

ABSTRACT. This essay, delivered as a keynote at the second national conference on the *sugidanon* (epics) of Panay at the University of the Philippines Visayas (Iloilo campus) in December of 2015, inquires into the broadly creative affordances offered by mythological material to artists in general, and to writers in particular. It uses as examples the first few volumes of the Panay Bukidnon's epic series, whose insights into non-dualistic thinking and transcendence echo the paradoxical procedures of poetic creativity on one hand, and urge translations into present-day national narratives on the other, in light of the country's increasingly cloven and agonized realities. Finally, as a way of fortifying its central argument, it discusses recent mythopoeic works by Filipino writers, that demonstrate in a variety of ways the generativity—and the usefulness—of this kind of creative project.

Myth and the Creative Imagination¹

81

Keywords: myth and writing, functions of myth, *sugidanon* of Panay, *Tikum Kadlum*, *Amburukay*, *Derikaryong Pada*, myth and pedagogy, mythopoeia, myth and science, mythopoeic retellings

J. Neil C. Garcia teaches creative writing and comparative literature in the University of the Philippines-Diliman, where he serves as Director of the university press and a fellow for poetry in the Institute of Creative Writing. He is the author of numerous poetry collections and works in literary and cultural criticism, including *The Sorrows of Water* (2000), *Kaluluwa* (2001), *Performing the Self: Occasional Prose* (2003), *The Garden of Wordlessness* (2005), *Misterios and Other Poems* (2005), and *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics: Essays and Critiques* (2003). In 2009, Hong Kong University

Press published its own international edition of his *Philippine Gay Culture* (1996). Between 1994 and 2014, he coedited the famous *Ladlad* series of Philippine gay writing. Another important anthology that he edited is *Aura: the Gay Theme in Philippine Fiction* in English, published in 2012. His most recent books are *The Postcolonial Perverse: Critiques of Contemporary Philippine Culture*, *Homeless in Unhomeliness: Postcolonial Critiques of Philippine Literature*, and *Myth and Writing: Occasional Prose*. He is currently at work on "Likha," his seventh poetry book.

University administrators, fellow teachers and cultural workers, students, friends, lovers of literature, ladies and gentlemen: a pleasant morning to you all.

With much trepidation I took over as Director of the University of the Philippines Press back in July of 2011. As I count down my remaining months in this office I find myself looking back on the past four years and the one hundred and sixty excellent titles that we have thus far published—in creative writing and scholarship, both.

Without a doubt among the titles that I'm proudest of are the books that we are featuring here today. The product of decades of painstaking research and translation work by a team of researchers from the UP Visayas—admirably headed by Professor Emeritus Alicia P. Magos—this epic series marks a singular moment in the history of Philippine publishing, for it presents in textual form the irreplaceable wisdom and communal lore of the Panay Bukidnon people. This is the first time that such a substantive oral corpus has been recovered, transcribed, translated into three languages, and subsequently published, in our country.

I'm very happy to be with you today, as you hold this Second National Conference on the *Sugidanon* of Panay. I am particularly enthused to celebrate and acclaim with you the first three volumes of this landmark series: *Tikum Kadlum*, *Amburukay*, and *Derikaryong Pada*, which we had the pleasure of launching at the Performatura Festival in the Cultural Center of the Philippines early last month.

Our people's epics are, of course, forms of native mythological knowledge, and it would do us well as a nation to preserve and cherish them in the modern medium of the

written word. While the technologizing of the spoken word can't help but reify and transform it—away from the provisionality of performance into the stasis of print—these books hopefully document something of the original experience of this native community's primeval and mythic world. Needless to say, mythology is a form of spiritual *orature*, which has provided human beings one of the oldest paths to the divine. Myth represents in ritual, narrative, and symbolic forms intuitions of the spiritual realm, and it has done so from the earliest times.

The basic theme of all myths is that there is an invisible reality that supports the visible world. Mythology, in this sense, is fundamentally mystical in character, rendering into images the amorphous essence of all things, through which it can be experienced and known. We may then see myth as a creative and “imaginal” field whose referent, in the ultimate sense, is transcendent. Its purpose is to enable us to experience the world that opens to us the spiritual dimension that enfolds it. Myths make us realize the mystical presence in every one and in every thing, for according to their deepest insight, we have all been poured out of the creator's eternal Self; we are all manifestations of the one divinity.²

Hence, mythology elicits in us a sense of wonder and awe: we come to realize the mystery of our selves, and of the universe we live in—the mystery implicit in all the forms of creation. Reading and experiencing myths, we come to see that our actual situations, like the different situations of the characters of these stories, are underpinned by a transcendent truth.

