

Filipino Writers in the United States: Toward a Contemporary Revaluation

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The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory, therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.

ANTONIO GRAMSCI, *Prison Notebooks*



After 9/11, the Philippines became the second battlefield (after Afghanistan) in the U.S.-led global war of terrorism. At the cost of 1.4 million Filipino dead, the U.S. colonized the Philippines after the brutal Filipino-American War from 1899, just after the Treaty of Paris of December 1898 when Spain ceded the Philippines to the U.S., to 1913, the last year of Moro resistance. Despite almost a century of domination, the Moro Bangsa nation continues its battle for autonomy against the successive neocolonial governments, aided with U.S. Special Forces, proof that the past exerts a nightmarish stranglehold on the present. Exploited and victimized by neoliberal global capitalism, 90 million Filipinos resort to migration abroad for jobs; about 10 million Filipinos constitute the current diaspora, with three million residing in the United States alone. From this diaspora emerged four Filipino writers who, in their varied situations of exile and deracination, may be said to reflect the Filipino predicament in its historical context and cultural contingency: Carlos Bulosan, Jose Garcia Villa, Bienvenido Santos, and Jessica Hagedorn. There may be other writers with more artistic skills, but these four may be said to have exerted some ethico-aesthetic influence and political impact on their environment as to merit attention.

Bulosan's Intervention

Bulosan is probably the most well-known Filipino writer in the North American academic Establishment after gaining canonical status in the eighties. His major works—*America Is in the Heart*, *The Cry and the*

Dedication, and *The Philippines is in the Heart*—have been accorded serious critical analysis and evaluation. My own efforts to publicize his works (particularly in *On Becoming Filipino* and my 1972 assessment of his corpus, *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle*) have provoked a vast, rich body of critical explications that it is not necessary here to replicate its findings (San Juan 2008). Suffice it to draw a synoptic outline of Bulosan's career after which I proceed to Villa, Santos, and Hagedorn.

The quasi-autobiographical writing of Bulosan, a migrant farmworker who arrived in the Depression years, was discovered by ethnic activists during the civil-rights struggles in the late sixties and seventies. Once adopted as canonical texts in the U.S. academy from the eighties on, Bulosan's radical edge was blunted, his subversive tendencies sanitized in the service of a conformist multiculturalism. Given the subalternized status of Filipinos in the U.S. metropole, we need to recover a submerged, anti-assimilationist strand in their history sedimented in Bulosan's testimonial accounts. My recent essays (San Juan 2009) have sought to excavate those oppositional impulses in Bulosan's works by re-contextualizing them in, first, the anti-colonial revolutionary movement of Filipinos dating back to the 1896 revolution to the Filipino-American War and the peasant insurgencies of the first three decades of U.S. occupation; and, second, in the popular-front anti-capitalist trends in the U.S during the great Depression up to the McCarthyist witch-hunts of the Cold War. Re-situated in their historical-biographical milieu and geopolitical provenance, Bulosan's entire body of work acquires oppositional power, with the post-9/11 stigmatization of Filipinos as suspect "terrorists" functioning as a token recalling the early persecution of Filipino union leaders in the Hawaiian plantations, California farms, and Seattle waterfronts. This anti-postcolonial experience of reading Bulosan from a historical-materialist perspective thus becomes possible for a new generation of readers faced by an alleged but officially promoted, ideologically tendentious "clash of civilizations."

In brief, a re-discovery of the uncanonized texts of Bulosan, particularly *The Cry and the Dedication*, threatens to herald a release of the Filipino "repressed," that is, the emancipatory energies of a decolonizing radical sensibility. This requires a militant historicizing of texts and contexts. What needs emphasis is Bulosan's commitment to the anti-imperialist struggle in the Philippines that constitutes the enduring vitality of his writing. We need to shift our interpretive, critical labor to the task of appreciating Bulosan's folkloric imagination in relation to the national-liberation imaginary at the heart of our emergent modernity as a neocolonized people. In this perspective, Bulosan's project coincides with a renewal of the Filipino radical sensibility now inseparable from the ten-million strong diaspora of Overseas Filipino

Workers (OFW), a symptom of both the continuing neocolonial subjugation of the Filipino nation and its irrepressible revolt against this globalizing but historically contingent fate. In this regard, the recent attempt to revive the reputation of Villa becomes not only retrograde but complicit with the neoconservative attempt to roll back the populist democratic resurgence symptomized by the election of Barack Obama to the presidency.

Villa's Predicament

Jose Garcia Villa, avant-garde and modernist poet from the Philippines, died in New York on February 7, 1977. Now virtually unknown, he is probably one of the most neglected twentieth-century writers in the English-speaking world. He is being publicized by astute cultural impresarios and hawkers of the New York Establishment, thanks to an eclectic multiculturalist ethos that functions as the "benign" face of predatory neoliberal finance-capital. In spite of this, Villa's achievement may be said to encapsulate the conflicted, dynamic interaction between U.S. imperial hegemony and a "third world" dependency, the former U.S. colony (now a neocolony) in southeast Asia, the Philippines. Hypothetically his work represents an emergent Filipino American culture on the margins of the canonical Eurocentric mainstream, a product of U.S. "tutelage" and the peculiar hybrid – the postcolonial trademark term – conjuncture of Spanish, Asian, and Malayan sociocultural strains, perhaps the missing "third text" of the ventriloquial subaltern. Anyone undertaking a genealogical anatomy of Villa's life and works is bound to raise scandalous questions of national autonomy, colonial subjugation, cross-cultural linkages, and the possibilities of a *Weltliteratur* in the epoch of cyber-globalization. Ultimately Villa may turn out to be, as some have generously speculated, the unknown avatar of Goethe's world citizen-artist, a native, autochthonous spirit from the colonial hinterlands – what the Cuban hero Jose Marti called "the belly of the beast" – materializing in the heart of the technocratic metropolis at the end of the "American" century.

