegible to that world, an affront to existing notions of what art is. When regarded in this manner, autonomy’s “cult of form” and “impersonal neutrality” produce an “‘immoral’ definition of art” that staves off
instrumentalization by the established order; while autonomous art resists “the moral
conformism of bourgeois art,” it also steers clear of the “ethical complacency illustrated by the
proponents of ‘social art’ and the ‘realists’ themselves when, for example, they exalt the
‘superior virtue of the oppressed’” (Bourdieu 75-76). Overtly skeptical of explicitly political or
committed art, Adorno firmly relocates the sociality of art from what art expresses to what it
enacts, saying that “in all art that is still possible, social critique must be raised to the level of
form, to the point that it wipes out all manifestly social content” (Aesthetic Theory 250).
Autonomous art, at its most radical, formalizes rather than expresses its dissent. Qualifying
Montañez’s ideal of the unity between politics and aesthetics, Adorno attests to the divide
between aesthetics and politics as the requisite condition for approaching the ever-receding
horizon of their unity and ensuring the ceaseless pursuit of transformation. When read in relation
to Lacaba’s linguistic turn, this divide, which occurs in his compartmentalization of his poetry in
English and poetry in Filipino into apolitical and political realms, respectively, gains new
meaning. Seen in Adornian terms, the “emphatic separation” of Lacaba’s poetry in English from
the political work (seen as the domain of his poetry in Filipino) is not the pinnacle of its
uselessness but the premise of its critical intervention.

Collage and “The Annotated Catechism”

It is easy, however, to see why a radicalized Lacaba would choose to abandon writing
poetry in English when “The Annotated Catechism” is juxtaposed with one of his most popular
Filipino poems, “Ang mga kagila-gilalas na pakikipagsapalaran ni Juan de la Cruz” (“The
amazing adventures of Juan de la Cruz”). Although both poems were written at around the same
time (in the aftermath of the First Quarter Storm) and both track the movements of a flaneur
roaming around Manila, it was “Kagila-gilalas” that soared in popularity among circles of dissent during martial law. The poem launched the dula-tula (drama-poem) genre, which was employed in consciousness-raising and mobilization efforts. It was performed (and continues to be performed) in mass actions and community gatherings. It also remains a choice poem for sabayang pagbigkas (choral speaking) in local schools (a cursory Google search yields various Youtube videos of students collectively reciting the poem). “Kagila-gilalas” is so popular that “marami sa nakarinig o nakapanood [nito]… ang ni hindi nakaalam na [si Lacaba] ang may-akda nito” [many who have heard the poem or have watched it performed do not know that Lacaba is its author] (Barrios 117). Practically anonymous in its provenance, the poem has become part of oral tradition.

None of these details that characterize the reception of “Kagila-gilalas,” which vouch for its political efficacy, are true of “The Annotated Catechism.” It is not in any of Lacaba’s books. Although it is included in Gémino H. Abad’s landmark three-volume anthology covering almost a hundred years of poetry in English, it is not even reprinted in full; only the first and third sections are in the anthology. Unlike “Kagila-gilalas,” which uses colloquial Filipino and loose rhyme to narrate a plot that unfolds in a linear fashion, “The Annotated Catechism” is a long, fragmented poem, full of associative leaps and allusions, and visually unpredictable in its lineation, which tethers the reading experience of it to the page. The poem becomes even more opaque, its persona far from representative, when cast against the protagonist of “Kagila-gilalas,” Juan de la Cruz, a stock character and stand-in for the ordinary Filipino. Lacaba’s Juan de la Cruz is “a would-be urban flaneur… who finds himself everywhere excluded by a city of prohibitive rules” (Tadiar 319). Confronted by a series of street signs that restrict his behavior in and access to public spaces, Juan de la Cruz is progressively driven out of the city and to the
countryside, where he joins the armed struggle. Next to Juan de la Cruz, who unequivocally represents the oppressed majority, the persona as bourgeois intellectual in “The Annotated Catechism” is more pronounced, its flaneur-like consciousness far freer than Juan de la Cruz to go “botanizing on the asphalt” (Benjamin, “The Flaneur” 37). The poem appears fiercely private, highly literary, and elitist in its imagined readership, all qualities that relegate it easily to the autonomous realm.

That “The Annotated Catechism” can in no way replicate the mass appeal of “Kagila-gilalas” diminishes the visibility of what encodes sociality in its autonomy: the poem’s form. It serves as a counterpoint to what dominates the production of Philippine poetry in English, as informed by its appropriation of New Critical tenets: primarily coherent lyric subjects who are preoccupied with personal-couched-as-universal concerns, committed to organic form via the staging of tensions that are unified into insights, and complacent in the transparency of language as a carrier of meaning. The persona of “The Annotated Catechism” is neither a stable nor a placeless lyric subject, and the poem grows increasingly fragmented as it navigates Manila. Written in a language alien to the streets yet set in the streets, the poem pressures the lyric privacy that English supposedly cultivates in the postcolonial poem to contend with geography and history. The result is not only a fragmented lyric speaker, literally forced out of a singular self, but also a discontinuous conception of space and time.

Furthermore, the dissolution of the singular subject produces a logic in “The Annotated Catechism” that functions as a counterpoint to the “paradigmatic plot” that Montañez outlines and “Kagila-gilalas” exemplifies. In the writing of Philippine history, historians have also recognized the dominance of a similar arc. Reynaldo Ileto, for instance, observes the almost irreversible impact of Catholicism on the conception of historical narrative among Filipinos.
Indigenized forms of the Old and New Testament immersed the masses in “‘history’ as a series of events with a beginning (the Creation) and an end (the final Judgment)” (“Outlines” 132). Even the native intelligentsia, who saw the deployment of religion as a tool for oppression, “retained the Christian constructs of ‘Fall’ and ‘Recovery’ in writing anti-colonial history” (133). Celebrations of the centennial of Philippine independence maintain this narrative of progress. In the “triumphalist official nationalism” following the 1986 People Power Revolt and the consecutive administrations of Aquino, Ramos, and Estrada, says Vicente Rafael, “[historical] events [are portrayed] as part of a smooth continuum” (*White Love* 3). Such narratives idealize history: “Colonial conquest is supposed to beget anti-colonial resistance which in turn is expected to give birth to a sovereign people steeped in the righteousness of their struggle and the knowledge of their destiny” (Rafael, “Mis-education” 42-43). The Catholic arc of descent and resurrection, expulsion and salvation, is recast in nationalist history, which frames the nation as a teleological project, as long as it follows the righteous and singular path to its realization.

When critique is raised to the level of form, says Adorno, it manifests “as a process essentially in the relation of its whole and parts. Without being reducible to one side or the other, it is the relation itself that is a process of becoming” (*Aesthetic Theory* 178). More than “manifest opinions,” it is this process that implicates the poem in the realm of the social (227). As a collage poem, “The Annotated Catechism” stages what Adorno describes. In departing from the norm of the Romantic lyric whose solitary speaker offers a singular “vision of Reality,” it privileges Aristotelian “poiesis as mimesis praxeos”; the poem becomes the site in which “the processes of the external world as we have come to know it” are played out (Perloff, “Pound/Stevens” 506); it is thus a site of provisionality rather than well-wrought coherence. Through its title alone, “The Annotated Catechism” already undermines the religious narrative of
development to which nationalist history also conforms. It proposes to alter the structural integrity of Catholic teaching through the inclusion of a familiar paratext (annotations are a common pedagogical apparatus in scripture and in instructional materials), which serves as a conduit for another voice to intrude on the absolute authority of religious doctrine. Each of the poem’s three sections opens with an excerpt from a catechism, a question and its corresponding answer, written in archaic Tagalog. The epigraphs recount the revolt of angels against God, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, and the Great Flood that punished all of mankind, save for Noah. Each excerpt frames its section in an iteration of the “Fall”; in effect, rather than advance toward “Recovery” through a cathartic transformation, the poem, structurally at least, seems to repeat itself.

What annotates the catechetical excerpts is the body of the poem, which dominates the page and visually overpowers what it is meant to supplement. The sections are thematically disparate. The first is an address to Valentin de los Santos, the shaman-leader of Lapiang Malaya (the Freedom Party), a religious-political peasant society. The second section is a rewrite of the opening of Florante at Laura, the nineteenth-century metrical romance of Tagalog poet Francisco Baltazar or Balagtas. The third is a fragmented meditation that seems to spring from the experience of walking the streets of Manila. In becoming the main text, the annotations challenge the resolute didacticism of a catechism by situating it among other discourses from history, literature, and contemporary urban life. The poem itself becomes an alternative method of instruction, which produces a profoundly different experience of the same streets roamed by Juan de la Cruz in “Kagila-gilalas.” “The Annotated Catechism” undermines the brute force of colonization by deconstructing the pedagogical apparatus that aided in the imposition of Catholicism on the Philippines by its Spanish colonizers; at the same time, it refashions the
religious template followed by triumphalist models of Philippine history as a means to interrogate what dominates nationalist discourse.

In constructing the chaos of Manila, rife with manifestations of uneven development and on the brink of Marcos’s declaration of martial law, Lacaba employs what Charles Bernstein calls “antiabsorptive” techniques, which, through the incorporation of “nontransparent or nonnaturalizing elements” direct the reader’s attention to the artifice of the text and the materiality of language (52). Juxtaposition, which the poet uses extensively, is made visually and auditorily apprehensible by the asymmetrical lineation and enjambments, as well as the appearance of Tagalog amid text written primarily in English. The contact of archaic Tagalog and modern English is particularly interesting because it magnifies the foreignness of the former (whose orthography is different from modern Tagalog) and the familiarity of the latter (as a language presently in circulation). This outcome destabilizes the binary of native and foreign often used to establish the oppositional relationship of the two languages. The collage form also undercuts the familiarity of English, which, in turn, suspends the possibility of reading the poem with ease.

The first section, while the most conventionally coherent of the poem’s three parts, already contains juxtapositions from manifold sources. It combines figures from mythology (Bernardo Carpio, a Filipino Herculean figure said to cause earthquakes), religion (Lucifer), pop culture (Vilma Santos, a movie star), and history (Valentin de los Santos). It casts men sharing a round of beer and rum out on the street (a typical scene in the Philippines) against “walls topped by broken/glass guard swimming pools”, which magnifies the gated privilege of the middle and upper classes, whose privacy is secured against the masses whom they exploit to afford their priva. Valentin de los Santos is conflated with Lucifer and held up as a hero of the working-
class men, who have little to drink and even less opportunities in life to speak of; the God figure and de los Santos’s unnamed opponent is Marcos, whose government forces crushed the Lapiang Malaya and their leader. References in the second and third sections add to the range of sources and discourses in the poem: Lacaba mentions Philippine presidents alongside porn stars, embeds profanities in prayers, and cites lines from sources as diverse as twentieth-century Western authors W.B. Yeats and Bertolt Brecht, nineteenth-century Tagalog poet Balagtas, an anonymous proselytizing pedestrian, and quotations from signs on buses. Like the metropolis, the poem is replete with heteroglossia and does not fuse into a unified whole. “A running transformer, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data” is how Marjorie Perloff characterizes the collage form of Ezra Pound’s Cantos, a description also applicable to Lacaba’s poem, which similarly relies on “metonymic linkages” and constructs “Cubist surfaces or aerial maps where images jostle one another” (“Pound/Stevens” 500).

“The Annotated Catechism” also generates disorientation through syntax, and in this Lacaba’s collage technique is two-tracked. Pierre Joris distinguishes between two approaches to verbal collage: “writing, the collage elements of which show the seams of their fracture, and those that hide those seams, fold them in open themselves; writing that has invisible seams” (30). Lacaba oscillates between the two approaches, both of which produce discontinuities that dissolve the singular lyric speaker and subvert the conception of time as a linear progression. The consecutive becomes contemporaneous, as the poem features different versions of simultaneity at play. Lacaba’s collage technique is seamless and more discreet in parts that couch incongruous elements in conventional syntax. This is evident in the second section, which rewrites and improvises on the opening of Florante at Laura, a classic Tagalog poem that assumes the guise of a love story to portray allegorically the oppression of Filipinos under the Spanish colonial
The speaker occupies two worlds at once through sentences that open with present-day objects and end with the epistrophe “in Albanya”:

Treachery is boss in Albanya
Justice has been strapped to electric chairs
in Albanya,
reason suffocated in newsprint.
Beauty tries in vain to claw its way
out of the memorial parks
and honor’s trapped in paperbacks
in Albanya. (16)

Each sentence conflates the Manila of the present (which, in the context of the poem, is 1970) and Balagtas’s Albanya, the mythical European kingdom from which the protagonist Florante hails. In syntactically stitching two worlds from different periods of time together, Lacaba activates “the transfer of materials from one context to another, even as the original context cannot be erased” (Perloff, *The Futurist Moment* 47). Manila is Albanya is Manila: the oppressive conditions of the Philippines under Marcos in 1970 (i.e., justice “strapped to electric chairs,” reason “suffocated in newsprint,” and beauty “tries in vain to claw its way out of memorial parks”) become the backdrop of the courtly love that unfolds in *Florante at Laura*; conversely, the allegorical commentary in the metrical romance is insinuated into the present crisis.

Seamless collage also occurs in several statements that combine lines drawn from Catholic doctrine with lines peculiar to a speaker in the poem. The profane is grafted onto the language of the sacred in a number of lines: “Bless us, O Lord,/and these our profits…” (from the first section); “Who sits at the right hand of/the piano player at 1571”; “I have said three Hail Marys/and a thousand ejaculations”; and “who have eaten of the body and blood of/Christopher Lee” (from the third section). The initial parts of the lines are derived from Catholic rites, be it prayer before meals, confession, or mass, but the succeeding portions are improvisations that
result in statements of hypocrisy and perversion. The Lord is asked to bless not gifts but profits, presumably acquired through unlawful means; the right hand of the “Father” is replaced by “the piano player at 1571,” the number alluding to the year the city of Manila was founded, predictably, by way of violence of colonial forces; and Christ, whose body and blood are symbolically consumed by Catholics during mass to receive the gift of salvation, is transformed into Christopher Lee, the actor also known as Count Dracula. Because the syntax of the source texts is maintained, it camouflages (somewhat) the aberrant content. Still, the reader already familiar with the appropriated lines is jolted into awareness of their detournement. The language of Catholic doctrine is defaced, so to speak, as parts of its syntax are infiltrated by words that make a mockery of Catholic ritual. Syntactical sacrilege exposes the structure of piety to be a structure of oppression.

The seams of collage become visible in moments of explicit syntactical fragmentation, which dominate the third and final section of the poem. The breakdown of syntax exaggerates the absence of linearity and lack of semantic certainty already present in earlier sections. Unlike previous examples of collage work in the poem, which draw some of their fragments from pre-existing texts and thus blatantly import semantic registers from outside sources, collage in this case manifests via the juxtaposition of dependent clauses, phrases, or words. The reader must deal with the double challenge of reading a syntactically incomplete thought on its own and in combination with others that are similarly incompletely constructed. The third section, for example, features a series of relative clauses minus the main clause to which they are subordinated and the noun or noun phrase which they modify. The dependent clauses open with the relative pronoun “who”: “Who walked the streets of Novaliches/tiny coffin on his shoulders/said his baby was dead”; “Who waited/and waited/for a cop court cherubim and
seraphim/a virgin housemaid raped by Ah Kong”; “Who sits at the right hand of the piano player.” Because the lines appear without a clear referent, the figure they mean to illustrate remains indeterminate. A recurring line in the section, “take it from someone who knows,” is a possible main clause, a potential pivot to which the relative clauses might be fastened. When affixed to the refrain, however, the relative clauses, which indicate different characters (a father of a dead child, an abused housemaid, a cryptic right hand figure) destabilize rather than clarify the speaker. The self who speaks the poem is polyphonic rather than singular, as it is simultaneously occupied by multiple voices. The lines “Not us not us/who sit around a pitcher/on three benches in a dim alley” finally provide a referent to a relative clause, but it is a referent by negation (“not us”), and while “us” evacuates the place of the speaker, the “someone” who takes over is multiple and uncertain. No matter which subjectivity the speaker occupies, the outcome is always tragic (untimely death, rape, poverty). The speaker is “someone who knows,” and yet the knowledge, which remains undisclosed, seems insufficient to alter the course of his or her experience.

Syntactical fragmentation becomes most pronounced when fragments are reduced to pairings or a series of individual words. One line reads, “drought fire pestilence quake storm”; another “Pepe and Pilar Dick and Jane Santa Claus.” Without the intervention of parts of speech which establish hierarchical relations among terms, or with only the paratactical conjunction “and” to connect one word to another, the lines once again gesture toward simultaneity. In the first example, the freestanding nouns gain potency through accumulation. Because they fall under the category of natural disasters, the effect of their enumeration is additive, elevating the sense of danger to catastrophic proportions. The second example, which consecutively cites “Pepe and Pilar,” “Dick and Jane,” and “Santa Claus,” precipitates not accumulation but
displacement. Pepe and Pilar are the Filipino counterparts of the American Dick and Jane in children’s primers, while Santa Claus, a Western cultural icon, is a modern-day accomplice of capitalism to convert Christian tradition into its own machinery. The calculated ordering of cultural references linguistically performs, in the blink of an eye, the cultural infiltration by the United States of the Philippines: Pepe and Pilar, educational tools in the transmission of Filipino culture, are displaced by Dick and Jane, educational tools in the transmission of American culture, which in turn are displaced by Santa Claus, shorn of any pretense of educational benevolence and representative of the capitalist enterprise. To read the nouns in succession is to speed through the violence, trauma, and aftermath of imperialism; the compression into a single line also suggests that they are contemporaneous, occupying the same space and time.

In the lines that follow a quote from Yeats (“The beggars have changed places but/the lash goes on”), Lacaba writes: “Take it from someone/who knows/from Quezon Laurel Osmeña/in whom I am well pleased/from Roxas Quirino Magsaysay/the joy of my youth.” The perpetual cycle of oppression invoked through Yeats clarifies the irony in the praise for the presidents of the Philippines, whose names are enumerated consecutively. As metonymies for the eras in which the presidents governed, the names send the reader who moves from one word to the next on a speedy journey without transition across successive periods in history. The quotation from Yeats, however, undercuts its implied narrative continuity, since it insists that regardless of era, the ruling class remains in place and the conditions of society remain the same. The paratactic presentation of the names renders the epochs they stand for equivalent, and by extension, interchangeable. Meaning is doubly destabilized, for the names of the presidents do not only represent historical periods but also streets in Manila, the primary setting of the poem. As street names, the enumeration does not function according to the logic of succession: one
street does not turn into another, and another, and so on. Instead, they become disparate fragments drawn from a chaotic urban sprawl, encapsulating the haphazard layout Manila. Disparate meanings simultaneously occupy the same words, fusing the geographical to the historical, the spatial to the temporal. To move around Manila is to repeatedly end up confronting the same conditions across times and spaces. Nothing changes from one street (or president, or era) to the other.

Lacaba describes the First Quarter Storm as “impossible to recall… in tranquility” (Days of Disquiet 11). The fight for national liberation and the overthrow of reigning oligarchs in an increasingly oppressive state are in no way realized through Wordsworthian quietude. By extension, the poet who is also an active participant in the surge of unrest at the onset of the 1970s can only break (and break free from) the stable lyric and the solitude of the Romantic individual genius, which, since the postwar years, has dominated the tradition of Philippine poetry in English. Without providing resolution to the disorder it formalizes and thematizes, “The Annotated Catechism” is hardly illustrative of the ideal New Critical text, which embodies, writes Cleanth Brooks, the “unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordinated to a total and governing attitude” (The Well Wrought Urn 207). The New Critics were not without appreciation of collage and the varieties of disorientation it produces. In fact, in his discussion of T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” a collage poem central to the Anglo-American modernist canon, Brooks consolidates its symbolic, mythopoetic, and Christian components in a systematic exegesis that amplifies the “oneness of experience” and the “unity of all periods” achieved by the poem; accounting for the poem’s fragmentation, he observes that its “statement of beliefs emerges through confusion and cynicism—not in spite of them” (“The Waste Land” 169, 172).

Nevertheless, when converted to creative writing practice in the postcolonial Philippine context,
this organic form prized by the New Critics results in primarily linear texts in the voice of singular lyric subjects. This affirms more than undercuts coherence and unification.

In turning to collage, “The Annotated Catechism” deviates from Philippine poetic production in the New Critical vein; however, in resisting full absorption into an autonomous poetics, it also does not resort to the language(s) or structures of overtly political poetry. Instead, the poem radicalizes its autonomy by positing its form itself as a site of resistance. Adorno laments how “familiar speech is taken as a sign of relevance… Only what [people] do not need first to understand, they consider understandable” (Minima Moralia 110). The antiabsorptive collage form of “The Annotated Catechism” risks illegibility, which renders the poem irrelevant; however, this apparent functionlessness of the antiabsorptive form is precisely its social function (to use Adornian terms); as a counterpoint to forms to which readers are accustomed, it challenges the complacency and passivity elicited from readers by familiar speech. The poem, through its form, exhibits itself as a structure of thinking and implicates the reader in the production of meaning. The collaborative role the reader is made to assume dislodges the act of reading itself from routine and turns it into a changing and changeable process. Through “absorption made possible by/nonabsorptive means,” the reader is “absorbed into a more ideologized/or politicized space” (Bernstein 53).

