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A Change of Face: Using Graffiti to Re-Imagine Spaces

Luba Pirgova-Morgan
University of Salford
England, United Kingdom
l.pirgova-morgan@salford.ac.uk

abstract

In much of the literature graffiti is connected to notions of defacing, devaluing, vandalising, participating in an illegal activity or exhibiting 'anti-social behaviour.' The aim of this paper is to show the change of perceptions toward graffiti as less of an act of vandalism or a criminal activity and more of a solution to many social and political concerns. The paper offers a way to re-frame graffiti as the solution rather than the problem based on a study of graffiti crews in Sofia, Bulgaria. The paper presents three cases of these crews, each attempting to address different social and political issues within the capital of Bulgaria. This paper is hoping to highlight how graffiti can be used as a tool to help reduce crime, showcase a critical subcultural communication that is inclusive of the community at large, and depict the aesthetic value that can be added to a place in order to re-design the space and people's attitude and behaviour. More importantly, the paper serves to show how graffiti can enable introspection and bring out not only the 'soul' from the wall, but also our own.

keywords:

Graffiti, Re-framing Criminal Behaviour, Bulgaria, Case Studies, Designing-out Crime



Introduction: Graffiti Framed as a Problem

In much of the literature graffiti is connected to notions of defacing, devaluing, vandalising, participating in an illegal activity or exhibiting ‘anti-social behaviour’. According to Stebbins it is vandalism¹ and Young considered it damage to property and lowering its value.² One frequently cited definition is that *graffiti* can be described “as writing or drawings that have been scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place”.³ This definition highlights the most important aspect of graffiti – *intent*. Graffiti carry meanings hidden in messages just waiting to be interpreted. Some of these messages are simply to recognize that a specific person was in a specific place at a specific time such as a ‘tag’, but many can be much more elaborative such as political, economic and social critiques as well as defining the social order such as when defining gang boundaries, claiming a murder, or making a threat of some kind.⁴

The aim of this paper is to show the change of perceptions toward graffiti as less of an act of vandalism or a criminal activity and more of a solution to many social and political concerns. The paper offers a way to re-frame graffiti as the solution rather than the problem based on a study of graffiti crews in Sofia, Bulgaria. The paper presents three cases of these crews, each attempting to address different social and political issues within the same region of the capital of Bulgaria, before presenting a conclusion.

¹Robert A. Stebbins, *The Interrelationship of Leisure and Play: Play as Leisure, Leisure as Play* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). 102.

²Alison Young, *Judging the Image: Art, Value, Law* (UK: Routledge, 2005), 52.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Derrick Watkins and Richard Ashby, *Gang Investigations: A Street Cop's Guide* (Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2007) and R. Blume, “Graffiti,” in *Discourse & Literature, Volume 3 of Critical Theory*, ed. Teun Adrianus van Dijk (Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1985):137-148.

Understanding Graffiti: Typology and Aims

There are many existing studies of graffiti, the messages and meanings it is used to convey as well as interpretative frameworks that have risen as a result. Some of these studies have attempted to develop a graffiti typology based on aspects of graffiti such as materials used, scale or style (see: Gottlieb 2008). The system that will be briefly examined here as necessary for the objectives of this paper is a classification system that focuses on the difference of styles within the graffiti genre. In this system there are 9 main styles of graffiti: *tag*, *throw-up*, *blockbuster*, *wild style*, *heaven*, *stencil*, *poster* (paste-up), *sticker* (slap) *piece* (masterpiece). Figure 1 below describes briefly the characteristics of each style.

Table 1: Styles of Graffiti as obtained from Graffito Canberra: Exposing the Best of Canberra's Street Art⁵

| Style | Colours | Size | Location | Repeatability |
|---------------------|---------|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Tag | 1 | Small-Medium | Anywhere | With Ease |
| Throw-up | 2+ | Small-Medium | Anywhere | With Ease |
| Blockbuster | 2+ | Large | Easily Accessible | With Difficulty |
| Wildstyle | 2+ | Large | Easily Accessible | With Difficulty |
| Heaven | 2+ | Any | Hard to Reach | With Difficulty |
| Stencil | 1 | Small-Medium | Anywhere | With Ease |
| Poster (paste-up) | Various | Small-Medium | Anywhere | With Ease |
| Sticker (slap) | Various | Small | Anywhere | With Ease |
| Piece (masterpiece) | 3+ | Medium-Large | Anywhere | With Difficulty |

⁵ For more information on the different styles of graffiti please see the website of Graffito Canberra: Exposing the Best of Canberra's Street Art <https://graffitocanberra.wordpress.com/styles-of-graffiti/>

Understanding these 9 styles makes clear that graffiti incorporates various types of text ranging from linguistic to visual. As Keegan wrote, graffiti includes “a broad range of texts – single letters, letter combinations, single words, phrases, sentences – and graphic representations – pictures, diagrams, identifying artist(s) signatures (“tags”, “throw-ups”, “stencils”, “stickers”).”⁶In addition, there are other forms of graffiti such as the ones done by ‘Moose’ (Paul Curtis) who established the company ‘Symbollix’ that offers strategic cleaning to create graffiti that are environmentally friendly and that fade over time – creative ‘commercial cleaning’.⁷ The different styles and text can be mixed within a single graffiti as well.

These different texts are all part of using graffiti as a unique mode of communication that bridges the linguistic and the visual. Graffiti exist within a paradoxical space where plurality and contradiction are inherent, where multiple social spaces exist simultaneously that may or may not be on opposing sides of the social spectrum, where various sign systems challenge each other, and where meanings, images and practices are contested.⁸“It is often not the words, images or messages of these forms that carries the most social traction or symbolic potential; it is their explicit mediating presence as a dream-medium of paradoxical space.”⁹This is what makes graffiti a unique mode of communication that transcends the written and the visual. Graffiti can connect city dwellers to a dream-space and “can act as ‘wish-images’ that bridge here and the elsewhere, the present situation and different possibilities”.¹⁰

The scope of graffiti is not limitless, however. Graffiti are anonymous texts, but often the themes relate to identity, resistance, oppression, aesthetics, or practicality.¹¹ Where a graffiti is used, can

⁶Peter Keegan, *Graffiti in Antiquity* (UK: Routledge, 2014), 4.

⁷Please see <http://www.symbollix.com>

⁸Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*(Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 151 and Anne M. Cronin, *Urban Space and Entrepreneurial Property Relations: Resistance and the Vernacular of Outdoor Advertising and Graffiti* (Lancaster, UK:Department of Sociology, Lancaster University), 7.

⁹Anne M. Cronin, *Urban Space and Entrepreneurial Property Relations: Resistance and the Vernacular of Outdoor Advertising and Graffiti* (Lancaster, UK:Department of Sociology, Lancaster University), 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14

¹¹Robin Patric Clair and AmardoRodriguez, “Graffiti as Communication: Exploring the Discursive Tensions of Anonymous Texts,”*Southern Communication Journal* 65 no. 1 (1999): 2.

infer the type of message such as mass communication as drawn on visible surfaces often has political themes; categorical graffiti that is aimed at particular groups as drawn on private surfaces is often targeted with sexual, feminist or other such themes; individual graffiti is even more bound by the self.¹² Even in private “the writing of graffiti is an essentially social act”.¹³ For instance, Ligia Lesko demonstrates how the art of graffiti can be seen as inner-city communication and as a means of public literacy, including a description on how the homeless people used graffiti (*bobo art*) on trains to mark safe places or leave each other various practical messages or how *Cholo* gang graffiti was used for the re-invention of identity and appropriation of the otherwise offensive term *cholo*.¹⁴

Despite the wide array of graffiti that exists and the many studies that examine its importance as a mode of communication, graffiti is still a criminalized activity connected to the damage of a property and lowering its value. The legal status of graffiti often depends on the permission of the owner of the property on which the writing or drawing occurs.¹⁵ In many countries it is connected to the idea of ‘anti-social behaviour’.¹⁶ An illegal activity confined to public spaces that arguably goes back to the ‘ancient world’. And yet, the arrival of graffiti “stars” such as Banksy, who is influential on a global scale have now begun to challenge the notion of graffiti as a criminal activity or as an ‘anti-social one’.¹⁷

¹²R. Blume, “Graffiti,” in *Discourse & Literature, Volume 3 of Critical Theory*, ed. Teun Adrianus van Dijk (Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1985): 139 and Robin Patric Clair and AmardoRodriguez, “Graffiti as Communication: Exploring the Discursive Tensions of Anonymous Texts,” *Southern Communication Journal* 65, no. 1 (1999): 2.

¹³E. Bruner and J. Kelso, “Gender Differences in Graffiti: A Semiotic Perspective,” *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 3,(1980): 241.

¹⁴Ligia Lesko, “The Art of Graffiti as Inner-City Communication and as a Means of Public Literacy,” accessed September 2017, <http://scholarworks.csun.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.3/140628/Lesko.pdf;sequence=1>

¹⁵Peter Keegan, *Graffiti in Antiquity* (UK: Routledge, 2014) and Troy R. Lovata and Elizabeth Olton, *Understanding Graffiti: Multidisciplinary Studies from Prehistory to the Present* (UK: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁶Alison Young, *Judging the Image: Art, Value, Law* (UK: Routledge, 2005), 52.

¹⁷Troy R. Lovata and Elizabeth Olton, *Understanding Graffiti: Multidisciplinary Studies from Prehistory to the Present* (UK: Routledge, 2016).

Graffiti in the Bulgarian Context

This challenge of perceptions about graffiti being more than just an act of vandalism has become more widespread over the last years. This paper will particularly focus on graffiti as an emerging art form in the Bulgarian context.

There is no specific origin one can pin point of graffiti in Bulgaria, so the context for this paper comes from an event that arguably is one of the first to place graffiti in the realm of art in Bulgaria, rather than as a criminal activity. Similar to many countries around the world, in Bulgaria for many years there was a particular problem with graffiti in the public space, but rather than making sentences harsher for offenders, an innovative approach was considered. There is a monument in the park of the National Palace of Culture,¹⁸ a monument that was meant to mark 1300 years from the formation of the first Bulgarian nation in its present geographical location. It was unveiled the same time as the NDK, however, after many years, this monument due to lack of upkeep and the natural elements has been falling apart. This monument after years of degradation is seen as an ugly socialist relic and yet the government for political and financial reasons has been unable to take it down or repair it.¹⁹ Instead, the government financed a fence to surround the monument for safety reasons. It is this fence that became the canvass of a graffiti fest that has both short term and long-term consequences for the Bulgarian community's attitude toward graffiti.

A competition in 2007 titled Sprite Graffiti Fest challenged graffiti artists to cover the wall around the monument with prizes provided for the most creative and beautiful graffiti²⁰. They have re-run the competition in the park many times since then. In the short term, the competition transformed the wall into an art canvas showcasing the best graffiti has to offer, but in the long run, that competition had much stronger and recognizable impact in the capital. A notable rise of appreciation of graffiti occurred in both young and old, which is why even the subway of the National

¹⁸Translated from Bulgarian: Национален дворец на културата; abbreviated as НДК, NDK

¹⁹The monument has finally been removed in 2017 after being fenced off for more than a decade.

²⁰Sprite Graffiti Fest official facebook website <https://en-gb.facebook.com/SpriteGraffitiFest/>

Palace of Culture was transformed and even re-named by city officials into ‘Graffiti Underpass’. Soon, similar underpasses covered in graffiti were created all over the city. These spaces were re designed using various signs and in the process established a mode of communication and expression. These spaces were transformed and re imagined as art.

Now the paper will focus further on 3 examples that will show the use of graffiti as an unique mode of communication; a) seeking to change community behaviour and bring out a reduction in crime, b) depicting a new mode of expression of a critical subculture within the Bulgarian context as well as c) illustrating how graffiti can be used to add aesthetic value to spaces and to bring out the ‘souls in walls’.

The Case of Three Bulgarian Graffiti Crews

In Bulgaria the recent graffiti trend in addition to transforming whole underpasses has also grown to include the painting of 8-12 storeys soviet tower blocks, or to re design the soviet 60s architecture and the perception of those public spaces into beautiful art to be enjoyed by the whole community. In order to achieve graffiti on such scale both above and below ground, in Bulgaria has become quite common for graffiti arts to join in crews. The three case studies that would be presented here are of the Urban Creatures Crew, 140 Ideas Crew and the POdLEZNO²¹ Crew. All three of these crews operate in the Sofia region and they all re design public spaces and places in a way to challenge the existing perceptions of the space as well as bring about a change of mentality or behaviour associated with a place.

POdLEZNO²² Crew – ‘Reducing Crime’

The POdLEZNO Crew specializes in the transformation of underpasses. As they describe it, unkempt underpasses can be very unfriendly, dirty, smelly and dark. These unkempt underpasses can be “depressing with their mono-functionality, lack of preservation and safety” (as translated from Bulgarian and obtained on their online current appeal to transform a new subway). As a result,

²¹Translated from Bulgarian: ПОΔΛΕЗНО

²²The name of the crew ‘POdLEZNO’ is a play on words in Bulgarian with ‘POLEZNO’ meaning ‘useful’ and ‘POdLEZ’ meaning ‘subway’.

many of these underpasses are hubs for various crimes ranging from vandalism to assaults. The crew has made it their mission to re design subways as safe spaces in order to encourage the community to use them and bring about a decline in crime.²³ This is particularly needed for the 5th RPU (5th police region) of the capital Sofia where these crews mostly operate, which has maintained relatively high crime for the 2010 to 2015 period as obtained from labs.capital.bg.²⁴

Their official logo is actually *Design and City Art* since what they do is purposeful design to change to feel of a particular place.

As the crew officially write on their website:

Sofia is a city with over 1 200 000 citizens, visited yearly by thousands of tourists. [...] but in it there are places where life just seems to overlook – like the underpasses. [...] The youth initiative “POdLEZNO” was created to experiment in an urban environment by offering a new interpretation of these underground public spaces, namely - saturation of these non-traditional places with cultural content. Light, live music, artwork, interactivity, dancing; events that will transform subways into cozy, lively, safe and preferred multifunctional spaces for those who live, work and raise their children in the city or just visit it. By sharing our culture, we also share our desire for change initiated by citizens for citizens' use.²⁵

²³There is much research done in the area of ‘designing out crime’, most notably by the Design Against Crime Solution Center in Salford University, Manchester, United Kingdom for further reference please see Caroline L. Davey and Andrew B. Wootton, *Design Against Crime: A Human-Centered Approach to Designing for Safety and Security* (UK: Routledge, 2017).

²⁴ For further reference see <http://labs.capital.bg/201601/csi-sofia#>

²⁵Obtained from their official website <http://podlezno.com/>. Aside from that, from the website <http://bnr.bg/en/post/100725276/podlezno-volunteer-initiative-with-new-project-and-cause>, they wrote this important information “thanks to the people of the PODLEZNO Initiative some of the capital's subways already look much nicer and more modern. Young volunteers have renovated the underground passages. The projects they have already completed include: "Natural Underpass" near Borisova Garden, "Music Underpass" under Tsarigradsko Shose Boulevard and the "Time Travel Subway" in Poduyane district. They are currently working on a project for renovating lighting in underpasses in the Studentski Grad district. During the past weekend "POdLEZNO" presented the first music project of the team, proving that there is room for music and culture in subways. "The Music Underpass," which opened last summer proved a great setting for the video of the debut song of the initiative - "Someone Told Me." Singer and writer of the song is Dimitar Stafidov.

