Research Note

It's More Fun in the Philippines: Positive Affects and the Post-Colonial Condition

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Abstract. This research note outlines ideas and maps out the critical context of the author's current research project entitled "It's More Fun in the Philippines: Positive Affects and the Post-Colonial Condition." It also engages with recent literature from the expanding field of critical happiness studies. This project, envisioned to be a book-length study, explores the enabling as well as the obstructive capacities of so-called positive affects in imagining and realising an affirmative and sustainable cultural and socio-political practice within conditions of postcoloniality. In the process, it bridges several disciplines – in particular, Postcolonial Studies, Affect Theory, Critical/Cultural Theory and Gender Studies – and also aims to analyse a variegated body of philosophy, literature and cinema.

Keywords and phrases: *Affect Theory, post-colonial, happiness, Philippines*

Introduction

"It's More Fun in the Philippines: Positive Affects and the Post-Colonial Condition" explores the multiple capacities of positive affects to energise postcolonial cultural inquiry. It will argue that a critical engagement with positive affects is essential in formulating a form of enduring optimistic critique that eschews a myopic focus on futurity in favour of the histories of the present. In the process, this project bridges several disciplines – in particular, Postcolonial Studies, Affect Theory, Critical/Cultural Theory and Gender Studies – as it situates its investigation in the specific history of Philippine colonialism while being simultaneously attentive to those moments when 'structures of feeling', could be shared by, and thus also be meaningful to, other colonial experiences. While most work located in the

intersection of Postcolonial Studies and Affect Theory have focused on negative affects (such as shame, melancholia, guilt and pessimism), this project asks how one might imagine happiness, love and optimism as potential resources for critique? However, resisting the often decontextualised deployments of both Postcolonial and Affect Theory, this project grounds that question within the history of the Philippine colonial experience and further asks: How might definitions of positive affects shift, depending upon the geopolitical contexts of its conceptualisation? How might the Philippines' longer *durée* of multiple colonialisms demand a reconfiguration of optimism, love and happiness – as the very condition of possibility – for resistance, resilience and anticolonial practice? My project thus takes on the challenge posed by Snediker (2009), Ahmed (2010) and Hardt and Negri (2009) to reevaluate and reconceptualise optimism, happiness and love respectively, but within the context of the postcolonial condition.

Critical Context

This project aims to be a positive intervention – and optimistically so – to Postcolonial Theory, which has been suffering from a steadily declining loss of faith in the last two decades. The prediction of Leela Gandhi in 1998 of the impending arrival of a 'pervasive postcolonial exhaustion' seems to have already come true. The reasons for the exhaustion seem to stem from, among other reasons, accusations that Postcolonial Theory has exclusively depended on a centre/margin model of power relations whereas contemporary global formations has "no territorial centre of power … a decentered and deterritorialising apparatus of rule" (Hardt and Negri 2001, xii). Postcolonial Theory has also been said to suffer from a devitalising 'fetishization of difference', which according to Neil Lazarus has resulted in understanding various postcolonial identities exclusively under the category of the Spivakian subaltern. This troubling homogenisation has supposedly muted the urgency of formulating an affirmative politics in its preoccupation with abstract issues of representation.

I mention the supposed fall from grace of Postcolonial Theory to emphasise that its recent coupling with Affect Theory is born out of necessity rather than mere novelty. Recent postcolonial scholarship that has engaged Affect Theory has been able to regenerate interest in the field because its proliferative corpus was able to foreground issues of trauma, shame, melancholia and reparation, which are constitutive of the lives of the wretched of the earth. As Ann Cvetkovich has noted, the focus on affect has enabled a discourse on emotional injury that emerges out of the lived experience of the formerly colonised from within specific histories of colonisation rather than from generically formulated theories. It is thus a union that has been enabling, contributing substantially in the construction of a historically specific archive of feelings.

