

INTRODUCTION

T.S. Eliot asserted that newness is the condition of art: “To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art.” Discussions about the new are the lifeblood of our local literary circles, driven by emerging authors. Since the early 2000s, pioneering publishing houses like Visprint and Kestrel have provided venues for new writing, but there is even more freedom and experimental literary work in small press initiatives such as the Youth & Beauty Brigade and the all-female Gantala Press. A notable online publication is the journal *transit*, begun in 2012 and edited by poet Carlos Quijon, Jr. and other young alumni of the UP Writers Club. The journal’s name itself depicts the unstable ground on which what is new attempts to rest—everything shifts, changes place, and so the new is ephemeral as much as the desire for it is infinite. In one issue, Angelo V. Suarez defines newness as the ethical standard of literature; in another, Renan Laru-an concludes that “[T]he new bemoans *to be emerged* . . . we grapple with a language, *an image, a space* . . . In forming itself, it always turns to and *on* itself.”

The beauty of newness is that it is also, paradoxically, a kind of fiction, a forming. It takes daring. And it is as much a function of time and space as of culture and politics. Plots without conflict, known to Western-oriented writers as episodic plots or plotless stories, may seem experimental or postmodern, and yet such structures have long existed in Chinese and Japanese novels. Similarly, the narratives of Philippine indigenous groups like the *lumad* have always existed, and yet their stories are new to us because their voices are so often silenced by socio-cultural, political, and economic forces.

It is the desire for a voice to be heard that remains, even in the cacophony that is the internet, and it must be a testimony to this desire that at least three major fiction anthologies published in the last ten years—*A Different Voice: Fiction by Young Filipino Writers* (UST, 2007), *Hoard of Thunder: Philippine Short Stories in English 1990-2008* (UP, 2012), and the annual *Maximum Volume: Best New Philippine Fiction* (Anvil, 2015 & 2016)—bear the motif of sound in their titles. Vicente Garcia Groyon, editor of *A Different Voice*, remarked on the “liberal but not radical” position of many new writers, as well as their formal experiences in creative writing programs and workshops and prolific publication in online and international venues. In *Hoard of Thunder*, editor Gémino H. Abad observed the rise of bilingualism, writing from the Philippine regions, and writing by women. As for the editors of the ongoing *Maximum Volume* anthologies, Dean Alfar and Angelo Lacuesta, they make few remarks about the traits of new writers; instead, Alfar, who has been instrumental to the rise of speculative fiction in the last decade thanks to the annual anthology *Philippine Speculative Fiction*, celebrates the persistence of Philippine short fiction in English: “Every now and then, someone states that the short story in the Philippines is dead. . . These lines of argument have been proven wrong time and time again”.

BRAVURA: An Anthology of 21st Century Philippine Fiction, a special issue of the *Journal of English and Comparative Literature*, is the final result of years of work that coincided with major global and local upheavals, among them the rise of social media as a major force in the bid to sway public opinion, the election into power of violent, authoritarian leaders, and on

our end, the fire that destroyed the UP Faculty Center, longtime headquarters of not only the Department of English and Comparative Literature but also of other departments, leaving so many writers, artists, historians, researchers, and students reeling from a deeply rooted sense of loss and displacement. And to our editorial team—associate editor Emil Flores who was crucial to the screening phase, and editorial assistants Julie Jolo and Francis Ang who kept our correspondence with the authors alive—this made the anthology even more important, because the short stories here are stories of loss and displacement, as much as they are of recovery and coming home.

In his assessment of the Filipino short story roughly two decades ago, Jose Y. Dalisay described then new writers as having “no single, defining experience, in the way that the War or the First Quarter Storm was for their predecessors.” I doubt that any of us wanted a war for our generation, but we got them in spades anyway: information wars, civil and religious wars, the war on drugs, the war on indigenous peoples protecting their ancestral lands from militarization and corporate encroachment, the war on activists who have been tagged as terrorists, the war against the poor, who are the first to suffer under faulty policies and corrupt practices. Especially in these times, with the re-emergence of fascist, macho-feudal government leaders shutting down media outlets and controlling the airwaves, the technology of social media has interpellated us into the language of war. And yet the appeal of this technology has always been, first and foremost, the idea of connectedness. Everyone is wired together, for better or for worse; on the one hand the world and those we love are virtually at our fingertips, and on the other hand, our online connections lead to groupthink and fragmentation. The tensions between particularity and universality, exclusivity and accessibility, are in full view in this space.