On August 5, 1908, Villa was born in Manila, Philippines, the son of Colonel Simeon Villa, the physician to General Emilio Aguinaldo, the president of the first Philippine Republic overthrown by U.S. invading forces in the Filipino-American War (1899-1913). He studied at the state University of the Philippines where he was suspended for writing erotic poems. In 1929 he won a prize for a short story, "Mir-I-Nisa," published in the *Philippines Free Press*. With the prize money, he left for the U.S. in 1930 and attended classes at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. Soon thereafter he moved to New York City where he resided until his death. In 1933, Villa's collection of short stories,

Footnote to Youth, was published by Charles Scribner's Sons, with an introduction by the anthologist Edward J. O'Brien. His first collection of poems, *Have Come, Am Here*, appeared in 1942, followed by *Volume Two*, in 1949. All of his poems are now included in the Penguin edition, *Doveglion: Collected Poems* (2008).

Through the sponsorship of the American poet Conrad Aiken, Villa was granted a Guggenheim fellowship. Among his other honors are the following: American Academy of Arts and Letters' Poetry Award; the Shelley Memorial Award; Rizal Pro Patria Award; the Philippine Republic's Cultural Heritage Award. On June 12, 1973, during the Marcos dictatorship, Villa was named National Artist in Literature. Aside from his work in the Philippine diplomatic mission office, Villa conducted classes in creative writing in the New School, New York. Although he lived for 67 years in the U.S., Villa remained a Filipino citizen. Long an exponent of the "art for art's sake" school, Villa, the petty-bourgeois sojourner, also cultivated a notorious lifestyle to outrage the conventional bourgeois *gentilhomme*, a kind of theatrical reenactment of his revolt against his father and philistine Victorian society of colonial Philippines in the first two decades of the last century. In effect, he struggled to fashion in words and deeds "a beautiful soul" not in Europe or North America but somewhere in between, in the "occult zone of instability" (to quote Fanon) inhabited by diasporic artists, exiles, émigrés, deracinated or *declassé* intellectuals wandering the arcades of the metropolises' culture-industry and subterranean art-world. Was it a choice or a fate imposed by historical circumstances?

Both Hegel and Kierkegaard wrote about the "beautiful soul" of the "unhappy consciousness," an adolescent stage in the development of the human psyche. Hegel foresaw its dialectical supersession in a more concrete historical understanding of life; whereas Kierkegaard, repudiating Hegel, wanted to sacrifice the aesthetic sensibility to a higher ethical mode of existence. Villa rejected the Hegelian alternative, but instead of moving on to the ethical stage, he opted for a permanent aesthetic beatitude. The 2008 publication of Villa's *Doveglion: Collected Poems*, edited by his literary executor and introduced by a devotee, clearly shows the itinerary of the poet from the colonial adolescence of rejection of the "Name of the Father" (to use the Lacanian term) and the ethical dilemma to a preference for erotic bliss in semiotic indeterminacy. But this rejection of symbolic differentiation also equals death, the repetition-compulsion of a mannerist style. The "beautiful soul" of infantile repetition self-destructs into a dead-end: the cutting and splicing of commodified prose, an ironic parody of the comma poems and reversed consonance. Thus, the publication of this volume of Doveglion's corpus may be said to mark not "a growing revival of interest" in Villa's work but rather the final nail on his coffin. It may, however, arouse antiquarian interest and nostalgia for the posthumous return of the repressed.

Villa died in solitary circumstances, literally unknown. His last volume, *Selected Poems and New*, was published in 1958, in which he preserved (as though he were a museum curator) those poems he wrote in the twenty years (1937-1957) that saw his maturation in New York City. No resurgence of interest greeted that last collection. Its centerpiece was "The Anchored Angel," selected by feudal-vintage impresarios Osbert and Edith Sitwell for inclusion in a 1954 issue of the London-based *The Times Literary Supplement*. From then on Villa ceased to be a publicly acknowledged creative writer. In fact, even when he was actively publishing, his recognition was quite limited and confined to a narrow circle of friends and patrons. Except for Conrad Aiken's 1944 anthology of *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, no anthology of significance — not even of minority or ethnic writers — has included Villa's poems. In effect, Villa remains an unknown writer for most Americans, let alone readers of American or English literature around the world. In the country of his birth, today, only a few aficionados and college-trained professionals are acquainted with Villa's writings.

Villa's last two books (published in 1949 and 1958) were all produced in the shadow of the Cold War, the Korean War, and the raging civil war between the puppet Republics of Roxas, Quirino, Magsaysay, and Garcia against the Huks and their millions of sympathizers. With the relatively stabilized world of the fifties under Eisenhower, Villa virtually terminates his active career and lapses into the typographical doodles and games of the "Adaptations" and "Xocerisms." It is indeed the distinctive impulse of modernism to "make it new," in Ezra Pound's terms; to break the traditional pattern, disrupt the conventional mold, and strike out on new ground. But Villa's innovations, whether the comma poems, reversed consonance, or adaptations, are superficial attempts to mimic the novelties of Mallarme, Rilke, e.e. cummings, or Marianne Moore. The Cold War created the vacuum of universalized exchange-value in which Villa's use-value — his dialogue with god and angels — became superfluous or fungible. It became mere paper not acceptable as legal tender because its use-value evaporated.

