



Episode 1: Merlinda Bobis

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Note: *Transcripts may contain errors so we encourage you to listen to the audio, which convey emphasis and feelings that are not apparent in the text. Oh, and don't forget to cite the Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities and the Agam Agenda for any quotes taken from the transcript. Enjoy!*

Padma So, Merlinda, what made you choose this particular narrator when you wrote the piece, she's going abroad for scholarship and she's not becoming a doctor that can repair her father, she's getting a Ph.D.

Merlinda It is this face. It is, you know, probably semi-auto biographical because I started with— when I saw the photograph, I thought, this is my father and this is a Bobis face, very much a Bobis face, so I thought. And it was just, it wasn't even a conscious choice, it was just, as I've said it's a very fluid development from seeing and him becoming my father in my narrative and then, I thought, well, I wanted very much to have that inside-outside point of view, so you have someone who's lived in the farm, has known the storms, and also, has been outside and is able to take that story outside. Because I believe the stories of the vulnerable spaces in this planet have to be taken to the very privileged world so that they can actually see that whatever they do there, would impact us. Please see the invisible. I wanted to visualize our landfall and the impacts of this landfall on our daily lives and to say, “Maawa ka naman”, *yun na yung ganon*. A little bit of, there is a, it's an advocacy piece like all the pieces in this book. And I wanted that the advocacies not just among us, we actually have to go to the people who are polluting, who are doing a lot of you know, the emissions who are responsible for this, the first world, and that your comfortable places, *yun*. You're not worried about the fact that maybe your island will disappear. But, there are many island countries in the Pacific who, you know, who with one super storm, one tsunami, they could just disappear from the face of the earth.

Padma That's why you wrote that line.

Merlinda That's why I wrote that. That's why it had to be that point of view with someone as able to, an insider and outsider and who's able to take it somewhere else. So she's, the story is she's in transit... but also the story is in transit. I would like to think that with these, I could hand it over the story, I could tell the story to someone who is not from the Philippines, say look, here it is, please see the invisible in the same way that I can hand over—I wanted to hand over the photograph of my father.

Padma And you mentioned that it's a semi-autobiographical piece. Could you tell us about that?

Merlinda Ah because of the fact, because sampulong guramoy is really a phrase of my father... That phrase, "I sent you to school with my sampulong guramoy, pinaaeskwela kamo kasakoyang sa sakoyang, aa pinaaeskwela kamo kong sa koyang sampulong guramoy. I sent you to school or my ten fingers sent you to school." Because he worked with his hands, and so, well he repaired refrigerators and air conditioners but he also was a farmer beforehand. So... any person who works with his or her hands, and used that work, that labor to send children to school, to feed children, to clothe children, I wanted this to be a homage to all our workers, especially our workers in the farm. Our fishermen, our workers who have to deal with the daily activities of nature and the disasters that come our way.

Padma And you originally wrote this in Bicolano?

Merlinda Oh yes, I wrote it in Bicol.

Padma Could you read us a few lines or phrases in your piece that express your thoughts better than the English version?

Merlinda I think the best is the ending part. I will have, it's a little bit long. It's a very short piece, but these are the ones that I felt cannot quite, the English version cannot quite get it the same so let me read this. It's that portion when he's saying that it's probably a giant sandwich that the mother is preparing, "Ay, Gloring, kahaloy-haloy mo man. Ano, higenteng sandwich 'yan?" Nag-oolok si Pay. Naghihibi. Pero dae ko nahihiling. Sampulong guramoy ni May, sampulong guramoy ni Pay. Hilinga tabi ang dae nahihiling. Pirang beses sa sarong taon ang pagpakaray kang atop na nahulkab kang pirang beses na bagyo. Pirang beses ang pag-bakwet dahil sa baha. Pirang beses ang pagsalba kang naglalapang paroy.

Merlinda “Kaso sarong aldaw, nagabot kang paros, kang uran su kadakol na harong hale sa dagâ. Superstorm: nahiling ko sa computer, kang pigtatapos ko su sakong conference paper. Pero dae ki nakahiling sa library: kung pânô nagabot su sakong puso hale sa sakuyang daghan. Kaya anion ako sa L.A. airport ngunyan, pauli sa dae ko pa aram. Sa dae ko nahihiling sa mga bareta: ang samuyang harong, umâ, si Pay, si May. I can’t see them, or the impending landfall in my chest. But I see you—you, gasping at the tragedy on TV, in your laptops and iPhones as we wait to take off. Please, I beg you. Look closer. It is my father, my mother, and all of twenty fingers holding back this storm.

Merlinda I’ll explain. I had to read this until the end, because I really wanted an uneven, as in the crafting of the story, the technical strategizing, it’s all in Bicol and suddenly switches to English. I really wanted that inside-outside headspace for the listener when the story’s told.

Padma What’s interesting is the first switch that happens is when she says “superstorm”. And that’s still mixed in with the Bicolano, and then it’s followed with her addressing her American audience. Why the words Superstorm? Is there no Bicolano term for it?

