

PERSPECTIVES

The Writing of *State of Happiness*: Writing the Archipelago

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A novelist's main task is to re-imagine and re-present worlds, re-construct time and space, create new novel forms. But there are three things that a novelist resists as much as they can. A novelist would rather not talk about their own work, as it should not be upon them to interpret what they wrote. For this writer, it should be intentions, not meanings, that should matter. Second, to tell the story of how one began and wrote their novel is also something to be avoided if one can, unless as Umberto Eco said it could help enlighten others in terms of technique and method. It has to be noted that similar to writing a novel, the novelist also needs to re-construct a cohesive narrative about process, because in reality it is not always as organized or neat. Third, to find a theory to describe one's novel is the task most resisted, unless the novel is one's dissertation and therefore the novelist has to oblige. For a novelist, the "theorizing" is the novel itself and/or the process of writing it. The "discoursing" may happen through the narrative structure and linguistic style, and generally in how the literary devices at one's disposal are used, rejected, innovated.

Keywords: archipelago, archipelagic, Bakhtin/Bakhtinian, postcolonial, Philippine historical novel

Beginning/Beginnings

Why write a novel? Or perhaps the more accurate way of putting this, partly as rhetorical question, partly to capture what preceded the writing of *State of Happiness* is: *why write another novel?*

“Because I had a yen to do it. I believe this is sufficient reason to set out to tell a story,” wrote Umberto Eco in his postscript in the 2004 edition of his novel *The Name of the Rose*.¹

Ursula Le Guin has also echoed some of my sentiments and thoughts about writing fiction: “Writing fiction or poetry is natural to me. I do it, want to do it, am fulfilled in doing it, the way a dancer dances or a tree grows. Story or poem is spun directly out of my entire self. And so I consider myself without question the primary judge of its accuracy, honesty, and quality. Writing talks or essays, however, is always more like doing schoolwork.”²

Perhaps, the answer also lies in Mikhail Bakhtin. I had always been drawn to what he said about what the novel can do—that every novel is a new form of novel and thus it cannot be canonic. That the genre is “ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms” continues to generate a certain appeal and challenge to me as fictionist.³

In a fashion show on Netflix, a popular A-list designer who was asked to give advice to young designers said “Your first ideas are always your great ideas” or something akin to this. How I began my writing of *State of Happiness* still has a lot to do with what has become of it. The novel has undergone changes in narrative structure, refinement in linguistic style, and incorporation of new plot twists but 70 to 80 percent of the story has remained, though the original intentions may have changed along the way.

As I cannot fully rely on memory, in much the same way when writing a novel, I also need to construct a cohesive narrative about my process, though in reality it is not always as organized or neat. It was only in the writing of this third novel that I started the practice of journaling the process, and not even in a sustained manner. It has its benefits, admittedly, as it helps me now recall how the writing of *State of Happiness* happened.

To tell the story of how one begins writing a novel is a task that a writer wants to avoid if they can. A writer would rather not talk about their own work, as it should not be upon them to interpret what they wrote. As I

often tell my students in fiction writing, what should matter to a fictionist is to begin from intentions, not meanings. Leave the meanings to the readers. But to heed Eco’s advice, shedding light on the production process can also be turned into the novelist’s problem-solving in terms of technique.⁴

Edward Said wrote a whole book, *Beginnings, Intention and Method* (1975), to ponder and problematize the concept of beginnings, including in literary texts and the novel in particular. “Every writer knows that the choice of a beginning for what he will write is crucial not only because it determines much of what follows but also because a work’s beginning is, practically speaking, the main entrance to what it offers,” he said.⁵

There is a difference though between the beginning, pertaining to the first sentence or paragraph in the novel, as something that has already been completed or accomplished, and beginning the writing, which is an act leading to a series of acts of writing. The first sentence I had thought of did not become the novel’s beginning—if beginning refers to a chronology of everything that came before this one that has now been privileged to appear in the completed manuscript. What appears now as Part I of the novel, “Love in the Island—An Interlude,” was not Part I before. It had been intended as the second part, a flash back, with Part III now, “Love and Entities,” as the beginning. It was not even the first part in the submitted dissertation version. Now it is the novel’s dramatic present and proceeds to the far future, Part II, “Love in the Year of Madness” (which appeared first in the dissertation version). “Love in the Year of Madness” was the most recent addition to the novel, the turn in the plot that appeared in 2017, almost two years into my writing of *State of Happiness* and also into the second year of the Duterte government, amidst the intensification of its war on drugs. Did I intend for this to reflect reality? This part of the novel perhaps carries a sensibility that reflects the so-called signs of the times, but I would not say that it is purely about mirroring reality. For a time, though, I got too close and involved in the obtaining social-political conditions that I wanted to change the title of the novel to *Year of Madness*. Fortunately for me, I got out of that state of mind—emotion—and back on track in the novel. It would become apparent that what was problematic in the dissertation version was making the story about the year of madness. I thought back to how I had originally envisioned the novel and

this part was not to be the center. It could not hold the whole story together.

There was something common in the writing of the first two novels and *State of Happiness*. What was present in the beginning of the process of all three was the impulse to write, though the motivations behind the impulse can be differentiated. My first two novels somewhat began with ideas. An *idea* as the point of departure was what Said referred to as Auerbach's *Azantspunkt*⁶, though for Auerbach this was the work's historiography. They were not however ideas in the sense of being theories but articulated as questions about things and/or events. But what happens to these "ideas"? Mine would eventually become characters and/or scenes in the novel, or would manifest in the way I would write the narrative. With *We Who Cannot Be Daughters* (2014), what preoccupied me at the time of the novel's conception was history and how disconnected we had become from both our country's as well as personal histories. But what is disconnectedness as a personal experience and not merely as a concept linked or applied to history and political events?