But while the coupling of Postcolonial Studies and Affect Theory continues to enhance the lexicon of suffering of the formerly colonised, it does so at the exclusion of the other affects, the positive affects. Recent work situated in that intersection has been, for the most part, preoccupied with negative affects: shame (Ahmed 2004; Barnard 2012; Kabesh 2016), melancholia (Gilroy 2004), guilt (Maddison 2012), fear (Kabesh 2016) and pessimism (Da Costa 2016). This pessimistic orientation justifiably emphasises the shamefully injurious legacy of colonialism that continues to structure the historical experience and vision of possible futures of the formerly colonised. However, one suspects that what Michael Snediker has observed in the affective turn of Queer Theory also applies to Postcolonial Studies: that optimism (and we may perhaps also include happiness and love) remains suspect, considered perpetually tethered to notions of cruelty, frustration and unrealisable – if not altogether empty – promises. Further, there is also the problem that attention to optimism, joy, happiness and love might risk sanitising the historical wounds inflicted by the history and legacy of colonialism, which have to be emphatically rendered in all its abject injustice.

Thus, the project attempts to formulate a theoretical grammar that will enable a thorough inquiry on happiness, a concept that has for the most part, achieved global consensus as being the penultimate object of human desire and thus immune to critique. I align my work with those of Ahmed (2010), Burnett (2012) and Davies (2015), which are key contributions to critical approaches to the topic. Although it might seem almost cruel – if not perverse – to be critical of happiness, the recent critical literature on the topic argues that the movement towards happiness often cloaks an insidious agenda by normalising inequalities, concealing privilege, and organising and orienting (collective) desires toward certain standardised directions at the expense of other possible futures. While the work of Ahmed (2010) has tended to focus on happiness in relation to gender and race, and Davies (2015) on its relation to labour, my intervention examines the implications of making happiness part of the identity of a nation and its people. More specifically, my study follows the spirit of this broader critique to examine why the Philippines has recently in the last four years started to fashion itself as a characteristically happy country, populated by happy people. Indeed, it is an identity endorsed by the state with the official slogan "It's More Fun in the Philippines" and further reinforced by numerous global rankings where the Philippines curiously places among the happiest countries in the world. This claim to happiness curiously persists despite the unhappy conditions of enduring political, economic and social inequalities and various oppressions that plague the nation.

The central claim of this project is that the strategic self-fashioning of the Philippines as a happy space, populated by happy people is a way for it to claim a unique

space within globalisation. Interestingly enough, the claim of the Philippines to happiness occurs at the moment when many countries in the West have started to define themselves as depressive societies. Indeed in an article from *The Guardian* (14 October 2014), George Monbiot suggests that our age is the "age of loneliness" (it is perhaps safe to assume that Monbiot was aiming his diagnosis at the Anglo-American world). And as the West suffers from pervasive social maladies of depression and loneliness, the Philippines, in contrast, insists that life is more fun in their islands. This study suggests that there are insidious connections between Western self-definitions of being a depressive society and the Philippines's claim to being a characteristically happy space. In a world that is arguably being slowly homogenised by globalising processes, I suggest that in contrast to the so-called 'depressive societies of the West', the Philippines attempts to mark a unique space within a globalised world, by strategically defining itself as a happy space. It is a new mode of self-exoticising in a time when the marketing of cultural difference as exotic is slowly becoming incompatible with the new ethic of multiculturalism gaining momentum in the West.

As currently envisioned, this project will be composed of four chapters, which are tentatively titled: (1) "Optimistic Critique: On the (Im)Possibilities of Love and Happiness", (2) "It's More Fun in the Philippines: On the Cultural Politics of Happiness", (3) "(Mis)Education of Desire: Optimism and the Colonial Classroom" and (4) "An Affair to Dismember: Shifting Discourses of Love in Recent Philippine Mistress Films". While the chapters are thematically linked, each offers an argument that stands independent of the others. I elaborate on the possible content of those chapters below.

