

Gabriela Lee on Reading Cinderella in the Philippines

Hopkins Press Podcast Transcript

Season 3 Episode 1

11 April 2024

Rahne Alexander

Gabriela, welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast.

Gabriela Lee

Hello, thank you so much for having me here.

Rahne Alexander

It's a pleasure to have you here, and we're relaunching the podcast with you, which I'm very excited to do. The reason that I wanted to talk with you to relaunch it is that a few weeks ago, we publicized your article on the Hopkins Press social media outlets, and it kind of went viral. We're used to seeing a few likes and shares, you know, maybe a couple dozen, for really popular posts, but you got hundreds and hundreds of likes and shares, especially on Facebook, which was marvelous to see. And it seemed to kind of break out of the academic sphere a little bit. And I wonder if you have any speculation as to why that might have been?

Gabriela Lee

I mean, part of my field is speculative fiction, so I guess that's one of the first things. I guess first of all, I have to clarify that I'm not on Facebook a lot. I have an account, but I haven't opened it in a few months. So when you first came to me and mentioned this particular fact, I was very surprised. This isn't the first time I have been published academically, but I don't recall anything I've written previously also getting this kind of online attention, and so that was a surprise for me too. But the more I thought about it, to a certain extent, it made sense for three reasons, at least in my mind.

The first is most of Philippine academia is on Facebook. It is the social media platform of choice, mostly because Facebook is free in the Philippines. And especially for those who live in places where internet access might not be as reliable, and it's more difficult to just get the signal and things like that, Facebook became, essentially, your digital third space in Philippine academia. So most academics I know do maintain a Facebook presence more than, say, on Twitter, or Instagram, or BlueSky, wherever. I guess that's why it's circulated very quickly.

The second was it was free. I think it was made free for a brief period of time, again, going back to access. Not a lot of our institutions subscribe to say, Project MUSE—again, mostly because of access or funding. And we all know that, to a certain extent, the humanities is usually the first one that gets hit with any kind of budget cuts, and that includes any kind of digital repository, much like Project MUSE and JSTOR and these kinds of very useful platforms that disseminate information, but are also

expensive to maintain or to keep track of. So the fact that it was free, I think, was also part of why it circulated quickly.

And the third is, I think, because — at least in my little corner of Philippine academia, the humanities, and creative writing and literature — we don't normally get a platform in journals outside of like area studies — so, Philippine studies, usually or Southeast Asian studies. We don't usually find purchase outside of these types of geographical areas, at least for journals. So that, plus the fact that children's literature is underexplored academic territory, I guess that was most probably the reason why it spread very quickly online.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, that's so cool. So really briefly, this is an article which traces the ways that the Cinderella myth was imported into the Philippines as a colonial project, but then, through a couple of channels became useful as an establishment of Philippine national identity, which I think is a fascinating trajectory. What prompted you to write this piece, and how does it fit in with your larger body of work?

Gabriela Lee

Oh, thank you. This wasn't just me, I wanted to quickly point out that it wasn't just me who did this on my own. I am indebted to four academic mentors who have helped forward this particular project. Obviously, Dr. Jill Coste who was the special editor of this particular journal issue of Children's Literature [Association] Quarterly, was instrumental in helping me develop the way I thought of this, what started as a conference presentation, toward the full article. So she was the one who kind of helped me think through editorially, from draft up until the version that we see right now, and it was also helped out by Dr. Nicole Constable over at the University of Pittsburgh, because she held an academic writing workshop class, in which this first began transforming, let's say, from ideas in my head into something that I was able to write down.

And then obviously, the Children's Literature and Childhood Studies area over at the English Department here at the University of Pittsburgh, especially with Dr. Courtney Weikle-Mills and Dr. Tyler Bickford, who encouraged me along the way and helped me with sources. But it was Dr. Weikle-Mills who engendered this paper, because she was the one who invited me for the conference presentation that started that this all in 2020. So she invited me as part of this panel she was putting together with the SHCY — Society for the History of Children and Youth. She invited me to present anything that I was interested in, that she generally had the theme of global mapping circuits of children's literature. So I thought about this project as tying into a larger research question that I had been kind of pursuing for a while, which is basically how Philippine children's literature was influenced by external literary trends or movements or contexts.

And in the presentation that I did for the conference, I talk more about global mapping: How do you trace these kinds of influences? How do you tease them out? And when we start talking about influence, especially literary influence, obviously it's very amorphous. And it's very much just trying to look at hints of how they might have appeared in finished products, such as books and primers and all of that. In that conference paper, which was, I think, just like 15 slides long—I just did slides for it, and notes—I talked more about not just Cinderella, but a couple of other stories, that kind of theme from

what we think of as the "Golden Age" or the "children's canon," essentially, and how they might have influenced stories in the Philippines, whether it's Filipino authors, or the way that they appear, the way they transform for an audience.

