

**SFL Portolan Project**  
Interview with Vida Cruz  
Dublin, Ireland, 2019

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Hi, I'm Mary Anne Mohanraj and I'm here with Vida Cruz. We're at the World Science Fiction Convention here in Dublin and I just asked Vida to come and talk with the Speculative Literature Foundation a little bit about her experiences in the field. Vida has come to us from the Philippines.

Vida Cruz: Yes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And this is her first World Con?

Vida Cruz: Yeah. *[laughter]*

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And, not your first convention though, or ... ?

Vida Cruz: Yeah. Unless you count San Diego Comic-Con?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah Comic-Con counts, so ...

Vida Cruz: Alright.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So maybe you could just talk a little bit about your, well, let's start with what it's like being here as a Philippines writer at the World Science Fiction convention?

Vida Cruz: It's amazing. I can finally put a face to all the people I talk to on Twitter, you know.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh yeah, yeah.

Vida Cruz: And then, there's actually a lot of books here that are not sold in my country.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mhm.

Vida Cruz: So, that's been amazing to me too.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah. As someone from, I was born in Sri Lanka and I have friends who are Sri Lankan science fiction writers and they, there are entire authors that they can't get access to ...

Vida Cruz: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: ... who are classics in the field. Like Delaney and so on. That it's really challenging to find the books. So is it a huge cost barrier for you in buying books in English? I don't know what

the exchange rate is like or ... ?

Vida Cruz: Oh well, let's see. If it's US dollars, I guess, 15 US dollars is about 756 pesos last I checked.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay.

Vida Cruz: That's kind of pricey. *[laughter]*

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah. So, and then I think, in terms of like print books it's also, I know my Sri Lankan writer friends, like they mostly rely on e-books because just adding in the shipping costs makes it, makes it much, much more expensive. So at least we have e-books now as an option.

What's, can I ask what the science fiction writing community is like in the Philippines? I don't really know anything about it.

Vida Cruz: Mmhm. Well, it's not, how do you put it, it's not banded like a community, like ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay.

Vida Cruz: ... like in Worldcon because we're mostly lumped together with the literary writers.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm.

Vida Cruz: So when you see us in festivals, the panels are every genre ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay.

Vida Cruz: ... all over the place and they're also more general things instead of like, technique things. Does that make sense? Cause, for example the panels that I wanted to go to were about food and fantasy or how to put together a mythology, and ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm.

Vida Cruz: ... we still get things like Intro to Writing SFF, things like that.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh, I see. Right, so there ... you are getting much more specialized conversation here at Worldcon than you would have ...

Vida Cruz: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: ... in the Philippines. I think that's interesting, the sort of

question, the sort of comment you made about you were considered sort of with the mainstream fiction writers, right?

Vida Cruz:

Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

I would guess that there are mainstream writers who are also, you know, who might be working with folklore or mythological material. But maybe not science fictional. Right? Like that shunts you off into a different category or ... ?

Vida Cruz:

Mmm.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

No? Or maybe not?

Vida Cruz:

It's a blur actually. It's a really big blur. And, well there's an interesting conversation going on in the Philippines because, well, for example, a lot of our writers are calling for better STEM education ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Okay.

Vida Cruz:

... because not, most Filipinos write fantasy.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Mmhm.

Vida Cruz:

That's, that's in our blood cause we have a lot of epics and folklore and things like that but science fiction is relatively new ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Mmhm.

Vida Cruz:

... in my country and actually our golden age of SFF began in the early 2000s [*laughter*] and it's still ongoing right now. It's a great ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Who are some writers that you are excited about, aside from yourself? Aside from Vida Cruz, [*laughter*] who else is fabulous? Who should we be reading?

Vida Cruz:

Up and coming?

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Up and coming or established. Like when the golden age started, I know Dean Francis ...

Vida Cruz:

... Alfar, yes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Alfar. Who does anthologies right?

Vida Cruz:

Yes. His wife Nikki Alfar is also great.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay.

Vida Cruz: And, let's see ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I don't remember the name of the anthology. Is there a name to the anthology series?

Vida Cruz: Yes. *Philippines Speculative Fiction*, they do it every year.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay. Okay, perfect. So ...

