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New Writing From the Philippines

Emmanuel Torres

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Introduction: The Pinoy Writer and the Asia-Pacific Century

EMMANUEL TORRES

THIS IS ONLY the third time in its forty-three-year-old history that *Philippine Studies* is devoting an entire issue to creative writing. I remember the first edited by the short-story writer Gilda Cordero-Fernando in 1965. Although she crowed at the prospect of a mainstream scholarly journal opening its pages to fiction and poetry ("It's about time!"), she wondered if its subscribers would be just as enthusiastic. But then, why not? It would only be paying due respects to the very lifeblood literary studies feed on in academe in the first place. When Gilda put together that *Philippine Studies* "special," some contributing authors thought it would be first and last of its kind. Or so it seemed, until another edited by the late Alfredo Navarro Salanga appeared twenty years later, in 1985.

The current issue raises hopes of *Philippine Studies* playing host to creative writing more often, say, once every ten years instead of once every twenty. Such practice would be doing a morale-boosting service to writers who have kept the faith in the literary text as we know it in an age increasingly hooked on video, pricey comicbooks, graphic novels, the Magic Eye mania, and the interactive games of computer technology. It is service certainly welcome in a milieu where the media give far greater attention to the visual and performance arts than to literature.

This 1995 anthology fills a gap by providing domestic and foreign subscribers a chance to get at the pulse of contemporary Philippine writing and note changes and new directions among its practitioners.

Much has changed since Gilda's and Freddie's anthologies. For one, the novel no longer seems as intimidating a genre as it once was. It is now foremost in the minds of fictionists in English

ambitioning to make a deeper dent in the public consciousness. It makes its presence felt in two excerpts from works in progress. Not wanting in "relevance," both take on timely societal and moral issues which call for broader narrative space. The opening sections of Charlson Ong's "An Embarrassment of Riches," a cross between *roman a clef* and black satire a la *Candide*, find its revolutionary anti-hero caught in the political jaws of a mythical country that cannily resembles the Philippines in the Marcos and post-Marcos eras. The much shorter excerpt from Luis Cabalquinto's "Sun on Ice" gets off to a bloody start as a jogger witnesses a shooting incident in a demographically diverse New York neighborhood ripped by racial tensions, junkies, and inner-city anomie.

For another, the language question—to write in English or Filipino?—which so preoccupied nationalists in the sixties/seventies, has been superseded by a pragmatic attitude, a kind of "social Darwinism," as a former humanities student of mine, Stephen CuUnjieng, now investment banker and business columnist, puts it. Ask any young writer represented in these pages if writing in English means a loss of identity (as hardcore nationalists equating English with colonial mentality are fond of saying), and the answer is likely to be: What loss? The key to literary survival and development appears to be proficiency in both Filipino and English, something taken for granted these days by such young and older writers as Ricardo Saludo, Danton Remoto, Jim Pascual Agustin, Ino Manalo, Benilda Santos, R.L. Santos, Danilo Abacahin, Neal Imperial, Cabalquinto and others. They write in whichever language serves the given literary material better with the confidence of those familiar with more than one language and one culture. Bilingual proficiency among today's better-known young writers is commonly seen as an advantage over the older guards who write only in one. Characteristically, anthologies of recent vintage, such as *Salim-Bayan* (1992), a collection of Tagalog and English poems by Agustin, Argee Guevarra and Imperial, offer no apologies for publishing bilingually as if it were the most natural thing.

There are, of course, users of other Philippine languages (notably the Cebuanos claiming they are the national majority) who cry foul at the central government's designation of Tagalog as Filipino, the National Language. That the word "Filipino" is made to refer to both Tagalog the language and a citizen of the Philippines is seen as a case of one region imposing its draconic will on others at their expense. In defense, proponents of Tagalog cite sociocultural forces that

are making it *de facto* the premier means of communication. More persuasive than any legislative mandate is the impact of TV, radio, movies and advertising nationwide. That is what's empowering the language of Francisco Balagtas as the country's lingua franca. Again, a matter of social Darwinism.

