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Rosario Cruz-Lucero

## “DEAD STARS”

### The Revolutionary Politics of the Edenic Past

#### ABSTRACT

This study undertakes a comprehensive, close reading of the original version of Paz Marquez Benitez’s (PMB’s) “Dead Stars,” published in the *Philippines Herald* in 1925. Previous critical essays have explicated selected aspects of the 1975 version edited and published by Leopoldo Yabes, based on some of its elements and techniques. On the other hand, this close reading is supplemented by empirical data gathered through historical research, including the cultural forms of the three Philippine traditions: indigenous, Hispanic, and colonial American. Weaving through the intertextual reading is the use of PMB’s biography, sources and influences, specifically the story’s historical context, milieu, prescience, and interrelationship with the Philippine literary tradition. On the premise of the story’s prescience, the study begins with the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during the Second World War (1942–45). It then works backwards through the American Commonwealth in the 1930s; the American Colonial Period in the 1910s to the ’20s; the Filipino-American War at the turn of the twentieth century; and to 1894, the year of her birth. A timeline of the story’s scenes is presented alongside parallel historical events. The study demonstrates how “Dead Stars” depicts the three cultures and sensibilities—Filipino, Hispanic, and American—eliding into each other. This theme is illustrated by the story’s descriptions of the architectural styles, the country-and-city dichotomy, and the behavioral differences between the older and younger generations. The characters, whether major or minor, dramatize

these sensibilities as well. Esperanza is the residual Hispanic hegemony; Alfredo is the tragic figure caught between his resistance to, and complicity in, the US dominant hegemony; and Julia Salas is the irrepressible oppositional hegemony. All these details lead to a revelation of the many-layered meaning of “dead stars.”

KEY WORDS

Paz Marquez Benitez, Philippine literary tradition, intertextual reading, history and criticism, explication de texte

“**D**ead Stars” by Paz Marquez Benitez (PMB) is invariably mentioned in Philippine literary histories as the first Philippine modern short story in English. As such, it has merited a sentence or two of lavish praise by editors of anthologies, such as Alberto Florentino, who calls it “the mother-story of Filipino short stories.”<sup>1</sup> Leopoldo Yabes, the first literary scholar to have edited it for inclusion in his anthology, describes it as having sprung “Athena-like” with “its quiet beauty,”<sup>2</sup> whereas Lucila Hosillos attributes the “Venus-like” rise of the Philippine short story to PMB’s story.<sup>3</sup>

In 1928, despite the publication of “Dead Stars” three years earlier, University of the Philippines (UP) English Department chairman George Pope Shannon, was still lamenting that Philippine short stories were “very flimsy, lacking originality, truth of characterization, or any vitality whatsoever.” He goes on to list the country’s wealth of raw material still waiting to be mined by Filipino writers: “the dramatic, often tragic, clash

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<sup>1</sup> [Alberto Florentino] Bert Florentino, “Notes on Paz M. Benitez,” email message to plaridelpapers, December 29, 2001, papers of Paz Marquez Benitez (hereafter cited as PMB papers), biographical records, Box 1, Folder 1, Ateneo Library of Women’s Writings, Rizal Library, Ateneo de Manila University.

<sup>2</sup> Leopoldo Yabes, ed. *Philippine Short Stories, 1925-1940* (University of the Philippines Press, 1975), xx.

<sup>3</sup> Lucila Hosillos, *Originality as Vengeance in Philippine Literature* (New Day Publishers, 1979), 54.

of creeds, races, classes, and cultures that are dying for treatment by a realist.”<sup>4</sup> Why Shannon did not recognize these very topics in “Dead Stars” might be explained away as the colonizer’s inability to comprehend its literary sophistication. It remained to Shannon’s interviewer and PMB’s fellow staff member in the *Herald*, Vicente L. del Fierro, to add, as a conclusion to the interview article, that PMB was already “acknowledged to be the foremost Filipino short story writer in English. . . . The high standard of literary excellence started by Mrs. Benitez has been continued by her successors, who, needless to say, have been her former students and contributors.”<sup>5</sup>

Three years later, T. Inglis Moore, an Australian associate professor of English at the UP (1928–31), praised PMB’s writing for her “command of idiom, naturalness, and grace.”<sup>6</sup> It would, however, take another sixty years before a full-length journal article, “The Art of Paz Marquez Benitez” by L. M. Grow (1991), would analyze the story in greater detail. This would be followed by “A Feminist Reading of ‘Dead Stars’” by Edna Zapanta Manlapaz (1993), and “Images of America in Paz Marquez Benitez” by Jennifer McMahan (2001).

L. M. Grow, in 1991, laments the “minimal attention” critics have afforded the story despite their unanimous recognition of its importance in our literary history. They have been content to acknowledge its artistic merits in generic terms, he states, without substantiating these in detail. Therefore, he sets out to demonstrate how “Dead Stars” is “an impressive blend of techniques . . . that is unified in storyline and tone.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> George Pope Shannon, interview by Vicente L. del Fierro, “P. I. Pioneer Identified with New Literature,” *Philippines Herald*, Aug. 7, 1931, clippings, PMB papers, Box 2, Folder 3, ALIWW.

<sup>5</sup> del Fierro, “P. I. Pioneer.”

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Benitez Licuanan, *Paz Marquez Benitez: One Woman’s Life, Letters, and Writings* (Ateneo University Press, 1995), 76.

<sup>7</sup> L. M. Grow, “The Art of Paz Marquez Benitez,” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 19, no. 1 (1991): 3.

Grow breaks down what Yabes meant by “quiet beauty” in several instances: of direct statement (“calm and placid,” “somnolent quiet”), onomatopoeia, visual imagery ranging from deliberate “blurriness” to “crisp,” assonance, synesthesia, literary ambiguity, foreshadowing of plot development, and the “plangent note” in the story’s last sentence. Then Grow moves on to syntax: the balanced sentence, inversion, and the pithy statement he calls “the little dagger construction.” Finally, Grow calls our attention to the names of the two female characters: Esperanza (hope) patiently waiting for Alfredo to settle down; and Julia Salas (living room) signifying the “peace of home” that Alfredo craves.<sup>8</sup>

Edna Zapanta Manlapaz reads the story as a reversal of the stereotypes of the feminine romantic and the masculine realist. She presents the two main characters, Alfredo Salazar and Julia Salas, as “antagonists” in “the battle of the sexes”: Alfredo Salazar, who passively submits to fate rather than act by choice, in contrast to Julia Salas, full of “vitality,” openly delighted and pleased but not afraid to confront Alfredo with her discovery of his impending wedding to Esperanza. It is Julia who resolves the love triangle when she calls off the relationship and goes home to the province. “In short,” says Manlapaz, “she simply gets on with her life, without him.” Julia’s agency, therefore, is a feminist act. Depicting her as such, the story is “a protest against the patriarchal system.”<sup>9</sup>

If Manlapaz’s reading explores the subject of sexual politics, McMahon reads the story as political allegory. She begins her critique of the story thus:

“Dead Stars” . . . can be read as a meditation on the American colonization of the Philippines and its impact on Filipino culture. .

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., passim.

<sup>9</sup> Edna Zapanta Manlapaz, “A Feminist Reading of Paz Marquez-Benitez’s ‘Dead Stars,’” *Philippine Studies* 41, no. 4 (1993): passim.

... It also can be read as a pointed critique of the quiet devastation wrought on the Filipino psyche by the insidious pressures of colonial hegemony.<sup>10</sup>

Her discussion of the three major characters illustrates this premise. McMahon likens Esperanza to the Americans for the following reasons: (1) Alfredo's engagement and marriage to her represents his present and future life under the Americans. (2) She is "the efficient, the literal-minded, the intensely acquisitive [and] always positive"<sup>11</sup>—traits which are typically identified with Americans. (3) She is a firm believer in the power of institutions to "regulate feeling as well as conduct"<sup>12</sup> . . . [and] to rein in irregularity and promote uniformity."<sup>13</sup> The Americans established their educational, judicial, and political institutions for exactly the same purpose. (4) She expects "loyalty and sense of indebtedness" from her servant, akin to the Americans' demand for "loyalty and gratitude from the Filipinos." (5) Her disruptive presence in the Holy Thursday procession signifies American individualism as against Filipino communal ritualism.<sup>14</sup>

Julia Salas, on the other hand, is "vital, spontaneous, and less grounded. . . . [She is] "the unfettered . . . , short-lived independent Philippines." Delighting in her youthful and vibrant company, Alfredo is able to momentarily escape Esperanza's oppressiveness. Esperanza

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<sup>10</sup> Jennifer McMahon, "Images of America in Paz Marquez Benitez," *Philippine Studies* 49, no. 2 (2001): 205.

<sup>11</sup> Paz Marquez Benitez, "Dead Stars," in *Brown River, White Ocean: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Philippine Literature in English*, ed. Luis H. Francia (Rutgers University Press, 1993): 9, qtd. in McMahon, 207 and 212.

<sup>12</sup> Benitez, 5, *Brown River*, qtd. in McMahon, 209.

<sup>13</sup> McMahon, 210.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 212, 211.

tethers him to the present “reality of a colonial regime,” whereas Julia takes him nostalgically to the “independence that never really took.” Like the period of Philippine independence, the sense of freedom that Julia gives him is fleeting and inevitably doomed. Thus, her name, “Salas,” is an “imaginary” home that “can only offer temporary solace.”<sup>15</sup>

Alfredo Salazar, a young lawyer engaged to Esperanza but in love with Julia Salas, is torn between the two cultures that both women represent: “the traditional, Spanish-influenced, Filipino culture [Julia] and the new, Americanized Philippines [Esperanza].” His conflict is between his “passion for Julia and his duty to Esperanza.” Throughout the essay are words describing his lassitude: total submission, resignation, passive, trapped, suffocation, force of external pressures, dissipated sense of self, utter alienation, self-annihilating, extreme disengagement, impotent will, corrosion of his soul, and relinquishment of passion. In the end, Alfredo’s marriage to Esperanza is “his ultimate capitulation to the passive obedience required of a colonial citizen.” Thus, Alfredo’s inability to resist the external forces in which he is trapped makes for the story’s tone of “melancholic despair.”<sup>16</sup>

### AN INTERTEXTUAL READING OF PAZ MARQUEZ BENITEZ’S “DEAD STARS”

All three critiques above explicate the story by uncovering its layers of meaning and pointing to the elements and techniques that validate their reading. On the premise that a Philippine critical tradition consists of all scholarly and critical studies on Philippine literature, I shall attempt to build upon the three preceding critiques of PMB’s story with an intertextual reading. Weaving into my reading are the author’s sources

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 207–208.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 206, 208.

and influences, including the story's historical context, milieu, prescience, and interrelationship with the Philippine literary tradition of which it is an inextricable part, regardless of language and region of origin. The preceding data will serve as the empirical basis for my explication of the text of "Dead Stars."

On the premise of the story's prescience, I start this reading of the story with the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during the Second World War (1942–45); and I will work backwards from there to 1925, the year PMB's story was published, and so on to 1894, the year of her birth.

