Humor and Pathos

Filipino Diaspora Drama (Carlos Bulosan's The Romance of Magno Rubio and Chris D. Martinez's Welcome to Intelstar)

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Abstract

Comedy and its opposite lie in the same disposition of feeling, and they are inside the process which results from it. In its abnormality, this disposition is bitterly comical, the condition of a many who is always out of tune; of a man who is at the same time violin and bass; of a man for whom no thought can come to mind unless suddenly another one, its opposite and contrary, intervenes; of a man for whom any one reason for saying yes is at once joined by two or three others compelling him to say no, so that yes and no keep him suspended and perplexed all his life; of a man who cannot let himself go in a feeling without suddenly realizing something inside which disturbs him, disarranges him, makes him angry…

All the soul's fictions and the creations of feeling are subjects for humor.."
Luigi Pirandello, "On Humor"

In "a narrow hotel room" in Stockton, California acclaimed writer Carlos Bulosan, himself a migrant worker with only a grade school education, disabled as a result of an accident suffered in his childhood and illnesses that plagued him all his life, wrote "The Romance of Magno Rubio" a short story based on the lives of his compatriots who had left their homeland to live a harsh life working on the farms in that area. The story centers around, "Magno Rubio. Filipino boy. Four-foot six inches tall. Dark as a coconut. Head small on a body like a turtle. Magno Rubio. Picking peas on a California hillside for twenty-five cents an hour. Filipino boy. In love with a girl he had never seen. Girl twice his size sideward and upward…" (34)[1] who embarks upon a fantasy love affair with a Caucasian American woman by the name of Clarabelle. As E. San Juan, Jr. reminds us, the story is not written in the realistic mode "but a satiric portrayal of a contrived situation, with strong allegorical and didactic elements…[that]...mobilize the tendentious potential of caricature, incongruities, and ribald exaggeration found in the genre." (San Juan 2008: 119)

The all male cast of workers in the story reflect the sexual demographics of Filipino migrant labor which according to Carey McWilliams from 1920 to

1930 some 1395 Filipino men entered California for every 100 Filipino females giving an excess male population of 39,328 (Higashida 2004: 236) The reality of this situation makes it understandable that workers earning "only two dollars fifty cents a day" (San Juan 2008: 35) such as Magno Rubio would so crave female companionship and intimacy leading to possible marriage enough not only for him to seek that in "…one of those magazines that advertised the names and addressed of girls for one dollar" (36). Pathetically this pursuit that Magno Rubio claims has given him purpose and direction in life costs him much more than just that one dollar since he has to pay for the services of a scribe who happens to be another worker with slightly more schooling to read and write his love letters who "demanded a flat rate of five dollars per letter" (35). The financial demands soon increase exponentially as "Clarabelle's pleas of love became more fervent in every letter" (41) so that they include gifts, requests for assistance for the "little brothers and sisters" (38) she was still supporting as well as at least two hundred dollars to pay for her travel expenses when she finally journeys to California for what turns out to be their first and last meeting. In other words, in this transactional relationship he might have fared better engaging in the services of a commercial sex worker as many of his peers were wont to do in order to find gratification. The saga ends, predictably, with Magno Rubio arriving at her hotel only to see her "in a car pulling out from the curb. She was beside a man with brown hair and thin moustache. She was laughing, he was laughing too"(43). As San Juan concludes, "Disillusion for Magno begets a sense of pathos: but comic distance eventually supervenes, and life returns to routine work in the end" (120).

This obvious commodification of love attests to the Marxist notion that Capitalism leads to alienation as elaborated by Alan Aldridge in his study, Consumption, "Price does not reflect the value of labour and therefore obscures the social relations of production. This leads to a double distortion: Commodities are treated as if they were persons possessing agency, while persons are reduced to commodities bought and sold for their labour power" (Aldridge 2005: 78-9). Magno Rubio belongs to those groups called nomad harvesters, people who cannot settle on the land they themselves cultivate, an idea which itself is oxymoronic belying the contradictions within monopoly capitalism's penetration of California farming whereby the migrant workers reap and harvest on land that does not belong to them and the fruit of their toil is remitted back home not in the form of agricultural produce but money. These labourers can be seen as the pioneers of what would later become the phenomenal Filipino diaspora of today where by latest estimates 8.2 men and women or about one in ten of the total population of the Philippines are living and working abroad in places other than the U.S. These Filipino overseas workers (OFWs as they are commonly known)

are now deployed in ninety four countries around the world since no jobs can be availed of in their own country. The government-run POEA or Philippine Overseas Employment Agency has therefore estimated that as many as 500 to 3,000 people are leaving to seek employment abroad every day.

