

History and Literature: Aspects of Memory

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About 10 years ago I attended a conference in San Francisco. The writers were a mix of ages, largely from Europe but including delegates from the Pacific Rim. NVM Gonzalez, F. Sionil Jose and myself composed the Philippine panel.

As spokespersons took the floor, younger writers began discounting history. They said the past was irrelevant; history was extolling dead heroes.

Those remarks dismissing history have been bothering me, and in my mind I have framed several arguments I *could* have proposed, so I welcome this invitation to speak on history and literature as aspects of memory

History is extolling not dead heroes but ourselves.

We need, however, to be aware of history's omissions and falsities; for flawed history distorts our sense of self and identity, our consciousness and our view of the world and our place in it.

It is hard to recognize and to counter official distortions by which governments memorialize themselves and their policies. Take the history of colonialism in the Philippines. In school we were taught that the Spaniards came to convert and to civilize us at a great sacrifice. We were made to feel grateful for their intervention; which despite random abuses/exploitation—the cost to us—raised our intelligence, and morality.

The same tradition of history taught that American occupation of the Philippines was for our own good: America brought civilization and prosperity, eradicated diseases, taught the lessons of democracy. The cost

to us official history will not admit. Colonialism interrupts the development of indigenous institutions, erases the colonial's past to impose a new consciousness and identity compatible with and acceptable to the colonial power. "Coercive transformation," writes Nilda S. Rimonte, leaves the colonized feeling inferior, leaves his world in chaos, so he acts as a subject in his own country, accepts being treated as a colonial wherever he lives; for he is the one who has to live with the identity and consciousness fashioned for him.

It is important for those of us who live outside the Philippines to know our past, for this enables us to participate more fully in the growth and achievement of communities where we live, as citizens or residents. A strong sense of who we are will prevent us from feeling insecure, from being uncertain of our worth, from needing constant approbation from others.

Filipinos Have Long Been Part of America

We have been part of history in America, its spiritual, geographical and political landscape. More Filipinos are being elected to public office, appointed to local and national government, are in the cultural, professional and religious life of America where we share common issues, are part of the solution to its problems.

As early as the seventeenth century, during the galleon trade between Manila and Mexico, Filipino sailors settled in New Orleans, giving the names of their villages back in the Philippines to the settlements they carved in the bayous. Filipinos also settled in New England before the past century, weaving some of the famous Nantucket baskets.

But there are scant traces of us in America; and even these are disappearing, being demolished locally as urban blight. Even though it is in The National Trust for Historical Preservation as one of "11 Most Endangered Historical Places in the USA," Little Manila, in Stockton, California—"the last, best example of the Little Manilas which sprang up from Seattle to San Diego... from the 1920s to the 1960s"—is in danger of being converted into a parking space for a strip mall.

Here was where pre-1965 immigrant Filipinos lived, segregated, the largest Filipino community outside the Philippines. In what is now Stockton's Emerald Restaurant, Filipinos came to look for jobs, attended union meetings, organized strikes and dances. Here met the Iloilo Circle, the Caballeros de Dimas Alang. The Rizal Social Club, built in 1938, became a Filipino boxing gym. The Mariposa Hotel housed Filipino workers from 1916 onwards. It was headquarters for the radical Filipino UCAPAWA Local 7 Union (headed by Carlos Bulosan and Chris Mensalvas who led a huge strike in Stockton in 1948.) Filipino farm workers were among the very first to unionize, but they disappeared quickly from the news.

Grassroots movement failed to save the South of Market district in San Francisco where, according to Luz de Leon, some 6000 single-room occupancy structures housed Filipino farm and service workers, including those who came as "manongs." Further down on Kearny Street the International Hotel housed Filipino workers. Subject of contention since 1993, an empty lot now lies where it once stood, in the middle of San Francisco's Manilatown.

These are parts of American history—where Filipinos entered American history—and their destruction is "unmaking American history," revising it.

In order to reflect our shared history correctly, remaining Filipino landmarks in America need to be preserved/corrected. Only in 1998 did the Library of Congress amend its catalog listing from "Philippine Insurrection" to the "Philippine American War of 1899." It was a war because it was between two republics, Aguinaldo having declared national independence in 1898. A request for the same purpose was sent recently to The Military Order of the Carabao asking it to share the concerns of the Filipino community by correcting their website reference to "Insurrection," and also asking for the deletion of the word Carabao, as an imperialist derogatory term.

