

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

---

## Popular Discourse of Vietnam in the Philippine

Rolando B. Tolentino

*Philippine Studies* vol. 50, no. 2 (2002): 230–250

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

# Popular Discourse of Vietnam in the Philippines

*Rolando B. Tolentino*

The collective effort of U.S. popular and political state apparatuses to deal with the Vietnam experience is an effort to construct an aspect of the American national heritage. The national heritage, in turn, rests on the privileged global hegemonic position of the U.S. Through these state apparatuses tensions from contrary identities and geographies are necessarily diffused to construct this national heritage. Mainly through the strategy of conflating other identities and geographies, a refurbished history is perpetuated. The moment of conflation, in essence, is the "moment of the apocalypse," whereby the national heritage is salvaged—resituated and rehistoricized into a workable narrative. In what I will argue later, the apocalyptic moment renames the structure of beings and feelings to experience and to tell the narrative of the national heritage. The apocalyptic moment also becomes the site where contestation for other meanings is made possible, signifying alternative value systems and practices.

This essay analyzes the politics of the colonialist's strategy of conflating identities and geographies through war and film. Using the film, *Apocalypse Now* as a screen in the collective effort to deal with the Vietnam experience, I intend to present how newer historical memories of Vietnam are constructed; how these are spiritualized and made apocalyptic; and how these constructions can be problematized. These then lead to a space which marks the construction's own contradiction, setting sites from which new coalitions and practices arise, specifically in the politics of the Broadway musical, *Miss Saigon*. My own interest

Funding for the completion of the study was made possible through a grant from the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Development, University of the Philippines.

as a Filipino provides me with an agenda—to attach the Philippine colonial and neocolonial experience in an analysis to recuperate the space and history of Filipinos in film and in history. There is a strong ground to do so. The first U.S. attempt at colonial enterprise started with its colonization of the Philippines. The U.S. bloody suppression of resistance by Filipinos, what has come to be known as the Philippine-American War, became a precursor of Vietnam War, the U.S. using similar tactics and strategies in both cases.

I draw from Carlo Ginzburg's conjectural approach. The approach allows the deployment of seemingly disparate elements in constructing a discourse of historical memory of Vietnam and in interrogating how this memory becomes competitive for other social groups. Similarly related to Bakhtin's dialogic, my own analysis, I hope, opens new relational aspects for remapping geographies and refiguring identities or simply for providing connections which do not seem to exist in the first place. This last point, in turn, is related to the Foucauldian notion of abrupt discontinuities of consciousness—how disparate elements and disparate relations eventually open possibilities of looking into the construction and contestation of consciousness itself.

I also draw from the comment of Michael Frisch's Nigerian friend, unnamed in the article, for the significance of this project. The friend stresses the significance of history for those in the margins. "History is a giant stone that lies on top of us (the marginalized); history is something we have to struggle from under" (Frisch 1990, 20). Foreshadowing one's politics and ethics is the weight placed on the historian from the margins. This can be seen ambivalently, but to take its positive side, the politics provide a distinct marking of a history "from under."

### Dissecting the Horror

Kurtz' last words—"the Horror, the Horror!"—in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and in Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, the film adaptation of the novel, interestingly frame the colonialist's own apocalypse. Like capital, the dying colonialist body abjects that which it has incorporated, then awaits to be reborn in some variant form. The old narrative fades, and new variations to an old theme resurface. However, for the colonized subject, it would be useful to frame the words differently, as an

ominous silence that utters archaic colonial 'otherness' that speaks in riddles, obliterating proper names and proper places. . . . is a silence that turns imperial triumphalism into the testimony of colonial confu-

sion and those who hear its echo lose their historic memories. (Bhabha 1990, 204)

The apocalyptic moment is thus reframed in a doubling, working well for and against the colonialist. This doubling, more so, marks for the colonized a certain empowerment to shatter the "historic memories" of the colonialist from which the colonized has been so entwined.

*Apocalypse Now* (1979) provides a journey towards this revelation. The film is a juncture for seemingly disparate elements—where Vietnam and the Philippines can be remapped; where Filipinos and Vietnamese can be refigured; where destruction, assimilation, and resistance come into the fold. The operations of the film and its making, as documented in *Hearts of Darkness: A Director's Apocalypse* (1991), refashion histories, geographies, and identities for the narrative of dealing with the Vietnam experience. It also opens other sites of contestation, as in *Platoon*, another Vietnam film shot in the Philippines; and *Miss Saigon*, a Broadway production set in Vietnam yet whose major roles are portrayed by non-Vietnamese actors (a Welsh and a Filipino).

Shot on location in the Philippines to give "the appearance of battle-shattered Indo-China," the film tells of Willard's journey to "exterminate with extreme prejudice" the brilliant-turned-psychotic Colonel Kurtz (Production Notes 1981, 2). Kurtz has turned against the military establishment, leading a group of natives who deify him. The journey has made Willard admire Kurtz, but, true to his duty, he kills Kurtz.

Though the film was not the first to deal with the Vietnam War—precedents include *Green Beret* (1965), *Limbo* (1974), *Rolling Thunder* (1977), *Heroes* (1977), *Coming Home* (1978), *The Boys of Company C*, *Go Tell the Spartans*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Hair*—the film set the Hollywood standard for the Vietnam picture. Principal shooting started on 20 March 1976. What was believed to be a sixteen-week shooting in the Philippines ended a year later, on 21 March 1977. Filming snagged with the firing of Harvey Keitel (originally groomed to play Willard), the onslaught of typhoon Didang (Olga) that destroyed the sets, and the alleged heart attack of Martin Sheen (dismissed, however, by United Artists "as heat exhaustion") (*Program Brochure* 1981). Originally budgeted for \$12 million, the cost of the war epic escalated to \$30 million.

