



In the Company of Strangers

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In the Company of Strangers by Michelle Cruz Skinner. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 2009. 180 pp. \$18.00 (paperback).

Michelle Cruz Skinner's *In the Company of Strangers*, a collection of fourteen accessible short stories, is a significant contribution to the corpus of diasporic Filipino literature. Skinner lends her authentic, perceptive voice to articulating the complexities of Filipino migration. Skinner joins with her literary *kababayans* ('fellow Filipino compatriots') to give names and faces to the statistics of millions of Filipinos moving abroad, around the world.

While the breadth and scope of these stories are broad, the underlying tensions of a tenuous Filipino identity pervade them all. In *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries*, Yen Le Espiritu observes that geopolitical upheaval, displacement, and dispersal is a way of life for Filipinos "flung to the ends of the earth" as contract workers, sojourners, expatriates, refugees, exiles, and immigrants (23). The narratives that emerge from this diaspora are thus intricate and multifarious. In her analysis of the Filipino American narrative, "Flipping Across the Ocean: Nostalgia, Matchmaking and Displacement in Filipino American Narrative," Begoña Simal González finds that the Filipino "(non)identity" is the most prominent feature of Filipino American literature, as Filipino American novels and short stories often portray Filipinos' nomadic lifestyles and their evasive, fluid identities that "move without going anywhere" (47). In his collection *Authentic Though Not Exotic: Essays on Filipino Identity*, Filipino scholar Fernando Zialcita finds, on the whole, that it is problematic to affirm a definitive Filipino identity, as the Philippines as a nation is culturally diverse. Skinner, nonetheless, positions her earnest, realistic characters within these uncertainties and ambiguities, with the juxtaposition emphasizing their "strangeness."

Despite this difficulty in describing Filipino identity, prolific Filipino-American writer and poet Bienvenido Santos praises Skinner's ability to relate some semblance of it because she "understands the way of humankind," and her sparse, yet profound stories are "written with such simplicity that the truth they convey shines with urgency the proper reader cannot miss" (qtd. in "First Philippine Literature Festival"). While deceptively simple, Skinner's stories confront the exigencies thrust upon the Filipino migrant during movement and displacement and together relate the multitude of experiences that comprise the diasporic Filipino identity.

Skinner, a transplant herself from Olongapo City, Philippines to Honolulu, Hawaii, relates the experience of Filipino immigration to being both a "stranger" and being in the company of "strangers." The title of the text draws on this paradox of being simultaneously *outside* and *within*—being a stranger, but one among many, constituting a community of strangers. Her text

provokes the question, then, of who these “strangers” are. Who is the “other,” the unfamiliar? In this way, Skinner’s characters are marked by what prominent postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha’s terms as “unhomeliness,” wherein they are not homeless but are not easily accommodated into familiar divisions of social life, with private and public spheres (9). They are displaced as the borders between home and world become confused, and private and public force upon them a vision that is divided and disorienting (9). Skinner’s characters are “strangers” to both realms, home and abroad, because they cannot truly belong to either and only find rest in a state of arrested, liminal living.

In the first story, “Translating {A Memoir},” Skinner opens the collection with an image of a “small zoo of exotic animals” on a military base in the middle of a jungle. Skinner draws on her experiences growing up in Olongapo City, a highly urbanized city located in the province of Zambales with a long history of military occupation—first as a Spanish Naval station in 1884, and then as an American military reservation in 1904, until the termination of US military bases in the Philippines in 1991, according to Lungsod ng Olongapo, the city’s official website. Skinner confronts the issue of Filipinos as the non-Western, exotic other and describes the fascination of the outsider looking into their metaphoric cages. Skinner then clarifies her position as a reluctant translator, claiming that it is the most difficult job to “[heed] what was left unsaid” (13). This book is, therefore, Skinner’s attempt to “translate” the feelings, emotions, movements, and experiences of Filipinos displaced through the diaspora. She describes her own identity as “mistaken,” not feeling at home in her origins in the Philippines but still confronting issues of identity in her relocation to Hawaii.

The stories “Natural Selection” and “Beautiful” depict the common but conflicting portrayals of Filipina femininity. “Natural Selection” is told using a series of letters from Harry, a Cornell graduate teaching in a college in Manila, to his sister Anna. Harry is the masculine outsider, sympathetic yet somewhat patronizing in his description of Filipinos, particularly of his Filipina wife, Estrella. He prizes her passivity, submission, and “over-solicitous” nature (23). In this way, he places value on her exotic femininity that is dutiful, dependent, and domestic. He emphasize how easily he is able to make himself at home in Manila, establishing himself as a dominant presence in his new surroundings. In contrast, “Beautiful” is narrated by sex worker Virgie, who asserts her agency by continuing in what her friends warn is “not a healthy occupation” and risks “STDs, AIDS, possible pregnancy [and] . . . bodily harm” in order to provide for herself (29). Through her covert maneuvers, Virgie exerts power in a powerless industry and overcomes hopelessness through her own resourcefulness. These portrayals complicate the perceptions of Filipina femininity perpetuated by patterns of migration. While Maruja Asis’s analysis of the Philippines’s culture of migration finds that the majority of Filipina overseas workers are either employed in domestic and entertainment fields, Skinner’s stories add depth to these descriptions in hopes of portraying women who are both admirable and flawed.