### **The Japanese Occupation, the KALIBAPI, and Anti-Americanism**

A year after Japan's conquest of the Philippines in 1942, it established the KALIBAPI (Kapisanan sa Paglilingkod sa Bagong Pilipinas) "to ensure the cooperation and unification of the Filipino people."<sup>17</sup> This was the Japanese solution to those who continued to resist the Japanese forces in the hope that Gen. Douglas MacArthur would fulfill his promise to return. The Japanese way to break the Filipino spirit was to disillusion them of any redeeming value that America might hold for them. The KALIBAPI's primary means was "the extermination of Anglo-American power and influence and free Asia for us Asiatics."<sup>18</sup> Prominent Filipinos who headed the KALIBAPI uniformly proclaimed their nationalism with anti-American pronouncements and, by inference, their pro-Asian—i.e., pro-Japanese—loyalties. They urged submission to Japanese rule and the repudiation of the "Anglo-Saxon influence."

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<sup>17</sup> Benigno S. Aquino Sr., "Address Broadcast over Station KZRH," January 29, 1943, *Official Gazette*, ed. Office of the Chairman of the Philippine Executive Commission 2, no. 1: 107, [https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Official\\_Gazette\\_of\\_the\\_Japanese\\_Militar/](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Official_Gazette_of_the_Japanese_Militar/).

<sup>18</sup> Director General of the Japanese Military Administration, "Address Delivered at a Dinner Given by Him in Honor of Provincial Governors, City Mayors and Constabulary Senior Inspectors," Manila Hotel, February 23, 1943, *Official Gazette* 2, no. 2: 228.

A 1944 US military report on the Philippines's national leaders of the time observes Benigno S. Aquino Sr. as being "one of the most prominent of the collaborationists."<sup>19</sup> And, it would seem, the most zealous. As director-general of the KALIBAPI, Aquino Sr. traveled all over the country exhorting the Filipinos to stop being "blind and slavish imitators of the distant West"<sup>20</sup> . . . and forget the spirit-breaking materialism and irresponsible individualism whose language you have lisped under the tutelage of the West." He reminded the Filipino people of the American regime's failure to grant them their independence, which it had promised as early as 1916. Japan, in contrast, was promising immediate independence within a year and a half of its subjugation of the Philippines.

On his part, Jose P. Laurel's first act, upon his appointment as commissioner of the interior under the Japanese Military Administration, was to issue a warning to all government officials and personnel to abide by the new regime's aim to "eradicate the evils of the past."<sup>21</sup> This phrase alluded to the practice of graft and corruption under the American colonial system. When he was secretary of the interior under the American regime, Laurel had had firsthand knowledge of government officials—Filipino and American alike—using their positions either for their own or their cronies' advantage.

Like Aquino Sr. and Laurel, Education Commissioner Claro M. Recto was tasked with attempting to persuade the Filipino people to accept Japan's offer of independence. In a lengthy radio broadcast,

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<sup>19</sup> *Civil Affairs Handbook: Japan; Army Service Forces Manual M354-18A*, Army Service Forces Headquarters, August 2, 1944 (US Government Printing Office, Wa, 1944), 21, [https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Civil\\_Affairs\\_Handbook\\_Japan/](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Civil_Affairs_Handbook_Japan/).

<sup>20</sup> Benigno S. Aquino Sr., "The Kalibapi and the Filipino Youth," Address at the Youth Rally, Philippine Club, Manila, January 7, 1943, *Official Gazette* 2, no. 1: 75-77.

<sup>21</sup> Jose P. Laurel, Department Order No. 10: "Officials and Employees Prohibited from Engaging in Private Business," January 7, 1943, *Official Gazette* 2, no. 1: 25.

he calls Japan's offer of independence an act of "divine intervention," since the Philippines would have obtained it anyway in 1946 had not the war broken out. But while the United States had conceded Philippine independence out of self-interest and only after several years of the Filipinos' continuous clamor for it, Japan had immediately promised "the honor of independence at the shortest possible time."<sup>22</sup> Thus, Japan, in its promise to liberate Asia from Western bondage, was a "friend and benefactor."<sup>23</sup>

The same US military report concedes, however, that Recto was only "forced to make statements avowing his appreciation of Japan's benevolence in granting her independence." His anti-American statements were "lukewarm" and rarely spoken.<sup>24</sup>

Other mouthpieces of the Japanese Military Administration were KALIBAPI president Jorge Vargas, who promised that the organization would "devote its efforts to ward off all Anglo-American influence"<sup>25</sup>; and KALIBAPI assistant director general Camilo Osias, who favorably compared Japan's offer of immediate independence with the Tydings-McDuffie Law, whose "onerous provisions" would have caused the same degree of suffering and privation as the war.<sup>26</sup>

KALIBAPI speeches were awash in repetitive anti-American propaganda: "Anglo-Saxon exploitation and materialism," "Anglo-Saxon policy of eternal economic domination of oppressed peoples," "materialistic

<sup>22</sup> Jorge B. Vargas, "Instructions to the Graduating Classes for Noncommissioned Officers," Constabulary Academy, Building No. 3, Manila, May 29, 1943, *Official Gazette* 2, no. 5: 533.

<sup>23</sup> Claro M. Recto, "Address Broadcast over Station KZRH," June 23, 1943, *Official Gazette* 2, no. 6: 608.

<sup>24</sup> *Civil Affairs Handbook*, 50.

<sup>25</sup> Jorge B. Vargas, "Statement on the Purpose of, and the Support That Should Be Given to, the KALIBAPI," *Official Gazette* 2, no. 2: 215; reprinted in the *Tribune*, February 8, 1943.

<sup>26</sup> Camilo Osias, "Address Before Released Prisoners of War Undergoing Spiritual Rejuvenation at the Institute for Former USAFFE Men," July 7, 1943, *Official Gazette* 2, no. 8: 781-84.

and hedonistic doctrines of the Anglo-Saxons,” “extravagance and materialism from the hedonistic civilization of the American people,” and “the shackles of Western imperialism.”<sup>27</sup>

Nationalism was an either-or choice—you were either for the Japanese or for the Americans. Under interrogation, if you gave the wrong answer, you were then beheaded, but not before being tortured first. This was the question that was put to Manuel Arguilla in the Japanese kangaroo court, after months of unspeakable torture in Fort Santiago. Asked why he had joined the guerillas, Arguilla replied:

“This is a war between two ways of life: between democracy and totalitarianism. For my country, I choose democracy.”

“So you are pro-American?”

“If you put it that way, yes.”<sup>28</sup>

What is the relevance of all this to “Dead Stars”? Its author, Paz Marquez Benitez, is named in another 1944 US military report as the head of the KALIBAPI Women’s Bureau.<sup>29</sup> The report, however, is silent on her involvement in its activities, unlike that of Aurora Lampa Aquino and Ildefonsa Cuaresma Osias, the wives of the two respective KALIBAPI directors. As leaders of the KALIBAPI Women’s Auxiliary, they are reported to have “played prominent roles.”<sup>30</sup> PMB must have taken the KALIBAPI oath, nonetheless, with all the aforementioned

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<sup>27</sup> Official Gazette 1942–1943, *passim*.

<sup>28</sup> Salvador P. Lopez, “How Manuel Arguilla Died,” *Orient*, December 1960, 43.

<sup>29</sup> *Philippine Biographies: Assemblage #46*, comp. Research and Analysis Branch, Office of Strategic Services, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii, September 15, 1944, 6. This list is taken from intercepts of Radio Tokyo and affiliated stations, dating from December 1942 to August 1944, from “Far Eastern Diplomatic Lists” (S-3082) and from R&A Report No. 1752, [https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Philippine\\_Biographies/\\_4D1f2L9IPAC?hl=en&gbpv=1](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Philippine_Biographies/_4D1f2L9IPAC?hl=en&gbpv=1).

<sup>30</sup> *Civil Affairs Handbook*, 3.31 *Makinaugalingon*, January 2, 1932, qtd. in Leonora M. Fajutagana and Rosario Cruz-Lucero, *A History of the University of the Philippines I* (University of the Philippines Press, 2020), 149.

denunciations of American culture and influence. Whether she did it wholeheartedly or only for survival, the fact is, fervid anti-Americanism was the discourse that she chose.

### The American Colonial and Commonwealth Periods

We then walk backwards into the 1930s, which peaked with the establishment of the Commonwealth government midway through. By the 1930s, the “hedonism” that was yet to be strongly condemned in the anti-American war rhetoric had become the subject of deep dismay in the media, theater, song, and literature of the period. Vaudeville and cinema, epitomized by Hollywood, represented American vulgarity. Newspapers expressed alarm at cinema’s erosion of the best in the Filipino soul. A typical editorial exhorted movies to “not only entertain but teach such values as justice, honor, goodness, proper Filipino behavior for the progress of the country and the glory of one’s native land.”<sup>31</sup>

When the seditious plays of the first decade of the twentieth century ceased to be relevant, *sarswelas* (musical plays) satirized the new, Americanized mores and manners, interspersed with stirring patriotic love songs. Dramatic and literary themes editorialized against the white-collar mentality, the overemphasis on formal education, class exploitation, social and moral corruption, government bureaucracy, and—spreading at an alarmingly rapid scale—colonial mentality, of which the English language was most symptomatic.

Hence, there was a nostalgic yearning for prim and proper behavior, emanating from both the convent and nineteenth-century conduct books, foremost of which was *Urbana at Felisa*.<sup>32</sup> This book—originally written

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<sup>31</sup> Makinaugalingon, January 2, 1932, qtd. in Leonora M. Fajutagana and Rosario Cruz-Lucero, *A History of the University of the Philippines I* (University of the Philippines Press, 2020), 149.

<sup>32</sup> Modesto de Castro, *Pagsusulatan nang Dalawang Binibini na si Urbana at ni Felisa* (Manila: Aklatang J. Martinez, 1938), cited in Soledad S. Reyes, “Urbana at Felisa,” *Philippine Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 3–29. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42634298>.

to prescribe rules of decorum, good conduct, and modesty of appearance suitable to the Hispanized way of life—was a consistent bestseller since its first publication in 1864, but “peaking in the first few decades of American rule.”<sup>33</sup> By 1938, its reprinting was meant to invoke moral and ethical standards as well. Julian Cruz Balmaseda, in this edition’s preface, explicitly declares the urgent need to evoke the “beautiful and glorious past” as a bulwark against “new patterns of behavior” brought in by Westernization, particularly the erosion of the Filipino home.<sup>34</sup>

The contrast between the two sensibilities—Hollywood and the convent—is satirized in an Ilongo play about the two colonial periods: While the sight of someone’s disgusting behavior might shock the prim and proper Filipina into exclaiming, “*Sin vergüenza!*” (Shameless!), the shrill-voiced one would shamelessly blurt out, “*Yu ar san ov el bits!*”<sup>35</sup> (You are son of a bitch!). The play, *Bunal nga Ualay Labud* (The Blow That Leaves No Mark), dramatizes the deleterious effect of the growing American hegemony: the vulgarities of the English language, the disdain for manual labor, political string-pulling, the red tape that impedes social justice, and colonial mentality in its various permutations.

A *Kapampangan dagli* (or “flash fiction,” if you will), similarly satirizes the same theme: The eponymous Binibining Phatuphats is the satirical name for the Filipino who takes on the trappings of everything American, no matter how ill-fitting and incorrect. When the character’s true color is revealed, she unleashes a storm of vituperation on her hecklers, in *Kapampangan*, her native tongue.<sup>36</sup> Sincere and real emotion, it is implied, can only be expressed in one’s native language.

