

THE CONDITION OF FILIPINO AMERICANISM: GLOBAL AMERICANA AS A RELATION OF DEATH

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Abstract

At the nexus of a prevailing Filipino-American discourse that celebrates the Filipino-American as a cooperative participant in the United States nation-building project sits an “unnamable violence” that masks the genocidal preconditions of “multiculturalist” white supremacy, to which this discourse unwittingly subscribes. The article explores the beginnings and development of this discourse, and the workings of American white supremacy in naturalizing relations of death between itself and its “others.” The article ends with a reflection on how “natural” disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo become means of legitimizing discourses that reinforce white invulnerability vis-à-vis disposability of non-white subjects.

Keywords

American multiculturalism, Filipino-American War, Hurricane Katrina, Mt. Pinatubo

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INTRODUCTION: MULTICULTURALISM AND FILIPINO AMERICAN CIVIL SOCIETY

The purpose of this essay is to offer a set of theoretical and political questions that address the “Filipino American” condition primarily, but perhaps the Filipino local and global condition in a more general sense as well. I am most concerned with how the discursive modality and political analytic of “Filipino American” discourse, including its articulations of “identity,” “community,” “politics,” and for that matter, “scholarship,” is underwritten by a peculiar, and singularly disturbing allegiance to the American national

project. By way of introduction, I invoke the 1997 audacious mission statement of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA), an organization that alleges to represent “the Voice” of Filipinos and Filipino Americans in the United States. A non-partisan, nonprofit national affiliation of more than five hundred Filipino-American institutions and umbrella organizations, the NaFFAA covers the continental United States, Alaska, Hawaii, Guam and the Marianas (“NaFFAA Description”). Representatives and leaders of the organization boast that they are “regularly invited to briefings at the White House and on Capitol Hill, as well as the respective state houses covered by our chapters, on issues affecting ethnic and minority communities in America.” According to the NaFFAA, its “primary objectives” encompass the following:

- Promoting active participation of Filipino Americans in civic and national affairs and in all other aspects of mainstream America.
- Promoting awareness of Filipino American contributions to social, economic, cultural and political life in the United States.
- Securing social justice, equal opportunity and fair treatment of Filipino Americans through advocacy and legislative and policy initiatives at all levels of government.
- Strengthening community institutions that promote the cultural heritage of Filipinos.
- Eliminating prejudices, stereotypes and ignorance of Filipino Americans. (“NaFFAA’s Objectives”)

This organization gathered in 2005 as the “3rd Global Filipino Networking Convention,” essentially a conference designed and facilitated by Filipino American entrepreneurs who found the Philippines to be their site of aspiration to spread the influence of US global capital. The rhetorical flourish of the convention is revealing, particularly for its conceptualization of the Philippines as a site of entrepreneurial philanthropy and patriotism.

WE, the delegates to the 3rd Global Filipino Networking Convention ...

BELIEVING that those who have more in knowledge, resources and technology have the capacity to uplift the lives of less fortunate Filipinos,

REALIZING the need to contribute to the growth of the Philippine economy by generating investments, revenues and jobs, AGREEING to work together to achieve

our mission to help in the alleviation of poverty in the Philippines ...

DO HEREBY COMMIT OURSELVES TO:

Be a strong and tenacious community instituted by nation loving generations to follow in the footsteps of our exuberant, action-driven results by dedicating ourselves to building our Nation.

To insure the support of the franchise industry and to establish thousands of enterprises, and generate millions of jobs for Filipinos by direct investments by OFWs.

Recognize that the Raw material is our people - their minds, their skill and their imaginations. ("Resolution of Economic Forum")

I open with the example of this particular Filipino American organization in order to suggest the following: the ambitious social dream of NaFFAA, arguably the largest and most powerful Filipino American umbrella organization in existence, hinges on a twinning of imaginary labors that in fact reflects the larger social and political imagination and desire of "Filipino American discourse" more generally. First, this discourse formulates an archetype of Filipino American *citizenship* that foregrounds the productive and cooperative role of the Filipino American to the United States nation-building project. This suggests a *transhistorical collective subject* that co-exists with—and becomes a requisite extension of—the peculiar and specific American articulation of a bourgeois and substantively white supremacist liberal democratic state.

Second, this discourse gestures toward a prototype of *Filipino American civil society*, that is, a consolidation and broadly pitched cultural *legitimation* of a civic presence that is empowered through a valorized, patriotic collective passage into the fraudulent pluralist accommodations of American governing and social structures. It is as if being empowered through, and therefore more actively participating in the structures of US state violence, white supremacy, and global economic and military dominance *is something to be desired by Filipinos*. To clarify the terms of this critical theorization: I am privileging the analytical question of whether and how the *problematics* of Filipino American discourse, across its different moments and sites of production, opportune on (and eventually flourish through) the corresponding hegemonic problematics of contemporary multiculturalist white supremacy, which provide delimited spaces of empowerment and social prestige for the racial subalterns of "classical" American apartheid (Massey and Denton), while

reproducing the institutionality of white life, white bodies, and white subjectivities as the *socially ascendant modality* of the (allegedly post-apartheid) US social formation.

