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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Marginal Voices, Silenced Annotations: Notes on the Life of Edith L. Tiempo

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## Abstract

The popular version of National Artist for Literature Edith L. Tiempo is that she holds a central position as the literary matriarch of the Philippines. However, little is known about her background as a partly tribal (indigenous) woman. This paper proposes that biography can be a form of intervention to recuperate silenced narratives and marginal lives. Drawing from the ideas of the Geneva School of Consciousness, biography can be seen as a form of reading, where latent images in an author's works can be made manifest and reveal hidden narratives in the author's life. Edith's life and works yield images of monkeys, the sea, cage, rage, fish thrashing around, double personalities of the same consciousness, among others. They point to the tension of her complex background as a partly tribal woman with Western upbringing, causing her to be in a limbo. The concept of "Between-Living" (a title of Edith's poem) captures this in-between state while it also ushers in the idea of the "unfinishability" of biography and the nation—offering possibilities in rewriting the nation.

**Keywords:** Edith L. Tiempo, Biography, Nation, National Artist, Indigenous

“[T]o really know me, this is what I am afraid of[.]”—  
this fear was in her subconscious, the fear of coming  
out of herself.”

—Edith on Marina in *His Native Coast*  
(from *Writers and Their Milieu: An Oral History*  
of *Second Generation Writers in English*)

“It doesn't mean you are not a writer when the pen is not touching paper,” National Artist for Literature Edith L. Tiempo once said to fiction writer Timothy R. Montes.<sup>1</sup> Writers were comforted whenever they heard

this from Edith because it meant that they were writing even when they were not putting pen to paper. Edith explained in an interview: “You don't have to put your pen to paper to be a writer, because while you're doing this one chore, while you're looking at that other, while you're merely talking with somebody, you are being a writer” (Alegre and Fernandez 454).

In the same way, biography is not only about the visible and tangible facts of a person's life. Biography also navigates the unknown parts of a person's life when it explores how a life is lived. Part of the

biographer's task is to discover the stories that are "unwritten"—those that do not make it to print yet are a vital part of a person's life. Some of these stories may be left "unwritten" because they are part of the "excess"<sup>2</sup>—those that did not make the cut, so to speak, because they do not contribute to the master narrative. What are such stories?

In the life story of the nation, there are also "unwritten" narratives of people and events, because they/these are considered insignificant. It is these "unwritten" stories of the marginalized and disenfranchised that this paper will like to shine a light on. In unearthing stories buried in the life of poet Edith L. Tiempo as an indigenous person, it illustrates how the life of the individual is a microcosm of the nation. By making space for the "excess" in biography, this is a cue to rewrite not only one person's life, but the life of the nation as well.

### National Portrait

When she was a young bride fresh out of war, Edith L. Tiempo (together with her husband Edilberto K. Tiempo) attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop under the renowned creative writing director Paul Engle in the late 1940s (Lara, "Silliman University"). Then and now, it remains the best creative-writing workshop throughout the world (Casocot). After her exposure to the workshop, from writing poems that were marked with a romantic idiom, Edith quickly learned to write in the vein of New Criticism.

It was the Tiempos' stint in the Iowa Writers' Workshop that eventually led them to establish the first writers' workshop in Asia—the Silliman University National Writers Workshop (SUNWW) in 1962 (Lara, "Silliman University").<sup>3</sup> This workshop has produced some of the major writers in Philippine literature in English. Some of the "graduates" of this workshop eventually started their own writers' workshops in the universities they are affiliated with in different parts of the Philippines. Thus, the Tiempos may be credited with indirectly contributing to the growth of regional literature (Alunan 375, 377).<sup>4</sup>

Edith wrote poetry, fiction, essays, and literary criticism, but she was best known as a poet. As a poet, Edith L. Tiempo has been hailed by Gemino Abad as "our finest poet in the New Critical tradition" (*Likhaan* 12). She was the only female poet in Leonard Casper's

*Six Filipino Poets* (1954), a collection of poetry by Filipinos writing in the New Critical vein. Edith started out as one of the forerunners of New Criticism in Philippine literature, but she eventually found her own voice, too.

In an interview with Edna Z. Manlapaz and Marjorie Evasco, she revealed that she aligned herself with the Romantic tradition (Tiempo, "Rhythm" 21). Furthermore, she explained: "If [a woman] turns off her inner promptings and instead attempts to be purely objective, I think the effect will be artificial because the life springs are not there" (21). In his introduction to Edith's third collection of poetry *Beyond, Extensions*, Gémino H. Abad writes,

Edith established a tradition in writing that to the present invigorates Philippine letters in English. This tradition may be said to have two distinguishing marks: a fine critical sense for language and poetic form, and a ceaseless quest for that synergy of idea and emotion by which the Filipino sensibility is most fully expressed: 'the heart and the mind, both.' (xiii)

She has transformed the New Critical idiom and made it her own: attuning it both to her as well as to the Filipino's sensibility.

In 1999, Edith L. Tiempo became the first female writer to be declared National Artist for literature. Her lifework as a writer and teacher has placed an indelible mark on the landscape of Philippine literature in English.

