

DRAFT

## F. Sionil José: The Rosales novels.

In Tolstoy's story, "What does a man need?" the answer given is six feet of earth for a grave. When, in F. Sionil José's novel Mass, the hero is asked "What do you want most?" his tentative answer is "To be truly alive." José pursues this question and its answer through the five volumes of his 'Rosales' novels, which provide a fictionalised history of the modern Philippines as he searches for an answer to the greed and poverty that deny his compatriots the fullness of living and even the dignity of a personal voice. This is the history of those who suffer it, from the tycoons imprisoned in their mansions and their wealth to the peasants who toil for them, who are "a part of those who have perished and those yet to come," and who long for "not just the irrevocable end to ... poverty, but justice as well."

Although the Americans invaded the Philippines just 100 years ago this year, the country remains residually Spanish. Magellan and his fleet arrived among its islands in 1521, and, after exchange of gifts and pleasantries, moved to the real business of conversion and killing. Magellan himself died of wounds inflicted while trying to subjugate the inhabitants of Mactan to the Raja of Cebu. Fifty years later, Manila had become a provincial capital of the Spanish Empire. Ruled for three centuries by a rivalry of Spanish governors and friars, and for the first half of this century by American missionaries of Protestantism and democracy, the Philippines remains an Asian state living within the institutions of western culture. Even its dominant religion comes from Europe, grafted by the friars onto a native animism, and more recently tainted by American styles of evangelism. Power remains with the ilustrados, the wealthy mixed-blood families who gained their power under the Spanish and, although fomenting the first nationalist stirrings, retained it as they collaborated with the successive colonial regimes until the nation gained nominal independence in 1946. Yet, despite its western institutions of government, education and business, its traffic snarls and the modern façades of its cities, and the multinational advertising that infests buildings and highways, the evidence is clear that the origins and destinations of the Philippines, lie outside the trajectory of western progress.

José's novels track the resistances and corruptions of a traditional society responding to the pressures of modernism. They follow the fortunes of the peasant enduring on the land or seeking escape in the city, of the graduate returning from study abroad only to become entwined in the cycle of corruption, of landlords and tycoons

deploying their wealth like generals their troops, of priests in the slums and revolutionaries in the mountains at the centre of its history as a land that has supplied its wealth to the Americas and Europe and the labour and skills of its people to the globe. After all, as José reminds us in Viajero<sup>1</sup>, Magellan needed guides for his voyage around the world, and where else to find them other than from among those Filipino navigators who had already made their way, voluntarily or otherwise, to Europe. The wretched slave Maisog of Sugbu starts his chapter in the novel with the proud declaration that “this humble vassal ... should be addressed Primus Circumdedisti Me by the earth,” only to ask, “who would do me - a brown man of anonymous origin - this exalted honour?” José was delighted when scholarly readers of the novel found this and his other fictional documents so convincing that they asked him for his sources. But his overriding concern is not with circumstantial documentation but with how the people caught in these circumstances can resist tyranny and take control of their own lives without themselves becoming destroyers. He is interested in resistance, but he is even more interested in building a just society.

The Americans came in the Philippines to a country long united by imperialism. Its unity depended on an imposed religion and on a ruling class based on Spanish descent and usurped property rights. After the coming of the Americans, this class quickly discarded its Spanish language in favour of English and faithfully served the new masters until, in the name of democracy, they in turn departed, installing their former agents as their new clients. The Philippines today is thus, with the exception of the Muslim south, geographically united, but at the cost of intractable social divisions. While everyone may enjoy the right to vote, there are few representatives of the peasants in Congress or the governors’ palaces. Those who have come from humble beginnings have forgotten the exhortation of the crippled poet in Dusk: “the most important thing ... is not that we are not farmers any more, but that we should never, never forget that we were.” This kind of forgetting unites the Philippines with all those former colonies in south Asia where the new rulers merely exercise their power in the way they were taught by their former masters.

José’s ‘Rosales’ sequence of novels moves from the early nationalist stirrings of the 1880s to the Marcos regime in this century. The first of them, The Pretenders, was published in 1962, but the next two, My Brother, My Executioner and Mass, which also deal with the problems of independence, were suppressed until 1988 and 1982 respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> Solidaridad, Manila, 1993.

José then returned to the beginnings of the nationalist struggles in Tree, an episodic chronicle of the loss of hope in the later days of American rule and under the Japanese, and Po-on, renamed Dusk for its American publication. This, the last to be written, is chronologically the first of the sequence, and provides an inspiring account of resistance to Spanish cruelty and the birth of nationalism from a combination of idealism, anger and solidarity. The events of the novel are shown through the consciousness of Istak, or Eustaquio, Samson, whose life encompasses an education both in European civilisation and in the wisdom and endurance of the peasant. Dusk, is the first of the sequence to be published in America, by Random House. Unfortunately, the publishers report no plans to release it in Australia.

The first part of Dusk is an account of Istak's passage into adulthood from a youth spent as acolyte to Father José, the old priest of Cabugaw. His passage, which is both literal and metaphoric, starts with his dismissal from his post by the new priest, whom Istak has discovered in *flagrante delictu*, his consequent return to the tasks of a peasant, the expulsion of his family from the lands where they have worked for generations, and their flight south in search of a promise of land and freedom. In the course of their flight, Istak is shot and left for dead by the Guardia, loses his father and mother to hazards of the journey, finds a wife and becomes leader of the party. Eventually, the family reach the town of Rosales, the centre of the district where they are able to settle as tenants, build a village and carve out property of their own from the jungle. Here Istak finds himself as both farmer and healer. In this dual role in the new village, reminiscently named Cabugawan, he is able to reconcile his peasant origins and the yearnings for a higher vocation that had been implanted in him by Father José.

