

# Disrupting the Realist Nation: The Forest as Radical Illegibility in the Novels of Jose Rizal

Glenn L. Diaz\*

The matter of geography does not seem to register in the predominant readings of the works of the nineteenth-century Filipino writer Jose Rizal, most of which privilege a framework built around nationalism. In this article, I consider how the forest as a narrative space and conceptual trope—or “forest thought”—can mediate the way in which history is imagined in Rizal’s novels, *Noli me tangere* (Touch me not) (1887) and *El filibusterismo* (The subversion) (1891), mostly by disclosing, unsettling, and ultimately resisting the legibility that state-making and narrative require and engender. In looking at “forest thought” in the novels and the conceptions of history that it reveals, I seek to bring to the surface a disrupting potential in the works: the forest as “excess” of and radical threat from the center, as incubator of an inchoate utopia, and as a site of generative illegibility, which also locates the trauma of colonial conquest in Rizal as a figure of European enlightenment, offering hopefully new ways of thinking about the constellation of space, narrative, state-making, and empire.

**Keywords:** Jose Rizal, spatio-poetics, forest, Philippine literature, empire

The novels of the late-nineteenth-century Filipino writer and martyr Jose Rizal—*Noli me tangere* (Touch me not) (1887) and its sequel, *El filibusterismo* (The subversion) (1891)—are literary and political marvels, widely considered “the greatest achievement of modern Filipino literature” (Anderson 2006, 26). *Noli* was the “first major artistic manifestation of Asian resistance to European colonialism,” according to the Penguin Classics translation by Harold Augenbraum (Rizal 2006), the first by a Filipino author in the imprint. Benedict Anderson (1998; 2005; 2008), who did vital work on Rizal’s writing and nationalism, views the works as pioneering not just in the region but across most of the colonized world by the end of the nineteenth century: “There is nothing in the Americas, nothing in the rest of Southeast Asia, nothing in Africa till three-quarters of a century later” (Anderson 1998, 232). In the history of Spanish-language literature, the

---

\* School of Humanities, Ateneo de Manila University, Loyola Heights, Quezon City, Metro Manila 1108, Philippines

e-mail: [gdiaz@ateneo.edu](mailto:gdiaz@ateneo.edu)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8950-9441>

two books are among “the most influential works of colonial or postcolonial fiction” (Augenbraum 2011, x).

But the “best evidence” of the books’ achievement is their enduring political influence, beginning with “the immediate recognition given to Rizal by both his own countrymen and Spaniards . . . as the leader of the growing nationalist movement,” a position that he would deny but for which he would be martyred, executed after a sham trial in 1896 (Guerrero 2009, xv).<sup>1</sup> More than half a century later, beginning in 1956—soon after America had granted the Philippines independence—a “Rizal Law” mandated that every Filipino high school student read the two novels, enshrined as “a constant and inspiring source of patriotism with which the minds of the youth . . . should be suffused” (Republic Act No. 1425). The landmark legislation, Caroline Hau writes, put *Noli* and *Fili* at the apex of the “nationalist pedagogical project,” in recognition of their role in “shaping the ‘national character’ by articulating a new historical entity, the (modern) Filipino nation” (Hau 2000, 86). Rizal’s novels are thus implicated in postcolonial state-making and the figure of Rizal effectively made “the general guarantor of the truth of Philippine nationalism . . . even its alibi” (Anderson 1998, 252).

Critics have pointed out the inadequacies in such formulations of nationalism applied in a postcolonial context yet rooted in Western modernity (Balibar 1990; Chatterjee 1996; Cheah 2003). In the Philippines, historians such as William Henry Scott (1982), Vicente Rafael (1988), Francis Gealogo (1994), Reynaldo Ileto (1998), Resil Mojares (2002), and Rosario Cruz Lucero (2007) have noted, in varying ways, how nation-centric historiography, which Rizal’s novels purportedly evince, privileges an elite and liberal conception of history that excludes the “conceptual world” of the masses: the “largely rural and uneducated Filipinos who constituted the revolution’s mass base” (Ileto 1979, 4, 27). Anderson (1998, 253) himself warns that “official nationalism” can be both “emanation and armature” for the state. This is evident in how Rizal’s fashioning as a reform-minded pacifist who allegedly opposed the revolution was foregrounded in the early years of American colonial rule, his politics defanged to suit the agenda of the new colonizer and collaborating Filipino elite (Quibuyen 1997, 228).<sup>2</sup> The Philippine state continues to harness Rizal’s stature as literary hero toward the “formation of model citizens,” a contentious field in which the state has the sole power to define what constitutes such virtuous citizenship (Hau 2000, 31). Radical and subversive in their time, Rizal’s novels have been co-opted as self-legitimizing ideology for the modern Philippine nation-state, unwitting apparatuses to its machinations.

In this inquiry, I seek to intervene in the field by positing an alternative reading of

1) See Guerrero (1974, 472–479) and De la Costa (1961).

2) See Delmendo (1998).

Rizal's novels, arguing that far from being stable "gospels of nationalism" (Guerrero 2009, xiii), they contain traces of resistance against the modern, nation-centric imaginary central to the dominant ways in which the texts have been read. I locate and explore this alternative paradigm in Rizal's rendering of the forest, both as narrative space and conceptual field, and how it contests and destabilizes the coherence of nationalism and state-making in the novels on the one hand, and realism, narrativity, and nation as artifacts of modernity on the other. Central to my reading is the notion of illegibility, in particular the illegibility of the forest as a narrative space and conceptual trope—what I will refer to collectively as "forest thought"—and how the disruption of legibility within and outside the texts can gesture toward a broader, more grounded conception of history. I use ideas drawn from James Scott's work on Zomia, the massive "great mountain realm" in mainland Southeast Asia and "one of the largest remaining nonstate spaces in the world" (Scott 2009, 13). The discourse around the "enormous ungoverned periphery," I argue, is useful in thinking about the spatio-poetics of the forest in Rizal's two novels and the fraught relationship between space and legibility in parallel with the dynamic operating between narrative and state-making.

Even so, this critique constitutes a very specific, even "rational," way of looking at forest thought and literature. It does not include explicitly ecological arguments from ecocriticism, biopolitics, or even environmental history, although the link between state-making and late capitalism on the one hand, and deforestation and the broader destruction of the nonhuman world on the other, is well established. I propose elsewhere a working theory of the tropical forest "as a material structuring force in the historical imagination that undergirds Philippine literary production," drawing ideas from new materialism, material poetics, and tropicality (Diaz 2022, 128–129). As regards current directions in Philippine ecocriticism, there remains ample ground to be covered in charting a nonhuman history of the forest and how it may clarify, nuance, or even overhaul dominant ways of thinking about the forest, state-making, and narrativity.<sup>3)</sup> This frontier of illegibility is outside the scope of this still largely anthropocentric critique.

### Looking for Rizal's Nation

More than his political work, it was Rizal's two novels that played a "central role" in helping galvanize the Philippine anticolonial imagination and revolutionary movement by, respectively, "creating in the imagination a whole (and contemporary) Philippine

---

3) See Ong (2019).

‘society’” in *Noli* and “imagining the political collapse of this society and the near-elimination of its ruling powers” in *Fili* (Anderson 2005, 567; 2006, 26). The collective anticipation for the dinner party with which *Noli* begins, Anderson writes, which was “discussed by hundreds of unnamed people, who do not know each other, in quite different parts of Manila, in a particular month of a particular decade, immediately conjures up the imagined community” (Anderson 2006, 27). A Filipino reader, recognizing the realistically rendered scene, is then implicated in this act of imagining, and

the casual progression . . . from the “interior” time of the novel to the “exterior” time of the reader’s everyday life gives a hypnotic confirmation of the solidity of a single community, embracing characters, author and reader, moving onwards through calendrical time. (Anderson 2006, 27)

In this way, the technologies of print capitalism, such as the novel, help create a common discourse through which people who could not possibly know each other establish a kind of kinship. In the context of Philippine nationalism, Rizal’s heroism, Miguel de Unamuno writes, is the heroism of a writer (in Arensmeyer 1970, 740). And his power, Anderson notes, “did not come from his sermons and critical articles [but] his novels” (Anderson 2006, 566).

