Likhaan Journal

Introduction (2007)
One Hundred Years of Leadership in Literature

FOR THE PAST one hundred years, no Philippine university has produced as splendid, as significant, and as sustained a crop of literary work and talent as the University of the Philippines. It's quite a claim to make, but it just so happens to be true. Other major Philippine universities—the University of Sto. Tomas, Ateneo, Silliman University, and La Salle—have all made important contributions to Philippine literature, and continue to produce new works of great vitality. But UP's preeminence in creative writing and criticism over most of the 20th century and well into this new one—particularly in English—is a fact of our literary history.

We are making this proud boast only to explain why, after a hundred years, we are finally emerging with a literary journal worthy of its precursors—the *College Folio*, the *Literary Apprentice*, the *Diliman Review*, and various other small literary journals and magazines (*Inkblots*, *Eleemosynary*, *Sitting Amok*). To have been here for so long with so many good writers and yet to have had no permanent literary journal seemed an odd, if almost criminal, oversight.

Thankfully, as part of the celebration of the university's centennial in 2008, the administration of the University of the Philippines Diliman saw fit to approve and support a standing proposal by the UP Institute of Creative Writing to publish *Likhaan: the Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature*—not only for UP-based writers but, in consideration of UP's position in the nation, for all Filipino writers, in both English and Filipino (and perhaps other Philippine languages, in future issues).

University-based writers in the Philippines are, in fact, not engaged in a competition with each other. The literary arts are unlike athletics; there is no fixed bar to leap over, no longstanding record to break. Philippine literature has been much too involved with language, class, and more recently with gender to find time for campus intramurals; if it has any competition to worry about, it is John Grisham, Danielle Steele, and Harry Potter, who all compete for the same barely disposable peso.

But academia has also undoubtedly had much to do with the survival and growth of creative writing in the Philippines over the past century—particularly these past four or five decades, when martial law crippled literary publishing (and much of the critical spirit that animated it) in the 1970s and shunted creative writing to the universities, where it continued to flourish, albeit without much of an audience.

Two major factors accounted for the growth of campus writing in postwar Philippines: the initiation of national writers' workshops by UP and Silliman in the early 1960s, followed by many other university-based workshops in the 1990s, and the institution and popularity of degree programs in creative writing, culminating in the offering of a full range of programs from the bachelor's to the master's and PhD programs at UP. Creative writing centers—such as UP's Institute of Creative Writing, and similar centers in La Salle and ust—were also established to provide university-based writers with a more formal sense of community and with the

institutional resources to undertake training and publications projects. Silliman, Far Eastern University, and Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology, among others, have likewise provided a nurturing atmosphere to creative writers.

And although no contemporary campus-based writers' organization has yet managed to achieve the cohesion and the cachet of the UP Writers Club established by Jose Garcia Villa, F. B. Icasiano and 11 other undergraduates in 1927 or the lifelong camaraderie of the the "Veronicans" of the 1930s, the "Ravens" of the 1950s, and the "Caracoans" of the Philippine Literary Arts Council of the 1980s, such organizations—most notably UP Quill—have continued to emerge and to nurture new talent.

UP has had a long tradition of excellence in creative writing in English, producing and sheltering a formidable roster that included—just to name a few of those now departed—Jose Garcia Villa, Paz Marquez Benitez, Angela Manalang-Gloria, Arturo Rotor, Francisco Arcellana, NVM Gonzalez, Bienvenido Santos, Manuel Arguilla, Estrella Alfon, Ricaredo Demetillo, Manuel Viray, and S.V. Epistola. With English rising as the language of the elite just before and after the War (as it is today, with a vengeance), and with UP as the university of the country's intellectual if not its economic elite, English flourished in the fertile soil of Padre Faura and Diliman.

