

Helen Yap

Translation and Self-Exploration in Travel Writing

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Abstract

All travel writing is, in a sense translation. Travelers come to an unknown place and try to “translate” it, i.e. to make it comprehensible, for themselves first, and then for their readers. In this essay, I wish to examine a travel book by one Filipina, Helen T. Yap, where this translation is both literal and metaphorical. In the process, I hope to demonstrate the rich potential of the genre of travel writing as a literary form for Filipino women writers of creative nonfiction.

From Inside the Berlin Wall (2004) chronicles the sojourn of Helen T. Yap, a Filipina marine biologist and professor of the University of the Philippines, to East Germany, at a time when that country was barely known in the Philippines. She has, first, to learn the language so she can work in it as she does her research and studies for her PhD degree. She then uses this foreign language to penetrate the culture, to understand it, and come to terms with it. And then—even as she is completing her research and writing her dissertation in German—she is translating her observations, impressions, and perceptions for her family, who are the first readers of her book. The resulting narrative is both a kind of social history, as well as an exploration of the author and narrator’s own state of mind: what drove her to leave her country, what she needs to

understand about herself—her family, her values, her ideals, her beliefs—so she can take the first steps into her own future.

My interest in the travel narrative by women stems from two sources. First, most of my research has been in the field of literature by Filipino women, in particular, their autobiographical writing. And, second, I have myself produced several volumes of travel literature, and therefore, am very invested in the genre. I am hoping, through this essay, which is the first of what I hope will be a series, to encourage more critics to pay attention to the genre.

Keywords

Helen Yap, *From Inside the Berlin Wall*, travel writing, travel narrative by women, Filipina travel writer

Travel Literature by Women in the Philippines: An Overview

Travel writing has only recently been recognized as a literary genre in the Philippines, although the first travel book by a Filipina was published in 1930—Maria Paz Mendoza’s *Notas de Viaje*. Mendoza was traveling on an educational mission to the US and she regarded her book as a “report to my colleagues and to my country,” an obligation to be fulfilled.¹ This she did with dispatch.

It was not until 1968 that another Filipina published a travel book, *Hanoi Diary*, a little known book by Gemma Cruz-Araneta. This is a pity because, if only for its being the only literary record of a visit by a Filipina writer to Hanoi during the Vietnam War, the work is historically important. Cruz-Araneta and her husband, Tony, were traveling as journalists and as guests of the Hanoi government.² Cruz Publishing issued a new edition in 2012 but it did not set off any ripples either. And, again, I feel that this is cause for regret. Because it is a well-written narrative—not just recording meetings with important government officials and visits to places significant for having been the sites of battles and such—but also offering observations of the daily life and attitudes of ordinary people during what was perhaps the longest war in modern Asian history.

These two books obviously do not belong to the tradition of travel writing by women in the West. Critics of travel writing by European and American women used to focus on the subversive nature of—not just travel writing—but traveling itself by women. Both travel and travel writing were considered masculine activities, and discussions of the travel literature produced by women often focused on the courage and intrepidity that it took to undertake their projects, and whether or not the works in question were complicit with the discourse of colonialism, of “othering” and “exoticizing.”³

Mendoza-Guazon and Cruz-Araneta travelled as professionals, on official business; and their writings, while not devoid of personal impressions, seem more akin to the tradition of male travel writing in the West, as described by Carl Thompson: “In most of its forms, travel writing’s prin-

cial business has been to bring news of the wider world, and to disseminate information about unfamiliar peoples and places . . . ” (62).

Kerima Polotan belongs to the generation between Mendoza-Guazon’s and Cruz-Araneta’s. She, too, was a practicing journalist, though she is now better remembered as a writer of fiction. Her travel writings are included in two collections of magazine articles produced during a long writing career: *Author’s Choice* (1971 and 1998), and *Adventures in a Forgotten Country* (1977 and 1999).⁴

The travel writing of Sylvia Mayuga, who belongs to Cruz-Araneta’s generation of writers (and, incidentally, my own) are included in three books—*Spy in My Own Country* (1981), *Earth, Fire, Air* (1992), and *Between the Centuries* (2004)—which, however, also include other nonfiction pieces which are not travel writing. The essays in the first book are undated, but a note at the beginning of the book says that they had been published “over the past 12 years in several national magazines.”⁵

The first of my own travel books, *Sojourns*, published in 1984, was a collection of essays on countries in Southeast Asia and the Middle East where my husband was posted by UNICEF. The rest were published from 1991-2009.⁶ I decided to call my *Looking for the Philippines* (2009) and *Travels with Tania* (2009), “travel memoirs” (a term I initially thought I was coining, until I realized it was already in use) to describe what I had earlier referred to as a “mongrel form.” The narratives in both books were not so much about discovery as about recovery—most were about places I had visited and revisited many times. I continue to do travel writing today. And recently, I’ve gotten into the habit of publishing them first as Facebook Notes, and then compiling them into books, along with other essays and personal narratives—*Stella and Other Friendly Ghosts* (UST, 2012) and *The Thing with Feathers: My Book of Memories* (UST 2017). I mention these works here in the context of the development of the genre of traveling as it is practiced by Filipina writers.

The term “travel memoir” seems to fit both *A Journey of Scars* by Criselda Yabes (UP, 1994) and *From Inside the Berlin Wall* by Helen T. Yap (UP 2004).

Yabes' book is really a memoir, but structured like a travel notebook or travel journal, consisting of a series of short entries which chronicle a brief period spent in Europe. The official reasons for her trips have to do with graduate courses and her work as a foreign war correspondent. The real reason is the need to get away from a bad relationship. Both the trip, and the writing about the trip, seem prompted by this need to "get over" something. So the book is not so much an account of places visited by the author as it is a chronicle of her own journey back "home," i.e. to both her homeland and to herself.

Helen Yap's book, like Yabes', records a trip that has both an official reason and a personal reason. I shall not go into details here since the principal concern of this essay will be her book.

Finally, there is *Twisted Travels* by Jessica Zafra (Anvil, 2007). This is a collection of essays about trips undertaken by the author primarily as part of her job(s) as a media person. Its most distinctive quality is the author's voice, her persona—the sharp, sophisticated, witty, irreverent, in-your-face stance which made Zafra not just a columnist but a TV personality, a celebrity.⁷

These authors are not the only Filipino women writers doing travel writing. There are others whose essays and narratives have been published in newspapers and magazines. Time constraints have dictated that I focus only on those who have either published travel books or collected a good number of their travel writing into their personal nonfiction books.

It seems to me that the "tradition" of travel writing by women in this country is being created by professional writers, mainly journalists and academics, who travel not on leisurely tours or in search of adventure but as part of their work. This accounts for many of the characteristics of their texts. Though the authors might sometimes travel as tourists, alone or in the company of husband or friends, they see with the eyes of a reporter and critic, relying on facts as well as impressions, producing analysis and reflection as much as reverie.⁸

Regrettably, travel literature in general has received very little critical attention in this country.

I selected this book from among the other travel books written by Filipinas, which I mentioned above, for three reasons. First, its subject is an unusual experience. To a generation born after “perestroika” and “glasnost” and the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Helen Yap’s experience may not seem particularly extraordinary. But her sojourn took place in 1984-1987, a couple of years before the Berlin Wall came down. It was actually a groundbreaking book.

Second, I find the narrator to be a fascinating person, a distinguished scientist whose concerns go beyond science, to cover philosophy, history, literature. Hers is an interesting mind grappling honestly and fearlessly with the Large Questions. And, third, the book is a remarkably engaging work, a fine example of the genre now referred to as “creative nonfiction,” of which travel writing is a sub-genre.

A Backward Glance: Criticism of Travel Writing by Women Writers in the West

Carl Thompson tells us that “[f]or much of the twentieth century . . . the genre (of travel literature) was usually dismissed by literary critics and cultural commentators as a minor, somewhat middle-brow form” (3). And this, despite the fact that many distinguished writers of fiction had produced excellent travel books. A few examples will suffice: Aldous Huxley, Somerset Maugham, Edith Wharton, Mary McCarthy, D.H. Lawrence, Lawrence Durrell, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Graham Greene, and M.F.K. Fisher.

With the appearance of a new generation of travel writers—like Paul Theroux, Bruce Chatwin, Peter Matthiessen, Ian Frazier, Bill Bryson, John McPhee, Edward Hoagland, Annie Dillard, and so forth—who not only made the best seller lists but received favorable reviews from such prestigious publications as *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian*, and the *London Review of Books*, this has changed. Critics now regard travel writing as a genre “especially reflective of and responsive to the modern condition” (Thompson 2). Even academe now considers it relevant to several disci-

plines like anthropology, sociology, gender studies, postcolonial studies, and of course, literature.

The question that interests me, as a travel writer myself and a teacher of travel writing is an obvious one: has travel literature by women aroused the same critical attention?

It is now an accepted fact that European women began traveling pretty much at the same time that European men did. They ventured forth beside their fathers, husbands, brothers (who were traveling as diplomats, officers in the armed forces, traders, missionaries, and so forth), and even by themselves, as nurses, for instance, and on religious pilgrimages. That they did not record these sojourns is due perhaps to the lower levels of literacy among women. Only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did women travelers become *women travel writers*; and even then, their writings were generally only circulated among family, as was deemed appropriate.

But by the mid-nineteenth century, more women were traveling either because they had the leisure and the means to do so or because they had decided to allow an adventurous nature its due. And their accounts of their travels were finally being printed (Thompson 171).

Criticism of this writing came much later. And when it did, it was, naturally, women—feminist critics—who first began to pay attention to it and to embark on the task of recovering and re-evaluating these books. To us modern readers, it now seems so odd that, for a long time, it was taken for granted that travel writing was masculine turf when, as Thompson observed, “women have, in fact, been prolific producers of travelogues, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (3).⁹

First wave feminists were inclined to read women travel writers as proto-feminists, and to regard their project as defiance of the patriarchy. More recent scholarship has suggested, however, that this might be too simplistic a view. Not all women travel writers were feminists, to begin with. And most of those who were, seemed not to have wished to rock the boat, that is, more than it had already been rocked by the very acts of traveling and writing about it. They sought, rather, to negotiate the gender norms, rather than confront them openly (Thompson 181).

In the aftermath of “second-wave” feminism of the 1970s, more critics have investigated other contributions to the genre by women.¹⁰

In her review of the book *Gender, Genre and Identity in Women’s Travel Writing* edited by Kristi Siegel, Helen M. Buss praises Sukanya Banerjee for her “excellent close reading by which relevant theory is allowed to rise out of the careful examination of the primary texts (she analyzed the letters of Lady Mary Montagu), rather than by using previously set theories which seem to impose themselves from our own position of post-colonial hindsight.” She also urges critics to pay “more attention to *the art of the travel writer*, to read travel writing by women as works of art, like novels, poems and plays, crafted by more or less sophisticated hands as much as they are considered mere tableaux of gendered subjectivity” (445-447).

Earlier than this, Clare Brant, in her introduction to the Everyman’s Library edition to the Montagu letters, wrote: “Our indifference to the literariness of letters has been reinforced by twentieth-century tendencies to take them either as useful sources of social history or as transparent biographical records.” She does not deny that letters do project something of their writers’ personalities as well as of their times. But she reminds readers that “writing a letter is less a matter of copying reality than of constructing it.” Finally, she points out that “by ignoring the literary form in which Lady Mary wrote, we may still discover her views but we cut ourselves off from understanding her better as a writer” (x).

Traveling with Helen Yap inside the Berlin Wall

For me, the position taken by Clare Brant and Helen Buss represent a significant development. And, taking up my cue from them, I hope in this essay to offer a possible framework for the literary analysis of travel literature, in particular travel literature by women.

