

The City in Philippine Gay Literature¹

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Abstract

In this paper the author argues that the city as the privileged situs of neo/colonial knowledge production is where the “perverse implantations” of global genders and sexualities take root and fructify. In the case of the Philippines, urban-based LGBT politics and identities may be said to univocally testify to this fact. While it will be easy to fall into the habit of reading these as forms of open or “globalized” consciousness, the author’s position is nonetheless to insist on interpreting these supposedly simple and “self-evident” formations as complex postcolonial narratives—which is to say, as instances of (in Edward Said’s words) secondary anticolonial resistance. Obviously, this view is diametrically opposed to what the newfangled and apolitical forms of cosmopolitanist theorizing typically argue and espouse.

One of American neo/colonialism’s most invidious and enduring effects is the socialization of Filipinos into Western modes of gender and sexual identity formation. This process has been instituted and “naturalized” through a variety of biomedical discourses (public hygiene, guidance and counseling, psychology, psychiatry, feminism, AIDS, among many others), and it has resulted in the entrenchment of the “homo/hetero” dichotomy as the key organizing principle in the now-heavily-freighted sexual lives of educated Filipinos, many of whom reside and work in the Philippines’ expanding urban centers, where Westernized knowledges are increasingly the norm.²

The neocolonial city, being the center of knowledge dissemination, is therefore the location of “perverse implantations” of global genders and sexualities, and indeed, it is to these selfsame processes that the Philippines owes the reality of local gay and lesbian culture as well as, in more recent

times, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender politics and identities. Even as the metropolis in many other places around world has functioned in more less the same way, there are many encouraging narratives that the mostly urban-based sexualization of Filipinos has engendered, and these are the narratives of cultural hybridity and appropriation, which may also be read—using a different kind of analytic optic—as narratives of postcolonial resistance. The perspective that inquires into the issue of resistance is different from and possibly runs counter to that being offered by cosmopolitanist theorizings, which tend to elide the agonistic questions of neocolonial power, by and large.

More specifically, we can say that these narratives include LGBT activism itself, which—as Filipinos espouse and practice it—is certainly not reducible to the same political “thing” that it arguably is, elsewhere in the globalized world. While we must accept the fact that it was the American sexological regime that pathologized Filipino LGBTs in the first place, as the present-day example of increasingly politicized Filipino gays, lesbians, and transgenders illustrates, we must also recognize that it was precisely this very stigma that paradoxically enabled them as well, in all sorts of interesting and unpredictable—and, possibly, even ironically “anticolonial”—ways.

In this paper I shall perform a broadly postcolonial reading of a selection of stories and poems written by Filipino gay writers, that have appeared in print in the last three decades. In my reading I shall be paying close attention to the ways the various spaces of the neocolonial city are depicted not only as privileged locations for sexual self-realization, affording the sexual “exile” structures for community-formation and support outside the traditional family, but also as ambivalent habitational tropes (for both global and national gay “belongingness”) that are at once welcoming and alienating—at once enabling and subjugating—precisely because of the city’s own inescapable contradictions, as the site of neocolonial knowledge-dissemination and subject-formation. Of course, more crucially, the city can do all this because it in fact provides the literal and conceptual space within which the homo/sexualization of the local effeminate identity of the *bakla* takes place—most efficaciously—in the Philippines. Needless to say, in the Philippines as in other neocolonized countries, the city is where traditional understandings of gender have come to confront, dialogue with, and syncretize the homo/hetero distinction that Americanization continues to bequeath.

The “postcolonial” signifier remains an entirely useful rubric within which to understand the textual productions of Filipinos, especially where they are in English, a language that continues to occupy an ironic place in the lives of many in this corner of the Global South. This seems a necessary qualification, despite or precisely because of the emergence and increasing “popularity” of cosmopolitanism, a theory sourced from social anthropology that has come to subsume the more “culturalist” aspects of globalization, of which it is generally uncritical. Cosmopolitanism pertains to the interdisciplinary academic “movement” currently gaining currency in increasingly cosmopolitan locations around the world, and at its heart is a social theory that attempts to address the question of modernity. The genealogy of this theory is undeniably western—drawing, for its key concepts, from ancient Greek and Kantian discourses. This genealogy itself problematizes its “universalistic” claims, and its most important idea—of a supposedly universal attitude, a “competence,” of cultural openness to be observed in all cultures—not the least because this genealogy in many parts of the world has actually coincided with the history of imperialism.³

In other words, the various cases of attitudinal or even affectional investments into acts of cross-cultural *détente* and/or “translation” by various peoples around the world may need to be distinguished from the cosmopolitanist imagination (as such), and flagged accordingly, especially when such investments have been and are being made by colonized peoples. Openness itself as an ideal cannot be made innocently normative across all cultural locations where it apparently manifests itself, for as we all too painfully know, the fact of imperialist subjugation has actually forced the colonized to translate themselves—their own lives, their own identities—into the cosmopolitan languages of their colonizers. While it’s true that cosmopolitanist theorizing arguably addresses questions of global seriousness and import, as well as occasions national “self-problematizing” in view of increasing global pressures to connect and dialogue across cultural borders, the “politics” that this kind of sociology betokens must remain suspect, precisely to the degree that it seems to assume that the playing field between Self and Other is now all of a sudden amicable and “equal.” Despite its translatedness, insisting on the resistant and postcolonial—as opposed to cosmopolitanist—character of contemporary Philippine literature is not only more historically precise; it is also more politically and ethically “responsible.”

Unpacking the history of this transcultural “encounter” begins with dismantling the “commonsensical” connection between the gender-transitive behaviors and identities of the bakla, *bayot*, *agi*, *bantut*, etc., and the discourse (and reality) of homosexuality as a question of same-sexual orientation and/or identity. To put it simply: while homosexuality is obviously a recent development, an “implantation” of the American-sponsored biomedicalization of local cultures in the Philippines, the phenomenon of “gender transitivity” permeates the oral past not only of the Philippines but also the whole of Southeast Asia.

