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The Mass Miracle Public Religion in the Postwar Philippines

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The Mass Miracle **Public Religion in the** **Postwar Philippines**

From November 1948 to March 1949, petals of roses fell from the sky on the grounds outside of a Carmelite convent in the town of Lipa, Batangas. The petals and stories about them circulated at local, national, and international levels, giving rise to a variety of interpretations of their significance. This article examines the rose petals of Lipa as both a phenomenon to be mediated and a medium in its own right, in order to propose the need to rethink the common category of “popular religion.”

**KEYWORDS: RELIGION • CATHOLICISM • THE MASS MEDIA • MIRACLES •
TRANSNATIONALISM**

The paradigm of “popular Catholicism,” often also called “folk Catholicism,” has been one of the most enduring paradigms for the study of Filipino Catholic practices and beliefs. The category appeared as early as 1965 in Filipino Jesuit professor Jaime Bulatao’s (1992, 12–22; cf. *ibid.*, 72–78) essay “A Social-Psychological View of the Philippine Church”; before that, the thesis that Filipino Catholicism was fundamentally syncretic was elaborated in the conjunctive ideas of “Hispanizing the Philippines” and “Philippinizing Catholicism” put forth by John L. Phelan (1959) in his classic work, *The Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses*. David R. Sturtevant’s (1976) *Popular Uprisings in the Philippines, 1840–1940* and Reynaldo Ileto’s (1979) revision of Sturtevant’s history from the perspective of vernacular sources, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910*, brought “folk Catholicism” to a whole new level, as the primary idiom through which discontent and resistance to Spanish colonial rule could be articulated. Found in book titles, buried in footnotes, or subtly present in the theoretical underpinnings of many ethnographies of Filipino Catholicism, the category and its concept have persisted.¹

Yet, while there is no doubt that religious syncretism has been an empirically robust outcome of the history of conversion to Christianity in the Philippines or that in times past and recent Christianity has provided the idiom for a radical reenvisioning of the social order, in my own research on twentieth-century Marian movements I often have had a difficult time squaring the “folk Catholic” model with what I have encountered in the field or in the archives. The communities and actors in these Marian movements may be better described as the opposite of all that the “folk Catholic” presumes to entail: urban instead of rural, middle and upper class instead of poor, orthodox (or interested in orthodoxy) instead of syncretic, and more apt to engage and contribute to globally circulating practices and discourses of Marian devotion instead of highly localized. Here one begins to sense the problem with the “popular” or “folk” category in that it has a bifurcating, encoding, and even performative effect: it is that against which “orthodox” or “official” religion stands. This bifurcation of “popular Catholicism” and its other—or “popular Catholicism” *as* an other—allows little room to examine, say, devotional and doctrinal negotiations between the institutional church

and the laity or the religiosity of what we would be forced to call awkwardly the “nonfolk.”

This article is part of a larger effort on my part to rethink more generally the category of “popular religion” as the rubric beneath which designations like the “folk” would fall. This effort entails critically engaging to some degree both the terms “popular” and “religion,” but I will leave aside the latter term, which deserves discussion in another venue, and focus here on the phrase itself as it has served many a scholar (Filipino and not) as analytical shorthand. As the historian of American Catholicism Robert A. Orsi (2010, xxx–xxxii) has argued, to speak in terms of “popular religion” is to move toward a “dead end,” to “seal off certain expressions of religious life from an unspecified but obviously normative ‘religion’ (without the qualifier *popular*).” While the critique of this specific category may be relatively new (even if the usage of this category in scholarly discourse dates back at least to the writings of Max Weber), the critical stance it entails is not. This stance is one of wariness toward any term that appears to render normative that which is not or, more pointedly, exists as a vestigial mode of colonial thinking that divides people, beliefs, and practices into the modern and the unmodern, the rational and the irrational.

So with this brief introduction and by way of the present article I hope to propose some alternatives to the popular model of “popular religion” by examining one case of a supernatural phenomenon from the period after the Second World War in the Philippines. This phenomenon sits uneasily between the categories of the “folk Christian” and its implicit other, Catholic orthodoxy. It takes place in a setting that is at once urban and provincial, and the conditions that surround the phenomenon are both irreducibly local and embedded in transnational networks of institutions and circulating ideologies. If it is “popular” it is so in the broadest sense of the term, that is, of pertaining to the people, across a wide swath of socioeconomic classes, and not only the elite (although it also includes the elite). But it is not popular in the sense that is commonly rendered as coterminous with the oppressed, and usually rural, “masses.” Instead the miracle I am about to describe precipitated a “mass movement” of a different sort, a kind of spontaneous spectacle attended by people from all walks of life that owed itself, in many ways, to the mass media, and that therefore engendered that peculiar, if commonplace, entity known as a “public.”