The unmistakable entwining of nationalist historiography and Rizal as a historical figure thus lies in his fiction, and any attempt to disassemble and trouble the link needs to attend to the imagination animating the work, to what Neferti Tadiar describes as “the experimental character of literature itself,” when “lived experience” is creatively recast and sheds “the form of incontrovertible social fact” (Tadiar 2009, 18). “Literary works are figurations of possibilities of life that authors exercise in their imaginations of historical experience; in this way, they are also theoretical perspectives on both dominant and residual cultural logics of social life” (Tadiar 2009, 18). Lee Horsley points out that novels about historical experience subjectify “the tensions involved in our imaginative shaping of actuality,” which “lay bare the dilemmas involved in giving form and meaning to historical experience” (Horsley 1990, 4). In the context of Rizal’s works, Ileto raises the possibility of a discrepancy between the liberal conception of history evinced by his novels and “phenomena that resisted his ordering mind” (Ileto 1998, 31). These phenomena, he adds, “exist on the fringes of his life and work, and can be retrieved if we set our minds to it” (Ileto 1998, 31). Locating the nation in his novels, its manifestations and “alibis” but also its excesses and slippages, requires unpacking the historical imagination at work, both wittingly and unwittingly, behind them.

In her influential *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946–1980*, Hau argues that while Rizal’s novels indeed “stand as the ‘originary’ fictions of Filipino nationalism,” a particular “outsider-as-insider” narrative stance in the works allows them

to complicate, if not contest, a blanket endorsement or reproduction of modern liberal historiography (Hau 2000, 86, 147). The outsider perspective from the metropole, she writes, operates via a “critical distance born of comparison,” while the insider one works “by critique through attestation or testimony” from the viewpoint of someone in the colony (Hau 2000, 144). Taken together, this “bifurcation . . . between official representation and the insider’s narrative” (Hau 2000, 147) is where Rizal’s narrative “derives its nationalizing impulse,” with the tension signaling the instability of the nation in the novels (Hau 2000, 144).

Set in the waning years of Spanish rule in the late-nineteenth-century Philippines, *Noli me tangere* and *El filibusterismo* follow the gradual radicalization of idealistic, reform-minded Crisostomo Ibarra, the son of a wealthy mestizo landowner who returns home from his studies in Europe with plans to build a modern school in his hometown. Instead, he runs afoul of the enormously powerful clergy, portrayed in the works as backward, corrupt, “degenerate descendants” of the first missionaries who turned the Catholic faith into a religion of “commerce in whips and scapularies” (Rizal 2006, 325, ch. 49).<sup>4</sup> The critique of this “frailocracy,” for which Rizal and the novels are best known, is narratively enabled, according to Hau, by the outsider stance often filtered through Ibarra, who brings “the cognitive apparatus and standpoint of Europe, of a sense of a ‘world history,’ and of moral development, and serves up a powerful indictment of the abuses of colonial rule” (Hau 2000, 144). In the opening of *Noli*, for instance, the omniscient narrator sarcastically describes the venue of the dinner party as a house whose doors, “like those of his country, were closed to no one but tradesmen or perhaps a new or daring idea” (Rizal 2006, 5, ch. 1). Meanwhile, the slow-moving steamer where *Fili* begins is described as “quite dirty despite its pretension to whiteness . . . [and which] shared their country’s particular character, something akin to triumph over progress” (Rizal 2011, 1, ch. 1). In both instances the colony’s backwardness, metaphorized, is situated within a discourse of modernity and progress as seen from Europe. This “outsider” viewpoint is perhaps most evident in the long polemical debates that pepper Rizal’s narrative. Ibarra in *Noli* engages in drawn-out discussions on education with the schoolmaster (Rizal 2006, 111–115, ch. 19); on the tactical pursuit of reform with Tasio (Rizal 2006, 164–170, ch. 25); and, most important, with the boatman Elias on the work’s—and the period’s—most overriding political question: reform or revolution, or “whether political reform is possible in the Philippines or a revolutionary upheaval inevitable” (Anderson 1998, 230).

This theme continues in *Fili* except the docile Ibarra, who returns in the sequel

---

4) For the passages from the two novels that I use, I referred to the Penguin Classics translations to English by Augenbraum (2011). For an overview of and the politics behind the many translations of *Noli*, see Testa-de Ocampo (2011).

disguised as the brash and vengeful jeweler Simoun, now argues vociferously in favor of violent revolution. He tells Basilio, another holdover from *Noli* and now a medical student: “I’ve come back to destroy that system, to shatter the corruption, to push it to the abyss to which it rushes without even its knowledge, even if it means tidal waves of tears and blood” (Rizal 2011, 52, ch. 7). Rizal’s capacity to novelistically engage in and comment on this political conversation is made possible by his time in Europe, which “put him in a position . . . of being able to ridicule the metropolis from the same high ground from which, for generations, the metropolis had ridiculed the natives” (Anderson 1998, 229). In *Noli*, this “outsider” viewpoint manifests in “liberal, utopian spaces that the patriotic Ibarra tries to create on the basis of his Europe-inspired vision of progress” (Hau 2000, 148). This modern vision does not go unchallenged. It is “constantly disrupted, ultimately ruined by crowds of the disenfranchised,” which Hau says articulates the “insider viewpoint” that represents the variegated and “not always laudable and progressive standpoints” of people who live in the colony (Hau 2000, 144). In *Noli*, a riot ensues among the crowd in rural San Diego when civil guards try to stop a zarzuela show during the town fiesta, and when the culprits are caught, “indignation exploded in every breast,” “stones rained down on the . . . militiamen,” and “some . . . proposed to torch the barracks” (Rizal 2006, 269–270, ch. 40). Later, after a heated encounter between Ibarra and Franciscan Padre Damaso, the former parish priest who out of spite denied Ibarra’s liberal father a Christian burial, the gossiping townspeople excitedly conjure up the specter of Ibarra’s being labeled a “subversive” (Rizal 2006, 237, ch. 35). In the novel’s climax, the same amorphous mass brands Ibarra a “heretic” (Rizal 2006, 364, ch. 56) following a botched attack at the town barracks for which he is framed by the current parish priest Padre Salvi.

In *Fili*, tenacious rumors also accompany the secret plot by Simoun to blow up a wedding reception in which all of Manila’s colonial officialdom and elite will be gathered. The explosion is to be the signal for his recruited troops to emerge from the outskirts, “in the mountains, in the caves,” and “fall on the city” (Rizal 2011, 283, ch. 33). But even days before the wedding, the capital is already on edge. Students petitioning to open a Spanish academy, including Basilio, have been arrested for subversive posters at the university:

Rumors circulated that there had been contact between the students and the cavalry of San Mateo. People averred that in one pansiteria they had sworn to surprise the city. There was talk of German boats outside the bay that would support the movement, that a group of young men, under the banner of protest and Spanishism, had gone to Malakañang to place themselves under the orders of the general and had been arrested because they were armed. (Rizal 2011, 247, ch. 28)

In the novels, then, the crowds are not just a passive chorus, acting “not simply as onlookers, but also as movers and doers, and above all as commentators” (Hau 2017, 156). In particular, while the “uprisings” at the center of the novels fail to materialize or achieve fruition, the “insider” perspective of the crowds, the gossip and comments and stirrings and occasional unrest, affirm and telegraph the popular anxiety and restiveness in which the imagined revolts are grounded. In this way, the novels “register the presence of the people . . . [with] this ‘people’ at once the frame of reference of nationalism, its essence, its truth” (Hau 2000, 160). But this presence, Hau says, is also an “excess that is indexed but not fully contained by the novel” (Hau 2000, 161). Narratively speaking, “we might look at this excess as creating the possibility of a failure of reference, a failure of perspective even, that blurs the conceptual boundaries that determine the oppositions that operate in the novel” (Hau 2000, 161). This excess generated by nationalist thought is a “constitutive feature of nation making, an irreducible component of the nationalist project of making community” (Hau 2000, 7).

