Resurfacing the Disappeared: The Author in *Fish-Hair Woman* by Merlinda Bobis

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The subject of my paper is the author. I aim to explore how the self-conscious author functions in *Fish-Hair Woman* (2012), a metafictional novel by Merlinda Bobis. I begin with a brief discussion of how the author is constructed, first, in Philippine literary criticism, and second, in light of the collapse of the humanist tradition of valorizing the writer, which prompted the proclamation of the author's "death" and rendered her irrelevant to the text and to criticism. But does the author *stay* dead? In metafiction, in particular, the author manages to "write" herself into the text using self-consciousness. I find that, while it is impossible to overlook the author's decentered status, it is equally untenable to ignore how an overt "manifestation" of the author functions *within* the text.

Through my reading of *Fish-Hair Woman*, I attempt to examine how the author's self-consciousness results in two seemingly contradicting implications. On the one hand, the author's constant references to herself allows her to "live" through the text, reinforcing the Barthesian notion that the author limits the text and its possible interpretations. On the other hand, the author's constant references to herself *as a subject* exposes the author's own limitations. This, in turn, "re-opens" the text, by giving room to questions about other perspectives that are not or cannot be represented in the text.

Keywords: Philippine novels in English, metafiction, author, Fish-Hair Woman, Merlinda Bobis, Barthes

Subjection and Death

Interest in the author has declined in recent decades, due in large part to Roland Barthes' (1967/1977) pronunciation of the author's death and the advent of poststructuralist thought, which privileges the study of the text over the writer. However, the author remains an important part of literary criticism in the Philippines, where, as Caroline Hau (2000) observes, "[t]he common lament is that biographical criticism . . . often takes the place of criticism in general" (p. 183). The production, reception and consumption of Philippine literature in English, in particular, is dominated by the author, an entity constructed out of gossip that circulates, not only within literary circles, but also within the sphere of literary production and reception (p. 179). This "politics of authorship" presents a restrictive view of the author as an entity separate from the politics of society. The author, however, is not the only one affected; the text also is. As Hau (2000) asserts, this politics of authorship also "[constrains], though never completely, the insertion of the political and, more specifically, of political commentary into the literary dimension" (p. 179).

In "Authorizing the Personal and the Political," Hau (2000) discusses how the reception of the writer Kerima Polotan and her work is often haunted by Polotan's perceived association with the Marcoses during the 60s and the 70s. In particular, the criticism of *The Hand of the Enemy* (1962), a novel by Polotan, tends to go two ways: it either posits writing as a personal act that stands in opposition to a politicized world, or it contents itself with drawing parallelisms between events in the novel and historical events, but without relating these parallelisms to a historically specific interpretation (Hau, 2000, pp. 181-194). In either case, the criticism is "haunted by an unacknowledged but nevertheless influential distinction between the personal and the political" (Hau, 2000, p. 180).

And yet, as Hau (2000) demonstrates by reading both the narrative and the reception of *The Hand of the Enemy*, the personal *is* political. In terms of the narrative, Hau (2000) observes that what each character says or does comes to affect what other characters say or do across time; each character's personal history is, in other words, inseparable from national history (p. 196). In terms of the novel's reception, Hau (2000) asserts that the attempt to demarcate the personal from the political is rooted in institutional and discursive efforts to distinguish "literature" from concerns that are supposedly "outside" it (p. 209). Literature, however, is implicated in the organization of power relations in the country. The state accords literature importance for its capacity to represent history "truthfully" and to intervene in history (cf. Hau, 2000). Thus, we must recognize the superficiality of the boundaries constructed between "literature" and its "outside," as well as between the personal and the political, in order to better interrogate how power operates in society.

The role that the author, as a *literary* figure, plays in these power relations may be better understood through the author-function. Michel Foucault (1969/1987) states that the author's name serves a classificatory function by grouping certain texts under one banner and differentiating them from others (p. 129). Its existence implies that the texts attributed to it must have "relationships of homogeneity, filiation, reciprocal explanation, authentification, or of common utilization" (pp. 129-130).

