

# From Allies to “It’s Complicated”: Toward an Ambivalent and Discursive Confrontation of America in Three Filipino Short Stories

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The stance of the anarchist is much luminous, yet for one trapped in the belly of the beast, that heretical strain will do.

—Edel Garcellano, from “Extra Memo”

More than twenty years after the United States’ largest overseas naval base was closed in Subic Bay, two US AV-8B Harrier attack aircraft today sit on the quiet flight deck of the docked USS Bonhomme Richard amphibious assault ship.<sup>1</sup> Without the clarity of war and the concrete mandate of a military base, both Manila and Washington are careful not to ascribe strategic importance to this configuration. Pundits, however, are quick to state the obvious: in the wake of China’s unprecedented rise in influence, the Philippines, in its location, in its unbroken “alliance” with the US, is once again a vital square in the global chess game that the world’s lone superpower has been playing since the wake of World War II.

From military stratagem, this neocolonialist dynamic is easily transferable to culture and the arts, in general, and literature, in particular. Contemporary “perceptual frameworks,” seen through the lens of literature, are often a reliable repository of such an ambiguous reality (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1995, 1). More than economic and political control, the locus of the stranglehold of the former colonial power had always been in the arena of culture and “whole spheres of Third World social life” (Hadjor quoted in San Juan 2000, 66).

As in all postcolonial societies, therefore, E. Vallado Daroy writes, it is not simply the language of the imperial center which has the greatest effect on the subsequent discourse, but “the writing itself ... the presence or absence of writing” (1993, 95). Transcription—the mere act of “speaking” and, in the case of the Philippines, appropriating English to articulate our aspirations and experiences—has long been seen as an act of the colony “writing back.” Critics have sought to qualify this wide net by stressing on the requirement to “foreground ... the tension” with the colonial power and willfully “correct or undo Western hegemony” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1995, 1; Gugelberger quoted in San Juan 2000, 65). And so any literary output in English hereabouts—from “Dead Stars” all the way to the host of stories being born today in classrooms and workshops and lonely desktops—can potentially be a strike, no matter how flimsy or “un-strategized,” at the imperial center, provided they perform the sort of “newfound power” which Arif Dirlik has posited as the distinction of postcolonial discourse over the much-banded about and less triumphalist “agony over identity” (1997, 302).

The stories “Under the Dinosaur” by Jose Dalisay, “White Boy” by Lilledeshan Bose, and “The Apollo Centennial” by Gregorio Brillantes all revisit this “writing back” in varied and invariably potent fashion. They trace the ambivalent history of US-Philippine relations, transitioning from simple colonizer-subject to more complex models fraught with the visible/invisible paradox of the neocolonialist apparatus. New themes in postcolonial studies, writes Dirlik, are rooted in “a new world situation ... that have disorganized earlier conceptualizations and effectively disabused early binaries, such as colonizer/colonized, First World/Third World, and West and the Rest” (1997, 295). This, of course, runs consonant with the fundamental imperative of dismantling all foundational historiography, in general, and Eurocentric master narratives, in particular (1997, 298).

With this reconfiguration in mind, this paper will seek to examine how—which is to say in concept and formalistically—the three stories confront the always germane postcolonial question by privileging discourse and exercising an acute self-awareness, how these gestures necessarily move away from the mimetic or representational mode of the classic realist short story that had long been the canonical preference in the country, and how they make use of traditional fictive elements in brilliant new ways. Concretely, there are clear (and pedagogically strategic) gradations at work here: from realism in the Dalisay story to the essayistic mode in the Bose story and the speculative

strain in the Brillantes piece—three modes of engagement that captivate even as they, to my mind, critique.

### **Discursive Realism in Jose Dalisay's "Under the Dinosaur"**

In "Under the Dinosaur" (1992), a realist story by Jose Dalisay, American Norman Reilly returns to the fictional island of Calinog in the Philippines as part of a contingent of retired World War II veterans. He remembers "landing" on the same island during "liberation" when, finding himself separated from his battalion, he survived on coconuts for days. Returning to Calinog decades later as tourists, they realize that much has changed: there are no more Japanese forces to neutralize and the forested town of a few huts is now a "city."