As a formal counterpoint to “Kagila-gilalas,” whose structure closely resembles the arc of transformation recommended in the writing of literature by the national democratic framework, “The Annotated Catechism” imagines a means of apprehending political life apart from the prescribed arc of nationalist history. Lacaba performs in poetry what Rafael suggests in the writing of history: a revision of form. As an alternative to “the epic recollections of the ‘passion’—the suffering, death, and resurrection—of the Filipino nation”, Rafael recommends “a
‘minor’ style of episodic narrative, which treats in a more condensed and concise manner clusters of historical details and reflections that do not easily fit into a larger whole” (White Love 4). The approach recalls Walter Benjamin’s historian, who, in a strikingly apropos description that divorces history from Catholicism, “stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary” (“Theses” 263). Positing a relation between present and past that is both dialectical and discontinuous, Benjamin presents such a relation as an “image,” or “that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (The Arcades Project 462). The approach accommodates what lies in excess of the linear model of history, cognizant of the risk that “[f]or every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (“Theses” 255).

Benjamin’s use of the term “image” not only arrests and reconfigures the forward march of time often seen as integral to the movement of history, but also frames history as a poetic endeavor, one that is constructed and subject to reconstruction. It authorizes a turn to poetry to re-imagine history, without exaggerating the capacity of poetry to galvanize people into protest; rather, it illuminates how poetry fosters resistant thinking, which neither readily formulates nor easily receives ideas, a necessary precondition and accessory to external forms of resistance. For driving the reader to grapple with linguistic fragments, with multiple discourses, and with an unstable, polyvocal lyric speaker, “The Annotated Catechism,” exemplifies Benjamin’s curatorial approach to history, in which time is unfixed, simultaneity staged, and ephemeral fragments juxtaposed to produce composites or “constellations” that can shock the reader into a new consciousness. Characterizing the procedure of montage in Brecht’s epic theater, Benjamin similarly extols its capacity to “discover” rather than “reproduce” situations, and thus create astonishment in the audience (“The Author as Producer” 234-35). Form becomes a means for
Lacaba’s poem to interrogate the reified nationalist arc and implicit notions of authentic Filipino identity in socially engaged texts while also disrupting the literary techniques that fortify their opposite, texts indifferent to the work of social transformation. The bi-directional critique it performs through its radical autonomy makes “The Annotated Catechism” a resistant poem in English, which neither fully renounces the formalist preoccupations of art for art’s sake nor complies with the established parameters of committed art.

**Procedure and “Prometheus Unbound”**

In November 1972, two months after the declaration of martial law, *Focus Philippines*, headed by esteemed fiction writer Kerima Polotan, published its first issue. A note from the editors dismissed the “unwitting conspiracy” that accused the government of silencing “thought, humor, irony – and good writing.” Describing Marcos as a writer himself, who “grapples with the problems of the state but is familiar with the anguish of the writing craft,” the editors assured the public that the president had loosened his initial policies regarding the press under the New Society (the Philippines under martial law). “[A]nyone can write what he wants to write any way he wants,” said the editors, “but the one difference is that the writer must now, where he did not before, accept responsibility for and take the consequences of, whatever he writes.” The editors extended an invitation to all writers, including those “who wrote from the other side of the barricades, before September 21,” to submit work to the magazine (3). The same issue ran Presidential Decree No. 36, an “amended” decree on the media, which authorized the closure of media enterprises that “have consciously or unconsciously taken part in the conspiracy against the Government, given aid and comfort to the forces of insurgency and subversion and have either directly supported, or aided and abetted the subversion of our established traditions and
value”; the establishment of a Mass Media Council, co-chaired by the Secretary of Public Information and the Secretary of National Defense, which would issue permits to operate to media outlets; and the use of all media facilities in operation for disseminating information from the government (20).

*Focus Philippines*, as evident in its rhetoric, was an ally of the Marcos regime. Its call for submissions insinuated that there was no longer an “other side” post-September 21; after the declaration of martial law, all writers, without exception, were absorbed by and assimilated into the New Society. The only dictatorship that was “fatal” to the writer was the “special arrogance” of his or her “closed mind,” said the editors, who in effect blamed the victims for the dictator’s crimes, which included the detention, torture, and murder of Filipinos who were critical of Marcos. A number of these critics, in fact, including senators, student activists, peasant leaders, teachers, and journalists, were already hauled off to prison upon the declaration of martial law. In *Notes on the New Society of the Philippines*, Marcos justified martial law as the necessary recourse to counter the Communist insurgency, to quell the threat of his assassination by former officers of the military, and to secure peace and order in the country (24-25). His regime was enforced by the military, whose elite torture units encapsulated the brutality of the state against its citizens.

Around 50,000 Filipinos were incarcerated in the first three years of martial law. Some 35,000 were tortured and 3,000 murdered. Among those killed, around 2,520 were “salvaged,” a euphemism in the Philippines for those “tortured, executed, and displayed” in public spaces (McCoy 205-06). Used as spectacles of violence in the dictator’s “theater state of terror,” the bodies stoked fear among citizens already coerced into silence and deference by the closure of Congress, the confiscation of corporations owned by Marcos critics, and the government’s
control of the media. Between 1972 and 1976, writes Raissa Robles, clashes between the Moro National Liberation Front, a Muslim separatist group, and the military resulted in 60,000 to 80,000 civilian and rebel deaths in Mindanao in southern Philippines. As Robles puts it, for every day of the fourteen years that Marcos ruled as a dictator, 23 Filipinos were tortured or killed. Large-scale economic exploitation occurred alongside widespread human rights violations. In the two decades that Marcos ruled the country, foreign debt rose from less than USD 1 billion to USD 27 billion, of which up to USD 10 billion went to the pockets of the Marcoses; from Php 3.90 to a dollar in 1965, the first year Marcos came into power, the peso devalued to P20 to a dollar by the time of his ouster in 1986 (Robles). These violations were tacitly supported by the United States, whose economic and military interests in the Philippines were protected by the regime. To date, the Philippines continues to pay for the foreign debt looted by Marcos and his cronies.

When martial law was declared, Lacaba was employed by Asia-Philippines Leader, which, like many media outlets, was shut down by the regime. Lacaba went underground and was working for Taliba ng Bayan, an underground newspaper, when he was caught by the military in 1974 (Lacaba, “The torture of my father”). Two years later, he was released from jail, but only through the intercession of another Filipino writer, Nick Joaquin, who agreed to accept a literary award from the Marcos government in exchange for Lacaba’s freedom. His release coincided with the death of his younger brother Emmanuel, also a poet and activist, who had joined the New People’s Army (the military arm of the CPP) and was killed by the military in Davao del Norte (Ventura 182). Lacaba is among the thousands who suffered torture in detention. In his deposition, one of roughly 10,000 filed by torture victims in a class suit against Marcos, he details the kinds of torture inflicted on him by his captors (the beatings, the use of a
‘truth serum,’ and physical assault with the aid of props like a broom, steel cots, an air-conditioner); his refusal to divulge information to an interrogator in exchange for the chance to see his wife and mother, who had finally found his place of detention after a two-week search; and the recurrence of his pulmonary tuberculosis during incarceration (“The way it was”).

Another incident Lacaba recalls from the time he was subjected to torture involves an interrogator, who said to him: “You’re the one who wrote that poem in that magazine.” He said nothing in response to the accusation, but remembers, despite the terror, feeling “flattered that a constabulary colonel was literate enough to have heard about my poem” (“Why I Stopped” 60).

The poem in question, “Prometheus Unbound,” was published by Lacaba under the name Ruben Cuevas in Focus Philippines in 1973. It appeared in a magazine known to be a mouthpiece of the state, during a dictatorship whose guidelines for “responsible opinion” in newspapers and magazines included an item specifically about what constitutes “responsible” literary works: “Literary expositions (fiction, drama, poetry), provided these are not written to disguise mischievous intent or do not employ allusion, imagery, hyperbole or any other literary device as a vehicle or veil for propaganda against the government or Administration” (“Responsible Opinion Defined” 39). “Prometheus Unbound” gained notoriety soon after publication for outwitting the censors, and the issue of Focus Philippines that featured the poem was pulled off the newsstands. Why it was published by the magazine to begin with is a story of how form in itself functions as a form of resistance. Here is the first stanza of the poem:

Mars shall glow tonight,
Artemis is out of sight.
Rust in the twilight sky
Colors a bloodshot eye,
Or shall I say that dust
Sunders the sleep of the just? (103)
At first glance, and as established by its first stanza, “Prometheus Unbound” appears conventional. The poem, which opens with an epigraph from Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, is made up of four stanzas with six lines each. It unfolds in rhymed couplets, in lofty English. Save for the omniscient voice in the final stanza, it assumes the persona of the Titan Prometheus, who steals fire from Mt. Olympus to give to humankind. The poem draws from Greek mythology, cites Aeschylus’s tragic drama, and alludes to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s play of the same title; it also distances itself from the milieu of its production, for it is devoid of any markers that locate it in the Philippines or index the Filipino identity of its author. Although the dramatic monologue speaks of the underdog’s defiance and triumph over the forces of his entrapment, a situation that may potentially resonate with Filipinos suffering under and in need of liberation from the Marcos dictatorship, the rather florid use of English, the foreign allusions, and the scope of the mythical retelling, which hardly recontextualizes Prometheus, result in obscure verse, removed from any immediate reality grounded in Philippine conditions. Steeped in the universal and mythopoetic, the poem, on the surface, looks like a work of art for art’s sake. Its reference to the Romantic poet Shelley, a progressive and politicized thinker disparaged by the American New Critics and their affiliates, could hint at an uneasy alignment with the New Critical tradition of Philippine poetry in English. Still, this incongruity is subtle and hardly disrupts the autonomous poetics to which “Prometheus Unbound” seems to conform. It expresses no dissent and appears to pose no threat to the regime.

How “Prometheus Unbound” “disguise[s] mischievous intent,” however, also occurs on the surface. It materializes through “a reasoned derangement of the senses,” so to speak, which entails a literal shift in the way the reader’s eye advances in reading the poem on the page. Alertness to the materiality of words reveals the potential to formulate meaning not only by
reading horizontally but also vertically. For instance, when the first letters of each line in the first stanza are strung together, they form, in capital letters, via acrostic, the word “MARCOS.” What emerges when the rest of the first letters of each line are combined into an acrostic is a popular anti-Marcos slogan in Filipino: “MARCOS HITLER DIKTADOR TUTA” (“MARCOS HITLER DICTATOR PUPPET”). Chanted by demonstrators all over the country before the regime eliminated the freedom of speech and the right to assembly, the slogan equates Marcos with Hitler and calls him both a dictator and a puppet (the direct translation of “tuta” is “puppy” but it also connotes “puppet” or “crony,” a direct reference to Marcos’s strong ties with the US government). Like the verbal-visual work of, for example, the avant-garde Russian Futurists, the poem cannot be divorced from the page and operates through “noncausality, nonlogical relationships, the simultaneous existence on a surface plane of seemingly unrelated verbal and visual elements” (Perloff, *The Futurist Moment* 129). “Prometheus Unbound” does not verbalize a direct correlation between the militant slogan about a Filipino dictator and a paean to mythical genius. The texts are not even written in the same language. Their relation, instead, is material, for the poem and the acrostic are literally held together by several letters of the alphabet.

Unlike the Futurists, however, who made the materiality of language explicit on the page, “Prometheus Unbound” demonstrates a discreet materiality, to be decoded by the reader through a process of deconstruction (of the poem) and reconstruction (of the slogan). Craig Dworkin observes that the outcomes of (Western) experimental writing in the twentieth century, a period marked by rapid developments in technology, largely derive from “materially focused recombinatory procedures,” an approach stimulated by “the typewriter’s presentation of unalphabetized, material letter forms waiting to be endlessly combined through physical actions” (72). Lacaba’s employment of a procedural constraint, which relies on alphabetical
recombination, aligns “Prometheus Unbound” with the tradition Dworkin describes, even as the poem also subscribes to the universality and individualism of the dominant New Critical tradition of Philippine poetry in English. For incorporating a political slogan in a poem, the poem also affiliates itself with protest poetry in Filipino, which includes, among its practices, the use of slogans to magnify the impact of the poem as a rallying cry (Montañez 14).

The generative force of poetry created outside of psychology and self-expression has many antecedents, from the Futurists who rallied to “destroy the I in literature” in 1912, Andy Warhol who declared “I want to be a machine” half a century later, to the American contemporary conceptualists. To turn to procedural constraints, chance operations, or technology-driven methods of composition is to dismantle the hegemony of the ego and Romantic individual creative genius as the well from which poetry springs. In the context of a totalitarian regime, however, where citizens are forcibly stripped off of their agency, the impersonality of such methods seems doubly oppressive rather than liberatory; in places where expression is prohibited, to be against expression appears deferential to, if not supportive of, the ruling power. Similarly, the use of the English language in a postcolonial nation barely able to battle against its neocolonial status seems only to restate and reproduce the cultural indoctrination of the colonizing power. English, after all, is the language of the imperial power that sanctioned and supported the regime; it is also the language of the Philippine literary tradition most associated with political apathy. Lacaba, however, interrogates these assumptions in “Prometheus Unbound.” An example of what Bienvenido Lumbera calls “the literature of circumvention,” the poem turns the “self-censorship,” which the Marcos regime cultivated among its citizens, particularly among writers who could only publish in avenues authorized by the state, into a “literary posture” (14). Such texts outwardly conform to the terms of government
regulation; they evade the wrath of the state and gain its permission to circulate even as they manifest a discreet resistance, undetectable to enforcers yet recognizable to comrades. At a time when explicit forms of dissent are met with extraordinary violence, the literature of circumvention is a means to keep the resistance, and the people involved in it, alive.

What facilitates the transformation of “Prometheus Unbound” into a resistant poem in English is a close reading of the formal choices deployed in its construction as a divided text. Its form simultaneously produces two texts, which literalizes the “process of becoming” that ensues, according to Adorno, when critique is elevated to form. The poem’s publication in Focus Philippines and the staging of its intervention in the political realm are contingent on the relation forged between the acrostic and the poem, not their separate identities or their fusion into a coherent whole. The simultaneity that occurs in its form discloses the capacity of poetry to operate as an unbounded structure, a text that is also an(other) text. “Prometheus Unbound” performs the “differential process by which and as which texts exist as such, as strangers to themselves. Text dismantles distinctions between a ‘within’ and a ‘without’” (Morton 2). The text’s strangeness to itself becomes even more pronounced as a relation of complicity forged within a finite pool of letters unfolds between components or concepts perceived to be oppositional: Romantic and avant-garde, autonomy and sociality, poetry and slogan, individual utterance and collective chant, English and Filipino. Cohabiting the same text, they become integral to each other’s existence and illuminate the technology of language as alphabetic code. The poem in English unravels without each line’s first letter; the acrostic in Filipino appears because of the poem that holds it in place.

At the same time, the varying degrees of visibility to the reader of these simultaneous texts, whose materiality is subjected to the flux of combination and recombination, serve the
practical purpose of enabling the poem’s circulation under the watchful eye of totalitarian censors. “Prometheus Unbound” superficially abides by the government’s control over freedom of speech with the aid of unlikely accomplices: the English language and a procedural constraint. These accessories to Lacaba’s crime ensured the poem’s safe passage into enemy territory; the poem, in turn, disrupted prevailing relations of production by outsmarting the enforcers of culture, in the form of a publication vocally supportive of Marcos’s brutal regime. Aside from fulfilling a basic requirement of Focus, an English-language publication, “Prometheus Unbound” also uses English in a manner largely similar to its predecessors and contemporaries in Anglophone Philippine poetry. It mimics the autonomous poetics that underpins many poems in English by presenting itself as a poem in the Romantic-New Critical mode, which is already known to shy away from politics, to favor both individual and the universal, and to articulate the preoccupations of a reticent middle class. Channeling tradition, the poem appears utterly uncontroversial and purposeless. Because its language behaves transparently, “we cease to see it as strange and so succumb easily as readers to its peculiar governance, as if this were natural” (Watkin 504).

The default treatment of language as transparent is made into a necessary component in reading “Prometheus Unbound.” The acrostic is not readily apprehensible to the reader who habitually decodes printed language by reading from left to right, from top to bottom. The reader is further lulled by the naturalized use of language as a means of expression in the lyric poem. Meanwhile, Lacaba uses the organic whole to which the poem adds up as a field of composition for executing the procedure of an acrostic. In its various permutations, procedural poetry is said to argue against the normalization of language, and to “giv[e] power instead to mechanistic procedures,” which exposes language as “a mechanistic, rule-governed procedure resulting from
a generative grammar, not a tool for us to use to express our inner selves to others or ourselves” (Watkin 506). To use procedural constraints as a method of composition de-naturalizes the treatment of language as a transparent means of communication by an emotive and expressive lyric subject. It destabilizes the notion of a stable lyric self who is indisputably in control of ordering experience.

Instead of staging the dissolution of the self, however, the impersonal method of a procedural constraint is precisely how Lacaba (as Ruben Cuevas) is able to reclaim agency and express what a society under a dictatorship is forbidden to express. If poetry says the unsayable, then “Prometheus Unbound” is its surprising literalization. Made possible by a method of composition that combines the procedural and the expressive, the poem is able to vocalize its dissent in the theater state of terror by co-opting a publication loyal to the regime in disseminating anti-Marcos propaganda. On the printed page, the slogan is both there and not there, both visible and invisible. Lacaba disrupts Focus’s regular program of enforcing state suppression through a procedural constraint, which reinstates, in the poem, the self who is a citizen and retrieves for her, momentarily, the right to speak. Committed to oblivion by the state, driven out of the streets or underground, and disposed of through incarceration or murder, the citizen is smuggled back to life, a spectral presence insinuated in a piece of language authorized for publication.

The poem also reworks the relationship of English and Filipino by using the language alien to the streets as the means to symbolically reclaim the streets and revive the dissent wiped out of the public arena. Adorno writes, “without what is heterogeneous to [art], its autonomy eludes it” (6). Lacaba activates and reconfigures this dialectical relation when he literally includes agitprop, in the form of a Filipino protest slogan, into his poem in English, a form often
conflated with autonomy in the Philippine context. If, for Adorno, art is most autonomous and therefore most radical when it is purged of the features of overtly political art and thus rendered purposeless, Lacaba posits another version of radicalizing autonomy by mobilizing Adornian purposelessness into a vehicle of protest. The autonomous poem in English, as deployed by Lacaba, turns into a secure vessel for infiltrating the mouthpiece of the state. Disrupting the hierarchy of languages that often characterizes the relation of foreign and native tongues, English becomes an effective accessory to the cry of protest and incitement to rebellion of the Filipino slogan. The two languages, often regarded as oppositional and divided according to the classes they represent, become, in “Prometheus Unbound,” complicit in the effort to reclaim agency; English even ensures the survival of Filipino by shuttling it past the agents of surveillance in order for it to reconvert a heavily monitored forum into a truly public space. For the duration of a short lyric poem, Focus Philippines turned into an unwitting accomplice to its own mockery; by extension, state-sponsored terror made a fool of itself and became laughable. Although “Prometheus Unbound” was suppressed by the censors upon catching on to its deception, its ephemeral appearance had made its mark, not only on comrades in the resistance, who responded to the poem with hushed amusement and tacit agreement, but also on the regime itself, who had for a moment unwittingly disclosed the limits of its impenetrability and the permeability of the walls it erected to imprison its constituents.

It would take another thirteen years from the publication of “Prometheus Unbound” for Marcos to be ousted from office. The poet, like thousands of others, would be arrested and detained; unlike thousands of others, he would survive the violence of the state and live to see the end of the dictatorship. Lacaba eventually claimed authorship of the poem in 1986, after the peaceful uprising that won Corazon Aquino the presidency and sent Marcos to exile in the
United States (‘Why I Stopped’ 60). On the one hand, the fact that ‘Prometheus Unbound’ is the only poem in English that appears in Lacaba’s books of poetry flags it as the one concession to English he is willing to make in his otherwise monolingual poetic practice in Filipino. Its presence aligns it with the political consciousness of Lacaba’s poems in Filipino, and points to the circumstances of its publication and reception, which justify the affiliation. On the other hand, its inclusion in Lacaba’s self-curated oeuvre suggests that ‘Prometheus Unbound’ is a poem in Filipino; at the heart of its ‘poem-ness’ is the disclosure of the Tagalog acrostic slogan, whose existence, at a time of extreme suppression, depends on its appearance as a poem in English. A limit case for the radical autonomy of Philippine poetry in English, ‘Prometheus Unbound’ demonstrates the potential to implicate the autonomy attributed to English-language poetry in social engagement, and to repurpose its purposelessness as a vehicle for resistance.

