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# The Filipino Writer in the United States

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Early in the sixties, having served on the Voice of America's staff in New York, Celso Carunungan published there his novel, *Like a Big Brave Man*, whose protagonist Crispin comes of age by reconciling the contending cultural pulls of Philippine and American life. Nevertheless, back in Manila, Carunungan joined his countrymen in complaining of the limited attention being paid Philippine literature by U.S. publishers.<sup>1</sup> That collective complaint did not fall on deaf ears. In 1960, my special Philippine issue of the *Literary Review* had already appeared. So also, in 1962, had my edition of *Modern Philippine Short Stories*; and in 1966, my *New Writing from the Philippines: A Critique and Anthology*.<sup>2</sup> A special Philippine issue of *Literature East and West* (1965) was followed by a vernacular issue in 1969.

The number and caliber of such "advertisement," calling attention to a cross Pacific literary phenomenon, hardly signified complete indifference on the world's part, although two Filipino writers not yet included in these earliest collections angrily responded with "crablike" disparagement far too common among *kabahayan critics*. Perhaps that negative attitude was born of the frustrating competition for print space in their homeland. Bino Realuyo says, "Literature is a luxury for most Filipinos, whether it is reading or writing."<sup>3</sup>

It is precisely such annoyance with alleged cultural cronyism—the perceived requirement that one's labors be "sponsored" by someone powerful (and sometimes insensitive to the most intangible literary values) within the Establishment—that has led so many novelists and poets to write in English and to find self-assurance through publication in a sometimes friendly, though foreign, land. The search for greater appreciation abroad is reinforced by the elevated image of colorful Emigrant #1, Jose Garcia Villa, that first Philippine National Artist who nevertheless often acted as if he had broken not just

national but even cosmic boundaries: Have Come, Am Here. Must Go Find My Wings.

Whatever their motives, writers in English have persisted; and the degree of their still evolving success has been measurable, particularly during the nineties. Though some of their creative energy may have been influenced by resistance to the repressive, censorious regime of the Marcoses, and have been re-inspired by centennial reconsideration of wars against Spain and the United States for national recognition, surely the maturing talent of many individuals seeking to express the very selves they were in the process of forming and discovering has been creating, in a variety of harmonics, the voice of the nation itself. The reconnaissance is over; the renaissance is well underway.

One cannot but be impressed by the literary record of Filipinos-in-America for the last decade:<sup>4</sup>

Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept*.

Nick Carbo, *Secret Asian Man*; El Grupo McDonald; ed. *Returning a Borrowed Tongue: An Anthology of Filipino and Filipino American Poetry*; ed. (with Eileen Tabios) *Babaylan: An Anthology of Filipina and Filipina American Writers*.

Luis H. Francia, ed. *Brown River, White Ocean*; ed. (with Eric Gamalinda) *Flippin': Filipinos in America*.

M. Evelina Galang, *Her Wild American Self*.

Eugene Gloria, *Drivers at the Short-Time Motel*.

Jessica Hagedorn, *Danger and Beauty; Dogeaters; The Gangster of Love*; ed. *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*.

F. Sionil Jose, *Three Filipino Women; Sins; Dusk; Don Vicente*.

Bino A. Realuyo, *The Umbrella Country*; ed. *The Nuyor Asian Anthology: Asian American Writing about New York City*; ed. *"Am Here": Contemporary Filipino Writing in English*.

Ninotchka Rosca, *Twice Blessed*.

Michelle Cruz Skinner, *Mango Season*.

Lara Stapleton, *The Lowest Blue Flame Before Nothing*.

Linda Ty-Casper, *DreamEden*.

Marianne Villanueva, *Ginseng and Other Tales from Manila*.

Bert Florentino requires separate attention: famed playwright and founder of the *Peso Book* and *Storymasters* series, in New York under the rubric *Ilustrado* he has now begun cyberspace productions, including *Rizaliana*, selected texts from *Balintataw*, interviews with Filipino/Filipino American writers.

## The Umbrella Country

Among Filipino producers of the printed word in America, Sionil Jose leads with his entire Rosales epic gradually appearing under the Random House/Modern Library imprint. On a different scale it is Realuyo's first novel, *The Umbrella Country*, which has attracted rare admiration. Both Jose and Realuyo are writers with a strong, broad (non-ideological) social conscience. Jose can present the action and motives of both rich and poor; Realuyo so far has provided access only to the latter, but his sensitivity to language (he has also published in America, a book of poetry entitled *In Spite of Open Eyes*) provides intimate nuances which prevent his principal characters from seeming pitiable stereotypes. His language serves rather than competes with the authenticity of his characters. They are as they are, but their starkness comes in multiple shades of chiaroscuro. (It should be pointed out that, when Realuyo became guest editor of the second special Philippine issue of Fairleigh Dickinson University's *Literary Review*, Spring 2000, he entitled that issue "Am Here." Admittedly he was proudly imitating Villa's proclamatory *Have Come, Am Here*. Yet "here" becomes not America or the New York metropolis of the *arriviste*, but "Wherever I am." The title therefore could just as well have been simply "I am," which is really the theme of that issue and of many other Philippine American writers. "Here" is "Anywhere; everywhere. See me seeing you!")

