

2012

"In the midst of and at the edges of this maelstrom": Experience and Archives After the Falling Away

Victor Bascara

University of California, Los Angeles, vbascara@asianam.ucla.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Bascara, Victor (2012) ""In the midst of and at the edges of this maelstrom": Experience and Archives After the Falling Away," *Criticism*: Vol. 54: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol54/iss2/7>

“IN THE MIDST
OF AND AT THE
EDGES OF THIS
MAELSTROM”:
EXPERIENCE AND
ARCHIVES AFTER
THE FALLING
AWAY

Victor Bascara

Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization by Neferti X. M. Tadiar. A John Hope Franklin Center book. Post-Contemporary Interventions Series. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. Pp. 496. \$99.95 cloth, \$28.95 paper.

An ever-growing body of recent scholarship in Philippine studies/critical Filipino studies has interpellated US readers by referencing globality, specifically by examining manifestations of contemporary globalization and mapping their genealogies in and through the Philippines. Scholars such as Vicente Rafael, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, Steve McKay, and Martin Manalansan IV have focused on such topics as the politics of translation, gendered labor migration, export processing zones, and diasporic sexuality, respectively. Their approaches resonate with what Neferti X. M. Tadiar productively terms “Philippine historical experience” in her recent book, *Things Fall Away*. As the methodology of the book demonstrates, *Philippine historical experience* is not a simply empirical object composed of, say, texts and cultural artifacts, but rather an irreducible matrix of affective sensibilities and elusive epistemologies. Philippine historical experience is then simultaneously a seemingly empirical point of access as well as an epistemological occasion to call into question the terms by which the Philippines, history, and even experience have come to be known by a wide range of institutions and disciplines, legible through such formations as, say, the Manila flyover network. Philippine historical experience may then be what Frantz Fanon in a not unrelated context memorably

referred as a “zone of occult instability where the people dwell.”¹

That is to say, the term “Philippine historical experience” seems straightforward enough, but it is not. And that is a good thing. It is this double move of both explaining and complicating that makes this concept rich and meaningful for understanding the ways in which the Philippines is, in Tadiar’s phrasing, “in the midst of and at the edges of this maelstrom” (2). of what was once called the New World Order. “The New World Order”—calling to mind the sonorous twentieth-century cadences of then-President George H. W. Bush—is a less current phrase she has understandably replaced with *globalization*, as the older term figures prominently in an important monograph Tadiar previously published: *Fantasy-Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order* (2004). New world order, globalization, neoliberalism, (post) modernity—whatever term one uses, it has become clear to even casual observers that the bloom is off the globalized rose at least since the uprisings in Seattle on the occasion of the World Trade Organization meeting there in 1999. That said, as Tadiar’s analyses show, appreciating the genealogies and new/subaltern formations of the makings of globalization can reveal occluded histories and give conceptual and concrete form to something that

can still be called “revolution.” For Tadiar, then, *historical experience* means “not only people’s collective responses to the objective social and economic conditions in which they find themselves” but also “the collective *subjective* practices they engage in that help produce and remake those objective conditions” (10, emphasis added).

So one challenge of Tadiar’s current study, which the book quite ably meets, is a task that both dogs and enables research on globalization that is nevertheless case-specific: scrupulous attention to both the exceptional and the paradigmatic. The Philippines manages to be both marginal and central. And in either situation Tadiar’s persuasive and rigorously historical materialist analysis draws on a methodology rooted largely in commendable capacities of exegeses of literature certainly, but also in the social text and in the contradictions and overdeterminations of late capitalism. Positioning the Philippines both “in the midst of and on the edges of this maelstrom” speaks also to the provocative adaptation of Chinua Achebe (and, further back, Yeats) in Tadiar’s title. In the allusion to Achebe, Tadiar’s book links Philippine historical experience to the global project of decolonization while also paying rigorous attention to the ways in which what has been “loosed upon the world” “falls away” to “provide grounds for the reconceptualization of feminized

labor and migration, modern authoritarianism, crony capitalism, civil society, and the cultural practice and political ontology of revolution" (4).

In grasping the dialectic between Philippine historical experience and the makings of globalization, *Things Fall Away* examines the relationships between knowledge and power, between objects, methodologies, and legitimation. Methodologically, the book could well be described as being "both in the midst of and on the edges of [a] maelstrom" of existing fields and their diverse scholarly approaches (such as Philippines studies, Cultural studies, development studies, comparative literature, postcolonial studies, Marxist cultural theory, Southeast Asian studies, and women's studies). Tadiar writes early on, "This book is premised on the idea that the outsides of capitalism are everywhere to be found in cultural practices in the moment prior to subsumption by universal capitalist forms" (21). With this extended attention to both epistemological and material stakes, Tadiar's book, even more than the influential books alluded to earlier, may be the bridge between empirically minded and conceptually grounded forms of scholarship. While the majority of the evidence analyzed in her book is literary and otherwise discursive, *Things Fall Away*, appreciates how the material and, more precisely, the phenomenological reflects and produces that discursivity.

