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Culture as “A Gift that Circulates and which No One Owns” in Nick Joaquín’s “A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino: An Elegy in Three Scenes”

Cheryl Julia Lee

Nicomedes “Nick” Marquez Joaquín (1917–2004) is widely recognized as one of the Philippines’ most important journalists and writers whose works span poems, short stories, novels, and essays. Critic Resil B. Mojares refers to him as “the greatest Filipino writer of his generation,” *primus inter pares* among his peers, who included the celebrated writers, N. V. M. Gonzalez, and F. Sionil Jose (n.p.); similarly, his contemporaries Francisco Arcellana and Armando D. Manalo respectively described him as “the most distinguished living Filipino writer” and “the first really first-rate writer to come out of this country since the Americans introduced their language here” (39; 9). The multiple accolades Joaquín received during his writing career include the conferment of the country’s highest cultural honors, such as the Republic Cultural Heritage Awards for Literature (1961), the title of National Artist in Literature (1976), and the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts (1996).

Though critically acclaimed and highly popular, Joaquín’s writing also often propagates the not-uncontroversial idea that the Philippines was borne out of the encounter between the archipelago and the Spanish conquistadors—and the subsequent inculcation of an achronological and disparate region with a sense of historicity and community through the introduction of new media (*Culture and History* 16–17). This was in contrast to more common and popular narratives that depict the nation as having spontaneously emerged among communities in the pre-colonial era or as a result of nationalist activities in the nineteenth century. The importance that Joaquín placed on encounters between cultures ramifies throughout his oeuvre as encounters between supposed binary opposites: the magical and the real, tradition and modernity, the masculine and the feminine, the old and the young, etc. Joaquín’s “favourite thesis,” as Mojares puts it, incurred the wrath of individuals such as Federico Mangahas, the founder and first president of the Philippine Writer’s League and an influential journalist (“Biography”). Mojares himself notes that Joaquín, “more polemical than academic,” “tended to be too dismissive of precolonial culture [...], overstressed the transformative role of technology [introduced by the Spanish], and was perhaps too apologetic

of the Spanish and Christian influence in Philippine culture.” That said, this position was just as passionately defended by Joaquín’s supporters, who argue that the Philippines’ Spanish colonial past serves as a standard against which Joaquín judges the failings of the modern world.¹ Joaquín proposed this thesis in the 1930s in response to an American-influenced intelligentsia that sought to wean itself quickly and neatly from the (Spanish colonial) past; he reiterated his stance in the 1970s, which saw what he perceived as the Marcos regime’s “scapegoating of the West” in an effort to legitimize their rule (Mojares, “Biography”). In the twenty-first century, Joaquín’s stance remains relevant in light of ongoing decolonization efforts that seek to challenge established binary systems and cultural boundaries.

The complexities attendant on this negotiation of the Philippines’ relationship to its colonial legacies lies at the heart of one of Joaquín’s best-known works, “A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino: An Elegy in Three Scenes” (1950), which is often considered one of the most important twentieth century Filipino plays. Since its publication in *Weekly Women’s Magazine* and *Prose and Poems* in 1952, the play has been staged multiple times all over the Philippines in English and Tagalog, as well as in the United States and South Korea; it has also been adapted into films by Lamberto V. Avellana (*A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*, 1965) and Loy Arcenas (*Larawan*, 2017). Set in 1941, the play dramatizes the decline of the Marasigan family at a moment of great change in Philippine history: having just emerged from the unsuccessful Revolution of 1896 and the Philippine-American war, and in the midst of American annexation, the Philippines is on the cusp of being invaded by the Japanese, which would see it—particularly its capital Manila, where the narrative takes place—reduced to ruins. The Marasigan family, a former bastion of cultural and social ideals, struggles to find their place in this turbulent world beset by modernity: Don Lorenzo, the patriarch, a once-revered painter, and a leading member of the Revolution, has largely faded into obscurity; his daughters Candida and Paula—the only two of his four children left holding the fort in the family house—are spinsters living in poverty and the targets of the town’s gossip. Meanwhile, despite their best efforts, the family home is slowly but surely falling apart around them.

