Vol. 1, No. 12
第一卷・第十二期

文化越界

Cross-cultural Studies

國立政治大學外國語文學院
跨文化研究中心
National Chengchi University
College of Foreign Languages and Literatures
Center for Cross-cultural Studies

Mediated Suffering and the Global Imaginary: Representations of the Other in the Wake of Typhoon Haiyan

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Abstract

On November 8, 2013, the strongest Category 5 typhoon ever recorded in terms of wind speed enveloped the Philippines, resulting in the deaths of thousands and over ten millions without homes. Typhoon Yolanda (or Haiyan, as it was known worldwide) became such a media event that for a brief time, the Philippines and its people became the subject of intense news coverage. Drawing on Shani Orgad's notion of the global imagination, among others, the present study examines the mediation of suffering among Yolanda's victims. Specifically, it interrogates representations of the distant, suffering other by the West, as well as representations offered by the "othered." To explore the multiplicity of viewpoints regarding the event, five different discursive registers were analyzed: a CNN news footage; conversations in a YouTube forum; a collection of poetry; a self-published memoir; and a performative piece. Findings reveal an interesting dialectic between victims as helpless and victims as agentic, or responsible for the tragedy that has befallen them; between an exaggerated sense of cosmopolitanism and a reduction of the other to primitivism; between naïve optimism and stark realism; and between suffering as homogenous and suffering as textural. Possibilities for the contestation of narratives are discussed.

Keywords: mediated, representation, othered, homogenous suffering texturalsuffering

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On Friday, November 8, 2013, the largest typhoon ever recorded in terms of wind speed struck the Philippines. Compared to the 2005 Hurricane Katrina, which was 400 miles in diameter, with wind speeds of up to 155 miles per hour; and to the 2012 Hurricane Sandy, which was 940 miles wide and 115 mph in speed—Typhoon Yolanda, as it was known to Filipinos (or Haiyan, as it was known worldwide), was 1,200 miles in diameter with speeds of up to 235 mph.[1]The typhoon hit the Pacific islands of Micronesia and Palau first, when it was a mere Category 2 storm, before accelerating and then enveloping the 1,700+ islands that make up the Philippines, at which point it had ascended to Category 5. With the eye of the storm centered on Visayas, this region suffered most heavily.[2] Many locales were leveled, including the capital of Leyte Province, Tacloban City, which in turn garnered much international media coverage.

According to estimates, over 10 million Filipinos were affected, 15 percent of whom were children under the age of five. One tenth, or one million, of those affected were shepherded into temporary shelters and evacuation centers. Upon impact, over five hundred thousand were rendered homeless, which climbed up to 2 million one week later, and ultimately, to 4 million. Two weeks after onset, 5,560 were confirmed dead, 26,194 had sustained injuries, and 1,726 were reported still missing. On average, there was only one functioning hospital for every 250,000 people in the region of Visayas.

With so many islands spread out across the country, the distribution of aid proved to be difficult. During this time, there were over 3,000 foreigners on site participating in search and rescue operations. Moreover, aid and donations were coming from all corners of the world. For example, South

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[1] From this point onwards, I will use "Yolanda" and "Haiyan" interchangeably. It must be noted that Yolanda is the 25th typhoon to hit the Philippines in the year 2013.Meteorological data and casualty estimates come from the Introduction to Meira bat Erachaim's *Fortnight in the Philippines.*

[2] There are three major regions in the Philippines. From north to south, they are Luzon, in which Metro Manila is situated; the Visayas island group, of which Cebu has a strong tourist attraction; and Mindanao, which has the largest Muslim contingent in an otherwise predominantly Catholic nation.

Africa donated 50 million US dollars in charitable aid; the United States and the United Kingdom pledged comparably huge sums; China sent its Peace Ark, a hospital ship comprising 100 medical personnel; and so forth. Indeed, Haiyan had become what McKenzie Wark calls a global media event, in which events taking place hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away shape local happenings, linking distant localities in worldwide social relations. And with the advent of the information superhighway that Paul Virilio speaks of, we are now not only able to "see at a distance, to hear at a distance," but also, "to reach at a distance, to feel at a distance" (par. 4). However briefly, the Philippines and its people became the center of media attention, the focal point of people's imaginations the world over.[3]

The present study examines the representations of those affected by Yolanda in various forms of media, by authors/producers inhabiting a range of cultural and spatiotemporal positions relative to the event itself. I will begin by reviewing the literature on mediated suffering, affect, and the distant other. As Stijn Joye has pointed out, the study of suffering is both inter- and multi-disciplinary, "reflecting an astonishing richness in terms of approaches, theoretical perspectives and topics of study" (23). This is followed by an explication of relevant theoretical frameworks, particularly Shani Orgad's notion of the global imagination, which she argues is a moralizing force that provides knowledge of what is right and wrong (47-48), and existing as well as possible frames (49). Using Orgad's framework, I will proceed to analyze the five discursive registers under study, and the oft conflicting narratives that they offer. Possibilities for the contestation of dominant narratives will then be discussed.

