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Edgar Calabria Samar

LITERATURES DREAMING OF A BETTER WORLD

On Teaching 21st-Century Philippine Literatures¹

ABSTRACT

This paper starts on the assumption that literature does not simply reflect reality—it shapes the conditions by which that reality can be reimagined. To teach twenty-first-century Philippine literature is not to fix a canon or reinforce a curriculum, but to reframe possibility: in language, in form, in pedagogy, and in community. It proposes a method of engaging with the teaching of twenty-first-century Philippine literatures today: PAKI. The acronym stands for Pakikisangkot (Engagement), Ambisyon (Ambition), Kahusayan (Excellence), and Inmortalidad (Immortality). PAKI is also an affix that becomes a word meaning care, which in a classroom saturated with distraction, is itself revolutionary.

KEYWORDS

Philippine literature, twenty-first-century literature, literary pedagogy, decolonial education, translation studies, experimental literature, care ethics, PAKI framework, vernacular literature, experimental literature

¹ Originally a paper read at the 57th ACELT annual international conference-workshop, “Teaching Literature in the 21st Century ELT Classroom: An Age of Multiliteracies and Multimodalities,” 27 June 2025, Ateneo de Manila University.

Contemporary Philippine literary education operates within a fundamental tension between aspiration and crisis. This tension manifests concretely in the classroom when I pose the opening question each semester: “Why are we here? Why do we do what we do?” Students’ responses inevitably converge toward a shared understanding encapsulated in this personal mantra: *Narito dahil patuloy na nangangarap ng mundong higit sa naririto* (We are here because we continue to dream of a better world). Yet this aspiration takes on urgent complexity when the world appears to be in freefall. As bombs rain on Gaza and floods engulf schools and streets across the Philippines—floods worsened by the corruption of politicians and contractors who pocketed funds meant for flood control—as families are stranded in airports due to geopolitical conflicts, the question of what it means to teach literature—Filipino literature, twenty-first-century literature, national literature—becomes increasingly fraught.²

These conditions of crisis are not merely the backdrop against which many of us teach; they are the very circumstances that make the act of dreaming through literature an imperative rather than a luxury. Literature does not simply reflect reality—it shapes the conditions by which that reality can be reimagined. To teach twenty-first-century Philippine literatures, therefore, is not to fix a canon or reinforce a curriculum, but to reframe possibility: in language, in form, in pedagogy, and in community.

This essay proposes a method of engaging with the teaching of twenty-first-century Philippine literatures through three interconnected trajectories: Translation as Reach and Reckoning; Experimentation as

² When I was writing this, the aunt who raised me was among thousands stranded in Doha after Qatar closed its airspace, following Iran’s missile strike near the US air base. She called me at 2 a.m., in tears. She just wanted to come home. I couldn’t do anything. We couldn’t do anything. See “Chaos for Thousands of Passengers Stranded at Doha Airport, Long Queues in Dubai,” *Reuters*, June 24, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/chaos-thousands-passengers-stranded-doha-airport-long-queues-dubai-2025-06-24>.

Form and Refusal; and Engagement as Community and Solidarity. These approaches culminate in PAKI, a pedagogical framework that puts care at the center (*paki* as both acronym and Filipino concept), as the foundation for literary education in our contemporary moment.

The term “Philippine literatures” here is intentionally plural, contested, and partial. It encompasses the canonical and the emergent, the regional and the diasporic, the speculative and the archival. It includes works written not only in English, but in Filipino and other Philippine vernaculars, as well as literature created through digital, visual, and hybrid forms that exceed the categories our institutions are often prepared to recognize.

TRANSLATION AS REACH AND RECKONING

In 2022, my short story “Laban sa Kalungkutan” was translated by Kristine Ong Muslim into English as “Against Unhappiness” for *Destination: SEA 2050 AD*, an international anthology of Southeast Asian speculative fiction published by Penguin. The story centers on Pat, a gender-neutral character living in a flooded, corporatized future where even emotions are regulated by AI. Muslim’s translation process illuminated the political dimensions of linguistic choice, particularly regarding the gender-neutral *siya* and the English singular *they*. As Muslim noted in her introduction, the story represents “one of those rare instances of fiction in translation where compromises have to be made to arbitrarily create a textual equivalence between the gender-neutral *siya* and the singular English code *they*.”³

This translation challenge extends beyond technical considerations to questions of representation and linguistic ethics. The experience revealed that translation is never neutral—it carries within it assumptions about gender, kinship systems, and social structures. The negotiation

³ Kristine Ong Muslim, Introduction to *Destination SEA 2050*, eds. Tilde Acuña, Amado Anthony G. Mendoza III, and Kristine Ong Muslim (Penguin Books, 2022), 10.

over pronouns became a negotiation over whose logic of identity would be privileged in the translated text.

