Haunted Legacies: Healing and Sorcery in a Visayan Community

Christina Verano Carter

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2015
ABSTRACT

Haunted Legacies: Healing and Sorcery in a Visayan Community

Christina Verano Carter

This dissertation is an analysis of the multiple legacies of one family’s relationship with a spirit medium, and in so doing unpacks the historical and cultural mythologies around witchcraft, healing, envy, ghosts, unexplained accidents, stories of the supernatural, family curses, secrecy, and the gray spaces between religious faith and superstition in the small Visayan town of Santa Barbara, Iloilo, located in the central region of the Philippine Islands. My inquiry takes place at the intersection of two converging horizons of the unknown, healing and sorcery on the one hand and on the other the uncertain future posed by the forces of globalization and the acceleration of natural disaster due to rapid climate change in the region. It contextualizes the voice of the “native” ethnographer doing fieldwork among family, within a larger set of questions around inheritance, transmission, and ethics.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Illustrations........................................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................................. iv

Preface....................................................................................................................................................... viii

Introduction............................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: House, Home, Museum................................................................................................. 21

Chapter Two: Healers that Run Afoul of the Law ............................................................................... 68

Chapter Three: Stories of the Living and the Dead........................................................................... 128

Chapter Four: This Town – Occult Sites and Economies................................................................. 174

Conclusion: Where the Dead Dwell..................................................................................................... 207

Epilogue .................................................................................................................................................... 224

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................... 229

Appendices ............................................................................................................................................. 235
Illustrations

Introduction
Figure 1.1 Healer and Her Husband. (Photo by author) ..................................................... 1
Figure 1.2 Postcard of Santa Barbara. (Courtesy of www.experienceSantaBarbara.blogspot.com) 3
Figure 1.3 Map of the Philippine archipelago, with Iloilo at center. (Courtesy of Sta. Barbara Centennial Museum) 5
Figure 1.4 Map of the island Iloilo, with the municipality of Santa Barbara highlighted. (Courtesy of Sta. Barbara Centennial Museum) 6

Chapter One
Figure 2.1 Cake House, 1959. Left to right: Teresita, Nenita, Conrada, Meliton, Romulo, and Helen. 25
Figure 2.2 Sornito Family, date unknown. (Photographer unknown) ........................................ 29

Chapter Two
Figure 3.1 Nenita and Teresita Sornito's personalized tricycle. 78
Note: the top of the cab says, ST. REGLA PRAY FOR US
Figure 3.2 Hand-drawn map of Santa Barbara train station. (Artist: Boyet Sumbillo) ........................................................................................................... 80
Figure 3.3 Interior, "The Farm" or Santa Regla's Healing Center, Cadagmayan del Norte, Philippines, 2011. (Photo by Author) .................................................................................. 89
Figure 3.4 The Mercado and Sornito Family at The Farm, 1986. .................................................. 91
Figure 3.5 Second Floor, Sornito House. (Image of Santa Regla) .................................................. 92
Figure 3.6 Papa Isio incarcerated at Fort San Juan, 1907. (Photographer unknown) ....................... 118

Chapter Three
Figure 4.1 Meliton Sornito's Toolbox. (Photo by Author) .......................................................... 130
Figure 4.2 “Sarah” at the Santa Barbara Cemetery, October 2011. (Photo by author) .................. 154
Figure 4.3 Day of the Dead, October 2011. (Photo by author) ..................................................... 156
The Sornito Mausoleum, October 31, 2011. (Photo by author)

Candles in front of the Cake House. (Photo by author)

Monument to General Martin Tan Delgado, Santa Barbara, Iloilo. (Photo courtesy of Sta. Barbara Centennial Museum)

Chapter 4
Jeepney, Iloilo. (Photo by author)

Balete Drive, Quezon City, Manila. (Photo by author)

Author's "Map" of Santa Barbara "Heritage Zone", 2011.


Accounting Notebook, Sornito Family, "List of Deaths." Note no.12.

Conclusion
GMA News Photo, November 10, 2014.

Line at the healer's home, Cabatuan, December 2011. (Photo by author)
Acknowledgements

The creation of a work such as this often feels like a solitary endeavor, however the writing and research that went into this owes much to a number of people who have over the years given me insight, encouragement, and support.

This story began and continues with the people of Santa Barbara, Iloilo, who reached out to me and unbeknownst to all of us at the time, sparked a unique collaborative effort between those of us who can call Santa Barbara “home”, whether that meant current residents or those descendants in the diaspora. In this respect I am especially indebted to Irene Magallon, the Director of the Santa Barbara Centennial Museum, a friendly neighbor, cousin, and tireless promoter of heritage. Irene took me into the world of the house and people described in this document, and within that house my friends Dante and Marlene Diron y Dorilag looked out for me and together we shared many unforgettable day-to-day joys and struggles. I am also grateful to their sister, whom I only ever knew as Dada.

There were others who helped take up the call of home. Principal among them was Dr. Roseny Sabidong, who invited me into a circle of women that supplied me with many stories, laughter and friendship in the long hours, days and months of my time in the field. These were the women of the “mahjong club”, and it is with the “regulars” Celia Labramonte Loot, Delia Souribio, Delia Sumbillo, and others who rotated in and out as life permitted them, that I owe the joy of many nights of laughter, storytelling, and my nickname “Nosebleed.” Gratitude is in order to NicNic Lebin, who took charge of my learning of Kinaray-a, so I could participate in the jokes and laughter.
I am grateful to the offer of a second home and care from Drs. Roland and Maria Padilla, their children Roland “Boyet”, Sophia “Butchay” and Josef, with special love and gratitude to Rebecca “Beking” Padilla.

Thanks to the staff of the Santa Barbara Centennial Museum and the Municipal Hall of Santa Barbara for opening the vaults of history and so many doors to me – the honorable Mayor Dennis Superficial, Jeow Lucero, Maricar Sorongon Sulcaldito, Joemarie Superio Bernas, and a very special debt of gratitude to Miss Danellyn Sumaylo. Special thanks to Representative Demy Sonza.

Thanks to the many organizations that opened their doors to me – especially to Melanie Padilla at the Center for West Visayan Studies, the Santa Barbara Centennial Museum, Central Philippine University, University of the Philippines – Diliman, the Phi Beta Epsilon Fraternity at Central Philippine University, and the Ateneo University de Manila for sponsoring my time as a Visiting Research Associate.

While I was amongst family, friendship is a lifeline while in the field, and there are too many names to recount, but I would like to highlight the friends I made in Northern Luzon for offering their homes, artistic inspiration, and companionship in a time of need: Ruel Bimuyag & Family, Eric and Katrin de Guia (Kidlat Tahimik), and Villia Jefremovas & Joachim Voss. In Manila, I owe much shared laughter with Karla Delgado, Leon Cruz Araneta, Jeck de Castro, and especially to Erdy de la Cruz and family.

Thank you to my advisors at Columbia University: John Pemberton, Zoe Crossland, Neni Panourgia, Marilyn Ivy, and Neferti X. Tadiar. Across the U.S., I am grateful for the sustained wisdom and advice of Vicente Rafael at the University of
Washington and Allen Shelton at Buffalo State University. Stephen Muecke, Robin Hemley, Kathryn Poethig, Jonathan Beller and Daniella Gandolfo gave me generous feedback and encouragement. When I moved to upstate New York, I had the good fortune to meet writer and editor Elisabeth McCaffery, a generous soul who helped make this document presentable to the world.

Early in my graduate school life, I asked my advisor, Michael Taussig, about the state of anthropology as a profession with the innocent question, “What happened to curiosity?” Since then, he has “schooled” me in the ways of “the adult’s imagination of the child’s imagination”, yes in the classroom, but mostly through countless conversations in rooms with hammocks and by campfires on the Rondout Creek during the six “mini-aaa” conferences he has held through a ten year span. These were lessons against the tide of professionalization (grants, IRBs, conferences, monotony) that engulfs a graduate student making their way, and allowed me to retain the ability to invoke the child so that as an anthropologist I can re-enchant the world. In What Color is the Sacred, he asked a question that in a way, is a rejoinder to the one I asked him over ten years ago, “What happened, you ask, on the way to adulthood?” (Taussig 2009)

I have the good fortune of friends and allies in the United States that have been my sharers in the trial by fire that is anthropological research and writing: Zainab Saleh, Emily Capper, Maria Ferro del Rosario, Christopher Santiago, Jun Mizukawa, Michael Fisch, and my best friend and life companion, Jon Horne Carter.

My sister, Mary Ann Sornito, is the likely inheritor of the power to heal within my immediate family, a gift she has used to help me through some difficult times. However this journey began at home (in Chicago, Illinois) with the unfailing love,
support, and stories of my parents: my father, the beloved “putchoy” of Santa Barbara, Eduardo Herbert Sornito and the best storyteller I have ever met, my mother, Adriana Verano Sornito.

This document is dedicated to the memories of the healer, Maura S. and the Sornito family of the Cake House that I speak of in this thesis – Meliton, Conrada, Helen, Nenita, Romulo, and Margarita. Across these pages resides the trace of the last living heiress to the secrets of the Cake House, Teresita Perez Sornito.
Preface

A place like home…but not quite

This thesis examines a history of one family’s relationship to a healer, commonly referred to in the Philippines as baybaylan. The family in question is my own. Both my parents emigrated to the U.S. in the early 1970’s as part of a wave of immigrants leaving the archipelago during the Marcos regime, a legacy that I was reminded of one rainy morning in Manila, when I received a short message from a distant relative of my father’s in Iloilo, a city some 450 km south of the capital city. It said, “We heard you were in Manila. Your Aunt is trouble. Please come home.”

Please come home. I was invited to come to a place that I had never called home, yet in that message from a family member who subsumed her individuality into “we”, became a transcendental voice that was calling me home. Put another way, it seemed that this place was calling upon me to redress my parents’ departure and desired me to stake a claim upon it as home. In another uncanny twist, the message was sent in English, and not the native language of that home.¹

While it may seem that the nation-state of the Philippines is invoked as this “home”, or bayan, in this case is even more specific. The message called upon me to return (balik) to an actual address in the town where my father was born. Furthermore, the house is known within the town as an iconic Filipino “ancestral house”, and one that

¹ Vicente L. Rafael, The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 203-204. This is the inverse of what Rafael described in his discussion of the “voice” of “Kalayaan”, a Tagalog word that translates to “freedom” but also a periodical of the revolutionary period in the Philippines that “calls” upon the youth from an indeterminate address, which for Rafael is in part intentional, since its origins could be from within or without the Philippines, and not traceable by the Spanish authorities. This indeterminacy for Rafael reinscribes the call of “kalayaan” as a voice or a calling from faraway, shrouded in secrecy.
is further particularly known by my father’s surname, Sornito. It was in fact the “Sornito Ancestral House” that was calling me home.

How else might I characterize the call of this house, or that ineluctable tugging that I perceived as having an agency powerful enough to bring me to a place that I spent years specifically avoiding as a research site? As I was drawn into the place and stories that eventually come to unfold in this document, it was the force of intellectual attraction and gravitation that revealed to me my a sensitivity I had not anticipated, that this “calling” might be ascribed to the ghosts and spirits of the dead. Important to this writing is the fact that these were not dead of the putative Other, that might have been easier to think as an object of study and analysis. These were my own living and dead ancestors, and I wondered, at many moments, if it were possible to disinter who was claiming whom. What kind of ethnography emerges from the deep familiarity of kin ties that are, at the same time, encountered as strange? How does one come to recognize the voices of the dead as speaking to them? In explicating the relationship of one family’s relationship to a healer, this writing works to figure the voice, registering through my own ethnographic articulation, of going “home”.
INTRODUCTION

*Image of the Image*

I’ve had this photo in an old album for years. I took it with the first Bugs Bunny camera given to me as a kid. It is a picture of another photo hanging on a wall in the Philippines. Before digital technologies superseded film, this image came back from the developing lab with a burning red and yellow at its center, giving off the sense that perhaps if you waited it would cool down and the image would become clearer. I can barely make out what the image is, much less the faces of the people in it. The photo is that of an image of a once famous baybaylan (healer) and espiritista (spirit medium) that was popularly known by the name of one of the saints she channeled – *Santa Regla*. From my childhood I knew her as Mauring. She stands on the left. Her husband is on the right. In the center is not an image of Santa Regla, but the Virgin Mary who was locally called *Mama Mary*. I had to ask many people to corroborate this basic description. For all the documentary failings of this photograph, I am not disappointed. What happened at the print lab only served to heighten a mystery at the center of the photo, even as I...
held up my own camera to document something as history.¹

By chance something in an image can lose individual memories, a “pricking” that Roland Barthes describes in the experience of looking at a picture of his mother. By accident there might emerge from any image an inimitable detail that moves a person.² During the days that I sat down to write about mediumship, both photographic and spirit mediums, I was surrounded by my own clumsy mediums of documentation – the piles of notebooks, the field recordings, the interviews, archival materials, objects, books, and letters. In such a context writing ethnography can be a form of divination. I felt I was constellating scribbles to high theory, as tea leaves to the stars. What’s new to me in this experience is the massive accumulation of data made possible by digital instruments of capture and archive. I am not longer limited by 24 to 36 film exposures, or having to copy longhand from an archive. I imagine the mechanical elegance of the wax cylinder recording machine that Franz Boas carried to the Northwest Coast to record the Kwakwaka'wakw people, the brass studded trunks laden with Malinowski’s voluminous notes on kula and coral garden magic, or the 155 pounds of recording equipment Alan Lomax lugged on one of his recording field trips. Today’s instruments of recording and archive are designed for travel, easy to operate, and tiny chips can hold vast amounts of information. It is a rush tide of information. Submerged in it, I still return to this distorted film image

¹ This ground, where apparitions of Mary particularly in relation to mass media and technology are part and parcel to Filipino modernity, has already been brilliantly tread by my predecessor in the Anthropology Department at Columbia, and [so] this writing experiment owes a great deal to her foundational work in this regard.

² Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, trans. Richard Howard, Second Edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982). The notion that “pictures” speak picks up more recently in the work of W.J.T. Mitchell in, What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images. It is in his “third definition” of pictures as “metapictures” or in this case “black holes” that one can get sucked into, that I found apt to helping me describe my relationship to certain images.
that once hung on another wall, in a sacred healing center in the islands of the central Philippines called the Visayas. It is this image that now hangs in the space of my writing about it. Scraps, images, and objects brought back from the Visayas fill my writing space. The profane space of writing is transformed into a sacred one, a psychomanteum where I feel I am, in some very basic way, in communication with the spirits. My table is the altar. I even covered it with an heirloom weaving that has been passed down in the family for four generations. The image hangs before me, a window (or a mirror) that moves me to write the story of an estranging experience in a place that for all intents and purposes should be called “home.”

Dorothy from the vantage point called over-the-rainbow said there was no place like home. But this was precisely the place where I was going. A place like home, but not quite.
The area around what is now the center of Santa Barbara was once dense with trees, foliage, and rolling hills. Now, the National Highway passes right in front of the Santa Barbara Cathedral on its way to the newly built international airport. The trees have been cleared away. Once known as Catmon, because of the abundance of the catmon or “elephant apple” trees in the area, the municipality of Santa Barbara has only one surviving catmon tree that grows next to the police headquarters. Just after I arrived back to New York City after field research in the Philippines, I was sent a tourist brochure of Santa Barbara, Iloilo, where I did the bulk of my fieldwork. The frontispiece was a painting of the Santa Barbara Plaza with the neoclassical cathedral prominently figured. The brushstrokes suggest it was rendered in a French impressionist style. The colors are reminiscent of Van Gogh’s starry night – the sky a muted mix of midnight blues, the ground and the façade of the cathedral illuminated a raucous red and gold on fire. As I looked for the plaza where I had spent many days and nights loitering about, I could not find it in this painting, not even its impression but only its vague contours rendered in a French impressionist idiom. This was not the place as I experienced it. I would have guessed a suburb of Paris.

I do not want to be a stickler about “reality” and “truth,” especially regarding a painting. However what I did not recognize in the brochure is precisely what throws me off. Put another way, perhaps because impressionism is by design affective, colors and play on light and dark that bring about an “impression,” this portrait is really about *invoking* a particular Santa Barbara, perhaps one that never existed before this portrait was made but now, is. This Santa Barbara has arrived, like the train that used to steam into town on a North-South axis until the not so long ago
first People Power Revolution that prompted Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos to flee after 20 years in power. The “arrival” of a new place also, as noted in the title of the brochure, invites us: 
Come. Discover. Santa Barbara.

In an essay written “after thirty years of writing ethnography” in the U.S., anthropologist Kathleen Stewart notes that “what life adds up to is a problem and an open question[...] It’s a mode of production through which something that feels like something throws itself together.” In this particular text Stewart is referring to a poem by Wallace Stevens, in which he describes Vermont as “throw[ing] itself together.” The experience of Vermont is “in a moment already there as a potential – something waiting to happen in disparate and incommensurate objects, registers, circulations, and publics. It’s in fall colors, maple syrup, tourist brochures, registers, circulations, and publics.”
What interests me about this Vermont is not the effort to pin down exactly where it came from – as a social construction – but the moment when the assemblage of discontinuous yet mapped elements assembles into this something.

---

I venture that something similar was \textit{happening} in Santa Barbara. Perhaps a better phrasing would be the \textit{potential} of a \textit{something} happening was Santa Barbara. In the tourist brochures it is a place that, like Stewart’s and Stevens’ Vermont, is there. To date, as far as I can ascertain, there has been only one such brochure ever made, and it was this particular year. Reading it I feel as though I was there as it, \textit{this} Santa Barbara, was happening and “throwing itself together.” So, then, the borrowing of the impressionist idiom makes sense after all.

\textit{Santa Barbara, Iloilo}

The former visita Catmon became the pueblo Santa Barbara, Iloilo in 1759 with the arrival of its first parish priest, J. Juan Ferrer. Iloilo is a province of the Philippines located on the island of Panay in the West Visayas region, about 250 km south of the capital city Manila. The area was mainly an agricultural town that produced rice, corn, sugar cane, tobacco, spices, coffee, cotton, vegetables, bamboos and fruit bearing trees.\footnote{Roceller Sumbillo, ed., “Santa Barbara, Iloilo, Philippines: Her Story,” (Document, National Archives of the Philippines, Manila, n.d.), 19.} The catmon tree had wide arching branches and thick

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{map.png}
\caption{Map of the island Iloilo, with the municipality of Santa Barbara highlighted. (Courtesy of Sta. Barbara Centennial Museum)}
\end{figure}
foliage. During the day, the locals would gather in its shade, set up cockfighting matches and consume *agahan*, also known as *tuba*, a fermented coconut wine. Others drank *taho* or *salabat* (a ginger tea) from bamboo or coconut shells. The main language spoken was *Hiligaynon*, commonly referred to as *Ilonggo*. In Santa Barbara, *Ilonggo* is spoken as a second-language to the local dialect *Kinaray-a*. In the 2000s, all government and business activities were conducted in English.

Augustinian friars were the main record keepers of the Spanish colonial period. Of Santa Barbara they wrote:

*Its lands were fertile due to the rich organic silt deposited from time to time by the flooded Salug (Tigum) River on the east and by the Aganan River on the west. The climate is temperate but its rainy on Saturdays.*

*The town was adjoined by other town, on the north by Cabatuan, on the south by Leganes, on the east by Zarraga and Lucena, and on the west by San Miguel. It has the geograhic coordinates 126 degrees 12’30 East Longitude, 10 degrees 49’04 North Latitude.***

Perhaps Santa Barbara was best known, and recorded in the national history books, as the site of the second major uprising against the Spanish, and then the Americans whose occupation began as the Spanish retreated. Martin Tan Delgado, an *ilustrado* (upper class mestizo), was named by the Spanish *Civil Guardia* as a captain to put down any revolutionary activity. Unbeknownst to the Spanish, Tan Delgado had already began organizing Ilonggo leaders against the colonizer, and in a meeting in the Santa Barbara Cathedral was secretly named the General of the *Ejercito Liberador* (Liberating Army).

---

5 Ibid., 14.

6 Ibid., 20.
When General Emilio Aguinaldo, leader of the revolutionary forces in Luzon heard of Tan Delgado’s army, he sent Tan Delgado a flag and a saber to cement the relationship. The passing of the gift was a treacherous one, as the Spanish guards inspected every person and package along the roads. The story goes that a man named Honorio Solinap and a woman, Tia Patron, volunteered to deliver the items. Tia Patron wrapped the flag under her patadyong (native dress) and swathed the saber in bundle of grass. When they encountered Spanish soldiers, they enacted a domestic quarrel, with Tia Patron playing the role of the overbearing wife and Honorio the henpecked husband. This act reportedly entertained the Spanish Guard, such that they were enjoying the scene so much they did not think to inspect the duo. On November 17, 1898, the Philippine flag was raised over Santa Barbara. Since then, the event was known as “The Cry of Santa Barbara.”

**Heritage**

Not long after I returned from my fieldwork I was working in windowless library carrel when I received an email from the mayor’s office and the board of tourism of the Santa Barbara. I was asked to write an application to the National Historical Institute of the Philippines for the family’s ancestral house as a “national treasure.” My ethnographic data was to contribute to this work of cultural preservation. Everyone in the town with whom I communicated in the ensuring days, considered this an honor. Still it was not my original intention to become part of the process of “heritage making.” I took it on without being able to say exactly why. It urged my reconsideration of what research in the bayan (the homeland) of

---

7 “Cry of Santa Barbara: November 17, 1898,” (Document, Santa Barbara Centennial Museum Archive, n.d.).
my parents and especially in the small agricultural town of my father’s lineage extending to before the Spanish – American War / War for Philippine Independence well over a hundred years ago. There are at least five generations of Sornitos if you count the etchings in the town’s oldest graveyard where the elders’ gravestones are sunk deeper into the earth from the weight of those that followed in life, death piling on top.

For a time I struggled with what seemed like basic questions. Where to begin? What voice to take on? How to approach and examine family secrets? How sociocultural theory might reveal or cloak the force of what I experienced and witnessed (and felt the sting) while doing fieldwork. The critiques of writing an overly “subjective” ethnography about one’s own family stalled my writing for many months, though a disinterested tone was equally improbable. I juggled the private/public; family/community; secrets/gossip; loyalty/objectivity; and especially the pull of being first-generation American aggressively taught to speak English, while also raised by immigrant parents equally aggressive with “Filipino cultural values”. Most challenging was the emotional content of the fieldwork that would at times engulf me while listening to recordings, reading notes, or looking at pictures of people with whom I am blood kin, what Renato Rosaldo called the “force of emotions” in his own recalling and writing about the untimely death of his wife Michelle in the Philippines. But still these feelings of “natural” attachment to kinship were interrupted with pangs of estrangement.

This document focuses on the places, people, and oral histories of the baybaylan known as Santa Regla, in the town of Santa Barbara. While the story

---

extends outward from my re-encounter with my family whom I have always known were ardent devotees of Santa Regla, and the events that followed my taking up residence in what is considered the “Sornito Ancestral House,” this domicile was in itself an archive of histories and characters constituting something much larger than just one family. In following their “legacies”, both the immaterial and material traces, the work is immersed in subtle and not so subtle developments in Santa Barbara as it was coming together as a heritage site in the 2000s. These occurrences offered a curious doubling of events recounted to me by residents of a not so distant past, of historical precedents that go farther back, and presented the return of specters, family secrets, and deep anxieties encrypted in the historical memory of this community and the house.

In 2007 an international airport was built just 2 km from the Sornito house, thus putting a commercial value on the surrounding land that was previously rolling hills or small rice plots. The town was establishing itself as a new and undiscovered tourist destination in the Philippines, rich with the tourist commodified “history” and “culture.” I watched as the bones General Martin Tan Delgado were exhumed and enshrined inside a new monument. The Sornito house was one of the oldest surviving residential homes in the area and quite deservedly considered at once an architectural wonder and a curiosity, towards becoming a “national heritage site” and thus embedded within the tensions of this emergent economy.

While I was not schooled in the Philippines, I learned about the principal revolutionary figures such as Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, and Emilio Aguinaldo on my own. It was unavoidable to know the name Jose Rizal. In virtually every town in the archipelago, there was a statue of the man called “The First Filipino”. If
not a statue, then a main thoroughfare was often dedicated to him in name. Indeed the main street in Santa Barbara was named for Rizal and not its own local revolutionary hero, Tan Delgado. If one were to follow the lineage, the latter might be the “Second” or perhaps the “Fourth Filipino”, if he were to be even included in standard history books of the “nation.” This is not to say there is not a great deal of writing or that these figures are forgotten, though it is not far off to say they as yet to constitute a “minor” literature of the Philippines. What I aim to accomplish here is not to fill out that history, rather to put on display the either fateful or accidental processes by which these secondary or even quaternary histories are encountered and narrated.

Chapter One explores the nature of dwelling in the Central Visayas and starts with a literal dwelling, the Sornito house, that by the standards of its surrounding environment and recent history could be classified as a "modern(ist)" dwelling. In the Philippines it is called the bahay na bato. I work with the pre-hispanic spirits inherent to Filipino building and dwelling as they appear alongside spectral modern and foreign presences in the architecture of domestic space. This chapter is one part of a bookending examination as Chapter Five reflects on instances of non-dwelling, particularly caused by catastrophic natural events, and how non-dwelling in the contemporary Philippines also borders the problem of final dwelling spaces as the dead come to rest in the rubble and sedimented remains of catastrophic storm damage. In between these chapters, I follow the legacy of one family’s relationship to a long dead spirit medium and healer who “returned” around the same time my research in the house in question commenced. The themes of heritage, legacy, and haunting are explored through narrating the Sornito house, the lives of one family
and the surrounding community, and the consequences of going “home” to dwell upon the stories of the living and the dead.

Family members and locals often spoke derisively of this branch of the Sornitos with close ties to a “quack doctor”, also described as “that woman taking advantage of your Aunts.” Yet overall the attitude was often more ambiguous than dismissal or non-belief. This ambiguity interested me as stalwart Catholics would speak of “second hand” stories they overheard of people going to get healed by Santa Regla. While Christianity no doubt bears a significant role in the healing practice and following of “Santa Regla” I do not dwell on the Church or official religion here. Indeed there stands a tension between Catholic icons, where Santa Regla herself is tellingly referred to as simply “the image,” and the contrarian influence of Protestant incursions into the island of Panay and nearby islands, which gave rise to Masonic societies and some of the first loan initiatives of a certain kind. Masons, who advocated for free education and developing capitalist venture, play a background yet significant role in the events that lead the Cake House to becoming both a monumental structure, an edifice to accumulation and even its excess, and its place in the minds of the locals as a cursed and haunted site. Consider for a moment that much of the colonial architecture of the Philippines was destroyed, if not during the first revolutionary period then during World War II. Also consider that before the colonial period of the Philippines, there had been no “tradition” of monumental architecture. Thus fragments of heritage from a not so distant past were gaining new value, as this “developing” country cites GDP indexes on the rise\(^9\) and hints at an

emerging middle class. While “heritage” belies a sentimental value, or value over and above a monetary one, it is inescapable that the Sornito house was layer by layer the transmutation of capital into private property, and thus stands as a document of shifting economic and social relations in this small town.

My work looks at a community that historically benefited from the Panay Railway system that transported sugar cane from the neighboring island of Negros to port in Iloilo or further north towards the province of Capiz. Several other unusual “modern” improvement projects, such as the first golf course in Asia, were built by Scottish railroad workers in Santa Barbara. I focus on this one middle-class family as a case study in Filipino modernity, where notions of “tradition” and “becoming modern” interface in particular ways. Perhaps it is not unlike what the tourist books aim for. How did a middle-class family in the West Visayas live sixty years ago? What historical tensions are embedded in the masterwork – the house – of a family on the rise?

There is a contemporary movement in the Philippines and across the diaspora to hearken back to the wisdom of the *indigenous*, especially the native healer, or the figure of the *baybaylan*. This movement is not the focus here though I flag it because it describes the space of oral histories where the *baybaylan* in this part of the Philippines is cast as a *bandit* or outsider, far from the sacred site of Mount Tubagan in the jungles of Panay. Rather, Santa Regla was first a woman and then a gay man, emerging in a middle-class family’s bourgeois home. I look at the dialectical flow of images back and forth across time and space; images that came “home” together to roost in a modern, bourgeois Filipino house and the legacy of a *baybaylan*, a native healer. Rather than looking to the “authentic” sacred sites of a
pre-colonial past, I examine these overlooked sites such as the Sornito house where traces of baybaylan history (such as the Visayan Baybaylanes Revolt, a group of healers and mystics that held out guerilla warfare against the Spanish and Americans long after the official revolution was over) exist as remnants in the phantasmagoria of a decaying Philippine ancestral house.

During this research I occupied the position of both insider, as kin and inheritor to a host of other legacies, and outsider, insofar that I was born in the United States. As such I was the subject of unusual expectations and the source of certain anxieties among the people I knew. As my time in Santa Barbara progressed, I found that the information I was pursuing was also in some way pursuing me. The house was a flashpoint and a burrow. Here I rely on the gothic as a trope by which to describe the effect of phantom histories of a family long dead, their intimate sponsorship to a healer of the region who died in 2000, and my encounter with the next individual who claimed to inherit Santa Regla’s healing powers and thus power over the Sornito family legacy. After living for a few months in the Sornito house, I returned from a short trip to find the last living relative living in the house, Teresita “Terry” Sornito, had vanished. Initially it was unclear whether she was kidnapped or had gone willingly, though soon it was clear she was living in greater proximity to the new medium of Santa Regla’s healing power. Save for Terry’s two house helpers, Dante and Marlene, I was left the only resident of the house and quickly realized that many in the town considered the structure haunted or cursed. There were the whispers that my Great-Aunt (Terry’s mother) was a renowned cinco por seis, a loan shark, which people said had brought the enmity of the community on the family and the curse of the usurer upon the
house that was built with ill-gotten gains. There was talk that the new medium had convinced Terry to commit large sums of money to the Santo Nino, San Miguel, and to *Mama Mary*. The local bank could not show me the documents, but they admitted that there have been withdrawals of tens of thousands of pesos at any given time. It was only then that the *tsismis* (gossip) leapt off the pages of my notes to envelop me in an ensorcelled space – the center of a story, unfolding day to day, and shielded from my immediate view.

How is gossip a form of sorcery? What has been reported in ethnographic accounts and from personal stories passed down from my parents, was a phenomenon known in Tagalog as *bati*. In other dialects it is *usog*, *balis*, or *nababaan*, which translate as “to say something.” However when used as a noun it could mean someone who has a “hot mouth”, not unlike an “evil eye”.10 *Bati* is related to a superstitious belief that certain people, by unguarded praise or malicious comment, can cause harm to someone else. As consistent with the evil eye complex, *batis* are more likely to strike children. In more contemporary parlance, gossip in the Visayas is pejoratively considered idle or groundless talk, and goes by the word *tsismis*.

While this document for the most part began as a tracking of heritage and of healing in the Cebuano/Ilonggo/Chinese speaking region of the Visayas, things that we think of as on the ground or within the realm of culture, later it was the force of nature that manifested powerfully across the time of fieldwork. In pursuing stories of healers and their clients, an unavoidable theme that later in November 2013 constituted the unthinkable as supertyphoon Haiyan, arose frequently. There were

---

stories of people who suffered and lost everything in typhoons of unusual strength or increased frequency in a given season. With so many landslides and earthquakes, the one thing the area had not seen in some time was a volcanic eruption. The last, the 1991 eruption of Mount Pinatubo on the island of Luzon, was the second most powerful volcanic eruption in modern history after Krakatoa in 1883. Such phenomena have been experienced in the Philippines with varying degrees of intensity for millennia. Some of the oldest myths bore the imprint of major geological or meteorological events. In translating this fieldwork into scholarly writing I am interested in the confluence of notes from the ground so to speak, and the forces that Michael Taussig called “transgressive substances”\textsuperscript{11}, that in their different ways elucidate how nonhuman entities enter into dialectical relation with human life. This is presented as an afterword to this text, as much of my thinking in this direction is based on ethnographic material gathered towards the end of the fieldwork and which I intend to develop further at a future time.

The document as a whole is a set of interlocking stories from the field, memories from childhood, letters that I wrote from the field, letters I found, and images that were carefully selected and included in conversation with the text. In heeding the call to come home, I had not anticipated that I would both experience and bear witness to subtle and not so subtle changes in the birthplace of my father. The place once known as Catmon was not about to vanish. Indeed, it was about to be reborn, as in the case of new images of the Sornito house, appearing on the social media network Facebook and local tourist blogs. The very image of pastness was

\textsuperscript{11} Michael Taussig, My Cocaine Museum, 1st ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2004), xvii. “Trangressive substances make you want to reach out for a new language of nature, lost to memories of prehistorical time that the present state of emergency recalls.”
that which could be re-discovered, and the touristic delights, mostly culinary in nature, were there to taste and experience. *Hot mouths* be gone! But salivating ones, with pesos to burn, were most welcome.

I submitted the application to make the family ancestral house a “national treasure” and still await the decision of the National Historical Society. I am left with a hollow feeling that we are memorializing a place before its time. As of this writing, Terry Sornito has not returned to the house and the mayor has invoked a court injunction to freeze her assets until it can be ascertained if their depletion is not the result of manipulation by a charlatan healer with a host of accomplices. The stage is set on which the State and witchcraft are at loggerheads. To follow the trajectory of an accident, misfortune, violence, or in this case, a series of accusations that culminate in a woman’s vanishing, is to make account for a failed attempt at signification. The full picture never came into focus, the pieces of the puzzle remained stubbornly broken up. I showed my old photograph to the *baybaylans*, *espiritistas*, religious clergy and even the Philippine National Bureau of Investigation, seeking an explanation. What happened to my Aunt? Who or what is behind all this? What was the nature of their power? What were the forces at work? When should I leave? When I broached these questions to Santa Barbara residents, most of the time there was an uncomfortable silence and a changing of the subject, though there were others who would talk and speculate about it for hours on end. The slim gap in explanation is where this story slots in. There was no final authority to explain or contain the situation. What I was left with was the trace of the actual “vanishing” of a woman without explanation. There were piles of notes and hours of interviews I accumulated to find out how and why the burning afterimage from
my childhood could invoke sorcery decades later. I was more than “pricked” by this image, so some have said, it may be my birthright to be haunted by it. Haunted by the fact that when I finally had to leave that I may forever be estranged from the house that I loved exploring as a child, from the world that indulged me with stories that will outlast Terry, the house, and my own life. One could say that this document is akin to what Kathleen Stewart describes as “the need to react.” She goes on to elucidate with uncanny precision what I (the girl she will refer to that is not me but very well could have been) felt in remembering and writing about her family.

For her, it started early. Because she was a girl. Because her family, like all families, built its skin around dramas and luminous little tales with shiny spaces and vibrant characters. And because the storytellers kept track of what happened to everyone-the ends they came to. (Which of course, were never good). The social and natural worlds could be seen through the outlines of impacts suffered. They registered, literally, in a kind of hauntedness, a being weighed down, a palpable reaction.12

A Note on Names

All names in this document have been changed save for those of the Sornito family. Since the writing of this document is premised on exploring what it means to write about inheritance, where I invoke my own lineage, I decided to retain the names of the immediate family. I made this decision not to seek notoriety or gain, but rather to be explicit about my own role in this research and lay bare the

complicated set of issues faced by an ethnographer doing fieldwork among one’s own family members.\textsuperscript{13}

The names of healers and their clients in this document have been changed to maintain privacy and respect for those who allowed me access into some of the most intimate and difficult moments in life.

\textsuperscript{13} Eleni Neni K. Panourgiá and Neni Panourgiá, \textit{Fragments of Death, Fables of Identity: An Athenian Anthropography} (Madison, Wisconsin: Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 12-13. I am certainly not the first to attempt this ethnography among one’s own family, and my decision to go ahead and do this research owes much to those (interestingly mostly women) who have trailblazed this path before me. In particular, Neni Panourgiá’s discussion of how two Is, (subject/object) was revealed for her when embarking on her anthropography of a death in the family, namely her own. I also owe a debt of inspiration to the work of Ruth Behar.
One may recall that China and the tables began to dance when the rest of the world appeared to be standing still – *pour encourager les autres*.

-Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One*[^14]

The *bahay na bato* is the conscience of Filipino architecture. As a conscience it manifests what is ideal and what is right. And like any conscience it is largely forsaken or ignored.

-Fernando Zialcita, *Philippine Ancestral Houses*[^15]


CHAPTER ONE: HOUSE, HOME, MUSEUM

Introduction

In this chapter, I set out to write the material and immaterial aspects of the “family ancestral house through a particular address, my own family’s “ancestral house.” Family + ancestral + house I think of as conceptual and material pylons that houses a collection of memories, objects, reflections and ethnography.

In the first half of the chapter, I explore the issues that arise out of “inheritance,” calling on me unpack whether it is a matter of staking a claim, of taking on the mantle of the right to heir, or defending against “outside” interests that are perceived as an inauthentic claim to inheritance. While “inheritance” often conjures up the situation of money being passed on from the dead to the living, though not unrelated, rather my thoughts on inheritance take the form of reflecting on the architectural style of the house itself, called the bahay na bato, which in the case of the Sornito ancestral house took the form of a cake. As an unnatural form that belies pure excess, especially next to its simple and “primitive” neighbor and forebear, the bahay kubo, or nipa hut, it was like comparing a wedding cake to a piece of bread. This cake was one fashioned from various native woods, all imbued with their special properties for a builder’s purpose but also in Filipino mythology, matter imbued with spirits. The wooden house was only a cake, but a cake stamped with the personality or insignia of the family, as the letter ‘S’ appeared in motifs all over of the house. I go through various objects in the house, where my own memories and name interface with living in the house, especially as certain events transpired that engulfed the house in scandal. Last, I begin the process of taking “inheritance” into thinking more broadly about the politics and everyday processes
of making national/regional/cultural “heritage”, which in the Philippines, a place
that has been the staging ground of calamitous battles and numerous natural
disasters, has been an ongoing project of loss followed by recovery, restoration,
recreation, repeating anew with startling frequency in the event of another loss,
disaster, and the slower but no less relentless processes of decay in the heat and rain.