Small victories: a name change; but it involves a mindset that affects official policy and our sense of self. (Consider the protest by Native Americans against the misuse of their icons by sports teams, or against

desecration of the contents of their sacred burial grounds being exhibited in museums.)

Perhaps, because of our "absence" from American history, the American Congress rescinded in 1946 the rights of Filipino war veterans. That's immediately after WWII ended. Only now are there serious promises to pass the Filipino Veterans bill which the American Coalition of Filipino Veterans has been actively pursuing since 1996. Only now is a bill being considered to recognize the rights of Filipino WWII veterans and New Scouts, to raise them to equal benefits with American veterans.

How many veterans will have died before their rights are restored? Of the original 141,000 only 29,000 survive. Of this, 8000 are in the US; the rest in the Philippines, to whom benefits will not be extended, should the bill pass this year.

Discriminatory decisions continue. On the eve of the last Memorial Day, the petition of a Filipino WWII veteran's family to have him buried in the Arlington National Cemetery was denied. Conscripted, along with 300,000 other young Filipinos by the US Army when he was 21, August Roa Realuyo survived the Bataan Death March, yet the federal judge in Manhattan declared that no "statute or regulation" allowed military burial for him.

American children born in the Philippines were excluded from the benefits of US Public Law 97-359, the American Immigration Act of 1982, which recognized children born to Americans in Korea, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, allowing them to immigrate to the US to become citizens. Filipino children born of US parents—about 20,000-50,000 born between 1941 and 1993—live in poverty; having been abandoned when the US bases closed. Only now is there a bill pending to allow them to immigrate to the US.

Filipinos, some 465, including American citizens, were deported, treated as criminals and placed in restraints throughout a 22-hour chartered flight as an aftermath of September 11. The Damayan Migrant Workers Association has denounced the scheduled deportation of 60 more Filipinos in the US.

We accept these inequalities, probably because, raised largely unaware of our history, we are not sure of ourselves, of our rights. I never heard of Balangiga while I was growing up. My father, who comes from Samar, never talked about Balangiga where atrocities were committed on both sides some 100 years ago during the Philippine-American War. I first learned of Balangiga when I chanced upon turn-of-the-century newspapers in the Boston Public Library. The bells of the church of Balangiga, long a subject of contention between the Philippine and American governments, are now in Trophy Park of the Warren Air Force base in Cheyenne, Wyoming, taken home by the Wyoming Volunteers as "booty." At the least, cannot one of the two bells be returned to the Philippines, to commemorate a common history?

Like all victims perhaps, we tend to erase painful memories. Mabini Castro said that, after liberation from the Japanese Occupation, the walls of the children's ward of the Philippine General hospital were painted white to cover the blood of children smashed against the walls.

We Are Not Memorialized in American History

The Philippine-American War of 1899, through which America transformed itself from a republic into an empire, is largely ignored in American history. An article that asked "is there any hope of breaking away from a bloody historical celebration mindlessly each July 4th?" did not mention *that* war in Asia which predated Vietnam. When *Time* in July 2003 mentioned letters of American soldiers opposing the various wars they have fought/are fighting, there was no reference to the letters of American soldiers in the Philippine-American War. Fortunately, some of these letters were saved from censorship and destruction by the Anti-Imperialist League of Boston.

That war is not mentioned in retrospectives of America's so-called wars of liberation which ended up instead as wars of occupation. This omission allows it to sidestep the militarization of the US—armed in time of peace, with the Cold War over—for the purpose of establishing "client states" in its role of "global supremacy." When it is mentioned, it is called Insurrection, justified in the name of Manifest Destiny—America accepting its "pre-ordained role" to save/shape the world. Impying divine sanction,

President McKinley supposedly dropped down to his knees before deciding to occupy the land America had come to liberate from Spain.

America has lessons to learn from the Philippine-American War: lessons which could have saved it from Vietnam, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and now Iraq where it is spending billions that could otherwise fund education, health insurance for the disadvantaged in America, economic productivity, world rehabilitation. The omission of a balanced record of the Philippine-American War in American minds and textbooks allows America to claim never having been an imperial power; to disguise its armed intervention in the Philippine struggle against Spain as establishing peace, introducing the blessings of democracy (through thirty-caliber bullets); as "benevolent assimilation" for the Filipinos' peace and prosperity. Just last month in Manila, President Bush repeated the claim.

One of the lessons of the Philippine-American War is the strategy of deception—now called spin—by which the American people were kept in darkness about that War. To convince the American people of the need for sending and keeping an army to civilize the Philippines, at the 1904 Exposition in St. Louis, tribal Filipinos—our brothers and sisters—were exhibited in the dead of winter in their thin tribal wear, effectively denying that there were among Filipinos then lawyers, teachers, engineers, doctors, surveyors, pharmacists—the whole of professions.

