# Flowers From Afar: *Mayflowers* (2021), "A las flores del Heidelberg" (1886), and Epiphytic Communities

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**Abstract**

This essay explores the agency of flowers in activating possibilities of a community, one that can be specifically described as epiphytic or dependent on botanic matters. In particular, the essay considers two seemingly unrelated works yoked together here on the grounds of their similar engagement with flowers: the virtual performance *Mayflowers*

(2021), inspired by the Filipino traditions of Flores de Mayo and Santacruzan, which presented Filipino women migrant workers from various parts of the world the chance to come together during the COVID-19 pandemic through working with artificial flowers; and the poem "A las flores del Heidelberg" (1886) by the Filipino polymath José Rizal, whose description of the phenomenon of flowers permitting one to seemingly return to their homeland resonates with the Thai poetic subgenre of *nirat* (นิราศ). By bringing these two works together, flowers are no longer seen as mere ornaments to human practices or inert figures in anthropocentric discourses, but rather as crucial agents actively participating in such encounters, and by extension, enabling the emergence of the collectives they entail. Ultimately, this unlikely comparison makes palpable how flowers help bring about moments of coming together with others—through and against the often-violent reality of distance in-between.

**Keywords**: flowers, epiphytic community, Philippine diaspora, Philippine contemporary art, José Rizal

## I

Consider the scene: a woman wearing a flower crown sits in a corner, surrounded by pots of live plants and paper flowers. Her name, as displayed on the screen, is Reyna Caridad (meaning, "Queen (of) Charity"), a character in the traditional Filipino pageant Santacruzan who embodies the theological virtue of love. But instead of the usual lavish red gown, this queen wears a modest brown floral dress, and in lieu of a red heart—the Sacred Heart—she holds a dummy infant wrapped in a blanket. Gently, she sways back and forth, singing a lullaby and patting the child as if to put it to sleep. And so, while the love that the queen

represents is commonly abstracted as pure, if not religious, the moment at hand renders it particularly, and secularly, maternal. Furthermore, given the overall context of the performance, such too is a love that hails from afar and reaches through distance: Zahra Chell, the woman playing the role of the queen, is a migrant worker in London, thousands of miles away from the Philippines; as such, her performance becomes an ode to her family back in her country, a means for her to be seemingly at home with them.

This moment appears halfway through *Mayflowers: Virtual Santa Cruzan and Flower Offering* (Kamustahan, "*Mayflowers*" 29:06-31:42), an event streamed via Facebook on May 30, 2021. Conceptualized and organized by the contemporary Filipino artist Nathalie Dagmang, Cielo Tilan (the co-founder of Filipino Domestic Workers Association (FDWA) in U.K.) and the Jesuit artist Jason Dy, it featured performances by Filipino women migrant workers from London, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. *Mayflowers* forms a part of the Kamustahan Arts Project, an online initiative dedicated to gathering Filipino artists, migrant workers, and activists from various parts of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the particular aim of harnessing art to form and strengthen connections among them and beyond. The event concluded a month-long series of online workshops given to Filipino women migrant workers which taught them how to make flowers from paper and other recycled materials, and how to arrange them and put them in installations. These flowers were then used by the participants to make costumes and sculptural works, the photos of which were shared every day on Facebook between May 17 and 29, as offerings for their loved ones back home.

The name *Mayflowers*, although commonly used in the temperate world to pertain to any plants that bloom during spring, is a translation of the Filipino *Flores de Mayo*, a Catholic festival held all over the Philippines during the entirety of the said month dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary ("About *Mayflowers*"). This pious celebration traditionally involves recitation of the rosary, singing of hymns, and offering of flowers to the holy figure.

Its practice has a long history, traceable back to as early as the 13th century in Europe (Tiatco 69), and is estimated to have arrived in the Philippines by the mid-19th century, when the country was well under Spanish colonial rule, after the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 (Panaligan 4). It further proliferated by the 1860s, with the publication of a religious booklet on the subject written by the Filipino priest Mariano Sevilla, first in Spanish and then in its Tagalog translation (Lopez 127n2). Although it is believed that the devotion was originally intended to be a domestic tradition (Lopez 101), it eventually became a communal one, extending beyond churches and onto the streets. This is especially because Flores de Mayo came to be conflated with another Catholic tradition, namely the Santacruzan, also held during the same month, particularly in its last days.

The Santacruzan is a ritual pageant that commemorates St. Helena of Constantinople and the young Constantine the Great's discovery of the wooden cross on which Jesus of Nazareth was crucified (Nakpil 78-81), hence its name, from the Spanish *santa cruz*, meaning "holy cross." The procession, accompanied by a crowd, a choir, or even a brass band, mainly features women, called *sagala*, from the Spanish *zagala* meaning "female shepherd," dressed in ornate gowns and bearing particular things, representing either biblical or historical characters, or virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary—the grandest among which are Reyna de las Flores, who holds a bouquet of flowers, usually roses, and personifies the devotion of Flores de Mayo itself; and Reyna Elena, escorted by a boy playing the young Constantine. Traditionally, each of the sagalas is attended by at least two young men holding up an arch decorated with flowers, which shows the name of their character. Lately, however, especially in more extravagant iterations of the pageant, the sagalas are made to ride on small floats built on trucks or motorcycle sidecars, relieving them from walking down the streets in the scorching May heat. Most recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Santacruzan was also adapted to the times by various communities through staging it online, in the form of

shared photos and videos (see for instance Regalado). Amid these new changes in the ritual, what remains the same is its being a colorful event, especially with the staple presence of flowers that make it a visual experience as much as it is—if not more than, to the worry of the Catholic church—a religious one.

