

TRAVELING GENRES AND THE FAILURE OF ASIAN AMERICAN SHORT FICTION

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If the autobiographical novel is now seen as the dominant genre within Asian American writing, its centrality has not always been obvious or inevitable. Indeed, a good case could be made that Asian Americans' earliest and most significant literary achievements were not in ethnic autobiography but in the short story collection. Sui Sin Far's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Stories*, published in 1912—decades before the work of Jade Snow Wong, Pardee Lowe, or Carlos Bulosan—is recognized by many recent critics as the earliest articulation of a proto-Asian American sensibility. The first literary work published by a Filipino writer in the United States was not Bulosan's novel *America Is In the Heart* but José Garcia Villa's *Footnote to Youth*, a short-story collection published in 1933. Bulosan himself came to prominence as a writer of short stories, publishing his collection *The Laughter of My Father* in 1944, two years before *America Is In the Heart*. And the first major published work of Japanese American fiction was Toshio Mori's *Yokohama, California*, which appeared in 1949. Why, then, has the short story not come to be seen as paradigmatic in Asian American writing?

This essay will approach this question through an examination of the work of José Garcia Villa, whose career neatly encapsulates the generic "failure" of the short story in Asian American literature. After the notable, though modest, critical success of his short-story collection *Footnote to Youth*, Villa abandoned the writing of fiction, reemerging, after a nearly decade-long silence, as a poet with the 1941 collection *Have Come, Am Here*. I argue that the generic logic of the modern American short story—most distinctively captured in Sherwood

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Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, the strongest influence on Villa's fiction—drew sharp boundaries between the Filipino and American settings of Villa's stories, in contrast to the fluidity of Filipino and American concerns suggested by Villa's short-story cycle. For Villa, it was modernist poetry that became a "traveling genre," one that allowed him to maintain his status as a major author in the Philippines while simultaneously gaining recognition as an emerging American poet.

Because Villa's movement across genres takes place before the rise to prominence of the ethnic autobiography, his case can only be suggestive of the more recent confrontation between the short story and the autobiographical novel. But this ambitious writer's decision to give up the genre of short fiction does give us insight into the possible limits of the short story in providing a foundation for Asian American literature. At the same time, it may point to short fiction's potential to challenge our current paradigms for Asian American writing, founded as they are on the narratives of immigration, assimilation, and identity that characterize the ethnic *Bildungsroman*.

The Short Story and Asian American Literature

Theorists of the short story would likely recognize the form's apparently neglected status as a genre of Asian American writing as simply another example of the short story's problematic position in the hierarchy of genres. While most major critics of the short story have been at pains to distinguish the story's generic traits from those of the novel,¹ Mary Louise Pratt, in her essay "The Short Story," observes that such attempts at differentiation are themselves a signal that the novel and short story are part of a larger system of genres:

The relation between the novel and the short story is a highly asymmetrical one....Their relation is not one of contrasting equivalents in a system (separate but equal), but a hierarchical one with the novel on top and the short story dependent....Hence, facts about the novel are necessary to explain facts about the short story, but the reverse is not so. (May 96)

While Charles E. May suggests that such views reflect a critical bias that attributes greater depth and complexity to longer narratives, he acknowledges that the idea that short fiction is "hardly...worth mentioning in the rarefied

¹ Brander Matthews asserts that "the difference between a Novel and a Short-story is a difference of kind...a Short-story has unity as a Novel cannot have it" (May 73), while B.M. Eixenbaum argues that "The novel and the short story are forms not only different in kind but also inherently at odds" (May 81).

atmosphere of current 'serious' criticism about 'serious' literature" has persisted through much of the twentieth century (132).

Does this dominance of the novel over the short story take any distinctive form within Asian American literature? Consider as an example the groundbreaking Asian American literary anthology *Aiiieeeee!*, published in 1974 and edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong. A survey of the anthology's contents would seem to support the argument that short fiction was, as of the mid-1970s, the dominant genre in Asian American writing. *Aiiieeeee!* includes eight short stories, comprising a total of 91 pages; excerpts from four novels, covering 54 pages; and parts of two dramas, taking up 53 pages.² The anthology format undoubtedly encourages the inclusion of short fiction, but the editors could hardly have given the novel greater representation: the novels excerpted include the only three novels deemed worthy of the title "Asian American" by the editors.³

Yet the editors' introduction gives little attention to the genre of short fiction—a silence made even more remarkable by the fact that three of the four editors were themselves writers of short stories, and none had published a novel.⁴ Although Sui Sin Far is the first author discussed in the introduction, praised for being "the first to speak for an Asian-American sensibility that was neither Asian nor white American" (xxi), the editors strongly suggest that it is only the handful of novels produced by Asian Americans that herald the arrival of Asian American literature. The short stories of Toshio Mori and Hisaye Yamamoto, for instance, are mentioned only as "predecessors" to John Okada's novel *No-No Boy*, an echo of Pratt's insight that "The short story has a reputation as a training or practice genre, for both apprentice writers and apprentice readers" (May 97).

