

## FORUM KRITIKA

### EMPIRE AND GLOBALIZATION: ON THE RECENT STUDY OF THE PHILIPPINES IN THE UNITED STATES

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#### Abstract

This short paper traces two of the more important developments in the study of the Philippines in the United States in the wake of critiques regarding American Orientalism in the late 1990s. The first is a rediscovery of the American empire at the heart of US national history, and by implication, of the buried significance of overseas colonies to metropolitan developments. Second is the emergence of robust cultural critiques of globalization from the perspective of those who have been globalized from below. The paper talks these developments with reference to Paul Kramer's *Blood of Government* and Neferti Tadiar's *Things Fall Away*, books that mark critically important advances not only in Philippine Studies in the US, but of American Studies in the age of imperial globalization.

#### Keywords

affective economies, colonialism, feminized labor, history from below, immigration, war and race

#### About the author

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What are the more recent developments in the study of the Philippines in the US or if you like, of American Studies of the Philippines in the last decade? I'd like to suggest at least two related but no less distinct tendencies. One has to do with the rediscovery in the wake of the so-called US global war on terror, of the American empire at the heart of American national history and by implication of the buried significance of overseas colonies in the formation of the metropole. Second, is the emergence of robust cultural critiques of globalization from the perspective of those who have been globalized from below. Taken together, these two tendencies open up pathways

to reconsider not just the persistent oppressiveness of empire but also the utopian conceits of the nation-state. I'd like to talk about these developments with reference to two books which to my mind exemplify some of the most promising approaches to the questions of empire and globalization: Paul Kramer's *Blood of Government* and Neferti Tadiar's *Things Fall Away*.

Let me first look at the question of empire by way of Paul Kramer's, *The Blood of Government*. Kramer shows how US colonialism involved a double invasion: on the one hand, Americans forcibly established their presence in the archipelago by way of a brutal and protracted war; on the other hand, Philippine products along with Filipino laborers "invaded" America, at least from the perspective of white nativists, farm lobbyists, American academics and politicians from the 1920s-1930s. The history of this double invasion suggests three things. First, that the Filipino-American war whose end was officially declared by Theodore Roosevelt on July 4, 1902 in order to speed the transition to a civilian administration and quell anti-imperialist protests in the US, was never really over. Indeed, the experience and legacy of war continued to shape the limits and possibilities of American policies and practice and Filipino collaboration and resistance both in the Philippines and in the United States. Second, that despite efforts to repress its memory and gloss over its effects, the war forces us to think of Philippine and American history within a common optic of imperial expansion, and thus of the trans-national orientation of the histories of both countries. Such makes a purely nationalist view of either US or Philippine history untenable as each is always already contaminated by the legacy of the other. And third, that US colonialism considered as a double invasion allows us to revise the history of racial formation from a more comparative perspective. The American presence in the Philippines and the Filipino presence in America amounted to what Kramer calls the "racial re-making of empire" as well as the "imperial re-making of race."

The mutually constitutive relationship between empire-making and race-making is richly documented in the history of the war and its aftermath. The idea of empire as a white man's burden realized in the violent encounter with non-white others had at least two effects. It not only added new terms to the rich and ever-expanding lexicon of American racism; it also resulted in the ethnic specification of the very meaning of whiteness itself. Given the ethnically diverse composition of the US army confronting Filipino fighters, American forces, with the exception of course of African American troops, came to be homogenized as "Anglo-Saxons." But just as empire re-made race, so too, did race shape the consolidation of empire. For example, during the war, Filipinos were subject to the most vicious racial invectives—"gooks," "niggers" "Injuns"—and subjected to what Kramer refers to as a war of "racial extermination" (not to be confused with "genocide"). After the war, however, these racial slurs were transmuted into the more familial though no less patronizing term "little brown brother" in the interest of securing Filipino collaboration and promoting colonial

tutelage. At the same time, Filipinos were also classified into “civilized” and “uncivilized” groups, conflating religious with racial differences which determined whether they were to be ruled by a civilian or a military government.

