Title: The struggle for form: a conversation between Nick Carbo and M. Evelina Galang.(Panel Discussion)

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Editor's Introduction:

This email conversation between poet Nick Carbo and fiction writer M. Evelina Galang took place during a ten-month period from September 2002 to June 2003. I invited Carbo and Galang to discuss issues that Filipino American writers have to encounter because I thought that a dialogue between two writers would provide enriching glimpses into highly individual creative processes and allow them to speak more openly in context. From their positions as talented writers concerned with the state of Filipino American writing and actively motivating the publication of diverse work--both Carbo and Galang have co-edited groundbreaking anthologies of poetry and prose--they are singularly well-suited for this reflexive exercise. The writers agreed to "talk" this way because, as they affirmed, it allowed them time to reflect on the questions they asked each other and provide the exact details often left out in hurried person-to-person interviews. This conversational form created a personal and intimate space without an outside voice directing the questions with a specific agenda in his or her mind.

In this conversation, Carbo and Galang uncovered hidden memories and exposed details of their lives that shaped much of what they are as Filipino American writers today. Though much of their dialogue centers on their writerly processes and experiences, many of their insights may be easily used to comprehend the process that occurs in other texts. Their views allow us to see behind the texts, to the complex itineraries of creative choices and positions that Filipino American writers make and occupy, respectively. Further, the writers engage many of the questions that the authors of the critical articles in this issue negotiate, primarily the intersection between aesthetic choices and thematic concerns in Filipino American writing.

--Rocio G. Davis

NC: I grew up in Manila in the seventies and early eighties during the height of the Marcos dictatorship. I attended the international School in Makati, which was the former American School established by the Americans during the Commonwealth period of the Philippines. Only the very rich families of Manila could afford to send their children to the International School. Among my classmates were sons and daughters of the Filipino elite with names like Tantoco, Benedicto, Elizalde, Araneta, Soriano, and Tan. There were even Filipino movie industry teen stars in attendance like Sharon Cuneta and Pops Fernandez. Even though the school was educating the children of some of the most powerful families in Filipino society, there was still a hierarchy based on nationality and race. In one of my early poems "Civilizing the Filipino" (from El Grupo McDonald's) I document an incident where I was accused by a white American classmate of stealing his gold pen. In the white American Principal's office I was slapped, picked up by the front of my shirt and thrown against the wall in an effort to make me confess to the crime. The words "dirty, lying Filipino" never left my mind because I realized that no matter how hard I protested, or pleaded my innocence, the American Principal believed down to his Florsheim shoes that the white kid was telling the truth. All American things (and people) were privileged over anything Filipino. I can look back now and say that it was the perfect example of a neocolonial existence. I learned to speak with an accent straight from California's Long Beach, I wore Nikes and Jordache jeans to school, and I read American books like The Catcher in the Rye and the Hardy Boys. My experience at I.S. was not the typical education most middle class Filipinos had growing up in the Philippines, who went to local private schools like De LaSalle, Ateneo, Assumption, San Agustin, and Xavier, where there was more homogeneity among the students.

How different or similar was your high school experience in Milwaukee? Was your sense of being Filipino formed that early?

MEG: As an adult looking back, it's easy to see issues of race and class, but I wonder how cognizant you are when the incidents are happening. I know I spent my youth going through these issues without processing them until I was well into grad school. My awareness and my identity of being an American-born Pinay came in slow and subtle ways. I grew up in the sixties and seventies. My dad was a medical resident in the US and my mother was a graduate student at Marquette University. We moved to seven different cities in the US, Canada, and the Philippines before I was ten years old, finally settling in Milwaukee. My brothers dealt with racism more directly than I did, often getting into fights with other kids for being Chinks and Nips and "karate" bullies, but for me it was different. I was always the new girl in school. So I think it took me a long time to decipher the difference between always being the new girl in school and always being the only brown girl. When you are always new, you are in some ways always on the outside trying to get in. You learn to be outgoing and resilient. You learn to make friends despite not knowing what's hip and what's not. You learn to overlook little hurtful comments or dismissals by the kids around you.