The second part of the novel reveals this settlement as illusory. Filipino patriots in alliance with the Americans overthrow the Spanish government, only to be themselves betrayed by the Americans. When the poet of the revolution, Apollinario Mabini, the Cripple, comes to live among them, he awakens in Istak his earlier longings for justice and for recognition as an autonomous human being, rather than as a man destined by the colour of his skin to serve others without will or voice of his own. The Cripple's conversations with Istak analyse the way colonialism denies the humanity of the colonised, taking away even their belief in themselves. Istak remembers too much of Father José and his teachings to share the Cripple's hatred either for the Spaniards, whose language held "a nobility that

affirmed man's worth", or for the Americans, whose constitution represents a similar idealism and who did eventually free their slaves. His concern is with the land he has cleared, with the family he feeds with the fruits of his labour, and with the neighbours he serves through his knowledge of language and healing. Although he fears that the villagers may once more be forced to flee into the wilderness, he knows that they could do this with the confidence "borne out of the sweat, the agony of having tried", with the intelligence makes of nature a friend rather than an enemy, and through the tight kinship of families who have made their own beginnings. Among these people he can find the patience to wait and the courage to prevail against the enemy. Yet this knowledge does not give him "peace such as he might have found had he become a priest." Such peace, he comes to realise, can be found only by retreating from the world. His wife persuades him that he can no longer flee the violence he rejects, and he allows the Cripple to recruit him to the nationalist cause. In almost the last pages of the book, he takes up a rifle against the American invaders who are trying to take from his country, his people and his life. In accepting the necessity of resistance, he finds within himself the faith he had sought since his time as an acolyte of the Church that rejected him.

This action of the book is bracketed by two letters that qualify any simple nationalism. The first, from Father José to his superior, although acknowledging the failures of the friars, reiterates the importance of their high mission, which he argues will be fulfilled only by admitting Indios like Istak to their seminaries so that they can carry the legacy of Spain into charge of their own future. The last, a letter from one of the American soldiers to his brother, who has announced that he is coming to the Philippines with similar high hopes to those that had brought the friars in other generations, praises the opportunities open to men of goodwill, but ends with a quotation from the final words of the diary Istak kept during his last journey:

"Conquest by force is not sanctioned by God. The Americans have no right to be here. We will defeat them in the end because we believe this land they usurp is ours. God created it for us. The whole history of mankind has shown how faith endures while steel rusts.

These words sum up the theme of the whole series.

The action of the novel, built on the twin quests for land and freedom, conveys both the urgency and the excitement of the struggle, but its theme is expressed even more

strongly by the images that dominate it. The life of the peasants is symbolised by the patient buffaloes that pull their carts and their ploughs, and by their few carefully crafted implements, passed on through the generations, worn by use and lovingly taken with them to their new habitations. Their endurance is shadowed by the horse riding Spanish officers of the Guardia and their mestizo and native accomplices, by casual rape and mutilation, and by the pistol shot of summary execution, accompanied by the announcement that “Spanish justice triumphs again”. In the background of the northern villages stand the thick-walled churches, built to shelter the population from attack by the Moros, and the belfries that call the people to prayer and remind them of vengeance. The bells represent the control of the friars, the churches the sanctuary of faith and a universal tradition. Later, the American invasion, first heard of only as rumour, becomes concrete in the bodies of the three rebel soldiers Istak sees hanging in front of the church, the village he sees set on fire and the blue Ilokano cloth lying, “already dry and in a heap” beside the young village girl raped and killed by the well where she had gone to bathe.

The later novels in the sequence continue this history through its alternating cycles of continuity and destruction, violence and community. Tree tells story of Rosales through the eyes of the young grandson of Don Jacinto, the patron who directed Istak to land they can clear for themselves, only to have it corruptly seized from them by a later landlord. My Brother My Executioner moves the story on another generation to the Hukbalahap rising, and to Luis Asperri, offspring of a union between a granddaughter of the first settlers and Don Vincente, the grandee who dispossessed them. Luis learns from his mother’s father how the Americans came with their transits and their measuring rods, how the Spaniards worked with the Americans and how with no more than scraps of paper they made binding and permanent the bondage of those who from the beginning had felled the trees, cut the grass, killed the snakes, and dammed the creeks, so that this inhospitable land could be made gracious and fecund.

But Luis is taken as a child from his mother’s family and adopted by his natural father. His memories of his mother, and his knowledge of her rejection by his father, prevent him enjoying the privileges that nevertheless separate him from his people. He and his half-brother, the rebel leader Captain Victor, represent the alternatives of peaceful change from within or violent revolution from below. One brother remains trapped in the past, the other seeks to wipe it out, to destroy what he has not created. The novel admires revolutionary

virtue, but endorses the proverb that “He who does not know where he came from cannot know where he is going.”

The Pretenders returns us to the Samson family, where Istak’s grandson Antonio, now married into a wealthy Manila family, has even less freedom to choose. The first member of the family to escape from Rosales and the restrictions of poverty, he destroys himself through a combination of ambition and moral cowardice. Finally, Mass brings us close to the present, telling the story of Antonio’s illegitimate son Pepe, who has been brought up in the village but escapes to Manila, where he becomes involved with priests and revolutionaries in the reeking slums of Tondo.

If we consider the novels in the order they were written, their themes become even more clear. In The Pretenders, Antonio, whose father has been imprisoned a foolhardy act of homicide in resistance to tyranny, escapes from the village by scholarships that eventually take him to America. However, his marriage into a wealthy family imprisons him in a world that requires him to surrender his independence in return for privilege. Only in suicide does he find escape. Similarly, the central character of My Brother My Executioner accepts the death of himself and his wife as the cost of the way he has lived. In Tree, set in the forties and fifties but published in 1978, at the height of the Marcos regime, all choice and all hope seem lost. The novel closes with the image of the baleta tree, symbol of protection for the villagers, but itself growing only from the strangulation of the sapling to which it has clung. Yet Mass, written a couple of years earlier, and Dusk, set earliest but written last, both find hope in the endurance and defiance of the common people, the “little people” who “have always been like flies - they die, but then they can bring on a plague.”

