

A “Monstress” Undertaking: an interview with Lysley Tenorio

by Noelle Brada-Williams

Filipino American Lysley Tenorio, Creative Writing Professor at Saint Mary’s College in California, is the author of the short story collection, *Monstress*. He has been both a Stegner and a Steinbeck Fellow, and recently won the Rome Prize for literature from the American Academy of Rome. His work has been anthologized in *Best New American Voices* and published in venues such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Manoa*. His short story, “The Brothers,” won the 2005 Pushcart prize. Philip Kan Gotanda has adapted his short story “Save the I-Hotel” for the stage and Sean San José has adapted the title story of the collection, “Monstress.” These will be appearing on stage together at the American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.) in San Francisco this fall. This interview was done via email during the summer of 2015 and is organized around his short story collection.

AALDP: As you know, *Asian American Literature: Discourses & Pedagogies* focuses on the teaching of Asian American literature. Has being a Creative Writing Professor at Saint Mary’s College affected the way you think about your own work?

Lysley Tenorio: It has. Teaching provides the opportunity to discuss, on a regular basis, both the possibilities and limitations of fiction. Being in the classroom, as both instructor and participant, is a privilege, one that keeps me on my toes, requires me to read with an open mind, and simultaneously uphold and question my own beliefs about writing, and what it means to be a writer.

AALDP: You have credited a class with Bharati Mukherjee for turning you on to writing about the immigrant experience. After we read *Monstress: stories* in my Asian American Literature class last semester, many of my own students wanted to know if you see writing about the immigrant experience as a kind of duty.

Tenorio: No. I feel no duty to write about the immigrant experience, or any other subject matter, question, theme, etc. I write what I want to write.

That said, I always feel a duty to render with accuracy, respect, and empathy, any person, place, or event that I might write about, so research and revision are essential to the process. But perhaps most importantly, I must feel some kind of emotional and intellectual connection to the material; otherwise, what's the point?

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AALDP: Many of my students at San Jose State are working on BA's in Creative Writing and they wanted me to ask you about how you do research for your stories as many of them have historical settings. In an interview with the *Paris Review*, you said, 'I think it's absolutely foolish not to indulge in the research.' It struck me that many of the creative writers I know would describe imagining characters and worlds as more indulgent and would refer to research and "fact-checking" as a kind of drudgery. Could you say more not only about your research methods but perhaps elaborate on what it means to you to "indulge" in the writing process?

Tenorio: Research—assuming research is necessary for the particular piece I'm working on—is critical in the early stages of a story. Every fact I find has the possibility of informing character, plot, theme, etc. Even on the micro level, research can help determine a single concrete significant detail, an essential building block of fiction. This is why, at an early stage of a story, it's important to indulge in the research, to give yourself as much potentially valuable information as possible. Plus, it's fun. The tricky part, of course, is figuring out what information is critical to the work, and what facts you need to ignore. You also want to be careful not to feel constrained or unnecessarily obligated to render the research in fiction. At a certain point, you need to quit with the research and get to the page.

AALDP: Knowing that teachers and students are using your collection, *Monstress*, in a classroom, does that affect how you think about what you write? I've always thought that we place literature in an odd situation when we turn a form that many of us perceive as entertainment and escape into a requirement that people will be tested on. Yet, in the classroom I feel that literature can have such a deep impact on many people who might never have picked up a particular book. Where do you see the role of academia vis-a-vis literature? Are there any things that you would want a class to focus on? Are there any things that you would not want to see done with your stories in a classroom?

Tenorio: I appreciate you saying that literature is a form of entertainment, because I think that's an aspect of reading (and writing) that is too often undervalued, particularly by those who read and write "literary" (whatever that means) fiction. A reader's time is precious; if I'm lucky enough to have one, I'd better do all I can to keep that reader entertained, whether it be on the level of story, character, language, etc. I'd much rather have a reader finish my book with a fun reading experience than with a strong thesis statement for the final paper.

That said, academia is important for many writers, because it can bring in readers we might not otherwise have, and because it provides a forum to discuss the more abstract ideas that aren't always on the surface. For me, the subtextual story is as vital as the dramatic surface--I cannot write one without the other. So to have these layers of narrative complexity discussed in an academic setting is something for which I am extremely grateful, and can sometimes help me recognize things in my own work that I didn't before.

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In terms of what I would and would not want to be done with my work in a classroom, I'm pretty open. I believe once the work is out in the world, it must stand on its own, so is therefore subject to the questions, interpretations, and predilections of the individual and group. I can only hope the work is read with an open mind, with a willingness to engage characters whose experiences may be vastly different from a reader's own, and with the belief that there is no right or wrong way to respond to the work.