As the standard by which to judge Vietnam films, *Apocalypse Now* is especially significant in many ways. It provides a way to explore the operations of a collective confrontation of Vietnam and the simulta-

neous creation of a narrative of this reencounter. This confrontation, however, has resulted in the interchangeability of the identities of the Vietnamese and Filipino, and the landscapes of Vietnam and the Philippines. The “making-of” documentary, *Hearts of Darkness* works in similar fashion. It reifies the colonial and neocolonial structures with which the Philippines and the U.S. are entwined.

My takeoff point is the notion of Vietnam as trauma. The U.S. defeat in the Vietnam War created a new unwanted experience, that of trauma and of dealing with a trauma. I use the term, “Vietnam,” as an encapsulation of the traumatic Vietnam War experience. Thus, Vietnam films, in this essay, are specific to American films about the Vietnam War and the “Vietnam” experience. Vietnam films can be seen as the screen by which Foucault’s notion of the confessional can be illustrated as “one of the main rituals for the production of truth.” Though Foucault intended the notion as one of the “procedures for the individualization of power,” the network of individuals produces a collective notion of a truth (Foucault 1990, 58–59). In this case, it is a truth of Vietnam.

In constructing the national heritage, as Michael Bommers and Patrick Wright points out, contradictions are abolished (1982, 264). Though the point Bommers and Wright make overtly presents a totalizing perspective, abruptly impeding any resistance and liberation, it remains useful in that it emphasizes something that is overlooked—the hegemonic power structures at work. It is significant in locating a context for localized and diasporic efforts in contesting these structures.

Through *Apocalypse Now*, a mechanism related to penitence and the purgation of guilt, anxiety, and trauma of Vietnam take place, with the effect of constituting a truth of Vietnam as a component of the national heritage. Through individual participation in the screening of the Vietnam film, one is networked into the confrontation of the Vietnam experience, ready as Jane Fonda is (after seeing *Platoon*) “to put it behind us” (Broeske n.d.). A Vietnam veteran who also serves as counselor at the San Francisco Veterans Center needed a community to watch the film with. Not wanting to see the film alone, the film for him, as noted in *The Hollywood Reporter*, “has stirred some rough memories” (1987, 36). Grounded in melodrama, whether in the vicarious or visceral experience, the film transforms the “good cry” into a sentimental yet historical sojourn. Some twenty years after Vietnam, emotions are still sensitive to the experience. Vietnam films provide a process of coming to certain terms with the experience, as a desensitizing of the Vietnam sensitivity.

As individuals negotiate the memory of Vietnam, contacts of this kind consequently forge a truth of Vietnam. Frisch, however, observes this truth as one of denial and disengagement. These reactions are emblematic as the invented category of "Post-Vietnam Syndrome" (1990, 18). The truth forged of Vietnam is reduced to its basic facticity: The use of the past tense is symptomatic of a "post-Vietnam" reading of the Vietnam experience, one in which historical imperatives are collapsed for a workable present. Anne McClintock finds that the growing ritualism with "post-" signals "a widespread, epochal crisis in the idea of linear, historical "progress." Specifically referring to the "post" in "post-colonialism," she writes that the prefix sets itself complicit with the "imperial idea of linear time," conferring upon "colonialism the prestige of history proper."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the ramifications of the imperialist war with Vietnam and its still unresolved closure remain as the privilege marker in the historicization of "post-Vietnam." More telling is the liberal politics of the apocalyptic moment of the "post-Vietnam" period: "Vietnam has ended. Get on with life. Time to move on." "Post-Vietnam" snags the historical connectedness of the present to the traumatic past.

The Vietnam film created a conditioned public sphere that localizes the actual war experience into the level of the individual. In the succeeding discussion, the notion of hegemony would favor the reading that a frame of reference has already been constructed prior to the individual's dealing with the collective trauma in the viewing of the film. With a shift to the focus of hegemony, attention is called from the means of force to the use of consensus in constructing notions of the community. In this case, actual war would be less preferred while popular cultural forms such as film would be idealized in explaining how people negotiated their lives within the power structures. However, force and consent provide simultaneous drives for the elaboration and critique of the power structures. War and film can then be rethought as useful frames in examining how power structures work and where the sites of resistance lie.

The making of the film gives valuable insights into hegemony and the relation of film and war. The filmmaking of *Apocalypse Now* is likened to a war within a war. From location hunting to precision detonation of explosions, to having Vietnam military advisors, *Apocalypse Now* and its making bear the stamp of authenticity of the war in its simulated war effort. As Coppola states, "it is not a film of Vietnam, it is Vietnam."<sup>2</sup>

Coppola constructs himself as colonialist master, acting in filmmaking as its field commander. He may have missed the war, but just the same, he wants to simulate the "authentic" experience of war both on and off screen. In location hunting, Coppola searched "exotic islands for the terrain that looked like that the U.S. forces had fought through along the Mekong Delta, in mountainous Cam Ranh, on Annam beaches and in the green hell of the Cambodian jungle" (*Production Notes* 1981, 2). This is interesting because Coppola, never having been in Vietnam, doubly simulates the geography of Vietnam. What he is basing his notions of the "authentic" terrain on are actually his own visions of the landscape of mainland Southeast Asia. These images of the landscape, in turn, were brought to him through newsreels and documentary war footages.

