

TWO-PART INVENTION: A RESPONSE

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Editor's Note

This piece is a written response to the responses the author received when he delivered his lecture "Dancing into Oblivion" at the *Kritika Kultura Lecture Series* on 4 May 2005 at the Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines. Both the lecture and the responses are printed in this issue of *Kritika Kultura*.

MEDITATION: LEONARD SHELBY

Leonard Shelby is convinced he can find those responsible for the murder and rape of his wife. He doesn't have a problem finding clues. They're all around him. He collects scraps in large folders, carries them in his car, under his arm, from scene to scene. Shelby carries no weapon. Instead, he's buried under a mountain of what he considers to be evidence: medical, police, and psychiatric reports, notes to himself, and photos. His biggest problem in trying to solve such a complex case is that he has no short-term memory.

Adapted from a story by Jonathan Nolan and directed by Christopher Nolan, *Memento* is more than a murder mystery that curiously unfolds for the viewers in a reverse chronology. Shelby's crisis reminds us that identities are ultimately about what gets remembered – not always handed down lovingly or reliably – but the active assembling and discarding of all the shards we often take for granted, the things that connect us from one scene to the next.

Those twinned expressions of distance and panic in Leonard Shelby's face seem understandable. He's reminded of his wife's bloodied body, her own distant and cold visage. It's all in the clues, he reminds himself. He mutters everything in short spurts. Because of his "accident," Shelby relies on an instant camera for quick reference. He dashes off captions underneath the images before they're fully developed. He crams them into his pocket where he's collected a stack of the photos. But while the camera and the notepads are always within reach – the Polaroid dangles from a strap off his shoulder, reams of notes sardined under his arm – he commits the most important information to his body. He is a canvas of tattoos; he becomes a walking text. Shelby's body is his most reliable tablet for his memory.

He suspects the people he's meeting are using him. Knowing that he'll soon forget the conversation he's having in a few minutes, he sends notes to his future self. Shelby anchors himself and his investigation to documents: his collection of Polaroid photos, his wad of notes, and his tattooed body. The texts found in the first two are not just commentaries but commands, functions, and prompts for action. They're performative in nature. "Don't trust her." Both the photos and hard copies are part of the detective's trade, methodical documentation. There's nothing special here; it's simply clinical.

The use of the body, though, is desperate. It is documentation's last resort; not ceremonial or ritualistic, but drastic. Shelby's reliance on his body expresses an expectation, perhaps something short of a hope – that he will not "lose" himself, his physical person. It is an expectation or hope that his body can continue to be a repository for information even though he knows his memory will fail him. There is a similar logic deployed in the PCN – an investment in the bodily disciplining of histories, cultures, identities and memories. Shelby's bodily commitment mirrors that of the PCN performers – taking to the stage as if history could not be committed anywhere else, to no place beyond that evening. It is as if each generation has to perform the long arc of sanctioned history in one night or it will not be performed at all.¹

CONVERSATION: SUMMERTIME IN QUEZON CITY

I welcome *Kritika Kultura's* offer to feature some of my work on the PCNs and I especially appreciate the commentary by each of the respondents who participated in the forum.

Maramara sees parallel functions enacted by the PCN organizers and Philippine-based institutions such as the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), especially in how resident companies such as Ballet Philippines and *Tanghalang Pilipino* (dance and theater, respectively) represent themselves to the public. She finds in their self-advertisements a peculiar ambition and function – to articulate and disseminate the nation's patrimony. Perhaps Mexican sociologist and philosopher Nestor Garcia Canclini knew what former first lady Imelda Marcos was up to when she spearheaded the building of the CCP:

The dramatization of the patrimony is the effort to simulate that there is an origin, a founding substance, in relation with which we should act today. This is the basis of authoritarian cultural policies. The world is a stage, but what must be performed is already prescribed. The practices and objects of value are found and catalogued in a fixed repertory. To be cultured implies knowing that repertory of symbolic goods

and intervening correctly in the rituals that reproduce it. For that reason the notions of collection and ritual are key to deconstructing the links between culture and power (Canclini 110).

While the PCNs and CCP productions seem to tackle similar concerns, namely, the celebration of “founding events, the heroes who played the main roles in them, and the fetishized objects that evoke them,” there is a significant difference. PCNs continue to be produced in a thoroughly decentralized and dispersed network of college and university campuses (occasionally mounted by high school students as well). Funding for the events is accomplished through a mix of campus- and community-based sources. On the other hand, works mounted at the CCP bears the imprimatur of the national government; the CCP was inaugurated in a series of executive orders beginning in 1969 (Canclini 110).

Panganiban identifies the overvaluation of certain kinds of expressive forms, specifically, modernized folkloric forms in the Philippines, as “the quintessential indigenous dance form.” She develops an especially critical estimation that “culture” is often conflated with the production of artifacts. I could not agree more with her assessment.

Like Maramara, Panganiban takes to task agents of national cultural production such as the Bayanihan Philippine Dance Company for authoring – or, more to her point – reproducing static notions of culture. At the end of her piece, she asks if that process of romanticizing culture is inescapable, whereby once active, dynamic and precious activities seem to be consigned to the idyllic or the pastoral. But in addition to tracking the cultural logics of late-capital – either corporate- or government-sanctioned – we should also stay attuned to work that speaks out to us as deep listeners and co-authors of other versions of the world that struggle to remain relevant, on-time and irresistible. It’s not a coincidence that some of today’s forum participants in their own work pay attention to the rebel, the dissident, to those who refuse to remain locked into the schemes of marketeers, bottom-liners and one-nighters.

Both Abad and Jacobo pay attention to my use of the phrase “reverse exile.” I credit Oscar Campomanes’s use of the term in his 1992 essay on Filipino American literature, originally included in an important anthology of Asian American literary criticism. A “reverse exile” calls into question the telos of assimilation that has driven social science theories of cultural change and adaptation in the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century. That discourse is premised on what had been seen as the inevitable march from contact, conflict, and accommodation, to assimilation (Omi and Winant 14-23). Both Abad and Jacobo pick up on the notion that these processes, which at one time

seemed inescapable or universalizable across racial groups, are in fact, in need of more complicated theorizing – that the children of immigrants, sojourners, and others have developed compelling and complicated ways of thinking about their commitments to where they have called “home.” More importantly, observers like Jacobo hone in on the potential for the PCN to frustrate expectations about cultural assimilability.

Abad reflects on his own conversations with his US-born niece and nephew, living in California. He senses in them an absence in what he describes as the “habits of mind and heart and speech that we would identify as Filipino.” Because of their lack of access to elaborate productions mounted by large numbers of those in their peer group, he asks: “Are they better where they are, trying to assimilate as Americans?” Let’s hope not.

Let’s hope his Filipino American nephew and niece learn enough chords to know what Ani DiFranco means when she says, “I have a personal interest in the intersection of culture, capitalism and media, because I am often standing at that crossroads with my guitar” (Franken and DiFranco).

NOTE

1 My use of the plural form is a conscious one. The PCN demands the individuation of experience, to make singular sense of the past for the performer, for her student organization, her campus, and so on. It is another example of how nationalisms almost always casually rely on the singular rather than the plural. Said rails on about this:

I think the one thing that I find, I guess, the most – I wouldn’t say repellent, but I would say antagonistic – for me is identity. The notion of a *single* identity. And so multiple identity, the polyphony of many voices playing off against each other, without, as I say, the need to reconcile them, just to hold them together, is what my work is all about. More than one culture, more than one awareness, both in its negative and its positive modes. It’s basic instinct. (99)

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