Walang Arte: Gina Apostol's Insurrecto and Filipino Non-Coherence

David G. Siglos

ABSTRACT. In this article, I use and theorize the Filipino performative style of *walang arte* to account for the ways in which Filipinos negotiate with the violence of translation and everyday life. By way of *walang arte*—which I will also be referring to as "the Filipino style of being" and "Filipino non-coherence"—and its disruptive and playful stylistic possibilities, I look at Gina Apostol's 2018 novel *Insurrecto* as not a mere performance of a postmodern aesthetic but an enactment in novel form of a Filipino repertoire of style. On one hand, the Filipino repertoire of style that *Insurrecto* performs poses a problem for translation as an act of mastery and fluency because of the ways in which it not only identifies linguistic fragmentation, but bridges the fragments through play; it enacts the Filipino capacity to move between fragments of languages. On the other hand, through fragmentation and acts of breaking, the novel articulates the dis/junction between playfulness and pain, the relationship between the pain of breakage and the play that breaking allows.

In a YouTube vlog, the famous Filipina actress and socialite Heart Evangelista joins fellow Filipino vlogger Mimiyuuuh in an ASMR video challenge.[1] Known for her fashion and make-up related videos, Evangelista invites Mimiyuuuh to her home for a make-up session and Filipino street food *mukbang* (eating on camera). Evangelista introduces her guest by singing "*Mimiyuuuh*," with the long "yuuuh" syllable endearingly and mockingly mimicking Mariah Carey's signature riffs. Mimiyuuuh's full name is Jeremy Sancebuche, but she often goes by Mimi taken from the doubled last syllable of her first name (or so I assume)—though her fondness for singing and for Mariah Carey has made her known for actually *singing* her name whenever she introduces herself. It must not also be lost on Mimiyuuuh that her idol Carey goes by the nickname "Mimi." While getting her lashes

1. ASMR or Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response videos, where content creators perform in front of the camera while whispering very closely into a microphone to evoke sensory response from the audience, is a popular content genre on YouTube.

done, Mimiyuuuh asks how Evangelista got into doing her own make-up. "*Kasi ang arte-arte ko* [because I am *ma-arte*]," Evangelista replies, and the two giggle in a whisper. *Ma-arte* loosely translates into English as being picky, particular, or pretentious. Growing up as a picky and "girly" young person who enjoyed doing her own make-up, Evangelista admits being *ma-arte*.[2] As a socialite and fashionista, Evangelista is also known for her yearly vlogs in Paris for the Paris Fashion Week. Kevin Kwan, the author of the novel *Crazy Rich Asians*, has also featured her for *Harper's* BAZAAR as a "real crazy rich Asian."[3] While Evangelista might be famous for being the ultimate *ma-arte* (albeit a self-aware one), Mimiyuuuh's popularity (she has almost two million more YouTube subscribers than Evangelista) might be a credit to her being *walang arte*. The opposite of *ma-arte*—"*walang*" is the Tagalog word for "to be without"—*walang arte* is to be un-pretentious, un-cool, un-fuzzy, or to be mockingly yet admirably simple.[4] Apart from her very modest upbringing, her role as a family breadwinner, her rags to riches narrative while remaining humble (all qualities of the *walang arte*), Mimiyuuuh is also admired by her viewers for being a "*jejemon*," a variation of *walang arte*. *Jejemons* are known for their often-incoherent linguistic style, which is a mix of Taglish, Filipino gay lingo, Tagalog slang, and SMS shortcuts. "*U kńÓw wH@t éM sÉyéN*" pops up in Mimiyuuuh's videos whenever she wants to emphasize something.[5] And because they often wear mismatched, oversized, and counterfeit designer brands, in addition to their improper speech, *jejemons* are also derogatorily referred to as uneducated, and backwards. *Jejemons* are *walang arte* because they are both unapologetically cheap in style and in words, and utterly disloyal to proper speech. They love to pun and make fun: "jeje" after all comes from the SMS expression "hehe" which means to laugh.

By way of *walang arte*, and its disruptive and playful stylistic possibilities, I look at Gina Apostol's 2018 novel *Insurrecto* as not a mere performance of a postmodern aesthetic but an enactment in novel form of a Filipino repertoire of style. Out of its formal acts of fragmentation, *Insurrecto* describes a Filipino non-coherence that, not unlike the style of *walang arte*, is borne out of the characteristically Filipino tendency to imitate, misrepresent, resist, hide, pun, and make fun as a means not only of survival but also creativity and play. By "non-coherence," I am not referring here to the colloquial use of

2. Heart Evangelista. "ASMR MAKEUP CHALLENGE + MUKBANG WITH MIMIYUUUH FT. HAPPY SKIN | Heart Evangelista." YouTube video, Oct. 8, 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoT8KbaR5bc.
3. See *Harper's* BAZAAR interview, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g01YnqH-2ek.
4. I have encountered the term *walang arte* before, but the idea of thinking about it as a Filipino mode of linguistic performance came to me during one of our Filipino food trips in L.A. with my Filipino American friends Christianne Sanchez and Raymond M. Lorenzo—who always playfully point out the cracks in my accent when code-switching. I thank them for that.
5. Jeremy Sancebuche (Mimiyuuuh), "FINALLY NAKAPAG-UKAY NA AKO ULIT! HIHI!!!!" YouTube video, Mar. 12, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDdBduraJBk.

the term or to "incoherence," which means meaningless babble, but its literal translation which is a non-coherence that refuses to come together or simply become one thing, thereby insisting on that which separates or bridges its parts. On the one hand, the Filipino repertoire of style that *Insurrecto* performs poses a problem for translation as an act of mastery and fluency because of the ways it not only identifies linguistic fragmentation, but also bridges fragments through play; the Filipino style enacts the Filipino capacity to move between fragments of languages. On the other hand, through fragmentation and acts of breaking, the novel articulates the dis/junction between playfulness and pain, the relationship between the pain of breakage and the play that breaking allows. Throughout the article, I use the terms Filipino non-coherence, Filipino style, and *walang arte* not necessarily interchangeably in meaning but perhaps interchangeably as points of articulating the relation of opposites: coherence and non-coherence, fragmentation and joint, border and bridge, pain and play. Through Apostol's novel, I intend to examine the labor, politics, and inner workings of the Filipino style.

When asked by Evangelista to introduce the Filipino street food challenge portion of the video, Mimiyuuuh bursts into her signature hysterics before saying, "I'm gonna challenge you in a [sic] eating… *kineso*."[6] "*Kineso*," like *kineme* and *kemerut*, is a Filipino filler word often used when one is out of (or cannot find the) words. The term, which most likely came from the expression "*kwan*" or "*kine*" (the Filipino equivalent of "you know"), is popular among *bakla* (queer) and *jejemon* circles not only because it is a convenient way of finishing a sentence, but also because of its mystique and playful gibberishness. Yet, it is not entirely gibberish. Mimiyuuuh most likely chose *kineso*, as opposed to *kineme* or *kemerut*, to make p/fun of one of the street foods in front of her, the cheese lumpia (fried cheese sticks), because cheese in Tagalog is *keso*: *kineso* could also mean "cheesed." Mimiyuuuh's *jejemon* style always has a reason for being, even if it is for the mere fun of it. Here, I also want to point out the significance of Mimiyuuuh's background as a queer, working class youth in my theoretical formulation of *walang arte*. Mimiyuuuh's *jejemon* style has roots in Filipino gay lingo, or what Martin Manalansan calls *bakla* swardspeak. According to Manalansan, swardspeak in Filipino queer culture, on the one hand, "mirror[s] the changes in popular culture; thus, the search for the new and the modern becomes the propelling force for changes in the language." On the other hand, "swardspeakers acknowledge that this language can be seen as a code for queer people, an 'open' secret for people 'in the know.'" In other words, the way I am formulating *walang arte* as a style of speaking (and being) follows from the tradition of *bakla* swardspeak in its reliance on innovation and inventiveness to sustain itself as a communal space while also maintaining its exclusivity "as a code for queer people" and because of the various ways it poses a threat

6. Evangelista, "ASMR."

to structures of power.[7] Furthermore, *walang arte*'s innovativeness also draws from the distinctly Filipino tendency to *p*un and make *f*un which characterizes its disloyalty to claims of authenticity. Sarita See has pointed out the importance of the relation between punning and making fun, not only because of its decolonizing potential, but also its "constant testing of boundaries [which] forms the hub of community."[8] That is, the demarcation between *p* and *f*, "Pilipino" and "Filipino," and pun and fun, in the Filipino context, highlights the precarity of linguistic formations and demands flexible identifications and multiple commitments. Evangelista's almost perfect American English against Mimiyuuuh's *jejemon* style, and her affectionate frustration in trying to keep up with Evangelista's English, make for a fun pairing while revealing tensions in the Filipino language.

