IN THE FACE OF WHITENESS AS VALUE: FALL-OUTS OF METROPOLITAN HUMANNESS

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What is a spirit, after all, but an untold story, a novel that awaits to be written?

— Tony Perez

In the pivotal scene of Filipino writer Tony Perez’s controversial novella, Cubao 1980, when Tom, the narrator, stumbles into personal salvation at a charismatic miracle rally, a seemingly inconsequential detail stands out. While he observes the American evangelist preaching the word of God and the crowd fervently responding, approaching the stage, shouting and singing praises and prayers to the Lord, Tom beholds a striking detail: the “so very, very white” [ang puti-puti] countenance of the American preacher. In the face of this intense whiteness punctuating the sonorous scene of mass desire, Tom unexpectedly finds himself the receiver of divine grace and mercy, his own surprising and uncontainable emotion the very experiential proof of the intimate, earthly presence of God. “Humagulgol ako. Inisip ko, kahit pa’no, dumating and Diyos, dumating ang Diyos sa Cubao [I wailed. I thought, somehow, God had arrived, God had arrived in Cubao]” (C, 73). Although the surfacing of this chromatic detail is a fleeting instant within the narrative, it is nevertheless an important and telling one.

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For at this moment when whiteness makes its brief and yet intense appearance, Tom encounters something in himself that is at once the manifestation of divine presence and the very substance of universal humanness. As the novella articulates, universal humanness consists of that aspect of a person's being that lies beyond any worldly determinant of social identity, such as nation, race or sexuality, an essence for which whiteness serves as privileged sign. Richard Dyer writes that whiteness involves "something that is in but not of the body." For Tom, that "something" which whiteness involves is value.

Tom's newfound value is undoubtedly moral, as the divine mercy and forgiveness he cries out for and receives would attest. But far from being simply a quality or condition conferred by a transcendent religious order, that value is also the product of a more material, indeed, fleshly, economy. Tom's redemption is, after all, a redemption from the demeaning, petty living he makes as a call boy on the proliferating seedy inner fringes of Cubao, a commercial district of metropolitan Manila developed under the authoritarian regime of Ferdinand Marcos. Under this regime the prostitution industry became the paradigmatic industry of a national economy based on the marketing of cheap sexualized labor to attract foreign — largely U.S. — capital investment. In 1980, the time of the novella's writing as well as of its setting, the Philippine economy was more tied to international financial institutions than ever, having become dependent on foreign loans to fund its various modernization development projects for attracting greater investments of transnational capital. Tom's redemptive moral value can not be understood apart from the local economy within which he circulates as a sexual commodity, as well as the transnationalizing national economy that this local sexual economy serves to supplement. Both the form and the substance of his redemption have already been shaped by these local and national sexual economies inasmuch as they are the same economies that gave rise to the fault or debt that compels such redemption in the first place. Put simply, Tom's divine experience of redemptive value in the fetish form of whiteness can be understood as logical compensation for the
racialized and sexualized lack that is produced in him (the form of his necessary devaluation) as the condition and consequence of the Philippines’ role within a transnational capitalist economy. Even God’s arrival in Cubao must be seen in light of its worldly preparation.

However, Tom does not behold in the face of whiteness the value of the embodied person, the American preacher in whom it appears, nor the value of the U.S. as the place of its origin. He sees rather his own abdicated and betrayed, but ultimately recuperable, human value. Whiteness has itself lifted off from the embodied person of the preacher to become the signifier of a value intrinsic to those who, under a previous colonial symbolic economy, would appear to have none. Relatively freed from any particular embodiment — and therefore implicitly from any bodily race — whiteness signifies the quality of humanness that can be found and developed in each and every person. However, whiteness is not simply the expression of a dominant symbolic system of race transported from the global metropolitan West to the periphery. It is also the product of a particular universalist claim to humanness that is made in the experiential effort to liberate oneself from the contradictory conditions of the everyday devaluation and debasement underwriting the expansion of global capital.

My point is that the racialized humanism that appears to be the sheer accomplishment of an expanding Eurocentric social order (and its racist system of human value) is also the uneasy achievement of a particular kind of resistance against that imperialist order (and its racist, heterosexist logic of production of economic value). Indeed, the perceptible identification of whiteness with recuperated human value emerges precisely out of Tom’s efforts to countenance the experience of his own corporeal debasement under this order. This white countenance of human value appears at a particular historical moment when a racialized universal currency for social and subjective practice is put into effect by means of a liberative gesture on the part of the periphery. In the experience of contemporary Philippine urban life articulated by Perez we witness the concrete rendering of this moment and of the
way such a global achievement and its fallout are simultaneously realized.

As the effect of a specific mode of subjective resistance to an older global order, the percept of whiteness does not, however, only index its socio-historical conditions of possibility. It also acts as a new point of subjectification, another place from which to reorganize one's subjectivity. In other words, the percept of whiteness is a signifier that calls into being a new modality of urban subjectivity, which works in the service of an emergent metropolitanist order of social relations. The making of this metropolitanist order on the level of the nation's capital can be viewed as part and parcel of the processes of transformation we refer to as globalization.

As an astute recording and enactment of the minute affairs and micro-events of urban subjective life, Perez's work thus affords an exemplary view of these transformations in the realm of subjectivity that take place within the particular historical moment of Manila's metropolitanization. But beyond the work of recording and enactment, Perez's writing also performs a practical function. It acts as an apparatus of subjectification, a form of experiential media for the shaping of new subjects and their social relations. It is not a trivial fact that for a few years Perez worked as a psychotherapist or that he considers his chosen writing vocation as that of a "healer not of ailments of the body but of ailments of personality/personhood [sakit ng katauhan]." In this light, Perez's rendering of Tom's experience may be understood as an effort to provide subjective resources and measures for healing the "ailment" that Tom, as a particular case, suffers.

Against Perez's own understanding, I interpret Tom's "ailment," as well as the solution Perez offers for it, in more social and historical terms. For Perez's very diagnosis and writerly treatment of subjective suffering as "ailments of personhood" (i.e., as human dilemmas) constitutes a specific mode of experience, which is socio-historical in character, and political and economic in significance. This mode of experience makes consequential use of a universal currency of human suffering as the means of creating a new metropolitan subject that would be capable of overcoming the dire
costs of living life in the urban recesses of the globalizing national capital. While it would be an inordinate stretch to think of his work as anti-imperialist, or even nationalist, Perez’s important role in the vernacularization of Philippine theater in the 1960s can be said to have contributed to the cultural cause of the anti-imperialist movement. By honing the vernacular as a local expressive currency, Perez’s original plays in Tagalog participated in the nationalist project of resolving the general crisis of cultural alienation wrought by neocolonialism. Given this larger orientation of Perez’s work, it is not difficult to glean the tacit workings of a social project at the background of his creative endeavor, a project crucially sustained and shaped by both the political agenda of nationalism and his explicit repudiation of it.5 Today, Perez notes, “As long as the majority of our people do not read creative works, we will remain a Third World country.” This tacit social project consists of the liberation of Filipinos from Third World conditions through the creation of a metropolitan subject rather than a nationalist one. By looking into the processes by which this subject overcomes subalternity, we are led to recognize not only the historical, social experiential work that contributes to the realization of racialized humanism as the universal currency of subjective valuation, but also the social consequences of this realization.

The Historical Racialization of Value

To a certain extent, the conditions for racialized humanism that we witness through Tom were already laid down under Spanish colonialism with the conversion of the Tagalogs and other indigenous Philippine peoples to Christianity during the sixteenth century.6 Dyer’s definition of whiteness as “something that is in but not of the body” highlights the foundational motif of Christianity conveyed through Spanish rule. That motif is incarnation, or the human embodiment of what transcends the body. Under Spanish theological rule, the moral virtue of native converts could only be ascertained by its derivative and mimetic relation to the spirit of Christ as the human incarnation of God. A fixed referent thus determined moral,
human virtue — a transcendent spiritual ideal towards which the natives were forcibly expected to strive, but which, to the extent that the natives were the very embodiment of sinful, corporeal nature, would forever remain beyond their reach. God was the “Infinite Creditor” to whom the natives paid tribute and perpetually indebted themselves (CC, 96). Whiteness was the spiritual surplus of God, indistinguishable from the white Spaniards who were God’s representatives. As a signifier of moral value, it could thus be experienced only externally. For whiteness to be experienced by the former natives as a value intrinsic to being human, another dynamic of social organization had to prevail.

