Book Recommendation

Mia Alvar's *In the Country* for Filipino Readers (and Philippine Short Stories for Americans)

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In the Country, a debut volume of stories by Manila-born, New York-based author Mia Alvar, made quite a splash when it came out in the US in 2015. Reviewers gave the collection, dealing with aspects of Philippine life both in diaspora and at home, glowing endorsement. In some cases the tribute went beyond the accents of praise commonly accorded new entries in the book trade. Maureen Corrigan reported to National Public Radio listeners on a "gorgeous writing style…an imagination [that] seems inexhaustible," declaring, "as a reader and a new fan, I want more and more and more" (par. 2, 8). Jessica Woodbury wrote simply, "*In the Country* is like no book of stories I've ever read and I loved it deeply" (Damien par. 25). Prize committees found merit, too, with PEN, the *New York Times*, Amazon, and numerous other organizations and publications awarding special recognition ("Mia Alvar"). Ordinary readers joined the bandwagon, especially as publisher Penguin Random House brought out a paperback edition in 2015, followed by e- and audiobooks, and arranged for a steady stream of author interviews. On the website *Goodreads* Rachel L. remarked on first not having heard about the collection, then finding it "suddenly everywhere I turned" ("*In the Country*" par. 4). Other subscribers to the site showered down four- and five-star ratings, and adjectives on the order of "stunning"; one suggested Mia Alvar

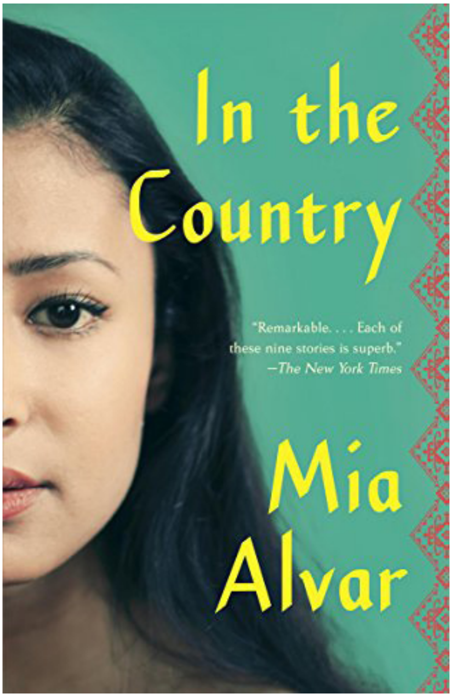

Fig. 1. Mia Alvar's In the Country, published in 2016 by Vintage Books. Penguin Random House, https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/237106/in-the-country-by-mia-alvar/.

might be the "new Alice Munro," referring to Canada's Nobel Prize-winning short fictionist (par. 15).

The excitement generated in the US literary world raised expectations of a similar reception in the author's native land. "Surely," predicted *BuzzFeed* interviewer Matt Ortile, "many Filipinos will…be proud to be represented in [your] book, particularly because it's a work of literary merit in the United States" (par. 29). However, cheering crowds did not arise to greet the arrival of the book in the Philippines. Instead of creating a splash, it has sunk pretty much without a trace. Although National Bookstore picked up distribution rights and sponsored a promotional tour, including a featured appearance for Alvar at a literary festival in Davao, sales have been modest at best.[1] *In the*

Country has not generated the buzz here that it has across the Pacific. When I mentioned to a number of Filipino colleagues in the literary field that I was considering a review of the book, it turned out that none of them had read it and fewer than half had even heard of it. One volunteered that no one she knew was working on Alvar—which, she added, in a reaction to which interviewer Ortile could have related, "is odd." Another advanced an explanation for the seeming incongruity: upon learning the venue of publication, she nodded in understanding and offered that Alvar would "not be perceived as a Philippine author."

Looking to drill down further into this decidedly indifferent welcome, I arranged (or had arranged for me, by a generous colleague) a meeting with several creative writers who had read *In the Country* and knew of its author. It was a rainy afternoon, good time for a literary conversation, and the exchange was a lively one. My interlocutors shared eye-opening insights on the stories, provided background on the book's—and Alvar's—arrival in the Philippines, and pointed me toward sources of information and intertextual influences I had not been aware of. But there was no mystery about the reception, in their minds, and little in the work in which to take national pride. Never mind perception: Mia Alvar "is not a Filipino writer," one participant stoutly maintained, however much she may have identified herself that way in promotional appearances. Another found the stories' fictional settings "inauthentic." The term "cultural appropriation" floated into the air. The gut verdict couldn't have been clearer. *In the Country* does not get it, does not capture Philippine reality as we experience it. The author is taking what is not hers, at worst, or at best violating the tried-and-true M.F.A. maxim to "write what you know."

Now, this is not the first time a disconnect has opened up between the reception of a book in the United States and in the Philippines. In 1990, Manila-born and New York-based Jessica Hagedorn published *Dogeaters*, to loud acclaim in the US. The topsy-turvy novel of the Marcos years wowed critics and was nominated for one of the very top American literary honors, the National Book Award. But reaction in the Philippines proved decidedly more mixed. This resulted in part from the choice of the title, which offended far more people than ever considered reading the book (but at least gained it wider recognition than *in the Country* has known). The "thoroughly postmodern" narrative technique (Zamora 89) and a frank handling of various sexual practices also produced their share of consternation. But critics of widely differing political persuasions united to pronounce Hagedorn's portrayal of then-recent national history lacking in "realism" (Zamora 89). A writer and personal acquaintance from that time thundered a rejection louder than any heard recently from the afternoon group, charging that *Dogeaters* had nothing whatever to say about the actual Philippines. The students in one of the first classes I taught here, to whom I enthusiastically presented a single photocopied (also pirated) copy as a special addition to the syllabus, responded to the novel with what in retrospect seems to have been a mix of perplexed interest and polite resistance.

If this type of disconnect is not new, [2] and if the reasons for it are not hard to understand (as we shall see, similar instances crop up in other "postcolonial" or analogous situations, and even when the differences between the communities of reader and author are less charged), that does not mean that it is unfailingly a good thing. Important values, literary, cultural, and human, can slip through such a gap as this. That is why the main, or at any rate the first thesis of this essay consists of a recommendation to Filipino readers to give Alvar's book another chance. The recommendation comes with two rationales. First, *In the Country* has compelling "literary merit," as that interviewer has said. The stories in this collection are rich in beauty, insight, and interest, to please and to move most any reader. Second, with due respect to my rainy afternoon consultants, and bolstered by the example of Maria Zamora, who has subsequently made a case such as this with respect to *Dogeaters,* I believe it may have something to offer to Filipinos in particular: these same literary qualities honed in on aspects of their distinctive experience.

The word "may" in the preceding sentence needs to be underscored. I am aware that my background as an American professor who has enjoyed a couple of stints teaching and living in the Philippines, and who has written occasionally on Philippine literary topics, by no means qualifies me to pronounce on what is or is not relevant, useful, or enlightening to Filipino audiences. As Gemino Abad rightly insists, in the introduction to his magisterial anthology of Philippine short stories in English, “we [Filipinos] are our own best critics and interpreters: [of] the way we live, the way we think and feel, how we see what we call ‘our world’” (*Hoard of Thunder*, vol. 1 xiv). My appeal here is only for a reconsideration, or a belated first consideration, on the part of those critics, interpreters, and readers, to see for themselves whether Alvar has produced a work, to use another phrase from interviewer Matt Ortile, of “cultural portraiture” (par. 24), in which they can see true reflections of themselves and their “world.” What’s more, the appeal itself is a tentative one: empirical and analytical rather than argumentative in nature, a laying out of evidence for the judgment of those best situated to judge.

This second provision of the basic recommendation, which attempts to move beyond general literary to specific cultural value, occupies by far the largest portion of the essay. This section begins with a two-part discussion, keyed to issues that came up in the conversation with the writers, first of the concept of “cultural appropriation,” and then of what Jose Y. Dalisay has memorably called “Filipino-ness in fiction,” together with a neutral evaluation of Mia Alvar’s case on both these scores. This evaluation will be based on what may be regarded as external factors, inputs to her fiction: life experience, sense of identity, sense of audience, writing process. Following that, with the same broad question in mind, i.e. of Alvar’s relevance or not to a Philippine audience, I will look to the output, the intrinsic features of the work itself: specifically setting, language, and theme, with the most extensive treatment—really the heart of the essay—going to the last of these. Again, the method here will not to be to make judgments from my own limited knowledge, but simply to compare and contrast Alvar’s stories with recent fiction of seemingly unimpeachable “Filipino-ness,” i.e. the texts collected in Abad’s multivolume anthology.[3] Holding these two up against one another, taking careful note of convergences and divergences, I hope to allow the reader of this essay to reach some determinations: about the fit or not of Alvar’s work with the canon of Philippine literature; about whether or not her fiction has something to say about the way Filipinos "live…think and feel…and see [their] world"; and about whether the stories in the collection deserve a place in any future anthologies of Philippine short stories, or only their current place, gathering dust on National Bookstore's shelves.

Should that reader wish to check the accuracy or adequacy of this comparative analysis by reading Alvar's stories, be my guest. Irrespective of the findings of the fact check, that perusal will go toward fulfilling the principal recommendation here. For that matter, reading or rereading the pieces in *Hoard of Thunder*, for a similar purpose, will likely also produce an incidental gain. I have discovered this for myself from exploring this body of work, which I set out to review only as a benchmark in relation to Alvar, but which I've come to believe has strong "literary merit" of its own. Indeed, the quality of many of these Philippine short stories inspires me to advance, at the close of the essay, something on the order of a second thesis. This also takes the form of a recommendation: one addressing a further disconnect, on the other side of the bilateral literary relationship; urging a reciprocal reading assignment, of Philippine stories, on American readers; and rolling out, as a means of making that assignment doable, a still further recommendation, this one a more markedly practical proposition. But before steering into these choppy cultural waters, let's first take stock of *In the Country* more or less on its own terms.

For Readers: Good Stories

The first grounds for recommending attention to this book in the Philippines is one that would hold for readers most anywhere: Alvar writes a good story. Testimony to the quality of her work has of course been offered by its critical and public reception. An indirect measure may be found in the circumstances of its publication. As leading authority on the short fiction genre Paul March-Russell has noted, it has become increasingly unlikely for mainstream commercial houses (like Alvar's publisher, Penguin Random House's Vintage Books) to publish story collections by a single author, especially a newcomer without a name already made as a novelist (49). Perhaps the only validation lacking has been the choice of one of her pieces for the prestigious annual series, *Best American Short Stories.* One wonders if perhaps the reverse of the judgment that has apparently impeded Alvar's acceptance in the Philippines, i.e. that her work comes across as insufficiently "American," may have played in here—although the only stated qualification for selection is publication in a US or Canadian magazine (gay title page).

But external evaluations aside, what makes these stories good? Let sus begin with some time-tested and basic criteria, the ones set forth by the judges for the O. Henry Prize, established in 1919: "originality, excellence in organization of plot incidents, skill in characterization, and power in moving emotions" (qtd. in March-Russell 81). Take first the two arguably more objective matters in the list, plot and characterization. Unlike too many contemporary short story writers, content to wind up a situation and let it play out more or less on its own momentum, or worse ready to bail out of artistic responsibility behind a deliberately ambiguous or artificially truncated ending, Alvar works hard on her plots. They tend to be, as one reader has observed, "multi-layered" (*Good Reads* "Jo"), and they move toward aesthetically satisfying and intellectually provocative ending-points. What's more, there's plenty of fictional maneuvering along the way. "Twists abound" in this collection, wrote *The New York Times* reviewer, "as in a good Tagalog movie" (Ramakrishnan par. 2). Many of these turnarounds bring to the surface dark secrets and unexpected cross-purposes, and some are genuinely "gut-punching" (Damien): none more so than climax of the first story in the collection, "The Kontrabida," upending assumptions about who is the hero and who the villain in a family drama. Yet there is seldom any trace of gimmickry in these effects. Indeed, as the *Times* reviewer went on to note, "Alvar's finely wrought shocks…reverberate without easy resolution."

It has become a commonplace of early commentary on the book to say that its stories are "character-driven" ("*In the Country*" par. 4), and in fact Alvar creates rounded, believable fictional personages who live up to Henry James' standard of co-equal weight with "incident," or plot (qtd. in March-Russell 120). But the strength that has been singled out for special note is her way with "morally gray" (Ortile par. 27), flawed characters. Devout Esmeralda of the tale that bears her name, for example, pillar of rectitude in her family, enters into an unexpected affair and discovers inside herself a craving for sex that reduces distance she has always felt from her drug-addicted brother. In another story, "A Contract Overseas," brother Andoy is the *mensch*, light-hearted, generous, caring. Yet a mysterious hole that appears behind his teeth when he opens his mouth to laugh signals a dangerous weakness in his makeup, a man who truly loves "not wisely but too well." In fact, Alvar shows something of a magical touch with secondary characters like Andoy, snapping them in an instant into unexpectedly full life.

Originality, the first of the O. Henry Prize committee's criteria, is admittedly tough to judge. You no sooner declare a tale to be the wildest, most unlikely thing you've ever heard, and you discover it to be a type found in the folklore of half the world. Certainly, though, it's not every story that contains a character like Baby, the rogue *katulong* of "Shadow Families." When she comes into the lives of the titular middle-class families, she is expected to be much like the other young women in their service: "another sweet, humble church mouse, who'd somehow strike us as a child and a granny all at once" (95). But not so. A tall mestiza, clacking along on heels that make her even taller, trailing clouds of cinnamon-and-roses perfume, Baby insists on speaking only a rough-edged English, refuses nearly every offer of food or routine assistance with her trademark phrase, "Thanks-no," and when accepting a favor returns no gratitude whatever. Her individualism is as unbreakable as it is inexplicable, and it is strategically counterpointed by a collective narrator, a voice speaking as "we" for the families and never identifiable with any one person. "No one could get anywhere" with Baby (98), the voice says, and likewise for the reader. She is a triumph of opacity, a cipher character worthy of comparison with Melville's Bartleby, the Scrivener (if that doesn't diminish the originality of Alvar's conception).

Of the O. Henry criteria, the fourth, "power in moving emotions," is undoubtedly the most subjective. Ample testimony does exist to the emotional power of *In the Country's* stories, but the reactions vary widely from reader to reader, by the nature of the emotion and the story that provokes it.

For example, in *Goodreads* John H. reports being “hit...like a truck” (par. 25) by the title story in the collection, while for another contributor it was “Esmeralda” that “took [her] breath away” (par. 20).

My own taste in these matters, admittedly conditioned more by a lifetime of sappy movies than a career of teaching literature, runs to happy-sad outcomes, moments when things work out or people come together, against all odds but rightly. One such outcome occurs near the end of “The Virgin of Monte Ramon.” Young Danny and his partner Annelise are prevented from dancing the *kuratsa* at the town fiesta, because he is horribly crippled and confined to a wheelchair, and then prevented even from playing their assigned auxiliary role because she becomes crippled by menstrual pains on the day of the fiesta. Yet some time after the event they meet, in a pouring monsoon rain. Annelise curtsies, Danny bows, she promenades around him and he shifts his wheels in the mud to turn with her: the opening movements of the *kuratsa*. Another, less climactic happy-sad triumph (involving one of those deftly drawn secondary characters) occurs in “A Contract Overseas.” Ligaya, the girl from a well-off family whom Andoy has made pregnant and left with his hard-pressed mother and sister while he goes off to work in Saudi, proves herself a massive drag on the household: she is spoiled, peevish, and the inveterate antagonist of the mother. But when Andoy and his income are lost to the family, Ligaya surprises everyone by rejecting her estranged family’s offer to take her in, strapping her newest baby to her back, and plying her mother-in-law’s accustomed odd-jobs route from house to house in the neighborhood.

Of course, the O. Henry committee did not capture everything of value when they laid out their contest rules a hundred years ago. *In the Country*’s stories exhibit a number of additional features that distinguish them as short fiction and as literature. One is descriptive language. A reviewer praised Alvar’s “gift for grounded, human-scale metaphors” (Gentry par. 8), and the figuration in “Esmeralda” of the 9/11 attacks—“When smoke, the second night in one bright hour, again snuffs out the morning” (188)—appears to fit the bill. But she is equally skilled in the creation of concrete, literal images and on occasion in suffusing these with hints of larger meaning, as in this rendering of a plaster replica of a 400-year-old statue: “The Virgin’s nose was fine and strong, her mouth tiny, her eyes bold” (143). Another merit may be found in depth and complexity. Numerous testimonies may be found to the effect that “each story…feels like it has the weight of a whole novel behind it” (*Goodreads* par. 25). Lastly, there is “human understanding,” without which fiction amounts to, as Eudora Welty put it, “the worst kind of emptiness” (qtd. in Charters 2). This quality is prominent here. In a follow-on to the *kuratsa* scene referred to earlier, Danny comes to an epiphany:

> It wasn’t easy. But for one brief moment, in the rain and the mud, I saw a world where everyone was struggling in the body he or she had been given. That world and struggle seemed bearable to me, and even beautiful (153-54).

And genial Andoy delivers an actionable nugget of wisdom, when he advises his sister that love takes both time “And money—yes, love does…You’ll learn *that* quick” (252).

All this said, the collection is not perfect. While its evocation of that September 11 morning does indeed “take [the] breath away,” I find “Esmeralda” the only one of the stories that feels in any way contrived. The weaving of the historic event into the plot imposes a more apocalyptic significance than is needed on the tender, conflicted relationship between “Es” and her lover. Too, in some instances there can be a bit too much complexity, novelistic “weight.” And while I experienced some sharp local effects from “In the Country,” in general I agree less with the reader whom it hit like a truck and more with those who found the novella-length narrative moves at the lumbering pace of a truck (*Goodreads* par. 15). This is the piece, coming last in the order, that I lost steam on, causing the book to languish on my bedside table for a year and more. But then, perfection can be something of a brittle virtue. *In the Country*, the collection, has more than enough in it, of both literary excellence and life, if not to inspire all to “love it deeply,” then to repay the attention of serious readers in any country and any culture.

For Filipino Readers: "Portrait" or Caricature?

Time to move to the second provision of the recommendation tendered by this essay as a thesis, i.e. the proposition that this collection may have something in it for Filipino readers specifically: reflections of their distinctive experience that they might recognize and even find illuminating. This is the proposition I offer most diffidently, looking to evaluate rather than advocate for the claim Alvar places on the attention of this particular audience.

Make no mistake, though, there is nothing tentative about the book's making this claim, first of all through its title: only one "country" is consistently in focus here. Curiously, in view of the preposition that leads off the title phrase, initial American takes on the collection, which seem to have cued a good deal of subsequent commentary, presumed the stories to be set anywhere but in the Philippines: "nine globe-trotting tales" (*Goodreads* par. 1); "Mia Alvar explores Filipino diaspora" (Ayala title); "nine different lives, connected through memories of their home country" (Donoghue par. 1). Yet while immigrants, expats, and OFWs figure prominently, they are by no means the whole of the stories here. Five of the nine take place entirely on native soil (granted, one of these features the sole American protagonist); another depicts a family who can only be the Aquinos, hardly typical "globe-trotters," and on the cusp of their return from Boston to Manila. One interviewer more accurately captures the overall intention in asking Alvar what she hopes to accomplish by "writing about Filipino experience"—a question the author answers without skipping a beat (Kaplon par. 19). Matt Ortile perhaps best characterizes this aim as "cultural portraiture….through these stories run threads of a distinct cultural fabric that is shared amongst a nation, a diaspora, a proud people" (pars. 24, 36). Yet it is also the case that the portrait painted by *In the Country* has gone largely unnoticed by the great majority of Filipino readers, and been roundly rejected by a select few who have carefully scrutinized it as an inauthentic, if unintended, caricature. So the question of the book's claim to national cultural space is very much an open one.