Put otherwise, the sanctity and quality of white life, figurative and physical integrity of the white body, and social and moral ascendancy of the (usually transparent) white subject animate the multiculturalist “turn” in US civil society, and form the condition of historical possibility for contemporary Filipino Americanism. The larger social project of representing, communing, and culturally producing a Filipino American historical bloc, then, is *essentially* defined by a specific conjuncture in the institutional and cultural apparatuses of white supremacy, which are themselves *fortified and elaborated* by this putative Filipino American communion. I am thus concerned with the conditions under which *any* Filipino, much less a collective organization of Filipino Americans, can voice such a desire to be at one with the American nation-building project.

By way offering a concise context for the origins of this discourse: the peculiarity of the Filipino American Dream, or its articulation of an incipient Filipino American “common sense” (in the Gramscian conception of the material link between cultural formation, common sense, and hegemony), can be understood as the logical culmination of a 1990s cresting of cultural and intellectual production that centered (and in fact presumed) the abstracted figure of the Filipino American as a particular embodiment of civil resolution and incorporation. I am suggesting that the formation of the Filipino American as a public and historical subject—that is, as a *mobilized material discourse* of identity, community, and intellectuality—was *leveraged* by a promise of coherence and identification that was animated by the disciplinary and interpellating seductions of an *American* civil subjectivity. This elaboration of civic personhood both encompasses and exceeds the desires and demands of (American) “citizenship” to the extent that the Filipino American figuration is periodically constructed as the *meta*-fulfillment of an American nationalist *telos*.

Thus, an academic and popular discourse emerged with particular prominence during the 1990s. A surge of civic and nonprofit organizations, performance art, high school, college, and university student groups, print media, academic programs, and other popular cultural forms precipitated a veritable “Filipino American renaissance,” meshing with an acceleration in scholarly production that increasingly located the academic “Filipino Americanist” within hegemonic sites of knowledge production and institutional formation.

I am concerned with the sets of proclamations, assumptions, and political demands (and for that matter *non-demands*) that underwrite this circulating Filipino American discourse that claims and coheres a particular social space within the “multicultural”

vicissitudes of American civil society. I am also, and not incidentally, interested in how Filipino American discourse articulates an American “civilian” ontology that is inseparable from—and profoundly productive of—a liberal (that is, formally inclusionist and pluralist) American multiculturalism that inaugurates new modalities of the American hegemonic, locally and globally. In the larger project to which this essay speaks (Rodríguez, *Suspended Apocalypse*), I initiate a more extensive critical examination of contemporary multiculturalism as a structure of dominance, state violence, and re-animated sophisticated racism and white supremacy. In my view, the innovation of hegemonic multiculturalisms is actually inseparable from systems of militarized global racial domination, from corporate globalization and the War on Terror to domestic warfare and the US and global “prison industrial complex” (Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*). Here, I wish to consider Filipino American discourse in a narrower conceptual and theoretical scope, as a particular *elaboration* of multiculturalism that is inseparable from a specific history of US-Philippine contact.

In what follows, I contend that the emergence of Filipino American discourse as a relatively coherent field of political, cultural, and intellectual identification begs the very line of critical inquiry its self-naming disavows. That is, at the nexus of the intersection and sometime conflation of the “Filipino” and the “American” sits an unnamable violence that deeply troubles the very formation of the discourse itself. The very rubric of the discourse, the very framing of this identity and community (the discursive linking of *and assumptive political coalescence* between the “Filipino” and the “American”) not only obscures a historical relation of dominance, it *naturalizes an essential relation of death*.

The currency of a “Filipino American” identity, history, community, and politic is at once the reification of a deeply troubled contact point between Frantz Fanon’s paradigmatic “native” and “settler,” while also a rhetorical valorization of a post-conquest *rapprochement* between the US nation and its undifferentiated Philippine subjects. Fanon’s durable critique of the “native intellectual” resonates the historic dislocation of post-colonial Filipino intellectuals from their collective, presumptively secure housing in the onetime colony. Disrupting contemporary pluralist and liberal multiculturalist paradigms of professional intellectualism, Fanon elaborates the conditions of domination and disruption that ruin possibility for authentic human dialogue within the historical dialectic of conquest. In Fanon’s analytic, the very notion of a “Filipino American” intellectual—that which asserts itself as a coherent and *presumed* intellectual subject—collapses on the possibility of its own internal disarticulation, in this case the rupturing antagonism between the “Filipino” and the “American.” Fanon resonates the current state of *cultural estrangement* in Filipino

American discourse when he writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*,

When we consider the resources deployed to achieve the cultural alienation so typical of the colonial period, we realize that nothing was left to chance and that the final aim of colonization was to convince the indigenous population it would save them from darkness. The result was to hammer into the heads of the indigenous population that if the colonist were to leave they would regress into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality. (149)

Fanon's longer discussion of cultural estrangement in *The Wretched of the Earth* captures in shorthand an antagonistic historical tension that echoes through the field of Filipino American Studies. One side of this tension involves a creeping sense of absolute cultural and historical *loss*—the accompanying, structured legacy of the genocidal US conquest at the turn of the century. The other side of this tension is reflected in anxious assurances of authentic collective (communal, subjective, and intellectual) identity: at times essentialist, though more frequently a flexible, dynamic, and straightforwardly anti-essentialist (yet no less *insistent*) claim to Filipino American-ness that works through the logic of an existing social formation and cultural hegemony. Fanon's concern with the native intellectual is most clearly founded in his desire for a decisive departure from colonialism's lasting cultural structure: "the colonized's endeavors to rehabilitate himself [sic] and escape the sting of colonialism obey the same rules of logic" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 150).

