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Racism and Cultural Studies, by San Juan, Jr.

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Book Reviews

Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference. By E. San Juan Jr. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002. 428 pages.

Reading E. San Juan Jr. is at once a necessary act of deciphering the possible and realizing, once and for all, the nightmare of its continuing loss. This is the incomparable hope—and ostensibly the terrible specter of hope's vanishing—that one gains yet again from San Juan's most recent labor titled *Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference* (2002). Perhaps such is the desire that only a constantly displaced and beleaguered presence can ever try to fulfill, and witness. Possibly this is why one always finds San Juan, wherever he may find himself in the labyrinth spanning America and the Philippines, striving to speak to power where power may be. For San Juan, this condition of disruption, this state of belligerent in-betweenness thrust upon him by History's own compulsion is the font of his kind's wounding. "If history is what hurts," writes San Juan, "then only the callous or insensitive can escape it" (11).

History is what hurts indeed and this hurting, interestingly, has its distinctive history. One realizes that this chronicle of ache is something specific to becoming a diasporic Filipino who suffers spells of dislocation in the unfamiliar spaces of transnational capitals—lost in the bright cities of America and elsewhere. In 1942 for example, Carlos Bulosan, Filipino immigrant turned radical labor organizer and writer, inscribed in one of his loving letters that to call oneself a Filipino in America was to summon the sharpness of the name that cut deep into one's being. Full of hope and sorrow, Bulosan observed that it would take years to blunt the severity of such a tormented designation, to overcome what he felt was its notorious connotation. According to Bulosan, only an immense faith in some collective aspiration can restore to the Filipino name its proper fullness. Fittingly one can declare that this is the history of the dislocated, at once material and felt, whence San Juan ob-

tains the emanations of the possible. Thus at a time when everything that is fondly called home or town or country or continent melts into air, the sole defense against solitude, warns San Juan, is the encompassing solidarity of all rendered homeless and vanished. This vanished history becomes a site therefore, a common one, where those who witness and wish to testify to their history's vanishing can enact a far-reaching collectivity for the ultimate restoration of the history of the vanished. San Juan suggests that central to the notion of witnessing a vanished history is the Other's position, indubitably fraught and complex, as the teller of the events of history's disappearance.

In *Racism and Cultural Studies*, San Juan takes pains to articulate the danger of misrepresenting the Other and, at the same time, the corresponding necessity to enunciate the representation of the same. San Juan cites here the example of Nobel Prize-winner Rigoberta Menchú, a Quiché Indian from Guatemala whose classic testimonio *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y Así Me Nació La Conciencia* has come under ruthless attack from the likes of anthropologist David Stoll for its supposedly bogus character. San Juan admits that at the heart of the question of knowledge is the problem of what is real, legitimate, and relevant. "Much more than this, however, in the secular/technological milieu of late modernity, what concerns us," clarifies San Juan, "is the usage to which such knowledge, whether of the natural world or of society, is put" (183). Needless to say, it is imperative to lay bare the procedures of such and such knowledge's deployment and articulation: who, for instance, speaks now? For whom? For what purpose? More importantly, San Juan suggests the inevitability of attending "to the problem of power, the knowledge it produces and that legitimates it, the uses of such knowledge in disciplinary regimes, and its mutations in history" (162). San Juan makes an immediate and significant correspondence here and locates this problematic of knowledge production within the similar mechanism of the controversy that the American area studies specialist Glenn A. May has recently instigated. May accuses generations of Filipino nationalist historians of doctoring certain documents and attributing them to the Filipino mass revolutionary hero Andres Bonifacio. In other words, May implies that a whole revolutionary tradition is constructed on the lies of nationalist historians in order for them to render coherent the heroic aura of Bonifacio as an invented symbol of the masses, the sham quintessence of the people's struggle for self-determination. For San Juan, the assaults on testimonios like Menchú's and on symbols of nation-states like Bonifacio become symptoms themselves of American racial polity's internal political antagonisms that reproduce and make manifest the overall unconscious narrative of U.S. interventionist policy. Accordingly, such attacks on people of color, silenced for centuries, and on their capacity to speak for themselves make the Other's articulation all the more fundamental and decisive. The question then, is no longer what is true but what is authentic, ultimately, for the uses of the people and valid, in the end, according to the needs of their struggle. As San Juan argues, "the purpose of speech is not just for universally

accepted cultural reasons—affirming their identities and their right of self determination—but, more crucially, for their physical survival. Such a capacity to speak entails responsibility, hence the need to respond to questions about ‘truth’ and its worldly grounding” (190).

