

The Social Responsibility of Filipino Intellectuals in the Age of Globalization and Empire: An Interview with E. San Juan, Jr. and Delia D. Aguilar

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Delia D. Aguilar and E. San Juan, Jr.

Introduction: From the Culture Wars to Global Forms of Resistance

The raging fires of America's first multiethnic rebellion (in Los Angeles, California) and Rodney King's plea for the country to "get along" inaugurated my college years in the 1990s.¹ As an undergraduate student of color in the midst of America's culture wars, I felt pulled in two different directions. On one hand, I was absorbed by gripping debates in interdisciplinary courses (from Asian American Studies to Women's Studies, from Cultural Studies to Queer Studies) concerning the significance of the "post" in a variety of theories that we engaged: postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism, postnationalism.² On the other, I was drawn to a broad student movement

¹ Peter Kwong, "The First Multicultural Riots," in *Inside the L.A. Riots: What Really Happened and Why It Will Happen Again*, ed. Don Hazen (Institute for Alternative Journalism, 1992), 88-93. Edward T. Chang, "America's First Multiethnic 'Riots,'" in *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994), 101-117.

² To get a sense of the lively discussion and debate about the meaning of the "post" in Asian American Studies during the 1990s see special issue of *Amerasia Journal* on the impact of contemporary literary and cultural theory in Asian American Studies. 21:1-2 (1995); E. San Juan, Jr., *Racial Formations/Critical*

for Asian American Studies developing on multiple campuses east of California.³ This tension between theory and practice, between discussing theory and engaging history, was felt within our student-based struggles for curricular reform. We grappled with the challenge of articulating to fellow students, faculty, and administration the legitimacy of Asian American Studies alongside our desire to honor the field's liberatory vision for social change beyond the boundaries of the academy. Through our student movement, we learned that Asian American Studies emerged from the interconnectedness of two defining moments for Asians in America: the 1968-1969 San Francisco State College Strike, which established the first College of Ethnic Studies in the United States, and the subsequent Asian American Movement.⁴

Transformations: Articulations of Power in Ethnic and Racial Studies in the United States (New York: Humanity Books, 1994); and Gary Okihiro, et al., eds., *Privileging Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies* (Pullman, Washington: Washington State University Press, 1995). bell hooks and Cornel West are among the first African American public intellectuals in the 1990s to examine what the "post" might mean for African American Studies. See also bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," *Postmodern Culture* 1:1 (September 1990) and Cornel West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times (Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism)* (Maine: Common Courage Press, 1993).

During my process of trying to make sense of the "post" in the neoconservative political landscape of the 1990s, I was struck by the insightful analysis of Glenn Omatsu, a pioneering scholar-activist in the field of Asian American Studies. Omatsu observed that after three decades since its inception, Asian American Studies was characterized by "new intellectual vigor" influenced by contemporary literary theory, which positioned Asian Americans as "'postcolonial' subjects and utilize[d] concepts such as diaspora, transnational identity, hybridity, and multi-vocality to analyze [Asian American] experiences." Despite new developments in interdisciplinary approaches to culture and identity in the field, Omatsu was deeply concerned about the privileging of a postcolonial theoretical framework precisely at a time when the "mass character of community struggles [had become] the least appreciated aspect of the Asian American Movement" among young Asian Americanists.

Terry Eagleton has recently referred to this phenomenon – a disavowal of or break with history – as a politics of amnesia that informs theoretical projects "after the golden age of cultural theory." From Eagleton's perspective, postcolonial theory, in its attempt to push against failures (real and imagined) of the past, embraced new keywords such as cosmopolitanism at the expense of nation, nationhood, and class "at a time when capitalism was more powerful and predatory than ever." Omatsu's perceptive interrogation of theoretical assumptions, shifts, and developments within the field of Asian American Studies in the 1990s enabled me to see how the "post" was connected to the process of institutionalization as well as to a particular way of looking at the world and imagining social change. See Glenn Omatsu, "Crisis of Practice in Asian American Studies," *Amerasia* 20:3 (1994): 119-210 and Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

³ Johnella E. Butler, "Ethnic Studies: A Matrix Model for the Major," *Liberal Education* 77:2 (March-April 1991): 26-32.

Johnella Butler and Betty Schmitz, "Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and Multiculturalism," *Change* 24:1 (Jan-Feb 1992): 36-41.

Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "Reconceptualizing Liberal Education: The Importance of Ethnic Studies," *Educational Record* 76.2-3 (Spring-Summer 1995): 22-31.

