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## Innocence and the Child of Sex Tourism in Filipino/American Literature and Culture

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Contemporary Filipino American novels have increasingly focused on tropes of both sexually agentive and sexually victimized children and adolescents in pedophilic situations. Most recently, Han Ong's 2004 novel *The Disinherited* features a child sex worker in the Philippines whom the primary protagonist, a displaced Filipino American touring his homeland, struggles to "save" from the clutches of the global sex tourism industry. Why use children in these novels? What are the contexts of these narratives? As someone who has studied Philippine and Filipino American history for many years, I instinctively turn to the colonial past, but an embattled globalized present is significant, too, particularly in relation to the sex tourism industry and sexual exploitation of children in the Philippines.

Colonial discourse about Filipinos is marked by images of the childish and childlike native and of the amorally hypersexual native. That Filipinos, as the native "other," have historically been considered "children" in colonial discourse is not a new observation; nor have scholars failed to note the sexualization of native Filipino bodies, specifically female bodies, in turn-of-the-twentieth-century travel guides produced by American colonials.<sup>1</sup> However, there has been no study of the simultaneity of the sexualization and infantilization of Filipinos. My larger project argues for the significance of examining the collusion of these two types of figurations in Filipino nationalist and postcolonial literary and social justice movements, in part by identifying and analyzing important tropes that discursively enable complicated forms of postcolonial agency.<sup>2</sup>

Focus on the use of the trope of the child's innate "innocence" in an examination of Ong's novel and the 1999 memoir, *Comfort Woman: A Slave of Destiny*, by Maria Rosa Henson, both texts being examples of Filipino postcolonial agency, demonstrates the complex implications of the historical and figural collusion of infantilization and sexualization. The mourning of lost childhood innocence is a trope found in various discourses on the sex tourism and mail-order bride industries, specifically in exposés and human rights advocacy texts. A memoir by a former Filipina "comfort woman" furnishes a firsthand account of survivorship from child trafficking and sexual abuse. As part of a larger campaign to demand

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justice from the Japanese government for the sexual violence perpetrated on approximately 200,000 women from different Asian countries during World War II, Maria Rosa Henson's text relates her childhood leading up to her abduction by Japanese soldiers and her experiences as a "comfort woman" in the Philippines during the war, as well as her life of silence and further abuse afterwards. In her memoir, the child's sexual innocence is integral to a critique of the imperial Japanese military's coercion of females as young as 10 to serve as sexual slaves in "comfort women" stations throughout Asia during the war. And this very same emphasis on the notion of stolen childhood innocence aligns the text with a broader, global human rights movement against the trafficking, exploitation, and abuse of women and children. However, unlike exposés of the international child sex industry, Henson's text does not take on a morally outraged tone or employ a battery of statistics to argue against the sexual exploitation of vulnerable women and children. Instead, in largely matter-of-fact prose, it resembles a dirge for her lost, or, rather, stolen childhood innocence, perhaps to greater sympathetic effect.

A general mood of shame and mourning pervades her text, as she depicts her ordeal as a theft of her virginity and childhood. She was not a virgin, however, when she was abducted and taken to a comfort women station. One year before this, two Japanese soldiers and one officer came across her gathering firewood and took turns brutally raping her. Advised by her mother not to tell anyone about the incident, she writes, "I was very sad. I could feel the pain inside me. I was fourteen, and had not begun to menstruate. I kept thinking, why did this happen to me?" (24-25). She mentions menstruation again later in the text, in the midst of her graphic descriptions of being a comfort woman. After miscarrying a child, she expresses disbelief: "When I learned that I had lost a child, I began wondering how that was possible, as I had not yet begun to menstruate" (45). In contrast to other comfort women stories, Henson's text emphasizes her youth and the youth of other comfort women to the point where the term "comfort *woman*" becomes a jarring descriptor. Indeed, in the introduction to the memoir, Yuki Tanaka notes that a "distinctive feature of 'comfort women' in the Philippines is that they became victims of military sexual violence at very young ages. The average age in the comfort stations for which we have information is 17.6 years. Many were younger than 15 years, and one was as young as 10 years. Naturally, the younger girls had not yet become to menstruate. An explanation for why the Japanese victimized such young girls will require further investigation" (xvi). Henson's attention to menstruation and her mention of the fact that she was laughed at by the Japanese soldiers for not having pubic hair (38) leave us with the sense that she was prevented from feeling like she ever had a proper

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childhood to begin with, as it basically ended without her consent, through the rapes, and without any pubescent desire involved. Or perhaps, the real tragedy is that the trauma of her abuse as a child left her feeling as vulnerable and powerless for the rest of her life.