Different Countries (2010) would further build on disconnectedness/disconnection as it related to or resulted from *disappearance*. Are disconnectedness and disappearance related? *Different Countries* was the second novel I wrote or what I would like to refer to as the "intervening" novel, but the first to be completed and published. *We Who Cannot Be Daughters* was my first manuscript, the novel with several incarnations and what I referred to as my "rite of passage" that I began in 2001 when I was just "coming back" to writing after a 10-year hiatus.

State of Happiness's "beginning" deviated from that of the previous two novels. It started as a—or with the—first sentence that I put down: "Half-human, half-ocean." Without any idea what it was about, the phrase just kept hovering in my mind that I had to write it down. It was not even grammatically correct. It stayed there on the page for some time before something more and something else followed; before I would come to that stage in writing when I would gain more clarity about what I wanted to do with/in the novel. True, the urge to write, more than two years after I had completed *We Who Cannot Be Daughters* and a little over a year after its publication, was upon me again. Yet initially there was only some vague longing for—more like a developing attachment

to—"place" that stirred me to the direction of where I wanted the novel to go. This search for what place is would become a central intention in my writing of this third novel, in the several beginnings that I would embark on.

When I wrote *We Who Cannot Be Daughters*, I was still steeped in the tradition of the Philippine historical novel and/or the novel-as-nation's narrative. When I decided to write in 2001, I was coming from a deep exposure to the novels where historicism was central, such as Jun Cruz Reyes's *Tutubi Tutubi Huwag Kang Pahuhuli sa Mamang Salbahe* (1987) and *Etsa Puwera* (2000), Luwalhati Bautista's *Dekada '70* (1983), Ninotchka Rosca's *State of War* (1988), Charlson Ong's *Banyaga* (2006), F. Sionil Jose's *Mass* (1982), among others. These novels have been widely characterized as being part of the Rizalian tradition and the kind that have been hailed too as the "Philippine novel" if ever there was a definitive national novel form. So I thought as well that if I were to aspire to become a novelist worth my salt then I should begin with a historical novel.

In Philippine critical literary tradition, the Philippine/Filipino novel, whether written in Filipino or English, is read as narratives on history. For literary critics/scholars Resil Mojares and Caroline Hau, the Philippine novels are narratives that problematize the nation as well as invoke and evoke nationalism. Though the novel carries with it its "universal" form and has also evolved from local narratives specifically during the early American period, it is still largely, if not entirely, shaped by historical and social realities.⁷ As Mojares argued, the major "organizing impulses" of the Filipino novel, especially in the tradition of viewing this narrative as mimetic, are still social realities, and the most important of these social and historical experiences would be colonialism and its legacy. "Colonialism... was both hostile and hospitable medium but it had, by and large, a negative influence on the development of the novel, creating intellectual and material conditions that occasioned distortions of form and vision," wrote Mojares.⁸

In a similar vein, when she talks of national/ist consciousness as a key element in the Filipino novel, Caroline Hau points to our colonial and neocolonial experience as the main historical shaper of this consciousness. In her writings, Hau has referred not only to keen awareness of history, but more importantly to national consciousness—of belonging

to the Philippine/Filipino nation. Hau, like Mojares, also underscored the Filipinos' colonial experience, and the continuing influence—impositions, in fact—of this colonial past on Philippine economy, polity, and culture. All these comprise the defining context against which this consciousness evolves/should evolve.

This “national consciousness” is not often defined only by the shared historical experience of colonialism, but also by cultural values that are associated with it, which according to Hau are freedom, sovereignty, and belief systems forming the standards for the determination of who is nationalist and who's not.⁹ For Hau, these cultural valuations attached to the nationalist discourse, whose main aim are to evolve and achieve a nationalist consciousness, had rendered nationalism problematic. Some of the key questions that Hau raised in her book were: How does literature “represent” (in both artistic and political senses of the word) the “true” Filipino national community?...How does literature forge the link between the personal and political...rethink the relationship between revolutionary theory and practice...¹⁰

For both Mojares and Hau, the study of the Philippine/Filipino novel begins with Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, which are seen as the epitome of the historical novel suffused with nationalist ideals, though written during a time when these ideals were just being born. The Rizalian tradition of an expansive historical novel set against the backdrop of a historical period, making historical subjects out of the characters as they respond to and are shaped by history, would be the prominent characteristic of historical novel-writing in Philippine literature.

In all the novels I listed above, history is mythologized to search for and generate certain truths. In said historical novels, history has already unfolded or happened outside the text, so that the narrative is already “fraught with background,” to borrow Eric Auerbach's phrase.¹¹ Philippine history are the novels' originary.

In *We Who Cannot Be Daughters*, the fictional world is also foregrounded by Philippine history—the time of the Spaniards, American colonization, Japanese occupation, and the Philippines under Corazon Aquino (albeit this last period in the novel is only implied). The novel was an attempt at having a “conversation” with Rizal's *Noli* about nation. In Rizal's novel, the story was from the point of view of a male hero and mostly male protagonists. In *We Who Cannot Be Daughters*,

the protagonists are women and cast mostly as anti-heroes.