Vida Cruz: Who's good? [pause] Jacob Mathew Ramos, he's ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay.

Vida Cruz: ... just starting out and he won a Palanca Award last year and that's our highest award for literature/

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh, okay.

Vida Cruz: And he won it for science fiction which is amazing because there's still genre politics about ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Sure.

Vida Cruz: ... stories that win Palanca Awards.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's true. What's, do you know the title off-hand or?

Vida Cruz: No. [laughter] Sorry, I don't.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay, we'll go look it up. Everyone go look up the Palanca Award and the author's name again was?

Vida Cruz: Jacob Mathew Ramos.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Jacob Matthew Ramos. Who just won last year?

Vida Cruz: Yes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So. Now, you've won some things yourself right? So you've won a Tiptree. Maybe if you can talk a little bit about, and Writer's of the Future. Could you talk a little bit about the two of those.

Vida Cruz: Umm, sure. The Tiptree fellowship, the work I submitted to them was ... I've been doing a series of news article style fiction ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm.

Vida Cruz: ... where modern day Filipinos live with our mythological creatures side by side in Manila.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm.

Vida Cruz: But I still, I'm still dealing with contemporary politics alongside all of those.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh, okay.

Vida Cruz: So, I have a story coming up in an environmental anthology called *Tales ... Invite to ...* I don't ..., *An Invite to Eternity*.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay.

Vida Cruz: And, that one is about the post disaster of Typhoon Haiyan a few years ago.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm.

Vida Cruz: And then I have one of the highest of our ferries going around a bunch of islands that were affected and doing relief operations.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm. Oh, that's really interesting. You know, that's making me think, in Sri Lanka after the tsunami there was a beautiful book by umm, Sonali ... I'm going to blank on her last name so I don't want to get it wrong but it was called *Wave* that was about that but it's mainstream lit and I actually don't know if anyone has written any science fiction / fantastical work dealing with the aftermath of that.

Vida Cruz: Mmhm.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And so it's great to, is that story out? Or is it ...?

Vida Cruz: It's just about to come out.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: In?

Vida Cruz: In November.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: From?

Vida Cruz: From Calque Press.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh, so it's part of an anthology

Vida Cruz: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's right so *Invite to Eternity*

Vida Cruz: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yes. That's great. So that was your Tiptree application story?

Vida Cruz: Well, I had another one of the same series. But this one was talking about if we, if the mythological creatures went to war with the Duterte administration, that was my segment.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh.

Vida Cruz: I'm actually a little worried about bringing that one out in public because you know how the political climate is right now.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Well, I don't, I actually, I understand some about the historical Philippines politics but I'm not necessarily up on what exactly is happening right now. So is it, would it be a potentially risky story?

Vida Cruz: Mmhm. At the moment, cause you see there are a lot of readers in the Philippines.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm.

Vida Cruz: But they're, the readers who read science fiction and fantasy, they're a very specialized field.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm.

Vida Cruz: So, unless somebody made it viral or something, I don't think it's going to get much spotlight.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Alright.

Vida Cruz: So, it's not that risky but also, who knows [*pause*].

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right. I know in Sri Lanka, and in India, one of the challenges if you're going to apply for a Fulbright is you know, the governments do read the applications, or they [*pause*] I don't know. They somehow, they look at them. They have to approve them. They have to sign off on them. And so, what I've heard from other writers is that if you submit something that is heavily critical of the government in some way you are very unlikely ...

Vida Cruz: Mmhm.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: ... to be, to get the grant and be allowed to go there and research, right.

Vida Cruz: Makes a lot of sense.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right. And so I think ... You know, I'm working on something set in ancient Sri Lanka, uhm, Sedit Sigiriya, you know, which is a World Heritage Site. And there was a moment where we were like "oh, maybe we should try to get funding from the government. They might be interested in promoting Sigiriya." But then, of course, this is a video game, we have queer characters in the game.

Vida Cruz: Ahh.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And like I have, I don't know if the government would be okay with that.

Vida Cruz: I get it.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And probably we don't want to invite them into that conversation necessarily, right.

