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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Contact Zones, Discursive Spaces: The Case of the Silliman University National Writers Workshop

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Abstract

The Silliman University National Writers Workshop's (SUNWW) historical circumstance has been implicated in the Cold War. As such it is accused of perpetuating colonial ideas on language and literary production. Its use of New Criticism is said to be detrimental to nation-building as this critical pedagogy is seen to be ahistorical and apolitical. This paper investigates the Workshop space and critiques the actual workshop discussions in the years 2019 and 2021. The explorations reveal that the Workshop is a discursive space, a "contact zone" where its participants are always engaged in the act of negotiating ideas about craft, literature and its functions, writing and social responsibility, the reader and its role in interpretation, and reading and criticism. It is a space that affords many possibilities of revisioning and repurposing of these ideas. It is a space of negotiation, meaning-making, and consensus.

Keywords: creative writing, contact zone, discursive space, critical pedagogy

Eric Bennet in an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* dated September 2020 recalled what happened in 2017 at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs in Seattle where he attended for his book's (*Workshops of Empire*) panel. The book's thesis holds that institutions of creative writing like Iowa and Stanford whose origins date back to the Cold War

fostered a literature of individualism and domesticity and suppressed a literature of solidarity and big ideas. Insofar as American writers still render the bedroom or kitchen more deftly than the zeitgeist or the world situation, they reflect the academic commitments of a bygone age. (Bennet)

In that conference, Bennet discovered that "the thesis mattered most for those who had lived through the history [he] was reciting—not in the Western hemisphere, but in the East" (Bennet). Filipina poet and critic, Conchitina Cruz and novelist Gina Apostol spoke about their experience in the Silliman Writers Workshop, the first of its kind in Asia and coincidentally founded by Iowa graduates Edilberto and Edith Tiempo. When Cruz spoke up, she was for Bennet "transmuting the lead of theory into the gold of an astonishing historical example"(Bennet).

Quoting Cruz's essay in a journal and Apostol's essay¹ that likens the supposed strictures of the Silliman University National Writers Workshop's pedagogy to Spam, unnatural and unhealthy, Bennet repeats Cruz's

conclusion via his project: indeed, “Iowa flattened literature in the former American colony” through the *Tiempos* as “instructors encouraged their students to center fiction and poetry on personal and aesthetic experience rather than on political or historical concerns.” The verdict: “[w]hat the *Tiempos* learned from Engle they codified at the expense of the literary fate of a nation, and writers today are still fighting it” (Bennet).

The article that Bennet referred to is a 2017 article² where the writer locates the Silliman University National Writers Workshop as a cause of the “(mis) education of the Filipino writer” (Cruz 3). The phrase is appropriated to reiterate Renato Constantino’s critique of the American colonial education that the Filipino has received.³ Such education has ensured the subservience of the colonized. The New Critical pedagogy that the *Tiempos* brought to the Silliman Workshop has been allegedly responsible for the propagation of “colonialist and classist ideas about language and literary production, which are camouflaged, if not naturalized, as principles and mechanisms integral to the craft of writing” (Cruz 3). The writer then “calls on the successors of the *Tiempos* who currently run the Silliman Workshop to scrutinize the historical contingency of the aesthetic values they inherited and to revise their New Critical pedagogy, which continues to uphold the primacy of English as the language of creative writing education and literary production” (Cruz 3). The article may have caused a stir as most, if not all of those who wield the pen have gone through the workshop as a “rite of passage for the country’s finest writers” (About) but no responding discourse was given on the critical pedagogy of the Workshop.⁴ Might it be perhaps that these concerns have been broached repeatedly or is it because it has reached an impasse? Either way, the critique is a welcome and timely invitation to perform a self-reflexive act on the Workshop.

Reading Cruz’s essay and Bennet’s, I felt much was unaccounted for and lost in between. In my work with the Silliman Workshop in the organization and administration of it,⁵ I listened to countless discussion sessions and somehow I cannot accept that I am complicit to fostering smallness in Philippine literature and thinking by enabling the Workshop to continue allegedly unchecked and unreflective. While I acknowledge the historical circumstance of the Workshop, I leave room for discourse on the

Workshop’s critical pedagogy (some claimed to be insidious) simply because my observations beg for a reevaluation of these criticisms.

The Silliman Workshop, founded by SEAWRITE awardee Edilberto K. Tiempo and his wife, first from the regions and by far the only woman National Artist for Literature in the Philippines, Edith L. Tiempo, has existed for over sixty years now, mentoring young writers over the years, many of whom have carved out their own literary niches. Considering its influence in Philippine letters, the Silliman University National Writers Workshop must be reevaluated.

This paper, part of a larger undertaking,⁶ explores the contemporary critical pedagogy of the Silliman Workshop through analyses of workshop discussions in poetry, *balak*, and *sugilanon* in the Workshop’s 2019 and 2021 installments. It assesses it vis-à-vis charges of being colonial, homogenous and hegemonic, linguistic centered at the expense of meaning, and by extension against the making of a Filipino nation. It prefaces with the claim that the Silliman creative writing workshop is a contact zone, whose space is discursive. In the critique of the discussions, I have also included interviews of former fellows of the workshop as well as freely quoted critical dictums from the Workshop’s founders. This is to attempt to provide a picture of the Workshop’s critical trajectory over the years.⁷ As will be seen in the subsequent discussion, the literary tenets such as those held by the *Tiempos* are pervasive in the workshop. Yet there are revisioning and repurposing of these tenets. In both fellows and panellists, there is always a constant act of negotiation in the Workshop space.⁸ I call this discursiveness, the many possibilities of revisioning and repurposing of ideas about literature and writing.

Contact Zone: Site of Negotiation

In a key article on “contact zones,” Mary Louise Pratt writes about what she means by the phrase:

I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. Eventually I will use the term to reconsider the models of

community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing and that are under challenge today. (34)

Akin to Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zone" as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" the Workshop space may not exactly contain "*highly* asymmetrical relations" as in colonialism. It is however, one of the "models of community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing" (34; emphasis added). In other words, the Workshop space, as model of community in teaching creative writing is a contact zone and as such it is a discursive space.

From the discussions I sat in and observed in 2019 in person and 2021 via *Zoom*, I chose four events. The first two are discussions on two poems in 2019 and a poem and *sugilanon* (short story) in 2021. The discussions were conducted predominantly in English, but such discussions would effortlessly codeswitch to Cebuano, and Tagalog-based Filipino. The first poem is written in English and the second one is a *balak*, a Cebuano poetry. The third poem in the 2021 installment is written in English while the *sugilanon* as well as the *balak* are accessed by non-Cebuano speaking participants via an English translation. For ease of reference, I chose these four events as the texts are much shorter compared to the others and their discussions yield significant yet varied concerns in craft and literature. Since there were only two languages (Cebuano and English) in which the submitted manuscripts were written, they would represent the bulk of the works. Finally, I recognize that these four events were video recorded well. Due to technical limitations, the video-recordings of other discussions are not complete and as such inadequate for referencing purposes.