In tracing the demise of the Marasigan family, Joaquín also traces the passing of a certain spirit of the age associated with Spanish imperialism. At the heart of Joaquín’s elegy for this Philippines is the titular portrait by Don Lorenzo, which depicts the scene of Aeneas’s departure from Troy after it has been sacked by the Greeks. The image of Aeneas carrying his elderly father, Anchises, on his back while his son, Ascanius, follows at his side, is a recurring trope in artworks throughout the ages, finding form on the vases of Attic painters in the sixth century and in sculptures such as Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius* (1618–1619). It has also been cited and adapted in a variety of contexts by artists and writers as diverse as Chaucer (*The House of Fame*, 1374–1385), Raphael (*The Fire in the Borgo*, 1514–1517), Shakespeare (*Henry VI, Part 2*, 1591 and *As You Like It*, 1599), Kuo Pao Kun (*Mama Looking for her Cat*, 1988), and Robert Hass (“The World as Will and Representation,” 2007), often in relation to meditations on time, duty, power, defeat, exile, loss, and frailty. Similarly, in “A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino,” Joaquín examines colonial cultural legacies in the Philippines as an unasked-for inheritance that has yet been formative to the nation’s sense of self. This moral dilemma is given form in the Don’s ambivalent re-interpretation of the myth of Aeneas, which serves to critique legacies of control and domination while recuperating this inheritance as a re-appropriated element in the syncretic production of a distinctly Filipino culture—as well as the conversations surrounding, and critique of, the painting offered by the various visitors to the family in the course of the play. Central to the painting’s operation is its evocation purely through ekphrasis: in allowing Joaquín to dramatize the

working through of power relations that inhere in Filipino society and to recreate the conditions under which active communal participation in meaning-making can emerge, ekphrasis models a process in which culture is transformed from a site of power, domination, and fragmentation into one of community and exchange.

A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino: A Grotesque Negotiation of Colonial Cultural Legacies

In arguing that “Philippine history [and culture] is the overt result of various others shaping its sense of self” and that the Philippines hence exists only as an “unfinished ‘reality,’” writer Gina Apostol gives voice to the moral dilemma that the Philippines faces in its negotiation of its colonial past (60). On one hand, generations of colonization have left the Philippines bereft, its land destroyed, and its people scattered. On the other hand, these regimes also left cultural legacies that constitute at least some of the stuff of which the Filipino identity is made—or, according to Joaquín, the very foundation on which the Filipino identity is built. In “A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino,” Joaquín negotiates this problem through the medium of painting, which, unlike theatre, has no indigenous precedent (Roces 164).² It is part of the cultural legacy inherited from Spanish colonization of the Philippines, having come to the archipelago by way of Ferdinand Magellan’s ships in the form of religious paintings in the sixteenth century (Javellana 157). These paintings, the tradition of which reflects a rich and intertwined European aesthetic heritage, served as prototypes for the teaching of painting to locals by Spanish friars and missionaries, resulting in work that imitated European styles; they were also instrumental to the religious conversion of the locals and therefore a means of perpetuating colonial rule (Javellana 157; Flores, *Painting History*).

It is on the basis of this historical association between painting and the colonial regime that the newspaper crew in Joaquín’s play, who visit the family to see the painting, charges the Don with “[celebrating] with exaggerated defiance values from which all content has vanished” and “[looking] back with nostalgic longing to the more perfect world of the Past” in his painting (Joaquín, “Portrait” 322). Citing key works of the Western aesthetic canon—Virgil’s *The Aeneid* and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), as well as the grotesque mode, and the Gothic, the Baroque, and the portrait traditions, the histories of which are commonly grounded in European culture—the Don’s painting is denounced as “the sickly product of a decadent imagination” (Joaquín, “Portrait” 322). That said, “European art,” as received in the Philippines, was often already mediated by, and reworked through, other colonial experiences such as that of Mexico, particularly given that the Philippines was ruled by the Viceroyalty of New Spain based in Mexico until the early nineteenth century (Flores 176). Unsurprisingly, then, even back in the sixteenth century, a Philippine aesthetic was nascent with artwork reflecting an “instinctive or non-deliberate fusion” of European idioms and indigenous perspectives, such that in reflecting the colonial experience, they also challenged it (Javellana 161–162, 168; Flores 127–182).³ It is within this praxis that the Don’s painting must be placed: drawing self-reflexively on aesthetic modes and traditions premised on irreconcilable realities and the rupture of boundaries, the Don’s citations of the European aesthetic canon are co-opted into a critique of imperialism.

