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Boundaries in Gamalinda's *Volcano*

Tomas N. Santos



Confessions of a Volcano. By Eric Gamalinda. Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 1990.

The concept of boundaries is not that unusual to a Filipino: islands serve as natural boundaries, dialectal differences serve as boundaries, languages create them (Tagalog, Spanish, English), and as a people we have accepted their presence.

About 300 active volcanoes ring the Pacific from Chile to Alaska, passing through such places as Villarica and Osorno, through Cotopaxi and Ruiz, through Fuego and Mount St. Helens; and then from Japan, passing by the prefectures of Oshima and Kirishima and through Fuji, past the Philippine plate down to Australia and New Zealand. (p. 125)

This epigraph highlights a unifying metaphor in Eric Gamalinda's novel. The ring of fire along the Pacific rim links such diverse places as Mexico, North America, Australia, Japan, and the Philippines. The work of Gamalinda, like his unifying metaphor of volcanoes, links the Filipino novel with other literary traditions. For example, in *Planet Waves*, the main character, Joaquin Alfonso, sprouts angel's wings but is unable to fly. This is reminiscent of the story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" by the Latin American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The "strange and wonderful parchments" bequeathed to Joaquin by his grandfather which Joaquin tries to decipher are functionally similar to Melquiades' Sanskrit parchments in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In *Confessions of a Volcano*, the use of "otherworldliness" and "mirroring," the point-of-view character being detached from his "present," is the motif in Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country*. The image of a foetus, "its small mouth opening . . . letting out a small, silent cry" (p. 119) is a central metaphor in the work of another Japanese writer, Kenzaburo Oe.

What we have evolving here is a poetics of appropriation. Gamalinda is omnivorous: his baggage of allusions includes French modernist painting, Hindu philosophy, Zen Buddhism, Einstein's "On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies," Dante's *Divine Comedy*, haiku poetry. Gamalinda's work assumes that Filipino identity has already been destabilized, and that in the postmodern era, perhaps the only eventuality is that of pastiche: we are not one thing, but rather, we are many things (bits and pieces of things).

I would like to retrieve, explore, and remark upon the aesthetic that informs the production of pastiche; in particular, I wish to show how this aesthetic moves away from traditional Filipino culture but is at the same time reined in by the social and historical forces that work upon the literature.

The Psycho-Social Landscape

Confessions is an important text because it explores a different psycho-social landscape, it works within a Buddhist sensibility, a Japanese aesthetic, and places the Filipino novel on unfamiliar grounds: an Asian tradition. Philippine tradition as a mixture of folk belief, Roman Catholicism, and Spanish and American influences seems to have developed apart from major Asian religious and philosophical traditions. It is this other Asian tradition that Daniel, the novel's protagonist, encounters in his visit to Japan. During his visit, he learns about Filipino contract workers, the Japayuki, the pleasure girls imported from other Asian countries. He witnesses the exploitation of these workers. At the same time—and quite at odds with social reality—Daniel has an aesthetic pursuit: he is fascinated by the life and work of Osamu Dazai, an early twentieth-century Japanese writer. His fascination with Dazai, who committed suicide by throwing himself into the Tokyo River, leads him to recreate a Japanese writer's sensibility. Daniel visits Hiroshima, Kyoto, the temples, Mt. Fuji, and as an aesthete, he endows these visits with haiku-like moments.

The temple bells were tolling when Daniel arrived in Kyoto. Their deep hollow sounds rose above the din of traffic, like blossoms pushing out of a sea of wild grass. (p. 31)

In an un-numbered chapter between chs. 12 and 13 (again, challenging the idea of demarcations), he quotes Basho's famous frog-jumping-in-the-pond haiku and, later in the chapter, offers his own image, of light breaking out of the mist on a lake. The sense of movement against stasis, of the momentary interpenetrating with the eternal—these are the elements not just of Basho's haiku but of Zen Buddhism. The Zen aesthetic is based on the assumption that experience is basically empty, that there are no substantive links between phenomena. Rather, things simply arise and converge, moments can comprise eternities (or that time is relative), self is a hindrance to enlightenment, and truth is sometimes perceived suddenly and unexpectedly. Gamalinda embraces the aesthetics of Zen as one who has come home to a native philosophy. This is the philosophy that justifies his experiments with the form of the novel, his appropriation of the metaphysics that underlie what appears to be random narrative selection, or what appears to be arbitrary phraseology.