"*Arte*," of course, is the Spanish word for "art," which means to be *walang arte* is akin to being "artless." However, in the Filipino context, *walang arte* functions in a more active and disruptive way in that underneath its performative surface of un-pretention and simplicity is the labor of adaptability and flexibility. Far from artlessness, it is a kind of concealed artistic style—in the manner perhaps of the Italian *sprezzatura*—that articulates various points of irruptions in Filipino life. Plain and incoherent on the surface, *walang arte*, underneath the surface, holds great logic and purpose. The *jejemon* style, *walang arte*'s seemingly gibberish and backward variant, can be deeply coherent in its non-coherence, and is in fact not backwards or undereducated but modern. I also situate *walang arte* alongside Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns' theorization of "*puro arte*" which performs an "ironic function" and conveys the "labor of overacting, histrionics, playfulness, and purely over-the-top dramatics."[9] However, while *puro arte* pays specific attention to the politics of "over-the-top" performances of Filipinos—in *puro arte*, a level of over-doneness and overacting has to be present—I use *walang arte* to account for the quieter, subtler, and more concealed ways in which the Filipino negotiates with the violence of translation and everyday life. Although I refer to Mimiyuuuh as *walang arte*, she is most definitely also *puro arte* in her "histrionics" and "over-the-top dramatics," which is a testament to *walang arte*'s ability to mutate and exist in various spaces. But here I am particularly interested in *walang arte*'s distinct marginality not only in terms of post-coloniality, queerness, and class but also as an aesthetic form, as a style that the novel formalizes.

7. Martin F. Manalansan. *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2007), 50.
8. Sarita Echavez See. *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 102.
9. Lucy San Pablo Burns. *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stage of Empire* (New York City University Press, 2013), 15.

Travel Guide

Having described some of the main workings of *walang arte*—its tendency to imitate, misrepresent, resist, hide, pun, and make fun, as well as its relation to breaking and violence—what the rest of this article aims to do now is complicate these ideas even further and, through *Insurrecto*, describe the tensions they create. Given the novel's relative newness, I make a deliberate effort in the next section to provide context: summary, reception, and a short author biography. In doing so, I hope to highlight not only the ways in which I de-situate the novel from its more predictable Western postmodernist aesthetic interpretations, but also the ways the novel was founded on and insists upon Filipino structures of breaking. By locating the novel within its Philippine literary and historical context in the section, "Hide and Seek," I describe the various colonial intrusions into the country which contributed to its fragmentation, while also underscoring centralization as a colonial hegemonic mode that sees the fragmentary nature of the Philippine culture as backwards, unmodern. To discuss the politics of translation and narrative representation, I interpret the novel's use of Chiara and Magsalin's dueling scripts in "Alter-native" as rehearsal of the novel's characteristic citationality, imitation, and distortion—that is, *walang arte* as plagiarism. In "Play, Pay, or Die," I describe the tension and relation between playfulness and pain. The novel's use of American song lyrics alongside President Rodrigo Duterte's drug war, for example, sutures the various remnants of imperial violence, as well as articulate *walang arte*'s violent variants. And to better understand—perhaps, understand differently—the Filipino playfulness with language (e.g., the use of song lyrics in conversations), I offer in "Style of Being" a rethinking of colonial influence—that is, as orchestration of fragments, expressions of desire, and acts of frustration. That the Filipino style elides language mastery and fluency, I argue, is not a sign of inadequacy but of having to navigate and mediate overconsumption. Furthermore, I point out in "Singing the Anthem" the various linguistic slippages in the novel that allows us to think about *walang arte* as a self-aware means of survival and innovation. Both *walang arte* and *Insurrecto*'s deliberately appropriative and fragmentary modes provide not only an alternative means for thinking about cultural production and identity formation but also a means for rethinking the relation between center and periphery.

Insurrecto

Insurrecto has received rave reviews from mainstream magazine and online book critics. *The Guardian* has pointed out the "complexity of its narrative and thematic structure [that] hint[s] at the difficulty

in understanding the confluence of history."[10] *The New York Times* describes its style as an "explosion of formal novelistic conventions."[11] Referring to the Philippine-American neo/colonial relation, *NPR* calls it, "seek[ing] to transcend the gap between the two countries."[12] *London Magazine* likens the novel's structure to "a locked-room mystery" that is at once "confusing" and "fun."[13] A few others have said something similar. What seems to be the common thread between these reviews is the way they reconcile the novel's postmodernist style with its postcolonial narrative characteristics, an issue that Kwame Anthony Appiah has tried to address in his essay, "Is the Post—in Postmodernism the Post—in Postcolonial?" Although it can be compelling, the issue of *reconciliation* is not this article's particular interest. Reconciliation itself seems antithetical to postmodernist ideas of decentering and fragmentation (one of the qualities which separates postmodernism from modernism is its very comfort with keeping fragments fragmented as opposed to the modernist tendency to cohere fragments and make meaning). And to call *Insurrecto* postmodern in the sense that it is an "explosion of formal novelistic conventions" is to read it against a certain tradition, a canon. It assumes a universal center out of which the marginalized operates. Thus, what I want to offer is a way of reading *Insurrecto* that considers the forms of Philippine literature as determined by and corresponding to Philippine conditions of modernity, one that navigates fragments through a distinctly Filipino style. And I use the Filipino performative style of *walang arte* to describe these conditions not only to ground my discussion of the novel in the Philippine context, but also to articulate various forms of post/modernities that developed outside the perceived Western center, what Martin Manalansan calls alternative modernities.

