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These works do not always, or even often, lead to healing or acceptance or tolerance. But they do pick at the national body's scabs, at the wounds, that through this painful process might lead towards a treatment or cure or some other palliative. That scabbing, that wound, *is* the story. The Trayvon Martin case is the latest outrage performed on the communal psyche of what remains of a coherent American public, of the idealistic promise of democratic, egalitarian treatment that so many trumpet in a deluded version of American exceptionalism. The stories, the novels, the poetry carrying the sense of outrage and demanding redress are being written. They are acknowledged here because activist literature demonstrates the crucial, but fragile faith in the power of narrative to shape a society, to give meaning to action, to provide a common ground for enacting and protecting the common good. Those American ideals seem to have fallen by the wayside in an avalanche of cynicism and ignorance. The creative critic, the American dissenting writer, the literary activist, combats the rotting away of the notion of the common good, of citizenship as a duty and not simply a list of privileges.

As a college teacher and mentor, I see the hunger, the desire, and the energy at the ready in my students. This generation is not apathetic. It is less cynical and uninformed than my generation. This invocation of American literature committed to social justice is for them. The teaching and writing of literature has one test: does it remain relevant to lived experience? The creative critics collected in these pages give proof that the tradition of dissent lives on and is more relevant than ever.

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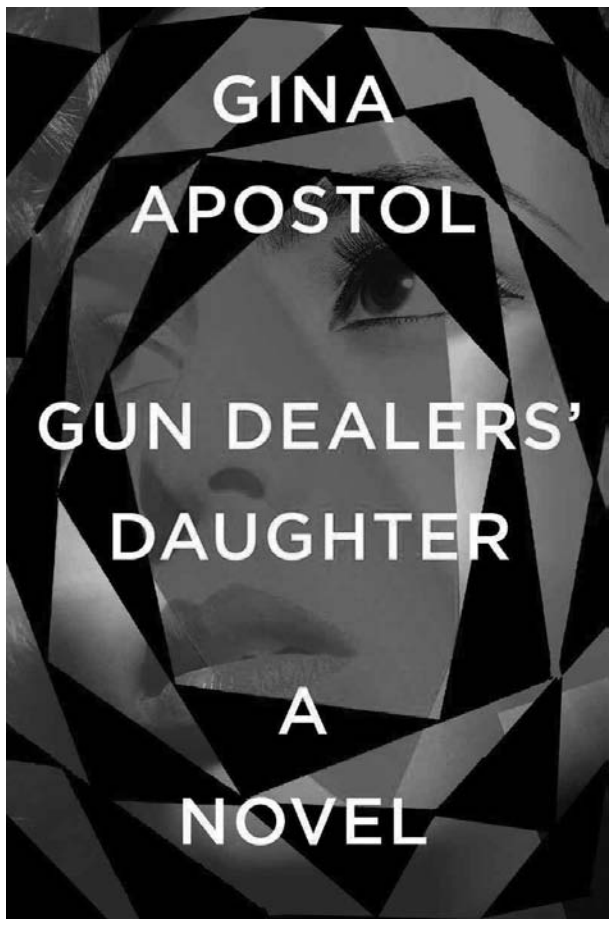
Revolution from Above

Martin Joseph Ponce

Gun Dealers' Daughter

Gina Apostol

W.W. Norton
http://books.wwnorton.com
304 pages; cloth, $24.95



"If you knew that your parents sold arms that prop up your country's military dictatorship, what would you do?" Twelve-year-old Sol (Soledad Soliman) overhears her American School teacher pose the central question of Gina Apostol's novel *Gun Dealers' Daughter* to his colleague after dinner at the Soliman home in Manila. But it is Mr. Fermi's emphatic *disgust* at the Solimans's shady transactions and tacky extravagance that implants "a dart, a punctuated clarity" about the dubious origins of the family's affluence into Sol's pubescent body, afflicting her like "something ingrown, an infected thing." The memory of it presages Sol's intermittent feeling of "nausea, an elemental eruption: this split in my soul," a divisive dis-ease about her and her family's place in Philippine society. Though Sol eventually comes into political consciousness—acquiring knowledge about her parents' import-export business, the prosperity it generates, and its complicity with both Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos's "conjugal dictatorship" and U.S. backing of the authoritarian regime—and though she acts decisively on that knowledge, her disoriented and disorienting, self-consciously faulty recounting of martial law in the Philippines (1972–1986) is far from triumphant: more an indictment than a vindication of her youthful deeds.