Although José has written an epic of nationalism, it is not simply nationalist. The novels condemn poverty and the rapacious landlords who perpetuate it, and present as heroes the rebels who take up arms against cruelty and tyranny, but they do not suggest armed revolution as an answer to the problems they depict. The revolutionary leaders are themselves too often vain and deluded, patriots become profiteers, and the little people, capable of enormous endurance and compassion, also betray each other. José is filled with pity for his people, but he does not ignore their share of responsibility for their troubles. In part this comes from a patriarchal society, where although men take the decisive actions, only strong women enable them to maintain their integrity. These women represent the continuing power they draw from the community, whereas wealth confers only the power

to destroy. But the women who allow themselves to become merely creatures of their men are also complicit in this destruction. Alienated from the land and its people, they lose their vitality, their ability to live with others and to achieve the desires that wealth and violence promise.

The characters who point a way to the future are those who find within themselves a strength that comes from a solidarity with their people, transcending their individuality and even their ties of loyalty to immediate family or clan. This enables them to accept death as the price of life and hatred of tyrants as the price of freedom, and to know that they must place in humanity the faith once directed to God. There is a world of difference between Antonio Samson, who kills himself in despair, and his grandfather Istak, who chooses death despite knowing that his resistance is futile and that even his fate will remain unknown. The series ends as Pepe, Antonio's son and Istak's great-grandson, returns to the village and takes up from his forebears the struggle he knows he cannot avoid. "I was afraid, but I felt very light. I knew I could go very far without tiring." After experiencing love, degradation, betrayal and torture, he has joined the living who take command of their own lives without denying their fellows.

Just as Pepe learns to take control of his circumstances, so the 'Rosales' novels transcend both the constrictions of colonialism and the limitations of the merely national. The voices they allow us to hear speak from within the particular history, loyalties and structures of a Philippines society that is itself subordinated to global structures of control. The speakers appeal from their constrictions to universal concepts of individual integrity and its necessary communal base. Only as we recognise these two axes of social identity can we find a way of moving from the tyrannies of a global economy to the possibilities of a global network of communities.



## **Referendum on the Republic 1999**

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### **Exposure Draft of Proposed New Preamble to the Australian Constitution**

**With hope in God, the Commonwealth of Australia is constituted by the equal sovereignty of all its citizens.**

**The Australian nation is woven together of people from many ancestries and arrivals. Our vast island continent has helped to shape the destiny of our Commonwealth and the spirit of its people.**

**Since time immemorial our land has been inhabited by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, who are honoured for their ancient and continuing cultures.**

**In every generation immigrants have brought great enrichment to our nation's life.**

**Australians are free to be proud of their country and heritage, free to realise themselves as individuals, and free to pursue their hopes and ideals. We value excellence as well as fairness, independence as dearly as mateship.**

**Australia's democratic and federal system of government exists under law to preserve and protect all Australians in an equal dignity which may never be infringed by prejudice or fashion or ideology nor invoked against achievement.**

**In this spirit we, the Australian people, commit ourselves to this Constitution.**

[Return to Referendum](#)



### Chapter Three: Crossings: intersections of place time and place

This is the use of memory:

For liberation--not less of love but expanding  
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation  
From the future as well as the past. Thus, love of a country  
Begins as an attachment to a field of action  
And comes to find that action of little importance  
Though never indifferent. History may be servitude,  
History may be freedom.

T.S.Eliot, 'Little Gidding', Four Quartets, III.

Miller, Ancestors, Maniam, In a Far Country, José, Viajero, Jose, The Rose Crossing.

Nationalism today is in today's world both a unifying and consoling force and a virulent source of evil, an aggregation of lies that lead to oppression and murder. Benedict Anderson points out that national consciousness inevitably produces historic amnesia.<sup>1</sup> Eric Hobsbawm has remarked that "no serious historian of nations and nationalism can be a committed political nationalist".<sup>2</sup> These historians of nationalism agree that it is a modern phenomenon. Yet modernism, a product of the Enlightenment, is oriented to a future controlled by reason, whereas nationalism appeals to an emotional attachment to a tradition that owes at least as much to mythology as to history.

The wars and civil wars that have followed the break-up of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and the actions of the Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka, appear to be examples of the bloody consequences of identifying the nation state with the traditions of particular ethnic groups. But these conflicts may also be viewed as examples of a deeper conflict at the heart of the post-imperialist condition. Hans Magnus Enzensberger has identified our present state in Hobbesian terms as the war of everyone against everyone else.<sup>3</sup> In this condition, the nation state is not the source of conflict, but the only alternative to chaos. Enzensberger maintains that, although some states have themselves become the sponsors of gang war, the root cause of civil violence is the retreat of the state from responsibility for its own citizens. Quoting Hobbes, he points out that "The subjects' duty towards their sovereign lasts only as long as he is able to protect them through his power. Man's natural right to protect himself when no one else is in a position to do so cannot be withheld by any treaty."<sup>4</sup>

Yet, although the state may retreat from the obligation of protecting its citizens, the rulers of the state, safe in their private enclaves and protected by their private guards, are not about to yield control of the economic and cultural resources that determine the possibilities of life for their fellows. If the state is not freely chosen, it will be imposed. Even the order of global capitalism depends on functioning nation states to provide the conditions of its activity. The Bougainville and Ok Tedi disasters are examples of the complicity between global enterprises, the nation-building elite of a new state, Papua New Guinea, and the institutions of government in a capital-exporting state, in this case Australia.<sup>5</sup> Yet Bougainville also demonstrates the tragic consequences that follow the loss of both national order and traditional authority.