Similar questions emerged during the editing process for a special issue of the journal *Kritika Kultura* on contemporary Philippine fiction.⁴ Working alongside novelist Glenn Diaz, we invited submissions in English, Filipino, and other Philippine languages. The response was encouraging—stories arrived in Bisaya, Ilokano, and Hiligaynon—but presented immediate editorial challenges. How does one evaluate works comparatively when evaluators lack shared linguistic competencies? Should translations be requested, and if so, who would undertake them? How might the act of translation affect the rhythm, register, or political voice of the original work?

These challenges intensified during my co-chairmanship of the 2023 Gawad Bienvenido Lumbera of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. Despite efforts to include eight language divisions, the award received few submissions in certain languages. No entries were received in Kapampangan for either poetry or short story categories, necessitating the dissolution of both. The difficulty extended to finding qualified judges with the necessary linguistic backgrounds.

State support for translation has historically prioritized outward movement: Filipino works into English, then into European or Middle Eastern languages, particularly for international literary events. While the

⁴ This special issue of *Kritika Kultura* is slated to come out in late 2025. In my introduction to the stories originally written in Filipino, “Contemporary Filipino Fiction Against Primers of Values,” I wrote: “For this special issue of *Kritika Kultura* on contemporary Philippine fiction, we deliberately rejected a submission model that demands English versions of vernacular works upfront. Instead, translations were commissioned only after acceptance—intentionally staged to counter the self-censorship writers sometimes internalize when we anticipate ‘translatability.’ That choice inevitably prolonged our timeline (and yes, our apologies for how long it took). This editorial approach also aligns with a principled divergence from state-backed, export-oriented translation efforts tied to the Philippines’s role as Guest of Honor at the Frankfurt Book Fair—an institution that is complicit in genocide through its ties with Israeli surveillance, tech, and military industries. In refusing to let English be the final market seal, we affirm translation as a working space, not a finish line.”

Philippines's being designated as Guest of Honor at the 2025 Frankfurt Book Messe marks a milestone for the government, it also raises questions about resource allocation in a country where many still lack basic access to books.

However, the history of translation in the Philippines reveals a more complex and locally grounded practice. The Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino's translation of world classics through its Aklat ng Bayan imprint, including Lamberto E. Antonio's rendering of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, demonstrates institutional commitment to Filipino-language literature. Even earlier, *Liwayway* magazine serialized adaptations of works like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *David Copperfield*, while sister publications *Bannawag* and *Bisaya* not only translated world literature but also created Ilokano and Cebuano versions of originally Tagalog works, including the pioneering *komiks* novel *Kulafu*. In the 1990s, *FilMag (Filipino Magazin)* serialized Filipino translations of canonical works, including Aurora E. Batnag's version of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* as *Si Alice sa Daigdig ng Hiwaga*. Batnag's translation, along with translations of the novels of other novelists, like Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Ernest Hemingway, was later published by the UP Sentro ng Wikang Filipino and is now available for free download through its Print Tungong PDF (P2P) Digital program, which aims to support open access.⁵

Translation, in this context, has served as more than an export strategy—it has been a method for making literature circulate across languages, media, and imagined communities. This circulation extends temporally as well; works from previous centuries, accessible now only through translation, belong as much to twenty-first-century literature as contemporary compositions. The first anthology of Sumerian literature,

⁵ Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, trans. Aurora E. Batnag as *Si Alice sa Daigdig ng Hiwaga* (Sentro ng Wikang Filipino, University of the Philippines, 2000). Downloadable e-books from UP Sentro ng Wikang Filipino are accessible at <https://sentrofilipino.upd.edu.ph/publikasyon/aklatang-bayan/online-downloadable-e-books/>.

originally inscribed on cuneiform tablets as early as 2100 BCE, only became available in collected book form for English readers in 2004 with *The Literature of Ancient Sumer*.⁶

My five years as Visiting Professor at Osaka University in 2017 to 2022 provided opportunities for linguistic and cultural translation through direct engagement with Japanese literature. Rereading Haruki Murakami's *Hear the Wind Sing* in the original Japanese revealed layers of meaning that resist direct translation. The opening line—「完璧な文章などといったものは存在しない。完璧な絶望が存在しないようにね」—was rendered by Alfred Birnbaum as “There’s no such thing as perfect writing, just like there’s no such thing as perfect despair.”⁷