Contrary to claims of homogeneity, the Workshop is a physical, virtual, and intellectual space where ideas and stances on literature and writing are exchanged and negotiated. Within this discursive space and based on the four specific events, I gleaned the following observations and pervasive themes on pedagogy and critical discussion: (1) the workshop as interpretive community, (2) the demand for 'genius loci' (3) the delicate balancing of craft and politics, (4) and criticism as bridge between writer and reader.⁹

The Workshop as Interpretive Community

Within the discursive space of the Silliman workshop, that is in the *actual* session itself, is an interpretive community that put into operation community expectations as linguistic clarity, coherence, physical logic, insight and meaning, and certain conventions as close reading—all these explored by Edilberto and Edith Tiempo in their critical works and by extension practice. The Workshop being an interpretive community touches base with reception theories' basic tenet: that the literary work is a coming together of text and reader. It is a product of the two poles of literature: the artistic pole (the author's text) and the aesthetic pole (the realization accomplished by the reader) (Iser 1674). Meaning resides neither in the text nor in the reader alone, but somewhere in between. Louise Rosenblatt would use the term "transaction" to label the convergence of reader and text (5). Stanley Fish further argues meaning is not fixed or intrinsic to a text rather it is a product of "interpretive communities" and our recognition and establishment of a text to be a poem or a work of literature" is the product not of the text's intrinsic qualities but of interpretive conventions and expectations (*Is There a Text in This Class?* 171; 322–27). Because the works discussed in the Workshop have passed the three requirements of (a) "wholeness of work's creative conceptualization, (b) "integrity of artistic articulation of creative concept into form" and (c) depth of work's transformative insight" (Pernia 73), such works may be said to have passed an initial *littérisation*, of confirmation and consecration, the process of a work's "transformation" and its "passage from literary inexistence to existence, from invisibility to the condition of literature" (Casanova 127). What perhaps the interpretive community of the Workshop adds to this is the subsequent bringing of the work and the writer into the discourses of literature. Indeed, the workshop is a coming together of readers who negotiate meaning and interpretive conventions; as readers are "co-creator[s]" of meaning (E.K. Tiempo, "Reader as Co-creator" 162).

The first discussion explores the poem titled "Lunch Break" written by Arielle Abrigo.¹⁰ It started with a fellow reading aloud the poem. When the poem was heard, the discussion was framed through strategic questioning which to my mind is more inviting of discourse and less threatening compared to pronouncements that almost always start with the

text's failures or perceived lack. I cannot categorically say this is always the case as each text's discussion is led by a different panelist.¹¹ The first questions from the 2019 Director-in-Residence Anthony Tan appear to crystallize the tenets of craft which is what the Workshop purports to facilitate in the first place, the "how" of "it": "How does an apparent subject transform into a discovered subject, that is lunch possessing the virtues of kindness and understanding?" Such question is three-fold in its assumptions: (1) that the poem indeed speaks about kindness and understanding, (2) that the poem's structure has transitioned into being a "discovered subject," and (3) that the poem either succeeds or fails linguistically to achieve this. These questions seem to be an invitation for deeper reflection in that as they were still settling in, the director posed yet another "Does the poem have the facility to transform such a mundane subject into a meaningful speech?"

The questions asked encapsulated the two-fold aspect of a work of art: form and content, framing the trajectory of the discussion. Indeed, the succeeding discussion revealed this preoccupation of form and content. One panelist went through the poem line by line and pointed out inconsistencies such as references and choice of words. Another panelist called attention to the need for the physical logic of the poem which some fellows understood to be simply clarity: "what is happening in the poem; who is speaking?" Other comments on the language included words running counter to the casual tone. There were praises too of how the line ended solidly with verbs and nouns; and an advice not to end a poem's line with an article or a preposition unless necessary. Another panelist, a poet and academic, was downright frank with his response to the poem—he simply could not understand what it was saying despite the suggestions given by other readers on missing home and disconnect. Though he could understand all the words used in the poem, they appear, unable in their interrelationship to realize an insight. On top of this, he thought there was arbitrariness in line cutting and spacing in the second stanza that called attention to itself. Craft-wise, the panelist insisted there must be a purpose for highlighting the two lines in the middle— Out / Yung ano— / The taste of fish surges inside the mouth—"what purpose does it serve?" Another panelist spoke up in defense against arbitrariness, that the line cutting and spacing might be for effect. He agreed however with the other panelists

that the poem needed a reworking in terms of language. The same panelist who spoke up in defense of line cutting commended the poem's last line—"There, everything is full of understanding"—"a solid ending." In the Workshop's discussion of language and form, they were also in the process making sense of the meaning of the work. For example, a fellow questioned the effectiveness of introducing the word *home*, a key word, only toward the end. For her, it could have foregrounded the overall effect of the poem. In her own understanding, the poem described the experience of disconnect but as a reader, she could not conjure a clear picture of who the persona was (was it a little girl or an older self in retrospect?) and what brought the persona in the scene. In the words of another fellow, though there was an attempt to depict an image of disconnect from home in the experience of lunch, the language remained unclear. The questions and comments from both fellows and panelists reveal that form is more than just vehicle for the discovery; form is inseparable from insight. Hence the first phase of analysis, the first level of reckoning so to speak, is linguistic.

The expectation of the inseparability of form and content reminds us of the formalist project of New Criticism. For Brooks, form and content are inseparable in a successful work ("Formalist Critics" 1366). Edith would call this "the transmutation of the manner of utterance into the utterance itself" ("Poetry" 304); where the structure is the substance, the inevitability and inseparability of the works' components. Hence, to paraphrase a poem is to split form from its content and vice versa (Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* 182–83). While we may be quick to put down our verdict of the Workshop's culpability in that it appears to obsess over language, the succeeding discussion calls for a closer look.

Individual transactions of reader and text shared in the Workshop community of readers, whose levels of understanding are not only sophisticated but varied reveal not a singular meaning and unilateral process of meaning-making rather, in Fish's words a certain "set of community expectations" that are in themselves negotiating. On the first level is linguistic clarity and on the next is the need for an insight. "A poem should open our eyes to a new insight," says Simeon Dum Dum Jr. who went through the poem line by line. Interestingly or perhaps, understandably, the insight requires linguistic clarity and while linguistic clarity is a must, it is not enough. A young fellow asked,

“what is the poem trying to say?” Such expectations reveal to a large extent what this community of readers think a poem should be—that it must mean, and the words must clearly convey this meaning. Like Edith’s concept of the nature of literature as “the necessary expression of both head and heart” (“A Bright Coherence” 109), this community of readers demand for the equally important aspect of literary expression in addition to form—meaning. And meaning here is tragically dependent on form so that form is meaning, and meaning is form. As a reader myself in this community that I sat in and observed, I realized why some fellows and panelists interpreted the poem to mean along the lines of “kindness,” “disconnect,” and “alienation.” The final line “There, everything is full of understanding” that Alfred Yuson commended to be “a solid ending” may have articulated the meaning the author intended. The need for an insight then is not for the poem’s lack of it; the last line is its articulation. Rather, it is the poem’s need to rework, as seen and felt by both fellows and panelists—(a) “wholeness of work’s creative conceptualization, and (b) “integrity of artistic articulation of creative concept into form.” These require processes needed for the poet to belabor so that the work arrives at a profoundly (3) “transformative insight.” In other words, the poem has to convince the reader of its proposition by making it move toward its insight, so that the last line or the argument is earned and justified. The readers then, both fellows and panelists, must arrive at this proposition smoothly through the logical movement and growth of the poem’s devices, through what Edilberto Tiempo calls “internal consistency” (“The Stories of NVM Gonzales: Destination Unknown” 94) and Edith Tiempo’s organic growth and unity (qtd. in Barreto-Chow 276)

This demand for clarity in meaning is made more complex in the discussion in 2021 of Thomas Leonard Shaw’s poem “Today You Tell Me of the Sea, I Remember Crabs.” The poem uses the mythic structure of a folk tale about crabs and their battle with the sea.¹² Structured in three parts, the poem begins with the death scene of the wives propelled by grief and loss whose bodies were shattered by the waves; the second part introduces the storyteller’s voice commenting on the actions of the crab; the third culminates in the orphaned crabs longing for their parents.