“Second Marriage,” “Parenting,” “Ten-fold Path,” and “What Can You Do About the Rain Anyway?” describe Filipinos’ intergenerational relationships within the Filipino diaspora. In “Second Marriage,” Heidi and Clem are subject to familial obligation and the impositions of tradition, impelling them to travel back to the Philippines for a traditional marriage ceremony that will appease their relatives. In “Parenting,” Ed’s Filipina mother comes to live with him and his white wife Frannie, and the family struggles to adapt to Lola’s routines and expectations. “Ten-fold Path” is told through a list of admonitions in response to common misconceptions about Filipinos in the mainland United States (US). The purpose of the list is to guide the young Filipino American from cultural denial and denigration to gradual enlightenment in the form of cultural

appreciation and self-awareness. “What Can You Do About the Rain Anyway?” is told from the view of an elderly Filipina woman who succumbs to indifference and denial when she does not remember her family members. The characters in these stories find themselves negotiating between Filipino collectivism and Western individualism and struggling to find their place within conflicting expectations and social norms. They also describe the fragile connections between generations of Filipinos, each with different notions of obligation and belonging.

“The Old Man’s Head {A Memoir}” is Skinner’s second memoir, appearing in the middle of the text. It relates her urgency in telling these stories, her fondness for her homeland, and her desire to share these experiences with her children. The title comes from Olongapo City’s most common folktale about an *ulo ng apo* (‘old man’s head’), from which the name “Olongapo” is derived. The old man’s head, Skinner claims, remains in her own. In this memoir, Skinner relates her fears of her people being blind to hope for a future and of her government being blind to the injustices resulting from a history of colonization. Skinner is haunted by the namesake of her city, whose eyes “were the eyes of a blind man” (84).

The titular story, “The Company of Strangers” is comprised of three parts: “Yellow Jasmine,” “The Company of Strangers,” and “The Exchange Rate.” These three stories relate the experiences of Filipino migrants to Italy. In “Yellow Jasmine” the smell of a flower helps the Filipino migrants remember the *sampaguita* (‘Arabian jasmine’) smell of their homeland and encourages them that, like the flower, they too will still grow even when transplanted. “The Company of Strangers” describes the initial excitement of a young Filipina migrant named Cely, who is “proud of herself like a girl finally out on her own” (112). Nevertheless, Skinner conveys the unraveling of Cely’s illusion of independence and self-sufficiency in “The Exchange Rate.” These stories render the vulnerable positions of these Filipino migrants as they begin to question what is gained and what is lost through the process of migration. These stories show that the state of unhomeliness is a result of, not just physical circumstances, but also changing economic, social, and psychological circumstances.

The final stories, “Expat,” “Displacement,” “In the Garden,” and “The Lives Before Us” illustrate the colonial mentality resulting from the Philippines’s generations of colonization. In his famous treatise “The Miseducation of the Filipino,” Renato Constantino describes colonial mentality as when Filipinos learn to use American criteria for problems and look at Filipino prehistory and past with the eyes of a visitor (16), a perspective that the young characters in Skinner’s stories have all adopted. In “Expat,” two Filipina American sisters move from the US mainland to the Philippines, a reverse of Filipino migration to the US mainland. The sisters admit no connection to their Filipino culture or heritage and instead exploit it for opportunities unavailable to them elsewhere. In “Displacement,” Maile, a Filipina from Hawaii who moves to the Midwest with her family, discusses her unhappiness, her lack of direction, and the discrimination she has experienced with Jesus, a son of Mexican immigrants. Their dialogue epitomizes unhomeliness, as both question whether home is a time, rather than a place (147). “In the Garden” is told by a young boy named Joel, who observes a party his family is throwing for his older brother’s graduation and move to college. While the family gathering is meant to reinforce community, Joel’s vantage point remains that of an outsider looking in. In “The Lives Before Us,” Skinner acknowledges her convoluted past and family origins in shaping her conceptions of culture and belonging. These stories are possibly more unsettling than the outsider perspectives described in “Translating {A Memoir}” and “Natural Selection” because they expose the vulnerability of the culture when the younger generations of Filipinos feel removed, apathetic, and like outsiders.

Skinner then concludes with her a final memoir, "Paper {A Memoir}," which ends in action and resolve. Skinner admits that her own identity is tied to the "pieces of stories and poems collected in folders, notebooks, and boxes" that fill her home, but she has "yet to tell everything" (170). Her papers attest to her writing as a moral act. She attempts to collect the stories of her people and allow readers to inhabit the diverse minds, motivations, and experiences of Filipinos affected by movement and change.

As a collection, Skinner's short stories allow readers to traverse alongside the Filipino migrant: she begins in the context of the Philippines, describes traveling abroad, deftly relates contemplating and wrestling with unhomeliness, and then revisits conceptions of home through recollection and writing. This is a valuable collection that contributes to understanding Filipino cultural identity through interconnections and shared experiences. Filipina scholar Leny Strobel argues that the Filipino identity must be understood in the context of colonial history, diaspora experience, and the efforts toward decolonization, and that migrants and US-born Filipinos must see their experiences as "part of the same thread that sews our histories together" (37). The sentiments inherent in Strobel's words resonate throughout Skinner's collection, particularly in Skinner's memoirs. While short, it is an ambitious work that reveals the connections among Filipinos across geographical spaces and generations. As Filipinos are a significant population on Guam and the Pacific, this work is particularly relevant for this region and is a productive source for scholars and educators in cultural studies, literature, and creative writing.

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