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## **Did Padre Damaso Rape Pia Alba? Reticence, Revelation, and Revolution in José Rizal's Novels**

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*Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*  
vol. 65 no. 2 (2017): 137–99

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# Did Padre Damaso Rape Pia Alba?

## Reticence, Revelation, and Revolution in José Rizal's Novels

This article revisits the debate in 2010 among *Philippine Daily Inquirer* columnists over the question of whether or not, in José Rizal's novel *Noli me tángere*, Padre Damaso "raped" Maria Clara's mother, Pia Alba, a debate inspired by the Reproductive Health (RH) Bill. The article examines how Rizal employs rhetorical strategies of reticence and revelation along with literary onomastics and allusions in his two novels to create meanings and associations that open his novels to multiple, even competing, interpretations. Such ambiguity reveals the artistic, intellectual, and political stakes of interpretation, which involves not only the struggle for understanding and struggle over meaning, but also the struggle to make, unmake, and remake community.

**KEYWORDS: RIZAL • NOVELS • INTERPRETATION • CROWDS AND PEOPLE • COMMUNITY**

In the mid-afternoon of 30 September 2010 popular tour guide and Reproductive Health (RH) Bill advocate Carlos Celdran walked into the Manila Cathedral where “Catholics and non-Catholics” (Ahn 2015) had gathered to celebrate the second anniversary of the “May They Be One Campaign” and the launch of the “Hand Written Bible.” The ecumenical service had been organized jointly by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines’s Episcopal Commission for the Biblical Apostolate and the Philippine Bible Society as part of their nationwide campaign to sell low-cost Bibles to five million indigent Filipino families (ibid.).

Donning a black suit and a black bowler hat, Celdran held up a placard on which the word “DAMASO” had been written, doing so before a crowd that included the archbishop of Manila, Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales. Drawing near the front aisle where the bishops were seated, Celdran raised his voice: “You bishops, stop involving yourself in politics!” (quoted in OSG 2016, 1–2).

Celdran was charged subsequently with violating Article 133 of the Revised Penal Code, which states that “The penalty of *arresto mayor* in its maximum period to *prision correccional* in its minimum period shall be imposed upon anyone who, in a place devoted to religious worship or during the celebration of any religious ceremony, shall perform acts notoriously offensive to the feelings of the faithful” (quoted in ibid., 3–4). The Metropolitan Trial Court of Manila convicted Celdran of the crime of offending religious feelings and handed down the indeterminate sentence of serving a minimum of two months and twenty-one days and a maximum of one year, one month, and eleven days of *prision correccional* in its medium period (ibid., 2). In 2013 and 2014, both the Regional Trial Court (RTC) and the Court of Appeals affirmed the conviction.

In interviews Celdran defended his decision to “dress like Rizal” (Sauler and Dumlao 2013, A1)—although witness for the defense Atty. Christian Monsod thought Celdran looked more like the comedy actor Charlie Chaplin (Angsioco 2013, A4)—and invoked the name of a literary character, Padre Damaso, the real father of heroine Maria Clara, from José Rizal’s obra maestra, *Noli me tángere*. Celdran declared: “I really believe (that) arts and culture is the best way to change society” (quoted in GMA News 2013). Why “Damaso”? “Because Damaso represents abuse of power,” explained Celdran. “Remember when he has the remains of [Maria Clara’s fiancé

Crisostomo] Ibarra’s father exhumed? And his threat of excommunication I link to the bishops’ threat of excommunicating President [Benigno] Aquino [III],” who signed the Reproductive Health Bill into law in December 2012 (Tejero 2013, D1). “The time of Damaso is not yet over,” he said in Filipino to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. “As a matter of fact, Damaso is flexing his muscles to get back into the picture” (quoted in Sauler and Dumlao 2013, A9).

The Damaso incident had the salutary effect of focusing public attention on the continued relevance and critical function of Philippine literature. Celdran’s act of bringing up Rizal and the literary character that Rizal created in the context of the heated debate on the RH Bill served as a reminder of yet another (unsuccessful) instance of the Catholic Church’s “meddling in politics” in 1956, when it opposed the Rizal Bill that was eventually signed into law as Republic Act 1425 (An Act to Include in the Curricula of All Public and Private Schools, Colleges and Universities Courses On the Life, Works and Writings of Jose Rizal, Particularly His Novels *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, Authorizing the Printing and Distribution Thereof, and for Other Purposes) (Ocampo 2010).

The contentious issue of the separation of church and state that came to the fore in the church’s campaign against the Rizal Bill more than half a century ago proved similarly bedeviling in the church’s long battle (since 1999) against the passing of House Bill 4110, popularly known as the RH Bill, which was nonetheless signed into law as the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act (Republic Act 10354), also known as the RH Law (see the overview by Cabral 2013). The RH Bill mandated the government to provide reproductive health services and supplies for free to marginalized sectors of Philippine society, require reproductive health education of adolescents in all schools, and increase public awareness of the need to protect and promote reproductive health and rights. Just as the church had once sought to prevent Rizal’s novels from becoming mandatory reading in school, the church sought to prevent mandatory reproductive health education in schools, arguing that discussing sex education in school served to increase promiscuity among the youth and erode moral values. The church’s attempt to “reduce the discussions on the RH Bill to the single issue of abortion” by linking abortion to contraception ultimately backfired (cf. Genilo 2014, 1047–48, 1052), and the passage of the Bill came to be widely viewed as a “stunning failure of the Church and a sign of its diminished

influence on Philippine society” (ibid., 1044), although this failure has not prevented members of the church from working with anti-RH groups and politicians to obstruct the full implementation of the law since its passage. In the 2013 elections endorsements by some church officials of anti-RH Bill Team Buhay (Team Life) candidates for the Senate against Team Patay (Team Death) had mixed results, as a number of Team Patay candidates such as Edgardo Angara, Loren Legarda, and Alan Peter Cayetano made it to the winning Magic Twelve list alongside Team Buhay candidates like J. V. Ejercito, Gregorio Honasan, and Aquilino Pimentel III (Calonzo 2013).

One important consequence of the Damaso incident was that the same Article 133 of the Revised Penal Code that secured Celdran’s conviction came under question as Celdran’s case was brought before the Supreme Court. In its Petition for Review on 13 May 2016, the Office of the Solicitor General (OSG) (2016, 3) argued for the protection of free speech and underscored the unconstitutionality of Article 133.

Another unintended, but no less noteworthy, effect of the Damaso incident was the debate that it stoked on the pages of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and other newspapers and internet sites on the character of Padre Damaso himself. Popular columnists Ambeth Ocampo, Michael Tan, and John Nery weighed in on the question of whether Padre Damaso counted as a “villain” by addressing the issue of whether or not Padre Damaso “raped” Maria Clara’s mother, Pia Alba. The debate exposed a plurality of competing interpretations of a single text, the *Noli*, and raised broader issues about the “correct” or “proper” way to understand Rizal and his novels and writings more generally.

The legal debate that Celdran’s “Damaso” act triggered and the intellectual debate on the character of Padre Damaso are both instructive for what they can tell us about the complex process of reading and understanding literary texts, the multifarious and often contending interpretations that writing and reading engender, and the artistic, political, and intellectual stakes of interpretation. The issue of interpretation is not simply an issue of converging and diverging opinions and stances, which is part and parcel of the struggle for understanding and the struggle over meaning. It constitutes a core issue in the debate on the protection of speech, and it is also a vital theme of Rizal’s novels, *Noli me tángere* (originally published in 1887) and *El filibusterismo* (originally published in 1891), and their attempt to work through the possibilities and limits of community.

This article shows how Rizal drew on an arsenal of rhetorical strategies—most prominently, multilayered allusion and the play of narrative reticence and revelation—and on shifting perspectives within the novels. The first part of the article examines the novelist’s strategies that render the Padre Damaso–Pia Alba relationship opaque, thereby inviting readers to speculate and comment on the characters and events. The ambiguity and undecidability that arise from the encounter among writer, text, and reader inform the past and present debates on Rizal and his novels. Just as crucial, ambiguity and undecidability resist attempts by writer and reader alike to fix interpretation as definitive once and for all. This openness of the novels allows different readers across space and time to read and act upon them in unpredictable ways. Rizal’s role in inspiring the Katipunan and his arrest, trial, and execution for being the “author” of the 1896 revolution are testaments to the capacity of Rizal’s novels to generate interpretations and actions that Rizal himself could not control. Furthermore, this incitement to commentary and action gives the novels their conjuring potential, a power of interpretation that has broad intellectual implications, for it speaks to the heart of debates on the political imperative to imagine, invoke, and mobilize “the people,” and to make, unmake, and remake community. One crucial component of this conjuring effect is the novels’ dramatization of the ethical dilemmas of thought and action that are delineated, as discussed in the second part of this article, in two principal figures of liminality and ambiguity, Elias and Ibarra/Simoun, who move between the “inside” and “outside” of colonial society.

### Interpreting the “Damaso” Act

How does interpretation figure in the case for and against Celdran’s “Damaso” act? In May 2016 the OSG (ibid., 3, 5), required by the Supreme Court to comment on the case, filed a manifestation arguing for Celdran’s acquittal on the grounds that Celdran’s “act is a protected speech” and that Article 133 “is unconstitutional on its face” and “unconstitutional as applied to” Celdran. Solicitor General Florin Hilbay stated that

Mr. Celdran’s display of the word “DAMASO” was made in the context of the debate over the Reproductive Health (RH) Bill then pending in Congress. Even the RTC made such a finding, and emphasized that Mr. Celdran shouted “Don’t meddle in politics” while he was being brought out of the Manila Cathedral. The RTC then concluded that

"the dogged determination of the priests and bishops in clinching on to their beliefs by fervently campaigning against the passage of the RH Bill had spurred accused-appellant [Celdran] in committing what he had done during the subject incident."

This only shows that Mr. Celdran's "act" is political speech, as it was "both intended and received as a contribution to public deliberation about some issue," "foster[ing] informed and civic minded deliberation." (ibid., 7)

The OSG took issue with the RTC's own finding that "In the mind of this court, only eyes tainted with prejudice and bias cannot see that these acts of accused-appellants **were meant to mock, insult and ridicule those clergy whose beliefs and principles were diametrically opposed to his own**" (quoted in ibid., 7–8; boldface in original). The OSG argued that Celdran's act, which was "no different from the use of a pamphlet" (ibid., 7), aimed at "arousing public discussion on the Church's perceived entanglement with the State" and did not represent a "clear and present danger" that would pose serious injury or be inimical to the interests of the state (ibid.). The OSG deemed Article 133 unconstitutional because of its "viewpoint discrimination": that is, it protects "practices of religious beliefs" by "prohibiting the expression of ideas that may be offensive to 'feelings of the faithful'" but "does not protect anything else or any other form of expression (religious or otherwise, political or not) people find 'notoriously offensive.'" In effect, this viewpoint discrimination that "promotes certain ideas while restricting others opposed to them" is a "violation of free speech" (ibid., 8).

Furthermore, the OSG held that Celdran's act does not "rise to the level of a 'notorious offense'" because "none of the witnesses for the prosecution were able to identify any religious dogma, ritual or belief that they felt ridiculed or insulted" (ibid., 9). Witness for the prosecution Marcelina Calcal, for example, testified that "I don't know how I can explain my feelings, it was traumatic for me every time I hear the word Damaso" (ibid., 10). The OSG held that she was unable to "explain why she felt the word was offensive or how it had any connection with a religious practice, dogma or ritual" (ibid.). Asked by the court what her understanding of Damaso was, she replied: "For me, Damaso was a person in our history about a priest who committed something against the church [*sic*]" (ibid.). Asked what she felt

when she first saw Celdran's Damaso placard, she said that "I was surprised, I did not know [*sic*] right away what is the meaning of Damaso" (ibid.).

Fr. Oscar Alunday testified that when he saw Celdran he had initially assumed that what Celdran was doing was part of the program of the ecumenical service and thought that "Damaso" referred to "Saint Jerome's secretary" (*sic*) and that "[a]t that point, it [Damaso] did not mean anything to me" (ibid., 11). (More about Saint Jerome later.) Another witness for the prosecution, Angelito Cacal, did not object to the word "Damaso." Rather, the "disturbance" that Celdran's interruption of the program created was what upset him because "[i]t's like butting in on a conversation that people are having. That's rude" (*Syempre, parang may nag uusap na tao tapos bigla kang sisingit dun, parang pambabastos yun*) (ibid.).

Celdran's sudden intrusion into the Manila Cathedral forced the congregation of onlookers to make sense of his act and the placard he held up. Interestingly, the word "Damaso" did not automatically recall the literary reference that Celdran marshalled to criticize the church's meddling in politics. Marcelina Calcal saw Damaso not as a literary character but as a "historical figure." So did the priest, who did not connect Damaso to Rizal's novel and character, but instead initially thought that "Damaso" referred to the real-life figure of Pope Damasus I, after whom Rizal named Padre Damaso, except that Father Alunday got his historical facts all mixed up. Pope Damasus I was not Saint Jerome's secretary; it was the other way around.

For the solicitor general, the ambiguity of the word "Damaso" proves resistant to the prosecution's effort to definitively fix Celdran's act as one "notoriously offensive to the feelings of the faithful" (ibid., 4). Because this operative clause is, as the OSG puts it emphatically, "unambiguously vague," the standard it establishes for "criminal harm" is "entirely subjective" (ibid.). Predicated on the "feelings of the faithful," Article 133 provides "no objective standards that allow a person to know whether s/he is committing the crime. An identical utterance would be safe before a tolerant crowd, but deemed criminal before an intolerant audience" (ibid.). The "net effect of Article 133 is not only to make an intolerant crowd the ultimate judge of whether a crime has been committed, but also to unconstitutionally vest wide discretion in judges, to the detriment of free speech" (ibid.). In short, the vagueness of Article 133—the undecidability of its meaning—opens it to multiple interpretations. If free speech is to be protected, neither people in

the crowd nor people in power can arrogate to themselves the authority to serve as ultimate adjudicator of what counts as “offensive to the feelings of the faithful” (ibid.).

### Debating the Character of Padre Damaso

It is no exaggeration to claim that Rizal’s novels are the Bible of Philippine literature,<sup>1</sup> second only to the Holy Bible in their ability to command reverence and elicit generations of exegesis. Celdran’s Damaso act inspired three prominent columnists of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*—anthropologist Michael Tan, historian Ambeth Ocampo, and journalist John Nery—to write on Rizal. Appearing within days of each other in October 2010, less than two weeks after the Damaso incident, their columns reflected on the “character” (here used in its two senses of *figure*—as in “person in a work of literature”—and *trait*—as in “mental and moral qualities possessed by an individual”) of Padre Damaso. Was Damaso the “villain” of the *Noli*? Did he “rape” Pia Alba, Maria Clara’s mother?

For Michael Tan (2010, A15) the Celdran incident made him reread Rizal’s novels, an experience that came as a “pleasant surprise” to him because it turned out that “Rizal could easily have been writing about 21st-century Philippines.” Tan (ibid.) drew a parallel between the “dismal situation of women” in Rizal’s time and the oppression of women “by modern reincarnations of Padre Damaso” in the present day. To prove his point, Tan (ibid.) embarked on a character analysis of Padre Damaso, arguing that, while Damaso is “so hated that he’s killed at the end of the novel,” “there’s more” to him “than a tyrant.” Tan (ibid.) noted further that

In popular culture, Damaso is remembered less as a symbol of Spanish tyranny than as a hypocritical lecher. While hectoring others on morality, he seduces women, and one of his victims is Pia Alba, wife of Capitan Tiago, a *cabeza de barangay* [village chief; sic].<sup>2</sup> Pia is seduced, her vulnerability coming in part because she so desperately wants to have a child. In the end though, she is raped—and dies at childbirth.

