

## Of Histories, Erasures and the Beloved: Glimpses into Philippine Contemporary Poetry

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### Abstract

To attempt a definition of Philippine contemporary poetry is to confront its historical and literary legacies and upheavals. While it has already been said that the Philippine writing in English is one of the most expansive in Southeast Asia, this assessment remains but a strand in the country's remarkably diverse literary milieu. There is much to be explored in the writings in Filipino – however the term may be contentious in embodying the regional languages that many of the country's writers are now advocating so as to affirm national identity. At the same time, the American literary landscape continues to dominate the poetics of many young writers as they destabilise long held creative practices.

This essay does not aim to map a cross-section of today's poetic production. What it offers are glimpses of the bursting energies that propel the writings among contemporary poets. Charlie Veric Samuya's *Histories* (2015), Mesandel Arguelles's *Pesoa* (2014), and Genevieve Asenjo's bilingual collection *Sa Gibapon, Palangga, An Uran* (2014) are recent releases in English, Filipino, and Kinaray-a. The three languages give a sampling of the richness of Philippine literature in general. As individual works that mark various points in the three writers' career, they impress by the strategies through which they execute their poetic projects. What this essay further offers is a sense of the other voices out there simply waiting to be heard.

### Keywords

Contemporary Philippine poetry, regional literature, linguistic diversity, translation, erasure poetry, national identity

“The Philippines is perhaps the only country in Asia with the highest density of poets per square kilometer,”<sup>2</sup> a Japanese academic remarked in a seminar I

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<sup>2</sup> Professor Reiko Ogawa of Kyushu University made this remark at the presentation seminar of the Asia Leadership Fellow Program (ALFP) on 14 September 2015 in Hakone, Japan, of which I was a fellow from September 7-October 30, 2015.

recently attended. I could have qualified the hyperbole by asserting that such “density” does not yet even determine the language, region, age and gender of the poets – factors which contribute to the complexity of the Philippine’s literary state.

Of the country’s writing in English alone, literary scholars Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden in the *Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English* (2010) observe that it “is on a scale unmatched elsewhere in Southeast Asia, not only for sheer quantity, but also for variety, range and overall fluency” (100). But this achievement has not been without cost, as the authors discussing the poetic writings of 1965-1990 note that “the worlds opened up by English have entailed a closing down of other linguistic options” (101). The period was in itself a crucial one marked by sociopolitical upheavals and redemptions. The declaration of martial law in 1972 and its lifting more than a decade later gave way to waves of painful national and literary reflection. And language was a key point of contention in debates surrounding national identity.

Given the fierce emergence of regional writings in the recent years, however, a rethinking of Patke and Holden’s assertion on “linguistic options” may be in order. The growing call for representation by regional writers and artistic groups is a claim to gain a voice in the national arena that can influence the formulation of concrete policies and funding toward cultural diversity. Alongside this has been the development of global Englishes amidst a postcolonial awareness of linguistic histories. Philippine English has now been subsumed into the wider spectrum of the country’s literary legacy, rendering it as one of the writer’s many linguistic options. Some writers have even begun writing in their mother tongues to revisit a world that has not been accommodated in English. The resulting literary atmosphere has been that of richness, a capaciousness that spurs many explorations.

On many fronts, the country’s literary talents are surfacing unabated each year, such that it has become a daunting task to choose among the works of today’s poets from which to draw up a survey of contemporary Philippine poetry. Their writings are more textured, and display the exuberance of a generation that has access to writings worldwide. They are bold. They unsettle long-held writing principles and defy literary patronage. Their experimentations are an undaunted foray into aesthetic prospects. Their resourcefulness is unhampered particularly when it comes to creating venues for publication and dissemination of their works. Overall, a healthy literary ecology is upon us, and where one finds fertile interaction, one also finds the whole gamut of alliances, rifts and skirmishes.

Against this robust background, my selection of works for this essay is based on how they may represent the varied facets of the country’s poetic landscape. Charlie Samuya’s *Histories* (2015), Mesandel Arguelles’s *Pesoa* (2014),

and Genevieve Asenjo's bilingual collection *Sa Gihapon, Palangga, An Uran* (2014) are recent releases in English, Filipino and Kinaray-a. Samuya's debut collection was published by a major university press, Arguelles's twelfth book continued his reliance on independent presses, while Asenjo's was one of the first titles released by a newly established university press based in Bicol whose goal is to support regional writings. At the outset, the three languages give a sampling of the abundance of Philippine contemporary poetry. As individual works, they impress by the strategies through which they execute their poetic projects.

