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Into the Woods: Toward a Material Poetics of the Tropical Forest in Philippine Literature

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Abstract

This study considers how the tropical forest as a material and discursive space mediates the ways in which history is imagined in Philippine literary texts and literary production. Mobilizing ideas from new materialism, material poetics, and tropicity, the paper looks at generative moments from indigenous and revolutionary literature—two broad traditions whose conditions of possibility are inextricably linked with the materiality of the tropical forest and thus inevitably evince the structuring force of such nonhuman agencies and subjectivities. By disclosing how the “more than human” is constitutive of history and historical subject formation, it seeks to foreground the agency of Philippine forests in actively and collaboratively contesting the catastrophic violence of capital and state-making on people and the natural world.

Keywords: tropical forest, Material Poetics, Philippine literature, new materialism, Tropical Materialism, tropicity, more-than-human

Introduction: Into the Woods

Early in Filipino writer and martyr Jose Rizal's novel *El Filibusterismo* ([1891] 2011), a Spanish friar in colonial Philippines makes a passing reference to "the era in which people were forced to cut down large trees for shipbuilding" (p. 8). Simoun, an enigmatic jeweler, had suggested harnessing slave labor to construct a new canal to facilitate travel to and from the capital Manila—one of his many provocations meant to agitate the locals into joining the secret uprising at the heart of the novel. "That would lead to riots", another friar cautions, at which point the first friar brings up the precedent of forced labor, which presumably refers to when indios were mobilized to cull the forests for wood in order to build ships, including the famed Manila galleons that for centuries linked Mexico City, the Spanish Empire's base in the Americas, to the East Indies. The backbreaking enterprise would have led to a lot more uprisings, the friar 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, three hundred years before the events in the novel, when the colony's timber resources began to be used by the colonial state.¹ "Ever mindful of the need for suitable wood, writers of early accounts of the islands were quick to appreciate their potential for naval purposes," writes environmental historian Greg Bankoff (2004, p. 323). 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, p. 29). "Corte de madera," or the extraction of timber, became a dreaded form of forced labor among the natives, "the most arduous and poorly paid," (Bankoff, 2013, p. 538; Newson, 2009, pp. 29, 145). The gruelling labor resulted in a high mortality rate and drove the natives to evade draft, and commit suicide, while "fugitivism [spread] on a wide scale" (Newson, pp. 145-46). 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. Forest decline as a consequence of state-led economic activity charted a "parallel development" with the colonial state itself (Bankoff 2007, p. 333).

Thus, in the passage from *El Filibusterismo*, while the tropical forest is made to recall an early stage in colonization when its value as extracted resource helped sustain the colony, it is simultaneously invoked as a space in which turbulent, anarchic resistance against the self-same colonial process was nourished. Conjoined here are the two major ways in which tropicality has been historically imagined—as "pestilential as [it

¹ Deforestation, as a systemic process of replacing forest cover in favor of other forms of land use, "began in the Philippines in 1521", when the Spanish arrived in central Philippines (Maohong, 2012, p. 118).

is] paradisiacal”; and as “fecund” and “exotic” as it is “wild” and “unconquerable” (Arnold 2000, p. 8; Lundberg et al. 2022, p. 3). Each is deployed in the novel to serve an anti-colonial critique. While certainly textual and discursive, this deployment thickens with a materialist dimension when one considers a vital biographical impetus. After the publication of his first novel, Rizal’s family became embroiled in a bitter land dispute against the Dominicans that resulted in eviction from their ancestral home, an episode that became a key turning point in Rizal’s politics and influenced a harrowing subplot in the book (Quibuyen 1998, Guerrero 1974). Rizal “gives” this crucial storyline to a woodcutter, and in the process, relocating it and its paradigmatic question about land and colonial bondage to the tropical forest, which provided him the imaginative clearing—in the sense described by Anita Lundberg (2008, p.11) as “a resonating space full of potential”—to rehearse a kind of resolution that was realistically unavailable. Thus, the swath of forest in the mountainous region around the author’s native province, toward which he had expressed a great deal of fondness (see Lasco, 2020), helped activate a radical possibility in Rizal’s consciousness, which was otherwise steeped in Enlightenment ideas about nation and progress as a result of a colonial education both in Manila and Europe.²

Yet this notion of dynamic, material, and nonhuman space does not seem to register in the predominant ways that Rizal’s fiction has been read, most of which seems to be preoccupied with secular artifacts such as nationalism (Hau, 2000; Bernad, 2004; Anderson, 2005, 2008).³ Reynaldo Ileto (1998) recalls that during the centenary of Rizal’s birth in the 1960s, a time of nationalist ferment, historians “wasted much effort by endlessly debating whether Rizal was a realist or an idealist...probing the intentions behind his actions, speeches and writings, and attempting to clarify his contribution to the process of nation-building” (p. 31). Recognition of this illegibility of tropical forests, or at least their incomplete, liminal, register as material and imaginative sites of complex historical reckoning, has the capacity to trouble long-held anthropocentric ideas about fiction, history, and nation in the context of Philippine literary production—and the pivotal role that Philippine forests may play in this rethinking.

