

# The Space of Travel Writing and the Filipino Gaze

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## *Abstract*

Traditionally *travel literature* focuses on the semantic aspects of space representation, without questioning the specificity of the relation of space and signs, and of space and language. In this essay, I connect my reading of some Filipino travel writing to philosophical and theoretical issues regarding space, not in the frame of exotic travelogues, but in order to address and valorise the complex traits of the *narrative gaze* recurring in many Filipino accounts and in their innovative rhetoric of space.

I will refer mostly to a tradition discussed by Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz in her *Filipino Women Writers in English. Their Story: 1905-2002* (2003). The authors mentioned are acknowledged protagonists of the literary scene in the Philippines, such as Luisa Aguilar Igloria, Edith Tiempo, Kerima Polotan Tuvera, Susan Evangelista, and Christina Pantoja-Hidalgo.

The blindness of stereotyping (in) travel writing deprives it of its epistemological impact as a complex world-conceptualisation. Against this blindness, the hermeneutical practice at work here is interested in travel writing as discursive formations and *qua* an epistemological and cognitive component of culture.

Where you came from is gone, where you thought  
you were going to was never there, and where you  
are is no good unless you can get away from it...

(Kerima Polotan, 1999)

## 1. Travel literature and critical views

Traditionally, and to a large extent even today, *travel literature* (itself a descriptive label), focuses on the semantic aspects of space representation without questioning the specificity of the relation of

space and signs, and of space and language. Therefore, criticism about *travel writing* (where *writing* is often connoted in this combination as a mark of a lesser Literature), does not normally address the radical questions of what *space* and *literary space* are.

In this essay, I would like to connect my reading of some Filipino travel writing to semiotic and theoretical issues regarding space – but not in the frame of exotic travelogues, even if this seems to have been the first step taken by Euro-American thematic criticism. Rather, I propose to address and valorise the complex traits of the *narrative gaze* recurring in many Filipino accounts (albeit as perceived through the lenses of my inherited theoretical Eurocentric tradition).

I will refer mostly to a tradition discussed by Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz in her *Filipino Women Writers in English. Their Story: 1905-2002* (2003), but I will also discuss works written after that time limit. All of the Filipino texts quoted here (except for one) are authored by women, but – because of lack of space – I will not go into the theoretical issue of authorship and gender, as essentialist or positional marks. The women authors to whom I refer are acknowledged protagonists of the literary scene in the Philippines in the last century and in this one. Among them are: Luisa Aguilar Igloria (b. 1961), Edith Tiempo (1919-2011), Kerima Polotan Tuvera (1925-2011), Susan Evangelista (born in the USA, year unknown), and Christina Pantoja-Hidalgo (b. 1944).

I believe that theoretical discourse is not separable from the discourse of quoted texts and my reading of specific texts here proposes an interaction of textualities. I will first put forward some theoretical considerations derived from a philosophical European tradition and then examine the hermeneutics of a number of Filipino travel narrations.

As already mentioned, my critical concerns here regard the discursive and rhetorical aspects of space representation, and, to some extent, the conditions of possibility of such *post(?)colonial* representations<sup>1</sup>. So my reflections are primarily epistemological and rhetorical, rather than socio-culturally oriented towards the

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<sup>1</sup> I prefer the use of the grapheme *post(?)colonial* (rather than the more traditional *postcolonial* or *post-colonial*), because the issue of who defines *post-colonialism* is an open and problematic question, both epistemologically and culturally. See Locatelli (2011).

extra-literary issues of *post-colonialism*, *gender*, and *imperialism*. I am concerned with the fact that critical readings often ignore the literary specificity of travel accounts, as well as the designation of the reader(s) intended by the text (not just the ones eventually overtly proposed by the *author*). However, notable exceptions to this critical trend can be found in works that have come to define *colonial discourse(s)* for Western eyes<sup>2</sup>. From these premises it should be clear that I do not underestimate the value of innovative cultural paradigms such as the ones put forward by Michel Foucault (1972; 1973) and Edward Said (1978; 1983), and their indications regarding why and how specific texts have appeared at a certain point in time and place.

