

## The Australian National University

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### 'Aesth-ethics': Meeting the Other

#### Abstract:

This is the story of a creative reading-writing workshop that I piloted in 2009 with three students on responding to a text and a life from an/other culture through the poem 'The Story I would Have Wanted To Tell you You Had I Met You Yesterday' (Reyes, 1990), which embedded 'an aesth-ethics' in meeting the other's story. I reference philosopher George Steiner's concept of aesthetic engagement as 'the meeting of freedoms' in artistic production and reception (1989) in conversation with my past and ongoing formulations on aesthetics and ethics that take off from Philippine indigenous beliefs.

#### Biographical note:

Merlinda Bobis is a Filipino-Australian writer with 4 novels, 6 poetry books, a collection of short stories and 9 dramatic works. She received Australia's *Christina Stead Prize for Fiction* for her novel, *Locust Girl. A Lovesong*; three Philippine National Book Awards also for *Locust Girl* and an earlier novel, *Fish-Hair Woman*, and for her collection of short stories, *White Turtle*, which also won the *Steele Rudd Award for the Best Published Collection of Australian Short Stories*. She also received the *Prix Italia*, the *Australian Writers' Guild Award* and the *Ian Reed Prize* for her play, *Rita's Lullaby*. Borders and difference, women and girls, geopolitics and environment, war and memory, the poetics and politics of care are among the subjects of her literary, performance and scholarly works. She taught Creative Writing for 21 years at University of Wollongong and is currently Honorary Senior Lecturer at The Australian National University.

#### Keywords:

Creative writing – reading – artistic production and reception – aesthetics – ethics – Philippine indigenous belief – self, other

'The Story I Would Have Wanted To Tell You Had I Met You Yesterday.' On reading this title of the poem by Philippine poet Lina Sagara Reyes (1990: 80-85), we sense regret. On finishing it, our eye gets caught by a footnote – and regret hits like a bullet:

*Emmanuel Gutierrez (1963-1986), was a student activist, painter, community organizer, and city partisan. He was killed by government soldiers together with three friends on September 24, 1986 at high noon. He was 23. (84)*

We finally meet him who will never be met, him who will never be told the story. Except posthumously, in a poem of regret.

In 2013 the impact of this regret-filled meeting led Chloe, one of the students in my *Writing Across Borders* class, to leave our workshop during a discussion of the poem. She did not return until the following week. The incident perplexed me; she was one of my most committed students. Two years later, she told me the story behind her 'disappearance.' Meeting Emmanuel had undone her. She did not know what to say, what story to tell him had she met him yesterday. So she left, went into the toilet, and wept.

This story about meetings began before *Writing Across Borders: Imagining and Re-imagining Story*, a subject I developed and taught at University of Wollongong (2013-2015). Reflecting on how Australian students read and write the other, in 2009 I piloted a reading-writing workshop with three undergraduate creative writing students: Matilda Grogan, Luke Phillip Lucas and Gilly Grundy<sup>1</sup>. They are among the protagonists of this story, which charts the pilot that contributed to *Writing Across Borders* and my conceptualisation of 'an aesth-ethics' in responding to a text and a life from an/other culture, history and geography. First, a brief background: earlier I taught one of the poems of Lina Sagara Reyes but students did not quite connect with the text. So I decided to experiment with a reading-writing workshop (a pilot) using Reyes' Emmanuel poem that might facilitate an in-depth meeting between readers and text. I invited my then students Matilda, Luke and Gilly to this out-of-class activity, which would produce a paper that I was to deliver at University of Zaragoza, Spain in October 2009. They came on board with much enthusiasm and we worked together informally outside class hours for two months through weekly workshops and regular emails. After the Spain presentation, three Spanish academics sent their responses (with much praise and gratitude) to what the students produced from 'meeting Emmanuel' — they met him too and the students, who were elated with the scholarly and humanly considered insights and commendation from total strangers. Together we realised that from the Philippines to Australia to Spain, meeting the other had multiplied many times over and richly so. But the provenance of meetings can be traced to an event much earlier than this experiment.