Planet Waves is a novel, yes, but it is also a diary, chapbook, film script, soap opera, almanac, scrapbook. *Confessions* is a collage of dream narration,

photo album, newspaper clippings, tourbook, science text, journal. These forms of narration are "moments" that are gathered together to comprise an experience, and since experience is empty, one is liberated within the text. One allows the narration to move as it will, apart from any preconceived ideas we may have about literature. In ch. 11, a dream narration, this line occurs: "There is faint music coming from somewhere. Fragments of a violin, shards of a concerto." At first one is stunned by the awkwardness of "fragments of a violin"—pieces of a broken Stradivarius?—until one sees the even more incongruous "shards of a concerto." Then we realize that what he's after is a bending of our perceptions in order for us to *see* (as opposed to *to hear*) the music. This, then, is a way for us to begin to see the affinity between Buddhist thought and the postmodern experience. Both share a similar aesthetic, and both allow the text to be supple, open, and free.

The Collapse of Boundaries

If boundaries cease to exist between types of narration, or between types of perception, then other boundaries cease to be as well. In the narrator's mind, the boundary between Manila and Tokyo doesn't exist. Both have their fleshpots, their garish neon signs, their commuters. It rains in both places. About Tokyo in the summer, Daniel says: "It feels like home." Young Filipina women are exploited in both places: in Tokyo, at the Crazy Horse Club, and in Manila at the Pierre Uomo. Both clubs are Japanese-owned. Clearly, the relationship between exploited and exploiter, between colonized and colonizer, moves beyond geographical lines. The subjugation of Filipina women collapses the boundaries between Tokyo and Manila and represents a new kind of Japanese imperialism, one made possible by economic superiority.

The collapsing of boundaries has further implications. The paradigm of departure-exile-and-return (the paradigm of initiation stories, the paradigm of the novel of education) no longer applies. Daniel leaves Tokyo and returns to Manila, but he cannot leave Tokyo behind, just as he has never left Manila. This psychological stasis is created by the ubiquitous Japayuki: they were already in Manila at the various clubs for Japanese tourists, and he comes face to face with them again in Tokyo. He can never really leave home, since "home" is wherever social reality threatens to deny him the preciousness of his experiences. Events precipitated during his visit continue in their inevitable course. In Manila, he learns from Luisa of Rosie's death. The first thing he witnesses on his return to Manila is the death of one Elias Gomez at the hands of fanatical Marcos supporters. His attempt to escape from journalistic routine leads him to "Doc El," a *poseur* who seeks publicity for his charitable acts, and who invites Daniel to the Paradise Inn, a brothel. Doc El persuades Daniel to spend the night with a prostitute. The experience turns nightmarish when the prostitute (on drugs) vomits all over the place, and has to be taken to a hospital. This experience serves as

a structural counterbalance to the otherworldliness with which he endows his perception of Luisa. His last view of Luisa, for instance, is when she gets lost among the dancers at a bon festival.

Finally the dance came full circle, and Daniel saw Luisa among the crowd. . . . For a moment he thought it wasn't her: she seemed to look like everybody else, with her dark hair and eyes shut. Perhaps she had become one of them, . . . She saw Daniel looking at her, and waved her hand. She looked very young under the soft pink lanterns, very young and very happy, her hair blown back by a slow, sharp wind that had risen about the park. That was the last time Daniel saw her, and the last he would remember as he stepped off the plane in Manila. (p. 91)