Literature Review

According to Daniel Vä stfjä ll, Ellen Peters, and Paul Slovic, "major environmental events may send psychological ripples globally, with the consequence that individuals and societies remote from the actual disaster

[3] In the interest of self-disclosure, the author of this article is also Filipino, so it would be more accurate to say "my people" instead of "its people."

may change their everyday decision behavior" (70). In a study of Swedish undergraduates, conducted 3 to 5 months after the 2004 Tsunami, which struck East Asia and received extensive news coverage globally, Vä stfjä ll and colleagues found that participants who were reminded of the disaster exhibited negative affect and a pessimistic outlook of the future. Compared to participants who received no such reminders, they believed that the future held fewer possibilities; that their time on Earth was numbered; and that the likelihood of future negative events was high, while the likelihood of future positive events was abysmally low (67-69).[4]

A key feature of our globalizing environment is a heightened sense of proximity and interconnectedness, which translates to empathy and compassion for distant suffering others. However, Eline Huiberts would argue that it is not always about affect. Even with a lack of emotional response, spectators of mediated suffering can still feel involved. Huiberts conducted a series of focus groups with 27 Dutch-speaking undergraduates, whom she showed Dutch national news broadcast of the 2011 drought and famine affecting much of the Horn of Africa. Participants felt morally responsible for the short-term alleviation of the suffering of African victims—not because of a sense of cosmopolitanism, but because of their background as western and Dutch, and therefore, better off financially (39). Responsibility for the long-term alleviation of suffering, however, was instead attributed to bigger national and international, governmental and non-governmental organizations, such as the United Nations (36). Doing so served to limit the scope of the participants' sense of responsibility. However, despite these more rational responses, affect still figured prominently, with some expressing guilt over not providing charitable aid. According to Huiberts, this guilt too is a manifestation of the sense of moral obligation (41).[5]

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[4] However, Vä stfjä ll and colleagues also found that the subjects' negative affect could be mitigated somewhat. Specifically, instead of just providing debiasing information (i.e. telling participants that natural disasters are relatively rare phenomena), they asked participants to write a list of all the natural disasters they could remember, which turned out to be few.

The studies mentioned so far are audience ethnographies. As Shani Orgad would argue, there is room for textual analysis in the study of mediated suffering. Based on analyses of media representations of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake , the 1985 African famine, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake, Orgad concludes that two such narratives of the other exist: (1) as someone *distant*, morally or existentially outside us, maybe even dangerous or strange; and (2) as an *intimate* with whom we share a common humanity. The first narrative dehumanizes the other's suffering, treating it as irrelevant to our lives. The second narrative, on the other hand, sees the other as someone in need of care, compassion, or pity. It communicates a cosmopolitan outlook and an obligation to help. Though these two narratives are often constructed as binary oppositions, they are usually enacted *simultaneously.* A single text can have diverse interpretations; it follows then that the same text can construe the other as both a stranger and an intimate. Furthermore, with cosmopolitanism comes the threat of effacing the other's difference and heterogeneity.

Orgad's theorization has some resonance with Maria Kyriakidou's typology of media witnessing, which was based on audience ethnographies of Greek viewers. According to Kyriakidou, media witnessing of human suffering can be articulated in four different modalities. The first, affective witnessing, is characterized by intense emotionality and the viewer's belief that s/he and the sufferer are connected by a shared human vulnerability (150). The second, ecstatic witnessing, is an extreme form of affective witnessing. Here, viewers position themselves as "live" witnesses (164). They are compelled to offer unconditional hospitality, and in the process, suspend their judgment towards the media. These first two modalities, one can argue, are elaborations of the cosmopolitanism that Orgad and others speak of. They also bear a resemblance to Andrew Dobson's differentiation

[5] A less common discursive strategy among the Dutch participants was to deny the suffering of distant others. For instance, Africans were said to be accustomed to thirst and starvation (Huiberts 41). However, this strategy was frowned upon by other members of the focus groups.

between "thin" and "thick" cosmopolitanism.[6]

The third modality, politicized witnessing, often manifests as expressions of indignation towards parties presumably responsible for the perpetuation of suffering (174). Global political state powers are often the targets of blame, as is the media apparatus itself, which is seen as inherently ideological. The Dutch participants in Huiberts's study above can be said to be engaging in politicized witnessing. Lastly, there is detached witnessing. Most common among young viewers, this type of witnessing positions the viewer as an indifferent bystander (188). Like Orgad's narrative of the other as someone distant, here the pain of the other is seen as inconsequential to the viewer's lifeworld. It is not the reality of the suffering that is doubted, but its relevance.

Theoretical Frameworks

Central to the present inquiry is Shani Orgad's notion of the global imagination. Drawing on the works of Arjun Appadurai, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Charles Taylor before her, Orgad argues that imagination is "a key dimension in the experience of globalization" (16). It is a negotiation between the personal and the collective, between thinking as well as feeling. She identifies five sites of the imaginary: self, other, the nation, the world, and possible lives. In a time when macro narratives increasingly work their way into the local and fuel personal expression, which in turn become representations in mediated places, the global imagination has never been so pertinent.

