Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research
Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter 2023)

Archipelagic Interiority: Notes and Reflections on Poetic Voice and Trans Writing in the Philippines

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Travelling to and from centers, between "worlds"

I am interested in thinking about voice in poetry. In particular, the voice in my poetry collections spanning nearly a decade: *travelbook* (2013); *Then, Beast* (2017); and *In Praise of Wilderness* (2021). It is often supposed that the poetic voice is imbued and animated by the poet's sense of self. By sense of self, however, I am suggesting neither the autobiographical mode in writing poetry nor confessional poems per se; what I am gesturing at is the poetic voice that embodies the simultaneously singular and communal experiences and sensibilities of a self that is continually shaped in relation to its movements to and from spaces as well as its (re)positions in its provisional habitations. In my thinking, which is to me a form of wondering, wandering, and exploration, I read the poems I have written in the past decade or so with the notions of archipelagic thinking and "world"-travelling. I ask how the poetic voice in my own poetry so far expresses my oscillatory movements to and from varying centers, and my transsituatedness and archipelagic interiority as a trans person poet writing in English in the Philippines; and how a sense of itinerancy might allow for a reimagining of what anti-colonial work might be in Philippine literature.

To pursue poetry, I left Cebu a number of times, set out to literary spaces, moved to Manila, moved to New York; after each time, I would return to Cebu, the province where I was born and where I grew up in, which also happens to be the Philippines' cultural and economic center in the Visayas region. Living in one of the many islands in an archipelagic country with more than a hundred languages, there is always a distinct sense of leaving a center and of reaching another every time I travel, such that the country's capital Manila is not only a geographically different space but also a linguistically and socially different world as New York, too, being in a country an entire hemisphere and ocean away, is another world. In these worlds that are not the world I first learned to inhabit, I was as an outsider constructed in ways such as being assumed to be a cisgender woman who is heterosexual and fluent in Cebuano, and also one who would write, perhaps with nostalgia for belongingness, about my hometown and the ethos of my Visayan peoples.

I was aware that I was or may be constructed as an outsider, but that did not mean I held these accounts true of myself nor did it mean completely otherwise. For although I recognized I may be from another "world" I found that, nevertheless, I felt a sense of affinity almost akin to belongingness in these spaces and places that were different and away – perhaps, precisely because they were different and away – from the actual place of my origin conventionally perceived as my home. This is not to mean the inverse that I am not at home in Cebu is also true; rather, that my cognition of being at home in a world and my sensibility of affinities have grown expansive by the lived pluralities of my identities.

By "world" I mean something modified from how María Lugones thought of it as one that is inhabited by actual people whether it be a few, as in a fraction of a society, a particular society in itself or even larger to include several peoples within the realm of animating principles.[1] A world, to my sense, also includes an affective dimension in relation to a kind of durational and geographical-spatial zone that "homes" such world and the individuals inhabiting this world. In this way, a world may be thought as a relational, rhizomatic center of

[1] Lugones, 1990, p.168.

affect. It can be created temporally such as when individuals are brought together by circumstances; when diverse writers come together in workshops, residencies, fellowships, or festivals that, although may seem momentary, could be enduring in its subsequent forms as their meeting of persons may take place not only within the experienced physicality of the moment but also, among others, at the intersections of a language, at the contiguous borders of coloniality, in an interlude of what may later be understood as a lifelong advocacy, in the liminal spaces where nuanced interconnections are made as writers draw from where they have been, where they are at, together at the moment, and where they intend to move towards dreamed futures.

It is in these encounters that I found my selves in worlds with Merlie Alunan, with writers from eastern Visayas who write in their own local languages similar but different from Cebuano, with literary communities in Cebu such as Women in Literary Arts and Bathalad, as well as writers from other regions across the country through which I "became" a writer from the South. South, where Cebu is cartographically located in relation to the capital, Manila, less a geographical marker of where I am from as it is, to my sense, an identity, a position by affiliation or affinity, a kind of belonging, and complicated alliance to bring the idea of "nation" outside its conception within the confines of the country's capital. That this world, mostly populated by writers from or writing in the Southern regions of the Philippines, may also nuancedly expand to include the entire country and even the Global South, gesturing at the irreducible variation of worlds that allows a world to be a kind of center in itself, created and grown within the labile self who provisionally inhabits this world through nodes of self-identifications and self-determinations.