To my knowledge, there are no books which articulate the poetics of travel literature in the Philippines. In formulating my framework—and in the absence of related literature by Filipinos—I have done extensive reading of both the travel literature and the criticism of travel literature in the West. I quote from some of my sources in this essay by way of illustrating what

they consider to be “good” travel writing. It is not my intention to prescribe their theories to Filipina travel writers. What I propose to do is to describe Helen Yap’s practices in her book and determine how effective they have been in allowing her to achieve the goals she has set for herself. And, were I to find that they have, indeed, been effective, to suggest hers as one possible direction that travel writing by Filipino women writers of travel literature might wish to explore. In short, I hope this essay will be taken as a tentative step in the direction of formulating a poetics for travel writing by Filipino.

I plan to utilize my suggested framework in the analysis of Helen Yap’s *Inside the Berlin Wall*. Further, I propose that—while it is true that the use of literary strategies leads to travel writing which contains more than useful information and amusing anecdotes, leads, indeed, to narratives as compelling as the best fiction—it can, and sometimes it does, do even more. I have mentioned that some critics have already accepted travel writing as a form of social history. I think that—since it is a type of memoir—it might also serve as a way of exploring social, political, philosophical, or moral issues which are of interest to the traveling writer. It might also be used for self-exploration, and, again like other types of memoir, for self-healing.

A good point with which to start is the question: what, precisely, does “the art of the travel writer” consist of? The answer I propose takes the form of a series of questions:

1. Who is the writer and why is she travelling?
2. Why did she decide to write about her travels?
3. Is there an awareness on her part of a tradition of travel writing that she might belong to? Does she appear to be writing in accordance with that tradition or writing against it?
4. What choices has she made—in regard to narrative strategies—and have these worked effectively toward what seem to be her goals/objectives, or have those strategies somehow impeded or compromised those goals?
5. Even as she narrates her experience as a foreigner (in short, the stranger-in-a-strange-land theme), is she embarked on another journey, an inner journey other than the ostensible physical move-

ment in space, i.e. from one place to another. Is there an inner purpose, a question that she might be grappling with? How has she used the genre of travel writing to fulfill this quest?

6. Does the account of her travels offer any insights or discoveries that might be of consequence or significance to others besides herself?

The first three questions are fairly simple and will be discussed only briefly. The fourth is more complex, and will require a longer discussion. This question will only be partially answered at this point. Question numbers 4-6 will be answered in the course of my discussion of what I believe are the book's five narrative strands.

First, who is the author and why is she traveling?

Yap answers both these questions in her Preface. She is an academic, teaching in what was the Marine Sciences Center of the University of the Philippines Diliman, traveling to the German Democratic Republic to do her doctorate studies there. Her scholarship had been arranged by her father, through his connections with the family of Jesus Lava, a leader of the old Communist Party of the Philippines, and Lava's connections with the GDR government.¹¹ Yap was 27 years old when she left Manila, and 30 when she returned.

Second, why did she decide to write about her travels?

Her motive for writing about her experience, she claims, was the thought that some Filipinos might take an interest in what it is like to live and pursue higher studies in a country extremely different from the ones Filipinos usually went to. She also wished to see for herself what life was like in a Socialist country, and to write about it in her country, which was still in the grip of Cold War propaganda: "Global tensions continue to exist, despite the so-called collapse of the Berlin Wall and the 'demise of communism . . . These tensions are merely played out on a different plane. I continue to believe in socialism, and that socialism lives: the kind that Albert Einstein believed in" (viii).

Her interest in the subject, as the book makes abundantly clear, is the result of her background: her family, her father in particular, considered

themselves socialists. However, Yap makes it a point to remind the reader of her age when the book was written, suggesting that her views may have altered somewhat by the time of her book's publication.

Third, does there seem to be an awareness on her part of a tradition of travel writing that she might belong to? Does she appear to be writing in keeping with that tradition or writing against it?

There is no existing "tradition of travel writing" in the Philippines, either by men or by women. The works mentioned in the previous section of this paper are little known even to Filipino writers; they are not part of the standard academic syllabi. I am not aware that they were even reviewed in the cultural pages of newspapers or magazines. So it is not likely that Helen Yap saw herself as writing either for or against a tradition.

What one learns from her letters themselves is that Yap seems to have had plans, from the start, to write about her sojourn to the GDR:

It's a good idea after all when a member of the family is away—the everyday life on both sides gets to be documented. Then later we could go back to all this correspondence and see how things were. And our insights as well, and how things evolved. When we try to write something about contemporary Philippine history (and perhaps relations with the GDR), we could use this material too! (47)

She does not make clear whether she intended her future book to take this form, i.e. letters to her family and diary entries; or whether these were written as "" from which she would then shape the book. But from the above passage, it would seem that the original plan was simply to correspond with her family. Later, "we" could return to it, and out of the "insights" produced, perhaps write that future book.

Fourth, what choices has the author made—in regard to narrative strategies—and have these worked effectively toward what seemed to be her goals, or have they somehow impeded or compromised those goals?

This question is concerned with the writer's literary style, i.e. the technical narrative strategies employed in her narrative. The first strategy that will strike the reader is, of course, its structure. The novel is epistolary in structure, i.e. the narrative unfolds through a series of letters addressed

by the author to her parents and siblings (mostly as a group, sometimes individually).

There is a long tradition of epistolary novels by women in the West, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1918) to Bel Kaufman's *Up the Down Staircase* (1965), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1981) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986). In Philippine literature, the book that comes immediately to mind is the nineteenth century *Urbana at Feliza*, a Tagalog novel by the secular priest, Modesto de Castro.¹²

Where writing in English is concerned, I can think of two novels which are written in either the epistolary or diary modes. My novel *Recuerdo* (1996) is epistolary but using the e-mail format and Cyan Abad-Jugo's *Salingkit: A 1986 Diary* (2012) which consists of diary entries.

Is there a similar tradition where nonfiction prose—specifically, travel writing—is concerned? Carl Thompson has observed that in the West, women's travel books often “took the form of writing intended for private rather than public consumption, such as letters and diaries.” These, he adds, were circulated only among family and friends, and printed only in the nineteenth century (170-171). Perhaps the most famous of these early women travel writers is the Lady Mary Montagu whose letters, written after her return from Turkey where her husband had served as the British Ambassador, published privately in 1763.¹³

Brant has described the “distinct literary advantages” for the choice of the epistolary form for her travel writing by Lady Mary Montagu:

Its sequential nature provides a rhythm of anticipation and immediacy; its personalized address creates an illusion of privileged access for readers other than the addressee; its flexibility allows the episodic nature of travelling to be matched to an appropriately punctuated form... (and) Negotiations of otherness inherent in correspondence are readily converted to explorations of alien cultures (xvii).

An even older tradition of autobiographical narratives which includes travel writing is a body of work which, for lack of a more suitable label, literary historians and critics named “diaries” produced by the court ladies of the 10th and 11th centuries in Japan. The best known are: *The Gossamer Years*:

The Diary of a Noblewoman of Heian Japan by a woman known only as “the mother of Michitsuna,” *Murasaki Shikibu: her Diary and Poetic Memoirs*, *As I Crossed the Bridge of Dreams: Reflections of a Woman in 11th Century Japan* by the Lady Sarashina, and *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon.

Helen Yap’s book consists mainly of letters. But inserted among the letters are short diary entries. These are in italics. That she intended these to be part of a diary is clear in one of her letters where she writes that she had resumed the “bad habit of keeping a diary. Not so much recording daily events, since my letters sort of detail these already, as writing down thoughts, impressions and other ideas that might come to me.” She adds, with her tongue in her cheek that this is “just to refresh my English,” since already she is sometimes dreaming in German, trying “to reconstruct grammatically correct sentences in my sleep” (47).

In trying to describe the kind of narrative that emerges from this collection of letters and diary entries, the term that springs to my mind when is the “braided essay.” The term was coined by Brenda Miller (2001, 14-24). As the term suggests, the author of such a text takes several strands—which represent several narrative lines or issues, or themes—which intersect at various points throughout the book. She is, actually, “braiding” them together. The result is an essay consisting of intertwined strands. I would call Yap’s book a “braided narrative.”

I am certain there is no lack of books by women in the West that combine letters and diaries. One such title that comes to my mind is *A Very Private Eye: an Autobiography in Diaries and Letters* by the English novelist Barbara Pym published in 1985.

But, in the Philippines, Yap’s book seems to be the only example of travel writing consisting entirely of either letters or diary entries or a combination of both.¹⁴

I have identified five major strands seamlessly interwoven into the “braided narrative” by Yap. First, there is the effort to adjust to a new place, and to know and understand its people and their culture. Second, there is her abiding love for her family, in particular, for her father. Third, there is the pursuit of her degree and the determination to be accepted as an equal by

international scientists. Fourth, there are the author/narrator's philosophical and political reflections. And, fifth, there is the need to heal or recover from something that has gone wrong in her life, and find a new purpose or meaning.

Fifth, even as she narrates her experience as a foreigner, is she embarked on another journey, an inner journey other than the ostensible physical movement in space, i.e. from one place to another.

Aside from structure, I think that narrative voice is another striking strategy. Perhaps the single most important quality of travel literature—and other autobiographical forms like the memoir and the journal or diary—is narrative voice. One expects the narrator's voice to be clear and strong, and his/her personality to be not merely interesting but engaging. This is because what actually happens in this kind of writing is that the reader is invited to join the narrator in a journey, an adventure, a quest. No one is likely to willingly come along unless the guide or host is at least pleasant, if not downright charming. Related to voice, is of course the tone or tones adopted by the narrator. The modern essay, as invented by Michel de Montaigne (and travel writing is as much in the essay mode as in the narrative mode—in fact, the distinction may be meaningless), has mostly been biased toward the humorous, the ironic, the self-deprecating. Of course there are many other tones that will work as well. We have ample proof of this in numerous essay collections and anthologies.

The voice of Yap's letter writer/diarist is strong and clear from the very beginning. She comes across as, not just intelligent, but interesting, initially a bit lost, lonely, and helpless, but as soon as she gets her bearings, a different sort of person emerges, as I hope to show. Her tone varies depending on who she is writing to, on her moods, on the season. And she uses an altogether different tone for the diary entries. And, most important of all, she is always self-aware, always self-reflexive.

Another imperative, arising from the nature of the genre of travel literature is the faithful and evocative rendering of place. This is done in any number of ways: through straight description, through captured conversation, through anecdotes, through embedded press clippings, and so forth.

Behind all these techniques one finds a sharp eye and ear for nuances of sight and sound, a feel for atmosphere or ambiance, a keen observation of people's habits and mores, and a sensitivity to what the great travel writer Lawrence Durrell referred to as "the spirit of place" (162). Yap's narrator brings time and place to life, not in lumps of clunky descriptive passages, but as a seamless part of her narrative. The natural curiosity that brought her to this unlikely place stands her in good stead as she attempts to recreate the different places where she lives and works for her family.

The reader—not just of travel writing, but of all types of narrative, both nonfiction, and fiction—looks forward to events or episodes presented in a manner which will involve, and even absorb, him/her. If action is dull, or banal or stereotypical, it will fall flat on its face. Taken together, Yap's letters and diary entries are arranged chronologically. This is effective, because taken together, they form a natural narrative arc, from arrival to departure. This natural arc is sustained by the earning of a PhD theme, and the inner journey theme. The narrative is enlivened by numerous little anecdotes; the narrator's large variety of interests (not just in new people and unfamiliar places, but in newspaper stories, radio broadcasts, political discussions, food, fashions, concerts, opera; and her sense of humor.