Literature, as critic Jonathan Culler said, is that which “invites a certain kind of attention.”⁸ The word *zetsubō* (絶望)—despair—caught mine. Constructed from the kanji meaning “eradication” and “hope,” it suggests a concept built on the negation of hope. When I searched for equivalent terms in Tagalog dictionaries, including the monumental *Vocabulario de la lengua tagala*, I found no direct translation.⁹ Contemporary Filipino typically uses the Spanish borrowing *desperasyon*. This linguistic archaeology suggests the possibility of an ancient Tagalog who had no

⁶ Jeremy A. Black, *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford University Press, 2004). Earlier translations had appeared as individual pieces in journals, but not in a comprehensive volume. See Samuel N. Kramer and W. F. Albright, “Enki and Ninḫursag: A Sumerian ‘Paradise’ Myth,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research. Supplementary Studies*, no. 1 (1945): 1–40; and Morris Jastrow, “Sumerian Myths of Beginnings,” *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 33, no. 2 (1917): 91–144.

⁷ Haruki Murakami, *Kaze no uta o kike* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1979); trans. Alfred Birnbaum as *Hear the Wind Sing* (Kōdansha International, 1987). I was rereading this in early 2021, in the middle of the pandemic, after one of my childhood friends—who had been eagerly awaiting the final book in my novel series *Janus Silang*, which she said had sustained her through her darkest hours—passed away. I couldn’t even return home to grieve with her family. The book came out six months after her death.

⁸ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011), 25.

⁹ Juan José de Noceda and Pedro de Sanlúcar, *Vocabulario de la Lengua Tagala*, ed. Virgilio S. Almarino, Elvin R. Ebreo, and Ana Maria M. Yglopaz (Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino, 2013).

concept of despair—who only ever knew hope, and to whom living was *walang* “*walang pag-asa*.” We didn’t only have hope, we never had despair.

EXPERIMENTATION AS FORM AND REFUSAL

Experimentation in Philippine literature has never been merely aesthetic—it has consistently functioned as political stance. The twentieth-century debates between Iñigo Ed. Regalado and Alejandro G. Abadilla over free verse, or between Salvador P. Lopez’s advocacy for committed literature and Jose Garcia Villa’s defense of art for art’s sake, established a tradition of formal innovation as ideological positioning. Contemporary experimental literature continues this trajectory while addressing distinctly twenty-first-century concerns: climate collapse, algorithmic culture, imperial memory, disinformation, digital distraction, commodified identity, and the erosion of language communities.

At its most vital, experimentation functions not as novelty but as refusal—a refusal to render literature easily legible to dominant systems of power, and a refusal to reproduce colonial, capitalist, or patriarchal logic. Contemporary experimental work operates as radical re-scripting of possibility rather than escape from reality.

The founding of *Tapat: Journal ng Bagong Nobelang Filipino* in 2011 represented an intervention in the genre’s public life—its infrastructures of publication, recognition, and readership. The absence of a journal dedicated to the Filipino novel, and the lack of spaces for works challenging conventional boundaries of form, length, or theme, necessitated the creation of alternative platforms. Working with former students Christoffer Mitch Cerda and Mark Benedict Lim, we released four issues that functioned as literary experiments.

Alvin Yapan’s *Sambahin ang Katawan*, published in *Tapat*’s inaugural issue and later translated by Penguin SEA as *Worship the Body*, exemplified literature written through rather than about the body. Its syntax moved

like breath, shame, and prayer, challenging conventional narrative structures. German Gervacio's *Hari Manawari* conjured protagonists existing simultaneously as myth and glitch. Mayette Bayuga's *Sa Templo ni Tamilah* and *Halinghing sa Hatinggabi* inhabited erotica not as titillation but as destabilization of Catholic guilt, feminine desire, and enforced silence. Khavn dela Cruz's *Himagsik ng mga Puno* prefigured his Palanca-winning *Antimarcos* (2023) as fiction of revolt written within and against narrative logic.¹⁰

These authors refused safety and smoothness, offering novels as sites of noise, ambiguity, and excess. Their work recognized that in the Filipino context, truth that excludes contradiction cannot be complete. This sense of refusal appears consistently in contemporary manuscripts encountered through workshops, literary competitions, and editorial projects.

Jov Ortua Almero's *Isang Taong Resty*, sequel to *Isang Dekadang Resty* and forthcoming from University of the Philippines Press, employs deceptively simple prose that conceals radical ethics. Almero's realism dignifies abandoned lives through quiet resistance rather than spectacular violence, creating wounded form that bleeds refusal of bourgeois comfort. John Brixter Tino's *Mulias*, published by independent collective Sierbosten, dismantles coherence through its insistence on fragment, interstice, and uncaptionable expression. His poems stage formal disaster—rituals undone, memories disturbed, decisions reduced to blank states. The work suggests that memory cannot serve as cure for