A world, then, is never stagnant; it is mutable. It is also interconnected in myriad of ways to many worlds that a self has previously traveled and inhabited, corporeally or otherwise. It may be first cognized through mediated introductions: overheard from someone; read from a book; seen on-screen; reimagined constantly into becoming real enough to be inhabited by a self. As my mobile sense of location and multiple habitations flow and leave traces in and through my poems, the certitude of the existence of worlds away and different from my immediate own is articulated by a voice in one of my earlier poems whose title serves at its first line, "Manila:"

> must be real, the world I see
> only on television: flood, famine
>
> the calamity of being
> human. Hearing only rumors
>
> carried through long distances
> and turning, with each swell
>
> effervescent foam and frequency
> stories into facts—seen

The voice in the poem resounds the curiosity of a speaker who is drawn to Manila as a world extraordinary not necessarily because different from one's own, but primarily because of its very existence simultaneous with and apart from one's immediate world. In spite of having learned of such place only through "television" and "rumors" the voice is steadfast in its belief that such an extraordinary place of tragedy and triumph of the spirit truly exists beyond mediated information. Later, having confirmed in person the "stories into facts—seen" the voice intimates "the idea of nestling home," that is, an openness to the possibility of moving onto and inhabiting this actual world. Implied through tone are affinities interconnecting the worlds where the voice must have been from and where the voice is sounding towards, as well as the relational spaces where the voice is at the moment of speaking.

I am cognizant that a world momentarily left would inevitably be different from the one arrived at during the moment of return. As a world is mutable so is the shifting plurality of one's interior self. The ongoing transformations of a world and of a self at the confluence of one's so-called return is projected by the voice in "To Go to Opon" showing changes happening in motion:

Have to go to Opon Have to come
Back to Opon which bus which road
which curve to take and turn to reach
the terminal bridging *this* to Opon
one foot at the station heavy with carryall
a new coat an old notebook a miscellany
of many others tag bearing a name mine once
when it was lived where now the other foot
is
swinging in the arms of trees hammock of scents
guavas in bloom and sweetsop and rose hips and
jackfruits honeyed as beehives the queen
bearing
a neighborhood of children all my brothers and sisters
running on barefeet on slippers toes dancing on dust 'til
dusk the streets potholed with rain

In this poem written after Alvin Pang's "To Go to S'pore" which he also wrote after Adam Zagajewski's "To Go to Lvov," the worldliness of the voice suggests knowledge that regardless of the intention and act of returning to a once inhabited world such world, no matter still geographically viable, may have only truly endured in memory where "a paper boat continues to sail in my mind."[2] Meaning, such previously known world may go on existing only within the expanding interiority of the self; a world that is only one of the multiple centers of affect constantly reshaped by one's accumulated experiences. Such attempts to return show

[2] Carreon, 2013, p.47.

oscillatory movements of the self between worlds wherein the self, through self-identifications and determinations, may affiliate with varying worlds by (re)forming multiple and complex relationships.

At times a self may oscillate between a world initially constructed in the mind – inhabited through affect – and the very (un)same world later found, through lived habitation, to be nuancedly similar and different from the one in mind. In my poem "America," written at a time with Maria Gillan, Joe Weil, as well as poets drawing from immigration and working class experiences, the poetic voice initially sounds thoroughly resolute in inhabiting a world made desirable by trappings and vestiges of colonialism. Towards the end of the poem, a possible double take occurs, a hint of uncertainty may be heard in the voice as the speaker's thoughts trail off:

> when we grew up we wanted to marry an American,
> go to America and live in a Big House
> because castles were not possible and princesses with frilly dresses
> no longer exist, of course we knew!
> But we could still choose the color of our rooms, the curtains,
> put on an apron and bake a cake
> for our kids who'd come running in with our dog at their heels.
> It would be late Fall or mild winter,
> the tree in our backyard would be leafless, holding our swing.