Critical silence and blindness in relation to the specifics of logocentrism in space determination as well as to the stylistic and discursive components of the representations of space may well indicate ideological presuppositions, such as the ones Luisa A. Igloria has cogently described as follows:

‘Multicultural’ writers in America can be typecast for that ethnically ‘colorful’ addition they bring to their writing, rather than on the writing itself [...] but to privilege only certain parts of these histories just to play up to a label would be to falsify the very premises on which poetry, art, rests. (Igloria 2001)

In short: how much does travel and cultural criticism today “play up to a label”, ignoring the radical dimension of “writing itself”? We need a radical (re)thinking of language and space in order to understand textual formations that only seem objectively descriptive, and/or merely informative, of exotic places.

The blindness of stereotyping (in) travel writing deprives it of its epistemological impact as a complex world-conceptualisation. This makes it unable to account for cultural ruptures or the hybrid dislocations implied by a functional, rather than normative, notion of travel writing. Yet I believe that no profound intercultural dialogue can develop while ignoring the cultural epistemologies that resist, symbolically and linguistically, globalised homogenisation. I ask,

<sup>2</sup> See: Hulme (1986); Pratt (1987); Spivak (1987; 1991); Mills (1991); Bhabha (1990; 1994); Fabb (1997); Polezzi (2001).

then, whether we are sure that all of this travelling from periphery to centre, and *vice-versa*, is just a transitory positioning, rather than the basis for the re-definition of *identities* by way of different acknowledgements of (self)location and what the cultural pre-suppositions are that define *re-location* for diasporic and nomadic people.

I believe that paying specific attention to language, rhetoric, and writing can provide readings of texts in ways that diminish (if not remove altogether), the risks of stereotyping and prejudice. Edith L. Tiempo is right, in her introduction to Kerima Polotan's *Adventures in a Forgotten Country*, when she reminds us of the ineliminable role of "spaces between words".

it is life that effervesces, steams, and spills over in these pages as the author recreates the journeys [...] in the secret spaces between the words where eloquence is finally rendered speechless. (Tiempo 1977: xi)

These words call to my mind Maurice Blanchot's thoughts on "the essential solitude" of writing, in which "eloquence is finally rendered speechless" because the work of writing "is what still speaks when everything has been said", and, in it, "the tone is not the writer's voice, but the intimacy of the silence he imposes upon the word" (Blanchot 1982: 26, 27). This is a particularly significant point in relation to Filipino Literature, when English is appropriated through a different eloquence, one that produces a different intimacy of word and silence. This is where I place the location and the genealogy of post(?)colonial literatures.

The *author* of travel literature re-creates a journey that is not simply a referential account of visited places, but is *eloquent*, to the point of moving the reader's imagination, by informing him/her about places in such a way that they *appear* (i.e., they emerge from the *ob-vious*, i.e., from that *un-seen* which is under everybody's eyes). The speechlessness of eloquence gives places a sort of life of their own, and eloquence has to be silent (though language is at work) for place to appear (and also eventually appear as the work of literature). This cycle of signification should not be ignored in any hermeneutics of travel writing interested in discursive formations *qua* epistemological and cognitive components of culture.

## 2. From Khôra to Topoi

In early European thought, space figures as a crucial object of investigation. Plato in his *Timaeus* (arguably 360 BC) addresses the definition of the nature of space in relation to the Greek definition of “Khora” (that which “gives space”; i.e., the matrix of forms, as it were). He implies that the physical world is the product of a “likely tale”, because humans cannot explain rationally the origin of the universe:

[W]e won't be able to produce accounts on a great many subjects – on gods or the coming to be of the universe – that are completely and perfectly consistent and accurate. [...] So we should accept the likely tale on these matters. (Plato 2000: 15)

The “likely tale” is the *eikos logos* or *mythos*, which indicates very clearly the fictional quality of the connection of space and narrative representation.