While use of the term "Filipino American" incorporates several dimensions of civic life—citizenship, location, national allegiance, and most importantly, a fundamental (though not necessarily exclusive) *identification* with "America"—I am interested in re-articulating this term as a point of contact and departure: that is, I want to consider "Filipino American" as the signifier of an originary relation of death and killing, the ongoing inscription of a genocidal condition of possibility for the Filipina/o's sustained presence in (and proximity to) the United States. While most scholars and researchers acknowledge the mass-scale killing and sophisticated campaigns of cultural extermination and displacement waged by the US during (and after) the so-called Philippine-American War, few have explored the implications of this death and destruction as *constitutive* and *productive* elements of the Filipino-American (Philippine-United States) relation.

Here I am offering a schematic re-inscription of Filipino American discourse, as well as Filipino American and Filipino Studies through a working, critical theory of the intersections—material, ideological, historical, and political—between 1) the United States'

production of a particular relation to the Philippines and Filipinos through changing modalities of political, military, and economic domination (direct relations of force) and/or hegemony (structured consent under the threat of force), and 2) the premises of this ongoing, dynamic relation in the nexus of *genocide*.

“GENOCIDE”

Beyond references to the liquidation of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and the industrialized elimination of Jews, “homosexuals,” racialized minorities, disabled people, and others under Hitler’s German National Socialism, few incidents of (ethnically/racially) targeted, mass-scale physical and cultural extermination have obtained the status of authentic human holocaust. It is one of modernity’s constitutive contradictions that the proliferation and evolution of technologies of killing is irrevocably tied to the varieties of social formation produced and reproduced by “modernization” itself (Bartov). In fact, the paradigmatic frontier question of *civilization or barbarism* has always and immediately required the marshalling of a vigorous popular *might*, an eager and often ritualized willingness to carry out the necessary and inevitable—if unfortunate and bloody—human sacrifice at the figurative altars of modernity (e.g. nationhood, bourgeois liberal democracy, capital).

The question of how genocide simultaneously manifests as a military and *social* logic of and for modernity is critical and overdue for producers of critical, progressive, and radical knowledges and pedagogies. How might this emergent field of research, teaching, and activism take its point of departure in a historic encounter wherein the toll in human lives—the vast majority of whom would have fallen under the categorical designation of “civilians”—was undeniably astronomical, yet is forever beyond the historical record (estimates of indigenous peoples killed during the four-year US-Philippine struggle range anywhere from *two hundred thousand to two million*)?

An American congressman who visited the Philippines, and who preferred to remain anonymous, spoke frankly ... “You never hear of any disturbances in Northern Luzon ... because there isn’t anybody there to rebel ... The good Lord in heaven only knows the number of Filipinos that were put under ground. Our soldiers took no prisoners, they kept no records; they simply swept the country and wherever and whenever they could get hold of a Filipino they killed him.” (Francisco 7)

What are the political-intellectual implications of the historic and geographic progression of American white supremacy and its genocidal logic, initiated in the territories of indigenous peoples throughout North America, sustained in the transatlantic holocaust and chattel enslavement of Africans, and momentarily culminating in the razing conquest of the newfound Philippine archipelago?

In short, [soldiers and veterans] wanted to wage “Injun warfare.” A Kansas veteran stated it more directly: “The country won’t be pacified until the niggers are killed off like the Indians.” Howard McFarlane agreed: It was necessary “to blow every nigger into a nigger heaven.” Adapting an old frontier adage, another veteran explained that “the only good Filipino is a dead one. Take no prisoners; lead is cheaper than rice.” (Miller 20)

Such declarations of commitment to racialized slaughter are supplemented by the US government’s own official records (including a wealth of Congressional testimony by veterans of the Indian and Philippine wars) (US Senate), constructing a history of the Philippine-US encounter that defies conventional definitions of “war.” Contesting this reification of military conflict requires a more substantive theoretical engagement with the history of genocide discourse.

The United Nation’s adoption of a resolution on the “prevention and punishment” of genocide in 1948 is defined by its structuring inadequacies as a juridical measure. In fact, Polish legal scholar Raphaël Lemkin’s original formulation of the document was comprehensive in scope and contained the outlines for effective enforcement of its content. His draft “specified that acts or policies aimed at ‘preventing the preservation or development’ of ‘racial, national, linguistic, religious or political groups’ should be considered genocidal, along with a range of ‘preparatory’ acts, including ‘all forms of propaganda tending by their systematic and hateful character to provoke genocide, or tending to make it appear as a necessary, legitimate, or excusable act’” (Churchill 410). The global superpowers of the time, however, conspired to strip the document of its definitional scope and legal context. In an interesting moment of Cold War coalescence, the United States and USSR forced Lemkin out of the approval process, erased the provision regarding the wholesale destruction of “political groups,” eliminated guidelines for a permanent international tribunal (instead allowing each state “to utilize its own juridical apparatus in determining whether it, its officials, or its subjects were to be considered of genocidal conduct”) and deleted the full second article of Lemkin’s original draft. Critically, it was

this second article that spoke to the question of *cultural genocide*:

In the original draft, Article II had specified as genocidal the “destruction of the specific character of a persecuted ‘group’ by forced transfer of children, forced exile, prohibition of the use of the national language, destruction of books, documents, monuments, and objects of historical, artistic or religious value.” (Churchill 411)

The elimination of this provision was central to the eventual ratification of the diluted Convention, particularly as it alleviated the United States from the burden of confronting its own history of mass-based killing and cultural destruction within its continental and trans-Pacific frontiers. The eventual jurisprudential capacity of the UN Convention is thus undermined by a drastic narrowing of definitional scope:

Article 2. In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (United Nations)

In addition to excluding political groups and social-economic classes from the realm of target populations, the Convention does not distinguish between violence that intends to annihilate and generalized institutional violence inflicted on a specific group. This lack of specificity is only compounded by the fact that the resolution has had no practical effect on adjudicating the historical genocides conducted by dominant nations and governments.