Radicalizing aesthetic autonomy, as Lacaba did, illuminates the possibility for forms of empowerment in what lies in excess of or is assumed to be anathema to postcolonial agency. The seduction of agency promised by the commitment to nativist-nationalist essentialism in literary production glosses over its convenience as an alibi for sustaining several illusions: the illusion of a stable lyric self who is able to whip language into submission as a transparent carrier of meaning; the illusion of an authentic national identity that can be both retrieved and achieved; the illusion of nation as a resolution to colonialist and class conflicts, and not a homogenizing and hegemonic category; and the illusion of poetry itself as either fully subsumed by or disqualified from the work of social transformation. Radical autonomy resists exaggerating the role of poetry to accomplish the transformation best galvanized by and certainly owed to social and revolutionary movements; at the same time, it implicates poetry itself, in no uncertain terms, in such efforts. It also broadens the dream of national sovereignty, by neither conforming to the
nationalist teleology that informs most explicitly committed poetry, nor assuming a comfortably individual yet “Filipino” voice, as some poets in English do without visible regard for the colonialist and class entanglements embedded in the language they use. In insisting on form as a form of resistance, radical autonomy relentlessly calls attention to the context of contradictions that construct the Philippine poem in English, and demands that the form of the poem itself be perpetually transforming and engaged in the flux of change.
Ten days after the strongest typhoon to hit the planet in recorded history made landfall in the Philippines, I flew from Albany, New York to Hong Kong for a poetry festival. Months earlier, as I coordinated my trip with the organizers, who were all strangers to me, I thought it absurd that they would want to bring an obscure Filipino writer attending graduate school in the United States to Hong Kong to do a reading of her poetry. I was, however, happy to overlook the strangeness of their invitation in exchange for a free plane ticket to a country in the same time zone as the Philippines. Filipinos could enter Hong Kong without a visa, and it was close enough to Manila, where my partner was living, which meant he could afford to travel to the festival and we could spend a week together.

When Typhoon Yolanda, known internationally as Haiyan, hit the Visayas, it pulled ships from the sea and sent them pummeling into coastal neighborhoods. It destroyed roads and farms, cut off communication lines, and wiped out entire villages. Those in evacuation centers found no refuge as the centers succumbed to the force of the typhoon. In the aftermath of the storm, survivors searched for loved ones in the ruins and among the many corpses that littered the streets. At the UN Climate Change Convention in Warsaw, the Philippines’ chief negotiator, whose hometown was in the path of the typhoon and who had yet to confirm the safety of his own family, went on hunger strike to demand specific policy changes and resource allocations to address the climate crisis. Rejecting the term “natural disaster,” he insisted that Haiyan and the like be understood as outcomes of social and economic inequity on a global scale, with the poorest of the world enduring the repercussions of unchecked progress and consumption. The
death toll from Haiyan would eventually reach 6,300. The typhoon, which affected close to a fifth of the Philippine population, destroyed over a million houses and displaced 4.1 million people.47

As the Philippine government’s response to the calamity shifted from silent to painfully slow, and as survivors, who were literally living among the dead, struggled with hunger and disease, I embarked on a series of flights two hours short of taking me home. On one of the flights, the attendants handed out envelopes to passengers for donations to the Filipino victims of the typhoon. I saw my partner “in real life” again at the Hong Kong airport. It seemed absurd to be alive and intact, even happy.

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Hong Kong has the fifth highest concentration of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in the world. Of the 331,989 domestic helpers working in the country, 173,726 are Filipinos.48 Months before I attended the poetry festival, the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal ruled that foreign domestic helpers, unlike all other foreigners employed in Hong Kong, could not obtain permanent residency after working in the country for seven consecutive years. Two Filipino domestic helpers had taken the fight for permanent residency to court, and the legal battle, which spanned a couple of years, culminated in the landmark decision. The Hong Kong court maintained that foreign domestic workers should not be regarded as “ordinarily resident” in the country.49 Its tautological logic invoked the precarity of the domestic worker’s labor as justification to keep her vulnerable, subject to deportation upon unemployment, and permanently ineligible to move her own family to the country where she works. At the festival, when people learned where I was from, the conversation often turned to Haiyan, which continued to figure prominently in the news. Occasionally, and noticeably when in the company of Americans living
in Hong Kong, I was asked about the “situation” of Filipino domestic workers, a matter more contentious where we were and therefore less palatable as material for small talk than the catastrophic typhoon. That Filipinos were “the help” in Hong Kong was a reality one would be hard pressed to ignore, observed the Americans, who were mostly working in the country as translators, university professors, or teachers of English. Maids were an ordinary part of Hong Kong households. Some of the Americans, in fact, employed Filipino helpers at home. More than one of them said to me that I was the first Filipino they had met in the country who was not a domestic worker. They were unanimous in their recognition of the gulf between their position as “expatriates” and those regarded as “migrant workers.” They were equally incredulous over the Court of Final Appeal decision.

The first Filipino I met at the festival was a woman with whom I locked eyes as I stood among the crowd outside the performance hall after a poetry reading. When I returned her smile, she approached and greeted me warmly in English, saying I must be the Filipino participant at the festival. Yes, I said in Tagalog. She said she had been on the lookout for me. Buti andito ka [I’m glad you’re here], I responded, referring to her attendance of the reading. Yaya ako ng anak ni Bei Dao [I work as a nanny for Bei Dao], she said, pointing to a child in the crowd, the son of the Chinese poet who was the director of the festival. Sikat yang boss mo [Your boss is famous], I chuckled, which prompted Auntie Lorenza (as she told me to call her) to tell me about her employer, whom she described as a kind and generous “amo” [master]. He was easy to talk to. He had a house full of books that she was welcome to read. He hosted writers from all over the world in his home; she was in charge of their meals, but she often also got to meet them. Do you know Gary Snyder? Do you know Eliot Weinberger? she asked. Eliot, she said, really liked her cooking. Auntie Lorenza first learned about the festival when Bei Dao was planning it, and she
told him she hoped he would invite a Filipino poet. She was unfamiliar with Filipino poets herself, but surely they were out there. He seemed to think this was a good idea, because after a few days he mentioned the name of a male Filipino poet to her as a possible guest. It would be nice if you chose a woman instead, she suggested. Later, he told her about a female poet, a Filipino-American living in the US. She said he could consider inviting a poet who actually grew up and still lives in the Philippines. Now the festival was happening at last, Auntie Lorenza couldn’t be happier that Bei Dao chose a young Filipina to represent our country. He even made sure to invite a Filipino band based in Hong Kong to perform in the same program as your reading, she told me. Bei Dao had insisted that she invite her friends to the event. She hoped they would go; there would be no reason for them to miss it since it falls on a Sunday, their day off from work.

I had been wondering to whom I should credit my invitation to the festival, which had reached me via what seemed a convoluted route (a message sent via academia.edu, a platform I rarely use) that bore no distinct link to my department in the University of the Philippines, where I was employed, or to any of the writers I knew back home. As I laughed and listened to Auntie Lorenza, who was quite the energetic storyteller, it became clear to me that I owed my presence in the poetry festival to her, a Filipino domestic helper, whose intervention occurred as she went about her household duties while chatting with her employer, a famous poet in Hong Kong.

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Only two of Auntie Lorenza’s friends joined her at my reading, two equally maternal aunties who were lavish in their praise of my performance, my ease as I read my work onstage, my excellent command of the English language. I myself wouldn’t want to spend my day off at a poetry reading, I (half)-joked to appease Auntie Lorenza, who was unhappy that the rest of her
friends didn’t show up. We were sitting at one of the tables outside the performance hall for post-reading refreshments. Over snacks, the aunties told me where I should go to get good shopping deals in Hong Kong. They also talked about their amo, and once again I heard how lucky Auntie Lorenza was, this time according to her friends, whose working conditions were far less ideal and whose employers were not particularly kind to them. The conversation drifted to longed-for trips back home, the never-ending work hours of domestic helpers, God, Haiyan, the annoying children they were helping to raise, the adorable children they were helping to raise, the children they left back home to be raised by relatives, the extended families they needed to support. Periodically, one of them would look in the direction of the festival crowd and say to me, Kaya mabuting andito ka, para makita nilang hindi tulad namin lahat ng Pilipino [That’s why it’s good that you’re here, so that they see that not all Filipinos are like us].

Between Auntie Lorenza’s broad-strokes description to her employer of what she thought a Filipino poet should be (similar to her, a woman born and raised in the Philippines) and why the aunties approved of my presence at the festival (I was a Filipina who was not like them) lies a thicket of political and economic realities that intensify my lack of conviction in the capacity of poetry (or art) to represent national identity and serve as an agent of social transformation. When I am asked to produce one, then two, then three identification cards in a Tokyo bank so that I can have my money changed, I know that I am being sized up and subjected to bureaucratic tediousness because I am presumed to be an “entertainer” (a common occupation of Filipino women in Japan), which my documents and a brief conversation about the university where I am an exchange student eventually dispute. When I hold up an immigration line in the Amsterdam airport because I’m asked to explain what a writer’s residency is, and then show the letters to prove that I am indeed on my way to one, I know I’m being made to dispel the suspicion that I
am actually a domestic helper with fake travel documents. When my travel companion and I are taken to the “inner room” at the airport in Detroit because his tone in responding to an immigration officer’s question is deemed insufficiently subservient, I know that we are being trained, through the threat of deportation, to combine our unquestionably legal travel papers with the appropriate demeanor of Filipinos seeking entry into the United States. When we are presented to the deporting officer, I do the speaking for both of us, because a petite Filipino woman seems more likely to communicate deference effectively than a burly Filipino man.

In all instances, I experience the treatment endured by and reproduce the submissiveness expected of the aunties, my newfound friends in Hong Kong, on a daily basis as Filipino women who are overseas domestic workers. In all instances, our sameness is short-lived, and it is in my interest for our sameness to be disproven. The sooner it is determined that I am not an “unskilled worker,” let alone an undocumented immigrant, the less likely it becomes that I would be at risk of deportation, or detention, or harassment, or plain old rudeness, which domestic workers must contend with on top of the low wages, long hours, lack of security and benefits, and susceptibility to abuse and violence that are part and parcel of the work that they do. In a letter sent by José Garcia Villa in 1950 to his employer at the American publishing firm New Directions, the Filipino poet rages against what he believes to be unjust treatment from his boss by enumerating the types of blue-collar work he has been forced to but should not be made to do. To retrieve his dignity, Villa insists that certain forms of labor are beneath him; in effect, the Filipino expatriate poet asserts difference from the Filipino migrant worker, distancing himself from his contemporaries who take on undesirable, low-wage jobs in the United States, and from the Auntie Lorenzas of the globalized world.50
My profile in the professionalized world of poetry is not unusual: schooled in academic institutions of creative writing, both in the Philippines and the US, published by university presses and literary journals based in universities, employed in an English Department as teacher of undergraduate literature and creative writing courses. It is unsurprising to see these details recur in the brief biographies of eighteen poets from eighteen countries in attendance at a poetry festival. In a country where “Filipino” is regarded as synonymous with “maid,” I go onstage, buttressed by my academic degrees and the grants that granted me time to write, and read my poems in English to an international audience. Behind me, translations into Chinese of my lines, as I read them, are flashed on a big screen. The space I am given to present my work is made possible with the help of a domestic helper, who reminded her employer to consider including a Filipino in the festival lineup. My poems betray preoccupations removed from the realities of the three Filipino aunties in the audience, who have, perhaps unwisely, decided to dedicate a portion of their day off to showing their support for a Filipino poet. The poems are what they are in part because I believe that what’s worse than a Filipino poet in English who does not in her poetry speak on behalf of fellow Filipinos is a Filipino poet in English who does.

On the international stage of professionalized poetry, I belong to the minority by virtue of nationality and ethnicity, and my presence both signals and advocates inclusivity in the world of letters, whose achievement continues to define the struggle of writers from the margins. My presence, however, is also indicative of multiple privileges that set me apart from the minority that I appear to represent. I am the Filipino at the festival precisely because I do not come from the margins of Philippine society. I neither live below the poverty line, like most Filipinos, nor am I forced to migrate to other countries in search of better (minimum) wages, like Auntie Lorenza and many others. My privilege is encoded in the very language that I use to write. A
Filipino poet who writes in the language of the educated and the elite cannot easily claim to represent the oppressed in her work. A Filipino poet can hardly claim to address or express solidarity with the marginalized, if she writes in the language that excludes them.

The need to reckon with the privileges inscribed in Philippine literary production in English is obscured, I think, by the minority position of Philippine literature in the “world republic of letters,” combined with the likelihood that Philippine literature in English, rather than in other Philippine languages, would gain access to this minority position, since it can be read by a global audience without the aid of translation. What dominates the hierarchy of literatures in the Philippines, becomes a stand-in for Filipino national identity in the global literary arena, where it is an extremely minor player and must struggle for visibility. I think this struggle, or even just the idea of it, at times emboldens Filipino writers in English to testify to the global audience about the lives of Filipinos, and to occupy or represent, in art, subject-positions of the marginal from which they are estranged in their immediate environments. Such moves can predictably generate essentialist or exoticized renditions of “the Filipino experience,” whose deployment of otherness to pander to the market is arguably compensated for by the space they strive to carve out for Philippine literature (in English) on the world literary map. More complex and nuanced imaginings of national identity, while contributing more meaningfully to the struggle for representation, are nevertheless still embedded in the business of representation. This inevitably commodifies the struggle and converts it to cultural and economic capital, whose immediate beneficiary, for good or ill, is the writer herself. It is simply more likely that efforts at literary representation would translate to accolades, or sales, or promotion points, or plain old recognition among the smallest of audiences, or an additional line in the writer’s curriculum.
vitae, than to a world where the exportation as cheap human labor of Filipinos, who live in the margins that frame the writer’s speech, becomes obsolete.

The invisibility of Philippine literature globally, when generalized to a degree that downplays the hierarchy of literatures locally, also reinforces the valorization of writing as a struggle in itself and thus in itself an explicitly politicized action. That the page is the arena in which the writer labors has yielded a routine exercise in the local world of letters that presents itself as a form of activism. In a country prone to disaster and rife with atrocity, Filipino poets, myself included, respond to disaster or atrocity by writing poems about it. In some instances, the magnitude of the death toll, or the extent of the violence, can drive a poet to mobilize other poets to write more poems, to post the poems on social media to reach a wider audience, perhaps put together an anthology, perhaps donate the sales from the anthology to the victims. Such gestures seem to restate even as they conceal the division between aesthetics and politics. There is something amiss in collective action when all that comes out of it is more poetry.

I don’t think I have ever felt the uselessness of being a Filipino poet more acutely as I did when the aunties in Hong Kong regarded me with pride because I was not like them. That I did not represent them made me fit to represent them at the festival. My privilege is indeed my loss. It is hardly consolation that the gulf between us would remain unaltered, even if I had written poems on domestic helpers for the occasion.

2.

According to the National Anti-Poverty Commission, poverty incidence among Filipino households declined in 2015. For every five Filipino families, one was poor, with a monthly income below Php 9,140 (roughly USD 200), the minimum income required to cover the basic
necessities of a family of five. When divided equally among family members, this translates to a budget of around Php 60 (a little over a dollar) per person per day. According to the government, this amount is enough to ensure a decent standard of living, with access to food, clothing, medicine, education, water, electricity, transportation, and hygiene. Shelter, apparently a non-necessity, is not on the list. Php 60 buys me one meal, a meat dish and two cups of rice, at the carinderia (a neighborhood eatery which sells cheap, home-cooked food). It covers round-trip fare (by jeepney and train) from Kamias in Quezon City, where I live, to Makati, the business district, a common commute of employees. The trip costs Php 54 total, with Php 6 to spare, which cannot buy you a cup of rice for lunch, let alone an actual meal. In order to claim that it has reduced poverty in the Philippines, the government offers the most effortless of solutions: it changes the definition of poor. If you live on only Php 60 a day, you are not poor. And still, each member of one in five Filipino families lives on less.

The most recent book I bought, Vicente L. Rafael’s *Motherless Tongues*, costs around Php 400. It is surprisingly cheap, for a scholarly book published by the Ateneo de Manila University Press (which is typically priced from Php 500-800), but it is already worth close to a week’s worth of expenses for the basic needs of the not-poor Filipino. The poetry books published by the Ateneo Press are cheaper, in the Php 300 range. Literary titles by other local university presses (which would be most inclined to publish such works) are similarly priced. When I think of these numbers, it seems absurd to situate the path to a wider Filipino readership in the transformation of the literary text in itself. In conferences and festivals, in workshops and lectures, at the dinner table or over beers, it is not unusual for conversations among writers to revolve around the question of cultivating readership. In a country of over a hundred million, the typical print run of a literary title ranges from 500-1,000 copies, to be sold over a period of
several years, a testament to the smallness of its audience. In any given branch of National Book Store, the largest bookstore chain in the Philippines, the lack of readership is reiterated by what dominates its floor space: office supplies and adult coloring books. A shelf or two, often tucked behind displays of international bestsellers, is assigned to Filipiniana, where literary titles compete for space with a hodgepodge of books, including dime-store romances, self-help books by celebrities, religious publications, and hagiographies of politicians. Does the key to more readers lie in one’s choice of genre? In one’s style of writing? In one’s choice of language? How must the writer write to make literature more appealing to readers? How can literature’s appeal become more popular?

It seems to me that the question of how to cater to the potential Filipino reader, while placing emphasis on writing as a social act, easily degenerates into a call to produce more marketable commodities for the culture industry, which regards the toiling majority simply as untapped consumers who would find reason to allocate their time and meager resources to literature, if only it were written to better suit their tastes. If the pursuit is not mercenary, it is myopic, for it makes readership primarily contingent on how the writer crafts the literary text. Her domain of responsibility begins and ends with the realization of the literary text as aesthetic object. While I don’t dispute the relevance of the writer’s skill in drawing the attention of readers, I think it is more crucial to foreground the inherently restrictive role of material conditions in the activity of reading any kind of literature. The ordinary Filipino cannot afford to be a reader, and the writer cannot address this fundamental issue by way of craft. No amount of skill in producing finely crafted literature, even when it pointedly represents and expresses solidarity with the oppressed, can grant Filipinos access to the material and activity of reading the way that equitable redistribution of wealth can. When the question of readership is conjoined
not only with the appeal of literature, but also with access to it, the limits of locating the writer’s struggle in the aesthetic realm are exposed.

In “Self-abolition of the poet,” Jasper Bernes, Joshua Clover, and Juliana Spahr imagine poetry in a society defined by “a fundamental equality of opportunity and equality of access to the means of cultural expression.” Among their projections is the disappearance of the poet and the poem as we know it: “There would be no need to seek out distinction by way of difference as happens in capitalist society, since distinction and singularity would be the given of social life… where social interactions are animated by collaboration and cooperation rather than competition.” In this ideal form of a communist world, not divided into public and private or free and unfree activity, “Poetry might become more intimate and more social all at once.” The American poets, in imagining this alternative world, stress the modest capacity of poetry to contribute to its realization, which necessitates nothing short of revolution.

I get a glimpse of what a poem that is simultaneously intimate and social might look like in Joi Barrios’s description of Jose F. Lacaba’s “Ang mga kagila-gilalas na pakikipagsapalaran ni Juan de la Cruz” (“The amazing adventures of Juan de la Cruz”). Written in the early 1970s, shortly before the declaration of martial law, the poem plots a series of oppressive scenarios that eventually drive Juan de la Cruz, the Filipino everyman, to the underground movement. Read and performed widely many years after its composition, “Kagila-gilalas” is a poem so popular, says Barrios, that many who have heard the poem recited or seen it performed may not even know who its author is. This, she continues, is perhaps the kind of honor appropriate to Lacaba’s work, “ang siyang pinakapatunay na ang tula ng makata, gaya ng kanyang sentral na tauhan, ay naglakbay na rin, hindi na kanya, upang kumawala sa mga parisukat na bumbakod sa espasyo ng panulaan, at upang maging bahagi ng pakikipagtunggali para sa isang lipunang malaya [the
best proof that the poem, like its protagonist, has also journeyed and no longer belongs to the poet, having broken free from the boundaries that delimit the space for poetry to become part of the struggle for national liberation]."

Instead of turning into a household name, Lacaba becomes obscure as his poem circulates more widely. To hail this growing anonymity as an achievement exemplifies the counterintuitive impetus that animates the avant-garde project: to create art that negates itself as well as the existing relations of author, audience, and artwork, in order to dissolve the divide between and mutually transform art and life. In the instances when the poem is no longer attributed to the poet, it moves closer to the dream of belonging to everyone. While the journey of the protagonist Juan de la Cruz, which culminates in armed struggle, reinforces the role of revolution as the inevitable requirement to restructure society, the journey of “Kagila-gilalas” away from its author emulates the life of poetry after revolution, undermining its identity as property as well as its poem-ness, for poetry after the fulfillment of revolution is by necessity beyond our recognition. More than the message of the poem, its existence apart from its author is what moves me, not because it is an anachronistic iteration of the authorless texts of pre-modern, pre-capitalist societies, but because it resists full absorption into today’s relentlessly privatized world, where material is also at once commodity, to which an owner and a price tag are attached. That it moves in circuits of dissemination both pointedly disinterested in and detached from art institutions is perhaps what allows “Kagila-gilalas” not to suffer the fate of many anti-aesthetic projects, for which art institutions are both homing device and permanent address.

