

READING AND WRITING CREATIVE NONFICTION

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For the longest time, academe did not take kindly to “creative nonfiction.” Even in the West, where the term has been in existence since the early 70s, its admission was a bit rocky at first. Leo Gutkind, who has been called the “godfather of creative fiction” (sometimes somewhat derisively), has written of how when he first introduced the idea of his teaching a course in creative nonfiction course in the University of Pittsburgh, his dean “proclaimed that nonfiction in general... was at its best a craft, not too different from plumbing” (Gutkind 2001, 171). What eventually swung the vote in his favor was the fact that the student newspaper—whose staff was interested in taking such a course—took up the cause. Since most of Gutkind’s colleague weren’t interested in fighting the student paper, the course was instituted. This was in 1973.

Venerable institutions like the *Vanity Fair*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker* still weren’t happy with the term, the latter preferring to refer to the stuff produced by John McPhee, for example, as “fact pieces”. And yet, as Gutkind reminds us, “writing nonfiction using literary techniques such as scene, dialogue, description, allowing the personal point of view and voice rather than maintaining the sham of objectivity—is hardly a new idea” (173).

The term for it in the 60s was “new journalism” or “literary journalism,” a term coined to describe such works as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* and Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. But Ernest Hemingway was already producing this type of reportage as a correspondent in Europe before World War II. (See *By-lines: Ernest Hemingway*, 1968.) Not to mention those famous diarists, the Japanese court ladies in 10th century Japan (like Sei Shonagon and the Lady Murasaki).

On a personal note, for all that I have been writing essays and many other types of prose nonfiction practically all my life, in my own mind, nonfiction has always taken a back seat to fiction. This idea was reinforced by the writing

college in the university that I went to for my undergraduate degree, where fiction and poetry were regarded as “literature,” and everything else was labeled “journalism.”

But in 1996, in his Ramon Magsaysay Lecture, National Artist for Literature Nick Joaquin declared that the old distinction between journalism and literature was no longer valid, that nonfiction had a much larger following not just in the Philippines but in the rest of the world, and that he personally never thought of his own writing as one thing or the other, simply as literature. Today, creative nonfiction is accommodated in literary contests (although the Carlos Palanca Awards still use the term “essay”), and writers of creative nonfiction are accepted in the university creative writing workshops.

This essay will offer a brief overview of the development of creative nonfiction as a literary genre in the Philippines, and then will focus on the literary memoir; in particular, the work done by women writers. I will also speak briefly about one type of literary memoir—travel writing, using Kerima Polotan and Sylvia Mayuga as examples. I will also touch briefly on my own experience as a writer and reader of creative nonfiction, and suggest questions that critics might ask when reading this type of creative nonfiction. This essay is written from the perspective of a practitioner, rather than as a critic.

Philippine Creative Nonfiction: A Short Overview

Practically all the varieties which are now included within the rubric of what is today called creative nonfiction are to be found in the writings of the essayists of the American Commonwealth, or what is sometimes referred to as the Pre-War Period, with the exception of the literary blog: social commentary, reverie, reflection, recollection, meditation, memoir, humorous sketch, journal entry, letter, travel, sketch, profile, etc. And while the contemporary reader may find some of these pieces rather naïve, both in the use of the English language and in the worldview they reflect, he will also be struck by the sophistication in the work of, for example, Francisco Arcellana, some of whose columns in the *Philippines Herald's Mid-week Magazine*, were as lyrical as his poems, and Francisco B. Icasiano (*Horizons from My Nipa Hut*, 1941), who adopted the persona of Mang Kiko, the humorous “nipa shack philosopher” to comment on the idiosyncrasies of his countrymen.

In the newspaper articles and columns of the Post-War Period, like those written by veteran newspaperwomen Yay Panlilio-Marking and Carmen

Guerrero-Nakpil, there is already a blurring of genres, exposition slipping painlessly into narrative, the so-called “human interest” feature sometimes morphing into memoir.