And then, there is, of course the matter of language, by which is meant, not simply the selection and arrangement of words, the use of straightforward speech or the reliance on metaphors; but other things as well. I am referring to, for instance, the choice of the concrete over the abstract; of clarity over ambiguity; attention to rhythm or cadence, timing, pace; a preference for subtlety over melodrama, or vice versa; for simplicity over complexity, or vice versa; the juxtaposition of scene and summary, of the comic with the tragic; of the routine with the melodramatic. One could go on and on, for style grows out of many elements, and all the others I have been discussing here—the creation of a persona with a distinct voice, tone, evocation of time and place, dialogue and action—are all part of it.

Yap's manner is mainly direct and straightforward. She is a scientist, interested in facts, in data, in getting things right. But, confronted with a people who are even more like *that* than she is, she begins to realize that

she begins to surprise herself. She is Asian, not European—she stresses this several times. Beyond the material is something else: there is spirit. And, she is not only a scientist. She is a poet and a philosopher. Her language mirrors this, in its inflections, its rhythms, its lucidity. Discoveries are followed by reflections.

At this point, I must add that technique is not all. A travel narrative is more than just technique. I believe that, even more important than technique is attitude, a particular frame of mind.

And sixth, does the account of her travels offer any insights or discoveries that might be of consequence or significance to others besides herself?

“The great thing is to try and travel with the eyes of the spirit wide open, and not too much factual information,” wrote Lawrence Durrell. He continues, “to tune in, without reverence, idly—but with real inward attention” (162). This is achievable, not by breezing through a place (i.e. traveling on the run), but by spending some time in it, ideally living in it for a while, as Durrell did in all the places about which he wrote in his famous travel books.

He is referring to what all good literature is about: insight. What is most important about what an author shares, is, finally, not just the experience, but his/her insight into that experience. I hope that, in the analysis that follows, I will be able to show, that this is precisely what the author has been doing: come a bit closer to understanding the place has been her home for almost three years, and to understanding herself, what brought her to this country so far away from her own home, and how she can use what she has learned to help others when she returns home.

Narrative Strands

First Strand: Adjusting to the New Environment and Finding Her Place in It

The short “en route” chapter with which the book opens, covers a stop-over in Singapore, and reveals a bit of Yap’s background. She is traveling with another young Filipina, Mahal Magallona, and neither of them had packed their own suitcases. (Mahal’s was packed by her mother and sister;

and Helen Yap's, by her Tita Let!) This dependence on adult relatives by many single Filipino women of a certain class, even after they have left school and are living professional lives, is something many Filipina readers will recognize, though we may be reluctant to admit it. It may explain why Yap alludes several times in her letters to her "crying," even as she disclaims its being caused by homesickness. I would suspect that the author decided to open the tale of her adventures with this little detail because it would strike the right humorous tone.

From the very beginning the letters also reveal the warm, frank, affectionate relationship which exists among the members of the Yap family. For instance, the narrator seems eager to assure them that she is well and there is no reason for anxiety. Even as she writes of her discomfort and loneliness, it is with a light touch. Never does she wallow in self-pity. Her narrative is disarmingly candid, consistently humorous, and livened by a quick curiosity about everything she encounters. In spite of the discovery that she has arrived a full six months too early, and has to be enrolled initially in an intensive language course in Karl-Mar Stadt, 220 kilometers south of Berlin, she is determinedly cheerful and optimistic.

Her first living quarters are in a students' dorm, which has common bathrooms, with no doors on the shower rooms, no hot water in the pipes, and "toilet paper that is not like ours," and what she describes as "king-sized" sanitary napkins. Yap reports this to her family, without sounding like she's carping. She explains to her family that there was no way the GDR in Manila could have known of these arrangements for the language course, since they were finalized only recently. And she chooses to focus on the kindness and helpfulness of the officers of the Students' League, who have been put in charge of her, on the shops which are "no different from department stores anywhere I've visited, like Australia and Singapore," on the clean and orderly streets, and on her own pride and excitement at being able to wash her own clothes. It does not seem to bother her that no one in the place seems to have any idea where she is, and who made the decision to send her there. "It seems they are still in the dark about me, aside from the explicit instructions from

Berlin.” Someone actually asked her, “if the Party has anything to do with my being here” (15).

To keep homesickness at bay (homesickness which is so bad it gives her an upset stomach) and preventing herself from using her return ticket immediately, she tells her family about the small circle of interesting people whom she has met. Her account of her encounter with a Syrian student is particularly amusing. She meets him while she is washing her clothes in the kitchen, and he invites her to dinner with friends—all also PhD students—in the apartment they share. The next day, he asks her “very carefully and matter-of-factly if we could live together” (18). But quickly, Yap adds that they (her family) are not to worry about her, since he is “otherwise very civilized;” and she dismisses it as something which “a girl traveling alone is likely to encounter now and again” (19).

I am reminded here of Mary Morris’ assertion that the early women travelers from the West “move[d] through the world differently than men. The constraints and perils, the perceptions and complex emotions women journey with are different from those of men. The fear of rape, for example, whether crossing the Sahara or . . . crossing the street at night, most dramatically affects the ways women move throughout the world” (viii).

M.F.K. Fisher, in her autobiographical *The Gastronomical Me*, has written about what it was like for a woman traveling alone in Western Europe even in the late 1930s:

I saw clearly for the first time that a woman traveling alone and behaving herself on a ship is an object of curiosity, among the passengers and even more so among the cynical and weary officers. I developed a pattern of behavior which I still follow, on ships and trains and in hotel everywhere, and which impresses and undoubtedly irritates some people who see me, but always succeeds in keeping me aloof from skullduggery.

Yap does not seem to take the little episode with the Syrian graduate student all that seriously, though. She simply recognizes that there are things women who are traveling alone need to be prepared for—passes, propositions—from both graduate school colleagues and near-strangers. And a bit later, she is proven correct. The invitation to visit their room “when she is

lonely” seems like a *modus operandi*, with Indian graduate students as well as Syrian graduate students. However, I note that she does not experience the same harassment from European men.

Fortunately, she also gets to know a different type of graduate student. Soon enough, Yap becomes part of a “small circle” which includes two German girls, one an 18-year-old teacher of math and physics who is quite “stern” and outspoken with other boarders but treats Helen as if the latter were her age, or younger, invites her to tea with her friends, tries to “look after me” One might speculate that this happens because of Helen’s being so slim and slight, and therefore, by comparison, so youthful in appearance.

Both the German girls are single mothers and have their babies with them. Yap describes them as “incredible—they cook, clean, wash, look after babies, and go to school, all by themselves.” One assumes she means—with no help from nannies, yet more proof about the narrator’s social or economic? class. On the other hand, she notes, there is “the crèche, and absolutely free medical services” (20). Then there is Yap’s roommate, a plumber’s daughter, also 18 years old, “a very nice girl” who offers her food, kisses her good night, and immediately invites her to visit her family’s home and go traveling with her.

A bit later, she becomes friends with some Vietnamese, more advanced students, with whom she finds she has greater rapport. They are curious about her, and she, for her part, asks them about the Vietnam War. She is a little surprised at their readiness to admit that they received help “even from the capitalist countries; and marvels at their resilience, at how “now they laugh and talk like little children” (38). This encounter is one of those touching moments in Yap’s narrative, her discovery that she enjoys a greater “rapport” with fellow Asians.

Yap is informed that there are also Syrian and Mongolian students in the GDR, at the expense of their own government, while the Vietnamese are funded by the GDR. And she learns, further, that there is a huge workforce of 40,000 Vietnamese in the country, manpower required for the country’s industrial development. Might this indicate an appreciation for a people as

disciplined as the Germans? Or perhaps a desire to help a political ally? It is details like this that function to make her narrative partly social history.

As she becomes more integrated into this small community, Yap is aware that they see her as a kind of curiosity. But she senses no condescension or rudeness in it. Not once does she mention being treated patronizingly or with prejudice, and through her friendship with them, she is able to observe the life of ordinary Germans more closely. Through them, she also gets exposed to Germany's rich cultural life, from opera to students' jazz clubs.

Second Strand: Her abiding love for her family, in particular, for her father

This strand in Helen Yap's letters is very closely interwoven with the first strand, the adjustment to her new environment. In fact, it underlies all of the narrative strands. Her letters are addressed sometimes to the entire family, and sometimes to particular members. Her tone changes depending on the letter's recipient. These documents provide a vivid picture of differences in character of the persons addressed as well as Yap's ability to nuance each message.

In her letters addressed to both her parents, she frequently reports on her health, e.g. how many pounds she has gained since arriving in Germany, week by week, to bring her weight up to 104 pounds, which gives one an accurate idea of how little she weighed when she embarked on her journey, and why there was the need to keep constantly reassuring her parents on her health.

She also informs them about the distances she walks to get to places, how she cleans her own room regularly and actually enjoys it. Nor is she daunted, despite her class background, about taking her turn with the other boarders in cleaning the toilet and other common facilities. She admonishes her family "not to get horrified: since the toilets are "so clean already, all they need is a token cleaning."

In reply to their questions about her delayed flight out of Manila, Yap reveals—and again, this strikes me as a curious reaction in a professional woman of her age—that she actually panicked (my word, not hers) and tried to find a phone, or to even get out of the building and ask her father to take

her home. This was also the way she felt when her flight out of Singapore was delayed. But “after talking with Apa, I felt much better and told myself to stop being irrational” (24). This, and many other passages in the letters reveal more about her father’s pre-eminent role in her life.

A later diary passage recounts the hurried farewells with her family in the chaos of the Manila airport, which includes this telling detail: “The parting with Apa was hard, but necessary. I think it was the first time I gave Ama a good hug” (44), a signal about the marked difference between her relationship with her father and the one with her mother.

To her father, Emmanuel Quiason Yap, she addresses a short note in which she refers to the matter of mail being opened in the GDR, and suggests that he not use envelopes marked “official mail” because they take longer to get to her, suggesting that they are intercepted.

And she announces the speed with which she has picked up German (already she is reading literature on marine science in the GDR in books obtained from the library), and that this has so impressed her teachers that they have decided that she need not take the 5-week language course, and can just do self-study and take a test afterward. So, she is to be sent, not to Greifswald but to the William-Peck University at Rostock, “the leader in the field,” and the place where the Institute of Marine Science of the GDR Academy is located. She is now anticipating living in the provincial capital city, which will make her life much more satisfactory in many ways (25). This is the first instance that one glimpses the third narrative strand: her professional progress.

Other letters to her father are more personal. Some speak of her admiration for him, a feeling she seems to have no trouble articulating. It is an emotion bordering on hero-worship, and it is a recurring motif in the book. She writes to him that she cannot be just a scientist or a poet: “Through you and your experiences I have derived an understanding of what is evil in the world, and what one really has to live his life for” (134). In one of her later letters, she reveals to him her ambitious dream for herself. She plans to “venture more and more into philosophy, with science as a tool, and poetry as a language” (134).

Another time she writes that many times she wishes she could sit down with him and ask him the answers to many of her questions, “[s]uch as when a matter of a political nature comes up, or those concerning human relationships. When a particularly tricky situation comes up, I think hard: ‘What would Apa do and say in this situation?’” (85)

Perhaps in response to some comment or question of his, she writes: “As to the opposite sex here, as far as I’m concerned, I am first and foremost a scientist. Then a writer, artist, historian . . . *and* then a woman. But of course I don’t plan to become an old maid!” This letter was written on January 10, 1985, the eve of her 27th birthday.