Insurrecto is about a Filipino American writer, Magsalin, who returns to the Philippines to work as a translator for an American filmmaker, Chiara. The novel opens with a meeting between Magsalin and Chiara at the Muhammad Ali Mall in Quezon City after Magsalin, having "just arrived from New York, on vacation in her birthplace," replies to Chiara's advertisement for a Filipino translator—which, as Magsalin will later realize, should have been an ad for a Filipino tour guide.[14] Chiara, the Sofia Coppola-esque character in the novel, is in the Philippines "scouting locations for a movie" about the Balangiga

10. Tash Aw. "Insurrecto by Gina Apostol Review – Struggles in the Philippines," *The Guardian*, Aug. 28, 2019, www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/28/insurrecto-gina-apostol-review.
11. Jen McDonald. "A Comic Novel Asks Who Gets to Write the History of the Colonial Philippines." *The New York Times*, Dec. 26, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/12/26/books/review/gina-apostol-insurrecto.html.
12. John Powers, "Witty and Stylish, 'Insurrecto' Offers an Inside View of the Pain of Colonization." *NPR*, Nov. 28, 2018, www.npr.org/2018/11/28/671506059/witty-and-stylish-insurrecto-offers-an-inside-view-of-the-pain-of-colonization.
13. Jack Solloway, "Review: *Insurrecto* by Gina Apostol." *The London Magazine*, Nov.11, 2019, https://www.thelondonmagazine.org/review-insurrecto-by-gina-apostol/.
14. Gina Apostol. *Insurrecto: A Novel* (New York: Soho Press, Inc., 2019), 3.

massacre of 1902 in Samar.[15] Chiara had been inspired by her father's film, *The Unintended*, which, not unlike Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, is about a massacre in a Vietnamese village but was filmed in the Philippines. Chiara shares the movie script with Magsalin and the two embark on a road trip, along with two private security guards, from Manila to Samar. Magsalin would then find Chiara's script inadequate and so, in the process, revise it. Weaved into the road trip narrative is Chiara's script about the 1902 massacre from the point of view of a white American female photographer and Magsalin's counter-script whose protagonist is a Filipina revolutionary. While the novel's three main narratives (the trip to Samar and the dueling scripts) might seem straightforward, the order in which they appear and reappear is less so. The book begins in chapter 20 and the proceeding chapters do not at all follow any kind of order or lend themselves to any solution, as a puzzle does. Some of the chapter numbers even repeat; there are about twenty Chapter Ones in the entire novel. Vivid descriptions of minor characters fill the novel, most of whom are given no context or ever mentioned again but whose stories can be consuming. *Insurrecto* also often digresses into lengthy reflections on American pop culture, literature, linguistics, and philosophy, various Filipino languages such as Bisaya, Waray, Tagalog and Spanish, along with fragments of Philippine history and current politics. The novel's narrative form is anything but coherent.

In *Insurrecto*, narrative acts of representation are indistinguishable from acts of mere collection. That is, the way Filipino life manifests in the novel is not one that seeks to be seen, or have coherent meaning, but one that signals various points of breaking. Magsalin's journey back home, for example, seems to be offering us a way of making sense of her *bildung* as a character, but we soon realize that her trip has only presented her, and us, more confusion than realization. The novel's narrative process—from its characters, use of language and translation, and acts of historicity to its reimagination of the Filipino style of being—performs a complex, and oftentimes non-coherent, movement of representation and misrepresentation, mimicry and mockery, a form of hiding in order to have/make fun. The novel's title, for example, is a reappropriation of the term *insurrecto* which has historically been used to refer to Filipino revolutionaries as dangerous, grotesque, primitive and uncivilized, thus in need of a leader.[16] Apostol's use of the term at once highlights that history and plays with it by refocusing the term to the active and creative ways that Filipinos and Filipino vernaculars rebel.

Given Gina Apostol's background, it seems, for her as a Filipino and writer, that such rebelliousness has also always been tied to the horrors of pain and the pleasures of play. "The horror of the Philippines is that its tragedy is best expressed through disco," writes Apostol

15. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 7.
16. See *Body Parts of Empire* by Nerissa Balce.

in a review on *Here Lies Love*, a musical about Imelda Marcos. She further points out in the review that her relationship with the Marcos dictatorship is not only by way of growing up during the Marcos regime but also more specifically growing up in Leyte, a Marcos territory, where, as a young student, she "danced for Imelda Marcos"—as one dances for her king or dictator.[17] Elsewhere, Apostol has also noted that her province's relationship with horror did not begin with the Marcoses but goes back to Douglas MacArthur's infamous landing in Leyte (1944) and way back to the "1901 revolutionary battle in Balangiga," Samar, a neighboring province and one of the settings of *Insurrecto*.[18]

Born in Manila, Gina Apostol grew up in Tacloban, Leyte before attending the University of the Philippines Diliman. She moved to the United States in her 20s and earned her Master's in writing from Johns Hopkins University. Her first novel *Bibliolepsy* (1996—but it only became available in the U.S. in 2022), which is set during the 1986 EDSA revolution, and has been described as a "love story" between woman and man and woman and books, is a winner of the 1997 Philippine National Book Award. Her second novel *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* was published in the Philippines in 2009—which became available in the U.S. in 2021. Set in 19th century Philippines, *The Revolution* follows Mata's memoir and his discovery of fellow revolutionary Jose Rizal. The memoir is highly annotated by the novel's fictional present-day critic and translator Mimi C. Magsalin. Illuminating Marcos-era Philippines, her third book *Gun Dealer's Daughter* (2012) is a winner of the PEN/Open Book Award. She has also written short stories and articles for *The New York Times*, *Foreign Policy*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Massachusetts Review* among others.[19] Apostol teaches creative writing at the Fieldston School in New York, and she actively promotes her books both in the U.S. and the Philippines. When asked in an interview why, despite having lived in America for so long, her novels are still "distinctly Filipino," she explains, having moved to the U.S. in her 20s, that she could not relate to the Filipino-American struggle "to take sides: be American or not American…I was always Filipino."[20] Hers is a different struggle; it is one against "[s]urrender and its twin, oblivion," which ironically are also "how we Filipinos have survived."[21] For Apostol, the Filipino desire to speak and narrate is almost always tied to survival and resistance against structures of power and with it the work of translation and

17. Gina Apostol, "Dancing with Dictators." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Dec. 2, 2014, lareviewofbooks.org/article/dancing-dictators/.
18. Gina Apostol, "Surrender, Oblivion, Survival." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, Nov. 15, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/11/15/opinion/surrender-oblivion-survival.html.
19. Details about Gina Apostol's books were taken from her official website: https://www.ginaapostol.com/.
20. Marga Manlapig, "In Her Words: Gina Apostol." *Tatler Philippines*, Sept. 20, 2019, ph.asiatatler.com/life/in-her-words-gina-apostol.
21. Apostol, "Surrender, Oblivion, Survival."

revision. In other words, to understand the Filipino style, one must also understand its imitative, contradictory, and fragmentary nature not as a fundamental and intrinsic way of being Filipino but as world historical.

Hide and Seek

Thus, I position my "postmodernist" reading of *Insurrecto* within Philippine (American) literature as well as criticisms about postmodernist Philippine novels. As Jeffrey Cabusao has noted, Gina Apostol, among many others, follows the works of Ninotchka Rosca, Jessica Hagedorn, R. Zamora Linmark, and Peter Bacho which "reflect the development and growth of Asian American studies, women studies, LGBT studies, and the emergence of multiculturalism in the United States." That is, *Insurrecto* must be understood within the complex web of political struggles in the U.S.[22] However, someone like E. San Juan Jr. has also pointed out that the "postmodernist technique of pastiche, aleatory juxtaposition, virtuoso bricolage" in novels like *Dogeaters* are but expressions of "narcissistic captivity" and imitations of western postmodernist tropes that mimic the fragmentary materialist, capitalist world system: "stylized gestures of protest."[23] While I appreciate San Juan's discussion on western postmodernism's political limits—which for him implicates postmodernist Filipino American novels—my reading of *Insurrecto* actually aims to advance and rethink the postmodern aesthetics of novels like *Dogeaters*, precisely when it is understood *not* through western postmodernism, but Filipino modes of performance such as *walang arte* and within the context of Philippine post/modernity. That the fragmentary mode of Philippine postmodernist novels like *Dogeaters* and *Insurrecto* are insidiously repetitive and imitative, I argue, are not mere "stylized gestures" but a deliberate Filipino style in which its idiosyncrasies are the very products of history and aesthetic innovation. And what San Juan might think of about these novels as Filipino complicity to bourgeoise aesthetic practice (which I am not claiming to be completely inaccurate) *can* also be understood as modes of experimentation as well as concealment.