Petal Showers, the Press, and Anticommunism

In November 1948 showers of rose petals fell from the sky on the grounds outside of a Carmelite convent in the town of Lipa, Batangas. These showers were only the most spectacular of several extraordinary occurrences, which began in September of that year when the Virgin Mary, announcing herself as “Mary, Mediatrix of All Grace,” appeared to a young novice in the cloister.² Rose petals were also found inside the convent in the weeks following the fifteen consecutive days of Mary’s appearance to the young Carmelite, but it was only once the petals appeared outside the cloister walls that the miracles were transformed into a truly public phenomenon. Over the course of several months the petals and stories about them circulated and proliferated at a national and international level. By the time the showers ceased at the end of March 1949, petals had fallen on no fewer than fifteen separate occasions.

The first news of the showers of rose petals appeared on 17 November 1948, in the newly resurrected *The Manila Times*. *Times* editor Jim Austria (1948a) wrote of his visit to the nunnery in a report that strikes a dramatic tone. In this article Austria painted a picture of stark juxtapositions: the gloomy and dark severity of monastic claustration set against the exquisite and delicate petals falling from the sky, out in the open. Hardly veiling his own bafflement at the shower of petals that “fell in graceful swirls straight down, almost like a drizzle, to a single spot” in front of him, he wrote of what he witnessed and of his interactions with the Mother Superior as if he were reporting from exotic and alien territory, “miles away from the roar of the printing presses” (ibid., 14).

Yet it was precisely owing to the printing presses that the miraculous showers came to be known, as little word of the apparitions and petals had traversed the confines of Carmel prior to Austria’s article. As the showers of petals increased in frequency, Austria and others continued to report in the *Times* on the swell of pilgrims coming first from Manila and then from places farther away in the archipelago (see photo on p. 429). Among the first of the pilgrims to arrive were a coterie of elite Catholics from the nation’s capital led by Aurora Quezon, former First Lady of the Philippines. A few days after that, “notables” of the Philippine government, including the chief justice of the Supreme Court, the secretary of agriculture, and the director of the Philippine Relief and Trade Rehabilitation Administration, “braved the rain to eyewitness the ‘miracle of the roses’” (*Manila Times* 1948a, 14).

As the phenomenon of the showers of petals grew, the *Times* became not only a constant source of reportage but also a forum for witnesses and skeptics to testify to what they had seen, failed to see, or had seen and not believed. In this forum we observe the kind of reflexive discourse that some theorists have claimed is the hallmark of a public as engendered by the circulation of texts (Warner 2002, 49–90). In an article headlined “Shower of Roses in Lipa Convent Interests Scientists, Educators,” for example, *Times* reporter Jim Austria (1948b, 4) dedicated half of his story to a word-for-word statement submitted to the paper by Salvador Araneta in response to a previous article in which Araneta appeared. In another article, Francisco Villanueva (1948,



Thousands of devotees yesterday continued to flock at the nunnery of Carmel in Lipa City to witness the occasional shower of the roses from nowhere. In the picture are seen three enthusiastic spectators climbing up the nunnery building to reach a couple of petals (pointed by arrows) on the awning. Yesterday's crowd included high government officials and well-known Manila residents who are still baffled by the “miracle” of the roses.

Photo of the crowd of devotees that accompanied the news about the Lipa rose petal showers that appeared in the 22 Nov. 1948 issue of the *Manila Times* (1948a, 14)

4) wrote of his investigative visit to Lipa and interview with the Mother Superior and a few Lipa officials, “gathering materials for my books.” Just a few months later, the only book-length manuscript contemporaneous with the miraculous events, Villanueva’s (1949) *The Wonders of Lipa*, came out in print. It drew much of its evidence in turn from those articles that had appeared in the *Times* in the first several weeks of the petal phenomenon. And would that that might complete the discursive circle, a brief notice appeared in the *Times* announcing the publication of the book in May 1949 (*Manila Times* 1949e, 3).

