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THE HISTORICAL CONDITION OF FILIPINO AMERICA
Eric Reyes


Ever since the United States purchased the Philippine Islands from Spain at the turn of the twentieth century, the status of Filipinos in relation to the United States has dynamically reflected America’s anxiety with race and empire. Oscar V. Campomanes points to this unease in his pivotal 1995 essay on representations of Filipinos in American discourse by arguing that Filipinos suffered from an inherent “unrepresentability” and “unassimilability” because of the absence of discussions of American empire in American academic and cultural discourses.1 Similarly, Luis H. Francia observed the enfolding complexity of the “Filipino condition” in his exhibition essay for the 1997 visual art exhibition, “Memories of Overdevelopment”:

True children of the electronic age, objects of America’s Asiatic thrusts, we know all about America even before we come. Remembering the future, we arrive here strangers in a familiar land, revisiting places we had never set foot on, renewing friendships that had never begun.2

Both Campomanes and Francia describe the logic of strangeness that structures Filipinos’ epistemological framework as a recursive matrix that defines the Filipino condition in relation to an imagined and deferred
America. *Suspended Apocalypse* extends Campomanes’s argument about the epistemological condition of Filipinos to a broader ontological inquiry. Dylan Rodríguez’s text addresses the underlying alienation identified in Francia’s observation through a theoretically engaged and critical genealogy of Filipino American discourse. Arguing that previous analyses of “the Filipino condition” neglect a broader theoretical approach, Rodríguez’s central argument is that “the production of the ‘Filipino American’ is defined—essentially and fundamentally—by a complex, largely disavowed, and almost entirely undertheorized relation to a nexus of profound racial and white supremacist violence” (11). Rodríguez’s intent is to provide precisely this broader theoretical engagement. He shifts our attention away from the characterization of the Filipino condition as residing solely within a binary of Philippine and US historical experience to a broader concern for disparities of power that are transhistorical and global, from benevolent assimilation to white supremacist genocide. Interdisciplinary and wide-ranging, Rodríguez’s polemical text deepens our understanding of the ontological status of “the Filipino” and, more broadly, the reproduction of epistemologies of dominant ideologies against and within those of the oppressed.

In each chapter, Rodríguez engages with insightful examples of the Filipino condition to illustrate the ways that Filipinos have confronted and addressed the pervasive power of white supremacist genocide. Chapter 1 explains Rodríguez’s key concern about the ways that the production of the Filipino condition disenables engagement against the very ideological discourses that create the Filipino condition. Rodríguez juxtaposes Pilipino Cultural Night, the popular cultural performance and event held annually by students on many campuses, with a student-led protest by the Third World Liberation Front at University of California–Berkeley against Proposition 209, California’s 1996 anti–affirmative action measure. For Rodríguez, Filipino American students’ conscious practice of Filipino Americanism was a form of identity politics that illustrates the normative Filipino condition. Rodríguez asserts that the individual subjectivity and shared community that Pilipino Cultural Night offered is inherently aligned with state power and, consequently, Filipino Americanism negates the possibility of engaging in critical political practices.

Chapter 2 elaborates on Filipino Americans’ conflicting affiliation with America. Focusing on Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall’s theorization of *common sense* as the ideological battleground for social dominance, Rodríguez argues that Filipino American common sense produces a “deformed nationalism”
that fosters the “arrested raciosity” of Filipinos in the United States. To illustrate how this common sense is produced, Rodríguez examines academic studies of Filipinos and mass media by Filipinos, such as Yen Le Espiritu’s ethnographies of Filipinos in San Diego and the widely distributed *Philippine News*. Rodríguez critiques both as representative examples of a Filipino Americanist discourse that supports a Filipino American common sense that “not only refrains from sustained critique of the racist and white supremacist institutionalities of the U.S. state across ‘Filipino’ and ‘non-Filipino’ localities; it is structurally incapable of it” (87). For Rodríguez, Filipino Americanist discourse produces the cultural identification and alienation that underlies Filipino American identity politics.