### The Life-Stories on Edith L. Tiempo

A number of scholars and writers have already written about the life of Edith L. Tiempo in the form of interviews (oral history) and biographical narratives.<sup>5</sup> The landmark interview that Edilberto N. Alegre and Doreen G. Fernandez conducted with Edith in *Writers and Their Milieu: An Oral History of Second Generation Writers in English* (1987) remains the most comprehensive. They followed the chronological timeline of her life: birth, education, marriage, writer's journey as well as a discussion of her creative process and seminal works.

Roger J. Bresnahan's *Conversations with Filipino Writers* (1990) delivered on its promise—it was a conversation with a Filipino writer. He covered topics

more spontaneously, touching on both the life and work of the writer. An important contribution of Bresnahan was to get Edith to elucidate on her ideas in her critical essays.

Edna Zapanta Manlapaz and Marjorie Evasco's "Edith L. Tiempo: Poetry as the Rhythm of Violets" (1996) differed from the two earlier interviews because their focus was on writing the "herstory" of Filipino women poets. They asked Edith questions about her life and poems, but from the lens of a woman. It was from this interview that Edith revealed the tradition and/or influence she belonged to—that of a Romantic, contrary to the popular view of her as a New Critic.

Susan S. Lara's essay "Dwelling in Possibilities: An Interview with National Artist Edith L. Tiempo" (2008) wove together the earlier interviews into one coherent narrative. She also included new details and insights from her own interview with Edith L. Tiempo. The motif of family ran throughout the narrative, which focused on Edith as a maternal figure (she is popularly known to workshop fellows as Mom Edith) who built the house of Philippine literature in English.

These works have helped form the master narrative of Edith L. Tiempo as a central figure in Philippine literary history—as a post-war writer, New Critic, female poet, literary matriarch, and so on and so forth. Yet, her indigenous heritage remains a buried narrative in her life and is still largely unexplored. This project highlights this relatively unknown aspect of her life to reveal how it is actually central to her life-work.

### Marginal Annotations

According to novelist Linda Ty-Casper: "If a country's history is its biography,... 'its literature is its autobiography...'" (qtd. in Hau, "Autobiography and History" 107). In the biography of the nation, Edith L. Tiempo occupies a premier place as a National Artist for literature. This journey was not always easy, such as when the wave of nationalism rose in the late 1960s and the Tiempos' work was deemed irrelevant (Manlapaz 2).<sup>6</sup> Still, she soldiered on and *persevered*. Gémino H. Abad wrote in his introduction to Edith's third collection of poetry *Beyond, Extensions*: "In our literary history, there are innumerable writers, but only a few persevere. To these few we owe our literature" (xv).

This is the popular version of her life, which has established Edith's crucial role in Philippine literature in English. Yet, while she is seen as a central figure in Philippine nation, there are silenced narratives in her life that are yet to be told. Edith is fond of saying that every poem has a story that is buried underneath.<sup>7</sup> This is instructive in re-reading Edith's life as a "poem": what is her story that is buried underneath?

One of the "marginal annotations" (to use the title of her poem) on Edith L. Tiempo's life is how she is of Spanish and indigenous descent. While this has been documented and is known among her literary children, it is not "central" in the discourse on Edith L. Tiempo. Moreover, her American training (both in the Philippines and in Iowa) has made her life the case of an individual allegorizing the nation, where there is a tension between tradition and modernity.

Edith hails from Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, and belongs to the indigenous group of the Gaddang.<sup>8</sup> The Gaddang are found in Bayombong, as well as in Solano and Bagabag in Nueva Vizcaya. They may also be found in other areas of Isabela, and to a lesser extent, Ifugao and the Mountain Province (Cosing). Historically, there have been several incursions of the Spanish colonizers into the territory of the upland Gaddang. They have succeeded in converting a number of them. These converts became identified as the Christianized lowland Gaddang, while those who resisted colonization were referred to as the non-Christianized upland Gaddang. Today, the lowland Gaddang have been integrated into modern society to such extent that "there is little to distinguish the Gaddang from other Christian Filipinos, whether in the rural or urban areas" (Cosing).

Edith is an example of a Gaddang who has blended in with other "Christian Filipinos." She herself is a Christian Filipino, which may lead people to identify her more with Christian Filipinos than with the non-Christianized Gaddang. Yet, it is the blood of the Gaddang that is running through her veins. She has since moved from her hometown in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya to live in different parts of the Philippines (due to a peripatetic childhood). In her adult years, she has found her second home in Dumaguete, Negros Oriental.

Edith's indigenous heritage is buried in her literary and critical works and only resurfaces there as marginal annotations, yet it is central to Edith's creative universe.

## Biography as Marginal Annotations

Biography in Filipino is *talambuhay*. While the etymology of the word “biography” is “life writing,” *talambuhay* refers to “notes on a life.” The Filipino word for notes is *tala*, with the accent on the second syllable, while *buhay* refers to *life*. *Tala*, with the accent on the first syllable, can also mean a star, suggesting that biography is about noteworthy lives.<sup>9</sup>

Edith L. Tiempo, as the first female National Artist for literature, fits the description of a “noteworthy” life. Yet, in the realm of biographical writing, what is noteworthy? Biography, as “marginal annotations,” can add new notes or notations to the existing narratives on a writer’s life. On the other hand, biography as marginal annotation can also add to the undoing of myths and the dismantling of hierarchical categories.

