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# AN INTRODUCTION TO TWO STORIES BY LINDA CHRISTANTY: “THE FLYING HORSE OF MARIA PINTO” AND “THE FOURTH GRAVE”

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These two stories by Linda Christanty, appearing in translation, bookend her award-winning volume *The Flying Horse of Maria Pinto* (2004). There are twelve stories in this collection, all of them short, all of them written in a voice that I would not identify particularly as that of a “woman writer,” a designation for the writers of women-centered narratives that has become fashionable in Indonesian literary circles. Linda is young, female, educated, and a respected writer often invited to participate in literary events abroad. It might seem plausible for Linda to be grouped with her contemporaries, other famous female authors who fall under the glamorous and slightly derided category of writers who create stories and novels known collectively as *sastra wangi* (fragrant literature). Instead her work merges thematic newness (a historical magical-realism) with her journalistic sensibilities, continuing the Indonesian tradition of *cerpen* (*cerita pendek*/short stories) that appear in newspapers and literary magazines.

In recent years, young female authors have gained notoriety as the writers of “*sastra wangi*,” the fragrant tales of sex and complicated desire.<sup>1</sup> This new *sastra wangi* that created such interest among Indonesian writers and critics beginning in the late 1990s said things that were not written about in polite—that is to say, “intellectual”—society: women’s sexuality, unlicensed desire and intimacy, infidelity. Its literary

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<sup>1</sup> The most famous examples would be Ayu Utami and Djenaer Maesa Ayu, whose works are available in English.

merits were mixed up with the power to shock. One of the central features that critics were keen to praise or denounce was the explicit sexual content of the works, which, depending on which camp one was in, either broke with patriarchal norms in Indonesian society in powerful ways or was itself proof of the influence of the decadent West upon Indonesian culture.<sup>2</sup> Some critics went so far as to call these representations “un-Indonesian.”<sup>3</sup> The way that “the personal has become political,” through the routes opened up by *sastra wangi*, reflect the coming of age of a particular category of Indonesian womanhood: the urbane, educated, middle-class woman, who has places to go, who changes and is changed by her own choices. In short, these are texts that move with the rhythms of the global. Even if the work evokes Indonesian mythology or complicates the cultural differences between East and West, the literary effects of *sastra wangi* have become inseparable from the extra-literary personae that belong to the writers of these works. The stamp of their origins is recognizable. The want that drives these stories expresses an unassailable fact: “I want something.” The “I” that wants cannot be denied.

Readers in Indonesia might prefer the shock of women writers exploring the literary and cultural bounds of sexuality to signify a social and structural change in women’s relationship to writing, representation, and the public, to the gentler tempo of Linda’s words. Linda is, after all, only writing about that ubiquitous national obsession: politics. Politics is unfashionable now for having become so fashionable in the wake of *Reformasi*. In contrast, *sastra wangi*, and the urbane “chicklit” that is its younger step-sibling, seem to show far more possibilities for individual change through the mobile professions and relationships the characters have, with appealing gadgets and locations built in.<sup>4</sup> If *The Flying Horse of Maria Pinto* falls a bit short of such cosmopolitan visions, it offers moments such as this:

The train pierced into the interior, crossing seas, salt fields, teak forests, plantations, rice-fields, and settlements. The beacons of light flashed and drowned in the field of the windowpane. Another certainty came, turning its sharp pains into the pit of the stomach. (“The Flying Horse of Maria Pinto”)

And again the quiet left by the disappearance of a political activist:

Paula’s room lay vacant for years. Our houseguests hardly ever spend the night. And if they did, they preferred to unroll a mattress or a straw mat on the floor of the living room. Once a year, when Paula came home for her school holidays, the room would have an inhabitant once again. Paula’s room was painstakingly cleaned every single day by my wife, as if she still lived with us. Clean sheets remain on the bed. Books on the shelves neatly ordered. Not one of Paula’s dolls has left the toy rack. The scent of liquid floor cleaner always lingered.

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<sup>2</sup> See Soe Tjen Marching’s essay “Descriptions of Female Sexuality in Ayu Utami’s *Saman*,” in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38,1 (February 2007), for a synopsis of the contemporary debate over *sastra wangi*. It is telling that critics and writers were not split by the political considerations of “rightist” and “leftist” politics that have defined much of Indonesian cultural production. Rather, the masters and grandes dames of opposing political factions were united in condemning the “pornographic” content of the women writers’ fiction designated as *sastra wangi*.

<sup>3</sup> Marching, “Descriptions of Female Sexuality,” pp. 134–35.

<sup>4</sup> “Chicklit” is a new phenomenon in Indonesia. Fictional works in this category feature the cosmopolitan trends of youth culture in Jakarta, or, if the plot spans different cities, that great new medium, the Internet, and text messaging lingo.

I saw that the window was already open. The fresh air flowed indoors. I walked to the window, looked out at the backyard. Three graves. I was planning to add another, but didn't have the heart to reveal my intention to Elia. ("The Fourth Grave")

Before the fall of the New Order, violence in literature existed in the realm of metaphor and surrealist imaginings; authors were inclined to take a Kafka-esque flight away from the dangers of social realism.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary writers of fiction and nonfiction are increasingly specific in exposing how instrumental violence is to politics. But how and where do these nodes of politics and violence appear? Linda Christanty reflects upon this question by building the effects of the political into the landscape of daily life. What the narrative voice does is create an aura of intimacy without the voyeurism of shock. Tragedies might have happened in the past, and will happen again in the future, but the narrative in her stories is anchored by meditative descriptions of the everyday.

