

Book Reviews

Interpreting Rizal

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Do We Really Need Another Rizal Book?

José Rizal, as the foremost hero of this country, is the most written about Filipino decades after he was martyred in 1896. The mandatory Rizal course since 1956 has flooded us with more and more textbooks on his life. With this mountain of textbooks on Rizal, it can be said that nothing new can be added to the general information that the Filipinos already know about the history of Rizal.

The recent milestone of the sesquicentennial of Rizal in 2011 did not generate a handful of new publications on Rizal, with the exception of perhaps Felice Prudente Sta. Maria's *The Foods of Rizal*. Among the authors who have recorded Rizal's life, Ambeth Ocampo is probably that one Rizal expert who has traveled around Europe and uncovered many Rizaliana hitherto unknown to many of us. These discoveries he discusses in his lectures—if published—will further reinforce things we already know about him.

The vast Philippine library on Rizal contains more than a mere record of his life. Through a paper based on the spy documents *Cuerpo de Vigilancia*, Rene Escalante more or less gave the final word on the validity of the Retraction documents. Two decades ago, Floro Quibuyen wrote a full book on how to reconcile Rizal and the Revolution, which Rizal seemed to be ambivalent about. These works by Escalante and Quibuyen chiefly discuss long standing controversies about Rizal.

In the recent past, other Rizal publications touched upon issues related to Rizal. To name a few, we have Nilo Ocampo's *Kristong Kayumanggi* on the Rizalist religions; the two collections of published Facebook discourses initiated by Zeus Salazar—edited by his young followers on the Rizal Monument and the Torre de Manila issue; and the concepts of heroism represented by Rizal and contemporaries. Even we, the young Knights of Rizal Sucesos Chapter, were able to compile two volumes of papers and speeches on Rizal. As this review was being written in 2018, two new Rizal publications came out: one on Rizal and his translations of the tales by Hans Christian Andersen, and a compendium of various Rizaliana called *Rizal+*, (edited by Krip Yuson), which was culled from art and essays from the recent past.

Without a doubt, each generation should be reintroduced to Rizal. The general outline of his life may no longer change (Rizal as text), but each generation can reinterpret the literature that Rizal created (Rizal's text). In the past few years, National Artist Virgilio S. Almario reintroduced us to

Rizal as a novelist and Rizal as a poet with two books. Reinforcing the idea that although Rizal is historical, we should treat Rizal's text as literature with a historical milieu and should be wary of the literary nuances of his work.

It is in this light that Caroline Hau's *Interpreting Rizal* should be seen as a contribution to the Rizal canon, as literary criticism, yet drawing from past and present contexts. The two chapters in the book were previously published essays in *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* and collected by the newly established Bughaw—an imprint of the Ateneo de Manila University Press for popular consumption—that will hopefully bring the life of Rizal to more students.

Hau's record as a literary critic and recorder of the past was established in *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946–1980*. She is also interested in the Pan-Asian connections as exemplified in her editing with Kasian Tejapira of the book *Traveling Nation-Makers: Transnational Flows and Movements in the Making of Modern Southeast Asia* and also in Hau's book *The Chinese Question: Ethnicity, Nation, and Region in and Beyond the Philippines*. Recently, she made scholarly works pertaining to the Ilustrados in Philippine History in her book *Elites and Ilustrados in Philippine Culture* and as co-editor of *Elite: An Anthology*. In *Interpreting Rizal*, it is as if all her previous scholastic interests converged.

To answer the question: “Do we really need another Rizal book?” we will look at the book vis-à-vis its usefulness to the teaching of the mandated Rizal course. The first chapter

in this unusually back to back book design, “Did Padre Damaso Rape Pia Alba?” may be of use in any class on Rizal as a supplementary reading to the novel, because it contains useful information about things that may be lost to the reader lacking any knowledge of the literary and historical contexts. This is the main problem in reading Rizal—even professional scholars are not always familiar with his mostly Western literary allusions. The chapter also summarizes and integrates many previous readings of the novels, providing a comprehensive review of many previous Rizal publications.

Although it is true that for the most part the teaching of the Rizal course is really about the historical context of the life and writings of Rizal, some think this should also be the case when looking at the fictional works of the hero. That is, instead of looking at the *Noli me Tangere* and the *El Filibusterismo* as literature, we teach it as if it was a factual representation of Spanish colonial times in the Philippines. In this way we look at the novels as factual, rather than something that is open to interpretation.