This counterpoint to what could have been a unitary discourse on modernity and nationalism in Rizal’s fiction is crucial as the novels can be seen as ultimately defeatist. *El filibusterismo*, which “imagine[s] the political collapse” of the society that *Noli me tangere* conjures, ends with what cursorily can be read as a repudiation of revolution, at least for the time being (Anderson 2005, 567). After his cover is blown, Ibarra as Simoun flees to the remote seaside home of the Filipino priest Padre Florentino, where he drinks poison, delivers a long confession, and demands to know why his plot has failed. Rizal gives Padre Florentino the burden of the final word: “I don’t want to say that our freedom will be gained at the point of a sword. The sword comes into play, barely, in modern destiny, but yes, we must win when we deserve it” (Rizal 2011, 325, ch. 39). Biographically, Rizal’s stand on the matter “is no straight progression . . . but a flexible accommodation to the realities of the situation” (Guerrero 1974, 287). While *Fili* imagines a subversive conspiracy and Rizal professed in some letters the inevitability of a violent reckoning, he also famously disapproved of the Katipunan’s plans to rise up in arms—“¡Ah no! imil veces no!” (No, no, no, a thousand times no!) he is said to have told the group’s emissary—and, when the revolution did break, denounced how his “name had been used as a battlecry” and offered “not only [his] services but [his] life and even [his] name to be used in any manner thought opportune in order to suppress” it (Guerrero 1974, 382, 422–423, 466). In a manifesto written after his arrest, as the wave of revolts spread across Luzon, he expressed his belief that “for reforms to bear fruit, they must come from *above*, since those that come from *below* will be irregular and uncertain”; as such, he “condemn[s] this absurd, savage insurrection” (in Anderson 2005, 559, emphasis in the original).



The crucial distinction he makes on the source and direction of revolutionary change, not to mention the discrediting of popular revolts as *salvaje* (savage), affirms the liberal *ilustrado* nationalism and historiography that Rizal, as the harbinger of modernity and bearer of the “cognitive apparatus” of Europe, is said to epitomize, although, on trial for subversion, his pronouncements were clearly made under duress. Even so, Hau admits “the relative paucity of attention” that Rizal devotes in his novels to the “day-to-day life of so-called ordinary people” (Hau 2000, 90), symptomatic, Charlie Veric writes, of “Rizal’s own failure to signify the ‘people’” and modernity’s “gesture of silencing” them (Veric 2002, 103).<sup>5</sup> Veric thus disputes the value of the critical “insider” perspective that Hau accords to crowds, which, “grasped solely by way of secret listening,” are robbed of agency and prevented from “[producing] their beings for themselves” (Veric 2002, 103). True enough, while the novels are populated by archetypal characters “from every stratum of late colonial society,” from the highest-ranking Spaniard in the colony down to “the illiterate indio masses” (Anderson 1998, 229), there is a marked discrepancy in their roles as narrative subjects. Characters who belong to the *principalia*, or noble class, such as Ibarra, while mercilessly mocked and satirized, routinely spar with friars and colonial officials with a measure of agency, generating conflicts that drive the plot. Indio characters such as Basilio’s mother, Sisa, in the little space they occupy, passively endure arduous colonial abuse in the background. While radical to a certain degree, there is something to be said about the fundamental ideological moorings of this narrativization of Philippine colonial society, an inquiry in which spatio-poetics may be generative.

### Space, State-Making, and Legibility in Rizal’s Fiction

The matter of space or geography does not seem to register in the predominant readings of Rizal and his fiction, most of which have been drawn to the stable framework offered by nineteenth-century nationalism (Hau 2000; Bernad 2004; Anderson 2005; 2008).<sup>6</sup> Iletto writes that during the centenary of Rizal’s birth in the 1960s, a time of nationalist

5) In a later essay, Hau used the novels’ “frequent depictions of crowds” to elaborate on “the role that commentary and speculation play” in “making, unmaking, and remaking community” (Hau 2017, 156).

6) Writing about the “narrative ruses” in the novels, Eugenio Matibag offers the tangle of “Rizal’s *baliti* tree” as a site of “narrative crossings and revelations” where “multiple plots with their ideological implications conjoin and cross,” suggesting alternate courses for “reinterpretation” of Philippine history (Matibag 1995, 255). Isa Lacuna examines the storm tropes in the literary and political writings of Rizal and suggests that Rizal’s “environmental imagination” (Lacuna 2021, 198) via a metonymic deployment of tropical weather prefigures a kind of “transnational solidarity” (Lacuna 2021, 201) so vital in the context of a broad ecocritical project.



ferment, historians “wasted much effort by endlessly debating whether Rizal was a realist or an idealist . . . [and] probing the intentions behind his actions, speeches and writings, and attempting to clarify his contribution to the process of nation-building” (Ileto 1998, 31). The inattention to fissures in his work only serves to affirm the liberal historiography that peddles a monolithic “national” narrative, with Rizal, the so-called First Filipino, at its helm, its untouchable “alibi.”

Much is elided in this conception of the country as a monolithic space, such as the long history of dynamic spatial configurations and its consequences for historiography. Prior to the Spanish conquest, there already existed a divide between lowland and highland peoples based on the areas and terrains in and around which they settled or moved, reflecting their respective lifestyles and cultures (Newson 2009, 12). When the Spanish arrived, the process of *reduccion* forcibly resettled “scattered tribes and semi-sedentary agriculturalists” from dispersed hamlets into centralized Spanish-style *pueblos*, where they could be “reached by clergy, tribute collectors, and road foremen” (Scott 1974, 75). This produced another version of the divide, this time between

Filipinos who settled where they were within easy reach of the power of the Church and State in *pueblos* (*taga-bayan* [from the town]), and those who kept their distance from the colonial administrators and their native agents, staying close to the sources of their livelihood in the mountains or the hinterlands (*taga-bukid*, *taga-bundok* [from the field, from the mountain]). (Lumbera and Lumbera 2005, 36)<sup>7</sup>

From the perspective of the colonial state, control necessitated visibility, which enabled bodies, resources, and land to be subsumed under and eventually expropriated by the system. The notion of legibility is thus inextricable from state-making, especially colonization, writes Scott (2009). From census-taking to tribute collection, proselytizing, and corvée labor, native populations upon conquest were, by design, “forcibly removed en masse from settings where their production and labor were illegible and inappropriable” (Scott 2009, 10). To a certain extent, spatial configuration determined the depth of one’s assimilation into the colonial order.

The cleavage also carries a narrative dimension. Space determines and regulates the degree to which these places are documented and narrativized, an operation in which legibility—of entities as historical subjects—is also key. In towns and cities in the colony lived the Hispanized elite and others under colonial subjection, the locus of nation-centric historiography, the contours of their lives well documented, while those outside such spaces were largely unaccounted for, stigmatized as “without history” or “as lacking the

---

7) For the deeper implications and other versions of this divide between lowland and highland natives, see Keesing (1976), Gealogo (1990), and Scott (2009).

fundamental characteristic of civilization, namely historicity” (Scott 2009, 237). Rizal’s novels initially seem to reproduce this bias toward the *pueblo* as the main site of narrativity and history, privileging its inhabitants as the sole agents of an elite conception of history. Indeed, Anderson notes that for the demographic breadth and lushness of *Noli me tangere*’s dramatis personae, “the geographical space of the novel is strictly confined to the immediate environs of the colonial capital, Manila” (Anderson 1998, 230).<sup>8)</sup>

A consideration of any monolithic or unitary “national” space overlooks the critical geographic divides and hierarchies that are constitutive of colonial society, and the divergent discourses whose negotiations, contacts, tensions, and antagonisms govern and animate the history of the colonial period and beyond. I argue that the destabilizing position proposed by Hau, evident in elements like point of view and character, can also be located in the rendering of the forest in Rizal’s two novels, as well as other encounters with the myriad ideas associated with it. By contesting the notion of legibility in different ways, this “forest thought” clarifies and disrupts the entwined apparatuses of state-making and narrativity not only in the fiction but also in Rizal’s fashioning as a historical subject under colonialism.