Examining inheritance and heritage in a localized setting opens to broader
discussion about “culture”, often divided between authentic or otherwise. Up until
the late 1980’s, it has been noted that the lowland Philippines, a geographical
category where one could situate the Cake House, had little to offer anthropologists
in the way of “culture.” There was a clear distinction, arguably a legacy of
American colonialism, hierarchizing the “highlanders” or “uplanders” of the
Philippines (those who have “tangible tradition”), and the “lowlanders” (largely
being associated as “imitators” or “mimics” or worse “assimilated.”)\textsuperscript{16} I will return
to this later in the document, especially as it pertains to American Protestant and in
particular Masonic incursions into the Visayas (a “lowland” region) in order to
establish non-Catholic educational institutions.\textsuperscript{17} For now, this point is taken as one
of the most mythologized instances of “tangible culture” here in the lowland
community of Santa Barbara, Iloilo is the Sornito house, what the Philippine
Heritage Commission classifies as a “Philippine Ancestral House.” As such, by the
time I arrived the inertia was there to earmark it as a “national treasure” or an
example of “tangible tradition.” As an anthropologist and kin to the family, I


\textsuperscript{17} While I flag this as a topic, this document does not cover the history of masonic societies in
the Philippines, and it is my intention to flesh this out in a future work.
became caught up in what felt like a “natural” and inevitable process, as I was asked by the local government to write the official history of the Cake House to be considered by the Philippine National Heritage Commission for national landmark status. (See Appendix D). For me, having lived in such a place that one can say is a return home of sorts, then the house, the objects within, and especially a wooden “image” that granted good fortune and healing, were my first informants into a phantasmagorical world layered with personal histories, legacies of occupation, healers, scandal, and tracking development in what was a small agricultural town in post-war Panay Island.

**Part I: The House**

*That Which Resides Forever*

The wooden house that stands at the corner of Hingco and P. Burgos street in the municipality of Santa Barbara, Iloilo was blessed by the local parish priest in 1958. It is common practice to ritually bless a new addition to a Filipino household, be it a baby or a new automobile. One of the traditions for the modern Filipino house had it that after the blessing there would be a party held where guests would throw coins into the house so that “wealth would reside there forever.”\(^{18}\) It is interesting that at the inauguration of someone’s home, the spirit of money be included as a permanent resident, which if one were to follow on the promise of “forever”, would outlast the current occupants and “live” on in the house for generations to come.

\(^{18}\) Zialcita, *Philippine Ancestral Houses (1810-1930)*, 43.
In Franz Kafka’s short story, “Cares of a Family Man,” the family man describes an omnipresent presence in his house. He describes the strange looking creature he calls Odradek. “The whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way is perfectly finished.” When further asked of its nature, Odradek replies that it has “no fixed abode” and otherwise remains mute. The most perturbing aspect of this entity for the family man who is of course a co-occupant of the house, is the question of the creature’s longevity. The family man wonders, “Can he possibly die[…] the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful.”19 Like Odradek, what kinds of feelings might arise in thinking about money and the spell of its eternal proliferation as a permanent entity in the home? Throwing money through a doorway is a relatively new tradition, a ritual done for the “modern” Filipino home.20 Of course, that kind of eternal presence is more a promise to future generations of the house and home once the current generation has passed on. Perhaps one can intuit that it is the living anticipating their inevitable absence, knowing they cannot


20 Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America, 30th Anniversary Ed.*, (Chapel Hill, NC:The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 13,17. In *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, Michael Taussig looks at the significance of contracts with the devil among peasant cum proletarian plantation workers and miners. People made these contracts to “increase production and hence their wage.” While the devil is not strictly speaking a part of the “money throwing” ritual I describe, it does have resonance with what Taussig terms pre-capitalist modes of belief (which in the case of the Philippines largely equals pre-Christian), and if I went out on a limb to say that pre-Christian beliefs are largely considered pagan and thus heretical, than such rituals might be in company with devil contracts. To follow Taussig further then, such beliefs he says “represents deep seated changes in the material culture of life[…]most especially the radically different concepts of creation, life, and growth through which the new material conditions and social relations are defined.” (Taussig 2010:13,17) In the case of the Cake House, the contract is made on behalf of families who historically had relative status (many being *ilustrados* or of Spanish descent) transitioning into middle-class subjects of the then newly independent Philippine state. In a highly stratified society such as the Philippines, there was very few middle-class to speak of, thus the Cake House was a relative anomaly. My fieldwork suggests that the Cake House and the scandal I encountered around it was an ideal site to look at the change in material and social relations that a fledging bourgeois family presented in a small, agricultural town.
“reside forever,” that they make their presence felt through what they pass on, what generations past see as their future legacy and from the perspective of the future is understood as inheritance from those who have passed on before.

A Brief History of House and its Occupants

By some accounts of the oldest surviving members of the Sornito clan and Santa Barbara locals, the house on the corner of P. Burgos and Hingco Street started as a *bahay kubo* or bamboo edifice in the late 1930’s. The house that now stands at that site is over fifty years old.

It was not until after World War II, on April 5, 1958, that reconstruction began that resulted in the elaborate domicile that stands at that location today. It is famously said of the house that even to this day, years after its creator has passed away, he never felt it was “really finished.” Meliton Sornito’s life’s work was the house, which stands as a testament to his creativity as an artist and formidable skills as a carpenter and architect. Since its transformation from *bahay kubo* to a *bahay na
bato, many additions and elaborations were made to the house, depending on the financial situation of the family.

Just one glance at the house that Meliton Sornito built and it is not difficult to understand how it came to be referred to as the “Cake House.” No other structure in the municipality bears similar color motifs. Bright pink, baby blue, white, crème, peach, green and variant tones were carefully selected to highlight the intricate wooden lacework throughout both the interior and exterior.\(^{21}\) While displaying the idiosyncratic genius of the master carpenter, the house also shows influences from developing fashions in bahay na bato that started in the late-nineteenth century up until World War II, when many “tangible treasures” of the Philippines were lost or destroyed. These influences include the aesthetics of the Art Nouveau movement that started in Prague and France, a movement characterized by its inspiration taken from natural forms, such as plants and flowers, and often used in the applied or decorative arts. The “Cake House” displays many Art Nouveau inspired embellishments, and yet, perhaps true to a post-colonial Pinoy sense of play, also combines a number of influences – traditional Filipino, Spanish, American, Chinese as well as European. This collage of international styles was usually at the discretion of the builder, whom in this case also custom made all the furniture in the house.

On the second story, at each corner of the sala, an elaborate case with a glassed-in bookshelf above and display table below were built.\(^{22}\) The folding dividers are stored behind these cases, set at intervals in the part of the sala that face the windows. Set in the center of the sala is what appears to be an old but undated

\(^{21}\) See appendix D, figures D.1-D.4.
\(^{22}\) See appendix D, figure D.5.
representation of the *Birhen de Nuestra de Santa Regla* or Santa Regla. There is much legend and *tsismis* (gossip) that surround this aspect of life in the “Cake House,” even as of this writing. Some say that the image is older than the house. Others say the “original” image that was given to the Sornitos has been stolen and replaced by a facsimile.

It is said that Conrada Perez Sornito, or “Da-Day,” brought the worship of Santa Regla from her birthplace of Pototan, about 15 kilometers north of Santa Barbara. What has been verified is that sometime in the 1970’s, a local washerwoman, a *lavanda*, went into trance not far from the house. When she awoke, she announced that she had seen a vision and could “speak in tongues,” in other words languages that someone only educated up to the second grade could not have learned – Tagalog and English. Maura Molina henceforth became known as a “medium” or *espiritista* of Santa Regla. Among her first clients were Nenita Perez Sornito, who along with the rest of the family save perhaps for Meliton, became ardent devotees of the *Birhen de Nuestra de Santa Regla*, Our Lady of the Rule, or simply, Santa Regla. The family was known to often hold weekly *orasyon* or prayer sessions to the Virgen, make prolific donations to the Catholic Church, become active members in the Association of Our Lady of the Rule in La Paz, and even built a personal financial tie with Maura Molina when they built the enormous “healing center” which was referred to as “The Farm” in the neighboring barrio (*barangay*) of Cadagmayan del Norte. The “farm” was built and designed by Meliton’s son, Romulo, along with his older sister, Helen, who was called by her title Attorney Sornito.

---

23 See appendix D, figure D.6-D.7.
The “Cake House” was one of the few structures in the town, besides the Municipal Hall, to have three stories. The third level was especially designed to house the vast library of books collected by the Sornito family. On all three levels of the house, Meliton designed up ingenious nooks and whimsical dwellings for books. Some of the books date as far back as the mid 19th century, with one dating from 1866. While there are bookcases lining the walls, most of the books are arranged in a unit the center of the room that ringed the staircase. It was designed this way to keep the books away from the windows, where the monsoon rains could not easily get to them. It was a delicate task to remove one of the books, as the front of the shelf of the centerpiece was adorned all the way around with hand-carved latticework in bright green and other subtle shade work. Since this set of shelves was situated at the top of the main pylon through the center of the house, it made me think it was like being at the top of tree, except instead of leaves the tree had books, or trees transformed into commodities. One could say that if the first floor was for everyday human dwelling, the middle for worship, the top was the brain of the house.

The place housed a large family. Meliton and his wife, Conrada, nicknamed “Da-day”, had four children. There was Helen (19--), Nenita (19--), one son Romulo (19--), and Teresita. Romulo married Margarita.

---

24 See appendix C, figures C.8-C.9.
The girls never married. Margarita lived in the house with her in-laws, and bore no children. She died young of tuberculosis. Their visages peer from frames with mother-of-pearl inlay all over the house. The youngest, Teresita, is the last living member. In 2011 she left the only home she has ever known. This is an event in the history of the house where I, the ethnographer, enter into the story. The house stands prominently in the central part of the Santa Barbara “Heritage Zone”, or the Poblacion, a stone’s throw from the municipal hall and the old cathedral on one side, and another stone’s throw from the first golf course in Asia and the Santa Barbara Cemetery on the other.

***

**Part II:**

**Childhood Memories**

Walter Benjamin’s essay *A Berlin Around 1900*, demonstrated for me the
power of writing place, in his case about and around fin-de-siecle Berlin, through the lens of childhood impressions and memories. Reading Benjamin divulging the minutiae of his life in the city of Berlin, not only gave me the courage, but made the most sense for me to start in a time and place where often the beginnings of some of the most effective stories are forged upon – memories from childhood.

I was seven years old the first time I crossed the threshold of the house at the corner of P. Burgos and Hingco Street in Santa Barbara, Iloilo. In the afternoon when the tropical heat was at its apex, our visits would often take place in the second floor sala, so to take advantage of the breezes that roamed the open floor plan of their house. If it was morning and the sun was on the back of the house we would sit outside on the front gallery, and listen to the dozens of exotic songbirds they kept in a large, white aviary on one side. At night we would sit anywhere in the cool night air, and listen to the bullfrogs. One year when I came to visit as a teenager, I took a video camera and asked Nita about the history of the house and her decades long relationship to a local healer and spirit medium known as Santa Regla. She was happy to talk about it at length. When I was ready to conclude and turn off the tape, she sat forward in her chair and said she hoped that when she was gone, the house would become a museum, a testament to the artistry of her father and a Sornito family legacy in the town. Both my mother and my sister were there, and recall her expressing this wish. When I returned to the United States, I listened to the tape and found that my recording mostly captured the bullfrogs, muffling Nita’s voice, stories, and her last wish for the future of her childhood home. Years

later, when I asked my parents to look for that tape in the archives of antiquated technology they insisted on keeping, they told me they could not find it.

My father would refer to the place prosaically as ‘Nang Nita and ‘Nang Terry’s house. They fit the stereotype of two elderly, spinster sisters living in a once stately and enormous house to a ‘T’. Nita in particular was a vigorous woman who often took my hand with surprising strength, either to show affection or physically pull me to the table to eat. They told me stories, especially about their father, the master carpenter who built the house and of whom it was obvious they were very proud. With an equal measure of love and pride, they spoke a lot about their cousin, my grandfather, who was a locally famous mathematician known for publishing a method of “squaring the circle,” a puzzle which in itself is a metaphor used to describe chasing the impossible.26

The first time I visited Santa Barbara, there were two Sornitos still alive and living in the Cake House. Nenita P. Sornito, or “Nita” as she was called, was the one closest with my father, because she taught calculus at the American established Central Philippine University in nearby Jaro where my grandfather, Juan Evangelista Sornito, was also a professor of mathematics after the war. She would refer to my father by his little boy name, “Putchoy.” Since we were the daughters of her beloved “putchoy”, we were treated with the same loving attachment. Nita never married, and never had children. It had been many decades since the sound of children were heard in the house.

When it came time to sleep, there were not enough rooms for everybody. My parents had the guest room, what used to be Romulo or ‘Moly’s room. Terry

26 For more on “Squaring-the-circle” and a reproduction of Engr. Juan E. Sornito’s “method” to squaring the circle, see appendix A.
and Nita each had their own room. They would not hear of any of us sleeping in the “servant’s quarters” downstairs. So Nita hired someone to bring down an antique metal bed from the attic and set it up in on the second level, behind the life-size statue of Santa Regla. The statue or “image” as everybody referred to it was encased in glass. I could tell my mother did not like the idea, but she could not say why. My father teased me, and said that aswang, the much feared vampire-like creature of Filipino mythology, would come through the volada and kidnap us. Nita seemed to take this personally and rebuked him. “The image will look over them.”

***

**Part II: Inheritance**

*Isabel*

Isabel is the head of the Santa Barbara Museum, Director of Tourism and Heritage and a distant cousin. During my time in Santa Barbara she once said to me, “You are a Sornito. That makes your Auntie’s house a part of your heritage.” What she literally said is that the house is *partly your inheritance*. She was not implying that I attempt to demand the house should anything happen to my Aunt, the last living owner of the house. That would be a mistranslation of her intention. Consciously I would never think to lay claim to the house of my father’s second-cousin, even if our families were close and we are blood kin. Still for Isabel it was no accident that she invoked “heritage” since it is her job to document, preserve, and promote places that gets designated a “heritage site.” Even though she tried to suggest that the house was *partly mine*, she did not mean that I lay claim to the house and move in or try to profit from it. Isabel wanted me to take a stand as the only family member she perceived as taking an interest in the house and my relative,
against other people’s perceived ill-intentioned interest in the house, especially people who were not Sornitos. This house was not their heritage, not their property. However, it was not really mine either. Yet there I was, and the intractable bonds of kinship, however loose, were invoked as my power, and for the moment, mine alone.

From my position, heritage was not just an abstract concept, but quite literal in so many senses of the word. Throughout my studies towards a higher degree in anthropology, I avoided working in the Philippines, the place from where both my parents emigrated. When I decided to pursue a project there, I learned Tagalog, which is not the major dialect spoken by either of my parents at home. Thus my conversation with Isabel was all the more ironic to me, as I had always known that my Aunts’ house and their deep involvement with a well known healer was something that would be fascinating to any anthropologist, yet I had avoided talking about it to anybody – not to family, to colleagues, or friends - in English, Tagalog, or the native language of the area, Ilonggo. In fact, nobody really spoke of it. Such a history was cordoned off by silence. So it was all the more interesting to me that it was precisely the Sornitos who seemed least interested in the house. My father is Terry’s second-cousin, and their respective families grew up quite close, especially, as I was told, during the Japanese occupation of Panay Island from 1943 to 1945. Terry had another second-cousin who lived a block away, another Auntie of mine who was a doctor. In fact, just about everybody in that household were doctors or in some way connected to the medical profession. Going to their house from Terry’s house, a one-block stroll from Hingco Street to the major thoroughfare Rizal Street, was not unlike going “back to the future.” Rosa’s house was thoroughly modern. Shiny cars with reflective black tinting lined the driveway. The toilets flushed with
handles. There were showerheads that streamed forth water at the turn of a dial. It was air-conditioned. Rosa’s husband, the President of a major hospital in town and a well-respected neurosurgeon who would often regale me with the story of the time he danced with the Jackie Kennedy, with one wave of his hand brushed aside the rumors about Terry as nonsense. Rosa would simply say, “I do not know what goes on over there. I do not involve myself.”

I was never quite sure why so much hush around this, and never gave a thought to not thinking about it, until I decided to move into the Cake House in 2011. The house became the setting wherein I began to peel away layers of family secrets, piece together oral histories, and attempt to divine the phantom traces left by the living and the dead. The house and the objects within were really the first things that I could turn to that could tell me anything.

***

Architecture – Bahay na Bato

What about Terry, you might ask? By last report my she is living with a spirit medium that locals now say spirited her away from the only house she has ever lived, to another house on a remote hillside in a nearby barrio built they say, by her money. This occurred in the midst of my time there, so I was the only family member left in the house. While other houses are known by their address or by the owner’s name, this house is perhaps the only private residence in the town that is more often referred to by a name all its own, “The Cake House.” Considered in the

27 While the Spanish word “barrio” is understood and often used in the Philippines, the term “barangay” is more common and shall be used henceforth in this document.
architectural category of *bahay na bato*, the Cake House is one of the oldest residential houses in Santa Barbara, a township about 16 kilometers from Iloilo City. Iloilo was once a major port city known as “The Queen City of South”. The title is an honorific that the city still officially holds, but has since been unofficially appropriated by the current busiest port city in the Visayas, Cebu.

The *bahay na bato* is by definition an architectural design that integrates a number of cultural influences. While it is an inheritor of the *bahay kubo*, an iconic Filipino structure on stilts fashioned from materials native to the landscape, it is a bricolage of Spanish, Malay, French, Chinese, and American elements. The *bahay na bato* is a uniquely Filipino home, yet what constitutes a Filipino house and home extends well beyond a identifying a national ideal or an authentic indigenous notion. I think of it more as a set of techniques, or a heterogenous set of operations that materially manifests in a creation like the Cake House, what Claude Levi-Strauss saw in Max Ernst’s technique of collage in art as the “bricoleur” technique, or perhaps what Filipino artist and filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik, reflecting on the diverse elements in Filipino culture, art and heritage as the work of the *indio-genius*.  

---

28 See appendix B: Examples of Bahay Kubo

29 Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 1997). Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990). Georges Bataille says of *l’informe*, or the formless, that it is a “job”. Rosalind Krauss says formlessness “allow[s] one to operate a declassification.” (Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 18) Marcel Mauss’ description of the Polynesian use of *mana* may be similar to the way Bataille imagines the formless, that “Mana is not simply a force, a being, it is an action, a quality, a state […]At different times it may be a quality, a substance, or an activity” (Mauss, *The Gift*, 108). I am stressing the operational aspect in these terms, which my purposes here serve to begin to intuit that there are historical and material processes in the *bahay na bato*. Filipino architecture is not a static aesthetic, but a continuous work of declassification.

Meliton Sornito began construction on the house that became known as the Cake House after World War II. At that same site stood a dwelling made of materials commonly used in other Filipino dwellings – rattan vines, *buri* and *nipa* palms, bamboo, and sometimes the much prized hardwood *narra* (mahogany). Meliton, a self-taught master carpenter, had another vision for a house. It is not clear exactly where the first influences of *art nouveau* found root in Meliton’s imagination that came to life in the Cake House. Some have speculated that the architect meant to emulate the organic forms that he saw in the nature around him.

While there are no doubt shades of truth to that explanation, it did not seem to do justice to the sheer excess of the Cake House. A cake is not an organic form found in nature, which as early as the 17th century was being offered at court by the European aristocracy as an item meant more for display, less for consumption. It was not until much later, with the development of refined sugar in the 19th century, that cakes became both excessive culinary and visual art forms.

For me, the Cake House did not give up self-contained stories but rather hints of a promised exchange, offering the enticements of any real “cake” yet could only yield enticement itself.

*Chan*

It was a “calling” in the most literal sense that prompted me to return to Santa Barbara and investigate what appeared to be a standoff between an Iloilo city development mogul and the mayor of Santa Barbara. I received a series of phone calls that would not stop. When I did come back, it was then that I learned of a new
person who claimed to inherit the power to channel Santa Regla as Maura did. This person also seemed to be very close to my Aunt, which was seemed an untenable situation for neighbors and the mayor alike. In the beginning, before I even met the mayor, I had already met the mogul, and she was desperate for my help.

I was at about to enter a bustling bus station in Quezon City (in Manila) so I ducked into a donut shop to blunt the sonic onslaught of a busy Manila thoroughfare.

Static.

“The mayor----static----allow me-----static----the house!” I heard.

I asked the voice on the other end of the line to repeat what she had said. The connection abruptly dropped. I knew from whom the call originated, yet I was not sure what this person wanted from me, and why she would be calling me.

As I negotiated my bus ticket, my cell phone rang five more times. I let it go to voicemail. No message was left. When I obtained my ticket, I went back to the donut shop, strangely the only spot in the entire complex that continued to be insulated from the afternoon din. I answered the phone that inevitably rang again.

“The mayor barred me from the house,” sputtered that sobbing voice again.

The voice belonged to a woman I had met a few months back when I visited Terry in Santa Barbara. In all the years that my family and I had been coming to this town to visit this branch of the family, now dwindled to one living Aunt, we had never met this woman, who claimed that she was a very “close” friend of my Terry. When my mother, my husband and I came to visit from Manila, we were greeted at the new Santa Barbara Airport as VIP’s. The security guards breezed us through. A small retinue of people awaited us with a small fleet of cars. This woman, who introduced herself as Chan, fluttered her hands a lot. When she did, people jumped.
With a gesture of her hand, a twitch of her lips, or a stern glance, all established security protocols were relegated to second order. I came to know later that Chan’s brother was a big contractor and the mogul behind building this new airport in the midst of a rice field about 15 kilometers from a major Visayan city, Iloilo. His sister Chan ruled this little, shining brand new strip of commerce.

A few months after this first meeting, I moved into my father’s second-cousin’s house, a person my father, who is considered an elder himself, called ‘Nang Terry. Short for “manang” (“manong” for males), it is an Ilokano term denoting an elder, a name used within kinship circles and the community at large. One takes on the status of manong/manang when they reach a certain age but also when one attains a place in the eyes of the community that relegate them to a place of status and respect. Especially in the rural Philippines, interaction between young and old is linguistically embedded in terms of address. I called ‘Nang Terry Tita or Auntie. Instead of the Ilokano term, I would call my slightly older cousins by the more common Tagalog names of Kuya (kew-yah) or Ate (ah-teh), and in turn the younger ones have always called me Ate. If they were a little older than, say more than sixty years give or take, I might call them Tita or Tito. I would often learn this blurred distinction the hard way if I called two people who are siblings by different names. It was often the case that the older one would take issue with being relegated to the domain of Tita, and would ask me why I called her Tita and her only slightly younger sister Ate.

Within the Filipino household, or dwelling, one encounters these words as grains of rice on the plate. I detail this because title of address was where I began to inhabit my second language, right after names of food. When I entered a Filipino
household, what I was instructed to and then expected to address the inhabitants of that house by, oriented how I should behave and my position literally in relation to them. The name of address also organized how I perceived how everybody interrelated, like a not so secret password.

**Arrival and the Everyday of Fieldwork**

I arrived at the Santa Barbara after an especially bumpy flight through a storm. For the first time I was alone coming to this town. Previously I had always come with one of my immediate family, if not all of us. I emerged from the sliding doors to see a man holding a sign with my name on it. Cab drivers ply the passengers emerging from the sliding doors, but we wait for a shiny, white truck to pull up. It reminds me of a white horse, one of those especially large breeds with extra tufts of fur at the hooves. It is festooned with religious decals all around truck bed. My white chariot takes five minutes to speed me into Santa Barbara.

When I get to the house, Terry seems happy to see me. Teresita Perez Sornito is the youngest daughter of Meliton and Conrada Sornito and the last surviving member of the branch of the Sornito family that occupied the Cake House.

Terry flutters her hands about in broad gestures, somewhat reminding me of Chan, however Terry does this to add clarification to her speech. Terry has been deaf for a number of decades, no one knows quite how long. However it has been long enough to impact her speech. She speaks fluent Ilonggo, the local dialect Kinaray-a, as well as English, but it was not language that was the barrier. Her speech was comprised of words worn down by the ocean of muted sounds she was immersed in, so by the time they reached the shore of my ears, the edges of meaning
became formless sound. Jessica or David would often cock their heads very close to her face, and with an emphatic *ah*, would interpret.

*Ah! She is saying .... and wants you to know that ...*

When I was younger, I used to ask my mother and father whether they understood anything she was saying. They always threw up their hands and said *No!* It is not that I did not believe David and Jessica did not understand Terry. Not exactly. It just seemed they, like Santa Regla, had some special power as mediums of Terry’s speech. My own Aunt was already mediated to me, even when she sat right next to me, eager to communicate. It only was much later that I discovered another ways for us to communicate.

It does not take long before she gets tired very and goes to bed. It also does not take long for Jessica to show me a letter from my Aunt’s *Tita*. My 73 year old *Tita* herself had a living *Tita*. The language in the letter is strong, like a fist shaking in the air, threatening to strike at any moment.

*You are being paid to take care of Nang Terry. Sign this to certify you are solely responsible should anything to happen to her.*

Jessica was silent and distraught as I read the letter that doubled as a weird contract. David came up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. I took the paper from her.

David was a tall, slight man with piercing eyes whose color I could never quite discern. At the center they were black as opals, but the surrounding iris looked cloudy. In some lights, it looked one murky color, and in others a variable stormy
grey. Like his ambiguous eye color, I could also not quite discern his and Jessica’s role in all this. I was introduced to them as Terry’s “helpers”, or people hired to take care of her and the house.

Jessica stopped crying and went on,

“Chan is upset with us because we would not let Pia be the ya-ya for her grandchildren. Pia wanted to go to college for hotel management. After we refused Chan reduced our salary and expenses for the household to only 800 pesos a week.”

In my head it was not difficult to do the math. 800 pesos was a paltry amount for one, no less than three people, to subsist on. I did not quite understand why there was a financial relationship between Chan and my Terry. My parents always told me my Aunts had always been a family of means, just look at the house. But as I sat at the table, it was not hard to see the signs of decay. The neon orange vinyl tablecloth was spotless but cracked and then duct taped over in several places. The bright mélange of colors throughout the house were ringed with spots of gray-green mold. There was no modern plumbing. In fact, the water would sometimes stop and David would pull out large bins to catch the rainwater which everyday he carried upstairs in smaller blue buckets to the two “C.R.’s” (or comfort room) as people refer to the bathroom. I watched Terry eat the food Mari said “poor people” ate, just some broth with a few tomatoes and dilis, or little fish.

Jessica said, “Of course your Tita Terry believes this is the only good food for her, because that is what Santa Regla recommended for her.”
I was not the first to notice that the Cake House was not in pristine condition. The next day, I went down to the outdoor kitchen\(^{31}\) and David was switching out a pot full of water for an empty one. A leak had sprung from the ceiling, and in the heavy downpours, the hole was an open faucet. Terry looked on, and pointed to the leak. “House is very old, hah?” She laughed. For David and Jessica, it was not funny, as they formed a tag team to drag the pots and buckets to dump the water in the yard, and come back just to have it filled again. At this point, a woman called from the door. Since everyone was busy with the leak, I went to greet the visitor.

Fieldwork occurred for the most part either in the Cake House or other people’s houses nearby, what locals would constantly say ping-ponging from house to house as “Makadto ako sa pihak balay.” “I am going to the other house.” And everyone pretty much always knew which house that person was referring. It seemed to be the case that more often than not, it was a house I was going to, rather than the family or people associated with or living in that house. In a small town and within the subdivisions of that town called barangays, the “sense” of people’s homes was not one necessarily of private property, where one cordons themselves away from the public. Like stoop culture in cities such as Chicago or New York,\(^{32}\) people in Santa Barbara could often be found in open areas adjoining their domiciles where they would be visible to any passerby, and not only that, that such a space was for the express purpose of a passerby to stop, to gossip, to join a game of mahjong, to be offered food or drink and pass the time until a heavy rain passed or

---

\(^{31}\) In many Filipino households, there are often two kitchens. One is inside and sometimes has modern appliances or is a place where the family or “helpers” (servants) will eat on informal occasions. The other is outside and is sometimes referred to as the “dirty kitchen.” [More on this from Zialcita’s book, \textit{Philippine Ancestral Houses (1810-1930).}]

\(^{32}\) Zialcita, \textit{Philippine Ancestral Houses (1810-1930)}, 85. Indeed, Zialcita points out that “in a world without mass media, watching and listening to the street was the pastime.”
the heat had abated. It was this type of circulation first among my closest relatives and eventually gaining associations with others that my “circuit” of ang mga pihak balay, “other houses” widened. What was pointed out to me early on was that the Cake House had for many years not been one of those places where people felt they could just stop by until I my arrival. Indeed the first thing I noticed about the house, was that it was a cake festooned with a good deal of barbed wire (painted white) lining a high fence and gate, the wire was cleverly hidden by garlands of green shrubbery and pink blooms. It was a cake not meant to welcome people towards it, but to dazzle the beholder from a distance.

A beautiful collaborative effort by an architect (Martin Tinio), an anthropologist (Fernando Zialcita), and a photographer (Neal Oshima) about the nature of building and dwelling in “ancestral houses” of the Philippines, was my dictionary and guidebook through the material, historical and mythological aspects of the Cake House.

The first lines of Zialcita’s book speaks of the bahay na bato as having a, …conscience [which] manifests what is deal and what is right. And like any conscience it is largely forsaken or ignored […] Through such concepts and principles (the concept of living with nature, etc.) the bahay na bato tells us what makes Filipino architecture Filipino and may even tell us about the personality and psyche of the Filipino.  

In later chapters, I expand more about the aspects of Filipino architecture and structures in relation to this “concept of living with nature,” for me most profoundly

---

33 Ibid., 6.
to be explored through not the idealized sense the “natives” living in harmony with their environment, rather through emergent global forces that make the experience of “living with (and in) nature” a different experience altogether, one marked by the advent of the now (projected for the future) recurring “natural event” of the super-typhoon.34

For now, the house is a place that channeled the fantasies, fears, and envy of many in the community. As the anthropologist who could arguably find a piece of her own history all over the house, in the faces that resembled me to my surname that was literally embedded into the architecture of the house, the Cake House was already a museum to a past that I could recognize in pieces.

What’s more, Zialcita insists that the evolution of the bahay na bato is the “apex in the development of an indigenous architecture.”35 For a structure that by definition bears out a heterogenous set of influences, including European, it is at first puzzling to think of it as indigenous to the Philippines. Yet if we were to allow for one bahay na bato to speak of the “personality and psyche” of at least one Filipino family, following Zialcita (who knowingly or not took a cue from Bachelard), than perhaps what emerges is a heterogenous and more nuanced version of what constitutes being indigenous instead of in contradiction to what it means to be a cosmopolitan, middle-class citizen of the Philippine nation.

34 This is a theme that became clearer after I returned from fieldwork in December 2011. On November 2, 2013, Typhoon Yolanda (international code name, Haiyan, swept through the Central Visayas region of the Philippines. This event prompted me to reflect on notes I had taken during my visits with healers and their clients in the Iloilo area, who remarked on the devastation that another storm, Typhoon Frank (international code name Fengshen) wrought in 2008. While the weather hovers over this document, comment on this development is briefly treated in the epilogue of this thesis, to be further developed in forthcoming works in progress.

35 Zialcita, Philippine Ancestral Houses (1810-1930), 6 (my emphases).
My writing may betray a lot of “weight”, something that I have tried time and again to “unburden” myself not unlike my initial unconscious avoidance of not doing research anywhere near family. I see myself in this document as not succeeding in completely throwing off that weight. While on the one hand, my friend Isabel put me squarely in the crosshairs of “inheritance”, one of my dissertation committee members surprised me by suggesting, “Perhaps you are a medium too!” Of course, that person did not believe I was an actual medium who could channel dead spirits, and have them speak through me. But when I think about what goes into compiling an ethnography of the living and the dead, especially when it is about your kin, it is very much a channeling of sorts. It just depends on one’s definition of a “medium.”

Avery Gordon’s says of “haunting”:

[...]the term haunting [is used] to describe these singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view. The ghost as I understand it, is not the invisible or some

---

36 Alfred W. McCoy, ed., An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines, Monograph Series 10 (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993). Alfred McCoy in his collection of essays, An Anarchy of Families State and Family in the Philippines, focuses on the interrelationship between the State and family in the Philippines, starting with a paradox – “How and why has this island nation, a veritable “lost Eden” rich in natural resources, become a very poor country with a wealthy oligarchy? (i) McCoy goes on to say that the Philippines has few models for [a] “non-dynastic” family history in contrast to the rich literature in Latin America.” (4). While the house and household that I talk about in this chapter are hardly to be ranked among what McCoy has observed as the Filipino oligarchy, as my entrance into this story belies, it all began with a telephone call from a member of such a family regarding her rights and access to my own family, not hers. I cannot pretend that this did not cause me to bristle inside, or put another way caused my kin blood to boil. At the same time, I cannot hide the fact that it’s a little absurd for me to “bristle” or feel protective of a house and a relative that I do not know very well. It may follow through on the lack that McCoy speaks about, stories of the “non-dynastic family history.
ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way [...] we are notified that what’s been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.37

As “insider” (inheritor of “incomplete forms of containment and repression”) and “outsider” (anthropologist and born in the United States), I occupied an unusual position towards the “Sornito Ancestral House.” These histories were located abroad as much they do within the borders of the Philippines, simultaneously existing in terms of colonial pasts as much as with the balikbayan’s (“the one who return’s home”) present, and what I will later begin to suggest, constitutes a shared futurity premised on the confluence of global forces and its uneven effects on diverse localities, or in other words, the burden of the living to decipher and carry out the incomplete legacies of the dead with vague interest towards future generations. Is not that what inheritance boils down to?

*The Volada or the Art of “Solar Control”*

Days at the Cake House often revolved around the mood of Terry. Some days she would wake up and be all smiles. Other days, as I sat reading or writing by the windows, which everybody either called the bintana or more accurately the volada, I could see Jessica going up and down the stairs with a strained look on her face.

From an exterior view, the volada on the Cake House appeared as an ornate girdle of intricate wooden latticework ringing almost the entire middle portion (or second level) of the house. It was a complex geometric pattern interlacing thin strips of wood set at 90-degree angles with alternating sine-waves and tiny diamond-shape carvings running the circumference of the waves at mathematically precise intervals. In addition, several panes of stained-glass windows were set into grooved tracks. One could slide open the windows a little bit in some places or wide open in other parts of the room. Thus it felt like living inside both a prism and a multifaceted sundial as one watched the daytime shadows move across the floor through the patterns and colors made by the volada.\(^{38}\) Zialcita saw the volada as an ingenious architectural solution to creating ventilation from the heat and shielding from the direct sunlight of the tropics. From the interior or gallery of a *bahay na bato*, the volada was a wall or set of double-doors (usually of light material), that could be opened and closed as the sun moved across the sky:

For the volada was basically a balcony that could be shuttered to protect the rooms. Its half open jalousies allowed the air in while filtering the noon glare; they and the doors opened fully only when the sun slid out of sight. The closeable volada was most effective when it bounded a room on two contiguous sides, say on the northern and the eastern. Doors on the morning side could be half-closed while those on the northern side, together with the windows, let in light and air.\(^{39}\)

At the Cake House, the interior of the volada was an especially complex and ornate system. The doors were hinged folding doors anchored to the main pillars of

---

\(^{38}\) See appendix C, figures C.10-C.11.

\(^{39}\) Zialcita, *Philippine Ancestral Houses (1810-1930)*, 83.
the house. The pillars were more than raw *molave* or *ipil* trunks. Each pillar had its own elaborate character. One was the aforementioned vanity, inset with three mirrors and surrounded by art nouveau style woodworking and carved shelves below. The other two main “pillars” were dressed up as marble-top display tables below rising up to glass-pane book cabinets above. It was from one of these cabinets that Jessica pointed out that one the house’s antique mirrors were missing.

Terry spent most of her days on the first level of the house. She would only travel upstairs to bathe, use the toilet, or go to bed. After breakfast, we would spend the morning in the front gallery facing Hingco street. It was not a main thoroughfare like Rizal Street, just one block up. However Hingco street did see a lot of foot traffic. By my second week in the Cake House, people were already telling me that my presence seemed to noticeably buoy Terry’s mood. One of the neighbors said they had never seen her outside as much as the first months I stayed in the Cake House. People would tell me that she was so happy to have a blood relative take interest in her. Others who also “seemed” to understand her speech told me that she bragged about me. I could tell that she was eager to introduce me to everybody in the neighborhood. People would pass the Cake House on their way to the municipal hall, to the only ATM in the neighborhood, or the hub that was the town square. When people saw that Teresita Sornito was out on her front porch, they would stop, peer from under their reflective umbrellas, and exclaim how they had not seen her in awhile and how beautiful she looked. She would thank them, and turn to me and say

---

40 Ibid., 40, 45. Zialcita liked to highlight the “honest” or “organic” beauty of raw trunks or unfinished posts in some *bahay na bato*. He points out that early Victorian tastes abhorred these qualities in favor of taming the wood into straight lines or concealing them inside a fancy board case (*tambor*).
quite audibly, “This is my niece from the U.S.” The passerby would greet me and ask how I liked staying with my Terry.

***

Fan

The Sornito sisters gave me little gifts straight out of the enormous collection of stuff in the house. They were not rich, but they were a family of means at one time. The gift I remember best was the “oriental fan,” a gift that performed the double-duty of practical use in the tropics and an item to be contemplated for its ornate beauty. The fan was inside a slim black metal casing that opened when I unhinged a latch at the bottom. Very carefully, as if I was holding a butterfly’s wings, I stretched the innumerable tiny folds, unfurling a bouquet of flowers outlined in gold-paint that sparkled in the sunlight. I could hear the folds crack and strain as the tension increased. Eventually, as with most children, I got careless and began to experiment with opening the fan with a single flick of my wrist, a motion that became something I practiced with the repetitive tenacity of a virtuoso. I was used to spaces that are air-conditioned, thus regulation of my immediate climate was either automated or changed at the push of a button. The “oriental fan” then became my first study in the “primitive art” of climate control. Already a signifier of the “exotic”, my first memories of the tropics unfurled from its voluminous folds. While the fan as a real object allegorized my first memories of a first-generation Filipina-American “going home” to my family’s “ancestral house”, for Walter Benjamin, reflecting on his childhood in Berlin, the fan was an allegory for memory itself.
“What Proust began so playfully became awesomely serious. He who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside; that image, that taste, that touch for whose sake this has all been unfurled and dissected; and now remembrance advances from small to smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while that which it encounters in these microcosms grows ever mightier.”

Secrets

“Hello.”

The voice was a lady casually dressed in shorts that I suspected accentuated her very slim legs and a bright cotton blouse.