As a myth-making genre, biography can be used to create subjects of the nation, that is, individuals who live noteworthy lives. Yet, biography can also serve as a site to recuperate marginalized and oppressed voices. Caroline Hau in her book *On the Subject of the Nation* (2004), writes about the auto/biography *Sa Tungki ng Ilong ng Kaaway: Talambuhay ni Tatang*: “*Tungki* holds up a reinvigorated notion of auto/biography as a potentially progressive genre for recuperating and empowering politically marginalized voices, as well as recasting the terms of nationalist representation (again understood as proxy and portrait) in potentially liberating ways” (119).

By bringing to light marginal aspects of Edith’s life as a partly tribal woman, it offers new ways of reading her life and work. Consequently, it offers possibilities of redefining what makes a noteworthy or notable subject in biography and in the nation.

## Edith L. Tiempo and the Geneva School

In unearthing the stories buried in the life of Edith L. Tiempo, I turn to the Geneva School of Consciousness as a way to find the unities in her life and works. The Geneva School can also provide a new way of looking at her works, which are often read through the lens of New Criticism.

“Phenomenological literary theory and criticism are identified with the Geneva School,” which gained prominence in the 1950s and 60s, and has its roots in the philosophy of phenomenology, primarily associated with Edmund Husserl (Magliola 105). It proposes

not an active reading of texts but a passive one. It is not so much about “applying theory” to texts, but more on “thinking the thoughts of another,” to use the felicitous words of its key critic, the Belgian Georges Poulet (1322).

It seeks a “wholly ‘immanent’” reading of the texts until the author’s thoughts becomes one’s own (Eagleton 59). This complements the genre of biography in letting someone’s else’s thoughts take over one’s own. In doing so, one has to “bracket off” all presuppositions. It is “a wholly uncritical, non-evaluative mode of analysis” (59). Rather, Geneva critics “are concerned with the ‘deep structures’ of [the writer’s] mind, which can be found in recurring themes and patterns of imagery; and in grasping these [they] are grasping the way the writer ‘lived’ his world” (59).

Geneva School considers all works by an author as part of the same fictive universe, belonging to the same consciousness. This includes “all available examples of a particular author’s writings, whether published or not...letters, marginalia, journal entries, essays, and fragmentary or aborted texts, as well as literary works in major genres” (Leitch 1318). Critic Terry Eagleton writes: “...phenomenological criticism can thus move with aplomb between the most chronologically disparate, thematically different texts in its resolute hunt for unities” (60).

Geneva critics, however, do not align themselves with biographical criticism: “To know this mind, we must not refer to anything we actually know of the author—biographical criticism is banned—but only to those aspects of his or her consciousness which manifest themselves in the work itself” (59). While Geneva critics discourage biographical criticism, they do acknowledge those “aspects of [the writer’s] consciousness which manifest themselves in the work itself” (59).

It is important to see how the Geneva critics view the “author’s ‘self’”: “The Geneva School, with few exceptions, agrees that biographical criticism or any critical system which treats the author’s ‘self’ in ‘disembodied form’ (that is, as external to the work) is invalid” (Magliola 107). This biographical project on Edith L. Tiempo differs from the “biographical criticism” that Geneva critics have in mind because it does not see the “author’s ‘self’” in “disembodied form (that is, as external to the work)” (107). Rather, this project proposes that Edith’s life and work are mutually implicated in the same way that Edmund Husserl asserts the mutual implication of the subject

and object. In the narrative of Edith's life, the life and work of an author are fused to become one creative universe. To quote a famous line from a poem by William Butler Yeats, "How can we know the dancer from the dance"?

This may seem to run counter to the intentional fallacy (introduced by New Criticism), where a reader cannot interpret a literary work by making assumptions on the intentions of the author. Yet, in her writing and her praxis, Edith (who is perceived as a New Critic) seems to contradict this. She writes in her essay, "Despair and Hope in the Creative Act" (1981): "Indeed there is an open-ended conduit between the writer-as-person and the writer-as-artist that enriches both identities, with the stimulus of the external world on one end, and of the imaginative world, on the other" (Tiempo 300).<sup>10</sup> This echoes the mutual implication of the author's life and work mentioned earlier.

In writing a biographical narrative of Edith L. Tiempo (informed by the Geneva School), it will only be an approximation of their practice. This paper will draw only from those ideas of the Geneva school that will be relevant to the task at hand—to read Edith's life in light of her works and vice versa.

### Fish Out of Water

How does one read Edith L. Tiempo—her life and works? In her interview with Roger J. Bresnahan in *Conversations with Filipino Writers*, Edith relates:

The only way you could get at the meaning of things to make them more rich and meaningful is to have another order of things, one that is parallel or superimposed. The danger is when that unreal world obscures the real world rather than somehow merging with it. To me, this unreal plays a most important part in looking at reality. Without that, I think I would be lost myself—as a writer and as a person. (Tiempo, "Edith L. Tiempo" 137)

This may be the reason why the presence of the indigenous, though ubiquitous in the creative universe of Edith L. Tiempo, can hardly be sensed in her works. Even in the quoted passage above, Edith couches her statement in universal terms ("real world" and "unreal world") yet beneath these terms lie those two worlds within Edith that make up her identity—the natural

and supernatural. One may surmise that because of the precarious position that the indigenous occupy in the life story of the nation, it is not easy to write about what is "unreal" and supernatural openly. It may also pose a risk for Edith in her central position as an academic and writer for people to discover the marginal aspects of her life.