Because of its signature vibrancy, the Santacruzan has also been among the Philippine festivities that Filipino communities outside the country often stage. More than a simple "cling[ing] to old customs and traditions" (Rosario 7) or reinforcement of Catholic faith (Tome 72), its practice has become an opportunity for them to strengthen their bonds, transmit cultural knowledge, insist on collective visibility in their resident country, and somehow experience being in the Philippines despite being without it. For instance, in Padua, Italy, the Santacruzan has become the Filipino migrants' claiming of their place in the larger Catholic community in the area, while also making themselves distinct from the local society (Saint-Blancat and Cancellieri). In Vancouver, Canada, as much as the pageant affords Filipinos a certain representation, it also challenges and negotiates with the avowed multiculturalism of the country, thus exposing and interrogating the latter's underlying white normativity (Farrales ch. 4). Meanwhile, in New York City, U.S.A., the Santacruzan offers queer Filipino migrants a way to articulate their experiences of displacement and discrimination, and more importantly, to fashion themselves in their own terms (Manalansan ch. 5). However, as also shown in a study of Santacruzan in Auckland, New Zealand, the community that emerges around and through its practice is not necessarily homogenous, but characterized as well by ironically constitutive divisions and tensions based on language, class, among other factors, that in turn shape alliances within the said community (Tondo ch. 6).

From this global tapestry of the Santacruzan, the significance of *Mayflowers* becomes more evident: it is an opportunity for various subjects, Filipinos and non-Filipinos alike, to

come together during the COVID-19 pandemic, on the grounds of their common concern for the struggle of Filipino women migrants from various parts of the world. However, it is crucial to also underscore that similar to the previous example from New Zealand, this particular encounter is ultimately founded on frictions, or "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across differences" (Tsing 4), especially with the diverse backgrounds of the involved subjects; in other words, the gathering that *Mayflowers* has inaugurated is certainly not completely homogenous too in terms of its participants' relation to the same event. Indeed, it is easy to imagine that, for example, the UK-based academic Deirdre McKay—Dagmang's co-leader in the Kamustahan Art Projects and a scholar of Filipino migrants—was engaged with the event in a way that differed from Dagmang herself, a Filipino artist and educator. This contrast becomes even more pronounced when considering Zahra Chell, the aforementioned Filipino migrant worker who played the role of Reyna Caridad. Yet, as with any instance of social mobilization, it was precisely through such differences—and the efforts to negotiate among them (Tsing x)—that *Mayflowers* came into being. It emerged as a collaborative endeavor that did not erase the diverse intentions and strategies of the various agents involved, but rather made space for them.

This is demonstrated, for instance, in how the Kamustahan Art Projects initiative came to respond to one of the urgent questions that arose as it took place. With the global pandemic forcing most interactions to shift to online spaces, visibility, as an inevitable consequence of using and being in such platforms, thus became a critical concern among the participating Filipino women migrants. This is because, as Dagmang put its, there exist for them "violent forms of visibility," including stern surveillance in Hong Kong and photographic perpetuation of stereotypes in London, which serve as a means for nation-states to police migrational fluxes (AAG 13:50-14:22; McKay and Dagmang 67). Therefore, what

is at stake for the community is not simply the "issue of not being visible, but also being able to control their own representation and their own image of what they think an OFW [overseas Filipino worker] should be represented as" (AAG 14:23-14:36). With this pressing concern, the initiative then had to cultivate an open space for the Filipino women migrants to talk about their working and living conditions during the pandemic; eventually, in *Mayflowers*, they were also given the choice of how they would like to present themselves on-screen and with which public they would like to particularly engage (AAG 15:13-16:11, 23:18-24:37; McKay and Dagmang 68). In this sense, the overall initiative materialized as "sharing spaces of creative action [among themselves] and with the wider public to build solidarity" (McKay and Dagmang 74), with the involved Filipino women migrants shaping its unfolding (see also Delgado 146).

Amid all this, flowers, both in their organic and artificial forms, play a critical role as nonhuman agents in the overall encounter—from blossoming during the month of May that somehow inspired the devotion of Flores de Mayo, from Europe all the way to the Philippines; to colourfully adorning the Santacruzan pageant, which then prompted its widespread practice not just in the Philippines but all over the world; and to providing contemporary Filipino women migrants the opportunity to connect with others so as to collectively endure and somehow work through the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, as the participating migrants themselves attest, flowers, specifically the ones they created, made things happen. For example, Zahra Chell shares that the flowers gave her employers another reason to admire her, and by extension her fellow Filipino women migrants', creativity (McKay and Dagmang 69); meawhile, Irine Berog, a migrant worker in Taiwan who played the role of the Samaritana, recognizes how the flowers gave her a chance to focus, helping her thus in handling her homesickness (AAG 27:43-28:05). And so, as much as *Mayflowers* is clearly a convergence of various human efforts (see for instance Delgado

142-146; McKay and Dagmang), it is also an assemblage of nonhuman agencies, among them those of flowers, that actively participate in making such an event happen; put simply, the project, as well as the aforementioned instances it subsequently caused, would not have taken place without these matters.