### The Forest as Excess, Radical Threat from Within

The first reference to the forest in *Noli* signals its rendering for the rest of Rizal’s fictional universe: a space pointedly outside of and a threat to the colonial order, but also uneasily connected to it. When Ibarra’s father, Don Rafael—who is the richest man in San Diego and has earned the ire of Padre Damaso for his liberal ways—accidentally kills a Spanish tax collector, “all his enemies emerge from hiding,” and he is accused of “heresy and subversion” (Rizal 2006, 28, ch. 4). One proffered proof is how he, a capitalist who owns large tracts of land, allegedly “kept up relations with *tulisanes* [bandits] so that his fields and animals would be protected” (Rizal 2006, 29, ch. 4). This reference to an interface between the “inside” or “of the town” and the “outside” or “of the forest,” where bandits roam, suggests a porous border between the two, including routine interaction, albeit tense and illicit. That the charge is hearsay and formless only adds to its numinous power, to the sense of danger that the forest and its associated elements exert upon the town.

Elsewhere, two bandit figures who gain notoriety for navigating the forests and mountains of the vast Tagalog region around San Diego and eluding capture by a mili-

8) For Rizal’s use of particular political vocabulary as indicative of his growing sense of geography or territory as marker of nation, see Anderson (2008). See also Woods (2005).

tarily more powerful force concretize the amorphous specter of the *tulisan*. Balat (literally, “skin”), whose “bloodthirsty name . . . [spreads] from province to province,” is “the terror of the villages” in *Noli* (Rizal 2006, 329, ch. 50), while Matanglawin (literally, “hawk-eye”), the “terrible and ferocious chief” of a gang of bandits, roams the countryside in *El filibusterismo* (Rizal 2011, 268, ch. 31). Their way of life “outside” is contingent on their decision to escape and abandon the social order built around colonialism and, later, to take advantage of and challenge the gaps in colonial policing by taking refuge in terrain beyond the ambit of colonial authority. Navigating the same spaces in *Noli*, but more pointedly political in motivation, is the band of fugitives led by Pablo, who abandoned a distinguished life in town to seek justice for his aggrieved children. Once rich and respected, Pablo witnesses his two sons get arrested and tortured for crimes they have not committed. Feeling guilty for not doing anything, Pablo goes to the forest and gathers an “army” of “disaffected ones,” with plans of “go[ing] down onto the plains to exact his revenge” (Rizal 2006, 299, ch. 45). He also refuses the boatman Elias’s invitation to go with him to the north and “live among the free, pagan tribes” (Rizal 2006, 297, ch. 45).

Here, where the colonial order sees “subversion,” the forest realm sees “protection,” strength even, a viable resistance to the legal, economic, and cultural regimes on which the town relies. The nineteenth century saw a “remarkable” increase in the number of bandits outside town centers (Gealogo 1990, 130).<sup>9</sup> Outsiders, including bandits and fugitives, historically thrived in provincial “frontiers,” which became their “centers of action” (Gealogo 1990, 130). In the Tagalog region, in particular, as religious orders grabbed more and more land, “many landless persons turned to crime: while rural poverty drove many to seek restitution of their lands and the improvement of conditions on the estates” (Newson 2009, 143). Gealogo observes that these indio “outsiders” freely traversed state-imposed borders, crisscrossing lagoons, mountains, forests, and expansive fields. They were known to “travel briskly” and “would be seen in all places at once” (Gealogo 1990, 130). The physical configuration of forests, the lush impermeability that hinders easy access and movement inside, and the mystery and incomprehensibility of the terrain create an inhospitable environment for “foreign” (Spanish) elements. The hostility of the environment becomes a form of protection, leveling the playing field between poorly armed indios and gun-toting Spanish civil guards.

In *Noli*, the only time a Spaniard—the salacious friar Salvi—ventures into the forest, he finds a hostile place with an almost sentient belligerence against his malicious intentions to spy on Ibarra’s fiancée, Maria Clara, during a picnic. Rizal describes how the friar “wandered among the thick undergrowth, avoiding the thorns that grabbed . . . as if to

---

9) The quotes from Gealogo were translated by the author from Filipino to English.

hold him back, the tree roots that emerged . . . from earth tripping this man . . . unaccustomed to walking” (Rizal 2006, 151, ch. 24). These are the same trees that appear “sad” at the end of the day when Maria Clara and the rest of the party leave, “the vines swaying, as if to say, ‘Good-bye, my young friends, good-bye, dreams of day’” (Rizal 2006, 160, ch. 24). By contrast, the forest seems wary but still welcoming of Elias when he ventures to visit Pablo. His steps through the woods are “slow and gentle,” and “in order to reorient himself, he whistles a particular melody, which is more often than not answered by someone far off, who whistles the same air” (Rizal 2006, 296, ch. 45). Elias is an ambivalent figure: by “choosing a life of self-exile from colonial society,” he is able to “flit between the two worlds of the *taga-labas* (those from the outside) and *taga-loob* (those from the inside) of colonial society . . . with a facility . . . denied men of privilege like Ibarra” (Hau 2017, 167). In moving about in spaces that are unmapped and thus illegible to colonial authority, the outsider harnesses geography, both distance and terrain, to guarantee survival and mobilize a challenge to the center.

The origins of the characters “inside” the *pueblo* and what drive them “outside” also reveal a critical aspect of how the two spaces are connected. In his “former life,” Matanglawin was a gentle woodcutter named Tales, who “cleared some dense woods on the edge of town, which he thought didn’t belong to anyone” (Rizal 2011, 26, ch. 4). He joins the bandits following a land dispute with Dominican friars who have suddenly claimed his fertile land, and he loses everything in a Sisyphean court battle,

the type of struggle never before seen in the Filipino universe: a poor, ignorant, friendless *indio*, convinced of his rights and the justice of his cause, fighting a highly powerful body before which justice bowed its head and judges dropped their scales and took up the sword. (Rizal 2011, 29, ch. 4)

Like Pablo, what drives Tales “outside” is a profoundly, existentially lopsided encounter between a disempowered peasant and an externally imposed legal infrastructure. His plight repudiates the notions of order and justice touted by the center, which derives its authority from the supposedly enlightened metropole. The forest transforms this bankruptcy into a persistent, if vague, threat and redirects it back to the town. It can be said that the lawlessness attributed to the outside is nothing more than the excesses of the legal and civilizational regime on which colonial society, and even colonialism itself, rests. All “projects of rule,” Scott says, “style themselves, unselfconsciously, as bearers of order, progress, enlightenment, and civilization . . . [wishing] to extend the advantages of administrative discipline, associated with the state or organized religion, to areas previously ungoverned” (Scott 2009, 1). The lawlessness that supposedly reigns in the forest is the justice that the colonial authority has failed to dispense. In calling outsiders “bandits” and other criminal names, Gealogo (1990, 127) says, the colonial center in fact

admits that they are, ultimately, free.

This dialectic is hinted at early in *Fili*, when a friar makes a passing reference to “the era in which people were forced to cut down large trees for shipbuilding” (Rizal 2011, 8). Simoun suggests harnessing slave labor to construct a new canal to facilitate travel to and from the capital, Manila, one of his many provocations intended to agitate the locals into joining his secret plot. That would lead to riots, another friar cautions, and the first friar brings up the precedent, presumably when indios were mobilized to cull the forests for wood in order to build ships. The backbreaking enterprise would have led to a lot more uprisings, he notes, “if it hadn’t been for the priests.” The forest-clearing “era” the friar alludes to could have been as early as the late sixteenth century, or three hundred years before the events in the novel, when the colony’s timber resources began to be used by the colonial state for such purposes, among others. “Ever mindful of the need for suitable wood, writers of early accounts of the islands were quick to appreciate their potential for naval purposes” (Bankoff 2004, 323). Thus, while the forest is made to recall an early stage in colonization when its value as extracted resource helped sustain the colony, it is also invoked as a site in which popular resistance against the self-same colonial process was nourished and incubated.