In this study I investigate this potential of the tropical forest to materially and discursively intervene in and impinge upon the historical imagination that animates Philippine literature and literary production. As a geographic space and idea, the country’s tropical forests have routinely lain outside the contours of conventional

² See Diaz, in press

³ I can think of two exceptions: Eugenio Matibag (1995) 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 (255). Isa Lacuna (2021) looks at the storm tropes in the literary and political writings of Rizal and unpacks his “environmental imagination” (198) via the metonymic deployment of tropical weather in his work.

historiography, their significance limited to either inert, exploitable resource, or unmapped terrain. Thus, the forests retain their profuse, layered potential as narrative and political subjects, including their ability to disrupt and transform human agency within them as well as the imagination of history as it manifests in Philippine literature. This potential, I argue, complicates notions of historical subject-formation in the context of Philippine state-making, narrativity, and the “more than human”, bestowing on the tropical forest an agency whose “accumulated effects”, Jane Bennett (2010) notes, can build toward something “quite big” (p. 96). Donna Haraway (2016, p. 100) points to how “assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors *make history*, the evolutionary kind and other kinds, too” (emphasis mine). The forest, both as a space and a human undertaking, also figures in her idea of “plantationocene”, among the “diverse kinds of human-tended” ecologies and assemblages that had been systematically transformed “into extractive and enclosed plantations” (p. 162). Specific to the context of Southeast Asia, Ignasi Ribó (2017) notes the need to acknowledge “the speechlessness of all those nonhuman others that are excluded, not just from literature and social discursive practices, but from human language itself” (p. 44). To make the tropical forest “speak”, as it were, I draw on key ideas from new materialism—especially Christian Benitez’s (2022) provocative refashioning of the tropical around the Philippine vernacular *bagay*, Anita Lundberg’s (2008) theory of material poetics as the potential of “social encounters between peoples, things, environments, imagination and mystery” (p. 2), and Daniel Clayton’s (2013) idea of militant tropicality as “counter-hegemonic thought and practice” (p. 9)—and use these notions against the phenomena that I feel sustain the afterlife of debilitating tropicalist discourse around Philippine forests: capital and state-making.

This has repercussions of course on political action and the regimes of thought that assign an inert role on the natural world (see Haraway 2016, Tsing 2015). That, as Bennet (2010) notes, historical “materiality most often refers to human social structures or to the human meanings ‘embodied’ in them and other objects”, impairs our understanding of politics, and creates a narcissistic dead end in which politics is “constructed as an exclusively human domain” and so “what registers on it is a set of material constraints on or a context for human action” (xvi). From the perspective of cultural theory, Jones and Cloke (2002) propose that the unpacking of “nature-society relations involving trees, woods, and forests” can contribute to a “social theory [that] (re)incorporates nature” (p. 17). In particular, Marder (2013) traces the justification for deforestation to the ontological devaluing of vegetal life due to, paradoxically, a notion of limitless growth and “the ensuing instrumental approach to plants” (p. 25). In the Philippines, among the most vulnerable places to climate change, the link between, on the one hand, authoritarian state-making and capitalist development, and, on the other, deforestation and the destruction of the environment, had been established by

Vitug (1998), Bankoff (2013), and Maohong (2012). A case in point is the dictator Ferdinand Marcos wantonly using logging licenses as a tool of political patronage, which unleashed the worst carnage on Philippine forests, with deforestation peaking at 300,000 hectares a year in the late 1960s, when “the dangerous intertwine of forest and politics” was in full display (Vitug 1998, p. 122). Among the human subjects entwined with forests, “indigenous people are rarely regarded as valuable contributors to defining environmental issues, concerns, risks, and possible solutions”, a broad othering that is of course a colonial legacy (Telles 2017, p. 88). But above all, the context of a full-blown climate emergency means the imperative to reimagine political action and agency, collaboration and assemblage, as regards forests and the non-human world, is paramount. Assemblages, Anna Tsing (2015) writes, are ultimately “scenes for considering livability—the possibility of common life on a human-disturbed earth” (p. 163).