Colette Guillaumin argues that with the ascendance of the bourgeois mode of production in European and U.S. societies and the expansion of colonialism into a global economy in the nineteenth century, a new form of racism emerges, different from the racism of previous feudal, aristocratic orders. If we look at the bourgeois economic conception of value, it bears the form of “in but not of the body” articulated by the idea of incarnation. Marx’s famous analysis of the mysterious character of the commodity-form is precisely a critique of the idea of Christian incarnation as it operates in the practices of commodity-fetishism. For Marx, “Christianity with its religious cult of man in the abstract, more particularly in its bourgeois development, i.e., in Protestantism, Deism, etc., is the most fitting form of religion” for a society of commodity producers (CP, 172). As Mark Taylor argues, both Marx’s analysis of capital (defined as “value in process” (CP, 256)) and Hegel’s speculative logic, which Marx’s theory of value appropriates, are predicated on the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity. Marx’s specific intervention, however, consists in showing how religious fetishism in the relations between people (as between people and God) passes into a fetishism in the relations between things. In the Christian cosmology of capitalism, money and commodities become incarnations of a hidden substance — value:

In its value-relation with the linen, the coat counts only under this aspect, counts therefore as embodied value,
as the body of value. Despite its buttoned-up appearance, the linen recognizes in it a splendid kindred soul, the soul of value. . . . Its existence as value is manifested in its equality with the coat, just as the sheep-like nature of the Christian is shown in his resemblance to the Lamb of God. (CP, 143)

As Harry Chang shows, this mode of thought peculiar to capitalist relations, i.e., the fetishism of commodities, is crucial in the very formation of "races" as the objectification of the social relations of slavery and, subsequently, of "free" labor. In the course of colonial Europe's capitalist development and industrialization, race enters into the value-relation itself. Or I should say, race begins to stand in for that which must be eschewed in order to approach value, and in this way retroactively determines the meaning of value as that which is not raced. Just as a thing must transcend its sensuousness, its physical body, in order to emerge as a commodity, a thing possessing value, so must the free worker transcend his corporeality, the aspect of his being which aligns him with an appropriable nature in order to become a bearer of value (labor-power). Since race comes to signify precisely this appropriable corporeal nature as a consequence of the histories of slavery and colonization, value itself, as the invisible content of an object or person distinguishable from its outward form, becomes aligned with that which is not raced. Hereon, value takes on the social aspect of those who, by virtue of their monopolistic agency over it, personify it in its ideal form as money. Although the value inhering in money would seem to transcend all sensuousness, its enigmatic power consists precisely of its suprasensible reflection of the social characteristics of production as objective socio-natural properties of money itself. Value reflects the racialized relations of its production, in particular the alienation of and from racialized labor as a suprasensible "quality" of unmarked, immaterial, even spectral power. The white subject is, simply put, the realization of the subjectivity of the vanishing mediator. As the personification of the money-form of value in its position of disinterest and transcen-
dence (its exclusion from the world of consumable objects), the white subject hence aspires to the highest (most fetishized) instance of itself: “capital as the subject of value in its movement of growth.” Indeed, it is in its appearance as the self-moving, independently self-valorizing, capital-subject that whiteness most vividly demonstrates its proximity to God.

Dyer writes:

At some point, the embodied something else of whiteness took on a dynamic relation to the physical world, something caught by the ambiguous word “spirit.” The white spirit organises white flesh and in turn non-white flesh and other material matters: it has enterprise. Imperialism is the key historical form in which that process has been realised. Imperialism displays both the character of enterprise in the white person, and its exhilaratingly expansive relationship to the environment. (W, 15)

In the Philippine context, it is this character of enterprise and, more particularly, of capital (rather than merely territorial) expansion that distinguishes the project of U.S. imperialism from the project of Spanish colonialism.

Under U.S. imperialism, a new dynamics of racialization comes to replace the rigid hierarchy of racial castes imposed by Spanish colonial rule. With the ascendance of a native mercantile class through an agricultural export crop industry, race becomes increasingly integral to class formation. Hereon qualities of racial superiority could be found to be embodied in this emergent national elite, whose domination was sustained by economic as well as identificatory ties to foreign capital. The white spirit thus shows itself to be no less than the spirit of capital, a spirit no longer confined to the harsh dispensation of the Friar, but rather in some sense freed for those in God’s grace to draw from. While under Spanish colonialism God may have already been the white Father, under U.S. imperialism He gains a benevolent countenance. His Spirit is
evangelical, descending upon earth to bring everyone within the
democratic realm of His beneficence.

From the late 1960s to the late 1970s, the Philippines underwent a radical economic restructuring, which linked it more intimately with transnational capital by completely orienting its production towards export. This nationalization of imperialism (by which I mean the assumption by the state of powers and functions held by the U.S., but here with respect to the rest of the country) at once manifested itself in and realized itself through the metropolitanization of the national capital, Manila. With transnational financial capital as both its means and its object, the Marcos State transformed the urban space into the material site for the subcontracting of multinational production. Metro Manila did not only serve as a showcase of modernity for the attraction of predominantly U.S. capital, it also served as the instrument for the greater integration of the Philippine economy into the international world market. Parts of the old national elite which rose to political and economic power during the U.S. colonial and post-independence periods, together with the new “cronies” of the Marcos State consolidated and parceled out the bodily resources of the nation in a strategy to attract foreign loans and investments for the ostensible purposes of development. In this way they established what would prevail during this period as the dominant mode of accumulation of foreign capital — principally characterized by what has been called “rent-seeking activities” closely linked to the strategy of “debt-powered growth.”

As an attempt to synchronize Philippine urban life with the developed metropolitan world, the metropolitanization of Manila consisted of innumerable projects of beautification, infrastructural improvements, and the construction of hotels, cultural centers, and international convention halls. Manila was dubbed the “City of Man,” one of the “many homes of mankind” that together would comprise the envisioned end of the inexorable trajectory of progress: the earth as “a global city.” As I have shown elsewhere, this metropolitanization of Manila created its own contradictory refuse in the form of the urban excess population and the informal econ-
omy they motored as the means of their own survival. It is from this seamy side of what will later be hypostasized as globalization that the historical experience of whiteness as value, as well as the new order of social organization and production which it indexes, can be concretely articulated.

**Experiencing Whiteness as Value**

In *Cubao 1980*, this seamy side is the world of casual male sex work. Of the socio-historical context referred to by the title, Carlo Tadiar writes:

From the late seventies to the early eighties, at the very height of the Marcos dictatorship, Cubao acquired national significance because it debuted American-style malls in the country. . . . Cubao allowed the masses access to a cornucopia of American-identified goods for the first time, finally introducing into the Philippines the fantasy sustaining full-fledged capitalism: universal consumerism — unlimited, unrestrained, free consumption. Ironically — or perhaps logically — Cubao acquired a shadow reputation as a market for male youths.

In Perez's novella mass consumption and the male sex market are brought into a logical relation in the experience of Tom, the sixteen-year-old boy who is first introduced into Cubao's dark, glittery world of boy prostitution by his friend Butch:

Man, we've got none now, Butch said once. We were at Ali [Mall] then, wandering about, 'cause there were so many things to see, so many delicious things to buy, you just think, later, when you've made some money. Let it be for now. All you can do is look, pretend you have some, show off to the chicks, give them a couple of winks, even though they're snobs, fun to annoy, anyway you can't bring them to Coney or Shakey's.

We've got none now.
What do you mean now? We never have any. I’m hungry — let’s just go home.

But Butch didn’t want to go home yet.

Let’s go hunting for fags, Butch said. They’ll give us some. (C, 4)

Faced with commodities everywhere, both Butch and Tom feel an absence. Butch’s refrain, *Alaws tayo ngayon* [We’ve got none now], is matched by Tom’s, *Tomguts na ko*, a slang expression for “I’m hungry” which makes of the word “hungry” [*gutom*], a play on his name. This absence disables them from acting like real men, and leads them to lend their bodies to baklas [fags] for the things which they believe would fill their lack: money and American goods. After his first sexual encounter Tom uses the money he earns to buy a *Dyambo hat dog* [jumbo hot dog]. As Tadiar reads this scene: “To bite into the hot dog is to bite into the fantasy of an American heaven of which Cubao is a terrestrial metonym, paradise on earth.” But like the penis of Tom’s only American customer, which is forced into him and which he describes as a jumbo hot dog, the fetishized object does not satisfy, leaving something to be desired — but, at the same time, leaving something to desire with. The exchange leaves him with the medium of desire — money — which is itself exciting, betokening seemingly infinite possibilities. It comes then as no surprise that when he receives this desiring medium in its highest form after being raped by Ken, the American, he experiences a kind of euphoria. As he remarks in awe, “That was the only time in my whole life that I ever held dollars [*No’n lang ako nakahawak nung dalar sa buong buhay ko*]” (C, 55). Dollars, it would seem, are the real thing.

As the purported universal equivalent for all currencies, the privileged medium of global exchange, the dollar acts as that unequivocal sign of power at whose behest the nascent Filipino elite would establish their own mythical prowess. The dollar indexes the very socio-symbolic order of late capitalism on which its representative status as the new gold standard (at least until the 1990s) depends. It does not only represent money and the infinite
possibilities it portends, but also the very place from where money seems to derive such power. We might say, then, that by holding it in his hand Tom momentarily holds the key to that sublime place where all value resides and where all desire that depends on value as its means or object is fulfilled. Or we might say, by holding this key he is himself held by it, possessed by its supreme omnipotence. Hence his euphoria.