New Journalism or Literary Journalism came into its own in the sixties and the early seventies, with the writers of the *Philippines Free Press*, the *Philippine Graphic*, the *Asia Philippines Leader*, and the Sunday supplements of the *Manila Times* and the *Manila Chronicle*, attracting some of the best Filipino writers in English, among them, Nick Joaquin (who sometimes used the pen name Quijano de Manila), Kerima Polotan, Gregorio Brillantes, Wilfredo Nolleto, Gilda Cordero-Fernando, Petronilo Bn Daroy, Luis Teodoro, Ninotchka Rosca, Antonio Hidalgo, Rosario Garcellano, Sylvia Mayuga, etc.

The most prolific, and certainly the pioneer, Nick Joaquin, produced every variety of nonfiction prose, including biography, history, profile, memoir, even an almanac, not to mention his voluminous literary reportage.

The martial law period (1972-1986) led to a long hiatus, but during the mid-80s, magazines like *The Observer*, *Who, Mr. and Ms.*, *Celebrity*, and *Panorama* began publishing the work of younger writers, like Conrad de Quiros and Sheila Coronel, who were to continue the tradition of fine investigative reportage into the 90s.

With the lifting of martial law, both media and book publishing enjoyed a flowering. Most of the creative nonfiction being published today still consists of essays (many of them published as newspaper columns or magazine features) which the authors later compile into books. I think the decision to do these compilations is most fortunate for Philippine letters, not just because of the excellent quality of the writing but because of the insightful social commentary it contains. Most of them have attempted to explain—perhaps to themselves as much as to their readers—why they write columns, to begin with; and then why they collect them in books. These explanations reveal the standard they set for themselves.

Sylvia Mayuga, for instance, has written:

Contemplation seeks to transform products of deadline pressure and the season's passions, history in a hurry, into wayfarer's landmarks in the continuing journey of a people. It is hoped that this collection and its portraits of a time, a place, and a people still caught in the

drama of survival, justice and self-determination will in some small way help to light a thorny way... (1992, 141)

And Randy David has said:

I write to condition myself to connect ideas—my stock in trade as a teacher—to the everyday world that I attend and help create as a human being. Writing is my way of remembering what I read, as well as of marking life's passing... I also write in order to remodel myself and to arrest my own continuities. In writing, I take up the challenge to veer away, whenever I can, from that which I had consciously and carefully cultivated over years of study and experience. Writing, for me, is like embarking on a project of self demolition so that a new one might arise from the fragments...(1998, ix-xi)

The Literary Memoir and the Travel Narrative

In the past, only prominent individuals were felt to have the right to write their autobiographies or memoirs, whose main value was seen to be historical and/or inspirational. Over the years, the genre evolved, with psychological probing and literary style taking precedence over social or moral ascendancy. And of course the most radical paradigm shift has been effected by the Net and its limitless possibilities for full exposure. Before the age of the Net, most readers expected autobiographical writing to present the lives of interesting people interestingly told. The democratic blogs have stood that expectation on its head.¹

In the Philippines, the existence of literary blogs has not led to an increase in the publication of literary memoirs. There are actually very few full-length literary autobiographies or memoirs. Maria Paz Mendez's *A String of Pearls* (1993), Bienvenido Santos' 2-volume *Memory's Fictions: A Personal History* (1993) and *Postscript to a Sainly Life* (1994), and most recently, *The Last Full Moon* by Gilda Cordero-Fernando (2005), more pastiche than memoir, and *Myself, Elsewhere* (2006) by Mrs. Nakpil. Then there are the unusual war journals of Dolores Stephens-Feria, *Project Sea Hawk: a Barbed-Wire Journal* (1993); and Pacita Pestaño-Jacinto's *Living With the Enemy: A Diary of the Japanese Occupation* (1999); and the war memoir, *Breaking the Silence* by Lourdes Reyes Montinola (1996). An unusual addition to this small collection

is Clinton Palanca's *The Mad Tea Party* (2002)—which contains a merry mix of short narratives, philosophical reflections, and witty observations on a wide array of topics, ranging from European wines to driving habits in Manila, to the travails of a restaurateur who happens also to be a teacher of literature—and which the author chooses to call an “autobiography.”

It is interesting that all the books mentioned were produced only in the last decade and a half, and that only two of the memoir writers mentioned are men. I have written elsewhere that the dearth of autobiographies probably has its basis in the cultural bias against airing one's dirty linen in public, and the importance given to preserving one's face and place in society. This may explain both the dearth of autobiographies and memoirs in general, as well as the more pronounced reluctance on the part of male writers to producing them.