Some ten years later, Aristotle, in his *Physics* (about 350 BC), claims that he has provided an “account of place – both of its existence and of its nature” (Aristotle 1930: 213a). Actually, his argument starts out by considering space both as *the infinite* and as *place*, but the latter becomes his main focus of investigation. He maintains that: “... all suppose that things which exist are somewhere (the non-existent is nowhere) [...] and [...] ‘motion’ in its most general and primary sense is change of place” (Aristotle 1930: 208a).

Basically, then, he tells us that we develop a dynamic notion of space, itself made visible by *change of place*. In fact, Aristotle's emphasis on the dynamic determination of space is also an essential feature of travel writing, implying epistemic shifts at the root of perception. He says:

The existence of place is held to be obvious from the fact of mutual replacement. [...] When therefore another body occupies this same place, the place is thought to be different from all the bodies which come to be in it and replace one another. (Aristotle 1930: 208)

Place is the figuration (conceptual and/or fictional) that emerges from the dynamic substitution and movement of bodies, which come to be in it, and replace one another. Thus, different bodies,

even in the same place, lead us to think that the place is different. This observation is very relevant for a phenomenology of travel writing, as the gaze of the storyteller selects the *bodies* to account for, thus changing the place itself. For example, the colonisers' presence always changes a place, making it *different* to the natives.

A narrative gaze on place should be understood as the determining perception of what interprets and changes a place, but also as the determination of what is worth being shown in narration, in order to bring about the meaning of a place, and of change of the same place. So, gaze is ultimately the mechanism of interpretation of place as the same or not-the-same.

A place is thought to be different in most coming-back-home narratives of self-named *expats* who show that the experience of travel (motion) has become so inscribed in their experience and identity that even home feels like a place to be visited. Their accounts often indicate that the same place is always already the same and not-the-same, simultaneously<sup>3</sup>. Two of Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo's travel writing collections, *Coming Home* (1997) and *Looking for the Philippines* (2009), are significant in this respect. In "Homecoming" she writes: "When I left my old University, some 20 years ago, I didn't think I would ever return. Martial Law had just been declared". Then, reporting on her return, she says:

my mind went wandering down to the tree-shaded lanes, seeking my old haunts – the Arch of Centuries, brought over from the old campus (yes, older than Harvard) in Intramuros, and standing guard beside the statue of the university founder [...] And it is unlikely that the campus becomes submerged ankle-high in flood water with the first monsoon rainfall.

But the old ghosts are still there. [...] "*It seems I'm home*". (Pantoja-Hidalgo 1997: 64, 65, 66, my emphasis)

It "seems I'm home": i.e., is it and/or is it not home? That is the question and the answer. Simultaneously.

Diasporic and *ex-pats* travelogues are particularly interesting, not only because of the inscription of a double gaze in the objects and places they describe, but also because of the implicit double

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<sup>3</sup> For a cogent presentation of these themes in Filipino literature, see Pantoja-Hidalgo (1994).

address of their reporting. They bring together the home native, who might actually have become foreign to the natives, as well as the foreigner, perhaps encountered abroad, who is well known but always remained foreign because his/her country never became a home for the immigrant and/or the international nomad.

An example of this binary implication, addressed to two simultaneously potential readers, and conveying both attraction and repulsion for both of them, is made explicit as a story of outrageous arrogance and outraged denunciation in Kerima Polotan's "Camp John Hay":

In Baguio there are two places you have to be able to get into if you are to count for anything – the Country Club and Camp John Hay. [...] The Filipinos came to play golf or to gawk at the golfers teeing off, always overdressed, flashy with jewels, high-pitched, and conspicuous. [...] The countryside is, of course, breathtaking, as what of Baguio remains untouched by civilization still is [...]. The Americans have not "discovered" them.

Where the Americans stay away, so, too, do the Filipinos, but where the Americans go, the Filipinos rush in – a fatal illness of the native psyche. [...] The epitome of Filipino-American relations is seen in the Angeles whore who sits casually in one corner of the Camp John Hay restaurant, surrounded by carton boxes of PX goods topped by cans and cans of beer, waiting for her American lover. [...] *C'mon, honey, and Honey* lifts her battered backside and slides into his car. (Polotan 1999: 31-2)

Whenever we feel that the same place is and is not the same, we are exposed to a work of difference, both spatial and temporal. I believe that such difference is linguistic even before it is registered as phenomenological and symbolic. It does not depend (only) on the *bodies* which come to be in a place, but rather on the linguistic trace these bodies inscribe in the place *qua* object of a gaze. In short, the dynamism of space is the product of a linguistic gaze, doubled in narration (where the *showing* is always already a *telling*).