By placing our emphasis on the function of nationalism in imposing an oppressive uniformity we neglect its capacity to nurture, to provide the individual with a sense of identity, of being at home with place and community. Nationalism based on the single identity of ethnicity or the single interest of class is, for the majority of citizens, at war with this nurturing function. The novels I am considering here offer different senses of identity, based on an acknowledgement of separate histories that must be recovered in the present before their heirs can become part of the larger community. Each of them - Alex Miller's The Ancestor Game, K.S. Maniam's In a Far Country, F. Sionil José's Viajero, and Nicholas Jose's The Rose Crossing - tells the story of a quest for origins that can furnish a basis for a life in the present, free from the constraints of the past and from any duty towards the future. When achieved, this freedom offers the possibility of living at home in a society that accepts the diverse singularity of its origins as guaranteeing the authenticity of its present, free from what Paul Sharrad has termed the "levelling multiplicity" of the modern age.

The Ancestor Game<sup>6</sup> begins with a double displacement. The narrator returns to England to confront the fact of his father's death and his own estrangement from both his parents. This episode frames the main quest in the novel, the unravelling of the mysterious origins of Lang Tzu, heir to both the Chinese and the Australian families of his great-grandfather, Feng, the Phoenix who arose from the death of the old order in China, and from the murder of his Aboriginal companion in Ballarat, to become a wealthy man on two continents. His grandson, Lang, however, is a man alienated from both continents. Brought up in the household of his maternal grandfather, the literary painter Huang Yu-hua, he has as a child destroyed the heirlooms that bound him to his Chinese past and been turned by his grandfather against the Australia that represented his future. These acts of destruction leave him nowhere to be at home. His companions - the narrator, Stephen, and the painter, Gertrude - recover the stories that enable him to take his place in the present. The book closes with the image of Gertrude's painting, "a divided landscape waiting to be inhabited, the principal characters withheld . . . until this moment" (p.302). The divided landscape of the triptych represents Europe, China and Australia, and also past, present and future.

The book grows from a series of deaths. It opens with the narrator, Stephen, facing the death of his Scots father and his own break with his mother and with England. The main narrative of the novel, the history of the Feng family in China and Australia begins when its first member leaves his dead family amid the ruins of early

nineteenth century China. Figuratively, he is rescued by Death himself and becomes his agent. We must therefore read the whole family history, ostensibly one of rise to power and fortune, as a story of death. The attempt of Lang, the great-grandson surviving in Australia, to recover this history becomes his attempt to free himself from death. But the death that Feng serves is implicated in the wider history of Australia. Feng comes to Ballarat, in a colony "predicated upon the inseparable concepts of dispossession and punishment" (p.223). His fortune is built on the gold nugget he finds as he digs the grave of his Aboriginal friend, lynched by the squatters. Back in China, death continues to the present century, when his great-grandson, Lang, heir to both Feng's fortunes and to the artistic tradition of his mother's family, throws away the mirror of his maternal ancestors and destroys their book of literary painting. Only at the end, after his friends have given him his history, is he able to step through its windows into his own life.

The novel punctuates its histories with a number of paintings. Whereas narrative moves through time, these pictures capture moments from its flow in an eternal present. At the beginning, Nolan's portrayal of Leda and the swan, where a white swan floats in the midst of a "sinisterly brutal world", is seen as a "bleakly dispassionate view of . . . a European civilisation that had failed to take root in an environment hostile to its ageless central icons" (p. 7). This is the present of Australia. The literary paintings that the young Lang executes, and those he later burns, represent "the indelible trace upon the face of eternity that had brought history into being" (p. 202). By his action, Lang launches himself from eternity into history and becomes bound by its inexorable flow towards the death that rules it. The portrait of Victoria

Feng, strange Eurasian child in the heart of suburban Melbourne, still hangs in her home, now Lang's, where it counterpoints the skull of Dorset, the slain Aborigine from whose grave Feng's fortunes had sprung. Through this picture and its accompanying relic, the past continues to exert its deathly hold. Only at the close of the novel, through the imagined empty landscape beyond the lighted hall, a world of potential still to be realised, does a possibility open beyond the denial of Nolan's picture at the book's beginning,

The narrator, Stephen, does not actually see the painting that brings this freedom - he tells the reader only how he imagines it. He envisages Lang and Gertrude standing in front of her pictures, free now to act in the present. This freedom comes from their recognition that the three of them - British, German and Chinese by origin, brought together in Australia, are among those people for whom "exile is the only tolerable condition" (p.302). Yet their freedom may be illusory, the searchers exhausted by their attempts to find it by escaping from the past, their identity merely a form of death they have brought with them from the old worlds of Europe and Asia. This idea of death is reinforced on the last but one page of the novel, where Lang lets Stephen know that he as once tried to return to Hangzhou, only to find that "none of it was real, and that it was all a dream . . . There was no one there. The place was empty. They can never know I returned" (p.301).

## II

In contrasting a world made by art with the activities of the merchant adventurer who joins in making a new world in Australia, Alex Miller restores one of the possibilities destroyed by colonialism. The cosmic mirror that reveals the truth of past and present has not been destroyed, but remains in the river as a possibility to be rediscovered by a future generation. This is however only one of the possibilities belonging to the diaspora that has spread through Asia and Australia. For those whose original migration was into a life of poverty, from which their children can escape only through education, and thus into a world at once cosmopolitan and deracinated, the need is not to recover the past but to find a way of joining the past and present that remain so urgently alive now. In the opening chapter of K.S. Maniam's In a Far Country, the narrator, Rajan, recalls the deaths of his father, of Mani, the village goat slaughtered for the festival of Deepavali, and of Muniandy, the nearly anonymous tender of the smoke-house.<sup>7</sup> In each case, the indignity of the death is a betrayal of everything the creature has stood for. They reinforce the narrator's need to escape from the village, to find an education and a career, but their memory returns to him at the height of his fortunes to render his own life futile.

The rest of the novel traces his attempts to recover a sense of life that the pressures of life in the village and his attempt to escape from it through education and career had all but denied him. He recalls an earlier experiences of time as "pure sound which interlaced road, tree, flower and sky into an unimpressed and unmarked fluidity" (p.24). His career commits him to the attempt to contain the forces of land and sea within the disciplines of material progress. He works for a developer, cutting down

trees and building bulwarks against the sea. He establishes his own business, buying and selling land without troubling himself about its meaning to the people who work it. But three people intrude on this life, tormenting him with visions of a reality beyond the material. They remind him that, just as his father, leaving his stories behind in India, had been trapped in the dreams of the colonists, so he is trapped in the dream of progress. His father brought no stories to give meaning to the new country, which he came to hate. Rajan has to find these stories from others.

