AKDA | Vol. 1 No. 3 | January 2022

PERSPECTIVES

Woman*unulat*: Popular Critical Writing as Performance

Katrina Stuart Santiago
De La Salle–College of St. Benilde
katrina@kssantiago.com

This essay discusses the exclusionary principles of the literary establishment in the Philippines using the lens of labor, given critical writing as practice, and gender as performance. It maps out a personal and professional history of writing that is intricately tied to the various voices of other women writing, across different forms, and throughout Philippine history, where women have shown that at the heart of this practice, and at the core of this performance, is freedom.

Keywords: women's writing, criticism, literary establishment, writing as labor, creative work, critical work

The romance we have with writing is bound to the idea of its solitariness. And it need not be as offensive as the old, white, male in that Anglo-Saxon ivory tower; it can be as simple as that room of one's own that Virginia Woolf had promised would be *all that a woman writer might need.*

None of that is true. You might hide out in a tower to write, or find a room of your own to do so; you might get that corner office to do your work, or go on a trip to do the writing you've always wanted to do. None of it will be about solitariness.

I have spent the past decade primarily writing. And when you write for a living, when it is your pay cheque from writing that will pay your bills, there is no waiting for solitude to do your work.

You meet deadlines while on a plane traveling from one country to the next; or in the car where you are hopefully not the one at the wheel (sometimes you are, and you are grateful for the heavy traffic that allows you to type out that sentence, or finish that paragraph). You sit on uncomfortable chairs and sofas at countless hotel and inn lobbies where the Internet is always faster; you write over the noise of a common pantry at a glamping inn; you sit on the floor of different airports, nearest the power source for your computer.

Copyright © 2022 by De La Salle University

You finish a set of short features at the backstage of a concert, as loud music blares from speakers, production staff in a frenzy around you. You write in the middle of a rally, sitting on a sidewalk or standing in the crowd, focused on your phone and praying it doesn't die on you. You write while friends sit around you at a table, done with dinner and starting on drinks, waiting for you to finish that column.

You write in fancy hotels where a photoshoot for the cover story you are writing is happening in the next room. You write in a 70's Bistro that slowly starts filling up with people wanting to watch Cynthia Alexander's farewell show. People look over your shoulder to see what you are writing. There is no time to care.

You meet a deadline while your students are in the same classroom, writing feverishly to meet theirs, too. You write as the neighbors' construction of a second floor terrace continues, as the laundromat next door starts drilling for its pipes, as a condominium is built down the street from where you live.

When you write to earn a living there is no time for a romance with solitude and quiet. There is no waiting for a muse, and there is no inspiration to be found. All there is, is the urgency of a looming deadline. The task is to ensure it is a piece worth submitting. The goal is to create for yourself the possibility of being asked to write again. And again.

So you write.

Singing to ourselves in the *silid na mahiwaga*

In the mid-90s two anthologies of women's writing were published in the mainstream. *Silid na Mahiwaga* edited by Soledad Reyes and *Songs of Ourselves* edited by Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz.[1] These two books gathered together poetry and short fiction by women writers in Tagalog and English, respectively, and became the go-to anthologies for a crash course on Philippine women's writing.

The 90's was filled with a plethora of women's anthologies, from women writing the erotica, to women from the Visayas, lesbian writings to testimonials of marginalized women. I did my undergraduate thesis on it, highlighting how the exclusionary principles behind the task of anthologizing necessarily sacrifices the premise of diverse voices and experiences that, to me, was at the heart of the insistence to anthologize women writers: publish as many women as possible, champion the diversity, go beyond the limits of the task of collecting these works.

That thesis was actually portent of the kind of relationship I would have with the literary establishment. Having studied literature, and more importantly the systems that cradle it, it is difficult to turn a blind eye to the literary establishment's crises. Once, long ago, I talked about its exclusivity, its cliquishness, to be its predicament.[2] But I think now that many other things might inform this crisis equally.

Say, the divides based on language, geography, and social class, which are the premise of any discussion about literary production, authorship, audience development, and profitability. Say, the lack of critical practices that engage and expand on the literary. Say, a vision of bookmaking and writing that is not simply bound to profit for the publisher, and instead looks at how to make writers and creators more productive. Say, the insistence on writing for a global audience, a decision that comes with the shadow of the untapped readers in the country.

The notion that writing is about muse and inspiration. The idea that only those who write within the definitions of existing genres deserve to be called "writer."