I. Externalities

Let us begin an evaluation of this claim with two distinct but related objections raised against it by that small group of writers. Both may be regarded as "externalities," inputs into the production of literature—matters of the author's background, identity, craft, intention in several senses—rather than qualities of the produced work, which will be the focus of the second phase of the treatment in this main body of the essay. Before setting out, a caveat: my evidence for these external factors is scattershot, gleanings from interviews and profiles published on the internet. A personal conversation might reveal a fuller, even a different picture. But I have judged that scholarly neutrality is better served by the public record. I do look forward to the possibility of such a conversation someday, perhaps in connection with the project to be proposed at the end of the piece.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

One of these objections, the more charged of the two although it came up slightly later in the conversation and arguably constituted the less fundamental sticking point, is contained in the term "cultural appropriation." This usage, in the public lexicon since at least the early 1990s, is defined in the Cambridge English Dictionary as "the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing you understand or respect this culture." Other, less official definitions follow the "especially" with different intensifiers, e.g. the culture of a minority or nondominant group, or with the intent to demean or make fun of the other culture, parade its stereotypes, etc. It seems clear that cultural appropriation understood in this way is tantamount to cultural misappropriation.

The issue of (mis)appropriation has marked one of the many battlegrounds of the culture wars worldwide. In the realm of popular culture, broadsides have been fired at British filmmaker Danny Boyle, whose Academy Award-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* has been accused of exploiting Bollywood styles and Mumbai slum conditions in order to pander to Western expectations of India (Singh), and recently at the half-Filipino hit songster Bruno Mars, charged with trading on African-American styles without having been “born into the legacy of the culture” (Harriott, “Bruno Mars Controversy”). The matter is typically taken with deepest seriousness in the case of postcolonial and “first nation” cultures, which have been (and continue in some respects still to be) subjected to tremendous pressures not only of appropriation but of de-legitimation and even extirpation emanating from centers of power. A signal episode in the field of literature has brought out the big guns of protest. In 2016 *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling published a fictional “History of Magic in North America,” one portion of which was devoted to magic in Native America and featured the Navajo tradition of skinwalkers. The story drew criticism for ignoring tribal distinctions and for being “shallow and poorly researched.” Other Native authors and critics went further, Aaron Paquette declaring, “This is colonialism. Simply put, it’s cultural theft, and these are not her stories to tell” (Fallon par. 6).

Nor have the guns been silent on the other side. In the same year as the Rowling controversy, the American novelist Lionel Shriver delivered a blistering attack on what she took to be the premise of cultural appropriation, decrying the notion that white writers can or should not write about members of other races as an abridgement of artistic freedom, a kind of censorship (Tolentino, ““Lionel Shriver”). Other writers have expressed themselves more temperately but would draw a distinction between appropriation and misappropriation, holding out the possibility of a respectful and illuminating artistic venture into unfamiliar cultural territory. They also appear generally inclined to defend the claims of empathy and imagination—without which “stories would be populated by clones of the author”—and to regard the “ventriloquism” reviled by critics of mainstream authors presuming to speak for marginalized subjects as a staple of the art of fiction (Kunzru, et al. par. 7, 18-19).

In fact, cultural appropriation is a difficult if not a wholly intractable issue, complicated by a number of additional factors, including unequal access to publishing opportunities for minority writers and the simultaneous desire on the part of modern audiences for both the representation of diversity and the feel of authenticity in their fiction (Fallon pars. 21-23 ; Kunzru, et al. par. 26). It seems virtually impossible either to resolve or to take firm sides in the conflict. Still, some parties to it, including the author who so categorically denounced Rowling's playing fast and loose with the Navajo skinwalker tradition, have suggested practical means by which appropriating materials from and telling stories of a culture not one's own can be done genuinely. One of these is research, widely commended as indispensable not only to sensitive intercultural work but to good fiction (Fallon par. 20; Kunzru, et al. pars. 13, 43; Wong par. 6). Another, related to the research orientation, would be an attitude of humility toward the enterprise, a desire to inquire into and examine the less familiar human reality, rather than using it for purposes of drawing audiences or showing off artistic virtuosity (Galchen and Holmes par. 9). A third involves consultation with knowledgeable insiders to the other culture, consultation extending (this according to Aaron Paquette) to "form[ing] relationships and get[ting] permission" from those key informants and leaders (Fallon par. 20). Finally, giving back, to the culture from which one has taken or borrowed, the artistic fruits of the appropriation, can be an indicator of a healthy reciprocity (Galchen and Holmes par. 2). This, in fact, is what defenders of Bruno Mars credit him for, notwithstanding the circumstances of his birth (Pasquini, ""Bruno Mars Fans"), and what Maggie Gee, an Englishwoman who in the course of writing a novel featuring an Ugandan narrator checked in with two writers from the country for feedback, and now is a member of an Ugandan women writers' association, has accomplished in her realm (Kunzru, et al. par. 41).

How does Mia Alvar's case stack up, in light of these ad hoc criteria for crossing cultural lines without exploiting a heritage and a lived experience distinct from one's own? On the score of research, there can be little to question. This writer has done her homework. Alvar reportedly makes research a fundamental part of her writing process (Lee par. 4), and the results are everywhere evident in *In the Country*. Whether it is the big pages of national history, like the day-by-day progression of the People Power revolution; footnotes like the Rosy Lacaba tragedy; folk traditions like the *kuratsa* or urban legends like the White Lady of Balete Drive; scholarly finds like Ninoy Aquino's early affinity for political strongmen; or empirical knowledge of the way a house deteriorates under the twin pressures of poverty and a tropical climate: Alvar places her fiction on a solid-seeming footing of fact. Likewise with the related matter of attitude, or purpose. Although there is more room for argument on this point, it would be difficult to deny that the different stories here at least attempt to examine aspects of Philippine culture and experience, rather than simply slipping these on to parade in them, as if they were the literary equivalent an exotic dance costume. Surely there is no hint in this work of an intent to carry misappropriation to its ugly extreme, of mockery or trading in stereotypes.

Measured against the remaining two criteria, consultation and "giving back," Alvar's case appears to be less strong. If she did check in with "insiders," none of the leading figures in Philippine letters with whom I spoke on my recent visit—who might be considered likely candidates for giving this kind of counsel—had heard tell of it. Nor does anything the author has said publicly indicate she sought out such assistance. Alvar appears to have pursued her research, and her fictional examinations of Philippine characters, settings, and themes, primarily under her own lights. As to making return, there is the marketing of *In the Country* by National Bookstore, and the associated book tour in 2015, no small gestures for an author published by a top-of-the-line American house. Yet I do not find mention of any more recent visit to the Philippines and, while she does lament the "lack of visibility and access" for Filipino authors in the US book scene, and does at one point speak of we "Pinoy" (Filipino-American) writers, Alvar seems not to have practically joined hands with peers based in the Philippines, as Maggie Gee has with her Ugandan colleagues.

"FILIPINO-NESS [NATIONALITY/CULTURE] IN FICTION"

Regarding the charge of cultural (mis)appropriation, the picture appears to be somewhat mixed. Let us turn then to the second and probably more strongly felt objection, among that small circle of writers, to Alvar and her book: that she is "not a Filipino writer." This is a line of resistance hardly unique to the Philippines or other postcolonial situations. A friend tells me of the case of Annie Proulx, a writer who lived the first half of her life in New England and wrote prize-winning fiction set there and in the Canadian

Maritime Provinces. When she moved west and came out with three volumes of "Wyoming Stories," critics and the general public responded enthusiastically: one tale was selected by John Updike for inclusion in the anthology *Best American Short Stories of the* [Twentieth] *Century*, and another became the basis for the highly regarded film, *Brokeback Mountain* ("Annie Proulx"). But, according to the friend, many long-time residents of the state remained unimpressed, deriding her fictional representations as not the "real Wyoming."[4] There can be no doubt, though, that matters of identity and authenticity are especially delicate subjects in the realm of Philippine literature. Anxieties along these lines among a group of the country's young writers prompted one of the deans this literature, Jose Y. "Butch" Dalisay, to turn the matter over in one of his newspaper columns, headed "Filipino-ness in fiction."

In this piece, Dalisay adopts a generally tolerant and inclusive attitude to national literary credentialing. "It doesn't matter to me where it's published, what it contains, what language it's written in…[or] even what passport the writer carries," he writes, before settling on some very basic commonalities: "What connects us as Filipinos is the land we came from and some experiences we've shared." By these minimal criteria (not the only ones Dalisay lays down, as will be shown), it would seem Alvar has a chance to stack up. Certainly she is no interloper the likes of J.K. Rowling, entirely without organic ties to the culture whose magical practices she outed in her recent North America book. Alvar was, after all, born and lived until age six in Manila, although she says her memories of that time are largely "impressionistic." Then came four years in the Filipino OFW community in Bahrain. After that, the family was mainly based in New York but had the resources for relatively frequent visits to relatives in the Philippines (Ortile pars. 13-15). Her husband, too, has similar family connections, in Pangasinan (Visaya par. 22). Not surprisingly, given this background, Alvar has maintained what are often regarded as primary cultural links, to food (with the exception, in her case, of *dinuguan* [Ortile pars. 3, 10]) and language : She has told an interviewer that if a sentence in her writing does not seem to be "landing right," she will ask herself how it would be said in Tagalog and then translate it literally back to English (Lee par.7). She has also said, apropos of this background, that a good deal of the material for the stories in the collection "came out of family anecdotes and childhood memories" (Piters par. 5).

So if an argument can be made for this writer's connections to the homeland, what of the "experiences" that Dalisay also makes part of his minimal criteria? On this point the case is more problematic. The experience that apparently set in motion the creative process leading to *In the Country* came in 1999, when as a senior in college, and after an absence of some ten years, Alvar returned to Manila to attend to the death of a family member. "After being away so long," she found the environment "completely new and alien" (Lee par. 5) but also "completely fascinating" (Ayala par. 7). She immediately started to explore, making observations and taking notes, for example on the Araneta Avenue "death district" (Lee par. 9). The opening story of the eventual collection, "The Kontrabida," had its genesis in the thoughts and feelings of that time (Piters par. 4). This would seem to count for experience or at least for "being there," as Rowling notably was not in the North American tribal areas, and Alvar followed it up with certifiably diligent research in working out the stories that fill out the book. However, during the more than ten-year period of composition she did not so much as revisit the scene that so fascinated her, still less take up residency there (Ardenia). It is hard to see this experiential basis for the fiction, even if we add to it the earlier times in Manila and the Middle East, the family's continued touch with the land and culture left behind, and the "anecdotes" and "memories" present to Alvar's hand, as being of any great depth.

Now there are any number of other factors, not touched upon by Dalisay in his brief columnist's riff on the subject, that can enter into the judgment of whether a writer should, as he puts it, address themselves to "carabaos and coconuts," or stick to "subways and mackinaws" (par. 9). Among them are authorial self-identification, intended audience, and acquaintance with the literature of, in this case, "carabaos and coconuts." On the score of all three of these further extrinsic considerations, inputs to the creative process rather than fruits of it, the picture for Alvar is mixed.

According to Kathryn Shanley, addressing the issue in a Native American context, the "cultural identity of a writer claiming to be an Indian" depends on a number of factors including community recognition and "self-declaration" (par. 67) As noted, a claim of the latter sort on Alvar's part, made to audiences on her Philippine book tour, served only to steel her creative counterparts here against any extension of the former, i.e. community recognition. In fact, though, her self-declarations have been varied. An early *Wikipedia* entry characterized her, presumably with the consent of its subject, as a "Filipino writer" while a more recent one uses the term "Filipino-American" (par. 1). The Ortile profile opens with a confession to being a "fraudulent Filipina" (although this is in reference to *dinuguan* and certain other dishes too strong for her palate) but closes with the declaration, "I'm pretty Filipino" (pars. 1, 40). She told an Oberlin College student journalist that she feels herself "American in many ways"—but that the feeling can vanish in a moment when something happens or is said to make her "non-Americanness" apparent. In short, as she also confided to that student reporter, identity is "fragile and fluid" for Alvar (Harris par. 12), as it is for many whose circumstances have been significantly transnational or transcultural—including her predecessor Jessica Hagedorn, who writes movingly at the close of *Dogeaters* of the displaced Rio Gonzaga as "at home only in airports" (247). Again, Alvar is no outsider on the order of J.K. Rowling to the people she writes about. But neither would it seem that she could state with a conviction to equal that of poet Mary Tall Mountain, adopted as a girl away from her Alaskan tribe but returned in adulthood and quoted by Shanley to have said, "But I know who I am. Marginal person, misfit, mutant; nevertheless I am of this country, these people" (par. 75).

The case is likewise with audience. While there are points in the Ortile interview where she appears almost talked into the proposition that she is writing to and for Filipinos, and while National's distribution and the accompanying tour might seem to have put that proposition into practice, in other connections Alvar professes a kind of writerly agnosticism, claiming not to have an audience in mind as she "just tries to get the story to work" (Harris par. 4). And she can let escape signals of a quite differently oriented intention. For example, while maintaining that she did not want to "dumb down" her work by providing translations of Tagalog words and phrases (presumably for the convenience of non-native readers (Ortile par. 35), she most commonly does offer these or at least sufficient clues from the context to make understanding readily possible. In a larger sense, when asked what she hopes to accomplish by writing of the "Filipino experience," she replies: "to inspire curiosity and then maybe as a result of that empathy or a connection" (Kaplon par. 19)—aims unnecessary for an audience of those who live this experience. The same premise becomes evident in the list cited often, and with no apparent objection from Alvar, of her primary influences: Junot Diaz, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Amy Tan (Ayala par. 3; Kaplon par. 1; Harris, par. 7). These are all writers who have made their names interpreting the experience of exotic cultural others to American readers.

The list would seem also to rule out the last of the three further extrinsic claims to affiliation: being steeped in the traditions of Philippine literature. Such a grounding could presumably go some way toward making up for a deficit in Philippine experience. As it happens, Alvar has tried to see herself in a Philippine context, occupying a position "midstream in a healthy and vibrant stream of Filipino writers" (Ayala par. 3), and expressing admiration for Paz Marquez-Benitez and Carlos Bulosan (Visaya par. 15). Yet Marquez and Bulosan (the latter of whose "Filipino-ness" has been questioned), lie quite far back in that stream. Nor is there any indication so far in the journalistic record that the author of *In the Country* has drawn inspiration from more modern practitioners, including the successors of Marquez who have contributed their short stories to the Abad anthologies.

On the basis of these externalities, then—geographic and cultural connections, experience, "self-declaration," intended audience, relation to the literary tradition—Alvar's case proves difficult to pin down. She appears to be neither fully native nor a complete stranger. But there are internalities to be considered, as well: qualities of the work as opposed to the writer. While a full exploration of these qualities is the business of the second part of the essay, a specific consideration—of the factor of imagination—is relevant to this phase of the discussion of literary nationality. In fact, Dalisay himself does eventually comes to this point.

> I suppose what I'm saying is, the 'Filipino' in what we write is…hardwired into our imaginations, and it'll almost surely come out in what we put on paper….In music or in art, you might be able to play like Rachmaninoff or paint like Pollock, and get away with it without anyone being the wiser. In writing, you can't—your language will give you away, and locate you as surely as a GPS tracker.

So in the end, to apply a different analogy than Dalisay's, the proof of a work's provenance lies in the pudding, and the pudding consists of imagination and language—the two basic ingredients, according to Gemino Abad, of fiction and of all verbal art (*Hoard* xiii).

Leaving aside language for the moment—there will be opportunities to apply this kind of taste test to *In the Country's* diction and syntax, style and tone, in what is to follow—let's pause for a moment over the idea of imagination. For, understood aright, imagination poses a subversive challenge to the notion that any artistic sensibility can tightly bound to a specific identity, national, cultural, perhaps even personal. This is the gist of the argument made by those writers who push back against the charge of cultural appropriation. "Fiction doesn't appropriate, it creates," insists A. L. Kennedy. To think otherwise is to fall into the error of presuming that "all writing [is] autobiographical, journalistic"—which, Kennedy maintains, fiction emphatically is not (Kunzra, et. al. par. 18-19). Imagination figures in this point of view as a power untethered from, or at the very least lightly tethered to fact. "'Write what you know' is a tired maxim," maintains Stella Duffy, and "'write who you are' is even more restrictive. We can write who we are not and do it well, if we write with passion, strength—and care" (Kunzra par. 24-25). And that care can be very substantially an internal matter: "One writes," according to Linda Grant, "out of a deep knowledge of one's interior world…" (Kunzra, et al. par. 26).

It turns out that Mia Alvar is of this mind, although not with any discernible intent to take a side in the controversy. Explaining her writing process to Matt Ortile, she relates that memory and research help in getting going on a story, but then imagination, “this other thing,” kicks in and assumes control (par. 21). To another interviewer she confides that as soon as she finds herself obsessing over details like exact driving times between two points, she knows she’s strayed off the track, is “not writing fiction anymore” (Kaplon par. 17; Sipin pars. 20-21). And with yet another she pulls out all the stops, declares that she is “not that interested in factual or geographical accuracy at all, to be honest. The Manila and New York and Bahrain in my book are imaginary” (Lee par. 10). Here is potential subversion, indeed—even, seemingly, of her own project, writing of the “Filipino experience.” If these seemingly vivid specific places in the book are imaginary, “in” what “country,” exactly, is *In the Country* situated?

Yet fiction, Alvar’s and others’, is not entirely the solipsistic enterprise that these comments may seem to imply. If the tie to the real is light and flexible, it is nevertheless vital. “Married to that” deep interior knowledge which Linda Grant celebrates, “is an intense curiosity about the lives of others” (Kunzra, et al. par. 27). What’s more, imagination can be a means to gratifying that curiosity. It is not only a power of invention but a tool for discovery, a privileged avenue to the truth of human life and the world in which it is lived. That is the premise, and the promise, that has established fiction as the preeminent literary genre over the last two centuries. It is the premise behind Philip Hensher’s claim that “A really good writer can throw themselves into worlds they may only have glimpsed, and light them up” (Kunzra, et al. par. 33). And it is the premise behind the remark with which Dalisay closes his column, by an artist whom few would accuse of a lack of “Filipino-ness,” and whose fiction is solidly set in the land of carabaos and coconuts: N. V. M. Gonzalez, who is reported to have said, “Writers create their own nation, even if they have never set foot in it.” By these measures, Alvar’s time after her “glimpse” of the Philippine scene in 1999, if spent in imaginatively lighting that world up, creating her “own” Manila, New York, and Bahrain—fictionalized theatres of Filipino experience—may have placed her stories more fully “in the country” than any amount of further setting foot in it could have.

