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The Igorot *Ili* in the Cordillera Regional Autonomy Pageants

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Abstract

The present essay intervenes in the resurgent discussions on Cordillera regional autonomy by relocating “autonomy” as it is showcased in the 2023 pageant “Search for Mr. and Ms. Cordillera Autonomy Youth Ambassador” (CAYA). This government-organized pageant simulates the simultaneously isolating and relational understanding of islands through the *ili*, an Indigenous form of self-governance, embodied by the youth “ambassadors” in the pageant. Through cultural analysis of the pageant space, contestant self-introductions, posters, and attires in the pageant, I argue that these minor agents of autonomy perform oratorical negotiations that uplift each of their *ili*’s alleged “self-sufficiency” to appeal to the government’s agenda for autonomy, simulating an affective geopolitical terrain of “pride” comports to the scripted “unity” unanimously felt in the “One Cordillera” agenda and in the winning answer to the CAYA pageant. However, this “unity” is challenged by the counter-aesthetic of the inabel-infused pageant attires that reflect the creative transformations of the Indigenous heritage’s repertoire and archive opening possibilities for an autonomy based on the promotion and protection of a perpetually transforming, distinct, and isolated yet connected Indigenous cultures and peoples of the Cordillera.

Keywords

archive and repertoire, Cordillera Regional Autonomy, Igorot, *ili*, inabel, interstitiality, pageants

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2006, the National Economic and Development Authority's Regional Development Council in the Cordillera Administrative Region (RDC-CAR) established "Regional Autonomy" as its "overarching goal" for all its development plans implemented through the Social Preparation of the Cordillera Administrative Region into an Autonomous Region (SPCAR) (RDC-CAR) program. Through this goal, the RDC-CAR has reinvigorated a decades-long struggle for regional autonomy in the Cordillera, advancing the autonomy movement once again based on the political promise set out in the 1987 Philippine Constitution, which states:

There shall be created autonomous regions in Muslim Mindanao and in the Cordilleras consisting of provinces, cities, municipalities, and geographical areas sharing common and distinctive historical and cultural heritage, economic and social structures, and other relevant characteristics within the framework of this Constitution and the national sovereignty as well as territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines. (Section 15, Article X)

In the case of Muslim Mindanao, south of the Philippine archipelago, the tumultuous history of armed conflict by local insurgency movements, namely the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and its breakaway group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), has shaped almost four decades of intermittent peace and autonomy talks in the region. In 2019, Republic Act No. 11054 or the "Bangsamoro Organic Law" was ratified through a two-part plebiscite formally establishing the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) but not without cultural and political challenges in government and among minority groups in the region (Abuza and Lischin 12-20).

In the case of the Cordillera, former President Corazon Aquino through Executive Order 220 established in 1987 the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) as a preparatory administration for autonomy. The CAR is the only landlocked region situated north of the country at the heart of its major island of Luzon composed of seven provinces namely Benguet, Abra, Mt. Province, Kalinga, Apayao, Ifugao, Bontoc, and the chartered city of Baguio predominantly inhabited by several Indigenous ethnolinguistic groups popularly referred to as the Igorot. Its Indigenous population forms a significant part of the estimated 10-20% of the Indigenous population in the country (IWGIA). Since the formation of the CAR, there has been two failed plebiscites for regional autonomy held in 1990 and 1998. Only Ifugao in the first and Apayao in the second Organic Act voted for autonomy. One of the common reasons for the failed plebiscites were due to the lack of time for intensive information campaign resulting in various "misinformation" about autonomy among voters (Bahatan).

Currently, the autonomy movement initiated by the RDC-CAR has gained momentum and significant political support through the filing of three identical bills for the creation of the Autonomous Region of the Cordillera (ARC) in the 18th, 19th, and 20th Philippine Congress. House Bill No. 3267 titled “An Act Establishing the Cordillera Autonomous Region” filed in the lower house last August 8, 2022, was endorsed by all Cordillera congressional representatives. Subsequently, on June 8, 2023, Senate Bill No. 2275 with the same title was introduced by Senator Robinhood Padilla. Deliberations for HB 3267 is stalled due to fiscal management issues while HB 6981 filed last December 2025, seeks to resolve this issue with an alternative fiscal projection (Cabreza). Currently, the RDC-CAR through the SPCAR continue to prepare the region for autonomy by raising awareness through Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) activities, building a network of supporters through Alliance Building (AC), and training different stakeholders through Capacity Building (CP) activities (Daroya). However, among current supporters and proponents of ARC within SPCAR, Shivane Dolo notes a “divided narrative” of the history of the Cordillera and its autonomy movements and “communist intervention” (162-163). These vital disagreements among respondents in this study created a division that has produced “non-cohesive constructions” of and “justifications” for autonomy despite “unanimously” citing a constitutional basis (170). She argues that the “confusion, apathy, and suspicion” among the public can be attributed to the divided and divisive perspectives from current advocates and proponents of Cordillera autonomy (Dolo 170) despite “hopeful” government coverage that purports a “united” and multi-sectoral support (Siawingco) with a 71 percent affirmative turnout in the RDC-CAR-commissioned Pulse Survey in 2021 (Daroya).

As government proponents remain hopeful despite internal contradictions for the passage of ARC into law, the tumultuous history of autonomy provides a backdrop of political struggle waged over three decades by various stakeholders and social movements with their competing ideas of autonomous governance. More importantly, as I will elaborate in the subsequent section, these previous autonomy movements present longstanding problems of prioritizing notions of regional autonomy that mirrors national bureaucratic structures imposed on the village level (Casambre 101) and are “‘ideologically’ or ‘bureaucratic-legalistically’ determined, or ‘politically’ driven projects” rather than anthropologically grounded ones (Casambre 103). Ultimately, the *ili* or Indigenous village and how it is understood and mobilized in the past and present autonomy cases is at stake. The *ili* is at the heart of this constitutional promise, rendering this pre-existing notion of Indigenous self-governance tied to the cause and consequence of the autonomy project.

Thus, this essay navigates the thorny discourse on Cordillera regional autonomy and how this contested movement for the self-governance of Indigenous peoples in the region contribute to the political islanding of the Cordillera. In many ways, the ideological, political, and historical divisions created by the promise of self-rule enshrined in the constitution continuous to widen the gulf between Indigenous identity and belonging and belonging to (or against) the nation/region. In my interpretation of previous scholarship on autonomy in the subsequent section, the *ili* has arguably become the site from which contested claims of autonomy flourished. This essay seeks to intervene in the discourses of autonomy by relocating and reinterpreting the *ili* beyond autonomy legislation and how this Indigenous form of belonging can be considered an “interstitial island” described by Ilan Kelman as “an area, entity, zone, or something more abstract which sits between parts” (2). Through cultural analysis enriched by relevant theories in affect, performance, and island studies, I pay attention to the distinct performance of the *ili* embodied by youth contestants of SPCAR’s pageant, “Search for Mr. and Ms. Cordillera Autonomy Youth Ambassadors” (CAYA) last 2023. Specifically, I analyze the CAYA 2023 livestreamed online through the official Facebook page of the Philippine Information Agency Cordillera (PIA) alongside media materials produced for and about the CAYA pageant in the official social media pages of the SPCAR under the name and campaign “One Cordillera.” I pay close attention to contestant self-introductions, the winning answer in the CAYA pageants, and the repurposing of the *inabel* Indigenous fabric in the pageant attires and seen in CAYA posters.