Samuya's debut collection, *Histories* (which as of this writing has entered its second print), attests to the strength of the personal, the "intending I"<sup>3</sup> that is central to lyric poetry. The personas in his poems are unflagging labourers in the excavation of meaning amidst the foreign shores they find or imagine themselves in. And it is this search for meaning, for the "missing heart," many times an evasive quest, that renders his personas all the more faithful and human.

Arguelles' latest collection *Pesoa* resonates with the Portuguese poet's fascination for "heteronyms," alter egos. Yet Arguelles innovates on this conceit by creating through erasure poetry an entirely new writing from the work of playwright Rene O. Villanueva. The resulting volume is an appealing articulation of a poetics of erasure against the vista that the Portuguese *Pesoa* exemplified in his earlier creations. Arguelles' *Pesoa* marks the contrapuntal notes of absence-presence, deletion-addition, withholding-yielding through which the "self" or its other manifestations are invented. Binaries do not divide after all when skilfully wielded by a poet like Arguelles. They instead transform into a continuum of possibilities.

Where *Histories* and *Pesoa* suggest fragments as scaffolds for poetic creations, Asenjo's *Sa Gihapon, Palangga, An Uran* nudges her readers back into the forest of mythic splendour. The collection is divided into four parts with the earlier sections providing a thick description of the island and the idyllic life that shaped Asenjo's imagination. She does not idealise her world into a bucolic wonder but sets it against the current conflicts of urban privation and environmental erosion. Her travels are not only about traversing geographies but of mastering the spaces in between. And here, love redeems as always. Asenjo achieves this with as much sensual deftness as she could poetically muster.

That Asenjo's second volume of poetry delights in the original and translation suggest the direction our regional writings are headed for. While admitting English as a colonial heritage, the translator Ma. Milagros Geremia-

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the lyric subject, refer to Blasing's *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of the Words*.

Lachica recasts the relationship of the two languages aright in order to free the bounty of Kinaray-a onto foreign shores.

This essay offers a survey of these outstanding works in the hope that readers would gain a better appreciation of the scope and depth of Philippine contemporary poetry enough for them to seek the other voices out there.

### Of “Histories”

While I admire Charlie Veric Samuya’s debut collection, *Histories*, it did take me some time to dig through its introduction, titled “Let the Missing Be Poetics.” It calls attention to itself for the sheer 31 pages of its length. I went along its narrative trajectory, through the metaphorical constructs of archaeology and history framing the creative process, resolved the equations the poet wants to forge until I could clearly hear his voice emerging above his declarations. That Alfred A. Yuson notes in a review that the testimony made in the introduction is an “an exaggerated conceit” (“Gravitas and Grace in Poetry”) may be due to how the author earnestly constructs himself as the independent, self-made poet, immune from any external motivations, opposing the current “professionalization” of poetry. A feat, as can only be expected from a first book that aims at leaving an impression on its readers.

“Temerity” (91) it is, according to art critic Patrick Flores. Samuya may have just voiced what many young Filipino poets would have probably liked to articulate themselves. No one is spared from the author’s artistic indictments: the writing workshops, the Carlos Palanca annual literary awards, the High Chair and other literary *barkadas*, the ecological bandwagon, the publication-for-promotion trend, and the so-called formulaic MFA programme. These are literary kinships that define today’s Philippine literary scene, and much elsewhere in the world. Patronage politics inadvertently traps a beginning poet in psychic indebtedness and leaves his own mettle untested. All these, inferring from the introduction, dilute one’s poetic promise.

For such audacity alone, I congratulate Samuya once more. But somehow there is a point in the introduction I have yet to come to terms with. The poet’s reference to Walter Benjamin seems to have given rise to a contradiction. If the poet were indeed to adhere to the notion of “aesthetic autonomy,” (25) – that is, no artistic creation “presupposes human attention” – then I do not see the reason why he with his supposed “autonomy,” would even care to ask the question “Who, then, are my readers?” (27). Why even try to carve a space out of the nebulous congregation called “reader?” Why even pre-empt a “misreading” if by the differentiated nature of a “capacious readership” one is bound to “misread?”

