

INTRODUCTION

BORDER CROSSINGS IN PHILIPPINE LITERARY AND VISUAL ART BY WOMEN

As they try to find artistic and literary space for themselves in Philippine literary and visual art, Filipino women have had to cross borders, virtually to trespass established and often rigid boundaries of gender, sexual difference, class, ethnicity.

Cultural differences loom up as, increasingly, Filipino women travel, work abroad or immigrate, crossing geographical boundaries and finding themselves in strange or unfamiliar cultures. But even cultures to which they have been exposed for years and which seem familiar and well known, become quite different when one has to live and work in them. This complex interplay of cultures and cultural influences lead women in particular to interrogate their identities, to redefine and reshape themselves. This seems to be an age of hyphenated identities: the Filipino-American writer, or even more broadly, the Asian-American artist. The essays, poems and art works in this issue illustrate the crossing and crisscrossing of multicultural influences on the lives and careers of Filipino women who live and work abroad as well as women who stay within our spatial boundaries but are nonetheless influenced by the multiple foreign cultures which have crossed our shores.

In "Dugong Naglalakbay: Transformations and Revelations," installation artist Genara Banzon gives us an account of her artistic career as she moves from her deep, comforting relationship with her early natural environment to her journeys in the outside world: to Manila, where she studied fine arts, to other parts of the Philippines, as she did her research, to Europe

2 *Introduction: Border Crossings*

and the U. S. on various travels and finally to the heart of New England where she has settled down. The title itself, “Dugong naglalakbay” is significant, indicating that her travels are not simply a crossing of geographical boundaries but are deeply internalized, affecting her very lifeblood, as it were. We see how deeply these cultural movements have affected her and how they have led to transformation and revelations that have given her a global perspective without ever losing touch with Philippine sensibilities and affections. Nothing has been lost of her earlier experiences as she layers and transposes images from her early natural environment, her personal narrative, the deep artistic influence, particularly of Gauguin, past and present history as well as various forms of media to form complex and evocative installations that address continuing issues of colonialism, race, color, gender and sex.

On another level are the semi-skilled workers who form the larger part of our overseas workforce. In her essay, “Savoring Romance Pinoy Style in Foreign Climes: Why Women Migrants Love Reading Tagalog Romance Novels,” Dr. Georgina Encanto notes the “feminization of migration.” Of the more than a million overseas Filipino workers in 2006, 75 percent were women as compared to 1980 when women constituted less than 20 percent of overseas workers. Most of the women work as domestics, caregivers or entertainers, although some are professional nurses. We need to ask how these women cope with cultural differences and attend to their social and emotional needs since, in many cases, the failure to accord to cultural standards especially in societies which traditionally look down on women often subjects them to violence and both physical and psychological maltreatment. To relieve them from the drudgery, monotony, discrimination and even imminent danger found in their jobs, many of these women read romance novels.

These stock romances with their invariably happy endings may be seen as cheap forms of escapist literature. But Dr. Encanto cites feminist theories that see romances as having an important social and psychological function because

reading them expresses or articulates women readers’ pent up anger and frustration over the contradictions and conflicts in the real world. Reading them thus dissipates or dispels the pent-up emotions that cannot be openly expressed and that might manifest themselves in more destructive way, through the imaginative “happy endings” or reconciliations of all the tensions or conflicts which couples in love have to undergo.

Her survey of returned overseas workers who read these romances validate some of these claims as readers speak of “relevance” and of learning

values and moral lessons from these novels which depict situations derived from reality.

Crossing borders inevitably lead to the problem of cultural identity. As a product of multiple cultures, the indigenous, the Spanish and the American, the Filipino has found the problem of cultural identity highly complex. This complexity is best seen in national artist Edith Tiempo's novel, *His Native Coast*. The novel deals with the problems of Marina, the daughter of an Ifugao woman and a Batangueno who is herself a teacher, a poet and an intellectual. In spite of these, the primitive forces in her blood impel her to go back to the indigenous culture of her mother, as that to which she really belongs. As Prof. Sylvia Ventura points out in her sensitive reading of the novel, "Here, There and Everywhere: An Analysis of Edith L. Tiempo's *His Native Coast*," this raises questions that are never resolved in the book. What would she contribute to the Ifugao culture as an intellectual and a poet? What sort of fulfillment does she expect? Yet, argue rationally as the reader might, s/he shares Marina's anguish and her deep need to escape her problems in the modern world by returning to a simpler, more nurturing culture.

