

Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints

Volume 65 | Number 2

Article 1

6-23-2017

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Jr. Aguilar

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Recommended Citation

Aguilar, Jr. (2017) "Editor's Introduction," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*: Vol. 65: No. 2, Article 1.

Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/phstudies/vol65/iss2/1>

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philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Editor's Introduction

Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr.

Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints
vol. 65 no. 2 (2017): 135–36

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Editor's Introduction

In 2010 Carlos Celdran summoned up the character of Padre Damaso in *Noli me tângere* in his solo act of objecting to church involvement in the debate on the Reproductive Health (RH) Bill. In turn, Celdran's act triggered a debate on the relationship between Damaso and Pia Alba, Maria Clara's mother, with one side asserting rape. In fact, in some classrooms, Damaso's rape of Alba is taught as a certainty—for, it is held, Spanish friars were a bunch of untrammelled evil. Caroline Sy Hau seizes on Celdran's act and the ensuing debate to underscore a basic point: "Rizal drew on an arsenal of rhetorical strategies—most prominently, multilayered allusion and the play of narrative reticence and revelation—and on shifting perspectives within the novels" (141). As Hau argues, the novelist's strategy of leaving certain things open to interpretation entices readers to speculate and comment on aspects of the novels, but they do so from their own perspective, enabling them to appropriate Rizal's works, draw meaning, assert conflicting views, and appreciate the novels' relevance despite the changing context. The dynamic of reticence and revelation invites discrepant readings.

Many readers of José Rizal's novels in the late nineteenth century considered them as constituting a manifesto for liberty and revolution. The novels inspired the Katipunan, an effect that Hau underscores was beyond Rizal's control. In 1956, when Congress passed Republic Act 1425, known as the Rizal Law, it assumed the novels would generate the same reading as they did in the 1890s and students who read Rizal's novels would necessarily and even inevitably imbibe nationalism. The law presumed that one canonical interpretation existed. Or did the law's proponents think that every generation would find something in Rizal's works to apply to its day and age?

Hau argues further that, amid the play of reticence and revelation, the novels' capacity to generate comment and action lends them their potential to conjure community and revolution, which has intellectual and political implications. Hau explores this potential of Rizal's novels in her discussion of Elias and Ibarra/Simoun as figures of liminality and ambiguity. Elias, for instance, grapples with the ethical dilemma of how to bring about social

change, preferring peaceful but radical reforms yet performing the very act of sacrificing his life and conjuring the possibility of people laying down their lives in a bloody struggle. Simoun, Ibarra's *nom de guerre*, not only embodies *filibusterismo*, combining images of freedom and terror, but his name also calls to mind a scorching desert wind, an untamable force that could obliterate culture but could also signify political upheaval. Both characters trigger what Hau calls "dangerous political fantasies" (175).

Although Hau had prepared her manuscript in two parts, which could be published separately, the editors of this journal decided to publish her article as one piece to allow readers to grasp the sum and significance of her argument in one sitting. We thank her for pruning the manuscript to its current length.

Merlinda Bobis's (2012) *Fish-Hair Woman* also deals with issues of violence and revolution, but Kit Ying Lye contends that the novelist deploys magical realism for a specific purpose: to represent the struggles and preserve the memories of residents of Iraya, a village caught between the state's military forces and communist insurgents during the Total War in the 1980s. In their struggle to survive, the villagers conjure the myth of the Fish-Hair Woman, who uses her hair to retrieve from the river the mutilated bodies of the disappeared and thus recover those obliterated by the counterinsurgency narrative. But, as Lye points out, not all stories could be told because ambiguity surrounds the disappearances and anonymity shrouds some of the recovered corpses. Yet, decidedly, the novel ends with the optimism of a new generation unaffected by the trauma of the Total War.

Trauma is one word that does not appear in the discourse of the Waray women who survived the onslaught of Typhoon Yolanda in November 2013. Chaya Ocampo Go analyzes these women's survival testimonies to show how they make meaning out of the disaster the typhoon spawned. Foremost of the women's strategies is the anthropomorphizing of nature when they speak of Yolanda as a sentient being who wills the vagaries of nature, thus making the super typhoon familiar and less fearsome than if it were conceived as something totally random and unknowable. In this sense, nature could not be allowed to remain reticent. Much like a novel, the typhoon has elicited multilayered interpretation and commentary. The ferocity attributed to Yolanda is mirrored in the ferocity, Go argues, that the women enacted to survive and recover from the disaster.

Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr.
Ateneo de Manila University