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Peripheral Philippines

When over lunch, I observed that the authors of the books I had been asked to comment upon characterised the dominant culture as 'heterosexist, masculinist, and macho', my lady friend couldn't restrain a mocking smile, "Macho? Most of these poor devils are decidedly mother dependent, many a wife referring to her consort as her eldest son! When you come down to it, this place is run by women. The big boy just remains that, a big boy, full of bravado, which needs his wife to prop him up." Her sneer reminded me of Thailand, where the lady of the house is referred to as 'the hind legs of the elephant' that would tumble without its mainstay.

Niels Mulder

Garcia, J. Neil C. 2nd ed. 2009.
Philippine Gay Culture: Binabae to Bakla, Silahis to MSM.
Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
xxv + 537 pages, ISBN 978-962-209-985-2 (paperback)

Tadiar, Neferti XM. 2009.
Things Fall Away; Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization.
Durham, NC: Duke University Press. ix + 484 pages, ISBN 978-0-8223-4446-9 (paperback)

ACCORDING TO MY ACQUAINTANCE WITH LIFE among the Javanese, Thai, and Filipinos, for the children the mother is and remains the moral centre of the universe and the touchstone of their conscience. In this way, she becomes a cultic figure, with people in politics sometimes circulating pictures that show them paying respect to their mother as proof of their moral worth. Next to this, John Cadet reminded us that, at least in Thailand, "[W]omen are ascendant on account of their natural, that's to say, biological power, while males wishing to assert and protect themselves are obliged to acquire power, mainly through initiation. Women do not need [to do so], since in the archaic culture their natural power overbids and threatens the acquired power of the male, which requires protection from it. [This] danger all mature females pose to the male [is] abundantly referred to in social practice and belief, as well as Thai folklore, literature and popular culture." Residually, this situation is referred to by our two authors in their interpretations of the pre-colonial Philippine *babaylan*, and in the mocking smile of my lady friend.

The two authors, students of literature by training, each seek to come to grips with the position of peripheral groups in mainstream culture and aspire to write recent subaltern history, in the main using sources originating from the country's very centre of Metro Manila. Garcia deals with gay culture and particularly with the position of the effeminate queer or *baklâ*. Tadiar addresses the feminisation of labour, the experience of the urban underdog, and the revolutionary imagination of the masses. In order to do just this, both of them exploit scholarly literature and *belles-lettres,* and venture to theorise the condition of their subject matter.

Above: Bird Boy participating in the Babaylan Festival of Bago City, Philippines (CC Attribute: Billy Lopue; http://flic.kr/p/9juWJT).

To be gay?
Before concentrating on being gay in the last five decades, we should be reminded that general ideas about homo-sexuality stem from a rather recent, Western psychiatric discourse that has infiltrated, but not radically subverted, the native Tagalog-Filipino understanding of, to use another imported idea, 'gayness.' In the West as elsewhere, culture, or the understanding of life, is always on the move, even as in this post-colonial yet imperial capitalist era of globalisation the current Western understanding of human behaviour – and much else – is colonially pervasive.

So, however frequently Philippine culture is characterised as 'heterosexist, masculinist, macho' (and effemino- and homophobic to boot), this current picture is no guide for understanding the past when, for example, power and dignity revolved around spiritual potency which was seniority rather than gender marked. From the extensive discussion of the pre-colonial female and the cross-dressing male *babaylan* (priest, medium, healer, spiritual leader), one might conclude that Cadet's observation of the archaic natural power of mature females also held in the archipelago and that, over colonial history and into the present, this power persisted as mother's (and wife's) moral superiority.

Be this as it may, both Garcia and Tadiar suggest that the present-day cross-dressing *baklâ* is a prestigious carry-over from animist days in which gender, gender-crossing and sexual practice were conceptually far apart from the novel notion of homosexuality. Meanwhile, though, for most members of the educated classes such distinctions 'have fallen away' and vanished into an irretrievable past. Consequently, the *baklâ* is not only labelled 'homosexual', but becomes, in masculinist homophobic logic, the homosexual par excellence, whose interiority (*loob; kalooban*) is woman-hearted, and who enacts this inversion in everyday life.