On the plantation, Lee Shin's flute sings with the beauty of an older order, but Rajan joins with the others to destroy this beauty, to reduce Lee to their own measure, and so to bring about his death. Sivasurian, with no family of his own but calling himself after the lord of the sun who gives life without himself changing, brings the vision of life founded on a community of work. This vision, however, is destroyed by the war, which brings violence and division. When the Malay, Zulkifli, takes Rajan to see the tiger, the spirit of the land, he runs away, for he is not ready for the vision. But Zulkifli's son sees it, only to be destroyed by the violence, corruption and oppression of the cities that represent the new world being imposed on the older communities. Rajan in a dream finds the tiger, drawing from it the wisdom to accept, to abandon attempts to impose his will on the country and its people. This resolve is then lost as he again dreams of the death of Mani, which now becomes a symbol of the fate of all who resist authority by trying to be themselves. This dream leads to him returning to the events leading up to Lee Shin's death, and his recognition of his own complicity in them as he tried to reduce Lee to conformity with the ways of the community. Finally, he is forced to



acknowledge that he has done the same thing to his own wife, and on this recognition is able to start rebuilding a true marriage that, in terms of mutual forbearance and respect, offers a model of what the community of a nation state could be. His acceptance of his role in the deaths of Mani the sacrificial goat and Lee Shin the outsider with spiritual vision free him from his entrapment in either the disappointed past of his father or in his own frenetic pursuit of a future of change and destruction.

### III

F. Sionil Jose's Viajero also begins with a death, in this case by fire as the consequence of a botched military raid, and then moves back to the origins of the life that is snuffed out in the opening conflagration.<sup>8</sup> But the story of this life, that of Salvador dela Raza, supposedly transcribed from tapes rescued from the fire, also leads us through a freshly imagined history of the people of his native country, the Philippines. These people are seen from the first as members of a world community, oppressed by successive invaders at home, driven abroad by war and want, but always agents in their own lives and, most importantly, in the imperial project that has denied them recognition as participants.

Salvador, twice orphaned by the Japanese, is brought up as an American by his adopted father, a black American historian. His scholarship gradually absorbs him in the task of recovering the history of the Filipino people, and his accompanying personal development gradually takes him back to the place of his origins and an identification with the people. Behind his personal story

lie "Terrible doubts as to the authenticity of my being" that have cankered his life. His historical search, begun almost as a whim arising from a love affair, leads him to the insistent question of who can be held responsible for the fate of his people, both the smug and the suffering at home and those who have been "dislodged from their homes to make a living, however perilous and demeaning, . . . in alien geographies" (p. 8) His own identity becomes inextricably linked to the fate of his people, and his writing the action that lives beyond the death to which the book inexorably tends.

But, just as the book ends with Salvador's death, the memories that he traces through it begin with other deaths - the vague horror of his father's death in a massacre, the precisely recalled death of his foster-parents that brings to an end the Edenic episode of his childhood. The memory of this time is both the call that eventually leads him home and the promise of a national future. He finds the guarantee of this future in the skills and endurance of his countrymen, from the first man to circumnavigate the globe to the labourers in the modern diaspora and the revolutionaries in the contemporary countryside. He finds it also in the memory of Inay Mayang, the blind foster-mother of his childhood who had inducted him into the healing mysteries of the land that stand firm against the repeated betrayals by its people and their leaders. These memories, both personal and national, construct in the imagination the place for an ideal state based on a common but precisely located humanity that is denied by the exclusions of nationalism based on power. Salvador's enlarges this ideal national community with his own status - American with black parents and Asian origins, scholar in the western intellectual tradition, lover of Californian freedom and food. His death defers its achievement, but his words, spoken after his death, give it a lasting reality.

Salvador dela Raza is both the observer through whose eyes we discover the history of the people of the Philippines, and a metonymic figure of that history. Even his name is given to him by aliens. The black American serviceman who adopts him names him after the place where he has found him, deep in the jungle. His earliest memories are blurred images of his mother and father, and of masses of people and men with guns, and of his father hiding him in a corner "under the awning of a huge building", and of waking alone among the dead. He is found by an old man, Apo Tale, who takes him far off to live safely in the country. These years with Apo Tale and his blind but visionary daughter, Malale, constitute a brief Edenic interval before the war again erupts into them and Japanese soldiers kill Apo and Malale. Although the soldier, Captain James Wack, takes him back to America and brings him up as his own son, his Edenic memories gradually draw Salvador, or Bud as he more usually known, back to the Philippines and to the place where he had most known peace. Here he lives as a hermit and writer, becoming teacher to a revolutionary movement that is, in effect, trying to make over the Philippines in terms of his Edenic memory, where people live in harmony, caring for the land and for each other. His life ends when he is burnt to death by the military in a raid that goes wrong, but his hopes live on in the recordings he leaves of his life and researches. The name Salvador dela Raza, combining the name by which he was known and the place where he was found, links him to both the Philippines and its Spanish legacy. By adoption, citizenship and upbringing he becomes completely American, yet he is drawn back to first to Philippine history and then to the country itself.