“Hello! We have not met. I am Doctor Flora S. We are cousins.”

This did not surprise me, as I suspected I was related in some way to more than half the town. Flora had a mischievous curl to her lip, and an earnest look. She took my hand and inspected me up and down.

“I was just passing by. I heard you were here.”

At this point Terry came out.

“Terry you look good!” Flora exclaimed, and put her arm around Terry.

“How are you feeling, hah?”

She kept talking to Terry, but I strongly suspected she did not know most of the time what she was saying.

When Terry went back to the kitchen, Flora suddenly changed her gregarious tone. She whispered conspiratorially to me,

“Do you know what happened to your Auntie Terry’s money? I know the story. It’s all over town. There is a new Santa Regla.”

***

*Mirror, mirror*

For a house so large and largely populated by women, there were not a lot of mirrors in the Cake House. There was a small vanity in the room where my slept. There was an elaborate vanity on the second floor, situated at midpoint against the stretch of the windows that faced P. Burgos street and my friend Isabel’s house. I knew that for special occasions my Terry would sit at that vanity with the windows open. She would take what looked like ancient tubes of lipstick, and paint her lips pink or bright red. She would open pots of the popular lyna cream, somewhat of a moisturizer but mainly a “whitening” agent that layers a mother-of-pearl sheen over brown skin. “Whitening” products are currently all the rage in the Philippines. You see entire aisles in the pharmacies and department stories, promising “whiter” skin. She had pots, tubes, and bottles of many beauty products. I look at the label of one I had never seen before. Some of the chemicals, in varying percentages of concentration, are banned in by the US Food and Drug Administration and the European Union as they have been correlated to heightened statistics for cancer. I tell her she is a “natural beauty” and that she does not need makeup, especially “whitening,” and the comment would send her into peals of laughter.

Earlier in the year, my mother came to visit the Philippines from Chicago. One of the first things she remarked upon when she got to the sala where the image
of Santa Regla held a prominent place, was not about how the house had barely changed, but rather that it had changed insofar that she exclaimed things were missing. She began pointing to places around the house where she recalled there was something there before, but she could not say exactly what. Jessica confirmed this observation,

“You see up there? There is a big, round mirror on the left. There was a twin on its right, but it is now gone.”

“Where is it?”

“Ben has it.”

The missing mirror was the item that indicated another presence about the house. Jessica and David told us that we should really wait for Danda.

“You will get the whole story from Danda. Danda knows everything.”

I had heard a lot about this Danda. As “the one who knows everything” there was a lot of anticipation on my part to meet her. She lived in Iloilo, so it was not far. However Danda was always busy. She was visiting her sick mother in another part of the Philippines. Danda was going to come, but then something came up and she changed her mind. Danda was sick. Danda had to cancel because of the heavy rains.

***

Violin

The object that attracted me the most in the Cake House was the violin.42 It was housed in an enormous glass and carved wood sideboard cabinet that seemed to

---

flower out of the housing for an elaborate *grapopono* (gramaphone) system. Isabel, the Director of Tourism and Heritage also doubled as the next-door neighbor, and would tell me that when the *grapopono* was built, it would fill the Poblacion with music, making the Cake House a large music box in the midst of the tropics.

The *grapopono* was not the only thing that made music in the house. All the Sornitos could play a musical instrument. “It was your Auntie Nita who could *really* play the violin,” many people reported to me.

The first time I really handled a violin was in the Cake House. Jessica took out a small step stool and I could reach the high glass shelf of the sideboard with the violin. I had asked Terry at least a dozen times if it was okay that I hold the instrument, as if it were as sacred as the image of Santa Regla situated right across from the gramaphone system. After feeling comfortable enough with my understanding that she had acquiesced, I took down the violin.

Isabel and Flora told me that my great-uncle had also made the violin. It was his pet dream to make a violin out of native wood, and after many tries so the story goes, he succeeded at last.

According to Zialcita, different types of woods played different roles in the Filipino house. The alchemy of woods was a “science” that master builders had known for generations. For posts, beams and rafters was the highly valued *molave* wood. When *molave* was cut, it was easy to work with, however when it was bled of its sap, and especially when that process was done in salt water, the wood became so hard that it could both split and sharpen an axe. *Molave* was largely resistant to

---

43 See appendix C, figure C.12.
decay, however should it come into contact with lime, it gave off a foul odor.\textsuperscript{44} It had multiple uses in the building of a house, from posts, to beams, window and door-frames, trusses, and floor planks.\textsuperscript{45}

I\textipa{pil} was another wood prized for its hardiness against termite and decay alike, the former repelled by the bitter taste. Like attributes to an element, ipil could do all the other things that molave could do except withstand salty environments and gave off a fragrant, nut-like aroma.

The house violin was a stained reddish-brown. The stories told about the violin had that it was made in the tradition of Antonio Stradivarius out of the wood of the langka or jackfruit tree. At first, people told me it was sheer experimentation that led Meliton to the discovery that jackfruit wood would lend its color, “softness” and “strength” well to the making of a musical instrument. Later on a friend who specializes in native instruments of the Philippines told me that among the lumad (a Cebuano term for “indigenous” or “native” and generally referring to native people) a stringed lute instrument called the kutiyapi was made from the wood of jackfruit.

Flora and Isabel tried to help me find a violin tutor, so the violin would sing again through the streets of the poblacion. The prospect of the violin tones coming out of the Cake House brought out conversation about World War II, when the Japanese Imperial army occupied Santa Barbara in June 1942. No one could make money at that time. The schools were closed. The Japanese army used the Santa Barbara Central School as a barracks and base of operations because it was the only large concrete structure in the town. The “old ones”, commonly referred to as the ang mga mal-am, would tell stories of evacuating into the mountains with a few pots

\textsuperscript{44} Zialcita, \textit{Philippine Ancestral Houses (1810-1930)}, 34.  
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 36.
and precious belongings. However the Japanese army ordered all civilians of outlying barangays to move back in to the Poblacion with the pretext that they were going to launch aggressive offensives against Filipino guerilla fighters hiding outside the municipality. Many Santa Barbara residents acceded to this order, and lived in the church, convent and other buildings in the public market. This was notably unusual to have a concentration of people in the central part of town during wartime occupation.\textsuperscript{46} Thus a rather lively and somewhat “normalized” existence reigned in the Poblacion. Terry’s older sister Nenita and her little brother, Romulo, would go into the town square or in the courtyard of the Santa Barbara Cathedral and play their instruments – the violin, the horn or the guitar – with their father’s bowler hat to collect money, and they got by pretty well. These stories were some of the first indications I got a hint of enmity between the people who lived in the Cake House and other relatives and neighbors. Who else could make money in this way? Japanese soldiers seemed to especially enjoy these impromptu concerts, and tossed in the some of the most generous tips, so some have reported. No one ever said anything derisive, but one could hear in some people’s voices a mix of envy and contempt. How could these people entertain the “enemy”?\textsuperscript{46}

\textbf{Part III: Fetish/Commodity Fetish}

\textit{The “Image”}

The most commanding presence in the Cake House by far was the image of the Birhen Nuestra de Santa Regla, or Our Lady of the Rule. She was a life-size

\textsuperscript{46} Santiago Cabigayan, \textit{The Town of Santa Barbara: Its Early Times and Historic Past} (Self published, 2005), 47.
doll, dressed in sumptuous garments of what obviously appeared to be handmade lace, real velvet, silk and golden jewels. In her left hand, she carried an equally festooned image of the baby Jesus. She was encased in glass, standing in front of one of the pillars that anchored the volada.

Everyone I met referred to the statue or doll as the “image.” The transmission of Santa Regla’s veneration is a tale of the origins of her “image” and its miraculous “appearance” in the Visayas, specifically on the island of Mactan in Opon, Cebu.47

The story goes:

“It was in the year 1735, when Father Francisco Avalle, Augustinian monk, became the first Parish Priest of Opon, of the historic island of Mactan, opposite Cebu Island. As a true son of St. Augustine, and having lived for ten years in the Monastery of Nuestra Senora de Regla, in Chiopiona, Andalucia, he showed the people of Opon a small picture of his native land Spain. St. Augustine himself had venerated this particular image during his lifetime, and when the great Bishop of Hippo, Africa died in 430, his spiritual sons continued the devotion until the Vandals invaded

47 Deirdre Leong de la Cruz, “All His Instruments: Mary, Miracles, and the Media in the Catholic Philippines” (Ph.D., Columbia University, 2006), http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/pqdtft/docview/305341700/abstract/139EAF5F862255B6236F/1?accountid=10226. This observation owes a lot to the work of Deirdre Leong de la Cruz, in her analysis of the Virgen Mary and her appearances across the archipelago. On images she has said, “Images of course are representational forms. But they are ones that, either because they are mimetic or because they cannot be hyper-abstracted, bear the traces of their origins. It is easy to know to what they refer and to whom they belong...”. [My emphases] The context of this analysis was her observation of the following of a faith healer after a news report “expose” on the fakery of faith healers. Her informants based their authenticity on the claim that they never accepted payment for doing the work of healing. Later on, my own observations of the following of Santa Regla revealed the opposite to be the case, that money was indeed exchanged and careful accounting records kept of clients and payments. The precise accounting records, detailed later in this document, kept by Nenita Sornito and the healer Santa Regla is where my work diverges from de la Cruz’s. If money is what sullies or makes inauthentic the exchange between healer and client, than a different sort of approach is required where money (ergo – contracts) is involved.
Africa in 443. They had to flee taking the Image of the Virgen de Regla to Spain[…]

Then another invasion took place[…]when the Saracens and the Moors persecuted the Church of Andalucia, destroying Churches and Images. Then the Prior of the Augustinians […] decided to conceal the Image in a cave. […] Centuries passed by, and the hidden Image was almost forgotten till the year 1330. Our Lady appeared to another priest[…] this Augustinian saw the Blessed Virgen, with Black complexion, holding a child in her arms. […]The faithful priest set on the journey to find the blessed image.”

One day I came home one day to find Terry visibly upset. She could not articulate to us what was wrong. Through her sobs, her words were even more indecipherable.

Our inability to reach Terry in her misery was difficult for all of us. We could only sit in mute sympathy as she cried. However it was in that moment that an idea, borne out of the impasse of the situation, came to me. I took out my laptop and opened the word processing program. I typed in a simple question, “What is wrong?”

The presentation of this object, this “mystic writing pad,” surprised Terry enough for her to pause in her crying. Then to our amazement, she reached out to the keyboard and began to type a response.

---

48 (Novena of Our Lady of the Rule 1983)

“My heart is heavy. I lost the original Image that she loved so much. The spirit of my sister I know is upset.”

The response as it appeared from what was a blank screen into full sentences, that her muffled world was opened up to one of clarity, shocked us into silence and stillness. David exclaimed, “Of course, she can read and write very well. Especially in English! She is a college graduate. Why didn’t we think of this before?”

As we typed to each other back and forth, it seemed as if Terry was unlocked from her loneliness, her frustration, and the sadness that she found difficult to communicate with anyone else.

Me: “Where is the Image?”

Terry: “Ben has it.”

Me: “What is the image in the sala?”

Terry: “It is a copy. But Nita loved that image, and never wanted it to leave her house.”

Me: “Why does he have it?”

Writing Pad.” In thinking about memory and its layers, Allen Shelton compares two observations by Freud: First, Freud’s analogy between Rome, where new memories accumulate over ancient scaffolding, which is not unlike the structure of the conscious/unconscious. Shelton sees something similar at work in the “mystic writing pad” to the ancient metropolis inferred at the level of a child’s toy. For Michael Taussig, the “mystic writing pad” illustrates the “processes” of consciousness, analogized in lifting the celluloid sheet, which in his words “obliterates” writing. He goes on to say, “The writing machine was actually an erasing machine. I flag this for my own purposes as the blank screen of the computer for a brief time acted as a “medium” between myself and Terry, who because of her hearing and speech impediment, has been sometimes characterized by others as “childish.” The “writing pad” and screen for the first time allowed her consciousness to show up as communication legible to others. However the mind is a changeable thing, and later communications with Terry on the writing pad became difficult and eventually stopped altogether when Terry herself “disappeared” from the Cake House. The pad remained blank without anyone on the other side to receive a message from, as if the spirit that I was in communication with had departed.
Terry could or would not really answer that question. She seemed to feel better after having expressed something of herself at last, and declared out loud that she was hungry.

Later Jessica told me what she knew about the “origins” of the “original” image. “Attorney Helen commissioned a famous artist in Luzon to make the image. I think this was maybe early 1950’s? When it was done she flew to Manila and bought a seat for the image to bring it back.”

“She paid for a doll to have its own seat on a plane?”

“Yes! They spared no expense.”

I wondered to myself if it would have been the case that the other sisters, long dead, would be upset that the image that they had originally commissioned for the house was gone. The one in the sala looked the same to me. What did it matter anyways? It was a copy of an image that was an image (already a copy) that a thousand years ago sat on the table of St. Augustine in Northern Africa. A copy of that image was brought back by Father Avalle of Opon in 1735 upon his return from Spain to the Philippines.

In Michael Taussig’s reading of Baron Erland Nordenskold’s study of Cuna figurines, he remarks “from the ethnography the magically important thing is the spirit of the wood, not its outer form, that determines the efficacy of the figurine.”

However, he goes on to wonder, why in the specific case of the Cuna figurines, did they take on the form of whites, more precisely the likeness of the white colonial?

I want to return to this in a later chapter, as what Taussig describes in the power of the copy over the original, will resonate more when I describe the

---

community (or cult, depending on how one looks at it) around the healer Santa Regla. For now, the observation about the magic properties of natural materials versus those powers when in this case wood took on form and likeness are important to flag here. Indeed the question for the “Image” in the house was not how “like” the original it was, even though the original was a copy of a copy where “origins” are basically shrouded in myth. In terms of the image, sentimentality was a battle over the succession of copies, and what’s more, who has the “right” of succession to inherit one image over another. What kind of value did this image have? Originally so to speak, the image was a fetish. People came to pray to it, to touch it, to bring offerings to it. Yet now it seemed that the image was along with the mirror and other items.

***

Heritage

The archaeologist Denis Byrne was interested in the politics of heritage management in Southeast Asia, and during a research stint at the National Museum of the Philippines, became interested in the Spanish fortification known as Intramuros, literally “Inside the Walls.” In his walks of the walled city, he was surprised at what seemed to be a complete effacement of Spanish influence in what was once that empire’s most monumental edifice in the Pacific. At the time he was touring, archaeologists and State officials were attempting to restore Intramuros as a Spanish period piece. Thus he thought he would look into the politics around what he termed the “piecemeal” attempts to restore Intramuros. Instead what captured his attention later on was that within this “heritage” site, tens of thousands of people (mostly Filipino civilians and then Japanese soldiers) perished in the February 1945
bombardment of the fortification by General Douglas MacArthur. Despite all indications that defeat was imminent, the Japanese Army refused to surrender nor allow the thousands of civilians living within the walled city to leave. On February 17th, the Battle of Manila ensued, and nearly everything and everyone inside were decimated or killed. Instead of a romanticized “heritage” site, Byrne began to see the traces of it having been a “disaster” site.\textsuperscript{51} When military operations concluded on March 3, 1945, even the U.S. command was shocked at the devastation. One general described was quoted saying, “Manila in effect has ceased to exist,” and about Intramuros he said, “It is just all a graveyard.”

In October 2013 a major earthquake measuring 7.2 on the Richter scale struck the Visayas. The first reports relate that the quake was centered in the island of Bohol, however it affected the nearby metropolitan center, Cebu. As the hours tick off, the death toll rises slowly, as rescue crews and heavy equipment are unable to be transported to remote areas of the island at the quake’s epicenter. One image that becomes immediately apparent to any spectator of the event is the “before and after” showing of the region’s notable architectural treasures, mostly churches. They run the opposite logic of most “before and after” charts, where the second frame visually depicts usually dramatic improvements from the first. Looking at the before and after images that quickly proliferated in the wake of the earthquake, you see immediate results that are the reverse. A structure is shown (more or less) intact and next to its double as a ruin. The effect is significant. Look and see how much devastation can happen in the space of a few minutes, where hundreds of years of “heritage” can be reduced to rubble and dust. Not only is it one “national treasure”,

\textsuperscript{51} Denis Byrne, \textit{Surface Collection: Archaeological Travels in Southeast Asia} (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2007), xi.
but several. The Heritage Conservation Society of the Philippines last counted that
ten churches suffered extensive damage. The mourning cry goes out to these stone
edifices, the most famous being the Basilica Minore Santa Nino, founded in 1565 by
the Spanish conquistador Miguel Lopez de Legazpi. It is the oldest Roman Catholic
Church in the Philippines.

Whether there is judgment to be made or not, the lionshare of the media
coverage of the earthquake focused on the loss of these “national treasures.”

GMA Network, one of the largest media consortiums in the archipelago
wrote the contrast in a very interesting way:

_Bastions of strength, stability, and most of all longevity,
the heritage churches of Bohol stood as symbols of the worldwide reach of a
powerful Church for centuries._

[pregnant spacing]

_Now they are evidence of nature’s power._

“For centuries” these churches were symbols of the “worldwide reach of a
powerful Church.” There is no doubt that the Catholic Church had and continues to
exert a powerful influence in the Philippines, the only predominantly Catholic nation
in Southeast Asia. The article does mention that several dozen people died in the
powerful quake, however it quickly returns to an assessment of the devastation of
the heritage sites (aka – churches).

---

52 Kim Luces and G. M. A. News, “From Treasure to Rubble: Heritage Churches before and
after the Bohol Quake,” _GMA News Online_, accessed March 26, 2014,
http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/330979/lifestyle/artandculture/from-treasure-to-rubble-
According to Trixie Angeles, vice chairman of the National Committee on Monuments and Sites, six national cultural treasures and two important cultural properties were damaged or destroyed by the quake.

[...]

The title of "national cultural treasure" is the highest recognition the Philippines can bestow on cultural properties, while "important cultural property" is the second highest recognition.53

The Jesuit built Baclayon Church, again one of the oldest in Asia, was noted for being made of coral stone and innumerable egg white to hold it together, a veritable architectural seafood soufflé, with a façade added by 19th century Augustinian recollects. While the Cake House only resembled a cake, it was made of wood. Many of the churches that did in fact have the likeness of a church, were in the inside made from ingredients found in the ocean and land. Is Nature consuming itself back into itself, where natural history made into colonial history is transformed back from “symbol” to raw materials of the Earth? But I am ahead of myself, thinking in geological time. Returning to the tempo of breaking news, the churches presented a devastating loss of “cultural heritage.” As already mentioned, such structures, from a not so distant past, are disappearing – either through war or acts of nature. Many scholars of the Philippines note the lack of “monumental architecture” or “scriptural traditions” by comparison to neighboring Southeast countries such as Thailand and Indonesia,54 and thus a sense of both regional and national anxiety emerges as territory marked as “national cultural treasure” and

53 Ibid.

54 Hau 2014
“cultural heritage” are lost. The same anxiety writ small hovered about the Cake House and its contents. On the one hand, Isabel in her position as the head of Tourism and Heritage Conservation was interested in preserving it for the town heritage. On the other, there was Flora, who along with other residents, family and friends gave voice to other anxieties that persisted about the house – the disappearance of Terry’s wealth to someone everyone perceived as a charlatan. Third there was the interest of the medium and his shadow in the construction mogul Chan. While everyone insisted that their reasons obvious enough, the way the situation unfolded left many gaps where one could not explain or rationalize.

While Tables Danced in China...

In many editions where the essay *The Fetishism of Commodities and Their Secrets Thereof* appears, the footnote about the tables starting to dance in China is not always included. It was a like a secret footnote. I was told this fact late one winter evening⁵⁵ as I wrestled with thinking about the Cake House and all the things that people told me that went into its construction, the way that locals felt about the inhabitants (my family!), and most of all the mixed expressions of awe, envy and sometimes contempt that sometimes came out. All this talk evoked about slabs of wood taking on the form of cake and a house.

Indeed as Marx notes:

[...] it “is a queer thing abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” that for example, “The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a

⁵⁵ Thanks to Allen Shelton for citing this footnote.
table out of it […] It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” ever was. (26a)

26a) One may recall that China and the tables began to dance when the rest of the world appeared to be standing still – *pour encourager les autres*.

-Karl Marx, *The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof*, footnote in the German edition to the above paragraph

The “tables” in China were for Marx peasants participating in the Taiping Revolt (1850 – 1864). Significantly it was a millenarian movement led by Hong Xiquan, who believed that he had received a vision from Jesus Christ, and was in fact Jesus’ younger brother. The point that Marx is illuminating is that the flip logic in commodity-fetishism that makes people treated more like things, and things endowed a life-like quality, was at work at precisely this time. While “tables” in China were dancing in revolt, the fashion among bourgeois British society was “table-turning” or a type of séance that involved a group of people around a table summoning spirits and making the table, so to speak, move of its own accord. Perhaps if Marx had been attuned to events in the American West later in the 19th century, he might have found better analogy with another millenarian revolt that started as an actual dance. James Mooney in preparing to research among the Cherokee under the auspices of the Bureau of Ethnology, went instead to investigate reports of the Ghost dance in the early 1890’s. He met and interviewed the “prophet” Jack Wilson, also known as Wovoka, who was given the “ghost dance” in a dream
that promised peace and prosperity for his people. They fashioned shirts for themselves that they believed could not be penetrated by bullets.\textsuperscript{56}

It is no accident that in my reflections on the material and immaterial aspects of the \textit{bahay na bato}, or a Philippine ancestral house, that it should take a turn towards millenarian revolts against imperial or colonial regimes. I cannot say exactly what Marx meant in his footnote. However in reflecting on the excess value or “secret” of the commodity-fetish, that it inverted social relations where people became treated like things and things like wooden tables with legs grew brains and began to dance, the footnote opens an underground tunnel from Marx writing in Victorian England to colonial Asia.

Marx noted that while inside bourgeois Victorian parlors, where the fashion of séance and “table turning” was all the rage, meanwhile “tables” or peasants were in revolt in China, a rebellion that Marx understood to stem from the Opium Wars with Great Britain, which China lost. While the British wanted in China a market for the production of opium from India, the Spaniards similarly used its colonial capital of Manila as a major port in what became the first global trade route.

Raymundo Ileto in his watershed text, \textit{Pasyon and Revolution in the Philippines}, opens his book with a millenarian revolt bearing stark similarities to the Ghost Dance, albeit a hundred years later against the Marcos dictatorship. He argues that a “history from below”, that is one that attempts to understand these millenarian movements not as errant and outsider, rather to integrate them into history as how the masses understood and appropriated elements of the \textit{pasyon} play into the script

for revolution. Later, I will go into how the Western Visayas region was the center of a millenarian revolt known as the Baybaylanes Revolt led by a former sugar plantation worker who became known as Pope Isio. Marx’s footnote on tables dancing in China leads the way into thinking about millenarian revolt in Asia.

Wood, glass, seashells imbued with the promise of “wealth”, transforms into commodity and becomes the Odradek that appears and, as we have seen in at least in the case of the mirror and the image thus far, also disappears from the home. If not tables, than wooden dolls, mirrors, tools, knick-knacks, and especially money began to dance right out the door. There seemed to be an obvious culprit, yet it was difficult to put a stop to it to the exodus. Besides the environmental spirits and other supernatural entities that have long been “resident” to the raw materials that went into the making of Filipino homes, it seems a new kind of spirit has taken up residence in the modern, bourgeois Filipino house. If not a spirit than some kind of uncanny presence seemed to be doing the opposite of throwing coins into the house. This “force” was reversing the spell where “wealth” takes up permanent residency. Wealth was leaving out the door.

---

CHAPTER TWO: HEALERS THAT RUN AFOUL OF THE LAW

“Ay Naku, what would people think if they knew I went to see Santa Regla?”

--Santa Barbara resident, asked about her relationship to a healer.

“Trial? You don’t need a trial for a case like this. I say drag them to the gallows, the sooner the better. Bandits! So many problems in this country as it is… Thieves all over the island. No honor.”

--“Senora Something or Other”, from the novel My Sad Republic

Introduction

Like the ritual of throwing money into the house, the exchange of money between healer and client evoked a range of mixed feelings, usually consisting of contempt, doubt, and envy. Speculators, charlatans, and usurers are artists of occult economies. The production of money in this sense comes from “magical” means or techniques that are not explicable. Stockbrokers practiced a sleight of hand in creating exotic financial products that no one could understand, and money inexplicably multiplied for a time. Earlier I mentioned Michael Taussig’s recollection of stories of spells enacted on money itself, as an example of an occult economy. I am not saying that “healers” in the Visayas are in company with these figures, though in this chapter I ask how the alliance of a “healer”, in this case Santa

58 Eric Gamalinda, My Sad Republic (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, c2000), 154.

59 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from The South African Postcolony” American Ethnologist 26, no. 2 (May 1999): 297. “Occult economy” has been defined by Jean and John Comaroff as, “the deployment of magical means for material ends or, more expansively, the conjuring of wealth by resort to inherently mysterious techniques, whose principles of operation are neither transparent nor explicable in conventional terms.” For my purposes, it captures both ends of what I observed during my fieldwork.
Regla, with burgeoning monied interests, is unusual in bearing out a set of social relations that appear to outlast its origins, with legacies and consequences for future generations. Mixing too much money with the “benevolent” art of healing brings about new (and old) social relations for which the Sornito family was known. I observed and spoke with many healers/sorcerers in Santa Barbara and the nearby towns. The bayad (payment) to these healers were often considered donations, and were said to be relatively small. This contrasted with what I heard about the money that moving between the Sornitos and both Santa Regla mediums.

I had fond memories of the first Santa Regla, who treated me like one of her own when we visited her place during my childhood. But as I pursued questions about her in 2010 I found distinctions between her and the new Santa Regla, Ben, beginning to blur. It was not so much an issue of whether I believed in magic and faith healing or sought to question others’ belief, but rather one of the people involved and their intentions. Too much money and property were involved in the Sornitos’ relationship with Santa Regla, such that healing seemed secondary. How does one interpret this exchange? Should it detract or taint the power and esteem afforded to a healer?

Isabel tried to explain the locals’ reticence in talking about Santa Regla. “Most people don’t want to be mocked and will deny having gone to see or even believe in her powers.” The fear that people would find out that they went to a “healer” or a baybaylan for advice was not something that most Santa

---

60 Fenella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 103. In Fenella Cannell’s discussion of healers and the people who go to them, who in her fieldsite were generally poor, they understand utang (debt) to be a category similar to that of Mauss’ notion of the gift. It is not a pure gift (free), but comes with a certain obligation, made in the form of gratitude and gifts (sometimes monetary) to pay respect to the healer.
Barbarahanons wanted to talk about or admit to. F. Landa Jocano, among the foremost authorities on the practices that were branded “folk healing” in the Philippines, noted in 1973: “There is a dearth of materials on what makes it possible for these two seemingly divergent methods of healing (allopathic and indigenous) to exist and be in operation side by side in the same community without much conflict.”

Unlike Westerners who came in search of “alternative medicine” in the Philippines and elsewhere in non-industrial regions, many residents of Santa Barbara displayed a hostile or skeptical stance. Generally, educated people considered healers “quacks” only sought after by the poor who could not afford a doctor or hospital would. Despite this initial difficulty, when I began to meet people willing to speak of going to a healer, I found it more common for people of diverse and sometimes considerable financial means to consult a healer than I was initially led to believe. As if in answer to Jocano, that “allopathic” or “Western” medicine and indigenous healing do exist side-by-side, though not without some conflict.

The business of healing was tricky. As a healer one had to maintain a mystique, or as people told me, a “faith” in your abilities to heal, to grant petitions, and drive away “bad” things like the malign spirits or ghosts of the dead. It was often said to me, “If your faith is true, your wish can be granted.” In the Ilonggo language, a “native healer” is manogbulong or mananambal, although it was rare that I heard either of those terms used unless I asked someone specifically to

---


translate “healer” into the local languages. The substitution at first seemed odd. More often than not I heard the English words quack doctor, healer or sometimes the common Filipino term across the archipelago baybaylan. The word for sorcerer or one who can do malign magic, was used almost exclusively in the local dialect - manughiwit. On occasion someone would say witch. According to Alicia Magos, who did a close study of the mara-am tradition in the town of Antique not far from Santa Barbara, a baybaylan presides over rituals that invoke supernatural beings. The baybaylan is often an “elected” or chosen individual by the ancestors. He or she has a surog (spirit-guide) that can be called upon to assist in diagnosing an illness, placate an unhappy spirit that may have been offended by the actions of the living, especially in cases where the spirit’s territory was encroached upon.  

In the Philippines at large, the term baybaylan is common parlance for those who heal by prayer, divining, performing rituals, “psychic operations,” prescribing herbs (arbulario), and mediating between human and spirit worlds. Practicing healing can mean a lot of different things depending on the region, and varies from individual to individual. This seems like an obvious point, however those who practice “native” healing were often lumped together as less-than “real” medical practitioners. In a country which exports around 12,000 nurses abroad every year and where 300 colleges of nursing have mushroomed in the capital city Manila in

---


64 Harold M. (Harold Morrow) Sherman, “Wonder” Healers of the Philippines (Los Angeles: DeVors, 1967). Harold Sherman’s text *Wonder Healers of the Philippines*, follows the practice of two Filipino psychic healers, describing the notorious practice of performing surgery without medical instruments or appearing to touch the body yet extracting “diseased” tissue from the patients.
less than five years, there was no dearth of knowledge when it came to modern medicine there.

I went to the person I thought would be the standard-bearer for doubt and refusal of the persistence and power of the baybaylans, the local parish priest of Santa Barbara, Reverend Juanito Ma. Tuvilla. When I asked him about what he thought about baybaylans, his first answer came out as a story. He said that when the first priest, J. Juan Ferrer arrived to the visita of Catmon to initiate the site as a proper pueblo with its own parish, it has been reported that for many nights he could not sleep because the music and drums of the local baybaylans kept him awake.

“Do you believe this story?” I asked.

“Yes! There are many baybaylan here. There always have been. They were once upon a time a powerful force here,” he said. I showed him the historical archives about Santa Barbara becoming an independent parish:

“After the Bishop of Cebu granted Visita Catmon the status of independent parish in 1760, the Augustinians immediately established their foothold and assigned Padre Juan Ferrer as the first Parish Priest of Santa Barbara. […] The natives still believe in anitos and spirits and rely on the powers of the baybaylans for healing the sick and the afflicted.[…]Like all other developing communities, Santa Barbara has also gone through birth pains prior to growth. Although many of the natives accepted Christianity as earlier mentioned, the missionaries found it hard to dissuade them from their pagan practices and beliefs considering they had been practicing them for centuries.”

65 Barnaby Lo, “FRONTLINE/WORLD . Rough Cut . Philippines: Have Degree, Will Travel | PBS,” accessed March 30, 2014, http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/rough/2007/12/philippines_hav.html. While the knowledge and institutions that disseminate so called modern medicine are not in short supply in the Philippines, it is ironic then that there is a shortage of medical staff and facilities in many of the remote (and sometimes not so remote) parts of the Philippines itself. The Former Department of Health Secretary, characterized emigration not just as “brain drain”, but more like “brain hemorrhage.”

He put on his glasses and skimmed the page. “Yes, that part where it says it was difficult to ‘dissuade’ the baybaylans. That was the drumming.” British anthropologist Rodney Needham in *Belief, Language and Experience* said, “[…] in mythical imagination there is always an implied act of belief, that without belief in the reality of its object myth would lose its ground, and that such belief is intrinsic and required of the mythical mode of application.”

Here was the parish priest proclaiming his “belief” in baybaylans, at least in their existence and influence. I asked him if he had ever been to a healing. He had, but not as a facilitator. He had gone as a witness to miracles. He then seemed to backtrack and said, “I don’t know if I believe these people can really heal, but I believe that God works in all kinds of ways.”

Needham goes on to say, “Usually, however ethnographers provide no rules for the interpretation of their reports about belief, and then appear to take it for granted that belief is a word of as little ambiguity as ‘spear’ or ‘cow.’” However ambiguity on the questions of belief persisted, not just by my own attempts to “make sense” of statements or actions that appeared contradictory, but also within the community of people who both profess not to believe and then later on, revealed more complicated sentiments.

I was still curious about the persistence and even relatively extensive numbers of *baybaylan* in urban and rural communities across the Philippines. In the poblacion alone, I counted around five practicing healers. This did not include

---


68 Ibid.
dozens more in neighboring barangays. While many Filipinos who lived a “modern”
existence, that is with jobs in the city, personal cars that sometimes came with
personal drivers, and obtained their food at supermarkets or fast food chains rather
than at market or direct from the farm, many would consult a healer on occasion.
The Sornito family was a rather exaggerated example, who were not only occasional
clients but had entered into an intimate and long-term emotional, spiritual and
financial relationship with a healer. The nature of this relationship had long been a
topic of speculation in the town, and when I arrived that speculation increased.
Rumors abounded that the “quack” for years was taking advantage of the family and
their money. That talk had been dormant for seven years since Melisa Mercado died
in 2000, but now it was being aired again since the appearance of Ben. Suspicion,
rumor, and even a slight air of fear permeated these conversations.

_Becoming Santa Regla_

Isabel invited me across the street one evening to speak with her mother,
Agnes. Agnes had been ailing for some time and was finally feeling well enough to
talk to me. They greeted me on the screened-off side terrace of the house. A few
other women were gathered there to talk and get away from the mosquitoes
emerging with the night. Isabel had told me earlier that Santa Regla for years was
her mother’s laundress. “Yes she was a _lavandera_ for hire. I don’t think she
graduated past the third-grade. She could not read or write. So she did our cleaning,”
reflected Agnes. “But then you know one day, I heard that she fainted in street. Not
far from here!” Agnes motioned with her hand somewhere down Hingco street,
right by the front door of the Cake House. “Her husband came for her and when she woke up, dios ko (my god!), Melisa was speaking Tagalog.”

“So it would have been unusual for her to speak Tagalog?” I asked.

“Yes! She only spoke the local dialect Karay-a. And then I hear, she is speaking in English! We go over to her home, and we heard her! It was true.”

“So then what happened?”

“Melisa, she said, I have seen things. I saw the Virgen. She was dark skinned. I knew immediately who she was. She was Santa Regla. And then, she was be visited by other spirits. Santo Nino. Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy. She would change. When she was Santo Nino, she acted like a child. She wanted candy and toys. You have seen all the dolls and toys in the house and in the Farm. Those were offerings to Santo Nino!”

“Did she heal you?” I asked. Agnes hesitated.

“Yes, I had some problems, and I went to Santa Regla. I made my petition. She went into trance, and I was told my problems would go away. You know what? I was cured,” she said. “But it was the Sornitos that really believe on her. Nita had suffered terrible backaches for years. She went to all the doctors in the city. They could not cure her. She went to Santa Regla. Then, no more pain!”

“So what kind of relationship did they have?” I asked.

“A very close one,” she said. After that she seemed to steer the conversation intentionally in another direction.
We NO LONGER TALK

One day while we were taking in a breezy afternoon, I asked Terry if she kept up with the Mercado clan. She shook her head with emphasis. She was sitting up in her “daybed”, in a dark corner of the main floor across from the dining room. Dante had rigged a rope and pulley system so she could pull herself up from the sagging mattress. As she hoisted herself up, she said, “WE – DO – NOT – TALK – NOW.” Jessica ushered me aside from a visibly annoyed Terry and explained.

“The Mercados and the Sornitos stopped talking around the time your Auntie Nita died. In 2008. No one is quite sure why. The children of Melisa do not like to talk about it with anyone.”

The Healer and the Train

Isabel advised I speak to a neighbor named Boyet. I asked her if he or his family ever went to Santa Regla for healing. “No I don’t think so,” she said, “but Boyet knows a lot about the people who did. His father was a conductor on the Panay Railway, and his family had a store at the Santa Barbara stop.” It amazed me that it was a train engineer and his son who knew so much about Santa Regla and her following. Isabel added, “You will see. Santa Regla was known all over the Philippines. Without the train, there would not have been so many people who came to see her. The train made it possible for so many to see the healer.”

As the sun went down, the Santa Barbara plaza grew lively with activity. Girls uniformed in sailor blue and starch white blouses traded gossip. A
small group of Aeta kids, a tribal group known in the Philippines for their nomadic lifestyle, gamboled and lolled about. I approached a group of footballers finishing up their practice session. Boyet motioned me over as he gathered the balls then led me across the street to a batchoy resto (noodle café). "These guys are our ball keepers," he explained, and tossed the soccer balls to a girl who caught and threw them through a curtained storage area. Boyet invited me to sit at one of the long benches in front, but it was too loud. The tricycle motors were oppressive, and many Ilonggo people are soft-spoken. My audio recordings often picked up too much trilling butiki lizards, local songbirds, and wild neighborhood dogs howling at dusk. Boyet spoke to the owner and a door opened to a flight of darkened stairs leading up to a terrace. It was a lovely place to sit and view the entire Santa Barbara plaza. I watched the sun about to dip behind the decrepit but still charming baroque church. The bell rang for evening prayer.

In his official capacity Boyet was the town librarian, though there was not really a library to speak of. His hobby was history. Boyet was a storyteller and his specialty was the town. As often as he would take me into his cluttered office to show me documents relating to the town that he had obtained from his last trip to the National Archives in Manila, he would also invite me to a karaoke bar, his favorite place for swapping stories.

His specialty was telling tales of passengers of the old train that used to run from Iloilo City in the south of Panay up to Roxas City in the province of Capiz. What struck him was that many of the passengers who stepped off at the Santa Barbara stop were in search of Santa Regla. His family ran the only "tindera" or “sari-sari” (like a local 7-Eleven pit stop) at the station, so it often fell to them to
direct people to what was known as "the farm" in the neighboring barrio of Cadagmayan del Norte. The store was opened in 1965.

"You know, in those days, there were no roads. The way was dusty, so the train was the best way to go. Most of them were from the north in Capiz. I could tell they were rich. I mean really! They wore nice clothes and jewelry, even though the trip was dusty. I told them to take a tricycle to Bag-an, and then a jeep to Cadagmayan del Sur. Then they'd have to walk to get to the farm."

From childhood I remembered that while the "church" or "the farm" was relatively near "Poblacion"69, it was hard to get to for a long time. The Sornito sisters’ had a red tricycle, painted with the image of

---

Figure 3.1 Nenita and Teresita Sornito's personalized tricycle. Note: the top of the cab says, ST. REGLA PRAY FOR US

---

69 Usually denotes the central and commercial district of a town.
Santa Regla and other Catholic icons. On the hood their names were imprinted bright blue and outlined in yellow against the red - Nita & Terry.

