

The Allegory of the Billiken in Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*

Capitalism as Religion in the Philippines under US Rule (1902-1946)¹

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Abstract

At the center of Philippine writer Nick Joaquin's masterpiece, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (published in 1961), is a series of dialogues and debates around an image worshipped by the central character, Connie Escobar. This image, as we discover, is a Billiken, which is a Buddha-like image that was largely responsible for inciting a doll craze in the United States towards the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. In this essay, I bring the history of this image to bear on an interpretation of Nick Joaquin's novel, which revolves around the author's diagnosis of the postwar Philippines. My analysis highlights Joaquin's threefold critique of capitalism, Christianity, and the state in their historical conjuncture; one that, paradoxically, coincides with the identification of the Philippines as an independent and national republic in 1946. By studying this critique, I show how the baroque ethos that drives much of Joaquin's writing features a poetic and political project that involves the dismantling, disentanglement, and disengagement of each object of critique with the other two.

Keywords

Billiken image, Capitalism, Christianity, Orientalism, Philippine nationalism, postwar Philippines, US Commonwealth period

Then I'm right and the world is wrong... Right to make you afraid; right to destroy your little faith, your bogus confidence; right to make you all aware of your lies with my lie!

Connie, in *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (270)²

At the center of Philippine writer Nick Joaquin's masterpiece, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (published in 1961) is a series of dialogues and debates around an image worshipped by the central character, Connie Escobar. This image, as we discover, is a Billiken: an impish, perhaps mischievous looking figure, which was largely responsible for inciting a doll, ivory fetish, and good-luck charm craze in the United States towards the end of the first decade of the twentieth century (see figures 1-3).³ In our day, college sports fans may recognize the billiken as the mascot of St. Louis University (see figure 4).



Figure 1: Billiken doll. Downloaded from: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/doll-original-billiken-doll-horsmen-doll-co/aQHDCudAQ9B9A>



Figure 2: Billiken ivories (photo courtesy of Joe Mabel, Creative Commons license cc by-SA 3.0: see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billiken#mediaviewer/File:MOHAL_Billikens_01.jpg)



Figure 3: Billiken good luck charm, from the 1940 film "Waterloo Bridge" (1931: © Universal Pictures USA)



Figure 4: Statue of St. Louis University billiken mascot (photo by Wilson Delgado 2004: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stu_billiken.jpg. Copyright public domain)

The inventor's source of inspiration is unmistakable. At a glance, one might easily confuse it with a Chinese Laughing Buddha, if a somewhat overly caricatured, elfish-looking one: a parody of Orientalia for American consumers, invented and consumed in the age of US World's Fairs held in various cities across the country during the first decade of the twentieth century (see Kanesaka Kalnay, "The Billiken Doll's Racist History").⁴

Transplanted to the Philippines during the years of US rule, however, the relationship between the sign and its antecedent become lost, enigmatic. Not coincidentally, this murkiness turns out to be one of Nick Joaquin's central themes in his diagnosis of colonial society and its aftermath. As the Philippines prepares to take its place among Asian countries as a new, fully fledged independent national republic, how independent, how national, and how republican can we understand it to be? Interestingly enough, these questions become aligned and expressed through the prism of the first qualifier: how *Asian*?

I begin this essay with the sign of the billiken in Nick Joaquin's novel because it deepens the ambiguities of the legacies of enlightenment and Orientalism in the politics of Philippine cultural identity, at the moment of the country's formal declaration of national independence (July 12, 1946). For the billiken not only signifies the grotesque phantasmagoria of Orientalism; but also its entanglement with the growth of consumer society in the Philippines during the four and a half decades of US colonial rule. In bringing to a close the half-century of *ilustrado* debates on the nature of Philippine culture under colonial rule, Joaquin pits the abstract and idealistic premises of both the enlightenment and pan-Asianist discourses against this emerging society, urging us to reflect on their usefulness or obsolescence.⁵ As I will argue, Joaquin's invocation of the Orient and the discourse of Orientalism through the figure of the billiken allows us to recognize and reevaluate the colonial origins of the idea of Asia—Asia as an idea, perhaps too an ideology, that was fashioned as much by Western thinkers as by Eastern.⁶ And to what degree would Philippine "liberation" from both US and Japanese rule restage a past history of unfinished revolution?

I.