*The Umbrella Country* occurs during the endangered days of martial law; but with only slight variations its human environment could just as well depict the country's malaise under each of the three presidents who have succeeded Marcos: Aquino, Ramos, Estrada. Although the San Juan family of critics might prefer to interpret the "Philippine condition" in this novel as the result of class warfare (Epifanio San Juan, Jr.) or, less inappropriately, of gender imbalance (Delia San Juan), any such narrow agitprop emphasis would wrench the novel's alignment away from the original author's purpose and constitute an abuse as severe as those dramatized in the novel itself.<sup>5</sup>

Characters in *The Umbrella Country* undeniably come from Manila's underclass ("casual" construction workers, often drunkenly inflicting their failures on blameless wives and children). But in the midst of all that evil flickers a heartening bond beyond bondage: between mother and children, between adult sisters, between young brothers—between blame and *mea culpa*. The same umbrellas that provide protection

against the typhoon's torrents keep off the biting sunlight as well. They are the shield against excess; they are the balancing device safeguarding the tightrope walker. Whatever compassion, whatever human communion defends the staggering self against despair: *that* is the umbrella image secretly lodged in Realuyo's imagination and released with a subtlety that, yes, is vulnerable to manipulation by the hasty Uncritic but that, yes, ultimately is inviolable.

Picture the monocular Director in his weatherproof office in the States, which he "heroically" chooses to call "the belly of the beast"; and though himself an empowered, sometimes hegemonic expatriate: consider how he will mock Daddy Groovie's dream of escape-to-America. Yet Realuyo, who is anything but naïve, can admit that America "saved me and my family from poverty"; can be appreciative of opportunities, without feeling himself the object of condescension or special treatment; can say that he has been born again, like many an other Filipino abroad, unashamed of having two navels, two homes. He is determined to find his own voice, so that he can also speak for his silent countrymen wherever in the world they may be. It is this sense of *shared* suffering which, in his novel, offers the best way to alleviate/mitigate that suffering.

The desperate sociopolitical situation in *The Umbrella Country* is soul-wracking: in the name of manliness Daddy Groovie regularly beats his wife Estrella. Through the same unrestrained violence he nearly emasculates his elder son Pipo, by refusing him the shelter of "Miss Unibers" fantasies, because they remind Daddy Groovie of his own delusion of manliness, his over-dependence on his sister abroad in America. Pipo, in search of comfort, becomes the rape victim of the *bakla* beautician, Boy Manicure, who may be addicted to mixed-gender fantasies of his own. In the "cave scene" (the tall grass along the old railroad tracks) Pipo becomes the center of a milling crowd of homeless boys anxious to touch one another, starving for companionship. Finally Pipo decides to follow Daddy Groovie to New York: what propels him? Masochism? Uncontrollable fate? An undeniable desire to be accepted by his father, whatever the cost, as male-enough, as elder son? An intuition that both he and his father share some terrible incompleteness but that (as in so many of Tennessee Williams' plays, where the helpless are one another's best help) they must try to be each other's cure?

*The Umbrella Country* is as openended as a wound—but it may be a wound which finally knows how to heal itself. At the heart of this

novel's nearly overwhelming pathos, its miseries and agonies ready for the Uncritic's reflexive search for someone, some habit native or imported, to blame (then why not just Adam? Or Satan?); at the core of that cascade of evil glimmers the flame of good. Good in the refusal of Gringo, the younger brother, to hate Pipo when the latter tries to turn their father's bamboo *yantol* onto *his* back. Good in the self-protective, yet sacrificial decision of Mommy *not* to accompany her sons to America. Good in the abandonment of the family by Ninang Rola, followed by her return ("People who run away," she says, "always end up in the same place") and by her offer of companionship to Estrella who may never again see the rest of her family. Neither son was originally wanted because of the timing of their birthing. Yet now Estrella knows how much she does love them; and it is with love that she sets them free. That is not abandonment so much as Mommy's releasing them to their potentials, as Felipe and Gregory. It is consistent with her acceptance of both their unplanned births. Each time, she says, she gave life to them—her life. Pipo's preserved umbilical cord is nearly fossilized, and in her longsuffering she may *seem* like a Stonewoman: but each of these is a true icon.