“Because of what you’ve stood and continue to stand for, our family had to develop precariously close to the workings of evil in this world. The systematic brutalization of the human spirit, greed, selfishness, cruelty. And you, my wonderful father, have shielded us from all of that. And we have prevailed” (134).

This is a rare tribute for a daughter to pay her father. Yap does not elaborate about “the workings of evil in the world,” nor does she go into the specifics about “brutalization,” “greed,” and so forth.¹⁵

With her mother, Erlinda Timbol-Yap, she is more reticent. In fact, there are just two letters in the book addressed only to her. One is dated March 17, 1985. It is mostly “a bit of girl talk”—about Ljubka’s admiration for her (Erlinda’s) good looks, about her fashion sense, her mania for cleanliness, the home she shares with her own widowed mother, her brother and her grandmother, as well as about her other new friends in Rostock.

Letters addressed individually to her siblings reveal a little of the character of each one, and the nature of her relationship with them. With Jop, the oldest of her brothers, she shares the political commentary she has obtained from the newspapers and the radio; she informs him of the lectures she has attended, relying on the German she has already picked up while just having barely started language training; she provides information about the exchange rate, the prices of cars, calculators, the existence of a doctorate in Computer Science for which a demand increased with the local manu-

facturing of component parts. Then she teases him with, “Surprisingly, mein Bruder, German girls here are slender and pretty. I think they have finer features than Americans (except that they don’t shave you-know-where. They also wear perfume and jewelry” (21). The comment suggests that her brother had a different idea of German girls. On her roommate’s abundant cosmetics, Yap says, “Compared to her, *I’m* the Spartan revolutionary.” Commenting on the girls she sees walking down the streets, she says, “Compared to them, I look like a tramp” (21).

She also discusses philosophy and politics with him, Ayn Rand and capitalism, the great religions. She owns up to not having read Hegel yet, and not enough of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, but feels that it “just may be that socialism is the best way, at least with the particular psychological stage of development the human race is presently in” (64). But there is no lack of caveats.

To her other brother Dave, she writes about the changing of the seasons, about birds and bird-watching, about news broadcasts over different radio stations. She asks after his caterpillars and his moths, and his lessons in the Japanese language (114).

Her letters to her younger sister Leah are full of gossip and chatter about places she saw during her trip to Berlin; her plans for her trip to Czechoslovakia; household chores she now knows how to do; and advise for Leah to learn them now. She passes on more gossip about her experiences with male students—at once amusing and annoying—an Egyptian and a Jordanian. After one such episode, the Jordanian asked her if they could still be friends. Helen says drily, “I agreed, but I think I lost my appetite for Arab food” (66). And there is one letter, which is of particular interest because it reveals another picture of the GDR—what it is like for older people. An old lady had asked her help with her grocery bag and complained to her about how frightful most people were. Yap assumed she meant they were rude and inconsiderate to her. Taking the grocery bag into the lady’s “drab, lonely apartment” showed her how old people lived (140).

With her youngest sister, April or Pili, Helen’s voice as “*Ate*” comes to the fore. It is April’s letter that makes her laugh the most, she tells the

family *bunso*. She recounts what she has learned about the life of the “young people” in the country—the discos, the obsession with being thin, the ease with which they are able to travel (in the Socialist countries at any rate), their amazement that in the Philippines people have to pay for everything, including vacations and dental treatments. She urges her sister to try and do well in her studies (“When one knows and understands as many things as he can, one can appreciate and enjoy the WORLD better. Which I am finding out now!”) She tells April that she is glad to learn of her interest in biology: “As a biologist one gets a deeper understanding of the laws that govern all life. And with this, an understanding of how the whole universe functions and develops. Then one can venture into the questions of human consciousness or of how societies evolve and make history” (133). In another letter she tells April that if the latter ever asks her parents questions to which they answer “stork” or “cabbage,” she is to come to her (Helen) and *she* will supply the right answer.

And then there is this passage in which she describes herself, perhaps more clearly than any other passage in the book that she was “greedy for knowledge and understanding” and that she was “trying to read as much as I can” (127). Finally, she reassures Pili solemnly, but probably with a smile, that “yes, I do believe we’ll be sisters for as long as we live.”

One of her letters addressed to the whole family is about how one time when her class is asked by the teacher what they expect out of life. Her classmates replied with jokes—one says “all material wealth”; another says, “a good wife”; Yap, however, answers seriously, “the capacity to help my fellowmen” (52). One of her Vietnamese friends tells her that this “is a very good thought.” Yap replies that she and her siblings were always told by their father that “your life is for your people,” and the Vietnamese says that this was also what they were reminded about in Vietnam” (52). This was another reason for the narrator to feel sympathy with her fellow-Asians.

First Strand (cont): Adjusting to Her New Environment

By mid-November 1984, Yap is settled in another hostel with a much nicer room to herself and her own mailbox and, one assumes, better bath-

room facilities since she mentions being back taking to daily showers. However, there are still common showers with men and women supposed to take turns at different hours of the day (with some perhaps deliberate overlaps). Nor is she expected to take part in cleaning the facilities since her new rooms are not part of a regular students' dorm.

Another interesting bit of social history is the arrival of a batch of Libyan students who get a whole hotel just for themselves thus "causing a lot of consternation." The rumor that reaches Yap is that the Libyan government is paying the GDR US\$2000 a month for each student for housing and education, and an additional \$250 monthly stipend. In addition, they are receiving an additional 300 marks from GDR. So "they go all over painting the town red." One German student remarked to her that a Libyan has only to yawn "and everyone is at his beck and call." A teacher who had been assigned to supervise Yap's language instruction personally was instead assigned to them, which is why she is still part of a class, despite her being far advanced in her German language skills (56). From this one gathers—as the narrator intends one should—that the GDR is not entirely immune from being impressed and bending its own policies to benefit the wealthier students. But she lets this pass without comment, and turns to the advantage of having classmates from those parts of the world which do not receive fair coverage from American media. Her scholarship, she feels, has enabled her to gain access to what is really going on in the Middle East, Africa, and so forth.

By the end of January 1985, Yap is settled in Ronstock, "the oldest university in Northern Europe. It is a university town, the university buildings scattered all over town, so that Ronstock is in effect like one big campus" (107). She has met her adviser, Doz. Dr.sc.nat. Jörg-Andreas Oertzen. Her dissertation is to be on the energy dynamics of benthic community systems. Her studies will include more German and Marxism-Leninism ("routine for everybody"). A minimum of two years' experimental and field work will be required. Her adviser informs her that "German Ph.D. standards are very high. But he also tells her that, because of her publications, she is considered fully integrated into the scientific community, which is not true of many other Ph.D. candidates (90). Yap is obviously delighted by this compliment.

Then her adviser and his wife present her with an anorak. They tell her kindly that there was no need for her “to have only one coat” (99?) One notes that Yap does not take offense. She is only perhaps a little amused. As she makes clear in several of her letters, she is determined to live frugally so she can save up for a washing machine, since her new residence, Betenhaus, is not a student hostel and tenants are expected “to look after their own needs” (99). Indeed, she does acquire the required appliance, with money to spare. In a later letter, she refers to having received an additional 7 Marks a day while she is doing her research work in Zingst. Her comment to this is that, since she is provided with bedding soap and washing powder, she doesn’t really need the extra money (125-126).

Even more important, perhaps, to her becoming fully settled in, is the way she relates to the people she encounters, how she eventually becomes part of a little community.

In her Preface to the anthology *Traveler’s Tales: A Woman’s World*,³ Marybeth Bond writes: “When we travel, we pause more to listen, to assimilate, to move in and out of the lives of those we meet on the way. Where women go, relationships follow” (Bond xv). She might have been describing Yap, even when she was a recent arrival, a fish out of water in an undergraduate dorm. None of her new acquaintances was Filipino, and, like Yap herself, they were students, therefore transients, and so much younger than she was. But the measure of how she succeeded in forming strong bonds with them is that when the time came for her to leave K-M-St, there was sadness. She was given two farewell parties, with dishes her friends had cooked themselves, and wine; and someone carried her luggage to the train station: “The one who took me to the station lingered more than an hour until the train left, even if it was quite cold,” Yap writes (98).

In Ronstock, she again quickly makes friends among her fellow graduate students. Her roommate Ljubka, a Bulgarian shipbuilding engineer, and this woman’s friend, Monika, who is doing a doctorate in communism, are both a bit older than Helen. They, too, treat her as “some kind of kid sister.” Yap’s term for it is “almost doting.” While watching TV, they offer her wine, munchies, pretzels, chocolates

Sharp little sketches of the members of the bright, enthusiastic young people who form her circle are scattered throughout this lively narrative. There are a German professor of English; a Cuban called Roberto who shares the washing machine in exchange for doing “house repairs” for Yap and Ljubka; a handsome surgeon specializing in neurosurgery who speaks English with a Cambridge accent, and “visits often to make us laugh” (109). Her partner for her first year of field work in an isolated spot called Zingst is 24-year old Michael Scheffler who is working on the equivalent of the Philippine MS.

Despite this, though, the narrator never quite loses the sense of being the “other,” of being “some kind of curiosity” to her new friends. She observes that “sometimes with the questions they ask, it would seem I came from some primitive tribe in the remote, barely discovered regions of the world,” and adds that they are surprised that she knows Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, and has been to New Zealand and Australia (104). However, since Yap seems to take no offense, one assumes that she does not detect in their questions an implied racism. In fact, racism does not figure in her narrative at all.

Eventually her friendship with Monika becomes so close that the latter invites Yap to her family’s home in Zingst and gives her the opportunity to get “a more intimate glimpse of German family life” (136). She also speaks of basking in the warmth of German hospitality and family life, when the Merckels (wife and daughter of the then GDR ambassador) go out of their way to cook interesting dishes for her such as goose and wild pig with rice; take her to the opera; introduce her to “jazzed up German gypsy music in the cellar of an old, dignified building made cozy by rugs, pictures on the wall, wooden tables, where students gather to drink wine, beer or whatever, and chat and listen to new trends in music” (154).

By August 1985, Yap reports having achieved “a pleasant balance” between her time in Ronstock and her time in Zingst, which reflects what seems to be a new-found emotional and mental stability and harmony. She provides a picture of herself. In Ronstock, she is a “city girl, dressed in slacks and pumps, “jumping on streetcars, hurrying from one University

building to the other, or to the post office, or to the various shops department stores. And having long chats with my new friends. In contrast, there is the “country girl” in Zingst, who’s always in jeans and rubber shoes, who gets up when she feels like it, and “spends hours tinkering in the laboratory, or going through my pile of data and scientific literature.” She takes walks in the woods, spots two small deer, gathers mushrooms for lunch the next day, cooks new dishes, takes bus rides with Michael, her assistant, to look at oak trees and beech trees, and taste her first blueberries, see her first squirrel. . .” (146-147).

A month later, Yap writes to her family that, of all the roommates she has had so far, she likes a 32-year old Cuban girl, Aida, who “feels the need to feed her when she cooks only eggs for herself” (149). One might speculate that the relationship works better because Aida is closer in age to Helen than her other friends are. And also because Aida is a person of color too. But I am personally bemused by this constant preoccupation on the part of her friends with Helen Yap’s eating habits.

Third Strand: Professional Progress

One thing Yap does not bother to disguise is her satisfaction at her remarkable progress where her studies are concerned.

Before leaving K-M-Stadt, she has to sit for an oral exam during which she is expected to discuss such topics as the causes of World War II, the oil crisis, world hunger, and so forth from the Party’s point of view. After this, she announces to her family that she passed with a grade (“AUSZEICHNUNG”) higher than a “1,” which is the highest recommendation the Herder-Institute can give. She is told that she is considered one of the best doctoral candidates ever to study there (91).

