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PERSPECTIVES

Lesbian-Essaying through Textual In(ter)ventions in Memoir

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In this exegetical essay, I show how I have deployed linguistic and non-linguistic strategies in the writing of my memoir in order to make my lesbian identity as a writer visible on the page without explicitly stating it. Using the theoretical ideas of Teresa de Lauretis and Nicole Brossard, I assert that a non-conventional approach to the writing of memoir is how a lesbian writer can challenge heteronormative writing standards, particularly in the Philippine literary system, within which I had allowed myself to be molded in my past writing practice. Some of these textual in(ter)ventions—both inventions and interventions—are narrative structure, word play, graphesis, erasure, and collage. While these tools can and have been used by writers of various sexual orientations, I posit that my purposive use of them functions as markers of lesbian subjectivity and textuality.

Keywords: Lesbian, memoir, gender, nonfiction practice

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American film scholar Teresa de Lauretis has shown through her analyses of how gender is represented in cinema and other media that gendered subjects are "constructed across a multiplicity of discourses, positions, and meanings, which are often in conflict with one another" (quoted in Glover and Kaplan 19). These contradictions provide discursive opportunities for fashioning alternative approaches to gender and sexuality, as well as accounting for cultural, class, and ethnic differences. In particular, her critical work on lesbian representation reveals "how lesbian writers and artists have sought variously to escape gender, to deny it, transcend it, or perform it in excess, and to inscribe the erotic in cryptic, allegorical, realistic, camp, or other modes of representation, pursuing diverse strategies of writing" (de Lauretis 53). Lesbians have this fraught relationship with gender because of their subject position outside the norms that require heterosexuality; they are "autonomous from men" because their desire is directed towards women only (56). This apparent autonomy allows lesbian artists and writers to become more daring in their work because they are not directly subject to the power of heteronormative standards. But because of the way I came into writing in the Philippine literary system, I had not been able to access this sense of autonomy and daring. I was more concerned with gaining the approval of the system, so I "passed" as a heterosexual writer in the way that I used to write. For instance, in my first book, *Women Loving: Stories and a Play* (2010), I inscribed my lesbian desire within the heteronormative standards of realistic fiction, which did get my work published, but it also somehow cost me my autonomy as a lesbian writer.

In this spirit of non-normative gender attitudes, de Lauretis describes the writing of Quebecois lesbian author Nicole Brossard as "formally experimental, critical and lyrical, autobiographical and theoretically conscious… crosses genre boundaries (poetry and prose, verbal and visual modes, narrative and cultural criticism) and instates new correlations between signs and meanings" (59–60). This framework clearly privileges non-traditional modes of writing and requires a receptive audience, particularly lesbian, our "imagined community," as Benedict Anderson puts it, of woman-loving women. Yet even this lesbian audience cannot be assumed as unified. Neither is the lesbian as writer.

Historically, lesbians have often written in code. Lesbians are aware that "to be a lesbian is dangerous, so this is something she must hide" (Wilton 121), but lesbian writers still found ways to tell their stories. Recently, the BBC-produced series *Gentleman Jack* brought new life to the diaries of Anne Lister, who lived in England from 1791–1840 and is considered as "the first modern lesbian." She started writing her diaries from 1817 and the archive has 7,720 pages, with around five million words, "one-sixth of it written in a code she created" to hide the lesbian content, which included her sexual exploits ("Anne Lister"). Helena Whitbread discovered the diaries at Shibden Hall and started decoding some of the pages written in what Lister called her "crypt-hand," a code using Greek letters and algebraic terms. Whitbread explains, "She was on a mission to try and define and understand and interpret her own lesbian identity" when "there was no language for that sort of sexuality" ("The Secret Life"). Thus, Lister somehow had to create her own language.

In a similar manner, even American poet Gertrude Stein, who wrote *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) about their lives together as a couple in Paris used some code words for the sexual aspects of their relationship. Wilton describes the writing as "so densely coded as to render its sexual content obscure to say the least" (126). Moreover, some critics argue that Stein's innovative poetry was a style she adopted "in order to be able to write about lesbianism safely and without censorship" (127).