As I elaborate in the relevant section, I argue that the youth as minor agents of autonomy, embody the *ili* as an interstitial island. The emotion of “pride” in representing their *ili* becomes a simultaneous compartment to their *ili*’s own political stakes in the autonomy movement while rehearsing the agenda of the RDC-CAR, rendering their self-introductions as oratorical negotiations against other “ambassadors” that either capitalize the gains or conceal the issues of their *ili*’s “self-sufficiency” in managing indigenous resources. Their oratorical negotiations are embodiments of performances originating in the repertoires of beauty pageants and political pageantry that demonstrate the geopolitics of the interstitial *ili* under the hegemonic agenda of the region while presenting Indigenous bodies as exotic commodities alongside their *ili*’s resources. In this terrain, the feeling of pride is flattened into a scripted unanimity under the banner of “unity” espoused by the pageant and its organizers. The winning answer of the crowned Ms. Cordillera reflects these negotiations further but also transgresses against it through the repurposing of the *inabel* Indigenous fabric worn as pageant attires. The uneven, disjointed, yet cohesive showcasing of the *inabel*-infused attires becomes a creative counter-aesthetic. This enduring and transforming archive and repertoire of

Indigenous heritage embodied by the pageant contestants offers the possibilities of understanding “unity” against the “One Cordillera.”

I pursue this argument in the following sections that first provides a brief overview of the history and debates surrounding Cordillera autonomy, followed by a discussion of the conceptual framing of my analysis centered around the *ili* that I engage with in the subsequent section that analyzes the autonomy pageants.

THE *ILI* AT STAKE: DISCOURSES ON CORDILLERA REGIONAL AUTONOMY

Since its inception in the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the promise of regional autonomy for Muslim Mindanao and the Cordillera region has been significantly shaped by competing ideological factions aspiring for self-governance rooted in their distinct colonial experiences and emboldened after the downfall of the Marcos dictatorship. Specifically in the Cordillera, the threat to ancestral domain became a source of political unity demonstrated by the popular resistance against the proposed World Bank-funded Chico Dam Project in Kalinga brokered by the Marcos administration. The protection from and resistance against the foreign encroachment upon the land and natural resources of the Cordillera became the organizing impetus of the Cordillera militant movement primarily represented by the Cordillera People’s Alliance (CPA) (Cariño 2016) and has become one of the earliest motivations for an autonomous region post-Marcos dictatorship (Finin 268-269).

However, the CPA was not the only agent in pursuing autonomy. Scholars have noted other notions of autonomy from the ideological factions of the time, emerging from what Dolo describes as the “militant phase” of the autonomy movement (163). While the CPA is recognized as the organization responsible for successfully advocating the inclusion of the autonomy provision in the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the subsequent Organic Acts of 1990 and 1998 have been influenced and dominated by several agents most notably the Cordillera Peoples Liberation Army (CPLA), a splinter group of the New People’s Army (NPA) founded by former NPA cadre, Fr. Conrado Balweg (Casambre 96). It was the CPLA that directly pursued the autonomy case to former President Corazon Aquino through a ceasefire agreement. The more nativist line advocated by Balweg’s faction convinced many cadres and even Indigenous peoples to the CPLA’s idea of autonomy (Bahatan). Perhaps the support can also be attributed to the prevailing media discussion found in newspapers in 1989, which framed autonomy as the

Igorot response to the “prejudice by lowlanders” against them and the “Tyranny of the majority” (Finin 268). Nevertheless, the meeting between the CPLA and the Aquino administration forged the 1986 Mount Data Peace Accord, a “*sipat*” or ceasefire agreement between the CPLA and the government, which led to the issuance of E.O. 220 (Dolo 165; Casambre 96). Through the accord, the government “co-opted former militant participants into occupying government positions” turning the autonomy movement as a “concerted effort” between the government and the former rebel faction (Dolo 165-166). Thus, in the first plebiscite of the Organic Act in 1990, the CPA “campaign[ed] for a ‘No’ vote” perhaps suggesting that their earlier efforts “had become perverted as soon as the government entered into *sipat* with the CPLA” (Casambre 96).

However, most notable in these ideological influences of the early autonomy movements is the banner[ing] of a “pan-Cordilleran” identity from the opposing CPA and CPLA groups. For the CPA, they assert “*Kaigorotan*” a collective identity founded on claiming the Cordillera as the “ancestral domain” of the “Igorot” who has “ancestral lands” in the region (Casambre 97). This identity was not well-received by Indigenous peoples who understand that their “self-identity is anchored in their village” and that this, in turn, produce varying experiences and social realities, albeit having a common experience distinct from the rest of the country (Casambre 97). On the other hand, the CPLA advocated for a “Cordillera Autonomous Socialist State” and a “Cordillera Nation” hinged on the romanticized notion of “communal land ownership,” one of several forms of Indigenous land ownership, and in which Indigenous institutions such as the “bodong” or peace pact agreement is used to negotiate between the national government and the “Cordillera Nation” (Casambre 97-98). Similar to the CPA’s assertion of a collective identity, the CPLA’s “Cordillera Nation” and its instrumentation of Indigenous culture for its political purposes produced several objections (Casambre 97).

Notwithstanding these ideological conflicts, Casambre notes the source of contention in the debates of both Organic Acts (100) found in the constitutional provision. Casambre emphasizes the problematic interpretation of the provision that led to disagreements about “the universality of any indigenous social practices among the Cordillera people” (100) from which she clarifies that the provision:

refers to the fact itself that indigenous practices and customary laws exist, not to the existence of a universal set of indigenous social practices, of which there is none. Hence, the rationale for an autonomous region is the protection and promotion of indigenous practices and customary laws, in whatever particular forms these exist in Cordillera villages. (100)

Casambre highlights here the “village” or the *ili* that becomes simultaneously foundational and contentious in the autonomy discourse. The core of the (mis) interpretation is found in this pre-existing form of Indigenous self-governance which exists across several Indigenous groups in the region. The *ili* is attached to different forms of Indigenous ownership and resource management of ancestral land, and its people governed by pre-existing customary laws and other Indigenous political institutions (Casambre 88) that have been conflated to different notions of a pan-Cordilleran identity espoused by competing ideas of autonomy bannered by militant movements such as the CPA and CPLA in their parallel and ideologically contradicting pursuit of the constitutional promise (97-8).

Understanding the discourse on autonomy attends to two distinct forms of autonomy in the region. As Steven Rood describes, there needs to be a distinction between the “*ili* autonomy” and “regional autonomy” the latter being that which is proposed in the ARC bills and the former being the historical status quo where the *ili* or Indigenous village remains “independent or autonomous from each other” (Rood 266). This dichotomous relationship between a pre-existing notion of Indigenous autonomy found in the *ili* and autonomy espoused by legislation presents the challenge in insisting on a “regional autonomous government that will dominate the villages and diminish or altogether take away from them their ‘indigenous’ autonomy” (Rood 266). Added to these, Rood also posits how these forms of autonomies might also be affected by introduced notions of political units such as the provincial and municipal formation down to the smallest unit of the *barangay* and how these might even disrupt the concept of the *ili* (Rood 267). Interestingly, according to Casambre, while the first Organic Act in 1990 recognizes, albeit falsely construes, the notion of the *ili* and its function and purpose in the proposed autonomous government, the subsequent Organic Act in 1998 fails to even mention *ili* at all (103). Among other homogenization and oversimplification of Indigenous culture replete in the first Organic Act and its attempt to codify an otherwise unwritten customary law into merely a version of local government legislation, the subsequent Organic Act became a “sanitized” version of the latter (Casambre 101-03), effectively removing the most crucial cultural, however contentious, substance of autonomy altogether.