Published by Anvil in the Philippines in 2010 and by Norton in the United States in 2012, *Gun Dealers' Daughter* marks Apostol's U.S. debut and carries forward the combination of literary play (punning and allusion, metafictional reflexivity and humor) with historical reconstruction and political irreverence featured in her previous novels, *Bibliolepsy* (1997) and *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* (2009). The novel opens with the psychically and bodily wounded protagonist arriving in Nice, France, then being shipped to her family's mansion in New York to resume her convalescence. Repeating several times the phrase "repetition is the site of trauma," the novel gradually unfolds the causes of Sol's dizzying derangement. She is diagnosed with anterograde amnesia, a condition in which her memory stalls at the traumatic experience, and compulsively returns to her single semester at the University of the Philippines-Diliman, circa 1980. Writing years later in a room overlooking the Hudson, Sol wonders whether words can make her whole, if language can save her, if "[t]his work I am doing right now could become a hesitant, crepitating—*talambuhay* [life story]? A reckoning. A confession."

Addressing would-be well-off radicals, on the one hand, and readers ignorant of U.S.-Philippine history, on the other, the novel presents Sol's rueful confession of her brief, explosive flirtation with activism some thirty years ago and her part in the assassination of Colonel Grier, as well as a critical reckoning of U.S. colonialism in the Philippines and neocolonial support for Marcos's dictatorship. While commentators since at least the Reagan era have asked why working-class constituents vote against their economic self-interests, the question is rarely asked of the other side. What would provoke the progeny of moneyed parents surrounded by seductive, sedative comforts—servant-filled mansions in Manila and New York, summer vacations in Europe and the U.S., casual, competitive mingling with Manila's upper echelon—to act against her family's investments?

The book combines literary play with historical reconstruction and political irreverence.

The puncturing sense of malaise Sol suffered when she overheard Mr. Fermi's *disgust* intensifies when she leaves the familiar luxuries of her home and enters college. Breaking through her class and cultural obliviousness and countering the socialization she received as "a member of the damned *burgis*…, the comprador bourgeoisie," Sol's politicization takes place under the tutelage of her university peers: Soli (Solidaridad Soledad), a tried-and-true organizer and demonstrator, and Sol's *tokayo* (name-twin); Jed De Rivera Morga, Soli's daytime golden-boy lover whose pedigree and fortune are even more estimable and execrated than Sol's; Edwin Cordoza, the humorless fellow bookworm; and Ka Noli, the elder lecturer on the tactics of people's war. More inclined toward Evelyn Waugh, Henry James, James Joyce, and Gustave Flaubert, Sol is instructed to read Mao, Marx, Sun Tzu, Neruda, Che Guevarra, José Rizal, and books on Philippine history—"the history I had not been taught as a child." Clueless about campus life and public transportation alike, and discomfited by her distance from her mother's Waray and her father's Tagalog, Sol realizes that she "had grown up a stranger in my country, living in my parents' landscaped cocoon in Makati." Even as she emerges from that shell of illusions and recognizes that the "state of the country was enough to condemn me," her attitude toward activism never becomes solemn, and she mocks the extremes of ideological conversion and self-flagellation: "I guess I should beat my breast, retreat into an ashram, join the crucifiers of Pampanga and lash my body against a bloody cross, at the mere sound of my father's name." And while the others uncharitably deem her a mere "sympathizer with dim potential" and a "useful fool," Sol herself declares that she thought activism "was the one thing that would make me whole."