Intimated through mood and image is a speaker moving towards an idealized world desired since childhood; and an arrival at such world that, although meeting expectations, turned out to be less than fulfilling as implied by the desolate feeling evoked by Fall or winter and the leafless tree holding what could be an empty swing.

As some worlds have been historically constructed in ways that induce certain perceptions and movements, the voice in the poem suggests a relationship forged by coloniality between a self and an imagined, desirable world; a relationship made even more complex upon the actual habitation in such world wherein the self, to adapt, survive, and thrive, must have necessarily grown new identities.

Reflecting on my own relationships with languages entangled with the histories of peoples, I wrote "Babel" to describe the idea of forced departure from a world and arrival in another through the process of (un)learning a language that is a critical part of a colonial project:

> I.
>
> The first rule is attentiveness.
>
> Listen to the rock on the solid wall.
>
> Listen.

II.

Against the tower, I place my open
palms, press my left ear, press
close my eyes, my lips open,
my tongue searching

for the language *There is no need for*
Cebuano that is fast becoming thin air.

The promise was heaven—

and so, rock after rock, I had cut
the tie of my origins, umbilical cord,
fibrils the weft of memory rough

as maiz, coarse as salt of dried sardine

The voice testifies both a personal and a peoples' experience of coloniality institutionally propagated through formal education; more particularly, how such systematic education can linguistically (de)form tongues through English. The voice speaks of my realizations while I was in Manila where the primary language is Tagalog; while I was in New York with its vernacular American English; in the times I returned to Cebu with its own local language; as I oscillate between different worlds wherein language has become a form with which, as a poet, I might be (dis)connected. I realize how language can shape not only one's literary affections but also affiliations. As a Filipino poet originating from Cebu, I hold linguistic mastery neither in Filipino, the Philippine national language mandatorily taught in the academe across the country, nor in Cebuano-Visayan which is conventionally supposed as my native tongue. What I have a mastery of is in Philippine-homegrown English that enriches as it also complicates my literary affinities and affiliations. In effect, my body of work is often categorized together with what may sound to be a caveat: Philippine literature in English; Philippine poetry in English; Cebuano literature in English.

This tension reverberates in "Babel." Even though throughout the poem the voice may sound compliant, there is a kind of anxiety against "attentiveness" and "obedience" to an abrasive language that not only does the work of colonial indoctrination, but also animates an imposed framework. Such framework includes a notion of gender. In the same poem, the coloniality of gender is hinted at:

The holy book, a red Webster's dictionary.

And a tower builder, I was

translated into & replaced by a pronoun

she.

But in my dreams, I found a boy

in my bowels. He was sleeping

like a stray dog. Beside the lamppost,

baleté tree, engkanto.

The lines "translated into & replaced by a pronoun / *she*" emphasize the significance of pronouns in relation to the body and as signifier of the self. The binary pronouns "he" and "she" in English impose a categorization and being in a world that is different from the world expressed in Philippine languages such as Cebuano-Visayan and Tagalog-Filipino where a pronoun *siya* exists, referring to not only either female or male and but also neither.

