

The Building of “Anthropologic”
By Barbara Jane Reyes

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I began writing the poem “Anthropologic” as an assignment for a creative writing workshop in which I enrolled at Vista Community College in Berkeley. Prior to taking this class, I had never before taken creative writing classes and barely considered my process as a proactive, deliberate one. I hadn’t thought too much about how I construct poems, though I was somewhat aware of some of my poems’ rhythms and that I drew from certain literary and cultural influences.

I’d always feared and avoided creative writing classes; discipline seemed counterintuitive as an “artist” who should just let the duende show itself, and the very real possibility of losing my own voice and being coerced to write in someone else’s terrified me. As the weeks passed, however, I discovered that I was capable of deliberate and crafty writing, open to examining others’ uses of form and language, wanting to know more about others’ creative processes, incorporating others’ techniques into my own when I found it fitting to do so, altering or amending these as needed.

DELIBERATE CONSTRUCTION

The process of writing the bones of this poem was not so remarkable. Having been totally mind-blown by Professor José Saldivar’s Ethnic Studies 173, “Cultures of U.S. Imperialism” class as an undergrad at UC Berkeley, saturated by Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan of the Apes* and the (homoerotic) memoirs of Theodore Roosevelt male-bonding with the Rough Riders in Cuba, I began laying down quotes from my dog-eared and copiously underlined texts of Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s *Woman Native Other* and Edward W. Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*:

“The perception of the outsider as the one who needs help has taken on the successive forms of the barbarian, the pagan, the infidel, the wild man, the ‘native,’ and the underdeveloped.”

—Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Woman Native Other*

“Of all the modern sciences, anthropology is the one historically most closely tied to colonialism, since it was often the case that anthropologists and ethnologists advised colonial rulers in the manners and the mores of the native people.”

—Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

From here, I scrawled down images upon images these texts elicited — American soldiers fighting in Philippine jungles, American anthropologists studying “subjects” of nameless natives first dancing in tribal costume, then boarding steam ships and leaving Manila Bay, now making

“homes” in St. Louis Fairgrounds. These were images from Marlon Fuentes’s *Bontoc Eulogy* — circa 1890-1900’s film footage of staged headhunting rituals utilizing a fake human head, these nameless natives engaging in silly games of tug-of-war, while well-dressed genteel Americans gazed at the spectacle. Black and white photographs of these same nameless natives’ feet, displaying widely spread toes which had developed as a tree-climbing aid, while an American male voice-over explains in “objective” Darwinian detail, how much “like the monkeys” these natives really were. All these archived materials collaged together and supplemented by the filmmaker’s own footage — Fuentes, circa 1990’s, roaming through the back rooms of natural history museums amid skeletons and dismembered body parts in preserve jars. Fuentes’s own narration as his character searches for the artifact that was once his grandfather, the tribesman Markod.

It was almost like writing a research paper, establishing a thesis and searching for supporting evidence. Once I figured out I was drawing from *Bontoc Eulogy* and the 1904 World’s Fair, I conducted an internet search for anything Geronimo, who I knew had been exhibited at the World’s Fair after being captured in the “Indian Wars” of the Southwest. The connection between Native Americans and Pilipinos was undeniable — bones and other human remains, sacred objects in American museum collections, American education and conversion to Christianity as the systematic erasure of culture. Even the naming of the World Fair’s Philippine Reservation tells us what is glaringly obvious.

The Apache chief Geronimo’s autobiography, *His Own Story*, revealed a perspective that was not subversive as I hoped it would be, but it was still one I could utilize — the voice of a defeated warrior, a once “wild,” recently “civilized” tribesman in American captivity. (Check out <<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/B/geronimo/geronixx.htm>> for *His Own Story*.)