But what exactly is the Filipino in concealment from? The Philippines' five hundred years or so of colonial rule (almost four hundred years under Spanish rule, at least a hundred years under American colony and neocolony, and about three years under Japan during World War II), apart from also being a cause for great resistance, has been a source of Filipino fear and submission. During the early

22. Jeffrey Arellano Cabusao. "Filipino American Literature." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, 2019, 11, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.777.
23. E. San Juan Jr. *Racial Formations/Critical Transformations: Articulations of Power and Ethnic and Racial Studies in the United States* (Humanities Press, 1992), 125–26.

years of American occupation, for example, the establishment of a network of public schools throughout the archipelago acted through benevolent assimilation as aid to American military counterinsurgency. "In the face of a fierce and protracted war between 1899 and 1902,"[24] the United States moved to fight Filipino anti-colonial resistance not only with military force but also ideologically through American education. American soldiers were the first to serve as teachers to Filipinos followed promptly by "an army of American civilian teachers known as the 'Thomasites.'" And, during the 1920s, in order to "Filipinize the colonial government"—that is, to prepare Filipinos for their eventual independence and neocolonial status—the Thomasites were eventually replaced by their Filipino students whose American education would be passed down to younger generations of Filipinos, the eternal bearer of American language, ideas, and institutions. The aim of American education was to create a linguistic and cultural hierarchy wherein English would be the only medium of instruction. However, given the Philippines' archipelagic geography and its overwhelming linguistic diversity, the task would prove difficult, and the United States would have to pass a law establishing the Bureau of Education whose job it was to make mandatory the use of English as the "basis of instruction," as well as the language of the court system, throughout the country. This would lead some of the American schools to collect fines from their students for not speaking English on campus.[25]

But, as the historian Vicente Rafael has also pointed out, due to "the chronic shortage of funds, the failure to extend universal access to schooling, and the difficulty of retaining the students beyond the primary grades," despite its democratizing and civilizing agenda, the American education system in fact intensified social and economic inequalities in the Philippines.[26] Moreover, the fact of Filipino students having to unlearn their native vernacular in order to learn a new and "superior" one at school added to the difficulty for Filipinos to master English. According to Rafael, Filipinos lacked wholeness because they were in a constant state of translation, managing multiple desires, making it impossible to become either coherent colonial subjects or coherent anti-colonial nationalists, rendering them on both sides "untranslatable." Rafael then argues—against what Renato Constantino called "The miseducation of the Filipino"—that the very fact of Filipino untranslatability, the Filipino "state of inarticulateness," highlights not only the failure of the American empire and the inadequacies of translation, but also the resistance and, more importantly, the *playfulness* of Filipinos.[27] For Rafael, such inability to master another

24. As Sarita See (*The Decolonized Eye*, 2009) and Nerissa Balce (*Body Parts of Empire*, 2016) have pointed out, 1902 was not the end of the Philippine-American war, but only the beginning of America's active censorship of it.
25. Vicente L. Rafael. *Motherless Tongues: The Insurgency of Language amid Wars of Translation* (Duke University Press, 2016), 44.
26. Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 45.
27. Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 49.

language allowed Filipinos to create and innovate. In other words, against all American efforts to institutionalize English in the Philippines, Filipinos proved to be unassimilable, not despite of who they are but precisely because of it. It is thus in dialogue with Rafael's points on Filipino playfulness and innovativeness with language, as well as the limits of translation, that I locate my readings of *Insurrecto*.

Alter-native

As a Filipino colonial subject and writer, *Insurrecto*'s protagonist, Magsalin, must not only perform the labor of translating for the American filmmaker, but also the labor of covertly rewriting that filmmaker's script—thus rewriting Filipino history and narrative. And underneath Magsalin's act of revision are also the novel's covert ways of problematizing translation itself—as an authenticating act for the "original"—through constant doubling and endless citations. Even before serving as Chiara's translator and guide, Magsalin had known of Ludo Brasi's (Chiara's father) film, *The Unintended*, which she had seen "several times in her teens. At one point, she recalls watching it frame by frame in a muggy class along Katipunan Avenue for a course called Locations/Dislocations."[28] Set during the Vietnam war, *The Unintended* is "about a teenage kid, Tommy O'Connell, who fails to be court-martialed for acts he has committed in a South-Vietnamese hamlet… The boy Tommy, along with his fellow soldiers of Charlie Company razes the hamlet to the ground."[29] Although the film is about Vietnam, Chiara had been aware that it was shot in Samar, Philippines where her father spent most of his and his family's time while filming. *The Unintended* here is an obvious nod to Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (and perhaps even to Jessica Hagedorn's *Dream Jungle*, a novel partly about the filming of a costly Vietnam war film in the Philippines), which was also inspired by Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, and so rehearses the novel's characteristic citationality. Through the work of a Filipino literary critic, Chiara then learns of the possible intentional link between the 1968 Vietnam massacre and the Balangiga, Samar massacre of 1901 in her father's film. This becomes an inspiration for her script about the Balangiga massacre, which would be narrated from the point of view of a white American woman who "is a stand-in for the generic consumer being enticed to know the story"—to which Magsalin asks, "does she need to be so—*white*?"[30] Magsalin is also uneasy about the use of Elvis's song as "the soundtrack for the Philippine-American War," parallel to the white woman's voice, making it seem as though there is something quintessentially and authentically (white) American about Elvis. For Magsalin, the script lacks imagination. It

28. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 15.
29. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 34.
30. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 122.

does not consider the possibility of Elvis's songs being in fact *made* in the Philippines—or at least equally possessed by different people from different places—how Elvis might have taken on a completely different and unrecognizable life in the Philippines. Magsalin after all grew up thinking that songs like "Are You Lonesome Tonight" by Elvis Presley "were absolutely Filipino…an annoying Kundiman if she ever heard one."[31] Her memory of the music of Sinatra and Presley is one "in which the songs seemed to spring from the bamboo groves, and grown men sang soulful versions of creepy ballads while sopping up bahalina tuba, their local wine."[32] Instead of grounding the narrative in the Philippines, Chiara's script assumes a fully realized white American narrative center out of which the Filipino operates.

And so, while working as a translator for Chiara (for money) Magsalin is also secretly translating and rewriting Chiara's script. Magsalin refers to her protagonist as the "alter-native" with an "altered ego" whom she will call Caz after the Filipino heroine Casiana Nacionales from Chiara's script. Caz's character would be anything but generic. She would stand in for the

> Caz Intahan [lover]
> Caz Abwat [conspirator]
> Caz Alanan [sin/sinner]
> Caz Saysayan [history/historian]
> Caz Inungalingan [lie/liar].[33]

In her alternative opening scene, "Caz is clutching an envelope, a thick manuscript…[and] there will be no voice over, no soundtracks, no song lyrics." Caz will be "a slight, brown woman" and "a schoolteacher in Giporlos, Samar, or maybe Oras, Bicol, or better still a doubling site—Sorsogon, Sorsogon, or Bulacan, Bulacan."[34] By providing Caz such plurality, Magsalin composes a narrative about the Philippines and Filipinos that is not driven by a desire for wholeness and coherence but by multiple identities and possibilities. That Caz possesses such variedness speaks of Magsalin's narrative as not one that seeks individuality but one whose search for identity must constantly reckon with other identities. That is, in the novel, breaking and bridging of identities are constantly at work. Not unlike Caz, Magsalin herself as a character possesses the same plurality. "Magsalin" in Tagalog means to translate or to transfer, or translator, which, coincidentally or not, becomes her profession. I might also note that the Greek origin of "metaphor," "*metapherein*," means "to transfer" which is symbolized in the novel by another mode of transfer, a "duffel bag (leather, made in Venice, aubergine with olive handles, always admired by salesladies)"

31. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 123.
32. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 123-24.
33. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 126.
34. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 126-27.

that both Magsalin and Chiara possess.[35] "Magsalin" is also the not-so-often-mentioned middle name of Crisóstomo Ibarra (whose full name is Juan Crisóstomo Ibarra y Magsalin), the protagonist of Jose Rizal's novel *Noli Me Tángere*. Like Magsalin, Ibarra's diasporic experience led him into acting as a revolutionary translator, something that could also be said about Rizal himself. Exemplified by Ibarra and Rizal, and Caz and Magsalin, it seems that the Filipino search for identity hinges upon the history of their name's displacement. Thus, Apostol's performance in the novel of an almost endless form of doubling and citationality (between Caz and Magsalin, Magsalin and Chiara, their opposing scripts, their scripts' opposing protagonists, between America and the Philippines, between the two countries' perception and translation of each other, the countries' languages, etc.), on the one hand, understands the "persistently uneven, and always contingent, power relations" within imperialism and in the act of translation, and, on the other, describes the ways in which, when seen through the Filipino lens, narrative meaning inevitably breaks.[36] In other words, *Insurrecto*'s multiple, layered effort to translate in fact dramatizes what Vicente Rafael refers to as the "condition of untranslatability," whereby "form and content are constitutive just as meaning and style are inseparable. Neither 'free' nor 'literal' translation will do, neither word for word' nor 'sense for sense.'"[37] The novel's attempt then to "translate" an American script, and *Filipinize* it, has less to do with translation itself—that is, with the aim to be subservient to the "original" and its prescribed meaning—than the performance of a state of non-coherence, a distortion of the "original" in the target language.

It is also worth noting that Magsalin's "revision" is in fact plagiarism and tampering with the original. Yet, one of the ways *walang arte* operates—as exemplified by *jejemon*'s love for anything counterfeit—is precisely through tampering, authenticity's nemesis. Unlike pure imitation, tampering is interested in interference and alterations which, for the purposes of the colonial subject, allow for various modes of experimentation and navigation through hegemonic structures. As Sarita See has argued about the Filipino artist's tendency to plagiarize and misrepresent, because of the historical and cultural erasures that Filipinos have had to endure, "the Filipino autobiographical or identitarian mode is characterized not by the 'real' representation of the self but the mimetic, ironized representation of the body double." And that in order to understand Filipino art and culture, we must first rethink "the imitativeness of the Filipino, understood usually as the limit of Filipino achievement and evidence of his or her incapacity for

35. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 4. In the longer version of this article, I will be discussing further the significance of this duffel bag in terms of how it might function as a means of looking at class division and conflict within Philippine society.
36. Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 1.
37. Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 12.

original thought…[,] as the sign of and for history."[38] In other words, the Filipino style, particularly modes of imitation like *walang arte*, operates on the level of aesthetic due to its ability not only to mock and make fun of power structures but also to make us rethink notions of originality and authenticity in cultural production. If for Chiara citation means honoring her father's work and the ideas of the literary critic—i.e., having a certain loyalty for the "genius" and "sacrilege" of the referent—Magsalin's plagiaristic ways might describe what André Lefevere calls "refraction," which is a way of understanding translation as being self-aware and without any loyalties to a sacred original, or that the "genius" of a given "original" has to be always understood not *a priori* but within the context of refracted/peripheral texts "which reflects the dominant practice of the time."[39] Magsalin deliberately tampers with the original not to honor it, but to further break it apart in order to make room for even more inquiries. *Walang arte*'s hostility towards the original and comfort with tampering refuses hierarchy and allows for that very experimentation, yet for the same reason also poses a threat and so must keep itself concealed. And one of its modes of concealment, or non-coherence, is playfulness.

Play, Pay, or Die

By Filipino non-coherence, I do not mean mere meaninglessness but in fact a breaking, a distortion, of meaning that lends itself to multiple possibilities of interpretation. That is, by freeing itself from the confines of surface cohesion, the novel is at once able to play around with language while also apprehending violence. In the novel, when Magsalin mentions to her uncles her plans of driving to Samar with Chiara for research, her *Tios* (Uncles) warn her of the dangers of "'cutting,' as they call the land trip to Samar":

> "Do not go to Samar." "Or why not take the plane? Or even the boat," says Tio Nemesio. "You should take first class and watch the islands in the stream. That is what we are. How can we be wrong? No one in between! And we rely on each other, ah-ahhhh! I always wanted to watch the islands, Mindoro, Cebu, Siquijor, all pass by from the window of a first-class cabin on the MV *Sweet Faith*. Waste of money, but why not?"[40]

38. See, *The Filipino Primitive: Accumulation and Resistance in the American Museum* (New York University Press, 2017), 170.
39. André Lefevere, "Translated Literature: Towards an Integrated Theory." *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 14, no.1 (1981), 68-78, 72.
40. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 112.

The dangers Magsalin's uncles are referring to here has to do with the current Duterte administration's anti-drug war effort and "the dead bodies…piling up at the garbage dumps, in the slums, near schoolyards, and on all the monotonous commercial streets of the country—bodies upon bodies."[41] Although not overtly named—he is called a "perverse despot" in the novel—Apostol is clearly referring here to the current Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Prior to assuming office in 2016, Duterte ran a campaign with an insistent promise to wage war against what he called the most serious threat to the Philippines, illegal drugs. As soon as Duterte held the office, he mobilized the Philippine National Police (PNP) to operate a nationwide anti-drug campaign which would eventually be called "Oplan Tokhang." Oplan Tokhang has already killed at least 4,000 people—with 22,000 related deaths still under investigation—some of whom are innocent bystanders or collateral damage or wrongly accused.[42] Over 27,000 deaths have also been reported as "vigilante killings outside police operations," which are referred to as D.U.I. or "deaths under investigation."[43] As the novel points out, Tokhang comes from the Bisaya and not Tagalog phrase "toktok-hangyo"—a vernacular nod to the Bisaya-speaking region in Mindanao where the president is from. "Toktok" is the Bisaya onomatopoeic word for "knock-knock" while "hangyo" means to plead. The first syllables of the words then comprise the term "tokhang" wherein "the drug-war policeman will knock on your door, and whether you open or do not open, you are doomed."[44] The idea is that after the knock-knock one must plead and not resist in order for one not to get shot. Apart from door-to-door visits, the campaign also includes random drug testing, police entrapments, community sweeps, armed raids, and "vigilante-style" killings on the roads at night and even during daylight.[45] "Oplan," of course, is a term adopted from Operation Plan (OPLAN) from the U.S. military. "Oplan Tokhang" shows that Duterte's violence also operates through wordplay and imitation. Part of Duterte's charm which connects him to the masses is his bluntness, vulgarity, and un-pretension. He does not often speak English when addressing the people, and when he does, he carries a heavy Bisaya accent. And so, despite coming from an affluent political family, the masses see him as relatable. In other words, Duterte, along with his modes of violence, performs and *is walang arte*, and as such rehearses the connection between violence and play insofar as violence does not precede play but is its synonym. Region VIII, in which the province of Samar is a part,

41. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 113.
42. See "The Drug Killings: Who, What, Where, When, How?" *The Drug Archive*, drugarchive.ph/.
43. Rambo Talabong, "How the Duterte Government Underreports Drug War Killings." *Rappler*, Sept. 18, 2020, www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/how-duterte-government-underreports-drug-war-killings.
44. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 95.
45. "The Drug Killings."

gets particular attention for their police department's strict execution of the anti-drug program, hence Magsalin's uncles' worry for the two women's plan of road travel to Samar. The uncles' advice against road travel in the novel implicates, through play, Duterte's murderous drug war.

