

Queer Reading into Queer Writing: Affirming the Self through Words

*An Online Generalist Class On GlobalGRACE's Work Package 4: Making Life Loveable: Digital and Literary Productions of Cultures of Equality Among LGBTQ Young People in the Philippines**

* The Philippine work package employs the mode of the creative writing workshop to engage with LGBTQ+-identified young writers in the Philippines and the intersecting forms of inequality they experience. The scene of the workshop is an opportunity of pedagogy, not only on the form and ethic of queer expression, but also on the various possibilities of subjectivity that can be imagined through solidarity in suffering and the aspiration to a life of being loved and cared for. There are two workshops held every year. First is a competitive national workshop hosted by the University of the Philippines at Diliman, which gathers LGBTQ+ writers from all over the country, who arguably embody a variety of queer sensibilities. The workshop also serves as a conference on the state of queer writing, exploring predicaments and engaging lines of flight session after session. The second workshop is community-oriented, held at the YMCA Rinali in Laguna province, catering to a select group of young people whose life experiences of queerness are mediated by methods of creation adapted from the literary practice of an invited facilitator. At the end of the workshop, it is hoped that these young people are empowered to articulate themselves queerly through life writing. The two groups have converged a couple of times and their encounters have also been instructive as far as redefining queer fellowship within a writerly community is concerned. [Summary by Jaya Jacobo]

About this Generalist Class

In keeping with the primary objective of the Philippine Work Package for GlobalGRACE, this online course has been designed with the beginning queer writer in mind.

It has several “sessions,” each drawing from materials coming from the National LGBTQ Writers Workshops: essays, poems, and stories, written by young Filipino queers who, during their residencies at these short-term retreats, received peer and professional feedback and friendly counsel on the craft—as well as on the inner and the outer lives—of queer creativity.

Our hope is that the subscriber to this online class will receive similar steady guidance—as well as cheer and encouragement—as they make the intimate personal journey from reading into writing, all for the sake of arriving at a clearer awareness, acceptance, and appreciation, of the queer and creative self.

Dear online student: the pace at which you wish you take this class will be entirely up to you.

We hope you will find this short educational experience enriching, meaningful, and enjoyable.

Welcome!

Session One **Seeing/Being Seen**

We begin our online course with this object:



“Kikay kit”: this is the Filipino *gayspeak* slang for makeup kit, whose rudimentary form is the compact-mirror, with accompanying face powder. Entirely functional, this ordinary item turns the beholders who refer themselves to it into an object and a subject—an outside (the “seen”) and an inside (the “see-er”), who are both active and agential, inasmuch as the kit itself is a tool to fashion, tweak, and indeed “make up” the self. In many ways, it is the in/congruence between the two, the awareness of the difference between the inner life and the outer life, that serves as an everyday entry-point into the inescapably social practice of selfhood, one of whose primordial attributes is that it must—for it to be intelligible—*be gendered*.

In one or two sentences, try answering any four of the following questions:

1. How does the sight of a face mirror and/or makeup kit make you feel?
2. What is your earliest memory of a face mirror and/or makeup kit? What is the context of this experience? Was this experience and/or this context a gendered one?
3. How important is your reflection to you? Would you prefer this reflection to be feminine or masculine or something else?

4. Describe the appearance of your skin in your ideal reflection of yourself? Where might you have gotten this ideal from?
5. What are the shades of facial powder, lipstick, eyeshadow, and blush-on that you believe best suit you? Why these particular shades and not the others?
6. When (and where) is the best time for you to look into a mirror? How much permission do you allow yourself to consult your own reflection? How often and why do you do this?
7. Generally speaking, do you like the face that looks back at you when you consult the mirror? What actions do you allow yourself to perform to close the gap between the inner and the outer you?
8. How important is it you to like what you see when you look into a mirror?
9. Do you think your reflection in the mirror is approximately or entirely the same as yourself? If not, which would you prefer others to know and, possibly, desire or love?
10. As occasioned by your reflection in the mirror, try to answer the following questions: Who are you, really? Who do you wish to be? How easily can the reflection that you see in the mirror allow this wish to come true? Is it the reflection only that impedes this wish from becoming realized, or is it rather something else?

