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**Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience  
and the Makings of Globalization  
by Neferti X. M. Tadiar**

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# Book Reviews

NEFERTI X. M. TADIAR

## **Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization**

Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. 484 pages.

In the introduction of her recent book, *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience in the Makings of Globalization*, Neferti Tadiar writes of seeking to understand globalization from the perspective of those who suffer, in all senses of that word, its production. Focusing on the Philippines from the 1970s to the 1990s, Tadiar asks what we, its anonymous, cosmopolitan addressee, can possibly learn from the historical experiences and literary productions of Filipinos struggling with and against the demands of interlocking hegemonic forces. These forces include: an aggressively expansive global capitalist network; a Philippine nation-state in both its authoritarian and postauthoritarian moments; varieties of liberal cosmopolitan identities proposed by feminist, gay liberation as well as the new social movements; and an ongoing Marxist revolutionary movement under the aegis of the Communist Party of the Philippines. The author examines how these hegemonizing forces draw their sustenance from the living labor of Filipinos and how the latter in turn absorb and parry the shocks of hegemony's demands. She does so through a sustained reading of a wide range of writings: novels, poetry, journalism, as well as different strands of academic scholarship over the last thirty years, situating her project within the broad ambit of what has come to be known as subaltern studies.

What emerges from her analysis is a welter of contradictory practices. Such practices produce not only dominant forms of sociality and hierarchies of power. They also put forth alternative ways of being ordered toward other historical possibilities. Tadiar begins by arguing that the globalization of capitalist modes of production hinges on the conversion of living labor into something that is pliant and “feminized.” Tadiar sees the feminization of labor as the realization of what Marx had observed to be the universal tendency toward the prostitution of labor power in the face of capital. Reduced as such, labor becomes homogenized into a resource for servicing the unceasing need for surplus value. The nation-state profits from this gendering of living labor. Tadiar shows how the discourse of nationalism similarly situates women’s reproductive, domesticating labor as subordinate and merely derivative of masculine productive labor. But rather than reiterate the feminist-Marxist condemnation of capitalism’s reproduction of generalized prostitution and nationalism’s patriarchal subordination of women, the author instead inquires into the productive capacities of the prostitute—which here includes the overseas contract worker—herself. In explicating the stories and poetry of Fanny Garcia, Ruth Mabanglo, and Luna Sicat, among others, she seeks to demonstrate the ways by which women reconfigure the terms of their subjugation and thereby resist their reduction into mere objects of value by both capital and the state.

These acts of self-fashioning, however, are never unitary. They instead open up into different tendencies. Such include: the invention of “woman” (*babae*) as a liberal subject, detached from its earlier social connections; the invocation of the self as a performative being, that is, a kind of medium that is hospitable to the comings and goings of otherness harking back to precolonial and Catholic practices of spirit mediumship; the embracing of contingency that makes for an ethic of risk and an erotics of gambling as a condition for freedom. Each possibility is implied in the other. Tadiar leads us to see from her consideration of Filipina writing the emergence of what she refers to as “pluri-subject,” a subject that is essentially plural, always a “part-subject” (*Kapwa*) oriented toward proximate affiliations, not oedipal identification with others. In this way, the “prostituted,” deracinated woman, whether at home or abroad, is shown to be not only the basis for the extraction of surplus value as well as the ground for the erection of nationalist identity. She also realizes herself as an agent and locus of historical experience, capable through her labor of creating a mode of being, an alternative temporality

that “falls outside” the time and space circumscribed by capitalist progress and nationalist citizenship. And, further, that it is precisely these experiences that “fall away and outside”—experiences that are regarded as marginal, the “accursed share” of capitalist and nationalist productions—which simultaneously invite domination and evade its full force.

The rest of this powerful book consists of tracking the obscured and suppressed practices that resist the assimilative pull of dominant systems for making subjects and objects. Tadiar looks at the literature of dissent produced during the period of martial law, for instance. In her close reading of the texts of Jun Cruz Reyes, Jose Lacaba, and Tony Perez, she maps a set of responses to the pressures of an authoritarian modernity imposed by Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos at the bidding of transnational corporations and lending institutions and fed by an overt identification on the part of Filipino elites with the desires of and for Western modernity. These writers, Tadiar argues, situated their work amid the failed promises and debris of development that marked the city. They wrote to contest the “magical” capacities of martial law to make itself felt everywhere in the country. They parodied the fascist-like spectacles that accompanied tourism development. And they undermined the erection of novel metropolitan forms which sought to reorganize Metro Manila’s spaces to speed the flow of capital by hastening the “liquification” and “social pulverization” of laboring bodies. Negotiating around the regime’s censorship laws, these writers sought to register the traumas of development on the level of everyday lives. Narrating the quotidian struggles of male prostitutes, low-level office workers, squatters, Xerox machine operators, among others, their stories and poems relayed the shock effects of dispossession and unaccounted losses.