While Tan concerned himself with how Rizal’s characters could help modern-day Filipinos understand the plight of women and the “failed system” that underpinned this oppression, historian Ambeth Ocampo (2010) drew

a different lesson from reading Rizal’s novels, asking the questions of how well Filipinos understand these works and whether Filipinos even “read the novel in full.” For Ocampo (ibid.) the mandatory reading of Rizal’s novels is laudable, but the simplified versions of the novels that students read result in “stereo-type images of Damaso and Sisa” that are “so different from what Rizal actually wrote.” Ocampo (ibid.) questioned whether Padre Damaso was the villain of the *Noli*: “Where did we get the idea that Pia Alba was raped? Remember, Kapitan Tiago was an opium dealer and probably had no time for his wife who found solace in her spiritual adviser. Was Damaso really evil? Or was he just being an over-protective father who didn’t approve of his daughter’s boyfriend?” The “real villain,” the “evil friar,” argued Ocampo (ibid.), was not Damaso but Padre Bernardo Salvi, “who lusts after Maria Clara and engineers an accident that would have killed Ibarra during the laying of the cornerstone of his school. Failing in that, he instigates a rebellion and implicates Ibarra” (cf. Tejero 2013).

John Nery (2010, A11) registered his own take on the “vexing relationship between Maria Clara’s mother and Padre Damaso, and . . . the meaning of Damaso himself.” Judging that Ocampo “got it wrong” and Tan “got it right,” Nery objected to Ocampo’s (2010, A15) contention that Pia Alba “found solace in her spiritual adviser” and as proof cited three passages from the *Noli* detailing Pia’s reaction to her pregnancy. The first passage has Doña Pia feeling “signs of motherhood . . . alas! like the fisherman that Shakespeare talks about in Macbeth, the one who stopped to sing [sic] when he found a treasure, she lost her joy” (quoted in Nery 2010, A11).<sup>3</sup> The second passage has Aunt Isabel recalling seeing Pia Alba “many times during the first months of her pregnancy cry before San Antonio” (ibid.). The third passage is Maria Clara’s own summary of the contents of her mother’s letters, which were “written in the midst of her remorse when she was carrying me in her womb” and which revealed “how she cursed me and wished my death . . . my death that my father vainly tried with medicines!” (ibid.).

Nery (ibid.) stated that “[t]his is not the conduct we expect of a young wife whom Rizal portrays as desperately childless, or even of a woman who has ‘found solace’ in a lover,” adding that the idea of finding “solace in an extra-marital affair seems so late 20<sup>th</sup>-century,” an “anachronous explanation, for the Philippines of the late 1860s or early 1870s.” Nery conceded that there were other ways to interpret the above words—that Padre Damaso wanted to abort Maria Clara to spare Pia Alba social shame, that Pia Alba’s



remorse derived from her seeking “a lover’s solace”—but remained adamant about the “pregnancy by rape” thesis because “the social circumstances, the novel’s own purposes, even the character of Damaso himself” warranted this interpretation (ibid.; cf. Teodoro 2010).

### **Allusion and Reticence in the Pia Alba–Damaso Relationship**

Rizal’s novels, like the Bible, have been known to arouse intense proprietary feelings among some of their most devoted readers. Years of careful study of the novels’ myriad characters and the words and thoughts attributed to them, of every chapter and every twist of the plot, allow attentive readers—often backed by institutions such as literature departments and schools more generally, as well as publications and mass media—to claim privileged access to the “truth” of the texts and what they “really” mean. Not surprisingly readers find a continuous source of irritation in the errors that abound like flies whenever the novels are talked or written about. Nery (2011, 6), for example, begins his book-length study of Rizal with a catalog of errors that he classifies as “instructive errors” that throw “unexpected light” on details or events or people; “unfortunate errors” that result from “momentary inattention”; and “pernicious errors” or “gross misinterpretations” that result in “serious misunderstanding.”

Literary criticism relies on the close reading of a text for cues on how to read a work. Referring “back” to the text and the evidence it provides is often seen as a way of testing and evaluating the robustness and plausibility of an interpretation, with the understanding that the encounter that we call “reading” may yield a number of different interpretations. Not all interpretations are equally valid within the terms of reading that are set institutionally (by literary studies, for example) and exegetically (by the protocols of reading specific to various “interpretive communities,” to use Stanley Fish’s [1980] term).

For example, the popular understanding cited by Michael Tan (2010, A15) of Padre Damaso as a type of father who “absconds” from his responsibility in caring for his child is clearly not borne out in Rizal’s novel. Padre Damaso tries in vain to abort his baby in order to hide all traces of his broken vows of celibacy and his paternity. But once Maria Clara is born, he dotes on his child so much that he becomes the overprotective father (in both senses of parent and priest). In effect, Padre Damaso usurps Capitan

Tiago’s position as paterfamilias of his own household by putting pressure on Capitan Tiago to call off Maria Clara’s engagement to Ibarra, even going through great lengths to pick a prospective spouse for Maria Clara in the person of a relative of his, the peninsular Linares.

But the problem is that such revealing details are not always forthcoming in the *Noli*. This narrative reticence is particularly pronounced in the novel’s account of Padre Damaso’s relationship with Pia Alba.

What we do know of Pia Alba suggests that she is no shrinking violet (Rizal 1978, 32). Doña Pia is described as a beautiful young woman (*hermosa joven*), willowy (*esbelta*), robust (*robusta*), and shapely (*bien formada*). The novel makes it clear that Capitan Tiago is the son of a sugar planter, “rich enough” (*bastante acaudalado*) but so miserly (*avaro*) that he would not shell out a *cuarto* (small coin of little value) to have his son educated (ibid., 31). However, Doña Pia is instrumental in helping Capitan Tiago make his fortune and giving him his high social position (*le ayudó á hacer su fortuna y le dió su posicion social*) (ibid., 32). Doña Pia, not content with buying and selling sugar, coffee, and indigo, “wished” (*quiso*) to sow and reap instead and persuaded Capitan Tiago to buy land in San Diego.

Typical of the novels of its time, the *Noli* is reticent on the precise nature of Doña Pia’s sexual entanglement with Padre Damaso. Padre Damaso, her spiritual adviser, suggests that she go to Obando to dance at the feast of St. Pascual Bailon and ask the saint for a son. Damaso’s penchant for women is alluded to in the first chapter of the novel, where he recounts to his fellow dinner party guests his experiences as a young priest. When he first comes to Filipinas twenty-three years earlier, he is assigned to a small farming town, and his lack of proficiency in Tagalog does not prevent him from hearing the confession of the town’s women. Damaso boasts that the women and he “understood each other” (*nos entendiamos*), and that the women “came to love me so much” (*me llegaron á querer*) that they weep when he is transferred to another town.

But whether Padre Damaso actually raped Pia Alba cannot be definitively established by the “facts” to be found in the novel. (It is also worth noting that Celdran’s Damaso act focuses on the church’s meddling in politics rather than on the sexual abuses and assaults committed by some of its priests, which have been much in the world news of late.<sup>4</sup>) To begin with, had Padre Damaso raped Doña Pia, one might expect a traumatized Pia to exhibit signs of depression well before she discovers she is pregnant, weeks

before she misses her menstrual period. But the passage Nery (2010) quoted states that Pia “felt signs of motherhood” and *then* became despondent. Another passage that Nery quoted has Aunt Isabel remembering that Doña Pia wept before the image of San Antonio many times *during* (not before) the first months of her pregnancy. Later on, when Capitan Tiago forbids Maria Clara from speaking to the recently excommunicated Ibarra, Tiago tries to get the weeping Maria Clara to stop crying by comparing her with her mother: “Don’t cry, daughter. . . . You’re not like your mother, who never cried except from paglilahi” (*No llores, hija mia. . . . tú no eres como tu madre que no lloraba mas que por antojos*; “antojos” is Rizal’s translation of the Tagalog term for cravings women develop during pregnancy) (Rizal 1978, 201).

The “evidence” of Doña Pia’s letters is similarly inconclusive. They only suggest that Pia had written them in her remorse when she was already pregnant with Maria Clara; that neither Pia nor Damaso wanted the child; and that both had conspired to have the child aborted.

It may well be that Doña Pia had been raped indeed and that either the people around her had not noticed any change in her behavior immediately after the rape or Pia herself had successfully hidden her distress from the people around her. Pia may have become visibly despondent, unable any longer to mask her suffering, when the physical evidence of her rape became obvious.

But the novel’s reticence also allows different slants of interpretation. Doña Pia may have been seduced, coercively or not, by Padre Damaso. She may even have fallen in love with the priest. Doña Pia is stricken by remorse when she learns she is pregnant. She may or may not have regretted her affair with the priest, but she definitely does not want the baby she is carrying and conspires with Padre Damaso to get rid of the foetus. Unlike Damaso, Pia will not be given the chance to fall in love with her daughter because she dies of puerperal infection soon after childbirth.

Another “proof” Nery cited concerns Pia Alba weeping before the statue of San Antonio. Saint Anthony of Padua is known in Catholic lore as the patron saint of lost property and “lost” persons (meaning either persecuted persons or persons in distress). Four miracles attributed to the saint are of some relevance to Pia Alba’s case. One miracle concerns a jealous husband who stabs his wife, whom Saint Anthony later restores to life (Keller 2015). Another miracle happens to a woman who apparently suffers from convulsions, which the townspeople mistake for demonic possession and

which the woman’s husband reads as guilt over her own immoral behavior. In despair, the woman tries to commit suicide, but Saint Anthony is able to calm her down and persuade her not to (Atwood 2012, 181). Yet another miracle comes to the jealous nobleman who refuses to believe that his wife’s newborn son is his own and plots to have his wife and her son killed. Saint Anthony asks the infant, only a few weeks old, “Who is your father?” and the infant turns to face the jealous nobleman and says, “This is my father” (Rieti 1895, 91–92). The fourth miracle occurs to yet another jealous husband who tears out his wife’s hair for spending too much time helping out in the church. Saint Anthony restores her hair (ibid., 56–57).

Doña Pia’s weeping before the statue of Saint Anthony by no means settles the issue, since it might also be read in at least two ways: as an expression of innocence because she had not engaged in immoral behavior but had been forced into it by Padre Damaso, or as an expression of suicidal despair over either the affair or the pregnancy, or both.

Michael Tan (2010, A15) utilizes literary onomastics to help make sense of the *Noli*. He stresses the acoustic similarities between Damaso’s family name, Verdolagas, and the Spanish-Filipino term “berdugo” (executioner). He also explores the etymology of Pia Alba’s full name, translating it as “white piety.” The Latin word *pious*, from which “Pia” is derived, can mean a number of things: pious, devout, prayerful, dutiful, loyal. The Latin *albus*, from which “Alba” is derived, does mean “white.”

But these derivations do not exhaust the associations that the names “Pia Alba” and “Damaso Verdolagas” bring into play. Naming has an important place in the Holy Bible because it sheds light on the one who does the naming (Pardes 1992, 40–43) and constitutes an “elemental act of language” in literature, offering “invaluable keys” for interpreting texts that often exceed the intentions of the author (Smith 2016, 309). Not all names in a literary text are meant to be meaningful, of course. The famous dialogue between Hermogenes and Cratylus (Plato 2006) over the question of whether naming is arbitrary or can serve as an instrument of teaching and distinguishing natures shows that there is no hard and fast rule in choosing between “ordinary” names and “moral” or “meaningful” names (Fowler 2012, 3). But some names do activate chains of references and associations that point to a wider etymological and allusive field that tells us something about the fictional bearers of these names. The Germans have their own term for such Cratylid names: “speaking names” (*sprechende Namen*).



Rizal appears to have given some thought to the “historical entanglement” of names (ibid.) and invested meaning and power in some of the names with which he christened his literary creations. “Alba,” for example, does not only derive from the Latin word for “white.” In Spanish, alba means “dawn” or “daybreak,” and in Spanish and more generally European literature (particularly of the Occitan region that encompasses parts of France, Italy, and Spain), alba is a type of lyric poetry known as the “dawn-song,” the theme of which is adulterous love. While most of these songs consist of lovers bewailing their parting at dawn after a night of lovemaking, the Spanish variant has dawn signifying not the time when lovers part, but rather the time when lovers meet (Sigal 1996, 6; Hawking 1979, 22).<sup>5</sup>

One can also glean from the name Damaso Verdolagas a wealth of (often playful, teasing) meanings. Father Alunday’s mistaking Damaso for Pope Damasus I is a felicitous example of the Rizalian “characterizing names” or *characterisierte Namen* drawn from well-known literary and historical figures. Pope Damasus I (366–384 CE) was not only a stalwart defender of the Catholic Church against heresy and one of the key figures involved in establishing the theological foundation of the primacy of Rome as the “Apostolic See” (the *apostolica sedes*), a term Damasus had been the first to use (Louth 2007, 76). In 378 he was also charged with adultery, although eventually exonerated. He has come down in history bearing the nickname “Auriscalpius matronarum” (ladies’ ear-tickler), in reference to his assiduous cultivation of the patronage of Rome’s wealthy matrons and his ability to persuade these women to fund his church-related projects (Cain 2013, 176). A reader well versed in church history would surely relish the thought of Rizal, tongue-in-cheek, naming his own colonial version of the dogmatic ladies’ ear-tickler after this illustrious personage.

What about Verdolagas? The word means purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*), whose Filipino names are *alusiman* (Bikol), *dupdupil* (Bontoc), *bakbakad* (Ifugao), *golasiman* (Tagalog), *kantataba* (Pangasinan), and *ngalug* (Ilocano) (Quattrocchi 2012, 3054). Although now considered one of the most widespread horticultural plants in the world, the purslane followed the Spanish conquistadores along their routes of colonization. Various viewed and treated as weed and herb, purslane thrives in high-temperature zones and can grow in uncultivated land, even waste places (Bermejo and Leon 1994, 310–14).<sup>6</sup> Purslane was historically used as an antiscorbutic, diuretic,

and analgesic (ibid., 311). Ironically, verdolagas were thought to have anaphrodisiac properties: these succulent herbs were supposed to “reduce the desire to fornicate” (Dioscoride, quoted in ibid.).

The point of tracing all these allusions is to draw attention to an inherent undecidability in the *Noli* as far as the depiction of the relationship between Doña Pia and Padre Damaso is concerned. John Blanco (2009, 261), in his analysis of the *Noli*, affirms the ambiguity of the relationship by stating point-blank that Maria Clara’s “true father is Father Dámaso, the same Spanish priest responsible for seducing (or raping: it is not certain) María Clara’s mother, disinterring the body of Ibarra’s father, calumniating Ibarra’s father’s name, and provoking the son Crisostomo’s wrath.”