But mythology also evinces other functions. Like science, myth describes for

1 Keynote given at the Second National Conference on the *Sugidanon* of Panay, December 10, 2015, University of the Philippines Visayas, Iloilo City.

2 I source this definition of myth—as well as its functions—from the numerous books of Joseph Campbell, most especially the following: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949); *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991); and *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001).

us the various shapes and textures of reality; unlike science, however, it more easily accedes to the realization that what is real is ultimately unknowable. And then, we may also say that myths serve a didactic or pedagogical purpose, as well: they provide individuals residing in their specific communities guides or “manuals” on how to live under whatever conditions. Finally, myth also serves to legitimate the social order, as it exists. It’s in this sense that myths are culturally bound as well as place-specific: they are entirely the products of their own time and circumstance. The problem of literalism, which is what the scientific dismissal of myths typically enacts, is precisely its reduction of these age-old tales to this literal level, this specific descriptive or “sociological” function, to the neglect of everything else.

By contrast, the moment we understand that our stories about God are myths—the moment we see that our religions proffer not literal truths but rather symbolic and spiritual ones—then our faith can be set free from the cultural prisons of fundamentalist ethnocentrism and literal-mindedness. The comparative study of myth makes us see that the various myths—actually, all religions—are at once false and true. False because what they give us are mere symbolic images or metaphors (which by definition cannot be facts, cannot be literally true), but true precisely because these very same metaphors gesture toward the one transcendent mystery.

All these insights are in full and splendid evidence in the *sugidanon*, whose epic and mostly coastal and oceanic world stands in contrast to the Panay Bukidnon’s everyday physical reality: a clear reminder that like most other indigenous peoples in our country, they must have been seaside inhabitants once upon a time, who were displaced and driven up- and inland by successive waves of conquest and Christianization. This may be the most obvious reference to something empirically descriptive about these myths, whose value

is that they remain expressive of this people’s profound aspirations, which include the vision that not only recognizes duality, but also—and more importantly—yearns to transcend it.

Indeed, in these stories, the “sky-world” and the “earth-world” are not divided, but actually interpenetrate one another, their creatures freely trafficking across the non-absolute and proximal realms—of the present and the non-present (either the past or the yet-to-be), as well as the abodes of the deities and supernatural forces and of ordinary people. Resurrection bridges the chasm between the living and the dead, and because time in this world is experienced as a cyclical seasonality, it happens over and again in these heroic tales. Even the distinctions of gender and “enmity” prove to be typically mutable: femaleness shifts into maleness if it must, and the enemy or the “other” is actually inextricably part of the “same”—is even, shockingly, its blood relation—if only you allow yourself to look more closely (these plot “twists” happen in these epics to precisely confound and finally collapse these onerous binaries).

Finally, evil can be good, too, once you intuit past the surface of the apparent into the hidden and implicit depth. We may, for example, think of the villain, the monster-woman Amburukay, whose actions emerge entirely out of her maternal benevolence. In like manner, there’s really no conflict between the body and the spirit, as can be intuited from the way these stories perceive and present the “truth” of human sexuality: namely, that it is nature’s entirely beautiful—indeed, its preciously fleecy and altogether golden—gift. Astonishingly, this “sex-positivity” is an insight that we may glean from the story of the theft of the luminous and beloved strand of grisly hirsuteness—a *violation* that actually gives this villain her own memorable “hero’s journey” (consisting of a ritualistic and genitally “self-flagellating” quest to regain her sacred treasure), as well as inaugurates

the journey of one of the *sugidanon's* primary protagonists.

Moreover, in *Tikum Kadlum* and *Amburukay*, we can see the mythical motif of the “one forbidden thing,” that resonates with the story of the Edenic garden and its mortally fateful tree. In the first book the datu’s enchanted black dog warns his master against cutting down the sacred bamboo in the middle of the magical forest. In the second, Labaw Donggon’s parents warn their son not to carry out his plan to steal the forest hag’s glittery pubic hair (to use as a replacement for the broken string of his heirloom guitar), for such an act would surely bring about disaster. Of course, the moment something is explicitly forbidden in a myth, we can expect it to be transgressed, for this is precisely how the plot of powerful stories—ancient as well as modern—may be said to unfold. Then as now, a perfect paradise has little or no narrative interest. The stasis and equanimity of the ordinary world will need to be disturbed, if the heroic journey should commence.

