

INTRODUCTION

Women's Studies and Feminist Practice in the UP DECL since 2000

Collected toward the close of the year-long 100th anniversary celebrations of the English department of UP Diliman in 2011, these essays and creative works, contributed by members of the English department, revolve around a core issue in gender and women's studies: the intersection of language, representation, and gender.

"Language reflects reality" is an idea that is often taken for granted. This is one assumption behind the motivation for the advocacy against sexism in language because the above idea easily extends to language reflects culture, and thus, reflects who we are, and subsequently, how we value those around us. On this basic premise, we critically examine and revise certain aspects of our language. In the English language, the move to eliminate sexism in the language is one of the earliest applications of a feminist consciousness in linguistics and in language studies in general. As a quick example, feminist linguists have pointed out the hidden assumptions behind the grammatical rule on certain nouns and pronouns standing for a universal application, i.e., "Man" and "he", which are really more cultural than morphological.

While the idea between language and reality may seem straightforward enough, there is another decisive dimension to this relationship that is not as apparent: "language constructs reality." That language shapes reality is an idea that ought not to be taken for granted. As carriers of meaning, language is a powerful tool for conveying, and actualizing, our intents and interests; it allows us to classify and differentiate things, in the process, understand what certain things are. Through language we express our feelings, thoughts and action; in the expression of these, we may in the process be creating emotions and ideas hitherto present or thought of. For example, prior to the coining of the phrase, and concept of, "domestic violence" in the UK in

the 1970s, people did not “see” the wrong or the abuse in wife-beating, even though such action was rampant and the person receiving the blows was in pain.

Paying close attention to the workings of language allows us to not only understand ourselves better but also to improve ourselves since the use and deployment of and meanings attached to language come from us as well.

That the works featured here all come from the UP Diliman Department of English and Comparative Literature (DECL), this volume then serves as a sampler of sorts of the DECL’s feminist and women’s studies-centered literary practice since 2000.

In June 2010, the DECL turned 100 years old. Founded as the Department of English, the oldest department of the College of Arts and Letters,¹ the DECL has a long history of contributions to women’s and gender studies in UP in particular, and in the country in general. Even during those years when “women’s issues” —other than hysteria — were non-issues and the idea of “gender” could not be imagined beyond its grammatical sense, i.e., the linguistic concept “grammatical gender,” the UP English Department has been home and breeding ground, if you will, to some of the pioneering and important figures in what is today understood as Philippine women’s and gender studies.

To name but a few, the acknowledged ‘mother’ of UP writers in English, as Franz Arcellana confirmed, Paz Marquez Benitez, was among the first graduates of the University in 1912. As a faculty member of the English Department from 1916 to 1951, Marquez Benitez influenced a generation of writers that eventually would make up the canon of Philippine literature in English; her influence was not only critical in honing the skills of the young writers but also in shaping the development of the field of Philippine literature in English as well. Among her students were: Loreto Paras Sulit, Paz Latorena and the male writers, Bienvenido Santos, Manuel Arguilla, S. P. Lopez, and National Artist for Literature (1990) Francisco Arcellana. Identified as the first modern short story in English by a Filipino writer, “Dead Stars” (1925) established Marquez Benitez’ position in Philippine literature, paved the way to an improved creative fluency in the genre and use of language, as it also demonstrated the Filipinos’ aptitude for English a little after only two decades of its importation/imposition.

The English language was not the only new import of the time. The participation of women in higher education and in ‘public’ life was considerably new, if not, radical enough ideas of the time, too. While Marquez Benitez, in the end, did not necessarily had to fight for her right to access higher education,² her performance demonstrated that women could easily compete with or be at par with men intellectually and

creatively, contributing thus to the early cracks, albeit small, made towards the demystification of the received notion of men being more ‘naturally’ superior to women.

Another important pioneering figure for Philippine letters, Angela Manalang Gloria, an alumna of the English Department, was also one of four women recorded *summa cum laude* graduates of 1929³ – there were a total of five *summa cum laude* graduates for the year. While her career in writing did not last long because of familial priorities when she became a young widow of the Second World War, the early part of it was a smash. As a student, she had built up a long rivalry with Jose Garcia Villa, later to be named National Artist for Literature (1973), that included competing for the literary editorship of the *Philippine Collegian*, which she held for two successive years.