² These counts include the brief biographical notes that precede each selection; I have also classified Sam Tagatac's "The New Anak" as a short story, although its unusual typography and dramatic structure make its genre ambiguous. The anthology includes no poetry, save brief quotations in the introductory material and in several of the selections.

³ The editors describe Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* as "the first Chinese-American novel set against an unexoticized Chinatown," in contrast to the earlier works of Jade Snow Wong and Pardee Lowe (xxx); John Okada's *No-No Boy* is "is the first Japanese-American novel in the history of American letters" (xxxv); and Diana Chang's work is praised for its resistance to the concept of the "dual personality" (xxxiv). The fourth novel included, Carlos Bulosan's *America Is In the Heart*, is mentioned only in the "Introduction to Filipino-American Literature" that follows the main introduction.

⁴ At the time of *Aiiieeeee!*'s publication, Chin was best known as the author of the play *The Chicken-coop Chinaman*; he published his collection of short stories *The Chinaman Pacific and Frisco R.R. Co.* in 1988, three years before publishing his first novel. Chan's story "The Chinese in Haifa" is included in the anthology, as is the story "Each Year Grain" by Wong, who would not publish his novel *Homebase* until 1979. Inada, the fourth editor, was a poet.

Short fiction alone, it seems, is not enough to found or constitute a literary tradition; Okada's novel is seen not an outgrowth of the work of Mori or Yamamoto but as "an act of immaculate conception" (xxxvi) that "invented Japanese-American fiction full-blown, was self-begotten, arrogantly inventing its own criteria" (xxxv).

It should perhaps be no surprise that the editors of *Aiiieeeee!*, and most Asian American critics who followed them, viewed the novel as the foundation of Asian American literature, and indeed of Asian America itself. Many critics have noted the role the novel plays in establishing a consciousness of the nation; in *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that the novel, in creating the "idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time," serves as a "precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history" (26).⁵ In the cultural nationalist period of the 1970s and 1980s, the novel, it would seem, was seen as playing much the same role for the Asian American "nation." For the *Aiiieeeee!* editors, it is Okada's novel, above all, that translates an extant oral tradition into the realm of print culture; it is a consideration of Okada that prompts the assertion that the Asian American writer's task is to "legitimize the language, style, and syntax of his people's experience, to codify the experiences common to his people into symbols, clichés, linguistic mannerisms, and a sense of humor that emerges from an organic familiarity with the experience" (xxxvii).

If the *Aiiieeeee!* editors championed the novel for its articulation of a cultural nationalist consciousness, they might also have valued it over the short story for its ability to reveal Asian American social history. It is a truism of short-story theory that the short story is a genre designed to portray the individual, isolated consciousness, while the novel places its characters against a much broader social backdrop— aspiring, in many cases, to nothing less than a portrait of a whole society. Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice* remains the classic statement of this position; the novel, O'Connor asserts, "can still adhere to the classical concept of civilized society, of man as an animal who lives in a community...but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community—romantic, individualistic, and intransigent" (21).⁶ Although the *Aiiieeeee!*

⁵ For a useful overview of Anderson's theory of the novel and its influence on other critics, see Jonathan Culler, "Anderson and the Novel," *Diacritics* 29.4 (Winter 1999): 19-39.

⁶ O'Connor's position is echoed by numerous critics, including Charles E. May, who argues that "the novel's quest for extensional reality takes place in the social world" while the short story focuses on "the primitive, antisocial world of the unconscious" (May 133), and Wendell V. Harris, for whom

editors would, at times, like to present the Asian American writer as just such a romantic individualist, they are ultimately forced to acknowledge that the social context of writing remains the central concern for the writer of color: "The subject matter of minority literature is social history, not necessarily by design but by definition" (xxxv). Elaine H. Kim's 1982 book *Asian American Literature*, the first full-length study of the topic, extends this sense of Asian American writing as social history, taking as its subtitle *An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Having "deliberately chosen to emphasize how the literature elucidates the social history of Asians in the United States" (xv), Kim is inevitably drawn to the social panorama provided by the book-length narrative; if, as Kim argues, "the theme that underscores the contemporary body of Asian American literature is the need for community" (278), conventional genre theory would dictate that one look to the novel for such a sense of community.

