RESPONSES TO “DANCING INTO OBLIVION”
Various Authors

Editor’s Note
The following are invited responses to Theo Gonzalves’s “Dancing into Oblivion” which was presented at the Kritika Kultura Lecture Series, held on 4 May 2005 at the Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines. The authors have presented these papers as well in the forum after Gonzalves’s lecture.

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Dr. Theo Gonzalves’s presentation brings to mind some personal events related to the quest for identity among Filipino-Americans. One is an email I recently received from a friend in Berkeley, California; a second is my work with Tagalog-on-Site, an immersion group for Filipino-Americans; and third, is my recent contact with a nephew and a niece, both Filipino-Americans, in Los Angeles. These personal events shape my reactions to Dr. Gonzalves’s paper.

1. A day after Kritika Kultura invited me to react to Dr. Gonzalves’s presentation, I received this email from a Filipino-American friend, a married woman, who teaches at the University of California at Berkeley where, coincidentally, a Pilipino Cultural Night (PCN) had just transpired. She writes:

We went to see (Berkeley’s PCN-Pilipino Cultural Night) yesterday. It always runs long (3 hours+) so I usually can’t/don’t see the whole production … The audience itself is a spectacle to behold. They are made up of parents of cast members coming in from out of town and Filipino student groups from nearby campuses and Southern California have made it a tradition to attend. They get to cheer their lungs out at the mention of their school during the informal opening remarks. It’s rowdy. PCN topics at Berkeley usually have a flavor of activism, this year it’s the rise of the “I” Hotel … the international hotel which was demolished to make way for urban renewal in the 70s yata, evicting Filipino manong and Chinese elderly residents, which was met with days and days of protests and a hunger strike. But the play itself encapsulates the experience in the character of an elderly manong, with scenes
in several skit forms, interwoven with dances, modern hip hop and folk dances. Past themes have been Gabriela Silang’s life, immigration and hardships of their parents generation, drugs and gangs, ethnic identity. Students audition to participate, and … there are a few parents who discourage or prohibit their son/daughter to participate as it takes a lot of time out of their studies if the student is not careful. I have to remind my students in mid-semester to remember that they are students first and foremost. I find my classes are smaller on Fridays the weeks leading up to the PCN.

My friend’s email message echoes many points raised by Dr. Gonzalves in his paper about the PCN – the deployment of a theatrical narration, as well as folkloric and modern dances or suites, as elements of the PCN genre; the intense involvement of the students and their families in the event; and perhaps more important, the desire of the organizers to instill in Filipino-Americans a sense of being Filipino in a foreign land.

But isn’t it funny? There they are, Filipino-Americans in the United States, dislocated from the homeland, seeking ways to strengthen a Filipino identity on foreign soil, while we Filipinos here in the Philippines seeking a similar strengthening of local Filipino identity against the backdrop of media imperialism and the globalization, or better perhaps, the westernization of lifestyle. We do not have PCNs to boost our sense of being Filipino, but we have exhortations to buy Filipino products, support OPM and Filipino movies, travel around Wow Philippines, and use the Filipino language as part of an academic discourse. Even my own work in the theater entails, in large part, the appropriation of Asian or Filipino meanings in western texts, notably Shakespeare’s. So while we, Filipinos, in the Philippines, seek a stronger Filipino identity given a colonial past, class inequalities, and the galloping westernization of everyday life, particularly in the cities, the Filipino-Americans seek a stronger Filipino identity given a highly pluralistic society dominated by white people of European ancestry.

Filipinos, then, whether they be in the Philippines or the United States, and maybe too in other Filipino diasporas around the world, are negotiating an identity suited to their present socio-economic and political situation. Both groups see that their self-definition is being threatened, bewail the loss or decline of those distinct cultural elements, and seek ways to restore or fortify a sense of local identity. The search for identity is thus a strategic devise to gain pride and self-esteem, a source of personal and communal empowerment.

But is it fair to say that while the Filipinos in the Philippines seek a Filipino identity to become better Filipinos, the Filipinos in the United States seek a Filipino identity to become better Americans – or better Filipino-Americans? Many of the Filipino-Americans
who attend the PCN are American citizens and therefore have a stake in American culture. If they make it in American culture, they make it as Americans of Filipino descent, and not as native Filipinos born and bred in the Philippines. The search for identity thus has different objectives in different places.

