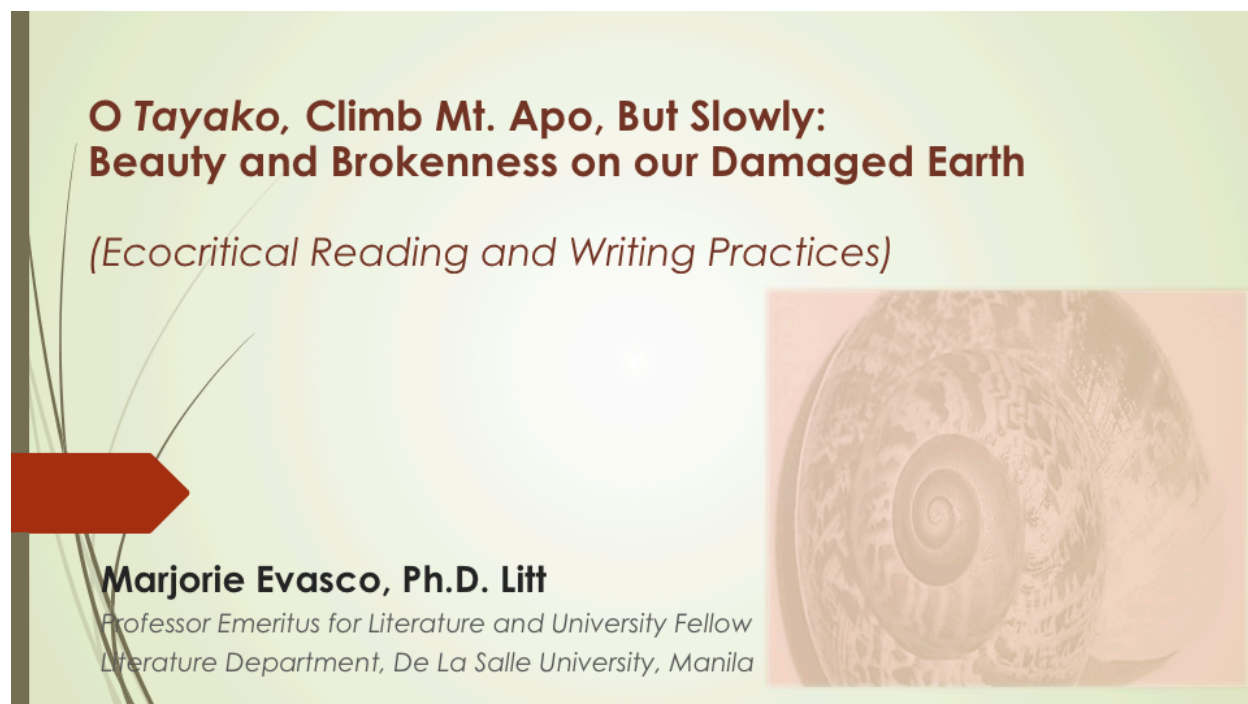


Keynote Lecture

Pag-Aboll: Facets of Mindanao  
UP Mindanao 1<sup>st</sup> Interdisciplinary Research Conference  
Apo Mountain View Hotel, Plenary 2, Nov. 7, 2019



*Maayong buntag!* Thank you for inviting me to explore ecocriticism and ecopoetics, or reading and writing the natural environment in the midst of the current ecocide, also known as the 6<sup>th</sup> Mass Extinction. My presentation title alludes to Kobayashi Issa's haiku of the snail climbing Mt. Fuji, an image representing literature's attention and response to the lure of the natural world, and the oscillating loci of beauty and brokenness in the acts of paying attention, which the contemporary writer's imaginative language illumines, not merely to fulfill the Horatian classic functions of literature, *dulce et utile*, but also to provoke our human consciousness into *actionable hope* at this edge of extinctions.

### Advocacy: Writing the Environment

In *actionable hope*, the Bienvenido N. Santos Creative Writing Center of DLSU-Manila, with USLS-Bacolod, aligned in 2017 with De La Salle Philippines' advocacy for the environment by giving 12-15 fellowships in the Iyas La Salle National Writers' Workshop to young writers with a sensibility awakened to the urgencies of the Anthropocene, practicing the arts of sympoiesis to show the human and more-than-human-species intricately interwoven, *hinaboll*, in its life systems.