Past the introduction, many of the poems in *Histories* are exhilarating in their limpid utterances. They seize by their meditative quality and conclusions of

gnomic stroke. That the body of the poetic text is prefaced by “How to Read a Poem” implies a relationship not so much between a teacher and his student, but among readers. In this quintessential role, one has to undertake his/her own digging and meaning-making. The poem in fact dislodges the position of the “teacher” amidst the impossibility of annulling the funded experience (or lack thereof) of a student reading a poem. Here, three times the word “misread” is used – in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and last stanzas – such that it seems to breathe life into the poem and, hence, into the very gesture of reading one, and on to the crucial invitation at the end, “For a poem to be,/ It must be misread, beautifully” (39).

“After Paradise” captivates with its cadence as it revisits the Adamic fall – a challenge that a poet at one point in his vocation confronts. The return to such scriptural stories in exegetic inquest is to face our own legacy of human frailties. In these two stanzas, Samuya triumphs in his counterpoints of “innocence/sin” and the temporal portraits of “brief/long”:

No sweetness of apple must have stained  
his lips. His earliest bite, tentative and wonderstruck,  
had made feeling all too human, brief.

To know the earth must have been a long  
infinite of pain: what to call the valleys, the shades  
of light as the hours wore on, the sounds at dawn. (50)

And so, the first man suffers. Driven out of paradise, he loses dominion over his shelter, over what he can command at will:

He must have longed for those days  
when the sun shone without end  
and the rain fell only when he wanted it. (50)

For its lyrical languor, the poem “What It Is” stands out in the hallowed darkness that finds fulfilment only in expression. But there are obstacles to this gesture. For the poignant question asked in the poem – “What if I told you I don’t know what it is/ I’m mourning? How is it that the stars are out/and in my heart a light rain is falling?” (66) – is predicated on pleas for alternate lives. Yet even the entreaty to “Let me live their lives” (66) is futile in supplanting the pain of leaving. The only response necessarily reverts to the question itself.

Among my favourites is “Manille” for its evocative quality (94): music as intangible, but all the more heightening a sense of presence; the ache; music seeping into consciousness; music as consciousness, harboured by our minds and hearts, one that does not long for physicality. The last line “I haven’t loved yet” (94) takes its own dignified place as it brackets the act of loving into a

different realm, away from thinking, into its own logic, that even in its suspended animation, the idea alone of love equates with pain.

The other poems I found notable for how they attest to Veric's poetic command are "Parting Time," "A Poet is Addressing my Loneliness," "Self-Reliance," "Open Anew, My Heart" and "Prophecy." The latter is particularly suffused with surreal aspiration as the persona confronts the experience of exile, unhomeliness, ownership, love, denial. The sprawling country of loss in these two stanzas overwhelms:

Grief shall equal love.

And there I shall be on the loggia  
to witness the gathering dance of the lost,  
the great mountains beyond bursting with orchids,  
the sky, a dazzling yellow, and everywhere, drizzling. (95)

The internationally renowned critic Epifanio San Juan, Jr. sees clearly how *Histories* commands different landscapes, opens up borders where there used to be none, provides us a cosmopolitan glimpse of other worlds – necessitating a "geopolitical triangulation" (92). In the poems, one finds a capaciousness into which a reader can be lured to the task of unearthing. To the depths he might reach, there he might just find a heart drawing him to his stories.

### **Arguelles' *Pesoa***

Erasure poetry continues to receive critical attention for the way it foregrounds the relationship of an original text, a "previous human agency" (MacDonald) with another authorial presence. This encounter has been described as a complicated, if not, controversial one. Allegations of mis-appropriation and plagiarism have been rife, and have become the source of debate among writers and artists. This has not exempted our country's artists from joining in the fray. And understandably so, as erasure poetry's history has not been modest at all with its beginnings. It sees itself as a method of "prosthetic repair" through which existing texts can be enhanced. With such aims, it can easily disrupt accepted notions of "texts" and "authors."

Yet despite the unease around erasure poetry, it has steadily gained ground among artists and poets who see an infinite source of material that can be wrought beyond the prevailing formal type of poetry. One of these poets is Mesandel Virtusio Arguelles through whom I have come to know of erasure poetry's versatility. A prolific writer of quiet depth, intensity and innovation, Arguelles now has twelve books of poetry to his name, one forthcoming, with most of these titles published independently by High Chair, a literary group that

has been influential among many young writers, and of which Arguelles is a member.