Perhaps the most interesting idea in these epics is that of the *tuos* or sacred pact, embodied in this pre-literate world not in any written contract but rather in actual tangible things, that are thereby invested with spiritual potency and incalculable worth. In the absence of writing, this ancient and oral people found a way of *indicating* and pinning down memory: through the worldly objects that signified beyond their physical forms, and whose radiance suffused their everyday existence. Most certainly, the act of investing meaning into their world was of a piece with this people’s reverential attitude toward nature, that they knew was animated by the same Spirit dwelling inside themselves. It’s important to remember that written words are signs as well, except that they have the tendency to stand apart from creation, which isn’t the case with these natural and meaning-endowed objects,

which abide fully inside their natural contexts even as they come to embody realities that refer to truths glimmering beyond their shapes.

Given this form of “mystical mnemonics,” we are reminded of the psychodynamics of oral consciousness, which is situational, sympathetic, and participatory, rather than abstract and individualistic. Moreover, evident in the language of these epics is the fact that oral thinking is—in the words of the historian, Walter J. Ong—immediate, practical, “close to the life-world,” and at once “copious” and voluble.³ Which is to say: the plenitude of their adjectives, epithets, and thought-pictures helps keep the listener focused and attentive, on one hand; and on the other, the structure of their epic utterance, as with the other examples of folklore, rests on additive and iterative sentence patterns (obviously, these exist for the purpose of easier recall, represented best in the *sugidanon's* ritualistic formula: “Where we ended/ Was where we paused”). Of course, what these self-same qualities finally tell us is that oral cultures are living and dynamic social formations, in their own right. Despite being pre-analytical, orality is a mode of consciousness that is eminently capable of generating—as well as nurturing—its own profound forms of thought.

In fact, the ideas of harmony and unification—between humanity and nature, or the worldly and the divine, on one hand; and between the conflicting interests of different groups of human beings on the other—are priceless bequests that these stories would seem to particularly wish to offer us, especially now that they have been transcribed, textualized, and translated, and therefore made newly abstract and categorical. In the face of a fractious and divided country, these are insights that Filipinos all need to embrace and to champion, more and more.

This is especially true now, when so many of our *lumad* brothers and sisters in Mindanao

3 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982)

are being imperiled by militarization and armed insurgency—the mineral resources of their ancestral domains becoming the object of corporate avarice and state-sponsored capitalist exploitation. By becoming more deeply aware of the rich oral traditions of our indigenous peoples, and by learning about and actualizing their mystical realizations about our spiritual Oneness as a nation, Filipinos in general will be able to recognize and respect the “difference” of our indigenous brethren, whose well-being and interest we will now see as being ultimately inseparable from our own, and whose identity coincides with the vital otherness living inside ourselves.

These epics remind us that we were all *lumad*, once upon a time. Because of their enduring value as gifts of the creative imagination—through which empathy or solidarity becomes possible and may finally be realized as a collective truth—the *sugidanon* also tell us that right in the marrow of our mythic bones, despite the epistemic violence and ruptures of our history, the luminous chant still croons that we are *lumad*, still and all...

* * *

Allow me, at this point, to share some thoughts on the possible pedagogical affordances of these myths, in relation to the teaching of literature in our schools, especially in view of recent curricular revisions and the wholesale structural shift into the K to 12 System.

I am thinking, in particular, of the deployment of creative writing strategies in the teaching of literature courses, especially in the High School and early College levels. Insofar as a literature course is ostensibly about the activity of reading and understanding literary texts, we might wish to consider how we, as literature teachers, can best instill the love of reading in our students. Whatever the language of instruction, in teaching the short

story, for instance, we might now consider taking our students through the process of story telling, by not simply enumerating its elements, but by letting them experience these on their own: with our guidance, they can make up plots, think up characters and dialogue, imagine settings, play around with points of view, contemplate ideas or themes. In teaching poems, on the other hand, the teacher might wish to end or emphasize certain lessons with a poetic exercise that may or may not eventuate in the writing of a poem, but at least presents a demonstration of certain poetic skills: poetic description or metaphor-making, for instance, the correct use of other figures of speech, or even an illustration of certain rudiments of versification.