Anyone familiar with the twentieth-century Philippines will notice that many of the people mentioned and contributing to the newspaper coverage bear the surnames associated with some of the country’s wealthiest families and political elite. The observations articulated by this particular public were thus specific to their concerns and interests. Those interests were highly topical to a national scene, which at that moment was dominated by the Huk rebellion, a peasant-based uprising that grew out of the Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon (People’s Anti-Japanese Army) and became a communist-led movement in the postwar period. Not surprisingly, then, participants in the reflexive discourse in the *Times* emphasized what they interpreted to be the anticommunist message of the apparitions and miracles. The article “Chief Justice and Noted Scientist Convinced Petal Shower A Miracle,” for example, claimed that Dr. Manuel L. Roxas (not to be confused with the president of the same name, who died almost one year prior), described as a “well-known Filipino scientist,” believed that “the apparition is a warning or a message to the people to beware of communism,” that “the ‘enemy of God and the people’ is rapidly advancing to our shores,” and that this was comparable to the “similar ideology” that threatened Europe in the times of Mary’s appearances at Lourdes and Fatima (*Manila Times* 1949b, 4). In a subtler, Durkheimian tone, yet one no less framed by Cold War rhetoric, in this case of race, US-trained Filipino professor of political science Maximo Kalaw said that “when so many worthy people believe in such a thing . . . there must be something to it”; he went on to call the miracle the first of its kind in a “brown world” (*ibid.*).

Casting the Lipa miracles beneath the rubric of anticommunism was one way in which the phenomenon of the petal showers was understood. In this sense the fanaticism on display in the *Times* forum was very much ideological and drew its anticommunist line from the Catholic Cold War

that was propagated on a global scale but devised primarily by followers in the United States. Indeed the interest in Lipa and its possible anticommunist meaning was not limited to the Philippines; the American press coverage of the Lipa miracles deployed unremittingly a Cold War framework to the apparitions and miracles of Lipa, linking them to those at Fatima, Portugal, as divine sanctions to take up the fight against communism.³ In fact, in 1949 and 1950 the Lipa miracles became a pet topic for anticommunist crusaders on the American Catholic talk circuit from Biloxi, Mississippi, to Santa Fe, New Mexico, whose speeches were announced and covered by local dailies nationwide in addition to the Catholic press.⁴

This is not to say, however, that the events unfolding in Lipa only captured the political elite’s attention, as less socially and politically prominent people arrived too in droves, coming by the car and busload. Students, aid workers, families, as well as parish, civic, and artist groups organized themselves to travel from as far as the Visayas to make up what on some occasions amounted to upward of 30,000 eager watchers on the convent grounds (*Manila Times* 1948c, 1949a). The sense of the heterogeneous crowd was conveyed in one description of the scene that appeared as part of a long feature about the Lipa miracles in the long-standing and widely read Tagalog-language magazine *Liwayway*, published over several issues in December 1948 and January 1949: “Ang harapan ng kumbento ay punumpuno ng mga tao, babae at lalaki, bata at matanda, mahirap at mayaman, may titulo at wala, may magagandang dalaga at ginang at may mga hindi kagandahan” (The front of the convent was full of people, women and men, young and old, poor and rich, those with titles and those without, beautiful women and those not so beautiful) (d’Alarcon and La Vida 1948a, 55–56).

For these masses, according to the *Liwayway* article, the experience of the miracles was one of multisensorial dimensions: of close surveillance (*nagmamatyag*); of inhaling what seemed like the fresh fragrance (*nakalanghap ng tila sariwang bango*) of flowers; and of being caught up in the commotion when petals fell and the crowd scrambled to catch them (*kaguluhan at pag-aagawan sa mga talulot*) (*ibid.*). *Liwayway*’s intrepid reporters Rafael d’Alarcon and Dominador La Vida put readers right in the middle of the crowd during a shower of petals that took place one Saturday in November 1948.

By some contrast to *The Manila Times*, this Tagalog-language source covered the miracles in a way that appealed to the interests and sensibilities of

its mass audience. In addition to giving a richer sense of being there than *The Manila Times* coverage had, *Liwayway*'s authors took great care to provide details about the physical conditions surrounding the event, from the position of the convent windows (cracked open or shut tight?) to the direction of the breeze. Clues added up (or did not add up) for the authors, and evidence mounted, as they interviewed witnesses and attempted to obtain a petal for their own investigation, at one point even by offering money. As in *The Manila Times*, however, the authors of "Himala ng mga Talulot ng Rosas" (Miracle of the Rose Petals) were self-reflexive about their own enterprise as reporters. They made reference to how they themselves asked questions, stating that they simply wanted to "be true to the events according to what really happened" (*mailagay sa katumpakan ang mga pangyayari nang alinsunod sa talagang nangyari*) (d'Alarcon and La Vida 1948b, 4). Unlike *The Manila Times*, however, the feature occasionally veered into a tone that would clearly appeal to their mass audience: in addition to opening the article in a style somewhat resembling true crime, they dedicated a considerable number of columns to the young novice Teresita Castillo, inquiring after her social standing and what kind of student she was, talking about her love for playing piano, and even musing at one point on the significance of the fact that she was born on the fourth of July.

