



## Book Review

**Angelica’s Daughters: A dugtungan novel.** Filipina American collaborative writing, art form, and collective experience. Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, Erma Cuizon, Susan Evangelista, Veronica Montes, and Nadine Sarreal, 2010. Manila: Anvil Publishing. 201pp.

WITH their collaborative romance, *Angelica’s Daughters: A Dugtungan Novel*, the five Filipina writers—Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, Erma Cuizon, Susan Evangelista, Veronica Montes, and Nadine Sarreal—have realized a remarkable project. Remarkable, because the romance combines the epistolary novel with traces of the tradition of the female “talk-story.”<sup>1</sup> The book therefore constitutes the collective artistic form and expression as well as cultural experience of a community of Filipina women of several generations. It is a remarkable work, also, because by choosing the unique style of collaborative writing that originated in the Philippines in the early twentieth century, the writers have revived *dugtungan* writing via the Internet and have brought together Filipina writers from both sides of the globe. As the authors themselves explain in their foreword, dugtungan writing means that “one writer . . . work[s] on one portion of the novel, then pass[es] this on to the next writer, and so on, until the novel [is] completed” (2010, p. vi). What began as a transnational writing workshop and weekly meetings in cyberspace soon turned into serious writing. So far, the publication of the short story “New Tricks” (2007)<sup>2</sup> and *Angelica’s Daughters* (2010) are certainly impressive results.

In addition to indicating its unique Philippine artistic form and heritage, the title immediately invokes a female genealogy, which has the

novel join the ranks of the body of Asian (American) women's writing that, since the feminist projects of the 1960s, seeks to "preserve memory and establish a matrilineal tradition" (Wong & Santa Ana 1999, p. 195). While *Angelica's Daughters* partly continues the 1960s Asian (American) feminist literature, whose aim has been to remedy and counteract racist and sexist stereotypes by turning to strong, heroic female ancestors, the novel also moves on—albeit at times rather tentatively—to such sensitive issues as failed marriages, sexual affairs with married men, as well the perpetual taboo of women having considerably younger lovers.

The story revolves around Tess, a young Filipina whose family emigrates to the United States when she was nine years old. Although Tess mainly grows up in America, marries there and lives close to her father's family, her childhood memories from Manila and her mother's family are not lost to her. Indeed, these memories resurge strongest in times of crisis. Pressured by the paternal family's and the couple's own (internalized) expectations of becoming parents, Tess and her husband Tonio have grown apart. But while Tonio finds comfort and salvation in a love relationship with what appears to Tess a younger version of herself, Tess appears to be left to face the failure of her marriage without any resources to cope. Too absorbed in being the wife of Tonio, Tess has unlearned her ability to develop or nurture her self-identity. It is at this point that the legendary forebear, Angelica, resurfaces from Tess's childhood recollections, which come alive during her visit to Manila and the ancestral home. Angelica's letters, as well as Tess's grandmother's (Lola Josefina) stories add to a multilayered plot that interweaves past and present, individual and collective experiences which evoke a rich and colourful female heritage that provides Tess with the sought for resources to live through her crisis.

At first, still shrouded in Lola Josefina's romantic tales, in the course of events the mythical female ancestor Angelica emerges as a headstrong woman whose fascination lies as much in her stamina to follow her own desires as in her whims and weaknesses. Rather than a towering mythical persona who is "in control of her life at all times" (p. 13), Angelica increasingly turns out to be a character of flesh and blood whose growth from young girl

into a woman and mother includes both the struggle against her own foibles as well as the adversities of the Tagalog War once she gets involved with the painter and illustrator Teban. Reconnecting to her female Philippines ancestors and their wisdom through Angelica's letters helps Tess recover her inner voice and compass—in short, her soul. Needless to say, this soul is decidedly Filipino, notwithstanding the obvious Spanish and American influences that surround her (and her ancestor Angelica) in Manila.

