KOLUM KRITIKA

GOING TO YALE

Charlie Samuya Veric
American Studies
Yale University
charlie.veric@yale.edu

About the Author
Charlie Samuya Veric is a PhD student in American Studies and a member of the Working Group on Globalization and Culture at Yale. He is the editor of Anticipating Filipinas: Reading Bienvenido Lumbera as Critic (2006) and co-editor with Alice Guillermo of Suri at Sipat: Araling Ka Amado (2004). His most recent publications have appeared in journals such as American Quarterly, Common Knowledge, and Rethinking History.

I had ready responses to statements that came my way as soon as I received the news of my admission to Yale. There were the requisite congratulations. But as soon as these were done with, there came the reminder: “Come back before you enjoy America too much.” I would nod my head, flash a smile, or say a conclusive yes as a response. Surely these people did not mean harm. But after listening to the same old refrain, it became upsetting.

I understand where such reminders come from. In a country where close to 5,000 Filipinos in search of better fortunes leave everyday, only the heartless can miss the point. What will happen, for instance, if we leave the country to warmongering politicians? Who will take care of the sick if nurses pack their bags and dash to New York?

Two years ago, my own brother left for Saudi Arabia. He turned 20 at the time. He was so young yet so bold. It said on his passport that he was going to work as a plumber, but he was actually there as a fashion designer. The minute my brother’s plane took off, I began to know how tragic the country was. Her children, as young as twenty, would rather leave the familiarity of home to face the uncertainty of foreign shores.

When people like my brother return, they are usually honored in state celebrations. During her presidency, Corazon Aquino declared overseas contract workers as the nation’s new heroes. The state finally recognized the worth of those who had left and returned.

This is not to say that the recognition has done anything to stop the national exodus. What I rather want to stress is the kind of respect and admiration given to overseas workers
who return. The honor may prove useless in the end, but for whatever its worth, it is symbolic.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of my own recent departure. When friends congratulate and remind me to return, I get this odd feeling that it is not felicitation that is being expressed, but suspicion. Those who have the good fortune to go to America are always doubted: they will not return until proven otherwise. I think it is an undeserved judgment of character.

Let me say why. When I arrived at Yale, its neo-gothic buildings, beautiful courtyards, tree-lined streets, and magical rooftops and spires welcomed me. One night, I was looking for food and my search brought me to Broadway Street. I marched past a group of white undergraduates waiting outside Toad’s Place for the night’s concert. As I walked in their midst, it became painfully obvious to me that brown was the color of my skin. And for the very first time, I felt my brownness. For Yale is indeed a white man’s haven. The blacks and the yellows and the browns are hard to spot. And it is easy to think that they have no business being here.

But things changed when a friend brought me to the heart of Yale called Beinecke Plaza—a square marked out by two neoclassical buildings, one of which houses the president’s office. In the open space at the center, a towering flagpole stands as a memorial. Its base has sculptured flowers and an inscription that reads: “Augustus Canfield Ledyard, 1st Class Lieutenant, US Army Killed in Action on the Island of Negros, Philippines, December 8, 1899.” Not too far from the flagpole lies another memorare bearing these words: “In memory of all the men of Yale, who true to her Traditions, gave their Lives that Freedom might not perish from the Earth, 1914-1918.”

And I thought of Ledyard who fell in battle on the island of Negros. Was it really a fight for freedom when the Filipinos that he encountered merely defended their own? What were the traditions to which Ledyard proved true? Then I came to know that the campus was full of memorials to men whose names evoked the turbulent years following the Filipino-American War. There is, for example, a commemorative plaque in memory of William Howard Taft, the chief civil administrator of the occupied Philippines who ensured the pacification of Filipinos so that American freedom might endure. The irony is not so subtle. The memorial that stands at the heart of Yale—a testament to its gilded traditions—is for the most part a memorial to forgetting. For Ledyard’s fight for freedom is the loss of another’s liberty. A memorial for him is the mockery of another’s history. Who will tell this?

More than a hundred years after Ledyard fell on the island of Negros, I have come to
take part in the same traditions that had molded the fallen hero into an American immortal. Perhaps it is time that somebody went to America to narrate the other tale that is in need of memorials. It may not save the Philippines from bankruptcy nor earn recognition from its demagogues, but it will make the people remember more fully and authentically.