But this is a theoretical, and indeed a hypothetical proposition. The way I propose to test it, again, is to turn from the inputs to the fictional process that have been under consideration—imagination, experience, research, cultural heritage and literary influences, conceptions of self and audience, and whatever else may be found relevant—to the output, qualities internal to *In the Country's* stories themselves, and to measure them against a comparatively empirical standard of "Filipino-ness," the stories collected in the two most recent volumes of Gemino Abad's anthology of Philippine short fiction in English. Let's proceed to this, the second task of this main portion of the essay, now.

II. Internalities: **In the Country *vs.* Philippine Short Stories**

The method employed in this section will be familiar to anyone who has written a comparison/contrast paper. Having read Alvar's book and then short stories which Prof. Abad has considered part of Philippine literature, and having made the determination that contributors to the most recent two volumes in the anthology, entitled *Hoard of Thunder* and covering the period 1990-2008, represent her closest counterparts in time, I seek to identify points of congruence and divergence between the two bodies of work. The main difference between what follows and a conventional comparative study, as indicated at the outset, is that I do not intend to provide a definitive weighing of the findings, an answer to the question whether a story or two from Alvar deserves a place in the next volume of Abad's anthology, or the more fundamental question of whether her collection offers an authentic "cultural portrait" versus an ungrounded "caricature." My expectation is that readers of this essay will make those for themselves, on as empirical a basis as seems possible to put in place in a matter of literary judgment such as this.

Now, while its attempted empiricism may give it an advantage over the usual subjective manner proceeding in these matters—"I know it when I see (or don't see) it"—the method in use here is by no means above challenge. For one thing, the stories collected in Abad's anthology are all written in English, an attribute which has led their "Filipino-ness," or at least their representativeness of Philippine literature, to be challenged in some quarters. For this limitation there is presently no remedy. My Tagalog, not to mention my Hiligaynon, does not permit a broader survey. Second, asymmetries mark what social scientists would call the two "samples" being compared. Alvar's collection contains only nine stories; the two volumes of the anthology hold a total of 92, written by somewhere near as many authors. The smaller number cannot hope to match the range and diversity of the larger (a range and diversity which do at least attest that Philippine short fiction in English is no unitary thing); therefore, comparisons made will necessarily be selective. What's more, in gathering the more extensive sample, I opted to be guided by the literary whim of "reading around" rather than the scientific procedure of marching straight through the volumes from end to end, checking off titles along the way. In consequence, I logged in only 74 stories altogether, and it can't be ruled out that personal preference, perhaps influenced by my previous acquaintance with *In the Country*, played a role in the types of stories admitted into consideration and those left out. Further subjective factors must surely enter, as well, into matters more sensitive than the count, for me and for any readers who care to join in the exercise. Comparison entails interpretation, one of the least scientific (if most meaningful) of intellectual operations. Also to be taken into account is the almost entirely non-intellectual "will to believe." In my case this was conditioned by the presumption, when initially reading Alvar, that I was reading Philippine literature. In the case of the writers I spoke with, the initial bent of belief appears to have been precisely the opposite. I cannot guarantee that I have eliminated all traces of this bias. I can only say that I have done my level best to try, and invite those on the other side of the page to do likewise.

Finally, less a qualification of the method than of the larger enterprise being undertaken here: Literature is not so much national as it is human. Among the great equalizing discoveries of recent times has been the finding that human beings share 98.8% of our DNA with chimpanzees, 90% with cats, 80% with cattle, and so on (Ramsey and Lee par. 6, 7 ,9; "What does it mean to be human?" par. 3). I submit that something like those proportions apply to the shared essence—both in terms of craft and in terms of the lived experience represented—of different national literatures. This is the rationale behind Wai-chee Dimock's call, in her 2001 manifesto "Literature for the Planet," to de-emphasize the place in critical studies of political, geographical, and even cultural boundaries. So it will be well to keep in mind some of the observations made in the relatively brief first section of the essay, while engaging in the intensive investigation of the factor of nationality that occupies this portion

Of course boundaries that recognize a shared identity do remain important to readers, whether they are found in Wyoming, Native America, or the Philippines. Accordingly, I have identified a number of "outputs," features of the finished literary work (fiction in particular) that seem the most promising sites for identifying national differences and commonalities. These include several subsets of setting, certain factors of language, and a short list of themes, which will anchor the comparative analysis. That analysis, again respecting the asymmetry between the two collections of stories, will be in some part quantitative, involving a rough determination of the proportion of *In the Country* and Abad anthology pieces either manifesting or not manifesting the qualities under consideration. (In other words, reader, brace yourself for a few tables.) In larger part, though, it is qualitative, looking to discover more subtle evidence of congruence and/or divergence in the interpretation of individual works drawn from the two sources. Transparency regarding the task established as best as can be, let's get to it.

Setting

One obvious place to look for the national provenance of a work of fiction is its setting. As a literary concept, setting comprises more than location per se. It is typically subdivided into any number of distinct dimensions. For purposes of the comparison between Alvar and her Philippine-based counterparts, the most immediately relevant of these are likely to be the following: geographic (focused here on national domains), demographic, historical, social, and physical (referring to the immediate material surroundings in which the action/s of a story take place).

With regard to national geography, it has already been mentioned that five of the nine stories making up *In the Country* take place on Philippine soil.

Of the remainder, two are set in the Middle East, one definitely in Bahrain, and two in the United States. How does this breakdown compare to the pieces collected in the two volumes of *Hoard of Thunder*? Here the first of the threatened tables appears. (Brief instructions for interpreting it and subsequent numerical displays appear in the endnotes.)[5]

Ninety percent of stories written by writers presumed to be Philippine-based, unfold on home ground, while close to half of Alvar's, forty-four percent, take place elsewhere.

National Setting	**Philippines**	**United States**	**Other**
Philippine Stories (n = 74)	(66.5) 90%	(5) **7%**	(2.5) **3%**
In the Country (n = 9)	**56%** (5)	**22%** (2)	**22%** (2)

This table reveals that an overwhelming proportion, 90%, of stories written by writers presumed to be Philippine-based, unfold on home ground, while close to half of Alvar's, 44%, take place elsewhere. This constitutes a material difference, and not a surprising one, given the circumstances of her family's migrations. At the same time, a number of *Hoard's* stories, 5 or 7%, are sited in the US. Moreover, if we take into account that Alvar's Other offerings are solidly situated in the Filipino OFW community (while that of *Philippine Stories* consists of the partial exception of China and futuristic other worlds) then the gap between national and foreign settings looms less large.

Once inside a given set of national boundaries, demographic as well as geographic distinctions become relevant. In the case of the Philippines, we have N.V.M. Gonzalez' still useful delineation of three internal "countries": City, Barrio, and Mountain (qtd. in Abad, *Hoard*, vol. 1 xxviii). Comparisons by these categories, with certain further specifications, are displayed in the following table.

Demo-graphic Settings	**City (Manila)**	**City (Provin-cial)**	**Barrio (Village)**	**Barrio (Field)**	**Mountain**	**Other**
In the Country (n = 5)	(4) **80%**	(0) **0%**	(1) **20%**	(0) **0%**	(0) **0%**	(0) **0%**
Philippine Stories (n=66.5)*	**67%** (44.5)	**17%** (11)	**9%** (6)	**0%** (0)	**2%** (1)	**6%** (4)

**Lower total reflects exclusion of sci-fi or fantasy settings.*

First apparent here is the decided urban bent of both samples. The overall percentages match nearly exactly, and, although the absence of provincial cities from *In the Country* marks a notable difference, Manila functions effectively as a default setting for Philippine-based writers, as well. The Barrio plays a clear second fiddle in the demographic dimension but has a definite role in each collection. An additional sub-category here, of the barrio as a scene for actual agricultural activity (as opposed, say, to scenes of cockfighting or of the capture of a rebel leader), reveals an even closer correspondence and a surprising finding, that not only Alvar but contemporary in-country authors have set none of their stories in this way. Apparently few if any contemporary short fictionists with their eye on the Philippines have entered the world of the *kaingero* which was the staple of Gonzalez' own storytelling or decided to treat the "carabaos and coconuts" that Dalisay takes as the proverbial marker of "Filipino-ness in fiction." The same holds true for the mountains and their tribal peoples: outside of Alvar's ken and present in only one narrative (Krip Yuson's "The Music Child") from the anthology volumes. In sum, then, the match between the two sets of stories seems somewhat closer by these internal geographical and demographic measures of setting than it is by overall national location.

Some potentially significant daylight opens between Alvar and her counterparts in two additional aspects of setting. One of these is temporal, or more precisely historical: the periods or events within which in which fictional scenarios take place. The contexts referred to in the table below are primarily derived from the stories collected in the anthology. They include the technically unhistorical "contemporary" period (contemporary that is to the time of writing), and feature a designation, "past," that may appear a tautology but will be explained in the discussion of findings.

Historical Setting	**Con-temp**	**M.Law**	**WWII**	**Spanish**	**Other**	**Future**	**"Past"**
Philippine Stories n=74	(48) **65%**	(7.5) **10%**	(2.5) **3%**	(3) **4%**	(4) **5%**	(4.5) **6%**	(5.5) **7%**
In the Country n=9	**22%** (2)	**25%** (2.25)	**3%** (.25)	**0%** (0)	**44%** (4)	**0%** (0)	**6%** .25

The first discrepancy evident here, in concentrations of stories with contemporary settings, is partly accounted for by the circumstance of Alvar's Bahrain pieces both taking place in the 1980s, roughly during the time of her family's sojourn there, placing them into the "Other" category of historical settings apparently of little interest to Philippine-based authors. But another addition to *In the Country's* Other choices, the 9/11 attacks on New York forming the primary context for "Esmeralda," does constitute a notable divergence. No story in the Abad volumes takes note of this event, which, while arguably international in scope, loomed larger in the US than anywhere else. The setting surely bespeaks Alvar's American ties; indeed, she has described the story as among other things, a "love song to New York" (Lee par. 15). At the same time, if she found herself resonating to this distinctive American cataclysm, Alvar is also drawn, by a markedly stronger percentage measure than her in-country counterparts, to what is arguably the great crisis of recent Philippine history: Marcos-declared Martial Law and the challenges raised to it from various sectors of political society. The same holds roughly true for another national crisis of the 20th century, World War II, although the focus on that event has measurably declined with passing generations, and Alvar's only reckoning with it occurs by way of backstory in "The Virgin of Monte Ramon."

Two other categories filled by the anthology stories are blank for *In the Country*: the future and the Spanish colonial period. Alvar's imagination appears not to have been drawn to science or "speculative" fiction, nor beckoned by far earlier times. Another signal difference occurs with the category I am labeling "Past," a kind of indistinct but emotion-laden temporal setting, as much mythic as historical, roughly equivalent to the American vernacular notion of "back in the day." This "Past," when it not frequently but quite recognizably appears in recent Philippine fiction, seems to refer to a transitional moment in the country's colonial history, marked by a fusion of fading Spanish and advancing American styles. Butch Dalisay's own well known story "Penmanship" captures this vanished era poignantly and even pinpoints it, after a fashion, in the date the protagonist's prized instrument of Stateside technology, a Parker Vacumatic, was manufactured: "1934, a few years before he was born, when the large and airy house on Donato Street must have been spanking white, and his mother would have been swishing about in a *terno*, minding the lilies in the vases" (Abad, vol. 1 194). No precise equivalent to this setting can be found in Alvar's collection, although she does evoke it in "Monte Ramon," which, while taking place in the 1970s, spins the ghosts of Catholic saints and American GI's into a kind of *kuratsa* with one another, in the background of the story.

Differences, along with similarities, are also worth noting in the social dimension of setting. The social milieu constitutes a subtle and variegated element of any story, but for purposes of this comparison it can be boiled down to the class background of the principal characters: upper, upper-middle, middle, lower-middle, and lower, distinguished as best as my American-acclimated eye for status details permits.

Social Setting	**Upper Class**	**Upper Middle**	**Middle**	**Lower Middle**	**Lower Class**
In the Country (n = 9)	(1) 11%	(3.5) 39%	(1.5) 17%	2.5 28%	(.5) 5%
Philippine Stories (n = 74)	23% (17)	39% (29)	20% (15)	7% (5)	11% (8)

Both Alvar and her counterparts write across the range of the Philippine class spectrum, with solid commonalities in the upper-middle and middle-class categories. Notable differences occur at both extremes of the spectrum. Seventeen of the *Hoard* stories profile upper-class individuals, their families, friends, cronies. *In the Country* features just one set of upper-class characters, although the aim here is high: "Old Girl" presents a fictional representation of what can only be taken to be the Aquino family, on the eve of Ninoy's return from Boston to the Philippines. Writers doing their work in the Philippines also show greater frequency of interest in the lives of the poorest of their countrymen and women; and they arguably exhibit a more intimate knowledge, or a more imaginative feel, for the texture of those lives. Maria L. M. Fres-Felix demonstrates this capacity in "Mayday" through vivid details, such as protagonist Nena's knowing observation that the scars on the backs of some demonstrators in a People-Power protest mark them as subjects of kidney harvesting. Even more telling is the understanding that Nena is at least as strongly motivated to join the action at EDSA by the prospect of a free meal as by any outrage at Joseph Estrada's performance as President. Alvar displays nowhere near this depth of focus on lower-class characters, but she does draw one memorable figure of the type: Annelise, Danny's love interest in "The Virgin of Monte Ramon," the daughter of his mother's laundry woman, a resident of the squatter area in town. She also introduces some compelling details of her own, including the observation that Annelise's *labendera* mother "walked with a haste that suggested there were too few hours in the day to earn a living" (122), while Danny's would-be upper-class mom favors reclining to walking. So perhaps the New York-based writer is not without some grasp, whether acquired through experience, research, or imagination, of the reality of class in the Philippine situation.

Last to be considered in this review is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of setting, the immediate physical surroundings in which the action of a story takes place—the equivalent of a stage set for a play. No need for a table here. Given the concentration on the urban demographic in both *Philippine Short Stories* and *In the Country*, it will come as no surprise that the primary physical setting in both samples is some facet of what is known as the "built environment": streets, trains, cars, stores, offices, schools, and especially houses. We find dwelling places of every shape, size, and condition in the two bodies of fiction. Let's allow the comparison in this instance to take the form of two passages, one from each side, descriptive of a specific living space. The task, which is left to the reader, will be to determine which passage comes from Alvar's and which from a Philippine-based writer's hand. No judgment is intended, by the way, in both descriptions' turning on a narrative of deterioration. I was simply looking for comparable levels of physical detail.

> Passage 1:
>
> It was in this flat, with its sagging ceiling-boards and cracked tiles and rust-encrusted plumbing, that Julie had grown up. As a child she had been in love with the place, with its mystery and darkness, with the hundred secret nooks where she and her friends could play hide-and-seek….As she grew up, though, the romance of the place had begun to fade, replaced with a growing hatred of the squalor of the building and of the area: she envied her classmates, their houses in the subdivision villages, with a garden and a garage and a drainage system in which the water only went one way.[6]
>
> Passage 2:
>
> Nine years before, a "slum upgrade" had turned the scrap shacks of our barangay into two-story homes, one room below and one above. We had electricity and plumbing now, concrete blocks instead of tin-and-plywood walls, furniture and some appliances, a bathroom with a faucet and a flush toilet at the foot of the stairs….[But] like all the neighbors' houses, ours deteriorated faster than it had improved. Rust had spread its scabs over the

> bathroom floor and walls. The vent built into the wall above the kitchenette to air out cooking smells became a nest for rats, who chewed through the wire mesh and made a racket with their shrieking every night.[7]

I am curious to know how readers do with this identification challenge. And, as a means of transitioning away from the discussion of setting to the next section of the comparative analysis, a follow-up question: In trying to determine whether a given passage came from the American- or a Philippine-based author, what did you focus on? Was it more the authenticity of the detail, or more the language in which the descriptions are conveyed?

Language

Of course, any skilled reader will simultaneously process both sets of cues. But clearly language is one of the intrinsic qualities of a literary work that matter to its cultural and national provenance. Recall Dalisay's admonition to those who would falsely parade their "Filipino-ness" in fiction: "your language will give you away" (par. 10). Bear in mind, too, Chinua Achebe's famous question, posed for those who would write in a tongue that came as a heritage of colonialism, "Can [an African writer] ever learn to use [English] like a native speaker?" and his equally famous reply, "I hope not." That writer's medium, according to Achebe, would need to be a "new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (82, 84). This is apparently the gist of Gemino Abad's oft-stated maxim holding Filipinos to be writing not simply in English but "from" it: "forg[ing], enrich[ing], and reinvent[ing] this medium to our will and purposes, in both discursive form and semantic content…" (*Hoard*, vol. 1 xiii-xiv).

Let's hold the two short story samples to some further scrutiny on this score. The following is a collection of short passages taken from Alvar and *Hoard of Thunder*, beginning with a pairing based on roughly parallel subject matter (as with the two dwelling places above), and then presenting six further selections ranged in no particular order. The passages may not be of sufficient length to allow for a determination of what Abad terms "discursive form and semantic content," but more garden-variety linguistic features—

diction, syntax, idiom and slang, figures of speech, style—should be more or less in evidence. One aspect of language not to be taken account of here is the use of Filipino words and phrases.[8] Of course, in these examples, authenticity of detail remains in play, as well; in some cases, indeed, this factor might prove determinative. But the challenge here, once again for the reader to take up, is to judge to what extent it is possible to identify, primarily on the basis of language, the nationality of these bits of prose fiction in or "from" English. As before, the source of each quotation can be found in the endnotes (but in order to ensure the integrity of the exercise, I recommend making selections first, peeking after).