Vida Cruz: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It may be simpler to do it just separately and then see how they respond.

Vida Cruz: Yes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: See what, see how things fall. So, you also did Writers of the Future?

Vida Cruz: Yes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So how was that experience? What was it like?

Vida Cruz: Hmm. Surreal, you know. A lot happens in one week.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah.

Vida Cruz: And, well [*pause*] there was a lot of good stuff. And there was also a lot of stuff that I could have done without in terms of racism.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Really, like overt? Things that you, like from other writers? From the organization?

Vida Cruz: The judges and the organization. My fellow co-winners were

great.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay.

Vida Cruz: And they were really supportive whenever they happened to be in the room, and then they hear something quite shocking. So ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So, I actually don't [pause] I hadn't heard about any of this. Can, if you're comfortable, is there any specific incident that you could talk about or [pause]?

Vida Cruz: Well. During one of the workshop classes somehow they got to talking about my winning story. And then, one of the judges said that "You know we get a lot of entries from the Philippines every year and when we picked yours out of the pile I had to check for plagiarism because it was that good."

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Ahh, right ...

Vida Cruz: And I ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right. One of those backhanded compliments that's really not a compliment, right.

Vida Cruz: Yeah. And uh, I was just sitting there and trying not to let my mouth fall open and I also couldn't look at anyone else because 'oh, what must they be thinking.' I don't know. [sad laughter]

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right. Right. I mean it's almost like, it sounds like an accusation, right. And, that's a terrible entry into American science fiction.

Vida Cruz: [laughter]

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right. I mean, I'm so sorry. It's terrible that you had to encounter that. You also went to Clarion.

Vida Cruz: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: How was, how was that? When were you there?

Vida Cruz: 2014.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Okay, and this was in Seattle?

Vida Cruz: San Diego.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh, San Diego. Clarion, Clarion, I'm sorry, Clarion East that is



now Clarion San Diego, yes.

Vida Cruz: Yes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And how was it? What was your, do you have any particular memories or ...

Vida Cruz: *[laughter]*

Mary Anne Mohanraj: ... thoughts about it? Is it worthwhile, in general? Would you recommend it to other writers from the Philippines or elsewhere?

Vida Cruz: Let's see. That's like, Clarion was one of the best six weeks of my life. And I mean, it's not just because of all the craft things that I learned there but because my classmates were also kind and they were always down for something fun. Like one weekend they all took me to the zoo and I'd never seen a giraffe and I love giraffes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: *[laughter]*

Vida Cruz: And then they sat at a cafe that was near the giraffe pen and ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm.

Vida Cruz: ... then I went to the bathroom. And then when I came back, there was one seat left at the table and they're all looking at me. And when I sit down, there's a giant giraffe peeking out over the trees. And I was like: "Ahhh".

Mary Anne Mohanraj: *[laughter]*

Vida Cruz: And it turns out that they had all talked to each other and said, "We're going to make sure she sees the giraffe from when she gets out of the bathroom". And that's just so sweet.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Aww. Yes, that is really sweet. That's great. So it sounds like you had a really bonding experience. Have you, and you've stayed in touch with some of them as ...?

Vida Cruz: Yes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: It's been five years right, so?

Vida Cruz: Yes. Mmhm, actually one of them is my roommate here right now for Worldcon.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's great. I think one of the things we've been, in one of our

other interviews, we've been talking to George R.R. Martin and he really emphasized the importance of being able to come to these conventions, come to places like Clarion.

Vida Cruz: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Just for that human networking. I mean networking makes it sound very business-y.

Vida Cruz: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Which is not really what I mean but the ...

Vida Cruz: Relationship building?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Relationship building, community building. And that gets [pause] it's scary I think, walking into some of these rooms on your own, right?

Vida Cruz: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: When you came from the Philippines, like, so what made you, what made you apply to Clarion? How did you hear about it and ... ?

Vida Cruz: You know, actually, I applied the year Neil Gaiman was teaching Clarion West.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mhm.

Vida Cruz: And I didn't get in but I got really good feedback from the committee and then, so I was like 'okay, maybe not this year.' And also I'd just graduated from college then.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mhm.

