Writing Against the Machine in Filipino American YA Novels

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Abstract

This paper explores the fantasy-productions of Filipino diasporic novels for young readers: *Hello, Universe* by Erin Entrada Kelly and *Patron Saints of Nothing* by Randy Ribay. The transnational concept of fantasy-productions is based on the theories of Neferti Tadiar and will be complemented by theories regarding mythographies and the imaginary by Arjun Appadurai. Both are coming-of-age novels by Filipino Americans, going against US and Filipino fantasy-productions, disrupting the ideological messages from the USA and the Philippines. The novels go against state rhetorics that rationalize violence and dehumanize marginalized groups. Their relevance is heightened in the present day given the attacks against immigrants under Donald Trump, and Rodrigo Duterte's arrest for crimes against humanity.

Keywords

Philippine literature in English, young adult literature, Filipino-American literature, diasporic literature, postcolonialism

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Today, we see a USA using state violence against its own citizens, and a Philippines that is deeply divided on the question of using extrajudicial killings and state violence against its people. The political divide in the Philippines has its echo in the present day USA. Many Filipinos believe in the use of state violence and extrajudicial killings, while others do not. The USA seems to have the same ideological divide. Filipino and Filipino Americans have warned readers about the USA for decades, about the falsity of the American Dream, and they have also written against Rodrigo Duterte's Drug War, and its extrajudicial killings.

Two diasporic novels stand out, both of which won significant literary awards in the USA. *Hello, Universe* (2017) won the prestigious 2018 John Newbery Medal for children's literature from the American Library Association (Dwyer), while *Patron Saints of Nothing* (2019) won the 2019 Freeman Book Award and the 2019 Young Adult Golden Poppy Award (Carmichael). Both are coming-of-age novels by Filipino Americans, going against US and Filipino fantasy-productions, disrupting the ideological messages from the USA and the Philippines.

Both novels were published after populist presidents were elected in the USA and the Philippines in 2016, with Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte, respectively. The novels go against state rhetoric rationalizing violence and dehumanizing marginalized groups. They are relevant, given the attacks against immigrants under Donald Trump, and Rodrigo Duterte's arrest for crimes against humanity. Sol Iglesias, from the University of the Philippines, writes that 12,000 to 30,000 Filipinos were killed using "state terror tactics" in the Philippines. Meanwhile, in the USA, Lynda Lin Grigsby reports that

> ... Filipinos make up a large percentage of the workforce – 4% of registered nurses are of Filipino descent, which is more than double the Filipino American population, according to National Nurses United.
>
> The large number of Filipinos in healthcare work includes

> undocumented people, who fill workforce gaps and care for ailing people. Approximately 2% of undocumented immigrants in the US are from the Philippines, according to data from the Migration Policy Institute.
>
> Amid heightened levels of immigration arrests, many Filipino healthcare workers say they are providing essential care while in the grips of anxiety over their own safety.

Fantasy-productions are usually believed in one's childhood, which is why it is interesting how these novels go against US and Filipino fantasy-productions. They are significant interventions in the Filipino and US imaginary at a critical age. *Hello, Universe* dismantles harmful Filipino stereotypes from US colonial fantasy-productions, while *Patron Saints of Nothing* dismantles the Philippine government's fantasy-productions of the Philippine Drug War, as well as US fantasy-productions regarding Filipino invisibility and the White Savior. Both young adult novels seek to understand why the Philippines and the USA would treat people as less than human and both novels have different solutions to this problem.

It is important to understand what fantasy-productions and mythographies are since they form the theoretical framework of this paper. Filipino cultural critic, Neferti Tadiar, writes that fantasy-productions are narratives created around people, places, and objects, commodified for individual and collective consumption, for individual capitalist interests or capitalist interests of nation-states.

> We have only to look at the history of the capitalization of people's dreams in the cinema (as a precursor of the Internet) to see that social imagination has been part of production for quite some time now. We also need to look no further than the makings of modern nations to recognize that imagination has also long been part of the organization of communities and their subjection to the powers of the state... Capitalism and state rule, and not only nationalism, are suffused with imagination... (Tadiar 4)

Mythographies are counter-narratives from diasporic communities (Appadurai).

They come from the tangential imagination and forward subversive micronarratives against portrayals from colonial powers and nation-states. Tadiar discusses Appadurai's mythographies, as opposed to the state's fantasy-productions, "I say all this because if imagination has only now entered the everyday social life of people, in particular, of third world peoples, then they – we – have only been collectively daydreaming the dreams of others, trapped in their imaginations of us and our worlds" (5). Tadiar then discusses how mythographies are critical interventions in cultural narratives, that "we are all of a sudden imagining for ourselves, creatively dreaming **beyond our nation-bound imaginations** (if not re-inventing them) and exerting that dreaming on the world in ways we have never done before" [emphasis mine] (5).