What is considered most pathetic about Magno's situation is not, however, his state of indigence as much as it is about the perception of how ridiculous it is that a man, not only of his financial status, but social status, education, ethnicity, nationality and physical attributes, could deem to comprehend so complex a subject as love. Love, an abstract notion poets and philosophers have sought and failed to satisfactorily define is a word consistently mentioned in the story from the very first line of dialogue where our hero insists, "I love her" despite the fact that Claro invokes the grotesque in his question 'But how could you?'…" She's twice your size sideward and upward." With this Magno Rubio emerges into an anti-hero, as a simple person thrust to extraordinary circumstances, not because love is an extraordinary notion but because, as the literal antithesis of the traditional hero who is supposed to be larger than life, this diminutive common man has attempted what can only amount to being a farcical and Quixotic enterprise of ignoring one's inferiority and trying to attain, not the unattainable woman in the courtly love tradition, but the foolish pursuit of romantic ideals in extravagantly, chivalrous action. In that same argument he musters up the courage to retort with a heroic questioning, Has size got anything to do with love? I mean real love, an honest love?" (San Juan 2008: 34).

To Magno, however, simply the idea of having an object for his affection, illusive though it may be, with or without any assurance of reciprocation, already constitutes love and affection. Bulosan's narrative follows conventions readers are familiar with from fables and other forms of story-telling with patterns of repetitions with slight changes as the story progresses that help heighten suspension and thicken the plot. The audience soon learns, through Nick, the narrator, how there was a "cost" involved in this entire exercise of love declaration. According to Magno, "It's very complicated. At first there was only a gallon of wine. Later he thought of making some money. I don't know where he had stolen the idea, but it must have been from the movies. He demanded a flat rate of five dollars per letter" (35). Apparently, Magno's love would also intensify as a result of this endeavor hence, "…I wrote to my girl every day. I earn only two dollars fifty cents a day. Still I had to write to her. I love her. You understand, Nick" (35). At that rate, the scribe would soon be overcome by greed, and, "Realizing that I truly love the girl, that I can't live in the world without her, he demanded one cent per word…And do you know what, Nick! He wrote long letters that I couldn't understand. And he used big words" (35). Ultimately, in true capitalistic

fashion whereby cost is determined by the law of demand and supply the cost of these love letters would escalate to "..ten cents per word!... You heard me right... I paid him twenty dollars per letter!" (36).

Lest the reader be led to think it is the cost that Magno is so indignant about we learn that it is actually the fear that the person paid to write the letters in his stead is actually taking advantage of Magno's illiteracy and courting the woman for himself. He tells us magnanimously, "I don't mind paying him that much money. But the words were too long and deep for me. And again I say: how would I know if he hadn't been writing for himself?" (36) turning himself immediately into a fiercely jealous lover necessitating the services of an honest scribe. It is also at this point in the story that the improbability of this supposed "courtship" of Magno who is continuously likened for both his physical attributes and gestures as a monkey, is emphasized. The burlesque verging on disgusting descriptions include the unsightly coughing up of "the slimy wad of tobacco in his mouth" as he "licked the brown shreds of saliva dripping down his thick lips with the tip of his serrated tongue", the barring of "his ugly teeth" and worst of all the inserting of "a finger in his hairy nostril to extricate a slab of dried mucus. He made a face when he pulled it out, looked at a minute, flung it aside and wiped his hands on his trousers."… "Magno Rubio seldom washed his clothes, if he ever did. He had the same rags on him all the time, even when he was in bed. It was insufferable to sit beside him at the dining table. He smelled of mud, sweat and filth, and more, he smelled like a skunk." (35-37) The humorous descriptions here verge on the use of scatological humor which is categorized as low culture since it deals exclusively with bodily functions like defecation, urination, flatulence or vomiting. In sum not only is Magno unworthy of lofty sentiments in the courtly love tradition (it is perhaps worth reminding here that this story is entitled "The Romance of Rubio Magno" and romance, especially chivalric romance, is a literary genre of high culture that originated in the aristocratic circles of medieval Europe) he is even not worthy of being categorized as a full-fledged human being. The illusiveness in the notion of romance is also a reminder that by stark contrast there looms the reality of anti-miscegenation laws that banned not only marriage but in some cases sexual relations between members of two different races. In California the law was first passed in 1850 stipulating that Blacks, Asians and Filipinos could not marry a member of the white race and was not repealed until 1948.

