Transnational Studies and Attempts at Inclusivity

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[*Abstract*]

This paper provides comments on Janus Nolasco's paper and the role that transnational or transpacific studies can play in overcoming the division between Philippine Studies (area studies) and Filipino-American scholarship. It draws attention to the fact that the crossing of localities and boundaries is always historically grounded and that the historical contexts in which Filipino diasporic communities are located vary one from another. It also considers the antecedents of more inclusive approaches to understanding the past and the present, and historical agency.

Keywords: translocalities, transnational studies, Philippine Studies, Filipino-American scholarship, historical context, agency

Janus Nolasco makes an interesting argument about the capacity of transnational or transpacific studies to encompass Philippine (and more broadly, Southeast Asian) studies, which are oriented toward the Philippines/Southeast Asia, and Filipino/Asian-American studies,

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which examine the life and place of Filipinos/Asians and Filipino/Asian communities in the USA in the past and the present. He also maintains that in a sense, the imprecision or open-mindedness of transnational studies is a virtue rather than a weakness because it enables this emerging field to take in a broad range of themes, frameworks, and approaches to the study of Filipinos and the Philippines. Philippine studies, he concludes, can happily co-exist with transnational American studies.

And, indeed, it can, just as Philippine studies can stand alongside global studies that examine movements and themes that cross and cut across localities and regions of the world. What is important is to keep in mind that the mobility or crossing of localities is always historically grounded and that the conditions in which these translocalities developed are entirely different from one another even if their end destination is, in the case of Filipino Americans, the United States. The historicities of Filipino diasporic communities in the USA are not exactly the same and neither are their contexts. Even the resulting identities and affiliations are different, which explains the diversity of Filipino-American scholarship, notwithstanding the effort to recover empire, as Nolasco puts it. In fact, a good number of the titles Nolasco cites in his paper speak of US translocalities rather than of the Philippines, such as Choy's *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino-American History* (2003), Isaac's *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino-America* (2006), Baldoz's *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America* (2011), and Balce's *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* (2016).

The effort within American studies to broaden its ranks toward transnational studies is, as Nolasco points out, a response to the reality that the USA "is itself a transnational circuit of physical, economic, and cultural exchanges whose dominion extends to regions that cannot be contained within the nation's geographical territory" (Shue and Pease 2015: 2, cited in Nolasco). This call for a broader outlook is in one sense a form of restitution, and it might help if we were to also consider the antecedents that sought a more inclusive approach to and understanding of the past and the present. The earlier antecedent is the attempt by UNESCO in the

late 1940s to produce history materials aimed at "international understanding" by including in historical works, the everyday life of people and not just national events that typically edify the nation. UNESCO reasoned that greater inclusivity would highlight the common humanity that binds all peoples and races.

> If the teaching of history in the past has not always helped to bring nations closer to one another, this can often be attributed to the nature of the subject matter taught: a mutilated history, limited to a chronicle of political conflicts resolved by wars. All too often everything has been omitted which, in the interludes between great national events, makes up the real life of a people and the history of humanity: everyday existence, ways of life and national customs, interchange of ideas, scientific improvements, and the common heritage of literature and the arts. Without in any way attempting to eliminate or even to curtail the teaching of political and military events, Unesco aims at restoring the balance between the various factors that enter into the historical process, thereby enriching the contribution of history to the development of international understanding. (Foreword to Febvre and Crouzet 1951: 1)

For this reason, in 1949 UNESCO commissioned Annales historians Lucien Febvre and François Crouzet to produce a textbook history of France. The resulting manuscript, titled "International Origins of a National Culture: Experimental Materials for a History of France," was novel, intriguing and, I imagine, unsettling to some. The two renowned historians explained, for instance, how even the simplest things commonly assumed as French, such as the chestnut tree, had originated from Asia in the early 17th century, and how 'classic' French food such as green beans, potatoes, and tomatoes came from the New World and citrus, from Asia. As the authors asserted:

> When we come to consider it, we see that there is nothing in this splendid structure of France that we French can claim as our own single-handed achievement except the act of creation itself, the art of the building and the general style of the whole; there is nothing else which can be called our own exclusive property. All the materials our forefathers used to build their civilization, the civilization of France, they took wherever they were to be found,