AALDP: There is not much I tell my students absolutely not to do when analyzing literature, but when I teach ethnic literature I do tend to preach to them about the difference between artistic representation and political representation. I typically say something like: Leslie Marmon Silko might be the only female Native American novelist *representing* Native Americans in the 1970's—or in my multiethnic literature class—but that doesn't mean she *represents* all Native Americans then or now. There was no election where Native Americans from every tribe got together and gave anyone that title. And people outside a community certainly don't get to make that determination. I really appreciate what you have said in your interview with Larissa Archer of *ZZZZZYVA* and your response to the reviewer who found your stories too generic and presumably not ethnic enough. Many of us are working with curriculums that imply that each text from a different ethnic community will somehow illuminate that whole community. I think that is part of the awkward task we've shouldered literature with when we put it in an academic setting. We want to explore the specificity of individual artistic expression, but even when we are aware of the pitfalls of representation, we still hope the literature will teach our students about the various communities "represented" on our syllabi. It is a bit "Do as I say, not as I do."

Perhaps that is why Reva Gogo of your title story, "Monstress," is so interesting. Not only is she not confined to any one nation but her character seems to occupy multiple competing identities at one time: beautiful starlet, grotesque monster, aspiring actress, doting girlfriend, practical dentist's receptionist. She really resists categorization, just like her story. How did you first conceive of this character? Do you perceive of Reva as more or less of a dreamer than Checkers? Is her love and faith in him more or less rational than his view of his future as a filmmaker?

Tenorio: I can appreciate that tension between artistic representation and political representation. Any artist who might be seen as writing about and/or coming from a particular group can both benefit from and be stifled it, but it can also generate vital discussion. So thank you for bringing it up.

I'm glad Reva resists categorization. The last thing I want is for my characters to come across as reductive types or representations of a defined group or idea. I understand they might be read that way, but I hope they're also seen as unique, emotionally and psychologically complex individuals.

I first tried writing "Monstress" from Checkers' point of view, but he seemed too

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extreme in his desires, and I worried that a reader would have trouble connecting with that. Reva was someone who had more distance from the immediate stakes of the story—initially, anyway—and was someone who could tell Checkers’ story while slowly revealing—though not necessarily understanding—her own. This created the tension I needed for the story, so I stayed with her as my narrator.

AALDP: How do you see her being transformed yet again for the stage?

Tenorio: I’ll find out opening night!

AALDP: “The Brothers” is the story my students wrote and talked about the most. Frankly, I was a little nervous when I was planning to teach it. I remember teaching the film version of *Kiss of a Spider Woman* back in the 1990’s and having a room full of college students giggle nervously during the viewing. Even more recently I’ve had a lot of students express discomfort when I’ve taught texts dealing with sexuality such as *Dogeaters*, *M. Butterfly*, or Manuel Puig’s novel. Yet when this last semester’s class read “The Brothers,” they were immediately engaged by it and discussed it energetically. While my own questions often mentioned the brother Eric and referred to Edmond’s sibling as “he,” my students tended to refer to the deceased sibling as “she” and “Erica,” the name she had chosen for herself. I think it was the first time I felt that my students were ahead rather than behind me in discussing issues of sexuality and gender identity. It made me realize how, despite the amount of criticism Edmond met with in our discussion, that I had unquestioningly accepted a part of his and his mother’s original sense of their family member as one unchanging identity. Why did you choose to tell this story from Edmond’s perspective?

Tenorio: I chose Edmond’s perspective because it’s really his story. I wanted Eric/Erica to be the person who actually led the more fulfilled, more emotionally successful life. Even though her life was incredibly difficult—she was disowned by her mother, and even suffers oppression in her death—she had the guts to live as the person she was always meant to be. So rather than make her life as a tran-woman a tragic one, it becomes the standard by which Eric will try to live his own. Whether he succeeds or not, I don’t know.

AALDP: Is Edmond’s changing way of thinking about his sibling a model for the reader of slow change and growth, or is his change too little too late? I guess I’m wondering whether you see this as a tale of redemption or as someone dealing with a sense of guilt that they will never have the chance to shake.

Tenorio: Hopefully it’s both.

AALDP: My class was split on whether to think of “Felix Starro” as a happy ending or a tragedy. One student even asked “Why no happy endings?” in any of your stories. I tend to see the endings as more mixed, but this one was

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particularly troubling in thinking about the youngest Felix Starro's future. It seems he is facing some kind of loss either way—either loss of his dreams and independence or loss of his name and family, possibly both. How did you conceive of Felix Starro's struggle?

