

## THE FICTIONS OF NECESSITY

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### Abstract

Nationalism's great success as well as its great failure comes from the fact that it is an artefact of the mind that strives to imagine a closed society. In Charlie Samuya Veric's review of *Necessary Fictions*, he lays bare the implications of Caroline S. Hau's uncovering of the narratives of exclusion in the ways the nation is conceived in key Filipino literary texts. As Hau inquires into the problematic authorships of the fictions of nation, Veric, meanwhile, returns the problem of Hau's criticism of the idea of nationalism as a necessary fiction. Necessary, Veric asks, for whom? For what purpose?

### Keywords

Caroline Hau, literature and nationalism, *Necessary Fictions*, Philippine literary criticism

### About the Author

Charlie Samuya Veric completed his undergraduate degree in Comparative Literature at the University of the Philippines. With the help of a few good friends, he masterminds the critical directions of "sub/berso"—an interdisciplinary circle of students based locally and abroad. He has written for the *Philippine Collegian* and has contributed articles to *The Observer* and to the journal of the UP Center for Women's Studies. He is currently teaching with the Department of English, Ateneo de Manila University.

No other book of Philippine criticism fills one with so much sense of arrival than Caroline S. Hau's (2000) *Necessary Fictions*. Unimpeachably a book about literature and nationalism, *Necessary Fictions* grapples with difficult, and often unbidden, questions regarding how we imagine the living fictions of our nation. But alas—in fiction, as in life—one fiction told leaves out other fictions waiting to take form, waiting for forms with which to tell other silent, because silenced, fictions of nation.

The coming of Hau's book augurs the arrival of overdue questions that shake the foundations of our nation as embodied in the canon of Philippine literature. Whose invisible hand writes, Hau asks, the fictions of our visible nation? Hau looks for answers in the ways the nation is produced and consumed by social and cultural institutions that forge historical subjects willing to fulfill monumental sacrifices in the nation's name. More specifically, Hau takes pains to reexamine the foundational fictions of Jose Rizal, Amado V.

Hernandez, Kerima Polotan, Nick Joaquin and Mano de Verdades Posadas, among others, to find the spectral light of her question's resolution.

Certainly the nation's power to exact extreme benefaction from its people makes such imagination potentially violent. Violent because a community of people wanting to count in its members will necessarily count out other peoples and communities perceived to be potentially unruly. An understanding of this phenomenon necessitates the remembrance of the place of the Chinese, or lack of it, in the constitution of the Philippine nation. According to Hau, the Chinese serve not only as bogeys of Philippine nationalism but also as principal objects of vicious economic and political legislation (Hau 133-4). Moreover, Hau argues that the Chinese are historically and systematically made to embody the "foreign" and the "external" against which notions of the ethnic and the local in Philippine nationalism are defined in severe contradistinction (134).

What is ironic about such an embodiment, I must say, is the fact that the symbolically embodied Chinese so central to Philippine nationalism's formation are banished from the body of Philippine nationalism itself—their blighted bodies exiled from the very history of Philippine nationalism itself. Here, Hau's discussion of the tribulations of the Chinese is anguished, as it is equally urgent. Reading her chapter on nationalism and what she lovingly calls the "Chinese Question," one feels the wounded shadow of the author lingering among her own visionary words.

But, as Hau herself declares, this "is not mere quibbling over what ought to be included in history textbooks" (135). More fundamentally, Hau argues that "anti-Chinese racist discourse is in part shaped by the nationalist attempt to imagine 'the people' as a unity that takes precedence over social differences, when the very reality of the history of the nationstate serves to highlight these social differences" (137). Hau adds that "the selective inclusion and exclusion of the Chinese helped enable precisely a political community to be imagined as Filipino" (139). Philippine nationalism, in other words, betrays the Chinese as well as history by using history against itself.