More than this return, "Under the Dinosaurs" is at its core a typical domestic story; in the foreground is an unhappy marriage between a philandering husband and a long-suffering wife, seen through the eyes of the outsider (Norman) who is allowed glimpses into their lives. Concurrently, it is also a political narrative, featuring feudal politicians whose members are willing to kill family members in order to guarantee their hold on power. Finally, it is a historical saga, as we are given, through Norman's recollections, a vivid account of how US forces liberated the islands during the war, and how the lives of these soldiers and officers turned out after their tour of duty.

It is in the comingling of the three where the story gains potency. As early as in the opening scene, for instance, we already find its seemingly strategic attempt at negotiating history by invoking it in collision with the present. Off the cuff this becomes evident in the transformation of the story's central image. The coconut, which Norman buys as a pampered tourist, had, decades ago during the war, provided him a lifeline. The effect that the author is going for here is clearly nostalgia and defamiliarization. We realize then that the story will consciously deal with changes across time; how, to cite, things become charged with different meanings at different points in one's (and the country's) history. On the other hand, as the narrative moves forward, we realize by contrast that what Norman thinks of the island he was "liberating" as a combatant virtually remained unchanged even when, decades later, it is supposedly "free" (but more on this later).

The very choice here of a main character with such a background is therefore central. It has made possible the incursion of history in the present's unfolding and guarantee that the invocation is organic to the narrative.

Moreover, making Norman (which smacks of allusions to Normandy, France, the site of the most iconic landing during World War II) part of the American military establishment simplifies the gap between the literal and the symbolic. His views, to cite, regarding the affirmatively crucial role of the US in the “birthing” of the Philippines is doubtless shared by the neo/colonial establishment. America, to Norman, is the historical and political enabler of the Filipino nation. In the persona’s hard-edged voice, a version of this “making” is revealed in an exasperated rant to a fellow veteran:

“I am serious. Don’t you realize we made this place, this moment, possible? We created this—this landing spot in the future, this energy.” I punted an imaginary football two hundred yards into the sea. (Dalisy 1992, 124)

This interpretation—that the Philippines was America’s “making”—is something that recurs throughout the story. Still talking to the same fellow veteran, who is apprehensive over rumors of a communist threat in the island, Norman asks, “Who really cares about this island anyway, except the folks who climb trees and eat nuts because their lives depend on it?” The person—named Billybob—answers, “The Japanese did. Then we did,” to which Norman angrily replies, “Well—not anymore! We’re not here because we care about the place, we’re here because of what *we* did in, to, for the place” (1992, 126). This “tactical omission” is of course common in master-slave narratives, in how history is written, and in whose point of view. Surely, Dalisy, a Filipino author, cites this line of thinking with tongue-in-cheek censure, and it is inevitable for a commentary like this to not be self-reflexive. Filtered through an outsider—a proxy for the Empire—the story is able to be self-ironic and discursive, defamiliarizing historicist and contentious remarks (not to mention otherwise humdrum Filipino things, like coconuts for sale at a roadside shack or the *tinikling* dance). Clearly, there is a case here of looking in the mirror, for the Filipino author and reader both.

Such self-consciousness and self-awareness are achieved via careful juxtaposition not just of a vividly constructed American character and a rustic, “indigenous” Philippine setting, but plot points and dialogue that necessitate the discursiveness, that make the confrontation inevitable. This football-loving, deer-hunting deli owner from Milwaukee lands on an island in the middle of nowhere, goes on a tour of the island, and eventually gets entangled with a local politico-domestic drama. The hybrid nature of “Under the Dinosaurs”—that it tells a story but also problematizes across subjects—is

made possible by using a narrator who is a participant in a pertinent historical event and therefore has a stake in its implications. By maintaining the stark difference between the persona and his milieu, both stand out. When you add history into the fray (which is necessary since what occasions the narrative is a pointedly historical exercise), the tapestry becomes even richer.

In fact, here and there we hear a naked commentary on controversial subjects, like the glorification of Douglas MacArthur (eponymous with one of the main characters) and the memorializing of the war. Norman complains that frontliners do not get enough credit in the narrative of history, and later, when his tour group gets to a mountain peak that had been strategically important in the landing, he is offended to find paper scrolls with Japanese characters at the site.