The major concern for all the panelists in this discussion is the reference to the myth/folk tale. It

appears that as a narrative frame used in the poem’s conveyance of meaning, the myth is the first level of reckoning. The task is to establish not only the existence of this myth but its purported lesson. There must be a determination of the myth’s original meaning before the poet’s intended meaning can be read. Further, it has to be ascertained whether the myth’s original intention or meaning is different or similar to the meaning intended by the poet. In effect, the writers are performing the work of the literary scholar in this instance of the Workshop. Two of the panelists, Ester Tapia, and Marjorie Evasco, both Bisaya and both can write in Binisaya, could not place this myth for they have never heard of it before. Their conjecture is this was invented by the poet himself. From here the reading becomes interesting because according to Ester Tapia, the poem invites readers to interpret it through two sieves—that of the myth/legend and that of the poet’s truth, ergo, his interpretation of the myth. If it were an invention, then readers must know its entirety. Likewise, Marjorie Evasco also thinks that the poem, since it uses an epigraph (excerpt of the legend about the battle of the crabs), invites two refractions: the poem itself and the telling of the folk story. These two registers must be clear before an understanding can be established. However, the heavy reliance of the poem on the myth that the panelists are unaware of hinders a full understanding of the poem. One attempt to make sense of the poem is Evasco’s reading it through the lens of ecocriticism, where the image of the crabs’ death may signify sixth mass extinction in the Anthropocene and the anthropomorphizing (a “trap in ecocriticism”) of the crabs is humanity’s “desire to destroy ceaselessly.” Cesar Aquino looks for the “human significance” in the poem, asking whether the story of the crabs is an allegory about humans. This may be because the second and last part transcends to a discussion of human nature’s traits in the crabs—

Perhaps there was no fault, rather
there was only the blindness of love,
that which tethers one to the other,
a body to a body to a sea.

The last part touches on children crabs becoming like their parents, the child becoming the man, hopelessly treading on the same path their parents took—“Children embrace oceans through nostalgia’s seduction” and “the child a man who drowns.” The

crabs like human beings drowned in the sea, in the expanse of life itself. Just as the crabs were lost to the sea, human beings get lost in the vastness and intricacies of life.

Timothy Montes (2021 Director-in-Residence) on the other hand is reminded of super typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan). The crabs who died fighting the sea remind him of those who lost their lives in the natural disaster. The despair and anger of the crabs remind him of the pain and anger of those whose loved ones were taken by the sea. Montes can be said to read the poem as a site of collective memory. Typhoon Yolanda devastated not just the affected areas but the whole psyche of the nation. The realization that the country is drowning both in the literal and metaphorical senses has been imbedded in the nation's collective memory and such realization also comes with it the despair and anger in a nation's helplessness. Indeed, the story of the crabs reminds Montes of the nation's narrative in the Anthropocene. He also took note of how the wives' sacrifice is almost "biological, lacking agency, almost anti-feminist" as if the wives do not have any choice but to die in grief of the husbands' passing—"of obedient wives, the only task to love..."

Edith Tiempo would have commended Thomas's choice of the mythic form. In 1954, she encouraged writers to use Philippine myths as story frames and as grounding for human values and sentiments, understandable to all. Such was the postcolonial agenda to address the incongruity of English language and native material ("Myth in Philippine Literature"). Admittedly, the poet of the work discussed has gone beyond the problem of language as everyone in the panel agrees that the poet is, in Montes's words a "powerful versifier," who can effortlessly mix images with long statements so much so that the poet Cesar Aquino finds the experience of reading the poem pleasurable *even* if he *cannot* fully grasp its meaning. In the comment section in the *Zoom* room discussion, the fellows accepted the poem's argument as it is, looking at it as a poem about lovers and the grief the other feels when the beloved passes away. While they accepted that this is a "retelling of a myth" that expresses a "cosmic truth," that is according to them "desire and longing," it appears that it was not an issue for them whether the retelling is a faithful account of the myth or whether the myth existed *at all*. Ester Tapia is of two minds about this. She said that after reading the poem, she researched the Internet for crab stories.

None of those she read was similar to the poem's. Although initially she thought it might not be important that the poem is a retelling of a myth, she backtracks because the second part questions the original tales' assumptions—

In the story of the crabs, the lesson is not clear,
but what if it is not about a lesson but about desire,
the ceaseless destruction, the endless pull, the ripping
apart until all that is left is longing.

Again, the two sieves that Tapia earlier mentioned must be dealt with before any meaning can be arrived at. The first sieve requires determining the myth's original intention before any questioning of its lesson can be entertained. Yet the fellows appear to be unaffected by these registers. The poem's powerful language has indeed to use Tapia's words "seduced" the fellows to accept without reservations its premise. It may also have convinced the fellows of the human values the myth purportedly teaches as evidenced in the chronology of the comments. Praises for the musicality of the poem precedes comments about the subject. This is interesting because in my observations, the fellows almost always look for the meaning/insight of a text. Almost always meaning takes preference over language. For this case it was the reverse. Language and musicality, what Edith calls the *euphonious* properties, made the reading experience fulfilling enough. This act of reading is what Edith calls the initial level of appreciation, when a poem is appreciated through its immediate form. However, serious poetry requires more from the readers and by this Edith means to read the poem as *art* ("Poetry" 281–84) and based on the panelists' comments art refers to the whole execution. The panelists' comments come from the perspective of craft and how craft must transform itself into meaning, the utterance itself: "the narrative seed of the poem has to be handled with more precision" (Evasco) as an important part of the poem is the persona's "questioning the assumptions of the original tale" (Tapia) which as a reader I would take to mean either or all of the following—the hardheadedness of the husband crabs, the futility of a fight one knows is unwinnable, the tragic irresistibility of love and desire.

Personally, I find the crabs story not of human fallibility but of human nature's love and desire as simply forces inescapable (perhaps to some extent this is also a human failing as it results to death). The

actions of the characters in the poem including the death of the wives are brought on by love and longing. The orphaned crabs' summoning their courage to fight the waves is because of their love and longing for their parents' lost affection. If the pervading theme of the poem is love and desire then the first sieve as Ester Tapia calls, or register as Marjorie Evasco says, is the original proposition of the crab myth: what does the original crab myth intend to teach about love and desire? As the panelists demanded, this should be answered first before the readers in this interpretive community can engage with the persona's questioning of the community storyteller's interpretation:

The storyteller will say the fault
was ignoring the advice of the shrimp,
to ignore the shore that harbors the bodies
of their departed husbands.

When this is addressed in the first sieve, the first register, the readers can then move in this act of meaning-making to the proposition of the poem's persona—"In the story of the crabs / the lesson is not clear." The questioned assumptions of the original tale directly bears significance on the interpretation of the poem's argument "but what if it is not about a lesson but about desire / the ceaseless destruction, the endless pull, the ripping / apart until all that is left is longing." Because the poem uses the narrative frame of the myth, its interpretation is circumscribed by the very myth itself; its meaning is gauged and measured, if not limited, by the original tale's meaning. Edith's suggestion then for myth to be used as narrative frame requires wresting a bright coherence, for the poet's furious intellection to arrive at a meaningful interweaving of two meanings, that of the myth and his own, and of the poet's considerable skill to move between the two frames of meanings.

For this interpretive community the one apparent convention coming into play is *close reading*. In fact, it is close reading that enables contextual readings. Yet this pedagogy and learning structure of New Criticism has long invited discontents. A case has to be made for this pedagogy, that "suspicion of which for many years served as a kind of disciplinary shibboleth" (McIntyre and Hickman 231), and its tool of close reading "thrown out with the dirty bathwater of timeless universals" (Gallop 182). A retracing of the historical roots of New Criticism would however

reveal it to be liberatory where learning literature was made available not just to the learned and cultured but to the average college student. The rebellious origins of New Criticism were a fight for art's autonomy against the dominant cultural order then and of scientific positivism (Jancovich 35–36). In terms of instruction, *close reading* in New Criticism is an "antiauthoritarian pedagogy" where instead of being told what a text means, students arrive at the meanings themselves (Gallop 185). In the Philippine context, the formalist approach of the Silliman Workshop as subsequently used by its alumni is tremendously helpful in teaching students who come from less advanced training in reading literature the ropes to "enter" the text (Alunan). As an initial framework for entering the text, it affords students outside the socio-economic and socio-cultural centers a fighting chance to read well.

