

In Stitches: Con/Refiguring the Language of Wit and Humour in Contemporary Filipino Poetry in English

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Abstract

Philippine poetry in English is rarely read as humorous text, but the period from the 1970's to the present is seen as creating a liberating space for poetry, and I posit that part of this "liberation" is the rise of new poets whose awareness of and engagement with language, result in works that could actually be seen as humorous, in which humour is seen as more than just universal mirth over human folly, but is consciously delineated as a sharp, if not violent, recognition of incongruities and incongruences in expected reality.

In the poems of contemporary Filipino poets Paolo Manalo, in his acclaimed collection *Jolography* (2003), and Isabel Banzon, in *Paper Cage* (1990) and *Lola Coqueta* (2009), Filipino humour becomes a way to imagine *communitas* as the poems in these collections use linguistic play, breakage of language, creation of hybrid language in Filipino and English to respond to new Philippine social realities or re/create social hierarchies in the Philippines by repositioning or questioning individual and communal states in which Filipinos find meaning.

By using the incongruity humour theory and linguistic humour theories, this paper seeks to examine the language of humour and wit in representative poems from these collections by Manalo and Banzon, and attempts to centre a new sense of creativity possible in Asian writing that now explores the potencies of humour not just as a generator of laughter, but as entries into psychical, cultural and national delineations of identities and awarenesses.

Keywords

Philippine poetry in English, humour, *communitas*, linguistic play, incongruity, incongruity theory of humour

Philippine poetry in English is rarely read as humorous text, as its history from 1905 to the 1970's is characterised mainly by a palpable Romantic strain from 1905 to the 1940's, and from the 1940's to the 1970's, a formalist spirit (Abad).

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But the period from the 1970's to the present is seen as creating a liberating space for poetry, and I posit that part of this "liberation" is the rise of new poets whose awareness of and engagement with language, result in works that could actually be seen as humorous, in which humour is seen as more than just universal mirth over human folly, but is consciously delineated as a sharp, if not violent, recognition of incongruities and incongruences in expected reality.

In the poems of contemporary Filipino poets Paolo Manalo, in his acclaimed collection *Jolography* (2003), and Isabel Banzon, in *Paper Cage* (1990) and *Lola Coqueta* (2009), we find very palpable instances of language play, an almost literal unmooring of English as a language, and an almost confrontational engagement with English and Filipino. My introduction of the linguistic play that we shall examine in the poems of these writers is best understood using Paul McGhee's definition of humour which could explain why the yoking of or the dissonances in language, and their consequent imagery and tone, are humorous. McGhee posits that humour is a "form of play – the play with ideas," and states that "without a playful frame of mind, the same event is perceived as interesting, puzzling, annoying, frightening, etc., but not as funny" (Ruch 36). McGhee adds that "while people might be very good at spotting the incongruities, absurdities, and ironies of life, only the mentally playful will find humor in them... [t]herefore, playfulness is seen as the foundation or the motor of the sense of humor" (36).

It is also important to note that we could find humour in what could be deemed "serious" poetry by its deployment of play or playfulness in the use of language because the perceived funniness of the text owes much to the cognitive processes that either "analyze the structural properties of humorous stimuli or the way they are processed" (Ruch 24), and in this, the perception of incongruity, "the bringing together of two normally disparate ideas, concepts, or situations in a surprising or unexpected manner" (25) becomes a salient basis, and consequence, of this linguistic play that involves, among many other strategies, punning and transliterations.

Paolo Manalo's *Jolography* is a poetry collection that won the Philippines' most distinguished literary contest, the Palanca Awards, in 2002. To understand *Jolography*, we have to see it as a cartography of both familiar and defamiliarised Philippine urban landmarks and practices, in which we find the incongruities of being Filipino set against *not* being one – as one who is not Filipino has to navigate through the breakage of English as it morphs into its Filipino transliterations. These incongruities, far from being awkward or nonsensical, take on new, relevant senses in the light of social, cultural, political and aesthetic realities in the Philippines. Indeed, *Jolography* is what its title promises it is, literally "writing the *jolog*." A large, and integral, part of the success of Manalo's collection is the inventiveness with which he anchors the specific poetics of these works to the underbelly of Philippine society. His poem "Being the True,