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From Object to Subject: A Reflection

Arguably a staple of queer life in the Philippines, in which this Work Package took place, the *kikay kit* may stand for all the appurtenances, tools, and techniques that queer subjects avail themselves of on an everyday basis, to fashion and constitute themselves, as a matter of physiognomic or even, loosely speaking, sartorial and/or self-presentational, style.

As embodied and performed, the self proves to be, hence, at once factual and textual—a lived reality as well as a signified and signifying production and productivity that, for queer subjects, needs to be individually and collectively sustained and championed against the culturally endorsed hatred (and ignorance) that seeks to thwart if not obliterate it. To be queer is to know and to live in the gap between interiority and exteriority, and to resist the everyday neglect and erasure, out in the public sphere, of one's inner truth, one's most intimate self-understanding.

The Philippine work package for GlobalGRACE features verbal expressivity and other forms of textual—audiovisual and spatiotemporal—performances by young Filipino LGBTQ individuals who are either beginning or aspiring writers.

The poems, stories, essays, installations, “films,” zines, and graphic art pieces that come out of these workshops are “textualizations” of their authors’ queer selves. As with the kikay kit, we may think of queer creativity as a way of apprehending one’s own place in the world, and as a form of self-representation or “self-écriture,” through which the queer subject’s inner life can be at once grasped, shaped, and externalized—a technology through which this self is figured and refigured, by which it can be more happily inhabited, and through which it can be more fully and abundantly lived.



While the image in the mirror is the self as others see it, writing and creativity are the image of the self as compositional: the self as it at once sees and creates—and recreates—*itself*.

Not unlike a mirror, the texts that we compose and write out of our lives return the image of our selves back to us.

Like the shape of our own likeness on any reflective surface, what others see of and *as* us may simply be taken as an object of perception.

By contrast, being acts of intense and intimate attention, the images that we draw, that we write out of ourselves are finally not so much objects as subjects: perceivers themselves, who see and are seen.

Let it be clear, then: the self that we write is an image—nay, a mirror—that we ourselves create, out of our very lives, and the desires that animate them.

Second Session

Knowing the Self: An “Origin” Story

All the fellows to the Work Package’s writing workshops were asked to write a response to the prompt, “Where I Am From.”

What follows is an essay by Macky Torrechilla, a transfeminine agi (loosely, queer) from Hamtic town in the province of Antique, located on the island of Panay, in the central Philippines.

Gypsy

By Macky Torrechilla

Where I come from, they call me Mac-mac. Some call me Macky, but my mother calls me Macoy. When I won a gay pageant¹ in the town back in 2017, it was easier for people to remember my name and recognize me. Now, my name is etched in almost every person’s mind in our small town because of the waving tarpaulins posted after I won the pageant. The barangays² in my hometown are either coastal or in the mountains. But I was raised in neither. I grew up in the Poblacion, where people wake up early in the morning, not really to tend to their children’s breakfast or sweep the littered rubbish in front of their houses, but to bring their mugs of coffee in a small, make-shift shed and make comments on the lives of their neighbors. By 5:30 in the morning, when the dusk has just greeted the earthlings, all the tiangge³ would lift open their wide lids and newly-woken up people still rubbing their eyes would already start buying *Kopiko* or *Nescafe Creamy White*.⁴

But where I really came from was missing for 19 years. The person who bore me for nine long months had been absent while I was growing up. I was months-old when she left me to my grandmother’s care. She went to Manila and after two years of constantly writing and answering letters of my Nanay,⁵ my grandma, my mother just disappeared from the family. No response. We were left with no traces to follow for 19 years.

¹ In the Philippines, “gay pageants” may be better understood as beauty pageants for transwomen; they are held almost universally in the archipelago, usually as part of town or city fiestas and festivities.

² A barangay is the smallest local government unit; several barangays constitute a town.

³ A tiangge is a night market or bazaar.

⁴ Kopiko and Nescafe Creamy White are popular instant coffee brands.

⁵ Nanay means “mommy”; in the author’s life, however, “nanay” referred to her grandmother.