The year is 1948. We first encounter the Billiken in Joaquin's novel as an idol ensconced in Binondo, Manila's Chinatown, where Connie brings dolls to the Billiken as a strange, propitiatory offering. As the narrative weaves in and out of flashbacks of Connie's childhood, her family's origins, and her unexpected arrival in Hong Kong two years after the formal declaration of

Philippine independence by the United States (in 1946), we come to understand Connie's devotion to this pagan idol as tied to her conviction that she has two navels. Both are symptoms of a delirium brought on by a series of traumas that refer at once to Connie's past and to the Philippines as a nation born twice: the first time in 1896, when the Philippine revolution led to the declaration of the short-lived first Philippine Republic; and the second time in 1946, when the United States "granted" the Philippines formal independence after the Japanese surrender to the US in the Pacific War. But it is Connie's devotion to the carnival god she calls Billiken that endows her delirium of possessing two navels with a seemingly diabolical intention. Her strange piety signifies not only her apostasy from the Church, which serves as the primary point of religious reference for the majority population; but also her fidelity to a pagan idol whose location in Binondo implies a sinister Asian origin.

An understanding of Connie's devotion to the Billiken takes the reader into the dark heart of the protagonist's trauma, which entails a brief summary of the novel. It begins in Hong Kong (2 years after the end of the Pacific War and the declaration of Philippine independence). Connie, the daughter of an aristocratic family, has fled from Manila to Hong Kong in search of a certain Pepe Monson. Pepe belongs to a community of diasporic Filipinos there, where the revolutionary government during the 1st stage of the Philippine revolution was exiled after their initial defeat in 1897 by Spanish forces (see figure 5). While most returned to the Philippines in the renewal of hostilities by the Philippine Revolution against the Spanish government (and later, the United States), Hong Kong had already become a place of refuge and resettlement for Filipino veterans. Many leaders sought refuge in Hong Kong again, after the defeat of Filipino revolutionary troops by the US government in 1899.



Figure 5: Hong Kong Revolutionary junta in exile (US National Archives, 391-PI-34)

Pepe's father, a former general of the 1898 Philippine war against the Americans, has spent his life in exile in Hong Kong, anticipating his eventual return to the homeland when it finally achieved independence.⁷ After only a brief visit to his native land after Philippine independence in 1946, however, Pepe's father returns to Hong Kong, a bitter and broken man, with the conviction that the bright promise of Philippine independence has gone terribly wrong (67-74). His melancholy disturbs and perplexes Pepe and his brother (Father) Tony, who grew up under the oscillating hopes and fears of their father for the country's independence. This hope ties them to a country they have never visited while also endowing their lives in Hong Kong with a perpetually transient, displaced sense of belonging. Indeed, Joaquin's portrayal of this conundrum anticipates the experience of many emigres and their children today, whether these children of the diaspora are raised in the US, Canada, or England: anywhere that Filipino professionals have opted to settle and plant new roots.⁸

Connie seeks out Pepe under the pretext that, as a horse doctor, Pepe might know something about the anatomy of beasts and monsters, and

might therefore help her understand why she was born with two navels.⁹ As readers we are led to observe Connie's constant state of distress and anxiety, the roots of which take us back in time through the history of her family from the US takeover in 1899 to the end of the Pacific war (WWII). Along the way, we learn about the attrition and withering away of the revolution's erstwhile leaders and poets, who become supplanted by a generation of compromised intellectuals and crass opportunists. Joaquin portrays the leadership of this generation in a rather harsh light: characters like Señora Concha Vidal and her first husband either spent their lives justifying their resignation to the Philippines' colonial status; or cynically exploiting the inequalities of colonial rule to line their pockets and build their fiefdoms. Indeed, Connie's father turns out to represent both extremes: he begins as a soldier in the revolution but abandons his patriotic ideals in order to become a doctor who performs abortions for the young women of aristocratic families (91). Moreover, he acquires a reputation for extracting from these women sexual favors. Connie's father later becomes a senator under the Philippine Commonwealth, where he exploits his public office and public funds for private gain.

As a child, Connie takes refuge from the negligence of her parents by retreating into a fantasy world in which her only companions are a doll and the squat, smiling, Buddha-like image of the Billiken in her backyard. This Billiken, the narrator informs us, was rescued from a carnival that was held annually during the period of US colonialism. As Connie grows up, however, she is gradually brought into the world of her mother: the aging beauty Concha, whose first husband Esteban Borrromeo lived and died as a poet believing in the future of Philippine independence (167-178). Stripped of her illusions, which mirrored the hopes and aspirations of her generation, Concha eventually marries Connie's father out of desperation. When Connie herself comes of age, she marries one of her mother's friends, a feudal baron from the South named Macho. A year into their marriage, however, Connie discovers that her husband was, and in an emotional sense remains, her mother's lover (94-96).

Summarizing the plots of novels is always an unpleasant task: I do so only to trace the roots of Connie's state of emotional and historical trauma. Joaquin allows us to read Connie's life as simultaneously a bildungsroman of a child growing up in the US-sponsored Philippine Commonwealth and an allegory of Philippine history. Connie grows up the child of a traitor to the ideal of Philippine independence; and later experiences the double betrayal of her husband and her mother, who have together implicated Connie in the perpetuation of their own infidelity.¹⁰ It is during this period of crisis that Connie returns to her parents' house after 1945, which has been destroyed in the US firebombing of Manila (246-252). Sifting through the ruins, she finds her Billiken with two bullet-holes in its great belly. She rents a chapel in Binondo's Chinatown and places the statue there, where she begins to bring it doll offerings and burn joss sticks as a form of reverence (57).