Ambeth Ocampo is not the only historian to question the “rape” of Pia Alba. In her study of how issues of urbanity, sexuality, and gender informed the patriotic discourses of the *ilustrados* in the nineteenth century, Raquel Reyes (2008, 117–19) cogently argues that friar “moral laxity”—commonplace in Philippine colonial society—furnished the ilustrados with material for fashioning their critique of friar obscurantism and abuse of authority. The figure of the irascible, parochial, libidinous, bigoted, and vicious Padre Damaso is Rizal’s contribution to fleshing out the idea of a “frailocracy” (*frailocracia*, as Marcelo del Pilar called it), which has kept the Philippines backward and stagnant. Reyes argues that “within the melodrama of the *Noli* lies the damning message that the consequences of entrusting the moral and spiritual guidance of women to priests are treachery, corruption, vice, and death” (ibid., 124). Reyes’s (ibid.) account of Pia Alba’s relationship with Padre Damaso differs substantively from the interpretations Nery and Tan propose:

Rizal relates, for example, the story of Doña Pia Alba, a wealthy married woman who is desperate to bear a child. After fruitlessly invoking numerous saints and the Virgin in order to conceive, Doña Pia turns for comfort or advice to her confessor, the Franciscan parish priest Padre Damaso. She finds him obliging, and soon becomes pregnant. But she is then filled with remorse, as she later admits in a letter, at carrying a priest’s child. She curses it, and desires its death. Together, she and the friar attempt to abort the fetus using drugs, but fail.

Reyes's critical insight into the ilustrados' antifriar campaign is not blunted by her decision to interpret the Pia Alba–Padre Damaso relationship in terms that stress Doña Pia's agency in initiating the affair. The narrative reticence of the *Noli* gives the novel a capaciousness that can accommodate disparate, even conflicting, interpretations. Every act of interpretation is place- and time-bound, arising out of the concerns specific to its time. For this reason, interpretation needs to be historicized (Jameson 1981, 9). Did many of the *Noli*'s readers in Rizal's time think that Pia was raped (which is not necessarily the same as being seduced)? When and why did the "rape" interpretation become influential? How have public awareness and understanding of colonial and sexual politics evolved in the wake of anticolonial, nationalist, feminist, and other movements? What are the intellectual and political stakes in advancing the rape thesis as *the* only valid way of understanding what happened between Pia Alba and Padre Damaso?

Just as interpreting Rizal's novels demands historicization, it is also imperative to historicize the ilustrados' own time- and place-bound attitudes toward female sexuality. Prevailing notions of women's (and priests') proper and correct behavior do not necessarily reflect the reality of on-the-ground relationships or public opinion in colonial society. As Reyes (2008, 117) has noted, what shocked a foreign observer like Robert MacMicking about the Philippines was not so much the priests' openly taking native women as mistresses (even lodging them and their mestizo children in the convent) as the routine violation of priestly vows of celibacy being "tolerated and indulged by society at large." Maria Clara's bastardy and her parents' botched attempts at abortion are pivotal to Rizal's moral critique of frailocracy. But they do not necessarily nor uniformly excite the same degree of moral and political outrage among all sectors of society outside the pages of the book. Informal unions and illegitimacy were, in fact, common among the colonial population, particularly among those who could not afford the marriage fees charged by the priests (MacMicking 1851, 75). In some parishes up to 25 percent of births were listed as having "unknown fathers" (Owen 2000, 33). *Queridas* (mistresses) and illegitimate children were a fact of life in colonial Filipinas (Hau et al. 2013, 5–6). While any number of these couplings (especially involving priests) might have been unwanted or coerced, neither *querida* nor illegitimate children necessarily elicited public opprobrium.<sup>7</sup>

## The Play of Reticence and Revelation in *Noli me tângere*

To note the undecidability in the *Noli*'s delineation of the Pia Alba–Damaso relationship is not to suggest that there is no way to make sense of the rest of the characters and the plot. Interesting about Rizal's novels is the way in which they play on—in other words, manage—the tension between narrative reticence and revelation that heightens suspense and challenges the reader to figure things out as the plot unfolds.

Take, for example, the novel's portrait of Padre Salvi, the other "villain" (if not *the* villain). The novel provides plenty of cues to enable the reader to see the hidden hand of Salvi (whose name, ironically, means "to save" or "rescue" or be "saved," and is derived from the Latin *salvius*) behind the plot to kill Ibarra at the laying of the foundations of the schoolhouse and the fake rebellion pinned on Ibarra when this plot fails.

At the derrick two clues suggest Salvi's complicity in the assassination plot against Ibarra. First, Salvi evinces hesitation when Ibarra hands him the trowel and fixes his eyes on the cornerstone hanging above him. Second, Salvi is supposed to hand the trowel on to another person after he is done. For a few moments he "looked doubtfully at Maria Clara" (*miró como dudoso á Maria Clara*) (Rizal 1978, 182), but then changes his mind and gives the trowel to the notary, most likely to make sure nothing untoward happens to her. There is a moment of suspense when the notary gallantly offers the trowel to Maria Clara, but she gracefully declines.

Readers learn that Padre Salvi finds the two letters Doña Pia wrote to Padre Damaso that Damaso had misplaced while the older priest was vacating the parish. Salvi persuades Maria Clara to give up Ibarra's letters to her in exchange for her parents' letters, although Maria Clara has no idea of the use to which Salvi would put Ibarra's missives. The use of these letters to implicate Ibarra in the staged insurrection that Salvi masterminds and his henchman, the chief sacristan (*sacristan mayor*), organizes is divulged toward the end of the novel.

Sometimes, the narrative voice itself instructs the reader on how to "read" a scene. For example, an infant bearing mestizo features sees Padre Salvi at the morning festivities and cries out "Papa!" (an echo of Saint Anthony of Padua's miracle!). While this incident attracts winks from the "malicious" and smiles from the Spaniards, and Salvi himself blushes deeply, the narrator steps in and states categorically: "But the people were wrong: the curate didn't even know the woman, who was a stranger" (*Y sin embargo,*

*la gente no tenía razón: el Cura no conocía siquiera á la mujer, que era una forastera*) (ibid., 165). Readers assume the worst about what Salvi does to Maria Clara in the nunnery, as Maria Clara's own extreme despair and tear-drenched accusations at the end of the novel testify, even though she is not named in the Epilogue and "the violences of hypocrisy" (*las violencias de la hipocresía*) and "horrors" (*horrores*) (ibid., 354) are not spelled out.

Another example of the play of reticence and revelation is the murder of Crispin, which is dramatized in an indirect way. Rizal renders the entire scene of the brutal killing in the form of a vivid nightmare that Crispin's brother, Basilio, experiences (although nothing the *Noli* and later the *Fili* say about Basilio before or since suggests that the boy is gifted with extrasensory perception). In that dream the curate beats Crispin, and out of desperation Crispin bites Salvi's hand. The sacristan mayor then picks up a heavy cane and kills Crispin with a blow while the curate tramples on the boy. Readers encounter Salvi the next day in an agitated mood, delivering three masses in the space of an hour. Some pious women describe him as looking "ill" (*enfermo*), and he brushes off Sister Rufa's attempt to kiss his hand. The reader does not get the chance to verify if Crispin had indeed bitten Salvi's hand, as Basilio dreamt. Although the fact remains that both Salvi and the sacristan mayor had something to do with Crispin's "disappearance," the *Noli* gives readers some leeway to speculate on the exact manner of his death. What matters is that readers learn early on that the sacristan mayor is Padre Salvi's henchman. Later on in the novel, Rizal plants amor-seco seeds on the person of the sacristan mayor, which are the telltale evidence that allows Elias to connect the murder of Lucas to the sacristan mayor and the false rebellion to Salvi. An unnamed young woman who reports Lucas's rendezvous with the sacristan in her conversation with Sister Pute in chapter 56 provides independent verification of Lucas's link to the sacristan.

The question, then, is why the *Noli* is far more forthcoming about its portrayal of Padre Salvi as villain than about the details of the Pia Alba–Damaso rape/seduction.

For one thing, this narrative reticence serves to "humanize" Padre Damaso without necessarily excusing his wrongdoings. It is true that Padre Damaso is one of the few "antagonists" (*kontrabida*) in the novel to get his comeuppance, his heart or his health broken after Maria Clara enters the nunnery. He is also one of the few characters given an entire chapter in the novel to explain in his own words his reasons for inflicting so much torment

and suffering on Ibarra and his father. In a long conversation he has with his daughter, Damaso explains that all of his ill will toward Don Rafael and Crisostomo had been motivated largely by his love for his daughter and his concern for her—and his descendants'—future and welfare. He could not permit her to marry a "native" because her husband would be vulnerable to oppression and persecution without any means of defending himself and his family, and because educating her sons would only result in their being branded as enemies of Religion and risking exile or execution. Damaso would have his beloved daughter give birth to "sons who command, not obey; who punish, not suffer" (*hijos que manden y no obedezcan, que castiguen y no sufran*) (ibid., 342).

At the most basic level of novel writing narrative reticence helps to turn the screw, building up tension and intrigue to spur meaning making on the part of the reader. The withholding of information creates novelistic suspense, stoking the interest of the reader and—most important of all—putting the reader in a position to speculate, imagine, and interpret. This incitement to meaning making bears out the fact that the reader, as much as the writer, is an active participant in the making of the novel.

Fiction, as its etymology suggests, is something *shaped* or *formed*, a work that involves both author and reader. An author makes decisions on what words to bring together and by orchestrating names, allusions, and plot, opens a field of meaning the bounds of which, however, may exceed even the author's intentions. The author is powerless to control the readings of his or her text. The reader is no passive consumer whose task is to uncover or excavate hidden meaning, like buried treasure, but an active meaning maker, producing the novel out of the words printed on the page.

Like many learned men of his time, Rizal larded his text with plenty of allusions, which may function in a variety of ways. Allusions serve to demonstrate the author's erudition (and in the case of Rizal, to show up the colonizers' ignorance of the colony alongside their backwardness in the production of Orientalist knowledge in Europe [discussed in Thomas 2012]), to stoke the reader's interest and emotion, and to enrich as well as suggest meanings. But allusions also "empower" the reader "at the expense of the author to make a literary work mean" (Pucci 1998, x) for it is the reader in the end who holds the book in her hands and comments on it. The reader constructs the import and implication of the novel, or else awards it only intermittent attention, or puts it aside, dismisses it, and forgets it.

Generations of devoted readers have seen something different in Rizal's novels more than a century since their publication. It goes without saying that words can take on meaning beyond the writer and the reader's control. That writer and reader both grapple with the challenges of meaning making renders the acts of reading and writing, and the literature created out of these acts, a quintessentially communal project (ibid., 256).

### Crowds, Community, and Commentary

Rizal's novels not only invite commentary and speculation; they also themselves reflect upon the role that commentary and speculation play in positing as well as questioning the possibilities and perils of making, unmaking, and remaking community.

The novels conjure up community through their frequent depictions of crowds, of people gathering or assembling for various purposes (and even no purpose at all). To refer to masses of people drawn from different racial and social backgrounds the *Noli* alone uses a number of terms: *gente* (Rizal 1978, 37, 50, 150, 161, 165, 194, 223, 227, 306), *personas* (ibid., 62), *vulgo* (ibid., 87), *multitud* (ibid., 154, 179, 186, 194–95, 276, 313, 370–71), *muchedumbre* (ibid., 153, 176; suggests a large gathering of motley people), *concurcencia* (ibid., 156; refers to people gathering together for a fiesta or to watch a parade, procession, or public performance), *pueblo* (ibid., 48, 139, 161, 196–197, 224, 270, 313, 338; this term can refer both to people from a locality as well as “the people” in the abstract sense, the latter most often employed by Elias, Tasio, Ibarra, and sundry government officials), *grupo* (ibid., 228), and *turba* (ibid., 229; note that a Spanish-language newspaper uses this rough equivalent of the negative “mob” in this particular context). Crowds are also limned in terms of their attributes, such as persecuted (*perseguidos*) (ibid., 248), unhappy (*infelices*) (ibid., 252), and curious (*curiosos*) (ibid., 262). Crowds also appear as publics, as in *mayoría* (ibid., 62, 289) and *público* (ibid., 315).

Even more important, the novels render these crowds not simply as onlookers, but also as movers and doers, and above all as commentators. These crowds look admiringly at Maria Clara (ibid., 173–74); attend the fiesta (ibid., 178); mill about and place bets in the cockpit (ibid., 296, 298); walk the streets (ibid., 173); shove each other as they make their way into church (ibid., 165–66); mistake the alcalde for a civil guard dressed as a comedian (ibid., 167); serve as curious bystanders when something happens

(ibid., 305–6); fall silent (ibid., 366); are preached to by Padre Damaso (ibid., 169–76); or else are harangued (ibid., 368). They also move about energetically (ibid., 49, 173, 189, 256). Seen at work are specific, smaller groups: convicts doing hard labor (ibid., 48); boys wandering into woods (ibid., 60); mourners driving animals away on their visits to the cemetery (ibid., 67); young women cooking for the picnic (ibid., 118); and *kasama* (sharecroppers) delivering part of their harvest to landlords, and laborers building the foundations of the schoolhouse (ibid., 146–47).

Crowds can also be malicious, as when townspeople close ranks against Don Rafael upon the first sign of his hesitation when Padre Damaso moves against him (ibid., 51). They can be intolerant of people with “dangerous” ideas, branding Tasio a lunatic (*el loco*), even as some of the well educated (*bien educadas*) call him *el filósofo* (the philosopher) Tasio (ibid., 62). They shrink from the leper (ibid., 153). They blame and stone Ibarra. They make fun of the powers-that-be, as Sister Rufa does when she calls Salvi stingy (*kuriput*) (ibid., 82), although not to his face. They have the power to judge and humiliate—as they do to Sisa (ibid., 108).

The crowd can become aroused and restive as well, even dangerous. When the *alferez* (lieutenant) sends two members of the *Guardia Civil* (civil guards) to shut down the public theatrical performance so that he and his wife, Doña Consolacion, can get some sleep following a bout of marital fighting, the crowd reacts in righteous indignation, throwing stones at the *cuadrilleros* (rural police) and threatening to march to the barracks and set them on fire. As things begin to turn ugly, Don Filipino tries in vain to calm down the crowd. Desperate, he turns to Ibarra to restrain the crowd, but Ibarra is also unable to do anything. Finally, Ibarra appeals to Elias, who has been watching the crowd with detachment. Elias is able to disperse the ugly feelings of the crowd and break up the crowd by going straight to the brothers Bruno and Tarsilo, who had stirred up the people in the first place.

A crowd sufficiently inflamed by collective agitation and in a state of extreme emotional tension can, under a specific set of historical and social conditions, turn or else be incited to violent action by people like Bruno and Tarsilo, whose own personal experiences of injustice may color their own attitudes toward violence and who may use violence as an instrument or as an end in itself.

Above all, people may be seen to talk, gossip, and comment. The novel famously opens with the news of Capitan Tiago's party spreading across

Binondo and the neighboring *arrabales* (suburbs outside the city walls) like an “electric shock” (*sacudida eléctrica*) (ibid., 1). The party has attracted not just talk but also action on the part of “parasites, bores, or gate-crashers” (*parásitos, moscas ó colados*), including of course the narrator, who has not been invited but proceeds to gate-crash the party and takes the reader on a tour of Capitan Tiago’s house (ibid., 2).