Aristotle maintains:

First then we must understand that place would not have been thought of, if there had not been a special kind of motion [...] – locomotion on the one hand, on the other increase and diminution. (Aristotle 1930: 210-1)

Apart from the indication that one figures out a place only by moving in and out of *it*, it is interesting to note that in European history

this motion eventually came to articulate the very notion of *place* in tropological terms: *tòpos* came to indicate a *motive*, a figure of speech, a rhetorical figure of discourse, highlighting the connection of place to discourse (if not to language itself). In short, locomotion itself could not stay still, and became figurative. A *tòpos* as we now know it, is a figure of speech hinged on a spatial presupposition, even when the metaphorical quality of a translation does not overtly acknowledge the spatial quality of such a transference (notice that both *trans-lation* and *trans-ference* imply space and movement).

In her “Preface” to *Looking for the Philippines*, Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo cogently observes: “Perhaps, after all, the search is really just a chasing after vanishing stories [...] a chasing after dreams [...]” (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2009a: xii). The search is made through stories of places: story and place intertwined by the transference produced by the *double gaze* of seeing and telling. In recent years, Mikhail Bakhtin’s elaboration of narrative *tòpos* into *chronotope* reflects the contemporary renewed cultural *epistémé*, determined by a new sense of space related to time, after Einstein. According to Bakhtin, the chronotope is: “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin 1994: 84). In Filipino writings this connectedness is often explicitly named as the working of memory, in space(s) re-visited.

### 3. Contemporary logocentric questioning

These theoretical bases allow me to map three different ways of looking at *space*, ways that often co-exist (more or less consciously) in literature, travel literature, and criticism. Heuristically, I would like to distinguish space as *representation*, as *narration*, and finally as *tropology*.

Space as topology is extremely relevant for an epistemological discussion of the relation of language and space, and has been the object of investigations performed by many critics such as Barthes (1985), De Man (1979), Derrida (1976; 1978), and Genette (1988). It regards space as the very condition of the functioning of any language, starting from the micro-level of structuring the letters of the alphabet or the basic ideogram. However, this logocentric perspective is less relevant for our present investigation, so I will



not examine it in this reading of Filipino texts<sup>4</sup>. I will continue to explore here the other two modalities in which theory can think of space: space as *representation* and space as *narration*.

The well-known Italian writer Italo Calvino highlighted what I would call, following Blanchot, the “eloquence of speechlessness” of literary space, by way of a question regarding the relationship of signs and space: “it was clear that, independent of signs, space didn’t exist and perhaps had never existed” (Calvino 2009: 42). The affirmative part of his statement indicates that signs are the condition for the *perception* of space (“independent of signs, space didn’t exist”), but he also puts forward a question, articulated by a very disquieting “perhaps” (“perhaps had never existed”), which indicates that there is no way of assessing if signs are the absolute condition of possibility of space. This question, as formulated by Calvino, is unanswerable; in fact, the anteriority of *space* in relation to *signs* (and language) is an irreducible logocentric question, not a phenomenological one, and *qua* logocentric, it remains insoluble. We cannot “get out of” language at the very moment in which we use it; i.e., we cannot do without signs when implying space, but we cannot assess if this is the inevitable condition of possibility of space itself. In short, we cannot “escape” logocentrism, and this is why “it was clear that apart from signs space did not exist,” but at the same time we cannot imagine alternative possibilities of space determination (“perhaps had never existed”).

