Kolum Kritika

MANUEL BLANCO’S EL INDIO AND THE HISTORY OF A RUMOR

Resil B. Mojares
University of San Carlos (Cebu)
mojares.resil@gmail.com

Abstract
The paper explores the social meanings that can be elicited from tracking the history of a rumor. It takes as its example the nineteenth-century apocryphal story of an Augustinian friar who labored for years on a treatise on the character of the Philippine native (indio) only to leave behind, upon his death, a book of blank pages. Tracing the origins and passage of the rumor and unpacking the various interpretations of the story, the paper demonstrates what can be gained from the study of rumors in Philippine history.

Keywords
colonial/anticolonial discourse, jokes, public opinion, rumor, science

About the Author
Resil B. Mojares is Professor Emeritus at the University of San Carlos in Cebu City, and has served as visiting professor in universities in Japan, Singapore, and the United States. His prize-winning books include Origins and Rise of the Filipino Novel (1979), Waiting for Mariang Makiling: Essays in Philippine Cultural History (2002), Brains of the Nation: Pedro Paterno, T.H. Pardo de Tavera, Isabelo de Los Reyes and the Production of Modern Knowledge (2006), and Isabelo’s Archive (2013). In 2013, he was conferred the Tanglaw ng Lahi Award by Ateneo de Manila University for his contributions to Philippine cultural studies.
IN THE PHILIPPINES IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY, a story was told that a Spanish friar was tasked by his order to write a treatise on the character of the Philippine native (indio). The friar secluded himself in a monastery and admonished his confreres that the book he was working on should be opened only after his death. When he died years later, the friars eagerly opened the *magnum opus* on which their brother had long labored, only to find that the book contained nothing but blank pages.

I tried to find out how and when this story originated. Though rumors are notoriously difficult to trace, I have thus far determined that this story was already in circulation by 1877 since Juan Alvarez Guerra, in his *Viajes por Filipinas* (1877), alludes to the story in a way that suggests it was already a well-told tale at the time (49). The story would be told and retold in the years that followed. In the way of rumors, the story of the blank book would be broken down or embellished, though we may never know what the “original” version was. The friar in the story would be identified as the Augustinian botanist Manuel Blanco (1779-1845) and his book would be described as a thick volume bound in vellum on the cover of which was inscribed the title, *El Indio*.

Why the story, and what is its message?

Relating the story in 1887, Wenceslao Retana says: “Silence, at times, says more than a thousand treatises: the wise Augustinian led the curious to understand that the Philippine native is an indefinable being, a blank book” (“El Indio Batangueño” 1). This a benign reading of the story; others would take it as a vicious libel that says the indio is a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, a vacancy, an emptiness. A theme of colonialist discourse already present in the early Spanish period, it would, by the second half of the nineteenth century, become a subject of acrimonious debate between Spaniards (particularly the friars) and an emerging “Filipino” intelligentsia. The story of the blank book could have originated as a friar’s malicious tale, knowing how Spaniards complained, whether in spite or exasperation, that the indio was a creature of contradictions, an enigma – or, in harsher terms, a being racially inferior, biologically deficient, and incapable of “civilization.” Typical was a nineteenth century Augustinian’s remark that the natives “can invent nothing, for they lack imagination and fancy, and are very obtuse in the abstract sciences because they lack understanding” (“The Friar Viewpoint” XLVI: 272-363). Or the Spaniard Vicente Barrantes’s comment in *Teatro Tagalo* (1889): “They waste their time those who search the histories of the Philippines for data that will show the intellectual capacity of the Tagalog race” (5). On the other hand, the story could have been invented by the early Filipino nationalists, who found the story useful to illustrate the friars’ ignorance about the country, and used it to inflame anti-friar sentiments. If they did not invent it, they clearly were the ones who benefitted the most from circulating it. T.H. Pardo de Tavera and Mariano Ponce, among others, would refer to the story to illustrate racist bias and colonialist malice. Pardo
roundly declared that the blank book did not demonstrate (as Retana said) the enigmatic character of the *indio* but “the incompetence of the [Spanish] observer.”