Orgad shares Appadurai's view that imagination is neither escapism, nor mere contemplation, nor elite pastime. Neither is it solely the property of the gifted individual. On the contrary, imagination is a moral force, providing knowledge of what is right and what is wrong (47-48). In other words, it is not only factual (i.e. what is) but also normative (i.e. what ought to be), and thus can be directed towards meaningful action. Imagination differs from

[6] "Thin" cosmopolitanism refers to the mere recognition of a shared humanity, whereas "thick" cosmopolitanism implies *acting* on that recognition.

discourse in that the latter focuses on existing frames of thinking, whereas the former also encourages *possible* frames (49). Both fantastical and meaningfully real, imagination instills global consciousness and cosmopolitanism, a sense of the world as connected and whole. It is also dialectical in that it opens up spaces for contestation and permits empathy by allowing one to take the subjective position of others (46). Lastly, imagination is directed not only towards the present, and but towards the past and future as well.

Also relevant is Arjun Appadurai's notion of global cultural flow, in which he offers five key sites from which the world is perceived. Two of these sites—mediascapes and ideoscapes—are especially pertinent.[7] "Mediascapes' refer to the flow and distribution of images, on the one hand, and to the technologies capable of generating said images, on the other. What is important here is that mediascapes enable the formation of scripts of imagined lives; "they help to constitute narratives of the "other' and proto-narratives of possible lives, fantasies which could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement" (299). "Ideoscapes' on the other hand, while also "concatenations of images" (ibid.), are intensely political and inextricable from ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of social movements. They are concerned with the power (or lack thereof) attached to representing and representation. Appadurai privileges the role of reflexivity, a departure from the economism of previous models, making the perspectival quality of his "scapes" rather palpable.

Research Questions & Methods

The present study seeks to address the following research questions, with the understanding that they are not mutually exclusive, and that their answers are heavily intertwined:

[7] The other three sites, in no particular order, are financescapes, technoscapes, and ethnoscapes, referring to the flow of money, technologies, and people, respectively.

1. How is the suffering of Filipino typhoon victims depicted in the global media landscape? What are the competing discourses and ideologies underlying these depictions?
2. Specifically, how is the distant, suffering "other" represented by the West? In turn, what representations of themselves do these "others" offer? What are the key sites of inclusions and omissions?
3. What are the possibilities for the contestation of narratives regarding typhoon Yolanda's victims? How do different forms of media—textual and visual, print and electronic, traditional and digital—enable (or prohibit) this dialectic?

In his discussion of vectors, McKenzie Wark noted that global media flows, and the resultant coalescence of texts in the human imaginary, inevitably affect the production of narratives and counter-narratives. Therefore, in order to capture the multiplicity of perspectives regarding the disaster, I have conducted textual analyses of a broad range of discursive registers. These registers span five different media platforms, and their authors inhabit differing cultural and spatio-temporal positions relative to the event and the people affected. The texts analyzed are as follows:

1. CNN coverage of the natural disaster, titled "Tacloban residents scramble for supplies," which had been posted on YouTube on November 9, 2013—the day after the typhoon first struck the Philippines. As of the writing of this paper (May 7, 2014), the video has received 58,671 views.
2. The 66 user comments accompanying the CNN footage above, all of which had been posted within 2 months of the event by 41 different users.
3. The poetry anthology, *Worlds of Love and Hope to Aid the Philippines*. This self-published collection features over 100 poems by 23 novice poets, who refer to themselves collectively as Alliance Poets World-Wide.

4. The memoir *Fortnight in the Philippines* by Meira bat Erachaim, who as part of an Israeli Defense Force (IDF) search and rescue unit, witnessed the aftermath of Yolanda in the Visayan regions of Bantayan, Daanbantayan, and Negros, among others. This, too, is self-published.
5. And lastly, "Patawarin Ninyo Ako" (literally, "Please Forgive Me"), a performance piece by Filipina-American artist Risa Recio. While the unedited piece is said to be 50 minutes in duration, the analysis is focused on the 4 minute, 13 second clip that is available on the artist's *vimeo* page.

The units of analyses thus range from so-called "objective" reporting to artistic or purely "affective" display; from immediate to reflective coverage; from representations of the "other," to representations offered by the *othered.* Given that typhoon Yolanda is such a recent occurrence, the lack of print narratives that have gone through traditional publishing and editing channels is unsurprising. From inception to conception, a memoir, a poetry chapbook, or a collection of short stories might take months, if not years, to see the light of day. It is for this reason that self-published literature were consulted, despite the stigma the literary world attaches to them.

A few additional notes on methodology: It can be argued that one more textual analysis is not going to reveal a whole lot more about the world. However, like Shani Orgad before me, I seek to add to the value of textual analysis by linking it to the imaginary, so that it is no longer just a matter of encoding/decoding, dominant/resistant readings (see, for example, the works of Stuart Hall)—but also, of affect and agency, of the push-and-pull between the individual and collectivity.

Moreover, while the analysis of YouTube comments sheds some light on audience reception of mediated suffering, it is not meant to supplant a more rigorous cultural studies or ethnographic research agenda. These user comments are comparable to the letters "written without solicitation to newspapers and television channels" that Evans (205) considers to be part of the inventory of ethnographic tools. While some might dub my analysis as

"virtual ethnography," I personally do not view it as such.