By focusing on both the contingency and structuring agency of race, Kramer debunks the view that US imperialism was exceptional and different from Europe’s. The unstable yet powerful significance of race helps to explain why the US decided to set its colony on the path of independence after a decade and a half of occupation. Kramer argues convincingly that the two independence laws, Jones Law of 1916 and the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1935 were in fact politically expedient responses to American nativists’ desire to exclude Filipino workers as much as they were calculated ways to redefine colonial hegemony without the political complications of colonial occupation. These laws were less about granting the Philippines independence (for it has continued to be a neo-colony of the US) as they were about making the US independent of the Philippines. Where earlier scholarship had almost completely ignored or downplayed the significance of race, Kramer thus shows how race invariably *and* contingently figured in every aspect of colonial occupation.

Kramer’s work along with several other recent works are all joined precisely by the task of making visible the workings of empire—as a way of life, as the context for redefining race and citizenship, as the pathway to bureaucratic and academic careers in and out of the metropole, as a conduit of disciplinary power, and as a determinant of metropolitan state formation. Nonetheless, while marking a significant advance over earlier works, much of the recent work on the American empire share with previous scholarship a common shortcoming. This has to do with the failure to engage vernacular source materials and the alternative views of empire, nation, and everyday life which these contain. Much of the new scholarship is based on archival resources primarily in English and Spanish. With rare exceptions, American scholarship, unlike British, French or Dutch scholarship on empire seems unable to invest the time and cultivate the sensibility required to develop a degree of fluency in the languages of the colonial periphery. Unlike the study of other regions in the world, the American study of the Philippines still tends to set aside the importance of local languages. Hence, much of the focus of the new scholarship on empire continues to be on colonial elites—American and Filipino—as well as metropolitan actors. This brings up the question: is there perhaps a danger that the critical study of empire with its inability to hear and read vernacular languages risks annexing the study of the Philippines into merely another branch of the postcolonial study of America? If a postcolonial understanding of US history requires the unearthing of the imperial as a structuring force of the national, and therefore of the ineluctable ties that bind colonial and metropolitan histories, what are the risks in continuing to set aside the varied worlds contained and conveyed by the vernacular languages of the former?

It is precisely the question of the vernacular and its potential for opening other routes to understanding the work of empire as globalizing power that is the subject of the second book I'd like to consider. Neferti Tadiar's *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience in the Making of Globalization*, in some ways takes up the cultural remainders of Kramer's book. It seeks to understand globalization from the perspective of those who suffer, in all senses of that word, its production. Focusing on the Philippines from the 1970s to the 1990s, Tadiar asks what we, its anonymous, cosmopolitan addressee, can possibly learn from the historical experiences and literary productions of Filipinos struggling with and against the demands of interlocking hegemonic forces. These forces include: an aggressively expansive global capitalist network, a Philippine nation-state in both its authoritarian and post-authoritarian moments, varieties of liberal cosmopolitan identities proposed by feminist, gay liberation as well as the new social movements; and an on-going marxist revolutionary movement under the aegis of the Communist Party of the Philippines. The author examines how these hegemonizing forces draw their sustenance from the living labor of Filipinos and how the latter in turn absorb and parry the shocks of hegemony's demands. She does so through a sustained reading of a wide range of writings: novels, poetry, journalism, as well as different strands of academic scholarship over the last thirty years, situating her project within the broad ambit of what has come to be known as subaltern studies.

What emerges from her analysis is a welter of contradictory practices. Such practices produce not only dominant forms of sociality and hierarchies of power. They also put forth alternative ways of being ordered towards other historical possibilities. Tadiar begins by arguing that the globalization of capitalist modes of production hinge on the conversion of living labor into something that is pliant and "feminized." Tadiar sees the feminization of labor as the realization of what Marx had observed to be the universal tendency towards the prostitution of labor power in the face of capital. Reduced as such, labor becomes homogenized into a resource for servicing the unceasing need for surplus value. The nation-state profits from this gendering of living labor. Tadiar shows how the discourse of nationalism similarly situates women's reproductive, domesticating labor as subordinate and merely derivative of masculine productive labor. But rather than reiterate the feminist-marxist condemnation of capitalism's reproduction of generalized prostitution and nationalism's patriarchal subordination of women, the author instead inquires into the productive capacities of the prostitute – which here includes the overseas contract worker--herself. In explicating the stories and poetry of Fanny Garcia, Ruth Mabanglo, and Luna Sicat, among others, she seeks to demonstrate the ways by which women reconfigure the terms of their subjugation and thereby resist their reduction into mere objects of value by both capital and the state.