In 1990 I translated Reyes' suite of poems (including Emmanuel's poem) from the English original to Filipino for an anthology of poems that received the Cultural Centre of the Philippines Literature Grants (1988-1989). These poems were also translated by Ester Bandillo to Visayan. In Reyes' mother tongue the poem's title reads: 'Ang Sugilanon Nga Buot Ko Untang Isugilon Kanimong Kon Nagkita Pa Kita Gahapon.' In Filipino, it is: 'Kwentong Ninais Kong Ikwentong Sa'yo Kung Nakilala Kita Kahapon' (Reyes 1990: 81). It is fitting to meet the languages of the poem's characters, who speak these tongues, before entering their story circle of friends:

Your friend Ricardo Lucas  
Floods the ponds  
Of my emptied days  
With stories  
About you, Emmanuel Gutierrez\*.  
From the mouth of his memory, words leap  
Agile, like green frogs. (Reyes: 80)

At first instance of meeting the poem (Reyes' story of Ricardo Lucas' stories), I leapt from the prescribed literary reading that treats the poetic persona as fictional to reading it through the lens of the biographical footnote and the political climate around 1986-1987 when Emmanuel was killed and the poem was most likely written by Reyes, also a journalist. In February 1986, then dictator President Ferdinand Marcos was overthrown by a coup and the People Power Revolution after 20 years of corruption and violence that saw the killing, torture and disappearance of political dissidents and activists under Martial Law declared by his administration in 1972, and the counter-insurgency war and militarisation under his regime. The murder of Emmanuel Gutierrez and his friends in September 1986 was a protraction of that violence.

This context was totally other to Matilda and Luke, both Anglo-Australian students, and Gilly, a student from the UK. So how did they meet Emmanuel, an artist and student like them but a Filipino killed when he was close to their age? How did they meet the dead? What story would they have wanted to tell him had they met him yesterday – before he was slain? These were answered by the workshop. My objective was to insert the students into the story circle of the poem so that like Reyes, they could respond in their own poem or short fiction to the experience of 'meeting Emmanuel.' If they could meet him (or would wish to meet him) at all.

Aesthetic engagement is underpinned by the freedom to meet the other or not, as George Steiner argues in his book *Real Presences* (1989), which interrogates the deconstructive movements in literature and 'the dominance of the secondary and the parasitic' (7), the critique about the text, over this primary artefact thus inhibiting the meeting with its real presence. I 'met' Steiner when I was writing about that pilot for University of Zaragoza. I came across him in a paper by scientists Wilson Poon and Tom McLeish who articulate 'the shock of relevance' of Steiner to scientific theory and practice (1999: 169). My response was also a shock of relevance. Uncannily, it seemed as if Steiner were describing the process and outcome of the workshop. I realised later that his discourse aligns with my formulations on aesthetics and ethics in my practice as writer, teacher and scholar, which also align with a worldview from my first home: the Philippines' indigenous beliefs of *kapwa* ('shared identity' or 'selfother') and *nagtawo* ('became a person'). These alignments are also meetings with the other: between creative practice and critical thinking, and between oriental and occidental worldviews.

## Meeting the other

'There is language, there is art, because there is "the other"' (1989: 137). Steiner's assertion turns our perception of creative practice 360 degrees away from its usual fulcrum: the self. We create, we speak and write, because of the other. For Steiner, what underpins aesthetic engagement is *meeting the other*:

The meaning, the existential modes of art, music and literature are functional within the experience of our meeting the other. All aesthetics, all critical and hermeneutic discourse is an attempt to clarify the paradox and opaqueness of that meeting as well as its felicities. (138)

When we read text, we are attempting to meet the other. But we can also close the door; we cannot be coerced into this meeting, even in a literature or creative writing class. According to Steiner 'the experiencing of created form is a meeting between freedoms': between the freedom of creation [of the artist] – 'the poem, the sonata, the painting could very well *not* be' – and the freedom of reception [of the reader/listener/audience] – 'we are utterly free not to receive, not to meet with authentic aesthetic modes at all.' He goes on to argue that 'Only in the aesthetic is there the absolute freedom "not to have come into being." Paradoxically, it is that possibility of absence which gives autonomous force to the presence of the work' (1989: 152-155).