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<sup>33</sup> Reyes, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Julian Cruz Balmaseda, i-ii, qtd. in Reyes, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Leopoldo Alerta, *Bunal nga Ualay Labud* (La Panayana Press, 1924), n.p.

<sup>36</sup> Juan Crisostomo Soto, “Binibining Phatuphats,” in *Kapampangan Literature: A Historical Survey and Anthology*, transl. and ed. Edna Zapanta Manlapaz (Ateneo University Press, 1981).

Reacting to the fear of the country's "Coca-colonization," the University of the Philippines, in the 1920s and '30s, took the lead in efforts to revive "native" art and culture. "Native" was synonymous to Philippine folklore, which was made up of inextricably intertwined Hispanic and indigenous elements and forms. American culture was the Coca-Cola culture. Hence, the first three Filipino UP presidents, whose combined terms lasted until 1939, advocated the use of Spanish alongside English as a medium of instruction while at the same time urging the development of a national language without giving up the use of the "mother tongue" at home.

In 1925 UP instructor Paz Marquez Benitez wrote and published "Dead Stars" in the literary section of the *Philippines Herald*, amid the pervading certainty that the US government would renege on its promise of independence or at least defer it indefinitely. Regarding the two decades of continual negotiations between the Philippines and America—ranging from sycophantic to diplomatic to strident—the *Philippines Herald* editorial wearily remarked in 1931, "It has been a somewhat trying decade."<sup>37</sup> The *Herald* had built up a reputation for being the country's only nationalistic newspaper. Hence, it was denounced as "anti-American" vis-à-vis the American-owned newspapers like the *Manila Times* and *Manila Daily Bulletin*, which dismissively called it "Quezon's mouthpiece."<sup>38</sup>

Since 1916, the country's national leaders had struggled, through legal and diplomatic channels, for independence. Hopes had run high that it would be granted immediately when the US Congress passed the Philippine Autonomy Act (a.k.a. Jones Act) of 1916. The US Congress, however, kept the country dangling through a series of negotiations, with America holding all the power and the Philippines using all manner of

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<sup>37</sup> "The Herald Carries On," editorial, *Philippines Herald*, Aug. 18, 1931, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Bernardita Reyes Churchill, "The Philippine Independence Missions to the United States 1919–1934," PhD diss, Australian National University, 1981, 178, doi.org/10.25911/5d763340147bc.

diplomacy, often to the point of diffidence. For a proud man like Senate President Manuel L. Quezon, this was a bitter pill to swallow, but swallow it he did.<sup>39</sup>

In 1920, only four years after the Jones Law was passed, House Representative Benigno S. Aquino Sr. already sensed that the US Congress was indifferent to the independence cause. To ensure that the independence missions could continue indefinitely, he won a unanimous vote in the House for a permanent budget. It was a token victory, nonetheless, because for the next twenty years, the US auditor, who controlled the funds, could cut it at will in retaliation for what he deemed to be Filipino belligerence.<sup>40</sup>

PMB was neither ignorant of nor indifferent to these political events. In 1913, at age nineteen and a recent graduate of the UP, she traveled from her hometown of Lucena, Tayabas (now Quezon province), to Manila to witness the inauguration of the new governor general Francis B. Harrison, who was a Democrat. In a letter from Lucena, dated October 7, 1913,<sup>41</sup> to her fiancé, Francisco Benitez, PMB happily recounts Harrison's inaugural speech, in which he declares that Democrats firmly believe that a government can only exist with "the consent of the governed," that his administration has "but one end in view—the independence of the Philippines," and that every opportunity would be given the people to prove their "capacity for self-government." Harrison, she concludes, "promises to be the most popular person in the Islands."<sup>42</sup>

In another letter dated ten days later, PMB describes the excitement over Harrison's forthcoming visit, together with Quezon, to her hometown

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, *passim*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>41</sup> Licuanan, 32–33.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

of Lucena: “Everybody is in a ferment over the Harrison reception and politics in general.”<sup>43</sup> The students, she writes with amusement, are seizing the chance to denounce the Americans’ continuing presence in the country, and so the teachers are praying for rain.

From his first day in office, Gov. Gen. Harrison did make good on his promises, handing the country almost full responsibility over the management of its affairs. In 1916, he strongly endorsed the Jones Act, which the Filipinos optimistically took to mean the US promise of immediate independence, by the end of the year 1916 at the latest. The outbreak of the First World War and its aftermath, however, shoved the Philippines onto America’s back burner.

When the war ended in 1918, the country, sensing America’s waning interest, prepared itself for negotiations for independence over the long haul. Matters only worsened when Harrison was soon replaced by Republican governor general Leonard Wood, who not only ruled with an iron hand but declared the Filipinos too infantile for self-government. At this, a *Herald* editorial ruefully declared in 1931 that he was the polar opposite of the thoroughly “pro-Filipino” Harrison.<sup>44</sup>

Two years before “Dead Stars” came into being, hostilities between Wood and the Filipino government officials finally came to a head in an incident called the Cabinet Crisis. Secretary of the Interior Jose P. Laurel had charged an American official with “corruption and moral turpitude.” Wood unceremoniously overturned Laurel’s indictment; Laurel resigned from his post in protest; and eight Filipino cabinet members—including Senate President Quezon, Speaker Manuel Roxas, and Justice Secretary Jose Abad Santos—followed suit.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Fierro, “P.I. Pioneer.”

<sup>45</sup> Churchill, 111, 129.

Camilo Osias, himself a member of the first independence mission in 1919 and ever the educator, had his own run-in with Gov. Gen. Wood. As president of the National University, he protested Wood's order to have "all pictures of Filipino heroes removed from all public schools in Mindanao"<sup>46</sup> in reprisal for the nationwide spread of Colorum uprisings in 1924.

Claro M. Recto was among the drafters of a letter addressed to US president Calvin Coolidge protesting Wood's despotic rule. But as a member of the independence missions, he also found himself the target of hostilities when he publicly reported that his fellow commissioners in Washington, DC, had not only failed to air their grievances against Wood to the US president but also accepted the offer of a twenty-five-year Commonwealth Period. While Quezon was willing to quibble on the ambiguity of the word "acceptance," Recto firmly stood by the mission's original demand for "immediate, absolute, and complete independence." Manuel Roxas railed at Recto for his lack of "decency and ethics" in spreading an "absolute falsehood."<sup>47</sup>

Aquino Sr., Laurel, and Recto were but three of the national leaders disillusioned by US political machinations, later accused as Japanese collaborators, but finally either amnestied or exonerated.

This was the political backdrop against which "Dead Stars" was written. Three months after her story's publication in the *Herald*, PMB was hired as its editor in chief, and a year later promoted by the UP to assistant professor.

PMB had been immersed in the country's politics all her life. Her father, Don Gregorio Marquez, was the one political opponent that Quezon half-jokingly admitted to being in fear of. She writes: "Long after

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<sup>46</sup> Milagros C. Guerrero, "The Colorum Uprisings 1924-1931," retrospective issue 3, *Asian Studies Journal* 43, no. 1 (2007): 67, <https://www.asj.upd.edu.ph/mediabox/archive/ASJ-05-01-1967/>.

<sup>47</sup> Churchill, 174, 239.

Quezon had graduated into national politics, he told me that whenever he saw my father crossing the Lucena church square on his way from our house . . . , he would say to himself: ‘There goes Don Gregorio to plot with his relatives, I wonder what he is up to now.’”<sup>48</sup>

Quezon took PMB very much into his confidence, especially in UP matters of consequence. It was she whom he consulted first when he wanted to appoint her husband as the commissioner of private education. When he complained to her about her university president Jorge Bocobo’s irresolute character, she was familiar enough with Quezon to retort that his despotic interference was to blame. But she also had her share of fun with the two future Philippine presidents: “I once taught President Quezon how to do the conga” and “I used to dance the Lambeth Walk with President Osmeña.”<sup>49</sup> Chief Justice Jose Abad Santos, later to be the first most prominent martyr against the Japanese, was her husband’s best friend since their pensionado years.

Before the coming of the Americans, Tayabas had already established an independent revolutionary government, and Don Marquez was assigned to oversee all its municipalities. But the American invasion meant another period of *taguan* (hiding). PMB’s first experience of Filipino-American relations was the loss, when she was seven, of a “treasured family music box,”<sup>50</sup> which she later witnessed an American soldier showing off to a group of children, herself among them.

Similarly, Don Higinio Benitez, PMB’s father-in-law, was a revolutionary against Spain and as such, a high-ranking Mason, as were his sons (presumably including PMB’s future husband, Francisco Benitez). As a representative to the Malolos Constitutional Assembly,

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<sup>48</sup> Licuanan., 55.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 135, 76.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 17, 20.

he supported the 1899 establishment of the First Philippine Republic, in defiance of the US claim to the Philippine Islands. With his son Francisco, he was imprisoned by the Americans in Fort Santiago but later released with the intervention of the first chief justice of the US Supreme Court of the Philippines, Cayetano Arellano. PMB, who liked her history in storytelling form, pieced her father-in-law's life story together for a history textbook that she and her husband would co-author. An added touch of personal detail was the Benitez family's old cook named Cayetana,<sup>51</sup> who we might surmise appears in PMB's story as Calixta the maid.

### “La Girl Filipina”

To her students, she was “la girl Filipina,”<sup>52</sup> for Paz Marquez Benitez was the synthesis of the three cultures—Filipino, Hispanic, and American—in her very person. Well into the 1920s and '30s, she wore the *terno* and *baro't saya* on campus and in class while teaching short-story writing in English. But anyone referring to her as an English professor, she would gently correct: “I am a Filipino professor of English.”<sup>53</sup>

Born in 1894, PMB disclaimed the idea that hers was the “transition generation” from the Hispanic to the Americanized way of life. She had been wholly educated under the American public school system, from age six until she graduated from the UP in 1912, at eighteen. There had been, however, a brief interval when she and her sister were sent to La Concordia College, a Catholic girls' school in Manila. Her mother had caught them perusing a library copy of the *Woman's Home Companion*,

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 62, 60.

<sup>52</sup> Lina Flor, “La Girl Filipina,” *Woman's Home Companion*, April 11, 1974, 24, photocopy, PMB papers, biographical records, Box 1, Folder 1, ALIWW.