Critical Happiness Studies

Dominant approaches to the study of happiness have tended to be oriented towards finding ways to maximise happiness. For instance, the 'new science' of positive psychology positions itself against so-called 'deficit' models of psychology (which focused on depression, defined as 'learned helplessness') and instead focuses on those attributes in a person (learned optimism) that lead to 'authentic happiness' (Seligman 2002). Then there is also happiness economics, which has attempted to manufacture models by which to empirically measure happiness (or its absence) towards the goal of influencing economic theory and policy (Bruno and Stutzer 2002). I suspect that the unreflective knowledge-production on happiness maximisation is made possible by the almost global consensus that happiness is the penultimate human desire. For the most part, happiness has enjoyed exemption from being the object of critical inquiry because of the unfounded idea that to critique happiness is to withhold its pleasures from those who rightfully deserve

it. While there seems to be no obvious reason to oppose the desire to maximise happiness – indeed, it might even sound perversely close to wanting to withhold happiness from people – what my study is particularly skeptical about is the idea that something as abstract as happiness can be rendered quantifiable. It seems that the maximisation of happiness also entails quantification, which allows for a measurable basis by which maximisation could be judged as a success or a failure. There are legitimate philosophical issues that have to be addressed when measuring something so profoundly abstract as happiness. Adorno (2005) and recently Badiou and Davidson (2016a, 2016b) – philosophers who are openly hostile to the rationalisation of emotions – insist that there is a radically subjective element in happiness that cannot be reproduced by institutions, economies and pharmaceutical industries. My own position does not completely discount the value of those dominant approaches to the study of happiness, but I do hope to emphasise that exclusive attention to the maximisation of wellbeing obscures other possibilities of happiness that might productively expand notions of what it means to live a good life.

I align my work with the recent work of Ahmed (2010), Burnett (2012) and Davies (2011, 2015), all of which are key contributions to the expanding field of critical happiness studies. Although we might think of happiness as a particular orientation of thought, readily accessible to those willing to reorient their perspective or worldview, Ahmed (2010) explores specific places where happiness is most likely to reside. She identifies the good life as being constituted by the conservative elements of marriage, family and heterosexual intimacy. The selectivity of happiness institutes a form of 'othering', whereby individuals and groups who pursue happiness in unconventional ways and patterns are identified either as deviant or unhappy by virtue of failing to subscribe to normative conditions of pursuing and maintaining acceptable forms of wellbeing. In her study, Ahmed identifies those so-called deviants as "feminist killjoys", "unhappy queers", and "melancholic migrants" (2010). Furthermore, she points out how when those groups resist hegemonic constructions of happiness, they are often portrayed as opposing happiness itself as they struggle against their own unhappiness.

Burnett (2012) pays attention to the historical moments that contributed to the development of the hegemonic discourse on happiness. He suggests that the "societal strive toward happiness did not occur in grand sweeping strokes, usurping the prominent hegemonies of before", but, rather, the shift in the discourse is rhizomatic, as it developed "from a near inexhaustible catalog of causes" (p. 46). Burnett begins by examining how happiness from being a philosophical question transformed into a political issue in the 19th century. At that point, the dominant narrative on the language of happiness was primarily informed by Utilitarianism,

whose theory could be summarised in the following: "the greatest happiness for the greatest possible number" (Mill 1980 in Burnett 2012, 61). He then moves on to examine the corporate assimilation of happiness in the 20th century. Happiness, in this context, is correlated with that of productivity, forming a "happy-is-productive" axiom and making it "a tenable, worthy and moral pursuit", precipitated by knowledge producers hired by corporations (Burnett 2012, 105). Burnett also examines the rise of positive psychology and how happiness has become an object of scientific inquiry. For Burnett, these knowledge-formations that brought about the 'happiness agenda' has established and rationalised itself as the hegemonic discourse in the current capitalist order.

Davies (2015) suggests that the current historical situation has created a new challenge that capitalism has to surmount: depressed, apathetic, chronically sick and therefore unproductive workers. This new resistance to capitalism has forced corporations to find solutions to this problem mainly by regulating the political economy of unhappiness by ensuring an individual's partial fulfillment in work and consumption. Seeing unhappiness as a negative externality of contemporary capitalism, knowledge production and policy agenda has submitted itself to quantify and measure happiness within the context that is subjected to the 'indicators' purported by the standards adhering to its interests.

