

BIENVENIDO SANTOS'S *WHAT THE HELL FOR YOU LEFT YOUR HEART IN SAN FRANCISCO* AND THE FILIPINO IMMIGRANT DREAM

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The voice of the immigrant as permanent exile has held a special fascination for Filipino American writer Bienvenido N. Santos, whose fiction centers mainly on the Filipino American community in America. Himself an immigrant who went to the United States for the first time in 1941 and has lived there most of his life, Santos' work deals almost exclusively on the plight of the men and women who left the Philippines to make America their home. In short story collections such as *You Lovely People*, *The Day the Dancers Came* and *Scent of Apples*, and novels as *The Man Who (Thought He) Looked Like Robert Taylor* and *What the Hell for You Left Your Heart in San Francisco*, he explores the conditions of the diverse types of immigrants and tells their stories, some of success and wealth, most of nostalgia and desperation.

Santos is an important link in the chain of Filipino immigrant writers who have written on the plight of their countrymen. From Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* in 1946, to Jessica Hagedorn's 1989 *Dogeaters*, Filipinos writing in the U.S. have constantly dealt with the themes central to all Asian American literatures: the pain of immigration, homesickness, the cruelty of racism and the creation of a new identity. With regard to this literary tradition, Epifanio San Juan, Jr. has recently pointed to the problem and the need of reinventing the Filipino in the U.S., articulating his silence and invisibility, for creative artists: new models must constantly be forged. A beginning must be made from the realities of immigrants in the second half of the century and from the experience of Filipino Americans born in the seventies and eighties. And this cannot be done without evoking the primal scene coeval with the present: the neocolonial situation of the Philippines and its antecedent stages, the conflicted terrain of ideological

struggle which abolishes the distinction/distance between Filipinos in the Philippines and Filipinos in the United States. The terrain is less geographical than cultural - culture defined as the complex network of social practices signifying our dominant or subordinate position in a given social formation (123). Interestingly enough, the shared experience of immigration is an integral part of the Philippine cultural composition. As Shirley Geok-lin Lim defends, expatriation, brought on by successive histories of colonization, is itself a form and an inseparable part of Filipino identity (68). The new Filipino American literature, therefore, must present this discourse of the Philippine cultural uniqueness, as well as present the drama of more than one generation of immigrants.

Bienvenido N. Santos' 1987 novel, *What the Hell for You Left Your Heart in San Francisco*, is a portrait of the Filipino immigrant community of that city, as seen through the eyes of a recent immigrant. San Francisco becomes the scene of the drama of the immigrant lives, whose actors play out their roles in the middle of a city charged with hope and laden with ambiguity. The novel's narrator, David Tolosa, stranded in the U.S. because of the political upheaval in the Philippines in the seventies, is hired by *nouveau riche* Filipino professionals in San Francisco as the potential editor of a magazine for expatriate Filipinos. David devotes months preparing the magazine, but the patrons have a very narrow view of culture and their sentimental longing for their country is easily overridden by their business sense. The capital outlay and editorial seriousness of a first-class magazine only dismay them. The project proposal is ultimately rejected and David leaves San Francisco.

The novel can be read as a collection of draft feature articles which constitute the magazine developing in David's mind. As he wanders around the city, he records images of the Filipinos who live in it, and write about them. In the background, the popular song «I Left My Heart in San Francisco», dripping with romance and nostalgia, plays. But the San Francisco David discovers is a city of ambivalence, ripe for irony. «A blazing city, to use the doctor's term. Later, when I learned more of the city, I saw the people who inhabited it, Filipinos among them, the very old and the very young, the lost and the never found, their exposed lives beyond the blazing view» (32).