The pedagogy of close reading in the Silliman Workshop is a familiar pedagogy that fellows have been accustomed to in their own literary and/or creative writing classes. A look at the fellows in 2019 and 2021 reveal their academic affiliations. The circulation of close reading then is educational in the Philippine context just as it is so in other places in the world and in fields beyond literature and creative writing. Thus, close reading becomes a tool to make more significations in the act of meaning-making as seen in the discussions earlier. It might even be said that it is an inevitable, most significant tool in the study of literature and creative writing itself. What perhaps makes the close reading in the Workshop particularly curious is its intensiveness. A session is devoted to the close reading of a single work. Additionally, there is also the added significance of more expert close readers, both fellows and panelists, brought together in a single space. Thus the dynamism of readings.

Negotiation: Is the Untranslated Word Necessary?

In the discussion of Arielle's poem "Lunch Break" the necessity of introducing the Ilocano word *kasla* in a poem written predominantly in the English language invited deeper exploration on postcolonial translation. Cesar Aquino recalled his own poem several years back where he wrote a "native word" and was torn between writing a translation next to it in the poem's text or letting the word stand as it was. He decided

to let it stand placing the responsibility on the reader to find out what it meant. The decision concerning leaving words untranslated brings to focus the writers' sense of their audience. For whom are they writing? Are they addressing readers in the anglophone world, or are they conscious and confident of a Philippine public readership? For Aquino, it might have been both: his audience are Filipinos and he has faith in their readership. Another alum of the Workshop and in Silliman's creative writing program, Ian Rosales Casocot has in mind a very specific audience: Dumagueteños. He envisions his readers to be those from his hometown. Both Aquino and Casocot may have envisioned an "ideal reader" in mind, who is similarly culturally located ("Dumagueteños like Casocot himself, and Cebuano-speaking people like Aquino) and able to bridge that cultural gap signaled by the "native word" and the world created by the writer. Curiously, this ideal reader is an anglophone reader as well, one who can read in English.

In a rather honest moment of curiosity, Aquino asked another panelist, then newly conferred National Artist Resil Mojares whether what he did was acceptable. Mojares commented that these days he noticed that writers do this often and they no longer translate because to do so may suggest relegating the translated language into the margins. But the same panelist questioned the need for introducing the "native word" under discussion—*was it necessary at all?* In his reading of the poem he seemed to think that it could stand without the introduction of the "native word." Though the designation "native word" may have been for lack of a better alternative in referencing (initially, no one knew what it meant), to say that a word is "native" already invokes the silent Other which is the non-native reader, hence revealing subconscious awareness of a powerful non-native readership. This goes back to the writer's sense of their audience. It may be that writers in postcolonial Philippines are in a constant act of negotiation with these layers of discourse, of being rooted in their context and of being aware of their writings to be transnational by virtue of choice of linguistic expression.

Rica Bolipata Santos the only woman writer in the panel in the first week who writes creative nonfiction disagreed with Mojares and suggested that perhaps the introduction of the Ilocano word *kasla* reinforced a sort of "double exile." The situation in the poem for her revealed an alien experience of eating lunch

outside of the home where fish was food, but here it was vegetables. The I persona, may have been a kid who found this whole experience as not only novel but alien as well and the introduction of the Ilocano word which the workshop community of readers find unintelligible, reinforced this alienation. Placed within a predominantly English text, the untranslated word italicized, not only called attention to itself it also jarred the flow and rhythm of the poem, linguistically reinforcing the experience of alienation, hence drawing attention to the foreign quality of the text to the non-foreign reader. Concerns about inclusions and exclusions are played out in these creative writing decisions. Such are the decisions on which the construction of a readership is based. Yet Santos could not say the poem as a whole succeeded in doing so. This is because for her the physical logic has to prepare the reader for the "mystery," by this she meant the insight. In the words of Alfred Yuson the poem has to "belabor the process" from the physical to the metaphorical, from the concrete to the figurative. There is again the requirement of unity. This time it is specificity—physical context or the objective situation—and the mystery, or the insight. Both need the form for transport.

The discussion about the untranslated word brings into focus discourses on translation. In translated colonial literatures, the source language and its cultural associations are tempered to accommodate the target audience, translation being a construction of a cultural representation for an intended audience. Most often early translations of Eastern literatures offered to a European readership painted a disheartening picture of the source culture. Yet postcolonial writers writing in English offer a different narrative for they are simultaneously authors and translators who now offer their work to a readership that extends beyond their own origins. In Philippine anglophone writing, the writers are themselves translators and authority of the source language and culture. Indeed, postcolonial anglophone writing in the archipelago are translational in character. J. Neil Garcia says as much about Philippine literature in English. It cannot simply claim to be "plainly representational, precisely because it performs the ironic and complex operations of cross-cultural translation" ("Translation and Philippine Poetry in English" 308). The use of English by Filipino writers for Garcia is "ironic" for two reasons: "because, historically, it shouldn't even have been an option to

begin with; and ironic because the everyday reality of most Filipinos isn't monolingual (or monocultural) at all" (308).

Case in point: "Lunch Break." One can infer that the lived experience of the writer is multilingual and multicultural. There is the all-encompassing identity of being a Filipino as represented by the national language Filipino in the word *parang* in the poem. Then there is the Ilocano identity in the word *kasla*. To top it all off, the entire poem is written in English, the language of the empire. This language of empire is as much a language of the Filipino writer, in her hybrid complex identity.

The 'unnaturalness' of English as a language that precariously 'coexists' in the heady flux of local languages in the Philippines makes it virtually impossible to be perfectly transparent to its meanings. It only follows that the literature written in it simply resonates the postcolonial opacity—what critics have called, the 'metonymic gap'—between referent and sign. (Garcia, "Translation and Philippine Poetry in English" 308)

In the hands of postcolonial writers, the use of a hegemonic language as English becomes a site of resistance. In the poem at hand, the untranslated word *kasla* is a form of "metonymic gap" in language—a "cultural gap formed when appropriations of a colonial language insert unglossed words, phrases, or passages from a first language, or concepts, allusions or references that may be unknown to the reader" (Ashcroft, et al., *Postcolonial Studies* 122–23). There are two levels of unpacking to be performed here. From the perspective of the Silliman Workshop space, *kasla*, the untranslated word signals the "metonymic gap" between the Ilocano language and culture of the writer that differs from the languages and cultures of the other participants from Manila, Luzon, Mindanao, and the Visayas. Within anglophone writing in the archipelago, there exists as well metonymic gaps that signal hybrid and multicultural realities of Filipino writers after all the country has 183 spoken languages (SIL Philippines). Should all these spoken languages be represented in their written literary production, we can expect 183 classes of metonymic gaps alone internally. This is magnified in the reception of readers beyond the country. Thus, the poem is essentially a hybrid cultural creation that merges three languages—

English, Filipino, and Ilocano, the latter two function as linguistic signifiers of the writer's hybrid cultural origins. While all the workshop participants understand Filipino and cease to perceive the other untranslated word *parang* as metonymic gap, the Ilocano word *kasla* remains the writer's signifier. *Kasla* subverts two metropolitan languages here. First is Filipino, the national language of the archipelago and of metropolitan Manila. Next is English. Written in the backdrop of an English text, it stands twice starkly of difference, signifying the gap between the Ilocano world of the writer and the Tagalog culture, and the Ilocano world of the writer against English-speaking cultures.

In the discussion there also arises the implicit question about postcolonial signification versus craft. "Is it necessary?" is a question that places the writer in the in-between. Should she signify her presence via the poem? Her Ilocano world stands different from both worlds in Manila and beyond. The word is a signifier of her alterity. Is it important for her? Or perhaps an alternative question is, should she further this postcolonial agenda of signification? On the other hand does the panelist's question require the artist's decision on matters of inclusion and exclusion in her work? Apparently, yes. The necessity of the untranslated word therefore hinges on its "proper" artistic spot in the text. In the overall pedagogical context of the Silliman Workshop, the postcolonial need to signify difference and alterity interplays with artistic decisions. It is a delicate balancing act on the postcolonial writer, to signify and signify effectively: "is it necessary?"