Gender-crossing was very much an archipelagic phenomenon in early colonial Philippines. The “gender-crossers” impressed the Spanish chroniclers both because of their gender transitivity and their esteemed status as *babaylan*—religious functionaries or spiritual mediums who were considered supernal figures of authority in their respective communities. We must not forget, however, the following fact: the *babaylan*’s assumption of the dress and demeanor (and work) of women was simply the consequence of their cross-gender transformation—in other words, their having successfully transitioned from male to female.

Thus, these female-identified genital males were not transvestites but gender-crossers, for not only did they take on the look and behavior of women; their society actually granted them the social status of being “womanlike.” Men were husbands (or *marido*) to these gender-crossers, with whom they indulged in regular sexual intercourse.

Of course, it’s clear that the primary reason for the gender-crosser’s “prestigious” status in pre- and early colonial Philippines was that women enjoyed a similar—or an even higher—status, as well. Native women or *mujeres indigenas* were—as the Spanish accounts put it—these respective societies’ priestesses and matriarchs. As such they could divorce their husbands, name their children, and acquire and expropriate wealth, all on their own.

Because of the gender norms of Hispanization, traditional gender-crossing, throughout the centuries, naturally became more and more difficult to successfully enact. As the status of native women progressively diminished, likewise the gender-crosser herself became increasingly ridiculed, courtesy of the Spanish brand of European machismo. From being *bayoguin* (the Tagalog term for a feminine male, derived from a particular species of bamboo), the gender-crosser slowly but surely transmogrified into bakla, a word which had originally meant “confused” and/or “cowardly.” The conceptual movement

is clear: *kabaklaan* isn't a natural (or predestined) state any more, but is rather merely a temporary condition from which the bakla himself might conceivably be ejected—using whatever persuasive, brutally loving means.

During the Spanish period, cross-dressing, effeminacy, and gender-transitive behavior in general persisted in the Philippines. They persisted not as themselves, however, since they were syncretized and transformed across the Hispanized centuries, morphing into a variety distinct colonial practices. The American period, on the other hand, saw the promulgation of modern notions of gender and sexuality by means of the public educational system (and the instruction in English that it deployed), and the Americanization of all aspects of government and the mass media. This discursive regulation in and through the imposition of American culture inaugurated a specific sexological consciousness in the Philippines—one that was premised upon a psychological style of reasoning that was hitherto unknown. Suffice it to say that this “sexologizing” has mostly been urban in its orientation, if only because it has mostly been urban in its sitedness: in the Philippines, the institutions of mass media, education, and governance, which all assume (and promote) the homo/hetero distinction, are centralized in the large metropolitan centers.

What facilitated the colonial sexualization of the bakla was the presence, in the native culture, of a discourse of valorized interiority or “transcendent depth,” to which the colonial notion of gendered psychosexuality came to readily append itself. Among the Tagalog, this is the discourse of *kalooban*. This conceptual process entails the discursive movement from the genitally sexed “external body” (*labas*) to the realm of the psyche and interior selfhood (*loob*), and what's important to remember is that it did not completely negate or eliminate the importance of the former, but merely cast both in a reverse and mutually exclusive relationship. This binarism effectively absolutized their difference from one another, effectively recasting the bakla's identity into a perversion (which is to say, a “self-contradiction”).

Moreover, it's important to realize that this binarism was premised upon another binary—the dichotomizing of the gendered body into practically anatomically immutable and mutually exclusive male and female normative “types.” This dimorphism is arguably colonial, as well, inasmuch as there is archival evidence to suggest that a number of pre-Hispanic cultures in the Philippines recognized the existence of “mixed,” “liminal,” and/or “alternative” bodies. From all available accounts, it would appear that, even during early colonial times, the male/female dualism did not exhaust all the

possible somatizations of the gendered self that the various Philippine *indios* could assume.

The sexological discourse of homosexuality (as a psychosexual inversion) proved easy enough to “graft” on to kabaklaan because of the equivalency or “comparability” that exists between the Western concept of the gendered inner self, and the capaciously generative concept of loob. This “sexualization” of local modes of mentality, behavior, and personality, was the inevitable result of the implementation of an English-based education system, and presumably, the “psychosexual logic” it introduced has prospered and become more stubbornly entrenched since then. It’s quite likely, hence, that the consciousness of many young Filipinos today has been formed by levels—indeed, by intensities—of sexual self-awareness that were unheard of in the past.

And so, by virtue of the Philippines’ uneasy modernity, the effeminate bakla has become the “homosexual”: on one hand, a genitally male man whose identity is primarily defined as a function of his sexual desire for other men, and on the other, by virtue precisely of this “inverted” orientation, a (homosexual) man whose psychosexual identification tends toward the female. What we need to remember is that while his residual transgender characteristics (meaning, his effeminacy, “femininity,” and/or transvestism) locate him somewhere along the continuum of gender-variant performativities within the Philippines’ much-riven history, the bakla remains quite distinct by virtue of the following fact: he is burdened not only by his gender self-presentation, but also, and more tragically, by his “sexual orientation”—a biomedical ascription capable of defining who he is, as a matter of deep psychological being, as an innermost question of self.

As we know, the history of gender does not, however, necessarily coincide with the history of sexuality, and in attempting to trace the history of male homosexual activity in the Philippines, we will need to consider not just the gender-transitive but also the “masculine” side of the divide. Easily, we realize that we cannot be sure about the exact prevalence (and quality) of genitally male “same-sex” encounters in early colonial Philippines, going by the history of effeminacy alone. Genital males other than the gender-crossers were perfectly capable of engaging in sex with each other (which is to say, with other males), and this “capability” went largely unchecked in the Spanish accounts. Solely for this reason, we cannot equate the history of homosexuality with that of effeminacy or transgenderism at all, short of falling into historical error.

Of course, we also face the bitter realization that piecing together this more “comprehensive” kind of history (of sexual acts) will be next to impossible, inasmuch as the “regularness” of even just those males who had sex with the gender-crossers precisely spared them from the ignominious honor of being written about and described in the archives—what more the rest of the “unremarkable” male population. All that we can plausibly say, therefore, is that the absence of such accounts in the archives will always confound any confident claims regarding the incidence of homosexuality during colonial times. To limit its occurrence to the gender-crossers and/or even just their partners would be to deny the existence of those exclusively male bonds that were strikingly comparable to same-sexual intimacy itself (even in the strict sense of genital contact), and yet, precisely because they conveniently fell under the various structures of officially sanctioned male homosocial relationships—friendship, rivalry, initiation, solidarity, fraternity, etc.—this resemblance largely passed unnoticed then (and yes, it continues to pass unnoticed today).