The fact is that however seriously dysfunctional this family is, *The Umbrella Country* celebrates life as an ideal, in the form of family, extended to barrio community and democratic nation, and even to one's once and future blood-brothers (at Bataan). Is the Philippines dysfunctional? Yes. Is the relationship between the United States and the Philippines dysfunctional? Yes.

Is the solution to these mismatched relationships despair, a withdrawal into narcissism and hedonism? Realuyo seems to think not. After all, selfish greed is itself one of the prime causes of dysfunction. Some dreams disable, some enable: discerning the difference is often difficult. But not to dream, at all, ever—not to have faith in the possibility of grace and the redemption of man is to risk dooming oneself irretrievably. Not to have forbearance, not to try to understand (forgiving is always easier than understanding, and meaningless without it), not to be willing to concede, to sacrifice something in every human negotiation—not to *love, despite everything*: then life is futile. "Listen!" Realuyo seems to say: the man with the bamboo stick may be crying out; the rapist may be expressing a need that even he wishes didn't exist. "So, listen well!" Who heard Boy Manicure's scream during his mutilation? In this novel hate is as strong as lightning and thunder under the shawdowless pine trees of the Cordillera. Yet the answer to

violence is not more violence. The answer to the two-handed sword is the shield—the umbrella.

Much of what prevents *The Umbrella Country* from being disheartening, or disgusting, is the author's decision to have Gringo be the principal narrator. His innocence is constantly under attack, yet survives; experience puts an edge on his voice, but he will not remain mute. Not only is this text essentially bilingual/ multicultural: in italicized sections, the interior voice of several others—Daddy Groovie, Ninang Rola—is brought to the reader's empathetic attention. And there are minor characters such as Titay, Boy Spit, Sergio Putita who may be immature or behave bizarrely but are not permanently deformed. Each within his or her limited capacity reaches out, blindly perhaps, often with surprising tenderness, toward human contact; a hand, not a fist: be my umbrella; save my better self from my worst; I was not born to be this depraved, or even this deprived; help, help me—so I can help you. What will happen to Pipo, once he is beyond shame, being anonymous in America? To Gringo? To Daddy Groovie? What will happen to America, with such immigrants as these? Will they ever see Mommy again? Can they possibly forget her? God knows, but is as silent as Sergio's wooden statues—unless one listens.

Is Realuyo someone who remembers hard times as material simply to be exploited for an assumed hardened "American market"? Not likely. His memorial to his father, survivor of the Death March and Camp O'Donnell Concentration Camp,<sup>7</sup> testifies to his ability to honor the worth of those who endured great suffering with no loss of dignity. The father is depicted as "Quick to anger, hard to approach, withdrawn," only to reveal that he suffered post traumatic stress disorder—"while all the time I simply thought that my father didn't know how to love." That love was secretly expressed when Augusto R. Realuyo applied for U.S citizenship and, having been sent to the VA hospital in Manhattan, successfully petitioned for his family to follow.

As the author did with italicized portions in his novel, so the feature article writer lets his father's personal record speak in *its* own voice, that of a peaceful man, and therefore a "tortured man of war." After the example of such a "hero," Realuyo could hardly fail to realize that some traumas go on and on, and disordered life goes on then too; yet that triumph later, "souls intact," is possible. For all its description of misery, *The Umbrella Country* is at heart a courageous offer of hope, based on faith in incorruptibility and the power to recover inno-

cence after the fall. As Ninang says, Filipinos are like grass and can grow anywhere.

Many Filipinos have the adaptability and tenacity of grass; and beyond these qualities some have fidelity, loyalty, love.

In their veins will always be their parents' presence.

So far apart; and yet so connected.

## Notes

1. See the author's "Dominion over the Horizon," *Solidarity* (Oct.-Dec. 1966), pp. 129-33.

2. A checklist of Philippine fiction and poetry appearing in American sources before 1965 showed over 300 items.

3. In the Reader's Guide to *The Umbrella Country* (NY: Ballantine, 1999).

4. Their place within the centenary achievements should be more apparent when Bert Florentino completes updating his 1963 *Midcentury Guide to Philippine Literature in English*. Florentino and Linda Nietes have in progress a definitive summary of such literature to the present.

5. As Luis Francia has said, "if you're writing literature, you're not writing propaganda. Because they think that because you have the right politics therefore you must be good." "Confessions of a Born-Again Filipino: An interview with Poet Luis Francia," *The Dispatch* (Spring 1986): 11.

6. "A Conversation with Bino Realuyo," appended to *The Umbrella Country*.

7. "When Heroes Are Not Dead: An Easy in Two Voices," *Filipinas* (Aug. 2000): 43-45, 71.