Vida Cruz: And then the next year I just happened to look because you know, I was like this is going to be a bucket list thing

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mhm.

Vida Cruz: And then I saw N.K. Jemisin and Cat Valente on the list of instructors and I went 'oh no, I gotta try.'

Mary Anne Mohanraj: [laughter]

Vida Cruz: "And then even if I don't get in, you know it's kind of expensive but I gotta try."

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right, right.

Vida Cruz: And then, I got in. *[laughter]* And then oh, I don't know how I managed to get there. Like, I do recommend Clarion but there are lots of barriers to entry.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mhm.

Vida Cruz: Like for example, I did have one Filipino friend who made it this year both to Clarion West and to the Milford Bursary. And he was actually granted a bursary from Milford but he couldn't go to either one because he was denied a visa both to the US and to the UK.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I know that for this Worldcon we missed a whole set of Nigerian writers who were denied their visas. Not denied, they, their visas weren't processed in time by the Nigerian government I think, and so ...

Vida Cruz: The Irish one, actually.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh, was it the Irish government?

Vida Cruz: Yes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Oh my god, that's terrible. And so they were not able to attend. So, yes there's of course these border issues in this world of ours and, which seem to get worse every year right now. *[laughter]*

Vida Cruz: I know.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Hopefully that trend will reverse soon.

Vida Cruz: Yes.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: But then there are the financial issues, then, right. And I know when I was, I was 27 I think when I was a student at Clarion and I was completely broke. I was in the middle of an MFA, which I'd took on quite a bit of debt to do. Maybe not the smartest choice in retrospect. *[laughter]* But I did Clarion entirely on credit cards, right.

Vida Cruz: Wow.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Like, I just put the whole thing on credit cards and said, "I don't know how I'm going to pay for this. At some point, I'll figure it out."

Vida Cruz: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And I did eventually but it took quite a while. And I ended up paying quite a bit more likely in credit card fees as a result.  
[laughter]

Vida Cruz: [laughter]

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So, umm, do you have advice for, or things ... actually, I'm going to reframe that. Rather than advice to young writers, are there ways that you could see the systems change that, whether it's organizations like Clarion or things that could be put in place to make it more possible for writers like you ...

Vida Cruz: Mmhm.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: ... to participate?

Vida Cruz: Well, actually I was able to attend Clarion because they were able to give me a Foundation scholarship.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm.

Vida Cruz: So that took up, like, two-thirds of the tuition.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm.

Vida Cruz: And then my family just had to make up for the rest of it.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm.

Vida Cruz: And then ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And the airfare and the ...

Vida Cruz: Yeah, actually. [laughter]

Mary Anne Mohanraj: No, the airfare's a huge barrier I think.

Vida Cruz: Super. And then here, for Worldcon I am here from the generosity of Con or Bust. They paid for my airfare and for my accommodations.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Yeah, that's a, Kate Nepveu has been doing incredible work with that organization for so long. Bringing writers and fans of colour to various cons around the world, so that's really great to hear.

Vida Cruz: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: If anyone listening would like to look for an organization to support, Con or Bust would be a great one to throw some

pennies at I think.

Vida Cruz: Yeah, definitely.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Alright. Well, we're almost out of time. We have to run off to other things so maybe I will just close with, if people were going to look for you and your work, what might you recommend that they read? You've been published in, you have stories published in a few places.

Vida Cruz: Yeah.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And, so maybe a starting point and your website? Or how would, how should they find you?

Vida Cruz: Alright. Well, I have two stories up on Expanded Horizons. You just google that with my name Vida Cruz. And they're both Filipino oriented stories and they're also emotional I would say, so ...

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Mmhm.

Vida Cruz: ... I hope that's something you would be into. My website is [vidacruz.org](http://vidacruz.org). You can find me on twitter and Instagram as well but Instagram is for my art, so.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And we didn't even get to talk about your art!

Vida Cruz: *[laughter]*

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So, another time.

Vida Cruz: Yay.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So thank you. Thanks so much to Vida Cruz. This is Mary Anne Mohanraj with the Speculative Literature Foundation. Thanks so much for being here.

Vida Cruz: Thank you too.