

Reaction to Prof. Locatelli

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Thank you, Prof. Locatelli, for your interesting paper on “The Space of Travel Writing and the Filipino Gaze.” The Filipino as a traveler is a common sight—the Overseas Filipino Worker (nurse, engineer, shipping crew, entertainer, caregiver, *yaya*)—to name a few of the jobs of our countrymen abroad. It would be difficult to find a place in the world where there are no Filipinos working, whether legally or illegally. This area of study—the Filipino as a travel writer—should be a very promising field especially in the era of globalization.

Prof. Locatelli focused on the “narrative gaze” in Filipino accounts and the link between the creation or “scripting” of a space. While I have mainly studied travel writing during the colonial period (Spanish, French, and the British) in the Philippines in the 16th-18th centuries, it is interesting to read a paper by a foreigner analyzing the gaze of the Filipino women

travelers from 1905 onwards. Her study on the Filipino women travelers include Luisa Aguilar Igloria, Edith Tiempo, Kerima Polotan Tuvera, Susan Evangelista, and Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo. But the study is meant to go beyond the interrogation of the texts based on gender, imperialism, and postcolonialism. Locatelli studies the “writing” not simply as autobiographical narrative or creative nonfiction, but in the sense of how what the writers “see” and create in their writing define a certain conceptualization of the world based on their subject position. It contributes to a discursive formation and it cannot be simply homogenized in a global context.

Derek Gregory defines “scripting” as a “developing series of steps and signals, part structured and part improvised, that produces a narrativized sequence of interactions through which roles are made and remade by soliciting responses and responding to cues” (116). “Scripting” emphasizes the “production and consumption of spaces” that reach beyond the narrowly textual and “foregrounds the performative and brings into view the practices on the ground” (116).

Several factors may impinge on the essays of these writers: the purpose for traveling (work, study, pleasure, vacation, pilgrimage, or tour), as a worker, student, spouse, or family of a professional; the length of time away for the Philippines (alone or with family or friends; financial capability (subsidized by parents, husband, relatives, on a tight budget); a community or group of friends to blend in (during the duration of the trip). The Filipino traveler may have a list of places to visit (why these? sites transformed into “sights” according to Derek Gregory—from referrals, guidebooks, or friends who decide where to bring them and in what sequence) and extent of the feeling of displacement and loss of identity or homesickness.

We would need to consider the form of the writing—letters, diaries, books, newspaper columns, etc. and for whom it was written. Each day and visit to another place may become a significant day in the autobiographical narrative, situated among other narratives written by travelers to that same place. What the writer may “see” can be influenced by what she has read or heard about a certain place, and the need to define how her trip is different and significant from other journeys to that place. The economic and political situation of the Philippines locally and internationally would also be a significant factor in the writing—in the 1950s or 1960s, a time of relative economic prosperity for the Philippines, the traveler may be more welcome, more affluent than later travelers. If the traveler lives comfortably and is well provided for, or if on a tight financial budget and barely surviving, what the traveler sees and writes about will be defined by their “space.” These travelers could concentrate on: lessons learned, new insights, a comparison on conditions in the Philippines and abroad, relations with foreigners, a sense of displacement while studying or working abroad, and the need to find a “place” or community to belong to.

But for a traveler in the 1980s, 1990s, and perhaps even now in some cases, as an overseas Filipino worker, or a student pursuing higher studies abroad, these travelers face a very different world. You are suddenly a second-class citizen, a suspected TNT (tago ng tago)—someone travelling under false pretenses and who will suddenly disappear once he or she arrives in another country. A small number may travel as tourists, but many travelers now are from the provinces and going abroad for the first time simply for work purposes—some for a definite period of time, for others, perhaps as long as it takes. As the holder of a Filipino passport, you may be picked out of the line in immigration and questioned repeatedly as to your real purpose for travelling. You are on a tight budget and need to find work and send money home so the places you

“see” may be limited to your place of work, residence and places which have no admission fees. The narrated space of the OFW would be very different from a relatively economically advantaged tourist, professional, or student. I would agree with Prof. Locatelli’s assertion, that “travel literature should not be regarded as documentary information, but we must valorize the language and eloquence that articulate the narrated space.”

As James Clifford wrote in his “Notes on Travel and Theory” –travel is a “figure for different modes of dwelling and displacements, for trajectories and identities, for storytelling and theorizing in a postcolonial world of global contacts.” Travel is a way of situating the self that focuses attention on the places and geography to which he or she travels.

In her conclusion, Prof. Locatelli goes back to Dr. Gemino Abad’s notion of country or the “meaningfulness of living in one’s own clearing.” The double address of their reporting in their travel narratives—as a stranger in the new place that becomes inscribed into a “space” and the constant gaze homewards filled with memory and longing for a space which may be imaginary since they have been gone for a long time. The “cleared space” which is the Philippines may be different in reality but in memory and space it is still home.

Works Cited

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