<sup>53</sup> Licuanan, 8.

whose cover was of a young couple kissing in very modest fashion. “My mother yanked my sister and me out of [Tayabas High School] and packed us off to Manila to convent school—and so back into the nineteenth century.”<sup>54</sup>

The twelve young Marquez siblings thought nothing of driving up to the doorway of the town church in their Packard and conspicuously walking down the aisle to the front row, where the pew was labeled “Don Gregorio Marquez y familia”—a remnant of the old Hispanic times. Yet their fluency in the English language created a new divide between them and their farm tenants, who called them “mga [anak] ni Don Gregorio na hindi marunong managalog.” Young as they were, they sensed it was a condescending, rather than admiring, remark. In hindsight, it was what PMB was to recognize as one of the “perils of an Americanized upbringing.”<sup>55</sup>

She was one of them—“a farmer’s daughter”—when she drove the tractor around their farm, weaving through the coconut trees. And her father had done his share of backbreaking work, “almost singlehandedly” clearing the forest for a coconut plantation on the province’s largest river valley. Already among the landed aristocracy when the Americans came, Don Gregorio made an even greater fortune when the US government opened a large market for copra, whose price skyrocketed when the First World War (1914–18) broke out.<sup>56</sup>

Being under the American educational system, fourteen-year-old PMB graduated from the Tayabas junior high school and went on to senior high school (a.k.a. postsecondary school) at the Philippine Normal School in Manila. In her senior year, at age sixteen, she met her

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 22, 25.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 5.

future husband Francisco Benitez in one of those soirees organized by the American dorm matron, who was training them in the social graces, American style.<sup>57</sup>

Seven years older than PMB, Benitez had graduated from the Philippine Normal School in 1904, was a pensionado at an American normal school a year later, and then taught in Cavite after his return in 1908. He was about to leave for America again for further studies when he and PMB met in 1910. For two years, Benitez studied at the Columbia Teachers College and returned to the country in 1912 with a BS degree.

Meanwhile, PMB went to the UP College of Liberal Arts for her BA, also completing it in two years and graduating in 1912 at age eighteen. Two other significant events bookended this year for her: In February, she won the title of Miss Manila Carnival Queen despite her father's quiet disapproval and in December, she became engaged to Francisco Benitez. More than her participation in the beauty pageant, her father disapproved of their two-year engagement—too long by his reckoning, especially as they were to spend it apart.<sup>58</sup> But it was not to be helped, for Benitez had to leave once again for graduate school in America, and PMB returned to Lucena to teach. Finally, with a master's degree in hand, Benitez wed Paz Marquez in December 1914. He immediately taught education at the UP and three years later, in 1918, founded its College of Education, of which he was appointed the first dean.<sup>59</sup> A year after Benitez's appointment, PMB cofounded the Philippine Women's College with other women and joined the UP faculty shortly thereafter.

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 26, 27.

<sup>59</sup> Marcelino Bautista, ed. "Francisco Benitez, Noted Educator, Dies after Heart Attack," obituary, *Philippine Educator*: 7, reprinted from *Manila Times*, July 1, 1951.

## “DEAD STARS”: PLOT AND DURATION

The story’s plot is a love triangle with a melancholy resolution: Despite his engagement to Esperanza, Atty. Alfredo Salazar falls in love with Julia Salas, who is staying for the summer in Manila with her sister, Doña Adela. For six weeks, he carries on a flirtation with Julia in the house of Doña Adela and her husband, Judge del Valle, who is his father’s good friend. On Palm Sunday, Julia bids him good-bye, as she must return home for Holy Week at her parents’ bidding. Believing her gone and after overhearing his sister complaining about his procrastination, Alfredo finally agrees to set his and Esperanza’s wedding date for May. But he is elated to see Julia again on Holy Thursday. Her sister Doña Adela, as it turns out, has asked her to postpone her departure. Julia congratulates him on his impending wedding. When he invites her to it, she disdainfully accepts. Eight years later, Alfredo travels to Julia’s lake town in Laguna in search of a witness for a court case he is defending. He finds her in her family’s thatched house. After an awkward conversation, he realizes that the torch he has carried for her these past eight years is merely “the light of dead stars.”

Assuming that the story’s temporal setting is contemporaneous with the story’s creation and publication—i.e., 1925—its duration would be as follows, in chronological order:

STORY EVENTS	HISTORICAL EVENTS
1913	
Alfredo Salazar graduates from law school	Perhaps not coincidentally, it is the graduation year of the first batch of UP law students

STORY EVENTS	HISTORICAL EVENTS
1913-1914	
Alfredo's one-year courtship of Esperanza	Gov. Gen. F. B. Harrison's first year in office and the launch of his "rapid and complete Filipinization" program
1914-1917	
Alfredo's three-year engagement to Esperanza	The US government's promise of immediate independence in 1916 is deferred
Mid-February to April 1, 1917	
Alfredo and Julia Salas's six-week summer romance	
Palm Sunday (April 1, 1917)	
The Salazar and del Valle families' afternoon outing in the Salazar coconut plantation in Tanda	
Julia tells Alfredo she is going home for Holy Week at her parents' bidding	
A day between Palm Sunday and Holy Thursday	
Alfredo overhears Carmen and Don Julian discussing his reluctance to set a wedding date	
Alfredo sets the wedding date presumably because of Julia Salas's farewell, and Carmen and Don Julian's conversation	

STORY EVENTS	HISTORICAL EVENTS
Holy Thursday (April 5, 1917)	
Julia postpones her departure at her sister Doña Adela’s request	
Alfredo is happily surprised to see Julia at the procession	
She congratulates him on his impending wedding, which she has only learned about	
She accepts his invitation to his wedding, “with disdain”	
May 1917	
Alfredo and Esperanza are wed	
1925 (eight years later)	
Alfredo and Julia meet again in her lakeshore hometown of Laguna	1923–25: the Cabinet Crisis and the consequent withdrawal of the promise of immediate Philippine independence
Alfredo realizes his romantic memory of Julia is but “the light of dead stars”	

**THE SETTING: PLACE AND TIME**

“Dead Stars” may be read as representing the three cultures and sensibilities—Filipino, Hispanic, and American—all eliding into each other. The architectural and topographical references throughout the story illustrate this theme.

**Houses and trees.** The story opens with Alfredo overhearing his sister Carmen and their father, Don Julian, talking about him as they water the rose plants on the *azotea*. We surmise, therefore, that it is a *bahay na*

*bato*, the house of the landed aristocracy. As a don, Alfredo's father is a holdover from the Spanish times but now part of the American elite, able to send his son, Alfredo, to law school with the earnings of his coconut plantation. From the azotea, Alfredo goes down the "stone steps," walks down the path in their yard "shaded by immature acacias," and stops just outside their gate to gaze up at the house on the hill, where he had first met Julia Salas. Acacias, associated with the Philippines's ancient and noble history, are here newly planted—"immature" like the transplanted American way of life and its institutions—and hoping perhaps to grow deeper roots and larger trunks and someday to overshadow the Salazars' *bahay na bato*.

In contrast to the Salazars' Hispanic house, Americanization is depicted by "the Martinez house, rented and occupied by Judge del Valle and his family." It is an American colonial house, with "wide, open porches" (plural, not the single azotea at the back of the Hispanic house), where Julia sits on the hammock and Alfredo on the rocking chair as they exchange flirtatious banter. We infer that del Valle, being a judge, is a member of the American colonial bureaucracy and, in the 1920s, presumably appointed by the US president Calvin Coolidge, as all judges were.

The description of this scenery has the overall effect of a watercolor or oil painting: The way to the Martinez house, which stands atop a hill, is a "gravelled road bordered along the farther side by a madre de cacao hedge."<sup>60</sup> From here, Arturo glimpses the "heat-shrivelled tamarinds in

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<sup>60</sup> This detail seemed prophetic of future UP president Jorge Bocobo's project of filling the campus ten years later with madre de cacao trees—or *kakawati*, the Filipino term by which he preferred to call them. Perhaps PMB shared his patriotic dream of adopting the *kakawati* as a symbol of the Filipino identity, as the peach blossoms were for America or cherry blossoms for Japan. In 1935 President Bocobo organized a *Kakawati Festival*, at which an oil painting by fine arts professor and medical doctor Toribio Herrera was unveiled (Cecilia Bocobo-Olivar, "Jorge C. Bocobo," PhD diss., UP, 1975, 380–81, qtd. in Fajutagana and Lucero, 160). To this day, Herrera's *Kakawate in Bloom* hangs at the Permanent Art Collection of the Vargas Museum, UP Diliman.

the Martinez yard” (77). Tamarind trees are, like balete trees, believed to be inhabited by *encantos*, or spirit guardians. Those in the story have apparently been abandoned by their *encantos*, for they have shriveled. The belief in the *encanto*, or *kapre*, is a residue of an indigenous but Hispanized belief system and now banished by American rationalism and materialism.

Even more mysterious are the whereabouts of the Martinezes, who own the house. It is a relatively new house, built in American colonial style, locally called the *tsalet* (from chalet). Are they of the capitalist nouveau riche, able to build-and-rent-out, or has the judge’s exertion of undue influence displaced them? It could be read as a metaphor of America’s displacement of the Filipinos from their own territory.

Finally, the “vine-covered porch” is where Alfredo and Julia conduct their lighthearted flirtation. It is a continuation of the romantic trope of Ibarra and Maria on their own azotea forty years earlier, but a playful American variant of it, devoid of the Sturm und Drang of Ibarra and Maria Clara’s doomed love.

**The country vs. the city.** The story shows the dichotomy between pairs of geographic locations: the country versus the city, and “up here” versus “down there.” The city is where he is weighed down by social expectations of him and consequently, by his own inertia. The countryside, contrary to its stereotype of simplicity and innocence, is even more complex. The idyllic picture is the Salazars’ coconut plantation in Tanda, where Alfredo feels completely free. In this picnic setting by the beach, he comes down the bamboo ladder of the house (in contrast to the stone steps of the *bahay na bato*), finds Julia’s bare footprints in the sand, and follows her, after shedding his black canvas shoes and laughing to himself as he tosses them high up and lets them fall on the sand. It is merely a reprieve, however, as Julia’s farewell at the end of the day will remind him (73).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Numbers in parentheses are page citations to the journal in which clippings of the original edition, published in the *Philippines Herald* (September 20, 1925), are pasted, 71–78, PMB papers, Box 1, ALIWW.

Julia's lake town in Laguna seems just as serene, as he thinks to himself, "How peaceful the town was!" followed by details of a "little tienda" with its window counter, the sound of a woman's chinelas dragging on the ground (a no-no in *Urbana at Felisa*<sup>62</sup>), and children noisily playing *tubigan*, or hawk-and-chicken (*lawin-sisiw*). But it is eight years later, during which he seems to have become so urbanized that he feels only a "pitying sadness" for Julia living "in that quiet place" (77).

Forgotten is his disparaging jest about Americans in his exchange with Julia eight years earlier, when he expressed his wish to visit her hometown. "You will find it too dull," she says. "There isn't even one American there!" He replies facetiously, "Well—Americans are rather essential to my entertainment" (74). The countryside is the Americans' no-man's-land, thus the Filipino Eden, untouched by American hegemony and a harbor for rebel fugitives. Behind the peaceful façade of Julia's lake town are the people "up in the hills" (77), who we infer are hiding from the law.

**Up here vs. down there.** Alfredo's "up here" is the del Valle house on the hill, to which Alfredo escapes from his ennui "down there." Up here, he enjoys the novelty and mystery of Julia—her sweetness, her youthful spirit, and his "heart's desire." It is also nearer to the stars. Down there is Esperanza, with whom his familiarity has dulled his feelings and to whom he feels compelled to dissemble because of his double life. Down there, too, is the drudgery of everyday life, where the road is "too trodden by feet, too barren of mystery" (73).

**Temporal setting.** Past, present, and future are inextricably enmeshed in the story. As early as the second sentence, the reader is told of Alfredo's sense of dread about his future: "Esperanza, Julia Salas, and the sorry mess he had made of life, the years to come even now beginning to weigh down, to crush—they lost concreteness, diffused into formless

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<sup>62</sup> Modesto de Castro, *Pag Susulatan nang Dalauang Binibini na si Urbana at ni Feliza* (1864; Project Gutenberg, April 18, 2025), 65, [www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15980](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15980).

melancholy” (71). On the narrative level, this is about Alfredo having trapped himself in a love triangle, the inevitable resolution to which he will always regret. But the third clause of that same sentence establishes the malaise consuming Alfredo’s spirit, the cause of which he cannot identify.