> Pairing (strong rain)
>
> The downpour drummed on the roof. About the street lamps fine spray and mist formed iridescent globes.…The rain struck him like pellets of glass that broke on his skin and tore at his pajamas. He was drenched before he got to the gate. The asphalt was a simmering obsidian river. He waded across.[9]
>
> Along the ravine, children were laughing in the storm, shirtless or barelegged or naked altogether. Their rubber tsinelas clapped along the mud. Below them, the creek collected raindrops with a sound like frying oil.[10]
>
> Individual passages, no order [equal number of passages from Alvar and *Philippine Stories*]
>
> You sit Manila jeepney-style, six knees in a row—as if you're riding home from Nepa-Q Mart, once again, your cousins' children on your lap, the week's meat thawing at your feet, while strangers pass their fare through you up to the driver.[11]
>
> Don't you believe me? I tell this tale in a marketplace that stinks of dried fish, dried squid, dried dreams. For these islands have stories as colorful as dreams woven on cloth, as mysterious as the sea churning in the wake of a boat bound for Borneo.[12]
>
> Positive, she said cheerily, as if I shouldn't go out and hang myself this instant. I was sure that if I let go I would fall down. The coffee turned to

> mud in my mouth—I ran to the sink and heaved. Congratulations, it's a fetus. You frigging idiot.[13]
>
> Smoking and drinking struck you as a man's vices, and a waste of money besides. Gambling, too. But nights with [name]—the stars in your brain, the beggar that sex made of your body—gave you a taste of it, that life, those forces that held [name] at their mercy.[14]
>
> "Goodbye, goodbye," he whispered, as his heart finally broke into a thousand mismatched pieces, each one small, hard, and sharp. The tears of the butcher's boy (who had long since ceased to be a boy) flowed freely down his face as he watched her rise…."[15]
>
> When she had finished, she went underground and fed the stencils to the mimeo….To replace the ink, she slid a barrel, heavier than her brother's guitar, across the grooved belly of the machine until it clicked with satisfying decision into place. She shivered in the basement, cold and gray as a stone church…[16]

Time to consider your findings. Without resorting to the kind of arbitrary scale that sometimes accompanies a task like this it should be possible to offer a rough guide to interpreting these admittedly subjective responses. If you were reliably able to distinguish the passages written by Alvar from those found in *Philippine Stories*—say in substantially more than half of the eight possible choices—then Alvar's "language gave [her] away," and the case against the "Filipino-ness" of this writer will likely have been strengthened in your mind. If on the other hand you found yourself more often wrong than right, then perhaps the room for her, within the fold of Philippine literary expression, expands. Either that or your confidence in the distinction between metropolitan and indigenized Englishes, championed by the three writer-critics referred to above, may have been undermined. (But in the absence of a "control" sample of passages by writers fully non-native in their background and linguistic range, no judgments can be made on this score.) It is also conceivable that your identifications were made primarily on the basis of the representational details—for example, that meat at Nepa Q-Mart in an earlier day would not have been sold frozen—or on the basis of other non-linguistic considerations. In any case, let us leave the reckoning with language at this and push on into themes, where perhaps interpretation, as opposed to gut-feel guesswork—or statistical breakdowns, as with the factor of setting—can play a role in adjudicating the overall question.

Themes

So, to the heart of the matter, and the opportunity dive into the literature, at last. While there has been some rumbling of late around the traditional notion of theme,[17] the term here will refer simply to an area or issue of sustained fictional exploration. Five such appear relevant to the comparative task at hand: the supernatural; family, with special attention to gender relations; class relations; Fil-Am relations; and struggle.

The Supernatural

The representation of supernatural beings, states, events, and forces would seem a likely dividing line between an American- and home-based writers addressing Filipino experience, and in some respects it proves to be. Take two common conduits into fiction of the unseen and the extraordinary: folk beliefs and the conventions of what is typically called in the US "magical realism" and in the Philippines more often "marvelous realism," or sometimes, following Dean Francis Alfar, "spec(ulative) fiction." (Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo has analyzed the distinctions between these terms, and additionally made the case that these highly literary modes of representation draw directly from the folk base. [109, 129]) Examples of both are reasonably plentiful in the anthology volumes. A total of eight stories feature *bangungot*, *engkantos*, astronomical signs, a Lady of the River (who is never actually seen), walking skulls (which are), fortune-telling, and faith-healing rituals that succeed in curing ills. A similar number of tales are typified (and distinguished) by an offering from Dean Alfar himself: "L'Aquilone Du Estrellas," a fable of a "marvelous" kite that takes a lifetime to make and carries its rider to a height that is the "beginning of forever" (vol. 2 126-28). By contrast, Mia Alvar makes only one reference to a folk creature, and this *manananggal* flies high above the school-yard only in "Monte Ramon" Danny's imagined escape from classmates who mock his physical deformities for the resemblance they give him to this mythical monster (126-27). Moreover, while the magical/marvelous genre is well established in the States, *In the Country* never so much as dabbles in it.

If there is a genre in which Alvar appears to relinquish her grip on realism, it is the ghost story. Long a part of both traditional folklore and fantasy literature, this to some extent distinct narrative type has a surprisingly strong foothold in short fiction in particular, and it finds a conspicuous—and honored—place in the *Philippine Stories* anthology. Seven separate stories in the two volumes feature beings existing somewhere between life and death. What's more, two of the selections are among the strongest entries in the entire collection. In "The Haunting of Martina Luzuriaga," a meticulously realized, state-of-the-art ghost, whose image appears, when the viewer has stared long enough, "as though everything around him had gone flat and he was the only three-dimensional thing…standing before a painted backdrop" (vol. 2 329), displays a stubbornly independent existence and ultimately leads the protagonist to a remarkable transformation in character. In Francezca Kwe's "A Ghost Story," the spectre makes its entry at the end of the tale, in the form of a howling indoor wind, whose cessation leaves the "clearest silence, unlike anything I have ever heard again" (vol. 2 504.) The terrifying apparition brings to a close a short story epic in its ambitions, linking the historical settings of the Past, the War, and the Martial Law period. Validating the realist, as well as the marvelous intentions of "A Ghost Story," Pantoja Hidalgo observes that even though the narrator "is unsure of what exactly happened in the old mansion, she does not doubt that it happened" (128). And Hidalgo goes on to provide a cultural anchor for these types of narratives, noting that in them "most Filipino readers will recognize echoes of stories they may have heard or perhaps even lived through themselves" (131). And author Kwe attests to the same culturally grounded fictional intention, writing "I want to keep alive in my stories the myths of my country: the half-human being *tayho*…the *mantayo* peering down from the crowns of the *kapok* trees…" (qtd. in Hidalgo 135).

Alvar seems to share her counterparts' enthusiasm for the ghost story, and even to enter into its spirit. *In the Country* includes two candidates for the genre, a proportionally greater representation than found in the anthology volumes. Both feature apparitional figures important to the main character and the narrative's meaning. "Legends of the White Lady" takes up the well known Philippine urban legend of a lady tragically killed, haunting the New Manila district's Balete Drive, in her white dress. Alice Anders, the American fashion model who tells the story, describes several encounters with a lady in white, one second-hand from a taxi driver, another with a tallish female who sweeps by the window of a restaurant where she is eating (among other things, *dinuguan*, a personal calling card tucked into the story by the author), and finally an old woman dressed in a nightgown, inside a house on Balete Drive. As it happens, this third figure proves thoroughly substantial. She attacks Alice physically, punching her in the face and bringing to an end her Philippine modeling gig—and not coincidentally bringing to an end the story's supernatural mystique. By the end it becomes clear that the "legend" is just that, and the actual "white lady" is the protagonist herself, who, in fright and shock at the sudden death of her half-Filipina roommate back in New York, had "wanted, even tried, to forget I had a body altogether" (85), and who, for her final photo in the country, poses in a way that will make it seem that she had "receded to a bright puddle and dissolved" (90). In short, ghostliness has served as a metaphor for the character's troubled identity.

A similar pattern unfolds in the story *In the Country*. Here the ghost is Billy Batanglobo, former owner of the house where main character Milagros now lives with her family. Billy is a victim of drowning, either by his own volition or by order of the Marcos regime—the facts are not clear, and he isn't telling. As happens with Martina Luzuriaga, the manner of apprehending the haunting presence is handled in chillingly credible physiological detail, and the description of his appearance appeals to multiple senses, creating an evocation tangible in effect:

> The first time Billy Batanglobo…appears to her, she senses him in her skin, the spread of cold pinpricks along her back. From her bed, facing the wall, she hears a dripping sound, smells fetid Pasig River water. And when she

> turns he's standing in her doorway: the bloated, waterlogged version of the man she's seen in Ateneo yearbooks….in soaked Levi's, his muddy Adidas leaving pools of water on the floor as he approaches, his polo shirt clinging to his swollen gut (305).

No less than Martina's visitor, too, Billy is an interlocutor with an agenda, a kind of moral lawyer arguing first principles with Milagros as she considers her life choices. In contrast to the Philippine story, though, and more in keeping with "Legends of the White Lady," this ghost is not real. Shortly after the initial appearance, the ostensible object of the haunting "wakes alone. The sheets are dry….She walks the corridor, expecting a puddle any second. But the floor is dry too. She knows then that Billy Batanglobo is hers alone; no one else is invited to his world" (306). In other words, this is a case of a projection, a hallucination, the personification of an inner voice, not a case of an independently if inexplicably existing being. So even in this genre for which Alvar shares affinity with her Philippine counterparts, and seems about to follow them across the threshold into marvelous representation of literally existing entities, she holds to a more conventionally realistic line. And that line might likely marks a divide between two sets of nationally inflected cultural sensibilities.

On another aspect of the supernatural the line may not be so clear. Religion has great prominence in Philippine life: a hundreds-year-old tradition of Catholicism; vigorous Protestant sects, some imported, some homegrown; not to mention Islam in the South and a history of indigenous beliefs, a number still practiced in certain regions. Some 23 of 74 anthology stories, nearly a third of total, address religion in one way or another; 10 of those take it on directly, as a theme. How does the fiction in Alvar's collection compare to the home-based literary representation of this feature of national life?

Quantitatively, again allowing for the disparity in sample sizes, the match is quite close. Two of *In the Country's* nine entries pursue religion, both of them in a manner that suggests genuine exploration, so the proportion is either slightly less or slightly more than that found in *Philippine Stories*.

There are differences to be noted in the treatment, though. Take for example Alvar's one sustained portrait of a conventional religious believer, "Esmeralda." The title character has been raised a devout Catholic, in a rural area of the provinces. In the room she occupies many years later in New York City, where she works cleaning downtown offices, a "wooden Christ Child and Virgin Mary live inside [her] nightstand drawer" (155). On what may be the last day of her life, September 11, 2001, she takes them out and prays as usual, recites the rosary in an emergency vehicle headed to the disaster at the World Trade Center, and in asking God to take her life so another's may be spared, assures herself: "Faith is a wealth, and you, Esmeralda, are rich with it" (187). Yet great changes have taken place in her life and her understanding of life. The other she seeks to spare is a married American businessman, who works in one of the towers, and with whom she has been having an affair. The intensity of the emotions involved is conveyed in the sample passage from the story offered earlier: "the beggar that sex made of your body." Not surprisingly, the situation creates a crisis of conscience for Esmeralda (and for the man, as well, whose wife is lost to him through a total deprivation of cognitive function). Yet in spite of a stern call from a brother still in the Philippines for a return to religious duty, and in spite of actually breaking it off for a period of several weeks, "Es" (as he calls her) resumes her relationship with John. In the passage following the one in which she bargains with God for the sacrifice, after having first asked whether the unfolding catastrophe might constitute a judgment on their infidelity, we get a flashback to the couple, their love matured: at peace, playful, fully committed to one another. The tender scene serves to undercut the question about 9/11 as a judgment, and to underscore the implications of the reply: "God doesn't answer" (187). Notwithstanding the wooden Jesus and the rosary, and the thoughts swinging from guilt to spiritual abundance, Esmeralda is no longer the person she was. While she retains the faith of her childhood in all of its external forms, it appears that her internal character has evolved: not exactly to an "American" identity (174), as she at one point suspects, but to a frame of meaning that is sometimes labeled secular humanism, the idea that, among other things, the most profound transformations and even redemptions are ones that human beings achieve for themselves and for each other.

If this seems a large claim to be making, it can at least be said that the treatment of conventional religious belief in this story stands far apart from the one offered in Gregorio Brillantes' "On a Clear Day in November." In this charmingly straightforward narrative, the eternal verities of Christianity are unambiguously affirmed. On the All Saints' Day in question, the residents of a provincial town gather in an expectant, festive mood, which changes to something more serious: "…the bantering and laughing ceased, and Rene listened to them speaking of faith, hope, and love, what it meant to die and enter into eternal life, which is the life of God" (vol. 1 107). And the affirmation is then confirmed by the appearance of the Saints, near and more distant ancestors of the assembled multitude—ghosts, of a sort, but communicative and comfortable ones.

Alvar's other religiously oriented story lies not in the direction of Brillantes' "Clear Day," but rather along a vector in which spiritual meanings are if anything still more occluded—but for that not without relevance. This is a fictional strategy, common in recent American literature and perhaps best exemplified in Raymond Carver's classic "A Small, Good Thing," that starts from a humanist perspective in which religious belief figures as illusory, irrelevant, or inaccessible to modern individuals, but then allows for a symbolic level at which traditional teachings, and beings, may retain their power. In "The Virgin of Monte Ramon," young Danny is held back not only by his physical disabilities, but also by a web of deceitful fantasies that his mother has woven around their cause. The son has his doubts about his mother's words, but accepts them as part of a continuum that extends directly from the most proximate to the highest authority. "But what were reasons in face of faith? I believed her—honoring, as the commandment taught me, both my mother and that greater, universal parent himself" (125). When he learns the truth, however (to be discussed under a different heading, below), Danny—after first trying to respond to the shattering news with prayer—makes a break with his childhood piety and deference: "But I didn't feel like praying. My palms simply refused to meet. They went to the wheels of my chair and pulled, retreating from my mother. I turned my back to her—a first" (152). Having completed his rebellion by desecrating his mother's bedroom, he strikes out on a new course in life, one free of hierarchical control: "I did not wish to look at another adult now, let alone console my mother. I wanted consolation for myself, and knew only one source for it" (153).

The "source" of consolation Danny seeks is no more theological than it is parental; it is the *labandera*'s daughter Annelise, with whom he has been forming something between a friendship and a relationship throughout the story. So at this point he seems to have shaken off completely a religious for a secular and human point of view, one in which he and Annelise enact redemption for one another. But this is where the symbolic level needs to be considered. The title has a dual signification. On the one hand, it refers to the statue of Our Lady, carved for the church in the distant Spanish past, carried to safety during World War II, and paraded in the annual town fiesta. At the same time, the title phrase fits Annelise, a linkage confirmed when the girl, prostrated by her menstrual pains, is carried to the hospital in the wooden boat used to parade the Virgin. What's more, descriptions of the statue, which itself exists in dual forms, a plaster replica as well as the original, convey a mysterious power. This quality has already been noted in the imagery of the replica, quoted earlier in the essay, and it is subtly amplified in the unveiling of the 400-year old original. The "real Virgin" is "both darker and brighter than the plastic decoy to whom Annelise and I had prayed…the jewels in her robe were real…her crown trapped and seemed to magnify the sunlight" (144). In reaching out to Annelise, then, Danny is also reaching out to an icon of the deep faith tradition of the place and culture, and a potential conduit, judging by the aura emanating from it, to a source of "consolation" beyond human offering.

Turning back to *Philippine Stories*, it seems that not only the numbers but the patterns evident there do not differ markedly from what has been discerned in Alvar's work. The quantitative record in fact gives a qualitative indication of this. Even tallying stories that only touch on religion in passing, rather than exploring it as a theme, does not add up to a large number, given the ostensible importance of the phenomenon in Filipino life, and leaves over two-thirds of the total without any reference whatever: secular in point of view, whether by default or design. What's more, among those that do address religion in some way or another, the uncomplicated affirmation presented in "A Clear Day in November" is by no means the rule. Fully six of these stories adopt a critical take, presenting belief, doctrine, official teachings, pronouncements by ecclesiastical leaders, and the like, as in one way or another self-serving, pernicious, or at best benighted, belonging to the past rather than the present, an impediment to human progress. One, Kwe's ghost story "The Haunting of Martina Luzuriaga," provides a surprisingly close analogue to Alvar's "Esmeralda." When the ghost first appears, the title character goes through a series of surmises about the purpose of his visitation, before settling on the explanation that he has been sent by God to tell her to be prepared for an imminent death. This she takes to mean having her spiritual affairs, and especially her burial plans (a new mausoleum, on the family property), in order. But the ghost, who himself has no clear idea why he has come to take up residence in this lady's house, objects: "That doesn't seem right" (vol. 2 339). And sure enough, as the story develops it becomes increasingly clear that he has appeared not to prepare her for death but to invite her to a life she has never lived fully enough. As his influence becomes more direct, and as the ties that linked the two individuals together become more apparent (the deceased was a member of a squatter community living on the fringes of the spinster Luzuriaga's property), Martina begins to swing into action, take risks, and transform things—beginning with the mausoleum project and continuing with the house, the grounds, her relationship with her family, and ultimately herself. Here, in spite of its frankly supernatural elements, is a humanist parable if ever there were one, with the dictates of conventional religion left far more decisively behind than Esmeralda is able to manage.

Analogues also exist in *Philippine Stories* to "The Virgin of Monte Ramon," that is, to the type of narrative in which religious meanings, seemingly routed by a secular perspective, make their way back into currency by symbolic or other indirect textual cues. I count six of these, including Andrea Pasion-Flores' "For Love and Kisses" and Rhea B. Politada's "The Epic Life."

The clearest example is “Things You Don’t Know,” by Ian Rosales Casocot. The story portrays a modern family in distress. The husband has been fired from his job for watching pornography on his work computer but pretends he is still going to office every day, while he actually searches, unsuccessfully, for a new position. The wife (the main character, Doris), operates somewhere between stress and rage as she pretends a) she doesn’t know about her husband’s doings and b) that they still have enough money to keep up their accustomed lifestyle. The six-year old daughter reacts in complicated fashion to what she can intuit of the situation, including pretending to be alternately a Spanish senorita or Princess Di. For Doris, religious belief plays a role in the general web of mutual and self-deception: “Sometimes I pray, the way I used to when I was still a kid and my mother was about being a good Born Again Christian—but nothing comes out of my most desperate Amen. I pretend God listens” (557).

The mother, or grandmother, is another important character in the story, even though she doesn’t live with the family. She embodies unvarnished religious belief, of the Protestant persuasion, emphasizing the word of the Bible rather than the iconographic and sacramental textures of Catholicism (although the elements of her belief prove rather eclectic, including “superstitions” [560]). It is clear Doris regards her mother’s faith as anachronistic or at any rate not relevant to the family’s current crisis. However, the older woman has an ally in her granddaughter. Margot, having shifted her fantasy persona to that of an angel, apparently inspired by a book given to her earlier by the grandmother, asks her mother point blank if she believes in God—adding that *Lola* says one must, or else go to hell. The query exasperates Doris, drawing from her the retort, “Well, your lola is always full of bullshit,” which in turn provokes Margot to a mild reproof for using “bad words” (560). Later, when the suddenly hospitalized grandmother attempts to offer some advice concerning the situation directly to her daughter, Doris is equally quick to dismiss it: “Is that from the Book of Matthew or Mark?” she scoffs, leaving the other to a conventionally scandalized comeback similar to Margot’s (567).

In the end, wife and husband come back together, seemingly around a peril that arises to their daughter (who runs away from the house and cannot be found), and also perhaps out of sheer exhaustion from all the pretense. Doris, the narrator, draws this lesson about "all I need to know now in this world. Love, forgiveness, understanding—all the bright little things easily lost in the rush to live" (570). To all outward appearances at this juncture, it would seem that "this world" is not only the operative context but the source of this wisdom, the "things" (as the title phrase puts it) that "you don't know." Secular humanism has firm control of the reins of this story, at the literal level. But, as in "The Virgin of Monte Ramon," there is present here another, subtler level, on which a differing interpretation is possible. Of the three virtues Doris ticks off, two, "love" and "forgiveness," come directly out of the teachings of the New Testament gospels that she mocks. And the third, "understanding," the key to the reconciliation she and her husband achieve, her mother has explicitly articulated in that hospital room exchange: "We have our little secrets…our little sins—our endless *transgressions* [emphasis in original]….In the end, it's enough that we understand how human each of us truly is in our imperfections" (567). In addition, it's hard to read Doris' reference to the "bright little things easily lost" without thinking of Margot's turn as an angel, gone missing. And this bit of symbolism clicks into place with the earlier, wisdom-transmitting conversation, when, pirouetting in her "crisp, white hospital gown," Lola has made her parting words, "Hey, look, I look like an angel, too" (567). So perhaps after all in Casocot's story the things we human beings "don't know" are things we can only know with assistance from beyond "this world."