Hau also sees traces of the same ambivalence toward the Chinese in Rizal's *El Filibusterismo*. In fact, Hau considers Rizal as "the best guide to the issue of the Philippine Chinese" (140). What is interesting about such a statement is the fact that, for Hau, Rizal and his works are magisterial when it comes to imagining not only the interior of Philippine nationalism but also its imagined and much maligned exterior. Intriguingly, Rizal's centrality haunts the other literary texts that Hau discusses in her book. Say the scene in Hernandez's *Mga Ibong Mandaragit* where the protagonist, Mando Plaridel, is being tested by an old revolutionary, Tata Matyas, on his knowledge of Rizal. Or, Posadas's

*Hulagpos* whose first circulation was titled *Huwag Akong Ipiit*, the Tagalog translation of *Noli me incarcerare* and an intertextual allusion to Rizal's *Noli me tangere*. In almost all of the chapters, Hau frequently returns to Rizal's works and ideas, like a tide torn between the moon and the earth.

Indeed, for Hau, Rizal is the founding figure of Philippine nationalism, and his *Noli me tangere* its founding text. Hau goes as far as suggesting that Rizal signifies the Modern whose modernity coincided with the modernity of the novel and nation as cultural artifacts (52). It is known, for example, that Rizal had a profound intellectual affinity with Europe. To illustrate, Germany was of particular importance for Rizal who called it his scientific homeland. In Rizal's analysis of Philippine conditions, according to Hau, "the 'modern' is primarily seen as external ... something that comes to the Philippines from the outside" (78). Hau contends that Rizal highlights the connection of the "modern" to the "outside" and that Rizal "looks to other countries, specifically to modern Europe, for the concrete embodiment of [his] ideals" (78). Disturbingly, the same motif is suggested in *Hulagpos* and *Mga Ibong Mandaragit*. By rehearsing the *Ilustrado* origins of nation and linking them with alternative and underground literatures like *Hulagpos*, one risks the error of perpetuating the dominance of *Ilustrado* narratives of nationalism. Thus, leaving out the real subjects and makers of history: the masses themselves. It seems to me that such an erasure is a trace of a symptom that inheres in Rizal's own failure to signify the "people." As Hau herself observes, "[s]ome readers may notice the relative paucity of attention Rizal devotes to elaborating the day-to-day life of so-called ordinary people (with the possible exception of Sisa), contenting himself with eavesdropping on their conversations" (90). It is richly ironic, therefore, that the multitudes that constitute Rizal's imagination of the Filipino nation are grasped solely by way of secret listening. And the single possible exception that is given space, Sisa, is doomed to suffer the speciousness of insanity. The "people" who embody the community end up being represented by the *Ilustrado* like Rizal as beings of a community who are not allowed to produce their beings for themselves. If Rizal's "literary feat of imagining a Filipino community is itself considered a characteristically *modern* gesture" (Hau 53), the same act, one may add, is at once Modernity's gesture of silencing the "people."

At this juncture, let me bring in the politics of knowledge production. It seems that for Rizal, the source of modernity—therefore that also of knowledge and power—is external, something that comes to the Philippines from outside. If it takes us *Necessary Fictions* in order to cement Rizal's reputation as the embodiment of modernity, as the creator of Philippine nationalism's master-text, does this mean that Hau's book is the

master-criticism of Philippine nationalism? To recall, Hau originally wrote the book at Cornell University as a dissertation. As Hau herself acknowledges, *Necessary Fictions* bears the ghostly imprint and imprimatur of Benedict Anderson—nationalism’s gorgeous theorist—who, in a correspondence with this author, described Hau as his most favorite student (Anderson).

In a 1998 review published in *Public Policy*, Hau coined the term “Cornell” school to refer to Filipino scholars educated at Cornell whose dissertations were all published by the Ateneo de Manila University Press (a friend, however, describes the coterie as the Cornell Mafia). Reynaldo C. Ileto, Vicente L. Rafael, Filomeno V. Aguilar, and most recently Hau, are all theoreticians of nationalism who benefited in one way or the other from the generosity of the Fulbright grants and Anderson himself. All these scholars of Philippine nationalism are now based in foreign universities.

Where, then, in the minds of American-educated scholars whose bodies grow ashen in the climate of distant shores do we locate Philippine nationalism and the Filipino people and the unfinished revolution? Without a doubt, the question of nationalism is ultimately a national one. Recognition of such is a comprehension of the ineluctable primacy of the nameless multitudes that move History. The project of the coming times, then, is to examine the fictions that self-exiled scholars of nationalism have imagined, for themselves, as the necessity of our people and community.

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