

philippine studies

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

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Philippine Studies vol. 41, no. 2 (1993): 251–254

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

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Song of Yvonne. By Cecilia Manguerra Brainard. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1991. 186 pages.

With each passing generation, Filipinos are more inclined to let slip from their collective memories the horrendous events of the Japanese Occupation fifty years ago. One result is that, unwittingly, they become accomplices to the attempt of Japanese revisionists, in recent "historical" accounts, to deny that their war ministry ever dreamed of aggressive empire building and to assert that they were forced by American treachery to invade the Philippines. In addition, during nearly half of the "postwar period" Filipinos have had reason to examine violence done by themselves against their hopes of national fulfillment; and therefore to be grateful for gifts and loans from the financial giant which Japan has become since determining to leave war and the production of war materials to other countries.

Who then could feel guilty of having no knowledge whatsoever of A.V. H. Hartendorp's *The Japanese Occupation of the Philippines*, I and II (1967), or Teodoro Agoncillo's *The Fateful Years* (also in two volumes: 1965), or Higinio de Uriarte's *A Basque Among the Guerrillas of Negros* (1962) or Jesus A. Villamor's *They Never Surrendered* (1982), or the many books about Bataan and Corregidor, the Death March, guerrilla action in Mindanao, liberation of survivors in Sto. Tomas and Los Baños, recorded by American writers? Only in the early 1990s did the United States begin to honor its battlefield promise of American citizenship to Filipino veterans, should they choose it. Nationalists were properly outraged by the protracted delay; but how many Filipinos themselves cared to know details of those war years, not out of perpetual thoughts of revenge or reparation, but so that lessons learned would not be lost; and so that the heroic or powerless dead would not be "killed again" by forgetfulness?

Faded from memory too is the fiction by those who personally endured the hardships, the soul-testing, of the early forties: such as J. C. Laya's *This Barangay* (1950); Stevan Javellana's *Without Seeing the Dawn* (1947); Edilberto Tiempo's *Watch in the Night* (1953), *More Than Conquerors* (1964), and *The Standard-Bearer* (1984). More memorable perhaps are Wilfrido D. Nolleto's

But For The Lovers (1970) and F. Sionil Jose's *Ermita* (1985) whose events flow largely from the rape of a Filipina by a Japanese soldier; but their seriousness may be lost on readers attracted only to their pungent eroticism.

Unlike these authors, Cecilia Manguerra Brainard was born, in Cebu, after the war. However, her father was a guerrilla engineer, just as Papa is in *Song of Yvonne*; and both real and fictional fathers brought their families temporarily to Mindanao, to survive under the leadership of renowned Col. Wendell Fertig. Brainard has listened carefully to "endless" anecdotes about the war, until she began to imagine herself the child Yvonne narrating this composite story. In her preface she laments that "Unlike Filipinos, the Japanese are very good at immortalizing injustices to them": they remember Nagasaki and Hiroshima, while Filipinos forget their own numerous dead, their own cultural as well as material wounds. Yet her principal motive in memorializing the days of wrath and wounds, Brainard says, is not to authenticate that victimization so much as thereby to dramatize the "triumph of the Filipino spirit over foreign oppression."

She does not flinch from describing atrocities: the rape and mutilation of a nurse; the beheading of Doc Mendez's family; the torture of a former governor, after shooting his wife and bayoneting his boys because he refuses to join the puppet government; the massacre of entire towns; the loss of limbs from booby traps . . . Other events equally terrible but not caused by the enemy are presented: Nida's pregnancy which results when she distracts a Japanese guard from imminent discovery of contraband in Mama's possession; the accidental severing of Bitong's toe with a bolo; Doc's nearly fatal penitential self-crucifixion; the betrayal of guerrilla leaders by Martin Lewis, an American *amok*. Each episode is as carefully detailed as if the narrative were autobiographical. Yet Brainard prevents the novel from descending into either melodrama or polemic by maintaining young Yvonne as her singular narrator throughout, a girl not yet in her teens. "I lived that terrible War through Yvonne," she writes in her preface, meaning that in a special way she intended a story of innocence/naivete gradually tested and tempered but never wholly torn to shreds by a violence for which the close, simple family life in Ubec (Brainard's code word for Cebu) could hardly prepare Yvonne. Even as the girl's experience darkens and she realizes that only a thin line separates night and day, death and life, the perspective of a growing child is faithfully kept. *Adults* are making war. *Her* share of its pain is naturally scaled down—except as she is constantly aware of and responding to the greater trials of her family or their friends.