The following example is of one of their creations in the “Ботевградско шосе”²⁶ Subway.



Figure 1: Subway Art Creation by PODLEZNO Crew

This graffiti was created using luminescent colours and within the Native American theme. There is a focus on both the aesthetics as well as the emotion. As the crew suggests, one of the main reasons why they transform the underpasses in such ways is to get people to use the subways more, to make the safer and friendlier, as well as to change people’s perceptions of those places and spaces including by encouraging the community to participate in the whole process of re designing and transforming the subway space. This might explain why the photo you see here, which was obtained from 24chasa online publication, was taken two years after the wall was painted and as you can see there has been no damage. Suffice it to say, the PODLEZNO approach has made the subway

Ivaylo Nedelchev joined with an electric guitar solo and Ivelin Lobutov also plays the guitar. Dimitar Krastev plays the bass, while Dragomir Rusev and the new mascot of the initiative – the dog Rila are drummers. The sound of the new addictive song was heard during a flash mob with a cause that took place on Saturday near the National Palace of Culture downtown Sofia, the Serdika metro station and the underpass near the Sofia University.”

²⁶Obtained from their official website <http://podlezno.com/>
















more accessible as well as has reduced graffiti vandalism, after all who would want to deface such a work of art?

This underpass, similar to most of their creations has a cultural element (not necessarily a Bulgarian one) as well as an educational element. Currently the crew is raising money for a new project, an “Educational Subway”. They raise most of their funds through crowdsourcing and numerous partners and they have local council support.

The PODLEZNO crew state that they hope to bring a decline in crime and influence the community at large, but an idea may not always have impact on reality. Well in this case, perhaps it did.

Since the rise of the appreciation of the graffiti culture in Bulgaria, there has been a noticeable decline in crime. The following graph is a summary showing crime trends for Bulgaria for the period of 2010 to 2015 as collected and obtained from Europa Statistics.

Table 2: Crimes Registered by Police in Bulgaria 2010-2015²⁷

| By Number | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |
|-----------|-------|---|---|---|---|--|
| Murder | 148 | 128 | 141 | 109 | 116 | 129 |
| | - |  |  |  |  |  |
| Rape | 211 | 157 | 187 | 164 | 148 | 119 |
| | - |  |  |  |  |  |
| Burglary | 50479 | 47323 | 44462 | 45256 | 41246 | 38315 |
| | - |  |  |  |  |  |

This data as presented in the graph clearly shows a decline in all types of crime listed.²⁸ Even if graffiti were not the direct cause for this decline, I would argue that it is at the very least a contributing factor. Further study would be needed to explore if there is a direct link between crime decline and the rise of graffiti in Bulgaria. That being said, graffiti may be a contributing factor because of the affordances it provides in terms of modes of

²⁷Obtained from <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

²⁸For more information also please visit [nsi.bg](http://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/3818/престъпления-регистрации-от-полцията) (the National Statistical Institute) and particularly <http://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/3818/престъпления-регистрации-от-полцията>

communication, innovation, and aesthetics as will be argued using the next two crews as examples.

140 Ideas Crew – ‘Critical Subculture’

The next graffiti artists that will be presented in this paper are the 140 Ideas Crew. This group formed in 2008 by Yeto, Teletto, Jermain and Flak. Similar to the POdLEZNO Crew, the 140 Ideas Crew also have local council support, but also partner up with schools and other stakeholders in the community. This crew works mostly over ground, on the sides of buildings such as schools or residential areas. Many of their graffiti combine art with moral lessons and/or political, social and economic criticism. The following example was created on the side of the 97 school in Sofia.



Figure 2: "Balance" by the 140 Ideas Crew²⁹

This graffiti is titled “Balance” and depicts various animals engaged in a balancing act. “Often already existing formulas (slogans, sayings, short verses etc.) are taken up and altered slightly, or given different contents, frequently giving graffiti the character of parody or counterfact”.³⁰ This graffiti comes as both a social and political satire in a particular moment in Bulgarian history. The

²⁹Image by Rom Levy, Street Art News, 2013.

³⁰R. Blume, “Graffiti,” in *Discourse & Literature, Volume 3 of Critical Theory*, ed. Teun Adrianus van Dijk (Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1985): 139.

social balance within the country is very delicate with Syrian refugees trying to come through the borders and further into Europe. The political balance for the last decade has also been a never-ending balance between a few major but opposing political parties who have to work together in order to get the political machine to work. Graffiti is a great way to bring these balancing acts to the front since graffiti arguably provides an alternative mode of communication.

Graffiti is very uniquely placed to express various forms of criticisms either vaguely or specifically. In particular, some argue that may be related to graffiti still existing within the paradigm of subcultures. “Subcultures may be defined as sites of praxis, ideologically, temporally and socially situated where fantasy and experimentation give way to the construction, expression and maintenance of particular consumption identities”.³¹ As a subculture in Bulgaria, graffiti exists in that space where rendering criticism is possible. Satire and criticism of self and others can help challenge people’s perceptions of the social, cultural, political and/or economic values within the Bulgarian context as well as lead to changes in their behaviours. For instance, because of the political balancing act for decades, in Bulgaria frequent political protests occur and change of power. Since 2009, no political party has managed alone or in a coalition to complete its political mandate of 4 years. Graffiti such as the one depicted above, allows for a conversation about the political situation to take place with humour rather than anger as a starting point thus enabling more members of the community to participate.

Urban Creatures Crew – ‘Souls in Walls’

Finally, the Urban Creatures Crew began as an illicit group of artists over a decade ago who were then welcomed and encouraged by the local government and community. Some of the main artists of the crew became known separately from their crew identity such as Bozko as well as Nasimo, who is actually the pseudonym of Stanislav Trifonov. This crew specializes in full

³¹ See Michael Saren, *Marketing Graffiti* (UK: Routledge, 2013) and Bernard Cova, Robert Kozinets and Avi Shankar, *Consumer Tribes* (UK: Routledge, 2012), 122.

building designs with educational purposes that often incorporate political and/or social critique. These designs are very impressive by their sheer size as well as their remarkable craftsmanship.

The following example of such large-scale graffiti is on the side of the 8-storey building, number 11 on bul. Vladimir Vazov, Poduyane.



Figure 3: "The Girl with the Flower"
by the Urban Creatures Crew³²

³²Otained from Bon Expose by Nasimohttp://urbancreatures.bg/

This is an impressive graffiti that has been attributed to Nasimo from the Urban Creatures Crew. This graffiti illustrates well the core idea of this crew, which is making the place come to life. The gaze of the girl is engaging as she sees something up high where we cannot thus inviting introspection on part of the viewer. As the crew argues, their designs are focused on creating what they refer to as “Souls in Walls”. They try to make the space itself come to life and bring out the soul of the place through the interpretative art.

Furthermore, Urban Creatures connect their art not just to aesthetics, but also similar to the other two crews, to encourage behavioural change. To use their own words from their website: “for us it is very important that the art we create is not one-dimensional, because the most significant change we are aiming at is the change of people’s consciousness.” This change in the mind can then lead to a change in behaviour, or as the local mayor Eva Mitova argues, ‘a change in the mind can lead to physical transformations’. Therefore, this graffiti serves to appease the eye, tell a story and entertain as well as communicate a message aimed at purposefully bringing about social change.

Graffiti has the ability to be used in these ways because as Clair and Rodriguez argue:

Graffiti level the playing field by getting past all of the factors— such as social status, hierarchical position, education, access, familiarity with the rules, expertise, communication competence—that advantageously privilege and benefit certain members against others. It is the only rhetorical form that affords such virtues.³³

The independence of graffiti from any social norm structure is connected to the aspect of graffiti being a socially prescribed form of communication that is not a subject to norm or convention.³⁴ This means that graffiti is not static, it is a social process of meaning making that has imbedded within it a possibility for innovation. Following Michael Foucault and his idea that

³³Robin Patric Clair and Amardo Rodriguez, “Graffiti as Communication: Exploring the Discursive Tensions of Anonymous Texts,” *Southern Communication Journal* 65, no. 1 (1999): 2.

³⁴R. Blume, “Graffiti,” in *Discourse & Literature, Volume 3 of Critical Theory*, ed. Teun Adrianus van Dijk (Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1985): 146.

resistance always counters power³⁵ and in relation to particularly graffiti as a resistant mode of communication³⁶ and mode of outlaw communication,³⁷ it is perhaps understandable that graffiti is often perceived in the nexus of opposing discourses, it is an anonymous challenge to mainstream discursive practices and messages. Nonetheless, graffiti has the power to approach social, political, economic and cultural issues in an innovative way, while presenting an aesthetically pleasing outlook— a beautiful way to bring out the social soul from within any wall.

Conclusion: Graffiti Re-framed as the Solution

Graffiti is arguably about expression, aesthetics, communication of messages and meanings including feelings, values and ideas in addition to being an anti-social act. It is precisely its status as an anti-social act within the ‘elsewhere’ space that allows graffiti to code and decode messages and meanings that challenge existing hegemony, transmit information and its interpretation to provide alternative discourses, and challenge our perceptions of a space, place, and the self. Often graffiti reflects the political, cultural, economic and social contexts in which it is created similar to various art movements. But graffiti is also more than art. Graffiti has the power to re design existing places and re imagine existing spaces challenging our perceptions as well as our further behaviour. While site specific art can challenge our perceptions, our thoughts and our values, it does not challenge our actions as related to that place. Contrary even to site-specific art, graffiti has the power to be the solution for many community problems from making sites such as underpasses more acceptable to helping with economics by encouraging tourism. For instance, countries across Europe, such as Germany³⁸ and Bulgaria³⁹ are already using graffiti tours as a way to boost the tourist economy.

³⁵Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

³⁶Susan Sontag, “The Pleasure of the Image,” *Art in America* 75, (1987): 129.

³⁷Michael Keith, *After the Cosmopolitan? Multicultural Cities and the Future of Racism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 136.

³⁸In Berlin, Germany <http://alternativeberlin.com/tours/free-tour/>

³⁹In Ahtopol, Bulgaria <https://weallwrite.today/waw/please> see also <http://poleznite.com/2834/we-all-write-ahtopol/>

This paper was hoping to highlight how graffiti can be used as a tool to help reduce crime, showcase a critical subcultural communication that is inclusive of the community at large, and depict the aesthetic value that can be added to a place in order to re-design the space and people's attitude and behaviour. More importantly, the paper serves to show how graffiti can enable introspection and bring out not only the 'soul' from the wall, but also our own.

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About the Author

Luba Pirgova-Morgan holds a PhD in Social Sciences and Humanities from Cardiff University, Wales, United Kingdom for her research on Images of Electricity. Before that, her MA thesis from the University of Aberdeen reflected her triple degree in International Relations, Sociology and Film and Visual Culture and focused on images of national identity and nationalism, while her MPhil in Modern Society and Global Transformations from the University of Cambridge focused on images of corporate culture. She currently works as a Research Fellow at the Design Against Crime Solution Center at the University of Salford, Manchester and her interests still include semiotics, images and perceptions of various phenomena.

Confronting the Nihilism of Our Day with Thomas Nagel's Ethical Objectivity

Kristoffer A. Bolaños

Polytechnic University of the Philippines

Manila, Philippines

kabolanos@pup.edu.ph

abstract

There are few scholars today who are challenging the notion "nothing is objectively right or wrong because nothing objectively matters," one such scholar is Thomas Nagel; we will pursue in this essay a keener understanding of the possibilities of ethical objectivity in the face of the popularity of the position mentioned above (often understood as "nihilism"). We will attempt to articulate Nagel's alternative, a "view from nowhere," as a way out of the rather relativistic and reductionistic tendencies of moral philosophies today.

keywords:

Thomas Nagel, Ethics, Nihilism, Philosophy, Ethical Objectivity

Introduction: The Quest for Objective Understanding

It has been a century and a half after the demise of the philosopher dubbed as one of the great founding fathers of existentialist thought—it was Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) who became the very exemplar of a mode of philosophy that dared to defend the “subjectivity” of man in the face of a modern, highly-technological, mechanistic world, a world that threatens to dehumanize the human subject, transforming him from being a legitimate center of meaning into a mere thing that can be manipulated, exploited, controlled, driven into calculative thinking. Existential phenomenology gave us good reason to suppose that our personhood is something inexhaustibly profound and irreducible to “cog in the machine,” or “a jar of chemicals,” a living human being is much more than just a mass of bones, tissues and cells—we are, after, all embodied subjects. However, we also realize that we *are* bodies, we conduct scientific procedures on ourselves as bodies whenever we treat bodily ailments and diseases; it is also true that brain activity is partially explained by the movement of electrical signals to and from the brain. Science demands us to be objective about what we know concerning ourselves and reality, and we conduct investigations and experiments that somehow would be methodical and would have a high degree of repeatability; science endeavors to conceive of knowledge about the world. In similar fashion, ethics demands objectivity with regard to reasons for doing what we ought to do.

Thomas Nagel (1937--) woke up to this intellectual climate when the so-called tension between subjectivity and objectivity is already in place. In the opening pages of his masterful work *The View From Nowhere* he addresses the problem of reconciling the subjective standpoint with the objective standpoint, but rather than aiming at complete unification (which he thought could occur occasionally but not always), he is quick to point out the often ignored intuitiveness drawn from the juxtaposition itself, the interplay of these two conceptions: “I find it natural to regard life and the world this way—and that includes conflicts between the standpoints and the discomfort caused by obstacles to their integration. Certain forms of perplexity—for example, about freedom, knowledge and the meaning of life—seem to me to embody more insight than any of the supposed solutions to those

problems.”¹ The tension itself is quite useful and we draw conceptions that will prove worthwhile, especially when it comes to knowing ourselves.

Science and reason have for the longest time been demanding that we undertake the objective method of understanding. Traditional academic inquiry suggests that objective understanding, often grounded on justified belief in accordance to available evidence, is to be differentiated from subjectivity which casually refers to raw, visceral, even “unargued or unjustified personal feelings and opinions.”² Drawing from this definition, it becomes impossible to create reconciliation, let alone a kind of back-and-forth interaction between objective and subjective, leaving us empty-handed. But Nagel endeavors to clarify further what he means by objective and subjective standpoints, which appear to be modified from the traditional meaning, and there is value in the tension itself: “To acquire a more objective understanding of some aspect of life or the world, we step back from our initial view of it and form a new conception which has that view in its relation to the world as its object...we place ourselves in the world that is to be understood [even if] the [initial] view [will come] to be regarded as an appearance... subjective...and correctable and confirmable by reference to it.”³ There are occasions, however, when the subjective standpoint cannot be subordinated, and as Nagel heeds the warnings of Nietzsche, we often wonder why it is easier for us to generate false objectifications than truer or sensible ones, “not all reality is better understood the more objectively it is viewed.”⁴ For instance, the ideas of “thought” or “emotion” are not reducible to brain circuits or organ functions, the idea of love is not simply a “trick of nature” as what material reductionists may have supposed, that religiosity may be more profound than the usual dismissal of it as simply a psychological delusion—there are plenty of human attributes that cannot be reduced to functionalism or calculativity. Nagel’s answer to the crisis of subjectivity is quite different from that of existential phenomenology, although he raises his own objections to the reductionistic tendencies of the sciences. The

¹Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4.