In short, we can encourage them to tell stories—for yes, poems also tell stories, by way of imagery and figurative expression. Rather than alienate them from literature, we can enjoin our students to actively participate in its production by writing texts, and not merely passively reading them. After all, creation is the highest form of literary appreciation.

A particular activity we may deploy in our classroom is what literary scholars call *mythopoeia*. This word isn't as scary as it sounds, because it simply refers to the creative appropriation of folkloric material, for whatever purpose in whichever genre. The Philippines abounds in folkloric sources, originally oral, although a number of them have already been transcribed. There exists an abiding interest in these materials among local readers, as evidenced in the fact that folklore anthologies—of myths, legends, tales, riddles, proverbs, epics and songs—are still, for decades now, the bestselling titles of the UP Press.

Why we are seeing a preponderance of mythopoeia in contemporary Philippine culture—from films, TV shows, theatrical productions, to books—can partially be explained by the “cultural simultaneity” of Philippine society, where oral and textual,

pre-rational and rational forms of knowledge blissfully coexist. The persistence of folkloric—also called “superstitious”—beliefs in an age of global digital information is probably one of the areas in which the syncretism of our local cultures is most obvious. And indeed, young Filipino writers seem particularly receptive to this dissonance, and are thematizing it in their works—in horror, fantasy, and the “speculative” sub-genres.

There are, to my mind, two kinds of mythopoetic projects—really, aesthetic modes. We may refer to the first mode as *ironic*, and this treatment is typically exemplified by parodic narratives involving mythological heroes (as well as villains). An example that immediately comes to mind is Carlo Vergara’s uproariously funny graphic novel, *Zsazsa Zaturnnah*, whose story implicates both the native belief in amulets and the modern mythos of comic-book-generated big-breasted *superheroines*. On the other hand, ready examples of earnest mythopoetic work are commonly seen in the *fantaseries* on primetime television or the heroic fantasy films—mostly historical, but sometimes also futuristic.

As a regular panelist in the University of the Philippines National Writers Workshop for a couple of decades now, I can say that mythopoetic works, typically as fiction or verse, are being carried out by more and more of our young writers. While some of these works are ironic—for instance, in this year’s batch, a campy novel about the lost and somewhat inept son of two superheroes, a magical transgender *shokoy*, and a cast of colorful characters drawn from both contemporary and ancient mythological references—the bulk would still be of the serious or even poetic sort. Offhand I can bring up Mayette M. Bayuga’s novel, *Sa Amin sa Dagat-dagatang Apoy*,⁴ about

the sex lives of elementals and *aswangs* (who are frantically searching for the “last male virgin”). Also, Will P. Ortiz’s prospective series of young-adult novels,⁵ in Filipino as well, about Aya Aquiling, an awkward twelve-year-old girl who discovers that she is, in truth, the reincarnation of the well-known and beloved nature goddess, Mariang Makiling.

Because myths are metaphorical figures for transcendent mysteries, my suggestion to writers who wish to undertake their own respective mythopoetic projects is, first and foremost, to bear in mind that a metaphor, being a figure of speech about resemblance and paradoxical unity, is composed of two elements: a vehicle and a tenor. While the former is easy enough to identify, we must remember that the latter, being the very heart or message of the myth, is always a matter of interpretation.

It is in this sense that mythopoetic retellings will always be subjective: the message or “truth” of the myth being utilized is always, in fact, an intimate and personal one. It’s crucial, however, for the writer to also realize that it is precisely this message that ultimately takes precedence over the contingent vehicle, which indeed can be adapted, revised, rewritten, and transformed. Thus, for example, in the case of Ortiz, because the Makiling myth is (to her) really about the importance of human accountability in the face of nature’s imperiled beauty, keeping this firmly in mind she indeed could elect to transfer the setting of the gentle and nature-caring native goddess away from the mountainous fastness of Laguna to the contemporary cityscape, and even to portray her not as a self-assured maiden, but rather as a confused pubescent girl, who will grow into her own “goddess self” and have a heroic adventure in the present-day urban world.

4 Mayette M. Bayuga, *Sa Amin, Sa Dagat-Dagatang Apoy* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014).

5 The first of these books was launched last month in UP Diliman. See Will P. Ortiz, *Ang Pagbabalik ni Mariang Makiling* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City, 2015).

