

*Reading and Writing the Region*¹

Resil B. Mojares, Ph.D.

{1} The rise of academic interest in the local, the popular, and the regional—in fields like literature and history—started in the early 1970s. I just noted, for instance, that the first paper on the subject of regional literature that I presented came in 1976, at the 21st American Studies Seminar held in Los Banos, Laguna (Mojares, 1976). And so the theme of our conference today is part of a long-running conversation that involved many over several decades. But it remains an important subject, one that is vitally current, and one on which there are things that have not been said since the subject has not stood still and neither have we.

{2} Today, I would like to revisit the idea of the *region*, and then speak of the utility of the *regional* to writers and, by implication, readers as well (Mojares, 1990).

Historically, the common meanings of the *regional* have been condescending and unflattering—outlying, peripheral, parochial. The regional frequently evokes the notion of survivals, of something residual. This is so in a situation when the nation-state is assumed to be an achieved reality, where localities are imagined to have been effectively incorporated into a larger, supra-regional community. What harkens to the regional is then perceived to be nativistic, sentimental, or even divisive.

All this, however, suggests a simplistic view of the processes of nation-formation. It is to imagine serially what is best conceived as having simultaneous existence. *Nation* and *region* are interacting, simultaneous, mutually constitutive realities. They implicate each other and are caught up in a process in which their values are not fixed. *Nation* and *region* are historical artifacts. They involve boundaries, or boundedness, which are not immutable or timeless but dynamic because they are socially and historically constituted. They involve, as well, relations of identity and power which either

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pull them together or pull them apart. To reflect on the position of the region is, unavoidably, to reflect on the state of the nation itself.

As sociocultural units, regions are not unproblematic and self-evident. How, for instance, does one proceed to define a “region” like the Visayas, a word of uncertain etymology, coined by outsiders, coming into its current use, perhaps only in the seventeenth century, to refer to some vaguely defined territory?

What of Mindanao itself? What makes it a single, definable unit? Mindanao may be easier to imagine than the Visayas as an integral unit since it can be viewed as a single land mass, with its offshore islands. Yet, the reality on the ground is much more complicated given Mindanao’s history and its mix of languages, religions, and ethnicities.

The complexity is illustrated in the word *Mindanaoan*. To speak of the inhabitants of Mindanao as *Mindanaoan* is relatively new. I recall, growing up in Mindanao and even much later, people would identify themselves as *taga-Mindanao*, which is more a place-reference than a mark of identity. Or it was more likely for people to call themselves *Cebuano*, *Ilocano*, or *Maranao*, or identify themselves by their province of origin, like *Zamboangueño* or *Dabawenyo*. An all-embracing word for the people of Mindanao did not exist. The current discourse on a *Mindanaoan* identity that transcends the region’s internal divisions, is therefore an interesting and challenging concept, with implications that go beyond just literature (as when people today speak of “Mindanaoan writing”). Whatever form or shape this attempt at identity formation may take, it illustrates that, in the end, region is just an administrative division or an academic concept unless it represents a “community” that people imagine themselves to be part of, a community that they create and claim for themselves, and out of which they act, write, and speak.

It was commonly thought (and still is) that regionalism is our bane. The statement is reductive. We have been impatient with our coming as a nation that we have been tempted into belief in facile constructs of unity (whether it is the use of a single language or adherence to definitions of nation by a dominant class). We have taken the easier path of leveling and exclusion and have instead reaped the wrath of the excluded. It is not regionalism which

underlies insurgency and separatism but the lack of belief in our pallid constructs of the nation-state.

The social theorist Ernest Gellner (1987) has said that nationalism requires a certain form of amnesia; it requires that we set aside, forget, our identities as clan, tribe, or ethnic group in order to forge the consciousness of being a nation. While this sounds eminently practical, it is also dangerous: what assures speedy mobilization for practical or political ends may also mean a diminution of our substance as a people. Amnesia breeds totalitarianism. It is the richness of memory which we must nourish.

Since the early 1970s, when I first took up an interest in regional studies, much has changed. The regional has come to the fore in discussions of Philippine literature (and culture in general), particularly after 1986 with the interest in decentralization, autonomy, and people empowerment in the post-authoritarian transition. (The organizer of this conference, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, was a product of this time, with its broadly-based structure of national committees made up of regional and sectoral representatives.) The intellectual shift over the past years is illustrated in the incorporation of the regional in courses on Philippine literature; it is shown as well in the shift in policies of the Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino to a more inclusive, pluralist view of language development. In many cases, the interest in the regional may have been routinized into a case of “preferential option” for the marginalized and excluded; hence it is important we do not grow complacent but must clarify and insist on what is indeed vital and essential in broadening and enriching the base of a national culture.

In any case, many of the stereotypes equating the “regional” with what is localistic and parochial have lost their force. One has only to look at the writers from or in the regions today, particularly among the young—passionately engaged in local languages and traditions, yet also distinctly multilingual, well-read, mobile, wholly at ease and confident in the language or languages they have chosen to write in even as they are effectively plugged into what is going on in the nation and the world.

In a way, the regional can no longer be thought of as marginal. After all, we have a president who is from Davao, and who,

I suspect, would have been happier ruling from Davao than from Manila. But then, again, we also know of course how, given the history and structure of the state, economic, political, and cultural inequalities across the regions continue to characterize our national life. The work of advancing the interests of the region is not done.

{3} We have spoken of the region; what of the writer? What is the utility of the *regional* for writers?