When *Different Countries* “intervened” in 2006 in my writing of *We Who Cannot Be Daughters*, the impulse to write, to create literature, was from a need to “respond” to the obtaining social-political events of the time. There were many stories of activists and human rights defenders being disappeared; military abuse was again pervasive under the government of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. The particular event that haunted me then was the disappearance of UP students Karen Empeño and Sherlyn Cadapan. In 2007 more information about their abduction and torture in the hands of former General Jovito Palparan and his men would come out through the testimony of farmer Raymond Manalo who had witnessed what happened. But before his revelations, I was already deeply affected by the disappearance and thought a lot about what happened to the two young women. Where were they? What was being done to them? What if they were not surfaced again? What was more unbearable then, to wait for the homecoming of the disappeared not knowing when this would happen or to have the certainty about their fates by seeing their bodies? Where did the disappeared go if they were never found? Suddenly, I was feeling irrelevant as a writer—and I have not even written my first novel. When would I finish my historical novel, *We Who Cannot Be Daughters*? Would it still be relevant when I complete it? Was it going to be read as a historical novel?

In the process of reflecting about disappearances of people and things—beliefs, relationships, the future—from our lives, the character Mercedes was born. She would not be physically present (except in a few scenes comprising a back story) in *Different Countries* yet it is around her story that everything happens in the novel. With her as the absent protagonist, the writing could not immediately proceed, and even when the writer-activist Katherine appeared. The story could not be written from their perspectives. The young Nora and her friend Joaquin or “King” needed to be born and the story told from their viewpoint. How they were born could be seen as accidental, but it was an “accident waiting to happen.” That the key to unblocking the writing process was to begin the novel with Nora and for the story to be seen mainly through the eyes of children. It was how the story achieved the imperative “distance” from its reality.

That afternoon is still vivid in my memory. I was riding a UP-Ikot jeepney. It had just rained and the road was wet, I was inside the jeepney, which just turned into Roxas Avenue, when I saw these young boys who I thought then was 11–12 years old, picking up garbage at the sidewalk and putting them in the sack they were carrying. I was not even thinking about what they were doing, but just seeing them, it came to me that the only way the story of Mercedes—of *Different Countries*—could be told would be through the perspective and voice of children and not through the jaded eyes of Katherine. After that ‘click’ in the mind, the other children in the novel started emerging and insisting that their stories be written too.

Intentions

Albeit there were always varying degrees of resistance to being obliged to find a theory for my creative project, this could not be done away with as I had decided to make *State of Happiness* my doctoral dissertation. I make a point of this here without facetiousness, as I had done this before with *We Who Cannot Be Daughters*, which became my master’s thesis. Why should it bother me to do it again with the third novel? For a novelist, the “theorizing” is the novel itself and/or the process of writing it. The “discoursing”—though a part of me still resists this term to describe the process of fiction writing—may happen in the “plot” or in being anti-plot, in the characters or being anti-character, in the world-building—through the narrative structure and linguistic style, and generally in how the literary devices at one’s disposal are used, rejected, innovated. (The point is simply that these are two separate things for me as a novelist—to study literary or other kinds of theory on one hand and to write fiction as another) Ursula Le Guin, pertaining to her novel *The Dispossessed*, wrote that novelistic narrative “resists reduction to abstracts and binaries, the embodiment of ethical dilemma in a drama of character that evades allegorical interpretation, the presence of symbolic elements that are not fully accessible to rational thought...”¹²

With *We Who Cannot Be Daughters*, the manuscript was almost done when I enrolled in my MFA studies while in the case of *State of Happiness*, it was taking a long time to put my finger on what I intended to do, even if there was already a vague inclination that maybe it would be a novel on climate change and/or the

subaltern. I was beginning from a place of uncertainty or uncertainty about what role place will take on in the story—and certainly, about whether I can still write a third novel, especially when I could not even make up my mind beyond it being “half human-half ocean.” But in my mind somehow, *State of Happiness*’ motivations, its plot, its focus on political issues closely hewed towards the postcolonial novel. My vagueness about it, indeed, can be masked as broadness.

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) posited that postcolonial literatures did not only have a singular trajectory, having developed through several stages. True, these literatures began as they corresponded to the emergence of national and/or regional consciousness in these former colonized societies. They were seen as necessary stage to assert these newly independent societies not only against but also as different, unique even, from the imperial center. The focus hence is on the continuing influence and lingering impact of the colonial experience on the history and especially the culture of the previously colonized in the form of “cultural denigration.” But even as these societies have long attained independence and autonomy, the nationalist projects have continued in literature, centering on the “relationship between literature and place, between literature and nationality, and particularly about the suitability of inherited literary forms.”¹³ These national literatures, argued Ashcroft, et al, are at the core of both postcolonial literary texts as well as postcolonial studies. However, this body of literatures has also produced other models such as black, hybrid, and syncretic writings.¹⁴

Robert Young, however, expanded the definition of postcolonial literature by focusing on what the literary text wanted to do. That postcolonial literatures set out themselves as statements about social themes, political issues, current events with the end goal of challenging assumptions and subverting dominant perspectives, mostly borne out of the influence and impositions of colonial history. In terms of form, Young also argued that postcolonial literatures are not necessarily realist, but that postcolonial fiction is “social science fiction,” so that in this fictional narrative, “writers present an account of the world which presents to you an analysis of its social form and of its culture, which is pretty close in some degree if not to social science then to anthropology.”¹⁵

Neferti Tadiar’s *Things Fall Away Philippine Historical Experience and the Making of Globalization*

(2009) offered a context to veer away from the traditional historical and “nationalist” novel. She identified globalization as a new defining moment for contemporary Philippines, a historical moment that further marginalizes certain groups of people and if we do not pay critical attention, these people, their lives, their experiences will be ignored and even erased. Globalization is now seen as both a continuing legacy of colonial times, i.e. the global political-economic order it instituted, as well as the result of further development in the capitalist system, one that has been described as its crises-ridden stage. In Marxist perspective, capitalism continually evolves and re-invents itself as history progresses but as it does, it creates and intensifies its own contradictions, with neo-liberalism and more recently economic globalization as its contemporary phases.