Such tensions are entrenched in complex social systems and power structures with which the authors in this anthology grapple through their stories. Originally conceiving a periodic publication that sought to shine the spotlight on new Philippine writers in English, our department put out a call for manuscripts from Philippine fictionists of any age who had not yet published their first personal collections before the submission deadline. What distinguished the project from others that also featured up-and-coming authors was the amount of space ultimately given to each of them: roughly ten thousand words in total that put on display the range, skill, and vision of their storytelling. This anthology now hopes to be both a vital addition to the pool of literary resources for teachers and students of 21st century Philippine literature, and a remarkable sampler of bold literary talent that bravely engages with contemporary issues.

Similar to the observations of other anthologists, many of the authors here are affiliated with local and international writing programs and workshops. Social realism has ceased to be the dominant mode, with a growing number of writers choosing to use speculative fiction to tell their stories. But these writers are not limited by a single mode, either, as form is fluid in the hands of authors writing in globalized, pop culture-influenced, historically situated spaces.

These spaces are vividly illuminated in the stories of **John Bengan**, whose Davao, its people, and its visitors come alive in the metafictional narrative of “Slaughter Story”; in his other two stories, he puts characters from the masses front and center to interrogate showbusiness and public perception, interweaving pain and humor in the process. Also negotiating with a specific geographical locus is **Gino Dizon**, whose coming-of-age stories set in Pampanga read like lucid dreams, snatches of myth

emerging from the crevices of the volcano that had shaken the province. And then there are Makati and Samar as experienced by **Glenn Diaz**'s young urban professionals, one of whom is his recurring character Alvin. Historical and structural violence merge to chip away at the souls of these yuppies, whether they're talking to Americans from a call center floor or embarking on a train for the long commute home.

The draw of political and cultural settings is not lost on these fiction writers, as in those who are drawn to the terrible legacy of Martial Law. Writing stories that explore the traumatic fallout of violence, **Sandra Nicole Roldan** uses memory and sharply fleeting imagery to limn the decisions and relations of her characters. Then there are tales of memory and sacrifice as written by the youngest fictionist in this anthology, **Lakan Umali**. He weaves myth into both his science fiction and his realist story, "Creatures of Night and Flight," a coming-of-age narrative set in the time of Bagong Lipunan.

It is perhaps the appeal of speculative fiction that it can utilize a variety of techniques to reimagine not only reality but agency, as **Christine V. Lao** does in her lovely flash fictions and metafictional tales about women trapped in (extra)ordinary circumstances. Another gifted storyteller to anticipate is **Mo Francisco**, whose tales of loss and abandonment stay with the reader long after their keening, elegant conclusions. **Mia Tijam** also works with myth, playfully warping tropes and language in order to tell weird and fantastic stories about *engkantos* and lady-boys.

Rich language play is distinct in the realist fiction of **Paul S. de Guzman**, whose subtle humor sings contrapuntal to his characters' follies and wordless despair. **Francis Paolo Quina** defamiliarizes a love story with textual games in "Under Erasure" as he examines the end of an affair and the roles that characters play of fall into, a theme that extends to his other stories. **Lystra Aranal**, whose fiction is situated in diasporic writing, creates protagonists who both fixate on and evade their problem of not-belonging, their lyrical first-person narratives attempting in vain to mask their desires. A similar atmosphere of loneliness and longing pervades the speculative fiction of **Gabriela Lee**, from her post-apocalyptic microfictions to her longer stories of life and love as they happen far from home. Another kind of estrangement thrives in the internal worlds of **Kristine Reynaldo's** stories, where language creates exquisite philosophical crevices which her protagonists both cocoon in and transgress.

These authors give us a substantial taste of some of the best new writing in Philippine fiction. Some of them have produced their first books after this project began, and all of them will continue to tell stories, interpreting and interrogating other realities in their future publications. That their voices ring clear in this anthology is the greatest pleasure that we can offer the reader.

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