So, a part of me came from the palda⁶ of my Nanay which I wore as an eight-year old kid, from her old red lipstick that I curiously put on, and from the set of books she bought me when I was nine, which was the very first ones I had. Now I have lots and lots of books, and Nanay saw how it compiled in my room through the years. Mama only got to see the pile when she decided to come home June of last year.

I came from the every ten-peso coin my uncle gives me as baon⁷ to school during my elementary days, and the every 50-peso bill he hands me during high school. If I am to calculate the money my uncle provided me from elementary to high school, perhaps that is the amount of the medals I received during graduation. But no. The looks on Nanay and uncle's faces when I went on stage to receive the award was priceless. So now, I don't bother counting the money I hand to them that comes from my salary.

I come from many different places and I continue to travel like a nomad, maybe because I like the idea of being a magical gypsy. But definitely, I came from the womb of my mother who never had a father for me and I inherited a surname that is widely spread. I came from the blood of Sumakwel and Alayon who settled in our place and bartered with Marikudo and Maniwantiwan.⁸ I came from a nurturing childhood filled with liberation. And I came from Hamtic, a quiet town in Antique, which gave me my first crown and a voice to stand up as a brave queer.

*

After reading Macky's short personal piece, write your own response to this prompt, whose aim is to urge you to look back on—and to reclaim, through both memory and imagination—the journey of your life, thus far.

⁶ Palda means "skirt."

⁷ Baon means "pocket money."

⁸ According to local mythology, Sumakwel, Alayon, Marikudo and Maniwantiwan are the founding parents of Panay island.

Third Session **More Origin Stories**

The following poem was written by the young gay poet, Alfonso Manalastas.

Where I'm From

By Alfonso Manalastas

Where I am from is a spoonful of steaming white rice;
a parcel of ripe mango perched eloquently on top
like the spiral drip of a muse's body.

Demetria is a homemaker through and through,
spit shines decades' worth of antique flasks and clay bowls
before plucking mangoes from her garden of Eden,

poises all four feet and eleven inches of her body
onto the Narra chair for recuperation
as she mechanically summons

the odd quasar of a spoon into her mouth
with a trembling hand—sap and grain erupting
behind her sheepish, almost childlike grin.

This is how I remember the woman:
Demetria, climbing gates from inside to peer
above the fence, eyes probing for a boy in his bicycle

teetering down a street; his young, pulsing knees
hungry for the gush of asphalt heat. On some days,
the boy lends himself to a kite string, tugging

the makeshift bird against the dexterity of the clouds;
and landlocked still, Demetria lingers by the fence
to watch over the boy at war with the sky.

As nightfall looms, merienda is served: a mango
halved on a small plate next to steaming white rice.
One for Demetria, one for her grandson.

Every day, the boy learns to defy long-held beliefs:
laws of balance, of gravity, of flavor, and as once told,
that everything good is better with rice. Everything is.

*

Food always links us back to our childhood. Write an essay or a poem about an early memory of food—how it was made, how it felt to eat it, where and when and with whom. Fill your piece with as many details as possible. Don't worry about whether it unmistakably means something: the point of this exercise is simply to remember as vividly and as particularly as you can.

Fourth Session

Description as Encoded Desire

Creative writers don't necessarily know, well ahead, the meaning of the story or the poem that they are writing. What distinguishes creative writing from other forms of composition—journalistic and academic, for instance—is that, quite often, in and for creative writers, the knowing is in the very writing. The creative work writes itself and leans toward meaning, as it were, the more you flesh it out.

A case in point: description, or the verbal conjuring of imagery, itself is meaningful, for it is—in the words of the poet, Mark Doty—nothing if not “encoded desire.” What this means is that the only way we can effectively describe a thing—carefully capturing it, in words, in all its specificity—is that if we somehow, on a fundamental level, actually desire it.

Read the following poem by Nico Pablo, and pay attention to how it describes—which is to say, desires—the object (here, the Other's body) to which it lyrically attends.

Lover's Synecdoche

By Nico Pablo

To sing your bones is
to release you, long
before I keep
a single bead
of sweat.
Memory is a
wishbone snapping and then—
two clavicles
engulfing the wilderness
sewn between these
blankets.

I forget the gristle
of guilt. I am nakedness
of want.
I am virgin's rapture.
I am

an account of
deep exploration—
drawn string of Cupid's bow,
suckle on the fruit of a rounded lip,

skim an incisor, film of spit,
the ghost of soap haunting
slope of a neck.

