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## **Abstract**

A Conversation between Author and Translator

history hurts my hair (Bobis 1999 11)

la historia hiera mi pelo

pigpapaduso kan nakaaging istorya an sakuyang buhok

MERLINDA BOBIS AND DOLORES HERRERO

## Sensing and Sensibility: The Late Ripple of Colonisation?

### A Conversation between Author and Translator

history hurts my hair (Bobis 1999 11)

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#### **MERLINDA:**

In English, then in Spanish, and in Bikol, this is a line from Estrella, the woman with twelve-metre hair in my short story ‘Fish-Hair Woman’. This story is based on the militarisation of my grandmother’s village in the 1987–1989 total war waged by the Philippine government against communist insurgency in the Bikol region. The Fish-Hair Woman uses her hair to fish out corpses, victims of war, from the river that transforms each time a body is thrown into the water —

A river sweet with lemon grass and breathing fireflies — how could you believe such a tale? (10)

Un río dulce con hierba de limón y luciérnagas suspirantes — ¿cómo puedes creer semejante historia?

The story opens with the Fish-Hair Woman being picked up by the soldiers to fish out another corpse from the river. This time she suspects it is her lover, the Australian journalist Tony McIntyre —

So when they asked me to come with them to fish out the lemon grass scent and give them back the river, the one that is sweetened only by the hills [...] every strand of my hair heard my heart break. (11)

Así que cuando me pidieron que les acompañara para pescar el aroma de hierba de limón y devolverles el río, el que tan sólo está endulzado por las colinas [...] todos los mechones de mi pelo oían cómo mi corazón se rompía.

‘Pain reduces a person to visceral bodiliness’, writes anthropologist and novelist Michael Jackson. ‘One becomes merely a vulnerable bodyself that either functions or does not, that either lives or dies, depending on forces outside one’s control, and despite one’s worth, wealth, or cultural identity. Pain makes questions of identity trivial’ (118).

But not in this conversation. Cultural identity, especially its language and history, is crucial to this article that will examine the collaborative translation

between myself, the author, and Dolores, the translator, of the short story ‘Fish-Hair Woman’ from English to Spanish — while noting that my English text is not necessarily the original version. The story, of course, was first translated from my native Bikolano sensibility and the history of total war and militarism. Both realities are as old as the Philippines’ history of colonisation: Spain for nearly 400 years (1521–1898), America for 40 years (1901–1945), then Japan for nearly five years (1941–1945).

The Bikol region has always been a setting of imposed violence and resistance. In a letter to the Viceroy of New Spain, the missionary Fray Martin de Rada (June 1574: see Blair and Robertson 288–94) wrote about how the Spaniards entered the region, which was

the most valiant and best armed of all these islands. Consequently, although they never attacked the Spaniards, still they defended themselves in all their villages and would not surrender unless conquered by force of arms [...] all the villages were entered in the same way, by first summoning them to submit peacefully and to pay tribute immediately unless they wished war. They replied that they would first prove those to whom they were to pay tribute [...] an entrance was made among them by force of arms, and the village was overthrown and whatever was found, pillaged.

(qtd in Gerona 45)

The natives fiercely resisted the conquest, and consequently as de Rada wrote, ‘more have perished in that land than in any other yet conquered’ (45). The Spaniards conquered Bikol with the cross and the sword, a combination that not only wrecked land and lives, but more insidiously, culture. According to Bikolano historian Danilo Gerona,

Archaeological facts suggest that this was one of the earliest regions in the Philippines to have a relatively advanced civilization. In fact, when early Asiatic trade began flowing into the Philippines, the region apparently was among the first to enjoy access to exotic Oriental goods.

However, because of the early Spanish chroniclers’ narrow and biased cultural horizon the thousand of years of Bicol civilization receded to oblivion. Most painful is the fact that many people were made to believe that civilization only arrived with the Spaniards in 1569. (6)

Rich in gold, the region was heavily hispanised. The colonial mark is felt to this day in the Catholic zeal of Bikolanos and the Spanish language woven into the native tongue: Bikol or Bikolano, an Austronesian language and a sub-branch of Malayo-Polynesian languages. Consider these quotes on language and education from Philippine historian Teodoro Agoncillo (1969), in the context of Spanish colonisation:

[...] instead of teaching the language to the people, as required by several royal decrees, [the friars] studied the native languages and preached and wrote religious tracts in them. In any artistic endeavour, native achievements were impregnated with the religious element, for the Spanish friars saw to it that Catholicism dominated the life of the community. (54)