The best of Ecocriticism inform poems, stories, plays, and nonfiction narratives that problematize human relationships with the environment. In Iyas, the teaching panel of writers use ecocriticism to close-read literary works in Hiligaynon, Kinaray-a and its variants, Akeanon, Binisaya, Filipino and English. Mindanawon workshop fellows since 2017 include B'laan fiction writer Elizabeth Joy Serrano Quijano, Iliganon playwright Angelito G. Nambatac, Jr., and Zamboangueña fiction writer Sigrid Marianne P. Gayangos, who are part of the robust community of writers of the Philippine South.



IYAS Fellows at the University of St. La Salle ECOPARK

*The Problem in Perspective*

Modern environmentalism began with Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" released September 27, 1962. Her exposé of the dangers of pesticides brought to households in the U.S. the fact that they used DDT without much thought of its effects on their health and the environment. Carson's book received the National Book Award for creative non-fiction. Almost 50 years after Carson's germinal work, John Felstiner edited a field guide to nature poems titled "Can Poetry Save the Earth?" He asked, "If poems touch our full humanness, can they quicken awareness and bolster respect for this ravaged resilient earth we live on?" (K153). This question was anchored on the complexity of our conflicted human positionality: 1) humans are *part of* the natural world and 2) humans are *apart from* the natural world.

Seven years after Felstiner's question, Bangladeshi novelist Amitav Ghosh's "The Great Derangement" asks why writers had not seriously engaged with the continuing degradation of the natural world by humans. He says:

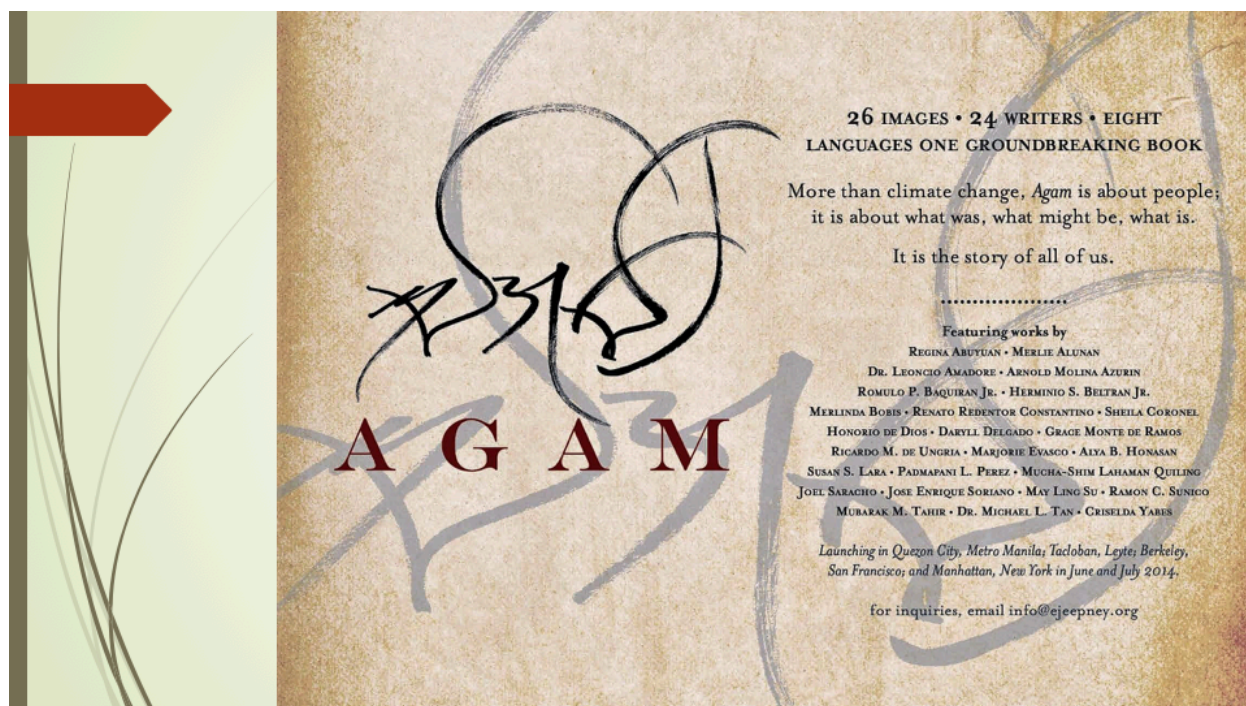
"There is something confounding about this peculiar feedback loop. It is very difficult, surely, to imagine a conception of seriousness that is blind to potentially life-changing threats. And if the urgency of a subject were indeed a criterion of its seriousness, then, considering what climate change actually portends for the future of the earth, it should surely follow that this would be the principal preoccupation of writers the world over—and this, I think, is very far from being the case." (114)