Anatomy of a Suicide

What I mean by the "evaporation" of use-value is precisely the drive to purity, to the conquest of the sublime, which underlies Villa's poetic doctrine. This obsessive metaphysics of transcendence, the diametrical opposite of secular humanism, may also be discerned in the abstract expressionism that swept the United States in the halcyon days of post-World War II prosperity, the beginning of the Cold War. The key figure here is Jackson Pollock. And the most perceptive historical-materialist

analysis of Pollock's art, its logic of metaphysical violence so uncannily replicated by Villa, is that by John Berger. Berger quotes Harold Rosenberg's insight that Pollock's modernism begins with "nothingness," which he copies; the rest he invents. Berger then delineates the sociohistorical context of that "nothingness" in the Cold War politics of McCarthyism, CIA propaganda about the "freedom of the market" (ancestral spirit of neoliberalism), and the will to impose an American vision of democracy born of Hiroshima and executed in Vietnam (earlier, in the Filipino-American War of 1899-1913). Berger perceives in the American ethos that shaped Villa "an inarticulate sense of loss, often expressed with anger and violence." Berger explains Pollock's nihilism: In traditional painting,

the act of faith consisted of believing that the visible contained hidden secrets,...a presence behind an appearance.... Jackson Pollock was driven by a despair which was partly his and partly that of the times which nourished him, to refuse this act of faith: to insist, with all his brilliance as a painter, that there was nothing behind, that there was only *that which was done to the canvas on the side facing us*. This simple, terrible reversal, born of an individualism which was frenetic, constituted the suicide (1991, 115-16).

With some modification, this judgment can be applied to Villa's art: the drive to avant-garde purity and novelty and the desire to free oneself from all historic determinants, apotheosizing the imagination as the creator/demiurge of one's world, reflect Villa's fatal imbrication in the vicissitudes of U.S. monopoly capitalism from the 1930s Depression to the brief rebirth of bourgeois liberal democracy in the war against fascism, and the advent of U.S. *pax Americana* through the Cold War and the imperial aggression in Korea and Vietnam. Villa's fatality may ironically serve to revive him in this transitional period of the U.S. decline as an unchallenged world power.

It is in the era of neoliberal globalization, the unchallenged reign of commodity-fetishism and global finance's "free market" (now undergoing serious meltdown), that Villa finally becomes a "classic" author. One of Villa's Xocerisms may provide a clue to the exhaustion of his linguistic register, poetic lexicon, and mannered style: "To reinvent God is unnecessary; all He needs today is a designer name." Indeed, Villa may have been reduced by his editor and devotees as a "designer name" useful to build prestige, firm up a reputation or aura, and promote status-conscious careers. It is indeed ironic to find a poet obsessed with uniqueness, singularity, essence, genius, angels, exceptionality, gods, now being swallowed up in the homogenizing universe of cultural commodities and the culture industry. But perhaps this is a fitting and

appropriate end: the dissolution of genius, the angelic imagination, in the totality of exchange whose value, while pretending to be absolute, is also absolutely zero. Nihilism may be the authentic vocation of Villa, a nihilism that may abolish art and all poetry, as well as nations, identities, etc. If so, then Villa has finally succeeded and conquered the last bastion of meaning and intelligibility: language that means and signifies nothing. Is our conversation about him also null, nada, devoid of sense or import? If so, then the only logical alternative (to follow Wittgenstein) is silence.

Malays Running Amok?

At this juncture, it would be useful to explore how Filipino writers in the United States responded to the shift from racialized pluralism to globalized differentiation. As everyone knows, Bulosan's problematic *exemplum*, *America is in the Heart*, has become an ever contentious object-lesson. The reason lies in the fact that practically all readers ignore or choose to elide the historical singularity absent from textbooks and mass media: the Philippines was violently subjugated by U.S. imperialism in the Filipino-American War (1899-1902) at the cost of 1.4 million Filipino lives (San Juan 2000; 2008). This is the submerged text of the first part of *America*, whose revolutionary impulse surfaces intermittently in the stories and essays, but more fully in the novel of the McCarthy/Cold War period, *The Cry and the Dedication*. Because of the persisting amnesia about this ugly truth in monumental U.S. history, only dredged up recently when apologists of the Iraq War invoked the "humanitarian" occupation of the Philippines by the US military at the beginning of the twentieth century; or when the recently reported practice of "waterboarding" on Iraqi and Afghani prisoners was discovered to be a common form of torture against captured Filipino insurgents, Bulosan remains unread, or inadequately appreciated, up to now.

