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FROM NOSTALGIA TO NIRVANA: A BUDDHIST EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACH TO DIASPORIC LITERARY FORMS

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Abstract
Like the diasporian, the Buddhist knows the displacement from home to homelessness. Practicing, the Buddhist makes homelessness her home. Writing, the diasporic writer (re)constructs a movable home in words. Using the Buddhist five thesis on form, this paper attempts to apply these principles to the notion of diaspora. Five new insights to the experience of diaspora are gained from this approach. The method is then applied to the diasporic Filipino poet Jose Garcia Villa's poem “Before, One, becomes, One.” In conclusion, it is argued that the Buddhist perspective offers a new critique useful in understanding the challenges of the postmodern world.

Keywords
Buddhism and literary forms, diasporic writing, Jose Garcia Villa

About the Author
Carlos Reyes wrote his doctorate on “The Ethics of Diaspora and the Aesthetics of Immanence: The Diversification of Bodies and Perspectives in Spinoza, Proust, and Joyce” while at the University of California, Berkeley. From this, he retains an interest in diasporic writings, aesthetics, literary studies, and emerging media. More recently, he is exploring how the teachings of Buddhism can provide a methodological critique for literary texts. He has taught for a number of years in Berkeley, and St. Olaf College, Minnesota, and is now in Vancouver.

STUDYING THE ART OF WANDERING WITH A SCIENCE OF THE MEANDERING MIND

Before tackling diasporic literary forms more specifically, I shall first show how Buddhist epistemology can be useful for analyzing form more generally. For this purpose, I shall be drawing on Buddhism not so much as a religion but more as a cognitive science, that is, as an intrinsic, empirical investigation of consciousness and its objects. In Tristes Tropiques, Claude Levi-Strauss, the great scholar of formal structures in myth, acknowledges his debt to Buddhist thought, posing the rhetorical question “What else, indeed, have I learned from the masters who taught me, the philosophers I have read, the societies I have visited and even from the science which is the pride of the West, apart from a few scraps of wisdom which, when laid end to end, coincide with the meditation of the Sage at the foot of the tree?” (411). Recognizing form then as a production of consciousness,
we can then draw on Buddhist epistemology as a conceptual toolbox for analyzing literary form both as a subjective mental construction and as an objective material structure.

MINDING THE BODY, EMBODYING THE MIND: BASIC BUDDHIST CONCEPTS

Five Theses on Form: Corporeal Transformations—Process as Reality

The Formed and the Unformed (First Thesis on Form)

*The Heart Sutra*, a key text of Mahayana Buddhism, puts forth a radical ontological proposition in its most famous line: *Form is emptiness, emptiness form*. The Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh interprets this paradoxical formulation as the deep recognition of how every entity is “empty of a separate independent self” or essence (Nhat Hanh 46). To put it another way, every existing “thing” depends on what-is-not-that-thing. Applying this proposition (henceforth referred to as the principle of emptiness) to our study of form, we arrive at the following aesthetic corollary: The existence of aesthetic form depends not only on the non-aesthetic but also on the unformed. In particular, to study form, one must investigate its inside (the aesthetically formed content shaped by authorial intention), as well as its outside (the non-aesthetic social and historical context, whose form cannot be attributed to any individual subjectivity). This perspective implies a critique—but not a
negation—both of formalism (with its exclusive preoccupation with the aesthetic) and of reactions to formalism (with their rejection of the aesthetic)—not as erroneous perspectives, but as incomplete ones. In short, form unfolds between the personal and the supra-personal, the intended and the unintended. Thus, because the writer that forms is also formed, the text is an indivisible combination of the formed and the unformed. Unlike Roland Barthes’s conception of the death of the author, this view of form from the perspective of emptiness simultaneously kills and saves the author (142-8). In aesthetic terms, the Zen koan “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him” becomes “If you meet the author on the road, kill him.”

Composition as Combination (Second Thesis on Form)

Buddhist ontological analysis identifies five aggregates as the components of all experiential phenomena: form, feeling, perception, consciousness, and volition. Since, according to the principle of emptiness, the five aggregates are necessarily interdependent, form is conditioned by the other four aggregates:

- Form is feeling.
- Form is perception.
- Form is consciousness.
- Form is volition.

Thus, to understand form, one has to investigate its affective, perceptual, cognitive, and volitional (or libidinal) dimensions.

To Form . . . To Embody . . . (Third Thesis on Form)

Also referred to as body, form in Buddhist thought is firmly grounded in the experience of embodiment. Accordingly, awareness of the body is a foundation of Buddhist mindfulness practice (Bodhi 281-5). Given this genetic linkage of form with embodiment an aesthetic interpretation, I arrive at my next thesis: The body is the most basic embodiment of form. To put it another way, the body is the primal work of art, the original aesthetic subject and object. This is substantiated by the fact that the body functions as a basic source, via metaphor, of formal conceptions of structure, (see, for example, Lakoff and Johnson’s Philosophy In the Flesh). Thus, from art to politics, modes of imagining form can often be traced back to modes of imagining the body.
Because literature recruits conceptions of the body to structure its forms, a focal point of my investigation of form will be an investigation of literary representations of the body along with their underlying conceptual bases.