This existential theme is anchored on the story’s historical framework and its political subtext. Of the six weeks in which he has been so feverishly absorbed in unraveling the mystery that is Julia Salas, Alfredo reflects to himself: “Neither the past nor the future had relevance or meaning, he lived only the present, day by day—lived it intensely, with such a willful shutting out of fact as astounded him in his calmer moments” (73). In historical terms, Alfredo no longer memorializes the revolution against Spain (“the past”) nor does he value the “relevance” of the Philippine struggle for independence (“the future”), for both are lost—and so he is resolved to live only by the demands of the present American era.

“Greed” is what he calls his desire for Julia. “The desire to crowd into a moment all the enjoyment it will hold, to squeeze from the hour all the emotion it will yield. . . . to the craving for immediate excitement. Greed—mortgaging the future for the sake of a present interesting reaction” (71). This is of a piece with American hedonism couched in the metaphor of American capitalism.

The Hispanic past and American present exist simultaneously on Calle Real in Intramuros. “The heart of town” is the pueblo complex comprising “old brick-roofed houses with quaint hand-and-ball knockers on the doors, heart of grass-grown plaza reposeful with trees, of ancient church and convento” (74). These houses belong—or once did—to the *peninsulares*, the Spanish elite whose houses formed the perimeter of the plaza, alongside the Intramuros cathedral, *ayuntamiento* (city hall), and *palacio del gobernador* (governor’s palace). By the 1920s, however, Calle Real has lost its old-world character and been overrun by “Chinese stores sheltered under low-hung roofs, of indolent drug-stores and

tailor shops, of dingy shoe-repairing establishments, and a cluttered goldsmith's cubby hole where a consumptive [is] bent over a magnifying lens" (74). Historically, Chinese immigration in the 1920s had reached such alarming proportions for Gov. Gen. Wood that he demanded that the Filipino leaders present a solution to "the Chinese problem" as proof of their competence in self-government.<sup>63</sup>

Hispanic and American influences are shown by the cultural differences between the old and younger generations in their behavior and dress, although comingling at the Holy Thursday procession: "Young women in vivid apparel . . . ; older women in sober black skirts. Came too the young men in droves, elbowing each other under the talisay tree near the church door" (75). When the procession ends, Alfredo pursues Julia Salas up to the last of the Chinese stores on Calle Real, though this street continues farther on to Puerta Real leading outside of Intramuros.

But the indigenous is not to be effaced, weaving itself into this multicultural and multitemporal fabric: "The gaily decked rice-paper lanterns were again on display, while from the windows of the older houses hung colored glass globes, heirlooms from a day when grass-pith wicks floating in coconut oil were the chief lighting device" (75).

The "round orange moon" then emerges, "whitening the iron roofs and dimming the lanterns at the windows"—its whiteness overpowering the Filipinos' corrugated galvanized metal roofs<sup>64</sup> and their oil lamps. "Huge as a winnowing basket,' shouted children's excited voices" (75). Yabes has deleted this dialogue tag from his 1975 edition, but it is PMB's pointed illustration of schoolchildren pulling out a simile from

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<sup>63</sup> Churchill, 159.

<sup>64</sup> Light roofing materials, particularly corrugated galvanized iron sheets, were required by the 1880 Earthquake Ordinance for houses built after this year (Ena Angelica C. Luga, "Building in 19th Century Philippines," *Hukay: Journal for Archaeological Research in Asia and the Pacific*, University of the Philippines Archaeological Studies Program, 19 [Sept. 30, 2014]: 4, <https://journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/asp/article/view/4365>).

their repertoire of English-language lessons. Hence, one might read it as a foreshadowing of Alfredo's own science lesson acquired from his American education—that the twinkling stars that we see are but the light of dead stars.

### ALFREDO SALAZAR: THE CENTRAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The subject of Alfredo and Esperanza's long engagement is what opens the story. Alfredo overhears his sister, Carmen, complaining to their father that he has been indefinitely deferring his wedding to Esperanza (metonymically expressed as "setting the long table"). Reflecting on this, Alfredo blames himself for his vacillation between the two loves of his life. "Esperanza, Julia Salas," he thinks, "the sorry mess he had made of life" (71).

But Alfredo, the central consciousness on whose point-of-view we must rely, is not a reliable narrator. He has been engaged to Esperanza for three years—and courted her for one—making a total of four that they have been together. Julia, in contrast, he has known for only six weeks. "Six weeks ago," he reflects, "Julia Salas meant nothing to him; he did not even know her name" (72). Therefore, while his vacillation between Esperanza and Julia may be his convenient and current excuse for deferring his marriage, what was his excuse for the two years and forty-six weeks of prolonged engagement before he met Julia?

Once the unreliable narrator is established, we are compelled to watch out for contradictions in the story's text, not in the deconstructive sense of unconscious gaps and fissures but as part of fictive technique.

On the surface, Alfredo is a sympathetic, likable protagonist. He is not a beer drinker, hence not a man of vice. A dutiful fiancé, he habitually waits for Esperanza at the church door after mass to escort her home—that is, until Julia Salas comes into his life. Then he rationalizes his neglect of Esperanza by calling it "neighboring" (73). Initially, it is to accompany his father, Don Julian, who persuades him it helps to

befriend their well-connected neighbor. But soon, he is seizing every opportunity to be alone with her, on the porch while the two older men are playing chess, or on the beach while the latter wander off to inspect the coconut trees. His Sunday visits with Julia also indicate that he is not a churchgoer. Nor is he a participant in other Catholic rituals such as the Holy Thursday procession; like the other Americanized men of his generation standing “under the talisay tree near the church door,” he waits for the ladies to disperse when the procession ends (75).

It is only after Julia bids him goodbye on Palm Sunday and then after he overhears Carmen complaining about his procrastination that he finally sets the date for his wedding with Esperanza. But this turning point only fuels his annoyance with Esperanza, in a muted kind of way, but enough for him to want to goad her for the “unvexed orthodoxy of her mind.” He tries to rise above it, though, because “one tries to be fair,” no matter how hard. Unwilling to admit to himself that he has a temper, “he looked . . . at her . . . with a kind of aversion which he tried to control” (76).

Irritably, he uses his lawyer’s training to belittle her moralistic pronouncements against the family servant Calixta, who is now “living with a man to whom she is not married” (76). Pointedly, he refers to Calixta solely as “their note-carrier,” underlining her role as the go-between in his courtship of Esperanza. Thus, Calixta and her lover embody the trope of the “below-stairs” romance, which parallels that of Alfredo and Esperanza’s “above stairs.”

But while Esperanza’s Catholic piety might condemn such an unholy liaison, Alfredo’s Americanized, pragmatic point of view sees it as neither right nor wrong. As long as it injures no one, he argues, then Calixta’s conscience is clean (76). Simply put, their argument is between Esperanza’s Catholic faith in the sacrament of holy matrimony and Alfredo’s Protestant (or Protestant-influenced) conviction that the sense of sin is personal, based on one’s conscience.

But Alfredo’s rationalizations backfire on him: now he must go through with the wedding to Esperanza to avoid injuring her by “what

people will say,” especially as it is almost the eve of their wedding and after an excessively long engagement. Although she offers him a chance to exit, it is by no means a graceful one, for she does it “in a storm of weeping that left him completely shamed and unnerved. The last word *had* been said” (76). The *Urbana at Felisa* discourse—keeping up social appearances—wins the day.

It is, nevertheless, only Esperanza having her last word in the argument, and not the end of the story itself. How can Alfredo win, who can only speak to her “hesitatingly, diffidently,” careful not to sound “ruder than he had intended”—and this after four years of “deep, accumulated exasperation”? She, on the other hand, can speak in an “indignant,” “insistent,” “thin, nervously pitched voice,” “tight with resentment,” “with suppressed violence” (76), and with a downpour of exclamation points.

But that is only the end of the story’s second section. True to his character, Alfredo is the unreliable narrator. He *will* have the last word, which is the story’s third section, and behind Esperanza’s back at that.

Eight years later and very much married, he finds a work-related excuse to visit Julia in her hometown in Laguna while allowing himself a fleeting thought for Esperanza and the “significance” she would impute to his trip. Again out of a sense of duty, “he had tried to be content” in the marriage—but more out of the need to spare himself the pain of longing for something or someone he cannot have (76–77).

Self-deprecation (or, in today’s parlance, the humble brag) is the flip side of Alfredo’s self-rationalization. Eight years after their summer romance, he wonders why “she had not married,” and concludes that the reason is her “faithfulness,” which he defines as “a recurrent awareness of irreplaceability” (77). If, in the context of their summer fling, Alfredo means that Julia has remained single because he believes himself irreplaceable, the overweening conceit is astonishing—though couched in lofty, hypothetical terms. Details throughout the story, moreover, consistently indicate that Julia is her own person, determining her own actions and decisions.

In the scene where Julia Salas has at last discovered his two-timing, Alfredo tries to elevate his self-rationalization to an existential-sounding meditation. He imposes the burden of shared guilt on Julia, to whom he presents his misbehavior as a universal experience (or “the human condition”) that he hopes she might empathize with. In the same breath, he tries to disarm her with the sudden switch to her nickname, which we are surprised to encounter for the first time in the story:

“Julita,” he said, . . . “did you ever have to choose between something you wanted to do and something you had to do?”

“No!”

“I thought maybe you had had that experience; then you could understand a man who was in such a situation.”

But Julia Salas refuses to give him a way out and demolishes him dismissively.

“That is his problem after all,” she says.

“Doesn’t it . . . interest you?”

“Why must it?”

Just as PMB’s nickname, Pacita, was reserved only for the exclusive use of family and intimate friends,<sup>65</sup> perhaps Alfredo calling Julia Salas “Julita” is a measure of how gravely (or laughably?) he has presumed on their relationship.

### ESPERANZA: RESIDUE OF THE HISPANIC PAST

Alfredo sees his fiancée as “Esperanza the efficient, the literal-minded, the intensely acquisitive” (76). She is the metaphor for the Hispanic culture, in which time is measured by the ringing of bells, and all literature must

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<sup>65</sup> Licuanan, 4.

be didactic and therefore singular in meaning; and which is “acquisitive,” as the Spanish colonizers were acquisitive of the indios’ gold, beeswax, *polo y servicios* (forced labor), *encomiendas*, *tributo* (tax system), and—as Rizal’s novels illustrate—the women.

Esperanza is, without ambiguity, the well-entrenched Hispanic hegemony, the central figure of the Hispanic flashback. A residual embodiment of the *Urbana at Felisa* discourse, she is “a believer in the regenerative virtue of institutions, in their power to regulate feeling as well as conduct” (73). Her values, feelings, and convictions, which she holds as universal “truths,” are constructs of the Spanish colonial institutions—marriage, family, education, law, and religion, particularly the Catholic church—and still very much alive (because “regenerative”) beneath an American veneer.