I draw from Steiner what applies to the problematic reception of other voices (outside the hegemonic race, culture, or language: white, Anglo-Australian, English) in Australia's mainstream literary industry and creative writing classroom. Since I arrived in Australia in 1991, I have witnessed how other voices have been mostly absent or have not been allowed to 'come into being' in these predominantly Anglophone environments and if they have been visible, their 'real presence' has not been comprehendingly welcomed. Much has been written about this phenomenon of literary gate-keeping (Gunew 1994, Davis 1997 & 2007, Ouyang 2007, Chakraborty 2012, Cahill 2014 & 2016 among others) and I too have reflected on it (2010, 2014, 2017). But the critical and the creative activism to resist the invisibility of 'the others' continues to struggle against a mainstream Anglophone imaginary in what is supposedly a multicultural Australia. Speaking out against this reality, one risks being labelled 'a whinger' or of pulling out the race/culture card yet again. True, non-Anglo Australian voices (including Aboriginal writers gaining more currency only in this decade) are now being published, are winning awards, are being taught at Australian schools and universities, and have become subjects of literary scholarship. A number of publishers and scholars also continue to support the struggle for the visibility of other voices. I believe this struggle needs to continue, especially in the classroom where imaginaries are still being shaped into, hopefully, something more inclusive, empathetic and global.

Through 21 years of teaching creative writing at University of Wollongong, I always included other voices in the reading list along with Australian, British and American texts to expose students to different writing styles, sensibilities, worldviews, experiences, and even languages other than English. 'Student responses ranged from the indifferent, perplexed, hesitant, timorous, appreciative, joyful, to resentful and sometimes downright hostile' (Bobis 2017: 27-28). I remember how one student took great lengths to prove to the class that an award-winning poem from the Philippines was 'poor writing.' Once I

asked a class to respond to poetry books by iconic poets from different cultures, including bilingual editions, and an American exchange student responded dismissively then read a poem by her choice American poet, telling the surprised class, 'You should be exposed to this.' Another time, a student complained about the assigned reading of a novel on the Congo: 'Why are we even reading this [Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*]?' And Robin Sheiner's short story 'My Sister's Funeral' about reinstating Aboriginal dignity in the context of the stolen generation received a surly reception. It is these and despite moments like these that kept me trying out for years reading-writing exercises that inspire, deploy and facilitate a meaningful meeting between self and other. Steiner is relevant to my aspiration:

Where freedoms meet, where the integral liberty of donation or withholding of the work of art encounters our own liberty or refusal, *cortesia*, what I have called tact of heart, is of the essence. The numinous intimations which relate hospitality to religious feeling in countless cultures and societies, the intuition that the true reception of a guest, of a known stranger in our place of being touches on transcendent obligations and opportunities, helps us to understand the experiencing of created form. (1989: 211)

These 'transcendent obligations and opportunities' in reading the other are missed, when one opts to remain in the safe ground of the self. Through years of trying to get other voices through the door, I realised that more often than not: 'There is language, there is art, because there is [the self and not] "the other."' A text is other because it does not speak to me – and 'it does not speak to me' means it does not speak about me and/or does not speak like me. If so, then it cannot be trusted. So I shut my ears; I close the door, I shut the gate. But Steiner plagues this shuttered entry, arguing for welcome:

... the movement towards reception and apprehension does embody an initial, fundamental act of trust. It entails the risk of disappointment or worse. As we shall note, the guest may turn despotic or venomous. But without the gamble on welcome, no door can be opened when freedom knocks. (1989: 156)

I cannot resist this gamble. A meeting with all its strife is safer than regret: what we would have experienced and become had we met each other yesterday. Imagine this regret in the tragic, global scale when stakeholders refuse to read the world beyond their respective worldviews and doors are shut to each other so that conversations between self and other (conflict resolutions, peace processes) never happen. It would not just be a bullet for the likes of Emmanuel that would shoot through the door; a bombing, a massacre, or a protracted war would bring the whole house crashing down. This is at the heart of why I chose to gamble on that reading-writing pilot with an unusual approach. My initial thought was: if you cannot trust the alien at the other side of the door, then let us talk about *you* first. Let us begin with a self-centred reading.