Findings and Analyses

CNN Footage

At 3 minutes and 25 seconds, the CNN clip of Tacloban is quite dense. It begins with a long and high-angle panning shot that accommodates as many leveled buildings within the frame as possible, thus underscoring the magnitude of the destruction. Shortly after, reporter Andrew Stephens's voiceover narration begins—"It struck with terrifying and deadly force"—accompanied by a montage of various people scrambling to piece their lives back together: a man wading through wreckage; children climbing up collapsed structures; another man hanging clothes on a clothesline; a distraught woman who, upon noticing the camera, turns reluctantly away. Cut to footage taken earlier: two males (one white) are shown rescuing what appears to be an injured Tacloban resident, the former in waist-deep water, the latter gliding on the water's surface on an inflatable raft. Back in the present, the camera makes yet another survey. Initially, it is positioned at a distance from the residents, so that they are faceless and diminutive in size. It then moves closer to its subjects, first via medium shots, then via close-ups. One of these close-ups is of a man said to be searching the rubble for his father, brothers, and uncle. We hear him speaking in Tagalog—the Philippine national language—briefly before the rest is translated into English by the narrator. We are never told the man's name.

Another Montage

One notable shot sees a little boy and then a man with a sack of rice over his head walking towards the camera, each of whom says "Help us" before they disappear off the screen. Another shot sees a long line of people waiting in front of an IBT Pharmacy, which then fades into the image of an archway, the entrance to Divine Word Hospital: "the only functioning medical facility in the city." Its positioning at the center of the frame indicates that we, the viewers, are about to enter. Inside, we see an

unconscious boy with a bandaged head and a swollen eyelid; a woman cradling a (presumably) feverish baby in her arms, while another woman wipes the baby's forehead with a moist towel; a lone man sleeping on the hospital's tiled floor, underscoring the hospital's crowded condition; and finally, dozens of people waiting for treatment in a darkened lobby. Off-screen, we hear the voice of a child wailing, "Help, help."

"We have no more rooms, no more space," a female doctor at close-up tells the off-screen interviewer in fluent English, before she is cut off by the narrator, who finishes her sentences for her. She, too, remains nameless. The next scene shows Filipinos carrying crates, plastic bags, and cloth sacks filled to the rim with goods out of a department store. They are looting, the narrator tells us. The on-site reporter adds that they are also taking appliances, air-conditioning units, and toys. This is followed by shots of teenage boys climbing up a lamp post to the second-floor balcony of a Western Union, from which they hurl handfuls of Philippine pesos. The clip continues with a panoramic shot of the leveled city as a chopper cuts across cloudy skies, then with shots of a middle-aged woman and a young boy crouching next to what appears to be a dead child covered in blankets. Their backs are turned to the viewer. The remaining shots are of more wreckage, with civilians, at long distance, once again searching through the rubble. "This was nature at its most frightening," says the narrator, "a display of force that has smashed the lives of so many people."[8]

The distant, suffering other is framed here as vulnerable, as the victim of unimaginable catastrophe. The aforementioned close-ups of children in precarious living conditions, with compromised health, underscore this vulnerability. As Orgad has repeatedly shown, a common trope in media coverage of natural disasters is the use of women and children as suitable victims to elicit viewer sympathy. This trope is utilized in the CNN footage, but to be fair, the losses suffered by both men and women, the young and the old, are conveyed democratically. Typhoon Yolanda is indeed the great leveler, both literally and metaphorically. Visually, however, the subjects are

[8] Interestingly, nature here is "othered," eliding scientific evidence that storms are now more extreme due to rising temperatures and warmer oceans.

homogenized, such that the differing textures of their suffering are elided. There are depictions of neither agency nor strength with which to balance the image of vulnerability. Absent from the footage are visual records of *bayanihan*—or the sense of community that binds Filipinos together during times of crises. There are no shots of people extending help to one another, or narrational voiceovers to indicate such occurrences. Instead, we are presented with people who seem to be looking out only for themselves, by looting convenience stores and pilfering money from a Western Union. Images of looting, which are typically used to represent race riots in the Unites States, and are therefore a familiar stereotype for American audiences, are here used to convey a reduction to primitivism among peripheral or "Third World" others.

With loss of agency also comes loss of voice, for the typhoon victims are not afforded the chance to offer their own representations. This is evident when the female doctor in Divine Word Hospital, who was speaking English perfectly, is cut off mid-sentence by Andrew Stephens, who "translates" the rest of her utterances for her. It would almost seem as if the only utterances allowed to go unfiltered are the ones in which Filipinos are pleading for "Help," which further underscore their helplessness. According to Robert Stam and Louise Spence, "The languages spoken by Third World peoples are often reduced to an incomprehensible jumble of background murmurs" (756). These, coupled with the fact that the lone rescue footage features a white man in the role of savior, only recapitulates the "West as redeemer" narrative—which Ella Shohat also finds in her feminist ethnographies of Western cinema (679), as well as Henry Geddes Gonzales in his analyses of the visual representation of the Yucatan (151).

Lastly, the two "interviewed" subjects—the female doctor and the man searching the rubble for his relatives—are never properly introduced. To name is to bestow agency and identity, and to withhold these subjects' names is to deny them representational power and authority.