The earliest examples of the gay theme in Philippine writing demonstrate the defining role the city—as the privileged site of modern subject-formation—has played in the history of Philippine sexual identities. Comparing, for example, “The Lion and Faun,” the unpublished novel of the nationally acclaimed dramatist Severino Montano, against *Hanggang Dito na Lamang at Maraming Salamat*, the celebrated one-act play of Orlando Nadres, both written sometime between the late 1960s to early ’70s, we readily see the difference that location makes, in the handling and depiction of the “homosexual” question.⁴

Montano’s text is a sprawling narrative about a gay, upwardly mobile, suavely urbane, globally traveled, and American-educated theater director who practices psychotherapy, and his tempestuous love affair with a much younger, less worldly, and behaviorally bisexual officer of the Philippine army. Written in English, the novel’s text problematizes the sexual definitions of its main characters, and uses the narrative pretext that the director, who is the narrator, is a psychoanalyst, in order to accomplish this otherwise dour and expository project. Needless to say, this fictive endeavor eventuates in the mooting of the local understandings of gender—namely, that the bakla is homosexual, while the “real man” or *tunay na lalake* he loves is not—and the novel ultimately adopts the Western perspective on the issue and basically declares them both as homosexuals.

On the other hand, in Nadres's Tagalog play, the protagonist, also an older man who is in love with a much younger man, while acceding to the point that the closeted bakla can sometimes look masculine (to his own internal turmoil), simply accepts the bakla/tunay na lalake dualism, and more or less endorses the idea that the bakla needs to reconcile himself to his ultimately sad fate, since the lalake he is attracted to (and slavishly fascinated with) will have to end up getting married to a real woman, and becoming a father, as these are what solidify the realness of his masculinity, in the first place. The locations of these fictional worlds—Washington DC, New York, and Manila, in Montano's novel; a small and unnamed town in the southern Tagalog province of Quezon, in Nadres's play—clearly spell a difference, as does the choice of language, in the treatment of the gay subject matter in these texts.

The expatriate nature of Montano's autobiographical novel—a kind of roman à clef, in a manner of speaking—and the fact that its main character, like Montano himself, resided, studied, and became sexually self-aware and empowered in the US, establish, rather visibly, the American connection in the Philippines' gay literary tradition. This is a connection that had been established earlier on, in fact, in what may be the “first” Filipino gay texts: four stories by the legendary and exilic poet, Jose Garcia Villa. These stories are called “autobiographical” by the American editor and literary power-broker, Edward O'Brien, who functioned as Villa's literary benefactor, in his preface to the collection, *Footnote to Youth*, in which they first saw print (published by Scribner, in Chicago, in 1933).⁵ In these stories, Villa narrates his consuming attraction to and love for two American boys, David and Jack, who were his schoolmates at university in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he first resided, after leaving the Philippines for good in the late 1920s.

Aside from detailing the racialized and unrequited nature of these attractions, these stories also propound a psychoanalytic understanding of homosexuality, as an orientation that supposedly derives from an unresolved Oedipal complex, which results in an “arrested psychosexual development.” This is something that is clearly suggested by Villa's own confessional passages concerning his tormented familial circumstances, characterized by an aversion toward his stern and unloving father, and a tender affection for his mother and aunts, who doted on him. In these stories, the city is evidently American modernity itself, with its future-looking secular knowledges, its comfortable anonymity, and yes, its irrevocable distance from the stifling judgment of the natal past, embodied most painfully by the image of the harshly intolerant patriarch, whom Villa left behind in the “backward” Philippines, but whose

ghostly presence haunts his early attempts at fiction, and certainly his poetry, as well.

In both Villa's and Montano's texts, the use of English arguably facilitated the broaching of the otherwise unseemly and unspeakable topic of homosexuality, although it's more likely that this language didn't so much render this topic simply sayable as made it experientially real, to begin with: colonial education was the vehicle upon which the homo/hetero distinction (and sexological thinking, in general) rode, and it was inexorably conducted in English—the medium through which Filipinos were sexualized and continue to be sexualized. It's only to be expected, therefore, that the earliest and more explicit literary representations of homosexuality in the Philippines were in its anglophone texts. This is simply of a piece with the fact that this literature is also where the first critical questionings of long-kept traditional values and depictions of perversions like pedophilia were made. For example, what immediately come to mind are texts from the 1950s: Bienvenido Santos's irreverent poem, "Race with Seagulls,"⁶ in which the speaker viciously excoriates his absent and deceitful father, and Estrella Alfon's famous story, about the magnificent profile the mother cuts when she fends her daughter against the assault of a sexual predator.⁷ On a related note, the Philippine literary tradition of homosexual representation would continue to evince this explicitly American connection in the autobiographical works of Filipino American queer writers like R. Zamora Linmark and Bino Realuyo, as well as in the depictions of the gay character in the fiction of women writers, like Jessica Hagedorn and Ninotchka Rosca.

On the other hand, the first locally published novel about homosexuality was arguably *Lumpen*, by Federico Licsi Espino Jr. It came out in a limited edition, printed by a small independent press in 1985. It's set entirely in pre-Martial Law Manila, and this novel tells the stories of a number of characters, mostly young male students belonging to the underprivileged class in the metropolis, all incidentally or intimately related to one other as classmates, siblings, contractual lovers, comrades-in-the-movement, benefactors, or fellow-hustlers.⁸ More specifically, many of its most compelling scenes take place in Quiapo and Sta. Cruz, old districts of the capital that serve as the center of commerce and academic learning—bustling with a density of restaurants, cinemas, department stores, banks, pawnshops, sundry business establishments, and a "university belt" of religious and secular schools—but also, at this time most especially, pretty much the center of the sex trade,

particularly along the longish stretch of Avenida, which the novel's narrator calls the "avenue of perversion." The year is 1971, months away from the declaration of Martial Law by the American-sponsored conjugal dictatorship. Almost daily now, the city is witness to increasingly angry student marches and demonstrations, all calling for genuine national liberation and the downfall of Marcos's lackey and American-backed, fascistic regime.