Summing up, in the exploration of supernatural themes the comparison between *In the* Country and *Philippine Stories* yields mixed results. Alvar shows little interest in reifying folk beliefs or in creating marvelous fictional effects, two modes of supernaturalism that have had appeal for a number of home-grounded writers. In a related, similarly popular genre, the ghost story, she draws a firm line of realism beyond which her apparitions do not stray, while in the anthology narratives—those that are not frankly marvelous in their representation—the haunters share in the realism of the characters they haunt. And it seems reasonable to speculate that this contrast owes to a difference in the cultural sensibilities from which the American-based writer and her Philippine counterparts draw. At the same time, though, it is surely noteworthy that Alvar creates a place for a ghost-like figure in two of her nine stories, a higher rate than occurs in the anthologies and a penchant altogether unlikely to see in an American fictionist otherwise committed to realism. This very possibly suggests the pull of a cultural sensibility in the opposite direction, from the other side of the Pacific through whatever of a national and family legacy remained to this writer in her upbringing in the US. When it comes to the supernaturalism of religion, perhaps surprisingly, parallelism is stronger than incongruity in the comparison. Not everything is alike, Brillantes' tale of literal Christian faith confirmed by a mass return from beyond the grave finding no exact counterpart in *In the Country*. But both in the overall pattern of attention to the theme and in the two types of stories in which the theme is explored—one which favors a secular humanist perspective and the other in which that perspective is significantly hedged by a set of symbolic cues pointing back to traditional religious beliefs—Alvar and her counterparts appear, perhaps surprisingly, to be writing effectively on the same page.

Family and Gender Relations

If religion is known to be prominent feature of national life and consciousness, so too does another Filipino preoccupation recommend itself for thematic comparison: the family, and within its relations between men and women, husbands and wives. Of course, family is a universal context for human experience and a universal theme of literature, but in the Philippines, as in other emergent traditional societies, it is a subject of intense concern. 58 of 74 anthology stories make reference to family life and/or family relations in some fashion, and of the first number 62% focus on these matters directly enough to constitute them as a theme or sub-theme. In an additional, still more subjective classification, roughly half of the directly focused narratives take what can be considered an affirmative and half a negative or critical perspective on the aspects of family under their purview.

Alvar is right up to speed with her counterparts in this concern. All nine of her stories at least instance family matters, and seven address them in a thematic manner. Attesting to the sincerity of her interests in this regard, she has spoken to an interviewer of the tension felt, when writing her title story "In the Country," of needing to work through the history of Martial Law and the People Power Revolution, "while really wanting to write the story of a family" (Kaplon par. 13). The departure comes in the attitude taken toward the subject. Five of the seven focused stories portray their fictional family or families in a critical light, only one in a hopeful or favorable way, while one more or less halves the difference. Matt Ortile notes this orientation when he issues readers of his generally laudatory profile the warning that Alvar challenges "the authenticity of the happy Filipino family…saintly children, diligent father, and his selfless pious wife" (par. 22). Certainly she does that. To take one example, in the collection's first story, "The Kontrabida," the father is no model of diligence: he has lost job after job, the latest for stealing from the employer, and his declining fortunes have not deterred him from demanding and physically abusive behavior toward his spouse. The son, for his part, has inherited or internalized some of the old man's worst impulses, and has strayed so far from saintliness as to have arrived home in the Philippines carrying deadly contraband from the US, also misappropriated from his employer. The wife certainly appears selfless and pious—she even overdoes the role, not only maintaining a posture of servitude toward her now helplessly ill husband, but seeming to wait even on laundresses, gardeners, and the like, paid to wait on her—before eventually revealing the dramatic opposite of those virtues. This variance from *Philippine Stories* is statistically and literarily significant. What's more, it seems reasonable to suspect a factor of national culture coming into play here, the US being notoriously the land where a fragile family came undone before the eyes of millions of viewers on public television (Ruoff).

On the other hand, a 50/50 split between affirmation and exposure, which is what we find among the anthology stories, does not exactly constitute a ringing endorsement of said Filipino family. True, the affirmations are often genuine. They can be unconflicted, as in Yvette Tan's "Daddy," in which a beloved parent who "loved us so much, it killed him" (vol. 2 526) gets in touch after death with an ambiguous yet encouraging message from which the entire family takes heart. They can also be hard-won. The Casocot text profiled above begins with every member of the family pretty much at odds with every other (and the father paralleling the one in "The Kontrabida," in having been fired from his job for malfeasance in it). But by the end, differences have been painfully worked through, including symbolically with Lola back in the hospital, and the characters have come together in "love, forgiveness, and understanding." The reader has every assurance that the restored family bonds will prove durable into the future.

Yet the negative treatments are equally compelling. The best example may be Socorro Villaneuva's "Foggy Makes Me Sad." The story actually begins on the upbeat, and with a jaunty tone that reflects its narrator-protagonist's "sense of humor—joie de vivre" (vol. 2 540), inherited from her father. Now it happens that a couple of discordant notes are struck early. Some type of sibling rivalry simmers between main character Tini and her adult sister Coylee, and their mother, a recent stroke victim, is given to making incongruous remarks—including, on the eve of a visit to Baguio where the family had lived for some time, and in reference to the city's frequent fogs, the title statement, uttered to "nobody in particular" (541). But the narrator quickly interprets, for her own daughter, the comment to have referred to "melancholy…a sweet kind of sad" (541). Indeed, Tini's memories of Baguio, anchored in the "tender, poignant love" (552) she felt from her father, which she believes she has found in the constancy and faithfulness of her own husband, and which she hopes will be the source for her daughter of the same "solid sense of self" that she has taken pride in, prohibit any harsher view of that time in the family's life. Still, as the mother rears up in refusal to return to Baguio, the older sister points out that the younger may have been looking through rose-colored glasses, failing to see "That we were unhappy. Misery" (547). Eventually, Coylee discloses the specific cause of that unhappiness: the father, whom Tini revered "like God" (551), was unfaithful to their mother just as he was most "tender" and protective of his younger daughter. It turns out that this infidelity was not an isolated instance in the mountain city of that day, which as Villanueva tells it would seem to have been something of a Filipino Peyton Place. But it is the revelation of her father's betrayal that rocks Tini's world, much like the great Baguio earthquake alluded to in the story. The shock wave buries the ready wit and joie de vivre (in the final moments she can't even speak). It shakes the presumed solid sense of self to its foundations. And it creates grave uncertainties, as her husband appears on the scene only to meld into the image of her father on an outing to Burnham Park, about the stability of any and all of her family's bonds going forward.

Sister Coylee's revelation proves to be no isolated instance in *Philippine Stories.* At least a half dozen entries in the anthology identify male infidelity as the prime cause of familial "misery," the breakdown of relations among members. This signals another contrast with Alvar, one perhaps more telling of national differences than the simple proportion of critical to affirmative treatments of the overall theme. For the stories of *In the Country*, the leading threat to family unity is female rebellion—granted, rebellion often provoked by male behavior (although as it happens never by actual extramarital liaisons).

One significant case of female rebellion, already hinted at, takes place in the lead story of the collection, "The Kontrabida." The selfless and pious wife eventually proves that her character is not to be contained by these attributes; in fact she inverts them. She does drop hints of her true nature to her unsuspecting son, visiting from the States: "Oh, Steve, you don't know my strength" (3) and "You underestimate me" (21). And she proves awesomely competent in running the family's *sari-sari* store, which seems a humble enough occupation yet serves not only as a fallback against the loss of the last of the husband's jobs but also as a way around his prohibition on her working outside the home. But when Steve, in partial recognition of the mismatch between her talents and the caregiving her ill spouse expects and demands from her—"You're a CEO, not a slave" (16)—gifts her with a supply of powerful painkillers he has appropriated from his hospital pharmacy, the woman whose habitual gesture is wiping her hands on a non-existent apron sees her path to a complete breakout. What she does with this unique *pasalu-*

bong makes for one of the "gut-punching" twists reviewers have commented on in Alvar's collection. Without wishing to spoil what I am recommending here to be read, suffice it to say that the opiates go to redress a lifetime of ill treatment at the hands of her husband and to give a nice boost to sales at the *sari-sari* store. The actions also lead Steve to wonder for the first time about the mother whose character he has always taken for granted. Who after all, he asks himself, is this woman? Is she the *bida* or the *kontrabida*, in the terms of traditional Philippine melodrama? Or, as he eventually comes to understand the hold these dramatic stereotypes have had on his moral sense, and to see that he has placed himself in the role of the family hero contesting his father's villainy, is the lesson rather that, when the "*bida* and the *kontrabida* crossed swords…the woman…might be the one to watch" (27)?

Two other stories in which the narrative of female rebellion plays out less directly may be briefly noted. In "Shadow Families," the ungovernable individuality of *katulong* Baby sets at naught all the rules of the collective family unit formed by Filipinos of all backgrounds.[18] In the end, her independence (coupled with the accusation that one of the husbands in the group has impregnated her) undermines trust and at least presages the eventual "toppl[ing of] our pillars of domestic and family life" (118). In another story, the part of the beset woman is played by a fictional version of the first female president of the Philippines, here known not by her name but by the title phrase, "The Old Girl." The phrase refers to the system in place in the 1940s and 50s for grooming girls of the wealthy classes as "future wives and mothers" (193), supporters in all things of their likewise well heeled, ambitious male partners. This role the Old Girl, having forfeited a promising career in law, plays in relation to an also unnamed but unmistakable former Senator and political prisoner, exiled for reason of major heart surgery to the US, and hatcher of such wildly impractical schemes as running the Boston Marathon and returning to the Philippines to confront the power of the sitting regime (the story draws an equivalency between the two plans, in its highly iconoclastic portrayal of this revered national figure). In the end she does not actually rebel, revving up the Old Girl instincts one more time to rally the family and follow the "hero, in his myths about himself" (192) home to his destiny. But the reader is certainly allowed, and encouraged by the story to imagine such a rebellion for her.

Perhaps the most complex but ultimately decisive instance of female rebellion occupies the center of "In the Country," the story Alvar mentioned in connection with her desire to write about the family. Main character Milagros Reyes' husband would seem to present a smaller target for disaffection than the surly beast of "The Kontrabida" or "The Old Girl's" self-absorbed Senator. Jim Reyes is a skilled and dedicated journalist with a political conscience; he and Milagros meet at a nurse's strike she is leading and he is covering. He proves his mettle when being arrested under Martial Law.

> Milagros had grown up thinking strong, decisive men were a myth….But in this moment, with Jim, she felt strong and safe….As the typhoon of history made landfall on their doorstep, she could train her eyes on this man, and follow him (285).

Follow him she does, becoming effectively his secretary for regime-critical writing from prison, not giving up her nursing career but letting it be eclipsed by the new commitment.

But cracks begin to appear in the armor of this shining knight. For one thing, work and politics come first for him, family a distant second. Rather than issue a correction to the piece that led to his arrest, he accepts six more years of confinement, leaving Milagros to wonder, "But they had a son now, didn't they? They'd lived apart longer than they'd lived together" (286). For another, it develops that Jim's opposition to the Martial Law regime consists in part of a *mano a mano* game with its President, a game in which he naively presumes to know all the rules. But when their son becomes a stake in the game,[19] Milagros reaches a point of alienation from male leadership.

> They're all the same to her now, this fraternity of men, who televise their hunger strikes, print articles after they're told to stop. They prize their causes and their names, their principles and legacies, above all. They eat the rice without wondering how it got cooked….They name sons after themselves and never once worry about those sons' [everyday care] (316-17).

On the momentum of this recoil, she makes plans to leave the family, including a younger daughter—a move the internal "ghost" of Billy Batanglobo questions sharply.

At the last moment Jim asks for a reconciliation, offering as an earnest of his reformation to resign from his job and foreswear journalism altogether. Milagros is almost persuaded. "But no" (346), she says to herself, in an echo of classic rejectionist Baby's signature expression. Thinking back to her mistake of taking it as "her life's mission, to tend the flame of [her husband's] work like a priestess at some temple" (347), and to other considerations, she moves off, on her own, to the new life that Alvar is apparently making the subject of a forthcoming novel.

Before entering into any analysis of this gender divergence, it needs to be acknowledged that, while male infidelity represents the most frequent cause of family breakup in *Philippine Stories*, there are instances in which the pattern of female rebellion appears, potentially or actually. How do these compare with the plots just reviewed? If ever a wife had reason to break off on an independent course, it would seem to be "Things We Don't Know's" Doris, whose husband has been fired from his job for watching porn and then goes through an elaborate charade to conceal the fact from her. But although she is furious with him, as their resources dwindle and other family relations come under strain, at no point does the thought of leaving come into her mind. The two just finally come to accept each other, and with renewed hope go on, as Milagros and Jim do not. In another story, Rhea B. Politado's "The Epic Life," the wife, Sarah, very definitely has thoughts of leaving. Indeed, she entertains an elaborate fantasy that includes an exotic lover and seems to touch down on the real as she contemplates her baby daughter, Lily, going through life without her. ("Maybe the [girl's] dimples will help" [vol. 2 613], she rationalizes.) But a chance memory of a past night of affection and promise—the very night, Sarah believes, that Lily was conceived—brings her back, imperfectly but realistically, to her husband and family: "a truce if not love" (616).

Rina of Linda Ty-Casper's "Time and Wandering Markers," does actually rebel. Her Lilo is cut from the same mold, just of a higher class, as the anonymous husband in “The Kontrabida.” He is a bully—Rina reports at the outset of the story being “afraid of his anger” (vol. 2 1)—a controller, and a failure. In addition, he has been unfaithful on numerous occasions and possesses an inveterate habit of confusing mine and thine. This last trait sets the plot in motion, as Lilo has brought Rina (driving her car, because his is low on gas) to the home in which she grew up, with the objective of persuading her to move from her Metro Manila condominium into the large but run-down house, and to pay rent for it to him, out of income anticipated from the rental of the vacated condo. The scheme arises because he has previously mismanaged his wife’s family home, creating a cash shortfall. But as Nina tours the house, the exhortations Lilo is urging upon her are progressively drowned out by a flood of memories of the place and of her parents, especially her father, who had cared for it meticulously. Fortified by the recollections, “no longer someone who has forgotten how to speak or to breathe” (8), she nullifies his plan by quietly declaring that she’s taking the house for her own. Further, now fully confident to face his anger, she resolves to let him know, perhaps after she drives him back to the city, that there will be no need for him to visit her in her old/new abode.

While the fact of Rina’s rebellion differentiates it from the two other cases in *Philippine Stories*, certain details mark it off from those portrayed in Alvar’s stories. First, there is no revenge in play, and no profit motive. Ty-Casper’s character remains unambiguously within the *bida* category throughout. Second, there is no blanket denunciation of men, such as we get from Milagros. In fact, Rina is led to her turnaround in part through the rediscovery of feelings of affection and admiration for another male, her father. Finally, in standing up for herself she does not turn her back on the next generation. In fact, her adult children—from whom her husband had succeeded in distancing her, to some extent—stand to gain from her decision, for they will immediately inherit the Manila condo she is leaving, allowing them to buy houses of their own for the first time. Her rebellion is intended to strengthen those family relations which deserve strengthening.

With regard to the gender relations aspect of the family theme, then, *In the Country* appears quite sharply divergent from the collected work of writers based literally in the country: more divergent, certainly, than in the area of religion or even that of family more generally, holding strong or falling apart. The reasons for the gap are not far to seek, and they do suggest the operation of broad cultural influences. The outlines of modern feminist thinking, as it has emerged in the West and the US, are readily evident in Alvar's rebellion stories: grievances over thwarted career aspirations and the inequality of responsibilities within the home and family, and a staunch critique of male power and privilege. Not even a figure as hagiographic as Ninoy Aquino escapes this treatment. His character in "The Old Girl" could have been lifted from one of Alice Munro's many portrayals of self-absorbed, humanly incompetent middle-class husbands. Even a character fictionally endowed with more gravitas, like Jim Reyes, turns out to have feet of clay—or rather a heart of steel. Rebellion against such figures is understandable, and also understandable, without necessarily warranting approval, is that rebellion sometimes eventuates in transgression. Angela Carter, the British fictionist and editor of the short story collection *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women*, says that the characters captured in the title, in order to avoid being trapped in a victim's role, "are prepared to plot and scheme; to snatch; to battle; to burrow away from within " (qtd. in March-Russell 57). Mia Alvar is among the feminist writers who are willing to follow their female characters across lines of law and perhaps even more binding lines of customary duty, such as to childrearing, as they struggle to escape victimhood.

This separates her from the authors represented in *Philippine Stories*. This is not to say that such an inclination does not exist in Philippine life or Philippine literature (or even in the stories from this collection that I did not review). But in the 74 or so pieces that make up this sample, none approaches Alvar's boldness in treating gender revolt; and the one that does portray such an event, staying within bounds of legality and civility, happens to have been written by an author long resident in the United States. This divergence needs to be acknowledged and if possible accounted for in any reckoning with the national literary provenance of the two samples of work.

Class Relation(ships)

If Alvar takes a harder-edged view of gender relations than do her Philippine counterparts, she appears to offer a more sanguine view of class relations. This is especially true of interclass relationships, or at any rate the possibility of love across socioeconomic lines, a theme visited with a fair degree of frequency in both collections.

Examples from *In the Country* of this kind of romantic connection being made include, of course, Danny and Annelise of "The Virgin of Monte Ramon": he the son of a want-to-be upper-crust mother, she the daughter of that mother's *labandera*. They also include Esmeralda the cleaning woman and her well educated and well-to-do paramour, John—although this story's being set in the US (where democratic matches are commonplace, at least in the movies) perhaps lessens the strength of its example. But the most exuberant case of love triumphing over class distinctions is that of driver Andoy, brother of the narrator-protagonist of "A Contract Overseas." Andoy wins the love of two different women above his station: one the daughter, the other the wife of his employer at the time. In fact, the social distance to be crossed in such situations serves as an aphrodisiac for him: "…what really made my brother weak was danger, obstacles—the chance to break a rule or cross a line or overcome some hideous odds for love….'I can't have her and I *have* (emphasis in original) to have her…." (234). As it happens, in the second of his two transgressions, with the wife of a wealthy Saudi connected to the royal family, the "danger" is palpable: the prospect of apprehension by the religious police, endless lashings in prison, public execution. But nothing stays Andoy, who continues to act on his belief that "love's miracle" is worth any cost.

What to Alvar's irrepressible character beckons as a line to be crossed, a hurdle to be cleared, in *Philippine Stories* looms as an apparently insuperable obstacle. With the caveat, again, that even a sample of 74 is a limited one, none of this number features a successful or even a promising interclass relationship.