There is no escaping the exclusivity of the literary establishment. The hierarchy exists as a matter of course, and the friendships built within these spaces are expected. The curse of the literary (if not the cultural) is such that you inevitably create versions of this hierarchy wherever you go, doing exactly the same things that the people you wanted to slay are doing. Create a clique, make the books you like, exclude others. The *tsismis* is just as vicious, the take downs as painful.

I still think there are many spaces outside of the house that literature built. But it isn't the space that is the problem, as much as it is *how we take up space,* what we do with it, and how we redefine it not just through the work that we do, but how we do this work. It is how we perform this freedom we insist we deserve.

The story "Ang Silid na Mahiwaga" was written by Jovita N. Martinez in 1927.[3] It is about Don Fernando who had turned away his wife after receiving a letter detailing her infidelity, only to realize a month after that his neighbor carried the same name as he did, and that the neighbor had killed his wife because she is the *babaing walang dangal*. For 10 years, Don Fernando had kept, in the *silid na mahiwaga*, a coffin in which lies a photograph of his wife Dalia. And every evening he would enter that space and mourn her loss.

The woman is absent for most of this story, and has no voice at all. But she is cherished and mourned and yearned for, and in that room, she is made alive.

The rooms we build and enter are not the problem, as much as it is the need to make sure we remain alive in these spaces, that we remain free to think, and speak, *and become.* There is no singing to just ourselves in a room filled with nods and agreements, praise and pandering.

The *silid,* after all, is only *mahiwaga* because there's a dead person in it. Do not be the dead person.

This long stag party—with women present

The process of extricating myself from the literary—and to some extent academic—establishment was long and arduous. It wasn't simply about leaving the room. It came with being told in so many words, in many places, that I didn't belong, because I was doing something wrong. It happened one essay at a time.

In 2006, an old male writer wrote a three-page letter to the Chairperson of the English Department where I was teaching.[4] I had written a riposte to what his claimed *alaga* had written about freedom, which was posted on a yahoogroup that we all shared. The male writer took it personally—he felt he had "welcomed me" into the literary and academic establishment, and as such had a right to reprimand me for misbehaving.

He insinuated that I was "naiinggit" because his protégé was "popular" and was a "pretty girl." He claimed that I had been "making a career" out of writing about his *alaga*—a complete and utter lie. He asserted that someone his "age expected to be treated with a modicum of respect <…> especially by much younger colleagues who are just starting out in the business of writing and teaching."

His point was that: "Unless Ina Santiago sees herself as a budding iconoclast whose future reputation could well get a jumpstart from that mode of behavior, I would counsel her to go easy on her critiquing until she becomes quite expert on such literary (cum socio-political) matters."

He defined me as someone who was "still so young and yet so heedlessly bitter."

I received a copy of this letter and seethed with anger, as much as I cowered in fear. This man was wielding his (literary) power over me, and he was taking what was on a yahoogroup mailing list and bringing it to this space where he felt he could throw his weight around. He was endangering my job because he was offended. And he sought to limit my thinking and writing to what he deemed acceptable. I was being reprimanded into, and being told to perform my, silence.

Six years after, and a year into doing the arts and culture beat for *GMA News Online*, I would find that the most difficult stories to write were those on the literary establishment. I had steered clear of it after I extricated myself from the academic and writing world, but one good day I thought I wanted to attend the Manila International Literary Festival and write about it.[5] Sometimes, we delude ourselves into thinking that doors remain open to us.

The violence of backlash was familiar, and none of it was a surprise—I was hitting right where it hurt pinpointing writers unprepared for panels, basically winging it and expecting to be forgiven for it, while forgetting that people actually pay to listen to these conversations. This time though the backlash was multiplied from one male-writer-voice to a chorus of writers, academics, and government officials, all offended by the criticism, all targeting the critic. The one thing that surprised me was receiving a phone call from someone I considered a friend, asking me to edit the published piece, or have my editor take it down, as the mother of one of the writers I had mentioned in the essay had fallen ill because of it. I had told her then: but that is not the way this works.

It took a while for it to sink in that maybe this *is* how it works. Just as younger writers who are part of the literary establishment can (must) perpetuate its ways, so are they expected to behave in specific ways for this machine to continue working. In this sense, I was the one who was being seen as broken: I wasn't performing as expected, I wasn't *who* was expected. I was being "fixed"—and by another woman, no less.

