

ABSTRACT. The Philippines, a country rich with natural resources, has taken steps to preserve its environmental megadiversity through the government's existing environmental laws. However, reality seems to show a glaring disparity between what is being protected and what is being abused. The question is: what is fair to all? This paper's primary purpose is to explore the aesthetics of local ecopoetry to discover whether the representation of environmental justice in literature can promote ecological fairness in the Third World. Using Hume's concept of aesthetics to explore the inconsistency between the environmental laws and the message of the selected ecopoems, this study reveals that literature may be an important key to unlocking the solutions to the issue of environmental justice. Moreover, literature may serve as the unheard voice of the abused in the environment and may help pronounce the long-awaited verdict that the law cannot give to achieve environmental justice.

The Surviving Sunset of Manila Bay and the Ethics of Environmental Justice in Philippine Ecopoetry

49

Keywords: aesthetics, ecocriticism, ecopoetry, environmental justice, sustainability

Rina Garcia Chua is taking up her MA and PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of British Columbia. She is the editor of the first anthology of Philippine ecopoetry, *Sustaining the Archipelago*, which is forthcoming with the University of Santo Tomas Publishing House. She obtained her MA in Language and Literature, major in Literature, from

De La Salle University. Her thesis was awarded the gold medal for outstanding thesis and all of its chapters have been presented in international and national conferences. She has been a fellow of several national literary workshops and her works have been published in different journals, literary magazines, and books.

Manila Bay is considered one of the most beautiful natural harbors in Southeast Asia and one of the finest in the world. The famous sunset along the bay has been the subject of copious postcards, artworks, and paintings. This strip of shoreline has also served as an important socio-economic port for the country before the Spanish occupation and, later on, was the site of the historic Battle of Manila Bay in 1898.

Now, Manila Bay continues to be a scenic spot in the city and a means of livelihood for fisherfolk. Its rich ecosystem consists of mangroves, coral reefs, sandbars, and migratory birds, all of which encourage the reproduction of fish. Endangered birds (e.g. Chinese Egret and Black-winged Cuckoo Shrike) have also been spotted in the area. However, land reclamation in the area has cost the area 70% of the mangroves, which are said to be of great help in containing the storm surges that frequently threaten the coastline and its residents.

The most recent reclamation project is more ambitious. It is the 148-hectare Manila Bay Goldcoast Reclamation, which aims to build a giant entertainment hub called “Solar City.” On one hand, the pros are economically beneficial: it aims to provide income revenue for the local government and at least 500,000 jobs for the residents of Metro Manila.¹ On the other hand, the cons are staggering: it will affect the fishing

industry and the bay’s rich biodiversity. At worst, the project will open up the bay, making it prone to disastrous storm surges similar to those experienced during Typhoon Haiyan.²

At this point, the most pressing question about the Philippine environment and its inhabitants is this: *what is fair to all?* This question may be answered in literature, using the concept of environmental justice.

What, then, is environmental justice? The debate on environmental justice explicitly includes the aesthetics of Manila Bay and the prevailing law. However, according to Environmental Lawyer Galahad Pe Benito, it is “not so much about the sunset but more about environmental degradation and respect for the rule of law” (“Manila Bay: Sunset and the Law”). The laws on environmental protection³ affirm not only the Bay’s protected status but also the rights of the Filipino citizens to the Bay. Again, these issues bring it back to the initial question: what is fair to all? The answer may lie in a thorough discussion of the state of environmental justice in the country.

This paper explores the representation of environmental justice through the aesthetics of poetry. First, a discussion of the different definitions attributed to environmental justice will define what it stands for in ecocriticism. Second, the state of environmental justice in the

1 According to Manila Vice Mayor Isko Moreno, the reclamation project is for a city dying from poverty and is meant to generate at least the mentioned amount of jobs. He also urged the public to support the project. Information gathered from: <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/529869/environmental-groups-oppose-proposed-manila-bay-reclamation-project>.

2 In 2011, Typhoon Pedring produced storm surges in Manila bay that were strong enough to destroy the decades-old breakwaters surrounding the area on Roxas Boulevard. More information can be read here: <http://news.abs-cbn.com/focus/11/17/13/storm-surges-waves-why-manila-risk>.

3 Proclamation No. 41, penned by Former President Ramon Magsaysay in 1954, states that Manila Bay is a designated national park and selling it for settlement or commercialization is prohibited. The Supreme Court in Republic v. Court of Appeals (G.R. Nos. 103882 and 105276, Nov 25, 1998) affirmed Manila Bay’s protected status when it ruled, in favor of the Republic, that Manila Bay is outside the commerce of man; thus, the bay cannot be the proper subject of reclamation agreements. Information gathered from: <http://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/25327-reclamation-manila-bay-sunset-law>.