²See Robert Solomon, “Subjectivity,” *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 4.

⁴Ibid.

important thing to realize is that the interplay of the two standpoints aforementioned is necessary and essential.

A Critique of the Nihilism of the Age

The necessity of ethical practice will always constitute a problem in philosophy. The situation today is easily likened to that of Greek antiquity wherein Plato apparently called for ethical practice in order to prevent further moral and political degradation in the polis.⁵ We have come to realize, however, that the practice of ethics, Nagel is quick to say, must look up to objective values; they are necessary as conditions for its possibility, and it seems Nagel is more than willing to assert that reaching objectivity is the primary problem of ethics, it demands objectivity even more than science.⁶ It has become a kind of capitulation to human weakness when we absolutize our most base, whimsical, often malevolent, capricious interests; ethics demands, then, that we strive for objectivity, that we step back from our initial perspective (which include subjective appearances) and form an impersonal perspective about the world. In other words, we must create room for “the possibility...for the recognition of values and reasons that are independent of one’s personal perspective and have force for anyone who can view the world impersonally, as a place that contains him.”⁷ But this does not mean that subjectivity did not play a rather transient role in constituting objective values: “when we detach from our individual perspective and the values and reasons that seem acceptable from within it, we can sometimes arrive at a new conception which may endorse some of the original reasons but will reject some as false appearances.”⁸ Even if we are eventually going to end up with a centerless view, we must acknowledge that its formative stages necessitated a deliberation of our subjective reasons and values. But insofar as we are generating an objective set of values, we must recognize their capacity as normative judgments, if they are to be sensible at all, so that a fine ethical question would not so much be about “what should I do?” but rather “how should anyone act

⁵Ethel M. Albert, Theodore Denise and Sheldon Peterfrund, *Great Traditions in Ethics*, Fifth Edition (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1984), 8.

⁶Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 8, 138.

⁷Ibid., 140.

⁸Ibid.

under such-and-such circumstances?” Daniel Bonevac alludes to the example of the Chinese philosopher Mencius: for very real reasons, it is expected that any adult ought to be ready to rush to the rescue of a child who is about to fall into a well!⁹

This ethical objectivity, however, will not remain uncontested, especially with today’s moral climate, we have a Facebook generation where men and women are highly motivated by spectacular appearances, who will use the most squalid, shallow, or profane stuff of Hollywood movies (of course, there are a few exceptional films out there) as their only basis for truth, who have no regard at all for sound and level-headed research of what they ought to know and understand, many have lost the sentiment of becoming *accountable* to truth itself, many are more than willing to capitulate to their base consciousness and to be played for fools by political forces who master the populace—a lazy generation, if the likes of Nietzsche might characterize us. And so it appears most of us have ceased from hoping for any basis for objective values, an attitude that Nagel can only describe as a nihilistic form of thinking:

But the claim that there are objective values is permanently controversial, because of the ease with which values and reasons seem to disappear when we transcend the subjective standpoint of our own desires. It can seem, when one looks at life from the outside, that there is no room for values in the world at all. So to say, “There are just people with various motives and inclinations...when we regard all this from the outside, all we see are psychological facts...[it would appear as if the] ascent to an objective view, far from revealing new values that modify the subjective appearances, reveals that appearances are all there is...Beyond that it applies here with a nihilistic result: nothing is objectively right or wrong because nothing objectively matters.¹⁰

While such nihilistic position might be attractive for many, a number of seasoned philosophers have expressed their rejection of it. Nietzsche for one, despite the fact that he is branded as “nihilist” by mostly still untrained and haphazard scholars; a more rigorous understanding will show that Nietzsche, by claiming that “values

⁹Daniel Bonevac, *Today’s Moral Issues: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, Fifth Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 7.

¹⁰Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 141.

that are not transitory do not exist,” is not telling us to embrace nihilism, but is inviting us to become physicians of culture, to replace bad, anti-life sentiments with life affirming valuations.¹¹ Reading in context is everything. In *The View From Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel delivers yet another critique of nihilism, dismissing it outright as a lazily reductionistic view, likening it to physicalism in science,¹² it is a doctrine that tempts one to believe that appearances are all there is, since the physical world is all there is; We must naturally admit that there are occasions when physicalism turns into a form of myopia, one that pretends to capture the entire reality but simply is pretentiously sophisticated.

As we have contemplated on earlier, there is something debilitating about pursuing a science that claims to be able to physicalize all sorts of phenomena, including human thought and mental states, as in admiring a painting, as if all these were explainable in terms of motions of matter, atoms--the laws of physics alone; here we end up not only with a dry but also an incomplete account of reality. That is also the reason why, explains Nagel, “current attempts to understand the mind by analogy with man-made computers that can perform superbly some of the external tasks as conscious beings will be recognized as a gigantic waste of time.”¹³ This simply is the result of passivity, of not being able to transcend the senses if one already needs to, or simply a lack or a laziness to exercise one’s powers of imagination. It also undermines the role of the subject in giving meaning to things.

Furthermore, the nihilistic position for Nagel is a constant temptation to reoccupy a Humean position,¹⁴ this time scholars have applied Humean skepticism to ethics, in the attempt to justify the view that nothing can be objectively right or wrong. Hume originally claims that knowledge consists of nothing more than a succession of rather loose perceptions (ideas and impressions) that we associate with each other by sheer associative imagination (that is, without real objective basis) so that causality cannot really be explained in a meaningfully rigorous way.¹⁵ This, then, is the

¹¹See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 116.

¹²Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 141.

¹³Ibid., 16.

¹⁴Ibid., 141.

¹⁵Reginald F. O’neill, *Theories of Knowledge* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1960), 189.

unimaginative approach to ethics by some: since all that what we have are loose appearances, there cannot be any right or wrong about them. Those who adhere to this view are content to provide a “naturalistic explanation” to values, analogous to a physicalist explanation of phenomena, which is also a “psychological explanation” about how we might *arbitrarily* choose reasons for our actions and behavior. Nagel objects to this view: “What we see” when people take action with regard to how they ought to act, “is not just people being moved to act by their desires, but people acting and forming intentions and desires for reasons, good or bad.”¹⁶ He contends that if our choices about how we ought to act are to make sense as normative judgments at all, they must be driven by very real causes, not by arbitrary, fictional or fancied ones; and as the very agents that make choices, we are active agencies, not passive ones. To us the reasons behind our actions may be viewed as meaningful reasons, not tricks of nature or passive, even capitulating, automatized reactions to external stimuli, as some behaviorists might suppose they are.

Objectivity in Ethics

We will find it useful here to probe a few more objections to ethical objectivity and to take a closer look at Nagel’s defense of such position as well as the notion that values are not illusions, that they are driven by real causes in real situations.

It seems the idea that what appear to be normative judgments are always arbitrary assumptions generated from a confused collection of mere appearances, and therefore cannot constitute anything objective, is a misleading one. To illustrate this point, Nagel invokes one of the suggestions presented in John Mackie’s *Ethics*. Nagel finds unacceptable the latter’s claim that values are “not part of the fabric of the world,” retorting instead that we can have objective reasons and values even with regard to the cognition and treatment of pain, or perhaps we can objectively say that anyone would have very real reasons, as opposed to “imagined” ones, to get rid of a certain form of pain, such as a headache. Nagel replies to Mackie, “The objective badness of pain...is not some mysterious property that all pains have, but just the fact that there is reason for anyone capable of viewing the world

¹⁶Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 142.

objectively that they want it to stop. The view that values are real is not the view that they are real occult properties, but that they are real values.”¹⁷ Even if one was to say that “my pain is entirely mine” and that “you cannot experience my pain,” nevertheless, the fact that we experience pain and that we have objective reasons to be rid of it is very real and not a fabrication of imagination.

Now, if we are willing to expand our notion of pain to cover not only immediate physical pain but also the “pains” that humanity experiences in the social sphere, we will see an even better explication of Nagel’s point. Anyone who is still in the right mind will definitely object to the notion that history consists of mere appearances so that even the great social evils committed against mankind are nothing more than illusions, explainable psychologically or metaphysically in terms of the negativity of being. Can we not actually derive real reasons for the valuing of human life, or valuing human dignity, or protection of human rights? The sensible answer seems to be that we actually can. Here we can probably hope for a higher degree of objectivity. It is impossible for anyone to deny the evil of the Islamic State,¹⁸ their threat of global terrorism, the possibility that another holocaust can occur (despite that many muddle-headed history teachers nowadays assert that the Nazi holocaust did not happen!), we do not need to see people actually being beheaded before coming to our senses and realizing that evil is real. The modern excess of eugenics by enforced sterilization, as it was driven by real evil causes, cannot be denied. The writer Ladelle McWhorter once stressed the importance of bringing out into the open the knowledges subjugated in history, such as the enforced sterilizations that were done in Virginia State in the 1920’s by the US government (this includes forcibly taking out the ovaries of “fickle-minded” women), carried out with the goal of ensuring that the part of the population responsible for bringing about “imbecile” or “fickle-minded” or “dumb” offspring

¹⁷Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 144.

¹⁸The IS, Islamic State, formerly known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), designated as a terrorist organization by UN and composed mainly of Sunni Muslim jihadist fundamentalists. They are known for chopping people’s heads off and creating a public display of them. For more information, See Jim Muir, “Islamic State Group: The Full Story,” *BBC News*, 20 June 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35695648>, accessed November 3, 2016.

will not propagate.¹⁹ We cannot continue to be ensnared by the nihilism of our time, lest we all become armchair scholars, unable to act, and can do no other than just describe what is happening and explain away the human blunders of history in terms of, say, the metaphysics negativity of being, as if they were to be causes of celebration rather than embarrassment! Let us share this sentiment with Negri and Hardt:

[T]he tragic philosophers of Europe...from Schopenhauer to Heidegger...turn these real destructions into metaphysical narratives about negativity of being, as if these actual tragedies were merely an illusion, or rather as if it were our ultimate destiny...from the killing fields of Verdun to the Nazi furnaces and the swift annihilation of thousands in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the carpet bombing of Vietnam and Cambodia, the massacres in Setif and Sweto to Sabra and Shatila.²⁰

There are even misguided scholars today who claim that the proposition “values are not real at all” is an objective one. Again such a proposition is unacceptable to Nagel. It can be demonstrated in this way: If we push ourselves towards our objective standpoint far enough, we are tempted to believe that we are detaching ourselves from all forms of personal values, or personal interests, so that we end up with an objective view that is free from all forms of value, “we discover that there is *nothing*—no values left of any kind: things are said to matter at all only to individuals within the world. The result is objective nihilism,”²¹ describes Nagel. Nagel acknowledges this temptation especially if one is to attempt at a centerless view, an objective conception of the world from nowhere. But Nagel insists that the centerless, objective view does not simply dismiss personal values and interests, “But the objective view has more to go on, for its data include the appearance of value to individuals with particular perspectives, including oneself.”²² We must bear in mind that in generating the objective view, we become

¹⁹See Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

²⁰Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 46.

²¹Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 146.

²²*Ibid.*, 147.

active participants in it, it is our reasons that will constitute what will be acceptable later on in the objective framework, with all the necessary tests for objectivity involved. In other words, Nagel seems to suggest that the objective view was a product of much deliberation, and only rational agents deliberate about values. Objectivity does not even entail the complete dissolution of all personal values: “the problem is not that values seem to disappear but that there seem to be too many of them, coming from every life and drowning out those that arise from our own.”²³ Nagel has already elucidated that these personal values arising originally from the subjective standpoint are subject to correction, confirmation, or even dismissal if they don’t seem to fit the objective view.²⁴ And nothing will stop us from deliberating about values.

There is another argument raised against the objectivity of values, one which Nagel would refer to as the empirical argument: “if we consider the wide cultural variation in normative beliefs, the importance of social pressure and other psychological influences to their formation, and the difficulty of settling moral disagreements, it becomes highly implausible that they are anything but pure appearances.”²⁵ Depending on the reader’s grasp of philosophical schools, one might see this position as closely associated with what many would term as moral relativism, as Bonevac explicates: “let us say that an *ethical relativist* believes that fundamental ethical truth—the basic truth about how one should live and what one should do—is relative to a group smaller than humanity as a whole. Something may be fundamentally right for one group but fundamentally wrong for another.”²⁶ Moral relativism has become highly popular in the academe so much so that Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* wrote: “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: Almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”²⁷ The empirical argument earlier described by Nagel seems to be one of the direct logical implications of this relativist philosophy; it is easy to imagine how a relativist might suppose that the reasons for choosing a norm for action are simply *trivial* and *arbitrary*, hence, not

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 4.

²⁵Ibid., 147.

²⁶Bonevac, *Today’s Moral Issues: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, 2.

²⁷Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). 25.

only can they not constitute objectivity but they may be deemed empty and unreal. Nagel clearly objects to this: “anyone offering [the empirical argument] must admit that not every psychological factor in the explanation of an appearance shows that the appearance corresponds to nothing real.”²⁸ That there are variations in normative beliefs does entail that the prejudices embodied in them cannot be transcended, neither does it necessitate that the agents that hold these normative beliefs are simply passive minds: “the degree to which agreement can be achieved and social prejudices transcended in the face of strong pressures suggests that something real is being investigated...that there are certain reasons for action,”²⁹ it is just that people often make a mistake of taking prejudiced, undeliberated “normative judgments” (which are disguised appearances) to be the best accounts for reality when, in fact, they are not. But the fact that people can deliberate, set standards, agree and disagree is very telling of what rational agents can do; what is lacking is practice of this capacity.

Conclusion

The nihilism of this age and time, the notion that “nothing ever matters objectively” is certainly debilitating and discouraging to say the least; proceeding in nihilistic fashion, we are unable to foster for ourselves the much-needed ethical accountability with regard to the reasons we hold behind our valuations. Perhaps the most important lesson in this paper is that we ought to disengage from such nihilistic frame of mind. In fact, ethics is quite the reverse of nihilism, it should be, from the outset, all about responsibility, or accountability with regard to our comings and goings, as even the ancients might have suggested with the term *ascesis*; such concept is applicable not only to religious life but to ethics in general, suggesting that one, borrowing a term from Michel Foucault, ought to put oneself in the activity of thought.³⁰ But we are not simply passive scholars; such a nihilistic manner of proceeding is not something that we can continue consenting to, as it has been the

²⁸Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 147.

²⁹Ibid., 148.

³⁰Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 9.

product of a confused, impulsive, irresponsible, often programmatic instruction.