But when she begins her actual PhD work, the going is not easy. “The scientific work can be very hard, what with the new techniques I need to learn, and the weather constraints. But on the other hand, many things and facts of life are beginning to seem so simple—distilled to their essentials” (110). She describes the difficulty of taking temperature and light measurements, and collecting samplings of sediment, while standing in water that

is 5 degrees centigrade, with a strong wind blowing so hard that it nearly knocks her off balance, followed by snow.

To me, the amazing thing, aside from her determination and meticulousness as a scholar, is Yap's high tolerance for loneliness. This is unusual in itself, but even more so, because she is a Filipina. Philippine culture practically makes solitude impossible. Our extended family system, while it guarantees a solid support group, also imposes countless claims on one's time and resources. In addition, there is the culture of the "barkada," the gang, the *posé*. We tend to move in packs of at least three. When a person is espied by his friends or acquaintances, in a mall or restaurant, in lieu of a greeting, he is likely to hear the query, "Sino ang kasama mo?"

Yap, on the other hand, seems to thrive in her solitude, or at least not to be bothered by it. In Zingst she is mostly by herself. In the evenings and on weekends, her main company consists of a pony, ducks, geese, chickens, and fat cats. Nowhere in her letters to her family does she indicate discontentment. She takes walks in the woods and acquires a tan, learns to drive a motorcycle so she can take herself to her work sites. She expands her cooking repertoire. She writes, "[i]t is almost like my dream of living in a Walden Pond like Thoreau, where my only resources are what I can create with my own mind and hands." And she gloats that the laboratory—and all its "sophisticated gadgets" are practically hers alone (120).

Yap takes justifiable pride in her professional success: "I know now that I can be not only a scientist, but also a good one. I read scientific papers now with a more critical eye, and can more or less detect the flows in the currents of thought of the writers, their weaknesses, even idiosyncrasies. I have a better grasp of the standards that science strives to set" (120).

Both the station director and her adviser are impressed with Yap's work. One sign of the esteem in which her adviser holds her is his recommendation that she replace him in an important experiment on "shallow water compartments" (called FLAK), involving scientists with different specializations. She is also accepted into a workshop in Hungary sponsored by UNESCO, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and the International Union of Biological Sciences in which Dr. Ed Gomez (her mentor in the Institute of

Marine Sciences at UP) is a member who she suspects, has recommended her acceptance to the workshop (127). Ulrike Schiewer, the program leader, she informs her family, is “world-famous, has written books, and is practically in? his field. But like many others, he is a very kind and unassuming man, and handsome, he-he . . .” (131).

Writing to her father on 1 July 1986, she says: “I think it is time to come home. After a few more months of doing concentrated work here, I feel more confident now about my whole research, and I think it is realistic to plan on finishing up this year” (180).

She adds that she knows it will not be easy for her to leave the GDR. She will miss her friends and the pleasant, convenient life she now enjoys: “But I know where I belong. I cannot remain in Europe for lengthy periods. The Europeans think in such a fixed linearity. They are also very materialistic, even in a society that strives towards utopia” (180).

In September 1986, she presents a paper at the 21st European Marine Biology Symposium in Poland (“the best conference I’ve ever attended”), and it is a great success. It earns her an invitation to read a paper at another big conference in Kiel, West Germany.

This is the international validation she has obviously been seeking. She writes: “So, with this I feel I was finally able to prove myself to the international scientific community, and, more importantly, to my hosts, the GDR scientists, who were present and who were my real judges” (192).

She attends a few more meetings, gives a few more talks, finishes her thesis draft. Her adviser tells her that she has broken all records.

After her dissertation oral defense before a panel consisting of her adviser and heads of departments of other universities, her dissertation is circulated within a committee of 10 professors and associate professors for their comments. The defense goes very well. She receives another “Auszelchnung” which means all ten members of her examination committee gave her a “1” (her adviser tells her he does not recall this having happened before). And she receives her degree, *magna cum laude*.

Looking back on what she has accomplished, toward the end of her book, Yap writes: “So I am here. Still coping with vast events. At the start,

greatly handicapped because of a crippled core. I think that for this reason, compared to my peers here, my achievements are tremendous” (171).

As she puts the finishing touches on her dissertation, she writes: “I’m in good shape, too. As a matter of fact, in terms of my work, I think I am reaching my peak . . . I’m enjoying my work with the FLAK crew, and feel like I belong in their company, even if the demands, as always, are pretty high” (178).

Fourth Strand: Philosophical and Political Reflections

Most of Yap’s reflections on politics and philosophy are to be found in the italicized diary entries. It is here that Helen is at her most transgressive: initially, in her candid admiration of socialism and how it actually works in the GDR, something that most Filipinos at the time would not have shared; later, in her equally candid assessment of its contradictions, which would certainly not have endeared her to her hosts; and, finally in her unorthodox view of religion, which is quite out of synch with Filipino Catholics who are a clear majority in the country.

She never actually refers to institutional religion, to the Catholic Church or to any other church. She does, however, articulate her belief regarding the existence of a God. She claims she has been developing her ideas regarding her concept of God since she was 15. And what she has distilled from her searching seems to be a kind of mysticism, which, paradoxically, she seems to have arrived at through her study of nature as a scientist.

Among the big questions she grapples with is the question of the spirit—its existence, its origins: “As a natural scientist, I have little doubt that it is very probably a product of nature, possibly a form of deathless energy But what is energy? What is nature? What are its origins, its limits, all its forms?” She notes Ouspensky’s concept of the several dimensions, of levels of consciousness, of cosmic consciousness; modern-day attempts to reconcile physics with mysticism (118).

“That the paradox exists—of Him being in each one of us, and at the same time only a part of Him being in each one of us, so that we need each other to achieve our spiritual wholeness. God is not external. He is the

'force' energy' we feel inside us, the sublime feeling. It is not externalized, but reverberates from inside of us to the world around us" (152). Hence, she feels that the whole point of existence is to pursue ever higher levels of spirituality. She returns to this theme several times, and elaborates more deeply on it, including its implications for human attitudes and behavior: "Pride and arrogance are only barriers to growth, a hindrance to the willingness to continually change and learn" (176).

She states unequivocally that she is not an atheist: "I do not believe that we come to an end with death. We undoubtedly possess a life energy that, according to simple physical laws, is indestructible What is this energy? To understand this is perhaps one of the most important tasks of science, as well as of this great diversity of philosophical and religious movements. There definitely is something greater than us. What is it? (177).

Her political reflections mainly have to do with her efforts to understand socialism better, and how it is actually working in the GDR. But they also have to do with her own country and her countrymen, and her efforts to understand and accept them.

The first of these entries is only half a page long. "Socialism demands an extremely high level of maturity," she writes. "One must be at peace with one's self; one must be able to gaze up at the stars, and sit back and say calmly to herself: 'I can reach them.'" She speaks about how Germans seem to lack a sense of humor, to be so intent (or did she mean "intense"?). Then she wonders, in parentheses, whether the thing wrong with the Filipino is that "he is all sense of humor." In this, too, Yap would be out of synch with her fellow-Filipinos who trot out this much-vaunted sense of humor anytime to counter any criticism about the national character (32).

This passage ends on a poignant note: "The Revolution is many decades and many worlds past. For us Filipinos, we have to dream it. From here, far away, I can see that my homeland is very beautiful. And that there is so much to do, and there is so much hope, and it is so difficult" (32).

She returns often to the theme of this difference between the Germans and her *kababayan*. And when she does, her tone is often frustrated, even despairing: "I see that it is huge and incredibly beautiful and I do not under-

stand why it is in such a mess.” She compares it with the GDR, tiny, with scarce natural resources (“the mountains and the sea are a poor excuse for mountains and sea”). Yet they have worked so that now they are at “the forefront of the world scene, and are capable of leading it.” She feels that it’s a combination of the devotion to hard work, and the striving for excellence, which “are already second nature to them. It is in their blood, and the air they breathe.” She demands: “Where did this incredible talent come from” (59)?

And then she turns to her own countrymen: “The Filipino simply cannot hold things together. Does his mind lack the ability to grasp the relations of things? . . . Is it entirely the fault of the colonial master, who, through hundreds of years systematically brutalized the spirit” (59)?

Yap is not blind to the flaws in the German character. The humorlessness, for example, which strikes her as most pronounced whenever she receives letters from her family who ~~which~~ are apparently consistently funny. This leads her to speculate that the humor of the Filipino is distinct, “penetrating and encompassing,” containing “a certain wisdom” drawn from a distillation of Malay, Chinese, Spanish, American and Japanese cultures.” She refers to it as “a great gift, almost a talent. The Filipino laughs because he sees something deeper . . .” (49).

In another diary entry, Yap comments on how remarkable it is that the Germans have “rebuilt from the death and ashes of the World War, with a conscious advocacy of selflessness, despite the poverty and desperation.” She remarks on the “kind of childlike innocence” of the Germans. This, I found difficult to quite accept, given that World War II was also a low point in German history because of the horrible Nazi atrocities. I would have expected that mixed in with the “poverty and desperation” would have been at least traces of guilt. But Yap makes no mention of it.

Regarding what she has called their “innocence,” she explains: “They have no pretension, no haughtiness, no vulgarity. They appear simply not to have learned them. Could it be a function, too, of this particular socio-dynamic system: that a real gentleness and unselfishness are deeply inculcated into the character of the people?”

And, again, I would protest: but are these not the same people who condoned the extermination of a race who were their fellow-citizens (43)?

When she does refer to World War II, it is not the Holocaust that she mentions but the bombing of Dresden by the Americans and the British: “. . . And for their vendetta they chose Dresden, with the intention of wiping it out” (74).

Initially, it seemed to me that the succeeding passage hinted at that contradiction. She notes that the people are somehow “subdued,” that a kind of sobriety pervades the atmosphere. But the next passage reveals her to be on a different page. She is referring to how curious they are about “the other side of the fence” and how “agog about imported goods such as coffee and chocolates, which is frankly a pathetic sight,” the “swarms of locals” in a shop that sells jeans at US\$50 a pair, and speculates that they must be regarded as “some kind of status symbol.” Yap notes, further, that movie theaters showing Russian or GDR films are hardly patronized, even if they can be quite good. But tickets for American films are sold out immediately. And her Vietnamese classmates boast to her of importing US cigarettes. (“What the rest of the world has, Vietnam also has!” they tell her with satisfaction.) Yap interprets this as “a curious balance between these people’s condemnation of the bad aspects of ‘capitalist’ society, and their candid appreciation of the good” (74). Which, of course, may be a valid observation.

There is an interesting letter dated December 2, 1984, which appears to be in response to one from her family—perhaps her father—suggesting the publication of her letters by the “Friends of GDR” (in the Philippines?) in their newsletter. It is not clear how they got copies of her letters. My guess is it was Helen’s father who showed them the letters. Helen says she is, of course flattered, but she is candid enough to admit her reservations about publishing so early, emphasizing that the letters contain her *initial* impressions. And she admits to having “very honest thoughts that maybe should not be published.”

Yap takes pride in her steadfast efforts to maintain “a sober frame of mind” where she is. So, while sometimes tempted to give in to “an all-out enthusiastic praise for socialism,” she sees the other side. Why would the

average American rather die than become a communist? And why should people from socialist countries think that America should turn socialist? Shouldn't what's best for America be left from? for? Americans to decide? She also voices her suspicion that some of the Germans who hold that opinion are just "envious" of what they perceive as "the American way of life" like the average Filipino. "And if they are unable to live like that, why should the Americans or anyone else for that matter?" From talking to different people, she adds, she sometimes thinks that "if all border restrictions were suddenly lifted, this country would be deserted in three days." She qualifies this by adding that this is the effect of the West's effective propaganda, and not because they are "unhappy with the system here."