It is this controlled resonance which raises the *Song of Yvonne* even beyond its evident importance as a documentary of Visayan resistance to the Japanese invasion; and which adds an unexpected dimension to this story of a ritual passage into premature adulthood. By the time of liberation Yvonne finds herself bleeding, and her mother explains to her that this is the beginning of her period. What is symbolized but not stated is the fact

that blood, so recklessly shed in ambush and torture chamber, also signifies life and the promise of continuity. Her menstruation, for example, parallels Nida's ultimate decision not to abort the child which rape has placed inside her; Bitong's determination to go on despite loss of one big toe; crucified Doc Mendez's near-death experience and "resurrection"; Engineer Macaraig's vision of Ubec rebuilt, based on his understanding even of pre-history: "I saw people living in Ubec centuries before me and centuries after me—an endless parade of humanity through time. And I knew that invaders could not really destroy Ubec, could never destroy its people." He is including self-interested Americans like Lewis among those who threaten the Filipino dream not just of nationalism but of peaceful, communal life. The question of excessive American interference (Lolo Peping and Gil Alvarez's grandparents have all witnessed the atrocities and needless deaths by famine which occurred during the Philippine-American War) is treated forthrightly, though with forgiveness for those who later fought alongside the Filipino scouts and guerrillas. What is acknowledged is that the resoluteness of Filipinos under fire is final proof of their loyalty not to American sovereignty but to democratic ideals of self-determination applied to Filipinos as a viable nation. The Macaraigs and Alvarezes take no lasting pleasure in their victories; war weariness, both in conscience as well as in body, sets in early. Their sole wish is merely to return safely to one another, once more. Symbolic of the price of violence even in self-defense is the loss of Doc Mendez's strange ability to judge the health of his patients on the basis of colorful auras surrounding them, as he engages more and more in military action.

Though Yvonne herself understands that the prewar world can never be wholly regained (the lost Eden theme common to much of Philippine literature), in the midst of change she senses the need to conserve/restore constancy drawn from the native culture's narratives of faith. At first it is only curiosity which makes her listen to Laydan, the family cook, tell of her youth as a disciple of Inuk, chanter of epic tales. Laydan herself once briefly became a singer of legendary events, until excessive pride stole her voice away because she failed to follow Inuk's advice, to *become* the epic; to surrender self-image to folk feeling and need. But having been humbled by war, Laydan's voice is restored in the midst of quiet tropical lands. Meanwhile her stories of the many-breasted goddess Maybuyan, mother to all those in need, and of woman warrior Bongkatolan who helped save the Ilianon tribe from rapacious Maguindanaos, teach Yvonne the means of comforting those who suffer and sorrow. When Laydan dies (apparently summoned by a companionate angel of death across a country river), it is Yvonne who chants the tale of Tuwaang and the Maiden of the Buhong Sky: the rainbow brings promise of sunnier days, after a giant creates havoc; and the slain are raised to life through the application of betel juice.

Other mythic remembrances become similar counterforces to the horrors of war. Nida's unwanted pregnancy moves Yvonne to sing of how Tuwaang rescued the Maiden of Monawon from Deathless Man by discovering his soul concealed in a flute, and smashing it. When Yvonne finds the corpse of a Japanese airman and contemplates the possibility that he too might have a child at home, she sings of Lam-ang whose bones were reassembled, after he was swallowed by a monster fish and his mother's apron restored him to life. Later Yvonne distracts Cris, the disturbed survivor of the Alvarez family, with the tale of Banna, turned into a python but restored to full humanity and marriage by a stranger's betel juice. Finally, at the time of liberation and the family's return to Ubec City, Yvonne rediscovers Inuk's vest originally given her on Laydan's deathbed. Immediately the girl thinks of how the Ilianons, ravaged and dispirited by Maguindanao warriors, were resurrected and guided by Agyu by ship to a place of paradise, Nalandagan.

Like Laydan, Yvonne has *become* the spine and flesh of her people. They are her song. She is the future; the past recreated, recovered; her song is the spirit of healing, the resilience of tribal/national memory that will not let essences die.

By splicing together folktale, family anecdotes, and the realities of slaughter, mitigated by the possibility of humaneness, Brainard has herself *become* Yvonne; has *become* singer of the songstress who commemorates a people at their best, in times at their worst; and Brainard has managed that singularity-rising-from-complexity by finding the proper form for her earlier work. Stories of Ubec occur in *Woman with Horns* (1987), where however they are mixed indiscriminately with other sketches and anecdotes, and are in careless disorder themselves. But at least whatever violence occurs in that earlier volume is undercut; and folklore is given credence rather than ridiculed and rejected as mere superstition. Similarly, the folktales which she collected from California Filipinas, in *7 Stories from 7 Sisters* (1992) are presented without any context cultural or otherwise, as if tattered heirlooms for children suspended in an ethnic limbo. Yet at least even these vocal exercises have proven, finally, to be appropriate preparation for a growing girl's plainsong united with both the Skyworld and humankind's collective unconscious, through a series of choric folk echoes—all become irrevocable voice, one song that sings itself: the epic Philippine Dream of diversified unity.