This emphasis on Magno's inferiority is obviously not merely an observation of the conventions of courtly romance but a satiric contrived situation in a story with strong didactic and allegorical elements that mobilize, as E. San Juan Jr. avers "the tendentious potential of caricature, incongruities, and ribald exaggeration found in the genre. They ingeniously expose the fakery of the

invented and fantasized object inhabiting Magno's imagination" (119). As many other critics have observed Magno's object of affection is not only in the figure of Clarabelle but America itself – America the country which colonized the Philippines from 1898 to 1946 which once had plans to annex this group of islands inhabited by their "little brown brothers" – a term coined by William Taft, the first Governor General of the Philippines as its forty-ninth state.[2] Therefore the Philippine experience as a colonized subject which comes with its own historical specificities is therefore unique which means that the typical immigrant circumstance and mindset might not be applicable in the case of Magno Rubio and his fellow laborers with their subaltern consciousness. It might not be surprising too that the proverbial American Dream which while credited as responsible for building a cohesive American experience as a national ethos of a land of limitless possibilities attainable through hard work to achieve a "better, richer and happier life," as articulated by James Truslow Adams in 1931 has also been blamed for its overinflated expectations especially by leftist critics who have argued that despite deep-seated belief in the egalitarian American Dream, the modern American wealth structure still perpetuates racial and class inequalities between generations. These commentators note that advantage and disadvantage are not always connected to individual successes or failures, but often to prior position in a social group. (See for example Heather Beth Johnson The American Dream and the Power of Wealth or Mark A. Smith *The Mobilization and Influence of Business Interests in The Oxford Handbook of American Political Parties and Interest Groups* (2010)) No doubt, these "overinflated" expectations resonate in the figure of Clarabelle the "…girl twice his size sideward and upward" in the recurring refrain, its comical overtones tingeing with sexual innuendoes heard over and over in the saga of Magno Rubio's failed romance.

This fixation on the part of Magno leads to manifestations of affection that come in the form of monetary sums and consumer goods which he showers on his lady love over and above the fees he has spent to procure her as well as to declare his love for her in the letters he has been sending. The pastoral is skillfully juxtaposed with modernity, for example, in one description of Magno as he "..grinned like a goat…carrying a big bundle under one arm. "I'm giving her a radio," he said. "A combination radio-phonograph. It costs me nearly two hundred dollars" (San Juan 2008: 39). A love token to one's lady of a phonograph, a byproduct of Thomas Edison's 1877 invention could not be more American. After all the American Dream traces its roots not only in the principles of hard work but also the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence which apart from stating that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights" includes "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" as well. Happiness can come to Magno with magnanimous

goodwill disproportioned with the size of his body and pocketbook with his manifestations of all symptoms connected to romantic love be they lovesickness, love tokens or the struggle with the attempt to define love even to the point of fighting in ways reminiscent of the mock-heroic tradition over the much coveted lock of hair sent supposedly by Clarabelle to not one but two men. In the words of the narrator, "He's happy, Claro… He has a girl, that's why he's happy" (39). whereas for Clarabelle the pursuit of happiness is equated with a material value, a fixation on money and worldly possessions that she can acquire with the privilege of a woman belonging to the dominant race in this country that is now Magno's terrain.

This reading of "The Romance of Magno Rubio" as a critique of Philippine enamorment of the U.S. and its consumerist and capitalistic ethos and practices can also be applied to a contemporary text set in the Philippines and not the U.S. in what Chris D. Martinez in 2005 calls a "One-Act Call Center Monologue" Welcome to Intelstar which won third prize for the Carlos Palanca Memorials Award for Literature (the country's most prestigious and enduring literary contest often dubbed the "Pulitzer of the Philippines") that same year. Born in1971 Martinez is a Philippine scriptwriter, director, and producer, who has worked in both film and theater. He moves with ease in the world of popular culture and also directs television commercials as a living. His first feature-length film, *100*, was highly acclaimed and won several awards. He is the author of the book *Laugh Trip and Last Order sa Penguin*, which was nominated for the Philippine National Book Awards. His educational background as a student in an exclusive boys' school and subsequent graduate in Business Administration from the University of the Philippines, Diliman has been credited for the dominant urban middle-class sensibilities he displays in his writings.