The Spaniards, it has been truly said, founded colleges and universities, the oldest being what is now the University of Santo Tomas founded in 1611, but what has been left unsaid is that those educational institutions were not for the natives but for the orphans of Spanish colonists and for the children of the peninsular Spaniards and the creoles, the latter being called *Filipinos* during the Spanish colonial regime [...] University education was opened to the natives [eventually], resulting in the rise of the intelligentsia class which the Spaniards, particularly the friars, feared might start and agitate for reforms and, ultimately, for independence. (58; original emphasis)

[Because of] the fear of an educated elite [...] Spanish colonial authorities, goaded by the friars, discouraged the natives from learning Spanish [...]. (58)

One can argue then that our current collaborative translation is both subversive and problematic: centuries later, a Filipino writer and a Spanish translator harness Spanish for literary ends — this is writing back to the empire — but the process also returns us to the language and sensibility of the Spanish coloniser (Filipino collaborators were executed during the Philippine revolution against Spain). But that was ages ago, and ours is now a transnational collaboration where both cultures have equal agency. We can shrug off this history. This position is equally problematic. Invoking transnationalism returns us to the earlier transnational enterprise, colonisation. Even more problematic, perhaps especially to Filipino nationalists, is the fact that I have always sensed my sensibility's close affinity with literatures of Hispanic/Latin-American origins. Is this literary affinity a late ripple of colonisation? On reading my short stories for the first time, Dolores sensed them as so 'familiar', evoking Spanish writers. This recognition may well reinforce that late ripple, now a liminal space, which we have harnessed towards a productive-subversive cultural production, where the creative arc is both disruptive and expansive.

#### **DOLORES:**

I became acquainted with Merlinda Bobis's work nine years ago, when I read her collection of short stories, *White Turtle*. I must confess that reading that collection was quite an extraordinary experience. The short stories were so fresh, so different from many other things I had read before (especially in the field of Australian literature), but at the same time they sounded so enigmatically familiar. They dealt with a different culture, and thus with an apparently different sensibility. Yet, in spite of all differences, they reminded me of Spanish poets such as García Lorca, Miguel Hernández, Rafael Alberti, and also of Latin American magical realist writers such as Borges and García Márquez, authors who had played such a prominent role in the formative years of my youth, who had paved the way for an innovative and rather more interesting and eclectic kind of literature. I can say that reading this collection was like going back home, like entering my own particular 'Third Space', to take Homi Bhabha's well-known expression so familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. When reading 'Fish-Hair Woman', and how history hurt Estrella's hair in particular, one of the voices whose echoes I could clearly hear was that of Miguel Hernández in his well-known elegy, 'Elegía

a la muerte de Ramón Sijé' (*El Rayo que no cesa*, 1936), which he wrote after the death of one of his dearest friends.

[...]  
 daré tu corazón por alimento.  
 Tanto dolor se agrupa en mi costado,  
 Que por doler me duele hasta el aliento. (ll. 7–9)

[...]  
 (I will feed on your heart.  
 There is so much pain inside  
 that every single part of my body hurts, even my breath)

Merlinda and I exchanged quite a few stimulating emails over a number of years, and finally met in 2008, when she kindly accepted my invitation to be one of the keynote speakers at the International Conference on Ethics, Trauma and Literature that I organised in Spain. Two years later, we decided to work together in Australia in order to explore the transnational dimension of her work as particularly shown in her short story 'Fish-Hair Woman', and to translate it into Spanish. During the course of our collaboration I realised that, although she was familiar with many Spanish authors, she had never heard of Miguel Hernández, nor of the poem I mentioned before. Yet, the sensibility and the wording were almost the same, and this was only one example. We both found these echoes fascinating, this late and incredibly productive ripple of colonisation (?), and soon decided to embark on the exploration of the infinite possibilities of this liminal space, which clearly transcended the realm of sheer postcoloniality.

As is well known, liminality (from the Latin word *limen*, meaning 'a threshold') has often been defined as a psychological or metaphysical subjective, conscious state of being on the threshold of or between different existential planes. Although liminal first appeared in publication in the field of psychology in 1884, the idea was introduced in the field of anthropology in 1909 by Arnold Van Gennep in his seminal work, *Les rites de passage*. Yet it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that the term gained popularity through the writings of Victor Turner. Turner first introduced his interpretation of liminality in 1967, drawing on Van Gennep's three-part structure for rites of passage (1. separation; 2. liminal period; 3. re-assimilation). He focused entirely on the middle stage, the so-called transitional or liminal stage, and affirmed that 'the subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, 'invisible' (1967 95). The liminal is described as a period of transition, as a threshold state of ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy, and it is only after going through this process that one may enter into new forms of identity and relationship, to rejoin again the culture one initially belonged to.