The Don’s *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*, for instance, reconfigures the myth of Aeneas from a valorization of filiality and lineage into an interrogation of the power dynamics that underlie the Philippines’ cultural legacies through the grotesque mode. His representation of the scene in which Aeneas flees Troy deviates significantly from that in *The Aeneid*, not least

of all because the Don paints himself as both Aeneas and Anchises, as he used to be in the past and as he is now. In doing so, he short-circuits the lines of continuity traditionally evoked between father and son, youth and old age, the past and the future; the Don also notably does not include Ascanius by his father's side. Here, there is no sense of Intramuros, Manila, where the Marasigans live, being resurrected as "a new Tyre and Sidon," no "new Rome" emerging from the ashes of Troy (Joaquín, "Portrait" 293). Instead, the past folds in on itself in a circle that sees the Don carrying himself not to a new eternal city but to "his own grave" (367). The painting has been read as a lament of the stillborn revolution of 1896 or of how "the present generation had been disloyal to the traditional beliefs and ideals of the past" (Pablo 200). Tellingly, however, what the image of the Don mirrored as if "a man with two heads," of the past repeating itself in the present, inspires is not wistful nostalgia though the moment depicted is one of defeat and loss; rather, the effect of the painting is fear accompanied by fascination: characters declare it a "masterpiece" while admitting that "[t]he effect is rather frightening," and remark about its "horrible eyes" and how it "gives me the creeps" while "*staring fixedly*" at it (Joaquín, "Portrait" 304, 303, 330).⁴ This paradoxical emotional complex denotes the grotesque work of art—that is to say, the depiction of an "*unresolved clash of incompatibles*" (Thomson 27) that speaks to anxieties arising from an enforced and violent confrontation with difference.⁵ The mode is also evoked by the Don's appropriation of elements from the Gothic and Baroque traditions—the uncanny doubling, the stark contrast of those "frightening faces, those darkly smiling faces" against the "calm and spacious" background, the depiction of the dramatic moment with "the burning towers of Troy" in the distance, etc. (Joaquín, "Portrait" 303)—that similarly engage with notions of excess and transgression.

Joaquín's deployment of the grotesque (as well as the Gothic and the Baroque) can be understood in the context of Spanish colonization in the Philippines, its continued subjugation to colonial powers in the twentieth century, and Manila's eventual destruction at the hands of Japanese and American imperial powers.⁶ Painted in the likeness of the colonizing West, the grotesque as that which "ruptures boundaries, compromising them to the point where they admit the contradiction and ambiguity of a contrasting reality" (Connelly 10) offers a means of expressing the fraught and indeterminate relationship between the colonizer and the colonized—particularly given that the syntax of the latter's culture has been irrevocably disrupted and produced anew by that of the former (Joaquín, *Culture and History* 12). This relationship can be parsed in terms of the logic of a perverse "conviviality," to borrow Achille Mbembe's term for the distorted power relations that persist in postcolonial communities (110). The same claim can be made of colonial Philippines as it experienced increasing degrees of imperialization over the course of many centuries. This, coupled with the locals' adoption and adaptation of the new cultures, resulted in the creation of a syncretic culture that only came under widespread attack of a regime of violence and domination in the nineteenth century, which in turn prompted a rise in nationalist sentiment (Joaquín, *Culture and History* 135–136; Phelan 26, 135; Mojares, *Brains of the Nation* 383–466). A "double portrait" (Joaquín, "Portrait" 304) of the Filipino that emphasizes difference and disjunction, the Don's painting self-consciously confronts traditional principles of aesthetic representation and through them, the assumptions and illusions of a culture that insists on verisimilitude, harmony, and the essential (Stamelman 608)—as well as the very possibility of self-representation, the concept of which also emerged only during the Spanish period (Roces 179). In doing so, it challenges cultural and social rationalities linked to colonial governmentality, which paradoxically contributed to the construction and amplification of differences within the Filipino community and self.⁷ Drawing on the grotesque as "a creative force for conceptualizing the indeterminate that is produced by distortion, and reflecting on the significance of the uncertainty that is thereby produced" (Edwards

and Gralund 3), the Don's painting gives form to a Filipino reality and subjectivity that has been rendered highly ambivalent by colonization.

