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Inaesthetics of Performance in the Black Nazarene Procession*

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Abstract: The subject of the paper is the procession of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo, Manila in the Philippines, held on the 9th of January. Theorizing pilgrimage as performance, I am exploring the productive uses of Alain Badiou's concept of 'inaesthetics' in thinking about the performance of pilgrimage as an event where the people who have nothing come to be something, where the subject appears from out of the 'void of the situation'--appearance as subjectivation, but, also, being counted and escaping the count. The paper explores how the procession is organized, supervised, and policed by the church and the state but becomes a site for individual expression and display of piety as well as a site of a metonymic struggle for spaces and shares in the power of the sacred. That performance is/might be a kind of thinking presents the exciting possibility of describing how the 'people who have nothing' think. If in looking at their performances one can see what and how they think and if this thinking can be recognized as valid and legitimate, then they who are commonly construed as having nothing to say may be counted for something. But if their performances think, what might be the thoughts generated and are there ways of accessing them? The paper argues that the performance itself becomes the articulation of these thoughts, the saying that need not be translated into other modes of expression, and therefore can only be apprehended or accessed by a process of witnessing and bodily engagement, a co-performative methodology that in Bikolano culture has its expression in the practice of *anduyog*.

Key Words: performance; pilgrimage; performance as thought/performance philosophy; Black Nazarene devotion; inaesthetics

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are commonly construed as having nothing to say may be counted for something. The subject of the paper is the procession of the Black Nazarene of Quiapo, Manila in the Philippines, held on the 9th of January. Theorizing pilgrimage as performance, I am exploring the productive uses of Alain Badiou's



concept of 'inaesthetics' (Badiou 2005a) in thinking about the performance of pilgrimage as an event where the people who have nothing come to be something, where the subject appears from out of the 'void of the situation'—appearance as subjectivation, but, also, being counted and escaping the count. The paper explores how the procession is organized, supervised, and policed by the church and the state but becomes a site for individual expression and display of piety as well as a site of a metonymic struggle for spaces and shares in the power of the sacred.

But if their performances think, what might be the thoughts generated and are there ways of accessing them? I propose that the performance itself becomes the articulation of these thoughts, the saying that need not be translated into other modes of expression, and therefore can only be apprehended or accessed by a process of witnessing and bodily engagement, a co-performative methodology as described Conquergood (2002).

I was not sure my own body was ready for it or if I had the stamina.

When I arrived at the Quirino Grandstand in the evening of January 8, various groups of devotees already littered the vast grounds of the park with their tents or makeshift bedrolls, ready for the whole night of vigil. The procession would start here and already the image of the Black Nazarene was on the huge stage cordoned off from the crowds and heavily guarded by church personnel and the Hijos del Nazareno. There was a long queue of devotees who wished to touch the image snaking its way from one end of the park to the stage, the *pahalik* or 'kissing of the image' carefully managed by the church officials. From six o'clock till around eight when I decided to leave, the area became progressively congested and noisy. I stayed only for the healing mass, deciding to sleep the night to prepare for the big day on the morrow.

At 5 AM the next day, I was back, armed with a litre of drinking water, bread and biscuits, a change of clothes, towel, and umbrella. But I had shoes on, the sturdy kind, and rubber; I was not ready to go barefoot like the devotees. There was hardly any free areas left when I arrived. I squeezed myself in a small gap between two groups who had stayed the night and were still curled on their bedrolls even as the dawn mass had already started.

The steady flow of people arriving for the procession soon woke them and in no time at all there was hardly any breathing space. When the procession started, I found myself being carried forward by sheer force of the moving crowd. The din was deafening with the crowd shouting 'Viva!' and singing the hymn in praise of 'Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno'. I found my rhythm walking with the crowd and got used to the smells around me. But soon the jostling began and for a while I was panicking, being pushed, being squeezed, struggling to keep my balance in the melee. I realized I had strayed too close to the centre of the procession, the carrozza of the Nazarene, where the scuffle was never-ending—for space and opportunity to see the Nazarene up close, to scramble up the carriage and touch the image. Overhearing a group of very wet devotees who had just tried their luck at touching the Nazareno and were now huffing and pushing themselves out of the crowd, I realized that it was the mission of every group of able-bodied devotees to do just that, and therefore the chaos around the image is normal. You just had to get out of the way. One journalist who is himself a devotee calls this a 'masterpiece in madness, a canvas of immeasurable chaos' (Trinidad 2012) and a critic calls this 'the most rambunctious and unruly observance on the local liturgical calendar' (Jimenez-David 2012).