Some recent critics, however, have questioned the association of the short story with the isolated individual, arguing that the Asian American short story can be seen as reinforcing, rather than fragmenting, the community which it depicts.⁷ These critics tend to emphasize the short story *cycle*, and the links that bind stories together, over the individual story, suggesting that the short story collection may be ideally suited to capture the life of an emerging community. In "Identity in Community in Ethnic Short Story Cycles," Rocío G. Davis draws an analogy between the "hybrid" nature of the short story cycle, which falls between the novel and the short story, and the hybrid identity of the writer of color, arguing that

the act of amalgamation required for the understanding of the short story cycle is the same movement as that needed for the consolidation of the ethnic identity portrayed. The shifting borders of identity, isolation, fragmentation, and indeterminacy find their formal expression in the isolated episodes that make up a cycle. The ethnic self, forced to sift constantly through the assorted influences that mold it, ultimately seems to find completion and coherence in the totality, in uniting within itself the diversity it experiences. (8)

James Nagel's *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle* makes the most sustained argument for the American short-story cycle's suitability to

"the essence of the short story is to isolate, to portray the individual person, or moment, or scene in isolation—detached from the great continuum—at once social and historical, which it had been the business of the English novel...to insist upon" (May 188).

⁷ Kim anticipates this argument by describing the short stories of Toshio Mori and Hisaye Yamamoto as "community portraits" that present "the total life of the community" (156-7).

“ethnic” subject matter, calling the genre “patently multicultural” in its evolution (4): “writers from a wide variety of ethnic groups have used the form for the depiction of the central conflicts of characters from their own race or nationality” (15). Like several other critics, Nagel traces the compatibility of short-story cycles and ethnic writing to the short story’s roots in oral performance and communal storytelling (5). But perhaps the most suggestive link between ethnic writing and the short story comes from another famous dictum by Frank O’Connor—cited by several critics—that the short story features, rather than a hero, a “submerged population group,” made up of “outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society” (18-9). Mary Louise Pratt, among others,⁸ alludes to O’Connor’s remark in suggesting that the short story can be “used to introduce new (and possibly stigmatized) subject matters into the literary arena” (104); the short story cycle can “do a kind of groundbreaking, establishing a basic literary identity for a region or group” (105).

But it is not at all clear that O’Connor’s notion of the “submerged” group can provide the kind of positive vision of ethnic community that Davis and Nagel propose. Indeed, one could argue that the more contemporary short story cycles are seen to cohere around a sense of an integrated community, the more they depart from the distinctive qualities of the modern short story. O’Connor’s “submerged” groups—which include “Gogol’s officials, Turgenev’s serfs, Maupassant’s prostitutes, Chekhov’s doctors and teachers, Sherwood Anderson’s provincials” (18)—are presented in the modern short story not to highlight extant communities and connections but to symbolize “an intense awareness of human loneliness” (19). It would be hard to argue that what we are left with at the end of Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* or James Joyce’s *Dubliners* is a sense of the vibrant collective life of a Midwestern town or of the Irish capital; instead, the common geographical locations of these stories would seem only to emphasize their characters’ profound isolation from each other. Perhaps this is what Elaine Kim has in mind in labeling Japanese American short story writer Toshio Mori a “Nisei universalist,” preoccupied less with the particulars of an ethnic community than with broadly human (and individualist) truths (163). If Asian American short fiction of the past two decades has taken on the role of ethnic community-building, it does so in sharp contrast to the work of earlier Asian American short fictionists.

⁸ John Streamas, for instance, quotes O’Connor in explaining why short stories are “good vehicles for [Japanese American] internment literature” (128).

In short, new theories of the ethnic short story cannot adequately explain the historically neglected status of the short story in Asian American writing. However strong the ties between its constituent parts, the short-story cycle cannot—for better or worse—depict the process of *Bildung*, of growth, assimilation, and identity, that has been central to the ethnic autobiography. As numerous critics have argued, the *Bildungsroman* has become the central genre of Asian American writing precisely because of its ability to chart this normative path of Asian American acculturation.⁹ Critics who wish to claim centrality for the contemporary Asian American short-story cycle thus often find themselves compelled to attribute to the short story those social functions previously assigned to the novel. In “Short Story Cycle and Hawai’i Bildungsroman,” Rocio C. Davis uses the example of Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* to argue that the contemporary Asian American short story cycle “incorporates, revises, and challenges the European paradigm of the bildungsroman” (232). James Nagel goes so far as to insist that book-length narratives such as Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, usually read as novels or memoirs, ought to be regarded as short-story cycles.¹⁰

In order to understand the fate of earlier Asian American short fiction—in this case, the stories in José Garcia Villa’s *Footnote to Youth*—we must focus, then, on the way in which short stories do a kind of work that is not done by the novel. While Villa’s stories do depict the life of Filipino villages and towns, they are neither romances of traditional life nor paeans to progress; his characters, like those of Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, are mythic, isolated and alienated, trapped in a ritualized existence. But perhaps the collection’s most striking technique—and its greatest divergence from the model of the ethnic *Bildungsroman*—is its juxtaposition of Filipino and American contexts in adjacent stories, a juxtaposition that does not rely upon the tropes of immigration and assimilation, but rather on symbolic and psychological unities. The ambivalent responses of U.S. critics suggest the boldness of Villa’s claim to both Filipino and American spaces, and Villa’s own abandonment of the form may demon-

⁹ Critical studies of the role of the *Bildungsroman* in Asian American writing include Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*; Patricia Chu, *Assimilating Asians*; and Samina Najmi, “Decolonizing the Bildungsroman.”