Boyet's father before him helped build the railroad in the early 20th century. These kinds of jobs were handed down from father to son. It was a tradition not unlike families who inherited the right to handle a holy image, and change its regalia every week into clothes donated by families seeking "contact" with the image. His father’s job was, for Boyet, security that he had hoped to inherit.

"There were three types of trains. Engine 100 was the biggest. It could haul 30 cars. We called those market trains. The others were passenger trains, 6 coaches at most. It was 20 centavos to travel from here to Iloilo, but all the conductors knew my father and I. I traveled for free! The train was always late. Very Filipino, no?" Boyet laughed at this stereotype of Filipinos being always late. *Mamayang oras.* Later time. “The market used to be behind the station. In front was a cockfighting ring. All those people! Oh my God,” he exclaimed with misty excitement, “business was good!

---

70 Rich or poor, they would commission the most expensive and florid outfits, and await their turn for it to be worn by the image. After a couple days, the clothes would be returned to the benefactor, now become a holy relic. This is something I learned at the main shrine of the Birhen Nuestra de Santa Regla in Opon, about a one-hour flight from Santa Barbara, where the same family had been adorning the Birhen for four generations, since almost the beginning of the Spanish occupation of the Philippines.
And as the people waited for the always late train, they told me about their problems, why they came to see Santa Regla."

Boyet drew me a sketch of the station and its surroundings. I had seen the old station. It was run down and one could barely tell a railroad had ever existed there. A few worn letters on the walls were all that hinted to what existed here 30 years ago. The station house was rented, and the tenants allowed me to look around. The tenants sold bananas and flowers. This remnant was all that remained from a major vein of the sugar economy and infrastructure that lasted for nearly a century. One of the vendors gave me an orchid.

"Some people would come twice, sometimes just once a week. Sometimes whole families came! So we did not have to give them directions anymore. We just talked. They told me Santa Regla cured them where the doctors in the city could not! It was amazing!" Boyet lowered his tone, even with music blaring and one other small group on the far end of the balcony. "When I was working there one day and the passengers had left, I talked to a friend who was a local. He had a theory
that Santa Regla was taking advantage of the Sornitos, and maybe all those people who came to see her. He said that they were paying her thousands of pesos in installments! Can you imagine? That is a lot of money even for this time. You know, the Sornitos owned the land that was half this plaza. The other half was the Delgado side. General Tan Delgado was the town hero, known as the first Filipino outside Luzon to declare war on the Spanish and then the Americans. I think the families donated it as the town center. Maybe that was when your great-great grandfather was the mayor.”

The man to whom Boyet was referring was not in fact my great-great-grandfather, but we continued. Boyet had been friends with Romulo Sornito, Terry’s brother, and locally known as ‘Moly. ‘Moly died very young. Boyet told me that as a child his most vivid memory was of going to ‘Moly’s house and playing with marbles. The way he described it, the Cake House was a funhouse, in which there were marbles of all colors and sizes.

There were many such evenings that I met Boyet for a beer and conversation at the karaoke bar. As the evening progressed, the staff of the Santa Barbara museum and others would join us. Since the town and historic preservation was their main interest, in no time they were swapping stories. In a town small enough that most people were related, stories often meant gossip about each other. It was times like these when local people were finally willing to tell their stories of Santa Regla, the healer that for decades people came by train from afar to see.

The karaoke bar was the only two-story structure in the town outside the Municipal Hall, and from the deck Isabel pointed to the spot where Melisa fainted. I
noted that it happened just down the block from my Aunt’s house. “Talking about Melisa again?” asked Boboy. Boboy was married to one of the mayor’s staff. His real name was Mike, as Boyet’s real name was Juan. Nicknames were so common that mail sometimes did not get delivered if the letter was addressed to an individual’s proper name, which was strange as there were likely to be a hundred Boyets and Boboys in Zone 1 of the poblacion.

“Of course we are talking about Melisa, that is what she is doing her research about,” said Isabel. Ever since Terry left the house and I had relocated, Isabel had been somewhat protective of me.

“Well she was a fraud, but she healed my cousin,” said Boboy.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Mind you, I don’t believe in this stuff. She was a fake! But my auntie believed and took her daughter to Melisa.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“I was very young. But my cousin got sick. We couldn’t afford to see a doctor then, so someone suggested we see Melisa. Everybody heard of her of course. My mother protested, saying Melisa was a quack, but one Tuesday my Aunt went to see her and took me along. Tuesdays and Sundays were the days that people went to see Santa Regla. In those days, there was no real road to Cadagmayan. We had to ask a neighbor to carry my cousin. My father was working in the rice fields and my cousin’s father worked in a sugar mill in Negros, so it was too far for him to come in time.” Boboy stopped talking as one of his friends stepped up to the karaoke machine and he dialed-up his selection on the large screen. “Stop singing already!” Boboy taunted him. “Someday someone might shoot you!” There was laughter
across the small crowd, at allusion to the violent altercations around karaoke renditions of Frank Sinatra’s “My Way”. Often these were fatal shootings, and had been mainly in Manila. By then the events were the stuff of morbid jokes across the Philippines. “So I went,” he continued. “I could not believe how big the place was! Your aunts built that for Melisa in the middle of a forest? You have been there, no?”

“Yes, since I was a child,” I said. “I understood them to be part of the family.” Sometimes in these encounters I would become the subject of questioning as much as those I was “interviewing.” I withheld saying my family had long been divided over our association with the branch of the Sornitos devoted to Santa Regla.

“Well we got there a little after dawn but the line was already so long! Your Lola Day was passing out numbers because the waiting room was full. It wasn’t until noon that we got in. By the time we got into the waiting room, your Lola Day had asked us some questions. She specifically asked for an item of clothing from the patient. We gave her my cousin’s pajamas that we had brought with us.”

Boboy’s story had become familiar to me. In all the late nights I had spent at weddings, funerals, birthday parties, fiestas, after work karaoke, or with the local ladies’ mahjong group, I had heard variations on it. The stories were strikingly consistent and told as if a confession or a secret. If I were to start conversation about her or ask questions, people were reluctant to talk. However in certain situations, such as the informality of the karaoke bar or in a group of people playing mahjong where everybody might decide to go along with my suggestion to speak about Santa Regla, I found out that almost everybody had a story connected to the healer. The other striking fact was her following seemed to transcend the boundaries of Santa Barbara. One could trace that to the train, as Boyet contended. I asked him when
the train stopped running and was dismantled if her following diminished. He told me that was a question for the children of Melisa Mercado, and perhaps Terry. “But you will not get a lot out of Terry. She is under a strong influence. Maybe she will tell you. But I can say that Rizal Street became part of the National Highway, so more people could come by car or jeepney.” And then, almost by way of an afterthought, he mentioned, “There was always the mail too.”

The Mahjong Ladies

While I loved spending time with Terry, especially after our communication improved with the typing machine, she eventually got tired of typing. And there were certain questions that she got upset about and then refused to “talk” for a spell. Her intentional silences were usually prompted when I asked a question about Ben or Chan. Why were they around so much? Why do people say that Ben has a lot of your things from the house in his house? Why did he have the Hi-Lux? Did you pay to build his house? Why do people say that Ben is taking advantage of you? These broached a boundary with Terry.

Terry’s silence contrasted with the banter and gossip at the mahjong table. I spent many nights with Isabel and her friends, which included my cousin Flora. Many of the women were single or separated, with grown children. After the workday they either congregated at Isabel’s or, more often, at Conchie’s house which was on the opposite side of the Cake House from Isabel’s. Flora was often the one to pick me up from the Cake House. She would greet Terry, who would often grumble. Terry was old-fashioned. She did not think it proper for young ladies to be going out at night. But Flora was very convincing. “Terry, she will be
just with us! She needs to go out and in order to learn Kinaray-a.” Terry would relent or she would get tired and go to bed, and Flora and I would walk off into the night. I would not have been afraid to walk around the village by myself in the dark if it were not for the packs of *azkals* (street dogs) known to lurk in the dark. I had rejected the U.S. health center’s strong suggestion that I take the rabies shot, since I had been to the Philippines dozens of times before and never been bitten by anything larger than a mosquito. But it was at times like this, with several dogs following and nipping at my heels that I sometimes regretted that decision. Flora, in her sandals and shorts, had no apprehension and would take her handbag and swat at the dogs with a stern ‘shoo!’ The dogs would scatter farther down the block.

Conchie’s house was closer to the main square and the Municipal Hall, so there was a lot of foot traffic going by, even late into the night. She lit up her cinderblock porch and would set out a table and plastic chairs, with most people lounging on the stone fence. They were taking turns at playing mahjong. I was usually given a prominent seat at the table. My first night learning to play mahjong was confusing because no one formally explained the rules. These ladies, who often referred to their coterie as the “mahjong group”, would drink, smoke, and talk. Conchie was married, but I rarely saw her husband. Her children came in and out, mostly occupied by the tv. One of the most popular tv shows at the time was *Dyosa*, with the Australian-Filipina Anne Curtis, a mestiza beauty, playing a young girl who discovers that she has supernatural powers and is in fact, a goddess. A lot of young girls in the barrio dreamed of being Anne Curtis.

The mahjong ladies were loud, would speak of just about anything without reserve, and laughed a lot, even though many of the stories they shared had to do
with financial hardship or sickness in the family. I would go through the motions with them of mixing the tiles. Flora would help me set up my wall of tiles. “We play a simple game, for a few pesos. You will learn.” As I learned the game, I also learned that these gatherings were less about playing the game. For these women the gambling was an activity for them to congregate, but really the whole thing was a forum to speak of anything on their minds. One would not exactly characterize them as feminists. Many of them had quite strict Catholic values. If they were married the women were often the main child caregivers and stayed at home. They passed on their impressions of America to me. “Mas mahal” (very expensive) was mentioned a lot. They peppered me with questions and generalizations.

“It’s true the maids there get paid more than the office workers here!”

“Life there is hard, I think. You should come back home and live here in the Philippines. You can have maids, drivers, cooks.”

“You don’t have family or helpers around to help you with the children?”

The last question reminded me of a dissertation that I was looking over at the archives at the Ateneo University in Manila. Later I had the chance to meet the author, and she said to me, “I cannot imagine finishing the dissertation without my ya-ya (hired caregiver).” Balancing dissertation writing and family was not among the problems faced by the mahjong group. They talked about their problems with men, friends, children and lack of money. Sometimes the conversation veered to sickness and death. It was one of the few times during my fieldwork that I felt at ease. At the Cake House, I was in the dark about a lot of things. Terry would often get tired of typing or get mad and sulk without indicating why. Jessica was busy with her side-job as a seamstress, and Dante was often away because his mother was
ill. I spent a lot of time alone, reading the books, staring out into the rain drenched streets, taking photos of the house and its contents, and attempting to draw the intricate patterns from all over the house. One of my few companions was the dog, Queenie. On rainy days, very few people passed by or dropped in to chat. During mahjong nights, everybody seemed to be exactly who they purported to be, even as we tried to “fake” each other to win a round.

All of them except Flora had been to see Santa Regla. But they often commented that the relationship between the Sornitos and the healer was strange. One woman said, “I never understood how such educated people could do what they did. All that money! And then they rarely socialized with anybody. They would shut that gate and only a few people ever came in and out. I saw your Aunties in church when the bell called for prayer, but sometimes they were not there. Everybody knew they were having their worship with Melisa in that big, big place in Cadagmayan. Meliton, he never paid attention to any of that. He was into betting at cockfighting and spent most of his time in his workshop. Your Da-Day (Meliton’s wife) was the strange one. She was a *cinco por seis.*” It was the first time I ever heard that term.

“A five-six?” I echoed back.

“It’s the rate of interest. Your Lola Day was, how do you call it now? A loan-shark. Her interest rate was high! Twenty percent, sometimes eighty.” The other ladies chimed in.

“Moly bought the first scooter in the town. But it was your Lola Day that used it! She would get up before the first cock’s crow, before the sun was up, even before many of the farmers would be awake! People dreaded hearing the ‘tuk-tuk’ of
her scooter. People closed their blinds when they heard her coming. She knocked on their door very loud and for a long time. She was very persistent. Then she would show up on payday, and get her payment then. Many people would go home with a very small salary.”

“My mother was a teacher with Da-day in the elementary school. That is how she started her business. She would loan gamay-gamay (very small) amount at first. But then, when people could not pay her back, she was ruthless. People began to dislike her. But they could not help going to her. They needed money.” A silence descended on the group for a moment, as if the gossip, especially of the dead had perhaps gone too far.

Isabel jumped at this moment to answer a scratching sound. “It’s Lilot!”

One of the women looked up from a project she was collaborating on with Isabel, while others took their turn at the mahjong table. They were making decorations for the upcoming All Soul’s Day fiesta. The many hours they spent bent over the handmade stars and bows made their own backs ache. Lilot was a hilot, or a specialist in Filipino massage. When she came in, she looked gaunt. Lilot, herself a healer, had been afflicted by something for a long time. However she had no other means to earn a living. One of the women laid down on a woven bench, and Lilot went to work. Despite her seeming frailty, her work showed that she was quite muscular. Conchie said to me, “You should hire Lilot. She is very good, and she needs the money. Wait here until she is finished.” For the moment, that stopped our talk about the five-six. But I noted it in my diary as something to find out about later. It was not lost on me that while we were gambling, our talk often revolved around money, marriage and death. But I was surprised to hear how much of it was
about money and the small business that many of the women ran to supplement the household income. In the end, it seemed to be all about how to get money to enter the home, just like the money throwing ritual. The subject of the five-six seemed to taint the everyday talk of business and home economy. I could immediately sense it was more of a taboo subject than any talk of healers and mediums.

Memory of ‘The Farm’

Most healers I met operated out of their homes. However the first Santa Regla, Melisa Mercado, had a big complex built for her in the neighboring barangay of Cadagmayan del Norte.

Since Melisa Mercado died in 2007, her several children inherited the place, but no healings ever took place there again. Since Terry was not on speaking terms
with the children, one of whom was her namesake, I was not sure how to go about approaching them. My cousin Flora told me she knew one of the children. He ran a shipping center near her dental clinic in the city. I had brought with me the few photographs that we had taken of our family visits to Santa Barbara and to “The Farm.”

I remember the heaping plates of rice that came out in succession from a corridor of a structure that was called “The Farm.” There was no discernible cultivation on the premises, but The Farm was a name that stuck. The building had different wings and stairways that to a child’s perspective, seemed to run every which way. The room we usually were ushered into first was a dining area, with a long table that could seat about 15 people. I thought the people who lived here must have been rich, because the place was enormous with many *katulong* (maids or helpers). But these were actually the children of the person I was told to call Tita Melisa, *Auntie*, also known as Santa Regla. I had never seen a Filipina smoke cigars, but Auntie Melisa did. She had a gap-toothed smile, and laughed a lot. She was a gregarious woman.
No one I heard of had an entire healing center that looked like a castle built for them, like Santa Regla did. Whenever my family visited the Cake House, we inevitably visited The Farm. If the Cake House was different from the neighboring structures, the Farm was even more dramatic. The ceilings soared and stairways ran in all directions. The structure was brick, one wing rounded like a cylinder. The Farm looked like a medieval fairy tale in the jungle. At that time, there were no houses nearby that I could discern through the thick forest.

The driver of my aunties’ tricycle would be called, rushing over from wherever he lived, and we would pile in, sometimes too full so that I would hang off the edge of the side-car. The Farm seemed far from the Cake House. The poblacion then was barely paved and quickly gave way to dirt roads, often muddy from tropical rain.
Each day during fieldwork that I had meals at the Cake House, I sat at a small table on the second level looking either out the window, or at the life-size Santa Regla. One day as Dante hastily cleared my lunch I learned that Chan and some other people were on their way over. Dante told me to listen and watch carefully, especially Chan’s “secretary.” Jessica scoffed and said she was not just a secretary.

“I have seen Chan’s bedroom at her home,” whispered Jessica. “She has ya-ya’s for the grandchildren of course, but then there are ya-ya’s for the ya-ya and even one for Chan! They sleep together in the same room!” I did not think Jessica was implying that Chan was gay, but that Chan was a grown woman with many assistants with her at all times. I also did know what commenting on Chan’s ya-yas had to do with her supposed secretary.
Chan arrived and the secretary, Cherry, arrived with her. Also with them was my Aunt’s Aunt, Lisa Castro. Despite our connection by interfamilial marriage, I felt on guard with her. She seemed courteous enough, but remained closer to Chan and whispered a lot into her ear. Chan and her entourage had brought lunch with them. Dante, Jessica and I set about arranging the aluminum pans heaping with food on the kitchen table and getting out dishes and place settings. When that was finished I went upstairs and was surprised to see Chan lighting the candles around the image of Santa Regla, and Mrs. Castro taking out a new prayerbook and putting on her reading glasses. Auntie Terry was sitting next to the image with rosary beads. Chan kept asking her if she needed anything. Then Cherry came up the stairs and Chan motioned her to get into place. A prayer session was underway with Cherry at the helm. Jessica was correct that Cherry was not just a secretary though as far as I knew, according to Catholic law, neither could a woman serve a priest. The prayer session continued for almost an hour. Cherry prompted the small group:

To obtain Through her Intercession Some Special Grace
In the name of the Father...

Terry, sitting in the chair nearest the image, had on her strongest bifocal glasses and held the booklet close to her face. Chan stood in one corner of the room, looking at the book but observing everyone else, still reciting in lock-step as if she had memorized the lengthy script. Mrs. Castro sat by the record player holding her booklet, scrutinizing the text, chanting back the loudest.

Our Lady of the Rule!

Mother of Divine Graces

And source of our happiness
Confident of obtaining the graces and favor
which you lovingly grant on those who ask
I beg your powerful protection.

Cherry:  Mother of Divine Grace, source of our happiness,
Pray for us.

Cherry:  On the very day that Father Avalle placed the first picture
Of the VIRGEN DE REGLA in the church
In 1735, this Cruz Lauron ordered two candles to be burned
in front of it.
They were the first to be lighted.
Instantaneously the poor man was cured.

The group:  Our Lady of the Rule, comfort of mortals:
I come to you to pray to you in my affliction,
Humbly prostrate
Before your Holy Image...

Aside about Chan
Chan’s ancestors were buried in a Filipino-Chinese cemetery located
between Iloilo City and Santa Barbara, near a major jeepney transfer station. Once
she took me to visit the grave of her son. The mausoleum was the size of a small
house, made of marble and polished granite. It was raining so the visit was quick.
She left the engine of her minivan running. Chan lit incense sticks in front of the tomb as her helpers swept and replaced the withered flowers with fresh ones, finally dusting the portrait at the foot of the tomb. I was surprised to see he had a boyish face and as she raised her head from prayer, I asked Chan what happened. “You know,” she said. “He was only nineteen. But he died of a heart attack. Very rare! The doctor said he ate too much bulalo.”\(^7\) I felt for Chan. Beyond that however I could tell that the loss affected her deeply.

**Loud Whispers**

During the hour that Cherry led the chorus of the novena to Santa Regala, Dante stood motionless behind the half-open sliding doors of the volada. These passageways were created such that “servants” could pass through the house unseen, though I had never seen Dante use it in such a way until that day. Chan seemed to instill in both Dante and Jessica a different attitude. When the last amen concluded the novena, Dante sprang back to life and down the stairs. I followed, confused as to what had occurred. When Dante spun around and saw me behind him, he almost hissed at me. “Go back up! Go watch your Auntie. You must watch her with Chan!”

I went back up but found no one in the sala. The image was surrounded with dissipating smoke from the candles. I went to the balcony upstairs to see if they were taking in the view and the sunny day, but didn’t find them. Back on the second level I noticed the door to Terry’s bedroom, usually open during the day, was shut. Inside I could hear voices. I knocked, then tried to open the door but found it locked.

\(^7\) *Bulalo* is a local soup that is rich and fatty because its central ingredient is the bone marrow of a cow.
My heart began pounding. What reason did I have to assume any harm would come to my Aunt, from these people? But then, why lock an always-open door? I beat on it and started to yell. I could not help myself. I could hear Dante calling me from the top of the stairwell. “You must go in! You cannot leave her alone with them!” I shouted that they unlock the door, and a moment later it opened. Terry was in a chair, with Mrs. Castro’ head close to her ear. Chan and Cherry were pacing around her. In my head the questions I wanted to ask never came out of my mouth. “Why did you lock door?” I asked. “What was going on?” When they did not answer me, I clumsily told them their food downstairs was getting cold.

**Danda**

The day had finally come that I could meet Danda. She had been a beautician early in life, which was evidenced by the fact that she maintained herself well. She was a slim woman who often wore neon, low-cut tanktops with a fishnet underneath. She wore a minimal makeup with a streak of color somewhere, whether a bright pink lipstick or metallic eyeshadow. She had the same cloudy, steel eyes as Dante.

That afternoon Danda arrived to give Terry a makeover. She set up a chair by the open door, where an enormous mirror was encased in a wood carved sideboard. “The one thing too heavy for Ben to take out the door,” Jessica said. The birds in the aviary were loud, as if they recognized Danda’s presence, and she hummed with them when there was a pause in the conversation. More often than not we were trying to hear each other through the bird chatter, itself a part of the Cake House.
“So you know Ben?” I asked

“Yes.”

“What is he like?”

“A bak-la,“72 whispered Danda mischievously. Then she shifted her tone. “A big man. A black man.” While the conspiratorial tone could be construed as homophobic or racist I did not think this was the case. Historically baybaylan have been women, and when men become baybaylan, and they often wore women’s garments.73 “You know at first, Chan comes to me, and says ‘we found a new medium!’ I was skeptical. Melisa had predicted one of her children would inherit the power to heal. But so far, no one has said anything. One of them is a police chief. One of them is a nurse in Saudi. One of them lives in the States. You have met them all as children. The Sornitos put them through school, you know. I think it is Margarita who lives in the States now. But I went to see for myself about this new medium. At first, I was shocked! He was a man! And then he showed me how he heals. You know what? When Melisa went into trance, she would gently sway and the spirit would take hold and she would fall, except her husband was always there to catch her. A few minutes later she would wake up, and speak in a different voice, a different language. She was a different person, you know? But this Ben, he would make big movements. And as I said, he was a big man. He would dance and things in room began to shake,” at this point Danda stopped and laughed. “You know, I got scared he would push me over with his wild dancing.”

72 Usually denotes a homosexual, crossdresser, or transgender person.
73 Strobel, Babaylan: Filipinos and the Call of the Indigenous, 2.
Healers Afoul of the Law: Part I, The Mayor

Jessica explained that the Mayor of Santa Barbara wanted to meet with me. “You will see,” she said. “He has been very interested in what is going on here.”

The municipal hall of Santa Barbara was only 100 meters from the front door of the Cake House and despite the short distance Jessica escorted me up the lane to my appointment. She stopped short of the front doors to chat with a tricycle driver, and motioned me to continue up the stairs.

I walked into a large, breezy room with an open balcony the width of the salon. I could tell this was a public meeting area. The narra (mohagany) wood floors were polished, and columns of stacked chairs rest on one wall. I entered the outer office through glass doors to incessant chatter and the clack of typewriters, a sound I had not heard in years, pausing for a moment as heads turn to look at me before returning to the conversations and tasks at hand. A receptionist behind an enormous desk asked my name and then, somewhat incredulously, whether I was Terry and Rosa’s niece. I acknowledged I was. “Who is your father?” she asked.

“Eduardo, son of Juan,” I said. She grabbed my wrist and we exited back out the glass doors into the large room. I thought we are about to go back down the stairs and that she would toss me out of the town hall, but right at the top she spun me around and pointed to the rafters of the ceiling.

“Juan!” Her eyebrows rise to the top of her forehead. “Are you the granddaughter of Juan Sornito? Naku!” (My goodness!) I had not noticed when I first entered but above the stairs was a long row of portraits and photographs of past mayors of Santa Barbara. The first was Martin Tan Delgado. His portrait was a drawing. Next to it, where there should be another image, there was a blank space.
in the frame. Underneath, the caption read, JUAN SORNITO. “We have been looking for a picture of him. Do you have one?” Another woman emerged from the glass doors. Her hair and makeup were done and she patted her forehead with a handkerchief once she entered the non air-conditioned space.

“The mayor is almost ready to see you,” she said. She looked at the space of Juan Sornito’s portrait. “It is nice to see that you have taken an interest in your history,” she said.

In the mayor’s office he stood to greet me and the first thing I noticed were his shoes, gleaming black with a square tip. He was genial with a quiet authority. “Thank you for coming,” he said. “How is Auntie Terry?” He was interrupted by a call. “Excuse me.” I hear the receptionist on other side of the glass wall, talking, as the mayor nodded, and then hung up. “Sorry, something is always coming up in this job,” he said. The nameplate on the front of his desk read,

DANIEL S---, M.D.

“So you are a doctor?” I asked.

“Yes, yes. I have a practice in the city. In fact, at your Uncle’s hospital.” He smiled, but then seemed awkward. “So, you know the story about what is going on with your Tita Terry, no?” I shook my head. I said I only heard that there was a new Santa Regla. “I became very concerned about your Auntie Terry,” he said. “She has been alone ever since Attorney Sornito died and then your Tita Nenita. They really took care of everything.” He picked up the phone again and requested some papers to be brought in to him. The receptionist appeared with a file. “You see?” he said, raising a brow.
The form was a police report in English, though I was unable to discern the nature of the “crime”.

THIS IS TO CERTIFY…
3:00 PM 27 March 20

Mayor S---- informed this police station thru telephone call that there was a suspicious person at the house of Teresita P. Sornito.

 [...] 

Said group of persons head by Ben S---- and a resident of Barangay A— together with [series of names] was invited to this police station for verification together with the Toyota Hi-Lux plate number F---- used by the group of Ben S. said vehicle was temporarily in custody of this police station for failure to provide the necessary documents to prove his ownership.

The Mayor could see I was puzzled. “Why did you call?” I asked.

He smiled. “You know my mother is a Sum---, and she is related to your family. So we are relations.” I tried to acknowledge the kinship in a friendly manner, as I understood him to be aligning our mutual interests. He also reiterated something commonly known about surnames in many towns of the Philippines, that under Spanish colonial administration, the surnames of the locals were recorded to match the first letter of the town. When the visita of Catmon became a proper municipal entity called Santa Barbara, it meant that ‘S’ surnames abounded. “I am concerned about your Auntie Terry. I do not think that,” he paused, “Ben and his – gang – have good intentions.”

“So what does this have to do with the car?” The Hi-Lux was Auntie Terry’s vehicle.

“I believe that Ben was trying to steal it. He claimed to just be borrowing it. But he showed the police false papers stating that he was the owner.”

“Who would forge the papers?” I asked.
The mayor smiled again. “That is where things get complicated. I believe you know Mrs. Chan? You know she is powerful. Her brother built the airport nearby. And…” he paused. “She says she is a believer in that man Ben, and has your Aunt convinced as well.”

*A Dilemma*

Over the days that stretched out into weeks I came to understand what the mayor meant by Terry’s “belief” in Ben, or at least his incarnation as Santa Regla. She suffered from severe bouts of arthritis, and the Mayor had prescribed her an anti-arthritic medication, which she refused to take on the grounds that Santa Regla advised her not to take the pills given by doctors. “I do not trust them,” she would type. “Santa Regla says that God provides all we need to heal.”

Jessica would go out in the evenings and come back with an armful of a green, leafy plant. I watched her as she took it out to the dirty kitchen, boiled it, laid it out to dry, and then wrapped it into poultices. She had several of these ready to go when Terry complained about arthritis. One night I asked to go with her. Jessica told me that it was getting more and more difficult to find the plant as she had gathered the ones that grew nearby. We would have to walk longer distances to find it. Sometimes we would have to sneak into people’s backyards to harvest it. Jessica said that most people did not really use it, so it should not be an issue. Still we laughed together as we sometimes played out these plant foraging trips as spy missions where the goal was not to get caught or even be seen.

However when Terry did have a bout of arthritis, it was anything but fun and games. She would be in foul mood. She would call all three of us names. She
would accuse all of us of stealing from her. I would type to her that was not the case.
I told her I have my own money, and she does not need to worry about my expenses.
What was really going on was that I was heavily supplementing the household
expenses. I paid for a carpenter to fix the leak in the roof. I went to the market
every week with Jessica and contributed at least another 1000 pesos to the
household supplies. When we went out to eat, I hired a driver for the Hi-Lux, paid
for the gas, and for the restaurant bill. I knew that the pain was driving her mad in a
sense, yet I could not understand why she was so suspicious of us, and especially
that she would include me in that sentiment.

The day came that her pain was so intense it was difficult for everyone to bear. I
called a number of people. I called the Mayor. I called the doctors Rosa and her
husband down the block. I even called my mother, a retired nurse, in the U.S. My
mother asked, “What does Rosa say?”

“To give Terry the medicine.”

“Well give it to her. Doctor’s orders.”

“Yes, but she has the right to refuse.”

“She is not right of mind. Rosa is her cousin. The Mayor is her relation.
They are good doctors. They know Terry,” my mother said.

That evening, after an especially long trip to find enough of the plant for the
poultice, we applied it as usual. We cooked dinner. Terry barely ate her food,
complaining about the bad cooking. She threatened to dismiss Dante and Jessica.
She said they were incompetent and that they were stealing. She looked at me with
what I perceived as heavy disappointment. Terry usually liked to have a little tea
before bed. A messenger had come by earlier to drop off the medication. Dante came out with the tea, stirring it vigorously. Terry drank it, and went to bed as usual.

The next morning when I came downstairs, Terry was already awake and laughing. Jessica was grinning. I brought the type-pad over to Terry. “You see! It works! Santa Regla was right. I was right!” Terry laughed in triumph. I had not seen her such a good mood in weeks. I said into her ear, “I am so glad it worked.” We were a bunch of tricksters, but the trick worked. Jessica and Dante, despite being the recipients of some heavy verbal abuse the night before, were just as happy. “What she says when she is in pain, that is the pain talking,” said Dante.

“One more voice talking too,” said Jessica. The other “voice” in Terry’s mind was her unshaking belief in Santa Regla.

_A Breaking Point_

I kissed Terry on the head. I was going on a trip to the shrine for the Birhen de Nuestra de Santa Regla in Opon, Cebu. It was about an hour plane ride from Santa Barbara. It was the center of the Santa Regla’s worship in the Philippines and the location of an especially venerated image of the Virgen. Terry had typed, “Your Aunties and I went there every few years.” I promised I would bring her back something from the shrine. I had been in contact with the clerical staff at the church, and was confident I would be able to interview the parish priest and mingle with the congregation.

The trip itself was uneventful. When I arrived and introduced myself as a researcher, no one seemed to know what I was talking about. I mentioned the name of a contact and was told that person was away. They had me on a bench to wait for
somebody with some kind of authority. After about two hours the same lady I first spoke to came back. She asked me what I was doing. I said that I was a researcher from outside Iloilo working on a following of Santa Regla. There was an image and a house of worship there that had fallen into disrepair. I wanted to know more about the devotees to Santa Regla. The woman replied, “So do you intend to donate this property to the church? Do you have a documented miracle to report?” I realized that I would not be getting anything useful from the official church. I decided to wander around the grounds and the cathedral.

I went up to the cathedral and sat in a pew to watch people approach the image. It was much smaller than the two in Santa Barbara. It was more the size of a doll than the life-size ones I was used to looking at everyday as I ate my meals. Individuals and groups waited their turn to approach the image, which was behind thick glass and encased in gold housing. Each person would touch their hand to the glass, pray, and sometimes rub the bottom of the frame. I finally took a turn to look at the image up close. I saw handprints clouding the glass. The next thing I saw was the stone at the base where the devotees touched was worn smooth. A guard, seeing that I seemed more like a tourist than a petitioner, came up to me and explained that contact with the image often brought people comfort. “But they are not really touching the image,” I said. “That does not matter. It means a lot just to be close to this image. This is the one brought from Spain by Father Avalle. She has performed miracles.” He pointed to a wall hanging behind me. “The history of this image is written there.” It was so high I could barely make out the writing. I used my zoom lens to read it. It struck me that there was in fact an “original” image. St.
Augustine with his own hands had carved the first image of Our Lady of the Rule, which became a relic that survived the sacking of the city of Hippo.\footnote{Mary Anne Barcelona, \textit{Ynang Maria: A Celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Philippines} (Manila: Anvil Publishing, 2004), 22.}

One of the pastors was available after my visit with the image. He was curt and polite, but said that he could not help me. The church does not sanction any faith healers outside the church proper.

Before I boarded the plane back to Santa Barbara, I received a short but alarming text from Dante:

```
may problem sa cke haus umuwi
```

(there is a problem at the cake house come back)

I did not call for someone to drive the Hi-Lux to pick me up. I hailed a cab to take me the 3 km to into Santa Barbara. When I got out of the cab Jessica rushed out the gates in tears. “Chan came here with Lisa Castro and her lawyer. She convinced Terry that Dante and I were stealing. She wanted us dismissed.” For a long time, Terry had been threatening to fire Dante and Jessica. I liked them, and would have preferred for them to stay, but it seemed Terry’s prerogative to have the choice of whom she wanted as her caretakers. I never quite understood until now what kept Jessica and Dante around.

“So we went to the 	extit{municipyo} so the mayor could arbitrate. He could not convince your Auntie Terry. He told Chan she had no right to interfere in the affairs of the Sornitos. Chan claimed to be the executor of Terry, and Terry had signed papers giving her legal power of attorney.” The mayor contested the legality of her power of attorney. He said his own lawyers were to looking into it. In the
meantime, Terry said that she felt “unsafe” in her own home because of Jessica and Dante. She wanted to leave with Chan. The mayor was powerless to do anything about that.

“So Terry is not home!” I shouted in the street, loud enough that people stopped or poked their heads out their windows. The whereabouts of Terry were unknown. Dante insisted I come inside, have something to drink. He opened a beer for me. I drank it. He opened another, and sat next to me.

“We owe a lot to the mayor,” he explained. He raised his shirt, pointing to a long scar across his torso. “I was very sick. But we did not have money for the operation I needed. The mayor, he performed the operation for free. Your Auntie Terry has had many helpers in this house. Chan fired all of them. He placed Jessica and me here, to watch over Terry. We were to let the mayor know if anything suspicious happened. We watched Ben and his group take everything they wanted: your uncle’s tools that he used to build this house, the mirror, antiques, and then the image. After the image was gone, Terry was inconsolable for weeks, but when it was replaced, she seemed to forget. Then the incident with the Hi-Lux happened, and the mayor reported the theft. You know the rest.” He sat looking at me.

“What is the mayor’s interest in all this?” I asked.

“Because they are relatives,” he said.

“But they are not close relatives.”

“The mayor, he is concerned. Terry has money. She has land. He is the mayor. It is his duty to protect the citizens in his jurisdiction. This house…” Dante paused. “He wants to make sure Chan or Ben does not get this house. They have no
claim. But they are trying. You see how they whisper in Terry’s ear? She will sign away everything if we are not careful.”

“This is calculated. They are trying to take Terry away,” I said.

“You see the mayor has challenged Chan’s power of attorney,” he said.

“The court date is this week. They were afraid of your influence on Terry. The mayor encouraged it.”

Later that week, an SUV with tinted windows and police escort arrived to the Cake House. The mayor came out in his shiny black shoes and Ray-Ban sunglasses.

He asked if I wanted a ride into the city to witness the first court proceedings. I went. The mayor explained that he was basing the case on Terry’s mental state. He had her examined by a psychologist, to ascertain whether she could make sound judgments for herself. Chan insisted Terry was sound of mind. “Yet if she is sound of mind, why would she relinquish power of attorney to someone else? If she can make these decisions, she does not need an executor to act on her behalf. You see? It makes no sense except they are swindling her,” he went on.

We arrived at the courthouse and located the room where the hearing was to take place. I saw the mayor’s name, but it was not Chan’s name next to it. The name he was challenging was Lisa Castro, the nearest living kin to Terry. When we entered a row of men in orange jumpsuits and chains were waiting for their hearings on a long bench. Jessica and Dante had somehow traveled to the city on their own and I sat with them. Lisa Castro and Chan arrived. Terry was not with them. The hearing went fast. The judge postponed his ruling to a future date and banged the gavel. The mayor was outraged.
As we waited on the steps of the courthouse, he speculated that Chan had bribed someone to postpone the date so that while she had Terry in her custody, she could get her to sign all sorts of documents. “This could drag the legal proceedings for a long time. Chan is connected to the fifth richest family in the Philippines. Technically, she could drag this court case until she exhausted her opponents or until Terry died,” he said. When the mayor’s entourage pulled up he ushered me to the vehicles, and Lisa Castro came out of the courtroom. I acknowledged her and got into the car. I did not know what else to say. Back at the Cake House we circled the date of the next hearing on the calendar. I noticed other circles going back for months.

Later that week, the mayor’s office called the Cake House to tell us Terry had been located. She was at the home of Lisa Castro. This was the same woman who came to the house and locked me out of Terry’s bedroom after the prayer session to Santa Regla, and of course the same woman now petitioning to become her “executor” with Chan somehow behind all of it. I went over to the police station. The mayor was filing a missing person report, and considering a kidnapping report. We talked about the consequences of these actions. I told them I wanted to try to talk to Terry. The mayor thought it was dangerous. The chief produced another police blotter report to me. Dante and Jessica had reported death threats from Angel “Boy” Castro, the son of Lisa. The chief told me that Angel had been indicted for shooting a local congresswoman’s son. I asked why. “Shabu (methamphetamines) addict,” he said. “Boy is unpredictable. He is violent. The mayor says you cannot go without police escort.”
As if this day had not been surreal enough, Flora appeared from out of nowhere into the station, and volunteered to go with me. She said would bring her teenage son. I protested but she dismissed any possibility of danger. I thought of the first day I met her, when she came to the Cake House and first hinted to me that something bad was going on. “You might not catch everything they say. Do not worry. We will be okay,” she said.