Thus, Brossard's challenge for lesbian writers to re-invent the world through experimental language is not an entirely new thing for our community. Our literary predecessors wrote in code because they wanted to reveal their lesbian stories but had to hide them. The difference today may lie in the intention—it is not to hide, but to draw attention to and reveal. Consistent with my own objective of combatting lesbian invisibility in the Philippines, I challenged myself to make my writing distinct as lesbian through linguistic and non-linguistic in(ter)ventions, that is, both interventions and inventions.

Nicole Brossard and her Picture Theory of Lesbian Writing

In "Theorizing Lesbian," American scholar Elizabeth Meese explains how lesbian is "not all I am and it is in all I am," like a shadow that "attests to my being there" (70). In like manner, my lesbian is not all I

am, but she was there even when I was in relationships with men, and was always there in my experience of sexual pleasure. She was there in my longing for her even within real-life lesbian relationships. And when I write, it is a love letter to this ideal lesbian who is inside me in my longing. Meese calls this ideal lesbian "L". Brossard also asserts, "Writings make sense that begin with the declaration of love" (quoted in Forsyth 49), as in love letters.

Brossard describes the ideal lesbian as the "aerial" woman, the one who "orient(s) her desire and focus(es) her vision" (Parker 305). She is the motive and the subject. For Brossard, she is a double: the object of desire and the channel for the passion, expressed through writing (310). There can be no lesbian writing without this beloved. We are writing to get her attention, to make her love us. She is also the one "who knows how to read" (Brossard 216), and this knowing "induces recognition, complicity, and possibly desire" (216). It is the woman's (lesbian) gaze that sees and desires the other woman. In a lesbian relationship, one is always the other woman, complicit in the illicit. For me she is the one that got away, as well as the one I've been waiting for all my life, an ideal that is always elusive. I desire her, write to her and for her, but I also know that she does not exist in the physical world. She is, as Brossard puts it, aerial.

Brossard takes this concept further when she asserts that this desire, which is transgressive of patriarchal demands of heterosexuality, must find a radical way to be articulated because language is a patriarchal system. "*To write in lesbian…*involves putting words on pages that evoke the voice and corporeal presence of a woman…whose passions carry her toward another woman and other women" (Forsyth 46). Brossard expresses this *em-bodied* desire through "textual in(ter) ventions" in the "lexicon, with syntax, grammar, and graphesis" (Parker 305). She calls this strategy "Picture Theory," in which "time and space merge so that thought itself is spatialized" and thus "reality can be intercepted" (311). More specifically, this interception is done through "wordplay, soundplay, syntactical inversion and reversal, and other manipulations that call attention to the surface…of the text" (312). Playing with words and sounds may be more readily done in French, the language in which Brossard writes, because many phrases can sound the same but have different meanings. For example, in Brossard's own work, she writes, "*Je n'arrete pas delire*," which translates literally into "I don't stop reading." But as Moxley, who writes the introduction to the Brossard reader, explains, *de lire* (reading) and *délire* (frenzy and un-reading) are both embodied when the sentence is spoken (17). I am certain this playfulness can also be done in Filipino and other languages. The key word is "play." The sentence has been translated as, "I don't stop reading/deliring," word play that expands the target language by alluding to the English word *delirium*, even though it doesn't have the same sense of "un-reading" as in the source language. Even in translation, a Brossardian text spins language around, reinventing the world.

In a way, this is the spirit of my explorations of language in my memoir. For instance, the title *Abi Nako* is a phrase that means "or so I thought," a refrain I use in the title essay and in the whole book to refer to my false expectations of myself and my move to Davao. But in the title essay, "Abi Nako, Or So I Thought," I also refer to other meanings of the word *abi* to try to find a new way of looking at my migrant situation:

> In Cebuano, *abi* means "to misread". But they also have a word, *abi-abi*, which means "to welcome someone". Despite my doomed literary romance, all was in fact well in the life I had chosen in Davao…. But best of all, I have found what I thought I lost. Davao was large enough to welcome me and my wishes home. And it taught me that I was truly something. Some woman. (85)

An editor once suggested that I remove the Binisaya[1] phrase and use only an English title because the Binisaya phrase can be "alienating," but I decided to retain it to show the spirit of wordplay and the thematic refrain of the memoir. And yet I know now that the title essay of the book also demonstrates how I used to write to fulfill heteronormative writing conventions. In the excerpt above, for instance, the desire for narrative closure in the form of a happy ending is clear. When I wrote the essay in 2015, it was important for me to assure myself that "I have found what I thought I lost." I realize now it is sententious and not completely true.