Writing in Tagalog/Filipino—then considered déclassé and practiced in UP only by such hardy pioneers as Teodoro Agoncillo (before he shifted to history) and his wife, the short-story writer Anacleta Villacorta—found refuge in the downtown universities, there to be forged by explosive talents of another sensibility, and not until the nationalist surge of the 1960s would UP prove more welcoming and encouraging to the writer in Filipino. That crop—quite a few of them converts from English—would include Ricky Lee, Lilia Quindoza, Fanny Garcia, Delfin Tolentino, Heber Bartolome, Rosario Torres-Yu, Edgar Maranan, Aida Santos, Hermie Beltran, and Romulo Sandoval.

But even as it would do much to define the Philippine literary canon of the 20th century—and later, through critical theory, to its debunking—the University of the Philippines has been different from its academic peers, different in its toleration—nay, its worship—of the freethinker, the iconoclast, the revolutionary. Beholden to neither priest nor politician, UP has encouraged and protected an atmosphere of experimentation, debate, and resistance that, perhaps more than any other single factor, has accounted for the plenitude and variety of literary creations to have come out of it. As an institution that has never quite been in total agreement with itself and where critical inquiry has been elevated to a fine art, UP has not and could not have imposed restrictions on thought and expression, providing a safe haven for dissident artists even under martial law.

Today UP continues to be the Philippines' main champion and domain of creative writing, through the icw and its programs, the National Summer Writers Workshop, the CW degree programs (and, in Filipino, the certificate as well) of the College of Arts and Letters, the literary publications of the UP Press, as well as the sheer number of its faculty members and students who have distinguished themselves in various local and international awards and competitions. Several National Artists for Literature—Carlos P. Romulo, Francisco Arcellana, NVM Gonzalez, Virgilio Almario, and Bienvenido Lumbera—have been associated with UP, as have standouts

such as icw (or then Creative Writing Center) directors Alejandrino Hufana, Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio, Gemino Abad, Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, and V. E. Carmelo Nadera, and former College of Arts and Letters Dean Rogelio Sicat. (For the full roster of current icw associates, please see the staff box.)

For several years from the late 1990s onward, the icw published an annual *Likhaan* series of the best published work in the Philippines in several genres: fiction, poetry, drama, and criticism. The realities and challenges of literary publishing for a chronically small readership soon rendered that activity terribly uneconomical. Besides, these works had already been published, and UP was merely compiling its chosen selections of representative works.

And thus *Likhaan: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature* was conceived, to invite and to showcase the best of new and unpublished Philippine writing in English and Filipino. It is a journal of Philippine—and not just university—writing; by this we mean creative writing of any kind that has some vital connection to Filipino life and Filipino concerns, no matter who writes the piece or where it is written. It will be launched as an annual, although—once a certain standard has been set and a readership developed—a semestral or quarterly journal should be possible in the future.

The editors received a total of 225 submissions—128 in English, and 97 in Filipino. These totals comprised 54 stories, 59 suites of poems, 14 essays, and one play in English, as well as 55 stories, 25 suites of poems, 16 essays, and one play in Filipino. We had not asked for plays for this first issue, thinking to reserve that for later; but finding ourselves with excellent entries we decided to include at least one, invoking editorial prerogative. We had also reserved a slot for an excerpt from a graphic novel—*Likhaan* will actively encourage new forms or genres of literature—but perhaps because of the relative novelty of the genre or more likely the inexactness of the parameters we gave—we'll do better as we learn—we received no submissions in this area.)

To ensure the highest quality of submitted material, the icw associates voted for a refereed publication, with referees chosen from the most accomplished and respected writers, critics, and academics from within and without UP. These referees worked "blind," with all entries submitted to them anonymously. By internal agreement, no icw associate submitting an entry served as a referee in any category; neither did the editors. For its part, the UP Diliman administration committed resources that would reward accepted work at the highest rates, and has pledged to sustain support for the journal over the next several years.

As to be expected and desired, there were differences in the criteria between the readers for each of the genres. These choices become additionally important in that they, in effect, define the critical canon of our times. When we say that our readers looked for—as they did—a certain "excellence of form and significance of content," they bare not just their choices but themselves to the scrutiny of others. That said, we relied in the end on the catholicity of our referees, on their own vast reading, and on their awareness of the many different ways of seeking and establishing merit in a work of the imagination.