> wherever they were to be taken, from every quarter and from every hand.
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> When we consider the great events in our history – the history of France – we see that not a single one of them, however definitely it may appear to bear the stamp of French genius, could have taken place, had it not been foreshadowed, in some cases, induced, and anyway given a particular turn, by the joint endeavours of other countries, other peoples and other nations. (Febvre and Crouzet 1951: 3-4)

The purpose of this international outlook was neither to denigrate France nor adulate external influences, but to highlight the membership of the French in the larger community of humankind. Now what happened to the textbook? Hunt points out that it did not see print until sixty-three years later (Paris 2012) because of objections from "those who disliked its de-emphasis on the nation and Europe." (Hunt 2014: 47)

The fate of this inclusive textbook is not unlike the National History Standards that spurred the history wars in the USA in the 1990s. This second strand, more recent than the UNESCO attempt, was directed not only at competence-based history learning (by exposing American students to excerpts of primary texts) but also at a more inclusive history of the United States. As Nash explains (1997), inclusivity embraces the uncomfortable parts of history, the silenced voices and those forgotten or ignored. The project was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), then headed by Lynne Cheney, a historian in her own right. Cheney, predicting what she called "the end of history" (1994), and conservative pundits like Rush Limbaugh lambasted the standards as biased, unobjective, and unfair to the American nation and people. As an example of this highly politicized history, Cheney pointed out that McCarthy and the Ku Klux Klan, for instance, were mentioned 19 and 17 times, respectively, while Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Ulysses S. Grant were each cited only once, and Paul Revere, J. P. Morgan, and the Wright Brothers, not at all.

Taken, therefore, from a larger historical context, the recent

move in American historiography toward transnational studies continues the effort toward an inclusive history though framed in 21st century conditions. What this new effort assures is the place of Filipino-American studies within a transnational or transpacific strand of American studies, regardless of whether Southeast Asian studies, within which Philippine studies are positioned, wither away or survive in the near future.

The other concern Nolasco raises deals with who possesses the authority to speak on behalf of the Philippines (Hau 2014, cited in Nolasco). This question relates to the more fundamental historical tenet of agency not only in the making of history (as it happens) but also in the writing of history (as it happened). Of late it appears that Filipino-Americans have become more aggressive politically in making their voices heard in American textbooks. In 2013, the governor of California signed into law the requirement that the narrative of Filipino-American farm workers be included in the history curriculum of schools in the state. The bill's sponsor, Assembly member Rob Bonta, speaking on behalf of the Filipino American community, explained that the measure aimed

> to supplement California's rich farm worker history with the contributions of the Filipino American community. The Filipino American population composes the largest Asian population in California and continues to grow; yet the story of Filipinos and their crucial efforts … [in] the farm labor movement … [are] an untold part of California history. ("Governor Signs Bonta's Filipino American Farm Worker Bill, AB 123," 2 October 2013)

The addition of Filipinos to the current narrative dominated by Mexican American labor leaders César Chávez and Dolores Huerta fills a gap in the curriculum of California schools that omits, for example, the Delano Grape Strike of 1965, which was led by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), composed of first generation Filipinos. After the strike, the Chávez- and Huerta-led National Farm Workers Association combined forces with the AWOC. The growth in membership—mostly Filipino and Mexican—was phenomenal: from some 2,000 in 1966 to 10,000 in 1970. The Governor's press release asserts that with the passage of

the law, California students will now be given "a more complete account of California's farm labor movement and ensure that these important leaders, such as Philip Vera Cruz and Larry Itliong, are remembered by future generations of Californians." (Ibid.)

In a way these efforts and those of local historical societies such as the Filipino-American National Historical Society (33 chapters strong) are "vernacular sources" (to borrow Rafael's term, 2008: 484, cited in Nolasco) of Filipino-American studies that scholarship in the USA would do well not to ignore. The public practice of history is another exercise of agency in writing about the past and the authority to do so is shared by academic and public historians alike.

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