For the question “Did Padre Damaso Rape Pia Alba?” some would answer to the affirmative because that has been the usual assumption all through the years. For a majority of the readers, Padre Damaso has undeniably had an overtly “contravida” image and therefore couldn’t have done otherwise. The essay opens with an example of a controversial appropriation of Rizal for a recent political issue: when Intramuros performance artist Carlos Celdran,

wearing a Rizal costume, gate-crashed an inter-faith activity by Catholics and Protestants on the Bible attended by Filipino bishops, and displayed a sign with the name “Damaso” in protest of the Catholic Church’s stand against the Reproductive Health Bill. Mainly because of the Rizal course, “Damaso” is still a very potent political weapon—so powerful that someone from the church filed a case against Celdran for offending religious feelings.

Damaso may be a symbol of the Church meddling in politics and governance, but also because of Pia Alba, the continued exploitation of women is now made to reflect the prevention of women’s choices when it comes to reproductive health. The incident triggered a debate among the columnists of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* on the question posed in this review’s title. The debate among Michael Tan, Ambeth Ocampo, and John Nery is not only about the different methodologies on how to draw interpretations from literature but also underscored the fact Ocampo pointed out: the mandatory course on Rizal made students read not the novel itself, but summaries that made the ambiguities of each character lost to generations of students. To answer Tan, Ocampo asked, “Was Padre Damaso really that bad?” Sure, he was rude to Ibarra, but it was Padre Salvi who was evil. With this, Ocampo posits a different view: there could even be romantic love between Damaso and Pia Alba, whose husband Kapitan Tiago was just too busy with his business deals. Nery negated Ocampo’s claim by using

other passages from the novel that Pia Alba was not happy with what happened with her.

What is apparent here is that Hau was able to demonstrate that even in the novel itself, some of the mysteries were ambiguous at most, and what we actually have as “facts” about what happened in the novel are age-old stereotypes and assumptions being taken as gospel truth. Hau also suggests that this ambiguity that leads to speculation and commentary was in itself shown in the novel, of how “the crowd” or “the people” in the novel talk and act in certain situations.

Spot on, this view resonates with how my colleague Vicente Angel Ybiernas and I look at the phenomenon of the so-called “fake news.” We always argued that in many ways, the Propagandists were the precursor of trolls: they were trolling the colonizers to give us reform. Their weapons were the stories in their literature that was meant to inflame and arouse feeling for a certain political agenda. So instead of looking at the stories as history, they were really fictionalized for effect, just like today’s satire. Hau quotes Rafael on rumors in Rizal’s novels, “What distinguishes rumors is not their truth-value—for their nature as rumors is such they have none—but their social effects.”¹ We should never dismiss disinformation just because it is fake, because the fact that they are being shared in the first place

¹ Vicente Rafael, *The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 90.

says something about the real and actual sentiments and frustrations of those who share it.

One of the things demonstrated by the spread of rumors or disinformation is that it actually creates a sense of community for those who share it. For Hau, “Rumors, like gossip, are often self-serving, but they also function to promote cohesion and a sense of community among those who participate in rumor mongering.”² As I always say, Rizal helped create the Nation because he wrote these two fictions—the stories that contained therein actually solidifies that we have a common problem: colonialism. The narrative of our national liberation hinges, whether correctly or not, on the evil deeds of “the other” whom we are gossiping about. Aside from the fact that most Filipinos at that time did not read Spanish, the fictions of the novels were also spread by gossip.

Another thing that was explored in the first chapter or essay was Elias and Ibarra’s debate on how to go about changing society. There was a popular impression that Elias was wholly for a violent overthrow of colonialism but it appears that his stance was more nuanced and restrained. Alongside this were explorations regarding the origins of the meanings of concepts such as “*filibustero*” and even the name of “*Simoun*.” *Simoun* means “desert wind,” and by

² Caroline Hau, “Did Padre Damaso Rape Pia Laba? Reticence, Revelation, and Revolution in Jose Rizal’s Novels,” in *Interpreting Rizal* (Quezon City: Bughaw, 2018), 36.

this, Hau claims that the meaning of Simoun was to bring the winds of revolution from Europe to the country. That Simoun was actually an insular Spaniard born in the Philippines, or a “Filipino,” links him not just to the events of 1872 and the execution of the Gomburza, but to the tradition of Creole nationalism from the 1820s of Andres Novales and the Bayot brothers.

