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Sketches of an Archipelagic Poetics of Postcolonial Belonging

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One of the great ironies of anti-imperialist movements in the Global South is that, despite their purported goal of liberating themselves from western cultural hegemony and political control, they arguably have yet to decolonise them selves of western imperialist logics; for example, those Enlightenment-derived logics pertaining to the transcendence of reason, the human, and the nation-state.

The National Democratic Movement (NDM) in the Philippines is no exception. This is a revolutionary nationalist (and more specifically, Marxist-Leninist-Maoist) movement, spearheaded by the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army. It has, from the Communist Party's founding in 1968 through to the present day, been engaged in continuous struggle against the liberal democratic Philippine state, seen as a puppet of Anglo-American imperialism. Being nationalist in character, the movement accepts the nation-state project as final and inevitable, with its notions of community and belonging therefore restricted within the premises of compartmentalised, national space. Its goal is to wrest control of the insular geography of the nation state from the insular, albeit expansive, geography of empire. It resists imperial homogenisation across transnational space, but replicates these homogenising imperatives within the bounds of the nation-state-space it aims to liberate. Thus, despite resisting external domination, the NDM, like all revolutionary nationalist movements, contains powerful structures of internal domination. Nationalism in this sense might even be considered as a kind of '*internal imperialism*'. As Chua Beng Huat (2008, p. 235) writes, Philippine nationalists did not erase Anglo-American imperialist ideology, 'but rather "Filipinized" it as part of their own nationalist ideology'. The modernist epistemology underpinning the NDM renders it largely intolerant of difference, reducing the multiplicity of cultural identities in the Philippines to a unity; that is, to a single, homogenous conception of what it means to be a 'true' and 'authentic' Filipino.

In effect, then, the Philippines, despite being an *archipelago*, is discursively rendered as mere *island*. Starting from the premise that revolutionary nationalism constitutes an anachronism in the current context, I will argue in this paper that there is an urgent need to re-found struggle upon new imaginaries of social space. To these ends, I would like to propose the 'archipelago' as an alternative imaginary to the centralising, homogenising, and essentialising schema of nation-state or 'island' space. The new archipelagic poetics which I am proposing would valorise what John Tomlinson (1999) calls 'complex connectivity', rather than homogenous 'unity', allowing for commonalities to be constructed *across* differences, rather than at the expense of them. It would furthermore allow for notions of community and be longing to become re-founded on *affinities* rather than essences,

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rendering the Philippines as a multiplicitous *translocal* community, rather than a unitary *national* one. Importantly, the various nodes of the Filipino diaspora might also be considered as part of the archipelago.

Before proceeding, however, it will be necessary to delve into a deeper discussion of that which I will be differentiating the archipelago from; that being, the modernist conception of social space, for which I am employing the trope of the *island.*

Island space and its discontents

In a recent article, the postcolonial literary theorist, Antonis Balasopolous (2008, p. 9) coined the term 'nesology' to refer to the 'discursive production of insularity, with the prefix 'neso- deriving from the Greek root for 'island'. The new descriptor, 'nesological', then, is used figuratively by Balasopolous (2008) to speak of phenomena commonly rendered or perceived as bounded and insular; that is to say, *island-like.* The 'bounded morphological schema of the island' (Balasopoulos 2008, p. 13) becomes the analogue and archetype for all the circumscribed entities that populate the modernist imaginary; for example, the individual, the body, the society, and so on. The nation-state is perhaps the example *par excellence.*

The nation-state-centric view of the world could in fact be seen as an extension of the 'nesological worldviews of Isaac Newton and Immanuel Kant, to whom much of modernist thought is indebted. Their vision is one of a stable universe composed of discrete, bounded entities. In effect, it sees only of *islands of order*, at the same time forgetting that there is a whole *ocean* out there; an ocean that mixes the things of the world. It is blind to the chaos from which all actuality is generated, preoccupying itself instead with the imposition of order; that is, with a vain attempt at the taxonomisation and encoding of all reality. The Newtonian-Kantian ontology of order sees the world we are born into as always already mapped out in a series of contiguous, stable, *à priori* categories, in effect imposing a stark geometry of *inside* and *outside* upon thought. This, in turn, gives rise to an epistemically-violent logic of 'either-or' in which difference can only be conceived of in absolute terms.