How I have held you:
wrists crossed,
the nooks under your armpits,
pelvis upon lumbar.
The body of fear, I feel his rib
cage, the uninvited partner.

We,
victims of solitude,
on a quest to wholeness.
We cause each other
to glisten.

*

Write a “tribute poem”—often called an “ode”—addressed to a personal body part/body parts (your own, or another person’s) that you particularly like or admire.

Fifth Session

The Forbidden

There is something inherently “creative” about being queer, for to be queer is to be outside the norm. This is another way of saying that to be queer is to live in an active questioning and challenging of what’s given, what’s permitted, what already exists.

You have two options for this session.

For the first, you may read the short story by Joseph Dazo, “Red Devil,” and respond to it by writing the story of a “touchy” childhood secret that you have, until now, been steadfastly keeping (bear in mind, as you are writing, that this secret may or may not be entirely true).

Begin with the phrase “When I was a child, I...”

<https://www.pinoylgbtq.com/fictionist-joseph-dazo>

For the second, you may read the powerful poem, “Cemetery” (in the original, “Patyo”), by Macky Torrechilla, whose conceit leads to the articulation and the frank transgression of a taboo (for it concludes on a hyperbolic and shockingly psychopathic thought). The speaker in this poem is an impoverished and unapologetically resentful *agi* (the local word for “queer,” mostly feminine-identified), who gives head to men in the midnight darkness of the public cemetery, one of the very few places this kind of desire can find precarious room to express itself in.

Cemetery

By Macky Torrechilla

The dark witnesses
demons,
elementals,
ghosts
quiet in the corner
before the moans of two souls.
Here, they sleep,
here, they rest.
Here, I’ll spit,
kill, and bury
the future of those
who would have been doctors,
teachers, engineers, seafarers,
the unemployed, prostitutes, addicts,

criminals.

*

Write your own poem, in which you willfully explore a topic that's considered taboo (it may or may not be sexual).

Sixth Session

Growing Inward/Coming Out

The following essay was written by a Muslim *bantut* (loosely, “gay man,” in the Tausug language of the southern Philippines) who writes under the pseudonym, Ibrahim Taib.

Where I Am From

By Ibrahim Taib

I was born in Zamboanga City, but that’s just paperwork. If by “from” we mean the point at which a person begins, then we may argue that she only truly begins with her coming into consciousness, as acted upon by many influences of course, but ultimately as a consequence of her own will.

We must also acknowledge the many variables that have journeyed along with the individual to that point of cognizance. With me, it was the irreversibly interlinked culture, values, and religiosity of the Tausug peoples of Sulu, followed and practiced strictly by my parents who migrated to Zamboanga to start our family.

Zamboanga is an ambivalent city. Its city hall stands proudly, displaying its Spanish colonial architectural design at the heart of the downtown area. Its “Spanish-ness” stretches in all directions, from the magnificent Fort Santiago to Cawa Cawa Boulevard, and farther on.

Festooning it on all sides, however, are the veils of Muslim women—the vividly woven designs of the Maranao and Tausug, all the malongs and hijabs being sold by enterprising mothers. The Protestants, Catholics, Christians, and Ang Dating Daan [evangelical] followers all fall into respectful silence when noon comes, as the mosques’ Bilals start to chant the Adhan. And at a table of friends, a late Muslim woman may enter with a hurried “Salam!” and proceed to explain her reasons in Chavacano; her friend may respond in Filipino, another in Tausug, and they might just end their banter with goodbyes muttered in thick-accented Englishes. Spatially, culturally, that’s the Zamboanga I am from, or at least how I remember it. However the “you” of the question (which is to say, my “I”) is a more important matter to address.

My formative years were not my own. A child may claim she knew her identity at the age of seven, and she may well be right. However, she may have also witnessed something at that age; she may have made an observation that has forced her to keep her “self” to herself. In my many meditations about my past, I can say that this may well have been the case for me, and it may well have been my first experience of trauma...