Furthermore, we should keep in mind that signs function as signs of space precisely because the linguistic system disappears into them while it is at work. Many Filipino writers have more or less implicitly addressed the questions of the disappearance of the linguistic system in the Introductions to their “travel essays”. They do this not so much in the form of overt philosophising, but by highlighting the personal quality of their telling and thus the contingency of their own perceptive and narrative gaze. I feel that the need to highlight a provisional and conditional rhetoric is much stronger in Filipino works than in most Eurocentric and US accounts which, at least until very recently, were often caught in the trap of something I would call *objective Orientalism*. Fascination with *the exotic* did not

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<sup>4</sup> I have addressed these theoretical issues regarding “space” in Locatelli (2006).

give much space to the questioning of such fascination and of the descriptions it produced (often radically ambivalent ones).

Repeatedly, Filipino writers connote literary space as a secondary effect produced by a telling driven by an *autobiographical* gaze, one that is subject to (self)interrogation, and clearly depends on a particular use of language. So, the philosophical issue of *interpreting* space and place is often developed in terms of personal (thus, again, linguistic) cognition and re-cognition. All of Pantoja-Hidalgo's travel reports insist on underscoring the *autobiographical* engagement of the speaker in the text, and the author's voice varies from affective and lyrical (usually in reminiscences) to sharp critical questioning:

Eventually, I began writing travel essays and narratives myself. I had not yet heard of Edward Said, and did not think to examine my own writing for possible 'orientalist' attitudes in the 'gaze' that my oriental eyes turned upon fellow orientals *and other types of 'others'*. (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2009b: ix, my emphasis)

It is interesting to note that "fellows" are clearly and simply connoted as "another type of others." The philosophical notion of "difference within" finds here a sensitive and enlightened pragmatic declaration.

In relation to *otherness*, which is a predictably recurrent issue in post(?)colonial literatures, Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz describes the specific cultural swaying that affects many *expats*, especially in the third wave of Filipino immigration to the USA in the late Sixties:

Filipino Americans are unavoidably identified as Other and invariably asked their ancestry. A recurrent theme in their writing is the trauma of their Otherness, whether experienced in relation to their Filipino parents or their American peers. (Zapanta-Manlapaz 2003: 9)

Zapanta-Manlapaz specifically refers to a number of Filipino women writers, such as Catalina Cariaga, Aimee Nezhukumath, Marisa de los Santos, Victoria Corpuz and Sarah Gambito, and mentions a couple of exemplary works: Evelina Galang's, *Wild American Self* (1996), and Lara Stapleton's, *The Lowest Blue Flame before Nothing* (1998).

The problematic issue of *otherness*, experienced negatively in relation to American-Filipinos by Filipino residents, is dramatically expressed by Kerima Polotan in "The Hills of Vermont":

Because when you ran into Filipinos in America, you were never sure if you could simply pick up the thread of your friendship and go on from there or you had to shake hands and get introduced and start from the beginning. They had left the country, which was no easy thing to understand or forgive, and were pathetically eager to show off what they now owned here – the house, the second car, the stereo, the piano, the dishwasher, the fur coat – if they had them – and you stood properly awed, with your mouth open, making all the accepted sounds of envy and approval, but in your heart you nursed the wound of betrayal [...] angry over the wasted years. (Polotan 1999: 192-3)

Interpreting places (as both the perceived and narrated *view*) is not very different from reading. Again the linguistic connection of space representation and narration is highlighted in some Filipino accounts. For example, Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo writes:

To me these trips were a bit like [...] picking up an old book, and rereading familiar passages, passages that had stayed in the mind because so moving, or so unsettling; and finding others which had seemed dull or trite or incomprehensible then, but which now are startling, intriguing, luminous. Maybe these are just essays about places. (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2009b: x)

Indeed, these are narrative representations (tales and/or essays) of *places*, but what is a *place*? Is it the conceptual result of the subtracted objects in it (as Aristotle suggests), or is it the accumulation of those movable objects, in and out, determining place as a work of memory? This interpretive questioning, far from making one believe that sentences such as: “But this is not fiction. These stories are *true*” (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2009c: xv, my emphasis), should be taken at referential value, should be read as the outcome of the author’s awareness of and simultaneous struggle against the linguistic pervasive imperative of spatial determinations. Stories of place are *true* precisely because they are logocentrically inescapable: there is no place and no space without signs.