**The Aesthetics of (De)Composition (Fourth Thesis on Form)**

Like the body, all forms are compositions. The Indo-European root of *art*—*ar*, meaning “to fit together”—reflects the compositional nature of all aesthetic objects. Formally speaking, the mimetic nature of art lies not in its reproduction of images of reality, but in its production of compositions, mirroring the productive, compositional nature of reality (“Indo-European Roots”). Since all forms are compositions, like the body, all forms are also subject to decomposition. As the Buddha said on his deathbed, “All compounded things decay.” This physical principle is also known as the principle of impermanence (Smith 88). Being subject to decomposition, aesthetic compositions commonly express value judgments—sometimes explicitly, more often implicitly—regarding what is worth protecting from destruction. And in light of the first thesis, we conclude that form expresses values, both individual and collective, shaped by pressures exerted by concrete socio-historical contexts.

**The Karma of Form (Fifth Thesis on Form)**

To say that form has karma is just to acknowledge that every form has a history. Thus, when a writer employs a form, she is necessarily conditioned—directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously—by the past deployments of that form. In short, the effects and meanings of a given form are products of its past deployments.
Diasporic Formations: The Five Theses on Form

1. Form unfolds between the personal and the supra-personal, the intended and the unintended.
2. To understand form, one has to investigate its affective, perceptual, cognitive, and volitional (or libidinal) dimensions.
3. The body is the most basic embodiment of form.
4. Form expresses values, both individual and collective, shaped by pressures exerted by concrete socio-historical contexts.
5. The effects and meanings of a given form are products of its past deployments.

THE DIASPORA OF FORMS

Equipped with the five theses on form, we now turn our attention to diasporic forms in particular and observe that every diaspora has its own karma, its own constitutive history which determines both its social and aesthetic forms.

In particular, diasporic literary forms embody both diasporic consciousness and diasporic social forms as historically conditioned phenomena.

Applying the five theses to the study of diasporic writing, I have developed a series of questions for analyzing diasporic literary forms as embodied productions emerging from determinate socio-historical contexts. (Corresponding to the five theses, the following analytical questions are numbered accordingly.)
1. Transforming the Personal with the Political: How does the form of a given diasporic text express features of diasporic consciousness on the one hand, and of contemporary diasporic socio-political formations on the other?

2. The Dimensions of Form: How do the affective, perceptual, cognitive, and libidinal dimensions of the diasporic text describe its form?

3. The Corporeality of Form: Which conceptions of the body shape the form of the diasporic text? How do representations of the body in the text reflect or counterpoint with the text’s formal design?

4. The (De)Composition of Form: What destructive pressures have conditioned the diasporic text? Stated positively, what individual and collective values are expressed in the formal construction of the text, and how are these values rooted in the text’s socio-historical context?

5. The Adventures of Form: How does the diasporic text interact with the history of its form? In particular, given the importance of formal experimentation in diasporic writing, I would like to ask whether this experimentation could be considered a dialogical response to the history of forms that have been adopted in colonial and post-colonial contexts. To put it another way, can formal experimentation be construed as a diasporic value? And what, in contrast, is the significance of formal conservatism in diasporic writing?

RE-IMAGINING COMMUNITY

The Globalization of Diaspora: Composing Community, Communicating Difference

Given the widespread and accelerating dispersion of previously sedentary populations in the era of globalization, diaspora can no longer be dismissed as the narrow concern of marginal minorities; understanding diaspora has now become crucial to understanding the contemporary world. In light of this, diasporic writing can deepen our appreciation of the problems and possibilities engendered by the globalization of diaspora.

Much has been said about the dissolution of traditional communities due to globalization, but there is less awareness of the new communities that have been made possible by diasporic movements. We can, however, find awareness of such new communal forms in diasporic writing. For if diasporic writing often draws attention to psychic and social fragmentation, it also highlights the composition of new forms made possible by diasporic encounters. In doing so, it offers these forms as alternative images of subjectivity
and community, images that present both individuals and societies as fluid compositions rather than as sedentary identities.

In short, we can view diasporic aesthetic forms as modes of re-imagining community in a world with disappearing boundaries. Coming from the age of empire and colonialism dominated by the exclusionary ideology of the national imaginary, we can look to diasporic communities as inclusive societies based on the communication and circulation of difference rather than on the rejection of otherness.