Coppola foreshadows a structure by which the viewing experience of the spectator is partially or largely conditioned. Coppola's selection of shots, simulation of the images, erasure of peoples, destruction of geographies, among others, reify the structure by which the spectator then frames the Vietnam experience. What eventually gets conjured on screen represents a system of inclusion and exclusion, absence and representation, conflation and reification. It is primarily through a textual reading that I am able to operationalize hegemony in the film as one symptomatic of the historical memorialization of Vietnam, and consequently the Philippines. The process works in two ways—through the destruction of geography, and through the alienation of the individual body.

The opening scene sets the frame of reference for the film. The first shot is still of a Third World/underdeveloped landscape of a coconut farm taken from a helicopter. Soundless at first, a linear explosion occurs. The spectator then is further made aware of the helicopters in an offensive action, not against an alien people (there are no bodies shown as a result of the offensive) but against a foreign landscape. The landscape is obliterated. Willard's face is then superimposed. Willard, either drunk or on drugs, stares for most part, then inflects a range of emotions—pain, fear, pity, alienation. The body is distanced from the mind. As an introduction to the narration, shots of the helicopter, the flames and the dark smoke of the destroyed landscape, and the alienated yet pained individual are juxtaposed. Such triangulation works again several times to frame segments leading to Willard's (and the spectator's) apocalypse.

The military establishment becomes the agent for the alienated white male individual to deal with his alien geography. The goal regarding the alien landscape is its destruction. Though the film would eventually include native bodies, this inclusion is only for the purpose of conjuring geographical decay, and hence calling for imperial intervention which comes into being through excess of military operations.

To authenticate the war film, cost was not spared to get the Vietnam/war effect—the simulation of destruction. For example, United Artists boasts of “more than 500 smoke bombs, 100 phosphorus sticks, 1,200 gallons of gas, 50 water explosions of 35 dynamite each, 2,000 rockets, flares, tracers and 5,000 feet of detonating cord are used in the 11/2 minute finale” (*Program Brochure* 1981, 3). So grand was this recreation that the production notes brag of smoke filling the sky “until the sun was blotted out” (*Production Notes* 1981, 2). The spectator then becomes aware of the magnitude of the destruction of the geography constructed as alien/foreign. However, this geography is forcedly linked to the magnitude of individual alienation constructed as a shared identity.

The Vietnam experience is authenticated by this triangulation. Military advisors were employed. The destruction approximated the bombing and other military operations in Vietnam. The white male individual, however, is more disjointed than the grittier image of Vietnam veterans as represented on television news during the actual war. The originary Vietnam image is recuperated in the later film, *Platoon*.

In *Apocalypse Now*, the white male individual—from Willard to Kurtz to the boat's crew—is portrayed as merely reactive to the geographical environment. The overreaction of the men to the Vietnamese on the boat represents America's overreaction to Vietnam and to the Vietnam experience thereafter. The overreaction is rationalized in two modes. First, it is exaggerated through the presentation of the landscape as death and decay, and second, through the presentation of the leadership and the bureaucracy as detached from the actual conditions of the men in battle. The white male body is then forced to mirror the geographical landscape. Not understanding the logic or the lack of it in the alien landscape, the body abjects that which it cannot incorporate. The body is machinized into the operation of war. The situation then reduces the men into machines, instrumentalizing their bodies to react to the geographic horrors. Atrocities are therefore made justifiable in the unenviable position of the men in battle.

It is the state of the mind, however, that provides a locus for the body. Drugs and alcohol in the film are made to simulate the mental effect of Vietnam. *Hearts of Darkness* exposes the rampant use of drugs and alcohol on the set. Actor Sam Bottoms was hooked on amphetamines; actor Frederic Forrest also admitted taking drugs on the set. Dennis Hopper was captured as "stoned," arguing with Coppola about his lines. When Martin Sheen's alienatory opening sequence was filmed, he admitted being "so drunk (he) could barely stand up." The alienating effects are reproduced for the spectator, who is made to think of the film in terms of either a good or bad trip, a good high or a downer, cathartically liberating or further alienating. In constructing this Vietnam history, the spectator is positioned somewhat as a co-dependent in the trial of collective guilt. Through the "Vietnamization" (the imperial action justified as a reaction to the consequence of doomed geographies and detached leadership) of the logic, a naturalization occurs, displacing the guilt in less debilitating terms.

By equating the destruction of the self with the "natural" recourse in dealing with the destruction of the alien space, one of two readings may result. First, the identification marks that there is no one to blame (all are innocent) or that both parties in the war are liable (all are guilty). Secondly, however, it also marks the identities and geographies outside the shared one as the final unburdening site of the collective guilt. The film provides a problematic reflexivity towards the margins as the end-in-sight of the Vietnam memory. The vanished colonies and the absent peoples become the dump site of the colonialist guilt. A paradox of history is reworked to the benefit of the colonial master. The colonialist is able to present a homeopathic solution to his psychological bind—that which had given him the problem provides the solution. As such, the figure of the colonized bears the weight of the transference, ending as the shock absorber of the colonialist. It should be emphasized, though, that in either case, a selective amnesia takes place.

History, then, is constituted through selected memory. In constructing the film (from the actual filmmaking process to its meta-construction through film criticism), the perspective of the hegemonic power is reified. According to official film sources, the U.S. Department of Defense declined to assist in the filmmaking of *Apocalypse Now*. Coppola sought the assistance of President Ferdinand Marcos to obtain military hardware (a major factor that made Coppola choose the Philippines as location) and "to simplify the complications of these particularly exotic areas" (*Production Notes* 1981, 4).