Even the proclaimed autobiographical dimension of many accounts should not lead one to think that these are personal accounts. For example, in *Travels with Tania*, Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo (never implied here as the biological writer, but as the complex, variable voice of an *author*) questions us: “so these are not travel essays. [...] perhaps what we have here are just essays...

or stories... about the ‘global *Pinoy*?’” (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2009c: xiv).

In looking for the “global *Pinoy*”, we are reminded of the fact that: “The diaspora is an aspect of the Philippine reality which cannot be ignored” (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2000: 335). Strikingly, though, diaspora is not often named as such, but it is constantly portrayed, and made evident from the cumulative effects of repeated episodes of the *Pinoy* displacement.

In her “Introduction” to Kerima Polotan’s *Adventures in a Forgotten Country*, Pantoja-Hidalgo highlights “defamiliarisation” as “the technique of turning the most humdrum places, the most banal experiences into intriguing adventures [that] held me in thrall” (Pantoja-Hidalgo 1999: x). Far from being a merely *formalistic* technique, it is the reading of places, i.e. seeing and interpreting them, that produces them anew, so that in Polotan’s and in many Filipino writers it becomes a change in the epistemology of place. “Defamiliarisation” of place applies equally to the US and to Iran; to Korea and the UK; to Cuba, Lebanon, and Italy. Also, significantly, it applies within the Philippines: from Surigao to Iligan; from Butuan to Legazpi; from Baguio to Cagayan de Oro because:

[F]or the Filipino, no camera’s necessary. Where you came from is gone, where you thought you were going to was never there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. [...] More than anything else, a flight through the stars shrinks the drowsied ego. What is man compared to the vastness outside, cloud heaps and sky, infinity? (Polotan 1999: 69)

The inscription of space could not be more powerful, as it tries to include the conditions of perception and interpretation of the place, by voicing the psychological unrest through which place is seen. Only the meditation on *infinity* (a very old and recurring *tòpos* interrogating the de-finitions of space), seems to restore to the mental gaze an acceptance of its limits.

As I have said, travel literature should not be regarded as documentary information, regardless of the language and eloquence that articulate the narrated space; it can become an interrogation of the limits of imagination and thought. For example, Kerima Polotan provides a very sophisticated *description* of space, blaming

the blindness of our perceptions on the limits of a physical frame (the airplane's window):

The steel cocoon hurtles towards sunrise, the sky grows light, the darkness lifts over a sleeping land: mountain and gully and occasional smoke rising from hilltop; island, shore and sea – the waves that break upon the white rocks must begin somewhere, but the round hole in the plane doesn't afford an adequate look. (Polotan 1999: 69)

"The round hole" in the airplane is primarily the window in the airplane, but also, metonymically, the "round hole" of the human eye (looking through the airplane window). Usually, it is much harder to see the limits of the latter. So, this beautiful passage seems to me a sophisticated investigation of how the human mind can determine space and place: epistemologically and poetically, mixing instruments of seeing and positions of seeing; mixing infinity and waves that "must begin somewhere", but which remain mysteriously beginning, for the eye seeing them.

Given the theoretical issues I have addressed so far, it should be clear that I agree with Loredana Polezzi in defining "travel writing" as: "A complex genre, often defined as hybrid or heterogeneous". I would not, however, say that "travel writing" "produces texts" (as she maintains), but that certain texts produce something we call "travel writing". Furthermore, I certainly believe, as she does, that the textual formations we classify as "travel writing" are "marked by alterity, by distance, and by multiple allegiances" (Polezzi 2001: 1). In fact, I go even further in believing that the very notion of genre always implies "multiple allegiances".

These Filipino texts seem to me political *qua* linguistic formations, even though, usually, they are referred to just as "fact and fiction, autobiography and description, ordinary life and extraordinary adventure" (Polezzi 2001: 1).

#### **4. Epistemology and writing: Filipino writers thinking space (as country) and naming place(s)**

In my opening remarks, I put forward the question of *space* in literature as *secondary effect of ordinary space*, i.e., as a sort of *portrait* of something pre-defined, or as a basically analogous representation of *ordinary space*, inasmuch as no space can exist without signs.