However, she also recounts a conversation she had with a Mexican and a Peruvian about ideology during which she got piqued by what she perceived to be narrow-mindedness, and told him in no uncertain terms that "stupid socialists also exist and they are as dangerous as stupid capitalists," (68) which quite bewilders them.

Yap feels fortunate in having grown up in a family which gave her a better understanding of capitalism, of "both its dazzling and its sinister sides, hence of the true nature that we confront." The basic attitude of the developed nations is arrogance, and that of the socialist countries is wariness and defensiveness. But this, she thinks, may be true only of immature individuals on both sides. She sympathizes with the socialists because "the odds against them are still very great"—such as the relentless propaganda and the acts of sabotage—political, economic military . . ." (61).

By January 1985, she feels that day-to-day life in Europe has actually fed her fascination for Asia, for her origins: "I'm beginning to realize that Europeans, compared to Asians, are just impertinent little children. And it is their arrogance that has made them grow big in the eyes of the world.

She identifies what she believes to be one crucial difference in character: "The Asian is unselfish. And the European . . . is selfish. In the home, in culture, in national life." Whereas the Asian is open, the European is cautious, calculating. And yet, "despite his spiritual superiority, the Asian has become the servant of the white man in the latter's harsh material world . . ." (87).

She expands on this idea in a later diary entry. "I will always be Asian in my heart and spirit. Even if, in the eyes of Europeans and even of my own people, I am 'Europeanized.'" She speculates that "in the development of the European spirit something has clamped somewhere. Is it the narrowness of the logical (Aristotelian) method, or in the phenomenon of the 'Ego' which has attained its high point in Western culture" (142)?

An interesting sidelight: Yap writes that her Brazilian friends showed her a paper from their country dated November 1984, a supposedly right-wing paper, "as are all of Brazil's." It contained a long commentary on Marcos. After reporting on his illness and the absence of a strong-enough successor, it predicts that "after Marcos the country would plunge into chaos." Comparisons were made between the Philippines, Nicaragua, and Chile. And it predicts the likelihood "that the communists would take over, since they are very strong."

"Anyway," says the narrator laconically, "this is how it was related to me, as I couldn't read Portuguese" (72).

She writes to her family that people she knows listen a lot to West German radio, GDR media being rather limited: "Hardly a squeak now and then about home, for instance." Whereas the western media "appears to take more interest in the Philippines." The assassination of Aquino, however, was "played up very prominently," and included a hint that President Marcos may have been behind it (105).

To her brother Jop she confides some of her realizations as she reads more Marx, Engels, Hegel, Feuerbach, as part of her studies. Regarding the "muddled philosophical bickering that took place after Hegel, "whether the spirit, i.e. consciousness or nature really determined historical events." They eventually decided it was "nature that was the primary force" (Feuerbach, with Engels' agreement) "because everything including men and their minds, stemmed for from? it." This makes Yap happy,

because frankly, many times, especially when I was shivering underwater, I'd wonder why on earth I was doing that, and whatever made me choose this field, when I was more comfortable with history and philosophy. **I suppose I'm beginning to find the answer.** "I'm here to learn as much as

much as I can from nature. There exists a link between nature and philosophy. A vital link. I suppose that all along I've unconsciously set to find it... (113; emphasis added).

Whatever philosophical label, the ultimate purpose of all the heartache and brain-twisting is most probably the development of a truly wise and noble human being capable of relating to society and the cosmos in an organic, creative and dynamic way, ultimately for the optimal development of human civilization" (117).

In May 1985, she feels that her "entire sphere of interest is shifting to Philosophy. I won't give up science because it's a vital foundation and powerful tool. But I feel there's a higher dimension on which I must focus" (129).

Aside from the diary entries, the philosophizing is generally to be found in Helen's letters to older brother Jop. The letter dated July 14, 1985, for instance, contains her observation that "when Marx and Engels declared that God does not exist, they did not work hard enough at formulating an adequate alternative."

She confesses that she is "starting to sense that a real difference (exists) between herself and "the people I now associate with"; she hazards a guess that is a difference that might possibly be a general one between the Asian and the European, which "lies in a certain level of spirituality."

She is astonished at the great value that Germans place on personal comfort, for example—"leisure, health, good eating." What is already uncomfortable for them is still "O.K. lang" to the Filipino! What is uncomfortable for us is already catastrophic for them! I do the Asian has a higher margin for suffering and hardship" (115).

Elsewhere, she writes, "[m]any people here work hard and well for personal enhancement—to secure a good position in society. I strive for excellence not to earn the esteem of others, but because I feel that the 'human condition' can be transcended and transcended even further, as one develops towards higher spheres of existence" (137).

If this sounds rather like hubris, I would accept it? as pardonable in a person as young as Helen Yap was when she wrote these letters and diary entries.

She tells Jop that her adviser, who is extremely logical and precise, once told her that her answers to his questions were “diffuse,” which made the man impatient. “He wants to see, and sees only, black-white 0/1? (as in computer language), $1+1=2$. What he doesn’t realize is that I deliberately make room in my thinking for spirals, multiple dimensions and probabilities. Without losing sight of logic (I hope!) as the Europeans so treasure it” (138).

And here one gets a clear statement of what the other quest has been: “I came to this far away part of the world in search of a perspective for myself. Now after almost a year away from home, in this quiet around me, things are beginning to fall into place in my mind. I’m slowly gaining my perspective. I have worked so hard . . . Leah, I have earned my ‘corner of the sky.’ It is back home, with my family and people. And there are so many things to do—science, literature, history, philosophy” (142). This strand in Yap’s narrative closely overlaps with the fifth strand, the strand I’ve labelled “the other journey.”

Toward the latter part of her book, Yap has reached a clearer understanding of her own intellectual background and its limitations. She describes this background as “strongly immersed in philosophy, and speculative philosophy at that.” This she attributes to her father’s Jesuit education.

She now considers this as possibly “very damaging” because “it alienates the cognitive processes of humans from the actual processes in nature and the actual physical laws.” Paradoxically, she also credits her father with consciously trying “to destroy those barriers of perception and understanding and evolve a progressiveness of thought to be imparted to and continually developed by his children—strongly marked by his personality, independent of but incorporating the best elements of philosophical movements, including that of Marx and Engels” (171).

I am not sure if Yap is aware of the paradox in this conclusion. It would make her father both the cause of the problem and its solution. Yap says that she has arrived at this point “after witnessing and experiencing what is

probably the best of present-day European civilization—German tradition and culture maturing in the socialist mold” (171).

In her brothers and sisters, Yap says, she still sees “vestiges of this handicap . . . a kind of idealism—the difficulty being that it masters them, instead of the other way around,” so that “life will always continue to baffle them somewhat, even if they fight bravely” (171).

For her part, she feels that her time in the GDR has cured her of “my shortsightedness.” Being assigned to complete a task in a very short period, “under harsh living and working conditions, within circumstances completely unknown to me at the start.” She was thus forced to learn “to master the resources around me, as well as myself” (171).

Fifth Strand: The Other Journey

This strand—which, as mentioned earlier—is closely interwoven with the fourth strand (“Political and Philosophical Views”)—first emerges in a letter dated November 11, 1984: “As I go from day to day here, I learn a lot about myself, too. I think I’m beginning to understand that my biggest fault is that I’m too much of a perfectionist, and that I get nervous and impatient most of the time” (48). That word “impatience” is to recur throughout the book.

A little later, she writes: “I need this peace, far away from my homeland, to be able to understand it. The sad inanity had taken its toll on me too though I am only twenty-six. In this quiet existence here I am trying to exorcise the anger. And the impatience with my people . . .” (59).

While on holiday in Berlin in the company of “kababayan,” Yap paints some scenes which echo other narratives by Pinoys sojourning in the West—the thrill of the first snowfall, the fun of hurling snowballs at each other. This holiday is courtesy of the only Filipina who appears in her narrative: Linda Abad, who teaches Pilipino in Humboldt. It is this lady who met Helen Yap and Majal Magallona when they first arrived in Germany, and stayed even after the Germans assigned to meet them had gone home due to the lateness of the flight. It is she who invites Helen and Majal and two Filipino students to spend the holidays in Berlin with her (74-75).

This leads to a little essay on the Filipino in one of the diary entries: “[a]fter my time in Berlin, I see a new side to my countrymen.” She speaks of their holding their own, of their dignity, of “a pride that radiates through the utmost gentleness and humility, even naiveté? And a keen intelligence and a quiet hunger for knowledge.” And then, she wonders,

[h]ave I found one of the answers to one of my questions? In these quiet, struggling Filipino youngsters that I’ve met? Has it all been staring me in the face all along, even back home? Except that I was so preoccupied with my own rebelliousness? Because these Filipinos studying in the German Democratic Republic are not unusual or atypical. They are everywhere—wandering far from home, swallowed up in the madness of the ‘university belt’ (81-82).

She wonders how she could have missed them all this time, and adds a phrase that makes one pause: “and failed to take care of them” (81-82).

It is not clear in what sense Yap means that she should have “taken care of these nameless Filipinos.” She doesn’t quite patronize them, no. But this strikes me as one of the very few times when she indulges in a bit of sentimentality, even of melodrama: “[t]hese boys are like little children, laughing over simple things. Awed, wide-eyed before the world of learning. But they have nerves of steel. And the blood of men who died for their fatherland” (82).

In another letter, she returns to the theme of impatience, the recognition that part of the problem back home was in herself: “I’ve been gone almost eight months. And in this whole time, I haven’t gotten angry even once” (115)! From which one might gather that she used to get angry often when she was back in Manila.

In the Diary entry dated 11 August 1985, she writes that one night, after a long day in the field and in the laboratory which ended at 1:00 a.m., she dreamt of her parents and cried in her sleep:

Now I understand why I felt so battered and broken when I left home for socialist Germany. Since my early childhood I had imbibed, unconsciously, the understanding that whatever one created in one’s lifetime would be

destroyed by others, that whatever one built up would eventually be taken away. I could not dare cherish the beauty that I saw and felt around me, the treasures I had. So is the brutal heritage of growing up in an oppressed country” (144).

She speaks of how her father had once complained that of all his children, she “looked the saddest.” She recognizes now that “the way I’ve led my life till now was merely a reflection of my father’s experience and struggles. But now, I realize he may have been too? impetuous. As I work out my own life in a foreign country, I feel that I am almost an exact replica of my father, except that I am more tempered. Maybe this way I could carry his battle a little further.”

What is this battle she refers to which apparently lies at the bottom of all this—what made her the kind of person she is, what drove her away from her country?

The answer lies—not in Helen Yap’s book—but in a little-known volume published in 2016, ten years after Helen Yap’s own book had been published: *Lessons from Nationalist Struggle: The Life of Emmanuel Quiason Yap* by Jose Dalisay and Josef T. Yap (EQY’s oldest son, Helen’s brother Jop).