the Good, the Beautiful and Definitive Meaning of ‘Jologs’ (Or When Is the Squattah Not the Othah)” (which he also calls his “bonus track”) is a tongue-in-cheek, waggish explanation of the jagged hierarchical juxtapositions in Philippine society. This section does not appear to be poetry at all, being as it is a dialogical positioning of the assumed largely middle-class students and the teacher as personas, the “pa-coño” kids, referring to the wealthy, English-speaking students, who represent the Filipino elite class, and the “jolog,” who, although contemporarily synonymous to the “squatter,” literally the poor who build their houses on other people’s lands, is noted by Manalo as being different from it. While we are looking at this section mainly to explain how Manalo has transformed the Filipino slang word into even newer coinage in the term “jolography,” we already see an engagement with word play, but in the guise of class discussion, when he asks for “the etymology of the word” (Manalo 78). There is a question whether “jolog” here is derived from the name of a Filipino teen pop star named Jolina, whose claim to fame aside from acting and singing is her colourfully creative way of dressing and accessorising herself that earned her the following of the Filipino lower classes (cf. “the true” 78); or whether it is a derived translation of the Filipino word “hulog” [to drop], “originally referring to the Pinoy hip-hop... especially those seen walking as a group in malls...” whose clothing “includes those very loose and wide pants that were ‘huhulog-hulog’ [literally dropping off the wearer] (cf. “the good” 78). “Jolog” could also have been taken from “the squatter of discos” called Jaloux, derogatorily deemed low class as it played “*baduy* [déclassé, in poor taste] disco music, and people who frequented the place were young fashion victims who were feeling... baduy themselves...” (“the beautiful,” 78). It may also refer to an abbreviation of “*dilis, tuyo* [small dried fish] and *itlog* [egg]” [di-yo-log] (“the definitive”) – “the food of the poor” (79). In these multiple possibilities we see here a parallel movement Manalo uses for his title poem “Jolography.” We find a parallel meandering of various peoples and classes through the literal and implied cityscape. We also note a play with chronology as he describes the movement of his speaking persona within this Filipino terrain.

“Jolography” is a poem that while written in English is almost impermeable to speakers of English who are not Filipino (and in fact even to many Filipinos themselves) as the text is replete with incomprehensible idioms, Philippine place markers that are tweaked to create new semantic references, and allusions to practices that are truly Filipino. Each of the couplets in the poem carries these departures from English, and the poem appears to be a self-referential journey into what is a seedy Filipino landscape, one inhabited by “jologs.” The first couplet actually refers to them as the speaking persona addresses a “you” in:

O, how dead you child are, whose spoiled

Sportedness is being fashion showed

Beautifulling as we speak – in Cubao
There is that same look: Your Crossing Ibabaw,

Your Nepa Cute, Wednesdays
Baclaran, ‘Please pass. Kindly ride on’ (Manalo 5)

Manalo actually explains in his glossary that “how dead you child are” “is a transliteration of the Tagalog expression “*patay kang bata ka*” which means loosely, ‘you’re dead meat’” (81). The speaking persona appears at first glance to be an entity apart from the “jolog” that parades, and the verb used here is “fashion showed,” which in Filipino is a phrase that could be colloquially conjugated simply by adding the appropriate affixes to signal tense shifts (*nag*-fashion show [past], *nagpa*-fashion show [present], *magpa*-fashion show [future]). While this makes sense in Filipino, the resulting verb form in English is almost incomprehensible, as for most, the reading here will point only to “showed” as the verb, which, by inversion, would refer to “spoiled Sportedness is being fashion” as the object of the verb, which makes even less sense. We are able to make sense of this verb use only when we see it in the context of the jologs gleefully parading themselves, “Beautifulling,” again another word whose part of speech is now violated to create a new one as this is transliterated from “*nagmamaganda*,” not just feeling beautiful, but presenting oneself to be beautiful, in the places where the masses tend to congregate: in Cubao, which is an urban, middle to lower middle class haven of shops, markets, malls, residential streets, in which could be found “crossing *ibaban*” (literally crossing above) – referring to the roadway that makes for a slower trip for public bus commuters as these are littered with bus stops, versus “*ilalim*” (under) which refers to the underpass, and “Nepa Q-Mart,” a public market frequented by middle and lower class folk (versus Farmer’s market nearby, with more expensive food stuff), now called Nepa Cute; in Baclaran in the south of Manila where a Catholic church in honour of the Virgin Mary is located, and whose novena days on Wednesdays make traffic in that part of the city a nightmare.

