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# *Malansang* Fish: Mistranslation and the Fact of Translation

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## Abstract

The article criticizes the failure to capture the Filipino sensibility in contemporary Philippine short stories in English, primarily using the fiction pieces in *Writing the Philippines*, a special issue of *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* in July 2018. With poets Ricardo M. De Ungria and Lawrence Lacambra Ypil as guest editors, it is one of the more recent collations of literary work that explicitly focus on the Philippines as location and on the local sensibility. The editorial, "The Pinoy Sensorium", claims that the contributors were "attuned to their localities across different parts of the country." There is a mistranslation, so to speak, with how some writers of English write the Filipino sensibility, a consequence that is attributable to the pitfalls of cultural translation and untranslatability, criticized by Brian James Baer for their shared ambivalence to what he calls "the fact of translation" (140). This fact of translation is similar to J. Neil Garcia's recognition of the translated nature of Philippine literature in English. In contrast to Garcia's criticism against the realism of Philippine literature in English, the article argues that translation renders realist the English prose, when monolingual English, as purported by the Tiempos in New Criticism, is recalibrated with the disruption of the multilingual and translational.

On the first day of 2018, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* called for submissions for their then upcoming special issue, *Writing the*

*Philippines*, to be guest-edited by poets Ricardo M. De Ungria and Lawrence Lacambra Ypil: "If you have something original to say about the Philippines, we would like to hear from you" ("Cha — Call for Submissions"). This was posted on their blog, after similar calls on Japan and Hong Kong in the previous year, and soon followed by calls on Singapore and Vietnam.

Released on *Cha*'s website by July 2018, the issue featured works in poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, photography & art, and book reviews by Filipinos within the country and elsewhere. The editorial titled "The Pinoy Sensorium[1]" prefaces *Writing the Philippines* and remarks that "[m]any of the pieces reckon with a Philippines that is seen from a distance and in retrospect, but entirely alive in the mind" (De Ungria and Ypil). It celebrates, ultimately, the Filipino sensibility in the contributions, exhibiting how attuned the writers were "to their localities across different parts of the country":

> Wherever they may be, it seems that the Pinoy sensorium remains alive not only to the many kinds of violence—their nearness and imminence—within and around it, but also to the depths of human connections plumbed in spite of and in response to such conditions. Whatever the response may be—serious, ironic, comic—it is mostly delivered with the coolness of a bottle of local beer. (De Ungria and Ypil)

The anthology celebrates writing that is grounded in the Philippines, but I must point to the lack of more concrete definitions of the Pinoy sensorium: First, what qualifies as "a multiplicity of identities and a porous sense of place" or being "attuned to [one's] localities"? And second, how can an anthology claim to write about the Philippines without acknowledging the tension inherent in writing the Filipino sensibility in English? And so, the absence of definition for the Pinoy sensorium engenders its own glaring absence in some included pieces, indicative of the recurring lapses in Philippine literature in English. This article interrogates the creative practice of writing fiction in English as it is demonstrably entangled with postcolonial conditions of the Philippines, and points towards a more critical and conscious poetics that is attentive to language.

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My short story "Death for Serafina" was included among the nine fiction pieces in *Writing the Philippines*. It is about a religious woman in her sixties who lives in a decrepit, moldy house that used to be a school. Lonely in her old age, Serafina obsesses over her death, which she mentions in each and every call with her daughter, Norie. But instead of coming home herself, Norie sends her aunt Lucretia to take care of her mother. What ensues is a stubborn, humorous clash between sisters whose decades-long conflict gets brought out, finally, in the open.

This would become my third short story based on my hometown in Cavite. I developed the premise during an errand to the town water station along Kalye Barako across a large house in a state of dilapidation—my mother's old elementary school building, where my grandmother, herself a religious woman, used to teach history. Having been explicitly framed in my mind as the municipality of Maragondon, the piece encountered multiple issues regarding how I would capture it best. I characterized Serafina as someone who is sensitive to the point of stubborn defensiveness, so much so that her filthiness is a cultivated habit that I made the house embody:

> … the shambles that remained of the small school it used to be. The iron gates, peeling with layers of paint, barred an unkempt courtyard that sheltered feces left behind by strays. The wooden upper floor, where water seeped through, was breaking down in places, opening up for patches of mushrooms and moss. Most of the sliding capiz windows had yielded to the shifting weather, shells missing and panels wrecked.
>
> Inside the building, there was a perpetually damp smell, exacerbated by days like this in the height of summer. In spite of this, there was an eerie calmness to it, quite the opposite of its façade. Every dingy shelf-space lent a space to a Mama Mary, a Sto. Niño or one of the other saints Serafina had managed to acquire over the years. The mirrors upon the walls stared at each passing visitor, surfaces blurry with age, a few cracked. (de Guia)

When I revised this story into the version published in *Cha*, I actively pursued uncleanliness, for which Filipinos have numerous words without English equivalents of the same nuance. In the quote above, I settled for "feces" in place of the Filipino "*tae*" in my mind, because I wanted to relay the disgusting image that "poop" is too childish for, and "shit" too offensive. In this case, "feces" worked well enough. The problem of translating uncleanliness would crop up again later. As Serafina sat in the courtyard, I had to evoke how she is, as my mother would say, *nanglilimahid* with her *pawis* and *libag*:

> The weather was scorching hot, even as the sun was starting to set. Sweat had formed and dried repeatedly on Serafina's neckline and spread wide onto her chest, meeting the wetness from her armpits. When she scratched the back of her neck, bits of dirt wedged themselves under her nails. (de Guia)

As it turned out, however, the most challenging translation in this short story was "*malansa*" in the scene where Serafina was about to rub salt on the tilapia without removing its gills and blood. I imagined Lucretia to say, "*Ano ka ba? Magiging malansa yan*!" "Fishy" as an adjective is less intense and primarily denotes the olfactory, whereas the state of *lansa* is a grave development beyond fishiness; a fish that is not thoroughly cleaned will smell and taste bad when you eat it. Used in dialogue, I had less legroom to elaborate descriptively as I did with "*pawis*" and "*libag*", and simply retaining the Filipino word—say, "That's going to be *malansa*!"—is unnatural to my ears, as if spoken by a *conyo* yuppy in Manila, instead of a sixty-year-old *probinsyana*. Translation figured prominently in the process of writing "Death for Serafina" and the short story encapsulates mustiness, in every sense of the word, as my poetics.

It is the translational nature of writing in English that makes realism attainable in my practice. Conversely, J. Neil Garcia asserts that realism as description and genre for Philippine literature in English is a "category mistake" since "realism as a critical term presupposes monocultural verisimilitude in a first language" (101). Pointing out the *kaingeros* and their children in N.V.M. Gonzalez's works, he remarks that their speaking in English to each other was

"obviously not realistic scenes" owing to the linguistic incongruence of what is being written about and the language used to write it. Garcia notes that unlike those who write in their first language, the Filipino writer in English cannot be wholly referential since the mimetic mode is a prerequisite to realism as a literary genre. He situates his argument upon the formation of realism as a Western literary tradition that is devoted to reproducing, through attentive details and descriptions, the real (102). But most importantly, the reader must believe the realism of what the author is saying, that they must share the same attitude and consequently same language and background. This requirement of reception meant that the translational nature of Philippine literature in English cannot adequately signify the surrounding culture into a realistic utterance, which is to say imitate it (103). In this sense, realism as conceptualized in the West, indeed, does not apply to the practice of a Filipino writer in English, but it is rather limited to presume that critics and writers of Philippine literature in English are not actively working with the conflicting nature of our multicultural conditions that necessitate translatedness, a self-awareness he readily assigns to Filipino critics—as if Filipino is not itself contested in many regions in the country (108-109). That realism is not possible or applicable because of linguistic incongruency is questionable when one delves further into the notion of referentiality as supposedly one-to-one. Garcia himself overturns his initial argument against the realism he earlier defined, that cultural systems vary in linguistic referentiality by the degrees of emphasis, and that referentiality is only one kind of representation, among others, for any language (113). In the end, he calls for critics to contextualize practices of writing in English that recognizes its "translatedness," and the required description and interpretation of the literary practice itself: not only how the act of writing must be transparent and purposeful in its translation of local culture into English, but also how translatedness hinges upon the reception of the Filipino audience (121).

Demonstrated by my own practice, translation is clearly inevitable. Part of what Garcia is arguing—that is, the recognition of translation in Philippine literature in English—is comparable to the "fact of translation" in Brian James Baer's criticism of the two

most popular conceptualizations of translation, cultural translation and untranslatability. Although the two appear to be opposites, they share an ambivalence to the fact of translation, defined as "the actual rendering of a text or utterance from one natural language or idiom to another"; cultural translation elides or mystifies the fact of translation through metaphorization of translation, whereas untranslatability impoverishes the fact of translation by focusing on a discrete set of "untranslatable" words (140). On cultural translation and translation as metaphor as abstractly defined by Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, Baer writes:

> One must ask whether the fact of translation and translation as metaphor are interchangeable in these formulations, or was the metaphorical translation of these authors into international Anglophone culture so successful precisely because they did not depend on the fact of translation? In other words, translation as metaphor glosses over or mystifies, in the Marxian sense of the word, the class implications of fluency in English. (143)

Baer's criticism is deeply informed by the recent rise of ethno-nationalist movements in the West, wherein translation and interpretation services are targeted by policies, which becomes a matter of life and death for migrants with no access to English as writers and scholars do (143-144). Moreover, the elision of the non-Western, non-English original text contributed to a new form of nationalism in multiculturalism—instead of promoting internationalism in publishing trends, they turned to hyphenated writers of foreign descent because everything can and should be English anyway (144). Regarding untranslatability, he posits it to be potentially ahistorical: "Who benefits from claims of untranslatability?" (148) The essentialist assertion of untranslatability mirrors ethno-nationalist sentiments of "unique national genius," and was considered "a bourgeoise fallacy closely tied to capitalist conceptions of private property" by Sovie translation scholars (148-149). What is glossed over as untranslatable is actually linguistic asymmetry or incommensurability, a characteristic that Translation Studies views as distributed across languages, and thus accepts "borrowing" to be a legitimate strategy in translation (147-148). As such, translated texts are inevitably hybrid texts of the source and target

languages, where full transposability or commensurability is not the goal, and where the fact of translation should be present (151-152).