In my own study of erasure poetry, I found out how works resulting from it have indeed been the most exquisite a reader could ever imagine.<sup>4</sup> If I were to extend Samuya's archaeological conceit of the poet excavating the earth, erasure poetry detests the monopoly of "wholes." For the poets' consuming passion is for "fragments" and the infinite permutations of coherence into which these fragments may take form. The visible surface, the so-called original text, is a vast source of possibilities, a vessel of words which paves the way for other texts to emerge. In such abundance, the poet deletes to create. In between words, the white space carries valence. There is no pretence for an organic text, only for what may simply emerge out of these random expunctions.

Arguelles' most recent work, *Pesoa*, is iconic of the tenets of erasure poetry. It appealed to me for two reasons. Firstly, Fernando Antonio Nogueira Pesoa (b. June 13, 1988) is a personal favourite of mine. And though I am aware of how he has influenced and inspired many poets from all the world, I was curious how the Portuguese poet, the quintessential modernist artist, would figure in Arguelles' work. Secondly, I was interested in the way erasure poetry, as performed by Arguelles, would reclaim Pesoa's literary bequest. The invention of "heteronyms" – distinct writing personalities outside of the writer's own – as compared to "pseudonyms" is Pesoa's greatest contribution to the writing world.

Arguelles is a poet adept at creating multi-layers of meanings. He skilfully conflates the techniques of erasure poetry to frame the persona's painstaking examination of the "self," as signified by the very name of Pesoa. Who is he, this person? Does he assume an identity in relation to himself? Or, others? How can he differentiate himself from those of others in the first place? These are the questions pursued in Arguelles' *Pesoa*, and in an almost incantatory way.

Fernando, Joaquin, Virgilio at iba pa. Mga tao sa nakalipas, sumibol sa akin ang kanilang mundo at panahon.... Walang sarili: mundo lang ng tanong.... Binubuo ng hiwa-hiwalay at tagni-tagning piraso ng pagkatao ang tao. (3)

(Fernando, Joaquin, Virgilio and others. People in the past whose worlds and time rose up in me.... No self: only the world of question.... The being of a person is made up of separate pieces, fragments.)

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<sup>4</sup> English translations of quotations from Mesandel Arguelles' poems from the collection, *Pesoa*, are provided by me. Also, as pagination is absent in the book, I have assigned pages for ease of reference. The book's title page is considered as the first page.

Marami ang ako o hindi ako. At kulang ang sarili. Pero ako, ako! Siyempre hindi ako lang ako. Maya-maya, ipagpapatuloy ko ang paghahakbang, tatawirin ang labirinto, maglalakad. (19)

(The I or not I abounds. And the self is lacking. But I, it's me! Of course, the I is not only me. In a little while, I will continue to step, cross the labyrinth, walk.)

Parang iisang tao ang lahat; bawa't isa'y ang unang tao. (22)

(Everyone is just a person; every one is the primordial person.)

Nang umagang iyon tumubo sa isip ko ang paghahangad na maging ako. (28)

(That morning, I awakened to the desire to be myself.)

Natuklasan kong may ako na puwedeng marami. Napakaordinaryo ng ako. Sumibol sa isip ko na kailangang may ako para magkaroon ng iba. (30)

(I discovered that I can be of many persons. The I is so ordinary. It dawned in me that I is needed for others to exist.)

And yet that search does not yield easy answers. As with difficult journeys, the meandering is one of lostness. The passage, at times, leads to “Cementerio del Norte,” where bodies of persons are buried. And in their place are spaces:

Parang ang sarili. Naglalaho ang laman, buto, at iba pang bumubuo sa bahagi ng katawan. Ang lahat ay mapapalitan ng isang tila malapot ng puwang. (43)

(It is like the self. The flesh, bones, and other parts of the self disappear. Everything will be replaced by a thick space.)

Kung saan-saan na ako naligaw. (31)

(I have been lost everywhere.)

But an answer finally offers itself in the knowledge embedded in the “word”:

Parang makapangyarihan ang palaisipang hindi ko masagot. Mas makapangyarihan ang salita. (34)

(It seems that the riddle I fail to answer is more powerful. But the word is more powerful.)

It is the “word” that finds, destroys, and creates.

What further makes the work riveting is the way Arguelles constructed *Pesoa* from another existing work that he duly acknowledges in his book. I am not familiar with the host text of Rene O. Villanueva’s *Personal: Mga Sanaysay sa Lupalop ng Gunita*. And I do not know if it should matter at all. In terms of readership, I ask: would it afford me an incremental appreciation of Arguelles’ work if I knew that of Villanueva? Erasure poets have been asked a similar question, and the reply underscores the erasure poets’ loyalty to the process itself and not to the host text.