Underscoring the role that nonhuman matters play in all these is crucial in light of the present "challenge of the nonhuman" (Heise 297), which calls for a critical reevaluation of agency, among other concepts, beyond historically anthropocentric ideation, to recognize its other, specifically nonhuman, materializations. This urge is further driven by the fact that nonhumans, especially in recent decades, have been reshaping the world in ways humans can no longer ignore, despite and against the delusion that the latter have long conquered and separated themselves from the former (Ghosh 62). Therefore, the nonhuman turn, as it may be called, with its "diverse and baggy set of interrelated critical and theoretical methodologies… argue[s] (in one way or another) against human exceptionalism" (Grusin xi, x), if only to remind us of the ultimate entanglement of the human to the nonhuman. In the case of *Mayflowers*, this entails the insistent acknowledgment that its unfolding, including the opportunity for coming together it has evoked, hinges not merely on the agency of the human, but also that of nonhumans, particularly flowers. Doing so, in turn, might allow further possibilities of the network that these flowers activate, to expand it perhaps as a "kinship… spanning the globe" (Benitez 209), an "archipelago of solidarity" that could "connect dispersed… struggles" (De Leon et al 10) together, if only through these nonhuman matters.

**II**

Consider another scene: on February 1st 1886, toward the end of winter, the Filipino polymath José Rizal boarded the train from bustling Paris to quiet Heidelberg. It had been four years since he had left the Philippines to study in Europe, and already a doctor then, he

intended to specialize in ophthalmic surgery, in the hopes of averting his mother's then impending blindness. In the Universitäts Augenklinik, Rizal began to train under the supervision of Otto Becker, serving as an assistant to the renowned figure in the field. During this time, knowing that his family back home struggled with the steady decline in the price of sugar, Rizal was also compelled to save as much money as he could—to the extent that in the last days of winter, he no longer bothered having a fire in his lodgings. And so, when spring finally arrived, "so beautiful that one feels like singing" (Rizal, *Letters* 228), Rizal could only be elated, moving him thus to write what is now considered the first of his "poems of maturity"—"an enchanting evocation of two lands remote from each other and utterly different" (Coates 94):

**To the Flowers of Heidelberg**
Go to my country, go, foreign flowers
sown by the traveler by the path
and under the blue sky
that watches over my beloveds,
tell of the pilgrim
whose faith breathes for his motherland!
Go on and say: say that when dawn
opened your bud for the first time,
beside the icy Neckar,
you saw him silent by your side
thinking of her constant spring.
Say that when dawn
which steals your scent
susurrates to you playful songs of love,
he also murmured to you
songs of love in his native tongue.
That when the sun turns the peak
of the Koenigstuhl in the morning gold

and with its warm light
animates the valley, the forest and groves,
he greets that sun, still in its dawn,
that in his homeland glows at its peak!
And tell of that day
when he gathered you by the sidewalk,
among the ruins of the feudal castle,
by the banks of Neckar, or in the forest shade,
say what he has told you,
when, with great care,
between the pages of a used book
your supple petals he pressed.

Take it, take it, O, flowers!
my love to my beloveds,
peace to my country and its bountiful earth,
faith to its men, virtue to its women,
health to the sweet beings
that the loving, sacred home shelters…

When you touch the shore,
the kiss that I pressed upon you,
release it to the wings of the breeze,
so with it, it shall go,
and kiss all whom I adore, love, and revere.

But, O, when you arrive there, flowers,
perhaps you shall keep your colors;
but far from the homeland, its heroic soil,
to which your life you owe,
you will lose your scent;
for aroma is the soul which does not leave the sky

whose light it saw at its birth, nor does it forget.

(Rizal, "A las flores de Heidelberg," *Poesias* 55–54; my translation; cf. Joaquin 113, 115)[1]

Although first published on December 15, 1889, in *La Solidaridad*, the newspaper of the Filipino intelligentsia in Europe, José Rizal's poem *A las flores de Heidelberg*—often referred to simply as *A las flores*—was originally dated April 22, 1886. This was a formative period in Rizal's writing, when he was nearing the completion of his first novel, *Noli me tángere* (Guerrero, ch. 9). His engagement with the novel form influenced his evolving attitude toward poetry, which is evident in this particular piece. The poet-critic Virgilio Almario (Rizal 80–81), for instance, argues that *A las flores* marks a realist shift in Rizal's poetics, depicting what may have been an actual encounter and specific locales—unlike his earlier poems, which were filled with allusions to European art and literature drawn from his colonial education in the Philippines. This poetic turn also coincided with Rizal's intensifying nationalist consciousness, which deepened during his time abroad (Almario, *Rizal* 82–83). Yet, in existing readings of *A las flores*—most of which are notably brief (see Almario, *Taludtod* 245–46; *Rizal* ch. 6; Coates 94–95; Dizon xxiii–xxiv; Guerrero 125–26; Toledo)—the poem is often simply viewed as an expression of homesickness and patriotic longing, despite being described as "deserv[ing of] closest attention" ("merecen toda… atención"; Goujat 109).

