*The Inventor: A Poet's Transcolonial Autobiography*, Eileen R. Tabios (Marsh Hawk Press 2023)  
  
I first got to read Eileen R Tabios' work through John Bloomberg-Rissman's *1000 Views of 'Girl Singing'* project which used Tabios' version of a Jose Garcia Villa poem as a prompt. I still use this as part of my remix & writing back module and have been able to send Tabios my students' work now that Bloomberg-Rissman has terminated the project and his blog.  
  
On the book's back cover, Grace Talusan suggests that *The Inventor* is Tabios throwing 'open the doors and windows of her poet's house, inviting both longtime fans and new visitors to the writing behind the writing', a description I find far more welcoming than the word 'autobiography'. Truth be told, I don't feel any need to know what is 'behind the writing', nor how an author lives or lived and how that informs the work; the poem is the text or a reading of it, experienced by the reader. On this last point, it seems we agree: in Chapter 2, Tabios states that '[w]ithout a respondent, (my) poetry doesn't exist'. Of course there's an argument to be had about unread words on a page, but I can't be bothered to go there right now.  
  
Tabios, however, is unfailingly optimistic and idealistic. She suggests that poetry 'can open you up to new modes of thinking/feeling/viewing . . . and hopefully then a newly better way of living', despite understanding that '[t]his element about poetry—*effecting positive change*—is [...] not based on the words that make up a poem. It's not based on the visible, e.g. text.' Some of this optimism is based on Tabios' understand of and belief in *Kapwa*, a Filipino humanist philosophy which recognises a shared identity, an inner self, shared with others; or what Tabios calls the interconnectedness of things.  
  
This puts a certain slant on things. Tabios seems more interested in the possible results and responses to writing and reading than the text itself. Where I see process poems or poetic forms, she sees affirmations and communities. Her invented form the Hay(na)ku is an interesting small poem form that subverts the haiku and also avoids the Westernised misunderstanding of them as syllabic forms but it is still, or only, just a poetic form; her Murder Death Resurrection project is a list poem generator that enables the creation of texts from a finite resource of lines. Many contemporary authors use similar structures as workshop exercises with groups, few attach such importance to them as Tabios does here.  
  
It's interesting to see work framed in this way, but it does seem to want poetry, or at least the effect it has, to be confessional rather than linguistic, political rather than individual. In the final chapter Tabios writes about how she has 'long preferred the term "transcolonial" because I considered "postcolonial" insufficient for reflecting my desire to transcend being contextualized simply by my colonized history.' She links this to wanting to '*trans*-cend into other concerns or interests not instigated by colonialism' and says that in the end she 'came to something more basic and fundamental: ethics.'  
  
This is uncomfortable ground for me. Can poetry be ethical? Aren't ethics to do with individuals and philosophy, society and sociology? She quotes the poet Paul le Couer, who says that 'Being a poet is not writing a poem but finding a new way to live.' This, says Tabios, means that 'I'd like my poetry to make me a better person who helps lighten the world's burdens with more good deeds from the planet's most powerful species: humans.' Are we really the 'most powerful species' or have we as a race simply colonized planet Earth? It's quite a human-centric statement and the cynic in me has to ask if poems are the best way to change anything?   
  
I have tried to read this book as a poetics but it is positioned so far from my understanding of language and text that I have struggled. I'm aware all writers and writing is embedded within networks of influences, friends, colleagues, pre-existing texts, readings and of course experience, and that all this informs what is written, but at best poetry is to understand and interrogate all of that, not to produce better people or 'a new way to live'. Tabios seems to want a readership who somehow find a way to experientially make her poems their own and let them affect their behaviour. Me? I'm sticking with the notion of linguistic plasticity and the poet as someone who plays with language before simply offering their writing to readers.  
  
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(770 words)