I remember the biceps of men, glistening and toned. I remember blue basketball jerseys. I remember the Tausug language, hard, forthright, and proud. My mother was there wearing a malong, crouching and cooking in an earthenware pot and tending to the firewood. Our

house then had no yard and the fence and house walls pressed against each other. Roosters were constantly crowing and smoke was rising from the kitchens of the other houses. I must have had friends before; my parents mostly did not allow us outside. If I did, I do not remember.

Vague memories, all of them... Mostly, I remember Uncle Gulam. My brother and I—there were only the two of us, at the time—never knew his full name. We only called him Uncle Goli, while the grownups called him Gulam. I do not recall him caring for my brother; all my aunts and mother told me was that he cared for me. He was the first gay man I knew. In my language, they/we are called “bantut.”

Goli never attended mosque prayers, even if it was required of all Muslim men. He never attended social occasions either. Or rather, he attended them, but confined himself mostly to the kitchens, along with the women serving at these events. His main duties were really just buying produce from the local market, and cooking the food. There were many coffee sessions after Asar, the Islamic afternoon prayer. Goli would serve them all from a tray, together with Baulu, Pitis, and Hantak: all of them were short and balding, and they were often to be seen sashing about in pink shirts and short shorts.

Goli would sit in a corner, ready to serve, as my father and the men he'd invited from the congregation would talk politics and business. Uncle Goli would now and then chime in, but the response would be the same: an agreeable silence, and a faint spark of thought, as though what he said was the signal to move on to the next topic. Any men who visited home would ask him in a mocking and audibly girlish tone, “When will you marry?” He would reply with a strained smile, or a raised eyebrow, and would promptly retreat to his room. The women who heard this would chuckle, and some would even look at me knowingly. Whenever I did something girlish, people would jokingly quip that this was all to be expected, as I was cared for by Uncle Goli when I was young.

It was gradual, but my preference for solitude grew. I started reading and watching movies, anything that would give me an excuse not to be around people too much. I continued to be observant but detached all the way to high school, which was an even harsher time, and then to college (in Zamboanga), in which dark desires expressed themselves in a love of alcohol, smoking, and arriving home late in the morning—all forbidden by religious and domestic rules.

Mockeries continued, secrets deepened, and a support system was still nowhere to be found. This was a small city after all, and at every turn there was someone who knew someone else who knew the members of one's own family. Soon, a restlessness developed inside me, growling, clawing, festering, wanting to gnaw its way out. I finally decided that enough was enough. I dropped everything, and proceeded to Manila to pursue my studies.

I felt the electric burst of energies from the airport going to Sampaloc, Manila. The traffic, the severe expressions on the faces of city folk, the heightened stress of metropolitan life—all this was a welcome change from the rustic and laid-back rhythms of my hometown. After I had settled into my room in our first home in the capital, a small, roach-infested apartment near España Boulevard, I lied to my brother (then studying at the University of Santo Tomas), and went down to the street outside to smoke. I felt the gush of freedom when I

turned a corner from our building, smoking freely, openly, on the side of the edifice, with absolutely no one caring about my standing there. While my over-cautiousness—paranoia—subsided a little as I began to explore the city, it never really went away.

I still did not reveal my love for men then. But in just about every classroom I entered, and eventually, in all the jobs that I landed, there always were secret admirations, seductions, and longings. So many longings. Soon I began to learn the secret language of the closeted, a language in which the greeting was a long, meaningful glance, confirmed by a turn of the interested head, or an affirming lift of the eyebrow. And on and on it continued: the hesitancy, the guilt, the repression. I carried on this way throughout my years at the Lyceum of the Philippines, as well as my one year in Dubai, and my three months in Thailand.

As I grew up, my “I” eventually, softly, revealed itself, insinuating itself through the layered filters, the “defenses,” that I had built to protect myself, and my family. Until, at last, I came out to one of my friends in Thailand. She told me the same thing that all my other friends to whom I would eventually come out also told me: “Halata naman, wala lang kameng proof talaga”; “Gurl, alam ko naman, pero good na sinabi mo na din, musta feeling?” [We’ve long suspected as much, we were just waiting for you to confirm it. Girlfriend, it feels good to come out, doesn’t it?]

“Congrats! Matagal na naming alam!” [Congratulations! We’ve known all along!] One confidante became four, four became twelve. At this point I decided to enter into yet another school.

