

KRITIKA KULTURA SPECIAL LITERARY SECTION ON THE CONTEMPORARY PHILIPPINE ESSAY

Introduction

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About the Authors

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This special literary section is an inquiry: to see what Filipino writers do when they think of the essay. The essay as a literary form is energized by this experimental spirit.

Any discussion of the essay conventionally traces back to Michel de Montaigne, the form's "father," the first to convert the French verb *essayer*—to try, to attempt—into a noun to title a volume of his own writings. Discussions about the form latch onto this etymology, one that points to a practice of the essay as an endeavor, a process, that a subjective understanding is being attempted and tested, not objectively proven.

Etymology leads to an interpretation of the form that we hold onto: that it seeks to investigate and thus resists dogma. The essay sets out to problematize, whether those be issues of language, political ideology, art, one's immediate world, or even one's own personal experiences. It is a spirit that is persistent in its reluctance toward passive appropriations of modes, toward rigidity, toward closed-endedness, and ultimately toward closed-mindedness. The essay as we appreciate it is naturally exhaustive rather than succinct (without the illusion of having captured a totality), meandering or fragmentary rather than straightforwardly linear (thus skeptical of continuity and absolute certainty), alert rather than laidback (cognizant of relativism and thus rigorous in its pursuit). The essay thus does not hide behind the pretense that it is beyond mediation.

The Philippine essay in English, however, is not usually framed as such a pursuit. The literary essay is seen as informal and thus distinct from the rigor of philosophical, academic, or political inquiry, and to write of oneself is to universalize as opposed to self-examine. To speak of the Philippine essay in English has been to speak of writings whose dispositions seem greatly influenced if not predetermined in terms of length, behavior, and intent by venues like newspaper columns, lifestyle sections, and glossies. Indeed, several of the single-author essay collections in English being published locally are collections of columns and feature articles previously published in magazine/glossy/general readership-type venues. The writing is what is customary of such venues.

This special literary section wishes to contribute toward problematizing the assumptions behind this kind of writing being cast as literary under the popular banner "creative nonfiction." Among these assumptions: that feature article writing and creative nonfiction and therefore the literary essay are interchangeable; that there is a kind of nonfiction writing that is novel enough to be its own literary genre simply because it employs the techniques typically attributed to other literary genres like fiction; that a genre or a literary form can be reduced to techniques; that the reason for using these techniques can be to simply make things more dramatic

and compelling; that the boundaries between kinds of writing is simply one kind's ability to pass the fact-checking process or its overt claim to speaking truths; that there is a universality to which we must sing.

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, primarily because of her *Creative Nonfiction: A Manual for Filipino Writers* (UP Press, 2003) as well as the accompanying *Creative Nonfiction: A Reader* (UP Press, 2003), remains a significant voice in our appreciation of this genre from a Philippine context. Her introduction to the manual brands creative nonfiction as “nonfiction prose which utilizes the techniques of fiction.” To situate the presence of this kind of writing in Philippine literature in English, she discusses writings in this mold that have appeared in newspapers, magazines, and glossies; a look through the original publication details of several of the selections from her accompanying reader will reveal that. The term creative nonfiction then becomes less its own kind of writing rather an umbrella term for nonfiction written in a specific style; indeed, her introduction cites, among others, the magazine feature article, the newspaper column, the review, the interview story, and the autobiographical sketch as part of the range of kinds of nonfiction that fall under creative nonfiction—writings, again, that have their inherent kinds of ends and constraints as determined by their otherwise journalistic kinds of venues.

The chapters that comprise the manual all the more frame the genre in terms of “strategies”—approach, point-of-view, tone, voice, structure, a strong beginning, rhetorical techniques, character, concrete and evocative details, scene, a convincing ending—that in many ways describe the considerations of good writing regardless of genre—parts of a whole that is defined by the parts that comprise it. Consider how one can view these “strategies” as not being representative of the indebtedness to fiction that Hidalgo’s definition of creative nonfiction represents. What of things like causality, conflict, plot?

Interestingly, Hidalgo relates creative nonfiction to New Journalism. The noticeable behaviors within this phenomenon in American writing articulated by Tom Wolfe in his introduction to *The New Journalism* (Picador, 1973) more closely connects—at least just on the level of techniques, devices, or strategies—to conventional fiction (i.e., scene-by-scene construction, presenting these scenes through the eyes of a particular character, recording dialogue and everyday gestures and other noticeable details within a scene as they may be symbolic of character and the individual’s position or status in his or her world) as seen in more “like a novel” (in length, in breadth, and in ambition) exemplars like Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night*, and Wolfe’s *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*.

Philippine journalism through the likes of Nick Joaquin, Jose Lacaba, and the *Philippines Free Press* has plenty of these compelling journalistic narratives, without question. Still, what is there to gain by viewing these as a kind of writing other than what they are—good journalism? This is the short-sightedness of how Hidalgo interchanges her terms. She may have been describing tendencies in writing in the guise of defining a genre.