While current debates and scholarly literature on Cordillera autonomy highlight the problematic interpretation of Indigenous notions of territory and identity and the homogenization of Indigenous communities and their practices and customary laws and institutions as basis for autonomy, I locate my intervention in what I surmise as both the context and concept of autonomy distilled in the *ili*. Gleaned from this brief overview of the earlier Organic Acts and discourses from primary agents advocating for autonomy, the *ili* that was repurposed or ignored in legislation while used as a site of ideological contestation and a platform for an

imagined pan-Cordilleran identity espoused in the CPA's "*Kaigorotan*" against the assumed constituents of the CPLA's "Cordillera Nation" reveal the affective potency of belonging *and* isolation inhered in the *ili*. In other words, the *ili* functions as a site of simultaneous solidarity and division and an affective source of belonging for those who advocate, even disagree, with autonomy. These affective qualities inhered in the *ili* are precisely what renders the Cordillera as a political island. The failure of previous Organic Acts reflects the process of islanding that began from ideological rifts that resulted in the devolution of the *ili*'s substance to acquiesce in legislative "sanitation," transforming the Indigenous notion of self-governance to reflect governance structures of the nation-state or removing the Indigenous concept altogether in the pursuit of Cordillera autonomy. These past concessions done for the sake of an autonomy yet to be realized can only sustain the islanding of the Cordillera further, rendering the *ili* currently at stake as the ARC bills are yet to be deliberated in congress. The *ili* can once again be under the threat of disappearance or transformation in the face of legislation as earlier observed in the previous Organic Acts, highlighting the urgency of this islandic entity. As I pursue further below in this paper's framework, the islandic and affective qualities of the *ili* also defines, sustains, and expands the borders of Indigenous relationality. A relationality hinged on the "spatial performances" of Indigenous bodies of youth pageant contestants, mobilizing the *ili* as both its site and embodied performance and contributing their own notions of belonging/isolation as minor agents of autonomy.

FRAMING THE *ILI*, AFFECT, AND THE BODY

The *ili* is a *flexible* Indigenous notion of belonging and isolation. While previous scholars rightfully assert its structural and cultural significance to Indigenous peoples in the Cordillera, this Indigenous notion has the capacity to adapt and transform as it is brought outside its context. As an example, Deirdre McKay illustrates how "virtual' villages" emerge as nodes of localities in which a "sense of place" is established through various digital interactions among Igorot migrants engaging with fellow migrants and their local communities back home (McKay 293). Similarly, Liezel Longboan observes the translocal interaction of Igorots in the diaspora through their community online forum, *Bibaknet*, that became a site that transcends "diverse ethnic and place-based affinities of the members" in which "village politics and global economic issues are discussed" alongside other cultural and social matters akin to the Indigenous "*dap-ay*" (338). I have also examined the mobilization of the *ili* among Igorot migrant domestic workers who utilize the *ili*

as simultaneously organizing ethnic affinity and political affiliation evident across different Igorot migrant organizations and demonstrated in their cultural activities such as protests, social media vlogging, and pageantry in Hong Kong (“Challenging” 2023). These studies demonstrate how the *ili* can be recontextualized away from the Indigenous village, producing new ways of organizing Indigenous communities, representing Indigenous peoples, and interacting with Igorots elsewhere and back home while wresting it from its fixed, insular, and legislative framing in the Cordillera autonomy discourse. The recontextualization and reworking of the *ili* in the diaspora concurs with scholars who have long questioned the essentialism of Igorot identity and its relation to land. While “partly correct,” this identification falls short of understanding indigeneity beyond “placedness” and “consanguinity” and bearing “political meaning” (Perez, “Green” 37) while also “contingent, context-based, and unstable” (McKay 294). The critique of place-based indigeneity is ultimately a form of resistance built on the flexibility of the *ili* demonstrated by the Igorot and their “practices of place-making” that shift back and forth from “local” to “global” (McKay 304). Generally, the flexibility of the *ili* also concurs with scholars who note how cultures are understood to be dynamic and relenting to pressures, influences, and changes from other cultures as in Ulf Hannerz’s notion of “cultural flow” where culture, Indigenous or otherwise, undergo interactive processes that generate internal and external interpretations of it (4). In other words, the *ili*, and by extension Indigenous culture discussed in this paper is dynamic. This dynamism is consistent with the cultural studies position that frames cultures as “cultural formations” or the “relations between ways of living and the differences *within* them,” capturing cultures as “complex or composite, relational rather than expressing single identities” (Johnson et al. 30). The subsequent discussion on the *ili* reinforces this cultural flexibility and dynamism by locating it as an island unit.

The reconstitutions of the *ili* elsewhere frames it as an entity that is both insular and relational. The insularity of the *ili* has been earlier observed in how it is falsely remade or ignored in the earlier autonomy cases and how these manipulations for regional autonomy stand against the *ili* autonomy of Indigenous groups—a discourse happening *within* the Cordillera. In other words, the *ili* is insular precisely because of the political discourses of autonomy and its capacity to structure discrete Indigenous communities. On the other hand, the flexibility of this notion outside the “village,” demonstrate the potency and creativity gained from its detachment, remaking an otherwise discrete Indigenous space into a relational one. This does not frame the *ili* as *either* insular or relational but is understood to have these simultaneous qualities akin to what Ilan Kelman describes as the “interstitial island” that simultaneously enable and facilitate “separation” and “connection” (7). The “interstitial island” is a “political construction” that is “created inadvertently or deliberately or a combination” thereof (Kelman 2). This formulation of the *ili* as an island entity and the context and substance of the agreement and dispute over

autonomy prompts the same questions Kelman raises about “creating” islands: “what is connected, included, and intersected, by whom and why?” (6) while conversely attending to its separation and exclusion.

While the *ili* is not an island in the geographic sense, my reformulation of this into an island entity is in dialogue with recent scholarship on island studies that have observed the island in diverse forms that reproduce, reorient, and transgress against the traditional figure of the “island”, which has ultimately conceived the interstitiality of this space, simultaneously “separating the real and fictional” and “connecting the observable and imaginary” islands (Kelman 8). To clarify, insularity and relationality is not limited to geographical locations but expresses islandness as a cultural and political condition. Indeed, the “island form,” enables a “geopoetics” that shift between “geographical and aesthetic registers” while accounting “aspects of spatial ‘knowledge’ that are dynamically made and remade in the process of social and cultural change” (Balasopoulos 9). In other words, the field of island studies is as critical of its insularity (geographic boundedness and nature of islands) as much as its current emphasis on relationality while understanding islands as an encounter of isolation *and* relation. I emplace the *ili* as an interstitial island within the distinct Philippine formulation of island studies identified by Oscar Campomanes as “mga pagsusuri ng Pilipinas bilang Kapuluan-Katubigan’ (Philippine archipelagic-maritime studies)” in which Philippine vernacular languages “formulate its own terms and methods that are responsive to, and therefore has aptitude for, Philippine contexts and conditions” (2018) and, in this case, are also articulating a distinct Indigenous experience from a region that is “landlocked.” Ultimately the *ili* is an articulation of an interstitial island of Indigenous belonging and isolation emerging simultaneously within the Cordillera and elsewhere. More crucially, as the succeeding discussion explains, is located within affective bodies of Indigenous peoples.