While I do not wish to propose a closed definition of the term, I am interested in offering an intervention on the existing political and scholarly discourse of genocide by attempting a conceptual departure from conventional accounts of the “Philippine-American War.” In this sense, Ward Churchill’s “functional definition” of genocide offers a sufficient working conception:

Although it may or may not involve killing, per se, genocide is a denial of the right of existence of entire human groups, as homicide is the denial of the right to live of individual human beings ...

Article II.

In the present Convention, genocide means the destruction, entirely or in part, of any racial, ethnic, national, religious, cultural, linguistic, political, economic, gender, or other human group, however such groups may be defined by the perpetrator. (Churchill 431-2)

Churchill's revision goes on to note three primary forms of genocide: the physical, biological, and cultural. Crucial for this discussion is his elaborated notion of cultural genocide, a practice that was essential to the US conquest of the Philippines. Churchill defines this form of categorical killing, following the logic of Lemkin's original draft, as

the destruction of the specific character of the targeted group(s) through destruction or expropriation of its means of economic perpetuation; prohibition or curtailment of its language; suppression of its religious, social or political practices; ... destruction or denial of use and access to objects of sacred or sociocultural significance; forced dislocation, expulsion or dispersal of its members; forced transfer or removal of its children, or any other means. (Churchill 433)

I am especially interested in how cultural genocide has articulated through the violent progression of American white modernity through and beyond its initial contact with the Philippines. This articulation, I argue, is at the unspoken nexus of Filipino American Studies as an emergent institutional and discursive field.

The era of US mass killing and ecological devastation in the archipelago is often constructed as an *episode* in the long history of Filipino/American, Philippine/US relations. Yet, to take seriously that the genesis of these relations historically inscribes through the genocidal (Westward and trans-Pacific) movement of white modernity is to break with the conventions of historical periodization. The *violence* of this encounter with American modernity intersects as it shapes time, subjectivity, and the collective life of the social. Kleinman provides a useful schema for conceptualizing violence as an active historical force, a constitutive aspect of the social, through which institutions and infrastructures are (partially though fundamentally) shaped.

Rather than view violence, then, simply as a set of discrete events ... the perspective I am advancing seeks to unearth those entrenched processes of ordering the social world and making (or realizing) culture that themselves are forms of violence: violence that is multiple, mundane, and perhaps all the more fundamental because it is the hidden or secret violence out of which images of people are shaped, experiences of groups are coerced, and agency itself is engendered. (Kleinman 239)

Herein lies the entanglement of Filipino American discourse with the generative legacy of an epochal, genocidal contact with the United States. In seeking to constitute a historical subject that reconciles the killer with the killed, the field fabricates a peculiar and powerful “Filipino American” sentimentality—a structure of affect and historical sense that forces the essential violence of the Filipino-American relation into silence and invisibility, for the sake of a fraudulently sustained coherence: the existential necessity for an identity otherwise permanently fragmented by a structure of irreconcilability. This sentimentality cuts across institutionalized discourses and textual forms—from academic works to popular cultural forms, there is a relative consistency in form and content, a vigorous assertion of Filipino American subjectivity that insists on the primacy of (American) location and residence, a reification of (US) nationhood, and the presumptive entitlements of (an admittedly ambivalent) membership in things American.

By way of example we can meditate on the words of Alex Escalamado, one of the founders of the NaFFAA, and also the publisher of a periodical called *The Philippine News*, the most widely circulated Filipino American publication in the United States. His words offer an organic glimpse at this production of Filipino American sentimentality and the modality through which it is reproduced and amplified. Esclamado’s self-published transcript of a 1997 speech at the Filipino Intercollegiate Networking Dialogue in Stony Brook, New York posits a direct appeal to notions of inherent, biological racial superiority that *directly borrows from the ideological, rhetorical, and pseudo-theocratic apparatuses of American white supremacy*:

My friends, we have a big task to transfer to you, and that is the future. The future is yours. The community has grown. Now is the time to empower you.

The world is yours.

You are a superior race. You are.

Why not? (Esclamado)

Such vulgar and frequently bizarre formulations of the Filipino American *telos* reflect something worse than a repression of memory—this is the eclectic, organic production of a collective lifeworld immersed in an appropriation and refraction of white supremacist, nationalist American sentimentality. It is the discursive institutionalization of a silence that is in excess of trauma or revisionist denial. Imagine the accumulation of different historical violences—and their rather perverse and disturbed reconstitution of political identifications—that must occur for such a statement as Esclamado's to *even be voiceable*.

Hegemonic Filipino American discourse inscribes a social fantasy: the disappearance of mass scale death, a decisive movement beyond an originating violence and toward an idealized metaphysical reconciliation between what Fanon would call the “native” and the “settler.” This is a contrived peace overshadowed by its historical condition of possibility in genocide, and generative of an altogether different (though nonetheless profound) structure of violence. Following Kleinman's critique, the very grammar of things “Filipino American” collaborates in the social logic of a genocidal colonialism (and its descendants in underdevelopment, imperialism, and neoliberalism).