By the same token English is here to stay. As far as managers and professionals this side of Asia are concerned, it is a *fait accompli*. What accounts partly for this is the long reach of broadcast and print media: CNN, BBC and Australia TV, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Asiaweek*, *Asia Magazine*, *Taipan*, *Lifestyle Asia*, *Art & AsiaPacific*, our own English-language periodicals and a slew of others elsewhere in the region. It has become the language of socioeconomic intercourse in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and beyond—from India and Bangladesh to Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore to Australia, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand. Its staying power is significant given that the country has ejected that last bastion of U.S. imperialism, the military bases, with not a little help from an active volcano in Central Luzon. Also, its widespread use may now be viewed more calmly as the result of national choice rather than foreign imposition. That choice gives cutting edge in dealing with the challenges of a global free market, as much as in linking up with the arts and cultures outside what used to be perceived as the "Anglo-American hegemony." Just as significantly, local writers are contributing to the evolution of an English distinctive to this part of the world. By this I do not mean just the Taglish/Engalog mishmash but something subtler, more subconscious—forms of thinking and feeling rooted in racial memory—set within the paradigms of Amer-English itself. Also doing much the same thing are Anglos in Asian and African countries once under British colonial rule.

But even as they acknowledge the advantages of English as a global power tool, our bilingualists are quick to point out: Nothing does the job better than Filipino in expressing nuances of meaning peculiar to the native soul. Of interest in this regard are the comments R.L. Santos and Saludo have written as pendants to their contributions. Useful not just to specialists of Philippine literature, they bear quoting at length for what they say about thematic and textual concerns in their writings (translations supplied by their authors).

In his afterword "Back to One's Own Language," R.L. Santos ticks off the unique evocative features of Tagalog (in particular, the Tagalog of his Malabon hometown)—word formation, accentuation, speech rhythms and so on—which for him makes it the preferred

language (by no means always standard or "purist") for the kind of poetry he writes, a blend of traditional and contemporary/postmodern idioms:

Although I started writing in English, I am now more strongly drawn to Filipino. Sooner or later, I suppose, one feels the pull of his roots. Besides, some memories are best evoked in the native tongue—Nanay's melodious reading, as we were lulled to sleep every siesta time, from novels by J. Fausto Galauran serialized in *Bulaklak* and *Liwayway*—and local context, of course, and hometown wit, are unique in their patois.

Nowhere else did the custom of the "bansag" reach more humorously caustic heights than in Malabon. Whole clans were nicknamed "bulabog" [to scare away] because a forebear spoke a little too loudly; or "bayabas" [guava] because he was mean and cranky, sour-faced, as if he had just bitten into the unripe fruit; or "kokak" [frog's croak] for being fond of and spreading gossip.

Some themes are patently "Pinoy." The way, for instance, we dote on miracles and the miraculous indicates how susceptible we are to the mystical, whether suspect or sublime!

A visitor recently told me that from reading our newspapers, it seemed two forces (other than politics) shaped current events—our religion and poverty. Indeed, let poets explore such themes in nuances unique to their experience. And let this be also in their native tongue!

In light of R.L.'s remarks, it is doubtful if Manalo's "Pakiram-daman" or Mayette Bayuga's "Karatig-Silid" could have been written in language other than Filipino. Words representing Pinoy values like *pakiram-daman*, which serves as title and leitmotif in the Manalo story, resist facile translation. The *delicadeza* (another presenting translation difficulties) with which the author handles the homosexual relationship in the story rings true because of the finely tuned indirections of a style that blends standard Tagalog with a more contemporary, grittier, idiom.

Very Pinoy as well is Bayuga's psychological probe of a young working woman as victim of rebarbative male chauvinism. Although its climax, or nonclimax, does not quite fulfill expectations, it remains a memorable piece of storytelling. Diction and cadence render precisely the heroine's romantic passion and the coda of disenchantment following her sexual moment of truth, with its concluding image of a forlorn Sisa scattering petals in the mud. Notable too is what she

does with a heady language mix not uncommon in new fiction: blending standard Tagalog with colloquial, shuttling from Tagalog to English and back, and using Taglish/Engalog spiked with street-smart homosexual lingo ("swardspeak"), in a virtuoso display of how Metro Manilans actually talk among themselves. She makes all this sound effortless and stylish, giving her scenes with dialogue a pungent realism.