II.

What do we know of this Billiken: this carnival god and the cult that Connie creates around it? Unbeknownst to Connie (but probably known by the author), the Billiken does not originate in the mystical pagan Orient, but paradoxically in the US. It was patented by a certain Florence Pretz of Kansas City, Missouri, in 1908.¹¹ While the significance of its name to its creator remains shrouded in mystery, one cannot overlook the coincidence between the doll's invention and the election of William Howard "Billy" Taft to the US presidency that same year (figure 6). Not coincidentally, Billy Taft also served as the first US governor-general of the colonial government in the Philippines, when military rule ceded to a civil colonial order. The association between the Billiken and President Taft was certainly clear to the dollmakers and manufacturers who took advantage of the Billiken image's immense popularity by plagiarizing it: one variation of the Billiken was thus spelled "Billy Can."



Figure 6: President William Howard Taft riding a carabao in 1904 (photo courtesy of: http://www.reddit.com/r/HistoryPorn/comments/1fk73r/william_howard_taft_riding_a_carabao_xpost_from/)

Similar to the “Teddy bear” invented and patented during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, then, the Billiken paid homage to the head of state by paradoxically reducing him to a cute and harmless doll for children. Unlike the teddy bear, however, the Billiken incited a doll craze that swept the country between 1909 and 1912, involving the skyrocketing of doll sales and the expansion of doll manufacture in the US to an unprecedented scale. “The doll was a hit without parallel in the toy trade,” writes US cultural historian William Leach, and it appeared on display “in hotels, in restaurants, and department stores, and in homes throughout America... [F]or the first time, Americans began to spend millions on toys and playthings” (Leach, 230).

Leach ascribes this phenomenon of doll craze to the transformation of popular religion in the US at the turn of the century, in which the interpenetration of big business and the government led to the creation of civic institutions of social welfare like the YMCA / YWCA, Christian Youth

Organizations, and the Salvation Army. What is significant about Leach's analysis, however, is the way he shows how the merger of public and private interests represented in these institutions also promoted the development of a uniquely American ethos. This ethos freely conflated the accumulation of wealth by capitalism with an abstract sense of religious spirituality, without firm grounding in the historical development of the world religions from which that religious sentiment was originally derived. It was in the US, Leach argues, where Christian charity and capitalist profit found their perfect marriage, to the degree that it became possible to identify one wholly in terms of the other. In this milieu, popular religiosity manifested itself in the search and consumption of mind cures, in investment and involvement in civic charity institutions, and in the disintegration of religious belief into a general theosophical understanding of the spiritual mysteries. Certainly, the US world fair expositions contributed to this dissolution, insofar as it brought the comparative knowledge of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and the myriad variety of the religions of indigenous peoples throughout the world, to the ordinary American.¹² In this environment the Billiken found its calling. For, along with a slew of other good luck charms, "rabbit's feet," and cute household deities, possession of a Billiken promised good luck, or the eventual providence of "things as they ought to be." As the image of the Billiken token illustrates, possession of the Billiken works "like money" while maintaining a quasi-sacred or non-monetary value (see figures 7 and 8).



Figures 7 and 8: The main face of this pocket piece reads “THE GOD OF THINGS AS THEY OUGHT TO BE,” along with the 1908 copyright; the reverse side reads: “GOOD LUCK: I am the God of the Chinese / So always keep me near / Misfortune’s frown will disappear / At one flash from my eye / Be sure that I am on the spot / When projects you begin / I am the god of luckiness / My name is Billiken.” Image downloaded from: <http://www.churchofgoodluck.com/Billiken.html> (last accessed 6/30/10)

The Billiken thus marks the threshold of a transformation in American popular religiosity: a form of religiosity freed from traditional institutions of piety and thereby disposed to invest in civic and political institutions at the turn of the century. In fact, one of the most important manifestations of this secularized religious sentiment was the providential characterization of US imperialism, which led to the US takeover of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Cuba (the latter *de facto* rather than *de jure*).¹³ A speech by Indiana State Senator Albert J. Beveridge demonstrates this identification perfectly. Speaking in September 1898, with the future of US policy toward the Philippines still uncertain, Beveridge intones the following: “It is a mighty people that He has planted on this soil,” and continues:

...a people imperial by virtue of their power, by right of their institutions, by authority of their Heaven-directed purposes—the propagandists and not the misers of liberty. It is a glorious history our God has bestowed upon His chosen people: a history heroic with our faith in our mission and our future; a history of statesmen who flung the boundaries of the Republic out into unexplored lands and savage wilderness...a history divinely logical, in the process of whose tremendous reasoning we find ourselves today.¹⁴