Espino's project in this text is not only to describe the gay sexual subculture that obtained in Manila during this significant moment in the nation's history, but also to draw from this reality an allegory for the situation of the country as a whole, particularly where the subject of perversion—which he understands to be synonymous with the "dissonance" between behavior and norm—is concerned. This text's most obvious perversions are, predictably enough, religious and cultural in character. While depicting the routinary paganization by Filipinos of the Western religion called Catholicism is not anything new in Filipino fiction, nevertheless *Lumpen* puts a new spin on this old insight by parodying and even hyperbolizing it (Christ, for example, is likened to a witch-doctor; the Eucharistic host is reduced to a bullet-deflecting talisman; and graffiti of the crucified Lord preside over the unspeakable goings-on inside a public male toilet). Moreover, another perversion that this text depicts is the "homosexual" contamination of "heterosexual" masculinity, or the inexorable irruption of what it calls the "third" gender into the "first." In the text, this perverse movement is embodied most forcefully by the racially mongrelized Segko (a callboy, and the novel's protagonist) who suffers nightly from the dream of losing his manhood, precisely because, according to the heterosexual norm that polices the local performance of masculinity, he has already effectively lost it when he fell in love with his client. By offering its own painstakingly dramatized point that Filipino men from the lower classes engage in homosexual sex for the ostensible purpose of getting extra cash, and that (elsewhere in the novella) the popular student movement that took to the streets of Manila to demand the end of the neocolonial regime of Marcos and his cronies was composed of males who had sex with one another or with middle-class bakla patrons on a regular basis, *Lumpen* draws our attention to the perversion that inheres both in the Filipino institution of masculinity, and in the institutionalized "notion" of the Filipino nation itself.

Perversion in this sense is made all the more potent because the very men who deviate from the masculine requirement of true and unbridled heterosexuality all look and act pretty manly, still and all. The dominant image of the Filipino male homosexual—the effeminate and/or cross-dressing

bakla—while mentioned in passing every now and then, is mostly absent in this fictive world. Thus, the deviation from heteronormativity by its able-bodied and rather dashing masculine men becomes all the more troubling, for the simple reason that other than this minor discrepancy, their identities remain pretty conventional indeed. It is as though Espino, in this text, is calling the masculine bluff, and unmasking Filipino men's enactment of their masculinity as merely a perverse and largely failed performance of its "ideal self." This only means that the claims masculinity makes about itself just cannot be trusted and taken on face value. Masculinity in this novella is a role that is itself "suspect," for it is haunted by the "unnameable something that stir[s] in the back of [the] mind." All this provides evidence of the syncretic and/or appropriated nature of the sexological norm—of homo/hetero—in the context of the neocolonial city in this corner of the Global South.

An interesting poem, written in English, by the Tagalog-identified National Artist, Rolando S. Tinio, provides us an example of how Filipino poets in English have treated the homosexual theme—which is to say (in the beginning, at least), metaphorically. Fellow National Artists Villa and Nick Joaquin had arguably done the same thing in their poems earlier on, using comparable cryptic strategies, but for the purposes of this presentation, I will be taking up Tinio's memorable and intriguingly titled poetic effort, primarily because it is entirely germane to the topic at hand.

A Parable⁹
for B.

Like most of us, you wish for death:
Like the Sybil of Cumae caged in glass,
Without desire for the past of things,
Without power to hold them at a distance.

We suffer from excess of knowledge:
Each instant starts at a mythic crossroad.
We stand to choose the particular way
We wish our tragedy to take.

So we stumble on public parks
And stop at the feet of statues asking
Cryptic questions about strange beasts.
So we dash along the bend

Where highways meet, and enter cities
Unrolling streets for us to tread,
And in the night perform ablutions
To clear our hands of all our choices.

And still, in sleep we make our rounds,
Descending labyrinths all doors,
Making entrances of exits.
Hell is an endless promenade.

As in a gothic garden live
With statuary in marbled white:
They loom above your head, those heads
Drilled with holes, as if the eyes

Fixed inward and gazed themselves to stone.
Memory is full of Gorgons,
The plague that cries deliverance.
Theban Magus, teach us to pluck

The inner eye: this trick of mirrors,
Bright as the burst of pomegranates.

Offhand, we can say that this is a highly allusive and textually elusive poem, which is nonetheless self-aware about its “cryptic” nature. We can surmise as much, going by “A Parable,” a title that immediately cues and urges one toward a nuanced and “layered” interpretation, as well as by the lack of clear textual clues concerning the poetic speaker’s particular cultural and historical location. Tinio wrote this poem sometime in the mid-1960s, well before he experienced a change of nativist heart, and turned into an eloquent champion of Tagalog.

Like other anglophone Philippine texts, this poem can only be read from the perspective of its “postcoloniality.” Which is to say: its historical reality as an ideological consequence of American colonialism on one hand, and on the other its ironic potentiality to secrete and promote forms of “anticolonial signification”—its ability to move beyond, critique, or “post” the colonialism that made it possible, to begin with. All of Philippine literature in English is, after all, postcolonial by definition—“postcolonial” not so much because it emerged from the period of American occupation and continued to flourish after the Philippines’ formal independence from the American

empire (which did not, to be sure, mean the end of its subjection to such, but merely signaled its passage into the state of neocolonial servitude that it still presently languishes in), but “postcolonial” because while written in the language of colonization, it nonetheless cannot be assumed to be ideologically circumscribed by this fact.

Needless to say, the language that the Americans brought with them and used to convert and pacify the minds of their subjects—in the various regions of their newly acquired colony in the Far East—was quickly transformed in its encounter with the intractable cultures that most certainly preexisted it. The transformation was a function of the situation in which this language was acquired by America’s colonial subjects—a situation whose effects necessarily exceeded whatever colonial power may have anticipated about it. This “qualitative difference” is not, however, always verbally marked. Much of Philippine poetry in English actually sounds pretty “universal” offhand, but a historical reading of it quickly particularizes this register in the lived experiences and situations of its specifically located writers and readers. In other words, put in its context, even the most universal-sounding anglophone poem written by a Filipino reveals the specific situation that gave rise to it, and that called it forth, into postcolonial expression. That it is a homosexual speaker (and, possibly author) who expressed himself through the language that pathologized—by sexologically naming—him, only renders this instance of postcolonial difference particularly poignant and remarkable.