The rest of the poem degenerates into a list of practices, many of them verging on the carnivalesque, as these are enumerated as a testament to the “jologs” own seedy nature:

Tonight will be us tomorrowd–
Lovers of the Happy Meal and its H,

Who dream of the importedness of sex as long as it’s
Pirated and under a hundred, who can smell

A Pasig Raver in a dance club. O, the toilet
Won't flush, but we are moved, doing the gerby

In a plastic bag; we want to feel the grooves
Of the records, we want to hear some scratch—

In a breakaway movement, we're the shake
To the motive of pockets, to the max.

The change is all in the first jeep
Of the morning's route. Rerouting

This city and its heart attacks; one minute faster
Than four o'clock, and the next

Wave that stands out in the outdoor crowd
Hanging with a bunch of yo-yos—

A face with an inverted cap on, wearing all
Smiles the smell of foot stuck between the teeth (5-6).

The “jolog” is the Filipino fast food lover (referring to the McDonald's “Happy Meal”) whose commonplace names exhibit a “fondness for the letter [h].... Bho, Ghirlie, Bheng, Jhenyfer, Jhoana, Jhayson” (81), a “face with an inverted cap on, wearing all/ Smiles the smell of foot stuck between the teeth” (6), who goes home not in luxury cars but “in the first jeep/ Of the morning's route” after “dream[ing] of sex,” going to cheap dance clubs and dancing to its music, defecating (“gerby”) not in the cheap club's toilets, but in plastic bags that are later thrown away in the sewers, as is the wont of the homeless in Philippine cities, who do so because they have no access to facilities (cf. 6).

Katrina Triesenberg, in writing about humour in literature, speaks of word choice or diction as a “humor enhancer,” especially “when words are carefully chosen to evoke particular scripts in the minds of the audience” (538). We can appreciate the use of diction here as a source of the humour when we see this in the light of script opposition that rests on the apprehension of incongruity. Victor Raskin, who pioneered the Semantic Script Theory of Humour, looked at scripts as the “stereotypical understanding of an object or an event” (Triesenberg 534), or as “a structured chunk of information about lexemes and/or parts of the world” (Ruch 25) and “posits that humor occurs when two scripts that shouldn't be in the same place” are yoked together, and somehow made to make sense within that place” (534). In this poem the prevailing script is the way lower class Filipinos, the jologs, are supposed to be seen and de/valued by an/other Filipinos, here unspecified, but revealed, or betrayed, by the very familiarity the speaking persona has with the microverse

the *jolog* inhabits. This provides our initial opposition in this script, an opposition based on familiarity and unfamiliarity. The poem takes us into the apparently unfamiliar ways of a Philippine social subclass, only to realise that both the speaking persona and the Filipino reader are co-opted by that very subclass by virtue of a familiarity, a necessary albeit a possibly reluctant one, with the spaces which this subclass inhabits. I had mentioned earlier that Manalo's poetry exhibits incongruities within a Filipino national terrain which set these incongruities against being non-Filipino. But it is equally true that his poems also set the Filipino against himself in his desire to maintain affinities with acceptable classes, only to find that to be Filipino is to be mired within a complex cultural economy that is diverse, various, rich, and in which "popular and local discourses, codes and practices resist... systematicity and order" (Featherstone qtd. in Pennycook 229).

A great part of the incongruity of the poem as script is the very fact that it is written in English while it chronicles cultural realities that are so Filipino that they are almost impossible to translate. We find humorous the very attempt to do so, because this entails the creation of a hybrid English that the *jolog* may not even use, or which, on the other hand, they may just themselves invent. The opacity of the text, especially for the non-Filipino, makes the poem appear almost nonsensical, which in itself already sets it up as an incongruous text. This incongruity is itself not enough to make this humorous, as a reader's reaction to this may be puzzlement or "even an aversive reaction" (Ruch 25). Incongruity resolution theories of humour look at incongruity as the "conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke," and resolution as the "more subtle aspect of jokes which renders incongruity meaningful or appropriate by resolving or explaining it" (Shultz qtd. in Ruch 25). We have earlier pointed to an abnormal, unexpected delineation of "jolog/Filipino life" in its depiction of practices unacceptable to the dominant classes in the Philippines as one source of incongruity in this poem, and the resolution lies in our realisation that Manalo, in painstakingly creating a new language to capture this subclass' experiences, ends up reframing the fissures within Filipino society, and indeed valorising this subclass as an active agent in the cultural and linguistic development in Filipino life. Again, Triezenberg supports this by stating that cultural factors such as the recognisability or offensiveness of a stereotype" can be another "humor enhancer," as

the author who is very well-versed in the prejudices, hang-ups, taboos of the intended audience, as well as the history of humor in that audience's culture, will be much more successful than one who doesn't know these things. To use an unrecognized stereotype is to fail to make a joke; to make fun of an issue that has rubbed the audience raw is to be at best boring and at worst boorish; to not know what was funny once... is to be stale, to create a complete disconnect with the readers, and to fail utterly. (538)