These fault lines in the Filipino identity meet in the position of the artist⁸—or more broadly, the *ilustrado*—depicted in the Don's painting as a monstrosity caught between a Western-shaped past and a Western-led modernity (Joaquín, "Portrait" 303). The Don's cultural vocabulary gestures to his membership of this historically emplaced elite class, which emerged in the wake of the opening of the Philippines to world trade in the nineteenth century. Landowning and wealthy, Spanish-speaking and often educated overseas, *ilustrados* were inspired by and helped to disseminate Western culture and liberal ideals, the latter which fired up already extant nationalist sentiments in them; many would go on to play leading roles in the nationalist Propaganda Movement, which would pave the way for the 1896 Revolution. The nationalist movement driven by the *ilustrados*, however, was an elite initiative that largely alienated the wider Filipino population (Schumacher, *The Propaganda Movement*; Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*), as articulated by the character Tony Javier, who begrudges that he "went hungry and ... got kicked about just the same in spite of that old Revolution" (Joaquín, "Portrait" 317). The movement had also sought assimilation with the larger Spanish Peninsular rather than separatism such that while individual members were celebrated for their intellectual, aesthetic, and political contributions, they were also "vilified as a 'class' for their 'betrayal' of nationalism and their co-optation by and accommodation with the colonial and postcolonial states" (Hau 10).⁹ For the young modern crowd of newspaper staff, the Don symbolizes this spirit of disappointment surrounding the *ilustrado* class; it is in this vein that they accuse the painting of being a result of "a decadent *bourgeois* imagination" and the Don and his cohort of being "relics of the glorious Past" (Joaquín, "Portrait" 326–327). Meanwhile, Bitoy, the narrator and the Marasigans' family friend, is equal parts nostalgic for the innocent childhood days spent with them and bitterly resentful about their defiant adherence to the past in the face of the waves of change buffeting the country in "the hard, hard nineteen-thirties, when everybody [else] seemed to have become poor and shabby and disillusioned and ill-tempered" (348). The *ilustrado's* position, hence, exemplifies the split consciousness and fraught identities within the Filipino community as a result of Spanish colonization and American annexation, which redrew the archipelago along new social, political, economic, and cultural lines.

The Don's painting is hence an allegory for the traumatic encounter between two cultures—an encounter that Joaquín highlights is also potentially transformative. As Homi Bhaba points out, the ambivalence produced as an effect of colonial power "enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty, that turns the discursive traditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention" ("Signs" 154). Even as the Don's appropriation of *The Aeneid* and various Western aesthetic traditions shift the emphasis of Virgil's account from the heroic resurrection of Western culture into a critique of colonial regimes of violence and domination, it also subverts the homogenizing and reductive colonial gaze by bearing witness to the syncretism enabled by these same forces and the locals' active participation in the shaping of their own culture. The painting's operation is emphasized by Joaquín's deployment of ekphrasis: given the circumstances under which it emerges, the portrait of the riven Filipino self fails to find form onstage; situated "in the centre of the invisible 'fourth wall' between stage & audience" (Joaquín, "Portrait" 296), it is only ever evoked through the characters' verbal descriptions of and their articulated responses towards it.¹⁰ Ekphrasis allows Joaquín to give form to the conditions of ambivalence from which a coherent sense of Filipino identity is expected to—and fails to—emerge. Beyond that, it also allows him to emphasize the interventionist role that Filipinos played in their history and, in doing so, articulate an alternative ethics of relation among difference that is not premised on mechanics of domination and control.

Staging Ambivalent Encounters

James Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis as "*the verbal representation of visual representation*" (3) is premised on conditions of impossibility—the irrecoverable absence of the visual representation is emphasized by the presence of the verbal representation that nevertheless stands defiantly in its place. The significance of ekphrasis lies in the tension evoked by the latter's acknowledged "failure" to adequately replace the former; the technique, then, can be understood as the verbal representation of a self-reflexively ambivalent negotiation of presence and absence. This relationship has, in turn, been mapped onto a range of other perceived polarities—verbal representation meets visual representation on a threshold at which one negotiates subject and object, spectator and image, absence and presence, voice and silence, the dynamism of narrative and the fixity of the image, etc.—and the power relations that inhere between them. Ekphrasis, W. J. T. Mitchell points out, tends to "expose the social structure of representation as an activity and a relationship of power/knowledge/desire," being "something done to something, with something, by someone, for someone" (180). Tellingly, ekphrasis is traditionally parsed in terms of power discourses, "a contest between rival modes of representation" (Heffernan 6).¹¹ It is hence unsurprising that ekphrasis has found resonance in postcolonial literature, where its engagement with alterity has been used to interpret and challenge political and cultural relations between "an active, speaking, seeing subject" and "a passive, seen, and (usually) silent object" (Mitchell 157).¹² Haunting ekphrasis-as-social practice is the proposition that "[I]ike the masses, the colonized, the powerless and voiceless everywhere, visual representation cannot represent itself; it must be represented by discourse" (157). Against this, ekphrasis potentially "bring[s] to the fore the heterogeneity and plurality of meaning-making and [...] reflect[s] the essential impurity and ... hybridity of all cultural formations" (Neumann 514).

