

**ABSTRACT.** This paper examines the current state of postcolonialism in the Philippines, represented by the critical works of J. Neil C. Garcia. It argues that the present privileging of difference in the mode of postcolonial (hybrid) performativity, as Garcia theorizes the intersection of postcolonialism and queer theory, creates the urgency for a re-examination of its denigrated other, sameness. By first delineating the contours of Garcia’s framework, it explains how hybridity is an inadequate setting for the understanding of salient and necessary but under-elaborated elements of postcolonial thought, namely, voluntarism or intentionality and universalism, the very objects of Garcia’s critique. The paper demonstrates that recuperation of these categories enables a renewed appreciation of postcolonial ethics and politics.

---

# “Wrestling with the Angels”: The Limits of Postcolonial Performativity<sup>1</sup>

64

---

**Keywords:** cosmopolitanism, ethics, J. Neil C. Garcia, hybridity, performativity, postcolonialism

---

**Antonette Talaue-Arogo** holds a Ph.D. in Literature from De La Salle University-Manila. Her dissertation argues for the cosmopolitan turn in the works of Reynaldo C.

Ileto, Vicente L. Rafael, and Caroline S. Hau. Her research interests include critical theory, continental philosophy, and translation studies.

Since Isagani R. Cruz's deliberate deployment in "The Other Other: Towards a Postcolonial Poetics" first published in 1991 and Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo and Priscelina Patajo-Legasto's *Philippine Postcolonial Studies: Essays on Language and Literature* first published in 1993, postcolonial theory has been deemed a necessary paradigm for Philippine Studies.<sup>2</sup> I am using Patajo-Legasto's framework for Philippine Studies as writings that resist Orientalism and neo-colonial discourses.<sup>3</sup> Philippine Studies is about, more than the subject (Filipino/non-Filipino) and object (the Philippines) of inquiry, "a critical perspective...a *postcolonial position*" (xviii). I am not suggesting that writings by Filipinos and non-Filipinos before the 1990s do not directly engage with the range of experiences arising from our colonial history and so cannot be considered postcolonial (see Manuud 1967, Iletto 1979, Lumbera 1986). Only that this period in scholarship saw the institutionalization of postcolonialism as a theoretical formulation, indeed a critical perspective, borne out by diverse modes of thought, principally poststructuralism and Marxism. In Philippine Studies, this is seen in the references, whether in the form of agreement or contention, to widely regarded foundational texts in the field, including Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Bill Ashcroft et al.'s *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures* (1989), towards our own critics' contribution specific

to our material realities and cultural practices. Moreover, postcolonial theory has enabled and continues to generate productive readings of creative and/or critical works through its many analytic lenses. A paradigmatic example here is J. Neil C. Garcia's 2004 *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics: Essays and Critiques* in which he propounds a postcolonial analysis of the poetics of Virgilio S. Almario and Gémino H. Abad. In canvassing not only their critical works but also of other Filipino critics (Patajo-Legasto, Resil B. Mojares), this incisive study allows for a mapping of the trajectories in Philippine postcolonial studies. It is characterized by the dialectic between essentialism and hybridity, a vigorous affirmation and renewal of national identity vitiated by a sustained critique of the same inspired by difference and plurality. Advancing the latter paradigm, Garcia will expand his argument in *Postcolonialism* via an intersection with queer theory in *At Home in Unhomeliness: Rethinking the Universal in Philippine Postcolonial Poetry in English* (2007). He foregrounds the importance of categories of identity, or subject positions, other than class that interrogate the givenness of the nation. In this light, we can submit that Garcia responds to Cruz's clarion call in "The Other Other." Enjoining Filipino critics to turn to "post-colonialism" in their analysis of works produced by Filipino writers and works produced within the imagined community that is the Philippines,

65

1 I read this paper at the Cirilo F. Bautista Lecture Series of the Literature Department of De La Salle University-Manila on August 8, 2013. It formed part of the Introduction to my dissertation defended and completed in March 2016 at the aforementioned university. I have made necessary changes and additions in lieu of the recent publications of J. Neil C. Garcia, particularly his *The Postcolonial Perverse: Critiques of Contemporary Philippine Culture*.

2 I have retained the critics' respective ways of writing postcolonial (with or without the hyphen) as seen in the reprinting of Cruz's essay in J. Neil C. Garcia's *The Likhaan Book of Philippine Criticism* (1992-1997) and the second edition of Hidalgo and Patajo-Legasto's *Philippine Postcolonial Studies*, published in 2004.

3 See Patajo-Legasto, "Philippine Studies: Have We Gone Beyond St. Louis?" xv-xxiii.

Cruz writes: “Tensions might be found not only along geographic and racial faults, but perhaps on more aesthetic seismic undergrounds, such as gender and politics” (59).

In this paper, I look at this theoretical moment in Philippine postcolonialism. How has queer theory, especially its key concept of performativity, intervened in postcolonialism? How has this intervention refuted the Marxist-oriented invective that postcolonial theory is apolitical (see especially San Juan 1998)? And how has this refutation conceptualized agency, the vexed question of postcolonial theory? My aim is to consider the theoretical gains of what can be designated as postcolonial performativity after Garcia, on which will be predicated my inquiry into its limitations as a model so as to explore other areas of thought for Philippine postcolonialism. To this end, I endeavor a close reading of select critical works in order to make explicit Garcia’s conceptual resources. While these ideas, namely hybridity and performativity, are by now familiar, I believe that problematization can only proceed by attending to theoretical assumptions that at times go without saying because of the currency of concepts.

In undertaking this project, I am reminded of Stuart Hall’s metaphor for how to do theory, “the metaphor of struggle, of wrestling with the angels” (280). As he writes: “The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency” (280).<sup>4</sup> To battle, then, we go.