The most vivid image of the ambiguity of the city is provided by Estela, the crippled daughter of the Sottos, both doctors: «On evenings before she would allow herself to be tucked in bed, she had to be given time to look down at San Francisco below the Heights, blazing up at her. The sight seemed to soothe her of all the ills that infested her misshapen body and mind, enough to give her the peace she needed to sleep at night» (1). Estela is entranced by her overview of the city until a telescope reduces its remoteness and makes her confront reality. Much as she is comforted by the blinking lights of the city at night as seen through her naked eye, San Francisco up close elicits a violent reaction from her. She refuses to look and will only gaze at it from a distance: «the telescope made it look as if the city had suddenly closed in, more vivid in details and outline, almost frightening in its nearness as if the lights could burn you to death or entangle you among endless wires and vapor traps. The traffic moved in a

steady flow but in close-up, something was lost along with the distance: the enchantment, the air of mystery of a city alive but unreal, almost like a dream» (177). The drama of the novel ultimately lies in David's realization that there is an abyss between the magnificence of the city as seen from far away and what is viewed up close, as he uncovers the lives hidden in the streets of San Francisco.

For over a century, California, specifically San Francisco, has been the center of many an immigrant dream. The Chinese called it *Gam Saan* or Gold Mountain, and flocked there by the thousands, certain that a few years of hard work there would permit them to return to China wealthy men. About one million Asian Americans entered the U.S. between the California gold rush of 1849 and the Immigration Act of 1924, when strict immigration laws were passed (Takaki 7). Nonetheless, the influx has not halted completely, and immigration continues. Today, Asian Americans represent nearly 9 percent of the California's population; about a fourth of San Francisco's population is Asian, and Asians represent over half of the city's public-school students (Takaki 5).

The case of Filipino immigration is an interesting study. At the beginning of the century, when they began to immigrate in large numbers, the Filipinos were technically not considered foreigners, for they came from a territory acquired from Spain at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War. While they had not been granted citizenship, they were classified as «American nationals,» which allowed them unrestricted entry to the U.S. (Takaki 115). Several thousand young men went as *pensionados* - government-sponsored students, Bienvenido Santos among them (Takaki 58). But the vast majority of the migrants were laborers who worked mostly in three areas of employment: domestic service, the fisheries of the Northwest and Alaska, and agriculture (Takaki 319).

The biggest surprise the Filipinos encountered was that the door to America was not open to them. Educated by the Americans to believe in liberty, justice and the American way, they quickly discovered that they were «little brown brothers» only in the Philippines; in continental America, their physical proximity exposed the limit of American-white paternalism and benevolence. As Ronald Takaki has pointed out, «based on an ideology of racial supremacy, American expansionism abroad turned into exclusionism at home» (324). The English-speaking Filipinos encountered racial discrimination, often finding themselves identified with the Asian groups that had entered the country earlier. They were refused entry into restaurants, excluded from theaters or forced to sit in segregated sections; they could not buy land, nor were they eligible for citizenship (Takaki 325). The transformation of innocent, hopeful young Filipino immigrants eager for a life of freedom and happiness into a community of lonely exiles was gradual and irreversible. The illusion of America was replaced by a fleeting dream of the homeland, pastoral, lyrical and beyond reach.

Anti-Filipino hate and violence were most intense in California, where most of the immigrants eventually concentrated (Takaki 326). The social system that developed among the Filipinos differed from those of other immigrant groups. Unlike the Chinese and the Japanese, for example, Filipinos did not develop their own ethnic sections in

cities. The Filipino districts in California were thus mainly gathering centers for migratory workers, stop-over places before moving on again. They were not places to live and build long-term communities as most of the immigrants were single-male migratory workers shuttling back and forth from Seattle to San Francisco, travelling constantly with the crops. Filipinos saw themselves as sojourners to a greater extent than did their counterparts from China and Japan, for they were from an American territory and thought they could come and go as they pleased. As sojourning «nationals,» they had even less inclination than the Chinese and Japanese to bring families and institutions, establish enterprises, and form communities replicating their homelands (Takaki 337). As a consequence, few married and raised families; most remained single, earning a meager salary, living with nostalgia and dying in poverty. Elaine H. Kim has described the central contradiction of Filipino immigrant life during the early period as «alienation of feelings of displacement among those who have left a traditional society where community, kinship, and mutual support are the basis of individual mental health» (Kim 268).