In "A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino," the Don's painting is verbally evoked as the site on which power dynamics between the various characters play out, all of which are mediated through the painting's negotiation of cultural legacies. The physical absence of the painting emphasizes the way in which the various characters' articulated responses towards the Don's painting, and therefore the state of the Philippines' cultural landscape, are interpretations that emerge from their particular subject positions and re-present the painting in light of their own agendas. Candida and Paula grapple with the painting as both an encapsulation of the (European) cultural ideals to which they are bound because of the Don, and as an unasked-for inheritance from their father, its horror a deserved punishment for their blaming of him for their dismal situation and humiliation, and his eventual suicide attempt: "there he stands mocking, mocking our agony!" cries Candida (347). Meanwhile, the newspaper team, representing the modern post-revolution generation, are affronted by the discourse of the elite neo-colonial class that speaks through the portrait as if on behalf of all Filipinos and respond to the painting with cynicism, dismissing it as "a piece of tripe" and evidence of an impoverished imagination that can only fall back on "[t]he most hackneyed theme in all Art!" (322). At the same time, they begrudgingly acknowledge the popular, if not the cultural, value of the painting and ask to borrow it to raise funds for "the Democratic cause all over the world" in the seemingly liberal spirit of American modernity (334). The Philippine government, for its part, represented by Don Perico, seeks to lay claim on the painting as a *Filipino* cultural masterpiece, with the latter lamenting that Don Lorenzo's "great works are all abroad—in the museums of Spain and Italy" (361). Simultaneously, Don Perico betrays his own nostalgia for his *ilustrado* past, reading into the painting "the world of my youth, a beautifully accurate picture" and missing its nuances; his focus falls on "the young Lorenzo, the true Lorenzo, the magnifico" and "[n]ot that bony, shivering, naked old man he is carrying on his back" (358). The ambivalent

ekphrastic re-presentations of *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* give form to the present of the Philippines as incoherent and its future as forestalled; notably, the characters in Joaquín's play tend to move freely about the space of the stage only to inevitably fix their gaze on the painting and come to a standstill as they offer their varying competing interpretations of it, giving the impression of narrative progress being arrested by their evocations.¹³

Joaquín's dramatization of these relations through ekphrasis makes visible the painting's thematic concerns with the conditions under which the Filipino identity is expected to emerge; it also sets the stage for a transformation of these conditions into thresholds that allow for dynamic interaction and exchange. Ekphrasis not only stages an encounter between two mediums but also proposes a potentially productive relation between them; Stephen Cheeke speaks of ekphrasis as a "creative act" that exceeds the function of mimesis (185).¹⁴ It is this capacity that Joaquín draws on to model the ways in which the Filipino has always played an active role in the shaping of their history and culture. The Don's painting serves as "a site of conflict, a nexus where political, institutional, and social antagonisms play themselves out in the materiality of representation" (Mitchell 91): the characters' varying and competing encounters with and interpretations of it are the means by which they actively negotiate the moral dilemma facing the Filipino population regarding their cultural heritage and by which they work to give form to that which resists form (i.e., the Filipino identity). The newspaper team's critique of the painting, for instance, raises key questions about culture in the particular context of mid-nineteenth century annexed Philippines: should art be "autonomous" or "socially significant" (Joaquín, "Portrait" 321–322)? What kind of cultural values should it celebrate—and whose? Is art still relevant given that "[t]he future of democracy and of the human race itself is in peril" (325)?

Bitoy, whose opening evocation literally sets the stage for this colloquy though he remains largely a bystander, comes closest to grasping the significance of the Don's painting, recognizing that it is meant to "disenchant" (336)—that is to say, to reveal the ambivalence inherent in the Filipino condition as a result of its colonial past and to provoke critical conversation about its complexities as much as about its possibilities. Confronting his own ambivalence towards what the Marasigans represent and his initial instinct to reject his past entirely, he concludes that while the time of the Marasigans has passed and that "maybe it's just as well" that it did, at the same time, "[s]omething of it" is worth preserving (431–432). This "something" is a sense of agency in the fashioning of one's own identity and culture that Paula asserts at the end of the play by paradoxically destroying *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*: this act symbolizes the sisters' autonomous rejection of a grotesque "filial piety" that liberates them to forge "a new relationship" with their father and their past (420). This new relationship is given form in the feast of La Naval de Manila, which closes Joaquín's play. In commemorating the Spanish's defeat of the Dutch in their attempts to invade Manila in 1646, it "encloses the first sprouting of native nationalism" as Filipinos celebrated "the continuation of their own power and privilege" as a community albeit with the help of their allies, the Spanish (*Culture and History* 133).¹⁵