## Garcia at War: Privileging Hybridity

In *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics: Essays and Critiques*, Garcia appraises the poetics of Virgilio S. Almario and Gémino H. Abad and in so doing, provides the occasional frisson of unfavorable commentary. His study of their discourses on Filipino poetics in Tagalog and English, respectively, makes a case for the appropriateness of postcolonialism as, one, the paradigm that attends to the historical context of colonialism and neo-colonialism in which creative and critical works in the twentieth century to the present are implicated, and, two, the paradigm that uncovers the imperial legacy of national hegemony. Here is where the crux of Garcia’s polemic lies, the act of imagining the nation proffered by Almario and Abad that is deleteriously universalizing in its appeal to what he calls “a form of nativist humanism” (*Postcolonialism* 12) and from which he will pursue a rethinking of the universal. Let us recapitulate Garcia’s arguments but first, an overture. In this brief summary of *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics*, I will concentrate on Garcia’s discussion of Almario. My evaluation is that Abad’s theory is a well-known narrative of the development of Philippine poetry *in* and *from* English. I will refer to Garcia’s criticism of Abad when necessary. In addition, the conversation through a counter-critique and then response prompted by this study between Garcia and Almario allows further understanding of the former’s theoretical stance.<sup>5</sup> Finally, given my objective, the following

66

4 Garcia is motivated by the same critical impulse. On the culture of critique in the Philippines, a reflection occasioned by his critical engagements with the works of Filipino writers particularly Virgilio S. Almario, he writes: “Too often, Filipino writers forget that criticism is an act of attention, still and all, and that the best thing we can aspire after isn’t that we are read and wholeheartedly agreed with, but rather that we are read, *and at least seriously considered*” (“Nativism” 69).

5 See Garcia, “Nativism” 68-83.

discussion and the rest of the paper will explore Garcia's critical perspective. For a more extensive look at Almario and Abad's critical projects, the primary texts are listed in the bibliography.

Almario sharply defends *Balagtismo* and *Modernismo*, initially perceived as inimical movements, as proof that we can make foreign culture nationally meaningful, a process "of 'indigenization' (*pagsasakatubo*) [the results of which] isn't a copy of the foreign, but rather another original" (*Postcolonialism* 16).<sup>6</sup> For Garcia, Almario presupposes that this is the achievement of the poetic faculty, validated by the writer's "pananalig" ("Nativism" 71). Hence, he charges Almario with the Romantic fallacy that apotheosizes the author and jettisons the contextual and affective functions, which, on the contrary, he deems crucial in postcolonialism. Moreover, he observes that Almario contradicts his own argument when he exempts the English language from relevancy to the project of national consciousness and "nation-dreaming" ("Nativism" 77) with the unanticipated result of attenuating the poet's exceptionalism. Endemic in Almario's text, Garcia concludes, is the rigid opposition between foreign and native, the latter Almario equates with the national, a binarism that has been negated most prominently by discourses on hybridity and its affiliated concepts of ambivalence and mimicry. To quote Garcia:

...perhaps it's not so much an indigenization as a hybridization that takes place in our appropriations of Western concepts. This is obviously

different from saying that the native simply wins over the foreign, for what results isn't either this or that, but both: a hybrid, precisely. Viewed from the perspective of hybridity, both the native and foreign, as they exist in the cross-cultural context of colonization, are already, from the moment of their initial contact, transformed...Nobody needs to intend hybridity to happen. Given the ambivalence inherent in the colonial situation, hybridity just is. (*Postcolonialism* 24)

The anti-intentionalism of hybridity is a focal point of Garcia's theorizing, largely drawn from the locutions of Homi K. Bhabha.<sup>7</sup> This, for Garcia, is supported by the ambivalence of the colonial relation in which colonialism's invocation of sameness through the category human is counteracted by the imperative for differentiation: "*we are all the same, but you are not us*" (*Postcolonialism* 25). The difference upon which the division between races is based is produced by the colonizer even as the colonizer disciplines difference. Garcia sees hybridity as a condition of possibility of agency, as precisely a production of an ambivalent identity through which the subject is, in Foucauldian terms, subjectivated. This is consistent with Bhabha's exposition:

If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the *production* of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native

6 For a relevant discussion on indigenization as contextualization of foreign critical principles to the specific material realities of the Philippines, see San Juan's "Cultural Studies, Ethnic Writing, and Indigenization in the Philippines."

7 There are of course other theoretical dispensations of hybridity. See Néstor García Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* xxiii-xlvi.

traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. It reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty, that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention. (112)

Garcia clearly inherits from Bhabha the idiom of hybridity as structural and hybridity as performance that point to the intrinsic failure of colonialism. Instead of a rigid identitarianism between colonizer and colonized, what emerges is the intimacy between the cultures and histories of peoples who are supposed to be enemies.<sup>8</sup> It is hybridity, indeed, that has captured this complexity of the colonial relation in which foreign and native become mutually constitutive. Garcia sees Almario's refusal to acknowledge this proximity of the colonizer and the colonized as grounded in his depreciation of postcolonial and postmodern theory, his "anti-theoreticalism" ("Nativism" 74) generally, divesting him of heuristic devices. Apropos of this estimation, Almario fails to examine the use of the English language as a performance of a colonial discourse in which phonological, lexical, and syntactic deviations destabilize its system of significations. "Hybridity," in Garcia's understanding, "explains the existence of agency as the variance between imperialism's idealized norms and the 'failed' and 'distorted' performances of those norms by imperialism's demonically plural, intractable peoples" (*Postcolonialism* 26). Furthermore, Almario's antipathy to English is symptomatic of a more pernicious gesture of

reifying the native and the national. Thereupon, the continuity of colonialism is established for then the relation of domination persists while left unproblematized, with the Tagalog assuming the position of the Euro-American.

