

# UC Davis

## Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies

### Title

An Interview with Marianne Chan: All Heathens

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2g35x50p>

### Journal

Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies, 3(1)

### Authors

Tiongson, Jr., Antonio T  
Chan, Marianne

### Publication Date

2023

### DOI

10.5070/LN43161820

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2023 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed



## An Interview with Marianne Chan

***All Heathens*, by Marianne Chan. Louisville, Kentucky: Sarabande Books, 2020. 96 pp. \$15.95 paper. ISBN: 978-1946448521.**

*First and foremost, congratulations on the publication of All Heathens as well as the overwhelmingly positive critical response! What do you make of the reception of your book and how do you go about processing it? What would you like readers to get out of All Heathens? How would you like readers to engage with All Heathens?*

Thank you so much for your congratulations! I've been surprised and absolutely delighted by the way *All Heathens* has been received by readers and critics. While writing this book, I didn't think too much about readership; I wrote these poems—selfishly—as a way to unpack and better understand my history, both personal and cultural. However, as the book made its way to publication, I began to think more about how readers might respond. I hoped that this book would reach people in the Philippine diaspora, who might read these poems and find that they have some things in common with my speaker. For non-Filipino readers, I hoped the poems would serve as an opening of sorts. While my book offers some information about the history of the Spanish colonization of the Philippines and the narrative of Magellan's voyage around the world, it is not a complete history by any means. I hoped that readers of these poems would become interested in Filipino history, or might, perhaps, feel encouraged to explore their own personal or ancestral histories. I also hoped that my

poems would show how histories of colonization continue to impact colonized groups in the present.

*As a collection of poems, All Heathens constitutes a critical engagement with history, specifically histories of imperialism as inextricably linked with the history of Filipinos. Why did you feel compelled to directly address Antonio Pigafetta's account of "history" and specifically, the notion of Ferdinand Magellan as the first individual to circumnavigate the globe? What would you say are the challenges and risks of engaging with Antonio Pigafetta's text as a source material and how did you deal with them? Is there a poem or two in your collection that speaks to this kind of engagement with history?*

I grew up learning about the story of Magellan in the Philippines. My parents loved Yoyoy Villame, a Bisaya comedic singer, who had a song called "Magellan," which details the history of Magellan in the Philippines. When my older brother was around four or five, he learned and memorized the song, and my mother, who was such a fan of our performances, regularly asked him to sing in front of friends. However, learning about that history from a three-minute comedic song left me with lots of questions: How could Magellan "discover" the Philippines if people were already there? Who is the hero in this story—Magellan or Lapu-Lapu? What does it mean that Rajah Humabon was happy to meet Magellan? The history puzzled me through adulthood, and eventually, I read Antonio Pigafetta's narrative account of Magellan's voyage. While reading that text, I wrote poems that allowed me to process that narrative and try to understand that history better; I also listened to lectures and read other texts about Magellan. I was frustrated with the fact that published writing about pre-colonial Filipinos was often from the perspective of Western explorers, colonizers, and anthropologists. I wanted to write poems in which the Filipina speaker centers her own experience, taking control of her personal narrative and attempting to reverse the uneven power dynamic. An example of this is in "Love Song for Antonio Pigafetta," in which the speaker becomes the chronicler of her family's travels and writes about Vicenza, Italy, Pigafetta's ancestral home.

*How does poetry complicate the way we think about and understand history? How is poetry a powerful vehicle for telling stories? What is distinct and compelling about it as a genre that provides a unique vantage point to understand and (re)narrate history?*

I think poetry is a vital genre for examining history because of the way poems often engage with the materiality of language. Unlike fiction, which is driven by plot and linearity, poems are arrangements of language, and their various systems of organization create layers of meaning. As you'll see in contemporary publications of documentary poetry, such as Robin Coste Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems* and Mai Der Vang's *Yellow Rain*, the genre of poetry gives space for the engagement, examination, and rearrangement of archival language, which I think sheds new light on history. I tried to do this a bit in *All Heathens*; I wanted to engage with the language used in Antonio Pigafetta's text, particularly in "Some Words of the Aforesaid Heathen Peoples," which is a poem that thinks about the Cebuano words Pigafetta chooses to translate in his chronicles.