Philippines will be defined through a survey of relevant Philippine environmental laws on these particular concerns: environmental freedom, colonialism, responsibility, and environmental preservation. Third, I will use Hume's concept of aesthetics to show that poetry can intervene in the environmental justice debate as a 'reflection' of personal and societal ethics. This in turn will attempt to find the answer to the core question of 'what is fair to all?' through the selected eco-poets' discourse. The objective is to come up with a concrete voice in our local ecopoetry that addresses environmental justice through literary ethics. The poems to be close read are Gil S. Beltran's "Ondoy" (103), Abercio V. Rotor's "Born in Tempest" (72) and "Sunset in the City" (159). This article aims to sum up the issues of justice and equality raised in existing environmental discourse (especially in the Third World) in a more feasible and tangible manner in connection with existing Philippine laws and poetic aesthetics.

Environmental Justice: Definitions

Generally, environmental justice is a movement that brings together some of society's greatest challenges: poverty; the effort to preserve and improve the environment; and the compelling need to shift social institutions from class division and environmental depletion to social unity and global sustainability (Ferris 298). However, there are many aspects to environmental justice when taken into different contexts. Here are a few:

Elizabeth Ammons says that, as an activist movement, environmental justice focuses on the disproportionate environmental harm experienced by people of color and poor "whites" everywhere so that the privileged can enjoy health and inordinate wealth (104). Here,

environmental justice fights for the poor so that they can get what is also rightfully theirs: health, wealth, and natural resources. This aspect aims to eradicate the first issue of environmental justice, which is poverty. Ammons expounds on this topic through this example:

Everyone knows that to remove, raid, or eliminate one element in an ecosystem throws the health of the whole system into crises and, often, extinction. Yet contemporary global corporate globalization constantly performs precisely those acts of raid and depletion daily. To enrich the few, it exploits and impoverishes the majority and plunges the earth's balance into chaos. The disastrous effects are already felt by huge numbers of people, animals, and plants and will soon catch up with all of us. ("Brave New Worlds" 105)

51

Contemporary global corporate globalization, in this instance, pertains to the companies that invest and set up their businesses in locations with cheap resources and labor (usually in third-world countries) so they can operate in a more cost-efficient manner. However, they compromise the environmental safety and sustainability of the areas they choose to invest in because of the pollutants that their factories will generate. Globalization also affects poverty, for if corporations continue to exploit the natural resources available, they will also put at risk the locals who use natural resources for their own sustenance. Not only will the locals lose their means of living, but they will also be exposed to pollutants in their areas. Environmental justice, as an activist movement, seeks to rectify these problems of poverty for global equity.

Practically speaking, environmental justice is a rational way to address the environmental crises. It is also an issue of survival, since the effort of preserving and improving the environment that one lives in will rationally improve the quality of life. To accentuate this point, Ammons cites a fundamental Cherokee truth to expound environmental justice: “You must give back when you take from the earth. You cannot take...and not expect disaster to occur” (105). According to environmental justice, all human beings have the responsibility to preserve the environment for themselves in the present and to improve its current state for the future. In doing so, they prevent disasters, health problems, extinction, and much more. The environmental justice movement is expansive and crosscutting, and according to Robert Bullard, “rests on an ethical analysis of strategies to eliminate unfair, unjust and inequitable conditions and decisions” (34-35). It is an ongoing process and a continuous analysis; thus, assuring the present and the future environment for all appears to be a complicated process that has yet to be fully explored.

For others, the terminology ‘environmental justice’ may be too broad. Vandana Shiva refers to it instead as “Earth Democracy.” In doing so, she offers another perspective of the movement, one that is more spiritual in nature: “Earth Democracy connects the particular to the universal, the diverse to the common, and the local to the global. It incorporates what in India we refer to as *vasudhaiva kutumbkam* (the earth family) – the community of all beings supported by the earth” (1). For Shiva, Earth Democracy seeks to find the solutions of environmental debates by being aware of the connections that we have with all things and of the rights and responsibilities that are generated by this connection. Environmental justice (through Earth Democracy) provides that all species have

intrinsic worth and that the earth community where all species live in is a democracy of all life (Shiva 9). This, according to her, eradicates the core problems of environmental justice, which are poverty, inequality, and class division. She also includes that establishing this “connection” among all species will foster care, cooperation, and compassion and not competition, conflict, fear, and hatred. Earth Democracy’s ultimate goal is to globalize compassion, justice, and sustainability (Shiva 11).

Despite environmental justice’s multifaceted framework, the fact remains that this movement’s main achievements come in the form of laws. A brief look at the history of environmental justice shows that the movement began in the early 1960s, when workers in California farm fields fought for their workplace rights, including protection against harmful toxins and pesticides. Interestingly enough, this issue was exacerbated by Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring,” which metaphorically detailed the harmful effects of pesticides on the environment. After protests and lawsuits in the late 1960s, it is in the year 1970 when the United States Environmental Protection Agency finally enforced laws to protect human health and safeguard the natural environment. Thus, environmental justice emerged as a movement.