Saludo's foreword to his comic play *Bingo!*, "Magkano Ba ang Asawa Mo?—Paunang Salita sa Dulang *Bingo!*" [How Much Is Your Wife?—Preface to the Play, *Bingo!*], casts another light on the function of language in evoking cultural contexts. To accommodate two distinct Hong Kong communities, he presented two language versions of his play on different nights (four performances in Filipino, two in English) at Kowloon's Space Museum. Produced by his own group, Tanghalanatin, a.k.a. The Asian Theater, and opening to favorable notices on 22 February 1986 (while an anti-Marcos People Power Revolution was going on at EDSA), *Bingo!* dramatizes a major social phenomenon of the century—Filipinas working overseas as housemaids, 100,000 of them in the Crown Colony alone. Saludo addresses a familiar plaint:

Is that something to be ashamed of? In the decade that I have lived [in Hong Kong], there was hardly [a time] when I didn't hear one of our countrymen or countrywomen remark: "People may think all Filipinos are maids." When we staged *Bingo!* . . . not a few Hong Kong Filipinos praised and supported the production because . . . we demonstrated that Filipinos could do more than just cook, wash and iron clothes, clean house and mind children.

. . . There is nothing shameful about being a maid working hard to serve others. The hundreds of millions of dollars they send home give a gigantic boost to the economy.

If there was any shame, it would be for the country's failure to give jobs to hundreds of thousands of Filipinos forced to go abroad in search of jobs that pay enough to sustain their families. And even more shameful are the ways of some of their relations back home who have no other thought but the monthly remittance sent by their parent, spouse, child, nephew, niece, cousin or sweetheart. . . .

Bingo! ridicules and condemns such selfish greed. . . .

The English and Filipino versions drew different reactions from their respective audiences one wondered if they were seeing the same play,

providing a textbook case for sociolinguists to sort out. The playwright himself was bemused:

. . . During the English performances, there was no let-up in the laughter. . . . But in the Filipino shows, there were silences punctuated by subdued sniffing and crying. For the maids that packed the Filipino version, there was nothing funny about the intention by Luz's family to virtually sell her to her wealthy Hong Kong employer.

Unlike many plays about the underprivileged class, the housemaids of Saludo's farcical drama are not pitiful or oppressed. Neither are they mere pasteboard characters but, as intended by the playwright, people "with both good and bad, wise and wayward sides"—and *educado* in the bargain. The main character is a former schoolteacher; her aging employer is no leery Fu Manchu but a sanguine compatriot, a former Philippine education official who has settled in Hong Kong. As such, the play does its share in neutralizing the stereotype of the Pinoy/Pinay overseas. (Remember the furor in the press in the early '80s when the editors of the venerable OED, or *Oxford English Dictionary*, was reportedly preparing an entry on "Filipino/Filipina" to mean "servant/maid" for a forthcoming edition, until Pinoy outrage worldwide put a stop to it?) The Hong Kong success of *Bingo!* has inspired yet another play about the Pinay domestic helper (more popularly known as "DH") titled *But Sir, I Haven't Always Been a Maid*, which was recently produced in Hong Kong; its author, a DH in Hong Kong herself, is a former Mindanao social worker and (hear this) an industrial engineering graduate.

But what we should be seeing more of by the year 2000 are plays, short stories, novels on OCWs written in a tragic vein. For the plight of the long-suffering Pinay DH abroad—specially those from the rural masses, poorly educated, unskilled, submissive—is the new Passion Play, or *Pasyon*, of our time. No problem figuring out who the new Judas might be. Our national government, with its shabby record of protecting the human rights of OCWs as shown in the controversy over Flor Contemplacion's execution in Singapore this year, is right for the part.

I hasten to point out that the contributions appearing in this issue were chosen for the quality of the writing itself, not on how well they could be shoehorned into a preconceived theme or agenda of "political correctness" to gladden those who regard all literary texts primarily as material for "cultural studies." The poetry section, for

instance, includes not only works on a wide range of social issues such as poverty, injustice, and human (as well as animal) rights but also intensely subjective experiences and themes of a physical or numinous kind. What counts is the craftsmanship, the aesthetic factor, more than anything else.

