

Gemino H. Abad and Alfred A. Yuson

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The Philippine Literary Arts Council (PLAC) was a group of young Filipino poets established in 1981 by Cirilo F. Bautista, the late Alfredo Navarro Salanga, Ricardo de Ungria, and interview subjects Gemino H. Abad and Alfred A. Yuson.

Besides holding public readings throughout the country, the PLAC published *Caracoa*, a journal that featured poetry in English. The PLAC also introduced a visual art exhibition series called *Chromatext*, which featured poems rendered or interpreted as visual art in a gallery space.

Caracoa came out at irregular intervals, beginning with its first issue in 1982; there would eventually be twenty-eight issues published over three decades. A handful of *Chromatext* exhibitions were also staged over the same period. The most recent issue of *Caracoa* was published in 2006, and a *Chromatext* exhibition is slated for late 2015.

In each issue of *Caracoa*, an image of the eponymous sea vessel appeared, accompanied by the following caption:

The Caracoa was a war vessel plying the waters off Mindanao and the Moluccas in the 16th century. The rowers stayed close to the hull, while the warriors stood with their spears on a platform. The poet sat alone at the far end of the boat, manning the rudder. He was neither rower nor warrior, yet he decided where the prow should point . . .

In him was rower and warrior; he himself was a double-decked vessel of grace and irony. He was far back, yet he provided direction. At times the caracoa lost its way. No matter. The sea would still be there, and the shoals would still be duly recorded.

Gemino H. Abad is the editor of what is considered the definite set of anthologies of Philippine poetry written in English: *Man of Earth* (1989), *A Native Clearing* (1994), and *A Habit of Shores* (1999). His essays on Philippine poetry are collected in *Our Scene so Fair* (2008). *All Our Nameable Days* (2014) is the latest collection of his own poems.

Alfred A. Yuson is a multi-awarded fictionist and poet. His best-known works are the novels *Great Philippine Energy Jungle Café* (1988) and *Voyeurs and Savages* (1998), the story collection *The Music Child* (1991), and the

poetry collections *Sea Serpent* (1980) and *Trading in Mermaids* (1993). He writes a column for the newspaper *Philippine Star*.

Angelo R. Lacuesta (ARL): How did the PLAC begin?

Alfred Yuson (AAY): The common thread was that basically four of us were employed at the PCSS of Adrian Cristobal—The Presidential Center for Special Studies. Cirilo [Bautista] had a high position at the PCSS. He was there on a daily basis. Freddie [Salanga] was also there, also on a regular payroll. We were called into a meeting with Cirilo. Cirilo and Jimmy started becoming friends and lovers or something . . .

Gémino H. Abad (GHA): Cirilo said, “Let’s form a group.” We hadn’t just met. We knew each other already.

AAY: Freddie and I knew each other a long time already, we were neighbors living behind SSS. And I remember he and I were at a Thomas Jefferson seminar.

ARL: Interestingly, you called yourselves the Philippine Literary Arts Council, which sounds very highfalutin and institutional. Did you mean for it to sound that way?

GHA: It’s Cirilo’s fault! Cirilo wanted it that way.

AAY: Really it was just camaraderie.

GHA: You know I never really felt, up to now, that there was such a thing as a literary establishment. *Kalokohan!*

ARL: But you called yourself the Philippine Literary Arts Council.

GHA: Just so we could impress!

ARL: How old were you gentlemen?

AAY: Mid-thirties.

ARL: So you were already published poets.

AAY: One of the qualifications for PLAC, when we decided to form the five-man group, was that we should have won a national prize or published a book. At the time, we just went with our peers. We were very few then. In our generation there were few poets.

ARL: Did you start with performance?

AAY: Poetry readings.

ARL: So you were like a book club? A poetry club?

GHA: Something like that.

AAY: But in public, readings in public. So in effect they were performances.

ARL: Your first big project was a televised reading on *Paco Park Presents*—that cultural show on the government channel.

GHA: It was our first public reading as a group.

AAY: We also had the avowed purpose of having a poetry reading circuit, and eventually in subsequent meetings, we agreed that we had better come up with a journal—*Caracoa*.

ARL: So the first *Caracoa* featured the five of you? You published this yourselves?

AAY: It was private. Nothing to do with the PCSS.

GHA: We just had contributions from friends.