In such interpretations, the titular flowers are primarily regarded in light of their figurative function. Almario, for one, underscores the flowers' being the object of the apostrophe, as this marks a turn in Rizal's writing: unlike his earlier poems which evoked the Muses, nymphs, or even the Blessed Virgin Mary (see for instance Rizal, *Poesias* 26-27, 33-34), his address to the flowers "caused a democratic possibility" ("nagdulot ng

demokratikong posibilidad"; my trans.; Almario, *Rizal* 80; my translation), levelling the hierarchy typical in this poetic gesture, thus subverting it. Moreover, Almario reads the lengthy description of the flowers and their surroundings in the first stanza as Rizal's way to create an appropriate setting for the persona's sentiments, "as if to convey what he feels as an emotion felt by anyone who relished the gift of native land" ("upang wari'y ikawil ang nararamdaman bilang isang damdaming nadaramá ng sinumang nagtamasa sa biyaya ng tinubuang lupa"; my trans.; 80). In other words, the flowers are simply apprehended as a passive metaphor for a traveler's sadness (Almario, *Taludtod* 245), with the latter human subject wielding "the capacity to reflect on and humanize [or anthropomorphize?] the flowers in their path" ("la capacidad de reflejar y hacer humanas las flores a su paso"; my trans.; Toledo; see also Almario, *Taludtod* 182).

In light of the present challenge of the nonhuman, to perhaps critically recover the agency of the titular flowers, it is then instructive to read "A las flores" through a poetic subgenre from another part of Southeast Asia: the Thai *nirat* (นิราศ), a traditional lyric poem composed over long journeys, usually through the forest and river, to ruminate on and address the persona's beloved from whom they were separated (Manas ch. 1; McBain 6-8, 52-56). This kind of poetry is also characterized by "harmonious co-existence" (Suchitra, "Harmony" 55) between the human and the nonhuman, so much so that the latter is regarded as an important influence on—and to some extent, an outright stimulus for—the former's sentiment. As the scholar E. H. S. Simmonds describes it, in *nirat*, "incidents on the way or natural phenomena are used to point the melancholy of separation" (186), allowing the human persona thus to seemingly return to the place and beloved they left behind. And as demonstrated by various examples, such a "usage" of nonhuman matters in *nirat* does not simply mean deploying them as inert correlatives to the human persona's preformed discourse; instead, it entails critically recognizing them as compelling "writing force[s]"

(Phrae 15) without whose vital presence the overall discourse may not have been articulated or even surfaced in the first place (McBain 10; Schweisguth 90).

For example, in *Kamsuan Siprat* (กำสรวลสมุทร, "Ocean lament"; see Baker and Pasuk 139-146), a *nirat* dating back to the Ayuttahaya period (1350-1767) and considered as one of the most important works in the development of the poetic subgenre (Manas 141), nonhuman matters, especially in botanic forms, appear to "trigger a memory or emotional reactions" (Baker and Pasuk 152) in the human persona. This phenomenon, in turn, causes the overall journey to virtually circle back to the beginning, with the persona being effectively sent to "travel backward in an interior journey" (Montri 210), returning him thus to the place he longs for, to be finally reunited with his beloved.

> I look out at gardens thronged with thousands of flowers,
> heavenly mangoes and golden jackfruit flowering in rows,
> soft scent of beautyleaf and *lamduan* wafting to me, my love,
> *maprang* like your sweet cheeks making my teeth tingle.
> (…)
> Hurting hard – both banks a bouquet of betel blossoms,
> Wafting like the tang of your hair.
> Maybe your hand is smoothing strong scent there,
> and the sandal-*krajae* speeds to rouse me here. (Baker and Pasuk 118-119)[2]

Similar instances can also be found throughout *Nirat Inao* (นิราศอิเหนา, "Inao's travel poem"), a Thai retelling of the Javanese tale of Prince Panji written by the national poet Sunthorn Phu (1786-1855) during the Rattanakosin period (1782-present) (McBain 297). In this poem, the titular character laments his separation from Lady Bussaba after she was mysteriously taken away by an angel from the cave where he brought and practically kept her captive. And so, as the prince travelled through the forest forlorn and brokenhearted, the

botanic matters he encountered along the way would also always bring him back before his lost beloved, and thus to a time and place prior to the journey being narrated in the poem.

> How he misses Bussaba, oh *Anicca*!
> I cannot fondle or caress in contentment – vanished from my sight is she!
> Sadder still, he turns to look around – what anguish!
> His puzzlement mounts and rises in the forest.
> Seeing Lady's Nails flowers, I think of your nails
> That once scratched sore my skin, made rashes on my arm.
> I see a Lady's Breasts tree in the midst of the forest, I admire it as if they were yours
> Akin, the same as seeing you there with elegance about to smile. (in McBain 326-327)[3]

Even in modern *nirat*, which often subvert the genre by shifting the traditional longing for a human beloved into a "selfless and spiritual love for a better world of the future" (Suchitra, "Love Poems" 20), this phenomenon of return can be observed, such as in the contemporary Thai poet Paiwarin Khao-Ngam's collection *Ma Kan Kluai* (ม้าก้านกล้วย, "Banana Tree Horse"; 1995). Commonly regarded as a landmark work in Thai literature for its focus on migrant experience within the country (Boccuzzi 8-9), the collection functions as a *nirat* lamenting the countryside of Isan, in northeastern Thailand, in light of the rapid urbanization of metropolitan Bangkok, which threatens the cultures of the region, and by extension of the entire country (Suchitra, "Love Poems" 17-18). Here, the poem "Jaosiao Baitong" (เจ้าสาวใบตอง, "Banana Leaf Maiden"), in particular, relates an encounter with the titular frond that consequently brings the persona back to his youth and homeland.

> My banana leaf maiden from plantation,
> Used to wrap white rice for provision;
> On each field trip or a journey away,
> You'd provide rice parcels to last my day.

