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INTRODUCTION: NICK JOAQUIN NOW

Texts, Contexts, and Approaches

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Abstract

This Introduction to “Nick Joaquin Now: Texts, Contexts and Approaches” surveys the main critical works on Nick Joaquin’s oeuvre and presents an overview of the essays included in this Forum Kritika. Following the contributions of scholars such as Blanco, E. San Juan, Galdon, Gutierrez, Hau, Holden, Patke, Pison, and Serrano, this new collection of essays reveals novel readers and (re)readings of Joaquin. The editors treat Joaquin “not as an object of study but more as an effect to be explained, where we as ‘readers’ become the implied readers that Joaquin’s works requires.”

Following Nick Joaquin’s centennial, marked by, among others, the release of the movie *Ang Larawan* and the publishing of the Penguin version of his short stories, this Special Issue features Arong’s “Temporality in Nick Joaquin’s *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*”; Delos Reyes and Selman’s “The Female Monster: The Pre-Catholic Manifestation as a Response to Modern Anxiety in Selected Stories by Nick Joaquin”; Labayne’s “Bedeviling Quijano De Manila’s *Discourses of the Devil’s Advocate* and the Openness of Historical Interpretation”; and Lizada’s “When She Started Acting Queer: A Queer Gothic Reading of Nick Joaquin’s *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*.”

Keywords

Ang Larawan, identity, nation, Penguin Classics, readers

About the Authors

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Jocelyn S. Martin is Assistant Professor in the English Department of the Ateneo de Manila University where she specializes in Memory and Trauma Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and the Environmental Humanities. Jocelyn obtained her undergraduate and PhD degrees in langues et lettres (anglaises) from the Université Libre de Bruxelles and her MA in European Journalism from Ircom, Angers. Aside from her recent publications in the volumes *Aboriginal Australians and other 'Others'* (Paris, 2014); *Decolonizing Trauma Studies* (Basel, 2015); and *Recherche littéraire* (Brussels, 2016, 2017), she has a forthcoming essay to be included in a Routledge volume on *Memory and Trauma Studies in Asia*. Polyglot, Jocelyn is Member of the Advisory Board of the Memory Studies Association based in Maastricht.

The lukewarm reception of the movie *Ang Larawan* in the recent Metro Manila Film Festival says something about our ambivalent attitude towards our national writers such as Nick Joaquin, who wrote *A Portrait of Filipino as Artist: An Elegy in Three Scenes*, from which *Ang Larawan* is based. Nick Joaquin is a prolific writer, who wrote in various genres, such as short stories, novels, children's stories, poems, plays, biography, and essays, from the young age of seventeen during the pre-war up until late 1990s. His reading audience spans generations and varies among the educated elite and the popular viewing public of classic movies like *Kisapmata* (1981 film, directed by Mike de Leon and based on his reportage, "The House on Zapote Street") and *Tatarin* (2001 film, directed by Tikoy Aguiluz and based on his short story "The Summer Solstice").

His friends and relatives would tell that he shies away from other people, never comfortable with attention or recognition, yet stories abound also where he would drink with common folk. There's even one interesting anecdote where he defended the employees of a printing press with their labor problems against the administration of that company. Most of us grew up with his stories as required readings in high school, and yet it was only recently that a Penguin Classic edition of his key fictional works—*The Woman Who Had Two Navels* and *Tales of the Tropical Gothic*—have been made available. Historian Vicente Rafael in his introduction to this Penguin Classic edition expressed his amusement to this belated recognition considering not only the number of Joaquin's works and studies thereof, but also how other writers, artists, and journalist regard the author. Fellow National Artist for Literature F. Sionil Jose would say that he was a living keeper of our national memory and without him, there could be no nation.

Doubtless that Nick Joaquin occupies a central role among writers, however, among historians and the academe, his writings present a challenge. At a time when poststructuralism or deconstructive reading is in its nascent stages, he was already questioning our concepts of heroism and nationalism, offering a different take on key historical figures, alienating inevitably some camps or schools of thought. Criticisms of his literary works are varied too. There are studies that reveal his Hispanic and Anglophone writing tradition, his sources, tracing his aesthetics to baroque modernity, to various reading appropriative strategies from psychoanalysis, Marxism, Bakhtinian heteroglossia, feminism, to the project of nationalism and national identity. For instance, Rajeev Patke (2013) compares Joaquin and the Indian writer Arun Kolatkar. Through a reading of *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, Patke shows the complexities of faith amidst modern predicaments. Ruth Pison (2005) looks at *Cave and Shadows* and examines the use of myth as a weapon for counter-memory during Martial Law. Caroline Hau in *Necessary Fictions* (2000) juxtaposes *Portrait* and Reynaldo Ileto's *Pasyon and Revolution*. Hau argues that both authors privilege a syncretic Filipino culture "as a

solution to the problem of confronting the colonial legacy of Philippine nationalism.” John Blanco (2004), concentrating on Joaquin’s Hispanism in *Portrait*, argues for the “recovery of the baroque mode of representation” and proposes a revaluation of the “baroque aesthetic of catastrophe in various colonial works.” Philip Holden (2009) inquires into modernist elements and Gothic aspects in Joaquin’s fiction and its place in a post-independence society, and Vincenz Serrano (2012) looks at heteroglossic and historiographic elements in Joaquin’s *Almanac*.