Again as Nagel puts it, objectivity is the main course of ethics, and should be its main problematic, even in teaching ethics in contemporary education. We believe he has good reasons for the claim, and it is our hope in this paper that we are able to give justice to some of Thomas Nagel's useful insights with regard to how we can be ethically objective about things or how normative judgments based on realistic reasons can be arrived at. We are, of course, made aware by Nagel of the difficulties involved in this pursuit for objectivity. It was admitted that there seems to be "no preset method of carrying out a normative investigation,"³¹ although there is hope for objectivity because the act of stepping back, which might involve what he terms as "integrating" the subjective with the objective, is not impossible—that itself should set certain conditions or parameters. Nagel continues, "the process...can go on indefinitely...some aspects of practical reason may prove to be irreducibly subjective, so that while their existence must be acknowledged from an objective standpoint their content cannot be understood except from a more particular perspective. But other reasons will irresistibly engage the objective will."³² Again we stress that there is no guarantee for success, but such undertaking is worthwhile, if we have already made up our minds about not succumbing to the nihilistic mindset.

In this paper, then, we highly commend Nagel for his contributions especially in the study of ethics, although it is undeniable that his work traverses other realms in philosophy.

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About the Author

Kristoffer A. Bolaños holds an MA in Philosophy acquired from Ateneo de Manila University, and is currently a PhD in Philosophy student of University of the Philippines Diliman. He is teaching philosophy courses at Polytechnic University of the Philippines. His growing research interests include Foucault, Nietzsche, Negri and Hardt, Plato, and most recently Nagel, Wittgenstein and Kant.

***La Chinoise* and Aesthetic Dissensuality¹**

Jesus Emmanuel S. Villafuerte

Polytechnic University of the Philippines

Manila, Philippines

jesvillafuerte@pup.edu.ph

abstract

Jean Luc-Godard and Jacques Ranciere are two of the most important intellectuals of their time— the first is a filmmaker whose films are considered to be some of the best French Cinema has produced, the latter is a philosopher whose works continue to immensely influence the intellectual current of the world. While it can be said that their lives did not intersect, their respective oeuvres are not totally different from each other, in fact, Ranciere in his works on Cinema has continuously referenced the films of Godard in explaining his theoretical concepts, and Godard for his part, although he never mentioned any awareness of it, seemingly molds his aesthetics after Ranciere's views on art. Keeping this in mind, this paper will endeavor to present a concrete link between the works of these two sui-generis thinkers; in particular, the researcher will attempt to read one of Godard's most little known films, *La Chinoise*, using one of Ranciere's most famous theoretical concepts: dissensus. *Dissensus* is the necessary break/gap in the sensible order and could be seen in works of art. Hence, *dissensus* is primarily a concept that operates in the aesthetic order, a tick of the aesthetic regime—the researcher wishes to uncover the *dissensuality/jies* in Godard's *La Chinoise*.

keywords:

Ranciere, Dissensus, Aesthetic Order, Godard, Partition of the Sensible

¹ An earlier version of this research paper was presented at the 2017 National Philosophy conference at the Saint Louis University, Baguio City.



Guillaume: “Tenderness”
 Veronique: “A bit of despair”
 —from *La Chinoise* a film by Jean-Luc Godard

I. A Choice of Film and Theory

Admittedly, I am not a film critic, someone whose dreams consist of shifting camera shots, the crisp sound of rolling film, Buñuel sitting in a chair with Lacan hovering behind him; someone who has memorized the lines of Toshiro Mifune in Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* or the lyrical dialogues between the characters in Kiarostami’s films. If you ask him a thing or two about a particular auteur or film, he would reply readily, almost by rote, words that are too foreign and unfamiliar even if they were enunciated in your own language: French New Wave, Italian Realist Cinema, American Noir. I am not a film critic, I am but a casual fan who knows only the basics of film.

But as it were, my choice of Godard and his film *La Chinoise* as my object of study is not a mere coincidence, a product of naiveté or even ignorance, if you will—known for introducing new techniques into the art of filmmaking, Godard’s name has been a fixture in international film festivals and theoretical critiques—*La Chinoise* (translation: *The Chinese*), his little known film produced during his early days as a filmmaker is about, among a lot of things, a band of Maoist ideologues converging in an apartment at the heart of Paris, conducting discussion groups and laying out plans on how they could propagate their ideas, this at a time when the leading theoretical line of the revolutionary party, PCF, was Marxism-Leninism (in alliance with the Soviet Union which Chairman Mao considered to be revisionist), this highlights one interesting thing in the dynamics of the proletarian struggle in France: For Maoists in Paris in the mid to late 1960’s, the enemy was not so much capitalism and its repressive logic as the Marxist Leninist Party whose logic of repression, it seems, was no different than that of capitalism. *La Chinoise* may be Godard’s most personal and political film.

Another admission, as someone who considers himself part of the left, or at least, as someone who thinks in a dialectical

manner, I have my own biases and these biases, which in this case I would like to call my *politics*, would necessarily play out in every decision I make—part of it, of course, is the choice of subject for my study. Hence, this paper.

In this critique, I will treat the film as a text and utilize multiple theoretical concepts appropriated from several theoreticians in reading it, I will use symptomatic reading, the proposed mode of textual interpretation by Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey, and attempt to fuse it with Jacques Ranciere's *dissensus*.² The first method (symptomatic reading), was used by Althusser in reading the works of Karl Marx, which Pierre Macherey further developed to make it a more viable and potent mode of understanding texts—symptomatic reading is the application of psychoanalysis in textual interpretation, that is, you must fundamentally assume that the text has an unconscious which you as a critic have to expose and uncover; the latter concept (*dissensus*) is a discursive concept that was first introduced by Ranciere in his book *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, I would like to read this concept as an appropriation and reformulation of Althusser's *epistemological break* the only difference is that the Althusserian break, (another term for the epistemological break), refers to the dialectical shift from one particular trajectory of thinking into another while *dissensus* is the necessary break/gap in the sensible order and could be seen in works of art.³ Hence, *dissensus* is primarily a concept that operates in the aesthetic order, a tick of the aesthetic regime. This act of theorizing *dissensus* or *aesthetic dissensus* is in keeping with Ranciere's project of explaining the logic of the sensible order of both *politics* or *police order*

² Ranciere explains *dissensus* as “a conflict between sense and sense” that is, he treats it as a gap in the sensible order—a necessary gap that resists conceptual determination: “Dissensus is a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or ‘bodies’ This is the way in which *dissensus* can be said to reside at the heart of politics, since at the bottom the latter itself consists in an activity that redraws the frame within which common objects are determined.” Jacques Ranciere, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010) 139.

³ The best example of this epistemological break would be Althusser's own study on the works of Karl Marx, he divided the oeuvre of Marx into two parts that of the young Marx and the older Marx. The young Marx's works are relatively more metaphysical and idealist, (the Hegelian Marx) and the older Marx's works are characterized by heavy emphasis on historical-materialism (the Feuerbachian Marx).

and the *aesthetic regime of art*; in a book published much earlier entitled *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Ranciere introduced his most well-known concept in his intervention into the loci of politics and artistic production: *le partage du sensible* translated as the *distribution of the sensible* or *the partition of the sensible* which is understood as the operative logic of the sensible order, the sensible being another loose appropriation of an Althusserian concept, *ideology*, the only difference is the absence of the body in the Althusserian version while in the Rancierian counterpart, the body takes the central role: the *sensible* is what is seen, or felt by the body vis-a-vis ideology which is invisible but always already present, residing in the unconscious (both concepts interpellates the onlookers as subject)⁴. For Ranciere, politics and aesthetics are effective conduits in the propagation of the sensible/ideology but like a Deleuzian machine, these conduits are prone to breakage which results to the cessation of the partition/distribution of the sensible and it has to be mentioned that this breakage of the conduit/machine is not isolated as it happens often and is indeed one of the primary characteristics of the modern regime of art and the police order.

II. The Break

This part of the essay is titled *The Break* as indeed, the concept of “the break” recurs multiple times in the film. Godard’s *La Chinoise* came out in 1967, one year before the now famous student revolt in France, a Marxist uprising of factory workers and petty-bourgeoisie that was led by students and intellectuals based in different universities, its eventual failure prompted immediate theoretical intervention and explanation from various philosophers and is still being discussed until now, Alain Badiou, one of the leading French intellectuals mentions in one of his recent books, *The Communist Hypothesis*, that in spite of almost half a century after the student revolt, *we are still contemporaries of 1968*⁵. Meaning, we can still feel the repercussions of the events that happened then. The

⁴ I have always maintained, in my reading of Ranciere, that although he has long departed from Structural Marxism, whose head figure was Louis Althusser, because of its “rigidities” (Ranciere has even written a book about it entitled “*Althusser’s Lesson*”), he still remains an Althusserian, albeit unconsciously the evidence is his appropriation of Althusserian concepts, and how, at times, he employs Althusserian methods of interpretation.

⁵ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso, 2010), 41.

year is an important historical juncture in the development of the intellectual tradition not only in France but the world as a whole; some of the leading theories today were directly or indirectly products of the 1968 student revolt in France, Post-structuralism, Postmodernism even Neo-Marxism. Here is Terry Eagleton in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*: “Post-structuralism was a product of the blend of euphoria and disillusionment, liberation and dissipation, carnival and catastrophe, which was 1968.”⁶ *La Chinoise*, in more ways than one, anticipated this historical moment, this *break* that influenced and continues to influence past and future historical moments.

Additionally, and this is on an auteurial level, *La Chinoise* is generally considered to be the film that signified the epistemological break in Godard’s artistic practice. Godard started his career as a film critic but was quickly dissatisfied with the type of films produced by the French filmmakers of his time, in fact he viewed these films as generally “bourgeois.” A reader of Marxist Philosophy, Godard’s first films until *La Chinoise* were critiques of capitalist excesses and the social order that prevails in capitalist societies, his films are considered political. These films that we are talking about were produced during his *ideological* phase, but after *La Chinoise* and not incidentally, after the 1968 student revolt in France, his films took a paradigmatic turn, his films became more existential and metaphysical, although his films did not lose their politics entirely, and to lose one’s politics is impossible anyway. Interestingly, there would be occasions in his latter films when, just like the intellectuals of his time, he would look at the events that occurred in France in 1968 with a “doomed sense of nostalgia,” an example is in the film *In Praise of Love* which was released in 2001, the narrator, a man, says “I was born three years before 1968” meaning, he does not have any memories of the events that transpired in 1968 but he, recognizes their importance – and we could even say that he recalls those memories that he never had in the first place.⁷

These *breaks* mentioned earlier, of course, are important in analyzing the *breaks*, or the *aesthetic dissensualities*, in the film, as these *breaks* that constitute the milieu around which the film was formed are themselves important in shaping the film. In the beginning of

⁶Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*(Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994).

⁷ Jean-Luc Godard, *In Praise of Love*. Blu-Ray, 2001.

the paper, I expressed my intent to read *La Chinoise* in terms of dissensus, that is, I will utilize symptomatic reading in order to see the *aesthetic dissensuality* in the film, how *sense* and *sense* are broken. The main reason why I decided to use Ranciere's *dissensus* in analyzing the film is this— as necessarily a product of the modern regime of art, the film (and all films for that matter) like all forms of art produced within this specific temporal and theoretical locus, contain within itself a kernel of *dissensuality* that we can see through symptomatic reading but more than that, *La Chinoise* as a an aesthetic statement and a film conscious of its political role, and for a work of art which has a defined ideological and political stance, to read it in terms of *dissensus* would be a type of a paradox—or at least some would believe that it is impossible. In the succeeding part of this essay, I will attempt to show the effectuality of a Rancierian critique on *La Chinoise*.

III. Aesthetic Dissensuality

This is how the film begins, we hear the voice of a man muttering these words to himself: “*The French working class won't politically unite nor go to barricades just for a 12% rise in wages. In the foreseeable future there will be no capitalist crisis great enough for the workers to fight for their vital interests.*”⁸ The man, then, is revealed to be very young, perhaps in his teenage years or in his early twenties. In a rather disturbed manner, he is pacing back and forth, while holding a pen and a book, he appears to be memorizing certain passages from the book which he is holding, suddenly as if jolted by an invisible force, he decides to close the book and we hear a silent thud. He then goes in inside an apartment building. His voice fades out. The importance of the scene is not lost to us—here, the apartment is shown, this is the group's point of convergence, meaning, it is the most important locus/space in the film as this is where meetings and discussion groups occur, this is where the exchanges between characters happen and hence, it is the site of most of the *break* or the *dissensualities*.

After the first scene, the second scene is an equally profound and important one: Guillaume and Veronique, two of the main characters, talking with each other, “*what is a word?*” Veronique asks, to which Guillaume replies, “*a word is what is left unsaid*” their

⁸ Jean-Luc Godard, *La Chinoise*. Blu-Ray, 1967.

faces are not shown. We only see their hands, doing gestures, moving toward and away from each other. I get a hint of psychoanalytical thought from this exchange, and that is not impossible as I believe Godard and Lacan moved pretty much within the same social circles, and if not, they most probably knew each other and were familiar with each other's works. Moving on, we can glean from the exchange that the word, as a Alain Vanier, a Lacanian theoretician said, is the murder of the thing, and hence, it is necessary for the thing to vanish in order for the word to exist (the word displaces the thing)—and hence, the word must be left unsaid to preserve the things existence. At the end of their talk, they said in unison “*we are the words of others*” which, as Maoist ideologues, means that they represent the oppressed classes, that they speak for them—and which is also one of the earliest manifestations of *dissensuality* in the film as *dissensus* is the blurring and erasure of distinctions, hence to claim to be the sole/totalizing voice that represents all the voices, is that rift that we are looking for between *sense* and *sense*.

Moving on, another important scene in the film is when Guillaume, sitting in front of a camera, a lit cigarette in hand, narrates the story of how young Chinese students protested in Moscow during the time of Stalin, and one particular student had bandage wrapped around his face, his appearance attracted the attention of the photographers and the media people. As the student was denouncing Russian revisionism, all eyes were on him. The student removed the bandage, and the people expected to see a mutilated or at least a cut face, but the face did not have even a single scratch. The photographers, feeling duped, were obviously disappointed. But these photographers, Guillaume says, had not understood that way they just saw was “real theater” or the theater of the real. That what happened was both an artistic performance that is replete with symbolisms and an anticipation of a future historical moment, a moment when the cuts would be real and bloody, an act of distributing the sensible. The photographers could not understand the significance of the act because they were looking at it not as an aesthetic event but as a real, an actual historical event—but if we look at it using Rancierian lense, we will see that the act, as already mentioned earlier, is not either an aesthetic statement or an anticipation of the things to come under a revisionist regime but a conflation of both that can only be understood by people who are looking for the necessary gap.