This is a key point of the essay. We historians have always pointed out that we should always contextualize the propaganda movement as a continuation of the reform movement of the 1820s, but this was always left out of the narrative. Zeus Salazar especially pointed out the example of Don Domingo Roxas, the rich don who co-founded the Ayala Corporation and was imprisoned thrice as a suspect for rebellion, as a pioneer nationalist even earlier than Rizal. Hau’s book reminds us that people see what they want to see when they read Rizal’s fiction. Those who advocated non-violence believe that Simoun was a warning against a violent revolution, while some stated that with the José Alejandrino anecdote (which was cited in the book) it was clear that Rizal advocated revolution only if its leader had the ethic of Elias—patriotic, disinterested, and selfless—and not the Simoun kind whose only motivation was revenge. As Rizal descendant Gemma Cruz Araneta said, *El Fili* shows us how “not to” wage a revolution.

Quibuyen, in his work entitled *A Nation Aborted: Rizal, American Hegemony, and Philippine Nationalism*, said that the American regime appropriated Rizal’s image and subverted

his revolutionary message so he could be the mascot of American education. Hau's *Interpreting Rizal* chiefly demonstrated how literary interpretation of Rizal's work—because many times it was ambiguous—can lead to many imaginations of who “the people” are, what “the nation” is, and who represents them. Zeus Salazar recently wrote that since the Propaganda Movement's goal was Hispanization, Rizal's idea of the Nation may not be the one that we know of today, but of a different kind: a nation and separate identity, but under the flag of Spain, just as Catalonia or the Basques are distinct nations all under Spain. Salazar had always differentiated Rizal's Western concept of Nation to Bonifacio's more indigenous and independent concept of Inang Bayan, which is more a cultural Nation rather than a political one. Salazar's fresh and learned perspective updates and strengthens that analysis. But the ambiguity of Rizal's literature may be the reason why Andres Bonifacio, despite his ambivalence towards the concept of Nation, appropriated Rizal for his revolutionary aims, and why the Spaniards actually convicted Rizal, believing that his writings were the soul of the rebellion to separate from Spain.

In the end, the chapter never answered the questions it posited, “Was Pia Alba raped by Padre Damaso?” and “Who are the people?” Rizal indeed created the Nation by his writings, but the Filipino people continue to interpret those ambiguities and shape how the Nation evolves based on their own understanding of nationhood.

The other half of the book—or rather the other side, written with Takashi Shiraishi—is in the tradition of Ben Anderson's trans-national discourse on the birth of nationalism worldwide, where Rizal loomed largely in his scholarship. Instead of posing a question, “Daydreaming about Rizal and Tetcho: On Asianism as Network and Fantasy” uses one little-known incident—when Rizal met a Japanese nationalist Suehiro Tetcho—to contextualize Rizal and his relevance to Asia, especially now as we try to integrate ourselves with our regional neighbors. We associate Rizal in our Rizal classes with the European enlightenment and European education, but novel is this approach of linking him with an Asian contemporary in the most direct way. Despite staying together as they sailed from Japan to the United States and then to London, these two heroes left little historical account of their time together, leaving us to imagine what ideas they could have shared.

We Filipinos know little about this meeting with this significant Japanese literary figure, because Rizal himself rarely talked about it. But because Tetcho wrote literary works that were culled by his travels and exaggerated as satire, he actually referred many times to Rizal: his character, his experiences, and his imagination of the Philippines. In his works, Tetcho embellished his Filipino hero with having Japanese descent—an imagination that the Japanese and Filipinos are brothers. He named his Filipino character with a Japanese name, Takayama, which incidentally is the name of Blessed Ukon Takayama, the Christian daimyo who fled

to Paco, Manila during the Tokugawa period. He mixes the experiences of Rizal and Ibarra in Takayama and identifies with his Filipino brother in wanting to bring down colonialism. This same rhetoric would be used by the Japanese fifty years later when they conquered the Philippines for the sake of a Greater East Asia against the West.

Through two essays, Hau demonstrated in this small but informative book the power of literature in taking us to other worlds and imaginations for a topic that seems so old and even perhaps worn-out. Teaching the Rizal course can be taxing and repetitive if you have been talking about the same old views for many years. Through Hau's book, we can add a fresh take on how to tackle our national hero. But more importantly, Hau's book is not just about Rizal and his continued relevance and freshness—it is also about our contemporary selves and how we are as a crowd. So, do we really need another Rizal book? If our heroes should be relevant in every generation, we should continue talking and writing about them. We should continue imagining them based on their contexts. But we should also allow ourselves to make them relevant to our present, so we could constantly reshape and understand the Nation they created.

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