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Review of Notes on Bakya and Other Essays

Jose Monfred C. SY

University of the Philippines Diliman, jcsy3@up.edu.ph

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Notes on Bakya and Other Essays

Jose F. Lacaba. University of the Philippines Press, 2024.

151 pages.

“Let’s begin with a little quiz,” starts poet and journalist Jose F. Lacaba in his phenomenal *Philippine Free Press* article “Notes on Bakya.” He cheekily asks readers to identify a series of terms such as “*pilyo, ngunit clean fun*” and “*Ricky na, Tirso pa*” that only a parishioner of 1960s radio, free-to-air television, and Quiapo cinemas could know. Getting a goose egg from his quiz implies that the taker is a “hopeless bourgeois or an incurable egghead,” if not a foreign reader (not only geographically but also historically, if I may add). On the other hand, a perfect score only means that the reader is “a true connoisseur of *bakya*” (1). Lacaba would go on to provide an etymological elaboration of “*bakya*” and an etiological defense of the term that roots the “lowbrow” and the “popular”—to which *bakya* is comparable but not necessarily synonymous with—in the bare life where the Filipino proletariat and peasantry are sequestered. Self-described as “an apologia of sorts for Filipino masscult,” the essay demonstrates the species of criticism our dear Pete has produced in his career: rarely perfunctory or disaffected, highly original, attentive to cultural, historical, and even economic nuance, and immensely curious about the mystique surrounding what others would deem common.

Readers today could (re)take Lacaba’s quiz through the recent anthologization of a tenable sampling of his articles, columns, and reviews in the collection *Notes on Bakya and Other Essays* (hereafter, *Notes on Bakya*), which contains the namesake piece. Published by the University of the Philippines (UP) Press with the Office for Research

and Publication of the UP College of Media and Communication (née Mass Communication), *Notes on Bakya* presents Lacaba's critical, even sociological, examination of Philippine culture in the long 1960s and tumultuous 1970s under the wretched Marcos regime. Let us riffle through its pages. Following the opener "Notes on Bakya" is "Movies, Critics and the Bakya Crowd," which locates the proliferation of films considered bakya in the uneven evolution of the cinematic medium in the Philippines and predominance of feudal culture. "The New Sound: Burgis Goes Bakya" traces the development of the musical category "New Sound" and the bakya sensibility in pop music within the political and commercial transformations that shaped radio airwaves at that time.

Notes on Bakya covers a wider ground than what its title promises. While the preliminary essays clearly aim to flesh out the intricacies of bakya, the others turn to a sundry of artifacts and practices of Philippine popular culture, undrapping the political contestations that permeate them. "The Darker Side of Smut," for instance, admonishes the critics of *Pogi* and other local sleazy magazines for their elitist bias and colonial prejudice. The animated piece "Being a Carol and a Paean to Downtown after Dark, Where They Celebrate a Beery Merry Christmas All Year Round" presents an almost ethnographic description of the siren song of city beer joints, that is, the crooners who always dedicate their performances to habitués they know by name. "The New Thing" begins as a hilarious polemic against Teodoro F. Valencia's 1969 column in *The Manila Times* that castigated hippies at the Rizal Park for being there. The essay proceeds by declaring our entry into the Age of Aquarius—an era of disillusionment and skepticism—and pulling out an amusingly long catalogue of Aquarians who, at one point in their lives, defied injustice, domination, and establishment. "Jesus Christ Anti-Star" takes its cue from Lacaba's endorsement of alternativeness and rebelliousness in "The New Thing." Here, he questions the Catholic faithful who dare brag about the strength of their faith but shun away any opportunity to follow Christ's footsteps in protecting the oppressed and upsetting the

powers-that-be. “If It’s Wednesday, This Must Be the Cultural Center,” extending Lacaba’s notes on contention, starts with a blow-by-blow account of an anti-Marcos, anti-American demonstration at the just-built Cultural Center of the Philippines, and ends with a reminder about the inextricability of art from politics.

The rest of the essays deal with specific worlds of art, namely film and poetry. Each work offers a glimpse into how practitioners grapple with the concrete conditions and contradictions surrounding and arising from their art. “Lino Brocka’s Last Shooting Day,” written in a style resonant to the technics of literary journalism, details the night the director died, shuffling across Brocka’s perspective and the actions and reactions of many a figure in the Philippine entertainment industry. In what may be the most sober entry in the collection, “Notes on Film Censorship,” Lacaba shifts to a tone befitting the gravity of the issue of government censorship of films. This is a rare instance in the book where he, then vice-chair of the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB), must perform a careful balancing act between his ballsy, nonconformist voice and a position of governmental power (albeit relatively marginal). In the next essay, we swiftly pivot back to the *pangmasa* (or better yet, *makamasa*) ethos the collection has established early on. “The Hazards of Being a Screenwriter” expounds upon the misfortunes of screenwriter Joey Papa—whose film story was, to put it crudely, stolen from him—in order to make a case for strengthening unions in the film industry. The deliciously sardonic “Yun ’Yon, E!” reviews the films of the 1968 installment of the *Pista ng Pelikulang Pilipino* in Manila.

The final essays in the collection, twins by all means, take language in Philippine creative writing as central issue. “Pilipino Forever!” limns the attitudes of the writing and reading public of the 1970s about language, not once forgetting to refer to the tides of nationalistic fervor that washed many universities and literary institutions clean of colonial aspirations (for up to two decades, at least). Lacaba’s discussion of language in Philippine literature turned inward in the final essay of *Notes on Bakya*,

“Why I Stopped Writing Poetry in English,” where he discloses why he chose to write in Filipino (then with a “P”). The ender reminds us that the collection, in the gesture of memoir or biography, also plunges us into the author’s life. His choice of topics and the people he speaks through via citation indicate his interests, obsessions, ideological leanings, and even intellectual influences.

