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Like Marginalia in the Canon of the Oppressors: Critical Theorizing at the Margin and Attempts for Redemptive Alternatives

Abstract:

Bestrewn with relics of subjugation, the frameworks that hinge on social progress have failed to appraise the plight of the marginalized in the democratic discourse. This is the case in the Philippines, as in other fringed spaces caught in hegemonic world-building. In this setup, emancipation is anchored in salvific attempts – salvaging the marginalized from a messianic standpoint. This tends to produce a pejorative image of the marginalized as incapable of self-determination. I argue in a three-part discussion: (1) reexamine the locus of the margin in critical theorizing; (2) retrace the act of recognition *vis-à-vis* the emancipative struggle; (3) present that the lifeworld of the marginalized offers redemptive alternatives for emancipation. Further, I argue that this offers a foremost framework in critical theorizing at the margin since their situatedness affords a stance that has not formed a patina of the West but is primarily informed by their rich local periphery.

Keywords:

critical theory, marginalization, emancipation, redemptive alternative, indigenous, margin

Occasioned by settler incursion, diaspora, globalization, and the systems of the market, the image of an emancipated margin is turning into the ground zero of a far-away utopia. The trajectory taken by current struggles for emancipation remains challenged, if not arrested by these hegemonic strictures. This particularly points to structured systems that persist as a glass ceiling for the minoritized; ordaining them into people lacking agency for self-determination. While this claim is not proposing an assumption of a dismissive stance to any redemptive promise, what this merits is a (re)valuation of the guarantee attached to these emancipative projects.

Given the claim that these hegemonic systems assume a throne at the center-periphery, all else is fringed at the pauperized marginal ground. Such a picture of phenotypical margin is a product of the peddled notion that the marginalized are in need of saving by the dominant rationality and governance. In turn, this effuses the belief that the act of recognizing is done in a privileged – albeit, as I argue later, an imagined – posture. This insistence only produces a more defined lacuna between those who do the saving and the group deemed in need of saving; those who assert the privilege to recognize and those held at the receiving end of such recognition. In this version of the oppressive power, an exigency for theorizing that incessantly carves its presence in the convoluted world of the oppressed, the least, and the marginalized, is to be found. While it can be argued that theorizing grounded in these systemic structures tends to be unvaryingly definitory, they are not profoundly complementary. This implies the possibility of a project for theorizing that, although dismisses the categorical dictation of any structured system, is informed by real experiences; a brand of theorizing that critically engages the system outside the framework of dominant rationality. Here, the demonstration of the “critical theory at the margins” appropriated by Paolo Bolaños and Jeffrey Ocaj finds its ground. This brand of theorizing espouses an alternative critical praxis grounded in the normative lifeworld of indigenous communities and peasant movements in the Philippines.¹ For Ocaj, the intention is to point to “a way of life that escapes the apparently inexorable ascendancy of the neoliberal regime.”² In the same respect, Bolaños identifies that the local communities where inspired by the normative practices fundamental in these communities, the possibility of *emancipative utopia*³ can be conceived again – a more tangible ground zero of the emancipated margin.

Offering a response, I explore how the operative resistance of the marginalized, particularly those of the indigenous people, disrupts the maintenance of oppression. Prominent positions are oppugned in this paper as it proceeds in this enterprise: first is the claim that the margin is continually construed as a negotiating terrain for power by and on behalf of the marginalized; second is the notion that recognition is foremost an act inherent to the governing power. The former requires an honest attempt to situate the margin in the struggle for emancipation. The latter warrants a qualification of the act of recognition that genuinely constitutes the plight of the marginalized. Further, this posits a rather hefty task to those who engage in critical theorizing: in identifying the margin, where should the struggle for emancipation be situated? In the bid to recognize the plight of the marginalized, who defines the direction of such recognition? These questions will direct the objectives of this paper. It is to be noted that this paper emerges from the critical theorizing done on the ground by thinkers such as Jeffrey Ocaj, Karl Gaspar, and Renante Pilapil. This is further substantiated in the analysis done by Paolo Bolaños and Agustin Martin Rodriguez on the trajectory of critical theorizing in the country. The paper proceeds in its reexamination of the locus of the margin and the task of recognizing the marginalized.

1) Bolaños and Wenning, “Introduction to the Kritike,” 2.

2) Ocaj, “The Peasant Movement,” 43.

3) Bolaños, “Critical Theory at the Margins,” 6–7.

The Locus of the Marginalized: Situating the Margins in Critical Theory

The site of critical ponderings on the ills of our time has traversed an expansive array of human conditions. In this enterprise, the identification of the margin remains a significant terrain for discourses. The incessant shelving of the marginalized into the uncharted sphere of social interactions has warranted more reason for appraising the definition of the margin from the compounding interests of the dominant power. This is how critical social actions find their way into the corners of libraries, the podiums of congresses, and the streets of many nations. Clearly, if one intends to arrive at a genuine understanding of the plight of the marginalized, one needs to ask: where is the margin, and what is in there?

