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PERSPECTIVES

Forest Thought, Narrativity, and Counterinsurgency in *Yñiga*

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Abstract
In this paper, I investigate the ways in which the tropical forest can assume the position of discourse, formal design, and textual form in fiction. I think about how, beyond its usual role as space, its vitality and various logics can facilitate a different way of storytelling, one that seeks to embody the historical resistance that the forest has long incubated. I demonstrate this by looking at the forest as a critical element in the spatio-poetics of my novel Yñiga (2022), and how its literal and conceptual manifestations—or "forest thought"—can help illuminate the ways in which history is imagined in the novel. These manifestations, I argue, allow the novel to contest state power and narrative in the context of the historical phenomena at its core: counterinsurgency and notions of "terrorism," urban development and global capitalism, and popular resistance and social movements in early twenty-first-century Philippines.

Keywords: forest, spatio-poetics, counterinsurgency, Philippine literature

Can the forest be both content and form, idea as well as structure? The question arrived about halfway into writing what would turn out to be my second novel *Yñiga* (2022). The forest is already a place and proposition in the work, which follows the eponymous ghost writer whose quiet life in a Manila slum is upended after an encounter with a fugitive army general, based on real-life "butcher" Jovito Palparan, who was captured in 2013 for his role in the government's bloody counterinsurgency campaign.[1] Early in the novel, before Yñiga ventures to the quiet-turbulent countryside where the rest of the narrative will take place, intimations of the forest hover in the background, ghostly images in short aberrant paragraphs, prefiguring how it will intervene—materially, discursively—in the story. At the center of her neighborhood, for instance, is an imposing balete, hanging roots conjuring a tiny forest in itself, which seems to participate actively, sentiently in the ordeals of her community. Following the arrest of the general, the tree "appeared to lean closer to the site of the capture, the shivering of leaves and roots and branches [like] vague applause" (Diaz 2022b, 2). The retaliatory fire that decimates the neighborhood afterwards, it is said, would've razed more homes if it weren't for the tree. Elsewhere are overt and not so overt references to trees and the woods. Crowds are "forests of bodies" (2), protesters are "armed with

no other weapon except their bodies and staying put, to root like trees" (240), and collective action is "an invisible forest" materializing around Yñiga at her direst moment (257).

In this paper, I investigate the ways in which the forest can assume the position of discourse, formal design, and textual form in fiction. I think about how, beyond its usual role as space, its vitality and various logics can facilitate a different way of storytelling, one that seeks to embody the historical resistance that the forest has long incubated. The forest as a critical element in the spatio-poetics of *Yñiga*, I argue, both its literal and conceptual manifestations, can help illuminate the ways in which history is imagined in the novel. I have argued elsewhere how the forest as a narrative space and discursive trope—or forest thought—can mediate the historical imagination in fiction by productively disrupting notions of narrative and political legibility.[2] Here, I attempt to demonstrate how forest thought in *Yñiga* similarly contests state power and narrative in the context of the historical phenomena at the novel's core: counterinsurgency and notions of "terrorism," urban development and global capitalism, and popular resistance and social movements in early twenty-first-century Philippines.

This inquiry is grounded in traumatic historical reality: the spate of killings, abductions, and human rights violations against Left-leaning activists, peasants, and journalists, among others, during the term of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in the early twenty-first century.[3] Carried out with broad impunity by elements of the armed forces, the attacks were part of the government's counterinsurgency campaign Oplan Bantay Laya (Operation Freedom Watch), "by far the bloodiest and most brutal…unleashed on the Filipino people by any president" and a "local version" of the US-led "global war on terror" aimed at quelling the decades-long Maoist insurgency—the so-called people's war—being waged in the countryside ("Oplan Bantay Laya" 3, San Juan 222). As a program of government, counterinsurgency can be traced back to the Cold War.[4] The intervening decades constitute the "forest of history" in which Yñiga may be situated.

For the foundation of my analysis, I draw on the enduring spatial and geopolitical value of the forest as site of historical resistance, how it has and continues to host either a deliberate, active struggle against an oppressive state (as in the resistance movements throughout Philippine history), or a lived reality pointedly outside state-led systems and modes of development (such as indigenous groups that persist beyond the reach of market democracy and global capitalism). I reflect on how I harness this historical charge narratively and discursively in *Yñiga* in the context of democratic contestation in a modern postcolonial nation-state, in particular through social movements that operate in towns and cities, "open" spaces distinct from the "underground" forest. Other than the forest as space, I also consider how its various logics—collectivism, repetition, strategic illegibility, and a sense of "forest time"—can be seen as a political and structural means of apprehending and, by revealing their limitations, destabilizing modern state-making and realist narrativity. I locate these logics in, among others, the "world" of the novel, a formal structure that necessarily exceeds realism, and a rendering of temporality that is markedly different from modern disenchanted "historical time."[5] The spatial historical charge and logics imbue the forest in *Yñiga* with what I hope is a capacious force, making it a numinous site in which seemingly disparate phenomena like counterinsurgency and global capitalism—the history in the novel—achieve affective and ideological coherence. I bring forest thought to bear upon the robust, enduring entanglement of these phenomena, which constitute a significant and profound historical truth in contemporary Philippine history.