Of course, all these elements are but typical tools in any fictionist's disposal, and all stories are arguably discursive one way or another. What we are showing is how mimesis can gesture toward outright discursiveness, and that this intrusion of politics and history, because of the author's masterful use of voice and convincing characterization, is an achievement rather than a liability.<sup>2</sup>

That being said, the family saga in "Under the Dinosaurs," against which these grand things are set, is distinctly Filipino, possibly replicable in dozens of towns and municipalities all over the archipelago. The characters here—from the young, privileged Macky to the meek but also fierce wife Annette, from the local politicians to the kowtowing police officers—are mainstays of Philippine fiction, acting in ways that are motivated by classic Filipino tropes: honor and family, money and survival, the search for happiness.

### **Genre Ambivalence in Lilledeshan Bose's "White Boy"**

"White Boy" (2002) by Lilledeshan Bose is a second-person narrative about a doomed interracial affair. It explores, by way of a short arc, the contradictions inherent in these types of relationships. Divided into three "movements," two unnamed characters, a Filipina and a Caucasian man, engage in a brief and initially casual affair, surmounting cultural differences at first until things go awry and he "lose[s] the way to [her] empire" and she reels from "love from [his] far-flung arm" (Bose 2002, 34–35).

Brief and stark, its confrontation of the issue of race is headlong and straightforward. The title alone—"White Boy"—is unapologetically racist, a conflation that would be at work throughout the story, as she surmises that

“He is British, or Swiss, or Australian” (2002, 34). Both characters in fact are guilty of hasty generalizations, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, sometimes grave, and, in the long run, something that triggers the relationship’s demise:

Foreigners who hang out by the beach are “unclean,” your dad said once ... You worry about HIV, about herpes, the three kinds of hepatitis ... You are used to Filipino boys ... But this boy is tall and thin and stoops down to breathe in the top of your head. “You smell like coconuts and sunlight, like the beach,” he says. Yet he doesn’t walk on the danger side, does not carry your bag, is not at your beck and call. (2002, 34)

The relationship suffers from others things such as stigma, the disapproval of loved ones, and, finally, a realization that the two have, in fact, very little in common to start with. The affair progresses alongside these seemingly antagonistic strains. As material and theme, interracial relationships, especially between those who belong to the global north and south, are always burdened by history. Most realist stories choose to render the innocent, contemporary symptoms of such contradictions, mostly in the area of culture, such as dating rituals, stereotypes, and gender roles (which “White Boy” also does). The invocation of politics and history is hardly ever done, something that this story is able to do because of its essayist method and style, on one hand, and opinionated persona, on the other.

The latter is not so revolutionary. As in “Under the Dinosaurs,” the contradictions in “White Boy” are fleshed out by a persona who we realize from the get-go is someone who is politically aware and highly self-conscious. “You are a feminist,” she remarks, referring to herself, “you know postcolonial theory ... Would your UP professors shake their heads and advise you to reread Tejeros and Sonny San Juan?”

Clearly, self-reflexivity is key, in characterization and story both.

Yet unlike how “Under the Dinosaurs” works, the essayist treatment of “White Boy” adds value to how highly self-reflexive characterization functions in a realist story. Here, the junction between the personal and the political is propelled by a distinctively argumentative, persuasive voice, its unconventional form and uneasy categorization. “White Boy” is divided into sections by intrusive subheads. It uses unnamed characters that willingly engage the story’s subtext, goaded by an authorial voice that sometimes tells rather than shows. It is filled with stereotypes, which is the grammar of the allegory, and deploys broad strokes rather than “slices of life.” As a result, it teeters between fiction and essay, making the story’s “statement” on race

unmistakable, on one hand, and increasing its meta-quality, on the other (the discourse, however, never fully takes over the narrative, which would have meant failure, first and foremost, as fiction).

This high level of discursiveness is achieved in the way “White Boy” proceeds like an argument, which realism typically admonishes to cloak under fictive devices. For instance, the two meet when the Caucasian man remarks, “White colonizers are the best thing that happened to Asia,” an undisguised commentary of such immense political load that is undercut when the persona continues, “You decide that he is kidding; after all, he has sad eyes.” Politically charged and jargon-heavy phrases like “imperialist jokes,” “dependent territory,” and “benevolent assimilators” are used in the context of the private, reconfiguring their meaning and making them resonate on a deeper level. “Empire,” most notably, is intimate and therefore in-depth, in the same manner that the postcolonial condition impinges on the minutiae and the quotidian.