Moving on, I would like to point out another noticeable aspect of the film, the abundance of slogans, which is not odd considering that the film is about a group of Maoist communist ideologues and the use of slogans is part of the practice of communists. For example, at the beginning, one notices these words scribbled on the wall of the apartment, “*Il faut confronter les idées vagues avec des images claires*” which mean “we should replace vague ideas with clear images”. The slogans shown would change from time to time, in another scene we would notice that the slogan on the wall is “*Une minorité à la ligne révolutionnaire correcte n’est plus une minorité*” which means “a minority with the right ideas is not a minority.” The first slogan refers to Marxist praxiology, a combination of theory and its practical application—that the vague ideas (revolution, dictatorship of the proletariat, communism etc.) must be replaced with clear images, that the future historical event must be ushered and actualized. The first slogan is a call for revolutionary practice; the second one refers to the status enjoyed by Maoism in France at that time, it was considered a counterfeit idea as the leading mode of thought among radicals back then was Marxism-Leninism, both prompts mobilization, to clash with the leading grain of thought—both slogans promote resistance—of one sign system going against and trying to displace another sign system resulting to a breakage, a rift. This has been present all throughout the film.

But dissensuality, in the film, is more glaring in the exchanges between the characters, as this is where Godard’s logic of artistic resistance manifests more pronouncedly; and among the many dialogues and exchanges between the characters this is for me the most profound scene in the movie: Guillaume and Veronique sitting at a round table, facing each other, Guillaume is reading words from a book, a novel perhaps, aloud and Veronique just listening intently. Guillaume now pauses and pours down tea into his cup, Veronique now starts to leaf through the pages of a book that has been laying on the table the whole time, Guillaume takes a sip from the cup, and out of nowhere says, “I want to be blind” Veronique asks “why?” Guillaume answers nonchalantly, “To speak to each other better; we would listen carefully” – and what he meant is not lost to us, there is politics even in normal conversations, not the politics that we know of, but politics as in the governing rules of an idea or a thought, the logic that makes them tick so to speak—that sometimes the sight gets in the way of

the message, and hence in order to understand the message fully, we must be blind, we must lose sight, somehow what is understood is not what is meant. Then Guillaume proposed a game, something like word association, one mentions a word or a phrase, the other would answer with the first word or phrase that comes into her mind. Here are the exchanges: Guillaume: On the river bank, Veronique: Green and blue; Guillaume: Tenderness, Veronique: A bit of despair; Guillaume: After tomorrow, Veronique: Maybe; Guillaume: Literary theory, Veronique a film by Nicholas—the conversation goes on until the moment when Guillaume, with and intent voice, said to Veronique, “you know I love you.” What we have just seen is the creation of a rupture, a gap in the symbolic order, *aesthetic dissensuality*—the failure of the distribution of the sensible. The words and phrases do not match on a literal level, the chain of signification gets broken. And if the film is political, does this break from effecting a distribution of the sensible, this break from the supposed ideological function of the film, makes it any less political? I think not. I think that this rupture although halts the ideologizing function, does something on the political level, that is, it presents other possibilities, other facets of politics—that being political could also mean the seeming absence of politics. In the end, the break/gap was sutured when Guillaume pronounced his love for Veronique—they were transported back to the plane of understanding, of coherence.

With all these said, I think that it is not without any irony that the movie ends with a failed assassination attempt, Veronique killing the wrong guy and their group getting disbanded. It is a fitting end to a film that is built on the logic of *aesthetic dissensuality*.

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About the Author

Jesus Emmanuel S. Villafuerte is a writer and critic based in Manila, Philippines. He has presented his research works in several national and international conferences, as a poet, his works have appeared in a number of journals and online platforms. He works as an administrative staff at the Center for Creative Writing of the Polytechnic University of the Philippines and he is currently enrolled in the MA in Literary and Cultural Studies program of the Ateneo de Manila University. His research interests include: canon formation, literary and cultural studies, aesthetic theories, minoritarian literature, film studies among others.

Memory and Food in Philippine Literature: A Molecular 'Re-siting' of the Filipino Kitchen

Lawdenmarc Decamora

University of Santo Tomas

Manila, Philippines

lawdenmarco806@yahoo.com

abstract

The paper explores the relationship of food and memory in selected Philippine literary works as textual monuments in confronting the traditionally molar Filipino kitchen. The articulated memory figures help relay common segmentarities and similitudes recounted in the narratives depicting the Filipino kitchen as rather molecular, minoritarian, hence 're-sited' a posteriori into a plane of recall and revision. Asymmetrically, the morphing capacity of the Filipino kitchen is favoured in order to escape the dualism machine that still consigns traditional culinary practices to the molar system of domesticity and monumentality. The process of refunctioning traditional kitchens encapsulates both the dynamics of interrogation and practice; more specifically, the sensory experience obtained from the stories can be reworked into a narrative of activity that distributes sensory images for critical reception and memory re-reading, which is possible through proximal correlation with language and desire that necessitate gestic movements like walking or strolling as a demonstration against, say, the kaleidoscopic metropolis of puissance. As molecular memory suggests the exchange and transfer of cultural remembrances among sites of contestations, the paper therefore identifies these sites as distinct kitchens if not similitudes of the domestic type, among them 1) fictive, 2) domestic, 3) sari-sari. Each type of kitchen—already fashionably 're-sited'—elicits a case of either nostalgia, forgetting or cultural amnesia. The result is the morphing of the Filipino kitchen into a metaphor, mentality, or simply a memory.

keywords:

Carnival, Filipino Kitchen, Memory, Sari-sari, Site into Sight



Introduction

Who would have thought that praying and eating are all in the same sonority of murmurous spiritualizing, of theorizing gastronomic rapture that the soul satiates with familiar home ingredients and sometimes, though a little overwhelming, cultural différance? Spicy, bitter, sweet, tasty, briny and tangy—these temperamental *gustus* in the textured and textualized presentation of food sought human creativity and cultural refinement. Although cooking is just another talent, craft or art on the one hand, eating on the other is tied to one’s gustatory marvel, which requires nonetheless flavouring the results or simply *ninanamnam*, hence “savouring it with tongue and lips and memory [to create] an exact, remembered taste” (Fernandez 85; emphasis added). Such that taste no matter how depoliticized it was perceived in gastronomy, but dramatically politicized in cultural studies given that it assumes a predilection toward luxury and necessity, may predispose taste feelers (or thinkers) to class difference and social inequity.

Literature like food with its concomitant ingredients and identifiable source context, requires a definite if not presentable truth; and truth here as was its wont to varnish no whines refers to the preparation and adjustment that writers and cooks foresee while materially concentrated upon the conditions forcing them to produce a folklorized memory within the confines of every Filipino kitchen: food *as* cultural capital. Predestination, or forced choice, can be scooped out, measure the method that is not invariably ascribing to gender, class nor diachronic traditions alone; the domestic and the carnival, both channelling folk memory, therefore can reconstruct a kitchen that is intensely Filipino and contingently informed by taste and sensory memory necessitating concerns about the language of food and the gastro-politics of foodways and food eating. Memory addends like place, symbols, mythic time, ways of cooking or eating, colonial or folk, presuppose the cultural conditions of significantly articulating the experience, expressions of taste, the feeling of being *there* consuming *it*—the dish that is everyone’s wish, as if the pleasure of eating and staying is heightened by the memory.

Doreen Fernandez in *Tikim* made an apparent synthesis about the traditional Filipino kitchen, that having localized foreign

cuisines, withholding still the family's palatable moments and other communal occasions like neighbourhood parties and fiestas, the ordinary Pinoy foodie at his most finicky when it comes to taste and the spatiality of the local, ought to remember provincial delicacies—"those no longer made in one's own or in modern kitchens, or requiring ingredients or methods now found only in the provinces" (6). She reconciles the diverse emotive energies of taste by referring to the "tastiness" of food as more exhibiting a symbolic identity; had she not initiated a semantic perusal of food there wouldn't be gustation or ingestion of what has been authentically Filipino, in taste and in fine manners. Moreover, the traditional Filipino kitchen manifests in itself a carnivalesque way of redefining culture, thus I deem to call this deeply-rooted kitchen *sari-sari*, as there is not an 'imagined' framing of time and space. The Filipino kitchen is likewise viewed in a Bakhtinian swirl of festive feasting of images, experience, and of existence. Thus Doreen Fernandez consigns the Filipino kitchen to the atmospheric feel of the fiesta, as there is no logocentric fixity to assume, and there is:

... no indoor kitchen could contain or provide for the hectic, festive, quantity cookery. The yard becomes the kitchen, where flies and spits were set up for the *lechon*; more fires for the hot water (for cleaning utensils and butchered animals) and the *kava-kava* of *adobo*, *caldereta*, *dinuguan*, etc. (107)

Additionally, the tastiness of food referred to by Fernandez and Edilberto Alegre in *Sarap* comes into three (3) rhythmic palatal descriptions: *masarap*, *malasa*, *malinamnam* (61). To put their utter distinction, both 'malasa' and 'malinanam' only denote food, while 'masarap' has a wider domain, say, "Masarap siyang tumawa." Simplicity and sincerity to the art of colonizing the kitchen only suggests that the distinctive and changing (say, regional) taste of, and the authentic show of *pakikisama* (fellow-feeling) by, the Filipinos speak of the way they are, yet adjusting to the needs of modern living. Like slow food cooking, Filipino food is love. The Filipino kitchen has a long history of the literature of love. 'Slow' because Filipino food, as Chef Horatius Mosquera claims, is indeed "cooked with no shortcuts, no scrimping on ingredients, but instead with painstaking care, and thus only with a whole lot of love" (Panlilio and Sta. Maria, *Slow Food* 197-198).

Although the purpose of the paper allows the author to reconstruct and re-imagine the familiar Filipino kitchen, for it is

ostensibly interesting to note how tradition undergoes transition and transformation especially the ‘re-siting’ of culinary expressions and practices from the Filipino “kusina”, deriving it thus from the wealthy taste factory known for centuries, the Spanish *cucina*. The activity of ‘re-siting’ in this paper is a matter of ingesting culture and re-imagining it in the process to offer an alternate site of contestation and consumption. This is the kind of hunger Resil Mojares informs us Filipinos, “[We] ‘eat places’ when [we] partake of local food while travelling or on the road. It is not just calories but culture which [we] ingest” (139). In short, the paper aims to articulate the language and relationship expressed by food when linked to home or food spaces as a cultural construct of social interaction and folk memory sited or re-sited in Nick Joaquin’s *The Legend of the Dying Wanton*. Once again, the siting or re-siting of memory can be foregrounded as the close reading of the text tries to establish the connection between mother and child, between the colonizer and the colonized, as polarized by the power relations inherent in food and space and their dialogic exchange of mostly prosthetic figures if not anamnestic examples.

The taste culture of Filipinos surely remains steadfast in its remembering of home, albeit precipitated by material necessities (say, career or even *amor fati* informed by the conditions of existence) in transforming the traditional notion of domestic labour. Such taste has been tested physically and metaphysically. The material or physical culture of Filipinos is prized because of the “cultural siting” of memory or mythic time to flow in a borderless, fissiparous heteroglossia of a cooking nation. To fully understand Filipino food in context is the singular appreciation of welcoming the proudly branded Filipino “hospitality and generosity—two of the most universal aspects of Filipino culture” (Besa and Dorotan, *Memories of Philippine Kitchens* 14). Consequently, the paper explores the differential relationship of food and memory in Nick Joaquin’s fiction as a textual monument in confronting the traditionally molar Filipino kitchen. The articulated memory figures help relay common segmentarities and similitudes recounted in the narrative depicting the Filipino kitchen as rather molecular, minoritarian, hence ‘re-sited’ *a posteriori* into a plane of recall and revision. Asymmetrically, the morphing capacity of the Filipino kitchen is favoured in order to escape the dualism machine that still consigns culinary practices to the molar system of domesticity and monumentality. The process of refunctioning traditional kitchens encapsulates both the

dynamics of interrogation and practice; more specifically, the sensory experience obtained from the narrative can be reworked into a synchronic narrative of activity that distributes sensory images for critical reception leading to “a memory re-reading of the now”, which is possible through proximal correlation with language and desire that necessitate gestic movements like walking or strolling as a demonstration against, say, the kaleidoscopic metropolis of puissance. As molecular memory suggests the exchange and transfer of cultural remembrances among sites of contestations, the paper therefore identifies these sites as distinct kitchens if not similitudes of the domestic type, among them 1) fictive, 2) domestic, 3) sari-sari. Each type of kitchen—already fashionably ‘re-sited’—elicits a case of either nostalgia, forgetting, or cultural amnesia. The result is the morphing of the Filipino kitchen into a metaphor, a mentality, or simply a memory.

The Fictive Kitchen: A Home Most Lovely, Lost

Admittedly, what defines the Filipino kitchen is not the scope of the study. But what negotiates the cultural asperities (and differences) of memory and food literature certainly makes sense as to realize the salvific worth of praying, and as to, in a way both Christianizing and memorializing, confront food images in their contemplative myth-making. I will get to the core of myth-making as a procedure of re-functioning the usual close reading of food images and the scaling of the context they represent. The fictive kitchen, this built-in workhouse of static and ecstatic words, is the mental factory that facilitates language and expression, with sensory experience at the wayside and the gift of remembering being at the core-sink. Before words are transmuted into a unit like the language of rituals and hymns, thus coalescing expressivity to be rather performative in nature, remembrances of home arrange themselves, carefully diced and then cooked, until they form an original out of the origin memory perfectly seasoned and marinated. By original I refer to the simulacrum of the origin, or the myth that is manufactured simply put. And by origin I mean the memory events and histories that framed sensorial fragments (premonitions, agitations, mishaps), for the latter may sour social connections and continuities resulting to cultural amnesia. One rare spice of modernity changes how people act and see things. Consequently,

Doreen Fernandez augurs these fragmentary possibilities impacted by cultural amnesia, or “the cultural loss ... [she] saw occurring in the primate city, Manila” (227; emphasis added). To note, one of these dramatic changes effected by technology and mobility, such that Fernandez observed that young people no longer remember or care about provincial cooking, about the importance of slow eating that speaks of not only the Filipino tradition and values but of the memories that were once flowing freely like the silken hair of water.

So, the fictive kitchen constructed here is the ‘imagined’ reservoir of homely hummings, as it were, the brusquely memory at work. The marginal, the memorial, the scientific and sanitary, all pick up the dreaded sentiment of beauty, exposed and expanding like any other home kitchens, of that delicacy, confirms David Hume, of imagination conveying a sensibility in the presence and absence of the object, which in the study arrests people’s assumption of food regardless of the physical appearance (cited in Korsmeyer 118). Note that deformity does not adhere to any degree of aesthetic presentation. In the study supported by a literary text, Nick Joaquin challenges the appearance and the disappearance of object which can be food itself as text, or of image which pertains to memory with its concomitant elements of contestation—language, spirituality, family, home. A basketful of cultural presences, as it were. In an instance in which a mother devotes most of her time to childcare and food preparation, while the father spends time furnishing office work, domestic labour attached to the kitchen has been contested due to economic securities and corporate opportunities befitting specific gender roles. However, cooking as craft, Fernandez affirms, is “not tied to gender, but to the person” (84). Let us establish instead the class difference which effects the transmission of cultural capital that can be deduced, as it were, from the food preferences consumers optionally maintain. In order to illustrate the gendered preferences for food—as portions of its likewise can be interpreted—and ways of eating, Pierre Bourdieu in contradistinction explains the division which both sexes recognize as disparate and diverse as the cultures of gustation of the different regions in the world. Although it would be unfair to synthesize this analysis culturally, but based on dietary findings foods like cheese or meat, the nourishing food par excellence, is the dish for men, whereas women are satisfied with small portions of it, especially if vegetables or salad are not served (cited in Korsmeyer

75). To succumb to this conclusion however, is to defeat tradition's practical commonality, that is, the Pinoy experience of food sharing.

