

Politics Inside-Out

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Picart C. J. S. (2004). *Inside notes from the outside* (Lanham, MD: Lanham/Boulder/New York/Toronto/Oxford: Lexington Books. 116 pages. \$60.00 (hardcover).

If, as Homi Bhabha asserts, colonial discourse depends upon “the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness,” it would seem that Kay Picart’s new book, *Inside Notes from the Outside*, provides a refreshing antidote (Bhabha, 1994, p. 66). A richly woven and stirring expressive account, Picart draws upon short stories, diary entries, childhood memories, family letters, a pen and ink sketch, poetry, and interviews to perform the very hybridity that she advocates. Picart charts her category-defying journey through the “politico-cultural chiaroscuro of inside-outsideness” that she lives as a “Filipino” woman, (with a name that “reveals the guilt of. . . lack of racial purity”), trained as a scientist, philosopher, dancer, and artist, in the Philippines, the US, and England (p. 19).

One of four children, Picart was born into a middle class family in the deeply economically stratified Philippines of the late 1960s and, although they never went without clothes or beds, not only was the purchase of a car or house beyond their means, “the threat of hunger was never far away” (p. 20). A “practicing Catholic” who, as a child, derived great solace from the biblical bedtime stories her mother “wove, like the blanket of dreams she would wrap around me,” Picart as an adult came to struggle with the religions’ naturalization of “gender hierarchies”(pp. 93, 15). Picart’s is a journey that cuts not only through time, space, and narrative structure, but also through the generic expectations of autobiography and critical theory.

A provocative contribution to the growing scholarship in autoethnography, Picart’s “risk-filled experiment” animates key debates within communication studies regarding complex infusions of power into the imbricated discourses of race, ethnicity, gender, and class (p. 3). Her book occupies the liminal space of what she calls “the ‘insider-outsider’ position,” which draws upon Bhabha’s notion of the “Third Space.” Picart thus attempts to free notions of “insider” and “outsider” from the tyrannical dichotomy that masks the ways in which power can never be either

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permanently secured or wholly unattainable. Power, Picart demonstrates, follows a Foucaultian trajectory in its productive diffusion into the microphysics of everyday life. Through its discursive force, hybridity, for Picart, functions as a potentially political “stance” against this power. In particular, the “insider-outsider” position of hybridity, the “Third Space” for Bhabha, emerges in “disjuncture between the subject of a proposition (enounce) and the subject of enunciation [the place of utterance]” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 36). Picart seizes the “temporal dimension” of this “unrepresentable” position by destabilizing “the logics of synchronicity and evolution which traditionally authorize the subject of cultural knowledge” (p. 36). Inspired by the earlier border-crossing accounts of Gloria Andzaldúa, María Lugones, Cherrie Moraga, and Trinh Minh-ha, Picart takes us to a place where borders are suspended in perpetual fluctuation.

Among the central concerns in Picart’s book is the difficulty of performing/theorizing identity that avoids the temptation both to overcome difference (as “melting pot” views advocate) and to reify difference (as identity politics has often necessitated). Picart avoids both of these enticements, indicting them for failing to honor the “ambivalence” which undercuts without dissolving any claims to identity, thus successfully meeting the challenge of evoking the indelible psychic, social, and material imprints of identity formations while displacing the ideological and fantasmatic structures upon which these very categories are built.

The role of ambivalence in neo-colonial discourse is perhaps most vividly depicted by Picart’s pen and ink sketch, *Nurturance?*, which draws upon the resonant Filipino mythological image of *Ina*, “the immortal image of Mother as eternal fount of life” (p. 6). Picart’s rendition positions *Ina* with a wild boar resting upon her right thigh, suckling her right breast, and a child perched on her left leg, with its chin resting upon her left shoulder, facing away from the viewer. The ambivalence of the image reverberates within the contemporary context of “the neo-colonial condition of the Philippines as a Third World country... a colonialism that continues to exist, not because of an overt military conquest, but because of a thoroughgoing colonializing mentality” (p. 8). For Picart, *Nurturance?*

captures the power and beauty of that dangerous, nostalgic longing for the archetypal, ancestral home: a vision that often hardens into a political desire for absolute enclosure within a constructed notion of racial purity, and of clear, dividing lines between what is within (Same) as opposed to what is without (Other). (pp. 8)

By keenly illuminating, rather than covering over, the ambivalence underpinning the colonial fantasy, Picart meets Bhabha’s challenge to “disclos[e] the ambivalence of colonial discourse [in order to] also disrupt its authority” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 88).

Picart interlaces incisive cultural critique within a sensual tapestry of reminiscences according to the logic of the postmodern. Her narrative uproots any reliance upon categories of truth and fiction. Picart acknowledges that “the places, events, and people are grounded in concrete experience, but envisaged as part of a past that is reconstructed using the tools of narrativizing” (p. 41). The vibrance of her descriptions of smells, tastes, sensations, and particularly sounds (“her [Picart’s mother] voice

reminded me of the wind that nightly murmured through the leaves of the narra tree that towered above the house we occupied”) gives rich flesh to the often stark realities her book invites readers to contemplate (p. 16). The images conjured by Picart’s descriptions often inflect her theoretical insights in fresh ways. Her key concept of the liminal space of the “insider-outsider,” as “not two separate layers that coexist in simple opposition, but a[s] intimately imbricated with each other in complex ways,” for example, takes on new dimensions when considered alongside her recurring imagery of “two palms facing”(pp. 11, 59). She describes this gesture during two significant geographical and psychic moves: first, when, as a child, she was told that her family was leaving their small town for hope of better opportunities in Manila, and she lay her hand upon her mother’s palm; later, as an adult, when leaving South Korea where she taught English for a PhD program at Pennsylvania State University, she revisits the visceral experience of moving, the “ordering of things. . . the harnessing of space. . . the point at which order and disarray, like the impersonal and the intimate, the fleeting and the eternal, lie upon each other, like two palms facing, their fingers intertwined” (pp. 58–59).

Picart’s “risk-filled experiment” ultimately succeeds but, indeed, carries high stakes. Perhaps her riskiest venture consists of her insistence that “everyone lives the insider-outsider perspective” (p. 11). While this insight is crucial to undermining the authority that lends certain identity claims cultural dominance, it runs the risk of subsuming the particular ways in which identities can be differently lived and valued (which Picart so acutely elaborates) under an abstracted notion of universal liminality. Rather than do away with any notion of “center versus margins,” as Picart advocates on the grounds that it is “a vestige of patriarchal dualism,” it might be useful to retain such categories, however provisionally, in order to preserve the potential political power that speaking from the outside can yield. Picart’s project profoundly demonstrates the ways in which particular identity formations are differently inflected (she notes, specifically, her recognition as a graduate student at Cambridge that “amidst the polyphony of accents and languages, not every accent or nationality was equally valued” and that, in the eyes of the departmental secretary, being a woman with a “lovely olive complexion,” meant that she was regarded differently to “those damned foreigners’ taking jobs away from the Brits” [34]). In this sense, a Derridean concept of a center not as a “fixed locus, but as a function,” might be useful in preventing the subsumption of difference into the overarching field of discourse (Derrida, 1978, p. 280). If for no other reason, a case for the conditional maintenance of the categories of “inside” and “outside,” or “center and “margin,” emerges not only from the need to make enunciations of diversity more prominent, but also from the vital importance of making culturally dominant identities more palpable, in order to remove the invisibility that undergirds their dominance.

References

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