Certainly San Juan is bound to validate the speech of the Other because such an affirmation is profoundly fundamental to his position as a “third-world” academic who speaks to power in power’s own terrain: a seditious body in the belly of the beast, as it were. San Juan, therefore, is justifiably the spectral figure of liminality fading in and out among the flashing images of what the Philippines must be and what America is not. As San Juan cogently maintains: “Ultimately, Filipino agency in the era of global capitalism depends not only on the vicissitudes of social transformation in the United States but, in a dialectical sense, on the fate of the struggle for autonomy and popular-democratic sovereignty in the Philippines” (381). The evident usefulness of this dialectical positing of the process of emancipation, one that neither divides the contingency of the local from the collective nor reifies such categories, lies in its envisioning of the collective that recognizes the permanent possibility of multiple collectivities. It is one of San Juan’s virtues that even as he is made distant from the country of his beginnings, he persists to remember his people’s democratic aspirations that are not entirely separate or entirely different from his own: necessarily mutual but not necessarily the same in other words. San Juan’s example reminds us, thus, that the engagement between center and periphery and between periphery in center and center in periphery, far from being unproductive and ambiguous, is in fact a functional and purposeful one if not completely crucial. San Juan’s presence in the imperial center, accordingly, does not make his politics less. As a matter of fact, San Juan’s advocacy of a Filipino agency in the time of global capitalism serves as a point of antagonism precisely because it is at this moment where categories of culture and race interfuse. As the globalization machine globalizes its desire via culture among other things, it simultaneously localizes the experience of Otherness. Interestingly, San Juan himself demonstrates this condition: a “third-world” academic and at the same time a person of color in a transnational space. As such San Juan’s experience is indubitably bound up with the process and practice of culture and “race,” immediate to the vehemence of their effects. Not surprisingly, one identifies the preponderance of the question of “race” in San Juan.

The structure of “race,” without a doubt, delineates the everyday life of people of color like San Juan in a way that is aching felt and eviscerating. This everyday experience of “race,” needless to say, is not the kind of everyday beloved of tenured philosophers but the day by day of the daily, like clockwork. To illustrate the extent of such an everyday anxiety stemming from an experience of “race,” it is worthwhile to recall here San Juan’s case regarding the violence of institutional racism. Recently, San Juan resigned as Chair of the Department of Comparative American Cultures (CAC) at Washington

State University (WSU). In a letter to the editor published in the 29 May 2001 issue of the *Asian Reporter*, San Juan (2001) cited various reasons for his resignation. Among these is racism, as San Juan claims. San Juan states further, "all the WSU claims of supporting ethnic diversity and education to promote diversity ring hollow—mere lip-service, empty propaganda" (7). "Racism, subtle and covert, pervades WSU. This is of course," contends San Juan, "a reflection of the larger society" (7). In spite of and precisely because of this institutional racism, San Juan maintains in the same letter that it is the character of Ethnic Studies departments like CAC to position themselves as oppositional and critical in their examination of "race" and ethnicity. It appears thus that Ethnic Studies departments are inherently utopian in that they always imagine a sense of space and time different from what currently exists. One may safely infer from San Juan's pronouncements that one's subjugation because of "race" serves as a personal though not an individual site where the methodology of "race" and the ways of its functioning can be magnified and analyzed as a system. That is why San Juan elaborates extensively in *Racism and Cultural Studies* that "race" as a mode of recognition is instantaneously implicated in the structures of power and privilege in any type of social formation. As San Juan explains: "Its signifying power comes from the articulation of a complex of cultural properties and processes with a mode of production centered on capital accumulation and its attendant ideological apparatuses to rationalize iniquitous property relations" (143). In other words, class, gender, and other social and symbolic relations function collectively in order to mediate, or more crucially substantiate, the latency of "race." One, correspondingly, becomes more aware of one's color as one realizes that one lives with countless others with the same skin in a community ghettoized by dispossession, removed from the ways of one's country left behind and haunted, quite infinitely, by the scented memory of the homeland's winds, fields, mountains, beasts, fishes, and seas. One observes, hence, that by dialectically merging the questions of lived culture and "race" San Juan effectively unifies the penultimate utopias of the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution without necessarily erasing the productive antagonisms and contradictions that are inhere in these two seemingly opposed but mutually productive systems. San Juan: "We need to examine not only the diverse cultures of ethnic groups vis-à-vis the dominant society, the solidarities and conflicts among them, but also how ethnicity itself is linked to and reproduces the market-centered competitive society we live in; how ethnic particularisms or selected cultural differences are mobilized not only to hide systemic contradictions but also to defuse the challenges and resistances integral to them" (162). It is disconcerting indeed to realize that the notion of difference so central to the struggle of people of color has been co-opted and evacuated of its oppositional potential, even ghettoized and reduced to rituals of empty recognition. This is no more apparent than in the example of Ethnic Studies departments in the university. Used as emblems of political