More recently, however, we have seen the appearance of a different sort of personal anthology which represents a kind of new phenomenon in the local publishing scene. These are collections of short essays and narratives mainly by young writers, some of which were originally published as blogs. Thus, alongside established, much-awarded writers like Gregorio Brillantes, Sylvia Mayuga and Jose Dalisay, Jr., who continue to publish their excellent nonfiction, are *Wala Lang* by Bud Tomas, *The King of Nothing To Do* by Luis Katigbak, *Love, Desire, Children, Etc.: Reflections of a Young Wife* by Rica Bolipata-Santos and *Stressed in the City* by April T. Yap.

Publishers have also been coming up with thematic anthologies of creative nonfiction, which bring together writers of different generations writing on such subjects as the hometown remembered, heartbreak, and even insomnia and other such maladies.

One good result of these new trends is that they have reached larger audiences. The usual print run of a book of fiction is about 1,000 copies. For poetry, this may even go down to 500. But *Suddenly Stateside* by Marivi Soliven-Blanco has gone into several print runs totaling around 4,500 books. The light, breezy style and humorous tone which generally characterize these works appeal to the reading public of mostly young people. The fact that some of the authors are not part of the literary canon seems to work for them rather than against them. It's like logging into someone's blog.

I confess to a bias for literary memoirs. Quite apart from the delight that all forms of good writing offer, I see them as chronicles of their time. Though not all memoirs are social history, I agree with William Zinsser that “a *good*

memoir is always social history” (1995, 12). Regardless of their faithfulness to “facts,” accounts of personal lives offer glimpses of the larger picture, the milieu against which the personal dramas unfold.

Though this seems fairly obvious, critics are only now beginning to pay attention to this. For instance, Jennifer Jensen Wallach has made a strong case for the literary autobiography as historical source material.

Few students of autobiography have been interested in what the genre can reveal to us about a knowable past. Conversely, although historians have continuously utilized memoirs as historical material, they have done so without benefit of a coherent theoretical framework, treating autobiography as if it were just another primary source. (Wallach 2006, 446)

The point she makes is that what is called “life writing” provides an enriching dimension to our understanding of history in ways that no other material does. But for it to do so, the reader must both alter his/her concept of what “historical understanding” means, and acquire an understanding of literary style and how it works.

...For there are certain aspects of historical reality that can best be captured by artfully wrought literary memoirs. Skillful autobiographers are uniquely equipped to describe the entire universe as it appeared from an acknowledged perspective, as well-written life writing has the ability to portray the complicated interplay between the thoughts and emotions of the historical actor. ... The well-crafted memoir enables us, in a way that no other single historical source can, to re-experience the affective and cognitive inside of a historical moment. (446-448)²

She adds that the “artful use of literary language... not only make the literary memoir more interesting to read, but actually heightens the author’s ability to represent lived experience” (450).

This is not to claim that memoirs should be read as literal historical fact. Memory is, of course, a treacherous affair. The imagination might embellish or distort, in the interest of more effective storytelling, i.e., in the interest of art. And writers of nonfiction who also write fiction are more sharply conscious of this than any reader.

Doris Lessing, who has written both novels and autobiography, is only one among the numerous writers who have mentioned their amazement at the discovery that someone who lived through the same experience as she did (in this case, her brother) could not remember some things they did together which were among their most powerful memories.

Now, in a novel, it doesn't matter: memories true and false become part of the fabric of the story and for a while you become one with the psychotherapists and psychiatrists who say that it doesn't matter if your fantasies are not true... They are the product of your psyche. They are valid. If you are writing autobiography that won't do at all. So you sit there for hours, wondering. Is that true? Did I make it up? What is the truth? (Lessing 2006, 96)

The consciousness of the unreliability of memory is itself a form of hedge against outright fabrication. Thus, in autobiographical writing, "a claim is made for the truth-value of what the autobiography reports, however difficult it may in fact be to ascertain this truth-value in practice... [and] the autobiographer purports to believe what he or she asserts" (Bruss, cited in Smith, 90).

