

PUNETA: POLITICAL PILIPINX POETRY edited by EILEEN R. TABIOS

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EILEEN TABIOS Engages

Puñeta: Political Pilipinx Poetry

(Moria Books' *Locofo Chaps*, Chicago, 2017)

BOOK LINK

ON FORMS IN PUNETA

There are only 13 poets in *Puñeta: Political Pilipinx Poetry*, which I recently edited for Moria Books' new chap series, *Locofo*, that focuses on "politically-oriented" poetry. Yet this brief chap displays a variety of meditations on the "political," as well as a variety of poetic forms. This attests to the diversity of wonders within the field of Pilipinx poetry.

First, let's address the more discernible stuff: content-wise, the poems may surprise. "Political" is not synonymous with just anger or protest—though they are (logically) present, e.g. in the poems of Jose Padua, Barbara Jane Reyes, Glynda Velasco and Kimberly Alidio, among others. They also span the wisdom of apology (Aileen Ibardaloza), taking stock (Luisa A. Igloria and Leny M. Strobel) and love (all of the poets, if one believes in love's infinite ways of showing itself). Many other facets are displayed, from "immigrant son" wonderment (Jose Padua) to grief (Mg Roberts and Cristina Querrer) to philosophy (Luisa A. Igloria and Angela Penaredondo) to both subtle and blunt observance/call-out (Jean Vengua). My summary is not fully representative, but serves to show how this mere baker's dozen worth of poets display an emotional expanse appropriately representative of human diversity.

But perhaps not as discernible are the gifts of poetic forms within this slim publication. You can say the same or similar things in a poem as in prose. But what can make the work a poem is (partly) its form. It's a pleasure to discuss some of these forms; unless indicated otherwise, the opinions below are mine and not the authors':

2 Poems by Kimberly Alidio: The unending, unpunctuated line of "untitled" (with first line "I'm sick of...") reflects the pent-up frustration of a speaker "sick of" something. If someone were to say the words out loud, it would be one long exhale ... or rant. Such frustration is apt given

the poem addressing the 2015 Baltimore protests, white privilege, co-optation of others' stories, fear engendered by the color of one's POC skin, class, ignorance and complacency, among others. The shape of the poem? Like a brick.

Kimberly's "I was born for a stricter regime" is from her book *After projects the resound*, and Jessica Gonzalez's review of the book illuminates as regards form. Go HERE for Jessica's review, but here's a relevant excerpt:

... boast a cadence that could not feel more familiar, taking on a language of fragment and subconscious rhythm that is unmistakably current. Whether the poems shout in a similar vein as knee-jerk, 140-character tweets ... or ring out decidedly in the midst of a quieter chaos ... Ms. Alidio presents an intuitive language pieced together by Filipino history, societal commentary, a queer, female, Filipino-American experience in the United States. The result is masterful: a collection of poems that are thumping declarations, intoxicating in their at-surface ambiguity and affirming in their ultimate power.

"Flow" by Michelle Bautista: Michelle is a 4th degree black belt in the Kamatuuran school of Kali. She intended for her poem (partly) "to create the feeling from a Kali movement when you feel you should stop, but keep pushing forward." As a result, her poem is one with very little punctuation and no line-breaks. As regards the latter, the published variability of line "breaks" is dependent on the margins and space provided by the poem's publisher. (Thus, to translate the poem from book form in *KALI'SBLADE* where it was first published to the space provided by Locofo was to present the poem as a single-paragraph prose poem. The lines then broke across the screen or page as Locofo determined. Michelle's poem just *went with the flow...*)

"The F Word" by Glynda Velasco: As one sees in the chap, the poem is presented as an image of a first or early draft of the poem. The image then presents the editing marks later applied by the author. I could have presented the final text version but opted to show it as an image to highlight the rawness of emotion in the poem based on the unfinished surface (including the shades of darkness in the image as a result of less-than-ideal photographing). Also, the handwritten sections offer an emphasis on their references, e.g. those involved in the fracking industry. As well, the poor quality/gray-ish look to the image visually relates to the matter at hand: oil and oil sludge. Finally, the tag at the bottom of the page, "GT Velasco" reflects how Glynda considers "GT [to be] more proactive. Glynda is the name my mother gave and is more meek and humble." I thought the reference to "GT Velasco" appropriate given how the poem is neither meek nor humble.

"Headhunters" and "Seven and Seven Is" by Jose Padua: Jose's poems straddle and play with that very thin edge between being boring and being riveting, as explained by what he says about his two poems: "[they] are in a form I came up with for some of my more narrative poems. I don't remember exactly how it evolved, but the form is seven lines to a stanza and usually thirteen syllables in a line. It was a way to keep things moving (at least in my own

mind) in a way that seemed cinematic with the specific movie I had in mind: Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura*. It's not something I make reference to in any of the poems. But it is among those long, slow movies a lot of people find boring but which I find riveting and as such is one of those things I keep in the back of my mind for inspiration."