Merlinda Bagyo, you know the Bicolano term is Bagyo. But superstorm after Haiyan, I think in fact Reming, when they started, that superstorm wasn’t even around right, or maybe it was. But that was the time when I got the, I became aware of this concept of superstorm and of course because there was a tidal surge that’s why the problem is because we’re coastal in in Bicol, in Legazpi, in Albay. So, it was water there and water from the ocean so. And superstorm is the recognizable word outside, but it’s also, it’s now part of the every day, well conversation and language of Bicolanos and areas where you have mostly these super storms so after that and storm surge also, has become part of the ordinary vocabulary of people in vulnerable areas.

Padma In your work, earlier you mentioned rivers and girls and children, so in your work, you focused a lot on water,

Merlinda Yes.

Padma And the environment and women and girls, why are these things important to you?

Merlinda It actually started the water thing the river thing started from me writing about *Fish Hair Woman*. That novel is about the total war in 1987 and which was waged in the countryside and one of the areas, of course, was Bicol because it was a hotbed of

insurgence, it was the purge of the NPA, and my mythologized Iraya, which is the village, the site of the conflict and of course there's a river and there all the dead bodies were thrown into the river. So the river gets sullied, polluted by these bodies, and there is this fisherwoman with her twelve meter hair who retrieves their bodies but also their stories, the lived stories so with that consciousness, having spent 17 years writing and researching that book before it was published— yes, it took a long time, I could have raised a child, a 17-year-old by the time the book was published— so I think that started my river consciousness, that kind of nature is always there, nature gets sullied by conflict and by what we do as human beings. And that as a scholar as well that started me into thinking about rivers and empathy for each other and empathy for the environment. It was a very, again, a very fluid movement from talking about the kapwa, your kapwa as the other person not just within your family, your kapwa not just within the Philippines and then eventually I thought the rivers are your kapwa. Nature is your kapwa, and that's really what I want, what I have been doing as a scholar now, and as a community facilitator of community workshops because that's what I have been doing so far, facilitating workshops with communities and even writers on rivers on water and I have now a template I have a module on how to do that, so that module that that style of facilitating and I even did it for elders in Bicol, we have these. I facilitated a workshop that's called "susugsalob" to save the dying river the Naga river and I facilitated it for elders the elders who could still tell stories about their memories of the river before it got polluted.

Padma I like what you called it earlier, you said "river consciousness". It's beautiful.

Merlinda It's a river consciousness. It's a water consciousness. It's a nature consciousness and if and what I love, is the children are very much at the helm, and you know all these demonstrations in Australia in Europe and kids saying, "It's our planet, excuse me, it is what we've inherited from you" and please. So they're talking to the politicians, the policymakers because you know Padma, I really believe the most important story is policy. It is the narrative that affects all our lives. That could kill us, that could make us live.

Padma What do you suggest for young people to do as they face the reality of climate change?

Merlinda Be kind. Be kind and be kind. When you think of kindness inevitably, if you're a Filipino, you'll have to think of the kapwa. Yeah, because and then your kindness extends to the earth. And if you're thinking of kindness you know how we are,

we only think sometimes of, oh I'm kind to my mother, my father, my friends, but you have to remember, but if you think, you know, it's really rethinking your framework but if you're thinking that, okay, kapamilya ko kapwa ko, my friends are kapwa ko but... the rivers, they're kapwa as well, then if I am kind to my mother, if I am kind to my friends, extension yan eh. Yung pagka-kapwa niya, kapwa niya rin yung ilog, kapwa niya yung air, yung dagat, yung lupa. So the kindness extends to these, even to the littlest animals. And that's how I wish, and, it's easy for children and especially at a very young age to probably still think beyond themselves. Because when we're older, we're very much on the lookout for number one, which is the "I". We get very obsessed with the vertical pronoun (laughs), but children, maybe, I like to think, if, although it is easy with all the YouTube and then the technology, they can see, and the consumerist society. We forget that we have to return to the way. And maybe just, plastaduhin muna natin yung vertical pronoun. Pahigain (laughs).

Padma So, since *Agam* was published in 2014, we've seen this rise in "clifi" or climate fiction, why do you think that happened?

Merlinda Oh I think there is. It's because, first, personally because I've written clifi. And I call *Locust Girl: A Love Song* clifi, uh, which is a bigger picture of a waterless planet so really it's very much about my water concern is extended in that book. But it's also about refugees when resources are controlled, and water is being controlled only by a few people and eventually, there will come a time, that there will only be that. This clifi book, this only one place pot one green haven in the planet, everything is desert. That's where we are headed. That's what we're doing to the planet. So very grim kind of way of looking at the progression of our narrative but that's how we are, you know, that's how what we've been doing. There is a trend. Why is there a trend of clifi? Because our bodies feel it. Your body is aware what's happening to climate. We just had an earthquake we just had, nature is telling us there is something, the planet is protesting. And we, if you are yeah, your body knows it and feels it. You feel the heat, you feel the cold, you feel the, you feel the lack of water so I think, I always, you know, all my works are always grounded in the body and of course the planet is a body. So I think because we feel it. So, clifi, it is we're seeing it in the disasters in our superstorms, we see it.

