

# philippine studies

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

---

**On the Subject of the Nation: Filipino Writings  
from the Margins, 1981-2004  
by Caroline S. Hau**

Review Author: David Jonathan Y. Bayot

*Philippine Studies* vol. 56, no. 3 (2008): 359–363

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>

# Book Reviews

CAROLINE S. HAU

## **On the Subject of the Nation: Filipino Writings from the Margins, 1981–2004**

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2004. 334 pages.

“Can the subaltern speak?” Caroline S. Hau’s work “on the subject of the nation” displays her command of contemporary critical discourse. Yet in her deft rhetoric resounds Gayatri Spivak’s unsettling question. Such a question inevitably insinuates itself, as Hau explores topics and tropics of inquiry homologous to the collective project and politics of *Subaltern Studies*. The scholars affiliated with this endeavor (headed by Ranajit Guha since 1982) have performed a materialist, deconstructive, and, thus, revisionist historiography of India.

Hau’s critical project and her assiduous scholarship bear a good family resemblance to the South Asia/India project. *Subaltern Studies* seeks to consolidate what Antonio Gramsci would call a “state” for the subaltern group to speak and to do so in defiance and *différance* of a history that has silenced and interpellated the Other as such on a literal “non-identical” basis of gender, class, and social/ethnic groups within the Order of things. And it is evident that Hau embraces this same parameter of concern, expressing it in unambiguous terms in the subtitle of her book: “Filipino writings from the Margins, 1981 to 2004.”

Hau’s excursion as an organic intellectual takes a deconstructive trek from institutional(ized) Philippine history, through “the dense entanglement of the personal and political in the writings produced over a twenty-

four year period spanning the final years of the Marcos dictatorship . . . to Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, and the various conflicts . . . that gave rise to the Communist armed struggle, the Moro separatist movements, and Edsa Dos and Tres” (1), and arrives at Other territories, foregrounded in the book as the constituent and reinscriptive forces contextualizing the sign and the signifying event that is the Filipino nation. The nation and its eventful/eventual narration are, here, strategically configured as a text “marked by deep-seated political instability, economic inequality, and social crisis” (1).

The reinscriptive gesture that Hau performs on the Filipino nation as a material(ized) “imagination” in the mode of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” (with its transgressive underscoring of plurality) logically leads to a reevaluation of this “subject” of the nation. The “subject” is, in the first place, posed as a discursive subject/topic of inquiry, and the “given” categorical space for the topic is an ideological site/choice (from among other sites/choices) from where the discourse is articulated. It “seeks to unpack the assumptions which inform the idea and practice of nationness, and . . . takes the nation as its object of inquiry or topic” (6). In the second place, the “subject” is “about subjectivity and subjectification, about ways of producing an enunciating and experiencing body; ways of understanding, addressing, and constructing selfhood; about how one comes to identify herself and live, speak, and act as a national subject and agent of history” (6).

In this initiative for and embodiment of “another” narration of the nation, Hau has made a bold stride in/on behalf of the paradigm of Philippine “literary” studies by breaking the frame of conventional literary genres. She “takes up both fictional and nonfictional works, mining their rich lode of techniques, subject matter, and narrative voices to uncover insights into Philippine realities and sensibilities” (7). The “noncanonical” and “nonliterary” texts—as Hau admits them to be such—include a Chinese semiautobiographical novel by Bai Ren, *Nanyang Piaoliuji* (Adrift in the Southern Ocean, 1983); a personal account by Robert Francis Garcia of the purges and “excesses” in the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), *To Suffer Thy Comrades* (2001); an autobiography of a respected leader of labor and revolutionary organizations by Cesar Hernandez Lacara, *Sa Tungki ng Ilong ng Kaaway: Talambuhay ni Tatang* (On the Tip of the Enemy’s Nose: Diary of Tatang, 1988); a collection of fiction and poetry, *Kung Saan Ako Pupunta* (Where I am Going, 1993), by CPP and New People’s Army activist and warrior Zelda Soriano; a novel by Filipino-American Peter Bacho, *Cebu* (1991);

and an autobiographical and ethnographic account by an “illegal” worker in Japan, Rey Ventura, *Underground in Japan* (1992).

Hau devotes a chapter to each of these “under-read” texts, reading them in the light of a national theme and its problematic in the (auto-)critical narrative race against hegemony. In the chapter on Bai Ren, Hau addresses “the question of foreigners” and seeks in the text “a redefinition of the basic conceptions of loyalty, belonging, labor, and love that underpin commonsensical as well as scholarly notions of nationalism” (8). In the second chapter, Hau directs Garcia’s narrative along the notions of textual production, critical reception, and “semantic excess”—all in relation to “the mediating role of experience.” The third chapter on “autobiography and history” positions Lacara’s text along the polemic line “that telling the nation’s ‘life story’ is an intrinsic aspect of constituting the nation as a form of community” (9). The chapter on “engendering the revolution” strategically mobilizes Soriano’s “literature” together with the “fatal” traits of “anxiety and sacrifice” in Jose Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere* to account for “the specificity of women’s activism and contribution to the theorizing and creation of new forms of sociopolitical and artistic intervention in Philippine society” (10). The chapter on Bacho’s *Cebu* provides an intertextual representation of the “feminine/Philippine,” thus “conjoining two symbolic processes—the process of differentiating geopolitical and cultural spaces in the form of nations, and the process of differentiating gender by ascribing specific attributes to women” (10). The final chapter on “nation and migration” takes “the life, labor, and discourse of the OFW” as a critical interrogative against the “official” discourse of the Philippine government, as well as a categorical imperative toward the redefinition of the Filipino nation: “the lived experience of nation and belonging to a national community” (11).