In Beveridge's speech, the role of divine providence becomes inseparable from territorial expansion, international defense against foreign invasion, the securing of overseas consumer markets and resources, and even the banning of silver as a form of monetary currency (which unfairly fixed the market of Latin American goods to the US monetary standard of value).¹⁵ "Have we no mission to perform, no duty to discharge to our fellow-man?," Beveridge inquires, "...And shall we reap the reward that waits on our discharge of our high duty; shall we occupy new markets for what our farmers raise, our factories make, our merchants sell—aye, and, please God, new markets for what our ships shall carry?" ("March of the Flag," web). The "secularization" of religious sentiment in the US corporation, the growth of consumer markets and technology, and the mass culture of world's fairs at the end of the nineteenth century, thus obscures the simultaneous and juxtaposed process by which these same entities and social forces become an object of cult veneration: the process by which capitalism becomes a kind of religion, facilitating the interchangeability of predestination and self-interest as they appear in the policy of US imperial expansion.¹⁶ In Beveridge's imagination, the Philippines became one of many "lands of our duty and desire" (52).

The spiritualization or mystification of US market capitalism returns us to the peculiar nature of the Billiken's manufacture and circulation. Despite the inventor's clear references to one or several of the many manifestations of the Buddha (which Ms. Katz must have seen at one or more of the many US World's Fairs); and despite the invocation of William Howard Taft as America's current head of state, the Billiken object was clearly not "meant" to be revered as an image of worship or cult. On the contrary, as a commodity that does not even pretend to serve a practical use, its identity brazenly flaunts the triumph of commodification over any and every faith or world religion, just as American popular religiosity brazenly flaunted the middle classes' independence from any and every form of transcendence or promise of future salvation. As a recent writer proudly stated: "Billiken became the first *Patented God*" (italics added).¹⁷ And yet, the nihilism that accompanies

the triumph of a “patented God” over all others paradoxically demands and exacts an even greater piety, and aspires to an even greater cultic status, than the religions it mercilessly destroys. This is, in fact what happened to the Billiken, which now boasts a church located in the small town of Wauconda, Illinois, as well as Osaka, Japan, and even Siberia (ibid.).

Walter Benjamin, following Marx’s insight into the commodity as fetish, observed how the destruction of religion under capitalist modernity became a faith unto itself.¹⁸ This is precisely what the billiken makes manifest. In his brief essay “Capitalism as Religion,” Benjamin isolates four aspects of capitalism that transform it into a peculiar super-cult, “super” in the sense that it absorbs and overrides all others. The first is that it represents a faith without a theology or dogma beyond its own existence. The second is that it ceaselessly demands a celebration and profession of this faith: a permanent holiday that is also a permanent observance of the ecstasy of consumption. The third aspect is that it “makes guilt and debt pervasive.”¹⁹ The guilt of having abolished all means of human transcendence forces the acolyte of capitalism to seek redemption in every nook and cranny of the universe; and to cynically conclude from every failure to find it a mere reaffirmation of our faith in nothingness. If we follow Benjamin’s lead regarding the transformation of capitalism into a new religion—a religion that zealously preached the negation of every form of transcendence before the act of consumption—we can see how the Billiken in Joaquin’s novel emblemizes this paradoxical cult without dogma: inspiring a strange piety that preaches nothing but fealty and indebtedness to the artificiality of our own projections, for their having saved us from having to hope for divine salvation. In contrast to hope, the Billiken’s task is to convince its believers that “life’s worth living / And that everything’s worthwhile.”²⁰

III.

The historical understanding of the Billiken provides us with a key to deciphering Joaquin’s interpretation of enlightenment and the Orientalist legacy in Philippine *ilustrado* thought.²¹ On the surface, critics like E. San Juan have rightly pointed out that Connie’s devotion to the Billiken cult

dramatizes a larger theme to be found elsewhere in Joaquin's work: the Filipino/a's eternal struggle between a presumably pagan-inspired resignation to a divinely preordained Fate, on the one hand; and a(n equally presumed) Christian-inspired recognition of our ultimate "freedom" from fate.²² This reading, however, only gets us so far; most notably, it omits the crucial historical context of the author as a child of the Philippine Commonwealth under US rule, which is essential to the understanding of the formal declaration of independence in 1946. Inserting this historical context allows us to see how Joaquin identifies the fatalism and the cynicism that corrupt all of the characters in the novel to some degree. This condition arises neither from an Orientalized understanding of Philippine values like *bahala na*; nor does it arise from the perceived exhaustion of Karmic rebirth in Eastern religions. In contrast to both, the fatalism and cynicism behind Connie's strange piety for the Billiken cult arises from *forty-six odd years of US colonial rule, which perverted and twisted every meaning of freedom and independence into its antithesis*. Under the promise of Philippine independence, the US strengthened and ramified all relations of colonial dependency; under the promise of eventual freedom, Filipinos became slavish consumers of market commodities, producing a derivative US culture that Joaquin elsewhere described as "Sajonismo."²³ In the same way that Rizal's dream of Filipino independence became twisted into a parody of freedom in Pardo de Tavera's reflections on "the Filipino soul," so too did the genuine trauma of Filipino defeat and surrender before US forces become perverted into grand phrases like "benevolent assimilation," "colonial democracy" and "Westernization."²⁴ One of the novel's characters correctly intuits the lie of Philippine independence after 1946 when he first arrives in Manila:

