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COMMENTARY

The Contingencies of Area Studies in the United States

Vicente L. Rafael

This essay offers a set of reflections on the "crisis" of area studies in the post-Cold War era in the United States. Setting aside for the moment the institutional aspects of this crisis, it delves instead into the contingent and accidental ways by which practitioners of area studies in the U.S. encounter that which is foreign and distant, then subsequently seek to consolidate this encounter as an integral part of an intellectual and politico-ethical trajectory of their lives.

KEYWORDS: *area studies, United States, contingency, identity*

Communication begins with a *betise*.

—James T. Siegel

It has become commonplace since the end of the Cold War (and even more pressing in the wake of 11 September 2001) to speak of a "crisis" in area studies in the United States, followed by calls to reinvent the institutional infrastructure and intellectual agenda for understanding different regions of the world at century's end. Rather than reiterate those calls, I want for the moment to pick up the notion of crisis and follow it along a somewhat different route.¹

Crisis connotes emergency, the critical point at which a state of affairs reaches a moment of either turning around or turning into something other than what it had been. We might say that crisis is a time of danger, which is to say that it is also the time of contingency: when things fall apart and the possibility of something new emerges. If area studies can be said to have a culture that is now in crisis, it is because

it forces us to think about its contingencies and accidents. We might be able to see the latter if we paused momentarily and considered area studies from the point of view not of their funders, administrators, or meta-critics, but rather from the particular histories of its practitioners. Is there something to learn from asking about the experience of area studies prior to its institutionalization: that is, at the point before it requires recognition and validation by someone from above? How does one come to study "others" prior to and beyond having to justify it to a patron, an ad hoc committee, a council, or a corporate foundation? How does a person living in one place come to have an interest in some other radically different place? What are the conditions necessary for one to invest considerable personal energy and intellectual resources in learning a language, traveling to a village or a city, pouring over archival documents and inscriptions, risking one's personal health and safety, in order to pursue a set of questions to which there are potentially no definitive answers? How and why does one return to foreign sites, become attached to them, or conversely come to spurn them? What are the structures of feeling specific to engaging in the study of that which, in order to be studied at all, must remain forever alien, however intimate and proximate it may be to one? What are the dynamics of detachment and fixation that come into play when one studies the foreign? And what are the risks and rewards of identification or disidentification with "it" or "them"? Finally, is there a politics to these engagements, an ethics to weaving and unweaving such affective bonds with the otherness of the other?

What I am suggesting here is that alongside institutional histories, we might also ask about the contingent and, for want of a better word, existentially particular relationships that area studies practitioners form with their areas of study. In assembling the notes for this commentary, I started by asking colleagues how they came to be interested in the particular region or country they had been working on.

Accidental Encounters

Given the specificity of their histories, there exist myriad reasons that led area studies practitioners to arrive at an interest in their particular

area. Involvement in wars—either World War II or Vietnam—or protesting against them, volunteering in the Peace Corps, following spouses to the field or fleeing from them, escaping small towns and parochial ways: all these were some of the more common routes to area studies. Other colleagues, men as well as women, who were neither in war nor the Peace Corps tell me that they were drawn into Southeast Asia because they had met by chance someone from there and became intrigued; or, by some stroke of luck, had sat in a class or a lecture on the region being given by a particularly good teacher. Still others recall that hearing the *gamelan*, seeing the *wayang*, or photographs of Angkor Wat had triggered a fascination with Southeast Asia for reasons that remain obscure and indeterminate. In other words, “Southeast Asia” or some aspect of it struck them when they did not expect it, like a stone hitting a windowpane. Surprised, they found themselves responding to this accidental intrusion, following the cracks that were traced around the hole that was left behind.

An accidental encounter brings with it a force of its own, sending one falling (for, after all, “accident” like the word “chance” is formed from the Latin *cadere*, to fall) into something unexpected and unknown that lies outside, yet shapes the limits of what is known. To have an accident is to come in contact with the radically foreign, a kind of otherness that resists assimilation. It is only after the fact of such an encounter that one can look back and retrospectively see the accident as the first in a series of events that lead to the present.