To speak of region is useful for strategic purposes: as a way of instilling a consciousness of location, and the advantages of location; as a way of marking difference, which is an artistic imperative for writers; and a way for mobilizing resources to support creative work by a group or formation of writers.

Location is a writer's comparative advantage. Location can be social and personal rather than simply geographical, such as positions of class or gender and the facts of personal history that make one person different from all others. Yet, a writer's geographic "home" is fundamental. Recognizing that "geography is destiny," as Susan Sontag (2001) puts it, it is important to sharpen one's awareness of the "place" formative of who or what one is, the place out of which one writes, the distinctive resources afforded and stimulated by one's location. Every kind of writing is the product of a specific historical and cultural location.² It is this geographically-determined specificity which gives the writer his or her identity as well as a creative edge.

One resource of location is the local language. Each language represents a unique way of looking at and being in the world. Language, after all, is not just language; a whole cultural tradition is tied to it—a people's songs, poetry, tales and myths. Thus, it is true, as one linguist has said, that when a language is lost

² V.S. Naipaul (2007) spoke of the particularity of location in writing. "Certain settings, certain cultures, have to be written about in a certain way. These ways are not interchangeable; you cannot write about Nigerian tribal life as you would write about the English midlands... It is the better and truer part of the labour of a writer from a new place to work out what his material is, to wring substance from the unwritten about and unregarded local scene."

(As an aside, it may seem strange to cite Naipaul in this connection, a writer who—Derek Walcott observed—refuses to be claimed by a country, whether the one where he was born or that where he lives. Yet, precisely for this reason Naipaul, a diasporic writer, part Trinidadian, part Indian, part British, is acutely conscious of the problem of location.)

or extinguished, “it is as if a whole, irreplaceable library has burned down.” Of language, however, two things need to be said. While one’s native language is an obvious marker of identity or difference, language is not a simple given or simply inherited, it must be learned, deepened, bent, and made one’s own. And one should not think in terms of either-or in language use, of chauvinisms of language. There is a value in speaking out of one’s home language, but there is value as well in multilingualism and the traffic of languages. That Mindanao has been called a “melting pot” of languages is a testament to the region’s linguistic richness and dynamism. These are values that need to be cultivated and preserved. (I was, for instance, in a creative writing workshop here in Davao years ago, and we were discussing texts written in “Cebuano.” One participant asked whether one should use Cebuano as it was spoken or written in Cebu as the standard. I replied, *No*, one should use the language as it was used here in Davao.)

A further resource of location is the physical environment. What can we draw from the environment we inhabit that would make of the literature we produce something distinctive? To cite an example, we live in a maritime country, and this is particularly evident in regions like the Visayas, which has been described as a mini-Mediterranean, and places like Southeastern Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. Yet, I do not think that this fact is evident enough in the literature we produce.

I speak of place not just as a matter of setting and subject matter in our writings but of those qualities that come with living in a maritime world, such qualities as movement, contact and exchange, the porousness of borders, of what is outward rather than inward looking, of what is fluid and hybrid rather than what is settled and sedentary. How are these qualities expressed in our writings?

Finally, there is the resource afforded by local history and tradition. Indigenous poetic and rhetorical forms, for instance, are a source that writers can draw from, as in the example of today’s Cebuano poets drawing from the *komposo* and *duplo* in writing poetry that cultivates the values of orality, open-endedness, wit, irreverence (even crassness), direct address, and social comment. We need more examples of the many possibilities in local history and local artistic forms that we have not fully exploited.

These are just examples. What I am suggesting is that we imagine or discover what it is that makes, say, “Mindanaoan writing” different in style, sensibility, and substance from the literatures of, say, the Ilocos region or Central Luzon. This is work that I am sure Mindanao artists and writers themselves are doing but the exciting part is that many possibilities remain. It is on the basis of difference that “Mindanaoan” or “Visayan” would signify a definably distinct and meaningful body of work, rooted in the realities of the region, in active conversation with readers in the region, and one that makes of the national literature itself broader, richer, deeper and more diverse.

Perhaps one more point on the notion of the marginality of regional writers—the literary field indeed remains uneven. For writers, it is important that opportunities, recognition, and rewards be equitably distributed. Yet, it is also important to say that for a writer, in the very heart of writing, the margin is a good place to be in. One of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, the Italian Primo Levi (1989) wrote:

If one lives in a compact, serried group, as bees and sheep do in the winter, there are advantages; one can defend oneself better from the cold and from attacks. But someone who lives at the margins of the group, or actually isolated, has other advantages; he can leave when he wants to and can get a better view of the landscape.

{4} To sum up. To be a writer in a particular region is to have the advantages that writers elsewhere in the country do not have. It means having a particular vantage point from which one can look out into the world; it means knowing a particular landscape intimately deeper than others would; it means having a language, a sensibility, and a style of feeling and thinking that could not but be a product of one’s having been formed in a particular place and way of life.

These advantages, however, are not simply given, they must be achieved. The materials for one’s fiction or poetry are not simply out there for the taking, one has to recognize them, draw them out,

and work on them. These advantages have to be actualized in the labor of knowledge, imagination, and craft.

I say, *labor of knowledge, imagination, and craft*. Craft is what writers' workshops are about: matters of technique and form. But technique is what one uses to work on one's material, and form is actualized or realized content. What if the material is thin and there is little content? Content is what we build through experience, immersion, study, and research (an undervalued aspect of the writing life). It is knowledge that, by the act of the imagination, we process for the meanings and possibilities that others and we ourselves have not quite seen.

One does not possess a place by just living in it but *by and through* the work of knowledge, imagination, and craft.

May all of us be blessed with such gifts.

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