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Writing the Body Corporeal Intimacy in N. V. M. Gonzalez's The Bamboo Dancers

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Stanley Guevarra

WRITING THE BODY

Corporeal Intimacy in N. V. M. Gonzalez's *The Bamboo Dancers*

ABSTRACT

In postwar Philippine literature, there is a conspicuous presence of Japanese and American characters, whose appearances can be investigated in terms of bodily representation. In his novel *The Bamboo Dancers* (1959), N. V. M. Gonzalez marks the corporeal presence of an American character and atomic bomb victims in Hiroshima through bodily description. Building on previous readings of the novel, I propose corporeal intimacy as an interpretative lens for analyzing the representation of bodies of other races in a postwar, postcolonial Philippine context. Literary descriptions of bodies reveal implicit attitudes toward the owners of those bodies as much as they manufacture affects and construct an emotional landscape of their time. In the specific case of *The Bamboo Dancers*, corporeal intimacy toward Japanese and American characters is a modest, albeit suspect, venture toward transcultural understanding worth considering in the context of the novel's publication.

KEYWORDS

corporeal intimacy, body, Japan, America, Philippine literature

In popular discourse of Philippine history, attitudes toward Japan and America are situated at opposite ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, Japan's war crimes remain etched in Filipinos' collective memory. The infamous Bataan Death March in 1942, a forced mobilization across 140 kilometers of American and Filipino prisoners of war by the Imperial Japanese Army, is commemorated as a national holiday every April 9th in the Philippines. A memorial dedicated to the victims of the Battle of Manila in 1945, estimated at over 100,000 civilians, is erected in Intramuros, Manila, alongside an installation of a piece of writing that emphasizes the violence and brutality committed by the Japanese Army. Ironically, in contrast to Japan's goal to liberate the Philippines from American influences, the Japanese Occupation resulted in a greater dependence on America by the Philippines.¹ This has led to the characterization of Filipinos as "Japanese-hating and American-adulating"² people after the Asia-Pacific War.

Such attitudes are reflected in Philippine literature. According to Ronald Klein, most Philippine literary works in English that are set in the war reflect a predominantly negative collective consciousness against the Japanese Empire.³ Further, Motoe Terami-Wada's analysis of short stories and serialized novels published in the Tagalog magazine *Liwayway* reveals that Japan's atrocities continued to be written about

¹ Setsuho Ikehata, "The Japanese Occupation Period in Philippine History," in *The Philippines Under Japan: Occupation Policy and Reaction*, ed. Setsuho Ikehata and Ricardo T. Jose (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999), 20.

² Floro Quibuyen, "Japan and America in the Filipino Nationalist Imagination: From Rizal to Ricarte," in *The Philippines and Japan in America's Shadow*, ed. Kiichi Fujiwara and Yoshiko Nagano (National University of Singapore Press, 2011), 112.

³ Ronald D. Klein, *The Other Empire: Literary Views of Japan from the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia* (University of the Philippines Press, 2008), 10.

long after the war.⁴ In contrast, Americans are depicted as “saviors” of the Filipinos during the Japanese Occupation through pro-American narratives, especially in early postwar works.⁵

Of course, there are exceptions to these stereotypes. Aside from Terami-Wada and Klein, who dutifully acknowledge these variations, Karl Cheng Chua’s separate analyses of comics and children’s literature shed light on nuanced representations that invite the question, “perhaps the Japanese were not all so bad after all?”⁶ Moreover, as early as its publication in 1947, Steven Javellana’s famous war novel *Without Seeing the Dawn* already demonstrates some aversion to America through the character of Jamie, who, having experienced living in America, declares with disgust that “America is a land where people burrow into the earth like toads and rats, glide upon it like snakes and lizards, and fly in the air like bats and crows.”⁷ While Jamie is a Japanese collaborator and serves as a foil to his fellow Filipinos, who testify to the violence of the Japanese Army, his appearance reveals that American representation has not been unequivocally favorable. Occurring alongside shifts in society at the local and international levels, Filipinos have demonstrated less hostile feelings toward the Japanese and critical sentiments toward America at various points in history.

