

Narrating Our Cultural Commons

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I would like to thank the Asia Leadership Fellow Program (ALFP) 2015 for this extraordinary time spent away from my busy life back in Manila. I can only describe the learning that has taken place in the last two months, from September to October 2015, as phenomenal. Gathering eight fellows from different disciplinary backgrounds and various parts of Asia to debate and share our opinions on matters that are of urgent concerns to Japan and the Asian region made me realize not only how important it is to be mindful of today's world but, most importantly, of our individual capacities to make it better. The latter is, of course, the more difficult task as we need to give of ourselves, no matter how small our contributions may be.

Before sharing the fruits of my participation in these two months and how these have clarified my knowledge of our commons in Asia, I would like to briefly focus on the impending 2016 Philippine elections as the starting point of my reflection. At the moment, the presidential candidates' qualifications (or lack thereof) are being daily contemplated on Philippine media. The comments are very cynical. At times, they may pass off as vitriol. While a level-headed commentary of the presidential candidates would be more of service to the public, I understand where the disappointment is coming from.

The Philippines had a huge historical impact on Asia and beyond with the EDSA Revolution or the People Power Movement of 1986 that toppled the Marcos dictatorship of 1965–1986. Proclamation No. 1081 that placed the Philippines under Martial Law was declared on September 21, 1972. I was four years old then, and had no idea about the world.

Fast track to 1986. I was 18 years old then with a year spent in college. I could still see myself on that long road of EDSA (one of the thoroughfares in Manila), not fully understanding the complex implications of the event. It was festive as many would still remember. It was also very tense, with tanks and canons deployed by the embattled Marcos regime. Images of those few days were surreal. There were nuns lining up the roads ready to offer flowers, ready to sacrifice themselves for any break out of violence. In other parts of the city, there were more agitated negotiations going on.

I remember the pervading doom days before the cataclysmic events unfolded. My father was a government official under the Marcos regime. I was a Marcos baby—someone born during the period of the dictatorship. My formative years were of Marcos. I knew how dirty politics could be from the way my father would recount the violent confrontations between the warring political parties in Masbate. When my parents found out that I joined the EDSA protests I knew they must have felt deeply betrayed. For me, in my young understanding then I knew that the Philippines was on the cusp of great change. And it was.

The Marcoses fled from the country assisted by the US government on February 25, 1986. But at the heels of Marcos' departure, the country was deeply in debt, there were thousands of political prisoners, dead and disappeared, massive land problems, corruption, countryside rebel groups, and the Mindanao Muslim conflict. It was also during the 1970s when the Marcos government started sending Filipino works abroad as a way to respond to the shortage of jobs in the country.

Fast track to 2015. The Philippines has sunk from its postwar glory of being the best contender for the Southeast Asian leadership. I used to hear my professors in the university say that the Philippines was once the destination for SEA researchers and scholars. The most famous research center was the International Rice Research Institute in Los Banos that used to be the mecca of rice research in the region. Now, we are importing large portions of our rice consumption from Thailand. This is only one among the many other things that we could be self-sufficient for. We now have 2.2 million overseas Filipino workers, and due largely to the overseas remittances (which has amounted to P160.2 billion in 2013) the Philippines is posting one of the most respectable GDPs in the region. Yet, on the ground, it is one of poverty, corruption, criminality, and misery.

Of what I have just narrated of my private life, I would like to say: The personal is historical; the personal is political. As a poet and humanities person, there are three things now that I understand. The American poet and scholar Helen Vendler has articulated these succinctly. She calls it the "three inescapable unfreedoms of the creative mind": "one cannot censor one's thoughts, one cannot deny one's wounds, and one cannot escape the duty to give expression to memory."¹

In these two months of the ALFP, what has been affirmed is how interconnected we all are in that duty to give expression to memory. During days I would write the seminar reflection papers in my room, I would pause whenever I hear the beautiful wedding march begins to play. In truth, I have lost track of the number of weddings held in the almost two months we have been here at the International House of Japan. Listening to it would make me teary-eyed as the couple would march in the afternoon light, the leaves of trees glistening in that magical moment. Was it that I was only pressured to finish the reflection paper that makes me emotional? No. It is the faith of two people vowing to share their life together through whatever trials may come.

Yet after the event's ecstasy, I ask: What would their stories be from here on? How would they, experiencing the most intense and joyful moment of their lives, fare in 10, 20, 30 years from now? How many children would they have? Would they still be together? How far or early into the marriage would they have filed for divorce? How would the children, who are often the hardest hit in such break ups, cope? What would be the probable cause of the

¹ Helen Vendler, *The Ocean, the Bird, and the Scholar: Essays on Poets and Poetry*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015).

split? How gendered would their troubles be? If it were intercultural, how difficult would it have been for differences to be overcome?