In the play, Joaquín is concerned with creating the conditions under which this "feeling of active communal participation" is produced for the audience (Oloroso 783), whether it is through his drawing on the grotesque tradition in the Don's painting, which critics have noted depends on the response it evokes in the viewer for its effect (Thomson 27; Connelly 2), or his choice of the theatrical medium. The premise of any act of theater lies, after all, in the engagement of a spectator's gaze: as Peter Brook has it, "A man walks across this empty space while someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (9). Furthermore, in the specific context of Philippine theater, the medium is often spoken of in connection to precolonial

transformative community rituals and to the tradition of a theater of social protest that flourished in the late nineteenth century through to the twenty-first century (Fernandez, *Palabas*; Hontiveros-Avellana, "Philippine Drama"). Hontiveros-Avellana's description of theater rings particularly true in the case of Philippine theater:

This, after all, is the final destiny of the theatre. The invisible yet solid bond between the actors on the stage and the people who watch them; the sympathy, the understanding and the responsive reactions between these two groups—the communion between life as produced behind the footlights and the lives of those in the [audience]. [...] For the theatre, after all, is not on the stage behind the footlights—it is there out front, among the seats. (688)

This proclivity for engaging the audience in Philippine theater is reinforced by Joaquín's situating of the Don's painting in the liminal space of "the invisible 'fourth wall' between stage & audience" (296)—that "point of invisible contact between the actors and audience" (Oloroso 779). The location of the painting is such that even as the audience watches Joaquín's "A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino"—that is, his staging of the dynamic negotiation of the complexities attendant on the representation of the Filipino identity—they also collectively constitute the titular portrait that the characters encounter. This is most clearly alluded to in the metatheatrical references to the painting's "horrible eyes," which Tony and Susan (Tony's friend and a vaudeville artist) feel are constantly looking at them and judging them (331, 316). In this way, Joaquín forces the audience out of any sense of complacency or detachment, draws them into an intimacy with the stage, and compels their participation in the moral task at hand by passing the responsibility of self-representation, previously sited in the painting, onto them.

This moral task entrusted onto the audience is elaborated on by Joaquín's ekphrastic evocation of the Don's painting, not least because ekphrasis, understood in terms of the rhetorical technique of *enargeia* (to bring vividly to life), has as its goal the production of an emotional affect on the audience (Webb 88ff). Joaquín's particular deployment of ekphrasis in the play—mediating between notional ekphrasis, which involves purely fictional artworks, and actual ekphrasis, which is premised on real and identifiable artworks (Hollander 209)—further involves the audience in his working through of the moral dilemma regarding the Philippines' cultural legacies. On one hand, *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* is a fictional artwork with no corresponding real-world referent; moreover, it never manifests onstage. In the case of notional ekphrasis, the "reality" of the artwork depends on the audience's imaginative participation to a much higher degree. That said, on the other hand, Joaquín deliberately draws on a familiar scene that has been prolifically reproduced such that the many extant cultural representations of the Aeneas myth potentially offer the audience some degree of reference. Faced with the co-existence of these two images, the audience is implicated in the play's negotiation of tensions between constraint and freedom, affiliation and the adversarial, reconciliation and resistance, and representation and self-representation—and therefore in Joaquín's attempt to disclose the Filipino in a scene that is ostensibly "not Filipino," as Bitoy and the newspaper team remark (Joaquín, "Portrait" 303, 322).

Writing thus in the mid-twentieth century, Joaquín anticipates the twenty-first century's shift from a definition of ekphrasis in terms of a rivalry, the resolution of which is figured as "the overcoming of otherness" (Mitchell 156), towards an understanding of ekphrasis as "a form of encounter or exchange," reflecting an increasing concern with "ideas of ethics, affect, and inter-subjectivity" over "representational and institutional struggles" (Kennedy and Meek 11). At Joaquín's hands, the power of ekphrasis, and visual culture in general, extends beyond its basic

descriptive protocols to articulate an ethics of relation between difference premised on reciprocity and collaboration rather than mastery and co-option as per the mechanisms of the colonial gaze. In “A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino,” Joaquín draws on ekphrasis not just for its capacity to model power relations but more importantly, for its potential for a “more generous lateral engagement” (Harrow 259)—a dynamic and generative transgression—in its mediation of the volatile relations between supposed polarities.