The mere attribution of an author's name to a text also grants the text a certain status; a text with an author is received differently from a text without one, although the manner of reception depends on the culture in which the texts exist (Foucault, 1969/1987, p. 130). The author, in this sense, functions by determining three kinds of relationships. First is the relationship between texts grouped under one author and texts "outside" this group; second is the relationships *within* the group; and third is the relationship of the group to society. The function is outward-oriented, with

the author defining relations "outside" the text. Meanwhile, the author stays at the "contours" of the text (p. 130). Foucault (1969/1987) summarizes the function of an author as "to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (p. 130).

The author, as a function of discourse, also has four features that must be considered. First, the author is tied to the idea that the author is the "owner" of a text which is legally and institutionally considered as property (Foucault, 1969/1987, pp. 130-131). Second, the author is neither universal nor constant, but changes with every culture (pp. 131-132). For example, older texts like folk tales and epics were valorized in spite of the anonymity of their authors (p. 131). Third, the author is formed by a process of verification and validation more complex and more precise than the spontaneous and simple attribution of a text to an author (p. 132). Fourth, the author does not pertain to an actual individual, but to a "plurality of egos" and to a variety of subject-positions that any individual may inhabit (pp. 133-134).

I take particular interest in the fourth feature and how Foucault (1969/1987) explains the "plurality of egos" that constitutes the author:

> It is well known that in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first person pronoun, the present indicative tense, nor, for that matter, its signs of localization refer directly to the writer, either to the time when he wrote, or to the specific act of writing; rather they stand for a "second self" whose similarity to the author is never fixed and undergoes considerable alteration within the course of a single book. It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the "author-function" arises out of their scission – in the division and distance of the two. (p. 133)

The author is the result of the tenuous connection between the "actual" writer and the narrator *in* the text. The writer and the narrator do not exactly and absolutely correspond to the same person, though it is difficult to deny the existence of a connection between the two. The author, as Foucault (1969/1987) suggests, is what arises out of this fragile connection that is, in one sense, also a disconnection.

While the connection between writer and narrator may be impossible to describe in more definite terms, one thing is certain about its nature: it is dynamic, constantly changing throughout the course of one book. The reason for this is that even the writer herself does not consist in a single, unified and unchanging identity. Rather, because she occupies a variety of subject-positions (e.g., as a woman, as a Filipina, as a migrant, etc.), her

identity is fragmented and incoherent; the writer herself consists in a multiplicity of identities. This multiplicity of identities—which arguably applies to the narrator as much as it applies to the writer—is yet another way of understanding how the author refers to a "plurality of egos." Perhaps it can also explain why the "actual writer" cannot be clearly "written" into the text: the writer's incoherent identity cannot be simply "made" into a coherent whole and its nuances cannot be categorically put into words, especially when words—and language itself—are arbitrary by nature, relying on a system of differences or negations, or what is *not*, in order to express what *is*.

Because the author's fragmented and incoherent identity is largely due to her *subjection* to various institutions, to history, to politics, there is a need to break away from the humanist idea of the author as a "pure" individual who stands above nature and society (cf. Hau, 2000, p. 212). The author, as a *subject*, is not sovereign. She is not an objective being, not a detached speaker merely channeling the truth about the world into her writing. As Raymond Williams (1971/1986) would say, her writing is always "aligned," always expressing a point-of-view that is grounded on her specific relations to specific situations and experiences (p. 125).

However, that her writing always comes from a perspective is not, in itself, negative. In fact, to be aware of one's alignment or of one's change of alignment—what Williams (1971/1986) calls "commitment"—is to be aware of the realities of one's social relations (p. 128). To be continually "committed," i.e., to be continually *conscious* of one's alignment, can thus lead to radical development (p. 128). This possible upside to the recognition of personal subjectivity is for the writer to consider. What about the critic?

In criticism, perhaps the greatest consequence of the author's "loss" of objectivity is that the author is no longer "god" over the text. She no longer has the sole, uncontested power over the possible interpretations of the text. In fact, not only has the author lost this power—as Barthes (1967/1977) famously declared, the author is dead (p. 148).

Let us qualify this declaration. The author is dead because her intentions and personal circumstances are unknowable and, even if we were to know them, they still would not determine the ultimate meaning of the text. The text, after all, cannot be limited to just one "correct" meaning. So, while we recognize the author as the "creator" of the text, we often cannot say for certain how the author, as well as her alignment, is "written" into it. This is also why the function of an author, as Foucault (1969/1987) describes, cannot pertain to the text itself (i.e., the form and the content). The connection between author and text remains tenuous, so it is futile to defer to the author in literary criticism.