It is this very enactment, this show of effeminacy, that makes the male homosexual a homosexual, not the sex act itself. Hence, his non-effeminate partner in sex remains 'heterosexual' or straight. This construction makes it plausible to suppose that the *baklâ* queer is almost consciously part and parcel of the dominant macho culture, including its internalised homophobia, which leaves him lovelorn, anguished and self-hating.

As a male of the effeminate variety, Garcia knows what he writes about and, graciously, over the years in which the dominant discourse was imposed and gradually internalised, the seeds were sown for the emancipation from that very discourse, or, at least, of becoming a respected partner in the totality of the nation. Whereas a blatantly rampant and fabulous gay culture emerged in the 1970s, it seemed as if the same got bogged down in stereotypical comedy shows. Toward the end of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the pressure for emancipation in wider society gathered steam, and seen from the 'Update' added to the book's 2008/9 editions, this movement toward full citizenship is well under way. Even so, the 'coming out' of the masculine gay, which is the perspective in which Garcia discusses the works of three authors, is a painfully slow process at the time that the capitalist juggernaut reduces the mother-dependent macho-males to puppets who need to shore up their egos through violence against women and *baklâ* gays.

To be an exportable lower-class woman?
This very juggernaut looms large in Tadiar's narrative and dominates the current phase in the evolution of the permanent crisis of Philippine culture. In this period, prostitution became the central metaphor for export-oriented and tourism-friendly policies that prostituted the nation as a whole and in which prostituted women became the paradigmatic figure of the crisis of Philippine culture (p.25-6). Where as this image, in which feminised bodies and natural resources are immorally used by multinational capital, pertained most saliently to the developmentalist policies of the Marcos period, under globalisation the crisis of culture comes to be expressed through the gendered and sexual imagery of overseas domestic work (p.27). Within this Olympian context of the international production processes and their attendant division of labour, the author proposes to explore the socio-subjectivity of female overseas contract workers through her exegesis of relevant *belles-lettres*.

Through going overseas, mothers, daughters, wives not only abandon their customary roles while tearing themselves apart from the security of their families, but also become 'Women Alone' in far-away places. The chapter concerned (chapter 2) starts on a quote from Nick Joaquin that reminds us of the fact that Filipinos grow up and live suffocatingly close together

which, according to Bulatao, leads to lowly individuated personalities who incorporate certain others (*kapwa*) in their self-experience (1964:430). As such, this 'tearing themselves apart' and becoming 'women alone' reminded me of a statement by the psychiatrist Lourdes Lapuz, who lamented, 'Perhaps, some day, the time will come when a Filipino no longer has to cross miles of ocean and continent to emancipate himself from his parents' (1972:180). It could be that this 'some day' has arrived with the massive deployment of Filipino labour world-wide which has opened the possibility for emancipation, individuation, and self-assertion.

First of all, this is illustrated at the poetry and stories of highly educated members of the middle classes in the capital that reflect on the experience of Filipinas living solitary lives. Some celebrate their independence of family and kin as 'a small victory' that 'gives form to their own wholeness' (p.59). The other thing to free oneself from is the tedium of a woman's existence, the monotony of attending to the activity of others. Subsequently, the narrator seeks the dream of enjoying her body and actions, of being free-floating, which, in turn, may affect her identity experience and results in a loneliness-induced madness.

I do not know how helpful these literary products are to understand the experiences and self-experience of the myriad manual workers, migrant domestics, unmarried mothers, mistresses and other single women living separately from their families, let alone the lives of the 'commoditised warm bodies' whose export was initiated under 'authoritarian modernisation.' Through imposing feminist, Marxist, literary, and a host of post-this and post-that theories on her subject matter, she attempts to catch the grain of subjectivity in the universe, whereas field anthropologists would prefer to see the universe in microscopic experience. Of course, sometimes that happens when certain writers visualise the 'fish bowl silences' of the wife in a society run by men to whom she is no more than 'rice, meat, dessert served for his pleasure´ (p.77).