One of the most common steps to solving most of the issues of environmental justice is through the creation, legislation, and enactment of environmental laws. In the United States of America, from the year the movement began up until today, the laws were passed and enforced on an almost annual basis. This is a satisfactory response for it means that the movement has gained momentum over the years. However, this momentum differs in a developing country like the Philippines. The problems and response are generally the same—the Philippines also has its

own environmental laws. The difference mainly lies in the way these laws are passed, enforced, and abided by.

Ella S. Antonio comments that in the Philippines, citizens disregard the existing environmental laws for more pressing concerns: “[majority of the people or the masses] would [not] hesitate to cut down trees, burn an area of forest to create a clearing for their agricultural activities in order to have food. Those who do not have land to build houses on would squat along river banks where they are also close to the waters they need for daily use” (6). In developing countries, major issues like poverty and inequity are still being resolved; thinking about the consequences of environmental degradation seems unimportant compared to these more pressing matters.

But the motivation to create the laws is present. According to Rodrigo Cosico, “[t]he urgent necessity to regulate human activities is all the more glaring in the Philippines due to its relation to nature which make it vulnerable to natural calamities or catastrophes” (1). The Philippines is located in both the Pacific Typhoon Belt and the Ring of Fire. Every year, this country encounters at least 20 typhoons that claim lives and livelihoods. Another motivation is the fact that the country is “endowed with one of the richest natural resources” (Cosico 2). The Philippines is gifted with land, water, and air biodiversity. All these considered, it is no wonder that the government has enacted environmental laws to protect and preserve its rich biodiversity for future generations to come. In fact, Francis Tolentino in “An Environmental Writ: The Philippines’ Avatar” cites that the Philippines is thought to have one of the world’s most developed approaches to environmental protection and preservation (35). What are some environmental laws that are unique to this country?

Environmental laws in the Philippines

In any democratic country, citizens are considered as stakeholders. As stakeholders, citizens have roles, rights, and responsibilities. Cosico continues that “[there are] processes that can be undertaken at the community level because the poor and the underprivileged are the ones primarily affected by the effects of environmental degradation” (31). Therefore, as citizens of a democratic country and as stakeholders of the environment, Filipinos ought to be aware of environmental laws to foster community empowerment.

The first right of a citizen is the right to the environment: Filipinos have the right “to a balanced and healthful ecology in accord with the rhythm and harmony of nature” (Const., Art. II, Sec. 16). They are entitled to having the environment preserved, protected, and advanced. At the same time, they also have the “inherent obligation to preserve and care for the environment. This obligation lies primarily with [them] because [they] are the ones who would greatly benefit from the utilization of the country’s resources” (Cosico 32).

One of the responses to this right is the creation of the Philippine Environmental Policy (Pres. Decree No. 1151). Here, the citizens’ environmental rights are reinforced by the government’s role in undertaking matters directly related to environmental degradation like population growth, urbanization, industrial expansion, rapid natural resources utilization, and increasing technological advances. In Section 1 of the Philippine Environmental Policy, creating, developing, maintaining, and improving conditions “under which man and nature can thrive in productive and enjoyable harmony with each other” is highlighted as a continuing policy. Furthermore, the government accepts

responsibility in doing everything they can to preserve the environment for the present and future generations of Filipinos.

The government and its citizens—including the private corporations—are meant to work hand-in-hand to uphold these laws. A good example of this is the Solid Waste Management Act (Republic Act No. 9003). Here, it is provided that the local government units are to set guidelines and targets for solid waste management in their respective communities. The citizens are then encouraged to cooperate with each other and to self-regulate their own wastes. Public participation is critical in the enforcement of this law to strengthen environmental awareness and action (Rep. Act No. 9003, Art. 1, Sec. 2).

Cooperation between public and private citizens is imperative for the success of a written law. Once this is instituted, the government still bears the bigger responsibilities in environmental protection:

Presidential Decree No. 1151 recognizes that the environment is a matter of government responsibility. With a view to launching a comprehensive program of environmental protection and management, the law covered the following areas of concern[:] air quality management, natural resources management and conservation and waste management. (Cosico 5)

The right to environmental preservation is, therefore, implemented by the government. It is the government's job to protect and preserve all that is in the Philippines' ecosystem. The citizens' job is to be aware of the process of enacting this law and do what they can, on an individual and community level, to enact their rights as stakeholders of the country.