This sense of freedom in the forests may be seen in the context of the historic struggle against feudal bondage, especially in the agrarian Tagalog region. The colonial labor system was the foremost reason for natives to flee from the lowlands (Keesing 1976, 224). In the early decades of Spanish rule, after Manila’s fortifications, churches, monasteries, and private houses had been built, “the main call for polo [forced] labor came for the extraction of timber and work in the shipyards” (Newson 2009, 29).<sup>10</sup> “Corte de madera,” or the extraction of timber, became a dreaded form of forced labor among the natives, “the most arduous and poorly paid” (Newson 2009, 29, 145; Bankoff 2013, 538). The grueling labor resulted in a high mortality rate; it drove the natives to evade draft and commit suicide, and led to “fugitivism on a wide scale” (Newson 2009, 145–146). Some 8 million hectares, or 22 percent of the colony’s forest cover, would be lost in the three centuries of Spanish rule, in addition to untold numbers of native lives. In broader terms, colonialism ushered in a shift in juridical notions of land and space as political and thus legal subjects, a process that saw the “nationalization” of once communally owned forest resources and consequently the “erosion” in the authority of indigenous communities and systems, each “with their own systems of tenure, customary law, and technologies for utilization” (Poffenberger *et al.* 2006, 14). As elsewhere in Southeast Asia,

---

10) Most of the timber came from forests in Laguna, Rizal’s birthplace and where the fictional San Diego is located. To build one galleon required some six thousand workers to labor for three months (Newson 2009, 145).

by putting once-mobile peoples in permanent settlements, states “tried to replace open common-property land tenure with closed common property [and] seized timber and mineral resources for the national patrimony” (Scott 2009, 4). Over the centuries, religious orders amassed massive tracts of land with impunity while systematically dispossessing the indigenous populations (Connolly 1992; McAndrew 1994). By the late nineteenth century, on the eve of the Philippine Revolution, the legal regime that kept the colonial system tenable had all but been discredited and had driven Filipinos beyond their limits: “unbearable exactions in taxes, tributes, and forced labor led the peasants to commit atrocities that ordinarily would have been shocking, yet were natural and justified when no means were left to air their grievances and to get justice” (Agoncillo 2002, 2).

The Rizal family, which had built its modest fortune through farming, did not escape the tide of escalating feudal unrest, including an ordeal that unmistakably influenced the Tales-Matanglawin subplot. Like Tales, Rizal’s family and many others in Calamba town, on which San Diego is based, became embroiled in a dispute about land claimed by the Dominicans. The tenants decried rising rent and other arbitrary charges levied by the Dominicans, who remained heedless of “hard times” (Guerrero 1974, 183). Rizal, already a marked man after the publication of *Noli*, “became the center of the struggle” (Guerrero 1974, 184), and the Dominicans sued his family in a case that dragged on for four years and which the family eventually lost. By then, Rizal had returned to Spain and could only hear from afar how artillery and military forces were sent to demolish his home, arrest members of his clan, and threaten them with exile (Quibuyen 1998, 166). The Calamba eviction ordeal was the “turning point” in Rizal’s politics, writes Floro Quibuyen, toward “a more radical separatist stance” (Quibuyen 1998, 156, 169). Rizal biographer Leon Ma. Guerrero (1974) confirms that this episode inspired the subplot of Tales in *El filibusterismo*. The note Tales the peasant leaves before becoming Matanglawin the bandit alludes to the evictions. Addressed to “the whole town of Kalamba”—including, dangerously, real names of evictees, such as Rizal’s brother, Paciano—it narrates the suffering of the people, none of whom “has taken the law in his own hands,” and vows to grant them justice (Rizal 2011, 77). The letter reveals “the whole point of the novel” (Guerrero 1974, 279) and “suggest[s] a way out of the impasse” on the debate about reform that Rizal began in *Noli* (Guerrero 1974, 282). In *El filibusterismo*, Rizal’s answer is unequivocally no: peaceful reform is no longer possible.

The ramifications of having rejected reform are productively inconclusive, a space where the forest as an idea can offer some direction. After all, Rizal chooses to “resolve” this significant biographical episode in *El filibusterismo* by moving the struggle “outside” of the *pueblo*, even if Matanglawin’s cause will later be subsumed under Simoun’s grander,

more self-involved, more “national” campaign targeting the colonial center. But the plot’s failure leaves key questions unanswered. If independence is the only route and a violent reckoning is inevitable, what “nation” exactly lies on the other side of this novel? *Nihil*, Anderson says, nothing: “Simoun has no plans for the aftermath of his successful vengeance, and nothing in *El filibusterismo* suggests that anyone else has either: only a dream of ‘liberty,’ formless and utopian” (Anderson 2005, 118).<sup>11</sup> He arrives at this conclusion after plotting Rizal’s place within “the zigzag of insurrectionary explosions in the metropole and in the colonies” at the time (Anderson 2005, 81), concluding that Simoun’s revolt is suffused with ideas from Europe even if Tagalog peasants “had their own utopian and messianic traditions” (Anderson 2005, 118). Anderson implies that the plot “has to fail” (Anderson 2005, 118) because Simoun’s imported nihilism, preoccupied solely with liberty, is unable to facilitate a more coherent imagining of the nation should the plot succeed.

### The Forest as Incubator of an Inchoate Utopia

The goal of this so-called formless utopia, I argue, already exists in Rizal’s fictional universe, though perhaps not within a discourse that Simoun—and Rizal—may readily apprehend. The forest in the novels generates an imaginative clearing in which an inchoate utopia can be glimpsed. It is utopian insofar as, in offering an alternative to the bankrupt colonial state-making, it draws from both what preceded colonial conquest and what could follow in the wake of its demise. “The main, long-run threat of the ungoverned periphery was that it represented . . . a constant alternative to life within the state,” writes Scott (2009, 6). In Rizal’s novels, this threat is telegraphed by the consciousness of certain characters as well as elements of setting, in particular the spatial configuration of San Diego in relation to events in the narrative. Because the imagination of these utopias falls outside, or is illegible to, conceptions of nineteenth-century nationalism and nationalist historiography, it presents a decisive danger to the colonial order.

Among Rizal’s characters, Sisa and her two young sons, Crispin and Basilio, are destitute indios who live in a hut “an hour away” from town (Rizal 2006, 91, ch. 16). With their forest garden and hens and the occasional journey to town for odd jobs, their life

11) In a letter, Rizal defined *filibustero* as “a dangerous patriot who will soon be hanged or a presumptuous man,” a word he first heard during the execution of three Filipino priests to whom he would dedicate *Fili* (in Anderson 2005, 59). It is not clear whether he was aware of another definition—an outlaw who radicalized people in the Spanish West Indies, including Cuba (*filibuster*)—although in the book Simoun’s riches were accumulated while he gallivanted around Cuba and Europe.



has the barest, most transactional connection to the center and is perhaps the closest one can come to forest living without actually living in the woods. One stormy night Crispin is accused of stealing from the parish where he and Basilio work—and are maltreated—as sextons, and Basilio, injured and traumatized after a scuffle with the civil guards, returns home alone. The fantasy he feverishly conjures up to his mother as they try to sleep is entwined with, indeed embedded in, the forest. In this dream scenario, he gets a job as Ibarra’s cowherd:

I’ll gather fruit in the forest and sell it in town along with vegetables from our plot and then we’ll have money. I’ll set snares and traps to catch birds and mountain cats, I’ll fish in the river, and when I’m older I’ll hunt . . . [Basilio] could already see himself and his little brother as herders. They gathered guavas, alpay, and other fruit from the forest. (Rizal 2006, 98–99, ch. 17)

Days later Basilio himself disappears, and Sisa is arrested for her sons’ purported crimes. The long, tortuous journey from her remote hut to the barracks in town marks the beginning of Sisa’s descent to insanity, the natural world hovering in the recesses of her ebbing consciousness: “vast rice fields, irrigation ditches, scrawny trees, but no cliff to jump from, no boulders to smash against!” (Rizal 2006, 130, ch. 21). Catatonic after hours in captivity, she is ordered released and begins wandering the streets back to her hut and around the edges of San Diego, calling out the names of Crispin and Basilio, in the scene that would make her the archetypal madwoman of Philippine literature. As she is uprooted from sanity, her final lucid thoughts are of her sons, in particular Basilio’s vision of freedom. These thoughts “lighted the darkness, and she was able to murmur, resignedly, ‘Later . . . later we will go to live deep in the forest’” (Rizal 2006, 130).<sup>12)</sup> The following day, she is seen “wandering about, smiling, singing, and talking, with all of nature’s beings” (Rizal 2006, 133, ch. 21).