By happenstance rather than editorial intent, *Philippine Studies* received a bumper crop of new writing by women. This is hardly surprising, considering that much of the best published in recent years is by women. The eighties and nineties have witnessed the publication overseas of such world-class fiction as *The Monsoon Collection* (short stories) and *State of War* (novel) by Ninotchka Rosca, *Ginseng and Other Tales from Manila* by Marianne Villanueva, and a first novel by a Filipina-U.S. writer, Jessica Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, which drew favorable reviews and was shortlisted for the prestigious National Book Award in the U.S. Hagedorn's poetry has been included in *Postmodern American Poetry*, a comprehensive U.S. anthology (Norton, 1994). And not to forget two pioneering anthologies of the decade, *Forbidden Fruit: Women Write the Erotic* (1992) and *Kung Ibig Mo: Love Poetry by Women* (1993) serving notice that erotic passion is not the monopoly of male writers. That both books haven't run afoul of the watchdogs of public morals is proof of the greater tolerance today toward certain aspects of the gender issue than before, in the fifties, when a story by the late Estrella Alfon raised the hackles of the religious far right.

Not surprisingly, feminist perceptions are discernible in several of the women's contributions: subtle, assured, witty, introspective, urbane. Thankfully they do not sound like dispatches from a war zone by the combat-ready likes of a Camille Paglia. Such perceptions are not confined, however, to the women writers, as a villanelle on woman-bashing by the acutely empathetic Ramon Sunico demonstrates.

Also represented is a movement that has gained momentum in recent years: gay literature. The poems of J. Neil Garcia and Jaime An Lim have appeared before in a landmark publishing coup, *Ladlad: An Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing* edited by Remoto and Garcia (1993). More than anything else, it is the quality of their writing that has raised gay literature from its underground status to a wider public, to be taken as a good read for all seasons, not as flavor of the month. Be not surprised if Garcia's darkly ironic "The Conversion" soon becomes a regular anthology piece.

Also by happenstance is the large number of contributions from Pinoys overseas—Cariño, Villanueva, Lim-Wilson, Cabalquinto in the

U.S., Reina Arcache Melvin in Paris, Ong in Tokyo, Agustin in South Africa, and Saludo in Hong Kong—or from recent arrivals from various points of the compass as Evasco from Italy, Jose Mario Francisco, S.J., from Thailand and Indonesia, Remoto from Scotland, and others from heaven knows where else. A growing circle has been the recipient of writing grants from Hawthornden Castle in Scotland, and they have just published a collection of prose and poetry inspired one way or another by their residency in that Scottish ivory tower for authors. What's important is not that today's generation of writers is a more travelled lot than their counterparts in the fifties/sixties but that at no other time has so much been written that resonates with experiences of travel, migration, or (to appropriate a coinage of W.H. Auden) "elsewhereishness."

Most noticeable of changes occur in poetry. Championed at the time of Gilda's all-English anthology was the idea of a poem as a well-crafted construct favored by the New Criticism of the forties/fifties: complex meaning through ambiguity and indirection, tight formal structure and evocative texture influenced by Symbolist practice. Poets tended to avoid specific social and political subjects, inclining toward the metaphysical rather than the ideological. It was enough that a poem dealt with universal emotions and managed language and rhythm with sensitivity, legerity, and control.

An alternative poetics is at work these days. Form is more open-ended than closed, looser, more improvisatory; the tone conversational, informal. And no one seems to think twice about making explicit statements in the name of personal passion or liberation. Despite the rise of "cause-oriented" writing, formal matters of craft in no way seem endangered, thanks to the influence of writing workshops in leading universities. The popularity of poetry readings on campuses and in writer-friendly coffeehouses is partly the reason for the current taste for the laid-back and discursive. Apparently being revived is the tradition of the poet as bard, one communally interactive and inclined to addressing the sound-world of a poem to a roomful of listeners rather than one crafting lines intended solely for the book page and the solitary reader (whom McLuhanites used to call by a certain term of endearment—p.o.b., or print-oriented bastard).