YouTube Comments

The sixty-six YouTube comments accompanying the CNN footage

offer some compelling insights into audience reception of mediated, suffering others. Unsurprisingly, users were quick to offer prayers and get well wishes and urge others to "contribute to the Red Cross or some other disaster relief organization" (user "John Strabismus"[9])—yet another example of Maria Kyriakidou's "ecstatic witnessing" (164). One user ("Julius Caesar Areno") even wrote: "My heart grieves to all the victims of Yolanda! In this time of tragedy we should all know that ACTIONS speaks louder than WORDS because WORDS without ACTION is useless! We had lose enough people so please Take an ACTION before we lose them all!"[10] The post implies a sense of responsibility and urgency—made more palpable by exclamation marks and upper case letters—and suggests a cosmopolitan attitude, evidenced by the frequent use of the plural, first-person pronoun "We." This sense of cosmopolitanism, of a shared humanity irrespective of background and origin, is reinforced by the following post of another user ("79ninzombie"): "The world knew this typhoon would hit. Where are all these countries to help our *fellow humans*???" (Italics added).

However, it must be noted that the Comments section was also highly politicized, with many users—a number of whom self-identify as Filipino—casting aspersions on corrupt Philippine politicians, who are said to have "put [help] on hold for hours and day and prevent them from tending to the needy" (user "AngelicGaming"). While claims to the veracity of this statement is beyond the scope of this paper, there is a sense that the local government was not doing enough, and that "the Philippine Government, police, and military" (user "Joseph Howard") ought to have done more. This has led one Filipino user ("Reinee Suraya") to write: "Corrupt politicians are all deserving in bad karma, this is all your curse and you should accept that!!! Shameful!!! U.S.A. you should take over our country please!!!!!!" Meanwhile, another user ("Kevin is Nice") commented: "In 1946 the Philippines government chose to leave the USA. They hurt the people of

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[9] I have put each username inside quotation marks to emphasize that it might not be the user's real name.

[10] In order to preserve the integrity of the data, I have refrained from correcting typographical errors in the YouTube posts.

today." These last two posts allude to the status of the Philippines as a former colony of the United States, and to the 1946 Treaty of Manila, which finally recognized the sovereignty of the Philippine Islands. By enlisting these historical moments in present-day discourse, the implication is that the Philippines would have been better off had it remained a colony of the U.S. It implies, too, that crisis management in the wake of Yolanda would have been handled more smoothly and effectively under American supervision—another manifestation of the West as redeemer rhetoric. Of course, the conviction of one Filipino cannot be taken to represent that of an entire nation. However, that it has surfaced should not be so casually dismissed, for it is traceable to the Philippines' colonial legacy, on the one hand, and to the nation's alliance with the U.S. during World War II (against Japanese occupation), on the other.

Based on the YouTube comments, it becomes immediately apparent that the footage on looting had made quite an impression on audiences. For a footage that is mere seconds long, the attention it garnered is disproportionate. Among Filipino viewers, it elicited reticent acceptance, shame, and/or guilt. One Filipino user ("Fatima Olfu") from Metro Manila, which was the least impacted by the typhoon, offered justifications for the looters' behavior: "They need to survive that's why they did that. I agree they shouldn't stole some Appliances but what can we do if your stomach is empty and you need to feed your families as well . . . Some said they could sell that to buy some food." Notice that the user enlisted first-, second-, and third-person pronouns: "we" to establish communality with the victims; "they" to differentiate him/herself from the looters; and "you" to elicit sympathy or empathy from readers. But another Filipino ("CrimelabS"), rather than express sympathy, reacted with vitriol instead:

> Some undisciplined people in Tacloban looting anything aside from food, water, and medicine is very embarrassing. The whole world is watching and helping while we are showing the world how greedy we are when it comes to everything. People all over the world will get the impression that they are helping

low-life'sand thieves.

Clearly, like "Fatima Olfu" above, this user identified him/herself as a member of the group affected, evidenced by his/her recourse to the pronoun "we." However, he/she also enlisted the discursive strategy of "othering" transgressive members of the in-group (as "low-life's and thieves"), in order to make a statement to the "whole world" that not all Filipinos behave in such manner, and that the user certainly does not. "CrimelabS" expressed shame on a second post when responding to another user: "Guess you can't be proud to be pinoy anymore but just be sympathetic to our undisciplined country."[11] That the "p" in "pinoy" is in lower case, when it is typically in upper case, speaks volumes.

It should be noted, however, that shame was *not* the universal response among users who identified themselves as Filipino. One user ("Mary Ann Nalasa"), for example, wrote: "Yolanda is a strongest typhoon ever recorded then Philippines is the strongest country. This is just a typhoon and we are a Filipino can't easily be falling down!!!!!!" However, such expressions of pride and faith in the resilience of one's people were few and far in between, and completely elided any reference to the looting.

It is remarkable that despite the number of Filipinos living in the U.S., no one called out CNN for failing to provide context for the looting, suggesting that its news are taken, at face value, as objective rather than as ideological reporting. It is also remarkable that while the Comments section of YouTube theoretically offers a symbolic space for contestation, very little (re)negotiation of meanings and messages actually took place (which may have to do with YouTube's demographics). As expected, scathing comments did arise, with one user ("David Ross") writing: "they like to fuck and over breed. This is what they get. The entire world is like this." Meanwhile, another user ("Laura Pearson") cited a recent "Tacloban gay pride" as the catalyst to "God's wrath." While these two users have been called "Troll[s]"

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[11] Pinoy/Pinay is colloquial for Filipino/Filipina, and is often used in written and spoken discourse as an expression of great pride.