His life, alternately ravaged and succoured by invaders, given vision from abroad yet alienated from its own sources, participating in the diaspora yet longing for

home, seeking a universal future but destroyed by the casual violence of the present, parallels the history of his people that he discovers through his research around the world. In the novel, these historical episodes alternate with the stages of Salvador's own travels in search of himself. As an American, Salvador has the money and education to shelter him from any problems arising from his identity as a coloured man, an outsider. For him, America is a welcoming and open society. But as the question of his origins comes to trouble him, and he travels first in history and then in space back to his native country, he finds as a Filipino that his problem is that his countrymen have identity only as the displaced and dispossessed. "Ah, my countrymen", he laments at the beginning of his memoir, "dislodged from the warmth of their homes, to make a living no matter how perilous and demeaning, to strike out in alien geographies and eke from there with their sweat and cunning what they can." (p.8) Although, like them, he has travelled, he explains that "in another sense I have never left the place where I was born", so that in telling his story he is telling theirs. (pp. 7-8) This image of the past brought into the present is both postcolonial and postmodern. By cutting beyond the immediate origins of America, including the institutions of slavery, to the more distant past of the various components of its nation of immigrants, Salvador restores the past that was disrupted by imperialism. Yet in Buddy's mind this is not an actual past so much a simulacrum, a virtual reality of ancestral dreaming to add to the dreams and illusions of affluent America. It does not engage with the realities of power and production, past and present, that have produced this affluence. Wack emphasises the importance of the engagement with a material past when he corrects Buddy's initial enthusiasm: "I am convinced that the Filipinos -- or the inhabitants of those islands -- had contacts with Chinese and other Southeast Asian cultures before the Spaniards

came," Buddy said with conviction. The professor interrupted him. "Buddy, never say you are convinced until you have the document in your hand. Say you are 'of the mind'. In the event that you cannot prove your thesis, then there is always a way out." (p.32)

While Buddy's search for his own identity is a way of placing himself within the shifting boundaries of the present, as Salvador dela Raza his researches are an effort to bring a material continuity to that present. The action of the novel thus challenges the postmodernist concept from which it starts, that neither place nor time has any fixed reality. Buddy's journey to the past becomes a journey to the future, as he travels back to his ancestral home and forward to the hopes of the revolutionary movement that is trying to transform the material circumstances of the people who still live there. The place of his origins is implicated in the contemporary world through the structures of the landlords -- agents of capitalism, the soldiers -- agents of the state, and the revolutionaries -- agents of an ideology of resistance. In his hut, linked as it is to the global electronic network, Salvador finds the intersection of time and space beyond this network that gives him the Archimedean point of purchase on the world it controls. In his isolation he is able to escape from the prison of "the concepts that the white man made" and that James Wack realises continues to hold "all of us who are not white" (p.56). Although the army finally destroys him with his refuge, the legacy of his words remains as a form of empowerment against the concepts of colonialism, even for the Filipino colonel who is responsible for his death. The power of his legacy comes from his success in identifying with his Filipino ancestry without losing the detachment given by his American education. Despite their American citizenship, neither he nor his adopted father and sister are accepted as full members of an American community that will "never be colour-blind" and more than "will other

regions of the earth be freed from the distinctions that people impose because they are different." (p.136) Yet his ideal America, his love for Serena Fong, his other loves across the boundaries of race and religion, and above all the loving care bestowed on him by his successive foster parents, and returned by him on his wayward and troubled sister, Jessica, suggest a potential community that will transcend differences while recognising them.

The question his historical researches constantly raises is why the Filipinos, who he discovers have been citizens of the world for some 1000 years, have failed to produce a community of citizens even at home. The answer in part is the imperialism that has constantly denied recognition to their place at home and abroad. In Jose's imagined, but not imaginary, history, the islander who was first man to circumnavigate the earth, returning home as pilot to Magellan, was a slave whose stories have been lost to Europeans. Similarly, the men who built and manned the galleons that enriched the Spaniards with the fruits of their Pacific crossings, like the members of the diaspora who contributed their labour to the posterity of California, and the heroes of successive struggles against Spaniards and Americans, have been written out even of Filipino history. Finally, the Japanese, who had given people throughout Asia the confidence that they could free themselves from European control, by the brutality of their military occupation betrayed the hopes they had inspired. Yet this is not the whole answer. José identifies the responsibility of the Filipinos for their own fate. Salvador concludes that the church taught a piety that concealed the cruelty of colonialism and the greed that motivated it. "The native peoples . . . submitted themselves to the lash and . . . became infected themselves." Their elite, seeking power within the Spanish dominion rather than freedom from it, adopted the worst qualities

of the colonisers, while the people became "willing victims long after the conquistador was gone, and the legacy of cruelty and intolerance still prevailed." (p.102)

The suffering of the Indios under their own leaders was equivalent to the situation of black Americans under white leaders. Church and state conspired to deny the people their past. This past includes courage, adventure, creativity and collective endeavour, but it also includes cruelty and exploitation. The first of the historical episodes tells of how, a thousand years ago, the ruler of Daya sent a military expedition to recapture his daughter from Chinese traders, only to sacrifice her to his pride, disguised as the greater interest of his kingdom. In later episodes we learn how the navigator who guided Magellan had been sold into slavery by his own people, how the contractors who built the galleons for their Spanish masters whipped and hung their own workers, how the nineteenth century revolutionaries were abandoned by their supporters or destroyed themselves by their own pride, and how guerrillas degenerate into hoodlums, and how, from the end of the second world war until the Marcos regime, the ilustrados, the old ruling class, take power back from the resistance. But, in the concluding episodes of the novel, when Salvador finally returns to the Philippines, he learns how the people betray themselves. The priest, Father Jess, sums up the answer to Salvador's question for him: "There is no mystery at all about how this nation deteriorated, how it has been colonised by its own leaders. But this internal colonisation wouldn't have happened if the Filipinos did not want it, but they permitted it through their ignorance, their incapacity to look at the Filipino elite as their exploiters." (p.199) But, throwing in his lot with the resistance, Salvador also learns that in successive generations the people produce their own leaders to renew the struggle, and how children of the ruling classes continue to join them. By the time he