Gerald Sussman, who was one of few journalists allowed to cover the closed sets, doubts that there was no assistance from the U.S. Department of Defense. He believes that Coppola engaged in a "patron-client" relationship with the Department.

The Pentagon's support included the use of important technical advisors, together with several hundred Clark Airbase and Subic Naval Station uniformed personnel in some of the key footage. . . . Coppola made specific script compromises in exchange for this assistance. In one major battle sequence, for example, Coppola substituted North Vietnamese (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) for the original (southern) Viet Cong flags over villages in the Mekong Delta south of Saigon and put North Vietnamese uniforms on the backs of the insurgents—in line with the Pentagon's "foreign (D.R.V.) invasion" justification for U.S. "allied" intervention in the war.<sup>3</sup>

The film then reflects this "official" history.

Criticism, on the other hand, supplemented the reification of "official" history. It works as an apologia for the dominant anti-war angling (devoid of actual historical past), which can be read too as the film's own "official" history. Marsha Kinder's (n.d., 1) focus on the power of adaptation in *Apocalypse Now* foresees the dilemma. She writes, "Coppola adopts someone else's material or structure, absorbs and expands it by identifying it with his own experience, and thereby transforms it into his own uniquely powerful vision." The critic readily foregrounds the masculinist and colonialist rigor of Coppola's construction yet does not further raise issues to critique these points. The triumph of the rational is always foreseen and lauded, as in Willard's abdication of Kurtz's throne in the kingdom of natives. After his slaughter of Kurtz, the natives were only too willing to deify him, transferring the godliness of Kurtz to him. Not having any other rational choice, Kurtz chooses to reinforce the military institution. He agrees with Kurtz that the problem lies not with the structure but with the individuals running the structure.

In the textual reading of the film, supplemented by the instances of its production, one sees that the hegemonic structure of viewing the film or of experiencing the war is equally reified. Hegemony provides the context for analyzing sites of resistance. In this aspect of the project, I find that the Vietnam experience tends more to homogenize hegemony than to subvert it. It is thus useful to look for other Vietnam sites where resistance lay. I find this in *Miss Saigon*. This text reworks the Vietnam experience through the operation of conflation familiar in

*Apocalypse Now*. However, the operation does not fully work as resistance evolved with the production of the text.

To go back to the film, hegemony also poses the problem of subalternity. Themselves a subaltern in the Philippine national landscape and identity, the Igorots who were cast as the natives in the film, are further reconstituted in the place of the subaltern. The film totalizes the absence of identity of the Igorot people, reifying them as a transcultural native subject. This recalls into mind, the World Expositions at the turn of the century which brought Igorots and other indigenes to the West as transcultural native subjects for exhibition. The exhibition and viewing experience are made to highlight not the artifacts' ethnicities but the white race's supremacy. Similar operations work in the utilization of the Igorots in the film. In consideration for the authentic "feel," 230 Igorots, the indigenous people of Northern Luzon, were cast en masse as Kurtz's followers and brought to the southern part of Luzon where the film was shot. The film doubly erases them as an indigenous group. On one level, they are displaced by mythology, lumped together as the colonialist's subjects. On a second level, they are further displaced by ahistoricity, the film figuring them as indigenous to Cambodia, an act of utter disregard for the "real" indigenous peoples of Cambodia. The specific space of identity becomes immaterial to the western feel; the indigene, however, is posited as the more authentic native body. What should also be emphasized is that this absence of a mark of collective identity is also (de)figured in the absence of any individual identity. Not one of Kurtz's followers speaks.

Furthermore, the rituals of the Igorots are also displaced, taken out of context for a suitable film ending. Encountering an Igorot ritual which involved the slaughter of a water buffalo, Coppola decides to incorporate the scene in the ending over which he has so longed agonized. Not having any idea for an ending, Coppola juxtaposes the slaughter of the buffalo with Willard's slaughter of Kurtz. Savagery is manifested and differentiated. While Willard's is forced upon him, the (displaced) Igorots' (uncontextualized) savagery is considered as natural.

The construction of a workable historical memory of Vietnam excludes that which it cannot assimilate. What becomes memory is the somewhat coherent retelling of history as a space for negotiating everyday life. The national heritage is related to Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities (1991). Individuals imagine them-

selves as a community by forging a sense of commonality with community ideals. An individual imagines one's belonging to a community through shared beliefs and practices. Reading a news essay or singing the national anthem becomes a ritual for the daily affirmation of this community. As in the screening of the Vietnam film, one imagines a community negotiating for a space of the memory of Vietnam. This space, however, is "overdetermined" for the spectator by the operations of certain political and ideological state apparatuses. What the spectator negotiates are one's relations to the Vietnam saga in the pre-defined space of mass culture. As mass culture defines the parameters of negotiation, contradictions are made to lie in the gaps and fissures. This then provides the space of resistance. I will go into this space in relation to the struggles in *Miss Saigon*.

Anderson suggests a strong affinity between nationalist and religious imageries (1991, 10). The collective effort becomes a spiritualized experience. Filming the journey of war then becomes a journey into war. Filmmaking and the filmic text reflect each other's image. Coppola states, "I found that many of the ideas and images with which I was working as a film director began to coincide with my own life, and that I, like Captain Willard, was moving up a river in a far-away jungle, looking for answers and hoping for some kind of catharsis" (*Program Brochure* 1981). He goes on to mention that the effect was the same for all the "close collaborators," "no one was left unchanged" (*Production Notes* 1981, 1). After the filming, Coppola lost 60 pounds.