Once we settled in Brookfield, a suburb in Milwaukee, I started running around with a group of five kids--guys and girls. I should say, I was always running behind them, trying to catch up. I was a reader and a singer and a dancer and a geek. I couldn't hit a baseball, I couldn't run very fast, I couldn't kick the can with any sense of cool. For me, there were two worlds. There was what was going on at school--which I think of as not just an American experience, but a minority American watching the majority American experience. And then there was what went on in our house--which was very much about learning the culture and the practices of Filipino families. My parents are community leaders--always organizing something in the Filipino American community. We grew up with titas, titos, kuyas, ates, mahjong parties, Philippine flags on fourth of July, barong tagalog and Maria Clara events. We learned to dance (and perform) the tinikling, to sing the Philippine national anthem, to make mano to our elders. I was a debutante in a Filipino cotillion. My father told stories of being twelve years old and in the middle of World War II in Macabebe, Pampanga. He recited history lessons, so we knew the names of Rizal, Aguinaldo, Bonifacio, Quezon. When Marcos placed the Philippines under martial law, I was in elementary school, and though I didn't really understand what martial law was, I knew it was bad and somehow a dangerous thing. These were the things spinning in the conversations of the adults around me and I yearned to be in the thick of that, the Philippines--this mystical land where our family and people like us belonged. My parents had promised to send me there when I was eleven, but when martial law was imposed, there was no way I could go, and so the desire to be there, to be Filipino, grew strong.

Secretly, I did everything I could think of to connect with the Philippines--I even took Spanish in high school--the language of the oppressors--just because we shared some of the same words like queso, basura, derecho. At the same time, high school found me fighting to be a typical American teen. I layered my hair, I wore clogs, I floated around in gauzy peasant shirts and played my folk guitar. I wrote for the Spartan Banner and I was chosen to be a Spartanett--a pompom girl! This gave me license to hang out with what was then considered the "in" crowd. I had made it in! But actually I never felt in. I guess I was almost in. Some could argue that this is typical teen angst, but when I look back at it, I wonder how much of my feeling left out had to do with this culture clash I was struggling with.

I see my nephew, Manolo, going through the same thing. At five, he told me there were some nice kids at school, but they needed more Filipinos. He is longing for the other half of his being, much in the same way I know I longed for it (and still do) back then. Our sense of Filipinoness springs from what we do not know, from where we have not been and what we want to be.

Did you feel the struggle between the two cultures early on, or did Filipino awareness come later? And at what point did that struggle resolve itself?

NC: In my case, I think I grew up truly multicultural with Filipino, American, and Spanish influences, in Manila we watched local TV shows like channel 7's "Uncle Bob's Lucky Seven Club" and channel 9's "John & Marsha" with Dolphy which was mostly in Tagalog. We were also addicted to American TV shows like "Starsky & Hutch" and "Charlie's Angels." I remember at recess being forced to play the Huggie Bear pimp/informant role because I was dark and the American boys would always play the white Starsky

and Hutch cops. The girls all wanted to play the Farrah Fawcett role and pretend to have all that wispy blonde hair. To be honest, I did not feel there was a struggle between two cultures because American culture just dominated everything. I guess I took being Filipino for granted because I lived there and was exposed to Filipino things. Being more like the white American kids was more important because they were the privileged kids. When I went off to college in the US, everything changed. My being Filipino began to take more of an active role in my interaction with other students. For the first time I was experiencing what it was to be a minority in a white majority culture. The term "alienation" was becoming an uncomfortable reality.

How was your transition to college life in terms of being more or less Filipino or American?