dies -- possibly of a congenital disease that first struck him in Spain, rather than in the fire lit by the army's flare -- he has recovered the roots of his own identity both by returning to his Edenic mountain and by his again finding love with the revolutionary, Namnana. He has accepted that the history of documents is a lie that says nothing of the lives of "those who have supported all these years the profligacy of the rich" (p.276). He has supported his black sister Jessie through the years of her personal rebellion to safety, and is confident in the vision of the future burning in the bellies of the revolutionaries around him. He has returned to where he came from. Yet this ending is not simply one of hope, and certainly not of reconciliation with the injustice of the world. Salvador has also learned from his research that the people betray themselves, and from his life with the revolutionaries that revolution will never succeed as long as "collaboration with the enemy, with evil, was never recognised and condemned" (p.254). Although the history of the Filipinos, with its potential and its evil, is created in the novel from the imagination and purely in words, these are grounded in experience that goes beyond words. As the guerrilla leader Pepe Samson, like Father Jess a figure from Jose's earlier Rosales quintology, says in response to Salvador's anguished search for identity, "That's a lot of crap, Professor . . . We all know who we are, where we are headed." Questions of history, source and identity are for "those who have all the leisure, who are not concerned with society or people" (p.233) J

José's novel constantly points us beyond its words, beyond its fictional characters and events, to lived experiences of loss and oppression, to their material causes, and to the moral truths they embody. It is the product of long meditation on the twin subjects of Philippines national history and the present plight of the Filipinos.



We can understand this in terms of Jakobson's account of the communicative function of language. The text of his history given to José, and to every other colonial reader, was narrated by western writers using the code that places the imperialist as agent of civilisation and the Filipino as object, mere 'Indio' or 'Chino', heir to an uncouth past who can be redeemed only by assimilating to the west. The narrative places its readers as a part of the civilising force, either, if they are European, by birth, or by assimilation. Reproduced through national education systems and the mass media, the narrative thus imposes on the native peoples the disempowering image of their own inferiority. It corrupts the rulers who have succeeded colonialism by offering them only western images of national or individual success, and influences even those who oppose them by offering western ideologies of power. Viajero reverses this narrative by retelling the history through the words of the Filipino narrators that Salvador discovers through his researches. Crucially, he actually gives us a page of one of these narratives transliterated from its archaic Filipino text. This has somewhat the same effect as Tolkien's invented scripts and languages, which confront the reader with a code he can never decipher. In this case, however, the indecipherable code signifies not a possible world of the imagination, but a world of meaning that belongs to others, a reality we can never know as our own. Within this code, the westerner is signified as the intruder, dependent on the skills of the Asians even as he appropriates them for his own enrichment. The text in turn situates its western reader as outsider, and its Filipino reader as agent, identified with those who have responsibility for his past and therefore potentially an agent who can determine his own future. By reversing the positions of narrator and object, the narrative frees its readers from the power structures of the imperial era. At the same time, it offers its Filipino readers a collective answer the

question insistently posed by the modern world, "Who are you?" As Tom Nairn points out in the context of Scottish nationalism, "the most useful, all-purpose handle here remains one's nation. Nationality is not in the genes, but it is in the structure of the modern world . . ." <sup>9</sup> By remaking the history of the Philippines, Jose remakes the history of modernism to allow a place for Filipino identity.

#### IV

While only the last of these three novels is explicitly nationalist, and two run counter to official and public proclamations of nationalist spirit, they all suggest a way towards a nationalism based on a community of difference. This is contrary to contemporary nationalist ideology, which, as Zygmunt Bauman has argued, implies uniformity, depending on the assertion that it alone is identified with truth and goodness. Its construction destroys all alternative sources of identity, including local communities and communities of strangers within the gates. <sup>10</sup>

Yet there are other ways of looking at the nation. Salleh Ben Joned, by no means a nationalist, cites Lin Yutang's definition of patriotism as "love for the good things one ate in one's youth." <sup>11</sup> He also prefaces the book in which this remark appears with an epigraph from Alexander Pushkin, "Of course I despise my country from head to foot, but it makes me furious when a foreigner shares my feeling." But Joned also writes against attempts within his country to impose any single identity, and single language or memory, on either himself as a

writer or on his contemporaries. In the same essay he writes that he is "incorrigibly Malay" and "terribly proud" of the "cultural heritage" of his race, the good things of his childhood that, "literally and metaphorically" inform his writing and furnish its energy.

But he also asserts that he cannot be exclusively Malay.

"I am a human being as much as I am a Malay Malaysian: Malaysia is my country and so is the world."

This dual assertion of identity, both immediate and universal, suggests the third way of looking at nationalism that John Salter identifies in the most recent issue of Antipodes.<sup>12</sup> Salter argues that nationalism, which he considers in terms of national literatures, is merely the other side of an internationalism that is the sum of all national cultures, each seeking to earn its separate place in the global pantheon. Drawing on Wittgenstein's metaphors, Salter instead considers a national literature as a family of resemblances, a rope that joins the many in one without requiring any single connecting thread. I would argue that, in the separate literatures of Australia and Southeast Asia, there is not yet, or perhaps ever, a single rope, there is at least a family of resemblances, not among developing literatures, but among the different understandings of nation developing in separate literatures. This emerging family has in common a tension between difference and identity that does not trouble older or larger nations.

In The Rose Crossing, Nicholas Jose takes characters displaced by the overthrow of the old order of government and has them thrown together on a remote island somewhere in the Indian Ocean.<sup>13</sup> His Englishman, Edward Popple, has witnessed the beheading of Charles I and then been himself literally displaced by the death of his patron. In seeking to repair her fortunes, his wife gives herself to a wealthy

royalist and amateur scientist, who in turn finds Popple a place on a mysterious excursion to the south seas in search of both curiosities for the scientists and validity for their exiled monarch. Popple is joined by his daughter, who smuggles herself on board in a trunk and assumes the disguise of a boy. The two are then twice further displaced: first by a mutiny that puts them in the power of the ambitious seaman Solomon Truro, who aspires to being sovereign of his own realm, and then by being marooned on the island when Truro sails off to seek supplies to support his kingdom.