{3} If the story persisted, it was because it was, in many ways, quite perfect.

There is, for one, the purported author of the apocryphal book, Fray Manuel Blanco, a felicitous choice for protagonist for reasons other than his name, *blanco* (white, blank).

In his lifetime, Blanco was the paragon of the dedicated scholar. Intellectually curious about many things, he was a voracious reader who was learned in the sciences and meticulous in his work. He produced topographic charts of Philippine provinces, collected samples of Tagalog *dalit* poetry, translated Tissot’s popular medical treatise from French to Tagalog, and even wrote a manual on the use of weaving looms. Teaching himself botany by reading Linnaeus, he produced his masterwork, *Flora de Filipinas, segun el sistema sexual de Linneo* (1837), the first extended study of Philippine flora, in which he classified over a thousand plants according to the Linnaean method that inaugurated the modern binominal system of classifying plants according to structural relationships in their reproductive system.2 Blanco even had the manner and look of a scholar: reclusive and austere, dark-eyed and slightly built, with a balding pate and shoulders that stooped because of a spinal deformity. He was the perfect protagonist. If a scholar so dedicated and tireless could not find anything to say about the *indio* to fill even a page, then the *indio* must indeed be what others had said about him, a *tabula rasa*.

{4} Then there is the timing of the story. While the theme of a “people without history” goes back to the beginning of Spanish colonization, it would not become a bone of public contention in the colony until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Recall these surrounding facts. The promulgation of the Cadiz Constitution of 1812 triggered the first signs of reformist agitation in the Philippines. In the decades that followed, the intellectual climate, particularly in Manila, darkened with racial acrimony and political intrigue. For the first time, clandestine publications and anonymous pasquinades (*pasquin*) appeared, attacking the government and the monastic orders. Spanish observers, like the Franciscan Miguel Lucio and the colonial officer Sinibaldo de Mas, viewed with alarm the growing insolence of the natives. Mas wrote in 1842: “I have traveled among Turks, Egyptians, and Bedouins, without pomp nor escorts, and I can say that in no place have I been object of less respect and deference than in the Philippines” (“Report on the Condition of the Philippines” 121). In 1885, Lucio y Bustamante vehemently reacted to native demands for education, dismissing these demands by saying that the native did not have a capacity higher than what was needed for taking care of his carabao (17, 91). It was a time of bitter contestation on issues of racial superiority and native capacity. It was a time in which the tale of the blank book was useful. That Blanco was cast as the friar in the story fits the historical context. Blanco had won renown...
in intellectual circles after his *Flora de Filipinas* came out in 1837 and had retired around 1839 to the monastery of Our Lady of Guadalupe outside Manila (in what is now Makati), where he died eight years later, a few months before the second edition of *Flora de Filipinas* came out. I speculate that it was around this time, after Blanco's death in 1845, that the story was invented.

{5} There is more to the apocryphal *El Indio*, however, than its value in the propaganda war of the nineteenth century. Rumors are not taken too seriously in Philippine historiography, and historians use them mainly for illustrative or anecdotal purposes. Yet, there is a great deal that can be learned from a history of rumor in the Philippines.³

Rumors, after all, are eminently social. They travel in time, circulate in space, move quickly by word of mouth (moving easily between the spheres of orality and print) — and thus define a “community” of experience, sentiment, and frames of reference, shared as well as contested.