But in articulating loss and trauma, such writers also made manifest what the regime sought to conceal and contain: the excess of desire and the overflow of affect produced by the sheer living of life even, and especially, under the most oppressive conditions. There is exhilaration and release, compassion and sharing, intensities of grief and explosions of rage that punctuate the dullness and “noise,” the pollution and the seeming abandonment of the city’s streets and its population. And, once again, contradiction. As Tadiar so astutely points out, the writers of this period share a common skepticism regarding martial law’s claims of exercising a transcendent power over people’s lives. They varied, however, in their tactics for addressing such claims. Their approaches included, for example, ironic commentaries and sardonic word

play of the regime's slogans. Writers rummaged through traditional aesthetic forms and reshaped these to serve avowedly modern, antiauthoritarian aims. Each literary strategy presented limits as well as possibilities. In her masterful reading of a novella by Tony Perez, for example, Tadiar shows the pitfalls of a psychologizing approach that tacitly prescribes a normative "emancipated" and individuated gay subject over traditionally constituted homosexual subjectivities (*bakla*). Perez's story concerns the lives of male prostitutes prowling the newly built shopping malls for homosexual johns to make money with which to satisfy their desire for imported consumer goods. One day, they stumble into a Christian revival meeting and are drawn to the preachings of a white American evangelist. Seeking redemption, they renounce not only their prostituted lives but also denounce the *bakla* as the source of their oppression. This tale of "liberation" and conversion ends with the author's plea for replacing the "degrading" sexual and cultural proclivities of local homosexual practices in favor of a Westernized, emancipated gay individualism. Thus does the story ironically reveal the ethnocentric, racist, and homophobic grounds on which a kind of middle class, White-identified gay subjectivity can be erected. Yet, in another short story by the same author, Tadiar points out how the painfully routinized life of a lowly Xerox worker brings moments of intense caring for cast-off objects such as a torn poster advertising a fast food chain. There is, in other words, always a contrapuntal tendency nesting within every literary work. This is because literature does not so much mirror life as it extends and intensifies modes of being otherwise ignored, marginalized, and thrown away by dominant forms of existence.

The notion of literature as that which does not reflect life but instead preserves it from forgetting and destruction, extending and amplifying it, partaking in its production and therefore furnishing its readers and writers with a technology of social memory: such is a key insight proffered by Tadiar. For her, following the line of argument laid out by such thinkers as Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Giles Deleuze, and Antonio Negri, the literary is that which insures not only the survival of life as particular living labor; it also provides assurances of an afterlife as the "sur" in "survival" already intimates. She refers to these matters of life and afterlife in literature as "historical experience." One of the most compelling contributions of this intensely practical (which is to say densely theoretical) book is its cultivation of the notion of "experience" as particular living labor that is always doubly productive. On the one hand, it constructs and registers the conditions of

oppression characteristic of modernity; on the other hand, it is also that which exceeds and thereby potentially subverts such conditions. Experience, to the extent that it is productive of agency, insures us against the end of history, as well as against the ends of those who seek to end historical change. In the last two chapters of her book, Tadiar shows the utility of this notion of experience as the power of producing history (and not simply as prostituted labor producing surplus value) in her analysis of revolutionary writings.