One type of writing which more and more Filipino writers seem to be experimenting with is the travel narrative. It is what I would consider a sub-type of the literary memoir. But Filipinos—or more accurately, *Filipinas*, since it would seem that, again, it is the women writers who figure more prominently here—don't seem to be averse to writing it. This may have to do with the genre's built-in constraints. A travel narrative is a personal account of the traveler's experiences in a particular time and place. The travel writer observes, reflects, does some research to validate or contradict or enrich her own impressions. *It need not get too personal.*

Again, on a personal note, I began writing travel essays because my husband had accepted a job with UNICEF, which meant lugging our children and our worldly possessions around the world. My way of coping with each of his new postings was to rush to the nearest bookstore and buy books about the country. In this fashion, I discovered the world's great travel writers: Lawrence Durrell and Graham Greene, Freya Stark and Jan Morris. I didn't actually intend to become a travel writer myself. I assumed that after the business of settling down and settling in was over, I could simply get back to writing fiction. But I found that I couldn't.

I think that to produce fiction you need to be *rooted*. My roots were in the Philippines, of course, but our gypsy lifestyle was causing us to drift farther and farther away. And I certainly didn't feel that I belonged in any of the countries in which we lived during those 15 years. I was always undeniably a stranger. Travel writing was, it seems to me, the inevitable choice. Travel writing doesn't pretend to a deep understanding of the land or the people or the culture in which I found myself. It doesn't stake a claim to more than the traveler's hotel room, or favorite bar, or desk in the office where he works, or at most, the house which she temporarily calls her own. The travel writer can only offer—and this with diffidence—impressions, observations, reflections, and always from an outsider's perspective.

When I began writing travel essays and travel narratives, there wasn't much of that sort of thing going on in the country. I had read Nick Joaquin's accounts of his trips to China, Russia and Cuba in the *Philippines Free Press*. And Kerima Polotan's accounts of her trips to different Philippine provinces. But I didn't think of them *as travel writing*. There wasn't a "travel writing tradition" to be accommodated to or resisted.

The earliest travel book by a Filipina is probably Maria Paz Mendoza-Guazon's *Notas de Viaje* (1930). She had the distinction of being the first Filipina to receive a high school diploma, and the first Filipina to receive an M.D. She categorically states in her opening chapter that she is traveling on her own funds. However, she acknowledges that the trip was made possible by the UP Alumni Association and the Supreme Council of the Philippines, which included among the members of the Educational Mission. Her book, she sees as a "report to my colleagues and to my country," an obligation to be fulfilled. And she proceeds to do so with dispatch.

This seems quite different from the tradition of travel writing by women in the West. Critics of travel writing by women in the west often focus on the subversive nature of, not just travel writing, but traveling itself. Travel and travel writing was regarded as a masculine activity, and tied up with the discourse of colonialism, of othering and exoticizing.

In her study of 19th century women's travel narratives, Lilia Marz Harper examines the lives and works of four such traveling women, who, being widows or spinsters, were "freed from conventional expectations" and chose to travel alone, a decision which "seems to have stemmed in part from a resistance to male influence and competition" (Sabiston 2002, 509-510).

Even Sidonie Smith's *Moving Lives: 20th Century Women's Travel Writing* harks back to the "ideologies of 'manifest domesticity' and treats of the travel of white Anglo-American women as a means of "negotiating cultural displacement through unbecoming subject positions" (Fish 2002, 672).

Kerima Polotan belongs to a different generation and a different profession from Maria Paz Mendoza-Guazon. Her travel essays and narratives have not been published as travel writing, but are embedded in three collections of the articles produced during a long career as journalist. This is fortunate, for it provides the reader access to the writer's views on a broader range of subjects than those covered by the travel pieces, and a deeper comprehension of the way her mind works.

The same is true of Sylvia Mayuga, who belongs to a younger generation of writers. *From Inside the Berlin Wall* by Helen T. Yap (2006) is a series of letters written by the author—incidentally a marine biologist teaching in UP—to family and friends when she was a student in East Germany. Jessica Zafra, the youngest of member of this growing tribe, contains accounts of travels undertaken as part of her job.