Tinio’s poem, devoid of Philippine place names and proper nouns, and couched in the classical idioms—all those references to Greek mythology—certainly qualifies as one such text. And yet, the representational project it engages in cannot be remotely self-evident, precisely because it is a postcolonial poem. As such, we need to think of it as a translation, which makes it an inherently complex and problematic articulation, whose “situatedness” is constitutive of what it actually is. In seeming anticipation, its author decided to give it a title that plainly gestures toward the intense interpretive labor its reader will need to carry out in order to begin to understand it. This is a labor that seeks out—that reads for—signs of homosexual “presence” in the cryptohomosexual text, and it is analogous to the labor of seeking and reading for signs of the gay city that coexists within the heteronormative one—an aspect or “quality” of urban living that sexual minorities, deprived of institutional support for their manner of loving, must experience and personally “navigate,” in distinct and allegorical ways.

The poem, dedicated to an anonymous “B.,” is spoken in the first person plural “we,” which implies a shared identity between the “I” and the “you,” who is presumably the “B.” in the dedication. The shared identity is defined right away as a function of a mysterious death wish, and invoking T.S. Eliot’s reference to the Sybil of Cumae, a once-beautiful seeress whose spurning of a powerful god reduced her to an ampulla-encased prophetic eye, the speaker attributes this wish to the helpless remembering of the past (which effectively persists in all its spitefulness in the present), as well as the endless envisioning of a future that the speaker, speaking for both himself and the “you,” is helpless to change or prevent from happening.

The certainty of the inescapability of this self-repeating life amounts to nothing if not a tragedy, and the remembering of it is the burden of this “inner sight”—is, by poem’s end, practically indistinguishable from this form of torturous introspection. The entire poem is devoted to metaphorically “summarizing” this tragic life, primarily through the use of images and tropes that are painted across the poem’s text in rather broad and almost blurry strokes. Cursorily reading the text, we do get clear enough suggestions of gay urban existence: cruising in public parks, traveling to unfamiliar cities, meeting and encountering strangers (who are evidently dangerous, because they are “beasts”), as well as the inevitable sense of dirtiness that afflicts the speaker at the end of the day—a “contamination” that needs to be washed away but can’t really be since, even in sleep, even in the speakers’ dream-life, the tragedy plays itself out, over and again. It is interestingly at this point that the poem’s text provides us with that particularly riveting and altogether telling detail—the intriguing passage, “making entrances of exits,” here merely half-heartedly acknowledged as a dream-image. This, of course, is a shockingly frank metaphorical shorthand for anal sex, and its unobtrusive presence in this poem’s text spectacularly opens it up to an unashamedly gay reading.

And so, yes, Tinio’s “A Parable” is a Filipino gay poem—possibly one of the earliest in the country’s anglophone tradition, written in the 1960s, by one of its best poets, who wrote it shortly after completing his graduate studies in the US, a place whose worldliness and cosmopolitanism (as with Villa and Montano) doubtless emboldened him. And yes, its sensibility is pretty urbane, going by its easy recourse to classical imagery and allusions, its confident aspiration after “universalism,” and its depiction of the gay city as coinciding with the traditional one—for, indeed, anywhere can be a cruising ground for anonymous homosexual encounters, if one could “read” the codes

well enough. The sensitive nature of its topic should explain not only its encoded and highly figurative language, but also the existential anguish, the harrowing guilt (a “Memory . . . full of Gorgons”) that its speaker recognizes, owns up to, and ultimately wishes to escape from—by asking the Theban magus, the mythological seer called Tiresias, who had lived life both as a man and as a woman, to divest him (as well as the addressee, with whom the speaker identifies), of this regretful and tormenting “inner eye, this trick of mirrors / Bright as the burst of pomegranates.” This exotic mythical fruit is, of course, rather famous and memorable for the following reason: it was the oral ingestion of its seed that condemned the goddess Persephone to spend so many of her fitful days in hell. The last image, of a “burst of pomegranates,” is thus especially telling: the pomegranate is a seed-filled fruit, which is associated with the idea of worldly sensuality (and so, we may take it as the opposite of immortality). As the famous myth would seem to put it, it is by gorging on this fruit that one shuts oneself out from salvation (and is thrust into hell). And yes, the image of a solid pulpy fruit bursting into a fountain of seeds can possibly strike us as particularly kinky.

That there remains much in the Philippines’ anglophone literature that needs to be unpacked in this allegorical and cryptohomosexual manner is easy enough to accept: the arrival of English into the country made it possible to verbalize, if only carefully, “inconvenient” and “difficult” realities that this language had itself at once instituted and undermined. In other words, while it was American modernization that introduced a sexological form of consciousness that admittedly stigmatized Filipino homosexuals, in the same breath it was what provided them a discourse and an identity around which they may rally, but only—initially, at least—subtly and dissimulatingly. Moreover, Tinio’s poem is one example of how the cosmopolitan lyric utterances of Filipino poets in English—which can either be vividly mimetic or permeated with so much allegorical opacity—are not really as “universal” as they may initially sound. Read in light of the cultural situation that framed them (in this case, repressive and religiously conservative), these texts’ various expressions of cosmopolitan-sounding, “universal” insights are grounded firmly in the exigencies and particularities of the Philippines’ troubled history.

Upon closer examination, then, this poem’s collective “we” isn’t universal. Situated in its time and place, the poem’s subject-position is, rather, that of the historically located Filipino homosexual, whose colonial shaming and abjection as psychosexually deviant and sinful this poetic articulation registers all too painfully, but by the same token embraces as a possible place from

which to speak, from which to “be.” Finally, we can say that the “postcolonial difference” to be intuited in this work derives from the Philippine locality of the experience that spurred it—a locality that transformed the language and resignified the colonial homophobic values it carried, precisely because this language became the medium through which a postcolonial gay subjectivity could, paradoxically, come to exist.

