CA+T Interview with Melissa Sipin
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Madalyn K. Le, CA+T Interviewer
Melissa Sipin, Educator, Poet and Writer

Madalyn Le: When and how did writing become an artistic practice for you?

Melissa Sipin: When I began writing, at the adorable age of five years old, I wrote as every child did: for expression. I penned my first nonfiction essay for a class assignment and entitled it “I’m So Only.” It was a typo. I was supposed to write, “I’m So Lonely.” I was supposed to write a cute class essay about how much my parents loved me. Instead, I infused my childish pangs of missing my birthmother, Mercy, onto the page. I wrote over and over again: I’m So Only. It was my first creative nonfiction essay ever, the first time I tried to use expression to translate the brooding storm within. When my father read it, he laughed. At its cuteness. Its honesty. Its repetition. To this day, I hold this essay, this memory, as a badge of honor. I wonder if my paternal grandmother, my adoptive mother, thought this—I’m so only—during the Second World War. She was the wife of a guerrilla fighter, a major in the joint Philippine-American army in Northern Luzon. Because of this, she was captured—she was confined in a makeshift garrison, in a room for over six months, a room that was not her own, a room where she gave birth in captivity: I’m So Only.

To be honest, when I was a kid, my biggest dream was to become an animator. I didn’t want to be a writer; I didn’t think someone like me could become one—only because writing was suspect, writing was too revealing, writing was confession, and my family didn’t do well with confessions. Because I was born into America, Japanese anime, for the first time, showed me characters who had the same color of hair as me. I saw myself mirrored in the shows I watched: Sailor Moon, Dragon Ball Z, Fushigi Yugi, Shadow Skill, Inuyasha. But, I wanted to draw anime characters who looked like my sister and me, who wore Sailor Moon skirts and had wands that fought bad guys. I never wanted to write a novel about the war, about how my family survived it. Because I didn’t know about what we survived, what my grandmother had to do to live, who my grandfather—a war hero—fought on the mountain ranges of Bessang Pass. My family doesn’t talk about these things not because we can’t, it’s because trauma is hard. When you live trauma, embody it, feel it in your bones, your blood—it’s not easy to recount what one did just to get by. You’re proof of it: your body is. That you survived.

MI: Your work is incredibly visual, especially your memories. What does your process look like when reconstructing these settings and memories into words?
MS: It's a very organic process. I've always been a very visual person. Even when I write stories, I map them out. Especially for my novel—I've must have mapped out different iterations of my novel's plot a hundred times now. But particularly for my piece in Talking Bodies, I was lucky that my uncle has kept these beautiful, fragmented videos of my family in Manila during the 1960s. Many of things my family held dear, little mementos, little artifacts, photographs, the things that were proof that we were here, there, alive—they would become lost after the constant years of moving. Of trying to find a home in America. As a child, my father had trouble with money, so we were homeless, transitory: we slept on relatives' apartment floors, motels, extra rooms my uncle once built in his backyard. I'd lived in over eight places before the time I reached the age of twelve. So, when I found this archival video of my family—images I've never seen before, images of my father I've never experienced before—so desperate and yearning—it broke me. For me, when I try to recreate these memories, I want to invoke the emotions I feel I might have forgotten. Although my art practice right now is highly inspired by autobiography, I seek to mythologize these memories. I seek to push them into the world and reflect the mythos they have mirrored within me. My process is simple: I take an image, a word, a story my dad once said in passing, and I make up the rest. I watch films, documentaries, television shows, and read a ton of books, especially about the Philippines, to help me imagine. I use fiction to fill in the empty spaces my family's silence has engraved onto my body. Because despite their silences, my body somehow remembers.

ML: In your Talking Bodies piece, you were able to conceptualize audio/visual components and share your voice. How did it feel reading your own work and hearing your own voice? What compelled you to select the soundtrack and visual components of the video?

MS: Splicing my voice of the family video was a natural concept. I first wrote the audio piece as an essay, entitled “To My Unknown Daughter,” which was published in Glimmer Train back in 2014. I thought reading this essay for CA+T's Talking Bodies exhibit was appropriate but also star-aligning, because I wanted to do something more with it, something visual, something multimedia. I decided against using footage of me reading this essay or any footage of me really, and instead used this vintage, archival footage of my family in Mandaluyong, Metro Manila, Philippines, in 1967, during the Marcos regime. There’s so much lovely irony in this archival, fragmented footage … My father’s in there with his older brothers; him the youngest, the most hungry. He’s about five years old, such a ripe and innocent age, a persona of my father I’ve never met or seen before, and he is seen riding a bike or longing for his eldest brother, the chosen patriarch of my family after my grandfather died. The men first seen in the beginning, in the first clip, are my two uncles—both of whom fled to the East Coast right around the time my grandfather passed, almost in defiance, in irreverence to their eldest brother. All the kids dancing are my familia—my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, my bloodline.

But, let me go deeper, and tell you the backstory behind the footage: my white uncle, who filmed this, met one of my aunts near Clark Air Base [in the Philippines] (she was a sex worker), and they married; before he left for America (and subsequently took her, which allowed my whole family to immigrate), he would visit the family home in Manila and bring gifts, like this camera. In this essay, I talk a bit about how this complication, this nuance, this

The original can be found at www.centerforartandthought.org.
chance meeting between my white uncle and prostitute aunt is a consequence of US imperialism, and how all of this—this kind of colonial inheritance—affects the ways I write about the Pinay body. Although I wanted to film new material, these archival, old family videos made by my white uncle—who, ironically, is the only one archiving and recording our family histories, our family tree, and salvaging mementos from our past—obsessed me. This footage always damages me in a slow, pregnant way; it marks the infancy of my familia, it marks the moment when we were once together, before we broke apart. I decided to loop the video in hopes of producing a kind of fragmentary remembrance.