### **Fondle the text, fondle the self: location**

'If you want to write, you must read, and read well.' My advice on my first lecture to first year creative writing classes. Then I shared with them this enticement from Filipino novelist Edilberto Tiempo: reading is like 're-dreaming the poet's dream,' taking off from Italian critic Benedetto Croce's 're-evocation of poetry': the poem 'similarly lives again in others who are, as it were, himself (the poet), because they are united to him by a

common humanity' (1981: 84). How can this 'common humanity' (but specifically gendered?) be enkindled – how do we read well? I introduced Nabokov's 'How to Read How to Write' in which he discusses the natural bind between reading and writing, advising that we 'fondle details' as we read (1980: 61) – and I added, especially as writers, also as we live. I enticed the students further: don't you love the tender and erotic evocations of the word 'fondle'? Fast forward to the pilot reading-writing workshop with Matilda, Luke and Gilly on their second year of the course. I deployed 'fondling' as a reading strategy, but not as a masturbatory pleasuring of the self. 'Fondle' can be an outward gesture: a gesture of care. If we fondle the text enough, it might reveal something that we have not touched yet. We might even meet the text's real presence: the other. Fondle can also be an inward exercise: fondle the self, in order to locate the reader's positionality at the outset, which is paramount to the ethical project.

I asked the students to insert their own stories into the poem's story circle: friends storying about a dead friend. They would join this storytelling by fondling details that I underlined in the poem, approaching them as questions about themselves. To illustrate this reading strategy, throughout this account I unfold the poem stanza by stanza with the details underlined and, beside them, the relevant questions. I asked the students to respond to them and write their answers into 'the story I would have wanted to tell you, Emmanuel, had I met you yesterday.' It was a role-playing exercise: talk to him, confess to him. But they would not know the truth about his death until they reached the footnote.

These stories do not bring

You back alive

These are those that deliver him and me

From the darkening high

Noon of bright laughter that encompasses

All these,

All our meager losses.

[What are these losses?]

He says, you eat well.

He says, at supper a *kaldero* of rice

And a mound of crunchy heads of *galunggong*

Won't last long with you at the table.

You are always hungered by this secret pain.  
pain?]

[What is this secret

(Reyes 1990: 80 underlining and questions not in original)<sup>2</sup>

Reading the above second and third stanzas of the poem while answering questions about their own losses and pain, the students were departing from the poem before they finished reading it – or, were they? Their responses were documented in emails and sound recordings through several debrief meetings. In their early drafts (August 2009), they

struggled with the binary, self vs. other. Gilly considered opening her door to Emmanuel, conscious of her privileged 'I':

If Ricardo had brought you, Emmanuel Gutierrez,  
to my home yesterday to mural my walls,  
my questions would have breathed heavy  
with dreams.

I would have told you I eat well.

I don't speak while my mouth is filled: fish eggs and lobster tails. (Grundy: in Grogan et al: 2009)

Luke's discomfort made him invent an Emmanuel outside of the poem and an 'I' in a café reading the news about 7000 dead in a foreign country, while overhearing anecdotes on him from another table:

A coffee I had forgotten ordering was handed to me and I placed it on top of the open paper, thankful for something else to look at while I listened. Emmanuel was the name of the subject in the man's stories ... (Lucas: in Grogan et al: 2009)

Matilda's response opened with regret like in Reyes' poem, but parenthetical, perhaps uncomfortable, as she took 'I' into her imagined landscape of Emmanuel when he was still alive:

What I would have told you  
(had I met you yesterday)  
was something I traced, wading in the noontide  
of light, the hard glow of cement and pollution,  
my palm pulled behind me along the bricks,  
fingers spread, the net behind a boat

You trampled it with your wide-bristle brush. (Grogan et al: 2009)

What was 'trampled' by 'You' (Emmanuel)? His landscape – or the 'something' that I traced? These early drafts of the students revealed both a struggle and a connection: a 'collision-collaboration' (Bobis 2003: 118) in making meaning between I, the self, and Emmanuel, the other. It began as a self-centred exercise; nevertheless, self met the other.