Is literary space a *categorical* condition of being in the world (as Immanuel Kant suggested), or is it always already an interpreted datum, produced by linguistic (re)cognition?

These are recurring questions in the travel writings of many Filipino writers, and they are addressed in several of their “Introductions” or “interjections”. Some address the issue of space as a *secondary effect*, in the sense that the role of writing-as-Literature is highlighted. Some address the issue of “interpreting the visible” in terms of personal (thus, again, linguistic) recognition.

In her introduction to Kerima Polotan’s *Adventures in a Forgotten Country*, Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo records how in the Sixties “essays and magazine feature articles” and travel writings were considered a “lesser type of literature” when compared to fiction and poetry, because they did not create worlds, but illustrated them:

It was generally acknowledged that this type of writing was somewhat inferior to poetry and fiction, that it was not to be taken too seriously. But the *Free Press* was a powerful argument against this [...] the publication in 1971 of *Author’s Choice*, and in 1974 of *Adventures in a Forgotten Country* was truly cause for celebration. (Pantoja-Hidalgo 1999: ix)

Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo implies both of these attitudes (devaluation and re-evaluation of travel literature), while explaining the title of her book *Travels with Tania*:

Tania is my blue notebook. She’s made up of many volumes [...] and she has been with me a long time. Tania is a kind of best friend, alter-ego, sounding board, durable, all purpose, non complaining traveling companion. (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2009c: xiv)

Tania is the personification of the condition for *literary accomplishment*; Tania is the designated writing receptacle of space-description and even a “Doppelganger” of the traveller. Therefore, Pantoja-Hidalgo (*qua author* of course) can declare: “Observations about the things I saw and did are a part of these tales, but they are not the major part. Reflections, recollections, memories – numerous digressions – take up the larger part” (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2009: xiv).

As I have pointed out, the reading of *travel literature* is normally performed with a documentary imperative and a *true-to-life* ideal of representation, but this seems extremely reductive in relation

to the possibilities of opening up representation to the mobility of signification, or, to put it differently, in relation to the possibility of letting *ground* (what you see) and *figure* (how you tell) float, and exchange priority of meaning-determination. In other words, the gaze can determine referential space, and space can determine the narrative gaze, in a coexisting substitutive movement by which one replaces the other as the supremacy of significance (and signification). See, for example, a quotation from Pantoja-Hidalgo's *Looking for the Philippines. Travel Essays*:

The Saulog buses were more interesting – old rattletraps which came lumbering up, wheezing and snorting with the exertion, every square inch, including their roof, covered with brooms, pails, baskets, squawking chickens, squealing pigs, cardboard boxes tied with strings, bulging *bayong*, and, of course, people. (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2009b: 23)

It is the parenthetical “of course” that suddenly shifts the focus of description, not only referentially (that had been shifted many times by the catalogue of *things* in the bus space), but, more importantly, in the *seeing* of *people* transforming the listing of things into the reminder that reality exists as inhabited and interpreted by people. They are always there, “of course,” but not always “seen”.

The mobility and interpretive contingency of space (both referential and narrative) is at the center of Gémino H. Abad's assumption that:

[O]ur story's “yearning for form” is, whenever one takes cognizance of “country”, an activity of imagination (an inner speaking, as it were) by which one seeks a meaningfulness of living in one's own clearing. (Abad 2008: 201)

A “country”, in this Filipino culturally specific definition, is produced by an imaginative motion, and is therefore symbolically determined: it is a mode of *speaking*. It is definitely a long way from the EuroAmerican notion of *nation*. This is why Pantoja-Hidalgo can say: “I write about places as a way of making sense of the spaces I occupy now, these islands which are and are not one country” (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2009b: xi).

Far from being a logical contradiction (as I have indicated earlier), the Philippines are and are not one country, depending on



the symbolic sense and on the work of signification one inscribes in that space/place.