MEG: I attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Go Big Red! It was only forty-five minutes away from Brookfield, and still it opened my world tenfold. I loved all the people on campus--I loved how big it was and how you could get lost in a crowd. I was tall then. I still am, but for a high school senior, I was taller than the boys in my class. But in Madison--there were tall boys everywhere. And I was finally being noticed.

Despite the diversity in Madison, I was still sort of a one and only. There was Marion--the other "oriental" girl. In the late seventies and early eighties there were not the student groups there that there are now. No Asian American Student groups, no way was there a Filipino American Student group. Now there's even a course called "Asian American Women Writers," but back then there were the "minority students" and there were everybody else. I remember getting mail from the "minority student" office and I'd just toss it in the basura. Never even opened it up. I had this idea that I was an American and I paid taxes like everyone else. This was my "wanna be white" period. And everyone in school treated me that way too except for when I was at a party and someone thought I was Marion. Was she Korean? I don't even think I was aware enough to wonder. I was fully assimilated in many ways.

My preoccupations went to issues of war--the Sandinistas and Nicaragua, and nuclear war--I was living on ground zero and this kept me and my friends up for hours wondering what was going to happen. I wanted world peace (I still do). I boycotted Nestle for sending bad formula to poverty-stricken Indian babies--not because it was some kind of disrespect for India and its people, but because babies were dying for profit. I carried my own candle down State Street and I cried when John Lennon was shot. I was simply not aware of race and culture. I started taking writing workshops--and I wrote these awful stories where nondescript (presumably white) girls got tangled up with these asshole boyfriends. Relationship stories. "What does she see in him?" was a popular workshop question. I don't know why my teachers put up with me. They saw something in my writing though, and they kept asking me back. I suppose they knew I was going through a phase. In Madison, I was in Lorrie Moore's first workshop out of grad school. Her book Self Help was on all the shelves at the bookstores and I was in total awe. I didn't want to be Filipina or American, I wanted to be Lorrie Moore. I read the book, which was written entirely in second person and I started talking to everyone in second person, all the time. When I think of that time now, I realize that the stories I was writing were mirroring my own issues of assimilation.

I had wanted to major in creative writing, but was told I could never make a living that way. And here's the thing, Connie Chung was really big at that time and so I had a teacher say, "Why not take journalism? You can still tell stories and earn a living at the same time." Drawing some parallel to Connie Chung pissed me off. I knew enough to be pissed off. Connie Chung was a far cry from Lorrie Moore. But I declared Communication Arts my major (so I could earn a living) and I took workshops on the side. I did a short stint at the NBC affiliate working first behind the scenes, and then in front of the lens as a feature reporter and producer. There were times when I was with the photographer, running through a crowd or shooting some stand up and I'd heard people yelling out Connie's name. I ignored them.

It must be a trip to be among the majority in the Philippines--one of many--and then to all of a sudden be a minority. I refused to be labeled the minority, even though I was. Can you describe what you meant when you said that alienation was becoming an uncomfortable reality?

NC: I was reading and studying Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Toni Morrison and James Baldwin, and Salman Rushdie and Carlos Fuentes. All those feelings of oppression felt and experienced by those characters in the books I was reading I was encountering in real life as a minority in white America. When a bunch of drunken white teenagers screamed, "chink! gook!" from a passing TransAm with a phoenix painted on the hood, I understood what it meant to be "dehumanized."

Can you tell us about your experiences of trying to become a writer in an MFA program? Did the faculty encourage or discourage writing from your ethnic viewpoint?