In his remarkable ethnography of male sex work in metro Manila, Carlo Tadiar argues that the socio-symbolic order of capitalist modernity shapes what he locates as the motoring conceit of the male sex market, that is, the notion of the essential difference between the customer as bakla (homosexual) and the kolboy (male sex worker) as lalaki (literally, male, presumed to be heterosexual). Tadiar argues that the phallocentrism of this order reshapes the local sex-gender system such that relations between bakla and lalaki can only take the triangulated form of commodity relations.24 “Both bakla and kolboy are reaching for the phallus. Where the one thinks he is looking for a man, the other thinks he is looking for money.” Both “man” and “money” are incarnations of phallocentric value. Each is, as Jeffrey Weeks defines it, “the representation, the signifier of the laws of the social order, the law of the Father, through which obedience to the social (and patriarchal) order is installed.”25 But the very heteronormative imperatives that shape this exchange (requiring the kolboy to be the real man) transforms man into a “fallen” form.26 Hence, Tadiar notes the kolboys’ obsession with ordyinal [original] commodities, that is, brand name commodities from the U.S., as somehow guarantees of the value of their personhood and, more particularly, their manhood. These U.S. commodities signify both real value and the origins of that value, both of which are to be found in an otherworldly place.

Inasmuch as real phallic value, which these commodities embody, will always lie elsewhere, the kolboys will necessarily always be lacking. Drawn into the circulation of bodies and money in which both kolboys and baklas endlessly go hunting [hanting] for each other, Tom thus experiences his life as a series of sexual exchanges that amount to nothing. Time seems to stand still; he for-
gets what year it is. “Because the days fly so quickly. Like money, when you spend it [Ang bilis kasi dumaan ng araw. Parang pera, pag ginastos mo]” (C, 41). He tries to keep a list of all his “happenings,” “like a list of debts, a list of sins [parang listahan nung mga utang, listahan nung mga kasalanan]” (49), but he loses count. He begins to see the people in Cubao as shadows. “At night, the shadows of the leaves on the ceiling would move and move. Like people, on the overpass, in Cubao. Moving, walking, there were so many . . .” (49).

Then one day he and his friends happen upon a religious rally of Don Stewart, the American evangelist. Here Tom encounters the real thing, even more real than dollars. “So very white, so very clean [ang puti-puti, ang linis-linis]” (72), he thinks to himself about the preacher who speaks in English (the language of those mockingly referred to as “dollar-spokening”) about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, “About people, about sins, about everlasting life, about those who were happy, I don’t know, about everything” (72). Before the all-encompassing understanding of the American evangelist, Tom is swept up in the religious euphoria of the crowd:

People were shouting so loudly. Everyone was crying, wailing, hurrying to get near the stage. He was praying, his face so very, very white, saying, come near, come near to God [Diyos], to God (Gad), to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit, come near, He was there with him on stage, even if you didn’t see Him. . . .

My God, my God, I cried and cried, I am so bad, forgive me!

I wailed. I thought, somehow, God had arrived, God had arrived in Cubao.

I didn’t ask why. (73)

The “Infinite Creditor,” that is, the Catholic God of Spanish rule [Diyos], descends to earth, sublated by the evangelical Protestant God of benevolent U.S. assimilation [Gad] (CC, 96). Tom’s sins, his debts, are here met by the kind countenance of a God very differ-
ent from the distant, prohibitive Spanish Catholic God moralistically invoked by his older brother, the stern, pious father-substitute whose authority, like that of the Catholic priest, symbolically derives from the Christ the King figure hanging over his bed. (Significantly, the figure is on an outdated calendar.) In contrast to God the Patriarch, God the Savior is close by, humanly near. His very arrival in this forsaken, lumpen world of Cubao is the act of His infinite forgiveness and love.

Against the merely real value of dollars and all that they portend for someone, Tom discovers a value that is for no other; it is a value without equivalence or relativizing condition but, as he also becomes painfully aware, a value he has continuously given over to others for a price. He discovers that his humanness [pagkatao] is above all relative worth or price (i.e., is value in itself, which he bears and yet, by allowing himself to be treated as a thing, he betrays).27 Thus, Tom finds both his sin and his salvation in the same moment. Having encountered true Value through its white representative, he realizes how far he is fallen from the ideal of a transcendent, metropolitan humanness by which he might recognize and measure his own soul. He and his friends climb to the top of the coliseum where the rally is held. From this place of transcendence, they view the entirety of the world in which they had been immersed. There, they decide to renounce their ways, their way of living, and to redeem their lost souls (that is, the intrinsic human value they continuously gave over to others).

This recognition of true Value and the divestment from his previous debased life that such recognition demands, constitutes Tom's personal conversion. "In other words, thanks to the act of conversion, the subject is supposed to attain a kind of alterity from the self and, in a spectacular shift of identity, thus arrive at his or her very being, whose function is to make the face of the god shine forth within."28 The conversion that Tom undergoes is also implicitly an economic event. In the transformative process of this direct communion with God, Tom's previous experience of himself as corporeal being for others — pinag-arkilahan ng katawan, pinaggamitan ng ari, pinagbentahan ng laman [whose body was
rented out, whose sex was let out for use, whose substance was for sale] (C, 78) — turns into an experience of himself as someone with at least potential Value.

The Minoritized Costs of Religious Human Redemption

In exchange for his total surrender to this Supreme Being in Itsel, in whose image he is made, Tom becomes a human subject. For Butch, this conversion to human subject means reducing all his contacts, including Hermie, his steady, to shadows — “Hermie was no more — no longer human, just a name . . . [dehin na tao, pangalan na lang . . .]” (79). Such redemption depends upon the repossession of one’s self from the agency of another’s corrupting, commodifying desire — indeed, from the agency of the other who occupies one’s desire. In the wake of redemption and from the place of transcendence where it takes effect immediately comes the denouncing cry: “Puking ina n’yo — mga bakla kayo! [You mother-whore, you faggots!]” (81). Or better, the denouncing cry becomes the enunciative act of one’s redemption.

Uttered by Butch and reprised by Tom as the contents of the entire chapter that follows, this denouncement consolidates all of Tom’s very different sexual experiences — all his happenings — into one social identity that remains external to him: mga bakla kayo [“you faggots,” but also, “you are faggots”]. Although the category bakla bears greater social consistency and a much longer history than this argument might suggest, it is only at this moment of enunciation that the bakla comes to be configured as the positive embodiment of the kolboy’s lack, a lack which is no more fully felt than in the process of one’s redemptive constitution as human subject.29 Unlike the extant use of bakla as a social category of persons characterized by effeminate bodily form and comportment and cross-dressing, the denouncing cry in the novel encompasses all the customers of kolboy sex work, regardless of the gender-codings of their behavior. In this way bakla becomes a category denoting, above all, a commodifying same-sex desire for the male body.

Reconfigured as such, bakla comes to stand for that which must be eschewed in order to resolve the internal contradiction
that prevents the kolboy from becoming a fully-realized, desiring human subject. It must be recalled that within the context presented by the novel, the bakla are the bearers of money, which is the ostensible object of the kolboy's hunting. As he takes this money in exchange for his body, the kolboy sinks into sin, each "happening" converted into an ever-increasing debt that itself takes the place of his original lack. In the moment of Tom's and Butch's conversion, the debt that must be settled in order for them to attain their humanness becomes the very identity of the bakla, who is hence targeted for its payment.

Caroline S. Hau writes about a similar conflation in her discussion of the spate of kidnapings of ethnic Chinese carried out by the criminal Philippine state from the late eighties to the mid-nineties. Hau argues that the conflation of the Chinese with alienating capital, which the kidnapping-for-ransom enacts, can be traced to the historically contradictory roles assigned to and played by the Chinese in relation to the colonial and neo-colonial state. In effect, the figure of the Chinese as alien capital is the means and object of a violent displacement of the social contradictions generated by the Philippine nation-state's own identification with global capitalism.

In another work, Hau observes the way in which this figure recurs in Philippine nationalist literary texts as part of a wider nationalist effort to imagine a unified body politic that could overcome the prevailing social and economic inequities generated by neocolonialism. Her reading of Edgardo Reyes' 1968 novel, Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag [At the Claws of Daylight] is of particular pertinence here, as it demonstrates the racialized personification of alienation that takes shape through the social realist imaginings of urban protest literature. In Reyes' novel, the humanist hero, Julio Madiaga [from matiyaga, hardworking], is the Filipino Everyman who journeys from the idyllic countryside to the corrupt and exploitative national capital in search of his disappeared sweetheart, Ligaya [happiness]. That journey does not only chronicle Julio's alienation through his absorption into the urban capitalist economy, it also raises his national and class consciousness that
serves to overcome that alienation. Discovering that Ligaya has become the sexual captive of Ah Tek, the figure of Chinese capital, Julio attempts to rescue her but when his plan fails and Ah Tek murders Ligaya, he takes his fatal revenge against Ah Tek instead. Hau reads this fantasy of vengeance as a “nationalizing” moment wherein the protest against alienation that threatens to take away the Everyman’s humanity “is directed against the Chinese, who is both an alien and instrument of capitalist alienation” (NF 165). The figure of the Chinese becomes the embodiment of an entire social system, which is seen to prevent the humanist hero’s realization of his humanity and his attainment of happiness.