In *Apocalypse Now*, the river journey makes Willard question the order of his superiors. He is fascinated by Kurtz, his brilliant track record and his defiance of the entire military establishment. He begins to change his vision of the war and the world. This identification with Kurtz is emphasized by his decision not to rescue a wounded Vietnamese who has been fired upon by the boat's crew. He shoots the latter dead to get him out of the way so he can concentrate on Kurtz. He remains fascinated when he meets Kurtz; nonetheless, he decides to kill him to preserve him rather than to see Kurtz die (to be placed on trial and sentenced to prison). Willard's wanting of a mission culminates in a moral dilemma when the mission is implemented. It then closes on a passive triumph of being able to play god or simply to use the rational, so fractured in time of war, instead. The symbolic landscape of the American national heritage is spiritualized. The national character is remythologized by the expected birth of "new Adam" (Kellman 1986, 206).

By 1986, this "new Adam" had matured in *Platoon*. Playing on a similar structure of journey with the end-view of recognition of a loss, *Platoon* uses the same white male voice-over and makes greater claim to authenticity: the greater the authentic experience, the greater it transmutes into the spiritual. The genealogy of father to son, Martin to Charlie Sheen is a continuance of the process of searching for Vietnam's meaning.<sup>4</sup>

*Platoon* is also a discontinuance of the theatrical filming of Vietnam. Oliver Stone, representing himself as a participant in the Vietnam War, becomes the mid-1980s American informant of the war.<sup>5</sup> An insider's point of view of the war, *Platoon* through Oliver Stone's autobiographical stance, gave Vietnam a grittier look. What can be more authentic than a filmmaker with actual combatant experience in the Vietnam War? Stone hired a military adviser to train the actors. He did not allow a transition between the 16-day training and the first day of shooting. The film was billed as a true-to-life Vietnam film and as a film based on a war Stone knew firsthand ("as a grunt with the 25th Infantry in 1967-68"). Another executive producer called the film "a movie that had to be made" (*Platoon Production Information*). The claim to authenticity (which, in turn, draws on personal and historical claims) becomes a plea for the film's production and consumption.

Both films play on a loss. Coppola's Willard mourns this void. Stone's adolescent soldier (played by Charlie Sheen) mourns the loss of his innocence. These are symptomatic to the post-Vietnam mourning of the loss of empire. One distinct characteristic of "critical" Vietnam films such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* is this soft-porn melancholia "that long mourns the empires, and their grief always has a stagey quality to it" (Anderson 1991, 111). The white male lead achieves a spiritual triumph in the film as the loss is acknowledged and displaced. The displacement is passed on to the colonized figure through a strategy of conflating these peoples' identities or of effacing their bodies on screen. The colonized body is destroyed, amassed, or effaced. The colonialist is fascinated with the colonized body as a way of recuperating his own loss of a body. Jameson refers to the disappearance of the bodies in relation to the First World "hysterical sublime": "the body is touching its limits, 'volatilized,' in the experience of images, to the point of being outside itself, or losing itself" (Stephason 1988, 5).

The film's destruction of bodies and landscapes has actual implications in the social sphere where effects of napalm bombs and torture,

for example, remain. The white male is regenerated through violence of the bodies and geographies of the colonized.

### **Obscuring the Filipino Identity and Space**

Anderson stresses, "All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives" (1991, 204). This is the space to reframe the apocalypse.

In Baler, Quezon, one of the location sites for the film, the community's everyday routine was disrupted as the locus of activity was shifted to the film site. The production induced food shortages and increased food prices (beef prices tripled). Taking advantage of the visitors, a culture of profiteering was instigated. Rents and transportation fees skyrocketed to the detriment of local consumers. A culture of excess was displayed as Coppola flew in food and alcohol from the U.S. to celebrate his birthday. In another instance, "200 'hostesses' were brought in from Metro Manila but made available only at Stateside prices" (Sussman 1992, 27; 1976, 20).

The implications are equally serious on the national scale. In collaborating with Marcos, Coppola was contributing to the escalation of human rights violations in the Philippines. He entered into an agreement with Marcos to leave the mounted machine guns on the Hueys M-50 after the completion of the shooting. "The refurbished Hueys were used on a rotating basis between the film site and the real life war against Muslim and communist-led New People's Army (N.P.A.) insurgents in the southern Philippines and other regions" (Sussman 1992, 26). I should add to this magnitude the numerous civilians caught in the crossfire.

In the context of the effort to deal with the Vietnam experience, the Philippines becomes the uncanny. Such connections may seem thin. The only link the film has to the Philippines is through a superimposed shot of Kurtz's military background. The confidential typewritten report states that Kurtz finished his master's degree from Harvard, with a thesis on the "Philippine Insurrection: American Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia, 1898-1905." The implications, however, are important. The term "insurrection," for one, has been pejoratively applied to the war engaged against the U.S. suggesting chaotic, isolated, and local instances of resistance.

The implications begin with U.S. interest in the Philippines at the turn of the century. On January 1890, Alfred J. Beveridge's first Senate

speech emphasized the unlimited resources of the Philippines: "No land in America surpasses in fertility the plains and valleys of Luzon."; "The wood of the Philippines can supply the furniture of the world for a century to come."; "forty miles of Cebu's mountain chain are practically mountains of coal" (Beveridge 1987, 25). Just as Daniel Boone's account was a real estate promotion for Kentucky, Beveridge's speech was supporting U.S. colonization of the Philippines. In the terms of Henry Nash Smith, Beveridge perceived the Philippines as a "virgin land" waiting to be tapped. This originary space in which the U.S. projected the Philippines is linked to Foucault's heterotopia (whose contrary role is "to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, meticulous") (Quoted in Soja 1993, 146). However, a year after his speech, U.S. military pacification drives took approximately 600,000 Filipino lives in Luzon alone. This information led an anonymous U.S. Representative to declare, "They never rebel in Luzon anymore because there isn't anybody left to rebel" (Quoted in Francisco 1987, 19). Genocide becomes the continuing strategy of conquering peoples and their geographies.