The Labor of Community

To flesh out the preceding argument, I now turn to the diasporic Filipino poet Jose Garcia Villa’s poem “Before, One, becomes, One,” which I shall explicate as an exemplary account of both the formation of diasporic subjectivity and the work of creating community from diverse constituents:

Before, one, becomes, One,

The, labor, is, prodigious.
The, labor, of, un-oneing,

To, become, a, One!
The, precision, of, un-oneing,
The, procedure, of, dissembling,

Is, the, process, of, expiation,
For, the, sin, of, Nothing.
This, Absurdity, is, Unification. (81)

RE-IMAGINING THE BODY
From the Body to the Body Politic

Re-imagining individual subjectivity (an expression of the body-mind\(^1\)), Villa also re-imagines community. Going a step further by politicizing the Buddhist principle of emptiness (which implies the mutually constitutive interdependence of individual and
community), I argue that to re-imagine community, it is necessary to re-imagine the body, a dominant Western representation of which is based on an oppositional definition of the self (identity) against the other (difference). Determined by the Aristotelian logical principles of identity and non-contradiction, this basic dichotomy engenders other oppositions—between unity and plurality, purity and contamination, order and chaos—oppositions that have shaped not only the formal imagination of many Western texts but also the political imagination of many Western—and postcolonial—societies. Nietzsche explores this dichotomy in his analysis of ressentiment as a basis of Western morality in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (22-5).

**Transforming Opposition to Composition: From Identity to Plurality, Hybridity, and Complexity**

For an alternative perspective on the composition of the body, one can look to certain diasporic texts, where, instead of being separated from the other and divided against itself by the logic of identity, the body is fluidly characterized by plurality, hybridity, and complexity. Corresponding to the diasporic body’s porous multiplicity, the paradoxical form of diasporic consciousness overturns the divisive principle of non-contradiction that defines a dualist body/mind. In short, the paradoxical body-mind transforms opposition to composition by including the other in the self. Hybrid and paradoxical, the diasporic text, like the diasporic body of which it is an expression, is also a plural composition formed and transformed by the encounter of diverse bodies and the productive communication of difference between them.

**RESISTING THE IMPERIAL IMAGINARY**

**A Formal Experimentation as (Post)Colonial Resistance**

In “Before, one, becomes, One,” we see the plurality (“the, labor, of, un-oneing”), hybridity (“this, Absurdity, is, Unification”), and complexity of diasporic consciousness expressed not only in the content but also in the form of the poem. Formally, the commas have a crucial role in the poetic “labor, of, un-oneing, / To, become, a, One.” Functioning simultaneously to disjoin and to conjoin, the commas assemble the poem’s diverse parts into a complex form. Creating an image of the body as a hybrid composition, the poem effectively criticizes the identitarian representations of the body that have dominated Western thought, and, more particularly, Western conceptions of form. Through this critique, despite his writing in the language of the colonizer, Villa is able to express his resistance to the hegemonic representations of Western colonialism. Like Villa, many
diasporic writers show an awareness of the colonial or postcolonial provenance of the forms they have adopted by adapting them for their own purposes through critical processes of formal experimentation and innovation.

THE DIASPORIC CRITIQUE OF ORTHODOXY: THREE DIASPORIC COROLLARIES

In summary, I argue that formal experimentation in diasporic writing can be linked to heterodox conceptions of the body on the one hand, and to alternative visions of the body politic on the other. This diasporic transvaluation of values can be encapsulated in the following propositions:

1. The diasporic body is plural, hybrid, and complex.
2. Diasporic consciousness is productively paradoxical.
3. Diasporic community is compositional rather than oppositional, diversity-based rather than identity-based.

THE MODERN ODYSSEUS
Is Contemporary Art Diasporic?

Interestingly (but not coincidentally, I would argue), these characterizations of the diasporic body and of diasporic community also characterize both modernism and postmodernism as aesthetic movements. Indeed, in Ulysses, emblem of modernism, Joyce boldly casts a Jew—the iconic diasporian—as the modern Everyman. Is it possible that, as international movements, modernism, and postmodernism are diasporic phenomena, whose exuberant formal experiments have been fueled by the diasporic consciousness of a critical mass of border-crossing practitioners? If so, this would explain why the art of our time has been, to a significant extent, the art of composing diverse fragments into complex hybrid forms.

Nomadizing the Subject: Is the Contemporary Subject Diasporic?

To conclude this theoretical composition of Buddhist thought with diasporic writing, I argue that it is no accident that Buddhist epistemology has proven to be an illuminating lens for analyzing diasporic forms; after all, Buddhism readily lends itself to being recast as a theory of nomadism. Indeed, the act of “going forth into homelessness” is a crucial act for Buddhists, one which marks the practitioner’s commitment to liberation (Bodhi 233-7). As
such, Buddhist thought and practice becomes a valuable tool for helping us understand not only diasporic forms, but also ourselves as global subjects. For as Gilles Deleuze might say, the universal subject is a deterritorialized subject (381). In this context, we might reconstrue the Buddhist notion of nirvana as the dissolution of fixed, bounded identities. Indeed, in the age of globalization, we are coming to understand that we are all diasporians.
NOTES

1 Following Spinoza, diasporic philosopher par excellence, I distinguish the compositional (simultaneously monist and pluralist) body-mind from the oppositional body/mind of Cartesian dualism (72).

WORKS CITED