Charlson Ong's excerpt from his novel *Banyaga: A Song of War* is a powerful account of exile from childhood and its original grace, brotherly devotion, misfortune, predestination, molestation,

an ill-fated boy taking wing in the end. All throughout the gloomy smell of incense and guttering candles pervades, alongside intimations of Peking Opera costumery and music. The storytelling is vintage Ong: robust and dramatic, but infused with the wistful magic and authority of the traditional tale.

"An Epistle and Testimony From June 13, 1604" by the Ateneo graduate Douglas Candano is a reassurance of sorts that the older Ong's "Chinoy" or Chinese-Filipino project is in good hands. This fabulistic narrative clearly draws on the friar-concocted *cronicas* and *relaciones* in Blair and Robertson, and has succeeded for the most part (and despite a few historical lapses we can yield to the fiction) in appropriating their voice.

Socorro Villanueva's "Foggy Makes Me Sad" is the most elegantly narrated and clear-eyed of the lot, a restrained, well-paced middle-class family drama evoking Amy Tan in the feminine continuum it presents of Lola, Mama, Tita, and the daughter, whose innocence is both burden and gift. Other than its elegiac recollections of a lost (and breatheable) Baguio, it is memorable for the twist in the end, cruel and terrifying though it may be. A painter and book designer with a background in psychology, Villanueva has an unerring eye for significant detail, more than capably illumined by her masterful language and urbane but sympathetic sensibility.

Alexis Abola's personal essay, "Pilgrim of the Healing Hand," is a kind of travelogue recording an actual trip from Cubao to Lucena. The physical journey is paralleled by a quest for coherence, for meaning in disparate facts and events. While its insight that fiction is neater than life is certainly not new, the details of his journey are, as well as their juxtapositions against each other, and the unique and, for many city-dwelling Filipinos, strangely collective story they tell. The interesting suggestion here is that, like many writers and artists, Abola—a professor of English at the Ateneo whose quiet fiction has also earned him critical attention—must himself have been hurt by life
into art.

Gemino Abad's essay on Fernando Maramag historicizes this early Filipino Anglophone's poetic utterances, arguing for their continuing relevance in relation to the question of a "Filipino poetry *from* English." This, of course, is Abad's famous and impassioned hypothesis, which he pursues once more in this essay: what Filipino poets write is not in English, but from it, inasmuch as their imaginations cannot be said to be constituted linguistically, being pre-verbal and pre-symbolic.

Mikael de Lara Co's suite of poems impressed our readers for their "raw nerve tempered by passages of lyric articulation." His work was "sensitive to the urban mood of rush, frenzy, and agitation," and was "set apart by its rude, jagged music." Another reader took note of "a poem full of enjambed lines, as though holding itself tight against the threat of loss or change or suffering. The central images of wind and leaves start off as literal physical details which, in due course, attain a resonance, convincing because gradually built up."

The poetry of Joel Toledo—a recent winner of Britain's prestigious Bridport Prize and among our finest new poetic voices—is a sustained feat in the lyrical mode. The various poems ring out in different tonal registers, each one well-crafted, and everyday matter gains a philosophical dimension through the poet's meditative lens. Demonstrating perfect poise and subtlety, a Toledo

poem does not rage against the dying of the light, but is quiet and accepting, coming to fullness without bombast.

The even younger Raymond de Borja's suite was found by the readers to be "fearless in its attempt to fuse seemingly unrelated cognates of poetic thought, and inventive in language without straining the given idioms. His "The Limits of Archaelogy" probes the limits of reconstructing and understanding a past life, or way of life. There are only bones, finally; death and disruptions are forever.