MEG: My overall experience at Colorado State was challenging and complex. The experience there--where I was the only Asian American in the program where all my peers were white (with the exception of Chicano poet Anthony Vigil) and all my teachers also reflected the dominant mainstream perspective--reflected the position I had been struggling with since childhood, that of minority. On the surface, my teachers and peers were respectful and supportive. No mean bones among them. But when I began to write material that pushed buttons and challenged some of their own issues, the experience got sort of rocky. For example, my first published piece was a nonfiction essay in MidAmerican Review. It was a personal essay of vignettes called "Are You From Vietnam?" When the piece was in progress, I brought it into workshop and while many of the women could relate to the issues of feeling objectified by strangers, many of the men in the class got angry and some of the comments were direct insults on my character. The professor, a gentle and supportive teacher, was baffled by the significance of the essay (was there one?). And what I learned from the workshop was that my audience (dominant mainstream male America) was not being reached--so I looked for ways to fix the piece. I sent it out and it got picked up and my teacher still said, "That's great, but I still don't get it." I was never told not to write from my perspective, but I did get the feeling that many readers--teachers and peers alike--were not comfortable standing in my shoes--whether those shoes were standing in places they've never been, or taking pathways they wouldn't take, or using words that were not English. My greatest support was my advisor, Steven Schwartz, who writes from a Jewish American perspective. He encouraged me and gave me the kinds of freedom that I needed to explore my material.

I think that grad school gave me the opportunity to question traditional models of writing. I'll never forget being in a literature seminar on Hawthorne and Stowe and getting absolutely livid when my professor insisted that Nathaniel Hawthorne was THE GREATEST American writer who ever lived. "Who says?" I wanted to know. "Who created the criteria? Who has that power?" That teacher challenged me in a way that has changed the way I look at literature, form, and the teaching of what we call "creative writing." I don't assume anyone is the greatest American writer as much as I like to think in our own ways, we all are. It was the moment in my journey where point of view took on a multiple layer of meaning. Where more than perspective--first, second, third person narratives--what it meant for me was FORM. Depending on where you are coming FROM your stories can be linear or circular--resolved or never ending--character driven, plot driven, image driven, politically driven. Everything was dependent on intention and from what pair of shoes, tsinelas, or bare feet you were standing on. In my understanding of our lives as members of the Filipino Diaspora--we are a community where history and narrative are as disparate and collaged as traffic across Metro Manila. (Who goes in a straight line? It's always ikot ikot--taking short cuts which are actually long, snaking, avenues of traffic jams and dead ends and hard to breathe diesel oil.) My first experience testing this new narrative form was Jessica Hagedorn's Dogeaters. I couldn't figure out who the main character was or what the dominant narrative was and why nothing felt "interior." She challenged my expectations of the book and taught me about my lineage and myself. Now every time I read Dogeaters (as a writer and a teacher) I see something new about how narrative comes together in both substance and form. I see a reflection of our community parties, politics, family myths and legends. No such thing as straight and to the point--something or someone is always interrupting our narratives.

Part of becoming a writer, for me, was to read other writers and to learn from their books. I kept a reading journal and my question always was: "How did he/she do that?" My greatest learning experience was the time I had set aside for reading for my comprehensive exams. I had a list of 75 "master" works (the traditional canon I found myself constantly questioning and at the same time hungry for) and then I got to choose an author of study. I chose the Irish writer Edna O'Brien. Then I was to come up with three lists of

ten books that reflected the material in my writing. I decided to focus on Contemporary Women Writers, Immigrant Experience as Revealed through Literature, and Filipino American writers. I found it difficult, in 1990, to come up with a list of ten FilAm writers so I expanded my list to Filipino/Filipino American writers. That time in life was the first time I sat down to study the literature of my kababayan in an academic way. I had to special-order everything. But in the same way, I was lucky that that list was so small. Bienvenido Santos was on that list, and his daughter-in-law was on my thesis committee (she was teaching chemistry at CSU) and so I got to meet him twice before he passed away. And then when my book came out I got the chance to meet so many of the authors on my list--Jessica Hagedorn, Ninotchka Rosca, Peter Bacho, even NVM Gonzales. I feel very honored and blessed to have traveled this road.

As a poet, did you find you had similar questions to form and narrative? Who are your influences? What is your process for gathering material and turning it into art?