In fact, one of my major textual in(ter)ventions is my refusal to structure my memoir conventionally towards narrative and coherence. While the narrative arc covers the first ten years of rebuilding my life in Davao City, the chapters are not arranged chronologically. In fact, the chapters are stand-alone essays that are not centered

on the retelling of events per se, but on conceptual approaches in an effort to "essayify the memoir" as Lazar puts it (49), focusing on "not just the thing itself (memory), but ideas about the thing" (50). For instance, in the chapter, "Coming Home: A Study in Disaster," which is a fairly straightforward narrative about me and my children returning to Baguio City together after eight years to join a supposed reunion of my ex-husband's family, I use the concept of disaster management to frame the trip. Using Anthony Oliver-Smith's definition of disaster, I find, "Taken out of the context of natural disasters, it suggests that our trip back to Baguio wasn't a disaster per se. Each of the events in that trip was part of a process that actually goes back in time, to my marriage and how it failed" (180). And then I go back in time to 2007, when we left Baguio, to reflect on how my feelings about the end of my marriage have evolved after all the years of being away. By the end of the essay, I reiterate that the trip "wasn't quite the disaster it had threatened to be. Every disaster is, after all, a matter of vulnerability. But after eight years, surely I had prepared myself for the onslaught of memories and the actual friction caused by our inherent differences" (188). In a way, the essay is a sequel to "Sapay Koma," my 2008 essay about how I decided to leave the marriage and move to Davao, but it does not really give the hopeful reader any comfort of a happy ending to the story, or a "reunion" in the literal sense of reuniting with an estranged family. At the end of the trip, I confirm, "What my children and I lost in Baguio City was only the sunk cost someone had to pay" (188).

As a concept and in the spirit of wordplay, I also explore the Binisaya word *labay* in the essay "Buying the House on Macopa St.":

> In Binisaya, the word *labay* is used to mean three things: "to throw away, to pass through, and for time to pass". Depending on stress, the phrase *mga tuig nga nilabay* can mean "the years that have passed" or "the years thrown away". By the time I moved to my own house in Davao City, seven years had passed. And part of me felt that in fact they were years I had thrown away because of my foolishness. (203)

The way I use wordplay directly draws attention to polysemy. I don't think it draws attention literally to the "surface of the text" as Brossard suggests, but for Filipino speakers, I hope it triggers them to question what the word means in their native languages. Speakers of Binisaya as a first language wouldn't ordinarily note these phonetic and semantic details, but because I am a migrant learning a new language, I am attuned to them. I have three Philippine languages[2] caroming inside my head, which are then translated into English in my creative writing, thus expanding the target language.

In her "Poetic Politics," Brossard further explains that her writing practice of intervention arises when language "gives the impression of closing itself off, and when our desire clashes with common usage" (182). She rebelled against the ways that language prevented her from articulating what she needed to, so she had to destroy what was standing in her way. She believes that "if language was an obstacle, it was also the place where everything happens, where everything is possible" (183). Thus, she also blurred generic boundaries, writing the "genre-queer" text before there was a term for it. I suppose we writers do feel like words fail us, maybe because of our own incapacity, but also because of their intrinsic nature. Writing in English as a second language often fails me, but it doesn't mean that my first language, Filipino, will succeed. I may speak it, but I don't use it as a medium for my creative writing. These are times when I wish I could draw. And that impulse is fulfilled by the graphic interventions I have been exploring in my present writing.