¹⁰ See *Tapat: Journal ng Bagong Nobelang Filipino*, ed. Edgar Calabia Samar, Volume I-01 (April 2011), Alvin B. Yapan, *Sambahin ang Katawan*; Volume I-02 (August 2011), German Villanueva Gervacio, *Hari Manawari*; Volume I-03 (December 2011), Mayette M. Bayuga, *Sa Templo ni Tamilah* and *Halinghing sa Hatinggabi*; Volume II-01 (June 2012), Khavn De la Cruz, *Himagsik ng mga Puno*. See also Khavn De la Cruz, *Antimarcos* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2023); and Alvin B. Yapan, *Worship the Body* (Penguin SEA, 2021).

suffering; thus, experimentation is positioned not toward past comfort but past confrontation.¹¹

These coordinates for pedagogy informed my work as Resource Person for the Department of Education in reworking the Senior High School Malikhaing Pagsulat elective. The course should teach students how form carries politics—that poetic structure connects to ideology, that genre can obscure as much as reveal, that line breaks and narrative ruptures carry meaning equivalent to character and plot. Students need to understand experimentation in Philippine context not as rebellion for its own sake, but as demand to reimagine how language might hold suffering and joy, silence and survival.

The rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) adds complexity to discussions of experimentation. While AI-generated texts may achieve formal innovation, they often lack ethical grounding and embodied stakes. They can replicate styles but not the necessity driving genuine experimental work. They produce simulations of refusal rather than refusal itself, offering performance rather than politics.

Authentic experimentation increasingly takes inter-art forms: poetry conversing with painting, narrative entangled with music, komiks rupturing page boundaries. Artists like Khavn, Emilia Kampilan (author of *Dead Balagtas*), and emerging voices from zine culture create not just new containers for old content, but entirely new grammars born from desire to break sentences into breath and make images speak.¹²

Form becomes ethics; refusal becomes pedagogy. At the heart of every experimental work lies a reader previously taught what literature

¹¹ Jov Ortua Almero, *Isang Dekadang Resty* (University of the Philippines Press, 2021); John Brixter Tino, *Mulias: Mga Tula* (Sierbosten, 2025).

¹² Emiliana Kampilan, *Dead Balagtas Tomo 1: Sayaw ng mga Dagat at Lupa* (Anino Comics, 2017); and Jokkaz SP Latigar, *Zine Thesis: Isang Paggalugad na Pananaliksik sa Kasalukuyang Mundo ng Zines sa Pilipinas* (Sentro ng Wikang Filipino, 2020).

should look like, suddenly offered different shapes. This rupture initiates thinking. Literature’s contemporary work involves not comfort or simplification, but awakening and opening.

Jose F. Lacaba’s circumvention of Martial Law censorship through “Prometheus Unbound”—his acrostic protest spelling MARCOS, HITLER, DIKTADOR-TUTA—exemplifies refusal as survival strategy. Contemporary experimental works continue this tradition, though often through subtler means. Online availability through journals like the University of the Philippines’ *Likhaan*, Polytechnic University of the Philippines’ *Entrada*, and Ateneo de Manila’s *Katipunan* makes many experimental works accessible. Charmaine Lasar’s Palanca-winning “Ang Value ng X Kapag Choppy si Ma’am,” depicting teacher experience during the pandemic and available through Sentro ng Wikang Filipino’s *Agos Journal*, demonstrates how new works can address immediate social conditions.¹³

Experimentation functions as survival instinct. If lives and stories remain unchanged, radical literary experiments may provide methods for endurance and renewal.

ENGAGEMENT AS COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY

Literary engagement in the Philippine context operates as care—not sentimental care, but care as labor: deliberate, infrastructural, and often unpaid. In a literary field fragmented by language, class, and geography, the most radical gesture available to writers and critics involves not simply writing well, but building, sustaining, and fighting for communities where stories can flourish.

This care labor has manifested primarily through independent publishing communities rather than state institutions or corporate

¹³ Charmaine Lasar, “Ang Value ng X Kapag Choppy si Ma’am,” *Agos: Refereed Journal ng Malikhaing Akdang Pampanitikan* 2 (September 2023).

media. Presses like Gantala, Romance Class, Librong LIRA, Aklat Ulagad, Savage Mind, Balangay, and Alamid function as ecosystems rather than mere publishers. Gantala amplifies women and farmers. Savage Mind foregrounds Bicol and other southern voices. Aklat Alamid archives indigenous stories as children's literature. These initiatives demonstrate that literature concerns not always originality but proximity—who listens closely, who cares sufficiently.