The image could hardly be seen as members of the Hijos de Nazareno surround it, trying to protect it from the wild crowd, but at the same time administering the bestowal and parcelling out of the valued 'touch' of the Nazarene to the crowd of faithful with the white towels handed or thrown to them and subsequently thrown back to the crowd. In the melee around the carriage, there prevails some kind of order known to most of the *mamamasan*, the devotees who push or tug the carriage: 'agos', 'indayog', 'salang', or 'ocho'—words which direct the movement of the mamamasan to 'go with the flow' or 'make way for others' to hold the rope, to 'walk and sway in a coordinate manner', or 'not to hold the rope' when it's forming the figure eight because of the risk of being caught in a fatal knot (Boncocan 2012).

What do all these mean? What is it for? This 'so-called ocean of humanity moving and groaning towards its destination' (Doyo 2013) —that in 2012 took all of 22 hours to cover the five kilometre procession route? This is the 'Nazarene's nightmare',



according to another Filipino journalist, who deplores the tons of rubbish usually left on the streets and what she calls the 'continued transmogrification of this religious event' (Ibid.). Another columnist looks at the procession as 'translation'—interpreting the 'traslacion' or act of transferring the image as akin to translation in the linguistic sense—and concluding, 'When I'm asked to comment on the Quiapo devotions, I'm often at a loss, almost as if these represent a different world, speaking a different language that cannot be translated' (Tan 2013).

I find out in my research for this paper that there is no lack of description or writing on the devotion to the Nazareno, from journalistic accounts to blogs, from television documentaries to amateur videos posted on youtube, from self-published monographs to postgraduate theses in the universities. And I did not even need to ask for the stories during the long and tiring procession on January 9. The stories were given to me, like a welling up of words from the heart to the mouth, as though they needed to be said for willing ears to hear. I came to have walking buddies during the procession and they had stories to tell, attesting to the 'miracles' of the Nazareno in their lives, whether it is about the healing of a sick relative, dealing with financial problems, or simply the 'grace' of holding on, persisting amidst difficult times. While the devoted faithful say these, however—profusely, whenever there is an opportunity—there is also no lack of critical comments on the devotion. I'd like to give voice to some of these.

Rina Jimenez-David, a newspaper columnist, calls the devotion a 'batya't palu-palo (washbasin and wooden club) spirituality' or 'folk Catholicism' that is 'a blend of fervid native animism and formal Catholic piety and devotion'. The name is such, after 'washer women', she explains, 'because this kind of faith is adopted most fervently by the poor and unlettered...symbolizing the hardy and hard-working poor'. Perhaps she was 'from the wrong social class,' she muses, or her 'Catholic education in an all-girls' school run by American nuns steeped in the post-Vatican II ethos ill-prepared' her for this kind of Christianity, because she feels totally 'alienated...from the deeply personal, irrational but energetic brand of Catholicism so eagerly displayed by the Nazareno's devotees' (Jimenez-David 2012).

Randy David, university professor and public intellectual, explains the nature of the sacred vow that keeps devotees returning every year to join the procession, a vow that is deeply personal, for wishes made without any feeling of entitlement, surrendering all for the Nazareno to grant or not grant. He describes the procession using Emile Durkheim's terms—a 'collective effervescence', and comments on how it happens that the objects held sacred, the objects of contestation during the procession, seem to lose its power afterwards. 'With single-mindedness, they jostled with one another to get close to the Black Nazarene for the rare privilege of wiping it with their shirts or touching even just the platform on which it rests. So deep was their faith that after the carriage broke down from the weight of the people who had clambered aboard, several devotees hoisted the platform on their bare shoulders, and carried it through the length of the procession.... Yet, when the procession was over, and the statue was back in its glass case inside the church, the platform that a while ago had been part of the venerated objects was casually shoved to one corner of the courtyard where it lay unattended. Amid the sea of garbage left behind, the Nazarene's andas stood as an ironic reminder of the shifting boundary between the sacred and the profane' (David 2012).

Much has been said about folk Catholicism by Filipino theologians and scholars, beginning with Bulatao's concept of 'split-level Christianity' in the 60s (Bulatao 1966) and progressing to ideas of 'inculturation' by a Jesuit bishop. Bishop Claver's views are important because they express a concern for building a 'local church', one with an 'Asian face' so that the Catholic Church would not remain forever 'foreign' (Carroll 2011, 16-17). Also, Quiapo's current rector Monsignor Jose Clemente Ignacio sympathetically describes the procession and devotion in terms of Victor and Edith Turner's concept of pilgrimage that engenders *communitas*, and declares it is not fanaticism or idolatry: 'It is a Filipino trait to want to wipe, touch, kiss, or embrace sacred objects if possible. We Filipinos believe in the presence of the Divine in sacred objects and places' (Tubeza 2013). There are abuses and excesses, however, he adds, and these must be 'purified' (Ibid.). Indeed, as a critic asks, how separate true faith from superstition, true faith from touristic exhibitionism? (Doyo 2013).