Here is an example. As a young boy growing up in upstate New York, a colleague remembers meeting a very well dressed and dignified looking man who appeared by chance on his family’s doorstep asking to use their telephone. He had been stranded by the winter storm that had blocked all the roads. The stranger turned out to be Filipino, who stayed for breakfast until the storm blew over. Intrigued by the stranger, my colleague looked up all the information he could get on the Philippines at their local library. Years later, he signed up for the Peace Corps and asked to be sent to the Philippines, in part because of his memory of this stranger. He realized subsequently that this mysterious man was none other than Carlos P. Romulo, then the Philippine representative to the United Nations and a prominent politician in his home country.

A foreigner appears unexpectedly in one's home, interrupting the flow of one's domestic life, making such an impression that he leaves behind a memory. Picking up that memory, one follows its associations, hearing in it all kinds of other suggestions until finally, or rather retrospectively, one sees oneself being carried physically and imaginatively to the other's home, as if to repay its visit and to find oneself in its place as a foreigner oneself. Drawn to the other, one finds oneself in its place, lured there by its accidental appearance here. It is as if in meeting the foreigner, one hears a call whose message is discovered only after the fact of its transmission. Further, it is discovered to lie elsewhere, outside the limits of the familiar.

This narrative of deferred meaning shares in the structure of a vocation. Years later, making sense of one's professional identity and the pressures that come with it, one reconstructs one's interest in area studies as the response to a call whose significance at the time of its issuance had not yet been disclosed. Rather than approach the Philippines in the mode of an explorer seeking to conquer new territories or expand one's power, one instead imagines oneself as being summoned by the area itself, crystallized by the memory of a stranger and the sense of something lying behind or beyond that figure. That one does not know what the message might mean brings with it the risk of misinterpretation and adds all the more to the urge of responding to that call. To think of area studies as a kind of vocation (from the Latin *vocatio*, derived from *vocare*, to call) is thus to imagine oneself elsewhere, in the place of the foreigner as a foreigner oneself, and therefore as capable of the same power of transmitting messages whose meanings are deferred, lying in some other place at some other time.

It is precisely the accidental nature of area studies, or more precisely the accidental ways by which their practitioners stumble into studying specific areas, that, in fact, makes them worthwhile as sites for encountering modes of otherness that the disciplines tend to discount. In this sense, we can think of the putative weakness of area studies as its actual strength. They serve as terminals for the unlikely meetings among the most diverse groups and individuals, all of whom did not originally mean to be in the same place, except that, at some point in the past, some unforeseen occurrence or chance meeting drew us, area studies

practitioners, to go "there," wherever that might have been. What we have in common is the fact that we not only study "otherness" but we often find ourselves through our travels and our readings in foreign languages to be in its position. Thus do practitioners of area studies feel themselves doubled: there is the "I" who comes home and writes about alien places, and another "I," the alien, who appears knocking on doors, asking to use telephones in the middle of storms, provoking curiosity, irritation and suspicion at times, and commanding authority at other times from those it encounters.

This doubled identity whereby two "I's" exist without one ever fully knowing, much less controlling the other, is present not only among American practitioners, whether male or female, of area studies, but applies with even greater force to immigrant scholars. For my last set of examples, I want to look briefly at two of the most well known practitioners and critics of area studies, who also happen to be immigrants to the United States: Benedict Anderson and Arjun Appadurai.

Anderson's Route to Southeast Asia

In his autobiographical Introduction to his collection of essays, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (1990), Benedict Anderson relates how he came to be involved with Southeast Asian studies. It started with a blow on his face. Aimlessly wandering into a political demonstration held by a small group of South Asians in Cambridge while studying classical languages in 1956, he found himself trying to stop a fight initiated by a group of upper class English students hurling racial insults at the Asians. "My spectacles were smacked off my face, and so, by chance, I joined the column of the assaulted" (Anderson 1990, 1). The rest of Anderson's account consists precisely of tracing the cracks created by such a chance encounter, cracks which in turn lead to more fortuitous meetings and unexpected events.