Even though the *Liwayway* feature appeared more at liberty to have been written to vernacular sensibilities, however, it did not remain at the level of the local, or even national, scene. In the fourth installment of the long feature, the authors of "Himala ng mga Talulot ng Rosas" situated Lipa Carmel in a much longer genealogy of the Order of Carmelites. They talked about the meaning of Carmel and the supposed vision of the prophet Elijah who, having climbed the mountain to pray for rain, saw rise out of the ocean an enormous cloud that took the shape of Mary. They talked about the establishment of the Order of Carmelites and the main figures behind the order's reform in the sixteenth century, Teresa de Jesus and John of the Cross (d'Alarcon and La Vida 1948c, 34, 48–49). In the final installment the authors linked the apparitions and miracles of Lipa to the appearance of Mary at Fatima, Portugal, in the early twentieth century, but without the strong anticommunist agenda advanced in *The Manila Times*. Rather the entire feature concluded with a section titled "Paulit-ulit ang Lahat ng Kasaysayan" (History Repeats Itself), in which the final interpretation of the phenomenon drew on the authority of sanctioned apparitions of Mary worldwide (d'Alarcon and La Vida 1949, 44).

A Supranational Phenomenon

Yet it would be a mistake to see the miracles witnessed in postwar Lipa as simply derivative phenomena. For the miraculous rose petals proliferated and circulated in a manner that could only be called magical, expanding the supernatural force field that surrounded Lipa Carmel, transforming the phenomenon into that from which other miracles derived: petals started to fall outside of the convent grounds; in a nearby garden; at a local marketplace; in a classroom; and in Sampaloc, Manila, on a street adjacent to a street the name of which was "Lipa" (*Manila Times* 1949c, 5; 1949d, 1; 1949f, 14).

Some petals even appeared in circulation abroad, with one in particular creating a sensation that for some time resulted in a sizeable healing ministry. In a marvelous reversal of history, one Lipa petal reportedly worked wonders upon the inhabitants of the village of Vadillo de la Guareña, in Zamora, Spain. Sent by a Dominican friar from the Philippines to his brother, the village teacher, the petal found its way into the hands of the teacher's wife.⁵ Señora María de la Concepción Ginestal Zapata de García Hidalgo had been suffering for more than a month from an open sore on her leg that oozed pus and caused pain to shoot through her body. According to the brief article that appeared in the conservative Spanish daily *ABC* (1949, 15), Señora Ginestal placed the petal on her wound and watched "in astonishment" (*con asombro*) as it healed without scabbing. In place of the wound appeared a small white blemish that over the course of a few hours had transformed into the shape of a crucifix. At the time of the *ABC* report the cross-shaped mark had lasted more than two full days, and the pain that had afflicted the woman completely disappeared. "The whole village witnessed with their own eyes the extraordinary occurrence," the article concludes, "which they considered to be a miracle" (*ibid.*).

A longer follow-up feature to the *ABC* article, which appeared in *Santo Rosario*, a publication of the University of Santo Tomas (Manila), reported how the petal's miraculous healing powers were further spread. First, the Ginestals took the petal itself on tour, as a saint's relics might travel. More extraordinary was the family's reproduction of thousands of proxy objects: prayer cards (*estampas*) that were brought into contact with the petal and then distributed (Marcial 1949a, 39–42). When applied to the bodies of the diseased and debilitated, these copies proved no less effective in curing, according to Ginestal, than the single petal itself. A woman who

had suffered for four years from a perforation in her bladder; a 2-year-old boy whose head and face had been covered with eczema practically since he was born; three or four paralytics; several developmentally disabled people—all healed by the petal-infused estampas that worked their magic at multiple sites and *simultaneously* (Marcial 1949b, 42). Far from diminishing the holy power found to inhere in a singular petal, the manufacture and circulation of these estampas proved to distribute it broadly. Still incredible, access to and experience of the miraculous became less the exception and more the rule.