Before exploring Han Ong's novel, here is an excerpt written by one of those middle-aged "First World" men who are the targeted audience for mail-order-bride websites and online services peddling sex tours of Asia and other nations in the global South. "Rik," a retired white American man, started a weblog in late 2004 describing his experiences as an expatriate in the Philippines, living with his much younger Filipina girlfriend, Celine, while going through an annulment process from his earlier marriage with a Filipina. On the blog, which he sees as a resource manual for similar-minded men who are thinking of finding Filipina wives or girlfriends, he has put up several e-mail exchanges between himself and one of his readers, "Peter," another middle-aged white American man who is seriously looking for a Filipina wife and is considering living in the Philippines while he looks for one. Here is some of Rik's advice:

You will need someone to take care of you as you grow older. If you pick well—unhurriedly—there's hardly a better woman to take care of you than a Filipina. By the way, the more highly educated Filipina's [sic] can be far more dangerous and deleterious to you than a simple girl. A "forest girl" as they're known as here [in the Philippines] can be the best. They live simply and are already well trained in obedience and submissiveness by their father and mother, relatives and neighbors.

Celine, for your edification, has a third grade education, has worked more or less steadily since she was eight years old. She's a forest girl. But, she is one of the smartest Filipina's [sic] I've met so far—certainly the most trustworthy, faithful, obedient, loyal and hard working. She's unassuming and satisfied with what I give her. City girls—college educated girls want MORE, and expect to get it. They know the ways of the Western world and want their piece of it. Forest girls are happy if they have electricity and a fan.

I would never let a city Filipina through my door. They preen and love to spend money and, worse, they love to show-off. They practice deception and dream always of more. They're never satisfied. They want you to take them to the States and live in the land of golden opportunities. Stick with simple; you'll be much happier. They are far easier to train to do what you want.

There is a lot to say about this, but let me point out just two items. First, let us be clear: both the city girl and the forest girl are simultaneously infantilized and sexualized by Rik's text. However, the forest girl is "far easier to train"—and we can probably assume that he includes sex matters here. Meanwhile, although the city girl likely also proves sexually amenable, she expects "more" as part of an

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exchange. The lost innocence here to be mourned (or deplored) has little to do with the sexual innocence idealized in Henson's text; rather, what Rik mourns is the fact that a more worldly woman or girl, one who has been educated at the college level, is no longer willing to see their relationships with such foreign men as other than primarily business transactions. The city girl, by eating from the tree of knowledge, has lost her innocence, or rather ignorance.

Secondly, the well-educated girl is educated specifically in modernity, or "the ways of the Western world," and wants the money that can provide her with the trappings of modernity; whereas the only element of modernity that the forest girl wants or needs is apparently electricity, which does little to alter her behavior or approach to men like Rik. Innocence here denotes a premodern ideal. Rik desires a Filipina who seems to originate and live in the past, thus employing what Johannes Fabian called a "denial of coevalness." As the ultimate modern subject, an older white American man, Rik sees himself (and others like him) as the steward of the more primitive indigenous Filipina "forest girl." Indeed, since the child has often been discursively and culturally linked to the savage,<sup>3</sup> perhaps: the younger the Filipina, the stronger the link to a savage, untouched, and *innocent* past. In another piece of advice to Peter he writes: "I don't doubt that your Filipina is a simple woman. Again, standard stuff in a land of poor people. The question is: will she stay simple once she's under your care?" Ironically, however, it is difficult to believe that Celine is as ignorant of the nature of her relationship with Rik as we are led to believe. The fact that he monetarily supports the rest of her family probably goes a long way towards ensuring the continuation of their relationship.