Allow me at this point to pose a few of the questions that I believe our myth-inclined writers should ponder. These are also opportunities for them to make more purposive decisions about their use of this type of allusion.

What should the Filipino writer's fundamental attitude toward mythology be? Is it simply material, or is it rather a distinct frame of mind or perspective, that bids one to see and acquiesce to the uncertain and the numinous in our midst, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*? Related to this is the question of whether the stance of thorough-going irony is even appropriate in our case, when it's quite possible that the *multo*-fearing, *tabi-tabi-po*-murmuring, horoscope-consulting, *feng-shui*-abiding, and church-going present-day Filipino is still very much living in mythological times? And then: might there be an ethical dimension to the issue of center-based writers appropriating the ancestral stories of cultural minorities, many of whom have been literally dispossessed by the cruel inflictions of the national reality that blatantly privileges their status as urban artists? And lastly, why must we promote the "fantastical" mode of writing, when it possibly amounts to little more than escapism, especially in the face of the urgent realities of our everyday lives?

The answers to these questions are many, and different—from one writer to the next—but I suppose, for me, I will have to begin by reminding myself that as a source of knowledge mythology remains valid, despite the ascendancy of science, which itself can only offer provisional and "self-rectifying" explanatory narratives for the nature of reality. As we may have heard, the best and most honest practitioners of science as a method of inquiry acknowledge reality as essentially mysterious, still and all. We may think, for example, of the "hard problem" of consciousness (the *qualia* or inner experience that cannot be

remotely reduced to the brain's gray matter), the singularity that lies at the heart of the Big Bang, the finely tuned universe, black holes and their event horizons, dark matter and dark energy, quantum superpositions and entanglements, the Planck scale, and all the other imponderables that scientists have been conjuring forth, of late.

* * *

Myth does not really compete with science, for its function isn't primarily explanatory or even descriptive of the physical universe. We can compare the "value" of myth to the experience of watching a film, which we know to be make-believe—a production that's been captured in a medium, and replayed. And yet, the experience elicits an affective response and encourages our "playing along" with its depictions, thereby eliciting our semi-credulity, a provisional "suspension of disbelief" and acceptance of the illusion that the movie offers, while it lasts. Myths provide guides to—rather than depictions of—the world. As such they express hopes and aspirations rather than direct representations of reality.

Finally, mythology remains relevant in our time because it is intertwined with creativity itself, so much so that the former is really the loftiest that the latter can ever wish to become. In other words, all literature, all art, finally aspires to turn into myth, for myth is nothing if not narration wielding powerful and transfigurative magic over the communal psyche that invents it, providing not so much explanations as experiences of its innermost depths, its uppermost visions, its intuition of the transcendental, without which it would be quite impossible for any us to grieve, to judge, to love, and be fully a person in this world.

The vital place and enduring relevance of such "intuitions of the transcendental" have been acknowledged by thinkers and writers across the millennia, even by critical theorists

like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.⁶ Indeed, recognizing the value of mythological thinking does not mean denying or even remotely overlooking the hard and gritty realities of the literal, of the “here and now.” Even as we gather here today to celebrate the *sugidanon* as exemplary works of ancestral imagination, this does not in any way mean that we are denying the Panay Bukidnon the right to tell their own contemporary stories, about their own contemporary realities, whatever form or shape these stories may take.

Let me be univocally clear, hence: in discussing the mythic virtues of these ancient oral works, I am not remotely suggesting that they are to be taken as the only possible representation, the only possible source of knowledge we should ever have of this increasingly imperiled community. Inspired by the work of folklore comparatists, my insistence on valuing these ancient stories’ spiritual insights—their mythological “nature”—comes out of a recognition that scientific materialism has all but effectively displaced and delegitimized the empirical value of myths, which indeed means they cannot be expected to tell literal stories (of dispossession, or whatever else) anymore, given precisely the ascendancy of science in our time.