Linda's work does not belong to *sastra wangi*, for these reasons. The loveliness of the language can seem conventional compared to the stylistic interventions of *sastra wangi* narratives; her stories are not character driven, there are no assertive "I"s that change the world. Rather, change comes in small increments, and even in dramatic moments of war and resistance, the characters turn their heads away. They look back and reflect in old age, years later, to tell another story of how politics has entered the home, defined family relations, and infected both old age and youth in frustrating ways. The characters are not the main point of the storyline; rather, their conflicted selves are the results of breakages within the everyday structures of family, language, and nation. These breaks create the conditions for other dimensions of longing, for the desire for human contact, and for secrets not to be. Linda's stories have the air of a confessional, because her narrators are unable to reconcile who they are, and who they appear to be. In "The Flying Horse of Maria Pinto," the title story that begins the volume, the soldier Yosef Legiman desires Maria Pinto, the rebel commander of the enemy troops. He is ordered by his superiors to keep her alive in order to keep the war alive. This desire for the enemy "other" follows him, in the form of Maria Pinto atop her flying steed, even when his target has turned inwards against itself. The soldier no longer shoots at the enemy in the border zones, but has been dispatched to shoot "terrorist" students operating within the nation. When he kills a young woman, a fellow citizen designated as an internal enemy, he feels at one with Maria Pinto. What a statement about the direction that the bullets take!

The language itself creates visual effects, invites an atmospheric rush when the trains race by or when women glide by, as only spectral presences can. Students, revolutionaries, political activists, missing fathers, informants, the broken families of

<sup>5</sup> One could say Putu Wijaya's work in the 1980s was at times more realist than surrealist, in particular his allegorical depictions of New Order violence in "Nyali." Yet social realism continued to be reviled for its close association with Lekra, the left-wing cultural institute of the 1960s. According to the government censors' logic explaining why Pramoedya's works were banned in the 1980s and 1990s, historical novels were dangerous because they had the potential to confuse people with an incorrect version of the way things were. Communist ideas might flow through these realist representations. See Henk Maier, *We are Playing Relatives: A Survey of Malay Writing* (Leiden: KITLV, 2004); and also Keith Foulcher, "Indonesian Literature 1950-1965: The Left Response" (paper for the Asian Studies Association of Australia Fifth National Conference, Adelaide University, May 13-19, 1984).

1965, all those who might have felt themselves misfits because they harbored a secret appear and disappear in these stories. For much of the New Order, an individual's secrets had the potential to cause harm to others. Linda's characters keep secrets naturally, even if they do not know why or what for. The secret is a counterpoint to the hearsay that circulates as an alternative medium for information. In these stories, "people say," or "people believe" things, and then the narrator repeats them to the listener. That the things said are fantastical is a moot point. It appears that the stories told by others have authority beyond mere rumor. The stories other people tell, stories that the narrator then repeats to the reader, have the effect of truth because this was the way information traveled through New Order times; as the uncorroborated story of a distant person without direct relation to oneself. Yet people are connected through these stories by their shared fear that the reports could be true. After all, they themselves are hiding damaging information, in the form of a secret. Linda Christanty has managed to convey the sense of the public constituted through these hushed repetitions; in these and other stories in the volume, "I heard that" or "They say that" open many a sentence.

As a student in the 1990s, Linda Christanty was also an activist. That might be the crucial clue that explains why her stories describe the social conditions of grief, loss, and the ambivalence of human relations so well. In the order of the stories, which begins with "The Flying Horse of Maria Pinto" and ends with "The Fourth Grave," the restless agitation that animates the characters has been put to rest. And this act, of creating a literary grave for certain important and still unexplained gaps in the historical record,<sup>6</sup> puts to rest not the political violence of the past, but the anxieties that drove people to rumor and silence. The grave allows questions to be asked of the past, beginning with "Why" things happened, not only where and how.

I met the author in early 2004, when I was doing my fieldwork in Jakarta. Then, as she is now, Linda was working as a journalist for *Pantau* magazine, an erudite and unusual publication, notable for the topics it covered. Linda's activist past helped me tremendously in establishing my research contacts, but she herself was modest about her own work. Until I saw Linda ascend the stage to accept the Khatulistiwa literary award for best fiction writer of the year, I had not paid much attention to contemporary Indonesian literature. And it was not until I read these stories that the possible trajectory Indonesian politics might be taking appeared to me. Some things put to rest. Others awakened. Consumed by our fetish for the stirrings of newness, we might forget that this rest, accorded by the quiet moments embedded in the writer's language, does far more for our political imagination than the dissonance of the new.

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<sup>6</sup> Among the events that are referred to in the twelve stories are the Indonesian Revolution of 1945, the aftermath of the killings and imprisonments of suspected Communists in 1965–66, the occupation and resistance in East Timor, and the student activist disappearances of the 1990s.