Concealing the true motives of intervening in Cuba, the American press and government used as a battle cry the sinking of the *Maine* in Havana, based on speculations that Spain blew it up. No such evidence was ever found, but war fever had taken hold, bringing America to Spain's colony in Asia. Dewey was sent to Hong Kong with sealed instructions to proceed to Manila, when Aguinaldo declared a Republic in Cavite – the first republic in Asia –Dewey refused to attend, but sat in Manila Bay waiting for more US troops to arrive and "liberate" the country, from the Filipinos this time, not from the Spaniards.

That official spin also deceived Filipinos into thinking they were going to be liberated from Spain, not taken over as a colony. Filipino exiles in Hong Kong were assured verbally that the Americans had no intention of taking their country—it already had more territory than it wanted—but would help them gain independence. After the Filipinos had trapped the

Spanish forces inside the old walled city of Intramuros, they were asked to wait for American troops who, on landing, took over the Filipino trenches and, accepting the surrender of the city, barred the Filipino army from entering.

Despite inequality in military strength and resources—children collected spent shells on the battlefield so these could be refilled with gunpowder; women donated their jewelry for the war effort—our determination to die for our hard-won independence (revolutions persisted all through the 350-odd years of Spanish rule) forced the Philippine-American War to last, officially, three whole years, but it was still being fought some ten years afterwards; the Filipino combatants, declared bandits to justify their summary execution.

Memory and Identity

Life depends on memory for its accumulation of meaning. If I may twist a cliché around, we are what we remember. Our memory of ourselves—here/now—contains our essential character/being, whether as Filipino/Americans, or American/Filipinos, or Filipinos, or Americans. That memory contains our cultural and psychic genealogy; wherever in the world we live.

What do we know about ourselves? Asked to define a Filipino, a television panelist replied, "The Filipino is a mix." Pressed for detail, the rest of the answer came, "We smile a lot. Other Asians don't."

Something deeper than that has to define us, or we might as well be absent from history; our history, the world's history. What about Filipino values? What do we value? To what do we, as a people pay our respect? When Franz Arcellana died last year, the passing of the National Artist was barely noted by the media obsessed with the doings of social and political celebrities. I have just been invited to San Diego to give a talk. With the invitation came a kind of caution that they have been sponsoring mostly beauty contests. I said yes, then immediately got scared. How do I compete with beauty pageants? They're ceremonies of life as are fiestas; but if that's all that defines us, we are rightly trivialized by the society in which we live.

We Are Becoming More Aware of Ourselves

Awareness of who we are allows us to put our own face and heart onto the statistics about us in America, because history happens, not so much in any particular place and time, as in the consciousness which we carry with us wherever we live. Those inherited memories allow the past to "keep unfolding in our lives," giving us a sense of who we are, wherever we are, enabling us to step out from the margins into a position of equality—emotionally and psychologically, economically and politically.

Fortunately, historical consciousness is growing among us. More and more of us are seriously exploring our roots. Instead of isolating us, this helps us understand and live fully our Filipino-American experience in America. This is not a question of loyalty; only of accepting ourselves as we are, of fighting harder for our rightful share of history in America.

Other movements attempt to preserve the meaningful past and relate it to the present. The vision and mission of Kamalaysaysayan groups. (*malay* as consciousness, *saysay* as history) is to know our history and discover what is innate (*likas*) in the Filipino way of seeing and being. Last July 7, in Quiapo, an assembly (Bagong-Sigla) marked the anniversary of the founding of the KKK: Kataastaasang Kagalanggalangang Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan, (Higest, Most Honorable Association of the Nation's Children). The movement is a "broad network seeking to apply the lessons of history to contemporary challenges."

Among the issues tackled by the Sangandaan Conference organized by UP and SFSU faculty this past summer was how to "return to our community." Are we separate communities in America as well as in the Philippines—unable to understand/relate to each other because we have several languages and dialects, interests and traditions? Are we one people despite this, language not being the only means to communicate values and insights. How do we stay one?

The FIND conference in Baltimore, in August, saw some 500 Filipino-American university students meeting to find ways of learning about their heritage. Empowerment through knowledge will enable them to initiate actions that will shape public opinion and influence policy; enable them to become part of the culture in America with their own values intact.