And yet Brossard admits that she was writing these experimental texts even before she became a lesbian. She had always been a "troublemaker." So is lesbian identity a necessary aspect of creating this language/genre-transgressive text? Yes, by her own reckoning. When Brossard became a mother at the same time she fell in love with a woman, it brought her body's experience to the fore: "my body was getting new ideas, new feelings, new emotions. From then on my writing started to change. It became more fluid…but this time I had "carnal knowledge" of what I was investing in words" (185–186). This carnality, as well as the politics of identity, made her veer further away from linear and binary thinking. It gave rise to her central argument about lesbian writing, embodied in the "cortex," which is a play on *corps/texte* or body/text, and how writing arises from her body's desire and at the same time feeds that desire. For Brossard, desire and pleasure are a point of departure in lesbian writing. They emanate from a woman writer's lesbian body, which desires another

woman, and lies somehow outside the patriarchy in her rejection of the male. I have always preferred to identify as a lesbian in my relationships and writing because I find it to be true in my body. Brossard gives me a theoretical anchor for my choice to identify as a lesbian writer and my efforts to inscribe this desire.

Non-linguistic Tools for Lesbian-Essaying:

a. Graphesis

Graphesis is employed in the work of Brossard as manipulations of white space that draw attention to book production and "move the poetry into other planes" (313). Graphesis is a neologism coined by Johanna Drucker in her book, *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production* (2015) and refers to "the act and study of representation in graphical forms" (Rodgers para 2). It involves examining "tables, charts, maps, and diagrams, all of which both embed and interpret information" (para 2). In Brossard's work, visual images open up what the reader expects is a book of words (poetry, fiction, nonfiction) into a new space that can encode lesbian experience in a way that only words cannot. For instance, American scholar Alice Parker describes the function of spaces in Brossard's book of poetry, *Lovhers* (1980), as "interlocking modes of perceiving, feeling, and thinking" (324) in which desire and text interact, producing the writing/reading together.

In the piece "Do Not Resuscitate," I introduce a spatial intervention when I reproduce the *Do Not Resuscitate* (DNR) form on the page. Being blank, it somehow invites readers to fill it out, allowing them to participate in the difficult decision-making process involved when deciding on end-of-life matters of a loved one.

In "Buying the House on Macopa St.," I utilize a more ubiquitous graphesis intervention through the visual rendering of the Tarot cards. I wrote my fragment in my handwriting, which I think is one way by which I can *em-body* my identity into the essay, like a signature. I asked the lesbian Philippine comic book artist Emiliana Kampilan to illustrate the three Tarot cards and render the interpretation in calligraphy. While it is also true that I needed to ask her to do this for me because I cannot draw, I think our collaboration permeates the space with what our hands can do—a metonym for lesbian desire.

FIGURE 1: The Fool

In "Nesting," I present a combined graphic and found essay, from a book about birds and a *National Geographic* video script about barnacle goose chicks. In my first draft, I wrote it as a closed spiral to represent the nest. But in the revision, I chose to highlight the fact that the nest is meant to be abandoned when the eggs hatch and the babies are ready to take the leap. The video shows that some baby birds do not survive this leap/drop. Figuratively, some of us who leap fall to our death instead of learning to fly. So I wrote the essay like a spiral with a drop that doesn't provide the comfort of a clear and happy closure. I used it as a prologue because it establishes the memoir's unconventional approach and suggests the theme of building my new home in Davao City.

FIGURE 2: Nesting

In her analysis of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother?*, American visual artist and academic Kay Sohini shows how powerful the Image-Text space is in allowing the writer not just to narrate the story but to simultaneously reflect on it. She adds, "The gaps between the panels […] extend an invitation to the readers to interpret through the act of projecting themselves onto the events unfolding on the page" (para 13). Even though my graphic intervention in "Nesting" does not exactly function in a narrative manner because it is more conceptual and metaphorical, I do believe it provides a space that readers can enter with their own interpretations. My use of the graphic intervention through illustrated Tarot cards in "Buying the House on Macopa St." is more similar to the use of the Image-Text space in Bechdel because the images are part of the narrative. The oracles somehow served to drive the way I thought about the situations I was in and the decisions I made. While I do provide fragments of how I interpreted the oracles, the space of the graphic intervention still allows readers to interpret the oracles on their own within the context of the narrative.