It must be noted that interstitiality inhered within the *ili* is mobilized and demonstrated primarily through the bodies of Indigenous peoples in this study. In other words, the *ili* is an embodied interstitial island. Historically, the Igorot body has been the enterprise of American colonization carried out through systematic documentation and proliferation of photographic material of the “naked savage” that illustrate and argue that the “Filipino” represented in these materials are incapable of self-governance (Rice 3). The significance of the Igorot colonial photographic archive and how it intersects with the American colonial project is underscored by several scholars (see Rice 44; Balce 181; Salvador-Amore 55), including other colonial narratives about the Igorot (see Aguilar-Cariño 194; Jularbal 300). More crucially, the Igorot body became a simultaneous representation and misrepresentation of the Filipino during colonial occupation that I elaborate elsewhere as the Igorot “embodying the debasing and othered image and imagery of the Igorot but, at the

same time, becoming a site from which national discourses on independence, liberation, and representation are contested” (Calabias, “Reclaiming” 526). In this manner, the Igorot indeed embodies notions of self-governance, albeit on a national scale and at the risk of misrepresentation. I extend these significant historical experiences that shaped the Indigenous body through the embodiment of the *ili* and its interstitial qualities by those I consider as minor agents of autonomy, the Igorot youth who are at the cusp of another transition to self-governance.

The youth targeted in the autonomy pageants are minor agents of autonomy precisely because they are rendered “minor” in the predominantly legislative discourse on autonomy and are assumed assimilated within the “major” categories of “Cordillera people,” “Igorot,” “*Kaigorotan*,” “Cordillera Nation,” among other overarching identities hailed in the autonomy debates (Casambre 97). Further, they are “minoritized” precisely because regional autonomy is a constitutional promise *specific* to those rendered “regional minorities” against the “national majority.” The notion of minor agents of autonomy is an extension of Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of the “minor” in which “language” is “deterritorialized” with “political immediacy” from “individual enunciations” becoming “collective assemblages” (18). While largely coming from literature, their notion of the “minor” can be situated within the “major” discourses of autonomy that replaces the minoritization of those rendered “strangers within [their] own language” (26) or, in this case, autonomy spoken/legislated for them against their own notion of autonomy. Ultimately, Deleuze and Guattari interfaces the “minor literature,” its linguistic/literary nature, qualities, and tendencies, with the “minority struggle...to reterritorialize, to redo the photos, to remake power and law, to also remake a ‘great literature’” (86). In other words, “minor literature” mirrors “minority struggle.”

In this regard, the minor agents of autonomy embodies the interstitial *ili* through specific performances that demonstrate their participation in this resurgent campaign for regional autonomy through spatial performances—performance about and advocating the *ili* in the CAYA pageants. The “spatial” in this regard is the context (pageant) and platform/purpose (the *ili* and regional autonomy). Embodying the *ili* can be traced through distinct affects that circulate within the discourse of past and recent campaigns for autonomy, the aspiration and anxiety, and assertions of and apprehensions to “unity,” which interestingly emanate from the CAYA pageants as a complex feeling of belonging and isolation. These spatial performances demonstrate affect and its “[s]ticky relation between signs and bodies” (Ahmed 191), but, more crucially, similar to Ahmed’s “stickiness” of bodies as “saturated with affect” (194-95), the bodies of Indigenous peoples have been endowed with “emotionality” by structures of power that render their bodies having certain emotions more than others (Ahmed 4) from the way they have been (mis)represented in the colonial photographic archive as “naked savages” (Rice

41) and the response and reclamation of their bodies in current social movements (Calabias, “Reclaiming” 526) down to their assimilation and “minoritization” in the autonomy discourses. They embody the interstitial *ili* but are also considered in the interstices of the autonomy discourse. Thus, the embodied interstitial *ili* has a “stickiness” as argued by Ahmed that enriches this island entity and its understanding as not just a matter of proximity (connection and separation, distance and depth) but also *affecting* its relations. The *ili* has, according to Ahmed, a form of “stickiness” that holds signs together but can conversely block signs from moving, helping us understand a “form of relationality” that associate “‘blockages’ with ‘binding’” (91). In other words, in the context of autonomy, Indigenous bodies “feel” unity, isolation, and belonging *more than* and *distinct from* others through forms of power that have saturated them with these “sticky” and interstitial emotions that simultaneously impede and mobilize belonging and isolation.

Thus, the framework of this essay fuses relevant theories I have discussed through cultural analysis that follows the cultural studies approach on the textuality of culture in which scholars “read constitutive cultural codes” while examining “the political, historical, economic, or social context in which texts” are produced (Turner 32). This approach considers the intertextuality of cultural analysis while emphasizing on the “uncompromising contingencies of concrete particularities and specificities” (Ang 19) of cultures. While this essay focuses on the Cordillera *ili* and how it is constitutive of/resistant to the discourses on Cordillera autonomy, its cultural analysis does not extend to other formations of the *ili* or Indigenous cultures outside of the *specific* historical, economic, political, and cultural context shaping discourses on regional autonomy that produced *specific* formations of the *ili* that I observed in the CAYA pageants.

The subsequent section presents the analysis of the second iteration of the CAYA pageant and coronation night held last July 14, 2023, at Pudtol, Apayao, which was simultaneously livestreamed in the official Facebook page of the PIA Cordillera. The analysis assembled an intertextual cultural formation of the *ili* in the CAYA pageant, which includes the pageant space and context, the contestant self-introductions, the “winning answer” to the CAYA pageant and the significance of the incorporation of the *inabel*, an Indigenous textile, into the pageant attires and in the CAYA pageant posters. This assembly demonstrates various cultural texts that compose the cultural formation of the *ili* in the CAYA pageant as an assembly of various media and embodied performances. I watched the pageant livestreamed and used screenshots of the pageants and other media in lieu of photographic documentation to account for this form of watching “live” performances.

THE MR. AND MS. CORDILLERA AUTONOMY YOUTH AMBASSADORS



Fig. 1. Invitational poster to the CAYA 2023 published in the “One Cordillera” Facebook page.

<https://www.facebook.com/One1Cordillera/photos/pb.100072009086801.-2207520000/2756078737865988/?type=3>

According to the RDC-CAR, the CAYA pageant “aims to provide the platform for youth participation in the autonomy advocacy,” which responds to “the 2021 Pulse Survey research report identifying the youth being the least aware on the region’s quest for autonomy.” This demonstrates a vital sector that appears to be a “minor” segment to the 71 per cent affirmative vote from the same commissioned survey (Daroya). The CAYA pageant is essentially a targeted information campaign “searching” for “the Next Youth Ambassadors for Autonomy” (see fig. 1) possibly responding to known challenges on information dissemination in the early attempts at regional autonomy but focusing on a particular sector. In its second year, the CAYA continues to involve the youth in autonomy talks, recognizing as well the “large portion of registered voters [that] come from the youth sector” (Costales). Thus, organizers also recognize the value of this information campaign through the potential polls generated by a “minor” sector who continues to grow as eligible voters.