In their broad circulation the miraculous rose petals were not only a phenomenon to be mediated (through press reports, public lectures, and others), but also a medium in its own right, a kind of media network hypostatized. The circulation of these petals engendered new geographical imaginaries, or new takes on old ones, as the author of the “Lipa–Vadillo” feature (the title of which alone blatantly announces the translocal) pointed out: “Thanks to one extraordinary petal . . . [Vadillo is] a new entry in the Filipino world of folklore! So too has the name of Lipa filled the hearts of all those Spanish faithful” (ibid.). That this observation recalled a colonial history was not lost on the author of the Castilian-language article, who specifically mentioned the two places’ shared legacy of “faith, culture, and language.” Yet this statement was less a reassertion of the colonial, I think, and more the delineation of one possible vector of connection—*un puente tendido* or “extended bridge”—among the many that the circulation of the miraculous rose petals could forge. Far from the “folk” of Filipino “folk Catholicism,” the devotional public that formed around the miraculous rose petals of Lipa was a community of *supranational* dimensions whose members admiringly reflected upon their own burgeoning ranks.

Lipa Townspeople: From Skepticism to Belief

Yet in tracing the numerous vectors these petals and the stories about them took and the new geographical imaginaries they mediated, we have overlooked one important community: the townspeople of Lipa themselves. So what did the miracles mean to them?

For this I turn to an interview with Guillermo Milan, a Lipeño and self-described “bad boy” whose life was transformed by the showers of petals. I went to his home initially to speak with his wife, Severina, a former Carmelite sister in Lipa. She was one of the few who worked outside of the

convent, taking care of visitors and procuring provisions for the cloistered community. Mrs. Milan was present at the time of the miracles in 1948, but left the sisterhood sometime in the 1950s. When I saw her husband scowling in the hallway I thought for sure the interview would be over before it could even begin. I was mistaken.

Back in those days, I was neither churchgoing nor kind. I was always drinking. Every Saturday my mother would go to the Carmelites and ask them to pray that I’d change. When the shower of petals began she knew about it because she was always at church. She said, “Guillermo, go to Carmel.” “Why?” “Don’t you know? It’s been showering petals for days.” “Mother,” I said, “you’re so easily deceived by these nuns. They’re the ones dumping the petals so that they can make money. They’re staging the miracle.” I wouldn’t believe it. Maybe if I saw it falling from the sky and picked it up myself. But I don’t care who you are—even the Holy Father in Rome, if he gave me a petal, said it was showering, I still wouldn’t believe it. So you know what I did, I borrowed a camera, a *candid camera*, to catch those nuns throwing those petals. . . .

The first thing I did was go around the convent, check out all the windows. They were all closed. Except for one in the front, one everyone was looking up toward, where they said the petals were coming from. I went to an avocado tree. There was a branch you could sit on. I didn’t move, and I hardly blinked. So there I was. Then people started screaming: “Shower! It’s showering!” I still didn’t believe it. But the Blessed Virgin was going to change my mind.

I saw one, a petal, coming from directly above. How could it come from the window when it was coming from above? And it was windy, but even then the petal drifted straight down, it wasn’t caught by the wind. So when that happened . . . [laughs]. It was really the Blessed Virgin. (G. Milan 2004)

Mr. Milan, while at first skeptical, utterly disbelieving, set out to prove that the nuns were the source of the miraculous showers. Armed with not one set of eyes but two, his plan was to catch them in the act—to capture them in

the act—using the verifying power of sight, a power amplified by the camera. In doing so it seemed that he was motivated by what has been commonly understood to be the infallible capacity of this technology to render all things visible. Yet, if we listened closely to his story, it was not just another instance of “seeing is believing.” In fact both sight and the camera dropped out of the picture at exactly the moment he came around to believe. Again I quote: “How could it have come from the window when it was coming from above? And it was windy, but the petal drifted straight down, it wasn’t caught by the wind.” What made itself visible to the eyes of Mr. Milan and the eye of the camera only mediates another truth. It was not merely seeing that compelled his belief. What compelled his belief was that the shower of petals, the direction they came from, and the way they fell were precisely *unreasonable*. It was not the truth of appearances, therefore, but the truth of unreason that convinced him.

It was interesting to compare Mr. Milan’s narration of the miracles with the version his wife liked to tell of his experience. Mrs. Milan never saw the petals for herself but recalled all of the sensational claims about the showers, and it was obvious that she knew her husband’s story by heart. But she emphasized a different moment in the story. She told me that her husband, after seeing the shower, clambered up near an awning where the petals appeared to have fallen heavily. She said he stuffed the petals in his pockets and then fended off the crowd that was clawing to get one of those precious petals. She said he escaped the swarm of friends and family and rushed home only to find that when he turned out his pocket the fistfuls of petals had vanished—and only a single petal remained (S. Milan 2004).

