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Images of America in Paz Marquez Benitez

Jennifer M. McMahon

In *Democracy and America*, Alexis de Tocqueville writes, "Only strangers or experience may be able to bring certain truths to the Americans' attention" (256). In 1925, Paz Marquez Benitez published "Dead Stars," considered to be the first short story in English of literary worth in the Philippines, and offered her own certain truth about America. This is a mere quarter of a century after the Americans had colonized the Philippines, set up the public school system, and introduced the English language to the Filipinos. The speed with which Filipinos took to the English language and began expressing themselves in essays, journalism, fiction, and poetry is remarkable for a territory under colonial rule. India was the first of the British colonies to have a novel published in English, and this was after about two centuries of English imperial control (*Filipino Novel in English* 1970, 3).

Of course, in the Philippines, there already was a tradition of literature in Spanish and in some of the native languages. Early critics, and some later ones as well, talk about English literature in the Philippines as though it were created in a vacuum, as though it just appeared *ex nihilo* (Abad and Manlapaz 1986, 376). This, of course, was not the case. In fact, Jose Rizal, a cultural hero then and now in the Philippines, made his mark first by writing two novels critical of Spanish corruption and oppression, and second by his execution because the Spanish were so threatened by his critique. Thus, the idea of writing literature in the language of the colonial power was part of a venerable tradition, as was using that literature to comment on the colonization itself.

Philippine literature in English was mainly cultivated at the University of the Philippines, which was established by the Americans in 1910. Very quickly after the English program was established, literary journals were established that could function as organs for students' literary pursuits. This initial period of literary activity is often referred to as the "Period of Imitation" (Echols 1968, 151) or the "Period of Apprenticeship" (Fernandez 1979, 46; Santillan-Castrencia 1967, 546) because of the students' indebtedness to the American and English models offered by their professors. The tone of condescension evident in this period's titles is manifest also in most of the criticism written about Philippine literature in English by both Americans and Filipinos. These two assessments, written in 1931 and 1966 respectively, are typical of what is written about this period in particular and Filipino literature in English in general:

The faults generally are lack of conciseness, lack of strict constructive form, shallowness, and sentimentalism. Brevity and economy are virtues which need stressing at present in Filipino English. The writers tend to flow on in a sort of unrestrained flux, till the thought becomes deliquescent. The softness which is in the climate and people may produce tenderness and delicacy of expression. But it also makes much work invertebrate and molluscan. It lacks direction and the force which comes from concentrated intensity. And even in editorials and articles we find that the appeal is to sentiment and not reason. There is too much emotionalism and not enough clean, hard logic. (Moore 1931, 528)

...

This brings us to what I think is the crisis of Philippine letters: lack of significance in theme, no universality of interest, and absence of plain old-fashioned substance. (Carunungan 1966, 68)

The pervasive negativity of the critical judgments about Philippine literature in English has contributed to its erasure from the radar screen of literary studies. Over and over again in the critical literature, one reads that there is really very little worth mentioning. This is, of course, not the case, and these sentiments are clearly rooted in the American disparagement of practically all native efforts of any kind. That these sentiments are then echoed by Filipinos is not surprising given the colonial yardstick they inherited. In a review of the early literature in English, there are several stories and novels that are worth our attention today. "Dead Stars" in particular is a story that rewards close examination.

Paz Marquez Benitez

One of the engaging aspects of this early fiction is its direct and indirect commentary on the Americans and their legacy. This is not to suggest that all literature written in English was solely, or even primarily, a critique of the Americans. Still, in several texts written during the colonial period, the colonization of the Philippines and its impact on Philippine culture are either an implicit or explicit concern of the writer. In the case of Paz Marquez Benitez's "Dead Stars," the commentary is not overt at all, and, in fact, no other readings surveyed have addressed this aspect of her story (Grow 1991; Manlapaz 1993; Pineda-Ofreneo 1992).