### **From meeting the other to meeting *kapwa***

Discourses on *self meeting the other* largely pivots on problematic otherness. There is though the hopeful concept of *intersubjectivity*, in which self and other hurdle otherness. It is 'the sharing of experiential content (e.g. feelings, perceptions, thoughts, meanings) among a plurality of subjects' and is 'fundamental, and somehow constitutive of what it means to be human' (Zlatev et al 2008: 1). Intersubjectivity, in the light of collaborative learning, is also defined as 'a concept that indicates *shared understanding* among people. This "sharing" is not a matter of individuals having similar understandings, but of them participating productively in a joint meaning-making discourse within a communal world' (Stahl 2015: 209). There is, however, another worldview that takes sharing to a

deeper level philosophically, conceptually and linguistically: the Philippines' indigenous belief of *kapwa*. It is only *one* word: *kapwa* which, to me, encapsulates 'selfother.' Father of Filipino Psychology Virgilio Enriquez defines *kapwa* as 'shared identity':

The *ako* (ego) and the *iba-sa-akin* (others) are one and the same in *kapwa* psychology: *Hindi ako iba sa aking kapwa* (I am no different from others). Once *ako* starts thinking of himself as separate from *kapwa*, the Filipino 'self' gets to be individuated in the Western sense and, in effect, denies the status of *kapwa* to the other. By the same token, the status of *kapwa* is also denied to the self. (1992: 43)

The self is *kapwa* of the other, and vice versa: selfother, an organic bind. Perhaps what the self must meet is this other worldview, rewiring perception by going beyond the fixation on otherness and individuality, and concomitantly, a rethinking/rewording of 'other.' In my essay "'Weeping is singing': After the War, a Transnational Lament' (2014) on mourning victims of war across different cultures, I employed the *kapwa* worldview (and *nagtawo*, which will be discussed later), opting for 'a grassroots theorising' (Bobis, 2013: 154) that builds on indigenous beliefs from my first home. In the Philippines, *kapwa* is used to address the other, recognising inherent connection and care. I open this worldview to include those outside the Philippine culture: 'You are my *kapwa*, as I am your *kapwa*.' Whatever is your race, culture, language, or geography.

I attempted to insert this worldview into the students' world. But worldview is shaped by culture, and culture is shaped by geography and the lived life in it. The students have never been to the Philippines and know little about it, and know even less about Emmanuel. But the fondling strategy of care and of recognition of positionality (even as one cares) seemed to have created in them a strange intimacy with him, akin to a *kapwa* relationship albeit worrisome, as they were only hearing his story from the poet who heard it from Ricardo Lucas:

He says, even the colours

Of the murals you paint

Are hungry.

Their sad growl wakes

Our slumbering

Questions

[What are these questions?]

The way hot pepper

In your homemade dish of *gising-gising*

Unclose our taste buds'

Countless biting eyes. (Reyes 1990: 80-82)

Unclosing the taste buds of the students to another way of perceiving, of using language, of reading. Waking them up in another space while waking up other spaces already in them as the poem continued to ask them questions about themselves. In the fourth stanza above, it is the hunger of the colours of Emmanuel's murals that wakes up 'our slumbering questions.' It is the hunger that drove his art and life to defy a militarised state. The hunger that propelled the poem, in itself an interrogation of his murder. The



'sad growl' that, I hoped, the students would hear in their bellies as they were interrogated by the questions I deployed. What are your losses, your pains, your hungers? What new questions wake in you as you read this and write to this?

The interrogated 'I.' This was what was deployed in that I-centred reading. It created accountability, an ethical nigggle that destabilised the students' reading and their response writing. Aligned with this outcome is Steiner's argument:

Interpretative response under pressure of enactment I shall, using a dated word, call *answerability*. The authentic experience of understanding, when we are spoken to by another human being or by a poem, is one of responding responsibility. We are answerable to the text, to the work of art, to the musical offering, in a very specific sense, at once moral, spiritual and psychological. (1989: 8)

Literally 'under pressure of enactment', *answerability* was facilitated through the role-playing exercise. The poem became a set of questions about the students and, subliminally, questions about their relationship with Emmanuel and the poem, hence problematising the ethics of this relationship: the moral, spiritual and psychological dimensions of responding to the other. Thus, Luke's self-reflexivity, Gilly's self-conscious 'I', Matilda's parenthetical regret, and later, Chloe's disappearance and tears: why am I talking about my self when I'm supposed to be listening to the other?

He says, "Those eyes."

He means their drooping heaviness

Never stops speaking.