The "tradition" of travel writing by women in this country is being created by professional writers, mainly journalists or academics, who travel not on leisure tours or in search of adventure, but as part of their work. This will account for many of the characteristics of their texts. Though they might sometimes travel as tourists, alone or in the company of husband or friends, they see with the eyes of a reporter and critic, relying on facts as well as impressions, producing analysis and reflection as much as reverie.

The Travel Writing of Kerima Polotan and Sylvia Mayuga

Polotan brings to her creative nonfiction all her strengths as fictionist, of which among the most impressive is the ability to make people come alive with a few deft strokes, and to evoke a place with vividness and subtlety. She also does what, according to Zinnser, is "the essence of good writing" about other places. He describes it as writing "that's less notable for what a writer extracts from the place than for what the place extracts from him" (2006, 128). He refers to how new sights touch off thought that otherwise might not have entered the writer's mind.

There are strong traces of Emma Gorrez (Polotan's protagonist in the novel *The Hand of the Enemy*) in the persona created by Kerima Polotan for her travel narratives. It is Emma Gorrez's restlessness and disenchantment she records. And Emma Gorrez' ability to discover once again, in some small town's somnolent church plaza, or some deserted slip of shore, the precious gift of grace, and hope.

But this is not a facile optimism. The gaze is a sharp one, and misses very little, noting the price (70 centavos) of getting a shoe repaired by a little girl who looks no older than ten in a sidewalk in Dipolog (1999, 60-61); the mayor of Naga holding office in space borrowed from the Camarines Sur High School, in a building originally meant for athletes' quarters. The tongue is even sharper, cutting down both the rude, pot-bellied policeman and the tearful midwife from Pampanga who insists that she (Polotan) pull strings to help her bring her husband to San Francisco, because they "have nothing back home". Nor is there anything wrong with her other senses—the ear unerringly picking up tricks of speech, be it the American plumber's answering her call ("Honey, is your tubes okay?"); or the officious PC major's in the Iligan airport, shoeing people away from the presidential plane ("Git away, behin de pleen! Git bak, you peepol der, git bak!"). And the nose picking up both the scent of new bread in a small Laguna town (1998, 99), and peculiar odor of the preening men in the flashy festivities surrounding the coronation of the Shah of Iran ("Almost without exception, they were good looking, tall noses and deep-lashed eyes, sensually hirsute from head to foot, but hampered by that peculiar odor of mutton and ancient cavalry" [230]).

"Zonk worry," he said and leaned closer to give me the full force of his personality—living moustache and sensuous eyes and hair on his chest peeping through slightly unbuttoned shirt, sheer animal magnetism, or so he thought—and then he turned to the Iranian girl who had sought his help for me and spoke briefly in French. Between them I seemed to be the moment's rich joke, brown woman in baggy clothes hysterical over lost luggage and this descendant of the peacock, this worthy worshipper of Ahuramazda, this son of sons many centuries removed from the proud conquerors of Babylonia, Media, Egypt, Sistani, Armenia, India, Libya, Thrace and Macedonia, crooked his little finger and said, "Zonk worry, I zed." (1972, 232)

Sylvia Mayuga brings to her travel writing not just the journalist's tough inquisitiveness and the poet's eloquence and imagination, but the activist's passionate commitment. Of her many causes, perhaps the one closest to her heart is the fight to preserve the sacred mountain, Mount Banahaw, "what remains of a lovely, awe-inspiring watershed that is also a place of worship and a womb of Philippine history." Elsewhere I have described her fighting style as combining legend, hard facts, and a limpid lyrical style.

Suspension of disbelief was easy in a nippy mountain breeze under an embarrassment of stars and a full golden moon free of competition from neon lights. Even the convocation of bright ochre beetles around our camping lamps seemed drunk with a collective excitement we could not have put to sleep but for totally wearied limbs. It leapt up again in full strength as dawn came over Banahaw in pink, gold and violet hues as we uttered a salutation to the sun. In single file, we next planted seeds in the rice terraces called *altaran*—a place for altars—and trooped to the spot where the Lado hut once stood. There on bended knees, we recited a poem of dedication... (1995, 10)

Another place often revisited is Baguio and Sagada, to whom the author has special bonds, ties forged early in the 60s, on a first visit with William Henry Scott, lovingly returned to again and again, in good times (the Baguio Arts Guild's art festival, Fiber Web) and in bad (after the devastating earthquake).