The politics surrounding English, whose function as a global lingua franca stemmed from colonial and neocolonial domination, cannot be divorced from translation. In Philippine literature in English, the ambivalence towards the fact of translation manifests in two ways: the illusion of full transposability in monolingual English that elides the multilingual culture from which it is produced and the so-called untranslatables as ornaments on the otherwise monolingual English text for tokenized local color. The former often prevails in realist works, while the latter, in speculative works, though it is worth noting that this is not a strict demarcation, but rather a guide to analysis. Both can be encountered in a single text in *Writing the Philippines*.

The American disdain for non-standard, non-monolingual English and translation is consistently observed in various sources, past to current, colonial to postcolonial. The 1925 *Survey of the Educational System* in the Philippines refers to a "foreign language handicap" induced by the competing languages that a student at the time must contend with by engaging in ceaseless translation. To overcome this so-called disability, "the handicap of translation must be overcome" (Rafael, "Mis-education, Translation, and the *Barkada* of Languages" 9). Likewise, this attitude factored into the decision of using English as medium of instruction, relegating the burden of translation onto the colonial subjects (9). The process by which a student was expected to overcome translation is through the war of, and on translation:

> The student learned to translate by way of putting the mother tongue in its place, under the domination of a foreign one, thereby coming to dominate the foreign language herself. Winning this double victory would then transform the student into a new subject standing atop and in control of the linguistic hierarchy. Colonizing both languages, holding each to their respective places, the educated subject can now command language itself in the service of her thoughts and expressions. Doing so meant putting an end to the labor of translation or at least

> minimizing its visibility which could only detract from the appearance of thought. The war of translation was thus also meant to be a war *on* translation. It would conclude in the unequal peace among languages that would establish the rule of the thinking subject over the means and materials of its production. (10)

This is a war that was and still is waged today, even in the West, through the untethering of translation from the fact of translation and its politics (Baer 144). To use English, in this sense, one must aim to speak it as if one is not at all translating; and for poet Edith Tiempo, to write in English, one must be monolingual in the absence of the non-English, because "[o]ne cannot improve in one's art unless there is continuity" (qtd. in Cruz 20).

When Edith and Edilberto Tiempo were in Iowa, their encounter with New Criticism was premised upon silencing—subjugating—their own foreignness. Edith was excluded from poetry workshops and was instead told by Paul Engle to read books on poetry (Cruz 16). An incident with Flannery O'Connor, due to her Southern accent being too thick and unintelligible, had the students begging for Engle to read her manuscript aloud for her instead, marking her as foreign despite not being so. This act of silencing seemed for Edilberto an equalizer for the American and the Filipino, making made him feel less insecure about his own accent. Rather than recognize the suppression of their otherness, the accent-less speech and consequently accent-less writing gets held up as pedagogical imperative (17). Brought to the Philippines, New Criticism conflates the dominant culture with the universal, and conceives excellence in craft as hostile to "committed writing", which Edith compares to "an experience similar to going to the bathroom" where "there is relief but only temporarily" (qtd. in Cruz 19)—disposable because of its specificity as opposed to having "universal values". The universal, thus, can only be achieved with writing in monolingual English. Translation, or what Tiempo refers to as compartmentalization, "works against the craft of the postcolonial poet" (21). Again and again, working with English requires the abolition of translation and non-English—the utmost refusal to interact with what is deemed foreign that underscores the very foundations of the Empire. The effacement has always been a part of this tradition and continues to haunt

contemporary Philippine literature in English. My own turn to mustiness as a poetics of disruption was a long struggle against monolingualism.

Birthed by the institutionalization of creative writing, Philippine literature in English cannot escape the postcolonial inheritance that is New Criticism. Therefore, a publication that claims to embody the Pinoy sensorium without interrogating the language that has continuously subjugated it understandably will result in a confused selection of works that, at times, veers away from the Pinoy sensorium it champions. What then is the "porous sense of place" that the writers of *Writing the Philippines* were attuned to? As an adjective, "porous" indicates small holes on a surface or an object, implying roughness or gaps in the text, but the largely monolingual selection of fiction suggests the opposite. English disorients the Filipino reader when monolingually unmediated in its illusion of fully transposing the Filipino sensibility into English. Take for instance "Terminal" by Matthew Jacob F. Ramos, whose setting of a domestic airport was difficult to place until later:

> I sat up immediately and wondered why this man had to come all the way to this distant bench to bother me. But when I looked around, it was clear that our gated area had reached capacity. There were people sleeping on the marble floors with no thought to the shoes that had tread upon it. There was a pregnant woman standing by the entrance, disheartened by the lack of offers for seats; a number of kids shuffling into every open crevice they could find; a family that had just entered with nothing to look forward to. Besides my rude awakener, no one looked the slightest bit at home in this dreary place. (Ramos)