The Anthropocene presents a challenge to the arts and humanities as well as to our “commonsense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general.” (142) Ghosh concludes: “Indeed, this is perhaps the most important question ever to confront culture in the broadest sense—for let us make no mistake: the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.” (142)

In the 2017 Iyas call for creative works tackling the problematic human relationship with the environment, we wanted to see if there would be young writers who would respond to the challenge. Would young writers actively and seriously engage with “potentially life-changing threats” of a damaged natural environment? And would they be aware of the science on the state of the natural environment? Would they show ecological literacy on relationship webs in their biospheric localities? Has creative writing become one of the cultural sites of hopeful action addressing the climate crisis and its effects in the Philippines?

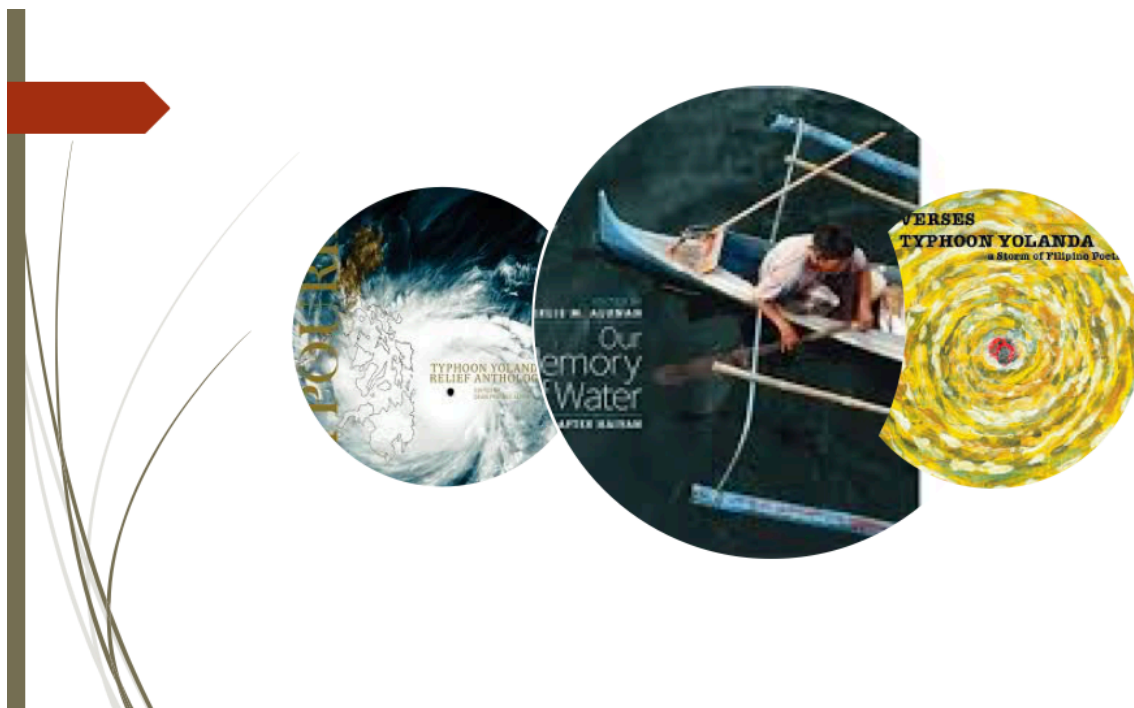
### *Filipino Writers' Response*



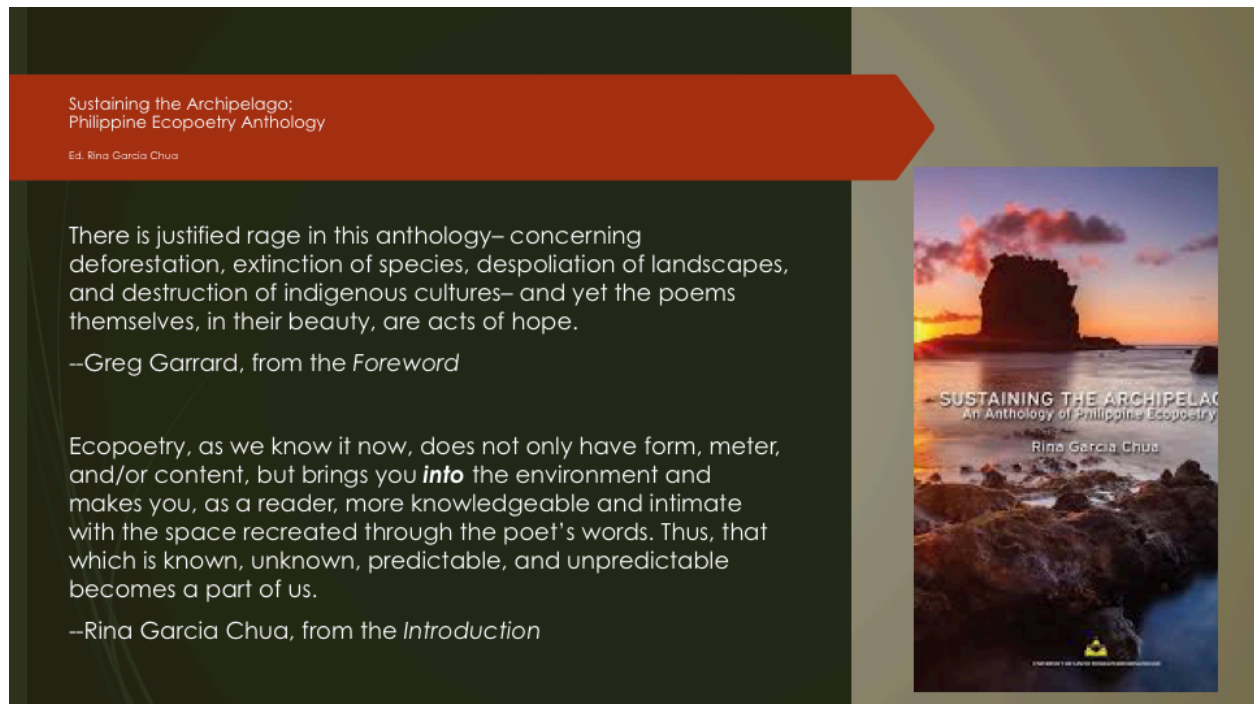
A review of Philippine poetry from 2009-2019 gives us landmark anthologies that chose to focus on the beauty, brokenness, and uncertainty of the natural environment. Contemporary Philippine writers see the connection between extreme weather disasters and the almost invisible, slow processes of ruination every single day. They focus on the particulars of these processes as metonyms of the unimaginable that could bring humans to the brink of their own extinction.

The first of these books was published in 2014 by the Institute of Climate and Sustainable Cities, led by Red Constantino: “Agam: Filipino Narratives of Uncertainty in Climate Change,” with 24 writers and texts in eight Philippine languages namely Sinama Laminusa, Maguindanao, Waray, Cebuano, Bikol, Ilocano, Tagalog, Filipino, and English. “Krutsay,” a *sugidbalak* I wrote in Binisaya and translated into English is in the anthology, with a photo of a Mindanawon fisherman taken after typhoon Sendong. This visual prompt came with a list of jargon I was forbidden to use like climate change and global warming, and two concepts I could explore: uncertainty and ambiguity. In the months of creative gestation I listened to the fisherman singing “*Krutsay! Ang sakayanon nagtawag sa hangin.*”

Other books which saw print were: “Outpouring: Typhoon Yolanda Relief Anthology” (2014), “Verses Typhoon Yolanda: A Storm of Poets” (2014), and “Our Memory of Water: Words After Haiyan” (2016). In our archipelagic imagination, wherever nature strikes the hardest and closest, writers wake up from the illusion that there is a safe place on earth. Human drama wrought by natural phenomenon morphed into catastrophic disaster begs to be attended to and made sense of.