The selections in Filipino display an equal richness of talent and material, and a fine blend of mastery and innovation. Of nearly a hundred works submitted to the journal, the referees chose "Iluminado at Iba Pang Tula" by Francisco Arias Monteseña; "White Love," a one-act play by Rene Villanueva; three short stories, "Rayuma" by Alwin Aguirre,"Huli" by Catherine S. Bucu, and "And Heredero ng Tribo Hubad sa Isla Real" by Mayette Bayuga; an excerpt from the novel *Minsan sa Binondo* by Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio; and a critical essay, "Haibun: Panimulang Pagpapakilala at Pagpapalaya sa Panulaang Pilipino" by Reuel Molina Aguila.

Monteseña's "Iluminado"—the only poetry collection selected—is a display of verbal virtuosity by a writer with a remarkable linguistic repertoire in the national language. The play with, and of, words is "illuminating" which apparently is the spirit behind the dynamism in poetic expression and creation. The poet creates couplets in Filipino with ease and insight minus the florid (*bulaklakin*) and wordy (*maligoy*) style that characterize the writings especially of beginning writers in Filipino.

"White Love" by Rene Villanueva is a play that investigates and interrogates one of the most notorious episodes of Philippine colonial history: the attempt by then Secretary of the Interior Dean Worcester to muffle the freedom of the press and of expression to advance the interests of imperial America in the Philippines. Through the use of the "Koro" (chorus) as "conscience" and a foil character, Mateo, the Filipino who acts as Worcester's aide, Villanueva unfolds the drama of early American exploration in the highlands of the Cordilleras.

"Rayuma" by Alwin Aguirre is speculative Filipino fiction at its best. The writer uses his keen understanding of the quirks of tropical weather and merges this with an incisive description of the pain of longing and aging. The main character in this story is thus vested with an intense desire to live through it all—the nasty and unpredictable weather, and old age itself, in order to reach a destination and a dream.

"Ang Heredero ng Tribo Hubad sa Isla Real" by Mayette Bayuga is a peregrination story that combines mythmaking with clear references to anthropological excavations and historical accounts and taunts our sense of identity and reality. The protagonist in the story is baffled by the mystery of the naked tribe on Isla Real, only to find himself one among them. And like all members of the tribe, he does not know where fantasy ends and reality begins.

"Huli"—here pronounced "HOO-li", *malumi* not *mabilis*, and meaning "catch" or "caught"—is a story by a very young writer, Catherine S. Bucu, and uses the device of double intention ingenuously. The narrative depicts how a friendly and exciting fishing expedition for the

butanding (the Philippine whale-shark) turns into an extraordinary event for friends and lovers. An outstanding quality of this story is its unfolding of passion, courage, and drama on the high seas, making it one of surprisingly few Filipino stories that acknowledge and make use of the Philippines' archipelagic waters as a setting and factor in the narrative.

"Minsan sa Binondo" is a nostalgia piece by Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio—a writer better known for her drama in English and her advocacy of children's literature through her puppet troupe, Teatrong Mulat. In this excerpt from her first novel, Binondo, a familiar haunt in the imagination of many Manileños, is relived and revived. Memory is aided by a narrative that exhibits a childlike wonder for the old, innocent and untainted Binondo, long since lost to urban sprawl and decay.

All four pieces of fiction, it will be noted, are stories of setting, which means that the stories focus on places, events, and action. This is a welcome departure from Filipino stories that are almost always focused on characters (*tauhan*) who engage in struggles against all kinds of enemies, natural or manmade. In these particular stories, protagonists and antagonists are not clearly defined as the characters flail and flow into the setting, and are defined or define themselves in the process.

The essay in Filipino, like the poetry collection, also reveals virtuosity in and mastery of the Filipino language, which has established itself as a language for all classes and all occasions. With and in this essay, Filipino flexes its verbal muscle, demonstrating that it can be as colloquial and intellectual as any world language, as useful in the streets and the marketplace as well as in the classroom or laboratory.

Reuel Molina Aguila's meditation on the "Haibun" is a challenge to both poets and literary critics. Aguila compels us to see that *haibun* can deepen our mastery of our own poetic forms as well as liberate Filipino poetics from all manner of inhibitions and repressions.

