

Aura: The Gay Theme in Philippine Fiction in English. J. Neil Garcia. Anvil Publishing, 2012, 360 pp. ISBN 978-9712726347.

The bakla¹ is not the only homosexual in Philippine society. In fact, there are many types of homosexuality therein, but a culture of silence about this diversity has been pervasive, a silence that the Philippines' first gay-themed anthology, *Aura: The Gay Theme in Philippine Fiction in English*, attempts to break.

The title contains two meanings. First, "aura" means homoerotically flaunting the "fabulous gay self" (that is Garcia's "Uma-awra"[aura as a verb]); secondly, it refers to the imaging of unmistakable queer personas, highlighting their gay-centric experiences in works penned by some of the most established Filipino fiction writers in English.

Garcia introduces the problematics of homosexuality: its subject, scope, and limitation, and motives, and explains the underpinnings that constitute the fictional imagings² of gayness and the gay self (concepts or representations, suggestions, intimations, or shamelessly full-blown articulations). The word *bakla* is rooted in historical, social, religious, and political dynamics. Indeed, Garcia historicizes homosexuality by differentiating ideas between gender and sexuality. Citing Zeus Salazar's (1989) concept of femininity in the pre and early colonial Philippines, Garcia asserts that babaylans were gays. And the historical survey proves that gender-crossing and transvestism were evident in precolonial Philippines. "Local men dressed up in women's apparel were called, among others, bayoguin, bayok, agi-ngin, asog, bido, and binabae" (10). These men did not only embody cultural significance; they also functioned as "highly respected leaders and figures of authority" (10), exuding aesthetic beauty, which Garcia defines as "downright astonishing and threatening" (10).

This account proves that the existence of gays in the Philippines is not new. And Garcia's anthology portrays their experiences, explores personal, familial, and social struggles therein, and affirms the gay self of

each narrative's protagonist. This imaging of the gay self, however, is not limited only to gay performance, as it were. It also portrays and critiques patriarchy in a Philippine context. More specifically, it defies the expectations of such a society, a resistance evident in the narratives of *The Doll*, *Twice Blessed*, *The Chamber of the Sea*, *Miss Unibers*, *Blame It, Lips*, *Introibo*, *Clay*, *Summer Solstice*, *Bamboo Dancers*, *In Hog Heaven*, *Song I Did Not Hear*, and *The Husband*.

For example, *The Doll*'s lead character, Narciso, is obstinately fascinated with a doll, typically a girl's toy. He derives satisfaction from playing with it, albeit secretly, and is much pleased designing its clothes. When Narciso's father angrily dumps the doll, Narciso feels broken. In *The Chamber of the Sea*, Tio Teban has odd inclinations that suggest gayness. First, he lives on his father's farm, but has a passion for doing domestic chores and dislikes work commonly given to men, like making fences, digging ditches, and preparing the seeds to be sown. Second, he is dedicated to his flower garden, his small-framed watercolor paintings, and his books and beautiful handkerchiefs; he is also suspicious, secretive, and is attracted to a male diver. These traits dovetail with "the framework of queer behavior that disclaims the normative perception of appropriate actions and thinking" (Wright 2017, 165).

Furthermore, many Filipino gay protagonists in the selections are repressed versions of their gay selves (*Geyluv* and Tio Teban and the naked diver in *The Chamber of the Sea*) just to name a few; they have homosexual desires that nonetheless find ways to be expressed. In *The Husband*, for instance, Elpidio Flores of *The Husband* kisses his child while thinking longingly thinks of a man named Tommy Kabuyao. Indeed, the anthology portrays the tension between gay-self imaging and the characters' regulation of their sexual desires, a conflict most evident in the stories of Coscolluela, Blanco and Ong.

Another significant feature of the book is its chronological, if not historical, arrangement of the literary texts based on the age of their authors, an approach that intimates their respective social contexts. In this way, the anthology allows us to situate the variety of homosexual experiences throughout Philippine history.

For instance, two of Villa's autobiographical narratives present the "modernist" images of the 1920s and 1930s amidst his interest in other men. Similarly, Nick Joaquin's *Summer Solstice* situates discussions of gender alongside Philippine cultural beliefs, mythic embellishments, and traditions including the fiesta, the Tadtarin procession, and the crowds that mark religious celebrations in the country.

N.V.M. Gonzales posits homosexuality as symbolic of the transnational but locally-bound Filipino identity. His *The Bamboo Dancers* juxtaposes elements of East and West, traditional and modern, and male and female—binaries that comprise the dynamics of Philippine (post)modernity. A more distinctly political edge appears in Ninotchka Rosca's *Twice Blessed*, whose characters' travails allude to the Marcoses. And Linmark and Realuyo imbue queer texts with a postmodern feel through quick-paced narratives, disco-related acts and scenes, and lip and real synching that creates a sense of contemporaneity.

Garcia's anthology has given us the diverse range of homosexuality in the Philippines: its triumphs, tensions, subversions, problems, and victories, a plurality that runs parallel to, and is influenced by, the historical—and thus ever-shifting—dynamics that underpins homosexuality in the Philippines, a historicizing that serves as the lasting contribution of this anthology.

Note

- ¹ *Bakla* is grounded on Garcia's conception thereof "agonistic effeminacy" (a poor copy of femininity).

References

- Salazar, Zeus. 1989. *Ang Babaylan sa Kasaysayan ng Pilipinas*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Women Studies.
- Wright, Christopher Yap. 2017. "The Queer Queen Quivers: The Gays in Selected Philippine Prose in English." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 8 (4): 157–168. doi:10.21659/rupkatha.v8n4.18.

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