The failure of art to abolish itself, which relegates the avant-garde to a historical rather than existent category, is often attributed to its co-optation by what it strives to critique and destroy. If art is to become avant-garde, its self-abolition cannot simply occur in the realm of
aesthetic experimentation, which has repeatedly proven to be prone to capture by institutions in the business of providing aesthetic frames. Countering the presumption that she no longer writes because of her activism, the poet Kerima Tariman states that she, in fact, has never stopped writing. “Ang kaibhan lang ngayon, mas madalas ay wala na sa isip ko ang paggamit ng sarili kong pangalan. Hindi ko na iniintindi na maglagay pa ng indibidwal na byline o pirma dahil kolektibo naman ang karaniwang paraan ng paggawa at pagpapalaganap ng mga pahayag, akda o likhang-sining‖ [“The difference is, often I no longer think of using my own name. I don’t bother with my individual byline or signature because the collective is the common mode for creating and disseminating thoughts, texts, or art”]. Perhaps to be truly avant-garde at this point in time is not to affix one’s signature to a thing, thus inaugurating its identity as a work of art; instead, it is strive to purge the work of art of one’s signature, as one works for and toward a community where art is no longer an exceptional thing to circulate in the market and preserve in the museum.

Under the rule of capital, however, it is difficult to imagine how not to affix one’s signature to any given thing, even if it is poetry, whose “amazing ideology,” writes Joshua Clover, permits the illusion that it is without economic value and unshackled from labor discipline. Invested with symbolic power as a domain of and for freedom, poetry in itself seems to be always already a radical counterpoint to the status quo. Clover examines this assumption by turning to his own work as a professionalized poet, a university professor whose salary and security are contingent on forms of labor that include the production of more poetry. Where poetry intersects with salary, the poet is paid all the time and at work all the time; this enslavement, at times, even hinges on the very idea that poetry is a bastion of autonomy, impervious and resistant to the regime of capital. “But that part we know is not true,” writes
Clover. “People buy [poetry] all the time. It just looks like something else is happening. In the society of ambient discipline all verse is unfree.”

While my own choice to remain committed to poetry is a road not taken by many when the reality of competing for entry into the workforce sets in, it has also become a direct route to unfree verse. My employment as a teacher of creative writing in a university converts my work in poetry into salaried work. The pursuit of tenure obligates me to produce poetry along a path apart from Lacaba’s “Kagila-gilalas” or Tariman’s work: the anonymity to which their poetry aspires is the fate my poetry ought to evade. It is in my interest as an academic for writing to become a precious commodity produced by the specialist. In the academy, a branch of the professionalized literary world, my signature is a necessity whose value should increase over time. This trains me to invest my work in pursuits compatible with the industries and institutions whose recognition of my byline invests it with value. It is a credit to my name, for instance, that I began my formal education in creative writing with the poet Edith Tiempo, matriarch of the New Critical tradition in Anglophone Philippine poetry. It is a credit to my name that my earliest exercises in lyric expression are included in Gémino H. Abad’s *A Habit of Shores: Filipino Poetry and Verse from English, 60’s to the 90’s* (1999), the third (and latest) of a multi-volume anthology spanning close to a hundred years of Philippine poetry in English. While obviously provisional, my position as the last and youngest poet in what is so far the most extensive, chronologically-arranged anthology of Philippine poetry in English assigns my signature with value as a boundary from which to regard Philippine poetry that already exists and Philippine poetry that is yet to come.

These early forms of literary validation provide a strong foundation for my reputation as a poet, which I continue to build over time through the awards and grants I receive, the degrees I
earn, and the books I publish. The credibility I acquire as an “expert in the field,” depends not only on the necessarily unwieldy notion of artistic merit, but more so on my participation in the reproduction of the increasingly homogeneous aesthetic, the patronage politics, and the monopoly structure of capitalism that oversees the local literary world, my immediate professional context. In a country of a hundred million, this world is small, yet like the world at large, it has its own oligarchy: the same names recur as judges in or winners of literary contests or awards, as authors of mainstream and university publishers, as editors of magazines that accept literary contributions, as teachers in creative writing programs, as mentors in national writing workshops, as participants in literary festivals, and as representatives of artists, if not administrators themselves, in cultural institutions. “Nation-building” endures as a lucrative concern that pairs writers with cultural patrons. The smallness of this world is underscored by the fact that the most prominent commercial publisher of literary and scholarly titles, Anvil Publishing, is also the affiliate publishing company of the biggest bookstore chain in the Philippines, National Book Store, whose name aptly conflates nation with corporation. For the author who seeks visibility in the marketplace largely monopolized by this distribution channel, a desirable route is to become an Anvil author, and thus part of the exclusive lineup that monopolizes the limited shelf space of National Book Store. These networks comprise the “ambient discipline” whose terms I must reproduce and whose relevance, in effect, I must help fortify, in order to produce my own relevance as a writer.

Because I have, for good or ill, decided to remain a practitioner in the professionalized world of writing, I am perpetually troubled by my complicity in the recognizably unjust mechanisms that govern it. What options for resistance are imaginable for the poet as academic, whose career requires deference to existing structures that poetry itself supposedly, at least
symbolically, resists? In his first book of poetry, the Filipino poet Charlie Samuya Veric prefaces his work with a poetics statement in which he proposes to be called an “anti-professional poet,” who subverts the industries and institutions that administer the “regimentation of poetic life.”

Channeling strains of José Garcia Villa’s professed aestheticism, though not the avant-garde poet’s formal experimentation, Veric locates the radicalism of his lyric poems, which stay close to the dominant aesthetic tradition, in his unconventional poetic biography. As a poet without an MFA and unaffiliated with any literary collective or barkada (clique), he envisions his poetic practice as one that occurs along the path of “expressive autonomy,” addressing a more “capacious readership” in poems described as “citizens of multiple countries” that “stay true to what [the poet] feel[s].”

I share Veric’s belief in the necessity of an anti-professional poetry, as well as the construction of a frame from which to comprehend the motives and features of its negation. I think his brand of expressive autonomy, however, which focuses on his poetry’s cosmopolitan and humanist sensibility, unduly relies on the myth of the artist as a solitary and sovereign individual to resolve, prematurely, the institutional critique that he initiates. While he points to his lack of an MFA as a form of resistance to professionalized poetry, Veric is silent on other quite visible vectors in his poetic biography that embed his work in institutions: his book of poetry is published by the press of a private university known to cater to the Filipino elite, the same university where he is a professor of English and where his home department, through its peer-reviewed international journal, published a series of short essays about his book by scholars and creative writers to celebrate its release. These facts are part and parcel of the contradictions that beset the professionalized poet, whose poetry is, by default, unfree, and who must therefore contend with the professional gains reaped from and the political compromises required by this
unfreedom. To claim autonomy from institutions without engaging one’s complicity in them is to gloss over these contradictions, and to risk enjoying the fruits of reproducing the status quo through the spectacle of raging against it.

In “The Author As Producer,” Walter Benjamin writes that the question to be asked of art is not, “What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?” Instead, it should be, “What is its position in them?” In a sentence that otherwise remains intact, the modification of a single word stages, with admirable clarity, a drastic shift in perceiving literature that foregrounds its commodity status and casts it in productive tension with the status of literature as a work of art. If, as Theodor Adorno posits, the artwork and the commodity are “torn halves of an integral freedom,” then, as Benjamin rightly clarifies, there is a need to disrupt the tendency to conflate the form of critical engagement a literary text takes with the attitude it espouses. Its position in capitalist relations of production is an equally pertinent coordinate, if not a primary consideration, in comprehending its critical intervention. Disregarding this position downplays the existence of the culture industry and ascribes a facile autonomy to the literary text, grounded in the illusion that it fully transcends its material conditions and social context. Benjamin’s proposition raises the stakes for the author, who must guard against the false autonomy she is prone to perpetuate when attitude eclipses position as the site of social engagement. Even the most overtly political works of art can simultaneously, as commodities, participate in the reproduction of the structural inequities they profess to condemn. The author is a producer. More than expressive autonomy, it seems it is material autonomy to which the author must aspire in order to intervene in the relations of power that oversee her labor. The position assumed by her art in this network is, in effect, is the form that its autonomy takes.
3.

My latest poetry project, *There Is No Emergency*, continues to treat the page as the proximate space of scrutiny of the enduring New Critical tradition of poetry in English, in whose image my poetry was shaped during my formative years as a poet. At its most popular and formulaic, organic unity, as espoused by the New Critical tradition, can be reduced to a checklist of moves. Fusion and harmony take the form of a cohesive persona whose tone is often sincere and solemn. This persona ponders the meaning of life through a central metaphor or a cluster of objective correlatives, and the poem concludes with a quotable insight. The impetus of my earlier attempts to depart from tradition was my artistic dissatisfaction with what I felt to be petrified paths that herded my writing process, resulting in poetry that, one the one hand, I personally found predictable and uninspired, but on the other hand, was legible to the literary milieu in which I wrote and thus was well-received. This incongruity has led me, over the years, to aesthetic strategies of the non-poetic. I often turn to prose and otherwise non-literary forms (such as footnotes or marginalia) to write poetry. In *There Is No Emergency*, I deploy procedural constraints and structure portions of or entire poems according to alphabetical order as a means to destabilize the lyric subject, whose coherence is central to the well-wrought poem held up as the template for what constitutes (good) poetry. The given-ness of a cogent persona, I think, contributes to the proliferation of unstudied navel-gazing in poetry, where smallness of vision is justified by its sincerity and its relatable portrayal of the mundane. It also authorizes the use of “the personal is political” as a shortcut to confidence in one’s capacity to testify, speak for, and represent other Filipinos from the position of multiple privileges, without contending with the vast experiential differences that occur within a shared subject (subaltern) position.
To contest the cursory pursuit of the identity politics that the prevailing aesthetic fosters, however, is similarly prone to smallness of vision when the imagined alternatives remain on the level of the formal. The page is the immediate space of scrutiny for the poet invested in the dream of a transformed poetry (and the transformed society that this implies). But it is not the only space, not when the politics of the monopolizing aesthetic owes its power to material conditions that privilege its visibility. In other words, I cannot reject the status quo simply by writing poetry. To propose an alternative attitude necessitates an alternative position in relations of production, a distinction which has changed my attitude toward the publication and circulation of my work. My first book of poetry was published over a decade ago by the University of the Philippines Press, based in the university where I work, and was given the honor of a National Book Award for Poetry a year after its publication, an achievement that helped me secure tenure at my university. I have, however, since then, published books and zines of my work (including There Is No Emergency) independently, through the DIY efforts of local small presses which I help finance and run. These works are neither eligible for awards, whose rules for participation require the resources of bigger publishers, nor visible in National Book Store, whose shelves are reserved for Anvil Publishing and other publishers that can afford its shelf space.

The shoestring publishing operations I am part of survive on the unpaid labor of and the funds pooled by the writers involved. We write, edit, and proofread work; design the cover and layout of the books and zines; canvass printers and paper sources for affordable deals; coordinate the printing and delivery of books; photocopy, collate, trim, and staple zines; ship and hand-deliver orders; and sell the books and zines at expos that we organize, which, if time permits, occur twice or thrice a year. What we earn either partly or fully funds the next cycle of production. I think of my practice as an independent publisher, which has led me to engage with
poetry as a form of both immaterial and material labor, as a contribution toward broadening the means by which literature is produced and disseminated. If the poetry I write is also a commodity that I circulate, then the marriage of content and form is not simply negotiated on the page. The author disrupts the cultural and economic monopoly in art production when, as a producer, she takes up methods of production and circulation that skirt, if not resist, the market overseen by the monopoly. Such efforts, I think, can alter the work of literature itself, as well as the kind of community in which it is forged. In his description of the “detachment hypothesis” of DIY politics, Clover gives ballast to my incessant inkling that a just writing life entails the pursuit of material autonomy: “the idea [is] that we can develop within the present world a branching network of non-capitalist relations that can expand toward self-sufficiency, finally abjuring any exchange with the surrounding capitalist economy.”

This is what I remind myself of, at least, as my self-publishing endeavors court the appearance of mediocrity in my workplace, where the prestige of publishing with a mainstream or university press remains a measure of excellence and productivity, and where “vanity publishing” is indicative of both self-indulgence and substandard work. Or I blame (in jest) my partner Adam David, my constant companion in the work of independent publishing. Adam and I co-run the traveling small press expo called Better Living Through Xeroxography (BLTX), which, as its name suggests, focuses on literary production via DIY efforts. A zinester and comic book maker, he has been plugged into DIY culture far longer than I have. Seven years ago, he published a manifesto on independent publishing as the antidote to the patronage politics in and homogeneous aesthetics of Philippine letters in the *Philippines Free Press*; it provoked the ire of the powers that be in the literary world and eventually cost him his writing gig as a reviewer of books for the magazine. Adam is the kind of writer who explores compositional processes
mediated by technology. He puts up all the writing he does (including those with purchasable print versions) online, always for free, often as downloadable pdfs.

A controversy triggered by one of his online writing experiments has been instrumental in my thinking about material (rather than expressive) autonomy, in the form of grassroots and independent publishing, as a necessary and generative wedge against a fully professional and professionalized world of writing. In 2015, Anvil Publishing and two of its editors threatened to sue Adam for a critique he wrote of an anthology of flash fiction they published titled *Fast Food Fiction Delivery*. To demonstrate the “flattening of aesthetics, politics, language, and form in contemporary English-language short story writing in the Philippines,” Adam used the Anvil anthology as a source text for a “randomizer,” which he coded and made available for free on Blogger. The randomizer was a Javascript machine into which he plugged various sentences copied from the anthology. It was programmed to generate what could be thought of as fast food fiction: a virtual assembly line of short short stories produced by randomly combining sentences from the source text. Each time a viewer clicks on a button, a machine-generated piece of flash fiction is instantly flashed on the screen, delivered, so to speak, to the reader. The method of textual production performed by the randomizer riffs off the anthology title, which implies that the book’s contents are formulaic and mass-produced. It also uses the anthology’s own words, as well as the anticipated coherence of most texts generated by the randomizer, to enact its critique. Adam posted the link to the randomizer on his personal Facebook page; it elicited a few emoticons of laughter and several screen shots of randomized texts left on the comments thread by friends who visited the site, some of whom were contributors to the anthology.

Weeks later, in a letter sent by the lawyers of Anvil and its editors, Adam was charged with four counts of copyright infringement for his technologically-enabled parody. The first
three grounds focused on the unlawful reproduction of substantial portions of the text. The fourth count invoked the moral rights of the anthology contributors, since the randomizer “erod[ed] the integrity of every short story in the book.” He was given five days to delete the randomizer, or he would be taken to court, which could impose the following penalties on him as mandated by law: “for each count of copyright infringement, the penalty is imprisonment of one (1) to three (3) years plus a fine of PhP50,000 – P150,000 [approximately USD1,000 – 3,000].”55 For a work of appropriation deployed as a form of critique, he was looking at a legal battle that could result in a maximum of over half a million pesos in fines (which the ordinary Filipino living on Php 60 a day can live on for 22 years) and over a decade of jail time.

In the unlikely event that a Pierre Menard-like turn occurs within the Javascript machine and the randomizer spits out, upon recombination, a replica of its source text, I think it is still arguably not a reproduction, given the creative process and critical intervention that inform it. Nevertheless, the mere idea that overseers of literary production in the Philippines would actively seek to penalize unlawful reproduction seems out of touch with the Philippine context, where piracy is a crucial means by which we are able to bust the barricades and gain access to knowledge, culture, and information that would otherwise be inaccessible to many of us. Without piracy, I, like many of my colleagues at the English Department where I work, would not be able to teach my students at least half of the texts I require in my undergraduate literature and creative writing classes. The books are not available in the library of our poorly-funded state university, or on the shelves of the ubiquitous National Book Store. In the unlikely event that copies of such books are locally available, they are bound to be unaffordable to my students, some of whom can barely round up the cash to pay for the significantly cheaper, photocopied versions of the required texts.56 Without piracy, I would have fewer readers; it is not unusual for me to
encounter readers who know my work through photocopied versions of my first book of poetry. Without piracy, the Filipino literati (including those with income to spare) would read less widely, since many cultural products are simply not sold in the Philippine market. Meanwhile, the claim made by Anvil and its editors that appropriation erodes the integrity of a source text resurrects fundamental and perpetually unresolved questions about what constitutes authorship, what delimits an artwork, and what counts as an artistic process. The debates provoked by the randomizer (and there were many, on social media), however, extend from the literary to the disciplinary, by virtue of what occasioned them in the first place: a cease-and-desist letter. In this context, engagement with the text leads not simply to insights about literature, often provisional, but to a verdict on the fate of the writer: either he deserves to be fined and do jail time or he does not. The question, ultimately, is not how the randomizer is meaningful, or generative, or beautiful, or offensive, or unremarkable, or inane, but whether it is criminal.

I belong to a generation that came of age after the martial law regime of Ferdinand Marcos, and my familiarity with writers as outlaws is conflated with state suppression. I learned from and continue to work with writers who are former political detainees. Despite the ouster of Marcos in 1986, the imprisonment of activist writers is still not unheard of. In 2011, a friend of mine from college, a poet, was marked as an enemy of the state and detained in jail. It took two years of legal action and campaigns among activists and cultural workers to secure his release. I must admit, I felt shame when this same friend reached out to me to express concern over Anvil’s demand letter against Adam. That imprisonment became a possibility for my partner because he made virtual fast food out of a source text called Fast Food Fiction seemed, well, silly. It was an insult to writers whose freedom was at risk or curtailed because of their criticism of the state. The threat to Adam’s freedom, though, was not from the state, but from
two editors who are well-known in the local literary scene, and from the most prominent commercial publisher of literary and scholarly titles in the Philippines, which also happens to be the affiliate publishing company of the biggest bookstore chain in the country. Anvil’s case against Adam literalized, for me, the corporation’s power to deny visibility to literary texts forged out of an aesthetic other than what it authorizes, especially when such texts call into question the prestige that its literary products enjoy. It also demonstrated, in no uncertain terms, the privatization of literature, by relying on the strength of market logic to determine what kind of literature is circulated and what should be forcibly erased. Conveniently silent on the critical intervention of Adam’s work, the cease-and-desist letter foregrounds literature as private property, whose profit generation is supposedly hijacked by the randomizer, to the detriment of the rightful entrepreneurs. Appropriation is framed as the defacement of property and the disrespect of its owner (the anthology contributor), whose integrity Anvil and its editors seek to restore. Never mind if mainstream publishing houses are themselves notorious for compensating their authors cheaply, if at all; the turn to litigation is a grand gesture that proves how the corporation values its authors, by defending them from the mercenary machinations of another author, who randomized their work in an obscure website that generates no income at all.58

During one of our legal consultations, a lawyer expressed interest in the fact that the parties involved in the potential case were a vocal advocate of independent publishing and a large publishing house. DIY publishing is obviously not a good thing for Anvil, the lawyer said. I thought the impression was hyperbolic and said as much; the network of independent publishing as we know it is so small, sporadic, and informal that it is no competition at all. Oh, any threat is a threat, was the lawyer’s response. At the traveling small press and DIY expo that we organize with the help of volunteers, the works made available demonstrate how small-scale
and community-based the entire operation is. The xerox machine remains the technology of choice to produce the low-budget and limited-run materials, and the individuals and collectives who participate at any given expo are primarily from the community where it occurs. The works in circulation include poetry pamphlets, anarchist zines, short story zines, zines resurrected from the martial law era, photography booklets, alternative histories and biographies, sketchbooks by art school kids, anthologies by writing collectives, anthologies by migrant workers, comics by comic book makers, comics by mothers, comics by students, comics sent through channels by cadres from the underground movement, works in English, works in Filipino, works in Ilocano, works in Bisaya, works in Cebuano, works in Bikol, works in Kankanaey. Some of the more expensively produced books cost several hundred pesos, but some of the zines cost as low as ten pesos. Some participants give away their work for free, or adjust prices on the spot by request, or trade works with each other.

In an interview about Commune Editions, a small press he co-runs, Clover observes that capitalism isn’t one to tolerate the commune that seeks to carve out a life apart from it. “Declaring that you will be making your own daily life without anyone showing up to be exploited may seem like a nice easy sidling away, but from the perspective of capital it is both economic and political attack, no matter how unthreatening everybody looks.” Any threat is a threat, it seems, and when it manifests, says Clover, “capital and the state tend to show up with armies and sieges.” The encounter with a cease-and-desist letter that frames artistic practice primarily in economic terms has made me more clearly apprehend the antagonism inherent in my work as an independent publisher, which I tend to think of as (in Clover’s words) a “piecemeal, peaceful detachment.” In a milieu where appropriative artistic practices are vilified over exploitative industry practices, what is illegible to market logic is offensive to it. It is against the
interest of a fully professionalized world of writing for writing communities with alternative motives and preoccupations to thrive. In this light, I see my continuing commitment to publish independently as an attempt to align, however inadequately, with the life outside of capital of, for instance, Lacaba’s “Kagila-gilalas,” which continues to travel away from its author’s signature, unencumbered by the grip of its copyright holder.