In the next two chapters, Rodríguez places the Filipino condition within a broader perspective beyond one simply tied to forms of nationalism, deformed or otherwise. Chapter 3 explains his use of the term *genocide* through a close reading of newspaper accounts, government documents, and congressional testimony on the Philippine-US War at the turn of the twentieth century amid the dawn of Pacifica Americana. Rodríguez shows that American actions in the Philippines were intentional and that they exemplify genocide as a practice of inhumane actions that causes atrocities, death, and misery. In other words, he highlights Pacifica Americana as more than an extension of American manifest destiny. Rodríguez specifies Pacifica Americana as the early manifestation of white supremacist genocide that fundamentally shapes the Filipino condition. In chapter 4, Rodríguez introduces the term “suspended apocalypse,” which he uses to describe the “political-cultural logic that rearranges, deforms, and dislocates a Filipino genealogy of subjection and death” (150). Compared to a common nostalgic optimism in Filipino American discourse, Rodríguez’s complex theorization offers an alternative interpretation of the Filipino experience with America. Rodríguez further elaborates:

The Filipino American dream of the United States of America is, in this light, a profound anti-memory, an un-remembering and un-witnessing, of U.S. conquest, colonization, and genocide that is not unlike what other racially pathologized populations have indulged under the seductions of post-civil rights multiculturalism. This is the context of what I have been calling the suspended apocalypse of the Filipino encounter with America, a moment which forms the necessary premises for Filipino arrested
raciality in its broadest enunciations, and particularly enables contemporary Filipino American rationalizations of the historical Filipino condition. (188)

In other words, suspended apocalypse is akin to Francia’s logic of strangeness that distorts Filipinos experience with America in the United States.

In his last chapter, Rodríguez transposes two major natural disasters: the 1991 eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines and 2005’s Hurricane Katrina in the American South. Rodríguez expands his analysis beyond a simple examination of the disasters and governmental response as failures of idealized expectations in order to argue also that the lack of adequate state response constituted another form of genocidal action. Rodríguez compares the situation of Filipinos in the Philippines and racialized Americans in the United States after these disasters, but he is careful not to create a hierarchy of victimhood. Rather, he uses this comparative mode to suggest a common strain of struggle and to generalize his analysis of the Filipino condition and white supremacist genocide as emblematic of fundamental struggle with the human condition and what constitutes genocide, intentional or not.

*Suspended Apocalypse*’s insistent focus on white supremacist genocide as the determinant force that creates and reproduces the recursive and oppressively limiting epistemologies of the Filipino subject adds an ethical dimension to debates about the Filipino condition. Yet, to attribute genocide such totalizing status raises questions about other competing totalizing perspectives on the human condition in general; surely, the pervasive logic of transnational capitalism or various globalized religious ideologies contributes to the situated and historical experiences of Filipinos around the globe. More specifically, regarding the aftermath of disasters, what of the response of nongovernmental organizations, groups, and individuals who in much less public and organized ways responded to and alleviated much human misery? And, while Rodríguez addresses difference within the rubric of “the Filipino” by, for instance, examining the situation of neglected ethnic and aboriginal communities in the Philippines in the last chapter, not all individuals of Philippine ancestry since the turn of the twentieth century inhabit the Filipino condition in the same way. Rodríguez reveals how disparate and subjugating power is articulated through race, in particular white supremacist genocidal racism. Yet, racism is not the only form of articulated power. As past debates arguing for wider theorizations of the human condition, such as those
about the postmodern condition, have shown, attempts to identify a totalizing systemic production of disparate power remain at risk of ignoring and replicating equally pervasive systems of power such as gendered hierarchies. Nevertheless, Suspended Apocalypse provides a useful framework in which to contemplate the Filipino condition as intricately linked to the production of race and empire.

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