The history of indigenous peoples in the Philippines has always been fraught with violence and marginalization, since pre-colonial period until the present. The survival of their culture is remarkable amid various attempts to "extinguish" them because they have been around for centuries. Today, they are now considered part of the "vanishing" worlds (Mendoza 123). Yet, they remain integral to the make-up of the Filipino identity, without which the nation would be impoverished.

Edith's position in the nation is just as precarious, because she straddles two worlds: she is both part of the tribal heritage of her forebears (specifically, Gaddang) as well as cognizant of the modern American culture she was brought up in. These worlds often collide, since the former is rooted in its traditions while the latter favors progress and change. The tension between these two forces is evident in Edith's work. What is more interesting is how she deals with this tension and responds to it.

*His Native Coast* (1979), Edith's second novel, may possibly be the most vocal in articulating her tribal heritage in her creative universe, yet one that is ironically silent about it, too.

It features the main character Marina Manuel, who is a poet and teacher.<sup>11</sup> She comes from a tribal heritage (Ifugao) on her maternal side, while her father is a Christian politician. Like Edith, she also has a Western upbringing. There are a lot of similarities between Marina and Edith that poet Alfred Yuson was prompted to write in his essay "Another Fine Day with Mom Edith": "Edith is not Marina, but Edith is Marina in some ways" (122). One might say that Marina is Edith's alter ego.

At the beginning of the novel, we find Marina thrown together with the American soldier Michael Linder in the mountains of Pagatban in Negros Oriental. Marina fled to the mountains during World War II along with other civilians to escape from the Japanese. Yet, even if it was during the time of war, one could hardly hear gunshots or witness scenes of brutality. Rather, one is met with silence.

Michael Linder recalled: “The mountains were a constant enveloping discomfort, like the heat and the humidity and the fog. Sometimes it felt as though time in the form of twenty-four hours cycling and limping throughout the world had constricted their jaded turmoil into this cut-off pocket of the earth” (Tiempo, *His Native Coast* 10). It was as if they were in a bubble during the time of the war. Yet, the setting is telling of the experience of Marina, too, as an individual—how she felt cut off from the rest of the world.

It is this same silence that we encounter in the short story “The Black Monkey” (1951). This short story is like a capsule version of *His Native Coast* (at least, its first chapter), which the author later expanded into the novel form.<sup>12</sup> Once more, that cut-off feeling from the world can be gleaned from this description: “The hut buried in the trees, where she was safe because almost totally isolated. The families asleep on the knoll were themselves isolated, she thought; they were as on an island cut off by the water and mountain ranges surrounding them...” (Tiempo, “The Black Monkey” 65).

There was a feeling of being stuck and not knowing when they would be able to get out of that situation. It was as if they were in a limbo, especially Marina in “The Black Monkey,” where they were living between war and peace time. They were not in the heat of the war itself, like Marina’s husband who was a guerrilla fighter. But on the other hand, it was not yet peace time, too, so they could not really relax yet even when nothing seemed to happen. The time of waiting could be more unbearable for some people than when they were in a whirlwind of action.

In that pocket of space, Marina/Neena was assaulted by fears (or what she called bogeys or spooks). It was when one’s surroundings were quiet and when one was on the brink of survival that shadows can emerge. In Edith’s creative universe, this came in the form of monkeys.

The most famous work of Edith that features a monkey is the poem “Lament for the Littlest Fellow” (1950). This was published a few years after the war and right after her stint in the Iowa Writers Workshop (1947–1950). From her Iowa experience, Edith shared with Roger Bresnahan that she learned how to understate or how to write in a “very lean, economical way” (140). She explained that “you could attain that only by intellecting rather than feeling. So I learned to subjugate the feeling to the intellect. It was necessary

for the writing, but I found that it robbed me of other things as a person. Inevitably it does. It’s not just a matter of using it for your writing. It gets to you as a person” (140).

When you look at the poem “Lament for the Littlest Fellow,” there is something that overpowered the persona in the poem, who is a wife (whereas the addressee “you” is her husband). The littlest fellow turned out to be a marmoset. The poem is about a husband and wife’s loss of an infant child and how the memory of it haunts the wife.<sup>13</sup> It is a powerful poem charged with emotion, perhaps made more so because of its restraint.

Yet, even as it spoke about loss using the marmoset as a metaphor, it referred to an even greater loss than that of a child: “shutting back a question far / Into my mind, something enormous and final” (Tiempo, “Lament” 7–8). The image of the marmoset was not random, because the monkey was one of recurring images in Edith’s creative universe. This was why the monkey in the poem “Lament for the Littlest Fellow” did not just stand for the lost child. Rather, it spoke of a sense of loss of primordial innocence that pervaded her consciousness.<sup>14</sup> This was why it was a lament.