2. My friend adds in her e-mail: “My daughter (Asia, 16) enjoyed watching the PCN. She felt the spirit of celebration and acknowledgment of a culture that represents her home. Atin-atin lang (Just between you and me), personally jaded na ako sa mga topics nila, pa-ulit ulit (I’m jaded because the PCN topics are repetitive), even their comedy is the same, they do it with much fondness of course. But this is their expression, a source of pride, an extension of themselves, they find family amongst themselves … so in the end, I defer to the students. It is after all, theirs, how they define themselves. We could all learn from them.”

This remark suggests a generational variation in the reception of the PCN.

My friend’s remark that “personally jaded (na siya) sa mga topics (ng PCN), pa-ulit-ulit, even their comedy is the same” gives me some understanding of Dr. Gonzalves’s loss of confidence at the way PCN has been shown over the years. This loss of confidence leads Dr. Gonzalves to make a critique of the PCN. While I am in general agreement with his critique, particularly his points about essentialism and the lack of critical reflection in the program numbers, we have to reconcile this critique with the apparent delight in which students and audiences receive the show. “My daughter,” says my friend, “felt the spirit of celebration and acknowledgement of a culture that represents her home.”

How do we reconcile these opposite receptions – one by the young, and the other by older members of the Filipino-American community? Is it fair to say that the young, though they enjoy the PCN, are being fed a kind of “false consciousness” about their Philippine roots? How have the young people, or the student organizers, responded to Dr. Gonzalves’s critique of the PCN?

3. I am delighted at the launching of what Dr. Gonzalves’s called “Cultural Evidences” as an alternative to the traditional PCN. May I submit for comment, however, another program that also seeks to strengthen Filipino identity. One, I think, is worthy of study and comparison.

For years now, I have been involved with a group called Tagalog on Site (TOS), an immersion program offered to Filipino-Americans to stay in the Philippines for two months during the American summer (July and August) to learn Filipino; have lecture-discussions on Philippine literature, history, culture; undertake exposure trips to farms, fishing
villages, mining communities and the like; and get opportunities to work in Filipino NGOs. I usually handle the session on Philippine cultural values, and year after year, I am amazed to find out that much of the misunderstanding between these young Filipino-Americans and their parents stem from the young person’s unfamiliarity of Filipino values and the inability of the parents or elders of these young people to justify the application of Filipino values or to make adjustments to the American context. On the whole, my impression is that the TOS enriches the Filipino-Americans sense of being Filipino but leaves it largely to them to integrate this rediscovered self with American life when they return to the States. This sounds like the “reverse exile” pattern that Dr. Gonzalves talks about.

My questions are: do you think immersion programs like this should be encouraged? Or perhaps more broadly, should “reverse exile” programs be encouraged?

4. What is the reach of the PCN? Is the PCN’s impact only felt in communities with a relatively large representation of Filipino-Americans? I ask this question because I know some young people who do not seem to take the issue of a Filipino identity that seriously. And I think this is partly because they live and study in a community where there are few Filipinos.

Two of my brother’s children, a nephew and a niece, the boy 16 and the girl 14, were born and raised in California. They do not speak Filipino, have been in the Philippines once when they were 10 and 8 years old, and do not have habits of mind and heart and speech that we would identify as Filipino. I met them last month in California, and in my conversation with them, I sensed that they were more concerned about fitting into a pluralistic American culture, at least in their respective high schools, than they were about crafting a Filipino identity. Being connected to Filipino customs, history, literature, or music does not appear to hold much interest to them. Trying to become like their “American” classmates is, however, important.

Questions: Are they better where they are, trying to assimilate as Americans, fitting into what Dr. Gonzalves called the “multicultural paradigm” and making their Filipino-ness recede into the background, as did I would guess the actor Lou Diamond Philips and the rock star Prince? Is some kind of multiculturalism an important goal for Filipinos to achieve in mainstream America? Should Filipinos hail Ang Lee and John Woo, two Chinese film directors who have made it in the United States, in large part because they have been able to package their “Asian-ness” in ways that please the larger American public? Do Filipinos have to engage in a similar packaging to become more visible in pluralistic America? Does a search of a Philippine identity, stressing one’s unique heritage, counteract
efforts to make it in the American mainstream? Is it better, in short, to dance into relative oblivion?

Perhaps not. Perhaps it’s better to talk about many kinds of Filipinos, each group building its own repertoire of representations, its own voice, in the societies they inhabit.