Padma And you mentioned, grim, there are very grim imaginings of future in a lot of clifi what do you think that implies? Our abilities to face that future with all the uncertainty and also the despair? But also hope?

Merlinda Yes, in fact, I write about very grim issues from war, to domestic violence, child prostitution. I write about trauma a lot, and I write about really the dying

planet, but all the time I am always saying there is hope. I don't want to despair. There is always hope and in fact even in *Locust Girl: A Love Song*, which they call a clifi, it is very much about love. Again, you know, even if it's not set in the Philippines, it's in a mythical time in the future, but love still goes back to kapwa. It's something that's part of our culture and I know some of us we bandy around the word kapwa and love, it has become so, we have become so glib in the way we use it but at the end of the day it is probably what we need. It's not a case of "all we need is love", you know that kind of thing no, no, no I am talking about meaningful loving where it is about feeling, thinking, doing. And there is self-awareness as you love, there is a kind of a self-reflexivity, a self-critique it's not just you know, how you can say oh, I'm kind and I'm good. The kind of self, a kind of, I think there should be an ethics, an issue of ethics in the loving. Accountability.

Padma It strikes me how it's easy to say, to talk about kindness. But when we think of it as a practice it can actually be quite difficult.

Merlinda It is, it is yes, it can be very difficult. However, having said that, that's why I believe in hope. There's hope, I don't despair because even if you become conscious you know when you become—you think, kind, I'll have to be kind, it's difficult. And we talk about so much kindness in the world locally and globally, but, it gives me hope when I see people doing acts of kindness and unconsciously even. And I want, I think for me, because I am despairing of the way we tell stories, really, I am despairing off the 24/7 media cycle where it's all very grim, very depressing and is like there's no and all the infighting, and we all are in the race on who tells the worst, the best story of tragedy and we seem to revel in it. And we have forgotten there's another side. We have forgotten to tell the stories of kindness. And so, my advocacy again. My project now is to put it there, it has the voices, please see the invisible, I go back to that, because it has become invisibilized because we're talking about conflict all the time. We're talking about kindness all the time and they do exist, I am not talking about an easy way out, I am talking about balance. If you're going to write about conflict, tell the story, please tell, see the invisible, there are stories of kindness They do exist.

Padma You've seen this.

Merlinda I've seen this, I've lived this but I never talked about it because I was also one of those who was very much into writing about conflict. Because of course, conflict you see that and of course, as a novelist, conflict is drama. You don't have a story without conflict, but then, and the danger for any storyteller is that you focus on that and you forget the other side. And it's a beautiful other side.

Padma My last question for you is, I wish I could, I'm tempted to hazard a guess but I will hold back, I would like to hear you first, what is your superpower?

Merlinda When I saw among the questions. I thought, you sent me that question. Actually my response, I have no superpower (laughs) no superpower, I never think in terms of superpower,

Padma If you had one, what would it be?

Merlinda If I had one, I think if I wished for one, if there is that, you know if you think of the superpower, the superheroes if I could have a superpower, I would like very much the power to shift people's consciousness and change the narrative, change how we tell stories, and if I believe, if we shift how we story, because story begins not when you put a story, not when you speak, not when you write, but the moment you see. You're already telling a story. So you can have even stories of unkindness just by looking at making judgments of other people, yeah? But you can also have very good positive stories by just the kindness of sight, I call it. So if I have this, if I could have that, if I could, I would have, I want a superpower so that I could give it back. I could touch each one and if I have that superpower, each time I touch a body they would return to that, they would remember what they already had within them because I still believe that each one has that. The capacity to tell a kinder story and to live a kinder story. So, the super power would, be if I were, you know, one of those super heroes flying around, I'd fly around and touch everyone, tap everyone so they can revise, re-vision, our story telling power... and also, storytelling is not just telling but also listening. That we can listen to each other and have conversations. You know in Bicol, we always say the first thing when we see each other, first you know, I think it's a typical thing with Filipinos, "anong nag kaon ka na?" "have you eaten?" and then "iiiistoryahan kita", "let's tell stories". But storytelling is a give and take, it's telling and listening, see imagine, if one has a super power to shift the storytelling and listening, so that people can live and tell and listen to stories. That view, relate to each other including our planet, our rivers, our waters, as kapwa, then, I think we'll be a better planet and maybe we'll feel better about ourselves too.

Padma I think you already have a super power.

Merlinda (laughs) Don't know about that.

Padma And what it is, is you make the invisible visible.

Merlinda Oh. Well, thank you, but I think every writer does that. I'm just one of them, I'm just one of them and when I talk about writer, by the way, I should probably use two words, every storyteller has that. Because you see, I think I became a writer because I come from a family of storytellers, my grandfather, my grandmother, my father, they tell stories, the oral storytelling and in fact, that's what I love most that's why I'm into performance because the orality of the story, the body, it's the body that tells the story, text is good, I love text, but text without the body, no thank you.

Padma Thank you.

Merlinda Thank you very much for speaking with me and allowing me to share this little, you know, wishes perhaps.

Padma They're beautiful stories so we're very grateful that you shared your stories with us, Merlinda.