Falling into the Olongapo River

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Recommended Citation
Many flew U.S. flags on their cars, lawns, and porches, and taxi cab drivers in New York City offered free rides in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and displayed the Christian cross and their nation’s flag and name as if imploring, “Pakistan please, not Afghan.” The Sikh Media Watch advised Sikhs in the U.S. to attend local memorials to the victims of 9/11 and to donate blood, clothing, and money toward the relief effort.

But the similarities must not slight the profound differences between December 7 and 9/11. Both wars and social relations were very different, and the constraints and opportunities likewise form contrasts. While the Japanese American Citizens League urged Japanese Americans to report any pro-Japan sentiment even among their parents in 1942, the Sikh Media Watch advised Sikhs to report any instance of racial profiling or hate crime, write to Congress, and file suits if necessary in 2001. The civil rights movement, led by African Americans and enjoined by Asian Americans, Latina/os, women, and gays and lesbians, helped to secure those rights and claims for equal treatment under the law.

And a coalition of Arab and West, Central, and South Asian Americans, Japanese and other Asian Americans, African Americans, Latina/os, Whites, and women joined in a press conference at the recently erected memorial to Japanese Americans during World War II in Washington, D.C., to declare their opposition to racial harassment and intimidation, racial profiling, and curtailments of civil liberty. Never again, they urged, should racism betray the Constitution’s promise. The Japanese American redress and reparations movement and Civil Liberties Act of 1988 provided the platform for that monument and renewal of a pledge made by countless women and men throughout the republic’s history, sealed with their dreams, sweat, and blood.

The lessons of December 7 and 9/11 are profound and fundamental for American history and democracy. I’d like to stress, among the many, just two. First, the struggles for freedom and equality of others in the past have consequences for us in the present. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before. And second, the victims of intolerance, those who have been denied their rights, through their resistance and refusal, have ensured the rights and liberties of all Americans. Those at the margins of American society are the most vulnerable. Consequently, they are the ones who most frequently suffer exclusions during times of war or crisis. It is also their claims to the Constitution’s promise from the margins that safeguard its guarantees for the mainstream, and indeed, for us all.

Falling into the Olongapo River

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Vulgarity permeated my childhood because for much of my childhood I lived on U.S. military bases surrounded by service-men, and they were vulgar in surprisingly creative ways. The vulgarity was present not only in accented adjectives, but also as nouns that marked people, down into their bones, and as verbs that marked the places, down into bedrock. Yokohama, Yokuska, and Subic Bay are the polite names for where I spent my childhood. It was in Subic Bay, in the Republic of the Philippines, where I was born. I was not born, to be truthful, on the American side of the fence; rather, I was born on the Filipino side, in the city of Olongapo. Due to the singular love of my mother, and her amazing efforts and sacrifices, I eventually made it to the other
side of that American fence, and was spirited away to other parts of Asia and then on to the U.S. My mother and my adoptive father moved the family, which included my younger sister, back to the Philippines where my adoptive father had a four-year tour of duty (1980-1984). It was in that atmosphere that I reached my adolescence. American military power, neocolonialism, sexism, sexual excess and exploitation, poverty, racism, classism, and the lottery of opportunity—all coated with a pervasive vulgarity—formed my moral and political universe, my sense of justice. The following story is from that time, and it is a story of my experience of Olongapo and my moral and political formation.

Shit River was the vulgar name for the Olongapo River in the Philippines.1 At its mouth, the river divides the main gate of the biggest military installation in Asia, Subic Bay Naval Base, from the neighboring city of Olongapo. Olongapo was the epitome of third-world slums: it is exceedingly poor, dirty and rough. The city was featured in the movie An Officer and a Gentleman, where the main character, as a young boy, was assaulted and robbed by a group of karate-fighting, poor Filipino boys. That movie also featured a pair of submissive, and tellingly silent, Filipina whores, one of whom was intended as the main character’s coming-of-age gift.2 A brown gift that he rejects, along with his father’s sordid blue-collar enlisted life: a vulgar, tough, working white man, another resident of the dirty Asian slums, and the lover of its residents. The main character’s rejection of his father, the whores, and Olongapo was in character with the chaste, white and pure shining her factory job—that he was fated to be at the end of the movie.