Paz Marquez Benitez is described by critic Jonathan Chua (1996, 17) as occupying "a premier position in the history of Philippine literature in English." Her work received wide critical acclaim when she began writing fiction and essays in the early 1920s, and her stories are still frequently anthologized. Paz Marquez Benitez also taught the first creative writing class at the University of the Philippines, and was a well respected editor. As a writer, editor and teacher, Paz Marquez Benitez is a foundational figure in the study of Philippine literature in English. Born in 1894, she was part of that very first generation of students who came of age entirely under American tutelage and who witnessed the radical shifts in culture that were inevitable after American occupation. In an interview, she recalled that "all of her teachers were American . . . except for one" (Alegre and Fernandez 1984, 5).

Dead Stars

It is not, then, surprising that "Dead Stars," her most famous story, can be read as a meditation on the American colonization of the Philippines and its impact on Filipino culture. Though most often read as a story of failed romance and a lamentation on middle-aged disillusionment (Joaquin 1978, 121), it also can be read as a pointed critique of the quiet devastation wrought on the Filipino psyche by the insidious pressures of colonial hegemony.*

"Dead Stars" is structured in three sections and told mainly from the point of view of Alfredo Salazar, a young attorney from a respectable family. For four years he has been engaged to Esperanza, a

*This reading is supported by Paz Marquez Benitez's private journals which are held at the Ateneo Library of Women's Writing.

woman from a similar family background. Unfortunately, his passion for her was regrettably short-lived, though not brief enough to prevent an engagement. When "Dead Stars" opens, their marriage is fast approaching. Shortly before this impending wedlock, he meets Julia Salas, the young, vibrant niece of his neighbor Judge del Valle. She is unaware that he is engaged and seems to enjoy his frequent visits over a period of about six weeks.

Eventually, however, she finds out about Esperanza, who has likewise found out about her. Alfredo is forced to recognize his fate which is that he cannot leave Esperanza and face the social condemnation for himself and humiliation for Esperanza that this betrayal would certainly incite. He does not feel that he has a choice and marries Esperanza, learning to live with the occasional bouts of yearning and regret. Years later, he visits Julia's town on legal business and sets out to find her home. Julia sees him on the street in front of her home and welcomes him. He has been in love with her, or at least her memory, for years; still, during their brief meeting, he realizes that whatever feeling she inspired is gone, that something missing in her or in him has quashed that long-burning flame. He returns home suddenly aware that this passion he has secretly nurtured is like "the light of dead stars, long extinguished, yet seemingly still in their appointed places in the heavens" (12).

The tone of the story is melancholic, and it is easy to see why most critics have focused on the theme of romantic disillusionment, at the expense of a more political reading. Still, there is strong textual evidence that a political allegory lies just below the surface. Alfredo is strongly identified as a young man who is straddling the traditional, Spanish-influenced, Filipino culture and the new, Americanized Philippines. Onofre D. Corpuz, for example, in contrasting the American and Spanish cultures in the Philippines, argues that the American "outlook is thoroughly secular, its methods are technological rather than spiritual, and its personnel are trained technicians and professional administrators rather than pious laymen and ecclesiastics" (1962, 4). Alfredo's family ties and his past are clearly rooted in the Spanish mestizo tradition, but his future as a young lawyer in the colonial judicial system lies with the Americans. Francisco Araneta (1967, 13) describes the generational chasm among the educated classes caused by the American colonization:

The break from Spanish meant the segregation of the new generation from the ones that immediately preceded them. It was a break not only

from the past of Mabini and Del Pilar [revolutionary heroes], but a cleavage even between the Spanish speaking father, and the boy who grew up reading Horatio Alger. The thinking men who wrote in Spanish could exercise little influence on the boys that would form the intelligentsia.