correctness, San Juan writes that such departments are made in the end to validate the ideological rationale of the university, and by extension that of the neoliberal state in order to conceal the structural contradictions of a racial polity such as the United States of America.

It becomes imperative therefore to engage in what San Juan calls a critique of institutions as well as of the political economy of differences built in the material histories of interrelated groups, classes, and sectors within a global field of conflicting political forces. It goes without saying that a radical cognition of culture is fundamental to this performance of resistance. A culture that is able to demolish the house of established meanings and imagine new collectivities, one that redeems the Other from the unkindness of othering and envisions an emancipative future at the hour of the interregnum. San Juan readily concedes for example that a new "cultural war" has swept the United States and that this clash "involves antagonistic set of norms, values, and beliefs expressed in institutional and discursive systems open to differing critiques and interpretation" (331). In what way, then, can culture be located as a site for maneuver and positioning? What explains the fact that culture has performed critical tasks in the scheme of the present battle? Definitely the value of culture in the current "cultural war" lies in its indispensable efficacy for those who are constrained from actively participating in a war of maneuver. Thus San Juan contends that culture in its numerous countenances—say performative, popular, transmigrant, and so on—becomes the key matter, if not the strategic locus of ideological and political battles. If culture is a relational site of group antagonisms characterized by permanent dialogue, then the ideal object of inquiry, suggests San Juan, is cultural production and practice. Certainly the notion of cultural practice is at the heart of San Juan's theory in such a way that San Juan hazards putting forward the idea, even if it may seem unacceptable and outrageous to his peers, that Ethnic Studies program may have to be phased out eventually in order to give way to other more urgent modes of resistance such as teach-ins inside and outside the university, or organizing movements. Other critics will no doubt sneer at San Juan's proposition and will perhaps mouth Harold Bloom's admonition that hypocritical Marxists critics, as the magisterial Bloom describes them, should abandon the impertinence of the academy and go live out there to toil among the factory workers. But no. San Juan's expression of solidarity confirms all the more his character as a "third-world" intellectual in the center of the knowledge industry who has not forgotten the disemboweling paradoxes that unfold daily—as surely as the exodus of close to 2,500 Filipino bodies seeking employment or migrating elsewhere in the world every day—in the country of his beginnings. San Juan's comradeship is therefore nothing short of a testimony to the inspiring durability and viability of his "third-world" politics. If San Juan's politics strikes other "first-world" intellectuals like Bloom as something tremendously out of sense, it is because San Juan goes against the very grain of what we have come to see, in the context of our present soci-

ety, as "common sense." It is without question that capitalism has so permeated and disciplined our desire, our most cherished and held secret wish fulfillment, in ways beyond counting that we have become inured to the scandal of its apparent disproportion. What San Juan does is to work against this form of control and forgetting—what he does is to refuse to adhere to this idea of "common sense."

