

## The Past: Always Personal, Always Present

*Anghindilumilingonsapinanggalingan  
Ay hindimakakaratingsaparoroonan.*

*Who does not look back at her origin  
Will never arrive at her destination.*  
--Tagalog proverb

By Luis H. Francia

That life is a journey is a commonplace. But where to, exactly? In the traditional Tagalog view, this can only be answered by recognizing where the journey began, and by that act of recognition (appraising its value, its relevance, perhaps for the first time) one can have a better sense of where one is headed.

The journey is best appreciated in a metaphorical sense, for which the physical one is emblematic (and at times also problematic). For myself, a Filipino born and raised in Manila, that journey has included New York City, where I live and where I am writing this. I claim it as my own as well, having lived here for more than half of my life, thus making me at one and the same time a Manileño and a New Yorker. New York is a city that allows, with no resentment, the foreign-born this kind of latitude, to be part of the city's fabric. Naturally you will always have those who turn their backs on the likes of me, but these are the least of the New Yorkers, in my view. New York at its best exemplifies the Whitmanesque trait of containing multitudes.

In *America Is in the Heart*, his passionate semiautobiographical account of his life in the U.S., Carlos Bulosan emphasized the role of memory, of looking back (*lumilingon*), and how it sustained him in those pre-World War II years when "in many ways it was a crime to be a Filipino in California." In particular, the memory of his mother, his *Ina* (and by implication his *Inang Bayan*), enables him to survive a near-fatal encounter with his knife-wielding older brother Amado, who, not having seen him for many years, has failed to recognize him. Allos (the book's narrator and Bulosan's doppelgänger) utters their mother's name. *Kuya* Amado puts down his knife and hugs his younger brother. Allos reflects, "Yes, to him and to me afterward, to know my mother's name was to know the password into the secrets of the past, into childhood and pleasant memories; but it was also a guiding star, a talisman, a charm that lights us to manhood and decency."

Allos clings desperately to his sense of himself as a Filipino grounded in certain traditions. His greatest fear is to wind up, as many of his fellow *manong* have, desensitized and brutalized, living without hope and forsaking their grand aspirations, to turn out, in short, as both root-less and ruthless. His fortitude and intellectual curiosity lead him to understand the ideological and social context that he emerged from and into—he says it reduces his “chauvinism—and this empowers him on his onward voyage.

How far back should one look? The easiest thing to do is to gaze through rose-colored lenses at our distant past. That would be a mistake, a futile exercise in false nostalgia. Sure, I’d love to situate myself in a place and time where the oppressive burdens of Catholicism, racism, gender inequality, and the continual exploitation of our natural resources (rarely for the benefit of most Filipinos) did not exist. This view of the distant past as a lost Eden can be therapeutic and act as an imaginative spur to reconfigure our lives in the same way that a belief in a heaven can reconfigure our lives here on earth. Otherwise nostalgia has a way of effectively sidelining the hard truths of what in fact are the realities of a recognizable past that we need to deal with: that of having been colonized for approximately 400 years. That Spanish words are part and parcel of our tongue. That the use of English is widespread. That Catholicism continues to play a dominant role in our lives. That the quality of *mestizaje* is an enduring feature of our Filipino-ness.

This is not to downplay the visceral appeal of the distant, precolonial past, nor its usefulness in helping to instill national pride, nor its corrective qualities that counter the distorted and racist views the colonizers propagated. I think of José Rizal, who, when living in London, regularly visited the British Library. There he copied Antonio de Morga’s 1609 *Sucesos de Las Islas Filipinas*, a biased history of the conquest of the archipelago by the Spanish. Rizal annotated his copy to show how, even before the arrival of the sword and the cross, there was in place a vibrant ancient culture, subsequently marginalized by the colonizers. Revisiting and reinterpreting the past did not, however, result in Rizal foregoing his education; he didn’t stop speaking, or writing in, Castilian; he did not give up Western dress.

So Rizal points the way. To recognize and familiarize ourselves with the precolonial past, one need not dress in a loincloth or tattoo oneself with *baybayin* (the ancient script), though there is absolutely nothing wrong in doing so. What we do need to do is alter our mental landscape, to ask the question of how does one use the colonial experience. How do we get it to serve us, rather than being held forever in thrall to it? This is both challenging and complex material for Filipino

artists in the various disciplines, through whose imaginative lens we can best explore the highways and byways of not just our colonial past but our colonialist-inflected present. I think of the painter Ben Cabrera, the sculptor Agnes Arellano, the novelists Jose Dalisay and Gina Apostol, the theater group PETA, the late film director Lino Brocka, the poets Jose Lacaba, Emmanuel Lacaba (killed by the Philippine army in the 1970s), and Joi Barrios, as among the many, many artists who have done and continue to do just this. Who can forget the revitalizing force of OPM (Original Philippine Music), where rock bands such as Juan de la Cruz and Asin wrote their own material and sang in unsentimental Tagalog, rendering the issues of our troubled times relevant to the greater population?

A signal event in my own journey was the discovery of the 1899 Philippine-American War, that bloody and brutal conflict (at least 250,000 Filipino lives lost!), resulting in the occupation of the islands by a supposedly freedom-loving United States for half a century. A war glossed over by U.S. history books, and not at all discussed when I was at the Ateneo de Manila as a naive undergraduate, it opened my eyes to my own personal past—my maternal grandfather was a U.S. soldier in that war while my paternal grandfather most likely supported the revolutionaries in his hometown of Magdalena, Laguna. In 2002, *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899-2009*, was published, edited by myself and a colleague, Angel Velasco Shaw. The book put together articles, both reprints and commissioned ones, as well as poetry, photographs, excerpts from plays, and reproductions of art. For me, the war continues to serve as an important lens through which to consider and question our recent history.

To investigate and interrogate the past isn't just one option among many but an obligation if we are to understand ourselves as Filipinos, whether in the Philippines, or in the Diaspora, the kind underscored by this production, whose lead choreographer Alvin Erasga describes it thusly: "In *Colonial* the body encounters the real and the imagined past ... recovering from domination. The inspiration's vigor lies in the premise that the remnants of the colonial past can be re-created as a metaphor of light that can guide one to a journey of hope, fearless and free."

Amen to that. And bon voyage to all those embarked or about to embark on such a journey.

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