Almost equal if not surpassing the total population of Chinese Americans, the Filipino community (more than three million of 12 million Asians) in the U.S. exists due to the political instability and economic underdevelopment of the Philippines (Hing 1998). Perhaps one should really define the Philippines from 1898 to 1946 (when the U.S. granted formal independence, with many strings attached) not as a classic colony but as a dependency, thus an internal colony like the Native American territories. Virtually a neocolony today, the Philippine social formation cannot be understood by means of postcolonial concepts of hybridity, in-betweenness, interstitiality, and so on. Nor can decolonization of Asian American Studies' paradigms of cultural nationalism, identity politics or national assimilation be carried out by using the phenomenon

of the global diaspora to expunge anti-imperialist liberation struggles that mobilize the sedimented nationalist traditions of peasants and workers in the neocolonies. The durable recalcitrance of Filipino subjectivity saturated with nationalist memory-traces explains why, unlike the relatively assimilated Japanese, Korean and Chinese middlemen strata, Filipinos who have been disenfranchised and demonized for a long time cannot function as the “buffer race” between the white majority and the castelike black underclass. This remains the case until today, even though these colonized “nationals” were not locked out in 1882, nor banned by the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907-08, nor by the 1924 Immigration Act which favored “desirable” Europeans and denied citizenship to Asian “aliens.” Nonetheless, all Filipinos are Americanized to one degree or another, in more ways than one; and if what Arif Dirlik says is correct, that Americanization is synonymous with racialization, then all Filipinos have been thoroughly racialized, “not just fitting into a racially organized society but also thinking racially” (2008, 1367).

A few years ago I pointed out how the postcolonial notion of transnational citizenship, fluid and flexible, originated from the dynamics of circulating use-value whereby all goods and services (as health care given by Filipino domestics) are commodified and made equivalent, translated or quantified into exchange value via the cash-nexus (San Juan 2005a). The Philippines to this day remains a neocolony, formally independent but politically a client-state of Washington and the Pentagon. It functions as a strategic testing laboratory for U.S. Special Forces fighting the proxies of Al Qaeda (shadowy Abu Sayyaf bandits some of whom work for local politicians and the government military) was long prepared by more than a hundred years of trying to preserve the oligarchic rule of a corrupt and murderous elite whose subservience to the “Washington Consensus” guarantees the accelerating Filipino “warm body export” part of which services the U.S. military bases in Iraq, Europe, Guantanamo, Hawaii, Guam, and elsewhere, including the secret “launching pads” of CIA clandestine operations in the Philippines itself (Mahajan 2002).

During the thirties and forties of the last century, Filipino workers exposed to the insurrectionary and seditious milieu of the islands were considered nasty trouble-makers, aside from being perceived as a threat to the purity of Caucasian women. They collaborated in strikes with Japanese, Mexicans, and other ethnics in the Hawaii plantations and West Coast farms. From the outset up to 1946, Filipinos were legally considered “nationals” without any rights but only the “duty of permanent allegiance” to the U.S. nation-state (Hall 2002, 101). They were not allowed to vote, own property, start any business or marry Caucasian women. However, Filipino surplus labor as a rule were Americanized enough to warrant their candidacy for model-minority

status; migration is thus valued as “an opportunity and mechanism for upward social mobility,” according to functionalist sociologists (e.g., Cariño 1996).

With the post-9/11 racial profiling, the Filipino re-entered the target-vision of the alarmed racial polity, i.e. “white supremacy... as a political system in itself” (Mills 1999, 25). In August 2002, for example, 63 Filipinos were herded into an airplane for a direct flight to the Philippines, all the deportees manacled during the flight. In December, a second batch of 84 Filipinos were deported under the same humiliating condition, legitimized by the Absconder Apprehension Initiative Program of the U.S. Department of Justice (effective since January 13, 2001) and other laws which criminalized the Filipino for being undocumented workers (Mendoza 2003). From October 2001 to April 2002, 334 Filipinos were deported through authoritarian executive orders, justified by legislative actions (including the USA Patriot Act) under the Bush administration. This is quite unprecedented: Filipinos have never been deported in this brutal way in such large numbers. With the discovery of terrorists in their country of origin, Filipinos are now doubly marked as a “brown peril” of sorts, with affinities to Muslim Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, Indonesians, Afghans, and so on. The old somatic/physical markers of race as well as the ethnic/cultural signifiers have now become either amalgamated or sublimated into the prevailing computerized “terrorist” profile.

How does a novelist like Jessica Hagedorn, for instance, respond to this new regime of “civic nationalism” engaged in a “just war” to defend “civic order and democratic liberties”? How does this post-Cold War “insecuritization” (Thornton 2002) under the aegis of the “global war on terror” provide an opening for Hagedorn’s volatilization of the old formal properties of mimetic art which foreground verisimilitude of character and plot?

Hagedorn’s Untamed Flicks

As though afflicted with a severe attack of “repetition compulsion,” Hagedorn does a reprise of her 1988 *Dogeaters* in her new production, *Dream Jungle*. We encounter here a postmodern repertory of combining parts and suturing disparate fragments. This technique of collage/pastiche may be viewed as imitation or copying without laughter. And since there is no original common language of bourgeois individualism and its attendant metanarrative, parody is ruled out. If the real, assuming there is some agreement that reality is out there, can no longer be captured or expressed by language and its resources, what is there to write about? What is striking in this setup, despite the postmodernist obsession with the materiality of the sign as image, not a vehicle of meaning, is that

readers and reviewers refuse to give up summarizing, decoding, and making sense of bits and pieces somehow stitched together in Hagedorn's artifice.