Another noticeable feature about Tio Nemesio's comment is how, despite the seriousness of the subject, he playfully slips into song lyrics: Dolly Parton's and Kenny Rogers' "Islands in the stream." By taking a plane or a boat first class—and watching the "islands in the stream. That is what we are. How can we be wrong? No one in between! And we rely on each other, ah-ahhhh!"—Tio Nemesio offers Magsalin and Chiara an option for a safer means of transportation, away from the enforcement of state-sanctioned violence. Money is obviously not an issue for them, as Tio Nemesio boasts: "Waste of money, but why not?"[46] Magsalin, however, insists on taking the road to Samar but asks her uncles to provide them with private security. By making light of the dangers of driving to Samar, by casually finishing his thought with a song, and because they can afford to fly or take a boat first class or hire security, Tio Nemesio underscores the corruptness of state institutions and the unevenness of their victims. The Duterte administration has reportedly rewarded police officers 10,000 pesos ($200) for killing each drug suspect, 20,000 pesos for street pushers, one million pesos for wholesale drug distributors, and five million pesos ($100,000) for drug lords resulting to allegations of planned and staged killings which involve shutting down streetlights and CCTVs during their raids. Alleged quotas for "surrenders" too have resulted not only in more staged arrests—e.g., planting drugs and/or drug paraphernalia in the homes and pockets of profiled suspects—but also in the chronic overpopulation of the already overpopulated Philippine prison system.[47] Many of Oplan Tokhang's murder victims are people in poverty and the majority of those incarcerated for drugs either cannot afford to get a court trial or cannot get one because the legal system is too congested, or both. But, as Tio Nemesio playfully points out, if you have the money, you can either get away with it or you can get away *from* it. The novel's playfulness with language, therefore, reveals not only the limits of state institutions, but also the institutionalization of violence especially towards the poor and marginalized.

In the manner of Filipino non-coherence and *walang arte*, in which the playfulness of breaking is always very closely tied to the pain of breaking—and how such surface non-coherence always possesses an inner working—I want to further suggest that Apostol's use of the song "Islands in the stream" is conceptual. Although Magsalin has described her counter-script as "[a]n abaca weave, a warp and weft of numbers…measured but invisible in the plot," I find *Insurrecto*'s

46. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 112.
47. See the Brookings Institution website, https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-human-rights-consequences-of-the-war-on-drugs-in-the-philippines/.

form to be *not* like an abaca weave—which still seems too clean, too ordered—but more in the spirit of "islands in the stream." That is, *Insurrecto*'s acts of fragmentation emblematize the archipelagic. Unlike an abaca weave, the Philippine archipelago as "islands in the stream" characterize a more random placement: the islands are of varying sizes and distances from one another (hundreds of islands even disappear during high tide), separated by a body of water that can be thought of as both border and bridge. By insisting on breaking points—as opposed to the mere fragments, which has the potential of being neutral—we are brought back to the context of pain and loss.[48] On the one hand, because of the archipelagic geography, Filipinos suffered a loss of language/s during the American counterinsurgency to standardize English in the Philippines (apart from the actual loss of lives during the Philippine-American war), to cohere almost a hundred languages from thousands of islands. Losing one's mother tongue/s, or to have one's language made minor or inconsequential, and to be told that to speak one's language is backward have all become traumatizing experiences for Filipinos. The fraught Filipino relationship with language, thus, can only be understood through its brokenness. On the other hand, the Philippine archipelagic situation has also determined Duterte's *modus operandi* through the mobilization of the Philippine National Police (PNP) and, equally crucially, the use of social media.[49] In the Philippine case, archipelagic breaking is almost always tied to the violence of breaking. In other words, what seems to be a random burst into country song lyrics during a discussion on how not to get caught up in Duterte's violent drug war, what seems non-coherent and non-signifying, is deeply coherent, if the fragments are bridged. However, part of that coherence is never to provide a surface that coheres. Indeed, for Filipinos, "islands in the stream, that is what we are."

Style of Being

In the spirit of playfulness and irruption of translation, I want to offer another way of thinking about Tio Nemesio's use of American song lyrics to finish a thought, one that reinforces what I have been arguing about the workings of the Filipino style, untranslatability, and *walang arte*, which is that the precarious nature, the non-coherence, of Filipino modes of performance forces us to think about these performances as world historical. Most Filipinos juggle at least three languages with varying levels of fluency (or lack of fluency): Bisaya, which is the most widely spoken language in the country; Tagalog, the national language;

48. I am inspired here by *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* where Fred Moten plays with the idea of *breaking* as part of a musical structure and about broken relationships to the past.
49. For more on Duterte and social media, see *A Thousand Cuts*, a documentary by Ramona Díaz featuring *Rappler*'s Maria Ressa.

and English, the country's medium of education and formal instruction. Many, like Magsalin, speak four languages and pun in five. Magsalin speaks Waray, Tagalog, Bisaya, English, and Spanish in all of which she hints at being fluent, except Spanish (but could nevertheless pun in it as do most Filipinos). Although Filipinos might consider themselves fluent in multiple languages, the Filipino relationship with language fluency is fraught. According to Rafael, when speaking, Filipinos are relentlessly moving back and forth between his own and the other's language. What comes across is neither the meaning of words nor the settled identity of the speaker and the hearer but rather the sense of the unstable and shifting relationship of languages to one another and to their users. Translation results not in the emergence of thought but in the spread of misunderstanding.[50]

Because of the various colonial intrusions into the already diverse Filipino life—colonial intrusions that also assert social and linguistic hegemony—the Filipino style of speaking has often been deemed, especially by its colonizers, incoherent: "unstable and shifting." That is, someone like Magsalin would grow up speaking Waray and Bisaya at home, which she would then have to repress while learning English at school; she would learn English grammar at school, yet she would feel the language is imposed upon her and that she could never feel ownership of it; she would hear and learn Tagalog through the national television channels, but she would not have access to its form. Precisely because of these conflicting linguistic desires to which Filipinos have been subjected, they would never feel complete fluency or mastery over any of these languages. Indeed, they would feel the constant tug between the anxieties of their lack of mastery and the pleasures of being able to play around with language—a tension that only the imitative style of *walang arte* is capable of understanding and making room for.

Exemplified in moments when Filipinos during conversations would burst into American song lyrics, what I want to suggest is that the Filipino lack of fluency is not a matter of incompetence or inadequacy but a *style of speaking*. It is a style of finishing or continuing a thought that, due to its citational and repetitive nature, rejects any claim of fluency or mastery. Filipino non-coherence is *not* about not knowing enough but about knowing, or having to consume, too much, so that the excess of thoughts, ideas and languages that reveals itself in the Filipino style is a representation of one's navigation through an overflow of information. The particular use of American song lyrics, for example, highlights imposed American cultural hegemony. As an American neo/colony, American consumer and media culture—through the professionalization of advertisement—were forced into the throats of Filipinos, the new consumers of American products, thereby embedding them into the Filipino psyche. But I also want to suggest an aesthetic dimension to that act of psychic and linguistic

50. Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 57.

navigation. The ability of many Filipinos to expertly imitate American singers like Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, and Steve Perry (e.g., the internationally acclaimed imitative voices of Charice Pempengco and Arnel Pineda to name two),[51] as well as expertly incorporate song lyrics into daily conversations, are proof not just of how much American music has seeped into Filipino pop culture and everyday life but how *aggressively* Filipinos take imitation. There is even the infamous case of the "My Way" murders, where karaoke singers have reportedly been killed for not properly singing the Sinatra song. That some are willing to kill and be killed for the sake of imitation (that Mimiyuuuh cannot help her outbursts, linguistic or otherwise), speaks of the Filipino style as not mere excesses from colonial influences, but an active expression of desire, as well as the labors of imitation and precision. That is, exploding into song lyrics in the middle of a conversation, for Filipinos, is not a simple manner of speaking but a playful and passionate orchestration of fragments.