From its commonplace definition, the margin is construed as a fringed space whose vantage offers a purview of the growing lacuna between those at the privileged center and those at the edge of social spheres.⁴ Here, I argue that the framing of a “privileged center” *vis-à-vis* the marginalized merits closer consideration. If taken from its familiar nomenclature, the term margin assumes a site at the edges or the outside. In this case, one may conjure the image of the *labas* (outside) of a *sentro* (center; or as used here, city center) or the *liblib* (far-flung areas) of a *sitio* (village) as the margin. Conversely, along this line of qualifying, the privileged is enframed at the *sentro* of the *kabihasanan* (the urban area).⁵ While this image of the margin may proffer a grain of truth, such cannot suppose a sole definitive stand. To insist on this is to point to a locus of the margin that imagines a fixed territory outside the privileged bounds. This produces a depreciated image of the marginalized: positioned outside the center, the indigenous are assumed indigent; assigned at the least prioritized space, the peasants are deemed uninformed. In this pejorated margin, emancipative projects are done as a “performative facsimile.”⁶ This pseudo-emancipation is performed in the semblance of generosity – albeit a false and paternalizing one – a kind of an appanage of the sovereign power to its ruled subjects. In the words of Freire, it is the realization of a “paternalistic social action apparatus” that brands the marginalized with the sanitized name of the “welfare recipients.”⁷ Moreover, this brutalizes the act of marginalization as hierarchical: the idea that one group is more marginalized than the other. It portrays the image of the margin as a mere part of the social whole. Thus, it is localized into a specific site and dismantled like a foreign and distant abstraction from the secured inside. This presents a bifurcated direction of marginalization: the first one pins on the identity of the marginalized; the other one fixes them at their spatial locatedness. I contend that this identification of a definitive locus of the margin only insists on the *classification* of the oppressed. What follows is an attempt to illustrate this misplaced identification of the margin.

4) A social sphere is defined as an area of activity where the actors are able to unite in sharing understandings, rules, and principles, regarding the activity. These influence the way in which individuals belonging to that sphere engage in such activities. See: Galligan, *Law in Modern Society*, 103–20.

5) Interestingly, the term *kabihasanan* is taken from the root word *bihasa* which means “expert.” This pertains to the expertise of skills congregated in a particular place equating to its advanced and better ways of life. The concentration of expertise in a particular inside of a center or *sentro* conjures an image of the outside that is underprivileged and indigent.

6) What I termed as “performative facsimile” pertains to emancipative projects taking the position of a benefactor and performed for the preservation of the status quo. This is in consonant with Freire’s claim that for the maintenance of their power, the oppressor must have a continued opportunity to express their generosity. See: Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 44.

7) Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 74.

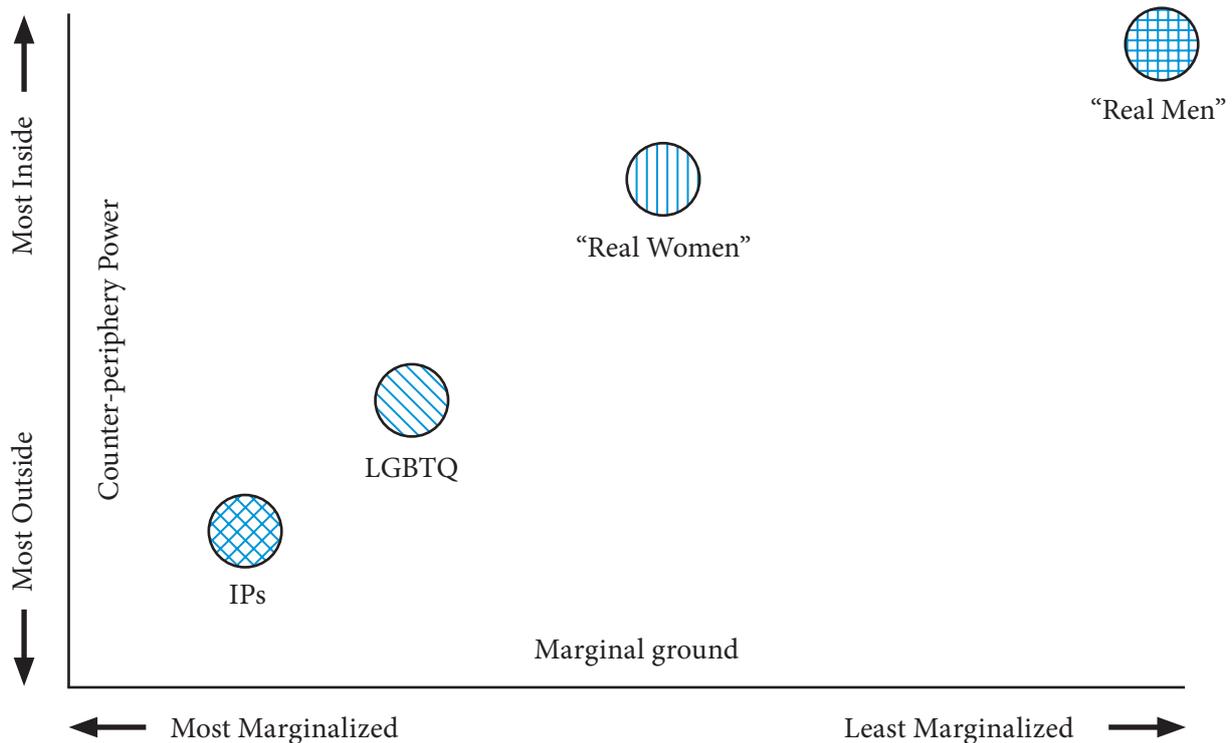


Fig. 1. *The Misplaced Margin*

Primarily, the terms “real women” and “real men” are taken from Judith Butler’s heterosexual matrix⁸ which accounts that bodies, desires, and genders are naturalized through the heterosexual norm. This is done on the premise that “a stable sex is expressed through stable gender.”⁹ Secondly, the intention of this illustration is not the elimination of the identity of the marginalized nor the abandoning of the margin as a spatial sector of society. Rather, this cautions the brand of thinking that assigns or even finds the marginalized exclusively in a particular and confined social sector. This also applies to emancipative acts that point to the identity of the marginalized and capitalize on it. While identity recognition is consistent with the project of emancipation, this should not just be instrumentalized in framing political claims or pushing for partisan social action. It begs the question: if an emancipative project is rigorously enframened in a particular identity, how will it be a representative of the other marginalized spaces? I argue that any acts which require the marginalized to assume a formalized and collective identity model for the sake of dislodging the oppressors of that identity will discount their struggle under the operative terms of the very oppressive regime they intend to fight. Largely, what this forfeit is the interlocking “intersectionality”¹⁰ of oppression and strips the individuals of their nuances.