That a class barrier proves inflexible is of course understandable in Dean Alfar's "L'Aquilone Du Estrellas (The Kite of Stars)," which is not only a brilliantly stylized piece of speculative fiction but a Spanish period piece, what must be the earliest setting of all the stories in the collection (although no date is actually specified). A fourteen-year-old "butcher's boy" finds himself dazzled by the beauty and intrepidity of the wealthy Maria Isabella du'l Cielo, two years his senior, and herself enamored of the dashing Lorenzo du Vicenzio. Informed that Lorenzo, an aspiring astronomer, "only has eyes for the stars" and therefore will not pay attention to her, the young lady conceives of a plan to make him see her and commands the butcher's boy to take her to the best kitemaker in the land. He complies and thus begins a career of service that lasts nearly the rest of both of their lives. At the end of the story, as Maria Isabella rises on the "kite of stars" that the two have painstakingly put together from sundry parts gathered from all over the Spanish Philippines, she calls out a goodbye to the butcher's boy. He, overcome, replies (in a passage quoted without source earlier):

> "Goodbye, goodbye," he whispered, as his heart finally broke into a thousand mismatched pieces, each one small, hard, and sharp. The tears of the butcher's boy (who had long since ceased to be a boy) flowed freely down his face as he watched her rise—the extraordinary old woman he had always loved…(127).

But the love goes unrequited. The butcher's boy realizes that in all their time together, "she had never known his name" (127). For her part, Maria Isabella does not come to this realization, and makes no further recognition of her faithful helper as she shouts out the name, Lorenzo, "that had been forever etched into her heart" (128)—drawing a muffled acknowledgement in the old man's dreams—and ascends, strapped to her stellar kite and secure in the social elevation of her love, to an apotheosis.

But the barrier remains intact in stories with contemporary settings, as well. Brief illustration is offered by two tales taking their point of departure in the world of musical entertainment. In Arterio E. N. Guttierez' "Blind," Ramon is a former concert pianist, reduced by an accident affecting his eyes to a part-time gig playing popular tunes in a chic restaurant. He is drawn to Fe, a waitress at the establishment, whose voice he initially mistakes for that of Angela, his lover from conservatory, and sighted days. A friendship slowly develops between the two from very different backgrounds, but an attempt to take things to the next level ends abruptly when Ramon's touch discovers Fe's deformed body and ravaged skin, the opposite of the physical perfection he had found in Angela. While played out in terms of literal beauty and the want of it, the unsettling end of the story might possibly be read as a metaphorical warning of the unpleasant discoveries awaiting one who would look for love below their station.

In "Karaoke Strip," by Caroline J. Howard, the performer is the character from the lower class: Emmarose, who has come to Manila to earn money for her struggling family in storm-tossed, poverty-stricken Sorsogon. The unnamed man she joins at his table after her stint at the mike is a burned-out journalist with a rebel past, carrying a torch for a woman still in the movement somewhere. Their conversation clicks. While she holds back details of her family's need, and of her own impending eviction from her rented room, he, with his "funny-sweet tongue" (457) does draw from her the admission that she wants some day to be a teacher rather than a singer. This prompts him, already seeing in her the image of the lover lost to the past, to volunteer a contact in the Department of Education, and to back up the offer by handing over his card. But when she looks at the name on the card, it "glare[s] like something on credit" (459), and she stifles a desire to follow the man outside the club. So in this case the rejection comes from the less advantaged party, and class pride may mix with female pride—and a fear of strings attached—in the motivation for it. But for whatever reason, a gulf once again opens between potential romantic partners, unequally situated.

The most extensive treatment of the interclass relationship theme, at once a foil to Alvar's "A Contract Overseas" and a bookend within *Philippine Stories* for "L'Aquilone du Estrellas," is to be found in Dennis A. S. Aguinaldo's "Burgundy." Narrator-protagonist Lino Sierra is, like "Contract's" Andoy, a driver by trade. Unlike Andoy, his hopes of seeking his fortune in Saudi have been crushed, and as a fallback he finds employment with the Uytiepos, a mother-daughter household his mother had done laundry for until her death. In time, he develops feelings for the unmarried daughter, eleven years his senior, whom he professes to find younger-looking than himself. In turn, the daughter –Ma'am Seling to Lino—calls him "Kuya," adopts an easy, bantering manner in their interactions, and comes to rely on him for a range of family-related services beyond simply driving. Why Seling is single is a mystery, certainly to her mother, Aling Naty, who pushes her toward matches that might lead to marriage—receiving a series of Baby-ish "thanks-no's" in return. Eventually, though, one gentleman appears to pass muster, and a wedding date is set. However, Seling secretly changes her mind and hits upon a drastic plan for extricating herself from the commitment. In this plan she enlists the unwitting help of Kuya, who parlays the task into an opportunity to shop for and present a gift "of worth" to the woman he admires and wishes above all to please (vol. 2 598). But when his gift turns out to play a conspicuous role in her final solution, Lino is crushed beyond anything the disappointment of his Saudi hopes had done to him; indeed, it seems that any hopes for his life have been extinguished by the event.

In the end, then, this driver's essential fictional kinship lies not with Alvar's Andoy but Alfar's butcher's boy. He tenders faithful service, never achieves intimacy, never even progresses to familiarity with his superior (as Andoy does in Saudi, shifting references in his correspondence from "Al-Thunayan's wife" to "Madame" to "Alia" [254]). Ma'am Seling, for her part, fills the role of Maria Isabella. True, she does know her assistant's name, although preferring Kuya to the "Lyn" that her mother uses. And she does not sustain attachment to her class peer, as Ma. Isabella does with Lorenzo. Now, some mystery does hover about Seling's feelings toward Lino, as about her aversions to marriage. It is she who has made the suggestion that the down-on-his-luck young man be taken on as the family driver. Later, when he ignores her advice to quit smoking, she flies into an uncharacteristic fit of temper, nearly causing an accident. But it seems unlikely that her pulling out of the marriage commitment owes to an unspoken love for Lino. In a notebook left behind, Seling offers both money and best wishes for a "bright future," and thanks him for his "gifts" and those of his mother (vol. 2 402). The expression of gratitude contains potential ironies, of more than one kind, but it also underscores his origins, as the son of the laundry woman. A fair conclusion would seem to be that in this story, and in *Philippine Stories* generally, class lines are not as easily crossed by love as in Alvar's fictional universe; the romantic mobility of a driver Andoy or a *labandera*-born Annelise appears harder to imagine. For even if, say, Seling's valedictory meant to thank his mother for the gift of Lino, even if she secretly harbored feelings for him, as he for her, the socio-romantic distance evoked in Alfar's period piece remains still too great to be transgressed.

Fil-Am Matters

From inter-class we move to international relations, or, practically speaking, Philippine-American relations. Exploration of the connections and disconnections between lives and cultures in the two countries constitutes a notable theme in both samples of short fiction. Ten *Philippine Stories* feature this theme; less than a handful, and no more than one each, deal with other countries, e.g. China, Austria, Saudi (although one can imagine these proportions changing in a selection made now or in the future). Seven pieces offer significant treatment of Filipinos residing in the States, one of an American in the Philippines, and one of a repatriate, returning from an extended sojourn in the US to his native land. Of course these numbers are roughly matched, and the percentages of the total greatly exceeded, by the coverage of *In the Country*. Six of nine of these stories (so 66 compared to 14%) delve into the theme. Two follow Filipinos in America, and one imagines an American in Manila. As to repatriate protagonists, whose recurrence in earlier Philippine fiction once prompted a younger critic than I to argue the case for them as defining a distinctive genre (Burns), the disparity is still more marked. Two classic cases (and one partial, making a representation of 28%) turn up in Alvar's collection, bearing solutions patented in the neo-imperial metropole to problems not necessarily perceived as such by the Filipinos who have stayed put. By contrast, the single (1%) *Philippine Stories* repatriate, comics-stall entrepreneur Billy of Carljoe Javier's "Everybody Gets Off at Cubao," is not so much intent on administering any kind of makeover as on coping with the challenges of life as he finds it in the homeland metropolis.

The disparity in attention to the Fil-Am theme is paralleled, to some extent, by disparities in the treatment of it. Philppine-based writers, at least those represented in the recent volumes of this anthology, tend to be almost uniformly skeptical of American ways and values, and, when they are placed together in the balance, stoutly appreciative of the Filipino alternatives. In Marianne Villanueva's "The Hand," a Filipina, Teresa, has been living for eighteen years in the US, married to a man whose name and nationality go unspecified, but whose traits coincide with some of the most widely reputed emotional deficits of American masculinity. He spends most of his spare time watching football on TV, coldly refuses to help out a son whose car has been totaled in an accident, blames and belittles his wife following her much more serious accident, and when she returns home from the hospital, still hurting, all he has to say is "I have to go to work" (vol. 2 532). The only refuge Teresa has from this callous treatment is the happiness brought by her memories of childhood in the Philippines. There she had inhabited a "magical realm" filled with "sunlight…and *talahib*," where her yaya had treated her kindly and neighborhood boys brought her gifts of animals, living and dead (533). In fact, it is to that place, which now exists "only in herself" (532), or to death (which may be one and the same) toward which Teresa appears headed when, in the aftermath of a difficult follow-up surgery, she heeds the beckoning of a mysterious, disembodied hand that has been her only ally in exchanges with the inaccessible American husband.

For a spunkier postcolonial sensibility than Teresa's long-suffering temperament can muster, we turn to Jessica Zafra's "Portents." The story begins with single-lady Miggy receiving the news that she is pregnant, which presents her with difficult choices: between boyfriends, either of whom could be the father; over what to do about the pregnancy; and about the kind of person she wants to be. All three involve cultural values that can be mapped on a Filipino-American axis. For boyfriends there are Lawrence and Ramon, whose names tell much of their stories. Lawrence is a well heeled young executive working for a US firm, a buttoned-down type on the outside who is not above groping his date under the table during lunch. It is not this, however, but his bad-mouthing a boss in from the home office, then, when the man happens by their table, kowtowing to him, that drives Miggy to stand up and leave the restaurant, trailing behind a taunt about a "your sahib" (vol. 1 54). Ramon on the other hand, occupation unspecified, is low-key and not very attentive to details like days of the week, but he claims to be able to read his friend's thoughts from her face, touches her gently, and is with her at the end as she contemplates her other choices. The pregnancy weighs heavily on Miggy: "Congratulations, it's a fetus. You frigging idiot," is how she processes the news from the clinic. What's more, the various "portents" of the title appear to point toward some apocalyptic disaster which compound with the young woman's doubts about her mothering skills to make a potent case against bringing another child into the world, and lead her to seek the advice of a co-worker who is the veteran of multiple abortions. Miggy rolls this choice into the larger one concerning her moral character.

Here the options seem likewise to be binary. One is the jaunty, hip-talking, designer-dressing career girl, independent, in full charge of her sexuality—a kind of younger Murphy Brown, the American television icon of the period around which the story was written (and who faced a situation much like Miggy's during a certain well known sequence of shows). The other is the girl raised in the "traditional Filipino values" (55) whose decline her mother is perpetually lamenting (albeit from American TV territory, L.A.) and trained by the nuns at the Academy of Our Lady's Seven Sorrows to wear skirts that safely cover the knees (unlike the outfit she is eyeing as the memory of her schooling comes back to her). Expanding on the recollection, Miggy muses that these nuns, "an enlightened bunch," would have treated a breach of modesty as occasion for a guilt trip rather than a spanking. But in her present case,

> Corporal punishment would simplify everything. For sleeping with a guy you weren't married to, you'd get, say, five hundred lashes. For sleeping with two guys, neither of whom you were married to, one thousand lashes. For even thinking about an abortion, ten thousand lashes. And I'd been such a good girl, too, until recently, anyway, so I'd probably get five hundred extra lashes for being such a disappointment (55).

Although the story does not lay all its cards on the table, it seems fair to project, from the vividness of the punishment fantasy, from the break-up with Lawrence and the closing snuggle with Ramon, and the late reflection that with everything in the world threatening a newcomer's arrival "you didn't need your own mother plotting to get rid of you" (58), an outcome: the "good girl" will win out over Murphy Brown. As punctuation to the triumph of "traditional Filipino values," and counterpoint to the latest portent spread across the sky, in the pit of her stomach Miggy feels a "little kick" (59).

In Alvar's stories we sometimes find these cultural polarities reversed. John, the American significant other Esmeralda commits to is every bit the mensch that Teresa's husband is the cold-hearted monster. He even cleans her offices for her when she is hobbled by ailing feet. And his maturely liberated sexuality stands in sharp contrast to the views of her drug-addicted but still traditionally minded brother, who hectors her about "fornication" and "adultery" (179) from rehab back in the Philippines. In "Old Girl" it is the Filipino husband who makes for the problematic character. What's more, the protagonist clearly loves living in America, whisking the children on train rides down the Northeast Corridor, appreciating not only New England's fall foliage but its winters, too. Earlier in her married life she had fulfilled the repatriate's role indifferently, feeling cooped up, "half-drugged and half-asleep" (198) in a dusty provincial town, prevented from making improvements to their house by the husband's fear of appearing too good for the life of the people, his constituents. She would happily have stayed in Manhattan where she'd taken a job, enrolled in law school, and rented an Upper West Side studio, before a certain letter arrived beckoning her back to Manila and a different destiny.

In other of *In the Country's* stories, however, the preference for American ways is more apparent than real. "The Virgin of Monte Ramon's" Danny and his mother live in a bubble defined by the legacy of a World War II G.I. martyr: light skin, and tastes ostensibly too refined for *dinuguan* or *radionovelas*. But the American story behind Danny's deformed legs turns out to be more sinister than the mother's fairy tale of inheritance from his land-mine injured grandfather. That tale is cover for the decision she made, early in a difficult pregnancy with Danny, to seek out a miracle pill, taken by women in "both Europe and America" (150), large quantities of which had been arriving in Manila, after "Westerners lost interest" in the remedy. The clear allusion here is to the German-manufactured drug Thalidomide, which caused large numbers of hideous birth deformities in the late 1950s (Michiyato), and the clear implication is that, once its effects became known, the substance was dumped on the market in the developing world. In fact, this is one instance in which Alvar's usually impeccable research would seem to have failed her: Philippine governmental restrictions on imported pharmaceuticals were stringent at the time, and little if any Thalidomide made it into the country (Michiyato). But this slip in execution does not negate the stand-up postcolonial intent of the plot feature. What's more, Danny's ultimate rejection of his mother's influence, in favor of dancing the *kuratsa* and following *radionovelas* with Annelise, signals a clear preference on the part of this protagonist for authentic Filipino over contrived American ways.

Another story in the collection repeats the trope of Thalidomide dumping, in the form of American model Alice Anders' attempt to prolong her career in the Philippines, after fashion consumers in the States have "lost interest" in her blonde bombshell look. According to Alvar, "Legends of the White Lady" was inspired by comments from the actress Clare Danes who, shooting a film on location in Manila, reported herself appalled by what she saw of life there: the traffic, the trash, and in particular the numbers of people with physical deformities (which we now know not to be the result of Thalidomide prescriptions). Alvar does concede she could relate Danes' feeling of alienation to her own on her pivotal return visit to the Philippines (Kaplon, pars. 16-17). But the story itself does not countenance, for long, the presumption of white privilege shared by the actress and her fictional avatar, Alice. Instead, it highlights the resistance, missing in the erroneous account of the "miracle pill's" introduction, that can be offered on the Philippine side to reputedly superior standards, whether of pharmaceuticals or beauty.

The chief source of this resistance in "Legends" is Jorge Delgado, the Filipino model and "real star" (70) of the gig which Alice has, as expected, easily landed over her Filipina competitors. The most obvious sign of the resistance is physical: although Jorge is slightly shorter than she, his “taut muscles” and the “hard denim” he wears for the shoot pose a barrier against the effect she is accustomed to having on men. A subtler sign pertains to the camera-ready appearance that is any model’s stock-in-trade, and it offers a tacit rebuttal to Clare Danes’ chief complaint, as well. Jorge bears a white scar across his upper lip, the aftermath, Alice later learns, of a birth defect. But while this could have defaced him, she finds herself acknowledging that this particular deformity is “beautiful in a devastating sort of way” (71). One further instance of Jorge’s holding up against the American’s expectations, comes in the matter of names, always significant in these sorts of cultural interactions. When Alice asks if she can anglicize his name to George, easier for her to say and without untoward associations with a certain English word, Jorge demurs, quietly “shushing” her (83).

In fact, a melting of other forms of resistance has occurred by this time of this conversation, apparently precipitated by Alice’s demonstrating a degree of local knowledge, specifically of the white lady legend. The two agree to go out and, in the moments following this exchange, come together. Things take yet another turn, though, when shortly after their coupling one of the candidates for ghostly status delivers a flesh-and-blood blow to Alice’s face. At first solicitous of his date’s condition and likely jeopardy with the modeling agency, Jorge turns cold the following morning, calling her “’kind of an idiot’…without laughter or forgiveness” (87). After having been duly sent packing by the agency, Alice tries to salvage the situation and keep future options open by suggesting to her lover from the night before that his look might be in demand in New York just now. The first time she’d dropped this hint he’d replied familiarly, “’Why should I [i.e. go to the States]? All the hot American girls come here’” (78). But this time, having been interrupted in a “rapid-fire Tagalog” consultation with a crew member, he throws up a wall with national feeling emblazoned on it: “’I’ve never had to leave my country to find work…but thanks’” (88). The rejection leaves Alice—and perhaps in fiction if not in fact the real-life figure who inspired her creation (and who has been punningly mocked earlier when Jorge opines that the “Danes” who are all the rage on the female side of international modeling “’look like aliens to me'" [72])—to retreat from the Philippines bluntly instructed on the wherewithal, and pride, of its people.

This brings us to Alvar's novella-length title story, the only one alluding to nationality in its title, and a complex, twisting exploration of the Fil-Am theme. "In the Country's" protagonist Milagros Sandoval comes to the reader's attention as an activist on behalf of Filipino rights, devoted to her homeland. In the early 70s she leads a successful strike by local nurses for pay equal to that of American expatriates doing the same job. "REWARD EXPERTS, NOT EXPAT$" (265) read the picket signs. The action draws the interest of journalist Jim Reyes, who in the course of an interview queries Milagros on the "greener pastures" option open to nurses, i.e. working in Saudi or the States. "Migration's not for me," she shoots back. "Your mother gets sick," she says (accessing a trope for a troubled nation that extends back in Philippine literature to Rizal [Burns 175]), "you don't leave her for a healthier mother. She's your mother" (267). In fact, Jim serves as something of a foil to Milagros' nationalist attitudes in the early stages of what will become the couple's life together. Although he does not appear intent on greener pastures, either, he does engage in culturally symbolic transactions around names. His own is Jaime but he pointedly instructs Milagros to "call me Jim" (265). And he takes, without explanation, to calling her "Jo," a cognomen she thinks might have come down from Rizal's Josephine Braken or (with far higher probability) Louisa May Alcott's icon of spunky young American womanhood, Jo March. In addition, Jim exhibits the kind of undeviating rationalism that has been associated with representative American male characters, for example Jim Cross of Moshin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007).