In looking at the revolutionary writings of Emmanuel Lacaba, Kris Montanez, Communist Party founder Jose Maria Sison, Felipe Granrojo, and Ruth Firmeza, among others, Tadiar demonstrates how writing at its most radical becomes indistinguishable from what it writes about. The literature of the revolutionary movement, whose tortured history and shifting ideological tendencies Tadiar traces, yields modes of writing that are styled as instruments for uprising. Dissent here is ordered toward violent transformation meant to overturn the violent impositions of an oppressive order. Literature as a weapon of the revolution calls for a literary criticism that safeguards and furthers the aims of the movement. When it is successful, Tadiar points out, revolutionary writing not only envisions but also effectively enacts a startling continuity among acts of literature, literary criticism, social critique, and everyday life. Unlike bourgeois notions that insist on the separation of literature from life, the policing of writing by criticism, and the reification of experience through its generic representations, the revolutionary texts Tadiar examines are sustained by other cultural logics and historical imperatives. Such literature emerges not only from the mandate to furnish weapons for the struggle emanating from the party's ideologues. It is also wedded to more traditional modes of imagination ranging from the Catholic Passion play, the colonial and nationalist melodramas, and indigenous forms of storytelling. The latter are reshaped not only in response to the conditions confronting guerilla fighters. They are also deployed in producing the tactical exigencies and modalities of the fighters' lives. In this way, revolutionary writing occasions the emergence of those "pluri-subjects" that Tadiar has written about in the earlier chapters. Rather than stand out as authors of their own lives, as sovereign individuals vested with the social and economic capital with which to distinguish themselves from the masses, the characters in revolutionary texts seek to become one with the masses. This becoming one with the masses is in fact a becoming many, a dissolution of the notion of self-possessed individualism in favor of a self possessed

by the movement of a multitude. Hence the common term of fighters for addressing one another, *kasama* (being as being with an other, as a being together with others), is also a term for denoting the filiation and relationality among things and people. The individual as *kasama* is one who is known and knows himself or herself in terms of a seething, moving collectivity. Here Tadiar illuminates this new kind of revolutionary subjectivity by situating it away from the dialectics of identity and difference and toward the experience of finitude and infinity. The dialectics of identity and difference produce subjects who struggle for recognition and thereby find themselves in a hierarchical relationship, dominating and subordinating one another, while beholden to a transcendent source that underwrites their subjugation. By contrast, the experience of finitude and infinity that Tadiar sees working in revolutionary texts constitutes subjects as open-ended rather than agonistic. They exist as beings proximate to rather than identical with one another. The revolutionary subject in literature is thus a part-subject integral to ever expanding “assemblages” of other part subjects.

Yet, revolutionary texts are also freighted with all sorts of contradictions. As Tadiar astutely points out, the party’s attempt to order literary expression as continuous with the everyday life of struggle at times recreates the very figures and conditions of oppression such a struggle had sought to overthrow. Indeed, the desire for the masses on the part of student activists and party members of petty bourgeois origins often enough effect the instrumentalization of the “people.” The instrumentalization of the masses for alleviating and overcoming the alienation of the bourgeois subject turned revolutionary is a common enough trope in revolutionary writing. In the Philippine case, the masses are at times idealized even as they are rendered silent. The real heroes are the fighters who support, live with, and die for the masses, even as they are wholly dependent on the labor of the masses to sustain their movement. In a series of astute critiques of this tendency in revolutionary writing, Tadiar points out the ways by which even the most radical pieces of writing rely on the most conventional of tropes. For example, they associate the masses with the land, and both with a kind of feminine body on which to erect the heroic, sympathetic, and masculine figure of the fighter. The militarization of the struggle places fighters in direct contact with the soldiers of the state. It is not surprising then that both in literature as well as in historical fact, the New People’s Army at times comes to mimic the behavior of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, even if revolutionary writing systematically seeks to disavow

such an identification. The violence of the revolution is overwhelming and contagious, as seen in the disastrous campaign to rid the movement of suspected counteragents that resulted in mass killings in the 1990s. In order to contain what it regards as “irrational,” “atavistic,” and “feudal” practices, the party has sought to privilege a masculinized and rational subject devoted to the masses yet acting to domesticate their practices and desires.

The literature of the movement, however, continues, like the movement itself, to produce characters and stories that foreground experiences in excess of this normative revolutionary subjectivity. It is as if there is not one revolution, but several going on at the same time; not one radical project of transformation, but many, whose horizons are far from foreclosed. Thus does literature show the movement to be fissured. On the one hand, it invests in the messianicity of the masses—the masses as embodying the very movement of their emancipation located at some imminent future; on the other, it seeks to sit in judgment of the masses, domesticating its excesses and uplifting it from its backwardness. Fetishized, the masses become the objects of desire constitutive of the revolutionary subject. Rather than become one with the masses, the fighter here becomes an agent of the party, seeking instead to be the univocal representative of the very multitude on which it depends.