But she has something to say, as well, of Palawan, Mindoro, Butuan, Davao. And always the journey is undertaken with eyes wide open, in full humility, and with a readiness to learn. Describing a trip south in the early 80s, she records her realization of something which encapsulates what lies beneath the country's seemingly insoluble "Muslim problem":

Through it all, the Christian layer of an identity causally labeled 'Filipino' was coming to a test. Traveling from Davao to Cotabato via Maguindanao in a busload of sarong-ed women and kopia-ed men became my first naked encounter with centuries of Philippine history—suspicious stares at a lone Christian Tagala who did not know enough to stay in Luzon where she belonged. 'Filipino,' I learned, is what a stranger like me is called in these parts, a name spat out when not used to frighten fitful children." (194)

When they visit foreign lands, Polotan and Mayuga are even sharper, funnier—truly the empire writing back. Too long have we been gazed at. These eyes gazing back wink, but do not flinch. Polotan’s chronicle of a writers’ conference in Bread Loaf is as hilarious as a TV sitcom. And Mayuga’s account of a French hotel’s glamorous receptionist’s attempts to dump them in favor of a white European family dismantles the romantic myth of “I love Paris every moment, every moment of the year...”

And in both of them the persona is an engaging character—sometimes whimsical, sometimes wry, often self-mocking, always attentive, and always engaged.

In my introduction to Mayuga’s latest book, *Between the Centuries* (2004), I wrote this:

One of the most appealing things about this collection of essays is the spirit of affirmation that underlies it. And it isn’t a blithe, unreflective, simple-minded optimism, but an affirmation carefully thought out and painfully arrived at, an affirmation clung to while staring unflinchingly at the monster. One way of describing it is that it is a love song to her country, the country which, in an essay on an anniversary of EDSA I, she called “a needy, irrepressibly creative country at the eve of the 16th anniversary of freedom, regained by breaking from the past on the wings of imagination.” It might also be said to be a love song to the world, proof positive that what is truly important to the people of a particular country is relevant to thinking men and women in the global village.” (Hidalgo. In Mayuga 2004, xiv)

I think the same would apply to Polotan’s work.

The travel narratives by both these women may be read, not just as marvelously wrought self-portraits but as delightful chronicles of a time and a place (or places), of the scandals that rocked them, the issues which absorbed them, of the people who touched the writers’ lives—briefly or lingeringly, peanut vendor and policeman, reclusive scholar and first lady of the land.

It is to be hoped that our critics will begin to give this growing body of work the attention deserves. A few questions they might ask of it are these questions, which have been asked by critics of travel writing elsewhere: what

are the similarities between fiction and travel writing, how do they intersect? What does travel writing do and how does it do it? What are the effects of encounter and border-crossing on gender, race, and national identity? How does the travel writer's working of the generic traditions/conventions of travel writing participate in the construction of both gender and identity? What are some of the problems and issues facing the scholar of travel writing?

Notes

1. It should be noted that there is some debate as to whether blogs should be considered "online diaries" (and therefore a kind of autobiographical writing) or not. Julie Rak, for instance, has called attention to the fact that weblogs "in the form of crude lists of useful links probably came into being a few years after HTML coded browsers were invented... In 1997, the term 'weblog' came into use for these pages and bloggers began sending information about their sites to Cameron Barrett's online lists, called 'Camworld'... These early weblogs were a combination of public service for other users who wanted a non-corporate guide to web content and an ideological backdrop for those links... Therefore, early blogs participated in the early ideology of the web as a non-corporate public space for individual expression." (2005, 170-171)

2. Over the course of the last two decades, the study of history has been emboldened, however insufficiently, by various theoretical trajectories such as poststructuralism and postcolonialism; at the same time, the notion of who constitute the proper subjects of history has been considerably expanded to include women, sexual and ethnic minorities, orphans, social 'deviants,' and many others previously consigned to the margins of history. (Antoinette Burton 2003. Cited by Lai. 2004, 673-676.)

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