A year after, as my first assignment, *Rogue Magazine* was keen on having me write an essay on the local literary scene. They were excited by this project as much as I was challenged by it, which is always good energy to have between editors and writer.

"Burn After Reading" was published in the first quarter of 2012. Rogue editors and I decided to put it up on their *Facebook* account,[6] if only to generate discussions we hoped would be productive. Of course it was only a matter of time until multiple comments threads turned vicious and personal, forcing me to disengage—an act that was of course taken against me, too.[7]

That "kuyog"—a collective performance of power in itself—ended with a poem being written about me and my dead daughter by the primary instigator of one of the more cruel threads. She was also a woman, high up in the political, literary, and academic establishments, and no one was going to tell her what she was doing was wrong. Soon after, whether by coincidence or circumstance, I would lose one of my best-paying writing gigs, in a space to which the same woman was connected. It was a major job loss that came from left field.

An *Esquire Magazine* article would come out later in the year,[8] one that called me an "unspecific opinion maker" and a "pundit with no specific expertise." It looked at my website radikalchick.com, and did a random rundown of my writing based on the way it is categorized on the site, putting into question my work as critic by highlighting the diversity of my subjects, which to the writer proved that the only goal of my writing was to be "controversial" and "contentious."

It then brought into the conversation the same female writer whose male literary patron had tried to get me reprimanded seven years prior; she was being championed as the better writer because she takes the nuanced middle ground. Released right on time for that year's literary festival—which was no coincidence—this attack piece was written by a woman.

On the surface, one has to take these things personally—after all, my jobs were endangered and my person attacked. But one quickly realizes that if writing is performance, then this is not so much about the writer as it is about what she writes. It is the final product that is being judged, it is the writing that is the real target. If there is anything that lies in the coffin of this room, it is criticism.

Sa Ngalan ng (mga) Ina

Dolores Feria wrote *The Long Stag Party* in 1991, a book of essays that talks about a gamut of topics, from colonial history to the socio-political present, the cultural and the literary, towards a sensing of a Philippine feminist history. In one of her essays, Feria talks about a "natural boundary between women writers and those who are simply women writing" (70).

> The latter, of whom there are now legions, and who consign themselves to future anonymity by sidling up as closely as possible to the current form of patriarchal control—both its ecclesiastical and its political arm. [*sic*] Unlike the woman writer, these writing teeny boppers have been seduced by the volatile satisfactions of status, limelight, awards, effortless orthodoxies, and even domestic bliss. (70–71)

Feria proceeds to talk about how the literary establishment itself labels and defines women writers versus the women who write close to the confines of patriarchal control.

> If the literary neophyte is classifiable, sweetly feminine, and jolts no one, she is likely to be consistently overrated and labelled "a fine writer"; but if she projects belligerence, is contemptuous of tradition, even with good cause, is decidedly neurotic, and operates without patronage, she will be just as consistently underrated. This has not been required of male writers, for whom ideological censorship may operate, but their private neuroses have never been a matter of public concern for Manila's literary establishment. (71)

This mapping of the literary establishment is painfully resonant. It doesn't only highlight the misogynistic behavior from within the system, it also reminds of how women *can be complicit* in its acts of exclusion and silencing. It speaks to the fact that it barely even matters what it is women write, or the forms in which they practice their writing; as long as the woman who writes adheres to tradition, is within the system of patronage, can be categorized under existing labels, and does not disturb (or "jolt") the status quo, then she is accepted and legitimized as "a fine writer."

Feria's was a dominant voice in my college years, hers the criticism that was important because it did not stop at discussing the discrimination in the (patriarchal) literary system, and instead insisted on a conversation about the complexity of class origins and agency, where the former is not seen as an end in itself, and the latter is championed as a space for possibility.

This is what informs her assertion about the woman writer being distinct from women writing. Bound to the historical lineage of woman writers that she traces to poet Leona Florentino (1849–1884) of Vigan Ilocos Sur and novelist Magdalena Jalandoni of Jaro Iloilo (1891–1978), Feria asserted these two women's uniqueness to be about how both "had reestablished the primacy of the free, pre-Spanish woman as prior condition to functioning as an effective writer" (70).

Florentino, says Feria, was "the pre-Spanish free woman who bartered respectability and the prescribed feminine role by demanding the freedom to be obsessed with poetry and to write on her own terms" (54).