Earlier this year, my often solitary self made friends with my neighbors. Through the mediation of a government agency, which invited me to hold a writing workshop with migrant workers, I met a community organization of former migrant women based a few blocks away from where I live. Prior to our workshop, writing was an activity removed from the lives of the “titas” (aunties). Their lives had been written about by others, they told me, showing me a handful of publications written by academics and human rights advocates, which they had on file in their office. In these texts, they served as resources on the plight of Filipino migrant workers; their testimonies were incorporated into analyses meant to lobby for policies to protect the rights of Filipino women workers overseas. I recall the poetry festival I was part of years earlier in Hong Kong, where the privileges that set me apart from the three Filipino aunties who attended my reading granted me access to represent them in the arena of cultural expression. I think of how this professionalized arena, whose mechanisms have determined what constitutes good writing and great literature, has also sequestered the activity of writing as a form of expression from the public domain. As a result, I found myself among migrant women workers who found the idea of writing their own stories down as an obvious yet alien proposition.

Several writing sessions and multiple informal meetings later, the aunties and I are now busy putting together a zine of their works, which were first drafted in the workshop I held with them, to be produced by the small press that Adam and I run. In the manuscript are narratives of
their experiences as entertainers in Japan, and as domestic workers and caregivers in countries like China, Australia, and Taiwan. One of the aunties recalls her attempt to seek work in Syria as a domestic helper, which ended in detention in Hong Kong over questionable travel documents. Another recounts the network of human trafficking into which she was trapped by the promise of employment in Malaysia as a dishwasher. There are poems of love, of single motherhood, and stories of violence in the hands of employers and customers. Our zine project has become an occasion for them to sit down and work on their stories, a reason to spend time apart from the routine demands of work and home life, and an excuse for their support group to get together.

A cursory explanation of how the office xerox machine can be a handy tool for reproducing zines has led the aunties to consider the possibility of zine-making as a recurring effort (something they could perhaps publish once a year), a means to disclose stories they have yet to tell anyone about their migrant worker experiences and to connect with other migrant women. The zine could also be an addition to their livelihood projects. The daily operations of their organization relies on the support of donors, as well as the money they make from various endeavors, which include a catering service, a laundry service, and a sewing shop. When the zine is ready, the aunties tell me, it can be added to office shelf that holds their wares, to be displayed among the bags, placemats, coasters, and clothes that they make and sell. There is a striking plainness to the inclusion of their literary production to the list of labors whose outcomes sustain their community. I am inclined to think that literature produced from this remarkable ordinariness is the condition of possibility for another world to occur, whose readjustment would transform notions of the literary work in ways beyond our current imagination.
There Is No Emergency
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Two or three things about desire
Letter to the stranger

What I am about to tell you may or may not matter in the long run.

I have taken to alphabetizing the things in my kitchen. Thus colander next to coriander, dairy next to dishwashing liquid, ice next to insecticide. Anything can be held together by a web of associations: armoire to banister, by virtue of setting. Clavicle to daffodil, by family of sounds. Elephants to falafel because of that day in December, gash to harbor because of that summer with nothing better to do. Illicit to jeopardy, jeopardy to karma, karma to long life or lip service or manual labor, manual labor to never again, never again to on one condition to private practice to questionnaire. And so on. Anything is the truest beginning of what I am about to say.

Words most probably included in what I am about to tell you: accept, again, alcohol, apparently, bakery, be, because, blue, bordering, come, company, continuous, crap, dashboard, definitely, don’t, drawer, end, enough, exactly, fantasy, forget, haha, how, hydrangeas, ink, insult, maybe, modern, more, must, nerve, never, no, of, period, phone, please, psycho, ridiculous, ring, slab, sleeping, sorry, splat, stash, teeth, television, tender, then, there, this, though, thus, very, wtf, yes.

What I am about to say may be said in other words, and these words may be divided into several categories resembling a system of looking at flies: a) detached, with a hint of disdain, b) obligatory, c) doubt replaced by candor, d) having slipped from one room to another, e) borrowed from the library, f) a subcategory of c), g) that which replays itself, h) without resignation.
Signals

I took the amaretto to mean there was no beer in the house.
I took the bassline to mean a particular addressee was in the crowd.
I took the clairvoyant weather to mean I could dismiss your unappealing conclusions.
I took the dry run to mean the echo was unreliable.
I took the elevated appeal of allusions to mean the fever had no fangs.
I took your fury to mean there was grass in the basement.
I took the gelatinous substance to mean a diminished generosity toward herbivorous endeavors.
I took happiness to mean I had the right syllable in mind.
I took the initials to mean just leave the front door unlocked.
I took the jellyfish scuttling by the reef to mean the kleptomania was the least of my concerns.
I took the kiss to mean a potentially inconsequential lesson.
I took the lesion barely hidden by your sleeve to mean you had no wish to mimic the tragedies of your flawed heroines.
I took the marionette on the clothesline to mean there was hope for the unsuspecting neighbor.
I took no to mean it was the only answer.
I took the oppressive serendipity to mean that panic might or might not send us straight into an emergency.
I took the paprika to mean quiz the cook, not the gardener.
I took the imperious quill to mean the repetition was intentional.
I took the sly reference to mean the substitute had surpassed the preference.
I took the song to mean you took the necessary pill.
I took the tricky decimal to mean I should unsay the speech I made over dinner.
I took the unexpected unification to mean veer away from condescending middlemen.
I took the violinist’s lisp to mean it was imperative to wait in line.

I took the waiver to mean there was a xenophobe in the building.

I took the third x-ray to mean you had nothing more to lose.

I took the yapping from the room below to mean the token zorroing was a far more appropriate gesture.

I took the zero dangling from the headline to mean the aphorism was a spell in disguise.
Two or three things about desire

Sunlight half-preening, almost fashionable.

An hour removed from this angle and cocotte becomes you.

I fish a kiss out of your river: o miss demeanor, o misdemeanor.

Nothing like leafy limbs clattering in attendance.

Really now, I say, perpendicular to your purplish dream.
Half an hour in the house of indecision or procrastination

ants
The cotton buds are attracting ants by the hundreds, they are almost flowers.

blinds
The blinds are behaving like piano keys at the mercy of an inebriated player. Or: the blinds are undulating like the sea on an uneventful summer day. Or: the blinds are shimmering like the grass skirt of a woman scavenging for keys in a cavernous purse.

conundrum
Are there three illegal puppies yelping without let up in the apartment next door or just two?

electric fan
The dust clinging to the spokes of the fan spans several eras: The Era of the Apartment Devastated by Flood, The Era of Politically Incorrect yet Extremely Amusing Terms for Informal Settlers, and The Era of Citrus-Scented Cleaning Agents to Cover Up the Accidents of the Ailing Cat.

history
There is nothing in the house that seems to have emerged from a grandmotherly chest inlaid with mother-of-pearl save for the stereoscope and the box of slides of pastoral scenes in turn-of-the-century India.

insight
Instant coffee with condensed milk is too pleasant to be thought of as making do.

melodica
In lieu of the guitar left in the office. In lieu of the sorely missed cable subscription. In lieu of mid-week nights at the bar with unexplainably cheap margaritas, now closed for renovation.

note
The term you mean to use when you say threshed out is fleshed out.

shameful vanity
The photograph taken years ago to commemorate the literary tattoo is languishing in a book bag from a forgettable conference.

wishful thinking
Today is hopefully not the day the landlady slips the electric bill under the door.
Here

In Amsterdam, I am seized by an uncharacteristic confusion over left and right.

In Antipolo, I learn to make a rosary, a macramé belt, and a hand-sewn apron.

In Baguio, I eat a macaroon.

In the balcony, I doze during a mellow card game.

In Bali, I am too embarrassed to say no to a manicure.

In the ballet studio, I am amused by my catastrophic pirouettes.

In Bangkok, I am addressed in Chinese.

In my childhood bedroom, I weep over a pincushion made for sewing class.

In Bellagio, I am mistaken for the writing resident’s companion.

In Binondo, I reject my companion’s dining choices.

In Boracay, I try to appreciate the Victorian wallpaper.

In Brisbane, I am thrilled to spot an actor whose movies I abhor.

In the bungalow by the beach, I indulge in the delusion of a miniature herb garden.

In the rickety cable car, I admit to my unforgivable condescension.

In Chicago, I attempt to mimic an old roommate’s unidentifiable accent.

In church, I calculate the costs of moving to a bigger apartment.

In Cleveland, I excuse myself from the exasperating religious debate over dinner.

In the clinic, I am pressured by the clerk to hyphenate.

In the coffee shop, I write the incriminating postcard.

In the computer room, I read the signs.

In the arctic conference room, I am intrigued by the red telephone.
In Cubao, I call into question the sparseness of my wardrobe.
In Davao, I despair over the malfunctioning keycard.
In Dumaguete, I affectionately decline phone sex at two in the morning.
In the elevator, I smile at the child drooling in its stroller.
In Florence, I lose a coat.
In the government office, I apologize for the errors on the form.
In the allegedly ghost-ridden hallway, I am hungry after making out.
In the hole in the wall, I wear my interlocutor’s sunglasses.
In the cheap hotel, I peel an apple with a Swiss knife.
In the library, I hunt in sequence, from PN to PQ to PR.
In Los Angeles, I am thought to be Mexican.
In Los Baños, I am told to keep my voice down.
In Makati, I take off my heels and slip into flats.
In Mandaluyong, I admire a strongly worded memo.
In Manila, I spend an inordinate amount of time around copy machines.
In New York City, I procrastinate.
In my office, I am annoyed by the bourgeois art of travel.
In Palawan, I take my lunch with a bottle of cerveza.
In Paris, I purchase tokens for a five-minute shower.
In Pittsburgh, I adopt a cat.
In Rome, I am unfazed by the transport strike.
In Sendai, I distract myself by painting flowers on a handkerchief.
In Singapore, I think of Cubao in June.
In the supermarket, I comfort myself in the aisle devoted to cleaning agents.

In the taxi, I am asked an unnerving question.

In the theater, I am envious of the protagonist’s impeccable posture.

In Tokyo, I am asked for too many identification cards to have my money changed.

In Venice, I watch a poodle sashay toward an ice cream shop.

In the waiting room, I judge the painting on the wall.
Dear discipline

All day I rehearse show tunes in the second person.

Trite like tourism, my trilling heart.

Is this the button for my visa to the interior?

My accents hallucinate a surplus of prepositions.

My protagonists take turns taking no for an answer.
Postcards from here and there

Salutation. Identification of location, time, and view. Description of bus ride and itinerary. Quibble about inappropriately cosmopolitan feel of structure from which view is observed. Commentary about architecture leading to remembrances of trips past leading to assessment of current company leading to desire for alcohol and sleep. Alcohol granted, funny detail about alcohol acquisition and current company. Acknowledgment of space constraints, expression of high hopes for coming days, subtle longing for absent company, explicit words of love. Yours—
Salutation. Identification of departure time. Mention of running joke throughout stay, haha. Recollection of quotes from current company and newly learned Latin words, promise to elaborate upon arrival. Acknowledgment of poor handwriting. Reference to film involving pine trees and ’80s actors. Beginnings of funny anecdote… promise to elaborate upon arrival. Admission of pointlessness of sending postcard bound to be overtaken by its sender. Yours—
Dear disappearance

Every not thing you occupy.

I grow a garden of holes gathering dust.

History, my guardian dear, your breath’s the room’s weather.

Everything appears to be intact.

I thank the diligent air, my eyeless sieve.
Instructions

You need an abattoir for that.
You need a bassoon and a bowler hat for that.
You need calamity in a remote town for that.
You need directions for that.
You need elbow room, elders, and elevator shoes for that.
You need a fraction of your impressive rage for that.
You need grass for that.
You need unapologetic hips for that.
You need an isotropic sense of isolation for that.
You need the judicious use of pesticides for that.
You need to kneel for that.
You need labored breathing for that.
You need medium frequency for that.
You need nuts the size of boulders for that.
You need an ocean for that.
You need to placate the children for that.
You need efforts at quality control for that.
You need your secret rabid nature for that.
You need spillage, but not too much, for that.
You need turmeric or thyme or t’ai chi for that.
You need to undulate for that.
You need varieties of indignation for that.
You need a way out of the basement for that.

You need xanthic acid for that.

You need to yodel in the dark for that.

You need zippers for that.

Yes, that’s what you need.
Still life with playing cards

At last, I am at my wit’s end. 
I deliver myself to the notary public on the sketchy side 
of the neighborhood and at the entrance 
I stand, anticipating my arrival. 
There is an appropriate letter for every mishap. 
I ask myself to choose a club: to enter, 
to swing, to beat unabashedly. 
As usual I am wary of my ideas. 
Perhaps the club is a spade is a heart is a diamond 
in disguise. As usual I agree with myself. 
Money changes hands.
Pedestrian Studies
She walked to distract herself
from the phone call she preferred
not to return. The streets
were crudely shaped
letters and she made a
route out of spelling
her name. She wrote in all
caps and the neighborhood was too
small she had to
backtrack and form different
letters with the same roads.
It wasn’t quite graffiti,
but it would have to do.
The apology was as bland as the walk she took on a recent trip to her hometown: every street populated by a slew of children playing hopscotch, pot-bellied men drinking beer, and parked cars with broken headlights. Every corner punctuated by a pile of trash baking in the sun and abuzz with flies.
She folded the map in half and the crease landed on the main avenue. It was not pedestrian-friendly. The walk dislodged the fragile system she had envisioned for the day. Her spreadsheets were infected by the grammar of a neighbor’s phone call. Her to-do list was faintly laced with regret. At the grocery, she could barely bring herself to look at the vegetables.
The day was dry enough for a walk. She took every opportunity to turn right until she hit a dead end. An old man was sitting by the barbed wire fence and smoking a cigarette. He asked her for money.
She used to live in a neighborhood with positive human attributes for street names.

Each time she walked it seemed she was piecing together her fortune:

- Prosperous, Prayerful, Healthy.
- Happy, Mild-Mannered, Skillful.

Charitable: a sickly year in a room for rent.

Affectionate: to fall out of love in a three-bedroom.

Obedient: to sleep on a couch in a studio.

The streets were the unsolicited gloss on the narrative she fashioned out of her life.
At every corner she asked a stranger if she should turn left or right. People were generally pleased to offer suggestions. She was stranded in the thick of a philosopher’s unruly paradox that she hoped a walk would pull her out of. At the next corner shop she finally felt unstuck. A bystander offered her water and she thanked him for his neighborly gesture. He was pleased that she assumed he was not a stranger to these parts.
Following the route of another seemed a plausible solution to her dismal mood.

She walked a few steps behind a young mother holding the hand of a small child and carrying an infant.

She turned where they turned.

She paused where they paused.

She boarded the jeepney they boarded.

Several times she switched guides before realizing she had done so.

Apparently, there were many young mothers with one small child and an infant wandering in the neighborhood.
She closed her eyes and pointed at a random spot on the map. Her finger landed so close to where she was. It could only mean a walk was not in the picture.
After the walk she ended up in the bar she used to frequent. On its walls were photographs of window views. The photographer had named each one after the place where it was taken, a most unimaginative taxonomy. She began to name each photograph after the people she was tasked to fire in the place where she worked.
Her theoretical daughter’s name spelled a path she could walk in less than fifteen minutes.
At the end of it she found herself in front of a pile of trash.
She took the bus tickets in her pocket and added them to the heap.
She walked across the bridge thinking about the time she had to walk from one end of the city’s main highway to the other during a transport strike. It was the same route she had to walk years earlier during a protest march, the same walk she took years later with a man who fancied himself a consumer of time.
Because the message had already been let loose, it was pointless to hold her breath as she watched it put on its trousers and shirt and cap, zip up its boots, and embark on a walk away from her.

She sighed as it sniffed strangers, clucked at mangy dogs, and skipped from street to street, falling off buses and slipping down holes, dozing on sidewalks and always failing her, always getting up and moving along, alive, unscathed.
Arrest
She held the sentence against the open window. Sunlight passed through *abduct* and *attack*. *Behead* settled below a cable line, on which perched a trio of birds. A pedestrian’s head grazed *close range*, then *civilian*, then *genitals*. The sentence was news and the window was news. The sentence was fact and the window was aftermath. The sentence was fiction and the window was emergency. Smog traced the crevices of *massacre*. *Carnage* turned *courage* turned *garbage* against the bobbing of leaves.
In the morning the box was a breakfast table and a dresser. At night it was a desk, stacked with clippings and notes. There were days that spun out of time: orange juice beside memo beside lipstick beside draft. Sometimes she knelt before the box, as if it were an altar or a fireplace. At times she stood beside it, as if it were company while waiting in line. The box was an anchor that held the rest of the room together. It said door to the right and kitchen to the left. It said body was in and rain was out.
We woke up and she didn’t, was all he wrote in a letter about the child they brought home and buried two weeks later. From his window, he watched the roadwork that added an hour to his daily commute. Over dinner years later he said he still woke up each day seized with terror, as if he would walk to the next room, bend over the crib, and find his child dead. Shouldn’t the worst already be over? he asked. There was no child in the next room. He was no longer a father. He was not a father.
The rain arrived without warning and it swallowed every sound. She touched each machine in the house to feel it humming. She touched her throat to feel the words out of her mouth. There was someone at the door, she could tell, by the knob that kept turning. No knock, or click, only the sight of it, turning. The rain was at the door. Someone was at the door. She watched the knob and turned on the television. The rain flashed on the screen, and already, a death toll. There was nothing to do. Nothing was about to be over soon.
They set the ghetto on fire and send fire trucks to put the fire out. The last siren speeds away from the standstill. The cab driver asks her to tip him extra for the traffic and she checks the meter, checks her money. Over beers she listens to a story about swimming with a whale shark the size of three bars and two galleries across them. Imagine yourself beside a breathing building, she is told. She closes her eyes and coughs up ash. Breathe like a building, she reminds herself.
There were several heaves, he said. First, he could see his limbs, and then he could not. He could see his chest, and then he could not. He could see his face, and then he could not. He remembered the O of his mouth, the water erasing it. When the sea returned to the sea, he pulled himself up from a field of bloated bodies. He looked for his face in each face. He scoured the tents. He read the lists. He could be alive, he said. There was no proof otherwise.
They had to begin somewhere. This one had a phone in her hand. This one had a gash on his cheek. This one wrapped her arms around her belly. This one shielded this one, it seemed. Helicopters swarmed overhead. Names were called out. This one was stripped of her clothes. This one was a face with no eyes. This one was a body with no head. This one was beaten with a pipe. This one was buried under a car. This one took a bullet in the mouth. They sweltered in the heat. They kept losing count.
The street was a river and she swam down the street. A natural swimmer she was unlike the rest of them, bodies midway and by the end of the street, statistics. The city was river was grave was ruin was monument was city again, less a bridge and neighborhood or two. Her cheek less a scar with the right makeup on. At the beach she got stung by a jellyfish and the boatman raised a cup to the swell of her foot. She glanced over her shoulder, sensing she had caught the eye of a limestone cliff.
They take turns telling each other what they haven’t been able to do since. This goes on for a couple of beers. Together they do not sit with their backs to the door. They trade photographs of children not named after their disappeared, for fear of the same fate. From the recurring dream, one recounts a path to a grave, the trek to it, what wasn’t there. The other spends nights keeping watch. There have been ghosts, though never the right one.
His hair falling over his eyes wide open his hair can barely hide them. His mouth on her mouth. His sound down her throat. Her body beyond coral reefs blown up in the dark, beyond limbs thrown down a hole. Her body beyond apology. His sound inside her stammering, softer, smooth, slick as guitar music, track five, circa speeding down the highway to the beach, eleven years old, uncle yammering about the cost of cement and labor for the new room, still unbuilt, for the baby, still unborn.
Search and Seize
Still life with monitor

Do I look like I could use a shower.
Do I look like I could fix a drink.
Do I look like I took the short cut.
Is the short cut a waste
of time. Do I look like I know
what time it is.
Is it worth the crease on my collar.
Is it worth the note on my door.
Is it worth the flashlight
in my purse, the stain on the mat,
the extra room.
Should I have stayed in bed.
Should I have quoted from memory.
Should I have crossed the picket line.
Should I have ignored the traffic light.
Is the light a glitch. Is it a sign.
Is it a ruse.
Do I look like I could sign the contract.
Do I look like I could reverse the terms.
Do I look like I wouldn’t know what to do
with a bottle of bleach
and would I say so.
Would I consult the right authorities.

Would I invoke the right references.

Would I dial the right number.

Hello, sniper.

Hello, stranger.

