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PORTRAIT OF A FILIPINO WRITING FROM ENGLISH

I discovered very early that I had a knack for writing (which means, by default, writing in English). My parents, readers and writers both, encouraged me, and I never problematized what language to write in—I was simply most fluent in English, case closed. I think of English as “my language,” and yet, at times I suspect it never will be.

As a teenager, I became aware of nationalist discourse, and its rejection of things foreign, especially the languages of our former colonizers. Spanish was successfully lobbied out of the college curriculum, but English continues to be resilient, especially in the age of globalization/Americanization. Nationalist discourse insists that one cannot think Filipino thoughts in English, and therefore the pressure mounted for this teenage writer to begin writing, and therefore reading, in Philippine languages.

There are a little over 170 languages in the Philippines, some with several dialectal variations, and about 4 to 8 major language groups, depending on how one defines “major.” Some of the languages are similar to each other, but more often than not, a Filipino from one part of the Philippines will not understand a Filipino from another part.

This is how it was for my mother and father. My mother spoke Hiligaynon, and my father spoke Tagalog. They met at the Ateneo de Manila University, and when their romance blossomed, it blossomed in English. When we moved from Manila to my mother’s hometown, Bacolod, to escape the terrors of Martial Law in 1972, my father began to speak some bad Hiligaynon, eventually becoming fluent in it. At that point I had begun talking in a smattering of English and Tagalog, although it’s said that my first coherent, original sentence was in English, signaling that at age 1, I was composing my thoughts in that language. Therefore I do not accept the notion that being a “native speaker” of a language is necessarily a geographical or racial matter.

English was a gift from America to her “little brown brothers” in 1901, a way of teaching the new colony how to be American, and it helped Filipinos understand one another, finally. It wasn’t until 1936 that an indigenous national language, called Filipino, was decreed by law, which caused problems of its own, but which now meant that most Filipinos would learn three languages: (1) the language of their region, (2) Filipino, and (3) English, which, despite legislative changes, remains the medium of instruction. It is the language of the educated, the language of the elite (or the elitist), and is widely perceived, as in many other countries today, to be a ticket to a better life.

English is the unofficial national language of the Philippines, and it is the unofficial regional language of Southeast Asia. Indeed, it is the official program language of the IWP, which arguably could not function as effectively without it.

As I began to read more literature in the Philippine languages that I know, I became aware of nuances of expression and sensibility that perhaps cannot be translated into, or even expressed in, another language.

Interesting experiments and innovations are happening today in Philippine writing, and they are happening in Philippine languages, in which, arguably, one comes closest to an idea of the “Filipino.” Ironically, there are more publishing venues for writing in English, and very little writing is done in Philippine languages apart from Filipino, as writers and publishers prefer to access a larger audience. Older works in Philippine languages are either inaccessible or unavailable.

The sad reality is that the literatures of most of the 170 Philippine languages are being lost to time, because they are largely oral and mostly unretrieved, unstudied, or unpreserved. As Philippine literary scholarship toddles in the footsteps of Western academic fads, the more basic work of constituting the body of Philippine literature remains undone, much less the work of translating it into Filipino or English so that all Filipinos can read it. Translating is a particularly bleak matter, owing to the paucity of inter-language dictionaries, and the diminishing number of native speakers.

My experiences writing a libretto and a screenplay in Hiligaynon led me to question my own tendency to write in English. Writing in Hiligaynon and relearning it felt like having a locked room in my memory suddenly burst open, evoking afternoons of listening to AM radio serials, househelpers gossiping, politicians speechifying, priests sermoning, and relatives catching up with each other at family reunions.

There is a Tagalog phrase, “lukso ng dugo” which literally means “the leap of the blood” and describes the sudden joy at recognizing the familiar, the beloved, the self in the other. My blood leapt to the cadences and tones, the nuances of thought and expression in Hiligaynon as I wrote. It’s said that multilingual people constantly translate in their heads from a first language before uttering or writing anything outside that language. I had always felt that this did not apply to my use of English, and now I had to reconsider.

Was I truly writing *from* English as a Filipino, deploying the language for my own expressive needs? Or was I merely drawing on received metaphors and turns of phrase, trafficking in clichés in the effort to write “correctly”? Did I have to choose one language or languish forever in a nowhere-land?

The answer is not as simple as it seeks to be. One can long for the “pure,” pre-colonial state of being several hundred divided, warring tribes on 7,100 separate islands, but one can never go back, only forward. To be Filipino is to be, necessarily, a hybrid—one free to draw from the streams of culture that feed into one’s history, including those indigenous and foreign. The elusiveness of the Filipino identity is a non-issue to Filipinos living in the Philippines, who blithely go about their hybrid lives, both aware of and disinterested in the ineffable national self that unites them.

Many of the best Filipino writers are bilingual or trilingual, producing excellent work in whatever language they choose, often translating their own work into the other languages they know. In this day and age, no one can own English. Filipinos have been writing from English for almost a century, both with and without Caliban’s seething resentment. To be hybrid is to be multiple and various. One of the paradoxes of globalization is that it engenders diversity, and hybrids are adept at traversing the borders between subject positions. Nowhere-land is proving to be not all that unpleasant, and quite a viable position, when one

considers the matter of shaping an identity, which is ultimately not a fixed, monolithic “am” but a more fluid, provisional, and evolving “to be.”