Something similar is at work in Cubao 1980 in relation to the bakla, whose symbolic condensation as an identity is performed by the sinister and remote figure of Hermie. Hermie is the big-time bakla who first lures Butch, himself the original kolboy in the story, into the demeaning sex-money exchanges he subsequently disavows. Hermie is surrounded by the trappings of modern affluence. Like Ah Tek he signifies money. He hovers over the narrative, intermittently invoked but virtually invisible. To Tom he is mysterious and indecipherable, he is unlike any of the other bakla Tom has met. Exuding power, he provides well for his kept lover. He is kind and materially generous, but also murderously possessive. In Hermie, then, we find the symbolic figure of the Chinese as “alien” capital, the source of the debasement and unfreedom of everyday alienation. Like the Chinese, who “perverts the ‘true’ value of citizenship,” Hermie is a perversion of the true value delivered to Cubao’s forsaken by God’s white representative (NF 138). On the level of national urban life, racism helps to resolve class antagonisms; on the level of submetropolitan life, homophobia helps to resolve the racism of the “universal” law of value. The gendered sexualization of the worker’s corporeal debasement that is already implicit in labor’s protest against its emasculation by capital is underscored and materialized by Tom’s and Butch’s own literal prostitution. It is, in part, the heterosexist sexualization of commodification that for Perez demands a homophobic solution to the problem of alienation. Tom turns away from one heteronormative-
ly gendered and racialized system of value underwriting the pros-
titution economy only to embrace a differently calibrated, but ulti-
mately identical, system of value underwriting the politics of humanist redemption. Hence the consolidation of bakla identity as
the corrupting disease that has to be purged from the metropolitan
space within which the humanizing self is upheld.

Scorned by his self-redeeming lover, Hermie emerges out of
the teeming crowd of undifferentiated faces, "like a ghost in a
dream [parang molto sa panaginip]" (C, 86), and shoots Butch
dead. Unlike the case of the kidnapped Chinese, the dramatic vio-
lent consequence of the kolboy’s white redemption rebounds on
the bakla, not as the purported source of the kolboy’s alienation,
but rather, as the movement of identification with a universal hu-
manness. However, this reversal is not an overturning of the pre-
vailing logic, but merely its precipitous fulfillment. Whether the
product (the alterity of identity) or the movement (identification), it
all comes to a fatal end. Blood, rain, and the chaos of bodies mix
in an explosion that stops the infernal city-machine for a moment.
And then it starts again, the relentless pounding tread of the crowd
pouring through Cubao.

It is upon seeing the dramatic consequence of his and Butch’s
redemption that Tom suspects another truth that lies at the core of
his acts — the truth, perhaps, that he had been seeing the world
from the place of his immanent redemption all along. That truth
that will be the turning point for a second conversion comes to him
through the urban deluge into which both Hermie and Butch dis-
appear, a deluge that dissolves the dead still of his universal human
valorization, leaving only morsels of time past [pira-piraso kong
nakaraan]. This other truth that calls Tom into a second moment of
conversion, a further subjective becoming, appears not as any par-
ticular content but rather as a question and a regret. Tom asks him-
self: “Who was Hermie? Who was Sonny, who was Bert, who was
Ken, who were those five guys who played music at Clark and at
Subic, who were all those people I allowed a piece of my life —
people, faces, mere shadows . . .” (C, 90). From the place of tran-
scendence, all those others can only appear as a race of dark,
obscure figures, what Guillaumin describes as an “undifferentiated mass, floating somewhere outside the passage of time, like an eternal essence from which no single individual stands out in space or time” (RS, 53). Shadows convey the hollowing out of persons as empty forms. However, they also suggest the full beings from which they are cast but which they necessarily obscure, the living persons they depend on but draw away from. Shadows suggest, in other words, all that Tom doesn’t know: “what a waste, what a waste, I knew so many things, but I didn’t know [sayang, sayang, ang dami kong alam, pero hindi ko alaml]” (C, 89).

This obscurity is depicted for the reader in Perez’s sparse narrative in the emptiness of its descriptions. It is precisely the glaring blank spaces that stand out from underneath the bare bones of this narrative, that highlight the complexities of life that are not known. Simple lang, “It’s simple,” is the refrain Butch uses to reassure Tom how easy the job they are getting into is. The refrain is precisely the instrument for making this life easy. By reducing his encounters to their most minimal outlines, Tom relieves himself of the burden of knowing, of feeling, and of responding to the lives he comes into contact with, but also of feeling and registering his own reduction to mere corporeality, to a piece of matter like all the disposable pieces of matter that saturate Cubao. As a strategy for coping with his own abjection, Tom experiences his life in this kind of muting, obscuring, and exterior way. He views everything in its exterior form — including himself and his own body — and is spare in his descriptions and characterizations, noting only the barest physical details as isolated objects marking the spaces of his happenings. The whole narrative consists of the stark verbal and sexual exchanges he engages in, in a series of discontinuous events in which he appears to be an accidental participant.

One of Perez’s noteworthy literary formal achievements lies in this ascetic economy of expression that he brings to Tagalog fictional narrative. Perez’s narrative style might be said to perform a minimalist surfacing of perceptible object-forms from the undifferentiated sea-like morass of urban existence into which everything would otherwise disappear. “I am a visual writer,” Perez claims.
“A word is a line. A sentence is a figure. A paragraph is a composed picture.” As material expressions of urban being, verbal gestures or kinds of speech [wika] are, for Perez, themselves objects to be surfaced. As Benilda Santos comments, “For Perez, words have very different qualities. These are not used to indicate a meaning or the meanings of a relationship, for example, but rather to become precisely that. That very condition of a particular relationship: the destiny or direction of that relationship.”

This use of words as the very matter of human relations places the reader in a situation of not knowing, and of wanting to know similar to that of Tom. The very ghostly atmosphere that results from Perez's sparing style augurs other immanent, yet invisible presences surrounding every surfaced word-thing, heightening the enigmatic quality and affective import of each commonplace detail spared from nothingness. In a play on the mysterious character of commodities, which reflect the social relations of their production as the intrinsic quality of these things, the reader is haunted by the unknown subjectivities that foregrounded word-things suggest and might contain.

Everything Tom spares from his dry listing of piecemeal experiences confronts him finally with the truth they portend: “ — one fan, tiles, a cabinet, a mirror, a light bulb, plastic flowers, a plaster of Paris Sto. Niño, a blue taxi, papers piled up, a small refrigerator, a magazine, coconuts, a square hole, Butterfly, crushed, the ‘Everlasting Thrill’” (C, 90). These are the undigested kernels of Tom's encounters, leftovers of experience that cannot be absorbed in the circulation of exchangeable bodies, sex, money, and food in which he and his clients are caught. Their peripheral presence alludes to the lives they were connected with, lives beyond the existence of “mere shadows,” beyond identity (beyond the disease of bakla identity that Tom creates as the object of his fear, in order that it may be exorcised), beyond commodification.

These remainders of Tom's experiences are somehow integral parts of those very lives they indicate; they are life-parts, vital aspects of the sensuous and experiential activity of the individuals who use them. As such, they also hint at other social relations he
might have had with his clients, relations that he can as yet only barely grasp. In contrast to that substantification of time which these racializing economic transactions imply, each of these fragment pieces [piraso] suggests a different time and bears the possibility of opening up into another quality of time, like the square hole in the van where Tom is raped: “through it entered the wind, through it entered the sun, through it entered the noise from the outside... [do’n pumapasok iyong hanging, do’n pumapasok iyong araw, do’n pumapasok iyong ingay sa labas... ]” (C, 55). “Pieces of time past,” the pieces of his life he allowed others to partake of return as signs of a new calling.

**Historical Transformation and Secularist Conversion**

Perez’s book is subtitled “First Cry of the Gay Liberation Movement in the Philippines [Unang Sigaw ng Gay Liberation Movement].” Perez clarifies that this is “a cry only in one’s dreams [sigaw sa pangarap lamang]” for such a movement cannot happen within the near future. Nevertheless, in a letter to X included in this collection, Perez contemplates the objectives of such a movement if it were to happen: the acceptance of one’s male body; the loving of one’s fellow bakla [kapuwa-bakla] rather than the desiring of a conventional man [karaniwang lalaki]; the battle for “equal employment opportunities”; and the replacement of “fleeting affairs and earthly enjoyment” with deep friendship and love. Perez’s vision advocates an ethics of respect founded on the recognition in people of true selves of value beneath their worldly trappings, including the trappings of gender.36 The deep friendship and love he envisions is a relation not between two of the same, but between equals.37 As the vanishing mediator of universal subjectivity, the measure of human value as that which cannot be bought, possessed, or governed by others, as that intrinsic worth of being, that whiteness which calls Tom into subjective redemption is thus the condition of possibility and limit of Perez’s project of humanist liberation from homosexual abjection. White value is a condition of possibility of this movement to the extent that it is the means by
which Perez's Filipino subject of gay liberation can come into being. It does not only provide the subjective form in which this Filipino gay man can be free, it is the very substance in him to be freed. Whiteness serves as the limit of this movement to the extent that its promise of liberation from racialized and sexualized exploitation draws constitutive sustenance from the depletion of other (trans)gendered beings who are here figured in bakla, who cling to false hopes, false ways of living and loving, false dreams, and who persist in their own unfreedom.