So with three Santa Barbara police units, we drove out toward Lisa Castro’ house. It was located in the city, in the barangay of Mandurriao. We would have to obtain permission from the Mandurriao police to proceed into their jurisdiction. I was discombobulated, watching the familiar roads go by. We arrived at the Mandurriao police station. The counterpart officers hailed each other. The Santa Barbara police explained our reason for coming. The Mandurriao police acquiesced, however they would send a detail of their own to escort us to the house. I overheard whispers and a few snickers from the Mandurriao police. It seems that this is not the first time they have been called to the house of Lisa Castro. By the time we arrived to the house, there were five police cars in front, lights ablaze. Neighbors came out to what the massive police presence was all about. One woman shouted, “I told them the music was too loud!”

Loud rap music coming from the house filled the air. To one side, I saw a bunch of men at a table drinking. By the doorway, Lisa Castro came out. I asked if I could speak with Terry. “She does not want to talk to you. You have been taking advantage of her!” she screamed.

At first, I was calm, “How have I been doing that? I have no interest in her money. I live in America. I do not care about her money. I have been the one
paying for a lot in the house.” Lisa Castro was not used to being spoken back to by a younger person. Her pitch elevated to a screech.

“You should be ashamed! Shame on you! You were with the mayor at the hearing. You say you are on Terry’s side, but you are on the Mayor’s. He is our enemy.” Then her son Boy also came out of the house. He taunted me. The next thing I knew the three of us were embroiled in a shouting match. I felt the blood rush to my head. I recalled my kinaray-a lessons. My teacher was sympathetic to me and hated what was going on at the Cake House. I would ask to review the names of certain native plants since I had been visiting so many healers. She was more preoccupied with how I would deal with Chan and Ben should I have an encounter with them, thus she would have me write down and repeat how to ask pointed questions or insult someone to the quick in kinaray-a and ilonggo. The phrases were there. But Flora came up and gently pushed me behind her and apologized to Lisa Castro. She tried to explain, “Christina, she is part American. She does not fully understand our ways that seems rude to Filipinos. She just wants to see Terry.”

They continued to talk. Flora was a charmer. They even laughed and had one arm about each other’s shoulder. Lisa relented, but said we could not enter her house. She asked one of the girls by the door to get Terry.

Terry came out. A chair was set in the yard for her. I could tell by the look on her face she was in one of her angry moods. She spoke. Lisa Castro translated. “Why did you go to the hearing with the mayor! You betrayed me. The mayor is not my friend.” I did not have my computer. I too out my fieldwork notebook. I had a
heavy black marker in my bag. I wrote, turning the pages as I wrote in big, black script:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Auntie, I love you and I am concerned. I respect your decisions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I went to the hearing just to witness it. Nothing more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am not involved. I just listen and witness. I have done nothing to hurt you. Please forgive me if I offended you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lisa Castro continued to talk into Terry’s ear, Angel in the other. I do not know how anybody could hear anything over the din of the music. I recalled at that moment that one of the Mandurriaio police earlier mentioned visiting this place for “disturbing the peace.” Terry swatted the notebook away. She got up and went back inside the house.

In yet another uncanny coincidence of timing, Chan’s minivan pulled up. Chan came out and called my name in a conciliatory voice. Her lawyer and Cherry were with her as well. She fluttered some papers in her hand. I headed back to the flashing lights and the crowd, but then marched back and yelled all those kinaray-a insults to her face. I swore in English and got into the car. I told the chief I wanted to return to Santa Barbara immediately. Flora put her arm around me. “That is a horrible place,” she said.

‘Nang Fe

Most of the healers I met operated out of their homes. There is a common saying among and about anthropologists, “that when the anthropologist arrives, the spirits flee.” In my case, it was not so much that the spirits fled. In town and afield,
and within the community of healers in the area, gossip moved swiftly. I was known to most people before they were to me. I would arrive to a healer’s place, either on a Tuesday or Friday, considered auspicious days for healing, and introduce myself. The first healer I met, known as ‘Nang Fe, came out of her “healing room”, a little space off the main house, and said, “Ah, you are the one that peke from Cabatuan has a grudge against.” Peke meant “fake.” Already my objective stance was disarmed. I became curious about how and why she knew about me, and the accusation she voiced about the person who claimed to inherit the power of Santa Regla.

In Michael Taussig’s discussion about “fakery” in shamanism, the more interesting question is not whether a shaman is a peke or the real deal, rather that “fakery” (in his words, “trickery” or the “trick”) is part and parcel to shamanistic practice. Indeed to pull off a successful “trick” and then have the secret “exposed” is perhaps the most successful magic trick of all.75 He asks us to consider, “Could it follow […] that magic is efficacious not despite the trick but on account of its exposure?”76

This is not the first thing I considered regarding the ‘Nang Fe’s remark. What first came to my mind was actually something that has been pondered from Evans-Pritchard to Taussig as to the power of envy to cast spells, especially amongst

---


76 Ibid., 123.
a community of shamans.77 Where Evans-Pritchard saw “witchcraft” among the Azande as that which in part accounts retroactively to the question, “why me?” in the instance of misfortune or tragic accident, Taussig draws attention to the ubiquity of envy betwixt shamans. Envy is a powerful form of magic, perhaps the oldest and most cutting.78 After what had happened in Mandurria and the ensuing drama, the question of “why me” was on my mind. While I had come to observe a local healer’s practice, I was also curious what she might have to say about my situation. Was I ensorcelled by envy?

At ‘Nang Fe’s, the scene was intimate. Her family streamed in and out of the main door of the house and stopped to say hello to people in line as they left. Some of ‘Nang Fe’s grandchildren or nieces and nephews liked the small talk and activity on the front porch. An adolescent was trying to build his own motorbike from a discarded one so he could ride more often to the city, and got advice from those in line. A girl sat on the stone railing, sucking on an ice pop and giggling with her friends.79 Chairs, benches, and hammocks were occupied by clients. The home was turned into a clinic that operated not according to the rhythm of “business hours”, but as clients came on the “rationale” that certain days were “auspicious” days to call upon the spirits for healing.

---


78 Ibid., 394.

79 Taussig also observed this “intimacy” or the rhythms of “daily coexistence” between a shaman’s family and his patients. He further notes that doctors and priests in modern settings garner some their “mystique” by separating the space of healing, the clinic or the office, from their home, whereas the shaman’s home and family are in full view and interact with clients again in an intimate way that[….finish this thought] (See Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, 344).
Like the others, I waited my turn to talk to ‘Nang Fe. A young girl came out and motioned me to come into the healing room. There was a woman with her. I asked if it was ok for me to be there, but ‘Nang Fe seemed more interested in me. She took my hands and cupped hers over them. She looked me over. There were onlookers peeping through the curtain, one of who was Jessica. ‘Nang Fe looked at Jessica. “This is about nothing but money!” she declared.

Jessica began talking rapidly to ‘Nang Fe. They went back and forth over my “fate.” Jessica was saying that the man in Cabatuan, Ben, was afraid of me, and may be plotting something against me. “Of course he is! She is an American, she is Terry’s relative, and she is the first to start asking the questions that nobody has ever asked since that house was built. But I tell you it’s about money! Nothing else!”

At first I thought this might have been considered a consultation by a medium, so I took out my purse to give her some money. ‘Nang Fe told me to put my money away. Jessica smiled and said, “This advice – libre. She is not going to charge you for information that everyone knows.”

For a time I was depressed. I ate very little. Since Terry was no longer in the house, I thought I had no right to be there. Others had the same idea but for different reasons. One day a black sedan with tinted windows came up to the gate. The window rolled down. It was my uncle. Dr. Roland De la Cruz. He was the president of one of the major hospitals in the city. He used to be the chief of police in Santa Barbara. He was the major beer distributor for the region. He was old, but he was a man that was feared and respected in Santa Barbara and the city of Iloilo at large. Dr. De la Cruz motioned to me and said, “You pack up your things. This place is not safe for you. It is time you come stay with us.”
The next morning, as I was packing, I could tell Jessica was sad. But she kept saying it is safer that I stay with Dr. De la Cruz. “This place is cursed,” she said. She was mending some of my clothes, so we were sitting at her sewing station by the side of the porch where the birds were kept and where the dog often basked in the sun. Dante came in at the moment. “Come, you must see this,” he said. I went outside and Dante ran back to the dog, Queenie. “Look.” Queenie was curled up in a cardboard box. A whimper came out of the box. I looked closer and squealed. Queenie was in labor. Dante gingerly helped each puppy emerge into the world. He brought old towels and made a nest for them near their mother. Queenie licked them. I whispered, “Happy Birthday to the puppies of the Cake House.” Jessica said, “Terry would have loved to see this.”

Healers Afoul of the Law: Part II - The Enduring Baybaylan Tradition

While quack doctor might initially seem harmless enough, the baybaylan and especially the legacy of baybaylans in the Visayas region for a time was regarded as anything but harmless. Monseignor Tuvilla’s remark that the baybaylans of Panay Island were once a powerful force is worth considering further. In a detailed history of magic and the sugar plantations of Negros Occidental, an island just across the channel from Santa Barbara, Filomeno Aguilar highlighted the baybaylan challenge to the power of the Catholic friars.

“In the second half of the nineteenth century, baybaylan subversion thus progressed from the use of orasyon (prayer, magical incantation), the ritual formularies appropriated since the seventeenth century from Latin Catholic prayers, to the proliferation of armed challenge to the colonial state. From its individuated privacy, magic reemerged with a collective public face. The disintegration of friar power was keenly felt on Panay Island, cradle of the
baybaylan tradition and sacred center of the universe where the “four pillars” supporting the world are believed to be located.”

The port of Iloilo in the mid-nineteenth century was a center of trade, especially to field the global demand for sugar. The wealthy merchant classes of Iloilo and beyond began to buy or engage in land grabbing both in Panay for transport and commercial houses, and Negros Occidental Islands for sugarcane fields. Many peasants were displaced. The old social structure, with the datu on top and his slaves below him was reproduced in the hacienda culture between hacienderos (landowners), aparceros (farm hands/sharecroppers), and jornales (wage workers). Similar to current issues faced by undocumented farm and wage-earners in the U.S., the natives of Panay and Negros Occidental were given derogatory names that marginalized them further – indocumentados, remontados, criminales, infieles and so on.

There were a number of peasant and baybaylan led revolts against the Spanish friars and the haciendero institution. Two figures, historically real and in the pantheon of indigenous folklore, interested me in ways that I contend inform the legacy of the relationship between a contemporary Visayan family, middle-class aspirations, and healing. According to Aguilar, folkloric accounts of the mestizo Isidro de la Rama commanded the respect and fear of native and Spaniard alike. For Aguilar, the key was de la Rama’s uncanny ability to make money. With only 500 pesos for start up capital, in seven years de la Rama was able to amass land, personal

82 Aguilar, Clash of Spirits, 157.
vessels, and penetrate the exclusive class of *haciendero* sugar barons. The *indios* were convinced that de la Rama had a strong *dungan*, the soul stuff that enabled him to triumph over his adversaries and gain his wealth. To the wage earners, rumors abounded that de la Rama had joined the Masons, the latter characterized in the Christian lowlands as merchant interlopers and infidels. His largesse was attributed to a Faustian-like bargain de la Rama made with a pre-colonial entity known as *Yawa*, a Visayan spirit known as the “lord of the forest.” The friars equated Yawa with the devil, and thus de la Rama gained *sungay* (horns) on his head. In exchange for his soul, de la Rama was given magic powers (*isting anting*) to create wealth. The story becomes even more fantastic as in a Sadean twist of the Midas touch, de la Rama had to flog the image of Christ with a whip made from a sea creature’s tail, so the image would vomit *kusog* (strength) and money. In addition, other legends had it that a mysterious figure would bring bags of money on Tuesdays and Fridays, holy days in the Catholic tradition, and as we recall also auspicious days of the week for healers in the contemporary Philippines.  

While cases like de la Rama who wielded power as money and vice-versa were rare, on the other hand, the shamans were appropriating the power of Catholic iconography by the magic of mimesis, in other words appropriating the power of imitation. Baybaylans began to wear clothes that resembled priests’ robes and wore red belts. The increasing unrest in Panay and Negros was the basis for the Spanish to begin referring to baybaylans as *pulhanes*, or instigators.

---

83 Ibid., 161.

84 Ibid., 166.
Michael Taussig in comparing two Cuna texts on healing, one the original and the latter what he calls a “clarified” rendering, sees the difference in the switching between “image” (in the original text rendered by a Cuna Indian) and the

Figure 3.6 Papa Isio incarcerated at Fort San Juan, 1907. (Photographer unknown).
“clarified” one, where all occurrences of the word “image” is replaced by “spirit.”

For Taussig then, “clarification parallel magical mimesis: from mere (image) of a thing comes its soul and spirit.[..]What a comment on the implicitly sacred nature of image making!”85

Aguilar’s analysis bears out similar conclusions. “Not only were these Hispanic being domiciled in the islands and the desired communion with the engkantos (environmental spirits) fulfilled, but they had been transformed into local sources of cosmic power the natives could tap through Catholic formularies, rituals, and medallions like the Agnes Dei.[…]No longer just the friars, this secret power had become the shamans’ own to behold and to use.[…]Imitative magic defined the possibility of the shaman’s liberationist project.”86

The other notorious figure in Visayan revolutionary history (besides that of Tan Delgado in Santa Barbara) was that of “Papa Isio,” (Dionosio), who led a baybaylan revolt in the Western Visayas against the Spanish and continued his resistance in 1899-1907 against the U.S. occupation. According to Cullamar, Papa Isio was born in Panay but moved to Negros Occidental following an encounter with a Spanish official that left the Spaniard seriously injured.87

---


86 Aguilar, *Clash of Spirits*, 170.

87 Curiously, there were few people during my fieldwork that mentioned or even knew about Papa Isio, as if he was a repressed memory being furiously stamped out to make way for the promise of progress. More on the connections between Papa Isio’s Baybaylanes Revolt and repressed histories of the shamanic tradition will be covered in a future publication.
Healers Run Afool of The Law: Part III, Fort San Pedro

I arrived to Fort San Pedro in the waning hours of the afternoon. It was located along the waterfront, and I took in the view of the sea. I discerned very little of what remained of the fort itself, save for the rubble of stonework being pounded away by the waves. I told the jeepney driver to let me off nearest the office of the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), the equivalent of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Iloilo NBI office was a rundown affair, itself set amidst a ruin that was pulverized during World War II.

I had an appointment with an NBI officer assigned by the Santa Barbara mayor to the “Sornito case.” The office was small. I was ushered to a chair by a polite young man in a polo shirt, pressed khakis, and a polished gun holster. Rows of desks piled with papers, files and books were everywhere. It felt less a police station and more a forgotten room at the edge of the sea. “At least you can enjoy the view,” said the young investigator. “So you are here about the Sornito case.” He picked up a file from his desk, and thumbed quickly through. “Yes, there was a report of grand larceny lodged by Dr. Daniel S. for one Ben Selorio. One count of fraud. One count of stolen identity.”

“Is that all?” I asked.

“Yes ma’am.” He hesitated, and then said, “This case is complicated.”

The week before my visit to Fort San Pedro, I had gone through all the bank records in the Cake House. I was prompted to do so by the husband of a friend who worked in the bank. He told me under strict confidence that I might want to check out what has been going on with Terry’s money. The man was an old friend of Terry’s brother, ‘Moly. “I do not like what is going on. Nobody does. There is no
one to protect the old lady. Look at how she lives, like a pauper. But the Sornitos had money. Where is it now?”

I took the bank notes to the local bank and asked to speak to the manager. The manager, whom I had never met, exclaimed that she was a Sum--- and that we were third-cousins. Encouraged by her immediate sense of connection, I asked about the bank notes. The third-cousin suddenly clamped down. She took me aside, but by then others had overheard my name and what I came to inquire about. Soon we were in a tight circle. One woman said, “Yes I saw Terry come in with a man and of course Mrs. Chan. He said right there in the middle of the bank, you must make a donation to Santo Nino. Dios ko! He asked for ten thousand pesos. You know what? She went to the clerk and signed for it.” The manager was less forthcoming, but admitted that Terry had been in the bank on several occasions with the man her colleague described. They told me that legally of course they could not release any records of Terry’s transactions. But then the woman who first spoke up said, “That man, he has done his bobo (crazy) act in here. We asked them to leave, but not before Terry was able to withdraw more money.” I asked who does have the right to view the documents? Ben? “No,” she said shaking her head, “Mrs. Chan. She had papers. But then the NBI came and we had to tell them what she showed us. I do not think they were proper.”

Back at the office of the NBI, the investigator said that he could not share all details of his ongoing investigation either. But he acknowledged they were looking into those bank transactions, but not officially. He seemed to get exasperated. “How do I prove anything? She (Terry) signed the papers. The mayor is still fighting in court the legality of Mrs. Chan’s power of attorney.”
“So in the end, all you are looking into is the attempted theft of a car?” I asked.

The man smoothed along the pleats of his pants nervously. “You know one day, some people come to my house. They tell me hey, you want a vacation? We can set one up for you. No cost to you. They had brochures to resorts. Some even to Thailand! They left them with me, told me to show them to my wife. She will convince me, they tell me. I say nothing. I do nothing. Then, I start receiving strange phone calls in the night. My wife thinks someone is following her, or watching the house.” The man’s hands are sweating despite rubbing them against his pants.

“I am just investigating the Hi-Lux incident. I have not been given instructions to look into anything else.”

Back in Santa Barbara later that night, I had been invited to a different mahjong group. They were friends with Flora. “These people are more fun,” she said. “You do not have to be so proper about what you say. They tell good stories, you will see.” The house was closer to a bahay kubo. The roof was made from nipa and the porch was also made from woven bamboo. I told them about my day at Fort San Pedro. The men laughed, the women sighed. One woman said, “Your Kinaray-a teacher has more power than that poor NBI man. No joke! She is the wife of the Provincial Army Commander. I would be scared if I were that NBI man too. First they try to bribe him! What next! They have a saying here, ‘it will not be the first or the last time that people have been found on the side of a mountain road.’ And it’s true. These people, whoever they are, they can do anything they want. They can
bribe, cheat, steal and even kill people without consequences. We are just simple people. Anyone one of us can be that body on the side of the road. Nobody will care.”

Flora interjected. “Yes but they will since she is American! There will be big trouble if something happens to her.”

“Maybe,” one man grumbled.

**Healers Run Afoul of the Law: Part IV, Fatima**

A new intern at the Santa Barbara Centennial Museum told me that she went to a healer on a weekly basis. He was an old man who was quite popular in the neighboring barrio Cabatuan. Isabel told me that was where Ben lives, so I might hear things about him.

The intern’s name was Fatima. She had a problem with her goiter. She could not afford to go to the doctor, but she heard from her cousin that there was a man in Cabatuan who had cured several people with goiter.

For anthropologists working in places where so many people are poor and barely have the means to get by, it is difficult to confront face-to-face the daily hardships that people endure. I could tell Fatima was trying to get close to me. She would hold my hand a lot and call me “sister”, like we were best friends, though I had known her only a week. I spent a lot of time in the archives section of the Santa Barbara Museum, and would often have lunch with her and the staff, and she always sat next to me, telling me about her life. Isabel told me to be wary of the municipal workers as they will always be working me for money. In spite of this, I asked Fatima if I paid for her next visit, would she take me along to meet this healer?
Fatima was a single mother. She told me that she had children when she very young. She showed me their photographs. Two chubby faces peered back, a boy and a girl. Fatima was experiencing financial difficulty because she was trying to build a new house. Her old house was near the banks of the Tigum River, and in 2008, Typhoon Frank (Fengshen) swelled the river like it never had before even during the strongest typhoon in her memory. She barely had time to grab her children and run for higher ground. Her home was washed away, along with all her belongings. “You know those people you see on the television? The ones who are running, or crying, or confused? I was one of those people!”

When we got off the jeepney in Cabatuan, the area was undeveloped but for a dusty road and one rundown looking house. On one side of the house, there was a store display that sold bottled water, soda, candy, and ice cream. There was a crowd of people but they were not in the store, but sitting or lounging on the right side of the porch. We went up to a screened window and a woman handed us a number. As the morning wore on, and people made room on the long bench, we finally got to sit and get out from under the noontime sun.

It took about two hours for us to get to the front of the line. A wizened man sat behind a small typewriter’s desk. He had a white legal pad in front of him with an assortment of different colored pens and a couple bottles of unidentifiable contents. Now that we were closer to the back of the house, I could see that his “office” was outdoors on a ledge that overlooked a pretty steep hill. There were some low-lying trees, but there was one that stood out. It was a tall and obviously very old mango tree. Fatima explained to him that I was a researcher from the States. He introduced himself as Lirio. I had the IRB forms for him to sign. He looked at
them put them aside and asked me if I had a Facebook page, so we can keep in contact that way when I return to the U.S. He laughed and pulled up a chair for me beside him. “You see that tree? When typhoon Frank hit, all the trees below were destroyed. This is the one that survived. I look at it everyday.”

Lirio did not have a particular saint or image. When a client came to him, he examined their clothes. He poked around their back and massaged their shoulders. He had assistants that performed *hilot* (therapeutic massage) on some people. He then sat back at his typewriter’s desk, closed his eyes, and for a moment, seemed to go into a meditative state. Then all of a sudden his eyes would open with just the whites showing, and he spoke in a medley of languages and sounds. Instead of a person incanting he sounded more like a radio trying to find a signal. In fact, in English he might say “signal coming in clear!” and then make strange buzz or high-pitched noises as if imitating static. He would then write frantically on the legal pad and pass it to the client or the accompanying family.

When Fatima was done with her consultation she had to go back to the woman behind the screened window to get her prescription. It was a bottle similar to the one on Lirio’s table. She told me it was a special mixture of the baye-baye flower with some other ingredients that Lirio puts in. I offer to pay. A month’s supply is only one hundred-fifty pesos, the equivalent for me of about three US dollars. Before we leave to catch the jeep back to Santa Barbara, Lirio motions me back. “You are Sornito? I have heard of you. Be careful. Do not leave your hair on your brush. Take it out each night and burn it. Also let no one take a picture of you. That man, he pointed up where the road climbed to a hill that overlooked the one we were perched on. That man is *manughiwit*. Yes a witch. I am an *arbularyo*.
I make good sagot (medicine) for the people. But that man, he makes bad medicine, and the people get more sick than they were before, and then they come back to him. Then they have to pay him more money to get good medicine to cure the problems caused by his bad medicine! That is the work of hiwit (sorcery). It is against the laws of nature.” Then Lirio smiled and waved. “Come back soon.”

_Terry Dreams of Ancestors_

Doctor De la Cruz tried to obtain Terry’s psychological profile that the NBI officer mentioned. While there were laws that protected patients’ privacy, a little influence went a long way. I do not think he would have handed them to me, but as her relative and her unofficial doctor he could look at the documents.

I spent a lot of time in the hospital with the doctor. The father, the mother and son were all doctors. They often liked me to check in with them, to see that I was okay. In fact, if I did not turn up at a certain time, Dr. De la Cruz told me he often thought of calling up his friend in the National Army to search for me. While we were technically just as closely related to the De la Cruz’s as we were to Terry’s family, as Rosa’s mother was a Sornito, we more often stayed with Nenita and Terry than the much more affluent De la Cruz family. I never realized that perhaps they felt a slight in this. My father explained it just so happened that he was much closer to Nenita and Terry growing up as they were age mates. Nanette, who lived with the De la Cruz family because she was the sister of Maria, was my father’s grade school teacher. They were close, but they did not grow up together.

One day Dr. De la Cruz’s sedan rolled up to the house. I had been sitting on the side porch with Linda playing with their new set of puppies. He came and sat
with us and told me he had seen Terry’s file. Dr. De la Cruz is a medical doctor, so he would not see anything strange in telling me in a fit of laughter that Terry reported having reoccurring dreams that she was descended from a baybaylan. To Dr. De la Cruz, that would not be a breach of privacy, just crazy talk. However for the rest of the evening I reflected on this. For Terry, I could imagine this feeling more like a memory than a dream of being a baybaylan.
CHAPTER THREE: STORIES OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

“Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell.”

-Walter Benjamin\(^{88}\)

“Listening to these stories, Isio was suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of sympathy for the deceased.”

-Eric Gamalinda\(^{89}\)

*Introduction: Distancing Death and the Storyteller*

“Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death,” writes Benjamin, at the heart of the essay on the storyteller, and the storyteller’s aura and authority. Nargas Erami, a close observer of Benjamin’s writing on the fading art of the storyteller has made a compelling case that the essay can be read as an oscillation between movement and stasis, or between the classical maritime “hero” figure that journeys afar to bring back tales and the craftsman whose stories bear “traces of the storyteller the way handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel.”\(^{90}\) Many Filipinos have served as seamen, bringing home not only the requisite *regalo* or gifts for their families when they return but also stories of the seafaring life and the ports where

---


\(^{89}\) Gamalinda, *My Sad Republic*.

\(^{90}\) Narges Erami, “Of Ladders and Looms: Moving through Benjamin’s Story Teller” (paper presented at Mini AAA, High Falls, NY, June 4-7, 2014), 2.
they spent time. There are the men who serve on large shipping liners that zigzag through Southeast and East Asia before making the long haul to the West Coast of the United States, laden with the exports that 500 years before were the stuff of fantasy among the European naval powers. One person I knew told me about his adventures of less official shipping channels on wooden pump boats that traversed and smuggled goods between the southwestern port of Zamboanga City, and what was referred to as Sabah, “the Land Below the Wind”, the region below the typhoon belt. Although I found myself sometimes raising a brow to his stories where he almost inserted himself often as a swashbuckling pirate of the nighttime sea, on the northeastern tip of Borneo Island where Sabah is but one-hour by speedboat, I listened attentively as someone who grew up in the landlocked American Midwest and for whom a tale of the sea was exotic as anything Ahab or Marlowe could relate.

The craftsman described in Benjamin’s essay could have been Meliton, the carpenter, but he was not alive to tell me the tales of his trade. Benjamin prizes the stories of Nikolai Leskov, and especially “The Flea”, a story that encapsulates the fascination and respect for the master craftsman. Meliton's house spoke of his obsession. He was known as a silent man, and one could say that his hands expressed what he had in his head. His language was gesture. The precise movements that went into following the outline of the lacework, whose intricacy hinted of total absorption, could be compared to the exacting work of the alchemist who must not tip too much of a certain tincture or have the flame too high, lest the experiment explode.

Several months after I had been living in the Cake House, I found
Meliton's toolbox under my bed. I went through its scanty contents. Dante was there and told me that the new medium, Ben, had taken many of Meliton’s tools. So even the instruments of his expression disappeared.

![Figure 4.1 Meliton Sornito's Toolbox. (Photo by Author)](image)

But it is death at the epicenter of the forces that endow the storyteller her power. Also at work in the essay this same aforementioned reader sees a vertical movement that travels both up and down a “ladder” where each of the 19 sections are a rung or step on, with the meditation on “death” (Part Ten) at the bottom rung of a descent on ladder, yet is also the turning point of the essay, where a near mirror ascent can be read in the second half of the essay.

Along the way, Benjamin has spoken of the storyteller as one that is the
journey of the hero that returns home. In another section, he speaks of the
craftsman whose tasks are usually repetitive, and such activity engenders the
setting for the kind of boredom that is ideal for the telling and listening of stories.
But in Part Ten, the axis of the essay, it is not the wayfarer or the laborer, but the
moment of death itself that endows the ultimate authority upon the storyteller.
Benjamin starts the essay stating that storytelling is a
disappearing art, or “one becoming something remote from us and something that
is getting more distant.” 91 In Part Ten he observes that dying itself “[…]has been
pushed further and further out of the perceptual world. There used to be no house,
hardly a room, in which someone had not once died.” 82 92 What I understand
Benjamin to be emphasizing is the distancing, that storytelling and the visibility
of death is receding from contact with the human sensorium.

Since its beginnings anthropologists have endeavored to tell or explain
how others become mediums to the spirits of nature and the ancestors, reflecting
on the nature and culture of the living’s relationship to the multitude of the dead.
In An Archaeology of the Recent Past, the case has been made to see what
discoveries we can unearth not just from the so called ancient past, but digging
within our own lifetimes. 93 Spirit mediums are charged with communicating
messages or could one say even stories by the dead for the living. Ethnographers
are an audience to storytellers, both alive and dead, and they in turn retell what
they heard, scribbling notes to translate into anthropological knowledge or just

91 Benjamin, Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, 83.
92 Benjamin, Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, 94 (my emphases).
divining the notes themselves. Are those not unlike the scribbles that my friend the healer Lirio, staring off into the distance at the two gnarled mango trees also transmitters of something from beyond the realm of our usual purvey? In his essay *Excelente Zona Social*, Michael Taussig speaks of his friend Juan Alvaro, an anthropologist working among the Huitotos of Northern Colombia, as a man “continuing the chain of storytelling”, especially of the atrocities committed during the rubber boom era, “as [storytelling] has the power to change the world, at least a little.”

To be sure the dead have their own stories to tell. In our telling, are we not reproducing the culture of the dead as much as the living? Are stories about the dead as told by the living not the afterworld’s power to “change the world, at least a little?”

For the psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Rosa Torok, the importance of “contact” with the dead is not to be underestimated. “The concept of the phantom moves the focus of psychoanalytic inquiry beyond the individual being analyzed because it postulates that some people unwittingly inherit the secret psychic substance of their ancestors’ lives.”

The working assumption is that many cultures include in their cosmology a “cult of ancestors” where the dead must be appeased or given proper rites so they do no return.

**Heritage and Haunting**

Abraham and Torok were particularly concerned with the family and the

---


phantom, “The concept of the phantom brings the idea and importance of family history, in particular the secret history of families, to the forefront of psychoanalysis….it [the phantom] represents the interpersonal and transgenerational consequences of silence.”\textsuperscript{96} What are these consequences? In the editor’s note to Abraham and Torok’s essay, he says that their work takes Freud’s nascent ideas on “archaic heritage”, that one can inherit primeval memories of early humans, to the level of individual life experiences which they propose can be unwittingly transmitted and received by future descendants.\textsuperscript{97} He goes on to say, “In no way can the subject relate to the phantom as his or her own repressed experience[…] \textit{The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness in the existence of the dead buried in the other.}”\textsuperscript{98} In other words, future descendents inherit the phantom of traumas they were not, so to speak, in direct contact. There may be distance of one generation or several. The point is that the originary trauma occurred long before the inheritor of the “intergenerational phantom” may have been born, and as Benjamin would likely have agreed, is marked by a distancing between the living and the dead.

The Italian philosopher Robert Pogue-Harrison puts it a different way. Does “cultural memory have a future?” For him the answer is tenuous. He also remarks on “distance” between the living and the dead:

“For the first time in millennia, most of us don’t know where we will be buried, assuming we will be buried at all. The likelihood that it will be

\textsuperscript{96} Abraham and Torok \textit{The Shell and the Kernel}, 168.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{98} Abraham and Torok \textit{The Shell and the Kernel}, 174–175 (my emphases).
alongside any of our progenitors becomes increasingly remote. From a historical or sociological point of view this is astounding. Uncertainty as to one’s posthumous abode would have been unthinkable a few generations ago. Nothing speaks quite so eloquently of the loss of place in the post-Neolithic era as this indeterminacy.”

Thus as in Benjamin’s essay, this chapter is the axis which the subjective “I” comes to the fore but as one of many like me – the balikbayan – or again the “one who returns home.” It took seventeen years for my parents to save up the money to take me “home.” We traveled a distance of nearly ten thousand miles, a formidable distance between my generation and my ancestors such that even Benjamin might not have even imagined. Thus it was in Santa Barbara through a series of experiences that had me actively relating to the dead – the dead of my ancestors, the dead of others, partaking in the communal marking of the dead that is All Soul’s Day, and the dead of the nation-state in the ceremonial exhumation of the body of a local national hero – when I realized that I had rarely if ever had any relation or engagement with the dead. As a “first-generation” born in another hemisphere from where my parents’ and their ancestors lived and died, I do not have dead here to commune or commemorate with. In Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, the town of Macondo could not be located by the spirits because no one had died there yet. The place was so new it had not established a spectral link with the world of the dead. Macondo was so new it was off earthly maps and otherwise. In Santa Barbara, the birthplace of my uncle, grandparents and great-grandparents, I experienced a (re)connection to the literal ground of ancestry. When I introduced myself to people in the town, they always asked whom my parents or my grandparents were. It became second nature to

introduce myself as the “apo ni Evang,” or the grandchild of Juan Evangelista Sornito, affectionately known as Evang. Such a preamble before any conversation immediately evoked recognition in the faces of all the people that I encountered. In such a small town it oriented my being in the world to them. Who I was at that moment had all to do with those who preceded me in life.

_Heimlich – “of or belonging to the home”_100

Notions of “home” and in particular the structure of a “house” is a well-worn path across Western literature, anthropology, poetry, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and music as the primary imaginary and physical site of personal memory. The house exterior marks a coordinate as “home” in visible and public space, yet it is also a demarcation of private territory, both a literal and figurative interior space containing intimate memories and secrets. As Gaston Bachelard said of the intimacy and poetics to be found in house and home”, “we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost”.101

Alongside the bricoleur’s poetry and art, ghosts and the legacy of a spirit medium are also a part of the legacy of the house built by the Sornito family. How can one make the claim that there are ghosts in a house? I never saw any shadowy figures, felt a bizarre presence, nor stayed up wondering about a strange sound. Once I had taken up residence at the Sornito house however, both relatives

---


and strangers would ask me, “How can you stay in that house. That place is haunted.”

Despite the apprehension voiced by others, I initially felt no anxiety, no fright when darkness came. If in the first few weeks I was not feeling in the midst of spectral presences, by the time I left I was convinced that certain phantoms were lurking about. As I worked through the personal dimensions of haunting, the question remained as to why people spoke of it as cursed and haunted. I could not ignore the fact that my own presence played a part in the events I relate, a part that eventually drove me away from the “Cake House” itself, and for a brief time, complicated my immigration status and thus my ability to even return to the bayan (homeland/heritage) of my parents. It was also the site from where Terry (my Aunt) vanished and as the last of her line became a spectral presence, or an absent presence, given that she was still alive. If I did not see a ghost, the experience of living in a place that was at center of a local scandal and on its way to becoming a museum, I did bear witness to it as a site that evoked fascination and speculation as much as any haunted house. The sensations (per Freud on explaining his experience of the uncanny) was a message in some ways meant for me and not, precisely in the way that the Cake House is a part of my heritage and also not.

I certainly am not the first to tread this territory of haunting and modernity.

Freud’s essay “The Uncanny”, is the benchmark for a host of literature on what Freud termed the unmheimlich, a sensation that surfaces when that which was
earlier thought to be surpassed reemerges. The uncanny has increasingly entered into anthropological inquiry, (de la Cruz, 2006; Ivy, 1995; Klima 2002, 2006; Morris 2000, Pemberton, 1994, 2009; Siegel 2006, 2010) especially concerning the topics of heritage, mediumship, ghosts, and Southeast Asia. The difference in my thesis and this formidable body of work is that I am exploring it from the point-of-view that Freud did, which was a personal account of his experiences with the uncanny. He was not analyzing a patient, he was examining his own encounters with what he came to term the class of experiences called the uncanny. It was something that Freud personally felt he had to explore, interestingly without reference to others experience or data from his patients. I thought about the first thing that Isabel said to me when we met, “You are a Sornito. That makes your Aunt’s heritage a part of you.” In what sense of the uncanny might this be the case?

The first two definitions of “legacy” are pertinent:

1. A gift by will, esp of money or personal property
2. Something handed down or received from an ancestor or predecessor

Both shades of the word seemed relevant to the situation. By all accounts, the rumors that swirled about me had to do with anxiety coming from all directions over money and property rights, something I had not even thought of claiming. My “objectivity” as a researcher was eroded steadily no matter what I tried. The Institute for Research Board had expressed concerns about how I might “benefit” from this research,

---

102 Freud, The Uncanny.

that to me was a moot point since I had been subsidizing the household expenses with my personal funds. Besides, I was too distantly related to even think of that. So if “my” legacy was not or could not be one of money or property, what was my stake in this?

In taking “haunted houses” as the starting point of reflection for this particular house, I mean to frame the literal architecture of the Filipino “ancestral house” and cultural notions of “home” and refigure them to broader questions. Martin Heidegger already asked about the act of dwelling, and how the materiality of building are entwined to dwelling. The Italian philosopher Robert Pogue Harrison takes Heidegger through Vico, asking how “building” and “dwelling”, the very soul stuff of “materiality,” works as a nodal point between the living and the dead. After all, it was the dead according to Pogue-Harrison that were the first to be housed. He also invokes also the “future unborn” as a spectral third.

These concepts return me to the Sornito “Ancestral House” and the tools and materials that went into its making. As earlier stated, there were parts of the house that make it an “indigenous” house of the Philippines, and there were the parts that made it stand out as “foreign”, a place that is out of place and definitely of another time. The Cake House is a site where “nature” and “culture” invite a


106 Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*.

107 Vicente Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History*(Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 168. Vicente Rafael’s account of the dialectic nature of Christian conversion via the Tagalog language is instructive here. As early as the 16th century,
third term, what might be something like what Barthes indicated as a “third meaning” or the specter that Derrida calls “hauntology.” For me, the questions to be explored are simpler. Why is this house considered haunted? What constitutes haunting in a village that is on the brink of accelerated modernization? Is the Cake House a crypt? Am I somehow an unwitting inheritor in the way Abraham and Torok describe?

ǂDouble/Troubleǂ

Almost immediately after my visit to the house of Lisa Castro in Mandurriao, the one phone of the Cake House rang every ten to fifteen minutes. The first time Jessica answered, it was Lisa’s son screaming threats and obscenities. Her face would darken and she would gently place the phone back into its cradle and return to her sewing work. The calls kept coming. When a certain space of time had elapsed without the phone ringing, our hopes that the haranguing would cease were dashed when it rang again. It went on in the morning and afternoon, late into the night, with only some respite in the early

Tagalog was codified into Roman characters, thus for Rafael has always been infused with foreign borrowings. Certain terms that could not be directly translated were left in the vernacular, constituting for Rafael “alien presences” in the colonial text. Yet it was these “foreign” presences that were taken up by natives in ways unforeseen and out of the control of colonial missionaries. Tagalog itself belies that which can be appropriated for revolutionary purposes, but is always already infused with the colonial other. Although Rafael does not say this directly, I would suggest that the “vernacular” or the “native” language is both heimlich (homely) and unheimlich (estranged). This history is different where I conducted fieldwork in the Visayas, where the dominant language was ilonggo and most government and business was conducted in English, however it is not in translation that I locate the uncanny. Rather the phantoms are themselves that which is unspeakable, or without (re)codification, much less language.

morning hours. “Las ng siya lahat ng oras,” everyone said. “He’s drunk all the time. Then he sleeps it off in the morning.” Dante finally took the phone off the hook to silence it. We all moved about the house furtively, as if we felt we were being watched, and as if, without my Aunt, the last living heiress and mistress of the house, we were strangers in a house that was not ours.