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The pleasure of Gonzalves’s critical text lies in its ethnographic texture, its ability to sense in a pop cultural genre, the Pilipino Cultural Night (PCN), the various contradictions faced by ethnic identities and the milieus that transform these selves into ir/resolute agents of history. This makes the study not just a theory of performance but also a rehearsal of the discourse of performative subjectivities. For the purposes of my reaction to this engagement, allow me to articulate specific categories that Gonzalves creates in his discussion of the PCN.

The first category I would like to explore is Gonzalves’s concept of the *spectacle*. When Gonzalves speaks of the folkloric aspect of a PCN performance, he refers to it as an “experimentation with fashioning identities” that inevitably produces “different kinds of Americans as well as Filipinos.” The PCN is spectacular, not because of its pageantry and pomp, but more significantly, because of its ability to introduce Otherness, and elicit responses of difference and discrepancy. For Gonzalves, the folk dance points to an “elsewhere,” which is by turns an amorphous fantasy and a concrete possibility: *fantastic* (read: impossible) as the scenography only emphasizes an ahistorical reckoning with an epically distant homeland; and *possible*, because the detached setting projects a “nascent anti-imperial critique,” an implicit refusal of the conditions of the assimilationist present, and a portentous desire to locate another Filipino America in an “anywhere else but here.” This is where we sense the rationale behind the nostalgic gestures and movements of the Filipino American folkloric dancer—one pines for a rural, local past in order to resist the totalizing influence of an urban, cosmopolitan present.

But because ethnicity, in this context, has become a repertoire of memories, acts of remembrance are dialectically challenged by acts of forgetting, the “dancing into oblivion” that Gonzalves celebrates with Bakhtinian laughter. Here Gonzalves evokes the necessity
of return after the leave-taking, to finally confront, through a realist rhythm, the materiality of assimilation. In the end, what salvages the memory is the dancer’s aspiration to dream of a certain “strategic essence” and at the same time awake through his “ironic body,” engaging dispersed imaginings and dislocated moorings in the unmistakable medium of the erotic. The dancer may contradict his Filipino American body with the Filipino that he embodies, but nevertheless accepts the grotesque compromise, for it is in this space where he finds ways of mobilizing his stranded modernity. Hence, the ethos of the travel the PCN enunciates, hyper-real as it may seem, transcends romantic escape and touristic foray, as it is ultimately, a pilgrimage.

The PCN pursues further the memorial motif in its tendency to dwell on issues by way of narrative, the second category I would like to focus on. But prior to the inscription of a coherent narrative is the premise on which the story is founded: that no memory in the present can attest to a Filipino American identity. Narrative in this sense exhibits an ideological critique, laying bare the past’s obliviousness to the wounds of departures, arrivals, returns, and the dislocations that lay among these historical decisions—local memories that had to be surrendered in exchange for a cosmopolitan reality.

The said premise clarifies the mechanism of the narrative, “reverse telos,” which for me, is the Filipino American’s strategy of employment into and out of both Filipino and American histories. “Reverse telos” as a principle of narrative structure symptomatizes the difficult historical dance that the Filipino must choreograph for himself in order to extricate his identity from a crude notion of hybridity—being a mere product of cultural assimilation. The Filipino American returns to the “national epic past” in order to disprove notions about his identity, that he is no accident of history, but a legitimate consequence of its motions. Therefore the re-identification with the Filipino is an imperative in renaming the Filipino American from an “immigrant imaginary” to, in Stuart Hall’s words, a “new ethnicity.”

Nevertheless, I wonder how the PCN, after returning to the Filipino component of Filipino American history, deals with the underwritten part of that narrative, the American present. Does “reverse telos” enable the Filipino American to finally utter the realities of his being an American Other? What part of the presentation allows for this reflection? If the speaking does not occur within the PCN, is it accommodated by another genre? Or is it a project that has yet to be written in Filipino American ethno-history before it is performed in what Gonzalves terms as the PCN’s “choreo-history”? 

In the end, Gonzalves works out a forceful theory of the Pilipino Cultural Night as a genre that only triumphs because of a conspiracy between spectacle and narrative in
order to inquire into, problematize, and resolve the specter of history that mediates the contemporary Filipino American as a subject of his present. We can only hope to read more of this critical virtuosity and learn from its nuances how we in the Philippines, in the time of the “strong republic,” remember our fragile selves, and dance against oblivion, into history.

