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American Workers, Colonial Power, by Fujita-Rony

Review Author: Charlie Samuya Veric

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Book Reviews

American Workers, Colonial Power: Philippine Seattle and the Transpacific West, 1919–1941. By Dorothy B. Fujita-Rony. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003. 302 pages.

Carlos Bulosan is a key figure in the imagination of the Filipino diaspora to the United States, so that a history so conceived without him is easily a scandal. Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, for example, is an indispensable text that documents the struggles, indubitably private yet evocative of the social collective, which colonial relations between the United States and the Philippines made possible. No student of the Filipino diaspora wishing to understand the past will do without Bulosan.

The reading and the dissemination of Bulosan, however, have become so deeply institutionalized they risk suffering the terrible fortune of institutions. Institutional, therefore official, performances of remembrance have the tendency to concentrate on a privileged symbol, so that they forget the multitudes from which they draw the power of their commemoration. Consequently, the necessary, albeit arduous, question must be raised. If Bulosan speaks for the whole, is Bulosan's speaking equivalent to the speeches of the parts that constitute the totality? If the elements are given tongues, what narratives of the whole will they tell?

Here, thus, is Dorothy B. Fujita-Rony's critical intervention. Her deeply compelling book *American Workers, Colonial Power: Philippine Seattle and the Transpacific West, 1919–1941* strives to offer alternative, but not necessarily different, accounts that make sense of the experiences born in the aftermath of the colonial encounters between two uneven countries, the United States and the Philippines. Fujita-Rony's book looks into the Filipino diaspora to Seattle between the two World Wars and brings out the particular nuances that attend the way the Filipino diasporic community lives out and claims, in and for itself, the daily meanings of class, space, race, and gender in the embattled American terrain.

Fujita-Rony admittedly frames the logic of her labor within the context of American and Asian American studies even as she endeavors to reconfigure the debates in the domains of American social history, immigration studies, and the history of the American West. No doubt the book attempts to recover the past of the Filipino diasporic community by using the account that the community itself writes in absence. This is history, therefore, whose often forgotten life and perspective come from below, one that struggles against erasure and the ravages of institutional forgetting while asserting the equal importance of "private," that is, personal, agency in the making of social, hence, collective history.

The country that we have come to know as Asian America, however, has been associated predominantly with Chinese American and Japanese American experiences. Thus, Fujita-Rony's project becomes more relevant and urgent especially in the light of the peripheral existence of Filipino diasporic history in the greater narrative of Asian America's annals. Fujita-Rony argues that the Filipino diasporic experience necessitates an understanding of the specific historical forces that are peculiar to the phenomenon. The author points out, for example, the pitfalls of subsuming the diasporic Filipinos under the overarching rubric of "immigrants." Given the colonial condition that obtained between the two countries at the time, the diasporic Filipinos who journeyed to the empire's heartland were already exposed to the so-called American ways of life via the colonial structures that the Americans instituted in the Philippines. The Filipinos, moreover, were able to enter freely the U.S. territory until the passage of the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934, which effectively banned their entry as American nationals.

It is because of such an exceptional relationship that Fujita-Rony begs us to examine the Filipino diasporic phenomenon within the framework of U.S.-Philippines colonial dialectic. The formation of the Filipino community in Seattle coincides, Fujita-Rony suggests, with the grand design of U.S. colonial military and government. Fujita-Rony explains that the Filipino community in Seattle "was in itself formed by the colonial relationship, not just how American colonials from the Philippines created a space for themselves in the colonial metropole of Seattle, but also how Seattle, in turn, was changed by its Filipina/o American residents" (p. 19). Indeed the geopolitical order in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century radically transformed the U.S. economic and military interests in the Pacific area, making the Philippines the strategic base that facilitated the traffic of trades and peoples in the transpacific region.

One may observe, however, that Fujita-Rony's proposition is not entirely original. (Other thinkers, E. San Juan, Jr. most prominently, have assiduously maintained the importance of the complex U.S.-Philippines dialectic in grasping the question of the Filipino diaspora to the U.S. that, up to the present, persists in the form of global, state-sponsored trafficking of Filipino laboring bodies.) What is rather evident is that the project is marked by its broadly

inclusive gesture. Earlier it is noted that Fujita-Rony extends beyond the borders of American social history in order to locate the place of the Filipino community in the continuing definition of the American social geography. Perhaps what explains the centrality of place in this study—the “place” of the Filipino community in the constellation of other locales both real and imagined—is the fact that one of the major motivations behind the writing of the book is to restore the political spaces of those whose narratives and bodies have long been placed under erasure. Space as the allegory of reclamation and, effectively, as the methodology of restoration accordingly becomes the underlying force that powers the desire of Fujita-Rony’s task. The author, for instance, asks and inquires into how gender privilege determines who gets reclaimed, or why the male hero permeates the writing of the community’s history.

Bulosan’s example comes to mind here. It is perilous to assume, however, that the narrative of Bulosan is beyond the pale of gender. The case of Bulosan, far from being exclusive of gender, makes us better understand the logic of gender that operates in his imagination of what America represents. Fujita-Rony makes it abundantly clear, however, and understandably so, that her work wishes not to perpetrate the exclusion of women from the permanent construction of the Filipino community’s collective history. One observes that in Fujita-Rony’s designation, the customary term *Filipino* becomes *Filipina/o* in order to repair, according to her, the marginalization of women in the official annals of pre-World War II Filipino American history.