In 2017 “Sustaining the Archipelago: Philippine Ecopoetry Anthology” was edited by Rina Garcia Chua. Ecocritic Greg Garrard concludes his foreword to the anthology thus: “There is justified rage in this anthology— concerning deforestation, extinction of species, despoliation of landscapes, and destruction of indigenous cultures— and yet the poems themselves, in their beauty, are acts of hope. Each strives for its own incarnation of the contest between history and poetry, animal and eternity.” (xxii) Chua defines in her introduction to the anthology what Ecopoetry is and what it does: “Ecopoetry, as we know it now, does not only have form, meter and/or content, but it brings you *into* the environment and makes you, as a reader, more knowledgeable and intimate with the space recreated through the poet’s words. Thus, that which is known, unknown, predictable, and unpredictable becomes a part of us.” (xxxiii)



Reading and listening to literary works that bring us *into* our environment is a way of finding space for some hope. In the “Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet,” Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and her co-editors say:

“Unless we learn to listen broadly, we may miss the biggest story of life on earth: symbiogenesis, the co-making of living things. Practices of storytelling matter... We begin with creative writing, the necessary stimulus to imagining pasts, presents, and the yet-to-come...Creative writing invites us to imagine the world differently, to listen beyond newspaper headlines to hear those quiet stories about the Anthropocene whispered in small encounters. Imaginative writing draws us into what Donna Haraway...calls “art-science activism,” “sympoietic practices for living on a damaged planet.” (M8-M9 )

*The Lenses of Ecocriticism*

To listen to “different modes of storytelling,” Iyas panelists prepared by reading ecocritical studies and theoretical discourses: Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*; Graham Huggan and Hellen Tiffin’s *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*; Bruno Latour’s *Politics and Nature: How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy*; Ursula K. Heise’s *Sense of Place, and Sense of Planet*; and Val Plumwood’s *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, among others.

Other readings were anthologies and literary journals published in the 21st century: “Earth Shattering” (2007), “Can Poetry Save the Earth?” (2009), “How Literature Will Save the Planet” (2010) and “The Ecopoetry Anthology” (2013). Periodicals were summer issues of *World Literature Today* (ed. Daniel Simon), and *Modern Poetry in Translation* (eds. David and Helen Constantine).

Editors Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura Grey-Street curated their anthology using a biocentric perspective that accounted for ecological interrelatedness and entanglements. They classified poems into three general categories: 1) Nature poetry, 2) Environmental poetry, and 3) Ecological poetry (Kl480-501). Nature poetry “considers nature as subject matter and inspiration, shaped by the poetics of Romanticism and Transcendentalism, often meditating on an encounter between the human subject and something in the other-than-human world that reveals an aspect of the meaning of life” (Kl480). A good example, “The Tyger” by William Blake, is constituted by a relentless flow of 13 questions on the limits of human creation in the industrial revolution. Another example, “Gabu” by Carlos Angeles, attends to the seascape of Ilocos and ends with:

...  
The vital splendor misses. For here, here



At Gabu where the ageless tide recurs  
All things forfeited are most loved and dear.

It is the sea pursues a habit of shores.

Environmental poetry “emerged out of nature poetry, propelled by and directly engaged with active and politicized environmentalism, influenced by environmental justice movements and committed to questions of human injustice and issues of damage and degradation of the other-than-human world” (Kl488). A good example, Phil Harold L. Mercurio’s “Ayaw Pagpudla an Tuog,” is a visual poem of the hardwood tree standing at the last frontier forests of Samar. Another is Wendell Berry’s “Questionnaire,” deconstructing master narratives we may have bought into. The last two questions ask:

4. In the name of patriotism and the flag,  
how much of our beloved land are you willing  
to desecrate? List in the following spaces  
the mountains, rivers, towns, farms you could  
most readily do without.

5. State briefly the ideas, ideals, or hopes,  
the energy sources, the kinds of security,  
for which you would kill a child. Name, please,  
the children whom you would be willing to kill.

Ecological poetry “thematically and formally investigates the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception, and which looks strange and wild on the page, experimental, self-reflexive poems that ask how poems can be ecological and enact ecology, willing to play with and engage with postmodern and postcolonial theories associated with language poetry” (Kl493-494). Examples are Kristine Ong Muslim’s two-line ekphrasis “Bathyscaphe” (after Jacek Yerka’s acrylic on canvas, 54 x 54.5

c.m.), and Jane Hirshfield's 'Global Warming' from "Three Pebbles," and the "Sixth Extinction":

*Global Warming*

When his ship first came to Australia,  
Cook wrote, the natives  
continued fishing, without looking up.  
Unable, it seems, to fear what was too large to be comprehended.

from *Three Pebbles*

Sixth Extinction

It took with it  
the words that could have  
described it.