Hello, Universe and *Patron Saints of Nothing* are diasporic novels that go against fantasy-productions about the Philippines, from its former colonizer, the USA, and from the Philippine government. Upon grappling with these fantasy-productions, these novels create new conceptualizations about Filipinos and the Philippines, creating new mythographies for its readers in the Filipino, Filipino American, and American imaginaries. Ostberg and Goldstein write that YA literature is marketed towards those between 12 and 18 years old and its readership in the 21st century has become older, with the majority of readers from ages 33-44 in 2024, with the 21st century as the "new golden age of young-adult literature," towards greater diversity and representation in terms of gender and race, and covering issues such as immigration.

Hello, Universe

Hello, Universe is a validation of the Filipino American experience in the USA and goes against US fantasy-productions of Filipino invisibility and inferiority. The novel goes against two US fantasy-productions about Filipinos: that of the uncivilized Filipino vis-à-vis the civilized American and the invisible Filipino American in the USA. Kelly creates three mythographies for the Filipino American community: the mythography of indigenous Filipino culture and spirituality as sources of empowerment; of the Filipino American defying fantasy-productions of Filipino invisibility and erasure; and of the Filipina indigenous elder as transmitter of indigenous culture and spirituality.

The novel follows the story of Virgil Salinas, a second-generation[1] Filipino American with a learning disability. His family is made up of first generation Filipino Americans and they speak English and Ilocano. Virgil's Lola[2] recently arrived in the USA, and forms a bond with Virgil, reaching out to him through folktales and stories about the Philippines. Virgil's other family members do not understand why he is so shy, mocking him and calling him Turtle.

The novel opens with Virgil thinking about his crush, Valencia, and feels bad about not talking to her. He consults his supposedly psychic friend, Kaori. She asks him for help, to post her calling card advertising her services as a psychic in the neighborhood. Valencia sees the card, which makes her want to consult Kaori. As Virgil is about to consult Kaori, he has a nasty episode in the forest with the bully, Chet, who takes Virgil's backpack and throws it in a well. To save the pet guinea pig in his backpack, Virgil climbs down the well, only to be trapped at the bottom. His situation worsens when Valencia sees the well and worries about squirrels falling in, covering it and trapping Virgil in the dark. Valencia goes to Kaori for a consultation, and Kaori tells her she is worried, because Virgil has not shown up for his appointment. They look for Virgil.

Meanwhile, Virgil starts communing with spirits. He eventually talks to the spirit of Ruby, a girl who was part of Lola's stories, when she reminisced about her hometown in the Philippines. While he is trapped, he thinks of all the things he wants to do once he is rescued, such as standing up to Chet, telling his mom he does not like being called Turtle, and saying hello to Valencia. Meanwhile, Valencia, Kaori, and Gen (Kaori's younger sister) go to Virgil's house. Valencia asks Virgil's grandmother, Lola, about Virgil's whereabouts. Lola does not know where he is, but she takes a liking to Valencia, and asks her for her mobile number, telling her she will text her when Virgil returns.

The girls go to the forest and try to commune with the spirits to find him. They encounter Chet, and he tells them that he saw Virgil that morning. Valencia figures out that Virgil is at the bottom of the well. They rescue him. When Virgil emerges, he is tongue-tied when he

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1 The second generation of immigrants are the children of the first generation of immigrants. The first generation immigrants usually remember the origin country and are the ones who left for another country. The second generation immigrants usually do not remember the origin country and rely on their first-generation parents to transmit knowledge about their origin country.

2 Meaning "grandmother" in tagalog.

sees Valencia. Later, Kaori tells him that, if one looks at all the events that led to his rescue, it is obvious that the universe wants Virgil and Valencia to be friends. She enumerates the coincidences in their coming together. Virgil then does the three tasks he sets out for himself: stand up to Chet, tell his mother he does not want to be called Turtle, and text Valencia with his Lola's mobile phone. When the message shows up in her mobile phone, Valencia knows it is from Virgil. Virgil's text message to her is "hello", a validation of one's existence as opposed to one's invisibility.

The first US fantasy-production the novel goes against is that of the uncivilized Filipino vis-à-vis the civilized American in the portrayal of indigenous Filipino culture. The folktales Lola shares with Virgil can be found in *Philippine Folk Tales* (1916) compiled and annotated by Mabel Cook Cole. Lola's story of the Stone Boy can be found in the folktale "The Boy Who Became a Stone" (85), Malaya and the Crocodiles is adapted from "The Alligator's Fruit" (91), and the story of Dayapan can be traced to "How the Tinguian Learned to Plant"(67). This book forwards a US colonial fantasy-production about the Philippines. She portrays the Tinguian tribe as either child-like or savage, adhering to the US colonial narrative rationalizing US colonization of the Philippines.

> For the colonizer, maintaining elements of savagery of the colonized remain crucial to the colonizer's colonial enterprise and define the logos of colonialism – to convert the native population... and its resources to Western, Christianized and civilized ways, to convert the colony into a domain of the colonizer. (Tolentino 668).