Historical Space, Narrative, Materialisms, and Tropical Forests

To some degree, more contemporary theorizing around historical and nonhuman space can be seen as building on, or at least a reconfiguration of, Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) foundational theory of the chronotope, the elemental fusion of space and time in narrative and discourse that he argued was “formally constitutive” of literary texts (p. 84). Here I have in mind such varied ideas as: landscape conceptualized as the “living entanglements of people, materiality, space, and place” (Lundberg et al., 2022, p. 2), and as a “participant in...historical process rather than a bystander to human experience” (DeLoughrey & Handley 2011, p. 4); Haraway’s (2016) *Chthulucene* as enabling a “sense of thick, ongoing presence, with hyphae infusing all sorts of temporalities and materialities” (p. 2); or new materialism’s broad rethinking of “the location and nature of capacities for agency” for what was often considered inert (Coole & Frost 2010, p. 9). We may even include here, as something that influenced perhaps most of these formulations, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (1987) rhizome as foremost an assemblage of “dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections” (p. 8). The Bakhtinian chronotope can be seen as similarly capacious, exerting such a determinative force that it structures plot, shapes motifs, and activates swaths of discourses. The “organizing center” of narrative, the chronotope bestows meaning upon its structure (1981, p. 250).

In assigning agency to materiality beyond human subjectivity then, the chronotope is not wholly ontologically incompatible with new materialism’s “avowed posthumanism”, and the warranted exhortation to “relocate” the human “within a natural environment whose material forces themselves manifest certain agentic capacities” (Coole & Frost 2010, pp. 20, 10). While specific chronotopic configurations can, over time, harden

into generic traditions and thus languish on the realm of passive signification, there is something in the chronotopic procedure of incorporating reality that is intensely concrete, almost biological: how time “thickens” and becomes “viable”, how space becomes “charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history”, how narrative events “take on flesh” (pp. 84, 258). After all, it is by “materializing time in space” (p. 250) that the chronotope enables the conditions of possibility in a text, the embodiment of granular, dynamic materiality in narrative.

Space, both physical and conceptual, is of course a major vector in the European construction of tropicality as first intimated by David Arnold (1996), who, in the critical tradition of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), described the tropical in terms of “an enduring alterity” vis-a-vis the temperate north, and thus routinely predicated on a history of “exploration, conquest, and colonization” (Arnold 2000, p. 7). The materialist dimension of this idea is germane in this inquiry in two ways—it foregrounds a determinative natural environment marked (misguidedly) by plenitude, and it employs an approach that moved porously from concrete to discursive. And even here, or as early as here, the tropical forest was already offering a resistance to stable, facile characterization. Arnold’s (2000) report of various accounts of the “experience” of the tropical rainforest not aligning with what had been “imagined” (p. 16, 10) gestures toward a kind of lush, agentic illegibility outside or in excess of a simple tropicalist framing.

Philippine forests stage a similar defiance. While accounts of their troubled plight and history rightfully litigate factors such as colonialism and capitalist post-independence state-making (Vitug 1998; Bankoff 2004, 2009, 2013; Maohong 2012; Pulhin et al. 2021), by and large the accounts can be characterized as statist and anthropocentric. There is much attention, for instance, on “empire forestry” as implemented by the American colonial administration, in many ways a more scientifically advanced and market-oriented continuation of the system started by the Spanish colonial government and premised on the dual imaginaries that attend European regard for the tropics: a “forest world...of potential riches” and (or but) “filled by perils” (Bankoff 2009, p. 373; see also Worcester, 1914). And true enough, as Arnold averred, colonialism facilitated not only an imaginative Othering but the logical material end to it in the form of the wholesale application of a “utilitarian conservation” strategy, which tried to bulldoze both existing indigenous practices and regimes of knowledge and, ultimately, the forests themselves. The country’s forest cover of 27.5 million hectares—90 percent of the total land area—before colonization was nearly halved to 15.8 million hectares toward the waning years of American rule (Ilagan 2021, paras. 2-3).