Turner argues that liminal individuals are treated as outsiders, and are therefore regarded as dangerous to those who have not undergone the liminal period. Moreover, liminal individuals have nothing: 'no status, insignia, secular clothing,

rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows' (1967 98). The group of liminal individuals is not a typical social hierarchy but a 'communitas', a communal group in which all are equal. Turner uses the Latin term *communitas* to express this notion of anti-structure, and refers to social structure and 'communitas' as 'two major "models" for human interrelatedness' (1969 96). This is how he defines these two models:

The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of *more* or *less*. The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders. (1969 96 [original emphasis])

This latter model of 'communitas' has a number of cultural manifestations, of which liminality (to be in between) is only one. The other two are: marginality (to be on the edges); and inferiority (to be beneath). However, although Turner strives to give examples of each of them, the differences are not always clear-cut, and some overlapping is always inevitable. For Turner the experience of liminality is essential to understand the true nature of community. The liminal is not opposite to, but the necessary counterpart to, individuality and identity. By getting rid of the usual definitions by which society assigns power and status, entrance into the liminal not only allows individuals to change who they are in relationship to society, but also offers them a chance to be aware of their oneness with the community as a whole.

Judging from all that has been said so far, it would be no exaggeration to assert that the notion of liminality can be used to represent the writer's and, by extension the translator's, task and experience in the world, all the more so when they are, to take Salman Rushdie's well-known expression, 'translated persons'; that is, people who have been carried across several languages and cultures, and who necessarily straddle them in their daily work and existence. It is their attention to what lies outside the order of ordinary life, their immersion in the life of multiple worlds, and their willingness to be inhabited by and speak for others that mainly characterise their work. Moreover, whereas for most members of a cultural community the liminal is a temporary point of transition, for the writer or translator, the liminal could be said to become their only possible dwelling place, their home.

Like Merlinda herself who, having been born in the triply colonised Philippines and now living in Australia, interlaces several localities/nationalities and their respective languages and cultures in an artistic global imagined space, Estrella, the main character in 'Fish-Hair Woman', wonderfully encapsulates the aforementioned ideas. A most important member of her community, but also alien to it due to her subversive monstrosity, she must constantly inhabit the liminal space that alone allows her to mediate between the familiar and the unfamiliar,

reality and magic, love and hate, life and death, earth and water, the villagers and the military, the Philippines and Australia, Bikol and English. Her body, and more particularly her hair, is the site of variegated tensions and contradictory meanings which, to quote Wilson and Dissanayake, ‘unsettle the hybridity discourse normative to postcolonial analysis with trenchantly situated readings that stress enduring asymmetries of domination, injustice, racism, class dynamics, and uneven spatial development’ (8). Estrella’s hair stands for both her people’s ultimate encapsulation of death and only desperate hope. Consequently, unlike in many patriarchal/colonial signifying practices in which, Barbara Creed (1993) argues, the womb, and by extension the whole female body, is represented as tomb and accordingly, as the ultimate embodiment of death and abjection, Estrella’s hair, like its transnational author, transcends that demeaning homogenising model in order to teem with threads which ever grow in multiple directions. This criss-crosses unequal and discrepant allegiances and inheritances to bring forth what Homi Bhabha calls an ‘interstitial’ or ‘third space’ born of the imaginative ‘negotiation of incommensurable differences’ (1994 218).

#### **MERLINDA:**

As a magical realist text, ‘Fish-Hair Woman’ exists in a liminal space, in the interstice of the magical and the real, subverting the violence of a real war in an actual political setting through the magical, monstrous female body. But unlike Barbara Creed’s ‘monstrous feminine’ that is reduced to abjection, the Fish-Hair Woman subverts her own and her village’s abject reality. In fact, my creative conjuring of this magical protagonist was an uncanny subversion that played out in the sensing space of liminality. Ten years after I wrote the short story, I learned about a military strategy used in that total war. Human rights advocate Arnel de Guzman writes:

President Aquino and her US military advisers mapped out a strategy dubbed *Lambat Bitag* (Operation Fishnet-Trap), a Filipino expression that suggests a noose tightening around a victim’s neck. *Lambat Bitag* relies on traditional military offensives bolstered by political and psychological warfare that are supposed to pave the way for peace and development. The strategy is not new; it was used by the United States in the Philippine-American War, was used to crush the Huk [peasant] rebellion in the 1950s, and was the mainstay of Marcos-directed counter-insurgency warfare in the 1970s and 1980s.