Balikbayan study groups offer field trips in the Philippines, lectures and language classes; a kind of immersion trip with which to offset rootlessness in America.

The Philippines can also be visited through books. Since literature reflects upon what happens in history, literature is one way of knowing the Philippines, not just *about* the Philippines. In the preface to *Common Continent*, Franz Arcellana wrote: "stories must first be read as information, essential information, then as knowledge, which is power, which empowerment leads to wisdom...."

Our literature can serve as the civics and history text the lack of which in schools has resulted in conscienceless societies, possessing no knowledge of right or wrong, pushing headlong toward corruption, and aimlessness.

Sadly, our treasury of books is badly depleted. What survives of pre-Spanish writings (inscribed mostly on bamboo and leaves) were largely destroyed in the belief that they were not valuable; that the Filipino was a *tabula rasa* on which a new and different culture could/should be imposed. Some survive in Spanish monasteries, in a language we no longer use. During the Japanese Occupation, NVM Gonzalez remembered seeing Japanese soldiers throwing down books through the windows of the National Library to bonfires on the ground. Other books have succumbed to neglect. In the Bilibid Prison where documents were archived after WWII, there were shelves and shelves of damaged material, mutilated by termites, flood, and indifference.

In Philippine bookstores today, books by and about us are segregated in back shelves labeled *Filipiniana*, treated as esoterica, irrelevant despite the fact that they can save us from extinction. Felice Santa Maria noted that the desire for egalitarianism/basic education has produced an indifference to the Filipino experience/past with nothing worthwhile offered in exchange.

All these attempts and efforts to become more aware of ourselves—*pagbabalik loob sa kaibuturan*—will enable us to bring ourselves and our culture into the mainstream in America. Movements to understand Filipino values and beliefs lead us to an understanding of the importance, for example, of having control of our bodies, helps us deal with mail-order

brides and porn sites about Pinays. They help us recover the right not to be judged by outsiders who may not understand our thought processes or the moral choices we navigate.

As a result of this resurgence of consciousness, a new Manilatown is being planned to bring back the Filipino community that has been in San Francisco since the 1920s, a community which was gravely reduced in the 70s when, in the interest of urban development, structures like the International Hotel were razed. A new International Hotel is now planned to rise in its original location.

Literature as Memory: Including Ourselves in History

When we were young, at night, our grandmother—Nanay—told us stories of the Revolution against Spain, of the Philippine-American War through which she lived, the prelude and slow ending of upheavals, mourning those who were never seen again. Running across battlefields, caught in crossfires, she recounted being separated from their food supply, and for days surviving on the water in the ricefields where dead frogs floated.

She intuited that literature is one way of including ourselves in history—our history and the history of the world; of giving us permanence and continuity. Almost always, before we drifted off into sleep, Nanay would say, "Someone should write about this. These things should be remembered."

Much much later, I realized that, through her stories, Nanay was reflecting on her life, even as she was reliving what happened. And her admonition to write about what happened to us, though I did not realize it until much later, is what made me a writer. For a long time, as a trained lawyer, I was ashamed of what people, especially classmates at UP Law, called "wasting my education on just writing."

This year, a Canadian classmate wrote to remind me to answer the questionnaire for the *Directory of Twenty Years of Women at Harvard Law*. I had tossed it aside, not wishing to relive years of doubts about the worth of writing; but since she, from her busy practice, had taken the time to prompt me, I filled the blanks, writing a rather long piece which, to my surprise, was printed in its entirety; along with those of such as Sandra

Day O'Connor. I wrote that at Harvard Law I had two memorable experiences. One was having Roscoe Pound hold open for me the lower doors of Langdell Hall; the other was coming upon materials on the Philippines in the subbasement of Widener library, shelves of negative/condescending/patronizing observations. In anger I decided to refute them with a novel because the shattering experiences of war and revolution need a novel to present the intensity and depth of the experience which leaves internal scars. Besides, I thought, essays are likely to be shelved in archives, whereas a novel might get a few readers at least.

Six years after graduating from Harvard Law, all that time conflicted about writing—*The Peninsulars* was a draft manuscript. I would have gone on rewriting had not NVM Gonzalez told me to stop; and himself brought the manuscript to Bookmark. That was my first; followed by others after long intervals—largely because I had to convince myself with each book that I had to write it—when I discovered other periods in the Philippine history that needed a novel to bring out the depth of the experience we had endured. Then followed *The Three-Corned Sun* about the 1896 Revolution against Spain; until some forty years later—interrupted by novels set in the Martial Law years—*The Stranded Whale* was finished. I wrote it not to fight over again the Philippine-American War of 1899, but to understand it, to figure out the continuing irritants in the Philippine-American relationships.