I suppose the notion of one's own body is part of the self that travels from and into a world and part of what animates the self as it moves in a world. My sense is that in some worlds the body is less a defining matter; while in some, the fixity of the body's corporeality is perceived as having more, if not full authority over the mutable self. While coming out in a world may effect recognition and relations in that world, the act may have shifting (dis)continuities in other worlds. Such that, although I have come out through the publication of my poetry collections, I find it nevertheless necessary to travel creatively as I find myself substituted by different pronouns, provisionally and simultaneously, in the different worlds that my self is in relation with. By travelling creatively, I am referring to the playful attitude in "world"-travelling that enables an outsider to be creatively present in a world by both having an "openness to surprise" and being "open to self-construction."[3]

Understanding that my work is read with identitarian assumptions and with constructions of myself as outsider, travelling creatively is signified by the voice in my poems that often take on an ambiguous relation to the body. In "Circus Parade" the voice is full of wonder at the sight of bodies performing for the public:

The elephants came
walking. The circus is
in town, mist rising

[3] Lugones, 1990, p.177.

on leathery flanks and shivers
rose from my wakening
skin. Beasts

Later, in the same poem the voice expresses identifying with the parading circus animals:

Head cocked
like baby impala, I

spotted myself in the clusters
of others darting
leaping curbs, ways

to the daily shows. Until these
grace of the elephants'
days, the unusual, vivid

times: smoke and fireworks
in tented firetraps
transforming

lanky thirteen-year-olds into
caged tigers pacing, taut
orange and inflamed

In this poem, as in a number of others, the consciousness of the self is less encased by a corporeal body as it is embodied by a voice that animates the self while sensing the flesh and the boundaries of the body. As the self travels into a world and provisionally inhabits in it, the corporeal body of the self also performs for the public in this world.

I am thinking that in spite of coming out in broadly circulated print, how I am constructed in some worlds generally remains premised on the corporeal body. Might it be possible to travel onto and be recognized in a world that perceives the materiality of the body as considerably less substantial in relation to the self? In "Love without light" the ambiguous voice distrusts the body, even considers it, as well as the sight of it as a kind of impediment:

So I prefer the dark
where we can abandon
our selves, where we are
no more than senses
and desire, perhaps

love, too,
the kind that feasts
celebrating its blindness.

Suggested in this poem is a speaker who, while having an affinity with a world, wishes to inhabit in this world as a self that is recognized beyond bodily impressions. Meaning, to be present and in relation with a world without being obligated into frameworks of gender and sexuality fixated on the corporeal body.

Transsituated Voice

I was assumed as a cisgender, heterosexual woman until I began writing poems on desiring and loving a woman; this evoked the presumptive reading that both the narrative and voice in my work are mimetic resoundings of my sexual identity and perceived authorial body. When asked to explain myself for my debut collection, I grappled with ferrying into coherence a sense that at the time I was yet to find the words for. The expectation to self-identify and comply with being neatly categorized be it according to gender, ethnicity, class, among others, is a pervasive norm in welcoming outsiders into a world; and the critical significance of self-identification is well understood as a form of testimony against a world's expected insistence of conferment grounded not only on normative assumptions but also on the visuality of the body.

Broadly speaking, in the Philippines, the focus on gender in the reading of a poem is normatively practiced by attributing the poetic voice to the authorial body of its writer; and by listening to the voice for audible signals of unequal power relations between men and women or for either explicit or implied disruptions in or support of heteronormativity. In other words, there is a direct linking of what is thought to be the textual gender of a poetic voice to the presumed gender of its poet whose corporeal body is read as the legible and superseding gender marker. In reading the poems, for instance, by Erlinda Alburo or Adonis Durado, what is taken for granted is the naturalized way of looking at the poet's corporeal body as corresponding with the presumed gender of their poetic voice. While there are rethinkings done by writers such as J. Neil Garcia who makes a point on troubling readers' assumptions of textual gender by looking for and being receptive to "gay auras" in "coded" works in Philippine literature,[4] there is neither critique nor complication in the default assumption of a cisgender writer. Common understandings and trajectories in reading gender in contemporary Philippine poetry continue to refer to the bold stances either against or for patriarchy and heterosexuality.