Forcing acceptance of colonial rule was the objective of the conquest of the Philippines. By militarization and the establishment of democratic institutions, the U.S. was determined to affix its brand of colonial rule abroad. The ultimate goal of the conquest of the West, after all, extended overseas to the Pacific. The U.S. conquest of the Philippines was a continuation of the myth of the frontier. The exotic space of the other has been transformed from virgin land, to howling wilderness when resistance exists, and in time, to exoticized spaces of tourism and export-processing zones of multinational operations. The "other" space is networked into the imperial circuits for the various colonized functions of a source of raw materials and cheap labor to market for finished products.

William McKinley set the tone for enlightened colonization in 1898. In a remark to a Methodist Delegation, he pondered on the dilemma of colonizing the Philippines:

I thought first that we would take only Manila; then Luzon; then other islands, perhaps, also. I walked on the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. . . . And one night it came to me this way . . . there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by

God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellowmen for whom Christ also died. And then I went to bed, and went to sleep and slept soundly, and the next morning I sent for the chief engineer of the War Department (our mapmaker), and I told him to put the Philippines on the map of the U.S. (McKinley 1987, 25)

I quote McKinley at length to stress the earlier colonialist imperatives I have discussed in relation to *Apocalypse Now*. McKinley's apocalypse is reinforced in other racist notions of "benevolent assimilation," "white man's burden," and "manifest destiny." The colonialist discursive space, however, displaces the weight of the apocalyptic moment to actual peoples. This unnaturally affects the lives of the people as modernity is attempted and cultural imperialism is naturalized on them.

Thus, almost a century after, the Philippines continues to struggle towards notions of local, sectoral, and national communities. The discursive space is further layered in the institutions introduced and perpetuated by the U.S. in the Philippines. Government officials still come from the landed class, and therefore prioritize their own interests over those of others. A counterweight to these operations are the people's own initiatives. The mass movement, as an example, has provided a leverage for working class issues to be articulated in the public sphere. There remains communist insurgency in the countryside, waging a socialist war. Non-governmental organizations are initiating and complementing community-based programs. The struggle for a redefinition of identity and space continues.

### **The Convergence and Divergence in *Miss Saigon***

What have been discussed are some general terms of constructing a national community in the Vietnam experience and its corollary aspect, the difficulty of constructing an equivalent from a Filipino perspective. Filipino American critic, E. San Juan is cynical about this construction of the "homeland": "the authentic homeland doesn't exist except as a simulacrum of Hollywood, or as a nascent dream of jouissance still to be won by a national-democratic struggle" (San Juan 1992, 122)

The stake, then, is constructing communities in diaspora at various possible levels. The text of *Miss Saigon* has constituted a temporal space of a community of Asian Americans. However, like *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, *Miss Saigon* also draws from the colonialist operation of conflating identities and geographies. The resistance here provided a way for Asian American groups to forge an alliance whereby to sus-

tain and expand notions of space and identities. The resistance and alliance-building are significant moves to create alternative and oppositional value systems and practices. The Asian American's own journey has been long, which is not to say that *Miss Saigon* provides the culmination of this journey. *Miss Saigon* is a phase in this Asian American journey.

After all, the Asian has either been lumped in a mass or conveniently ordered in a hierarchy of races. The massification begins with physical attributes—color, shape, size of the eyes, nose, face, and so on. Lack of knowledge of specific Asian groups is usually remedied through representations already constructed for other “minor” races. During the Philippine-American War, for example, editorial cartoons in the U.S. presented Filipinos as infants and savages—stereotype images of the peoples of Africa.

The positions of “minor” races were held in relation to the superiority of the white race. Composite facial pictures in “The Races of Men” (published separately in *An Intermediate Geography* and *Physical Geography*) represented the centrality of the white race as personified by the noble woman, “in contrast with the swarthy males with eyes averted,” and the classical Apollo figure (Hunt 1987, 48–51). Furthermore, groups were made to compete against each other for the favor of being privileged to be in proximity with the white race. Filipino farm laborers were welcomed to replace Japanese workers in Hawaii when the latter proved to be disconcerting for the plantation owners. Chinese coolies were tolerated during the building of railroads but were despised after the tracks were built. During World War II, the Chinese were preferred over the Japanese in the U.S. whose commitment to the Allied cause was always taken with suspicion. *Life Magazine* (in December 1941) came out with a physiognomic chart for the public to be able to distinguish Japanese from Chinese. Subtitled, “Angry Citizens Victimize Allies with Emotional Outburst at Enemy,” the guide uses actual photos of male Chinese and Japanese Americans, noting for example, their “parchment” and “earthy” “yellow” complexions, more and less frequent “epicentric fold,” higher noses and bridges that were supposed to be distinct in (though universalized within and among) the two ethnic peoples. While the Japanese in the U.S. were interned in camps during the war, the Germans were not treated equally harsh.