Another important law relevant to environmental justice is Rep. Act No. 8371, the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997. Under this law, the Indigenous Cultural Communities and Indigenous People (commonly referred to as ICCs/IPs), such as the Aetas, Igorots, and Ifugaos, are entitled to their own rights and duties as citizen stakeholders for they follow their own justice system. Some of these rights and privileges include the right to participate in decision-making on matters that affect their lives as an indigenous group, the right against any form of discrimination, the right to equal opportunity and treatment, and the right to their ancestral domain. They also have the right to maintain, protect, and have access to their religious and cultural sites, and they are lawfully allowed to explore and develop the natural resources within their ancestral domains. The rationale for this law is to preserve and respect the culture of the country's indigenous tribes. The law itself is developed such that it allows the ICCs/IPs the freedom they deserve to live their lives according to their own customs and traditions, but it also ensures them that they are still part of the citizenry and that they are also a primary concern of the government.

These are just some of the environmental laws in the country. Although fairly new, a number of environmental laws in the Philippines have already been developed, passed, and established. In ecocriticism, these laws are important for two main reasons: first, one of the reasons for creating environmental laws is for the sustainability of the environment; second, these serve as compasses to what is right and wrong in any environment and society. With these environmental laws, there are processes for ensuring that what is right is upheld and what is wrong is punished. The environmental laws were written to ratify conventional moral ethics regarding the environment. What is right

and wrong in any situation is determined by one's own ethical understanding at that moment; laws exist to remind anyone what kind of decision they should make.

In that case, literary ethics in poetry also plays a part in reminding us of what is good and bad in particular situations.

Literary Ethics and Environmental Justice

Raja Halwani says that “[i]f we were to take a quick survey of works of literature, we would be hard pressed to find one that is not ethical in nature” (19). One of the reasons that the Philippines’ Commission on Higher Education included literature in the current general education curriculum is the importance of ethics in the formation of a person’s character.⁴ It is assumed that literature presents interesting and detailed examples of how moral principles are applied (Halwani 21). Ethics in literature comes from the ideas represented in a body of work and is uncovered through the process of reading. The representation that literature carries out can be explained through the idea of “aesthetics.”

Aesthetics in literature refers to the imagery created by the writer. The writer uses words to instill in the reader this particular image: on the positive side, “pretty,” “well,” “pure,” “robust,” “chiseled,” “sweet,” or “awesome”; and on the negative side, “ugly,” “foul,” “vindictive,” “tarnished,” “rejected,” “disastrous,” or “repulsive.” What the writer does is to convey a moral assessment by ascribing an aesthetic property to the subject (McGinn 93). These words are used to presuppose one’s expectations of the subject,

to make one evaluative of the ideas rather than be analytical. They are meant for the reader to believe in the idea and the context in which they are presented.

Despite the persuasiveness and poignancy of these ascribed words, aesthetics is mainly dependent on the reader. What may be disastrous to one person may not be to the other. This is where a general viewpoint and context comes in. According to Hume:

‘tis impossible men cou’d ever agree in their sentiments and judgments, unless they chose some common point of view, from which they might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the same to all of them.’ This general viewpoint is the source of the ‘general inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners. (as qtd. by Jones 163)

55

To have aesthetics, the writer looks at a general viewpoint agreed upon by a particular society and subscribes to that so that his/her image becomes believable. To make the image more effective, the writer situates the idea in a particular context where this general viewpoint is accepted and true. The adoption of a general viewpoint enables readers to understand the idea on an intellectual level (rather than a sentimental one), for the aesthetics prescribes a context wherein such an idea is possible. This is valuable because of the following reasons:

[F]irst, because “our passions do not readily follow the determination of the

4 CHED Memorandum Order No. 59, Series of 1996 (2) states that literature and the arts are included in the General Education curriculum “to foster critical understanding and appreciation of how people give expression to their experience in the world.”

judgment,” and change more slowly than the operations of the imagination, second, because our sentiments are not influenced immediately, but only mediately by judgments. (Jones 263)

Once an idea is situated in a particular context, Hume says that “[t]he passion, in pronouncing its verdict, considers not the object simply, as it is in itself, but surveys it with all the circumstances, which attend it” (as qtd. by Jones 264). Thus, through aesthetics, the writer is able to make the reader relate to the body of work. The reader finds himself/herself within the work by understanding the general viewpoint and the context that the writer made. Thus, the idea is conveyed.

This concept of aesthetics in literary ethics shows that literature teaches “aesthetically”; it is able to give the reader’s life the meaning it incarnates. It can embody ideas present in society into identifiable symbols so that the reader can understand life better, and in turn, make sound decisions. Halwani espouses this by saying that the task of poetry in literary ethics touches the emotions and intellect of the reader in such a way that s/he is taking up in the world of work (25). Poetry appeals more when it draws on life experiences where the reader can relate to it and be able to relate it to their own lives.