The legacy of physical extermination and cultural-ecological devastation entails far more than the formal inception of an oppressive and exploitive colonial regime: in the case of the United States' relation to the Philippines and Filipinas/os, one also finds the birth of a modernist racial pedagogy, wherein the native becomes the preeminent embodiment of Progress and its unstoppable historical ascendancy. For Fanon, colonial and neocolonial native intellectuals (the prominent subject of Fanon's political critique and anti-colonial polemic in *The Wretched of the Earth*) work in a field of cultural death, advancing the mission of white modernity through a dialectical process of “adoption” and “renouncement”:

Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his [sic] jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He [sic] becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (*Black Skin* 17-8)

Proximity to blackness and the jungle become primary signifiers of backwardness, premodernity, *the dead past*. The epochal killing of the initial contact, having allegedly and decisively ceased, is now replaced with the relative benevolence of liberal state institutions and a state-sanctioned cosmopolitan civil society, the grammar of modernity having

sustained a logic of cultural displacement. Humanistic progressivism—the lifeblood of cultural conquest—restores the supremacy of modernity’s presumptive white subject in magnanimous fashion, inviting the native’s selective and always partial membership.

Perhaps the nexus of what I have been calling the “Filipino-American relation” is the convergence between the physical extermination of an object native people, and colonialism’s contingent production and incorporation of native intellectuals as subjects of modernity and agents of modernization. Of course, here I am suggesting that most self-identifying Filipino professional intellectuals fall squarely within the contemporary genealogy of the Fanonian “native intellectual,” differently located though we may be.

“ZONES OF DEATH”

Whether the site of modernity’s presumptive progress is civilization, barbarism (“the jungle,” in Fanon’s vivid rendition), or deeply conflicted, liminal sites of contact (in the segregated and militarized post/colonial city, for example), the *pedagogical* mission of modernity, advancing in and through the collective whiteness of colonizers and the violent displacements of their transplanted institutions, is persistent and clear. The genesis of the Filipino-American relation in the moment of conquest is, most of all, constituted by its white supremacist articulation in provincially focused US campaigns of mass slaughter and geographically organized “scorched earth” destruction of farms, villages, and local ecologies. Preceding the era of industrialized warfare and weapons of instant mass destruction, it is worth emphasizing that the US slaughter was utterly *labor intensive*, requiring extraordinary physical expenditures and strategic improvisation in the struggle to exterminate guerillas and civilians, and to exert tentative military control over the countryside. Beyond the alleged military requirements of large-scale killing in this euphemistically termed American “war” against a scandalous, treacherous, and generally criminal (hence apolitical) guerilla resistance, it was the irrepressible compulsion of modernity—its “racist culture” of deadly, manifest whiteness (Goldberg)—to fantasize (and wage) genocide for life’s sake. (What kind of life? Whose lives? Life where?) The 1902 Congressional testimony of Brigadier General Robert P. Hughes is instructive here:

Sen. Rawlins: ... [I]n burning towns, what would you do? Would the entire town be destroyed by fire or would only offending portions of the town be burned?

Gen. Hughes: I do not know that we ever had a case of burning what you would call a town in this country, but probably a *barrio* or a *sitio* ...

Sen. Rawlins: What did I understand you to say would be the consequences of that?

Gen. Hughes: They usually burned the village.

Sen. Rawlins: All of the houses in the village?

Gen. Hughes: Yes; every one of them.

Sen. Rawlins: What would become of the inhabitants?

Gen. Hughes: That was their lookout.

Sen. Rawlins: If these shacks were of no consequence what was the utility of their destruction?

Gen. Hughes: The destruction was as a punishment. They permitted these people [guerillas] to come in there and conceal themselves and they gave no sign ...

Sen. Rawlins: The punishment in that case would fall, not upon the men, who could go elsewhere, but mainly upon the women and little children.

Gen. Hughes: The women and children are part of the family, and where you wish to inflict a punishment you can punish the man probably worse in that way than in any other.

Sen. Rawlins: But is that within the ordinary rules of civilized warfare? Of course you could exterminate the family, which would be still worse punishment.

Gen. Hughes: These people are not civilized. (Graff 64-65)

The indigenous population of the Philippines, to resonate several aforementioned quotations from military personnel, was not simply being *compared* or *reduced* to “Indians” and “niggers” through a transplanted racial analogy readily available to the presumptively white US nationalism of statesmen, generals, commanding officers, and rank-and-file soldiers. In this state of contrived war, where the distinctively American rendition of modernity’s aggressive movement through place and time entailed the production of (racialized) enemy/others, “Indians” and “niggers” constituted *categories of death*. This was the bottom line of American modernity, that its path toward the good society required the categorical death of categorical others.

Categorical death suggests a leap beyond the realm of the biological, a modality of non-existence that begs for more than corpses and mass graves, a process of mass killing that demands extraordinary endings, outside the realms of physical destruction waged by the US military’s turn-of-the-century “dum dum” bullets and slaughter strategies. Filipinos embodied the continuity of conquest *en masse*, a Pacific native population that both occupied and exceeded the discourses of “Indians” and “niggers” (Balce) while sharing the essential distinction of living for extermination and selective, coercive assimilation into a

white (American) modernity—the very crystallization of categorical life.