Interestingly, the RDC-CAR did not acknowledge the popularity of pageants in the country as their reason for organizing the CAYA pageants, but it is fair to assume that the undeniable popularity of pageants in the Philippines can further stimulate interest among the Cordillera youth targeted in the CAYA. More importantly, the CAYA pageant can be understood, as Genevieve Clutario argues, as an intersection of colonial or nation-state agenda with notions of beauty where contests such as the

“Carnival Queen” during the American Commonwealth “make money, gain public attention, and perform colonial success through the presentation of beauty queens” but have also alternatively empowered the gendered identities of these influential contestants (16). Similarly, the CAYA pageant presents a complicated intersection of regional interest and the promised autonomy granted by the nation-state but, as I will argue subsequently, this renders bodies of Indigenous peoples not just adjudicated against typical pageant criteria but assessed whether their advocacies can comport to the autonomy campaign as potential ambassadors.

In the CAYA 2023, each pair of contestants come from and represent the provinces of the Cordillera and the chartered city of Baguio, vying for the major title of “Mr. and Ms. Cordillera.” Alongside the major title, contestants can also win minor titles that are interestingly aligned with the programs under the SPCAR namely, Mr. and Ms. Cordillera Autonomy Youth Ambassadors for Information and Education Campaign, for Capacity Building, and for Alliance Building, all separate titles. Additionally, the contestants can also win the “Best in Autonomy Pitch,” a short video presentation of the candidates delivering a “pitch” that aims to convince others of autonomy based on their provincial origins. The pageant also has a slew of minor awards traditionally seen in many pageants: Mr. and Ms. Photogenic, Mr. and Ms. Congeniality, Mr. and Ms. Darling of the Crowd, Mr. and Ms. Articulate, Best in Creative Wear, Best in Production Number. The reigning Mr. and Ms. Cordillera in the 2023 CAYA is Mr. Benguet, Arnel Calanzo Labisa, and Ms. Apayao Jazreal Jamilla Calaycay Enciso. Previous title holders were Mr. Kalinga, Shawn Michael Barila, and Ms. Abra, Angela May Respicio.

PARADOXICAL ASPIRATION

The significance of Apayao as the location for the 2023 CAYA offers an interesting historical backdrop to the pageant. Apayao was host to both the CAYA pageant in July 14 and the main program of the 36th Cordillera Month celebration in July 15. Cordillera Month acknowledges the creation of the CAR on July 15, 1987 through E.O. 220 but it also serves “to promote greater awareness, deeper appreciation, and active participation among the people of the Cordilleras in the pursuit of regional autonomy” (Cawis). It can be recalled that it was only the province of Apayao that voted for autonomy in the failed second Organic Act in 1998. Now hosting the main activity of the Cordillera Month as well, Apayao restages the conflicts and debates around autonomy in a “tableau” that re-enacts Apayao as the sole affirmative actor during the last plebiscite surrounded by representative “ambassadors” of other provinces that has historically declined autonomy, isolating Apayao. Interestingly this also highlights Ifugao’s role in the earlier Organic Acts in which the province

was the sole affirmative vote in 1990 but voted otherwise in 1998. Nevertheless, Apayao restages a more “positive” political dynamic in the CAYA pageant through an event that searches for an “ambassador” among “ambassadors” seemingly in “agreement” to autonomy. However, their agenda, which I locate through their self-introductions also reiterates the very problem of the failed Organic Acts—the assertion of a homogenous Cordillera as “distinct” to the rest of the nation while conversely privileging its vastly “distinct” Indigenous culture and communities. The CAYA becomes a paradoxical restaging of autonomy.



Fig 2. Still from the CAYA 2023 livestream during the self-presentations of Mr. and Ms. Baguio City. Facebook, streamed by the PIA, 14 July 2023, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=261914569805860.

This paradoxical restaging goes beyond the provincial context of Apayao and its historical role in autonomy now flipped as facilitator to an allegedly affirmative crop of provincial representatives, theirs included. Through the self-introductions of the candidates in the CAYA pageant (see fig. 2), a paradoxical aspiration can be observed. The parade of candidates begins with their self-introduction: the “self” (i.e. the body) and its “I” enunciated as pageant “introduction” are anchored to their *ili* signaled by the sashes they wear signifying their province. Thus, as they present themselves on stage, even before introducing themselves, their bodies are “sashed” to a “sign” that simultaneously confers their origin and introduces themselves-as-their-province. In other words, the “self-introductions” already began prior to the pageant.

Embodying the signification of their *ili* simulates the condition of “stickiness.” In her analogy of the “glue” and “disgust,” Ahmed emphasizes that “glue” becomes “disgusting” “*only when the skin surface is at stake such that what is sticky threatens to stick to us*” (90) (emphasis hers). While largely talking about “disgust” in the

quoted passage, Ahmed also extends this stickiness throughout her work that describes how emotions tend to stick and make certain subjects more prone to this “stickiness” than others (2004). In this regard, the pageant contestant’s body becomes a “surface” from which their emotional aspiration to win in the pageant congeals with their *ili*’s own “stake” at autonomy. These aspirations, as I later uncover, are attached to “pride” as a palpable emotion felt by contestants who declare this in their self-introductions but most definitely cathected to their conferment as a representative of an *ili* charged by the title of “ambassador.” The *ili* serves as metonym of who they are, what they feel, and what they “proudly” show and showcase in the pageants.

What could be considered a “threat” to this stickiness are what the contestants simultaneously “bear” and “bare” to the audience in their self-introductions—their “pride” coalescing with their *ili*’s goals, ambitions, and stakes in the autonomy movement. In other words, what is “stuck” to them and what prefaces them and their aspiration to win in the pageant is bordered by “pride” in and of their *ili*. The *ili* simultaneously propels their desire to win but also curtails them to their localities, a paradoxical ambition as they proudly declare “who they are” (their *ili* as themselves) and comporting their *ili* and themselves to the “One Cordillera.” As each candidate couple sashays to the stage, the visceral qualities of “stickiness” is already felt permeating in a pageant crowd fiercely supporting and cheering their own “bets” to win, *attaching* themselves arduously to a candidate whose person and province is seemingly one and the same.

ORATORICAL NEGOTIATIONS

As the candidates “speak,” the simultaneously “separate” and “connected” qualities of the *ili* manifest in a series of self-introductions done in provincial pairs. Many of these paired self-introductions have similar rhetorical structures akin to many pageants. Aside from their name and age, the self-introductions capitalize on having brief attention-grabbing statements about themselves, but more importantly, about their province and what it is known for. It is no surprise that many of these self-introductions are taken from their province’s tourism slogan. Take for example, Mr. and Ms. Benguet in their tandem introduction:

Mr. Benguet: Kagagam-is ay labi tako am-in (A sweet night to all of us)

Mr. and Ms. Benguet: Cordillera!

Ms. Benguet: Sak-en si Kristine Atelba Dilao, blessed di Bakun! (I’m Kristine Atelba Dilao, blessed by Bakun!). From the home of god *Kabunyan*.

Mr. Benguet: Sak-en abe si Arnel Calanzo Labisa (And I'm Arnel Calanzo Labisa) proud Mankayan, home of the largest gong!

Ms. Benguet: We are honored and privileged to represent...

Mr. Benguet: ...the rows of the northern mountains...

Ms. Benguet: ...in the Salad Bowl of the Philippines!