Paco sensed an unreality... One smiled and floated away, insulated from all the drab horror of inadequate reality by the ultra-perfect, colossal, stupendous, technicolored magnificence of the Great American Dream. But the strain showed in their faces...sweating from the violence of their exertions and from sheer terror of not being up-to-the-minute, of not making an impression, of not being able to do what everybody else was doing. So they jerked harder, and laughed more naughtily, and sweated agonized... (Joaquin, *Woman Who Had Two Navels*, 48).

The passage resonates strongly with the watercolor drawings sketched by the wartime-era painter Trudl, whose husband served as an Austrian diplomat in the Philippines during the 1940s (see figure 8). While Trudl captures the collective exuberance of Philippine liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, her watercolors also hint at a more disturbing aspect of that liberation. The shimmering figures appear to lose all sense of form: an aesthetic representation that can be read as the complete surrender of Filipinos to the romance of having been “saved” by the same US forces that were responsible for the destruction of Manila by firebombing. Their reflections, in turn, would anticipate works like Kerima Polotan’s *Hand of the Enemy* as well as the essays of Renato Constantino.²⁵



Figure 9: Trudl’s depiction of a dance hall after the Philippine “liberation” from Japanese rule by US forces (copyright pending)

In the simultaneously ecstatic and catastrophic unreality of the postwar Philippines, Connie begins to search for her “first” origin, which takes her back to the institution of hypocrisy at all levels of state and society with the US takeover of the Philippines. On one level, her faith in Billiken can be

read as a critique of the previous generation's failure to establish their "cult" of national independence, i.e., to bequeath to her the correct knowledge of her origins and a memory of the values that accompanied that knowledge. Speaking to this critique, Joaquin writes of the revolutionary generation:

In two swift decades they would find themselves obsolete—discarded and displaced persons gathering in each other's parlors to revile the present and regret the past. The future of which they had so happily babbled had turned into a dead end. They were to have no continuation; a breed and a history stops abruptly with them (*Woman*, 170).

This critique of the revolutionary generation, however, finds its counterpart in the equal failure of Connie, Paco, Tony and Pepe Monson's generation to preserve the past and bring it up to date with the present. In the following passage, Pepe Monson reflects on his father's disillusion with the national project post-liberation:

[Pepe] felt the emptiness of his father's silence. In their different ways they had all betrayed and forsaken the old man... They had apostatized, leaving the old man to carry on his cult alone. Now the cult had abruptly come to an end; the candles had all been extinguished and removed. There was only a vacant darkness, a vacant silence (68).

The billiken, then, stands between and sublates two tragedies and two corresponding critiques: the tragedy of failing to live up to the revolutionary dream by venerating its memory; and the tragedy of allowing a US caricature of the Orient, and the culture of commodity fetishism more broadly, to install itself as an object of cult adoration.²⁶ Its sinister, demonic aspect, in other words, arises from Connie's decision to worship it as an idol. In doing so, she scandalizes those around her by revealing their complicity in the hypocrisy of colonial society. By worshipping a "false god," she forces both the revolutionary generation and its aborted progeny to reflect on both the forgotten cult of revolutionary forefathers and the omnipresent cult of commodities and commodification.

Not coincidentally, it is a priest who most strongly reacts to Connie's cult of devotion to the Billiken; for the central obsession of colonial Christianity for the better part of three centuries in the Philippines as well as the Americas had been the extirpation of so-called idolatry. In this case, perhaps without realizing it, this priest is in fact responding to the US colonial legacy:

-- [Priest]: [P]eople like you are the devil's fifth-columnists: you make us not sure. You spread fear and distrust until we begin to doubt our very senses, until we begin to believe in a world where people have two navels, a world where it is always Saturday night and carnival time... You come creeping among us, whispering: *Come to our Sabbath, come to our carnival... Abandon the effort, relax, let everything come to a stop...*

...

--[Connie]: Surely, one doesn't merit (a witch's) burning for telling a silly lie, for keeping a silly doll?

-- [Priest]: And (witches) too, began, just as innocently: a silly little lie, a silly little doll. *But the lie becomes a fact; the doll grows a fist and becomes master.* Your Billiken has found you (Joaquin, *Woman* 267-68 *passim*. Italics added).