As a possible corrective to this asymmetry, Christian Benitez's (2022) articulation of a new materialism from the tropics as parsed from Philippine reality and enacted through the vibrant vernacular term *bagay* may be useful. Firstly, I argue, the country's tropical forests mobilize the sort of indeterminacy that inheres in *bagay*, whose undulating meanings radiate from "matter", and literally, "anything", to a sense of temporal harmony, imbued with a "swerving quality that permits it to denote practically anything at any given time" (p. 3). This concrete indeterminacy—the Philippine forests as a space both singular and contiguous, a thing and object, a *bagay*—becomes a strategic illegibility that allows it to withstand the relentless mapping of the archipelago's terrestrial space facilitated by imperial technologies of visibility (see Anderson 2006; Scott 1999, 2009). For people and state alike, a calibrated uncertainty historically attends every encounter with the tropical forest. Surveying the "anarchy and arbitrariness that reigned in the forest", for instance, was among the first orders given to the Spanish forest service, the *Inspeccion general de Montes*, upon its establishment in 1863—an insurmountable task easily overwhelmed by the scale of the forests themselves and then exceeded by the Philippine Revolution that broke out in 1896 (Bankoff, 2004, p. 328). Upon the arrival of the Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, the forests retained a kind of inscrutability despite the threat of a more coherent forest bureaucracy and more sophisticated science. US Forest Service Chief, Gifford Pinchot, on an initial reconnaissance tour of the country's forests described as "somewhat bewildering" the experience of being "dropped into the midst of a forest not one tree of which [he] knew" (Bankoff 2009, p. 371). His successor, Henry Graves, conceded that "no forestry officials had knowledge of the islands' tree species, but rather depended upon Filipino recruits", with confused Americans "constantly asking...the names of trees" (Roberts 2014, p. 130). As a result, "absolutely nothing [was] known of the silvicultural requirements of the species to be dealt with," said American forester Barrington Moore (Luyt 2016, p. 77). All of this prefigures a larger, more systemic inability of empire forestry to fully contain the country's forests. Guided by imported theoretical approaches and a rigid regime of measurement, uniformity, and legibility, empire forestry failed because it failed to comprehend, much less meaningfully engage with, the complex and aleatory ecosystem of people, economies, and natural environment in which the forests are inextricably situated (Luyt, 2016). It failed because it did not see the need to adapt to—*pakibagayan*—the materiality of such fervid local relations and nonhuman agencies.

Secondly, and which enlarges and builds on the above, Benitez (2022) also frames new materialism through *bagay* in terms of a generative and abundant multiplicity of relations, as "an assemblage of perhaps many other bagay" (p. 7). Perhaps no phenomenon exhibits this grounded relationality more than *kaingin*, the practice of

shifting cultivation via the slashing and burning of vegetation. American foresters looked at *kaingin*, which also refers to the cleared lot, with utter disdain and revulsion, the opposite of their touted “rational forestry” (Bankoff 2009, p. 486). As the new colonizer sought to bring order and homogeneity into the country’s forests, *kaingin* remained stubbornly “irregular, temporary...often a family or village-based undertaking,” a “pre-modern” and “unregulated” activity that was “inherently localized” (Roberts 2014, p. 250-251).⁴ The encounter with it—the sight of billowing smoke and ash-covered earth, the smell of burning wood, coming face to face with the negative space of the burned out clearing—must have inspired a visceral reaction. *Kaingin*-like practices all over the tropical world, Michael Williams (2006) writes, were revolting to “the European sensibility”, which regarded it as “primitive”, “unproductive”, “wasteful and destructive to the point of irrationality” (p. 321).

But the *kaingin* “represented a particular interaction between Philippine peoples and their natural environment” from which both forest and human benefited; part of “complex local economies” and indigenous systems in which social relations, political economy, and land are implicated (Roberts, p. 249-250). Lundberg’s (2008) theory of material poetics propitiously regards the clearing via Heidegger’s image of a clearing in the forest, proposing the idea of “humans and artefacts” as “clearings through which we manifest to each other”, an approach that sees “relationality” as “the constant vibration between people, things and environments” (pp. 11, 13). For indigenous uplanders, for instance, *kaingin* is “integrated harmoniously into the natural environment and is not harmful to it”, representing a knowledge system premised on sustainable harmony because “nature could not be conquered and controlled” (Maohong 2012, p. 120). Tragically, the “nationalization” of once communally owned forest resources meant the erosion in the authority of these indigenous communities and systems, each “with their own systems of tenure, customary law, and technologies for utilization” (Poffenberger, et al., 2006 p. 14). Filipino novelist and Philippine National Artist N.V.M. Gonzalez, who grew up in rural Mindoro and whose naturalist fiction is populated by subsistence *kaingeros*, describes *kaingin* as “an institution for survival” for many Filipinos (Gonzalez & Bresnahan, 2006, p. 23). He also saw in its materiality a generative metaphor for Filipino life under American occupation: “What does a *kaingin* project visually? It projects the leveling of trees, the burning, and the use of the area for planting.... What was the Commonwealth period but a kind of burning down of the old institutions of the first decades of the American regime and the planting of new things?” (p. 23). Colonialism, he said, has bequeathed in its aftermath a place of ruin but also catalytic potential that he calls “*kaingin* country,

⁴ Harold Olofson (1980), a visiting professor at the University of the Philippines College of Forestry, notes the “utter confusion in the use of the term” in the country, “used in quite different ways by different sectors of Philippine society” (p. 169).

where everything—even the jungle—can grow” (Gonzalez, 1964, pp. 52-53). The *kaingin* as practiced and lived in Philippine forests is thus *bagay* in several ways: firstly in its capacious unwieldiness as locus and discursive object; secondly, in its practical adaptability to the specificities of a natural environment; and, finally, in its ability to concretize the gamut of social relations and meanings that transpire, cohabit, and duel within and outside the horizon of burning trees in the country’s forests, untamed by regimes of control and management.