You offered me rice, when hunger loomed;
Its aroma heartened e'en the mid-day sun;
Each mouthful was fragrantly perfumed
With a light, lasting scent, yet heady one.

1 had loved you, my banana frond fair,
I once guarded you with a jealous zeal;
Then we parted, with an indifferent air
That no winds of change could conceal. (Paiwarin 59)

From these examples, it becomes evident why the *nirat* may be instructive in reading Rizal's "A las flores" beyond anthropocentric patriotism: the latter poem, despite being erroneously classified as an example of Spanish *silva* (see Rizal, *Poesias* 113; Almario, *Rizal* 77), also exhibits the essential characteristics of the former poetic subgenre, namely the seemingly instantaneous return to one's distant homeland in the midst of travelling, upon encountering certain nonhuman matters, especially botanic ones.[4] Indeed, while traditional approaches to Rizal's poem may simply dismiss this comparison as rather unwieldly, if not outright unreasonable, this conclusion is only relevant if one insists on an anthropocentric view of literature. After all, as the scholar Michael Karlsson Pederson (52) puts it, while "not all literary genres have the same interest in the nonhuman," it is nevertheless possible to imagine one that is particularly "oriented toward the nonhuman"—that is, a genre in which Thai *nirat* and Rizal's poem, among others, can perhaps be classfied together, on the grounds of their common critical attention to the agency of the nonhuman.

And so, reading "A las flores" through the *nirat*, contrary to how the former has been previously interpreted, the flowers emerge to be more than mere objects of the human persona's address or metaphor for their longing for home. Instead, they can be recognized, as

much as they demand to be recognized, as active agents that crucially partake in the encounter, whose overall materiality—color, fragrance, multiplicity, and perhaps diversity[5]—seemingly transports the persona back to their homeland, particularly through rousing them into a rumination about the said place and its people. Moreover, following the common conjecture that the poem is based on Rizal's personal experiences in Heidelberg (see Almario, *Rizal* 77; Coates 94; Guerrero 126), this agency of flowers can be intuited to have extended even to the poet himself, demonstrated especially by how it compelled him to write "A las flores" in the first place. In other words, the poem can be said to not simply feature the titular flowers, as if they were inert vehicles to an anthropocentric discourse; but rather, the poem, in and of itself, is also a consequence of these flowers coming together into an encounter with the human-poet and other nonhuman matters comprising a specific moment (see Benitez 214).

This can be argued as well, given that in many other instances Rizal expressed his love and longing for his homeland. For example, in his poem "Un recuerdo a mi pueblo (Kalamba — La Laguna)" (A memory of my town (Calamba, Laguna)), written when he was 15 years old and studying at Ateneo Municipal de Manila (Toledo), the persona relates that "When they breathe in the flowers'/ Pleasant intoxicating aroma" (Cuando aspiran de las flores/ Grata esencia embriagadora), they remember "a simple town/ Their happiness, joy, and cradle/ Beside the fresh lake" (…un pueblo sencillo,/ [Su] contento, dicha y cuna/ Junto a la fresca laguna; my trans.; Rizal, *Poesias* 4). Meanwhile, during Rizal's time in Europe, flowers would be often mentioned in his letters, such as the one he sent to his family on February 7, 1886 from Heidelberg: here, he describes how the withering flowers he once found on a German table reminded him of back home, "where it costs nothing to have flowers fresh" (que no cuesta nada tener las [flores] frescas; my trans.; Rizal, *Cartas familia* 219). And even right before his death, these botanic matters remained crucial in Rizal's imaginary

of his homeland: in the originally untitled poem he wrote before he was executed on December 30, 1896, often referred to as "Mi último adiós" (My last farewell), the persona envisions the possibility that "over his grave one might see sprouting, one day,/ Among the wild grass a simple, humble flower" (…sobre [su] sepulcro [se podría ver] brotar, un dia,/ Entre la esposa yerba sencilla humilde flor; my trans.; Rizal, *Poesias* 69).

This moment appears halfway through *Mayflowers: Virtual Santa Cruzan and Flower Offering* (Kamustahan, "Mayflowers" 29:06-31:42), an event streamed via Facebook on May 30, 2021. Conceptualized and organized by the contemporary Filipino artist Nathalie Dagmang, Cielo Tilan (the co-founder of Filipino Domestic Workers Association (FDWA) in U.K.) and the Jesuit artist Jason Dy, it featured performances by Filipino women migrant workers from London, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. *Mayflowers* forms a part of the Kamustahan Arts Project, an online initiative dedicated to gathering Filipino artists, migrant workers, and activists from various parts of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the particular aim of harnessing art to form and strengthen connections among them and beyond. The event concluded a month-long series of online workshops given to Filipino women migrant workers which taught them how to make flowers from paper and other recycled materials, and how to arrange them and put them in installations. These flowers were then used by the participants to make costumes and sculptural works, the photos of which were shared every day on Facebook between May 17 and 29, as offerings for their loved ones back home.

