



## A CONVERSATION WITH GLENN DIAZ

*This transpired online from 15-28 October 2020.*

**B.B.P. HOSMILLO:** Hello, Glenn Diaz. Thank you for accepting my invitation. How are you now and what are you doing?

**GLENN DIAZ:** Hi, Bry! I'm good, trying to manage like everyone. Right now I'm in the middle of two activities, a workshop and a residency, both of which had migrated to online platforms. It's both happy and exhausting.

**B.B.P.H.:** Let's go back to the time you were writing *The Quiet Ones*. What you wanted to happen on the page—did it always happen?

**G.D.:** That's a tough one to begin! I think the actual writing happens in the struggle precisely between those two—what you “intend” and what ends up on the page. There lie both the pleasure and difficulty. Things are always complete in our heads, and figuring out what to (strategically) include and withhold constitutes the bulk of my process. I'm also the obsessive (and slow) type of writer that needs to perfect a sentence or a paragraph or a section as much as I could before I allow myself to move on to the next. I lose count just how many times I revise. So yes, the disconnect between intention and execution is the rule rather than the exception.

**B.B.P.H.:** How long did you write it for?

**G.D.:** I wrote it intermittently over six years.

**B.B.P.H.:** Did it ever occur to you not to finish it?

**G.D.:** No. If anything I was in a rush to finish it because someone influential to my writing planted the idea of needing to publish my first book before I turned 30. Which in hindsight was careeristic, exerted undue pressure on myself, and was less about the work than the writer, which can be problematic.

**B.B.P.H.:** *The Quiet Ones* gave you a Palanca Grand Prize, the Philippine National Book Award, and the Madrigal Gonzales First Book Award. How important was it for you to win those awards, for your career and standing in the Philippine literary scape?

**G.D.:** I'd like to think my familiarity with certain aspects of local literary production demystified what awards mean to me as a writer. I am happy to receive awards, of course; I could use the prize money for one. At the minimum they ideally mean that the work doesn't suck, but I'm always careful not to



overstate their value in this regard because awarding prizes is obviously a political process. I suppose I'm also aware that awards carry some form of prestige, which had opened, and continues to open, doors for me as a writer.

**B.B.P.H.:** Your first novel, published by the Ateneo Press, *The Quiet Ones* was celebrated. For its language. For its postcoloniality. For its realness. And by realness, I mean the clarity of its telling, its persistent to be who we are—a generation of Filipinos, mostly middle-class some say, but actually mostly poor, curious where to put our desires, ready to end, always ending, even on a normal day we are ending. Indeed, it was hailed as an important work of Philippine Literature. I am so proud that our country has a writer like you. Your reading of it, was it any different from how people read it? Was there something said about this work that surprised or bemused or angered you?

**G.D.:** It's really a simple text, if overlong and plodding; it's realist, located in the everyday, and occasionally prone to sermonizing. So for the most part it was thankfully read the way I had hoped it would be. I appreciated the rethinking of the BPO industry, consumerism, of Manila as a space, of desire as mediated by so many things. I think I was amused, and educated, the most by the reactions about the form. The language, the supposed lack of plot, the opening "hook" of the heist arc that some felt was sort of disingenuous and others welcomed. Occasionally I would hear, despite myself, less than salutary things said about it, and I try not to engage because the work *is* the argument. Anything I say is beside the point.

**B.B.P.H.:** I almost have no serious interest in writings that don't see how humans surrender to different forms of power and how they resist. I suppose, as your work has no fear of addressing capitalism and class-race-gender-based struggles, you would agree that great writing is always political. What would you say to people who see this as a problem?

**G.D.:** It's funny because an excerpt from a work-in-progress was just workshopped, and the sort of confident, heavy-handed politics was pointed out as a possible issue. It's something that I've heard literally since my first workshop many years ago. I have absolutely no problem with overt politics, as you said. I constantly negotiate politics and "artfulness" in my fiction, because politics, broadly conceived, and history are the lens through which I make sense of experience, of society. Is the politics contrived? Well, fiction *is* a contrivance. Others are of course free to disagree.

**B.B.P.H.:** Every time I would read a text written by a Filipino author, which I considered good, I would wonder how it might be read by students, by Filipinos, if ever they would have that chance since I view reading literature in the Philippines as a privilege and elitist, even when our literacy rate in 2015 was 99.08% according to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics. Would you say the same? Do you worry that because of this the creative writing of social texts



might not really reach a point when Filipinos re-think the importance of their lives quite publicly after reading evocative poetry or fiction of our own?

**G.D.:** I harbor absolutely no illusion that what I write now would be popular in any sense of that word. I write in English, and a copy of my book costs almost the equivalent of the daily minimum wage in Metro Manila. These realities are always sobering for anyone who publishes in English in this country. I am constantly thinking about the role that accessibility plays in my work, from the writing to issues outside it. I agree that insularity of any kind, especially if it oversteps into elitist notions of art, ought to be disconcerting. At the same time I understand that the problem is complex and goes much deeper, beginning with our education system, the entrenched inequality, the strange, uneven afterlife of colonialism in our lives, etc etc.

**B.B.P.H.:** What do you want to achieve as a novelist? Have you?

**G.D.:** I sincerely shudder just thinking of myself as a novelist. As a fiction writer I think what I want to do (very broadly speaking) is invite other Filipinos in the collective imagination of our historical selves. I am always dumbfounded at the kind of brutal history that we are dealt with as a country, and which I feel deserves some form of reckoning. The impetus behind *The Quiet Ones* is initially personal in that fictionally rendering my disempowering experience as a call center agent brought me comfort. As I was writing the manuscript, the canvass became larger, and I realized the comfort was from thinking of the experience in historical terms and salvaging a measure of agency in the face of such grave historical subjection. This affliction with history is what I will always want to engage in my writing, which I try to “achieve” one work at a time.