The victims of the tightening noose are of course meant to be the insurgents, especially the leaders, but since they are so elusive, a broad net with small openings is needed. Casting such a net risks catching innocent fish, but this, reasons the military, would be an acceptable byproduct of war. In regions where the net fails, the entire population (the water) may have to be removed in order to starve the fish. (1991 40)

My fish-net hair of salvation is then an accidental subversion of the deadly military strategy ‘Fishnet-Trap’, the *Lambat Bitag*. Moreover, the Fish-Hair Woman redeems not only corpses, but also history. Each time she remembers something that ‘unsettles her heart’, her hair grows a hand span. Even so,

abjection is not effaced; with her ever-growing hair hurting with history, she remains in agonistic liminality between devastation and redemption, abjection and subversion. ‘Agonistic liminality’ is a term from Hamid Naficy’s essay on independent transnational cinema:

The authority of transnationals as filmmaking authors is derived from their position as subjects inhabiting transnational and exilic spaces, where they travel in the slip-zone of fusion and admixture. What results is an agonistic liminality of selfhood and location which is characterized by oscillation between extremes of hailing and haggling. This turns exile and transnationalism into a contentious state of syncretic impurity, intertextuality, even imperfection. They become moments of dialectical vision, of sameness in difference, of continuity in discontinuity, of synchronicity in diachronicity. Emotionally, they are characterized by zeniths of ecstasy and confidence and nadirs of despondency and doubt. Finally, exile and transnationality are highly processual, discursive, and ambivalent. (124)

Naficy could have been describing my creative process of writing the short story in Australia in 1994, while worrying about the protracted violence in my region — as well as my status as a migrant writer, a label that I have dropped because the concept of migrancy suggests a peripheral supplicant always at the mercy of the nation that was left behind, or the nation where the writer has arrived to live in exile. Instead I now see myself as *a* translational-transnational constantly translating and being translated between my Filipino sensibility and the demands of an Australian audience. As a trilingual writer in English-Pilipino-and-Bikol, and a transmedia artist working across diverse literary and performance forms, I now refuse to privilege the notion of exile, and therefore succumb to despondency and abjection. I prefer the ‘transnational imaginary’ that defies structures, and consequently colonisation —

the ‘transnational imaginary’ comprises the *as-yet-unfigured* horizon of contemporary cultural production by which national spaces/identities of political allegiance and economic regulation are being undone and imagined communities of modernity are being reshaped at the macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (cultural) levels of everyday existence. (Wilson and Dissanayake 2005 6; [original emphasis])

‘As-yet-unfigured’ and therefore unterritorialised, the transnational imaginary is a liminal space of agency which can serve a decolonising function as it facilitates the creative collision-collaboration of diverse cultural identities — and consequently the infinite imagining and re-imagining of cultural products and culture itself. In the creative process, the transnational imaginary is a sensing space before it is constituted into a fixed sensibility, a fixed culture, a fixed story/discourse. It is disruptive and expansive. It has latitude. It is open to play between Self and Other.

#### **DOLORS:**

If understood in these terms, the creative process has a clear ethical agenda. It is the writer’s ethical impulse towards the other, the writer’s openness to it, that ultimately effects a release from the confines of the self. Subjectivity is

therefore regarded, as Andrew Gibson has put it, ‘not merely as radically and definitely incomplete, but as intrinsically a projection towards the future, *un sujet-à-venir*’ (1999 38 [original emphasis]). The writer who conceives the literary imagination as transnational, as a culture-crossing force that transcends all territorial, linguistic, and cultural barriers, advocates, to rely on Gibson’s ideas again (161–65), an ‘ethics of affect’, since s/he is mainly concerned with being affected rather than affecting. Sensibility and reception, two key concepts in the field of literary theory and criticism, are reconsidered from an ethical perspective. Since, according to Gibson, sensibility ‘does not direct itself at an object with the intention of mastering it, but is rather characterised by a mode of openness and attentiveness’, it could be ‘effectively thought of as a capacity for being mastered, a receptiveness which even precedes cognition and makes cognition possible’ (162). The creative text, like art in general, Gibson goes on to argue, does not attempt to embody and illustrate a stable, pre-existing realm of prior values and principles, but rather reveals itself as a complex and unlimited set of relationships, always subject to the game of composition and fission, repetition and difference, which clearly discloses its ethical potential. According to this critic:

It is precisely insofar as it both recognizes and elaborates a constitutive multiplicity that art not only achieves its goal in contemplation, but is redemptive and ethical. For it does involve a better awareness of *la vie des autres*. This awareness, however, is not to be achieved according to the old humanist principle of putting oneself *à la place des autres* [...]. Better awareness lies in a finer sense (and rendering) of the limitless proliferation of worlds and their incommensurability. In striving for such an awareness, too, art not only reflects people back to themselves, but reflects them back as they have never seen themselves, as both actuality and potentiality, person and event, subjectivity and its other. (130 [original emphasis])

To put it differently, it is the unlimited multiplicity at work within the text, or rather, the text’s ultimate liminality, that turns transnational literature into a source of never-ending scenarios and possibilities, into an ultimately ethical project, which consequently exceeds the limits of former reductive postcolonial interpretations. In the short story under analysis, it is Estrella’s capacity to open herself up to absolute otherness that allows her to represent what ultimately transcends the limits of representation, to contract space and time, to become the catalyst that can alone contest and lump together distinct but entangled worlds and cosmovisions. Similarly, her ever-growing hair becomes a tool of reconciliation and resistance that brings to the fore the problems involved in trying to live with multiple identities. In other words, Estrella’s monstrous hair ‘express[es] and encode[s] the melo(drama) of transnational subjectivity’, since it inexorably blurs and negotiates ‘the boundaries between self and other, female and male, inside and outside, homeland and hostland’ (Naficy 128–29), to the point of opening up space for an on-going transformative dialogue across barriers of language, nationality, gender, race and class.

**MERLINDA:**

‘There is language, there is art, because there is “the other”’, argues literary critic and philosopher George Steiner (137):

The meaning, the existential modes of art, music and literature are functional within the experience of our meeting the other. All aesthetics, all critical and hermeneutic discourse, is an attempt to clarify the paradox and opaqueness of that meeting as well as its felicities. (138)

Meeting the English reader with a Philippine story and sensibility has always been problematic. During my early years in Australia, when I was writing my bilingual epic poem for performance, *Cantata of the Warrior Woman Daragang Magayon*, I was always looking behind my shoulder towards my first home: how do I remain true to its language rhythms? And almost immediately, I was wrenched back to face the reality of the creative enterprise: I am also writing this in English, in Australia. The language divide kept me from writing for a whole year. Finally I recovered from the writer’s block and wrote the epic in two versions, Pilipino (my national language) and English, only after I found a comfortable conceptual template for that meeting of disparate tongues — and disparate heartbeats, so to speak. In an early essay ‘Redreaming the Voice: From Translation to Bilingualism’, I wrote:

The first heart’s tongue is silence. This found concrete voice in the first primal grunt of the prehistoric person. A sound that was eventually finely tuned in different soundstations, thus breeding the different languages. That I am born to a particular soundstation is accidental. It does not deny me birthright to that first primal sound. I am born with the timbre of the first sound. Thus, I am bound by kinship to all the languages it has bred. And when I tune in myself to any soundstation and know it by ear and heart, the language it has bred becomes mine. (1995 33)

This argument was for my own psychological appeasement. The more conscious postcolonial strategies came later, when I began writing my short stories only in English. Writing ‘Fish-Hair Woman’ for Australian publication in the 90s, I had to make sure that the original tongue was not abandoned, even as I tried to translate ‘a foreign experience’ for the reader. True, I fine-tuned the Bikol reality in English: where Bikol words and concepts were used, English translations were always embedded in the sentence. As writer-translator, I had to be the bridge in this transcultural meeting. However, I decided that the Australian reader must meet me halfway on this bridge, which leads to a story that, considering our present and relatively comfortable domicile, is arguably foreign to both of us. Accordingly, my creative choices were also facilitated by a decolonising intent, consciously at work at sentence level. Steiner writes:

A sentence always means more. Even a single word, within the weave of incommensurable connotation, can, and usually does. The informing matrix or context of even a rudimentary, literal proposition — and just what does *literal* mean? — moves outward from specific utterance or notation in ever-widening concentric

and overlapping circles. These comprise the individual, subconsciously quickened language habits and associative field-mappings of the particular speaker or writer.