In addition to these contributions, the editors also actively solicited two pieces that should serve as templates for future articles of a similar nature: an interview with National Artist for Literature Bienvenido Lumbera and a pictorial essay on the great, groundbreaking poet-critic Alejandro G. Abadilla.

While we have been deeply gratified by the quality and variety of this first crop—our most senior contributor, Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio, was born in 1930 and the youngest, Catherine Bucu, was born in 1986—we know full well that this journal can yet be better, sharper, and more comprehensive. We have more plans for other sections of future issues: the aforementioned inclusion of graphic works, for example, a bibliography of the past year's literary publications, and works representing or devoted to translation and children's literature.

All this, we are certain, will come in good time. In the meanwhile, and on behalf of the university that sheltered and nourished our own literary aspirations, we proudly present this first issue of *Likhaan: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature* as UP's initial contribution to yet another century of vibrantly imaginative writing by and for Filipinos, and for the world at large.

Introduction (2009)
Introduction
by Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

More than a decade ago, the Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz contemplated what he called "the troubles in the present phase of our civilization," and the resulting sense of *deprivation* afflicting contemporary man. Theology, science and philosophy are no longer effective, he said. "They are at best able to confirm that our affliction is not invented … The world deprived of clear-cut outlines, of the up and the down, of good and evil, succumbs to a peculiar nihilization, that is, it loses its colors, so that grayness covers not only things of this earth and of space, but also the very flow of time, its minutes, days, and years."

This led him to turn, once again, to poetry. "By necessity, poetry is … on the side of being against nothingness." His offering was the lovely volume, *A Book of Luminous Things*, his personal selection from the works of the world's best poets. Its purpose, he said, was "to remind readers that for some very good reasons, it may be of importance today."

A similar impulse must lie behind our own efforts to seek solace and salvation—from both the global international crisis, and from a bankrupt national political leadership—in the arts.

Our National Artists have shown us the way. BenCab has built—carefully, lovingly, and over many long years—a hilltop museum which offers, not just his own oeuvre, but the art of a people, from the anonymous tribal woodcarvers to the old masters. Virgilio S. Almario—with full support from UP Diliman Chancellor Sergio S. Cao—determinedly mounts annual festivals to revive interest in traditional theatrical forms which, though they might be forgotten in urban centers, remain vital and vibrant in the margins. Edith Tiempo rises from her sickbed to participate in a program that takes each national artist to different parts of the country—starting from his or her own hometown—to introduce them to the common folk. Billy Abueva goes in his wheelchair to be part of the "necrological service" at the Cultural Center of the Philippines to protest a decision that demeans the National Artist Awards themselves. Bienvenido Lumbera abandons classroom and lecture hall to appear on national television and argue the same cause.

In Likhaan: the UP Institute of Creative Writing, the late National Artists Francisco Arcellana and NVM Gonzalez, and Lumbera and Almario today, have worked tirelessly, alongside fellow writers, to ensure the steady development of a national literature, by providing invaluable support for successive generations of writers, through a myriad projects, among which are the annual National Writers' Workshop, the national literature portal (www.panitikan.com.ph), and numerous publications. The latest of these is this journal, of which this is the third issue.

Introducing the new journal in 2007, issue editor and present ICW director Jose Dalisay Jr. wrote of "showcasing the best of new and unpublished Philippine writing in two languages, English and Filipino."

The "best" literature—the best art—addresses itself to humanity's vital concerns and aspirations, offers itself as illumination. And the more urgent the pressures, the more beleaguered the dreams, the greater the need for art truly luminous.

Dalisay mentioned another imperative: what we value is writing "with some vital connection to Filipino life and Filipino concerns."

These guided our selection of the handful of stories, poems and essays to be included in *Likhaan 3.* It needs to be said that the quality of the entries received seems to grow—357 this year (158 in Filipino and 199 in English)—and to improve with each year. But budgetary constraints and page limitations forced us to turn down some pieces which our referees had deemed worthy of inclusion. Where other things were equal, we generally chose for the new. Implicit in the responsibility of a leadership role is the ability to recognize the bold and the innovative, even as it values the traditional and the exquisitely polished.