Do I look like I’m in danger.
Exhibition Notes

At six I lost my first watch and gave up on biking. At eight I wanted a cow and a fridge to put the cow’s food in, and also a music box. At thirteen I broke a tooth in a dream and for days tapped each tooth in my mouth with my tongue, searching for cracks. At seventeen I lived with three strangers and at twenty-one I got chicken pox exactly two weeks before graduation. I prefer beer to wine. I prefer a couch to a chaise longue. I prefer landmarks to street signs. I prefer to say perhaps rather than maybe, which perhaps makes me sound officious, although I hope this is not the case. I like to watch horse races and figure skaters. I like not being good friends with my neighbors. When in the shower, I sing. When afflicted with a pain I have no name for, I sleep it off. I cry over migraines and missed deadlines. I would rather rent for life than be responsible for a house. I would rather spend a weekend up in the mountains than in the city, but this was not always so. I look forward to plane rides, if they are less than ten hours long. On trips I prefer to stay in the hotel and read books, often about the place I am visiting. I like to sit in the lobby and take pictures of window views. I do not mind asking strangers for directions. I do not get upset when the directions turn out to be unreliable. I do not think twice about spending money on books, but I tend to hold off on buying a bag of potato chips, no matter how intriguing the flavor. Sometimes, in my office, I choose not to answer the knock at the door, despite its persistence. I pretend I am asleep, or simply not there. I find turnstiles and carousels reassuring. I think photographs of shadows are inevitably elegant. There were years when I signed my name as well as the date and place of purchase in every book I bought, and there were years I did not. There were years I recorded in my journals and there were years I did not. I enjoy sitting in a coffee shop and listening to the talk at the next table, but I am annoyed when I tell my companion a joke and find the man at the next table laughing. I cannot look at a painting without reading its title first. I feel awkward making the sign of the cross. I feel compelled to write words with my index finger on dusty surfaces. I do not smoke pot if there is no one in the room I would like to sleep with. Mannequins make me nervous, as do poorly ventilated diners. I am always a little disappointed when the person I am calling picks up the phone. I have a hard time watching movies with scenes of rape and torture in them. I would rather not have a conversation begin with “We need to talk,” although experience has taught me that what follows is not necessarily terrible news. There are two or three things in my life that I regret. I am pro-choice but am amenable to a reproductive health law that excludes abortion. I am embarrassed to belong to one of two countries in the world with no divorce law. I read the news after I read the classifieds. I despise cops and evangelists. I can live without beauty pageants, although I find myself keeping the television on long enough to see the evening gown portion. Sometimes, alone in a restaurant, I feel obliged to finish my food quickly if there are others waiting to be seated. I stay away from people who hand out flyers. I stop in front of pet shops when rabbits and birds are on display. I compare prices. I make lists. I return by the due date. I think it is better to walk in the middle of the street and get hit by a car than to walk on a dark sidewalk and get mugged. I think a cab with a rosary hanging from its rearview mirror is safer to ride in than a cab without it. I have a hard time evading small talk. I have fallen down a flight of stairs twice. I have watched a group of men smash a car with lead pipes. I have stood on top of a mountain in one country to view the mountains of another. I have had sex in ten countries across four continents. I have been kissed inappropriately by a priest. When I am bewildered I think of olive trees half my size which I must have seen on a trip long ago or merely read about. When I am unnerved I recite the phone
numbers I know by heart and am relieved that I still know them. There are two or three things I have done that I must apologize for. I sleep by myself on the right side of a double bed. I sleep with the lights off, and by this I mean I sleep with the light from the lamppost outside my window. When a man is in bed with me I leave the cat outside and ignore its meowing by the door. When a man is in bed with me I say screw even when make love is a distinct possibility. There were years I spent filled with road rage and there were years I did not. There were years I wrote thank you notes and snacked on cheese and crackers and there were years I did not. I do not underestimate receptionists and security guards. I am more likely to pick up a book with a beautiful cover even if it is by an unknown author than a book with a hideous cover even if it is by an author I love. I think dictionaries are more reliable than novels. I think swimming pools are far more bearable than oceans. I forgive friends easily, but I am a ruthless critic of acquaintances. I am sometimes rendered speechless by indecision. Sometimes, on my way to work, I see myself walking across the street. I feel the urge to follow myself, but soon enough, I change my mind.
Austerity Measures

Yield to the search and seize I would prefer not.

A cog in the recording throat, my corporate allure.

Above the dotted line I lease this prime piece of language.

With all due respect, may I cop a feel, may I corporeal?

I appeal to the body in unison, my only privacy.
A field guide to neighborhood flora and fauna on the last day of December

**atis**
The lampposts are infested with staple wires and sprouting want ads for plumbers. They are upstaging the curvy globes of atis hanging from trees.

**bougainvilleas**
What a house with a blue roof, blue shutters, and a blue door needs is bougainvilleas in a row of blue pots.

**commerce**
They suggested cabbage, cell phone plans, or a cheap ride home. She asked for forget-me-nots, but they unfortunately did not speak flower.

**dead tree**
The cops are finally noticing the dead tree, its brittle branches trapped in a cat’s cradle of cable wires. Or maybe they are merely admiring the blimp afloat in a sea of cumulus clouds.

**devotion**
The store they run is always out of eggs, noodles, and sardines. They’re always tossing their trash in the canal by their fence. She’s always yelling on the phone and he’s always harping about the hens across the street. But every morning the old couple take their five shih tzus out into the sunlight, sit them one by one on a stool, and comb their long blond hair.

**fried fish**
It’s one thing to turn a corner and find a feral face painted on the hood of an orange car. It’s another to take money out of a machine and detect the smell of fried fish.

**kalamansi**
The overpopulated kalamansi plant is now serving you with delight!

**loan sharks**
Of course, it would be best to avoid them.

**Penelope the piglet**
Penelope the piglet is hanging by the ears from the clothesline and hooting at the neighborhood kids.

   She says, “That is one fashionable strawberry blond wig!”
   She says, “It was Hawksmoor, with his non-intrusive freemasonry references in structures, who taught me the possibilities of art in architecture.”
   She says, “Look at the silly dogs on the ledge!”
   She says, “I want to sodomize you in your sleep.”

**road kill**
Today’s view from the congee place is of two kids in the middle of the road, poking at
unidentifiable road kill. Is it too much to ask for this not to be so?

*strays*
Every so often, on the news, they feature stray cats being sold by the sackful.

*whiskers*
Aside from decks, yellow bell canopies are most fashionable in the neighborhood. And also the bushes of nameless white flowers, the ones with whiskers so friendly and flailing in the sun.

*yin and yang*
A scruffy black dog in white socks is sleeping under a car. A scrawny white dog in a black mask is telepathing dreams of dinner.
Letter to the stranger

Each morning, I take my coffee in a balcony that faces the sign of a laundromat: Wash Now My Love. Bubbles form the flashy script. I have been told I am easy with laughter. I chuckle each time you tell the story of the accordion and the cowboy boots, even when you tell it as the story of the ukelele and the wet dream.

When I realized that by and you meant but, the sentence took a different turn, and what I thought was a closed-door meeting in Makati was a shabby eatery on the way to Batangas. All the words in the vicinity followed suit: today was not today but two months ago at the beach, and at the beach there was rain that didn’t matter since you were indoors, not with me but it was fine and it was fine because it was fine. There was free beer from an expat in need of an audience. There was some kind of music for some kind of mood. What can happen in twelve hours? I knew, I know, I must’ve known, I should’ve known, I couldn’t have not have known.

Between us, at the dinner table: ants, ash-colored cups, bananas, boredom, a bowl of rice, cell phones, a compliment, a crude remark about the neighbors, a coughing fit, fish stew from your mother, hand gestures, insomnia, latent Catholicism, leftovers from the party last night, a lewd joke, a lie, a note from the landlady, pork rinds from the store downstairs, smoke, a stiff drink, unsolicited advice, a witty exchange.

In bed we play ourselves and endear ourselves to each other. How moved we are by the script. Come morning I wake to the inscrutable gaze of the lion inked on your shoulder. I rest my palm on its fur.
A toast to your dazzling modernity

Into the hotel you take summer at the park; cut grass and a river view on the bed.

The birds work around the chandelier, rehearsing their formation.

I stage my stillness by the divan, my longing an odd contraption.

Surely your voice would know its place.

It would be kind to let the two girls sunning in the grass make an exit.
Postcards from here and there

Salutation. Alternate caption for image. Doodle + overexplanation. Rundown of schedule, token promise, hyperbolic expression of love. Yours,
Salutation. Description of cloud cover, choice beverage, current cast of strangers. Reference to season, clunky display of newly acquired vocabulary. Unreasonable query, half-hearted joke. Yours,
Salutation. Location and historical fact overheard at the station. Gratitude for phone call. Reiteration of gratitude. Comment on noise, comparison to random locations. Rejection of comments made thus far. Annoyance. Apology. Yours,
Salutation. Happiness over recent purchase. Slight nostalgia and paranoia. Recollection of code invented in grade school. Name in code. Name in code. Yours,
Salutation. Quote lifted from exhibit notes. Emphasis on repeatable, reportable, impoverished, impartial. Deletion of im, note on nested words, imp, impart. Yours,
More animal

An elegy in the form of address in the form of a dress I seam unseemly.

Your body divides its time between departments.

I pledge a contraction a contraption my skip and song.

Jumpstart the provision lines will you not.

More animal I dictate to the well-timed stroke.
Still life with famous scientist

You have three hours on dry land. You put on your teardrop earrings, slip into your coat, and slip out of the ship where you work as a waitress. You are in the city. The other girls plan to go clothes shopping, but only after getting on the next ferry to see the statue the city is known for. They want to take snapshots of themselves out in the sun, on the ferry, their hair windblown, their cheeks ruddy, the statue looming behind them. They want to send photographs home that their mothers could show off to the neighbors. You send your mother money twice a month. You call her once a week to check on the bills, her health, and your child who lives with her. The last time you called she asked if you were in touch with the child’s father. Her inflection reminded you not to make a fool of yourself. It is warm in the city and your coat, still damp from a drizzle that welcomed your ship as it docked, starts to dry. You don’t want to be alone, but you don’t want to get off a ship only to get on a ferry. In the subway you listen to the languages spoken around you and read an ad on real estate that puns on a biblical passage. You think about the store for left-handed people you used to think you wanted to own, its shelves stocked with left-handed scissors and can openers and other kitchen implements. You already had the perfect name for the store, a word that meant both left-handed and adulterer. It seemed funny at the time. Back then you passed time smoking at the steps to the library and sketching cartoons for the school paper. There was a girl you used to go to the library with who studied for tests by crossing out the key terms in her notes with a black marker. She said by erasing the words she was committing them to memory. She said loss was the best antidote to forgetting. Always at some point she would hold up her notes against the light, trying to decipher the words she had crossed out. She always remarked on the doodles of fish and ocean waves on the margins of your notebook, as if she were seeing them for the first time. You told her you liked the feel on your wrist of drawing spirals and scales. As a child you liked to draw girls with small torsos and huge skirts. You filled the skirts with sketches of bows and stars, planets and animals, a house or two. Your mother still has one such drawing on her fridge, next to a photograph of you and the father of your child at a cousin’s wedding. The last time you were home you saw that she had moved your drawing to cover one half of the photograph. You alone were left visible, smiling, a glass of wine in one hand. You were wearing the sapphire dress your cousin lent you that fit you well. You think of the songs you loved that the band played at the wedding, the apartment you moved out of that year, the child you had not long after. Out of the subway, in the park, you walk past the carts selling sandwiches, the crowd forming around a busker, the playground. You search the ground for leaves to mail home and teach your child autumn. You pick a few orange leaves shaped like stars, and a few red ones shaped like teardrops. The rhythm of the joggers behind you fades, the whirr of the ship in your bones eases. It occurs to you that you could wear the waitress uniform you wash and hang in your closet each night to your best friend’s costume party, which she hosts every year to celebrate her birthday. Once you went as a tomato, another time as a wrestler, and still another time as a nun. There was a man dressed as a priest at the party and at the end of the night he invited you to share a cab with him since you lived in the same neighborhood. In the cab you exchanged crass jokes and phone numbers. You smile as you stuff the leaves in your coat pocket. Past the bridge you come upon a clearing with a larger-than-life statue of a famous scientist sitting on a bench, his lap roomy enough for you to sit on. You stare at his stony bushy eyebrows and his stony scruffy suit. You stare at his stony clamshell ears and his stony shoes. A squirrel hops on the bench, then on his lap, then hops on. You put your
hands on the scientist’s knees and look up at his eyes. You feel the stone in him rise up in you. It is noon. There is enough time. The veins in your arms begin to turn cold.
Five Lines

I’m spying on myself again.

I’m slicing tomatoes and tossing the chunks in a bowl.

The kitchen light is attentive, and so is the blue of the bowl.

Now must be the safest time to disappear.

I won’t come out until I’m gone.
There is no emergency
Today we haul a dozen plastic bins filled with books into the study. The aging cat swats a few dust balls, grooms, curls up in a corner. We spend the afternoon cross-legged on the floor, snacking, thinking up systems for classifying the books on the shelves.

I would like the ceramic hippo in a tutu to be a disposable artifact from my early twenties. I just need to reread the notes to self that I slid through its slot in lieu of coins to confirm that this is so.

In response to the persistent solicitor at the gate, I walk to the window and yell out an apology.

If I could set aside my sharp declaratives for what is after all a treatable infection.

Music pouring out from you into the house, some notes almost childhood summers, the kitchen air humid from my newly pressed school uniforms. I pull up a stool next to the laundrywoman. Together we sympathize with the heroine of the soap opera.

The sputtering motor of the fridge, the dying engine of the car, the parking lot in the reclamation area, the concrete eroded by the waves of the sea, the cracks insinuating an open grave.

According to the calendar, we are days away from a demonstration and a birthday dinner.

By the unused sink, the stack of brick-hard books retrieved from the flood.

In between writing out the receipt for the rent and rummaging through drawers for the electric bill, the landlady tells me her instructions to her niece for her own wake and funeral. Money is the best child you can have, she says.

I deposit another rosary from my mother in the jar where we keep our spare keys.

In bed I play the girl you fucked while I was away. I come out of it with a craving for seafood and, two days later, a bruise on my shin.

Dear animal, I write, mimic my face so I can touch you.
Track three on the loop today to drown out the wailing of the neighbor’s child. The sound of wood on metal, metal on skin, skin on skin. The cat arches its neck to look out the window.

I re-color the reindeer with a felt-tip pen, which doesn’t conceal its broken leg.

A gaggle of girls in balloon skirts and pumps emerges from the church across the street, ready to terrify pedestrians with their apocalyptic flyers.

If I could conduct the confrontation via questionnaire, a box to check for every unfounded claim.


You are still younger than I was when I met you.

The chart on the bill plots our increasingly irresponsible consumption of energy.

Thirteen reminds me of glasnost and perestroika, the fall of the Wall, the coup d’etat. I do not remember the state of the world when I was twenty-five. Something has clearly gone wrong along the way.

The cab driver would like to know what I’m doing out alone late at night without a male companion.

With subtitles, the window view transforms from ominous to cathartic.

In bed I am the intern from the second floor who gets Thursday afternoons off to attend worship. I am taught to do things with my mouth.

The reminder joins the bouquet of motivational post-its on my desk.
Up on the roof today to investigate the leak, we scan the city and divide it into north, south, east, and west, tracking the fault line and the path of last year’s flood. The young man who suns himself daily by the corner store sees us and waves. He’s not quite all there—you say to me, again.

I steady myself with one hand on the scales of the fish inked on your arm.

Signs on the road to the neighborhood hardware store: the hotline to salvation, the tea for inducing weight loss, numbers of plumbers for hire, the obscenity on the pedestrian’s shirt.

If the admission were true rather than a more bearable version.

There ought to be a spot in the house where the object can be admired as a symbol of hard-won purchasing power and not a symbol of the summer that needs to be undone.

Because there is still one missing body, the news continues to distinguish between official and unofficial counts.

My father tells me, as we watch the protagonist of the telenovela die a slow death, that the actor is in fact alive, unharmed by the shot to his chest. I don’t know if he is commenting on my occasionally infantile sense of reality or misreading my lethargy for heartbreak.

The earthquake is what you talk about when you talk about having done your time.

In bright light, the term of endearment is almost acceptable.

I nurse a beer to keep up with my subjunctive mood.

In bed you want to watch without touching. This goes on for a while.

Dearest—. My fingers follow the fault lines.
Today I travel from room to room, pausing at every doorway where, overhead, a crucifix hangs, left by the previous tenants. Is this their passive-aggressive method of spreading the good word or their passive-aggressive method of renouncing their faith?

The mysterious thing on the carpet is actually the missing beak of the wooden bird we thought to be beyond repair and discarded along with yesterday’s take-out.

The vagrant standing outside the fence eyes me with suspicion.

If I could fold myself into garden, fold myself into near, fold myself into are.

Sometimes the lie sits up in bed and clicks incessantly, surfing channels. Sometimes the lie keeps the faucet running in the bathroom. It wants to know what it’s up to, but it won’t say where it is.

You watch me turn the knob eight times to make sure the door is locked.

Because I believe my name is too strange to be duplicable, I feel guilt when a police record pops up, even though I am not fifty-five years old, have no birthmark on my cheek, am not from Bulacan.

I learned white elephant from the nuclear power plant, not from the monosyllabic writer.

In the dream I misread howl for how and understandably end up wasting time.

Keep your vegetables raw, my mother says.

In bed I ask if you can tell I’ve been newly fucked.

The better to see you, my dear.
Today, walking to the bakery to buy bread and laughing at the photoshopped politician’s head on the tarp, I am awash with the joy of being alive, soon replaced by the dread of being mistaken.

The dog on the counter bobs its plastic head up and down in agreement.

In case the world is listening, the neighbor, by way of videoke, wants to dance with somebody, wants to feel the heat with somebody.

If I could reduce the crisis to a quip I wash down with the last of the wine.

The epidemic on the news, an unread message from your mother, leftovers for lunch. The epidemic left over, the message for lunch, news from your mother. Leftovers unread, the epidemic for lunch, the message new.

A child’s bike now parked in the balcony of our old apartment.

In the hospital lobby, I pass the time reading the unpronounceable names of doctors, some of the letters having fallen from the words they spell, littering the bottom of the glassed-in directory.

I share a birth date with a senator afflicted with logorrhea, a penis-fixated comic book artist, and a volcanic eruption that reduced global warming by a few degrees: this is one available explanation.

The fortune cookie says, if it isn’t something, then it’s something else.

The siege does not yet merit more than a ticker tape footnote grazing the chin of the weeping soap opera star as she performs her most daring role to date.

In bed I lean on your shoulder as you scan our lewd photos. I am impressed by how often I changed my hairstyle in the course of a year.

*Enough*, I write—the last item on the grocery list.
In the mail today: an invitation to lunch with a friend at her favorite restaurant, the one place on campus which pairs forks with knives rather than spoons, she never fails to note, as if this were the height of civilization.

Things that fall from the pages of books: ants, drugstore receipts, petals, moth wings.

The office girl pauses before a parked car, leans close to the window, and checks her makeup.

If it were a phase rather than a habit, I suppose.

Because they are flustered, I ask: Is iamb an iamb? Is trochee a trochee? Is anapest an anapest? Is dactyl a dactyl?

It ought to be unlikely that the owner of the coffee shop I frequent is the former neighbor who turned his living room into a sweatshop of life-sized naked-girl pillows, the whirr of sewing machines keeping me company as I nursed my insomnia.

The phone rings without letup, caller unknown.

The semester of the drought, I stood in line every morning to have a pail filled with greasy water from a fire truck. In this way I began to know the girls in my dorm.

Advice from the radio announcer: infidelity is a natural disaster.

It would be funnier if it were called They Think They Want The Same Thing.

In bed you want to hear about the proposition at the bar. And then what? you ask, your knuckles pressed against my back.

Dinner in the fridge, I scribble on a post-it and stick on the door.
Today the shoeshine boy at the gate wants to know if we can spare any empty plastic bottles. While waiting, he snaps his fingers and clucks at the cat, trying to get it to look at him.

You volunteer to move the dead shih tzu from the middle of the road to the sidewalk.

Oblivious to the tricycle behind her, the girl continues to text on her phone.

If it were any other day—or year, for that matter.

It would have to depend on whether you meant to, or too, or two.

On the news, the ambush of a retired general. The camera zooms in on the broken glass and blood on the concrete, then zooms out for a panoramic view of the traffic. He had a lot of people killed during martial law, my father says, bewildered by my sympathy.

Between us, a total of two things won by raffle: a trip to Australia and a toaster.

In the kitchen cabinet, you keep the bottle of ashfall scooped up from your childhood backyard.

I have never been known for betrayal, says the politician to the poker-faced crowd.

Is it unfortunate that we know the answer to every blind item?

In bed I am the waitress who never gets our drinks right.

Here, I type.
After I let the cable guy in today, he holds the door to let a companion in, and then another, and another, and another. Now there are five men in the living room and I begin to plot my escape, in case the need arises.

The tail of a mouse dangles from the ailing cat’s mouth.

A cab pulls over. The driver gets out and pees by the gate.

If the weather could serve as a reliable indication.

Days when we live in a house with a yard. Days when we live in a yard with a house. Days when we stand by the window and watch the grass. Days when we stand on the grass and watch the window.

It would’ve been easy to find, had they not replaced the tree with the corner store with the barangay outpost with the pawnshop.

How much longer before it stops being a prank?

Apparently, it is possible to blast black coral the size of two cities without our feeling a thing where we are.

In the computer shop, the young girls hover over the screen. Yes, say that, one giggles.

Newly framed and beside the reading lamp, the photograph I’ve come to think of as 1998 becomes 2007.

In bed I am an ex who will only do rough when angry.

It isn’t either-or, says the scribble in the library book.
Today the landlady shows off a set of wicker chairs with mismatched cushions, newly stationed in the porch, collateral for money loaned to one of the neighbors. The cat hops onto one seat, kneads.

Track three on the loop to drown out the mewing of newborn kittens from the nearby gutter.

