

## Policy Insight

### Taking Stock: Hybridity and the UP Press<sup>1</sup>

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I have been with the University of the Philippines (UP) Press for a few years now, and I have used these occasions not only to congratulate and thank our authors and the hardworking people of the official publishing house of our country's one and only national university, but also to reflect on issues like literacy, residual orality, and the fraught and unfinished question of nationhood.

As against my initial expectations—and fears—this administrative assignment has not been entirely managerial, but has offered me a unique opportunity to become, in the veritable sense of the word, thoroughly and unabashedly “academic.”

Which is to say: since I do get first dibs on manuscripts, and since I do get to read so much Filipiniana material, and participate in discussions about book production and the existence of writing and reading cultures in the country, the post of press director very quickly transformed itself—for me, at least—into an “intellectual project” of sorts.

As prompted by a recently concluded Book Industry Summit, I needed to take stock of things. Please allow me to share with you some of my recent “realizations.”

Since I took over the University of the Philippines Press in 2011, we have published around 330 titles.

A good 65 percent of them are literary: poetry, essay, short story collections, novels, and play collections, in that order.

Most of these are single-author books; some are anthologies with multiple authors. The languages are almost evenly split between English and Filipino.

While we have also published books written in regional languages, they are few and far between. Moreover, each of them has been accompanied by a translation into either English or Filipino. This is our requirement, inasmuch as we would like all our titles to appeal to a broader local and possibly translocal readership.

Of late, we have seen a spike in literary titles falling into the *genre* category, in particular, young adult and speculative fiction. We take this to be a good sign, for what it betokens is a growth in the market of writers and readers of locally produced—even if mostly “nonrealist,” traditionally seen as “nonserious”—fiction.

Novels in Filipino have outnumbered the novels in English in the last eight years. We are not talking about a very large number, however. It would seem that, as far as fiction goes, the “long form” does not come so easily to our writers.

Poetry books are probably the most numerous. They are sadly the slowest moving titles, in terms of sales. Our *bodega* still has copies of some of the poetry titles that came out when I came on board eight years ago.

On the other hand, my term as UP Press director has seen an increase in the number of scholarly books being put out. The humanities and social science titles are more or less equal in number, with the books in the natural sciences being the hardest to come by. To begin with, they are the hardest to source, probably because peer-reviewed journals are the gold standard for productivity in this discipline.

UP Press’s scholarly books are mostly written in English, particularly if they are in the sciences, social or otherwise. The scholarly books written in Filipino are most commonly works in literary studies.

The scholarly titles of UP Press are very rarely “disinterested.” What I mean by this is that they are, in the main, written with a clear interest or agenda on the part of the author, which is to bring to bear both the activity and the output of the research on a clearly identified social issue or problem. To my mind, we may broadly describe this “interest” as a *nationalist* one.

In other words, we need to remember that UP is a nationalist institution, historically, as well as by definition (actually, by law).

Many of the works of UP's writers—scholarly and creative alike—may be said to bear this history out.

The clearest expression of this “nationalist” orientation is the fact that we have published UP-sourced scholarly titles whose “category” cannot be easily ascertained.

Are they just books in the social or natural sciences, for example, when they bring together research from both fields in order to guide government in the crafting and implementing of policy—for instance, in regard to the problem of regional and national electrification, mitigating the effects of climate change on local agriculture and aquaculture, and the management of national parks, of mountain reserves, or of marine and silvicultural resources?

Some, if not all, of these titles are the outcome of years of funded research, often by international agencies. In the end, it simply behooves the University to make this output available to both Philippine policymakers and future researchers alike.

I have recently decided that, very soon, we at the UP Press will be formally describing—actually, labeling—books of this sort as books in *policy and governance*.

Of course, this does not mean that as books they cannot be appreciated or read using the more traditional optics of the disciplines. But what this new nomenclature will do is that it will formally register or recognize their purposive and “mixed” nature.

We can say that “mixedness” is an essential feature of the kind of knowledge production that, to my mind, Philippine books necessarily embody and evince.

It is a mixedness or hybridity that we, as publishers and also as editors and book industry stakeholders, need to appreciate and understand better, so that we do not have to subject our books—and our writers and scholars—to uncritically assumed standards of scrutiny and evaluation that do not remotely respect where they are coming from, what their nature and purpose are, and what value and importance, what “meaning,” they actually, and for all intents and purposes, bear.

Like the other academic presses, UP Press has been the proud publisher of many outstanding works by our very best writers in English. Allow me then to conclude this section by weighing in on a recent social media “discussion”—one that was occasioned by an opinion essay written by a benighted arts and culture columnist several weeks ago.

In this piece, the columnist basically maligned the quality of our anglophone literature as our local writers are producing it, in favor of Filipino-American and other diasporic Filipino writings, that he believes hold the veritable key to securing the future of Philippine letters.

Upon closer scrutiny, we discover that there is not much to commend—by way of reasonable argument and proof—about this rather shallow and willfully tendentious assessment. This being the case, it is easy to see that the best reaction should really be, well, no reaction at all.

In other words, *deadma*.

But an online firestorm stoked by very irate and articulate young writers did flare up. And because I do not only teach but also, for several years now, publish and market excellent books in Philippine literature in English, I find that I too must register my own demurrals against this unthinking piece of slander.

This is a demurral that ties in with my point about the hybridity of the knowledges that we are generating and promoting in our country.

We need to say that it is a hybridity that is constitutive not only of our writings, but also, and more vitally, of our lives, which are implacably situated and unfolding in our multilingual and culturally simultaneous reality as present-day Filipinos.