Thus, this year's fiction collection includes on the one hand, a chapter from Bambi Harper's forthcoming historical novel, "Águeda," and on the other, "U d Toilet" and "Media Presents: 'Savages'," irreverent metafictions by Zosimo Quibilan and Dustin Celestino (at 25, the youngest of the authors); both Rommel B. Rodriguez's straightforward realist narrative, "Kabagyan," and Chuckberry Pascual's comic, marvelous realist "Berde."

Former ICW director Gémino H. Abad, given a preview of the poems, observed that Edgar Maranan, Mikael de Lara Co, Joel Toledo, and Carlomar Arcangel Daoana are among the finest poets writing today in English … "naming everything that passes, leaving nothing to chance … stones turning in the mind" (Toledo), for what is written and composed is wrought *from* language, and the naming seeks "the true feeling and the fruited silence, (Co). Everything "the world our made-over home," (Daoana), our country and her history, the lot of the poor and oppressed, Nature, passion. "It may well be," Abad added, that, as Howard Nemerov says, the poet is 'a metaphysician in the dark,' and feeling is wider and deeper than thought, and what is sought is that most subtle and mysterious fruit from the roil and toil of daily living called *grace*."

Some of our referees, on the other hand, felt that it is the poetry in Filipino that best represents the "new voice in Filipino writing." Rolando B. Tolentino describes Joi Barrios' poetry as "mapanlaro pero matalas na pagninilay hinggil sa mga politika na isyu," poetry meant not just to be read but performed in collective action. He calls Frank Cimatu's poems, amusing yet arresting in their exploration of poetry as high parody, "napapagsanib ng koleksyon ang matulain na pamamaraan at malalimang pananaw sa pagtula, lipunan at kasaysayan na pawang kontemporaryo ang laman ng tula at kiling na pananaw." And he says that Kristian Cordero's rewriting of old Bikol stories are a postmodernist intervention, through modernist free verse, a good lesson in how to interrogate tradition, "kung bakit at paano tumula mula sa laylayan at rehiyon."

But perhaps the most interesting of the contributions are the creative nonfiction pieces. Jose Claudio B. Guerrero's "Talking to a Fu Dog on a Wedding Afternoon" combines a sad little tale of alienation and exclusion with erudite reflections on Philippine church architecture. Karl R. de Mesa, one of the earliest Philippine writers of gothic punk, traces his obsession with the genre to a childhood that strikes him now as surreal, in the remarkably candid "Report from the Abyss: Episodes from a Coming of Age in the Philippine Left." Eugene Evasco's narrative of confrontation with death—both his and his father's—is dark comedy, but it is also an angry tirade against the state of Philippine health service. And Jun Cruz Reyes's "Ang Galak at Lumbay ng Makata," a chapter from his forthcoming literary biography of Amado V. Hernandez, is full of digressions and ruminations about, among other things, early history, anthropology (fiestas and burial practices), and gossip about modern writers, both living and dead.

This year, an unprecedented number of critical essays have been included. Lumbera's "Versus Exclusion" is an important restatement of a dilemma faced by Filipino writers for more than a century now, a dilemma made sharper by globalization. Ricardo de Ungria's elegantly precise, highly technical critique of Cirilo Bautista's poetry is an interesting contrast to Vlad Gonzales's spirited presentation of the significance of "hyperwriting" and Sharon Anne Briones Pangilinan's polemical advocacy for the inclusion of lesbian literature in Philippine literary studies.

Finally, there is the interview with Gilda Cordero Fernando by prizewinning essayist, Rica Bolipata-Santos, a worthy successor to Susan Lara's interview of Edith Tiempo in *Likhaan 2*, combining as it does a close friendship with the subject and a deep appreciation and understanding of her contribution to the nation's culture.

As fine a harvest as we had hoped for when the project was first conceived each one a brave attempt to create order and beauty from tumult and uncertainty.

September 2009