Since nationalism invariably valorises unity over multiplicity (in other words, island space over archipelagic space), it is simply unable to account for flux or heterogeneity, therefore marginalising or ignoring by default alternative forms of experience which overspill or evade the nationalist frame. The Philippines, then,

emphasised throughout this paper, it would also serve as a valuable and much-needed antidote to the 'tragic popularity of ideas about the integrity and purity of cultures' (Gilroy 1993, p. 7), aiming to undo the block to thought that is the nation, thereby opening up new possibilities for liberation.

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18) argues, we need to recognise 'the simultaneous provenance of singularity and interconnectedness constituting the experience of the world'.

Significantly, in place of the modernist revolutionary projects of old (of which that of the NDM in the Philippines is a prime example), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) articulate the possibility of a new revolutionary project; one centred around the concept of the 'multitude'. The multitude is described, simply, as 'singularities that act in common' (Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 105). Instead of the homogenising notions of the nation or the working class, then, struggle is re-founded on a radical plurality of agents, which are nevertheless able to forge a common project. Such is the case with the alternative globalisation movement today. There are also a number of other important examples which could be invoked. Third Wave feminism and the queer liberation movement, for instance, have been at the cutting edge of articulating and inventing a new postmodern politics of the sort that the concept of the 'multitude' attempts to capture and de scribe. If we accept Jeffrey Juris' (2008) perspective of social movements as laboratories of alternative values and practices, then we cannot afford to ignore the nascent forms of subjectivity emerging from these milieux. Alternative futures are indeed *prefigured* in the present. Queer identity perhaps serves as a perfect example of a multivalent identity*,* with plurality and flux inextricably structured into it from the beginning. There is no one way of being queer, and queer circles certainly do not require conformity to any à priori essences. On the contrary, *diversity is valued in its own right*. Such is the radical shift in thinking that an archipelagic poetics would hope to bring about.

Conclusion

I would like to propose, in conclusion, that the task of an archipelagic poetics in the current context would be to foment new, multivalent, archipelagic forms of identity and community, in ways which refuse and overspill the boundaries and terms of compartmentalised island space. Not only would it seek to spark new forms of sociality and ways of being in the world, but would also attempt to make explicit that which is already implicit. As I conjectured earlier, perhaps Umali's (2006) vision of an archipelagic confederation is reflective of deeper mutations of subjectivity currently being engendered in the collective psyche through processes associated with postmodernity. An archipelagic poetics would grope towards a language better able to articulate the postcolonial present, for instance, favouring fluid 'seabound' metaphors and tropes over static, 'earthbound' ones. As has been

despite being a rich site of cultural hybridity is discursively naturalised as a unitary national community — one history, one people, one *telos*, and so on — by nationalist scholars. From this perspective, multiplicity and hybridity represent 'pollution and impurity' (Gilroy 1993, p. 2). The liminal and the ambiguous are rendered as threatening, renegade elements that either need to become wholly, often forcibly, incorporated into the 'inside' or else banished to the 'outside'. This is the same disastrous logic which led to the horrendous purges within the NDM in the late eighties.

Certainly, it must be admitted that modernist, and more specifically, nationalist, forms of belonging have undergone somewhat of a resurgence in recent times which is, of course, seemingly at odds with many of the triumphalist assertions of early scholars of globalisation that the increasing integration of the world would automatically lead to more post nationalist and cosmopolitan dispositions. Franco Berardi (2008, p. 139) contends that the increased appeal of national ism and other forms of absolutism in fact followed on from 'the panic unleashed by the postmodern condition'. This is precisely because, from the perspective of the world that is being lost, postmodernity becomes associated with pro cesses of social fragmentation and disintegration.

If we shift our gaze, however, to the world that is being *made* (instead of just that which is being lost), postmodernity is soon able to become understood in terms of a more positive conception of 'complex connectivity' (Tomlinson 1999). It is not only that social relations are disintegrating, but also that they are changing and being reconstituted. Postmodernity, therefore, is not just about the collapse of grand narratives' (Lyotard 1984), but is also about the fomentation of new subjectivities, the liberation of 'subversive multiplicities' (Butler 1990), and the proliferation of innumerable micro-narratives that refuse conformity to all the old categories and constants of moderni*ty*.

Towards an archipelagic reconfiguration of social space

In a brief online article by Filipino anarchist writer, Bas Umali (2006, p. 5), a startling proposition is made; one calling for the dismantling of the Philippine nation-state and the implementation of an 'archipelagic confederation' in its place. Umali's (2006) vision is presented as a stateless, anarchist alternative to the state socialist goal of 'National Democracy' as proposed by José Maria Sison,

the founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines and principal theorist of the NDM. An archipelagic confederation would, in Umali's (2006, p. 18) words, be 'a structure that connects and interlinks politically and economically every community in the archipelago', without the need for a centralised state. It would consist of networks of autonomous villages (*barangays*), together comprising regional assemblies in which translocal coordination could take place. These regional assemblies, in turn, would constitute an archipelago-wide assembly. Importantly, this vision balances local autonomy with regional solidarity and coordination. The local is not disregarded or deemed subservient to the national, as is the case with the nation-state. The goal is one of constructing heterogeneous *affinities* between autonomous localities, not one of enforcing homogenous conformity to a higher centralised authority.