His interest in "Asia" stoked by the violent encounter, he then decided to learn about Indonesia, which had been in the news. He had heard that there were only two places where Indonesia was being seriously studied, Yale and Cornell. Thanks to an "old friend," he

found a teaching assistantship at the latter and there met three of his most important mentors: George Kahin, John Echols, and Claire Holt.

While doing fieldwork in post Revolutionary Indonesia of the early 1960s, Anderson's interests were again guided by unexpected happenings. Jakarta then was adrift with possibilities, rumors, and contradictions, yet was also awash in what appeared to be a genuinely egalitarian ethos. The coup and subsequent massacres of 1965-66, which were themselves totally unexpected both in their extent and viciousness, led to Suharto's dictatorship and the subsequent banning of Anderson from Indonesia for having co-authored a report implicating the regime for its role in the killings. But again, as luck would have it, Anderson's exile from Indonesia coincided with the overthrow of the military dictatorship in Siam in 1973 and the return to a more open society. Having cultivated close friendships with a number of Thai dissident intellectuals, Anderson was given another chance to pursue his interests in Southeast Asian revolutionary movements. And, in an even more fortuitous spin of the wheel, he tells us about the influence of his brother Perry Anderson who had been editing the *New Left Review* and had authored important comparative works on the history of nation-state formation in Europe. Thanks to the accident of birth, Anderson found his intellectual and political horizons shifting again towards more comparative directions. In the midst of repeated displacements and exiles, he found himself "haunted" by unsettling questions about solidarity, difference and imagination (Anderson 1990, 13), and accompanied by a recurring object of love, the "imagined community." The latter is alternately figured as the nation, the mother and her substitutes, the family in its most extended form, mentors, colleagues, students and friends from various parts of the world linked by the generosity and affection of their regard (Anderson 1990, 14). The imagined community, born out of a series of violent mishaps and exiles, contingent meetings and ghostly questions, is also a community of sentiment.

Appadurai's Route Out of "India"

It is this very notion of sentiment as the basis of community that Arjun Appadurai theorizes in his book of essays, *Modernity at Large*:

Cultural Dimensions of Globalization (1996). Like Anderson, Appadurai is also an immigrant intellectual who writes, among other things, about his "own" country, India. But, unlike nationalist scholars, indeed in sharp and self-conscious distinction from them, Appadurai (1996, 18) is quick to tell us that his "India" is "not a reified social fact nor a crude nationalist reflex" but an "optic" from where to gauge the uneven effects of what has been termed "globalization." He thus deflects suspicions of parochialism by turning to the question of the "local" and argues that it is really there that one sees the incarnation of the social science abstraction, "modernity."

What interests me here, though, is how an autobiographical note initiates this theoretical turn. Where Anderson's account tells of how he came to be interested in the nationalisms of Southeast Asia, Appadurai talks of how India, specifically Bombay, drew him out of the nation and into the world. Bombay is the setting of his earliest encounters with modernity, and there the modern is experienced in what he calls its "pretheoretical form": as sensuous immediacy and seductive materiality. He writes of his desire for the modern:

I saw and smelled modernity reading *Life* (magazine) and American college catalogues at the United States Information Service Library, seeing B-grade movies (and some A-grade ones too) from Hollywood and Eros theaters five hundred yards from my apartment building. I begged my brother at Stanford (in the early 1960s) to bring me back blue jeans and smelled America in his Right Guard when he returned. (Appadurai 1996, 1)

In place of England, Appadurai discovers "America" as the site of the modern, or at least the most modern of the modern.

I did not know then that I was drifting from one sort of postcolonial subjectivity (Anglophone diction, fantasies of debates in the Oxford Union, borrowed peeks at *Encounter...*) to another: the harsher, sexier, more addictive New World of Humphrey Bogart reruns, Harold Robbins, *Time*, and social science, American style. (Appadurai 1996, 2).