Hagedorn's *Dream Jungle* weaves two constellations of events. The first centers on the wealthy playboy Zamora Lopez de Legaspi who discovers a tribe of Stone-Age cave dwellers (alluding to the Tasaday tribe found in 1971 before Marcos' declaration of martial law). The second gravitates around a servant girl, Rizalina Cayabyab, daughter of Zamora's cook, who flees to Manila, becomes a go-go dancer, and meets an American actor, Vincent Moody. Moody happens to be working on the crew of *Napalm Sunset* (alluding to *Apocalypse Now*), a Vietnam-war movie being filmed in Mindanao, Philippines, where the indigenous Tasadays were discovered. These two event-networks, for one reviewer, function as semantic indices to convey what Hagedorn feels are the effects of Spanish and American colonialism. They are decipherable signifiers that convey the novel's major themes, making this *bricolage* intelligible: "explorers [Magellan; Coppola; other foreigners] turn out to be conquerors, Westerners are still bending Philippine destinies and lechery continues to bind colonizer and native" (Ramzy 2003). If so, then Hagedorn has wasted time and energy on banalities. At best, she has distracted our mind from the toxic and barbaric disasters inflicted by U.S. power on the peoples of Iraq, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

What strikes our critical intelligence is the standard by which Hagedorn can be said to represent a Filipino response to the historical conjuncture I have addressed here. Tentatively we can say that this schizophrenic mode of fabulation is actually both the form and substance of Hagedorn's attempt to make sense of the historical period from the end of the Vietnam War to the 9/11 terror attack. Pastiche, variegated points of view, alternation of episodes, may indeed achieve what the *New York Times* reviewer suspects is Hagedorn's singular intent: to engage with the "unreliability of the realities it depicts" (Upchurch 2003). But then we have to ascertain if the realities — among others, for example, Secretary Manda Elizalde/Marcos' abuse of power on all levels, and the corruption of Filipinos by Coppola's filming of *Apocalypse Now* in the Philippines — have been convincingly presented, and scrupulously documented, as claimed by clever reviewers.

Metropolitan taste demands more than humdrum anecdotes. It turns out that Hagedorn's real concern — to zero in on "the societal repercussions of heavily staged-managed creations," such as the alleged anthropological findings, or the publicity surrounding that and Coppola's representation of the Vietnam War experience — was achieved by simply intuiting or insinuating "her way around a dozen memorable characters and milieus, letting her concerns swarm beneath the busy surface of her narrative" (Upchurch 2003). Granted; but this technical

experimentalism itself relies on a dense texture of surface details, an incoherent assemblage that reproduces the illusion of an interminable present without depth or resonance.

As Shelley Jackson acutely puts it, Hagedorn's is "a scavenger aesthetic, choosy but eclectic" (2003). It chooses, yes, but in a rather brusque, self-conscious, astutely exhibitionistic fashion. Given the fact that Hagedorn (since *Dogeaters*) has rejected the typifying realism of the bourgeois narrative for the abstract, psychologizing mannerism of high modernist art (Lukacs 1995), which is the ideological aura of finance capital in the age of globalization, we can conclude that *Dream Jungle* serves precisely the agenda of the racial polity caught in an emergency: namely, human existence is a matter of individuals with arbitrary experiences, society an accidental collocation of idiosyncratic characters, and history a wild, arbitrary and ultimately chaotic iteration of scenes for which there is no overarching vision or framework that can make sense of the whole. Isn't this a version of the fluid, heterogenous, border-leaping Asian American creature fashioned by Lisa Lowe, Shirley Lim, and their disciples?

Homecoming Trajectory

Let us now turn to Bienvenido Santos, a Filipino writer whose career spans two generations: the Manongs of the forties and the immediate postwar period, and the post-1965 immigrant community of professionals and exiles from the Marcos dictatorship. Now, the vintage Santos beloved by anthologists, the author of *You Lovely People* (1955) and *Villa Magdalena* (1965), can certainly be aligned with the "model minority" scheme that could not resist the inroads of alienating bureaucracy, consumerism, utilitarian standardization, and the predatory Social Darwinism of the seventies and eighties. Santos' novel *What the Hell For You Left Your Heart in San Francisco* (1987) may be regarded as the melodramatic and at times self-ingratiating response of the petit-bourgeois stratum of the Filipino community to the shock of its continued marginalization, subordination, and exclusion.

One peculiar feature of Santos' life may be contradistinguished from Hagedorn's. While Hagedorn's sensibility was shaped by the "Beat" generation of the sixties and the trendy cosmopolitanism of New York, Santos' world-view emerged from his forced stay in the U.S. when World War II broke out in 1942, and from his voluntary exile from the Philippines when his novel *The Praying Man* was banned by the Marcos authoritarian regime in 1972. By circumstance and choice, Santos aligned himself with the fate of the Filipino community in a period when the pressures of fascist power and reactionary ideology impacted heavily on the daily lives of his compatriots, pressures registered in the

episodic but chronological unfolding of his 1987 narrative. It serves as the inchoate national allegory of Filipinos in the interregnum between World War II and the Iraq War.

Santos' attempt at a totalizing narrative may be conceived as an emergent national allegory, or if you like, a national allegory-in-the-making. I believe Fredric Jameson's theory of "national allegory" is more useful in describing the situation of Asian American writers trying to represent their group for the racial polity. The reason is that the personal and political for the Asian writer is always intertwined, given their reification and subjection to the dominant norms; hence the logical distinction between the spheres in Asian experience is not as rigid or fixed as European aesthetic doctrine since Kant and Coleridge would have prescribed. Jameson defines his concept of national allegory: "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (2000, 320). As a reaction to Jameson's hypothesis, Aijaz Ahmad (1986) calls attention to the sheer plurality of the cultural production in "third world" societies which defies reduction to a formula. However, I contend that Jameson's paradigm takes into account distinct national bourgeois formations with specific histories determined by the international division of labor organized by imperialism. Imperialism is thus grasped here as a concept, not an experience. Unfortunately, Ahmad confuses these two spheres of discourse and analysis, hence the need to experimentally assess Jameson's theory and mobilize its potential with the necessary mediations, as I do here.