Love, she asserts, is cemented by the institution of marriage; and even prior to that, the man’s fidelity, by a couple’s engagement: “If a man was married, why, of course, he loved his wife; if he was engaged, he could not possibly love another woman” (73). Given her if-then logic of argumentation, Alfredo can only say, “You are so positive,” and again to himself, “Esperanza was always positive” (76).

She lives *debajo de las campanas*, being first in the procession upon the “insistent summons” of the “ringing of the church bells,” positioning herself immediately behind the float of the Mater Dolorosa. But as Alfredo looks on, “the sight of Esperanza and her mother sedately pacing behind Our Lady of Sorrows suddenly destroyed the illusion of continuity and broke up those lines of light into component individuals” (75). Esperanza, the epitome of Hispanic culture in this new era of Americanized culture, is an anachronism in historical chronology, out of place in an era in which the ethos of American individualism is trying to break up the solidity of institutionalized Hispanic religion. As “a woman dressed with self-conscious care, even elegance,” between the “young women in vivid apparel” and the “older women in sober black skirts,” which generation does she belong to?

But “at home, in the church, on the street, she was always herself, a woman past first bloom” (76). Thus, she stays in the procession from beginning to end as it is “wending its circuitous route away from the church and then back again, where, according to the old proverb, all processions end” (75). *Pagkahaba-haba man ng prusisyon, sa simbahan din ang tuloy*—could well sum up Alfredo’s engagement to Esperanza, which, prolonged and deferred as it might be, does finally end up in a church wedding. It also defines Filipino life, of which the church is the constant in a country of revolts, revolution, war, and the resulting culture upheaval.

Esperanza is the quintessential conservative, as depicted by her judgmental moralism against the housemaid Calixta’s dalliance—the exact nature of which we find out later from Alfredo: “Living with a man to whom she is not married.” Esperanza cannot allow herself even to pronounce the words, which can be spoken only in the darkness of the confessional because, in the Catholic religion, any reference to sex is taboo.

Esperanza underlines the feudal nature of the mistress-servant relationship when she complains that Calixta the maid is inconsiderate (“she should have thought of us”) and “ungrateful” (*walang utang na loob*). Urbana at Felisa explicitly defines what *utang na loob* is:

Kung may gumawa ng magaling sa kanya ay pasalamatan, kilanlin ang utang, at gumanti sa kapanahunan, sapagka’t isang kapalamarahan, isang kasiraan ng puri ang di kumilala sa utang na loob.

[If someone does one a good deed, give thanks, acknowledge the debt, and pay it back someday, because it would be an act of ungratefulness, damaging to one’s good reputation, if one fails to acknowledge one’s debt of gratitude.]<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Modesto de Castro, *Pagsusulatan nang Dalauang Binibini na si Urbana at ni Feliza*, ed. Romulo P. Baquiran Jr. (SWF, UP, and NCCA, 1996), 57; transl. and qtd. in Charita A. Delos Reyes, “Urbana at Felisa: Ideological Reproduction of Femininity in Philippine Education, 1864–1938,” *Philippine Social Science Review* 64, no. 2 (2012): 66.

This is the Spanish colonialist discourse in the *pasyon* tradition, the conduct book, and the *confesionario* (confession manual). As the sins committed by the indio were a personal offense against God and His representative the friar, so Calixta's sin is a personal offense against her mistress Esperanza.

Provoked by Esperanza's "unvexed orthodoxy," Alfredo rises to Calixta's defense like the lawyer that he is, demanding evidence with words like "to conduct a test," "the test of fairness," "not necessarily wicked," "seem positive about her badness." But Esperanza turns the tables on him, calling his fairness, rationality, and dispassionate logic "immoral," and pointing to herself as the exemplary woman—"I have never gone out of my way, of my *place* to find a man" (76)—thus leaving him nonplussed. He is not sure now if she has brought up the topic of Calixta's sexual adventures so that she can lead the conversation toward the issue of the uncertain status of their own relationship. But if so, then she has caught him out, and there is no defense against that.

For the whole length of time that Alfredo and Esperanza have been together—a yearlong courtship and a three-year engagement, which metaphorically translates to 333 years—he has been entirely faithful to her—until Julia comes along. Then he conducts a clandestine courtship with Julia, telling neither woman what he is up to. For a year, he courted Esperanza the traditional (i.e., Hispanic) way—with "flowers, serenades, and notes" (71)—and with Calixta acting as their note-carrier. She is also his *esperanza*, his hope for a calm and stable future, not the hedonistic and tumultuous passion that he harbors for Julia.

### JULIA: THE POLYSEMIC OTHER

Of the three main characters, Julia Salas is the ambiguous one or, as Alfredo puts it, the "mystery" (73). She seems, at first, to be the Americanized counterpart to the Hispanized Filipina, Esperanza. This is affirmed by Alfredo mistakenly calling her Miss del Valle, thus associating her with

the Americanized Judge del Valle, until she supplies him with her correct name, Julia Salas. Thus she dissociates herself from the del Valle name and declares herself to be her own person, although who she really is, we have yet to discover.

### Family Names

Julia Salas's full name is immediately introduced in the story's opening paragraph (although here, Yabes deleted her family name, Salas, in his 1975 edition). Her full name, Julia Salas, is given fifteen out of the sixteen times that "Julia" is mentioned, the one exception being the paragraph where she is described side by side with her sister Adela. The full name is mellifluous if *Julia* is pronounced with the Hispanic-Filipino *H*, and jarring if pronounced with the American hard *J*. Two-thirds into the story, the Hispanic-Filipino pronunciation of Julia is confirmed when Alfredo suddenly calls her *Julita* to plead his case after she has caught him out (75).

She has namesakes in our literary tradition, one of whom is Julia (with an *H*) of the revolutionary *sarswela* *Walang Sugat*. This musical play was performed for the first time in 1902, the year that America officially but prematurely declared its victory in the Filipino-American War. *Walang Sugat* is about the forbidden love between Tenyong, the revolutionary, and Julia, who is being forced to marry a wealthy man. Although set in the revolution against Spain, the American authorities took it to be an allegory of Filipino resistance to American colonization and banned it as "seditious." Consequently, they had the playwright, Severino Reyes, thrown in jail.

The full name of Julia Salas's sister, Doña Adela, can be inferred, including her married one, Salas-del Valle, she being now the well-connected Judge Dionisio del Valle's wife. Although their parents back in their lake town are unnamed, they do have more than a walk-on part, as they signify Filipino culture in its pristine state, prompting Alfredo

to behave toward them with old-fashioned courtesy (78). Therefore, Julia and Adela's family roots are shown in narrative fashion, no matter how sketchy.

Esperanza's name precedes that of Julia Salas in the same sentence absent her family name: "Esperanza, Julia Salas, the sorry mess he had made of life" (71). But while Julia's full name is immediately given at first mention and repeated fourteen times thereafter, Esperanza remains without a family name throughout the story (until, that is, she marries Alfredo and implicitly becomes Mrs. Esperanza Salazar). Her only family is her mother, also nameless and mentioned only once very briefly, accompanying her at the Holy Thursday procession. The only other member of Esperanza's household, the note-carrier, at least has a first name, Calixta. Though "homely and middle-aged" (76), she is defined by her sexuality, which American permissiveness has brought out in her and which Esperanza cannot abide by. As the Hispanic residue, Esperanza hovers everywhere and nowhere at once, stubbornly clinging on to the changing times while denouncing them, which the Americanized Alfredo signifies.

Most realistically drawn is Alfredo's family life: The Salazar family is headed by Don Julian, who owns a coconut plantation and beach house in Tanda, and enjoys "neighboring" and playing chess. Alfredo's sister, Carmen, is married to hard-working farm owner, Vicente (surname unknown), and they have "four energetic children" (73). This family's lifestyle is contemporaneous with the American colonial era, having kept its social and economic status intact while adapting to the new dominant order. That this is the lifestyle that the author PMB is most familiar with might account for its high degree of verisimilitude.

### **The Paradox of Julia**

A foil to the stiff and rigid Esperanza, Julia seems the liberated, Americanized woman, playful and mischievous, quick at repartee and

able to hold her own at flirtatious banter. She is “the girl next door” (73), next door being the American colonial house where Alfredo first pays her court on the “vine-covered porch,” then on the beach, and finally on the dark deserted street after the Holy Week procession.

### **Julia, the Natural Filipina**

Despite the indelicate images that such settings might conjure within the *Urbana at Felisa* discourse, Julia’s behavior in all of them consistently shows her to be the archetype of the *dalagang Pilipina*—the native Filipina—of her Laguna lake town. None of her movements or gestures are deliberate, studied, or restrained in accordance with Hispanic urbanity; nor has she been infected by Hollywood women’s images of the roaring twenties, deliberately cultivating their sex appeal in dress, movement, and behavior. While the “vine-covered porch” (72) sounds much like a lovers’ lane, the privacy it affords keeps Julia’s reputation intact, although whether in public or in private, she spontaneously behaves within the bounds of propriety.

**Julia on the beach.** She is a child of nature, we infer from Alfredo’s thoughts as he gazes at Julia, demure but free: “The wind blew the hair from her forehead,” her skirt “tucked up” as “the wind whipped it around her figure.” It is, by inference, a *patadyong*, sticking closer to her body the stronger the wind, and not the full American skirt that the wind could lift up above her waist. Julia’s charm is “an inner quality, an achievement of the spirit,” her allure emanating from her “naturalness,” her “alert vitality of mind and body,” her “thoughtful, sunny temper,” and her “piquant perverseness which is sauce to charm” (73).

“It looks like home to me,” Julia Salas says of this countryside setting. And “home” is her lake town in Laguna.

**Julia at the procession.** The sight of Julia at the tail end of the procession surprises Alfredo, although it does give him the chance for another intimate moment with her on Calle Real. Having perceived her

initially in Alfredo's eyes as Esperanza's polar opposite—i.e., the Hispanic vs. the modern Americanized Filipina—the reader might be surprised, too, at her presence in the procession, which is a devout Catholic practice. At the same time, Julia thinks nothing of lingering unchaperoned in his company in the dark, deserted street—which signifies her “modern” Americanized behavior. On the other hand, it is Julia's only opportunity to show her disdain of him for having kept the fact of his engagement from her.

On this he reflects: “She had reverted to the formal tones of early acquaintance. . . . simply the old voice—cool, almost detached from personality, flexible and vibrant” (75). The unreliable narrator that he is, Alfredo chooses to miscomprehend her words dripping with sarcasm as she accuses him of assuming she has the naivete of a country bumpkin: “You know mere visitors like us are slow about getting the news” (75). And she makes it clear that she has had to stay on over Holy Week not because of him but because her sister Adela has asked her to.

Time and again, Julia proves herself to be the emotionally independent woman, strong and self-determined and not the stereotypical, codependent woman. If anything, it is Alfredo who is emotionally dependent on her. He seeks her out constantly: at the del Valle home, the beach, Calle Real, and finally, unable to forget her eight years later, in her lake town. Not once does she return the favor.

### **Julia, the Oppositional Residue**

An early clue to Julia Salas's signifying the *dalagang Pilipina* is her physical description, which is contrasted with her sister, Adela. While Adela's features lean closer to the Spanish *mestiza* type, Julia is “not so obviously pretty. . . . She was much darker; of a smooth rich brown with underlying tones of crimson which heightened the impression she gave of abounding vitality” (72).