But Jim Reyes cannot hold a candle to the adopted Americanism of his friend Billy Batanglobo, who has died before the story opens. Jim called him "Joe Kano," and upon his return from college in the US he cut the most gung-ho repatriate figure to be found in the collection. Billy acknowledges in his ghostly colloquy with Milagros that he liked America so much he only left "so I could re-create it here" (305). One of his intended re-creations was suburban living, which Billy tried to approximate in a housing division of his design. A grimmer innovation was the Cold-War style fallout or bomb shelter, two of which he installed on his own property, to play a role in the plot later. However, Billy's infatuation with America hit an abrupt end with the Vietnam War. As a volunteer with a Filipino civic action group, he came to witness firsthand civilian deaths, crop destruction, and prisoner torture. He went AWOL from his organization and came to regard his housing development and "everything [he'd] believed…a complete lie" (279). Eventually he either killed himself (the claim of the Marcos regime) or fell victim to government reprisal (Jim's suspicion).

Curiously, Billy Batanglobo's pivot reflects the one that Milagros undergoes, more gradually, in the opposite direction. Reacting to the kidnapping and eventual killing of her first-born child, Jaime, in an effort by the regime to silence Jim's critical reporting, she begins to entertain the possibility of leaving for greener pastures, after all. "YOUR CAP IS A PASSPORT" (293) proclaims a brochure handed her by a fellow nurse from the strike days. Billy, or the projection of him that speaks for part of Milagros' mind, now remonstrates with her. At first, the push back is gentle: "You can leave a place, but places have a way of not leaving you" (305). But then, as if drawing on his eventual alienation from the American alternative, he becomes more insistent, calling her a "defector," comparing her with the regime generals who will go into exile "without a scratch" (329), and most pointedly reminding her of the daughter she will leave behind. While she protests that he has read her wrong, in the end Milagros cuts her ties and plans to depart for what she had once half-mockingly described as "that shiny, organized place where the buses run on schedule and the bosses pay you well" (293).

Why the turnaround? It does seem possible to see this as less a cultural and political than a personal decision, a rejection of Jim as a husband and a human being. But Milagros herself says that "Jim is not the one—at least not primarily the one" she blames for her son's fate (347). Exactly where that blame lies is not explicitly stated. But in her silent consideration of Jim's appeal for a reconciliation, she trains her gaze precisely toward the level of culture and politics, that is, nationality. Even if things could be better between them, "this country [would] still [be] the country that took everything away." And she repeats that emphasis in her stated reply: "'Jim*…I* *am leaving the country"* (346). So it appears that at length she has come to conclude that her metaphorical parent's condition is a hopeless one, and that migration is for her.

Now, to determine whether this course should be understood as a selfish and cowardly or a liberating and hopeful one, we will probably need to await Alvar's projected novel following Milagros' life in the States. But it seems clear, to trade on the assessment the character makes of the reply she gives to her husband' promise of a reformed marriage—"a serious answer to a serious offer" (346)—that this and other stories in the current collection present a serious exploration of serious theme: Philippine-American relations extending from the political and cultural to the personal level, and back again. It is also apparent that the exploration yields markedly different outcomes, suggesting that it is driven more by imaginative than ideological imperatives, reflecting a working out of possibilities inherent in fully realized fictional characters and their situations.

Struggle

A Filipino artist of the short story in an earlier period, Amador T. Daguio, recollected of his starting out in the 1920s:

> I began to see possibilities in the suffering and miseries of my lonely and repressed boyhood…and the struggles of the poor around people around me. I wish[ed] to write about the poor and the ambitious, therefore of the majesty of life, the search for man's meaning in this world" (qtd. in Abad, vol. 1 xxiii).

In this reflection Daguio articulated not only his own aims as writer but an enduring theme in Philippine literature, and the last to be considered in this discussion: struggle. As with the other themes that have previously been taken up (with the exception of the most recent, the Fil-Am), struggle is a universal, of experience and expression. Nevertheless, in a country in which, even today the human subjects a fiction writer like Butch Dalisay feels most closely around him are those "for whom a gas-stove explosion or a case of diabetes could set a whole family back by one generation of social mobility" (par. 7), it is an indispensable focus. Arguably no assessment of *In the Country*'s claim to the attention of Filipino readers is complete without a comparison by this measuring rod.

Before proceeding to the comparison, two additional points need to be made regarding the theme. First of all, a given instance of struggle need not be exclusively directed toward an economic end. As Daguio's reference to his "lonely and depressed" personal existence implies, the striver might just as well be poor in love or poor in spirit, or in some other of life's needs, and the gap between the depth of the deprivation and the strength of the "ambition" equally capable of energizing the current of human "majesty." Second, especially in Philippine context, the struggle does not always, or even usually, succeed. This was borne in on me personally first when teaching an American story whose unhappy outcome typically shocked American students but which a class of Filipinos anticipated as a matter of course, and then in my study of "repatriate" protagonists, who uniformly fell short of realizing the projects that animated their return to the homeland. It has seemed to me that Philippine fiction is often written in what Northrop Frye has called the "ironic mode," where the hero is "inferior in power" to what the reader presumes as their own, and "we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity" (33)—without, it should be added, any necessary diminution of the dignity or even the majesty of the hero's character.

This being said, some sixteen of *Philippine Stories*, or slightly less than a quarter of the total, explore the theme of struggle, of varying kinds, and of them over half end in the failure, frustration, or even death of the striver. Some of these are tales of downward socioeconomic mobility. For example, the narrator-protagonist of "Burgundy" sets out to escape the poverty into which he was born by going off to Saudi, then by following a three-year plan drawn up by his next employers, only to fall by the end of the story into a dead-end job, as a night watchman. B.S. Agbayani Pastor's "An Act of Kindness" tells of a young girl selling cigarettes on the streets, whose situation is so unremittingly grim that an older man's decision not to intervene in her suicide warrants the characterization conferred upon it in the story's title (Abad, vol. 1 18-28). But perhaps the best worked-out examples in these volumes of the struggle theme involve love. (For that matter, Lino's descent in "Burgundy" is triggered by unrequited love and the death of its object, Ma'am Seling; and the young girl of "Kindness" seems to have been pushed over the edge by the return to the provinces of a boy her age whose company had been her only comfort.) So in the interests of time (if it is not already too late to serve them) let us take up only two of those examples, stories not otherwise discussed in this section, and then proceed to the comparative analysis of Alvar's work.

A classic story of failed struggle is told in Aurelio Pena's "The Apartment." Isidro Bato has been doing quite well for himself financially since leaving the provincial town of Mati, running a small business in Davao City. But his departure from Mati was occasioned by a hurt in love, when his wife proved unfaithful with a visiting ship captain. Isidro left quietly but can't free his mind from the children, wife—and ship captain—left behind. He finds himself tormented by "fits of depression" (181) and dreams or fantasies of death. In an especially telling one of the latter, he imagines his tomb, surrounded by *ipil-ipil* trees, which the wife, Carmela, had for some reason hated.

The character's solitary life takes a turn when he meets three young women, one of them a niece. These girls are struggling economically, working in a Chinese department store (from which one is about to be fired) and sharing a dingy room in a squatter area. To give them some hope, Isidro tells them he's thinking of looking for an apartment. As they jump at this possibility of an upgrade, he suddenly feels like a father again, concerned for the younger folks' safety and health.

However, it is his identity as a husband that gets rekindled when he begins to be sexually attracted to one of the girls: Edna, like Carmela, a tall *morena*. After a sleepy, half-accidental coupling at a beach resort to which he has brought the three friends, Isidro's feelings escalate. Getting the apartment, for which he has to this point been looking for only half-heartedly, takes on a sudden urgency, "because of her" (187). But this renewal of amorous interest—unabetted by any further contact between the two--receives an abrupt check when Edna invites to the apartment a young male friend, an engineer, who it turns out is financing her move to Cebu after her firing from the department store has become official. Isidro doesn't show any reaction to what he feels as a reprise of his wife's betrayal, but he is clearly crushed. Leaving the apartment after turning it over to the remaining two tenants, he turns back to see over the roof of the building a symbol of his defeat: a "crescent moon…struggling against a slow dark cloud which had begun to swallow it" (190). He also notices for the first time that the trees around the apartment are all *ipil-ipils*, an allusion to the earlier tomb fantasy which suggests that in some sense life is now over for him.

Evidence that in *Philippine Stories* struggle does not always end in defeat comes from Carljoe Javier's "Everybody Gets Off at Cubao." Main character Billy does not appear to have any romantic failures equivalent to Isidro's behind him. On the other hand, past successes do not seem likely, either, for this severely bespectacled young man with his head full of the heroes who inhabit the comics he sells. But Billy is realist enough to know that "these [aren't] days for heroes" gifted with the magical powers to save young ladies in distress and the "cool…to say the right things" to them afterward (Abad, vol. 2 474). And he is realist enough to know that he is struggling in his life. His comic book business (which is also his repatriate "adventure" [476] to the Philippines) is barely breaking even, he has been unable to connect with friends from childhood, and he feels himself a superhero in free fall without a cape, "alone, plummeting now and flailing his arms, grasping for something or someone to hold on to" (477).

In fact, Billy has already identified a potentially saving "someone": a young woman with shoulder-length straight hair highlighted at the tips, with whom he has been sharing the MRT ride home for six months. During that time, while he's fantasized coming heroically to her rescue, the closest to a cool, right thing he has come up with to say to this damsel is the story's title phrase, drawing a one-word reply: "Yep" (474). So disgruntled is he with the lameness of that line that while mutteringly repeating it he slaps himself, hard enough to send his glasses flying. In addition to the dissatisfaction with his timidity in this matter, Billy is down on himself for the way he lets the other passengers bump and push him out the way in the rush to board the train. This leads him to wonder, in shades of Isidro, what it would be like to jump down on the tracks with the train coming or, alternatively, to launch a supervillain-style rampage against these aggressive fellow commuters (Isidro had also had thoughts about killing his wife and the sea captain).

Shortly after these musings, Billy experiences his real-life low point. Totally stampeded by the unruly crowd, he loses his glasses once again, then his footing, and finds himself crawling, "blind and helpless" (481), on the platform. Tears spring to his eyes, "as if he had been unmasked," and snot from his nose mingles with the tears as he continues a futile search for his glasses. Much of "Everyone Gets Off at Cubao" is comic in tone, but this moment registers a full measure of Frye's ironic mode: the hero powerless, the reader looking down on a spectacle of "bondage, frustration, and absurdity." Yet it is also the moment when the hero himself is rescued: by the damsel, she of the highlighted hair and the crisp "Yep," who touches his shoulder and hands him his glasses. Still, his vision restored and the rescuer recognized, eloquence once again fails Billy. He can only stammer and offer a feeble smile, before rushing off to clean himself up. All that sleepless night he weighs his mortification against the hope engendered by the possibility of her having been intentionally looking out for him.

The following day, determined at least to convey a proper thank you, he waves aside a potentially action-defeating hero fantasy and bulls his way through carloads of other passengers to where she is standing. A conversation ensues, in which Billy says nothing super-cool but shows his interest and draws from the young lady her name (Janice), the tacit admission that she has been noticing him for as long as he her, and even a repeat-back of what he had taken to be his utterly unmemorable line. This last is offered to signal her own unaccustomed getting off the train at Cubao. But the early departure is accompanied by a promise which, delivered with her characteristic matter-of-factness, allows Billy, with his characteristically active imagination, to start filling in an empty comics page in his head with thoughts of "Tomorrow" (485).

And how does *In the Country* bear in comparison with *Philippine Stories* on the score of this venerable literary theme? Six of the entries in Alvar's collection treat instances of struggle, with varying degrees of directness and to different outcomes. The closest counterpart to Javier's "Everybody Gets Off at Cubao" is likely "The Virgin of Monte Ramon," which has been discussed in several contexts already. Certainly Danny's situation lies more consistently and more viscerally in the ironic mode than does Billy's. But other details are quite similar: fantasied magical powers (attributed to a mythical beast, in the one case, to caped superheroes, in the other), and a love connection with an unconventional female willing to do her share of rescuing. And the endings are very much the same, in triumph or at least in hope, rather than defeat and despair. Danny's is accompanied by an epiphany, a passage quoted earlier, which names and universalizes the theme. It "wasn't easy," he concedes, to dance the *kuratsa* with Annelise in the quagmire produced by the pouring rain. "But for one brief moment, I saw a world where everyone was struggling in the body he or she had been given. That world and that struggle seemed bearable to me, and even beautiful" (153-54).

Alvar also enters stories of struggle on the other side of the ledger. The most abject defeat actually befalls her only American protagonist. "The Legend of the White Lady's" Alice Anders comes to Manila hoping to revive her modeling career, only to be sent packing by the agency, given the cold shoulder by her romantic interest, and reduced to spending her final moment in the country contriving how to make her image disappear. But leaving aside the question whether an American character's enacting it cancels out any Philippine quality to the theme, a more nuanced and, to Filipino readers, potentially more relevant fictionalization of struggle may be found in "The Miracle Worker."

This story is an unusually complicated one, containing a sizable number of moving parts even by Alvar's standards. But by focusing on the main plot line, in which aspirations play out along an axis of servant vs. professional occupational status, a compelling tale of "bondage, frustration, and absurdity" can be made out. Protagonist Sally Riva grew up "poor and Catholic" (29), her mother either a servant or of some comparably menial occupation. But that mother had a plan for a "better life" (59) for her daughter, which Sally has attempted to fulfill by entering a professional career in the field of special education. At the time the story opens, though, she has seemingly left behind her teaching days in Philippines to accompany her engineer husband, Ed, to an opportunity in the oil fields of Bahrain.

Yet while Sally seems to have made it, become a woman of leisure in a comfortable home provided by the Arab petroleum company, ambiguities concerning her status persist. A Filipina maid, whose posture and manner of "servitude" (34) Sally takes to resemble her own mother's, asks her in a public market, "Who is your *amo*" (33), meaning, master or employer? In larger perspective, a former boyfriend had criticized the government's rush to export contract workers abroad, arguing that a "peasant [is] a peasant [is] a peasant, whether on the rice fields or the oil fields" (29). And in another case of mistaken personal identity, yet with national implications, the story circulates among the OFW's of the wife of the Philippine ambassador having been ordered out of the Dubai country club swimming pool, on grounds that "no domestic helpers [are] allowed" (34).

As it happens, it is the mistaken maid who makes the connection with her *amo* that puts Sally back to work and sets off a complex reckoning with her economic and social place in the world. Mrs. Mansour is the mother of a severely handicapped child, whom she brings to Sally in hopes that "Teacher," as she always refers to her, can play the role of Annie Sullivan to Helen Keller alluded to in the story's title, "The Miracle Worker." Sally accepts the challenge, partly to feel "useful" (47) again and partly because the money (to which Mrs. Mansour adds extravagant gifts from her weekend shopping trips to European cities) is lucrative. But she omits the customary special education teacher's protocol of setting of "realistic expectations" for the parent(s), and Mrs. M., who literally does believe in miracles where her daughter is concerned, is left to entertain visions of bilingual competence and symphonic conducting in the future of a child who cannot communicate and shows little responsiveness of any kind.

The work with Aroush, as the girl is named, yields limited but real gains, and an unexpected result: a growing affection on the part of the teacher for her pupil. This feeling leads Sally to realize that she would like to have a child of her own, which drives a wedge between her and Ed, who is perfectly satisfied with their childless marriage (and who for this and other reasons joins the rolls of feckless middle-class husbands in Alvar's collection). It also leads her to question the charade she is maintaining with Mrs. Mansour. "Com[ing] clean" (56) however, proves difficult to do, in part owing to the power she believes her professional expertise gives her in this situation, with a parent who punctiliously recognizes that expertise, at one point drawing a line between Sally's services and that of a mere "baby nurse" (55). "Mrs. Mansour was the first mother I had known to put herself at my mercy. I saw more clearly…the damage I could do, her dependence on what I chose to say" (56).

In the end, though, our protagonist determines to carry out what both professional duty and personal ethics urge upon her—only to discover that the relationship between her and Mrs. Mansour does not answer to the preconception she has formed of it. The scene is the compound swimming pool, where "Teacher" has declared a "Parents' Day" (59) of one, to demonstrate some of Aroush's distinctly modest accomplishments and to use these as a basis for speaking frankly to the mother. In a brilliant image, the "sun wink[s] in a million facets off the water," hurting Sally's eyes "as if they'd been blinded and gained total clarity all at once" (60). Thus equivocally illuminated, she pushes forward with the truth:

> Please listen, Mrs. Mansour. Aroush is not Helen Keller, and I'm no Annie Sullivan. She won't write books or cure cancer. But I can teach her to hold objects, to communicate without words, to recognize sounds, even shapes… (61).

But her listener does not appear "damaged," or even budged, by this straight talk. "Cut[ting] a terribly elegant figure" beside the pool in which Sally is immersed, like the Philippine ambassador's wife before her, Mrs. Mansour draws the line of expertise above rather than below her employee's occupation: "'Now you are doctor, as well as Teacher" (61)? And she simply chooses not to believe what the teacher has told her. With a "cheery finality" she lowers her sunglasses, previously raised to take in the day, back over her eyes. Therby she issues "a warning I understood: that whatever I wished to illuminate, she was happy in the dark" (62). Sally simultaneously understands her own position. If she wants to keep Aroush in her life, she will have to continue providing services on false pretenses. "What I had thought was deception was my duty" (62). With darkness now covering not only Mrs. Mansour's eyes, but her own earlier, blinding revelation, much like the clouds "swallow" the moon over Isidro Bato's head, Sally comes to realize that her struggle for a fundamentally different place in the world than her mother or her maid friend occupied, has come to an ironic end. The illusion of a professionalism transcending wealth and class extinguished, the teacher adopts her equivalents of the posture and manner of subservience: "I held my tongue and treaded water, looking up at where Mrs. Mansour's eyes were hidden from me. From a distance perfect strangers could assume that Mrs. Mansour was my *amo*, and I was the servant at her feet" (62).

Now, more could probably be said on this matter of servitude and the responses to it in Alvar's stories. Not all those responses align with Sally Riva's. Think, for example, of the mother in "The Kontrabida," who breaks free of a lifetime of subservience with a dramatic and coldly calculating act of vengeance; or of "Shadow Families'" Baby, who does not so much rebel against as refuse to be defined by her station, maintaining the sovereignty of her island-like self. Indeed, it would seem to constitute a distinct theme of *In the Country*, albeit related to others that have been discussed, e.g., gender, class, struggle, and even Fil-Am relations (consider the different stances adopted toward their American love interests by Esmeralda and "White Lady's" Jorge Delgado). What's more, the perceptual link established in "The Miracle Worker" between servitude and nationhood suggests the relevance the theme may carry for whatever larger "portraiture" is being drawn within the collection. But as this interest does not appear to find an exact match among *Philippine Stories*, and as this section of the essay has already extended well beyond its planned boundaries, it will be best to offer here a brief summary of the themes that have lent themselves to comparison.

As in the areas that have been investigated previously, findings from the thematic comparisons are subject to interpretation. Clearly, differences are manifest in the treatment of specific themes, and a number of them appear to correlate with generally acknowledged differences in the two national cultures. A good many Philippine stories embrace of folk and spectral expressions of supernaturalism, while Alvar holds to a scientifically tethered iteral realism, even in her “ghost” tales. *In the Country* features numerous female characters, imbued with the spirit of Western-style feminism, rebelling against their husbands and the family responsibilities thrust upon them. Filipino short fictionists tend to take a less conflictual view of gender relations but see more of a battle line running through class distinctions, possibly owing—if Alfar’s “Aquilone du Estrellas” may be taken as a vector—to the legacy of a hierarchical Spanish social structure. Alvar’s stories are more apt to find something to admire in American characters and values, whereas Philippine narrative, perhaps reacting to a more proximate legacy of colonial and neocolonial hegemony, is inclined to look askance at anything tinted red, white, and blue.