As the first wave of immigrants, called the old-timers or *manongs* (a Filipino term for «older brother» used as a respectful address to any older man), began to come to terms with their never returning to the old village, a second wave of Filipino immigrants began to arrive. Since the fifties and the sixties almost a million of these new Filipinos have entered the U.S. Unlike the early Filipino immigrants, these Filipinos have come from the city rather than the country, and they have migrated as settlers, rather than as sojourners. Many have been women, and the new immigrants have included professionals such as engineers, accountants, teachers, doctors, nurses and lawyers (Takaki 432). The factors that made them move in such masses was the oppressive Marcos regime, a problematic economy, and the overabundance of a well-educated middle-class that could not find work after graduation. They found, in America, a place to settle down and raise their families in relative wealth and comfort.

What the Hell for You Left Your Heart in San Francisco presents these groups of immigrants and their manner of surviving in the city. David, who describes himself as «an oriental with broad hints of Malay-Indonesian, perhaps Chinese, strain, a kind of racial chopsuey, that's me. Better yet, for historical and ethnic accuracy, an oriental omelette flavored with Spanish wine» (1), is a journalist, who seeks truth in objectivity. His interest in the magazine heightens his awareness of the realities of immigrant life in the U.S. in the 1970s. A hidden racism still beats: «we, who are obviously Asians, have to be ready at all times to prove who we are and what our intentions are, at least for the day» (2). His obsession with documenting the pulse of the Filipino in San Francisco makes him strive to look for «words to name what I see and hear and feel as I go about these now familiar streets. Surely there is a way of surviving for me and others like me in this city - without compromises and betrayals, without anchors» (1).

In his novel, *Bienvenido Santos* explores the drama of the oldtimers in a San Francisco that is both home and not home, faced with the tragic awareness of their

irrevocable separation from their homeland, for whom a patient waiting for their own deaths is «the name of the game» (166); of the professional immigrants who, moved by the American Dream, came to work and set down roots; and of the second generation, for whom America was birthplace but not native land, hovering between two cultures, and whose difficulty with their parents' language and ways are only cause for frustration and pain. The immigrants form a culture of contrasts: first, he presents the oldtimers who «did not want to become American citizens because they planned to return home to the Philippines, living the remainder of their days in the old villages, where their roots are» (Santos 1977, 55), then, the educated and ambitious Filipinos who were desperate to come to America and become completely assimilated into American life and, finally, the children of the latter, typical embodiments of the Asian American cultural dilemma.

Each Filipino has a story to tell. There is the old-timer Tingting, a former tennis champion in the Philippines, still spry at 72, living alone in a shabby hotel room and the other *manongs* who broke the monotony of their humdrum experience by going crabbing, whose eyes «said everything about hope and disappointment» (130). The next generation of doctors and businessmen offer another view of city. Most seem to have fulfilled the American dream and their integration into American life seems so complete that, to entertain, they prefer «a Hawaiian party to something more native to the Philippines» (7). But the pain of immigration is not spared them. The Jaimes, for example, cannot understand why their two youngest daughters, born and raised in America, reject their Filipino heritage. In their confusion, they eventually drive their daughters away, only to roam the streets of the city in desperate search for them. The Sottos must deal with the guilt of having left behind their severely malformed daughter when they immigrated. Unable to have more children, their marriage suffers and hope begins to dawn only when they finally bring Estela to the States. The most poignant story is that of Dr. Tablizo, who, after his mother's death, brings his father to live with his family in America. The old man had known no home but his village and, in spite of a tender relationship with his American granddaughter, he eventually dies of what David diagnoses as a broken heart. When Dr. Sotto insists that nobody dies of a broken heart, David can only answer: «Filipinos do» (166). Apart from the Jaime's two rebellious daughters, David experiences the second generation firsthand at the City College, where he is hired to teach a course on Philippine culture. Most of his students are children of Filipino immigrants, who «just didn't have any feeling for the Philippines» and continued to «complain and ridicule their parents, specially their grandparents» (134).