The poem ended with the persona “bruising [her] hands on the living cage” (Tiempo, “Lament” 14). The subjugation of her feelings was finding resistance through the image of a cage. A number of her works also echoed this sense of enclosure or entrapment. In Edith’s short story “The Corral” (1948), the protagonist Pilar was faced with several choices: “a lifetime of subordination to either her father or Mr. Perfecto, or spinsterhood” (Hidalgo 44). She was corralled, left with no other choice in life. The state of being in a limbo resurfaced in this story.

There was a scene that featured the corral being constructed in the sea which Pilar witnessed. She half-dreamt about it: “she saw the great fish thrashing around in the meshes; their mouths opened and closed in dumb shouts and their eyes were indignant blobs of white in their flat heads” (Tiempo, “The Corral” 106). When she woke up, she could only grasp at what she could remember about the dream—“she had not understood its strange outlines, its disturbing rage” (106). The word “rage” was also mentioned in “Lament for the Littlest Fellow,” where the marmoset has fled “the dark room of [their] rage” (Tiempo 12). The word “rage” is far too strong an emotion and must mean something beyond its different permutations in these texts.

In *His Native Coast*, Marina's brother Ernesto told Michael Linder what he thought about Marina's poems: "It's all there, Mr. Linder. Marina's spook, or bogey, as you call it" (Tiempo, *His Native Coast* 151). Elsewhere, Marina spoke to Michael Linder about her poems, "Anyway, the so-called poetry is only a sublimated form of thrashing around" (175). "Thrashing around" called to mind the fish in "The Corral" who were "thrashing around in the meshes" (Tiempo, "The Corral" 106).

Marina, whose name means Latin for "of the sea," was home to the fish ("Marina"). Yet, in a poem of Marina/Edith, this home served both as the source of life as well as the site of death: "*Familiar sea, warm womb, dark home, deep grave*" (Tiempo, *His Native Coast* 194).<sup>15</sup> In Edith's creative universe, water was the source of all life.<sup>16</sup> Marina, or "of the sea," was so named because the sea was in her: "The sea in us / (It has been years and years), / The old mark of our water home" (Tiempo, "Wandered Far" 42–44). With the sea in her, she felt connected to the life of everything that belongs to the sea, including the fish. She was one with the thrashing around of the fish.

Yet, this way of thinking was foreign to the modern world, which saw the sea as a means to benefit humanity even if it meant the degradation of natural resources. This was why Edith had such violent imagery in her fisherman poems. In her interview with Alegre and Fernandez, Edith explained: "People wonder why I saw madness in the fisherman. But you see, to begin with, the act of pillaging the sea is already an act of violence" (Tiempo, "Edith L. Tiempo" 469). We read, for instance, in the last two lines of her poem entitled "The Fisherman" (1954): "His hunger scooped the sea, he preyed and trapped / And tore the masks. Around him all the voiceless faces wept" (Tiempo 17–18). Marina understood the weeping of the fish—the "voiceless faces." It was the cry of the indigenous people who could not voice out their protest against the pillaging of their ancestral territories.

Marina's groanings as a tribal woman were silenced—and sublimated. How could an educated woman like her utter such a cry on behalf of her tribal heritage? This might explain why this part of Edith/Marina's life was always hidden. Edith said of Marina in her interview with Alegre and Fernandez: "In effect, she was afraid to live. She wanted to remain hidden" (Tiempo, "Edith L. Tiempo" 461). This was why she could only express her "spook" or "bogey" in her

poems, as Marina's brother Ernesto claimed. When it was presented as art, it was acceptable. Marina could hide herself in her poems.

She could not hide herself for long. In *His Native Coast*, as Michael Linder was reading Marina's poems, he observed: "The poems sounded quiet but were actually rather threatening" (Tiempo 194). "Lament for the Littlest Fellow" and Edith's other early poems fit the description. Michael Linder "decided that a reader would take the poems innocently enough at first, and then the ideas lurking in them got stirred up somehow and soon the ideas usurped the identity of the images that gave them their shape and voice" (194). There *were* stories buried underneath the poems and it was every poet's unspoken desire that these would be unearthed.

Even in seemingly innocuous poems, echoes of this restraint could be felt. The last lines of Edith's poem "The Rhythm of Violets" (1977) read:

And the world holds grace  
By strict season and art,  
For blood is a wanderer  
And must have the heart,  
Where rhythm is prisoner  
In the careful cage. (Tiempo 25–30)

The language of this poem is controlled. It no longer has the "rage" that is buried underneath other poems. Yet, it spoke of that tension between wandering away yet reigning oneself in through a "careful cage" (Tiempo 30). This feeling of being restrained resurfaced in another poem "Journey" (2001), where she wrote: "Now I'm wishing, not again to be / So sentinelled..." (Tiempo 21–22). The persona wished that she would not to be so guarded.