A Philippine-specific urbanism informs pretty much all the avowedly gay works being written by avowed Filipino gay writers—if not explicitly as the settings (and sometimes motivations) of their texts stories and dramas, then implicitly, as the grounding condition of their articulations, which are, by necessity, precisely premised on the modernizing discourse of sexuality, that American colonialism bestowed, and that American global neocolonialism continues to bestow. This is clearly to be intuited in almost all the works—poems, essays, short stories, plays—included in the landmark three-volume series of Philippine gay writing, *Ladlad*, which came out between 1994 and 2006. These texts all articulate the Filipino gay subject position, from within an implicitly urbanist framework: citified and educated speakers, personae, narrators, protagonists, and characters all live, work, love, have sex, and die as self-consciously gay Filipinos residing in or transiting through the translocal city—mostly metropolitan Manila, although occasionally also a global gay ghetto or district tucked away in the major urban centers of the West.

The city is the location of the bathhouses, discos, motels, bars, public parks, malls, jeepneys, buses, gyms, churches, side streets, and neighborhoods where gays cruise and are cruised, have sex, fall in love, go wooing, are wooed, turn moony and sentimental, and suffer from existential moments of Catholic-guilt-induced gloom. This is clearly evident in the poems and stories of many of *Ladlad*'s contributors, who by turns celebrate and bewail the “permission” granted them by the anonymous and sexually “open” spaces of the city. A typical example of the conflicted response of the Filipino gay subject to the city's sexual underbelly—to which they cannot help but be privy, given their proscribed desire—are the poignant and bittersweet poems “Sa Bathhouse” by playwright Rodolfo Vera,¹⁰ the jeepney-set “Rush Hour” by Camilo Villanueva,¹¹ Nicolas Pichay's ode to cruising in the gym, “Karnehan,”¹² and the melancholy “Backroom Love” by Ralph Semino Galan,¹³ which ends with the following trenchant lines:

very late at night,
just before the inevitable

coming of the light,
drenched with sweat
salty like the sea,

you will copulate with shadows
and call it love.

On the other hand, in Jaime An Lim's powerful poem, "The Cost of Living," set in what has memorably been described as the "armpit" of Manila, the old and historic district of Quiapo, the middle-aged persona encounters a former lover, and the reverie prompts him to reconsider a lifetime's worth of erotic attachments on one hand and, on the other, upon realizing the irrefutable truth of time's inexorable passage, to contemplate the absolute wages of being alive—namely, unstoppable decrepitude and eventual death.¹⁴

Sidewalk vendors milled on street corners.
Harassed pedestrians rushed blindly home
to yet another so-so dinner and TV.
Dodging and angling for right of way,
a latter-day prophet blended into the six o'clock
Crowd. He wore a gold-stud earring and a sweatshirt.
Black polyester, but the message luminescent red.
The Cost of Living is Dying, the front said,
and the back, over his tight-assed swagger,
Everyone Pays.

Predictably enough, it's the heady and densely peopled and ever-vibrant city that serves not only as a backdrop but also as the occasion for this existential reflection. A cursory reading of the *Ladlad* anthologies easily reveals that such "dark" sentiments are not the exception, but are in fact par for the course, in many of the poems and stories written by city-based gay writers in the Philippines. A self-published, didactic, and eponymous novel, from 2006, written by Louie Mar Ganguangco, dwells on the specter of HIV-AIDS, and it uses the (in)famous gay-identified district of Orosa-Nakpil, in Malate, as a metaphor for the precariousness of gay life—and love—in the crowded and increasingly dangerous metropolis.¹⁵ This fictive vision has proved sadly prophetic, in fact: currently, in the Philippines, HIV-AIDS is an epidemic among the sector epidemiologists call "Men who have Sex with Men"; and yes, big urban centers like metro-Manila, metro-Cebu and metro-Davao are, at present, registering the highest rates of seroconversions.¹⁶

Tony Perez's famous novella, *Cubao 1980: Ang Unang Sigaw ng Gay Liberation Movement sa Pilipinas*, which came out in 1992, uses a congested, crime-ridden, but gay-friendly segment of Quezon City as both backdrop and trope: the protagonist is a teenager who lives and studies in the area, and his descent into prostitution constitutes, pretty much, the novella's sordid and cautionary plot—one that is nevertheless didactically corrected, in his ultimate ascent to propriety and religious redemption, courtesy of a charismatic fellowship that he witnesses in the coliseum that dominates the skyline of this benighted corner of the metropolis.¹⁷ The city thus appears as a veritable paradox: occasioning both doom and salvation; privileging certain identities while devaluing others. This is a paradox that distinguishes Perez's text, in fact: it claims to be "liberationist" (as its subtitle boldly declares), but its depiction of the bakla as a corruptor of minors, as well as its morally preordained closure, reveals it to be disturbingly anti-gay and staunchly anti-liberationist. We may even go so far as say that Perez's novella is appallingly homophobic, and its vaunted shout is nothing if not the bitterly hateful one-line chapter (number twenty-five), *Puking ina n'yo mga bakla kayo* ("Sons of bitches—you faggots."). Not only does its story reinforce the stereotype that gays are sexual predators of the vulnerable young, it also chooses to narrate the admittedly sensitive story of lost innocence from the point of view of the boy-prostitute—a "personality" it cannot help but romanticize, inasmuch as Perez's own subject-position in reality obviously was never this.

On the other hand, Perez's book does contain most disturbingly lurid descriptions of male-to-male sex, a fact that "eminently" distinguishes it in local literature. This creates a tension between the texts' own diametrically opposed "performances": while ostensibly condemning the gay lifestyle for its corrupting and dehumanizing effects on the lives of impressionable boys, the text deviously promotes this very lifestyle by indulging in lucidly rendered, protracted, and powerfully arousing descriptions of the various sexual acts that deliciously characterize it. The ultimate religious conversion notwithstanding, the novella does succeed in untying the tongue of Tagalog fiction as far as articulating the frank and visceral reality of homosexual sex is concerned. Thus, we can say that in terms of sexually explicit expressivity, Perez's book does advocate a kind of half-hearted if disingenuous "liberation," after all.