These acts of self-fashioning, however are never unitary. They instead open up into different

tendencies. Such include: the invention of “woman” (*babae*) as a liberal subject, detached from its earlier social connections; the invocation of the self as a performative being, that is, a kind of medium which is hospitable to the comings and goings of otherness harking back to pre-colonial and Catholic practices of spirit mediumship; the embracing of contingency that makes for an ethic of risk and an erotics of gambling as a condition for freedom. Each possibility is implied in the other. Tadiar leads us to see from her consideration of Filipina writing the emergence of what she refers to as “pluri-subject”, a subject that is essentially plural, always a “part-subject” (*Kapwa*) oriented towards proximate affiliations, not oedipal identification with others. In this way, the “prostituted”, deracinated woman, whether at home or abroad, is shown to be not only the basis for the extraction of surplus value as well as the ground for the erection of nationalist identity. She also realizes herself as an agent and locus of historical experience, capable through her labor of creating a mode of being, an alternative temporality that “falls outside” the time and space circumscribed by capitalist progress and nationalist citizenship. And further, that it is precisely these experiences that “fall away and outside”—experiences that are regarded as marginal, the “accursed share” of capitalist and nationalist productions—which simultaneously invite domination *and* evade its full force.

The rest of this powerful book consists of tracking the obscured and suppressed practices which resist the assimilative pull of dominant systems for making subjects and objects. Tadiar looks at the literature of dissent produced during the period of Martial Law, for instance. In her close reading of the texts of Jun Cruz Reyes, Jose Lacaba and Tony Perez, she maps a set of responses to the pressures of an authoritarian modernity imposed by Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos at the bidding of transnational corporations and lending institutions and fed by an overt identification on the part of Filipino elites with the desires of and for Western modernity. These writers, Tadiar argues, situated their work amid the failed promises and debris of development that marked the city. They wrote to contest the “magical” capacities of martial law to make itself felt everywhere in the country. They parodied the fascist-like spectacles that accompanied tourism development. And they undermined the erection of novel metropolitan forms which sought to re-organize Metro Manila’s spaces to speed the flow of capital by hastening the “liquification” and “social pulverization” of laboring bodies. Negotiating around the regime’s censorship laws, these writers sought to register the traumas of development on the level of everyday lives. Narrating the quotidian struggles of male prostitutes, low level office workers, squatters, xerox machine operators, among others, their stories and poems relayed the shock effects of dispossession and unaccounted losses.

But in articulating loss and trauma, such writers also made manifest what the regime sought to conceal and contain: the excess of desire and the overflow of affect produced by the sheer living

of life even, and especially, under the most oppressive conditions. There is exhilaration and release, compassion and sharing, intensities of grief and explosions of rage that punctuate the dullness and “noise,” the pollution and the seeming abandonment of the city’s streets and its population. And once again, contradiction. As Tadiar so astutely points out, the writers of this period share a common skepticism regarding Martial Law’s claims of exercising a transcendent power over people’s lives. They varied, however, in their tactics for addressing such claims. Their approaches included for example, ironic commentaries and sardonic word play of the regime’s slogans. Writers rummaged through traditional aesthetic forms and reshaped these to serve avowedly modern, anti-authoritarian aims. Each literary strategy presented limits as well as possibilities. In her masterful reading of a novella by Tony Perez, for example, Tadiar shows the pitfalls of a psychologizing approach that tacitly prescribes a normative “emancipated” and individuated gay subject over traditionally constituted homosexual subjectivities (*bakla*). Perez’s story concerns the lives of male prostitutes prowling the newly built shopping malls for homosexual johns to make money with which to satisfy their desire for imported consumer goods. One day, they stumble into a Christian revival meeting and are drawn to the preachings of a white American evangelist. Seeking redemption, they renounce not only their prostituted lives but also denounce the *bakla* as the source of their oppression. This tale of “liberation” and conversion ends with the author’s plea for replacing the “degrading” sexual and cultural proclivities of local homosexual practices in favor of a Westernized, emancipated gay individualism. Thus does the story ironically reveal the ethnocentric, racist and homophobic grounds on which a kind of middle class, white-identified gay subjectivity can be erected. Yet, in another short story by the same author, Tadiar points out how the painfully routinized life of a lowly xerox worker brings moments of intense caring for cast-off objects such as a torn poster advertising a fast food chain. There is in other words always a contrapuntal tendency nesting within every literary work. This is because literature does not so much mirror life as it extends and intensifies modes of being otherwise ignored, marginalized and thrown away by dominant forms of existence.