It is curious, though, that the overarching motif of inclusion resonates ultimately in what the book professes to be its purpose. Even as Fujita-Rony, for example, asserts the specificity and difference of the Filipino American history, she also maintains that her efforts are intended to complete the writing of what she calls a more nuanced and expansive U.S. history—in other words, the formation of American culture as a whole. It seems, thus, that the antagonisms one finds active in the diasporic Filipinos’ experience of class, space, race, and gender risk, in the overall context of Fujita-Rony’s labor, appearing like a catalog of a past existence that serves unconsciously to sustain the present myth of America as inclusive, because multicultural, society. Such a deed detracts us indeed from grasping the violence that inheres in the performance of a “classed,” “spaced,” “raced,” and “gendered” being in a terrain as discordant as that of America. Consequently, the book may end up suggesting implicitly that much of the conditions of pre-war Asian America are memories rather than, properly, events of the continuing past even as we admit that the present, as we know it, may not be entirely the same as the era before it. The diasporic Filipino community’s particularity is displayed for it to be visible. In truth, however, it ends up becoming a function of the universal narrative of U.S. history. The productive antagonisms of the particular experiences of the diasporic Filipino are classified, thus controlled, in order to propel the absolute coherence of an all-embracing U.S. history.

It is true that the history of the diasporic Filipino community overlaps with that of the U.S. However, when Fujita-Rony declares that the use of the Filipino diasporic community is to complete the writing of the so-called expansive U.S. history, is she not close to obscuring the complex interests that determine the very constitution of history and its writing? History for whom? And for what purpose? Certainly it is exceedingly unfair to demand that a single book answer such a fundamental query. It is evident, nevertheless, that the determination of the usefulness and purposefulness of history is a permanently contested act—contingent upon those who realize history's instrumental promise.

The great irony in Fujita-Rony's counsel that we view the history of the Filipino community as nomadic rather than permanent comes into fullness, for history becomes beholden to the desires of the one who commands it in its wandering. History's guide, its angel, is Fujita-Rony, but can we trust an historian who cannot get the verity of her annals straight? Fujita-Rony writes that José Rizal got his first education in Spain; that Emilio Aguinaldo succeeded Andres Bonifacio as the leader of the Katipunan; that Malay peoples moving up from Indonesia displaced the aboriginal Negritos. An earnest student of Philippine history knows that Rizal's first formal education was at the Ateneo Municipal and, later, at the University of Sto. Tomas (misspelled in the book as University of San Tomas) under the tutelage, sure enough, of Spanish teachers. Aguinaldo was the first president of the Philippine Republic. Bonifacio was the leader of the secret society. Lastly, historians, chief of whom is William Henry Scott, have long refuted the theory of migration via the land bridge, which Otley H. Bayer, among others, had notoriously propounded.

All history, of course, is fraught with legends. What concern us, however, are the costs of such errors. What happens to history that is founded on discredited fictions? What are the perils of writing the history of the long invisible only to return to the history of the long visible? What results when the advantages of strategic silence share space with the exploitative uses of being silenced? A substantial part of the book, for example, is based on oral history. Fujita-Rony analyzes interviews of Asian Americans that the Washington State Oral/Aural History Program gathered in celebration of the American bicentennial year in 1976. Records at mostly American university archives are also studied. While it is true that the interviews make us realize the purposefulness of personal agency in the reconstruction of collective history, the author admits that they rather have the proclivity to underscore the narratives of "progress." How then do we extricate the history of the diaspora if the narratives of its children remain most problematic? Who and what do we turn to? One of the most valuable properties of our time is the fact that one cannot be outside: that our history is one of imbrication. Such a state, however, makes it all the more necessary to define, in and for itself, the particular and maintain its particularity lest it suffers from being a mere function in the grand order of totality.

Fujita-Rony, finally, does not deserve to be castigated for her errors. More than anything, her example demonstrates the danger that confronts us in our continuing struggle with, and understanding of, the fatal art of the invisible. The historian's inadequacies are, hence, futures for us who, like her, endeavor to change the world we continue to interpret. The scandal of insufficiency is always instructive.

Charlie Samuya Veric
Department of English
Ateneo de Manila University

Barlaan at Josaphat: Modernisadong Edisyon ng Salin ni Fray Antonio de Borja. Edited by Virgilio S. Almario. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003. 402 pages.

In this edition of *Barlaan at Josaphat*, Virgilio S. Almario fills in another lacunae in the country's collective memory, which has relied heavily on works put out by popular publishing houses. The book is a welcome addition to the number of critical editions of Philippine literary classics, already among which are *Urbana at Feliza* and *Si Tandang Basio Macunat* (the latter also edited by Almario), both part of the Bulawan series published by the Sentro ng Wikang Filipino of the University of the Philippines.

Almario's latest effort would undoubtedly generate interest on the history of the novel or prose literature in the country and raise questions literary and historical, from e.g., the actual hegemonic hold of the Spaniards on eighteenth-century Philippines to the influence of Indianization, a pervasive theme in Southeast Asian historiography. Here lies the importance of the publication of the *Barlaan at Josaphat*: the renewal of interest on a field of literary scholarship which has long been neglected because of the inaccessibility of texts. The edition includes, aside from the text of *Barlaan and Josaphat* itself, two essays by Almario on the work, a glossary of words no longer part of contemporary speech, a copy of the original title page and the preliminaries (permits from the censors, a complimentary poem by Don Felipe de Jesus, etc.).

The essays are important for the light they shed on *Barlaan at Josaphat*. Of interest are Almario's correction of errors in previous scholarship on de Borja's work. He states that the book first saw print in 1712, not 1708 as previously held, the year that a permit for its publication was secured. Previous studies also say that Don Felipe de Jesus lived in Bulacan. Almario proves that he was actually a Manileño. Further, while it is generally believed that de Borja's work is a translation of a work in Greek by San Juan Damaseno, Almario warns readers that this is merely conjectural. De Borja's source text could have been some other work. He further laments the lack of familiarity with the Spanish language among contemporary Filipino scholars, their reli-