And thus the author dies. But does she *stay* dead? What if the author, through self-consciousness, *inserts* herself into the writing, as in the case of metafiction? How does this "reincarnated" author function?

Reincarnation

Metafiction is, simply put, fiction about fiction. It is fiction that, according to Linda Hutcheon (1980), "includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (p. 1). Metafiction is "narcissistic" because of its textual self-awareness or self-consciousness. As Steven M. Bell (1984) observes, while self-consciousness in metafiction is not new, it has never been so prevalent as in the present time (p. 84). For example, in the Philippine context, Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo (2000) states that while realism continues to be the favored mode among novelists in English, writers are beginning to experiment with various metafictional forms such as marvelous realism, science fiction, parody, and so on (p. 336). Indeed, a cursory survey of the first prize winners of the Novel category of the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards within the last two decades yields five metafictional works out of the eleven that have been published: *Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café* (1988) by Alfred A. Yuson, *The Sky Over Dimas* by Vicente Garcia Groyon (2003), *Salamanca* (2005) by Dean Francis Alfar, *Ilustrado* (2010) by Miguel Syjuco, and *Subversivo, Inc.* (2014) by Jose Elvin Bueno.[1] All five novels are also markedly historical, though not in the traditional sense of history providing the setting for each of the narratives. Rather, in these novels, history plays a crucial role in determining the motivations of the characters and the course of the plot itself.[2] The inclination towards the historical is not surprising considering that the current emphasis on self-consciousness—not just in metafiction, but in literature in general and in the social sciences as well—is rooted on the idea that, when "reduced to their most tangible essence, all of [the humanistic disciples] are made up of language or, more specifically, written discourse" (Bell, 1984, p. 84).

Hutcheon (1980) states that metafiction has two major focuses. The first is the linguistic and narrative structure of the text, as the metafictive text problematizes the idea of language as representational of reality (p. 7). The second is the reader, as metafiction forces the reader to acknowledge the world as fictional, while demanding that he or she participate in its co-creation (p. 7). Metafiction is paradoxically "self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented toward the reader" (p. 7).

While Hutcheon (1980) has undoubtedly provided incisive insights about metafiction, I would like to suggest that, for certain metafictive texts, the author is also a prime focus. This focus is also achieved through self-consciousness, through the author's constant references to the author. The

author of metafiction is, in a way, a meta-author—an author authoring an author.

From the outset, we can already perceive two seemingly contradictory implications of the presence of a self-conscious author in metafiction, especially if we consider that metafiction gained prominence in the same century that the author "died." First, does the self-conscious author indicate an "acceptance" of the author's death? Is it a move to further decentralize the author by exposing her unreliability, her subjectivity, her alignment? Or, secondly, is it a mere way of reinstalling the author to her pedestal by overtly inserting her into the text?

Let us take, for example, Mahsa Hashemi and Farideh Pourgiv's (2012) study of John Barth's *The Floating Opera* (1956). Hashemi and Pourgiv (2012) posit that the dominance of "postmodernism" in the arts and letters in recent decades designated an emphasis on "the sense of loss, alienation, confusion, and ultimacy in the face of a chaotic universe" (p. 362). Implicated here is the disappearance of the author, a construct that once signified stability, unity and coherence. Barth, according to Hashemi and Pourgiv (2012), is able to contest the decentered status of the author through *narration* (p. 362). Narration may no longer give the author immortality, but it functions as a means of survival in a world so obsessed with death (p. 365). Hashemi and Pourgiv (2012) describe how Barth reasserts his existence in the metafictional text:

> [Barth] is simultaneously the puppet and the puppeteer, as the dichotomy is deconstructed and overthrown. Neither has primacy and authority over the other. As such, he is the postmodern puppet master pulling the strings of his characters as his own strings are being pulled by unknown hands. The entire world, in Barth's rendering, is reduced to a narrative, an act of narration; it can be fabricated as it is desired by any narrator who wishes so. (p. 365)

Thus, by being both narrator and narrated, Barth "reincarnates" himself in the text.