Tess's full embrace and affirmation of her Filipino origins and identity are mirrored in an intriguing episode between her female forebear Angelica and the American consul and stepfather-to-be. In her letters to Tia Elena, Angelica depicts the consul as the quintessential colonizer who, while utterly unconscious of his blundering and ignorance, is firmly convinced of his own moral righteousness and humane mission: "*Once, as he expounded (he loved to expound!) on the future of Asia, he swung his right arm and knocked over the Meissen vase. It broke into a million pieces! Mama saved the shards, hoping to put them together again, but that project is doomed. The poor vase was pulverized*" (p. 31). Apparently unaware of his own presumption and convinced of the liberating and progressive spirit of his mission to spread democracy throughout Asia, whenever the consul gets into one of his "expounding" moods, he manages to drive even the present colonizers into the corner: "*people back off and let him have his say, even the Spaniards*" (p. 34). To Angelica, the American consul is a "magician" who both "*charm[s] and mesmerize[s]*" (p. 35), but also an "idiot" (p. 34) and "*blunderbuss*" (p. 33). The authors are at their best in their ironic enhancement of the consul's colonial personality through the analogy of Perico, his parrot, a bird "*meaner than sin*" (p. 31). Against the advice of Angelica's mother and convinced of his magnanimity, the consul nurses the half-dead parrot back to life, only to have Perico terrorize the rightful inhabitants of the household, "*Papa's three aging parrots*" (p. 31). What is more, "*[t]he nasty bird is master of the place, defecating wherever he pleases and pecking at the mahogany furniture*" (p. 32).

When Angelica writes about the consul's gaze at her budding sexuality and relates that he looks at her "*in a peculiar way*" (p. 42), the

classical patterns of colonial and patriarchal appropriation seem to be complete. However, neither in the life of Angelica nor in the life of Tess does appropriation by a non-Philippine culture take hold; neither of their stories is an example of assimilation. Quite the contrary, both women actually get closer to their Philippine identity in the course of events, even though their life stories are separated by more than a hundred years. In spite of the overbearing behavior of the consul—and his parrot—Angelica takes on the American challenge: driven by her hatred, a hatred that is shot through with her own (sexual) attraction to and curiosity about this male Other, as she admits, Angelica's deceitful "romancing" of the American consul ends in expelling the intruding foreigner for good with the unexpected retreat by the consul himself. Here, the novel re-writes and responds to the tradition of the popular historical romance that Amy Kaplan has identified as being complicit in the American national-imperial project in two ways. First, it provides a counter-narrative to the traditional assimilation and incorporation of imperial subjects. Second, it shifts the focus away from the "spectacle of American manhood" (Kaplan 1990, p. 667) and onto Filipina womanhood. But in doing so, the novel deviates from the traditional pattern of flawless, heroic characters, aware of the fact that the production of a mere counter-narrative necessarily remains entangled within the troubling discourse of empire and nationhood. Instead of a shining heroine that would qualify for a "spectacle of womanhood" within a national project, Angelica is exposed as "selfish and short-sighted" (p. 59), a flawed fictional character and a woman who openly acknowledges her faults and dark sides. As she writes in her letter to Tia Elena: "*I will try not to exaggerate, nor twist things in my favour*" (p. 41).

Similarly intriguing are the situations two other female characters find themselves in: Lola Josefina's relationship with her considerably younger dancing instructor, and Tess's second cousin Dina's affair with a married man and father. While I applaud the authors to include the unusual love story of Tess's grandmother with the 43-year-old Dante, I find it unfortunate that her point of view is excluded from the narrative focalization. Except for the fact that Lola Josefina feels like a teenager in

love and that Dante behaves as a handsome lover and graceful dance instructor should—courteous and respectful—in their relationship the two characters remain shadowy and underdeveloped.

In contrast, Dina is allowed her own focalization and her story opens up yet another angle at Filipina womanhood, love, and sexuality. Dina's obsession with Mike is quickly smothered by her own bad conscience and an angry outburst by Tess, which brings Dina's secret affair into the open. The older women scold and wail, and once Dina's father finds out about her affair with a married man, "the house seemed to shake down to its foundation" (p. 138). It seems that much of the parental disapproval of Dina's "foolishness" (p. 139) derives from cultural and social expectations in which female morality plays a central role. Both Dina's bad conscience and her preoccupation with the nuns, as well as the older generation's rage, reflect the ideal of a young Filipina who knows how to restrain her sexual appetites and make the "right" choice—that is, not to have an affair with a married man. Sociologist Yen Le Espiritu (2001) has discerned a similar "'ideal' Filipina" in immigrant communities whose "sexual virtuosity" (p. 427) and family dedication often pose severe restrictions for the younger female generation. However, contrary to the parental strictures, Tess's first harsh reaction to Dina's transgression derives neither from a misdirected sense of morality nor from an insistence on limiting traditional values. Instead, through Dina she relives the anger and disappointment about her own failed marriage. In their later reconciliation Tess apologizes to Dina: "I'm ... sorry Dina. I had no right to tell your family. It was a terrible thing for me to do" (p. 166). All in all, the female descendants of Angelica show an extraordinary openness toward matters of sexuality and passion, no matter what their age.