Appropriately, then, two main, overlapping methodologies emerge over the nearly five hundred pages of Tadiar's study: Marxist cultural studies and transnational feminist critique. She begins with three chapters that strategically foreground gendered analysis as a means to grasp the reasons why the face of the Filipino diaspora under globalization has come to be the Filipina. By first establishing the always already gendered terms of postcolonial and neocolonial conditions in the Philippines, the book makes a strong case for the centrality of texts by Filipina writers and activists to rigorous critique and political activity. For example, Tadiar considers the ways in which the "poetics of Filipina export . . . revitalize and reinvent" ways of existing under the conditions of globalization:

What appear . . . to be practices of self-making through consumptive mimicry and identification might instead be seen to draw upon practices of spiritual mediation that historically obtained as the domain of female-gendered members in precolonial Philippine societies. If overseas Filipino women appear to be now "forced onto a different arena of feminized mediation" by the cultural logic of global capitalism, it may be that this different arena

of overseas domestic labor is itself also the product of older practices of spiritual mediation, which are revitalized and reinvented in the actions of Filipinas selling and sending themselves as labor commodities for export. (125)

These opening three chapters then set up three middle chapters that focus on the postcolonial metropolis as a space where multiple temporalities coexist. Residual pasts, unforeseen and unrealized futures, and fought-over presents all inhabit the same exhilarating, frustrating, inescapable space; for Tadiar's analysis, that space becomes the place of Philippine historical experience, in a particularly subaltern-inflected register, taking us through and beyond modernity. One such example is her analysis of Tony Perez's "*Cubao 1980*" at *Iba Pang Mga Katha: Unang Sigaw Ng Gay Liberation Movement sa Pilipinas* (1992) (*Cubao 1980* and other works: The first cry of the gay liberation movement in the Philippines):

Unlike Western modernist expressions of symptom, which, as Fredric Jameson argues, in taking its form from value can only mark the absence of the full traumatic context that gives rise to it as a lack of meaning, these pieces in Perez's novella

are neither meaningless nor latently meaningful. They are, rather, part-objects still awaiting signification. They are traces of nonabstract relations of meaning, indeed, of new social relations, yet to be made. (255)

The final section of the book then operates as something of a synthesis of the previous two sections by focusing on emergent forms of gendered mobilization that take place in and around and from the postcolonial metropolis. A particular strength of the book is that this section is not merely a rallying or condemnatory epilogue but rather a sustained consideration of the failures and potentials of past, present, and future organizing. In an interweaving of Achille Mbembe's elaborations on the politics of death and Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life," Tadiar analyzes Levy Balgos de la Cruz's story "And Mga Alaala'y Parang Mga Alitaptap" (Memories are like fireflies) to appreciate the revolutionary potential of death understood through what she calls "divine sorrow":

Immanent in the cult politics of revolution is another affective economy where the dividing line between life and death and its gendered regulation are trespassed or rendered mutable. As opposed to

the death upheld and wielded by sovereign power, the death that divine sorrow draws near creates a breach in the material finitude of the living, enabling a surpassing of the limits of a merely human world in order to serve as the means of a renewal of the very life that has been lost. (365–66)

She later elaborates on the implication of “divine sorrow” as a site of the radically emergent that may provide a “release” from “capitalist sovereignty”:

I am suggesting that, drawing on a history of mixed cultural sources, the experience of divine sorrow opens up an emergent political ontology and economy of human life and death and of nature that departs from the ontological foundations of the hegemonic cultural-political logics of both state power and revolution. What is “divine” is not a transcendent agency, fate or destiny, but a more mundane, singular advent that releases one from the eschatological lineaments of capitalism and modern sovereignty. (368)

While the book frankly acknowledges the long history of

failures to realize and even envision revolutionary possibilities in Philippine history, it points, in the final chapter, “The Sorrows of People,” to ways in which those putative failures can be productive when mobilized as “the sorrows” that constitute and motivate the multitude as “people” in a revolutionary sense. There may be some risk of this condition merely coming across as a once and future resentment that can and has been seen across diverse examples. But in Tadiar’s uniquely well-qualified hands—which draw on a skill set and archive of materials few in the US academy or elsewhere can so readily and magisterially summon—the specificity, complexity, and implications of “Philippine historical experience” vigorously resist such reduction while remaining bracingly urgent.

Victor Bascara is an associate professor in the Department of Asian American Studies at the University of California–Los Angeles. His research and teaching examine the transition from formal colonialism to informal colonialism, and his writings have been published in such journals as American Quarterly, the Journal of Asian American Studies, and American Literature.

NOTE

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (1961; repr., New York: Ballantine, 1963), 227.