⁴ San Francisco State University's College of Ethnic Studies houses Asian American, Africana, Raza, and American Indian Studies. For more information about the history of Asian American Studies and the Asian American Movement, see the following:

In the fall of 1996, I was fortunate to have an opportunity to interview two leading Filipino American scholar-activists who were invited to Oberlin College by students organizing for Asian American Studies: literary critic, cultural theorist, and public intellectual E. San Juan, Jr. and feminist writer, teacher, and activist Delia D. Aguilar. The prolific author of over forty books and two hundred articles (many of which have been translated into various languages such as Russian, German, Spanish, Italian, French, Chinese, and Japanese), E. San Juan, Jr. is a member of the New Left generation of intellectuals that re-imagined and radicalized the complex relationship between culture and society. This group includes Fredric Jameson, Angela Davis, Edward Said, and Juliet Mitchell among many others.⁵ A pioneer in the field of “Third World” feminist studies, Delia Aguilar is distinguished for developing and advancing a historical

Glenn Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons’ and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s” in *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994), 19-69.

Karen Umemoto, “‘On Strike,’ San Francisco State College Strike, 1968-69: The Role of Asian American Students,” *Amerasia* 15:1 (1989): 3-41.

Fred Ho, et al, eds., *Legacy to Liberation: Politics and Culture of Revolutionary Asian Pacific America* (San Francisco: Big Red Media, 2000).

Steve Louie and Glenn Omatsu, eds., *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Press, 2001).

Yuri Kochiyama (Marjorie Lee, Audee Kochiyama-Holman, Akemi Kochiyama-Sardinha, eds.), *Passing It On: A Memoir* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2004).

The first study of the Asian American Movement is William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). For an analysis on the possibilities and limitations of Wei’s study, see Tim Libretti, “Incorporation or Insurgency?” (Review article on Wei’s *The Asian American Movement* and Aguilar-San Juan’s *The State of Asian America*), *Against the Current* 69 (July/August 1997): 36-38. Libretti observes how Wei’s study does not fully grasp (remember and explore) the contributions of the Asian American Movement to theorizing the significance of race in U.S. society. He states, “‘Race’ has historically been a central feature of capitalism, in positioning populations hierarchically within the global economy and targeting people of color for superexploitation, a fact Wei ignores.” According to Libretti, Aguilar-San Juan’s text “provides models for grassroots political action” that not only generate a systemic analysis of race and class, but can also help us to recover the “cultural memory and political history” of the Asian American Movement.

⁵ Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (New York: Verso, 2004). Denning provides a list of major intellectuals of the New Left generation that turned “to culture in order to reshape radical thought” (81). The list includes the following: “Roland Barthes, C. Wright Mills, Louis Althusser, Leo Marx, Doris Lessing, Harry Braverman, Raymond Williams, Betty Friedan, E.P. Thompson, Lucio Colletti, Amilcar Cabral, Andre Gorz, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, John Berger, Gustavo Gutierrez, Jurgen Habermas, Noam Chomsky, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Andre Gunder Frank, Jean Baudrillard, Immanuel Wallerstein, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Roberto Fernandez Retamar, Richard Ohmann, Samir Amin, Stuart Hall, Alexander Kluge, Antonio Negri, Susan Sontag, Stanley Aronowitz, Fredric Jameson, Amiri Baraka, Edward Said, Armand Mattelart, Nicos Poulantzas, Wolfgang Haug, Frigga Haug, Perry Anderson, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Roberto Schwarz, E. San Juan, Juliet Mitchell, Regis Debray, Etienne Balibar, Walter Rodney, Gayatri Spivak, Ariel Dorfman, and Angela Davis” (82). See also Peter McLaren, “E. San Juan, Jr.: The Return of the Transformative Intellectual,” *Left Curve* 33 (2009).

materialist approach to understanding gender relations in the Philippines.⁶ Through her long-standing involvement in women's movements in the United States and the Philippines and in landmark books and articles on Filipino feminism, Aguilar theorized how, in neocolonial countries like the Philippines, women's liberation and national liberation are inextricably and intimately intertwined. This position, which she continues to hold today, is articulated in key essays such as "The Social Construction of the Filipino Woman" and "Questionable Claims: Colonial Redux, Feminist Style."⁷

San Juan and Aguilar's dialogue remains relevant because of its spirited critique of issues that continue to haunt us in the fields of Asian American and U.S. Ethnic Studies. Their discussion provides an opportunity to acknowledge the existence of a unique yet oftentimes marginalized Filipino critique of the ideological function of racism in the maintenance of U.S. imperial hegemony. This critique was forged and developed by forms of Filipino subaltern resistance that emerged during the devastating Philippine-American War (1899-1902) and continued through decades of American colonial occupation and neocolonial control of the Philippines. We currently find this critique of racism re-emerging and advancing within a variety of interdisciplinary fields (such as Ethnic Studies and American Studies) as well as through countless demonstrations for peace around the globe as a U.S.-occupied Iraq is remade in the image of the Philippines.⁸ Filipinos have been affected in very specific ways by the Global War on Terrorism: Filipino immigrants in the United States targeted for deportation (close to 85,000 under the 2002 Homeland Security Act) and the Filipino people subjected to gross human rights violations by the Philippine government since 2001 (over 1,000 extrajudicial killings and more than 200 abductions).⁹ At the interview sessions, San

⁶ E. San Juan, Jr., *Filipina Insurgency: Writing against Patriarchy in the Philippines* (Quezon City, Philippines: Giraffe Books, 1998): 154-190.