⁴ Motoe Terami-Wada, “Postwar Japanese Images in *Liwayway* Short Stories and Serialized Novels, 1946-1988,” in *Panahon Ng Hapon: Sining Sa Digmaan, Digmaan Sa Sining*, ed. Gina Barte (Cultural Center of the Philippines, n.d.), 91.

⁵ Karl Ian Uy Cheng Chua, “Friend or Foe? Representations of the Japanese in the Philippine’s Print Media, 1940s to the Present,” in *Imagining Japan in Post-War East Asia*, eds. Paul Morris, Naoko Shimazu, and Edward Vickers, (Routledge, 2013), 93.

⁶ Cheng Chua, “Friend or Foe?,” 103; Karl Ian Uy Cheng Chua, “Japanese Representation in Philippine Media,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity*, ed. Steven Ratuva (Springer, 2019), 426.

⁷ Stevan Javellana, *Without Seeing the Dawn* (Phoenix Publishing House, 1999), 268–69.

In writing the Japanese and Americans, there is inevitably a depiction of characters' bodily features, as when Terami-Wada observes "the image of the Japanese as bowlegged, chinky-eyed and highly sexed."⁸ This is unsurprising considering how bodily descriptors reveal implicit attitudes toward the owners of those bodies, such as aversion or affection. More than just a reflection, such language also manufactures affects and constructs an emotional landscape of its time. Paster et al. establish the relationship between the cultural constructedness of emotions and bodily description, claiming that "the way we describe the workings of our bodies and minds . . . may shape and color our emotional experiences."⁹ After all, there is a close relationship between literature and the body—an interest shared by poststructuralist thinkers who acknowledge the body as a cultural sign and, conversely, culture as a force by which the body is shaped.¹⁰ As a critical site of social relations, the body as represented in literature can "help us understand the complexities of embodied life."¹¹

In this regard, I am interested in the ways in which Japanese and American bodies are depicted in Philippine literature. Whereas previous studies investigate "images" in a general sense, I shift my attention to the corporeal vocabulary found in bodily description. Here, I propose corporeal intimacy as an interpretative lens for analyzing the representation of bodies of other races in a postwar, postcolonial Philippine context.

⁸ Terami-Wada, "Postwar Japanese Images," 88.

⁹ Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson, "Introduction: Reading the Early Modern Passions," in *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 16.

¹⁰ David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, eds., Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

CORPOREAL INTIMACY AND N. V. M. GONZALEZ

The idea of corporeal intimacy takes its cue from Edward Said's *Orientalism*. However, whereas for Said, the Westerners' in-the-flesh encounters with the "Orientals" were used to manufacture knowledge that enabled colonial domination,¹² I am interested in the opposite scenario, where the formerly colonized subject interacts with bodies that bear a colonial lineage in a manner that gestures toward understanding. I therefore think of corporeal intimacy as a reversal of Orientalism—intimate encounters via bodily description that can upend colonial legacies. As applied in this essay, corporeal intimacy emphasizes writing moves that describe, demarcate, and define the body, and that in the process, implicate a certain degree of emotional closeness.

Indeed, the ways in which a body is imagined reveal the extent to which intimacy is achieved. In Michael Warner's essay "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," he argues that the self-abstraction of certain bodies ("white, male, literate, and propertied") allows them to gain the privilege of anonymity and authority in the public sphere.¹³ Warner writes, "Access to the public came in the whiteness and maleness that were then denied as forms of positivity, since the white male qua public person was only abstract rather than white and male."¹⁴ Other bodies are therefore marked by differences that render universality and neutralization, themselves integral to "publicness," unattainable.

This taken into account, Daniel Hartley's analysis of Ivan Vladislavic's novel, *Double Negative* (2010), forwards how dead letters—

¹² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979), 32.

¹³ Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1992), 382.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 382–83.

anonymous mail from non-privileged bodies that bear traces of bodily remnants, such as fingerprints or sweat stains—stand for an absent materialism “that avoids the structural racism of the self-abstracting public sphere.”¹⁵ The binary of self-abstraction and marked difference is evaded in favor of an *impersonality* that resists the utopian promise of Warner’s public sphere. Hartley further posits “that impersonal distance from immediate reality and the body is sometimes a precondition of knowing them more intimately.”¹⁶ Hartley’s point is particularly useful later on for considering corporeal presence and absence as well as impersonality as indicators of the extent of intimacy.