The stories of the showers of petals told by this couple complemented one another nicely, and they introduced themes that have cropped up again and again in the stories I have both heard via interviews and read in affidavits testifying to the miracles of Lipa. The first theme was that of skepticism, disbelief that turned into belief once one witnessed the petals and their effects defy the natural world, by how they fell against the wind, by how they cured one of disease or handicap. Here the operative word was almost always some inflection of the term *maniwala* (to believe). By some contrast to the Tagalog term *sampalataya* (more akin to the English word “faith”), in this context *maniwala* was an a posteriori concept, arising out of experience, proof, and very often an initial disposition of skepticism. Indeed “belief” seemed to be predicated on its opposite, disbelief, according to my

interlocutors’ numerous stories of friends, acquaintances, and local Catholic Church authorities that arrived at the truth of unreason through witnessing the phenomena.⁶ Their attitudes bespoke neither a worldview nor cultural schema vis-à-vis the supernatural, but a process, a procedure, by means of which sense—here a synthetic judgment about the possibility, or even reality, of enchantment—was made.

The second theme was that of the materiality of the petals themselves or, more precisely, their miraculous materialization. As one Lipeña put it: “it was like magic!” Not only did the petals magically appear out of the sky (when many, like Guillermo Milan, expected to see them thrown out of the convent windows) and fall at numerous locations but they also disappeared and reappeared elsewhere: in a pocket, in a shoe, in a piece of *pan de sal* (bread roll), in a prayer booklet. These marvelous discoveries were at times what brought an especially stubborn skeptic around to belief. But more often than not they were simply eruptions of the miraculous into everyday fields and objects.

In short the versions told by the Milans of the miraculous showers of petals revealed two local, quite possibly gendered, attitudes of sense and sensibility. On the one hand, people had to be convinced. On the other hand, they were delighted to be surprised. In trying to account for these local attitudes, I found little reason to recourse to a repertoire of autochthonous or “folk Christian” beliefs. Although one can certainly trace out some syncretic motifs in the miracles, such as that holy object that vanishes from one location only to pop up in another, Lipa is neither Mount Banahaw nor Mount Tapusi, but a city legendary for its firm footing in the Catholic establishment.⁷ This legacy is indeed part of what is locally particular about Lipa and may account for some of the local peoples’ receptivity to the miracles; it makes a difference, I would argue, that the apparitions of Mary and the miracles took place in a Carmelite convent and not, say, in a cave. It is a more apposite setting for a community whose inhabitants have long boasted a kind of pride in their history of *Hispanidad*.⁸

War Atrocities and the Miraculous

But there is another locally particular history to note, as Lipa was also the provincial headquarters of the Japanese Military Administration during the Second World War. The entire province of Batangas was at that time under the military command of Colonel Fujishige, a man who, according to one

prominent historian, liked to call himself “General” and grew excessively paranoid as food and staple shortages were felt, economic pressure increased, and word started to spread that American forces were returning (Jose 2004). Fujishige’s reaction to these threats and pressures would amount to some of the greatest atrocities committed in the entire wartime period. Essentially declaring war on the population of male civilians who he was convinced had all become guerillas, Fujishige ordered that they be rounded up and executed. It is for this reason that Batangas suffered the most civilian casualties of any Philippine province, including the city of Manila: between October 1944 and May 1945, an estimated 25,000 people were killed (Jose 2002, 236).⁹

“Lipa”—the name that originally referred to the wood nettle that abounded in the region—came to be linked with these atrocities; several episodes of mass killing were carried out between February and March 1945.¹⁰ One of these killings took place on 27 February 1945, when at least 500 male civilians from around the area were reported rounded up, lured with the promise of receiving passes that would permit their movement throughout Japanese controlled areas (United States Army Forces of the Pacific 1945, 36–54). The men were then executed on the premises of a minor seminary that would just one year later become the plot of land upon which Lipa’s first Carmelite monastery was founded. Lipa suffered further destruction when US bombers razed it to the ground in 1945.

How does this history inform what we might consider local responses to the miracles? What historicity might there be to petals falling from the sky a scant couple of years after major air strikes demolished an entire city? Although there were certainly some Lipeños who played active roles in resisting or abetting the Japanese, we might imagine that the majority of Lipa’s inhabitants felt themselves to be what any civilian casualty of war ultimately is: a victim of chance. Seen in this light the complementary perspectives represented by the Milans—of skepticism and surprise, of reasoning and magical thinking—would play the important function of reestablishing sense after senselessness while at the same time converting the experience of chance—of the “happen to be”—into one of feeling blessed to discover.