The notion of literature as that which does not reflect life but instead preserves it from forgetting and destruction, extending and amplifying it, partaking in its production and therefore furnishing its readers and writers with a technology of social memory: such is a key insight proffered by Tadiar. For her, following the line of argument laid out by such thinkers as Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Giles Deleuze and Antonio Negri, the literary is that which insures not only the survival of life as particular living labor; it also provides assurances of an afterlife as the “sur” in “survival” already intimates. She refers to these matters of life and afterlife in literature as “historical experience.” One of the most compelling contributions of this intensely practical (which is to say densely theoretical) book is its cultivation of the notion of “experience” as particular



living labor that is always doubly productive. On the one hand, it constructs and registers the conditions of oppression characteristic of modernity; on the other hand, it is also that which exceeds and thereby potentially subverts such conditions. Experience, to the extent that it is productive of agency, insures us against the end of history, as well as against the ends of those who seek to end historical change. In the last two chapters of her book, Tadiar shows the utility of this notion of experience as the power of producing history (and not simply as prostituted labor producing surplus value) in her analysis of revolutionary writings.

In looking at the revolutionary writings of Emmanuel Lacaba, Kris Montanez, Communist Party founder Jose Maria Sison, Felipe Granrojo and Ruth Firmeza, among others, Tadiar demonstrates how writing at its most radical becomes indistinguishable from what it writes about. The literature of the revolutionary movement, whose tortured history and shifting ideological tendencies Tadiar traces, yields modes of writing that are styled as instruments for uprising. Dissent here is ordered towards violent transformation meant to overturn the violent impositions of an oppressive order. Literature as a weapon of the revolution calls for a literary criticism that safeguards and furthers the aims of the movement. When it is successful, Tadiar points out, revolutionary writing not only envisions but effectively enacts a startling continuity among acts of literature, literary criticism, social critique, and everyday life. Unlike bourgeois notions that insist on the separation of literature from life, the policing of writing by criticism, and the reification of experience through its generic representations, the revolutionary texts Tadiar examines are sustained by other cultural logics and historical imperatives. Such literature emerges not only from the mandate to furnish weapons for the struggle emanating from the Party's ideologues. It is also wedded to more traditional modes of imagination ranging from the Catholic passion play, the colonial and nationalist melodramas, and indigenous forms of story telling. The latter are reshaped not only in response to the conditions confronting guerilla fighters. They are also deployed in producing the tactical exigencies and modalities of the fighters' lives. In this way, revolutionary writing occasions the emergence of those "pluri-subjects" that Tadiar had written about in the earlier chapters. Rather than stand out as authors of their own lives, as sovereign individuals vested with the social and economic capital with which to distinguish themselves from the masses, the characters in revolutionary texts seek to become one with the masses. This becoming one with the masses is in fact a becoming many, a dissolution of the notion of self-possessed individualism in favor of a self possessed by the movement of a multitude. Hence the common term of fighters for addressing one another, "kasama" (being as being with an other, as a being together with others), is also a term for denoting the filiation and relationality among things and people. The individual as "kasama" is one who is known and knows him or herself in terms of a seething, moving collectivity. Here, Tadiar illuminates this new kind of revolutionary subjectivity by situating it away

from the dialectics of identity and difference and towards the experience of finitude and infinity. The dialectics of identity and difference produce subjects who struggle for recognition and thereby find themselves in a hierarchical relationship, dominating and subordinating one another, while beholden to a transcendent source that underwrites their subjugation. By contrast, the experience of finitude and infinity that Tadiar sees working in revolutionary texts constitutes subjects as open ended rather than agonistic. They exist as beings proximate to rather than identical with one another. The revolutionary subject in literature is thus a part-subject integral to ever expanding “assemblages” of other part subjects.