Of Jalandoni, she says: "<…> she belonged to no school of letters, she was unknown to readers of English or Pilipino, organizations did not interest her, and as for writer's workshops, the concept behind such ventures would have puzzled her, although she was always happy to meet young writers, and she had no literary barkada[9] to fall back on. She lived and died an Outsider except in Panay, where she had succeeded in becoming the unique symbiosis of a populist core and a woman who only knew how to write—all else was extraneous" (70).

That both women were of the ilustrado class was no reason to dismiss their writings or experiences. In fact, to Feria, what is important is that "in spite of the advantages of wealth and class privilege, <and in spite the fact that> neither were exempt from years of torment and built-in censorship implicit in their social structures, <… both> wrote from astonishing inner compulsions which exacted a price. And <both> were willing to pay the price" (63).

Both women defied the different ways in which they were being told they could not write. They navigated familial and societal limitations and persisted in the work of writing. They insisted on freedom. There is also no overstating the value of Florentino and Jalandoni deciding to fashion their spaces beyond the patriarchal institutions, literary and otherwise, to build their work regardless of readership. Their writing was a performance in itself of the impulse to create, the need for sanity, and the urgency of survival.

In the poem "Sa Ngalan ng Ina, ng Anak, ng Diwata't Paraluman,"[10] Lilia Quindoza Santiago traces the struggles of Filipino womanhood as tied to the frenzy of multiple roles she is expected to fulfill, ones that keep her outside of history, ones that force her to fall through the cracks, and ones that keep her from creativity. The woman here is also nation—restrained, abused, silenced—never free.

When the persona in the poem makes the decision to disengage from this narrative, it also directly ties itself to all the women in the past (ina), the women in the future (anak), the female spirits (diwata), and the female muse (paraluman), as it promises an evolution towards the Babaylan—priestess, healer, warrior—a performer in herself.

> *ang nais ko ngayo'y lunasan ang kinagisnang sugat,*
> *Tanganan ang palad, kumalabit ng gatilyo*
> *Gulantangin ang katahimikan ng mga siglo.*

To shock, to astonish, to surprise the silence. That which is about the "systematic silencing of women for centuries <…> which also takes from them the agency to make sense of their experience and lives as women" (Quindoza Santiago 15–16).

Florentino and Jalandoni, in their mere insistence on their freedom to be woman writers, shocked, and astonished, and surprised. They denied the institutional patriarchies the power to decide what they could do and who they could become. Their writing was a performance of what they fashioned as their very own version of freedom.

(Tres) Fragmentos de mi Juventud

Fragment One. My childhood is filled with memories of my mother, Angela, writing, tapping away on a blue typewriter—on her desk, on the bed, at the beach. I know the smell of typewriter ink, as I know the sound of one finger pounding on the letter *x* in exasperation, erasing a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph that doesn't work. When you're a child, you usually cannot explain what it is your parents do. But I always knew of writing to be about words, and that this was what Angela did to help put food on the table.

Throughout my teenage years, Angela was writing in English, Tagalog, Taglish, and when the opportunity arose, in gay lingo. She had regular TV review columns in magazines, newspapers, tabloids; she was writing TV scripts, doing cause-oriented documentaries, adapting Broadway plays to Taglish; she wrote scripts for live shows and special events, would do proposals for a new TV sitcom, or a screenplay for a rogue film project. She wrote books.

In 1996, she published her first. It had started being written on that blue typewriter, and was a manuscript finished on a Wordstar computer, continuously printed on a dot matrix printer.[11] She has since written and published six books, the most recent of which was in

2017. She has maintained her own blog far longer than I have, and far longer than most writers.[12]

Despite this body of work, my mother is not in any mapping of creative history. She is not in literary history, which only sees writers based on the fixed set of genres that is deemed "literary." She is not in media history that will only include those who studied journalism, or film, or broadcasting, and those who produce in the mainstream. And despite having written three books on the EDSA 1986 Revolution, a book on family history as tied to the local history of Tayabas Province,[13] and an anti-biography on Ishmael Bernal,[14] she is not considered a "historian" for not having studied history.

The thing is, Angela has never cared. Because writing to her was always about work. It was about earning a living, it was about helping put two kids through school, making sure bills were paid, and food was on the table. The work she did was always outside of the institutions of the writing and academe, and it was okay. Because what mattered was that there was work to do, projects that were interesting, books to write.