Another very interesting feature of Abad's definition of *country* is in the intrinsic relation to the meaning of one's life, as felt/seen in relation to the setting one appropriates as one's own, after some indispensable *clearing*. It is worth noting that Heidegger thought of "Khôra" as "a clearing", in which Being takes place, and that another poet, Mary Dorsey (Irish and thus also post(?)colonial?), has emphasised the "Moving into the space *cleared* by our mothers" (Dorsey 1991, my emphasis). This insistence on "clearing" and "cleared spaces" seems to me an important point because it puts forward the issue of appropriating space.

Furthermore, inscribing place with "a clearing" subverts the traditional understanding of travel writing as primarily *visual*. There is no visual hegemony that can determine a "cleared space" as "cleared"; it is rather the inscription of memory and desire that the portraiture of space carries with it, which denotes it as "cleared" and can describe it as such.

Do Filipino women writers portray "cleared spaces"? It seems to me that they always do so, since, as I said, there is always already a *double address* in their descriptions of place: one speaks to the *locals* (who could be diasporic subjects, even if formally also citizens of another country), and one explains the place to the potential onlooker (tourist or cultural visitor). It is a double address encoding both a *homebound* memory and a *pedagogical* intent. Filipino women writers address simultaneously those who know and can remember, and those who do not know and must be informed. In a sense, the variety of the *locals* is much richer than that of the *onlookers*. The latter are implied as a generalised subject (not necessarily a tourist in the conventional sense of *guided visitor*, but nonetheless as a *global-virtual visitor*, as it were). The former is addressed in the variety of his/her positioning in relation to that differently known place, a knowledge that is modified by present re-location, which ultimately determines the potential "clearing" of the place at stake.

In Pantoja-Hidalgo's recurring "doubly addressed" description of place, I select (randomly) one example regarding the cleared space of "Tagaytay: The Candy Box" (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2009b: 20-41). The opening of the visit inscribes the place with declared autobiographical reference:



When I was around ten years old, Papa bought a bit of land in Tagaytay and built a small cottage on the ridge overlooking Taal Lake. And then it almost felt that, like everyone else, we had a province to go home to. (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2009: 20)

The *province* as *home* is a perfect example of a *cleared space*. A non-Filipino “cleared” place is often inscribed by an ironical Filipino gaze, as in the case of Cambridge, a place that needs no “clearing” (or perhaps cannot be “cleared”), for how solidly *classical* it appears: “It was all supremely civilized, a reasonable world where conflict could be resolved by intelligent debate, and chaos organized into graceful, intelligible patterns” (Pantoja-Hidalgo 2009c: 24).

The progression of harmonic overtones makes the place excessive: is there really a place where chaos can be organised, were it not for a pervasive rule of social conformity?

## 5. Conclusions

I hope I have suggested how the *Filipino gaze* on space(s) displays extraordinary structural complexity, due to the Filipino writers’ rich differences in their ways of interpreting the world, and in *making their own* the spaces they have cleared.

As a sort of antidote to the unsettling opening quotation from Kerima Polotan, I would like to conclude with another quotation, taken from Susan Evangelista’s “Growing into Asia”:

After that, it will be time to think of a final place to live, a place really for myself. [...] a place for myself doesn’t mean for myself alone. [...] And if I don’t find what I am searching for, the village of my heart, in this life, maybe it will be waiting for me in the next. (Evangelista 2009: 222)

The ethical lesson is very clear here: diaspora is not a destiny, unless nomadic subjects are oppressively forced to be nomadic. The tradition of *the written gaze* (“le regard écrit”), romantically theorised by Lamartine in relation to travel writing (de Lamartine 1835: 32), is still living on here but inscribed with the hardships of witnessing displacement and expressing the desire for a clear(ed) place. Gémino H. Abad does not refer explicitly to the romantic Lamartinian *written gaze*, but to a *field of vision*, the space where place takes place as symbolically determined and poetically

expressed. That is the condition in which poets “constantly make new discoveries” (Abad 2008: 9).

It is the same field in which place(s) take(s) on a life of its/their own in the dialogical trans-ference of dialogical (travel) writing.

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