While Truro returns to the island only as a corpse washed up by the ocean, Popple and his daughter are joined on the island by a Chinese vessel carrying the heir to the Ming throne, who has been displaced by the Ch'ing dynasty of the Manchu invaders. Both parties enact on the island their own fantasies of recovering their lost kingdoms. Popple plants his roses and emulates Crusoe in attempting to establish a self-sufficient kingdom of two. The leader of the Chinese, the Lord Lou Lu, eunuch commissioner of the Ming, plots an alliance with Rome to restore the fallen dynasty, and cultivates Popple's friendship to win from him the knowledge of navigation that will enable him to complete his voyage to Europe.

Both Popple and Lu are expressions of an imperialism based on knowledge. Popple is compelled by necessity to submit to the brutal overlordship of Truro, but exacts as his price the freedom to pursue knowledge, to catalogue the island that he considers a manageable laboratory -- a paradise." His ambitions are wider than Crusoe's, who merely managed his island as a place of temporary exile. Popple sees his rather as a new world where nature will be subjected to knowledge: "Were this island all that remained of the world, this world's centre, we should be the bearers of humanity, the sole envoys of our Christianity." (p.116) His Christianity is however one

of reason rather than faith, an Adam-like delight in the God of knowledge rather than a worship of a God of salvation.

Popple was intrigued by the namelessness of things. For most of the specimens he identified, there was no name. He devised names, using English and Latin, on the basis of a resemblance, reasoned or fancied, between the new discovery and an instance already known to him. In that way he mapped the fauna and flora of the island to the catalogued nature of the civilised world, by threads of affinity perceptible to his mind. (p.126)

The act of naming gives him possession of this new world, but it also joins it to a particular culture, changing it from exotic to familiar. His act of making it his own demonstrates that Popple belongs elsewhere. For Lord Lu, everywhere is potentially home because the presence of his Prince, Taizao, makes it a part of the empire he serves. Yet, like Popple's, this realm is based on knowledge, in this case a knowledge that perceives things in their distinctive being rather than one that affiliates them to a systematic order. "Where the rarest things are found, the freaks of nature, the chance creations of the gods, there shall be the unique being, the one who can appreciate them, who comes once in time, standing apart from the far-stretching ranks of humanity, to see and know the precious wonder that the world has produced. That being has the mandate of Heaven . . ." (p.142) In this view, knowledge is not used to dominate. Rather, the world gives itself to the one who sees its truth. Yet while the action of the novel brings into conflict these two perceptions of truth, its conclusion suggests that finally the world belongs to those who have money and the power it can buy. Edward Popple's attempt to improve on nature by crossing the roses to produce perfection ends in desolation. His daughter, symbol of his hopes, is sold into

concubinage after the furtive assassination of her husband, last of the Ming, putative emperor, and vehicle of Lu's hopes. But the memory of the roses and the garden, and of Lu's extravagant vision of using the west to redress the ills of the east, remain.

Nicholas Jose's novel can be read as an attempt to transcend the conceptual divisions identified by Edward Said in Orientalism. In one sense, Lu and Popple represent the ultimate stereotypes of traditional oriental and scientific rationalist occidental. Even the marriage of the Prince and the daughter can be seen as an attempt to bring western vitality to restore an effete oriental civilisation. These images are however undermined by the ironic circumstances. The two protagonists are both marooned representatives of regimes that the reader knows have no future. But their interaction offers the possibility of the two cultures learning from each other on a basis of reciprocity directed towards the future. Popple's attempt to produce the perfect rose brings science to the aid of beauty. Lu's scheme of appealing to the Pope would similarly use western power in support of an eastern ideal. These possibilities of an alternative future are defeated but not destroyed. The aspirations to knowledge and vision remain as much a part of the eternal cycle as do revolution, power and betrayal.

In each of these novels, the chief characters embark on a search for home, either in the past or in the future, and in each case their quest ends in death. Yet through these deaths they free themselves from both past and future and find a home that provides promise of a future for others. In this promise they give us a hope of future nations that will be defined by difference, not identity. To paraphrase Derek Walcott, their hope is that they may learn to escape the tyranny of separate histories by sharing them in the common love of a place and the languages it speaks.<sup>14</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism, revised edition, Verso, London/New York, 1991, p.204.
- <sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism Since 1780, second edition, CUP, Cambridge, 1992, p.12.
- <sup>3</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Civil War, trans. Piers Spence and Martin Chambers, Granta/Penguin, 1994, p. 17.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- <sup>5</sup> Gabriel Lafitte, 'Ok Tedi, BHP and the PNG elite', Arena Magazine, 19, 1995, 18-19.
- <sup>6</sup> Alex Miller, The Ancestor Game, Penguin, Ringwood, Australia, 1992.
- Nicholas Jose, The Rose Crossing, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1994.
- <sup>7</sup> K.S.Maniam, In a Far Country, , Skoob Books, London, 1993.
- <sup>8</sup> F. Sionil Jose, Viajero, Solidaridad, Manila, 1993.
- <sup>9</sup> Tom Nairn, 'Upper and Lower Cases', London Review of Books, 24 Aug 95, p.17
- <sup>10</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, 'Modernity and Ambivalence', in Mike Featherstone (ed.), Global Culture: nationalism, globalization and modernity: theory, culture & society special issue, SAGE London, 1990, pp.143-69. F. Sionil Jose, Viajero, Solidaridad, Manila, 1993.
- <sup>11</sup> Salleh Ben Joned, As I Please: selected writings 1975-1994, Skoob Books, London, 1994, p.49.
- <sup>12</sup> John Salter, 'What Makes Australian Literature Australian?', Antipodes 9:1, 1995, pp. 15-22. Salleh Ben Joned, As I Please: selected writings 1975-1994, Skoob Books. London, 1994, p.49.
- <sup>13</sup> Nicholas Jose, The Rose Crossing, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1994.
- <sup>14</sup> Derek Walcott, The Antilles: fragments of epic memory, the Nobel Lecture, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1992