Cook Cole writes about their colonial enterprise in her Preface, "... it was my good fortune to spend four years among the **wild tribes** of the Philippines. During this time we frequently heard these stories, either related by the people in their homes and around the camp fires or chanted by the **pagan priests in communion with the spirits**" [emphasis mine] (vi). She uses colonial language, othering Filipino tribes as "wild," their priests as "pagan," and orientalizing Filipino tribespeople for the US imaginary. The book is framed "to learn something of the magic, superstitions, and weird customs of the Filipinos, and to feel the charm of their wonder-world as it is pictured by these dark-skinned inhabitants of our Island possessions" (vi).

The Tinguian tribe is further exoticized in her introduction to the Tinguian folktales,

"Coming out of the darkness, we were almost convinced that we had entered a **new world**... As they worked in the flickering light, they stretched their distaffs at arm's length into the air like **witches waving their wands**; and with that the elfland picture is complete" [emphasis mine] (4). Notice the words she uses in othering Filipinos: "magic," "superstitions," "wonder-world," "dark-skinned inhabitants of our Island possessions," "like witches," and "elfland."

Hello, Universe cleanses the Filipino folktales from the colonial worldview, decolonizing them for the Filipino American and the American imaginary. It decolonizes the US fantasy-production of the tribal Filipino as child-like and creates a new mythography: of indigenous Filipino culture and spirituality as sources of empowerment. To give an example of how Kelly does this, I provide one of the narratives from *Philippine Folk Tales* below:

The Boy who Became a Stone

Tinguian

One day a little boy named Elonen sat out in the yard making a bird snare, and as he worked, a little bird called to him: "Tik-tik-lo-den" (come and catch me).

"I am making a snare for you," said the boy; but the bird continued to call until the snare was finished.

Then Elonen ran and threw the snare over the bird and caught it, and he put it in a jar in his house while he went with the other boys to swim.

While he was away, his grandmother grew hungry, so she ate the bird, and when Elonen returned and found that his bird was gone, he was so sad that he wished he might go away and never come back. He went out into the forest and walked a long distance, until finally he came to a big stone and said: "Stone, open your mouth and eat me." And the stone opened its mouth and swallowed the boy.

When his grandmother missed the boy, she went out and looked

> everywhere, hoping to find him. Finally she passed near the stone and it cried out, "Here he is." Then the old woman tried to open the stone but she could not, so she called the horses to come and help her. They came and kicked it, but it would not break. Then she called the carabao and they hooked it, but they only broke their horns. She called the chickens, which pecked it, and the thunder, which shook it, but nothing could open it, and she had to go home without the boy. (Cole 85-86)

In the end, the grandmother could not save the child. It is almost allegorical of the US fantasy-production of the Filipino as the helpless child, who cannot be saved by their own kind, and needs the civilizing hand of the Americans to save him. Kelly humanizes the folktale in *Hello, Universe*, and changes the ending, seen in the conversation between Virgil and Lola:

> "You know," she began, "I had a dream about the Stone Boy again last night."
>
> She's been dreaming about the Stone Boy for days now. The dream was always the same: a shy boy – not unlike Virgil – gets terribly lonely, takes a walk in the forest, and begs a rock to eat him. The biggest stone opens its gravelly mouth and the boy jumps inside, never to be seen again. When his parents find the stone, there is nothing they can do. Virgil wasn't sure how hard his parents would try to get him out anyway, but he knew Lola would hand chisel that rock to pieces if she had to. (Kelly 5-6)

The narrative is reshaped towards Virgil's certainty that his grandmother *would* save him. This narrative twist revises the US colonial fantasy-production, saying that it is possible for Filipinos to save themselves. Furthermore, it creates a stronger connection between Virgil and his grandmother, and his connection to his Tinguian ancestry. Given the novel's reliance on a US colonial source, one might ask whether the novel is tainted. As can be seen in the excerpt above, the answer is no. The US colonial fantasy-production is revised into a diasporic mythography that empowers, instead of belittles, the Filipino. The love between Lola and Virgil is the metaphor of the love of the Filipino and the Filipino American of the

Philippines. Absent the colonial framing of Cook Cole, Kelly's treatment of the folktale creates a feeling of belonging and a sense of identity.

Another diasporic mythography in the novel, that intervenes against the US colonial fantasy-production, is the Tiguian belief in communing with the spirits. *Hello, Universe* makes this a positive quality, with Virgil's spirit guide, Ruby, helping him confront his fears. She tells him,

> "I can see that you're afraid, Bayani, but you needn't be."
> "How? How can you see?"
> "I see by listening."
> "My name isn't Bayani."
> "It is to me," the girl said. (Kelly 183)

The fact that Virgil communes with Ruby is consistent with Cook Cole's depiction of the Tinguian tribe. However, this communing with the spirits is a counter-narrative to the US colonial fantasy-production. Ruby is a spirit guide, not a demonic spirit. Ruby empowers Virgil, telling him, "There are many ways to fight. Maybe you just haven't been ready" (Kelly 201-202). The advice that Ruby gives to Virgil, seems to be the same advice Kelly would give to Filipinos who haven't stood up for themselves; that someday, they will be ready.