In his play *Welcome to IntelStar* [3] the experiences of Magno Rubio more than half a century ago have altered quite dramatically. The subject matter concerns Filipinos employed by an American company –the fictitious IntelStar, but the setting is not in the United States but rather in the Philippines itself. The play opens at the Central Office of IntelStar, a leading call center company that offers U.S. directory assistance. A call center is a centralised office used for the purpose of receiving and transmitting a large volume of requests by telephone. It is operated by a company to administer incoming product support or information inquiries from consumers. To minimize on the cost involved companies in the U.S. find it cheaper to outsource these services to third world countries where overhead in terms of rent and wages is not as high, than to administer such services on U.S. soil. The hour-long monologue takes place in actual real time with the audience supposedly assuming the role of a class of newly recruited batch of call center agents being given an orientation by a trainer who goes by

the name of Ma'am Chelsea, hence the term "interactive comedy" has been used to describe this play.

The supposed hirees are in fact a new generation of the aforementioned "Little Brown Brothers." Describing the ability of Filipinos to speak English as a "linguistic bonus" in his introduction to *Brown River, White Ocean: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Philippine Literature in English,* Luis H. Francia muses on the fact that this might have been "the only advantage to being colonized" (ix). The Spaniards might have occupied the Philippine islands for over four hundred years and Tagalog (or Filipino which is now the national language) has a large number of Spanish or bastardized Spanish vocabulary but strangely enough "Spanish never took hold the way it did in Latin America, or the way that the Spanish form of Catholicism did." Instead American political and military dominance following the Spanish-American War at the close of the nineteenth century would bring forward an effort to educate the native people starting in 1901 when six hundred American teachers arrived on board the USS *Thomas* (hence the name "Thomasites"). If Spanish colonialism was cloaked under the guise of fervent religious proselytizing, the American mission, according to Francia was instead "to spread the gospel according to Thomas Jefferson $ Co., and later to make us forever imagine the ethereal beauty of white Christmases, Coca-Cola bottles in hand. ...Having been denied mass public education by the Spanish, Filipinos took to learning their ABCs and nursery rhymes like the proverbial ducks to water" (Francia 1993: x). Barely able to express himself verbally in any language but his native tongue, Rubio Magno's greatest disability was his inability to read and write English. On U.S. soil all he could do is to comprehend so much English as to take orders from his supervisors to toil the land enough to eke out a living for himself and his family back home who belong to the poorer, underprivileged socioeconomic class. Ma'am Chelsea, on the other hand, having had, what Francia terms "[A]n American-inspired education" (x) has at least, in theory, acquired the means toward social mobility. She appears on stage as the prototype of what the disciples of her creed aspire to be "…a typical well-scrubbed Makati middle management yuppie: high-heeled patent leather shoes, smart-looking, Armani-inspired suit and freshly manicured French-tipped nails; pleasant and perky--she speaks English fluently with what is known in the call center circle as a "NEUTRAL AMERICAN ACCENT" (Francia 1993: 3), armed with a PowerPoint presentation and, not to forget, a spill-proof-Starbucks coffee mug that completes her get-up.

Chelsea's lecture is meant to orient the trainees on what they can expect as well as what is expected of them in this particular profession in terms of etiquette, conduct and most importantly, it seems-- the ability to communicate effectively in English. The session starts off with her customary congratulations and greetings that come with the feel-good pep talk format complete with the usual clichéd

" give yourselves a big, big, big round of applause" where she "starts to clap and invites her audience to do as she does" (Francia 1993: 4). It is worth applauding to land oneself such a job not only because the unemployment in the Philippines is high but that there is also underemployment that many graduates have to settle for as in the case of overseas domestic helpers many of whom have college degrees but are unable to find suitable jobs for themselves. And since she immediately underscores the fact "that IntelStar gives one of the best compensation packages in the industry. Aside from regular salaries, bonuses are given to those who perform way beyond what is expected of them" (4). Workers who have passed what she deems "our series of rigid tests and interviews" should be even more exhilarated, shouldn't they?"(4).