This echoes Rizal's own description of Mariang Makiling, his archetypal dalagang Pilipina: "Her color was a clear and light brown—kayumangging kaligatan." Much like Julia in Alfredo's eyes, "Mariang Makiling is a fantastic creature, half nymph and half sylph; and she is pure, simple, and mysterious."<sup>67</sup>

For the townspeople of Laguna, Mariang Makiling is the source of "abounding vitality," for she always restores life to their crops after a natural catastrophe. One might catch a glimpse of her sitting motionless on a cliff by the river, "letting her long hair float in the wind, all flooded with the moonlight" and "watching the gentle currents of the stream."<sup>68</sup> She is the woman posing in stillness, the prototype of *ang babaeng nakadungaw sa bintana*, the woman who looked out the window.

But at the tale's end, she protests her beloved woodsman's conscription into Spanish military service and denounces him for choosing not to join the rebels in the mountains instead: "Alas, . . . since you have lacked the courage . . . to defend your liberty and make yourself independent in the bosom of these mountains, . . . go! I leave you to your fate—live and struggle alone—live as best you can!" And she vanishes forever, her anger fueled all the more by the Dominican friars' acquisition of her territory: "They say that Mariang Makiling is offended because the Dominican friars are trying to despoil her of her possessions by taking half of the mountain."<sup>69</sup> In Rizal's version, the legend of Mariang Makiling is the living memory of the revolution and Philippine independence.

Like Mariang Makiling, Julia Salas disdains Alfredo's cowardice in his decision to take the "level paths made easy to his feet" (77) in

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<sup>67</sup> Jose P. Rizal, *Mariang Makiling: A Philippine Folk-Tale*, transl. Charles Derbyshire, with a foreword by Austin Craig, History Department, University of the Philippines (Manila: n.p., 1916), 8–9; the Tagalog original by Jose Rizal was published under his pseudonym Laong-Laan, *La Solidaridad*, Dec. 31, 1890.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 10–11.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 28, 22.

conformity with his social role: the American-educated lawyer forging a career path and conventionally marrying a woman who will look after his material (and moral) well-being.

### EIGHT YEARS LATER

The story's third section, however, is the inverse of all that has come before it.

It is eight years later. Alfredo travels to Santa Cruz, Laguna—Rizal's home province and Mariang Makiling's domain. Here, where Julia Salas lives, the people speak with "peculiar hill inflections" in "slow, singing cadences"—not the Americanized banter between Julia and Alfredo on the Martinez porch, nor Esperanza's Hispanic-infused diatribes. Here, "on the outskirts" of this little lake town, the early evening sky "glows redly" and the mists disappear into "the purple shadows of the hills" (77). As the defense lawyer in the case of "People of the Philippine Islands vs. Belina et al." (76), Alfredo has come to Santa Cruz in search of a witness named Brigida Samuy.

In the 1920s, the "People of the Philippine Islands" was the US colonial government prosecuting the Filipino people. Many of those deemed "criminals" were the exploited and oppressed, particularly the victims of land grabbing that had been legitimized by the Torrens title. Those who fought back took to the hills, or else were hauled to court and charged with banditry. Half of the judges of the Supreme Court were American; the other half, Filipino. The first Filipino chief justice, Cayetano Arellano, whose term lasted from 1901 to 1920, testified before the American authorities that he did not believe the Philippines capable of self-rule. As a director of the Philippine statehood movement, his dream was to make the Philippines the forty-ninth star on the US flag. Nationalists called the members of this movement the *Americanistas*.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Renato Constantino, *The Philippines*, with Letizia R. Constantino (Monthly Review Press, 1975), 239.

An actual court case in PMB's time occurred in 1924, in which forty men were found guilty of frustrated murder, having attacked the foreman of an hacienda, coincidentally named Hacienda Esperanza, with bolos, clubs, a stone, and a lance. The motive for the attack was that these men had been "dispossessed of portions of the land by judicial order"<sup>71</sup>—meaning, they had once owned the land that was now Hacienda Esperanza and were therefore victims of legal land grabbing. Needless to say, all the accused were meted out lengthy prison sentences plus hefty fines.

When Alfredo arrives in Santa Cruz, he is told that the town mayor has already gone in search of Brigida—also called Tandang Bindow—who has taken to the hill town of San Antonio. This is the excuse the mayor relays for not having replied to Alfredo's letter. Although Alfredo is grateful for having been spared the arduous climb to San Antonio, there seems something clandestine about the mayor's actions, especially in light of that period's social unrest. Would a simple reply to Alfredo's letter have been incriminating? Has the mayor gone up to San Antonio to warn Brigida instead? The reader senses authorial irony in Alfredo's appreciation of the mayor's thoughtfulness: "San Antonio was up in the hills! Good man, the presidente: he, Alfredo, must do something for him. It was not every day that one met with such willingness to help" (77).

"Up in the hills" is an idiom for fugitive rebels against the state, or "brigands," as the US colonial government called them; "*filibusteros*" in Rizal's time; or "subversives" in ours. A stranger, especially a representative of the US colonial-judicial system, did not simply go "neighboring" in there without arousing suspicion, from both sides—the state and the rebels. Hence, Alfredo is relieved that the *presidente* (mayor) of Julia's town has gone ahead up the hills to fetch Tandang Bindow, "that elusive old woman" (76). As such, Brigida Samuy (a.k.a. Tandang Bindow) might be

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<sup>71</sup> *People of the Philippine Islands v Dagman et al.*, G. R. No. L-23133 Phil. S. Ct. (Aug. 20, 1925), [https://lawphil.net/judjuris/juri1925/aug1925/gr\\_23133\\_1925.html](https://lawphil.net/judjuris/juri1925/aug1925/gr_23133_1925.html).

the allegorical name for a “brigand.” And yet, PMB bestows this absent character with a full name in the manner of real names in history books and official documents, akin to Dionisio Magbuelas (a.k.a. Papa Isio) and Macario Sakay (a.k.a. Dapitan).

Laguna is a province rich with the history of uprisings and revolts, one of which, a year before the publication of “Dead Stars,” was that of the Colorum Movement. The members worshipped Rizal and Felipe Salvador (a “brigand” in the early years of American rule) and went on pilgrimages to Mount San Cristobal, Laguna. Over the whole year of 1924, the Colorum members were massacred and the leaders imprisoned for sedition, forcing the rest to either surrender or disperse.<sup>72</sup>

That Alfredo has opted to defend his own people against the American colonial system reveals wherein his—and certainly the author’s—sympathies lie. Even as he is a product of its transplanted institutions, particularly its educational and legal systems, his loyalties do not lie with the USA. The object of his present engagement is justice for his people.

### **Julia: Fidelity to Our National Identity**

Despite himself, and knowing “he must not heed the radiant beckoning” (77), Alfredo seeks out Julia, who lives at Calle Luz, the street of light. Alfredo has had to give up Julia Salas because he cannot give her “something he [is] not free to give,” though “something that would not be denied beckoned imperiously, and he followed on” (73).

It is a walk similar to the ones Alfredo used to take from his family bahay na bato to the del Valle home, where Julia had briefly vacationed eight years earlier. But here, the acacias are old and full-grown, their tops forming a cathedral-like canopy over the streets. Instead of the

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<sup>72</sup> Guerrero, 67–68.

“shrivelled tamarind trees” as in the del Valle yard, a *kapok* (cotton) tree grows in Julia’s garden (78).

Towering over most trees, the kapok has a straight vertical but strong and resilient trunk that can weather the most powerful of storms. Thus, it can survive for centuries. During its fruiting season, its abundance of fluff floats down and covers the ground, so that Filipinos call it their version of “snow.” This being a town where “there isn’t even one American there,” it is as close to Westernization as it can get.

Alfredo finds Julia sitting at the window of her home, which she described to him eight years earlier as having a roof of “yunut<sup>73</sup> with ferns growing on them” (74). “The house was low and the light in the sala behind her threw her head into unmistakable relief” (78). It is unmistakably a *bahay kubo*, and she is the *babaeng nakadungaw sa bintana*, the guiding light for those who have lost their way, and where Calle Luz has taken him.

The Philippine folk tradition is replete with images of the woman at the window as a metaphor of anti-colonial resistance. A popular *harana* still sung today implores the woman—who is the serenader’s light and star—to awaken from her deep sleep and rise above her oppression:

O, Ilaw  
sa gabing malamig  
Wangis mo’y  
bituin sa langit. . . .

Gising at magbangon  
sa pagkagupiling  
sa pagkakatulog  
na lubhang mahimbing.

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<sup>73</sup> *Yunut/yunot*: coarse fibers like those of the coconut husk. Syn. *bunót* (Vito C. Santos, *Vicassan’s Pilipino-English Dictionary*, National Book Store Inc., 1978).

Even more explicitly defiant is the poem “Tula ni Oryang,” written in 1897 by Gregoria de Jesus, Andres Bonifacio’s widow. After peering from her window in hopes of seeing her husband coming home, Oryang puts away the handkerchief that she has been using to wipe away her tears, and defies death as she goes in search of her husband:

Tuloy na dungawan, kasabay ang silip,  
 Sa paroonan mong hirap ay mahigpit. . . .  
 Ako ay lalakad, usok ang katulad;  
 Pagtaas ng puti, agiw ang kapalad; . . .  
 Masayang sa iyo’y aking isasangla  
 Ang sutlang pamahid sa mata ng luha,  
 Kung kapusing palad, buhay ma’y mawala,  
 Bangkay man ako’y haharap sa ‘yong kusa.

Over his own emotional tug-of-war, Alfredo feels “no rebellion; only the calm of capitulation to what he recognized as irresistible forces of circumstances and of character.” Despite having resigned himself to Esperanza’s ordered way of life, “the essential himself that had its being in the core of his thought would, he reflected, always be free and alone” (77).

Alfredo’s career choice to be a defense lawyer (foreshadowed in the way he took up the cudgels for Calixta) is both his resistance to and complicity in the American hegemonic regime. Nevertheless, his very choice to work within the US colonial system also signifies that all hope for “immediate, absolute, and complete independence” is dead. Thus, he is still “haunted by a sense of incompleteness as other unladen ghosts” (77).

“What had she lost? Or was the loss his?” Much like the Philippine revolution is incomplete because interrupted and lost, the ghosts of its heroes still wander all over our Islands. Julia Salas is the woman waiting at the window—but not for him. For another Andres Bonifacio perhaps? Alfredo straddles both the heroic past and the Americanized present.

Like his generation's ideal man that is Rizal, he works to defend his people's rights, although his legal profession has him inexorably working within the new colonial power's judicial system. He is always, as he puts it, Elsewhere (74).

Only Julia has remained faithful to the Filipino ideal and kept the light burning: "She had not married—why?" And then follows a most insightful definition of love of country: "Faithfulness, he reflected, was not a conscious effort at regretful memory. It was something unvolitional, maybe a recurrent awareness of irreplaceability" (77).

And so we come full circle back to Julia Salas's name. She has remained unmarried and thus retained her maiden name. It is a female version of Alfredo's: As Salazar is to Alfredo, Salas is to Julia. But it is also the word for the Filipino family-living room, the heart of the home, not the azotea nor the porch, both mere appendages to the main structure of the house.