(82; [original emphasis])

My ripples of ‘language mappings and associative field-mappings’ were not simply subconscious. In the keynote paper that I delivered on ‘Fish-Hair Woman’ for Dolores’s conference, I explain:

With my obsession to write [...] the voices of the village, I was, in fact, constantly working with a sense of the oral-aural. I wanted the reader to return with me to [the village of] Iraya. I wanted their placid air assaulted, rippled with the inflections of my native tongue that is ornate and dense, the storytelling of daily life, and the spontaneous, in-your-face cry of grief of that total war. (2009 11)

The dense lyricism, the emotionally charged sentences, and the unusual syntax of the text were deliberate translations of a place, its bodies, its voices. Listen:

[...] history hurts my hair, did you know that? Remembering is always a bleeding out of memory, like pulling thread from a vein in the heart, a coagulation so fine, miles of it stretching upwards to the scalp, then sprouting there into the longest strand of red hair. Some face-saving tale to explain my twelve metres of very thick black hair with its streaks of red and hide my history. (1999 11)

Writing this, I wanted to make strange the English language, therefore stylistically foregrounding my native sensibility and its attendant history. Here, I am evoking Viktor Shklovsky’s defamiliarisation technique not primarily as an aesthetic device but as a decolonising strategy. He argues:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. [...] art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects *unfamiliar*, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*

(1965 12 [original emphasis])

While Shklovsky can be referenced in the conjuring of the Fish-Hair Woman in a village at war, for me, the real war itself is as important as the artfulness of the magical protagonist. For aesthetics, the long, dense sentences are meant to evoke her lengthening hair, which is a metaphor for the lengthening stories of violence in the village; for a decolonising politics, the emotionally charged and overwrought sentences are intended to defy the habitualised expectations of the finely crafted English sentence, and the emotionally checked English sensibility — which can be so colonising if you are from a Non-English-speaking-background publishing in a prevalently Anglo culture. Note Pablo Neruda’s poem ‘Oda a la crítica’, which critiques his own critics:

Then came the critics: one deaf  
and one gifted with tongues,

and others and others:  
 the blind and the hundred-eyed,  
 the elegant ones  
 in red pumps and carnations,  
 others decently clad  
 like cadavers ...  
 [...]
 others were English,  
 just English ... (30)

In Australia, my writing has often been described as ‘densely lyrical, with big emotions, and, at worse, sentimental’. On the transcultural bridge, my hoped-for meeting is thereby arrested. I begin to wonder: is the Anglophone sensibility the sole basis for experiencing a Filipino landscape and voice? According to Susan Sontag, ‘[t]o translate is still to lead something across a gap, to make something go to where it is not. (340). In translating that Bikol total war by unsettling the stylistic expectations of the Anglo ear, I was hoping that this ear would ‘go to where it is not’. Can we remain in our comfortably familiar and peaceful grounds [and sentences] — while entering a war? Sontag argues that:

Translation is about differentness. A way of coping with, and ameliorating, and yes, denying difference — even if, as my story illustrates, it is also a way of asserting differentness. (339)

Her story is about how she and a team of Sarajevo artists translate and stage *Waiting for Godot* in war-torn Sarajevo. She tried to describe this experience back in the United States:

It’s not just that people can’t imagine a war or a siege, or the danger of the fear or the humiliation. More: they simply can’t imagine that degree of differentness from their own lives and comforts, from their understandable sense — understandable, for it’s based on their own experience — that the world isn’t such a really terrible place.

They can’t imagine that. It must be translated for them. (339)

To this I add: translated for them in their own sensibility, emotional parameters, and sentence construction. For all the postcolonial discourses of Western literary theory, does the West wish to truly meet the Other — on equal ground? I return to George Steiner who writes that, ‘[t]he experiencing of created form is a meeting between freedoms’ (152). Scientists Wilson Poon and Tom Mcleish — their disciplines (Physics and Astronomy) so Other from the humanities — did meet Steiner with welcoming precision, and ‘the shock of relevance’ to their own practice. They write that Steiner’s ‘bold, positive assertion’ is about a meeting

between the freedom of creation — ‘the sonata, the painting, could very well *not* be’ [152], and the freedom of reception — ‘we are utterly free not to receive [...] [when we are] face to face with the presence of offered meaning’ [152–53] or we are free to make the ‘gamble of welcome [...] when freedom knocks’ [156]. Some do make the gamble, and extend the courtesy of welcome to a work of artistic creation. According to Steiner, the ‘discipline of courtesy’ [155] consists of seeking to hear the language

of the stranger accurately, 'lexical *cortesía*' [157] and being sensitive to 'syntax, to the grammars which are the sinew of articulate forms' [158]. When we do that, we discover that 'we have met before' [180]. (1999 5 [original emphasis])

As early as 2004, Dolores and I met through our creative and scholarly texts, and sensed that we had met before. A little tingle of recognition, which kept happening through our collaborative translation of 'Fish-Hair Woman' in August 2010.