Sisa spends the rest of the novel as this charged, meandering specter, haunting the narrative and adrift in the town and beyond, her violent dehumanization, like the others’, a product of the manifold, systemic “excesses” of the colonial system returning to the spaces under its dominion, interrupting the peace like a ghost. She appears at the picnic during the town fiesta and after the attack at the barracks, when it is revealed that she stayed with a doctor who sent her away because of her association with Ibarra, leaving her “crazy as ever,” singing, bothering people, and living in the forest (Rizal 2006, 412,

12) In a deleted chapter featuring Elias and a love interest, Salome, the forest is also utopia: If it weren’t for a dire family history which he must reckon with, he tells her, “I would have married you months ago in the eyes of God and we would have gone to live in the jungle far from civilization” (Rizal 2006, 427, appendix). Salome’s “tiny but picturesque” hut, the site of their brief encounters and thus respite, is itself “built among the lush bamboo, palm tree, and coconut palm forests, on the shores of the lake” (Rizal 2006, 423).

ch. 63). For Epifanio San Juan, in her transformation Sisa “assumes the sentient environment of rural Philippines . . . the humanization of the stigmatized territory customarily identified with the autochthonous ambience of savagery and barbarism, with bandits and *tulisanes*, with outlaws, pagans, and vagrant lunatics” (San Juan 2011, 17). Her traumatic arrest is framed as a violent act of making her visible to colonial policing, from being a “dweller on the fringes beyond the scope of the church bells’ tolling . . . alienated from the urban circuit of money and commodity exchange” to becoming suddenly and unjustly subsumed under its rule (San Juan 2011, 16–17). For Sisa, the idea of the forest as refuge survives this deluge of agony and trauma. Seeing her captor, the ensign, at the picnic, she becomes “terrified and [breaks] into a run, disappearing among the trees” (Rizal 2006, 154, ch. 24). Even in fragments, the forest commands muscle memory. Ordered to sing by the ensign’s megalomaniac wife, Sisa hums a desolate *kundiman*, or love song, about a “parched, faded flower” whose final image is the “hollow of an ancient trunk” and the “melancholy of the forest” (Rizal 2006, 260, ch. 39). Trauma may even have resuscitated fantasies about the forest, which register as both dream and lucid ambition, heedless of time.

This idea of the forest as a durable, perennial utopia can also be glimpsed in the fictional town’s genesis in and as a forest. The swath of earth that would become San Diego begins as “a spur of forest amid a section of tilled earth . . . an ancient stand of hollow trunks” (Rizal 2006, 62, ch. 10). According to a fictional legend in the novel, an old Spaniard arrived when the area “was a miserable pile of shacks and grass grew wildly in the so-called streets . . . when deer and wild boars wandered about the town at night” (Rizal 2006, 63, ch. 10). He bought land from men “pretending to be the owners” and promptly disappeared, before a “fetid odor began to emerge from the forest” and shepherds followed the trail and came upon the same man “in a state of putrefaction, hanging from the branch of a *baliti* [banyan] tree” (Rizal 2006, 63, ch. 10). Months later, a “Spanish half-breed” introduced himself as the dead man’s son and began to farm the area. By the time the newcomer, Ibarra’s father, Don Rafael, had taken over the land, the arrival of “new residents” meant “the hamlet [had] become a village . . . then a town” (Rizal 2006, 64, ch. 10). After the first Spanish friar replaced the native priest, “the tomb and the old boundaries were respected” (Rizal 2006, 64, ch. 10). While geographically part of the town, this “ancient stand” is also distinct from it. It emits a ghostly and sacred aura, suffused with lore and teeming with real dangers, resulting in a combination of danger and awe that protects it from accidental incursion.

In the narrative, at one spot in particular, the area around the tomb, which has remained unchanged over decades, protectively conceals the forest’s potential, the charge it can activate and unleash. The Ibarra family’s treasure is buried at the foot of the *baliti*

where their ancestor hanged himself, his death lending the tree a preternatural energy. The treasure transmits danger in the most material sense. In *Noli*, Ibarra's reforms, such as the building of a modern school, rest on the family's wealth. In *El filibusterismo*, all of Simoun's "subversive" activities—the most concrete threat to the colonial order—from the recruitment of men to the purchase of arms, are also financed by these riches. This also means that, despite the comparatively limited "action" that takes place in the woods, all the conflicts in the town and city centers are in fact enabled by something deposited in and emanating from the forest. It is telling that *El filibusterismo* ends with the Filipino priest Florentino—"while the forest whispered in incomprehensible voices"—throwing this treasure into the sea, after which "the abyss closed over" it (Rizal 2011, 327, ch. 39). The act appears conclusive, a natural enactment of the priest's—and the novel's—ambivalent attitude toward a violent revolution. But the priest's closing apostrophe to the treasure affirms the dormant potential of the riches, still mediated by nature, and effectively modifies the "no" into "not yet": "When men need you for a holy, sublime reason," he intones, "God will pull you from the bosom of your waves" (Rizal 2011, 328, ch. 39).

Aside from the narrative significance, the metonymic value of a treasure in the forest is also critical, evoking not just an indigenous conception of the woods as communal resource but a utopian ideal of harmony that colonization has dismantled. The idea is inscribed in local lore, most notably in a well-known folktale about Mariang Makiling, a retelling of which Rizal published in Spain in 1890, a year before the publication of *El filibusterismo*. In his version, the titular mountain spirit is a "half nymph, half sylph, born . . . in the mystery of [the mountain's] august forests and to the lullaby of the murmurs of the neighboring lake" (Rizal 1968, 1). From this forest realm come the gifts the spirit regularly bestows on the rural folk—"gold, money, reliquaries, and jewels" (Rizal 1968, 2). One day the bounty stops, and the spirit vanishes without a trace. Details from the Calamba evictions case spill over into Rizal's retelling. The gifts from Mariang Makiling stop "because the Dominican friars seek to despoil [rural populations] of their property by appropriating half of the mountain" (Rizal 1968, 5). Meanwhile, according to an "old woodcutter" of "secular trees" (Rizal 1968, 5), a young man Mariang Makiling is fond of enters a forced marriage to evade a military draft for an unspecified war, leaving her distraught. In both cases, the idea of an abundant indigenous treasure sourced from the forest realm is withheld in the wake of, and seen as inherently incompatible with, an unwelcome and disruptive colonial order.

Thus, the act of harnessing this treasure in the forest is also an act of harnessing the past, not just in the sense that the treasure is an accumulation of wealth from the soil of San Diego, but that in its place in the anticolonial struggle, aligned with the other

fugitives that haunt the forest, it absorbs a collective disenchantment amassed over time. In *Noli*, Tasio the philosopher tries to convince Ibarra that the struggle of which Ibarra is terrified persists beyond him, like resilient flora: “Put in the first stone, sow the seeds. After the storm is unleashed, perhaps some grain will germinate, survive the catastrophe, save the species from annihilation and serve thereafter as the seed for the children of the late power” (Rizal 2006, 170). The forest’s value as a space in the narrative also affirms this persistence: the forest is the site of revolutionary struggle passing through time. At the conclusion of *Noli*, young Basilio reunites with a dying Sisa near the baliti but also sees the older Elias, himself injured after helping Ibarra escape from prison and covering for him when they were accosted at the lake. After telling Basilio to gather firewood for a pyre, Elias reveals to him the location of the treasure before he dies. This story continues in *El filibusterismo*, when Basilio, grown up and part of an assimilationist student group, goes into the forest to visit the grave of his mother and accidentally discovers that Simoun is Ibarra. When the jeweler invites the student to his more radical conspiracy, the cycle—and the discourse around the struggle—continues.