At first the persona attempts to overlook and battle the glaring antagonisms. She levels racist accusations against her white partner in the same way that she readies herself for the barrage of complaints about the Philippines. “[Here] everything is low quality, everything is expensive, everyone wants a handout ... Every other sentence of his starts out with ‘In my country, things work because ...’”<sup>3</sup> In conclusion, the persona admits, “The truth is, you have mutual disdain” (35).

To be sure there are more “essayist” short stories out there, which take the forms of scientific documents, artifacts, and the like in really blurring the line between genres. What is being pointed out here is how realism can accommodate, by way of voice, characterization, and method, the “attack” of the essay in a story like “White Boy.” Ambivalent both in form and subject but clearheaded and assertive in its stance, its “power” lies in the way it charts the liminal space between politics and the self, on one hand, and genres, on the other.

### **The Subversive Speculative Spirit in Gregorio Brillantes’s “The Apollo Centennial”**

Set in 2069, a hundred years after man first set foot on the moon, “The Apollo Centennial” (1980) is a futuristic piece by Gregorio Brillantes that many call the precursor of the “speculative” strain in Philippine fiction (Alfar quoted in De Vera 2007). From a remote barrio in Tarlac, everyman Arcadio

Nagbuya takes his two sons, and, along with their teacher Mr. Balaoing, goes to see the commemoration of the Apollo Centennial in the city. It is by no means an easy journey, as they transfer from raft to a dilapidated bus to reach the exhibition. At the plaza, they are wowed by the dome-like structure that resembled “a giant egg half-buried in the earth” which housed things like replicas of launch vehicles and life-size dummies of astronauts (Brillantes 1980, 74). At 5 p.m., Arcadio and his boys return to their town. After crossing the river, he meets a cousin who is part of an underground resistant movement, and the story closes with the image of the moon, shaped like a “sharp-pointed sickle in the eastern sky,” alluding to the group’s communist orientation (80).

The rubric “speculative,” “non-realist,” or “fantastic,” under which futuristic fiction and alternative history fall, has long been seen as a genre replete with potential for subversion. By veering away from the mimesis of realism, it takes its imaginative potential a step further. After all, the ability to transform reality necessitates, first and foremost, an acute awareness of it. This awareness, so evident in “The Apollo Centennial,” undergirds all well-“strategized” fiction under this umbrella: that reality is this way and here is an alternate version of seeing it, telling it:

Perhaps [its] most important difference [to realist fiction] is one of degree. While all fiction defamiliarizes the “real,” the very *raison d’être* of fantastic fiction is its existence in contrast to the “real.” ... Occasionally, they confirm the official worldview, even celebrate it. More frequently, their relationship is oppositional ... They resist it, transgress it, and ultimately attempt explicitly to subvert it. (Napier 1996, 6)

What is most striking in “The Apollo Centennial” is the commentary that is achieved by a careful juxtaposition of the “real” and the “imagined” in the story’s “worlding.” For one, the “real” Apollo landing is set vis-à-vis the fictional centennial commemoration, pushing further the already huge symbolic potential of the historical lunar landing, which in 1969 placed the US in an enviable leadership position. Everything departs from there. Outside the big dome in the story, a band’s playlist transitions from Kapampangan folk song “Pamulinawen” into “Deep in the Heart of Texas.” The bus-riding kids, in crude English, sing the Apollo Hymn (“Prom the launch pad at Kennedy, Neil Armstrong bentured porth por hu-man-ity ...”). A rotunda in the city has a headless statue named the Last President. The language that the characters speak is a hybrid: Tagilocan, which seems to be an imposition



of the current dispensation. Every now and then, an American “High Commissioner” addresses the crowd in the plaza via a wide screen.

Always, there is an interplay between the happily familiar and the vaguely apocalyptic. Published in 1980, while the country was under Martial Law, the result of these interactions is chilling, and the message is clear. Speculative fiction, therefore, since it is necessary conceptual, is necessarily subversive, painting, in this case, the “official worldview” in terrible, dystopic fashion.