With my failed plan to teach abroad, I decided to come back to Manila and pursue a Master’s Degree. I was eventually accepted into the Creative Writing Program of De La Salle University, where classes are held every Saturday. I instinctively tried to hide my sexuality, until a classmate casually said, “Girl, lunch tayo” and at that moment I thought, “the hell with it; I’ll be gay only during Saturdays.” Needless to say my Saturdays eventually turned into weekdays, during which I would reveal bits of myself to people that I trusted. I felt I had been inhaling all throughout my childhood, and finally, at the ripe old age of twenty-eight, I could exhale all I wanted!

I told myself: “As long as none of this ever reaches my family in Zamboanga.” About this I was, I am, certain.

My biggest risk, my greatest blessing came when I was accepted into the Second LGBTQ National Writer’s Workshop. With all my special requests for “pseudonymity” granted, I received not only guidance in the craft of writing, but also much-needed help as far as my overall well-being, my selfhood, and my sexuality, were concerned. A late-blooming butterfly, I find I am still scared to leave my chrysalis behind, even though I know that the time to completely break free and come into my own has come.

I hope you understand it when I say that my life, my “self,” as I have chosen to live it, really only began in my young adulthood.

Now I’m thinking that this “I” will probably always stay unfinished—for it is a lifelong work in progress.

I'm thinking this may well be true for one's own gender identity, and one's own sexuality, as well.

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After reading Taib's personal essay, try to write your own "coming out" story. Pay special attention to the people and/or situations that both confounded and sustained you through this difficult process.

Seventh Session

The Beloved: A Lover's Discourse

There are two activities for this session.

For the first, read the short story, "All that Remains of Summer," by Sigrid Marianne Gayangos.

In a short essay, write out your thoughts on how and why queer love is both different from and similar to our world's normative (i.e., cis-gendered and heterosexual) love. You may take off from this story of a complex or "difficult" woman-to-woman love—between the narrator and the beloved, Alex—in trying to answer this question.

<https://www.pinoylgbtq.com/fictionist-sigrid-gayangos>

For the second, read the poem, "Terramycin," originally written in Filipino, by the young gay poet, Steno Padilla. Remember that in any love poem, only the lover speaks. The beloved is silent. The beloved doesn't even have to know he or she is being spoken to. As Roland Barthes tells us, the lover's discourse is mostly a discourse of solitude.

Terramycin

By Steno Padilla

So this is how it is
to be cared for when
the body feels
the pain of
the pinky finger.
You are holding
my finger while
applying
Terramycin, and

then you'll wrap it in
a yellow-colored
Band-Aid so it
won't get worse.
So, you're scared of
blood, but you didn't
hesitate
to touch me
and heal the

small wound
that would've
healed on its own even if
you didn't bother.

You are there
beside me
even in
the little things.
So this is how
happy it feels to be cut
by the cover of canned
Argentina
corned beef. The deliciousness
of beef is nothing
compared
to your care.

*

Compose your own “lover’s discourse,” in the form of a poem or a story. As in Padilla’s piece—in which the careful tending of the persona’s injured finger becomes an occasion to reflect on love—write it as though it were a letter, in which you are speaking, tenderly and inwardly, to your beloved, who doesn’t literally hear.

Eighth Session

Queer Pride: Affirming Love, Affirming Life

The pandemic has acquainted us all with the idea—and the practice—of quarantine.

It bears remembering that queer people understand the truth of quarantine in a rather specific and special way.

This is because queers are all bracingly familiar with the everyday reality of desire, whose brutalization and thwarting it would seem to be this heteronormative world's gleeful mission to carry out.

As we know, desire is our first and final sequestration—our existential quarantine—for by its very definition desire cannot ever be fully satisfied or met.

This is because we are all essentially exiled from one another into our own singular shapes, whose defining boundary is our skin—the barrier that divides Self and Other, which makes both possible to begin with.

Love, then, is the leap of faith across this chasm, this ontological border: an aspiration toward togetherness, toward oneness, despite the magnificent odds.

One of the lessons of queerness is that despite the impermeability of our skins' necessary fictions (and frictions), still and all we remain perfectly capable of loving, and being loved.