Ethics, meanwhile, is the “the moral values, moral principles, and human values [that] refer to the specific human behaviors that people consider desirable and good” (Ritter 8). It is also mentioned that the complication in this concept of ethics is that people usually have different viewpoints on certain issues such as abortion, capital punishment, and in this case, environmental justice. In constituting Hume’s concept of aesthetics, there may be a chance for the reader to relate to the given literary text and, in turn, conceive an ethical viewpoint on the

matter of environmental justice, as embodied in the ecopoems. The concepts in aesthetics are also applicable to environmental laws. The aesthetics of the law is both positive and negative—detailing benefits and punishments if and when there need to be. These laws were written with the idea that in the Philippine context, there needs to be a general viewpoint regarding citizens’ interrelationship with the environment. Furthermore, there must be guiding principles for what is wrong and right.

At this point, the ecocritique will proceed with this concept: ecopoetry can embody the aesthetics of environmental justice through the words, structure, and language that it uses. In ecopoetry, the general viewpoint is generated from environmental laws directly related to it, and the context is the situation the poem establishes. In ascertaining these, the reader is able to relate to the work by believing the idea and finding himself/herself within that idea (whether retrospectively, presently, or potentially), and be able to create an ethical decision on the issue of environmental justice as discussed in the ecopoem.

56

The Aesthetics of Ecopoetry

The first poem is Gil S. Beltran’s “Ondoy,” based on 2009’s massive flooding of Metro Manila and its neighboring cities. The poem describes the disastrous flood as it enters the persona’s house and disturbs personal possessions within one hour. The first three lines of the poem unravel the ruin slowly to allow the reader to grapple with its aesthetic context:

In an hour, the water on our ankles races
to our necks
Newly-bought TV sets and music
machines rise to the second floor

With wood sculptures, carvings,
 paintings, and land titles.
 (“Ondoy” 1–3)

The context begins by presenting familiar objects of possession: “TV sets,” “music machines,” “wood sculptures,” “paintings,” “land titles.” These things bring the reader to a place that s/he is accustomed to for they represent the idea of a home. However, the context also puts in the situation words such as “race,” “necks,” and “rise,” which show an urgency, an uncharacteristic alarm within the confines of a home. This juxtaposition deconstructs the familiar so that the context that is received is unsettling. In the exact same way that common monsoon flooding takes the comfort and safety of the city away, the persona also takes the comfort away by making sure that there is a dismantling of the household context.

The next lines continue with this dismantling, but this time the objects are more personal: from “newly-born pups,” “newly-bathed parents” to “pictures rearranged,” “gifts unsent,” “show tickets unused,” and “books unread.” As the flood persists into the household and the persona salvages objects that s/he deems important, forgotten objects are also revealed by the water. The use of the words “unsent,” “unused,” “unread” depict unremembered belongings—those that the persona would not have thought of until they floated from their hiding places and onto the water. The context now shifts from urgency to disconcerted discovery, for when the persona describes these objects as “ghosts from underneath beds,” it is obvious that they are unwelcome things that s/he also has to save from ruin.

As the flood overtakes the first floor of the home, other unused, broken, forgotten objects float up from inside or under the overturned cabinets and unmoved furniture. At this point in

the poem, the image is of utter devastation. The persona cannot save everything that s/he needs to, until eventually, out comes aged cutlery:

Knives rusty lying
 In a dark corner, awaiting a wayward
 foot –
 Here they come from under the stairs
 To the front door, to the iron gates,
 swung open,
 Out the streets joining the murky bay
 – (“Ondoy” 11–15)

The knives are revealed when it is clear that the flood has completely overtaken the house and the persona cannot save anything else. The words in these lines—“rusty,” “dark,” “awaiting,” “here they come,” and “murky”—reveal the knives as ominous objects. The knives are depicted as something evil, for they are in a “dark corner” stalking “a wayward foot.” The persona is helpless; there are too many things to save and too much water inside the home in such a short amount of time. In his/her helplessness, the sinister knives are seen as wild, deadly, and frightening. The personal belongings here stop being personal and become intimidating. They become uncontrollable as they rush out of the open front door and iron gates, onto the dirty waters outside.

The context once again shifts here: from the persona being frantic to uncomfortable, and now, to being helpless. The idea up to this point in the poem has been of surviving a natural disaster, but the last two lines interpret a different image:

Out into the light
 We stare at ages of greed and neglect.
 (“Ondoy” 16–17)

As the knives leave home and join other personal possessions washed away by the flood, this

image pushes the reader out of the comforts of home and out into the open, where they are left vulnerable and uncomfortable. The knives are objects that no one ever wanted to find, let alone brought out into the open.

The idea changes in the last two lines of the poem, for they do not only talk about the narration of the flood but also the reasons behind it. The idea is now of responsibility. The words “greed and neglect” imply that the flood is not natural; it could have been artificial. Since the persona does not expound on whose “greed and neglect” caused the flooding, the general viewpoint assumed by the poem may provide some clues as to whose greed and neglect are being accounted for.