I noticed that in dealing with this problem, we took on some of the habits that I had heard about the family over the years—self-imposed isolation from the outside, rarely going out except to get food, and securing the premises from unwarranted visitors. Dante took to shuttering the volada of the second floor during most hours of the day, keeping the sala in perpetual gloom. I spent hours away from those same windows that faced the corner street, either in my room (which had once been Terry’s room) or the third floor, where I spent many rainy days cataloguing and reading the ancient books. I scanned hundreds of documents and photos. I even found a rusted tin, the same kind used for Christmas cookies, full of keys different shapes and sizes. I tried every key in every lock in the house, to no avail.

In the time I had to explore the house of my literal descendants, I am also writing as a literary aficionado of the gothic horror fiction of Edgar Allen Poe, indebted particularly to his famous tale about a haunted house in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” The parallels between my encounter with the Cake House, its

---

109 These include Shirley Jackson’s “The Haunting of Hill House” and Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” In all these tales, the story is premised on a stately property fallen into disrepair, and the surviving family are either few to zero in number or in
inhabitants, and what I will argue in this chapter constitute it as a crypt as well as
a housing of crypts, are perhaps too obvious a set connections to enumerate,
fashion a mode of analysis, and one that might seem forced on top of it all. The
“American Haunted House” is a category of literature, which would seem to bear
no purchase on a “haunted house” in the Philippines. Yet can it? There is a good
deal of valuable work on “native ghosts” as they pertain to the return of repressed
holocausts, especially regarding Native North American peoples and
landscapes.\textsuperscript{110} The Cake House may one day become an official museum, but
the question remains, of what? It is not an ancient structure. No famous or
historical figure has ever lived there. But if it does become a museum, the tourist
guides are already saying that it will be a “showcase for how the Sornito family
lived sixty years ago.” What story will others glean from that?

In the film \textit{The Haunting} (1963) based on the story by Shirley Jackson,
actor Ashley Montague plays of all things an anthropologist interested in the
paranormal. He conducts an experiment where he invites a number of volunteers
to spend the night in the notorious Hill House. The main character, Eleanor,
almost immediately exhibits strange behavior and develops an uncanny
attachment to the house. While the others display fear and degrees of doubt
regarding the strange occurrences and Eleanor’s behavior, for Eleanor, there is one

place she fears to tread. There is one door in the house that beckons to her and frightens her at the same time. The caretaker, who appears only by day and seems to bear secrets of her own, lures Eleanor to the room of reckoning. Eleanor comes to understand that a terrible crime and death occurred there. The former mistress of the house died, and the second wife was driven to suicide in her shadow. It turns out the caretaker adored the first wife, and drove the second one mad by pointing out she would never fill the shoes of the former.

There was one door in the Cake House that was kept locked. It was adjacent to the room I was staying. It looked like part of the wall, except for the lock that betrayed the recesses of a door. I asked Jessica about it. She said that was Nenita’s room. It was where she died. Terry decreed that after her death, no one should enter that room again. Rosa, Terry’s cousin, said she had been present soon before Nita’s death. She said the room was set up like a hospital room. Nenita had refused to go to the hospital. No one knew why she insisted on home care, which was very expensive. In her usual calm manner, Rosa told a quite shocking story. “You know, I went to see her, and she would be asleep. Then she would wake up with a wild look on her face and she would laugh this terrible laugh. It was sort of like a child’s laugh, but coming from this old woman.” The monseignor at the time, Father Haguisan repeated the same story. As he was performing last rites, he told me that Nita sat up and cackled like a demon, and said in unnatural voice, “Aalis ka!” (Go away!) It crossed his mind to ask the Church to perform an exorcism. “Gin mag-possess siya!” (She was possessed!), he said. The mayor and the NBI hypothesized there might be legal documents in the room that would settle the
matter of inheritance and executor of the remaining finances and the house. While no one asked me point blank to breach the lock, everyone told me I had every right to enter the room if I wanted.

The lock was not particularly strong. One could have taken a screwdriver to the bolts of the hinges without even breaking or picking the lock. However, unlike the caretaker in *The Haunting* and Eleanor, I felt no strong desire to violate this door. Even if it meant that the house could be signed away to a witch or a capitalist or both, I did not think the “evidence” would be there to keep the house the way the Mayor and others in the town seemed to want it. I was divided. Why didn’t Terry want anyone to go in there? Contrary to Benjamin’s assertion in the *The Storyteller*, that “today people live in rooms never touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity[…]”111, Jessica told me that virtually all the rooms in the Cake House had borne witness to a birth and a death. The room I was staying in used to be ‘Moly’s room, and he died there. Then it became Terry’s room, until she moved to Helen’s old room. There had been some changes to the arrangements of rooms, but Danda assured me that everybody in the family had died in the house.

“It is Not Always the Living Who Seek Contact with the Dead, but the Dead who (Sometimes) Seek Contact with the Living.” -Ruel

I continued to receive text messages from Angel Castro. Most of them were crass or annoying. He called several times day and night. I was loathe to change the sim card in my phone because most of my contacts had that number.

There finally came the day when Angel threatened to shoot me if he saw me, bragging about his .45. I read in the archives of the local paper the congresswoman’s son was shot with a .45. The mayor took this threat seriously, and had me file another police report. My uncle would not allow me to leave the house unless I was with him, his driver, or one his children. I was not to take public transport or walk the streets of Iloilo alone. There was discussion of hiring a personal bodyguard for me, an idea I rejected. The mayor declared that Angel Castro was *persona non grata* in Santa Barbara and would be arrested on sight. The mahjong ladies suggested I take a trip until things settled or Angel was arrested. I resisted this idea. If I was at least safe in Santa Barbara, and there was no reason for me to go anywhere near the barrio of Mandurria, I thought I could continue my work.

However the constant voicing of concern made me reconsider. Perhaps I would gain new perspective on the situation, a semblance of objectivity if I took a step away from kin and this scandal. I called a friend in Manila, and planned a trip to the remotest place from the lowland Visayas I could think of – the Mountain Provinces of Northern Luzon.

The last time I traveled north of Manila, my family visited the mountain city of Baguio in the province of Benguet. The next year, in 1990, an earthquake that measured 7.8 on the Richter scale struck the region. Back in the U.S., my mother pointed out the hotel we had stayed, the Hyatt Regency. It used to be at least five floor concrete structure. In the images on the news it was flattened. Over eighty people died in that building alone. We had also been one of last passengers to ever fly to
Baguio for some years. In 1987, a passenger plane, experienced visibility problems, and crashed into the side of a mountain. All flights to Baguio were canceled for many years. Again my mother felt personally impacted as one of her friends was among the dead. Despite all this tragedy, for decades I wanted to return to the city. I loved the climate and the mountain air.

The Cordillera Administrative Region is a landlocked region in the midst of an archipelago. I was comforted by the fact that I was related to no one there. Travelling there felt like going to another country, compared with the density of kin- ties in Santa Barbara. Yet despite my desire for distance from kin it was in this place that I was quickly faced with the intimacy of the living and the dead.

A friend recommended I hire a guide named Ruel. Ruel was an artist, well- educated, and a traditional weaver. Ruel was descended from a long line of the Ifugao people. His wife and business partner was an unusually beautiful woman. Ruel boasted that he waited a long time to find the most beautiful woman in the Mountain Province. We immediately hit it off and he agreed to take me up to a Kalinga village called Buscalan. Technically it was not far from Baguio, however he warned me that it would be a strenuous journey. From Manila to the northern highlands of the Philippines it was just over 150 miles, and it took me about 3 hours to get there by bus. The trip to Buscalan and beyond might be over a day, and would require several modes of transport. Ruel teased me that my cell phone will soon be useless. “Maybe you can hang it from a tree and it will catch a signal in few days,” he joked.

I knew he was not entirely joking. “The phones here are like mangoes in the lowlands, low-lying fruit,” Ruel continued, more for the benefit of my sister
who recently arrived from Chicago to visit. I knew the trip was not going to be short or easy and there was some worry on my mind about not being able to call for help. We boarded buses, then jeepneys, and then hitchhiked as our surroundings grew increasingly remote. Just when I thought we must be getting closer, there was another three to four hour ride ahead. The road was winding and narrow. Cars, buses and other large vehicles careened in both directions, up and down the mountainside. At the point where we could not count rely on scheduled transport, Ruel said we would wait until a vehicle passed by and see if the driver would acquiesce to taking us further. Several stopped but we could not all fit. We passed the time by sitting at the side of the road, where there were only a few houses on either side and few young ladies peered from their front stoops.

Ruel seemed to know them, and struck up conversation. I tried to get into the banter in Tagalog, but Ruel was speaking the native dialect of Kan-kanay, which I could hardly understand. One of the older people poked their head out the door and laughed. “Tagalog!” she said, surprised to hear it. The girls laughed, and said in nearly perfect English, “We prefer to speak English.” Ruel smiled.

“Tagalog won’t get you far with these people. They like to hear your English,” he said. He pointed to a ridge where we could see a village that we had passed about a half hour back. It appeared so close you could imagine making a giant leap and reaching it. “That’s Bug-nay,” Ruel said. “That’s one of the villages where Marcos sent his assassins to kill chiefs. The people here never forgot. They have a distaste for Tagalogs or people from the city.”

There came a point where the paved road ended. We would have to hike
up the mountain. I looked up and around at the winding path. It was narrow. I thought of the anthropologist Shelley Rosaldo, who had died walking paths like these not far from where we were about to start our walk. I was worried about my sister, so I took on as much of her load as I could. We began our ascent. We could neither go too slow or fast. We had to make it to Buscalan before nightfall.

About halfway up we ran out of water. Incredibly, we were not far from a mountain waterfall. We encountered a group of young teenagers at the base of the waterfall. At first I was hesitant to drink. One of the older youths stepped up and introduced himself as Miguel. He showed me a bamboo spigot at the base of the falls. I thought of the long way back down, of my sister who was visibly taxed by the climb and the heat. I had to see if the water was safe to drink. I took a sip and then a gulp. So many times before I had drank from plastic bottles labeled “mountain spring water,” and now for the first time, I was really drinking water from a spring on a mountain. I filled my bottle and thanked Miguel. I noticed for the first time how beautiful he was. He wore blue jeans and was shirtless. His back and arms were tattooed, but spare in comparison to photos I’d seen of his elders. I was on my way to be tattooed by this same person, a woman from his village, famous for being quite possibly the last of the so-called headhunters to still practice the art of native tattooing.

We arrived to Buscalan at dusk. I could tell there were a number people nearby because as Ruel predicted, there was a low hanging tree with several mobile phones tied up in plastic bags on its boughs. We quickened our pace as the sun set, and the gleaming stone paths one by one disappeared into blackness. Buscalan was a tiny
village, situated on a steep incline. To get from one house to the next, one had to virtually climb. The trace effects of chewing betel nut lingered in my perception as I scanned the hills and rice terraces that seemed to roll endlessly in each direction. When we arrived Ruel poked his head in each of the huts. Few were home. But as the night set in, people started appearing. Some were alone, others in small groups. While we had taken at least 2 hours to scale the stone steps, outfitted with state-of-the-art hiking gear, the locals were either barefoot or wore tsinelas, worn flip-flops. They carried enormous bundles of palay, or rice, balanced on their heads. Those carrying the heaviest bundles were the women. In the twilight, I could see their slim and well-muscled forms gliding up the last of the “2,000 steps”, as Ruel called it. He said it was probably more than 2,000 if one counted the more remote villages beyond where we stopped. 5,000 steps. 10,000. Up, up and around.

I thought that everyone would go to bed since there was scarce electricity. Most of the huts had none at all. Instead there was music coming from down the hill. With my flashlight, I fumbled down the slope to a clearing demarcated by a half ring of flat stones. Ruel and Miguel were sitting on the stones. They stopped their conversation and he started to tease me about what the ladies in the village were saying about my machine made tattoos.

In the flickering light of a torch I saw the glint of Ruel’s gold earring. He had encouraged me to purchase a replica version of it in Sagada. I knew that his was an heirloom piece, and since I was thinking a lot of inheritance, I decided then was the right time to ask about it.

Ruel likes to tease and make jokes. He was a storyteller and a talented
photographer. When called upon to tell a story, he laughs and says we are in no
better a place to hear such a story than precisely the spot we are sitting. The area
was a perfect half-circle made of stone. The ground were carefully laid flat stones
and the area was fenced in with a low stone wall that gave one vertigo to peek
over its edge, knowing that the sloping path and the fabled rice terraces of this
land yawned below. When we started this journey, at Ruel’s home in Baguio, he
had created a smaller half-moon space like this right next to it. It is a space where
the chiefs and other important people of the Ifugao tribe would gather, conduct
business, make music, and tell stories. “So here we are,” he said. A few children
had gathered around. Ruel tousled the hair of one and, in Kan-kanay, said that he
would be speaking Tagalog for this story. “My wife is Kalinga,” he said to me,
“but I am an Ifugao. I tried to find an Ifugao woman, but I kept finding out that we
were kin.” He winked, letting me know that this did not stop him from having
girlfriends that were at least a couple times removed. “So I traveled the region. I
went to the other side of the mountain range and there I met the most beautiful
woman in a village. It’s farther up the mountain from here in Buscalan. I married
her.”

Ruel was a prankster but also a proud individual. As he spoke, there was
no trace of his usual mischievousness. “I married a woman of the Kalinga,” he
went on. “So I keep the tradition of this region. I never wanted to marry an
American. No offense,” he laughed.

“None taken,” I said.

“My grandfather was a datu, a chief of our community. He was respected.
When he died, we buried him beneath a tree. My aunts told me the day would
come where he would communicate with one of us. About two years later, I had a
dream about my grandfather. The next morning I had a terrible pain in my back. I
could hardly move.” Ruel paused and strummed a chord on his guitar, as if to
punctuate the story. “My aunties, my mother, and the shaman said it was a sign.
So we dug up my grandfather. When we did, we saw that the root of the tree had
penetrated the coffin and his body right at the place where my back hurt. You
see? He let us know. We took his bones and we made special furniture to put
them in. If you come to my parents’ home, you can sit on a chair and my
grandfather is there, sitting with you. Besides the bones, it was time for me to
inherit his anting anting, (amulet) this earring. It has been passed down for
generations.”

I have told Ruel’s story to others, especially my students. The idea that it is
a tradition to exhume the bones of a relative after a period of time caused many
brows to furrow and noses to turn up in disgust. I wondered what it was they
feared? Too many horror films? Was it the idea that our bodies decay, smell, and
putrefy? Would it be too disturbing to see someone you loved in a state-of-death
or appear not as you remembered them, as alive?

Preparing for the Day of the Dead

Death touched me for the first time when my father’s youngest brother
died of lung cancer in a hospital in Little Rock, Arkansas. He was in his early
fifties, and left behind eight children. I was only a child then. I vaguely
remembered family fishing trips
to central Illinois during which he accidentally hooked a goose. We tried to free it
because it wasn’t hunting season but it died anyways and my Uncle was more than happy to prepare a filipino-style duck stew. It was delicious, and it was where I first learned to say the word “delicious” in his and my father’s native tongue, namit. We visited my uncle in the hospital in the weeks before his passing. I remember his slim face, bronzed face from years of playing soccer, turned pale and bloated under the mask forcing oxygen into his lungs. I remember I putting my hand in his and I imagined that I could see him muster a smile. A few years later my grandfather, known for squaring-the circle, passed away at the age of 86. There was an open casket wake in the blazing heat of Fort Worth, Texas.

Some ten years after that, my grandmother died at the age of 96. I found an account of her passing when I came across a forgotten online diary that at the time I was keeping. That form of diary keeping would become today’s “blog.”

Entry: December 6. I got the news by phone call. I was in my first year of graduate study. A huge snowstorm was about to hit the East Coast, so I could not fly to her funeral. Missing that event left me wanting. I did not get to say goodbye. While there were funerals held for all those in my family who passed, there are no graves or markers of their existence anywhere on Earth. My uncle’s cremated remains are divided among his children who are scattered across North America and his wife who returned to the Philippines. I cannot even say where my grandparents are, though I think they were cremated and are kept by my Aunt in Texas. My mother, against the grain of many Filipinos we know, bought a plot in Chicago and told me that my aunts, uncles, and cousins will pressure me to have her brought “home” to be buried by her mother, father and sister in Mindanao. She forewarned me to say to them, “I will haunt all of you if bring me back there. This is my home now. I want to be buried in Chicago.”

Death is an recurrent theme in writer and sociologist Allen Shelton’s Dreamworlds of Alabama. He opens the “dreamworld” of his native Jacksonville,
Alabama with the story of local Civil War hero John Pelham. Pelham was no relation to Shelton’s family though his memory formed part of the personal-mythological terrain of Shelton’s present and past. He traverses it through the inheritance of his family’s ancestral house. Shelton writes that Pelham’s legacy “changed the shape of haunting in Jacksonville,” insofar as he the first blooms of wisteria to spread through the region were sent by Pelham’s female admirers, who fastened the blooms to his coffin before transport home. The blooms introduced a new “botanical mythology” to the landscape become Benjaminian dreamscape of Shelton’s birthplace.\textsuperscript{112} For Shelton, the “botanical mythology” is not simply myth, rather that Pelham’s death “baptized the landscape” such that the dreamworld that aFlora around it is the book \textit{Dreamworlds of Alabama}, or “another name for the mysteries of capital reaching into memory and the ecosystem around John Pelham.”\textsuperscript{113}

Capital. Memory. Ecosystems. These were becoming the touchstones for coming closer to the dead. In the days preceding \textit{Araw mga na Patay}, (Day of the Dead) where portals between spirit world and world of the living are flung open, I was helping clean the family mausoleums in the Santa Barbara Catholic cemetery. Jessica told me that first it was Attorney Sornito that made all arrangements for the Sornito mausoleum. When she died her sister Nenita took up the duty. After her passing, Chan somehow took charge with Terry’s blessing. While I had moved to my uncle’s house, a great-aunt also living in the compound said to me, “You must take care of the Sornito mausoleum now that

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{112} Allen Shelton, \textit{Dreamworlds of Alabama} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
\textsuperscript{113} Shelton, \textit{Dreamworlds of Alabama}, xvi.
\end{flushleft}
Terry is not here.” I had no idea what to do. My friend Sophie was busy preparing the house for the big day. It was custom in the town that all houses be open on the Day of the Dead and especially All Soul’s Day. You had to entertain and feed anybody that came by. Sophie was a great cook and did catering on the side, so she had both kitchens going day and night. She told me, “You know who knows best is Sarah.”

Sarah was also very close to my father. She was a Sornito by birth, and a Sa---by marriage. In fact, the house of my uncle was once owned by Sarah’s mother, Purificacion Sornito, another great-aunt and a woman legendary for her strength of will. Sarah was well over ninety years old. She was a wisp of a woman, always felt cold even on the hottest days, and in her slippers moved about the house with the silence of a cat. She felt her age in the sense that there was so much activity in the household that everything seemed to go by very fast for her. When the time for the Day of the Dead approached, she began ruminating on how she would soon be joining them. Along with one of the younger house helpers, I escorted Sarah to the cemetery nearly every day for a week preceding All Souls Day. We would take a tricycle and carry a plastic chair and a large umbrella. We set the chair by the Sabidong mausoleum, and the girl held the umbrella over her head. It was at these times that Sarah would “see” into the past, and begin to tell stories of the people housed in those crypts.
All Soul’s Day was new for me. But it was also intense because I counted as an “insider”. Relatives reminded me that this was where my blood came from. It was the one day where you can be sure the dead are listening to you.

During this time Terry had not returned to Santa Barbara. This was difficult because I was delving into my ancestry, and for the first time in my life enthralled by it. My presence had provoked a schism by which the last living member of that branch of the family took flight. The four-century old cemetery was a backdrop for these tense few days, caught in the smoky haze from fires burning off the accumulated garbage and weeds as men and children cleaned the cemetery. Family members or people hired to whitewash the tombs from had glowing white skin from repainting the tombs.

Some mornings, I had to be rustled out of bed by Jessica, who came to my uncle’s house to fetch me. I had asked her and then insisted that she get me up early
in the October weeks leading up to All Soul’s Day. Jessica woke with the cock’s
crow of the predawn hours her entire life. Her voice and touch was gentle as my
own mother’s, that or because she was a master seamstress her hands worked a deft
kind of magic. I had long suffered from insomnia, what I thought was the terrible
curse of wakefulness that gave me little peace except in those early hours when my
body surrendered to exhaustion. Jessica knew that I had likely managed to fall
asleep for just an hour, maybe two. She did not want to ever wake me up.

I had been going to the cemetery regularly with some distant relations who
flew in from New York just for The Day of the Dead. We went to visit the graves
of their grandparents, father and mother, sister and brother. They lit candles for
each of their dead. They were leaving that day for Manila, and then back to New
York by

Monday. Everywhere people were grooming their family mausoleum in
preparation for the All Soul’s Day.

I asked Flora how I would go about hiring someone to do the same for the
Sornito mausoleum. I must procure lots of candles. I must thoroughly clean,
whitewash, and bedeck all the crypts with flowers. We walked over to the Sornito
mausoleum. Flora said it looked fine. I saw a lot of detritus – a tangle of weeds, a
few plastic drink boxes thrown inside the gates, cigarette butts, and empty vases
of dead flowers.
Later I came back to the cemetery with Jessica and her son from the Cake House. We just had simple native brooms, a hedge cutter, and a dustpan. I had asked earlier if they had the key to the mausoleum and they said yes. So at least I could clean after them. I asked Jessica to take the camera and tape me cleaning the family mausoleum. Everywhere small fires were burning. The effect on my senses were manifold. The overgrown weeds, dead grass and garbage were being collected and burned. The cemetery was misty with wafts of grey-white smoke. If it was not the "golden hour," when the sun slants at its most diagonal point in the sky, it might feel eerie. Instead everything was aglow and I wondered at its strange beauty. Everywhere people were wandering about with either a paintbrush or a broom. The cemetery was pulsating with a strange sort of life. Meliton Sornito's mausoleum is about midway down the main strip bisecting the cemetery. As we approached, Jessica son said that he recognized the man sitting in plastic chair in front of the mausoleum. It was Rodney, a friend of

Figure 4.3 Day of the Dead, October 2011. (Photo by author)
Angel Castro. He was watching another man we didn’t know repainting the mausoleum in the exact colors of the Cake House. He must have climbed over the fence to get in. It was such a strange encounter. Usually if one were to see people in a well-to-do family’s mausoleum, you could be sure they were grave robbers. But these were people hired by others who were supplying and paying to do what I was told was my duty, to prepare the dead for All Soul’s Day. My body instantly filled with nervous rage. This man who is not even related or gives a fig about this family, my family, is sitting there, flicking cigarettes over their graves, because he was hired to by someone else. At the same time, in that smoky haze, I wondered in my mind’s eye that Angel would emerge out of the smoke with his gun pointed straight at me. I wondered out loud if we should come back later, but Jessica said it was okay. We marched forward and unlocked the gate. I overheard Rodney say gruffly to Jessica ‘we're painting here,’ as of we could not see what was going on. We just ignored him.

I did not know how to begin. I tried to think of it as comic relief for my parents later to see the tape of me cleaning the graves of our relatives with a native broom, when I barely operated the vacuum at home. But then, with Rodney there, a dead seriousness came over me. I was coughing and it only got worse as I took that broom and swept over every inch of that huge mausoleum. I swept up the past year of accumulated dust, dirt, mold and waste. As I worked sweeping through literal crypts, I couldn't help but think allegorically about all the dirt that had blown-up in the past few months. Maybe my friends were right, that some things are better left alone. I couldn't help but wonder if the dead had thoughts or any bearing on the living, and if they did, what they thought of me
sweeping through their past lives. I have pored every last inch of their house; their old pictures and documents; stories told by relatives and neighbors who would talk to me; the community of "faith healers" from here to countless far-flung barangays who also cautioned me to leave well enough alone, and now here I was, sweeping every nook and cranny of their tombs, wondering if this was an act that would do some good.

At precisely 5 pm, Rodney stubbed out his last cigarette and the painter got up to leave. Jessica joked to me it must be "quitting time" and they must be "off the clock now."

“Nosebleed, I will be very lonely.”

I had never attended so many funerals in my life as I did during the months I lived in Santa Barbara. It seemed that every couple weeks, someone died. I would get a call to come to the funeral procession or invitation to eat at the house of the family in mourning. For most of my life I had lived in large cities where death was frequent but largely anonymous. It was on tv or in the newspaper, and it is now part of my life as a ticker tape on internet newsfeeds. In Santa Barbara death occurred with intimacy. Even when I did not know the person or the family, I was swept into communal mourning.

So it went that one evening that Yen texted me to meet her at the casino. She had come home late from work at the museum, and wanted me accompany her to Amparo’s house for the evening vigil of her husband that just passed away. I had been a regular at the novena. It was the fourth day of the nine-day vigil with
the body. Usually the fourth or the ninth day is when the spirit of the dead returns for a last time. Food is usually left as an offering at an altar or by the doorstep for the spirit. I informed the household that I was going out, and everyone asked me, from my uncle to the youngest kitchen maid, who would be with me. They warned me to be careful. I knew it was out of concern. In recent weeks a local thug had threatened my life, and the police had gotten involved. I felt like a teenager each time I had to explain to my uncle the details of my comings and goings. I did not want to be around police. I thought it would intimidate my informants, who were already silent on the questions that had to due with Chan, the Cake House, or Ben. So I cobbled together an informal network of companions.

That particular night it was already dark when I left the house and I had only 500 meters to walk from my uncle’s compound. The casino was just two houses from the Cake House. Even as I approached the gate to leave, old man Estoy asked where I was going. He had been asleep in a green plastic chair by the road. Estoy was a distant relative who liked to hang about the house, and he sometimes doubled as a vigilante for the property.

“To the casino to meet my Ate Yen,” I said.

“Ok, I will walk with you,” he said. I protested but he brushed-off his shirt, straightened his yellow cap, and walked with me. “You should always be careful.”

“I know, Manong. Thank you.” Estoy was an elder, mga mal-am, and being part of that community meant acceding to that authority. I felt conflicted but later as I wrote in my diary I realized the concession was based on fear that
maybe I needed his protection. He was certainly the farthest thing from a police officer.

“For example,” Estoy said, “take these guys.” He pursed his lips in the direction of the open house on our left. Old jeepneys, motorcycles, and car parts were scattered on the street in front. The house was less an enclosed domicile than a diorama. It had only three walls and nothing that curtained it from the side facing the street. At night it was lit up and you could see the activity like a stage-set. A woman nursed a child in an old chair. In the yard men with soot strewn faces hunched over an old engine block. Kids rolled old tires up and down the lane. In the hundreds of times I had walked up this street, no one had ever bothered me except to nod.

“Why should I be cautious, Manong?” I asked. Estoy shook his head. By his weathered looks and the hint of alcohol coming from him, one might think that he himself was someone to keep your distance from. But uncle told me that he trusted Estoy with his life.

“The men are bad. They have a reputation,” he said. He did not elaborate and there was no chance to ask further as we were already approaching the casino. The mahjong ladies all waved to Manong Estoy to come in and eat something, but as soon as I was through the gate he had turned back and disappeared towards home.

“Haha, your uncle is always worried about you,” said Flora, as she offered me some sweets she brought from the city. I declined but took the silent offering of a beer from the small boy that cracked it open for me. Without a word he scampered back into the house.
Conchie was talking to people on the other side of a low cement wall that abutted a neighboring house where the novena was taking place. Usually the ladies on Conchie’s side of the fence had the mahjong table out, but given that a novena was going on next door, dozens of tables were set up in their yard where people were playing cards and mahjong by candlelight.

Conchie motioned for all of us to get going. We laughed because in a sense we were already there. We filed out Conchie’s front gate and went the long way around Amparo’s very large fenced-in yard to the front of her house. Despite Conchie’s initial hurry to leave, we loitered along the way to chat with people coming and going from the novena or the town square directly ahead. This rhythm of movement and interruption happened a lot in Santa Barbara, and sometimes tried my patience. All the time I felt time and resources were dwindling, and then there was the matter of my movements being restricted and fussed over. Perhaps this goes against the grain of the ethnographer’s practice, which among them are to “never decline an invitation,” to “go with the flow,” or above-all to take note of everything no matter how trivial it might seem at the time. Nonetheless I hurried ahead of the group and into Amparo’s house.

“Here comes the nosebleed,” Amparo said as I entered. Everyone on the porch laughed. Earlier Flora had explained to me that my nickname, “nosebleed”, meant that everyone had to strain a little more in conversation. In my case it was the effort to speak Tagalog, English, or mainstream Ilonggo rather than the local dialect of Karay-a when I was around. I knew Amparo did not dislike me. Since that day all the mahjong ladies affectionately referred to me as “nosebleed.” Amparo took me by the hand and led me through the house, offering food. I said I
already had dinner but it made no difference as I was squeezed on a bench right by the open casket with an enormous bowl of bulalo, a hearty beef broth. The dish was shielded from flies by a little girl with her electric fly swatter like a small, neon tennis racket. The chore of minding the food from flies became a game for the kids, as a successful swing at a fly would produce an electric spark and sizzling sound that satisfied them to no end.

I had never eaten in such close proximity to a dead body. A stranger who had taken the seat next to me, an older gentleman, turned and held out his hand. “Amparo told me you are Terry’s niece,” he said. He shook his head. “What a shame about your Aunt.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“I am Mr. Leon. I went to the Santa Barbara High School with Amparo’s husband,” he said. Mr. Leon did not have much to say after that, except that when we were finished he introduced me to his wife, who was sitting at the bamboo bench directly in front of the casket. I was not sure whether we should talk in front of the dead. For a few minutes we sat in silence.

I contemplated the setup of the casket. Novenas in the Roman Catholic Church are intercessory prayers lasting nine days, or other times on a particular day for nine consecutive weeks. Novena derives from the Latin “novem”, meaning nine. In Christian tradition, the number is associated with suffering, grief and imperfection. Usually these are performed to attain special graces from the saint or spirit to whom the novena is being made. There are four categories of novena - novenas of indulgence, novenas of prayer or to a particular saint, novenas held in anticipation for a significant holiday, and novenas of
mourning. From what I read about novenas and from the priests to whom I spoke, the Catholic Church acknowledged these devotions but also issued warnings against the “superstitious.” Novenas were not part of official liturgy but rather considered as “popular devotions.”

Biblical scripture insisted that the practice began as a mortuary rite with Jesus’ apostles and Mary praying together for nine days that culminated in the Pentecost, or the descent of the Holy Ghost fifty days after the Resurrection. It was St. Augustine who founded the devotion to the Birhen Nuestra de Santa Regla, and first cautioned against the novena to avoid the appearance of aping pagan rites. Other leaders within the Catholic institutions followed suit. The first allusion of a nine-day observance was a Roman ritual that began when stones fell upon Mount Alban, prompting seers to call for a sacrifice to appease the angry gods and prevent further calamity. Among the Greeks and Romans there was also nine days of mourning with a special banquet on the ninth day after death or burial. Usually this occurred as a private family event. The Romans also commemorated the death of all the departed members of their families in the parentalia novendialia, culminating on the ninth day with a sacrifice and a feast. Interestingly, the novendialia was also a time where creditors were forbidden to trouble the heirs of their debtor for nine days after his or her death.  

“Do you know what that is?” asked the wife of Mr. Leon. She pointed to the canopy overhanging the body. I could tell when I came in earlier that Amparo

---


115 Hilgers, “Novena”.
was proud of the display, and I heard her telling someone about the “artista” who had envisioned and executed it. “It’s called langit-langit. It is supposed to represent heaven. You see the angels and stars there?” she asked. The angels were white pasteboard cut-outs and the stars were stapled to the inside of the canopy and covered in silver glitter. It looked like a homemade float that could glide in a parade or a children’s stage play of the Pentecost. The intensity of the fluorescent lamps gave it a holy glow in contrast with everything around it. “Did you also know that there is no word for hell in our language?” Mrs. Leon continued. “I am not sure why. We Filipinos just didn’t know about it before the Spanish got here.”

I was taught this distinction in some of my earliest formal lessons in Tagalog. It struck me that she was attempting to make appropriate “small talk” before a dead body. The thought of this caused me to nearly laugh out loud. But Mrs. Leon’s question arrested the moment that I was contemplating the dead body in front of me, wondering what I should be doing or thinking, given that I was not Catholic nor had I known the person himself. His corporeal form was staged as being already in heaven, as many were no doubt praying for him to be. While this was a gathering to mourn the passing of the dead, the novena was foremost about gathering together prayers of petition. I was sure that in keeping company with the body people were also reminiscing about the time that Mr. Padernilla was alive. But there was something else going on at a subtler register than the wails of mourning that could be heard every now and then, mostly from the widow as she greeted family arriving in waves from other provinces. The older people carried rosaries and whispered prayers under their breath as they
stood before the body at the base of langit-langit. If the concept of hell does have an historical starting point in Filipino life, its impact was clear. Fear of hell necessitated the novena, for a rite of petition on behalf of the dead.

Before I left, Amparo gave me a hug and whispered into my ear, “Come see me in the cemetery. I will be keeping vigil with my husband. I will be very lonely, Nosebleed.”

**Coming Closer to Dead and the Last of the Storytellers**

The following week the town was in a flurry of preparation. There were no mahjong nights. Everybody was cooking. A messenger came to the door of Dr. Padilla’s, a special delivery for me. It was addressed from the Sangguniang Bayan (Municipal Council) and the Office of Mayor inviting me to be a judge for the best Halloween display. Isabel insisted it would be fun. Most all the houses that line the road leading to the cemetery have been preparing displays for competition.

On what I used to know as Halloween, Flora came by to pick me up from my uncle’s house for the Day of the Dead. Old Estoy tipped his hat and swigged his beer, telling us to watch out for *aswang* tonight instead of Angel Castro and his .45. *Aswang* was a vampire-like viscera-sucking creature that was possibly the most feared supernatural entity in the pantheon of Filipino mythology. As we emerged out into the night, families, couples and children were running all over the place, in costume or faces painted. The air was festive.

After the best or most horrific Day of the Dead tableau was awarded, I headed alone to the cemetery. When I arrived the sight was breathtaking. Candles lit up every one of the mausoleums stacked upon each other. The air was
heavy with the smell of flowers. Sarah was still sitting at her chair, with a blanket wrapped about her shoulders. She motioned to me, and I kneeled beside her. “It will not be long before I join them. My mother. My father. My sister and brother.” Most people feared the coming of death. Sarah neither feared nor embraced it. I had never witnessed anyone just be with the dead, and to seem at peace with one’s place between one’s own memories and the idea of becoming a memory to future generations. The architecture of this cemetery was such that there were not rows of plots in the ground stretching out like an endless lawn of headstones and grass. Over the centuries the number of dead had outgrown the area allotted for the original cemetery, when Santa Barbara was still called Catmon. The dead are housed in mausoleums that stack upon each other, making it more like a city – a city of the dead. Lewis Mumford said in The City in History, “Mid the easy wanderings of the Paleolithic man, the dead were the first have a permanent dwelling: a cavern, a mound marked by a cairn, a collective barrow. These were landmarks to the living probably returned to at intervals, to commune or placate the ancestral spirits…the city of the dead antedates the city of the living…is the forerunner, almost the core of every living city.”116 The Day of the Dead turned the cemetery into a tableau of sorts, and for Sarah, that tableau seemed to bring her closer to the past and to those who passed on before her. In Susan Sontag’s introduction to One Way Street, about Walter Benjamin’s aphoristic wanderings of his native Berlin, she emphasized memory as a structuring of tableau: “Memory, the staging of the past, turns the flow of events

into tableaux. Benjamin is not trying to recover his past, but to understand it: to condense it into its spatial forms, its premonitory structures.”

Sarah seemed to understand this better than anyone. She did not distance herself from the dead. She took time in the City of Dead and walked back through the corridors of time with the dead, and as I sat with her, I realized that she had been one of the best storytellers I had ever met. While she seemed sometimes in a haze, confused or just tired, there were moments of clarity where she would describe in detail how she took my father’s hand and a cooking pot in the other, and they fled by foot into the mountains when the Japanese Army invaded Santa Barbara. She told more vivid tales of Conrada “Da-Day” Sornito, the day that my grandmother went to the Cake House because Da-Day had slapped my father as a three-year old boy for small infraction. Said Sarah, “Da-Day was strict, but your grandmother was strong willed. She went straight to Da-Day and hit her so hard that she drew blood!” Sarah would laugh at the memory. She tugged at my sleeve and said, “Bring your father back home to see me before I go.”

---

I too wandered through the city of the dead for awhile. Entire families were huddled with candles, food, and lawn chairs. Several people greeted me. I lit the candles at the Sornito mausoleum. More flowers had appeared. By accident I happened upon Amparo. She had a much more involved set up than others in the cemetery. Some people were leaving because it was drizzling rain. Amparo had set up an icebox to keep food and double as a table, where she had a solitaire game going. She set up a tarp anchored by large stones on the top of the mausoleum and propped up the sides with bamboo. In her tent, she kept an oil lamp, a flashlight, a bible, and a sleeping bag. I huddled with her under her tent. She was crying and put her arm around me. She said she would stay by her husband all night. “He died too young. Now I am alone in that big house. I am so tired. Relatives keep coming and coming. I have had no rest. You know Nosebleed, the relatives come to keep the nearest of kin busy, so we do not have
time to get sad. But I needed to get away. I will stay this one last night with him.” I kept Amparo company for another hour, playing cards in silence, until the rain started to really come down. Amparo offered for me to stay with her. I wanted to, but I knew my uncle and his family would worry. I gave her a hug and wished her well. Amparo’s husband died in the domicile where he lived his life, and now his wife was keeping vigil with his newly departed spirit in its final home.