"Bench", "gated area", "marble floors", a disheartened pregnant woman, rowdy kids, and a family in "this dreary place" —these are generic elements in any airport when domestic airports in the Philippines are quite distinct from international ones, especially from those of other countries. The paragraph illustrates how an unmoored setting is further displaced in prose that does not deliberately make space for specificities. The disorientation in

setting is also heightened by the preceding description of Mister Neilsont:

> He was a burly sort of fellow. Hanging over his collared shirt was a dirty jean jacket painted in all sorts of bright and clashing colours. Looking again, I could barely place his ethnicity. He didn't have the sort of leathery skin shared amongst other Filipinos. Instead, he wore a bird-like face alongside his meaty body. He came across as the sort of person who spent their entire lives trapped in one of these airports. On the other hand, I must have come across as someone completely anathema to him. (Ramos)

A reader would be surprised to find out that the "bright and clashing colours" the narrator could not place the ethnicity of is supposed to harken to Sarimanok, Philippine folklore, and, it would seem, indigenous textile. This odd way of describing, coupled with "the sort of leathery skin shared amongst other Filipinos" and names like Gale and Mister Neilson, give off the impression that the narrator is psychologically and physically distant from his destination to Manila. The decision not to specify the local repeatedly crops up, and the symptom of the Western sensibility overpowering the Filipino becomes more evident. The detachment is not intentional, unlike the Filipino characters in "Selfies in Crisis" by R. Zamora Linmark in their speculation of the shooting in Resorts World Manila while detached in terms of diasporic/tourist sensibility, class, language, and physical location. Nevertheless, the detachment in "Terminal" is palpable.

Once settled in the cabin, the reader is introduced to a barrage of names of Philippine mythological figures from various locations—Amanikable, Languiton, Kaptan, Muhen, and Upa Kuyaw—mentioned by a woman called Macky. The funeral where the narrator had come from extends into this flight as Gale, his lover who died in his absence and continues to haunt his dreams, is revealed to be the God of Wind, whose death was caused by the dwindling number of Filipinos who believed and worshipped her—she was replaced by the modernity of the airplane, signaling that "the little people no longer needed [her]. That they were slowly manipulating their world, so they could explain [her] away" (Ramos). She died because she was forgotten. Without the fact of

translation, Ramos writes under the illusion of transposability and "the Romantic rhetoric of loss and distortion that often accompanies the recognition … that translation cannot ever achieve perfect transposability" (Baer 157). Gale's death as the God of Wind exemplifies this within the text itself, in which the native faith is pronounced dead in forgetting, as opposed to its continued perseverance and transformation in the postcolonial.

Languages in the twentieth century have unequal status, and when one encounters a dominant language, it is easy to submit to its demands. Many Filipino writers believe that to write well in English, one must psychologically assimilate into English (Mojares 20; Cruz 23)—that is, to fully transpose the self without any trace of non-English. The notions of continuity, intelligibility, and clarity pervade what is considered correct and well-written English, which mainly serves the native English-speaking recipient, whether or not they are intended to be as such. But the standardization relies on its arbitrary development in Western countries, and for the postcolonial writer and reader, conforming to this obfuscates the source language from which the self exists. To echo Resil B. Mojares, "What then shall I have become?" To resist assimilation, he concludes that "the most productive encounter between two languages lies … in the state of tension one is able to achieve between one and the other" (20). Writing my locality in English means I have to confront it as a site of tension for my conflicting postcolonial existence—tension I manifest linguistically in my prose by disrupting monolingual English with a multilingual, translational poetics that I call mustiness.

A basic condition of Philippine life, writes Mojares, translation is a given due to our maritime environment, but it is unfortunately also dictated by the "realities of domination," when translation was a tool for conquest and conversion wielded by the Spanish-colonizers (12). This, however, is not a "one-way traffic" (13). In parsing Tagalog, the Spanish missionaries had to encode it in Latin grammar and express it in Castillan to make it intelligible to them (Rafael, "Confession, Conversion, and Reciprocity" 326). The notion of untranslatability was instituted concerning terms that pertain to faith, in which *Dios* could never be *bathala*, placing Tagalog far down in the linguistic hierarchy (325). This

simultaneously answers and exhibits Baer's aforementioned question on untranslatability. It is easy to assume that the enthusiasm of Tagalogs to convert and confess is simply submission, but Vicente L. Rafael showcases the complex negotiations at work in *confessionarios* vis-à-vis the native value of reciprocity that is *utang na loob*, and the *hiya* accompanying it. When one receives a gift, one has *utang na loob* which, following Rafael, is "a debt of, from and for the 'inside,' as indicated by the particle *na*", wherein *loob* is situated in a circular process of exchange rather than a hierarchical position within transactions, the "debt of gratitude" as understood by the Spanish (331-332). To experience *hiya*, often translated as "shame," is "to be in a vulnerable position as one available for an other's blows", and in *utang na loob, hiya* arises when one is unable to effectively read the value of the *kaloob* received, rendering one speechless (332; 336). Therefore, when the natives received the gift of a foreign religion that they could not fully evaluate, they found the *confessionario* to be a solution to overcome and defer the outbreak of hiya (333). Because the sacraments were utilized to contain *hiya*, the converts were noted to confess not the way they were expected to do: a native confession was labyrinthine and *bogtong*-like for its digressions and braggadocio, sometimes including the sins of their neighbors instead of their own (337-338). With this, the colonial deployment of translation is beleaguered by the native ability to deflect and also utilize it in return: "… Tagalogs 'submitted' while at the same time hollowing out the Spanish call to submission" (339).