Fragment Two. From the time I was 8 or 9 years old, I read to my Lola Nena. Blinded by cataracts and glaucoma, my last memory of her "watching" TV was very close to the screen, seeing only shadows of what was happening on *Knots Landing* (or was it *Falcon Crest*?). At some point she gave up. It was not worth it trying to keep up with characters she couldn't see.

But Lola Nena didn't give up on anything else. She continued to touch-crochet for as long as she could—big needles, thick yarn. When I learned how to make ribbon roses, she made so many of it every day. She folded and strung together cigarette foil for Christmas decorations. She did this while she listened to the radio, all day every day, screaming at politicians or commentators she disagreed with, sometimes calling to correct the Tagalized Spanish words they were using, often having a conversation about what was happening in nation with my Lolo Ding.

At certain hours of those days, for a stretch of time from my childhood to much of my teenage years, I came to sit beside Lola Nena, and I read to her. I started by reading her news articles and commentary that Lolo would pick out for her, from the weekly *Newsweek* subscription they kept, to the *Philippine Star* that would be delivered every day. At some point I started reading her books, kicking off with some Nancy Drew (I was that age), and evolving quickly to some Tom Clancys and James Clavells long before I had the ability (and attention span) to understand these. We both loved some good ol' sci fi ala *Lord Valentine's Castle*, and some family drama via Jeffery Archer's *Kane and Abel* series. It was with Lola Nena that I first read Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. When I entered college as a lit major, I would start reading to her interesting stories that were in my reading lists: from Clavell's classic novella *The Children's Story,* to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale.* The latter, along with Maria Doria Russel's *The Sparrow* would be the last books I'd read to her.

Across this period, Lola Nena would regularly sit at a foldable typing desk, with an electric typewriter and a tiny tape recorder. She knew how to touch type, and she had memorized which buttons to press on the recorder for it to play, or pause, or rewind. She would listen to Mama's recorded voice on those cassettes, reading in Spanish the memoirs of my Lola Nena's mother, Lola Concha. Lola Nena would then translate the Spanish into English, not seeing what's on the page, just typing away until the machine tells her she needed to stop and reload the carriage with the next page.

Lola Nena would finish this translation of the three-volume memoir of Lola Concha. It wasn't clear to her who its audience would be, and why it would be important to the generations after her and her children, but she did it anyway. Performing a promise to allow more of the family to understand where we came from, who we are, and what we can (still) become.

Fragment Three. I have a photograph as a baby being carried in my Lola Concha' arms, while she sat beside my Lola Nena and Mama. I was too young to remember her. But I grew up knowing of Lola Concha. Hers was the big house in Tiaong, hers was the compound I spent summers in, where cousins and family lived. Lola Concha was also the woman who, in her old age, sat down, took empty La Salle notebooks from her grandchildren's leftover school supplies, and started writing, long-hand, in Spanish, about her life.

She had no notion of literariness, no organizations or cliques to tell her to write, and even, no diversified reading list other than her favorite *Liwayway Magazine* and pamphlets for prayers and novenas. Despite having a daughter like Lola Nita (Umali Berthelsen) who was a writer by profession, my Lola Concha didn't seem to have a sense of a bigger audience that would be interested in her memoir. But it didn't matter.

On the sixth of January, 1975, I took the pen

> in hand to while the time by translating a few Spanish proverbs into my poor Tagalog. Most of these I learned from my parents, relatives, and friends.
>
> But scarcely filling the fifth page, as in a dream I remembered that eighty-nine years ago, my parents were married in Boac, Marinduque, by proxy, a kind of marriage never seen or heard of in my 89 years, which moved me to recall and relate all the important events in the life of my parents, of some of their ancestors, and mine.
>
> May the Holy Spirit illumine my mind, refresh my memory, and direct my pen.[15] (Prologo, trans. by Nena Umali-Stuart)[16]

I was in college when I realized that Lola Concha's act of writing was one of daring, but also one that would, within the limits and confines of literary genres and forms, would be relegated to simply being that of a woman of privilege writing about her life. The memoir was the space of the privileged, as the testimonial was the space for the marginalized.[17]

But my Lola Concha was both, in the same way that she was neither. As with many real lives of those who are in the middle classes, the family history she wove was one of struggle and toil, as it was of really good years of familial peace and privilege, as it was of a fall from grace, and massive losses. She wasn't here to romanticize the life she had lived and built. She was here to write.

