QUE(E)RYING THE NATION, THE BAKLA SPEAK*

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What upheaval would fall upon men if the *bakla* think the nation? What happens if one pictures the *bakla* as terrible angels of history whose gaudily made-up faces vacillate between the past and the future? What if the new angels hate permanence, puke at the thought of dead fathers, and see a resplendent wholeness in things crushed? No storm that blows from Paradise is strong enough to catch their wings with such violence because the impenitent angels closed its gates when they left. What can men like Walter Benjamin really say?[1]

I write/speak as a *bakla, bayot, agi, bading,* gay, queer, homosexual, bisexual, sinner, demon-sent epidemic, or however one calls it — no matter. I write/speak as such because it is one thing that is exigent, contingent, and ultimately experiential to me. Exigent because much of the economy of my desire is negotiated under such sign: *bakla.* To me, *bakla* as a consciousness is a normative mode that frames and regulates being

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and becoming. It becomes more and more exigent then, to ground the *bakla* in both theory and practice as a force that wills to interrogate, subvert, and change. In other words, as a theory that practices and a practice that theorizes. The contingency of *kabaklaan* (male homosexuality), however, lies in its ability to engage varied specificities that circumfuse such identity. To be a *bakla,* therefore, is necessarily to conduct a dialogic encounter that traverses, through destabilization, the mutually belligerent intersections of gender, class, power, and ideology. What I propose here is a notion similar to antagonism found in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). They argue that in advanced countries, the loci of antagonisms become the points where multiple democratic struggles annihilate the possibility of structuring two antagonistic zones: the people and the dominant bloc. Put differently, the proliferation of identitarian politics in struggles inevitably results in the splintering of social movements. Feminism, for example, has branched out into many enterprises that go by myriad names: eco-feminism, materialist feminism, black feminism, Third World feminism, Caribbean feminism *ad infinitum.* In what may be deemed specific to Third World countries like the Philippines, it can be deduced from Laclau and Mouffe's argument that the multiplicity of identity-claim or rights-oriented movements may be characteristic of decolonized territories (Beverly 1997). Thus the heterogeneity of struggles present in a decolonized space *ideally* follows a cumulative dialectic: *baklang parlorista* and Makati gay urban professionals and academics and lesbians and New People's Army and Moro secessionists and National Democratic Front and comfort women and sexually molested children and prostitutes *ad infinitum* (Cf. Beverly 1997: 42–43). This summative logic of multiplicity is fundamental to what

Laclau and Mouffe call "radical and plural democracy" — the optimization of new social movements until they become irreconcilable "with the structural matrix of capitalist hegemony and the functional relation of the state with capitalist interests" (Beverly 1997: 45). Laclau and Mouffe's summative dialectic is close to the logic of "serialization" which Sartre discussed in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* where the difference and value-claims of the "one" can only be made in a dialectic relation with the "other" (*Ibid.*).

Interestingly, Laclau and Mouffe define antagonism as "the presence of an other who prevents me from being totally myself" (*op. cit.*: 125). Laclau and Mouffe differentiate between contradiction and antagonism, suggesting that the former be exclusively constrained to disunity between two completed or fully structured paradigms. Laclau and Mouffe outline the disjunction as follows: "The [antagonistic] relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution" (*Ibid.*). Laclau and Mouffe assert that "if each struggle transforms the moment of its specificity into an absolute principle of identity, the set of *these struggles can only be conceived of as an absolute system of differences, this system is. . . a closed totality*" (my italics; *Ibid.*: 182). As Slavoj Zizek explains, the impossibility of constituting a totality is made possible by the "[prevention of] the other from achieving its identity with itself, to become what it really is" (1987: 251). Zizek elaborates further that the same is true with sexual antagonism claiming that "patriarchal oppression is necessarily filled out by the illusion that afterwards, when patriarchal oppression is abolished, women will finally achieve their full identity with themselves, [and] realize their human potentials" (1987: 251). On the contrary, I am not wont to share Laclau and Mouffe's idea of the improbability of constituting the total,