This circumvention also persists in the imposition of English as the medium of instruction when the colony changed hands from Spanish to American. The domination of English in the educational system, for Renato Constantino, displaces the Filipino student as "tourist" to her mother tongue, thus rendering her inarticulate and unable to think and express in any language (Rafael, "Mis-education, Translation, and the *Barkada* of Languages" 4-5). On the other hand, American colonial officials saw plainly the failure of their policy and its inability to repress the vernacular (7). Determined as the greatest hindrance to the fluency of Filipino students, the vernacular instead Filipinizes the language by "dressing English in the clothes of 'Malay' sound patterns" (11).

The disruption of the vernacular becomes an affront that ranges from annoyance to more than that—a violent assault, ironically enough, against the colonizers, amounting to the "perversion, contortion, and mauling [of] our familiar phraseology out of most of its intelligibility" (Barry qtd. in 12).

The problem with Garcia's criticism of realism and writing in translation is that it undermines the capacity of the colonized in utilizing and perceiving the imposed language, evidenced by Rafael to be the contrary. Like proponents of untranslatability, Garcia impoverishes translation itself. Despite arguing for the translatedness of a text in English in lieu of our multicultural conditions, he commits the same essentialist treatment of language and culture. That realism, in the Western literary tradition, is not applicable to our neocolonial situation and our complex process of referentiality brings to light the question of who gets to define reality and for whom. Realism as a genre, in this regard, is treated as untranslatable for the Filipino writer in English, subscribing to the notion "that the cultural values created in politically dominant cultures cannot become the property of other peoples" (Fedorov qtd. in Baer 150). When one's culture is multilingual and translational, would that not itself be the reference?

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Particular to Philippine Literature in English is Philippine speculative fiction which is plagued by the same dubious practice exhibited by "Terminal". In 2016, I presented and published a paper in the 4th Literary Studies Conference in Universitas Sanata Dharma that criticizes the problematic conception of this genre and how that manifested in the only young adult fantasy novel in English at the time, *Naermyth* by Karen Francisco. Dean Francis Alfar and Joseph Frederick F. Nacino, who were among the figures at the forefront of the movement, edited an anthology of fantasy fiction, The *Farthest Shore*. In the introduction, Nacino actively seeks to relieve the Filipino writer the burden of writing the Filipino: "Why can't we be allowed to let our imagination roam free without the constraints of culture, location, or element?" (qtd. in Salcedo 182). He echoes what has always been a major issue in Philippine literature in English but with astoundingly less

recognition as he cites white, Western fantasy writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien and G. R. R. Martin whose secondary worlds are deeply influenced by Western culture, yet perceived as transcendentally universal. Likewise, in a different essay, Alfar chafes against the realities surrounding a Filipino writer in English: "A third world country should not be constrained to write third world literature, especially since at its core, speculative fiction is all about imagination—possession of which has nothing to do with social realities" (qtd. in 182) What the New Critical writer effaces in the service of craft, the speculative writer effaces in the service of imagination.

By ignoring "social realities," the speculative writer mimics the practice of a white, Western writer like Neil Gaiman: taking from ancient world mythologies and freely molding them for whatever purpose in his narrative. Transplanted in the Philippines, the Filipino speculative writer turns to "precolonial mythology." This exposes the writer as uprooted from the everyday experience of mythology that has, along with the vernacular, remained in contemporary Philippine cultures, neither dead nor precolonial. Drawing from my experience, I witnessed for the past decade how my family prayed to different Marian statues because they have hierarchy in power and ability, dealt with *kulam* for years that one healer alone could not counter, performed *pagpapa-usok* in our ancestral house to exorcise the ghost attached to a family member—all real, all current. This is to illustrate that one cannot just restructure these aspects on a whim, where random figures from Philippine mythology attend a funeral on a plane, their existence and death dependent upon the faith of people, without much basis. Just like the Spanish colonizers subsuming Tagalog under their languages, patterning these existing and evolving mythologies within Western frameworks and beliefs is akin to replicating the colonial displacement we are still dealing with.