In centralizing the allegorical approach to the reading of these tales, I am therefore insisting on their “relevancy”: despite or precisely because they are now considered “limited” or downright “false” as descriptions of reality—being about the magical adventures of heroes and heroines, sorceresses and monsters, gods and *duendes*, set in the fantastical landscapes and seascapes of the primordial and mythological past—these epics continue to embody the dreams and aspirations of the

people who have fashioned them out of their communal imaginations. We must believe that this continues to be the case, even as this very same people recognize that these are stories that come from what is already an increasingly superseded past: the simple truth is, since the arrival of AM radio—and its soap operas—epic chantings have practically vanished among the tumandok (another, more localized name for this people) of Central Panay.⁷

Moreover, we must remember that the Panay Bukidnon, including even their elderly epic chanters, have for many decades now almost all of them been Christians—evangelical, even. The story I personally heard, of Professor Magos’s interesting exchange with them⁸ about the “One True God,” just now comes to mind: asked about what they thought of their remote ancestors’ animistic and polytheistic faith (as revealed in the epics), the chanters expressed their belief that their forbears must’ve intuited the truth of the Supreme Being, or the Ultimate Principle, only that “their imaginations could only reach so far...” It is interesting, hence, to learn that these chanters recognize the transcendent tenor of the *sugidanon*, for which their various adventures and characters are but temporal vehicles—and as such, as they themselves have realized, must finally fall short.

As Spivak’s recent interventions urge us, there is certainly theoretical room to discuss transcendence in the various fora of liberative discourse—for instance, the postcolonial or even the decolonial—precisely because the respect of faith and “spiritualities” is an integral and unavoidable part of any discussion of human dignity, equality and justice. In this regard, we need to remember that in many locations in the Global South, colonial

6 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sara Harasym (London: Routledge, 1990), 12.

7 *Tikum Kadlum*, Federico Caballero (Chanter), Teresita Caballero (Chanter), Alicia P. Magos (Translator), Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014 s, 23.

8 From a personal conversation with Professor Alicia P. Magos, December 9, 2015, University of the Philippines Iloilo City campus.

violence had disrespected and displaced native mythological systems, after all. On the other hand, in my own recent interventions, I have been insisting on reclaiming universalism as a postcolonial “good,” for it is in granting subalterns and minoritized peoples the ability (nay, the right) to aspire to it—and to escape the ethnographic prison of empirical particularity—that we can properly begin the task of imagining a more livable and more equal world.⁹

Finally, it needs to be said: reducing the question of indigenous people’s suffering to talk of their material need alone is levelling at them the ultimate insult. Like all the world’s disenfranchised and downtrodden poor, indigenous communities do not only have needs. They can and do also desire. Like everyone else, the tumandok can look up at the imponderable vastness of the night sky, and ask ineffable and existential questions.

And so, yes: as their ancestral stories still have the power to remind them (and, hopefully, us): we all can dream of transcendence...

* * *

To conclude, I would like to read one of my mythopoetic retellings—in this case, of a “cosmogony story” coming from the Panay Bukidnon themselves, as the anthropologist Felipe Landa Jocano first recorded and adapted it.¹⁰ It features the interesting characters of Tungkung Langit and Alunsina (in the *sugidanon*, her name is probably the older Laon Sina), the primordial conjugal couple in this primordial Visayan world. In revisiting and revisioning their story, I decided to keen

inward into its metaphysical depth, where I discovered its astonishing insight regarding the proliferative power of grief and longing.

Before I could set out to begin my retelling,¹¹ I needed to recall the original version of this tale, which I realized tends to discredit Alunsina altogether, thinking her a frivolous and jealous wife who does nothing to help Tungkung Langit put order into the chaos of the first universe. But what this original story leaves entirely to the listener to contemplate is just how it is Alunsina herself who sets the inexorable wheels of creation turning, by disappearing from Tungkung Langit’s life. Because of this wise goddess’s brave and bold decision, the otherwise self-absorbed Creator is made to forswear his own ego and look outside himself—in the process begetting, out of his unfathomable sense of sadness and loss, what we now recognize as the living and limpid world.

According to this myth, we came out of a god’s mourning for his lost love. In my *mythopoetic retelling*, I wanted to say something else, and maybe it is this: Alunsina is the implicit, fluid, and dark principle in all of creation, without whom nothing vital would exist. According to this myth, absence is also a form of presence, and creation is nothing if not the restless “filling” and “healing” of the Elemental Gap sighing inside all of us—a yawning and infinitely cavernous Gap whose other name is Desire.

89

9 Garcia, J. Neil C. “Reclaiming the Universal: Postcolonial Readings of Selected Anglophone Poems by Filipino Poets,” *Humanities Diliman* (July-December 2014) 11:2, 1-30.