b. Erasure

In my memoir, the piece "Dear Joy, erased, with thanks" is an exercise in poetic erasure. As defined by the Academy of American Poets, it is a "form of found poetry wherein a poet takes an existing text and erases, blacks out, or otherwise obscures a large portion of the text, creating a wholly new work from what remains" ("Erasure"). I erased the last letter my abusive writer-boyfriend sent to me. I had never done erasure before except as a language game called "Cloze" in class. But poetic erasure is different because it is not random; it has its own poetics. Brian Reed writes, "In the new millennium…many poets have resorted to redirecting language: appropriating others' words, redacting them, and presenting them as their own…presumably in an effort to make readers rethink their assumptions about what the art form can and cannot accomplish" (759). Erasure is one of the techniques used by conceptual writers to do this redirection of the words of other writers to create a new work. Even though it doesn't entail creating something new from one's own material, it does make both readers and writers reconsider what we think about authorship and genre. Is it a poem? Or is it plagiarism? Who owns the erased text?

According to Philippine poet Mesandel Arguelles, who has written whole books using erasure, "*ang espasyong blangko/patlang ay maaaring hindi naman talaga ganap na blangko/patlang/kawalan—kayâ ang espasyo ay wika rin. Wikang hindi mapatatahimik kailanman bagama't tila nananatiling tahimik*" (11). That is, "the erased space may not be a true blank/space/emptiness—which is why the space is also language. A language that can never be silenced even though it seems silent." He adds that sometimes the space can say more than the words themselves. Referring to the work of Ann Lauterbach, he is guided by the idea, "*Ang pagbubura kung gayon ay paghanap ng anyo ng tula sa loob ng ibinigay na teksto*" (14), that erasure is a process of finding a poem's form within a given text. In my case, erasing the letter allowed me to find my essay within it: my piece, as in what I had to say about the matter, and my peace, by erasing the abusive narrative in a letter meant to deal a death-blow to me, and thus asserting my own narrative over it.

I based my erasure only on content, not prosody or metrics. I wanted to erase my ex-boyfriend's version of me and thus give power to my version. It was both liberating to erase him, make him disappear, to release me from the stranglehold of his narrative and see my truth revealed in his own words. By erasing him, I reposition the male voice in the narrative, privileging mine. It also somehow erases my bisexual past with him. And yet I do remain aware of the irony that writing this memoir commits that past permanently to writing within what I posit as a "lesbian" memoir.

First I blacked the words out, but just to save on printing ink, I "whited" them out instead. And the meaning serendipitously became clearer in the poem that appeared, with the erased parts not foregrounded. The erased text really can stand alone, and the spaces in between words filled with what is unsaid. My lesbian voice travelled freely in the spaces between the words remaining.

c. Collage

Reading a first draft of the memoir chapter/essay "Buying the House on Macopa St." during the revision process, I myself found it boring and the narration of events too straightforward. I considered incorporating discussions of architecture or feng shui into it, but they seemed too obviously connected to the subject, too easy. I was stumped about how to work around it. How about the archetypal aspect of house as person? How about the old Bachelard essay about the poetics of space? Or maybe something to do with seashells or creatures that carry their own houses? Still too straightforward and predictable.

Nothing clicked, so I just played with the essay by literally cutting it up. I cut it into strips, threw the pieces in the air, and put it back together with my eyes closed. It was both scary and liberating. No need to be afraid because I had the original file anyway; if the experiment didn't work, I could restore the essay. But I didn't want to restore it. I wanted to break it all up, to explode the narrative, and find a new way of telling the story.

It was a mess. My MFA-with-High-Distinction mind immediately replied, "That's not how writing happens." But why not? Isn't that how I cast my Runes? Isn't that how I've actually made some major decisions in my life? By throwing Chinese coins in the air? Why shouldn't I believe it can work wonders for my writing? It is only a matter of looking. It taught me what a truly non-linear narrative reads like, breaking my illusions about my own efforts to write one. As in real life, I didn't like being lost in the mess of a story that wasn't going anywhere.

After a few days of letting the matter sit, I retrieved the cut-up strips of my essay (deconstructed, if I may), which I had inserted into the *Bird* book in the "Making a Nest" section. Intuitively, I took the paragraph about making a nest and wrote it into the shape of a nest. It worked like a mandala meditation, putting into greater focus what I needed to do with my essay—the way we look into a microscope by trying to focus with only one eye until the image becomes clear. Unfamiliar, but clear.