On my way back, I passed by the Cake House. Unlike all the other houses, which were lit up with people were streaming in and out, the Cake House looked abandoned and shrouded in darkness except for one set of lights. There were three lit candles next to a drawing of a fish on the ground by the front door. When I returned to my uncle’s house, I asked about the candles. Sarah, who had come in from the rain and was drinking tea in the dining room, told me the candles were a signal for the dead they are welcome but to _apasyal_ (pass) this house and return home to the cemetery.
Figure 4.5 Candles in front of the Cake House. (Photo by author)

Figure 4.6 Monument to General Martin Tan Delgado, *Santa Barbara, Iloilo.*
(Photo courtesy of Sta. Barbara Centennial Museum)
Exhuming the National Body

I awoke one morning to see Isabel in my room. She said I must get dressed quickly, there is something happening that would not want to miss. It was still dark. I fumbled around for clothes. We headed across the street to the museum where a truck full of people with tools and shovels were waiting. We took a tricycle and followed them to the cemetery.

When we arrived, a small group of people was already there. They were wearing black t-shirts that said Tan Delgado on the back. Obviously these were the relatives of General Martin Tan Delgado. The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon, so the men had enough light to begin the work. They began to chip away at the tomb of General Tan Delgado. I watched all this in silence, feeling the chill morning air turn warm. They brought out bags and boxes, and set the remains inside. Isabel encouraged me to look. I peeked into the boxes. I half expected to see pieces of recognizable skeleton parts, even a skull. What I actually saw was an assortment of shapes and sediments, in bright coppery brownish colors. I asked a man in a black t-shirt if I could touch one of the bones. He said of course, why not? I reached in to what I thought was the most recognizable piece of skeleton. It looked like a vertebrae. I was fascinated by it and kept looking at it from different angles. I put it back and attempted to find something else, a femur or a finger. But Isabel rushed me along back to the truck. The whole operation took less than a half hour.

We returned to the museum and Isabel stowed the bones of General Martin Delgado under her desk. I glanced at the clock. It was five-thirty in the morning. The town was just waking up and getting underway with the business.
of the day. Isabel explained to me that this “covert” operation happened because they were preparing to ceremoniously move the bones to a monument being built for him at the top of the town plaza in a heavily publicized event to commemorate his heroism and Santa Barbara’s place in history of the Philippine Revolution. She said that they suspected someone might as she put it “play a prank” and rob the grave before the event. It was decided that with the family’s blessing, they would exhume the body before the ceremony, and on the day of the event they would put it back and “re-exhume” it for the public and the cameras.

The bronze statue was erected in 1998 for the Centennial celebration of the Philippine Revolution. It was an imposing figure. Tan Martin wielded a sword in his right hand behind him, and in his left his arm was outstretched with a pistol at ready to fire. I asked why his bones should be placed in the monument now. Isabel explained that it was part of a series of events to commemorate Tan Martin’s birthday on November 11. It was called the Triple 11, since the date was November 11, 2011. Isabel exclaimed, “You can take part in the Triple Tan Fun Run!” Isabel and I often met in the morning to “jog” around the poblacion. Isabel was more into power walking, and I trotted or ran and often made a full circle and caught up to her.

Tan Martin’s statue dwarfed that of Jose Rizal, which was on the other end of the plaza. The Santa Barbara in the tourist guidebooks was emerging. The bones of Tan Martin were being called upon to tell the story of the hero on behalf of the Ilonggo people. As the guidebook narrates: “The monument is a tribute to the town’s most distinguished son and the greatest revolutionary hero the Visayas has ever produced – General Martin Tan Delgado. The statue which was unveiled
in time with the 1998 Centennial Celebration is an unfading memorial to the
gallantry and patriotism of General Delgado and his revolutionary forces.”

118Tourist Destinations and Events (Santa Barbara, Iloilo, n.d.), 1.
CHAPTER FOUR: THIS TOWN – OCCULT SITES AND ECONOMIES

Introduction

What today is officially known as the barangay or barrio of Cadagmayan del Norte long ago was called Caragmayan, because of the gabi plants or dagmay once commonly found in this place. Of the town where the healer known as Santa Regla lived, so the story goes, long ago robbers sought refuge in this place after stealing the people of their money and animals. When the animals were lost, the people looked for them in Caragmayan, or the place where the gabi plants grew.

I read this in the handwritten notes from the archive that Boboy, the town librarian, showed me. He told me they were found in a notebook of a Santa Barbara resident who went from barangay to barangay looking to gather oral histories.119 The most common tales on the notes were stories about how a town got its name. Boboy kept bemoaning “this is not real history. These are myths told by old ladies.” He often visited the National Archive in Manila to comb for anything about Santa Barbara.

The oral historian who gathered these testimonies from “old ladies” never put his or her name to the work they did. Perhaps that person never properly recognized him or herself as such. When Alan Lomax took his recorder all over the American South, he was intent on documenting something that he felt was disappearing. The same ended up being the case for James Agee, although his

119 Helen Grace de la Torre Abad, “A Study of the Folklore of Santa Barbara, Iloilo” (thesis, University of the Philippines, Iloilo, 1974). Later I found these stories translated into English for a thesis by an English major at the University of the Philippines, Iloilo.
project started out as an article on sharecroppers in rural Alabama, it self consciously ballooned into *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a piece that is a visual and oral inventory of everyday life among anything of what we normally think of as “famous men” (and women), but rather the poor and marginalized of the U.S. Depression years. In other words, it was a document of the lives of people that had been theretofore outside of historical documentation.

Such precision documentation did not exist for Santa Barbara, as is the case for many parts of the Philippines. Scores of buildings that housed historical or government records were destroyed especially during World War II. In the opening pages of the one history book about Santa Barbara, Iloilo, the author, a self-proclaimed proud native of the town said:

“Nevertheless, the tragic absence of written documents, [the] one very reliable source for history writing about Santa Barbara was first-hand information about less remote events than the Writer himself witnessed or experienced or were relayed verbally to him. The Writer conducted personal interviews with the town’s prominent personages and elderly residents who were directly involved in the various historical events narrated in this book. [...] Indeed, such facts once upon a time were here, but now are mere beautiful memories captured between the covers of this book.”

Cabigayan’s (the Writer’s) effort is a sincere and laudable one, relying on techniques that any anthropologist would employ. Yet his text is a hagiographic one. From the beginning he speaks of being a schoolboy enthralled by reading about the heroism of General Martin Tan Delgado and the Ilonggo uprising. Eventually he worked in different capacities for town officials closely related to the Delgado family.

---

This document is anything but a hagiography. Of course I do not set out
defame or libel any person or community. The efforts to produce a local history by
former colonies to merge with official nationalism, has more often than not been a
production by the bourgeois. (Anderson 1983; Chatterjee 1993; Fanon 1959). The
situation is no different in the Philippines, where it was the *ilustrado* or *principales*
class that organized and fought in the Philippine Revolution. While this is a story
about modernity in the West Visayas, it is a particular one that picks up similarly to
Cabigayan’s in the sense that I too largely rely on oral histories, interviews, and
informal conversations. It also focuses on the lives and house of a bourgeois family,
albeit one that was not particularly powerful or known as war heroes. At mahjong
nights, countless novenas, birthday parties, visits with healers and their clients, no
one spoke about the glory of Ilonggos or the bravery of Martin Tan Delgado. More
likely, they would speak about their everyday lives, which often included stories of
encounters with the supernatural. Filomenar Aguilar, in his study of spirit
appearances in the sugar economy on the island of Negros Occidental said of myth
and I follow: “I have used popular ideas, or folk-historic categories of lived
experience[…].” Providing glimpses into indigenously rooted notions of reality and
the world, folk historic concepts are interrelated and change in ways that shed light
upon the ebb and flow in the economic, cultural, and power relations between
groups and classes in society.”

When I first presented a portion of this document at a conference at the New
School University, where the theme was “inheritance”, I was singularly struck by
the nostalgic and reverential tone in many of the presentations. Like myself, the

---

121 Aguilar, *Clash of Spirits*, 11.
other presenters spoke about their family or ancestors. However it became clear that they were highlighting the major accomplishments or the special role their forebears played in an important historical moment or event. When it came my turn to speak, my relating the story of a family at the center of local scandal between a witch doctor and a mayor seemed so outlandish that some lauded it for its bravery to “expose” the dark underbelly of family life. Yet this was not my intention. The Cake House for me was a flashpoint from which to examine social relations within a community, especially in this chapter as those relations congealed around the practice of usury and bookkeeping the profits of a healer.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part attempts to augment the connections about Masonic societies suggested in Chapter Two, and how these obfuscated influences secretly find their way into the current gossip and scandal around the Cake House. The second part recounts the local folklore and what one might term “superstitions” unique to Santa Barbara, stories which seem to take place in an “ancient past”, but rather are stories of the supernatural that emerge at scenes of encounter (like “first contact” but not), or tales that arise when development projects such as the railroad and the highway system began to take over the landscape. The last part deals with archives I found in the Cake House of letters and bookkeeping accounts the Sorno family kept for Rosa, or the healer Santa Regla.

**Part I: On Masonry and Money**

Sadie took me out with her friends one day into the city. She wanted me to have a day to relax and de-stress. She was a hardworking woman, who ran the admissions department to one of the city’s medical schools on top of all her business
side projects – catering, flower arrangements, and sitting on the board of the local power consortium. So with equal measure she liked to take leisure days at the spa and then treat herself to the best restaurants. We met her friends at a local coffee shop that made Starbucks look like a food truck in Times Square. The desserts were rich and made with artisanal care. The coffee came in fancy chinaware.

Her friends were a couple who owned a bar down the boardwalk from the coffee shop. Sadie’s husband, the man from the southern Philippines who I mentioned earlier had talked of his night voyages between Sabah and the southern Philippines, began talking about his induction into the Demolay Order, a society that fashioned itself after freemasonry and as he narrated it, was connected with the Order of the Knights Templar. Sadie turned to her friend and said to him that my grandfather was a mason. The friend’s husband with some awe in his voice interjected that Sadie’s friend was the youngest man in Iloilo to reach one of the highest levels that can be attained in the Masonic Order. The man, who had been somewhat aloof before, suddenly straightened up and asked me my name. When I told him, and added that I had heard that my grandfather was a high-ranking mason according to his former students and colleagues at Central Philippine University in nearby Jaro, the man interrupted me and said, “Yes I know. I know that name.” He paused and then abruptly said, “It is my duty to serve you.” The table was silent for a moment, and then erupted into laughter, except for the man. I asked him why. He said he could not tell me. Of course, it’s a secret. It was simply his duty to serve the descendents of high-ranking masons. I was at a loss for speech. In jest, Sadie’s husband egged me on to ask for a million things. I kept looking at him, thinking that
he would set conditions or explain himself. The man just said, “If you need anything, you just let me know.”

According to Aguilar, Masonic lodges were developing in the Philippines as early as the British occupation of Manila in 1762 – 1763. A new Spanish inquisition of sorts began to form against these Masonic incursions, as along with their growing power in mercantilism, they also brought “dangerous” liberal ideas.122 “The terms of opprobrium “Protestant”, “Mason”, and even “Jew,” became synonymous with the heretical and the seditious (but also the monied and seditious)…”123 The historian Alfred McCoy credits the British vice-consul to the Philippines, Nicholas P. Loney, as a major player in the West Visayas economy in the mid to late-nineteenth century. McCoy noted that during Iloilo’s height as “Queen City of the South,” when it had overtaken Manila as the major port for foreign distribution, the town became something of a “foreign enclave”, dominated by the British and Chinese. It was these communities that constituted the merchant classes in Panay in the mid-nineteenth century.124 McCoy also credited Loney singularly with Iloilo’s demise.125 McCoy emphasizes Loney’s interests in the import/export of local weaving, development of commercial houses, and later the sugar boom, while Aguilar focuses on Loney’s money lending business to hacienderos out of a

122 Aguilar, Clash of Spirits, 18.

123 Ibid., 20–21.


125 See, Demy P. Sonza, Sugar is Sweet: The Story of Nicholas Loney (Manila: National Historical Institute, Manila, 1977), 5 and (McCoy and De Jesus, Philippine Social History, 303) Aguilar has argued that McCoy overestimates the power of a single individual in the overall economy of a region, and especially takes issue with McCoy’s assertion regarding Nicholas Loney.
waterfront warehouse at 8% interest rates. He goes on to observe that many of the *hacenderos* became addicted to credit and cash advances from foreign lenders. Furthermore, the capital was not saved for future crops or investment in better refining machinery, but rather spent in conspicuous consumption, such as gambling and shows of opulence. The *nouveau riche* mestizos looked to the merchant capitalist standard of living, that is the British and Chinese.\(^{126}\) George Bataille in his essay *The Notion of Expenditure*, makes this link between achieving higher social rank and ostentatious loss, “More or less narrowly, social rank is linked to the possession of fortune, but only on the condition that fortune be partially sacrificed in unproductive expenditures such as festivals, spectacles, and games.”\(^{127}\)

It is interesting that almost immediately following Bataille’s discussion of unproductive expenditure by the wealthy, is an opposite apprehension of the middle-class or bourgeoisie. Whereas his observation in archaic potlatch societies had it that social rank was enhanced by excessive display and destruction of accumulated wealth, he states, “a certain evolution of wealth…leads to shame and petty hypocrisy. Everything that was generous, orgiastic, and excessive have disappeared…The representatives of the bourgeoisie have adopted an effaced manner; wealth is now displaced behind closed doors…in other words by hiding its expenditures as much as possible.”\(^{128}\)

Furthermore Bataille reserves special remark for modern banking: “Around modern banks, as around the totem poles of the Kwakiutl, the same desire to dazzle


\(^{128}\) Ibid.,124.
animates individuals and leads them into a system of petty displays that blinds them from each other, as if they were staring into the blinding light…Jealousy arises between human beings, as it does among savages, and with an equivalent brutality.” It is at this point, where the Cake House emerges at the nexus of ostentatious display and simultaneously a wealth that is jealously kept behind closed doors. The people did not fail to notice.

**The People’s House**

“See that part of the house? My aunt used to say that is our part of the Cake House.”

After prodding the Mayor and my uncle, it was deemed safe for me to walk about the Poblacion and perhaps venture to the healers in other barangays I had regularly visited if I had a companion. If I needed to meet with people or if I found an archive that might be useful in the city, my uncle would dispense his driver and his black sedan, always polished so that it shone like a black mirror in the midday sun. The driver always wore black, reflective Ray-Ban shades. He was not a bodyguard, just a professional driver. He liked to play the lottery, so before we would arrive into the city we would stop at a roadside kiosk and buy tickets together, promising each other that if one of us won the jackpot, we would split the winnings 50/50. “Not like the math of the 5/6,” he would joke with me.

As days wore on, I took longer and longer walks through the town, especially with Flora. After the debacle at Lisa Castro’s house, the court hearings, and the text messages, she checked up on me nearly every day. On one of those
walks we ran into a local photographer Freddie. He was taking advantage of the clear day to practice his art, and his subject for the day was the Cake House. He had a gigantic camera lens, and he let me hold it at the precise zoom point he wanted me to see through. I followed his finger to the balcony of the room I stayed, which to the outside observer was stone carved into detailed baroque filigree. Freddie repeated himself, “That is the part that my mother says was paid for by one or two of her paychecks. She knows this because after she paid Da-day, it was about one month later that this new addition appeared on the house.”

After Freddie’s disclosure, I would bring this up with the mahjong group. They erupted into a flurry of talk. It’s not well to speak ill of the dead, however it is true that Da-Day was a locally prominent cinco por seis (five-six). Throughout the post-war period up until Rosa became Santa Regla, Da-day was a force to be reckoned with. It was Santa Regla that told her money lending was a sin, and so the story goes she ended her lending business. However the damage of the reputed “curse” of the usurer had already been cast. One woman said, “You know what people sometimes call that house? The ‘People’s House,’ for it was the belief that it was with their money that it grew. Every time Da-day got money, Meliton would be in his workshop, and something new would be added to the house.”

Isabel said, “I truly believe it was the intention of Nenita Sornito that the house would become the property of the town after Terry passed. They were all so proud of their father. I cannot imagine that she would not have wanted it to be a legacy of his talent and genius for all the people to see.”

Another person, a man, commented, “Or the house should just be returned to the people that really paid for it! Maybe the old man was a genius and not involved
in that other crazy stuff with Santa Regla, but he took that money and converted it into carved tables, big *narra* sideboards, and that big lazy susan cabinet that makes no sense. Have you seen the ceiling in that place? It is fancier than Malacanang Palace! My mother was a teacher with Da-day and she saw her use her students to run errands, do the cooking, or even clean the house. The parents used to complain to the school, ‘why is my child being asked to do this work?’ It was not right. But those same parents often owed Da-day money, and other teachers and administrators at the school! So what could you do about it? *Wala! (Nothing).*”

Lewis Hyde says in his analysis of usury says that, “Usury and interest are sisters to commodity; they allow or encourage a separation.” In contrast to the separation inserted by “interest”, in contrast is Marcel Mauss’ description of gifts that are not given freely, but with a different type of obligation:

> Speaking of the hau, the spirit of things and particularly of the forest and forest game, Tamati Ranaipiri, one of Mr. Elsdon Best’s most useful informants, gives quite by chance the key to the whole problem. ‘I shall tell you about hau. Hau is not the wind. Not at all. Suppose you have some particular object, taonga, and you give it to me; you give gifts and you return gifts to me without a price. We do not bargain over it. Now I give this thing to a third person who after a time decides to give me something in repayment for it (utu), and he makes me a present of something (taonga). Now this taonga I received from him is the spirit (hau) of the taonga I received from you and which I passed on to him. The taonga which I receive on account of the taonga that came from you, I must return to you. It would not be right on my part to keep these taonga whether they were desirable or not. I must give them to you once they are the hau of the taonga which you gave me. If I were to keep this second taonga for myself I might become ill or even die. Such is hau, the hau of personal property, the hau of the taonga, the hau of the forest. Enough on that subject.”

---


The description of the gift belies anything but separation. It is pure description of how gifts (in this instance Maori society) are what drive social relations. *Hau* cannot be aggregated to belong the individual, it is the spirit of the (*taonga*) gift, of which bears the spirit of the *hau*, which is much more than just one instance personal gain, or gifting, but as Mauss’ informants adds, the spirit of the person who gave the gift before, and in addition the spirit of the forest as well. I might venture to say that this spirit, like the wood spirits discussed in Chapter One, maintain a spirit afterlife in giving of themselves into the economy of gift exchange among humans. Hyde echoes this in tracking the socio-historical shifts of usury post-Reformation, “No one by himself controls the cycle of gifts he participates in; each, instead surrenders to the spirit of the gift in order for it to move…If this were not so, if the donor calculated his return, the gift would be pulled out of the whole and into the personal ego, where it loses its power.”

In David Graeber’s book, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, he states that it would be nearly impossible to find a benevolent depiction of a moneylender. “The very name *“usurer”*, evokes images of loan sharks, blood money, pounds of flesh, the selling of souls, and behind them all, the Devil, often represented himself as a kind usurer, an evil accountant with his book and ledgers.” I will return to the subject of bookkeeping and ledgers later in this chapter. By now the point has been made that money lending bears out a long history that evokes all kinds of negative effects. In addition, it disrupts and distances social relations - between people, objects, and even nature, or the *hau* of the forest.

---


**Utang (Debt) and Figure of the Cinco por Seis (Five Six)**

There is not a lot of literature on the figure of the *cinco por seis* or the five-six (5/6) in the Philippines.\(^{133}\) There is plenty of discussion of the term *utang* (debt), a complex term that involves all the relationships that Mauss described in the gift. *Utang na loob* (debt of the heart/inside) describes a state that both encompasses and exceeds economic logic, and is the subject of much debate in literature on the Philippines especially as it regards historical debt-peonage relationships or subtler categories of social relations where pity, power, and spirit powers come into play. (Cannell 1999; Hollensteiner 1973; Ileto 1979; Rafael 1988) However, Fenella Cannell in her ethnography on healing in the Bicol region of the Philippines (also in the Visayas) makes brief mention of the “5/6.” She says, “It is expected that lenders will make practical calculations about which potential borrowers will fulfill their obligations.”\(^{134}\) At the same time, in her fieldwork, she found that despite rational calculations and promises made between creditor and debtor, that there remained the “possibility of talking things over.” She contrasts this with a woman she spoke with who dealt with a bank loan where the rules of repayment were much “ stricter” and her family barely survived on rice and maize, the food of the destitute. Cannell takes from this woman’s story that it is better to be in debt “those who are not difficult to talk” against those who have no common decency or compassion.\(^{135}\)

---

\(^{133}\) After an exhaustive search, I consulted Alfred McCoy who to the best of his knowledge confirmed that he has not seen research concerning the five-six in the Philippines.

\(^{134}\) Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*, 103.
The mahjong group in the nipa house knew who the five-six were in the Poblacion, but they told me I would find it difficult to get them to talk to me. There was one woman in particular that I saw a lot sitting in the park that faced the cathedral. I thought she just loitered there, because I never saw her speak with anyone. But the mahjong group assured me she was a five-six.

Flora got one of her friends (who was in debt to this five-six but did not say so) to broker a meeting. Reluctantly the man agreed. The next day Flora came to see me and said that the 5/6 would talk to me. I was to meet her in the park by the statue of Rizal at around dusk. I went early and watched the kids coming home from school, the after-school band and soccer practice, than the day laborers from the city returning home. By then it was well past dusk. I waited longer in the dark until Freddie the photographer saw me and asked why I was sitting in the dark all alone. I told him whom I was waiting for. Freddie laughed and said that woman is a ghost. Now you see her, then she disappears.

A festival was usually the best time not to talk to the five-six, who was busy, but to their debtors. The debtors were usually people who ran mobile food kiosks. I literally ran across them in the early dawn hours on my daily run with Isabel. I saw whole families stretching and gathering water to clean themselves and their equipment. I stopped to talk to one group that ran a popular fish balls cart. The owner was a single mother, who with her four children followed the pyesta (fiesta) circuit throughout Panay island. It reminded me of traveling minstrels and circuses of medieval Europe. The woman sat on a plastic crate and scoured her deep fryer right on the side of the street as the cars flew by spewing exhaust or dogs sniffed

Ibid.
around, looking for scraps. She explained to me that they had to live in their cart because they did not know people in every town they visited, so they often had no place to stay. She said the money they made either went back into the ingredients for more fish balls, gas, or to the 5/6. What little they had leftover she would try to save. However last year, their cart was robbed, and she went further into debt with at least two 5/6’s in different towns because she could not pay, the interest just increased. The woman kept saying life is very hard. Her children were wild because they never stayed in one place long enough for them to go to school properly, and she needed them to mind the cart. She said they she was almost caught up in her debt to the 5/6 in Santa Barbara, but was worried that she would arbitrarily decide to increase her interest rate. She said that she was anxious that the 5/6 would come by this morning, because that is when she usually collects, before the dawn. I tingled at the coincidence between the timing of this woman’s 5/6 with Conrada Sornito, both dreaded specters that comes to collect just before the sun comes up.

The next day I went to look for the fish balls truck, to see if the 5/6 had paid her a visit. It was gone. I asked the vendor that was next to hers what happened to the fish balls lady. The man told me that she went to another town fiesta. Even though there was no one else around he whispered to me, “I think she is also running from the 5/6. She owes her a lot of money. Look around, a lot of vendors have left, and this fiesta is not over yet. It’s because they cannot pay their debts. I think the 5/6 threatened to take their vendor licenses if they did not pay. No license, no business. Then how would they make money to pay her back?”
I asked Isabel about this and she looked through the paperwork of the vendors. It was strange. Many that were slated to stay the entire festival had just disappeared. Isabel was disappointed because they also had not paid the tourism office for the municipal fee to use the space. When I told her what the vendor said about the 5/6, she told me that the 5/6 does not have the power to revoke vendor licenses, only the mayor has that power. But then she admitted that the 5/6 probably made them believe she had that power. Isabel said, “The 5/6 has all kinds of cunning tricks to get their debtors to pay. Some are worse than others.”

Part II: Economics and Fairies

In a 1980 dissertation written about “Folk Healing in Iloilo” an interesting error or “slip” occurs in the author’s discussion under the heading Natural Resources and Economic Wealth:

“An important gauge of a community’s economic life is the presence of banking and financial institutions in the area. As of 1976, Iloilo had 22 commercial banks, 13 financing institutions, and 28 rural banks. (van Gilder 1977) suggests a close relationship between spiritbeings and Nature. Fairies are believed to be the “caretakers” of the physical creation of God, each group of fairies performing a specialized job.”

136 Moises K. Ponteras, “Folk Healing in Iloilo: A Dissertation Presented to the College of Arts and Sciences, University of the Philippines Diliman, Quezon City” (Dissertation, University of the Philippines Diliman, Quezon City, 1980).

137 Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin, 1991), 150. A “Freudian slip” or parapraxis is an error in spoken language, memory, or action that can be interpreted as a manifestation of repression within the unconscious. While “slips” are more
discussion on the relationship between money, healing, and usury is an ellipses that I seek to slot into. In the time during my fieldwork in Santa Barbara, connections between the repressed of the five-six and the other occult histories were not “slips”, but began to make sense in its own fragmented way, especially as I learned more about the landscape around the Cake House. As Allen Shelton reminded us with John Pelham and the reshaping of haunting in the dreamworld of Alabama, the world of wisteria that grew up around Pelham’s death was “just another name” for the mysteries around Capital, Memory, Ecosystem.

It might have been the case that people liked to share or tell me stories about supernatural creatures, ghosts, accidents, and haunted sites because they knew the predicament I was in, and in their minds I was an anthropologist and it was this sort of “archaic” knowledge that I would be interested in. Perhaps my presence encouraged people to tell these stories. However after months of sitting at the mahjong table, at meals, in the karaoke bar, the cemetery, the park, birthday parties, sporting events, taking walks, festivals or just sitting inside someone’s house or some shelter to wait out the heavy rains, I found a recursive quality to this storytelling. This is not to say such stories were the only things that people talked about. But after enough time had passed I did not get the impression they were told and re-told for my benefit alone. They were the stories of this town.

---

precisely defined as words that accidentally get substituted for other words, most salient for my purposes is that it [the slip] is a “source outside of speech.”
The road between Iloilo City and Santa Barbara was about a twenty-minute drive. If one took public transport, or a jeepney (refurbished and stylized World War II jeeps that have become something of a icon of the baroque on wheels in the Philippines), it took a little under one hour. Whenever I took the jeeps, something would consistently happen just as we entered the border crossing into Santa Barbara. Mothers would grip their children more securely to them. Several people could be heard saying prayers under their breath. Others clutched to *anting* (amulets) or their rosaries. The driver would also touch the rosary hanging from the rearview mirror.

I started to make small talk with passengers. I would get off the jeep, cross the road, and get on a jeep heading back. I would consistently hear similar tales and observe the same behavior. At a certain point along the road, people began to get visibly nervous. I sat up front with the driver and asked him as he hung on to his rosary. He pointed to a lone tree in the distance. He said *bunawa* (fairies) and *kapre* (gnomes) were said to live in that tree. The area around it used to be full of trees, but now many of them were cut down. I asked why would fairies make anybody
nervous? Many accidents happened here, he told me. About twenty years ago, a bus full of children was coming down this road and right around the bubog tree, it turned over and caught fire. Almost all the children died in that accident. It was a tragedy that nobody in the town could forget. The driver got upset again, as if he were imagining that could happen to him and his passengers. He gripped the rosary tighter, and stepped on the gas. After traveling about 1 kilometer from the tree, everyone relaxed.

When I finally returned to my uncle’s house after making circles up and down the highway around the bubog tree, I told them what I had been inquiring about. My uncle laughed. He declared that is all nonsense, but nonetheless the people believe something is wrong with that tree. He told me this story had been around for decades, ever since they built the National Highway between Iloilo and Santa Barbara. In the 1980’s, when he was Chief of Police, he said that he wanted to empirically do away with all rumors about the bubog tree. He said that he took a unit of armed police and they camped around the bubog tree. “You know what? Nothing happened!” I asked him why they went armed. He said that members of the unit wanted to bring guns, just in case of bandits or robbers. My uncle told me it is not a safe place, and if I decided to go off the road and see the tree, that he would dispense people to go with me. I was left wondering why bandits and robbers would flock to a remote place that fairies are said to live.

The mahjong group at the nipa hut laughed over this story but confirmed it was true. All agreed that nobody stopped believing that something could happen at that spot. It was too much of a coincidence that so many accidents happened there. I tried to look them up in the archives of the local papers, but sometimes such
accidents were not reported. There was a visitor to the group that day from another barangay that lived near this bubog tree. He told me that he often takes a tricycle around that area to visit with friends or family. The tricycle drivers often reported seeing people, especially women, in the road. They drive up to the woman who they think is hailing them, but as they get closer, she vanishes. The drivers called her the “white lady.”

When I lived in Manila, similar rumors about a “white lady” abounded, especially along one road near in Quezon City called Balete Lane, located between Aurora Boulevard and Rodriguez Lane. It was so named after the balete trees that lined the road. A friend of mine who made part of his living as a professional driver, especially loved to go on ghost-hunts at night. While socialites and young people were flooding the nightclub scene, my friend Erdy and I would be driving up and down Balete Lane, hoping to see a white lady. We would stop to chat with cab drivers. All of them had either their own stories or secondhand accounts of the white lady. According to a news report, like my uncle, the mayor of Quezon City ordered

Figure 5.2 Balete Drive, Quezon City, Manila. (Photo by author)
police surveillance of the lane for two weeks.\textsuperscript{138}

The impulse to talk about these things intrigued me. However I began to take it more seriously when I saw Boyet again, the man who ran the sari-sari store by the Santa Barbara train station, and the story he told me about the building of the Panay Railway through Santa Barbara.

Construction on the Panay Railway began June 8, 1906, connecting the southern section of Panay to the northernmost point at Capiz. An American company J.G. White and Co., was in charge of the construction. In 1907 the first passenger train started transporting passengers from Iloilo to Pototan.\textsuperscript{139} The project in Panay coincided with lines built in the capital region of Luzon, which underlined its priority to the American regime insofar that the booming sugar industry on Negros Occidental required fast and efficient transport for the sugar entrepot. Boats were often at the mercy of sea conditions or the weather. There needed to be an overland transport system that could bring the sugarcane north towards Manila and local distribution sites in Panay.

Boyet asked me if I knew about the kurba (curve), that was a simply a road that was paved over a part of where the Panay Railway tracks used to run. Yet it was not just any curve, but a proper name, the Kurba near the exit from the airport. Curves, said Boyet, of course were not the most efficient shape for a railway to take. “Diretso, hindi bala?” (“Straight, isn’t that right?”) “It is called the Kurba here because people know it to be a special place. When the Americans came to build


the railroad, there was a particularly large balete tree that grew directly in the path of
where they planned to lay the track. The manager of the project was an American.
The people told him not to cut down that balete tree, because bad things happened to
people who came near it. He ignored them, thinking they were just superstitious
indios. But when construction began, one of his workers lost a finger when he
started to cut that tree down. There were rumors of other accidents, not at the site of
the tree, but bad things started happening to the workers. Then the manager had a
dream. He reported that a bunawa (fairy) came to him in the dream and told them
that more misfortune would occur if they disturbed their home.” Boyet laughed.
“This is not written anywhere, but anyone here can tell you this story. The manager
got spooked and he ordered that they build around the balete tree. The tree died
long ago, I think during the war, but the curve that the train track made around the
tree still exists and when the government paved a service road there after the railway
stopped running, they followed the kurba.”

Oral Histories of How Barrios Got their Names

In the spirit of storytelling, below I pass on some of the oral histories of how
barrios or barangays in Santa Barbara got their name; oral histories that my friend
Boyet lamented as being stories by “old ladies.” If, as I indicated in the case of
Sarah, that ang mga mal-am (“old ladies”) with a certain relationship to death are
endowed the power of the storyteller, than perhaps this art has not receded
completely into an insurmountable distance. While these are “myths”, it is
interesting to point out two things: 1) These are myths of a not so distant past, as
many of the towns were renamed either towards the end of the Spanish colonial era
(late-nineteenth century) or at the beginning of the American occupation of the
Philippines, so they are anywhere between a little over a century or some perhaps as
recent as World War II. 2) Whether these stories are “true” or not, it is nonetheless
interesting to note that lost in translation between Spanish or American and native,
the barangays often got the name of the local tree or plant by the Spanish or
Americans who misunderstood what the natives said or did not realize they were not
answering the question – ‘what is the name of this place?’ In a twist of the colonial
screw these places were given and recorded the names of indigenous plants or
markers of the landscape prior to colonization. This was hardly the case that people
were renaming towns to hearken back to folklore or pre-colonial identification. It
was the processes of colonization, war and development in the memory of the native
people that in a sense staged a return of the indigenous.

Boyet had theory that before the Spanish, many places did not in fact have
names. Since the Atis, a tribal group known to have lived a nomadic lifestyle, were
some of the first inhabitants of Panay Island, it is entirely possible that there were no
“proper” names or permanent settlements. It was the colonial administration that
parsed up land into *visita* (colonial settlements without a parish priest), then *pueblos*
towns with a parish priest), and then provinces and so forth. He even brought up
the movie the *Land Before Time*, a Disney film about dinosaurs. Before names, the
landscape existed outside of time in Boyet’s imagination.

Arjun Appadurai has said of the production of locality that, “all locality has a
moment of colonization, a moment both historical and chronotypic, when there is
formal recognition that the production of a neighborhood requires deliberate, risky,
even violent action in respect to the soil, forests, animals, and other human
beings….The anxiety that attends many rituals of habitation, occupation, or
settlement is a recognition of the implicit violence…some of this anxiety remains in
the ritual repetition of these moments, long after the foundational event of
colonization.” 140 The remains of this anxiety I understand to be the repeated
separation between nature and culture in unpacking how the landscape gets “named”
and reconstituted, as if the moment of genesis repeats itself ad nauseum. Capital.

My own “theory” of the town is in the form of a drawing I did of the
Poblacion of Santa Barbara. It “mapped” all the locations that constellated the
world of my fieldwork.

---

Camambagan\textsuperscript{141}

The barangay of Camambagan was formerly known as Kabubugan. The large bubog tree was plentiful there, and when some Spanish soldiers asked a native the name of the place, they got the name of the tree. When the U.S. occupied the Philippines they renamed Kabubugan to Camambagan, a play on words into syllables as to say, “come-on-the-bubogs-are-gone.” It is unclear who exactly deforested the place of the bubog, the Americans or the natives. What is clear is that the disappearance of the trees coincided with the American occupation.

Daga

Formerly known as Daga-an, a resting place. Adjacent to Daga was the sitio of Camingawan, or the “place of loneliness.” Bandits marauded the land, burning down the houses and killing its inhabitants. Eventually it was ceded to Daga. During the raids, the wealthier families of Daga escaped. Along the way they passed through areas lush with many trees, grazing animals, and a stream. Women passed the time engaged in pangigi (driving away bad thoughts).

Mangancina

Once a place with “no name.” The Spanish found that the language spoken there was called Cina and mangan meant person, thus they combined the words to form the town’s name.

\textsuperscript{141} Helen Grace de la Torre Abad, “A Study of the Folklore of Santa Barbara, Iloilo.” The following stories are taken from the English translations of de la Torre and the personal archives of Boyet Sumbillo, Santa Barbara Centennial Museum Archives.
**Binangkilan**

There was once a girl named Venancia. She was nicknamed Binang. She spent much of her time helping her family. Every afternoon she went fishing in a stream near her house. Few people went to that place because there was a hidden quicksand trap, and many people had already died and were long buried there.

One day Binang went this brook to fish. She set her line and waited for what seemed like a long time. Suddenly she felt a strong pull. Out of the water came a strange fish with long and sharp canine teeth. She screamed for help. Fortunately, a group of people was passing by and heard her screams. They came to her rescue and saw the monstrous fish, as she lay unconscious. They group called her name, “Binang! Binang!” When she awoke, she kept repeating, “Kilan, Kilan.”

From that time, the place where the mysterious creature appeared was called “Binangkilan.”

**Guno**

The people that lived in what came to be called Guno was separated from the rest of Santa Barbara by the Aganan River. Most of the people of this place lived by subsistence farming. The raised gulay (vegetables), manok (chicken) and tuba (coconut wine). They did not have to fish very often.

One day a group of fishermen came through the settlement with a large catch of the fish guno. Everyone bought some of the fish. On the same day, the capitán ordered a survey of the land and the condition of the people. By the time the surveyors arrived to this place, they saw everyone eating fish for dinner. The Spanish Civil Guardia asked one family the name of the fish. Guno was the reply.
The following day, the Spanish returned and declared that this settlement was now to be known henceforth as Guno.

**Bolong Oeste**

A long time ago, Bolong Oeste had no name. The people were known for their skills at growing medicinal herbs and plants, which they also used for decoration and making perfumes.

When the Americans invaded Panay Island, Filipino guerillas took refuge in this place because of the availability of healers and healing plants. It became a first-aid station for the guerillas.

One day an American platoon passed by a group of people busily picking some plants and others grinding them into a paste. One of the soldiers asked, “Which way is it to Santa Barbara?” (Santa Barbara was of course the center of the revolutionary forces in the province at the time.) The person asked thought the soldier was asking the name of he plant that he was picking, so he answered, “Bolong.” Other soldiers asked the name of the place they were standing. Frustrated the man replied, “Bolong, este, you don’t believe? You think I am joking?”

The soldier, thinking he had obtained the information he had asked for, repeated, “Bolong Este. Okay, thank you.” He gave his informant chocolate and cigarettes. He marked a spot on his map with Bolong Este, and declared to his platoon that Bolong Este was two kilometers from the base of General Tan Delgado.
**Ilonggo Riddles and Proverbs**

My Kinaray-a teacher’s favorite methods of teaching me the language were through *mga hurobaton* (proverbs) and *mga paktakon* (riddles). For her generation they were popular word-play games for young children. It was especially during times when a crowd gathered, such as a wake or celebratory feast, that games of storytelling would take place.

The first one she taught me was oddly one that my mother, who speaks Ilonggo fluently and who grew up very poor, often told me:

*Nagluso ang paghigugma bintana manutok ang gutom sa gawang.*

Love flies out the window when hunger knocks at the door.

Then there were proverbs that challenged my ability to interpret, as they turned to metaphor.

*Ang balay nga may kalamay, ginadapo sang subay.*

Where there is sugar, there ants gather.

The ones my teacher took most delight in was trying to get me to solve riddles.