On one hand, “greed and neglect” in the last line may be directed toward private citizens. As stakeholders of the country, they have roles, rights, and responsibilities to the environment and the community they belong to. One of the first rights of a citizen is the *right to environment*, which states that it is also the citizen’s responsibility to protect the environment for s/he is the one who will benefit greatly from this practice. This is done through maintaining and improving their direct surroundings: for example, by self-regulating their wastes. The Solid Waste Management Act, as was previously mentioned, is enforced by the local government unit for the implementation of private citizens. Aside from self-regulation of wastes, this Act also requires cooperation among individuals, community members, and the local government unit. If they neglect (or are not aware of) this law, then flooding (as what happened in Ondoy) is also their responsibility. There is a

need to be aware of the general viewpoint based on this law so that they can act accordingly to preserve not only the environment, but their own lives as well.

On the other hand, “greed and neglect” can also point to the government. The Philippine Environmental Policy has stated that the environment is the responsibility of the government. One of its tasks is to ensure the citizens of their environmental rights by making certain that it handles all matters regarding the environment. Also part of the government’s responsibility is to ensure the preparedness of local government units for the safety of the citizens. However, before the Ondoy flood, PAGASA⁵ was only able to gauge the intensity of storms through wind speed. It is only after the disaster that they came up with Project NOAH,⁶ which includes a rainfall warning system that measures the amount of rainfall in a given area. The government was as stricken as the citizens when the heavy rains came back in 2009. This is an unfortunate concern in a city that is one of the most vulnerable to flooding in Southeast Asia (Tharoor, “The Manila Floods”).⁷ This general viewpoint says that the government must also do its part in enforcing and implementing the laws for the safety of all lives.

In the end, “Ondoy” is an ecopoem that serves as another witness to the social situation in our country. Its aesthetics reveals that the idea of responsibility is present—we understand that someone or something is responsible for the Ondoy flooding—but the last lines show us an unclear idea of who is truly responsible.

5 Philippine Atmospheric Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration

6 Nationwide Operational Assessment of Hazards

7 A recently published study by the Economy and Environmental Program for Southeast Asia (EPPSA) in Singapore ranked Manila as one of the provinces in Southeast Asia most vulnerable to flooding.

The next ecopoem has issues similar to the previous poem. Abercio V. Rotor's "Born in Tempest" reminds readers that the country they are born in is one that is prone to natural calamities. Since there is a constant struggle to survive such situations, Rotor tries to depict the unique camaraderie that we experience during crises.

The first stanza uses contrast to illustrate its context: the negative, "ask not," "none for another," and "break the sky," as opposed to the positive "friend," "neighbor," and "brother." The persona seeks to define the citizens' relations with each other during times of crises. According to the persona, when there is a calamity, citizens can all count on one another. This aesthetics brings them to a comparison of contexts before and after crises. Even if they haven't before, people can help if and when the situation arises. The idea is now of camaraderie among fellow citizens during difficult times.

Then, the final stanza says that the "tempest" has left and that peace has settled in. The last two lines show how the context was maintained in the ecopoem:

When the tempest's finally gone, and
 Thor's no more,
 From the lips of the bold comes peace
 in store;
 Heralds the calm throbbing hearts,
 neither ire nor fear;
 But brotherhood from the last drop of
 tear. ("Born in Tempest" 5–8)

The words "gone," "no more," and "peace" all demonstrate that camaraderie develops even if the crises is abated. It is the last line, though, that seems to represent the aesthetic context the best: "But brotherhood from the last drop of tear." Even if there is no more

"ire nor fear" in the community, the help shall continue until everything is settled. The idea is that Filipinos can and will help no matter how hard the situation is for them, and this help can be sustained until everyone is rehabilitated. Still, there is a need to speculate on who are really responsible for Filipinos in times of crises. Does the responsibility rest on the citizens as members of the community or on the government?

The general viewpoint implied by the poem once again aims toward the idea that every citizen—public and private—is meant to work hand-in-hand in any situation. As citizen stakeholders, the community and its members are also their responsibility, for that is both morally right and lawful. At the same time, the government has claimed responsibility in anything that concerns the environment. Not only that, but the government also has the duty to create, develop, maintain, and improve conditions of citizens and the environment. They are also in charge of matters related to environmental degradation, including the havoc left behind by natural disasters. The citizens' morality may tell them to extend a helping hand to their fellow citizens in need, but in the end, it is still the government's responsibility to sustain that helping hand by rehabilitating the affected areas until these are independent enough to get back on their feet.

"Born in Tempest" has a different representation of its idea. As the general viewpoint offers a factual basis for the ecopoem, "Born in Tempest" may be a reminder to all of their duties to their fellow citizens. If discussed within environmental justice, this poem prompts the reader to come up with sustainable ways on how to rehabilitate those in need after natural calamities. As a country expectant of natural disasters, a poem like Rotor's may be

a motivation for one to start planning and enacting sustainability for our future.