The Philippine Forest in Philippine Literature

The deep entanglement of history, narrative, poetics, and the natural world that is constitutive of Philippine literary history opens up a space in which to think about the possibilities generated by the idea of tropical forests as mediating our imagination of history. We may begin at the positivist turn toward the end of Spanish rule in the late nineteenth century, when realism, heralded by the novels of Rizal and driven by a nationalist impetus, ascended to the status of master narrative—to the detriment of folk and indigenous oral traditions, which nevertheless continued to exist if not flourish away from the Hispanized towns and cities. The turn not only discloses the clear link between state-making and literary production (see Hau, 2000), it is also symptomatic of a society whose broad historical imagination was undergoing a radical change, away and distinct from the lush and disparate ecosystem—forests—of indigenous consciousness and toward something homogenous, secular, and decidedly “modern”. Over the course of the American occupation, Resil Mojares (2006a) points out, Philippine nationalism, despite its radical genesis in anti-colonial struggle, “[mutated] into a canonical, *civil* nationalism under American auspices”, a process that left some things—realities, systems of knowledge—“stratified, excluded, or left unfinished” (pp. 12, 27). It is no coincidence then that this “deforesting” of historical imagination, this flattening of thought along a monolithic nationalist line, began and was consolidated while empire forestry sought to control the country’s forests, a program of government that all succeeding post-independence regimes would continue. Writes Marites Danguilan Vitug (1998), “the Philippine forests have been the most coveted among the country’s natural resources, and the few who have been granted the privilege of ‘taming’ portions of them have reaped power and wealth,” (p. 122). Needless to say, this sense of beneficent passivity in which the country’s forests have been viewed post-independence, aligns with colonialist constructions of the tropics, suggesting a continuity in the paradigms during and after colonization.

I propose turning to moments from two broad traditions of Philippine literature—indigenous literature and revolutionary literature—as potential sites for inaugurating a preliminary theory of the tropical forest as a material structuring force in the historical

imagination that undergirds Philippine literary production. While the tropical forest logically figures in the entire breadth of oral and written Philippine literature—a field that warrants its own thorough mapping and inquiry—a theory that emanates from and reckons with the active materiality of the country’s forests necessarily goes beyond subjectification or tropological critique, no matter how complex or ecologically minded these may be. I argue that, because their conditions of possibility are inextricably linked with the materiality of the forest, indigenous and revolutionary literature can stage the ways in which the “more than human” is constitutive of history and historical subject formation, contesting in Philippine literary production “the exclusive hold of humanity on political agency” and thus “partly strip[ping] humans of their hegemony as social agents” (Dittmer 2014, p. 397; Descola 2014, p. 268).

Indigenous Poetics

The idea of the natural world as a default, unproblematized element in many folk forms testifies to an indigenous way of life that is in deep harmony, or at least critical interaction, with the environment, which perhaps recedes toward invisibility because of omnipresence and plenitude. This is evident, for instance, in the country’s epics, the form in which “Philippine folk literature reaches its highest point of development” (Eugenio 2001, p. xi). The exhaustive introduction to the definitive anthology *Philippine Folk Literature: The Epics* by Damiana Eugenio (2001) pays no explicit or particular attention to the natural world, even as landscape, flora, and fauna recur in the discussion of formal elements, narrative conventions, and dominant motifs (pp. xi-lviii). It is the epics themselves, chanted for hours in the night after a day’s toil at the forest and no doubt amid a background of forest sounds, that validate this prominent position, at the same time articulating a community’s intimate familiarity with the natural world. For instance, the *Ulahingan* epic of the indigenous Manobo people in present day North Cotabato in Mindanao devotes some 800 lines to the description of landscape, including the “meticulous” and “enchanted” catalog of each plant, tree, and stone in the forest, recited alongside “the sound of an indigenous musical instrument [which mimics the sound the forest] is said to make” (Maranan, et al., 2020, p. 208). Indeed, in the epic, the forest of Nalandangan, the Manobo people’s mythic stronghold, is characterized as “a symphony of orchestra with a human chorus” (p. 208).