*Miss Saigon* emanates from this mold. The musical is Cameron Mackintosh reworking of *Madama Butterfly* and Vietnam. The story is

stereotypical, the taking of the Asian woman's own life for love of the white man. Ironically, David Henry Hwang who first reworked *Madama Butterfly* into the gender bending *M. Butterfly* initiated the protest. It involved the issue of the hiring of non-Asian American actors to portray the Vietnamese leads. The Actor's Equity acceded at first, denying permission for non-American actors to come to the U.S. Charlton Heston resigned, saying, "I'm ashamed of my union" (1990, F4). When Mackintosh decided to cancel the show altogether, the Actor's Equity reversed its decision, realizing that Jonathan Pryce, a Welsh actor, was actually "a star of international stature," and Lea Salonga, a Filipino actor, actually had "unique ability." Consequently, the union's decision reaffirmed the insulting claim that there were no qualified Asian/Pacific actors to fill in the lead roles. There were also resignations on the side of Asian-Americans in protest to the ruling. Mackintosh, playing the colonialist overseer role in the debate, demanded that the union first apologize before he reconsiders bringing his play to Broadway. This play, incidentally, had the biggest advance ticket sales at that time: \$25 million. Also at stake were fifty jobs, thirty-four of which were to actors of color. The protest landed on thin ice, and it was divisive too. The female lead was also non-Asian American but nevertheless Filipino.

"Asian American actors have noted that they already have a hard time getting non-Asian roles as it is, and have even less opportunities to play an Asian-specific roles," laments writer Johnny Ng. He ends with a positive note, "this is probably one thing that has galvanized the Asian American community across the nation. We are a diverse bunch and this is something we can all agree on" (1990, 3). Actor George Takei who portrayed "Mr. Zulu" in *Star Trek* is more cynical, "It's my firm belief that he's (Mackintosh) got an additional \$25 million worth of free publicity."

The issues resulted in the unearthing of past and cultural anomalies. The use of white actors for Asians was standard practice even sixty years ago: Joel Grey in *Remo Williams*, Christopher Lee and Peter Sellers as Fu Man Chu, John Wayne as Genghis Khan in *The Conqueror*, Peter Ustinov as Charlie Chan. The earliest protest on this issue was in the 1970s, in the film adaptation of *Teahouse on August Moon*, which cast Marlon Brando in an Asian role. More recent anomalies included Pryce's prosthetically altered eyelids and yellow facial make-up in portraying the Amerasian character.

Spearhead by Asian American actors, a coalition was formed—the

Asian/Pacific Alliance for Creative Equality (APACE) in the West coast. Other groups that joined were the Asian American Journalist Association, The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Asian CineVision, the Chinese Arts Council. Don Nakanichi, Chair of the Asian American Studies program in UCLA, sent a letter to Actors Equity, invoking the guild to stand pat on its original decision. In the East Coast, the issue brought about the alliance of the Asian Lesbians of the East Coast and the Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York. This alliance worked towards the issue of Asian American representation in the play, a divergence from the earlier position posited to the Actors' Equity. The issue cut across race as other groups joined the alliance—Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts, Gay Men of African Descent, Kambal sa Lusog, Las Buenas Amigas, Latino Gay Men of New York, Men of All Colors Together, Other Countries, Queer Nation, Salsa Soul Sisters, South Asian Lesbians and Gay Men, We Wah, and Bar Chee Ampe. A link with APACE was established, and a working relationship with other Asian and Pacific Islander groups was formed.

On the issue of *Miss Saigon*, alliance-building among and within Asian American individuals and groups eventually merged into a national network. Relations were evaluated, as new alliances were formed and old ones were cut. "Gray haired Japanese American wives and mothers and brash young white men from Queer Nation marched side-by-side" in a protest action (Yoshikawa 1994, 284). The Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, a national law organization that champions lesbian and gay rights, however, chose to premiere the play despite protests from the Asian American community. Yoko Yoshikawa, one of the protesters, writes:

At stake in *Miss Saigon* is how those who control the means of representations and reproductions choose to define people of color and non-Western cultures, and to what ends. *Miss Saigon* rewrites the Vietnam War, pulling a sentimental love story from the carnage of carpet bombing, My Lai, and Agent Orange like a rabbit from a hat. Vietnam becomes just another exotic backdrop, good for a shot of nightclub sleaze and real live helicopter lift-off. Mackintosh and company spiced the racism of *Madame Butterfly*—a white man's wet dream—with the endorphin-pumping antics of *Rambo* and came up with a new version of an old story. (280)

In the Vietnam films discussed, in the opera *Madama Butterfly* and the musical *Miss Saigon*, the West inscribes death as natural to Asians. "The principal military advisor for *Apocalypse Now*—who spoke of the

'authenticity' of the film—General William Westmoreland, the U.S. wartime commander explained the Vietnamese unremitting resistance to brutal imperialism as the Asian indifference to death" (Sussman 1992, 24). This orientalist view reifies the structure of violence towards Asians and Asian Americans.

Bommes and Wright fail to forewarn of community-based consciousness outside the paradigm of the national heritage. Still working from within the myth of the model minority or the melting pot, the authors take community-based consciousness as liable only to the risk of appropriation by showcasing these contributions within the heritage of the nation (Bommes and Wright 1982, 302). However, where consciousness counters the national heritage, Bommes and Wright are silent.

In struggling with the Miss Saigon text, Asian Americans were remapping a space and refiguring an identity of their own, so to speak. The text has provided an opportunity for an imagining of an Asian American community, one that actively territorializes the space of hegemonic structures. This counter-memory comes by way of transference. Dominick LaCapra refers to transference as "a repetition-displacement of the past in the present as it necessarily bears upon the future." In stating that the desired objective is "not to blindly replicate the debilitating aspects of the past," LaCapra is calling for an ethics of writing history, one in which the "debilitating aspects" of the privileged position is problematized, allowing for histories within the margins to come in (La Capra 1985, 72).