The essay "The Music of Pestle-on-Mortar" discusses the possibility for an indigenous Philippine poetics, mapped through the story of Tuglibong, one of the creation myths of the Bagobo tribe. While Alfar views temporal and local specificity as impediment to being part of the world literatures, Rosario Cruz-Lucero writes:

> Artists and writers who credit their native traditions for their accomplishments take pride in the fact that they have stamped their identity onto the world by allowing their native roots to diffuse themselves into the world. To be internationally recognized is to be deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of one's own nation. To be a functional global citizen, one must first be firmly rooted in the cultural traditions of one's own soil. (9)

Furthermore, what I would like to highlight as well is this paragraph, which I will quote in its entirety:

> Perhaps the never ending debate in our literary circles between form and content, or social consciousness and art for art's sake, derives from our alienations from our cultural roots. Because of the sort of postcolonial literary education we are still having to submit to unquestioningly, we are immersed in the Western attitudes of nihilism and despair, of ennui and angst (or, in Visayan translation, *buangsit*). And yet, we find ourselves remaining suspicious of, and uncomfortable with, them. "The racial unconscious," "national identity," "nativism"—call it what you like; but something in our soul cries for a way of ordering the universe that neither the gods of Mount Olympus nor the heroes of Homer not the antiheroes of Hemingway not even the chocolate-drinking, levitating priests of Gabriel Garcia Marquez can provide to our full satisfaction. (4)

This entails a reorientation of our creative practice. It is not to conceive of our own cosmos after the West; it is not to write how Tolkien, Martin, Gaiman, or other Western writers do. It should be the other way around. After all, detachment and fetishism are two sides of the same coin that is the absolute and unquestioned subscription to the Western tradition. Both present in "Terminal," they sustain our postcolonial alienation from our own culture and ourselves.

Another speculative short story in *Writing the Philippines* is "Hegira" by Pearlsha Abubakar, which uses elements of science fiction and fantasy. She falls into the same traps as Ramos does with regard to detachment and fetishism, although the text on

some level attempts to overcome these. Science fiction elements come, initially, in the form of a smart wristwatch called Geekbit endowed to the narrator Pawik by his American tutor, the once-mentioned robot that completely eradicates the need for translation between foreign tutors and the Sama people; and next, the date of the appearance of the ancient island Lubas on March 4, 2067, indicating futurism. All these would have no bearing beyond the convenient flow of the plot and in fact avoid explicitly tackling the political conflict with mainlanders in Kandungan which is central to the narrative. The unfortunate result is that the local elements are reduced to ornaments. There is also an uneasy implication that the intended audience does not come from the Mindanawon culture it draws from. After his legs were amputated, Pawik narrates, "Inda didn't waste time crying over wasted seaweed," from the English idiom of spilled milk. Twice, dialogues of Inda in English were appended with "in Sama", and the utterance of *sungit* had to be explained:

> "Ah, orang *sungit*," Inda had hissed when she learnt that Isma's whole family had gone. The *sungit* is the spirit of a termite-like creature that lived in rotten wood and couldn't derive any satisfaction from anything even after it had sucked it dry. "They are getting restless again. We too must leave." (Abubakar)

On the surface, it appears that Abubakar is signaling the fact of translation, but to whom and for what purpose? When the narrative has already established that Inda, Pawik, and all the characters are not English speakers even in 2076, who is it accommodating when it further clarifies that Inda does not actually speak in English? Or what *sungit* is?

"The Last of Sama-sellang" by Sigrid Marianne Gayangos becomes a breath of fresh air among the speculative short stories in the issue. It lingers on the last moments of a legendary creature from folktales, the sama-sellang, which soon succumbs to its demise caused by human greed and exploitation. Despite its similarities with the works of Ramos and Abubakar, the short story manages to avoid the problems besetting the two. Its success lies in how it presents the immediate setting as is. Unlike in "Terminal," the narrator of "The Last of Sama-sellang" does not give a mere visual

checklist. The journey to the sama-sellang was a combinatory stimulation of the senses: the image of Mr. Tsai's house, against the "descending blood-red sun", on the calm sea, mentioning that the day before, there was a storm that made the waters dangerous; hearing the puttering sound of the motorboat, at the same time, smelling "the scent of decay and salt"; and the sight of terrifyingly disgusting cluster flies, "huge ones with blue and yellow sheen on the thorax," inside—the intimacy that is almost tangible, inducing familiarity. And this intimacy does not relent even in the face of the sama-sellang itself:

> Inside the pool was a creature that looked like a human-whale chimera gone wrong: its eyes sunken into dark holes; a tear on its face, which could only be the mouth, revealed many sharp, fang-like teeth; its skin (or was it scale?) was blue-gray all over, all six feet of it, with patches of pink and green. Next to the pool, Mr. Tsai knelt and caressed the head of the wheezing creature. (Gayangos)

This is heightened by how Mr. Tsai mourns the creature in an extremely tactile manner—"The old, scrawny man held the sama-sellang's limb-like pectoral fins"; "he continued to caress the creature"; "the old man's hand had traced a path" and "getting into the briny pool himself, as he leant closer and clasped the dying creature's hands"— coalescing most effectively at the ending:

> Mr. Tsai leant his forehead against the sama-sellang's. The creature's eyes peeled open for the last time and sought his face. Their bodies had merged into one: one forehead to another, hands and fins, sallow skin and intricate patterns on the old man's sash.
>
> The sama-sellang let out a final sound, a growl that was at once pitiful and terrifying. It reverberated around the tiny house, and as the echo died away, so did the beating under my hand. And then, darkness descended unannounced.
>
> Mr. Tsai continued to hold the creature in his embrace. I rose as quietly as I could and headed to the makeshift stairs that faced the quiet sea. (Gayangos)

