

# The Most of All Worlds

## An Introduction

*Judy Celine Ick*

Every culture proliferates along its margins. Irruptions take place that are called 'creations' in relation to stagnancies. Bubbling out of swamps and bogs, a thousand flashes at once scintillate and are extinguished all over the surface of a society. ... It swarms and throbs. A polymorphous carnival infiltrates everywhere, a celebration both in the streets and in the homes for those who are unblinded by the aristocratic and museological model of durable production... Daily life is scattered with marvels, a froth on the long rhythms of language and history that is as dazzling as that of writers and artists.

Michel De Certeau,  
*Culture in the Plural*<sup>i</sup>

"Gud PM, sWiT PhRINZ!!!!!!!"

This bit of Shakespearean revision would have been considered a horrifyingly scandalous, if not a downright indefensible, line of poetry in the UP DECL not too long ago. Indeed, it would even have been unreadable. That it is the poetic line on which this journal issue closes speaks volumes about how far scholarly thinking and literary production in the Department have come since then—treading on the ground of the unreadable, the overheard, the imagined, the peripheral, and the ephemeral. By some measures, mostly those of the past (hopefully), Paolo Manalo's "JHemLeT", the poem from which this line is taken, may stand as the aesthetically unworthy

parody of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The notion of the parodic, however, fails to account for the richness of this appropriation that is not so much a writing alongside or a critical postcolonial "writing back" as a joyous, unapologetic "writing in." It is as much a loving, if tongue-in-cheek, re-telling of Shakespeare as it is a representation of contemporary Philippine culture.

In what can only be described as a crude appropriation of Michel de Certeau, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the place from which Manalo creates the space of JHemLeT. It comes from a fixed place, a text (if not THE text), yet is re-presented in the language of Philippine jologs cum beki textspeak. By doing so, it creates a space, a renewed articulation of its existence beyond its origins—an articulation, it must be emphasized, that makes its own kind of sense. Naturally, for example, death finds its home in Manalo's poem in a KTV bar, karaoke being kin and kind to death in these parts. Strangely enough, the apparent estrangement makes JHemLeT strangely familiar and instantly readable to most Filipinos with cellphones—even those who wouldn't fare as well with the Elizabethan text.

What is evident in Manalo's text is also present in varying degrees in the other contributions to this journal. In what may also well be described as a "win-win situation," the essays in this volume, like Manalo's poem, seem to respond to Isabela Banzon's poetic admonition to "get the most of all worlds." Like the language of Banzon's poem that alludes and misses—but in missing means and creates the entirely new—the critical essays in this volume carve spaces from which this place, or more precisely, this nation, can be understood or articulated anew. Firmly placed in the Philippines, their objects of study nonetheless range from the only recently conventional and not quite canonical genres of travel writing and children's literature, to the quotidian world of textbooks, to the performative grammars of dance and cinema, to the slippery task of literary translation. Together they represent a breadth of

inquiry and analysis atypical of English departments not too long ago. The critical practices they employ encourage a reevaluation of cultural agency and value. They are, in short, illustrative of the cultural turn that has characterized literary critical production in recent years.

What's marvelous about all this is how unreadable these texts were in the not-too-distant past, how unimaginable they would have been as objects of study by members of English departments. Likewise, the creative works featured in this volume, notably those by Banzon and Manalo, also exist at the very edge of the read and the unread, making sense out of the heretofore unreadable and interrogating the very notion of readability itself. What do we read? How do we read? Or even more basically, what can be read?

Corazon Villareal's audacious move to locate translative meaning in the (almost) undecipherable spaces of aurality or the overheard rather than more concretely and absolutely on the printed text sets the tone for this volume's interrogation of readability. Lily Rose Tope's essay on the local movie icon Fernando Poe Jr. finds in his films the extra-literary space of the nation—still imagined—but in performative terms, quite outside of the print capitalist economies of its European counterparts. Ruth Pison's recounted chronicle participates in the larger project of writing a performance form, dance, into the national narrative that necessarily but seldom includes its unread peripheries. Carla Locatelli theorizes on the undertheorized spaces of travel writing and finds in the writings of contemporary Filipina travel writers the productive oscillations between narrative and representation that create the structurally complex clearings of spaces made our own. Reading the "paradox that is identity" in stories written for children, Lalaine Aquino finds both its instability and its "relative predictability as a process of becoming." Resisting facile reading, Florianne Jimenez argues in her essay for a less

than simplistic analysis of a local English textbook as mere colonial artifact and instead proffers its also countercolonial status.

These articles on texts that emanate from the Philippines, here conceived in its limited geographical sense as a fixed place, also create spaces where new knowledges are produced and new practices of reading are tested, liberating the unread and unreadable into legitimate objects of study. The overheard as a key element of translation of regional literatures, the action star as champion and embodiment of a fictive cinematic nation, the struggles of a regional dance company of keeping the integrity of art on the periphery, Philippine women's travel writing viewed by a traveling Italian woman, a highly-structured and thoughtful analysis of questions of identity in stories for children, a probing evaluation and critique of a high school textbook—all these essays represent a stretching of the limits of the readable, creating a new space in an old place.

The featured creative works in the volume swirl around the notions of space and place as well. There are poems concretely set in place (Haskell, Thumboo, Lacanilao), as there are poems that place on firmly Filipino soil, soul, or tongue (Manalo, Banzon). Some carve out time as space (Reyes), one vividly recounts the desertion of place into a new space (Chaves), and another playfully catalogs the creatures in the minute spaces of our daily lives (Abad). In all these takes on places and spaces, the limits of the poetic and the literary are laid bare. They read and make poetry from the seemingly unremarkable elements of daily life and the unidiomatic, even barely readable, grammars of everyday language.

“Every culture,” Michel De Certeau tells us, “proliferates along its margins.” In describing the productive energies of the margins, De Certeau's formulation of culture reverses commonsensical and more conservative notions of culture as that which the margins contain, that which is to be protected

from the barbarians at its gates. In its place, we find cultural creation at those very gates, at those margins where, again in De Certeau's words, "it swarms and throbs." The margins prove to be the dynamic spaces where culture is continually produced, the unread and unreadable spaces in which this volume thrives. While remaining steadfast to the rigors of critical reading, the contributions to this volume illustrate and make plain the idea of cultural production at its most dynamic by daring to read the unread or the seemingly unreadable that reside, not in the hallowed halls of the recognizable literary, but in the less-revered texts of daily life, or in De Certeau's terms, on "the froth on the long rhythms of language and history."

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<sup>i</sup> De Certeau, Michel. *Culture in the Plural*. Trans. Tom Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 139-142. Print.

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