Leading up to the entrance of Subic Bay Naval Base was an avenue that ran the length of the base, but at the main gate the avenue lead to a bridge, lined at both sides with sidewalks, that spanned Shit River, and then emptied onto long and wide Magsay-say Drive, which terminated at Olongapo’s city square. Crammed on both sides of Magsay-say were dance clubs, tattoo parlors, whorehouses, street-side vendors and cantinas.

The streets were filled with young boys and girls selling cigarettes, individually or by the pack, vendors hawking foods such as meat-filled sweet rice cakes, chicken and pork shish kabobs, and grilled chicken intestines on a stick. All around are the vendors, beggars—asking for a centavo or a peso— and young women, some of them adolescent girls, selling themselves to passing American men. The shining voices, the calls of the vendors, the clamor of the cars, buses, trucks and jeeps, the appeals of the beggars, and a cacophony of other propositions filled your ears. The smell of oil, diesel, gasoline, smog, cooking food, the not too distant fish market, and the ever-present stench of Shit River filled your nostrils.

If you were to stop on the bridge sidewalk and look over the white concrete railings down onto Shit River, you would see thick, brown, and murky ooze slithering its way to the bay. Trash and refuse, dead fish and an occasional dead animal, and pools of human waste—from the Navy base and the shantytown that sprang up over the years on the bank opposite the base—have soiled the Olongapo and, thus, baptized it Shit River.

Occasionally young Filipino children in homemade canoes paddled out to the bridge and called out to the pedestrians above, servicemen and the Filipinos who labor on the base going to and from work, to throw down coins.3 The pedestrians invariably did throw coins, and just as invariably they threw the coins out of the reach of the children—into Shit River. The children, for the entertainment of the smiling, kind, expectant American faces above, dove into the river to fetch the coins.

Into the slime, murk, disease, and death they went, to collect a few centavos so that they could buy themselves scraps of food and candy.

As a young boy I remember clearly the day my American stepfather pressed a peso into my hand, and I, looking over the bridge, turned my hand over and watched the coin descend into the river’s depth with the children, who were my age and my color, following after. I will never forget that river. I will never forget my complicity, and my reflection in Shit River.

On August 21, 1983, Ninoy Aquino was shot as he arrived in Manila. A henchman of Marcos assassinated him. My family was in Pasay City, outside of Manila. We were visiting my uncle, but due to the potential for unrest we had to rush back to Subic Bay. Not long after that day, I awoke on a bright morning and walked to a field that overlooks the opposite bank of the Olongapo River. The shantytown was gone, it had disappeared in the night, and in its place were fresh brown dirt and the violent tracks of the tractors that had done their deeds at night. “Where are the people?” I thought to myself. “Were they underneath that light brown mud?” I felt as a young boy that Marcos himself was connected to the destruction of the shantytown. Perhaps the shacks were destroyed to please the Americans, to help keep the base safe, or to fatally quell the anger of the poor that lived there. In the summer of 1984 my family left for the US.

I am overwhelmed by what that river means to me, and the Olongapo that remains in me. It was my experience of what Gloria Anzaldua captured in her discussion of la frontera:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish as from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undefined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los astraídos live here; the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they’re Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only “legitimate” inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites.4

That river and its inhabitants have always been a source of pain and allegory for me. When I read or write about the other, borders, purity, impurity, and separation, I return to that river and its people. When I write, I am writing about that river, about Olongapo, and its people.

When I think of that river, I think of walking to the middle of the bridge, climbing up onto the concrete railings, looking down at those kids, and diving in. There in Shit River, with the kids diving after, encased in its stinking brown waters, I cannot tell up from down, nor can I make out the passing forms. I cannot reach bottom. I cannot breathe.

Endnotes
1. This essay was originally entitled “Shit River Reflections,” and I have been working on it in various contexts since the fall of 1996.
2. I use the latter and dehumanizing term ‘whore’ in a sarcastic manner. I do not want to hide from the readers, or myself, the awful truth about how these women were regarded and treated by the sailors, marines, and the U.S. Navy.
What Does Asian American Studies Have to Do with Philosophy?