He remembers, you feed fires

With your fierce way of craving

For whatever is nourishing:

Food, woman, freedom, solitude,

A company of dreams

You tried to make come true

With many friends. (Reyes 1990: 82)

The poem (and Emmanuel) 'never stops speaking', never stops interrogating the reader, even if s/he too does not stop speaking back with his or her own dreams and cravings. There is a re-dreaming and speaking of dreams many times over and somewhere in this cacophony, self and other meet not only each other, but in some uncanny moment, one's *kapwa*, the selfother. Meeting what is already in you but also outside of you, 'you' (carrying many others in yourself) are in 'a company of dreams' of 'many friends.' But how to make friends with the dead? According to Zygmunt Bauman:

Death is the absolute *other* of being, an *unimaginable* other, hovering beyond the reach of communication; whenever being [self] speaks of that other, it finds itself speaking, through a negative metaphor, of itself. ... death is not like other 'others' – those others which the ego is free to fill with meaning, and in the course of this meaning-bestowing act to constitute and to subordinate. (1992: 2)

Just as Ricardo Lucas and the poet Reyes conjured Emmanuel posthumously in that 'unimaginable other' world, the students also attempted to imagine him and tell him a story, problematically constituting and subordinating the dead in their imaginaries. As Luke confessed during a debrief:

Throughout the process, there was definitely a sense of unease with writing about a real person who had died. I found that I had to distance myself from the persona of Emmanuel at times, and just focus on the ramifications of his death. Regardless of this distance, however, the fact remains that we had been making our speculations, assumptions and unconscious judgements about him throughout the whole process (Grogan et al: 2009).

### ***Nagtawo* and translocation**

In the Philippines, one can meet the dead; in fact, in this meeting, one can save the dead from dying. This uncanny translocation completes the ethical project.

In the 80s, I was teaching English at Manila's Colegio de San Juan de Letran. I had a co-lecturer, Tita Remy (not her real name), who had cancer. Sometimes she was so sick, she could not come to work. Once she was absent, but someone saw her standing by a window. One of the administrative staff, Mario (not his real name), announced this uncanny event, with such regret:

*'Absent si Tita Remy ngayong araw, pero may nakakita daw sa kanya na nakatayo sa may bintana, at walang ulo. Dapat kinumutan siya para di mamatay.'* [Auntie Remy is absent today, but someone saw her standing by the window, without a head. A blanket should have been thrown over her so she does not die.]

Auntie Remy is absent yet present. This is the phenomenon of *nagtawo*, which literally means 'became a person.' It is an indigenous belief from my home region Bikol. When someone dies or is dying, s/he can *nagtawo* and translocate anywhere in the world to appear to the beloved, in order to make known her/his passing. Formulating this belief into an ethical project, I argue that 'being present' is reciprocal. Absent to each other, the dead/dying (say, in the Philippines) and the beloved (possibly in Australia) meet to witness each other. An ethics and, I contend, an act of love propel the completion of *nagtawo*. The living witness must respond to the dead by also translocating to her world and, as Mario hoped, throw a blanket over the apparition, thus, I propose, acknowledging her as a body, *a real presence*. Only then can she be more than a witnessed apparition: she becomes *a tawo*, a 'person' who may be retrieved from death. Mario comes from the Visayas region and his own indigenous belief meets and completes the *nagtawo* principle from my different home region. His regret was that the witnesser did not throw that blanket. 'Throwing a blanket' is an impoverished translation of *kinumutan*, which literally means 'blanketed' (with care). In this sense, *kinumutan* is blanketing the other with one's arms: an embrace. It was not enough to witness Tita Remy or Emmanuel, who had translocated into the space of the living. It was incumbent on the living to actively close the space between life and death. The dead must be touched, held close, fondled with care, so s/he can become a person – so the dead does not die.

Aligned with my above formulations is an uncanny realisation during a workshop debrief:

Matilda: Emmanuel is physically there and doing things. It's not just a text – he was actually a real person. It's so easy to go, oh yes, he's just a character.

Merlinda: Emmanuel is dead, but you say, 'He is there' – present tense!

Gilly: We brought him back to life! (Grogan et al: 2009)

An insight after two months of reading, writing, and meeting several times to debrief at different stages of fondling the poem, answering its questions, writing to the poem and discovering new questions about their own stories that 'I would have wanted to tell you, had I met you yesterday, Emmanuel.' We were 'neck-deep' in stories and questions, like the story circle of friends in the poem:

There was a day

We were again neck-deep in his stories

About you; we were drowning.

I wanted to raise my voice as if

It has long arms of rivers.