ARL: Did you find there was a gap, there was a need for publications like *Caracoa*? What was the poetry scene like at the time that allowed or necessitated this to happen?

AAY: Hardly much compared to now. The Silliman workshop was already there. But we were aware that it was our first poetry journal. All the rest were weekly publications. I had just come from *Ermita*—1976—a magazine which also published fiction and poetry. And then it was gone. Before *Ermita*, there was also *Manila Paper*. Soon after *Paco Park* and we had put the first issue out, we embarked on the National Poetry Circuit already. Somehow we got an invitation. We went to Cebu and Dumaguete. That was one trip. In Cebu and Dumaguete, we would speak at radio stations. We also spoke at at least two universities and we had readings there. That was the start of the National Poetry Circuit.

GHA: That's how the word spread around for *Caracoa*.

AAY: Because there were hardly any poetry readings anywhere, not even in Manila. There were no poetry readings, no spoken word series, no nothing. Not even at Café Indios Bravos. I don't recall a poetry reading there. Our readings were well attended because the local poets would also read, not just us.

GHA: There were just poets and poets, other writers. That was the literary scene.

AAY: Until Café Orfeo. There were regulars. With Virgie [Virginia] Moreno. This was upon the demise of Indios Bravos.

GHA: We wanted more space for writers.

AAY: What you had to do back then was win the Palanca [Memorial Awards] competition, and then do the Dumaguete workshop, and then publication in *Philippines Free Press*, *Philippine Graphic*, *Nation*, *Focus*.

GHA: You know it's possible that *Caracoa* is the first poetry journal in English in Asia.

ARL: Who was the creative mind behind it?

AAY: Each of us also had innate skills in terms of design—graphic design. There was no permanent point person. It revolved. There were some issues when Eric [Gamalinda] was already with us, and we assigned break text to him. There were some issues Ricky designed, some by me, some Jimmy. That would rotate.

ARL: Where did you distribute it?

AAY: At the time not National Bookstore. It must have been Erehwon and La Solidaridad. It was just five hundred copies.

AAY: We attracted contributors: Clovis Nazareno, Simeon Dumdum, Carlos Cortes. And also included Dumaguete—because most of us also served as panellists in Dumaguete. It was a coterie in effect, depending on socialization. It revolved around UP, Café Orfeo, bohemian places, Club Dredd, whoever you met there and met often. UST. Eric Gamalinda.

GHA: La Salle and Ateneo—with RayVi Sunico and Emmanuel Torres.

AAY: What happened was that poets came out of the woodwork on a national basis. When it got regular with issue two, we began to accept contributions. We sent word out. After the first issue, we sent out invitations, we had contributors, whom we screened.

ARL: How did you do that?

GHA: Maybe word of mouth. There was no texting then! We would meet and pass around contributors' poems. And then we approved it around the table.

AAY: Mostly new voices in two. And then with three, we became thematic.

GHA: Women Poets, special issue. And we had a special issue of Salanga.

Women Poets, an environment issue, *Sub-Versu* . . .

AAY: My favorite was *Genus Loci*, poems of place.

ARL: Did things change when Ninoy died?

AAY: Yes, of course, because we came out with a protest issue, and Adrian got pissed off, with the operative line that you don't bite the hand that feeds you. The climactic incident was the death of Ninoy. We came out with that yellow volume. That was also about the time we got fired from PCSS.

GHA: You know when we were reading our poems over the radio in Cebu, we were reading anti-Marcos poems. And then we had a PLAC poetry reading with Ramon Santos at the College of Music. We also read anti-Marcos poems then.

ARL: What about *Chromatext*? What gave you the idea to do it?

AAY: Agnes Arellano and Michael Adams used to throw a lot of parties. And then they started the Pinaglabanan Galleries. And I used to run a

magazine for them called *San Juan*. We were close. For one thing, Cirilo, most of what he did at PCSS, when he wasn't writing messages and speeches, was to do his dot-dot-dot with pentel pens and create geometric forms. And then during our meetings, Ricky [de Ungria] was doodling, and so was Freddie [Salanga]. And then I spoke to Agnes—why not feature us?

GHA: You just write your poem in your own hand, and then illustrate it if you can, even if you just add color.

AAY: Cirilo's was visual art.

GHA: And Ricky's was terrific. I've got one framed in my office.