We see the limitations of this interpretation of the Philippine essay in English. We see value in breaking free from “creative nonfiction” and returning to the weight that “essay” brings with it in terms of etymology and therefore impetus, and also in terms of its long tradition which extends beyond informality, storytelling, and gestures toward supposed universal themes and leisurely affairs to include intelligent analysis, insightful criticism, intensive and self-reflexive reflection and rumination, as well as alertness to form.

Kritika Kultura itself publishes these kinds of essays in both its regular and literary sections. Providing a special *literary* section for the Philippine essay in English is thus an intriguing proposition: that a journal of primarily scholarly essays posits that the essay need be considered literary as well, and that there may be a distinction between such essays and those which KK publishes in its other sections. This is but a natural extension of this special literary section’s experiment: what do Filipino writers do when they think of the essay as a *literary* endeavor?

We were confident that many of the submissions would not fall back on the characteristics and behaviors of “creative nonfiction”—storytelling techniques used in the spirit of agreeable themes framed as compelling leisurely reading. Or at least this was our hope.

We sought to find out to what extent the Philippine literary essay is willing to be formally alert and critically engaged. We sought to discover the lengths to which the Philippine Filipino essayist today experiments an understanding of—ultimately a response to—who, what, and where he or she is. We wondered where the Filipino essayist stood in relation to perceived dichotomies that the essay represents—formal versus informal, systematic knowledge versus idiosyncratic (and irrational?) form, the scientific versus the personal, knowledge versus experience, thesis versus hypothesis. Could we not see the essay as inherently hybrid—and yet what could that possibly mean in terms of a submission?

It is difficult to enter a deliberation process without expectations. Which among the essays we accepted represent what we had initially hoped for? Those by Gonzalez, Quijon, and Nery, we count among the essays we consider formally alert and more successful in their experimentation. Their works attempt to bend

the essay form, almost to a synaesthetic breaking point, by straining it toward an intense encounter with the visual.

Pobre, Acuña, and Guieb were not only formally alert but also critically engaged in their subject matter. Nevertheless, the range of tones and textures could not be more disparate among these three. Pobre's contribution is a rather dignified reflection on Beethoven, philosophy, and a shard of Philippine history. Acuña's essay is a freewheeling, tongue in cheek reportage with a constant and mounting sense of scandal and outrage. The tradition of the essayist as researcher-storyteller continues through Guieb.

Through these initial six essays, we noticed that the willingness to play while being intelligently engaged is noticeably pronounced.

The essays we accepted which went beyond what we initially hoped for include those written by Cornelio, Casocot, Bengan, and Torres. The essays by Casocot and Torres are immersed in wondrous rural worlds of childhood and memory. Bengan's contribution is a quietly sensitive and unsparing reminiscence which is exhilaratingly triumphant in its own way. Cornelio's essay is the most different, being a hardluck story of a flunking student, but is engagingly written as such can be. They all wrote strong narrative-driven personal essays.

There were others of the same genre, but the ones included in this special section were exemplary in their narratives and in the fact that the first-person narrator's place in the world is part of its own inquiry. Narrative-driven works are still there and are being done well. This strong tradition of the Philippine essay continues—an I pining for home, assuming a nostalgic subject position, recollection as self-examination. As we received several submissions in this mode, we were deliberate in selecting works that gestured toward examining the self in relation to the social, wary that essays that do not do so fall susceptible to the passivity of the culture industry. (Theodor Adorno, in "The Essay as Form," warns that the essay is easily subsumed by the culture industry.)

It was unavoidable that there were essays which caused some disagreements. The essay by Garcia and the one co-written by Dimaranan and Labayne were not unanimous choices. There was a sentiment that these essays could more appropriately be evaluated according to the criteria of straightforward scholarly writing—the refereeing process, for example, employed by KK for the essays in its non-literary section. Garcia's essay became a welcome contribution under the rubric of the reflective essay of which it is the sole representative in this special section. Dimaranan and Labayne's essay, on the other hand, could be viewed as a critical work representative of a youthful collective effort which is promising and

engaged, thus deserving encouragement in spite of certain issues regarding form and approach.

Are the essays we included kinds of writing that have been published in other venues or recognized by long-standing institutions? Of course. Most of the essays in this section represent an aesthetic that has been previously seen in venues run by the traditional literary institutions (KK, UP's *Likhaan* anthologies, Ateneo de Manila's *Heights*), independent online venues (*transit*, *Plural Prose Journal*, and *High Chair*), as well as the several independent or small press outfits that actively engage in self-publishing, and even local magazines and glossies who still at times carve out some space for extended essayistic projects. Foregrounding such writings overtly in this special section hopefully incites not just more venues for such works but also for those venues, institutions, and independent groups to incite more conversations about the essay as literary practice. The hope is that the Filipino essayist does not just respond to the venues available to him or her by abiding their conventions, but ultimately that he or she shapes the venue's editorial thrusts or creates venues and platforms of their own.