Questions of whether or not it is at all possible to bring about an archipelagic confederation in practical terms is, for me, beside the point. Putting all such questions aside, what is most important about Umali's (2006) proposal is the very fact that such a postnationalist reimagining of social space has taken — and is taking-place. Umali's (2006) vision could perhaps be seen as symptomatic of some more profound mutations of subjectivity currently being engendered under conditions of postmodernity. In addition, it is a not insignificant fact that such a decentralised, network-oriented, and translocal reimagining of social space has emerged from the specifically *anarchist* milieu in the Philippines. Anarchism, as a current of radical political thought and practice, has, after all, always defined itself in opposition to centralised power and to the homogenous collectivities favoured by state socialist thought. It is also becoming an increasingly attractive option for radical young activists in the Philippines, who have understandably become disillusioned with the Maoist orthodoxy of the NDM, which for so long had enjoyed hegemonic status on the Philippine Left.

Following Umali (2006), perhaps we can reclaim the term used to refer to the Philippines *before* it was constituted as a modern nation-state; that term being, simply, the 'Philippine *archipelago*'. According to Fijian anthropologist, Epeli Hau'ofa (2008b, p. 33), the pre-colonial world was one 'in which people and cultures moved and mingled, unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers'. What he wrote of the South Pacific is also much the case with pre-colonial Philippines: 'From one island to another they sailed to trade and to marry, thereby expanding social networks for greater flows of wealth' (Hau'ofa 2008b, p. 33). These maritime flows have historically been of central importance in the constitution of cultural identities in the Philippines. This is evident in the fact that ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippine archipelago do not map with particular islands, but rather, with particular maritime regions. For example, the Cebuano language is spoken on the island of Cebu, as well as in the eastern portion of Negros and the western portion of Leyte, both of which face Cebu. As a further example, Waray is spoken on the island of Samar as well as in Eastern Leyte which faces Samar. Culture can therefore be seen to be produced in *flows*. Indeed, *no culture is an island*.

The sea, then, does not constitute a barrier, but rather, a connective tissue crossed by perpetual flows. The importance of the trope of the archipelago is exactly this; that it shifts attention *away* from compartmentalised island space and redirects our gaze towards the *relational* space of the sea. In this sense, the archipelago, as I conceive of it here, is *not* reducible to a mere aggregate of scattered territorial surfaces or a collection of individual islands. Instead, what is significant about the archipelago is the *sea between* — a site of a multiple series of relationships that are never fixed, but constantly influx. The networked space of the archipelago which I am attempting to articulate here finds resonance in Stéphane Dufoix's (2008, p. 63) notion of 'atopic space' which he describes as 'a space of more than a place, a geography with no other territory than the space described by the networks… a territory without terrain'. It is important to note here that the local is in no way erased by atopic or archipelagic space; it is just that it is seen as inextricably connected to, and enriched by, the translocal, itself enriching the translocal in turn.

The question I would like to pose at this point is: Would it at all be possible to find belonging or construct community in a 'territory without terrain' as Dufoix (2008, p. 63) puts it? We have hitherto only been able to imagine belonging in terms of compartmentalised island space. Perhaps it is time to consider, instead, the possibility of making a home for ourselves in the archipelagic sea; that is to say, to construct new forms of belonging based on *affinities*, rather than essences. 'Essences' are those attributes constituting a rigid, invariable ideal to which people must conform. Essence-based collectivities thus impose strict criteria for membership and are intolerant of difference. I use the term 'affinity', in contrast, to de scribe those social solidarities which ride, rather than erase, difference. A necessary recognition of the world and eve*r*y thing in it as irreducibly plural and multivalent in fact lies at the heart of the archipelagic poetics that I am proposing in this paper. An archipelagic poetics would resist any attempt to reduce a multiplicity to a unity. Homogenous unity should *not*, as is the case with nationalism, be considered a precondition for life in common, since it is entirely possible for commonalities or affinities to be constructed bet*w*een different elements without necessarily effacing their heterogeneity. As Balasopoulos (2008, p.