Elsewhere, I have already noted the way Philippine scholars have explained the Filipino conversion to an alien faith and subsequent religiosity in terms of 'translation' and 'domestication of the foreign' (Rafael 1993), a 'clash of spirits' harnessed for increase in native potencies (Aguilar 1998), or appropriation for popular movement and revolutionary ideals (Ileto 1979). I have also already speculated that the Black Nazarene procession, much like the traslacion of the Virgin of Penafrancia in my home region, are *performances* of piety, risking the ire of purists who would object to even think of this display of faith as performance, as spectacle, suggesting therefore that it is inauthentic. I am not suggesting this, far be it from me, but saying that sincerity or states of interiority and their outward expressions may be very different in the religiosity seen in pilgrimage practices like the Nazareno and that there may be more at play here, ones not necessarily expected or desired by the public institutions of church, state, and school (see Llana 2011, 96). As Cannell explains about the Bicolans and their Lenten reading of the *pasion*, the ritual recitation of the passion of Jesus, 'such performance was not simply drawn out of the text itself but from "aspects of social interaction, such as notions of balance and contestation between matched players"' (Cannell 1999, 159-60 cited in Llana 2011, 96).

On taking up the research on the Black Nazarene devotion, therefore, I have asked myself what else is to be said about it. What can I add or should I even attempt to say anything more? The discourses are many and loud, but the loudness masks a gaping void it seems to me, because the discourses almost always end in an apology: the devotee is an ignorant Christian who must be formed, catechized, 'purified'. The acknowledgement of presence of the people who have no part, the people who have nothing at all, the uncounted masses, is always in the negative. And it is this situation that calls out to be addressed in a different way.

Alain Badiou's concept of inaeconomics (Badiou 2005a) opens up a possible different way in my view. The devotion to the Black Nazarene may be seen as a form of practice that makes the people who have nothing, the unorganized mass, appear and count for something.

People who inhabit the edge of a situation's void are people who have nothing which entitles them to belong to the situation [:] they do not themselves count for anything in it. Having nothing, they occupy the place from which the void as such might be exposed, via an event (Hallward 2004, 8).

In saying this and using inaeconomics as my conceptual framework, I am in effect asking if the pilgrimage performances which enable them to appear can be thought as acts of resistance *sui generis*. For if the acts and their contexts are regarded through the framework of traditional aesthetics and politics, apprehended only as the weak rumblings of the powerless crying out for divine justice and mercy, then their meaning and significance remain occluded, and the people themselves are rendered excluded from the political situation they might otherwise be seen as seeking to represent.

Instances of resistance and agency surface again and again in the journalistic reports and unpublished researches over time. I will cite only two, which I believe significantly clarify who these people are who have no place, have no part, have nothing in the Quiapo context.

One master's thesis made in 1981 (Yu 1981) talks about the commerce in various kinds of goods from candles to talismans to herbal medicines to fruits and vegetables, to fortune telling and prayer peddling, as having been passed on from one generation to another of locals who claim the Quiapo and Carriedo areas as their territories and who are then hostile to the coming in of strangers who would compromise their control of the 'market' during the peak season of the devotion. The protectionism stemmed from being perpetually harassed by the law because they had always operated outside it. As 'sidewalk vendors' or hawkers without any license to sell they were considered a nuisance to public order and cleanliness, and periodically driven out by the police. This did not prevent them from staking a claim to the church area and its environs which had become their home and to the Black Nazarene who was their protector and source of economic survival. Last Good Friday as I spent hours in the sweltering heat observing the goings on in front and on the sides



of the church, I sensed that the network of local inhabitants noted in this 1981 research still existed at present, for many vendors addressed each other familiarly and comported themselves confidently compared to the visitors like myself who did not know where to go or what to do next. I was even berated by a candle vendor not to stand in the way of her customers, much to my embarrassment of course.

A second very telling instance is the procession of 2010. The authorities decided to follow a different route, bypassing the narrow streets of the Quiapo district. The devotees would not accept this and attacked the fire trucks set up across the street as a barricade. The scene as recorded on youtube (Polistico 2010) looks more like a riot than a procession. The firemen and police officers relented and the procession proceeded along the traditional route. A second attempt at rerouting was made in 2012 because the carriage wheels of the Nazareno broke and the authorities thought to take a short cut. The devotees lifted the carriage on to their shoulders and insisted on following the same route, even if it meant the procession lasted till the early morning of the next day.