Although this illustration does not discredit the center-periphery of power, the intent is to identify a less far-removed image of the margin that disclosed the varied structures and relations of the dominant power troubling current societies. This could be situated at the “privileged elevation” of societies, a term I find pertinent to describe the position of structured power. In the privileged elevation, the lacuna that the dominant power creates

8) In this matrix, a “real man” takes on the sex of a male and a masculine gender, hence, assumes a heterosexual desire. Conversely, a “real women” is understood to have a female sex and feminine gender, hence, assumes a heterosexual desire. See: Butler, *Bodies that Matter*.

9) Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 151.

10) This refers to the multiple forms of exclusion based on multiple social identities. See: Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality*.

does not only planarily expand (and therefore exclude those pressed outside), but has intricately deepened. This means that marginalization can take varied shapes and forms since even in the sophisticated sections of urban spaces, hegemonic power takes different forms of oppression. In actuality, even in privileged spaces, there are pockets of marginalized sites. As such, marginalization could happen even within what is assumed as the center. In this assertion, Ocaj even argues that the venue of critical theorizing, while addressed against the hegemonic center, does not assume a starting point “at the center” but identifies the real violence and destructive potential of the dominant system.¹¹ What this pertains to, for Ocaj, is that while the emancipative struggle can happen “at the center,” this often takes its fulcrum on false hopes that promise the inclusion of the marginalized into the dominant society of production and consumption.¹² Conspicuously, marginalization does not solely stem from a unitary, homogenous, and central resource. There are complex sites of a hegemonic power in the same manner that there are multifarious marginalized spaces.

If the aim is to reach a preliminary understanding of what makes a margin a *margin*, a succinct yet nonexclusive standpoint that can be taken is this: the margin is any space where forms of oppression and injustice toward other beings persist. The way oppression is understood here finds a coherence to the claim of the “privileged elevation” since its etymological term *opprimere* pertains to the act of “pressing down.” To press down is to assign and subordinate someone “below” the privileged space which takes its place at an elevation. In this oppressive state, any actions rooted in emancipating the oppressed from the fetters of injustice are pressed with the challenge to bear witness to other forms of oppression. I agree with Douglas that what appears to be a boundary can represent other forms of boundaries threatened by or put in precarity by the dominant spaces.¹³ In the same manner, it is in this margin that critical theory carves its space and grounds its relevance, especially one pursued by the Frankfurt School. This is richly explicated by Bolaños in the task of reconstructing Horkheimer’s basic presuppositions of critical theory and grounding that such philosophical thinking must exigently lead to an engagement with reality by assuming a theoretico-practical standpoint.¹⁴ The reference of such a meeting is the oppressed and their social realities. Horkheimer discards the understanding of social injustice that is merely vaunted by the valorization of positivistic science and mathematics, nor one categorically shaped by noetic conceptions. Instead, he emphasizes an anthropological basis for our engagement with the oppressed: genuine emancipation springs from critical theory’s restructuring of the political and capitalist society. In this way, critique is done immanently and leads to the actualization of human potentialities.¹⁵ In doing this, “the unconstraint, unifying, and consensus-bringing force of argumentation”¹⁶ and discourse for emancipation can truly flourish. This is anchored in the plight of the oppressed, not only to understand it fully but to experience it profoundly.

At its crux, critical theory then is a critique that has to remain active since it engages itself in social realities found in the margin. It is an engagement with the inside, that is the system of critiquing, and proceeds to what is on the outside, that is the real situations at the margins. As to the former, critical theory engages itself in a self-critique, that is, a critique of its structures and methods to ensure its relevant attentiveness to the call of the time. To the latter, it seeks a more genuine and immanent engagement with the oppressed – an engagement that discloses itself from the dominance of the traditional theories and closed philosophical systems and

11) Ocaj, “The Peasant Movement,” 49.

12) *Ibid.*, 51.

13) Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 116.

14) Bolaños, “What is Critical Theory?,” 3.

15) *Ibid.*, 10.

16) Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

meets the others on the ground. Given these, the struggle to arrive at a genuine emancipatory project – even one that pivots on redemptive alternatives – finds its merit here.

The proposal for redemptive alternatives begs one to inquire into the conditions of existing emancipatory projects. The notion of “redemptive alternative” is one I borrowed from Jeffrey Ocaj which is enriched by his years of working with the marginalized. This pertains to the ability of peasants and indigenous communities, through their plights and organizations, to provide an alternative stance in the struggle for emancipation, especially “their way of life that escapes the apparently inescapable logic of technological domination and points to the possibilities of emancipation.”¹⁷ Primarily, the possibilities for redemptive alternatives pinpoint the lifeworld of the indigenous and the peasants since their lifeworld does not only remain representational of their beliefs but visceral of their communal values of respect and equality.