Of particular interest in this study is N. V. M. (Nestor Vicente Madali) Gonzalez. Among the early postwar writers, N. V. M. Gonzalez is revered as a representative author for his time. Having lived in the Philippines and America, he was profoundly influential in the literary scene both within the country and abroad. Belonging to the second generation of Filipino writers in English, he also lived through the Second World War and its aftermath.¹⁷ He was conferred the title of National Artist of the Philippines for Literature in 1997.

Gonzalez’s novel *The Bamboo Dancers* deserves special attention for its unique treatment of the Americans and the Japanese at the time of its publication in 1959. Not long after the Second World War, the 1950s in the Philippines saw reparation missions to Japan under American pressure, which arguably did little to quell Filipinos’ hatred of the Japanese.¹⁸ Under these tense conditions, *The Bamboo Dancers* attempts to make

¹⁵ Daniel Hartley, “Dead Letters: Impersonality and the Mourning of World Literature in Ivan Vladislavić’s Double Negative,” *Interventions* 22, no. 5 (2019): 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁷ Edilberto Alegre and Doreen Fernandez, eds., *Writers and Their Milieu: An Oral History of Second Generation Writers in English* (De La Salle University Press, 1987), ix.

¹⁸ Cheng Chua, “Friend or Foe?” 93.

sense of Philippine relations with America and Japan. It centers around Ernie Rama, a sculptor awarded a study grant in the United States. A good half of the novel is set in America, where he reunites with a long-standing Filipino friend from college, Helen Reyes. She is involved with an American writer, Herb Lane. Helen and Ernie later have a surreptitious affair before Ernie travels to Japan, where he talks to survivors of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima with an interpreter. Ernie is later in Taipei, and coincidentally, Helen and Herb are as well, but it is here that Herb is shot to death as locals are enraged when they learn of Herb's running over a young girl.

In what follows, I specifically look into bodily descriptions surrounding Herb and the atomic bomb survivors in Hiroshima, respectively. While many Filipino writers that time, whose memories of the war were as fresh as an open wound, resort to familiar stereotypes, I argue that Gonzalez, albeit imperfectly, gestures toward transcultural understanding through representations that are at once corporeal and intimate.

THE AMERICAN AS AN IDEA AND A BODY

The Bamboo Dancers begins in New York, and it introduces the reader to an account of Ernie's loneliness. He has been living in America for over a year. Ernie, it seems, has been eating in the same place with strangers for days in a row. This is not to say that Ernie is completely alone on all occasions. He meets an old Filipino friend, Reggie Samonte, who, in turn, introduces him to his Filipino friends as well as Dr. and Mrs. Rice, an American couple whom Ernie describes as "Filipinophiles." Ernie admits that he and his Filipino friends would frequent the Rices' apartment since their first visit.

The relationship between the Filipinos and the Rices, however, is merely surface-level. On one occasion, Mrs. Rice reads a poem that alludes to infertility, a condition that the American couple seems to

struggle with. Johnny Kilala, one of the Filipinos, takes offense as if the poem were meant to attack *his* sterility and bids the Rices farewell with an affront. The rest of the Filipinos', including Ernie's, passive reaction to Kilala's indecorous behavior is indicative of their indifference; as, in the words of Edilberto De Jesus, "they [the Filipinos] do not try to understand the tension that the reading of the poem has generated."¹⁹

Ernie's indifference to the Rices is an ignorance of their corporeality: a bodily concern, such as fertility, is dismissed, and even their physical features do not generate much observation. Later, he reflects on his relationship with America, thinking, "I couldn't keep from asking myself whether my fellowship year in America had made me dislike the country and whether in any case it had made me a different person altogether."²⁰ Describing himself as a "stranger" in a foreign land,²¹ Ernie is indifferent and barely registers his surroundings for the most part of his stay in the country.