Professor Ventura points out that the search for identity in *His Native Coast* is in fact, a double quest. The pronoun in the title refers to Michael Linder, a former member of the American troops during the war, who falls deeply in love with Marina. She rejects him but unable to readjust to life back in the U.S., he returns to the Philippines to work as personnel manager of the hacienda in Sta. Rosa. He meets Marina again (she is married to an executive of the hacienda) and tries hard to understand her viewpoint about reclaiming her indigenous identity. When Marina is abandoned by her crooked husband and flies back to the Cordilleras. Michael goes in search of her. He stays a month in the town, meeting the people, absorbing the rhythms of its life and finally accepting Marina's decision as irrevocable. He realizes that he too has felt "his own bit" of Marina's impulses but has come to a different conclusion, that "one need not be always rooting physically or metaphysically in any one place... one's identity was, in many ways, frankly ubiquitous." He packs up and goes back to his desk in Sta Rosa, a significant step in affirming his identity as he has finally come to understand it. Professor Ventura aptly describes it as "a homecoming of sorts, a transplant in the deepest psychic sense."

Then there is the problem of language. Filipino writing in English is undeniably multicultural. To write in a language not one's own is, no matter how elegant or eloquent such writing may be, a crossing of linguistic borders. It is also a cultural crossing because it involves shifting or relocating one's cultural perspectives. Many will argue that Filipino writers at their best have made English their own, appropriating its rhythms to accommodate the rhythms of native speech, reshaping its structures to express images of Philippine life

and culture. This may be true to some extent but it is not easy to cross the cultural gap between languages, much more use the structures of one language to express the rhythms and images of a culture not its own.

In her essay, Merlie Alunan, a successful poet in English, reflects how she felt the need, after a decade of writing in English, to write in the native language. She describes it as “a powerful homesickness for the language of home as I want to call it, a desire to write about ordinary people and their ordinary or extraordinary lives in their own tongue.” But what was the “language of home” for Professor Alunan? Part of her essay describes her linguistic loyalties as her family moved from one part of the Visayas or Mindanao to another. She describes in entertaining detail how she moved from her native, beloved Hiligaynon to other Visayan languages like Cebuano and Waray. Finally deciding to write in Cebuano, she faces the problem of translation into English, particularly for those poems which are, significantly “broad reflections on nationhood and identity.” To solve the problem, she decides to use a “persona” that would embody the Cebuano voice, a voice that “carries a whole world of attitudes and nuances peculiar to Bisaya.” Her persona uses a colloquial version of English which Alunan says uneducated Filipinos do use to express themselves authentically. We must read “Carmelita, the Cootie Girl,” a poem expressing the folk view of the Balangiga massacre, to agree that these innovations do work and adequately fulfill the author’s intent of conveying an authentic Bisaya voice.

The other poets included in this volume make use of other multicultural possibilities. In her poem, “Rindu,” Isabela Banzon deals with the complexities of love in parallel realities – the Malay and the Filipino which reflect on each other and give us a sense of connectedness, enhancing our awareness of a possibly shared Southeast Asian consciousness.

Rosalinda Pineda traces her growth as a young feminist activist, through a deeper consciousness of social inequities as seen in the life and work of common people like Aling Rosita and the Metro Aide, to her later years when she journeys to various parts of Asia and sees herself and her life concerns mirrored in the scenes of everyday life and work in these seemingly exotic places.

Aida Santos explores boundaries of sex and love in her poems. In “Pagsilong,” she links the refuge and shelter love offers to the need of the poor and underprivileged for a similar refuge, and invokes her beloved to join her to help these people renew their hope: “inisip kita na maging katuwang/sa paghahanap/ ng duyan/na paglalagakan/ng muling pag-asa.”

In “5 Berso / 5 Verses” she also crosses the border from despair to hope. Like the bilingual poets of old (*ladinos*), she writes the poem in two languages, Filipino and English -- one language alone cannot seem to measure

the depth of her emotions.

Of the multicultural writers and artists represented in this volume, there is no one more so than Maningning Miclat (1972-2000). She early learned the arts of Chinese painting and poetry in Beijing, China where she spent the first half of her life. Excelling in these arts, she held a Chinese painting exhibition at the Cultural Center of the Philippines and published her first book of Chinese poetry at the early age of fifteen. By this time, she was in the Philippines, where she turned her attention to writing poetry in both Filipino and English and also opened herself to other artistic influences, both Filipino and Western. Her poetry and her painting are closely linked; as her father aptly says: we may see her paintings as poetic expressions on canvas.

Another multicultural artist, Sandra Torrijos, is helping the U.P. Center for Women's Studies celebrate its 20th anniversary and the U.P. Centennial through her creation, "Dakila." This is a mosaic sculpture in the round, a larger-than-life figure symbolizing the Filipina woman and her major roles in Philippine society as mother, teacher, activist-nationalist, healer, preserver of nature and the environment.

Thelma B. Kintanar

Note

1. "Dugo" is Tagalog for the word "blood." "Lifeblood" is perhaps the best translation of the word in this context.