So because a lot of my work is situated at the intersections of Philippine literature and English, children's literature and speculative fiction, this project kind of hits on all of those three interests, but also became essentially what was my first exploration into more historical sources and contexts that led me to doing this PhD. So yeah, that's essentially the convoluted way of getting there. (laughs)

Rahne Alexander

But you're working your way through it as academics kind of tend to do, right? (laughs)

Gabriela Lee

Yeah. (laughs)

Rahne Alexander

Well, you talk in the article about the development of a Filipino children's literary canon, a lot through fairy tales and folk tales. Can you describe that more fully, and how Cinderella fits in? Are there other fairy tales that function similarly to Cinderella? Or do you think there's something unique to that narrative that strikes a chord in the Philippines?

Gabriela Lee

Oh, that's such a wonderful question. I don't think I am the be-all end-all of saying whether there is a development of a Philippine children's literary canon. Certainly there are canonical texts that we consider to be the genesis, if you're tracing it historically, the genesis of where we might pinpoint where a formal label such as "Philippine children's literature" would have started. And that's certainly part of what I'm working on right now, for my graduate degree, is essentially what might that mean, what might that term actually mean, in the first place?

There are a few chapters and books and so forth that imply that there are titles that are firmly considered to be part of the Philippine children's literary canon. So like, for instance, the Philippine National hero, Jose Rizal, who lived at the tail end of the 19th century, is widely regarded to be the author of the first Philippine children's book, a story, "The Monkey and the Turtle," which was published in, oh, gosh, I'm going to get dates wrong—in the 1860s or 1870's. But I know that it is published in a publication called Trubner's Oriental Record in London. And they know that he wrote this story called "The Monkey and the Turtle," which was based on existing folklore coming from the northern parts of the Philippines, in Ilocos. He wrote a version of it for his nieces and nephews, and he illustrated it himself. He also translated some of Hans Christian Andersen's work, into Tagalog, as well as a couple of other myths and legends essentially, and "The Monkey and the Turtle" is considered the first Philippine children's book, both in terms of its form, because it was illustrated and had text with it. And it was intended for his younger relatives, essentially, for his nieces and nephews. And that's actually even the basis—when this was published, contemporarily, this is when you celebrate Philippine National Children's Book Day, which is every third Tuesday in July, in celebration of Dr. Rizal's contribution. So that's an example of what could be considered canon children's literature in the Philippines.

But even before then, as far as I was able to ascertain, there were already Cinderella stories, or what could have been classified as Cinderella stories, prior to the American colonial period, except they weren't obviously called Cinderella stories at that time, because it was by word of mouth. And it was only recorded by American anthropologists when they came over to the Philippines as part of this bigger colonial project with like, the benevolent assimilation, etc. So they also went around the Philippines selecting folktales. And that was probably the first time that these stories were actually written down, comparatively speaking. So that's why I think the first print version of it was in the early 1900s. I believe it's 1904, 1903, simply because they weren't written down, and so there was no traceable record of them.

Rahne Alexander

This isn't in the questions that I sent you over, but I'm thinking now to the beginning of that article where you're kind of differentiating these two paths, these two kinds of Cinderella stories, there's the "catskin" version, and then the other version.

Gabriela Lee

I think it was the "Cendrillon" version of it? Yeah.

Rahne Alexander

Do the precolonial narratives kind of fit into that divergent structure?

Gabriela Lee

They feel more closely in terms of the, at least the ones I was able to find—just as an aside, one of the most interesting things that came out of this article being on Facebook and being widely circulated was I've had a couple of colleagues from the Philippines actually get in touch with me and go, "Oh, we also have a version of this in our regional language," because obviously, the Philippines has like 100-something languages. I only speak two, and a lot of them are not in translation. So that also came out of that conversation, "Oh, we also have a version in our regional language of the story." Or "Oh, I've also heard that is a version of this." But obviously, it's never been translated into English, or it's not been accessible to a wider audience. So that was an interesting result, I think, of the article receiving wider circulation.

Rahne Alexander

Rereading the article this morning in preparation for the podcast, I noticed one of the common components of the two variations on the Cinderella myth that you talk about is that the mother/godmother figure appears as a crab before becoming a tree, and immediately because I've been doing other reading, and we publish across a lot of disciplines, I had been doing some other reading about this evolutionary notion that species tend to evolve towards crabs. And so of course, my mind is like, this is amazing. Yeah, and I wonder, do crabs have a significant place in myth and legend in the Philippines?

Gabriela Lee

Oh yes, definitely, across the archipelago, crabs are one of the more common animals that we see in myths and legends. I think partially because the Philippines is an archipelago, so we're surrounded by water. So one of our more common industries is obviously fishery. And also if you travel across the Philippines, there are many, many regions that have some kind of culinary dish involving crabs. So on the one hand, very delicious, but also appears a lot in our stories. So like I think I mentioned it in the article—and I hope I am pronouncing the name right, because I am not Mandaya, but "Tambanokano", or the "giant crab" from Mandaya folklore. So the Mandaya is an indigenous group in the southern parts of the Philippines, and part of their cosmology is this giant crab that tries to swallow the moon.