As a heuristic proposal, Jameson emphasizes the pervasive reification and alienation characteristic of the culture and sensibility of the metropole, part of which are relayed in colonial institutions and ideological practices. National allegory then functions as the typical colonized people's response to this ideological fragmentation and commodification. Of course, there exist sub-categories or variants of this archetypal response. By extension, an allegorical project of reconstituting a self-determining collective subject or subject-position may be discerned in those artists operating within the internal colonies of the United States (Asians, Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans). In the perspective of "internal colonialism," the Asian communities resemble the underdeveloped "third world" of the sixties and seventies. What a world of difference it would have made if the canonical texts by Kingston, Bulosan, Okada, Villa, Theresa Cha, Frank Chin and others were read as allegories of their specific nationality formations and not one-sidedly as emanations of individual psyches reacting to hostile environments.

Parenthetically, it would be prudent to remark that I reserve a full exposition of this new approach for another occasion. Here I can only signal the inadequacies of past and existing theoretical frameworks where critical interventions can be launched. Such interventions will be collective and experimental in nature. In the process of critique one may discern the seeds of emergent trends and new directions. Meanwhile, I urge that Kingston's three major works, *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men*, and *Tripmaster Monkey*, be read as national allegories of a kind, critical articulations of Asian American feminism wrestling with racialized patriarchy and class exploitation. I nominate two powerful examples of a "national allegory" that elaborates a metanarrative of multi-ethnic solidarity: first, Yuri Kochiyama's autobiographical assemblage, *Passing It On*, which resists Derridean or Foucaultian subsumption; and second, Marilyn Chin's shrewd recasting of the dramatic monologue genre in "A Portrait of the Self as Nation, 1990-1991" (1997, 159-163).

Realism and the Cartesian ego have been jettisoned together with all kinds of nationalism – except the unmarked one of U.S. *Herrenvolk* patriotism, and the equation of its national interest with democracy and liberty (of the "free market") everywhere. And so the hegemonic ideology continues to prove tenacious and instrumental for careerist ends. Otherwise, we could have easily liberated ourselves a long time ago from the corrupting spell of the "model minority" myth inflected in postmodern ambivalence, multiculturalism, and compensatory postcolonial mimics. National allegory requires a dialectical method that would mediate historically specific experiences and establish their coherence in a meaningful totality, a unifying meta-narrative of historical development anathema to our current orthodoxy. With finance-capital dictating the parameters of globalization, Asian America remains locked up in a world of virtualization where an emergent configuration of wholeness, autonomy, and unity dissolves in simulacra, spectacles, and illusions of alterity regurgitated from the mechanical reproduction of the commodified Same, and finally assimilated in the absolutist Leviathan corpus.

Adumbrations of Pinoy Existentialism

Conventional wisdom has recycled platitudes about the Filipino community in the U.S.: family- and clan-centered, regionalistic, with unique resources drawn from the cultural heritage (barangay, plaza complex) such as the "bayanihan" (cooperation) spirit and "balikbayan" (returning to the homeland) practice, which allegedly harmonize the native-born Pinoys/Pinays from the interfacing Philippine-born immigrants (Guyotte 1997). Santos' novel dramatizes those stereotypes

and clichés only to satirize them tactfully, as shown by the choreographed behavior of the circle around Dr. Vicente Sotto, the employees and bureaucrats of the Philippine Consulate, the Filipino-American organizations at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, and Dante's students and colleagues at City College.

David Dante Tolosa's journey, ostensibly a hunt for his lost fugitive father, turns out to be an education/initiation plot, a learning process. Although filled with a menagerie of character types, whose relatives inhabit Hagedorn's *Dream Jungle*, Santos' narrative revolves around the writer Dante's search for a viable community. He pursues solidarity linkages with American lost souls (Judy), enigmatic survivors (Cesar Pilapil), and anti-"model minority" derelicts like Professor Arturo Jaime's family. Right from the start, Dante moves to settle the issue of ambiguity by identifying himself as typical Americanized colonial subject: born in 1938 "on the outskirts of the American naval base near Subic Bay in the Philippines. An oriental with broad hints of Malay-Indonesian, perhaps Chinese, strain, a kind of racial chopsuey, that's me. Better yet, for historical and ethnic accuracy, an oriental omelette flavored with Spanish wine" (1987, 1). Well-meaning pastiche breaks down here into culinary grotesques.

In Dante's search for support for his project and his vocation, Santos allegorizes a whole nation's struggle for genuine sovereignty, for recognition as a singular nation. Not so much the character of Dante as the itinerary of the quest for solidarity, the deracinated individual's need to communicate and connect with others (the priority of audience and context for the Filipino artist) and thus unify the fragmented collective psyche – that is ultimately Dante's over-riding motivation. It is none other than to articulate the dream of nationhood, to imagine the birth of national self-determination. It is not so much the solitary artist's *agon* for self-fulfillment that we see in Dante's comic if pathetic maneuvers for self-recognition, but the Filipino organic intellectual's dilemma of deciding whether to succumb to self-indulgent anarchist gestures – the fate of Jose Garcia Villa, a contemporary exiled artist, and kindred compatriots – or to mediate the shipwrecked psyche's anguish and craft with the suffering and oppression of the larger community to which, by descent or consent, he belongs. Dante confronts this ethical imperative during his sojourn in America.