To introduce a final modest proposal, it would be fitting to end by remembering that we began with bilingual ambitions for this KK special literary section. The constraints of publishing in a journal like KK required that Filipino language submissions be accompanied by English translations. This turned out to be enough of a burden to radically limit the Filipino language contributions. In light of this, some reflection on the linguistic texture of the essays brought out one possible direction of experimentation and development for the Philippine essay.

In general, one notices the general avoidance of "Philippine English" and the visible aspiration for a certain conventional refinement of style in the contemporary Philippine essay in English, including most of the contributions to this issue. Philippine English, considered one of the so-called "world Englishes," is often pointed to as proof of the Filipino appropriation of English. It is also useful in allaying feelings of unease regarding the alleged "foreignness" of English in the Philippine context.

Through Philippine English, it is said that English has become hybridized, become absorbed, become no longer alien but part of us. It has become just as "Filipino" as you and me, or, at the very least, (if it has not exactly become a part of everyone to the same uniform extent) a narrow social stratum which can afford college education can legitimately claim it as its own. Moreover, the largely multilingual population with a large segment currently working in the service sector has made the production of a distinctive Philippine English inevitable.

However, this “Philippine English” is not taught in English classes and its distinctive grammar and pronunciation is generally frowned upon as an embarrassment and as being simply “wrong.” Proper English of the American or British varieties are still considered the standard. The “native speakers” and canonical writers of these standards are still looked up to as the most important stylistic authorities.

The Filipino writer in English often finds herself/himself casting a sideward glance at an imagined third listener who always casts a shadow on their speech, the native English speaker. This is certainly understandable looking at it from the point of view of the imbrication of language in economic factors and considerations of personal prestige and professional advancement.

If Philippine English is so great, why isn't it used in serious writing? Isn't it a kind of bad faith to extol, on an exclusively theoretical plane, with all the “post-colonial” verbal trappings, the supposed “Englishes of the world” while writing only in “correct” and standard English easily publishable by literary and scholarly outlets here and abroad?

Why not take seriously the challenge of doing sustained writing in “Philippine English”? To push the envelope even further, why not mix this with Taglish or Engalog, or with large amounts of Bislish, Englokano, or any other possible combination? Someone who could harness the linguistic wealth of the Philippines in a soup of Joycean thickness would be nothing less than a virtuoso. The contributions by Casocot and Torres in this issue point toward these exciting possibilities. The most formally alert of the contributions are indeed exciting and intelligent, but they are, to an extent, personal appropriations of experiments with a distinctively Anglo orientation.

The conventional Philippine essay in English smells of domestication more than any other contemporary form. Perhaps this is due to its natural closeness to the school and academic environment where everyone is incessantly required to write essays as opposed to poetry or short stories. Even the more outrageous little essayistic experiment with its adroit allusions and juvenile amorality is still meant to please the English teacher looking over one's shoulder.

Filipino essayists still seem to spend an inordinate time flipping through pages written by masters of English prose (or of European prose in English translation) for models of good turns of phrase, precepts of elegant expression, and polished verbosity. This brand of “excellent style” is often a mark of a complacency which has given up the struggle of genuine thinking for the sake of a limpid phrase. The derivative elegance, commercial sheen, and hyper-subtle refinements of the essay are often a camouflage for poverty of thought.

The German theorist Walter Benjamin considers translation as a means by which languages gesture toward a state of mutual completion. He wrote that the translator can expand, deepen, and transform his/her own language through of a foreign one by allowing a foreign tongue to set his/her own language in motion. In this way, the “the rotting barriers” of his/her own language can be destroyed.

Translation can produce monstrous examples (*monströse Beispiele*) which open themselves to the immense risk or danger (*ungeheure Gefahr*) of unintelligibility. Benjamin proffers his own preferred example of letting a foreign language influence one’s own tongue by means of a “literal rendering of syntax.” However, one arguably doesn’t need to actually engage in translation to pursue this program. One is always already translating anyway even in one’s mother tongue. Instead of just the two languages of the original and the translation, with their implicit chronological sequence and hierarchies, one can put all sorts of languages simultaneously in play.

But this play always rigorously occurs in context and cannot just be an empty word-dropping exercise with a tasty Italian or French phrase dropped her and there. This does not mean raiding words sleeping in the tombs of dictionaries. The essayist must be able to draw from laughing, living tongues rather than steal from the solemn crypts of the dead. It means to deeply immerse oneself and engage in one’s own linguistic and social environment.

Wouldn’t the linguistic monstrosities which result out of such experimentations not constitute a scandal? Is this not a mark of the success of an essay? To scandalize the schoolmarmish English teacher? To go too far and write in an English prose that even Filipinos can only fitfully understand? Striving for new thoughts often means straining the limits of one’s own language(s) to the breaking point.

We conclude by saying that perhaps the frontier that has not been explored—the barriers that have not yet been breached through experimentation—by the contemporary Philippine essay in English is the English used itself. Not just in terms of it being a medium rather an inquiry in and of itself—the way we configure and necessarily reconfigure and ultimately (re-)articulate ourselves, part of, as Adorno writes, the essay’s “anti-systematic impulse into its own procedure.” This is just as much another challenge as it is a forecast.