Mr. and Ms. Benguet: The province you will never forget, Benguet!
(translation mine)

The tourism slogan done in tandem here acknowledges Benguet province's two municipalities, Mankayan and Bakun represented by Mr. Benguet and Ms. Benguet, respectively. Their introductions first point to their municipalities that are "home" to intangible and material culture serving as tourist attractions: *Kabunyan* and the gong. Mt. Kabunyan located in the municipality of Bakun is "sacred" to the locals as it is believed to be where *Kabunyan*, the god of the sky, resides (Mammatong). The mountain, while steeped in mythological significance, is also a popular mountain climbing spot for locals and tourists alike. Notably, after being closed for two years, Municipal Mayor Bill Raymundo reopened the hiking site through E.O. 29-2022, "with the goal of improving tourism industry in the municipality" (Mammatong). While on the other hand, the gong also known as the *gangsá*, a traditional musical instrument of many Indigenous groups in the region, is also a key tourist attraction of the Mankayan municipality known as "the gong factory" of the region (Lapniten). The "largest gong" is part of the municipality's "One Town, One Product" (OTOP). In 2019, the significance of the gong as both tourist attraction and local industry was recognized in the establishment of a "Gong Fabrication Center" in Barangay Bedbed funded by the Department of Science and Technology in CAR (DOST-CAR) (Dionisio). On the other hand, Benguet is the "Salad Bowl" of the region due to its commercial vegetable industry that continue to be the largest producers of vegetables in the region. In 2023, Benguet contributed a little over 90 percent of the region's vegetable production which overshadow neighboring provinces (PSA).

Fusing provincial tourism and commercial industry, the candidates "connected" to the overarching goals of the ARC movement, bringing to the surface one of the RDC-CAR's "modeling" strategies that demonstrate the readiness of the region for autonomy. Specifically, in the 2007 RDC-CAR agenda, the council determined "fiscal autonomy" as an essential component to implement their regional development plan in which the region should have

fiscal capability and position and strive to gain a modicum of self-reliance and veer away from full dependence on national government funding to effectively implement regional development priorities. (RDC Secretariat)

Here, the RDC-CAR believes that “fiscal autonomy” is “one strong foundation and pre-requisite for full autonomy” (RDC Secretariat). Sources of fiscal revenue indicate external and internal sources, which include “...incomes of economic enterprises that the region may embark on,” which seems to point to these provincial units as potent sites of revenue. Indigenous tourism has been widely criticized for its incursion on Indigenous territories and natural resources (for examples see Butler and Hinch 2007) but has also shown possibilities such as Indigenous-led efforts in ecotourism aligned with community development (Colton and Harris 221). However, while scholars have observed ecotourism implemented by Indigenous communities elsewhere and its benefits to their local economy and the preservation of their culture and knowledge systems, communities find it challenging to “consistently influence the scale and pace of development due to their dependence on funding from the federal government” (Colton and Harris 232). While this problem may yet to materialize for the region, what is implied in the self-introduction of the candidates is the declaration of relinquishing control over their natural and cultural resources to be under an advocated autonomous region.

However, these Indigenous resources have long been “relinquished” to capitalist interest and are replete with environmental and cultural issues. For example, before the construction of the “Gong Fabrication Center” in Mankayan, it has been subject to criticism over the implication of “mechanizing” the production of a cultural heritage. Aside from questioning its marketability, critics point to the possibility of compromising the quality of the gong, which also implies, as Cordillera artist, Luchie Maranan states, the “mechanical and market-oriented” nature of “mechanization” “negate” the “social interaction and cultural expression” produced by the creation and use of the instrument (Alejo). On the other hand, the commercial vegetable gardening industry of the “Salad Bowl” and its overproduction has been known to cause health-related issues due to the presence of toxic agrochemicals in vegetable produce (Cheng and Bersamira 32) while negatively impacting traditional agricultural practices, land and resource management, and Indigenous culture at the expense of profit (Lewis 1992).

Complicating the matter of relinquishing resources is the self-introduction of Mr. and Ms. Apayao:

Mr. Apayao: Good evening Cordillera. A man with an indomitable purpose, Ediemar Pacis, 21!

Ms. Apayao: The most beautiful, Jazreal Jamila Enciso, 20!

Mr. Apayao: Representing the most peaceful province...

Ms. Apayao: ... and the Last Nature Frontier of the North...

Mr. and Ms. Apayao: Apayao!

The candidates from Apayao refer to their province as the “last” frontier due to its “precious and untouched natural resources,” which, in 2023, was threatened by Pan Pacific Renewable Power Philippines Corporation’s proposed hydro-power plants to be built along the Apayao River and its tributaries (Flores). Conversely, in 2024, Apayao was recently included in the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves, citing the province, among other biodiversity index, as “vital watershed” and “refuge for critically endangered species like the Philippine eagle” (DOT). In this regard, Apayao candidates have paradoxically uplifted their province’s environmental significance while also revealing active threats to its celebrated and “untouched” resources by hailing their province as “The Last Nature Frontier.” In other words, the “last” signals to the urgency of “preserving” the rich biodiversity acknowledged by UNESCO, but, on the other, imply that Apayao is *the* “last” frontier for this kind of reservation, which is now threatened by developmental projects targeting its very resource that made them a biosphere reserve in the first place. Apayao candidates are simultaneously communicating a message of preservation or perhaps even a “call to action” in a slogan that reflects an urgency. By extension, Apayao places center stage the underlying environmental issues concealed by the Benguet candidates who seem to have relinquished their own “frontier.” These provinces’ self-introductions interact as simultaneously opposing and parallel to each other’s *ili*, claiming “self-sufficiency” of their Indigenous resources.



Fig. 3. Still from the CAYA 2023 livestream after the self-presentations livestream during the evening gown portion. Facebook, streamed by the PIA, 14 July 2023, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=261914569805860.

Thus, the “self-introduction” is both oratorical and negotiatory in ways that it is rehearsed, choreographed, and styled after a pattern of speaking and that it negotiates the contestants’ position in an adjudicated pageant, but, more crucially, it negotiates the *ili*’s stakes at autonomy as it is delivered by “ambassadors.” The title of “ambassador” implies a “negotiatory” performance turning the self-introductions into oratorical negotiations. The rehearsed, choreographed, and styled oratorical negotiations in the CAYA stem from what Diana Taylor describes as the “repertoire” or “embodied memory” of “performances, gestures, orality, movement” that are transmitted and transformed in a continuum of performance acts (20). The oratorical negotiations come from two, arguably similar, “repertoires” of pageantry: beauty pageants and political pageantry. On the one hand, the repertoire of beauty pageants include the choreographed “*pasarela*” or catwalk, the make-up, styling, and ensemble enabled by a retinue of local designers, make-up artists, and stylists, the bodily comportments such as their posture on stage, hand gestures, and sustained smiles (see fig. 3), and their prepared speeches and its measured and rehearsed cadence and delivery, among others. On the other hand, as “ambassadors,” their speech and presentation are also construed as political pageantry framed by its performances of negotiation, diplomacy, and trade. While it can be argued that the use of vernacular languages and “major languages” such as Filipino and English in the pageants reveal an underlying tension from pageant contestants asserting their vernacular against the dominant use of major languages, namely English, in autonomy documents such as in past organic acts and current ARC bills in congress, it also reflects a degree of linguistic comportment by those who use majority languages in the CAYA pageant. But the use of vernacular languages can also enhance the commodification of bodies of pageant contestants by performing their indigeneity through linguistic and other aesthetic efforts of accentuating their “exotic” bodies in a bid to become ambassadors. In this way, the

minor agents of autonomy demonstrates the “deterritorializing” of languages by recognizing the control of and resistance to national consciousness in articulating languages, vernacular or otherwise, that they are simultaneously a part of and excluded (Deleuze and Guattari 16-17). These pageantry repertoires are embodied as condensed instances of oratorical negotiations over relinquished resources. Interestingly, the candidates are indeed “ambassadors” and have in fact underwent SPCAR’s IEC “speaker’s training” as part of pageant preliminaries. Thus, regardless of the difference in language choice in their self-introductions, the oratorical negotiations are *trained* performances dually rehearsed, choreographed, styled, *and* regimented by the repertoire of beauty pageants and the SPCAR training modules. Indeed, as Clutario argues, the “beauty pageants” in the country is an “industrial complex” that fuses the interests and investments of the state, audience, and the contestant (66). Interestingly, in the CAYA pageant, autonomy is both the “investment” and the prize in this “beauty regime” (Clutario 33).