The lively chatter and exchanges among the *cigarreras* (female cigar-factory workers) bring back to Ibarra memories of the Lavapiés district in Madrid and its insurrectionary “riots” (ibid., 42). An old dying priest, in a conversation with Padre Sibyla, speaks of the people chafing under the burden of paying rents that the friar landowners keep raising arbitrarily (ibid., 47). The San Diego townsfolk look forward to their fiesta, but some of them cannot resist badmouthing the organizers (the *gobernadorcillo* [town mayor] and *teniente mayor* [chief deputy]); others pin the blame on the young men who had tried to introduce changes to the fiesta program; and still others blame everyone for everything (*no faltaba quien echase la culpa de todo á todos*) (ibid., 110). Pious women gossip incessantly among themselves, alert to Padre Salvi’s pallor and obvious interest in Maria Clara (e.g., ibid., 111).

Best of all, the novels give readers a chance to eavesdrop on some of these conversations. The *Noli*’s chapter 56, entitled “Rumors and Beliefs,” records the comments and exchanges of the townsfolk in the wake of the fake rebellion. The people speculate on whether the military, the *tulisanes* (social bandits), or the Chinese were involved, as these had been three groups whose “rebellions” had been part of historical memory (ibid., 303). The *Fili*’s chapter 9, entitled “Commentaries,” details people feeling bad or indifferent, as well as reacting like Pontius Pilate (handwashing and all), at the news of the tragedies that befall Cablesang Tales’s family (Rizal 1990, 57–58).

Chapter 35 in the *Noli*, entitled “Comments,” deals with the aftershocks of Ibarra’s attack against Padre Damaso. Ibarra’s actions provoke much commentary: people greet the news, as it spreads, first with incredulity and then with various “commentaries according to his or her own moral elevation” (*Cada uno segun el grado de su elevacion moral hacía sus comentarios*) (Rizal 1978, 196). While some spread the false report that Damaso was killed, others use the occasion to talk about other things and exchange information about the young mestizo whose

walkout on the sermon had originally sparked Damaso’s ire. Through these conversations, eavesdropping readers learn that the mestizo, who claims not to know Tagalog, appears to have unlearned his native tongue to burnish his credentials as one who has been abroad.

The same chapter ends with a debate among a group of countryfolk on the meaning of the term “*filibustero*,” which had first entered and circulated in the Philippines in relation to the Cavite Mutiny of 1872, but had yet to be widely circulated (Aguilar 2011, 430). In this scene readers see how a new term enters public consciousness for the first time. The term undergoes mutation in spelling (*plibastiero*, *plebestiero*, *plibestiro*, *plibustiero*, *pelbistero*, and *palabistiero*) as people try to make sense of an unfamiliar word in light of their own experiences of being on the receiving end of insults and curses issuing from those with more power than they (Rizal 1978, 199–200). The common people compare the word to sundry other insulting terms leveled at them by people in authority, whether secular or religious. What concerns them most are the issues of who deploys these terms and the kind of ill effects the negative terms can generate once specific persons pinned them onto “Christians like us” (*cristianos como nosotros*) (ibid., 200). What makes *filibustero* so fearsome a label is its being spoken by “a Christian, a priest, or a Spaniard” against “another Christian like us” (*dicho por un cristiano, un cura, ó un español á otro cristiano como nosotros*) (ibid.), which is tantamount to saying prayers for the dead.

Another comic scene in the *Noli* demonstrates how rumors are actually born and how people may embellish what they hear. In chapter 53 lights seen at night in a cemetery generate a spate of reports. One person says he counted twenty lights; another insists she heard cries and groans; and still another reports seeing tormented souls in a dream. The one young fellow who actually saw something—one light and two men in *salakot* (wide-brimmed native hat)—is predictably dismissed by the others (ibid., 288–89).

The *Noli* compares the confusion that reigns in Capitan Tiago’s house following news of Ibarra’s excommunication with the confusion in people’s imagination (*En casa de Cpn. Tiago no reinaba menos confusion que en la imaginacion de la gente*) (ibid., 201). In his study of the French Revolution, Timothy Tackett (2015, 124) talks about people’s susceptibility to rumors in times of social and political unrest. Confusion arises in moments of anxiety-inducing uncertainty, when reliable accounts and information are not always obtainable (and especially not from state authorities), and people in ambiguous



situations have to struggle to make sense of happenings and occurrences as they intrude on their consciousness and demand interpretation. Under such circumstances, rumor can function as “improvised news” (Shibutani 1966), an alternative source of information and analysis based on the public “pooling of intellectual resources” (ibid., 9). Hearing and spreading rumors become a collective enterprise and collaborative process that can cut across racial and socioeconomic boundaries (ibid., 9–10, 15). Rumors, like gossip, are often self-serving, but they can also function to promote cohesion and a sense of community among those who participate in rumormongering (Besnier 2009, 16; White 2000, 65). As Vicente Rafael (2005, 90) rightly points out in his analysis of how rumors function in Rizal’s novels, “[w]hat distinguishes rumors is not their truth value—for their nature as rumors is such that they have none—but their social effects.” What matters is that Ibarra’s arrest provides a pretext for people to come together and voice their opinions on the state of affairs in the colony.

Because rumors by definition are unofficial—that is, not institutionally sanctioned—they are deeply political. They involve acts of speaking and interpretation by those who are not authorized to hear about important matters or make themselves heard, and these acts of speaking and interpreting may serve to put into question the authority that reserves for itself the right to determine who can or cannot hear and who can or cannot speak (Kapferer 1990, 13–14).

Given the state officials’ reticence, the priests’ agenda, and the public’s own restricted access to information, such news—incomplete, fragmentary, decontextualized—are refashioned into, and according to, people’s respective personal experiences and knowledge in the course of its transmission, and different interpretations can arise even among people of similar backgrounds and people who hold similar values. The narrator in the *Noli* observes that “The fact, distorted into a thousand versions, was believed with more or less facility according to whether it suited or ran contrary to each person’s passions and mode of thinking” (*El hecho, en mil versiones desfigurado, fué creído con más ó menos facilidad segun adulaba ó contrariaba las pasiones y el modo de pensar de cada uno*) (Rizal 1978, 318).

Gossip, rumors, conversations, debates—the *Noli* reports them all to the reader, who occupies a privileged position as the one who is in the best position to make sense of the occurrences in the novel, to sort out the truths from the lies, to sift the wheat of fact from the chaff of speculation. Rizal’s

novels set up the ideal reader as adjudicator, but the imputed reader is a highly select, literate, and cosmopolitan arbiter who is able to recognize and appreciate the allusions and epigraphs inlaid in the novel. Rizal’s presumed readership is made up of an elite cohort of “friends and foes,” literate in Spanish, residing in the Philippines or abroad (especially, but not only, Spain and Europe), and well versed in the milieux of these places. This ideal reader must be privileged enough to have had sufficient Western-style education to recognize classical, Christian, and European references, while delighting in the novel’s strategic use and explanation of local (Tagalog) vocabulary and local references. The ideal reader, in other words, would be someone from within Rizal’s own small circle of fellow (male, if not Tagalog) ilustrados and the Spanish-speaking, educated reading public in and beyond Filipinas.

The cosmopolitan Rizal could never have anticipated a situation wherein only a very small minority in the Philippines would speak Spanish, and some (many?) of his allusions would be unfamiliar not only to most Filipinos, but to most Europeans as well (the pianist Doña Buenaventura Gálvez y Mijares de Reyes, the poet Alajeos), even the so-called educated ones. Rizal’s novels do not exist in a world in which their readers occupy the same space and the same time. In our case, we are separated from Rizal by time (the past is a foreign country); by language (and having to read these novels in translation); by space (the novels having been written and published in Europe, whereas most of our received knowledge nowadays is heavily Anglo-American-mediated); and by changing ideas, mores, standards, and values, particularly in regard to the “national” community (which did not yet exist in Rizal’s time) and to women and their positions in society (which accounts for why, of all the characters in the novel, it is Maria Clara who has undergone the most radical resignification, ranging from heroine and model of feminine virtue to object of critique, feminist or otherwise<sup>8</sup>). Moreover, as Mary Louise Pratt (1982–1983, 209) has argued, interpretive acts are shaped by power relations and by the contingencies that impose limits on human memory and capacity, contingencies that affect linguistic performance such as lack of access to information, inability to remember, wishful thinking, even lack of vocabulary (ibid., 216). Meaning making, in other words, is a social process and practice (ibid., 221) inseparable from the social and material life of the reader (ibid., 222), and subject to “doubt, indecision, ambivalence, contradiction, ignorance, and all other openings through which power is exercised or resisted, and through which changes occur” (ibid.).



As such, ways of seeing and understanding the world may be entrenched but also subject to change, and meaning making entails not only agreement but also disagreement, conflicting as well as converging interests. Contending and contentious interpretations give some idea of the social divisions and hierarchies at work in meaning making. They posit *and* put into question the very meaning of “community.”

In the case of the *Noli* and the *Fili*, the meaning of “community” has proven particularly fraught because Rizal wrote well before the nation-state was forged, when the basic term “Filipino” was still in “semantic turmoil” (Anderson 2008, 81). Rizal’s frame of reference is both local and mondial, but neither Filipinas nor the world can be understood in terms of a romanticized “linguistic utopia” of shared language and assumptions, shared knowledge and worldviews. Instead, what prevails is a “linguistics of contact” (Pratt 1987, 60), characterized by highly asymmetrical power relations *between* and *within* countries wrought by colonialism and imperialism, and by the brute, material reality of political, economic, and social inequality and injustice.

### Reading Rizal’s Dedication: “A mi Patria”

The tension between the “proper,” “correct” way of reading and interpreting the novels and the openness of these novels to being read and interpreted according to the interests and moral precepts of whoever reads them is evident—and powerfully thematized—in Rizal’s “A mi Patria,” which opens the *Noli*. In this dedication Rizal (1978, vii) talks about striving to reproduce the state of the Patria as faithfully, as objectively as possible (*trataré de reproducir fielmente tu estado sin contemplaciones*). The author marshals the metaphor of “lift[ing] a part of the veil that covers the evil, sacrificing everything to the truth, even amor propio itself, for, as your own son, I, too, suffer your defects and shortcomings” (*levantaré parte del velo que encubre el mal, sacrificando á la verdad todo, hasta el mismo amor propio, pues, como hijo tuyo, adolezco tambien de tus defectos y flaquezas*) (ibid.).

In the preceding paragraph, Rizal (ibid.) provides yet another metaphor for how he intends to go about “lifting the veil”: “*Deseando tu salud que es la nuestra, y buscando el mejor tratamiento, haré contigo lo que con sus enfermos los antiguos: exponíanlos en las gradas del templo, para que cada persona que viniese de invocar á la Divinidad les propusiese un remedio.*” Interestingly, Charles Derbyshire and Harold Augenbraum differ substantively in their translation of this famous passage.

Derbyshire translates the passage more or less literally: “Desiring thy welfare, which is our own, and seeking the best treatment, I will do with thee what the ancients did with their sick, exposing them on the steps of the temple so that every one who came to invoke the Divinity might offer them a remedy” (Rizal 1912/1956, vii). Soledad Lacson-Locsin’s translation (Rizal 1996) makes the same eloquent point as Derbyshire’s translation: “Desiring your well-being, which is our own, and searching for the best cure, I will do with you as the ancients of old did with their afflicted: expose them on the steps of the temple so that each one who would come to invoke the Divine, would propose a cure for them.” In these two translations, the sick are left on the temple steps, waiting to be offered remedy by temple worshippers. This way of seeking advice toward remedy is democratic: every person who encounters the sick on his or her way to the temple is free to recommend to the sick person some form of remedy, which is presumably based on his or her own knowledge and experience of the best way to deal with the sickness.

Harold Augenbraum offers this translation: “Therefore, because I desire your good health, which is indeed all of ours, and because I seek better stewardship for you, I will do with you what the ancients did with their infirmed: they placed them on the steps of their temples so that each in his own way could invoke a divinity that might offer a cure” (Rizal 2006, 3). The Augenbraum translation comes off sounding more ambiguous. Here, the sick are placed on temple steps, but “each in his own way” *appeals to a divinity* for a cure. The word “each” might refer to the patient as well as to any worshipper who comes to the temple to pray, but this translation puts emphasis on invoking “a divinity that might offer a cure.” The Augenbraum translation puts emphasis on invoking “a divinity that might offer a cure,” whereas the Derbyshire and Lacson-Locsin translations underline the fact that it is not divinity but rather the people who come to the temple to worship who are in the position to offer (free) advice to the sick based on their own respective remedies.

This difference in translation is not a simple mistake or misunderstanding on the part of Augenbraum. What is telling about this passage from Rizal is that it appears to have brought together two different classical references to two different ancient traditions of practicing medicine.

The practice of bringing the sick to temples to implore divinity for a remedy if not a cure is typical of the so-called healing temples founded by

followers of Aesculapius in Greece and later Rome. Here, the sick perform rituals and then spend the night in the temple, with the expectation that medical advice will be given to them in their dreams directly by the gods or else, failing that, be interpreted for them by the temple priests, who are also in a position to offer medical advice and administer medical treatment (cf. Petridou 2016, 438).

But the countervailing practice of the sick soliciting advice not from the gods and their priests in a temple but from the general public in a public square is attributed by Herodotus to the Babylonians. In his masterwork, *The Histories*, composed between 450 and 430 BCE, Herodotus (2014, xviii) writes of the following Babylonian practice:

[197] Next I come to the custom of theirs that I rank second for ingenuity. Rather than consult a doctor, the Babylonians will instead carry anyone who has fallen ill into the city's main square, where passers-by will give him tips on his ailment, drawn either from personal experience of the sufferer's symptoms, or else from having observed the symptoms in others. Whether the passerby was himself cured of a similar disease, or studied someone else who had been a patient, and had recovered, he will be sure to offer prescriptions and remedies. To walk past an invalid in silence, without asking him what illness he has, is forbidden. (ibid., 98)

Historians have disputed Herodotus's contention that Babylonians did not consult doctors. Babylon had a long, distinguished tradition of practicing medicine. Herodotus might have misinterpreted the practice of indigent Mesopotamians, unable to afford professional healers, seeking free advice from the public in public spaces as evidence of the absence of a medical tradition comparable to that of the Greeks (Worthington 2009, 55).

It appears that Rizal melded the Greek and Babylonian traditions in his dedication, placing the sick on temple steps (Greece) to solicit advice from the public (Mesopotamia). Rizal's apparent mistake or confusion (whether deliberate or not) is a felicitous, productive one, for it succinctly captures the tension between his novels' positing, on the one hand, of an ideal, full-knowing reader with privileged access to the truth, and on the other hand, the plurality of readers, who are free to read the novel in whatever way they want in order to offer their own interpretations as well as "remedies" (whether political, cultural, or social) based on their own experiences and knowledges.

## The Narrator's Shifting Perspective

The *Noli*'s narrator, who adopts both the omniscient and limited perspectives at different parts of the novel, embracing the viewpoint of the "gente" from time to time, also enacts this tension between truth and interpretation. The narrator draws the reader—friend or foe—with him as he ranges across Philippine society, eavesdropping on dinner parties among the *alta sociedad* (high society), confidential consultations between priests, Maria Clara and Ibarra's courtship, conversations among ordinary people, the dialogue between Ibarra and the governor-general, the torture-interrogation of Bruno and Tarsilo, and Padre Damaso's private conversation with Maria Clara. In most instances, the narrator undertakes the role of a modern-day Celdran, acting as tour guide and explaining the customs and practices of his fellow Tagalog and occasionally commenting on the personages and scenes.