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The younger generation’s negotiation with culture wherein “they perform histories they have not read, narrate their insecurities about cultural awareness, and take for granted the “authenticity” of folk forms is not only happening to a Filipino youth sect that has been uprooted from its origin but to an entire generation, which includes those who have remained in the Philippines. Gonzalves’s account and analysis of PCN and Cultural Evidence speaks of the Filipino American students’ attempt to be rooted in the Filipino culture, not simply as receivers of a historically determined product, but as active participants of the culture. It also serves as a challenge to the Filipino youth who have not been uprooted to be more aware and actively participate in their own culture since they are “rooted” by default.

It is admirable how the Filipinos in America celebrate their Filipino heritage especially since this celebration stems from their “fascination with what it means to be Filipino,” so much so that they become “producers of cultures; not merely as artists with interesting or curious notions, but organic intellectuals who help generate new ways of thinking about what we often take for granted.” Through performance, the culture has been appropriated from the past into the present, and “authenticity” is naturally lost. It is however the active search for a connection that matters, for the answer to the question of authenticity or what it means to be Filipino seems perennially elusive.

To find a parallelism in our local cultural celebrations, we might examine the events in the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP). Since Gonzalves sets the parameters of the cultural celebration using dance and theater, these will be the focal points.

First, the Philippines’ CCP resident dance company is Ballet Philippines, which claims to
stand out on the international dance stage as one of the few companies to successfully synthesize diverse dance and movement forms. From classical ballet to avant-garde choreographies, from traditional to modern dance, from martial arts to aerial movements, Ballet Philippines distills these different forms into distinctively Filipino contemporary expressions. (*Ballet Philippines*)

Ballet Philippines takes pride in “translating western technique into Filipino movement, theme, design and inspiration to produce a distinctly Filipino dance form.”

Secondly, the CCP’s resident theater company is *Tanghalang Pilipino*, which aims to bring Philippine Theater to the pinnacle of artistry by developing artists to produce original Filipino plays:

By staging plays from the repertoire of Philippine past and plays in translation from other countries TP hopes to bring to the experience of both artists and audience the best of Philippine and global theater tradition. It looks forward to educating and awakening the cultural consciousness of the Filipino audiences through its regular performances and other related activities like workshops, symposia and interactions. (*Tanghalang Pilipino*)

Both resident dance and theater companies of the CCP make use of the Filipino heritage passed down to them even as they assimilate Western practices. The focus here is not on the loss of culture through assimilation but the Filipinos’ mastery of the crafts of dance and theater. It reinforces Gonzalves’s claim that “modern history is not simply about the one-sided conquering of natives, but also about the resistance to and adaptation of the modern West” and by the drawing on such influences the way the PCN organizers drew on the Philippine histories they were exposed to, we are able to “reckon with some interesting juxtapositions wrought by modernity.” What is celebrated in the CCP, the PCN, and Cultural Evidence is the greatness of the Filipino.

However, the tendency of the PCN, which audiences here in the Philippines is just as guilty of, is to “laud the Filipino’s ability to assimilate cultural forms and miss out on the oppression of colonial rule … the narrations tend to rely less on celebrations of cultural assimilability and more literally toward the subordinated status of Filipinos as workers caught in the streams of a global economy.”

On a smaller scale closer to home, the cultural scene at the Ateneo has similarly been lauded by the *Philippine Star* when it featured the 145th year of the Ateneo: At the college
level, through a wide variety of courses and co-curricular activities, faculty and students
work together in understanding and enriching Philippine culture while engaging in
analytical and creative discourse on the major ideas and methods of the global intellectual
heritage” (Bernas 3). It also commends two respected thespians, Ricky Abad and Salvador
Bernal, for the Ateneo theater’s ability to adapt foreign texts, indigenizing them so that the
plays might have a more powerful effect on the Filipino audience.

Working with Abad, the Artistic Director of Ateneo’s resident theater group, and
National Artist Bernal is greatly empowering in terms of widening one’s exposure to
culture, and performing in their productions is an honor. But not all performers, much less
audiences, share as much eagerness for celebrating and witnessing culture and identity as
they do for mounting or viewing a production; they are not as concerned about culture as
they are about savoring the moment of performing or watching a performance. There are
times when Tanghalang Ateneo is tempted to stage a production regardless of its relevance
and content. Most productions have audiences composed of reluctant Ateneo students who
sit through the play for three hours only because they have a reaction paper to submit to
their English teachers.