These incidents are interruptions that burst apart the usual narratives of faith and invite one to dig deeper into the complex weave of relations of place and people, time and space, gender, class, and religion implicated in any telling of the Nazareno devotion. As Badiou points out, 'To tell it like it is, and to draw the consequences of this "telling" situation, is in the first place...an operation of thought'—a decision 'by logic' that '[bears] a possibility for action' (Badiou 2005b, 7-8). The concept of inaeffectivity allows the thinking of the 'folk' devotional practice as agentic action and enables the writing and talking that articulate it. I should add that given the very corporeal expressions of subjectivation, one's methods of apprehension must necessarily involve a bodily co-presencing.

These are all, of course, initial thoughts, and I figure I will continue with my field work in Quiapo for several more years before I can say anything I can believe myself with few doubts. But walking the difficult trail of the procession in January and braving the crowds again last Good Friday I am plagued by the thought that I will never get to the end of this. The uncanny feeling of something or someone appearing and yet not being seen persists.

The practice of devotion is never still, ever dynamic, as any performance is and will be. But, also, the dynamics of the political count is such that being counted means something but escaping the count also means something. In the Nazarene devotion, while there are many stories freely offered by devotees, many of these stories are similar to those already heard, repeated or reproduced almost as standard versions for the consumption of the press, the tourists, the postgraduate researcher and academic. A graduate researcher in 1998 was able to retrieve only half of his survey forms and many of the respondents refused to be interviewed (Piscos 1998, 34).

This indicates that I am probably correct in setting a limitation to my methodology—I do not conduct structured interviews or even unstructured ones in the mode of the traditional participant-observer. Instead I try to strike up conversations that organically develop from the practice of co-performative ethnography introduced by Dwight Conquergood (2002, 2003). I have reframed this methodology as *anduyog*, following the Bicolano practice of being with the other without thinking of any hierarchical boundaries and differences (the concept of *bayanihan* in the Tagalog lexicon). When you go to be with, *mag-anduyog*, you just go and pitch in where you're needed, lending your body and your strength without need for grand entrances or even acknowledgement and gratitude. Being present allows participation, being with, and all other things flow from this. As a researcher I find that I learn more genuinely in this way. I am also experimenting with 'active listening-in-a-crowd' when snatches of conversation of people squeezed together interrupt your reverie and make their imprint in your mind so strongly you don't need to write down anything in a notebook in order to remember. An example is an advice given by a young man to his female companion while trying to find their way out of the bunched up mass of people just outside the church doors of Quiapo—'in a crowd you just go with the flow and get to where your feet will take you in the process'. I am following that advice in my research process too, trusting in the aleatory and improvisational encounters, face-to-face and, especially in the pilgrimage experience, body-to-body. And perhaps indeed this is the way with performance research, to experience the performance itself and not comprehend it only via its descriptions or what even the performers say about it. For both performers and



their audience, words fail to say what the body senses or what is embodied in action, and if only this can be understood, performance can be *thought* itself, and not only its object—surely this is what Badiou means by ‘inaesthetics’—art, or in this case pilgrimage as performance, as itself ‘a producer of truths’, not ‘an object for philosophy’:

...[A]rt is always already there, addressing the thinker with the mute and scintillating question of its identity while through constant invention and metamorphosis it declares its disappointment about everything that the philosopher may have to say about it (Badiou 2005a, 1-2).

In the end I could not complete the procession. It was three o'clock and the procession was just half way through. I felt as though my legs and feet were cut off from the rest of me and my body was almost collapsing, hungry, exhausted, and overcome by the heat and stench. I held on by sheer will power. As the procession moved on to the exciting Quiapo district where local residents awaited with food and drink and brass bands, I took a short cut from MacArthur Bridge to Quiapo Church, passing by streets teeming with activity and filled end to end with vehicles, carts selling all sorts of food and drink and other merchandise, including miniature icons of the Black Nazarene, and people everywhere, many of them also stragglers from the main procession, like me, in various states of exhaustion, sitting or lying on the pavements.

In front of the church Lauro Gonzalez who believes himself possessed by the Nazarene had set up his entourage complete with costumed ‘prophets’ and followers, and the group had attracted a crowd of observers including a crew of a national television channel. Gonzalez’s Christ the King Spiritual Government is already mentioned in the 1981 thesis which proves that he has been persistent in his ‘role’ as ‘Christ the King’ for the last thirty years. I managed to take some photos but did not have the energy to stay on and talk with anyone. But what I saw blasted me out yet again. The encounter with ‘Kristong Hari’ played by a former movie bit player now turned healer and ‘god’ (Villegas 2008 and Snoeck 2010) threw into stark relief the challenges to understanding presented by the Nazarene devotion.

In a moderate form such challenges consist of the image of a fortune teller-slash-prayer peddler offering to read my fortune with tarot cards on the left hand and a rosary on the right, for fifty pesos only, right outside the church of Quiapo.

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