⁷ Delia Aguilar, *Toward a Nationalist Feminism* (Philippines: Giraffe Books, 1998).

⁸ David E. Sanger, "Bush Cites Philippines as Model in Rebuilding Iraq," *New York Times*, 19 October 2003.

Stephen R. Shalom, "If Iraq is the Philippines, Iraqis Should Be Wary," *History News Network*. October 27, 2003. Retrieved May 25, 2009 <<http://hnn.us/articles/1759.html>>.

⁹ Since the launching of the U.S.-led Global War on Terror (GWOT), a systematic "criminalization of dissent" has taken place from the Global North and throughout the Global South. See the following: "Forum: What GWOT Has Wrought: Egypt, El Salvador, Philippines, Thailand, and Pakistan," *The Nation*, 13 December 2007. Retrieved May 25, 2009 <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20071231/forum_intro>.

Juan and Aguilar encouraged young Filipino Americans to create alternative narratives that can enable them to understand the social forces that shape their lives and to situate their experiences within the larger context of a Filipino diaspora.

The fortieth anniversaries of the San Francisco State College Strike and the Asian American Movement arrive at a time marked by the emergence of new possibilities with the reinvigoration of progressive grassroots movements that elected the first African American president of the United States as well as the return of repressed memories of U.S. Empire (use of waterboarding) from the battlefields of the Philippines and Vietnam.¹⁰ San Juan and Aguilar can help us seize the possibilities and critique the limitations of this moment of deep global crisis. Their discussion contributes to a rich tradition of intellectual dissent by communities of color in the following ways. First, it provides insight into the process by which two progressive Filipino American intellectuals of the New Left generation infuse intellectual life with a passionate

In the case of the Philippines, we witnessed the return of U.S. troops under the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the Balikatan joint U.S.-Philippine military exercises, which intensified the U.S. militarization of the archipelago as well as sexual violence committed against Filipino women. The high profile rape case of “Nicole” by Lance Corporal Daniel Smith and the more recent case of “Vanessa” remind us that individual cases of rape by U.S. military soldiers cannot be disconnected from their larger conditions of possibility: the neocolonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines. See Benjie Oliveros, “The VFA-Balikatan Mess,” *Bulatlat*, 16 May 2009. Retrieved May 25, 2009 <<http://www.bulatlat.com/main/2009/05/16/the-vfa-balikatan-mess/>>. See also Egyptian feminist writer and physician Nawal El Saadawi at Housmans Bookshop interview. Parts one and two. April 2009. Retrieved May 25, 2009 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJ1zV1z7gb4>> and <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3PSMCOgh4>>.

Another consequence of the GWOT under the Arroyo administration since 2001 are massive human rights violations, which include over 1,000 extrajudicial killings of civilians and more than 200 abductions. See Carlos H. Conde, “American Woman Said to Be Freed in the Philippines,” *New York Times*, 25 May 2009. Retrieved May 25, 2009 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/26/world/asia/26phils.html>>. See also “Filipino-American Activist Freed, Two Companions Remain Missing,” *Bulatlat*, 25 May 2009. Retrieved May 25, 2009 <<http://www.bulatlat.com/main/2009/05/25/filipino-american-activist-freed-2-companions-remain-missing/>>.

On the other side of the Filipino diaspora in the United States, according to the Critical Filipino/Filipina Studies Collective, close to 85,000 Filipinos have been racially profiled for deportation under the 2002 Homeland Security Act. See Critical Filipino/Filipina Studies Collective (CFFSC), *U.S. Government post-9/11 Actions Threaten Filipino Immigrant Rights*. Pamphlet.

¹⁰ For a reflection on the 40th anniversary of the San Francisco State Strike and Asian American Studies see Jeffrey Paul Chan, et al., eds., *At 40: Asian American Studies @ San Francisco State: Self-Determination, Community, Student Service*. (San Francisco: Asian American Studies Department, San Francisco State University, 2009). For an assessment of Ethnic Studies and its relevance in our post 9/11 historical moment, see Vijay Prashad, “Ethnic Studies Inside Out,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 9:2 (June 2006): 157-176. For a commentary on ways to sustain the hope mobilized during the Obama campaign see Naomi Klein, “Hopebroken and Hopesick, Obama Fans Need a New Start,” *Guardian*, 17 April 2009. Retrieved July 18, 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/17/barack-obama-supporters-naomi-klein>>.

commitment to social justice. Second, it functions as a document of the Asian American student movement of the 1990s for Asian American and Ethnic Studies. Third, this interview illustrates critical pedagogy in action – one that draws on cultural theory, social movement history, and autobiography.