Moreover, slipping into song lyrics can also be thought of as an act of frustration, or even a means of mediating anxiety for one's lack of fluency in English. For many Filipinos, speaking straight English is an inconvenience, at times a cause for embarrassment since English has become associated with the language of the educated. Speaking Taglish or any combination of languages is often far easier. And so, apart from being a stylistic expression, the use of song lyrics, because it is almost always funny, hides the anxiety and embarrassment that one might feel from one's lack of English fluency. It is defensive. In another mukbang vlog (with an Australian vlogger this time), where she must speak only in English, Mimiyuuuh is forced to resort to multiple defensive tactics to explain herself. For instance, while trying to explain to her vegan guest why Filipinos love lechon so much, she exclaims, "it gives me something like…something like…something like you make me feel like a dangerous woman." Having dodged the question through the Ariana Grande song, and having left her guest confused, the two moved on. At another moment, when Mimiyuuuh wanted to ask her guest if they could eat the vegan sushi with their arms intertwined like they were newlyweds, she finds herself lost for words and instead says, while dramatically gesturing with her arms, "we should eat it like…we should eat it…we should eat each other."[52] Another one of Mimiyuuuh's characteristically *bakla* and *jejemon* tactics (because of its vulgarity and tackiness, the opposite of *refine*) to get out of a bind is by turning the conversation sexual and flirtatious. Both scenes show obvious frustration (albeit at times affectionate) on her part which is reflected in her video editing: the

51. See Karen Tongson's and Christine Balance's works for more on karaoke, Pempengco, and Pineda, as well as the labor and aesthetics of imitation.
52. Jeremy Sancebuche (Mimiyuuuh), VEGAN MUKBANG WITH JAMIE ZHU (KASUKA OPO!!). YouTube video, Sept. 21, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XYkUYmkj5w&t=563s.

video turns black and white to show her frustration. The Filipino style of speaking, thus, is an active and modern form of dealing with the various changes and circumstances around the speaker providing us a way of seeing how language mediates identity formations. Martin Manalansan has pointed out the constant changeability and mobility of the Filipino language and its "code-switching-system."[53] Although his book focuses mainly on the specificity of Filipino gay lingo, or *bakla* "swardspeak," his discussion on how "swardspeak" is "made and remade in a speedy, often dizzying, manner…[and] is always on the move" is helpful when thinking more generally about how Filipinos not only navigate multiple languages but also their hierarchical structure. For Manalansan, the ways in which Filipino languages change based on the needs and choices of the speaker must be considered not only active or reactive but modern: "The aim of the speaker is to be au courant, to be modern and to be aware of the latest and newest word or the twists and turns of the new verbal acrobatic act."[54] Although Mimiyuuuh's guest is somewhat confused about her hysterics, it is obvious that he is entertained by Mimiyuuuh's quickness of wit and pop-culture references. (But, of course, the *bakla* [queer] dimension in Mimiyuuuh's performative frustration cannot be overlooked. One must wonder if tackiness and sexual vulgarity are "entertaining" coming from a *bakla* person because the *bakla* person is perceived as always already sexual, making her funny but also vulnerable to heteronormative violence. Once again, we are reminded, here, of the relation between play and violence in every aspect of *walang arte*). Thus, the use of song lyrics to finish a sentence involves great navigational skill and method in that the syntactical movement between speech and lyrics must seem fluid and well-rehearsed, despite it occurring in the most random of times. And, as a defensive and stylistic form, it is often a source of comfort for the speaker and joy to the listener.

Singing the Anthem

Apart from the syntactic use of song lyrics, the thematic of singing in the novel also indexes various linguistic slippages—between the official and unofficial, and the national anthem and nursery rhyme. And what I want to further suggest about non-coherence as the novel's formal mode, as islands in the stream, is that, like *walang arte*, it is very much aware of its fragmentation, as well as its imitative modes, as means not only for making sense of itself but also holding on to the fragments it has been left to deal with. That is, the Filipino style depends on innovation to survive. While in the Philippines with her father filming *The Unintended*, the young Chiara

53. Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas*: *Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2007), 48.
54. Manalansan, *Global Divas*, 50.

learns the Philippine national anthem from a Filipino teacher "before [she] learns [her] own country's pledge of allegiance." She sings the song thus: "*Bayang magiling, perlas ng sinungaling*."[55] Immediately, Magsalin and the two Filipino guards guiding them in their trip to Samar chuckle upon hearing the words. "Beri gud!" one of the guards mocked. "*Magiling*" and "*sinungaling*," Magsalin points out, should in fact have been "*magiliw*" and "*silanganan*." *Magiliw* comes from the word which means love while *silanganan* means that where the sun rises, the east, or the orient. The phrase in English should have been "Oh country I love…Pearl of the Orient." Instead, Chiara was taught *magiling* which is to grind and *sinungaling* which means liar or lies. Magsalin translates the mistaken phrase as "*Obscene country*, *Land of lies*," translating *magiling* as "obscene" because to her, in this context, "magiling *sounds* [my emphasis] obscene." Such variation in Magsalin's (mis)translation is, of course, not a defect in the Filipino style but point to the difficulty of translating Filipino phrases since translation for Filipinos involve not only grammar but also context and personal perception—not to mention the constant urge to pun and make fun. As Manalansan further points out, the act of translation itself, making sense of the Filipino style of speaking, is always already doomed to fail since "changes in the code are usually seen as very rapid, so much so that conversations almost always contain lexical or syntactic innovations."[56] *Bayang magiling* roughly means "ground up country" which still playfully describes the country's brokenness geographically, linguistically, culturally, etc. But because *magiling* sounds obscene to Magsalin, although it is not the direct translation, she would translate it as so. And to refer to the Philippines as an obscene country and land of lies is in sharp comedic contrast to the actual sentiment of the anthem which is of love and loyalty. Magsalin is impressed with how well Chiara sings the Tagalog anthem, yet she is also convinced that Chiara's teacher taught her these words on purpose because in the Philippines "Everyone's a joker."[57]

However, the miseducation of Chiara might be more than just a joke. The Filipino descendants of the Thomasites—Filipinos who were expected to master American education and English, and eventually replace the American teachers—after all turned out to be disloyal, or incapable of being loyal even if they wanted to. As mentioned above, "the chronic shortage of funds, the failure to extend universal access to schooling, and the difficulty of retaining the students beyond the primary grades"[58] contributed to the "miseducation of Filipinos," to borrow from the Filipino historian Renato Constantino.[59] But there

55. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 131.
56. Manalansan, *Global Divas*, 50.
57. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 132.
58. Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 45.
59. See also "The Miseducation of the Filipino" by Renato Constantino to which Rafael is responding.

is another dimension to that miseducation, as Rafael further points out, which has to do with "the workings of the vernacular."[60] Although English was strictly implemented in American schools, the fact that most Filipino students grew up speaking a non-English mother tongue/s, and that they were still surrounded by the Filipino vernacular outside the school, meant the mother tongue proved itself inescapable. And because the mother tongue was the one being repressed and policed, it was the language with less pretense, or *walang arte*, towards which the Filipino will always be drawn. Oscillating between the languages, and their imposed hierarchical status, Filipinos were in a constant state of translation. And, relieved from the burdens of complete translation/fluency, they now possess what Rafael calls "motherless tongues" with no real loyalties either to America or the Philippines. Given such unassimilable condition, what I think is worth considering about the Filipino teachers of Chiara is not only their disloyalty to their American education but also to Filipino nationalism;[61] it is unclear, after all, whether "*Obscene country*, *Land of lies*" refers to the U.S. or the Philippines, or both. Such lack of loyalty might be precisely how the Filipino language sustains itself.