Tenorio: Felix Starro's (the grandson) struggle came to me after endless drafts—it took a long time to understand what the story was really about. When I wrote that scene where he realizes his name will change if he accepts Flora Ramirez's offer, that's when I realized this story was really about family, of belonging, of being part of a familial tradition and legacy, however proud or morally corrupt it might be, and the risk of erasing yourself from it. Once I knew that scene was going to stay, I knew I could finish it.

AALDP: This story may give us the darkest vision of the "American Dream" for immigrants. Young Felix seems to be trying to buy his way in to America even while Papa Felix is performing psychic surgery for heartsick immigrants, "waiting and waiting, just for someone to bring [them] hope" (57). Like "Monstress," this story also thematizes ideas of real versus false representations. To what extent is the American dream a dangerous fake and to what extent is it a kind of guide or even a placebo that helps us to get by?

Tenorio: That's a big question, so I can only answer it according to my own experience. The word itself—dream—is so romanticized, and when you pair that with the word "American," which is already so loaded, the idea becomes very complicated, and yeah, even dangerous. But ultimately, the American Dream can simultaneously be the American Nightmare, and everything in between. So if it is going to be any kind of guide or goal, I hope all the gains and losses inherent to the American reality are acknowledged as well. I certainly try to do that in my fiction.

AALDP: At first "The View from Culion" felt like it didn't fit in with the other stories as its tone seemed so different. It appeared more sentimental and less quirky, like a forties black and white. I kept alternating Audrey Hepburn and Ingrid Bergman in my mind when Sister Marguerite appeared. But I found that on a second reading it became one of my very favorite stories. I love how Teresa's interaction with Jack works as a great metaphor for the anxiety we all face in interacting with each other: Would this person like me if they really knew me? Am I lacking too much for him or her to return my affection? The leper colony setting then seems a really quirky setting for a potential love story—one's lover could be missing physical pieces and not just intangible ones! How did you choose the setting for this story and why did you choose the particular time period of the mid 1960's for the action?

Tenorio: I read about a real leper colony in an article in *The Wall Street Journal* in the late 90's. It was unbearably sad, and stayed with me for some time, and

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I knew I wanted to write about it. But when I learned about the Culion Leper Colony in the Philippines, that it was run by Americans but housed only Filipino patients, I realized that Culion resonated with so many of the tensions and questions I like writing about, so the story proceeded from there. For the sake of authenticity, I had to stick with Culion's actual timeline, so I set the story in the 60's.

AALDP: For most of my students and myself, we found ourselves really liking Teresa and wishing a happy ending for her. I really appreciated the fact that the setting of the story was near the end of Culion's era as an isolated colony and within a decade or so of new treatments for leprosy that would allow people to reconnect with their families—not that I think that would have necessarily done Teresa much good, but it was good to know that the horrific and historical fact of the babies either contracting leprosy or being sent away as orphans would end within Teresa's natural lifetime. I want to say more about the ending but just in case our readers have not yet read this story, I just want to say that ultimately I really admired Teresa's choices and the way her choices help the reader to interrogate his or her own assumptions about what might make a happy ending. The mother in "Superassassin" seemed to really base her life's choices on concepts of romantic happy endings with some disastrous results. We have a lot of abandoning, abandoned, or simply wrong-headed mothers in this collection, especially in "View from Culion," "Superassassin," "The Brothers," and "Help." What attracts you to writing about such characters?

Tenorio: I'm not sure if I'm drawn to these characters so much as I'm drawn to their dramatic circumstances. I almost always begin with plot, event, and setting. These things provide a kind of map, a narrative trajectory I can follow. The next step—and the most difficult one—is to figure out who might occupy this space, and that's where character comes in. In a way, I'm drawn to them out of necessity.

AALDP: In "Superassassin" we get a first person child narrator. Usually those kinds of narrators really pull at the heartstrings and offer readers easy identification. Sandra Cisneros's work would be a good example. Why did you choose to make a child narrator who is so difficult to connect with?

Tenorio: I actually found him very easy to connect with. While I certainly don't condone what he does, I think many can relate to adolescent revenge fantasies, not in terms of violence, of course, but in terms of wanting justice in the world, righting the wrongs with which the universe has seemingly screwed you over.

Of course, I understand that he may not be the most empathetic, or even likeable, character. But that's one of the challenges of fiction—characters

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don't need to be likeable, as long as they're compelling, complex, and unexpectedly human.

AALDP: Was "Superassassin" the first story from this collection that you published? Could you say more about the long incubation period for this collection? At what point did you envision these stories as part of a whole?