Tadiar differentiated colonial times from this unique historical moment known as globalization even as she also considered crucial what had happened to liberation movements and nationalist struggles, particularly how they created new hegemonies and correspondingly new forms of subalternity. Because of these new hegemonies and subalternities, literature has to capture these new social-historical experiences. Tadiar pointed to a specific kind of literature for fulfilling this role. She wrote, “Works of postcolonial literature are rather to be viewed as experiments in broader social projects, indeed, in the very imagining of modern political communities, most evidently of the nation but not exclusively so.”¹⁶

I thought that this could be a good point of departure as I dove into my third novel, envisioning it as an “experiment in broader social project” which would seek to re-imagine and make sense of contemporary Philippine social-political realities and social groups or movements. The new novel would be oriented towards social-political themes or issues, speak to and challenge power, but that it is also postcolonial in the sense that Young described it. There is an ethical dimension as it explores what in our current social-political and economic order makes us cruel, uncaring, or worse inhuman. The novel could be political and ethical in the broadest sense of the concepts. I could envision *State of Happiness* to be political not only through the issues or themes that would be part of the plot, but also through the stories of its individual characters and their world: of how they would challenge, condone, or surrender to their world order; of the dialectics between

their private lives—their morals, ethics, beliefs as well as economic interests—and the public; of the tension between being inclusive and exclusive; of resisting or conspiring with the belief systems that enable the powerful to continually marginalize and oppress. What if love, the most essential attribute of being human, is subjected to the vagaries of the system, of globalization, of climate change?

So I was back again to what it would be about.

I decided that the right direction was to frame my creative work in the postcolonial theory; with that serving the purpose of my dissertation, the best thing to do was to get right back into writing the novel.

“Place” as Archipelago

I remember having read Raymundo Punongbayan’s “The Genesis of an Archipelago”¹⁷ years before I made my first foray into novel writing through *We Who Cannot Be Daughters*. The archipelago has its own story, I thought fascinated. And Punongbayan, a geologist and former chief of the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHIVOLCS) before he tragically perished in a plane crash in 2005, was a very good storyteller. He wrote with the perspective of a scientist who also understood and appreciated Filipino culture, myths in particular, expressing his fascination with our ancestors being scientists in their own way—of how stories about our islands and its people were created and told, transforming geologic time into mythical time. He told the story of Palawan Island, the biggest province of the Philippines having a coastline of 1,959 kilometers and itself being a group of 1,769 islands and islets, and how it mirrored the shape of the Philippine archipelago. In a recent referendum it was proposed that Palawan be subdivided into three districts, thanks to the political and economic interests of certain people in power. (Fortunately for Palawan and the Palawēños, the no-votes won) International scientists had been so enamored by the flora and fauna endemic to this island. I have to admit I had never appreciated the Philippines as an archipelago the way Punongbayan conceived of and wrote about it. I had never travelled around knowing how the islands could have their own story, like Mindanao and Luzon being born before the Visayas islands so that these two large island groups had the same land formations, and where in Luzon the first to be born was the Bicol region, the oldest land formation in the Philippines. Previously, I

only saw the people and their issues, the Philippines as “nation” and all the attendant social-political issues/challenges. This got me thinking about having a new way of looking at the different communities, the people and their environment that I would have the opportunity to encounter in my future trips. Post-writing of the first two novels, I had felt disappointed with myself when this heightened sense of the archipelago or archipelagic did not seem to be echoed in these works. Perhaps this “fresh” or novel appreciation of the islands would not just come to me in one go; this notion of the Philippines beyond “nation” would have to deepen through the years of writing and travelling. Yet now when I look back to the two novels too, the archipelago has always been the imagined/re-imagined space in my works.

It was in 2017 when I resumed the writing of this third novel. It was during my trip to Japan with girlfriends in April of 2016 when I would make the personal commitment to write it. The open spaces and sacred places we visited in Japan affected me deeply. These places were spaces for solitude, silence, reflection, distancing, but strangely I felt at “home” in this foreign land. It was an unsettling feeling in the beginning; it was some kind of a betrayal to attach the concept of home to the places we visited. But that trip ushered me into my process. I felt more at home in my writing upon returning to the Philippines.

With the previous two novels, I had only needed “time” away from a regular job. I was able to write in the quiet of the bedroom when the kids were still in school. When I would get tired and the creative juices seemed to be “drying up,” going to coffee shops was what constituted my “writing trips.” *Different Countries* was written in a specific location in our old house in Pandacan, also an old district in Manila established during the Spanish period. I wrote mostly on the counter-top of what I had called my own version of the *banggera*. We enclosed and converted into a dirty kitchen this narrow balcony of our apartment on the third floor, a feature of the houses in these rows of apartment-buildings. It had the same wide, open windows of the *banggera* of the traditional Philippine nipa houses. My view would be the *kaimito* tree at the back of the building next to ours, which also reminded me of my favorite fruit when I had been pregnant with my first son. In that corner of our house was a “place” that somehow connected me to childhood stories that resided in the countryside—the summer vacations in Atimonan and Gumaca, Quezon province, when

I was in grade school. It was also from this province where my paternal ancestors hailed. My archipelago in *Different Countries* was re-constructed from ‘childhood memories,’ though largely inspired and influenced too by my travels in different provinces as part of my extension work in the non-government organizations I used to work with, thus the attending social-economic and political issues in the plot of *Different Countries*.