An interview with E. San Juan, Jr. and Delia D. Aguilar

Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. Recorded November 1996.

Jeff A. Cabusao: One of the burning questions that I have is, why do you think it's important to interrogate postcolonial theories at this historical moment in the academy? And what are the implications of challenging this theoretical approach?

E. San Juan, Jr.: Well, first of all, this theory has become almost part of the academic orthodoxy. In other words, it has been merged into the kind of establishment thinking that generally justifies the status quo. Postcolonial theory would be useful if it poses criticism of, for example, the North-South divide and the inequalities within the industrial metropolis and the dependent "Third World" countries. As long as it doesn't consider the historical inequalities between these countries – the divide between the North and the South – I think postcolonial theory can only be a kind of academic exercise in textual analysis, which is mostly what Spivak and the others are doing anyway. So all claims about being the most subversive, revolutionary or radical theory on the part of postcolonialists are subject to that test – the test of whether they really question the existing domination of many formerly colonized, and still, to some extent, neocolonized countries by the transnational corporate powers. So that's the bottom line about postcolonial theory. No doubt, there are some postcolonial theorists who would claim that they are very critical of corporate exploitation and domination of, let's say, Mexican maquiladora workers. But as long as they don't touch on those very fundamental realities of the majority of the people in the underdeveloped world, I think postcolonial theory would only serve to reinforce this very unjust global system. Okay, that's the short answer.

JAC: This is a question for Professor Aguilar. The last time you spoke at the Asian Pacific American conference at Oberlin College, you critiqued postcolonial theory and postmodernism. And you mentioned your emailing your daughter Karin who's in graduate school and asking, "Do these [post] theories actually make a difference outside of the academy?" And your daughter, who has been involved in community organizing outside of the academy, said that it really doesn't matter. That these theories don't touch us and that they don't seem to really have the kind of impact that academics claim. But, for me, it's a struggle. I was once seduced by postcolonial theory, but I'm now feeling abandoned. Seduced and abandoned!

Delia Aguilar: What do you mean? You found it very attractive? And why?

JAC: Initially, it gave us a language to articulate "difference" or an experience of "difference." It gave us a language about being marginalized subjects. Because that language, I think, is somewhat validated in the academy, I think for us as marginalized subjects and people of color, it's a way to talk to our white professors...

DA: Because you're talking about your own "authentic" experience.

JAC: Right. I realized that it doesn't go beyond ideas of hybridity, identity, multiplicity of identities. There really isn't a "blueprint" for action. That's what students of color, and other marginalized students who feel they've been abandoned by contemporary cultural theory, have expressed to me. My friend and a former classmate Carmen Mitchell, who now works full time as organizer for DSA (Democratic Socialists of America), says that it's cool to talk about all this stuff, but where do we go from there? So my question to you is – I've been reading bell hooks and Cornel West's dialogue *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* – do you see the academy as a site of progressive social change or as a potential site contributing to that struggle? What role do you see the academy playing in creating social change?

DA: Yes, certainly. The educational institution is a contested terrain as every other institution is in U.S. society. The problem right now, of course, is that we're living in a very neoconservative political climate where post-ality has pretty much taken control.¹¹ And I think your response is a good indication of that... that when you first came, you thought that identity politics was indeed very radical because it allowed you a space to authenticate your experience and to find your voice, right? And then you, soon enough, discovered the limits of identity politics. And that's the experience of the students I have too. But, in this case, they're graduate students in my classes [at Bowling Green State University]. They are very well versed in this politics of difference. And they're beginning to see that in failing to link the politics of culture to material realities is in fact very conservative. Not only is there no "blueprint" for action, but it really doesn't even detail the underpinnings of this difference.

bell hooks, for example, speaks of "coming to voice" as a form of empowerment, but she's also been questioned by someone like Teresa Ebert who asks, "Is coming to voice the same as economic empowerment?" Because that's really the problem of people of color and women of color. It's not just having a voice... they have a voice! They've always been speaking! So Ebert is asking the question, "Do white feminists mean having them (women of color) speak to us (white women)?" Which is, of course, another matter. In short, the limitation of a politics of difference is that they are disconnected, detached, or removed from material life. And so, in effect, it's a good exercise for students and faculty in the academy. It's a good, safe exercise, really. But you've got to move on from there.