Most importantly, however, is the major criticism of the kind of service offered by offshore call centers which are often deemed to be of lower quality when a service is outsourced and particularly exacerbated when that outsourcing is combined with off-shoring to regions where the first language and culture are different. Some consumer callers find linguistic features such as accents, word use and phraseology different making the call center agent they are speaking to difficult to understand. To remedy this, therefore, Chelsea offers a crash course, not on how to improve one's knowledge of English but how to approximate the accent of a native speaker of American English so as to lend credibility to the products and services these potential call center workers are dealing with so that the caller will never suspect that at the other end of the line the speaker is not a blonde, blue eyed attendant. Since these people are not native speakers of American English (in his classification of Three Concentric Circles World Englishes, linguist Braj B. Kachru places the Philippines and other formerly colonized nations in the "Outer Circle") what is required of them is to fake an accent (is it surprising that a result of a random Google search on the topic of "Faking an accent" would yield results as diverse as "How to fake a convincing French accent", "Faking your way to fluency," "Simulated immersion in Language learning –Fake it till you make it?") For a foreign speaker trying to learn another language some level of affectation which is the act of taking on or displaying an attitude or behaviour not natural to him or her self is crucial. Ironically enough whereas fakery or forgery is commonly regarded as a sign of inferiority the ability to ape or to fake an accent is a matter of great pride in the case of Chelsea who wonders out loud why it is that "…we, Filipinos, do not realize how blessed we are to be the only English-speaking people who can perfectly fake an American accent. By the end of this year, there will be 100,000 Filipinos working in call centers." She also pompously reiterates, with sentiments echoing the Manifest Destiny concept, "[I]t is our destiny to thrive in this business. It is our fate

to be the call center capital of the world." Her manifesto ends with her paying homage to vestiges of American pop culture "Thank God for Sesame Street! Thank God for Hollywood! Thank God for MTV! I mean, thank God, period!"(Francia 1993: 7). And here one is reminded of how the Philippine colonial history has often been described conclusively as "Four hundred years in a convent and fifty years in Hollywood."

Armed with her impeccable "California-neutral" accent, PowerPoint presentation and of course a spill-proof Starbucks coffee mug Ma'am Chelsea proceeds with her pronunciation lesson which Martinez ingeniously turns into an interactive session with the audience simulating the staff members she is supposed to be orienting. Some theatre critics have suggested that some of Chelsea's lessons are part of a standard call center's language improvement exercises starting with tips on how to pronounce tag questions "in a neutral American accent" (9):

Did he?	Didee
Does he?	Duzzy?
Was he?	Wuzzy?
Wouldn't he?	Woody?
Wouldn't you?	Wooden chew?
Hasn't he?	Has a knee?

after which she generously adds tips. "You see, the secret lies in the following letters. Let me show this slide.

She clicks on her mouse to change the slide. A new table of letters and words appears.

TT+Y=	CH	What's your name?	Wachername?
D+Y=	J	How did you like it?	Howja like it?
S+Y=	SH	Bless you!	Bleshoo
Z+Y=	ZH	Where's your mom?	Werzher mom?

The exercises in the slides are accompanied by copious explanations and pronunciation rules reminiscent of George Bernard Shaw's Professor Higgens playing Pygmalion that "…can also be observed in words like "ejucashen" or "indivijual" or "grajuashen" (9).

Fixing her trainees' pronunciation skills in the hopes of them shedding any trace of their accented English is still, however, not sufficient and there is still one more matter she needs to attend to. One of the ways to counter criticism and doubts regarding the quality of services offered by a call center is to make sure that caller/customers start out believing that the person on the other line is actually American. In order to effectively create that illusion as soon as a call is put through to an agent you answer it with the same format "Hi, this is Chelsea. City and state please?" That's how I always begin my call. "Hi this is Chelsea. City and state please?"(5) adding that "it's very important that we have –what" (Pauses.) Correct! An American-sounding name. Like Chelsea! I mean what can be more American than Chelsea, right?" concluding that "It is mandatory that we have an American name here at IntelStar" (6). The idea behind this is not to facilitate the pronunciation that foreigners will have of agents' names since traditionally Filipinos have Spanish sounding names which because of strong religious roots are either saint names or biblical words. It is not uncommon for a person to have multiple names since many also honour their parents and grandparents by naming their children after them. What usually happens is that it is more common for Filipinos to be known by a nickname that is either in duplicate form like Jun Jun (Jun for Junior) or Lyn Lyn or a name ending with the ng consonants as in Ping or Ding or duplicated ng words like Ding Dong or Bong Bong. One can go forever into the trivial or humourous nature of Filipino nicknames but, as Chelsea reminds us, these names belong only in the Philippine context and any aspiring professional introducing themselves with such names will never be taken for an American. Worse still, she reminds her audience, "[O]ur customer would suspect right away that we are not centrally located in the US. And that's a big, big no-no! They're not supposed to know that we're on the other side of the glove. I mean, what can be more Pinoy than Ma. Leonora Teresa—or Bayot for that matter. It's such a giveaway. Don't you think? So the first order of the day, I mean, of the night, is to choose your American name" (6).