In other respects, though, the two collections of work seem to be effectively in synch: in the treatment of religion, for example, or of unhappy family situations; in Alvar’s willingness to let her stories take a postcolonial turn, presenting presumed American superiorities as superficialities or worse, and validating sturdy, sensible Filipino resistance to them; and in the more or less even-handed representation of struggle’s outcomes, frustrated or triumphant. Equally noteworthy, perhaps, as these specific divergences and convergences, is the concordance evident around the larger set of themes. Granted, spiritual matters, family and gender, class, and struggle—all but Fil-Am matters, really—are to some extent universal concerns of literature. But this particular combination, which stands out quite clearly in the anthologized Philippine stories, may be a distinctive one. And, to extend what was said about Alvar’s penchant for the ghost story vis-à-vis other practitioners of realistic fiction, it would be at the very least unusual to find other American-based writers focused as intently as she appears to be on exploring these particular themes.

At the same time, of course, it has just been suggested that one theme repeatedly explored in *In the Country*, servitude and the responses to it, does not appear to be precisely matched in Philippine stories. This raises the possibility that the interest is something that Alvar brings to her material for idiosyncratic reasons, or out of her American background. Indeed, as I recall it now, attentiveness to the situation of servants in Philippine social life is one of the few aspects of Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* that drew a reaction from my students in that long ago class: a reaction either of incredulity that the matter would be seen as important enough for fictional comment, or unwillingness to credit that the comment had actually been made. So it may be that, while the concordance of themes is striking, a cultural disjunction manifests itself at this level, as well.

Conclusion and Further Recommendations

If the findings under all headings of this inquiry—cultural appropriation, authorial identity, setting, language, and thematic comparison—are open to interpretation, the task of interpretation falls to the "best interpreters," as Abad puts it: Filipino readers. This was the assurance offered at the outset of the essay. These readers are to be both judge and jury over the evidence set forth here. It is theirs to determine whether the pattern of convergence or divergence is stronger in the thematic explorations of *In the Country* and Philippine stories; whether the English in which the former is written can reliably be distinguished from the language of the latter; whether Alvar's knowledge of Tagalog is canceled out by her distaste for *dinuguan*; whether the labor of research and feats of imagination that turned a "glimpse" of Manila in 1999, pearl-like, into an elaborately realized fictional world, outweigh the dearth of lived experience in the actual world represented by the fiction. It is also theirs to make determinations on the larger questions. Do these American-published stories deserve a place in any future anthologies of Philippine short fiction? Do they paint a "cultural portrait" in which a "nation, a diaspora, a…people" can see themselves, authentically and honestly? Do they have things to say that Filipinos can take to heart?

This may be the point to issue the reminder that the purpose of all this evidence gathering has been to support a recommendation for Filipino readers simply to read Mia Alvar's book. Doing so will allow them to add to their roles of judge and jury that of eyewitness, and will be the best assurance of a fully considered and balanced verdict. It will also allow for the "disconnect," between the book's reception in the US and in the Philippines, to be eased. And, of most immediate benefit, it will put those readers in the way of some fine stories, to be enjoyed for their own sake.

This is also the point to recall that a further recommendation was promised at the start of things. This one, too, is aimed at healing a disconnect, and bringing good stories within range of a readers who have not had the benefit of them. Had this proposition not already been indicated in the title and the introductory section, the just completed discussion of themes would have tipped off what is coming. For although Alvar's work is the ostensible focus of the comparison, Philippine stories receive here very nearly the same amount of detailed critical attention as those in her collection. This was far from the original intention. In fact, I first planned to write a review essay of *In the Country*, urging its claims on Filipino readers and even as Philippine literature, with no more instructed sense of that body of writing than the blurred and partial idea gained from occasional past forays into it. Even after discovering Abad's anthology and with it the error of my presumption, I only imagined using the entries in those volumes as more or less collective and anonymous markers of "Filipino-ness in fiction"—having something of the function, in the comparison, of the unidentified voice in Alvar's "Shadow Families," blandly expressing the conventional standards of that community.

But as I became more deeply involved in the analysis, individual stories from the anthology began to take on something like the sharp edges of Baby's personality, demanding to be taken seriously on their own terms. Numbers of them sprung into vivid life before my eyes. Not a few of them lifted me up and away, like Ma. Isabella's marvelous kite. I discovered myself shedding tears, laughing out loud, and testing the patience of family and friends with detailed plot summaries. In terms of the evolving study, I found it no longer enough to be extracting generalized qualities from these works; it became necessary to move inside them, to engage with the particularities of their designs, language, meanings. This has led, I hope, not only to a more specific but a deeper and more authentic comparative understanding, than would have been possible from a more schematic view. It has also led to a personal recognition that the "literary merit" Matt Ortile felt would commend *In the Country* to Filipino readers belongs also to home-grown stories. And it leads to this essay's second recommendation, that American readers open themselves to short fiction by Filipino authors.

Nor is this endorsement, any more than the one in Alvar's favor, made solely on literary grounds. The Philippine stories offer cultural payoffs, as well, to an American audience, although the "portraiture" in this case would not hold up a reflection of their own reality but rather that of another people and culture. That said, Filipinos are not the Other, not exactly strangers in this case. In doing this reading Americans would be learning about the life of a nation whose history is deeply entangled with their own. They will see everywhere the influence of their own ways. They should be able to feel a palpable bond with writers who struggle to express their meanings in a shared tongue. At the same time, of course, they will sense the rooted presence of mores and traditions very much "other" from what they know. And they will detect subtle but inexorable movement away from old colonial and neo-colonial ties toward genuine literary and cultural independence—one hallmark of which may surely be found in the quality of this body of stories. Beyond such markers of larger significance, though, and more than anything else in these stories they will find fictional representation of people living their lives, struggling, failing, and triumphing in ways which, whether they be culturally similar or different are humanly akin to their own. Such an encounter may allow those readers, to reverse the phrasing of a defender of fiction quoted earlier, to "marry… an intense curiosity about others" to a "deep interior knowledge."

But if there is this parallel, there is also a decided asymmetry between the two recommendations. If I were to ask random colleagues in the US the same questions about Philippine short fiction that I posed to Filipino colleagues regarding *In the Country,* i.e. "Have you read…Have you heard of…?" the result would be a far higher percentage head shakes and blank looks. That's because the disconnect between potential reader and work is more pronounced in this case. While Alvar's book was promoted and at least remains available in the Philippines, courtesy of whatever cooperative arrangement was struck between NBS and her publisher, short stories by Filipino authors (with the exception of a couple that have appeared over the years in the *Atlantic*) enjoy no such profile in the United States. A number of novels and a few volumes of poetry have debuted, but no anthology of short fiction from the archipelago has been published in the US since Leonard Casper's *Modern Philippine Short Stories*, in 1962—a book long since out of print. True, there is Amazon (and other clearinghouses on the internet), but without the marketing muscle of a domestic publisher, a book listing might as well not exist for American literary consumers. As long as this state of affairs continues, any appeal to such consumers to make room in their reading for this unfamiliar genre must ring hollow.

While this circumstance might seem an argument for retracting the appeal, in fact it prompts a still further recommendation, one hinted rather than placed directly on the table at the outset: bring out a book of Philippine stories in the United States. That will eliminate any (valid) excuses on the part of American readers. But is this call, which would need to be answered by the publishing industry, any more realistic, less hollow, than the one that preceded it? Here are a few points to consider. On the face of it, the disconnect in question appears a vacuum waiting to be filled. The market for short stories, which are regarded as something of an American specialty (March-Russell 56, 83), is generally strong in the US. What's more, by testimony of practitioners from past to present, the short story is a preferred genre among Filipino fictionists, as well (Hidalgo 13, 59; Dalisay conversation)—a marker, perhaps, of a significant parallel between the two literary cultures. What has prevented this natural complementarity from being recognized as a business opportunity? Actually, a larger factor has entered in here and would need to be taken into account in any approach to a prospective publisher. Not only Philippine, but "postcolonial" short fiction in general has been given relatively little notice in the US, perhaps in part due to the strong push to recognize the work of domestic minorities (March-Russell 86). But one can imagine turning this deficit to account, by arguing that an anthology of stories from one postcolonial setting could open the way into this largely uncharted but potentially expansive new marketing territory. What's more, since it is the major trade presses that stand the best chance of exploiting such a market, it might make sense to propose the idea first to a major player, on the order of Alvar's Penguin Random House. For that matter, perhaps right of first refusal should be offered to that very publisher, to allow them to capitalize on the success of *In the Country* (and, more distantly, *Dogeaters*, which the same root company brought out twenty-five years before). Suggesting publication in calendar year 2022, the fiftieth anniversary of Casper's volume, just might put the icing on the cake.

Yes, but what of likely audience interest in such an anthology? Selling is the main selling point to make to commercial publishers, and readers who buy are not necessarily interested in closing gaps and redressing imbalances. They need to be drawn to a particular book or type of literature, and then to like it enough to influence others to give it a try. On this score, no doubt some serious market testing would be in order. But here, too, Alvar's example can prove instructive. Among those posting their reactions to her collection on the *Goodreads* site, a good many sincerely believed themselves to be reading a work of Philippine literature. And they waxed enthusiastic about it, in some cases wildly so; a few commented how little they had previously known of this other culture and how grateful they were to these stories for so vividly informing them about it. Needless to say, the aficionados of *Goodreads* constitute a small and perhaps atypical sample. Certainly it might prove difficult, even with a more extensive data set and the other savvy pitches that have been trotted out, to persuade a major commercial house to take a risk on this venture.

Not the end of the world. If a Big Five publisher doesn't bite, we simply fall back and approach an independent or academic press, enterprises less focused on the bottom line, which publish the majority of short fiction anthologies in the US (March-Russell 49). The first run may be smaller, and the volume less likely to attract reviews from *The New York Times* and National Public Radio. But who knows? With a push from the *Goodreads* crowd that gave *In the Country* a bump, and maybe word of an over-the-top response to a cooperative release in the Philippines (something stronger, anyway, than Alvar and National Bookstore received), a buzz starts up, a second printing rolls out, an audiobook goes in the works, Netflix shows interest in adapting select pieces for a series on their streaming service and…recommendation 2 gets fulfilled: Americans get to know Philippine short stories.

Of course, recommendation 3, the precondition for 2, has not yet landed on a publisher's desk, and so for the time being this recommendation lies in the hands of the recommender. But I welcome help in preparing a package of materials for submission; the hope of having more hands involved is what emboldened me to slip into the pronoun "we" in the preceding paragraph. In fact, I have offers of assistance on the task from some of the notables in Philippine letters who have been referenced here, and I am grateful to them. Yet others can give input, too. Among the questions to be resolved is the scope of the anthology. Should it include stories from all periods of Philippine literature in English, going back to Marquez-Benitez, Arguilla, Daguio, Joaquin, Gonzalez, Jose, Rosca…or focus on the more recent decades covered in the *Hoard of Thunder* volumes drawn from for this essay? Are there still more recent works that might deserve inclusion? And, not to aggravate a sore subject, what about Alvar? Does the question of her status, as a Filipino, American, or Filipino-American writer fall under a different light, or not, when a book like this, rather than a follow-on anthology to be published in the Philippines, is in consideration? As for getting suggestions to me, let us make it simple. Here is my email address: burnsgt@franklinpierce.edu. I look forward to hearing from any who still have the energy, having sat this far through the discussion of it, to step up and take a practical turn with the matter at hand.

For no number of recommendations will heal the disconnects that have been identified here. Only acting on the recommendations will. So Filipino readers, give Mia Alvar another chance, and see what you think. American readers, if there be any, your time to read Philippine stories may come. Meanwhile, bear in mind that a number of your countrymen who, rightly or wrongly, took Alvar to be Filipino writer, loved her. And those who wish to help get the proposed new volume to press, so that it can come into the hands of the Americans, hit that email link, roll up your sleeves, and let's set to work.

Notes

1. In spite of repeated requests to representatives of National Bookstore and Vintage Random House (Asia), I was unable to acquire definitive information on Philippine sales of *In the Country.* In consequence, I am left to rely on the anecdotal evidence that appears below in the text for judging that the reception of the book in the Philippines has been less than rousing.
2. Closer in time to *In the Country* than *Dogeaters* came Fil-Am author Lysley Tenorio's short story collection *Monstress* (2012), another work which received praise in the US but does not appear to have made an appreciable impact in the Philippines (at least, it was not mentioned in any PH interviews with Alvar, or by the literati whom I consulted, as a precedent to her efforts). Although the fictional worlds Tenorio creates are more Filipino-American than Alvar's in their centers of gravity, they do feature Philippine settings and Filipino characters. Perhaps because the publisher in this case (HarperCollins' Ecco imprint) did not actively promote the book in the Philippines, *Monstress* seems not even to have entered the field of controversy over what qualifies as national literature. However, a more recent entry may be enjoying a somewhat different fate. US-based Randy Ribay's young adult novel, *Patron Saints of Nothing* (2019), has found an audience in the country to which its Filipino-American protagonist travels on a mission. One reviewer on YouTube gushed, in very much the terms Matt Ortile had expected Alvar's work to be received, that the publication of *Patron Saints* by a Big Five US house "means our story, our people, our country will be given an international spotlight. My country is being represented" ("Patron Saints…"). In the testimony of this admittedly unsophisticated commentator, at least, no barriers are being raised against the relevance of an American-raised and American-published author's perspective on the Philippines. A more savvy set of comments to a Facebook posting do suggest that Ribay's book, while supported by a comparatively modest marketing campaign (but addressing a topical concern, the Duterte drug war), has succeeded in creating the buzz among Filipino readers that Alvar's stories did not achieve. Still, one of the comments on this thread strikes a familiar chord: "I wanted to like it, but it seems to be written more for Western audiences" (Pantoja Hidalgo, Randy Ribay). No doubt few things change fundamentally overnight. Still, a recent communication from a Manila colleague suggests that judgments of what does or does not constitute Filipino writing may be more complex and evolving than my brief survey of attitudes led me to presume. If so, then the underlying aims of this essay may already be in process of realization.
3. It turns out that this "unimpeachable" standing is not universally acknowledged. Concerns have been raised regarding the determination of what is and

is not Philippine literature from the other side, as it were, with Abad's selection coming under question for being Manila-centric, insufficiently attentive to the work of fictionists from the provincial areas of the country. See Monica Macansantos, "Becoming a Writer: The Silence We Write Against."

4. As this essay was headed to press, another literary controversy, bridging issues of cultural appropriation and those of identity/authenticity currently under discussion in the text, broke out in the United States. A novel titled *American Dirt*, the story of a tumultuous flight to refuge in the US by a Mexican woman and her daughter "seemed poised," according to the *New York Times*, "to become one of this year's biggest, buzziest books" Oprah Winfrey selected the novel for her prestigious book club and made plans to interview the author on the border between the two countries (Schuessler and Alter par. 1-2, 5). But reviewers and other advance readers began to voice resistance to the work, by a writer distant from the experience depicted: Jeanine Cummins, "Latino" only by virtue of a Puerto Rican grandmother, whose understanding of Mexico and the migrant experience appears to have come from "five years of research" and whatever imaginative investment she was able to make in the material. One such reader, with direct family ties to Mexico and a journalistic record of interviewing refugees from there, reports having wanted "to see myself in this book," but finding in it "all these things that constantly make us feel small" and coming away from it with the sensation of her "skin…crawling" (Martin par.1-2, 4, 6-8) At the same time, a bookseller in the border city of San Diego maintains there has been no pushback from customers and that the most disturbing reaction has been the "vitriol…in some critiques" (Schuessler and Alter par. 25). So the beat goes on, and the issues raised by the Filipino writers remain relevant.
5. The basic criterion for comparison appears in the top row left, followed to the right by specific categories. The left-hand column holds the two "samples," i.e. the stories in Abad's anthology and Alvar's collection. The data displayed in the interior cells consists of both a percentage (in **bold**), allowing for the most direct comparison between the very differently sized samples, and an absolute number (in plain type and parentheses), offering a check on the weight to be placed on the percentage values—the "statistics of small numbers" being not the most reliable of mathematical indicators. One seeming oddity might be the presence of decimal values. These reflect ambiguous cases, when the setting, in this case, is not clearly identified or unitary. Here, for example, a story whose individual and company names sound American but whose geographic setting is otherwise not specified figured as a .5 for the US category and .5 for Other, while another whose backstory is set largely in China split a point between Other and Philippines.
6. Clifford Palanca, "The Apartment." Abad, ed. *Hoard of Thunder* vol. 1: 224-225.
7. Alvar, "A Contract Overseas." *In the Country* 235.

8. The use of Filipino words and phrases I take to be primarily a matter of intended audience, previously addressed. For the record, Alvar introduces quite a number of Filipino terms but commonly—not always—provides a translation or explanatory clues within the context. *Philippine Stories* writers use such terms more regularly, once in a great while breaking out into something approaching the code- shifting that marks a good deal of everyday speech among educated urban-dwellers in the Philippines (*Hoard* vol. 1 273). These writers tend also not to offer any assistance to understanding—although an exception is made by none other than NVM Gonzalez (*Hoard* vol. 1 121).
9. Bobby Flores-Villasis, "Menandro's Boulevard." Abad, ed. *Hoard of Thunder* vol. 1: 168.
10. Alvar, "The Virgin of Monte Ramon." *In the Country* 153.
11. Alvar, "Esmeralda." *In the Country* 171.
12. Timothy R. Montes, "Under the Wave." Abad, ed. *Hoard of Thunder* vol. 2: 585.
13. Jessica Zafra, "Portents." Abad, ed. *Hoard of Thunder* vol. 1: 50.
14. Alvar, "Esmeralda." *In the Country* 178.
15. Dean Francis Alfar, "L'Aquilone du Estrellas." Abad, ed. *Hoard of Thunder* vol. 2: 127.
16. Alvar, "In the Country." *In the Country* 291.
17. Among other developments, there has been a push on the one hand to construe theme as an abstract proposition, analogous to a thesis in argumentative writing (Griffith 40-41), and on the other to understand it as a more diffuse feature, manifesting itself it not only in relation to the subject but the form of a work (Childs and Fowler 239).
18. The super-unit of families in this story constitutes an example of a "chosen" family, in which "nonbiological kinship bonds" unite people for purposes of "mutual support and love" [Gates par. 1]. Familiar in American pop culture and fiction, the chosen family also makes appearances in the Philippine anthology, notably Eric Gamalinda's "Fear of Heights" and Butch Dalisay's "Some Families, Very Large."
19. Here is another plot point apparently supported by Alvar's research, in this instance into the case of Primitivo Mijares and his son "Boyet," abducted, tortured, and killed by the regime in retaliation for the father's critical journalistic writings. I am indebted to my former UP student, Monica Macansantos, and to her mother Priscilla S. Macansantos, for recognition of this probable source (which is in fact more complicated than this brief summary can convey ["Conjugal Dictatorship"]).

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