What I consider remarkable is the discussion that took place in my Vista creative writing workshop, and the numerous revisions of “Anthropologic.” Originally, I titled it “Anthropology,” but this title alone inspired resistance in my teacher and classmates, as if I were defiling some sacred thing with my interpretation of the “science.” I then chose “Anthropologic,” playing with the “anthropological” “logic” employed in the colonization of the Philippines. The superiority of the civilized over the savage. The duty of the civilized to uplift the savage.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RELEVANCE: POETRY OR POLITICS?

Because the poem’s subject matter is of an obscured (read: not intrinsically obscure) part of American history, it bewildered many of my monolingual, American classmates. Where I hoped for constructive discussion, there was only vast silence interspersed with mostly comments of confusion and aversion.

A young Vietnamese man who wrote about the War cited these lines as holding meaning for him:

*Exact penance from those
Who do not learn to speak proper English*

*Unmarked graves for insurrectos
Guns and uniforms for those who comply*

Though he may not have known of these specific historical details, he related his own personal and collective historical experiences.

The same was true of another classmate; a young African American man, whose work echoed Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam, the Black Panthers. His notes to me read: Your unique style has caused me to accept what is being said because it is presented in the way of school and books.

An older African American woman complained that she didn't understand my non-translated Pilipino words (that part was OK; I accept this), but she could not accept them remaining untranslated, nor could she try to derive meaning from context, nor was she willing to concede that the Pilipino words and titles served a purpose untranslated. I had hoped she could look into African American history and recognize these offensive media images familiar:

Nappy-haired black-faced babies,

Naked throwers of spears and tantrums

But the alien-ness of my non-Western language, its rejection in an American, English speaking classroom setting confirmed for me a hierarchy of foreignness. Whereas non-translated French, Latin, and other (Western) European languages are acceptable in English texts (T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*), Tagalog/Pilipino serves as an inconvenience to these same readers. If this isn't blatant colonial hangover, I don't know what is.

I remain adamant about not including translations or glossaries. To do so would compromise the artistry of my poetry. I am not a journalist or historian; there's no reason why I ought to include MLA citations and ethnographies. "Anthropologic" is a commentary on ethnography! I would prefer that the reader 1) look it up themselves, as good readers of literature should have agency, and 2) focus in on the manner in which these "alien" elements are assessed and interpreted by American anthropologists:

Subject: Ayta

Assessment: *Missing link*

Subject: Ifugao

Assessment: *Headhunter*

Subject: Moro

Assessment: *Infidel*

Subject: Mangyan

Assessment: *Wild man*

Subject: Negrito

Assessment: *Brown monkey*

Subject: Igorot

Assessment: *Dog eater*

While praising my poem as “bold,” my workshop leader, a Caucasian woman, admitted to feelings of discomfort while reading “Anthropologic.” She sought something not so cold and clinical, perhaps an individual’s account of living as an artifact. She referred to the first person narrative from Geronimo, a simultaneous prisoner and guest of the same World’s Fair, and a witness of the Philippine Reservation, as “satisfying” in its humanity.

Another classmate, a young Jewish woman argued; the point of the poem is its clinical coldness, negation of the individual’s experience, and cited the following as humanity erased:

Babaylan Datu Rajah

Catalonan Hari Sultan

And later:

Ama Ina Anak

In fact, my “Subject,” “Assessment,” and “Plan” section is derived from a medical encounter documentation format to which I have grown accustomed as a community health clinic administrator. My poetic revision of the manner in which one documents scientific examination of the clinically ill, diagnoses an ailment, disease, or non-curable syndrome, and subsequently establishes an appropriate treatment plan. A course of medication to stave off infection; surgery to excise a malignant tumor, to sever a gangrenous limb; speech therapy to eradicate a foreign accent; courses of other healing therapies, water torture, electric shocks to force someone’s obedience.