The need to signify cultural position in the writer is almost always inevitable. Cultural positioning is inescapable. Since, to follow Garcia's logic, anglophone writing is translational, it follows that our writing already imbeds with it the vestiges of ferrying across our meaning, ergo Filipino sensibility and thematic preoccupations, in a language different from the Filipino languages of our own. English writing then contains within itself the indelible ink of bending the language to our own purposes. To use the words of National Artist for Literature Gemino Abad, Filipino writers "inhabit the...language" and "wrought from [it]" ("This Scene so Fair: Filipino English Poetry" 290). It is as much a language for Arielle's literary expression as it is a language for other postcolonial writers writing in English.

In the discussion of the untranslated word is the concomitant invitation of the Workshop to delve deeper into the politics of language, translation, and multiple subject positions that Arielle the writer has filled in her poem. Firstly, she is an Ilocano subject position. Secondly, she is a Filipina subject position as like every other Filipino in the archipelago, she imbibes that instructive identity via the Filipino language. Thirdly, she is a transcultural subject position in that she comes in and out of the identity pendulum that swings from regional identity (Ilocano), national identity (Filipino), and postcolonial identity (cosmopolitan English-speaking subject) rolled into one. Inescapably, the Filipina writer speaks from a simultaneous multivocal subject position. Arielle's refusal to gloss *kasla*, not only signifies her sense of cultural distinctiveness, it also forces the Workshop body to focus on another unglossed word *parang*. Thus in the poem, the unglossed word, to my mind, invited readers to engage with another unglossed word from which a possible meaning of *kasla* can be understood. The Filipino word *parang* may approximate a similar meaning of *kasla*, its meaning gleaned from the cultural horizon, that is Filipino in Metro Manila, of the other unglossed word *parang*.

Craft and Politics

How does a young writer with strong moral conviction navigate the tricky terrains of craft without this moral conviction losing steam? Listening to how the panelists perform a thorough reading of a young fellow's work, extrapolating its strengths but mostly its weaknesses pained me. But listening to the young woman writer cry in the end as she explained her work, broke my heart. Despite the best intentions of the Workshop, I felt right then and there that just maybe craft could be sacrificed for once for exigent values as giving voice to stories untold. The story discussed that day in 2021 is a *sugilanon*. A *sugilanon*, originally precolonial folktales told among Cebuano-speaking regions, has come to mean the short story replete with hybridization of local sentiments and the short story techniques in contemporary times. The present *sugilanon* is written in the Cebuano variant of Mindanao. In taking note of orthographic and orality concerns in Binisaya language, Marjorie Evasco suggests that except for dialogue which can be the

hybrid Mindanao Bisaya, the Cebuano the writer may use in the whole narrative can be Binisayang Sugboanon, the standard Cebuano that *Bisaya* magazine uses. She suggests this as *Bisaya* magazine is arguably the only magazine that publishes works in Cebuano.

The story is told from the perspective of a young girl whose father is a policeman. The title alone "Pulis Iyang Papa" ["Her Father is a Policeman"] signals to readers familiar narratives and signification in President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs. It brings to mind "state-sanctioned violence" (Evasco), "extrajudicial killings" (Tapia), "tokhang" (Montes, Ong), and the complicity of state forces as the police. The action of the story happened in two days starting from the little girl Ana's birthday to the night her father was shot by fellow operatives of the force. Though there are hints in the story that the father was involved in the drug business, the reader remains uncertain, that some of the fellows in the *Zoom* discussion chat box think the father may have been "framed." The story starts in *media res* in the birthday party where Ana's friends boast about their superheroes. Ana shares that it is her father who is her superhero because he is a policeman. In the binary between good and evil, Ana classifies the policemen to belong to the first camp (Evasco). Yet her playmates contradict this when they relate familiar narratives of "policemen killing drug addicts" that a friend personally knew of a friend's father shot to death by the police. Toward the end of the story, police operatives storm into their house, drive out Ana and her mother, and kill her father inside. The final scene of the story reiterates this concern of losing innocence and coming face to face with evil when Ana asks her mother if her father was a bad person.

Ester Tapia led the discussion and her main concern centered on the story's central intelligence. The "limited omniscient point of view" of a child Tapia pegged to be between 10–11 years old precludes a deeper exploration of a topic that is very complex, controversial, and painful. As it happens the child is a "passive observer" in the story. Her feelings could be "variegated" by listening in on further to adult conversations especially so that there are assumptions in the story that are not explored well. One of which is the assumption that "the killing of drug addicts is a justified punishment." For Marjorie Evasco the story could be enriched by making it "character-driven instead of plot-driven." There was no exploration of

the father whom the young Ana reserved a special heroic place in her heart. The POV should be used consistently too because this is a familiar narrative of the “tokhang” in the past administration and the narrator must remain in the focus of the child. In fact the author’s hand protruded in the last part of the story after the character asked her mother if her father was a bad man when Ana thought about Kate her classmate whose father was a policeman too. For Evasco, this is “manipulated” by the author to achieve an intended effect but it sticks out and “robs the magic” from the story. The intended effect I suppose is Ana’s coming to terms with the cycle of violence she has just experienced and that Kate (whose father was also a policeman) can experience the same thing as death of the father or the subsequent questioning of the father’s integrity. For Evasco, the author’s manipulation displaces the loss the little girl feels. Ester Tapia has a theory for this: perhaps the girl’s thinking of her classmate is a manifestation of her trauma; she is unable to deal with her grief. Timothy Montes, though apologetic, was more direct in his critique of the work. He cited Ezra Pound to impress upon the writers the need to write well: “Literature is news that stays news.” While moral conviction is always necessary for writers, “that’s why we write,” one must never forget artistry. “Artistic execution should go with good intentions.” As a reader, Montes has the impression that the story is “mechanically told—told from the outside” that the reader ends up feeling “mishandled” as the author “pushes buttons.” Taking the reader in mind, Montes reminds the fellows that there should be “joy in the discovery for the reader and the writer.” Because this is a familiar story that a reader does not need to read it to know about the drug war, the challenge of writing about topical subjects, to avoid becoming propagandistic, is to present something new about it. Cesar Aquino may have seen this potential in the story as he interprets the last scene as Ana becoming the real superhero in the narrative, strong and brave, comforting the mother—“the hero the country needs right now.” Despite this potentiality though, the story for Evasco lacks “psychological interiority” where new depths of perception should have been revealed. Tapia even suggests “author intrusions”¹³ to provide psychological depth. Montes and Aquino offer verisimilitude to make Ana convincing. The comments by fellows in the *Zoom* discussion reveal not only their familiarity of this event as chronicled in the news almost every night but also of

their evaluation of police culture and violence among operatives: “they tend to protect their own, unless the father was not one of them, as in “di nakikisama”; “this [is the] kind of toxic, patriarchal, cishnormative kind of kinship and community historically tied to questions of violence, capital, and (with regards to the police) to questions of the state.” But these discussions cannot move forward as they are not possible in the text. As one fellow says “it isn’t something that can be easily explored in the text.”

Since the story limits its perspective to the child’s and the story of the father is not fleshed out, one of the fellows suggested “*siguro* the writer should do more research on police SOP, the culture, etc.” Novelist Charlson Ong was more specific in his advice: read poems, stories, watch documentaries and movies about the “tokhang.” He reminds writers that “part of writing is to look at how others treated the same subject.” For Montes, the story has to draw these treatments out. He offers by way of recollection how he learned more from his poetry classes with Edith Tiempo than his fiction classes. He learned that technique *can* be learned by a serious writer, something Hannah undoubtedly has, but it is “conceptualization” that is more important. It is conceptualization that will enable the writer to say something new. In Edith’s “head and heart” formulation, it is the latter that her student remembers most. How to do this, Montes offers two ways: to propose a new idea or to go against the grain of what other people are saying. As to technique both Evasco and Tapia acknowledge the writer’s skills in handling the language and the material well and thus the Workshop readers can “demand more” from her.

