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Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz,
Filipino Women Writers in English

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Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz, **Filipino Women Writers in English, Their Story: 1905–2002**. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003. xii + 258 pages.

Edna Zapanta Manlapaz's *Filipino Women Writers in English* is really two books. First, it is an encyclopedic collection of biographical and critical data on major and minor Filipino women writers of fiction and poetry in English. An extremely thorough researcher, Manlapaz has assembled a valuable and sometimes fascinating collection of data on the lives, writings, and struggles of these women whose works cover nearly 100 years of writing in English.

The second and perhaps more interesting book is an extended critical essay on these women and their writings. It starts with a consideration of why they wrote in English and goes on to explore the intersection of language, class, gender, and even history. The group that Manlapaz calls the "literary matriarchs" (Paz Marquez Benitez, Loreto Paras, Paz Latorena, and Angela Manalang Gloria) reached university age fairly early in the American period, which meant, first, that universities were considerably more open to women, and, second, that the medium of instruction employed in them was English. Most of the early women writers were indeed, as Manlapaz observes, from privileged backgrounds. A number studied in the University of the Philippines, finishing bachelor's degrees and sometimes going on to do graduate work abroad. Working in an atmosphere of new freedom for women and having perhaps a greater facility for language than some of their male classmates, they reached levels of excellence probably unimagined fifty years earlier.

Yet language was still a—perhaps *the*—major issue. The book starts with a Prologue featuring Trinidad Tarrosa-Subido's poem "Muted Cry" (pp. 1–2):

They took away the language of my blood,
 Giving me one "more widely understood,"

 Ah, could I speak the language of my blood,
 I, too, would free the poetry in me,

 These words I speak are out of pitch with ME!
 That other voice? . . . Cease longing to be free!

Forever shalt thou cry, a muted god:
 "Could I but speak the language of my blood!"

The epilogue, perfectly rounding off the language theme, is Luisa A. Igloria's "The Secret Language" (pp. 212-13):

I have learned your speech,
 fair stranger; for you

 I have covered
 My breasts and hidden,
 Among the folds of my surrendered
 Inheritance, the beads
 I have worn since girlhood.

 In the night,
 When I am alone at last,
 I lie uncorseted
 Upon the iron bed,
 Composing my lost beads
 Over my chest, dreaming back
 Each flecked and opalescent
 Color, crooning their names,
 Along with mine:
 Binaay, Binaay.

The class issue is raised as a critical, rather than a biographical, issue late in the book with a consideration of the limitations of women's fiction, christened apparently by Kerima Polotan as "village fiction" (i.e., limited in scope to the interests of the women living in the exclusive villages of Makati and Manila). Such a limitation was likely to be considered fatal during the very political years of the 1970s and 1980s when a "sense of the nation" was imperative. "Are Filipino women writers in English, belonging as they do to the middle class intellectual elite, perpetually doomed to write effectively only of their own privileged class?" asks Manlapaz and declares: "The answer is a firm no" (p. 209).

She then goes on to name Estrella Alfon and Lina Espina-Moore as prime examples of women who have written beyond their own backgrounds. She also gives credit to Ninotchka Rosca and Marianne

Villanueva for the same virtue. She does, however, suggest that in dealing with a theme that aims at “encompassing a nation” women writers, like men, must work on the larger canvas of the novel. She then gives very brief consideration to novels by Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, Tess Uriza Holthe, Rosca, Jessica Hagedorn, Azucena Grajo Uianza, Arlene Chai, and Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo.

The second book, the critical essay, is the more interesting of the two “books,” although of course this essay is firmly based on all the background research that makes up the longer, encyclopedic book. But chapter 2, the heart of the biographical “story,” runs from page 11 to page 208 and is a bit difficult to read straight through. It is probably meant, though, to be used more as a reference.

The critical essay gives rather startling prominence to Filipino-American writers; they are considered immediately after the general profile of writers in English. Distinctions of name and whether Carlos Bulosan and Jose Garcia Villa were Filipino-American writers or merely expats hardly seem worth the effort, but when we look at the names of Filipinas writing abroad we see immediately that this is indeed an important group: Brainard, Eileen Tabios, Lara Stapleton, Gina Apostol, Nadine Sarreal, Reine Melvin, Norma Mirafior, Chai, Linda Ty-Casper, Rosca, Villanueva, and Fatima Lim-Wilson.

Perhaps the importance of these writers is not really surprising for, first of all, they are all but forced to write in English if they wish to be understood in their own universities or areas. Then the displacement issue comes up, naturally, even more strongly than it does among writers in English at home—who, nevertheless, do experience this problem. (Ah, the blessings of colonialism!) And then, of course, the simple fact is that these writers are very good and are widely read in the Philippines.

Manlapaz starts her book with a few caveats on her scope and limitations, one being that she has tried to present critical reception and evaluation of the writers covered while keeping her own evaluations merely implicit, except for the writers she has studied closely, and here she has made her evaluation explicit. Those familiar with her earlier work know that these closely studied writers include the “literary matriarchs,” as well as Estrella Alfon and Trinidad Tarrosa-Subido. It is also evident that the book draws on years of her experience as the director of the Ateneo Library of Women’s Writings and many personal

acquaintances formed during those years. It seems, then, a particularly fitting finale to a very rich academic career.

Manlapaz, however, still remains unstoppable.

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Allan Popa, **Kami sa Lahat ng Masama**. Quezon City: High Chair, 2003. 59 pages.

When his first collection of poems *Hunos* (2000) was published, Allan Popa was hailed by Virgilio S. Almario as part of a new generation of poets who write in Filipino but whose world is not Tagalog. Nonetheless, whatever is picked up from this “nilakhang daigdig” finds its way in the national language.

Popa demonstrates this in his second collection *Morpo* (2001), which shows the processes by which the Filipino language may form, melt, and erode subject matter and subjectivities with the dynamism of a language that is continuously re-forming and in-forming itself. Difficult to translate into English, the poems generally rely on wordplay (puns, homonyms), abstractions, and parentheticals. These devices may seem difficult to readers familiar with the traditional poetry written in Filipino, but the book prescribes its own discourse and consciousness so that each poem extends to the next until the end of the collection. Such is *Morpo*.

The reader familiar with this vision will be open to Popa's latest collection, his fourth, entitled *Kami sa Lahat ng Masama*. The title comes from the last line of the Tagalog version of the Lord's Prayer: “. . . iadya mo kami sa lahat ng masama.” Popa does away with the two words “iadya mo,” so that the result is, in English, “we in all evil.” This book is not about deliverance, but it is an exploration of the depths of man's evil.

The poems are arranged in the same manner as the books of the late Egyptian poet Edmond Jabès (*The Book of Questions*, *The Book of*