



Introduction

FOR THE LITERARY SECTION of this issue of *Banwa Series A: Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences*, we put up a call for works that attempt to tell stories about Mindanao, a specific but also somewhat open invitation. Perhaps because of this thematic constraint, we received a modest number of submissions. We decided to invite two guest editors. Prof. Timothy Montes, a former faculty of the University of the Philippines Mindanao and now part of the De La Salle University, had settled in Mindanao for about two decades; while Lualhati Milan Abreu, author of the seminal work *Agaw-dilim, Agaw-liwanag (Dusking, Dawning)*, has been living here for most of her life—both had come to these islands under some sort of duty or mission.

The guest editors helped us narrow down our selection to works that are closer to being ready for publication. From the submissions, we looked for works that we believe have something meaningful to say about our shared experiences here. This issue of *Banwa* remains multilingual. One story written in Binisaya, about a child who speaks about being trapped in a crossfire, was authored by a writer of mixed Blaan heritage. The poems are in Filipino. One suite responds to other literary works about Cotabato, Saranggani, and Lake Sebu and gives us snapshots of lives that trace varying shapes of violence. The other suite is more brazenly polemic, anchored on the author's experience while visiting North Cotabato after the violent dispersal of the farmer's barricade in Kidapawan. One author contributed two short essays in Binisaya and Filipino, respectively, about life near a port in Iligan. A personal essay in English talks about diving along the Davao Gulf and also learning from her previous relationships.

We wanted to know what some of our writers from different parts of the country have to say

when they write about Mindanao, especially in the wake of the Marawi siege; the declaration and succeeding extensions of martial law; the continuing displacement of Lumad communities entangled in the war between the government and insurgents; and also, the peaceful establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, all in what seemed like a very long couple of years. With the exception of the visual essay, none of the works directly confront the current events. The stories and essays offer instead a closer range: a group of teenage gay boys grow up in a Catholic school in Davao del Sur, a college student immerses himself in a Tagakaolo community, a young boy comes home to Agusan to bury his father. Graphic art, perhaps the most popular of the genres represented here, becomes a medium of dissent and pointed commentary. In this issue, we have “an illustrated primer on the agricultural situation of the farmers, the effect of environmental crisis to the most vulnerable sectors of Philippine society [...]”

Perhaps, the call for works about or for Mindanao need not remain in one issue. What's certain is that *Banwa* will welcome more contributions that speak about our home.

—PROF. JOHN B. BENGAN
Editor, *Banwa Series A*

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IT TOOK THE ELECTION of Rodrigo Roa Duterte for the rest of the country to be aware of the strangeness of the national terrain. The vicious divisiveness that now permeates news threads and Web forums is as much caused by this cultural

divide as by socioeconomic ones. Mindanao is different from the rest of the country; don't ask me how—it is difficult to explain.

Coming from the Visayas in 1999, I arrived in UP Mindanao as a literary missionary, a young assistant professor intent on propping up the Creative Writing program of the last outpost of the national university. When I left the place twelve years later, I harbored the sentimental illusion that I had helped develop a new generation of writers born in Mindanao. This was in contrast to the previous generation of prominent Mindanao writers who were migrants, born elsewhere and carrying turtle-like on their backs the framework of their formative experiences elsewhere—Aida Rivera-Ford, Tita Lacambra Ayala, Christine Godinez-Ortega. My nativist sentiment was partial to the idea that literary genius could only organically emerge from those who were born and bred in the place they would write about. Opportunistic tourists need not apply.

And yet I myself was as much a tourist as a missionary. I saw with an outsider's eyes, foisted foreign theories on an indigenous domain. And so it was a pleasant experience to return to Davao three years ago to witness a thriving literary community in that part of the country.

More than the institutions, what is worth emphasizing is the emergence of new young writers who would forge in the smithy of their souls the uncreated conscience of their region. Right now, in the country's landscape of the imagination, Duterte is Mindanao—tyrannical, vulgar, prone to violence. These young writers from Mindanao are bent on disabusing this idea.

If there is such a thing as literary justice, it would be served by time. A century hence, the figure of Duterte will shrink to its realistic contours and more micro-stories will speak for Mindanao with more compelling authenticity. The stories currently being written by Mindanao writers will bear out the fact that Mindanao cannot be contained by the Duterte metaphor—that the quiet lives of small-time characters in these narratives have as much validity as the most glorified despot.

This special literary issue of *Banwa* (the first issue of which I edited twenty years ago)

is a testament to this missionary project of imagining Mindanao's literary landscape. Here the unchronicled marginal voices of the island get to be heard—a third-grader in the hinterlands of Davao who has never been to the city, a coterie of gay students in a Catholic high school mesmerized by the transformative power of a wig, a boy who cannot muster the courage to butcher a pet pig. These stories are as familiar as they are strange. The overemphasis on the difference of Mindanao from the rest of the country have been so defamiliarized in these stories that, in the end, we cannot help but confirm the final insight of the ethnographic essay by Jade Baylon: “how I have been so detached from my homeland.”