Fisher-Wirth and Grey-Street underscored that nature poetry is NOT anthropocentric, eliminating the popular poem "Trees" by Joyce Kilmer, which sentimentalizes and anthropomorphizes nature; that environmental poetry it is not mere agitprop that sacrifices art and nature's complexity for a political agenda; and that ecological poetry is not hyper-intellectualism and emotional distance or detachment from the natural world. *Homo sapiens sapiens* is gifted with "a compound eye" (Kl509) that allows poets and poetry readers "to engage in and slide between modes of contemplation, activism, and self-reflexivity" (Kl514) so as to adjust the human lens from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric sensibility.

*Writing Ecopoetry*

Possibilities of hope borne out of collaboration and interdisciplinary conversation between creative writers and scientists continue in my research and teaching. Among

the interdisciplinary courses I am currently facilitating in the MFA Creative Writing program is Ecopoetry Techniques. What begs for our attention is not only the “how?” of writing poetry, but more urgently so, the “what for?” and “why?” of the art of writing poetry. In the wake of supertyphoon Haiyan, Leni Mendoza Strobel asked in her introduction to *Verses Typhoon Yolanda: A Storm of Filipino Poets*: “What are poets for?” She believes the language of poetry heals and encourages us to “Stay. Read. Be Here. Feel.” (<https://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2014/6/26/books-typhoon-yolanda-and-art-call-and-response>)

Environmental destruction in the Anthropocene impacts art practices, whether one is aware of it or not. Every artist must rue upon and position her practice vis-à-vis the reality of ruin. I am suspicious of art-making that has no viable component of beneficial application in the world where effective action unfolds in real time and space, amongst real people. Without this time/space affiliation between artists and the world, art practices would be hermetic, would not have the benefit of contact, context, connectedness.

For MFA students to write poetry with their eyes open in new, urgent ways, part of our ecocritical approach was an “examination of consciousness” of our ecological literacy. We also examined the interdisciplinary design of the course, where triangulated historical, mythical, and speculative strands invited them to re-imagine and creatively tell stories of the web of living relationships among species.

One Saturday, we viewed *Expedition Reef*, a video-documentary of the California Academy of Sciences, and listened to Dr. Wilfredo Licuanan, Director of DLSU’s Brother Alfred Shields Ocean Research (SHORE) Center Marine Station, who told us that the

greatest diversity of corals is found in the Philippines. We also visited the experimental aquaria on campus for the growing of “captive” and “rescued” corals from our polluted seas and oceans, in preparation for writing a villanelle on corals and bioluminescence.

Writing “Pebble Poems,” was our first poetry writing project, a nod to Jane Hirshfield’s “Three Pebbles” and W.S. Merwin’s poem for the series called #PoetsforScience (<https://naturalhistoryinstitute.org/poets-for-science/>). The provocation went:

Compose a “pebble” that you can throw into the ocean of life to create ripples that will reach other shores of earth. Using the technique of nuanced precision and economy in language shared by science and poetry, make your pebble skip across the waters of human consciousness.

Two “pebble poems” by Alexis Tapalgo and Mitch Balladares, show that they turned the ship of their imagination away from the anthropocentric to sympoietic practice.





Other writing projects include an ekphrasis poem on a photo from John K. Chua's masterworks of the the rice-growing culture of the Ifugao; a visual or concrete poem in the shape of an endemic bird, insect, or fish; and an *ambahan* in the mother tongue on the concept of cascading global heating tipping points in relation to rising sea levels in the Philippines vis-a-vis glacier meltdown in the Arctic.

### *Mindanawon Ecoliteracy*

The need for interdisciplinary collaboration finds visual and aural metaphor in John Cage's composition called *Fontana Mix* in 1958, which evokes the precarity of the postmodern age. Instead of using a sequence of notes, John Cage composed "a finite system of elements" combined into "infinite compositions...(Kl108)" to create "musical scores of indeterminacy" (Kl108):



These “musical scores of indeterminacy” composed by poets of Mindanao can be read in recent literary anthologies. One poem is “Homecoming” by Sigrid Gayangos (12), published in “Mindanao Harvest 4: A 21st Century Literary Anthology” (2019):

My mother never journeyed beyond  
 The circle of my father’s warmth  
 But one day she shed her human skin  
 And revealed her body’s burnished scales  
 The color of emeralds.  
 Her secret fell to the floor of our house  
 On bamboo stilts by the sea—  
 It sizzled and withered and quieted,  
 Leaving behind a ten-year old me  
 Clutching at the imagined opening  
 Of my own skin.  
 There are days when the waves sing  
 And I think that it is she who calls,  
 Yearning to resurface from the waters  
 That swallowed her whole.  
 And I fear that I, too, will take that swim  
 Up to the farthest reef, in the infinite blue,  
 When I get called by my ancient  
 And watery name.  
 On that day, my human-skin will peel back,  
 And naked I will slither out.  
 Colors of flame shall clothe me  
 And wrap me in a shawl of woven sparks,  
 But here and there, I know,  
 Are splotches of burning emerald.