and exceedingly disagree with Zizeks' condescension — so typically a beloved past time of phallocrats — of the feminist movement's project as mere "illusion." To suit my intention, I would rather suggest that such "impossibility" be reconfigured as a suspended moment whose contingency is always future-oriented rather than think of it as an eternal banishment from whatever project or agenda a movement may have. The motor-drive for the possibility of a social project, therefore, lies in its imagined impossibility; a forward-looking desire for the ultimate constitution of an identity. Laclau and Mouffe's concept of antagonism is certainly useful. The way I re-read antagonism, it, foremost of all, creates the conditions within which reciprocally belligerent forces clash and transform into a strategically transacted synthesis, or at least, a glimmering specter of a final suture. Such antagonistic disruption is crucial in attempting to constitute the specificities of *kabaklaan* against another so that what forestalls the realization of the *bakla* of their identities is their antagonism with the *"totoong lalake"* who act as the constitutive outside. In line with my earlier proposition that *bakla* and *kabaklaan* be theorized as a politics, a movement with a manifest project for change, I suggest that the *bakla* as antagonistic forces be aligned against fully constituted yet contentious and contestable paradigms, say nation and nation-ness. Is it possible then, to think of nation, as well as nationalism, as the constitutive outside of sexuality? Is the path to deconstructing the nation and its attendant presuppositions by way of devising antagonistic relationships among the *bakla,* nation, and nation-ness? Do the *bakla* need to antagonistically traverse the axes of class, power, and ideology in order to destabilize the liminal marginalities that fictively exist among them? Significantly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1992) proposes in "Nationalisms and Sexualities

in the Age of Wilde" a construction of a set of equivalences. Suggesting

> that the mutual interrepresentations of emerging national and sexual definitions must be looked for at no less a level of complexity for other important figures as well. . . [T]he question of the Other of the national, as of a sexual, identity [is] an irreducibly — and *sometimes* an enablingly — complex one (Sedgwick 1992: 243).

Correspondingly, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1993) attempts a similar configuration of equivalences crucial to understanding how nation and nation-ness produce, in ways that are subterranean, the primacy of heteronormativity. He argues, albeit with a portable disclaimer,

> [T]his is not to say that the ideologues of Black Nationalism in the United States have any unique claim on homophobia. But it is an obsessive motif that runs through the major authors of the Black Aesthetic and the Black Power movements. . . in such a way as to engender a curious subterraneous connection between nationalism and homophobia (1993: 234).

Seemingly the *bakla* as eternal outsiders outside of nation and nationalism, among other things, must create their outsideness, their historylessness, loci of antagonism that may also act as the constitutive outside of nation and nationalism. This, without a doubt, is a double burden for the *bakla;* but the history of historicizing a *bakla*-specific nationalism out of nothingness is not facilely elided just because it looms as a history of fundamental failure.

What Laclau and Mouffe term constitutive outside, however, must not be confused with the binary logic of *loob* (in) and *labas* (out) since a reversal in such binarism is in order. The antagonistic exteriority of Laclau and Mouffe's formulation of the constitutive outside is dialectically productive because within such framework an antagonism

erupts that eventually results in the construction of an identity. The logic of the *labas,* however, is not transformative — for the *labas* is already an end in itself since the source of the transfiguring force resides in the *lalim* (depth) of the *loob.* Within the ambit of the *labas*, the *bakla* as entities whose subjectivities are framed by their externality can never be subversive enough if they do not interrogate the logic of the *loob* where the loci of antagonism are constituted. Thus, situating the *bakla* outside and only outside of nation and nation-ness will only mean never-ending evisceration from these categories within which the *bakla* are nevertheless confined as illegitimate subjectivities that need to be perpetually extinguished because they threaten the chimerical order of heteronormativity. The *bakla* as thought and practice become radical only if these performances are not delimitated within the romantic ideation of silence and solitariness. This is to say that the *bakla* as subjectivities subsumed under the rubric of the *labas* necessarily have to define themselves against the nation and nation-ness's determination of the aphoristic *loob*, meaning the heteronormativist formation of the *loob* of the Filipino nation and nation-ness. Anthropologist.and Filipinist Prospero R. Covar (1995), for example, structures the formational matrix of the Filipino *pagkatao* (humanity) as divided between the *panglabas* (outside) and the *pangloob* (inside). In the domain of the *pangloob*, Covar assigns such notions as *kaluluwa* (soul) and *budhi* (conscience) in the *lalim* of the *pagkatao.* So that whatever may figure in the *mukha* (face), *dibdib* (chest), *tiyan* (belly), and *sikmura* (stomach) reflects the state of the *loob.* Intriguingly, *pagkakaiba* (difference) is considered to be an impertinent thing in the cosmological configuration of the Filipino *pagkatao*. As Covar argues, the Filipino treats the other as *kapwa* (fellow person) and not as "other" that he says, is so characteristic of the West. (To what