When Virgil emerges from the well, he sees Chet, and Chet says, "What are you looking at, retardo?" Virgil answers, "Call me that again, and you'll regret it" (Kelly 301). Ruby tells Virgil, "It doesn't take many words to turn your life around, Bayani" (Kelly 302). When Virgil tells his mother not to call him Turtle, Ruby tells him, "You are not the same Virgilio. That's what she understands" (Kelly 305).

Hello, Universe goes against US colonial depictions and recuperates indigenous spirituality in the diasporic imaginary. The idea that we are part of the larger universe and that we can commune with the spirits are not strange concepts for Filipinos. But, as can be seen from a US review of the novel, this can be seen as threatening. According to US Christian reviewer, Nancy Lohr, the spirituality in the novel is not Christian, and she fails to understand why it won the Newbery Medal.

The novel's mythography regarding Filipino spirituality is important for the Filipino American and the Filipino imaginary, as it decolonizes Tinguian folktales and indigenous worldviews. It is an intervention in the US imaginary, correcting previous assumptions about Filipinos in US fantasy-productions. It challenges the demonization of Filipinos, and the Tinguian tribe in particular, in US colonial fantasy-productions.

Filipino spirituality is embedded in the plot of the novel, which informs the novel's world of synchronicities. One of the synchronicities found in the novel is the relationship between Virgil and Valencia. Kaori gets exasperated when Virgil does not speak to Valencia after he emerges from the well. Kaori insists that they are "Fated to be friends... the universe itself is trying to intervene on your behalf" (297). She supports her argument with several facts, one of them being the fact that they both own guinea pigs with names from *Gulliver's Travels* (1985).

The allusion to *Gulliver's Travels* is important as *Hello, Universe* shares a similar theme with Swift's work: that foreign peoples that seem strange may be more civilized than the average Englishman; or in *Hello, Universe*'s case, the average American. For example, Chet's father tells him, "Respect came in two flavors, Mr. Bullens said: fear or admiration... Otherwise, you're just a weakling at the bottom of the food chain ready to get crushed under someone else's boot" (74). This brutal US worldview is furthered when he discusses people who are deaf, "Some people are just born defective" (74). Rationalizing his horrible treatment of people, he says, "Sometimes the only way to teach people was to embarrass them, wake them up, make them see the error of their ways" (77). Chet's bullying is rooted in his father's worldview. The portrayal of Chet's father is similar to media portrayals of Donald Trump, with his dog-eat-dog ideology, his valorization of authoritarian strength, and his mockery of the disabled.

Virgil's coming of age contests the US fantasy-production of Filipino American as invisible, transforming it into the mythography of Filipino American as hero. This is seen in Virgil's encounters with Chet. Invisibility is emphasized when Chet cannot remember Virgil's ethnicity, calling him the "Chinese or whatever-he-was kid" (131). Ma. Socorro Perez tells us that Ilocanos in the USA experience "institutional invisibility" functioning as the erasure of their cultural roots:

> Another instance of Ilocanos' victimization is their relegation to

> oblivion in the history of the United States. Through their sweat and toil, the Filipinos who were part of the great Asian population had largely contributed to the building and shaping of the economy of Hawaii and the US mainland... little is known, however, of the Asians in the building of America. (Perez 541)

Because of the institutional invisibility Ilocanos experience, they created a writing organization, GUMIL Hawaii, to "attempt to reverse racist attitudes and to work against their erasure" (Perez 541). Perez believes these acts of writing and storytelling are important for Ilocanos in America to validate their existence and to preserve their experiences.

The recuperation of the Tinguian tribe's culture, as well as that of Ilocanos, go against harmful fantasy-productions that are found, not only in the USA, but in the Philippines, as well. Many Filipinos look down on indigenous people and believe they are more civilized. Most Americans do not know, nor care, that Filipinos are not homogenous, and that there is enormous cultural diversity in the Philippines. The erasure of the Ilocano in US fantasy-productions point towards a similar erasure of tribal, and regional, cultures and languages, in the Philippines. Which is why the novel is doubly important, since it goes against marginalization of indigenous cultures in the USA and the Philippines.

Hello, Universe contests not only the US fantasy-production of Filipino American invisibility but also the invisibility of people with disabilities. Valencia is deaf and Virgil has a learning disability. In the author's interview found at the end of the book, Kelly writes, "There are many people – young and old – who carry this terrible feeling that they're invisible. I want readers to know that I see them, and I understand" (321). The relationship of invisibility when it comes to race and disability is worth exploring. According to Jamelia Morgan, there are similarities between the experiences of racism and ableism with "social subordination, marginalization, and exclusion" (663). The connection between racism and ableism was discussed by W.E.B. Du Bois and how

> race and disability were linked in the dominant white supremacist ideology... ableist notion of disability – was coded in descriptions of racial groups labeled as non-white to demean and dehumanize them. In other words, disability tropes became part of the way race became socially constructed. (Morgan 674-675)

From the fantasy-production of the Filipino American as invisible, there is the mythography of the Filipino American as hero. Although Virgil is soft-spoken, he finds the courage to challenge Chet's bigotry, creating the mythography of Filipino defiance in the face of US bigotry. Perez writes that, "Filipinos… are often essentialized as docile, subservient, and often deferring to the white hegemony" (563). Virgil's defiance of Chet shows that despite racial stereotypes, Filipinos fight back. Furthermore, when Virgil says *hello* to Valencia, the novel counters the trope of Filipino emasculation in the USA. Lola emerges as the Filipino storyteller and transmitter of indigenous culture and folklore, creating the mythography of Filipino tribal elder as storyteller. Perez tells us that storytelling is important, since it creates "venues for crafting spaces for Ilocano immigrants, survival strategies that can be employed to recuperate their dislocation, displacement, and disempoweredness – conditions that will continue to haunt them… " (565).