I would argue that Perez demonstrates the racist and heteronormative law of value supporting the demeaning sexual relations of possessive exchange through which Tom and others are led to map their desires. In returning Tom to an open-ended embeddedness in the shadow-pieces of Cubao, and through these pieces behooving him to find new ways of being with others, Perez implicitly critiques the constitution of a redeemed subject who would transcend and renounce those lives with whom he has come in contact. However, in constructing a pure, free, intrinsically valuable human subject as the subject of that liberation, Perez also accedes to the white normativity of an emerging global sexual identity politics. Perez's very use of the term "gay" as the umbrella concept for this movement of liberation indicates this emergent politics, as well as the historical shift that has made it possible. If, as Martin Manansalan argues, the "cultural and politico-economic milieu that allowed this concept to become a hegemonic category for describing individuals as well as groups of individuals . . . are conspicuously absent in the Philippines," (DH, 195) its ambiguous presence here evidences a new socio-historical situation at hand.

Cubao 1980 attests to a process of historical transformation and social conversion that is underway. In this specific context, the conversion manifests itself in the minoritization of bakla under the rubric of homosexual identity. The analogy that I draw between the specific racialization of the Chinese in contemporary urban formulations of national community, which Hau analyses, and the homophobic personification of urban alienation in Cubao 1980, is meant to highlight a common historical provenance for both forms of
minoritization, and the respective claims to equal civil rights and political representation to which such minoritization, in some quarters, gives rise. Hau suggests that the conflation of race and class exemplified in the case of the kidnapped Chinese has as its historical condition the fact that “the extractive logic that used to be identified with the colonial and neocolonial state vis-à-vis the Chinese has become generalized and diffused throughout society.”\(^40\) It may be argued that the “extractive logic” to which Hau refers saw its highest instance in the crony capitalism of the Marcos state, the deposing of which, as well as the subsequent rise and vigorous propagation of neo-liberalism and democracy that followed, ushered in precisely the generalization and diffusion of a logic that had concentrated in and created the authoritarian state.

J. Neil Garcia also links the minoritization of the “newly ‘manufactured’ person” that is the bakla/homosexual to the authoritarian regime, locating in the 1970s the nascent hegemonic practice of homo/sexualizing bakla as an identity.\(^41\) Although he does not provide an account of historical determination for this new phenomenon, Garcia interestingly alludes to constitutive connections between Martial Law and “the efflorescence of gay culture” he observes in the metropolis during this period. He points to homophobia within the revolutionary struggle as one “reason for the ‘allowance’ ostensibly granted by the Marcosian dispensation to local gay discourse.” “So,” he muses, “the agonistic space which was granted Filipino gays for a good part of the Martial Law period may have become the logical trade-off for the generalized suppression of socialist discourse at the time” (P 20-21).

If we were to carefully track the mediations comprising this “logical trade-off,” we would see as one of its central conditions of possibility a forcible turn away from the problem of national identity that had for more than a couple of decades preoccupied progressive, liberal, as well as conservative social forces, and which had shaped dominant conflicts in political and economic policy and practice.\(^42\) Presidentially executed and inscribed by the declaration of Martial Law, this turn can also be characterized as the sublation of the problem of national identity by Humanism, the state
ideology of the New Society. In effect, Martial Law can be said to have overcome the abiding crisis of Philippine life through the establishment of a crisis government, a state form that arrogated to itself the powers unleashed by the intensification of this crisis in order to unify the nation under its command. The authoritarian unity of the nation accomplished by repressive means thus found in the Marcos state the symbolic realization of Philippine identity, an identity whose point of constitution was no less than Universal Humanity.

We are led then to recognize generalized humanism as both consequence and instrument of the repression of progressive, nationalist movements seeking the radical resolution of modern alienation, repression, and exploitation, which the category of national identity attempted to articulate but could only inadequately address. For the logic of humanism's sublation of nationalism as crisis is undoubtedly a violent symbolic and material accomplishment. Nowhere is this better encapsulated than in Imelda Marcos' wide-reaching efforts to consolidate the heterogeneous, autarchic areas within and surrounding the nation's capital as one, single environment for metropolitan humanity. Imelda extolled that "a metropolis is not space alone; it is a dimension of the mind, a surge of the spirit" (1, 80) and that "the call of the metropolis is truly a summons to humanity" (1, 86). The Ministry of Human Settlements, headed by Imelda, thus proceeded to eliminate from the "City of Man" the inassimilable debris of its own projects to attain this humanity. "Having proceeded to clean up the physical debris, we must now pay more attention to the non-physical. Having introduced measures against physical pollution, we must proceed against spiritual pollution. We go from the outer to the inner environment, from the external to the inner being, from the out-reach to the in-reach of the Metropolitan Filipino" (1, 162). This process of humanization, which courted international capital, yielding the regime millions of stolen dollars, illuminates important connections between Perez's text and the "Marcosian dispensation."

I am not saying that Perez's humanism simply mimed that of the Marcoses. I am claiming that Perez's articulation of a prevailing
social dilemma, as well as the desired path of one’s escape from it, finds its condition of possibility and limit in the generalized humanism purveyed by the newly built environment of the Marcos’ New Society. In effect, the New Society is the space determining the shape of public expressions of freedom and happiness and hope, which the Marcos regime allowed. Cubao — the unprecedented focus not only of this work, but of a series of works by Perez — was itself the product of this new dispensation. After all, Cubao owed its sudden commercial success and prominence in great part to crony connections to the Marcoses.\footnote{In trying faithfully to capture the molecular operations and affective structures of this city-machine and the social beings that animate it, Perez inscribes the very sinews of the powerful summons that it issues and that he ambivalently heeds. However, this inscription is also a creation. Unlike most scholarly anthropological and sociological accounts of peripheral socio-cultural life, Perez’s literary rendering of urban experience is also a practicum for the molding of subjective desire.

The mundane striving that Perez creatively inscribes serves as the very fuel and fodder for the operations of that metropolitan apparatus of capture, the “City of Man.” In other words, this regime of democratic subjection, within which the denizens of metropolitan Philippines found themselves equal under the law of state humanism, also greatly depends on the experiential labor of those subjects working on themselves, working to be worthy, that is, working for their value. This labor, whose other side is a liberative, creative becoming, is what makes the very spaces contracted as the material site of modernization. Indeed, it is what enables and supports these transformations that seems everywhere to be taking place around it.

As the material infrastructure for the foundation of a moral or spiritual infrastructure, metro Manila served as the built environment for a whole set of social, cultural, and subjective transformations whose reach we have yet to fully grasp. One of the ways we might think about these transformations is to cast them in terms of an emergent secularism that arguably had never permeated Philippine social formations to the degree that it did then and has
now. This emergent secularism is by no means a turn away from religion, which clearly suffused the self-representations of the New Society and its leadership. Rather, like its Euro-American models, it is "a shifting, unsettled, and yet reasonably efficacious organization of public space that opened up new possibilities of freedom and action." Such freedom and action depends on the privatization of moral and religious differences, even as a generic Christianity oversees this very organization, as well as the public space in which its own mores find expression. Certain evangelical, Protestant features characterize this generic Christianity, as well as the new public sphere that it sought to organize. It is no coincidence that at the height of the Marcos regime, numerous mass evangelical Christian crusades took place, often at the very centers built under the regime's auspices, such as the Don Stewart crusade at the Araneta center depicted in the novel. The space accorded such religious events confirmed and expanded the new secularism of the state. At one such crusade in 1977, Imelda gave a speech that provides a picture of the Protestant features of this new secularism. In this speech, Imelda describes Filipinos as "engaged in our own miracle of resurrection," a process of bodily and spiritual redemption inspired by the example of the liberation from Old World bigotry and degradation that founded American freedom and spiritual strength. Like Billy Graham, to whom Imelda pays tribute for making "man more God-like, and God more human," the U.S. becomes the means and ideal symbol of the mundane incarnation of God attainable by the Philippine nation. "God is not a stranger but a friend, here in the Philippines. We fully realize that as we strive to make Metro Manila the City of Man, its basic foundation is the City of God. For it is love that affiliates man to God" (I, 70). Here we witness the familiarization and personalization of relations with God, the closing of the gap, one might say, between God and Man, which distinguishes Protestant spirituality from Catholic piety.