The elder Yap was born in 1913 and passed away in 2011. Recognized for his brilliance since he was a schoolboy, he had a remarkable career in both Holy Angel Academy in Pampanga (where he did his high school) and at the Ateneo de Manila (where a Litt.B. in 1953?). Then he took his MA in Economics at Georgetown University. But while working on his PhD he decided to quit and come home. He is quoted in the biography as saying of his graduate education: “I learned nothing good . . . I had already learned most of what I needed to know from Laurel (Pres. Jose P. Laurel) and Lansang (Jose A. Lansang).” He was a nationalist, a socialist, a reformer; though he was not affiliated with any political party and did not hold public office, he nonetheless exerted a strong influence on Philippine politics. His biographers sum up his legacy thus:

His peers and colleagues would recognize and refer to him, even within his lifetime, as a visionary, an astute student and critics of his nation’s political and economic fortunes, a shaper of minds whose firm nationalist beliefs

might have led the Philippines on to another track of growth and progress. He was an adviser to presidents, senators and congressmen (3).

Former UP President Dodong Nemenzo describes him as

... [a] very strong nationalist intellectual who saw an American conspiracy to dominate the world. He was too individualistic to become a Party member, but he was very close to the Party. There were many people like Manoling who were close enough to the leadership of both the Party and the nation to exert some influence on their thinking—Renato Constantino, Justice Barrera, JBL Reyes, and so on. They identified themselves as nationalists but resisted Party discipline. I don't know whether he was the original author of the idea, but the push for industrialization, which Manoling championed, practically became dogma within the Left.

When EQY passed away, Helen Yap recalls that she ran into President Nemenzo at the Chocolate Kiss in the UP campus, and he consoled with her reminisced? briefly about Manoling. “Yes he is much older than I am,” she quotes Dodong as saying. “When I returned to the Philippines from my studies, he was already a demi-god” (145).

Elsewhere in the biography, Helen Yap is quoted as describing her father's political and moral influence:

He was very frustrated about the way things worked out. He was an idealist who believed he could bring all of these people together and make things work. You won't believe who came to our house in Teachers Village. They included Susan Roces, Mike Defensor, Apeng Yap, the Lavas, the Tarucs, Norberto Gonzales, Ramon Mitra. My father also met with businessmen like Danding Cojuangco, Peping Cojuangco, and Enrique Zobel. He sat down with military people like Gringo Honasan and Danny Lim. With all these people, he tried to draw on their love of country and to find that common denominator that could get them working in one direction (81).

He was, his biographers say, a true reformer: “But as many, if not most, reformers soon discover, Manoling Yap would often find his idealism opposed, rejected, or even taken advantage of by others resigned to a more cynical view of things” (4).

Details of his tireless attempts to steer the country's leaders in what he felt was the better course, of his important contributions, and of the vicissitudes he and his family had to undergo are to be found in this biography.

The effect of all the latter on his children is clear in a letter from Manoling Yap to Letty Ramos-Shahani, sister to then Constabulary Chief and future President Fidel V. Ramos (Manoling Yap worked with Ramos-Shahani later when she became a senator), dated October 10, 1979(?). He writes: "I have suffered a great lot in my commitment to the cause of true and enlightened nationalism. My family has suffered with me, uncomplainingly" (159).

In another letter, addressed to Speaker of the House Jose B. Laurel, dated August 28, 1979, he requests the Speaker's assistance in regard to the "covert persecution" that he is being subjected to: "I am very sorry that I must explain this way now, but I feel so disheartened, and my family is suffering with me as a result of this persecution" (163).

This persecution led to Manoling's frequently losing his position, and constantly having to transfer the family's place of residence and other forms of harassment which, of course, took a toll on his wife and children. The information that I found in EQY's biography has thus shed light on why his oldest daughter, who loved and admired him fiercely, was almost broken, and had to practically flee the country.

In her diary, Helen Yap writes about her father in a way that reveals the depth of her admiration for him, what I referred to earlier in this essay as a form of hero-worship: "My father now is fully, inexorably encompassed in a struggle bigger than him, than his own life. It started from the horrors of the Japanese war, the lessons from the peasant struggle, and now the continuation of the quest for independence and identity for his nation. As a result his personality is growing in explosive bounds, **into a kind of transcendental supra-humanness**" (172; emphasis added).

Toward the end of her own book, Yap moves toward a recognition of what she came away for, even more than the need to refine her skills as a scientist:

In this country, far away from the struggles of home, I'm beginning to be able to put myself together again. In my extreme sensitivity, I've been finding even the socialist Germans too selfish and too aggressive—always looking for weaknesses in the other's personality and working on them . . . **Now, after almost a year, I'm becoming whole again. I can follow my own rhythm again** (144; emphasis added).

She cannot help but compare her situation with that of her close friend Monika Wallis—“a simple girl from the humble town of Zingst,” the daughter of a carpenter and a shop assistant, and herself, having spent most of her life in the capital city of her country, educated in the best Philippine schools, the daughter of a man “who had his time in the limelight of the country's political and economic life.” Discussions over supper in Monika's home “center around the everyday, the trivial” while discussions in her own (Helen's) home “were always highly intellectual,” and deliberately so.”

And then the reader catches, again, the note of despair: “[a]nd my growing up was always a struggle. Monika, though also shy and reserved, did not need to fight to be what she is. She ripened . . . peacefully” (145).

But in the end, Yap feels, both she and her friend have survived, and prevailed in their different ways. Their ideas are their own (144-145).

While Helen Yap is on a short visit to Manila, the People Power Movement and EDSA happen. It is worth noting that she says nothing about it, in either her letters or her diary entries. The reason for this might be gleaned from this passage in the “Prologue” to her EQY's biography:

. . . History has a way of revealing the truth. Take for example the conventional wisdom that the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution heralded a new era for Philippine society. Yet no fundamental change took place. Thirty years after this historical event—by now it is clear it wasn't a revolution—the Philippines has fallen farther behind . . . (ix-x).

What she does write of in her diary is her strong desire to be back home for good. In a diary entry dated May 25, 1986 written when she is back in Ronstock, she says:

I came here and got cured. It is almost as if I started to really live only from 1 September 1984 onward. I came loaded with psychological burdens, because the basis of daily living in my country was so tenuous. And I had to deal and work with the unstable characters of the people around me. Growing up was a painful fight where, on balance, I lost This whole process of upheaval was too great for me as a child. To contribute to it, I had to find my own freedom first. Else I would be destroyed (171).

Having found it, she is now ready to go home and “help the little I can in the rebuilding” (171).

Conclusion

Helen Yap’s book ends in Quezon City, with a few entries dated October 1987 and May 1988.

Seven and a half months after her return from the GDR, she feels that she is not really a different person from who she was when she left home, “perhaps I just have a slightly better command of my emotions.” But she remembers how sapped she felt then, remembers her “desperate tiredness.”

Now that she is back, she sees the advances in the Marine Science Institute, and finds herself surrounded by younger people who now look up to her “as a model, a guide, teacher, source of support.” This convinces her that she has a duty to fulfill.

I had set out, in this essay, to do two things. First, I wanted to offer a possible framework for the literary analysis of travel literature, in particular travel literature by women, and to utilize it for the literary analysis of Helen Yap’s book, *From Inside the Berlin Wall*. Second, I hoped that my analysis of Yap’s book would show that literary travel writing by Filipinas does more than provide useful and entertaining information and serve as a form of social history. It can create narratives as compelling as one might find in fiction, analyze political and philosophical issues, and serve as self-exploration and self-healing.

To achieve my objectives, I asked the first three questions that formed part of my framework: (1) who is the writer and why is she travelling; (2) why did she decide to write about her travels; (3) was she writing with an

awareness of a tradition she might belong to or of deliberately going against that tradition; (4) what choices has she made—in regard to narrative strategies—and have those worked effectively toward her achieving what seem to be her goals or objectives, or have those strategies somehow impeded or compromised those goals; (5) even as she narrates her experience as a foreigner encountering a new place, is she embarked on another journey, an inner journey other than the ostensible one? Is there an inner purpose, a question she might be grappling with? How has the genre of travel writing enabled her to fulfill her quest; (6) does the account of her travels offer any insights or discoveries that might be of consequence or significance to others besides herself?

The answers to the first two questions were answered by the narrator herself in her Preface: she was travelling as a student to obtain her PhD from a university in Germany; she had decided to write about it, because she thought that her observations and reflections might be useful to other Filipinos, and because she wanted to witness with her own eyes what life was like in a Socialist country and share it with her *kababayan* who were still in the grip of Cold War propaganda. Her plan seems to have been to return to these letters and these notes later, and from them, perhaps construct a book, perhaps with some members of her family.

The fourth question has to do with style.

First, the choice of the epistolary style, which provided the Lady Mary Montagu with “distinct literary advantages” (as Clare Brant observed), have uncannily provided Helen Yap with similar advantages, even if her book was written three centuries later. The sequential nature of letters and diary entries, which provides a rhythm of anticipation and immediacy are at work in Yap’s book. The author cleverly builds suspense as she takes readers through the steps of, initially, Yap’s adjustment to her new environment; then, of her efforts to prove herself equal to the highest academic standards; and, finally, of her search for answers to her political, philosophical, and personal problems. The letters, addressed both to her family as a group and individually to its different members, create in readers the impression that they are eavesdropping, so to speak, on private conversations, and have

become, in effect, intimates of the narrator, what Brant described as “the illusion of privileged access.” The flexibility of structure allowed for the development of what I have named a “braided narrative,” referencing Brenda Miller’s “braided essay,” where fragments do not appear truncated or incomplete, but are woven together to form a unified, organic whole. And, finally, even as she experiences her “otherness” among her university colleagues and professors, the narrator is exploring their cultures (particularly German culture), and comparing them with her own.

Second, the author-narrator’s voice is clear and strong, and she comes across in her book as sincere, honest, open, and self-aware. One of her most striking qualities, in my view, is her attitude toward the new and the strange, which is open, curious, tolerant. In a letter dated October 27, 1985, she mentions what someone observed about her a kind of “defenselessness.” She attributes this to her training as a scientist: “I approach a new experiment or system or process with no preconceived notions or judgments. My mind is like a blank pool of water which absorbs and evaluates things as they happen.” Apparently, there is a German phrase for it which translates into “I allow for surprises.” The mind behind this book is wide open: “I came to this country without feeling the need to *defend* myself, conceptually, spiritually, or physically” (150).

Yap’s response to initial difficulties and deprivations, is simply to adjust, to accommodate herself to what she found. And confronted with the unknown, her response is to welcome it.

Pico Iyer has written:

On the road we often live more simply . . . with no more possessions than we can carry, and surrendering ourselves to chance. This is what Camus meant when he said that ‘what gives value to travel is fear.’ Disruption, in other words (or emancipation) from circumstances, and all the habits behind which we hide. And that is why many of us travel, not in search of answers but of better questions.

Yap’s book chronicles precisely this: her having to live more simply than she ever has, and surrendering to whatever awaits her. She is prepared to discard much of what she is used to and to do challenging work under extremely

difficult circumstances, so difficult that she falls sick several times. And toward the end of her narrative, she is still asking questions.

Moreover her letters and diary entries are replete with passages which record her feeling that much of what we Filipinos think we know about foreign countries—particularly the countries from which come many of the people whom she gets to know in the GDR—are unfair, being the result of political propaganda. She wants to go beyond that, and understand both why the Germans she comes to know have made the political choices that they have made, and what they are like, apart from those political choices.

It is a kind of sensitivity... ewor? perhaps the more appropriate word is depth. She is not content with recording her impressions. She needs to dig deeper, to understand motives, values, patterns of thought. And, always, she compares what she finds with what she left behind, wanting also to understand what she had rejected, what she needed to distance herself from.

To cite Iyer again:

For me the great joy of travelling is simply the joy of leaving all my beliefs and certainties at home, and seeing everything I thought I knew in a different light, and from a crooked angle We travel to fill in the gaps left by tomorrow's headlines Travel is the best way we have of rescuing the humanity of places, and saving them from abstraction and ideology.