Only because in our tight-fisted world queers must remain ever-desirous, they understand that recognizing love's solitude isn't necessarily denying its existence, nor our inextinguishable need, to experience it.

Finally, the hope of this online course is to be able to affirm all the beautiful and queer forms that human love may take, for love is the condition of our very possibility—of our being and our becoming—in this dear and fugitive life.

Write a poem that affirms desire, that affirms love, that affirms the mindful and everyday living of a life.

For a possible model—to which you may choose to directly respond—you may use this “chronologically structured” poem by Nico Pablo.

Crush

By Nico Pablo

I am nine.
I have my first male class adviser.

Something is different; I notice his ears too often,
his skin the color of coffee I do not drink yet,
his perfume that lingers in the air
of the classroom at dismissal.

I am eleven.

I pretend to be a slave to the clock,
turn my head like a sunflower
seeking its sustenance.

I find it in the cherubic face
of the class president.

He catches me once and beams,
his cheeks cushion the eyes that
narrow likewise into smiles.

The sunflower goes against its nature,
wilts in the heat of what keeps it alive.

I am twelve.

A classmate walks up to me, impish grin.

Hey, do you do this?

He forms a circle with his meaty hand,
pumps it up and down above his groin,
sticks out his tongue.

My blank face gives away my innocence.

Not so many months later,

I turn a newspaper page
and a vision appears to me -

a bronzed god emerges from the ocean.

I study where every sinew leads

and think of Adonis in my mythology book.

I finally understand what the hand-circle is for.

I tuck the paper in a dark corner of a cabinet.

I am fifteen, sixteen, seventeen.

I try to talk to girls at parties.

I message them online.

If this is what love is supposed to feel like,
then it feels like nothing.

I feel more alive when I slip

past the stony gaze of the saints

in the hallway of my home

and into the computer room,

to discover how divine fire tastes when

it explodes in my body,

torch lit by images of reclining men.

I am eighteen.

I see a giant of a man in class,

commit his full name to memory during roll call,
believe in Fate when we're assigned to the same group.
I sit with him on the floor, but how can I concentrate
on literature when already I write verse
as my sight sails a maiden voyage
across the sea of his shirt,
the grooves of his shorts,
the golden forest that grows on his chin and shins?
There is no shadow of a crucifix
to flag this expedition.

I am twenty-three.
I feel like a stranger in my own clothes
when I'm on dates. A crepe halved with
an almost neighbor turns into one movie,
then three, several chai teas, paintings, dinners.
If Time always reaps rewards,
I learn what risk looks like instead:
a taxi ride of a martyr ending in tears.

I am twenty-five.
I have created a chimera in the laboratory of my mind;
his hair, chest, shoulders, arms, belly, legs gathered,
snatched from men in movies, streets, gyms,
boardrooms, daydreams. I visit him whenever
I grow bored. I'll have to release him
one day but not now, not today.
Oftentimes I cannot cross the threshold.

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Ninth Session

From Self to Others: Building a Community

At the end of each workshop, the fellows were asked to share their thoughts and impressions about their experience.

All of them remarked that what the workshop provided them, first and foremost, was self-affirmation and a safe space within which to learn—along with peers coming from different linguistic, cultural, and personal backgrounds—the intricacies of the poetics and the politics involved in writing about themselves, their aspirations, their desires.

At the end of their workshop residency, the fellows all discovered that they need not be and indeed were not alone: they belonged to a community of fellow-queer creatives, and these friendships and solidarities are meant to and hopefully will be life-long, profound, and sustaining.

Sometime in June of 2020, smack dab in the middle of a nationally imposed “enhanced community quarantine,” a selection of fellows to the first and second national LGBTQ Writers Workshops, along with a group of GlobalGRACE panelists, gathered together via social media to co-compose a renga, a collective poem made up of linked free-verse couplets.

Here, then, as a final bequest, are the text and the video recording of this renga—from us, team Philippines of GlobalGRACE, to you, our dear subscriber to this online class.

We share this poem with you now, with the hope that, through the medium of the internet if not within your own immediate spatial contexts, your thirst for self-affirmation through words will soon be fulfilled—and that you will find your own community of friends, your own companion-spirits, in the life of queer creativity, and of the written word.