But in several instances of the *Noli*, the narrator actively puts himself in the position—and adopts the ground-level view rather than the bird's-eye view—of the "we" (*nosotros*) of the "gente." One example is the opening chapter, where the narrator tells the reader flatly that he has no invitation to Capitan Tiago's party and coaxes the reader into gate-crashing the party with him. Another example is the hilarious passage in chapter 6, where the narrator, remarking on Capitan Tiago's belief in miracles, relates his—the narrator's—own gullibility at the "miracle" performed by the priest, only to be disabused by the sacristan, who lets the narrator in on the trick behind the miracle:

Nosotros mismos hemos visto al predicador enseñar al público, en el momento del descenso de la cruz, un pañuelo manchado de sangre, é ibamos ya á llorar piadosamente, cuando, para desgracia de nuestra alma, nos aseguró un sacristan que aquello era broma: era la sangre de una gallina, asada y comida *incontinenti* apesar de ser Viernes santo . . . y el sacristan estaba grueso. (Rizal 1978, 28)

We ourselves have seen a preacher show to the public, at the moment of the descent of the cross, a handkerchief stained with blood, and we ourselves had begun crying piously when, to the disgrace of our soul, we were assured by the sacristan that it was a joke, that the blood was that of a chicken which had been roasted and eaten despite the fact that it was Biyernes Santo . . . and the sacristan was fat.

In putting himself in the shoes of the gente whose foibles he holds up to comic light, the narrator does not laugh *at* the gente because he implicates himself in that laughter. He makes himself an object of laughter, sharing in the defects and shortcomings of his country (as Rizal states in his dedication) rather than standing at a judgmental distance from it.

In other words the tension between reticence and revelation at work in the *Noli* and the shifting perspective of the narrator enact the (productive) tension between a hierarchical understanding of reading that prescribes “correct” and “proper” ways of arriving at the meaning of the text, and a demotic—arguably democratic—understanding of reading that is open to individual meaning making and interpretation according to particular agenda, interests, and moral lights. This openness of Rizal’s novels to interpretation has generated substantial commentary in different media and languages, and across many decades and different spaces, and accounts for the novels’ ability to seem relevant well into the present era, even as Rizal advocates fret over the novels remaining largely unread or misunderstood by Filipinos and the world.

### **Elias: Self-Sacrifice for the Coming Struggle**

The openness of the *Noli* and *Fili* to multiple interpretations and relevance is evident in the lively debates these novels have provoked since their publication. But above all, meaning making has conjuring potential: the ability to imagine something new, something otherwise, something that does not yet exist but may become real or, just as important, be made real.

The conjuring power of the *Noli* and the *Fili* comes into focus through the political speech and action of two of their principal male characters, Elias and Ibarra/Simoun, and their liminal, ambiguous relationship to colonial society. Just as important, these two characters—and the novels themselves—wrestle with the forking ethical dilemmas attending political speech and action and test the limits of both political options of reform and revolution. In delineating Elias’s self-sacrifice and Simoun’s filibusterismo, Rizal used allusion and argumentation to question the basic foundations of colonial society. In doing so, however, he and his novels gave rise to images, thoughts, and fantasies among readers and audiences that far exceeded Rizal’s own stated political intentions, engendering political effects that Rizal could neither have foreseen nor forestalled.

The conjuring power of interpretation has broad intellectual implications as well, for it speaks to the heart of debates on the political imperative to imagine, invoke, and mobilize “the people,” and to make, unmake, and remake community.

Through the character of Elias, *Noli me tángere* tackles the challenge of representing (in both senses of speaking of and speaking for [Spivak 1988]) “the people.”

Elias not only has the masterful capacity to control an unruly crowd (as discussed in the preceding section); he also has the facility to disappear into crowds (*perdía entre la muchedumbre*), as he does after warning Ibarra in church to keep close to Padre Salvi at the laying of the cornerstone and not go into the trench (Rizal 1978, 176). Although possessed of striking looks, Elias appears in the eyes of colonial authorities like every other “indio,” and for this reason he is able to elude capture (in contrast, Ibarra, with his mestizo features, might have stood out in a crowd).

Like his Biblical namesake, who appears as an old man, a cowherd, and a shepherd, Elias can assume different guises. He can change his clothes and even his accent at will (*ibid.*, 337). Elias, too, lives a life of wandering and privation and takes on prophet- and Messiah-like qualities in his diagnosis of Philippine conditions and his readiness to sacrifice himself.

Already, his reputation as a troublemaker, coolly and fearlessly defiant of colonial authority, precedes him across several adjacent provinces. The novel tells us that the “famous Elias” (*el célebre* Elías) “came from who knows where” (*venido sin saberse de donde*) (*ibid.*, 133). While his defiance of colonial authority—seen in Elias’s much talked about encounters with the alferéz and the guardia civil—cements his reputation as an outlaw, Elias resists the label “tulisan” and “criminal” imposed indiscriminately by the colonial government on bandits and rebels alike, having been known to have fought the tulisanes who attempted to rob a house (*ibid.*). Elias does have close ties to Capitan Pablo and his band of *remontados* (literally, those who go back to the mountains), bound to Pablo as he would later be to Ibarra because Pablo had once saved his life. But Elias is hesitant to fully commit himself to joining Pablo’s men. He offers, instead, to serve as a “bearer of the people’s complaints” (*portador de las quejas del pueblo*) (*ibid.*, 252) and approach Ibarra with these complaints in hopes that Ibarra will bring these grievances before the higher authorities in the colony and in the metropole. Elias pledges to join Capitan Pablo only when this avenue is exhausted, but

Pablo's death spares him the agony of having to make that final decision to turn remontado himself (see *ibid.*, ch. 62).

Choosing a life of self-exile from colonial society, Elias nonetheless flits between the two worlds of the *taga-labas* (those from the outside) and *taga-loob* (those from the inside) of colonial society, moving between these worlds with a facility that is denied men of privilege like Ibarra, no matter how well intentioned the latter are and how dedicated they are to working for the good of their own fellow Filipinos.<sup>9</sup> A man of the people, he also strives to give voice to the persecuted, serving as their interpreter.

Elias's own family background straddles these two worlds of outsiders and insiders, making him a figure of liminality and ambiguity that is difficult to pin down definitively in sociological terms. Ibarra and Elias are both graduates of the same "Jesuit College," but even though Elias speaks Spanish fluently, he is not by Manila standards an *ilustrado* because he elects not to attend university. Elias is a locally educated and locally well-traveled indio whose urban-middle-sector grandfather was a bookkeeper in a Spanish commercial house and who was brought up as a member of the municipal elite, only to turn his back on his wealthy mother's family. What distinguishes Elias from Ibarra is Elias's deep knowledge of the everyday conditions of the country, knowledge built up from the ground through his close interaction with ordinary people in the course of his long-distance travels not outside, but inside, Filipinas, including, most crucially, the forest and mountain strongholds of *remontados* beyond the reach of the colonial state. Elias's proximity to the *gente* ("people") sensitizes him to the suffering, dissatisfaction, and restiveness of "the hunted" (*los perseguidos*).

Ibarra and Elias's first exchange of opinions centers on their disagreement over the status of the civil guard and the necessity of reforming the priesthood. With regard to the civil guard, Ibarra declares them a necessary evil for ensuring the security (that is, the protection of life and property) of the towns while Elias denounces the institution as a source of abuse, suffering, and resentment among the people (*ibid.*, 269–72). The "terrorism of the Civil Guards" (*el terrorismo de la Guardia Civil*) (*ibid.*, 271) serves only to harden the defiance of the "tulisanes."

Ibarra and Elias also debate the necessity of reforming the priesthood whose members (doubling as big landlords) not only oppress the people, but also stifle native entrepreneurship. While acknowledging that the early missionaries were guided by "a true faith" (*una verdadera fé*) (*ibid.*, 273) and

"a sincere love for Humanity" (*un verdadero amor á la Humanidad*) (*ibid.*, 273–74), Elias criticizes the descendants of these priests who have committed abuses. The cost of adhering to this religion is huge: to it "we have renounced our nationality, our independence, we have given its priests our major towns, our fields, and still, we give over our savings to buy religious objects" (*hemos renunciado á nuestra nacionalidad, á nuestra independencia; por ella hemos dado á sus sacerdotes nuestros mejores pueblos, nuestros campos y damos aún nuestras economías con la compra de objetos religiosos*) (*ibid.*, 273).

Elias's impassioned criticism of the *guardia civil* and the priests makes a compelling argument for colonialism's destructive, divisive effects on Filipinas. Elias tells Ibarra: "In our country, there is no society, since there is no unity between the people and the government" (*En nuestro país, no hay sociedad, pues no forman una unidad el pueblo y el gobierno*) (*ibid.*, 269). Instead, colonial Filipinas epitomizes the nightmarish anti-Republic precisely because of colonialism's perversion of the military and religious institutions necessary for promoting social and political unity and order. A citizen army capable of defending the community and a religion capable of binding citizens to their community constitute the principal props of the Republic as theorized by Niccolò Machiavelli. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1998, 43) judges people as capable of ruling themselves if they can, "by abundance of either men or money, put together an adequate army and fight a battle against whoever comes to attack them." Although Machiavelli did not believe in the truth of religion, he thought it necessary for the prince to incorporate religion into the practice of politics as a way of upholding the civic and moral virtues necessary for maintaining order and securing the unity of the people with the state (Dietz and Winham 2014, 21).

Elias's critique of colonialism acquires emotional and political power through his ringing exhortation of Ibarra to "take up the cause of the people, unite with the people, be not deaf to their voices, set an example to others, show the idea of what is called a homeland!" (*tomad la causa del pueblo, uníos al pueblo, no desoigais sus voces, dad ejemplo á los demás, dad la idea de lo que se llama una patria!*) (Rizal 1978, 280). Elias does not use the word "revolution," but gestures toward the "cloud in the horizon" (*la nube en el horizonte*) of a "struggle that is preparing" (*la lucha que se prepara*), the "combat" (here meaning a showdown) originating from the realm of ideas that will later descend upon the arena, "which will be dyed with blood" (*el combate comienza en la esfera de las ideas para descender á la arena, que se teñirá en sangre*) (*ibid.*).

When an embittered Ibarra sees his efforts at reform sabotaged, he decides to plot revenge by fomenting insurrection: “I’ll call on that ignorant people, I will make them see their misery, so that they will not think of brothers, only of wolves that devour, and I will tell them to rise against oppression and proclaim the eternal right of man to win [*conquistar*] his freedom!” (*Yo llamaré á ese pueblo ignorante, le haré ver su miseria; que no piense en hermanos; sólo hay lobos que se devoran, y les diré que contra esta opresion se levanta y protesta el eterno derecho del hombre para conquistar su libertad!*) (ibid., 338).

Against Ibarra’s “ignorant people,” Elias counters with “innocent people [who] will suffer” (*El pueblo inocente sufriría*) (ibid., 338). Elias appears to have drawn some lessons from his conversation with Capitan Pablo, where readers learn that Pablo had been wounded because, to avoid shedding innocent blood, he had chosen to curtail his men’s attack against the town after failing to flush out and confront the enemy (ibid., 250). Elias draws back from the radical implications of the “combat” and “struggle” he has conjured up only a short time ago, telling Ibarra that the country does not think of separating itself from the “Mother Country” (*Madre Patria*) (ibid., 338)—for it only asks for “a little freedom, justice and love” (ibid.). Ibarra’s efforts to “spark the war” (*encender la guerra*) (ibid.), according to Elias, will attract many people, for sure, but also its own share of the discontented, the criminals, and the desperate (*los descontentos, los criminales, los desesperados*). According to Elias, in all likelihood, in the ensuing fight (*lucha*), it will be the defenseless and innocent who will suffer the most (ibid.).

Torn between sympathy for and defense of the cause of the oppressed and fear of the potentially arbitrary violence unleashed by the explosion of the people’s wrath, Elias grapples with the ethical dilemma of how to bring about social and political transformation, knowing that the conflagration set off in the course of the struggle is likely to be “dyed in blood.” And yet, despite Elias’s deep-seated qualms, he continually finds himself in practical situations where his stated preference for peaceful but radical reform comes up against the imperative of having to assume responsibility for serving as an agent of justice against men like the derrick builder or the senior sacristan.

In the case of the derrick builder, Elias firmly catches the yellowish man to prevent him from running away from the collapsing derrick. Explaining his actions to Ibarra, Elias appeals to an even higher notion of God as the

“only judge” (*el único juez*) (ibid., 186), and goes on to make a distinction between his action and the mere act of taking another person’s life:

no es lo mismo. Cuando el hombre condena á los otros á muerto ó destruye para siempre su porvenir, lo hace á mansalva y dispone de la fuerza de otros hombres para ejecutar sus sentencias, que despues de todo pueden ser equivocadas ó erróneas. Pero yo al exponer al criminal en el mismo peligro que él ha preparado á los otros, participaba de los mismos riesgos. Yo no le maté, dejé que la mano de Dios le matára. (ibid., 187)

It’s not the same thing. When a man condemns others to death and destroys their future forever, he does it with impunity and relies on the force of other men to execute his sentences, which after all may be mistaken or wrong. But I, in exposing the criminal to the same danger that he had prepared for others, put myself [literally, participated] in the same risks as he did. I did not kill him, but let the hand of God smite him.

Elias is willing to put his life on the line, to stand *with* the condemned and court death together, rather than simply play judge and executioner at a distance—both moral and existential—from the condemned. A restatement of Elias’s thinking and action can be found in Walter Benjamin’s (1986, 298) “Critique of Violence”: “Those who base a condemnation of all violent killing of one person by another on the commandment are therefore mistaken. It exists not as a criterion of judgment, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it.” There is nothing glib about wrestling in solitude or taking responsibility when it comes to heeding or flouting the Sixth Commandment. There is no room in it for Ibarra’s egocentric vengeance, indeed, no glorifying of violence, because there can be no way of justifying the violence as means or ends, in advance or in retrospect, because one cannot evade one’s responsibility for the action that one takes, even if that action consists of doing something right like, say, bringing a criminal to justice.

Elias’s words are dangerous because of their extreme provocativeness—to put such strong critique of the colonial state and church in the mouth



of an “indio agraviado” and above all to have this same “indio” conjure up the specter of a coming bloody struggle are not mere political and religious heresy but highly incendiary. More, Elias’s prophetic words are matched by his equally messianic act of self-sacrifice, giving his life for another. If an indio stands ready to die for another fellow native, even one whose family had oppressed and brought so much tragedy to the indio’s own family, this solidarity founded on unity of purpose poses the biggest threat to the existence of colonial authority.

### Simoun: Conjuring Revolution

Whereas the *Noli* deals with a fake rebellion staged by a Spanish priest to frame a young reformist, the *Fili* turns the screw by focusing on the “real” thing—a revolution masterminded by one bent on destroying the rotten order. Rizal conjures this specter in the title of his 1891 sequel, *El filibusterismo*.