In what Garcia sees as a parallel move, the difference in linguistic context notwithstanding, Abad embarks on, to borrow from Frantz Fanon, "this passionate search for a native culture" (153).<sup>9</sup> The maturation of Filipino writers from adoption to adaptation of foreign modes of expression as well as theoretical/critical discourses underlines his theory of Philippine poetry *in* and *from* English. This naturalization of English into a national language is consonant with the forging of the national culture. Garcia avers that the Filipino essence on which the national language and national culture are supposed to be founded oppresses as it invalidates other categories of identity and terms of experience that make up the nation. This reiterative Romantic return to an origin that can be retrieved in all its purity, an exercise of the mind assigned to the native poet as national genius, is a myth because, as Garcia maintains, the necessary fact of our postcolonial condition is hybridity.

68

### The Trouble with Performativity

It is this essentializing strain that Garcia deconstructs in *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics* and that serves as theoretical motivation for the postcolonial criticism he proposes in *At Home in Unhomeliness*. Herein, he seeks to "inaugurate, probably for the first time in our country's literary history, the thoughtful linking

8 On the theme of intimacy in postcolonialism, see Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, especially chapter one.

9 See Garcia, *Postcolonialism* 44-72.

of a body of poetic literature written in what is, for many Filipinos, a 'second language,' to the critical paradigm of postcolonialism" (*Home* 10). This is his alternative to "Romantic Formalism (or Formalist Romanticism)" (21), more affiliative than opposed and that continues to be practiced. His quarrel with these paradigms has to do with, as often pointed out, its humanist basis and how humanism has authorized taxonomies of races, genders, sexualities, classes. The worldliness of the text, or what Garcia calls "'sociality' of textual meaning" (4), is suppressed in favor of a transcendental vision of reality. Needless to say, he inquires into the context, the colonial history, of our literature, particularly Philippine poetry in English. Garcia, contra Almario and Abad, examines language as a site of identity formation with the presupposition that an atemporal Filipino essence is unobtainable and thus the need for the construction of a postcolonial identity, to which end English is transformed. He contends that this transformation does not have to be prominent in the text, say through linguistic distortion or inclusion of ethnographic details. To understand hybridity thus is to once again be inveigled into humanism, the notion that hybridity is intentional, or "hybridity as willful resistance" (Garcia, *Home* 16), rather than structural, not to mention how this tendency

panders to exoticization. For Garcia, the "stance of deliberate and voluntary Otherness" ("Reclaiming" 177) typical of anglophone writing in postcolonial studies reveals an interested conformity to Western-approved norms of difference. Such humanist approach to hybridity invalidates the poems that appear most imitative of Western forms, but if studied within his Bhabhean framework, unfettered by a "humanist and purely 'voluntaristic' schema" (*Home* 17), can be understood as subversive.<sup>10</sup> The task, therefore, is to foreground the difference that inhabits especially the most colonial postcolonial writings, that is, we can deduce, Philippine poetry *in* English, with emphasis on the preposition. Garcia writes: "this form of inquiry will conceivably involve the performance of critical readings that will particularize the seemingly humanist and thus universalist expressions and aspirations encoded therein" (*Home* 19). The urgent question now is: what form does this difference as particular, that is, as "Filipino" or "Philippine" take? Diverging from existing trajectories in Philippine postcolonial studies, Garcia posits the Filipino or Philippine as performatively produced. Rather than an essence expressed in the behavior of subjects, these performances not only constitute this norm but indefinitely exceed it. The variation

69

10

I must here make an important qualification. In "The Postcolonial Perverse: Hybridity, Desire, and the Filipino Nation in Federico Licsi Espino Jr.'s *Lumpen*," first published in 2006 and republished in *The Postcolonial Perverse*, Garcia if not contradicts then makes an exception to the anti-intentionalism that informs the great majority of his criticism. Here, he explicitly distances himself from Bhabhean hybridity and argues that it "is not merely inherent to the structure of colonial relations itself, but rather can be willfully represented in fiction or poetry by postcolonial writers" (14). He sees the hybridization of the nationalist novel and history as the authorial intention of Espino on the basis of, arguably, biographical information: "In order perhaps to register *what he perceived and experienced* (emphasis added) to be a mostly perverse or hybrid existence as a multilingual writer of more than forty books of poetry and fiction in pre-martial law and martial-law Philippines" (14). Read alongside his other writings as we've canvassed, Garcia can be interpreted as returning to the theory of expressive realism, which he disavows, if not rejects. This can also be read as simply a reinforcement of hybridity's facticity: where biographical information is available, there intentional hybridity can be explored; otherwise, hybridity by the fact of the colonial experience is simply *is*.

between the ideal and its enactment, what is also hybridization, is the locus of agency, the resistance to the logic of the same that only absorbs the plurality of the people and conceals the social divisions among them. “Thus,” Garcia resolves, “what is Filipino is, ultimately, what exceeds the norm of Filipinoness itself” (*Home* 50).

In seeing, in his words, “following the central precepts of recent ‘postfoundationalist’ theories of identity, national identity as a kind of compulsory ‘performativity’” (*Home* 48), Garcia turns to Judith Butler, whose oeuvre patiently interrogates the givenness of the body on which identity as woman or man is founded and the object of desire. We might here review arguments significant to Garcia’s appropriation in developing what we’ve called in this paper postcolonial performativity. The impetus for Butler’s project is her theoretical discontents with feminism, which is to say that she is interrogating a mode of politics and intends to augment the concept of the political. Feminism has conceded the necessity of the category “women” in the service of emancipation. Yet, the feminist subject has first to be recognized as such by the power this representation seeks recognition from and through which attain liberation. It is this very power and its technologies that produces the juridical subject, pursuant to its own interests. Thus, feminism must challenge the conception of “a subject who stands ‘before’ the law, awaiting representation in or by the law” (Butler 5). It must also resist what Butler calls the “fictive universality” (7) of identity that only results in exclusion, proper to power. While the distinction made between the sexed body and culturally constructed gender has freed gender from determinism, it has also naturalized sex when it is in itself a cultural construction. If, as Butler argues, “sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along” (12), then the causality between