10 This version was included in the compendium edited by the late Professor Emeritus, Damiana L. Eugenio. See Damiana L. Eugenio, ed., *Philippine Folk Literature: The Myths*, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1994.

11 I first recounted the genesis of this poem in my essay, “Of Legends and Poetry.” It was republished in my *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics: Essays and Critiques* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2003), 322-58.

Legend of the Seafoam

In the beginning there was always mist
shrouding and blurring the edges of things:
untouched by clovenness, water and sky
knew nothing of horizons; land and air
lay languidly, caught in the grip of shared
rootlessness and sleep. In the beginning
the void stirred awake from itself, remembering
all it could of its mist-borne soul as it began
to dream of difference. Out of this wish
two beings churned loose, and arose:

Tungkung Langit, omnipotent lord of the sky,
and his wife, Alunsina. She was his liling
consolation as he was her all: at sunrise,
he returned from his labors at creation
to find her singing beside a pond
which had been her desire turned into water.

He loved her enough to bequeath her
this one power: a gift of crystal grief
and pain that grew lucent in her breast
and flowed shimmering to her lips. As she sang,
she strummed the water's anxious skin
with her fingers, and he felt the cool touch
of ripples spreading faintly from his brow
to his mind's very bottom. But still,

Tungkung Langit alone wielded heaven's
towering staff, for he was lord over all
that cowered in its shadow. Alunsina
thought little of the massiveness that was
his shape, but of what hid there:
while he was not looking, she had mastered

the trick of seeing the space between his stares
 as he searched for more emptiness to fill, more
 black regions to banish from his sight
 that craved light and more light. She had felt
 the doubt in his limbs as they tore apart
 ancient waters from their springs, had heard
 the muffled sigh in his breath as it blew out
 heaving mist like a candle whose flame
 was darkness. And so, when he told her
 in the brilliant clasp of sunlight how her songs
 tired him so, how darkly woeful he found them
 as depths that lurked wanton under
 the formless worlds that he despised,
 she knew more than he did of the folly
 inside his heart. While Tungkung Langit
 was stern-eyed blowing fire into the sun's
 roaring furnace, Alunsina disappeared
 from the sky which had been her home.
 At first he thought it refreshing
 not to listen to her songs, not to find her lying
 on her side by crystal ponds that cooled
 the air of celestial places. But soon,
 he was weary of the heat sputtering
 from within his fervent imaginings. Soon he craved
 her fingers to put out the flame on his brow,
 to heal the gap leering at him from within
 the blinding magnificence of his mind.
 In his solitude her absence spoke to him
 more loudly than any creation
 he could ordain! Fired frantic by her loss
 he sought her from the bottom to the surface
 of things he had caused: from sunrise
 to sunrise, from order to order,
 light to more light in the universe
 of his own proud invention. She was not there.
 And so he remembered who she was:
 Alunsina who haunted everything
 he had shaped as shadow haunted light.
 He threw the pall of his sorrow
 over half of the sky, leaving only a hole
 through which he might see her, and the glint

of countless pinpricks to guide her home.

But she remained lost to him the way dew
was lost to the newly formed earth in the haze
of the very first sunset. And then,
he gathered her liquid sadness from all
the ponds she had orphaned in her wake,
and cast it into the hollows down below.

Perched on the crest of a rainbow,
Tungkung Langit wept a rain full of life
that took root everywhere it fell:
on land it crept, through air it flew,
and across the ocean it swam, all in the same
fitful rhythm of loss. He pressed
his mouth to the soil where quivered
flowers sighing their mottled fragrance
into his face. For all this he only grew
more forlorn: she was nowhere in the exuberance
for which he was everywhere called Almighty
by the progeny he had enfleshed. If only
they knew the formless grief enwombing him,
the pain whence they themselves had throbbled
within his heart's seething mist!

After staying in a fire-lit cave,
where his longing had moved the fingers
of an upright creature across a wall,
Tungkung Langit lifted himself up
to the evening. He would have thought
the moonlit sky beautiful had he not
noticed the glimmer of ripples
over the surface of a breeze-blown sea.
For a moment he could see her lying
across the horizon, her head resting
on a hand while the other strummed the water's
trembling skin. She would seem to be singing
to waves that rushed headlong to shore as if
desiring seamlessness. From across the sea
he called her name an eternity of times
into the rising wind, Alunsina,
Alunsina. But no sooner had he spoken
than she vanished as the foam swirling
lucent among storm-swept rocks.