“Peksman” is a poem that thrives on what Manalo refers to as “homonyms” in his explanatory notes, but which we shall look at as punning. Again, “Peksman” is premised on a Filipino “colloquial word used in promises and honesty” (Manalo 82), used almost like a default phrase to underscore one’s truthfulness. The word “peks” in Filipino does not really mean anything and the particle “man” is an emphasis word that could mean “even if.” Manalo explains in his notes: “the complete phrase is ‘*Peksman, mamatay man ako,*’ which is like ‘Cross my heart and hope to die’” (82). Given this explanation, we understand how the poem is again a dialogue between the persona making the promise, and the other who is the recipient of it.

The truth is what was taken
was maybe got, as in the heavy-
pare heavy, mostly labo.

What did you expect? To see
is to bilibid, to be blind
is too divine: in the darkness
more expectations.

This is a phone call out of season.
(Hilaw?) This is
an angel out of
breath. (Hilo?) This is a watermelon
Out of order. Hello,

Peksman, ay knew you (well, I knew you too)
Too well. For you I’ve crossed
The breaking point (the number
You dialed); for you I thought
I died (maraming namamatay
sa akala)

This is where it hit me--- the (bullet
Today will giant you) come back
Making a comeback as though killing
Time would be the reason for

Forgetting the past tense future
Imperfect diction of our ‘coz/cause, the wanna
gonna, walang-gana of course as in crash

Testing your birtud. It is what makes me

Invulnerable/ impossible
to translate the/ tomorrow seconds
of my lifespan. / What am I saying?

“I cannot get past the pronouns...”

Which is why you have to

Hirit again (making) and again (sing-
it na lang: bara,
bara, bye) (11-12).

Manalo’s opening stanza already plays with the synonymy of “taken” and “got” in the lines “The truth is what was taken was maybe got” (11), but here Manalo begins a series of homonymy, and well, takes off from there. “Maybe got” is, as he explains, “a homonym of the Tagalog ‘mabigat’ which means ‘heavy’” (82), and the speaking persona segues into allying this idea of “bigat” (weight) with the colloquial phrase used even in English – “heavy pare heavy” (heavy, dude), and mostly “labo” (unclear).

The poem continues to mine such homonymy to underscore the speaking persona’s, or the addresser’s, own negotiation of the “way to truth,” as it is his or her own complicity in the language that is used to arrive at this truth. In fact, what we see in the poem are already hints that whatever this truth is, it is almost doubtful that this could be achieved, first, because the poetic addresser does manifest this doubt: “What did you expect?” s/he says, “to see is to bilibid,” in which the phrase really refers to seeing as believing, but again the speaking persona plays even with this by resorting to the non-equivalent “bilibid,” meaning “prison” and “believe it.” The lines that follow do underscore not belief or certainty, but doubt, when we get phrases such as “to be blind is too divine,” “in the darkness more expectations” (11). Manalo’s persona follows this up by another punning situation in another attempt to arrive at communication: “This is a phone call out of season,” and then plays with Filipinized versions of “hello”: one is “hilaw,” meaning “raw,” which in reference to the unseasonal phone call could be that, raw, unpolished; and “hilo,” meaning “dizzy,” again comically referring to the “angel out of breath.” In the next stanza, the standard pronoun “I” is changed into “ay,” which could be both a Tagalog linking verb or an interjection of surprise, again a homonymic reference to a literal Filipino self.