*I'm struck by the phrase "materiality of language." Is it possible to elaborate on your use of the phrase? What, exactly, do you mean by that phrase particularly in relation to poetry?*

Absolutely. I'm very interested in the ways in which poets take language from older texts, sometimes nonliterary texts, to reveal something new. When I say "materiality of language," I'm thinking about poets who use the words from other source material as a palette of sorts that can be examined in a different light or manipulated. For example, in the title poem of Robin Coste Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems*, Coste Lewis creates a poem out of the language from descriptions or titles of works of Western art that depict the bodies of Black women. This cataloging of language becomes a meditation on how the Black body is perceived by Western arts institutions and how these institutions try to claim ownership over the Black

female form. In *Look*, Solmaz Sharif writes poems using the language from the Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms to reveal how the government sterilizes the language of war. Writing and reading poetry involves slowing down and observing how language is arranged, which makes it an important artistic genre for examining language of all kinds.

*What would you say is the relationship between poetry and affect, or the potential of poetry to tease emotions out of the reader? In what ways does your work evoke emotions in you and among readers? Is there a poem or two in *All Heathens* that best exemplifies this relationship?*

I think many of the poems in *All Heathens* do elicit emotional responses from readers because much of the book is driven by loss, not only the loss of loved ones, but the various losses that accompany living in the diaspora—loss of language, culture, religion, and relationships with family members. I think the robust history of the elegy demonstrates how poetry is such an important genre for grappling with grief. Some of the more elegiac poems in the book include: “My Mother Tells Me About Lolo” and “Viewing Service.”

In addition, I hoped that the book maintained a balance of brighter and darker poems. I wanted the book to show the resilience (and joy!) of my Filipino community in Michigan, especially in the poem “Lansing Sinulog Rehearsal, 2010.”

*Michigan is not the first place that comes to mind when you think of places in the Filipino diaspora. Why do you feel compelled to amplify the experiences of Filipinos in a place like Michigan? How does it illuminate the complexities and contingencies of the Philippine diaspora?*

Great question. People don’t think of the Midwest as a region where Filipinos live, but here we are! This might sound silly, but it wasn’t until I was in my early twenties, living in Las Vegas, that I realized how small my Filipino American community in Michigan truly was. I was so naïve. I didn’t know that Filipinos on the coasts experienced their

Filipino-ness differently, that there are varying degrees of feelings of minority-ness and alienation. I went to high school in a mostly white suburban town, and I think I have a very particular and complicated relationship to my Asian identity that many of my Asian students who grew up in Las Vegas didn't have. Also, I think Filipinos immigrate to Michigan for reasons that are different from Filipinos living in the larger cities of Nevada, California, or New York. Friends in my community mostly moved to the States through marriage or through work in the STEM field, and there were very few Filipinos who'd been in Michigan for more than two generations. In my own work, I believe it's important to share the particularities of my diasporic experience. The Filipino identity in the U.S. is not monolithic, and regions can change the shape of our identities and communities.

*Why pursue a PhD in English & Creative Writing at the University of Cincinnati? What do you hope to get out of a PhD in English and Creative Writing? What does the future hold for you in terms of current and potential projects?*

I love poetry, and I'm so glad that I was able to pursue a PhD to spend more time learning about it. When I applied to grad school, I hoped that time in a PhD program would give me the space to read and write and learn, and it certainly has done that. I'm currently in my dissertation year, and I'm working on a collection of prose poems about a strange, fictionalized version of my hometown in Michigan.

Thank you so much for these wonderful questions, Tony!

*Antonio T. Tiongson, Jr.*