Such transference works against the odds and against the grain. Identities and geographies remain contested. Its conflation only deepens the problem of reconstruction and reframing. I hope this is one such initiative towards the direction.

Unfortunately, however, I have yet to acquire new information on how the alliance work has been since the efforts with *Miss Saigon*. Yoshikawa's own analysis of the lessons drawn from the struggle towards creating a history and a space of collective identity. The point Yoshikawa raises may even be way ahead of what I have tried to outline in this essay.

Our coalition pointed the way to a possible future: where a complex identity is not only valued, but becomes a foundation for unity. We who occupy the interstices—whose very lives contain disparate selves—are, of necessity, at home among groups that know little of each other. We know what others do not in reconciling differences in our lives, and the mutable nature of borders We have a deep hunger for a place in which

we can be, at one and the same time, whole, and part of something larger than ourselves. Our knowledge and desire may at times bring us to action: We push the parameters of existing communities wide and open, and cause the struggles of different communities to overlap and meld. In the tangle, we may also be midwives of vital coalitions. (Yoshikawa 1994, 293)

In 2000, however, *Miss Saigon* closed in Broadway and found a venue in the Philippines. The staging reified a self-orientalist value, which eroded the temporal gain of the alliance work against its Broadway opening. Alliance work needed to be transnationalized, especially when it came to cultural struggles. The play was staged in Manila's main cultural venue (the Cultural Center of the Philippines) with the full backing of politicians and big businesses only too willing to partake of this belated industrialized artifact. Resistance from various groups, led by the Concerned Artists of the Philippines, failed to prevent the massive financial and high-art support for the play. There was an amnesia of past political and cultural turmoil, caused by the very hegemony of global capitalists and culturati, willing to reinvent the past for present financial gain.

## Notes

1. Anne McClintock (1992, 85–86). She mentions that the what seems to be the vogue of “post-ing” current cultures (as in “post-colonialism, post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-cold war, post-marxism, post-apartheid, post-Soviet, post-Ford, post-feminism, post-national, post-historic, even post-contemporary”) is problematic as it remains complicit to the imperatives of the privileged race-class-gender-ethnicity-sexual preference-etc.

2. *Hearts of Darkness* (video, 1991) opening sequence.

3. Gerald Sussman, “Bulls in the (Indo) China Shop,” in *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 20, no. 1 (1992): 26. Sussman covered the filmmaking in a series of articles published in *Philippine Daily Express* in 1976–1977.

4. Charlie Sheen felt he wanted to be an actor after being with his father on location in the Philippines for *Apocalypse Now*.

5. The movie ad for *Platoon* features a picture of Oliver Stone (likely taken during the Vietnam War) and the text: “in 1967 a young man named Oliver Stone spent fifteen months in Vietnam as an infantry in the United States Army. He was wounded twice and received a bronze star for gallantly in combat. . . . Stone has come a long way from Vietnam. But he has not left it behind. There were the men who knew and fought with in the country they could not win. The feelings of fear, comradeship, rage, and love. Feelings that won't go away for a lot of people. Especially the ones who lost pieces of their lives, or their bodies there. Oliver Stone was one of them and he still is. *Platoon* is his movie, and theirs.”

## References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined communities*. London: Verso.
- Beveridge, Alfred. 1987. Our Philippine policy. In *The Philippine reader*, ed. Daniel Shirmer and Stephen Shalon. Quezon City: Ken.
- Bhabka, Homi. K. 1990. Articulating the archaic: Notes on colonial nonsense. In *Literary theory today*, ed. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bommes, Michael and Patrick Wright. 1982. "Charm of residence": The public and the past. In *Making histories: Studies in history-writing and politics*. London: Hutchinson.
- Broske, Pat. H. n.d. After seeing "Platoon," Fonda wept. *Los Angeles Times*.
- Foucault, Michel. 1990. *The history of sexuality*. Trans. Robert Hurley. Random: Vintage.
- Francisco, Luzviminda. 1987. The Philippine-American war. In *The Philippine reader*. Quezon City: Ken.
- Frisch, Michael. 1990. The memory of history. In *A shared authority: Essays on the craft and meaning of oral and public history*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Heston, Charlton. 1990. I'm ashamed of my union, actors' equity. *Los Angeles Times*, 13 August.
- Hunt, Michael. 1987. *Ideology and U.S. foreign policy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kellman, John. 1986. *American myth and the legacy of Vietnam*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kinder, Marsha. n.d. The power of adaptation in *Apocalypse now*.
- LaCapra, Dominick. 1985. *History and criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- McClintock, Anne. 1992. The angel of progress: Pitfalls of the term "Post Colonialism." *Social Text* 10 (2&3): 85-6.
- McKinley, William. 1987. Remarks to a Methodist delegation. In *The Philippine reader*. Quezon City: Ken.
- Ng, Johnny. 1990. Bay Area Asian actors vow to continue fight. *Asia Week* (24 August).
- Platoon troubles S.F. vets. *The Hollywood Reporter*. 1987.
- San Juan, E. Jr. 1992. *Articulations of power in ethnic and racial studies in the United States*. New Jersey: Humanities Press.
- Soja, Edward. 1993. History: Geography, modernity. In *The cultural studies reader*, ed. Simon During. New York: Routledge.
- Stephason, Andrew. 1988. Regarding postmodernism—A conversation with Fredric Jameson. In *Universal abandon*, ed. Andrew Ross. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sussman, Gerald. 1992. Bulls in the (Indo) China shop. *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 20 (1): 26.
- Yoshikawa, Yoko. 1994. The heat is on, Miss Saigon coalition. In *The state of Asian America: Activism and resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan. Boston: Southend Press.