Punning here, which is largely alliterative, involves “the repetition of a given set of phonemes [which are] scattered along (parts of) the relevant text...” (Attardo 105). Attardo adds that puns “invoke... the surface structure of language...” and are therefore “non-casual speech forms” as “in casual speech the speaker is unconcerned by the surface structure of the forms he/she

is uttering” (105). Puns, therefore, are evidently incongruous because “speakers assume that same (or similar) sounds should carry the same meanings and that therefore, if two strings sound the same, it is legitimate to bring together their two meanings, as puns do” (106). Punning, too, exhibits “wit,” which very generally is related to a “quick inventiveness in language” and a facility with liberties taken with meanings (Stott 55). Feingold and Mazzella have “defined wittiness as the ability to perceive in an ingeniously humorous manner the relationship *between seemingly incongruous things*” (in Ruch 45; my italics).

The one-sided peroration in the poem may not mean anything to us, again because of the continuous slippage of the language, but in fact this provides the tenor of the poem’s more philosophical concern, that while “the truth” is the aim of all one’s relationships, language is as much an obstacle in achieving this truth as it is the conduit to affirm this. The poem points to the impossibility of translating meaning because the persona grapples with this certainty that language should provide. But language instead betrays him/her: when s/he says, “... for you I’ve crossed/ the breaking point and then belies this affirmation by intertextually referring to a marker of futility – “the number you dialed...,” which comes from the repetitive “the number you dialed is not yet in service” that one hears when one is unsuccessful in contacting another party in the Philippines. “For you I thought I died” is a play on the Filipino rejoinder (*maraming namamatay sa akala*) made when people are literally proven to be wrong (when Filipinos preface statements with “*Akala ko...*,” meaning “I thought,” “I assumed/presumed...,” some smartaleck usually snaps back with, “a lot of people die because they thought/ assumed [wrong] things”) (cf. Manalo 82). The persona acknowledges this alienation from truth and language when he claims this enervation by language (“walang gana,” no appetite, “losing drive, faith, energy... [Manalo 82]), leading to incomprehensibility (“forgetting the past tense future,” “What am I saying?” “I cannot get past the pronouns”) and the impossibility of arriving at this verity (“impossible to translate the tomorrow seconds [“bukas, makalawa”] of my lifespan”). The onus is laid on the addressee, “which is why *you* have to/ hirit again” (a play on “hear it,” but “*hirit*” also means “to go for something,” or to make an effort to do something), and “sing it” (a truly hopeful, celebratory way to aver the truth on the addressee’s part). This ends up being a hilarious, tongue in cheek reminder, as “sing it” really reads “sing-it,” which in Tagalog may mean an innocuous verb “to insert,” or to the almost taboo, “singit,” roughly meaning “groin.” Again, in the midst of an almost lyrical/philosophical tone, Manalo brings us back to the challenge of treating language as structurally unstable because “language use in the Philippines is not only characterized by the complex intersection of and overlapping of different languages, but exhibits internal dynamism and variation” (Hau 59). Raymond Williams avers as much, when he states in his essay “Introduction to *Keywords*” that

... it is necessary to insist that the most active problems of meaning are always embedded in actual relationships, and that both meanings and the relationships are typically diverse and variable, within the structures of particular social orders and the processes of social and historical change... social and historical processes occur *within* language, in ways which indicate how integral the problems of meaning and of relationships really are. (79)

Williams looks at ways by which these new relationships and “new ways of seeing existing relationships” are made evident in language, and whether by

the invention of new terms (capitalism), in the adaptation, alteration, or reversal of older terms (society or individual), by extension (interest) or transfer (exploitation)... such changes are not always simple or final. Earlier and later senses coexist, or become actual alternatives in which problems of contemporary belief and affiliation are contested. (79)

I am using two of Isabela Banzon’s poems, one from each of her collections – “Sushi” from her earlier book of poems entitled *Paper Cage* (1987), and from her newer collection *Lola Coqueta* (2009), “DH Sunday, Hongkong.” While the collections touch on varied topics, Banzon’s play of language in these two poems focuses on the experiences of Filipina overseas workers, and while underlying these works is a poignant realisation of alienation and reification, the poetic object in “Sushi” and the speaking persona in “DH Sunday” carry comic identities “found in a sense of division or incompleteness. This can manifest itself as a conflict between alternative world views, between appearance and reality or between self-image and public perception” (Stott 60).

This is particularly evident in “DH Sunday, Hongkong,” which Banzon masterfully crafts as a villanelle, which makes the repetition of lines not just a formal imperative, but which pursues the thesis Banzon has in mind.

I’m not ashamed to be Pinoy:
My contract’s not expire
But I want a little to enjoy.

I no stop working but ‘unggoy’
Or ‘please’ they never say to me;
Well, I’m not ashamed to be Pinoy.