After the vendor hands me my change, he spits on the sidewalk.

If the blue car turns left, then. If the water arrives before noon, then. If the appointment doesn’t come up in the phone call, then.

The horse pauses mid-spin in the carousel on the postcard. The postcard hangs on the fridge, held there by a magnetic fish. On the fish, the misspelled name of an island—or what we’d like to think is a backhanded joke of a child laborer with a wicked sense of humor.

I have taxidermied my way to an irredeemable regret.

Things that go bad in the refrigerator: birthday cake, curry from your mother, eggplants, tomatoes.

Do you love her unintelligible work less because she calls war a natural phenomenon?

After six hold-ups, I wouldn’t mind driving around with a gun, says the cab driver.

I caption the bad weather to pass the time.

In bed we kiss by the light of the porn on the screen.

My happiest days have always been with you, you inscribe.
Today I sweep up the cockroaches coaxed out of hiding by the scent of insecticide and littered about the house, their bodies upturned and dry. I count them as I sweep, even though I’d rather not.

The lion, open-mouthed and mid-leap, threatens to emerge from the calendar on the vendor’s cart.

The stranger at the gate needs bus fare to attend a funeral in Bicol.

If the signature could signify having read the terms and conditions.

The new message from my mother reminds me to eat a princess for dinner and check the news for diploma chops. I give her a call and walk her through disabling autocorrect on her phone.

The needle lands on a song out of a mix tape from my cousin, now ten years dead. The laundrywoman hums along. If her death were a child, it would be in elementary school, she says.

At last, the cat regains its appetite.

I remember the energy crisis as sometime between the ruptured appendix and the bounced check, before the kidnapped students and after the massacre of the farmers.

The days of injustice are numbered, says the optimistic sign.

Because they are being particularly unhelpful, I explain my situation in English.

In bed I put my hand on your mouth.

The final notice goes into the folder of letters for previous tenants.
Finally, today’s rain washes away the leaves clogging the skylight. We wake with sun in our eyes.

You take photographs of the bruised branch, its welts from the rope the neighbors used to hang the rabid dog.

I fashion another theory out of the wailing across the street.

If I could stop flicking on every switch. If I could stop opening every drawer.

I watch you adorn your excuse with adjectives. I contribute a noun or two.

From the proverbial top hat, I whip out a broken collarbone, a burning building, a car crash, a dying animal, an erupting volcano, a flooded highway, a ghost, an unnamed illness. Isn’t it time you changed your safeword? I ask as I stand, neck-deep, in a catastrophic mess.

Eighteen years on the pill to make sure that nothing happens.

To reduce the prevalence of hunger, the state declares a lower figure for meeting one’s required daily nutritional value.

Nothing happens to you without your permission, the landlady says as she writes out the receipt for the month’s rent.

I would rather title the period Small Talk.

In bed I am bewildered when you call out my name.

Dearest—if need be. If possible.
On the news today, another update on the territorial dispute that I feel obliged to read. Which senator made which suggestion for which claim? Which court case buttresses which decision?

The stuffed animal guarding this week’s trash appraises the world with its lazy eye.

I would’ve recognized the unsolicited advice, but nothing gave it away.

If you could divide your time between the version where you call it a ghost and the version you describe as ill-timed but apropos.

I confront an anagrammatic conundrum at my desk. The titles on the spines volunteer an unsympathetic fortune.

Each time we pass the highway, you pine for the burger joint of your youth. Do you realize it’s still there? I say, pointing to the neon sign.

The recommended allocation for rent, like foreign debt payment, is a third of the budget.

What kind of slip is the anchor’s repeated substitution of national for natural disaster?

It wouldn’t have happened if it didn’t have to happen. Etc.

The usually slick interviewer stutters her way to the right preposition.

In bed we play ourselves on the day we met.

Dear animal, I say to the shell on the windowsill.
Notes

1. Literary production in English in the Philippines, as is the case in other colonized nations, began in the university. “Filipino literature in English was born on the college campus, and on the campus of the University of the Philippines rather than elsewhere,” writes Salvador P. Lopez (119). Established by the Americans in 1908, the University of the Philippines is called “the cradle of Philippine Letters in English” by Gémino H. Abad (Our Scene So Fair 2).

2. Produced by college students, early literature in English by Filipinos was first circulated on the university campus. The College Folio of the University of the Philippines, which featured poems, essays, and stories by campus writers, was first published in October 1910 (Patke and Holden 63).

3. Edel Garcellano clarifies that Lopez and Villa are two sides of the same ideological coin. Despite the call for a proletarian literature, Lopez’s analysis remains the same “old liberal critique of society,” which “papers over class differences and fails to confront the semi-capitalist, semi-feudal structure that allows such gross, inhuman hierarchical distinctions.” A true counterpoint to Lopez and Villa, according to Garcellano, is Jose Ma. Sison, poet and founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines. While the “Villa archetype” (with which the Lopez tradition is aligned) is bourgeois, the “Sison genre” is “proletariat, expressing a centrifugal, open-ended discourse toward the other—ergo, the collective itself” (25).

4. Of the nine signatories of the Philippine Writers’ League manifesto, five were part of the UP Writers’ Club in the late 1920s: Federico Mangahas, Jose A. Lansang, Salvador P. Lopez, F.B. Icasiano, and Amando G. Dayrit.

5. In “From Hybrid Seed,” Torrevillas says the Tiempos were the first non-Americans to graduate from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. There is no record in the vertical files of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop to confirm this, according to Denise Anderson, library assistant in the Special Collections Department of the University of Iowa Libraries. Among the MFA students who graduated ahead of Edilberto Tiempo, there is a graduate from June 1947, Karl Sjogren, whose home address is Wispa, Sweden. His nationality is
unidentified, but he is possibly non-American. In an interview with Alegre and Fernandez, Edilberto Tiempo says he and his wife were the first Filipinos in the program (409).

6. Creative writing was officially institutionalized by the Iowa-trained Tiempos in the 1950s, but Tom Inglis Moore, an Oxford-educated professor of English, could have also brought Iowa-influenced creative writing instruction to the Philippines. Moore had spent time as an instructor at the University of Iowa, where creative writing courses were already being offered, prior to teaching and mentoring young writers at the University of the Philippines from 1928-31. As a mentor to young Filipino writers and an outsider to U.S. colonial relations (Moore was Australian), he believed that the Filipino writer “has to learn not only to write with English but also to write against it… He can use the language correctly, and should use it correctly. But he has to write English without becoming an Englishman or American… a Filipino literature must remain Filipino if it intends to be literature” (qtd. in Hosillos 69). See “About the Workshop” on the Iowa Writers’ Workshop website and Perkins.

7. Former students of the Tiempos teach creative writing in universities all over the country. Alunan mentions Marjorie Evasco and Jaime An-Lim in Manila; Erlinda Alburro, Leoncio Deriada, Elsa Victoria Coscolluela, Ian Rosales Casocot, and Myrna Peña-Reyes in the Visayas; and Anthony Tan, Christine Godinez-Ortega, and Antonino de Veyra in Mindanao (375).

8. A memory of Tiempo from World War II both fortifies and dispels the direct link between colonial education and colonial subjugation. He recalls having once met Colonel Jesus Villamor, a fellow Filipino who worked closely with MacArthur, on a beach south of Dumaguete. Venturing beyond the scope of official business, Tiempo asked Villamor to take a manuscript he had written, a World War II novel set in the Philippines, to the United States through Australia. Villamor obliged, and it pleased Tiempo to think that his manuscript was probably the only one to journey by submarine beyond Philippine shores during the war (Nazareth, Alegre and Fernandez 410-11). The anecdote, on the one hand, celebrates the individual agency derived from creative expression at a time of danger and vulnerability. The effort to smuggle the manuscript out of the country magnifies the empowerment the creative work affords its
maker, as it crosses the borders that the author himself cannot cross. On the other hand, the manuscript is emblematic of the military hold of the United States on the Philippines, now seemingly sublimated into autonomous literary expression but marked by the mediation of colonial education: it is a manuscript written in English by a Filipino. The fact that the author is also a Filipino officer serving the USAFFE reinscribes the military control that is the manuscript’s condition of possibility: the education that facilitates Tiempo’s creative expression is also a tool to enforce his loyalty to the American armed forces. The manuscript later became his MFA thesis at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and his first novel, published as *Watch in the Night* (1953) in the Philippines and *Cry Slaughter* (1957) in both England and America (Alegre and Fernandez 410-11, Klein 66).

9. The exact year of Engle’s visit is unclear. Torrevillas (in “Light on the Mountain” and “From Hybrid Seed”) says he visited in 1962; in “Blue Route,” she specifies that while on tour in Asia, he spent a few weeks in Dumaguete to lecture at the Summer Writers’ Workshop of the Tiempos (86). Bennett states that Engle, while on a Rockefeller-funded tour of Asia in 1963, spent two weeks in the Philippines (*Workshops of Empire* 105). Pernia also pegs the year of Engle’s visit as 1963 (85). He is included in her list of writers who have served on the panel of the Silliman Workshop. In a letter dated 12 February 1963 from the writer Jolico Cuadra to the expatriate poet José García Villa in New York, Cuadra mentions that Engle was going to visit the Silliman Workshop, or so he’d heard.

10. Bennett’s account shows that Engle’s crusade was not without partners: “Hemingway-bedazzled veterans” were in the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in its early years, which purged the writing classroom of “the taint of pink or red affiliations”; small corporations and businessmen from the Midwest responded favorably to Engle’s fundraising pitches, which framed writing programs as an alternative to bohemia, where artistic energies merged with Communist sympathies in the early decades of the twentieth century; publishers such as Gardner Cowles, Jr. (of *Look*) and Henry Luce (of *Time* and *Life*) provided the media mileage to bolster Iowa’s image as home to the American way of life (“Creative Writing” 381-82). Through charitable foundations that also functioned as tax shelters, large corporations poured money into
academic programs and provided the state with resources to recruit intellectuals outside the United States (379, 381). Bennett singles out the Rockefeller Foundation as a major funder of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop during Engle’s tenure as its director, as evident in its generous grant to the program in 1953, its sponsorship of writers from abroad in the 1950s to study in the US, “often under Engle’s wing,” and its financing in 1963 of Engle’s months-long trip to Asia, “where he scouted talent among politically uncommitted individuals in the capitals of the East” (382). Similarly, the Farfield Foundation, a CIA front that invested in cultural efforts abroad through the Congress for Cultural Freedom, was one of the initial funding sources of the International Writing Program (IWP), which Engle established in 1967 upon his resignation as director of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop (Bennett, “How Iowa”; Bennett, “Letter: On the CIA”). Among Filipinos, the Tiempos were early recipients of Rockefeller Foundation grants, and those who attended the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in the 1950s through its support include Bienvenido Santos, Ricaredo Demetillo, and Francisco Arcellana. For biographical notes of the Tiempos, Santos, Arcellana, and Demetillo, see Abad, Cruz, Hidalgo, Yuson, and Manlapaz; Alegre and Fernandez; Abad and Manlapaz.

11. Put into effect shortly after the declaration of Philippine independence, the 1947 Military Bases Agreement authorized the operations of 23 US bases in the Philippines for 99 years. Over forty amendments between 1947 and 1991 paved the way for the historic termination by the Philippine Senate of the Military Bases Agreement in 1992 (Yeo 37-38); however, a mere seven years later, the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) of 1999 once again allowed US military forces to operate in the Philippines. The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) of 2014 authorized the increase in presence of US military forces, as well as the construction of US military bases and stations in areas belonging to the Philippine military (Bello; Sison, “US and Philippines”).

12. Salvador P. Lopez, advocate of art committed to social change, came to represent the opposition. Because Villa and Lopez contemporaneously wrote about the relationship of literature and society, their
names are routinely invoked as shorthand for art for art’s sake and literature in the service of society, respectively.

13. Tiempo recalls that Warren presided over a discussion of student texts, which he was given copies of sans the names of the authors. (The Silliman Workshop adapted this practice of anonymous workshop pieces, emphasizing objectivity and the author’s impersonality.) The first poem he picked, “The Pane,” was Tiempo’s; she said Warren liked it for “the imagery which was very, very sharp, and then the paradox at the end. I was beginning to catch on by that time” (Alegre and Fernandez 451).


15. Both Baquiran and Cleto confirmed this via personal correspondence.

16. Culture was part of Marcos’s totalitarian vision of a modern nation under his heroic leadership. He positioned himself and his wife Imelda as indispensable “parental figures” who were “the incarnation of the nation’s renewal”; cultural programs during their reign, which operated under the slogan “Isang Banza, Isang Diwa” (One Nation, One Soul), saw national culture built from a mythicized past that embodied “Great Malayan culture” as a foundation of national progress (Lico 39-43).


18. Tiempo similarly mistrusts local color. Recalling a visiting American writer who told the young writers of Silliman University to use local proper nouns to particularize their poetry, Tiempo says, rather solemnly, “there is no short-cut to redemption” (“Philippine Poetry” 271).
19. It may be argued that the Silliman Workshop is still Manila-centric. Based on the roster on its website, of the sixteen writers who served on the panel in 2014, ten are based in Manila, and three are based abroad. In 2015, of the twelve panelists, eight are based in Manila and two abroad.

20. According to the Silliman Workshop website, the first international writer invited to be part of the panel is Xu Xi of Hong Kong, who visited in 2010 (“About”). Why Engle, who visited in the 1960s, does not count as an early (or the first) international writer of the Workshop is unclear. Pernia’s list of writers who served on the panel includes several Americans aside from Engle, such as Hortense Calisher, Kelly Cherry, William Gaddis, and Kenneth Rexroth.

21. Villa’s decision to move to the US is attributed not only to a hostile relationship with his father, but also an obscenity charge for a series of poems he published called “Man Songs.” The charge led to a fine and his suspension from the University of the Philippines, where he was a law student (Abad and Manlapaz 411-12, Espiritu 79-82).

22. Villa’s national identity has often served as a point of entry into his work, regulating its reception, which, in the United States, has oscillated over time between visibility and invisibility, and, in the Philippines, between relevance and irrelevance. For example, Alfred Kreymborg, an early critic of his work in the US, attributes the reinvigoration of the English language in Have Come, Am Here to the otherness of the poet, describing Villa as “a youthful Filippino [sic] who comes to us through our own language and who has enriched that language with delightful inventions” (18). Babette Deutsch is similarly inclined, suggesting that “[t]he fact that [Villa] is a native of the Philippines who comes to the English language as a stranger may have helped him to his unusual syntax” (512). Timothy Yu, in his survey of the reviews of Villa’s books upon their release in the United States, observes that critics who foreground Villa’s national identity “tend to be more negative, further suggesting that nationality disrupts the modernist criteria of judgment” (48). Racialized and racist readings of Villa’s work trace its flaws to, among others, Filipino Catholicism and a weak grasp of English (48, 52); this dissociated him, in the process, from the Anglo-American tradition, and caused him, in time, to become virtually unknown.
Jonathan Chua tracks the changing reception of Villa’s work in the Philippines when he writes, “[Villa] was defined, at various times, as the leader of a group of avant-garde writers, a token of the native genius, a ‘decadent esthete,’ a prop for nationalization, and an instrument of American imperialism” (“Villa in Print” 291).

23. For instance, Republic Act No. 1425, or the Rizal Law, passed in the mid-1950s and still in effect, requires all public and private schools, colleges, and universities in the country to teach the life and work of national hero Jose Rizal, specifically his novels, the Spanish-language texts *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. The novels led to the arrest and execution of Rizal and proved instrumental in propelling the 1896 revolution and the declaration of Philippine independence two years later. The Rizal Law, which situates Rizal’s novels at the heart of national culture, presumes and advocates the usefulness of literature as a tool to promote nationalism.

24. Although the Villa-Lopez binary serves to clarify two conflicting stances on the function of literature in society, it is important to recognize that the relationship of Villa and Lopez was not merely oppositional. Lopez wrote the introductions to Villa’s first two books of poetry in the Philippines; *Poems by Doveglion* and Lopez’s *Literature and Society* were the two books published by the Philippine Writers’ League (Chua, “Villa in Print” 134). Villa was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of the Philippines during Lopez’s tenure as the university’s president. Such links between the key figures of opposing camps complicate the divide between art for art’s sake and literature in the service of society that they came to represent.

25. Recent readings of Villa’s work retrieve him from the realm of the apolitical through situating him in the intersection of queerness and postcoloniality. Martin Joseph Ponce explores both Villa’s poetry and fiction to track how he dismantles heteronormativity through “formal innovation but also through an equally experimental logic of love” (59). Garcia sets aside Villa’s poetry to focus on his fiction, in which “the pathologizing discourse of homosexuality” both impedes and empowers him as a discursive subject (“Villa, Montano, Perez” 168). The anthology *Aura: The Gay Theme in Philippine Fiction in English*
(Anvil Publishing, 2012), edited by Garcia, opens with two stories by Villa, who inaugurates the production of queer Philippine fiction in English, according to the chronologically arranged anthology.

26. In his 1942 review of Have Come, Am Here and Chorus for America, Alfred Kreymborg identifies Villa as the poet whom Bulosan does not name in his introduction.

27. *Footnote to Youth: Tales of the Philippines and Others* (Scribner’s, 1933) and “Song of Ripeness” published by the *Philippines Herald* in 1929, are early works by Villa that suggest his ethnicity, if not identify him as Filipino.

28. It is interesting to note that the other writer honored with the National Artist Award in 1973 is Amado Hernandez, a known radical and committed writer, who was granted the award posthumously. Kris Montañez sees the move to honor Hernandez as a means for the dictatorship to de-fang and co-opt his revolutionary status (62-63).

29. Villa received numerous national honors with financial compensation, and repeatedly gained employment in Philippine government offices in the United States, despite a track record of unprofessional behavior. The Commonwealth government of Manuel Quezon in Washington D.C. supposedly attempted to employ Villa several times, but Villa repeatedly left his job without filing a formal resignation. For being at work only on paydays, Villa was fired from his job at the Philippine UN Mission in 1962. It seems logical to conclude that the national identity he denied in his work was beneficial in life for the economic support he could receive from the Philippine government (Espiritu 88-90).

30. Abad contends that “from the mere fact that the author is Filipino, one may legitimately assume that the experience as represented in the poem is ‘a Filipino matter’” (*Our Scene So Fair* 217).

31. In *Misplaced Ideas*, Schwarz characterizes the appropriation of the European novel in Brazilian literature as “foreign debt,” which is “as inevitable in Brazilian letters as it is in any other field, and is not simply an easily dispensable part of the work in which it appears, but a complex feature of it” (50). In his reading of José de Alencar’s *Senhora*, he points out the formal discrepancies arising from the combination.
of liberal ideology and a slave economy. Because the European novel’s structure is unable to accommodate the culture of “favour” in Brazilian life, Alencar resolves this “lack” through a method that enacts the “split vision” of the postcolonial author. He creates a secondary world that registers the specific Brazilian reality, a revision of form which affects the manner in which the novel unfolds (51-53).

32. The Philippines has been mired in foreign debt since the plunder of its coffers by President Ferdinand Marcos during his dictatorship in the 1970s. The country’s foreign debt rose from USD 1 billion to USD 28 billion under the Marcos regime. Roughly a third of these loans was pocketed by Marcos and his cronies. It is projected that Filipino taxpayers, who have been shouldering payments for fraudulent debts incurred by Marcos, have to bear this burden until 2025 (Freedom from Debt Coalition).

33. Exclusionary powers are not the sole province of English in the Philippines, for Filipino also homogenizes in seeking to unify its constituents, recreating internally the stratifications propagated by the colonialism that it seeks to combat. In 1937, President Manuel Quezon issued Executive Order 134 and made Filipino, with Tagalog as its basis, the country’s national language (Tupaz). In a move toward unifying the Filipino people, Quezon conflated the term for the lingua franca with the term for the country’s citizens and institutionalized the domination of Tagalog among the local languages in nation formation. The unified nation that the national language constitutes and contains is also the result of what it displaces and marginalizes.

34. “A ,,Composition,,” is described as an “artifact/manifesto” by San Juan (“Articulating a Third World Modernism” 207). It is classified as an essay in The Anchored Angel.

35. Villa began using the pen name “Doveglion “ in 1938. Chua observes that Villa deployed pseudonyms (“O. Sevilla” was an earlier nom de plume) not to disguise his identity but to call attention to the construction of a persona in his work. The three animals combined to produce Doveglion, according to Villa, stand for gentleness (dove), wisdom (eagle), and courage (lion) (“Villa in Print” 102-05, 117-18).

36. This draft is among Villa’s notes in box 11 of the José Garcia Villa archives at Houghton Library, Harvard University.
37. Villa traveled to the United States as an American colonial subject (he arrived prior to the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934, which granted the Philippines Commonwealth status). He lived and died a Filipino citizen (Veric 54).

38. “Filipino” refers to the national language of the Philippines. In 1937, President Manuel L. Quezon decreed Tagalog, the language of the capital, as the basis for the national language. What used to be called “Pilipino” (there is no letter ‘f’ in Tagalog) was changed to “Filipino” in the 1987 Constitution in the effort to produce a more inclusive national language. The change from ‘p’ to ‘f’ signified the expansion of the alphabet to include sounds present in other native languages. Although Filipino is supposed to be a mixture of the various native languages of the Philippines, it remains Tagalog-based (Rafael, “Filipino, the language that is not one”; “Filipino is no longer Tagalog”).