The white-robed priest identifies Connie's "idolatry" as an "obsession with evil" (266). But do his words not also describe the very message that the Billiken fetish preached to the American and Filipino publics at the turn of the twentieth century? For what other world does the commodity inaugurate, but one in which "it is always Saturday night and carnival time," provided that one enters into the ever-expanding circuit of commodity exchange and circulation? Following the same logic as the Billiken, the shibboleths of "US tutelage," and the "earned right to freedom" all begin as "silly little lies" that uphold forty-odd years of colonial dependency, interrupted only partially by the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. Point for point, our good priest sets out to denounce the blasphemy of Connie's false-god worship; yet ends up underlining the cultural devastation wrought by US colonial capitalism as religion in the image of the Billiken.

IV.

The US origins of Connie's "Chinese doll" or billiken redirect the debates on cultural identity to the very place nobody wants to look. At a time when former leaders of the Philippine revolution like Generals Emilio Aguinaldo and Artemio Ricarte were making their last, desperate pitch for relevance in a society that no longer recognized them; and younger leaders flirted with the idea of being Asian or "Oriental," few writers beyond Joaquin paused to reflect on what many Filipinos had actually become. The tragic dimension of Joaquin's novel arises from the painful reckoning of this legacy, which set the nation on a course toward a cultural schizophrenia that mirrors Connie's deliriums.

From this tragedy, however, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* also labors to imagine and stage a rescue from what Renato Constantino later critiqued as a postwar "society without purpose" (see Constantino, 11-30). Connie's ambiguous heroism, in this respect, stems from her determination to take the religion of colonial capitalism *seriously*: to the point of supplying the professed nihilism with a proper theology and dogma. If the revolutionary cry of independence found itself compromised and corrupted by years of colonial servitude under US imperialism; and if the radical notion of messianic freedom had found itself captured and prostituted by an Americanized, formless "spirit of capitalism"; then Connie's mission would proceed by taking seriously the diabolical machine that makes of freedom a fetish. She does this by eschewing both the cynicism of her father, which thrives on the illusory, "Sajonista" freedom possessed by the new elite; and the disenchanting freedom of her mother, expressed in her fatalism to blindly follow a sense of tradition in marriage while mocking it in her love affair with Macho. To the hypocrisy of her mother's piety, Connie opposes a sincere piety to the practice of hypocrisy. And to the apostasy of her father from the revolutionary dream, and the ensuing legacy of secret guilt it bestows, Connie opposes a blind faith in the power of apostasy.

Finally, to the Orientalization of Philippine culture through the cult of the Billiken, Joaquin juxtaposes the survival of the revolutionary dream of independence through the experience of the Hong Kong emigres, and more

broadly the forces of exile and diaspora.²⁷ As a man who has spent his entire life looking at the past and regretting his historical oblivion, Doctor Monson's encounter with Connie, in which she confesses to him as she would a spiritual minister, coincides with a vision in which he suddenly glimpses the past looking "back" at him: staking its truth-value on his capacity to interpret and translate the past to the younger generation (Joaquin, *Woman* 302-306).²⁸ Their encounter allows for an ambiguous, new rite to emerge: a confession, which allows each character to confront the historical shortcomings of their respective generations, and forgive:

Kneeling down, he laid a hand on the girl's head, praying to be joined to her grief, yearning to be part of her pain. She felt his hand blessing her and knelt up and crept to his breast and he flung his arms around her and embraced her, embracing in her the grief of all the generations he had failed to know.... Clasped in each other's arms, in a foreign land, the young girl and the old man mutely implored each other's forgiveness (306).

It is through the enactment of a rite that has been emancipated from the institution of the Catholic church that Doctor Monson finds himself able to not only reverse the experience of colonial disenchantment, but also re-evaluate the historical fate of his exile as a *decision* and *necessity* for future generations: "exile had, after all, been more than a vain gesture...his task had not ended with that other death in the pinewoods..he had stood on guard, all these years, as on the mountain pass, while something precious was carried to safety.... Here he was, home at last" (331-332). As Doctor Monson closes the revolutionary generation's life-chapter in diaspora, he absolves and sets free the woman who had two navels, Connie, to begin *another* diaspora on the Asian frontier of the new Philippine Republic.

V.

As an allegory of "Sajonismo" disguised as Asia, the billiken embodies the irreconcilable and opposed trajectories of Philippine cultural identity in the aftermath of the Pacific War. The contrasting duality of the billiken in many ways reflects the name of its principal acolyte, Connie—a name that refers at once to "con," or deception, and "Constance," or faith keeper. In keeping

faith in the billiken as a “con,” the protagonist disrupts all the stable categories of West and East, insider and outsider, tradition and modernity, the Philippines and Hong Kong. Conversely, however, Joaquin also encourages us to read this monstrosity against the grain: to recognize Connie as vindicated in her attempt to unmask the faithless “faith keepers” of Philippine tradition and modernity (represented by her parents) and escape the living hell they had destined for her.