The last poem is Rotor's "Sunset in the City." Timely, it may seem, to the ongoing issue regarding the Manila Bay. As an ecopoem, "Sunset in the City" describes the persona's interrelationship with a natural phenomenon. It only has four lines and its aesthetics makes the idea clear even in the first line. Below is the poem in its entirety:

Even the sun gets lost in the city,
As I miss the sense of time and place;
I've always known East and West, now
tell me
Where to find my bed in peace and
solace.

("Sunset in the City" 1-4)

The words "lost," "miss," and "where to find" show a sense of displacement. The aesthetics shows the context of disorientation; the persona appears to be in his/her room while thinking about the missing view. How can the sun be lost in the city? The photograph that joins the poem gives us a clue: it is a picture entitled "Smog at Sunset" taken in Fairview, Quezon City by the author himself. This is one way for the sun to get lost in the city, but skyscrapers, houses, overpasses, and other infrastructures also block the citizen's view of the sun.

The persona seems to rely heavily on the sun to tell "time and place" and "East and West." Losing the view of the sun gives the persona unease that s/he cannot find "peace" and "solace" even during rest. This is one of the many effects of nature's view or aesthetics on people: it indicates directions, weather conditions, night from day, and so much more. The idea is the reaction of displacement, which is a direct effect of losing access to a part of nature.

The general viewpoint evoked here is that citizens have the right to "to a balanced and healthful ecology in accord with the rhythm and harmony of nature" (Const., Art. II, Sec. 16). The government assures them of this right, while also taking care of matters related to "air quality management, natural resources management and conservation and waste management" (Cosico 5). While citizens have responsibilities to uphold as stakeholders when it comes to the environment, the government is generally responsible for our natural resources. It has the right to identify, enforce, and implement laws that can help protect or improve their natural resources.

The idea of displacement contradicts this general viewpoint, however. This means that there is a problem when it comes to the implementation of the general viewpoint. The idea proves that there is already an issue regarding the environment and that it needs attention from those responsible for these laws. The ecopoem in this case has not only reminded the reader of the issues regarding the environment, but it also served as proof that there is injustice present in society. The role of literature in the environmental justice debate has become clearer: it intervenes to remind the reader of the inequality that citizens experience. If there is proof of an issue, then something must be done to solve it for it is the citizens' right to be aided in finding solutions to their problems.

Environmental Justice in Philippine Ecopoetry

I return to the question raised at the beginning of this ecocritique: what is fair to all?

The three ecopoems demonstrate different ideas regarding environmental justice. Whether

it is through natural disasters, camaraderie, reminders, warnings, struggles, and displacement, the answer to the previous query can only be obtained through another one: who is responsible for what is fair to all?

The answer? Everyone is. The ecopoems, as general “testimonies” to the traumatic social situation, reveal the general viewpoint for both public and private citizens. Nowadays, “[l]iterature is one of the ways we tell one another about aspects of human experience that cannot be contained by ordinary modes of expression and that may even exceed human understanding” (Marder 3). Ecopoetry can be the voice of social abuses that were not articulated in the past, and now through aesthetics, may finally be articulated out loud. These ecopoems have shown that, in the context of environmental justice, there will always be two sides to the issues debated on—what you can personally do and what others can do. As the ecopoems have shown, laws are not to be enforced by the government alone for they are also meant to be enforced by the citizens for themselves. As they implement these laws in their own homes, communities, and cities, they become the context of these laws and they experience their effectiveness. If they are not effective, then they must speak—and part of speaking is through poetry.

Now, what is fair to all? Fairness is neither quantified nor qualified. The ecopoems may show that there will be injustice if there is a misconception or inefficiency of environmental laws. If there is an overlap, misunderstanding, or even a misjudgment of these laws, then there will be injustice. As long as these bigger issues are not fixed, fairness will be an ongoing debate in environmental justice. Yet, in that case, ecopoetry will always be there to assert the truth. Injustice may always be an issue; however, even if we cannot “cure” or “overcome” it, “we

can and we must *listen* to it and *survive* it by listening to its effects as they are transmitted to us through the voices of its witnesses and survivors” (Marder 4). This way, ecopoetry becomes another way to speak about survival from the abuse and injustice experienced.

It is interesting to see how Beltran and Rotor profess their ideas about environmental justice without even being aware that they are doing so. Their ecopoems are primordial reminders of one’s right to environment. They explore the idea of losing and missing the aesthetics of nature and the biological changes in the environment. In doing so, they are able to enlighten the reader that a deleterious *change* is indeed happening and that their right to environment is not being upheld. This way, ecopoetry can be an effective tool in ensuring that environmental justice is voiced out loud and is, thus, constantly in our consciousness.