In a sense, the unarticulated B's (*bayot*, *bayotiful*) of Douglas Crispino's novel excerpt asserts the idea that grace and beauty can be extracted from the most painful of experiences. Camp humor and grotesquerie could only have been wrested from such a thing as a wig, an object which used to be owned by a cancer victim but is now used to magically transform the lives of small-town adolescent gays. At times, the language of the story hides an ornate style that reflects the squeezed-in lives of these gay characters, as if it takes so much sophistication to rise above the painful humiliation that confront these characters every day.

Ivan Khenard Acero's “Outsider” is a sensitive treatment of a young man who refuses to conform to the macho ethos of a community, as represented by his own father who is a butcher. The narrator comes home for his father's funeral and the necessary confrontation with his past forces him to navigate a parade of memories. The literal parade at the end of the story creates a musical and existential dissonance that beautifully captures his alienation. Acero chooses to treat with quiet delicacy “the gulf of silence” that comes over the narrator and his father.

Perhaps the most compelling story in the volume is the short monologue “Dili Pwede Mogawas” by Elizabeth Joy Serrano-Quijano. Uttered by a girl in grade 3, the social map of Mindanao is authentically embedded in this piece. It takes a sophisticated reader to see through the language of an innocent child, to give the idea of an unreliable narrator a new twist. For

instance, it only takes the child one sentence to give a more nuanced description of her father the soldier. “Adunay pula nga tatak ang kilid sa iyang yuniformal.” [There was a red badge on the side of his uniform.] The adult reader will grasp the eureka moment as to disbelieve the child as an unreliable narrator: the father is not a soldier, but a member of the New People’s Army (NPA). This child narrator who keeps on innocently repeating the title phrase makes for a very complex oral storyteller that is not usually within the purview of techniques in the Western short story tradition. The layers of social meaning that adhere to the narrator’s words make the reader puncture to another interpretive realm that implicates the reader as a self-aware adult who is part of the social system. This is an unreliable narrator against whom the adult reader is powerless to disbelieve. Technically, this is a very sophisticated narrative feat.

One essay in this volume—“Notes on Finding Stories in Treeless Jungles” by Jade Monteverde Baylon—fittingly illustrates the outsider’s effort to do justice to the lives of the indigenous tribes in Mindanao. The act of writing both affirms and betrays the lives it portrays. As a creative writing student, Baylon undertook to write a nonfiction narrative project for his thesis by immersing himself in a Tagakaolo community in the mountains of Davao del Sur. Not to be construed as pure ethnography, this essay is a fragment, a postscript from the formal thesis—“dried corn kernels that have not been crushed to become chicken feed.” It is not a scientific description of the lifeways of a native tribe, but an honest reckoning of the writer with his attitude towards his material. As such, this brings us back to the metaphoric implication of imagining Mindanao from the perspective of differentness that results, in this particular case, in both empathy and wisdom.

I embrace these new stories as part of the repository that comprise my personal memories of Mindanao—adolescent gays chattering during lunch hour in a Catholic school, a nine-year-old boy slitting the throat of a fluttering chicken, a girl afraid to get out of their nipa hut due to thunderstorm and sound of guns, a college student nursing a numb rump after a four-

hour *habal-habal* (motorcycle) ride just to visit a Tagakaolo community. Who says words don’t matter anymore in this post-literary world? Not even the vulgar threats of a president can outlive the compelling beauty of these narratives from a new generation of Mindanao writers.

—PROF. TIMOTHY R. MONTES,
Professor of Literature,
De La Salle University, Manila

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ANG MGA AKDANG PAMPANITIKAN na nakalakip sa isyung ito ng *Banwa* ay pawang nagpapakita sa umiiral na kalagayan sa ilang lugar ng Mindanao—Iligan, Makilala, at Cotabato. Sinasalamang rin ng ilan dito ang panloob na tunggalian sa isip ng tumutula: “Kasa, Saka, at Iba Pang Tula” ni Tilde Acuña at “Apat na Tula” ni M.J. Cagumbay Tumamac. Sa una, inihanay ang mga punto sa pagkasa o hindi sa pultaym na pakikisangkot sa pakikibakang bayan; sa ikalawa, buo at malinaw ang desisyon na maging mandirigmang bayan. Ang dalawang sanaysay naman—“Demolisyon sa Tabing-Dagat” at “Nasaan na Kaya si Arman?” ni Delfin M. Mundala Jr.—ay naglalahad na hindi mabubura ng anumang mga kaganapan sa kanyang buhay at kapaligiran ang mga alaala na dulot nito sa kamalayan ng nakaraan: demolisyon sa una at pagkalagas ng mga dahon ng panahon. Patunay ang mga akdang ito ng pagbibigay ng espasyo ng *Banwa* sa mga akdang makatotohanan at palabang.

—LUALHATI MILAN ABREU
Author of *Agaw-dilim, Agaw-liwanag*
(*Dusking, Dawning*)