No play on day-off, no toy
With lift that go updown, no sorry
too but I want a little to enjoy.

I fix Pinoy foods, hot like batchoy,

very near to Jollibee.
Why I ashamed to be Pinoy?

Jewelries, pants, you like, 'Noy?
Ma'am, you pay? I take your money
'cause I want a little to enjoy.

I also buy, but cheap only, hoy,
pasalubong for my family.
I'm not ashamed to be Pinoy.
I want so little to enjoy.

The poem appears to be a straightforward depiction of how a Filipina domestic worker in Hongkong would likely spend her Sunday, stereotypically her “day-off,” and in six stanzas she delineates this leisure day that ends up being another day of “work,” only it is not now in the households for which she is paid to clean, or with people for whom she is hired to care, she spends it selling things, cooking food that other people would buy, in order to augment her income to be able to send more money to her family back in the Philippines. The script is stereotypical enough, and following Raskin, the opposition is between the unexpected “work,” and the expected “leisure.” This may be one incongruity that we see here, but that in itself is not funny, until we couple it with the breakage of English traditionally expected of “uneducated” lower class folk. In writing about the success of a Philippine film comedian, Dolphy, I have argued that in using ungrammatical, broken English,

at the background of these exchanges is the portrayal too of the abnormality of quasi-education, and the valorization of a class-engendering necessity... it points rather savagely to the reality that one's ineptness in using English underscores the equation of this ineptness with dumbness.... The comic who fails to show that he knows English, or who ends up mangling that language ironically evokes more laughter, first due to his creation of nonsensical language, but also due to his lack of sophistication. The person who knows English is therefore superior because of the assumption that he is schooled – “*may pinag-aralan*” – vis-à-vis the comic who “destroys” the language, doing so presumably because he is a fool, and therefore “*walang-pinag-aralan*.” As this is an issue that confronts the majority of [Filipinos], and one that lies at the heart of Filipino class hierarchization because it is interwoven with issues of economic independence, and life-values held by Filipinos, [this kind of] language humor... end up allying the audience with Dolphy, who see in him the uneducated dolt who rises to beat the oppressor at his own game; however, they also end up passively watching their own lack of education and opportunities being replayed for their own enjoyment, with no real or practicable solution being offered to alleviate these. (Ancheta 89-90)

This is the very humor we find in Banzon's poem, and when she begins her poem with the assertion "I'm not ashamed to be Pinoy," she deploys an apparent language of pride that sets this against an expectation of failure, given the sign of failure that the language evinces. The deliberate use of incorrect participial forms (ashame for ashamed, expire for expired) mark the speaker as the "DH" in the title (for domestic helper), but the transliterated Filipino expressions do so even more convincingly; "so pity" is a translation of the untranslatable Filipino term/concept "*sayang*," "I want a little to enjoy" and "I want to buy" (with no object), "...but cheap only". All these, while understandable, use Filipino syntactic arrangements instead of the English "I want to enjoy a little," prepositional misuse in "very near *to* Jollibee," or wrong nominal formations ("jewelries" instead of the more correct jewellery). Actual colloquial Filipino words and practices also insert the familiar here, as in the use of "Pinoy" for Filipino, or "Noy," which is a kinder way of calling a Filipino male compatriot, usually of one's age or younger, or the bringing of *pasalubong* or treats that are brought for those left back home.

The first three stanzas may be read as an almost blatant parody of servility: "I no stop working but 'unggoy'/ Or 'please' they never say to me," which could mean that they (non-Filipinos, her employers) in the guise of fairness and equality, do not call her monkey ("unggoy"), but neither do they say "please" to her. This is belied by the next stanza's lines "no play on dayoff, no toy with lift that go updown, no sorry too," in which the lines take on the guise of fractured sentence forms that mimic the cultural and linguistic infantilisation that is inherent in the Filipina as alien. The repetition of "I'm not ashamed to be Pinoy" in the first three stanzas juxtaposes her apparent pride in being Filipino against an almost pathetic circumstance of passivity and lack (waiting for her contract to expire so she could go home, and taking pride in the fact that she is a legitimate alien, and not an illegal one, not being the recipient of respect nor derision in "I no stop working but 'unggoy'/ Or 'please' they never say to me," not playing/enjoying herself on her free day, despite her desire "a little to enjoy"). In the last three stanzas, we find an ironic reversal of states in that while the speaker has changed her statement of pride "I'm not ashamed..." which now reads "Why I ashamed to be Pinoy?," we find this juxtaposed against very familiar everyday life practices such as cooking hearty soup (batchoy), selling this near a familiar Filipino fast food store (Jollibee), taking on extra jobs such as selling clothing and accessories in order to care for family back home (sending *pasalubong*). The Filipino reader of this poem will follow this narrative and will find the last stanza's "I'm not ashamed to be Pinoy," despite this being repeated throughout the text, ringing truer, given not just the speaking persona's depiction of heroic tactics for survival in a strange country, but also the assumed lack in one's native land. We follow Andrew