Retracing the Act of Recognition: The Philippine Marginal and Attempts for Redemptive Alternatives

Under the impression that the schema of the neoliberal has aggravated the structuring of politics, the governance in the Philippines is seen today as either too Western-defined or too radically shaped by globalization. In this milieu, attempts to recognize the plights of the marginalized are usually lifted from the Western canon. It is worthwhile to note here the argument of Rodriguez that most philosophical reflections on political, electoral, and economic reform in the Philippines tend to postulate that emancipation is realized when the marginalized are educated in the manners attuned to Western democratic deliberation.¹⁸ He further inferred those Filipino scholars, in their attempt to offer critical theorizing, veer toward prescribing systems of discourse that favor Western-educated rationalities. This is mostly seen in their “critical view of ‘the masses,’ ‘the uneducated,’ and ‘traditional people’ who are unable to participate in rational discourse.”¹⁹ Far from supposing a kind of purist panacea, that is, the total abandoning of Western influence, to the ills of marginalization, what this paper proposes is to survey the legitimacy of the act of recognition from the vantage of varied viewpoints of the Philippine marginal and allow their narratives to discourse – in their own context – with the established dominant thinking. This posits a challenge to reconstruct the basis of the act of recognition and decentralize its role – one that truly emerges from the intricacies of experiences of the marginalized in the Philippines.

(a) The *Misrecognized* and the Plight of the Ungovernable Other

One may easily argue that the call to action of the enterprise of emancipation is found in recognizing the marginalized other. While I share my agreement with this, there is a need to identify the source and direction of the act of recognition. To recognize the other is to arrive at an awareness of their plight, that is their real situations, and their positionality, that is the socio-political contexts that affect such situations. This is in consonant with the claim of Honneth that the resulting situation where the individual is born is governed by already existing structures of relations.²⁰ In the absence of such considerations, the act of recognition that intends to legitimize the emancipation of the ungovernable other could not prosper. One might claim that it is also in the act of recognizing that one can “*de*-recognize” the others given that one cannot *de*-recognize what one has not primarily recognized. Honneth even adds that on the wrong footing, such an act would produce

17) Ocaj, “The Peasant Movement,” 43.

18) Rodriguez, “Problematizing Critical Theory,” 12–13.

19) *Ibid.*, 19.

20) Pada, “Reification as a Normative Condition,” 19.

the problem of *misrecognition*. This could lead to the exclusion of anyone unfit to an established structure of relations. Ensuing from this is the *othering* of the others, particularly those deemed ungovernable, or what Rodriguez termed the “ungovernable other.” In such a case, the act of recognizing provides a kind of power to the recognizer – it allows him to identify his ground in the elevated space *vis-à-vis* the marginalized. This allows two possible reactions:

- (1) the recognizer is given a sense of certainty of their secured locus, which could lead to an assumption of an undisturbed position; or
- (2) the recognizer is brought to a genuine realization that their subscription to the structure of governance springs from dominant and elite-defined rationality.

The first setup cultivates a system of valuation arising from privilege; the second arrives at a radical act of affecting positive change. This is close to Honneth’s assertion that the struggle for recognition finds its bearing in two opposing conditions: first, values in a society are governed by existing positive normative structures, and second, these values are negotiated and even distorted by the antithetical adverse conditions.²¹ What is produced in this struggle is a standpoint that provides a radical viewing of the different reasons involved in the act of recognition. Hence, recognition is not a unidimensional kind of *seeing* but one that accommodates various intersubjective views. In his seminal work, Rodriguez offers one of his takes on where this profound act can begin, that is, in the notion of *hospitality*.²² For him, the act of recognizing should rise to *hospitality* where one carves a space for the others in the structure of governance. This allows the others to determine themselves and give them a voice, not just a spokesperson; to take a space where they can formulate solutions to the social ills that they are experiencing firsthand. Most intensely, *hospitality* allows and moves those in the privileged elevation to let the ungovernable others occupy a seat at the drawing table but without enclosing them into the system or asking them to speak the dominant language and act the hegemonic gestures of the powers that be.

This brand of recognizing can provide an alternative discourse in the telling of the “history from below” – an emerging study that attempts to account for historical and social events from the standpoint of the disenfranchised and the oppressed. Thus, understanding oppression from their situatedness can generate a closer – if not an accurate – picture of the real empirical conditions of the marginalized communities.²³ This allows for an understanding of their situation not solely anchored on the agenda of the center-periphery of governance. Rather, this calls for a radical act of *decentering* its structures. Likewise, recognition emanating from *hospitality* challenges the curation of their story and history from the dictations of the dominant rationality. This also offers an analysis of the problematic studies of Filipino culture identified by Rodriguez. This concerns studies that proceed from rational discourse rooted in abstract thinking of pure reason and legitimize this as a tool in the critical examination of the ideologies that framed the Filipinos. For Rodriguez, these tools remain to be curated by the very same ideologies, that is, by “Western man’s global world-building.”²⁴ The kind of recognition that proceeds from *hospitality* postulates a hope that when their conditions are genuinely examined from “below,” that is, their personal and communal experience, then a genuine “understanding from below” can also be arrived at. Instead of prescribing structures and relations alien to their socio-economic conditions, what the “history from below”

21) Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 75–76.

22) Rodriguez, *Governing the Other*, 14.

23) Although I find it important to note that this claim does not necessarily invalidate emancipative efforts done by outsiders to their normative circle. Such would be perversely counterintuitive to the call for an inter-sectoral effort for emancipation.