Like the lyrical short stories of Gayangos, the poem lights upon the stories of the seafaring peoples of Sulu. The poem’s story evokes the lore of the Sama-Sellang. The persona’s mother “...one day...shed her human-skin/ And revealed her body’s burnished scales/ The color of emeralds.” The child-persona, witnessing this magical moulting is awakened in her imagination to her own capacity for shedding her human shape to go

back to the sea. On the 12th line, however, the poem's discourse turns when the remembering self recalls the child's sorrow over her loss. Sorrow comes in the shape of waves echolocating what she imagines her mother must feel: "There are days when the waves sing/ And I think that it is she who calls,/ Yearning to resurface from the waters/ That swallowed her whole." The child knows hers is a "watery name," and that one day the sea would also call her to return. She imagines her own moment of moulting, but the configuration of images is strikingly different from that of her mother's, evoking her own genetic hybridity: "Colors of flame shall clothe me/ And wrap me in a shawl of woven sparks./ But here and there, I know,/ Are splotches of burning emerald."

We are filled with the persona's fear at the end of the 25th line: will she, who is both her mother and her father, be able to breathe in the water? Are the emerald splotches on her skin perhaps her magical gills? Would the human part of her be her doom?

Gayangos' poem resonates with Gary Snyder's poetics. In a Paris Review interview he says: "The work I see for myself remains on the mythopoetic level of understanding the interface of society, ecology, and language, and I think it is valuable to keep doing that." (<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1323/gary-snyder-the-art-of-poetry-no-74-gary-snyder>) In "Homecoming" Gayangos reiterates in lyrical and familial language our marine origins. All life on earth, as science tells us, began its first stirrings in that rich environment where complexities thrived and flourished. But unlike the mythical Sama-Sellang people who have learned how to live with and in water, those of us who have gone to live in cities know that our human skin will be shed

when we suffer immolation in the extreme heat, dry winds, and fires that have ravaged many cities in the world.

Another poem is “Lubong ng Uwak” by Mandaya writer Danny Castellones Sillada (69-70) translated by the author as “Funeral of the Crow”:



When I was seven or eight years old,  
I had my first encounter with a dead crow  
lying on the rice paddy.

The sky was bleak and the heavy clouds  
were about to fall when I asked  
my father to bring

the dead crow inside our house  
because it might get wet  
from the downpour of rain.

“There’s nothing we can do,”  
said my father in a gentle manner,  
“better leave it to the ants and flies to bury the crow.”

At home, I was sitting by the window  
 thinking of the dead crow  
 and I couldn't contain my tears from flowing

because I thought if I died one day,  
 my father would abandon me outside our home  
 like a lifeless crow soaking under the sun.

Structured in six three-line stanzas, the poem's first part renders the crucial scene in the child's memory: the crow lying on a rice paddy and above, the dark sky bringing rain. The child's request for his/her father to bring the crow into the house so that it won't get wet shows the child's innocence of death. Then, we hear the father tell the child the truth: "There's nothing we can do." We also hear in the father's speech his mature understanding of the entanglement of life with death. He speaks gently to the child that the crow is better left outside for the ants and flies. Crow's death feeds other creatures— this is within the natural order of things.

The poem's closure, however, persists in the child's compassion for the dead crow, his/her almost-complete identification with the bird. This compassion gives way to a sadness borne out of his/her perception of the death of smaller creatures in the web of life. The child anticipates the same abandonment to the elements when his/her time comes to die. The poem's reflexivity nudges us into asking about our own attitudes towards the ongoing deaths of vulnerable species. How did this particular crow die? Was it death by a boy's slingshot? Was it the decimation of the forest, its natural habitat, because of development? And why do we not cry, unlike this child, over the extinction of another species of birds?