That she did so with a sense that this would require mind, memory, and body, that she did so with a hope for lucidity and clarity and reason, speaks to a sense of her own notion that this is about freedom—to speak with no more reputations to consider, to detail personal history with no more party politics or *compadres* to think of, to speak of familial failures and political disasters with no more shame or embarrassment.

This three-volume memoir she would call *Fragmentos de Mi Juventud*, *Fragments of My Childhood*, which belies how heavily personal and political the narrative of her life was, and how she traces it to include what she remembered of her grandmother and father. She wrote it from 1973 to 1975. She finished it at 89 years old. Mama typed out the handwritten manuscripts in 1976, something she was volunteered for by Lola Nena as she was mostly at home, pregnant with me. So she took on the job, an experience which, interestingly enough, she contextualizes in the goal of writing:

> I was <…> dabbling in astrology and transcendental meditation, but what I really wanted to do was write, except I didn't have much yet to say, and even if I did, it was martial law and one was not allowed to say much.[18]

Lola Nena would start writing the translation after Lola Concha died in 1980.

If the pre-condition for writing is freedom, then Angela, Lola Nena, and Lola Concha—home and hearth, matriarchs and sisters, healers and warriors—liberated me long before I held a pen.

@radikalchick: notes on independence[19]

The understanding and acceptance of the exclusionary principles of mainstream literary production come with the requisite push-and-pull with regard the relationship one might keep with it. Here it bears repeating that for woman writers like Florentino and Jalandoni, writing was a matter of survival in the sense that writing was what they had the impulse to do and was what defined them. Neither of them (as is true for my Lola Nena and Lola Concha) were going to die of hunger or lose the roof on their heads because they decided to write. Neither had jobs they could lose because they insisted on the writing they wanted to do.

But for many women who write, and many woman writers, the labor of writing is about wage. It is about our literal survival, our ability to live off the work of writing, our decision that what we want to be is writer.

In the 1972 Panganiban *Pilipino–Ingles Diksyunaryo Tesauro*, the entry on the word *sulat* surfaces interesting linguistic specificities. *Mánunulát* expectedly means "Writer (professional)" but its entry includes a Cf (comparison) to the word "*tagasulat:* clerk." More interestingly, where *magsulát* is "to write continuously or repeatedly," *manulat* is "to write professionally" or "to have writing as a means of living."

I am woven from the same cloth as my mother when it comes to our existence as woman writers. To us, to be *manunulat* is about our labors, equated as it is with our wages, and bound as it is to systems of production that leave it rarely recognized, unless one fulfills the demand that we fall into the trappings of patronage.

Eschewing the latter comes with repercussions that go beyond one's erasure in history. When being writer is how you earn your keep, the decision to perform writing as an act of freedom, and to see freedom as a pre-requisite to writing, makes the cliquishness and exclusivity of the writing establishment dangerous. It means that when its actors do hit pieces and write poison letters, when they engage thoughtlessly in online *kuyog* and cancel culture, these acts actually put your livelihood at risk.

One will be told that the smallness of the establishment makes it negligible, and an unnecessary foe. But this is not true.[20] The establishment carries with it an amount of power, and opportunities, including those from the State, are funneled to its actors. This is why the complete disengagement is problematic—it ensures that the status quo continues as it should—as opposed to finding possible spaces for doing actual battle, for seeing where critical engagement is tenable.

Personally, one gets used to becoming that person who is not allowed into the room—after all, you've been shown the door many times. But there has to be something in the rooms that you inhabit that make others want to enter it, to see what you're doing differently, or better.

It's been productive for me to look at the space between lack of recognition and eschewing patronage as that space for freedom that one can eke out. It would arguably be the same space that women like Florentino and Jalandoni inhabited, if not the same interim when my Lola Nena and Lola Concha focused on their writing. The idea of freedom here is not just about doing the writing that one wants to do. Cut from the same cloth as Angela, the freedom here is in knowing that writing is work and labor and wage; it is mind, memory, and body; it is sanity and survival.

It is also a space for self-criticism, for rethinking, for reconfiguring and reimagining what you want to do. At each of the harrowing junctures when I was told I could not do the writing I wanted, I went through a process of critique, and decided that I wanted to try again, to do it better, to do it differently, to expand on it.

I'd go back to the writing that got me tagged as a bad iconoclast, the work that got me labelled an incendiary, the performance that was dismissed as a punditry without expertise and oversimplified as nothing more but deliberately contentious and controversial. I would go back to the work for which acts of silencing and censorship have been normalized, through which one loses friends and mentors, and accept those as part of the job.