The atmospheric feel of fiestas in the province aromatizes an invigorating community of senses: more than nostalgia and memory can penetrate someone's deep heart's core. As a communal experience rooted in the kitchen, whether taking place in backyards or in tree-shaded grounds, the Hispanized fiestas of Filipinos find profound values which ignite more than anything the talent and manpower of the barrio folks most especially seen in their evocation of *pakikisama*, a quality which also adjusts to the needs of modern living, by all dynamism and deference. The study of food as text welcomes the premise of this paper's cultural approach using a Nick Joaquin story to further the elaborate relationship between tradition as manifest in prayer as the latter seems to regard a concentrated communicative act with the high above, and food imagery which articulates most picturesquely the memories of home.

Deterritorializing the Centrality of Taste

Sensing gustatory pleasure from food is a foretaste to memory, and this privileged desire to feel through bodily organs the reflective sublimity of an indissoluble matter, more so the reality that taste eventually validates aesthetic judgment. Food and drinks, eating habits and foodways, deserve a space for sociality and dialogic interaction that charges intellectual engagement with the whole gastro-spectacle, that is, from food alone, taste culture, to the unseemly cultural politics of culinary practices, slow eating, and countercuisine. Therefore, taste and food consumption presuppose class relations, social inequity, as well as freedom to follow one's appetite. In a more Kantian sense, there is subjectivity in our pleasure to satisfy our gustatory craving but this does not mean there is no social or moral use for it. What is beautiful for us could be universally justified since our aesthetic response also applies to the reaction of interested social participants, thereby causing the gastro-spectacle that I raise here to be multi-built for pluralized verbal constructions and reconstructions. According to Immanuel Kant, "Taste is the faculty of aesthetic judgment which makes universally valid discriminations" (quoted in Korsmeyer 213). Extracting discriminations in the first place is a valid yet risky

attempt to associate what is tasty in food or what is memorable in memory with the sublime's many of differential qualities appertaining to aesthetic judgment.

From tasting food gestured by the mad swirling approbation of the tongue, to dramatizing a memorable Proustian moment, the study prefers to single out taste and smell as the two most necessary senses in connecting food to memory, which as a result emanates a lyrical expression from the psalmic language of food images and from their *relationship* with the story narrative that anticipates their mythicizing potential. I chose the story *The Legend of the Dying Wanton* simply because of the repertoire of food images which are good tropic(al) examples to discuss memory and myth as flavour-makers of human experiences. The centrality of taste is nevertheless deterritorialized by the unfolding cultural narrative and by the ontological shock of folk memory reacting against modernity. Roger Bromley arguably contends that “each deterritorialization (of people itself; of [taste] or genre) constitutes and extends the territory itself; it is a way to keep on opening up meanings” (cited in Velasco 351). In concurrence with this, taste referred to by Kant and Hume is subjective, positional, plural, or molecular in the Deleuzian sense of the word. The re-sited Filipino kitchen, as a result of catering to multicultural taste and ‘schizoid’ cultural memory, is shaped by lived experience through an imagined dialogue which provides a space for a multicultural subtext that is contingently carousing with the carnival.

Site into Sight:

Memory Studies and Bakhtin's Theory of the Carnival

In the production of collective memory, the Filipino kitchen as a site of memory, and in order to achieve a level of sustained rhythmic dialogue, speculates before a framed time and space a balanced yet fluid oscillation between presence and absence. There is no site, as in the mythic flow of time, to take shelter from and no history to visualise in its shapely diachronic skeleton, but only a sight to remember. Bakhtin's conception of time and space operates a temporal machine orchestrating “at the forefront of this dance of de-coding and re-coding of space: memory sites play complex games with time by keeping the past visible and comprehensible in the present, curating narratives and conveying sentiments” (Bach

49). Memory studies rhetoric would recount in Joaquin's narrative an obvious counterfactual movement and siting of traditional practices. To re-site these practices however offers an alternate memory construction which is now to be imagined as a dialogic discourse, or what I critically view as a contingent process of re-temporalizing site into sight, hence a memorial and molecular landscape like the re-sited Filipino kitchen.

Traditions of fiestas, family cooking, fine dining or touring around for several food stations in the street, as well as food buying and delivery highly encouraged by media, had been too overwhelming for the Filipino kitchen counter-pose. These contemporary food activities and culinary practices belong to the dominant order which folk memory finds itself so unlucky to determine a medium of excesses and expressions. As a result, foodways and food customs become a fixed memory of the past, which all the more renders their physical appearance as merely a site. Human mind, like Joaquin's protagonist's museum of mental images, seems to reconstruct a alternative world full of unperturbed imaginings and carnival moments of exaggerations. In moments of metamorphic transitions, the carnivalesque and the grotesque are the aesthetics of transgression that makes dialogue possible. Currito in Joaquin's story metaphysically enjoined himself in the festival of his own making—that is, both metal and memorial—in order to reach the waters of meaning and memory. This struggle thereby conjures an awareness to openly traverse the terrestrial discourse articulated by Bakhtin. In a new world freed from both bourgeoisie and totalitarian cultures, Bakhtin prefers to resuscitate life from individual loss and cultural amnesia in an atmosphere where the carnivalesque and the grotesque are hung suspended under mythic time. The carnival atmosphere like Currito's swirling memories of food representing places abstracted by human (sometimes mental) struggle, romanticizes a 'sight' where "participation rather than representation, dialogue rather than monologue, equality rather than hierarchy" is realized (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 20). Another point in the narrative is the somewhat unrealistic confrontation of the ideal that lies in the carnival to mask the problem of forgetting. It seems that Currito is still in the state of denial regarding the subject-position of his remembering, thus his contested becoming is prematurely anathema to his total disavowal of fixed terms.

From Domestic to Sari-sari: An Interrogation of Cultural Belonging

With the potential of the Filipino kitchen to make real the fictive or the charged resolutions of the grotesque, Joaquin invites tradition to assume “the other ideal”—in which case the carnival moment, not just the status quo imposing the domestic chronotopes of the ordeal, the dominant order, as it were. Everyone knows that the kitchen is a place, a site, a habitus. But to confront the domestic familiar kitchen one should be privy to the compartmentalized socio-cultural standing of the family. The Filipino family embraces different social classes and this means having a well-furnished family kitchen is not enough. Some prefer to spend bucks for kitchen renovations and extensions. Such is the case of constructing a “dirty kitchen” as an inferiorly spare-space for middle to upper class families. In short, the domestic kitchen informs a culture of liminality and hierarchy. The grotesque elements in memory’s fictive kitchen therefore counteract the domestic kitchen’s activity of still caressing the centre and its traditional vicissitudes, say, the concentrated portrayal of opposites bereft of Bakhtin’s dialogic imagination. The fictive kitchen which is the site of memory “re-imagines a sight”; it makes the Filipino kitchen transformative and transgressive, rather than informative and submissive. Also, the art of reading the Filipino kitchen as a cultural text for collective meaning or fictive space for myth-making, involves the contextualizing of human memory. Hence the fictive kitchen, like episodic memory, “enables [Filipinos] to reconstruct and re-encounter autobiographical experiences which have occurred throughout the course of [their] lives” (Bietti et. al. 268).

Cultural belonging evokes an informed familiarity with the community, the Filipino people and their unparalleled textualizing of fiestas as totem amalgam of *pakikisama*. Barrio folks, families, and guests project another cultural identity of the Filipino kitchen: the sari-sari. The sari-sari, as the label apparently fetishizes on the carnival, “organizes an intricately coded experience that merges intimacy and publicness into a lifestyle constituted by kinship ties, [entertainment], and community service” (van Doorn 90; emphasis added). As a cultural text allowing the free flow of discursive thoughts and fissiparous expressions, the sari-sari as another type

Filipino kitchen, at least for the aim of this study, projects an extensive reach to facilitate an act of cultural remembrance—“a performance, literally, that seeks to make ‘remembering in common’ possible” (quoted in Plate 144). Given its totemic rootedness and constructedness in folk memory, the sari-sari transcends exchange value, a kind of anamnestic projection memorializing and mythicizing culture.

Resurrecting Memory in *The Legend of the Dying Wanton*

Before close reading the text as a literary means of cooking it, I first asked a few questions: Why does the narrative brush with Spanish diachronicity? Am I reading a text depicting a Pieta-inspired family picture? Is Doña Ana the Virgin who sheds light on the dying Currito? Why is augury related to memory and memory to myth? Will I find a banquet scene or a feast here so that food is all over the narrative? Like preparing ingredients, dicing and chopping, I ask questions to shine a light of curiosity. I even find the title ironic because of the telling resurrection I sense from the Christianized characters and sensory images. Conversely, the Proustian moment begins when prosthetic memory figures such as the chapel, wardrobe of “Santo Rosario”, and the chapel’s altar, flash before Doña Ana’s dissuading eyes, as if to remind her that being old and well-off is not an excuse to worship and to look after a son (Señor de Vera) whom she thought might wind up being savage and brutal and Filipino. The poor and uneducated wimp that the Europeans fear of entering their lifeways has been framed in the mind of Doña Ana. Here, the subversive figure of a son terrorizes a mother—“the blue dusk of her altar” signifying Christianity and tradition. However, some deconstructionist nuances pervade the fictive kitchen in a mythicizing fashion. So as the narrative proceeds a mythicizing of the altar or chapel being first and foremost the symbol and site of the Christian faith, takes part, is being cooked for unimaginable. A sacred house of worship can turn into a confinement: a jail, an asylum, a memory prison. There is a connection though, the iconographic sketch of the cross in the different houses of worship could be the same cross pinioned on hospital walls. This case of diversion from the rational, disciplining character of the mother into the idolatrous, submissive woman might change the complexion of the narration. But this is pure insight we cannot by de-mythicizing. Graphically the Pieta image

between Doña Ana and her son, and later between her and Currito who asked of her blessing to leave Malaga, is painted; with the sublime subsiding, this beautiful image of a mother-son-mother-stranger relationship becomes a scar, a gothic tropicity pervading the supposed merry memory.

Meanwhile, the presumption of the aesthetic gaze ascertaining taste and social judgment creates a stir in the part where Doña Ana studied the Lucifer-looking Currito, drunk and stinking in the street. But to her, Currito carried a different aura that reminded him of the innocently accused Christ. Perhaps his being alone stations him to be there, enough for easy judgment to make: "Alone, perhaps, in all the city, she knew another side of this man's character" (Joaquin 84). This, in short, counters the colonizing gaze of the affluent, and Currito felt he repulsed had he not been silent. The permission to speak likewise opposes the assumed visual interrogation. Currito was even given the chance to request from the Doña Ana a blessing which he believed would cleanse his soul of the sins he allowed entry. His life, now in the murkiest and most confused state, is begging for a new life. Permission that is being requested is not permission, but a form of begging that has eluded materiality. What is elicited therefore is spiritual help. Note also the distance that keeps the two; it means that this distance blurs the flighty hesitations hovering above Currito's head. When both distance and gaze are transposed, such familiar language is articulated, and this is the language of tradition, a Christianized favour to leave and love.

For a sinful man to depart for battle, he be blessed first. How desperate Currito is now that his revolve seems rock-solid and unchanging! Another way of interpreting this tradition is to consign it to the familiar fascination of readers with the picaresque or the ur-works in which the divine presence precedes battle. However, in the case of Currito, it is a poetic battle that stars him and his inner troubles, or somehow biblical that includes man and his sins tugging close at predestination. Given the blessing he desired, Currito unwittingly became once again an easy prey of a brewing speculation. This time the mythicizing feature of memory comes into play; so memory as augury as prophecy has instanced Doña Ana to foresee the hapless fate of Currito as a dying soldier, though not verbally communicating this to him.

Things in their place remain tucked to memory, most especially to Currito who is about to leave but seems already has left

Malaga. This early sign of rootlessness envisages for him a “homing” in which all traces of home make their way inside. With this ‘inside’ memory storing precious signs and symbols, remembering food and home, the fictive kitchen that I’m proposing here all of a sudden touches modern thought and desire. Gossips, tall tales, and folk quarrels find their place in this new storehouse memory I’d like call sari-sari. Like in a small town sari-sari store, the so-called rumours or cheap talks could be mythicized into barrio legends or other otherworldly narratives; furthermore, the deliberate cataloguing of food and drink, warm women, Malaga, the fountains and streets in Granada, is welcomed by the sari-sari type of memory to interpellate the soul, “not the salvation of [Currito’s] soul but the things of earth his senses had enjoyed and would never enjoy again” (86). Let us consult the list of food, characters, and lifeways that cannot be decoupled from home and all memory that deems to portray the role of sari-sari:

food & drink + warm women = Malaga
 fountains & streets = Granada
 cypresses & bandits = Sierra Morena
 roasted lamb + shepherds + weeds + Romans = Ronda
 vineyards + convents + orange & olive groves =
 Guadalquivir & Cordoba

Stereotyping of sites has been finally ‘re-sited’ since cultural pollution or social nuances attached to these sites are as well interchanging. A traveller guising himself in other places may experience seeing and feeling these signs in Malaga, or sometime in Ronda or Cordoba. Like sites of memory foods also are expressive of their emotive relations to site and that contains them and to the traveller that reads them. Currito conveys the Proustian moment with his experience of travel and dying on an island alone and helpless. The after-life odyssey seems very fitting to revisit the memory spectacle in which the soul seasons sin with food and spices, forgiveness and salvation. The native dreaming here is vivified by the senses, and these senses are perhaps extra-sensory like the dream fingers of childhood memory crawling for “figs and boiled chestnuts and feeling happy” (87).

Lastly, I would like to expound on the critical relevance of smell to memory—a sensory faculty more personal and revealing than taste. Home sensitizes for real, remembers as well, not only the backward exchange of family narratives but also the experiences

with which most are transmuted to objects. As Immanuel Kant observes of the gift of smell:

Smell is, so to speak, taste at a distance, and other people are forced to share a scent whether they want to or not... Smell of food is, so to speak, a foretaste. (cited in Korsmeyer 211-212)

The Kantian privileging of smell as a foretaste is relatively true as was utterly briefed in the descriptive narrative placing Currito to smell home and other places from food. He reminisced Palma that smelled of clams, Tarragona of goats, and Seville and Toledo of their sweet wines. He even remembered food dishes and how they were cooked, which hint at the various ways of food preparation or the Filipino procedure of *pagsasangkap*, say, *kilaw*, *buro*, *iban*. Thus the following phrasal description alludes to masterly culinary skill: “whether *cold* in the cask or *warm* in the goatskin: nor to fish stewed in ripe lemons: nor to chicken boiled in thick olive-oil: nor to buñuelos during the ferias: nor to puchero on Sundays” (Joaquin 87).