This shift toward proximity responds to contemporary Philippine literature's development within ten urgent pressures that fracture and reconfigure our world. These ten pressures operate not as discrete themes but as simultaneous forces that reshape literary production and pedagogy:

Climate Catastrophe and Ecological Collapse have moved beyond speculative fiction into lived reality. Stronger, more erratic typhoons and vanishing islands appear not in myth but on maps. Eros Atalia's *Tatlong Gabi, Tatlong Araw* (Three nights, three days) positions forest rather than human as agent of revenge.¹⁴ Contemporary literature recognizes nature as actor rather than symbol. The rise of ecopoetics and cli-fi in adult and children's literature marks narrative pivot: rivers, trees, floods function as characters rather than mere backdrop. Writing Philippine fiction now requires confronting extractivism, pollution, displacement. The challenge involves narrating the inhuman without speaking for it.

State Violence, Red-Tagging, and Authoritarian Nostalgia make authorship itself precarious. Writers face profiling and death—poet-activists Ericson Acosta and Kerima Lorena Tariman died in separate military encounters, yet their poetry circulates, resisting erasure. Genres like horror, noir, and mystery offer shelter. John Bengan's *Armor*, written during Duterte's rise under Davao's death squads, encodes violence

¹⁴ Eros S. Atalia, *Tatlong Gabi, Tatlong Araw* (Visprint, 2013).

through metaphor and shadow. Allegory returns not as grand nationalist gesture but as paranoid, encoded fear-form.¹⁵

Mass Migration and the OFW Condition 2.0 have evolved beyond remittance and longing narratives. Contemporary migration stories address digital parenting, proxy intimacy, outsourced care. Elaine Castillo's *America Is Not the Heart* captures transgenerational trauma, queer inheritance, dialectic belonging. Jack Alvarez's *Ang Autobiograpiya ng Ibang Lady Gaga* follows trans OFW experience in the Middle East with tenderness and fury, tracing visibility and survival politics in denial-worlds. These narratives produce not the "bagong bayani" but ghost parents, asynchronous siblings, love unable to fly home.¹⁶

Digital Surveillance, AI, and the Archive position algorithms as replacement for divine authority. Writers contend with platforms, metrics, shadow bans alongside traditional readership concerns. Literature undergoes code-based reshaping. Mesándel Virtusio Arguelles's constraint-based poetry, including *Pesoa* (an erasure of Rene Villanueva's *Personal*), and Adam David's *The El Bimbo Variations* and ephemeral "Better Living Through Xeroxography" zines propose counter-archives: anti-algorithmic, impermanent-resistant. Form becomes glitchy, laggy, haunted. Critics must ask not only "What is this story?" but "Who remembers it?" "Where is it stored?" and "Who owns our stories' data?"¹⁷

¹⁵ Ericson Acosta, *Mula Tarima Hanggang at Iba Pang Mga Tula at Awit* (University of the Philippines Press, 2016); Kerima Lorena Tariman, *Sa Aking Henerasyon: Mga Tula at Saling-Tula* (Gantala Press, 2022); and John Bengan, *Armor* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2022).

¹⁶ Elaine Castillo, *America Is Not the Heart* (Viking, 2018); and Jack Alvarez, *Ang Autobiografia ng Ibang Lady Gaga* (Visprint, 2014).

¹⁷ Mesándel Virtusio Arguelles, *Pesoa* (Balangay Books, 2014); Rene O. Villanueva, *Personal: Mga Sanaysay sa Lupalop ng Gunita* (Anvil, 2004); and Adam David, *The El Bimbo Variations* (Youth & Beauty Brigade, 2010).

Lumpenization and the Politics of the Poor involve the disappearance of Filipino poor from fiction—not through non-existence but through publishing’s unsaleability judgments. New fiction reclaims what might be termed “poor personhood”—stories resisting arc, redemption, upward mobility. Chuckberry Pascual’s *Ang Nawawala (The Vanished)* presents stasis, drift, decay alongside wit, gossip, grief. Pascual reinvents barangay detective fiction where *pakikialam* and *kawalang-pakialam* drive mystery. Talong Punay becomes folkloric site where Bree, a queer receptionist, investigates disappearances including Bree’s own parents’. This literature dwells in ruin not to aestheticize suffering but to recognize it as structure.¹⁸

Queerness Beyond Representation has moved past featuring queer characters toward queerness as method. Narrative bends, loops, refuses resolution. Anthologies like *Plus/+, at Iba Plus, Maramihan: New Philippine Fiction on Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities* collect stories that disorient and resist closure. Ricky Lee’s *Kalahating Bahaghari* chronicles queer history while protesting worlds teaching queers to doubt their being worthy of love. The novel documents the first Pride March, names figures like Danton Remoto, and marks Quezon Memorial Circle as sacred space, while featuring deaf protagonists. Queerness and disability intersect in content and form—queerness becomes not just story content but movement method.¹⁹

Neocolonial and Regional Alignments continue imperial presence through changed forms: joint military exercises, Chinese dredging, ASEAN realignments. Literature responds with ghosts

¹⁸ Chuckberry J. Pascual, *Ang Nawawala* (Visprint, 2017); trans. Ned Parfan as *The Vanished: Stories* (19th Avenida Publishing House, 2022).