And there's another story named "Batak," or the "titanic crab," somewhere in the northern part, so this very different indigenous group. This one comes from, I believe, the Bontoc tribe, which again, is another indigenous group, this time up north, again, a giant crab that causes earthquakes whenever it goes in and out of its hole in the ocean. So the crab itself seems to play a large part in various cosmologies of indigenous groups in the Philippines. I'm pretty sure there's more. This is the three that I can think of right now.

So to me, it wasn't surprising that, "Oh, of course the fairy godmother is a crab in these stories." But again, going through the editorial process, Dr. Coste was like, "Oh, you have to explain this." Because, again, that was one of the great things about working with an editor, a journal editor is they kind of help you craft towards an audience. And so in this case, she was like, "You have to explain this, and you have to clarify why this is important that you're highlighting this." Because to me, it made sense as a Filipino like, "Okay, of course! I have no questions about why it's a crab." And then she's like, "No, but you have to understand, your audience is not just Filipino. It's wider audience, so you have to explain." [I said,] "Okay, I understand that." (laughs)

Rahne Alexander

One of the terms that you use extensively in this article, or several times in this article, is "glocal," "G-L-O-C-A-L" and "glocalization." And this is a relatively new term to me, I think it was a fascinating concept and one of those moments where I'm like, "There's a word for something that makes sense that I didn't realize, you know, was was a thing that I was even thinking about it." And so that was an exciting moment of revelation for me. Can you talk a little bit a little bit about your relationship to this word idea, and its meaningfulness in your work?

Gabriela Lee

Oh, sure, thank you for highlighting that. So, the term "glocalization," I actually picked it up from another scholar's work, Anna Katrina Gutierrez, who is also Filipino, and her book titled *Mixed Magic: Global-Local Dialogues in Fairy Tales for Young Readers*. It's very helpful in the ways that I was thinking about Cinderella. She actually does also talk about Cinderella in her book, but she talks more about the Disney version, and also more contemporary versions, whereas my direction went more historical.

I did pull the quote from it so that I could put it more definitively. So she writes about it in her book, *Mixed Magic*, it's a term that she took from Roland Robertson, let me just quote what she says about it: "'Glocalization' occurs as a process of creation rather than competition between the dominant and domestic spheres. This interaction based on cultural borrowing produces expressions of global

hybridity, that cannot simply be described in terms of sameness or difference. Recognizing the interplay between unifying contexts and diversifying elements reveals paradoxical pressures between international and national spaces, such that cooperation exists at the same time as conflict, as do order and disorder, inclusion and exclusion, modern and traditional." End quote.

So to me that was such a useful definition as I was thinking through this project, because I didn't want to just present a binary of "Oh, this is the colonial version of Cinderella, and this is the traditional or precolonial version of Cinderella." And then there are two separate Cinderellas that don't meet in the middle. I was more interested in the ways that they influenced each other, and I think that's part of what was interesting about the two versions that I was able to excavate and talk about, the version from the Camilo Osias primer, but also the translated version from Severino Reyes, which is one of a number of translations of "Maria Alimango." So I just used the English translation of it that was circulating, currently. So I find it useful that Gutierrez talks about the process of interplay or the process of intermingling as opposed to separation, because I also think that's part of both the creative process, but also what comes out of it.

And it's useful to describe the currents of influence in children's literature production, especially outside the global north, where we're still reckoning with both colonial influences and with the intention that children are meant to be reading them primarily. So I thought that "glocalization" was such a useful term to describe that process, and to describe that way of how these forces move towards each other. And I find that it's also useful, because she does talk about both unifying context and diversifying elements, and I think that's part of what the bigger project of that special issue of the journal is about, is asking what does "children's canon" mean, outside the Global North, outside the Anglosphere, with does having a canon—if it even exists—what does that mean? And what kinds of stories have come out of that? So to me, it was a very succinct and useful way of thinking about the project.

Rahne Alexander

Well, I'm hoping that everybody's going to read this article, because it's really fascinating. It's really accessible and very enlightening. So I'm hoping that this will drive more and more people to look at your work. Do you want to talk about what you're working on next?

Gabriela Lee

Sure! I'm working on a dissertation which is essentially tracing the speculative elements and influences that have affected Phillipine children's literature and trying to do a social and historical contextualization of what that might mean, and mapping, essentially, the colonial imaginary and how that influenced Phillipine children's literature, but also how it kind of speaks back. So the colonial and postcolonial and the decolonial in kind of conversation with each other through the existing literature. So that's obviously an ongoing project. I'm working, with a number of other scholars, including Dr. Lara Saguisag and Dr. Marilisa Jimenez-Garcia on an MLA Forum article about children's literature under the long shadow of US imperialism, which we're hoping to put together this year. And I'm working on a literary encyclopedia article on Phillipine children's literature as well that's with Dr. Dainy Bernstein over at University of Illinois. And I have a couple of short stories in the works.

Rahne Alexander

In your spare time. (laughs)

Gabriela Lee

On top of everything else, why not throw in that? (laughs)

Rahne Alexander

Well, this has been great and I hope we can have you back on the podcast after you've put some of this stuff into print and, and see what see what you do next.

Gabriela Lee

Thank you so much. I really appreciate being part of this.