(by "jd2384") and "savage animal[s]" who have no "respect for the loss of life" (by "Cesar cris"), their scathing comments nevertheless bring to light a discourse opposite that of victims-as-vulnerable. Here, Filipinos are instead conceived of as *agentic* and responsible for the tragedy that has befallen them. Further, such comments recapitulate yet another narrative deployed in colonial discourse: the West as morally and ethically superior over "the rest," and the other as inherently inferior.

Poetic Offerings

With over 100 poems by 23 contributors in the anthology *Words of Love and Hope to Aid the Philippines*, it is both impossible and unnecessary to comment on every single piece. The poems are written in a variety of styles—from free verse to haiku, to list poems and "sculpted" poems that take on a plethora of shapes, including a chalice and an hourglass. Nor is this the place to critique the collection's literary merit, which experienced creative writers might argue to be questionable. Having said that, with this much material the analysis has yielded some fruitful insights that warrant at least some passing remarks.

Absent from the collection is the shame and vitriol that seemed prevalent in the YouTube forum. In its place is an exaggerated sense of cosmopolitanism, a plea to readers—and therefore, the rest of humankind—to offer aid, material sustenance, and prayers to our suffering "sisters" and "brethren." "The entire world has come together" (26), writes Dena M. Ferrari in "Tropical Dreams." And in "A Storm For All Time," contributor Lynne M. Cullen writes: "Though we can't console the lives they have lost/ We can nourish their bodies/ And give them hope and love, without any cost" (12). Among the contributors, most of whom are of Western origin,[12] there is a collective sense that their daily troubles pale in comparison to the plight of Filipino survivors. "I could write you a long list/ Of all that's troubled me," bemoans Patricia Ann Farnsworth-Simpson in "Earth Not Heaven," "But what would be the point/ When there's others that

[12] This has been confirmed by the author of this paper during his visit to the Alliance's website (www.apfpublisher.com) on May 5, 2014.

I see/ Suffering more hurt and pain" (5).

In an essay titled "Photographs of Agony," John Berger argues that it is impossible to "emerge stronger" from looking at images that depict human suffering. The resumption of one's life would almost seem like "a hopelessly inadequate response" to what one had just seen, and one's "moral inadequacy" becomes just as shocking as the horrific images themselves (42-44). For the poets of the anthology, their closest encounter with Haiyan survivors was through televisual portrayals. This is evidenced by such lines as, "My heart sinks as an overladen ship/ as I recall the scenes I have seen on TV" (37), in Peter Dome's "A Million Miles Away From Home." The poets' exaggerated cosmopolitanism—or again, to borrow Kyriakidou's words, ecstatic witnessing (164)—can perhaps be attributed to this sense of moral inadequacy.

An overwhelming majority of the poems are hopeful. In fact, one can say that they are *too* hopeful, maybe even sentimental. The most recurrent images are those of rainbows, sunshine, flowers in bloom, and spring—ironic, given that there is no spring season in the Philippines.[13] For instance, in "The Fragility of Earthly Life," Patricia Ann Farnsworth-Simpson writes: "If we just accept, overcome and outgrow/ All the heartaches that give us a blow/ Of pain in the guts in the heart and soul/ To let love keep our spirits whole" (3). Similarly, in "Sea and Wind Power," Erich J. Goller writes: "with friends and courage/ life will come/ echoing back/ with golden sunshine" (13). But life will not come "echoing" back. The Filipinos have suffered irreplaceable losses—loved ones, livelihood, home, and other material and immaterial possessions. To imply that the mere adoption of a positive attitude will restore things to the way they were is somewhat naïve. Such poems also reveal the experiential gulf between the writers and their subjects, and the limits to what can be imagined at a distance.

Admittedly, there is some dark imagery, cultivated by such affective words as "hunger," "death," "destruction," "drown," "rubble," "darkness,"

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[13] The Philippine calendar year can be divided into two seasons: *tag-araw* (dry season), which runs from December to May, and *tag-ulan* (rainy season), which runs from June to November.

"night," and "pain," which recur throughout the anthology. These words, however, are either too general or too abstract. There is an utter lack of specificity, a scarcity of explicit references to Haiyan, that the poems might as well be referring to other disasters. There is no mention of grieving parents who witnessed their sons and daughters get swallowed by meters-high waves. Nor is there mention of sick and emaciated bodies, feasted upon by disease-carrying mosquitoes and flies. This reduction to abstraction serves to efface the range of suffering experienced by Yolanda's victims and traumatized survivors.[14]

Autobiographical Reflections

Whereas CNN presented Filipinos as utterly helpless victims who looked out only for themselves, in her memoir *Fortnight in the Philippines*, Meira bat Erachaim, a pilot for an Israeli Defense Force (IDF) search and rescue unit, recognizes their agency and sense of community (*bayanihan*). Says bat Erachaim: "I was impressed by how well the people of the Philippines handled themselves in such a horrible situation. . . . The heroes were the Filipinos who put their own recovery on hold to help out their neighbors. . . . Nobody did more for the Philippines than the people of the Philippines themselves." [15] Regarding the looting, she writes: "The looting . . . was largely seen as desperate acts of survival rather than any breakdown of society or planned anarchy." She points out that the owners themselves often allowed their shops to be ransacked out of concern for the well-being of their looting neighbors. She also recognizes the uniqueness of each person's story of survival; in her memoir, she refers to the locals by name (when their names were made known to her), granting them

[14] Curiously, there is a strong Christian overtone to the anthology, with references to "the Lord," "Father God," "Angels," "the Creator," "eternity," "light," "spirit," and "soul," among others. Given that nearly three-quarters of the Philippine population are Catholic, invocation of the ecclesiastical is not surprising. However, doing so also excludes from the narrative the remaining quarter of the population.