"Stop, stop now. Stop this talk about this one

Who will never be tomorrow.

I desire to listen to the future.

Gift me with what lies ahead.

[What lies ahead?]

You, you who are now

The future, beginning and begun." (Reyes 1990: 82)

'The future, beginning and begun' was the uncanny gift when we felt as if the absent dead had translocated from that unimaginable other space into our lives that had reciprocally translocated into his world. So we met Emmanuel: a real presence, a *tawo*, a 'person', alive. As Gilly wrote in an email after all debriefs:

I no longer felt as though I had simply read a poem about a man called Emmanuel. I had to conjure Emmanuel into being. To collect him from the station, to walk with him, to have dinner with him, to divulge my secrets. To explain myself and justify myself to him. Emmanuel rose from between the lines into a three-dimensional being (Grogan et al: 2009).

'To explain myself and justify myself to him.' Again, the ethical niggles in the interrogated I. There were many moments like this in those two months of intensive meetings. Now, in 2018 I realise that our reading-writing workshop in 2009 was, in fact, an ethical project within an aesthetic event: an experience of 'aesth-ethics.'

### **'Aesth-ethics': location and translocation**

I initially formulated the notion of 'aesth-ethics' for a conference paper "'Aesth-ethics" and Disappeared Bodies: Between Absence and Presence' (2015) on the writing about the disappeared dead in my novel *Fish-Hair Woman* (2012), which chronicles the 1987-1989

Total War waged by the Philippine government against communist insurgency, a continuum of Marcos' counter-insurgency offensive: the context of Emmanuel.

In this paper, I assert that aesth-ethics is the awareness and interrogation of our self's location in relation to 'the absolute others' (the disappeared dead) and how we read and write them. As we make our aesthetic choices and judgments about the dead and the stories about them, hopefully we translocate (like in *nagtawo*) to the others' side, but still self-aware of our re-positioning. For all our good intentions, this translocation is an arbitrary act, so that the other can appear as a real presence – as arbitrary as when we make the other disappear by remaining 'frozen' in our own location, thus engaging the other is inhibited or refused. *Aesth-ethics happens in the meeting points where we appreciate and query our location and translocation.* This is made possible by producing an interrogative text, asking the reader to be part of not only the aesthetic encounter but also of the ethical project. Thus, *Fish-Hair Woman* turned out as meta-fiction, an interrogative story embedded with questions about writing and reading the other in the context of a war. I hoped the writer's ethical niggles could also happen in the reader.

Realisations sometimes happen long after the event. Almost a decade after the pilot workshop, as I write this story about it, I realise that aesth-ethics drove my deployment of questions for the reading of Reyes' poem. I turned it into an obviously interrogative text and made the students answerable to it – just as I made myself answerable to writing about a war in my first home from the first-world comfort of my Australian study. As one of my characters lashes out against the likes of me:

I don't like those who take because they can, because they don't have to answer for the taking, or for whatever they've taken. Because they're able to leave the source. The foreign writers who come to dirty their fingers for a while can go afterwards and publish to the world – but you know what...? The worst are our own expatriate writers, those migratory birds. First they abandon us to fly to a greener pasture, then return as vultures to feed on our despair. (2012: 226)

I was writing *Fish-Hair Woman* when I facilitated the pilot workshop. Perhaps unconsciously I was trying to make sense of my own aesth-ethic niggles by co-opting 'foreign writers' (my students) into this creative-critical predicament: how does one ethically meet the other in artistic production and reception? Did I resolve this after I published the novel? The resolution, if there is one, is still under interrogation. As it was with the students, even after they had finished the final drafts of their story for Emmanuel. The final role-playing was recreating the story circle of the poem by reading their texts to our group of four, as if we were Emmanuel present and listening. About this moment, Matilda writes:

Luke's reaction to the reading of my piece – something along the lines of 'That's not me at all!' – made me really consider why I had imagined Emmanuel the way I had, and really made me wish I could meet him, or at least see a picture or something. I almost felt like I had intruded into this man's life, constructing a notion of him in my head and using his murals to create a poem. I am so far from his life and his values, it made me think about whether my imagining was valid ... (Grogan et al: 2009).