24) Rodriguez, *Governing the Other*, 9.

espouses is a way of recognizing their narratives as primarily informed by their own experiences. In this context, the ungovernability of the others is not of their own making, neither does it signal an absence nor a depreciation of values among these sectors of society. In this brand of recognition, the gloss of one's understanding of the predicament of the ungovernable is one that is genuinely emancipative intersubjectivity.

(b) The *Moro* Struggle and the Dislocation of the Moral

The Moro people of Mindanao and their struggle for self-determination is one that has been apprehended by political forces and is fraught with noetic ideologies. The understanding of their struggle remains to be studied from the vantage of politics and history. While the worth of such approaches has been taken to contain truth, such attempts remain to be lacking if not exclusive. I argue that there is a need to revisit their socio-political conditions from the standpoint of morality. What is left on the precipice of the unbothered, to which Renante Pilapil directs our utmost consideration, is the recognition of the moral basis of their struggle – the decades of disrespect and humiliation that the Moro people have to live by.

Historically, the Moro people belong to a long generation of traders. This means that, far from being isolationists, they have accommodated people and cultures from overseas even prior to the arrival of the Western colonizers. They have learned to live with the local settlers and their socioeconomic systems. On account of this, their groups have been subjected to conditions that compel them to negotiate their positionality. In recent decades, this is worsened by the portentous maintenance of the monologic discourse of the dominant governance. Largely, the discourse remains laconic since most of the solutions unilaterally favored the welfare and agenda of the state, and policies of assimilation were used as vehicles for systematic oppression. Although in the recent past, efforts to arrive at a genuine emancipative action have commenced. Many experts, mostly from great universities, have been summoned to offer a solution to the struggle. A great number of laws have been derived from the podium of the Congress and peace negotiations drafted from the table of the President. Yet, for Pilapil, what has been dislocated in these attempts for emancipation is the respect for the *being* of the Moro and the recognition of their humanity. Conversely, such disrespect and misrecognition will always produce conditions of *dehumanization* which steal away their “vocation for becoming more fully human.”²⁵ I maintain that the dislocation of the moral in the act of emancipation further ensues in:

- (1) The insistent assertion of the acclaimed “bonafide intellectual” in summoning solutions that are far removed from the first-hand experiences of the oppressed. In prescribing esteemed yet autonomous solutions, it delegitimizes rationalities that are assumed traditional and tribal such as that of the indigenous.
- (2) The assumption of “paternalistic protectionism” of the dominant governance which sees programs that control and delimit indigenous people as an act of maintaining their systems and protecting them. This misplaced preservation takes away the power of self-determination from the owners of the indigenous knowledge themselves.
- (3) The belief in “false generosity” which retains the image of the indigenous people as indigents who constantly need the help of privileged societies. In this kind of thinking, attempts to craft initiatives and programs for the marginalized will suppose a messianic stance where the indigenous remain in their merciful benevolence.

25) For Freire, dehumanization is never a given destiny but brought about by an unjust order. As people perceive the extent of their dehumanizing condition, they become uncompleted being conscious of their incompleteness. See: Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 43–44.

For Pilapil, the dislocation of the moral consideration is unfortunate since it constitutes the crux of the Moro problem.²⁶ What has not been listened to in their narratives is the experience of disrespect: unrequited respect for their identity and autonomy, the subsumption of their indigenous political system to the hegemonic government structure, the indifference to the massacre of their people, and the *othering* of their being – seeing them as terrorists, traitors, or violent minorities – by the dominant groups. Their struggle is largely motivated by these experiences brought about by their “minoritization,” displacement, and discrimination. This is consistent with Honneth’s claim that any systems that produce moral injury are detrimental since these impede individuals to develop a kind of positive relationship with themselves.²⁷ Drawing from this reasoning, Pilapil claims that struggles for recognition are grounded in the desire for intact personal identity and self-realization. He further established that the Moro struggle is brought about by decades of misrecognition and, worst, nonrecognition of these experiences.²⁸ Thus, fights for injustice and recognition are moored into the psyche of the Moro people since theirs is not only a struggle limited to territory or dictated by politics but one that enmeshes their whole being. This explication provided by Pilapil emerges from a more nuanced understanding of the structural problem of oppression. It is clear that struggles fought under the banner of self-determination must translate to self-realization by providing the marginalized a space to actualize their potential and the right to demand the respect afforded to them by anything that stands for what is morally good and right.

(c) The *Manobo* and the Land as an *Event* and Site for Signification

The land has always been central to understanding the dynamics of marginalization and emancipation: for the subjugator, it is a marker of its power consolidation; for the subjugated, it is a space for reifying their identity and culture. The former sees it as a spatial-physical possession. For the latter, the land transcends its material valuation – it is the ontological foundation of their being, knowing, and valuing. This holds true, most fundamentally, among the indigenous people. The land is a dynamic *event* where the act of liberating their narratives from the canon of the colonizers can take place.

The struggles of the *Manobo* of Arakan are aptly captured in their attempts to negotiate a space in what should have been their ancestral domain. Karl Gaspar provided a rather poignant image of this claim-making process: with the entry of lowlanders and the imposition of the lowland system of the body politic, the *Manobo* are forced to bargain their concept of land ownership.²⁹ They were rendered to yield to a power of governance legitimized by Western colonizers. Gaspar identifies its personification in the Regalian doctrine, which he caricatured as a “legal fiction”³⁰ that the government used to insist on privatizing lands and the ownership of those lands considered as public domain. Such assertion is charged with and done in the name of its patrimony – one that is artificially cultivated in our own soil by the Spanish colonizers. In many attempts at total subjugation of the *Manobo* of Arakan, the hegemony of the center-periphery governance is consolidated in the acquisition of their land. According to Wolfe, this control of the land operates as the “logic of elimination,” which bids to obfuscate the particularity of land and so disqualify any claims of the indigenous people for a relationship to their land. Primarily, the motive of such logic is not the elimination of ethnicity, religion, or race but the

26) Pilapil, *Recognition: Examining Identity Struggles*, 162.