"I did not know then...": which is to say I had no idea where I was going, only that I was moving, thanks to coming into contact with the shapes and smells of the "modern." Here, it is not surprising that the modern should also have a foreign origin. Through sudden and inexplicably pleasurable encounters with the objects of modernity, Appadurai comes to know that there is something he does not yet know. To come in contact with the modern in all its lush and sensuous materiality is to come into a fantasy about another "I" speaking a different language and in different accents, choosing among exotic items that seem to appear fortuitously in Bombay. Confronted by the foreignness that is the very stuff of modernity, he becomes an agent of desire whose satisfaction is forever strung out into a potentially endless series of objects: books, movies, blue jeans, deodorants, American social science, etc. Where Anderson begins with an unintended identification with South Asian students that leads him from England to the U.S., then to the revolutions in Indonesia, Thailand and lately the Philippines, Appadurai begins with an avid identification with commodities and their mysterious allure that leads him to follow their circuitous routes, first around Bombay, then to the "first world," looping back to India, and then back again to the mid-west of the United States.

Clearly their projects have important differences. Where Anderson sees in the nation the utopic possibilities of a post-Enlightenment community subsequently compromised, if not violated by the state, Appadurai sees the nation-state as an exhausted form that can no longer respond to the demands of emergent communities. Anderson's interest in modernity is tied to his concern with the possibilities of nationalist revolutions and the loss of such possibilities in Asia. Appadurai is far less interested in revolution as a medium of change and far more concerned with the technologies of migrations and mediations chained to capital flows that give rise to a variety of vernacular responses and strategies of local adaptations.

The Alien in the "I"

However, despite the differences in the trajectory of their projects, they are also joined by their recurring fascination with the foreign. For both,

the "foreign" is memorable, if not the point from which memories arise. Surprised by the foreign, they were provoked to follow its call, drawn into its communicative power. Because it appears accidentally, as their accounts show, the foreign insinuates a gap in their lives that they are compelled to cross imaginatively and physically. Contact thus leads to communication or, more precisely, the *fantasy of communication*. Such a fantasy is enacted in the process of translation, or what Appadurai theorizes as "vernacularization" that entails substituting the foreign for the familiar and vice versa. But such translations, as they point out, are never complete. They are always lacking and are bound to be full of errors and mistakes, thereby making more translations necessary. They thus lead you out, to texts you did not think existed, to places that you did not expect to go to, to encounters you did not foresee. In this way, you become a kind of exile, transformed into someone who is, we might say, periodically beside oneself. To the extent that encounters with alien presences compelled Anderson and Appadurai to travel and translate, the alien becomes the source of the language with which to fashion their own identity as agents exiled from any fixed identity. Anderson's "Irishness" is as multiply qualified as (but never commensurate with) Appadurai's "Indianness." When they speak of "Ireland" or "India," they always have other figures in mind: Indonesia, Hollywood, etc. And when they speak of themselves, it is always in terms of two "I's," one which belongs to them and their disparate histories, and the other which belongs to someone else who eludes them but to whom they are nonetheless attached.²

The unresolvable doubleness of their identity is, I suspect, prototypical of all other practitioners of area studies. A stranger to itself, it is an identity that is not only in motion but is always in translation. Such translations, which form the stuff of their—and, perhaps, I should say our—lives, are never complete because they are never exact. Working with foreign language sources, we all know how words in one language never have their exact equivalent in another. What we have are always approximations. Part of us hopes that somehow these will be heard by others in ways we intend. But the other part of us, the other that is our double who resides in another language, makes sure that this is never quite the case. Meanings remain elusive and something al-

ways escapes, only to emerge elsewhere in one guise or another. At times we find them, or, more often, they find us, confronting us in forms we did not anticipate. And when they do, and we are surprised, or we mistake them for something else but feel compelled to live through that error and follow the traces they leave behind, then we could be certain that our work, the work of area studies, would have begun again.

Notes

1. For an extended discussion of the origins and development of area studies in the US, see my earlier essay (Rafael 1994).

2. The richly problematic notion of the first person pronoun as inherently divided between the self that speaks and the language which is spoken owes its most compelling formulation to Emile Benveniste, especially his essay, "The Nature of Pronouns," in Benveniste 1971, 217–22. My understanding of this question has also benefitted from the work of James T. Siegel (1997). My thanks to Gerry Finin, Ricardo Trimillios, Leonard and Barbara Andaya, Lindy Aquino and Michael Cullinane for contributing to and commenting on this paper.

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