Less emancipatory and most pertinent in the case of the (female) overseas workers is the recognisable cultural theme of sacrifice – in the tradition of Christ, José Rizal and Ninoy Aquino – that purifies and ennobles, and that justifies the suffering in what is sometimes referred to as 'the prison without bars.'

To be urban underclass?

In the first chapter under the rubric 'Urbanization', Tadiar seems to move closer to actual experience through reflecting on a novel by Jun Cruz Reyes that highlights 'pedestrian testimony against the transnational spirit' at 'the time of catastrophe.' The person at the centre of the narrative is a university student who, because 'students are communists', is forced to save his skin through dropping out of college and abandoning his abode when Martial Law is declared. In this way, he becomes one of the streets, poor, scavenging, without a future, etc.; this gives Reyes the means of imagining life at the city's underbelly and, in the process, to delightfully expose the actions, ideas and stupidities of those in power.

Below: Annual Babaylan Festival, Bago City, Philippines (CC Attribute: Billy Lopue; http://flic.kr/p/9juY1p).

When, with the Marcoses in Hawai'i, the book finally appeared, its author reasoned its value as keeping history alive and preventing the reappearance of the horror of an authoritarian regime. About this, Tadiar is apparently doubtful, as she introduced the chapter with, 'I am troubled by the gradual obliteration of the past's capacity to disturb our present' (p.141). She is right; in the Philippines, I am steadily impressed by the absence of a sense of history. This absence makes the nation like the young as it floats, unburdened by its past, through an ever-present present in which Marcos's family and cronies are comfortably re-ensconced and in which a discredited president stood a serious chance of making a come-back.

In the second chapter of 'Urbanization', the author wants to explore 'different ways of understanding the modes of power and production that operate in postcolonial social formations and, therefore, for seeing the different forms that everyday struggles take' (p.187). These struggles are then visualised in individual cases of human 'metropolitan debris' who 'endure life as excess matter' (p.220), and whose misadventures and reflections are yet revealing of particular moments of Manila's metropolitanisation (p.229).

Revolution?

Whereas the resulting observations take us to the fly-overs symbolic of the Manila of the 1990s, she still thinks it useful to devote the last three chapters to 'Revolution', and so we are exposed to the Maoist romanticism of revolution-inspired 'masses' that should be 'served' and 'awakened' and with whom the (urban, educated) cadres 'become one' in order to achieve a 'cultural revolution' and a 'popular democratic' future. As long as the Marcos tyranny lasted – and even as the great Chinese example had already crumbled – such ideas and the armed struggle in the countryside held a certain promise. However, following the popular uprising of 1986, the revolutionary movement has been in steady decline, while the 'sorrows of the people' live on unabated. Even so, giving attention to the 'undercurrents of experience' is a legitimate exercise as it may reveal 'cultural resources of the living past that bear radical political potentials for unfinished imaginations of the revolution in the present' (p.378).

The living past

Within the scope of this review of voices from the periphery, it is not possible to do full justice to two very complex, at times rather abstruse and at other moments pellucid texts that, in the tradition of literary critics, caused me sometimes the feeling of reading discourses that were dressed up in such an esoteric babble as to leave the subject imperially bare in front of the uninitiated reader. About this, in the 'Note to the Second Edition', Garcia observed, 'I am glad that I am no longer the clumsily prolix, over-eager, wide-eyed, and theory-crazed person who cobbled together these words' (ix); this self-reflection gives hope that, one day, Tadiar will also come down to terra firma.

She took the view that the Philippines exemplifies an everlasting cultural crisis. There is no doubt that having been violently colonised (Newson 2009), exposed to Spanish racism, brainwashed into Catholicism, exploited to the hilt, etc., created doubt about the own being, about identity. Too much had simply fallen away. In passing, this was confirmed by the appalling absence of a sense of history that is possibly related to the cultural catastrophe of the American colonisation that created, in Nick Joaquin's metaphor, 'a generation without fathers and grandfathers', oriented to the timeless future of 'progress.' No cause for wonder that those who are aware of the triad culture-history-identity yearn for an autochthonal past that, in my view, is much more alive than most rabid nationalists are aware of.