AAY: Ricky's was like pastiche, with an illustration and a poem. Also Freddie's. He did a cartoon and a poem. And as for me, I did sculpture, I used tires, for example, and painted the poem on them, like installation art. The first *Chromatext*, I think we were confined to that annex, that black square room at Pinaglabanan. Around 1983. So there were two in Pinaglabanan.

ARL: How many *Chromatext* shows did you have?

GHA: We had several *Chromatext* shows, at least four.

AAY: Five if you count UP, and then you might want to add Baguio. The last one was in 2007, called *Chromatext Reloaded*, curated by the late Sid Hildawa. Sid was visual arts director of the CCP. He remembered *Chromatext* from before and suggested we mount a big one in the main gallery.

ARL: But big projects like *Chromatext* became possible because of *Caracoa*. Did you ever have a manifesto?

GHA: None. We're the officers of the group, and we don't have—

ARL: You did have a flyer.

GHA: It was democratic.

AAY: There was a bilingual divide in the 70s, because of the birth of nationalism. I recall the Filipino poets then were sounding the death knell for English poetry. I was still in UP then.

GHA: Even Pete Lacaba sounded the death knell.

AAY: "Everyone will write in Filipino." What *Caracoa* disproved was the death of English, the sole use of Filipino. Because out of the woodwork came poets from Mindanao, Cebu, Ilocos.

ARL: Did you have any connections with the US?

AAY: Eventually, because they funded a *Caracoa* issue—*Flipside*: "Poems on America." We were supposed to launch it at the US Ambassador's house. It was a party, arranged by a very active cultural affairs officer.

ARL: *Flipside* was not necessarily positive about America.

- AAY: Someone at the Embassy read it before it was launched. Copies were sent by the press to the US Ambassador. After all, they had funded it. They saw one particular poem by Butch Dalisay. Something about lining up at the embassy, with the title or a line or something that read “dickhead.”
- ARL: *Caracoa* did have its political moments. But what about poetics?
- AAY: One thing you can say about PLAC: we never really . . . we never discussed poetics.
- GHA: No, we didn’t.
- AAY: We never. Maybe others believed themselves to have been founded on a certain poetics, but we never said anything of the sort.
- ARL: So you were founded on friendship.
- AAY: Yes, and the relative merits of each one’s poetry. We would laugh at some poems and not laugh at others. “Did you like Alex Hufana? Ricaredo Demetillo?” The use of particular words—such as *cloacal*.
- GHA: “This is cloacal poetry.” That was Ricaredo Demetillo.
- AAY: Demetillo became our honorary member. One other thing, very important—there was no chip on the shoulder.
- GHA: It’s a democracy! Actually the general frame of mind in PLAC: there are kinds and kinds of poems. You cannot dictate poetic form.
- ARL: So you didn’t talk about poetics.
- GHA: No, we didn’t. We didn’t discuss it at all. We just assumed, c’mon, do your work.
- AAY: The only advocacy was providing a venue for poetry writing in English, both in terms of the publication venue and the reading circuit.
- ARL: But that’s your thing now, Jim. Poetics.
- GHA: I’m obsessed with it.
- ARL: And at that time, you were not?
- AAY: We wouldn’t have let him mount the pulpit in PLAC.
- GHA: I would have been shot. We would circulate the manuscripts, we were aware of craft, but we didn’t dictate.
- AAY: And there were different styles anyway. Freddie [Salanga] was epigrammatic, journalistic . . .
- GHA: Skeletal poetry.
- ARL: I could hardly understand him.
- GHA: He was difficult. Oh boy, what a loss.
- ARL: So what’s your prognosis?
- GHA: The writers will continue.
- ARL: But it was a different world then. There was no animosity. You certainly had your own corner.

Interviews

GHA: No ideology. No sir.

ARL: Some would say that writing in English is an ideology.

GHA: No sir, language is free, you forge it. Any language, you forge. Writing is forgery. You forge it.

Writer and editor **Angelo R. Lacuesta** has won numerous awards in the Philippines for his fiction, among them two National Book Awards, the Madrigal Gonzalez Best First Book Award, and several Palanca and Philippines Graphic Awards. He was literary editor of the *Philippines Free Press* and is currently editor-at-large at *Esquire Philippines*. He is also co-founder of Et Al Books, a publisher of Philippine contemporary literature. He may be sent an e-mail through this address: sargelacuesta@gmail.com.