Despite the differences in their approach and focus, the aforementioned studies share a suspicion regarding the collusion between capitalism and the dominant discursive formation of happiness. The so-called "happiness industry" (Burnett, 2012) mirrors the oppressive structure of capitalism itself, purporting to be for the good of all when really only benefiting the interests of a few. I share the pessimism of the aforementioned critical approaches and suggest that rather than an authentic expression of self-identity, the claim to happiness of the Philippines is another dimension of the insidious connivance between happiness and capitalism. Indeed, then Philippine Department of Tourism Secretary Ramon Jimenez, the person behind the "It's More Fun in the Philippines" campaign made very easy connections with the demand for the exotic in the tourism industry and the claim to happiness of the Philippines. Jimenez says:

> *Nu'ng nilabas* nila (Malaysia) *ang* "Malaysia Truly Asia", it was after they analyzed *na ang mga taong gustong pumunta ng Asya naghahanap ng* exotic. We need a line that is easily understood. Competitive. More fun in the Philippines is true. *Kering keri natin ang* campaign *na 'to* … Believe in the beauty of your country. Sell it at every turn. Sell it on Facebook, on Twitter, on Multiply. Talk about your country because we deserve a visit from the world. (GMA News and Public Affairs 2011)

> When Malaysia released "Malaysia Truly Asia" it was after they analyzed that tourists come to Asia in search of the exotic. We need a line that is easily understood. Competitive. More fun in the Philippines is true. This campaign is very doable … Believe in the beauty of your country. Sell it at every turn. Sell it on Facebook, on Twitter, on Multiply. Talk about your country because we deserve a visit from the world. (GMA News and Public Affairs 2011; author's translation)

What is significant about the campaign as envisioned by Jimenez is that despite the manifest intention to self-exoticise it is framed within the discourse of happiness, a supposedly democratic rather than privileged form of desire.

Ahmed (2010) offers an important intervention: The meaning of happiness has been confined to what constitutes 'good life'. The good life constitutes the conservative elements of marriage, family and heterosexual intimacy. However, according to Ahmed: "The happy object circulates even in the absence of happiness by filling a certain gap; we anticipate that the happy object will cause happiness, such that it becomes a prop that sustains the fantasy that happiness is what would follow if only we could have it" (2010, 43). This creates a form of 'othering' through which individuals or groups which subscribes to unconventional patterns of acquiring happiness are identified as deviant or considered generally as 'unhappy' or associated with unhappiness as they failed to fulfill the normative conditions for maintaining the acceptable form of wellbeing. These deviants were the feminist killjoys, unhappy queers and melancholic migrants. Furthermore, happiness masked the oppression of marginalised sectors and rationalised social norms as social goods therefore identifying groups that observed resistance and activism as unhappy as they struggled against happiness itself.

The language of killjoy as described in Ahmed's book, must be distinguished from the conceptualisation that would be developed in the research. The context used by Ahmed is specifically grounded on identity politics, particularly that of feminism, which redefined feminine 'happiness' from the constrained rationalisation of the Enlightenment period to a politics of women's emancipation. Similarly, however, the 'killjoy' is defined as a pushback or as how Ahmed put it, a "troublemaker". Feminist literature mentioned in the book locates the female subject as a nonconformist, an imaginative and curious persona which scrambles to find her own happiness, as opposed to the chauvinist idea which contains the subject within a male-controlled and determined environment. The troublemaker and the killjoy, in this context, emancipates herself by "not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising" (Ahmed 2010).

