

## Her Wild American Self.(Review) (book review)

MELUS; 12/22/1999; Lewis, Krishna

Her Wild American Self. M. **Evelina Galang**. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1996. 184 pages. \$12.95 paper.

A century after 1898, as the public and academy turn their eyes to the Philippines and to Filipino American lives, this slim volume of short stories requires attention. While **Galang** rehearses familiar issues in ethnic fiction by women, she also provides insight into the concerns particular to the writing of the contemporary Filipina American self. In this manner, *Her Wild American Self* contributes to the American literary landscape in which the Filipino/a tradition is slowly emerging.

Deviance and instability are recurrent themes in ethnic writing by women, and, as suggested by its title, they are prominent here in **Galang's** work. Furthermore, *Her Wild American Self* is in the company of recent fiction which offers alternatives to representations of the American ethnic self as exemplified by the widely-read and widely-taught novel *Jasmine*. Whereas in the latter the heroine *Jasmine* touts "difference" and a "traveling" subjectivity only to have these ultimately yield to accommodation and to the reproduction of exoticism, the women of *Her Wild American Self* insist on self-definition in negotiating the frequently conflicting demands of being an American-born Filipina.

The story "Filming Sausage" is especially provocative. It is narrated as a journal kept by Elena as she deals with her conditions on the job as a stagehand on a film set. The white male director is increasingly persistent in his efforts to take Elena as mistress. First he calls her Ellen, thus simultaneously refusing her her difference and fashioning a co-operative subject; as she remains both incompliant as well as silent, he renames her simply as Asia, constructing her as radically different, darkly mysterious, and passive, thus legitimizing his escalating violence on her person. Finally she abruptly leaves the production, forfeiting job and pay. Elena not only departs from the stage of mastery, but also continues to record in her journal. The story concludes with a chronicle of apparent loss:

Look down the center of your body. What do you see? ... You are Asia.... A delicate foot.... The curve of a woman's hip.... You are an entire race of women.... Chinese, Japanese, Filipina, Vietnamese. Fragmented and seemingly free, you have lost your edge. Your name. The soul that you once recognized. You've lost the continuity of self.

Repeating and elaborating on the director's language, Elena narrates the appropriation of her identity and the concomitant disintegration of self. However, in the very documentation of the strategies by which she would be colonized, she articulates the emergence of an independent identity. The strength of "Filming Sausage," as well as of *Her Wild American Self* as counter-narrative derives from the juxtaposition of the general with the particular. That is, the above journal entry, in its disclosure of the metonymic identification of women with sexual availability and of the conflation of all non-Western descents, recalls the dangers of exoticism and the traveling subjectivity available to the colonialist geographic imagination which attend the assertion of any ethnic woman's difference. At the same time, in her suggestive "Chinese, Japanese, Filipina, Vietnamese," **Galang** retrieves the multiplicity of that which is "Filipina." The names "Ellen" (white American) and "Asia" (Other) with which the director would contain and master Elena return us to 1898 and the history of U.S. imperialism. Kipling penned "White Man's Burden" on the occasion of the U.S. occupation of the Philippines(1); **Galang's** fiction brings attention not only to American Filipino/a lives but also to the relations which obtain between colonialism and ethnicity.

"Filming Sausage" is not the sole memorable story in this collection. While some stories are rather standard coming-of-age narratives, others deal interestingly with the complexities of self-representation by a young American Filipina. In the piece bearing the title of the volume, the

heroine discovers in the Virgin Mary not only a figure of liberation but also the spirit of her grandmother and aunt who are the models for "her wild American self." Religion provides for familial continuity along maternal lines between the Philippines and the U.S. and is the means for individual expression for the American Filipina. The story "Contravida" carries similar resonances. A single mother-to-be, in persisting to cultivate a relationship with her disapproving aging spinster aunt, realizes that the older woman herself is in a painful predicament. That is, though from "back home," she is compelled to make herself relevant and valuable in a "new home," dominated by younger generations of American Filipinos. Thus in a poignant scene of disclosure, the aunt applies makeup with a shaky hand, so that she has two lips, two brows, two faces. The garish double image in the mirror is displaced at the end by the face of the new baby girl, doted on by the aunt. In "Our Fathers," a young girl carries a photo of her grandparents in her locket. She never tires of hearing about the lives of the grandparents; the father, amused by his daughter's obsession, obliges with whatever he knows, whatever he remembers. For years her parents have saved money to bring the grandparents from the Philippines, and now parents and daughter expect their arrival any day. Suddenly news arrives of the grandfather's death. The daughter turns the locket over to her father. A thread to the homeland has been broken; in the future, they will have to reconstruct family history together. In this collection, plots of loss merge into promises of new life, which is also the direction of Filipino / a writing in America.

#### Note

(1) See Oscar V. Campomanes, "The New Empire's Forgetful and Forgotten Citizens: Unrepresentability and Unassimilability in Filipino-American Postcolonialities," in *Critical Mass: A Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism* 2.2 (Spring 1995), 184.

Krishna Lewis is Assistant Professor of English at Florida Atlantic University. She has written on American, Caribbean, Asian American, and postcolonial literatures and is at work on a book-length study of heterogeneity, ethnicity, and migration in New World literatures.

COPYRIGHT 1999 The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States