then, will the West attribute their alterity besides pointing their pale fingers to the East? To Covar's *kapwa* perhaps?). That, however, is a blanket dismissal of the existence of *kabaklaan* as *pagkakaiba*. That means and only means that the *bakla* and *pagkakaiba* cannot be theorized simply because these are outside of the discursive realm of the Filipino *pagkatao*. As Mouffe proposes,

> There will always be a "constitutive outside," an exterior to the community that is the very condition of its existence... [T]here cannot be a "we" without a "them" and that all forms of consensus are by necessity based on acts of exclusion (1992: 379).

Antonio Gramsci's doctrine is instructive here: that every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational one. But what price do the *bakla* have to pay to learn from a relationship of hegemony, meaning, a relationship between the *bakla* and the constitutive outside that vows to unleash upheavals just to keep the *bakla* eternal outsiders? Doubtless, the violence inflicted upon the *bakla* in the process of such a *sine qua non* of learning is insidious as it is fatally debilitating. It is of importance then that experience is carefully taken into consideration and is made a legitimate concern of critical study. Here the hackneyed doctrine that the personal is political gains a renewed warranty. Clearly, it is imperative to make the invisibility, or more aptly, the visible invisibility of the *bakla* experiences see the light of history. In doing just that, the oppressive, not to mention asphyxiating, shawl of silence is put asunder so that the *bakla* experiences of the everyday free themselves from the domain of memory and the threat of forgetting. What is needed then is a history, a mode of writing that is propitious to alterities and other forms of subject positions that are ceaselessly fluid and incessantly inchoate. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari admonish us that "history is

always written from a sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus, at least a possible one, even when the topic is nomads. What is lacking is a Nomadology, the opposite of history" (Cited in Trumpener 1992: 861).

The Artfulness of Possessing

The long history of the exile of the *bakla* from the histories of their experiences is non-history *par excellence.* (Anachronism, not to mention pun, intended.) The *bakla* as performance and positionality have always been outside of the historical space and time, outside of the Law, outside of the Church, outside of the West and the East, outside of the nation state, outside of writing, outside of discourse, outside of normativity, outside of being and becoming. But the *bakla* refuse to die; they linger as a resistant, vexingly recalcitrant force — as a freezing coldness that enfeebles the hardness of the phallus and all that phallus embodies.

This sense of a roaming resistance resembles Pierre Bourdieu's (1994) idea of the *habitus*, a mediating order of normativity that frames experience and practice and is framed by practice and experience in return. The *habitus* privileges the everyday practices, which are ordinarily obscured by the dominant representational practice. Bordieu contends that the *habitus* appears spontaneous and inescapable because its historical contingency has been overlooked, re-inscribed in the unconscious, and doubly repressed. Significantly, the *habitus* is configured by the exigency of possession, or more accurately, of possessing. In fact, the term's etymology is procured from the verb *habeo*, to have something. In this case, the possession that is denied to the *bakla* is their legitimate claim to historicize their experiences and everyday practices. A recollection of the *bakla* experiences, therefore, is a necessary return to memory, a contiguity that sires familiarity that in

turn sires normativity. Once the *bakla* experience and practice become normative, they can potentially pose a trenchant threat to the fictive legitimacy of heteronormativity.

In Philippine gay discourse, however, there is an apparent irrational fear in making nationalism a thought seemingly distant and obscure part of the *bakla's habitus*. Curiously enough, the Philippine gay discourse I am talking here points to J. Neil Garcia's cosmopolitan discourse that masquerades as a synecdoche of what he defines, in manners that are anachronistic, constitutive of the "Philippine." It is without doubt that I confer upon Garcia my admiration for such courage and sublimity in clearing the macho wilderness that made it possible for me to trace his path and see for myself the difference between looking from within and without the forest. In the meantime, it's time everyone buckled down and returned to business. I know that (gay?) history will be kinder to Garcia but I would rather do away with granting such futile and unpalatable vanity. (Anyway, awards are meant for aging rogues who need to remind themselves, as Edel Garcellano puts it, of their infantile excursion.)