Conclusion

Joaquín’s “A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino” is a “parable on the encounter of cultures” that makes visible its potential for both violence and transformation, critiquing the one while celebrating the other (Javellana 168).¹⁶ It is hence that Joaquín is interested in the latency of the in-between, be it the liminal spaces of the grotesque and the fourth wall between art and audience, the cultural intermediaries that were the *ilustrados*, or the intermedial device of ekphrasis. It is also hence that he wrote the play (and generally) in English, an act that was “[f]rom the start ... fraught with contradiction,” simultaneously consolidating American imperialism and serving as “the privileged idiom for expressing the novel experience of a coming freedom” associated with American modernity (Rafael, “Introduction” xvii, xx). Apostol describes Joaquín’s use of English as such: “He took on with blithe sin the language of his father’s enemy, mastering it to witness the paradoxical ways a nation survives. [...] His unapologetic, Calibanic choice of English is both rebuke to the occupier and revenge upon it” (“Foreword” xii). Bhabha discusses this notion of the postcolonial “third space” as “terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (*The Location of Culture* 1–2). It is in these “interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference,” he argues, that cultural values, along with nationhood and community interest, can be negotiated (2)—and that, as Joaquín demonstrates, subjection can be subverted into strategies of self-fashioning.

For Joaquín, the Filipino identity was brought forth and determined by the perverse conviviality enforced through centuries of colonization: necessarily fragmented and ambivalent, it is also grounded in resistance and an assertion of autonomy, the traces of which are most evident in Filipino culture. If Joaquín “emphasizes ... the necessity of restoring a national awareness of our Catholic Spanish heritage” in his work (Pablo 190), it is with the aim of challenging historiographies that replicate an imperial logic in seeking to eradicate these aspects of Filipino history—whether these narratives stem from the nineteenth century nationalist movement; the twentieth century American annexation, which sought to reshape the national drama into one that postulated American occupation as the origin of Philippine nationhood (Mojares, *Brains of the Nation* 480–498); or twenty-first century post-independence efforts at developing a national cultural history structured around precolonial indigeneity. This gesture amounts to the dismissal of the long tradition of participation and intervention of Filipinos in the shaping of their culture.¹⁷ It is the loss of this interventionist “spirit” (Joaquín, “Portrait” 420) that the Marasigan sisters seek to honor and the “something” that Bitoy vows to preserve; that Joaquín perceives as the essence of the Filipino and an important index of the Philippines’ progress as a nation; and that the play as an elegy mourns—and not the colonial regime itself, as the modern newspaper team sees it, with which this cultural interchange is inextricably and unfortunately intertwined. The problem of the Filipino, as staged by Joaquín in “A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino” and elaborated on in *Culture and History* almost four decades later, is “how to integrate what’s felt to a disagreeable first act into the national drama without making either the colonizer or the colonial embarrassingly

prominent, and yet with not downgrading of their era; with the intent, in fact, of revealing how relevant, how important, that era was to us” (7). Joaquín’s solution is to recenter culture in the conversation as that which animates the capacity of exchange, intimacy, and community, and to celebrate it as a “gift that circulates and which no one owns” (Rafael, “Introduction” xxiv).