The realization that there is actually space, editors, and audience for critical work beyond the establishment was a welcome one. It could be popular iconographies of the artist formerly known as Charice Pempengco, or Manny Pacquiao, or Marian Rivera; or it could be theater, art, and film reviews. It could be a cover story for a glossy magazine, or an art feature cum review of a new exhibit. It could be the script for a concert, an event, a commemoration; or a press release about a new song or theater production. It could be the script for a protest rally; or content for building issue-based solidarities across diverse sectors and classes. It could be a book about love; or an opinion column. It could be this essay.

You find that you will find your readers, and create more of them. And hopefully build more critical work with them—because criticism is nothing if it is masturbatory. Without the limits of the systems that dictate forms and genres, and without concerns about patronage, one fashions a space where critical writing is diverse and complex, intimate and infinite, a conversation as it is a dialogue.

And when you're a woman writer of criticism, you will take it as part of the job that you will be called names. You will be pitted against other women. You will be reduced to size by institutional patriarchies. You will be stereotyped as bitter or angry, envious or ugly. Your personal life becomes open season for anyone who takes offense that you have a voice at all.

If there is anything we must know by now about a woman writer who insists on her freedom, a critic who persists in doing her work, it is this: where she is *manunulat*, that professional who lives off her writing, she is also perennially in the middle of a performance of her survival and sanity. She is also performing a function, one that Doreen Fernandez captures in her Introduction to the 1985 anthology *Filipina 2 essays* published by Women Writers in Media Now (WOMEN).

> One soon realizes that these pieces have as subtext the idea of woman as person, not as adjunct to man; woman as free to work, to be useful, to create, and not dependent on a husband's or father's permission (to flex her rights, to wield her talents). (Fernandez viii–ix)

Here, Fernandez equates the work of the woman writer to be about her being "useful,"—a usefulness that is bound to her independence from male permission, which is also about writing as a flex, as it is about writing as weapon that is wielded.

For four years I kept an opinion column with *The Manila Times.* On the first year of the twice-a-week column, all my articles would pass through Angela. I insisted on this, despite the fact that I had been writing professionally for years. I was unsure about writing on politics and governance at such a scale; I was lucky to have a willing editor. On the day she said that the column was fine, that she had no edits, I cried in relief.

It was like passing a test, one that I had been taking for a full year. It was like being told I could wield this weapon better now, flex my muscle more, make myself more useful. Do battle.

This was not permission to perform one's freedom through writing. It was—it is—knowing that there is no better way to do writing, *and be (woman) writer*, than to be free. ***

Notes

[1] Both published by Anvil Publishing in 1994, and which continues to be reprinted in the present.

[2] "Burn After Reading." *Rogue Magazine.* April 2012.

[3] "Ang Silid Na Mahiwaga" (1927) by Jovita N. Martinez, from *Ang Silid na Mahiwaga, Kalipunan ng mga Kuwento't Tula ng Babaeng Manunulat* edited by Soledad Reyes. Anvil Publishing, 1994. 17–21.

[4] Private correspondence. Author copy furnished. March 2 2006.

[5] "Slim Pickings @Manila Lit Fest 2011" by Katrina Stuart Santiago. GMA News Online, 5 November 2011.https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/lifestyle/content/239635/slim-pickings-at-manila-s-lit-fest-2011/story/

[6] "Burn After Reading" by Katrina Stuart Santiago. *Rogue Magazine Facebook Page.* April 2012. https://www.facebook.com/notes/10159646301512985/

[7] See: "Burn Baby Burn: The Falsity of Facebook Engagement" by Katrina Stuart Santiago. www.radikalchick.com, 22 April 2021. https://katrinasantiago.com/burn-baby-burn-the-falsity-of-fb-engagement/

[8] "Zero Shades of Grey" by Kristine Fonacier, *Esquire Magazine,* November 2012. 70–72.

[9] Seven years after, in 1998, "the literary barkada" would so be institutionalized via the Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo's The 'Literary Barkada' in the Philippines, in *The Filipiniana Reader,* 144–151.

[10] "Sa Ngalan ng Ina, ng Anak, ng Diwata't Paraluman" by Lilia Quindoza Santiago in *Sa Ngalan ng Ina, 100 Taon ng Tulang Feminista sa Pilipinas,* University of the Philippines Press, 1997. 280–282.