Certainly Garcia is Garcia in Philippine gay criticism; he is practically one of the few if not the one who has made a sustained critical production of texts on Philippine- and gay-specific discourse. It is exactly in that enunciative performance where Garcia stages his subjectivity and from whence he produces his discursivity. With *Philippine Gay Culture: the Last Thirty Years* (1996) and *Ladlad* (1994), among others, not to mention being the first to teach "Gay Literature: Writings, Theory, and Criticism" at the University of the Philippines, Garcia has established himself, positively, as a cornerstone in Philippine gay studies. And there also lies his vulnerability. As a reference of origin of Philippine gay studies, his par-

ticular style of performance creates fissures that render performable his destruction. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautions us that too much affinity with origin leads us to the "grounding of mistakes that enables us to make sense of our lives. But the only way to argue for [an] origin is to look for institutions, inscriptions and then to surmise the mechanics by which such institutions and inscriptions can stage such a particular style of performance" (1992: 781).

Garcia's insistent performance of distancing, for instance, of his self-styled Philippine gay studies from the politics of change invites inquisitiveness. Garcia's witting or unwitting classlessness suits the pseudo-class of the lumpen proletariat who constitute, according to Marx, "the scum, offal, and refuse of all classes":

> Alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaus*, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ-grinders, tinkers, beggars — in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la boheme* (Marx, 1963: 75).

The lumpen, according to Marx, distribute goods that do not have values — the necessary condition for the contingency of a politicized consciousness. Though I am far from suggesting that Garcia's discursive enterprise is without value whatsoever to the domain of Philippine gay studies. It is most peculiar to me however, why Garcia is afraid of the politics of nationalism, specifically Filipino nation-ness, when he, in fact, indiscriminately flaunts the titular Philippine here and there — as in *An Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing (1994)*, or *Essays in Philippine Gay Criticism (1998)*, or *Philippine Gay Culture* (1996). According to Garcia, the Filipino nation "is

an oppressive category for those individuals and social groups who cannot be found within its conceptual parameters" (1998: 95). He adds that, "Gay Studies may even choose to work outside this visibly exclusionary ensign. This implies that while spatially, [the academic practice of] Gay Studies remains grounded in the geopolitical reality that is the Philippines, other corollary assumptions on the Filipino identity and culture may not necessarily be accepted by it" (1998: 96). Thus and thus says Garcia. Tacitly his enunciation bares his discursive mapping of a self-proclaimed Philippine gay studies in the "geopolitical" coordinates of the global — within the international space and time of the cosmopolitan homosexual scenes that bolt out of the closets of Diliman, Detroit, and Dublin — while consciously eliding specific categories of the national. In ways more amusing than absurd, one sees Garcia as an aging pontiff from a papal palace window pontificating *urbi et orbi,* from the city to the world. Such pronouncements readily make Garcia a cosmopolitan, post-national, non-territorial, Philippine, and not Filipino, *bakla.* In "Philippine Gay Studies: Theoretical Notes", for instance, Garcia (1998) draws an irresponsible equation between two universally isolated dynamics of sexual violence and oppression. Saying that a partnership between Philippine and Western gay and lesbian studies is indispensable because the same technologies of oppression are at work in burdening both the Filipino *bakla* and the Western homosexuals (p. 96). Garcia details that "[I]f for [that] reason alone, Philippine Gay Studies will have to maintain close links with Western Gay and Lesbian Studies" (p. 96). Ironically, while Garcia always insists on the specificities of the *bakla* as opposed to the Western construction of the homosexual, he also calls for a close and evidently uncritical connection between Western homosexuals and his self-anointed Philippine