In his fine-grained analysis of the provenance and multiple meanings of the word “filibustero,” Filomeno Aguilar (2011) traces the multilingual origins of the term (derived from the French *flibustier*, in turn derived from the Dutch *vrijbouter* and English *freebooter*) to the late-sixteenth-century piracy wrought by the French, and later the English and Dutch, against Spanish ships and possessions in the Caribbean (ibid., 434–35). In pirate novels produced in such Latin American countries as Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico in the context of the war of independence from Spain and the ensuing civil wars and challenges of nation making, filibustero came to embody both positive ideas of independence (freedom) and negative ideas of plunder (terror) (ibid., 437–38). Filibustero also acquired an additional layer of meaning in reference to North American or North-America-based patriots and adventurers like Narciso Lopez and William Walker, who relied on fellow patriots as well as mercenaries to stage armed interventions in the politics of South American countries (notably Cuba), often conspiring with the natives of these countries to overthrow the ruling governments. Filibustero thus came to be linked simultaneously with the independence movements against Spain and with US expansionism in the American region (ibid., 438–41).

The Philippine colonial state itself was quick to react to any hint, even rumor, of conspiracy or rebellion—even a fake one—with the full force of its military might, as seen in the *Noli*, where torture under interrogation, arbitrary arrests (even of an obviously innocent simple-minded Andoy who

was caught defecating near the barracks), jail, exile, and worse, execution were ordinary occurrences. Rizal makes this link explicit by dedicating the *Fili* to the unjustly executed priests Gomburza, victims themselves of persecution in the wake of the Cavite Mutiny of 1872.

What makes the *Fili* so provocative is that on its pages revolution is no longer just talk but now assumes flesh, form, and intent in the figure of the filibustero Simoun, confidant of the governor-general. Although the reader is put in a privileged position to learn Simoun’s identity early on in the novel, when Simoun reveals himself to a now grown-up Basilio, the aura of mystery and menace that envelops Simoun makes it difficult to speak of him as either foreigner or Filipino. This man has spent most of his adult life abroad. Just as Elias has access to the world of the *taong labas* beyond the limits of colonial society, so too does Ibarra, whose access to the world outside colonial Filipinas makes him a liminal figure that cannot be contained by colonial authority. And now he comes back to his own country, a Filipino masquerading as a foreigner. His strategy, as he tells Basilio, is basically to stir up trouble, stimulating greed and corruption, instigating crime, committing acts of cruelty, and feeding the desire to plunder (Rizal 1990, 46–47).

The ambiguity of tense political situations that gives rise to rumors can have insurgent possibilities, the transmissibility of rumors serving to spread news of any revolt far and wide and galvanizing others to take up arms (Ranajit Guha [1983, 260] calls this ambiguity “cognitive unclarity”). But that same volatility can also escalate quickly into uncontrollable violence whether or not opportunistic. The narrator of the *Fili* reports that the governor-general has been advised to take advantage of this opportunity to strike “terror” (Rizal’s own word) through a major show of force (Rizal 1990, 218). Moreover, the individual anxieties, suspicions, and fears prove infectious, breeding such a climate of mistrust and stoking paranoia about agent provocateurs (*agentes provocadores*) that several deadly mishaps occur. In one arrabal, residents catch (and almost lynch) two people burying firearms that turn out to be unusable. In Ermita a government employee accidentally fires at a policeman. In Dulumbayan, shots are fired at an old deaf man who failed to answer the sentinel’s *quien vive* (who goes there?), and a pig that heard the sentinel but failed to supply the correct answer “*España!*” The journalist Ben Zayb stumbles upon the half-naked corpse of a young woman.



It is the figure of Simoun, above all, who embodies filibusterismo in its most incendiary form. Through Simoun the *Fili* shows how, in parallel to Elias, who appears to have come out of nowhere within Filipinas, the filibustero as figure of subversion can come out of nowhere and everywhere, both inside and outside Filipinas.

Simoun is described as brown-skinned, speaking in a mixture of English and South American accents, and dressing in the English fashion (ibid., 5). The journalist Ben Zayb, knowing that Simoun has spent time in the US, repeatedly brings up the word “Yankee” in his conversations with Simoun (ibid., 6). Ben Zayb thinks Simoun might be a “British Indian” (*indio inglés*), but Don Custodio (whose opportunistic behavior makes him anything but a custodian of the public interest) insists that Simoun must be an “American mulatto” (ibid., 8).<sup>10</sup> Custodio marshals as proof the fact that the governor-general himself, having met Simoun in Havana, believed this to be so. Simoun’s influence on the governor-general, in part secured through loans Simoun extended to the governor-general that helped the latter buy his current position in government, earns Simoun the nicknames Brown Cardinal (*Cardenal Moreno*) and Black Eminence (*Eminencia Negra*), racially charged epithets that fixate on his brown (might as well be black) skin (ibid., 15).

While colonial alta sociedad attempts to definitively pin down Simoun as “American mulatto,” those in the lower rungs of society do not do so and instead attribute a far wider range of nationalities to Simoun. Basilio sees Simoun as passing for a “British Indian, Portuguese, American, mulatto” (ibid., 44), but finally recognizes him as the Filipino—in its original Creole sense of a Philippine-born Spaniard—Ibarra. This revelation brings the reader into the novel as a coconspirator in much the same way Basilio becomes Simoun’s coconspirator by keeping Simoun’s secret.

The revelation of Simoun as Ibarra, far from dispelling the aura surrounding Simoun, serves to further enhance his allure. For the word “filibustero” is not the only multivalent, plurilingual term at work in the novel. More than any other name in the *Fili* (or, for that matter, the *Noli*), Ibarra’s choice of the nom de guerre “Simoun” would have the power to call forth myriad wild, potent, unsettling symbols and associations and give rise to dangerous political fantasies.

“Simoun” is derived from the French, pronounced “simūn”; variants of the word include “semoun” and “simoon” (see “Simoun” in Ortolang n.d.). In Spanish it is called “simún,” and in English, “simoom.” Local pronunciation

of the name varies according to region, sounding like “simón” or “simōn” in the Manila area and “simún” in the Visayas. Like filibustero, “Simoun” is multivalent and plurilingual. A simoun is literally a scorching, dry desert wind that sweeps across the region stretching from the Middle East to the Maghreb, covering the Arabian peninsula, Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Saharan Africa, with a Central Asian variant called a *Garmsil*. The simoun’s suffocatingly high temperature (55 degrees centigrade), low humidity (as low as 10 percent), and strong wind (billowing dust and sand) make it extremely dangerous to humans and animals, which have been known to suffer heat stroke (*Encyclopedia Britannica* n.d.). The Arabic *samūm* (سَمُوم), from which the French “simoun” is in turn derived, means poisonous or pestilential wind.

Moreover, the simoun has religious significance, appearing in nineteenth-century commentaries on the Bible (see, e.g., Calmet 1835, 927) as the fabled “East Wind” that serves God’s purpose by bringing locusts (Exodus 10:13) and famine (Genesis 41:27), drying up springs (Hosea 13:15), destroying ships (Psalms 48:7), and parting the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21).

The simoun would also provide Romantic literature and Orientalist painting with one of their most iconic imageries. From the eighteenth century onward, Western explorers had attempted to map the deserts in the Middle East and the Sahara, then the least known and understood regions in the European imagination. In his study of Romantic poetry, Cian Duffy (2013) argues that the emptiness of the desert made it a powerful symbol of the sublime in the European imagination. The dreaded simoun wind was an exemplary figure of the sublime because, as a force of nature capable of visiting violence and destruction on humans and obliterating individual and cultural (including national) subjectivity, the simoun resisted the European (imperialist) attempt to inscribe if not impose European cultural values on the desert landscape (ibid., 22, 137, 163). Because the simoun as a figure of the sublime was capable of erasing and effacing person and culture, the Western encounter with the simoun neither “thrill[ed] nor aggrand[ized] the European subject,” serving instead as an “awful reminder of the fragility of subjectivity” (ibid., 166). English Romantic poets like Coleridge (“Religious Musings,” 1796) and Byron (“The Giaour,” 1813) would refer to the simoun in their writings, as would the French novelist and poet Victor Hugo (1859), while painters such as François-Auguste Biard, Eugène Fromentin (see fig. on p. 176), Ippolite Caffi, François Portaels, and David Roberts found the simoun a source of inspiration for their Orient-themed paintings.<sup>11</sup>



Eugène Fromentin, *Le Simoun*, oil on canvas, 45 cm by 65 cm.

Source: Chevallier et al. 1894, 48; [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Catalogue\\_de\\_tableaux\\_anciens\\_et\\_modernes\\_pastels\\_objets\\_d%27art\\_et\\_d%27ameublement\\_porcelaines\\_and\\_fa%C3%AFences\\_composant\\_la\\_collection\\_de\\_M\\_X\\_\(Lallemand\\_et\\_Lecocq-Dumesnil\)\\_-\\_et\\_dont\\_la\\_vente\\_aura\\_lieu\\_\(14764456485\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Catalogue_de_tableaux_anciens_et_modernes_pastels_objets_d%27art_et_d%27ameublement_porcelaines_and_fa%C3%AFences_composant_la_collection_de_M_X_(Lallemand_et_Lecocq-Dumesnil)_-_et_dont_la_vente_aura_lieu_(14764456485).jpg)

But the simoun wind also has political significance, providing simile and metaphor for the winds of revolution, most notably the French Revolution, and the complex “images of freedom and terror” (to borrow Aguilar’s [2011, 438] formulation of the filibustero) that reverberate across the world. In his continuation of Scottish philosopher David Hume’s 1757–1758 and Tobias Smollett’s 1760–1765 *The History of England*, William Jones (1828, 149–50) wrote: “There was not a corner of Europe where the same ingredients were not brought into ferment; for the French Revolution had not only the violence, but the pervading influence of the Simoom, and while it destroyed where it immediately passed, made itself felt everywhere.”

In rechristening Ibarra—whose Basque name bespeaks the history of that region straddling the border of France and Spain that has supplied the leading conquistadores and entrepreneurs in Spain as well as in the

Americas and Filipinas<sup>12</sup>—as Simoun, Rizal anchors his ideas in an “age of revolution” (to use Eric Hobsbawm’s [1962] phrase) that is worldly in intellectual and political orientation and worldwide and world-spanning in scope. Rizal’s original contribution lies in his reconfiguration of the simoun as anticolonial, revolutionary sublime.

Indeed, in Spanish America, places like Cuba (where Simoun spent time and met the governor-general), Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and the Caribbean parts of South America that are now Colombia and Panama were “contact zones” with intense links to French territories (Zeuske 2016, 80), links historically created by “slavery and the slave trade, smuggling, piracy, *cimarronaje* (marronage), and hidden movements of all kinds” (ibid.). The French Revolution was known to have had a deep impact on Francisco de Miranda and Simón Bolívar, and the Napoleonic Wars in Spain had ignited the initial conservative revolution of the Creole elites as part of the latter’s effort to contain the more radical demands of the *pardos* (free people of color), slaves, and poor whites who in turn drew inspiration from the Haitian Revolution against French colonialism, which broke out just a few years after the French Revolution (ibid., 90).

The French Revolution’s own “complex images of freedom and terror” — its positive message of equality, liberty, and fraternity, and its negative message of violence, bloodshed, and judicial executions (most often symbolized by the Terror)—come into play in the associations surrounding the *Fili*’s Simoun. On the one hand, the novel emphasizes Simoun’s determination to organize a revolution to overthrow the Spanish colonizers after centuries of oppression. The simoun of revolution endows political action with the apocalyptic force of nature, capable of shaking up, if not destroying, a colonial order already riddled with violence and social and moral corruption. On the other hand, the reader is not given any hint of what Simoun’s plans for transforming society are after the successful overthrow. Instead, the *Fili* leaves open the questions of what kind and extent of reform—with revolution as the “ultimate reason” (*la última razón*), the final means by which people insist on bringing about change—are needed to break the cycle of oppression and retribution and how to offer some measure of institutional safeguards against incalculable violence.

Anderson (2005, 69–81) argues that Rizal drew inspiration from anarchism for his novel.<sup>13</sup> Rizal’s *Fili* was written at a time when anarchists were engaged in “propaganda by the deed” (*propaganda por el hecho*), a

tactic that anarchists and social revolutionaries formally adopted at their international meeting in London in 1881 (Esenwein 1989, 63). For most of the nineteenth century, Spain had been wracked by the power struggle among the monarchy, church, army, and bourgeoisie. Spaniards waged a war of independence against Napoleon's armies and were able to promulgate the Cádiz Constitution of 1812, which provided for a constitutional monarchy, universal suffrage, and civil liberties. But Ferdinand VII annulled the constitution upon his return from exile. This struggle between absolutist monarchy and the army had borne fruit in the Philippines with the Creole revolts and conspiracies of the 1820s. The church—which in earlier centuries had served as “social conscience” on behalf of the exploited peasantry and colonial population (Bookchin 1977, 62)—now played a major role in the attempt to impose a theocracy in Spain (on behalf of Ferdinand's brother Don Carlos), triggering the Carlist Wars (see the accounts of Latimer 1907 and Clemente 2011). The church—which had seen its lands disentailed and passed to the hands of the aristocracy and rich middle classes—attempted to exercise political influence by penetrating the bureaucracy and accumulating wealth, transforming itself “from the largest landowner in Spain into the largest capitalist” (Bookchin 1977, 64). In reaction to the political vacuum created by the internecine conflicts and unstable government, a series of movements arose and drew on the ideas of republicanism, socialism, and anarchism (ibid., 65). Rizal would have personal and intellectual connections with the Catalan activist-turned-politician Francisco Pi y Margall (1824–1901), whose ideas, although by no means revolutionary, converged with those of self-styled “anarchist” Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and influenced the radical movement in Spain (ibid., 21).<sup>14</sup>

The French Jacobins had once used “anarchist” as a derogatory label for the sansculottes, but the Directory that replaced the Reign of Terror in turn labeled the Jacobins “anarchist” (Marshall 2010, 432). The invention of dynamite—highly volatile, but easy to make and transport—lent bomb-throwing Spanish anarchists an “aura of power” and enabled them to wage “psychological terrorism” against their enemies (Esenwein 1989, 169). For Spanish activists, the anarchist message preaching autonomy, association, and federalism had a particular resonance because of Spain's own history of regional struggles for autonomy. Operating in a specific country milieu in which political violence had become commonplace since the Napoleonic Wars, these activists proved receptive to the ideas of Mikhail Bakunin and

the “poetry of destruction” (Marshall 2010, 453–54; Esenwein 1989, 23–30). But in the late 1880s Spanish anarchists—drawn mainly from the lowest strata of the bourgeoisie and working class (Bookchin 1977, 114)—had not been very successful in detonating bombs in the factories, churches, and other places; in this sense, Anderson (2005, 113) is right to argue that Rizal's *Fili* anticipates the wave of bombings that occurred in Spain and France in 1892–1894. Simoun in no way corresponds to the prototypical anarchist, since the *Fili* does not provide any detailed discussion of the substantive ideas of a just and harmonious society founded on antihierarchy, mutualism, reciprocity, associationalism, and cultivation of the individual's potential that the anarchist movement had sought to realize.