I reviewed the strips and selected the necessary "material": what matters, what must take up space. Not narrative, but key words. Then I constructed them into the shape of a house on a black sheet of board paper. I trimmed the strips to fit the space in a collage. And then it was done: "The House on Macopa St."

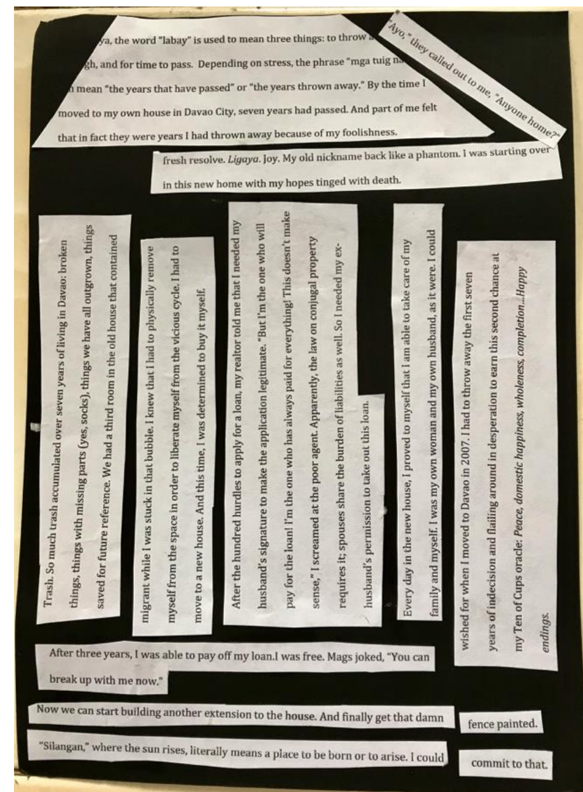

FIGURE 3: The House on Macopa St.

This literally deconstructed and reconstructed house writes against what Pantoja-Hidalgo has said about women's autobiographical writing in her 1994 dissertation: "In the woman's consciousness, the house is not just a symbol of her identity and her position in society, but provides her with that identity and position" (12). It may have been true for the women writers she had studied. But no, I am not my house. Even though I did buy this house about which I've written an essay, I refuse to be defined literally by it or by what it symbolises in society. This artifact/essay is evidence that I created this house—with my hands. I define it, not the other way around.

In addition, the cut-up strips signify the various displacements I have experienced while living in Davao as a migrant: losing my marriage, losing my old homes, separating from family, having to learn a new language, the break-ups and the deaths…. It is in the parts that I have severed that my narrative of self is; it is not in the whole. In fact, the house is an illusion. De Lauretis suggests that lesbians, by virtue of their sexual identity, necessarily experience this "displacement and self-displacement: leaving or giving up a place that is known, that is "home"—physically, emotionally, linguistically, epistemologically—for another place that is unknown" (74). And it is this displacement that enables lesbians to reconceptualise their subjectivity within given social realities, giving rise to what de Lauretis calls the "eccentric subject."

My identity as a lesbian inflects the deployment of these non-linguistic tools, which can and have been used by writers of various sexual orientations since Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, for instance. My pieces, particularly with graphic in(ter)ventions, are essays that deliberately resist genre classification in an effort to reinvent the world as a lesbian writer. Part of me still remains terrified at the reception of these non-conventional pieces within a book that labels itself as a "memoir," but another part, the lesbian who refuses to pass anymore and must be seen, feels proud of her achievement, especially the one in which she resisted her own old ways of thinking and writing. As Brossard says, "Writing is making oneself visible…. The woman who writes thus finally enters" (quoted in Forsyth 47).

Notes

[1] Binisaya is the term for the dialects based on the language Cebuano used in the Visayas and Mindanao. It is the lingua franca in Davao City.

[2] My first language is Tagalog, spoken in Manila where I was born. It is the basis of the national language called Filipino. Having lived in Baguio City for six years, I have had to learn the lingua franca, Ilocano. And then moving to Davao City, I have learned Binisaya. Most Filipinos would speak their first language, plus Filipino, and English. And those from Tagalog-speaking areas like the National Capital Region and Luzon would not know other regional languages. The Philippines has over a hundred living languages.

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