Nonetheless, because of its paradoxical nature, this text bids us to reflect on the differences between Western and Philippine constructions of

gender and sexuality. In the sexological West, it's become increasingly possible to understand homosexuality as a question of sexual orientation that exists independently of gender—that is to say, as a question of whom one sexually desires rather than on of what masculine, feminine, or androgynous gender one fancies oneself to be. Thus, it is unthinkable for most Americans, for example, that a man who has regular sex with other men is not or does not understand himself to be a homosexual. Needless to say, after a hundred years of sexualization, the biomedical discourse of homo- and heterosexuality is, in their lives, a most powerful socially “constructing” force.

In the Philippines, on the other hand, residual indigenous valuations of gender have simply served to modify—that is to say, hybridize—the newly “implanted” sexual order. For instance, despite the popularly recognized fact that the bakla has sex with the lalake or “man,” it continues to be true that for many Filipinos (especially those belonging to rural and urban poor communities), it is only the former who is legitimately homosexualized by the activity. Edzel Cardil's story, “Par,”¹⁸ found in the first volume of *Ladlad*, easily comes to mind: its narrator is Sheila Lukasta, a small-time couturier who's been living as the typical, long-suffering wife of a typical, wife-beating macho and lowlife, Par. This story bears witness to the contemporary reality that, among members of the urban poor, the selfless and conveniently fungible bakla can become the wife of a “real man,” with the implicit approval of the family and the community at large. The darker side of this familiar story is what Honorio Bartolome de Dios offers in his murderous tale, “Lalaki.”¹⁹ This story subverts the conventional wisdom that gays are weak and harmless. As de Dios's text would have it, the stereotypically obsequious and forbearing bakla, when pushed to the extreme, can strike just as mercilessly as any other knife-wielding avenging angel.

What these texts tell us is that the sexualization of Filipinos, premised upon the fundamental incoherence of the homo/hetero logic, while increasing in alacrity and perniciousness, has not been very thorough—so far, anyway. Examining this process more closely, we can see that it has, in fact, been skewed toward the further minoritization of what had already been an undesirable, because effeminate, “native” identity: the bakla, precisely. We may therefore say that in the Philippines today, the bakla as a partially homosexualized identity signifies a hybrid notion that incorporates both local and translocal conceptions of gender transitivity and homo or “same” sexuality, and this homosexualization turns more rigid the more urbanized and therefore neo/colonial the location is. Thus, despite the modernizing ideologies of gender

and sexuality it continues to preserve, within itself, residues of its more gender-specific, “prehomosexual” past—for instance, the idea that kabaklaan is simply a matter of “confusion” and “indecisiveness,” which are, in the first place, the oldest and even strictly “genderless” denotations of the word bakla. The popular belief that a bakla child can be un-confused and set aright by inflicting on his body acts of parental, typically fatherly, cruelty precisely proves the persistence of earlier, “presexological” meanings even in this day and age of the homo/sexualized bakla. This belief was documented in popular culture texts—in particular, novelty songs—coming from the Visayas in the 1960s, and it gets repeated in urban hiphop songs up to now (for example, Gloc-9’s recent hit, “Sirena”).

Moreover, we can see that Perez’s version of gay liberationism is a unique articulation, inasmuch as it’s remarkably different from its American model, which takes gay identity as a revolutionary identity that no longer seeks acceptance into the dominant order, but in fact challenges the authority of that order, and calls into question such “naturalized” conventions as maleness and femaleness, marriage, and even propriety itself. Borrowing its teleology from Freudian psychoanalysis, gay liberationist philosophy begins and ends with an essentialism: that a return to “polymorphous perversity” is the real and final objective of an ideal, mass-scale “sexual revolution,” of which gay liberation is merely a catalyst.

As a social movement, American gay liberation in the 1970s saw contemporary civilization and its sex and gender roles as the problem, and worked to liberate not only the sector that called itself gay or lesbian but also the whole of society from the constraints of all oppressive norms. It was staunchly materialist and secular, having emerged from the same “counter-cultural” environment as black militancy, student radicalism, and hippy and anti-war activism. These various advocacies all did their bit in debunking conservative values (including religious ones), raising the consciousness of all and sundry, and exposing the hypocrisy and undermining the authority of revered social institutions. The liberationists understood that gays and lesbians could only be free if everyone else were set free from the enslavement of patriarchy, racism, and capitalist exploitation. Obviously, Perez’s understanding of the issue—dualistic, religious, and rather socially conservative—veers away from these distinct features of the American gay liberation movement, which he has tried his best to emulate in his own political discourse. But, as can only be expected, this emulation only partially succeeds, if only because it is only partially or syncretically emulated.

On the other hand, while evidence of the pressure that the neocolonial city brings to bear on the formation of sexual objects is clear enough in these various texts written by Filipino gay writers, as has been argued by historians of urban gay culture in the West, we can just as cogently argue that a mutually constitutive dynamic obtains in this relationship. In other words, it isn't only urbanity that constructs gay subjectivity; conversely, Filipino gay subjects themselves come to embody what is seen to be exemplary instances of the urbane in the Philippines, especially to the extent that it can be equated with global externality and the culturally syncretic.

In *Ladlad* are various poems and stories written in gayspeak, which is a register of linguistic coding and dissimulation that potentially exists in all of the Philippines' many languages—a subcultural “third space” in which translations across hierarchies and divisions take place. Gayspeak is also where—channeling an American anthropologist's interesting study of the bantut, the equivalent of the bakla among the Muslim Tausugs in the southern Philippines²⁰—the trauma of global incursions is “softened,” by which radical “change” can become assimilated into the traditional culture, whose heart and soul remains ostensibly pure precisely because it is only the expendable outer layer, constituted of gender and sexual objects, that is being exposed to the corrupting influence of what supposedly exists outside the fantasy of the ethnically pure Filipino nation. Indeed, Philippine gay writings are highly syncretic not only in terms of languages but also of influences, aesthetics, themes, and styles, evincing, for instance, a variety of appropriations of modernist gestures like minimalism and narrative collage on one hand, and more traditionally didactic and “sentimental” elements, on the other.

This kind of reading—about the mutuality of the urban trope in Philippine gay writing—is apparent in the interesting work by Jaime Ruiz, a seminarian who exposes in his hilariously gayspoken poem, “Ritual ng Eksorismo ng Multong Bakla” (loosely: Ritual to Exorcize the Sissy Ghost),²¹ the sexual hypocrisy of the Catholic hierarchy, that doctrinally abominates homosexuality, and yet secretly condones its practice by its “questionable” deacons and priests (herein also metaphorized as predatory taong-lobo or “werewolves”).