Pinay poet Michelle Bautista was also enrolled in this workshop and was especially helpful in pointing out that what it looked like I had were excerpts from anthropological notebooks and texts (left-hand justified) and my own notes on the anthropologists’ work (right-hand justified). What she saw emerging was my own anthropology of the anthropologist (Trinh Minh-Ha did this in *Woman Native Other*, observing the practices of anthropologists, then equating anthropology to gossip), my observations on the employed “scientific method.” It was only after Michelle’s comment that I consciously interjected my own voice:

***It is a logical assertion that the modern
“science” of anthropology was created and
legitimized by the modern empire in order to
legitimize the very empire which created it, by
claiming neutrality and objectivity in the
thorough examination and subsequent***

interpretation of empirical evidence.

Hence, anthropology as a tool for the building of empire. No empire without scientific method. No scientific method free from cultural bias. No cultural bias without dire historical consequences. No historical consequences are easily erased.

With these two verse paragraphs I thought I was giving the reader too much, even though the reader would now have to grapple with the idea of science as not totally objective. The reality of science abused for purposes of dominance.

WHITE SPACE... FOR WHITE PEOPLE!

Additionally, Michelle interpreted the readers' apparent discomfort as not having any place within the poem to rest their minds, however briefly. She advised me to look at the work of poets who have influenced my own. Leslie Marmon Silko, Myung Mi Kim, Catalina Cariaga came to mind — women of color who wrote of Western dominance over their own respective homelands and cultures. Michelle then asked me how these women convey disciplined intensity in their poems, and I replied, "with a lot of white space," and precise structuring.

Here is where a previously three-page poem grew to become a seven-page poem with a whole lot of white space: line breaks, double-spacing, page-breaks, though I worried that the poem would lose its momentum, its crucial density, and would read as tepid, experimental, abstract, soulless.

Historically, my poetic intentions have included prying readers away from their safe and comfortable places. I had always refused to scale down my language or tone if it meant losing sight of these poetic intentions. The politics of "Anthropologic" cannot be compromised for those who cannot bear to look at these obscured eras in American history because it would shake their foundations. The politics of "Anthropologic" is reliant upon questioning these very American historical foundations through the overload of information and through the poem's very structure. I intended to impart upon the reader the same ill-feeling uneasiness I continually experience every time I watch *Bontoc Eulogy*; someone like Fuentes's protagonist, the tribesman Markod, could be somewhere in my own genealogy. And at the same time, I also wished to impart upon my readers a sense of empowerment through the critical exposure of a systematic American erasure of us.

While this poem was alienating, perplexing, offensive to many in my creative writing workshop, I believe this to be a result of a not-explicitly-stated expectation that I, one of three Asian "foreigners" in the class, should happily play ambassador and anthropologist to them. That I should, rather than rely on a politicized or conscious audience working proactively towards some glimmer of understanding, however remote, save them the inconvenience of the work or the discomfort of the message, and soothe them gently with benign explanations, thereby undermining my own creative and political endeavor. I had already given away many concrete

historical clues — McKinley, Colt 45 M1911, “Jingo,” 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair (also known as the Louisiana Purchase World Exposition), Chief Geronimo, “China Melon.” I sensed they also expected me to placate the general climate of white guilt over such unsettling, such ugly American deeds and ugly Americanism. That my poems should have instead painted them pictures of idyllic island paradises, replete with images of childlike natives, golden mangoes, emerald rice terraces, and balmy monsoon seasons — more palatable themes from a writer born in the Pearl of the Orient.

I have never believed my job was to serve as ambassador and especially as anthropologist, to be the sole representative, or token, of my exotic foreignness to American audiences; they are not my primary audience and I don’t envision my work as pandering to them. My role as a poet is to contribute to an historical body of work written by us, for us, about us; to challenge audiences and readerships, especially folks of my generation, to devote quality, critical thought to the contradictions of our American lives, to those bodies of knowledge which have historically rendered us invisible.

I have read and reread the seven-page “Anthropologic” again and again and again (incidentally, as “Anthropologic” appears in my book *Gravities of Center*, it now takes up 12 pages). I have reflected on the sparseness of each page. In the beginning stages of this poem, I had cut out all extraneous articles in an effort to achieve a certain word concentration and impersonal, clinical tone. I’ve come to understand the value of white space in the academy; it is almost like an erasure of the poet from the poem.