#### **DOLORES:**

I wrote the first draft translation of 'Fish-Hair Woman' on my own, which was quite a challenging and difficult task. An ethical translation should always be an expansive transformation of the original, and an ethical translator should always serve the text, that is, show respect for the original, which by no means implies that s/he should produce a blind translation, one that does not take into account the process, the hidden meanings of words. A holistic approach is always necessary. I had to try to see the whole picture, and look for dynamic equivalents in the Spanish language and culture, like when I chose the word 'pícaro' for 'tricky' to convey the idea of both 'unpredictable' and 'up to mischief', as was meant in the original. I often had to change the word order and substitute a whole long sentence in Spanish for a rather more short and precise expression in English. I must confess that, at times, it was hard to strike a balance. As is well known, sentence structures are important, since our cognitive parameters determine the way we see and interpret the world. Over and above everything, though, I had to hit the note that embodied Estrella's voice. Many factors are to be taken into account when translating; the translator must make her/his own decisions, and voice often determines most of them. To give but one example, for hair I chose 'pelo' instead of 'cabello', because the former belongs in a rather more popular register, which better suited Estrella's character and rural background. A good translation can never be mechanical, that is why some professional translators prefer the term transliterature to that of translation. Translation is more than pinning down the meaning and grasping the words that fit the specific cultural context. More importantly, translation is a sensing of what cannot be pinned down by language; it is also sensing the liminal.

When I went to Wollongong, Merlinda and I reviewed the translation side-by-side. This translation has been a collaborative process, which is a rare privilege. Moreover, in the transnational imaginary with its liminal ripples of disruption and expansion, we often found that the stories, emotions and sensations, and even syntax from our respective homes, kept meeting again and again, just like both of us, who have always felt that we have been meeting even before we physically met. Sometimes, I could not explain to Merlinda my choices: why did I sometimes translate 'miles' into 'kilómetros' and some other times into 'millas'? The context — and the text — find the words. Actually, when I read my Spanish draft with Merlinda, better words came to my mind, whereas when I only had the English text in front of me, I often felt sort of blocked. Sometimes you

cannot quite explain the liminal workings of language. If you cannot explain the workings of language within your own singular culture, how can you explain the workings of a language that is a product of colonisation? This means that there are more liminal spaces, gaps, slippages when working with language in the context of (post)colonisation, as in this translation enterprise, so full of surprises for both of us. I will give two examples. Once Merlinda read my Spanish translation, she all of a sudden heard in ‘Fish-Hair Woman’ the resonances of Lorca’s ‘Romance Sonámbulo’/‘Somnambular Ballad’ — from his well-known *Romancero Gitano/Gypsy Ballads* (1924–27) — which she had never intended: the same repeated question ‘¿Dónde está?’/‘Where is she?’, the same recurrent use of hair and green as a symbol of death (‘pelo verde’/‘green uniforms’). Some other times, this collaborative revision disclosed some interesting cultural variances, like when we discovered how different the meaning of the word ‘sutil’ is in Bikol and Spanish. Whereas ‘sutil’ in Bikol means ‘naughty, stubborn, difficult’, in Spanish it conveys the positive idea of ‘subtle, nicely refined and sophisticated’. Words change when being carried across from one culture to another, and it is the translator’s task to be well aware of these variations to avoid dangerous misunderstandings and prevent cohesion from interfering with coherence.

#### MERLINDA:

Discovering the liminal ripples of disruption and expansion: this was the gift of our translation process, which moved from a postcolonial to a transnational enterprise. We found moments of dissonance, which, I argue, are the Bikols’ postcolonial subversions of Spanish words and concepts that had woven themselves into the local language and sensibility. The Bikolano either revised the Spanish word to suit the native tongue or revised its meaning to adapt it to local experience. But revision was not necessary as regards emotional intensity or dense lyricism. These were clear resonances between the two sensibilities, which I surmise are not consequences of colonisation. Of course, problematising colonisation was crucial in this translation process; one cannot move forward without tackling colonial history. But it was just as crucial for us to harness not only both cultures, but also both lived experiences on equal ground in intersubjective play. No, this is not an argument for a happy transnationality, but for balance. Fixating on postcolonial alterity, we would have missed the resonances — the relational Self-and-Other — especially in the fact that both Dolores and I have known militarism. They had Franco, we had Marcos. We both know the fear inspired by men in green uniforms. History hurts both our hair — in different circumstances.