With the removal of the mediating role of priests, saints, and the Holy Church, the point of command shifts from God and His representatives to the moral subject — the national individual — who hereon must serve as the guardian of his own inner spiritual
value. This value, which links the moral subject directly to and in a homologous relation with God, can be found within an inner space marked by a new privacy, a space configured as both a refuge and a site of moral redemption. It is now the individual moral subject who is responsible for his own redemption, which is attainable within this life. Protestant secularism opens this possibility of salvation on earth as the premise of human striving. This possibility must partly be seen as the achievement of the ecumenical Christian resistance to the dictatorship and its State spiritualism.48

I have already hinted at some of the Protestant features of Tom’s newfound spiritual infrastructure. God is by the side of self-determining humans for whom he has unbound love. Tom’s redemption depends no longer on the priestly absolution of his sins, but on the divine forgiveness he experiences through his own act of deeply felt personal remorse. What we witness in Cubao 1980 is precisely the conversion of a debased, commodified life into a new ethical subject. Invented to countenance the daily self-devaluation supporting the regime’s metropolitanist aspirations, this new ethical subject nevertheless serves as the means for the privatization of a generalized repression. Carried out by urban demolitions, elimination of dissidents, and public censorship, such repression was the condition of possibility of the nation-state’s uneasy identification with an unmarked capitalist humanity.

Faith In Kiyeme [Frivolous Detail]

It is in light of these metropolitan transformations and their material and spiritual infrastructure that we can account for the specific foreclosures of Perez’s political articulation of subjective liberation. The morally ascetic, Protestant self that Perez fashions as the means of this subjective liberation demands the eschewing of frivolities, the signs of material artifice and commercialized transactions that characterized the economy of Tom’s debasement. Hence while Tom sees as worthy of rescue those pieces [piraso] that are residues of his experiences of others, having faith in their immanent or potential meaningfulness, he cannot see any relation between
them and those other particularities that he describes as *kiyeme* [silly affectations] — those excesses of personality, frivolous gestures, surplus posturings, and expressive artifices which he sees as characteristic of the duplicitous and worthless effeminacy of *baklas*. As Butch describes them, "Mga pa-etsing-etsing lang. Mga babaeng walang kuwarta, walang dyoga, walang kephyas, walang kinabukasan" (C, 8). Kiyeme, as well as *et-singan* and *ek-ekan* (varieties of queen-like behavior) all bodily mark those who bear them as beings lacking the virtues of white humanness. To the extent that such virtues continue to inform Perez's project of gay liberation, these beings and their modes of personhood can only be what must be made to fall away. We might say these fallen forms are the hidden price — the strange fruit — tendered by the liberative claim to white normative human value.

If we understand the accoutrements of *kiyeme* as subjective life-creating practices rather than as mere secondary attributes of given beings, we are confronted with the objective reality couched behind this metaphor of price. In a continuum with *swardspeak*, the phonetically and semantically playful, paronymic and heteronymic modes of speech wielded by the affirmative *sward* whom they help to fashion, the mercurial modes of acting denoted by *kiyeme, et-singan, ek-ekan, kunday, kendeng,* must be considered as creative, life-enabling, even death-taming, practices that make for subjectively and socially viable forms of being-in-the-world. They are, in a word, indispensable forms of subjective and social life-making struggle on the part of a particular refuse of urban humanity seeking hospitable places of habitation, as well as resisting the dominant strictures against their own creative presencing. These practices of superfice, as social arts of self, are integral parts of the kinds of living that people have made for themselves under the name of *bakla*.

Like *lalaki*, for whom the *kolboy* stands, *bakla* is a dominant fiction that means "more than a set of representational and narratological possibilities for articulating consensus. It is also a libidinal apparatus or 'machinery for ideological investment', an investment which is as vital as labor or exchange to the maintenance of
the social formation.” The practices of living which create, sustain, as well as contain, this dominant fiction are productive of the value that is accumulated elsewhere and that returns as the very measure of their failed humanness, their imputed worthlessness [walang kuwenta]. Hence, the dominant fiction of bakla is also the means of new forms of exploitation. As tools of the trade of the makers of spectacles, beauty, and pleasure, which are constantly appropriated by the dominant culture and for this reason seem never to inhere in or abide with them, libidinal practices of kiyeme, of ek-ekan, of feminine artifice, vitally make the world they seem merely to adorn. We could say that these practices make for Manila’s appearance as a city in cosmopolitan drag. Describing the 1980 re-opening of one of the landmark gay discotheques in the revived sex-tourist district of Malate, a reporter grasps the queer truth of the City of Man’s metropolitanism: “kiyeme is reality.”

Tom himself makes the equation between price and kiyeme when he contemplates the compensations afforded by his hunting: “Give twenty, thirty, forty, a hundred. Different kiyeme, different happenings [Pa-beinte, treinta, kuwarenta, sapuwe. Pa-iba-ibang kiyeme, iba-ibang happening)” (41–42). The ambiguity of whose kiyeme this is blurs the line of distinction between kolboy and bakla that Tom himself is at such pains to draw. After all, the small-time change that Tom associates with the garapal [shameless] baklas and expresses as kiyeme applies to him as well. His earnings consist of petty cash, which serves to supplement the formal wages of real workers like his brother and thus which can only have come from non-work and can only offer trifling pleasures in return. This daily experience of his own small-time existence, of happenings which lead nowhere and amount to nothing, of an excessive liquidity that cannot accumulate into a solid, worthwhile life is what impels him towards the embrace of transcendent value. As the medium of conversion of his compensation into consumption, this experience supports the formal urban economy that appears as Cubao by day. Additionally, the cat in heat, to which he likens Cubao at night, is also Tom himself as well as all the other kolboys hunting, just as the baklas are hunting, seeking amusements or
diversions [aliw] in a way that can only be described as kiyeme, or happening.

While Perez's humanist claim might be seen then as an expression of his conversion to the secularist universal ideal of individual humanity (the "cult of man in the abstract"), this conversion can also be shown to bear its limits on the very surface of his attained subjective constitution. As Judith Butler argues:

Conventional and exclusionary norms of universality can, through perverse reiterations, produce unconventional formulations of universality that expose the limited and exclusionary features of the former one at the same time that they mobilize a new set of demand . . . there is no way to predict what will happen in such instances when the universal is wielded precisely by those who signify its contamination. . . .

This unpredicatability is evidenced in Vicente Rafael's discussion of the uneven and contradictory character of the Christian conversion of Tagalogs during early Spanish colonial rule. There, submission to the universal doctrinal word of Christianity was accompanied by a hollowing out of the very call to submission. The token character of the performed rites of conversion exposes the very limits of its supposed accomplishment. Similarly, the particular universalizing subjectification articulated by Perez broaches the limits of humanness, which his own identifying claim invokes.

We can view those limits in the formal and thematic function of those pieces [piraso] that surface at the novel's end. Unlike the symptom, which, taking its form from value, can only mark the absence of the full traumatic context that gives rise to it as a lack of meaning, these pieces are neither meaningless nor latently meaningful. They are rather, part-objects still awaiting signification. They are traces of non-abstract relations of meaning (indeed, of new social relations) yet to be made. Even after the trauma of racialized value-production that Tom experiences has become homophobically embodied in Hermie (as symptom), these part-
objects remain, as if to haunt him with what, in spite of everything he knew, he didn't know — “who?” “Who was Hermie? Who was Sonny...?” These remainders confront Tom with the question of the possible relations he may have foreclosed, and the potential self he might have had through them. In this way, the remainders act as details — not in the sense of a minor component of a pre-given meaningful totality (being neither merely referential nor merely symbolic, neither realist, allegorical, nor modernist), but rather in the sense of tasks to be carried out as part of the process of arriving at the who. This who is as much one's own self as it is others', and consists of the very process of coming to know oneself in and through others, a praxis inseparable from the urban refuse's daily work of prevailing.

The tangible details Perez spares from the worthless and undifferentiated shadow life to which the refuse of metropolitanist humanity are condemned thus become practical tasks for the creation of a new self, a new relational being. In “Oberpas” [Overpass] and “Paskil” [Poster], stories in the same volume, Perez demonstrates the life-importance for the petty as well as lumpen urban dweller of this practice of sparing detail as a practical task for sparing the self and for releasing a different subjective potential. “One creates new modalities of subjectivity in the same way that an artist creates new forms from the palette.”55 For Perez, “emotions constitute the creative writer's palette of colors.” As the material of expression of such emotions, surfaced fragments of the rapidly deteriorating, changing environment become elements in the recomposition of new selves.

Both against and in keeping with prevailing conditions of social pulverization, which the authoritarian regime brought to effect as the by-product of its own consolidation of power, and which the post-authoritarian regimes have since made into the basis of new forms of exploitation, Perez articulates a practice of care predicated on a peculiar, perhaps queer, faith in disposable material details. In this way, the fallout of global humanism as the achievement of Philippine metropolitanization is recast as the spiritual means of a new thriving in the world. That new form of thriv-
ing does not consist of a self that is an atomized piece of consumable and disposable matter like Tom, but, rather, of a self as a means of coordinating scattered life-remainders into a viable life of one’s own. As I’ve suggested, the aesthetic form of Perez’s work instantiates for the reader the call to another mode of being which beckons Tom. Perez’s writing is precisely an exercise in the making of a singular life. As he proclaims, “the objective of creative writing is individuation” (F, 68). Individuation is not however a matter of differentiating oneself from other members of the social collective within which one has become integrated. It consists of opening oneself to and connecting with other singular beings in a world of details. The self thus acts as a communicative port through which signifying pieces of other selves might be received, reconfigured, and managed. Unlike the ideologically free self that serves as the destination of a political, activist consciousness in the urban protest writings of the period, Perez’s self serves as the agent-medium of passage for the submerged and dematerialized subjectivities dwelling in the urban unconscious.