The tropical forest assumes a determinative materiality in the case of the indigenous Teduray people, who live in the rainforests of the Cotabato Cordillera in southwestern Mindanao, and the *Berinareu*, the group’s “immensely long cosmological epic” that takes eighty hours to chant (Schlegel, 1999, p. 63). While creation myths explaining indigenous cosmology in many Philippine epics necessarily implicate the natural

world, the mythic origin of the Teduray as narrated in their epic is rendered as not only subordinate to the tropical forest but wholly contingent on its existence and care. The reported edict of their Great Spirit Tulus captures this: “So long as a forested world exists, Tulus wants there to be people” (Schlegel, 1987, p. 20). This stewardship is even suggested to be potentially endless. In an episode toward the end of the epic, Tulus welcomes the hero, the great shaman Lagey Lengkuwos, and the Teduray people to the cosmic realm after a long journey (Schlegel 1999, p. 82). But because this meant there was no one left to take care of the forest, the Great Spirit created a new group of Teduray. In total, the creator would “[make] human beings four different times...in each case the purpose was ‘so that they could take good care of the forest’” (p. 80).⁵ The iterative, cyclical co-constitution with the tropical forest seems to lie at the heart of the Teduray idea of *poiesis*, its fashioning of a livable world, which is the forest itself. This refers to, in the group’s everyday economic life, swidden cultivation or “forest gardening”—*kaingin* (p. 84). Also included in the epic, the activity is marked by communal, festive labor, beginning with a “ritualized clearing of undergrowth” and a formal expression of respect for the spirits of the forest and a request for permission to work the appointed site (p. 85). The call of a small forest bird that comes from specific directions transmits assent from the spirits. After harvest, care was taken to allow the swidden to “lie fallow...while the forest reclaimed the land and restored itself” (p. 91).

From this cosmic humility, inscribed in the epic and lived in the everyday, we may say that it is the forest that supplies the material grounds of the Teduray worldview, the logic and structure of the “politics” that animate Teduray society. Characterized as broadly “egalitarian” and “unranked” by vectors of wealth, gender, or even age, it is a way of life in which impulses like “competition, greed, and self-promotion” were “simply alien” (Schlegel 1999, pp. 244, 84). Their encounters with people outside the forest meant they are “well acquainted with hierarchy and power”, but “Teduray men didn’t seek such power and they didn’t try to wield it” (p. 111). Principles such as limitless private accumulation, arbitrary valuation of commodities, and inequality and scarcity—all deemed compulsory or justifiable in the capitalist mainstream of Philippine, and global, society—are not so much rejected as rendered materially unnecessary and inconceivable, even if they lie within the realm of imagination.

⁵ This stands in contrast, for instance, with the seeming ethos of the creation story in the Bible, in which flora, and the cyclical regeneration at the heart of forests, is a gift bequeathed to the universe and, later, humans. There is painful irony in that Christianity, seminally described by Lynn White (1967) as the “most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” and a critical impetus in scientific revolutions and thus environmental destruction (p. 1205), had long been among the threats to the way of life of the Teduray – from the first Spanish Jesuit missionaries in the 1860s to the waves of Christian settlers who arrived as part of the national government’s homestead program beginning in the 1910s (Wood, 1957, pp. 13-14).

The shared histories of the Teduray and the forests of Cotabato galvanizes this relationship and elevates it to something akin to vital, visceral memory. The centuries-long isolation of the group was among the casualties of the American campaign in the early 1900s to forcibly include the Muslim regions in their colonial project, to create the Philippine nation (Schlegel 1999, p. 6). Prior to this, a huge part of Mindanao “lay beyond the control of authorities in Manila”, its forests “still largely unexplored by Europeans and relatively unexploited by its indigenous inhabitants” (Bankoff, 2007, p. 330). Crucially, American rule and the attendant deforestation created a cleavage among the Teduray, between the “forest people” or the “traditional communities still living the old way in the ever-shrinking rainforest” and the “peasant Teduray” who, in becoming part of Philippine society’s arduous and exploitative rural peasant market system, had “lost the significant independence the forest had allowed them” (Schlegel 1999, p. 10). Thus, the tropical forest for the Teduray swerves between mythic, natural, and human histories, an apparatus with which to negotiate their porous, shifting borders. And its staunchest materiality is in this imagination of a cosmic freedom that lies outside the brutal history dispensed by capital and state-making, and the drive to continue the struggle toward it.