Yet, revolutionary texts are also freighted with all sorts of contradictions. As Tadiar astutely points out, the Party’s attempt to order literary expression as continuous with the everyday life of struggle at times recreate the very figures and conditions of oppression such a struggle had sought to overthrow. Indeed, the desire for the masses on the part of student activists and Party members of petty bourgeois origins often enough effect the instrumentalization of the “people.” The masses as instruments for alleviating and overcoming the alienation of the bourgeois subject turned revolutionary is a common enough trope in revolutionary writing. In the Philippine case, the masses are at times idealized even as they are rendered silent. The real heroes are the fighters who support, live with, and die for the masses even as they are wholly dependent on the labor of the masses to sustain their movement. In a series of astute critiques of this tendency in revolutionary writing, Tadiar points out the ways by which even the most radical pieces of writing rely on the most conventional of tropes. For example, they associate the masses with the land, and both with a kind of feminine body on which to erect the heroic, sympathetic and masculine figure of the fighter. The militarization of the struggle places fighters in direct contact with the soldiers of the state. It is not surprising then that both in literature as well as in historical fact, the New People’s Army would at times come to mimic the behavior of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, even if revolutionary writing systematically seeks to disavow such an identification. The violence of the revolution is overwhelming and contagious, as seen in the disastrous campaign to rid the movement of suspected counter-agents that resulted in mass killings in the 1990s. In order to contain what it regards as “irrational”, “atavistic” and “feudal” practices, the Party has sought to privilege a masculinized and rational subject devoted to the masses yet acting to domesticate their practices and desires. The *literature* of the movement, however, continues, like the movement itself, to produce characters and stories that foreground experiences in excess of this normative revolutionary subjectivity. It is as if there is not one revolution, but several going on at the same time; not one radical project of transformation, but many, whose horizons are far from foreclosed. Thus does literature show the movement to be fissured. On the one hand, it invests in the messianicity of the masses—the masses as embodying the very movement of their emancipation



located at some imminent future; on the other, it seeks to sit in judgement of the masses, domesticating its excesses and uplifting it from its backwardness. Fetishized, the masses become the objects of desire constitutive of the revolutionary subject. Rather than become one with the masses, the fighter here becomes an agent of the Party, seeking instead to be the univocal representative of the very multitude on which it depends.

Related to but distinct from Paul Kramer's *The Blood of Government*, Neferti Tadiar's engagement with the imperialism of globalization moves away from a focus on governing elites to the point of view of those who produce globalization's conditions of possibility: living labor. Where Kramer's work is informed by Anglo-American cultural studies and the more progressive strains of US social history, Tadiar's book comes across as an assemblage of theoretical practices that include post-structuralist Marxism, existential phenomenology, feminist epistemologies and postcolonialism. Kramer excels at weaving together Spanish and US sources, comparing each other's colonial projects with those of other European, especially British, powers to deflate American imperial exceptionalism. Tadiar picks up where Kramer leaves off. In her close readings of literary texts, she exemplifies an ethical concern for the vernacular particularities of Filipino experiences (where her incisive translation of Tagalog texts, for instance, extends and safeguards the survival of these texts for new, ever emergent readership). In Kramer's book, we see new ways of articulating areas of historical inquiry—the imperial and the national, colonialism and immigration, war and racial formation, American, Asian and Asian-American histories—in ways that are as inventive as they are compelling. In Tadiar, we read highly textured and lyrical evocations of the affective economies of various texts, as the author dwells in the very excesses she finds thematized in those things that “fall away.” Both books thus mark critically important advances not only in Philippine Studies in the US, but of American Studies in the age of imperial globalization.

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