In 1940, Manalang Gloria shook the literary circle with her poems titled “Revolt to Hymen” and “Querida”. The jurors of the Philippine Commonwealth Literary Awards were said to be aghast and called the poems “immoral” and “not making any sense,”⁴ respectively. Even though Manalang Gloria’s collection, *Poems*, was the only anthology of poetry in English published by a woman at that time,⁵ it was basically banned until the 1950s when it was re-issued as a student anthology but only with the condition that the author agreed to change one of the words in “Revolt to Hymen”: that of “whore’s” to “bore’s” -- that word which was considered the “most objectionable and offensive.”⁶

The words surely rhymed but clearly, the censors had no care as to what the word meant for the poem and how replacing it made the piece actually “not [make] any sense.” In fact, the word “whore” itself may even be the least subversive part of the poem. From the title on, subversion was explicit: it was a declaration of a rebellion or a revulsion against “marriage” in it being a revolt to Hymen, the Greek god of marriage. And this “revolt” could encompass both the concept and its daily living. It has to be remembered that at that time, the concept of marriage was taken to be *natural* and *sacred*.

All throughout the four stanzas of the poem, the narrator was extolling a sense, or a fact, of freedom found in being alone and on being unbound from the marriage pact. The first stanza likened this freedom to the peacefulness and calmness offered by a womb to an infant’s slumber. The second stanza described it as awaking without the dark, bitter, foreboding heaviness of the heart. The third, described both sides of the face free of the trace of bruising. And the last stanza, declared “being alone at last” and freed from the marriage bond that sanctioned the narrator’s being treated and used like a prostitute.

The lines “broken the seal” / “That marks the flesh no better than a

whore's!" could be read as: marriage was an authorization to use a woman's body, for sex, regardless of love or respect on the part of the husband and regardless of desire or willingness on the part of the wife.

This, the underlying idea: that marriage is no different from prostitution, would be the actual "most objectionable and offensive" content of the poem. But this remained uncensored, to the detriment of the censors. The subversion got through however because at the time, this idea, even the suggestion that anything essential, nay, anything at all could be wrong with, and in, a marriage was unthinkable; it was almost there were no words for such an inconceivable thought. And there were none. Or, perhaps, it was just that such words were never articulated.

And then, this poem came along. It was not understood. It didn't make sense, it was said.

By the 1990s,⁷ "Revolt to Hymen" would find a different appreciation. Among the readings or interpretations that came along, and which the critics accepted, were those about "marital rape" (Manlapaz 1996; 1998)⁸ and a metaphor about post-colonial relations (Banzon-Mooney, 2003). The interpretation of the poem being about marital rape was influenced, it seemed, by biographical research. According to the Ateneo Library of Women's Writing, which archived the works and materials of several Filipino women writers, that "among the personal papers and photographs" of Manalang Gloria were found two notebooks issued by the Bureau of Education and purportedly "appropriated" from the author's grade school son. The notebooks contained "early penciled drafts of [...] poems and various notes, some of which have faded beyond legibility," including an early draft of "Revolt to Hymen". As the ALiWW reported: "The draft seethes with anger at the experience of marital rape, and becomes a compelling read against the final version of the poem, where the poet successfully transmutes the raw display of rage into controlled but masterful spite" (ALLiW website).

In the latter decades of the 20th century, the English Department was among the first units⁹ in UP to institutionalized a course on gender. English 311: Seminar: Language and Gender was approved by the UP Diliman University Council in January 1989. This would be followed by the institutionalization of the courses, English 246: Gender and Genre in Anglo-American Women Writing, English 147: The Tradition of Women's Writing in Anglo American Literature and CL 182: Western Feminist Theories and Literary Practices¹⁰ in 1990.

In these early days of incorporating women's issues in course content and pedagogy, the only other unit in UP Diliman actively pursuing this

endeavor was the College of Social Work and Community Development (CSWCD), which started doing so 1984. In 1988, the University Center for Women's Studies, on the UP System level, was recognized by the Board of Regents at its 08 December 1988, 1017th meeting.