Revolutionary Poetics

Also suffused with ideas of liberation is revolutionary literature. I refer specifically to the writing that is ideologically aligned with and produced as “part and parcel of the national democratic revolution” waged by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) since its reestablishment in 1968, and in particular its “central task” of the Maoist “protracted people’s war” by cadres of its New People’s Army (NPA) in the Philippine countryside (Montañez, 1988, p. 9; Sison, 1974). The natural world as both the field of production and dominant figure undergirds the imagination of history in revolutionary writing, where the masses, Neferti Tadiar (2009) writes, “are identified with a dynamic nature” (p. 270). But similar to the case made above regarding the indigenous Teduray and the *Berinareu*, the materiality of nature in, say, guerilla poems, is less a passive vessel for human signification than “a technology of imagination that is fundamental to the practical life of the movement” (p. 270). Interestingly, as Tadiar notes, CPP founder and poet Jose Maria Sison (1972), writing as Amado Guerrero, cited the rendering of, and attitude toward, the tropical forest in the memoir of American soldier-turned-cadre William Pomeroy’s *The Forest* (1963) to clarify and articulate CPP’s ideological break from the older Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) and its armed resistance, whose final years in the Sierra Madre mountains the memoir documents. Pomeroy’s disdain for the tropical forest is held up by Sison as revelatory of his chronic “bourgeois pessimism”, betraying a misdiagnosis of the crises attending the revolution and an “absolute” lack of faith in its victory. As Sison states: “Here is a sham revolutionary

who hates and does not appreciate [the] tropical forest and rain as advantageous conditions for fighting the enemy” (pp. 18, 20; see also Kerkvliet, 2014). By contrast, in laying out the “specific characteristics” of the CPP’s armed resistance, Sison’s (1974) meticulous description of landscape and topography, including the critical value of the Sierra Madre, prescribed its overall military strategy, where “mountainous terrain with some population and with thick vegetation is an excellent condition”. This “crucial turn in imagination” in relation to terrain and the natural world, Tadiar says, “articulated a shift in military strategy” from building “fixed strongholds” to focusing on “spatially dispersed mass bases” that could support “mobile guerilla warfare” (p. 270): toward, in other words, plasticity, cooperation, and movement, all in concert with nature.

Even so, despite Sison’s misgivings, these ways of regarding the natural world, including the tropical forest, are not so much teleologically antithetical to each other—both being ultimately utilitarian and privileging of the human—as they are divergent in terms of the potential they activate in negotiating the contours of “landscape-based assemblages”, along and across Marxist lines (Tsing 2015, p. 158). While new materialism emerged to some extent out of the “exhaustion” of and fresh inadequacies in the important materialist approaches of the past centuries such as Marxism, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010) rightly point out that there is room in it for both the constructivist and deconstructionist view of subjectivity and phenomena that overturned rigid determinism, on the one hand, and social construction in the Marxist tradition, on the other (pp. 3, 25-26). “It is entirely possible...to accept social constructionist arguments while also insisting that the material realm is irreducible to culture or discourse,” they conclude, noting the methodological potential of such imbrications (p. 27). A possible forerunner of such a capacious procedure, as Lance Newman (2002) points out, is Karl Marx’s study of “the soil science of his day”, which had allowed him “to apply fundamentally ecological modes of analysis to the ways that human societies have organized themselves within nature” (p. 12).⁶ Optimistically, a new materialist consideration of the tropical forest as a structuring force in the imagination undergirding Philippine revolutionary literature may testify to its dexterity as regards these possibilities.

To this end I turn to Sison’s arguably most well-known poem, “The Guerilla Is Like a Poet” (1968, “Guerilla” from this point on), which not only anticipates the central strategy for the people’s war that he would articulate years later, but also, I argue, materializes the tropical forest as constitutive of the history-animating revolutionary literature. Better known for his polemical work, mainly *Philippine Society and*

⁶ Reconciling Marxism with ecocriticism, Newman also rejects the equivalence leveled at socialism vis-a-vis capitalism as both being “equally dedicated to expanded production for its own sake” for ignoring how “the current mode of human interaction with nature is organized for profit, not for human needs” (p. 13).

Revolution (1971), the so-called Little Red Book of the Philippines where he applied Maoist thought in the dissection of the country's history and social crisis,⁷ Sison was an English major with two published poetry collections who wrote extensively on the role of culture in the national democratic revolution (see Montañez, 1988). In the author's note to *Prison and Beyond: Selected Poems 1958-1983* (1984), which includes "Guerilla", Sison traces poetic creation to "a special field of subjectivity—that of the poetic imagination", where "thought and feeling" converge and which the poet needs to inhabit "constantly or at least for an extended period of time" (Sison 2013, p. 213). Everyday material reality in the form of his "theoretical work" and "practical tasks" in the movement prior to his imprisonment impinges upon this creative act, thus materializing such convergence of "thought and feeling"—the imagination that mediates the raw material of historical experience (p.213). This materiality of dialectical creation, I feel, is captured most eloquently in his prison poems, including "Poems and Rest", where he wrote: "Solitary confinement / Is torture so vicious. / But the poems I compose / Are my ardent companions" (p. 282).