sex and sexuality is also annulled. What is left is a discontinuous subject, the unity of identity ruptured since gender is no longer necessitated by sex, and sexuality is no longer reflective of gender. In this light, compulsory heterosexuality functions to maintain the coherence of a gender identity. Within phallogocentrism and heteronormativity, subversion lies in the repeated performance of acts that constitute gender identity. Butler argues: “The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (179). And so, after Butler, we must now acknowledge the political force of what have been previously relegated outside the realm of the political—“the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities” (174). These acts of denaturalizing identity disrupt norms and the unity at which these are directed. Does Butler, then, concede agency to the performing subject? It bears quoting her in full in order to suggest the anti-intentionalism, or the disavowal of voluntarism, of her queer politics:

...gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. The challenge for rethinking gender categories outside of the metaphysics of substance will have to consider the relevance of Nietzsche’s claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.” (33)

It is clear why Garcia finds Butler's theory hospitable. The theme of sexuality is the center of gravity in his re-imagining of the nation, as evidenced in the essays collected in *Performing the Self: Occasional Prose* (2003). We must note that he urges a contextualization, a particularization, of the heterosexual matrix, to which the book *Philippine Gay Culture: Binabae to Bakla, Silabis to MSM*, first published in 1996, is committed. An important step in this direction is strategic essentialism. Hence, the bakla is expressive of spirituality, or "kalooban" (*Performing* 134), and primarily designates gender rather than sexual orientation.<sup>11</sup> It is the continuity of theoretical concerns of postcolonialism and queer theory that I would like to focus on, however. What Garcia's felicitous configuration articulates is the conception of identity as sociologically constrained, a determination that is built into the structure either of colonization or heterosexism, and the anti-humanist understanding of resistance as enabled by the very structure of domination. The postcolonial performativity of Garcia is without doubt a significant contribution to identity politics, which is a crucial process, but his privileging of difference and deferment must also be problematized. Such problematization, I believe, can only proceed by engaging his conceptual resources. If Garcia is ostensibly theoretically fluent in Bhabhean hybridity as structural and hybridity as performance, he is as eloquent

a theorist of Butlerian performativity as anti-normative. On that account, we can now begin to mark the limits of a postcolonial performativity.

### An Apologia for Agency

To summarize: Garcia believes that the belated arrival of postcolonial theory in Filipino poetics has resulted in, one, a penurious criticism, disqualifying Philippine poetry in English and "all other hybridizing registers of the native language" (*Postcolonialism* 75), and, two, a "regulative essentialism" (Gandhi 21) that neutralizes identity politics or the differences hierarchizing the diverse groups that make up the nation. The oppositionality that characterizes Filipino poetics, in which decolonization proceeds through the native's indigenization of foreign culture, must give way to infiltration, in which hybridity is the form of resistance. I agree and in point of fact this has been the movement of postcolonialism in general, that oppositionality, in the form of nativism, only remains true to the spirit of the colonial project of binarity and that the division between races ultimately fails, allowing for a re-conceptualization of identity.<sup>12</sup> While hybridity has generated thought on the symbiotic relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, it has nevertheless delimited agency, precluding the question of voluntarism, or self-

71

11 In relation to strategic essentialism, Garcia acknowledges that "in certain contexts, dwelling and insisting on sameness can have its own felt usefulness" ("Filipino" 17). He thus recommends Resil B. Mojares's poetics of *Alma Filipina* as the therapeutics for colonial trauma. Yet Mojares shows that "we must think of the national soul not as essence but as process...not as singular but as multiple and plural" (Garcia, "Filipino" 18). Furthermore, again after Butlerian performativity, Garcia holds that "the performance of the Filipino identity retroactively produces the effect of some true or abiding essence behind that identity, when it is really the repetitive and ritualistic performance of the Filipino norm that constitutes the Filipino self, and that socially produces the performative effect Mojares lyrically calls the Filipino soul" ("Filipino" 18-9).

12 See Gandhi 1.



problematization, as a condition of possibility of resistance or subversion. Let me explain.

After Bhabha and now Garcia, what we have learned is that hybridity is immanent to the ambivalence of colonial discourse and power, and this is what leads to the resistance of the colonized. In other words, colonialism carries within itself its own undoing. This view has been interrogated by postcolonial critics—an example here is Leela Gandhi—who see this as a homogenization of the West and the non-West and an inadequate setting for the study of Western anti-imperialism and crosscultural collaboration.<sup>13</sup> To quote Gandhi, this criticism is “a complaint against the subtle determinism to which post-colonial orthodoxy is susceptible because of its reliance on a concealed rhetoric of historical dialecticism in which the dissolution of colonial division is seen as in some ways inevitable: a matter of temporal unfolding, an evolutionary effect of the laws of biological mutation” (5). This triumphalism is transmitted in Garcia’s hybridity, the facticity of hybridity guaranteeing that subversion is implicit in the poet’s use of foreign language and poetic medium.<sup>14</sup> The resistance is occasioned by the context of production and the imperative for its actualization is now transferred from the text to the reader, the postcolonial critic who as a thinker is supposed to be self-aware, meaning anti-essentialist and anti-universalist.