After a half-hearted stint of collecting copper five-centavo coins (which she later learns are for smelting into bullets) and embarking on graffiti adventures at night with the two-timing Jed, Sol is ultimately persuaded to help Jed seize a cache of high-powered arms from her father's warehouse when she is shown a photograph of beheaded, dismembered villagers—adults, children, babies.

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Edwin directs Sol's horrified vision to the corner of the picture where an automatic, sold to the government by her parents, is just visible. The government, he informs her, distributes the guns to the new "civilian militias" that brutally punish villages suspected of harboring rebels. (Marcos formed the Civilian Home Defense Force in 1972; Apostol references its later incarnation, Citizens Armed Forces Geographic Units [CAFGU]).

The culmination of Sol's political education and her attempt to heal her "split soul" is the targeting of Colonel Grier, a former POW in Vietnam and counterinsurgency specialist who embodies U.S. neocolonial influence in the Philippines. A cross between Edward Lansdale and *Apocalypse Now*'s (1979) Kurtz, Grier wrote his master's thesis on the Philippine-American War (1899–1902) and bases his military techniques on his study of "indigenous tactics." To Sol's dismay, he insists on using "those old colonial terms"—like calling the war an "insurrection." "That was our war of independence," Sol proclaims. Grier answers: "Which you lost.... We won." Grier's narrow view of the past—seeing history "only through a military lens"—so offends Sol that she not only desecrates his precious gold medallion inscribed with the commemoration "Philippine Insurrection 1899," but singles him out for assassination.

However justified Sol's hatred for the man, the consequences of the killing reveal the novel's rejection of the act. Tactically speaking, it backfires tremendously. Rather than undermine counterinsurgency training and implementation, it expands the practice: the police step up raids against activist, church, and student groups; the president demands "counterinsurgent funds" to fight the rebels; "vigilante groups with brand-new guns" proliferate. Ethically speaking, Sol descends into a remorseful madness when she discovers that innocent people—Soli, the passionate organizer, and Manong Babe, the dutiful driver—were framed by her family and killed by the very paramilitary forces that the group had hoped to weaken: all to save the rich and powerful from retribution. Jed's father whisks him away to safety, but Sol does not escape unscathed. Her attempted suicides and her anterograde amnesia signal her regret, her ongoing "mental self-punishment."

But what do these deleterious personal effects and the repetitive motion of history—the corrupt class structure remains in place decades after Marcos's ouster—say about the possibilities of revolution from above? Well before the assassination plot is revealed, Sol had foreshadowed their fate to Jed: "We live outside of the country's rules. We can do whatever we want. We can commit crimes. We can even play at revolution. We could kill people, for all we knew. And then in the end we will always get away. We're cockroaches. It's we who are the problem, Jed. Don't you see?" Does this mean that the elite can never be part of the "solution," as Jed insists, that their ability to "return to the lap of luxury" renders them ineffectual, counterproductive, suspect?

Though the novel doesn't hold out much hope for this class in the Philippines, Sol's diasporic presence in New York implicitly raises the question of the political orientation of post-1965, upper-middle-class Asian Americans and their descendants. What brings them/us to political consciousness? Does standing against the forces of U.S. empire that produce systems of transnational violence and economic disparity constitute acts of familial betrayal and ingratitude on the part of the second (plus) generation? To be sure, Sol's situation is hardly representative. Nonetheless, as the economic recession grinds on, unemployment rates remain high, debts accumulate, and mass uprisings continue to flare up in the Middle East, North Africa, and South America, the conditions are not entirely unripe for the financially fortunate to examine critically their (precarious) states of privilege. Surely, there are alternatives other than the ones proffered by Sol, who relishes in reiterating Kierkegaard: "Hang yourself, you will regret it; do not hang yourself, you will also regret that."

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