

BOOK

**Migrations and mediations: The emergence of Southeast Asian
dispора writers in Australia, 1972-2007**

By Jose Wendell P. Capili

Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2016, 452 pages

ISBN: 978-9715428033

In literature and literary studies, the consciousness on Southeast Asia and the Pacific represent relatively emergent interests. How are geography and cultural history represented in literature? For decades now, a vibrant cultural interface has taken place between Southeast Asia and the Pacific. But are we even mindful of these regional encounters? And in the realms of culture, what are the legacies of such a dialogue? To entertain these questions is to explore issues in cultural history. In *Migrations and Mediations: The Emergence of Southeast Asian Diaspora Writers in Australia, 1972-2007*, Jose Wendell P. Capili gives us a method for answering these questions. The book is his germinal contribution to Southeast Asian literary history.

Capili begins with a bold step, luring away scholars of cultural studies from that predictable attraction to United States-Philippine relations. In many attempts to narrate Philippine and Southeast Asian cultural histories, an almost rhetorical disposition argues that creative initiatives and innovations could only come from the undisputed center, the United States (US). In its stead, Capili points to a southerly direction, inviting his readers to orient themselves toward another geographic milieu, tracing another story about cultural sustainability and the growth of literary ideas and initiatives in the Southeast Asian region.

A clear vision informs this book, both historical and literary in its reckoning. It begins with a problem: writers from Southeast Asia would reach Australia only because of unsettling experiences owing to cultural dispersal. Capili then contextualizes the widespread diaspora confronted by most Southeast Asians at the onset of the seventies. Keen turbulence in the otherwise settled life of Southeast Asia would be felt not only in the Philippines but also simultaneously in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste, and Vietnam.

For instance, political security was greatly threatened in the Philippines due to the excesses of the Marcos dictatorship. Prior to the 1970s, the Communist purge, genocide, and antagonism toward the Chinese were pressing issues in Indonesia. For Malaysia, this coincided with a time of intense racial tension among its ethnic groups composed of the Chinese, Indians, and Malays. Vietnam in turn was racked in the American war.

In this shared and undeniably turbulent milieu, many writers had to likewise wrestle with existential choices regarding language issues. In the Philippines, for example, nationalist struggles motivated language choice. For some writers, this meant making a choice between writing in English or committing fully to a national or a local language. Such choices, however, reflect a concern not only for literature's rightful audiences but also for the most principled social advocacies. Quite often, the decision to write in English was met with suspicion, if not downright animosity, in the wake of national literary struggles.

Capili's book assembles an interesting gallery of writers now settled in Australia, engaged not only in writing but also committed to identity politics and social activism. Who are these writers and how have they been chosen? Capili draws from an expansive background, blurring distinctions between traditionally designated as high literature and the more politicized forms. He accepts the pragmatic assumption that what people experienced back then could be rendered imaginatively either as biographical material or as fiction. Thus, the writers featured in the book personify broad generic commitments to fiction, poetry, and nonfiction.

The author's writing is limpid, enhanced by anecdotes, facts retrieved with a curious eye for details, and a personal attraction to oral history. The hours Capili invested in interviewing writers and cultural workers is commendable. It shows us that one way of crafting history is to draw persuasive narratives from the recollections and reckonings of those who have lived the hours. This way, the alternative cultural history that Capili proposes would not have been possible if not for his patience in upholding the methodology of oral history.

Certain personal advantages favor Capili. His primary professional engagement in literature and creative writing allows him to cast the book's central ideas as compelling narratives. The result is both story and history. His ability to present facts within the framework of a narrative allows for a reader friendly book, as he speaks to a wide range of readers with a certain intimacy and clarity.

Capili proceeds systematically, with the conscious structure of his historiography. He reminds us that certain rubrics must be prioritized. After setting the context, he also traces alignments that had been forged before 1972. This means creative writing programs and teachers of language and literature. It means mentorship and activism in the cultural field. In the long run, he recognizes certain efforts which contribute to the institutionalization of forms of cultural diplomacy.

The book rightfully evokes the literary legacies of the University of the Philippines (UP). The early chapters pay tribute to the person and agency of Tom Inglis Moore as literary mentor. This mentorship comes full circle as Capili identifies several generations of intellectuals coming under Moore's sway, they

themselves eventually assuming important responsibilities in Philippine cultural life. Capili scores high in revealing the UP's influence on the Philippines' early literary milieu.

Capili sheds light on the agency of the public intellectual through two other important figures: Philippine National Artist F. Sionil Jose and eminent Malayan thinker Wang Gung Wu. The book charts the brand of cultural diplomacy initiated by Jose by way of organizing writers from the region to pursue a regional agenda through dialogue. From the fifties onward, Jose has also published landmark anthologies and journals featuring the work of emergent voices in the region.

Wang Gungwu is another central figure whose legacy the book considers. While Gungwu began his career as a poet, it is all the more evident today that he has devoted an entire lifetime in evolving into a prominent advocate of the Asia-Pacific agenda and would spend years mentoring students and scholars from all over the Southeast Asian region, charting the region's progress through its various discursive dimensions of its material life and realities. Capili validates keen profiles of these two remarkable public intellectuals and the ensuing movement which strives toward a clearer definition of the Southeast Asian agenda.

Through this history, Capili further strengthens the UP connection. His scholarship charts the rise of literary talents fostered in UP who will venture out in diaspora to influence the Southeast Asian cultural landscape. The chapter on S.P. Lopez sheds admirable light on the cultural engagements of the state university. Through his literary criticism, Lopez gave emphasis to the undeniable link between literature and society. It is also enlightening that many of the migrant writers mentored in UP have assumed significant forms of community engagement, establishing that activism and literature, art and enlightenment of society are not alien from each other. From Gemino Abad to Amando Doronila to Capili himself, the unceasing act of mentorship has yielded sustainable results.

The book also introduces possibilities for articulating a regional publishing history of Southeast Asia. Capili devotes an entire chapter, detailing the supportive role of Australian publishing, in the light not only of emerging nationalisms in Southeast Asia but also of the rise and fall of repressive regimes. For instance, in the most devious years of the Marcos dictatorship, the University of Queensland Press took a bold interest in publishing both Nick Joaquin and Ninotchka Rosca. For its trenchant vision, Rosca's book would not have seen print in the US mainland where Marcos enjoyed vocal support and encouragement. Whatever exposé Rosca wanted to make had to be negotiated via a backdoor entry, by way of aggressive Australian publishing.

Following the historiography outlined in this chapter, today's generation of Asia-Pacific scholars may wrestle with the expansive canon of published Southeast Asian materials generated by this Australian connection. This formidable reading

list presents possibilities for future scholarship—from compiling a bibliography to problematizing issues, motifs, and patterns of discursive representation of the Southeast Asian regional agenda.

This book steadily keeps in balance the concerns of current scholarship in charting a global history of creative writing. So far, most of the new valuations concentrate on tracking American cultural capital, exerting its influence through the likes of the University of Iowa’s pioneering programs in Creative Writing. Capili’s alternative model offers a curious counterpoint to the ongoing critique that everything is the handiwork of the US. His research proceeds steadily in tracing this divergent cultural path. It is quite enlightening to see its provisional narrative charted, the vibrant progress of which we are hopeful Capili will continue to trace in his future scholarly projects.

REVIEWER

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