

Introduction

Clash of Voices, Spirits Flying

This issue marks just over 10 years of the *Journal of English Studies and Comparative Literature*. When it first appeared in June 1993 its editor wrote: "taken together, the essays in our maiden issue reflect the spirit of the Department of English Studies and Comparative Literature." In its non-materiality, the term "spirit" calls to mind the elusiveness and exciting unpredictability of research. But it also suggests cohesiveness, (as in the phrase "capture the spirit, for instance)" and an a-historicalness quite contrary to what we are now, or would like to be. Today it may make better sense to say that the articles are reflective of the "clash of spirits" at the DECL, to borrow from the book of the same title by Filomeno Aguilar on the history of power and sugar planter hegemony in a Visayan Island. Claiming that "the view of reality possessed by the inhabitants of the islands Spain colonized was one pervaded by cosmic struggles," he writes that it was from this "cultural window" that "indios observed and reacted to the power encounter between the Spanish friars and the foreign merchant capitalists in the nineteenth century."

But what is this "clash" in the context of the articles in this issue? It is juxtaposition and collision in language as much as in thought; a collision not just in thought but in the process of thinking as well. In "After Words: Understanding Poetry Through Understanding Comics," Paolo Manalo articulates a poetics formed in the "Sabanggaan" where English is broken but not flawed or distorted. The poet, he says, "gathers the heard that one can look at"; his poem thus is not just the poem on the page but the orality/aurality of the inscriptions. He traces this orality/aurality to two genres traditionally separate from mainstream Philippine literature in English—Tagalog poetry and Comics.

A good number of the articles, in fact, (more than half are by young, first-time contributors to the JECL) deal with non-mainstream genres, such as Comics, Children's Literature, and Science Fiction. In "Comics Crash: Filipino Komiks and the Quest for Cultural Legitimacy," Emil M. Flores examines the politics of identity in Filipino Komiks. Komiks producers (K, instead of C to mark a genre produced by Filipinos in the Fili-

pino language) are the group with “the least power” in a field dominated by American and Japanese comics producers. In view of this fact, can Komiks compete both in the national and the international market? With the influence of the Big Two in Comics, can Komiks hope to represent Filipino identity, or, must cultural distinction be effaced in an increasingly globalized world?

The writers question established norms and display a theoretical position, particularly with regard to gender issues. This critical turn is evident in the analyses of two selections from the genre of Children’s Literature. These are the “The Paradox of Being Female: Reading Palanca Award-Winning Children’s Stories from a Gender Perspective” by Lalaine F. Yanilla Aquino, and “Outside Authority: Reflections on Gender and Education in *Tehanu*” by Lara Q. Saguisag. Aquino studies stories written by six women authors from 1991-1996 and published in *The Golden Loom: Palanca Prize Winners for Children* (1997). Drawing from similar studies such as those of McQuillan and Pfeifer, she scrutinizes the female characters in the stories, then demonstrates that they actually re-enforce gender inequality even while appearing to challenge this. The female asserts her voice, but only within a male-dominated hierarchy, thus paradoxically re-enforcing patriarchal values.

In her analysis of Ursula Le Guin’s *Tehanu* (sequel to the Earthsea Trilogy), Saguisag’s take on the gender issue is pedagogical: “*what* do we teach, and *how* can we teach?” The Trilogy valorizes the patriarchal system of education and leaves women on the margins. Through the character Tehanu and the metaphor of the dragon, however, Le Guin shows that women can actually break free from these patriarchal confines to become agents for changing their status. Drawing upon inner resources of creativity (the child-dragon within her), Tehanu summons Change (the dragon Keeslin) exercising thus, a newly-found authority to define herself in in her own language and in her own terms.

But as Aileen Salonga shows in “Deeper, Wider Hungers,” a study of Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, the search for identity cannot be easily resolved. Set in what was then Rhodesia, the novel focuses on the eating disorders of Nyasha; these, according to Salonga are actually both symbolic and symptomatic of social disorders rooted in patriarchal and colonial domination. Nyasha is caught in the push and pull of resis-

tance and accommodation and in the end suffers a breakdown from which, it is not certain she would recover. For as Fanon says in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “The condition for the native is a nervous condition.”

Applying a materialist critique of art and gender, Jose Duke Bagulaya notes the “silence” of women in Waray (Leyte, Samar) Literature in his article “Satirizing Women: The Ilustrados and Women in Waray Poetry.” Bagulaya’s point is not really the silencing of women and men’s attempt to speak for the former. What he finds problematic is the reason why in the early period (1920’s-50’s) of Waray literature women became the target of Leyte Ilustrado writers’satirical poetry. Bagulaya argues that with the coming of the modern capitalist American culture, the Waray women freed themselves from the strict morals of the older order only to find themselves captive to the American commodity. Thus, they became the object of satire of the male intelligentsia.

Lily Rose Tope shifts the focus from gender to ethnicity in “Ethnicity and Trans-Nation: Hybridizing the Malaysian Nation in Karim Raslan’s *Heroes and Other Stories* and Marie Gerrina Louis’ *The Road to Chandibole*.” With the race riots in May 1969, the Malaysian government imposed an “instrumentalist” or state-managed ethnicity in which Malay literature and culture were privileged. As a result, Malaysian writers in English were severely deterritorialized. However, Tope notes the emergence of young Malaysian writers in English today and how, through what she terms the “performative” theory of ethnicity, they break free from a state-formulated to a self-constructed nation transfigured by various ethnic communities.

The lone linguistic study, Ma. Corazon Aspeli-Castro’s “FROM THE MOUTH OF BABES: A Pragmatic Analysis of Children’s Responses to Questions” focuses on the language acquisition process of children in its social context. In case studies of three children, Aspeli-Castro examined the major functions of their responses to questions, their linguistic forms, their textual strategies for communicating, and the social context of their use of language. The results show that communication skills develop not just from the children’s mastery of language structures but from their interaction with the environment. In particular, the mothers’ negotiated interaction with their children lead the latter to acquire pragmatic communication skills.

The articles reflect a broadening of the intertextual field of literary and language studies in the Philippines, that “blurring of genres” which Geertz had noted early on (165-79). (Does this also signal the need for curricular re-alignments?) They venture into the non-mainstream—comics, children’s literature, sci-fi/fantasy; cross over from a spatial concept of a national literature to the trans-national; show a preference for non-Western works; and keep in step with current interdisciplinary perspectives and critical paradigms. Evident on the whole is an openness to change and disjunctions. Clash of spirits, voices flying.

The freedom is exhilarating. Yet, with the peso careening, FPJ’s presidency looming, and poverty ever more glaring, we wonder if it makes sense at this time to speak of disembodied spirits. While this concern may be justified, still we wish we could touch ground and rein in forces we can not seem to control. Pursuing change and resistance for their own sake is meaningless; debates removed from the condition in the here and now, mere pedantry. Happily, most articles show a sensitivity to both print and materiality. The reference to Aguilar’s article is in context, after all.

Works Cited

- Aguilar, Filomeno V. *Clash of Spirits*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998.
- Geertz, Clifford. “Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought.” *The American Scholar* 49.2 (1980).