Why I chose the soundtrack for the video was more of an obsessive tick than anything else: I am obsessed with the song and tend to write to Nujabes often when I feel I am stuck. My husband actually made me this playlist a lot time ago, when we were kids, 14 years old, and it’s where I discovered this song. I thought it was only natural to use it for something that tries to recreate such longing.

ML: Throughout your other pieces, you continually produce an immense feeling of the body, family, history, and intergenerational trauma between yourself and the women in your family. When you share these experiences, what has it been like to put such personal experiences and emotions into the public sphere? Has your definition of vulnerability shifted since you started writing more about these experiences?

MS: To be very honest, when I create and write, I tend to not think about the public sphere, even if what I write about is my family. Because when I feel as if I am successful as a writer, the characters I create, though inspired by my relatives, become no longer my relatives, and instead these mythical heroes and anti-heroes who are just trying to find their way through the world and the darkness and light that surround them.

But, it would be a lie to not confess that my vulnerabilities as an artist are not affected when my work is within the public sphere. I don’t quite like it, to be honest. The things I create are reflections of the many egos, the many personas, my body holds and remembers. They’re me and not me. They’re my family and not-my-family. I hate it when the public sphere tries to devalue the value and merit of mythologizing and autobiography, especially in the West, especially when it comes to writers of color (read the essay "Based on a True Story" by Bryan Washington). What I write are mirrors to how I sift and move about the world, they reflect my worldviews, my philosophies about the human condition. Even when I write memoir or essays, they’re still a particular mythos of my experience.

But, I believe I have been drawn to write about my own experiences because of my artistic practice, because of my family’s origins myths, because of my own. I did not know of the traumas my grandmother held in her body until her death. She held this secret to the grave, and it was only because of her sister, who confessed these things during the funeral, that I found out that she could, and most likely is, a WWII “Comfort Woman.” But her silences, all her life, haunted me. The turbulence and chaos but also undying love my family harbors for one another is another catalyst for my artistic practice. For a long time, I held onto Edwidge Danticat’s brilliant book, Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work, where she says:

The original can be found at www.centerforartandthought.org.
As immigrant artists for whom so much has been sacrificed, so many dreams have been deferred, we already doubt so much. Who do we think we are? We think we are people who risked not existing at all. People who might have had a mother and father killed, either by a government or nature, even before we were born. Some of us think we are accidents of literacy. I do.

I have long thought that I was an accident of literacy. I now find that to be untrue. I am a daughter of a diaspora whose nation was birthed out of a novel that was written in the colonizer’s tongue. I cannot read or write or speak my own birth tongue, Ilokano or Tagalog. I was born into a family of an aristocrat’s daughter, my grandmother—whose father was the mayor of my family’s ancestral town in Aringay—who became poor. Because she chose to elope with an orphan during the war. Because my paternal grandfather, despite his class, made his life into his own by fighting all odds and getting into the Philippine Military Academy and mastering English, Tagalog, and Japanese.

And despite not knowing all of this as a child, I copied, I imitated, I mirrored my grandmother. I chose to elope with a Filipino American boy, my childhood sweetheart, who enlisted in the US Navy. The colonizer’s navy. I ran away from home to survive. My artistic practice began, I believe, out of the need and the will to make sense out of the senseless violence that barreled through my childhood, my family, my homeland. It started with a small essay where I repeated: I’m so only. Maybe this is why I don’t think so much about how my vulnerability has shifted. Ever since I was abused as a child, life was vulnerable. My life was fragile. I’m lucky. There have been many times I could have died, could have been more harmed, could have been hungrier, could have not made it. I live my life as a vulnerable person. Through a lens that reminds me every life has merit, every life is vulnerable, and every life has value. So, I hope to infuse that in my work. I hope that as my work lives on its own in the public sphere, it helps to mirror my vulnerability I have with the world. I only wish that more people were willing to be vulnerable, willing to see each other beyond the walls and fortresses and -isms and positionalities that separate and sever us.

ML: Is there anything else you have been working on lately, or anything you’re looking forward to sharing with the world in this moment in time?

MS: I think I’ll be working on my novel, Scorched-Earth, which is about my grandmother and my alter-ego, Dolores, for a long, long time. I’m excited about a short story, which is an insular chapter in the novel, which was recently accepted into Slice Magazine’s Issue 22: Borders. This particular story is one of my most fierce, strange, brazen, and unapologetic portraits of a mother I’ve ever written. It’s abrasive and angry and so very sad. I wrote it after reading Roberto Bolaño’s “Clara” in The New Yorker. But its voice is so different, has much more rage, and maybe even might be Clara’s voice, if she were Filipino (hal!).

Anyways, I’d love to share the opening. Here’s the first paragraph:

I dream of a vision of you on a tiled floor, your arms spread like wings. I imagine your big tits, your curved mouth, your slashed up arms, the face that looks like your father’s, and the skin that’s brighter than mine could ever be. I always thought you were beautiful, my daughter. There’s a lot of things the woman who gives birth to you

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has the right to say, despite all this silence over the years. I used to write you and your sister Louise a letter every evening, Dolores. A letter to update you on what I did, what I saw, what I ate, and what I missed. I sent them to your address for years, yet you never answered them. I wonder if you ever got them. Did your grandmother give them to you? I knew she was always a liar, I don’t care if she suffered through a war, she always thought she was better than my family just because her grandfather was an aristocrat, was a mayor of their small provincial town, but really, she was a whore just like me, di ba. Or did you actually receive them and just never wrote back? Were you just a cold child who never loved her mother?