¹⁹ Rolando B. Tolentino and Chuckberry J. Pascual, eds., *Plus/+, at Iba Plus, Maramihan: New Philippine Fiction on Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2022); and Ricky Lee, *Kalahating Bahaghari* (Ricky Lee Writing Services, 2024).

rather than with slogans. Rio Alma's *Huling Hudhud* and Gina Apostol's *Insurrecto* fracture time, memory, region.²⁰ Apostol confronts language's fabrication, satirization, resistance of history. *Insurrecto* examines war's reconstructions through film, photography, translation, music, including BenCab's cover painting, tracing ignorance and persistence. The novel toggles between Balangiga massacre and Duterte's drug war while centering women—artists, daughters, translators—meeting violence with memory, remembrance with action. Contemporary anti-imperial writing resists totality and closure. What returns is not the nation but fragment, haunted dialect, alternate present. Literary presses outside Manila create re-mapping rather than mere decentralization—centers emerge wherever listening occurs.

Precarious Work and the Gig Economy have expanded Filipino worker identity beyond OFW experience. Contemporary workers include call center ghosts, delivery app bodies, AI training voices. Glenn Diaz's *The Quiet Ones* and Vincent Jan Cruz Rubio's *Paspas* narrate burnout, delay, entrapment without romanticizing hustle.²¹ Bodies are coded, timed, discarded rather than merely tired. *Paspas*, particularly "Shawarma Nights," presents six interconnected stories orbiting sex, music, desire, and a woman jumping at a crossing—central yet peripheral to lives in constant motion. Its epigraph reads: "Tayo ay mga eksistensiya ng kapaslasan—mga alipin sa mundo ng pagmamadali, hindi pananatili" (We are existences of haste—slaves in a world of rushing, not of staying).²² Rubio, killed in 2009, lives through this book waiting for ping, job, signal.

²⁰ Rio Alma, *Huling Hudhud ng Sanlibong Pagbabalik at Paglimot para sa Filipinas Kong Mahal* (C & E, 2009); and Gina Apostol, *Insurrecto* (Soho Press, 2018).

²¹ Glenn Diaz, *The Quiet Ones* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017); and Vincent Jan Cruz Rubio, *Paspas: Mga Kuwentong Siyudad* (University of the Philippines Press, 2022).

²² Rubio, 4.

Urban Dystopia and Displacement position Metro Manila as antagonist, wound, labyrinth rather than mere setting. Julius Villanueva's *Ella Arcangel* presents city haunted by poverty, violence, mythic remainders. *Tomo Una: Ito ay Panganib* (Volume I: This Is Danger) offers three interlinked stories rooted in Barangay Masikap where landlessness, rage, and environmental collapse shape daily existence. Stories reimagine folklore as structural despair witness. Supernatural elements entangle with social conditions rather than providing escape. *Tomo Pangalawa: Awit ng Pangil at Kuko* (Volume 2: Song of Fang and Claw) sharpens critique, echoing Duterte's drug war through child killing, justice erosion, normalized violence.²³ Pangil, a reimagined monster raised by abuse survivor, mirrors systems failing the vulnerable. When Ella kills him, readers confront hero complicity questions. Urban horror becomes reportage rendered through shadow, humor, grief.

Failure of Memory and Weaponization of History enable revisionism through historical fiction's forgetting. Literature must remember otherwise—as haunting rather than monument. Writers build alternate timelines, haunt official records, transform footnotes into fiction. Alvin B. Yapan's *Ang Sandali ng mga Mata*, set in native Bikol, gathers ungrieved wars and unspoken domestic violence through folklore, memory, gaze mysteries.²⁴ Following herbalist Esteban whose third eye sees witnessed and buried events, the novel demonstrates vision's non-neutrality in Esteban's failed attempt at saving his beloved Selya and at tracking down her descendants who are haunted by literal and symbolic serpents. Historical fiction resists nationalist closure—ghosts function as method rather than as metaphor.

²³ Julius Villanueva, *Ella Arcangel: Tomo Una: Ito ay Panganib* (Haliya, 2017); and Julius Villanueva, *Ella Arcangel: Tomo Pangalawa: Awit ng Pangil at Kuko* (Haliya, 2018).

²⁴ Alvin B. Yapan, *Ang Sandali ng mga Mata* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006); trans. Christian Jil R. Benitez as *Time of the Eye*, which received the inaugural PEN Presents × International Booker Prize translation prize in 2025.