Rightfully, San Juan's refusal of this "common sense" extends to his important critiques of multiculturalist ideology and the politics of difference as a kind of "common culture." Following Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's notion that multiculturalism is the cultural logic of transnational capitalism, San Juan intimates that a multiculturalist ideology may just be a politically correct form of terrorism. For San Juan, the gospel of multiculturalism obscures the uneven power relation that obtains in a profligate idea of pluralism—that differences are permissible as long as the reigning dispensation is able to control these differences by containing them as an undisruptive complex of disciplined differences known also as a "common culture." Another concern for San Juan is what he deems as the compromising character of the liberal brand of multiculturalism. As San Juan puts it: "This pragmatic species of multiculturalism, color-blind and gender-blind, elides the actual differences in systemic power relations immanent in the lived experiences of communities, peoples, and nations. In fact it apologizes for the institutional racism, sexism, heterosexism, and overall class exploitation that prevail, sanctioned by the instrumentalities of government and the realpolitik of international agencies" (337). Thus it may be said, discloses San Juan, that liberal multiculturalism legitimates and supports the status quo. This vogue of identity politics, in other words, does not really address the fundamental questions of status and class. Moreover, the ethos of a liberal multiculturalism works in fact to organize differences in such a way as to render them docile and malleable. Consequently, it undermines and neutralizes any attempt to interrogate systematically the systemic process inherent in the logic of multiculturalism as, ultimately, a function of transnational capitalism. A systemic violence, thus, necessitates a systemic analysis. Hence San Juan questions the underlying purpose of anti-teleological visions of Derridean deconstruction, Foucaultian genealogy, and Lyotardean anti-totalism. Whose interests, asks San Juan, do they serve?

It is most fitting therefore that in San Juan's desire to restore the telos of the future, its inevitable project and dream, he returns to the scene of the diasporic Filipino whose agency disseminates silently yet surely from the boondocks to the cities of the world. Recognizing the inadequacy of ideas of postcolonial syncretism and hybridity in illuminating the problem of forced and at the same time government-encouraged diaspora of Filipino migrant workers that reached nearly 4.8 to 7.7 million bodies in 2000, San Juan inquires into how diasporic Filipinos can be conceived of as ethnic cosmopolitans who can assert their integrity and dignity and overcome their prostituted,

quarantined, and stigmatized collectivity. San Juan properly acknowledges that the Filipino diasporic consciousness is a peculiar species for it is not pre-occupied with returning to the roots of its existence where shared histories and monuments of its past are recollected and exalted. This peculiar diasporic consciousness, San Juan observes, "is tied to a symbolic homeland indexed by kinship or particularistic traditions that it tries to transplant abroad in diverse localities" (380). San Juan's concern here is how to see the possibility of enabling the infinitude of the Filipino diaspora-in-the-making in the context of its specific historical contingencies and in relation to the abiding principle of national liberation being waged in the homeland. In other words, how the aspirations of the geo-political Philippines can meet with the aspirations of the Philippines of the mind, variously conceived and speckled around the globe, in the absolute horizon of a transformative and emancipative theory and practice for all—the enduring theories-practices of struggle, sympathy, and solidarity: *pakikibaka*, *pakikiramay*, at *pakikipagkapwa-tao*. San Juan concedes, however, that these idioms of love and liberation may just be addressing a slowly vanishing audience, his book "a wayward apostrophe to a vanished dreamworld—a liberated homeland, a phantasmagoric refuge—evoking the utopias and archaic golden myths and legends" (381). But one can say equally that San Juan is actually making a dialogue with an unconscious majority. The mass that will inhabit the singing spheres of the possible: the spaces of not what will be but those of what must be, justly. Ultimately San Juan and his labor are neither for America nor for the Philippines, but rather, they are for the impending present of the possible.

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The Hills of Sampaloc: The Opening Actions of the Philippine-American War February 4–5, 1899. By Benito J. Legarda, Jr. Makati City: The Bookmark, Inc. 2001. 202 pages.

The author has a clear primary purpose in writing this book: to correct the mistaken impression, fostered and disseminated for a century, that the first shot of the Philippine-American War was fired on the San Juan Bridge. It was not.

"Both the Filipino and American official reports agree that the first shot was fired by the Americans, and that it happened between Blockhouse 7 (on the Manila City boundary) and Barrio Santol ("In the jurisdiction of Sampaloc"), on the connecting road that is now Calle Sosiego."

This is the fact and the truth, and to prove it Dr. Legarda has brought together all possible documentary textual and pictorial evidence in this slim but important volume.