The idea of *poiesis* in "Guerilla" seems to be premised on a similar idea and procedure—"dialectical in operation and materialist in grounding"—that is characteristic of Sison's work (San Juan, 2013, p. 227). In the poem, it is the natural world that stages and mediates the reconciliation of, on the one hand, the guerilla and the masses, and, on the other, the poet—and by extension, armed struggle and poetry, revolution and creation. The guerilla is like a poet for both are "keen to the rustle of leaves / the break of twigs / the ripples of the river". Like a poet, the guerilla "has merged with the trees"; he is "enrhymed with nature / the subtle rhythm of the greenery". The extended metaphor terminates with the human and nonhuman figuratively entangled in/as "the green brown multitude" with which the guerilla and the masses, like the poet, marches, "swarming the terrain as a flood // an endless movement of strength". The final line textually enacts, by repetition, by simultaneity of breath, the phenomena whose creation the poem has sought to unite: "The people's epic, the people's war". In the work, "the techniques and tactics of the creative process is turned into possibilities and postures of revolutionary armed struggle" (Daroy, 2013, p. 253). And it is "the close articulation of the masses and nature or land as a dynamic, empowering presence", writes Tadiar (2009), that enables "the constitution of the revolutionary subject" (pp. 272-273).

There is no need for explicit mention of the tropical forest in "Guerilla", for it is both the field of its material creation and its discursive "world", the ground for the "landscape-based assemblages" that make the revolution possible. Written in 1968, the poem

⁷ It is by virtue of *PSR* that Sison is considered by some as "the most influential writer after Rizal" (Daroy, as cited in Sison 2013, 247).

came to be on the eve of the founding of both the CPP and the NPA, presumably after Sison's shift to underground work in the countryside following a failed assassination attempt (Abinales, 1992, p. 21). History now tells us that this date is crucial, a turning point in the continuum of Philippine revolutionary history that ushered in a "resurgence that was unprecedented in the national context" and which reinvigorated a radical tradition "long thought to be politically dead" (p. 7). Meanwhile, this is dramatized in the forested "world" of the poem by the guerilla troop being depicted *in medias res*, in constant eternal motion: first leaving camp ("the ashes of departure"), then engaging in skirmishes ("the steel tensile in-grace / that ensnares the enemy"), before finally encircling the centers of power in cities as tactically envisioned ("marching at last against the stronghold"). "Guerilla", in other words, in enacting the logistical centrality of the tropical forest in its creation as well as the distilled rehearsal of the CPP program, reconstitutes the revolution as a creative act that is enabled by and situated in a tropical landscape populated by human and nonhuman agents. The poem reveals a historical imagination, suffused with the forest's material charge, that becomes "the very active means and material process" of enacting revolution (Tadiar, 2009, p. 275). As an artifact of the Cold War, the poem also activates Daniel Clayton's (2013) idea of the tropics as "militant", with the forest where guerilla troops lie in wait actively frustrating the "disciplinary and annihilatory" drives of capitalism and fascism, facets of Philippine state-making and brutal afterlives of American colonial rule (p. 3). Tropicality, Clayton notes, has long been "enmeshed with wider post-war dynamics of war, revolution, imperialism, and Cold War aggrandizement" (p. 9). The tropical forest in the poem, situated within the avowedly anti-imperialist national democratic project, combines the "conceptual and physical space of opposition and struggle" at the crux of militant tropicality (p. 9).

Conclusion: The Tropical Forest as Creation, Creating the Tropical Forest

Mojares (2006b) has offered the idea of the forest as a narrative apparatus suited to the task of recuperation of alternatives and hauntings, a kind of vitality that, as earlier demonstrated in the case of Rizal, permeates the imagination in ways that allow us to interrogate orthodox views of history and historical agents. "To write about Philippine culture," Mojares notes, "is to wander through a forest of signs, ambushed at each turn by sights, sounds, and silences, dark and dissembling, as well as bright with intimations of transforming discoveries" (p. ix). Wandering into the forest, in the "spectral presence of absence . . . the miasmatic whiff of the unburied, the traces of what has been silenced and forgotten," rescues from the clutches of disenchanting time this numinous capacity to narrate (p. 298). As a material and discursive force in literary texts, the forest and the liminal imaginative space that it clears hews close to Roberto Echevarria's (1984) notion of the archive as "a relentless memory, that disassembles

the fictions of myth, literature, and even history,” out of which an important historical charge can be resuscitated at any moment (pp. 371, 379).

As these traditions, in their own ways, derail the coherence and hegemony of nationalist state-making and capitalist development, we may say that the absorption, incubation, and enactment of anti-capitalist thought is the tropical forest’s most vital agency. It is not a coincidence that this potential is embodied by groups and movements whose collective lives in the forest inspire, produce, and shape these literary traditions. While there are “several possible calibrated variations” between “statelessness and incorporation” (Scott 2009, p. 244), the retreat—or advance—to the forest is an active political choice in the face not just of the nation-state’s hegemony but of its narrative and conception of history.

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