*Things Fall Away* is a remarkable achievement. It is as ambitious as it is careful in its attempt to address the phenomenon of globalization from the point of view of those who produce its conditions of possibility: living labor. It is itself a vast and impressive assemblage of theoretical practices, fusing and fissuring Marxism and existential phenomenology, feminist epistemologies with postcolonial thinking, everywhere deconstructing received assumptions not only about the Philippines but about the limiting nostrums of political economy and cultural studies. Each page bristles with ideas and demand attentive thinking. At the same time, Tadiar’s highly nuanced engagement with literary texts exemplifies an ethical concern for the vernacular particularities of Filipino experiences (where her incisive translation of Tagalog texts, for instance, extends and safeguards the survival of these texts for new, ever emergent readership). Her writing takes on a powerful rhythm, moving between audacious theoretical openings (her explication of “experience,” of mediumship, of productive labor, of “value” whether in its masculinized, racialized, or revolutionary incarnations, for example) to highly textured and lyrical evocations of the affective economies of various texts. There is, in a word, much passion in this text, as the author

swims in the very excesses she finds thematized in precisely those things that “fall away.” The author is thus faithful to her promise of what her work is to be about. As she writes in the introduction, “This (book) is a tale of dispossession and lost potential, told like many other tales of dispossession and loss with some measure of anger, some measure of sadness, and some measure of hope” (1).

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JAMES A. TYNER

## **The Philippines: Mobilities, Identities, Globalization**

New York and London: Routledge, 2009. 223 pages.

Every once in a while, a book comes out that is able to weave together vague and looming macroprocesses, capture the necessary context and fundamental concepts of theories, and show how they operate in the typical and everyday life of individuals. These are the books that are able to tease out and reconfigure—in a pleasantly engaging, analytical, and informative way—how matters of agency and structure come together in the reality that is experienced and lived through by people. These texts are written in such a way that readers every so often pause and, from their own memories and experiences, validate the words they read. James Tyner’s *The Philippines: Mobilities, Identities, Globalization* is one such book. It is written with brevity without compromising sufficient theoretical or empirical ground and in a language that is accessible and straightforward, making for an engaging and satisfying read. Given the author’s academic background and intimate knowledge of Philippine reality, the book offers a simple, but not simplistic, discussion of the complexities of how globalization and state intervention find their way into the daily lives of Filipinos. There is no pretentious use of highfaluting words or convoluted conceptualizations that confuse rather than clarify. More importantly, in the discussion of metaproceses and structures, the negotiations and centrality of individuals as they understand, navigate, and give meaning to the globalization experience is not lost.

Tyner sets out to “understand how the Philippines has become the world’s largest exporter of government-sponsored temporary contract labor and, in the process, has dramatically reshaped both the process of globalization and also our understanding of globalization as concept” (xiii). To achieve this goal, the book is divided into six chapters that provide the background and discussion of the Philippines and labor migration; the theoretical underpinnings and implications of the processes and structures as they play out in the country and in Manila; and a story of a Filipina and her sojourn outside of the Philippines as a case to illustrate how the previous themes are actualized in a person’s life.

The first chapter entitled “Local Contexts, Distant Horizons” shows the current situation of the Philippines and the socioeconomic challenges with which its peoples contend. It includes a concise and informative account of Philippine history (with emphasis on the colonial period), as well as the groundwork for and outline of the book. The second chapter provides a thorough discussion of the establishment and evolution of the Philippines’s migration agencies and labor regime, which is underpinned by neoliberal precepts. It traces the policies and programs of what is now the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) from the Marcos regime in the 1970s to the recently-ended Macapagal-Arroyo administration. The book provides an update on migration policies and programs of the Philippines, with a corollary discussion of the implications of government actions on the domestic and international arena. The third chapter draws from urbanization and globalization theories in analyzing Metropolitan Manila and how it has become a site for “global city formation” (117). Tyner draws attention to Manila’s emergence as a “global city” and its theorization. This chapter also includes a useful discussion of the unintended consequences brought about by Manila becoming the focal point for transactions and the center for the myriad administrative offices and processes, along with the countless private businesses, which aspiring and returning overseas workers have to deal with.

The fourth chapter, with its catchy title of “Global-Philippines.Com,” investigates how government, recruitment and employment agencies, and Filipino overseas workers have appropriated technological developments, especially the Internet, in pursuit of their respective agenda. On the one hand, national governments and private businesses seeking optimum efficiency in transactions have used technology to facilitate the international flow of