What I find inescapable for writers in this workshop is the demand not only for craft but of meaning as well. A young writer is reminded always the need for that “transformative insight” that separates a work of art from other expressive forms. While the text at hand possesses the techniques that enables a writer to write a story, insight or the “fresh viewpoint” may have been missing. This demand for an “insight” is perhaps this Workshop’s own translation of critical theories that would suit the context of Filipinos. The deployment of New Criticism is indeed Filipinized because a strictly New Critical paradigm would have stamped the work successful because of its sheer artistry. Yet, the Workshop demands “an insight.” In this case it is moral insight that is lacking. In another poem under discussion which will be tackled here too, it is the

nationalistic imprint that is demanded from the work. In the Philippine context, our criticism levies on work the moralistic and nationalistic content, or if we may, the lesson. In this case the imagined schism that exists in criticism, of theory and praxis between that which is exercised in “learned circles” as the Workshop or in the university classrooms and that performed in Philippine classrooms, may not be so huge at all. Garcia calls our criticism as practiced in most Philippine classrooms as “practical criticism.” As such it is

irreparably *functional*...subjecting the text to a purposeful reading in order to advance certain extra-literary imperatives, of which the moralist and the nationalist are arguably the most common and ‘correct.’ (“Introduction” *The Likhaan* xii)

The Workshop’s demand for “transformative insight” is consistent with how we generally view literature as a people, as containing a social value. In describing the practical criticism in the country, Garcia says “it is acutely cognizant of literature’s practical value, its function within the culture that produces it, its nature as a social discourse...” (xii). In the Silliman Workshop, translations of critical theories have in the end served this purpose of literature as “social discourse.” It can even be said that such translations can be traced back to precolonial demands of literature being sources of insight.

Hannah the writer was emotional when she related how *close* this experience was to her. It was the story of her teacher and she had always the nagging feeling that she had to tell it as it was. While she was appreciative of the comments and wished they were given in 2018 when she wrote the story, she was uncertain how to make her form beautiful to tell an ugly story: “*paano ko mapaganda ang pangit?*” Edith’s answer to this may be cool “intellection” (“Limits—or Chaos” 205), and “aesthetic distance” (“Suggestion and Irony in a Poem” 42) to achieve objectivity. For Edilberto, content is not enough because what comes out in the work is the “raw material communicated as felt or experienced” and such communication is inadequate because the original feeling can never be approximated (“The Fallacy of Expressive Form” 76). The process of finding the correct form and control provides the writer enough distance and a better vantage point from which to view the material of her story. Intellection will render

the immediate emotions cooler and more manageable, thus capable of communication to the reader.

Though I felt for Hannah I also realized in the countless discussion sessions I sat in and observed that in art, there might not be an easy way. One may say that the terms, e.g. character-driven, plot-driven, psychological interiority, and a famous modernist/imagist tenet “literature is news that stays news” are familiar lines in writing workshops in the U.S., disseminated by the Iowa creative writing model. Hence, the very terms of discussion betrays the presence of the Iowa model in the Creative writing process in the Philippines, even as what is being discussed is a text about events in the country. If there are better terms for discussion I simply cannot say. It bears noting though that literary techniques both traditional and western are coopted and adapted by contemporary writers even by those writing in local languages. Their coopting and adaptation of what Edith calls *external limits* (“Limits—or Chaos”) require no less than hard work and craft.

It is as what Edith says: “art is a taskmaster, a strict taskmaster. You’ve got to devote yourself wholeheartedly to it” (Manlapaz and Evasco 21) whatever your moral convictions are. This is what Edilberto means when he said that “what [the writer] does with his material is his most challenging, his most important task” (“The Challenge of National Growth to the Philippine Writer” 47). The seriousness of the task of a writer to write well in order to mean well is indeed what former fellows of the Workshop remembers. Take for example Marjorie Evasco’s realization:

The Silliman University National Writers Workshop taught me in 1976 that creative writing is serious business and one must write, conscious of the gravity of this responsibility for one’s language, the literary form one has chosen, the subjects one writes about, and the potential readers of one’s works.

This is this seriousness that the panelists want to impress on the writers, especially on a subject that reverberates sociopolitical issues that call into question a people’s morality. As what Ester Tapia observes, the story neither explores nor answers assumptions, one of which is that “the killing of drug addicts is a justified punishment.” From my perspective, considerable skill is demanded from the writer to develop the story

because of the choice of point of view. In many ways, psychological dimension of characters and exploration of moral questions are circumscribed by the central intelligence. In this sense, form circumscribes content so that a revision of the piece necessarily invokes in the writer a make or break decision on the choice of form, specifically the point of view. Further, distance and a safe vantage point may have enabled the writer to treat her material better, to subject her material to better intellection so she can find her own “fresh” viewpoint especially about the subject. Her work is doubly challenged as it is a familiar narrative, she has to say something that has never been said before. As a work told from a child’s point of view, she has to make the child introspective. Thus, from the comments of the panelists I understand that her work must in the words of Edilberto “compel belief through [its] integrity” (“People Power and the Creative Writer” 28).

Though Hannah might yet to put enough distance between herself and the story she wrote, it is consoling to see that the panelists honored Hannah by devoting so much time on her text. Both Ester Tapia and Marjorie Evasco prepared written critiques in gentle language that one could never have mistaken those criticisms as a put down. Cesar Aquino’s, Charlson Ong’s, even Timothy Montes’s though frank, comments were not disparaging but encouraging of the author’s talents. Honest criticism may pave way for healthy encouragement here. Jose “Butch” Dalisay Jr. will never forget what he learned from the Workshop which he finds helpful in his own teaching: “to be careful and gentle with young writers, but also to give criticism effectively.” I can only hope Hannah sees the workshop the same way¹⁴ because as Timothy Montes said “your heart is in the right place...”

The Need for a Genius Loci

The Workshop community’s expectation for a genius loci and sense of place surfaces most acutely in the discussion of a balak, a Cebuano poem. For purposes of intelligibility as some fellows and panelists do not speak the language, an accompanying translation by the poet himself, Dave Pregoner, was provided to all. From my point of view, the poem talks about the idea of hell through the physical experience of bingeing. The panelist leading the discussion was Grace Monte de Ramos who writes poetry in both Binisaya and

English. The poem on the first level according to the panelists lacked physical context. It directly went to the “drama” so to speak contained in the last stanza.

Imperno diay
ang tawag sa dapit diin
ang paghungit maoy silot
sa imong pagkaikaw
ug sa iyang pagkasiya.

Hell is what you call
to a place where
eating is a punishment
of being yourself
and of being himself.

While according to two women panelists, Evasco and Monte de Ramos, they understood the attempt at the concept, that is the description of hell for the persona, they did not quite get how the poem arrived at this supposed argument. There were usages of the Cebuano language that sounded awkward and strange for the two poets who write in both Cebuano and English; that one of them enjoined the writer to “know your language.” Because Dave wrote in the two languages, one was the inevitable English translation, this requires from him a working handle in bilingualism which requires the author to deal with two realities, and perhaps two audiences. In the discussion of the text, the balak is the main text under scrutiny but the English version offers itself as a kind of intertext. Thus, the translation the author does is in itself an intertext. Yet the discussion of the balak oscillates between the original text and the intertext in the translated text so that the two texts become one in the process of interpretation, offering much freedom in the act of referencing.