There is a caveat to this "reincarnation," however. The author is "alive" only because he has an overt textual manifestation, i.e., he is consciously inserted in the writing, which is demonstrated through the self-conscious narrator, characters who are also authors, and other similar techniques. The author is subsumed in the text and cannot exist outside it just as, in a way, the text does not exist without a source. Nonetheless, as Hashemi and Pourgiv (2012) assert: the author has defied death.

Let us consider, from the other end, what Hutcheon (1989) calls *historiographic metafiction*, and which she asserts best embodies postmodernism in fiction (p. 3). In historiographic metafiction, "the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the 'world' and literature" (p. 4). Conventions of fiction and historiography are simultaneously and self-consciously used, appropriated and subverted in order to question notions of history, reality and truth (p. 5). This kind of metafiction, by extension, also questions authors as objective "sources" of history and truth. The author, then, is further decentralized—in theory, at least. Mayel P. Martin (2010) observes that all the Philippine novels in English that were written from the eighties to the onset of the millennium and that are considered historiographic metafiction are critically acclaimed for countering the oppressive discourse of colonialism and martial law.[3] However, as she primarily argues in her paper, the practice of historiogprahic metafiction may also be used in order to further the agenda of the dominant class, as in the case of *The Sky Over Dimas* (Martin, 2010).

For my analysis, I aim to show that a combination of the author's necessary reincarnation and decentralization is possible through self-consciousness.[4]

Fish-Hair Woman

For this paper, I have chosen *Fish-Hair Woman* by Merlinda Bobis (2012) because it adds another dimension of complexity to the notion of a self-conscious author. The move to decenter the author is, to a large extent, due to the recognition that its construction enables an exercise of power that can, whether explicitly or implicitly, oppress others. But what if the subject-position of the author cannot be categorically and uncompromisingly classified as "oppressive"?

Such is the case in *Fish-Hair Woman.* But before the question can be answered it will be useful to discuss how, exactly, the author is "reincarnated" *within the bounds of the book*. The foregoing discussion has presented the author as a figure that is "outside" the text, and justifiably so: the connection between an "actual" writer and a direct "manifestation" in the text often remains weak. With that and the introverted nature of metafiction in mind, I concentrate my analysis on the self-conscious author's "reincarnation" *within* the book.

The narrative of *Fish-Hair Woman* (Bobis, 2012) may be roughly divided into two: the main storyline set in 1997; and the story that unfolds through a manuscript, also entitled "Fish-Hair Woman." Set in the town of Iraya in Bicol, the manuscript appears to be the autobiography of and is narrated

by Estrella Capili/Capas, the town mayor's illegitimate daughter. After her mother dies during childbirth, Estrella comes to live with Mamay Dulce, the village midwife, and her children, Bolodoy and Pilar. During the 70s, while Estrella finishes her schooling, Bolodoy enlists in the mayor's private army and Pilar joins the communist uprising. Bolodoy is killed. Pilar disappears, presumably killed as well. As if responding to the trauma, Estrella's hair begins to grow with every act of remembering. Years later, in 1987, the military forces Estrella to use her hair to fish out corpses from the village's river, the dumpsite for the casualties of two different wars: the Total War, the Philippine government's campaign against insurgency; and the internal purge within the communist army itself. Around this time, Estrella also falls in love with Tony McIntyre, an Australian writer who comes to document the communist revolutionaries. The manuscript doubles as a love letter to Tony, who has also disappeared.

The main storyline of *Fish-Hair Woman* (Bobis, 2012) is set in 1997 and, except for the prologue and the epilogue, is told in the third person. It follows Luke, an Australian teenager who comes to the Philippines after receiving the "Fish-Hair Woman" manuscript and a letter from his estranged father, Tony, asking to see him. Through this storyline, it is revealed that Estrella migrated to Hawaii with her father during the 70s and never came home until 1997; it was Pilar who fell in love with Tony. The Fish-Hair Woman is only a myth in Iraya. This storyline also reveals that it is the ex-mayor who lured Luke with Tony's fake letter. The ex-mayor is later murdered by Estrella, who, in turn, is killed when she returns to Iraya to bury her father. The epilogue is set in 2011 and is narrated by Luke, who claims that he has finally completed Estrella's manuscript.