This capacity of flowers to virtually summon one's homeland extends well beyond Rizal's discourse, with the Philippines, just like many other contexts, being often evoked through these botanic matters, such as the sampaguita (*Jasminum sambac*) (see Gutierrez ch. 3). This tendency can perhaps be attributed to the chromatic materiality of flowers, which commonly rouses the notion of goodness, as attested by how it has been regarded in various cultures all over the world (Barthes 86-87; Goody)—that same virtue that, in turn, has also

been often ascribed to the concept of nation, as one of its supposedly inherent qualities (see Anderson, *Spectre* ch. 7). With flowers and the nation being related this way, the latter, as a community crucially mediated by technological nonhuman matters such as print-media, clocks, and calendars, emerges thus to be "structurally dependent" (Walker 55) too on these botanic matters in order to activate and faciliate the necessary inventive practices that create and sustain it. And so, aside from being an "imagined political community" (Anderson, *Imagined* 6), the nation can then be seen as *epiphytic* too, as it unfolds through these botanical subjects; and that the modern world, being comprised of such communities, despite its typical figuration as a "gridwork of electronic capital" (Spivak 72), is indeed a world too of plants, of flowers.

**III**

While contemporary Filipino women migrant workers and the Filipino polymath Rizal, with their respective milieus and circumstances, have certainly experienced being away from their homelands differently, the strategic juxtaposition of their engagements with flowers is nevertheless instructive in the attempt to think through the agency of the nonhuman. For although *Mayflowers* and "A las flores" can be simply approached in light of their own traditions and inspirations, as demonstrated in the two previous sections, their being yoked together, gathered as if flowers in a bouquet, particularly permits the recognition of how such botanic subjects are not mere ornaments to human practices or inert figures for anthropocentric discourses, but rather crucial agents actively partaking in these very encounters. In other words, this comparison, no matter how unlikely, renders palpable how flowers critically contribute to making possible instances of coming together with others, through and against the often-violent reality of distance in-between.

And yet, in juxtaposing these two works, a friction, or that crucial difference, comes

to the fore, refusing to be overlooked: that the flowers in *Mayflowers*, unlike the ones that the persona—and supposedly, by extension, Rizal himself—came across in "A las flores," are not organic, but instead were made by Filipino women migrant workers themselves from colored papers and other recycled materials they gathered, folded, cut, and pasted during the project. Given the artificiality of such flowers, there might be the temptation then to ultimately attribute *Mayflowers* solely to human agency, as it is often the case in gestures of critique (Bennett xiv). And so, in light of the present challenge of the nonhuman, it is only crucial to acknowledge and emphasize again how various nonhumans do partake even in this instance of seemingly exclusively human creation, by way of their sheer materiality: from the papers and found objects like branches and dried leaves that stimulated the participants' imagination and allowed them to actualize their artistic visions; to the communicative technology that facilitated their conversations in the midst of the global lockdown; and even to the COVID-19 virus itself, whose catastrophic spread all over the world compelled the conception of the project—these, and many other nonhuman subjects, were all agents that actively participated in making the said performance happen in the first place.

Following this idea further, it can be asserted that even organic flowers participated in the same instance of creating, particularly by being inspirations for the historical emergence of Flores de Mayo and Santacruzan—two festivities that, in turn, eventually gave way to the inception and unfolding of *Mayflowers*. By drawing such a connection between organic flowers and this performance despite the former's seeming complete absence in the latter, it then becomes possible to intuit as well the relation between organic and artificial flowers in a different manner: the latter, more than being mere attempts to "imitate natural blossoms" ("Flowers, artificial" 394), ones that are commonly "derided as cheap and [even] disgusting" (Hardie 180), can be recognized thus as extensions of the former, as materialized iterations too of their "plasticity and restlessness…. ceaseless[ly] striving toward the other and

becoming-other in growth and reproduction" (Marder 162). In other words, just like the flowers they also propagate through pollination, these artificial flowers are as much an effect of the materiality—such as the alluring colors, shapes, and even smell—of organic flowers.

However, unlike the latter, with their purported naturalness that typically "goes without saying" (Barthes 86), artificial flowers can especially intimate how the phenomenon of blossoming is far from natural, as if simply spontaneously occuring; but instead a consequence of various matters, both human and nonhuman, strategically coming together and working toward its happening. Indeed, as Rizal himself puts it in his novel *Noli me tángere* (1887), "a lot of will and a lot of gold are needed just to sprout a leaf and open the calyx of a flower" ("[se necesita] mucho voluntad y mucho oro [solo] para que brote una hoja y abra su cáliz una flor"; my trans.; Rizal, *Noli* 63; see also his *Cartas familia* 219)—a reality that is often overshadowed by the fact of the same flourishing. And while this revelation may not be always realized with any artificial flowers, as they have long "bloom[ed] readily" (Hardie 177), and thus sharing with organic flowers the tendency to "go without saying," *Mayflowers*, as a particular encounter, imbues these botanic matters with this critical potency: with the specific attention of the said performance to the procedure itself of folding, cutting, and putting together paper flowers, the latter's materialization of the commonly, and most of the time deliberately, overlooked labor and resources required in making flowers bloom is thus ultimately foregrounded.

Moreover, in the context of *Mayflowers*, these labor and resources are especially related to the Philippine diaspora, particularly Filipino women migrant workers. In entangling the artificial flowers with this specific demographic, the overall encounter emerges thus to be a critical recognition and materialization of the latter's often neglected work, and by extension the dehumanization it entails (Tadiar 9-11). In this sense, more than the traditions of Flores de Mayo and Santacruzan themselves, what is being staged in *Mayflowers* is the

typically unseen, if not intentionally disregarded, labor of these migrant women; more than being an adaptation of such Catholic practices outside the Philippines during the pandemic, the performance is also a cosmopolitan attempt to articulate the violent reality of being a migrant worker that the participants themselves have to daily contend with and live through, in order to remotely sustain the home they long for.[6] And so here, aside from being triggers for memories and sentiments regarding their homelands and distant beloveds, as in the case of Rizal's poem and Thai *nirat*, artificial flowers crucially become embodiments too of the migrant women's experiences, their very lives indeed.