To an extent, it was still childhood memory that fed my imagination of the archipelago in *We Who Cannot Be Daughters*. Although there was the imagined San Vicente, located in the southern area of Luzon (most likely I had been thinking of Quezon province again), the archipelago was mostly the city—my Manila during my growing up years. There were Bindondo, Divisoria, Sta. Cruz (Avenida), Galangin (Tondo). I have always been a city girl—a *taal* Manileña and self-conscious about being one. (In school, when we were often asked “*saan ang probinsiya ninyo*,” I had felt alienated having no ready answer to offer)

When I was already writing *State of Happiness*, I needed out-of-town and out-of-country travels to be able to write. (I can say that this is so far my most “expensive” novel) Between the Japan trip in 2016, Bali in 2018, Chiangmai in 2019, the local travels to Tagaytay, Banaue, Baguio served the purpose. These trips, planned and designed for my writing, did not always produce the pages I wanted, but they always helped me focus and put me in the writing mode. By the time I started writing after the Japan trip, part of me was still insistent about certain issues or themes. I was into the environment, climate change, natural disasters and their impact on people, communities, and on personal relationships. These were the “issues-of-the-times” apparent to me as a writer.

After a couple of trips that followed Japan, I would realize though that distance—and to an extent unfamiliarity—had become a key idea in the plot of the novel. From my travels, the world being created/re-created in the novel would become an amalgamation of the characteristics of the places I had been to. This time I was re-imagining the archipelago as something beyond the Philippines, probably an influence as well of the exposures I have had, mainly associated with work with a Bangkok-based non-government organization. Or so I thought.

The temple and the burial grounds in Ubud’s Valley of the King sort of inspired the details of underworld,

the undiscovered volcano, in the imagined island of Hain. On the surface, the Balinese “village” had appeared to me like a re-creation of the past for the enjoyment of the sightseers. But there was a sense too of something not seen, of something “underneath” that evoked awe when I just stood there staring at those carved-up tombs on the mountain, undisturbed by the hustle and bustle of tourism.

The experiences in Chiangmai on the other hand created this paradox—I was able to contemplate even from those punishing physical activities of riding the train and going up to a temple the significance of the disembodied voices from the present and the past that constituted some chapters punctuating the embodied or “real” story in the novel. Climbing up and down 400 steps and sitting in the train for 16 hours going to Chiangmai and another 16 going back to Bangkok had been both physical and meditative acts. The embodied and disembodied parts are all integral to the story—a character from the future and one from the past who would not seem to be connected to the other characters; their chapters would not seem to fit with the rest, but they would.

I cannot think of any other inspiration for the sun-saluters in the imagined island of Hain than what I saw during the 2018 trip in Bali, though obviously I did not see any such people in the beaches at Denpasar. I was just there every afternoon for four to five days staring at the vast beach and the intimidating waves where the mass of people (it was crowded during that trip because August was supposed to be peak season) would become relegated to the background. During sunset, the mostly-tourist crowd would stop in awe of the blinding, commanding presence of the sun just before it slid down the horizon. At the onset of sunset, people would have their arms raised holding smartphones and cameras, but as if entranced by the sun’s power, one by one the arms would be lowered and everybody would just be watching that ball of fire as it slowly disappeared. I guess they became my sun-saluters in the pages of the novel. But beyond this, I would later realize during the trip to Samar and Tacloban that the Bali trip created a counterpoint for seeing island life—its distance from the island life in the Philippines would foreshadow the latter trip.

How I began (or so I thought that this would stay as the novel’s beginning sentence) at that time with the phrase “Half-human, half-ocean” was also a kind of foreshadowing in my own writing process. I would not

know it then, but that beginning would trigger my later reflections on archipelagic space, on life in this space, on the social-economic and political issues ascribed to or even imposed on these spaces. The incompleteness or half-ness idea would also affect the novel’s structure. In my past two novels, I tended to describe this as fragmentation, but in *State of Happiness* this does not seem apt. Incomplete, half, never closing, just looping, separated-by-water-but-connected-underneath were the concepts/words that initially came to mind when I visualized the novel’s narrative form.

My most recent trips a little over a month before I finished writing the first completed draft in February 2020 were in Tacloban and Samar, eastern Visayas (specifically in Basey, Marabut, and Balangiga). These were the places previously devastated by the super typhoon Yolanda in 2014 and I chose these places for the trip supported by a grant from the University Research Coordination Office (URCO) of De La Salle University precisely because of this reason. The story of devastation and tragedy though have foregrounded the novel’s story even before the November 2019 sojourn in these places. The parts about the reconstruction of Hain and when the island once again vanished because of a second disaster were written in the past three years before this trip and yet going there helped me find some of my endings for the two parts of the manuscript.