The embodied display of indigeneity through the oratorical negotiations and distinct linguistic choices, becomes a restaging *and* reversal of the historical commodification and exoticization of Indigenous bodies found in the colonial archive of American occupation of the Cordillera where state interest converge and is implied on the bodies of Indigenous peoples. In the colonial archive, Indigenous bodies became objects from which the colonial agenda of sustaining American occupation to civilize the “savage” and “naked” Indigenous bodies (Rice 49) coursed through while in the CAYA pageants government autonomy discourse courses through the bodies of Indigenous youth as they articulate a bid for autonomy that essentially “frees” the region from the nation-state. In many ways, the bodies of pageant contestants are rendered as another form of commodity to be exploited alongside their local resources.

The “ambassadors” comport and articulate the dual repertoires of pageantry as they negotiate a “deal” with the regional government, bargaining/relinquishing their resources while also undercutting other “ambassadors” in this contesting bid for demonstrating “fiscal autonomy.” The embodied *ili* performed by the CAYA contestants yields to the simultaneously oppositional and relational nature of interstitiality through the tenuous and arbitrated agreements on autonomy that manifest as self-introductions of “self-sufficiency” bids done on a pageant stage that simulates a terrain of island (*ili*) politics. In this way, the CAYA pageant stages an interacting theatrical assemblage of *ili* island “ambassadors” that borrow qualities of what Campomanes describes as “extra-territories” (2018). Similar to how the U.S Aircraft Carrier embody US “extra-territorialism,” as Campomanes argues, the *ili* becomes an “extra-territory” through the bodies of the youth that become extensions of hegemonic control and territoriality (2018), each serving as

conduits of both their *ili*'s "self-sufficient" interests and the regional government's development plans for autonomy.

What permeates across the stage is an affective terrain of "pride" entangled in oratorical negotiations between minor agents of autonomy turned "ambassadors" or envoys of their respective *ili*, articulating their self-introductions that meld the emotion of "pride" as pageant contestants with the tourism slogans of "self-sufficiency" that their *ili* is "proud" of. The oratorical negotiations temper and embolden this "pride," punctuated by their captivating smiles, rhythmic walks, and "persuasive" speeches. "Pride" in the oratorical negotiations creates relations and disconnections where one's *ili* becomes a simultaneous site of belonging (one's "home"), isolation (as an "ambassador"), and identity in the pageant. More crucially, the oratorical negotiations are premised on a "unanimous" agreement to the government's vision and plans for autonomy. It is no surprise that pageant contestants align themselves with this as they are contending in a pageant organized by the very proponents of autonomy. Thus, "pride" has a "sticky" arrangement with "unity." What can be extended from Ahmed's emotional "stickiness" (2004) evident in the personal aspiration of "pride" congealed to political ambition of autonomy is the tendency of emotions to become indistinguishable from the person who feels it as it is "unanimously" felt in "unity." In a pageant wherein the "crown" and the political stakes are the same (autonomy), it is understandable that pageant contestants are "one" in their support for autonomy but, more crucially, are told how they should *all feel* about it. This feeling and agenda of "unity" flattens the affective terrain into a "unanimous" feeling of "pride." In other words, the CAYA is a competition designed to reiterate the region's own plans and ideas for autonomy by *training* "ambassadors" to "unanimously" agree with their agenda of "unity" performed in the repertoires of pageantry. "Pride" is then attached to a "divided" (Dolo 161) and "frustrated" (Casambre 101) history and movement of the autonomy discourse interestingly staged in the CAYA pageants as a "scripted" performance and feeling of "unity."

THE INABEL AND THE //I



Fig. 4. Still from the CAYA 2023 livestream during the evening gown portion. Facebook, streamed by the PIA, 14 July 2023, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=261914569805860.

The oratorical negotiations reach a fuller proposition in the winning answer of Ms. Apayao, Jazreal Jamila Enciso. She won the title of Ms. Cordillera in the CAYA 2023 through her answer to the question given to all female candidates: “What are the challenges that the region is facing today and what will you say as a Youth Ambassador to help solve the problems?”:

Thank you so much for that wonderful question. I believe that the region’s problem [we’re] facing today is the information dissemination about autonomy. As your next Ms. Cordillera Ambassador 2023, I will be flexible and purpose-driven in applying my whole-of-society approach in implementing my program “ABEL: Acquiring Benefits, Enhancing Lives of Cordillerans,” so we could empower the “3P’s.” First, People, second Policy, third Progress. If we could achieve this, then we will have: first, comprehensive youth programs for youth are the hope of the future. We should empower them. Second, community responsive education. Education is the ticket for a better living. Third, supporting small scale businesses and organizations for 50% of us belongs to the marginalized sector. Fourth, sustainable development for agriculture for 70% of us are farmers and agriculture is the backbone of our society. Lastly, to promote eco-cultural tourism for the preservation of our culture heritage and protection of ecology. If we could achieve all of these, then we will be sure to have a maginhawa, panatag at matatag na buhay for all Cordillerans for one prosperous, one resilient, one inclusive Cordillera. (PIA)

This answer distills the previously mentioned oratorical negotiations into a “perfected” speech in which the distinguishing propositions of other ambassadors that capitalize/conceal their *ili*’s self-sufficient contribution to autonomy are repackaged, unsurprisingly, within the broader framework of the SPCAR’s own goals and activities (IEC, AB, CB). What makes the Indigenous distinct, the very cause of the constitutional promise, its cultural practices, communities, and institutions, is distilled (or reduced) to “preservation” under the rubric of “eco-cultural tourism.” I cannot expect the candidate to provide a fuller explanation as to what she means by preservation and what kind of eco-cultural tourism enables this during a time-pressured event, but the “self-sufficient” self-presentations earlier already illustrates a possible future. Similarly, the flattening of the Indigenous into sectoral priorities homogenously represented by “Cordilleran” or, more tellingly, “People” rehashes the same problem of autonomy as a means to merely devolve national government function and power to the region, setting aside why autonomy was provisioned in the first place— a recognition of “distinct” Indigenous communities that have distinct cultures and distinct problems. While indeed the “policies” for “progress” she propositions here are legitimate demands from those working in these sectors and that the youth’s education is vital to understanding autonomy, the Indigenous’ “problem” seems to be unanswered. However, her answer also opens the possibilities of reconfiguring this “scripted” call for “unity.”