While Alfredo is described as torn between these two cultures, Esperanza, the woman to whom his future is inextricably tied, is described in language reminiscent of the Americans. For example, she is "Esperanza the efficient, the literal-minded, the intensely acquisitive" (9); she is "always positive" (10). These qualities were often associated with the Americans and were used as evidence by Americans of their cultural superiority. American efficiency was juxtaposed against Filipino laziness, American rationality held in contrast to Filipino superstition and religious fanaticism, American acquisitiveness posited against Filipino nonchalance and fatalism. Alfredo's commitment to Esperanza is a transition to a full alignment with the values she represents. Julia, in stark contrast, is more vital, spontaneous, and less grounded. If Alfredo is straddling the new American and the traditional Filipino cultures, and Esperanza is firmly aligned with the powerful Americans, then Julia is nostalgically associated with an unfettered Philippines, with the short-lived independent Philippines. Angus Fletcher notes in *Allegory* that there is a long tradition in allegorical tales of setting up this kind of sharp opposition, what he calls "dualism in its theological sense, where it implies the radical opposition of two independent, mutually irreducible, mutually antagonistic substances" (1970, 222). In her political allegory, Benitez positions Esperanza and Julia in such a polarized relationship.

The descriptions of Alfredo's meetings with Julia are characterized by dreamy language, a romantic intensity, and a youthful vibrancy missing in the rest of the story. Describing their weekly meetings at Judge del Valle's house, Benitez writes:

It was so easy to forget up there, away from the prying eyes of the world, so easy and so poignantly sweet. The beloved woman, he standing close to her, the shadows around, enfolding. (5)

Alfredo says to Julia,

"Down there. . . the road is too broad, too trodden by feet, too barren of mystery." (6)

Julia offers escape from the oppressive world represented by Esperanza. Her last name, "Salas," suggests home, but this is a home that is imaginary and can only offer temporary solace. The conflict between these two cultural forces, the reality of a colonial regime and the nostalgia for independence that never really took, is a conflict that affected most especially Benitez's generation and that of her parents. In her evocation of Alfredo's struggle to reconcile his passion for Julia and his duty to Esperanza, Benitez traces his sense of a nameless but ubiquitous oppression, his fleeting desire for a retreat into a nostalgic and illusory free space, his recognition of what his life with Esperanza would be like, and his ultimate capitulation to the passive obedience required of a colonial citizen. In this resignation, he reminds himself of

[t]he climber of mountains who has known the back-break, the loneliness, and the chill, [who] finds a certain restfulness in level paths made easy to his feet. He looks up sometimes from the valley where settles the dusk of evening, but he knows he must not heed the radiant beckoning. Maybe, in time, he would cease even to look up. (10-11)

Alfredo's submission is foreshadowed in the opening lines of the story, when he is introduced as alienated from both his past and his future, and passively open to the penetration of a pressure that is powerful and yet as diffuse as the air coming through his window. Benitez writes:

Through the open window the air-steeped outdoors passed into his room, quietly enveloping him, stealing into his very thought. Esperanza, Julia, the sorry mess he had made of life, the years to come even now beginning to weigh down, to crush—they lost their concreteness, diffused into formless melancholy. (3)

The melancholic despair that permeates the story is evident here. It is rooted in a sense that both the past and the future are lost. Sitting alone in his room, Alfredo is trapped, both by external forces and his intense internalization of an oppression from the outside that is "stealing into his very thought." The narration is often focalized through Alfredo's consciousness, and this sensation of being enveloped occurs over and over again throughout the story. Alfredo is consistently unable to offer any resistance to this suffocation, except in his relationship with Julia which is, at once, distinguished by a sense of freedom and by a sense of doom. In other words, like many illicit affairs, this carved-out space is not a viable space, and collapses at its first brush with the outside world.

Alfredo meets Julia when he accompanies his father on a visit to Judge del Valle's home. The visit itself highlights the differences embedded in his "American" approach to his work and his father's more traditional Spanish outlook. Benitez writes:

One evening he had gone "neighboring" with Don Julian; a rare enough occurrence, since he made it a point to avoid all appearance of currying favor with the Judge. This particular evening however, he had allowed himself to be persuaded. "A little mental relaxation now and then is beneficial," the old man had said. "Besides, a judge's good will, you know"; the rest of the thought—"is worth a rising young lawyer's trouble"—Don Julian conveyed through a shrug and a smile that derided his own worldly wisdom. (4)

One of the Americans' main priorities was to transform the justice system to one with a stronger sense of neutrality, in contrast to the Spanish colonial system that had relied more heavily on connections and favors. Alfredo's desire to maintain that appearance of impartiality suggests that he is operating under a different code from his father's.