However as much as we would like to believe, poetically, that *Filipinoness* is something that inheres in our character or our “spirit”—something portable, or even inheritable, like a nugget of cultural or genetic memory perhaps, that we can conveniently lug around in our veins—in all likelihood what is Filipino is what is experienced and in many ways *endured* locally, *situationally*, on the level of the everyday, by the multitudes of Filipinos living in the gruel and the grit, in the savor and the spit, of our poor and beloved Philippines.

Our anglophone literature comes from our particular anglophone world—one that has coexisted and admixed, commingled and dissolved, clotted and congealed with all the other linguistic and cultural worlds in our country. Because English is globally spreading, we can imagine that, increasingly, more and more anglophone worlds are coming to exist, including those that our diasporic writers are doubtless living and working in.

What is supremely interesting is that despite appearances—the outward familiarity of intelligible “English” words, for example—these worlds are inexorably and irreconcilably different, *one from the other*.

In the same way that the *englishes* of these worlds are accented differently as they are spoken by their various interlocutors, written anglophone words bear experiences, memories, and ideas that are grounded in and inseparable from the demonically plural and specifically sited lives of those who read and write them.

In other words, despite their use of what seems to be a common verbal currency, in truth, nothing is purely and unproblematically plain or intelligible across these anglophone contexts.

These are dynamic and empirically heady communities, in which seemingly English words bear histories that are not necessarily apparent, because, for example, they are not necessarily explained or annotated in each and every utterance. (Why annotate and explain yourself, after all, when your conceptual assumptions and cultural referents are already clear to your listener or reader, who stands on the same experiential ground as yourself?)

It makes easy sense to say, therefore, that the prospect of making any facile and so-called “objective” comparative assessments of anglophone utterances—and literatures—is at best iffy, if not downright harebrained.

Allow me, at this point, to remind our self-satisfied opinion-giver: the universalist stance of formalist judgment has long been called out as delusional, if not insincere. There is no value-free position from which to perceive and determine merit in anglophone compositions, *literary or otherwise*.

In other words, our literature in English is entirely our own. It is entirely irreplaceable, entirely unreplicable.

And, most important, because it is grounded in our archipelago’s embarrassment of cultural and linguistic riches, and because it is unavoidably translational and as such shot through with recontextualized meanings, it is precious beyond anglophone words.

Turning now to the marketing side of things: my tenure as UP Press director has likewise seen an expansion of marketing platforms and business models.

We engaged in a limited venture in electronic book publishing in 2012, in partnership with the local digital company, Flipside Digital Content. We ended this venture in 2016, after our contract expired, and Flipside folded up (I almost want to say, flipped, belly-up).

We are currently exploring new options in this regard, even as, going by our experience, the sales from this platform are most likely to be modest, at best. Our hunch tells us that the print book market is still the dominant market for most of our academic and literary titles.

We made a direct foray into online sales in 2016, with the opening of our online store. We would have done this earlier, except that in UP, being a government institution, there were all sorts of legal and financial hurdles that the university system administration needed to clear before we could get our online sales facility up and running.

While our bookshop has branches across a few campuses in the UP system, since 2018 we have also been operating our own commercial outlet, Upper Shelf, located at the Urban Turf Wing of the UP Town Center.

The sales from this shop have been very encouraging, with the general and random—rather than dedicated—book buyer becoming a surprising and welcome addition to our local retail market.

To optimize the opportunity presented to us by this commercial space, we have decided to hold weekly book signings at Upper Shelf. As an activity, this has undoubtedly helped boost sales, even as it has also raised awareness about this new and special “meet-and-greet” venue.

Other than sponsoring book signings, UP Press is helping create a social and a critical life for its titles by entering into partnerships with academic bodies in the University—for instance, the Likhaan: UP Institute of Creative Writing, with which it cosponsors a semestral book forum, which features academic experts from a variety of disciplines discussing a recently published UP Press title.

I would like to say that our social media presence is, at present, pretty sustained and in earnest. The UP Press maintains Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube pages and channels, in which we regularly feature our authors and their latest books. We have discovered that selling authors is an effective way of selling books; it is always a joy to encounter new media-savvy authors, who blissfully and singlehandedly sell themselves.

Finally, allow me to say that the UP Press is in a comfortable—read: stable and fairly liquid—financial position, as of the moment. We draw our operational and publishing expenses from a revolving fund, and because of more aggressive marketing strategies—coupled with an optimization of editorial and administrative operations—we have seen a septupling of this fund since my tenure as director began around eight years ago.

With the support of the university administration, the UP Press hopes to continue its existing editorial and marketing initiatives, even as it seeks to pursue other platforms and formats (yes, our books are now on Lazada!), and make newly available a selection of “classics” and

titles written by its roster of important authors (that includes, among others, national artists, national scientists, and national academicians).

I would like to end by once again congratulating and thanking all our authors for entrusting to us their books—which are nothing if not the children of their ethical best selves, their categorical hedge against all that is provisional and perishable (including, alas, our famously pliable memory, as an abidingly oral people).

Allow me to also thank Team UP Press—the dedicated members of our administrative, editorial, and marketing departments, whose untiring devotion to the Press’s mission and vision is beyond reproach, and is the reason it is able to do the kind of work that it does.

Finally, I would like to say that we are all looking forward to publishing and marketing more excellent and, of necessity, formally and verbally hybrid or “mixed” books, as crafted—and, more importantly, as lived—by our very best creative and scholarly writers.

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### Note

1. This is an excerpt from the opening remarks at the yearend Paglulunsad of the University of the Philippines Press, held on November 22, 2019 at the Balay Kalinaw, UP Diliman.