The most evident way in which the author "reincarnates" herself in the novel is through the character of Estrella Capili/Capas. Both Bobis and Estrella are writers of narratives entitled "Fish-Hair Woman," both grew up in Bicol, and both migrated to "Western" countries. Both are also extremely self-conscious authors. For instance, even if her manuscript is supposedly a love letter to Tony, in it, Estrella frequently addresses the "reader," sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. In the following excerpt, she even appears to allude to the author's "death":

> Oh, how I wish I had stayed dead. I could have dreamt up life as a perfect coffee grove. But I came back to life, Tony, to dream warily on the page instead. These days, after the act of dreaming a different fate, I always look behind my shoulder at the reader who might tell me what I shouldn't have written or failed to write, or what I so inadequately conjured. Wrong dream, wrong dream, you might say as

> you push back this page as if it were coffee. (Bobis, 2012, p. 55)

The excerpt also reveals another aspect of the author's self-consciousness: that of her inability to tell a "complete" story. This will be revisited later.

Estrella's incorporation of the legend of the Fish-Hair Woman into her own autobiography also shows an awareness of the author's own mythical character, a construct based on both reality and fiction. Moreover, Estrella's manuscript is easily distinguished from the rest of the novel because, apart from its use of first person narration, the language it uses is more lyrical and more poetic compared to the "realist" register of the main storyline. The language reinforces the fantastical aspect, not only of the manuscript, but also of the narrator Estrella. Estrella, in this light, is both the fantastic woman of the legend and the actual, "real" woman who leaves her hometown only to come back years later.

But it is not just through the manuscript that the author reinserts herself. Throughout the entire novel, the thoughts of characters blend seamlessly with the narration, to the extent that it sometimes becomes difficult to distinguish who is speaking. Is it the character or the supposedly third person narrator, who, in the end, is revealed to be Luke? Or is it Bobis herself, in that Estrella and Luke are *both* Bobis? The already unreliable narrator is made even more unreliable. See, for example, the following passage, which is taken from the main storyline but supposedly pertains to the character of Estrella:

> Did we all take this away when we left, this smell of dried herbs and moulding rice, of sweets all ours for the asking, once? Like love. She is thirty-eight years old and too aware of the end of her story. It is a fairy tale, a melodrama, a myth, and it always returns to the river. My village is well named. *Iraya:* upstream, towards the source of the water.
>
> She crunches the sweet in her mouth, it hurts to swallow. She heads for the door into the night, re-tracing the path back to the source. No, I have never left the water, always fishing for a story and finding none but my own. (Bobis, 2012, pp. 293-294)

And thus the author, in all her complex identities, comes to "existence" in the text.

Outside of the narrative is yet another method in which the author asserts her presence. At the very end of the book is a fairly lengthy section entitled, "A Conversation: Paz 'Doods' Verdades Santos, Connie Jan Maraan, and

Marjorie Evasco talk with Merlinda Bobis about *Fish-Hair Woman."*[5] The section is basically a series of questions and answers that attempts to clarify the author's intentions, inspirations and personal ideology in the writing of the narrative. Through it, Bobis is able to discuss a wide array of topics, e.g., her Bikol sensibility, her position as a transnational writer, and the poetry that inspired her work, among others. The author is thus not only Estrella and/or Luke; she is also the "Merlin" who speaks in the interview.

This interview section is part of what Gérard Genette (1991) calls the "paratext." The paratext of a work includes not only interviews or short discussions, but also the title, the author's name, the preface, the acknowledgments, and so on. But, for the sake of brevity, I will be focusing only on the interview section in *Fish-Hair Woman.*

According to Genette (1991), the paratext is the threshold between the text and whatever lies outside it; however, it is not merely a zone of transition, but of *transaction* between the author and the reader (p. 262). The paratext, which always bears content legitimated by the author, serves to *present* the text, and by using the word "present," Genette appeals to the different senses of the verb: "to *make it present*, to assure its presence in the world, its 'reception' and its consumption" (p. 262). Genette notes, however, that for whatever the author puts into the paratext, the paratext remains subordinate to "its" text (p. 269).