With that Chelsea assumes the right of being able to re-Christen the names of her new recruits.

> "*She singles out a man from the audience.*
>
> CHELSEA: You! What's your name? Teodoro Albarillo? You can be a Teddy. Or a Ted? No, this is much better: Todd! Todd! That's it! Todd! Not Toad, Todd! (She singles out a girl this time.) You, Miss, what's your name? Jennilyn Grace Humbrado? Jennilyn Grace. To me, Jenny is okay. Lyn is okay. No offense, but when you put them together you sound like a Pinoy taxicab. You know, like RonaLyn Taxi, LynDon Taxi or LynLan-LanielLou Taxi. Okay. I know! For you, let's use Grace instead. Is that

okay? You like that? Uh-huh! Or better yet, instead of Grace – we'll use Gracie. You like it? Uh-huh! Good for you, Gracie"(6).

The act of naming and renaming of people, structures or places has always been a common practice throughout the history of colonization, the most pertinent example of all being the name of the Philippines itself that King Phillip II of Spain in 1556. In an entry in the online Dictionary of War Macedonian Suzana Milevska (2010) discusses the politics of name changing in connection to her native Macedonia seeing renaming as a war concept that could be interpreted as a strategy for erasing ethnic, cultural or gender identity without using any aggression or causing any direct material damage. It functions as a conceptual weapon of destruction, as a kind of wage war or a contest between the old and new identity layer. Taking the liberty of naming or renaming someone is tantamount, therefore, to denying them their historical and cultural identity. In the case of the staff of IntelStar, the definite "no-no" in Chelsea's lingo is any Filipino sounding name that which she denigrates collectively as "Taxicab names." Such names are themselves a reflection of a feature of a culture that is fun-loving (hence penchant for fun sounding nicknames) and personal alliance systems that are anchored by kinship. Philippine personal alliance systems are anchored by kinship, beginning with the nuclear family to whom a Filipino's loyalty goes first to (the overseas workers phenomena is sustained largely by this strong sense of filial loyalty. Amalgamations of names might sound incongruous and as such devoid of meaning that a name should be endowed with but in a child it represents a union of his or her parents or grandparents in a taxicab it represents what might be the one and only means of eking out an honest living by someone who has probably purchased this vehicle with hard earned remittances of a wife working in a foreign country for the sake of their four children whose names are creatively combined as "LynLanLanielLou." Yet, if that is not condescending enough for someone who opts for the name Chelsea there is also the matter of last names that leads her to frown upon a name like "Bayot." In terms of hierarchical classification a native Filipino last name is obviously inferior to a Spanish sounding one – more so in this case one which is further denigrated like "Bayot" which in some Filipino dialects happens to have the pejorative meaning of "homosexual."

With the business of naming and renaming over Chelsea has effectively "baptized" though perhaps in this case with coffee in lieu of water, the kind that is served while they have the privilege to lounge "…in the break room upstairs at the 23rd floor" where staff "…can watch CNN, read USA Today and catch up on the top stories in the US" (18) or if they choose to "can only be brought into work areas if it's contained in a spill-proof mug. (She shows off her mug.) Just like this mug which I got from Starbucks. It's nice isn't it?" (12). Coffee is an