[15] Because the source is an e-book, page numbers have not—and cannot—be provided.

representational power.

But bat Erachaim is far from valorizing. She balances her narrative accounts of Filipino agency with accounts of their vulnerability. Unlike the generic and sterile treatment of human suffering by the poems in the anthology and the CNN clip, bat Erachaiminstead offers a textured and multi-layered view. She recounts, for example, her encounters with a man cradling his severed limb, hoping that it could be reattached; another man who had been stuck on a beach for eleven days due to his broken ankles; a girl who survived the death of her mother from abdominal trauma; a man crying into his hands because his income for the entire year, a year's worth of sugar cane, was suddenly and instantly gone; and people keeping dead relatives close to them because there was no place to bury the corpses.

The author was also forthcoming about her own affect. She acknowledges the need for detachment in order to carry out her responsibilities in the midst of "heart breaking scenes": "It would be like a surgeon who is afraid to cut people [otherwise]." However, she later confesses to the emotional toll such scenes took at each day's end. Tasked with airlifting injured survivors to a nearby field hospital, bat Erachaim sometimes had to make the difficult choice of choosing one person to rescue over another. She recalls crying "like a little girl" when one of her decisions led to the certain death of a pregnant mother and the unborn child within. This harkens back to the comment by Eline Huiberts that the closer the proximity between the agent and the occurrence, the greater the sense of moral responsibility and obligation (23).

If the poems in *Words of Love and Hope* are naïve in their optimism, then *Fortnight in the Philippines* is candid in its realism. "Long after all of us foreigners have gone home these people will still be rebuilding their lives," the author writes. The memoir is highly politicized, but not because it ascribes blame and responsibility to larger state forces, as the previous discursive registers have done. In fact, Meira bat Erachaim seems to want to avoid doing that. Rather, it is politicized because it points out the flaws in media reporting itself: "Whenever there is any disaster anywhere in the world the United States generally gets all the publicity for sending in

whatever assistance is needed. But they are far from the only country that assists in humanitarian efforts." She writes further: "I simply feel that if you want to call yourself an international news organization then you should probably recognise that there are more than twelve countries in the world." Her statement is reminiscent of Shelton Gunaratne's plea to de-center the West, specifically, the United States (483).[16] Moreover, bat Erachaim criticizes the excessive media focus on Tacloban City, due mostly to the size of its population, when in fact other locales, though smaller, were just as horribly damaged.

Cosmopolitanism is also present in bat Erachaim's memoir. Recounting an incident in which a little girl named Maganda ("beautiful" in Tagalog) says "shalom" ("peace" or "hello" in Hebrew) to her: "She was not a Filipino thanking an Israeli, a student thanking a soldier, a Catholic thanking a Jew. She was a person thanking another person from one heart to another."

Performative Spaces

The last discursive register under consideration is a performance piece by Filipina-American artist Risa Recio, entitled "Patawarin Ninyo Ako" (literally, "Please Forgive Me").[17] Risa Recio is a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In an interview with Nicole CuUnjieng of *The Manila Review*, Risa said that she had been working on an art piece that explores the connection between memory and home when Typhoon Yolanda struck. Upon hearing the news, she felt a mixture of sadness, helplessness, and disgust with her "self-indulgence." "It's just me, here, away," she said, "disassociating myself from everything at home in order to work on my art. It has been self-indulgent, by nature, as artistic practice so often can be." To

[16] Meira bat Erachaim is in an interesting and unique position of having been born and raised in South Africa, attending university in the United States, and finally embracing Israel as her adoptive homeland.

[17] *Ninyo* in Tagalog is equivalent to a plural form of the second-person pronoun "You." However, when used in the singular, it is an honorific mode of address towards one's parents, elders, or superiors. The use of *ninyo* therefore suggests that Risa's performance is a plea to elicit forgiveness from the Philippines, here personified as both mother and nation.

channel her disgust with herself, she proceeded to demolish the art she had been making, leading to the performance piece that is the subject of this analysis.

As previously mentioned, the unedited footage is 50 minutes in length, but the excerpted clip under study is 4 minutes, 13 seconds. The clip takes place in a chamber with intense white walls. Leaning against the walls are two panels of sea-green sheetrock. The camera is positioned in such a way that the frame is symmetrical, with one panel on the left, the other on the right. Risa, dressed in black shirt and black pants, and sporting goggles and a surgical mask, enters the frame and becomes part of the canvas. She picks up a hammer and chisel from the floor and proceeds to chip away at the sheetrocks—right first, then left—until they are both reduced to rubble. Every now and then, throughout the demolition, we hear her breaths, sighs, panting, and cries. I agree with CuUnjieng that there is "a paradox of power and powerlessness" at work here. In destroying her art, she becomes Yolanda personified; but in destroying her art, she evinces helplessness as she looked on, from a mediated distance, at the devastation of her homeland.[18]

The clip ends with Risa attempting to clean up the rubble. She picks up large chunks of sheetrock and puts them inside plastic bags—ten altogether—which are meant to recall the relief bags handed to typhoon victims by volunteers. However, Risa cannot disappear all the debris with her bare hands, symbolizing the enduring impact of Typhoon Yolanda on Philippine cultural memory.