In this light, Perez’s turn in the mid-1990s to spirit quests does not really depart from his vocation as a writer, which by all accounts he seemed to have abandoned. On the contrary, the project of searching transpersonal encounters with spirits of the deceased in “bondage to the earth-zone” as well as non-human entities dwelling in the urban fabric appears to be the occult development of this self as agent-medium for the release of the living ghosts of violation and unfulfillment, whose hollowed presences are intimated by dislocated details-signs in the urban environment. In these widely publicized spirit quests, Perez conjures new alchemies of faith out of a mixed assortment of New Age, Jungian, cosmopolitan, native, and local mystical sources. These alchemies of faith — labeled by Perez’s publishers as “Filipino transpersonal psychology” — serve as experiential supports for the formation of a civil spirit society, a spiritually-connected sociality that would make shared sense of the bits and pieces of catastrophe strewn around it. This sociality is exemplified by the telepathic social networks he assembles into his teams of Spirit Questors. Strangely enough, these
telepathic social networks do not only resemble the telecommunicational social networks of Generation Txt, the new generational urban class of mobile tele-texting technology users who have freed their loci of identifications from local, territorially-bound communities. The Spirit Questors are Generation Txt.

The self as social coordinating medium that arises out of such alchemies of faith can be viewed as the result of practical attempts to ameliorate the individualized subjective and bodily toll exacted by the intense exploitation and continuous devaluation of Philippine labor. Such attempts are already evident in the practices of this labor, which not only depends on a social network for its subsistence, but also serves as the subsistence support for a continually devalued formal labor force. The self as a facilitative nexus of renewed relations with others appears as the subjective apparatus of an emergent service class trying to stay buoyant in conditions of sinking personal value. Characterized by openness, this subjective apparatus can be viewed as the consequence of a widespread social critique of the centralized power of the authoritarian state, a critique in part made up of just such struggles to escape the racialized and sexualized life-devaluation on which such power depended.

The crisis effected by this critique led to the deposing of the Marcos regime in 1986. We can even say that it helped bring about the transformation of the authoritarian state into a coalitional type of democratic government, which postures no longer as a dominant power or a mere instrument of power but instead as a secular mediator of plural political and economic desires and interests. It is more than coincidence that the post-authoritarian president whose administration exemplifies this secular state was the first Protestant elected to this office. State reform is the mirror-image of social reform. What E. San Juan, Jr. calls with respect to the popular democratic movement as mutations of sensibility since 1986 can be viewed in these subjective transformations, which, in Perez's work, attain and express the spirit of a new metropolitan form. This new metropolitan form, whose "spirit" is neither simply the "spirit of capitalism" nor the "spirit of resistance" but rather the uneasy cooperation of both, has been given the name civil society.


8 Marx’s extensive religious references in his analysis of capital in general are not idle analogies; they comprise a systemic critique of the speculative idealism inhering in the bourgeois conception of value, the mystifying “religion of everyday life” which he credits Hegel as “the first to present its general forms of motion in a comprehensive and conscious manner.” *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 102–3. Hereafter cited as CP.


13 Cf. the differential, but intrinsically related, use of “race” for the severance of Native American and Hawaiian traditional relations and prior claims to their land in order to justify and facilitate the systematic appropriation of that land and its resources by the U.S. government and U.S. corporations. Here discourses of the soluble blood of Native Americans and Hawaiians (as distinguished from the insoluble blood of Blacks) prepare the ground for the “disappearance” and “selective assimilation” of these communities into the unmarked mainstream, i.e., white, population. See Kehaulani Kauanui, Ph.D. dissertation.*
14 “The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labor become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social (C, 165).” While Marx reads the “suprasensible or social” character of the commodity as quantitative labor (which is properly the capitalist reading of the labor contained in the commodity-form), he also suggests that the mysterious character of the commodity form is the expression of the qualitative alienation of labor, and of the qualitative experience of labor as an abstract amount in relation to a total sum.

15 This is not to say that such subjectivity is not filled with all kinds of content — recurring narrative themes, feelings, attitudes — which critical scholars have insisted upon coding as the “ethnicity” of whiteness. I am merely pointing out the formal lynchpin of such content.

16 See Temario C. Rivera, Landlords and Capitalists: Class, Family, and State in Philippine Manufacturing (Quezon City: Center for Integrative and Development Studies and University of the Philippines Press, 1994), 15–16. The Marcos state’s consolidation of finance capital from foreign loans and its establishment of a monopoly through the quashing and cooptation of its political and economic rivals can be said to follow in the footsteps of Western imperialism. One of the major differences between this local imperialism and Western imperialism is that the former did not capitalize accumulated profits from this rent-seeking behavior. However, it did significantly carry out the destruction of non-capitalist modes and the direct extraction of capital through foreign capital investment schemes, proving once again, as Western imperialists did, that the methods of “primitive accumulation” are entirely consistent with, and necessary to, the expanded reproduction of capitalism. See Rosa Luxemburg, The Accumulation of Capital (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951).


20 “Kolboy: Desire, Disgust and the Creation of Value in Philippine Male Sex Work” (Unpublished manuscript), 83–4. Hereafter cited as K. Much of my discussion of this novel’s exposition of whiteness as value is indebted to B. Carlo Tadiar’s reading of the novel, and his brilliant illumination of this reading through ethnographic work. See also J. Neil C. Garcia’s reading of Perez’s humanism in Philippine Gay Culture: The Last 30 Years, Binabae to Bakla, Silahis to MSM (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1996); hereafter cited as P.
21 The translation of bakla is a politically-fraught issue. In the context of this novel, I have chosen to translate it initially into the derogatory “fag” or “faggot” to the extent that such words convey the generally derogatory tenor in which they are deployed here, even though they do not necessarily connote the “berdache” or gender-crossing qualities adhering to the notion of bakla. On the complexities of the social construction of the bakla, see Martin F. Manansalan IV, “Speaking of AIDS: Language and the Filipino ‘Gay’ Experience in America,” in Discrepant Histories: Translocal Essays on Filipino Cultures, ed. Vicente L. Rafael (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); hereafter cited as DH. For a history of the bakla figure and Philippine gay culture, see J. Neil C. Garcia, Philippine Gay Culture: The Last 30 Years, Binabae to Bakla, Silahis to MSM.

22 “Kolboy: Desire, Disgust and the Creation of Value in Philippine Male Sex Work,” 153. Tadiar provides a striking psychoanalytic analysis of the “lure” as a crucial part of the economy of desires underwriting the male sex market.

23 Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr., Clash of Spirits: The History of Power and Sugar Planter Hegemony on a Visayan Island (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998).

24 I want to quickly clarify that this is the dominant imperative. As I will discuss below, it is precisely the resistance against this imperative that accounts for the ambivalence provoked by gay rights politics. Such ambivalence is registered in the tendentious claims and counterclaims made in behalf of “gays” and baklas.

25 Jeffrey Weeks, “Preface to Homosexual Desire,” in Guy Hocquenghem, Homosexual Desire, 30. “And as the money is the fetish, the true universal reference-point for capitalism, so the Phallus is the reference-point for heterosexism. Ours is a phallic (or ‘phallocentric’) society. The Phallus determines — whether by absence or presence — the girl’s penis envy, the boy’s castration anxiety; it draws on libidinal energy in the same way as money draws on labour” (38).

26 “Some form of material benefit — in cash or in kind — is ‘required’, and becomes important markers (sic) for the ‘real male’ to ‘retain’ his masculinity. This applies even to a casual fling, which often takes place after a session of drinking paid for by the bakla. The beer, and the ‘real man’s’ becoming lasing (drunk) can be described as a way of distancing. It is not important whether the male was drunk or not; invoking the beer, paid for by the bakla, ‘legitimizes’ the sexual encounter, as will other gifts and benefits if a relationship is pursued” (Michael Tan, quoted in Tadiar, “Kolboy: Desire, Disgust and the Creation of Value in Philippine Male Sex Work,” 119).

27 We can glean an early Protestant formulation of this notion of humanness as value in its self in Kant: “Now, I say, man, and in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will . . . . All objects of inclination have only a conditional worth . . . . Therefore the worth of any objects to be obtained by our actions is at all times only conditional. Beings whose existence does not depend on our will but on nature, if they are not rational beings, have only a relative worth as means and are therefore called ‘things’; on the other hand, rational beings are designated ‘persons’ because their nature indicates that they are ends in themselves.” Quoted in Pheng Cheah, “Positioning Human Rights in the Current Global Conjuncture,” in Transnational Asia Pacific: Gender, Culture, and the Public Sphere, eds. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Larry E. Smith, and Wimal Dissanayake (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 18.
Kant calls the substance that guarantees the condition under which persons can be ends in themselves dignity: "That which is related to general human inclinations and needs has a market price . . . But that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself does not have mere relative worth, i.e., a price, but an intrinsic worth, i.e., dignity." Quoted in Cheah, 19.