Discussion of Proposed Chapters

The first chapter entitled "Optimistic Critique: On the (Im)Possibilities of Love and Happiness" develops a theoretical grammar that enables a form of critical engagement that takes positive affects seriously. This chapter asks: how might critique be reimagined so that it consolidates and mobilises rather than fractures and divides? And, insofar as dialectical movement of critique is often driven by optimism, how might optimism be refunctioned as necessarily reflexive? Optimistic critique, as I develop it, is born out of and animated by a purposive postcolonial sensibility. That is to say, an orientation that "compels a search for transformative strategies that bridge dissident voices with Others as well as within the self" (Agathangelou and Ling 1997, 29) and also challenges "efforts of self-discipline arising in counter-cultural contexts, supporting instead … a multiplication of occasions for enjoyment, adventure, and experimentation" (1997, 32). Optimistic critique then, to use Sedgwick's helpful categories conscripted from Object-Relations Theory, is reparative rather than paranoiac, always anticipating fortuitous moments of establishing "new assemblages and new forms of the common" (Hardt and Negri 2009, 186). Following Sedgwick (2002) and Snediker (2009), I utilise the theoretical resources of object-relations theory to elaborate on the enabling potential of positive affects. However, instead of drawing from a primarily Kleinian and Winnicottian corpus, I turn to Wilfred Bion (1961; 1977) whose work on group dynamics will be instructive in theorising impediments within collective movements. I further supplement my analysis with Clare Hemmings's (2012) concept of "affective solidarity" and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's work on love to explore how singularities may consolidate despite plurality in identitarian affiliations.

The second chapter entitled "It's More Fun in the Philippines: On the Cultural Politics of Happiness" explores the consequences of making certain affects and emotions constitutive of national identity. Within the last decade, the Philippine has started to fashion itself as a happy nation populated by happy people, which achieved state recognition with the official slogan "It's More Fun in the Philippines". Interestingly enough, the claim of the Philippines to happiness occurs at the moment when many countries in the West have started to define themselves as depressive societies. This chapter will suggest that there are connections between the rise of Western depressive societies and the Philippines's claim to being a characteristically happy space. In a world that is arguably being slowly homogenised by globalising processes, I suggest that in contrast to the so-called depressive societies of the West, the Philippines attempts to mark a unique space within a globalised world, by strategically defining itself as a happy space. It is a new mode of self-exoticising in a time when the marketing of cultural difference as

exotic is slowly becoming incompatible with the ethic of multiculturalism gaining momentum in the West. The central claim of this chapter is that the strategic self-fashioning of the Philippines as a happy space, populated by happy people is a way for it to claim a unique space within globalisation. Toward that goal, I will analyse the meme campaign of the Philippine Department of Tourism that encouraged primarily middle-class Filipinos to produce what I suggest are self-orientalising images cloaked in the more universally accepted lexicon of happiness.

The third chapter entitled "(Mis)Education of Desire: Optimism and the Colonial Classroom", examines the trope of colonial tutelage to suggest that it is also an encounter structured around conflicting and competing models of optimism. Bhabha's (1994) formulation of colonial tutelage as a process of inevitable failure – as colonial discourse sets up an impossible model of imitation that undermines its own authorial legitimacy by producing unintentional hybrids – is premised on the assumption of felicitous attempts at colonial imitation. I explore the limitations of this model of colonial tutelage as well as the model of agency it suggests – where agency is located in slippages and (mis)translations. I intend to analyze the novels of Jose Rizal (*El Filibusterismo)* and Pramoedya Toer's (*Footsteps* from the *Buru Quartet*), paying particular attention to the scenes in the colonial classroom, to suggest that the colonial classroom is a site of negotiation of multiple optimisms that are variously inflected by local issues of class, ethnicity, and gender but often erased by both the cruel optimisms (Berlant 2011) of colonial and nationalist discourse.

The fourth chapter, "An Affair to Dismember: Shifting Discourses of Love in Recent Philippine Mistress Films" will attempt to explain the curios reemergence of *querida* (mistress) films in the last five years. Whereas mistress films of previous decades were narratives with a conservative agenda that promoted the sanctity of the nuclear family, the new batch, I argue, tends to be structured by discourses of happiness. In those films, the integrity of the nuclear family is no longer an absolute good, but one that has to be weighed against issues of personal happiness and fulfillment. I situate these narratives within the broader effort of the Philippine state to define itself as a happy space within globalisation to suggest that these films offer a challenge to state endorsed definitions of happiness that is centered on responsibilities to the nation, family and religion (unofficially the Catholic church, which continues to hold significant political influence in the Philippines). This chapter proposes to examine five films in particular: *No Other Woman* (2011), *My Neighbor's Wife* (2011), *A Secret Affair* (2012), *The Mistress* (2012) and *The Bride and the Lover* (2013).

Acknowledgement

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