27) Honneth, “Recognition and Moral Obligation,” 72.

28) Pilapil, *Recognition: Examining Identity Struggles*, 160.

29) Gaspar, *Manobo Dreams in Arakan*, 192.

30) *Ibid.*, 192.

elimination of access to their territory.³¹ Largely, such reclaiming of the land is done against the backdrop of a dismissive attitude toward the indigenous people's claim for any ontological foundation emanating from their land. In this hegemonic power play, the land is structuralized by:

- (1) emptying it of the ontological meaning that turns it into a barren, non-essential space;
- (2) capitalizing it into a project motivated by commercial and economic needs, and;
- (3) articulating a spatial point of view of the land as a bounded property.

One of the apparatuses used in explicating such hegemonic power is the introduction by the Spaniards of the system of putting up *mohon*³² – a distinguishable marker of the privatization of land. The *mohon* is a result of the structured system of control introduced by the colonizers whose legal power is founded in the Regalian Doctrine. This construct achieves the careful maintenance of the land from the viewpoint of its function, not from the standpoint of its being an *event*. By claiming that a *land is an event*, I am pertaining to a kind of understanding of it as an active site for signification. It is in the land that a group of people is bonded and formed into a community; it is through the land that meaning-making is celebrated, and it is with the land that the talks and the fight for justice for the indigenous people must spring from.

In this context, grounded emancipative projects are aimed at the recognition of the land not from the legal standpoint but from its being an *event*. In his seminal book, Gaspar laid out a clear example of this in which the Manobo themselves, through their groups, such as the Manobo Lumadnong Panaghiusa, and Tribal Filipino Program for Community Development Inc., reconstructed a localized public sphere where a genuinely democratic space for dialogues, argumentations, and consultations can take place.³³ In situating the land as the active site for signification, the Manobo are provided an ideal speech situation: more than recognizing, they are empowered to speak for themselves; rather than rely on intermediaries, they are given the space to fully and actively participate in voicing out their validity claims.³⁴ In this situation, the social space and cultural contexts of the Manobo are not pawned in the enterprise of negotiation and claim-making dominated by the powers that be. Any attempts then to reclaim the ancestral domain of the indigenous people and correct the injustices against them must spring from this valuation of the land: it is the meeting place of their knowing, that is, understanding their lifeworld, of their being, that is, meaning-making, and of their valuing, that is, formation of ethos. Ultimately, the land is the relational ground of the indigenous people since it is their link to their gods, their communities, and their ancestors.

In noting the varied marginal sectors in the previous pages, I attempt to present them as prototypical spaces where disenfranchised members are placed at the receiving end of the programs by dominant governance. In this setup, the maintenance of power is done to the exclusion of the marginalized from any solution-driven and grassroots-oriented initiatives. What is produced in this brand of governance is a group of people proscribed into silence and interpreting such silence into the myth of cooperation or the illusion of illiteracy and ignorance. But the resistance of indigenous communities like the ones explicated in this paper can serve as an alternative model for emancipative projects.

31) Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 387.

32) A *mohon*, or *mojon* in Spanish, is a cylindrical concrete marker that is used as the standard marker to delineate a property boundary.

33) Gaspar, *Manobo Dreams in Arakan*, 195.

34) Ibid.

Lessons of Struggles from the Margin:
Redemptive Alternatives from Cordillera Indigenous Communities

Foregrounding the critical role of indigenous communities in the Cordillera, current struggles for emancipation can identify from their lifeworld an ethic of resistance against the dictations of hegemonic power. Establishing that these views are narrated within the activist accounts of opposition, what they offer is an outside-of-the-orthodox mode of resistance that disrupts the framing of the oppressive rationalities. Their indigenous views offer a careful consideration and a richer critique of the interests we attached to these emancipative efforts.

Firstly, I argue that the Cordilleran view on the body of women is an astounding revolt against the idealization of the body persisting in dominant societies. Through their body, the Cordilleran women occupy a space in the social and political sphere of their communities. As a form of refusal against the heteronormative view, they offer a way of *ungendering* women by resisting the role they are expected to play. The dualistic model of labor based on gender typically maintained by traditional society such as one that assigns women to the domestic role has no basis in the Cordillera indigenous communities. Even the gendered division of labor in agriculture and other forms of production is not predicated upon the ascendancy of the masculine forms of labor. This means the value of the work of women is not anchored in their bodies but instead, both men and women share complementary and often interchangeable roles.³⁵ Rather than articulating a divide between the productive and the reproductive functions and confining women to the kitchen or household chores, they participate in agricultural activities as much as the opposite sex tends to childcare and house chores.³⁶ Women in the communities even assume the freedom to form associations or peer groups and perform collective agricultural labor called *khakayam* or *ogfu* which can also be observed in other indigenous communities in the country.