With the plethora of these studies, Nick Joaquin becomes the penultimate text itself that even his biographies reveal different aspects of his personality. He is quite singular in this context, we know him but at the same time there’s always something about him and his works that elude us. Even E. San Juan, Jr., who made a comprehensive study about him in *Subversions of Desire* (1988), admits that he has barely scratched the surface of Nick Joaquin’s oeuvre. San Juan calls for a more intimate or strategic reading that would contextualize Nick Joaquin in our collective memory and national reckoning. It is in this context of rereading Nick Joaquin that we treat him not as an object of study but more as an effect to be explained, where we as “readers” become the implied readers that Joaquin’s works requires. As Wolfgang Iser explains, it is not so much that we read a text, but within the horizon of a text or *Erwartungshorizont*, we as readers, make expectations, meanings, and the unstated details of characters and settings assume a wandering viewpoint. Interestingly, the painting or picture in the movie *Ang Larawan* is really the audience. In the play, this portrait is strategically placed as the fourth wall, where the actors look at the audience and discuss the painting. Similarly, our studies of Nick Joaquin’s works become a dialectic process of production and reception, revealing a lot about us as readers more than Nick Joaquin himself. Joaquin’s drama and fiction have been studied extensively simply because these works remained to be part of our required reading courses in high school and universities. However, very little scholarship has been made on his journalism, history writing, children’s books, translations, or his work on Manila, to name a few less-considered examples. Similarly, there is little scholarship on Joaquin’s children’s stories, with Anna Katrina Gutierrez’s study (2014) one of the few exceptions. Even rarer are discussions on Joaquin’s poems, aside from Joseph Galdon’s “Review of *Collected Verse* by Nick Joaquin” (1990). E. San Juan’s call to study Nick Joaquin was three decades ago, and it is quite fitting that in celebration of his centennial to respond to that call, not just to commemorate him but to understand the role of writing and literary works in our collective soul and national-popular consensus on behalf of the struggle of the Filipino people, especially now that we are beset again with political forces that threaten to ruin our hard-earned democracy and genuine independence.

This Forum Kritika, therefore, is not only a contribution to the legacy of the National Artist, but also a re-reading of Joaquin for our times and contexts.

Marie Rose Arong's essay adds to the novel's scholarship through her discussion on temporality in *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*. By highlighting Joaquin's experiments with time, Arong underscores his historical re-vision of the past by shedding light on the consequences of an American-endorsed modernity and development, on the one hand, and the nationalists' quest for the authentic Filipino, on the other. Thus, instead of endorsing a certain Hispanic nostalgia that Joaquin has often been accused of, Arong's essay, "Temporality in Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*," argues that the novel should also be read as a strategy for resisting US neocolonialism and a critical view of nativism.

Along with Arong, Miguel Antonio Lizada also explores *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, however, this time, by examining gothic tropes and drawing on queer theory. Consequently, Lizada's essay is, most probably one of, if not the first, queer reading, not only of the novel, but of the Joaquinian canon. "When She Started Acting Queer: A Queer Gothic Reading of Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*" explores the idea of doubling and monstrosity and demonstrates how these two gothic tropes are deployed to activate the queer potential found in the character of Connie Escobar. By extending existing interpretations of regeneration, the essay argues that the narrative of transformation is mobilized precisely by a rejection of heteropatriarchal narratives encoded in the novel's post-colonial world.

The theme of monstrosity reappears in Tyra Delos Reyes and Xavier Selman's "The Female Monster: The Pre-Catholic Manifestation as a Response to Modern Anxiety in Selected Stories by Nick Joaquin." In this issue, our two authors re-examine Joaquin's *Tropical Gothic*, more specifically, "Summer Solstice," "Doña Jerónima," and "The Order of Melkizedek." Delos Reyes and Selman argue that, while feminist and gendered readings of the primary works deem necessary, an understanding of the pre-Catholic and the modern are essential. Their paper thus aims to offer alternative ways of understanding the treatment of the female as a monster. The women's transformation and self-sacrifice consequently allow one to understand the modern masculine anxiety around them.

Lastly, Ivan Emil Labayne's "Bedeviling Quijano De Manila's *Discourses of the Devil's Advocate* and the Openness of Historical Interpretation," evaluates this understudied work of Joaquin. Using a Marxist framework, this paper looks at Nick Joaquin's history writing, juxtaposed with the general practice of historical writing. What follows is Labayne's critique against "the pretentiously grand claims of History" and the "flirtations with liberal tendencies of history writing." By hailing the potentials of oral sources for alternative practices of history writing and interpretation, the author thus calls for a reaffirmation of reflexivity.

Similar to all the recent national initiatives held for the Joaquin centennial, this Forum Kritika therefore is not only another canonization of Joaquin, but also a (re) interpretation of the Joaquinian archive. Rather than understanding the archive as something set aside forever, according to Assman, it is that which is ripe for new interpretations; it is that which is ready for new articulations. The title, “Nick Joaquin Now” therefore highlights these reconfigurations according to new contexts and new societal needs. Like translated works, may this issue offer an afterlife (cf. Benjamin) to the National Artist as, with a glass of beer, we bid “dahling Nick” long life onto the next centennial.

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