### Interdisciplinarity in the 21st Century

The list of 10 of the most endangered birds of the Philippines include the Sulu hornbill, the Sulu Racquet Tail, the Visayan wrinkled hornbill, the Negros fruit dove, the Negros bleeding heart, the Cebu flowerpecker, the Isabela oriole, the Black-hooded coucal, the Philippine cockatoo, and the Philippine eagle. But this scientific data must recuperate the child's compassion in the language of poetry, as we hear in Sillada's lyric line: "wà ko kapùg-ngi yang pag-awas ng kanàk mga luhâ." With poetry we must ask: Where did that gentle child go?

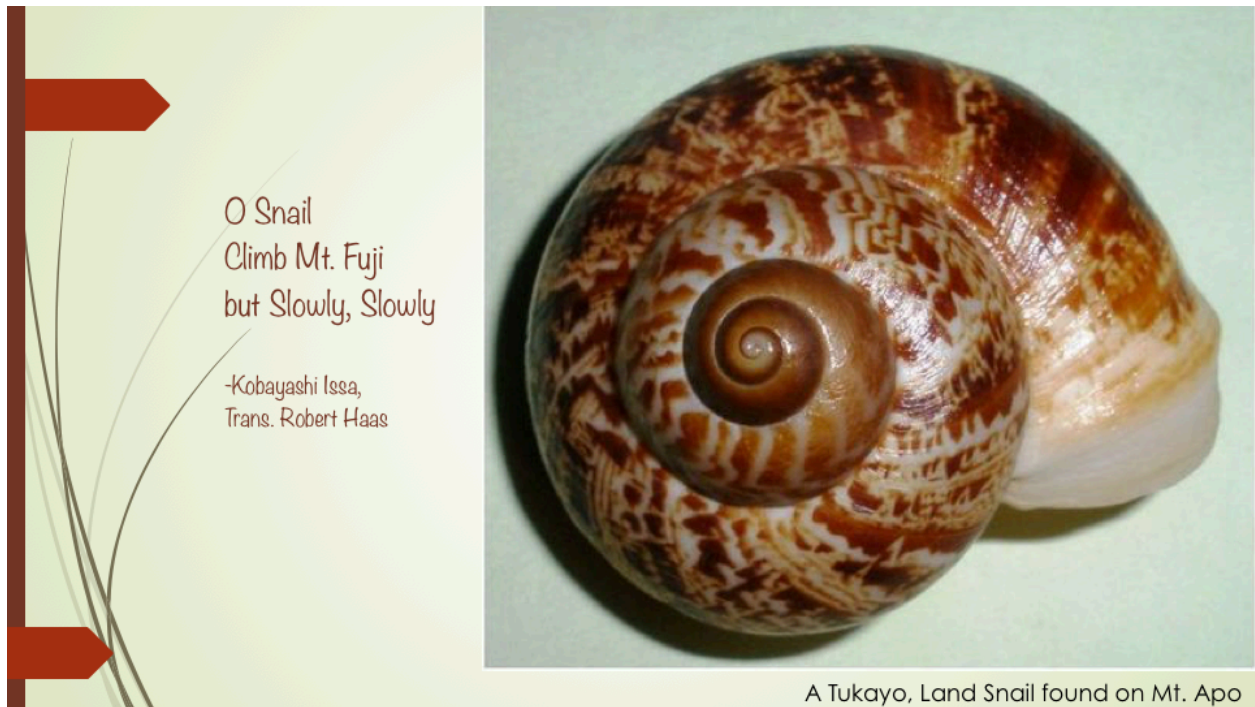
Jonathan Franzen in his book "The End of the End of the Earth" says: "...Birds can't protect wetlands, can't manage a fishery, can't air-condition their nests. They only have the instincts and the physical abilities that evolution has bequeathed them. These have served them well for a very long time, 190 million years longer than human beings have been around. But now human beings are changing the planet— its surface, its climate, its oceans— too quickly for the birds to adapt by evolving...But the future of most bird species depends on our commitment to preserving them. Are they valuable enough for us to make the effort?" (38)

The interdisciplinary practices of creative reading and writing show us that literature or creative writing could be a counterforce against concealments and deceptions of all kinds of master narratives that tend to mislead human perception regarding our natural world.

When we successfully breach old disciplinary boundaries through creative collaborative research, teaching, and learning, we may be able to fall onto our knees and



see up close and personal the *tayako*, kindred to Kobayashi Issa's snail on its majestic climb up Mt. Apo.



A Tukayo, Land Snail found on Mt. Apo

*Thank you for listening. Daghang Salamat sa pagpaminaw.*

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