important part of the job since call center staff operate in a different time zone, "…if it's 8 AM in Makati, it's 7 PM in New York" (13) Chelsea reminds after assigning them the task of memorizing the map of the US – the fifty states, their capitals and the different time zones from East to West, Alaska to Hawaii soon to supersede their consciousness of their archipelagic nation comprised of eighty one provinces in merely one time zone. In so doing Chelsea is also successful in mapping the changing face of the colonized mindset of a modern-day Filipino who need not leave Philippine soil but is already identified by an American-sounding name, dexterously giving out information that is there at their finger tips, "…from addresses to phone numbers. From movie listings to restaurant reservations" (5), coping professionally with irate customers or verbally abusive or obscene calls with an admirable level of detachment, keeping in mind Chelsea's mantra to "…never ever hang up on your caller. Just let him vent. Do not butt in as he verbally abuses you. And try to apologize when there is an opportunity to do so" (15). Noting the choice of pronoun used for this particular type of caller one could only be reminded that physical and emotional abuse is always prevalent as a sordid reality faced by overseas contract workers the world over -- the kind of reality that provoked what was supposed to be a comment made in jest by a Philippine cabinet member during the Gulf War when hundreds of Filipinas barricaded themselves in the Spanish Embassy in Kuwait because they were afraid for their lives after some were raped by soldiers from both the Kuwait and Iraq armies. When told of the incidents the high-ranking government official commented that if rape is inevitable, "Why don't they just lie back and enjoy themselves?" (Merkinson 2005). One comes to realize that eventually the ultimate form of "neutralization" is a denial that reaches a level of betrayal reminiscent perhaps of the biblical denial of Jesus Christ by Saint Peter. In the play, Chelsea recounts a fresh personal experience in a manner whereby the narrative could even reach didactic proportions. As a sort of prologue, she begins by saying "...there's this other call that I got just three weeks ago, it was sort of funny but you'll learn a lot from this story. I got a call from an old Filipino lady in San Diego. She had this thick Tagalog accent."

"…she reenacts the call. She also mimics the way her caller talks.

CHELSEA: "Hi, this is Chelsea, City and state please?" "I am from San Diego in California." "Yes, ma'am, how can I help you in California?" And she goes, "What?" "How can I help you in California, ma'am?" Then she says, "Are you also a Filipino?" I was shocked! But I regained my composure and go, "I'm sorry but due to security reasons, I cannot disclose that information." She goes, "You are! You are a Pinay. It's true what my kumares told me. Dial 411 and a Pinay will answer you. I can hear it in your voice. You are a Pinay. How is everything back there in the Philippines?" Then I go, "I'm sorry but due to security

reasons, I cannot disclose that information." Then she says, "So, I am right? You are from the Philippines." And I go, "We are centrally located." "Uy, 'eto naman, it's just the two of us! Tell me, what time is it there? What is Manila like these days? I haven't come home for 20 years na. I miss all of my family back there." "I'm sorry, ma'am, but is there anything else I can help you with?" "Just talk to me. Make me *tsismis*." "I'm sorry, ma'am, but is there anything else I can help you with?" (17-18).

When Chelsea relates her story up until that point and goes on to say "As much as I wanted to…" one's guess might be that she was very tempted to give in and reach out to the expatriate whose absence from the Philippines is only a physical one judging from the way she is pining for a connection in whatever form with the land of her birth. As it turns out, Chelsea was fighting with the urge to rid herself of the annoyance of this persistent caller thus breaching her professional training. Instead she triumphantly announces "As much as I wanted to hang up on her, I couldn't. Big, big no-no!" And with that she can hail herself as the prototype of all call center agents where perhaps it is not the fake accent that matters as much as the blind and unquestioning loyalty to a country, a culture and business ethics not different, perhaps, from Magno Rubio, "*Filipino boy. In love with a girl he had never seen. Girl twice his size sideward and upward*?"

While one may agree with theatre reviews[4] of this interactive comedy as "an amusing and light-hearted look at people who work in the financially rewarding but rather cyclic world of call centers." deeming it "heart-rending and rip-roaringly funny" one does wonder what it is in the end that gets members of the audience, many of whom are young professionals who themselves might be aspiring towards call center jobs rolling in fits of laughter. While not "rip-roaringly funny" "*The Romance of Magno Rubio*" is also a heart-rending tale. Both of these stories, as Ma. Rhodora Ancheta observes in her paper on *Welcome to IntelStar* can be used as a foray into how "the humour used by Philippine literary texts, which are heavily marked…by a palpable social realism that seems to present difficulties in Philippine life, and ultimately revolve around an almost modernist query of how daily life unmoors the individual by setting them against the implacable uncertainties and mutabilities of unsympathetic institutions, thus rendering the Filipino a fractured entity, by way of his history and his everyday life." (1)