The ABEL program references to the *inabel*, the Indigenous fabric and culture of weaving in the region that is also incorporated in the evening gowns and suits of the pageant contestants (see fig. 1 and fig. 3). Traditionally, the *abel* or *inabel* is the fabric used in Indigenous attires such as the *bahag* or *wanes* (loin cloth) for men and the *tapis* (wraparound skirt) for women. The *inabel* as both acronymically and sartorially repurposed point to Ms. Apayao’s answer as an embodied interpretation of “One Cordillera” from an otherwise scripted form of “unity” into the simultaneously repertorial and archival nature of the Indigenous fabric. The *inabel* is both a material and intangible cultural heritage that exemplifies both a “repertoire” of weaving practices embodied by its weavers and an “archive” that stores Indigenous knowledge and cultural memory (Taylor 21). The *inabel* fabric is distinct to each weaving community and reflects a diverse repertoire of weaving practices and practitioners that are further transformed into pageant attires by local designers who fuse their own repertorial and archival histories. Thus, the *inabel*-infused pageant attires are an amalgamation of diverse embodiments of repertorial and archival interaction observed from its pageant showcasing down to the practices of local weavers and fashion designers behind the attire.

The contestants showcase this amalgamated reinvention of the *inabel*’s traditional use by wearing attires that incorporated the fabric in varying amounts of coverage that “negotiate” the fabric’s place alongside modern material. The *inabel*-infused

attires and its varied reinterpretations showcase the legible tensions that undergird “unity” in the “One Cordillera.” The *inabel*-infused pageant attires reveal a disjointed cohesion of Indigeneity and modernity while also “unrelenting” in this aesthetic negotiation even if it fully comports to the silhouette of a modern pageant gown. It is noticeably *there* even if, in other cases, the *inabel* serves as accented panels of a suit or tied to the waist as an accessory (see fig. 1). Both in its full incorporation and accessorizing in pageant attires, the *inabel* reveal a tentativeness to “unifying” under “One Cordillera” but are unified nonetheless. At this point it would make sense to relent to the CAYA’s messaging here of “unity amidst diversity,” but while it is too convenient an explanation for the diversity of *inabel*-attires and, by extension, Indigenous cultures on display, the “diverse” cultures here are uneven, negotiated, and blurred. The *inabel*-infused attire is off-script and creative. The *inabel* and its archival and repertorial tradition and “modern” continuity into the pageants weave in a creative counter-aesthetic to the oratorical negotiations of autonomy. The “unity” that is worn and embodied demonstrates how “One Cordillera” cannot simply homogenize cultures but each are woven together as patches of distinction, even dissent, threading creative tensions into any unifying and homogenizing agenda. In other words, the claim to “distinct” Indigenous cultures in the region must account for the changes of these cultures that are far from their pure and romanticized Indigenous societies while still retaining their difference from the rest of the nation as these cultures are reiterated, transformed, and reimaged in the living embodiments of their archive and repertoire, “disrupting” the staging of “autonomy” in the pageant.

The disruptions in the pageant recalls the foundational disagreements in the earlier autonomy debates where some advocates universalize different Indigenous cultures noted by Casambre (100). She rightfully asserts that “the rationale of an autonomous region” is the “promotion and protection” of Indigenous cultures and institutions however they may appear in the villages (100). To a limited extent, the CAYA pageant is informed by this rationale however, it homogenizes these distinctions into a unifying banner of “One Cordillera” that purports to be inclusive but has absorbed these differences into a self-serving pageant where candidates rehearse the very discourse that needs further scrutiny. In this way, the counter-aesthetic demonstrations interacting with the oratorical negotiations reveal a fertile terrain for continued discourse, a dynamic between Indigenous peoples, cultures, and notions of self-governance that I think must also be promoted and protected, reflecting the reality of changing Indigenous cultures and people whose archive and repertoire are living. The “pride” of representation must spring from this sea change in a terrain of transforming *ilis* and cultures simultaneously associated with and separated from each other, which forms what genuine Indigenous self-determination could mean.

CONCLUSION: UMILI

In this essay, I examined the interaction of the *ili*, affect, and Indigenous bodies in the Search for the Cordillera Autonomy Youth Ambassador (CAYA) pageant in 2023 and specifically tracking these in the self-introductions of the pageant contestants, the winning answer in the pageant, and the creative repurposing of the *inabel* in the pageant attires and posters. Through cultural analysis that engages with relevant affect and performance theories, the youth or the minor agents of autonomy further complicate the “divided” (Dolo 161) and “frustrated” (Casambre 101, 103) autonomy movements as the *ili* they come from becomes an embodied interstitial island in the CAYA pageant. As “ambassadors” of their *ili*, the emotion of “pride” is a congealment of their personal aspirations with their *ili*’s own political stakes in the autonomy movement. Further, embodying the *ili* simultaneously propels their ambition to win while curtailing them to their localities which in turn comports to the “One Cordillera” envisioned by government proponents of autonomy, creating a paradoxical aspiration. This isolating and relational nature of the *ili* embodied is pursued further in my analysis of the self-introductions of certain pageant contestants that I describe as oratorical negotiations between competing *ilis* and contestants. In the oratorical negotiations, the contestants simultaneously capitalize the gains and conceal the issues from their *ili*’s “self-sufficiency” as a tourism and commercial industry that pander to the region’s plan to demonstrate “financial autonomy.” The oratorical negotiations are rehearsed, choreographed, styled, and regimented by the repertoires of beauty pageants and political pageantry but, more crucially, also restage and reverse the colonial representation of Indigenous peoples through the exoticization of the bodies of Indigenous youth as commodities similar to their province’s resources. Thus, the oratorical negotiations demonstrate further the pageant’s staging of a geopolitical terrain in which the *ili* become “extra-territories” under hegemonic regional politics, flattening “pride” into the government’s agenda of “unity” that compels contestants to unanimously feel the same as they negotiate over a notion of autonomy ascribed to them by the very organizers of the pageant. However, in the winning answer of Ms. Apayao that references the *inabel* tradition and the *inabel*-infused pageant attires, a counter-aesthetic runs through the agenda of unity. The disjointed cohesion of the *inabel* fabric in the pageant attires contrasts with the convenient and homogenizing “unity” promoted in the pageants while also recognizing the *inabel*’s continuing and transformative tradition embodied in its archive and repertoire. In this way, the creative counter-aesthetic to the oratorical negotiations in the pageant formulate a productive and fertile terrain for discourse in the constantly shifting *ili* and cultures of Indigenous peoples, recognizing and valuing the cultural transformations that simultaneously separate and connect the Cordillera.

The future of the autonomy movement cannot be determined by these assertions alone. The “wonderful question” to be asked in the pageant and beyond is what do the youth, the minor agents of autonomy, *really* want in an autonomous Cordillera? Do they want it at all? Or more crucially, how and what do they *feel* about the future of self-governance? Earlier polls suggest that a majority of them are arguably ill-equipped to respond to these questions and to this I appreciate the RDC-CAR’s dedication to devote its resources to addressing this gap not just in the pageant but in other notable efforts such as seminars and dialogues they conduct in schools across the region. While I cannot attest to the quality of these activities, it is still a fertile ground for continued engagement with the youth and proposes a challenge to government proponents to extend the discussion beyond the schools into each *ili* from which a truly “organic” response can be cultivated from the *umili* (people).

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