Rumors figure a social world. They are a distinctly urban phenomenon since they require a certain demographic density and mobility to acquire that scale, speed, and spread that distinguish rumor from simple gossip. As a mode of communication, they are (unlike, say, superstition and gossip) part of what constitutes or defines the Habermasian “public sphere,” though less the sphere of the cultured classes (that Habermas is concerned with) than its cultural or intellectual underground. They are sign and symptom of the emergence of a modern “public.” While rumors are fed by an appetite for novelty and amusement, it is important to stress that they can also be read as a claim to political knowledge. Rumors assume a particular importance in societies and times when there is a rising interest in public issues and people are eager to keep up with current events, but there is difficulty in procuring first-hand information, there is a lack of transparency in the powers that impinge on people’s lives, and there is a general state of uncertainty about what is true or false. In such a situation, inventing and spreading rumors become a form of “public opinion,” a way of asserting one’s right to hold and declare an opinion on what is happening. While the political knowledge that rumors convey may be untheorized and unformed, there is (to quote the historians Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel) “a deeper, unspoken truth seeking to take shape and substance by means of the power of rumor” (107). (It is for this reason that dictators, who know their business, are fearful of rumors and outlaw rumor-mongering.) Rumor was an active constituent of the social life of the Philippines (and in particular, of Manila) in the late nineteenth century. It is now difficult to track and map the circulation of talk, gossip, and rumors in the communication circuits of the time, marked by such sites and channels as cafes, taverns, gaming parlors, cockpits, race tracks, theaters, factories, shipyards, and churches. But it is clear that what was happening in these circuits, in the 1870s and 1880s, was essential in creating the mental groundwork for what would, in a matter of years, become a revolution.
Read the novels of Jose Rizal, or Gabriel Beato Francisco’s trilogy of novels (*Fulgencia Galbillo, Capitan Bensio, Alfaro*) – written “out of” the politically agitated 1870s though published only in 1907 – and one gets a kinetic feel for how so much of the nervous system of nineteenth century Philippine society was quickened by such communicative forms as gossip and rumors.

{6} The story of *El Indio* is part of this nineteenth century climate of subversion. It is overtly political, one that carries essential information about the identity of the victim (the *indios*) and the enemy (the Spaniard, particularly the friar), in a story that, whether true or false, was familiar, credible and sufficient in itself to incite reaction.

But then one should also point out that it is a rumor with its own character, origin, and trajectory. Not all rumors are the same. The tale of the blank book is not in the same order as the rumor on the eve of the revolution that Jose Rizal was in Mt. Makiling to seek the blessings of the mythical hero Bernardo Carpio, or that Rizal did not die in the field of Bagumbayan in 1896 but had gone to Mt. Banahaw to join the martyred Fr. Jose Burgos. The Blanco story is distinctly bourgeois, literate, and male, one that foreshadows the social composition of what would emerge as the Propaganda Movement. One imagines it told in the *tertulias* (soirees) and secret Masonic gatherings in private homes, or by politically restless students at the Ateneo and in Santo Tomas and by the anti-friar firebrand Marcelo del Pilar in his speeches in the cockpit of Malolos.

Rumors, lies, fabrications, “what did not happen”: these are as constitutive of history as “facts” and “actual events.” To the extent that they change how people view the world and act in that world, for better or for worse, they make history. (We only have to remember how the epidemic of jokes and rumors played such a vital part in eroding and bringing down the Marcos dictatorship in 1986, as well as the ouster of President Estrada in 2001.)

{7} I am attracted however not only to the problem of rumor and its role in history but the elements of the story itself. The tale of the blank book strikes me as so archetypal that I would not be surprised if somebody tells me later on that in fact this story has its versions in Latin America, Africa, and places where Western knowledge came face to face with local realities that could not be deciphered.

The critic George Steiner has said that imagined or imaginary works trace a void that is itself quite eloquent about what is left unsaid or unrecorded in our history. Writing of the seven books he thought of writing but never did, in *My Unwritten Books* (2009), Steiner says:

A book unwritten is more than a void. It accompanies the work one has done like an active shadow, both ironic and sorrowful. It is one of the lives we could have lived, one of the journeys we did not take. (i)
What Steiner says about the books he did not write can be said as well of the unwritten in a nation's history. The lost and the apocryphal limn the empty spaces of our literature, and excite us with the possibilities of the what-could-have-been-written.

