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BABAYLAN POETICS & THE MDR POETRY GENERATOR

I forgot why lovers destroy children to parse the philosophy of separation—

I forgot my bones became hollow, flutes made from reeds—

—*from 44 RESURRECTIONS*

An ongoing work, "Murder, Death and Resurrection" (MDR), includes "The MDR Poetry Generator" that brings together much of my poetics and poet tics. The MDR Poetry Generator contains a data base of 1,146 lines which can be combined randomly to make a large number of poems; the shortest would be a couplet and the longest would be a poem of 1,146 lines. Examples of couplets (and longer forms) are available in 44 RESURRECTIONS (http://www.eratiopostmodernpoetry.com/pdfs/44Resurrections.pdf), the first poetry collection emanating from The MDR Poetry Generator. A forthcoming book, *AMNESIA: Somebody's Memoir* is an example of a single poem of 1,146 lines.

The MDR Poetry Generator's conceit is that any combination of its 1,146 lines succeeds in creating a poem. (In the couplet-poem I cite in the above epigraph, I believe an equally valid poem could be generated if one reversed the order of the two lines.) Thus, I can create—generate—new poems unthinkingly from its database. For example, I created several of the poems in *44 RESURRECTIONS* by blindly pointing at lines on a print-out to combine. While the poems cohere partly by the scaffolding of beginning each line with the phrase "I forgot…" (a tactic inspired by reading Tom Beckett's fabulous poem "I Forgot" in his book ~~DIPSTICK (DIPTYCH)~~, Marsh Hawk Press, 2014), these poems reflect long-held interests in abstract and cubist language—partly as a means to interrogate English whose (linear) narrative was used by the United States to solidify its 20th century colonization of my birth land, the Philippines. Through my perceptions of abstraction and cubism, I've written poems whose lines are not fixed in order and, indeed, can be reordered (as a newbie poet, I was very interested in the prose poem form and in writing paragraphs that can be reordered within the poem).

Because English was a tool for colonialism, it's been called by Filipinos to be "the borrowed tongue," though "enforced tongue" would be more accurate. Whenever I disrupt conventional uses of English—from linear narrative to normative syntax to dictionary definitions—I view the result as poetry for transforming language into its own—and stripped off its past as a tool

for damage—as well as "returning the borrowed tongue" (also the title of an anthology of Filipino and Filipino-American poetry that was edited by Nick Carbo (released by Coffee House Press in 1995).

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

While the MDR Poetry Generator presents poems not generated through my personal preferences, the results are not distanced from the author: I created the 1,146 lines from reading through 27 previously-published poetry collections—the title's references to murder, death and resurrection reflect the idea of putting to death the prior work, only to resurrect them into something new: sometimes, creation first requires destruction. But if randomness is the operating system for new poems (i.e. the lines can be combined at random to make new poems), those new poems nonetheless contain all the personal involvement—and love!—that went into the writing of its lines. The results dislocate without eliminating or pretending to eliminate authorship.

It is significant that I do not disavow authorship. There are enough forces and would-be aesthetic trends out there (e.g. "the author is dead") that would erase the subjectivity of a poet (and any other artist) of color. Identity may ever be in flux, but the "I" always exists.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

For calculating the number of poems (in math, "permutations") possible from The MDR Poetry Generator's 1,146 lines, I asked my son's high school math tutor, Carl Ericson, for assistance. Carl could not find an explicit formula for evaluating my question. But he did find an approximation formula to apply. His approximated answer to the total poems possible to be generated by the MDR Poetry Generator is a number that has 3,011 digits. Since the number of permutated poems is huge, this means I can keep ~~writing~~ making poems for the rest of my life without having to write new text.

As of this writing, The MDR Project has generated about 132 poems, including those that make up the following poetry collections (parentheticals indicate confirmed publishers, as of this writing):

44 RESURRECTIONS (2014, PostModernPoetry E-Ratio Editions)

I FORGOT LIGHT BURNS (2015, Moria Books)

DUENDE IN THE ALLEYS (2015, swirl editions)

THE OPPOSITE OF CLAUSTROPHOBIA: Prime's Anti-Autobiography (2016, Knives, Forks and Spoons Press)

THE CONNOISSEUR OF ALLEYS (2016, Marsh Hawk Press)

AMNESIA: Somebody's Memoir (2016, Black Radish Press)

HIRAETH: Tercets From the Last Archipelago

Some poems have also generated visual poetry versions, such as "I Forgot Forgetting My Skin Was Ruin") which inaugurated *h&*, a journal of visual/concrete poetry curated by Ian Whistle.

One poem, "I Forgot the Plasticity of Recognition," generated a folio of response poems by John Bloomberg-Rissman, Sheila E. Murphy, lars palm, Marthe Reed, Leny M. Strobel and Anne Gorrick. These were published by *Otoliths* (http://the-otolith.blogspot.com.au/2014/09/6x1-1x6-cover.html), edited by Mark Young, and will be part of *AMNESIA*.

Since I'm loathe to repeat myself, I'm uncertain as to whether anymore poems will be generated—it undoubtedly will depend on whether future projects can avoid repeating concepts already explored.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

The MDR Poetry Generator also reflects what I call "Babaylan Poetics"—a poetics based on indigenous Filipino practices. A Babaylan from the Philippines' pre-colonial times was someone who mediated with the spirit world, was blessed with the gifts of healing, foretelling and insight, and a community leader. The Babaylan is often a source of inspiration to contemporary Filipinos, including myself, who are inspired by the Babaylan's attributes, including what the

Center for Babaylan Studies in Santa Rosa, CA, call "belief in Sacred Wholeness… [and] the desire to serve their communities in achieving justice and peace." As regards how I apply the Babaylan's inspiration to my poetics, there's an image from pre-colonial Philippine times of a human standing with a hand lifted upwards; if you happened to be at a certain distance from the human and took a snapshot, it would look like the human was touching the sky. In a poetics essay in my book *THE AWAKENING* (theenk books, New York, 2013), I'd described the significance of this image as:

> "…the moment, the space, from which I attempt to create poems. In the indigenous myth, the human, by being rooted onto the planet but also touching the sky, is connected to everything in the universe and across all time, including that the human is rooted to the past and future—indeed, there is no unfolding of time. In that moment, all of existence—past, present and future—has coalesced into a singular moment, a single gem with an infinite expanse. In that moment, were I that human, I am connected to everything so that there is nothing or no one I do not know. I am everyone and everything, and everything and everyone is me. In that moment, to paraphrase something I once I heard from some Buddhist, German or French philosopher, or Star Trek character, 'No one or nothing is alien to me.'"

At its simplest level, Babaylan Poetics operates within The MDR Poetry Generator through its insistence that seemingly random topics and references all relate to each other. In addition, *AMNESIA* incorporates a section of poem-responses by other poets because I wish to acknowledge the reader's significance for my poetry—a literary experience requires a reader as much as a writer.

Ultimately, within this indigenous moment or space where I create poems, issues of authorship and (or versus) the randomness with which the lines are combined from The MDR Poetry Generator are irrelevant—*All is One and One is All*. And aptly so, for poetics can also be the blueprint for how one lives—Babaylan poetics guides me in my behavior beyond the page: to see others as much as I would want others to see me. For a relationship—love—to exist, should not there first be a mutual sighting? And from there? Babaylan Poetics believes that differences cannot erase how we are interconnected with each other—that we all live in the same world. As a poet and a human being, I try to behave accordingly.