Scholars who seek in Joaquin’s masterpiece a “national allegory” or “foundational fiction” that provides a utopian vision for the fledgling Philippine republic in the age of decolonization must have felt disappointed and betrayed.²⁹ Far from representing a paragon of virtue and sacrifice, Connie pursues a line of deterritorialized flight across the cultural geography of the Philippine Commonwealth: disavowing her parents and husband, not to mention breaking up her lover Paco’s marriage and the bonds of ethnic community among the Hong Kong émigré community. Instead of settling or sacrificing herself for the newly independent Philippine republic, she abandons it, and escapes with Paco to Macao: a satellite cosmopolitan center in Southeast Asia where Paco can pursue his career as a jazz musician. Instead of surrendering to the telluric and nostalgic call of the native land, the couple cuts themselves adrift, to explore the contact and entanglements of cultures across oceans and lands. Even more scandalously, contrary to the revolutionary generation’s condemnation of Connie’s flight, Joaquin aims to show that her action falls in line with the principle of the revolution from the very beginning. That principle was to effect a radical rupture with the colonial past, even as that past worked to reinvent itself as some bright and necessary future. Having secured this truth, the elder Doctor Monson pronounces *Nunc dimittis*, from the hymn or Canticle of Simeon, in which the biblical character Simeon sees the messiah in the temple of Jerusalem and asks for permission to die: “Nunc dimittis servum tuum, Domine, secundum verbum tuum in pace” [Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word].³⁰ By elevating Connie to inheritor of the revolutionary legacy, Joaquin defies the colonial institutions that the revolution had inadvertently engendered or retrenched: a predatory elite, a sycophantic religion.

The dissonant chord that Joaquin's final message strikes to any present or future construction of memory of the Philippine Revolution and its unexpected twin, the Philippine Commonwealth, makes it all the more striking that he was elevated to the canon of Philippine National Artists during the time of President Marcos (1976). Perhaps if the President and First Lady had read *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, they might have thought twice about the author's nomination. But then again, one of the surest ways of disarming a writer is their canonization. In 1956, while Nick Joaquin was writing his novel, the Philippine Congress passed a bill mandating all educational institutions to offer courses on the anticlerical nineteenth-century writer and advocate of colonial reform, José Rizal. Rizal's novels identified the monastic religious Orders as the veritable cornerstone of colonial rule in their impunity, unaccountability, exploitation, and hypocrisy. Copies of his books were burned and forbidden, and Rizal himself was excommunicated. Fifty years later, the Philippine government officially recognized Rizal as the nation's most prominent patriot and hero. Yet it did so by permitting the publication and teaching of "expurgated editions" of his novels in secondary education.³¹ In many versions of the expurgated editions, censors redacted any criticism pertaining to Catholic theology, pastoral administration, or the religious Orders.

One hundred and twenty years after Rizal's martyrdom, the Philippines has the third largest population that professes the Roman Catholic religion in the world; and boasts being the largest Christian nation in Asia.

Notes

1. The phrase “Capitalism As Religion” was the title of an essay by Walter Benjamin: see *Selected Writings, v. 1: 1913-1926*, 288-291.
2. Nick Joaquin, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*. Originally published in 1961.
3. For a history of the billiken doll against the historical background of the US at the turn of the twentieth century, see William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*, 230-247 *passim*. See also Erica Kanesaka Kalnay, “The Billiken Doll’s Racist History,” web.
4. In *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, Joaquin himself describes the billiken as “squatting like a buddha” (57).
5. On the influence of pan-Asianist discourses on Philippine politics in this period, see the collection of essays in Eliseo Quirino and Vicente Hilario, eds., *Thinking for Ourselves: A Collection of Representative Filipino Essays*.
6. This is of course the central thesis of Edward Said, *Orientalism*. See also Wang Hui, “The politics of imagining Asia: a genealogical analysis,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8:1 (2007), 1-33.
7. Like Pepe, Nick Joaquin’s father Leocadio also fought in the Philippine Revolution as a colonel in the revolutionary army.
8. Yen Le Espiritu has analyzed the condition of “differential inclusion” among children of the Filipino diaspora in the US: see *Home Bound: Filipino-American Lives Across Cultures, Communities, and Countries*. For other insightful discussions of Filipino diaspora, see Rick Bonus, *Locating Filipino-Americans: Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Space*; and Linda Basch, Nina Glick-Schiller, and Christina Szanton-Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States*.
9. The reference to Connie as a monster also occurs throughout the novel: cf. for example 236 and 258. But the billiken is also described as such (264).
10. Indeed, these conflicting historical legacies manifest themselves on the very level of her name, Constance for fidelity, which later takes on the Americanized form “Connie” as a homonym for “con” or swindle.
11. For a brief summary of this doll’s history and patent, see Leach, *Land of Desire*, 230.
12. On the impact of the World’s Fairs on US popular education and the imagination, see Robert Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*.
13. For an example of “divine guidance” in President William McKinley’s decision to seize possession of the Philippines and suppress the revolution taking place against Spain, see Brewer, 37 and 45.