ESJ: I think universities play a role in the maintenance of hegemony of the corporate elite in the United States. However, in some cases – for example, teaching in community colleges or in areas where there's a preponderance of minorities – some schools or educational institutions can serve to introduce ideas that are critical of the system. In

¹¹ "Post-ality" was coined by cultural theorist Mas'ud Zavarzadeh in his essay, "Post-Ality the (Dis)Simulations of Cybercapitalism." He defines post-ality as "the ensemble of all practices that, as a totality, obscure the production practices of capitalism – which is based on the extraction of surplus labor (the source of accumulation of capital) – by announcing the arrival of a new society which is post-production, post-labor, post-ideology, post-white and post-capitalist." See Zavarzadeh, Ebert, and Morton, eds., *Post-Ality: Marxism and Postmodernism. Transformation: Marxist Boundary Work in Theory, Economics, Politics, and Culture. Volume 1* (Washington, DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1995).

general, I would say the academic establishment is an institution serving the interests of capitalism, of global capitalism, but I think it depends, again, for each teacher. If you are in environments, in certain places where there is an audience, which is willing to discuss ideas about postcolonialism or the politics of identity – and this can be related to the actual problems of the community or the problems of students of color in the community – then probably you can say that you can start in schools, in classrooms. So I'm not entirely ruling out the possibility of using the academy when the conditions are such that you have the people there who are willing to analyze and give some kind of critical insight into high cultural theory. And this discussion is connected with what's going on in reality in those communities. So I think that's when you can use, to some extent, the classroom. So it's not an all or nothing proposition. And I think that's what we learn also from Antonio Gramsci, who says that the struggle has to go on in all spaces in capitalist society as far as possible. He even says not only in the government, but also in the military, in prisons – of course in all institutions where it is possible... even in the police department...

JAC: I have two questions/concerns. First, in our class we've been reading postcolonial theories and some of us have noticed that they're somewhat removed from the reality of our lives. And sometimes we get frustrated. We're discussing Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and several students got very upset because her answer was, "No, the subaltern can't speak." We got into a discussion for forty-five minutes about whether the voice is authentic or mediated through certain structures. What's frustrating is that we have no definition of what those structures are.

My other question/concern is more personal. I've been feeling, and some of my friends have been feeling, this extreme burn out – extreme feeling of alienation from what we learn in the classroom and alienation from our own communities outside of the academy. I had a talk with one of my professors, Linda Delgado (visiting professor in the History Department). She tells me, "Take a walk. Get away from the books. Take a walk because you have to have a life outside of the academy." She says that the academy separates us [people of color] from our communities and from our intellectual work. So

she tells me to take a walk. I told her, “But Ms. Delgado, my fear is that if I take a walk, I’m just going to keep on walking...”

DA: And you won’t come back! [Laughter]

JAC: Yes! And I’m not going to come back! And she says, “You know, Jeff, I wake up every morning and I have those same feelings, but I need to take my break. But I come back because I realize that there’s an urgency for me to do this work.” My question to both of you is: What enables you to walk back to the academy to do your work? What inspires you or what gives you that sense of urgency?

[Sustained laughter from San Juan and Aguilar]

DA: Well, you know, I don’t have that sense of urgency anymore; in part it’s probably because I’m in a particular stage of my life. But also because for the past what? Twenty, twenty plus years of our lives, everyday was imbued with a sense of urgency. But that sense of urgency was not centered in the academy, by the way. It wasn’t centered in the academy at all! We were in the academy because we had to earn a living. You know, you live in the real world and you have to have a source of income. But also at the time... it was a highly politicized period where we considered ourselves Filipinos, and, as you know, there was a dictatorship in the Philippines [U.S.-backed Marcos regime] and there were all kinds of struggles in the U.S. as well. So that’s what we were involved in! That’s where the sense of urgency was! Whatever your involvement was outside was, of course, carried into the classroom because, you know, you’re a whole person! You’re not fragmented, even though postmodernists say you are. So that carried over into the classroom, but I never saw the classroom as my main source of activity precisely because I see the limits of it.

But I think it is also critical when there are students who are really raising questions for a progressive faculty to do the best they can to communicate certain ideas that would help progressive students to develop a perspective that would allow them then to make changes in their own communities. But I have never felt... I never thought of

the university as a major instrument of change because as Sonny [E. San Juan] said, and I agree with him, overall the educational institution is an agent of the capitalist system, an agent of the capitalist class to put it more bluntly. But there are always spaces within it where you can educate students. Now, I think the spaces are very much narrower. They are also filled with people who claim a radical language, as you say with regard to postcoloniality. And unfortunately, students, because they're young and haven't been exposed to anything else, are caught up in that; assuming themselves to be the most radical. So I think that's unfortunate. But I also understand that kind of thinking is also part of the neoconservatism that's prevailing. So it has to be seen within that context. But I think things are also really about to change. I mean they can't go on in this way. They simply can't because people question: what is this all about? As you yourself found, it doesn't take you anywhere.