Many Lipeños I spoke with expressed belief that the Virgin Mary appeared in Lipa in 1948 because she pitied (*naawa*) this community that was in need of comfort, and that the petals were corresponding signs of this consolation, accessible to all. Amelia Kison (2004), who played an

instrumental role in bringing the apparitions and miracles of Lipa back into the public sphere in the 1980s, recalled the massacres and stated point blank, “This is the reason that Blessed Mother appeared. Perhaps she felt sorry because of what had happened there, for all those killed, for us.” Then she added, probably with the best of intentions to make my work easier, “it is the perception of most people here from Lipa” (*ibid.*).

This blanket generalization gave me pause, because it suggested that a collective consensus had been reached over what the apparitions and miracles of Lipa meant to local people. Moreover it echoed the kind of psychological-functionalist model that one sees subtending the narration and even scholarly analysis of Marian apparitions worldwide. This model goes something like this: Mary appears in a moment of crisis, be it political, social, or arising out of war. These appearances symptomatize real world conditions at the same time that they, for some, promise solutions to those conditions. They provide, in other words, a way to cope. This may very well have been people’s experience, and my point here is certainly not to discount these perspectives, spoken by those who lived through this time. Rather we must recognize the extent to which even “local” perspectives may adopt, adapt, and advance an explanatory discourse already in broad circulation.

The Public and the Verdict of the Church Hierarchy

Not taking at face value the frequently articulated link between Marian apparitions and crisis leads us to be highly attuned to the other discourses or topics of conversation that make themselves felt or skirt around the edges of these common narratives or views. It brings us back to the mass media and how great a role it may have played in the experiences and recollections of the miraculous events. Here I wish to draw the readers’ attention to a couple of other features of Mr. and Mrs. Milan’s stories.

In his narrative Mr. Milan used the phrase *candid camera*, which referenced, I presumed, Allen Funt’s long-running American television program. In both his skepticism and enthusiasm for capturing in real time what he thought would be the nuns’ role in throwing petals out of the window, Mr. Milan set out to act as a reporter or at least as someone who was in on the hoax. In other words, at least at the outset of his actions, his intention was to be a producer of media. Mrs. Milan’s version of the story, meanwhile, intended to undermine or at least soften her husband’s boastfulness, also reiterated the stories told about Mr. Milan in both the *Liwayway* (1948b)

feature and an article in *The Manila Times* (1948b). It was, in fact, through my conversation with them that I first learned of the long *Liwayway* feature.

In my interviews with Lipeños who were present at the time of the miracles, the press coverage of the events was often a theme or topic of conversation unto its own. Luisa Mayo (2004), a longtime Lipa resident, recalled the havoc that erupted when the headline “Shower of Roses in Lipa!” appeared, adding that the press reported even things they themselves did not know (“maski hindi mo alam ay napapalagay sa periodiko”). In other words, even for those from Lipa the showers of petals were a media event and thus, whether from God or human action, the showers were governed by another order of circulation and proliferation. This order of the mass media confounded the distinction between the “local” and the “national,” or the “elite” and the “popular.” Here the “masses” that congregated on the convent grounds were not the marginal and oppressed, but an entity precipitated by the mass media coverage. Here we might think about the “popular” more in terms of a “public.”

Although a public may be captivated for some time, it cannot be contained. Perhaps this observation best explains the curious emphasis that the Catholic Church hierarchy placed on the “showers of petals” in their 1951 verdict (“Official Statement”) on the miraculous phenomenon in Lipa. It reads in its entirety:

We, the undersigned Archbishop and Bishops, constituting for the purpose a special Commission, having attentively examined and reviewed the evidence and testimonies collected in the course of repeated, long and careful investigations, have reached the unanimous conclusion and hereby officially declare that the above-mentioned evidence and testimonies exclude any supernatural intervention in the reported extraordinary happenings—including the shower of petals—of the Carmel of Lipa.

Manila, April 6, 1951. ([Philippine Hierarchy] 1951, 287)

This statement, which appeared simultaneously in both the internal and widely circulated bulletins of the Philippine Catholic Church, *Boletín Eclesiástico* and *The Sentinel*, made no effort to identify the persons and incidents investigated in the case of Lipa Carmel—not even the apparitions of Mary. An exception appeared in the final line, in that offset clause. Why,

we might ask, did the church commission feel compelled to note only this feature? What was it about the showers of petals, above everything else, that the church felt needed to be singled out, invalidated, and eradicated?