¹⁰ In the case of Tan, Nagel does have some authorial support for this position; he quotes Tan as stating that “The book was actually written as a collection of short stories, not a novel,” despite most reviewers’ reception of it as a novel (Nagel 191).

strate the difficulties of writing short fiction across national and colonial locations.

Filipino Tales

When José García Villa's *Footnote to Youth* was published in the United States by Scribner's in 1933, only four years after Villa's arrival in America from the Philippines, it became the first literary work written in English by a Filipino to receive American publication. The book made Villa a celebrity in the Philippines, giving him a status as the Philippines' preeminent modern writer in English that he would not relinquish for decades. The book's publication also demonstrated how quickly and effectively Villa had established a presence on the American scene. *Footnote* featured an introduction by prominent critic Edward J. O'Brien, whose two studies, *The Advance of the American Short Story* and *The Dance of the Machines*, and yearly *Best Short Stories* anthologies had made him the foremost authority on the American short story. O'Brien became Villa's most significant patron, calling Villa, in the introduction to *Footnote*, "among the half-dozen short story writers in America who count" (5). As Francisco Arcellana notes, O'Brien included stories by Villa in his *Best Short Stories* of 1932 and 1933; listed twelve Villa stories in his 1932 "roll of honor" (to ten by Faulkner, seven by Erskine Caldwell, and one each from Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson); and even dedicated the 1932 volume to Villa (610).

Although it is Villa's literary debut, *Footnote* is a substantial collection, including twenty-one stories and weighing in at well over three hundred pages. While the majority of the stories are set in the Philippines, six take place in the United States. Nearly all readers of *Footnote* have seen a sharp break between the pieces set in the Philippines and those set in the U.S., and it is certainly true that there are notable stylistic differences. The stories with Filipino settings are largely written in the third person, in an expository style that alternates between the realistic and the mythic:

More years passed. Malakas' father died, and the children with whom Malakas had grown up now had grandchildren and some already had gray hair. Maganda, Bayani's wife, was older now and no longer looked young: thin had grown her arms, her mouth drooped, her hips were wide. And the river Pasig was broader now, deeper, and the little bamboos of long ago now had grown so tall they stooped with their own weight. (48)

In contrast, the stories that take place in the United States are, with one exception, told in the first person; they are written not as conventional narratives but in short numbered paragraphs, heavily symbolic, that verge on prose poetry:

Then a strong wind blew in and the paper moved.—It is a white flower trembling with love. It is God's white flower.—It made me think of my gorgeous purple flower which my father had refused and I wanted it to become God's white flower. Make my purple flower white, God, I prayed. (83-4)

How should we understand these stylistic differences? The temptation is certainly strong to map them directly onto geography, partitioning Villa's work into "Filipino" and "American" styles. Edward J. O'Brien's introduction initiates this approach, contrasting the "autobiographical stories" of America—direct observations strongly influenced by Sherwood Anderson—to Villa's "Filipino tales," in which "memory takes the place of vision and race consciousness flowers in an unfamiliar kind of art" (4).¹¹

O'Brien's distinction between Filipino "tales" and American "short stories" recapitulates the development of short fiction itself, in which the traditional, orally-based, plot-driven, and allegorical genre of the tale gives way over the course of the nineteenth century to the modern, psychologically realistic, and interiorized form of the short story. Northrop Frye suggests that the "tale," epitomized by the work of Poe, bears the same relationship to the "stories" of Chekhov or Mansfield that the prose romance bears to the novel. The romance, as an older form, "does not attempt to create 'real people' so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes," while the realistic novel "deals with personality" within "the framework of a stable society" (304-5). Robert F. Marler extends this insight, noting that while the tale "may itself illustrate directly a state of mind or condition," short-story characters have an "inner consciousness" which is "communicated to the reader through inference or through a narrator's penetration of the mind" (May 166). Charles E. May grounds the distinction in narrative structure, contrasting the "elaborately plotted tale" to the "story as minimal lyricized sketch" (May 199). What unifies these various distinctions is a developmental narrative in which the more primitive tale is supplanted by the more modern short story. It is no accident, then, that in Villa's case this narrative of generic development is superimposed on a nar-

¹¹ Francisco Arcellana disputes this claim, noting that "the Filipino tales weren't composed in America and therefore not written from memory; these were the stories that Villa had just published [in the Philippines], written from direct vision, and had decided to republish in America" (610).

rative of national development, with the tale associated with the underdeveloped Philippines and the story with the modernized United States—an association reinforced by *Footnote's* subtitle, *Tales of the Philippines and Others*.