Or perhaps, more precisely, these flowers materialize their very *remaindered* lives, or parts of their lives which are "neither simply oppressed nor exploited, neither disposable nor wasted [and instead] bearing possibilities for the radical remaking of… social relations" (Tadiar 69). For as much as these artificial flowers do represent the difficult circumstances of Filipino women migrant workers, they also open to opportunities for further encounters not only among the participants themselves or their loved ones back home but even with the general public, which in turn may lead to other forms of alliances. Indeed, it was crucial for *Mayflowers* to be an online performance, not only for it to work with the scatteredness of the involved migrants across the world and to respond to the global lockdowns at the time; but also to rouse such potential coalitions into existence, through trying to reach for other contexts via online platforms. This attempt at making alliances is also demonstrated in how the project has encouraged others to make their own artificial flowers, by providing resources on how to do so on its website and Facebook page (see "Basic flower-making"; Kamustahan, "Paano gumawa"); as well as setting-up an installation for flower-making when *Mayflowers* was shown in an exhibition in Manila in 2022. And so, more than virtually returning one to their homeland, flowers appear to also provoke the drawing of new relations, communities, and even what could imaginably be, in time, homes.

The agency of flowers compels the reconsideration of how collectivities might emerge: that instead of simply basing them on presumptions of unitary human cultures (Spivak 27), they can be envisioned to unfold from and through entanglements with nonhuman matters like flowers. Here, it is crucial to note that unlike the scholar Benedict Anderson's conception of imagined community where nonhumans such as the print-media are merely utilized by humans in service of their cultivation and sustaining of ethnocultural collectives (see Anderson, *Imagined* ch. 3), what is proposed here is the possibility of these nonhumans activating the very phenomenon of coming together, even—or perhaps, especially—among those that do not share prior affinities under the category of nation. In the case of *Mayflowers*, this is demonstrated by the fact that aside from the participating Filipino women migrants and organizing artists, other subjects from various backgrounds were also involved in the making of the project, including the former's employers who supported the performance one way or another (see for instance McKay and Dagmang 69). And so, what these nonhumans ultimately open is the possibility of an "archipelago of solidarity," or the "connect[ion of] disparate political-economic struggles… kept separate by oppressive forces of colonialism, nationalism, and capitalism" (De Leon et al 10): that through following these matters, another community, however provisional, might come to surface, revealing itself to be bound together by comparable plights that are yet to be, and demand to be, understood in light of each other.

To demonstrate the possibilities of the proposed epipythic community at a preliminary level, it is worth considering here as a final turn a seemingly distant and disparate context, if only to yoke it together with the aforementioned community of Filipino women migrant workers: in different parts of Thailand, from the capital Bangkok to the rural central and northeastern regions, various communities make up the country's artifical flower industry. Its foray into the global market began in 1973, when the government started supporting the

export of the product, until its eventual peak between 1983 and 1989 (HomeNet Thailand 56; Crossette). Three kinds of artificial flowers are typically produced depending on the primary material used, namely, plastic, fabric, and paper; each of these has their own benefits and drawbacks in terms of durability and resources needed in making them (HomeNet Thailand 59-62). These flowers are predominantly made by subcontracted laborers gathered in households in rural areas or factories in urban areas (66). Most of these workers are women, and particularly in Central Thailand, they intially entered the trade to supplement their earnings from their primary livelihoods or simply make use of excess materials collected from farming (Khridsadakhon et al 1-2); however, the booming of the national artificial flower industry persuaded them to pursue the work full-time, causing thus a notable decline in workforce in the agriculture industry (Tomosugi 79, 97-98).

On the ground, the artificial flower industry in Central Thailand unfolds in a way reminiscent of the virtual gatherings that took place around *Mayflowers*:

> The making of artificial flowers in the shade of one's house can be seen everywhere in the village. This job has spread to neighboring villages as well. The flower making has become a newly developed cottage industry in the process of the bringing the market economy to the village (Tomosugi 79).

Consider then the scene: that of villagers making artificial flowers, perhaps at the same time of the day, though not necessarily together in one place. Collectively, they are all bound by the same "simple, but monotonous, repetitive work" (86) that nonetheless allows them to stay in their hometowns and be with their folks, instead of having to move elsewhere, as was the case for many Thai people from the countryside who were compelled to migrate to the city in hopes for a better life (Tomosugi 102-104; Boccuzzi 9-15). And yet, the trade does not guarantee that their needs will be satisfied, considering how artificial flower companies in the urban centers set the standard for wages, even for those from rural areas, without taking

into account economic inflation (Tomosugi 80; HomeNet Thailand 70), for instance; or how health-related conditions, especially in urban workplaces, are often left unaddressed (76). It becomes apparent that ultimately, "most flower-makers continue their work, however strenuous, since they have no alternative livelihood" (Tomosugi 88).