The defamiliarization at work here then is clearly self-conscious, too, with an obvious reference to, among others, transportation infrastructure. It has been a century since the US space program had sent a man to outer space. By contrast, Filipinos still travel in poorly constructed rafts and rickety buses (that the story dwells on the journey to the exhibition is telling). The vivid exposition of the scene in the bus to the city is reminiscent of many a bus trip in the Philippine countryside today:

Behind the last bench and occupying the rest of the vehicle is a storage compartment, now filled to the roof with sacks of charcoal, bundles of kakawati firewood, vegetable crates, and chicken cages. On the platform jutting out from the rear of the compartment are piled more chicken cages, a goat with hostile bloodshot eyes, and three pigs grunting passively, bound for the slaughterhouse in the city. (Brillantes 1980, 71)

The story’s defamiliarization project—otherwise typical of any mimetic undertaking—gains another layer in the story’s classification as “speculative” or “alternative history.”

The field of operation here is history and, by extension, time, on which postcolonial theory has ample annotation. Whether it is hybridity, syncretism, or multidimensional time, various propositions of “decentering history” and “resist[ing] all ... and temporal teleology” had been put forth (Dirlik 1997, 298). And so any alternative retelling of history is a critique of the “official” version (which is always contingent on the dominant power structure) or at the very least an alternative way to make sense of it. Dirlik has followed this up with a caveat on capitalism as a foundational category in the fixing of the colony—of the Other—as monolith subject in the history of the center. The implied critique of a US-backed fascist regime in “The Apollo Centennial” invokes, too, at least in my mind, the capitalist global order precipitated by America’s ascent after her Cold War victory.

Finally, what, indeed, can be more telling of a conceptual rendering of America than the absence of any American characters in “The Apollo Centennial”? From the naïve war veteran in “Under the Dinosaurs” to the nameless lover in “White Boy,” America in the first two narratives is represented more or less by an entity, a metaphor, a discourse. In “The Apollo Centennial,” America is the story’s premise, the unhappy occasion, the meta-text, which the story, by exposing it, pushes readers to recognize, on one hand, and, on the other, to challenge.

There is crucial interaction between thematic and formal in how these stories confront the idea of America in their own ways. What is noteworthy in these stories, as this paper has shown, is how traditional fictive elements can resonate much more if used deliberately and consciously, how “newfound power” can be exercised not just in rehashing the same forms but in attempting new ones. The strategy predictably drifts away from realism (which is not to say that mimesis cannot achieve what these stories do), and the level of discursiveness, self-irony, and ambivalence increases with the increasing complication of the relationship.

All this, of course, is but a reiteration of the postcolonial strategy as being a highly justified form of contention. Often its sheer scale is cited as reason enough—more than three-quarters of the global population today have had their lives shaped by the colonial experience—although critic Isagani Cruz has cautioned that since the country is “twice removed from the Empire,” postcolonial discourse cannot fully explain its “Americanization” (Cruz 2006). But isn’t modern colonialism differentiated by, other than the scale and scope and systematization, its effect on the colonized, on “the detail, and not just the large outlines of life?” (Said 1990, 71). Worse, in the Philippines, the erasure appears to be complicit, where history and institutions have long “perpetuated stereotype images of the American liberator, that gave long life to ... a mechanism that to this day ensures long life for images and attitudes that [had been] implanted in the consciousness of the Filipino” (Lumbera 1999). Postcolonial discourse, writes Homi Bhabha, is therefore a “liberatory discursive strategy” (1992, 444). To intently contribute to the nation’s literary conversation in this regard is in itself an admirable venture.

In the end, as early binaries are disabused even as old unequal systems persist, these stories demonstrate the agency of the Filipino short story writer in English: studiedly appropriating the quintessentially American genre, and

portraying and commenting on the ongoing negotiation to find, as is the point of all emancipatory literature, opportunities for subversion.

## Endnotes

1. Another round of joint military exercises began in October 2012, amid rising tension in the West Philippine Sea (South China Sea) over disputed territory.

2. When this story was written during the late 1980s (in the US, no less, while Dalisay was completing his PhD), US-Philippine relations were tense. Following the downfall of the US-backed dictatorship of Marcos, an upsurge in nationalist sentiment would lead to the closing of the US Naval Base in Subic Bay in 1992, a major thorn in the usually peaceful relationship. We see in the story a rethinking of a previously monolithic dependence by the Philippines on the US, a line that would be pursued in the coming years, complicating the relationship further.

3. To assume that the romantic interest here is American is to privilege the same conflation that the story chooses. On the other, a close reading of the rendered antagonisms will fall flat if he is assumed to be of any other nationality; no other colonial power, perhaps with the exception of Spain, has influenced “the detail, and not just the large outlines of life” in twentieth century Philippines.

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