Ernie is so desultory that he is driven to travel to Vermont for no particular reason. Here occurs a slight change to the monotony of his everyday life: the introduction of the American character Herb Lane, who I argue is representative of the American body. Meeting him along with Helen Reyes, Ernie is impressed by Herb's otherworldly aura, given his Hollywood-type face and soulful eyes.²² This adoration is ephemeral, however, as he soon finds it nettlesome for having to compete with him

¹⁹ Edilberto De Jesus, "On This Soil, in This Climate: Growth in the Novels of N. V. M. Gonzalez," in *Brown Heritage: Essays on Philippine Cultural Tradition and Literature*, ed. Antonio Manuud (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1967), 750.

²⁰ Nestor Vicente Madali Gonzalez, *The Bamboo Dancers* (Bookmark, 1993), 241-42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 62.

for Helen's attention. When he strolls in the woods with Helen, he is vulgar and tactless regarding Helen and Herb's ambiguous relationship.²³

Ernie's unwelcoming attitude, however, belies his attraction to Herb. In his review, De Jesus makes a trenchant observation of Ernie's queerness by calling attention to Ernie's peculiar behavior when Herb visits his hotel room. Placing his hand on Herb's shoulder, Ernie finds himself aroused. He thinks, "I had to take my hand off his shoulder, for fear that one moment more and I couldn't help myself. Already I was thinking he would make me a very fine figure, and I'd call the statue 'Man Heavy with Novel' or something of the sort."²⁴ De Jesus concludes that this trace of homosexuality isolates Ernie further,²⁵ but this reaction registers Herb's bodily presence in the novel more explicitly, though brief it may be.

After leaving Vermont, Ernie does not meet Herb for a significant amount of time, yet Herb's shadow looms over him. Ernie meets with Helen on multiple occasions—in New York, Tokyo, and Taipei—and Ernie, envious as he is, would often compare himself to Herb in terms of their compatibility with Helen. Later, Ernie has a sexual affair with Helen and tells her to "lie low on that Herb Lane fellow."²⁶ This can be read as disrespectful, if not spiteful, to Herb and his relationship with her, no matter how ambiguous the extent of their romantic involvement may seem.

This attitude, however, gradually changes throughout the novel. On a plane to Taipei, Ernie cogitates on how his recent experiences are

²³ Ibid., 72.

²⁴ Ibid., 89.

²⁵ De Jesus, "Growth in the Novels" 755.

²⁶ Gonzalez, *The Bamboo Dancers*, 125.

starting to take form and make sense. He thinks, “Here, now on the plane, I couldn’t but think that all of them were like instruments on the panel of an efficient and sturdy aircraft.”²⁷ Ernie begins to be cognizant that there is value in his desultory stay in America, in the brief encounters he has had with various people, and in his trips to cities elsewhere. At this point, Ernie has amassed enough experiences to recognize that there must be a unifying thread that gives meaning to his experiences thus far. Here is a subtle change, but this version of Ernie is a significant development from the Ernie who had been indifferent to the Rices.

Concurrent to this gradual change is a seemingly newfound respect for Herb. In Taipei, the Philippine Consul disdains Helen and Herb’s engagement on the basis of Herb being American. Ernie refuses to go along with his suggestion and responds, “But Herb’s all right.”²⁸ Ernie’s response is more mature, given how he used to have a somewhat facile view of Herb as well as his relationship with Helen. Unfortunately for Herb, he is shot to death after fomenting anti-American sentiments for running over a young girl. Interestingly, it is upon Herb’s death that Ernie comes to an epiphany about Herb’s corporeal presence. He dwells on this thought:

But actually it was Herb Lane the person whom I knew, not the abstraction. He was not the poetry I had learned in school, the books I had read in English, the movies I had seen; nor yet was he the slick magazine ad, the car and the electric stove, and all the gadgetry, and the house beautiful and good housekeeping, nor even fame and fortune or a career on the make; nor Hollywood and New York and Europe and all the exciting spots on the skin of the globe . . .²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., 242.

²⁸ Ibid., 262.

²⁹ Ibid., 282.