The efforts of the DECL to include women's creative works and feminist issues in its teaching continued on into the new millennium, with the institutionalization and refinement of the following courses. In 1995, four new courses were added: CL 108: Literature and Gender, CL 183: Non-Western Feminist Theories and Literary Practices, CL 184: Gay Writing and CL 284: Gender Issues in Literature, The Role of Gender in the Production and Reception of Literature. By the year 2003, the existing CL 154: Philippine Women Writers in English and CL 182 would undergo a change in prerequisite, and; in 2007, CL 282: Feminist Perspectives in Literature would have a minor change in title.

The 1990s likewise saw the publication of two pioneering collections of feminist literary criticism on the works of Filipino writers. *Women Reading: Perspectives on Philippine Literary Texts* (UP Press, 1992), edited by Thelma B. Kintanar featured critical works by the leading feminist literature professors of the DECL, Thelma E. Arambulo, Helen E. Lopez, Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, Priscelina Patajo-Legasto, and Kintanar, with the Dept. of Filipino professor and writer Lilia Quindoza Santiago, CSWCD professor Rosalinda Pineda-Ofreneo, and De La Salle University professor and writer, Marjorie Evasco, and Ateneo de Manila University professor Edna Zapanta Manlapaz and Stella Pagsanghan. The essays took-off from the perspectives and critical practice of Gynocriticism as they traced and established a literary tradition of Filipino women writing and critical practice.

The second collection, *Feminist Readings of Philippine Fiction: Critique and Anthology* (UP Press, 1996), by Sylvia Mendez Ventura, examined the presence of feminist consciousness and its repressions in the works of Lilia P. Amansec, Edith L. Tiempo, Tita Lacambra-Ayala, Kerima Polotan and Ines T. Cammayo; the second part of the book was a critique of the representation of women by male writers, Nick Joaquin, Rony V. Diaz, Gregorio C. Brillantes, and Jose Y. Dalisay, Jr.

The current DECL projects featured in this *RWS* are arranged by the academic programs of the department. The first two essays are from English Studies: Language; the next two, from the Comparative Literature program, followed by two essays from the Anglo-American program and then, from the Creative Writing program.

While the first two collections may have been influenced by the critical practice of the US and British second wave of the feminist movement and have employed these perspectives as products of their time,

the succeeding essays are pretty much products of their time too, in terms of issues and theoretical and methodological approaches undertaken even as the authors of these new essays and creative works continue the tradition of feminist engagement started by the women of the DECL nearly a hundred years ago.

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NOTES

¹ Initially called the College of Philosophy, Science and Letters upon its establishment in 1910, it was renamed the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 1911; and, in the 1970s, the college came to be called the College of Arts and Sciences until its reorganization and renaming into the College of Arts and Letters in 1983.

² The public school system and the establishment of the state university that was open to both men and women were the legacies of the American colonial rule.

³ UP Alumni Association, *UPAA 2006 Yearbook* (Quezon City: UP Alumni Association, 2006).

⁴ In *Bulawan* (NCCA, 2001) as cited by Isabela Banzon Mooney, "Challenging Traditions: Prosody And Rhapsody In The Poetry Of Angela Manalang Gloria," in *In Focus* (Nov. 10, 2003), National Commission on Culture and the Arts website, <http://www.ncca.gov.ph/about-culture-and-arts/articles-on-c-n-a/article.php?i=23&subcat=13>

⁵ ALiWW Ateneo Library of Women's Writing Website, http://rizal.lib.admu.edu.ph/aliww/english_amgloria.html

⁶ *Ibid.*, Banzon Mooney.

⁷ By the 1990s, society had gone through the bold, *bomba*, critical films of the 70s and the political and anti-neo-imperialist activisms and the women's movement of the 80s, among other social transformations.

⁸ Edna Zapanta Manlapaz, *Our Literary Matriarchs, 1925-1953* (QC: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996); and "The Impact of English on Pre-War Filipino Women Writers," *Budhi* 3 (1998): 257-267.

⁹ Which may mean, in this case, to be a department or college

¹⁰ One hundred-level courses are undergraduate courses, while 200-level ones are Master's, and 300-level titles are Ph.D. courses.