Further, the body of women serves as an embodied instrument for resistance against the dominant power. This is particularly shown in the belief that the *sipit* (vagina) and the *susu* (breast) of women possess a certain emancipative authority. In the past, it was natural among Cordilleran women to expose their *susu*, yet their bodies are never objectified nor transgressed. Even today in Mainit, a small *ili* (village) in Bontoc, Mountain Province, the practice of taking a dip in the community bath fully naked and exposed to people and passersby is a natural scene. I have witnessed this in the many events that I visited the place. Interestingly, in that community, no one is cat-called and, in the past decades, there was even an absence of rape, both as an idea and as an act. Instead, in their *sipit* and *susu*, the Cordilleran women are signified rather than objectified. Examples can be recounted when during tribal wars, women would expose their *sipit* to the enemy and they will eventually fluster and retreat. This embodied act of stripping naked or disrobing is called *aglabos* in Ilokano, *lusay* in Kalinga, and *enlafos* in Bontoc and bears the signification to frighten, shame, curse, or neutralize the impending danger.

In recorded history, this was displayed in their struggle against the big mining and logging companies in different parts of the Cordillera. In the community of Mainit, the women who protested the operation of the Benguet Corporation bared their *susu* and *sipit* to deter the exertion of force toward them and to drive the miners away. The same happened in the protest against the commercial logging operation of the Cellophil Resources Corporation.³⁷ This baring of sex organs was also done in their organized protests against the destructive mining, hydropower dam projects, and military aggression during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. As their shared

35) Prill-Brett, "Gender Relations," 14. See also: Casumbal, "Unintelligible Bodies," 95.

36) Casambre, *A Study on Women's Participation*.

37) Casumbal, "Unintelligible Bodies," 7.

gesture of resistance against the growing numbers of soldiers and the Philippine National Power Corporation (NAPOCOR) militia, the women disrobed themselves. Put to shame, the soldiers and dam workers retreated from the confrontation.³⁸ For Casumbal, the act of baring their breasts and vagina is not simply epiphenomenal to the action but constitutes a rather strong form of confrontation against an oppressive power.³⁹

This resistance led by women in the Cordillera allowed them to be recognized as community leaders despite the male-dominated leadership then. They were at the forefront of mobilizing community-based initiatives and lobbying for the rights of the indigenous peoples.⁴⁰ Today, indigenous women are still actively involved in the protection of the environment and in keeping peace and order in the Cordillera. In 2020, Betty Belen, a community leader from Kalinga, was arrested for opposing the Duterte government-led Chevron geothermal project that will displace communities and destroy ancestral lands.⁴¹ Another interesting women-led initiative is the Bontoc Women Brigade. Armed only with flashlights, the brigade composed of mothers and grandmothers helps patrol the streets and implement the curfew and liquor ban every evening. This initiative was brought about by the lobbying of women in the 1990s to institute regulating policies on the sale and consumption of alcohol after the increase in public drunkenness, family violence, gambling, and other alcohol-related violence.⁴² Another women-initiated group from Ifugao called the Lagawe Peacekeeping Team shares the same objective. Today, these volunteer-based organizations' role includes conducting awareness campaigns of community ordinances on peace, health, and environmental care, and as a support group in reporting domestic abuse. Another active People's Organization (PO) in Bontoc is the Kaublan Women's Organization organized in 1988 which works on projects involving reforestation and agroforestry to enhance the forests' ecosystem and contribute to the local sources of food.⁴³ Today, the roles of these women-led organizations include conducting awareness campaigns for community ordinances on health and environmental care, and as support groups in reporting domestic abuses.

The resistance of Cordilleran indigenous communities also disrupts the developmental agenda where the marginalized are merely seen as passive recipients of progress. For one, this redeems the normative understanding of the notion of "development" from the definition peddled by the neoliberal market. For the Cordillera indigenous communities, the term "development" is to be taken as *pansigshan* or *pansigedan* which speaks of a "state of wellness and total well-being." Hence, when one talks of a project that hinges on development such as the development of people (*sigid jen to-o/sigid ay ipugaw*), or development of a community (*sigid jen ili*), or a stable condition in life (*sigid jen biag*), such should promote the good of the person's being.⁴⁴ Their resistance then is largely directed by the desire to further programs that are divorced from the market-defined "development" but one grounded in *pansigedan*. In this perspective, the preservation of the environment is a prime

38) Cariño, *The Situation of Women*, 248.

39) Casumbal, "Unintelligible Bodies," 114.

40) Among these were Maria Galong, Leticia Bulaat, Endena Cogasi, and Petra Tannaw Macliing. In the fight against military harassment and threats in her community in Sabiyan, Besao, Endena Cogasi confronted them and headed the civilian-military peace dialogue in Mountain Province in 1991. Leticia Bulaat led her community in Dupag, Kalinga in resisting the Chico River Dam Project by baring their sex organs and blocking the roads going to the construction site. Maria Galong assumed roles in farmers' organizations and founded the Save the Apayao People's Organization which fights large mining projects. Petra Macliing became a founding member of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA), a multisectoral alliance of women's organizations that involves grassroots movements of indigenous peasant women, women in urban poor communities, women workers, and the youth and students. See Yocogan-Diano, "Extraordinary Women."

41) Yocogan-Diano, "Extraordinary Women."

42) Casumbal, "Unintelligible Bodies," 160.

43) Killa-Malwagay, "Bontoc's DRRM."

44) Adonis, "Community Development," 167.

communal responsibility, hence, the generation of development programs is to be responsive and sustainable. This also entails the recognition of their accountability for the devastation of those natural resources. This allows for the conscious creation of culturally-sensitive models of development. In this sense, the community can counter forms of development that discount their rights and aggress on their environment. Based on my observation from living in Cordillera, and as expounded by Carling,⁴⁵ this is identified in their take on:

- (a) ecotourism and development projects that fence out access to ancestral domains;
- (b) biodiversity protection and tourism activities that further commercialization of nature;
- (c) external studies that open their land to researchers but aggress on their rights to own and manage outputs of said studies and projects; and,
- (d) researches that lead to the patenting of their indigenous knowledge, systems, and practices for academic consumption, and commercial production.