In spite of Catholicism that, like the other religions of Middle-Eastern origin, is highly misogynist, homophobic, and, in its missionary zeal, racist, the pre-colonial, animistic past lives on, even as the life-giving, female representations of natural or animistic power in archaic Southeast Asian cultures have been repressed by the monotheisms focussing on the one, male creator God. Consequently, women were demonised as a danger to men, with Islam probably most obsessed with keeping Adam out of harm's, i.e., the polluting woman's, way.

Even so, morally mothers remain ascendant, an aspect of lowland Southeast Asian culture that Catholicism, through the Holy Mother, even reinforced. As the very name of this religion implies, it is extremely hospitable to original animist practices (Mulder 1997, chapter 2). The characteristic cult of the near ancestors – people whom we have known in life – became part of Filipino Catholicism as these forbears were incorporated as approachable, near saints who hear prayer and who are feasted at their graves on *Undras* or All Saints Day. Like the animist, Catholic Filipinos have no shortage of power laden objects that may protect as amulets or that can be tapped for blessing through touching them, such as certain statues in power laden places like churches – that many observantly greet in passing, just like a Thai does in passing the abodes of powerful spirits.

When the Spaniards overran the islands, they found miniature social orders with which they were familiar, namely, hierarchically ordered polities with a *datu* on top, a layer of *maharlika* or privileged freemen, and the multitude (*masa*) to serve them. In Spanish times, the pyramid of command was extended to the *superdatu* in Madrid, and today, it extends to Malacañang or, as Tadiar would have it, to the IMF, the World Bank, and Washington. The point is that the order is not different from the order of the *baranggay* and that nothing goes if you do not know the people concerned. And so, it is not strange that most peasants in the far-flung countryside rather aspire to an atavistic millennium than to revolutionary correctness.

A cardinal difficulty in spreading the class-struggle based gospel of the class-less society in which everybody is equal lies in the fact that it does not connect to the prevailing world view. In Southeast Asia, Western sociological concepts, such as class, are no part of the indigenous imagination. Javanese, Thai, and Filipinos see the social edifice as a moral arrangement based on the essential inequality of individuals who are obliged (or not) to each other through 'debts of gratitude' that spell their concretely experienced life worlds that shade off into the not morally obliging space of wider society. That space may be seen as 'public in itself', as the hunting ground where one vies for a prize, but it is not 'of the public' or 'for itself'.

Another most pertinent carry-over from the pristine past is the idea of power. In animistic thinking, morally neutral power pervades cosmos and nature, and the cult of it aims at appropriating such power or bending it according to one's wishes. Those who do so successfully and who come to embody potency, have acquired a highly admired social good; they will be women or men of prowess, bosses, patrons, (or *babaylan*), deferred to by the lesser creatures, and so there is small cause for wonder that the competition for power is fierce and often violent. The political game is about power as such, not how it has been acquired or even how it is exercised, and so it may be that in the days that *datu* were close to their constituents, they were held more accountable for their actions than today's distant, oligarchic politicos.

In the reflections on cultural crisis, it was also observed that the prevailing doubt about national identity may be related to the absence at the time of early colonisation of overarching institutions, such as royal courts, the state, cities, exemplary religious centres, and that those imposed by the Americans failed to take root, with the consequence that the pervasive orientation of most remains myopically focussed on family, relatives, and locality. Wider, public space remains like the surrounding nature of *baranggay* days: it is a no man's land where one carries no responsibility and that nowadays appears as the private realm of politicians or *hacenderos*, and so a citizen-based culture of the commonweal fails to develop.

In view of these striking continuities and reflecting on the days that women and *babaylan* embodied potency and prestige, it may be concluded that the gravest cultural violence inflicted on the pre-colonial order of life was the ascendancy of men at the expense of women. (Lady friend, "Ascendancy? They're spoiled brats who need us to get their act together!") Apart from this discontinuity of original gender equality, the past lives on in the present, even as it seems to have 'fallen away' into the subconscious.

Niels Mulder has retired to the southern slopes of the mystically potent Mt. Banáhaw, Philippines, where he stays in touch through niels_mulder201935@yahoo.com.ph

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