There was a price for keeping it all in. Numeriano Agujo in "The Dimensions of Fear" (1959) was an expression of this same personality. Toward the end of the story, we read: "Because in his life he had chosen not to be involved with his share of the dark, the ugly, the sorrowful, these had come to take their rightful place, not openly and naturally, but sneakily and in grotesque forms" (95). This line could very well have described Edith herself—the writer-as-artist. The grotesque would rear its head in her works, in as much as she guards against them in her work. The grotesque cannot help but manifest itself in her work.

There is the monkey in "The Black Monkey" and in "His Native Coast," which both Neena and



Marina confronted and eventually killed. The latter immediately regretted her action, while the former bludgeoned the monkey, to the great surprise (and perhaps horror) of Michael who saw her with the slayed monkey in hand. Edith wrestled with the monkey throughout her life. This monkey speaks of Darwinian evolution, tracing the origin of human beings.<sup>17</sup> The monkey was a sublimated form of Edith's yearning for her tribal roots.

At the same time, the monkey was a grotesque form, haunting Edith's characters, making it the perfect metaphor for embodying Edith/Marina's bogeys in her creative universe.<sup>18</sup> That obsession with her past (tribal heritage) did not have an easy fit with who she was—a woman born and raised in the modern world. That was why Edith/Marina always sought to exorcise the black monkey from her life. It reminded her of who she was. She was that monkey.

This could explain why her characters were often at the point of indecision. Her poem "The Edge of Things" (1996) highlights how each character had to make a decision:

You alone are possessor  
Where the edge is all.  
Will you go  
Or stay to wonder,  
Or enter  
—And fall? (Tiempo 29–34)

The characters in Edith's universe squirm at this thought—would they rather endure a caged life as they put on a "ready-made identity" in the modern world?<sup>19</sup> Or do they dare to turn back to their roots and embrace their tribal heritage? There is no easy answer to this question. Edith is caught between two worlds: the world of intellect and intuition, natural and supernatural, tradition and modernity. This left her in a limbo, torn between the pull of the earth and the sea.

Toward the end, Marina finally gave in to the call of her tribal blood. She went back to her roots in Lagawe, which was the land of her tribal mother. Suddenly, Marina vanished, calling to mind the "vanishing" worlds of the indigenous people.<sup>20</sup> There was always a longing for this return in Edith's creative universe.<sup>21</sup> Yet, to do so was considered social suicide. There was no life for people who choose this path. When Michael reflected on this decision of Marina's, he called it "a choice for barren living" (Tiempo, *His Native Coast* 235).

Whenever indigenous characters exposed themselves to the light or came out into the open in Edith's fictive universe, they "vanished." In Edith's last and fifth novel *The Builder* (2003), the same thing happened to Lawanagan Gimod. This character again shared some of Edith's history: "He is tribal, you know, but well-educated, trained in the States" (Tiempo, *The Builder* 117).

In the novel, which was a detective fiction, Gimod was found guilty of committing murder. Later on, when motives for his action were revealed, readers may wonder who the real victim was. It turns out that the mystery to be solved is not so much the identity of the killer but rather the worth of his identity. He eventually died towards the end of the novel because of sickness. But once more, when his identity as a tribal person was revealed, he "vanished."

"*Sa gawas lang*" (Cebuano for "outside only"), a phrase uttered by the victim of Gimod before she died to refer to an "outside" child, could refer to how tribal people are also "sa gawas lang" in the biography of the nation. Interestingly, it is easy to focus on Gimod as the tribal person in the novel. But what was not as obvious was how the protagonist, the physics professor Felix Acuña, also had tribal heritage because he was Gaddang.

Both Acuña and Gimod formed two sides of the same coin, each having tribal blood. One lived a "ready-made" identity as a respected professor and a breadwinner of his family. His identity as Gaddang was almost hidden or unnoticeable. Gimod, on other hand, was identified as a tribal person who was educated in the United States. Acuña enjoyed the esteem of others, while Gimod was exiled from the novel—"sa gawas lang." The exile of the indigenous in the creative universe of Edith is reminiscent of how the indigenous are also displaced even in the 21st century.<sup>22</sup> Yet, they form the core of the identity of the nation.

Similarly, it was only in acknowledging and embracing this part of her life that Edith could find peace. Felix Acuña seemed to be making a plea for him, Gimod, and all those who belonged to the tribal heritage with this insight: "he knew how needful [it was] to the wholeness of one's being to accept and to make room for any bestowal of the strange and the unknowable" (69).

In her poem "Becoming" (1993), Edith wrote: "And I become / The poem I write" (Tiempo 47–48). Earlier, it was mentioned how Marina in *His Native Coast* remarked to Michael Linder that her poems were

a sublimation of thrashing around. Her brother Ernesto also told Michael that Marina's bogeys were in her poems. The poems served like a mesh that restrained the fish from thrashing around. Yet, in the poem "Becoming," it was as if it was an admission from Edith/Marina that she had become her own poems.

Edith may have been thrashing around long enough in her poems, seeking cover in the shade, wrestling with monkeys, having double personalities, yet it was only in acknowledging who she was that her divided self can become whole. The buried narratives underneath the poem called Edith L. Tiempo will remain buried, but it is also slowly beginning to be unearthed through the intervention of biography.