In an email interview with this author, Arguelles stated that he came upon erasure poetry looking for new ways of generating materials for writing. Arguelles found “erasure” the most engaging and productive as it complemented his own minimalist preference. Although he hesitated at first, he found this feeling to be natural for someone entering a new field. He persevered and by 2010 Arguelles was confident enough with the techniques of erasure poetry, so he embarked on writing another book out of his earlier published one.

At the end of *Pesoa*, I understand why Arguelles feels that he has not yet exhausted the gifts of such a creative mode. Given the resources waiting to be utilised, there is no stopping the artist from dipping into the infinite permutations of works that may come out of erasure poetry. I can only wish for the meandering to reach manifold destinations.

### **Always, the Beloved**

In the Preface by the translator Ma. Milagros Geremia-Lachica, the crucial relationship between the poet and the translator is reinforced. Yet a hint of resentment can be inferred when the latter writes that although she “suckled from Kinaray’s nourishing milk” such sustenance was disrupted when English was imposed as the medium of instruction (xi). She shared (the violence of) what many of us from the same generation experienced: being penalised for speaking in our own tongues. For Asenjo, her poems in Kinaray-a celebrate an immense lushness, a freedom inhering from a language that intimately shaped her tongue, her vision, her world(s).

To “trans-create” is how Geremia-Lachica views the task of translating Asenjo’s poems into English. She had to enter Asenjo’s “forest of words so lush” – that “familiar sound” from which an “ache” of longing emerges. To such ache, each poem offers a “bittersweet potion of love and longing, dearth and plenty, current and myth” (xiii). Finding their expression in English, these translations alter a language long viewed as oppressive into a tool that frees Kinaray-a’s charm onto other shores. It is a relationship that builds its fulcrum on the basis of reciprocity, no matter how aspirational the thought may sound.

As a reader, I am delighted to have been able to glimpse the abundant world not only of Asenjo's Kinaray-a but of the geographies that come across her island of Panay. I too felt the ache springing from Asenjo's delicate evocation of her birthplace vis-à-vis the dispossession many of us experience in eking out a living in urban places. What Asenjo offers to her readers is not a place that is imagined, but one against whose geography the poet herself has forged her identity as a person, woman, poet, and, in many ways, an activist advocating for a more engaged appreciation of the natural world fast eroding before our eyes. There is expanse in her poems, in her sensual articulation of love, in the probabilities of loss and triumph that mark our daily human struggles.

Each of the four parts in the volume directs readers to a fountainhead of native knowledge as Asenjo unfolds her world before us. In the first section "Looking for the Forest," the first three poems afford its readers the conflict that set what was once the people's cultural commons – myth, dreams and stories, trees, land, forest – against those systems that now force everyone into ownership, estranged by borders and enclosures. The dream of the search for forests sets the persona on an odyssey that ends with the glaring sign: "Private Property, No Trespassing."

....  
Pero bisan ang anang mga mata  
Wara makatukad sa mga bakulod  
Nga napalibutan kan kudal  
Kag salsalon ang mga kahoy  
Nga nagatubo sa tunga: lapida  
Kang mga tinaga nga indi na mabasa, masulat:  
"Private Property, No Trespassing"

Pero bug-os na nga nahangpan  
Sa anang kamatayon nga wara it rulubngan. (4)

....  
Even if his eyes  
did not scale the hills  
enclosed by fences  
with trees of steel  
growing at the center: a tombstone  
of words he cannot read nor write:  
"Private Property, No Trespassing"  
he fully understands  
upon his death there is no grave. (5)

It is a restriction that not only limits in physical perimeters but, more importantly, in psychic and cultural measures. And with each recognition and rehearsal of this dream, the persona finally encounters the answer: in each of us is the source of growth:

....  
 Rugya nagapanubo, nagalambo ang kakahuyan:  
 Ang lasang sa ana mga palad, sa punta ka mga tudlo. (8)

....  
 Here grow, here thrive the trees:  
 the forest is in hands, on his palms, at his fingertips. (9)

The poems in this section are powerful in their incantation of the wealth that one finds in myths, and how a remembrance of ancient lores allows us strength amidst the stark reality we suffer from.