For many readers, these developmental narratives would also seem to extend to the structure of the collection itself, in which the artist-intellectual journeys from the rural, provincial Philippines to the American imperial metropole of New York City—a journey that corresponds to Villa's own biography. Even twenty-first-century readers such as Augusto Fauni Espiritu, who would in no way subscribe to the association of the Philippines with the primitive, see in *Footnote* a narrative that proceeds from the margins to the center. *Footnote*, Espiritu argues, echoes the structure of Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, at the conclusion of which writer George Willard leaves his small Midwestern town for the city. According to Espiritu, Villa's collection, like Anderson's, "sketches the pathetic lives of his small town (i.e. the colonized Philippines)," and like George Willard, "Villa's artist seeks to leave provincial grotesqueness behind and risk everything in the big city" (83).

But is such a narrative really visible in *Footnote*? The trilogy of first-person stories that form what O'Brien calls the "American" heart of the collection are placed in the middle of the book, not at its end, and in the book's second half stories set in the Philippines alternate with those set in the United States. Indeed, several readers have remarked that the collection's organization seems to have no logic at all, veering unpredictably between different topics and locations.¹² I would argue that the collection's perceived lack of coherence is due precisely to the extent that it does *not* make the United States its endpoint; the developmental narrative of the artist's journey from the provinces to the metropolis, while present in some individual stories, is simply absent from the collection as a whole.

The misreadings *Footnote* calls up in its readers—and its "failure" to become a foundational text of Asian American literature—can thus be attributed to Villa's refusal to clearly demarcate the boundaries of the Filipino and the American, or to offer a conventional narrative of crossing those boundaries. It provides a sharp contrast to contemporary narratives by Asian American

¹² Arcellana calls the book "strangely shapeless...It is not a coherent book. There is no design in it. For example, one is at a loss to find a principle of arrangement. Why are the stories printed in this particular sequence? It is not chronology. It is not thematic grouping. It is not anything that I can see" (610). Roger J. Bresnahan agrees that "the ordering as [the stories] appear in the volume makes no sense," speculating that the stories may have been organized by O'Brien or by an editor at Scribner's (60).

intellectuals such as Younghill Kang's *East Goes West* (1937) or Dhan Gopal Mukerji's *Caste and Outcast* (1923), whose very titles set up an East/West divide that their protagonists traverse only in one direction, never to return. Nor does Villa give us an immigration narrative, one with America as its telos, of the kind that animates Bulosan's *America Is In the Heart*. Instead, Villa's stories depict a Philippines rendered in a strikingly "modern" style, and linked to the United States through a vivid symbolic language.

Untitled Stories

Villa quite self-consciously plays with the association of the "primitive" tale and the Philippines. The story "Malakas," whose title alludes to the Filipino creation myth,¹³ mimics the style of traditional oral performance:

Hai! I have heard the songs of the wind, the songs of the young lush moon, the songs of tall strong trees. And I have heard too the wisdom in all these songs—but the greatest of all wisdom is in the song of love, when man and woman love. For this I tell you: There is wisdom in love, for love is wisdom. *Hai!* (41)

But the "wisdom" proclaimed by this tale-teller is that of a suspiciously modern masculinity: "The love of man is stronger than that of woman. The love of man is a great red flower with a blue-white heart, and it is a heart that is hard yet big. And so, when man loves, he is cruel—even to himself" (41). The jarring, imagistic juxtapositions—that of manhood with the flower, that of the flower with hardness—introduce a motif that will be central to the "American" stories, including "Untitled Story": "I was very angry I became a poet. In fancy my anger became a gorgeous purple flower...Then when I had won it and it shone like a resplendent gem in my hands I offered it to my father" (80-1).

If Villa's Filipino tales engage with primitivism, it is a distinctly modernist primitivism, characterized by a stripped-down vocabulary and a world of sharply observed objects in the service of an elemental masculinity. "Footnote to Youth," the collection's opening story, may best exemplify this mode, rendering the circular rhythm of rural life in a style reminiscent of Hemingway or Stein:

Dodong thought to himself he would tell his father about Teang when he got home, after he had unhitched the carabao from the plow, and led it to its shed and fed it. He was hesitant about saying it, but he wanted his

¹³ Roger J. Bresnahan observes that the story's plot, in which Malakas and Maganda fail to marry, takes place "at the expense of the Tagalog race, whose progenitors will never come together" (61).

father to know...Dodong finally decided to tell it, but a thought came to him his father might refuse to consider it. (9)

Dodong started homeward, thinking how he would break his news to his father. He wanted to marry, Dodong did...He was growing into a man—he was a man. Dodong felt insolent and big at the thought of it although he was by nature low in stature. Thinking himself man-grown Dodong felt he could do anything. (10)

One can hear the echo of Stein in the first passage in the rhythmic repetition of pronouns in slightly varying formulas (“saying it,” “tell it,” “consider it”), and perhaps that of Hemingway in the second passage’s minimalist diction, its chiasmic evocation of masculinity (“growing into a man,” “man-grown”) and its leaning on basic words (“big”).