The book’s thematics of “the personal and political” and “the lived experience of nation” echo Spivak’s question about the subaltern. In the context of this question and Spivak’s controversial negative reply one finds Hau’s book—its “reiterative” and “representative” value—a critical force of intervention in the narration of the Filipino nation. For Spivak the subaltern is “irretrievably heterogeneous,” and to speak *about* it as an organic, unmediated, and essential(ized) entity is to run the risk of speaking *for* it and for its eventual effacement. Moreover, in speaking on the subaltern’s behalf, one may only be attributing the critical role of political agency to the subaltern subjects; they would appear to “speak” where they were merely “talking,”

the subaltern having been, in the first place, discursively positioned to such performance of subjectivity.

Hau's representation of the subaltern dramatizes its heterogeneity (as her choice of texts indicates). Such "representation"—modally interrogative and autocritical, though not at the expense of stylistic lucidity—is certainly conscious of the two senses of the term, as her notes indicate: representation simultaneously as an act of speaking for another, "political representation" (a *Vertretung*), and representation as an act of giving a portrait of that which one is representing (a *Darstellung*). Thus "heterogeneity" (of class, gender, race, and their material dynamics) is posed in this writing in/on history—this historiography—not merely as a general, empirical "given" with its appearance as a naïve claim to objectivity. Rather, "heterogeneity" is significantly foregrounded in the way the book directs its attention cogently to the textual specificity of these "noncanonical" and "nonliterary" texts as it "explor[es] the multifarious ways in which narrating the nation and narrating the self draw on a set of *literary conventions* . . . to construct their [the subjects'] . . . interlocking 'experiences'" (7; italics added). In the context of subaltern representation and the terms of complicity it poses to the organic intellectual, the book performs a significant hermeneutic move of underscoring "the complex, lived dimension of nationness, and with *the representational strategies for depicting, decoding, and ultimately deconstructing 'experience'*" (7; italic added). Given the choice of texts—autobiographical, ethnographic, and deterritorialized—and their generic association with the Real, the book overrides the receptive disposition accorded to what Catherine Belsey calls "expressive realism," and has done so without taking its toll on "experience" by "highlight[ing] the specific ways and contexts in which the individual and the collective, and the connections between them, are constituted in theory and practice, and shows how narratives can play an important role in theorizing and realizing these connections while offering ways of working through their often fraught relationship" (7).

"Can the subaltern speak?" Hau's book on "Philippine Studies" as a field of academic study—the versatility of her appropriation of a wide range of discourse theory and historiography, evident in her choice of texts and in the hermeneutic strategies she wields—is an insightful, cogent, and valuable affirmation articulated in the space between "positivist essentialism" (Spivak) and the moral/political category of agency and counterhegemony. And the book, given its polished magnitude, is likewise invaluable to the

"national quest" in the broad sense of the term, as it "reiterates" the subaltern question: Can the subaltern speak—this time or maybe next—in another tongue and in another woods or jungle, beyond the alluring academic tropes before it gets petrified again as another subject? Hau's project on the subject of the nation is certainly a projection of a utopian vision, and it is positively such that it reaches toward what Ernst Bloch would term the *Noch-Nicht* (Not-Yet).

**David Jonathan Y. Bayot**

Department of Literature  
De La Salle University-Manila  
<djbayot@yahoo.com>

LUCIANO P. R. SANTIAGO

## **To Love and To Suffer: The Development of the Religious Congregations for Women in the Spanish Philippines, 1565–1898**

Foreword by M. Maria Clarita R. Balleque, RVM  
Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2005. 275 pages.

A history of women in the Philippines is not complete without the religious component, ranging from the precolonial *catalonan* or *babaylan* to the present-day nun, whose Catholic beginnings we can trace back to the *beata* of the seventeenth century. *Beatas*, literally meaning "blessed women," were, by definition, laywomen who lived saintly lives but were not nuns. Native women *indias* were not allowed to become nuns; hence, they either lived as *beatas* in solitude or among their own families, formed their own *beaterios*, or joined the Spanish nuns in the convent as *beatas*.

This book unfolds three centuries of the *beata's* struggle for recognition and authority in her own domain, in the process forging opportunities and opening doors for all women in various sectors of Philippine society today. At the outset this may sound highly paradoxical, as the traditional image of the nun is one who lives an enclosed life dedicated solely to serving God. But, as the author offers us a cursory look at the histories of seventeen religious communities for women, we also glimpse the spectrum of social institutions and influences that they established and that live on to this day. Drawing on sources both primary and secondary, found in both local and foreign