In his romanticized view of Luisa, Daniel sees a Filipina who looks "more Japanese than the Japanese" (p. 3), and who, because of her energy, warmth, and optimism rises above her circumstances. Daniel even believes her story about Kato marrying her to enable her to reside permanently in Japan. In his naivete, he doesn't wonder why she continues to work at the Crazy Horse Club. His nightmarish interlude with the Manila prostitute is emblematic of Daniel's refusal to consolidate Manila reality with Tokyo fantasy. Later, he hears by a long-distance call from Tokyo that Luisa has thrown herself off of a sixth floor apartment, holding her baby in her arms, and that she and the baby died from the fall. Perhaps for Daniel's sake, this is how the narrator imagines Luisa's death:

as they passed the window she looked out, and she must have been amazed at what she saw: a thick, pristine wind howling like a polar mammoth over the streets, an icy furred mastodon over Itabashi. . . . It seemed so free out there. . . . She lunged, in one swift arc, through the window, into the soft, diaphanous volutes of that wind. For a moment she must have been terrified by the fall: she clutched the child closer to her. . . . In the reports they gave to the police the men said she had been crazed with drugs, and had been threatening to kill the baby. (pp. 163-64)

The last sentence in the passage breaks from what precedes it, and contrasts the two languages at work in the narration: the first is the language of the poet—where Luisa's death is idealized in her plunge into the "soft, diaphanous volutes" of the pristine wind. The second is the language that will eventually become part of the police report—death due to drug addiction—the language of expediency. The same dual language describes Osamu Dazai's plunge into the Tokyo River. The poetic:

holding tightly onto the hand of a mistress [here, note the parallel to Luisa's clutching her child closer as she jumps] . . . two figures falling swiftly . . . waiting for the water's glassy surface to rise to meet them;

and exhilarated, waiting for the whole earth to take them in a swift, violent embrace. (pp. 74-75)

This contrasts with the subsequent description of bloated bodies floating on the river (p. 75). The language of the report is suggested later on: Dazai's suicide may have been caused by an addiction to drugs. "In Tokyo right after the war, Dazai's wife had him committed to an insane asylum to cure . . . his addiction to pabinal, a pain killer" (p. 171).

Dazai, the legend, and Luisa, the victim, are caught in the polarities of the ideal and the commonplace, the poetic and the banal, and they either equalize or trade places: Luisa, the legend; Dazai, the victim. That they will never truly equalize (one is Japanese, the other Filipino; one is male, the other female; one is an artist, the other a nightclub hostess) is beyond the narrator's articulation. All he can tell us at the end of the novel is that "we choose to go on living not because we are too drained even to bother killing ourselves, but because of some obstinate, burning instinct for hope."

Conclusion

To return to the epigraph. All volcanoes are connected; the slightest murmur from one vibrates among all three hundred. The "burning instinct for hope" is one such murmur. "Confessions," however, as in *Confessions of a Volcano*, bespeaks a connectedness on a deeper level. If the volcano *could* confess, what admissions would it make? And why should it speak? The narrator says:

In the area of political censure Daniel is more restrained than I am, or perhaps I refuse to impose my own sentiments on my characters. But he and I feel the same helplessness when we think about conditions in our country. (p. 139)

The distinction the author makes between himself and Daniel emphasizes the tension in the novel. On the one hand, there is the prevailing aesthetic—that which makes possible his experiments with form, that which empowers him to use language in a new way, and that which allows him to discover his own sensibility in another Asian tradition. On the other hand, there is the undeniable presence of racism, of exploitation, and of economic reality.

The legacy of colonialism is perhaps an unfathomable guilt, a profound disturbance in the very core of ourselves, a psychological condition that keeps us from taking action. If the aesthetic pursuit and the social burden are to be reconciled, they are brought together through a middle passage. Fantasy is real; the real is fantastic. This is the Middle Way as conceived in Buddhist terms, where polar opposites are inclusive rather than exclusive, a "both/and" rather than an "either/or" condition. Through this middle passage, we begin to appreciate difference and commonality, private and public, silence and utterance, and ultimately, inaction and action.