

## FORUM KRITIKA

### WHAT, AND WHERE, IS PHILIPPINE STUDIES? A RESPONSE

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#### Abstract

The paper responds to the papers on Philippine Studies presented in the 126<sup>th</sup> MLA Annual Convention. The panel consists of T. Ruanni F. Tupas, Jeffrey Arellano Cabusao, Cynthia Tolentino, and Vicente L. Rafael. The paper contends that what is most instructive of these papers is their cogent treatment of Philippine Studies as a problem, a mode of critical inquiry, more than a field of studies. The paper challenges scholars to explore Philippine Studies in a truly transnational perspective, to look for Filipino imaginaries beyond the United States, in unexpected sites.

#### About the author

Charlie Samuya Veric is a PhD candidate, member of the Working Group on Globalization and Culture, and poet. He is the editor of *Anticipating Filipinas* and co-editor of *Suri at Sipat*, and has published in *American Quarterly*, *Rethinking History*, *Common Knowledge*, and *Kritika Kultura*, among others. His current projects include a dissertation on the techniques of the face, which looks at the everyday uses of the face from a postcolonial perspective; a study of planetary forms of imagination from below; and an English translation of the selected poems of E. San Juan, Jr. He had been educated at the University of the Philippines and Ateneo de Manila University prior to coming to Yale University for his doctorate in American studies.

I want to start with a bit of provocation. What exactly, and where, is Philippine studies? I raise this question in order to imagine what Philippine studies can be like from a transnational perspective. So, can we divorce the Philippines from its geography and deny the temptation of turning space into history?

Indeed, the papers inquire into the cultures of Philippine studies as a transnational practice and limit the contours of a borderless study. But what is most instructive, it seems to me, is how the papers compel us to see Philippine studies not so much as a field, but rather as a problem, that is, as a mode of critical inquiry.

For Rafael, for instance, the problem entails the work of making empire visible. The problem of Philippine studies, in that sense, is a problem of historical and cultural excavation. For Rafael, moreover, works such as Paul Kramer's *The Blood of Government* and Tadiar's *Things Fall Away* embody this kind of work because they not only show the salience of comparative and transnational scholarship, but also the importance of attending to the nuances of vernacular experiences.

If Rafael suggests the necessity of historical and cultural excavation, Tolentino suggests the importance of what she calls the work of interpreting the barely apprehended. She explores this idea by closely reading the film *Pinoy Sunday*. For her, to read the film is not only to apprehend the lives of Filipino migrant workers, but also to see the hidden narrative of the end of the American century in which Taipei displaces Washington as the new site for the dreams of migrant workers like Manuel and Dado.

Meanwhile, Tupas shows us that the apprehension of the nation is not the sole property of official Philippine languages such as English and Filipino. The Filipino nation, he suggests, is also imaginable in other Philippine languages. Here, I think, is where Tupas departs from Rafael and Tolentino. If Rafael and Tolentino imagine the study of the Philippines as a critical inquiry, Tupas illustrates that Philippine studies is also, rightly or wrongly, a political project.

It is precisely in this light—in imagining Philippine studies as a political project—that Cabusao's paper is able to speak to Tupas's. That is to say, if Tupas suggests the importance of recovering the many marginalized mother tongues in the Philippines, Cabusao suggests that the project of recovering the radical hope of Bulosan's works in the US should be connected to the project of self-determination in the Philippines. On the face of it, Tupas and Cabusao's papers may seem unrelated. Upon a closer analysis, however, they share a deep affinity, one that has to do with how multiculturalism in empire, as signified by the battle over the reading of ethnic literature, actually coincides with linguistic multiculturalism in the postcolony in which regional linguistic communities contest the legitimacy of the nation by insisting on the utility of marginalized mother tongues.

Thus, what appear to be unrelated issues—the inclusion of other languages as the medium of instruction in Philippine schools and the recovery of radical ethnic literary traditions in the US—are, in fact, mirror images of each other in that both are profoundly inspired by the spirit of multiculturalism. A connection such as this can only be made, however, if we denaturalize the boundaries of Philippine studies, that is, if we open the floodgates of transnational inquiry in the hopes of making unsuspected connections in impossible places.

Indeed, the transnational is invoked in all four papers—say, the movement of ideas between the US and the Philippines in Rafael and Tolentino, the politics of English in Tupas, and the transnational legacy of Bulosan in Cabusao. But is Philippine studies really transnational if it deals almost exclusively with the relations between the Philippines and the US and the languages that bridge these two polities? What about the Philippines and the rest of the world? The Filipino, after all, is all over, blanketing the planet.

Ultimately, then, Philippine studies can call itself truly transnational only when its scholars go beyond the US and start looking for Filipino imaginaries in unexpected sites. So, are we ready

for Philippine studies in Dubai, Tokyo, Beijing, Milan, Berlin, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Bangkok, Rio de Janeiro? For Philippine studies in Mandarin, French, German, Swahili, Arabic? Having started this discussion with a provocation, I wish to end with another provocation.