### Biography as "Between-Living"

Reading Edith's poem "Between-Living" (1993), one cannot help but be struck by some parallels between this poem and the recurring images/motifs in her creative universe. Take this line, for instance: "The massive world's timekeeping / And our own agile flow / Never to blend" (Tiempo, "Between-Living" 28–30). This universalizes the tension between the two opposing forces in Marina's life: her tribal past and her American upbringing.

Not finding an easy solution or reconciliation between the two, Edith/Marina is in a limbo, always feeling lost in the middle of nowhere. Michael Linder's insight at the end of the novel is telling: "how one need not always be rooting physically or metaphysically in any one place. After all, one's identity was something that was, in many ways, frankly ubiquitous" (Tiempo, *His Native Coast* 235). Michael has uttered Marina's unspoken thought: there is no fixed geographical place to call home for someone straddling two worlds.

The last few lines in "Between-Living" seem to speak of being in a state of limbo. What is surprising is how the persona bravely faces it:

It is the wait, creative  
Life and love in full;  
Unfinished, uncertain, unknown,  
Yet mocking the known end  
That comes sooner,  
Later, or not at all. (Tiempo "Between-Living"  
35–40)

The persona finds beauty in the act of waiting, where life and love can be lived to the fullest. It even goes so far as to say that whatever is "unfinished, uncertain, [or] unknown" can mock the "known end / [t]hat comes sooner, / [l]ater, or not at all" (37–40). It is a radical thought that goes against the grain of today's culture, which values seeing the results or the "known end" (37). This resonates with what Edith says about writing to her students: you are writing even when you don't put pen to paper, even when nothing seems to be happening at all.

Biography, in a sense, is also about "between-living": "So it's the space between / The wishing and the end / That is the true unknown" (25–27). Biography is the dash—"the space between / [t]he wishing and the end"—that inhabits "the true unknown" (25–27). Biography is the dash found between the years 1919–2011—the years that span Edith L. Tiempo's life. Biography as a dash is a probability—what could have happened between those years (as much as research as well as imagination could determine). It is therefore "creative / Life and love in full"—something crafted—"[y]et mocking the known end / That comes sooner, / Later, or not at all" (35–36, 38–40). This explains why some writers have more than one biography written about them. No one can determine the end—the "definitive" life story—of any individual. Though there is an ending to the biography as narrative form, there is no end to the multiplicity of readings on a person's life.

"Here is where imagination comes into play," according to Meltzer (173). That is where the beauty of biography lies: although life ends, the imagining of that life does not end. The role of imagination is not to alter the facts, but to discover the hidden melody in the cacophony of everyday life. It is to fish out the story or narrative buried underneath the poem of a person's life. Milton Meltzer writes in "Notes on Biography": "When the biographer tries to do more than compile the facts he is taking all the risks of the narrative art without the full freedom the novelist has" (174).

Meltzer also writes, "This gets us to the core of biography. It is only and always how one person sees another person" (173). One might say that a biographer can be biased, yet "[t]he definitive biography...does not exist as a realistic possibility" (Nagourney 89–90). Biography, like Edith's consciousness, also operates on the concept of duality. There is the biography—the finished product—that is like the surface of the sea

that shows the reflection of the subject. Yet, what lies submerged underneath the sea, may be far beyond the reach of both biographer and subject. That is where the “true unknown” in biography lies: in the stories that are left untold (Tiempo, “Between-Living” 27). As Henry James said, “Never believe that you know the last word about any human heart” (qtd. in Meltzer 174).

Once one recognizes that the task of biography is unfinished and that it is by its nature “unfinishable,” this can open up possibilities for those marginal aspects and silenced narratives of one’s life to come to light. In Edith’s life, a reading and re-reading of her works in light of her life has yielded a glimpse of the buried narratives under the poem of her life. In this sense, biography (in conjunction with Geneva school) is a form of reading—a way to listen to another’s narrative without judgment, allowing recurring themes to rise to the surface.

One discovers that what Edith sought to exorcise from her life and channeled through her works is representative of what is also happening on the national level. Since she is caught between two worlds, there was that tension on whether to move forward in progress or hold on to her ancestral heritage. This allegorizes the nation which has also favored rising at the expense of the little ones hidden in the shadows of the periphery. Yet, if literature—biography—can begin to make space for the indigenous in it, then it can also be a call for the nation to follow suit. If the biography of a subject can be re-written, so can the nation be “re-visioned.”

Biography and the nation share this character of “unfinishability.” Caroline Hau writes: “And it is this unfinishability—the fact that the ‘nation’ is always made and unmade and remade—that makes it impossible to ever speak of the end of ‘history,’ the end of politics” (145). This is where hope can be found in the very “unfinishability” of biography and the nation: “It is the unfinishableness of the nation that gives this country its chances, turning every crisis into opportunity, conferring on that country the possibility of a future” (Hau 145).

It is this quality of “unfinishability” of biography and the nation that can overturn one’s perspectives on how lives are shaped and formed. Whereas biography as “notes on a life,” can produce narratives of noteworthy lives and notable subjects, it can also become a site of recuperation of marginal voices and silenced narratives. Biography can then become an

act of intervention. Precisely because no biography is definitive, it can be a site of recovery of “unwritten” stories, those that take place in the margins. When that happens, “marginal annotations” can become noteworthy, too. Biography then deconstructs what is considered noteworthy or notable.