But “Footnote to Youth,” like Villa’s other “tales,” most strikingly shows the influence of another writer, Sherwood Anderson, in its focus on characters grappling with emotions which they do not quite have the vocabulary to articulate. The characters of Anderson’s *Winesburg* are haunted by inexpressible ideas and passions, from the writer with a “young indescribable thing within himself” (22), to Wing Biddlebaum, whose restless hands express the unspoken “ideas that had been accumulated by his mind during long years of silence” (28), to the desire of bartender Ed Handby for Belle Carpenter: “[S]o simple was his nature that he found it difficult to explain his intentions. His body ached with physical longing and with his body he expressed himself” (181). Villa’s Dodong finds his attempts at insight similarly balked: “He stood in the moonlight, tired and querulous. He wanted to ask questions and somebody to answer him. He wanted to be wise about many things...Dodong could not find the answer” (19).

It would be easy to read the limits faced by Anderson’s characters as representative of the limits of American Midwestern small-town life at the turn of the twentieth century, left behind by an urban, industrial modernity—a modernity whose aspirations are embodied by George Willard, a young writer who leaves *Winesburg* at the book’s conclusion to seek his fortunes in the city. If we extend this reading to Villa, we may see, as Augusto Fauni Espiritu does, the Filipino “tales” as damning portraits of the narrowness of Filipino village life. “Footnote to Youth” portrays rural life as despairingly cyclical: the young Dodong marries despite his father’s protests that he is too young; finds himself beaten down by marriage and fatherhood; and finally finds himself demurring as his own son demands to be permitted to marry. But the question of resemblance between

Winesburg and *Footnote* ultimately hinges on the question of framing. Does the first-person, ostensibly autobiographical narrator of Villa's American stories function as a George Willard figure, hovering above the action, acting as a proxy for the well-educated, cosmopolitan reader?

The answer to this question would seem to be no. For Anderson's George Willard is the unifying principle of *Winesburg*: a character in many of the stories, a sympathetic listener, but ultimately a detached observer who places the townspeople of Winesburg at a critical distance from the reader, and who offers at least the possibility of escape from rural life. The relationship of Villa's first-person narrator to the collection as a whole is much more ambiguous. The introduction of the first person does not provide a stable perspective on the Filipino material, but rather multiplies our perspectives, so that the American setting comes to seem another facet of Filipino experience rather than an escape from it.

The first-person voice is introduced in "Wings and Blue Flame," a group of three stories positioned about a quarter of the way into the text. What autobiographical details are revealed are recognizably those of Villa: the narrator has traveled from the Philippines to attend college in New Mexico, and dreams of becoming a poet and living in New York. That these stories will not present a conventional narrative of exile or immigration, however, is evident from their unusual structure; they are arranged in short numbered paragraphs, some as short as a single sentence. The narrator's motivation for departure is figured not in national or economic terms but in Oedipal and erotic ones:

Father did not understand my love for Vi, so Father sent me to America to study away from her. I could not do anything and I left.

I was afraid of my father. (73)

The shock of arrival is treated with seeming non sequiturs and an almost comical understatement: "When I arrived in America I was lonely...I saw President Hoover's home in Palo Alto but I did not care for President Hoover" (74). The narrator reports little in the way of explicit racism; in "White Interlude," he remarks that Jack Wicken "would give me ugly glances because I was a foreigner" (99), but the narrator and Jack eventually become friends. Indeed, the narrator's friends at the university form a multiethnic blend, including Jack, who remarks that his father is "a Swede" and an unemployed auto mechanic (100); Johnny, who "the boys said...was an Armenian but when we came to know him he said he was Welsh" (103); and Joe Lieberman, a "Jewish boy" whose

presumption of anti-Semitism (“I’m a Jew. If you don’t like Jews tell me and I will not come to you again” [245]) is transformed by the narrator into a religious revelation: “You are Christ coming to me” (246).¹⁴

For Villa’s narrator, it seems at times that the gap between the Philippines and the United States is little more than that between different kinds of women: “Then I fell in love with Georgia. Georgia had golden hair and I became enamored of it. In my country all the girls were blackhaired” (78). But unlike Carlos Bulosan—and many male Asian American writers to follow—Villa does not turn the white woman into a symbol of America. Instead, the narrator’s short-lived love for Georgia becomes a phase in his self-realization as a writer:

One day Georgia and I quarreled and many nights thereafter I walked the streets muttering to myself. I did not know what I was saying. I called myself, “You...” but the sentence did not get finished...