14. See Albert Beveridge, "The March of the Flag," Modern History Sourcebook website (<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1898beveridge.asp>). Accessed 2/25/22.
15. One of the most vociferous and eloquent opponents of this US policy was Cuban national martyr José Martí: see his famous essay, "La conferencia monetaria de las Repúblicas de América," in *Obras completas* v. 6, 157-172.
16. See Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," 288-291. For an insightful discussion of the rise of the corporation in America, see Alan Trachtenberg's classic study, *The Incorporation of America*.
17. Cited in "Billiken History: In Search of the Billiken's Roots—the People Behind the Throne," Church of Good Luck, web.
18. "As against this, the commodity-form," Marx writes, "and the value-relation of the products of labour, within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation, between men, themselves, which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations, both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is, therefore, inseparable from the production of commodities" (*Capital*, 165). Originally published in 1867.
19. Benjamin elsewhere notes, in his study of Franz Kafka, that the German word for guilt and debt are the same (*schuld*). See *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, xx.
20. At the 1909 Alaskan-Yukon Pacific world exposition held in Seattle, Washington, the second stanza of the card that accompanied the purchase of a Billiken figurine reads as follows: "I am the God of Happiness, / I simply make you smile / I prove that life's worth living / And that everything's worthwhile; / I force the failure to his feet / And make the growler grin, / I am the god of Happiness / My name is Billiken." Image downloaded from "Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition (1909): Pay Streak Amusements" website, History Link.org (web).
21. For a fuller account of this tradition in ilustrado thought see Resil Mojares, *Brains of the Nation*; Megan Thomas, *Orientalists, Propagandists, and Ilustrados*; and Blanco, "Orientations and Orientalizations of Philippine Nationalism in the Twentieth Century," in *Filipino Studies: Palimpsests of Nation and Diaspora*, eds. Martin Manalansan and Augusto Espiritu, 56-83.
22. See, for example, E. San Juan, *Subversions of Desire*.
23. See "The Filipino as 'Sajonista,'" in *Rediscovery: Essays on Philippine Life and Culture*, eds. Cynthia Nograles Lumbera and Teresita Gimenez Maceda, 219-235.

24. See Blanco, "Orientations."
25. Kerima Polotan, *Hand of the Enemy*. First published in 1962. Renato Constantino, *Dissent and Counter-Consciousness*. See in particular "Society Without Purpose," 11-30.
26. This point is, in fact, the central argument behind the publication of Philippine revolutionary General José Alejandrino's *La senda del sacrificio: Episodios y anécdotas de nuestras luchas por la libertad* [The Path of Sacrifice: Episodes and anecdotes of our struggles for freedom]. The work was republished, in English, as *The Price of Freedom* in 1949.
27. One may speculate that the character of Doctor Monson may have been inspired (at least in part) by the exiled Philippine revolutionary general Artemio Ricarte (known as "El Víbora"), about whom Joaquin wrote eloquently in his contribution to the cult of national heroes, *A Question of Heroes: essays in criticism on ten key figures of Philippine History*.
28. This theme runs unevenly throughout Joaquin's work. See, in particular, *Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* and the short stories "May Day Eve" and "Guardia de Honor," in *Tropical Gothic*. For an analysis of the play see John D. Blanco, "Baroque Modernity and the Colonial World," in *Kritika Kultura* 4 (web).
29. The idea of Third World novels as national allegories was first developed by Frederic Jameson: see "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," 65-88. Jameson's theory received a stinging rebuke by Aijaz Ahmad: see "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" 3-25. For a more nuanced treatment of novels as national allegories in 19th century Latin American fiction, see Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. More recently, Ruth Pison has discussed national allegories in the context of Martial Law fiction: see Pison, *Alternative Histories: Martial Law Novels as Counter-Memory*.
30. See "Nunc dimittis," Wikipedia entry (web).
31. Republic Act No. 1425—"An act to include in the curricula of all public and private schools, colleges and universities courses on the life, works and writings of José Rizal, particularly his novels *Noli me tangere* and *El filibusterismo*, authorizing the printing and distribution thereof, and for other purposes" (June 12, 1956), cited in the Chan Robles Virtual Law Library ("Philippine Laws, Statutes, & Codes") (web). For an excellent analysis of the Rizal Bill against the background of post-Independence literature, see Caroline Hau, *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946-1980*, 1-47.

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