[A]s early as April 1899, General Shafter gave grisly portent to the future conduct of the war: “It may be necessary to kill half the Filipinos in order that the remaining half of the population may be advanced to a higher plane of life than their present semi-barbarous state affords.” (Francisco 4)

The notion of a “zone of death” constitutes an appropriate allegory for the relation that provides theoretical and structural coherence for Filipino American discourse amidst its anxious discourses of membership, entitlement, and belonging.

By way of addressing and working through the problems of Filipino American discourse, I will conclude by meditating on a more specific and contemporary historical and political geography of state-formed racial violence and consider what it yields in the way of possibilities for a more authentically critical, and politically radical conception of identity, community, and antiracist/anti-imperialist work that truly violates the borders that have been imposed on Filipinos in multiple ways. I wish to reflect on the social logic of the massive forces of destruction that popular and state discourses have simplistically termed “natural disaster,” and begin to address the social formation that such destruction constitutes under the dominance of a white supremacist global order. I will begin by considering the significance of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the US Gulf Coast in 2005, and continue by thinking about Katrina’s linkages to the explosion of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991.

“NATURAL DISASTER,” WHITE LIFE, AND FILIPINO RACIALITY

Hurricane Katrina continues to be invoked as an exceptional episode in US history—as something already framed *in the past tense*. However, the living time of Hurricane Katrina, which I understand here as an *ongoing* material history of rigorously organized, state-facilitated, and militarized white racial dominion, presents an acute opportunity to express and firmly restate the logic of dominance that encompasses our collective existence.

Hurricane Katrina has abruptly displaced the “multicultural” pretensions of the American post-civil rights national and global formation, and reinserted the *sanctity* of white existence, white bodies, and white life as the central condition of the nation’s coherence. Katrina thus speaks to the essential structuring techniques of white life as a system of dominance: the time of Katrina articulates a global indictment of white life,

framed by the possibility for a political and existential identification with the context and substance of a critical common sense of Black and Third World death.

While accountings of indigenous, Latino/a, Asian, and poor white suffering at the hands of Katrina continue to be written, we ought to be clear that the fundamental economic, cultural, and state/military logic governing the discrete geographic and human drowning of a post-segregation, though effectively apartheid New Orleans is animated by the sturdy symbiosis between Black disposability and American nation-building. Hurricane Katrina re-enshrines the specificity of American white supremacy—and specifically mass-based Black bodily and geographic liquidation—as *an epochal articulation of democracy, state-building, and nationalist well-being*. Katrina, in other words, was/is good for (white) America.

The time of Katrina indicates the fundamental *irrevocability* of white life as a unilateral declaration of war: it is a life-or-death struggle to ascertain the collective white body's ascendancy over the mundane conditions of Black suffering, and constitutes a dynamic structuring of domination over the form, duration, and condition of "life" itself. Black death and displacement, ordained through the ritualized negligence and organized dysfunctioning of the American state during and after the anticipated destruction of Katrina—a hurricane that, it cannot be overemphasized, was meteorologically well-predicted—can and must be understood as the organized and enforced condition of contemporary liberal multiculturalism, the most current and recent innovation of white supremacy that feeds and fosters a desire to, in plain words, live as (we imagine) white people do (including the eclectic consumption of ethnic and racial "diversity"). When located alongside coterminous structures of white supremacist, nationalist, and democratically articulated antiblack violence—e.g. racially militarized policing and the post-1970s prison industrial complex—Hurricane Katrina is well within the historical conventions of American white civil society itself, amplifying and restoring the sanctity of white bodily integrity (and multicultural aspirations toward the same) through state-sanctioned, and popularly consumed productions of Black bodily disintegration. Katrina, in its presentation of Black social liquidation as a *naturalized* state of emergency for an allegedly isolated population of Black people, gratifies the multiculturalist desire to flee the condition of "Blackness" toward the imagined sanctum of white life.

Katrina especially amplifies how the historical production of a white supremacist racial existence has been continuously fortified through an institutionalized immunity of white bodies from categorical (that is, racial) fragility—white bodies are generally alienated from and systemically *unfamiliar with* forms of collective, unexpected bodily violence and premature death. In this sense, the relation of "disaster" to white life is that

of a *socially reproductive* technology: the social, political, and physical liquidation of the white world's durable racial antagonist(s) reproduces the transparent universality—the very “normalcy”—of white civil existence and bodily integrity, and provides a material opportunity for white life to quite literally *transcend death*.

A reflection on political and philosophical positioning is appropriate here. I arrive at this reflection on Hurricane Katrina through a *Pinoy* genealogy, as someone born and raised in the US while sustaining lifelong affective, extended familial, and imaginary connections to another place. For reasons I am not sure I can fully understand or explain, Katrina resonates with me in ways that render sympathy and mourning as inappropriate, even offensive reactions to what has happened and continues to happen. In my guts, I do not feel as if Hurricane Katrina was/is a “tragedy,” and I find myself viscerally objecting to its being characterized as such. While there are unnumbered tragedies—personal and political—composing the mosaic of this historical moment, Katrina strikes me as something closer to a planned atrocity, and the spectacle of its becoming sits with me as a scene of white popular enjoyment,¹ wherein the purging/drowning of Black people provided an opportunity for white Americana to revel in its entitlement to remain relatively indifferent to this nearby theater of breathtaking devastation. This structure of witnessing and orchestration, perhaps, is what most disorients my autobiographical sensibilities.