gay studies. A "close link" is not really that bad. Unguarded reliance, however, is. Is this not the reason why Black, African, and Third World feminisms emerged as a counter-discourse, as a corrective to the universalizing tendencies of Anglo-American and heterosexual brand of feminism? Certainly it is dangerous to assume that a modality in oppression exists in specific, mutually opposed realities: what may be a blessing for a Western homosexual may be a damnation for a Third World *bakla*. Further, Garcia claims that the term "Filipino Nation" is coeval with being "Tagalog, propertied, colonial, lowlander, Christian, masculine, and, of course, heterosexual" (p. 96). Though there is nothing new in what Garcia says, I find some of his pronouncements disturbing. Is he himself not "Tagalog," "lowlander," "Catholic," and of course, "propertied" in the loose sense of the word? Do these specificities make him less a Filipino and more a Philippine gay critic? One who brandishes certain cosmopolitanism and who obfuscates radicalism with kitsch? We know that many historians before Garcia have already clarified the naive mystification of Andres Bonifacio's "Katagalogan" as an imagination national in scope and character rather than parochial and ethnocentric. Benedict Anderson reminds us that "communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style they are imagined" (p. 15). Unfortunately for Garcia, he terribly fails to grasp the elementary distinction between nationalist politics and identity politics. And he does not seem to understand the difference between state-apparatus and nation-form. It is nothing short of thoughtless theorizing to totally reduce nationalism into ethnicity because nationalism, as Anderson argues, is a horizontal *esprit de corps* that hinges on the idea of affinity. Perhaps knowing more and more style, as in formal elements of a "good" poem, and less and less history, as in *The Revolt of the*

Masses (Agoncillo 1956), Garcia exposes his lamentable if not abysmal ignorance of the history of the Philippines that he so privileges as a term of reference.

In "Philippine Gay Rights", for example, where he theorizes the lackluster outcome of purportedly the first Gay March in Asia organized by Pro-gay-Philippines on 25 June 1998, Garcia bewails the "lack of a tradition of speaking up for one's rights" in the Philippines (p. 61). (One begins to wonder if any of Teodoro Agoncillo's books ever figured as required undergraduate texts at the University of Sto. Tomas.) Garcia adds, rather magisterially, that "this difficulty in organizing is sometimes attributed to the culture of silence" apparently common to many Asian countries in which militancy of whatever political persuasion or ideological shade is hardly ever successful (*Ibid.:* 61). What "culture of silence"? He does not have to look any further. The EDSA Uprising — however fatally flawed and relentlessly bourgeois — is a testament to the gross inaccuracy of his formulation that confuses profundity with the grandness of a reckless dismissal.

Another case of blanket condemnation is infinitely unfailing in Garcia's "Gay writing vs. National literature (1998)". Here, to cite an instance, is Garcia in his hallmark paranoia of nation and nation-ness. He says, "gayness, as a specific form of what has precisely been a suppressed and neglected sexuality, can only be outside of a "nation" whose internal and implied content militates most violently against and is obsessively annihilative of it" (p. 52). Part of what Garcia declares is true, but most of it is virulently misguided. Anderson admonishes that the category of nation may be practicable to conceive "not as an ideology" but as if it belonged with "kinship" or "religion," rather than with "liberalism" or "fascism" (p. 15). Thus, to suggest that because the *bakla* subjectivities are exiled from the national space at

the very moment of its inception necessarily warrants an impervious enclosure as an infantile reaction at the very least, and uncritical at the very most. Historian John Dalberg-Acton, ironically, had outgrown Garcia's preposterous juvenility one hundred twenty years earlier when he wrote, "exile is the nursery of nationality" (Cited in Anderson 1994: 315). While the nation may be seen as an inimical and unrepresentative space from the perspective of subaltern classes or groups, such idea does not discourage anyone from contesting the hegemony of, say, a heterosexist formulation of nation-ness. Let us not forget that the nation is a space open for dispute and one way of countering it is by way of articulating, of elaborating. Gramsci's argument regarding the hegemonic articulation of the national-popular is a necessary corrective to Garcia's infantilism. Briefly, Gramsci asserts that the hegemony of a social movement can be effected if such enterprise articulates the social project of other movements and the elements of other class such that a particularized totality is embodied. The nation as space, therefore, becomes an unstable territory for hegemonic ideological articulation. Chantal Mouffe counsels adeptly that "the critique of essentialism [or the heterosexism of nation-ness] and all its different forms: humanism, rationalism, universalism, far from being an obstacle to the formulation of a feminist democratic project [or a pluralistically democratic nation] is indeed the very condition of its possibility"(p. 382). Indeed.

Endnotes

[1]This paragraph is a variation of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

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