Madir, two eyes ko'y minsá'y may nakita
Sabado Night sa Jaloux, multong baklang rumarampa
Habang mga B.Y. ... Ho-hum! Sinasabi ko nga vah!
Avah! Di ba't ikaw bukas ay may misa pa? ...

Multong bakla't taong-lobo'y kapwa pereho
Sa t'wing sasapit ang kati, este, gabi ng alas-otso
Nagsisimulang maglipana, susuyurin lahat ng kanto
Hanggang sa may mabiktima't masaid ang libido.

Furthermore, this text accomplishes the queering of the Catholic norm, and its use of “gayspeak,” that gleefully contemporizes, globalizes, and faggotizes Latin, Tagalog, and English, doesn't just state but actually formalizes this agenda of willful perversion.

Ora! Ora! Oremus pro invicem.
Hada! Hada! Et extra rampa nos salvem,
Manus at annus tuas non regular usem,
Et boquas largas non finis subuem.

Te dakes bananarama non pansinis,
Puritatis! Celibitatis! Castitatis! Tui tiis-tiis,
De finis testicisque non penetratis,
Et boga-boga abstinentis! Plis! Plis! (Lafang papaya, puedis!)

On a related note, the annual Philippine LGBT Pride March, the oldest such march in Asia, upon the invitation—and with the sponsorship—of city governments, has been moved from Manila to Quezon City, to Manila to Quezon City, to Manila to Makati—the country's Central Business District, to be exact—over the past two decades. What this tells us is that the local LGBT movement, as part of a general neocolonial fantasy of desirable cultural simultaneity, is being increasingly seen by certain government officials, as good for culture, good for business, good for tourism, precisely because it is being increasingly seen as an indicator of global contemporariness and cosmopolitan openness.

All this takes us to the realization that all cross-cultural encounters—including “postcolonial appropriations”—end up producing not anything purely native or purely foreign, but rather, a hybrid of both. As the homo/sexual city itself literally embodies, and as these various gay texts that it has occasioned suggest, the contemporary Filipino gay, like contemporary Filipino gay discourse itself, is a syncretism of local and Western gender and sexual constructions. Rather than adopt the nativist perspective that sees this hybridity as a symptom of weakness on the part of Filipino culture and a sign of the ultimate triumph of colonialism, Filipinos must instead argue that, contrary to how its usually seen in dogmatic nationalist discourse, hybridity

may well be the most potent “ground” of postcolonial resistance. Needless to say, Filipinos must do this because they already are, at this point in their country’s “multilayered” history, helplessly and unquestionably hybrid anyway. Indeed, to deny or reject this fact will be tantamount to denying or rejecting nothing if not their very selves.

Notes

1. I read this paper at the 36th Southeast Asia seminar, “Cities and Cultures in Southeast Asia,” sponsored by the University of San Carlos Cebuano Studies Center and Kyoto University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Nov. 20, 2012, USC Talamban Campus, Cebu City.

2. An early version of the foregoing summary of the history of homosexuality in the Philippines (which is also, viewed from a slightly different angle, the history of heterosexuality therein) first appeared in my essay, “Postcolonial Resistance, Hybridity, and the Filipino Gay Writer: The Case of Villa, Montano, and Perez,” *Diliman Review* Centennial Issue, Vol. 55 Nos. 1–4 (2010): 8–48.

3. Gerard Delanty, “The Cosmopolitan Imagination: Critical Cosmopolitanism and Social Theory,” *The British Journal of Sociology*, Volume 57 Issue 1 (2006): 25–47.

4. I first offered “gay biographical” readings of these two “foundational” texts of Philippine gay literature in the second section of my *Philippine Gay Culture: Binabae to Bakla, Silabis to MSM* (Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

5. Jose Garcia Villa, *Footnote to Youth: Tales of the Philippines and Others* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1933).

6. Bienvenido Santos, “Race with Seagulls,” in Gemino H. Abad, ed., *The Likhaan Anthology of Philippine Literature in English, from 1900 to the Present* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2002), 44.

7. Estrella Alfon, “Magnificence,” in Abad, 145–60.

8. Federico Licsi Espino Jr., *Lumpen* (Pasig City: Limbagang Araro, 1985).

9. Rolando Tinio, “A Parable,” in Abad, 56.

10. Rody Vera, “Sa Bathhouse,” in J. Neil C. Garcia and Danton Remoto, eds., *Ladlad 2: An Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing* (Pasig: Anvil Publishing, 1996), 157.

11. Camilo Villanueva, “Rush Hour,” in Garcia, *Ladlad 2*, 163.

12. Nicolas Pichay, “Karnehan,” in J. Neil C. Garcia and Danton Remoto, eds., *Ladlad: An Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing* (Pasig: Anvil Publishing, 1994), 163.

13. Ralph Semino Galan, “Backroom Love,” in Garcia, *Ladlad 2*, 104.

14. Jaime An Lim, "The Cost of Living," in Garcia, *Ladlad 2*, 86–87.
15. Louie Mar A. Gangcuangco, Orosa-Nakpil, *Malate: A Filipino Novel* (Manila: Louie Mar's Publications, 2006).
16. Sheila Crisostomo, "DOH: 2013 HIV/AIDS Cases almost 5,000," *Philippine Star* (January 29, 2014): C 17.
17. Tony Perez, *Cubao 1980 at Iba Pang Mga Katha: Ang Unang Sigaw ng Gay Liberation Movement sa Pilipinas* (Manila: Cacho Hermanos, 1992).
18. Edzel Cardil, "Par," in Garcia, *Ladlad*, 7–17.
19. Honorio Bartolome de Dios, "Lalaki," in Garcia, *Ladlad 2*, 221–240.
20. Mark Johnson, *Beauty and Power: Transgendering and Cultural Transformation in the Southern Philippines* (New York: Berg, 1997).
21. Jaime Ruiz, "Ritwal ng Eksorsismo sa Multong Bakla," in Garcia, *Ladlad 2*, 145.