I might add that, all this being said, Yap also has a kind of tough-mindedness that's as important as tolerance and sensitivity. She's no pushover. She will give everyone and everything all the reasonable chances that fairness demands. And then she'll call it as she sees it. Hence, after living in the GDR for two years, she begins to see the place a little more clearly, and she does not hesitate to say so in her letters and her diary.

Rolf Potts was referring to that, I think, in this passage:

I think the core task of travel writing—going slow, experiencing, listening, seeking nuance, reflecting—hasn't changed much, and won't change all that much in the future. Often travel writing is a matter of getting past your preconceptions and being thoughtful and honest about what you experience. This naturally applies to getting past crude cultural stereotypes, but

it also means avoiding performative sensitivity and the over-idealization of other cultures.

Third, in the matter of language, William Zinnser, writer, critic, and teacher of writers has emphasized that travel writers need to be “intensively selective” with words as well as details. After warning against anything that sounds remotely like a cliché, he says:

Also resist straining for the luminous lyrical phrase to describe the wondrous waterfall. At best it will make you sound artificial—unlike yourself—and at worst, pompous. Strive for fresh words and images. Leave “myriad” and their ilk to the poets. Leave ‘ilk’ to anyone who will take it away (118-119).

I hope that the quotations from Yap’s letters and diaries have shown that she is in no danger of using language that is either artificial or pompous. Her prose is simple and straightforward, but it is also lively and vibrant, which is as much the result of an observant eye as of an instinct for the precise words that will capture her impressions on the page. For instance, in this passage she describes having to take samples for her research on a terribly cold day:

I waded into the water and spent about two hours taking temperature corers, and had to be very careful so that the original sediment structure was not disturbed. The water was +5° C! A strong wind was blowing and nearly knocked me off balance a couple of times. And I had to *face* it so that the stirred up sediment would flow away from and not towards where I was sampling. Then I noticed my field jacket was white . . . with SNOW! By the time I had finished, I was so chilled to the core that my hands had no more strength to screw the sample container shut. My companion, who had been waiting in his car the whole time, had to do it for me (119).

And, even when having to put up with inconveniences and difficulties, her humor comes to the rescue. Describing the sudden invasion of her work station in Zingst by a high-powered research team, she says, “Now the place is swarming with intense, nervous German scientists” (129).

That humor is only very rarely turned against others though (as when telling her sisters about the importunate male graduate students who were basically harassing her); most often it is directed at herself. For instance, after

having invited her friends to have a chicken adobo dinner in her apartment, she has to confess that she “had never cut up a chicken in my whole life, and that I didn’t know how to cook rice.” Her surgeon friend ends up cutting the chicken, and everyone else does the cooking, sets the table, brings the wine and opens the bottle. “All I ended up doing,” Yap says ruefully, “in addition to looking over each one’s shoulder was cutting up a cucumber” (131).

Another time, she describes going to a fair:

I was at a fair in town today, alone. A Christmas fair. A large pine towered against the cold evening sky, adorned with lights. Under it, I ate hot, crisp potato puffs coated with sugar. (I had poured on too much sugar, and later on my hands were so greasy that I couldn’t put my gloves back on.)” She ends ruefully with, “I felt at home because American rock music bounced merrily in the air and kept me company” (63).

And, fourth, I believe, that what makes this narrative of one woman’s journey, to the GDR and back, most unusual, is the story of the parallel journey, “matching the physical steps of a pilgrimage with the metaphysical steps of a questioning . . .”

From the very beginning of her sojourn to the GDR, the reader senses that something has gone wrong in the traveler’s. There are hints scattered here and there: the constant assurances to her parents that her health is fine, the references to her thinness, her anxiety. Is there something she needs to escape from? something she needs to recover from? something she needs to find? Little by little, the letters and diary entries, reveal what the trouble is. Perhaps she sometimes exaggerates the situation, but, given her age, this is forgivable.

What is important is that she has confronted her demons, and, having named them, she is now trying to overcome them, and to heal herself. The reader accompanies her on this quest. So, when she attains her goals—when she finds what may be the answers to the questions that have been troubling her—the reader feels her triumph, and shares in her sense of fulfillment. That her discovery also means a return to her homeland adds a touching poignancy to the journey. She will take up her work again. She will contribute

what she can. And now, she will do it with peace of mind, and with a more quiet, more patient courage.

“Perhaps what I would most like to do is contribute by asking the right questions, treading the essential paths. Life is formed by many stormy seasons. What is most beautiful is the tranquility that comes afterward” (218).

However, it cannot be said of this book that it has a conventional happy ending. The author is aware that the life she has committed herself to, for many reasons, will still be a lonely one. And Helen Yap has accepted this.

One significant indicator that a story is well told—is that the ending leaves the reader wishing that it hadn’t ended quite so quickly, that it were possible to find out what lay in the future for the story’s characters. Helen Yap’s *Inside the Berlin Wall* is one such book. And even more so, perhaps, because one knows it to be a true story, not an imagined one. Its hero goes on living, is alive today. One wants to know if she continues to chase the dream, or if it has become a reality.

However, the book has done its job. And if my essay has done what it set out to do, the book will now be taken as proof of the possibilities of travel writing as a genre: possibilities for the creation of character, the evocation of place, the chronicling of social history as it is lived; a reflective meditation on political and philosophical ideas considered important by the author and narrator; and the exploration of one person’s deepest conflicts and tallest dreams.

Notes

1. There is no translation of this book into English or Filipino. But I translated one chapter from it: "A Newspaperman and a Bolshevik," in the anthology *Pinay: Autobiographical Narratives by Women Writers, 1926-1998*, which is mentioned above.
2. Tony Araneta was the son of Don Antonio Araneta, publisher of the *Graphic* magazine, and Gemma Cruz, writer and daughter of the distinguished essayist and journalist Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil. The *Graphic* was among the publications closed down when President Marcos declared martial law on September 21, 1972.
3. In her study of nineteenth-century women's travel narratives, *Solitary Travelers: Nineteenth-Century Women's Travel Narratives and the Scientific Vocation*, Lilia Marz Harper examines the lives and works of four such traveling women, who, being widows or spinsters, were "freed from conventional expectations" and chose to travel alone, a decision which "seems to have stemmed in part from a resistance to male influence and competition" (Sabiston 512). Even Sidonie Smith's *Moving Lives: 20th Century Women's Travel Writing* harks back to the "ideologies of 'manifest domesticity' and treats of the travel of white Anglo-American women as a means of "negotiating cultural displacement through unbecoming subject positions" (Fish 672).
4. The earliest essays in the first of these books were initially published in the now-defunct *Philippines Free Press* between 1964 and 1970. The first of these seems to be "Remembering Saigon" which is about a visit to that city, as part of the Motion Picture Production unit of USIS Manila, just before and during the TET offensive of the summer of 1956 (but published in the PFP in November 14, 1964). Then there is "Letter from Bacolod," about sex and politics in another city in the Visayas a few months after the election of Ferdinand Marcos as the country's president in 1965 (and published in June 25, 1966).
5. These magazines are the *Philippines Free Press*, *Asia-Philippines Leader*, *Focus Magazine*, *Ermita*, *Sunburst*, and *Who*. Some essays are devoted to trips taken to different places in the Philippines, and one (titled "Just Passing Through") records a trip to several cities in the US in the late 70s.
6. This is a list of my own travel books: *Sojourns* (1984); *Five Years in a Forgotten Land: Five Years in a Forgotten Land: A Burmese Notebook* (1991); *I Remember... Travel Essays* (1993); *Skyscrapers, Celadon and Kimchi: a Korean Notebook* (1993), first published as *A Korean Sketchbook* (1987)); *Coming Home* (1994); *Passages* (2007). Many of these narratives were published in Philippine magazines during the 14 years that my husband was posted in different countries as a UNICEF officer and I worked at different jobs, mostly as a teacher and writer. More

- recently, I returned to travel writing with two books which I call travel-memoirs: *Looking for the Philippines* (2009) and *Travels with Tania* (2009).
7. In October 2018, as I was completing the final edits of this paper, I read an announcement on the publication of Jessica Zafra's new book, *Twisted Travels: Rambles in Central Europe*, published by Visprint.
 8. The exception is a book co-edited by myself and Erlinda Panlilio, *Why I Travel and Other Essays* (2000), an anthology of travel essays by women, most of whom are not professional writers and who do travel for leisure.
 9. Harper, as cited by Elizabeth Sabiston, stresses that solitude conferred authority on these early women travel writers, hitherto a male prerogative. On the other hand, it seems to have precluded any collective action, or female solidarity. In other words, they lived a contradiction (511). Leading courageous lives, they nonetheless refused to deviate from Victorian respectability. For example Mary Kingsley and Gertrude Bell seem to "have tried to balance the implicit transgressiveness of their remarkable travel achievement with an ostentatious display of conventionally 'feminine' attitudes" (Thompson 181).
 10. In the social sciences such as Geography, Anthropology, and Sociology . . . recent interest in travel writing is partly a consequence of theoretical and methodological debates as to the forms of knowledge and enquiry most appropriate to each discipline. All these disciplines to some extent evolved out of travel writing, engaging in enquiries that once were principally associated with, and articulated in, the genre known in English as 'voyages and travels'" (Thompson 4).
 11. Jesus Lava, a medical doctor turned revolutionary, was the Secretary General of the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas also referred to as "the old Communist party."
 12. I am unable to add other titles to de Castro's because not much has been written about the early novels by women Tagalog writers. Soledad Reyes has noted in at least two essays—"The Romance Mode in Philippine Popular Literature" and "Lost in History: Women's Text in Filipino and Canon Formation" (2012)—that Filipina novelists are hardly visible in the literary history and criticism of literature in Filipino. This is not because they did not exist but because they were not considered important enough to be taken seriously, having been mainly serialized in magazines or written about? in *komiks* form. She names numerous such writers but does not anywhere indicate if any of their works was written in epistolary mode. Patricia May B. Jurilla, in *Tagalog Bestsellers of the Twentieth Century: a History of the Book in the Philippines* (2008), makes similar observations about twentieth-century romance novels but does not discuss literary techniques, like structure.
 13. In her Introduction to the Everyman's Library edition of the Lady Mary Montagu Letters, Clare Brant writes: "Letters were peculiarly open to women because they require no classical education, literary training or uninterrupted

time. They could if desired, uphold class distinctions through the etiquette of address and the designations of certain idioms as refined. Letters also manifest class by the ways they create impressions of leisure, and through the cost of correspondence, which could be expensive and in this period was paid by the recipient. For women, letters were also a neat solution to unwelcome publicity. Enough correspondence was published in the eighteenth century for publication—whether illicit or posthumous—to be a distinct possibility; simultaneously, the domestic or familial nature of ‘familiar letters’ allowed women do disavow plans to publish” (xi).

14. I am not aware of any published diaries, letters, or travel narratives written either in Filipino or Tagalog by Filipino women. But this may simply be due to my lack of expertise in the area. Where Philippine literature in English is concerned, one chapter, “Letters to Rita,” in my book *Sojourns* (1984), is epistolary in form; and one chapter, “An English Major in Oxbridge” in *Coming Home* (1997) and another, “Peacocks and Roses in Perth,” in *The Thing with Feathers: My Book of Memories* (2017) are in diary form. But I have never combined the two forms in one book.
15. To answer the question of what Helen Yap was referring to here, I have consulted his biography, written by Jose Dalisay Jr. and Josef T. Yap, *Lessons from Nationalist Struggle: The Life of Emmanuel Quiason Yap*, which was published long after Helen Yap’s book was published. I shall return to this volume later in this essay.

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