Let me just turn the table around and ask you – when your teacher told you to take a walk if you're burnt out – to link that also with your relationship to your parents, for example. When you go back, you say that you... speak a different language. You feel a little alienated. I think that's important for you to think about. Don't you think? What you think is more important actually than what we can say right now because you are in a critical period. You say you're feeling a tension between yourself and your parents now when you go home. You have a certain language, right? How are you resolving that kind of tension? What are your thoughts about it?

JAC: You know, my parents didn't have an opportunity to obtain a liberal arts education. My mother went to a nursing school in the Philippines and my father, right after high school in the Philippines, went into the U.S. Navy. Other students on campus say, "Well, my dad went to Yale, my mom went to Princeton, so I rebelled and came to Oberlin." They then ask me, "What do your parents do?" I say, "Well, my dad's in the U.S. Navy and my mom's a registered nurse." Then the conversation would just stop there. So I was dealing with that kind of experience...

ESJ: You're learning about class...

JAC: Right. Where I grew up in Southeast San Diego, Filipinos basically had a shared experience. Many of our mothers are nurses and our fathers are navy men. And regarding expectations on young people... young women are expected to go into nursing and young men are expected to go into the U.S. military. When I interviewed my parents last spring for my U.S. immigration class, I realized that my parents can speak “theory talk.” My father just doesn’t use those technical terms [marginality, interstitial spaces, strategic essentialism, etc.]. He uses a different language to talk about his experiences with racism.

ESJ: It’s what called, in a sense, the language of ordinary experience, which is full of contradictions. That’s one of the things that Gramsci says. You have all these different forces and factors operating in your life, and they overlay your own psyche and your own experience with so many things that you haven’t really processed. Your father and many other people who haven’t spent time thinking about these ideas express this disorderly, contradictory body of experience, ideas, and so forth that they have gathered. You’ve been a student, one who has devoted most of your time trying to criticize, to be critical and to understand all the ideas that you have gathered. And often, of course, the level of discourse [you engage] is different from the kind of common sense language. What Gramsci is saying is that the task of the intellectual – and you are an intellectual whether you are engaging books or not, so long as you are self-aware of the ideas – is to provide some kind of inventory or critical awareness. The task there is the effort to understand the reality in which [everyday people are] placed, the reality of their lives. So I think your task is not to alienate them or to speak another language, but to help them sort out their experiences and give some kind of order that will help them understand the reality of society. I think that’s what most intellectuals fail to provide because they feel they’re operating on this “high” level. And there’s no way they can connect with the experiences of other people, especially among Filipinos with all the colonial experiences we have. That’s the other thing about people of color. We are subject to racism and colonial exploitation and oppression. So that whole part of the racial dimension of the colonial experience is something that Filipinos must understand. You have to somehow find a

way of explaining that. The burn out is also a symptom of a lack of connection between what you're studying and what's going on in your life.

DA: Yes, that's really what it is!

ESJ: The academy hasn't engaged that problem. How do you translate those things that you're learning to actually understanding what's going on in real life? But that's not for the academy, because it's a bourgeois academy. The bourgeois academy fragments your life. It tries to, in fact, mislead you into thinking that the life of the mind, or culture/high culture, is the most important thing. And it separates from day to day everyday work, you see. And it will never tell you how exploitation occurs. What is the secret of profit? How does labor produce capital? And so forth and so on. Those things are never really touched. The other reaction that you have to guard against is [the position that says]: "To hell with books, to hell with theory." That's very bad because that means that you have abandoned all the weapons that you can use to criticize the society. And so you immediately abandon the game, and you say, "Well, that's for the bosses, for the white man." And I think you withdraw before the battle. You have to use those instruments for a liberating purpose. As Bob Marley says, "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery!" So I think that's one way of trying to look at your situation between you and the Filipino community. In general the Filipino community [struggles with] this colonial mentality that it's going to prove that it's white, assimilate, acculturate, and forget about the Filipino experience.

DA: A young bi-racial Filipino woman [a graduate student] is coming with me to the Philippines. Her Filipino father never really educated her about the Philippines. Her father came, I guess, in the late 1960s. He's about our age. And he's doing very well as a doctor, and so he has sort of disavowed connections with the Philippines and has never talked to his daughter about the Philippines. And has discouraged her from even going there because, you know, you read about kidnappings, about all kinds of problems there. So he's worried for his daughter... and his daughter is also concerned. Now that his daughter is growing up and developing an interest in her father's homeland, he's

retrieving... he's recovering that interest as well, which is an interesting phenomenon to me.