Tenorio: "Superassassin" was the first story I ever sold, miraculously pulled from the slush pile by *The Atlantic Monthly*. I stupidly thought finishing the book would be easy-breezy after that. Instead, it took about ten years, but I've finally learned a story takes as long as it needs to take. Nonetheless, I remain forever impatient.

AALDP: What are you working on now?

Tenorio: A novel.

AALDP: In "Help" the narrator describes seeing in The Beatles's tanned English skin, "evidence of a bigger world, proof that you could move through it and keep it with you" (154). In the interview with *The Paris Review* you talk about the Tagalog word *uwi*, "to return home," and the impact it had on your family's simultaneous connection to both their home in America and home meaning the Philippines. Do you think the desire to "occupy two places at once" is particularly strong in Filipino culture? I keep thinking about some of Bulosan's work such as "Story of a Letter" or *America is in the Heart* that evoke an intense sense of homesickness, nostalgia, and loss even as they depict constant movement. While you certainly get similar themes in non-Filipino literature, I've never seen this dilemma as so central as I've seen it in yours, Bulosan's, and Bienvenido Santos' work, for example. Do you think that emotional dissonance of desire for home and desire for elsewhere is a product of the century of American colonial and postcolonial connection to the Philippines, inherent in Filipino culture, or do you think it is just coincidental that that theme comes up in work by Filipino Americans?

Tenorio: I don't think it's a coincidence. Most Filipinos in America have an immigrant background of some sort, and that history has a huge impact on their experience, and can even be a kind of filter through which they see the world. So I think it's natural that the tensions you mentioned might resonate in the work of Filipino American writers. But hopefully, each is presenting them in original and surprising ways so that the work evokes other ideas and questions as well.

AALDP: In "L'amour, CA" the desire for both home and elsewhere seems to be split between the two siblings with the sister desiring to leave both the Philippines and her family home while her brother and mother evoke the intense

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desire for home—finding even the architecture of their American home unsettling in the way it divides the family into individual components rather than a whole. To what extent do you see the desire for change, movement, escape from home as a natural part of growing up and growth? To what extent are Isa's motives dictated by a lack of confidence in her own cultural identity and self worth?

Tenorio: I used to believe that leaving home was essential to a human experience, that in order to understand your place in the world, you needed to separate yourself from your group, from what's most familiar. I still think it's true for many, but I no longer see it as an absolute truth. Many leave, many stay. It would be foolish of me to assume that the former are automatically more evolved than the latter—both have so much to gain and lose.

AALDP: I've left "Save the I-Hotel" for last since I feel that it is the ideal story for teachers of Asian American literature to teach as well as being so resonant with recent historical events. One, it gives teachers the opportunity to talk about the I-Hotel and it's impact in defining Asian America and the Yellow Power movement. Two, it allows a class an opportunity to discuss the discriminatory anti-miscegenation laws that prevented most Filipinos of the Manong generation from marrying in the US and how those laws were not ruled unconstitutional in all 50 states until 1967. And of course the characters themselves are incredibly compelling. How did this story begin for you? Did you start with the characters or the historical events?

Tenorio: I learned about the International Hotel—the story of its fall, the eviction of its longtime residents, many of whom were Filipino men who'd come to America in the 30's and 40's—in the early 2000's, when I was doing research for a short story. I wanted to write about it, but knew it couldn't be a convenient backdrop or plot for a story—the event itself needed to be integral to the story. When I finally came up with the characters of Fortunado and Vicente, and understood the complexity of their relationship, I felt the pieces finally fit together.

AALDP: When we started this conversation via email, many of my friends' marriages were not recognized in more than a dozen of the United States. Now, with the Supreme Court decision in June on *Obergefell v. Hodges*, everyone I know can now have their marriages recognized in all 50 states. Some commentators have credited popular culture with the rapid change in perceptions that Americans have about marriage equality. To what extent do you feel your art can or should have a political purpose?

Tenorio: I think that's entirely up to the reader. When I'm writing, I'm not thinking about the politics. I'm more focused on what feels true to the characters, and the story being told.

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AALDP: Part of me wanted to shout, “Homophobia is dead! Peace in our time!” But the same day this was announced, President Obama spoke at the funeral of one of the nine people killed at the African American church in Charleston. With 48 years since *Loving vs. the State of Virginia* made anti-miscegenation laws illegal, we still have huge problems with racism in the U.S. The other part of me wonders if our culture really can cure its homophobia so quickly or if we could still be facing major problems half a century from now. What do you think?

Tenorio: I think bigotry, ignorance, fear, and stupidity are, unfortunately, part of being human, so I don't believe homophobia—or any kind of prejudice—will ever go away. Even if all groups are granted equal rights, individual discrimination—a major problem in itself—will persist, so we need to continue to do our best to fight against it.

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