This passage implies that there is a tendency to view Americans as an abstraction of images from popular culture, a typical case of fetishizing Americans. Ernie suspects that Hellen had fallen victim to this—reasonable when she thinks that her coming to America is “because of all the books you and I have read, all the movies you and I have seen”³⁰—but he also admits that there is “no way of really knowing” whether this is entirely true for her.³¹ What can be gathered, however, is that Ernie himself is not exempt from this; at the beginning of the novel, he remarks that an American server’s “facial features, particularly the sharp chin, suggested he might have been an actor in a film version of Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*.”³² At the end of the novel, however, it would seem that Ernie wrestles away from this fetishizing tendency by claiming that Herb had been more than an idea; in his words, he had seen Herb “as a figure, a physical entity.”³³ This is perhaps the most explicit acknowledgement of corporeality in the novel.

At this juncture, there are two ways to interpret Ernie’s relationship with Herb. A sympathetic reader would take Ernie’s words for what they are. This interpretation also ties into the epilogue: throughout the novel, Ernie had suggested that he had been seeking the truth, though he could not grasp it just yet. The epilogue reveals that he is close to it, and when he thinks of the truth, he thinks of Herb and what he would make out of Ernie’s experiences. Ernie reflects, “He who is gone, I trust, is here in his good will and innocence, while we who live on are no more . . . I’ve set this down as a small tribute to what Herb Lane perhaps meant.”³⁴

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 282.

³² *Ibid.*, 18–19.

³³ *Ibid.*, 282.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 330.

The apostrophe in honor of Herb goes hand-in-hand with the reading of Ernie's growth of character as advocated by Edilberto De Jesus. After all, memorializing a person upon their death is only proper. Seen from this perspective, Ernie is a changed man by the end of the novel, and Herb is perceived both as body and virtue.

On the other hand, there is reason to suspect the authenticity of Ernie's words. Ernie's treatment of Herb impresses the critic Leonard Casper as "a kind of mirror in which Ernie, in concealed self-pity and admiration, can see himself—as he is not."³⁵ Casper stands by the idea that Ernie does not reach a profound epiphany of himself or of humankind, and that the epilogue is a mere facade. Indeed, there is no proper buildup leading to Ernie's sudden intimacy toward Herb.

The lack of descriptive detail surrounding Herb's body recalls Warner's self-abstraction, not only because of his white, privileged standing, but also by the way in which Herb's body is romanticized and made textually immaterial, literally through death. Given the minimal details provided in the novel, and considering Ernie's sexual attraction, one can make the case that his attitude borders on fetishization, the very attitude Ernie denies. This echoes readings of Ernie as a morally corrupt figure, and as Miguel Bernad would argue about the novel, "the characters do not exhibit a well-defined moral dimension."³⁶

Could it be that Ernie is simply deluding himself, as Casper suggests? Or, is it more prudent to go with the grain, aligning with Gonzalez's interpretation of his own work that Ernie had seen Herb wholly?³⁷ In my view, this is a question of narration and can be resolved

³⁵ Leonard Casper, "N. V. M. Gonzalez," in *New Writing from the Philippines: A Critique and Anthology* (Syracuse University Press, 1966), 54.

³⁶ Miguel A. Bernad, "Bamboo Dancers," in *Bamboo and the Greenwood Tree: Essays on Filipino Literature in English* (Bookmark, 1961), 51.

³⁷ N. V. M. González, "N. V. M. González to Father Bernad," *Philippine Studies* 8, no. 3 (1960): 625.

through a formal analysis that carefully considers Gonzalez's writing style across his oeuvre as well as a contextual investigation of his milieu and the literary trends at the time. For the purposes of this essay, it is instead conclusive to contend that Herb's body is more absent relative to Japanese bodies in the novel. Representations of Japanese bodies are worth investigating in that they are seemingly void of affection, in contrast to Herb, yet abundant with bodily description.