There are several questions we can raise. To start, triumphalism is precisely one of the main points in Garcia’s critique of Almario, whose

poetics assumes a native agent able to victoriously appropriate foreign influences. According to Garcia: “Caught in his own dualistic logic, Almario does what is the only hopeful thing: naturally, he chooses to believe that the native wins. *All the time, or practically all the time*” (*Postcolonialism* 28). That Garcia discernibly thinks this character of hopefulness uncritical is symptomatic of the hermeneutics of suspicion that pervades much of the work deriving from poststructuralism and queer studies.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to this negative critique, there has been a steady movement in critical theory towards scholarship characterized by a mood of optimism. An illustrative example is Neil Lazarus’s *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. Oriented towards a materialist formulation of postcolonial studies, Lazarus sees negative critique in the “struggle against representation” (18) as epistemic violence. Accordingly, postcolonial studies has adamantly called upon “difference under the rubric of *incommensurability*” (18). Yet, a substantial portion of postcolonial literature point not to the idea of “‘fundamental alienness’ but of deep-seated affinity and community, across and athwart the ‘international division of labor’” (18). I think Garcia’s theoretical stance inhibits the exploration of this “more ‘positive’ moment of reconstruction” (Lazarus 1) in postcolonial studies, first in his argument that what Almario grants to the poet is not only the genius of creative writing but of criticism as well, that “he is, over and above being a poet, also a sophisticated and rather incisive cultural critic”

72

13 Ibid.

14 As Garcia straightforwardly puts it: “Using this critical approach, we may therefore say that no matter how American-sounding and ‘universal’ a Filipino text—for instance, [Paz Marquez] Benitez’s famous story, ‘Dead Stars’—may be, the fact of the matter is that it was not an American but a Filipino writer who wrote it” (“Alterity” 71).

15 Garcia writes: “In saying that our poets accept Western influences sometimes because they see in them something comparable or equivalent to their own native culture, Almario displays a nativist humanism that not only posits a complete and perfect ‘sovereignty’ on the part of the Filipino poet, but also assumes he is always conscious or reflexive about his poeticizings” (*Postcolonialism* 28).

(*Postcolonialism* 28). Garcia, on the other hand, maintains the distinction since poets “being poets, they are supposed to be ‘makers’ and not thinkers, after all” (*Home* 45). Thus, universalism committed by the poet is but a venial sin whereas it would be unpardonable should the critic be found guilty of the same. This kind of disciplinary boundary between creative writing and criticism is one that has been contested since the linguistic turn and invites an inquiry into other differentiations we are wont to make between creative writing and criticism, such as the question of reflexivity.<sup>16</sup> In the same way that Garcia points to Almario’s poetics as testament to hybridity—“he has woken up from the slumber of colonial complacency and can now theorize as anti-imperialist not because his fancied *nativeness* is strong and especially impervious to the wiles and sorceries of the colonial system, but because, possibly the system was itself inefficient and flawed to begin with?” (*Postcolonialism* 27)—we might look to Garcia’s own oeuvre as bearing testimony to the self-awareness of the poet-critic, and that reflexivity, while having lost its currency, is a significant faculty especially if the theoretical value of intentionality or voluntarism is reconsidered. What also explains the position Garcia advances is his view that the expressive function does not have theoretical priority in postcolonial studies, but rather “culture and

interpretation” (*Postcolonialism* 14), which leads us to another question.

What kind of relationship between the colonizer and the colonized obtains from the idiom of hybridity as structural? Colonial discourse analysis has shown the “instability of power” (Young 186). We can recall that the colonial subject constructed is “almost the same, but not quite” (qtd. in Childs and Williams 130) and this partiality is menacing as it calls into question the originality of what is imitated. In the process of imitation, colonial authority is resisted through the transformation, or translation, of its messages by a culture that receives it in light of its own knowledge system. While acknowledging agency, in Bhabha’s words, “resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention” (110) but rather an effect of discursive conditions. Can this state of inbetweenness, of being neither one nor the other, properly account for affiliative relations between the colonizer and the colonized, as recent scholarship on the colonial archive has unearthed?<sup>17</sup> This positive critique in postcolonial studies is associated with the turn to ethics in critical theory proper. Of course, the argument can be made that hybridity is the form of postcolonial ethics, Levinasian in orientation whether it is explicitly articulated.<sup>18</sup> Garcia does invoke the ethics of alterity of Emmanuel Levinas: “In discovering the exhilarating possibility that the other can remain an other even as it relates with

73

16 Consider, for example, Geoffrey H. Hartman’s proposition that literary commentary *is* literature. What makes Hartman’s piece compelling is its demand to accord criticism the same freedom given to creative writing, that is, the use of difficult language. That “the letter of the text” (Davis 8) is as significant in theory as in literature means that meaning, assured or otherwise, in both is not to be had without deep contemplation and attentive reading.

17 See Gandhi, especially chapters four and five, and Lazarus, especially chapter three. It is also a feature of works by Marxist-oriented critics of postcolonial studies. See San Juan, *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*.

18 For Emmanuel Levinas, the concept of “totality” translates into the subjugation of difference, the “Altogether-Other” who embodies “infinity” and so exceeds knowledge formation. The “face” is where infinity presents itself as that which can be perceived but cannot be reduced to perception for it refuses knowingness, issuing the command: “thou shalt not kill.” See Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*.