One night I stopped talking to myself. I was no longer incoherent and the sentence on my lips that began with “You...” got finished.

Later Georgia and I made up but everything was not as it used to be. The finished sentence was as beautiful as a dancer in the dawn. After a time I did not care for Georgia nor she for me. (79)

The narrator’s enduring love is not for Georgia, but for the beautiful sentence that is his own creation.

Thus it often seems that the United States is less a destination for the narrator than a backdrop for the playing-out of already extant psychological and aesthetic dramas. Images of flowers, trees, and fertility are carried across from one setting to the other. In “Untitled Story,” the poet’s anger at his father, who has separated him from his beloved in the Philippines, becomes in the United States a “gorgeous purple flower,” a symbol of his poetry that is rejected by his father: “My father could not understand the meaning of the gorgeous purple flower. When I gave it to him he threw it on the floor” (81). The theme of “White Interlude” is not anger but love toward the father, whose imagined reciprocation is symbolized by a tree: “I took with me the tree of my father, my new love, to the new land—America...In America I nourished the tree of my father till his

¹⁴ The narrator’s seeming integration into this milieu of white ethnics, it must be said, rests at least in part on the displacement of racism onto abjected African Americans. One of the first American experiences the narrator describes is an encounter with a black porter on a train: “The nigger in the Pullman hummed to himself. At night he prepared our berths and he was automatic like a machine. As I looked at him I knew I did not want to be a machine” (74).

love had branches" (94). Villa's narrator has not left the Philippines behind, but rather continues to reimagine and reconfigure them.

Indeed, after this trilogy of American stories Villa figuratively "returns" to the Philippines with another story set there, "The Son of Rizal." Yet the narrative structure of this story is a marked departure from that of the earlier tales: it is narrated in the first person by a resident of Manila, who describes his encounter on a train to the provinces with a man who claims to be the son of the Philippines' national hero, José Rizal. The narrator of this story cannot be confused with that of the American trilogy; this narrator is a middle-aged man, a "commercial agent," married with children, who speaks in a self-conscious, formal, and even pompous voice. But the structure of his relationship to the "provincials" aboard his train, who "bustled and palavered loudly like little, unruly children" (134), is unmistakably analogous to the relationship implied between the "cosmopolitan" narrator of the American stories and the rural villagers of the Filipino tales. The dichotomy of cosmopolitan/provincial, central to Anderson's work, has in Villa become modular, a figure, an abstract relation rather than a realistic depiction. And Villa is thus able to view the relation itself with a degree of critical distance, satirizing the cosmopolitan's sense of his own sophistication: "In such little things I am most conscious and sensitive" (135).

Why allude to the relation of cosmopolitan and provincial only to abstract and satirize it? We can understand this move as perhaps Villa's most daring strategy of representing U.S.-Filipino relations, and also as the reason for the ultimate failure of his short fiction with American readers. To represent the relationship of the Philippines to the United States as like that of the provinces to their metropolis is to deny a sense of the Philippines' radical foreignness—to reject the idea, advanced by O'Brien in his introduction, that Villa hails from "a totally unrelated civilization" (5). It is, in fact, to acknowledge what nearly all of Villa's American readers refuse to acknowledge: the fact of American colonialism. But then to unmoor the cosmopolitan/provincial dichotomy, translating it from an external relationship (that of the United States to the Philippines) to an internal one (that of Manila to its hinterlands), suggests that the boundary between village and city is not as sharp as might be imagined. Such borders are further blurred by Villa's imagery, in which flowers and trees are planted in one place and bloom in another. The structure of Villa's collection, in short, alludes to the colonial boundaries between the United States and the Philippines; then it

proceeds to make those boundaries surprisingly, and perhaps dangerously, permeable.

From Filipino Prose to American Poetry

While Villa's representational gambit earned *Footnote* its publication—and enduring literary fame for Villa in the Philippines—the book's reception showed the limited effect such strategies could have on American readers, and perhaps signaled to Villa the need to abandon the genre of the short story. As I discuss in “Asian/American Modernisms,” American readers of *Footnote* combined cautious praise for Villa's talent with anxiety over his origins and skepticism about his ability to tackle American subjects. The two major reviews of *Footnote*, in *Scribner's Magazine* and the *New York Times*, center their praise on Villa's Filipino tales, with William Lyon Phelps remarking in *Scribner's* on the “poignant beauty” of some of Villa's “tales of his native land” (382). But this praise is double-edged, as it also serves to cast doubt on Villa's ability to write on a topic that readers presume is “foreign” to him: America.