These pressures demand reorientation of what constitutes literature and how it should be read.

PAKI AS FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING

Educational systems rewarding compression and technologies demanding instantaneity have trained students to approach literature like problem sets: What is the correct answer? What knowledge ensures passing? Literature resists such instrumentalization—it functions as encounter rather than data point. Restoring this encounter requires helping students read for commitment rather than mere content while developing programs with sufficient depth and horizon-scanning capability.

Drawing on Paulo Freire’s concept of problem-posing education, which positions learners as critical co-investigators of reality rather than passive recipients of knowledge, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s decolonial methodology, which centers relational knowledge-making over extractive research practices, I propose PAKI as a pedagogical framework that centers care as epistemological foundation. The acronym PAKI stands for Pakikisangkot (Engagement), Ambisyon (Ambition), Kahusayan (Excellence), and Inmortalidad (Immortality). PAKI functions simultaneously as assessment rubric and as invocation of the Filipino concept *paki* (care), positioning emotional and ethical investment as prerequisites for meaningful literary encounter rather than obstructed to scholarly objectivity.²⁵ Caring, in distraction-saturated classrooms, constitutes revolutionary act.

²⁵ PAKI is a framework I initially developed for film and literary criticism, now adapted for pedagogical assessment of textual value. See Edgar Calabia Samar, “Kailangan Natin ng mga Pelikulang May PAKI: Ang MMFF 2024 at Isang Mungkahing Kritisismo sa Pelikulang Filipino,” *Esquire Magazine*, December 28, 2024, <https://www.esquiremag.ph/long-reads/notes-and-essays/an-essay-on-mmff-2024-and-film-criticism-in-the-philippines-a3364-20241228-lfrm4>; and “Kailangan Natin Maghangad ng Lampas sa Aliw at Aral: Paninindigan, Ambisyon, at Kahusayan sa 10 Pelikula ng MMFF 2024,” *Esquire Magazine*, January 7, 2025, <https://www.esquiremag.ph/long-reads/notes-and-essays/mmff-2024-film-criticism-aliw-at-aral-a3364-20250107-lfrm5>. Notice that I initially used *Paninindigan* for the ‘P’ in PAKI, but I have since changed it to Pakikisangkot. I made this shift because the kind of paninindigan

Pakikisangkot (What world does this story demand we enter?) begins with entry recognition. Literature opens doors requiring the readers' conscious choice to enter. Pakikisangkot shifts the focus from "What is the plot?" to "Where are you in this world?" Teaching *Tatlong Gabi*, *Tatlong Araw* or *The Quiet Ones* requires one to challenge students to inhabit precarity rather than merely to guide comprehension.

Application involves pairing literary texts with syllabus absences: regional works in Waray, Meranaw, Kinaray-a; oral epics like Humadapnon; climate poems from marginalized communities. Questions include: Who gets translated? Who gets taught? Pakikisangkot requires outward turning—matching texts with real issues, pairing speculative climate stories with typhoon displacement news, following novels with fieldwork, interviews, community forums.

Reading becomes risk of involvement, allowing classroom-world leakage. Pakikisangkot asks not only reader location but identifies missing persons and necessary reaching methods.

Ambisyon (What does the text risk? What does it imagine?) recognizes ambition as necessary rather than arrogant. Literature chooses a leaping over explaining, risks failure rather than settles for safety. Classroom questions shift from "Is this good?" to "Ano ang itinaya?" (What does the work dare?)

This applies to both taught texts and teaching methods. Including writers whose works are harder to access but richer in stakes requires ambition—replacing canonical English short stories with newly written Kinaray-a pieces by Genevieve Asenjo, or centering Tausug epics alongside world literature.

we need is one that actively involves others; taken alone, paninindigan (principled stance) can risk becoming individualistic. For problem-posing education and decolonial methodology, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (Continuum, 1970) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 3rd ed. (Zed Books, 2021).

Ambisyon invites systems thinking. Teaching Kaisa Aquino's *Isabela* allows students to map causal-loop diagrams linking political violence, land dispossession, insurgency, and kinship. They trace reinforcing cycles of trauma and militarization sustaining unrest while identifying balancing loops like local peace-building. Literature becomes strategy site.

Ambisyon trains imagination alongside analytical rigor, urging movement from critique to construction—reading for method rather than mere meaning. *Isabela* functions as system for reimagining rather than simple interpretation object.²⁶

Kahusayan (How does the work fracture form?) defines excellence not as clean grammar or polished prose but as precision in defiance—form bending in historical response. Philippine context demands Kahusayan emerge from archipelagic, improvised, fractured sources rather than imported standards. Twenty-first-century Filipino novels succeed through form remaking under duress, in resistance, with care, rather than through form mastery.