Mabuhay!

Thirst

On the other side of longing is dread:
a guttering candle, dank kiss that glints

on the skin—sharp flecks from a wish
to the ghost moon that gluts on want

and devours in a manner resembling
neither hunger nor desire, only

baring the aftermath of mourning,
bearing the weight of what remains.

Dreams come over me and refuse to sleep,
even after a conceited cup of chamomile.

It is 3 a.m. The void sits on the sill, eluding
rest: the restive crest of waves, Tungkung-Langit.⁹

Outside, someone is selling salvation, calls out
an offer. Even if I look out the window, I can't afford.

Reaching into my pocket I palm a curious
trinket: bronzen memory we once shared.

As you ripple further away, I intuit
gold. One is more pristine when alone.

Prayer is a special pleading: let strength swallow
rain and tongue, salt and fingers. Nothing else

but the tender unlearning of your body—
this, slow death by water I should not have tamed.

Why dip fingers into a parched baptismal font? Mouthed,
this ring of stains—rust, tea, daybreak. A thirst I raise

to my own lips to bless memory
beyond metal and a sky that cannot return.

[These couplets have been contributed by the following (in order): J. Neil C. Garcia, Adrian Pescador, Alfonso Manalastas, Thomas Leonard Shaw, King Llanza, Nerisa del Carmen Guevara, Joel Donato Ching Jacob, Steno Padilla, Jaya Jacobo, Nimruz De Castro, Rayji de Guia, Naro Alonzo, and Nico Pablo.]

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1j0WE1c7o7o&t=58s>

⁹ Tungkung-Langit is the name of the creator god of the ancient people of Panay island, in the central Philippine archipelago. According to the myth, it was his grief over the loss of his beloved—the goddess Alunsina—that spurred him to create the universe.

Supplementary materials:

1. www.pinoylgbtq.com
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nKmv5oDzBw>
3. <https://journals.ateneo.edu/ojs/index.php/kk/article/viewFile/809/840>
4. <http://research.gold.ac.uk/22592/>
5. <http://revistaperiferias.org/en/materia/the-bakla-the-agi-our-genders-which-are-not-one/>
6. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpEU6oqcuyY&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3J0TnsXq_rz8Ot6OopQ5owHreyNpdmKhgNkfFa03aScivwWuE9FnANtYs
7. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PBAAA888.pdf
8. https://ilga.org/downloads/SOGIESC_at_UPR_report.pdf
9. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a61ee3a4.html>

The first source is the archive of the Philippine work package workshops. It includes videos and texts of the workshop manuscripts and writing prompts, together with bio notes on the fellows.

The second source is the official Youtube video of popular local band Gloc-9's hit from a few years back, "Sirena" (mermaid). The video is self-explanatory. A translation of the song's lyrics into English may be found here: <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/sirena-mermaid.html-1>

The third source is a scholarly article written by the academic lead investigator for the Philippine work package. A relevant response to this article may be found here: <https://medium.com/@LydiaAnderson/response-to-nativism-or-universalism-27ac45af5a6c>

The fourth source is an article on forms and imaginings of queer love in the Southern Philippines by GlobalGRACE researcher Mark Johnson.

The fifth source is an article on trans theory written by the ECR of the Philippine work package, Jaya Jacobo.

The sixth source is a video presentation on the first LGBTQ National Writers Workshop by J. Neil C. Garcia. It was given last September at the 2019 EUROSEAS Conference at Humboldt University, Berlin.

The seventh source is the 2014 country report on the state of SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Expression, and Sex Characteristics) in the Philippines, as prepared for the USAID.

The eighth source is the SOGIESC Universal Periodic Review prepared for ARC International by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA).

The ninth source is the 2018 Report on the Philippines by the Human Rights Watch, which identifies the many SOGIESC-related human rights abuses and privations that have taken place during the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte.

This course pack has been prepared by lead academic investigator J. Neil C. Garcia (University of the Philippines Diliman), with the kind assistance of Early Career Researchers Prof. Johann Vladimir Espiritu Prof. Jaya Jacobo, and Prof. Nerisa del Carmen Guevara, and NGO partner Prof. Kate Ramil.