39. Traditional Tagalog poetry has four essential features: sukat (meter), tugma (rhyme), talinghaga (metaphor), and kariktan (beauty). The tradition regards the nineteenth-century poet Balagtas as its model (Chua, Introduction 9). Lacaba cites Rolando Tinio and Bienvenido Lumbera, professors in the Ateneo English Department when he was a student, as colleagues in writing poetry in Filipino whom he met in the university. The Bagay Poets valued imagery and conversational language in their work; they also ventured into the use of Taglish (a mix of Tagalog and English). They first published their work collectively in the early 1960s, in the university-publication Heights, probably the first instance that an official publication of the university published texts written in the native tongue (“Balik-wika”).

40. The editors of Kamao, an anthology of protest poetry from 1970 to 1986, identify several poets who wrote in English yet were socially conscious in their work: Jose Maria Sison, Alan Jazmines, Gelacio Guillermo, Clarita Roja, Mila D. Aguilar. Most, if not all, these poets also wrote in Filipino and were active in the national democratic movement (Salanga et al. xxviii). The apoliticism of the Torres anthology, which Montañez criticized, is unsurprising. Published by the Department of Public Information, the book was sanctioned and supported by the state. In his foreword, Minister of Public Information Francisco S. Tatad (who is most remembered for announcing the declaration of martial law
on television) describes the book as among “the nonpolitical seedlings of the democratic revolution” cultivated by the Marcos government. Kris Montañez is the nom de plume of writer and critic Gelacio Guillermo.

41. Also known as the 1986 People Power Revolution or the Edsa Revolution (named after the main avenue where hundreds of thousands of citizens converged to oust Marcos), the Edsa uprising was the apex of massive civilian dissent against Marcos. Widespread civilian unrest began upon the assassination Benigno Aquino, Jr. three years earlier and was amplified during the snap elections that preceded the revolution, in which the dictator and Corazon Aquino, the late senator’s widow, vied for the presidency. Edsa paved the way for Aquino to be installed as president of the Philippines and rekindled hope in the realization of an equitable Philippine society. Decades later, the historic event is said to have ushered in a regime change rather than social change; it ultimately restored an elite democracy, ruled by both new and longstanding oligarchs (Rafael, “What was Edsa?”).

42. Prior to founding the CPP in 1968, Jose Ma. Sison graduated with a degree in English from the University of the Philippines; he also taught with the English Department of the same university. In his address to PAKSA, he rejected most of the poems in his first book of poetry, *Brothers and Other Poems*, for failing to live up to the standards of truly proletarian literature. His most famous poem is “The Guerrilla is Like a Poet” (Sison, “Mga Tungkulin ng mga Kadre”; Ordoñez, “A Revolutionary is not a ‘Terrorist’”).

43. Songs, for instance, are favored for their portability: they are circulated through performance rather than print; they are brief and easy to memorize, translate, and adapt; they recycle and insert new content into existing forms from oral tradition or popular tunes heard from the radio; they concisely convey the stories, sentiments, and beliefs of those engaged in the struggle (Montañez 33, 41-42).

44. In 1967, de los Santos called for the resignation of Marcos and led his followers in a revolt in Manila, which ended in the massacre of Lapiang Malaya members as well as de los Santos’s detention and eventual death in a mental hospital (Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution* 1-2).
45. The New Critics and their affiliates were severe in their criticism of Shelley. For instance, Brooks and Warren, in *Understanding Poetry*, cite Shelley’s “The Indian Serenade” as an example of sentimentality (322). T.S. Eliot relegates Shelley’s ideas to the realm of “adolescence” and deems Shelley to be a poet of personality rather than impersonality. This makes reading Shelley’s work difficult to divorce from the poet himself, who, says Eliot, “was humourless, pedantic, self-centred, and sometimes almost a blackguard” (89).

46. Yeb Saño’s exact words were: “Disasters are never natural. They are the intersection of factors other than physical. They are the accumulation of the constant breach of economic, social, and environmental thresholds. Most of the time disasters is a result of inequity and the poorest people of the world are at greatest risk because of their vulnerability and decades of maldevelopment, which I must assert is connected to the kind of pursuit of economic growth that dominates the world; the same kind of pursuit of so-called economic growth and unsustainable consumption that has altered the climate system” (“‘It’s time to stop this madness’”).

47. Two years later, less than ten percent of the 16,331 houses pledged by the government and non-government organizations for typhoon victims have been built. Thousands of families remain in makeshift housing (Bonifacio; “Philippines – Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan Fact Sheet #22”).

48. The top destinations for exported Filipino laborers, in order, are as follows: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Kuwait and Qatar, and Hong Kong. Approximately a third of the 2.32 million OFWs are laborers and unskilled workers. Remittances from OFWs total P173.19 billion. Statistics on Hong Kong’s domestic workers are as of February 2015 (Uy, Mandap).

49. In the court’s language, “The foreign domestic helper is obliged to return to the country of origin at the end of the contract and is told from the outset that admission is not for the purposes of settlement” (“Hong Kong’s foreign maids lose legal battle for residency”).

50. Among the facts commonly cited in biographical sketches of Villa is his stint as an associate editor of New Directions, a publisher affiliated with experimental and avant-garde writing, from 1949 to 1951.
New Directions published *Volume Two* (1949) Villa’s second book of poetry released in the United States. The book was not as well received as his first book of poetry, *Have Come, Am Here* (1942). The lukewarm reception, writes Timothy Yu, can be attributed to the book’s incompatibility with the modernist orientalism discreetly employed to celebrate his arrival in the American literary scene six years earlier (42). Villa, it seemed, had become too universal and not ethnic enough in his second book of poetry. This angry letter by Villa, which is included in the poet’s archive at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, suggests that a falling-out with his employer, who was also his publisher, could have contributed to the eventual invisibility of his work in his adopted country.

51. The term “world republic of letters” is borrowed from Pascale Casanova.

52. I borrow from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, underscores the inescapability of the subaltern’s status as muted subject and the limits of representation as a project.


54. A fuller description of the randomizer project is on available at himaamsir.blogspot.com. Servers at Filipino fast food chains greet customers by saying “Hi ma’am sir” quickly, as if the phrase were a single word. The cheery demeanor of the server is undercut by their seemingly automated greeting (the verbal equivalent of “Dear Sir/Madam” in form letters).

55. The letter also described the randomizer as a punishable offense under “the new Cybercrime Law, R.A. 10175.” Filipino literary writers were among those who protested the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 because it criminalizes libel.

56. In “Copy that: Textbook publishing (and photocopying) in the Philippines,” the book historian Patricia May B. Jurilla accounts for the historical and economic factors that fostered and continue to foster “xerox culture,” or the widespread practice of unauthorized reprinting or publishing of textbooks and other reading materials, in the Philippines. She mentions the illicit yet commonplace practice of professors in the University of the Philippines in Diliman, who leave master copies of selected chapters, if not entire books, at “xerox stalls” for students to photocopy. More enterprising xerox stalls at UP Diliman
offer a service called “book-alike”; for an additional fee, they reproduce the master copy, and then cut and bind the reproduction so that it looks like the original book. Jurilla’s study features images of original and book-alike copies of my first book of poetry, which she used as a specimen for reproduction to gather data on the quality and cost of book-alike production.

57. The randomizer reminds me of Dieter Roth’s *Literature Sausage (Literaturwurst)*, which I saw at a retrospective of the artist’s work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 2013. Using a traditional recipe for making sausages, Roth substituted meat with ground-up source texts and made sausages out of work he was jealous of or hated.

58. A complication arising from the legal action involved around a dozen authors included in *Fast Food Fiction* anthology; they were among over 150 writers who signed a collective statement that denounced the threat of a lawsuit (“Order in the Food Court”). The contributors were not consulted regarding the legal action, which, as stated in the demand letter, was made on their behalf. Although the copyright to each story belongs to the individual authors, the copyright to the anthology belongs to the editors. In publicly registering their disagreement with the legal action, the authors shed light on another gray area in the matter of literary property: whether editors could pursue legal action on behalf of the contributors sans consultation with them. Adam opted to forego the legal battle (an interesting test case for fair use as applied in the Philippines, said a sympathetic lawyer whom we consulted) since it would require years of our life, a significant chunk of our limited financial resources, and our inability to speak about the matter publicly throughout the duration of the case. He deleted the randomizer and put up a statement about it on the website instead.
Appendix

Permissions from Publishers of Previously Published Poems Included in the Dissertation
Permission to reprint poems that appeared in Diagram

DIAGRAM <editor@thediagram.com>
To: Conchitina Cruz <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com>

Conchitina: weird that you’d have to ask permission for a dissertation, but sure, no problem. Reprint away.
Ander

On 10/28/16 4:53 PM, Conchitina Cruz wrote:

Dear Editor,

I am writing you to request permission to reprint the poems “Letter to the Stranger” (published in Diagram 10.4) and “Postcards from Here and There” (published in Diagram 12.5), in my dissertation. These poems are part of the creative component of the dissertation, and the dissertation is one of the requirements for me to complete my PhD in English from the University at Albany, State University of New York.

I need to put together an appendix of permissions to reprint my work from all publishers who first published poems included in my dissertation. An email from you stipulating that I can reprint the work that first appeared in your journal would suffice. I hope to hear from you soon— I am eager to submit my dissertation and your permission would speed up the process. Thank you!

Best,
Conchitina Cruz
Dear Conchitina Cruz,

We are happy to inform you that we have accepted the following poems for publication in *Salt Hill* 27: "Five Lines" and "Nobody Does It Better." *Salt Hill* prints only previously unpublished work. If you have already published this work elsewhere, please let us know immediately. In order to comply with 1979 copyright law, we need your signature on this letter as a contract assigning copyright.

**Contract Details**

*Salt Hill* retains first serial publication rights and rights to publish the work in our own anthologies and flyers. You may include your work in an anthology or a collection of your works without obtaining our permission. As a condition of publication in *Salt Hill*, we do request that you give credit to *Salt Hill* as the original publisher if your poems are reprinted elsewhere. *Salt Hill* also retains the right to post your poems on our web site (www.salthilljournal.net), and to include said poems, in perpetuity, in our online archives.

As payment you will receive two complimentary copies of the issue in which your poems appear, and you may purchase additional copies for the reduced price of $6.

Thank you for letting us publish your work in *Salt Hill*.

Sincerely,

Carroll Beauvais and Alice Holbrook
Editors-in-Chief
Salt Hill Journal

Signature assigning copyright __________________________ Date ____________

Name (please print) _____________________________________________

Address ______________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________

Phone number(s) ______________________________________________

E-mail __________________________ Fax # _________________________
Hi Conchitina,

Of course!!! We are so excited to hear that those poems are going to be included! Of course, of course you have all our permission to reprint the work, and more importantly all our congratulations on the it-sounds-like-nearly-complete dissertation!

Congrats & congrats & congrats on your work, your writing, and this major accomplishment!

Yours,
Andrew Wessels
Editor
The Offending Adam

-----Original Message-----
From: "Conchitina Cruz" <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, October 28, 2016 8:04pm
To: "editors@theoffendingadam.com" <editors@theoffendingadam.com>
Subject: Permission to reprint poems that appeared in The Offending Adam

Dear Editors,
I am writing you to request permission to reprint the poems "Letter to the Stranger" and "Here" (published in The Offending Adam 148, 24 June 2013), in my dissertation. These poems are part of the creative component of the dissertation, and the dissertation is one of the requirements for me to complete my PhD in English from the University at Albany, State University of New York.

I need to put together an appendix of permissions to reprint my work from all publishers who first published poems included in my dissertation. An email from you stipulating that I can reprint the work that first appeared in your journal would suffice. I hope to hear from you soon—I am eager to submit my dissertation and your permission would speed up the process. Thank you!

Best,
Conchitina Cruz
Permission to reprint poems that appeared in Cordite Poetry Review

Kent MacCarter <kent@cordite.org.au> Sat, Oct 29, 2016 at 6:08 PM
To: Conchitina Cruz <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com>
Cc: Autumn Royal <autumn.royal@gmail.com>, Ivy Alvarez <ivyalvarez@gmail.com>

Hello, Conchitina

Thanks for getting in touch about the poems. Of course, there is no problem at all with those poems appearing in your dissertation. It was an honour to publish them the first time, and they have been accessed thousands and thousands of times online.

Too, in the future, I look forward to running an interview with you.

Warm regards,

-Kent
Kent MacCarter
Managing Editor, Cordite Poetry Review
Publisher, Cordite Books

---

Cordite Books | Cordite Poetry Review | Submission open for CONFESSION and EXPHRACTIC

PO BOX 393, Carlton South 3053 VIC, AUSTRALIA

We acknowledge and respect the First Nations people as traditional land custodians and their role in international literature.

---

On 29 October 2016 at 20:58, Cordite Poetry Review <cordite@cordite.org.au> wrote:

---------- Forwarded message ----------
From: Conchitina Cruz <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com>
Date: Sat, Oct 29, 2016 at 10:44 AM
Subject: Permission to reprint poems that appeared in Cordite Poetry Review
To: cordite@cordite.org.au

Dear Editor,

I am writing you to request permission to reprint the poems "Exhibition Notes," "Signals," and "Half an Hour in the House of Indecision or Procrastination," which were published by Cordite Poetry Review on October 31, 2012, in my dissertation. My dissertation, which contains both a critical and creative component, is among the requirements for me to complete my PhD in English from the University at Albany, State University of New York.

I need to put together an appendix of permissions to reprint my work from all publishers who first published poems included in my dissertation. An email from you stipulating that I can reprint the work that
Hi Conchitina -

Of course, that's absolutely fine. You have permission to reprint. Rabbit only reserves first rights to publish - after a reasonable amount of time (eg, three months) we're happy for contributors to reprint in their own collections or anthologies.

Yes, we're having a bit of a website headache! Hopefully it will be fixed soon.

Cheero -
Jess (Editor)

On 29 October 2016 at 04:38, Conchitina Cruz <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Stuart and Jessica,

I hope all is well with you. I am writing you to request permission to reprint “Twelve Walks,” a poem of mine that first appeared in Rabbit 14, in my dissertation. I tried visiting rabbitpoetry.com to see if you have a general statement that allows authors you publish to reprint their own work, but it seems the site is down. My dissertation, which contains both a critical and creative component, is among the requirements for me to complete my PhD in English from the University at Albany, State University of New York. I need to put together an appendix of permissions to reprint my work from all publishers who first published poems included in my dissertation. An email from you stipulating that I can reprint the work that first appeared in your journal would suffice. I hope to hear from you soon—I am eager to submit my dissertation and your permission would speed up the process. Thank you!

Best,
Conchitina Cruz

On Tuesday, February 10, 2015, Jessica Wilkinson <jessica.wilkinson@rmit.edu.au> wrote:

Dear Conchitina -
Thanks for being patient as we bring Rabbit 14 (guest edited by Stuart Cooke) to completion. We’re almost going to print!

I have attached proofs of your poem: please check carefully and let me know if there are any errors that have occurred in the typesetting by Thursday evening at the latest.

With all best wishes -
Rabbit Poetry Journal

Dr Jessica Wilkinson
Senior Lecturer, Creative and Professional Writing
Media and Communications
RMIT University, Melbourne, 3001
Office location 36.3.5

Dr Jessica Wilkinson
Senior Lecturer, Creative and Professional Writing
Editor, Rabbit: a journal for nonfiction poetry

https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/?ui=2&ik=7e121f8a41&view=pt&search=inbox&me=&gole=15800e11197238e&dse=1&surl=15800e11197238e
Request to reprint poem published in High Chair Issue 20:1

Allan Popa <allanpopa@gmail.com>
To: Conchitina Cruz <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com>

Dear Conchitina Cruz,

As requested, you may, of course, reprint the poem "Arrest" in your dissertation.

Allan Popa
Editor
High Chair 20:1

Sent from my iPhone

On Oct 29, 2016, at 8:23 AM, Conchitina Cruz <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Editor,

I am writing you to request permission to reprint the poem "Arrest" (published in High Chair 20:1), in my dissertation. These poems are part of the creative component of the dissertation, and the dissertation is one of the requirements for me to complete my PhD in English from the University at Albany, State University of New York.

I need to put together an appendix of permissions to reprint my work from all publishers who first published poems included in my dissertation. An email from you stipulating that I can reprint the work that first appeared in your journal would suffice. I hope to hear from you soon—I am eager to submit my dissertation and your permission would speed up the process. Thank you!

Best,
Conchitina Cruz
Request to reprint poem first published by Kritika Kultura

Vincenz Serrano <vserrano@ateneo.edu> 
To: chingbee <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com>
Cc: "Jocelyn S. Martin" <jmartin@ateneo.edu>, "Kritika Kultura [LS]" <kk.soh@ateneo.edu>

Dear Dr. Cruz,

Thank you for letting us know, and congratulations on your dissertation.

You may reprint 'There Is No Emergency' in your dissertation.

Kindly let us know when we can access your work in the SUNY digital repository.

Sincerely yours,
Vincenz Serrano
Editor
Kritika Kultura
Ateneo de Manila University

On 29 October 2016 at 08:12, Conchitina Cruz <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Editors,

I am writing you to request permission to reprint the poem "There Is No Emergency" (published in Kritika Kultura 23, 2014) in my dissertation. The poem is part of the creative component of my dissertation, and the dissertation is one of the requirements for me to complete my PhD in English from the University at Albany, State University of New York.

I need to put together an appendix of permissions to reprint my work from all publishers who first published poems included in my dissertation. An email from you stipulating that I can reprint the work that first appeared in your journal would suffice. I hope to hear from you soon--I am eager to submit my dissertation and your permission would speed up the process. Thank you!

Best,
Conchitina Cruz
Dear Ms Cruz,

As you may already know, the Youth & Beauty Brigade as a legal entity holds no copyright at all for any of its publications, as it always remains with the author. But for the purposes of documentation: you may do with your poems whatever you see fit; the Youth & Beauty Brigade has no right over them.

Beshies,
AD

On Mon, Oct 31, 2016 at 2:49 PM, Conchitina Cruz <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Adam,

I am writing to request permission to reprint the following poems in my dissertation: "The Terrible Moment," "Box," "Rain," "The Natural World," "Fire," and "Ruse." These poems first appeared in Thursday Never Looking Back. They have been revised and are incorporated into a longer poem in the dissertation. Since I am a co-publisher of Thursday Never Looking Back as part of the Youth & Beauty Brigade, I am in the position to grant myself permission to republish my work, but I figured it would be best to run this by you as my partner in our publishing enterprise.

Best,
CC
Gmail - Permission to reprint poetry that appeared in Two or Three Things about Desire (published by CUP in 2013)

Conchitina Cruz <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com>

Permission to reprint poetry that appeared in Two or Three Things about Desire (published by CUP in 2013)

Chinese University Press Business Division <b103476@mailserv.cuhk.edu.hk> Mon, Oct 31, 2016 at 2:22 PM
To: Conchitina Cruz <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com>

Hi Conchitina Cruz,

Permission granted. Please acknowledge source.

Wishing you all the best with your dissertation.

Angelina Wong

The Chinese University Press

From: Conchitina Cruz [mailto:chingbee.cruz@gmail.com]
Sent: Saturday, October 29, 2016 7:32 AM
To: CUP-BUS
Subject: Permission to reprint poetry that appeared in Two or Three Things about Desire (published by CUP in 2013)

Hello,

I am writing you to request permission to reprint the poems that appeared in Two or Three Things about Desire, a chapbook I authored which you published in 2013 as part of the International Poetry Nights in Hong Kong 2013. The poems in this chapbook are included in my dissertation, which contains both a critical and creative component, and is among the requirements for me to complete my PhD in English from the University at Albany, State University of New York. The poems in the chapbook are incorporated into a larger set of poems in the dissertation. Some of the poems in the chapbook have been revised. The dissertation does not include the translations of the poems into Chinese.

I need to put together an appendix of permissions to reprint my work from all publishers who first published poems included in my dissertation. An email from you stipulating that I can reprint the work that appeared in Two or Three Things about Desire would suffice. I hope to hear from you soon--I am eager to submit my dissertation and your permission would speed up the process. Thank you!

Best,

Conchitina Cruz
Permission to reprint There Is No Emergency

Adam David <davidfostenvalastik@gmail.com>  
To: Conchitina Cruz <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com>  
Cc: the Youth & Beauty Brigade Books <ybb.books@gmail.com>

Wed, Nov 2, 2016 at 4:41 AM

Dear Ms Cruz,

They're your words, not mine, so you can do whatever you want with them.

Better,

AD

On Mon, Oct 31, 2016 at 2:52 PM, Conchitina Cruz <chingbee.cruz@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Adam,

I am writing to request permission to reprint There Is No Emergency in my dissertation. A version of this poetry manuscript was published by the Youth & Beauty Brigade in 2015. It has been revised for the dissertation. Since I am a co-publisher of There Is No Emergency as part of the Youth & Beauty Brigade, I am in the position to grant myself permission to republish my work, but I figured it would be best to run this by you as my partner in our publishing enterprise.

Best,

CC
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