Like the city Filipina, Pitik, the child sex worker in Han Ong's novel, is a worldly subject. But he is a far more complicated character than any of Rik's representations of Filipinos. Fifteen-year-old Pitik is not college-educated or even well-educated, but he understands the ways of the Western world through the films and magazines he consumes, and he desires above all to be loved by an American man and taken to the United States to live the good life. In order to make this dream come true, he willingly participates in the sex industry. Precocious at seven, Pitik has been in the world of erotic dancing and prostitution for eight years, with clients who are for the most part white, middle-aged foreign men who come to the Philippines specifically for sex with children like Pitik. In contrast to Rik and Peter who look for Filipinas to take care of them and obey their every command, the foreign men who are obsessed with Pitik—or rather his persona, Blueboy—desire to pamper the boy. Pitik's plan is to become so irresistible that one of these men will decide to bring him to the United States in order to have Pitik by his side forever, as in a fairy tale.

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Pitik believes that he has finally found “the one” when he meets the handsome, fortyish, American-looking mestizo Roger Caracera, the primary protagonist of the novel. Roger, a deeply cynical man who rebelled against his rich family and all they stood for, has returned to the Philippines for the first time since he left as a teenager in order to attend to the funeral of his father, the head of the Caracera clan. In his will, his father left Roger half a million dollars in order to help bolster his unsuccessful life in America and finally make something of himself like his doctor and lawyer siblings. Instead, again in rebellion, Roger views the inheritance as blood money, siphoned from the poorest members of Philippine society, and decides to give the money back, so to speak, by giving it away to the descendants of the workers exploited by his family’s sugar company. When that proves to be impossible, he donates money to a boys’ charity and funds the budding tennis career of a talented but impoverished teenage boy who works in the club partly owned by the Caracera family. Meanwhile, Roger learns that an earlier inheritance that he received from his outcast uncle, Eustacio, was in fact diverted from its true beneficiary, a boy named Pitik. Banished from the Caracera family because of his homosexuality, Eustacio, at first, represents for Roger a kindred rebellious spirit despite the fact that Roger is straight. When he learns that Eustacio was not just homosexual but a pederast, however, he is dismayed and a little sickened, particularly by how young Pitik was when Eustacio met him: around seven years old. In some ways, this reaction of disgust and his arguments with one of Pitik’s American lovers about the unnaturalness of the man-boy relationship point to, as in Henson’s memoir, the notion of an innate childhood innocence that is easily corrupted and exploited through sexual relations.

Roger, however, also sees in Pitik a lack of innocence that is similar to what Rik describes in the “city girls.” Pitik is no prostitute with a heart of gold; nor is he a simple forest girl who only needs a small allowance from her lover and electricity in the house to be happy. But he doesn’t simply want *a lot* of money, either, as Rik’s city girls do. Instead, Pitik confronts Roger with a demand to be loved for himself, and to be swept off his feet. Pitik does not want money to provide for himself; he wants a true lover (granted a rich one) to take care of his needs.

Demonstrating the same cynicism about poor Filipinos that Rik does about Filipina women, Roger assumes that Pitik will be grateful for the small fortune and finally leave his pimp, who Roger believes has coerced Pitik into sex work. Roger is so convinced he is right about his assumptions of Pitik that he wrests Pitik away from the clutches of his American lover, thus misleading Pitik into believing that Roger is a closeted gay man who can be “turned” by his irresistible love for Pitik. But when Roger is faced with Pitik’s demands for love, he is stymied

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and wishes Pitik were more like, say, Celine, Rik's dutiful forest child, or even the stereotypical city Filipina, who would take the money and run. End of story, end of personal interaction for the cynical, misanthropic, and hypocritical Roger—hypocritical because, throughout the novel, from his vantage point as an immigrant Filipino American, Roger rails against the hangdog, self-flagellating, overly humble attitude of Filipinos to foreigners, the same attitude that seems to justify all of the stereotypes of Filipinos as primitive, unworldly children who will bend over backwards to accommodate any foreigner's need. Yet when he is forced to interact with Pitik as an individual with desires and unwieldy demands of him, Roger passes him off to the erstwhile lover, the white American who vowed undying love for the boy. In the end, Roger turns out to be as much a foreigner as the sex tourist who sees in Filipinos only what he wants to see. And because Roger Caracera can be seen as Han Ong's alter-ego, given their similar backgrounds as Filipino American immigrants, the novel's critique of Roger suggests a self-critique that extends to other Filipino Americans, other postcolonial subjects, similarly distanced from the Philippines.