In *Different Countries*, there were Gumaca and Atimonan in Quezon province and Marinduque and Polilio island, off mainland Quezon and facing the Pacific Ocean, as well as Culion island of the Palawan island-group. In *We Who Cannot be Daughters*, there was the birthing of a city—a fictional Manila partly inspired by Nick Joaquin’s *Manila, My Manila*. Before the novel’s protagonists traveled to the emerging city under the American occupation, they came from San Vicente, which was a made-up place, but also inspired by Quezon province in southern Luzon. Again, in *We Who Cannot be Daughters*, shores and mountains are a constant in the setting. But in these two novels, it is predominantly the archipelago/archipelagic as social theme. In *Different Countries*, the villagers living at the foot of the mountain in Gumaca—the mountain of my childhood where my grandfather lived after retiring and from whom I would first hear about the New People’s Army—suffered because of the logging business. There is also military presence in this village, bound by sea on one side and the mountain on the other;

in the eyes of the two young protagonists the soldiers were a nuisance to their play. But when I saw the strange and unique seashores and limestone formations of Marabut as well as the lingering effect of Yolanda in Tacloban, “half-human, half-ocean” came back to me and made sense. Yes, the archipelagic space is so much about environmental problems or issues; but it is not merely social or political. When I was already re-reading the manuscript just before arriving at the endings of the different parts, I was already seeing Hain in a different way and relatedly how I should tell its story. This reflection is not meant to diminish, much less to neglect or deny, the social-political and economic dimensions of the archipelagic spaces. But there is the archipelago’s geologic and mythical history, the community, the beauty, and strangeness of it all that resist to be just an “issue,” even natural phenomena like super typhoons caused by human-induced climate change. Samar’s land and seascapes reminded me of the strangeness and unfamiliarity that Japan and mostly-Southeast Asian places that I had visited evoked in me. I realized after all that these are not the places that I have recreated in *State of Happiness*. It was how I felt during and after those travels that I brought into my writing. In and through the novel, I am just seeing the archipelago in a different way—or come to think of it, not really in a different way. It was still the wonder I had felt when I first encountered Punongbayan’s “Genesis of the Archipelago” merely coming back to me.

Reflections on the Title

One of my students once told me that the meaning of the title *We Who Cannot be Daughters* befuddled her, especially when she was already near the end of the book and still trying to understand what the title signified. It was a great relief that she found in the second to the last page what would complete the title. “You meant that those who cannot be daughters cannot be mothers,” she said. It was my turn to be confused when she told me that, as I tried to remember what I put there in the last pages that a reader would claim as completing the title. After the class, I hurried to get a copy of the book and turned to the last two pages and there it was: “I’ve never been a daughter, but I can be a mother, can’t I? Can a daughter who wasn’t mothered know how to be a mother? (178)”

About *Different Countries*, Dr. Rosario Lucero, one of my readers, once asked me “why different countries,

aren’t we one nation?” I honestly do not remember my response or if in fact I explained the title at all. I also have a dim recollection now of my reason for sticking with that title when I was writing the novel, except that there was this intention to interrogate the idea of one Filipino nation through it. But I was still more fond of the children characters who were outsiders; they who wanted to take a boat to that far-off island to build their own country of outcast children.

As for *State of Happiness*, in its inception I was kind of vaguely thinking about how Filipinos when asked about our unique trait would always answer we are a happy people, always smiling, always resilient. That it was ironical to be such considering what was happening in our country. But as the story moved further along, I lost the connection to this initial context of the title, and with more new characters—and story threads—emerging and occupying more central roles, this state of happiness may even be more philosophical, or personal to me and would be, too, for each future reader of the novel.

Notes

¹ Eco, Umberto (William Weaver, translated by) *The Name of the Rose*, p.546

² Le, Guin, Ursula K. *Words Are My Matter Writings About Life and Books 2000–2016*, p. i-ii

³ Bakhtin, Mikhail (Holquist, Michael ed.) *The Dialogic Imagination Four Essays*, p.39

⁴ Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*, p.544

⁵ Said, Edward. *Beginning, Intention and Method*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.7

⁷ Mojares, Resil. *Origins and Rise of the Filipino Novel*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.356

⁹ Hau, Caroline, *Necessary Fictions Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1964-1980*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Said, Edward. *Beginnings Intention and Method*

¹² Le, Guin, Ursula K. *Words Are My Matter Writings About Life and Books 2000 -2016*, p.22

¹³ Ashcroft, Bill; Griffiths, Gareth; Tiffin, Helen. *The Empire Writes Back Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures 2nd edition*, p.15

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Noske, Catherine “A postcolonial aesthetic? An Interview with Robert Young,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing Vlumne 50 Issue 5*, 2014

¹⁶ Tadiar, Neferti X. *Things Fall Away Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization*, p.6

¹⁷ Punongbayan, Raymundo S., Zamora Prescillano M., Ong Perry S. *Kasaysayan: The Story of the Filipino People, Volume One*; 1998

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EXCERPTS FROM PART I *Love in the Island—An Interlude of the novel State of Happiness*

A Love Story Anchors on the Island

Levi is beginning to worry about Cecilia's tardiness. He is not impatient about waiting, especially for her. It is part of his job to wait for passengers, more so if he has been hired to do special trips. But it is going to be 10 a.m. soon and the sun won't be as forgiving in mid-day as he is in that journey to the cliff. It will take less than half hour to get to the foot of the mountain and another half hour, maybe more, for the ride up. Sometimes Levi's motorcycle seems to have its own mind—acts up when it wants to, delaying the trip and annoying Levi's passengers. In the past days that Levi has been taking Cecilia around the island, it has avoided giving Levi engine trouble. In Levi's estimation now, he and Cecilia will be at their destination by noontime sans vehicle problem. *The heat is going to punish this girl*. That he thinks of Cecilia as a girl amuses Levi. Such a scumbag he is, he chides himself. *Really, a girl?* That's not the way he has looked at her and imagined her when she's not around—or even when she is. *You like her. A lot*. Maybe even more than that, if the feeling might be mutual.