Conclusion

Explored in the analysis of food and memory is the oscillation of the myth subject in the textual spaces provided in *The Legend of the Dying Wanton*. Not only does the author put premium on the poetic layering of food images but he also reprises to undertake the role of myth-making. The myth in memory is indeed “flavourful” and “tasty”: with the direct articulation précising memory’s fictive construction of personal home, domestic kitchen, and the social sphere of interaction known as sari-sari. In the narrative discussion, the author uses these as memory constructs that confront the nostalgic dilemma and diasporic relationship of the characters with the high above, or the Christianized recognition of religion. Also, foods attached to their sites by memory flows or cognition are likewise free moving subjects, at least to the reading and remembering of the praying protagonist. Praying as a consequence results to confession, like the memory flow that makes ready the food images for critical analysis and metaphysical cooking.

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About the Author

Lawdenmarc Decamora holds an MFA in Creative Writing and is presently completing his MA in Literary and Cultural Studies at Ateneo de Manila University. He has successfully presented papers in both national and international conferences. His poetry has appeared in literary journals and magazines in the UK, Australia, China, Israel, the Philippines, India, Canada, Mauritius, Pakistan, Vietnam, and many places in the US and Singapore, including forthcoming poems in *Kitaab* and *LONTAR*, not to mention an honorable mention award for his poetry at Columbia University's prestigious *Columbia Journal*. He teaches humanities and literature in UST and serves as a faculty researcher for the UST-RCCA.

Ongangen (Wisdom): Women's Means of Overcoming Troubles as Depicted in Maranao Folktales

Eugenia A. Velasco
Mindanao State University
Marawi City, Philippines
eanonas@yahoo.com

abstract

This paper utilized feminist analysis to find out how women characters in the selected Maranao folktales used *ongangen* or wisdom to solve their problems. Specifically, this study aimed to find out (1) the roles of women as depicted in Maranao folktales; (2) their struggles; and (3) their means of maintaining balance to overcome such struggles. The analysis revealed that Maranao women played important roles in the Maranao society, especially so, if they held royal titles. They performed social functions inside their clan. However, these women still struggled against discrimination within their own societies as well as against stereotyping once they came out from the confines of their family and tribe. In the folktales, the Maranao women used *ongangen* to try to overcome their struggles. Doing so allowed them to keep their balance thus they were able to face their challenges more serenely and confidently. Such depiction provides another dimension to the common image of Maranao women who merely stay at home taking care of the children and being submissive to the husband.

keywords:

Maranao, Maranao Folktales, Maranao Women, *Ongangen*, Mindanao



Introduction

The Maranaos are one of the three main Muslim groups already a unit before the arrival of Islam in the island. They mostly live in the interior portion of western Mindanao around a lake. The Maranao term for lake is “lanao”, thus the term “Maranao” refers to the people of the lake¹.

The Maranaos as a unit have their own set of beliefs and way of life. They are known to be superstitious just like other ethnic or tribal groups in the Philippines. Even if the Maranaos follow Islam but then “religion cannot completely erase local customs, practices, and beliefs even if these are against such religion.”² They also follow certain courtship and marriage practices that are unique and interesting. Moreover, they are widely known for their sophisticated weaving and wood metal craft³.

The Maranao society adheres to the patriarchal system: males are at center stage occupying highest positions. They are given higher valuation and wider exposure than the females in preparation for their future societal roles. In this respect, maleness and wisdom are the utmost prerequisites of manhood in Maranao society. This ideal is celebrated in the *Darangen*, the Maranao epic song which encompasses the wealth of the people’s knowledge about their history, the tribulations of their mythical heroes, customary law, standards of social and ethical behavior, notions of aesthetic beauty, and social values.

Although mainly patriarchal, Maranao society nonetheless gives its women their due importance and assigning them societal roles to play aside from being a grandmother, mother, daughter, and sister. Such roles are reflected in the Maranao oral literature specifically its folktales.

Knowledge by other Filipino groups of Maranao customs and beliefs is at best sketchy. Those far from Mindanao either are totally unfamiliar with the group or have negative impressions about

¹Robert Day McAmis. *An Introduction to The Folktales of the Maranao Muslims of Mindanao in the Southern Philippines*.(Chicago: Philippine Studies Program, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1966), 4.

²Abdullah T. Madale, *The Remarkable Maranams*. (Quezon City: Omar Publications, 1976), 1.

³Madale, *The Remarkable Maranams*, 1.

them due to hearsays. Thus, this study aims to help provide a better understanding of Maranao society and its people.

This paper focuses on how the Maranao concept of *ongangen*, meaning wisdom, is utilized by the women to surmount their day-to-day challenges as shown in the five selected Maranao folktales. Specifically, it intends to determine (1) the roles of Maranao women as depicted in the folktales; (2) the daily struggles of the Maranao women; and (3) their means of maintaining balance despite their struggles and/or challenges.

The Maranao concept of *ongangen* is similar to the Navajo concept of “hozho” or, more completely, “*hozho: walking in beauty*”. For the Navajo people, *hozho* represents synthetic and living description of what life on earth should be, from birth until death at an old age. *Hozho* is the shorthand of the phrase *sa’abnaaghaiibik’ebhozho*, which are actually “two distinct phrases that together form a unity”. The whole phrase means a model of balance in living which encompasses health, long life, happiness, wisdom, knowledge, harmony, and order⁴.

Hozho is the ideal life for the Navajo people - a life that is long and filled with harmony, peace, happiness, and beauty⁵. The concept was used by the American Indians as they struggled against the Europeans when the latter invaded the “New World”. More particularly, it was utilized by the American Indian women in trying to deal with the effects of colonization:

These women struggle on every front for the survival of their children, their people, their self-respect, their valuesystems, and their way of life. On their journey of surviving, they continue living and even come to the point of surviving war and conquest, colonization, acculturation, assimilation, beating, rape, starvation, and all sorts of hardships⁶.

Many Navajo dealt with colonization negatively: some became alcoholics and addicts; others abandoned their children and

⁴Robert Drake. “Hozho: Dine’ Concept of Balance and Beauty,” accessed March 14, 2017 <http://oceansoulrenewal.us>,

⁵Kenneth Lincoln, *Speak Like Singing Classics of Native American Literature* (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 2007), 102.

⁶Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (U.S.A.: Open Road Media, 1992), 190.

their elders; while still some others became violent, insane, or committed suicide. However, there were those who tried to face their situation with equanimity and so wrote songs and poems or painted and drew taking strength from the saying, “We walk in beauty. Let us continue”⁷.

Smith in her book’s Introduction explains “walking in beauty”:

I focus on the real value that is deposited into a woman to persevere through life despite hardships, happiness, struggles, love, failures, disappointments, and success. We as women must maintain balance and have structure to nurture us. As we discover our quality, we must strive harder to guard the hidden treasure that was deposited into us not to obtain worth, but to appreciate how valuable we are as individuals.⁸

The concept of *ongangen* is reinforced through the use of cultural feminism as an analytical approach. Cultural feminism asserts that “personality and biological differences exist between men and women”. Its main belief is that “women are inherently and biologically ‘gentler’ and ‘kinder’ than men”. As such, these women’s ways should be highlighted and celebrated because in the eyes of the cultural feminists, women’s ways are better than men’s⁹.

Such description of women comes true with the Maranao women. As they go through life, meeting challenges is inevitable. The study of Carlos and Cuadra uses the term resilience to describe Muslim women’s ability to regain their shape after going through crises or difficulties as they closely follow their family traditions and practices. Muslim women in the first place are believed to be good followers of their religious and cultural practices and following the said practices entails challenges. One that challenged much the Muslim women is the arranged marriage¹⁰. Despite of this, they are

⁷Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* 191.

⁸Naomi Hafford Smith, introduction to *A Woman’s Worth...from Broken Promise to Fulfilled Prophecy* (Indiana: WestBow Press, 2011)

⁹Charles E. Bressler, *LITERARY CRITICISM An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. 4th Edition. (Indiana: Pearson, 2007),181.

¹⁰Abigail F. Carlos and Jovy Cuadra F. “Migrant Muslim Women’s Resiliency in Coping With the Traditional Family Practices,” *Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, Vol. 7, Issue 1,(June) 2017 ISSN 2289-1552 :59. Accessed from <https://jesoc.com>

still able to cope and do well in life despite of having to face many struggles.

Stories about how Muslim women remain in shape and how they empower themselves despite of discriminations and prejudices really become so inspiring. “Palestinian women face their own unique challenges; they face an enormous burden in terms of not only raising their families, but rehabilitating those families in the aftermath of Israeli assaults like Cast Lead and the on-going blockade. Palestinian women were also increasingly becoming the breadwinners in their families”¹¹. The said women in this situation, are playing multiple roles and responsibilities. But despite the challenges, they still continue and take their responsibilities as a wife, a mother and a Muslim woman.

Similarly, midlife women found the strength and resilience that enabled them to rebound and grow as they negotiated significant life challenges in their marriage, and with their children, parents, careers, and health¹². The study reveals that even for the challenges these women met in their midlife and in their marriage they remain in shape for they use core beliefs that facilitated how they made meaning of their struggle and influenced their response to their challenge. They also stress the importance of having connectedness and relationships to make them strong enough as they face challenges.

Objectives of the Study

This paper focuses on how the Maranao concept of *ongangen*, meaning wisdom, is used by the women to surmount their day-to-day challenges as shown in the five selected Maranao folktales. Specifically, it intends to determine (1) the roles of Maranao women as depicted in the folktales; (2) the daily struggles of the Maranao women; and (3) their means of maintaining balance despite their struggles and/or challenges.

¹¹Carlos and Cuadra, “Migrant Muslim Women’s Resiliency in Coping With the Traditional Family Practices,” 59.

¹²Linda Peterson Rogers, “Women Recreating Their Lives: Challenges and Resilience in Midlife” (Dissertation, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2000) Retrieved from <https://theses.lib.vt.edu/unrestricted/etd>

Materials and Methods

This paper employs feminist analysis to find out how women characters in the five selected Maranao folktales published in *The Mindanao Art and Culture Number One The Agamnaiyog Folktales*, used *ongangen* or wisdom to solve their problems. The analyses of these folktales have been guided by the following questions: (1) What are the roles of women as depicted in these folktales? (2) What are their struggles? and (3) How do they maintain balance to overcome such struggles?

Folktale Synopses

Tingting a Bolawan and Her Wicked Aunts

“Tingting a Bolawan and her Wicked Aunts” is about Tingting a Bolawan, the only daughter of Solotan and Bai sa Agamaniyog and how she and her three brothers, Radiya Bagaran, Radiya Mangandiri, and Radiya Mangawarna, survived and escaped the wickedness of their mother’s sisters, Potri Bonso, and Matagbabay. After birth, the siblings were thrown by their aunts to the river telling their sister, Bai sa Agamaniyog, that her children have died during her labor. However, the children survive and manage to live on their own by the shore. Potri Bonso and Matagbabay later notice these children and realize they might be their own niece and nephews. They devise another plan to harm the latter. Every time the three brothers are out, they visit Tingting a Bolawan in her house and try to poison her mind by telling her if she couldn’t have things like “*bentola a bolawan*” (miniature golden cannon) her beauty will be useless and that she should also have “*surod and salday a bolawan*”. Tingting a Bolawan, unaware of her aunts’ malicious intent, then expresses desire to own these things endangering her brothers’ lives who get magically imprisoned in a big tree while attempting to procure the items. In the end, Tingting a Bolawan sets her brothers free and, eventually, they are all reconciled with their father and mother.

Tiny Bird

Tiny Bird is about the couple Lokes a Mama and Lokes a Babay who are in the habit of setting bird traps late in the afternoon

and visiting these early the next morning. Since Lokes a Babay cannot climb trees, her trap is always set on the ground. One day, Lokes a Mama cheats his wife by exchanging their traps when he sees that her trap got a big fat deer while in his trap, only a tiny bird was inside. Lokes a Mama cheats again but his wife keeps silent although she knows about it. One night, she dreams that her pet bird would lay precious stones if fed with *palay* every day. She does it without telling her husband. Her husband continues trap-cheating her until she decides to divorce him. She builds her own torogan (royal house) in a nearby settlement. When Lokes a Mama hears of her good fortune, he wants to reconcile with her but Lokes a Babay refuses.

A Lesson for the Sultan

The story is about Solotan sa Agamaniyog and Ba'i sa Agamaniyog, a wealthy couple who owns almost half of the land in Agamaniyog. They have been quarrelling over Lokes a Mama and Lokes a Babay's misfortune. Solotan sa Agamaniyog blames Lokes a Mama but Ba'i sa Agamaniyog blames Lokes a Babay for her laziness and inability to support her husband. Their arguments lead the couple to separate. The Solotan goes to live with Lokes a Babay in her torogan, while Ba'i goes to live with Lokes a Mama in the nearby forest. Ba'i sa Agamaniyog tries to prove to the Solotan that Lokes a Mama's failure to be a good provider is Lokes a Babay's fault. Lokes a Mama gradually made Ba'i rich and becomes a renowned while the Solotan loses everything because of Lokes a Babay.

Empty Bags, Bitter Rice

The story tells of the separation of the Solotan sa Agamaniyog and Ba'i sa Agamaniyog because of jealousy. The Sultan thinks that his wife is in love with Lokes a Mama when she expresses her pity towards Lokes a Mama and Lokes a Babay who are very poor. He asks his wife to leave the torogan and take Lokes a Mama as her husband while he takes Lokes a Babay. The Ba'i gets hurt but still follows the order. With so much weeping, she leaves the torogan but before leaving she tells her husband that she has always been faithful to him. When the Ba'i and Lokes a Mama are able to settle in a good place, she tells him to do his best so that

in the future the Sultan will instead be following him carrying his bags for him. Ba'i encourages Lokes a Mama to endeavour to have a better life and helps him by weaving baskets and stuff. She also saves some of their earnings. Little by little their savings increase and their livelihood improves. On the other hand, the Solotan's wealth decreases because Lokes a Babay is very lazy, and his land is stricken by famine. Ba'i sa Agamaniyog's last words to her former husband come true when the latter goes to her place to buy palay. The story ends with the Solotan feeling great shame and sadness because of his misfortune.

The Wanderings of Radiya Mangandiri

Radiya Mangandiri sets out to search for the woman destined to be his wife. While searching, he saves a beautiful maiden named Potri Gonong Lidang from the tarabosaw, a man-eating monster. Potri Gonong Lidang is actually a lost princess (daughter of Sultan Bandiyarmasir). Her father's men have long been searching for her but they have, so far, been unsuccessful until they chance upon her resting with Radiya Mangandiri after being attacked by the tarabosaw. She is brought to her father's torogan while Radiya Mangandiri is left sleeping in the cogon hut. She tells her father how she was rescued by the young man. The sultan then orders his men to bring to him Radiya Mangandiri to be rewarded.