As typified by Cordillera indigenous communities, taking a critical stance on neoliberalist forms of development has allowed for a “bottom-up approach” to engagement that mobilizes the members of their communities. This model of engagement mobilizes the members of communities in lobbying for their rights and in campaigning for dialogues that are conducive to genuine development. Although, I find it important to clarify that this claim is not advancing a dismissive attitude against foreign models of development nor assuming that the indigenous lifeworld is necessarily a touchstone of egalitarian structure. Rather, it is to ground that their struggle against the historical narrative of oppression led to the exposition of the government’s dominant policies of development. This ushers a participative form of development that enables the communities to genuinely take a project as their own and therefore work for its monitoring and sustainability. This approach posits the formation of community programs and initiatives informed by their own experiences and set by their rich local periphery.

The Neoliberal Gods and Critical Theory at the Margins

Sans any critique, the privileged spaces are turned into a playground of the neoliberal gods. It is here that the demagogues of political games and the seirs of capitalist lords thrive. In these societies, the *modus operandi* is that of a servile and dead sure follower: a modern yes-man of the dominant structures. Conversely, the challenge this offers is a defiant way out, and even an alternative space where a great refusal can stand. In this act of resistance, what is required is an impetus to empower not only those sidelined in the background, that is, the oppressed found in prototypical marginal spaces, but also those pressed below the privileged elevation, that is, even the marginalized at the center-periphery of governance.

In this society, rehearsal, and reevaluation of the act of refusal are prominently needed. For instance, the argument to reconsider the term “margin” challenges us at present. This confronts the prevailing notion that the marginalized are always at a disadvantage and, therefore, need saving. If the task is to find a word that describes this, one may find the term *salvage*⁴⁶ fitting for such. In its literal sense, salvage means “to rescue” or

45) Carling, “The Cordilleran Experience.”

46) In the Filipino vocabulary, however, the word *salvage* means “to apprehend” or “execute.” Ironically, the word is most commonly used when one means “to make someone disappear,” as in the *desaparecidos* during the Martial Law of the Marcos Sr. dictatorship. Here, what is made to disappear is the very *being* of the marginalized – a telling of a belief that when one makes the others disappear, one is turning their presence into a seeming non-presence. In turn, their being is treated and transformed into non-being. In this context, this is the worst form of marginalization.

“to save.” At first glance, this is easily believed in, especially if one assumes a vantage point at the privileged elevation. Divorcing from this notion, critical theorizing at the margins invites a radical way of engaging with the marginalized. Rather than taking the messianic persona, one is asked to suspend their noetic biases and theories, or even their pre-noetic baggage, and learn from the marginalized alternative acts of resisting the dominant power.

Born out of this, the critical theory at the margins exemplified by Bolaños and Ocaj finds its crucial nook in Philippine society. The pondering offered by the former is informed by the recognition of the peculiarities of the practical lifeworld of marginalized communities. The latter offers an alternate critical praxis springing from the normative lifeworld of local communities and peasant movements.⁴⁷ Their project toward a genuinely positive social transformation opens a space where critical theorizing can be situated – the plausibility of critical theorizing at the intersection of those subsumed in the status quo and those still presuming their lifeworld in the margins. Such reinterpretation of critical theory hails from a neocolonial context of the oppressed.⁴⁸ While not promising a total solution, this propounds a more realistic if not more grounded emancipative project.

In principle, when we recognize and respect the existing lifeworld of these communities, we are granted a glimpse of their rich social and political structures. For instance, Ocaj provides some of these practices that can be alternatives in redirecting the capitalist mode of production, such as their mode of work, consumption habits, and the concept of distribution, which hinges on the notion of community cooperation.⁴⁹ He also examines the philosophy of work among the elderly people in a remote village where the notion of “cooperative work” present in this community confronts and resists the domineering logic of globalization.⁵⁰ That being the course of affairs, one can contend that critical theory at the margins is an act of *anticipation* for a genuine social transformation. When one anticipates, one is open to the dynamicity of the lifeworld of those in the marginalized. When one anticipates, one starts to recognize that a true understanding of the struggle for emancipation is gained not necessarily *for* the marginalized but *through* and *from* the marginalized. Through this, emancipative acts, even those that hinge on an alternative, are made legible and even tenable since they are rightly entrenched in the vocation of the marginalized to be fully emancipated beings.

Conclusion

The antithetical stance taken by critical theory against any preponderant systems is not one informed by an empty rage. Instead, it challenges those who apotheosize the structures of power domination. Such challenge is charged to those who find solace in the realm of intellectual abstraction yet fail to recognize the ability of the marginalized spaces as a source of emancipative vision. The *pièce de resistance* of critical theorizing then is encountered, primarily and essentially, among those who suffer the repressive power. Thus, within the framework of a system that deprived the marginalized of self-determination, their struggle is a call to action of arriving at redemptive alternatives. Though their fight is far from being done and dusted, the struggles of the oppressed, the neglected, and the marginalized serve as *marginalia* – a living note from which current and future generations can situate their fight and hope for a less distant emancipated society.

47) Bolaños and Wenning, “Introduction to the Kritike,” 2.

48) Ocaj, “The Peasant Movement,” 44.

49) *Ibid.*, 49.

50) Ocaj, “Philosophy at the Margins,” 11.

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