The crucial, illicit negotiations take place under the cover of the forest, always at night or in the small hours, in the reprieve carved out from colonial surveillance. Buoyed as much by the energies of the past as visions of the future, the forest unites the historical present in the novels, its regime of discontents, with the valuable possibilities of the ongoing “precolonial” time and the imagined aftermath of colonization, both suffused with utopian ideas. In Rizal’s anticolonial narrative, the perennial forest signals and embodies what the critic Greg Forter, citing Walter Benjamin, calls a work’s “utopian project of constellating alternative, post-national futures,” inscribed in the “unrealized residues of a past that persists within yet disrupts the ‘homogeneous, empty time’ of colonial modernity” (Forter 2019, 2). As forest time in the works encompasses colonization and the time around and outside it, the forest is able to act as incubator for various utopian visions by “recover[ing] from the historical past new resources for the radical imagination” (Forter 2019, 5).

### **The Forest as Illegible, Illegibility as Resistance and Trauma**

While space and geography signal a counterpoint to the nationalist thought that Rizal as a novelist is said to have forged, the narrative and discursive fullness of the forest do not seem to register either with Rizal or in the predominant readings of his novels. What constitutes forest thought, it seems, may be among the “phenomena that resisted his ordering mind” (Ileto 1998, 31). I argue that this illegibility demonstrates the resistance

of the forest as both a political and narrative subject, in a process abetted by Rizal's conception of history and reliance on the narrative apparatus of social realism. It also locates the trauma of colonization in the figure of Rizal as colonial subject, and the illegibility can be seen as the loss in imaginative capacity that colonization irrecoverably engenders on the consciousness of the colonized.

Colonization, in the sense of a broad project to "integrate and monetize the people, lands, and resources of the periphery so that they become . . . rentable" (Scott 2009, 4), had uneven results in the Spanish Philippines. It was perennially and widely contested,<sup>13</sup> but as a political system and bureaucracy it was able to "facilitate" the "exaction" of Filipino tribute and labor (Newson 2009, 24). This is perhaps most evident in the way conquest has altered traditional land tenure systems and the nature of people's relationship with land, which proves to be the costliest, most irreparable, and enduring legacy of colonization.<sup>14</sup> Following the Calamba evictions, Rizal seemed to recognize the grievous sense of helpless incarceration that de facto landlessness brought. But if his fictional response was reluctant fugitivism via the Tales-Matanglawin arc in *Noli*—fomenting a threat to the colonial order from outside—in reality what he considered was a reproduction of the same system, albeit humane, elsewhere. Just before returning to the Philippines, he considered founding a "Filipino colony" in North Borneo, south of the Philippines, with the other evicted farmers of his town (Guerrero 1974, 319). The British North Borneo Charter Company was eager to occupy the "very sparsely populated region" and offered him 5,000 acres of "uncultivated land" rent-free for three years, with an option to purchase the estate eventually. While it did not preclude a continuation of his political work on Philippine independence, transplanting his reformist utopia to Borneo allowed Rizal to envision "a community of free men with guaranteed rights and liberties" (Guerrero 1974, 319).

The Borneo plan would fall through—Spanish authorities, unsurprisingly, did not approve—but the discrepancy between what Rizal elected to do in his fiction and what really happened is perhaps telling not only of his class position and its many implications, but also of the faint, indistinct quality in which such an outside realm registers in his historical consciousness, how that world, and "defecting" to it, appears to have been illegible to him. From Rizal's position in the center, the narrative and discursive instability of the forest—demonized but feared, a source of danger but also a potential—is a space that resists incorporation into the colonial fold, hence the seduction of the same tenancy system in Borneo without the same sense of feudal abuse. This "official invisibility of defection is encoded in the narrative itself," Scott writes, especially in the

13) See Rafael (1988) and Mawson (2019).

14) See McAndrew (1994).

context of a “civilizational narrative that assumes its own cultural and social magnetism and that depicts acculturation to its norms as a much desired ascent” (Scott 2009, 125). As a result, “those who move to non-state space, who adapt to its agro-ecology, become ethnicized barbarians who were, presumably, always there” (Scott 2009, 125). How the forest resists fully registering in Rizal’s novels attests to its exception to this normative reading.

Inscribed in this same illegibility, I argue, is the trauma of colonization; the illegibility of the forest to the imagination of *Noli me tangere* and *El filibusterismo* may itself be the loss in imaginative capacity that colonization irrecoverably engenders in the consciousness of the colonized. This can be located in Rizal’s “full demonstration of the Western [realist] novel form” (Mojares 1983, 192) and not just in the sense that his novels have helped supplant a dynamic, variegated oral tradition but in how they privilege a certain conception of historicity. Orality and literacy as traditions differ in many ways, foremost being their relationship with knowledge and knowledge production. Writing, Walter Ong argues, “separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for ‘objectivity,’” while orality achieves a type of “empathetic and participatory” learning, an interactive and communal “identification with the known” (Ong 2002, 45). Orality has an “unalterable presentness” (Scott 2009, 230), in that it implicates aspects of its performance every time it is performed even if it invokes, say, millennia of a group’s “history.” Orality emerges from a narrative tradition organically embedded in everyday lived experience, suffused with “more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings” (Ong 2002, 42). By contrast, Rizal was guided by “empirical and mimetic impulses,” influenced by European realists such as Charles Dickens, Honoré de Balzac, and Émile Zola (Arensmeyer 1970, 741–742; Mojares 1983, 94). His avowed intention in the novels—to render “the first impartial and bold account of the life of the Tagalogs” in which “the Filipinos will find . . . the history of the last ten years”—“hinges on the question of truth, of accuracy . . . [and] objectivity,” which he set out to accomplish by novelistically “creating a discourse that is in an important sense scientific” (Hau 2000, 118). This “ability to depict—if not actually politicize the depiction of—the national character” (Hau 2000, 14) is how the two novels “enter history” as a complex and multipart cultural artifact that “presents and elaborates the knowable community”—that of the modern Filipino nation (Hau 2000, 124). While orality is ephemeral and thus resists codification in this way, Rizal’s novels can be seen as a project in making what he imagined to be a Filipino experience duratively legible as a narrative subject.

Although in the service of anticolonial critique, the novelistic narrativizing of legible subjects can nonetheless be seen as epistemologically extractive, the same way that

naming and documentation preceded the commodification of native resources and bodies. The operation is certainly linked to the unitary, rational way in which Rizal imagined the nation in his works, afflicted perhaps with what Mojares describes as the “crippling fetish about so-called ‘facts’ and the ‘unities’ of time, place, and action,” and which had banished “local histories” to the role of “mere . . . embroidery on ‘national’ history” (Mojares 2002, 69). What exactly constitutes this field of legible narrative subjects—and what it excludes, wittingly or not—is a product of how Rizal apprehended history. For Ileto (1998, 31–33), Rizal’s subject position as part of the liberal-educated elite predisposed him to an “evolutionist” view of Philippine history, one in which colonization interrupted a flourishing precolonial civilization, the recovery of which was necessary before the inevitable progress toward secular (European) enlightenment. Deeply in tune with this conception of history, Rizal labored to “reconstitute the unity of Philippine history, to bring under the sway of the ilustrado mind the discontinuities and differences that characterized colonial society” (Ileto 1998, 35). The forest, perhaps as part of “the thought-world of the history-less” (Ileto 1998, 31) that Rizal subdued, to some extent escapes this attempt, contesting legibility by virtue of its unstable, slippery nature as “knowledge” and narrative subject.

The incomplete, often liminal, register of the forest in the novels can thus be attributed to the manifest failure of the entwined apparatus of narrative and the state, both of which are unable to contain the forest’s supposed lack of history. The supposedly scientific and documentary impetus behind the Western realist novel, the mode in which Rizal wrote, delimits its field of legible narrative subjects to knowable ones, while nationalist historiography, anchored in modern state-making, either resists or ignores the forest’s multiplicity of excess meanings. This failure to register fully can thus be seen as the assertion of the forest’s radical historical illegibility as both narrative and political subject. Inscribed in that failure is also the trauma of colonization, in that Rizal, a brilliant colonial subject, is only able to apprehend and imagine a trace of the forest’s agency as a space and discourse, and so his rendering of it is limited, perhaps inevitably, to the forest as “the inescapable ‘dark twin’ of state-making projects in the valleys” (Scott 2009, 326).