In this light Simoun's plan appears to fall somewhere between Mike Davis's (2007, 269–72) anarchist typology of lone-wolf moral-symbolic terrorism and state-smashing strategic terrorism (and possibly Robin-Hood expropriatory terrorism, given the involvement of Cablesang Tales's group), concerned as it is with revolutionary upheaval, but largely reticent on the anarchist principles of solidarity, collectivism, and freedom. Simoun famously compares the vices of colonial rule to the vulture (*buitre*) feasting on the corpse and asks: “why is there not in the bowels the poison, the ptomaine, the toxin of the tombs to kill the disgusting bird?” (*¿por qué no fermentaba en sus entrañas la ponzoña, la ptomaina, el veneno de las tumbas, para matar á la asquerosa ave?*) (Rizal 1990, 46). Simoun fights poison with poison, fomenting greed and corruption to rouse the colonized beyond endurance to active rebellion. Simoun in fact explicitly compares his treasure chest of jewels to a medicine chest (*como en las cajas del los médicos*), saying, in bad Tagalog, that in this chest he holds “life and death, poison and medicine” (*la vida y la muerte, el veneno y la medicina*) (ibid., 64). Simoun's own name suggests this ambiguity: in Arabic, *samm/summ/simm* means poison, but in related Western Semitic languages such as Aramaic and Syrian, *sm(m)* can denote both poison and medicine (Murtonen 1989, 302).

On the eve of his planned attack on the city, Simoun has an attack of the conscience: “A voice in the interior of his conscience asked if he, Simoun, were not part of the *basura* (trash) of the evil city, perhaps its most deleterious ferment” (*Una voz preguntaba en el interior de su conciencia si él, Simoun, no era parte tambien de la basura de la maldita ciudad, acaso el fermento más deletéreo*) (Rizal 1990, 145). Derbyshire translates the final phrase as “perhaps its most poisonous ferment” (Rizal 1912/1956, 151).



As readers well know, Simoun's plans fail, and he takes poison to escape capture by the authorities. In his deathbed, he tells his life history to Padre Florentino. When Simoun asks the priest why God has not helped him carry out his plans, Florentino answers that this is because Simoun has chosen means of which God could not have approved. Florentino utters the now-famous words: "the glory of saving a country is not for he who has contributed to its ruin!" (*la gloria de salvar á un país no la ha de tener el que ha contribuido á causar su ruina!*) (Rizal 1990, 282). The dying man then asks why God is more concerned with tallying up Simoun's iniquity than heeding the clamor of the innocents (*por qué ese Dios ha de tener más en cuenta mi iniquidad que los clamores de tantas inocentes?*) (ibid.). Florentino lays out the same logic that originally inspires Simoun's own plans: "The just and the worthy must suffer so that their ideas will be known and understood" (*Los justos y los dignos deben sufrir para que sus ideas se conozcan y se entiendan!*) (ibid.).

The priest takes Simoun to task for fomenting social decay without planting an idea (*sembrar un idea*) (ibid.). Instead, liberty must be earned (*mereciéndola*) by "elevating the reason (*razón*) and dignity (*dignidad*) of the individual, by loving what is just, good, great to the extent of dying for it" (*amando lo justo, lo bueno, lo grande hasta morir por él*) (ibid., 283). Unless the people have the energy to proclaim, with heads held high and chests bared, their right to social life and guarantee this with their sacrifices (*el pueblo filipino no tenga suficiente energía para proclamar, alta la frente y desnudo el pecho, su derecho á la vida social y garantizarlo con su sacrificio*) (ibid., 284), no independence is possible, for independence without such preconditions merely means that the slaves of today will become the tyrants of tomorrow (*los esclavos de hoy serán los tiranos de mañana*) (ibid.).

Padre Florentino's point is not so much gradualist reform as the radical hope that political action entails people reforming themselves to the extent that they will be willing to guarantee their right to social life with their own sacrifices. To break the cycle of oppression and retributive violence, it is not enough to rely on the sacrifices of enlightened, committed people like Elias. People must reform, remake themselves and their social relations in the way that Elias remolds himself by turning his back on his privileged life, and remolds his social relations with Ibarra and others by breaking the cycle of blood, debt, and vengeance that colonialism breeds.

True to form, Rizal leaves open-ended the question of whether Simoun accepts or rejects Padre Florentino's braiding of revolutionary action and the revolution in consciousness and social relations. The *Fili* tells us that

Padre Florentino feels the pressure of Simoun's hand on his and hopes that Simoun will respond to what he has just said. But the dying man, in the novel's final act of reticence, says nothing. Simoun's silence raises another possible interpretation of the relationship between revolutionary action and revolutionary consciousness, one not based on priority of one over the other, but on their mutual determination: just as political action is contingent on the remolding of minds and social relations, so too political action has the potential to transform society by remolding selves and social relations.

Rizal was writing decades before the successful socialist revolutions in Russia and China. Within Rizal's own period and place, the brutal repression of the Paris Commune was still a living memory in Europe, and the French Revolution had generated so much anxiety and fear of revolution among the ruling monarchs and governments of other European countries that they enacted measures and controls that further deepened the surveillance and repression of their own respective populations (as detailed in Zamovski 2015).

Even though the Communists had begun formulating an idea of revolution in terms of the overthrowing of existing social and political conditions by violence, if necessary, both Marx and Engels and even Lenin were quite pragmatic and did not make violence a necessary correlate of revolution. On different occasions, each allowed for the possibility of engaging in class struggle by peaceful means (Schaff 1973, 263) particularly in Marx and Engels's assessment of the prospects for America and England. They believed that America's lack of a strong military and bureaucracy might make it easier to effect a peaceful socialist transition—a belief that proved untenable in retrospect. Marx also believed that in England social revolution could be achieved by peaceful and legal means, though he did not expect the ruling classes to submit to this peacefully (ibid., 266). In those decades when Rizal was working on his novels, when socialist revolution had yet to triumph in any country the Marxists did not discount reformism as a means of class struggle (cf. ibid., 269).

For all that the *Noli* and the *Fili* ultimately pulled back from demanding the separation of Filipinas from Spain, the fact remains that they pointed to the horizon of struggle and independence. Even better, they offered a potent political fantasy, a series of thought experiments, in which revolution might be organized by people as "la última razón" to bring about change. This conjuring of revolution had an electrifying effect on Filipinos back home who had read these novels or, failing that (because of tight censorship),

had heard—through rumor-mongering—about the radical content of these novels from others.

There is a literary term for the rhetorical strategy of calling attention to a point while claiming to disregard or deny it: *praeteritio*. Rizal raises the specter of independence through revolution, only to postpone it by laying down a set of conditions by which independence might be achieved. But the fact remains that the jinn of revolution, once released, can no longer be so easily contained. Moreover, Elias grapples with the ethical dilemma of effecting political and social change without recourse to the kind of violence that will result in the deaths of innocents, but finds himself in situations where he is forced to correct an act of injustice by resorting to violence. Rizal lays down the ultimate condition for “earning” the right to revolution by having Elias sacrifice himself, not just for another fellow Filipino, Ibarra, but for unnamed and as-yet unborn generations of Filipinos who, in his famous last words, will see dawn break over their native Filipinas. How long in the future before dawn actually breaks remains tantalizingly unanswered.

Self-sacrifice and the negation of self that it entails have long been integral to the theory and practice of nationalism and are two elements of nationalism’s emotional core. But they are, as well, core elements in the debates on revolutionary violence. Giorgio Agamben (2009), drawing on Walter Benjamin’s (1986) idea of sovereign violence, argues that revolutionary violence is not “a violence of means, aimed at the just end of negating the existing system.” Violence that enforces the law and violence that defies the law are “no different from the violence aimed at establishing new laws and new power” because in each of these instances of violence, “negation of the other fails to become a negation of the self” (Agamben 2009, 108). One can discern traces of Elias and Rizal in Agamben’s (ibid.) words, written almost eighty years after the *Fili*: “Most of the violent revolts against the dominant class do not bring about revolution, just as most doses of medicine do not bring about miraculous cures. Only those who consciously confront their own negation through violence may shake off ‘all the muck of ages’ and begin the world anew.” Agamben (ibid., 109) suggests that the “limit and irrepressible truth of revolutionary violence” lie in the act of crossing the “threshold of culture and occupying a zone inaccessible to language.”

Elias crosses this threshold at the cost of his life, but his decision to sacrifice himself, to give his life in place of Ibarra’s, does not—cannot—authorize the sacrifice of the lives of others. In contrast, colonialism exercises

sovereign violence in naked form as a means to create as well as preserve the law. Because the colonial state and its authorities have the power to exercise the law in arbitrary ways, their capacity to create exception places them inside and outside the law that they posit and preserve. Colonial authorities can kill their subject populations with impunity in the name of preserving law and order. The outlaw Elias, whose defiance of colonial authority puts him outside the law, gestures at the looming struggle capable of destroying the colonial law and order, yet offering neither immunity nor guarantee against violence.<sup>15</sup>

Rizal’s novels point to the horizon of liberation necessary to found a (national) community, while keeping always in view the ethical dilemma of debating and realizing the means by which justice and freedom must be earned, fought for, and died for.<sup>16</sup> All efforts to make community, no matter how just or right, are haunted by the specter of the massacre of innocents. No movement, no matter how just its cause, can take life with impunity, nor demand sacrifice from the people in whose name it fights for liberation. The *Noli*’s formulation of the ethical dilemma of fighting for change would haunt theories of political and social transformation in the century to come.

### Rizal, Author of Revolution

Just as there is no way an author can control how readers will interpret his or her novel, so Rizal learned soon enough that his novels would lend themselves to being interpreted in ways that he could not have anticipated, let alone prepared for.

While the *Fili* imagined a revolution led by a Spanish-mestizo descendant of Creoles, Rizal’s novels were being read (“read” can mean actually read or else comprehended through hearsay and the commentary of others surrounding Rizal and his novels [discussed in Hau 2000, ch. 2]), interpreted, and acted upon by a different social group: the urban middle sector and municipal elites, that is, the people who came from the same social background as his fictional Elias. The urban middle sector would in fact seize the initiative to establish the revolutionary secret society, the Katipunan, and municipal elites would join the Philippine Revolution that broke out a few years later (Cullinane 2014).

The Katipunan drew inspiration from Rizal and his life and works, making Rizal an honorary president (ibid., 48), and hanging his portrait in the session hall of the Supreme Council (De La Costa 1961, 101). Emilio

Jacinto raised the battle cry “Long live the Philippines! Long live Liberty! Long Live Dr. Rizal! Unity!” in his speech on 23 July 1893 (ibid., 108). Thirteen of the twenty-eight known members of the Katipunan’s Supreme Council were members of La Liga Filipina, the short-lived organization that Rizal helped to found (ibid., 403).

Pio Valenzuela testified that, when he told Rizal in Dapitan of the Katipunan’s plan for an uprising, Rizal had contended that “it was hardly the time to embark on such foolhardy ventures, as there was no unity among the various classes of Filipinos, nor did they have arms, nor ships, nor education, nor any of the other requirements for a resistance movement” (ibid., 93). Anderson (2005, 153) rightly points out that Rizal, not well acquainted with Valenzuela, might have been wary of endorsing the uprising for fear of being baited by an agent provocateur. Exiled to Dapitan, Rizal may not have been up-to-date on the happenings in Cuba, although he would have had no problem anticipating the difficulties entailed by organizing a successful revolution (ibid., 154).

During his trial, Rizal issued a manifesto on 15 December 1896 denying his authorship of the 1896 revolution. He wrote:

I desire as much as the next man liberties for our country; I continue to desire them. But I laid down as a prerequisite the education of the people in order that by means of such instruction, and by hard work, they may acquire a personality of their own and so become worthy of such liberties. In my writings I have recommended study and the civic virtues, without which no redemption is possible. I have also written (and my words have been repeated by others) that reforms, if they are to bear fruit, must come *from above*, for reforms that come *from below* are upheavals both violent and transitory. Thoroughly imbued with these ideas, I cannot do less than condemn, this ridiculous and barbarous uprising, plotted behind my back. (trans. Horacio De la Costa 1961, 119)

Rizal argued, in his defense, that the Katipunan had fundamentally misread and misinterpreted him. Deep reservations about the feasibility of reforms “from below” may conceivably have been a factor in Rizal’s refusal to give his blessing to the Katipunan when it was forced, by betrayal of its existence by one of its own members, to go ahead and rise in arms. Rizal’s reservations

about the feasibility of revolution also rested on a number of pragmatic concerns: arms, funds, education, and unity among the various classes in their support for the revolution, among others (ibid., 93).

Nevertheless, the judge advocate general at the trial countered Rizal with this argument based on the judge advocate’s own reading of Rizal’s manifesto:

But he [Rizal] suggests pretty clearly that the independence they dream of can be achieved by means less dishonorable than those currently being employed by the rebels; that is to say, when the cultural level of the people shall have been raised to the point where it will be a decisive factor in the struggle and a guarantee of success. As far as Rizal is concerned, the whole question is one of opportunity, not of principles or objectives. (ibid., 119–20)

The prosecution argued for Rizal’s guilt based on the capacity of his writings—as expressions of political speech—to “stir . . . up dormant resentments and hold . . . up hopes for the future” (ibid., 127). The Office of the Governor-General, in its summary, similarly pointed to Rizal’s “overheated imagination being inflamed with fantasies of freeing his country from the dominion of Spain” (ibid., 132). The judge advocate general, called on to give his opinion following Rizal’s sentencing, declared that Rizal was no less than “el Verbo del Filibusterismo” (ibid., 73), the Word of Filibusterismo—De la Costa (ibid., 158) translates this as “Word Incarnate of Revolution”—in the same way that his character Simoun was revolution incarnate.

The trial in effect conflated the two meanings of “author” (*autor*)—the actual term used in the official trial documents (ibid., 43–44; see the analysis of the trial by Bernad 1998, 53)—as writer *and* as agent/instigator of revolution. He who sets down in writing the political fantasy of freeing his country, in so doing, makes things happen. Rizal argued that he never authorized his name to be used by the Katipunan and even denied authorship of a *kundiman* (love song) that had been submitted as evidence of his guilt. Just as Ibarra’s words in his letter to Maria Clara would be “misconstrued” by the authorities to prove that Ibarra was the principal author of the insurrection staged by Padre Salvi, Rizal would find himself disputing the reading offered by the prosecution of verses taken from his poem “Himno á Talisay.” Rizal’s guilt would be based on the judge’s selective, discretionary interpretation



of Rizal's words. There was to be no protected right to free speech in his time, for Filipinas was under colonial rule, now under serious threat from anticolonial revolution. The trial was swift, there was to be no appeal, and by the end of the month Rizal was executed.

### Conjuring Community

Ambeth Ocampo (2001, 34) has rightly observed that "As each generation writes its own history, Rizal is either a hero or anti-hero depending not on facts, but more on judgment, explanations, and interpretation all influenced, or maybe dependent, on the politics and ideological bent of the times."

Readers find positions in their various encounters with the *Noli* and the *Fili* to construct broad views and understandings of the events and characters in the fictional Filipinas and the world. The *Noli* and the *Fili* take as their major theme this very process of reading and meaning making by giving "the people" a starring role, showing them in the act of gathering together, moving about, and doing things, and—most important of all—letting readers eavesdrop on "the people" speaking among themselves and making sense of what is happening and who does what and with what consequences.

The ways in which readers deal with the tension between reticence and revelation in Rizal's novels bring them into repeated confrontation with pockets of undecidability that resist the efforts, even those that claim to obtain proof directly from the novels themselves, to pin down and fix the meaning once and for all.