In writing a biographical narrative of Edith L. Tiempo, what is noteworthy or notable is also challenged. She is a national treasure, not only because she is a National Artist, but also because she becomes a national representation of the marginalized, in particular the indigenous peoples. By pursuing alternative endings in biography, one has allowed silenced voices to be articulated and marginal notes to take center stage.

Biography may be known as the realm of the known, verified, and certain. But it is just as much the realm of the “unfinished, uncertain, [and] unknown” (Tiempo, “Between-Living” 229). Edith once said this about writing, which is also true of biography: “You don’t begin by limiting yourself. You begin by seeing possibilities.”<sup>23</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This was shared with this writer through a personal correspondence.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the word “excess” here and elsewhere is a nod to Caroline Hau’s use of the word “excess”: “a term... to refer to the heterogeneous elements—‘the people,’ ‘the indigenous,’ ‘the Chinese,’ ‘the political,’ and ‘error’ that inform, but also exceed, nationalist attempts to grasp, intellectually and politically, the complex realities at work in Philippine society” (*Necessary Fictions* 6).

<sup>3</sup> The workshop is also known as the Summer Writers Workshop (Lara, “Silliman University”).

<sup>4</sup> (Alunan, “The Tiempo Legacy” 375)

<sup>5</sup> There are numerous articles and personal essays on Edith L. Tiempo’s life, but this paper will only cover those significant to this project.

<sup>6</sup> “By the late 1960s, nationalism sent strong tremors through the groves of academe, with self-styled nationalists vocal in their criticism of writers whose orientation differed from theirs. The Tiempos’ advocacy of formalism was censured as irrelevant, their persistent use of English taunted as colonial” (Manlapaz, *Reader* 2).

<sup>7</sup> In her interview for *Akdang Buhay*, poet Merlie Alunan relates that Edith would always say, “Look for the story in the poem...Any poem, she says, will always have a narrative.” In her book *Introduction to Poetry: Poetry Through Image and Statement*, Edith L. Tiempo writes: “... the narrative element in a poem is somewhat submerged and often just implied” (46).

<sup>8</sup> Edith uses mostly the term “tribal” in her creative works, while she uses the term “indigenous” in her critical essays. While governments around the world use “indigenous,” some tribal groups may be opposed to the use of this term. See Peters and Mika for further discussion on this topic.

<sup>9</sup> Caroline Hau calls talambuhay “life-notes” in “Autobiography and History” (*On the Subject of the Nation*), p. 124; I am indebted to Dr. Antonette Talaue-Arogo for introducing the different permutations of *talambuhay*.

<sup>10</sup> In his interview with Edith in *Conversations with Filipino Writers* (1990), Roger J. Bresnahan asked her about this statement and she clarified, “...[R]eaders should never associate the writer with what he has said in a creative work. That’s unfair. I just think that the writer-as-person and the writer-as-writer can never be completely separated, especially because the private life feeds the public, and the public, the private” (133).

<sup>11</sup> David A. Genotiva in his paper “Edith L. Tiempo’s *His Native Coast*” (1997) writes: “While the novel narrates a single dilemma, it is lived in two qualities of awareness, Marina’s and Michael’s” (259).

<sup>12</sup> Both works were drawn from Edith’s experience during the time of war, though the events play out differently in the two texts.

<sup>13</sup> Please check the entry “The Tracks of Babylon and Other Poems” in the *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art* for a discussion of this poem.

<sup>14</sup> Edith speaks about this “loss of primordial innocence” in her interview with Alegre and Fernandez (462).

<sup>15</sup> This is a line lifted from Edith’s poem, which is also included in *His Native Coast* as Marina’s poem.

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Mr. Timothy Montes for helping bring this into focus. He cites American anthropologist Loren Eiseley as an influence on Edith. See Eiseley’s essay “The Flow of the River,” for instance.

<sup>17</sup> Thanks is due once again to Mr. Timothy Montes for his insights about the monkey and its role in Edith’s oeuvre.

<sup>18</sup> The etymology of the monkey suggests a “grotesque mumbling figure” (Abad, “Mapping” 16).

<sup>19</sup> In an interview with Edilberto N. Alegre and Doreen G. Fernandez, Edith gave a reason why Marina married Paulo Lacambre when they seemed to have nothing in common: “[S]he was actually looking for a ready-made identity to slip on, and she also wanted an identity which was respectable, which she did not have to bother about justifying or improving” (Tiempo, “Edith L. Tiempo” 461).

<sup>20</sup> Please read the article of S. Lily Mendoza entitled “Promises of The ‘Vanishing’ Worlds: Re-Storying ‘Civilization’ In The Philippine National Imaginary” for a further discussion on this topic.

<sup>21</sup> One of her poems is entitled “The Return.”

<sup>22</sup> One can read for instance, Marina Wetzlmaier’s “Cultural Impacts of Mining in Indigenous Peoples’ Ancestral Domains in the Philippines” to see how this is happening in the present society.

<sup>23</sup> Edith shared this in the *Akdang Buhay* video that featured her.

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