the self, Levinas gestures toward an alternative philosophy that is founded not on the ontological presumption of universal sameness but rather on the ethical (meaning to say, the responsive and responsible) relationship between self and other” (“Alterity” 58). This is an ethics of nonviolence through the inviolability of the difference of the other, and one way to practice this is to suspend knowledge of the other. The subject, even at the cost of personal suffering, avoids the injustice of assimilating the other into the logic of the same. Thus, it can be argued that Levinasian ethics is about the vulnerability of the self, calling the self into question, as it is about preserving the alterity of the other.<sup>19</sup> The approach to postcolonial ethics I am more interested in exploring departs from the emphasis on difference, sustained in Garcia’s interpretation of hybridity, and pursues the role of the subject not only in the reproduction but also the transformation of norms in the conceptual and material realms, a possibility that is also opened up by the subject’s hospitality in Levinasian ethics.<sup>20</sup> Without denying the elitism and ethnocentrism that haunt universalism, we must also engage with theoretical attempts to reconsider this category, its most inspired elaboration being the re-emergence of cosmopolitanism.<sup>21</sup> Garcia,

while acknowledging the space for postnational thinking and transculturalism that is enabled by cosmopolitanism, is skeptical because cultural exchange remains bound up with or bears the traces of imperial subjugation. He argues that “the ‘politics’ that this kind of sociology betokens must remain *agonistic* (emphasis added), precisely to the degree that it tends to assume that the playing field between Self and Other is now all of a sudden amicable and ‘equal’...[Postcolonialism] is not only more historically precise; it is also more politically and ethically ‘responsible’” (“Reclaiming” 171). It is irresponsible, yes, to claim that uneven distribution has all but disappeared given the increasing interconnectedness of peoples, histories, and cultures. It is another thing, however, to disregard the possibility of voluntary affiliation on the basis of determination and identity politics, especially when the critical theory being deployed to make this argument precisely is underlined by the very possibility of self-problematization.<sup>22</sup> In a related discussion, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick appeals to practices that diverge from the hermeneutics of suspicion, or “paranoia” (3), a predilection in queer studies that is inextricable from the “phobic dynamics around homosexuality” (7). Sedgwick sees this in Butler’s

74

19 I owe this brief interpretation of Levinasian ethics to Leela Gandhi and the participants of the 2009 School of Criticism and Theory seminar entitled “On Anticolonial Metaphysics” at Cornell University. That memorable seminar prompted and continues to shape my thinking about postcolonial ethics. For a related discussion, see Davis 81-5.

20 For a discussion of intentionality in a postfoundational age, see Bevir 163-72; for a discussion of Levinas, see Davis, especially chapter four. According to Davis, Levinas’s framework has been described as “postmodern ethics” because, unlike Kant’s categorical imperative, Levinas offers no guiding rules or universal principles that would mediate between his moral philosophy and practical living. Davis writes: “This ethics does not teach us how to be good; it teaches us that goodness, peace, generosity and responsibility are the original terms of our relation with the Other, *though we can of course reject them if we choose* (emphasis added); war, violence and murder are always possible, commonplace even” (83).

21 See Anderson, *Way* 69-92.

22 There is a need for an alternative to anti-humanism and denaturalization as resistance premised on, to quote Anderson, “inherently restless modes of critique—irony, performance, negative freedom” (*Powers* 27). These enact what she describes as “double gesture,” the presupposition of the possibility of critical distance that makes possible critique while delegitimizing detachment as liable to the charge of epistemic violence, a feature of discourses on strategic essentialism she says.

argument for denaturalization in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Paranoia has “required a certain disarticulation, disavowal, and misrecognition of *other ways of knowing—ways less oriented around suspicion—that are actually being practiced, often by the same theorists and as part of the same projects* (emphasis added)” (22), ways of knowing that might fall under the rubric of reparation. It is productive to explore the compass of affects that accompany theory, “whether ecstasy, sublimity, self-shattering, *jouissance*, suspicion, abjection, knowingness, horror, grim satisfaction, or righteous indignation” (24). Even hopefulness. We might submit the idea, then, that after hybridity, to what Garcia calls “imperialism’s ‘double-talk’: *we are all the same, but you are not us*” (*Postcolonialism* 25) would be anti-imperialism’s riposte: “*we are not different, but you are not us,*” or more injuriously, “*we are even more/evermore different, and you can never be us.*”

An alternative theorization, following Sedgwick, would consider the role of norms and, interdependently, voluntarism in subversion. Much as in Bhabha’s hybridity, Butler attributes agency to the operations of power, and thus what is tendered is “a kind of agency without a subject” (*Young* 188).<sup>23</sup> Although the subject’s actions take place within norms, or culturally determined patterns of behavior, the disruption of these conventions through transgressive ways of conducting oneself that render these conventions unintelligible surely attests to the subject’s capacity to bracket ideology and willingness to confront the risks of resignification. Indeed, Butler has been critiqued for her disavowal of voluntarism. According to Amanda Anderson,

Butler strictly defines norms as hegemonic rather than potentially a standard for the evaluation of practice, even as she “necessarily evokes a subject who is actively and deliberately reworking the law, and thus not under compulsion” (*Way* 33). Underlying Butler’s insistence on norms as always already normalizing is the early Foucauldian notion that resistance is itself a strategy of containment by power, which creates the very terms through which subversion is acted out. And so, this hybrid performative non-subject, with a “persistent attitude of rebellion or irony” (Anderson, *Powers* 30), not to mention paranoia, refuses any normativity and the projection of an ideal of thought and action through the critical problematization of the self and its relation to the world. Gandhi asserts: “the hybrid subject of new left, queer, and postcolonial theories, among others, has performed admirably, leaving in its wake ‘splinters,’ ‘fragments,’ ‘instability,’ ‘disarray,’ and ‘ruin,’ progressively exploding, in the words of Chantal Mouffe, ‘the idea and the reality of a unique space of the constitution of the political’” (22). While it did set out to reconstruct the political, how viable is the politics of a postcolonial performativity? Its theoretical inclination towards divisiveness and its concomitant indeterminacy—in Garcia, the radical undecidability of the performances of the Filipino, always in excess of the norm—proves to be rather wanting. More importantly, what is theoretically dissatisfying is the insufficiently acknowledged role of the subject in developing a politics. In this regard, the more relevant framework with which Philippine postcolonial studies can also engage is the latter work of Michel Foucault in which the subject of

75

23 Butler explains: “The ‘performative’ dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms. In this sense, then, it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity” (qtd. in Anderson, *Way* 32).