After this first visit to Judge del Valle's, he returns every Sunday with his father, forgetting that he usually spent Sundays with Esperanza. It is not until Esperanza asks what he has been doing on Sundays that he admits to himself any discomfort. In reflecting on the conversation, his thoughts move from Esperanza to Julia and the juxtaposition begins that aligns Esperanza with an American-like rigidity and Julia with an ethereal idealistic space. After Esperanza asks about his activities on Sunday, he responds that he has been working and occasionally visiting with Judge del Valle. In response, Esperanza

dropped the topic. [She] was not prone to indulge in unprovoked jealousies. She was a believer in the regenerative virtue of institutions, in their power to regulate feeling as well as conduct. If a man were married, why, of course, he loved his wife; if he were engaged, he could not possibly love another woman. (5)

American Colonial Policy

Of course, this belief in institutions profoundly shaped American colonial policy. The American method of transforming Filipino culture, and regulating "feeling as well as conduct," was to establish various types of institutions, primarily educational, judicial, and political. Though of course that process is dynamic, there is a certain rigidity

and staticity inherent to any institution. Their purpose is to reign in irregularity and promote uniformity, a mission that Esperanza seems to share at a more local level. Onofre Corpuz describes the American model, which Esperanza represents, in detail:

The basic innovation introduced by the Americans in this respect was the establishment of what Max Weber calls 'rational bureaucracy'—that is, government as a social apparatus deliberately and rationally used to implement public policies. The distinct outlook of government under this regime was secular and technological, which implied a style of management that emphasized rational and impersonal efficiency in governmental behaviours or transactions. . . . In contrast to the almost feudalistic society during most of the Spanish occupation, Filipino society in the American period became what we now call modern. (1962, 11)

In contrast to Esperanza's bland rigidity and her associations with efficiency and the virtues of institutions, Julia is described as having a "tantalizing charm . . . of naturalness, of an alert vitality of mind and body, of a thoughtful, sunny temper, and of a piquant perverseness which is sauce to charm" (6). This is the most vivid description of Julia that is offered in the story. Her vitality is mentioned often, but it seems what is most appealing about her is that she is not Esperanza and not part of the "real" world. Alfredo describes being with her as an experience of being "Elsewhere" (7) and a time when "he lived only in the present . . . with such a willful shutting out of fact as astounded him in his calmer moments" (6). Julia offers escape from his grim reality. Alfredo is both saddened and relieved when Julia says she is returning to her parents' home. He has been unable to stop seeing Julia and unable to break his tie to Esperanza and, therefore, passively resigns himself to her departure.

This atmosphere of isolation and dreamy escape ends abruptly in the second section of the story which takes place in a far more public space. This part of the story opens with Alfredo standing in the town square watching a religious procession, the scene invoking all of the pageantry and deep ritualism associated with Filipino Catholicism. Benitez writes,

Into the quickly deepening twilight, the voice of the biggest of the church bells kept ringing its insistent summons. Flocking came the devout with their long wax candles, young women in vivid apparel (for

this was Holy Thursday and the Lord was still alive). . . . Soon a double row of lights emerged from the church and uncoiled down the length of the street like a huge jeweled band studded with glittering clusters where the saints' platforms were. Above measured music rose the untutored voices of the choir, steeped in incense and the acrid fumes of burning wax. (8)

The strong sense of community and passion abruptly ends when Esperanza enters the picture:

The sight of Esperanza and her mother sedately pacing behind Our Lady of Sorrows suddenly destroyed the illusion of continuity and broke up those lines of light into component individuals. Esperanza stiffened self-consciously, tried to look unaware, and could not. (8)

This effect that Esperanza has on Alfredo's perception, the splitting into fragments of something continuous, is again interesting in light of its strong association with another American tenet, the foundational belief in the individual. The Americans had worked very hard in the Philippines to promote support for individual endeavors and to break down the strong communal and religious ties that Americans felt fostered superstition, further entrenched poverty and inhibited progress in the Philippines. Esperanza's effect on the scene is both alienating and awkward, not unlike the Americans' presence in the Philippines.