The leading panelist thought that the point of view confused the reader; there were mentions of *ikaw* (you/yourself), *iya* (his/her), and *tawo* (person) but the reader got lost whose point of view she had to follow. At this level alone, the balak lost its readers and whatever insight it proposed in the last stanza seemed unjustified. This requirement is the principle of “organic growth,” where the insight is earned through the logical movement of the form (E.L. Tiempo 165 qtd. in Barreto-Chow 276). Evasco went a mile or so for the “potential” of the poem. As for her it conjured a specifically cultural picture, something similar to a cultural experience they have in Bohol, her hometown and that is the *fiesta*—a feast in honor of a patron

saint. The man whose eyes were “nagsiga” (wide open—eyes being wide open in the context of food in our culture connotes hunger and poverty) could be the familiar stranger who come to people’s houses and eat food. The owner of the house must never turn away anyone lest it is the patron Saint incognito who comes knocking on doors; the moral is, one has to be kind to everyone. In her reading, the panelist executes her positionality vis-à-vis the positionality of the writer through the poem. In this positionality, we observe as well a sense of place on the part of this reader and such sense of place is demanded from the work that by virtue of its language is situated in similar geographic, sociocultural positioning with the reader’s. Evasco’s and Monte de Ramos’s reading of the poem draws out the writer’s context and his approach to the subject matter. In other words, his vantage point. Evasco sees this vantage point through the *language* and *form* Dave used in his balak, yet the poem’s sense of place is hazy. While the form of the balak brings with it significations that are preponderantly the Cebuano culture, the poem’s lack of specificity wrests it from a culture thereby becoming placeless. The only signifier of this culture is the language; the narrative context of the poem refuses any placement, any sense of place. Any Cebuano-speaking or any Bisaya reader can place the poem in the region but the narrative space—*when* and *where* the action of the poem happens—is difficult to conjure.

What Evasco liked about this poem is the potential to explore class differences. Here was a man who could eat the kind of feast laid on someone else’s table only during the *fiesta*. Yet the poem “aborted its promise” because of the treatment which was less than serious; rather, it “glosses over class differences” by “essentializing” the you and the him in the end. The poem could have explored this potential of social critique which I understood to be possible via situating it firmly on a place, a locus familiar to the persona and an experience which resonates intimately with a specific culture. From my point of view, the poem may have aspired for the “universal” in its attempt at “essentializing.” Perhaps this is how it came across to one of the fellows too who pointed out that hell here may be gluttony, one of the seven deadly sins in the biblical tradition. Rightly so, it does conjure gluttony and the narrative situation in the poem reminds the reader of insufferable greed and the misery that comes with it. The panelists, however, insisted for a sense

of place after all the language used invokes a culture shared by Cebuano-speaking people. The panelists’ demand for a *genius loci* rejects the notion of the ‘universal’ that in the curious economy of *Weltliteratur*, despite its avowed ‘universality’ and ‘political neutrality’ has its Eurocentric roots (Casanova 154).

Edith Tiempo has early on addressed a focal point in postcolonial writing: the need for “*genius loci*.” The sense of self is established vis-à-vis a sense of place and the latter can become fractured due to dislocation, displacement or “cultural denigration” (Ashcroft, et al. *The Empire Writes Back* 9). What Edith has always proposed then is an act of firmly rooting oneself in her local context as well as affirming her place and identity in the postcolonial experience so as not to become an ‘incongruity’ or worse a mere cultural clone (Abad, et al. 285). She proposes to do this by being aware of the ‘native spirit’ and expressing the predicament of the ‘collective man’ (271) after all “we need the specifics of our sociology to give body to artistic abstraction” (“Introduction” *Palanca Awards* x). In fiction’s parlance this is “solidity of specification,” the situatedness of work. The poet Myrna Peña-Reyes, one of the early students of the *Tiempos* recalls an important concept she learned from the writing classes she had with Edith and Edilberto, the issue between specificity and universality: “particularized the universal otherwise it is an abstraction—the “universal” is on the application on the reader.” The poetic/eternal truths that the *Tiempos* require in a serious work (“Poetry” 274–276; “Literary Criticism in the Philippines” 87) for Peña-Reyes can be extrapolated in well-conceived and executed “human values.” The particular becomes universal in the process of reception. In other words, wresting a universal and timeless value from a work is the resulting act of criticism itself. The writer’s job is to be specific to her context. If nation is imagined (Anderson 6) and literature’s function is to develop this national imaginary, then a literary work’s physical location is its first level of imagining. And if nation is dynamic and perpetually in formation (Bhabha 145), then writing is a space the nation can be performed. I am going to stretch this further and say that what the panelists demanded from the work is to perform the nation through the specific writer’s location. The location in the poem would perform the nation and establish a *genius loci*. A writer then if she has to signify meaning inescapably brings to her work her context. For others this becomes an unconscious default: “how

can you not? It is always there even when you do not know it is” (Rica Bolipata-Santos). As Merlie Alunan would say, “we try to build a nation with every word we can muster.”

Criticism as Bridge between Writer and Reader

All four works, from my observation of the analyses may benefit most from this advice: “The writer must go through the conscious process to move from being a poet/writer to being a reader,” Rica Bolipata-Santos suggested for the reworking of the poem “Lunch Break.” While the initial comments on language seem basic for writing, even in the compositional level, the fourth most significant thought here discussed is the critical bridge between writer and reader, between text and interpretation. These dialectical and dialogic relations between writer and reader, text and interpretation have been Edith Tiempo’s battle cry in defense of literary theory or criticism, and to my mind a focal point in the Workshop after all workshop is performative criticism, criticism performed. In an interview, Edith articulates a fundamental concept in interpretation, the meeting of reader and writer through criticism:

[I like to think of these principles as the bridges between the writer and the reader.] They are the common passages through which both can communicate. Otherwise, if you take away those literary principles, where is the bridge? I mean, how is a reader to approach a writer? The writer may build bridges, but he will be building bridges in the sky because they will never reach the reader, who seems unable to grasp the way towards the bridge offered by the writer. The critics point out the bridges.” (qtd. in Veric “The Formal is Political” 258)

According to poet and critic Charlie Samuya Veric, criticism for Edith Tiempo is the site of the critical. In the Workshop, the writers are themselves the actors that point the bridges to readers, which are each other. Nowhere is this idea of privileging the reader in both the creative process and interpretation present in the dogmatic configuration of New Criticism where both the author and the reader are effaced by the centrality of the text.

It is in criticism where the encounter between the writer and reader becomes more meaningful

and comprehensible. The world of the writer fades into the world of the reader within the greater, more encompassing sphere of what Tiempo calls literary principles. In Tiempo’s sense of things, the writer and reader, discrete or fused, are not enough to complete the creative experience. Between the writer and reader there exists an essential bond, a bridge, to use Tiempo’s own loving metaphor, which criticism provides and makes possible. (“The Formal is Political” 258)

Edith Tiempo envisions criticism as uniting the reader and writer, making clear to the reader the writer’s intention with an important agent in this act of meaning-making in mind—the critic. Interestingly in the Workshop context, the *critics* that one might say exercising some level of independence and objectivity in the analyses of works, are only the panelists. The fellows are always implicated in subjectivity whenever their works are discussed. In this instance of bridging the writer to the reader, they are themselves simultaneously the critics, the writers, and the readers.

This Workshop’s interpretive community then not only acknowledges an important fact in interpretation—meaning lies not in the text but in the coming together of readers and texts—it also concedes to the integrity of criticism itself. It teaches a writer then to become her own critic, her own reader, taking the route first of the critic, then of the reader, and self-reflexively back to the writer herself. Put differently, the writer is taught how to read like a writer in the process becoming one’s own critic. Reading in the Workshop’s configuration is illuminative of the route and different shoes the writer takes and wears. A key aspect of this movement from being writer to critic is aesthetic distance which in Edith’s formulation requires intellection. If in the creative process the writer goes through a furious movement from intuition to intellection and finally to refined intuition (“Beyond, Extensions” 321–37), the criticism in the Workshop similarly enables the young writers to go through these processes—reading, criticism, reading. The first phase subjects the written works through an initial reading. The second phase is criticism where the work is collectively close read by the workshop participants. The third phase will have been the stage where the work is viewed through a different lens, this time with the benefit, if not impositions of a critique. For the writer whose work is

discussed, this stage will have been the phase where she becomes her own reader-critic. She reads the work then with the eyes of a writer. The movement from initial reading to reading as a writer is enabled by criticism, both individual and collective in the Workshop space. This is one of the things former fellows remember. For Marjorie Evasco the Workshop taught her to do “a robust close-reading of [her] own works after enough aesthetic distance defamiliarized the work for [her].” For Simeon Dumdum Jr., “it allowed him to develop self-criticism skills.”