THE WOUNDED BODIES OF THE JAPANESE

Before flying to Taipei, Ernie makes a stop in Japan, and notably in Hiroshima, not out of boredom, but as "a matter of duty."³⁸ A task to deliver a typewriter lands him in a resthouse meant for victims of the atomic bomb. There, Ernie gains the privilege of listening to the victims' stories with the help of an interpreter. Survivors would talk about their family members or themselves who suffered bodily afflictions: Dr. Mori's son and wife suffered burns and died a few days after; Mr. Yamada's skin had peeled off after a few days of exposure to the bombing site; losing a leg, vomiting blood, and going blind were common occurrences; and many considered themselves "invalids." Grief and suffering fill the air of the resthouse, and Ernie, being a foreigner and henceforth a link to the rest of the world, is the perfect candidate to whom they could express their sorrows. "So please tell all the people of your country for me. Tell them how we suffer," the road-worker Kumagai addresses Ernie.³⁹

Notably, Ernie seems unmoved by the trauma of the Japanese, and his thoughts and responses can be facetious and tactless. De Jesus reads this as a reflection of his incapability to grasp "the personal immediacy

³⁸ Gonzalez, *The Bamboo Dancers*, 159.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

of the problem of the *Genbaku* posed for his Japanese friends.”⁴⁰ Rather than being considerate of their disposition, he gives an unfavorable opinion of Mori’s facial features, regarding that “the way he flecked his eyelids was enough to make me uncomfortable.”⁴¹ After hearing some survivors’ stories, he suggests fishing by the resthouse to pass the time, as if they had not been talking about the horror of their experiences. When Kumagai supplicates Ernie to share her story, Ernie replies “lamely” that Filipinos also suffer “in a similar way,”⁴² despite not having been victims of atomic bombings.

Ernie’s indifference becomes more disturbing when considering the form of the novel. In his response to Miguel Bernad’s critique, Gonzalez claims that the novel takes on Northrop Fry’s “confession” form and “the shape of partial recall and of conscience.”⁴³ The novel is prefaced by letters to and from Ernie, suggesting “the entire book from the first section down to the epilogue being a memory re-lived in the letters.”⁴⁴ Herb and the Japanese are therefore not simply narrated, but remembered, and the novel functions as a representation of memory. Ernie is thus not an “experiencing I” but a “narrating I,” and his narration does not fall under “pre-narrative experience” but rather is defined as “narrative memory.”⁴⁵ Given that *The Bamboo Dancers* is a memory novel, Ernie’s choice to remember his indifference and discomfort with

⁴⁰ De Jesus, “Growth in the Novels,” 757.

⁴¹ Gonzalez, *The Bamboo Dancers*, 182.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 195.

⁴³ Gonzalez, “To Father Bernad,” 624.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 624–25.

⁴⁵ Astrid Erll, “Traumatic Pasts, Literary Afterlives, and Transcultural Memory: New Directions of Literary and Media Memory Studies,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 3, no. 1 (January 2011).

the Hiroshima survivors, rather than expressing guilt for having such feelings at the time, poses a difficulty to be reconciled with De Jesus's interpretation that there is growth in his character.

It seems understandable that Ernie would remain aloof from the Japanese. When at the resthouse and asked about a bridge in Manila, he lets his Japanese companions know of its disappearance, implying it as a consequence of the Asia-Pacific War. The narration is written, "'Well, it's gone,' I told him with all the conviction I could suggest. 'Gone!'"⁴⁶ It appears that Ernie carries some resentment toward the Japanese after all.

However, while Ernie's inner monologue and behavior toward the victims are convincing reasons for his indifference, it is equally important to consider that this is the portion of the novel where Japanese bodies are described in rich detail. Aside from his personal encounters with the victims, Ernie goes to see the exhibits in the Atomic Bomb Explosion Center Museum and studies them carefully: the clothes of the victims, the roofing tiles that melted at the time of the explosion, the wrist watches whose displays had stopped, and so on. Ernie's further reflections on the exhibits reveal the meticulous detail in which the bodies of the Japanese are portrayed:

How vain the Flesh is, the watches seemed to cry out. And Flesh answered back through the huge photographic enlargements that covered the walls, the now long dead but still groaning in pain entombed in those picture frames. The seared and twisted shapes, the nude and bloated, the crushed heads, the sprawled bodies—each of them cried out from the cold tomb of photographic print to warn of danger, of extinction itself.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Gonzalez, *The Bamboo Dancers*, 198

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 202-3.