The grounding of the setting forces the reader, whether Filipino or not, to be familiar with it. In having the narrator interact with the surroundings, the story was able to paint a believable location "across the Basilan Strait, past the two Santa Cruz islands." Gayangos successfully overcomes the obstacles many speculative short stories, and as a whole, short stories in English, could not, allowing her to avoid explicating what is culturally specific. Moreover, the death of a mythological creature is not tied to the nebulous and romantic idea of loss, of forgetting; the sama-sellang's extinction, like many animals, is by the world, and affects the world: "… the cicadas sang and the wind whistled. The waves joined in a mournful ebbing and flowing." When it finally dies, the sea returns to unsettling quietness. In this portrayal, Gayangos skirts the alienating tendency of writing in English while affecting the everyday mundanity of mythology.

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Inherent to translation is the question of audience and reception. When one translates from one language to another, there is a target reader in that language. The overheard theory provides a framework for how one can achieve a translation that retains the foreignness of the source language into the target language. According to this theory, meaning is relayed to the reader as if they are simply overhearing the translated text (Villareal 10-11). The overheard, therefore, is able to signal the fact of translation through a variety of linguistic interventions, such as incommensurability and grammatic peculiarity without much regard for full understanding in the target language. Phyllis Bird used the concept of overheard on the task of Bible translation, stating that she is "not certain that the translator is even obliged to make the modern reader *understand* what is overheard" (qtd. in 11). And so the overheard defies monolingual fluency: "Listening to the overheard is actually a re-working of meaning through a re-working of language" (18). Instead of adjusting to the style and mode of English as Edith Tiempo had done, the overheard undermines the notion of English being "a fully formed language," one that a Filipino writer can co-author away from the demands of fluency (Cruz 24; Villareal 18-19).

The last story in *Writing the Philippines*, "Salve" by Daryll Delgado, operates with a level of awareness of the overheard. The title itself is only the first in the series of multilingual wordplays that pepper the text: Salve as the name of the Bisaya narrator in Quezon City, the beginning of Marian prayers in Latin, the English word for something that heals or saves, and the implication of the local slang *salvage* paralleled with *tokhang*. Other examples are Libing Things Funeral Service from "living things", how certain sections begin with "God" or "Lord" not as a call to the divine but as exasperated utterances, and the radio *panawagan* as various calls that could be anything. There are times that she explicates on her translations, but unlike in "Hegira," the explications are not alienating; they serve a purpose within the narrative, such as the play on the *funeraria* name: "Libing Things Funeral Services. Still cracks me up. In Bisaya we say 'lubong' instead of 'libing' for burial, so the pun won't work. Perfect in Tagalog, where we sometimes pronounce 'living' as 'libing' anyway." Another example is on the word *ingat* later on:

> Ingat. Take care, he says, driving off, leaving me staring after his red tricycle. Take care. How does one do that these days? How does he do it, still driving around Talipapa, still living in the house where his father was killed? I'm pretty sure the lola taking her apo to school two days ago was taking care. I'm sure she wasn't expecting to get shot in the face that day. I know I was taking care of my family, my husband. (Delgado)

In either instance, the explication signaling the fact of translation is less for the convenience of the imagined English-speaking audience, but to highlight Salve's own multilingual thought process, which is not only in English and Tagalog—she does not call it Filipino—but also in Bisaya. In fact, her voice as a nurse / caregiver narrating the story in fluent English effectively contrasts the multilingual reality she is faced with in Talipapa, both her and others' problems that she desperately wants to detach herself from. A clear example of the deliberate contrast of Salve's largely, although not entirely, monolingual internalizations vis-à-vis the multilingual external world, is when she interacts with the young tricycle driver, prior to her ruminations on the word *ingat*:

> I almost get hit by a tricycle as I limp across the street. *Sorry, Doktora*! The young driver calls out, smiling in a too-friendly manner. *Sakay kayo*?
>
> I am about to yell, *I'm fine, I can walk, and I'm a nurse, not a doctor, OK*?!, but I realise it is the young driver who brought me to the subdivision gate the last time. I can't recall his name, only his story, about his father.
>
> *Uy, kumusta*? *How's everything*?
>
> He shrugs, smiles sadly. I tell him I have to drop by a few other places, but will look for him later at the terminal, when I'm ready to go.
>
> *OK, Mam. Ingat*. (Delgado)

In the flashback to the death of Salve's mother, who did mani-pedi service among many other menial jobs for a living, contrast is once again deployed, albeit in a slightly different manner:

> *It happened in the afternoon, between noontime and the afternoon mass*, they said. *A las tres, the hour of great mercy*. Others said she died in the hospital, while being treated. *For what*? Nobody could tell. A neighbour she was doing laundry for brought her there when she collapsed while in the middle of hanging clothes in the yard. *She had been feverish for days*. *"She had been feverish for days*. Some said it *was sanib, a curse, an evil possession. She was as healthy as a carabao, all of a sudden she was so sick, so thin*. Others said *poison, hilo, lason. She was beautiful, but sometimes too friendly with the husbands of her jealous clients*. (Delgado)

Dialogues from various speakers are lined up in a single paragraph, capturing the back and forth of *chismis*. The vernacular exists with the English, not necessarily translated, but coming off as bursts of repetitive stutters in the stream of words.