It must be noted that Risa inhabits a liminal space as being both Filipina and American—someone with Philippine ancestry yet acculturated to the U.S., and therefore, one with the victims yet existentially apart. The frustrations that come with this hybridized identity is compounded by her simultaneous distance from (geographically speaking) and proximity to (virtually speaking) the events—near yet far, "there" yet "not there"—and by

[18] For those who might criticize the piece as being so abstract that the connection to Haiyan is lost, the description accompanying the video should clear up any misconceptions: "A response to the devastation of Typhoon Yolanda."

her comparably privileged lifestyle. Interestingly, her performance shares with the poetry anthology a pervasive sense of moral inadequacy, although the origins of her feelings are obviously more personal.

Unlike the other discursive registers analyzed thus far, "Patawarin Ninyo Ako" is kinesthetic and *embodied*, using, as communicative signs, movements and sounds rather than words. It is also *affective* to an extreme degree. But one might ask: Is this form of embodiment a substitute for being "there"? If Risa's sighs and cries are any indication, the answer would be no, at least not for Risa herself.

Summary and Conclusions

The present study examined the representation of distant, suffering others in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan—and to some extent, audience reception of these media representations. The analysis of multiple discursive registers, by authors/producers inhabiting a wide range of cultural and spatio-temporal positions relative to the event, has yielded some fascinating insights into the nature of mediated suffering.

"Objective" news reporting by Western media outlets can render faraway victims of natural disasters as utterly helpless, devoid of agency and identity. They are suffering, but their suffering is depicted as homogenous and lacking in texture or variation. Charlie Beckett and Robin Mansell warned of this paradox: that by bringing others too close to view, their distinctiveness—and ultimately, humanity—are sometimes effaced (10). Conversely, when audiences did attribute agency to suffering others, it was to blame them for the tragedy that has befallen them. In unfortunate cases, the distant other is reduced to a state of primitivism, subjected to colonial discourse in which the other is inherently inferior. This reduction, to borrow the words of Shani Orgad, had a "defamiliarizing" (87) effect on Filipino audiences who either lived abroad or at some distance from the epicenter of the storm. The ensuing sense of estrangement caused them to feel shame and/or guilt, which in turn led to the discursive strategies of "othering" transgressive members of the in-group, or offering justifications for the

transgressive behavior. By no coincidence, the Philippines' colonial history was also brought in to bear on the discussion. Taken together, these narratives serve to recapitulate (and reify) the "West as redeemer" rhetoric, and the West's moral and ethical superiority "over the rest."

But sometimes the opposite narrative is constructed. As the poetry anthology reveals, instead of vitriol and shame there is an exaggerated sense of cosmopolitanism. Instead of moral superiority, there is moral inadequacy. However, the "ecstatic witnessing" and overzealous desire to help evinced by the poets underlie a naïve hope, that the mere adoption of a positive attitude will somehow rejuvenate the Philippine landscape. The unfortunate outcome, of course, is that the permanence of loss is elided.

Possibilities for the contestation of the aforementioned narratives come from Meira bat Erachaim's autobiographical reflections, and from Risa Recio's embodied narration. As someone who not only bore witness to the destruction but also participated in rehabilitative efforts, bat Erachaim fits Andrew Dobson's profile of "thick" cosmopolitanism—someone who *acts* on her recognition of the humanity she shares with others. By invoking the disaster in all its horrific details, and by depicting the wide range of suffering—and agency—exhibited by Filipinos, she transgresses the self/other binarism endemic to colonial discourses, thereby escaping the "Western savior" syndrome. Meanwhile, the physicality of Recio's response to the typhoon illustrates just how complex affect can be—that affect is plural rather than singular. While abstract and possibly too artful for some tastes, her performance recognizes the enduring impact of Yolanda in the years and generations to come. It also shows that a single person can inhabit a range of competing subjectivities—together with and apart from the suffering other, and to borrow the words of Stuart Hall, a "familiar stranger" (qtd. in Morley and Chen 490).

Taken together, the five discursive registers illustrate the importance of a perspectival approach to media analysis, with imagination as the conduit. Each locus of production—and for that matter, consumption—carries with it a multiplicity of narratives that are enacted *simultaneously*. For instance, the other has been constructed as both passive and agentic; noble and morally

suspect; civilized and savage; a stranger and a familiar. Moreover, only by examining multiple registers can we see fully the spectrum of media reception and response—from thin to thick cosmopolitanism, from moral inferiority to superiority, from detached to ecstatic witnessing, and all the shades in between. These responses are colored by the spatial, temporal, and cultural positions inhabited by the viewer relative to the disaster and the people affected. Of course, even imagination has its limits. Nevertheless, without imagination there would be no empathy, and the "other" that resides within us all will forever be beyond reach—in front of us, yet chasms apart.

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ISSN 2071-4971

GPN 2009-702389