NC: Let me start with my influences. My father is a book lover and he collected all sorts of literature, art books, history books, and even dictionaries. When my sister and I were still young, instead of letting us watch television my father would retell stories from the Bible, the adventures of Alexander Dumas, and sections from Miguel de Cervantes' Don Quixote de la Mancha. He would recite stanzas from Francisco de Quevedo's Parnaso Espana and recite lines from Jose Zorilla's Don Juan Tenorio. All this was presented with Spanish dramatic flair and aplomb. The literature of Spain's Golden Age easily became a part of my consciousness. When I was seven or eight my father made me memorize (in Spanish) the first two sections of Jose Rizal's final poem "Mi Ultimo Adios" and he'd make me recite it at big dinner parties. After the guests were impressed with the recitation, my father would then ask me what were the two novels that our Filipino national hero published in his lifetime? I would answer, el Noli Me Tangere y El Filibusterismo. I remember most of the guests who were already high on Martinis and Margaritas shout, "Este nino es un genio! Un gran poeta!" Of course I would get embarrassed and run back to my room to play with my Voltes V and Mazinger Z toy robot action figures.

One of the occasional guests at these parties was an old De LaSalle College buddy of my father whom we called Tito Ralph because he was around so much. He owned a kindergarten and pre-elementary school called the San Lorenzo School, which I attended for a year before going to the International School. Tito Ralph, as I found out much later, was none other than Raphael Zulueta y da Costa, the poet who had won the Commonwealth Literary Prize in 1940 for his book Like the Molave and Other Poems. The main poem in that book, which has one of the most memorable first lines in Filipino poetry--"Not yet Rizal. Not Yet. Sleep not in peace"--was required reading for many Filipino high school students for several decades. The roots of my poetry dig deep into the Filipino soil with poems like Rizal's and Zulueta y Da Costa's. So when my poems become political poems, they respond to an impulse derived from a long struggle against all forms of colonial oppression: a desire to have a native voice come out of the shadows of obscurity and proclaim to the world that we do exist.

The forms I choose for my poems can be found in contemporary American poetry: prose poems, free verse, couplets, sonnets, found texts, and direct narratives. I consider my last book of poems, Secret Asian Man, a highly experimental book that contains many postmodern techniques. First of all, it's a novel in verse (but not really), there is a palpable narrative, there are recurring characters, there is dialogue, there is rising action, a climax, and an epilogue. The French New Wave cinema with Godard and Truffaut's film experiments come in when one of my characters (Orpheus) becomes aware of himself as a character in one of my poems from my first book, El Grupo McDonald's, and engages the main protagonist (Ang Tunay na Lalaki--The Real Man) in Secret Asian Man. Hong Kong martial arts and gangster films also permeate the book during the fight scenes and car chases set in New York's Chinatown. Maybe the ultimate form I'm working towards is a movie.

Another form I am exploring is the idea of a palpable interactive poem. In the tradition of Stephane Mallarme's Un Coup de Des Jamais n'Abolira le Hasard, I have created Cube Dice Poems. On a piece of paper I have made an outline of a cube which the reader can cut out and tape together. Each square of the cube contains a line from a poem. There can be two or more cubes and the reader throws them on the table like die and writes down the lines that come with each throw. The reader becomes an integral part of the

reading of the poem. My latest example of this form is available for download from the internet published in e-chapbook format from an experimental poetry publishing house in Finland named Xpress(ed). The address is: http://xpressed.org.

You wanted to talk about how your narrative technique is unique to our cultural expression. How so?