The struggle to define or, at the very least, take part in the Filipino culture is
apparently more pressing for the Filipinos in America. This is perhaps because they are
not on Philippine soil and identity becomes a great issue as the generations move farther
and farther away from their heritage. This pressure is made evident in the “outing”
of accomplished Filipinos in America, which is done in order to “generate common
knowledge and sense around who is supposed to be included in one’s “community” —an
explicit statement about who may constitute Filipino America.”

Thus, although Filipinos and Filipino Americans are both faced with the question,
“What is or who is Filipino?” the question becomes more important to the Filipinos
thousands of miles away when their old heritage fades and death becomes the sole receiver
of the memory of a culture and the younger generation begins to asks “Who am I?” On the
other hand, here where the climate never changes, the Filipino youth seem oblivious to the
effects of the worldwide cultural assimilation on their identity. It is as if colonial mentality
has taken another guise more than a decade since the American bases left and will continue
to persist.

Shouldn’t we then demarcate what constitutes Filipino, while our kababayans
(“countrymen”) demarcate what constitutes Filipino-American? Why are our Filipino
youth here in the Philippines apathetic to culture – here where it should be held in highest
regard – while Filipino students in America, most of whom were born there, strive so hard
to win it back or define it for themselves?
Works Cited


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Gonzalves problematizes, among other issues, the representation of an authentic Philippine cultural form as a necessary reminder of identity. The writer acknowledges that PCN, at some point in its existence, may have been essentialist in its operations, presuming that there is a distinct, sterilized national culture and identity, unchanged by the passage of history. I agree with the paper’s statements about culture and identity as fluid and unfolding. I take interest in both issues since they parallel local debates as to what actually constitutes Philippine national culture.

Most Filipinos here and abroad have overvalued folk dancing as the quintessential indigenous dance form. This, ultimately, finds expression in various ways from the collective to the individual – in Linggo ng Wika (“Language Week”) festivities of schools where administrators insist that their students should dance the tinikling or pandanggo sa ilaw every year; in Dick Gordon’s “Wow! Philippines,” purportedly a showcase of the country’s best, where paid performers do a variation of the tinikling and pandanggo sa ilaw; in a college teacher’s testy remark that ballet is “anti-Filipino.” These practices and sentiments suggest a narrow and static notion of “Philippine culture,” conflating culture with artifact reproduction – they derive their motivation from lazy habits and a mistaken sense of “nation-ness” or nationalism, which is almost always “imagined.” As such, folk dancing, especially as produced in such contexts, has over time become far removed from the complexities of experience and the knowledge that has produced them; it has become more spectacle than performance, forfeiting its transformative energies.

Consequently, this development in the production and reception of folk dances, its loss of power to engage its audience in performance, influence how such forms are
appreciated abroad. As the main exponent of folk and ethnic dances, the Bayanihan Dance Troupe serves as a case in point. The Bayanihan thrives by catering mostly to an international audience, inspiring, as their souvenir program proudly claims, “other countries to exploit their own folk material for international presentation … without sacrificing authenticity.” This plug invites scrutiny as it proposes a definition of culture in its claims of authenticity. Culture, as discussed by Homi Bhabha in “The Commitment to Theory,” is negotiated in a “Third Space” where hybridity operates (18-28). Instead of falling back on the categories of “Self” and “Other,” Bhabha posits that cultural identities are dialogically constructed, and cultural meaning itself is the process that results from the “translations” and “transmutations” of indigenous traditions in foreign contexts. Such an understanding of culture, I think, is more receptive to the passage of history and to the dynamic cultural interaction/exchange that occurred between colonizer and colonized. Dr. Gonzalves cites an example of this concept at work – the American expression “running amok” appropriates from native Filipino vocabulary. This notion of culture perhaps, to return to my initial point, renders assertions of authenticity ineffectual and unnecessary.

Given this frame, is it likely that the Bayanihan’s performances here and/or abroad as well as the general attempts of the government to showcase slices of Philippine culture pander to Orientalist fantasies and fetishes? Although the Bayanihan endeavors to showcase an authentic panorama of ethnic and folk dances, their constant reproduction of the same might reinforce the belief that such cultural forms are representative of an “essential Philippine culture,” which is by now a simplistic and deluded category. From what I’ve seen of its shows and its reviews, the Bayanihan sometimes resorts to romanticizing what it represents such as the countryside and rural life, very much like an Amorsolo genre painting. Does this qualify as “strategic essentialism”? Bhabha’s analysis informs us that cultures and identities are never unified or binary (Self and Other) and this I hope, will come to guide our understanding of both terms.

WORK CITED