{8} What new meanings can be teased out of the story of the blank book if we take it seriously, and assume it to be factual? (Call this the textual analysis of an empty page.) That Blanco, the friar-naturalist, is cast as the character in the story is extremely felicitous. If a scholar of such analytical abilities as Blanco could not find anything to say about the indio, was that not a proof that the indio was indeed a vacancy, an emptiness? Or is the blank page a woeful confession that after two centuries and more, there was indeed so much about the land and its people the Spaniards did not know? Consider the choice of a naturalist and taxonomist as author of an anthropological treatise on the character of the indio. What does it say that a reclusive classifier of plants would be chosen to write about the “Filipino”? Does this insinuate the dark malice that reduces the native to the category of something less than human, a phenomenon of nature, like plants? Or does it mock the naïveté of the colonizer’s claim of a superior “science”? With what taxonomic means (Linnaean rather than Borgesian) can one render a creature that refuses the stillness of a botanical specimen? Recall how Jorge Luis Borges playfully mocks the arbitrariness of classificatory systems, with a story about a Chinese encyclopedia that divides animals into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerous ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel’s hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance (101-05). How does one begin to classify and name a people?

{9} Consider other lines of narrative tension. Father Blanco lived in a time of confusion, dark with the intimations of disaster. In 1820, a cholera epidemic triggered riots in Binondo and the indiscriminate murders of foreigners, fed by the rumor that foreigners had poisoned Manila’s wells. Rumors of coups and conspiracies played out in the Creole-led revolts of 1822-23. In 1841 (when Blanco was in the Guadalupe monastery, “writing his book”), Manila was in a state of alarm over mass arrests and massacres as the authorities moved to suppress the subversive confraternity of the rural prophet called Hermano Pule. What did Blanco think of the state of the colony at the time? A reclusive scholar, he said that he devoted himself to the study of plants out of curiosity. Yet, he was undoubtedly aware that there was a religious purpose to his taxonomic labors as well, to reveal (as natural theology teaches) the underlying system and orderliness in all of God’s
creation. If so, what did Blanco make of the growing signs of social disorder in the colony at the time? We do not have a record of the political views (if he expressed any) of this modest and austere missionary but one speculates that he must have had an independent streak in him. After all, he chose to study plants according to Linnaeus’s *sistema sexual* – that looked at stamens and pistils in the sexual act of pollination, with the pollen the sperm and the seeds the ova – a theory that his conservative colleagues must have viewed, if not heretical, rather obscene. (I imagine – if I am going to write this story – Blanco’s colleagues telling scurrilous jokes, explaining his absences from the convent by saying that the good Father Blanco was out in the fields observing plants copulating.) Is the blank book then one disillusioned friar’s confession and indictment of the failure of the colonial project?

{10} You might object by saying that these are clever, present-day speculations on a nineteenth century text or non-text. Did those who invented and spread the story of the blank book see inscribed in the story the meanings I have just explored? It does not really matter. What is more important than what was “originally” intended in an oral tale or rumor are the meanings it gathers as it is told and retold. The story of Manuel Blanco’s *El Indio* is the stuff of speculative, conjectural, or alternative history – or, better yet, a novel. But to label it thus does not make it less important as a “text” in Philippine history, one that is eloquent, even profound, in the ideas it insinuates about the human drama that is history. Let me close by citing what the eminent Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg has said: “The historian’s craft (and, in a different way, the poet’s) involves something that is part of everyone’s life: untangling the strands of the true, the false, and the fictive.” But the aim of this untangling is not simply to choose one and reject the others but to see the intimate relations of the true, the false, and the fictive, and to appreciate that together they are “the substance of our being in the world” (6).
Notes

An expanded version of an article that appeared in the author’s *Isabelo’s Archive* (Manila: Anvil, 2013), 101-04, this was presented at the Kritika Kultura Lecture Series, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, 26 July 2013.


2. *Flora de Filipinas* was first issued by the University of Santo Tomas printery in 1837, and a second edition was produced in Manila in 1845. A third edition was printed in six volumes in Manila and Barcelona in 1877-1883.


6. On the subject of the unwritten, also see Enrique Vila-Matas’ *Bartleby & Co.*, a novel the author calls “footnotes to an invisible text,” which tells the stories of writers who do not write or have inexplicably stopped writing.
Works Cited