MEG: I don't know if my narrative technique is unique especially to our cultural expression, but I do think that my influences of growing up an American-born Pinay and reading mostly western narratives as a student and then being a child in a Filipino household where all the adults around me were oral storytellers (the ikot ikot route of narrative) has made me a hybrid of these worlds. And I notice that I am not the only one. I am probably still partial to the linear narrative when it comes to getting to the point but I know the line of that plot can be circular or truncated or that it can wind around in unending labyrinths and that is acceptable. I'm in the midst of revising my novel What is Tribe and I know that Jessica's nonlinear model Dogeaters and R. Zamora Linmark's Rolling the R's as well as Evan S. Connell's Mrs. Bridge, Ron Hansen's Mariette in Ecstasy, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's DICTEE influence my notions of what the shape and substance of the book can be. My novel has vignettes and dramas and these little things I call "word photos" interrupting the narrative as a way to show the fabric of storytelling in this Filipino-American-based world.

I've got to say that nearly all my readers of color never question this form and suggest I interrupt the work even more. And on the other side of the spectrum, though I didn't mean to divide my writer friends into color camps, my traditional readers of that dominant white perspective want me to take all those distractions out. That leaves me with the dilemma of what to do to follow through on the intentions of the book where the material of the work (what it means to belong to this TRIBE) influences the shape or form of the book, or go with a straight narrative so that the majority of readers (who come from traditional linear narratives) will not feel alienated in their reading. To go with the latter revision, to me, is selling out. The book would be only half true. But to disregard that critique altogether is to shut out the point of writing and to me that point is to communicate a world outside of the reader's experience. So in the same way that I am this hybrid writer, I am looking for a hybrid solution to the book's structure and I think I'm getting there. In fact, I know I am.

I feel really lucky to have traveled this path. I wouldn't change any of it. Not my upbringing, not my education, not my list of books and especially not the struggles I have had on various levels of culture clash. Culture clash processed is my cultural expression. The more writers challenge traditional forms and our expectations of what books do, the more inspired I am as an artist and a writer. This is how we grow.

NC: I must say that you have certainly inspired many younger Filipino American writers by publishing that amazing short story collection Her Wild American Self in 1996. I have met many Pinays at writers' conferences that have said that it was the first time in their literary lives that they could see themselves in a work of literature when they read your book. You are really the first US born Filipina writer to publish a book with a Filipino American perspective and have that book well-reviewed in the New York Times. Other Filipino American writers that have published recently with a Fil-Am perspective are Lara Stapleton, author of The Lowest Blue Flame Before Nothing; R. Zamora Linmark, author of Rolling the R's; and Brian Ascalon Roley, author of American Son. An excellent Filipino American short story writer who has published in top-line magazines like Ploughshares and Atlantic Monthly is Lysley A. Tenorio. In the world of poetry, younger Filipino American poets who tackle the Fil-Am identity are also growing in number. Among them are Eugene Gloria, author of Drivers at the Short-Time Motel; Eileen Tabios, author of Reproductions of the Empty Flagpole; Catalina Cariaga, author of Cultural Evidence; Oliver de la Paz, with Names Above Houses; Aimee Nezhukumatathil, with Miracle Fruit; Marisa de los Santos, author of From the Bones Out; Rick Barot, author of The Darker Fall; Jon Pineda, author of Birthmark; and Patrick Rosal, author of Uprock Headspin Scramble and Dive. With this many younger Filipino American poets and writers publishing books in the US, one can't help but think that there is a literary "boom" occurring in Filipino American literature and this may only be the beginning of an explosion which might last a whole decade.

Works by Nick Carbo and M. Evelina Galang:

Carbo, Nick. El Grupo MacDonald's. Chicago: Tia Chucha, 1995.

Carbo, Nick, ed. Returning a Borrowed Tongue. Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1996.

Carbo, Nick. Secret Asian Man. Chicago: Tia Chucha, 2000.

Carbo, Nick, and Eileen Tabios, eds. Babaylan. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2000.

Carbo, Nick, and Denise Duhamel, eds. Sweet Jesus. Los Angeles: Anthology Editions, 2003.

Galang, M. Evelina. Her Wild American Self. Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1996.

Galang, M. Evelina, ed. Screaming Monkeys. Minneapolis: Coffee House, 2003.

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