In the series of poems entitled “Dao,” Asenjo recounts the renaming of her town “to the name of the person who disappeared” (17). It is a retelling that undermines the folkloric to give way to the political.

The poem “The Difference Between Then and Now” skilfully summarises what the entire volume argues for. Everything once accessible to humans is now partitioned, parcelled, weighed and assigned economic value while the real labour of human hands vanishes along with those that touch it. Hence, the opening line – “The couple pulled their hands from the earth” (27) – is striking in the way it embeds the values by which human lives were once upheld. The earthiness cascades onto the last section with the question: “You wonder why the rain has not come yet?” (27). The implied dryness contrasts the lushness of the first line where the couple’s hands touch the fertile earth.

The second section, “Getting to Know My People” delves into the persona’s efforts at refamiliarising herself with the historical wonders and cultural heritage of her ancestry while steadily locating herself in the caprices of the present. The first stanza of the poem “Getting to Know My People” is unforgiving in its commentary of how history is often misrepresented:

....  
 Nag-abot dya kanakun nga sangka panghayhay  
 kag nagpungko sa akun tupad nga sangka pagbakhu,  
 sa lubad-pagpasaylo ni Dr. James A. Robertson, nga indi na masaysay  
 ang pakighilawas nga ginahimo kang mga Ati sa bukid kag baybay: (54)

....

This came to me as a sigh

and sat beside me as one great sorrow,  
in an apologetic translation by Dr. James A. Robertson,  
that he could not recount  
how the Ati fornicated in the mountain and sea: (55)

“Naming In Another Country” delicately paints the encounters with foreign places, and how the intertwine of bodies and memories can only be evoked through one’s own world of places. The images are sensual, with many of the poems comprising the section ending with strokes so finely wrought that yearning is palpable:

....  
Andut gin-unahan mo ang mga dahon  
sa pag-ilis kang kolor, bag-o pa ang hangin  
halin sa Norte maghuyop paagto sa Sur?  
Sa diin ang imo mga butkon sa una ko nga owtum? (84)

....  
Why did you change  
before the leaves changed their color?  
Before the north wind blew south?  
Where are your arms for my first autumn? (85)

It is perhaps this section that fine tunes me into the lyrical power of Asenjo as she couches many of her poems in images so crisp and pulsating. A personal choice, I almost feel this section can stand on its own as a collection.

Lastly, the section “Sa Gihapon, Palangga, An Uran” finely concludes the collection. It is a farewell but one that promises a reunion that is anticipated in the poem “Tale of the Conch Shell.” The *budyong* (conch shell) is a familiar image at this point of the book. But the poem returns to its ancient significance by using it as a device through which stories from distant shores could be told. In faith and silence, it is heard clearly: “we will meet again” (115).

## Conclusion

In an article titled “The Centre Cannot Hold: Six Filipino Contemporary Poets,” Australian poet Stuart Cooke traces the many fissures in today’s Philippine literature. While his selection of poets is confined to those writing in English, his valuation of the country’s poetic production inevitably touches on the dynamics of languages, and how this elucidates the historical processes that continue to shape the country’s national literature.

Fascinated by what he had observed during his brief stint as a visiting writer in the country, Cooke remarks that the “Philippines is a microcosm for the world-at-large” and “ambassadors of the future.” By this, he refers to how

Philippines' linguistic diversity, partly an outcome of serial colonialism, is something he finds in Australia as well as in many parts of the world. It is this polyphony that will be the sound of the future.

While I agree with Cooke's views in general, there is a need to mention that the "centre" is no longer hostage to the debates of what may singularly define national identity and literature. Gemino H. Abad's landmark theorising of the "native clearing," of how Filipino writers rework English into our own linguistic terrain and, thus, into our possession by virtue of it being a historical bequest, reduces its colonial hold on us. What has matured over the decades is the way we have come to embrace how the term "Filipino" – for all its fractiousness – may hold the centre together after all.

The three works discussed in this essay testify to the burgeoning of the country's cultural and creative yield. Charlie S. Veric, Mesandel V. Arguelles and Genevieve L. Asenjo are poets of varying persuasions and temperaments who labour amidst the disjunctures that define the Philippines as a nation, a culture, a history, a future. With their gifts of insight, they know too well how to craft into meaningful cadences our own experiences of homeliness and longing, of erasure and lostness, or of the mythic promise of an eroding world that can only be renewed by dreaming. Such visions can only be achieved in a unison of voices which the Philippines has in abundance.

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