In this 'fractured entity,' the Filipino psyche is at once given to easy humor and comic wit, on one hand, and a rather brooding predisposition prevalent in the maudlin telenovelas and tearjerker, overly sentimentalist movies that abound in the realm of popular culture, on the other. It is not uncommon for the visitor to the culture to observe how in the midst of abject poverty the Filipino is almost always given to laughter and the languid gaiety of the barrio fiesta, depicted starkly in the laughable if not poignant vignettes of refugees or victims of massive flooding

stranded on rooftops with a guitar in tow, singing while waiting for elusive rescue. Magno Rubio's obsessive amorous pursuits for an illusive woman he desperately yearns for is roundly hilarious if not for the sad absurdity of the lengths by which he takes to woo her in a language and style oppressively alien to him. Martinez' characters of a 'bifurcated Filipino' of today's call center milieu with fake accents and sleep patterns turned upside down (sustained, albeit pretentiously, by a steady stream of Stateside Starbucks coffee) make for rib-tickling funny portraits, if not for the rude truth that speaks to the literal dislocating of identity of the differently-colonized 21st century Filipino youth. The merciless adjustment to time zones at the opposite side of the globe, transporting oneself to another time and space - pretend-that-you-are-not-in-the-Philippines when taking calls, answering clients as if they themselves were physically located in America – and denying an existential reality of being Filipino by having to force oneself to traverse great lengths to "speak like an American" with faux accents and even take on what passes as American-sounding appellations, makes for ridiculous, amusing fodder for plays like *Welcome to InterStar*, but it reflects nonetheless a pained, lingering pathos of learned helplessness, if not imminent nervous breakdown.

Humor and pathos are two sides to the same coin of the human experience, alternating in ways that speak of enduring tragedy and turmoil yet interminable light-heartedness and optimism. In the diaspora of the Filipino, in the drama of his itinerant, peripatetic, colonized, alienated, globalized self, his 'tragic suffering' gives way to a coping, soothing mode of easy, ready humor, the better to bear with 'comic sufferance' the travails of having split, bifurcated, dichotomized and altogether ambivalent, dislocated identities. But it is perhaps in that raucous laughter that finds mirth in the absurd and the bizarre, or in the awkward yet resilient humor that flows from the banality of muted suffering, repressed anger or prolonged pain and longing, that the Overseas Filipino Worker, the struggling Filipino Everyman – the hardy souls like Bulosan's Magno Rubio or Martinez' Starbucks-bearing, American twang-obsessed, never-say-die Chelsea – finds some solace and clear mooring, however enfeebled, yes, but resolutely, defiantly hopeful no less. In their creation of these characters and their pathetic situation these writers are not content simply to be comical or satirical, to return to Pirandello, "…reflection can reveal to the comic and the satirical as well as the humourous writer this concept of illusions. The comic only laughs at it, being pleased to blow away this metaphor of himself created by a spontaneous illusion. The satirical writer will be upset by it. But not the humourist: through the ridiculous side of this perception he will see the serious and grievous side of it. He will analyze the illusion, but not with the intention of laughing at it. Instead of feeling disdain, he will, rather, in his laughter, feel commiseration." (48)

Notes

[1] The play was presented in Filipino and for reasons that the writer of this paper has not been able to obtain the script passages from the short story version written in English by Carlos Bulosan will be cited instead.

[2] The idea of expansion through colonization is also an extension of the nineteenth century belief in its "Manifest Destiny" that America was destined to expand across the North American continent eventually providing a rationale behind the annexation of Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines. British poet Rudyard Kipling's poem based on this concept "The White Man's Burden" is subtitled "The United States and the Philippine Islands."

[3] The play came to the attention of this writer at the 6th Malaysian International Conference on Languages and Literature in Putrajaya Malaysia from a presentation on "Phanstasmatic constructions: Language and humor and the interrogation of identity in contemporary Filipino comic plays" by Dr. Maria Rhodora G. Ancheta from the University of the Philippines, Diliman.

4 see for example, http://kerms.multiply.com/reviews/item/8

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