The 1991 explosion of Mt. Pinatubo in the Philippines (the second largest volcanic eruption in the twentieth century), which is arguably best known for having effectively (if only temporarily) incapacitated the massive Clark and Subic Bay US military bases, is prominent in Filipino/a diasporic consciousness and historical memory. While the context, geography, and sociopolitical impact of the Pinatubo eruption do not conveniently parallel or sustain easy comparison with the atrocity in the Gulf Coast, the volcano's explosion undoubtedly contributed to the atmospheric and environmental conditions of possibility for Hurricane Katrina. The ash, gas, and toxins distributed by the volcano were so significant that they effectively reduced the overall temperature of the earth by 1.5 degrees Celsius, altered global wind circulation, and destroyed a significant portion of the planet's ozone layer (Rantucci; Bautista; Castro; Davis; Asian Development Bank). Beyond this mind-numbing environmental consequence, and the 800 dead, 200,000 displaced by the eruption and subsequent lahars, Mt. Pinatubo is perhaps most significant to the Filipino/a diaspora for its signification of instant mortality and involuntary, unexpected “evacuation” at the hands of God (or, if you like, diasporic susceptibility to an inaccessible transcendental agency).

Unexpected displacement and premature death are absolutely unremarkable to Filipinos, above and beyond exposure to the worst of naturalized environmental disaster

(although I will not rehearse the socioeconomic, health, or mortality data here). Members of the Filipino diaspora, across class and regional distinctions, can almost universally state that they are immediately connected to the fallout from environmental hazard/disaster, assassination, acute government repression, or US military occupation/mobilization. Mt. Pinatubo's devastation, however, also reveals that this diasporic connectedness is neither seamless nor unmarked by its own reinscriptions of localized productions of racialized hierarchy and dominance. Rarely invoked in remembrances, commemorations, and (re) narrations of the eruption is the fact that (to quote one author) "hardest hit among the casualties were the Negritos who were not immunized from diseases and even shunned the treatment of doctors" (Castro 2).

The national/racial positioning of the Negrito peoples reflect the Spanish colonial and Euroamerican anthropological etymology of their naming, and the Negrito ethnoracial categorization serves as a convenient categorical incorporation of a much broader collection of indigenous Philippine groups, including the Aetas who inhabited the immediate region of Mt. Pinatubo. The colonial, anthropological, and contemporary Philippine national/racial imaginary conceptualizes the Negritos through a version of "epidermalized"² blackness that articulates with notions of an aboriginal (and quaint) Philippine "tribal" premodern. As historically racialized, and conventionally racially pathologized subjects, Aetas self-consciously sustain a rupturing of universalizing notions of Philippine nationalist, diasporic, "racial," and (pan)ethnic identity, condensing in the vernacular delineation between indigenous/Aetas/Negritos and "straight hair"/lowlander Filipinos. Victor Villa and Elvie Devillena, two Aetas who survived the eruption, thus consider the delineation of (racial) difference as they reflect on the moment of disaster:

I believe that Aytas and straight-hairs have certain similarities in thinking and certain differences in behavior. Aytas are just as intelligent as straight-hairs; the only difference is our lack of education. We eat differently, we dress differently. Straight-hairs like wearing shoes and fancy clothes, while Aytas are comfortable with *bahags* (loin cloth).

The lowlanders look down on Aytas. They even sneer at us as if we were direct descendants of monkeys. (Villa 263)

[W]hen people see that you are short, they already know you are an Ayta. They can tell you are Ita by your skin, height, or speech pattern.... No matter how you look, if you are an Ayta, it will always show. People have called me "Ayta, Ayta, Ayta.

Kinky hair, kinky hair, kinky hair.” They say that with so much derision. Sometimes we are called *beluga* because we have dark skin. People from Manila think that Zambales is filled with wild, savage Ayta people. (Devillena 288)

The Aeta/Negrito condition in this moment of Philippine national crisis compels a rereading of Mt. Pinatubo’s eruption and a reconsideration of how this moment might alter our understanding of the larger genealogy of Filipino familiarity with disaster (etc.) *especially in relation to the naturalized global linkages between “blackness” (Negritoness), social liquidation, racial subjection, and historical obsolescence (aboriginalness).*

A central political and theoretical problem defining the global and historical structure of Filipino intimacy with death and terror is its relative alienation from a common sense of white supremacy that *sees, analyzes, and viscerally experiences* mortal Filipino suffering as the logical global and historical condition of white (American) life. It is white civil existence and its analogues (including elitist versions of Philippine cosmopolitanism and Filipino identity) that create and circulate the “racial” and aboriginal existence of the Negrito people and their global cohorts, and install them as the durable centers of gravity for precisely the forms of civil, social, and biological death rendered so immediately visible in the US through the racial apocalypse of Hurricane Katrina. Such a racial common sense is precisely what Black Americans have involuntarily obtained, and rigorously, commonly theorized, over the last several centuries of US national formation.