## Conclusion

Invested with Enlightenment ideas of rationality, secularism, and an evolutionist conception of history, while also formally attuned to a “realist” accounting of such history, Rizal’s two novels are a rich field for disentangling the operations of state-making and narrativity in the context of Spanish colonization. As an ambivalent space in Philippine



history and a productively illegible presence in the novels, the forest as both site and idea offers a glimpse into the limits of and resistance to colonial conquest, as well as the gaps and fissures in the imagination of Rizal as a historical subject. Recovering a sense of this lost agency is critical in confronting the world of misrecognitions, and their political implications, which colonialism has engendered.

Accepted: September 1, 2022

### Acknowledgments

The writing of this article was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship through the University of Adelaide. It benefited from important feedback from my supervisors over the years: Dr. Jennifer Rutherford, Dr. Patrick Flanery, and Dr. Matthew Hooton. I'd also like to thank Cristian Tablazon, Brad Madrilejos, Edgar Calabia Samar, and the two anonymous reviewers for their critical insights that no doubt helped clarify and refine the ideas in the manuscript.

### References

- Agoncillo, Teodoro. 2002. *The Revolt of the Masses: The Story of Bonifacio and the Katipunan*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.
- Anderson, Benedict. 2008. *Why Counting Counts: A Study of Forms of Consciousness and Problems of Language in Noli me tangere and El filibusterismo*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- . [1983] 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso Books.
- . 2005. *The Age of Globalization: Anarchists and the Anticolonial Imagination*. London: Verso Books.
- . 1998. *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World*. London: Verso Books.
- Arensmeyer, Elliott. 1970. Little Mansions: Some Aspects of Jose Rizal as a Novelist. *Philippine Studies* 18(4): 740–752.
- Augenbraum, Harold. 2011. Introduction: Rizal's Ghost. In *El filibusterismo* by Jose Rizal, translated by Harold Augenbraum, pp. ix–xviii. London: Penguin Classics.
- Balibar, Etienne. 1990. The Nation Form: History and Ideology, translated by Immanuel Wallerstein and Chris Turner. *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 13(3): 329–361.
- Bankoff, Greg. 2013. "Deep Forestry": Shapers of the Philippine Forests. *Environmental History* 18(3): 523–556.
- . 2004. "The Tree as the Enemy of Man": Changing Attitudes to the Forests of the Philippines, 1565–1989. *Philippine Studies* 52(3): 320–344.
- Bernad, Miguel. 2004. *The Native Sky: Studies in the Life and Writings of Jose Rizal*. Quezon City: Office of Research and Publication, Ateneo de Manila University.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 1996. Whose Imagined Community? In *Mapping the Nation*, edited by Gopal

- Balakrishnan, pp. 214–225. London: Verso Books.
- Cheah Pheng. 2003. *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Connolly, Michael. 1992. *Church Lands and Peasant Unrest in the Philippines: Agrarian Unrest in 20th Century Luzon*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Cruz Lucero, Rosario. 2007. *Ang bayan sa labas ng Maynila* [The nation outside Manila]. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- De la Costa, Horacio, ed. and trans. 1961. *Trial of Rizal*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Delmendo, Sharon. 1998. The American Factor in José Rizal's Nationalism. *Amerasia Journal* 24(2): 34–64.
- Diaz, Glenn. 2022. Into the Woods: Toward a Material Poetics of the Tropical Forest in Philippine Literature. *eTropic* 21(2): 120–139. <https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.21.2.2022.3892>.
- Forster, Greg. 2019. *Critique and Utopia in Postcolonial Historical Fiction: Atlantic and Other Worlds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gealogo, Francis. 1994. Hermeneutika ng pakikipagtungali: Ang pagpapakahulugan sa diskurso ng pakikibakang lipunan [Hermeneutics of antagonism: Meaning-making within the discourse of people's struggle]. In *Ang kilusang masa sa kasaysayang Pilipino (1900–1992)* [The mass movement in Philippine history (1900–1992)], edited by Jaime B. Veneracion, pp. 1–37. Quezon City: College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines.
- . 1990. Ang taong labas, ang kabayanihan, at ang diskurso ng kapangyarihan at kasaysayan [The outsider, heroism, and the discourse of power and history]. *Diliman Review* 28(1): 123–138.
- Guerrero, David. 2009. Introduction. In *Noli me tangere* by Jose Rizal, translated by Leon Ma Guerrero, pp. xiii–xviii. Pasig City: Anvil Publishing.
- Guerrero, Leon Ma. 1974. *The First Filipino: A Biography of Jose Rizal*. Manila: National Historical Commission.
- Hau, Caroline. 2017. Did Padre Damaso Rape Pia Alba? Reticence, Revelation, and Revolution in José Rizal's Novels. *Philippine Studies* 65(2): 137–199. <https://doi.org/10.1353/phs.2017.0014>.
- . 2000. *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946–1980*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Horsley, Lee. 1990. *Political Fiction and the Historical Imagination*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-11055-1>.
- Ileto, Reynaldo. 1998. *Filipinos and Their Revolution: Event, Discourse, and Historiography*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- . 1979. *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Keesing, Felix. 1976. *The Ethnohistory of Northern Luzon*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Lacuna, Isa. 2021. Atmosfera Rizaliana: Metonymic Journeys of Storm Tropes in José Rizal's Writing on the Philippines. *eTropic* 20(2): 180–208. <https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.20.2.2021.3806>.
- Lumbera, Bienvenido and Lumbera, Cynthia. 2005. *Philippine Literature: A History and Anthology*. Pasig City: Anvil Publishing.
- Matibag, Eugenio. 1995. “El verbo del filibusterismo”: Narrative Ruses in the Novels of José Rizal. *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 48(2): 250–264.
- Mawson, S. J. 2019. Incomplete Conquests in the Philippine Archipelago, 1565–1700. PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.35839>.
- McAndrew, John. 1994. *Urban Usurpation: From Friar Estates to Industrial Estates in a Philippine Hinterland*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.

- Mojares, Resil. 2002. *Waiting for Mariang Makiling*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- . 1983. *Origins and Rise of the Filipino Novel: A Generic Study of the Novel until 1940*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.
- Newson, Linda. 2009. *Conquest and Pestilence in the Early Spanish Philippines*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Ong, Timothy. 2019. Editor's Note: Látag, or, Lay of the Land. In *Látag: Essays on Philippine Literature, Culture, and the Environment*, pp. 6–11. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Institute of Creative Writing.
- Ong, Walter. 2002. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Poffenberger, Mark; Soriaga, Rowena; and Walpole, Peter. 2006. *Communities and Forest Stewardship: Regional Transitions in Southeast Asia*. Tagbilaran City: Asia Forest Network and Community Forest International.
- Quibuyen, Floro. 1998. Towards a Radical Rizal. *Philippine Studies* 46(2): 151–183.
- . 1997. Rizal and the Revolution. *Philippine Studies* 45(2): 225–257.
- Rafael, Vicente. 1988. *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Republic Act No. 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. Republic of the Philippines, 1956. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1956/06/12/republic-act-no-1425/>, accessed March 30, 2022.
- Rizal, Jose. [1891] 2011. *El filibusterismo*, translated by Harold Augenbraum. London: Penguin Classics.
- . [1887] 2006. *Noli me tangere*, translated by Harold Augenbraum. London: Penguin Classics.
- . [1890] 1968. *Mariang Makiling*, translated by Arnold Warren.
- San Juan, Epifanio. 2011. *Sisa's Vengeance: Jose Rizal and the "Woman Question."* Mansfield: Philippine Cultural Studies Center.
- Scott, James. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Scott, William Henry. 1982. *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers.
- . 1974. *The Discovery of the Igorots: Spanish Contacts with the Pagans of Northern Luzon*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers.
- Tadiar, Neferti Xina. 2009. *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Testa-de Ocampo, Anna Melinda. 2011. The Afterlives of the *Noli me tangere*. *Philippine Studies* 59(4): 495–527.
- Veric, Charlie Samuya. 2002. The Fictions of Necessity. *Kritika Kultura* 1: 101–104.
- Woods, Damon. 2005. From Wilderness to Nation: The Evolution of Bayan. Lecture, University of California Los Angeles Center for Southeast Asian Studies. February 3.