In this light, it becomes easier to identify how the interview with Bobis functions in relation to the narrative. The inclusion of such a section ultimately directs the reader or the critic on *how* to "receive" or interpret the work (although it may likewise be argued that we cannot determine how, exactly, the reader or the critic will respond to such "direction"). The apparent credence of the interpretation offered in the interview is further strengthened by the fact that, in it, Bobis is conversing not just with "ordinary" women, but with other recognized authors, i.e., other authority figures. Additionally, all the participating authors are identified using their nicknames—"Merlin," "Doods," "Connie," "Marj." This lends a sense of intimacy or camaraderie, not only between the authors, but also between the authors and the reader.

But, is not the inclusion of the interview merely consistent with the notion of an author extremely conscious of her subjectivity and subjection? Does the author's self-conscious reinsertion in the text inescapably denote a "return" to power? This brings us back to my initial question about the authorship of *Fish-Hair Woman*. What happens if the author's subject-position, which is revealed through her self-consciousness, cannot be traditionally or categorically classified as "oppressive"? Can her "reincarnation" in the text not be *necessary*? Or, is the mere notion of the author, regardless of her

subject position, already considered detrimental to the text for limiting its possible interpretations? If the author is self-conscious, is it even possible to separate the notion of the author from her subject position? Has not the author been "decentered" precisely because she *is* a subject?

What I am trying to say is this: in *Fish-Hair Woman,* the author is not simply reinserted into the text. She is, first and foremost, reinserted *as a subject*, as one speaking from only one perspective, but a perspective that we must also recognize for holding a degree of importance. In *Fish-Hair Woman*, it is crucial that the author is a migrant Bikolana writing about a turbulent period in the late 80s considering that, first and foremost, in Philippine historical texts, prominence is often given only to narratives set in Tagalog regions, particularly in the capital of Manila and its surrounding areas. The exclusivity is most unfortunate considering how these histories are frequently branded as "national," suggesting that they are representative of the experiences of people from every part of the archipelago. The author's position as a Bikolana allows her to provide an alternative to the more mainstream histories, owing to her different experience of historical events, which is due not only to Bicol's sheer distance from Manila but also to Bikol language, which frames her experiences differently from someone who speaks only Tagalog and/or English. Her frequent usage of Bikol words perhaps most clearly demonstrates the complexities of translating experience.

Second, there is a dearth of writings that deal with the relationship between the Filipina and the Australian, who is another "white man" with his own history of colonialism (in his case, of Aborigines). In a way, the lack is hardly inconceivable: the Philippines shares a much longer and much more complicated relationship with the United States and Spain, two of its colonial masters. However, this does not at all mean that the tensions between the Filipino and the Australian, as well as the tensions experienced by the many Filipinos in Australia, bear no weight in the discourse on Filipino expatriates. I must note, however, that while Bobis' position allows her to share considerable insight into the experiences of Filipinos living abroad, we must also remember her more privileged position as a critically acclaimed expatriate writer. She is not quite like the majority of Overseas Filipino Workers who face far more grueling working conditions in various countries across the globe.

Third, the violence of the Total War and the communist purge is often forgotten by many Filipinos, especially when compared with the darkness of the Marcos era and the optimism of the first People Power Revolution. The forgetting is lamentable considering how both primarily involved the left, who stood at the forefront of the resistance movement against the Marcos

regime even before the 1986 revolution—indeed, even before martial law was declared in 1972. But what is even worse is the forgetting of the thousands of others who were subjected to the brutality of both events even if they belonged to neither the army nor the communists. Thus, as someone well acquainted with the suffering of these "others"—and while she may not personally be a victim of either war—Bobis is able to confront the reader with the difficult truths of these often forgotten events.

While the perspective given by the author inevitably limits the discourse about the text, the consciousness with which she presents herself allows the exposure of her limitations, which can lead to a "re-opening" of the text. In the novel, the revelation that Estrella manipulated so many details of her autobiography motivates important questions about other characters and other truths. What really happened to Pilar? To Tony? To all the disappeared?