This section of the novel narrating Ernie's stay in Hiroshima is distinguished for being "almost journalistic in its spareness and matter-of-fact tone."⁴⁸ Incidentally, it is a style that resonates with the first generation of atomic bomb writers—such as Ota Yoko, Hara Tamiki, and Shoda Shinoe—whose focus lies on describing rather than philosophizing experiences surrounding the bombs.⁴⁹ Descriptive and detached, this type of writing recalls modern literature, much of which disturbs conceptions of wholeness. Dead and dying bodies in modern writing "follow a Hellenistic tradition of realistic (and resolutely de-aestheticized) death."⁵⁰ With the excess of violence witnessed in the twentieth century, modern writers have undermined the aesthetic qualities in death that pre-modern consciousness has acknowledged: symbolic and allegorical, rejecting the reality of death with the promise of another life or resurrection.⁵¹

In fact, a recurring theme in atomic bomb writing is the question of whether the atomic bombs can be understood by non-victims when victims themselves struggle to understand the atrocity committed against them. Ultimately, this bleeds into the postmodern suspicion toward language's capacity to represent reality. After all, how can language begin to capture something as inexplicable as the bombs? Describing the experience of the atomic bombing in itself is a contradiction: it is an attempt to imagine a reality—and this is oxymoronic—that is

⁴⁸ De Jesus, "Growth in the Novels," 756.

⁴⁹ John Whittier Treat, *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 21.

⁵⁰ Sander Gilman, "Representing Dead and Dying Bodies," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, ed. David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 150.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

simultaneously unreal “insofar as it is an experience of ‘extremity.’”⁵² Further, if there exists a language that can effectively convey the victims’ experience of the atomic bombs, “the intimate links between themselves and the bombings would be severed and their existences violated even further.”⁵³

If an atomic bomb victim faces such contradictions when writing their experience of the bombings, how is Ernie (and by extension Gonzalez), a distant observer whose motherland bore witness to the horrors of the Japanese Occupation, supposed to put this into words? In a letter to the editor of the *Manila Standard* about Hiroshima, written at the time of remembering, Ernie writes about the absence of birds and makes no mention of the victims he had met. De Jesus observes that Ernie “can report the material rehabilitation of the city but he cannot discern the spiritual and the moral recovery of the people.”⁵⁴ However, I propose that Ernie’s seeming aloofness can instead be read as an empathic metaphor in the context of a literary work that treads on dangerously sensitive experiences surrounding the atomic bombings. In fact, outside *The Bamboo Dancers*, Gonzalez had written an untitled sidebar in *The Saturday Mirror Magazine* similar to Ernie’s letter. In it is written: “Meanwhile, in Hiroshima, hundreds were seeking treatment for radiation sickness that all of a sudden began to appear after 11 years. And for these people no birds sang anywhere anymore.”⁵⁵ While not in the novel, the statement confirms some level of empathy on Gonzalez’s end.

Considering the problems of language to contain the atrocities of the atomic bombings, John Wittier Treat acknowledges the possibility of

⁵² Treat, *Writing Ground Zero*, 38.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁴ De Jesus, “Growth in the Novels,” 757-758.

⁵⁵ N. V. M. Gonzalez, *The Saturday Mirror Magazine*, August 10, 1957, 10.

misreadings being projected into atomic bomb writing. “Fearful of this potential for distortion,” Treat writes, “the cooperation atomic bomb writers ask of us is a kind of ethical restraint, a sort of respectful restraint from naively ‘understanding’ what we read.”⁵⁶ Gonzalez has taken on the perilous task of writing about these experiences and demonstrates “ethical/respectful restraint” if only through detachment via his protagonist. Ernie’s tactlessness aside, he steers away from interpreting the atomic bombings on his terms and allows room for readerly imagination.

Further, recalling Hartley, intimacy can be achieved through impersonality. Ernie’s attitude adheres to some of Hartley’s elements of impersonality: an ethos of passionate indifference; depersonalization through the negation of personal identification, at least toward victims whom Ernie does not personally encounter; and affectless prose in poetics.⁵⁷ This allows Ernie to know the Japanese “more intimately” as it goes against Warner’s self-abstraction. Nonetheless, as in Vladisvalic’s novel, there is a risk of fetishization, for the protagonist’s attachment to the dead letters, enabled by corporeal distance, betrays a fetishism that “prevents the working through of a trauma.”⁵⁸ In contrast, however, Ernie’s “in-the-flesh” interactions with the Japanese give way to a bodily presence that prevents the fetishizing tendency that absence can elicit. Thus, a level of intimacy is achieved through impersonal writing, whereas fetishization is reduced through corporeality.