"Prayers of Petition" by Barbara Jane Reyes: Barbara's poem is "crowd-sourced" in that she'd asked for other writers to participate; she used feedback from Arlene Biala, Veronica Montes and Jay Santa Cruz for her poem. It's an approach that reflects her poetics, including "Aswang poetics." Here are some useful links from her blog: [HERE](#) and [HERE2](#). I present an excerpt below as "Prayers of Petition" reflects her approach:

"... poetic kapwa, "shared humanity." That humanity, constantly under attack, must be preserved and upheld, by any means necessary. Recognizing, practicing kapwa can be essential, crucial here as insurgency. Is this praxis? Not entirely, not yet, but it begins the process of bringing to light our epistemologies, and doing so collectively. I would like to think that critical dialogue, that circles of women, like war council, can return to our own families, communities, and work, can bring something back with them, and enact... // ... I know who I am writing for, and it bears repeating that my ideal reader is that young Pinay who has never seen herself in literature, only superficially represented as an acquiescent wordless body for patriarchy. "

Barbara's poem also reflect "found" materials from various sources (e.g. information about a saint named Saint Wilgefortis), which is a logical reflection of her assemblage approach.

"On The Limits of Grief" by Leny M. Strobel: The title partly relates to the origin of Leny's poem: 2014 journal entries while doing a Grief retreat with Francis Weller. In Leny's poem, we'll see single and double slash marks. A single slash denotes a line break and a double slash denotes a stanza break. So one can rewrite her poem into a free verse poem, which is also its final form, by following the codes as presented by the slash marks. The poem is presented as a single-paragraph prose poem to leave it up to the reader to discover the poem in its final form—a strategy that befits the reference to archaeology at the end of the poem and its conclusion, "... *being seen*."

"APOLOGY" by Aileen Ibardaloza: Aileen's poem is in the form of a chained ducktail hay(na)ku, which is a series of tercets ending with the "ducktail" of a single long-ish line. Aileen has written many hay(na)ku because she feels its writing to be "almost effortless..., albeit intentional in its effortlessness." It's an observation about the hay(na)ku that many other poets have shared, and is obviously a form with which Aileen feels at ease—one can sense the *effortless* flow of her words, from one tercet to the next. Finding a form with which she's comfortable is, according to Aileen, especially important to her as "a self-trained poet." (More information about the hay(na)ku is available [HERE](#).)

“LINE THEM UP” by Cristina Querrer: Lyrical, but also quite effective as spoken word. Don’t just read it. Read it out loud! When I did, I sensed faint drum beats—how apt given the reference to “...ancestors’ spirits.”

2 Poems from *All Things Lose Thousands of Times* by Angela Peñaredondo: I so appreciate the haunting, freshened-up imagery of Angela’s poem. One can read but also easily picture something like

When a tree falls, its roots
aim jagged, pointing in all directions

like a chapel buried up
by the sea, hiding from any
marriage of light. Her cross
poking out of waves covered in nothing
but a green flesh.

Her combinations of abstractions and images are particularly deft, like

You think of the different places
now washed over by rain,
very well,
they tell you under fractions of sky,
because they’ve watched all things
lose thousands and thousands of times.

It’s raining hard in California as I write this, and yes, I am looking up at “fractions of sky.”

“SEPTEMBER 5, 2013” by Jean Vengua: Jean’s poem is a wonderful manifestation of telling it slant and imagery. As a result, its ending couplet offers a heightened—and powerfully blunt—impact, all the more impressive when the ending’s bluntness arises from the delicacy permeating all of the couplets in her poem.

“PEOPLE LIKE US” by Luisa A. Igloria: I was first struck by the poem’s (deceptively) casual tone. But the tone—“matter of fact” is another way I thought to describe it—is appropriate to fit what’s happening as the poem begins: a cafe conversation bespeaking a(n initially) casual encounter. As the poem later transforms into a more philosophical meditation, the tone helps to keep the reader’s interest in keeping accessible what are actually weighty philosophical issues addressed mid-poem. Finally, the casual tone works to emphasize the power—and danger—of the ending by not writing over the danger but by simply presenting it as what it is. This is one of those writings where the author makes it look easy, but is not.

“excerpts from *Anemal Uter Meck*” by Mg Roberts: Here, Mg shows mastery of the caesura and white space. A good way to illustrate is to imagine her lines as just printed quad-left on the page. How would your reading differ between that imagined free verse poem versus how Mg displays them: spread across the page with words surrounded generously by white space? For me, I read Mg’s versions more slowly as the caesuras encourage me to linger over what I’m reading. By lingering, I focus more. By focusing more, I feel more deeply the impact of the poems—including that I meditate more over their significances. Their fragmented appearances also befit how the lines are ... fragments: form=content.

In our prior issue, Marthe Reed also offers an illuminating analysis. Go [HERE](#) for Marthe's insight which begins

Mg Roberts’ *Anemal Uter Meck* (Black Radish 2017) draws from Oakland graffiti art and artists for its title, re-contextualizing the poet’s art and language within the transgressive, urban, and public temper of graffiti. This richly folded, felted text takes complexity, multiplicity, profusion as its genetic code, a textual mirror for the world(s) Roberts invokes and celebrates, realms of being and knowing by which she, and her readers with her, are rapt and riven.

“Pilipinx” by Eileen R. Tabios: As noted in the chap’s acknowledgements, “Pilipinx” was generated by my “Murder, Death and Resurrection” Poetry Generator project. The poem was written or “generated” with the general idea of “political” in mind. You can read more about the MDR Poetry Generator [HERE](#).

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