For all the importance of her "voice," the author remains an "outsider." In her discussion with other authors, Bobis (2012) states, "[t]o the bodies of the dead, the disappeared, the living traumatised by war, I am 'other,' even if I feel deeply for their suffering as a Bikolana" (p. 307). The same sentiment is expressed in the narrative through the character of Professor Inez Carillo, a woman who grew up with Estrella in Bicol but who does not leave the country. Inez criticizes Estrella's manuscript for "[e]roticising violence, making our grief literary—and of course, valourising the writer on the page" (p. 225). But perhaps most damning is Inez's criticism of the author herself:

> I don't like those who take because they can, because they don't have to answer for the taking, or for whatever they've taken. Because they're able to leave the source . . . The worst are our own expatriate writers, those migratory birds. First they abandon us to fly to a greener pasture, then return as vultures to feed on our despair. Then they take off again. Take, then take off. Just like that. A simple equation. (p. 226)

Such an "admission" allows us to see that, for whatever "validity" her perspective might have or whatever "honorable" reason she has for wishing to represent the community, the author is ultimately only "using" the people.

> I can dive a hundred times into the river, fish out this or that beloved and tenderly wrap a body with my hair, then croon to it in futile language such as this, but when I lay the dead at the feet of kin and lovers, their grief will just shame

> my attempt to save it from dumbness. Listen to the mute eloquence that trails all losses, the undeclaimed umbrage at having been had by life. This is silence no one can ever write and least of all rewrite. (p. 58)

The author, however, is not just an outsider, but an outsider who also holds a form of power over the people. This power comes not only from the author's privilege as a migrant, but also from her position as a writer. This begs the question: why engage in an act as blatantly political as writing at all?

The author offers several answers. Guilt appears foremost, as when Estrella states, "Listen, I too am seeking absolution in this confession of memories" (Bobis, 2012, p. 42). But Estrella's guilt stems, not only from her leaving Iraya during its darkest years, but also from the very reason she is able to leave, study and write: her association with the town's ex-mayor, Francisco Estradero/Alvarado, also known as her father, and the same man behind many of the disappearances and the dead bodies in Iraya. This is an association that she can never erase: "In Iraya blood is so thick, one cannot see through it the colour of the individual heart" (p. 271).

Bobis (2012), in her interview, gives yet another reason for writing: "To write is to survive" (p. 309). Estrella echoes the same sentiment when she watches her hair growing, "lengthening into narrative after narrative and my perpetual interrogation of my place in each of them. Whose salvation is it that I seek?" (p. 176). Whatever the reason, it seems, it is always personal. As Estrella writes:

> Perhaps at the heart of all our seeking, we are always 'petty bourgeois,' naturally in search of a personal reason for love, war and everything else in between. For when we declaim about our cause, is *our* not the operative word? Our country, our village, our dead, our story. And even if we elevate our quest to the noble act of communal salvation, is it not private urge that fuels our feet? Such a short distance between *our* and *mine*, whether we run from the left or the right side of the heart. (Bobis, 2012, p. 176).

In other words: as the personal is political, so is the political, personal.

Again, as the narrative of *Fish-Hair Woman* shows, in speaking out for whatever personal reason, one inevitably exercises power over others. What does this exercise of power look like? Pilar, for instance, spends years living in Estrella's shadow, in spite of being Mamay Dulce's biological daughter. She receives not only less attention, but also less material support. The "silencing" of Pilar is repeated in print, when Estrella writes herself in Pilar's

place in the manuscript. But even Pilar winds up "dominating" someone else: Bolodoy, who has to live in the shadow of both his sisters.

Incidentally, Estrella is characterized as the most intellectual among the three. She is also the only writer. And yet, no matter how many people Estrella attempts to write into her manuscript, it will never be enough. As the gravedigger, Pay Inyo, observes, "There are too many stories weaving into each other, only to unweave themselves at each telling, so each story can claim prominence. Stories are such jealous things" (Bobis, 2012, p. 259). The impossibility of speaking for all is highlighted when the villagers of Iraya are shocked to find that only certain people are covered in news reports about the disappearances in their community: "[They] could not believe that only these victims were remembered, as if all their disappeared could be reduced to four names" (p. 284).

This shows yet another reason for the writer's guilt. In trying to speak, not just for herself, but also for others, still another person, still another group, still another community will be left silenced. In a sense, Estrella died so that another may continue the story: Luke. But even Luke can never "truly" speak for Adora, his wife, who became mute after she was shot in Iraya.

And yet the writing must continue, even if it cannot "cause" others to live, but only resurface the bodies of the *desaparecidos,* the disappeared.