Hegemony in politics and art is a matter of calibrating the ratio of force and consent. Dante was driven into exile by geopolitical forces beyond his control. His reservoir of "consent," fueled by conscience or naivete, is what explains Dante's sympathy for Estela, the invalid in a wheelchair in a mansion on Diamond Heights – the child whose inability to control the psychosomatic symptoms of her life symbolizes the existential plight of the Filipino community. Estela's fascination with the blazing lights of San Francisco from the Heights is the general

Filipino enchantment with the surface glitter of industrialized America as the incarnation of the mythic “City on the Hill,” the promised land of freedom and equality and redemption. The scene epitomizes Bulosan’s enduring fantasy of a fabled America, innocent and virginal before the Puritans’ bloody errand in the wilderness.

This theme of fantasy and disillusionment is recapitulated by Santos for this period of “colorblind” racism and brutal fascist violence in the Philippines and other U.S. imperial outposts before the advent of a “global apartheid” (Marable 2006). Unfortunately, this doctrine of American Exceptionalism – a Messianic ideology embodied in the policy of “Manifest Destiny” and affiliated slogans of the Cold War and Bush’s “war on terrorism” (Pease 2000) – appears as a healing trope, even though ironically fused with a horribly diseased, helpless Filipina child. Ultimately, the “American Dream” evaporates in the flood of sordid disenchantments that hound Bulosan’s characters, a lesson not lost to Santos’ protagonist. Dante survives owing to a peculiar mixture of native resources: susceptibility to seduction, intellectual naivete, convivial will-power, sensuality, and strong animal instincts. At times, he manifests the DuBoisian virtue of double-consciousness. For the mass audience of the global North, however, Dante serves to personify the model citizen of impoverished, underdeveloped “third world” countries vulnerable to the temptations offered by the World Bank/International Monetary Fund, US Agency for International Development, and transnational corporate investors hungry for super-profits.

Asian America: A Utopian Project?

What I find somewhat disconcerting, though in hindsight perfectly understandable, is Santos’ resort to a tired humanistic formula to resolve his protagonist’s problems. Having gone through the grotesque and painful ordeals in his search for some mooring (emblemized by the lost father) in a chaotic consumerist milieu, Dante settles for an ending to his existential search. The novel’s closing scene with his final goodbye to Estela may be read as an attempt to transpose to this vacant placeholder the old Jamesian “central intelligence,” a scene that emits something like the “Great Gatsby” intuition that would reconcile all contraries and pacify everyone. Dante imagines Estela watching the landscape before her as her limbs twist, eerily crying and frothing, the convulsions of “wounded beast” that operates as Santos’ “objective correlative” for the diseased body politic and the metropolitan wasteland at the end of the Vietnam War and the onset of deadly Reaganite repression and missile warfare against the unruly “third world” subalterns in Libya, Nicaragua, Grenada, Philippines, etc. (Blum 2005):

There are no stars blinking at our feet, no encrusted jewels, such as you might imagine, winking over our heads. We are flesh and blood, tired before the day is over, seeking to find after the rains, a welcome door, a smiling face, both the familiar and the strange. Surrounded by strangers, we look for friends in a continuing search against despair.

We have left native land but our hearts are still there, not here, Estela, not in this golden city by the bay. We like to think we gain a lot from day to day in hope, that we are not as we often suspect we are, sentimental fools. But we believe in love, that's all we live for, love. But what the hell is that? And like you, Estela, we carry our own deformities as nobly as we can, but unlike you, we hide them well (1987, 191).

Unlike Hagedorn's slyly cynical if proprietary distance from her creations, Santos' empathy is, to my mind, somewhat patronizing and even excessive for the real worth of the problems his characters are grappling with. Perhaps Santos senses this danger of pathos-becoming-bathos so that he catches himself and asks rhetorically: "What the hell for you left your heart in San Francisco?" The colloquial register seems to offer a fitting denouement to a memorable verbal performance, analogous to how the Chinese artist Zhang Huan incarnates genealogy in his theatrical art. In enacting "Family Tree," Zhang asked three Chinese calligraphers to write directly on his face and shaved head until all his skin was covered. Not the substance (Chinese folktales, poems, names) but the form soon becomes legible: the ink-brushed characters gradually darkened his entire head. In the last of a sequence of nine photographs of this unrepeatable happening, Zhang's face is completely black "as if erased by, or completely absorbed into, language" (Cotter 2007). This may apply to Hagedorn's art, but not to Santos' stylized realism and his stubborn drive to articulate the tale of the "tribe."

In any event, Santos' performance values signifiers but not at the expense of the signifieds and their sociohistorical grounding. References to public conduct and speech-acts are not manipulated simply for a psychological reality-effect; they index the kaleidoscope of scenes and characters to specific embodiments, to concrete historical contexts: Marcos' authoritarian rule and the suspended state of animation of the Filipino petty bourgeoisie in California. In a time when "Only English" became the latest outburst of the racial polity (San Juan 2005b), with de-industrialisation, outsourcing, and cutbacks wrecking middle-class lives; with the abject failure of *Brown vs Board of Education* to remedy *de facto* discrimination; and when the gains of the Civil Rights struggles have been coopted or eviscerated by right-wing assaults on social services and public programs—long before the Katrina disaster will demonstrate that equality and freedom for people of color remains a hope or dream—Santos dares to write in Tagalog and other vernaculars

with English words. Maxine Hong Kingston praised Santos for this miraculous feat, for his being “a master at giving the reader a sense of people speaking in many languages and dialects” (Cruz 2005, 36). This dialogic, more exactly polyphonic or heteroglossic (after Bakhtin), method of constructing the scaffolding of a particularized “national allegory” is, I contend, a much more subversive and radically transformative strategy for thwarting finance-capital’s attacks on immigrants, ethnic minorities, and internally colonized peoples than the calculated ruses and panaceas of multiplicity, leveraged ambivalence, transnational cosmopolitanism, and other new-fangled nostrums sold in the now bloody, turbulent marketplace.