Bringing these Thai country flower-makers together with the Filipino migrant workers folding paper flowers in *Mayflowers*, another source of friction comes to the fore: that the former do not share the latter's experience of being away from their homeland. And yet, by attending to their comparable entanglements with artificial flowers, it becomes imaginable nevertheless that they can come into an epiphytic community across their seemingly disparate contexts, to allow instead their common plights as women laborers to be a viable ground for coalition. In turn, it can be intuited that the kinship activated by flowers can only further unfurl from here, to perhaps span across the globe, and to reach, for instance, even the organic cut flower industries in Ecuador and Kenya, among others, where female works suffer similar circumstances (Pintado and Ferm 2; see for instance Hale and Opondo; Korovkin). Somewhere in Colombia, for example, a single mother and flower-cutter laments how "there are no other job options here, but it's not fair employment that these companies offer. With the profits they make, they could provide us with much better working and economic conditions, with a dignified wage and a fair job" (qtd. in Balch). Such might have also been a Filipino migrant woman's reason why she has to leave home and be elsewhere, just to make the same home.

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**Notes**

1. “A las flores de Heidelberg” by José Rizal

   ¡Id á mi Patria, id extranjeras flores
   sembradas del viajero en el camino,
   y bajo su azul cielo,
   que guarda mis amores,
   contad del peregrino
   la fe que alienta por su patrio suelo!
   Id y decíd: decíd que cuando el alba
   vuestro cáliz abrió por vez primera,
   cabe el Neckar helado,
   le vísteis silencioso á vuestro lado
   pensando en su constante primavera.
   Decíd que cuando el alba,
   que roba vuestro aroma,
   cantos de amor jugando os susurraba,
   él también murmuraba
   cantos de amor en su natal idioma...
   Que cuando el sol la cumbre
   del Koënigsthul en la mañana dora,
   y con su tibia lumbre
   anima el valle, el bosque y la espesura,
   ¡Saluda ese sol, aún en su aurora,
   al que en su patria en el zenith fulgura.
   Y contad aquel día,
   cuando os cogía al borde del sendero,

entre las ruinas del feudal Castillo,
orilla al Neckar ó en la selva umbría,
contad lo que os decía,
cuando, con gran cuidado,
entre las páginas de un libro usado
vuestras flexibles hojas orpimía.

Llevad, llevad, ¡oh flores!
amor á mis amores
paz á mi país y á su fecunda tierra,
fa á sus hombres, virtud á sus mujeres,
salud á dulces séres
que el paternal, sagrado hogar encierra...

Cuando toquéis la playa,
el beso que os imprimo
depositadlo en alas de la brisa,
porque con ella vaya,
y bese cuanto adoro, amo y estimo.

Mas ¡ay! Llegaréis, flores,
conservaréis, quizás vuestros colores;
pero lejos del patrio, heroíco suelo,
á quien debéis la vida
perderéis los olores;
que aroma es alma, y no abandona el cielo
cuya luz viera en su nacer, ni olvida.

2. "Beautyleaf" pertains to the tree *Calophyllum inophyllum*, "lamduan" *Melodorum fruticosum*, and "maprang" *Bouea macrophylla/burmanica* (Baker and Pasuk 118n59). Meanwhile, "krajae" pertains to aromatic water made from the steeped bark of a tree (*Hesperethusa crenulate*); the appendage of "sandal" means the inclusion of extracts of this tree to the water (159).
3. "Anicca," which is a word for "impermanence," also means "alas" (McBain 326n282).

Meanwhile, the species of the plants alluded here, namely "Lady's Nails flower" and "Lady's Breasts tree," are not noted in McBain's translation; for the latter, he simply describes it as an "herb [used] for increasing the size and milk-yield of women's breasts" (327n283), which could be the horseradish tree (*Moringa oleifera*), being the most well-known plant for this function. As for "Lady's Nails flower," it could possibly pertain to balsam (*Impatiens balsamina*), native to India and Myanmar, whose flowers can be used to make red nail dye.

4. The Spanish silva is characterized by hendeca- and heptasyllabic meters and patternless rhyme; Rizal's "A las flores," however, does not meet the former criteria. However, in reading the poem through the *nirat*, the latter allso recovers the long-forgotten association of the silva to the nonhuman. The name *silva*, derived from the Greek *hyla* (ὕλη) meaning "material" or "matter," was used to pertain to woodland or forest, imagined to be wild or orderless (Kallendorf and Kallendorf 145). Being so, it was also used to signify a miscellany of literature, as general as being a poem that was "written in the woods, and in secret" ("in siluis scripserit, & in secreto nemore"; my trans.; qtd. in Rivers 255). By early 17th century, the name was adapted by the Spanish poets to refer to a kind of poetry with the aforementioned particular formal characteristics (Kallendorf and Kallendorf 146).

5. There is an unspoken assumption that the flowers mentioned in Rizal's poem were only of one kind, commonly believed to be forget-me-nots (*Myosotis*) (see Zaide and Zaide 80). However, it is possible—likely even, considering it was the early days of spring—that the said flowers were, in fact, diverse. Such a proposition might then explain why Rizal, despite his expertise on botany, chose to deploy the generic term "flores" rather than a particular name of a flower in his poem.

6. *Mayflowers* features the characters Reyna Bangan (Queen Bangan), a deity in Ifugao mythology; and Prinsesa di Kabenguetan (Princess of Benguet), a made-up persona embodying the said province (see Kamustahan, "Mayflowers" 39:02-41:12, 41:22-43:45)—both of which do not exist in the traditional Santacruzan, given their non-Catholic roots. In an email, Dagmang relates that the project, in the first place, "focused more on making flowers and the Santacruzan as a communal activities of migrants, and not just a Catholic tradition" (mas nag-focus… sa paggawa ng bulaklak at sa [S]antacruzan bilang isang communal na activity ng mga migrante, at hindi lamang ritwal na [K]atoliko).

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