Conclusion

In a text like *Fish-Hair Woman* (Bobis, 2012), it is crucial to recognize the importance, not only of the text and of the reader, but also of the necessarily self-conscious author. On the one hand, the self-consciousness allows the author to resurrect herself from her "death" in the metafictive text; on the other hand, it forces her to confront her constitution by a multiplicity of identities. In the novel, the author is both the mythical Fish-Hair Woman and the real Estrella; she is also both the Estrella of the text and the Merlin of the interview section appended to the novel. However, the author's acknowledgment that she is constituted by a "plurality of egos" also entails the recognition that she occupies a variety of subject-positions in relation to different "others." She is the "other" Filipina migrant to the Australian, but at the same time, she is the privileged expatriate to those who suffered during the war. Her self-consciousness thus becomes an acknowledgment not just of the limits of her own writing but also of the implications of writing, which is always a political act.

While I certainly do not wish to condone a revalorization of the author as the supreme source of meaning, neither do I want to advocate an idealized notion of "equality" that ultimately results in meaninglessness, as

some strains of writing and/or criticism are wont to do in their unchecked veneration of infinite play. Some "voices" do need to be heard even as they "limit." Indeed, while my own critique of *Fish-Hair Woman* is severely limited and limiting in that it focuses only on the author, it is the existence of these boundaries that allows a productive interrogation of the text.

In the same way, I ask for a reconsideration of the possibility of a *decentered*, self-conscious author—considering that we cannot completely "get rid" of or "kill" the author, anyway—that can provide productive insights about the relationship between the personal and the political, between literature and society. The author's own subjectivity undeniably limits the text, but this would hold true even if the author were not self-conscious. Writing will *always* be aligned. It is just that the self-consciousness allows us to establish a stronger link between the author and the manifestations of her subjectivity.

And yet her self-consciousness is necessary—not for the author to give herself a pat on the back for her apparent perceptiveness and honesty, nor for the reader to know the "source" of meaning—but for its revelation of the author's limitations, which "re-opens" the text to necessary questions. In this way, author, text and reader can come together in order to pave the way for a purposeful "search" for the stories, the truths, and the people whose conspicuous absences that will continually haunt literature—even literature that apparently already speaks for the oppressed.

I end with a quote from Resil Mojares (2002):

> While it is a soul a writer seeks, it is in the haunting of its absence that he does his best work. It is in this haunting that the nation will be created—and not in the condition of denial where one refuses to acknowledge that one has been shocked, seduced or has sinned, nor in the state where one has erased memories of what has been violated. (Mojares, 2002, p. 311)

This is a call to the writer and, just as importantly, the reader and the critic, to continually interrogate our own places in literature, which is ultimately implicated in the politics and the history of the nation.

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Notes

1 The Palanca Awards are often considered the most prestigious literary award-giving body in the country.

2 This qualification of historical novels is taken from Hidalgo (2000), p. 334.

3 These novels are *Cave and Shadows* (1983) by Nick Joaquin, *State of War* (1988) by Ninotchka Rosca, *Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café, Dogeaters* (1990) by Jessica Hagedorn, *Twice Blessed* (1992) by Rosca, *Empire of Memory* (1992) by Eric Gamalinda, *My Sad Republic* (1998) by Gamalinda, *An Embarrassment of Riches* (1998) by Charlson Ong, and *Voyeurs and Savages* (1998) by Yuson (Martin, 2010, p. 13). Martin also cites Ruth Jordan Pison's (2005) treatise on martial law novels as an example of the positive reception of the works (p. 13). Pison's (2005) study notably includes six of the novels that Martin considers historiographic metafiction.

[4] I use the term self-conscious and prefer it to other homologous terms such as self-reflexive and self-referential, though the latter are also valid, in order to incorporate the connotations of personal uneasiness and discomfort carried by the term self-conscious. Also, I believe that the word "consciousness," compared to "reflexivity" and "referentiality," more clearly implicates an actual person or the idea of an actual person; this is especially important as I primarily use the term in relation to the author.

[5] The section appears only in the Philippine edition of *Fish-Hair Woman*. That it does not appear in the Australian edition, published by Spinifex Press, inevitably leads us to ask not only the reasons behind such a decision, but also its implications, especially considering how interpretations are "offered" in this section. However, these questions are best answered in a separate discussion.

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