This aspect in literature makes it the platform in social and environmental injustices. Again, it is in writing about these situations that we avow the truth to survive it: “the individualization of social suffering encourages the idea that recovery from the traumas affecting the members of the marginalized groups is basically a matter of the individual gaining linguistic control over his or her pain” (Craps 55). To gain control through literature is to also gain justice over the situation. To voice it out is to acknowledge the trauma and concretely act on it, so that it does not own us anymore and, instead, becomes owned by us. What happens is a way for literature to give justice to those situations that the general viewpoint or the laws cannot:

Literature is a dimension of concrete embodiment and language of infinitude that, in contrast to the language of the law, encapsulates not closure but precisely

what in a given legal case refuses to be closed and cannot be closed. It is to this refusal of the trauma to be closed that literature does justice. (Feman, as qtd. in Marder 5)

The refusal to be silenced through literature gives a way for the abused to speak and be heard. In poetry, environmental injustice is given a verdict from the inside, not from the outside forces of the law-giving bodies of society, where the literary historical itinerary reaches a genuine point of self-reflection (a point of naming the testimony in literature) so that true justice is received and that the general viewpoint's verdict is resisted/rejected (Toremans 345). Literature may become the much-awaited verdict that the general viewpoint cannot offer. However, the ethical judgment will still be dependent on the readers themselves, for every reader has his/her own "general viewpoint," or personal ethical laws that s/he adheres to.

Beltran, Rotor, and other ecopoets are able to open the door for environmental justice in local Filipino ecocriticism. Scholarship may also delve into environmental laws to aid some of its issues through sustainability. Hopefully, through further studies of environmental justice in poetry, the capacity to see these truths as testimonial tools in improving the environmental justice system will improve.

In the end, just like how ecopoetry cannot provide the exact answers to that one question, it will not also find the exact solutions to save Manila Bay. However, it can continue to ask the right questions to keep the debate—and in turn, Manila Bay—alive.

WORKS CITED

- Ammons, Elizabeth. *Brave New Worlds: How Literature Will Save the Planet*. Iowa, University of Iowa Press, 2010.
- Antonio, Ella S. "Achieving Social Justice and Sustainable Development." *The 11th East and Southeast Asian Conference of the ESEA Local Government Network on the Theme Social Justice, Hyatt Regency Hotel, Pasay City, Philippines, 3-4 Dec 2003*. Edited by Colin Durkop, and Gaudioso Sosmena Jr., Singapore, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Singapore, 2004.
- Beltran, Gil S. "Ondoy." *Ani: The Philippine Literary Yearbook*, vol. 36, 2010-2011, p. 103.
- Bullard, Robert. "Environmental justice challenges at home and abroad." *Global Ethics and Environment*. Edited by Nicholas Low. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
- CHED Memorandum Order 59, series of 1996. "New General Education Curriculum (GEC)."
- Corrales, Nestor. "Environmental Groups Oppose Proposed Manila Bay Reclamation Project." *Inquirer News*. Inquirer.Net, 18 Nov. 2013, newsinfo.inquirer.net/529869/environmental-groups-oppose-proposed-manila-bay-reclamation-project.
- Cosico, Rodrigo V. *Philippine Environmental Laws: An Overview and Assessment*. Quezon City, Central Book Supply, Inc., 2012.
- Craps, Stef. "Wor(l)ds of grief: Traumatic memory and literary witnessing in cross-cultural perspective." *Textual Practice*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2010, pp. 51-68.
- Ferris, Deeohn. *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. USA, Sierra Books Club, 1997
- Halwani, Raja. "Literary Ethics." *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 32, 2013, pp. 19-32.
- Jones, Peter. "Hume's Literary and Aesthetic Theory." *The Cambridge Guide to Hume*. UK, Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Marder, Elissa. "Trauma and Literary Studies: Some 'Enabling Questions.'" *Trauma and Literary Studies*, vol. 1, no.1, 2006, pp. 1-6.
- McGinn, Colin. *Ethics, Evil and Fiction*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Pe Benito, Galahad A. "Manila Bay: Sunset and the Law." *Rappler*. Rappler.Com, 2 Apr. 2013, rappler.com/thought-leaders/25327-reclamation-manila-bay-sunset-law.
- Philippine Constitution*. Art. II, Sec. 16.
- Ritter, Don. "The Ethics of Aesthetics." *Transdisciplinary Digital Art*. Berlin, Springer, 2008.

Rotor, Abercio V. *Don't Cut the Trees, Don't!* Philippines, University of Santo Tomas Press, 2010.

Shiva, Vandana. *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*. Massachusetts, South End Press, 2005.

Tharoor, Ishaan. "The Manila Floods: Why Wasn't the City Prepared?" *Time*. Time Inc., 29 Sept. 2009, content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1926646,00.html.

Tolentino, Francis. "An Environmental Writ: The Philippines' Avatar." *The IBP Journal*, vol. 35, no.1, August 2010, pp. 117-139.

Toremans, Tom. "Trauma: Theory – Reading (and) Literary Theory in the Wake of Trauma." *European Journal of English Studies*, vol.7, no.3, 2003, pp. 333-351.