Cecilia Mayon, 24 years old, is just two years Levi Cruz's junior. In the very short time he has known

her, she has impressed him as a smart person, smarter than him—school-smart, he qualifies—but at times she seems so clueless about the world. This kind of intelligence will not protect her from the harsh realities of life, Levi believes. Maybe he is just underestimating her. Or he wants to find reason to be protective of her. He has to admit that he instantly felt the attraction when he saw her at the port last week approaching his motorcycle. She looked pained, probably from the tiring trip. Or because of things related to the family that had brought her back to the country—that much about her father lying comatose in a hospital in Manila, Levi knows.

He and Cecilia also first met at the small harbor of the island on Thursday more than a week ago. It is here where Levi regularly stations his vehicle-for-hire to wait for the arrival of the morning ferry that transports the few people given travel pass from the mainland province to Hain, and back. There is a small airport in the island, but it is for government-chartered and private helicopters of companies. Geologists have advised against constructing a big, commercial airport. Good for the island, is how Levi looks at this situation. Tourists would have to think twice about coming here and destroying the environment. But on this last thought Levi still tends to be ambivalent. There seems to be no natural environment to destroy. There's nothing much to see, except out of curiosity to check how the communities and zones in the island have been organized in such orderly manner.

Levi's knowledge of goings-on in the island is limited to the orientation seminar he attended before living here. He is happy in Hain and finds no reason to be bothered by government policies—that the government believes Hain to be some sort of a prototype of future archipelagic cities and they are proud of what have been accomplished here. The island is not being actively promoted as tourist destination, though almost a quarter of it has remained part of the beach. There is a quota for the number of foreign and local tourists allowed every day, especially in summertime, and one has to get an approval from an office in the national capital. The mountain, an unusual expansive rock formation, which could be considered the biggest wonder in the island, is off-limits even to Hain's residents. Not that the people needed to be policed. The story surrounding the mountain has made it less attractive to the island's settlers—that the volcano is located underneath this rock formation.

It is not difficult to convince the people to be wary of the mountain. Even with advance equipment, the scientists have yet to find the volcano's mouth or the path to the volcano, two years after the island-city has been built. Every day seismic movements underneath it are detected and recorded but the exact location of the crater remains elusive. The most skilled divers of the country's navy have scoured the deep for what is expected to be a most historic discovery, not only once but through several expeditions, yet have failed. CordTech Industries, the top in its field in the country and Asia, have developed trailblazing underwater robotic creatures. They have released similar miniature trackers that blended with the flora and fauna in the mountain. These have produced valuable information on water and land resources, the reason why the company keeps on investing in government endeavors, yet nothing on the volcano except that its rumbling and episodic seizures.

Cecilia arrived alone last week, carrying a backpack and another travelling bag slung on her right shoulder. She looked confused as she found her way out of the embarkation platform to the shed where mostly the motorcycles were parked. Levi already noticed Cecilia while she queued for her turn to climb the stairs to the wharf. She was fair-skinned and had a clear face. She appeared harassed, yet her mien exuded freshness. It was as if she had just washed it as one did upon waking up in the morning. Her hair was pulled back and held by a short ponytail but in a messy way, as strands covered her cheeks. Levi tried working his mind power on Cecilia, was how he called it, by staring at her to get her attention. The mind power did succeed because Cecilia went straight to his spot and inquired about the fare. Or it was not farfetched to assume it was because of his looks—he was the youngest and most good-looking of the bunch that waited for passengers.

“Hi, this is a public transport, right?”

“Yes, it is! The best you can get in the island.”

Cecilia seemed to smile but the corners of her mouth only moved up very slightly that Levi couldn't be sure. Her voice though sounded lively when she spoke again.

“Okay then, so how much going to the town center?”

“Where to? This is not a big island, but it is still difficult to find the location we are looking for without any address. I don't even know where the middle of the island is if you ask me.” Levi felt encouraged by what he considered flirtation with Cecilia. But he couldn't

guess whether she was being responsive or not. She maintained a bright expression that told Levi nothing.

“The truth is I don’t know either where I am exactly going. The website of the government didn’t tell much and there were no other private sites or blogs about Hain. You look friendly and helpful though. Would you know of any place that rents a room where I can stay?”

Levi had this sensation of being tickled in the stomach when Cecilia complimented her.

“If you trust me, I can offer to take you to my *Tiya* Anita’s place. It’s only a two story-house, but with four rooms upstairs, a small living room, and a *balconaha* where you can get a glimpse of the beach. The dining room for visitors is on the first floor and there is a mini-grocery too in front. It’s her version of an all-around, multi-purpose bed and breakfast.”

“So how much?”

“For taking you there, free, because I will receive commission from *Tiya* for bringing her a guest. But for the lodging and breakfast, it’s P1,500 for one night and one day. You can request for other meals but there is extra payment. I can even give up my commission, so you can get a discount on your first night there.”

Cecilia did not even look impressed with Levi’s generous offers, but just as she was hopping on the motorcycle, she smiled. Levi had goose bumps on his arms while taking from the young woman the other travelling bag, which he slung on his left shoulder across his chest. He carried it this way while driving during the whole trip.