What further differentiates the poetry of now from then is an awareness of a given time and place, of historicity. Although crossing cultural barriers comes easily on the electronic superhighway, particulars of cultural heritage and vernacular mores still count for much and command attention and respect in the global village. They

continue to play an essential role in the making of art, enhancing its authenticity and significance. Quite common in the works of younger poets are constant references to historical-cultural figures and events that may be intelligible only to Pinoy readers. Allusions, for instance, to the fat Governor-General William Howard Taft astride a carabao (Agustin), the cargo of the Manila Galleon (Cariño), Ilokano place names (Gemino Abad), the *Noli/Fili* (Constantino Tejero), Gabriela Silang and the late stage actress Ella Luansing (Remoto), Smokey Mountain and the leftist activist Edgar Jopson (Imperial), Eduardo Masferre's masterly photographs of the Mountain Province (Evasco), the ritual of the *orasyon*, or angelus, and the soap opera "Gulong ng Palad" (R.L. Santos) need no obligatory gloss or footnote. The tendency of the new poetics is to turn inward into the native psyche, to re-center the self within one's own ethos.

If there is another tendency to refer to texts and contexts outside the once-dominant Western canon, the reason is growing familiarity with Afro-Asian and Latin American authors through English translation: not only Lao Tsu and Lu Hsun, Basho, Mishima, and Kawabata, Tagore and Premchand, Soyinka, Senghor, and Achebe, Muhammad Iqbal and Chairil Anwar but also Aime Cesaire, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Juan Ramon Jimenez, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, V.S. Naipaul, Octavio Paz. Some of these authors of canonical stature have been included, or co-opted, suprisingly, in the "monumental list of the greatest literary works of all time" by Prof. Harold Bloom in his magisterial *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994). This tendency is also evident in new campus writing, signifying a breakthrough in some university humanities curricula that favor a postmodern, postcolonial neo-internationalism—broader, more universal, more conscionable—one that doesn't exclude aesthetic practices different from Western models. Underlying this neo-internationalism is an appreciation of the arts and literatures of Third World countries that have undergone colonial experiences similar to ours and provide a means of synergizing the Pinoy creative psyche.

The last decades of this millenium have put to rest Rudyard Kipling's "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." Well, the twain have met, in head-on collision as well as in productive, symbiotic, interaction. In the event, the East-West encounter has given rise to a postmodern awareness in which mutual respect, not domination, is the basic premise. It has produced works of art that are attracting interest beyond their countries of

origin. Providing role models for Asia-Pacific writers are recent fiction in English by the Amerasians Amy Tan and Hagedorn, the Anglo-Japanese Kazuo Ishiguro, the Sri Lankan Romesh Gunesekera, the Indians Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth, and Pinoy expats Rosca and Wilfrido Nollado (whose novel *But for the Lovers* from the seventies has been reissued in the U.S. with a new introduction by Robert Coover). The success in the West of such stage and film productions as *M. Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon*, Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Wedding Banquet*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Farewell, My Concubine*, and *The Scent of Green Papaya* attests to worldwide interest in Asian perspectives and attitudes. Also making its mark in international festivals, but only now released on video in the U.S., is a 1977 Pinoy benchmark classic, Kidlat Tahimik's *The Perfumed Nightmare* (highly rated in Leonard Maltin's 1995 *Video and Film Guide*). In still another cultural scene, the *First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* held in Australia in 1993, saw the Philippines put on an impressive show of imaginative firepower in painting, sculpture, and installation art.

The Asia-Pacific Century should find Pinoy writers with their rich East-West legacy moving on and beyond their shores. Opportunities and options have never been better in an international scene that is increasingly hospitable to multicultural/multiethnic writing. Award-giving bodies like Sweden's Nobel Prize and England's Booker Prize have of late been considering authors with mixed ethnic or hybrid backgrounds in their nomination shortlists. An anthology of Philippine writing, *Brown River, White Ocean*, edited by Luis Francia (Rutgers University Press, 1993), and another awaiting publication, *Desti/nations*, "describing the diasporic journeys and negotiations of the Filipino in the world," edited by Maria Luisa Aguilar-Cariño and Oscar Campomanes, are noteworthy in that they are edited by Pinoys, not Americans. Signs are up that the literary geography of the Philippines now extends beyond its archipelagic boundaries and that a large market is out there for our writers to go for. As a surfer might say, a transnational wave is rising, beckoning those with the will to ride it and the staying power to surge ahead.