Potri Gonong Lidang has a cousin named Potri Intan Tiyaya, also a princess. Having heard some merriment, Potri Intan Tiyaya goes to her cousin's torogan to investigate and sees Potri Gonong Lidang. Radiya Mangandiri, on the other hand, sees Potri Intan Tiyaya and realizes that he is the woman in the portrait left by his father, the Sultan sa Agamaniyog, whom he is destined to be married. However, Potri Intan Tiyaya has already received a marriage proposal from the prince of Bandiyarkorom. The prince challenges Radiya Mangandiri to a contest, with the winner marrying Potri Intan Tiyaya. Radiya Mangandiri wins so he marries Potri Intan Tiyaya.

Results and Discussion

Roles of Maranao Women in their Society

In spite of the inequality between the Maranao women and their male counterparts, the former do hold titles and positions in their community although first and foremost, “it is the home where she plays the ethical role of a daughter, a mother, an aunt, and a kindly grandmother”¹³.

Ba’i sa Agamaniyog, for instance, in the stories, *A Lesson for the Sultan* and *Empty Bags, Bitter Rice* holds the title (grar) “ba’i”, the female counterpart of “sultan”. Ba’i lives in the *torogan* (royal house), the symbol of rank, status, and power among the Maranaos and is the highest ranked among women in the community. “Maranao women assume varied titles and statuses in the traditional sultanate...The title of *Ba’i a labi* is the feminine equivalent of the title Sultan or Datu” and she is expected to uphold the honor and prestige of the community and to perform her functions as stated in their customary laws¹⁴.

In the story, *Empty Bags, Bitter Rice*, after a few years of the Ba’i leaving Agamaniyog to live with Lokes a Mama (*lokes* means old, *mama* means man), the land experiences famine:

Finally, famine (*taon*) came to Agamniyog, because farmers had fewer, since Ba’i sa Agamniyog left the place. This was because she was not there to give them advice¹⁵.

This suggests that she played an important role in Agamaniyog aside from being the counterpart of the Sultan. When a Maranao woman becomes an adult, “the menfolk consult her on important matters of family and community affairs, more so if she holds the female title (grar) and is known for her wisdom”¹⁶. Since she is expected to play that role and, at the same time, serve as the

¹³*The Maranao Woman. Mindanao Art & Culture* Number 2, (1979): 3, University Research Center, Mindanao State University, Marawi City.

¹⁴*The Maranao Woman*, 33

¹⁵*The Agamaniyog Folktales. Mindanao Art and Culture*, Number 1 : 82, University Research Center, Mindanao State University, Marawi City.

¹⁶*The Maranao Woman*, 3.

people's inspiration not only as the female counterpart of the Sultan but also because of her wisdom, the farmers are no longer encouraged to do their best to make the land productive because their inspiration is gone.

Tingting a Bolawan and Potri Godong Lidang, on the other hand, are princesses. They are daughters of Sultans and Ba'is. Tingting a Bolawan, in freeing the people imprisoned in the *gindolongan* tree and whose eyes are pulled out and placed in the omoy, an earthen water vessel, is told "*because you have freed us you will be our queen and your brothers our princes*"¹⁷. She becomes their savior and inspires the people with her bravery, wisdom, and determination.

Potri Godong Lidang is also a princess although she has been away from her parents for a long time. She suffers so much; nevertheless, when she is already safe and back in the torogan, she wields authority. Even Radiya Mangandiri listens to her. When she tells him, "*I know that you are looking for something. I must tell you that you would not find it if you do not come with me. I shall be of great help to you*"¹⁸. Here, she serves as an instrument to end Radiya Mangandiri's wanderings. Through her wisdom, Radiya Mangandiri finds the woman meant to marry him.

Lokes a Babay, in contrast, is an ordinary woman and already of age (*Lokes* means old/mature but she does not let these deter her starting her life over again. She states:

I can no longer stand the way you treat me as a wife. I know you have been cheating me. For this reason, I accept your suggestion to divorce me. From now on, we will live separately without disturbing each other's lives.¹⁹

In Maranao society, even if a woman does not hold any title but already an adult known for her wisdom, she would be looked up to by the people, with the menfolk seeking her advice or consulting with her regarding important family and community affairs²⁰. Lokes a Babay is seen as an independent woman whose fortune from the tiny bird has allowed her live like royalty despite

¹⁷*The Agamaniyog Folktales*, 16.

¹⁸*The Agamaniyog Folktales*, 55.

¹⁹*The Agamaniyog Folktales*, 76.

²⁰*The Maranao Woman*, 3.

not having a royal title: “she built a torogan in a nearby settlement [and] had guards and slaves to serve her”.²¹

Struggles of the Maranao Women

The selected folktales portrayed Maranao women having struggles/challenges within the confines of their own culture and society. These struggles are still the same today as in the past. According to tradition, a Maranao girl is brought up in the strictest manner. She has a whole set of grandmothers, aunt, and elderly ladies, who teach her what and how to do things. In addition, her mother is tasked with the responsibility of transmitting to her the unique customs and traditions that will make her the Maranao girl she ought to be.²² Despite such guidance and teachings, the Maranao woman is not spared from the difficulties that life may bring.

In the five folktales analyzed, the women characters struggled in various ways. Tingting a Bolawan struggles to survive right after birth when her two aunts threw her to die in the river, together with her three brothers. Growing up, she is confined inside the house by her three brothers, not exposed to the outside world. Her aunts take advantage of her naivety/gullibility easily manipulating her to make frivolous demands from her loving brothers: get the “bentola a bolawan” (miniature golden cannon); and then the salday and surod a bolawan lest her beauty would be diminished.

She is demanding these things, unknowingly endangering her brothers’ lives, to feed her vanity. In a sense, keeping appearances is important to Maranao women who grow up within a tradition of both modesty and proper grooming although this might later on become a weakness. For instance, before wearing any new blouse or clothing, a Maranao girl always says to herself: “These clothes will bring me happiness.”²³ Thus, Tingting a Bolawan, after being told she should have magical things so as not to waste her beauty, obsesses in acquiring the salday and the surod a bolawan becoming deaf to her brothers’ warnings endangering their lives in the process.

²¹*The Agamaniyog Folktales*, 76.

²²*The Maranao Woman*, 4.

²³*The Maranao Woman*, 4.

Meanwhile, Lokes a Babay in *Tiny Bird* is maltreated by Lokes a Mama, her husband but after a while she stands up to him: "I know you have been cheating me. For this reason, I accept your suggestion to divorce me. From now on, we will live separately without disturbing each other's lives."²⁴ Choosing to remain silent becomes a strategy for her so she could follow her dream which could potentially bring her fortune.

On the contrary, her silence shows her being tied to her husband as is commonly expected in Maranao society. Such practice is also depicted in *A Lesson for the Sultan* and *Empty Bag, Bitter Rice*. The Ba'i and the Sultan sa Agamaniyog in both stories argue about the misfortune of another couple. Their argument results in a serious quarrel and the Sultan decides for both of them to go on an arranged marriage with the said couple, Lokes a Mama and Lokes a Babay, no matter how absurd this may seem.

This situation shows that a man cannot allow a woman to step on his ego. Women are in many ways submissive to their male-counterparts inasmuch as they are made to believe that a woman's primary responsibilities are to look after the family and manage the home. Once married, they have to follow the wishes of their husbands. For the Maranao woman, being submissive extends to agreeing to an arranged marriage, negotiated by her family, while still very young. Though unprepared to face the responsibilities of being a wife, she cannot protest because this is customary for their tribe.

Sultan and Ba'i sa Agamaniyog and Lokes a Mama and Lokes a Babay exchanging partners, in a sense, is also an arranged marriage. Ba'i sa Agamaniyog is a princess who was kept by her parents in their *lamin* (tower) when young. She was not seen by people except by her parents, siblings and her maids. She was not exposed to even minor household chores. But the Ba'i exposes herself to hard physical labor to augment Lokes a Mama's earnings as a means of showing him her support:

Ba'i sa Agamaniyog then wove the rattan into baskets and other things that could be sold in the market. She gave the finished products to the children to sell.²⁵

²⁴*The Agamaniyog Folktales*, 76.

²⁵*The Agamaniyog Folktales*, 81.

Bai's own efforts and support of Lokes a Mama improve their living condition exponentially while the Sultan, her former husband, loses his wealth.

In the case of Potri Godong Lidang, her primary struggle is being away from her parents, the Sultan and the Ba'i sa Bandiyarmasir who had been looking for her for a long time. This separation brings about her secondary struggle - the cruelty of the tarabosaw: "I'll just hope that every day the *tarabosaw* (a man-eating monster) can get some food...she is reserving me for the time when she cannot find food"²⁶

Traditionally, Maranao women grow up sheltered and are discouraged to go on a journey alone for the outside world is unknown to them and they can easily get lost. A Maranao woman is isolated from the complex urban life.²⁷ She is confined in her homeland without any opportunity to go outside of her world from which she can acquire more knowledge. Once she is out of the confines of her home, she gets exposed to danger. For instance, after getting lost, Potri Gonong Lidang was captured by the tarabosaw reserving her as food for when there would be nothing to eat at all.

Maranao Women's Means of Maintaining Balance

The women characters in the analyzed folktales have learned to surmount their trials and tribulations by maintaining their balance through their *ongangen* or wisdom or good sense of judgment. The concept of *ongangen* in the context of maintaining one's balance in the face of adversity is closely similar to the American Indian's (Navajo) idea of the *hozho* which literally means "walking in beauty"; also maintaining balance.

Tingting a Bolawan when reunited with her parents does not avenge herself against what her aunts did to her and her brothers. She has remained whole and calm despite the physical and emotional hardships she experienced. Upon seeing the *kilala* plant (planted by her brothers meant to indicate their fate) wilt, she knows that her brothers are in danger. Though she cries the whole night, she does not let her emotions overcome her. When the morning comes, bravely she goes on a journey to save her brothers.

²⁶*The Agamaniyog Folktales*, 53.

²⁷*The Maranao Woman*, 3.

Using her wisdom, she is able to free her brothers from their imprisonment in the *gindolongan* tree, with the other people whose eyes were taken from them and placed in the *omoy* (earthen vessel).

Yes, our queen, you will see them if you follow our advice. Go around the *gindolongan* tree seven times then knock on the other side so that the door of the tree will open. Tingting a Bolawan went around seven times and knocked on it and the door opened. She was surprised to find so many people coming out of the tree.²⁸

The character, Ba'i sa Agamaniyog, in both the stories *A Lesson for Sultan* and *Empty Bags, Bitter Rice* maintains balance by using her ingenuity to endure the emotional pain inflicted by her husband. It is not easy for her to part ways with her husband whom she truly loves, but she never let her emotions overcome her. She puts up a brave front and struggles to make a new life with dignity and determination.

In *A Lesson for Sultan*, the Ba'i sa Agamaniyog uses her wisdom by thinking of ways to improve Lokes a Mama's condition in life. She told Lokes a Mama to cut down the sandalwood tree, chop it into pieces separating the branches from the trunk and store all the pieces for future use. Not long after, the Sultan of Balantankairan happens to meet Lokes a Mama and asks him if he knows someone in Agamaniyog who has the sandalwood tree. Lokes a Mama tells the Sultan that no one would find such a tree in Agamaniyog except the one he has. The Sultan buys the sandalwood paying with everything he has on his boat, including his seven maids and seven servants. Consequently, the Ba'i sa Agamaniyog and Lokes a Mama become rich and they build a *torogan*. Soon after, the Ba'i holds a feast to announce to the townspeople that Lokes a Mama will be named Maradiya Dinda. All the townspeople witness the affair except the Sultan sa Agamaniyog who has become very poor.

In the same manner, the Ba'i sa Agamaniyog in *Empty Bags, Bitter Rice* feels the extreme pain of being asked to leave her husband and the Sultan's *torogan* and go live with Lokes a Mama. With much weeping she leaves the Sultan with the following lines:

²⁸*The Agamaniyog Folktales*, 14.

Oh! My husband my love! I am now leaving you, but don't forget my words. If I should die, you will have to remember me in the future forhaving been always faithful to you.²⁹

Just like in the preceding story, the Ba'i remains stoic and maintains her balance in the midst of her pain using her wisdom in helping Lokes a Mama uplift his financial status. She is determined to be the partner of Lokes a Mama encouraging him to follow what she says to make their life better. And she herself "... wove the rattan into baskets and other things that could be sold in the market. She gave the finished products to the children to sell".³⁰ All her efforts have not been in vain. Little by little their savings increase and their life improves.

Similarly, Lokes a Babay, despite having been deceived by Lokes a Mama, is not in a hurry to end their union as husband and wife. She waits for the right time to act on the matter. Confronted with her husband's deception, she remains calm, unbroken, maintaining her balance through her *ongangen* to prove to Lokes a Mama that she can stand on her own. Eventually, her efforts bring her wealth making her able to build a *torogan* in a nearby settlement and have guards and slaves to serve her.

Lastly, Potri Godong Lidang who has had to contend not only with the pain of separation from her parents for a long time but also with imprisonment by the *tarabosam*, remains calm in all her actions. She maintains balance, through her wisdom waiting for the right time to escape from her abductor. When the time finally comes, she acts carefully and wisely so is able to overcome her fear against the *tarabosam*. She even instructs Radiya Mangandiri to break the bamboo tube to end the life of the cruel *tarabosam*.

The plight of these women characters fits the description of the Indian American women:

These women struggle on every front for the survival of their children, their people, their self-respect, their value systems, and their way of life. On their journey of surviving, they continue living and even come to the point of surviving war and conquest, ... starvation, and all sorts of hardships.³¹

²⁹*The Agamaniyog Folktales*, 81.

³⁰*The Agamaniyog Folktales*, 81.

³¹Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Tradition* (U.S.A.: Open Road Media, 1992), 190.

Maranao women, just like other Filipino women are capable of aiming high. They are born achievers but being tied down in their culture makes them lose opportunities to uplift their social status. However, there are those able to break away from the shackles of their culture although they do not totally forget their roots even if they become renowned in their chosen fields. Thus, “deposited in a woman is her will to persevere despite hardships, failures, and disappointments, and to discover in her that hidden treasure that would make her a valuable individual.”³² This description fits the Maranao woman perfectly as portrayed in the analyzed folktales.

Conclusion

Despite their patriarchal society, Maranao women can hold esteemed roles whether they are royalty or common people. With maturity age-wise and proven wisdom, these women are consulted by their menfolk about both family matters and community affairs.

But the same patriarchal system confines Maranao women mostly to their homes making their exposure to the larger world very limited, thus, they struggle more than most women when they are thrust outside their homes. Still, the Maranao women are able to deal and overcome their struggles by maintaining their balance through the use of their *ongangen*. By being so, they remain calm, whole, well-groomed, polite, gentler, and kinder even in the worst of situations. Such balance then allows them to lead positive and, ultimately, successful and/or fulfilled lives.

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³²Naomi Hafford Smith, introduction to *A Woman's Worth...from Broken Promise to Fulfilled Prophecy* (Indiana: WestBow Press, 2011).

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About the Author

Eugenia A. Velasco is a faculty member of the English Department, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mindanao State University, Marawi City, Philippines. Currently, she is taking PhD in English (Literary Studies) at Silliman University, Dumaguete City.