When I came out as a "woman-loving woman" in my debut poetry collection, I spoke from my lifelong habitation in a world by women, from living and being recognized as one, from taking on female-designated social roles, and in keeping with set up conditions for lesbian visibility in the country. I entered the Philippine literary world as someone from Cebu who writes poetry in English and as someone who could be an addition to the far from robust lesbian writing in the country. Although I already had a sense that I could not yet place a name, I was nevertheless at home in the many worlds in Philippine literature. Nearly ten years later, prior

[4] Garcia, 2012, p.9.

to the publication of *In Praise of Wilderness* where I publicly changed into masculine pronouns, I came out as trans to a small circle of writers. Based on this act that was yet an extratextual dimension of my published body of work, I was subsequently excluded from the world of Filipino lesbian writing. Might such exclusion underscore a reception of texts shaped by privileging self-identification as counterpoint to the preoccupation on the authorizing corporeal body? How might forms of exclusion and inclusion configure relations of voice and gender in poems by transmen/transmasculine poets such as myself whose sensibilities, by and large, may still be informed by their continuing to inhabit worlds where they are visible and recognized only as women, and by their constant travelling onto worlds that may provisionally see them as otherwise? How may poetic voice be heard as a form of decentering, an echoing of the constant shifts of interiority?

These questions resound in the poem "the debutant" wherein the voice not only intimates a self who is uneasy of its own body but also implicitly confides ineludible sensibilities from lifelong experiences largely shaped by this body:

> Mother found out I bound my breasts
>
> bandaged them as a ribbon would
>
> wrap a gift I did not want to receive.
>
> She said nothing. Only kept still
>
> as I uncovered my chest
>
> allowing flesh to remember
>
> its swelling, swollen self.

Mother and daughter share a precious moment of inclusion-exclusion. As the mother dresses the daughter to perform in a rite of inclusion into the world of womanhood, she suddenly sees and recognizes for the first time her daughter beyond the cover of the body. The daughter senses her mother's realization: how the daughter could only provisionally inhabit in the world of women, that is, the world of the mother; and how the mother may travel into a world with her daughter wherein such "world"-travelling is characterized by a loving perception[5] that could, in effect, affectively support the daughter to continue being at home in the mother's world.

This instantaneous moment between daughter and mother shows that travelling across and within worlds, although not necessarily a conscious or willful act, may be done consciously and willfully; also, that exclusion from a world, whether the exclusion is premised on the corporeal body, self-identifications or both, do not

[5] Lugones, 1990, p.162.

necessarily mean the excluded outsider has no connections to such world, or may not travel into and conditionally inhabit in it.

Expanding the sense of inclusion-exclusion from worlds to include the relations of one's body to race, ethnicity and other identifications, history and coloniality, as well as one's complicated affinities is the voice speaking in the poem "Body 2:"

> My own brown body is not without its own memory.
> My own poor brute brown female body resisting
> the betrayal of my own forgetting, denying.
> How in too many ways I disown it, all the brown
> women who beat their breasts, disquiet and unwritten
> island histories.
>
> Love, how then can I promise you beyond this tangle
> of desire, the wild, the constant
> faithfulness in this country of white men.

At times, the sound of the poetic voice together with the narrative details in a poem and the contexts where it is drawn from are immeasurably close to its writer that it is not difficult to see why a common practice in listening to the notion of voice in poetry is through presumptive readings of the poet's identity and body. Identities, however, are plural and shifting; they may also not concur with one's body; and when identities are projected as poetic voice, the voice resounds their provisional habitations in different worlds and their mobile self-locations. Denoting identities through language or through the corporeal body as signifier is no less complicated as these can also (re)position one's relations and relationships.

I am not suggesting an understanding of a poem and a listening to a poetic voice as completely separate acts from thinking about the poet. Sensing the relations of the poem, the poetic voice, and the poet enriches the aesthetic experience in poetry. Such experience though, I believe, could gain more breadth and depth when the reader allows themselves opacity in knowing the poet beyond naturalized identitarian assumptions premised on the corporeal body. In this way, the poetic voice may be recognized as expressing a poet's sense of itinerancy in different and simultaneous worlds, as a form of transsituated language that could potentially reimagine presences for intersectional anti-colonial literary coalitions.

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