Conclusion

After the disaster of September 2001 and the raging wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, humanistic studies in the U.S. has become more nakedly instrumentalized in the campaign to repair the U.S. ruling elite’s hegemonic ascendancy in the world. In the process, Asian American Studies has suffered retrenchment along with Ethnic Studies and remains subalternized. Its status as an internal colony of American Studies persists despite its claims to independence because its theoretical and political conditions of possibility still accept neoliberal “democratic” pluralism and the antinomies of commodity exchange as its overarching world-view. One tell-tale evidence of this is the recently updated 2007-08 *National Asian Pacific American Political Almanac* edited by Don Nakanishi and James Lai (2007). For the contributors, Asian American group empowerment is based on subscription to the two-party system, electoral rituals and schemes utilizing community-based organizations for hierarchical partisan interests. Even the non-conformist gesture of Lt. Ehren Watada is subsumed by many observers within the formal statutory limits of questioning the presidential power to make war. Such narrow legalistic approach conforms to the textualism and moralism of current literary scholarship delineated earlier.

Over a decade has passed since the publication of King-kok Cheung’s orthodox guide, *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (1997). But the trends remain metaphysically idealist and formalist despite disavowals and disclaimers. Take the exemplary essay by Donald Goellnicht, a model of the fallibilist reflexive white male critic. He argues that Asian American texts, primarily those by women writers such as Joy Kogawa, Trinh Minh-ha, Theresa Cha, should be read as “theoretically informed and informing” (1997, 357) Fine, but for what purpose aside from classroom exhibitions? How do the ideals of heterogeneity and multiple shifting subject-positions help us grasp and destroy racist and sexist predatory practices in our communities, not to

mention the brutal interventions in the Philippines, Pakistan, Thailand, Bangladesh, and other Asian dependencies of US corporate power? Imperial violence has worsened since 1997. Goellnicht's essay may have affixed the good-housekeeping seal on the postmodernist dogma of the tricky performative self and its hybrid epigones.

Everything now seems geared to global market operations. There is no doubt that neopragmatic cultural pluralism, despite its ironic and self-mocking modality during the Bush years and earlier, has no quarrel with hybridity and even the appeal to citizenship. Both Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish are extolled as good patriots. Commodity exchange, the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value, contains infinite contradictions, antinomies, paradoxes, as the Marxian tradition has fully demonstrated. Postmodernist love of Nietzschean/Foucaultian drive for singularities, enigmatic ambivalence, aleatory subject-positions, and Lacanian absences (fomented by Slavoj Žižek) can be readily assimilated to the versatile technologies of the cyber market and financial speculation. Likewise, despite its rejection of the repressive concepts of bourgeois nationality, identity politics, and national assimilationism, orthodox postcolonial theory (inspired by Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak) serves as the foundational template for an academic industry blind to the tortures in Guantanamo prison cells and in the horror chambers of Bagram airport in Afghanistan, not to mention multiple renditions and indiscriminate slaughter by Hellfire missiles launched from US Airforce drones anywhere in the world. Postcolonial theory, or for that matter diaspora and global studies on offer, is unable to free itself from its derivation from nihilistic, methodologically individualist premises redolent of the Cold War that undermine its own quest for agency. If any such agency materializes, it is that of the highly rewarded academic 'star' in the metropolitan lecture circuits and chic salons of New York, Paris, London, and Rome.

Colonization, to be sure, proceeds under other logos and nomenclature. Despite the invocation of Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and other "third world" heroic protagonists, postcolonial theory rejects dialectics and the historical unity of opposites for a world made uniform and thus exchangeable by a logic of formal democracy where abstract, statistically equal individuals operate as buyers and sellers of commodities. In short, the general world-view controlling humanistic studies, including Asian American literary studies, in the U.S. remains the ideology of capitalist relations of production and reproduction. What's the alternative?

Lest I be accused further of indulging in a denunciatory mode of debunking and the polemical advocacy of Gramscian inventory or Jamesian allegory, I would like to endorse Teresa Ebert's brilliant work *The Task of Cultural Critique* as an initial move toward a pedagogical

alternative for Asian American Studies. Ebert's summarizing precept is both strategic and principled:

If cultural critique is going to matter and become more than delightful entertainment for the cynical, it must abandon the mythologies of singularity and become materialist. It must become an explanation of totality and understand the singular in the collective. Difference is honored only when the subject is freed from needs. Under all other conditions, difference is merely another name for the boundless rule of the entrepreneur in the free market where use value is obscured by exchange relations and human labor is traded. Materialist critique is a critique for totality. It is not diverted by the profusion of details, textures, and heterogeneities that capitalism manufactures in order to obscure the material logic of the exchange of human labor for a wage. Cultural critique becomes critique-al only when it becomes a critique for collectivity and joins the cultural struggles for social freedom from necessity.... (2009, 196).

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