Despite the demarcation in terms of class, gender, and profession, Salve consistently sees herself reflected among the "unskilled" workers in Talipapa, even as she resists any comparison, or even connection. She is much more comfortable admitting similarities

with other women in her life, such as Jenny, who is her employer and friend, as well as the daughter of her patient; her mother who died at her current age; her daughter who got pregnant a year younger before she did; the thin, young woman, half her age, that her husband left her for; and the dead woman on the news with a flabby stomach, like her belly, who may only be a few years older. All throughout the story, she wishes to untether herself from her worldly problems, from the problems of those around her—the same way her mother, husband, and daughter have left her. This is represented by her use of English as a distinguishing voice in the narration vis-à-vis other multilingual voices in dialogue.

When she goes to have her toe ingrown removed at the salon iPrettiserie, the languages inescapably merge from the radio playing a Tagalog song, the Bisaya-speaking assistants, the angry rants of one of the *parloristas* swiftly cursing between English and Tagalog, and the miserable sobbing of another for his boyfriend Ton, presumed arrested or killed *tokhang*-style for doing drugs. Her feet, especially her toe, immersed in warm water, she herself experiences comfort from the same act of caring that her mother did for her as a little girl. Rested for the first time in a long while, she wishes she "could close [her] ears, [her] other senses, too", be desensitized to death as she claims she is as a nurse, be "nawara." As the pain subsides, she, like her ingrown, "softens," indicating a submission to her reality, a multilingual culture not limited to the middle class bubble she wants to lose herself into. Delgado's careful attention to language-use demonstrates the gulf between texts like "Terminal" or "Hegira" and a critical and conscious poetics that harnesses the multilingual and translational.

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Prior to the *Writing the Philippines* issue's release, I was able to preview "Death for Serafina." Majority of the editorial changes were minor, although numerous, technical polishing. My American spellings were converted into British since that is the standard for *Cha*. I raised my concern to one of the main editors of the journal regarding the italicization of the non-English, such as *maestra, hermana, taho, capiz, funeraria, ylang-ylang,* and so on, because it is a political choice of mine that the English text does not treat the local as other in my creative work. However, they

must adhere to the consistent treatment of non-English in the issue and across the journal, a perspective I was asked to consider. So I acquiesced, this being my third fiction publication and first international one. Even though the editor kindly offered to negotiate this if it were truly important to me, I had already decided to forfeit it, much to my own dismay. With future publications, I will realize that local presses are less considerate with editorial interventions.

On the matter of italics, writer Butch Dalisay wrote in a column on Philstar why he chooses to italicize. It was a topic that came up twice in the NVM Gonzales Workshop he had attended, the second instance brought up by Filipino-Americans from the United States. His use of italics straddles technical grounds–in cases when local Filipino words look like English–as well as political grounds–highlighting the Filipino words signals that they are "special to [him] and to [his] culture". Furthermore, he supposes that this is a concern for hyphenated Americans due to their specific, diasporic contexts. While it is true that needless peppering of Filipino terms for local color is exoticizing, his overall argument for italics and how this is a diasporic concern is shortsighted. Clarity for the sake of readability is too rigid and limited as a way to deliver meaning, and as I have argued, a submission to the domination of English. That he highlights the Filipino words because they are special is dubious, since inclusion in a literary work does not automatically frame something positively, and to defend italics for indicating specialness borders on the exoticism he claims he is against.

Pertaining to her then upcoming novel *America is Not the Heart*, Elaine Castillo talks about how she purposefully does not translate non-English in her writing. In "There is no single voice of America," Castillo writes that she draws from her experience growing up in a multilingual household that spoke Pangasinan, Tagalog, and Ilocano, languages that floated "around in [her] head [her] entire life, flawed and fragmented," as natural to her characters and herself as English. She refuses italicization to create an equal portrayal of languages in her work. As a Filipino-American writer, she notes the targeted demand for comprehensibility from writers of color, whose non-English is particularly non-Western. She elucidates on the very reason for the

multilingual reality of America, the history shared by both diaspora and non-diaspora: the violence that resulted from US imperialism and neoliberalism.

Castillo speaks from a diasporic context, but her resistance to italics and explanation of the non-English in her English prose reflect my practice. Moreover, she states that "it's not by understanding everything perfectly that we are enriched"—when something is not quite grasped, then there is something to progress from, and to find articulation. Mustiness as disruption of English manifests my tensioned existence of being a Filipino.

In the end, my translation of "*malansa*" in dialogue did not entirely make it in *Writing the Philippines*, which finalized it as "terrible taste in your mouth" (de Guia). The smell *and* taste of fish that is cooked without proper cleaning ends up being portrayed as simply a matter of taste. I supposed the original did not qualify as coherent, intelligible English, but it is precisely why I wrote it as such. I still maintain that *malansang* fish gives you a terrible *stench* in your *mouth*.

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**Bionote:**

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