One of the most important accomplishments of the *Noli* and the *Fili* is their giving space and voice to "the people," a term flexible enough to encompass few as well as many, but a term that is also conceptually split because it can mean two different things: a sociological notion of the "people" as heterogeneous members of a given population and a political notion of the "people" (frequently invoked by characters ranging from government officials to Tasio to Elias and Ibarra) as a collective subject.<sup>17</sup> The conceptual splitting of "the people" (Canovan 2005, 2, 6) into collective body and agent of political, social, and cultural transformation, on the one hand, and collection of individuals with motley, potentially conflicting private (and worse, self-serving) interests, ambitions, and concerns, on the other hand, is fittingly encapsulated by Rizal in a title he chooses for chapter 59 of the *Noli*: "Patriotism and Interests."

Both of these notions of "the people are entangled, constitutive

concepts" (ibid., 10) because they were formulated in the wake of a series of world-spanning revolutions from the late eighteenth throughout the nineteenth centuries in which the "number" of people came to be correlated with the "power" of the people, making "the people" not only the agent of change but also the subject of history, the object of study and increasingly of governmentality (Foucault 1991). At the same time, the numerical strength that characterized "mass" also made this "mass" an inherently opaque and ambiguous term, internally differentiated and divided, multiple and shifting in meaning according to the perspectives of the viewer and commentator (Jonsson 2013, 8–9). For what was at stake was nothing less than the intellectual and political issue of "how society ought to be described, depicted and represented, and by whom" (ibid., 10), and how society ought to be transformed, and by whom.

The idea of the numerical strength of the people had come, in Rizal's time, to have both positive and negative meanings. In its positive sense, "the people" was the name given to the revolutionary agent whose action aimed at protesting political marginalization and oppression, economic dispossession and exploitation, and social injustice. This collective agent was capable of articulating universal norms of horizontal solidarity, equality, and liberty and bringing about the renewal and transformation of society. This agent was also—in keeping with the times—typically an embodied, gendered one, iconically male and masculine (ibid., 12). In its negative sense, "the people" dissolved into "masses" or, worse, "mob" that brought "error," social chaos, and violence, and needed to be managed and contained. The "masses" were often rendered in feminized as well as racialized terms, derided as intellectually incapable and ignorant, irrational, emotional, and instinctual, requiring education and above all representation by either intellectual or political leader in order for the "masses" to become a "people" on whose behalf community is asserted (ibid., 11, 23, 62, 248).

In the years to come, in *our* time, the contingencies and uncertainties that attended revolutionary situations and under specific circumstances spiraled into violence would be papered over in favor of blanket generalizations about the revolution *necessarily* devouring its children, generalizations that try to ensure that there can be only one definitive interpretation of the "revolution" (revolution equals terror) and only one definitive "remedy" to revolution (no revolution).<sup>18</sup> Yet, the irreducible tension between the two senses of the people continues to challenge progressive political and social

movements concerned with seeking viable alternatives and solutions to the current problems and challenges the world faces.

Through the character of Elias, readers get to imagine the possibility that a noble, heroic man who turns his back on his wealthy mother's family and immerses himself among ordinary people can come to be one of the people, learning and experiencing firsthand the travails and suffering of the people. This total immersion among people proves transformative for Elias, gifting him with the necessary experience and knowledge to "interpret" and relay the people's grievances. But Elias can act as interpreter only insofar as he already commits himself to defending the ordinary people and fighting for justice.<sup>19</sup>

Even as Elias interprets the grievances of the people, he makes no claim to speak *as* "the people," standing in for them by speaking in their place. Nor does he make any claim to guarantee the outcome of the "struggle that is preparing" once this struggle actually breaks out. No detailed program of action, no matter how well thought out, can fully account for the contingencies and imperatives that arise in the course of political struggle. Moreover, this struggle always carries the risk and danger of self-sacrifice turning into sacrifice of others, and revolutionary movements must always grapple with the ethical dilemma of ends never justifying the means.

Simoun is filibusterismo made flesh, now given a world-spanning scope by yet another word, "revolución," summoned by the name that Rizal gives to his law-annihilating antihero. As Anderson (2005, 121) eloquently puts it, Simoun "is a sort of *espectro mundial* come to haunt the Philippines, mirroring what Izquierdo had once fantasized as the invisible machiavellian network of the International. Not yet there in reality, but, since already imagined, just like his nation, on the way."

The mere act of conjuring up that coming struggle in writing did have real social and political effects, some that Rizal might have conceivably anticipated (pissing off the friars, for one), others he did not (an actual revolution planned by non-Creoles and encompassing multiple sectors of society, including "from below").

The power of writing to conjure community is evident as well in the Katipunan's founding document, dated August 1892, drafted only a year after the *Fili* was published. The Katipunan's words were bold and decisive: "Be it declared that from this day forward this Archipelago separates itself from Spain and does not recognize nor will recognize any leadership but

this Kataastaasang Katipunan" (*Ysinasaysay magbuhat sa arao na ito na ang manga Kapuloang ito ay humihiwalay sa Espania at walang kinikilala at kikilanling Pamumuno kung di itong Kataastaasang Katipunan*) (Richardson 2013, 21; I have slightly modified Richardson's translation to stress the active tense of "humihiwalay" [separate]). With these written words, the Katipunan founded itself in the act of formally declaring Philippine independence, designating itself the "pamumuno" of the Archipelago, speaking and acting on behalf of the entire Archipelago, on the instance of the Archipelago's separation from Spain. The coming into existence of the Katipunan signals the moment when the "people" come into being as individuals mobilize themselves and decide to undertake action collectively (Canovan 2005, 44; cf. Derrida 2002, 49).<sup>20</sup>

If it is true that "[w]e make Rizal in our own image and likeness" (Ocampo 2001, 7), the textual ambiguities, ambivalences, and undecidabilities that readers encounter as they make sense of the *Noli* and *Fili* are not only revealing of the backgrounds and contexts in which readers struggle for understanding in light of the existing inequalities, divisions, marginalizations, and contestations that haunt—and continue to haunt—Philippine politics, society, and culture. These ambiguities, ambivalences, and undecidabilities haunt the imagining and making of community, whether in mondial, national, regional, or local terms. Rizal's abiding preoccupation with the problems and challenges of narrating community lends his novels an open-endedness that resists narrative closure while enabling the emergence of new revolutionary subjects beyond Rizal's own political calculations. In so doing, the *Noli* and the *Fili* enact literature's normative capacity for world making, for "reworlding and remaking the degraded world" (Cheah 2016, 186, 330).

Democracy, too, must contend with the intractability of claims made on the political and economic system by people of various backgrounds and perspectives. Classic assumptions of democracy uphold the idea of an unambiguously defined Common Good (equivalent to the welfare and interest of "the people") that all people can be made to see and realize *if only* they were educated enough and *if only* they were not so concerned with their own (selfish) interests (Schumpeter 1950, 250). But the reality is that the "common good" can mean different things to different people, and the issues of what policies need to be implemented and whether they are implementable do not always boil down to the question of whether

these policies are “good” or “bad,” because there is often serious intellectual disagreement on which policies work or not, and these policies may not always be resolvable through rational argument (ibid., 251).

The *Noli* and the *Fili* simultaneously posit *and* question “community,” showing that the differentiations and divisions that indelibly mark the concept of “the people”—complex, multiple in meaning, heterogeneous, just like representation itself (Didi-Huberman 2016, 68)—are precisely the source of the concept’s “uncanny political efficacy” (Bosteels 2016, 4). It is because community is wrought out of inclusion and exclusion that community can—and must—be unmade and remade.

## Notes

I thank Jojo Abinales, Leloy Claudio, Ambeth Ocampo, Takashi Shiraishi, and the anonymous reader for their constructive comments; and Jun Aguilar, Angelli Tugado, and the staff of Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints for their encouragement and for shepherding the article toward publication. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine, and all errors of fact, translation, and interpretation are my responsibility.

- 1 Rizalistas secular and religious consider the *Noli* as the Old Testament and the *Fili* the New Testament. I thank Ambeth Ocampo for this information.
- 2 Capitan Tiago served as president of the mestizo *gremio* (guild) for two years.
- 3 Although Rizal (1978, 32) attributes to William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* the allusion to the fisherman who stopped singing when he found treasure, no such passage exists in Shakespeare. The passage is found instead in Friedrich Schiller’s rewriting of the Witches’ Scene (Act 1, Scene 3) in his German-language adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1801), based on Eschenburg’s German prose translation (Furness 1873, 447–48, English translation 448–49). In a letter to Ferdinand Blumentritt, Rizal (1888b/1961, 173) wrote that for his planned second edition of the *Noli* (which sadly never materialized), he intended to “correct the erroneous citation of Shakespeare in place of that of Schiller.”
- 4 I thank Jun Aguilar for this observation.
- 5 See also Arthur Hatto’s (1965) historical account of the *alba* theme of lovers’ meeting and parting in world literature.
- 6 Speaking of herbs and weeds, not everyone who has written about Rizal views Damaso as an unreconstructed “villain.” In his essay “Rizal’s Philosophy of History,” Ricardo Pascual (1961/1991, 305) contrasts Padre Damaso with Padre Salvi this way: “Here we have two classes of priests, the early missionaries and the succeeding missionaries who became heirs to all the achievements of the former. The early missionaries were brusque, crude, and actual participants in the building of and struggles in the life of the people, while the later missionaries were preoccupied with the preservation of the gains already attained by the former. This is what the author has exposed in the novel, hence he made Fray Damaso actually the physical father

of Maria Clara while Fray Salvi was very much concerned with capturing the attention and in dominating through his influence the activities of Maria Clara.”

- 7 Revealingly, Rizal objected to fellow *ilustrado* Isabelo de los Reyes’s matter-of-fact citation of Fr. Martin de Rada’s account of abortion and infanticide in Filipinas at the time of Spanish contact (Rizal 1890/1996, 507; Rizal 1888a/1961, 210–11; see the discussion in Reyes 2008, 211–12). Rizal claimed to Blumentritt that Rada was suggesting that “almost all mothers kill their children before birth when they already have more than one or two, with the exception of those who want to have children” (Rizal 1888a/1961, 210–11, italics added). In his critique of Isabelo de los Reyes, Rizal (1890/1996, 244) accused the latter of parroting Rada in depicting Philippine towns as pueblos of assassins (*asesinos*), thieves (*ladrones*), criminals (*facinerosos*), cowards (*cobardes*) and “mothers, de-naturalized, killing their children when they had many” (*los madres, denaturalizadas, matando á sus hijos cuando tenían muchos*). Rizal (ibid.) went from accusing both Rada and De los Reyes of overgeneralization to casting doubt on the existence of such phenomena in the Philippine islands: “Are there cases . . . of infanticide as there are in many Catholic countries in Europe?” (*Regístranse acaso casos de...infanticidio como en muchos países católicos de Europa?*). Historians, drawing on some of the same sources that De los Reyes used but wary of sweeping generalizations, tell us that abortion and infanticide did take place in precolonial times, in situations when women had too many children and were concerned about how a large family might result in a diminished share of inheritance among their progeny, or when unmarried women chose to do so (neither courting punishment or shame, nor worsening their prospects for securing a future mate) (Pedrosa 1983, 13–14). Furthermore, such practices continued well into the seventeenth century despite the attempts of Spanish religious orders like the Jesuits to proscribe them (Newson 2009, 108). Ferdinand Blumentritt (1962, xiii), in his prologue to Rizal’s annotations of Morga, offered this gentle rebuke of his good friend’s tendency to sanitize history: “I have observed that you suffer from the error of many modern historians who censure the occurrences of centuries past in accordance with the concepts that correspond to contemporary ideas. This ought not to be so. The historian ought not to impute to the men of the sixteenth century the broad horizon of ideas that stirs the nineteenth century.” Ironically, Spartan women, whom Rizal would hold up as models for the women of Malolos, routinely practiced abortion and infanticide, which were legal in Sparta (Tetlow 2005, 46).
- 8 A good account of how nineteenth-century colonial reform and political and economic developments shaped and altered women’s status and prospects and family dynamics is Owen 2000. For a sampling of reflections on Maria Clara, see Lopez 1953; Joaquin 1964, 1980; Nakpil 1963/1999; Hau 2004, 152–68; Almario 2008; Reyes 2008, 167–77; and Cruz 2012, 74–88.
- 9 On the *taong labas* in Philippine history, see Gealogo 1990.
- 10 The Spanish word *mulato* (French *mulâtre*) originally derived from the word for mule, the cross between a donkey and a horse. “Mulatto”—which is usually defined as the mestizo offspring of a European and an African—denoted a range of “non-white” skin color, from “lightened black” to “darkened white” to “darkened,” depending on the areas of Latin America and the Caribbean in which it was used (Torres and Whitten 1998, 19–20). “Mulatto” first appeared as a racial category in the census of the US in 1850 (Jackson 2014, 50).
- 11 With the help of the Yankee Mr. Leeds, Simoun stages an Orient-themed illusion (dating to the sixth century BCE of the Achaemenid King of Kings Cambyses II, conqueror of Egypt, with Egyptians standing in for inhabitants of Filipinas) of a talking head at the Quiapo Fair to tell

his life story and accuse Padre Salvi, who promptly falls into a fainting fit. What is interesting about this illusion is how Simoun recasts Filipinas as Egypt, drawing on that country's ancient civilization (which predates that of the Achaemenid empire) and history of resisting foreign invasion.

- 12 On Basques in the Philippines, see Borja 2012. Basques played an important role in the Spanish Reconquista (Woodworth 2008, 22). The Basque conquistador and explorer Diego de Ibarra was responsible for "discovering" the Zacatecas mines that would yield one of the richest lodes of silver in the New World (Bakewell 1971, 9, 129). A prominent family, the Ibarra would, centuries later, provide the liberator of Latin America, Simón Bolívar, with an adjutant (Zeuske 2016, 79). The Basque region was also the "safe region" of the Carlist insurgency (Lawrence 2014, 13).
- 13 Jim Richardson (2006) disputes Anderson's contention that the *Fili* is *anarchisant* in spirit and sympathy, arguing that Rizal did not view anarchism as a viable political option, let alone solution.
- 14 The link between Rizal and Pi y Margall is explored in Sarkisyanz 1995; on the economic and political background of Rizal's time, see Legarda 2011.
- 15 Benjamin's concept (1986, 297) of law-destroying divine violence—to which this discussion is indebted—is capable of annihilation without bloodshed, but Agamben (1998, 64) argues that it has "the capacity to lend itself to the most dangerous equivocation."
- 16 As Jacques Derrida 2002, 252 puts it: "A decision that didn't go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision."
- 17 See the discussion in Jonsson 2008, 23; for a survey of western philosophical attitudes toward "the crowd and the mob," see McClelland 2011.
- 18 For a stringent critique of the historical revisionism that links the French Revolution to the Russian Revolution and anticolonial movements and indicts them for their alleged totalitarian tendencies and violent messianism, see Losurdo 2015. Such revisionism, argues Losurdo, obscures the historic role of colonialism in providing the model and techniques for authoritarianism as well as mass repression and extermination. For a critical assessment of the Reign of Terror and Jacobinism, see Wahnich 2012.
- 19 The *Noli* renders this preparation for self-sacrifice as a form of masculine self-discipline that eschews sexual intimacy and domestic (marital) happiness (Hau 2004, 154–68).
- 20 "[The concrete, mobilized people] is outside time in the sense that it has no continuous history, and that each appearance of a mobilized people is a fresh start. In a sense, it is the mobilization itself, the engagement of individual people in collective action, that constitutes a people where none existed before, and may in due course give rise to a nation" (Canovan 2005, 44).

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