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What’s in a Name? ‘The Committee for the Status of Asian and American Philosophers and Philosophies’ is one of the longest of the titles among the APA committees. Why? The tortuous title bears witness to struggles for inclusion. Some of these struggles were discussed in this publication when David Kim raised the question, “Why are Asian Americans virtually absent from the APA, despite the widespread perception that Asian Americans are ‘over-represented’ in American universities?” Another struggle has been for the inclusion of Asian American perspectives and philosophy within the scope of this committee and the APA. This essay discusses the question, “What does Asian American studies have to do with philosophy?”

What is the difference between Asian and Asian American studies? Gary Okihiro, Director of Columbia’s Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, once suggested the following thought experiment: Can you understand the Civil Rights movement in America or do justice to the experience of Blacks in America by studying the cultures of Africa? Clearly not. Similarly, studying the cultures and philosophies of Asia does not do justice to the Asian American experience or to the importance of Asian American philosophy. One reason why philosophers fail to include a space for Asian American philosophy is that Asian Americans, unlike African Americans, are stereotyped as “perpetual foreigners,” the current political implications of which we will discuss after distinguishing Asian and American studies.

The founding purposes of Asian studies and Asian American studies are quite distinct. Since 1838 the French term orientalisme has been used to refer to the European literary and scholarly interest in the Orient, although the meaning of ‘the Orient’ has changed over time to encompass Turkey, the Middle East, East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and West Asia. Ever since Rudyard Kipling declared that “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (1891) and articulated the “White Man’s Burden” (1899), British literature and philosophy has mediated the colonialist meeting of East and West. Edward Said in his seminal Orientalism (1979) identified the colonizing agenda of Oriental studies.2 “Orientalism,” Said wrote, “is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’ ... In short, Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”3 The “Orient” or “East” came to represent the farthest, most exotic, and most remote opposite from Western civilization. During the Cold War era, the status of Oriental studies increased by assisting the U.S. government to deal with “the Orient” (even though the Far East, from America, was, in fact, the Far West). Many of the Orientalist scholars of this era came from the ranks of diplomatic corps. Today, added to these ranks, is a second generation of upper-class immigrant scholars. Many of these immigrant scholars fled to America from communist-controlled countries and have tended to hold conservative cultural and political views.4 Yearning for a respected presence within their disciplines, many of these scholars fashioned themselves as “authentic cultural brokers,” perpetuated stereotypes of Oriental culture as unfathomable to the Western mind, and cautiously avoided the issues of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy.

Asian American studies, in contrast, emerged in the 1960s during the Civil Rights movement. The birth of Asian American Studies is dated to the 1968 Third World Liberation strike at San Francisco State University, which resulted in founding the first Ethnic Studies program in the nation. Influenced by the Black Power Movement and other struggles for liberation, Asian American studies sought to articulate authentic Asian American voices and to free itself from assimilationism, overseas nationalism, and Orientalism.5 Today, Asian American studies continues to help Asian Americans to understand themselves and to represent themselves, and their diverse communities, more accurately to the wider American public. UCLA Professor Shirley Hune articulates the values of the discipline:

What is Asian American Studies? It is the documentation and interpretation of the history, identity, social formation, contributions, and contemporary concerns of Asian and Pacific Americans and their communities. Its activities of research, teaching, and curriculum development relate to the experience of Asians and Pacific peoples in America. While thoroughly academic in its approaches, Asian American studies is also strongly committed to a focus on community issues and problems... In short, Asian American studies seeks to democratize higher education.6

The historical conditions under which Asian and Asian American studies arose should not be regarded as historical accidents, but as the historical basis for understanding and critiquing the scholarship that is produced, the differential reception of that scholarship by the mainstream, and the continuing marginalization of Asian American studies.

The naming of the Committee for the Status of Asian and American Philosophers and Philosophies, therefore, carries a commitment to democratizing philosophy. The name signifies that among the goals of the committee will be addressing the issue of the under-representation of Asian Americans within the APA as well as articulating Asian American philosophical research and scholarship. In these tasks interdisciplinary conversations between Asian American philosophers and scholars in Asian American studies has been, and will continue to be, of mutual benefit.

Dis-Orienting Philosophy. In what ways could dialogue with scholars in Asian American studies help to raise issues of importance to philosophers? Charles Mills in The Racial Contract argued that the assumption of white supremacy was formative and foundational to the history of Western philosophy.7 John Locke’s justification of the Royal African