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William Peterson

Places for Happiness: Community, Self, and Performance in the Philippines

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Places for Happiness: Community, Self, and Performance in the Philippines

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 209 pages.

William Peterson works as senior lecturer at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia. He is a former director of the Centre for Theater and Performance, Monash University. His major works on performance are, among others, *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore* (Wesleyan University Press, 2001); "Performing Indigeneity in the Cordillera: Dance, Community, and Power in the Highlands of Luzon" (*Asian Theatre Journal*, 2010:246–68); and "Discipline and Pleasure: Dancing Inmates in Cebu's Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center" (*About Performance*, 2012:41–62).

Peterson's latest work comes as a very much welcomed empirically based addition to the body of scholarship on Philippine performance. Much of the scholarship in this field tends toward descriptive, interpretative, and historical approaches while focusing on specific performance forms or traditions. Peterson's work decidedly goes the other way by linking performance to identity formation, the creation of meaningful or meaning-imbued sense of place, and the very human pursuit of individual and collective happiness. He pursues these linkages not only through a thorough review of literature on Philippine culture and performance, but also and more importantly through insightful observations gleaned from regular visits to the field.

From the point of view of Philippine studies grounded on the concepts from the field, Peterson's introduction to his inquiry rightly includes, among others, Virgilio Enriquez's notion of *kapwa*, which encapsulates Philippine identity as a "unity of the 'self' and 'others'" (11). *Kapwa* as a concept can indeed explain many Philippine values and their behavioral correlates that may very well be observed in performative events such as rituals and festivals. As seen in many Philippine ritual-festivals, such as that of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo, Manila, or the Peñafrancia of Naga City, there is a Filipino propensity to come together regularly in extremely dire conditions to pursue potentially dangerous ritual acts. Such collective action that reconstitutes self-in-community, which is well illustrated in Peterson's work, can be said to convincingly stem from this conception of self. Augmenting the concept of *kapwa*, he uses F. Landa Jocano's notion of *kalooban* (interiority), which includes "the inner dimensions of personal consciousness that combines the

perceptions, the mental state and the emotional well-being of a person vis-à-vis the situation or condition within which interaction is carried out or about to take place” (97). One external expression of *kalooban* is found in “*dama* (perception through intuitive feel),” which in turn is operationalized through “the actual practice or compassion” or *damay* (106). Among lowland Christian communities, *damay* is a most important concept in understanding the whys and wherefores of the *panata* (oath), which propels many to embark on acts of self-sacrifice during Holy Week, linking the suffering of Christ to that of self and others. The *panata*, therefore, integrates the person’s *loob* (interior) with the *labas* (exterior) through performance.

From a discussion of Philippine perceptions of self, Peterson proceeds to present a “*bayan* action model.” This model constitutes his most significant contribution to theory building in the field of performance studies as presented in this tome. It operationalizes the “relational” aspects of Filipino identity in the conceptualizations of “*bayan* as people,” “*bayan* as place,” “*bayan* as nation,” and “*bayan* as cultural imaginary” (174–79). “*Bayan* as people,” which may be understood as the totality of individuals who self-identify with or who are ascribed the label of “Filipino,” constitutes the encompassing sphere in Peterson’s visual representation of this model. The three others constitute smaller interlocking spheres located at the center of the larger encompassing one. “*Bayan* as place” refers to the “physical space of the archipelago” as well as to the smaller-than-the-nation communities that “self-define by location, religion, shared cultural practices” (174) and others. “*Bayan* as nation” refers to that network of constructed loyalties or to those who have invested in the project of the nation or national formation itself. “*Bayan* as cultural imaginary” may be understood as that sphere of reality where Filipinos create meanings regarding self and their shared way of life. Using this model, Peterson persuasively locates specific performances in terms of their relative distance or proximity to discourses on the nation.