Not surprisingly, when Alfredo unexpectedly sees Julia as well in the procession, her image evokes a very different response: "Suddenly, Alfredo's slow blood began to beat violently, irregularly. A girl was coming down the line—a girl that was striking, and vividly alive, the woman that could cause violent commotion in his heart, yet had no place in the completed ordering of his life" (8). Once again, Julia is associated with a vitality in stark contrast to Esperanza's self-consciousness, and with a passion that is unsustainable in the "completed ordering of his life."

Alfredo's sense that his future is not really in his hands is evident in his last conversation with Julia before marrying Esperanza. He explains obliquely that while he does not want to marry Esperanza, he must. When Julia challenges whether he is sure this is what he should do, Alfredo responds with his usual allusion to the force of external pressures. He says to her, "[T]here is a point where a thing escapes us and rushes downward of its own weight, dragging us along. Then it is foolish to ask whether one will or will not, because it no longer

depends on him" (9). Alfredo's sense of self is utterly dissipated as he begins to imagine his life with "Esperanza waiting, Esperanza no longer young, Esperanza the efficient, the literal-minded, the intensely acquisitive" (9).

This meeting with Julia is followed immediately by a confrontation with Esperanza. His discussion with her centers around a servant of Esperanza's family who has run off with a man to whom she is not married; though of course the subtext of this conversation is Alfredo's relationship with Julia. Esperanza expresses her moral outrage and sense of betrayal to which Alfredo is, at best, indifferent. Esperanza's strong belief in her own moral superiority and the absoluteness with which she expresses herself carry colonial overtones. She expects both loyalty and a sense of indebtedness from her servants much like the Americans expected both loyalty and gratitude from the Filipinos. Alfredo comments, "You are very positive about her badness" (10), and then thinks to himself, "Esperanza was always positive." (10) This section of the story ends with Esperanza in a teary outburst, with Alfredo "shamed and unnerved," and with his implied submission to a bleak future.

The third section of the story begins with Alfredo's approach on a boat to Julia Salas' town some eight years later. Through a third-person focalized narration, the reader learns that

He was not unhappy in his marriage. He felt no rebellion: only the calm of capitulation to what he recognized as irresistible forces of circumstance and of character. His life had simply ordered itself; no more struggles, no more stirring up of emotions that got a man nowhere. (11)

Interestingly, he still practices a kind of retreat, but again, the freedom he discovers is circumscribed because not viable in any kind of social space. For him utter alienation is a kind of solace. Benitez writes,

The essential himself, the himself that had its being in the core of his thought, would, he reflected, always be free and alone. When claims encroached too insistently . . . he retreated into the inner fastness, and from that vantage he saw things and people around him as remote and alien, as incidents that did not matter. (11)

Though Alfredo's retreat is a kind of freedom in oppressive circumstances, it seems more self-annihilating than self-preserving. This extreme disengagement is a defensive acknowledgement that his will is

impotent. Both "things and people" are lost to him because his submission has been so total.

Given this corrosion of his soul, it is not surprising that Julia no longer matters to him, though he does not discover that she too has become part of what is "remote and alien" until he sees her again. He has nursed an affection for her for many years without realizing that his submission to those external, read colonial, pressures associated with Esperanza required also a relinquishment of the passion and freedom of Julia Salas. The latter is not sustainable in the ordered and regulated world of the former. When he realizes after their meeting that "he had been seeing the light of dead stars," he also realizes that a world untouched by Esperanza, a world untouched by the Americans, is forever gone. Benitez's final words of the story are a lamentation for this loss:

An immense sadness as of loss invaded his spirit, a vast homesickness for some immutable refuge of the heart far away where gardens bloom again, and where live on in unchanging freshness, the dear, dead loves of vanished youth. (12)

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