The novel's depiction of Virgil defying US bigotry and racism, and finding the courage to pursue one's aspirations, has resonance with the young reader. Filipino American children are able to critique the values and beliefs of the origin country, as well as the new, because of their exposure to different worldviews (Aguilar). The young reader is able to use a critical lens in looking at US and Filipino fantasy-productions of indigenous peoples, cultures, and spirituality, as well as race and disability. It provides readers with a critique of the toxic traits of one's culture, resulting in a stance that is critical and self-aware. It ultimately creates a mythography of the diasporic Filipino against racism and colonialism, one that encourages Filipinos and Filipino American children to be resilient, courageous, and grounded in one's heritage.

Patron Saints of Nothing

In *Patron Saints of Nothing*, Jun wishes to be a Patron Saint of Nothing in a letter to Jay. This, presumably, has a deeper meaning, of helping those who have no one to speak for them. By the end of the novel, both the protagonist, Jay, and Jun, become *Patron Saints of Nothing*, speaking for the victims of the Philippine Drug War. This counters the Filipino government's fantasy-production about the Philippine Drug War, under former President Rodrigo Duterte, and creates new mythographies from the tangential imagination.

On March 11, 2025, President Rodrigo Duterte was arrested by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity because of his Drug War. *Patron Saints of Nothing*

chronicles what the Philippines experienced under the Duterte regime. The novel contends with three fantasy-productions, two from the USA and one from the Philippines. It challenges the Filipino American fantasy-production of the balikbayan as White Savior (embodied by Jay) and contests the Filipino fantasy-production of the Filipino government's Drug War under Rodrigo Duterte. It also grapples with the fantasy-production of the invisibility of the Filipino in the USA. According to Blanch Ancla and Psalm Mishael Taruc, Duterte and the Philippine government forwarded its narrative about the Drug War using four strategies, "the assumption of guilt of drug suspects, distinction between drug addicts and peddlers, emotionalization and disinformation". These fantasy-productions dehumanized Filipinos connected to the Drug War and argued that they did not deserve due process.

> While due process guarantees the presumption of innocence, the narrative of the war on drugs immediately labeled as criminals anyone suspected to be involved in drugs... This maintained a dehumanizing narrative that Duterte prominently used when he was chief executive, based on a 2023 masters thesis from Utrecht University analyzing the former administration's drug war rhetoric from 2016 to 2017.
>
> Dehumanizing narratives endorse the harsher treatment and punishment of certain groups of offenders...
>
> Orville Tatcho, associate professor of speech communication at the University of the Philippines Baguio, said such narratives undermine the presumption of innocence that is enshrined in the Constitution.
>
> *"'Yung presumption of innocence... 'yun 'yung nawawala dito. Kasi pagka sinabi lang na, 'Uy, may adik sa ganitong barangay!' Sinabi no'ng kapitbahay niya, ganun kasi 'yung tokhang. Parang community surveillance din siya in a way kasi nare-report ng mga ka-barangay 'yung mga pinaghihinalaan nilang adik,"* explained Tatcho. (Ancla and Taruc)

The novel follows the story of Jay, a 17-year-old, second-generation Filipino American who finds out his cousin, Jun, was killed in the Philippine Drug War. Upset about Jun's death, Jay goes back to the Philippines to find out what happened. When he arrives in Metro

Manila, he stays with Jun's family, headed by Tito Maning, and reacquaints himself with Jun's family. Tito Maning is a police chief, proud of the Drug War. Jay learns more about what happened, by asking the help of his new friend Mia, a journalism student, and her journalism professor, Brian Santos.

Jay finds out that Jun ran away from his family because of his father's brutality; that Jun stayed with Tita Chato and met the love of his life, Reyna, from Tita Chato's NGO. Jun left Tita Chato and lived with Reyna in the slums; he appeared on a drug watch list as a drug pusher, and was eventually killed on the streets. Jay discovers these things through some snooping of his own, as well as by talking to Tita Chato, when Jay is kicked out of Tito Maning's home. Jay suspects that Tito Maning had Jun killed.

During a family reunion in their ancestral home, Jay confronts Tito Maning, accusing him of murdering his son. Tito Maning starts to strangle him; he only stops when his mother pinches his ear painfully, and brings him to his knees. Tito Maning tells them that he did not kill Jun and that he asked Danilo, a Catholic priest, to help bring Jun back. Jay and Grace (Jun's sister) set out to go to Danilo's parish to discover the truth. They find out that everything Tito Maning said was true and that Jun became a drug addict and a drug pusher. The truth is devastating for Jay and Grace and they mourn for Jun in the church.