Child sex tourism is a fact. It is not the most sizeable part of the tourism industry, but a significant amount of discourse and action have collected around it since its emergence three decades ago, in part because it forces us to reflect on the idealized notion that children in our societies are the seeds of the future, and in part because examining the who-what-when-where-and-how of child sex tourism illuminates the history and current state of glaring inequalities between nations in different parts of the world. While Henson's memoir has been mobilized as a firsthand testimony of a historical atrocity by activists to demand social justice and reparations for former comfort women on the level of human rights advocacy, Ong's novel moves in decidedly different, less activist circuits. However, I see both as products of postcolonial agency insofar as they furnish important critiques that implicate the colonial legacies of economic impoverishment, racial hierarchization, and even religious stratification in the contemporary (and historical) hypersexualization of Filipinos, including children, in a globalized tourist economy.<sup>4</sup>

Closing on a more diegetic level, I would like to note that, judging by the cynical, paradoxical nature of Roger's interactions with Pitik, "postcolonial agency" is a complicated thing. While Roger is the primary protagonist of the novel with the history of emigration to America and the belief that most Filipinos have a colonized mentality via religious belief and fixation on money, I want to recognize Pitik as also a postcolonial agent, as so few of the human rights exposés and news articles would do; according to these, Pitik would not be an agent, postcolonial or otherwise, but an automatic victim because he is a child. Although

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we find that the reason for Pitik's participation in the sex trade is not as simple as mere impoverishment, that in fact he agentively plans to use his clients as a stepping stone to his American fairy tale, there is no real forgiveness for the foreign tourists who travel to Third World countries for sex with children, nor for the corrupt and greedy forces in Philippine society—which include Roger's family—that make this unequal structure of relationships both possible and even inevitable through the continued exploitation and impoverishment of the poor. In the end, after all, through his, in retrospect, naïve and self-serving attempt to make things right through a redistribution of wealth, Roger sets up Pitik for intense personal disappointment and inadvertently causes the boy's demise when the rich Caracera relatives decide that they need to take drastic measures to end the scandal of Pitik's existence in their lives. Despite Roger's central role in the narrative, the narrative foregrounds Pitik as the true moral conscience of the novel through the sleight of hand that positions Roger not as savior of his homeland but as one of the foreign exploiters, thus calling attention to the complications of postcolonial agency. What are the postcolonial exile's moral obligations to the homeland, if any? Indeed, after his death, Pitik becomes for Roger the hate-filled "gremlin" that torments and impels Roger, rather like the monkey on one's back.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the child in colonial discourse on the Philippines, see Healy's *US Expansionism: The Imperialist Urge in the 1890s* and Rafael's "Mimetic Subjects: Engendering Race at the Edge of the Empire." On the hypersexualization of Filipina women, see Balce's "The Filipina's Breast: Savagery, Docility, and the Erotics of the American Empire."

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms "the child," "child figure," "childhood," and "Filipino-as-child" in the same way that Jo-Ann Wallace does, borrowing from feminist theory's distinction between the discursive objects of study and "real historical beings":

I distinguish between "the child" or "childhood" and *children* much as feminism has taught us to distinguish between "woman" or "femininity" as discursive constructs, and *women* as what Teresa de Lauretis has called "real historical beings who cannot as yet be defined outside of those discursive formations." (173)

<sup>3</sup> For a sampling of scholarly texts that point out this historical linkage between the child and the savage, see Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*; Fabian's *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*; Stoler's *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*; and Kincaid's *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*. For the savage-as-child in the Philippine case, see Vergara's *Displaying Filipinos: Photography and Colonialism in Early 20th Century Philippines*; Hoganson's *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars*; and Wexler's *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism*.

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<sup>4</sup> Even if the character of Roger Caracera would say that blaming the Philippines' economic and social impoverishment on the country's colonial history is a too simplistic answer that only breeds complacency among Filipinos, the novel's indictment of him in his failed role of postcolonial savior suggests that Caracera is not the moral conscience or heart of the novel.

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