Back on the boat on Laguna de Bay, Alfredo gazes up from his cot and sees only "one half of a star-studded sky"—one half of the star-spangled banner—half-truth, half-lie. As for those "dead stars," Paz Marquez Benitez's prophetic genius sees us a hundred years later still gazing up at these twinkling non-entities that—for all the education they gave us—never really gave us light.

So—all these years—since when?—he had been seeing the light of dead stars, long extinguished, yet seemingly still in their appointed place in the heavens.

An immense sadness as of loss invaded his spirit, a vast homesickness for some immutable refuge of the heart far away, where faded gardens bloom again, and where live on in unchanging freshness the dear, dead loves of vanished youth. (78)

## Miseducation of the Filipino

But does it matter whether the stars that we gaze at are alive or dead? The paradoxical nature of dead stars is that, though they are extinct, they still do shine forever (in human terms), and therefore are not really dead by our reckoning. We only realized they were dead because our science education under the US public school system said so. That is how it co-opted the revolutionary significance of the *bituin* of the *loa*, *kundiman*, and *harana*. Thus began what Renato Constantino calls, forty years later, the “miseducation of the Filipino.”

Nevertheless, meaning-making creatures that we are, it is images that we see or hear that signify, and not necessarily the scientific nor factual source of these images. This conundrum might be analogous to the philosophical question: If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? One might say that the very question itself has created the sound. As the sound creates the tree, so the light creates the star.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY INTO ART

“All writing,” PMB once stated, “is autobiographical. All *real* writing is autobiographical. But I [must have] the drive to transmute autobiography into art. . . . [And] it all has to happen inside, first.”<sup>74</sup>

The fictional Martinez house is a mirror image of the real-life Benitez home to which her family moved in the early 1920s—specific address: Kilometer 8, Barrio Ermitaño, San Juan. The Benitez house was reached by a “narrow dirt road leading . . . up a steep hill,” surrounded by a yard with fruit trees, including “old tamarinds gnarled with age,” and with “blue-flowered vines that covered the iron grills that surrounded

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<sup>74</sup> Edilberto N. Alegre and Doreen G. Fernandez. *The Writer and His Milieu: An Oral History of First Generation Writers in English* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1984), 6.

the red-tiled porch.”<sup>75</sup> In the story, Alfredo Salazar’s visits with Julia Salas start with him “crunching up the gravelled road to the house on the hill.” This is the Martinez house, which the del Valle family is renting and where Julia is vacationing. It has “vine-covered porches” and a yard with “heat-shrivelled tamarinds” (72).

As the story unfolds, the house on the hill becomes a recurring motif—the exact phrase is mentioned three times, each time with a different qualifier that expands on its symbolism. At first mention, it is literally a location that is part of the physical description of the Martinez house. Second, it signifies Alfredo’s uphill climb to professional success or, as his father calls it, going “neighboring” to win “a judge’s good will” (72). And third, “at road’s end, the lighted windows of the house on the hill” (75) are all that Alfredo desires but cannot name—heartsease perhaps—that he thinks Julia and this house, if it were their home, would provide. If only.

The story abounds with such examples of autobiographical elements transmuted into art: PMB uses her specific knowledge of her father’s coconut plantation as an exit line for Don Julian and Judge del Valle to leave Alfredo alone to seek Julia out. So the two elders wander off to examine what young coconuts look like—“plenty of leaves, close set—rich green” (73). PMB’s choice of setting for the Palm Sunday picnic heightens the poignancy of Julia bidding Alfredo good-bye at the end of that joyous day. And in the scene where Julia ignores Alfredo’s use of her nickname Julita, PMB, whose own nickname is Pacita, uses the social nuance of nicknames to dramatize Julia’s rejection of his justification for his duplicity, which he couches as an existential dilemma.

Notwithstanding her fellow townsfolk’s impression that PMB did not know their mother tongue (“hindi marunong managalog”), she knew it well enough to use it as a withholding technique for the story’s

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<sup>75</sup> Licuanan, 1, 47.

narrative hook. “And when will the ‘long table’ be set?” is the story’s first spoken line, in medias res. “Long table” is the literal translation of the Quezon Tagalog idiom *mahabang dulang*, which denotes, in picturesque terms, a wedding. Defamiliarization is effected by this newly coined idiom by PMB and thus piques the reader’s curiosity more than the prosaic alternative, “And when will the wedding be?” The word “wedding,” in fact, does not appear until two-thirds into the story, and it is Julia who utters it when she reveals that she has discovered Alfredo’s deceit.

In another instance, PMB transmutes her own real-life prolonged engagement, to which her father had persistently objected, into Alfredo’s three-year engagement, which prompts his sister to complain about his “indolence” (72). Twice, PMB uses the word “indolence” to describe Alfredo—both when he is in a state of “perfect physical repose” (72), and even when he moves. “Indolence” is a word that has the weight of Rizal’s patriotism—when he defends us against the Spanish condemnation of “the indolence of the Filipino people.” The description of Alfredo’s “indolent” ease is followed by his physical description, which echoes biographical descriptions of Rizal:

He moved with an indolent ease that verged on grace. Under straight recalcitrant hair, a thin face with a satisfying breadth of forehead, slow, dreamer’s eyes, and astonishing freshness of lips—indeed Alfredo Salazar’s appearance betokened little of exuberant masculinity; rather a poet with wayward humor, a fastidious artist with keen, clear brain. (72)

“Breadth of forehead” is the English translation of *malapad ang noo*, which is said of brainy people, and again, which is said of Rizal. The rest of the paragraph is quintessential Rizal: the “slow, dreamer’s eyes; . . . a poet with wayward humor; and a fastidious artist with keen, clear brain.”

PMB’s opinion of Rizal aligns with her characterization of Alfredo. Rizal’s “nobility of character,” she states in an essay, lay in “his dedication

to a cause” greater than patriotism. “It was love of humanity, a desire to improve it, enlighten it, dignify it.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Alfredo’s nobility is demonstrated in his love for the humanity of the underdog, such as Calixta and defendants in the courts, and in his dogged commitment to Esperanza. PMB elides patriotism with love for humanity, anchoring both in the specificities of Philippine life.

Rizal was the spirit pervading the works of Filipino writers who came after him, including PMB. N. V. M. Gonzalez, writing in 1953 about her importance in Philippine literary history, prefaces his essay with Rizal’s influence on writers: “In moments of national crisis, we have not been found wanting in writers eager to explore the problems so that men of action might pursue the required solution. . . . And it is a tradition we are trying to keep.” The subsequent generation of English-language writers, to which PMB belonged, were all “imbued with the same sense of our nationhood that the writers of Rizal’s generation felt.” Of the various genres produced in English at the time, the short story was the most important, he concludes, and for which PMB “has been well remembered.”<sup>77</sup>

A requisite of the modern, well-made Western short story, for which “Dead Stars” has been praised, is its exploration of “the human condition” and the protagonist’s power of self-determination amid choices that circumstances offer him. The resolution of “Dead Stars” is not so much melancholic—which is the predominant affect of melodrama—as it is angst-ridden: Alfredo realizes that whatever path he chooses, will always linger the absence of the other.

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<sup>76</sup> PMB [Paz Marquez Benitez], *Brevities*, *Philippine Journal of Education*, July 1956, qtd. in Doreen G. Fernandez, “The Day’s Adventure: The Essays and Notebook of Paz Marquez Benitez.” (First Paz Marquez Benitez Memorial Lecture, Ateneo de Manila University, November 17, 1995; unpublished manuscript, November 11, 1995, 11), PMB papers, Box 1, Folder 3.

<sup>77</sup> N. V. M. Gonzalez, “Imaginative Writing in the Philippines,” in *Philippine Writing: An Anthology*, ed. T. D. Agcaoili (Archipelago Publishing House, 1953), photocopy, PMB papers, Box 2, Folder 3, ALIWW.

This existential theme must have filtered into PMB's literary sensibility from her American literary education. Her readings included the naturalist fiction of Jack London, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Emile Zola, who depicted how environment and social conditions determined human behavior. American fictionists who were standard fare were Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe, who all had a bleak worldview.<sup>78</sup>

But PMB's use of British orthography<sup>79</sup> in "Dead Stars"—e.g., the double l's in "gravelled" and "shrivelled," the archaic "tho" and "thru," and the nineteenth-century "fulness" with a single l—might also indicate her partiality to nineteenth-century English writers like Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, and even early twentieth-century Virginia Woolf. (Leopoldo Yabes, however, in his 1975 edition,<sup>80</sup> edited these words and other parts of the story in accordance with standard American orthography and other personal concerns.)

Perhaps the most astounding source of the story's verisimilitude is PMB herself, particularly the likeness between her personality and that of Julia Salas. It would seem that Julia is her alter ego, based on the list of her qualities that her daughter, Virginia Benitez Licuanan, gives:

her energy and enthusiasm,  
 her adventurous curiosity,  
 her instinct to be a loner,  
 her impulsiveness,  
 her romantic imagination,  
 her unorthodoxy,

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<sup>78</sup> Judith R. Raftery, "La Girl Filipina: Paz Marquez Benitez, Brokering Cultures," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 9, no. 2 (April 2010): 236, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27821470>.

<sup>79</sup> Licuanan, 10.

<sup>80</sup> Yabes, 1-19.

her rebellious impatience, and  
her glorious disarray.<sup>81</sup>

Even the contrast between the fictional sisters Doña Adela and Julia Salas is strikingly parallel with that between PMB and her sister Socorro. It is almost as if the two sisters stood side by side in front of a mirror so that PMB could copy their images for her description of Adela and Julia. In the story Adela is “small and plump . . . a pretty woman with the complexion of a baby,” whereas Julia is “taller, not so obviously pretty, . . . much darker; of a smooth rich brown” (72). PMB writes in her journal that her sister was “the beautiful one,” “petite,” with a “cream-and-roses complexion and curly hair.” PMB thought herself “pangit,” “the big dark one” because, at five feet four, she was too tall, “much taller than the average Filipina.”<sup>82</sup> All this might explain why Julia Salas, as Esperanza’s foil and the story’s protagonist, is the more realistic, three-dimensional character.

The real measure of the story’s verisimilitude, however, is Julia and PMB’s identical response to their era under US colonialism—i.e., their assertion of a Filipino identity against US hegemony. PMB best exemplifies her generation’s age of anxiety as observed below:

Colonialism inflicted a “spiritual incubus” on the Philippines. The “independence movement” was “not primarily a desire to throw off political shackles” but to allow Filipinos to regain their self-respect. Each day, she and her circle faced the daunting dilemma of proving that they were qualified for full citizenship in their own country. . . . Paz lived within the duality of two worlds, American and Filipino, and served

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<sup>81</sup> Licuanan, 3.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

both as a bridge and as a cultural broker between the imposed American way and her Filipino people.<sup>83</sup>

In sum, “Dead Stars” is a masterpiece of memory work that is an indictment of America’s broken promise of Philippine self-determination.

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<sup>83</sup> Raftery, 240, 243. *People of the Philippine Islands v Dagman et al.*, G. R. No. L-23133 Phil. S. Ct. (Aug. 20, 1925), [https://lawphil.net/judjuris/juri1925/aug1925/gr\\_23133\\_1925.html](https://lawphil.net/judjuris/juri1925/aug1925/gr_23133_1925.html).

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