Ultimately, Gonzalez proposes that the novel defines Filipinos’ “moral emptiness in the shadow of the A-Bomb.”⁵⁹ Japanese bodies are laid out in the novel as if in response to Kumagai’s supplication to tell

⁵⁶ Treat, *Writing Ground Zero*, 33.

⁵⁷ Hartley, “Dead Letters,” 2–3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, “Dead Letters,” 13.

⁵⁹ Gonzalez, “To Father Bernad,” 627.

the world of their condition—in this case, the “world” is the reader of the text. Indeed, the novel offers a potentially radical view that challenges prevailing assumptions of the Japanese. The bodily description of atomic bomb victims seems to assert that the Japanese can go beyond being a lustful tormenter or a sadistic soldier, as they have been depicted in other Philippine literature; they can also be humans who are victims of a shared war. Writing with a level of detachment is perhaps the best response to Kumagai’s plea.

CONCLUSION

Corporeal intimacy starts with the acknowledgement of the Other. When put into words, affect colors the language that is used to describe the body. To capture the body of another race in language is to grasp what is personal to the subject being written about, yet it is, at the same time, sourced from vulnerable recesses of the writer. In this manner, bodily description is inevitably intimate, and intimacy here goes beyond simply knowing; it is entangling one’s self in an intricate nexus of body and feeling.

In the case of *The Bamboo Dancers*, Herb and the Japanese are treated similarly insofar as their bodies are sensed and acknowledged through literary description. To repeat, descriptions of Japanese bodies fill a huge portion of the novel, which not only reveals a recognition of their corporeality but also suggests a certain degree of emotional weight in their remembrance. Further, as argued earlier, the ethical restraint in Ernie’s narration can just as well be a form of empathic maneuvering. On the other hand, Herb is explicitly acknowledged as a body, and his death prompts realizations and evokes affection. It can be said that this orientation goes against the abstraction of the American; instead, it endeavors to look at America as a concrete body. Though discrepant in terms of the extent to which the bodies are sensed, both modes of description toward the Japanese and Herb enable a level of corporeal

intimacy, where, by virtue of the other race being perceived in terms of bodily experience, a degree of emotional closeness is achieved.

Simultaneously, however, Ernie's questionable moral compass hampers this intimacy. As Casper points out, Ernie talks about the Japanese "without a word of guilt for suffering caused by them or a sigh of commiseration for others who suffered or a sacrificial silence for the grace and good of others."⁶⁰ Moreover, the absence of bodily description in Herb invites a critical reading where Ernie's words betray superficiality and inauthenticity. These "flaws" may just as well stand for some of the popular attitudes in the Philippines at the time: resentment for the Japanese on the one hand, and fetishization for the Americans on the other.

Although there is evidence to assert that *The Bamboo Dancers* is in many ways suspect, especially in Ernie's relationship with Herb, resolving this necessitates a separate analysis of form and context, where critical and theoretical issues surrounding the body will not receive much attention. This essay instead looks into bodily description, which supplies enough reason to consider that the novel at least *gestures* toward an alternative, postcolonial view—one that neither glorifies nor vilifies the Americans or the Japanese in an unequivocal fashion, but rather attempts to understand and even humanize. In this way, Gonzalez proffers a different way of feeling toward the Americans and the Japanese.

There is another body in the novel that is all too relevant for the present analysis: that of Ernie Rama. The body is a sign that is often used to represent the nation in postcolonial writing, and Ernie can certainly be interpreted as a metonymy of the state of the Philippines at the time. His disagreeable and desultory character, in consideration with his illicit affair with Helen, aligns with the sense of lostness that the country grappled with immediately after the war; his partial "growth," as well,

⁶⁰ Casper, "N. V. M. Gonzalez," 54.

may be Gonzalez's way of posturing change for the country. Perhaps being acutely aware of the various crises in the mid-twentieth century, it seems plausible that Gonzalez, through Ernie, had simply envisioned a transcultural attitude for the Philippines that is far from perfect, but worth considering for its time.

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