Magsalin's miseducation also operates in a similar way. Upon hearing from one of the guards that they will have to take a "Ro-Ro" to get from one island to another, Chiara asks Magsalin what a "Ro-Ro" is. "You know, like ro-ro-row your boat, gently down the stream!" Magsalin explains, "though she has no idea, too, why Gogoboy [the guard] calls the vessels Ro-Ro." She then informs Chiara that the reason why the nursery rhyme was her first guess was because

"Filipinos were taught YMCA camping songs by Thomasites… Clever form of pacification. Very smart. It stuck, you know. Camp songs are the backbone of my education. I learned the song 'Row, Row, Row your boat' in nursery school. I sang in English before I wrote in Waray. Actually, I never learned to write in Waray."[62]

Magsalin's introduction to English through nursery rhymes is in stark contrast to the young Chiara learning the Philippine national anthem. But, of course, the racialized dimension of it should be obvious. Part of President William McKinley's program of "benevolent assimilation" was the "uplift" of "savage" Filipinos through "Anglo-Saxon" values. The terms "unincorporated territory" and "foreign in a domestic sense" also juxtaposed American benevolence by virtue of Filipino racial difference.[63] Filipinos were savage children in need of Western education, which "naturally" begins with nursery rhymes. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Magsalin's relationship with English is not one

60. Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 53.
61. See *Motherless Tongues*, Chapter 2, for more on the anti-Filipino nationalist tendencies of having a motherless tongue.
62. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 131.
63. See Duffy Burnett and Marshall, *Foreign in a Domestic Sense*; Rafael, *White Love and Other events in Filipino History*, chapters 1-2; Kramer, *The Blood of Government*.

of disavowal. She is obviously fluent in English, and English surfaces in many aspects of Filipino life including the Ro-Ro vessel. And it is also not one of assimilation either. It is linguistic recurrence through playfulness and invention. Instead of seeing English nursery rhymes as a developmentalist medium into "greater" American values, she sees in the foreign language the possibility of the vernacular's survival, not its death. Instead of Americanizing herself, she Filipinizes the English language, turning an English phrase from a nursery rhyme into a Waray word for cargo ships—or so she assumes. Magsalin does not actually know if the origin of the Ro-Ro term is the nursery rhyme. RORO vessels are in fact cargo ships that allow vehicles to be "rolled in" and "rolled out," hence "RO-RO." She is simply guessing, which is another trait of the Filipino style; indeed, guessing and mistranslating are two of its many characteristics. But it is not *mere* guessing either. That Filipinos can assimilate an English language acronym to the grammatical doubling that happens in Malay languages[64] (e.g., *halo-halo*, *turo-turo*, *anting-anting*, to a certain extent *arte-arte*) is precisely an instance of appropriative inventive play. That is, because the doubling is endless, the potential for play is also endless, making Magsalin's rationale about the nursery rhyme utterly in keeping with the style. To be *walang arte* is to be un-picky, and to be able to *make do* of what one is left with—a trait particularly useful for the marginalized. Calling a cargo ship "ro-ro" from "row, row, row your boat" is also characteristically *jejemon* in its seeming childishness. But here I am insisting on the invention and innovation necessary in the playfulness that the Filipino style deploys. Magsalin may not have learned to write in her mother tongue, Waray, but she knows the language will survive so long as they are allowed to coexist—or, better, given room to play. Filipino non-coherence, therefore, does not hierarchize, favoring English over Filipino, or vice versa, but merely makes room for multiple parts to simultaneously function while never losing sight of American imperial and racial subjugation and its centralizing, developmentalist logic.

Conclusion

At every turn, *Insurrecto* insists upon, not only the insurgency of the Filipino people, but of the Filipino vernacular over the implementation and institutionalization of English through American education. By way of constant doubling, endless citationality, and defiance against coherence, the novel articulates the resilience of Filipino languages—amidst a history of erasure and silencing—through the Filipino style of being and turns it into the literary. In other words, the Filipino style bears with it its own beauty and survival because of its adherence to

64. The longer version of this article will necessarily situate the geographic, cultural, religious, and linguistic fragmentation of the Philippines within its Southeast Asianist context.

adaptability and, most importantly, I think, playfulness. Apostol's book deliberately opens up and allows for various interventions in whichever direction the reader might take, such as precisely what I have been able to do in this article. In discussing the "play of translation and the friendship between languages" that characterize the Tagalog slang, Rafael quotes the Filipino journalist Nick Joaquin thus:

"This language [Tagalog slang] …is the most daring, the most alive, the most used language in the country today…[It] is being created by the masses, out in the open, to express their lives, to express their times, and just for the fun of it. That's why it promises to be a great language: because it's being created for the sheer joy of creating. *Happy-happy lang!*"[65]

While I agree with Joaquin's description as it refers to Tagalog slang (i.e., Joaquin's focus is the use of slang within *barkadas*, or close circle of friends), by way of the Filipino style and *walang arte*, I want to suggest that that description applies not only to slang but to various aspects of Filipino everyday life as I have catalogued above.

Bookending the novel are lyrics from Elvis Presley's "Suspicious minds." In one of the opening chapters, Virginie, Chiara's mother, hears "*We can't go on together! With suspicious minds*" on the radio in late 1960s Las Vegas—a city where "everything in the world is doubled."[66] While Stephen Sohn has described, not inaccurately, the "profligate provinciality of Las Vegas,"[67] I find the city to be an apt Filipino American double, as well as an apt starting point (to the extent that there is one) for the novel, in that it was not only home to "The King," but also because of its spectacular embrace of imitation. It is no coincidence that Filipino performers have done well in Las Vegas: Lani Misalucha, Martin Nievera, Pops Fernandez, to name a few—but, of course, they would not get the same renown as their American counterparts. However, at the end of the novel, Magsalin and Chiara find themselves in Magsalin's uncles' home in Punta, Manila where "Exequiel and Nemesio sing out the doubling chorus…*We can't go on together—with suspicious minds*" in a karaoke performance.[68] As Magsalin herself exemplifies, Filipinos like to imitate especially American culture, but they also have suspicious minds. That is, as in a mystery novel (Magsalin's choice of genre for her counter-script), in *Insurrecto*, and in *walang arte*, everything is doubled, everyone is of suspicious mind, and nothing is what it seems—which is precisely the mode of play and style: figuring it out. And so, to close the novel in Manila with Magsalin's uncles singing "Suspicious Minds" in karaoke is to insist upon that mode of suspicion (playfulness) and the deliberateness of Filipino imitation.

65. Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 59, 62.
66. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 13.
67. Stephen Hong Sohn, "From Discos to Jungles: Circuitous Queer Patronage and Sex Tourism in Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 2 (2010), 317–348., doi:10.1353/mfs.0.1694: 329.
68. Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 296–97.

While mimicry in the colonial context is often described as negotiation with colonialism and subtle survival technique,[69] the Filipino style tends to be more actively aggressive in wrenching away from the imposed imperial culture out of its own framework to the extent that Magsalin can think of Elvis's song as utterly and absolutely Filipino, as belonging in a communal karaoke machine for *everyone* to sing. It is a total appropriation through performative mimicry that is more aggressive and has the function not only of revealing contradictions and fissures in the American culture, but also the labor and inner logic of the Filipino style. Filipino non-coherence does not necessarily reject the desire for the original and authentic, but it understands the (Filipino) distance from/impossibility of the perceived original thus making imitation a worthy substitute. It describes Filipino modernity as a particular kind of colonial carnivalesque that at every turn defies any linear, rationalist, and developmentalist formation—but sometimes also, just for the fun of it, *arte-arte lang*.

69. See *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha.

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