

Chinese were tracked into the laundry business because it was a service industry that the bachelor Anglo-American communities did not want as it was deemed lowly “women’s work.” On the other hand, Siu concludes that the Chinese isolation in the U.S. was due to the “sojourner” mentality, which was “deviant.” As sojourners, the Chinese did not try to “seek status in the society of dominant group” and instead, the process of socialization was “contact, conflict, accommodation, and isolation.” Siu goes further to suggest that the Chinese were “non-assimilable” and thus formed their own “racial colony” in Chinatown. Are the Chinese immigrants non-assimilable or victims of racial prejudice, or both?

The dissertation describes the reality that Siu witnessed as a participant observer but concludes in a framework that accommodated to Robert Parks’s theories of cultural assimilation: contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. Still in 1953, this academic compromise did not make this research acceptable enough for scholarly recognition. A study of Chinese laundrymen by a Chinese American scholar was deemed superfluous to the serious work in “American” sociology.

But Siu’s research survives the odds. His consistent attention to descriptive details in this study is invaluable in helping 1980s scholars understand the daily drudgery of Chinese American laundrymen. Siu systematically recorded a way of life that few others bothered to appreciate in that era. Siu’s *The Chinese Laundryman* is yet another testimony that the ethnic experience could not be completely suppressed despite the racist attempts by both general society and academia.

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**Michelle Maria Cruz Skinner.** *Balibbayan/A Filipino Homecoming.* (Honolulu: Bess Press, 1988) 76 pp., \$6.95 paper.

Homecoming is that eternal and unrealizable dream for expatriated Filipinos, from the migrant workers of the 1930s to the skilled and professional immigrants of the last two decades. Sheer economic hardship or cultural estrangement after relocation consign them to limbo and leave-taking. Homecoming becomes an act to be imagined; a dream pursued by Carlos Bulosan in his village stories and 1950s novella, *The Power of the People*; a hope nursed by the “hurt men” of Bienvenido Santos’s *Scent of Apples* (1981); an experience textualized by Ninotchka Rosca’s account of the 1986 Four-Day Revolt in *Endgame: The Fall of Marcos*.

Michelle Skinner imbues her stories with a sense of this elemental trope

in the expatriate experience and imagination. But for her, as for every emigrant, imaginative homecoming cannot recover the original innocence that is lost with the gesture of leaving. More, within the gambit of colonial and neocolonial US-Philippine relations, emigration for many Filipinos is an inescapable destiny sealed by the impossibility of return. Against romanticized visions of home, Skinner writes as a mestiza who grew up in the American base city of Olongapo, under the dark shadows of martial law and the relationship of (neo)Colonialism. The US as a powerful idea and reality confronts Filipino emigrants more directly in the new country yet is also the spectre that frames regenerative memories of the old. The “homecoming” in her title becomes incantatory as she sets her stories in the Philippines and writes as an “exile.”

“Balikbayan,” the title story, grounds the reader in the sensibility of change and rebellion of Ruth, the reluctant returnee grappling with the tenacious traditionalism of her grandmother and three aunts. Ruth’s “growth” becomes possible only because she left for the US in the first place, away from the stifling protectiveness of her mother-surrogates (she is orphaned at age four). “Ruthie,” as her aunts persist in calling her, intends to depart again after her grandmother’s funeral (the old woman dies on the day she welcomes “Ruthie” back) but the story ends with her attempt to reach out to her aunts from her new sense of self. “Balikbayan” thus personalizes the momentary process of cognitive growth that follows one’s separation from the homeland or “mother culture.” Occasioned by the act of return, growth springs from the unarticulated impact of the emigrant experience, from the internalized distance that allows a “balikbayan” the perspective and the will to go back and rediscover herself and her cultural crucible.

For Skinner, that cultural crucible consists of the climate of fear, image-building, poverty and terror spawned by martial law (“Faith Healer,” “A Modern Parable,” “They Don’t Give Scholarships to Artists”) and the hybridization of the old country and the new in bizarre but often profound ways (“Taglish,” “The Television Man”). One does not have to go to the US to feel American presence in one’s life. A car driven by a peace corps volunteer negotiates a tricky curve and hits a boy on one of Manila’s busy thoroughfares (“At the Corner of EDSA”). Greg, an impetuous American youth out of the base for a night of fun in the city confidently wends his way through the maze of speeding jeepneys (“In the Neon City by the River”) because “They always stop for us.” Indeed, even Macarthur, the gentle black serviceman who lured the shopgirl Evelyn out of her shyness in “An American Romance” must blurt out, “Man, how can you live here?” upon seeing her living quarters.

This cultural crucible to which Skinner returns ultimately becomes the prism through which she radically redefines the expatriate dream of homecoming. Skinner draws from her stark memories of local landscapes of cultural atrophy, corruption, colonial thinking, repression, intrigue and class divisions to form the background for all the stories, but only as a

new American. Still gripped by the silent terror of what she remembers, she can only allude to the era in which she grew up: the routine “salvaging” or summary executions of electoral candidates (“A Modern Day Parable”), the American bases and their cities teeming with “dirty children in oversized t-shirts,” the tourist-orientation of “faith healing” and lenten spectacles (“The Television Man”), or indeed, the Balikbayan program through which Filipino Americans and their precious dollars were attracted by the Marcoses to revitalize an economy squeezed dry by their excesses. Yet Skinner inverts these allusions even as she makes them self-evident to emphasize her historical positionality as an expatriate. She may be a martial law baby, one of those who were “born feet first . . . children who faced death” at the point of birth, but her narrator is also “a faith healer.” Ruth may be introduced as a “balikbayan” to the parish priest but she returned for reasons other than tourism, and only temporarily. Maria Clara in “Simbang Gabi” may be the “barangay” beauty queen but chooses to burn her queen’s gown in a backyard pyre that she builds with her competitor and working-class neighbor Memet.

Skinner’s remarkable achievement lies in making the cultural crucible of her own emigrant generation sensible from the standpoint of their removal or distance from it. Made possible, ironically enough, by one’s flight to the “father country,” this position of historical spectatorship suggests a homecoming that is self-recreative rather than merely imaginative. Finally understood after the gesture of return, the cultural crucible from which one originated must make the experience of emigration sensible as well. “Simbang Gabi” best metaphorizes this movement—which is Skinner’s too—with Maria Clara’s view from her bedroom window of the vacant lot on which Memet’s family erected a shanty and a (microcosmic) squatter culture of gamblers and drunkards. Locating Memet in that context, but only because of her vantage point, she is eventually seduced out of her sheltered existence and down from her privileged pedigree as a middle-class mestiza by Memet, to burn the gown and everything that symbolizes her own “exile.” Indeed, as Skinner seems to say, one must have that peek through the window and that glimpse of life beyond the confines of accepted boundaries, to reach out for “home,” for others, and for oneself.

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