ESJ: I gave this example when I had a talk at Pullman, Washington in front of Filipinos. [I spoke of] a common experience for Filipinos. Whenever a white American approaches a Filipino, the first question asked is, "Where are you from?" You may say you're from Hawai'i, but they'd ask, "But where are you *really* from?" From the perception of most Americans, when they look at you – because of physical differences – they do not identify you as part of American society. They want to find out where you are from to establish that kind of difference.

Remember what Ronald Takaki always says. He's always asked where he's from. But he's from Hawai'i. He was born in Hawai'i. But they think he's Japanese [from Japan] and that he speaks Japanese. So I think that whole framework of differentiating – who belongs to the white Euro-American majority and those who don't – that's still very strong in American culture. In the case of this Filipino doctor who wants to deny that he's Filipino... the fact is this society perceives you in a certain way, whether you like it or not.

JAC: It's your subject position.

ESJ: Yes, you're placed in a certain way.

DA: That's why this assimilation paradigm doesn't work for Asians and for other people of color.

ESJ: No matter how successful you are, you're still considered...

DA: You're marked! You're marked!

ESJ: Somehow not part of this society.

DA: So that should also be a radicalizing factor, actually. You know, I mean, it could be turned around... to radicalize people of color to understand what this system's about.

ESJ: Actually, the Filipino doctor knows this, but wants to suppress it, right?

DA: Yes, he's hoping that his daughter won't experience the same kind of racism.

JAC: One time I asked my postcolonial studies professor, "Where's the 'blueprint' for action? How do we take what we learn from class to help change society?" And she said to me, "Look where you're located. You're in the academy!" So I think she was encouraging me to be very aware of the limitations of being located in the academy. It's like what Spivak, who is located outside in the teaching machine, says, "I claim so little for myself." Then again, there's an essay by R. Radhakrishnan that challenges us to really think about ways of creating solidarity with oppressed communities outside of the academy.¹²

DA: I'll pass on this short article by Teresa Ebert ("Toward a Red Feminism") to you because as I was reading it I realized what my graduate students were saying.¹³ They kept telling me that the class they were taking with me was not really theoretical. And I realized then, from reading Ebert, that postmodernism poses a distinction between what is theory and what is practice.

ESJ: Ah, really?!

DA: Yes, really. In fact, it implicitly does that.

ESJ: It values theory on a higher level...

¹² R. Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Meditations: Between Home and Location* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

¹³ Teresa Ebert, "Toward a Red Feminism," *Against the Current* 65 (November-December 1995).

DA: Well, of course. Yes. For example, I was telling them about the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) conference that's going on right now in the Philippines. I said that this is part of what this global restructuring is all about. [This is relevant to] women in the era of globalization, right? So we've got to talk about transnational corporations, I said. Any kind of talk about women and development without talking about the impact of transnationals and the impact of structural adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on Filipino women and Filipino people in general is bankrupt! It doesn't say anything! And because I do that it's no longer considered theory.

ESJ: Because it touches the real world...

DA: What they mean by "theory" is something that is abstract. In other words, when you're asking your professor what is the type of action that postcolonial theory provides – it doesn't! It doesn't want to do that! That is not its purpose. Because there is no connection.

ESJ: So what use is it?

DA: I like that Ebert article because it enlightened me. It really enlightened me. My students are very sophisticated with postcolonial theory because they're graduate students, and they're reading and so on. However, they are shaken by the course they're taking with me. They're shaken because I'm forcing them to make the connections. But that's no longer theory once you do that. But then they've also read essays that critique postmodernism because of the obtuse language it uses, right? And so I ask them, "Okay, well you know *Das Kapital* wasn't exactly simple! And yet you know that Marxism has led to revolutions, right? So can we then simplify the language of postmodernism so that it can lead to political action?"

ESJ: But it's not a question of simplifying when there are not enough ideas that...

DA: Exactly! Exactly! It's not just a matter of language.

ESJ: It's a framework, a view of the world, which separates ideas from the real world out there...

DA: So then I raise the next question, which is, "What do you think is the relationship between capitalism and postmodernism then? Do you think it's compatible with or incompatible?" And they said it's very compatible with...

ESJ: It supports it...

DA: In other words, it supports it. It reinforces exactly the system as it exists. So therefore its claims to subversion are completely false!

ESJ: Capitalism has two principles. It separates the world of the mind from the world of human labor. So that human labor is either secondary or inferior, although it produces value, no? And the mind that directs is the superior one, right? That's philosophical idealism... where intellectuals are [assigned] much more privileged value. And manual labor is inferior...

DA: On the other hand, that's also the modernist view that the postmodernists disdain, right? Because the binary opposition is between the mind and the body, right? And yet they're doing the same with theory and practice!

ESJ: And the other thing... it separates the academy, or intellectual life, from the life of ordinary people. So the split between theory and practice is a typical bourgeois capitalist societal attitude. And it's good for the ruling class because they can claim that they have education and they have all the ideas. Then the rest of the people, because they are considered "stupid" by the ruling class, can just work [manual labor]. Postmodernism is a version of metaphysics of the past although it's dressed in [new language].