governmentality exercises freedom through the ethical practices of the self in the activity of self-constitution, which is to say, for whom the ethical is the political.<sup>24</sup>

### Ethics as Politics

Postcolonialism has been critiqued for its textualism, a symptom of which is the entry to and subsequent domicile of non-Western intellectuals in Western academies sanctioned by the West to be the spokespersons of the non-West, generally with a view to championing hybridity as the position from which to negotiate “the collisions of language, race and art in a world of disparate peoples comprising a single, if not exactly unified, world” (Brennan qtd. in Anderson, *Way* 75).<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, owing to its poststructuralist provenance, postcolonialism has, if not abjured, devaluated the need to foster solidarity as a precondition for politics. We might here remember Butler’s thesis that the globalizing of female consciousness and experience of masculinist oppression in order to form a coalition is self-defeating, because this predetermined unity cancels the contradictions that must instead inform any attempt at building coalitional structures.<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek, launching another offensive, disparages what he calls “(postmodern) ‘dispersionists’...[who] condemn politics as unifying, totalitarian, violent, and so on, and assume the position of ethical critics who reveal (or voice) the ethical Wrong or Evil

committed by politics, without engaging in an alternative political project” (171). Garcia does make a case for the distinction between postmodernism and postcolonialism based on the latter’s political agenda, the “dismantling of structures of colonialism and neocolonialism, which have, of late, precisely taken a postmodern turn” (“Postcolonial” 29), but again the efficacy of the politics of postcolonial performativity that unrelentingly deconstructs identity and delimits the formation of social solidarities must be taken to task. Catalyzed by the later Foucault, how might we understand the rapprochement between ethics and politics? Could this generate thinking about how we can engage with the experiences arising from our postcolonial condition? Might it facilitate productive readings of creative and critical texts in Philippine Studies? What follows is a preliminary discussion of these points of inquiry towards discovering other areas of thought for Philippine postcolonialism.

76

A starting point is to look at how the presumptive demarcation between the ethical and the political is exemplified in the stated aim of cultural studies to “politicize aesthetics” (Hunter 347).<sup>27</sup> This objective is underwritten by the notion that aesthetics is divorced from the public sphere of labor and politics, retreating into the private ethical realm of self-realization. In line with the rethinking of ethics in critical theory, Hunter proposes that we reconsider aesthetics as “a distinctive way of actually conducting one’s life—as a self-supporting ensemble of techniques and practices for problematizing conduct and

24 See Foucault 1-32. For a discussion of the conceptual changes from the earlier Foucault to the later Foucault, see Moss 1-17.

25 See also San Juan, *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* 21-52

26 See Butler 18-22.

27 This objective of cultural studies, E. San Juan, Jr. reinforces, is to “arrive at a position in which our concern with form, aesthetic pleasure, and other traditional criteria of worth can be reconciled with our new interest in agency or identity and knowledge-production linked with ideology, power, and institutions” (“Cultural Studies” 3).

events and bringing oneself into being as the subject of an aesthetic existence” (348). In the literary domain, the “exercise of oneself in the activity of thought” (Foucault 9), asceticism in classical philosophy, is a process set in motion by the dualities that shape the literary text—form and content, reason and imagination—as “a means for individuals to concern themselves with the disintegration of their own sensibilities” (Hunter 350). This self-problematization is not unique to aesthetics but rather is a technique to be harnessed in all spheres of existence, or the whole way of life, wherein the dissociation of sensibility is seen to be continuous with the alienated society. An integral feature of asceticism is “ethical telos, or, the kind of being that individuals aspire to as the goal of their ethical activity” (Hunter 354), the personality that the subject is cultivating and the kind of community that the subject participates in forming. What have been proposed as models are the elimination of class inequality, an organic society, and the flowering of human faculties. Utopianism is certainly audible in this discussion. Hunter maintains that the elusiveness is not so much a property of the ideal one is striving towards but the practices of the self that seek to actualize it: “a practice that as it were moves on only by problematizing its current state and promises only the problematization of its next state, in a series of contrapuntal cancellations” (354).

Now, this might seem to be liable to the indeterminacy of postcolonial performativity. While the telos of one’s ethical practice can only be approximated, this is not quite the same as saying that norms of thought and action are necessarily power-laden and cannot be

reflexively deployed, or that self-reflexivity has no conceptual and material purchase. Asceticism, widely known to be rooted in the conception of philosophy in antiquity, is preceded by a choice of a mode of being and being-with made within a community who with examination agree to these norms as valid and encourage one another in realizing this view of existence. Comparatively, and as I more lengthily argue elsewhere, Reynaldo C. Ileto’s neo-phenomenological approach to Tagalog peasant movements from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century explains the motivation behind these collectivities as the inextricability of religion and politics.<sup>28</sup> To the masses, “*kalayaan* was not mere political autonomy, but the attainment of certain possibilities of existence” (187). The path to *kalayaan* is the purification of *loób* through what can be interpreted as spiritual exercises, such as meditation, prayer, and the cultivation of detachment from familial affiliations. These practices encourage and enliven sodalities and are means for accumulating power or rising to leadership. What I want to point out as a fruitful area of study is the similarity between this and Western ethico-political thought in the classical period in which mastery over the self attests to one’s right to exercise mastery over others.<sup>29</sup> This is not to discount important differences—one distinction being the kind of social relationship that arises between the leader and the governed—only to make a case for, one, voluntarism, or positive freedom, in the face of determinism and, two, the reconsideration of universalism as a way of encouraging a more expansive sense of community or belonging, and

77

28 I would refer readers to my dissertation, “Mapping the Cosmopolitan Turn in Contemporary Philippine Critical Theory,” especially chapter one.

29 See Foucault.

establishing participation in the cultural dialogue of critical theory. That ethical practice, and the problematization of ideas, does not cease is not debilitating but enabling. As Hunter writes: "It is simply a practice for neutralizing ends and for moving on from whatever point one happens to have reached" (354).