When they return to the ancestral home, they organize a memorial for Jun. Everyone speaks in the memorial except for Tito Maning. When Tita Ami, Jay's mother, speaks, she breaks down in tears. Tito Maning appears by her side and her daughters comfort her. They finally mourn Jun's death as a family. Jay goes back to the USA and is met by his father in the airport. They talk about Jay's experience in the Philippines and find out that they have more in common now. Jay tells his father he wants to go back to the Philippines, to learn more about the country and its languages, and to get to know Mia better.

One of the Filipino American fantasy-productions present in the novel, which it attempts to resist, is the Filipino American fantasy-production of the *balikbayan* as "White Savior". Scholars Francisco Benitez and Luis Teodoro observe that there is the White Savior complex from Filipino American fantasy-productions, with the Filipino American as the White Savior helping "poor" Filipinos. The White Savior complex was first seen in the Rudyard Kipling poem, "The White Men's Burden". According to Patrick Brantlinger, Kipling wrote this poem to exhort the US government to take over the Philippines "and

rule it with the same energy, honor, and beneficence that, he believed, characterized British rule over nonwhite populations of Africa and India" (Brantlinger 172). Kipling claimed that they were in "the business of introducing a sane and orderly administration into the dark places of the earth" (quoted in Brantlinger 178). As Brantlinger observes, one cannot separate the "White Savior" fantasy production from White Supremacism and US imperialism.

In the character of Jay, the novel wrestles with the Filipino American fantasy-production of the balikbayan as White Savior. Although the novel is nuanced enough to show that Jay cannot save the Philippines and its drug war victims, it is still problematic, because Grace, Jun's sister, asks for Jay's help in understanding the truth, when Jay has no idea about the Drug War. Grace could have investigated on her own, since she is friends with Mia, a journalism student. Although the novel tries to transcend the Filipino American fantasy-production of White Savior, in the end, the novel's protagonist *is* Jay; his concern for the welfare of the Philippines seems to anoint him, and other Filipino Americans like him, as heroes who can rescue the Filipino people from themselves. The novel, though, is self-aware about the dangers of White Saviorism. When Jun brings up Jay's death with Tito Maning, Tito Maning scoffs,

> He laughs, low and derisive. "You read some articles?" This is not really a question. "I am guessing they were written by your Western media?"
>
> I stay quiet.
>
> He laughs again. Unclasps his hands, uses one to rub his chin, and then folds his arms across his wide chest. "Do you think they know what is happening in this country?"
>
> "For one article, the journalist and photographer spent something like forty days in Manila."
>
> "Forty days? Let me know when they've been here for forty years."
>
> He mutters something to himself in Tagalog, and then holds his arms out as if to encompass the room. "I know you knew nothing when you

> arrived, but have you learned nothing today? Our country's history is full of invading foreigners who thought they knew us better than we know ourselves. Many of us welcomed them with open arms, learned their language, joined their churches, asked for positions in their colonial governments." He folds his arms over his chest again, turns his face back towards the painting, and shakes his head. "No more." (Ribay 155-156)

It is interesting to note that the antagonist in the novel, Tito Maning, is the one who articulates why White Saviorism is a problem. Jay hears the same message, albeit more gently, from Grace:

> "There has to be something I can do," I say weakly, feeling like a failure in the face of her new resolve.
>
> "No offense, cousin, but even though you are from here, you are also not. I know you want to help, but you have only recently learned about any of this. You are not going to be the one to save us." (Ribay 291-292)

In this manner, the White Savior fantasy-production is problematized, giving the novel's readers different ways of viewing it.

It must be emphasized, however, that at the time the novel was published, articulations against the Drug War were much needed. Although there were others in the Philippines who went against the Drug War, they were punished by the Philippine government, as experienced by the news website, *Rappler,* as well as Filipino journalists, lawyers, activists, and politicians. The observation of prominent postcolonial scholar, Bill Ashcroft, about the emancipatory potential of the diasporic novel, is present in *Patron Saints of Nothing*, wherein one is able to articulate criticisms against the origin government without being censured or punished.

The novel creates the mythography of the Filipino diasporic writer as protected witness to human rights violations. This is seen in the conversation between Mia and Jay, who asks him to be part of an article about the Drug War:

> "He said your story's important." She pauses. "And that... if I could write a good enough piece about it... there might be wider interest."
>
> "You mean get it published?"
>
> She nods. "Even though you're not Filipino –"
>
> "I am," I interrupt. "But I'm also American... The thing is, I'm not sure I'm in a position to give permission. After all, it's not my story – it's Jun's... Could you and I try cowriting it?" I ask. "And maybe Grace?" (Ribay 307-308)

Jay is thus portrayed as part of a group that stands united against state terrorism.