[11] See *Chronology of a Revolution* by Angela Stuart-Santiago. Book published by the Worldwide People Power Foundation, Inc., 1996. Website created 2010: http://edsarevolution.com.

[12] Angela Stuart-Santiago blog: http://www.stuartsantiago.com. 2007–present.

[13] *Revolutionary Routes, Five Stories of Incarceration, Exile, Murder, and Betrayal in Tayabas Quezon 1891–1980.* 2011.

[14] *Pro Bernal, Anti Bio.* ABS-CBN Publishing and Everything's Fine, 2018.

[15] Herrera-Umali, Concepcion. *Fragmentos de Mi Juventud*. Unpublished memoir. 1973–1975.

[16] Umali-Stuart, Concepcion. *Fragments Of My Childhood*. Unpublished translation of *Fragmentos de Mi Juventud*. 1980 onwards.

[17] See "Contour and Content: Testimonial Narratives by Women in the National Democratic Movement" by Patricia B. Arinto in *Nationalist Literature, A Centennial Forum* edited by Elmer Ordoñez. University of the Philippines Press, 1995.

[18] Stuart-Santiago. "Family Secrets" in *Revolutionary Routes.* 8.

[19] The name of my blog, social media handle, and name of my four-year opinion column with *The Manila Times. "*Notes On Independence" is part of the title of the book *Rebellions: Notes on Independence*, *Edited and Curated Essays.* Ateneo de Naga University Press, 2017.

[20] See: "A Heritage of Smallness: The Crisis of Criticism in the Philippines." From *Post-Pandemic Futures | KritiKa: Criticisms on Philippine Criticism* by the National Book Development Board. 27 August 2021. https://www.facebook.com/nbdb.phil/videos/279048036943305. Start: 1:42:20. End: 2:09:31.

Works Cited

Arinto, Patricia B. "Contour and Content: Testimonial Narratives by Women in the National Democratic Movement." *Nationalist Literature, A Centennial Forum* edited by Elmer Ordoñez. University of the Philippines Press, 1995.

Feria, Dolores Stephens. "The Patriarchy and the Filipina As Writer." *The Long Stag Party*. Dolores Stephens Feria and The Institute of Women's Studies, 1991.

Fernandez, Doreen G. "Introduction" in *Filipina 2: essays.* 13 May 1984. New Day Publishing, 1985.

Fonacier, Kristine. "Zero Shades of Grey." *Esquire Magazine*, November 2012, pp. 70–72.

Herrera-Umali, Concepcion. *Fragmentos de Mi Juventud*. Unpublished memoir. 1973–1975.

Martinez, Jovita N. “Ang Silid Na Mahiwaga” (1927). *Ang Silid na Mahiwaga, Kalipunan ng mga Kuwento't Tula ng Babaeng Manunulat*, edited by Soledad Reyes. Anvil Publishing, 1994.

Quindoza-Santiago, Lilia. “Ang Pinagmulang ng Kaisipang Feminista sa Pilipinas.” *Sa Ngalan ng Ina, 100 Taon ng Tulang Feminista sa Pilipinas*. University of the Philippines Press, 1997.

——. “Sa Ngalan ng Ina, ng Anak, ng Diwata't Paraluman.” *Sa Ngalan ng Ina, 100 Taon ng Tulang Feminista sa Pilipinas*. University of the Philippines Press, 1997.

Stuart Santiago, Angela. “Family Secrets.” *Revolutionary Routes*, *Five Stories of Incarceration, Exile, Murder, and Betrayal in Tayabas Quezon 1891–1980*. 2011.

Stuart Santiago, Katrina. “Burn After Reading.” *Rogue Magazine*, April 2012. Rogue Magazine Facebook Page—https://www.facebook.com/notes/10159646301512985/

——. “Burn Baby Burn: The Falsity of Facebook Engagement.” *radikalchick.com*, 22 April 2021. https://katrinasantiago.com/burn-baby-burn-the-falsity-of-fb-engagement/

——. “Slim Pickings @Manila Lit Fest 2011” by Katrina Stuart Santiago. *GMA News Online*, 5 November 2011. https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/lifestyle/content/239635/slim-pickings-at-manila-s-lit-fest-2011/story/

Umali-Stuart, Concepcion. *Fragments of My Childhood*. Unpublished translation of Fragmentos de Mi Juventud. 1980 onwards.