DA: It's perfectly congruent with capitalism.

ESJ: With class structure, with class division. As long as you don't understand the world of everyday work – which means production relations, how value is produced, how labor is exploited – what's the use of your theory? If it doesn't explain the whole system... the way the system is underpinned by the labor of millions of people?

There are intellectuals from India [like Salman Rushdie] and from the Caribbean who have moved to England or to the United States and see themselves as privileged. They speak and write about their own experiences, and they claim they also represent the experiences of those people in Jamaica or in India. But whether that's true or not, the point is they only speak from their own point of view, you know? That's the diasporic intellectual. So it's all right if you say that postcolonial theory is valid for those intellectuals because it expresses their alienation, their fragmentation, their hybridity. But to say that explains the everyday life of millions of people in India or the Philippines is completely a different story. Bhabha, you know, says every person in the Third World is a hybrid. [Laughter] That's probably not true among many American Indians, you know, or among Igorots in the Philippines. They may use modern instruments or utensils, but they're not hybrid. They have a particular culture. So that hybridity idea is really for floating intellectuals in the First World who come from India and the Caribbean. They may explain their own position of alienation and being in both worlds, like the transnational migrant, which I think refers mainly to the rich Filipinos, no? The upper class that comes back and forth. Business men like the Lopezes.

JAC: Could you please talk a little bit more about Spivak's article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and the concept of the subaltern?

ESJ: I think the theory is that the women in India do not have the means of expressing their own conditions so they have to be represented by intellectuals either British or Indian, okay. So the subaltern can't speak in the sense of using the language that is available for communication with the outside world. But they certainly can speak in their own language, you see. They can speak and represent their own experiences! So there

are two meanings, I think, to that expression: “can the subaltern speak?” There was a woman – Daphne Patai... do you remember? [turns to Delia Aguilar] – who was very angry with Spivak. Patai said subalterns can speak! They’ve been speaking for some time. And do you remember Rigoberta Menchu? She has a book in which she speaks, even though it’s a translation. But still, even though some part of her own language may not have been fully translated, I think that you can still get something from it. All right? So subalterns can speak. They’re not completely victimized or totally deprived of their own resources. No doubt that many of them have been colonized to a degree or another. However, like the American Indians, they still assert their own identities.

JAC: If you say the subaltern can’t speak, it takes away their agency!

ESJ: Yes! It makes them into either robots or complete zombies.

JAC: We had a student in class who objected to Spivak and asked, “But isn’t this condescending of her to say this? That the subaltern can’t speak?” Our postcolonial studies professor was silent for a bit. And then she said, “I guess so.”

[Laughter]

ESJ: I think the test is whether the universities welcome postcolonialism and why. Because it’s not dangerous. It’s not threatening. In other words it offers a new area for research and specialization. And that’s what capitalism is. The more you try to invent new areas the better because people are tired of the old approaches. In the university every ten or twenty years they have to come up with a new theory that’s supposedly different from the previous theory, right? But this is another kind of variety of the same old metaphysical theory trying to give you a sense that it’s new but at the same time it...

DA: At its core it’s really the same! Old wine in new bottles!

ESJ: Refurbish certain things... the test is that it really doesn't give you an understanding of what's going on in the real world. And also of how to go about organizing people to change it.

JAC: But it seems that the people who are threatened by postcolonial theory are older, traditional professors.

ESJ: That's because they use a different language, although, I think, the effect is the same!

DA: What it does is that it renders them obsolete, right? So it's telling them that their field is no longer au courant! And it would take another Ph.D. for them to learn the new language! But, in fact, the substance that is embedded in the new language is not really so different. It's just a new language. But even learning this new language takes a whole lot of effort. It's not worth it for them. So, of course, they're threatened.

ESJ: So that's the brief bird's eye view. Another issue that postcolonialism really doesn't address is racism, or racial inequalities, ethnic exclusion. Well, it also doesn't address class. If it addresses race or gender, it addresses it only in terms of textual analysis. It might be good for new Ph.D. candidates who want to write about a new mode of textual analysis, but aside from that I think it's very difficult to use because it doesn't have concepts like relations of production. It doesn't have those concepts that will enable you to somehow articulate what's going on, the experiences of people, to generalize that, to sum it up, and to see where you can make changes.

DA: Because it really, actually, doesn't want to make universalizing statements, right?

ESJ: That's the other thing!

DA: That's the main problem.

ESJ: It rejects the whole metanarrative of the Enlightenment.

DA: It rejects any kind of social analysis.

ESJ: Struggle for change...

DA: How can you have change then, if you do not have an analysis of the situation?

ESJ: Struggle for change...