White spaces for white people! And while I really used to hate the idea of white space, I now love that white space can be subversive, capitalizing upon the poem’s disturbing impersonality. I do not believe I have removed the poet from this poem, as my politics remain clear throughout. Rather than giving the reader safe “resting places,” I have given them clinic waiting rooms; places full of suspense and anxiety, to stop and process barrages of intense information, to linger about feeling unsafe and unsettled, to think about why they feel so unsafe and unsettled there. Fearful of what comes next. That much of the class was so ill at ease when others like me, young, progressive folks of color, were exhilarated and empowered confirms for me the poem’s effectiveness.

Anthropologic
After Marlon Fuentes's *Bontoc Eulogy*

"The perception of the outsider as the one who needs help has taken on the successive forms of the barbarian, the pagan, the infidel, the wild man, the 'native,' and the underdeveloped."

—Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Woman Native Other*

Stars Stripes

Land of Mo(u)rning

Metropolis Center

Frontier (Bad)lands

Howling General

Scourge Wild(er)ness

Colt 45 M1911

Machete (Will)power

Steam ship, high seas

Cosmopolitan (as) exploitation

Genteel teachers, bureaucrats

Mission: “Benevolent” “Assimilation”

McKinley’s fateful oath:

“Civilize” “Christianize”

Nappy-haired black-faced babies,

Naked throwers of spears and tantrums,

Sinister ladrones, tulisanes, banditos

Jingoist political cartoons

Wholly unfit for self-governance

*Introduction of
Little Brown Brother
To captive American public*

“Of all the modern sciences, anthropology is the one historically most closely tied to colonialism, since it was often the case that anthropologists and ethnologists advised colonial rulers in the manners and the mores of the native people.”

—Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

Babaylan Datu Rajah

Catalonan Hari Sultan

Subject: Ayta

Assessment: *Missing link*

Subject: Ifugao

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Assessment: *Infidel*

Subject: Mangyan

Assessment: *Wild man*

Subject: Negrito

Assessment: *Brown monkey*

Subject: Igorot

Assessment: *Dog eater*

Plan: Elevate, Improve

Anthems Parades

Annex colony

Commonwealth

Presidential Dream becomes Foreign Policy:

*Exact penance from those
Who do not learn to speak proper English*

*Unmarked graves for insurrectos
Guns and uniforms for those who comply*

It is a logical assertion that the modern “science” of anthropology was created and legitimized by the modern empire in order to legitimize the very empire which created it, by claiming neutrality and objectivity in the thorough examination and subsequent interpretation of empirical evidence.

Hence, anthropology as a tool for the building of empire. No empire without scientific method. No scientific method free from cultural bias. No cultural bias without dire historical consequences. No historical consequences are easily erased.

“There were little brown people at the Fair that the United States troops captured recently on some islands far away from here. ...I do not know how true the report was, but I heard the President sent them to the Fair so that they could learn some manners, and when they went home teach their people how to dress and how to behave.”

“The Government sent guards with me when I went, and I was not allowed to go anywhere without them.”

—Geronimo, “At the World’s Fair” in *His Own Story*

1904, *Meet Me in St. Louie Louie*, *Meet Me at the Fair*

In reservations

Vicarious savagery spectacle

Conquered feign ritual

2 PM Toy weapons

3 PM Plaster heads

Matinee Shows: Scripted marriage vows

Feats of hunting prowess

Barbecue of stray dogs

No rites of passage, deceased

(Disem)body research unceremonious

Ama Ina Anak

Formaldehyde in pickling jars
Slices of cranium
Cross-sections of stillborn
Tree-climbing toes spread
Curvature grip rough bark
Skeletons glass-encased

Could be anyone's great grandmother

Gawkers now neglect

Names never recorded

Phantasms of former selves

All this, just to vie for a slice of that China Melon.