Throughout the novel, female sensuality is further underscored by the increasing, and increasingly mouthwatering, omnipresence of Philippine food and cooking. While all these issues show the authors at their very best, a number of scenes display a sentimentality and stock inventory of romance that may disappoint the sophisticated readers, in particular when it comes to the male lovers Luis and Teban who remain

truly sentimental men. This may, however, be perfectly satisfactory to those who read *Angelica's Daughters* as what it is intended—namely, as “a relatively light romance” (p. vii). This definitely pertains to the erotic encounters between Tess and Luis, as well as Angelica and Teban. Their lovemaking is filled with romantic clichés and hackneyed phrases. For example, in one of her letters Angelica relates her first moments of bliss with Teban:

We stayed locked together for a long time. I rested my head on his chest and his heart thumped against my cheek. “I have to leave today,” he said.

“I know,” I replied.

*He stared deep into my eyes, and he ran his fingers over my forehead, my nose, my cheeks, my chin, and then he held me closer to him. “Are you real?” he murmured. “Perhaps you really are an angel sent from heaven and you will vanish at any moment.” He kissed me, and I kissed him back. And he wrapped me tight against him, and continued, “What will I do without my angel? ...”* (p. 89)

Likewise, when at the end of the book Tess finally finds in Luis the wished-for significant Other, a scene unfolds that sounds all too familiar:

Tess turned to find Luis standing just a few feet away. “What are you ...?” she said. And then, “You’re here.” Without any forethought, she found herself moving quickly towards him. He opened his arms to her as if he had been doing it for years.

“Paolo told me I would find you here,” he said. He held Tess to him for a few moments, and when she lifted her head to look at him, he said, “We don’t have much time right now. Just tell me, Tess. Tell me you feel the way I do.”

*Suddenly, all the trepidation she had felt about Luis, all the fear of commitment, of being hurt again, were gone; all she knew was how safe*

she felt in his arms. In answer, Tess had done what she'd wanted to do from the first moment she saw Luis: she kissed him deeply. (pp. 158-159)

While I consider *Angelica's Daughters* most impressive in its ambiguous and puzzling moments than in its major romantic figure constellations (Tess and Luis; Angelica and Teban), I definitely recommend the book to readers to make up their own minds about such matters of taste. Tess's ultimate—and predictable—fulfilment of true love, however, leads to a question on which the authors remain conspicuously silent throughout the novel: where does Tess stand concerning her other “home,” the United States? Does it still qualify to be called “home”?

Let me return once again to the titular emphasis on the making of the novel and the process of dugtungan writing. Indeed, if one did not know otherwise, one would suspect that the book was the result of a single author, since *Angelica's Daughters* proves a surprisingly even narration. In fact, the success of any dugtungan writing may stand or fall by being too uneven, or not uneven enough. The result may be a texture stitched together so poorly that it falls apart completely or degenerates into “tasteless pap” (considering all the traditional and delicious-sounding food and recipes in the book this comparison comes naturally). If successful, however, it may produce an excitingly diverse texture whose individual patches generate fascinating, fresh meanings and a life of their own. But apparently the published version of *Angelica's Daughters* is the result of the authors' efforts of rewriting their initially submitted manuscript. The final novel is thus heavily revised and reworked in answer to the “scathing” review by a critic from Anvil Publishing who had panned the novel's “lack of unity” (Lim 2010). One cannot help but wonder whether the writers, in their tour-de-force revisions, did not do too much of a good thing erasing all the bumps and crags of their original product, since it is often the rough edges that make the most endearing characteristics of artistic expression. But since any predilections for or against such criteria obviously depend on the eye of the beholder, or rather the respective reviewer, it is moot to speculate whether the original unevenness would have added spice to this romance in a positive sense. Hence, after this first publication, we eagerly

await the next dugtungan novel, which, hopefully, will gratify a less conventional critic and be bolder, and prouder, of its idiosyncrasies and experimental nature.

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### Notes

- 1 The element of the “talking story” is surely no coincidence. Not only is it a common “female practice of telling stories, often from one generation to the next” (Grice 2004, p. 182) among Asian American women writers, but it has already defined the form of Cecilia Manguerra Brainard’s novel, *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept* (1991).
- 2 The short story was published in *Sawi: Funny Essays, Stories and Poems on All Kinds of Heartbreaks*, edited by A. J. Loredo, B. J. A. Patino, and R. Bolipata-Santos (New Manila, Quezon City: Milflores Publishing, 2007).

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