29 Manansalan discusses bakla as "an enduring social category" with a social dynamics inadequately captured by terms such as homosexual, queer, and gay which some scholars and writers have translated it into. Garcia argues that bakla has a longer history than "homosexual," which he attempts to substantiate by tracing its genealogy to pre-colonial practices.


32 There is more to this than mere analogy. Perez himself deploys this figure in his 1970 play, entitled Anak ng Araw (Child of the Sun), about the intimate lives of residents in a Manila boarding house. Bienvenido Lumbera notes that the unseen Chinese figure in the play "seems to embody the forces of economics on which the fortunes of the boarders depend" (R, 240). It is he who controls "the economy of the world of the play," an economy of missed encounters, aborted relations, and failed desires for intimacy and love, an economy characterized by deep uncertainty and unfreedom. As the forces of economics, the figure of the Chinese is what prevents the self-realization and self-determination of the individual characters. His personification allows the translation of bare economic subsistence into emotional subsistence and deprivation.

33 Unlike the metaphorical prostitution of the laborer invoked by Marx. See my "Prostituted Filipinas: The Crisis of Philippine Culture," Millennium. Also, unlike his metonymical prostitution via the prostitution of his lover, the body which belongs to him, as in the case of Madiaga. Interestingly, in the 1987 film of this novel directed by Lino Brocka, Madiaga is himself led into prostitution, which becomes a key moment in his path towards revenge.


36 "Walang bakla sa langit pagkat wala ring lañaki at wala ring babae — mga kaluluwa ng tao lamang, na nagmamahal sa Diyos, at minamahal ng Diyos." (C, 165).
In his letter to Y, Perez praises Y's relation to his Western lover, Wayne, for being "a relation of two persons who are equal" (relasyon ng dalawang taong magkapantay). For what characterizes the bakla-relation [relasyong-bakla] in its "cleanest and finest form" (pinamalanis at pinakamagara niyang anyo) is true, good friendship, a relationship that is "pure" or "unalloyed" [lantay]. The use of the word "lantay" here counterposes this relationship to the prevalent heteronormative relationship between bakla-lalaki, the fiasco of which (in the case of the lalaki "actually" being bakla) is horrifyingly conveyed by means of the notion of "tanso" (counterfeit). For a discussion of this discourse of counterfeit and authentic currency in bakla-lalaki relations, see C. Tadiar, "Kolboy." While the bakla-relation consists of equals, it does not, however, consist of sameness. As he writes, "walang dalawang taong magkatulad, kayat wala ring dalawang baklang magkatulad" (K, 150). It is important to note that Perez makes this point in the context of the issue of coming out, a decision that he sees as personal: "ang bawat tao ay may kanikaniyang bilis at bagal, at kani- kaniyang sisidlan ng tubig, at kani-kaninang dalang at dalas ng pag-inom" (K,150). As I will argue later, this demarcation of a personal realm, which is both a source of life and a potential source of pain ["ang tubig na kinabubuhay ay nakapagdulot din ng sakit, kundi nakaluluno" (K,150)], betokens an emerging secularism.

Perez suggests that the prevailing aspiration to heteronormative relations of love among baklas bears with it all the ties of private property and possessiveness that mar bakla ways of loving, and prevent them from attaining relations of friendship that are "pure" and "free."

Ang tunay na pakikipagkaibigan ay relasyong lantay, at di kinakailanang sangkapan ng tampaahan, ng selosan, ng lansahan, ng pakikipaglaban o ng iba pang maaring magsilbing balakid sa mabuting relasyong mag-asawa. Ang tunay na pakikipagkaibigan ay malaya, di pinabibigatan o kinatatuloyan ng mga kondisyon, ng paghati ng mga ari-arian, ng pagdeklara ng estado, ng pagbabago ng apelyido at pag-atang ng mga tungkulin sa pag-aaruga, pagpapalaki, pagpapakain, pagbibihis at pagpaparal sa mga anak. Ang kalayaan ito ay siyang hiyas ng ganitong relasyon. (158)

With this proviso, Manansalan uses the term to describe Filipino gay immigrants in the U.S., ostensibly the place where such a hegemony holds sway. See also John D’Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity."

Hau, "The Criminal State and the Chinese in Post-1986 Philippines," in Geopolitics of the Visible: Essays on Philippine Film Cultures, ed. Rolando B. Tolentino (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), 230-31. This is a slightly different version of Hau's essay, "Who Will Save Us From the "Law"?: The Criminal State and the Illegal Alien in Post-1986 Philippines," cited above. In this version, Hau reads the "minority" figure of Ah Tek as well as Chinatown, "the city within the city," as synecdoches of Manila, synecdoches that cast into relief "the deforming and dehumanizing violence, the rapacity and alienation that characterizes the city itself" (217).

Garcia also notes the enduring resistance against this hegemony, as when he mentions the great "animosity" provoked by his own public pronouncement of the objective reality that "all bakla are homosexual, but not all homosexual are bakla." (P, 53).
The problem of national identity, seen in its own right, is different from though certainly closely linked to the problems of national sovereignty, national freedom, national justice, etc. that were fundamental to social movements since the revolution against Spain in the late nineteenth century.


Imelda Marcos fashioned herself as the figure of this courting, becoming the ambassador of Filipino humanity abroad whose main task was to attract the good favour and capital trust of the international community. See for example her appeal, made at the 1976 International Monetary Fund-World Bank Joint Annual Meeting, held in Metro Manila, in which she invites First World nations to bring about, "through their wise use of capital and technology, a new world order fit for man" (I, 62).

All the malls and franchises that Tom and Butch hang out in and yet feel excluded from were established during this period. Ali Mall, specifically, was built in conjunction with one of the Marcoses' events staged to attract international attention: the world heavyweight boxing championship fight ("Thrilla in Manila") between Muhammad Ali and George Frasier. The Araneta family, which owned the commercial center of Cubao, was a member of the landed oligarchy that expanded into urban real estate, and was a close friend of the Marcoses. The scion of this family, Greg, later married the Marcoses' youngest daughter, Irene.


For the importance of swardspeak for coping with and addressing AIDS, see Manansalan. The practices of swardspeak and kiyenne are often associated with though by no means exclusive to bakla in lower-class situations and occupations such as parloristas, manicuristas, palengkeras [beauticians, manicurists, market vendors]. The vital significance of these practices in sustaining one's life and living are articulated in the short story, "Lucy" by Miguel Castro in Ladlad: An Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing, ed. J. Neil C. Garcia and Danton Remoto (Metro Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 1994).

Kaja Silverman, Historical Trauma, 115*.


Judith Butler, "Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism," in Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left, eds.

54 For Fredric Jameson, image-fragments in Western work are products of the practice of the symptom, which operates "to confront us with the structurally incomplete, which, however, dialectically affirms its constitutive relationship with an absence, with something else that is not given and perhaps never can be." The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1988 (London: Verso, 1998), 158-159.*


56 Perez himself remarks that the vocation of a Spirit Questor was not of his choosing. In 1997, he writes, "I had other dreams. I wanted to be the country's leading playwright and post-postmodern fictionist in Filipino. I wanted to be a national artist for drama and literature. My objectives then were to complete my theater trilogies and a projected 36-volume Cubao series. When I received a different calling in 1996, all of that changed." Beings: Encounters of the Spirit Questors with Non-human Entities (Quezon City: Anvil Publishing, 1999), 65-6. Elsewhere, Perez describes this time as "a time when others thought that I had abandoned being a Christian in favor of being known as an explorer of other religions; a time when others thought that I had abandoned conventional teaching in favor of being a teacher of emotional truth; a time when others thought that I had abandoned literature and theater in favor of being known as a writer of the occult... In truth, I abandoned nothing. I simply affirmed the werewolf within myself. I increased, I did not decrease. And I thereby became the complete person that I believe everyone ought to be" (F, vii).

57 See Tony Perez, The Calling: A Transpersonal Adventure (Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 1996) and Beings: Encounters of the Spirit Questors with Non-human Entities, ed. Cecille Legazpi (Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 1999). This development can be accounted in part by the "composite, heterogeneous baroque character "of the conversion to secular humanism to which his own work testifies. As Mbembe writes, conversion "always has a composite, heterogeneous baroque character. In this respect, it participates in hybridization, in the erosion of ancient references and traditional ways that always accompany the rewriting of fragmented new memories and the redistribution of customs" (OP, 229). Indeed, Perez's role in the collective project of the Spirit Questors is as urban shaman. Perez regularly published the spirit quest narratives in The Philippine Star, a fairly Catholic newspaper, which has increased his "clients" all over the Philippines.

58 In this transformative divestiture can be located the beginnings of the "diversification" of capital that allows the very cognition of Value as U.S. whiteness. The crisis of the bilateral relation between U.S. and Marcos leads to the relativization of U.S. Value (that is, with respect to Asian Values), and hence to the complex reorganization of racial categories that Paul Gilroy points out as characteristic of today's "nano-politics."