The lengthier *New York Times* review, “Philippine Stories,” takes note of O'Brien's sponsorship of Villa, in particular O'Brien's inclusion of Villa “among the half-dozen short story writers in America who count.” But the *Times* reviewer makes a distinction within Villa's work. He asserts that the best stories in *Footnote* are those that “have a Philippine background,” while demurring from O'Brien's praise of Villa's first-person American stories: “He stresses too much...the freshness of Mr. Villa's approach to American life” (7). Seeing Filipino life as Villa's “natural” subject is, of course, a means of insisting on his foreignness, and of denying the crisscrossing of borders that characterizes *Footnote*; the review opens by describing Villa as “an extremely youthful Filipino who had somehow acquired the ability to write a remarkable English prose and who had come to America as a student in the Summer of 1930” (7, emphasis added). What is elided by that “somehow,” of course, is the fact of U.S. colonialism and Villa's English-language education in the Philippines. It is an elision made even by Villa's greatest patron, O'Brien, who mythologizes Villa's origins in the “country life” and “lush tropical background of the Philippines,”¹⁵ along with his “Filipino sense of race” and “Spanish sense of form and color” (3), in making the case for Villa's “innocence of eye” in America “after leaving

¹⁵ O'Brien's characterization, of course, bears little resemblance to Villa's actual biography. Villa was the son of a prominent doctor and was born in Manila.

a totally unrelated civilization" (4-5). Filipino tales and American stories are, for O'Brien, sharply divided, not only in setting but in style and sensibility.

Villa's refusal of a linear narrative of exile or immigration, and his border-crossing awareness of colonial relations, was thus lost on American readers intent on repressing the fact of colonialism, who saw national boundaries between the U.S. and the Philippines as rigid and Villa's foreignness as irreducible. Indeed, the back-and-forth structure and perspectival shifts of *Footnote* could look, in such a context, only like confusion, or, perhaps, transcendence. That interpretation would also block the text's reception by later Asian American critics intent on narratives of immigration and claiming America. Perhaps it should be no surprise that *Footnote* marked the end of Villa's career as a fiction writer, initiating a decade-long silence and refashioning that would result in the publication of Villa's first American book of poems, *Have Come, Am Here*, in 1941.

Villa had his own explanations for abandoning prose for poetry. Poetry, he often claimed, was simply the greater art; Francisco Arcellana quotes Villa as asserting that he "willed to be a poet because a poet is the highest thing, the hardest thing to be" (608). But it seems reasonable to wonder whether Villa did not sense the limits that would be placed on his achievements in short fiction. A short-story collection could not offer the large-scale narratives that would make the "foreigner" Villa comprehensible to American readers: the "east goes west" narrative of an intellectual-ethnographer like Younghill Kang, or the unidirectional narrative of immigration that would be realized in Bulosan's *America Is In the Heart*. And the American reader, willfully ignorant of colonialism, would not accept the juxtaposition of Filipino and American scenes; Villa would have been seen only as a teller of charming "tales" of Filipino village life, while his American stories would have been denigrated.

In choosing poetry, Villa found a more effectively "traveling" genre, one that seemed to allow him to cross the boundaries mapped in *Footnote* with little evidence of his passing. As I discuss in "'The Hand of a Chinese Master,'" *Have Come* was widely hailed as the debut of a young "American" poet, with only a few reviewers remarking at all on Villa's Filipino origins. Lyric poetry allowed Villa to lift his psychological symbolism to a level of nearly pure abstraction, with its biographical and geographic bases erased. But while poetry seemed to liberate Villa's career from the constraints of nationality, we may wonder whether it did so, paradoxically, because it allowed Villa's work to fit

more securely into the colonial framework. For Villa's poetry debut was praised above all for its evidence of meticulous apprenticeship to the Anglo-American tradition—for registering the influences of, and alluding to, Blake, Dickinson, Hopkins, Cummings. The colonized writer could thus become "American" by positioning himself as a diligent student, but in a manner that allowed empire to remain a subtext, as aesthetic training rather than political domination.

A genre can travel, then, across colonial boundaries in a way that either mutes or registers the presence of those boundaries. As a short-story collection, Villa's *Footnote to Youth* quite strikingly does the latter. It maps the relation of the city and the provinces onto the relationship of the colonizer and the colonized, then destabilizes both by making them aspects of the relation of the first person and the third. Its vision of U.S.-Filipino relations is not unidirectional but multivalent, showing how each country, in the right circumstances, can be a figure for the other, and for the protagonists' own interior dramas. From our own perspective, *Footnote to Youth* may matter precisely because it does register, within its generic structure, the evidence of its travels.

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