In our respective disciplines, we pick up the different parts of stories and thread them into the language we are trained in. I *see* the beautiful garden (to which I *wake* up every day), and someone else sees the conscious design of the rocks that imitate nature, instilled as it is with philosophical thoughts.

Later on, these personal stories are transformed into statistics. These are the statistics that have been presented in many of our seminars, with the one on aging being the most widely cited. These numbers are the ones that are made proofs for policies, for funding programs—all for the main goal of improving the quality of our lives.

These stories are what we find in literature. Yet, cliché as it may sound, literature is not just about emotions. The whole gamut, complexity of it is our very commons as a people, in whatever continent we find ourselves in. The questions I have asked earlier are probably the reason why many people are not comfortable with what literature and, in that regard, humanities have to offer. It offers life at its most chaotic, unforgiving, uncensored, undistilled forms but paradoxically the most beautiful, before it is broken down into systems and statistics for people to scrutinize them. Often, it is with the primordial that literature deals with—for it is at that level that we experience emotions such as pain, fear, jealousy, anger—those emotions that when confronted creatively, drive us to reflect deeply on who and how we are as human beings.

In the midst of this, I would think of the commons, the topic for which this year's ALFP program is framed. As a humanities person, our advocacy has always been that “we do not forget.” Memory plays a very important role in our lives and the lives of future generations. Its expression takes various modes—literature, painting, music, sculpture, cinema, dance, the visual arts, etc. They form part of the cultural commons. They are the most effective in reminding us where we are now in our life as individual human beings and collectively as world citizens. And unlike the other forms of commons, literature is infinite. Writing about this, author Enrico Eraldo Bertacchini says in his book *Cultural Commons: A New Perspective on the Production and Evolution of Cultures*:

...Being essentially composed of information, cultural commons tend not to suffer from limited carrying capacity. Their carrying capacity, as public goods, is infinite: consuming culture does not reduce its total amount for others. Unlike typical common-pool resources, characterized by exhaustion problems due to limited carrying capacity, cultural commons are thus non-rival in consumption.²

² Enrico Eraldo Bertacchini, *Cultural Commons: A New Perspective on the Production and Evolution of Cultures*, (Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., 2012), 5.

We find in the literary arts an infinite source of knowledge that delights due to its aesthetics, and persuades due to its emotions. It cuts across the three main dimensions of commons: *space*, *time*, and *community*.³ It provides a textured lens with which to see cultures and peoples. A poem can be consumed repeatedly and, the more times, the more that it can give both pleasure and understanding.

As people's stories are subsumed into theorizing, into abstractions, into systems that analyze the operations of larger machinations, we should not forget the very individuals who suffered through the most heart-wrenching of experiences, the individuals who in their daily struggles at times could not survive the pressure of the system.

We need to continue telling their stories. So it was that I found the plight of the farmers in India (as presented by my colleague Jaideep Hardikar) as heart-wrenching. That in their helplessness they leave behind them writings of poetry that speak of the fathomless depths of their desolation. At what point do they give up? At what point does a father choose to leave behind his family? I was also moved by the poetry books written by the leprosy patients at the Nagashima Aiseien Sanatorium, who faced with infinite time on the islands could only perhaps write their thoughts as if reaching out to their loved ones. In both these instances, writing could be the last manifestation of control they had over their plight as suffering individuals. It is an act of agency. To write down is to be read, to be remembered.

I am grateful for the opportunity to learn of these. I am also thankful for the stories of their countries shared by the other colleagues during the ALFP—of the civil war in Sri Lanka, the political upheavals in Thailand, Malaysia, the religious conflicts in Indonesia, the gender and other sociopolitical situations in Japan, and the growing pains of China. I am certain that these are being written right now into poems, short stories, memoirs, novels, plays. People need to look back so as to dwell on what had gone wrong. I always recall my chance to have stood on that historic moment on EDSA because it gives me hope that we would all be driven again to act for the better good of the country. To remember can help us forge a hopeful stance for the future. To achieve a deeper understanding of the world. To remember is to anticipate a future.

How do we create visions for the future? We should make sure that the future generations learn of the stories of the past. Despite their grimness and, more so, because of this. And we shall all be doing these together in our modest capacities as citizens of Asia, in the various fields we are trained in.

I would like to end with one of the most beautiful word that I have learned while here in Japan: “Nimisha”—which means *of the moment*. And that word taught me that our futures can only be as good as the way we give the best of ourselves to each moment.

³ Ibid., 6.

References

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