This critical Black common sense—the notion, consistently sustained as a Fanonist “historical truth,”³ that Black peoples’ intimacy with death and terror is the *fundamental purpose of white civil existence, and, perhaps, global white life itself*—is (again) being stunningly vindicated as plans are made to “reconstruct” New Orleans in the image of a gentrified white metropolis (Davis; Jackson; Younge; Enzi). The time of Katrina thus amplifies the necessity for a political articulation of white supremacy that is “radical” in the most historically contextualized sense of the term. We can understand the planning of Katrina in its geographic and political specificity as antiblack state violence and orchestrated, “natural” population control, while also situating it in relation to the global material structuring, and material genealogy, of white Americana as a perpetual state of warfare that is fundamentally *racial* in its historical architecture, social vision, and militarized ordering of human disposability. I am suggesting that the significance of Black death and displacement in the living aftermath of Katrina is reflected in the creative possibility for Black common sense to resonate with, and provide substantial political-theoretical premises for, other (neo)colonized, underdeveloped, and racially pathologized peoples’

self-conceptualizations and global political identifications in relation to things like (US and US-proctored) state violence, “natural” disaster, poverty, disease, and bodily disintegration. Perhaps most importantly, this suggests the global rather than narrowly “national” or even “regional” significance of US-based antiblack violence as a modality of white supremacist social ordering: it is to consider naturalized American antiblackness as a material foundation on which other circuits of global dominance—including neocolonialism, nationalism, “globalization” and “empire”—rely for matrices of warmaking, racial subjection, and hierarchized material and ideological structures of human mortality.

Thus, Mt. Pinatubo’s eruption did not merely contribute to the global climatic condition for Katrina, it also marked the deep connection between apparently disparate “natural” occurrences which, in turn, surfaced as linked formations of global white supremacy and racism, which Ruth Wilson Gilmore conceptualizes as “the state sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death” (Gilmore 261). Aeta testimonials in the aftermath of the Pinatubo eruption suggest a firsthand, organic accounting of the Philippine state that more clearly renders its relation to the American white supremacist/racist state. There persist among the Aeta traces of precisely the critical common sense that 1) formulates a fundamental *disidentification* with the social and political logic of the Philippine national/racial formation, and 2) invokes latent possibilities for a rearticulation of cosmology, history, and identity that can think alongside the critical Black common sense of the Katrina moment.

What if we understood the death and destruction of Mt. Pinatubo’s eruption, and the genealogy of Filipino suffering and disaster itself, as mutually and materially *articulating with* Black death and displacement before, during, and beyond the time of Katrina? I am asking for a different paradigm of *identification*—encompassing the realms of spirituality, cosmology, (racial) identity, cultural imagination, and political dreaming/fantasizing—that precedes (and hopefully generates) a different kind of praxis, across the localized sites of US white supremacy.

I am also openly wondering if this partly autobiographical reflection is really an allegory for a particular political desire to instigate and participate in a radically collective global communion of people who are capable of mustering the voice to (at least) accuse the white world of conspiring and reveling in the death of others. It is in the act of making such an accusation that we might see the genesis of political labors that push and break the limits of rationalistic, formulaic, and pragmatist agendas challenging American hegemony and neoliberal capital. Of course, such an accumulation of identification and bonding, alongside others, could well contribute to the end of white life as we know it.

Finally disaster, conceived in the presence of white supremacy, definitively and conclusively means the end of any viable, much less rational possibility for the future of white liberal humanism. Something that many survivors of European and Euroamerican colonialism, slavery, and genocide share in common is a durable belief in the existence of evil, a basic conception that its force of possibility is always lurking in the overlapping spiritual and material worlds, and a powerful (though often understated) conviction that evil inhabits and possesses the white world, its way of life, and its relationality to “others.” Liberal white humanism, which constantly circulates and rearticulates notions of a shared universal “human” character while morbidly militarizing against manifest human threats to the integrity of the coercively universalized white body, cannot authentically survive the moment of Katrina. In fact, white humanism can only survive at all if it is capable of (again) reconstructing its apparatus of meaning to accommodate the materialization of white evil in the face of Black New Orleans. Perhaps, then, another question we might visit is, What does Katrina tell us of evil? What happens if we look up and evil is armed absence and militarized neglect, intentional and institutional without a doubt, but materialized through the white world’s persistent festival of health, happiness, and physical integrity in the face of such incredible suffering?

NOTES

1 While hers is a discussion of white enjoyment of mundane and unspectacular moments of Black subordination and antiblack violence under the dominance of racial chattel slavery, the fundamental insight of Saidiya V. Hartman's work *Scenes of Subjection* is wholly germane here: central to the affective, juridical, and psychic structures of slavery (and white supremacist dominion over the Black body) is the essential and multi-valenced *availability* of Black suffering for the consumption and use of white subjects. (Hartman)

2 Frantz Fanon's well-known meditation on "The Fact of Blackness" best articulates the notion of race as a formation of power that condenses at the sight of the racialized body, more specifically the overdetermined site of the epidermis. In one famous passage from this essay, he reflects on his experience with a white child on a public train, whose exclamation "Look, a Negro!" instantly invoked the alienation of the Black body/subject from human history, displaced by a racist "historicity" of blackness:

Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places. I had already stopped being amused. It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other ... and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea.... (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 112, all ellipses in the original)

3 Fanon writes of racist colonial domination that it is a constitution of "history" itself: The colonist makes history and he knows it. And because he refers constantly to the history of his metropolis, he plainly indicates that here he is the extension of this metropolis. The history he writes is therefore not the history of the country he is despoiling, but the history of his own nation's looting, raping, and starving to death. The immobility to which the colonized subject is condemned can be challenged only if he decides to put an end to the history of colonization and the history of despoliation in order to bring to life the history of the nation, the history of decolonization. (*The Wretched of the Earth* 15)

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