The material of *Notes on Bakya* typifies one of Lacaba’s most distinctive qualities as an essayist: his cheekiness, an irreverent humor that sharpens rather than dulls his critique. In “Jesus Christ Anti-Star,” he observes: “And Christ himself, the man of peace, was not averse to violent means to achieve his ends: he did not drive the money changers out of the temple by writing letters to the editor” (68). His occasional banter and raillery are never merely ornamental. In “The New Thing,” for instance, Lacaba refuses to correct the grammatical infelicities in Valencia’s anti-hippie tirade, insisting that “a scattering of *sics* where they are needed would destroy the flavor of the piece” (45). Likewise, in “Yun ’Yon, E!” he describes the 1968 Pista ng Pelikulang Pilipino with acid wit: “If only it were truly a festival of films!” (123). His humor functions as a method of fielding critique. Lacaba’s sharpness surfaces from his writing’s capacity to situate cultural production within systems of power.

But one would be remiss to think that the value of the collection lies solely in its remarkable style. *Notes on Bakya*, for the conscientious student of the human and social sciences, could also function as an archive for Philippine studies. The bakya essays illuminate the complexities of class, taste, and colonial mentality. In “Notes on Bakya,” Lacaba observes that “the preference for things native” is a curious feature of the bakya sensibility: “The imported is never bakya . . . the local often is . . . [bakya] tends to favor something which is one’s own, though it be ersatz, and to reject something entirely alien, though it be the original” (5). This comment dislodges the simplistic association between bakya and nationalism and instead anchors it to the creative energies of the

masses beyond institutional auspices. In “The Darker Side of Smut,” Lacaba advises conservative devotees who wish to restore decency in Philippine society “to where the real indecencies in our midst are. True smut is not the photographs of nudes, but in the reality of social injustice . . . in the degrading poverty that afflicts more than 90 percent of our population, the poverty that leads to crime and revolution” (29). As if a sociologist, Lacaba is wont to press the festering wounds of our national body to lay bare class contradictions.

For *Notes on Bakya*, the Establishment, and its technologies of measuring and counting, are antithetical to the noisy and riotous crowds where common Filipinos live and cultivate culture. In “Movies, Critics, and the Bakya Crowd,” he critiques the intellectual’s alienation from the masses: “We cannot appreciate mass culture . . . because we have been conditioned to regard as inane whatever does not measure up to our exalted notions of art and culture” (11). Meanwhile, “The New Sound: Burgis Goes Bakya” points to a moment when “the denunciation of colonial control . . . couples with the attacks on elitism” (22) generating widespread guilt and introspection among Filipino artists and intellectuals. Remember that this is the same exciting period when “the [Pilipino] language is being bent, battered, hammered into shape, molded, to meet the needs of a rising generation” (140), as Lacaba explains in “Pilipino Forever!” He cannot help but admit that he himself has been carried off by the same antifeudal and anticolonial spirit that propelled nationalist movements at that time towards revolution. Nonetheless, in “Why I Stopped Writing Poetry in English,” he muses that he would probably be remembered for a poem he wrote in English. Yet “Prometheus Unbound,” that poem, “is not entirely in English . . . the first letters of the lines, if read downwards, spell out a Tagalog slogan popular among demonstrators before martial law: MARCOS HITLER DIKTADOR TUTA” (149). Indeed, relatively younger readers in the current decade would know Pete by this poem. Through analysis and reflection, the book reveals the psyche of a writer transformed by the upheavals of his time, a writer who would pen the

reportage later collected in the 1982 compendium *Days of Disquiet, Nights of Rage*.

Reading Lacaba in this archival mode and considering his career in print media and participation in activist circles, I am reminded of another figure in Philippine studies, the unionist, folklorist, and writer Isabelo de los Reyes. Resil B. Mojares describes de los Reyes's masterwork, *El Folklore Filipino*, as an epitome of journalism's potential as a mode of knowledge production.¹ His articles on folk beliefs, superstitions, narratives, and the like, for Ma. Diosa Labiste, offered a genre accessible to lay readers, multiplying their capacity to shape the social imaginary of the reading public.² Comparably, Lacaba's essays, even those that express levity, participate in meaning-making processes that illuminate a people's cultural life.

Aesthete, comic, sociologist, archivist, Filipinist—these are only some of the hats Lacaba wears in the pieces collected in *Notes on Bakya*. The book encompasses enough material to accommodate many palettes. It goes without saying that Lacaba is a critic like no other, and very much unlike some of those writing for today's magazines who seem to have a better taste for commercial partnerships. Thus, reading *Notes on Bakya* nudges one to reflect on what criticism is (must be?), which, to Roland Barthes, is a certain strain of desire: "To read is to desire the work, to want to be the work, to refuse to echo the work using any discourse other than that of the work. . . . To go from reading to criticism is to change desires, it is no longer to desire the work but to desire one's own language."³ Writing as a true connoisseur, Lacaba desires his own people's culture.

¹ Resil B. Mojares, *Isabelo's Archive* (Anvil, 2013), 35.

² Ma. Diosa Labiste, "Folklore and Insurgent Journalism of Isabelo de los Reyes," *Plaridel* 13, no. 1 (2016): 37.

³ Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, translated by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman, (Continuum, 2007), 40.

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JOSE MONFRED C. SY

jcsy3@up.edu.ph

Department of Comparative Literature, University of Hong Kong

Department of Filipino and Philippine Literature

University of the Philippines Diliman