How peculiar was the *public* nature of these showers and how proliferative were these petals could not be emphasized enough. In Lipa it was imaginable that anyone— “babae at lalaki, bata at matanda, mahirap at mayaman, may titulo at wala, may magagandang dalaga at ginang at may mga hindi kagandahan”—could have experienced these showers or come across a petal if only they were at the right place at the right time. It was this possibility of immediacy, of obviating the mediating power of the Catholic Church, that posed the greatest threat to the church’s effort to police and contain what was very rapidly becoming a mass phenomenon—a mass miracle—and it is for this reason that the “showers of petals” were made the focal point of their verdict. For if timing and proliferation come to trump grace and singularity in the act of making a “witness,” perhaps it is only a small leap to take for one to begin to believe that they can, as the saying goes, expect miracles.

Notes

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- 1 Fenella Cannell’s (1999) elegantly holistic study of lowland Bicol communities remains the scholarly touchstone for the anthropology of Catholic syncretism in the Philippines, although her framework does not subscribe to the “great versus little tradition” concept undergirding a lot of studies of the “folk,” focusing much more on the local. See also Wiegele 2005. For an excellent overview and engagement with the category of “folk Catholicism,” cf. Bautista 2010, especially ch. 5.
- 2 For an original account of the apparitions of Mary to the young Carmelite, see Appendix A in Keithley 1992, 178–204.
- 3 In May 1917 three children claimed that they saw the Virgin Mary at the Cova de Iria near the rural town of Fatima, Portugal. Although local authorities attempted to prevent the children from returning to the spot, they could not contend with the crowds that began to gather there,

per Mary's instructions, every thirteenth of the month until October of that year. The apparitions resulted in the erection of a shrine approved by the church, yet received little attention beyond the region until the 1930s, when one of the visionaries, Lucia Santos (who by that point had become a nun), wrote what she claimed to be the full version of Mary's messages to the children. The most important revelation in Sister Lucia's revised account was Mary's request that Russia be consecrated to her Immaculate Heart and those devoted to her receive Communion every first Saturday of five consecutive months for this purpose.

The link between the apparitions of Mary in Lipa and those at Fatima also comes from one of Mary's messages to the Filipina visionary Teresita Castillo (1997, 58) to "pray for the conversion of sinners . . . for those who rejected me, and those who do not believe my messages in different parts of the world." The messages concluded with "what I ask here is the same as in Fatima." It is important to note, however, that the Filipino political elite and American anticommunist Catholics paid disproportionate attention to this sole reference to Fatima in Castillo's testimony.

- 4 Some of these speakers were noted anticommunists like Stephen Breen Jr., who wrote frequently for the popular American Catholic magazine *The Scapular*. Another speaker was Julia Hughes, the daughter of an American colonel and a Filipina, and one-time golf champion of the Philippines, who drew in audiences with her first-hand accounts of the apparitions. See, e.g., *The Biloxi Daily Herald* 1950; *Racine Journal Times* 1950; *Santa Fe New Mexican* 1950.
- 5 This story is the subject of "Lipa–Vadillo," a two-part article found in *Santo Rosario*, the bilingual (English–Spanish) monthly magazine published by the University of Santo Tomas (Manila).
- 6 Part of this dialectic between disbelief and belief, I strongly suspect, has to do with the very controversial history of the apparitions and miracles as defined by the church decree issued in 1951 that declared there to be nothing supernatural about the phenomena.
- 7 According to some observers and Lipa historians, the strength of Lipeños' Catholicism owes in part to the thirty-year tenure of Lipa's parish priest, a *burgalés* named Fr. Benito Baras. For more on Baras see Sastrón 1895, 165–69. The strong Catholic identity of the city's inhabitants certainly has much to do with socioeconomic class, as briefly discussed in note 8.
- 8 In the nineteenth century Lipa became one of the wealthiest cities in one of the wealthiest provinces in the Philippines, when a convergence of global factors led to a boom in coffee production, resulting in a burgeoning of wealth for many of its elite families and a stronger material and cultural identification with the colonial metropole. Writing of this golden era, Lipa's native son and celebrated writer Teodoro M. Kalaw (1965, 1–2) once wrote: "These were the days of prosperity for Lipa. . . . The *señoritos*, dressed in the style of the day, in shirts spangled with sequins that glittered in the sun, went about their business, mounted on spirited Arabian horses. . . . Money was splurged on clothes, interior décor and pictures; on rare crystals and china ordered from Europe; on curtains of the finest silk, on stuffed chairs from Vienna, on exquisite table wines and foods. . . . The ladies came to use golden slippers with diamond incrustations."
- 9 The majority of these deaths, Jose (2002, 236) notes, took place in February of 1945.
- 10 For documentation of these atrocities see United States Army Forces of the Pacific 1945. Other estimates of those killed in Lipa and additional testimonies of the killings based on oral histories may be found in Ishida 2001.

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