Stott's earlier definition of "dividedness" as a delineation of comic identity, and this we see so palpably in the speaking persona of "DH Sunday, Hongkong."

I think the last poem "Sushi" more potently, and more cunningly, encapsulates this alien experience, and while the persona in "DH Sunday" is drawn almost volubly in that poem, the economy with which the poetic object is presented to us in this poem surprises us and then swiftly shocks us with its neat, yet unforgiving depiction of the female overseas worker who ends up working in Japan.

Sushi:

Also called
Phirippine meat.

O Suzy.

"Sushi" becomes a structural parody of a haiku, in which ultimately we find that "sushi," now defined as "Phirippine meat," also parodies speech patterns of the stereotypical Japanese speaker, or at least one as a Filipino would depict him or her. We find too that "sushi" is a mispronunciation of the Filipina worker's name, "Suzy," which turns what would have been a simple word play, a sample of wit here, to a world of grisly possibilities, as the poetic diction plays with images of consumption and devouring, on the one hand, understandably allying this with work in the flesh trade (signalled by "phirippine meat" and again, stereotypically expected to be the standby of many young Filipinas who work in Japan), but also with the more unexpected turn which makes of young Filipinas literal, cut-up meat, given the spate of hard luck stories that chronicle their physical abuse at the hands of employers and clients (note the spate of popular "massacre" films in the 1990's that depicted this very victimisation, in which Filipina workers in Japan were depicted as massacre, or murder victims, and whose utter misfortune is in being returned to the Philippines as dead carcasses). I used the term reification earlier on to refer to many "Suzy's," and I am not far wrong, in that the equation with sushi puts them on view and for contemplation, in much the same way that sushi would be admired not just as food but as a well-prepared Japanese dish. In such a short poem, Banzon is able to encapsulate the horror of this experience by way of an almost mocking tone in the poem. Using Kronenberger's view, we can see this both as "wit," and as "humor":

Where wit is a form of criticism or mockery, humor includes an element of self-criticism or self-mockery; where wit tends to proclaim imperfection, humor wryly acknowledges it.... At its best, humor simultaneously hurts and heals, makes one larger from a willingness to make oneself less. It has

essentially more breadth than wit, from being much more universal in appeal and human in effect. If harder to translate or explain, it often need not be explained or translated at all, revealing itself in a sudden gesture, a happy juxtaposition. We speak constantly of the ‘humor of the situation’, almost never of wit; just so, virtually everything that is farcical or funny derives from humor gone a bit wild (Davis 547).

While Banzon and Manalo do use similar tactics of linguistic play, Banzon more directly addresses a very contemporary Filipino concern in these two poems, the traffic, conscious or forced, of Filipino women in the overseas workplace. Manalo pushes English to the brink of incomprehensibility in order to birth a new consciousness about how English and Filipino, to borrow Hau’s phrase, “constitute a matrix” (and perhaps not just these two languages in the future) in which the specificity of Philippine experience “is identified as ‘common’ or ‘different’ from the experience of other cultures” (60).

Filipino literary humour in these contemporary Philippine poetic texts becomes a way to imagine a new *communitas* as the poems in these collections use language (Filipino and English) to respond to new Philippine social realities like the overseas foreign worker diaspora, or re/create social hierarchies in the Philippines by repositioning or questioning individual and communal states in which Filipinos find meaning. In the same guise, these are also poems whose linguistic play, breakage of language, creation of hybrid language, present the irony of isolation that becomes one evident and poignant, if blackly funny, consequence of this new linguistic configuration.

In examining the language of humour and wit in Banzon and Manalo, we centre a new sense of creativity possible in Asian writing that now explores the potencies of the region’s local humour not just as a generator of insular laughter, but as entries into awarenesses and understandings of psychological, cultural and national delineations of identities.

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