Novels as a Response to History's Silence

Awed by the breadth and violence of forces that sweep over whole peoples and continents, changing boundaries both physical and psychological, we take history as absolute truth. But suppose official history is a trap, a flawed memory?

Where it is, literature can provide the truer picture with proper depth. In literature's interweaving of our lives—we gain a critical awareness of the truth sometimes buried or misplaced in history, Jose Rizal's novels, the *Noli me tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* did that for the Spanish period by depicting the exploitation and oppression we suffered.

Literature can be a cry for justice. Consider the poems inscribed on the walls of Angel Island where immigrants to California were kept in

isolation, not understanding the reason for their imprisonment; not knowing how long they were to remain there.

Consider the importance of Carlos Bulosan's affirmation of the Filipino at a time in America when they were segregated and discriminated against, of Stevan Javellana's novel about the brutal Japanese Occupation. Their novels should daunt anyone intent on revising history to their own purpose. An American historian, just back from a research grant from Japan, declared that Japan never planned to invade the Philippines and make it part of Japan's Co-Prosperty Sphere.

Besides, history needs novels to explore the full dimensions of the human struggle, the suffering of individuals on all sides, in the hope of helping countries and leaders, in the future, to make right decisions for the right reasons.

Historical novels are challenging. A University of Connecticut student said that *The Stranded Whale* was a hard read. Entering into the experience of a historical novel cannot be done hurriedly, in one sitting. It has to be read at the pace that allows one to imagine oneself in the pages of the book being read. Full attention has to be paid so one's consciousness is open to what is being transmitted.

I told the student that *The Stranded Whale* was a hard write; whenever I stopped writing for any reason—I found a version dated 1969—I had to start over again, retyping on an old typewriter that kept losing its keys. And it was painful for me to write—I was going through the upheavals myself—so that many times I want to give up writing.

When I am most tempted to give up, I remember that in our personal and national history, there are people who have lived with dignity and honor and courage—"Filipino" is not another word for corruption; but could be/could again be the other word for integrity—and I want, like my grandmother, to have the whole truth remembered so my children and their immediate generations will know we can be proud of ourselves.

Literature: Our Common Memory and Community

We are more complex than history remembers. Because literature is about personal memory, in a very real sense it is our continuity within the world. We live in our literature, those stories of ourselves, after we die.

Literature makes the past a present experience for us. Maria Teresa Martinez Sicat wrote that literature is the treasure map through which to discover who we are, to recover what we have been in the past—a people capable of fulfilling the future. It charts lives long gone from our immediate memory which have, nevertheless, imprinted in us attitudes, intuitions, and insights, longings and dreams; lives embedded in our flesh as certainly as genes; lives from whom come our national character and values—wherever we live—which, in turn, we will pass on to future generations through the way we live, the decisions we make today.

Robby Kwan Laurel said, “probing through the experiences that we have as a nation will not do without literature as part of our lives...making us understand ourselves as Filipino in a world of contradictions and conflagrations. In an atmosphere of helplessness...a good book...is the only refuge we have...You must read...”

Literature is also a map of our soul and spirit. Our national soul preserves the character of our wisdom and insights as a people. Spain's generation of 1898 traced their defeat in the Spanish-American War to the loss, temporarily, of their *alma vida*.

The temporary loss of our national soul might be the cause of our despair today. Impeachment of a chief justice in Manila, following imprisonment of a previous president for Plunder! Where else are we headed? I have been getting emails asking for prayers for the Philippines. A nephew said, “The child is not yet born who will free us from politicians.” During Martial Law, people said, “The child is still in short pants, who will free us from Marcos?”

A young Korean student wrote that after the Korean War which devastated his country, they envied the Philippines. He sees the reason for dramatic resurgence—“We have corrupt leaders, too,” he said—in their love for their country, even when living abroad. “We cry for our country,”

he said, and asks us, "Do you cry for your country?" Some of us can answer, Yes....But how many?

It is not corruption from above that, in the likes of Marcos and Estrada, has brought the Philippines to the bottom of the list of Southeast Asia nations. Every country has corrupt leaders. It is when corruption becomes a large part of the national character, primary occupation, that a country loses its soul; wastes the sacrifices of the past...

Do we cry for the Philippines? In the memory which history and literature keeps for us—one *refining* the truth which the other *defines*—we have the antidote to despair about the Philippines today.

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