---

#### WORKS CITED

- Abad, Gémino H. "Mapping Our Poetic Terrain: Filipino Poetry in English from 1905 to the Present." *The Likhaan Anthology of Philippine Literature in English, from 1900 to the Present*, edited by Gemino H. Abad, The University of the Philippines Press, 1998, pp. 3-21.
- Almario, Virgilio S. *Balagtasismo Versus Modernismo: Panulaang Tagalog sa Ika-20 Siglo*. Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1984.
- Anderson, Amanda. *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*. Princeton University Press, 2006.
- . *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*. Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. Routledge, 1989.
- Bevir, Mark. "How to be an Intentionalist." *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, edited by Gabrielle M. Spiegel, Routledge, 2005, pp. 163-172.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 1990. Routledge, 1999.
- Childs, Peter, and Patrick Williams. *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*. Prentice Hall, 1997.
- Cruz, Isagani R. "The Other Other: Towards a Post-colonial Poetics." *The Likhaan Book of Philippine Criticism (1992-1997)*, edited by J. Neil C. Garcia, The University of the Philippines Press, 2000, pp. 50-61.
- Davis, Colin. *After Poststructuralism: Reading, Stories and Theory*. Routledge, 2004.
- Fanon, Frantz. "National Culture." *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, Routledge, 1995, pp. 153-157.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume 2*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage-Random House, 1990.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*. Duke University Press, 2006.
- Garcia, J. Neil C. "The Postcolonial Perverse: Hybridity, Desire, and the Filipino Nation in Federico Licsi Espino Jr's *Lumpen*." *The Postcolonial Perverse: Critiques of Contemporary Philippine Culture*. vol. 2, The University of the Philippines Press, 2014, pp. 13-39.
- . "Alterity and the Literature Classroom (Or, I Look for the Other when I Teach)." *The Postcolonial Perverse: Critiques of Contemporary Philippine Culture*. vol. 2, The University of the Philippines Press, 2014, pp. 54-80.
- . "Filipino Postcolonial Poetics: Preliminary Notes." *The Postcolonial Perverse: Critiques of Contemporary Philippine Culture*. vol. 1, The University of the Philippines Press, 2014, pp. 3-25.
- . "Nativism and Critical Theory: A Response to a Counter-Critique." *The Postcolonial Perverse: Critiques of Contemporary Philippine Culture*. vol. 1, The University of the Philippines Press, 2014, pp. 68-83.
- . "Reclaiming the Universal: Postcolonial Readings of Selected Anglophone Poems by Filipino Poets." *The Postcolonial Perverse: Critiques of Contemporary Philippine Culture*. vol. 1, The University of the Philippines Press, 2014, pp. 168-198.
- . *Philippine Gay Culture: Binabae to Bakla, Silahis to MSM*. 2nd ed., The University of the Philippines Press, 2008.
- . *At Home in Unhomeliness: Rethinking the Universal in Philippine Postcolonial Poetry in English*. Philippine PEN, 2007.
- . *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics: Essays and Critiques* (Forthcoming manuscript from the course Postcolonial Studies, De La Salle University-Manila). The University of the Philippines Press, 2004.
- . *Performing the Self: Occasional Prose*. The University of the Philippines Press, 2003.
- García Canclini, Néstor. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Translated by Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. Lopez, University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Edited by Arnold I. Davidson, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1995.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies." *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, Routledge, 1992, pp. 277-294.

- Hartman, Geoffrey H. "Literary Commentary as Literature." *The Geoffrey Hartman Reader*. Edited by Geoffrey H. Hartman and Daniel T. O'Hara, Fordham University Press, 2004, pp. 268-272.
- Hunter, Ian. "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies." *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, Routledge, 1992, pp. 347-372.
- Ileto, Reynaldo C. *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*. Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979.
- Lazarus, Neil. *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. Kindle.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen, Claretian Publications, 1997.
- Lumbera, Bienvenido L. *Tagalog Poetry 1570-1898: Tradition and Influences in its Development*. Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1986.
- Manuud, Antonio G., editor. *Brown Heritage: Essays on Philippine Cultural Tradition and Literature*. Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1967.
- Moss, Jeremy. "Introduction: The Later Foucault." *The Later Foucault: Politics and Philosophy*, edited by Jeremy Moss, Sage Publications Ltd, 1998, pp. 1-17.
- Pantoja Hidalgo, Cristina, and Priscelina Patajo-Legasto, editors. *Philippine Postcolonial Studies: Essays on Language and Literature*. 2nd ed., The University of the Philippines Press, 2004.
- Patajo-Legasto, Priscelina. "Philippine Studies: Have We Gone Beyond St. Louis?" *Philippine Studies: Have We Gone Beyond St. Louis?*, edited by Priscelina Patajo-Legasto, The University of the Philippines Press, 2008, pp. xv-xviii.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage-Random House, 1994.
- . *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.
- San Juan, Jr. E., "Cultural Studies, Ethnic Writing, and Indigenization in the Philippines." *The Philippines Matrix Project: Interventions toward a nation-democratic socialist transformation*, 8 Dec. 2012, [philcsc.wordpress.com/2012/12/08/cultural-studies-ethnic-writing-and-indigenization-in-the-philippines/](http://philcsc.wordpress.com/2012/12/08/cultural-studies-ethnic-writing-and-indigenization-in-the-philippines/).
- . *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*. St. Martin's Press, 1998.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're so Paranoid You Probably Think this Introduction is about You." *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 1-37.
- Talau, Antonette P. "Mapping the Cosmopolitan Turn in Contemporary Philippine Critical Theory." Dissertation, De La Salle University-Manila, 2016.
- Young, Robert J. C. *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2004.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. Verso, 1999.