The novel's stance against the Drug War is important for the youth. In 2019, an anonymous review of the novel was published in the *Inquirer*. The reviewer asks the rhetorical question why such a dark topic was the subject of a young adult novel. They answer their own question, writing, "Our safety is in danger. And this novel recognizes our plight". One surmises that the reviewer was anonymous because of the fear of government reprisal.

The second fantasy-production that the novel contests is the Filipino fantasy-production regarding the Drug War and extrajudicial killings. To understand how the Philippine government was able to create this fantasy-production, we turn to political psychologists Danielle P. Ochoa and Michelle G. Ong:

> Though wide in its scope, its most controversial feature and thus the focus of this study is "Project *Tokhang*", officially described in the Philippine National Police (PNP, 2016) memorandum circular as *"the conduct of house to house visitations to persuade suspected illegal drug personalities to stop their illegal drug activities"* (p. 3). The circular justifies this on the basis of *"the worsening drug problem that has victimized mostly the underprivileged and impoverished sector of the society"* as *"the government seems to have overlooked the worsening drug problem at the grassroots level"* due to its focus on pursuing high level drug traffickers (p. 2). The source of harm then is identified to be *"the worsening drug problem"*. The document describes the operations in

> benign terms, but hints at the use of force in euphemistic terms such as *"the neutralization of illegal drug personalities"* (p. 3). Messages from Duterte are more explicit in encouraging violence. For instance, in a speech with police as his audience, he said *"Do not bullsh*t with me but do your duty, I will die for you. Do your duty and if in the process you kill 1,000 persons because you were doing your duty, I will protect you."* (Francisco, 2016). More broadly, his speeches position the killings as moral and part of his rights and duties as a leader upholding his campaign promises. He also constructs drug users as dehumanized and deserving targets, for instance referring to them as slaves with brains shrunken by drug use and beyond rehabilitation (Camacho & Montiel, 2021) and uses war metaphors to construct drug users and dealers as enemies threatening society to legitimize their exclusion or even extermination (Brasilino, 2019). (Ochoa and Ong)

The Drug War enrages Jay, as it goes against his sense of justice. He describes the Drug War, covered by the news[3], and muses on Kian delos Santos[4], how

> All the stories follow a similar pattern: Someone is accused without evidence, they are killed without mercy, then the police cover it up without regret. Of course, the official report reads that the suspect resisted arrest. But this is contradicted by videos, anonymous eyewitness accounts, or forensic evidence... the victims are almost always the poor and don't have the means to bring legal action against the government... the system in which police officers earn certain amounts of money for killing specific types of suspects, creating an economy of murder – especially since there are no bonuses for arrests. (Ribay 42)

The novel's subversive micronarrative is the portrayal of drug addicts as victims and how they were murdered by the state. Jay reads what a mother of the victims of the Drug War

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3 News sources are also fantasy-productions.

4 Kian delos Santos was one of the victims of the Philippine Drug War. He was a 17-year-old who was killed by three policemen. His murder was caught in CCTV, and before he was murdered, he begged the police to let him go since he had an exam the next day.

says, "They are exterminating us like we are rats in the street" (42). Jay feels empathy, stating, "In every dead body, I see Jun" (31). He sees the pile of dead bodies wrapped in newspaper as the dehumanization of its victims.

A sense of righteous anger fills Jay; his impassioned speeches contrasting with the silence of the Filipino family, as seen in his experience with Tito Maning, Tita Ami, Grace, and Angel. Although Jun recently died, his family is not allowed to mention his name. It mirrors the fear in the smallest unit of society, the family, which reflects the larger unit of Filipino society, the Philippine government. Jay observes how public criticism was muted, even as thousands of extrajudicial killings were done in the Philippines, along with how the Duterte government silenced Senator Leila de Lima, by putting her behind bars. This silence is echoed in the portrayal of meals in Tito Maning's household.

In the USA, Jay was taught how the culture of silence led to the abuses of power around the world, as seen in the novel required for school, *Night* (1960) by Elie Wiesel. He listened to Wiesel's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, musing, "... if people don't speak out when something wrong is happening – wherever in the world – they're helping whoever is committing that wrong by allowing it to happen" (26). Jay feels guilty about the silence of Filipino Americans about the Drug War, thinking that they "allowed Jun's death in some way" (27). This silence is mentioned by Danilo at the end of the novel, "It is a shame what is happening to this country. And it is a shame that the Church has been so quiet. That all of us have been so quiet. That the world has been so quiet" (Ribay 279).

The mythography of the Filipino fight for justice emerges. Jay connects with more like-minded people in the Philippines who go against the Drug War. Mia and her teacher, Prof. Santos, document the Drug War, and Grace maintains a website that covers it. Mia, Grace, and Prof. Santos accept the risks of going against the Philippine government. Grace explains, "I refuse to let Kuya's life to have been for nothing, because I understand how important it is for the world to remember the humanity of those the government murders so easily" (292). The commitment of Filipino journalists and photographers to expose the horrors of the Drug War is consistently mentioned. Jay describes the gruesome photographs, "These photographers didn't want to water it down. They wanted the audience to confront the reality, to feel the pain that's been numbed by a headline culture" (Ribay 31).