While reception theories primarily favor readers over the writer and text, this critical pedagogy in the workshop is more inclusive in that it considers equal agents in making sense of a work: writer and reader, text and interpretation. More decisively so, is the inclusion of criticism in the relationship between writer and reader, criticism being bridges that connect the two poles enabling the move from being a writer to becoming a reader. While the suggested act to move from writer to reader is an intimate one and may be realized in the process of revision and rewriting, the bridging actually *commences* in the Workshop discussions, in the act of criticism itself.

From my perspective as an observer and participant, this critical pedagogy is an eclectic one, combining strengths of critical theories, reading, and writing. At the risk of labeling it, perhaps this is what New Formalisms is about. Others call the movement and theory as “strategic formalism” or “historical formalism,” the 21st century new formalist turn that combine strengths of New Criticism, Russian Formalism, the Chicago School, and New Historicism. The plural designation of “formalisms” allow for multiple stances and approaches in the reading, teaching, and writing of literature. While the movement shares affinities with New Criticism in bringing back attention to the text as object of study, it also departs from it in its inclusive concept and praxis. While meaning in New Criticism resides solely in the text, a “verbal icon” in one instance and a “well-wrought urn” in another, proponents of New Formalisms aim for a formalist analysis that “*produces or discloses dimensions of textual meaning and textual performance that are of the greatest readerly, cultural, and social significance*” (Bogel 33; emphasis added). In New Formalisms, this is what Fredric Bogel advises: “consider meaning and reading together” (41). In fact “objective meaningfulness in which the work

exists prior to interpretation must be rejected in favor of *inescapable positionality*” (29; emphasis added). Each person in the Workshop comes from a specific positionality bringing expectations which may or may not coincide with others’ expectations, but nevertheless bear upon the work’s meaning.

This is where the Silliman Workshop’s critical pedagogy departs from the older formalist project of New Criticism where the literary text alone contains meaning. Instead, meaning in this sense, from the discussions and negotiations arises from the event itself, and from the interpretive process. To quote Bogel again, meaning in New Formalisms is “produced by interpretation” (41). Though the entry point of the discussion is always textual thereby formalist, the subsequent discussions which are contextual are all in service of ascertaining the creative impulse and intention of the writer which is finally a manifestation of the Romantic theory.¹⁵ Such theory may be more receptive and friendlier to young writers and the nurturing of their creative impulses over adherence to formalist strictures.

Indeed, the Silliman Workshop’s critical pedagogy is difficult to corral into a single critical persuasion. It is as dynamic as its composition of panelists and fellows year after year. While in this space, there are staples as steady as Edith and Edilberto Tiempo’s concepts of literature, creative writing process, writing and social responsibility, reader, writer and criticism, Workshop discussions allow for a contact zone that turns into a discursive space where craft, literature, meaning, interpretation are discussed and negotiated. Based on the 2019 and 2021 installments of the Workshop, one can infer a discursive space where each participant is a reader in the collective act of interpretation and meaning-making. Each exercises her positionality vis-à-vis a work. It is indeed an interpretive community where meanings, and requirements of craft are negotiated. In the discussions the following concerns recur: the inseparability of form and content, the need for context and situatedness, the interweaving of craft and politics, and the role of criticism in meaning-making. These are concerns not so different from the issues Edith and Edilberto engaged with in their critical works and by extension inside the Silliman Workshop practice. Perhaps, the writer’s concerns remain the same. In finding her voice and art, she perpetually grapples with these inescapable issues that when we look closely require conceptualization, craft, positionality,

situatedness, and agency. All these are brought and framed by the Workshop's critical pedagogy that is from my perspective an eclectic approach, combining strengths of critical theories, reading, and writing.

To say then, from the Workshop process, that the Silliman Workshop is forever arrested in the limiting demands of American New Critical pedagogy is simply untenable; for as the discussions have shown, there is no doubt that every interpretation is positioned. There is no form of reading that is ever devoid of politics, socio-economic, geographical, and cultural locating. The Workshop space and its pedagogy then can never be unilateral. Its very nature precludes circumscription.

Endnotes

¹ Gina Apostol's essay titled "Narration and History" published in March 23, 2017 can be accessed here <https://ginaapostol.wordpress.com/2017/03/23/narration-and-history/>.

² See Conchitina Cruz's "The (Mis)education of the Filipino Writer: The Tiempo Age and Institutionalized Creative Writing in the Philippines," in *Kritika Kultura*, vol. 28 I, 2017, pp. 3–34.

³ See Renato Constantino's "The Mis-education of the Filipino." *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1970, pp. 20–36.

⁴ Workshop alum Niccolo Vitug has written a response to Conchitina Cruz's essay. His focus was on "relationality," the Tiempos' relationship with others and how this translates to the Workshop space. See "Irog-irog: Making Space for Contributions and Critique of the Tiempos and the Silliman Workshop," in the *Silliman Journal*, vol. 61, No. 1, January–June 2020, pp. 129–168.

⁵ I have worked with the SUNWW for over a decade, first as secretariat then eventually as coordinator in 2015.

⁶ This article is part of my postgraduate thesis submitted to the English Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong: *This 'Sense of Disquiet': Postcolonialism, New Criticism, and the Nation in the Silliman University National Writers Workshop*.

⁷ One of the major limitations of my thesis is the lack of materials on the workshop discussions. Due to financial constraints, the Silliman Workshop has not been able to

consistently record workshop discussions. To reconstruct the critical pedagogy of the Workshop, I utilized interviews with former fellows and did a textual analysis of Edilberto and Edith Tiempos' critical works.

⁸ In spite of the founders' coherent agenda as manifested in their critical persuasion, there are indeed disenchantments, dissonances and differences. I refer to former fellows' workshop experiences that deviate from expectations and differing critical leanings. I explored some of these in my thesis.

⁹ In my thesis, I included a discussion on the writer's agency in the workshop space.

¹⁰ Arielle Abrigo was an alumna of the University of Santo Tomas in Manila and at the time of the workshop was currently taking up her master's degree in creative writing in the University of the Philippines– Diliman (See "UST Alumni join Silliman writers workshop"). Dave Pregoner, the poet of the balak whose discussions of it are included as well in this paper, is also university-based, a student at Cebu Normal University in Cebu City. Thomas Leonard Shaw is originally from Cebu City but currently teaches at the University of the Philippines's Department of English and Comparative Literature. "Hannah Adtoon Leceña is a high school teacher and spoken word artist from Kiamba, Sarangani Province...She earned her Bachelor of Secondary Education (major in Filipino) degree at Mindanao State University in General Santos City" (<https://cotabatoliteraryjournal.com/tag/hannah-adtoon-leceña/>).

¹¹ The director-in-residence starting with Edilberto and Edith Tiempo's daughter Rowena Tiempo-Torrevillas in the 49th edition of the Workshop, assigns a discussion lead for each session among the panelists. Other times, the panelists turn tables and ask the fellows to start the discussion instead.

¹² The poet based his poem on a folktale on crabs from Mabel Cook Cole's collection. He offered the following site to access the tale: <https://www.univie.ac.at/voelkerkunde/apsis/aufi/folk/folk-v08.htm>.

¹³ Ester Tapia mentioned Milan Kundera's authorial intrusions in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and William Faulkner's handling of narration in *That Evening Sun*.

¹⁴ I was unable to interview Hannah about her piece and her Workshop experience about it as she has not given her permission.

¹⁵ In my longer project, there is an entire section discussing the writer's intention and how this figures in the interpretive act in the workshop space.

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