BANI world conditions—brittle, anxious, nonlinear, incomprehensible, as futurist Jamais Cascio describes our current era—destabilize language itself, requiring critical and ethical teaching responses.²⁷ Modules like “Language as Testimony” read poems and essays as violence, displacement, denial witnesses. “Narrative Ethics and Misinformation” examines how stories including memes and vlogs shape belief and fracture trust. “Decolonial Storytelling” features works like Jun Cruz Reyes' *Etsa-puwera* and Eric Gamalinda's *My Sad Republic*, tracing subaltern and Indigenous coherence reclamation.

²⁶ Kaisa Aquino, *Isabela: A Novel* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2024).

²⁷ Jamais Cascio, “Facing the Age of Chaos,” *Medium*, April 11, 2020, <https://medium.com/@cascio/facing-the-age-of-chaos-b00687b1f51d>.

Contemporary Kahusayan refuses language weaponization against people it should serve. Excellence becomes context-rooted precision and care-shaped critique.²⁸

Inmortalidad (What remains in the reader, long after?) concerns residue rather than canonization—story aftertaste, haunting persistence. When examining what works leave behind, we ask what they change within us. Some stories disappear after examinations; others linger in protest methods, mourning processes, transmitted words. This constitutes *inmortalidad*—persistence rather than permanence. Literature that survives is not always that which is most awarded but that which is most returned-to during a crisis: *Noli me tangere*, “Bayan Ko,” *Dekada ’70*, books students borrow and never return because they feel owned.

Generative AI era makes *inmortalidad* defense against memory flattening. Students need teaching in deep reading and meaning preservation. Digital archives with rich metadata, community annotations, classroom modules on “AI and Authorship” explore machine mimicry limitations. Collaborative projects like annotating *Florante at Laura* with human and machine transcripts teach stewardship as literary practice.

Inmortalidad functions as praxis rather than myth. Endurance choices root literature in memory, scholarship, living cultural rituals no algorithm can erase.

Teaching with PAKI refuses neutrality while believing literature read with full weight of being can shape understanding and responsibility. Dreaming better literature institutions—classrooms, ministries, publishing networks, readerships—must begin with care through the asking of hard questions: Do translation policies support true cross-regional circulation or only “global exportability”? Why do few students read contemporary Filipino novels and fewer still read works from the

²⁸ Jun Cruz Reyes, *Etsa-Puwera* (University of the Philippines Press, 2000); and Eric Gamalinda, *My Sad Republic* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2021).

regions? Why do we frame Filipino literature through Manila-centered, Eurocentric pedagogical models rather than building exchange ecologies among Indigenous, regional, diasporic texts?

When asking students “Anong paki mo sa nobelang ito?” (What is your care/stake in this novel?), we seek posture rather than answer—a leaning-in, caring choice. In this collapsing world, literature needs participation rather than protection, *pakikiisa* rather than performance, *pagpapalaya* rather than closure, life rather than rubric.

Arundhati Roy’s observation in *The God of Small Things*—“And the Air was full Of Thoughts and Things to Say. But at times like these, only the Small Things are ever said. The Big Things lurk unsaid inside”—resonates powerfully in classroom contexts.²⁹ Educational spaces remain full of unread novels, unfinished essays, unnamed hungers. Students bring thousands of thoughts but speak only handfuls. They say, “It’s too long,” “I can’t buy the book, sir,” “What’s the requirement again?”—but inside, big things lurk: longing for understanding, fear of inadequacy, quiet hope that something might finally make sense.

When we ask students to read literature, we offer not compliance demands but vessels for those big things—language for what they cannot yet articulate, slow unfolding of thought, stance, self. If we remain patient, teaching literature with PAKI while prioritizing translation, experimentation, and engagement, we may find that these big things, though unsaid, will not remain silent forever. They will find their way into the world, one page at a time.

Literary education thus functions as what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms “aesthetic education”—not the cultivation of bourgeois taste but the formation of ethical imagination capable of responding to otherness without immediately assimilating it to the known.³⁰

²⁹ Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (Random House, 1997), 136.

³⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

The work of teaching twenty-first-century Philippine literatures requires acknowledging that we labor not only within dreams of better worlds but also within the material conditions that make such dreams appear both necessary and impossible. Literature serves not as escape from collapsing systems but as technology for their reimagining. In every experimental form that refuses coherence, every translated text that troubles linguistic boundaries, every community-engaged reading practice that challenges institutional gatekeeping, we say again and again: “walang ‘walang pag-asa’”—the capacity of the present to respond to past suffering and future possibility through the careful attention to how cultural forms break and heal.

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