Though David's interest in the immigrants is purely professional at first, the experience elicits from him a profound emotional reaction. The magnificent view from the hills belie the sordid world he discovers:

I told myself, get lost in the city, sniff around those places where Filipinos live and die, introduce yourself to the new breed, get invited to their private

clubs... I got lost in the city all right. I learned something of what the Filipinos were before, a hint here and there of bitterness and frustration, sometimes a desperate struggling to attain the dream, the ultimate dream of wealth, luxury and ease... [T]his beautiful room you let me to live in, on top of Diamond Heights, wasn't any good for anything except for writing my heart out, for crying quietly, for God's sake, while I gazed down the hills and valleys of your blazing city and saw old men waiting to die a long, long way from home; and angry young brown boys and girls who cursed their parents and spit on their own images, confused and secretly frightened (34).

The power of David's reaction may also come from an ulterior motive for immersion in the San Francisco: the search for his own father. Thoughts of his own immigrant father, who one day stopped writing, are constantly on his mind. «My father must have walked these streets. Does he still walk them now?» (4). His obsessive search for the truth about the immigrants becomes a personal quest for his father and, by extension, a search for roots, both individual and national. When he comes to know the oldtimers, David cannot help wishing Tingting were his father; and, as a model of quiet certitude from the past, he does serve as a father figure. In one of the most remarkable scenes of the book, David dreams that he does find his father, only to be told by him that he is David's son. Leonard Casper claims that this scene can be taken to mean that David should stop looking for himself in only in the past. The past is everpresent and is discernable therefore in the *here* and *now*. In the case of the Filipinos, the multiplicity of pasts/fathers has to be accepted, along with responsibility for one's own decision and behavior (Casper 68). Nonetheless, life is in the present, and, although one - in particular the immigrant - must look to the past to find a touchstone for identity, one cannot live there always and must forge on ahead. The most positive note in the novel with regards to this is the show David's students put on. Second generation Filipino Americans who appeared to reject their heritage demonstrate that they are more culturally appreciative of their homeland and its culture that their parents would have thought. But the point is made clear: the Philippines is the past and San Francisco is both the present and the future.

Bienvenido Santos' San Francisco is the world compressed and endlessly turning. «Sometimes while walking through the streets of San Francisco, I felt no sense of direction. It mattered little whether I was going north or south, east or west. I was going nowhere and yet I wanted to be somewhere but I didn't know where. All I wanted was the movement, the seeming progression into what lay ahead, which somehow calmed me down and there was less clutter in my mind» (27). The city offered many things to many people. David moves from seeing every street as «a rainbow's end» (28) to finding «the jungle of the streets...» (67). His dream-father calls it «one hell of a city» (189). But it will not leave its inhabitants or those who pass through unscarred. David's leavetaking articulates the dangers the city offers: «Goodbye, San Francisco. Oh, let me leave with my heart intact and in the right place» (167). His experience of the

immigrants in the city has forced him to look both at himself and at his country and heritage in a different light. His valedictory, laden with pathos, is a summary of the emotional pain of the immigrant in the city:

Look close, Estela, under the stars; see us little brown men and women, walking the streets of the city as they wind and turn and climb upward, without warning about sudden corners and dark alleys on the downward bend. There are no stars blinking at our feet, no encrusted jewels, such as you might imagine, winking over our heads. We are flesh and blood, tired before the day is over, seeking to find after the rains, a welcome door, a smiling face, both the familiar and the strange. Surrounded by strangers, we look for friends in a continuing search against despair. We have left native land but our hearts are still there, not here, Estela, not in this golden city by the bay... You see us all, don't you? At least, your heart knows we are here, that's why you love to look down from Diamond Heights on this city blazing up at you.... Then there are the nameless ones... They have found this city, their city now, nurturing them like a mother sitting on the hills, the fog in her bosom, the salty breezes chasing the clouds beyond the reach of your naked eyes, Estela... There is fear in our hearts as we listen for tremors under our feet and against our will we look back to that home far away now lost in the late mists of evening and the long years. Pray that life gives us another chance for each loss we suffer as we walk and live in these sullen streets among rusting wharves, smelly canneries and loud fish markets far from the vineyards spilling with bubbly wine (191-192).

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