Peterson’s model offers great potential in explaining how and why some performance traditions in the Philippines are hardly known at the center or seen in presentations nationally or internationally, while others such as the Tausug *pangalay* and the Maranao *singkil*, among others, have achieved statuses as national icons. The prestige accorded to these two dances is largely due to their inclusion in the repertoires of dance companies such as the Bayanihan Dance Company. In the case of the Bayanihan, “*bayan* as cultural imaginary” as seen in the act of devising and (re)presenting a

Philippine repertoire through processes of inclusion and exclusion overlaps with “bayan as nation” as seen in the company’s enviable position as the “Philippine National Dance Company,” a title bestowed by no less than an act of Congress. Like the census and the map, the dance repertoire of an officially recognized company is therefore another way of (re)imag(in)ing the nation. Inclusion in this repertoire therefore bestows upon the artefact of dance the power to (re)present the Philippines and to define the Filipino.

That being said, Peterson’s view on the pangalay is perhaps in need of some updating. He refers to this traditional dance form as “a product of Tausug, Samal, and Badjao peoples of Sulu” (124). More recent studies on the dances of the southern Philippines and North Borneo differentiate pangalay as a Tausug tradition, *igal* as a Sama Sitangkai, Sama Kubang, and Sama Tabawan tradition, and *pamansak* as a Sama Bangingi (or Balanguingui), Sama Siasi, and Yakan (another Sinama-speaking people) tradition. These various traditions differ from each other in terms of musical and dance repertoires, kinesthetics, costumes, properties, and instrumentation. The distinct instrumentation held by each of these different groups has been established by Alain Martenot and Jose Maceda in their seminal work titled *Sama de Sitangkai* (Paris: SELAF-ORSTOM, 1980). To hold these traditions as falling under the singular label of pangalay can only be seen as a failure to recognize important cultural differences in performance among distinct ethnolinguistic groups.

Peterson also mentions that pangalay “no longer exists as a significant cultural force on its home ground in the Sulu Archipelago” (175). The basis for this rather bold conclusion is not substantiated in the text. Any visitor to the Sulu Archipelago can easily observe that the pangalay is still very much performed in *lami-lamian* (literally, “merry-making” in Tausug and Sinama) wedding night celebrations and during other festivities such as the Maulud Nabi, the celebration of the birthday of the prophet Muhammad. Furthermore, a brisk trade of DVD products that feature pangalay dancing exists between the southern Philippines and Sabah, Malaysia. These DVD products feature Sabah-based Tausug singers, among others, backed up by dancers performing pangalay in the *pakiring*, or contemporary style, accompanied by the synthesizer or electronic organ. Clearly, the dance is not at all diminished in terms of spiritual, social, or artistic significance. It is not only alive, but also evolving. This misreading of the significance of pangalay reveals a gap in Peterson’s work. Although he specifically made

a caveat regarding the noncomprehensiveness of his work, this gap must be acknowledged. Despite mention of the pangalay and the singkil, the traditional and “tradition-inflected” performances of the Muslim Filipinos and *katutubo* (Mindanao-based indigenous groups) are largely unexamined in this otherwise wonderful work.

Gaps notwithstanding, Peterson’s book presents students of Philippine culture and society a compelling read in seven chapters on how Filipinos craft identity, a shared sense of community, and collective aspirations through performance. In particular, his chapter on the Moriones (chapter 3) of Marinduque shines in its convincing argument on how a community-based performance shapes individual and collective identity, and at the same time how it is shaped by forces such as powerful members of the local elite who perceive their political interests to be linked to performance. He illustrates these points through a detailed case study of the *moryonan* masked-penitent practice, which includes its early beginnings as established by Fray Dionisio Santiago in the 1880s, the emergence of so-called “orders,” “legions,” and other organizations devoted to the preservation of its authentic character from the 1960s onward, and the later intervention of members of the provincial political elite and other local actors to change the general appearance of the *morion* masked performer as well as to transform it into a touristic event embedded in Holy Week celebrations from the 1970s onward. In chapter 7 Peterson’s interrogation of Juana Change, a stand-up comedy act featured in Liberal Party rallies in the 2010 national elections, likewise eloquently illustrates how performance can be used as a tool to support certain political interests and at the same time as a tool of resistance against the political culture that these very same interests stand for. He succeeds in showing the political in performance and therefore underscores the peril in underestimating it or portraying it as unnecessary or trivial.

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