Notes

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- 1 See Lourdes Busuego Pablo, “The Spanish Tradition in Nick Joaquín.”
- 2 Patrick D. Flores notes that prior to Spanish colonization, natives already demonstrated an “inclination for pictoriality” as evident in their practice of body drawing and painting although there was nothing like the European visual culture (129–130).
- 3 This tradition would mature in the nineteenth century with the nationalist movement. See, for instance, Esteban Villanueva’s (1798–1878) series, *Basi Revolt* (1821), which was commissioned by the colonial state to commemorate the failed 1807 attempt to overthrow it and to warn against future coups; critics have, however, also argued that Villanueva included symbolism that lend the paintings to an alternative reading of martyrdom, and “community and resistance” (Flores 25–26; Pilar and Vinuya, “Villanueva, Esteban”).
- 4 This is particularly striking given that this episode in the *Aeneid* is often cited in service of pathos.
- 5 Beyond the painting, the grotesque also finds form in the juxtaposition of the Marasigans’ house, as well as Candida and Paula, in the midst of ruins, obstinately raging against the dying light. That said, contrary to Pablo’s reading of the sisters as defenders of “their father’s idealism which the modern world has condemned as impractical and foolhardy” (200), the past is no “welcome load” (*Aeneid* 128) for the sisters. Fixated in horror, incomprehension, and guilt by their father’s painting, they are unable to participate in any semblance of futurity: they refuse to sell the painting although the money would ensure their survival and are hence doomed to an allegiance to the past that manifests in the form of a hopeless biding of time.
- 6 See Philip Holden’s “The ‘postcolonial Gothic’” and John Blanco’s “Baroque Modernity and the Colonial World” for discussions of the Gothic and the Baroque in Joaquín’s oeuvre.
- 7 For instance, the establishment of a linguistic hierarchy accompanying the introduction and dissemination of colonial languages, at the bottom of which lay the many diverse native vernacular languages, helped in turn to shape social and cultural hierarchies (Rafael, “Introduction”; *Motherless Tongues*; “Colonial Contractions”).
- 8 In his introduction to a study of the *ilustrado* painter Juan Luna, Joaquín declares, “the Filipino as painter was the First Filipino. He was the first to exemplify, both in himself and in his works, those virtues that were said to be lacking in the Indio; and by making those figures define the identity of the Filipino, he advanced the process of our evolution from Indio to Filipino” (“Introduction” 16); in addition to these virtues, one might also add the ambivalences of the Filipino condition.
- 9 Post-revolution, the class, represented by *ilustrado*-turned-senator Don Perico in the play, continued to benefit from their connections with Europe and America such as by being offered “positions in local municipal boards, the military, and the civil service” (San Juan 9). See also Mojares, *Brains of the Nation* (492–493).
- 10 Similarly, the Don himself, exemplar of this self, does not appear onstage and is only alluded to and mentioned by other characters.
- 11 See also Mitchell’s “Ekphrasis and the Other” and Cheeke’s *Writing for Art*.
- 12 See, for instance, Gabriele Rippl’s “Postcolonial Ekphrasis,” Birgit Neumann’s “Intermedial Negotiations,” and Michael Meyer’s *Word & Image in Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures*.
- 13 This notion is also given form in Bitoy’s ekphrastic evocation of the Marasigans’ home in the city of Intramuros at the start of the play. His descriptions are so detailed and impassioned as to yield the scene they describe, calling the Marasigan home back into existence onstage and, along with them, the family itself: as he speaks, the lights go on inside the stage and “*the sala of the Marasigan house becomes visible*” (293–294). That said, his conjured presence of these places is haunted by their inevitable-because-already-pronounced-and-staged destruction; moreover, their resurrection is self-consciously temporary, bounded as it is by the limits of the ephemeral theatrical medium, and when the lights go

- down at the end of the play, all the audience are left with are “*the stark ruins, gleaming in the silent moonlight*” (432).
- 14 See also Heffernan, Tamar Yacobi’s “Ekphrastic Double Exposure,” and Michael Benton’s “Anyone for Ekphrasis?”
 - 15 The venerated image of the Virgin at the heart of this celebration also speaks to this process of inculturation: she is dressed in a “17th-century style Spanish court dress, ornamented with various gems and jewels” including “a large red gem on her head that allegedly came from the mouth of a giant serpent in the Pasig, and two jewels presented by Norodom I of Cambodia to Josefa and Ana Roxas of Bulacan during his Manila visit in 1872” (Ocampo, “La Naval de Manila” 15).
 - 16 Here, I borrow architect Rodrigo Perez’s description of the architecture of the Roman Catholic Morong Church in Rizal, Philippines, which is exemplary of the ambivalent effects of colonial power: carvings on two wooden posts depict native crocodiles simultaneously swallowing and disgorging Greek Ionic columns, signaling both “voracious acceptance” and “contemptuous rejection” (qtd. in Javellana 168).
 - 17 Though Joaquín’s play focuses on the intellectual and cultural elite, this participation was notably not limited to them but also included ordinary folk such as craftsmen. This is gestured to in Bitoy’s description of Intramuros, the architecture of which demonstrates the syncretization of foreign styles and materials such as stone with native engineering and needs (“Sa Loob ng Maynila” 117; see also Javellana 107–124). In addition, Intramuros, a common trope in Joaquín’s work, is also notable for the way it gathered all of Manila in communal participation in generations-old ceremonies which, while usually liturgical and hence colonial in origin, also allowed Filipinos to pursue a sense of continuity within their own community that served as a form of resistance against oppression and domination (Joaquín, “Sa Loob ng Maynila”).

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