The author's note gives a concise summary of the Drug War and recommends reading

materials from *Rappler,* the Ateneo School of Government, *VERA Files,* the *New York Times, The Brookings Institution,* and *The Guardian.* In response to the novel, Senator de Lima writes an Opinion piece from jail, writing, "I urge everyone to read this book. We must read this because it is written for us. We, too, must rescue ourselves from our stony indifference". This kind of grit found in Filipino journalists' defiance against the Filipino government, and its fantasy-productions, seems to be the same kind of grit needed by US journalists today.

The novel confronts US and Filipino American fantasy-productions, both with Jay being aware of his invisibility, and his acknowledgement of his ignorance about the Philippines in the USA. In the USA, when Jay talks to his American friend, Seth, about what happened to Jun, Seth remembers that Jay has Filipino ethnicity. He has forgotten that his friend is not white. Seth's assumption of Jay's whiteness makes him feel like his identity was erased. There is also the realization that Seth knows more about the Drug War than Jay does. Jay narrates, "It's crazy and sad and shameful that all of this has been going on for the past three years, and I basically knew nothing about it" (31). After researching about the Philippine Drug War in the USA, he has a difficult time coming to grips with its harsh realities. This is a realization of his Filipino American privilege and his ignorance of the Philippines. Randy Ribay reveals why it was important for him to deal with Filipino American invisibility and ignorance, given his midwestern childhood in the USA:

> I never read a book by or about a Filipino, Filipinx American, or biracial person until I got to college. Having grown up in a somewhat assimilationist household and in a mostly white suburban community, the result was an underdeveloped understanding of my own racial identity and all of the colonialist consequences that comes from that. It was those books I would eventually come across in college that helped me learn and come to love the Filipino side of myself. (Ribay)

The importance of Filipino representation in an American novel is mentioned in *Patron Saints of Nothing*, with Jay thinking, "Come to think of it, I've never read a book with a Filipino character" (74). The novel's calling out of the ignorance of Filipino Americans, as well as their assimilation in the USA is important for American and Filipino American imaginaries. It goes against US racism and against Filipino American privilege and their ignorance about the Philippines. It resists Filipino American erasure in the American

imaginary. The novel points out that many Filipino Americans are ignorant of their own cultural heritage and languages, as opposed to Filipino American fantasy-productions that represent them as more enlightened than Filipinos. This is a necessary intervention in the Filipino American and American imaginaries, that propounds the White Savior complex in the global material imaginary. At the end of the novel, there is an expression of Filipino American solidarity with Filipinos in the Philippines, expressed when Jay and Grace mourn the death of Jun.

> And in Grace I finally realize that there's something important in sharing this sorrow, in not carrying it alone. I crossed an ocean to learn about what happened to Jun, but it's what I'm learning in this moment that gives me faith that we'll be all right, that we'll figure out how to live without him in ways where we will never be fully without him. (Ribay 293)

Upon Jay's arrival in the USA, his father sees that Jay understands him better, and that despite the flaws found in the Philippines, there is a bond tying Filipino Americans to Filipinos; there is an attachment to the Philippines because one's loved ones are still there. The conversation between them, of their desire to make sense of the Filipino American experience vis-à-vis the Philippines, is described as a new understanding. Jay contemplates, "We are not doomed to suffer things as they are, silent and alone. We do not have to leave the questions and letters and lives unanswered. We have more potential and power than we know if we would only speak, if we would only listen" (Ribay 318).

Patron Saints of Nothing portrayed the Drug War in 2019, when most people were silent about it in public. This tells us about the importance of speaking truth to power and speaking up against injustice. Although one can respond by saying that there were other people who spoke up, the anonymous young reviewer in the *Inquirer* tells us that the novel's articulation about the Drug War mattered, since it recognized the traumatic situations that young adults had to grapple with in the Philippines.

In the end, the collective articulations against Duterte's crimes against humanity mattered, coming from the diasporic and tangential imaginary, to go against the hegemonic fantasy-productions of the Philippine government under Duterte. Subversive micronarratives permeated the Filipino imaginary, making it into a counter-hegemonic opposition against

Duterte's social imagination.

Conclusion

These novels are subversive micronarratives in an increasingly authoritarian world. *Hello, Universe* contests several US and Filipino fantasy-productions, normalizing indigenous spirituality, and creates a critical lens against US fantasy-productions promoting ableism, racism, and bigotry. *Patron Saints of Nothing* confronts Filipino and US fantasy-productions, in its confrontation of state fantasy-productions about the Drug War, and its grappling with US fantasy-productions regarding Filipino invisibility and the White Savior. The novels go against existing colonial, neo-colonial, and state fantasy-productions. Given the contemporary era, it is necessary to teach the youth how to stand their ground against authoritarian fantasy-productions, so that they can do the same in the real world. They have done their part in dismantling colonial, neo-colonial, and authoritarian fantasy-productions from the USA and the Philippines. Such diasporic novels are significant, forming part of Philippine national discourse, and conversing with fantasy-productions from the Philippines and the USA, articulating different ways to highlight resistance and solidarity.

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