On the way to the bed and breakfast Levi started dropping bits of information about his relation to Anita. That she was a first cousin of his father. That his aunt was a former university professor who quit early to put up her own coffee and book shop in Manila. But her passport to being chosen as one of the island’s residents was Levi’s uncle who’s an engineer of CordTech. Being a successful businesswoman herself, with good background, meaning no other affiliations but to her family and business, was just an added advantage. Since his aunt and uncle do not have children of their own, Levi was given probationary permission to be included in the family. Levi’s aunt is to be responsible for him.

Before Levi left his aunt’s bed and breakfast, he offered to take Cecilia around the island the next days as long as “you want to.” She found nothing wrong with the offer and agreed. In the next two days, they would scour the different zones of the island. While

on the road, Levi would lecture Cecilia on the history of the island, surprised that Cecilia seemed to know so little about the place. But Levi would accept her being a *balikbayan* as an excuse for her ignorance. She had vaguely read about the disaster and the volcano island, and she had just come back a couple of weeks earlier to be with his father.

Hain

The website that Cecilia had read talked briefly about the history of the island. She did not really plan to have a side trip while in the country; she was coming back, after all, due to a serious business—to see his father. After the unpleasant encounters with his father’s wife, that’s when she decided to leave and give up for the moment on the purpose of her homecoming. She searched for what new place she can visit and the word ‘new’ led her to “new island” *Hain*. While reading the information in the website, there was nothing spectacular about the island as a tourist destination, but there was something uncanny about its history that appealed to Cecilia. She decided it was the place to be while taking a break from his father’s wife. There was nothing she could do at the moment about her father, but she was not going to leave his side for pleasure either. As an American citizen with Filipino ancestry, young and a dependable job and income to declare, the approval for her visit to the island came just a few days after she had submitted her form. The price for the permit was steep though and that’s where her good income was supposed to play a part.

According to the government website, in the year of Hain’s discovery two years ago, the underwater volcano-island in the Pacific Ocean off the west coast of the archipelago’s central group of islands, the Visayas, was kept a secret. But the rumors about an exploration ever since have persisted; the government just preferred not to make a public comment until it can be certain of success. The announcement was eventually made a year after the discovery and this date was now to become a national holiday for commemorating the country’s expansion from hereon. In the aftermath of the executive order signed on that day, there was more confusion about where and how the country’s flag could be hoisted on the submerged territory. Without such literal and symbolic act, the international community could question the claim. But it was given a name, as first critical step for recognition. It was christened *Hain*

or to be served or offered in Tagalog—which could mean it was nature’s gift to the country. It could also mean that the island was being offered as some kind of appeasement on behalf of the troubled nation. A picture of Hain was finally posted on social media and went viral. Everyone seemed to feel assured that Hain was real. For people in the Visayas islands, Hain was taken in its own local significance—the word meant *where or wherever, whoever*. The provincial government of the nearest province wanted jurisdiction over the still-submerged territory. But the government in the capital wouldn’t hear of all this nonsense. Whether the small territory was found off the coast of whatever part of the archipelago, it was still part of the national territory. The national government was to have the legitimate authority to do whatever it wanted in this island; the folks from the capital were also not about to give in to the request that the name be localized.

“We are one, undivided nation...in language and identity” the preamble of the presidential order said.

The tragedy that followed the celebratory proclamation was not detailed in the official website, but Cecilia’s search yielded a lot of articles written about the island’s story beyond its birth history. The undersea volcano erupted causing a tsunami that engulfed coastal villages in the mainland province of western Visayas. Not fewer than 3,000 people perished and there was much devastation. The executive order signifying a celebratory mood was then replaced with another to mark what was to be known as the first great disaster. The year of discovery was forgotten and immediately replaced in the memory of the nation. This year, 2016, shall now be known as year of tragedy—or more correctly, tragedies, for there was more to come. It was as if nature were playing tricks on the archipelago and its people, so that a few days after the disaster, an island emerged on that same spot where the volcano had been located. It wasn’t trickery after all because in fact nature was giving a peace offering in the form of a new land. The dilemma of where to install the flag was solved. Everyone forgot about the devastation that the tsunami had wrought and became hopeful again. So many tragedies in the past had done the same thing—they became the poster for hopefulness. What has remained baffling though was the disappearance of the volcano’s crater.

The government, supported by Congress, did not waste time planning and legislating the development of the island, setting aside the rehabilitation plan

for the old, devastated provinces. Top businessmen had been let in on the secret. The people running the country deeply believed in the symbolism of hope; of something new that can be started in the island. They would not allow any social group, any sector of the population, any other political party to taint Hain Island, much less leave nature to its own whims and caprices. The executive and legislative branches in the capital decreed that migration to the island would be managed. It would be a result of a strict screening drawn up in the new law’s implementing rules and regulations. The people who would be allowed to populate the new island should undergo stringent screening. At the end of the process, the main requirement was for each person to renounce religious beliefs and associations, cultural traditions and affiliations, all kinds of yearning for any connection to the past. Their loyalties have to be to the prosperity of the island; to its defense against anything or anybody that can cause conflict—including nature itself. Geologists, climatologists, biologists, and other scientists with knowledge of the archipelagic flora and fauna, mostly employed by the corporations allowed to establish offices and laboratories in the exclusive science and development zone became the first residents of Hain, and then their families were allowed after houses had been built. The government was in a hurry to make its final mark as national elections for a new administration approached. The candidate from the incumbent president’s party would have to win to continue the legacy of what has been started in Hain. Nature and politics should be allies. But nature would beg to disagree.