‘Pain reduces a person to visceral bodiliness [...] Pain makes questions of identity trivial’ (118), again to quote Michael Jackson. The individual suffering is the acute human imperative, more than culture. Jackson problematises ‘identity terms and collective nouns such as culture, nation, race or tribe’ and ‘all epistemology’ or ‘any discursive strategy’, as they ‘seek to convert subjects of experience into objects of knowledge’ and are ‘inevitably reductive’ (125). He

writes: 'I insist that culture be seen as an idiom or vehicle of intersubjective life, but not its foundation or final cause' (125).

Like the writing of 'Fish-Hair Woman', which navigated multiple subjectivities resisting and relating with each other, this translation and transnational enterprise — and, in fact, this dialogic essay — has employed culture and cultural production as 'a vehicle of intersubjective life'. The process is an infinite interplay of Self and Other, where the lived experience cannot simply be reduced to or railroaded by epistemology. Note how the title of this paper is a question premised on ripples. The conversations, and the living, must continue to disrupt and expand all human engagement.

#### **DOLORES:**

'Fish-Hair Woman' is much more than a local story, since it is also part of the big global picture. A close analysis of this short story reveals complex patterns of assimilation and resistance, which become rather more enticing and obvious when accomplishing its translation into Spanish, the language of the former colonisers, which, paradoxically enough, stands for oppression and alienation, but also for a very specific empowering sensibility. By writing such a dialogic and multi-layered text, Merlinda has managed to embody the push and pull between different cultures and languages, but also and more importantly, to transcend these barriers. As I argued in the conclusion of a previous essay of mine (2007), for Merlinda, it is in this liminal space that 'we can speak of Others and Ourselves. And by exploring this hybridity, this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves (Bhabha 1988 8)'. The subject, and all the more so the writer/translator, is in constant dialogue and transformation. The multiple histories that circulate in different societies overlap, intersect and compete with one another. They can be neither fused into a singular national (or any other kind of) narrative nor completely separated from one another or from their own particular contexts. Hence the need to create ethical discourses that incorporate the stories, desires and frustrations of the multitude of people who make up this global *communitas*. As Jahan Ramazani warns us:

If criticism is to be alert to both globalization and to any particular [...] text in its literal meaning of a woven thing, with sometimes contending and overlapping discourses, forms, techniques, and ideologies, it might look instead to dialogic or enmeshment models, attuned to the 'growing extensity, intensity, and velocity of global interactions' and the 'deepening enmeshment of the local and global'. Such models involve both homogenization and heterogenization, both standardization and resistant diversification. (9)

Transnational paradigms should be developed, since this is the only way in which univocal and oppressive ideologies (patriarchal, colonial) can be dismantled, and reductive postcolonial assumptions transcended, so that cross-cultural dynamics become the engines of shared authority and contemporary literary development and innovation, and thus of mutual tolerance, understanding and care.

**MERLINDA:**

‘Fish-Hair Woman’ is now a novel, coming out in 2012, and a play, *River*, *River*, which I performed for Dolores’s conference in Spain, and in the US. To conclude this meeting between writer and translator, we offer a recently updated excerpt from the play, which transcends the original narrative premise: from the body hurting because of remembering to the hurt transforming in another plane, another language — a ripple is inevitably far reaching.

The ache in my scalp  
 El dolor en mi cabellera  
 Think of flowers ...  
 Piensa en las flores  
 The trick of memory ...  
 Los trucos de la memoria  
 Think of blooming ...  
 Piensa en el florecer  
 The betrayal of nerves  
 Los nervios que traicionan  
 At the roots of my hair  
 En la raíz de mi pelo  
 Think of fishes ...  
 Piensa en los peces  
 Think of fishes ... sira ...  
  
 Rumduma an mga sira ...  
 Acuérdate de los peces  
 Rumduma an mga bayong ...  
 Acuérdate de los pájaros  
 Rumduma an mga bayong.  
  
 Remember the fishes, the birds  
 Acuérdate de los peces, de los pájaros  
 Rumduma an mga sira, mga bayong ...

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