Luke clarifies his reaction to Matilda's poem in relation to his own self-reflexive text:

I'm still not sure how entitled I feel to write about him when the only information I have is from the poem. This is why I have stayed away from bringing Emmanuel personally into my story. When we listened to one another's pieces as though we were Emmanuel, my reaction was 'that's not me,' because I felt like none of us could have represented him on the page even if we had known him, because a person always sounds different in summary.

Aesth-ethics is always in progress and could be unsettlingly retroactive. As writer, reader, scholar and teacher, years after any creative, critical or pedagogical project (like that workshop), I still always question whether I did and got it right in relation to the other: the subject and object of the enterprise. This interrogated 'I' aligns with Steiner:

A reflection on or (as German grammar allows) 'a thinking of' meetings, of encounters as instrumentalities of communication, comports a morality. An analysis of enunciation and of significance – the signal to the other – entails an ethics. (1989: 141)

Because the meeting with the other is not on the page – it is *lived*, was lived by the students and myself. This point is also made by Steiner:

In a wholly fundamental, pragmatic sense, the poem, the statue, the sonata are not so much read, viewed or heard as they are *lived*. The encounter with the aesthetic is, together with certain modes of religious and metaphysical experience, the most 'ingressive' transformative summons available to human experiencing. (143)

Gilly's recent email evokes Steiner: 'I'm not at all religious but I often got the feeling he [Emmanuel] was looking down on us, touched by the energy we put into writing about him' (2018). *Touched*. Fondled within a story circle, which, to Luke, generated empathy and, for all of us, something deeper, an uncanny connection precipitated by its inherent inclusiveness:

But he kept on.

He said he was so much like you.

Over his life, secrets  
secrets?]

[What are these

Hang, too. Clouds

Gathered like fried fish heads

On an empty rice plate.

Then, Ricardo Lucas, my friend, laughed.

*He laughed.*

His laughter

Spoke to me

Of something beyond the deepening

And shallowing of the eye's remembering.

I must lean  
Toward  
Its opendark, like into  
The old, old well of lifestories  
Where I see my own  
Face swimming, swimming [What do you really see?]  
On the surface  
Of its wrinkled and wrinkling waters. (Reyes 1990: 82-84)

When we re-read this final stanza on our last debrief, another uncanny spark hit us: we saw our own faces in 'the old, old well of lifestories.' We were in there, but also outside. An empathetic and ethical location arrived at by the self that had translocated into the other's space, while being aware of positionality before and after the meeting. Empathy: putting ourselves in the shoes of the other, but – *they do not become our own shoes*. This recognition is the new location of the final stories produced by the students. Now a prose poem, Gilly's text opens thus:

Had we met at the station yesterday, Emmanuel, I would have asked you to dinner.  
Had we passed your muraled walls, my questions would have reared with dreams  
signed 'I want' on the dotted line: I want, I want, I, I.

I swallow it whole, my stomach churns a sad growl: a small want, a small growl.  
(Grundy 2010: 53)

In the café, Luke's 'I' eavesdropping on the story about Emmanuel from the anecdotes in another table was a necessary immersion (like the fondling exercise), in order to find a position to speak to him:

I immersed myself in his speech and soon it soaked into my skin. Just as the feet, knees, waist, chest, and finally the head become accustomed to the cold water of a pool when one lowers oneself in, so I began to understand the unfamiliar eddies of his speech. (Lucas 2010: 55)

Yet he will never be able to master that other speech about a devastation in a foreign geography; he is still other. His story is bookended by the line, 'Seven thousand dead in a place whose name I couldn't pronounce' (loc cit). The reader's inadequacy and that pervasive ethical nigger. But more acute than these is a woundedness from being caught in the other's world, as Matilda writes in the final lines of her poem humbly offered to the dead:

Now, a fishhook curves its tooth into my palm.  
I wonder  
how many others you have caught, but  
  
it is your own story  
tossed across the wall like a net  
that I return to you:

I don't even think you realised  
it was there, Emmanuel. (Grogan 2010: 57)

Almost a decade after that original meeting in 2009, I wish to tell Matilda, Luke and Gilly: Your stories have met him. *Kinumutan n'yo si Emmanuel* – You blanketed Emmanuel. You embraced him.

## Endnotes

1. Matilda, Luke and Gilly gave permission for their works, experiences and insights to be included in this paper.
2. Underlines and questions inserted in all following quotations from Reyes' poem are not in original.

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