**B.B.P.H.:** “affliction with history”—this is really significant, crucial I would say in being a Filipino, and thank you for mentioning this, and I thank the stars in the universe that this is central in your creative practice.

In my birth year, then-president Cory Aquino signed a pact with the US to continue the operation of two military bases in our country in exchange for \$962 million in military and economic aid to be distributed in 1990 and 1991. I was about to turn 1-year old when Ferdinand Marcos died in 1989. I grew up knowing I was poor and that the Philippines was colonised, but I didn't know exactly what those meant, how those things would translate into a difficult psychology later in my life. When I was an undergraduate in the university, there was no lecturer, no subject that prompted me to think of myself as a child of a colonised nation; nothing of those either opened any door for me to contemplate on dictatorship, the losses one needs to sustain under it. Really nothing. And when I came to a point in my life, I think 21, when these things became the door to my personhood, it was an experience of estrangement because the texts that I had to address that were written by either white



intellectual or a non-white who could not speak to my queerness and internalised shame of being a Filipino. I became obsessed to look for intellectuals who could validate me, say my pain was real—Trinh T. Min-ha was the closest I could remember.

Now, I'm writing a poetry book about same-sex intimate partner violence, from a personal experience. And because, in my view colonialism is an institutionalised narcissistic abuse, I use fragments of our history in my narrative, which is so difficult to do because "our history", as I am experiencing now more than ever, is overpowered by non-Filipinos who wrote the Philippines. Take for instance, the Bataan Death March. I have three or four memoirs on this written by white surviving soldiers and nil from a Filipino voice.

Glenn, why do you think we are not yet done in telling history? How dangerous is it for Filipino writers to do this?

**G.D.:** What a question! We can devote a whole symposium to this subject, and I feel we'd barely scratch the surface. But what you sense is right, I think. The state, which regulates and structures a gargantuan aspect of our lives, is not interested in telling the kind of popular history that we can attest to because it would reveal just how precarious and illegitimate and violent it is. This red-tagging business by elements of the security sector, for instance, traces its roots all the way to the Cold War and even beyond, a point when Americans were essentially "writing history" by controlling key aspects of the narrative (to which their Filipino collaborators were only too happy to acquiesce). Even our general remembrance of EDSA is stripped off ideology, reduced to words like "democracy" and "freedom" and supposedly being "bloodless." But what exactly was regained in that transition? So many actors from the Cold War-era Marcos regime survived that turnover unscathed and even celebrated. And the things that Filipinos fought for, from, say, the Tagalog Revolts of 1745 to the Huk rebellion to the ongoing peoples' war, such as those revolving around land ownership, persist to this day. This kind of history is dangerous to the state because it reveals just how hollow and actively harmful its apparatus of power is. And all the more reasons for artists, and Filipinos in general, to seek it.

**B.B.P.H.:** Have you made a pact with yourself to always include a gay man in your work? Was there a time you were hesitant to do this?

**G.D.:** All but a couple of the main characters in *The Quiet Ones* are gay, although I think that's more a function of the project being largely drawn from real life than any conscious design. I was never hesitant to do this; if anything it seemed like a default decision for me to center my early works around a gay protagonist because it was the subject position I was, and am, most familiar with. I had thought there was something empowering about this element being unproblematized. Why was the character gay? He just *is*. Later on I realize



there is privilege in thinking that this dimension need not be foregrounded in my work. Gender politics is something I also think about a lot, especially for what I'm working on now, which is populated by women characters.

**B.B.P.H.:** I watched that episode of the workshop in which you presented your work and even sent a query to the UP National Writers' Workshop if they could send me a copy of the text in order to better understand the discussion.

Involved in projects that are created principally from the possibility of queer imaginary or the rupture of heteronormativity, I have had experiences with publishers and writers who told me things about gender from a privileged point: "why are they happy about this non-discrimination bill"—not considering that there are literally numerous queer communities that know all things about being punished yet have only vicarious schema of what it feels to be recognised, celebrated. How do you think we could step out of our privilege in re-thinking gender, especially if it plays an important role in what we write?

**G.D.:** I can only speak for myself, and my go-to modus is to decenter, i.e., recognize when something is not about me, or my subject position. Maybe that's a roundabout way of saying recognize the privilege, and recognize the contexts and conversations in which one needs to be silent and open and supportive and "pass the mic," as it were. I constantly interrogate my own notions of privilege and my embeddedness in systems that perpetuate them, and I'm always happy and grateful to be educated.

**B.B.P.H.:** What will you not write about?

**G.D.:** My choice of subject matter is largely informed, I think, by individual experience cross-pollenating with my more "theoretical" education about society. I can't think of anything specific at the moment, but generally I don't see myself writing about a reality that is not compelling and resonant and true for myself as an individual, which of course includes my sense of politics and history.

**B.B.P.H.:** Are you ready for the next work after *The Quiet Ones*?

**G.D.:** I completed a first draft of what I hope to be my second book a few months ago, and I think I'm actually excited to get it out there when the time comes.

**B.B.P.H.:** Glenn, there are writers out there, still in our country, beginning, trying. What should they know and what should they do?

**G.D.:** I don't know! Except maybe that writing is only one way of engaging society, and there are many others. That said, writing can be powerful, and



powerful in a very specifically political and also pleasurable way and thus has a critical place in the kind of work that I feel we all must do as citizens.