*Ang ulo hari, ang lawas pari, ang Paa lagari*

Its head is that of a king, its body is that of a priest, its legs are saws

*sagot – apa*  
*answer – locust*

*Baston ni San Jose, indi maisip (ulan)*

Cane of Saint John can’t be counted (rain)

The last one I remember best was, “Of whatever things there are in the world, anything in excess is poison.”
Part III: Keeping Accounts

Max Weber pointed out two peculiarities about modern Western capitalism:
1) the separation of business from household, and 2) rational book-keeping.\textsuperscript{142} I am concerned with the latter. In his analysis of Calvinism, he notes that “religious account books in which sins, temptations and progress made in grace were entered and tabulated.”\textsuperscript{143} While the Sornitos were Catholics, the balance of moral and financial accounts were tabulated and duly recorded.

The Sornito ancestral house as a piece of architecture is indeed an archive of the material world and everyday objects carved and jointed into the “dreamworld” that became a Cake House. However inside it also was a safe deposit box for all kinds of accounting that especially Nenita P. Sornito scrupulously kept in handwritten notebooks. I did not have to break down the door to the room that Nenita died in, as everyone initially wanted me to do. After a few months, Angel Castro’ round the clock calling of the Cake House landline was silenced as we cut the line. I kept two cell phones and when it became clear to him that I either discarded or stopped using the number he had for me, he also stopped calling me. I remained with my uncle’s family but spent some afternoons in the Cake House meditating over its structure, poring over the books, and writing in my fieldwork journal.

As I sat writing on the balcony of the room that was first ‘Moly’’s childhood room which became Terry’s when he died and then my own for a time, I saw a

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 76.
rusted metal filing cabinet painted pink. I did not pay much attention to it for a long time because I figured it was a discarded piece of furniture that was kept outside because it did not match the finery of the rest of the house. One rainy day I opened it. Since it looked unwanted and it was unlocked, I did not expect to find anything or feel like I was snooping.

Normally one might not think that finding a set of notebooks with someone’s old book-keeping would not be much of a treasure to find. For me however, the discovery was incredible. What I needed to bring together the complicated legacies of the Sornito Ancestral House were all there. Besides the notebooks, were several albums of the Sornito and Molina (Santa Regla’s) families. I even found images of Chan as a young woman in those albums. There were two sets of accounts kept. One a file of letters that Nenita Sornito copied by hand from the original typewritten letters to devotees of Santa Regla. They were letters written in English, and addressed to people in Hong Kong, the United States, and all over the Philippines. I recalled Boyet the railman’s son mentioning the mail. Here were the letters, but they were not sacred parchments written with Tagalog, English and pidgin Latin, as some baybaylan are known to do. Rather these were “double-accounting” or “copies” of very official looking original letters sent to the petitioners of Santa Regla worldwide. What baybaylan ever had a bookkeeper? I felt as if Franz Kafka, as an employee for the Accident Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia, would have been good at this job. The second notebook I found was one written in both by Nenita and Da-day, a handwritten book-keeping of the family financial accounting, which also included accounting for Santa Regla. The house and Santa Regla’s healing clinic functioned as one financial unit. The notebooks were in
remarkably good condition, given that they were stowed in a rusting file cabinet tucked away on an outdoor balcony, where it more likely than not should have rotted under the ministration of the humid to wet tropical climate.

While it did not appear that the Sornito’s were engaged in loan sharking, they were still engaged in making loans, but no mention of interest, as the letter in Figure 4 suggests.

Figure 5.4 Page 31 from Account Book of Nenita P. Sornito of a Loan, dated August 21, 1997.
The notebook was a collage of names, dates, deaths, notes of petition, recitations of devotion, but most of all, keeping accounts of money. On the left page, (Figure 5) Nenita enumerates what Santa Regla has given their family, which lists anything from “good health”, for “Helen’s (Attorney Sornito) winning her case and getting promoted to Chief Register of Deeds for the City”, and for “Romulo turning over a new leaf”.

3) Through St. Regla’s help, we are enjoying good health and long life with a better living condition due to the children’s stable earnings as compared with our past life.”

On the right were Da-day’s notes to herself about accounts paid and land titles numbers. At the very bottom of this page of numbers she intones a prayer, “May this Sornito family inherit Heavenly Kingdom through Christ our Lord. Your daughter in Christ, Conrada P. Sornito.”

Figure 5.5 Page from Accounting Notebook of Sornito Family, dated August 27, 1994.
As I turned the pages, the life of the family unfolded before me in Nenita and Conrada’s delicate handwriting. They often used different colored pens, and the colors had leaked through to other pages, giving the notebook something of an artful effect. Michael Taussig in his meditation on the fieldwork diary says this of the notebook in general: “The notebook is enchanted as well as enchanting, at least from afar.”¹⁴⁴ I was enchanted by these notebooks, which entered my own fieldwork notebooks. This collection was the material medica or book of spells of the cinco por seis, the scrapbook of a Filipino bourgeois family in the West Visayas, the inner thoughts and financial tallyings of Santa Regla’s cult following, and as they entered into my notebooks, their legacies became part of my inheritance. One of the last pages in the notebook of accounts was an account of deaths in the family. The last person on the list was my grandfather, Juan Evangelista Sornito, August 17, 1990. As if I was there to pick up where this notebook last left off.

Figure 5.6 Accounting Notebook, Sornito Family, "List of Deaths." Note no.12.

CONCLUSION: WHERE THE DEAD DWELL

“History is our tsunami, and in our seaside shelters, we keep watching the tide return, waiting for our cleansing as bodies drown.”

-Gina Apostol

Introduction

In my discussion of haunting, legacy, healing and sorcery, I had the opportunity to disinter my own relationship to the dead. Halloween in America is meant to estrange us from the uncanny, the ghoulish, and especially the dead. The masses of the dead are the ultimate “Other”, that which is abject from sight and speech, such that the realm of the dead must be made into a cartoon and sweetened with candy to soothe the fears of children and maintain sanitized contact with death and dying. To return to Benjamin on death and the storyteller, “In the course of modern times death and dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living.”

In this chapter, I want to turn briefly to thinking about how the dead dwell under a different set of circumstances than what I and Walter Benjamin ruminated upon – death and storytelling receding into the distance from modern, bourgeois life. While the Cake House bore witness and was the keeper of accounts for many deaths, it was in my interactions with healers in and around Santa Barbara that I began to get a glimpse of a phenomenon that perhaps Benjamin intuited but in the end, even


146 Benjamin, Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, 94.
he could not face it - mass death due to war, structural violence, and unprecedented natural disaster. It is the latter that I am concerned most with in this chapter. Robert Pogue-Harrison, reflecting on Zoe Crossland’s work on the exhumation of the “disappeared” in Argentina, the dead that never come back but might, comes to the question of “what is the human obligation to the corpse? […] They tell us that the corpse possesses a kind of charisma, and that in many cases the event of death remains unfinished or unrealized until person and remains have been reunified and the latter disposed of ceremonially… Mortal remains are never a matter of indifference where bonds of love and kinship exist.”

2008, Dreams of the Dead

The woman spoke in low tones such that even in the tiny room we were huddled, I could barely make out the words she was saying.

That did not seem to matter so much to ‘Nang Fe, the local spirit medium who had granted me access to her practice. She sat in a worn brass-studded armchair across from her client, the woman.

The woman broke out into sobs, and her sister, just on the other side of the sheet that doubled as a curtain to the doorway of the healing room, reached out and cradled the woman’s head.

‘Nang Fe wiped her forehead and asked the woman to wait. She got up and went to get something from the main house.

The woman’s sister talked to me while we waited for the healer to return.

147 Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, 147.
“You remember typhoon Frank?”

I shook my head. I was not in the Philippines when typhoon Frank, international code name Fengshen, struck the region in 2008.

“My sister had a house in Zarraga. When the typhoon passed, her family returned to the house, thinking it was safe. The worst of the storm had passed. We should have waited longer. There was a mudslide. My sister and her children escaped. Her husband did not.”

At this point the woman raised her head. “I just started a new life. I am building a new house. In Cabatuan. But my husband is visiting me in my dreams, telling me this is a bad place to build a house. He is insistent. He visits me every night. I wake up screaming. I am scaring my children, so I sent them to live with my sister for awhile. I don’t know what to do. So I am here, to ask ‘Nang Fe what I can do.’”

Her sister said that that her own household finances were strained with the addition of her sister’s children. They also missed their mother. “We do not where else to go. The government has given a little assistance to survivors, but it is not enough to start all over again. And then something else happens. Another storm. There have been so many. We have never seen so many typhoons like this.”

Before leaving’ Nang Fe, the woman offered her name. “My name is Josephine. You can come see where my house is going to be.”

2013, The Dreaming Dead

I found myself unable to sleep much as I watched on internet newsfeed and eventually on national television networks in dread and then in anguish as typhoon
Yolanda, international codename Haiyan\textsuperscript{148}, cut a similar path through the Visayas and Samar region of the Philippines as did Typhoon Frank in 2008. On November 6, 2013, I watched the storm begin as a tropical depression over Micronesia. On November 8\textsuperscript{th} 2013, a category 5 super-typhoon leveled thousands of homes, killing an estimated 6,190 people and by some estimates displaced around 4 million people in the Philippines, destroying 1.1 million homes.\textsuperscript{149}

“Its residents stared out at the chaos below like zombies,”\textsuperscript{150} intoned a few of the early headlines in the wake of the storm.

The invocation of the “living dead” initially caused me to bristle against cheap journalistic jingoism. The same audience for a popular tv series about zombie apocalypse is invited to view the images coming out of the Philippines as a scene right out of the zombie imaginary. These people are alive, but are in shock. They are not lifeless animated figures. Wouldn’t you be if your entire world was berated and then washed away by the most powerful storm on record to make landfall?

James Siegel invokes the “living dead” in the wake of the 2004 tsunami that struck parts of Asia, not for a television viewing audience, but as a way to describe how the relationship of the living and the dead fundamentally changed in the aftermath of such widespread devastation. “People are aware that they themselves, like everyone in the city, do not know who is alive and who is dead[…]there are

\textsuperscript{148} International storm Haiyan will be referred to in this document as Yolanda, the name it was given in the Philippines.


\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
thus ‘living-dead’, people whose status as alive or dead is unclear.’’

I watched for the status of my own family and friends through a popular social network website in the hope that a wireless signal would allow them to login and establish their status as “ok” or at the very least “alive.” Even under ideal conditions, making a telephone call to the Philippines can be difficult, and the popularity of social networks in the Philippines is among the highest in the world. Suddenly, the mundane tickering of people’s “status updates” of what they ate or where they were became a signal of life itself. Hotlines and blogs began to pop up everywhere, giving names of people who reported themselves as alive. Vanguard reporters who went into the city Tacloban, perhaps the hardest hit metropolitan area by Yolanda, brought back “proofs of life” on scraps of paper plates, bags, and any scrap that people could find to write on.

To: Elma N./Anthony D.

Okey kami lahat ng mga bata, buhay kami.
Translation: (We are okay, all the children are still alive.)

From: Kristine Faith D.

---


152 Political prisoners long held by the Colombian Communist guerilla army, FARC would periodically send “proofs of life” in the form of voice or video recordings to the families of their captives as “evidence” that the person was still alive.
Not all were proofs of life. One message, written in neat block letters, said:

*Kuya, patay na si daddy at mommy. Pakisabi sa lahat

Translation: (Kuya [elder male], mommy and daddy are dead. Please tell everyone.)

*Home is where the….*

The Cake House, though in the direct path of Yolanda, weathered the storm without any damage. However so many other people’s homes did not. In the town of Guiuan, Samar, where the storm first made landfall, one person said, “Most of the dead were found in their homes, it came so early that a lot of people were caught off guard and still sleeping.” Another person in the city of Tacloban, some 100 miles west of Guiuan, had taken refuge in their concrete house, set back from the shoreline by a couple rows of houses, and emerged to find they now had beachfront
property.¹⁵³ In the wake of this storm, I am forced to rethink my focus on one haunted site, and reflect more broadly on the landscape of widespread devastation scarring once multiple spaces of dwelling, where everywhere the dead may still waiting to be recovered or may never be found. The difficult task of sorting out the status of the living and the dead has been ongoing.

Fernando Zialcita noted that early Spanish *peninsulares* who started to build domiciles in Manila, that the growing settlement became a city of stone. They looked down upon the lowly and primitive *bahay kubo* (nipa huts) that the *indios* lived in. They knew that earthquakes and other natural events could break stone, but that just inspired them to build thicker stone foundations, requiring more manpower and imports from China. However, Zialcita had said of the new residents and their stone houses, “Like its residents, the Manila palaces were an alien import with no roots as yet in the land.”¹⁵⁴ Then on November 31, 1645, Zialcita reports from an unnamed archive:

*The sky was clear, the moon was bright, and the air calm and still, after a long period, even months, of clear and dry weather. Suddenly a frightful crash was heard, and the earth began to shake so violently that it seemed as if it would become a sepulchre for all its inhabitants. As a result, during the space of four Credos – the time during which the first shock lasted, the earthquake passing from north to south, and then from east to west, with a rapid movement – in that brief time it flung to the ground the most beautiful and magnificent buildings in this city. The stone walls were shaken and bent like sheets of paper or parchment fluttered by the wind; the towers*


The Spaniards who managed to flee the chaos took refuge in the *nipa huts* that bent and swayed with the ground.

Officials estimated from some of the first aerial photographs of areas impacted by the storm, that 80% of the buildings were destroyed. In the weeks that followed, the controversy that initially dogged President Aquino’s administration was the lack of aid and in particular, the fear of the corpses that seemed be everywhere or appear in suddenly in one’s path. One report was not shy to describe the putrefaction:

In Paradise, Village 83, a short walk from the Tacloban Leyte Ice Plant, a man’s body bobs in the water, everything but his clothes bleached a powdery white. Feather strings of skin trail in his wake, small clumps of fish gnaw away at the stumps of his arms. On the coast another corpse lies sprawled on debris among pink bottles of baby powder, his swollen body bursting the seams of his blue baseball jersey.

The children of Village 83 point to the center of the bay, right where the steel edges of half sunken container trucks are visible. There are men out there, say the children, drivers sitting inside the cabs of their own trucks. Fishermen repairing their boats along the port say more bodies are caught in the grass along the edge of the coast.

Just by the trucks, in clumps in the water, more bodies float in piles, caught on wooden markers.

In the mangroves, near where children are playing, the corpse of a woman hangs impaled in a tangle of branches, her legs spread, her arms akimbo, thigh and ankle pierced by twigs. Her naked torso is a yellow bag of little more than bones. What is left has turned the color of wood.156

---

155 Ibid.
People were complaining about the stench as the weeks passed. In a town called Fisherman’s Village on the island of Leyte, they clamored for more body bags. One person said that an official told them they were afraid that people were sleeping in the body bags, rather than giving them to the dead. The people of Fisherman’s Villages painted the roof of the elementary school so it would be visible from the sky. It said:

**HELP THERE ARE MANY DEAD BODIES HERE**

---

**Where the Living Fear to Dwell**

The site of Josephine’s new house was on a hill that overlooked the town of Cabatuan. She thought that living on higher ground would be safer in the event of another typhoon. Construction on the house had abruptly ceased when she started experiencing the visits from her dead husband.

“The dreams started when the foundation was finished. I thought that was all they were at first, just dreams. But then I thought I saw him on the side of the road from my jeep rides into the city. Or I would see him in a crowd of people, and when I tried to approach him, he would disappear. Things like that. I have not been able to go to sleep. I am afraid. He takes me to this place and tells me this is not a good

---

156 (Hodal 2013)

place. I do not know what to do. I bought the lot already. My daughter is in school here now.”

_Tuyaw, a Reminder from the Dead_

Dante told me that one had to be aware of “little hills” in the landscape. At best one should avoid them and if you can’t, you must pay courtesy to the spirit beings that may dwell there. Called _panabitabi_ a person must ask for safe passage through the dwelling. This is also the case for certain trees or other formations in the land.

Josephine said that ‘Nang Fe would try to help her clear the space of whatever made it a “bad” place to build a new home. In her case, she had to resort to a more intensive measure called _daga_, where a chicken or even a pig would be sacrificed as offering to the spirits. She was trying to decide whether to invest the money in a pig, to see if a larger offering would appease whatever disturbance laying the foundation of her new dwelling had caused.

The next time I saw Josephine was back at ‘Nang Fe’s healing room. She looked more even distraught. She was not able to afford a pig, but she did sacrifice two black chickens. ‘Nang Fe said that she did not think it was spirits of the forest. With a piece of _luya_, or ginger root, balanced between her fingers, she pronounced that Josephine’s affliction was indeed what she feared, that it was _tuyaw_, a reminder from the dead.
“What can one do about that?” I asked ‘Nang Fe later.

‘Nang Fe was never one to waste words. She said, “Listen to what they are saying.”

Construction on Josephine’s house came to a halt after about a month. She stopped responding to my text messages. I would ask people to drive me by her place. I did not see Josephine at ‘Nang Fe’s again for a long time. After a long period of time, it was pretty clear that she was gone. Even her daughter was no longer enrolled at the elementary school.

‘Nang Fe said to me, “You know her land was not far from Jessie’s. Maybe that whole area is bad? Her husband knew and did not want his family near him.” This theory seemed too convenient for ‘Nang Fe to say to me, as if by invoking the sorcerer whispering into the ear of Terry, that I would immediately understand. However the coincidence did have an effect on me, as coincidences do in situations of misfortune. Although in the case of Josephine, the misfortune was an accident of tragic proportions. I remember her saying over and over, “What if I had gone back? What if I stayed longer to get something? What if my husband had an appointment in the city that day? He usually did have something to do in the city on Tuesdays.” The “what if’s” seemed endless.

Josephine was one of a number of people I met while doing fieldwork among local healers or baybaylan of the Visayas. I had filed her story away to be noted for

---

a future time when I could follow up on her. I had noticed a slight trend in the stories of people who came to baybaylan seeking answers or assistance, however it was not enough to substantiate a claim at the time.

Most people came to the baybaylan with various ailments or petitions, like my friend at who worked at the Tourism Office and had a recurring issue with gout. Many people were petitioning to come to the U.S., and asked healers for blessings on their hopes and dreams. Over time, more people like Josephine were coming in with stories that were tied increasingly more to issues with changes to the landscape and dwelling, which for me, became the story of spaces of non-dwelling. Barangays with names were washed away, transformed into blighted landscape. Hollowed out husks of concrete buildings, where a body might be underfoot or stuck in the rafters. Earth that erodes from the weight of so much water coupled with the destruction of deep-root system trees, re-surfaced the land while taking homes and people into its murky depths. It reminded me of the story the town of Binangkilan, where there was a dangerous spot of quicksand that people assiduously avoided. Now the scope of what is now called the “monster-typhoon” is not so easily avoided.

The Last Mango Tree and the Missing

I had not visited Lirio in a long time. He saw me approach his porch and motioned me to the front, to sit by his typing desk. The line was unusually long that day, with a crowd loitering on the road and slowing traffic down. He told me, “You listen. These people are here for one reason. I will bet you money I know why.” I knew he was not kidding, but I declined the bet. I looked down the line and saw that instead of afflicted children, many people were carrying little sacks or empty plastic
bottles inside plastic bags. They were also mostly men, as opposed to women and children.

Instead of talking or giving Lirio an item of clothing of the sick person for him to examine, the first man was a farmer, and he spread out seeds onto the table. Lirio inspected them under a magnifying glass. He handed me the magnifying glass and told the farmer I was an American “scientist.” The man leaned forward and looked at me with widened eyes. I looked at the husk of unmilled rice. It was brownish and looked to me just like any other grain of unmilled rice I had seen before. The person reported that the appearance of a particular frog that marked when it was time to plant the next rice crop never emerged. The frogs had disappeared. He kept naming people in his family and village that could not remember a year when this frog did not appear.
Lirio wrote a lot on his legal pad that morning through the afternoon and
distributed them to the men with bags and bottles of seeds. He did not dispense as
much *sagot* (medicine) as much as just lending an ear to the disturbing pattern he
encountered that day.

When I returned to the U.S., I found Lirio on Facebook as he requested. I
could tell that he did not have access to a computer very often, but he did send me
messages. The most common one was the question, "*Buntis ka ba?*" ("Are you
pregnant yet?") Lirio had taken a keen interest in the fact that I was married with no
children. After the event of Yolanda, I wrote to Lirio. He was the only one of the
people that I was connected to through the internet that I had not heard from. I have
yet to receive an answer. Gina Apostol, a native of Tacloban and a writer living in
the United States, wrote of the desperation in the search for countless individuals
and the strange, new world that brought on by the advent of the super-typhoon:

But the people of Tacloban, looking for signs of life beneath the matchstick rubble
of their ephemeral homes, didn't need to hear finger-pointing about governance.
Women are still looking for their dead babies. Sons are searching for drowned
fathers.

*Makeshift online forums remain a bedlam of voices seeking the lost. Horrific Flickr* albums of looting and dismembered limbs pass like sewage on Facebook posts.
*Sleepless relatives, looking for clues, scour strangers’ videos showing the dazed* along the Maharlika coastal highway from Tanauan to Palo. “*Zombies,*” as online
comments describe them, in search of food and shelter — though not blood.159

Santa Barbara weathered the storm relatively unscathed. Even as the storm
was raging over PanayIsabel posted a photo of the Cake House online and captioned
it, “the old house is still standing.” Afterwards I got swept up in the local efforts to

159 Apostol, “Surrender, Oblivion, Survival.”
reach out to people affected in Northern Iloilo. Flora wrote me to say that what happened in Tacloban is terrible, but it also happened in parts of Iloilo. She told me the rescue boats that were readied before the storm to be deployed were swept away by the tidal wave. It was hard to get help to the remote places. “Remember when you took Terry to see the Panay Bukidnon?” (The Panay Bukidnon are lumad or an indigenous tribe who live in the mountainous interior of Panay Island.) I told Terry that I wanted to go see them, and then she decided that she wanted to go and donate all the old clothes in the Cake House to them. So we took the Hi-Lux and undertook the long journey. Flora continued, “They were completely devastated. No one can get help to them by land. The roads are too dangerous.” I asked Isabel to ask Fatima about Lirio. Weeks later, I heard back that his house was destroyed and the mango tree that had survived Typhoon Frank had been struck down. No one told me if he was dead or alive. Sophie wrote to me that the bubog tree was still standing. My father told me that a classmate of his was reported among the dead. “It was actually the wife who died. My classmate was the husband, and he was in a wheelchair. When the water began to rise, he told her to leave, but she tried to get him to higher ground. He survived, but she got swept away in the flood.”

**Changing the Shape of Haunting in the Age of the Supertyphoon**

The claim I was not ready to substantiate in 2011 with Josephine’s and others stories was the increasing theme of problems that I interpreted as having to do with climate change. The tuyaw that ‘Nang Fe spoke of in the case of Josephine was a singular warning from the dead just beginning emerging into the consciousness of the living.
Siegel found a different sort of apparition in the post-tsunami landscape in Aceh, Indonesia. For a period of time, stories of the “hypnotist” began to emerge. The hypnotist targeted women, and would rob them of their valuables and jewelry. One special feature of the hypnotist was that his victims had no memory of him. Ghosts, says Siegel, are different. They have a “trace.” Ghosts produce effects on people in the form of sounds, visual appearances, smell, or other types of sensation. The hypnotist is the “loss” of something, but simply a marking of the “loss” of something. “The hypnotist in that sense almost figures the living-dead. They are possibly alive, possibly dead…Can nothing exist?”

A few days ago, I found myself waking up at odd times of the night, thinking of Josephine. I wondered if she was okay, if she had found a new place to build a new home, or if she had moved to one of the many areas of northern Iloilo devastated by typhoon Yolanda. In the wake of 2008’s Typhoon Frank, which as of 2011, people were still talking about and feeling its after effects, I have no doubt then after Haiyan, which affected thousands more, will echo into dreams of a future generations come. But climate change was not on immediately apparent to everyone. People in the villages were not talking about it, even if it was a hot topic among foreign diplomats and NGO’s. However, all that has radically shifted. Haiyan has become inextricably associated to climate change. People in the barrios are talking about the kinds of houses they can build now to withstand Category 5 storms. The question remains, how will people negotiate their way between two unknowns, locating the living and the dead among the swiftly changing circumstances of nature on a global scale? Gina Apostol poses the question best:

160 Siegel, Objects and Objections of Ethnography, 113-114.
At times our choices for survival are clever — like the learning of others’ tongues, a resilient ruse in unsteady times. But in our resilience, we also make our doom. We rage at politicians’ self-serving blame of their inept governance. But governance is the point. It is easier, after all, to blame nature for the thousands of dead rather than on the choices we make — of incompetent leaders trailing a family history of unpunished plunder, of our continuing pillage of our forests, of our clinging to Western allies that spurn our demands for a forceful response to climate change.

On Red Beach, America will soon rumble onto Leyte’s shores with its ships, returning, like MacArthur, to Tacloban’s rescue, on the heels of a planetary emergency for which it feels no guilt or will to fix.

History is our tsunami, and in our seaside shelters, we keep watching the tide return, waiting for our cleansing as bodies drown.\(^{161}\)

\(^{161}\) Apostol, “Surrender, Oblivion, Survival.”
Near to the end of my stay in Santa Barbara, I visited a priest in the coastal town of San Joaquin some 50 km from the “Cake House.” This priest was the former parish priest of the Santa Barbara Cathedral, a Father Nelson. While I was there to interview him, for he knew my family and the inhabitants of the “Cake House” and its story very well, I was also relieved to be somewhere nobody would recognize my name. I went to San Joaquin’s very beautiful cemetery and there was not a name I could recognize on the graded stone and marble plinths that stretched up to the setting sun. Right before sunset, Father Nelson took me to the shoreline behind the cathedral. He pointed out a ruin set amidst a wild field of cadena de amor, the “chain of love.” It is a vine of pink blossoms that one could often find running amok in a cemetery. Here in the ruin, he told me the story of the fire that swept through the nunnery that used to stand here. He pointed out the largest well I had ever seen, overgrown with cadena del amor. We walked in circles among the stone ruins, as if this were something like Stonehenge, while Father Nelson recounted the history of the friars in San Joaquin.

But then I noticed something else in the stone and I pointed this out to Father Nelson. Embedded in the stone were fossils, the fossils themselves set in calcified coral. Father Nelson laughed at my wonder and said, “What else were they going to build things out of on a tropical island?” I ran my fingers between the stonecutter’s carvings of angels that gave way to the ministrations of nature, of geological time. Here is where colonial history and natural history merge, and it was then that I realized the shape of the story I had to tell.
The ideal intention, what Edmund Husserl called the *noematic intention*, for my intellectual journey was just that, an ideal, and one that was not fully realized. The outcome, what really happened is also just that, the project or story as I prefer to call it here is just what *really happened*, a node of experiences in a finite period of time, but in my case was drastically shaped by the unexpected and sometimes inexplicable. However, what I would argue, is that the story is as much a product of the *natural history*, the sort of history that Walter Benjamin spoke of in his essay on *The Storyteller* that borrows its authority from death, as much as the events particular to the time of fieldwork. In the course of making this story “graphic,” I am called upon to narrate the stories of how each barrio in Santa Barbara, or *barangay*, came by its name in a once-upon-a-time that was the transition from Spanish colonialism of the early 16th to late-19th centuries and then to the U.S. occupation of the Philippines which lasted until the not so long ago year of 1946. I must tell the story of the bones of the Visayan Revolutionary hero Martin Tan Delgado, those bones I saw exhumed from the old Santa Barbara cemetery before they were transferred to the newly erected shrine in the town square where everyone told me, “half this square was all owned by Sornitos, the other half, Delgados.” If that story is there, then I must tell the story of Conrada “Da-day” Perez Sornito, whom I was to learn was a notorious *cinco por seis*, a loan shark, whose understanding of numbers and money became the stuff of legend and derision. Then there is the *lavandera* named Maura who at the height of the Marcos administration, fell into a trance a few meters from the Cake House, and awoke to speak in tongues and henceforth become the medium of the *Birhen de Nuestra de Santa Regla*, or just
Santa Regla, and how the Sornitos, especially Conrada, became her ardent followers, main financial sponsors, and how their mastery of numbers (not just from Da-Day) but from my grandfather the mathematician who “squared-the-circle”, achieved high-rank among the first Masonic societies of Asia, and a teacher who helped develop the institutions of the American system of higher education after the war in Panay. Math and accounting after all, was also good for the business of healing. But then I would have to relate all the stories of witches, ghosts, creatures, curses and people’s fear of all of those, so that one may begin to glean how these spirits came alive at the very moment when people were to supposed to stop believing in such stories, like when the Americans came to build the Panay Railroad in 1907 and then Chan’s family built the new Iloilo International Airport exactly one hundred years later in 2007. Capital. Memory. Ecosystem. Catmon becoming Santa Barbara would be the story of “capitalism [as] a natural phenomenon which drew a new dream-filled sleep[…], and through it, a reactivation of mythic forces.”162 Last I would have to put on display the family tensions, schisms, attempts at communication (both with the living and the dead), and new relationships forged on the heels of scandal and all these legacies that for the briefest moment, snapped into view. All this happened right in Santa Barbara. I tell the stories of many characters, some still alive but most of them dead, stories which take me on long walks to the old cemetery but somehow all seem to lead me back to the “Cake House,” a house where destiny may yet lead it to become a museum, or in other words a place where

the past and the dead are enshrined for the future generations, though the irony is that its owner as of this writing is still very much alive. It is already a place that on the latest tourist blogs beckons the reader to “Discover Santa Barbara,” as if it is a veritable Macondo that had been isolated since the founding. But for me, this place, less so than even the cemetery on All Soul’s Day, was a crypt of secrets and ghosts that attracted and repulsed me all at once.

In a closing anecdote, so stories of the dead shall not recede into oblivion, I recount a story that Ruel, my companion on my trip to the Northern Highlands told me should be my next project. “I know you can speak a lot of languages, so why not Japanese next?”

Ruel said that his cousin was learning Japanese. He told me his family had been approached by Japanese State officials, reporters from NHK, and shadier characters that he believed were yakuza. The Ifugao, as Ruel’s earlier story about exhuming his grandfather based on a dream demonstrated, are very attentive to the corpses of their dead. It seems the Japanese knew this, and were especially interested in getting the Ifugao to help them find bodies that were not Ifugao or other natives. Ruel said it is true that the landscape was full of bones that did not belong to any of the Northern tribes. They were very likely the dead of fallen Japanese soldiers. I asked if they were requesting repatriation of the bodies. Ruel said no, not always. Interestingly enough, they wanted the shamans of the various Cordirellas’ tribes to perform death rites over the bones. Of course, my next question was, ‘why now?’, sixty-five years after the war?

Ruel lowered his talk to a whisper as we were on a bus. “I do not know. It is strange. I think there is money involved. I think the Japanese State has some
program or funding for this kind of project. But it’s all hush. That is why I think even the mafia got involved.”

He knew that he still had not answered my question. He then said, “One NHK reporter did not want me to tell anyone, but they started coming after the tsunami at Fukushima. So many people died. Of course people are shocked and traumatized. Someone had an idea that the all this disaster had something to do with the dead left behind during the war. From there, all these people have been coming to us, to help them find their bones. There is a lot of money going around. That is why my cousin is in Tokyo learning Japanese now.”

We stood in silence for a long time, warily watching the bus wind its way down the narrow and steep mountainside. There were many accidents that occurred along this stretch of road between the Northern Highlands between Baguio and down to Manila. I found myself holding on to the neck charm that I picked up at a shop in Sagada. It was a facsimile Ruel’s “authentic” anting (amulet) inherited from a dream of his grandfather.
Bibliography


“Cry of Santa Barbara: November 17, 1898” Document, Santa Barbara Centennial Musuem Archive, n.d.


Ponteras, Moises K. “Folk Healing in Iloilo: A Dissertation Presented to the College of Arts and Sciences, University of the Philippines Diliman, Quezon City.” PhD diss., University of the Philippines, 1980.


Appendix A: Squaring the Circle.\textsuperscript{163}

Squaring a circle

\textsc{Juan E. Sornito, Centra Philippine University, Iloilo City, Philippines.}

It is impossible to construct a square equal to a given circle by the exclusive use of a straight edge and compass.

This paper is intended to present a solution to this problem with a slight departure from the purely "straight-edge-and-compass" method.

If a square is to have equal area with a given circle, then \( s^2 = \pi r^2 \) or \( s = \sqrt{\pi} r \), where \( r \) is the radius of the given circle and \( s \) is the side of the required square. Therefore \( s \) is the magnitude to be determined. The first step to determine \( s \) is to represent \( \pi \) by a straight line. This line is equal to the circumference of a circle of unit diameter. Hence, it is necessary to "rectify" a circle whose diameter is equal to 1, that is, to determine a straight line whose length is equal to the circumference of a circle of unit diameter. The second step is to represent by a straight line the square root of \( \pi \). The third step is to represent \( s \), the product of \( \pi \) and the radius of the given circle. The fourth and last step is to construct a square with \( s \) as a side. These steps are taken successively in the following solution.

\textbf{Solution}

\textit{Given:} The circle with center at 0 and diameter equal to 1.

\textit{Problem:} To construct a square equal to the given circle.

\textit{Construction:} Let \( AY \) be perpendicular to \( AX \) (see figure). The circumference of the given circle is equal to \( 2\pi \).

\textit{Step 1.}

(a) Measure \( AP \) equal to \( \frac{\pi}{4} \).

With \( P \) as center, construct a major arc \( AB \) equal to \( \frac{\pi}{4} \) of the circumference. (Construct angle \( APB \) equal to 90\(^\circ\)) Then major arc \( AB \) is equal to the circumference of the given circle.

\[ 2\pi \left( \frac{\pi}{4} \right) = 2\pi r \text{ length of the arc } AB. \]

(b) Measure \( AQ \) equal to \( \frac{\pi}{6} \).

With \( O \) as center, construct major arc \( AC \) equal to \( \frac{\pi}{6} \) of the circumference. (Construct angle \( AQO \) equal to 120\(^\circ\)). Then arc \( AC \) is equal to the circumference of the given circle.

\[ 2\pi \left( \frac{\pi}{6} \right) = 2\pi r \text{ length of the arc } AC. \]

(c) With \( R (AR=2r) \) as center, construct arc \( AD \) equal to the semicircumference.

This is obviously equal to the circumference of the given circle, since the radius is equal to \( 2r \).

(d) Measure \( AS \) equal to \( 3r \).

With \( S \) as center, construct arc \( AE \) equal to \( \frac{\pi}{3} \) of the circumference. (Construct angle \( ASE \) equal to 120\(^\circ\).) Arc \( AE \) is equal to the circumference of the given circle.

\[ 2\pi \left( \frac{\pi}{3} \right) = 2\pi r \text{ length of arc } AE. \]

(e) \( AD=4r \).

With \( D \) as center, construct arc \( AF \) equal to \( \frac{\pi}{4} \) of the circumference. (Construct angle \( ADF \) equal to 90\(^\circ\)). Arc \( AF \) is equal to the circumference of the given circle.

\[ 2\pi \left( \frac{\pi}{4} \right) = 2\pi r \text{ length of arc } AF. \]

(f) Measure \( AT \) equal to \( 6r \).

With \( T \) as center, construct arc \( AG \) equal to \( \frac{\pi}{6} \) of the circumference.

\textit{Squaring a circle} 51

(Construct angle $ATG$ equal to $60^\circ$.)

Arc $AG$ is equal to the circumference of the given circle.

$2\pi(6r)(\frac{1}{4}) = 2\pi r$ length of arc $AG$.

(g) Measure $AU$ equal to $8r$.

With $U$ as center, construct arc $AH$ equal to $\frac{1}{4}$ of the circumference.

(Construct angle $AUH$ equal to $45^\circ$.) Arc $AH$ is equal to the circumference of the given circle.

By continuing the process, taking one longer radius at a time, the arc will approach the straight line $AX$. Connect the points $A, B, C, D, E, F, \ldots$, etc., with a smooth curve and prolonged until it crosses the line $AX$ at $I$. It will be observed that the arc approaches $AI$, as the radius approaches $\infty$. Therefore $AI$ is equal to the circumference of the given circle, equal to $\pi$.

**Step 2.**

To determine the square root of $\pi$ or $AI$.

Measure $KI = \text{the diameter of the given circle.}$ Upon $KA$ as diameter, construct a semicircumference. At $I$, erect a perpendicular to $KA$. Let this perpendicular intersect the semicircumference at $J$. Then $IJ$ is equal to the square root of $\pi$, since $IJ$ is the mean proportional between $KI$ (1) and $AI$ ($\pi$).

**Step 3.**

To determine $s$ or $\sqrt{\pi r}$.

From $K$ draw $KL$ making any convenient angle with $KA$. Measure $IM$ equal to $r$, and $KN$ equal to $IJ$. Draw $NI$ and $ML$ parallel to $NI$. Then

$$\frac{KI}{KN} = \frac{IM}{NL} \quad \text{or} \quad \frac{1}{\sqrt{\pi}} = \frac{r}{s} \quad \text{or} \quad s = \sqrt{\pi r}$$

**Step 4.**

With $s$ as the length of a side, construct a square. This square has the same area as the given circle, i.e. $s^2 = \pi r^2$. The square $NV$ is the required square.
Appendix B: Examples of Bahay Kubo

Figure B.1 Bahay kubo, *Santa Barbara, Iloilo*. (Photo by Joemarie Superio Bernas)

Figure B.2 Bahay kubo, *Santa Barbara, Iloilo*. (Photo by Joemarie Superio Bernas)
Figure B.3. Bahay kubo, Santa Barbara, Iloilo. (Personal Archive of Joemarie Superio Bernas)
Figure C.1 Exterior, Cake House, 2011. (Photo by author)

Figure C.2 Interior Ceiling, Cake House, 2011. (Photo by author)
Figure C.3 Exterior Balcony, Cake House, 2011. (Photo by author)

Figure C.4 Interior, Window, Vanity, & Chair Detail, Cake House, 2011. (Photo by author)
Figure C.5 Interior, Wall cabinet, detail, Cake House, 2011. (Photo by author)

Figure C.6. Interior, Sala with Santa Regla Center, Cake House, 2011. (Photo by author)
Figure C.7 Sala with Detail, Santa Regla Shrine, Cake House, 2011. (Photo by author)
Figure C.8 3rd Floor, Cake House, 2011. (Photo by author)

Figure C.9 3rd Floor, Bookshelf, Detail, Cake House, 2011. (Photo by author)
Figure C.10 Exterior, Cake House with Latticework, 2011. (Photo by author)

Figure C.11 Interior, Volada, Detail. Cake House, 2011. (Photo by author)
Figure C.12. Interior, Grapopono. Cake House, 2011. (Photo by author)