I identify three key and overlapping ways in which the forest registers in the spatio-poetics of *Yñiga*: as a specter of the people's war, as sentient protection within the city, and as radical resolve and utopian vision. All three emerge from the counterpoint that the people's war marshals against the state-led neoliberal paradigm that structures the lives of Filipinos, chiefly the normalized violence against, and dispossession of, the broad majority, and the counterinsurgency programs that "defend" this paradigm.[6] I also locate the logics of the forest in the novel's structure, in its fragmented and circuitous form and deliberately unresolved gaps, gashes, and deferrals, both enabled by a sense of anomalous and unstable "forest time." These strategies, I argue, ultimately allow the novel to engage and disrupt the notion of legibility, which serves as central to the entwined apparatus of state-making and narrativity. It is this narrative and discursive disruption, facilitated by forest thought, that I hope *Yñiga* enacts as a Filipino novel about and produced during a very specific historical moment.

The forest as a specter of the people's war

There seems to be an agreement among environmental historians and state foresters that "at the time of European contact in 1521, most of the Philippines were covered in forest" (Bankoff 321). Records of these initial encounters with the tropical forests in which the archipelago was enswathed routinely noted their "fecundity," their "profusion and plenitude," and the sheer "variety" of tree species "everywhere," always with the view to exploiting and commercializing these resources (Bankoff 321–22, Goode 88). These are consistent with the "abundance and grandeur" with which tropical forests are often characterized (Park 1), even as the tropics had also been discursively imagined from the temperate world as replete with danger, "pestilential" and "wild" (Arnold 8, Lundberg et al 3). These competing paradigms have, on the one hand, facilitated the carnage unleashed upon the country's forests, but, on the other hand, have also been mobilized to foment resistance against, say, colonial occupation and capitalist development.

Found today across Latin America, Western Equatorial Africa, and Southeast Asia, the tropical forest as a physical realm is distinguished from their temperate counterparts by, among others, a characteristic climate marked by "relatively constant temperatures and heavy rainfall"; a rich, diverse, and complex ecosystem of plant and animal life, nurtured over millions of years, that "can appear… somewhat random and chaotic" but are in fact "highly regulated and tightly intergated"; and a numinous sightline dominated by vegetation, from the towering trees whose crowns form a lightproof canopy to the abundance of "climbing plants, lichens, ferns, and orchids" (Park 6, 11, 14). Also a salient feature, both spatial and discursive, is the inherent resistance of the forest to being totally and conclusively "known" and thus, to some extent, governed and conquered by state-making projects.[7] The tropical forest as this geographically and politically fraught terrain and idea is described, unpacked, and troubled in the novel.

The tropical forest—and the history it holds—registers in the diegetic world of *Yñiga* as a firm and abiding presence, a spectral force affecting and structuring the characters' experience of the world. In terms of geography, Yñiga's childhood home in the town of M—is positioned vis-à-vis the woods. Beyond the backyard, it is said, stand the "lush foothills…demarcated by a flimsy wire fence" (25) Her room looks out on the same vista, which she finds "relaxing but…too still, too constant" except during monsoon seasons (112). Its proximity is reflected in the configuration of the town as a whole, bordered by mountains that are routinely referenced with a broad wave, a gesture to a vague and pregnant "out there." Upon Yñiga's return decades after leaving, the town is still suffused with suggestions of the woods as impervious to time's passage and so-called progress: "In between the face-lifted houses…were pockets that didn't change, wooden shacks and trees on which time appeared to lay little claim. Farther from the poblacion, the pockets became the landscape" (53). In their backyard, she finds "the chicken wire fence that lined the property [leaning] leftward [and] swathed in vines, the forest beyond marching forth" (113).

The forest gains a deeper, more individuated meaning in light of her father Itos's implied participation in the "protracted people's war" waged by the communist New Peoples' Army (NPA) in the countryside, the longest-running insurgency in Asia (Mangosing 2019). The Maoist guerrilla war takes place largely in spaces like forests, as in the Zambales mountains in *Yñiga* where the rebels take advantage of city-centric state-making to gather military strength in order eventually to surround cities and seize state power.[8] Terrain and geography—and the control of mountains—play a significant role in this army's ability to contend with state forces, said communist party founder Jose Maria Sison (Kent 1986, 26).[9] After Itos leaves to go "underground," the forest transforms for Yñiga: "Once the source of unease, [it] suddenly assumed an unplumbed depth. A life" (31). Moving to the provincial capital for college, in her weekly journey home, she notices roads "surrounded by trees as high as fortresses." She is comforted that her father, who has left their "world," still lives and moves within what she begins to see as a liminal space, "home to… endless footsteps unseen by those on the surface, the rest of the conspicuous world."

Yñiga recalls that, prior to Itos's leaving, the forest was his site of farewell. In an encounter not unlike an introduction, Itos "[tried] to identify the trees they met along the way" until "their sightline [was] crowded with alien shades of greens and browns, where everything seemed to defy naming" (196). For her, it is a reconciliatory experience after the trauma of her older sister's death years earlier. This event

births a relationship, an affinity, and I describe her experience in tactile, almost incommunicable terms: "something arrived in her; not quite comprehension but a granular, wordless understanding, as if her skin was trying to memorize a dear sensation." What seems to be transmitted is the logic of the forest itself, although it is not so much "extracted" as "sensed," a connection beyond language. These transmitted ideas include a sense of scale and multitude, wonder and illegibility, the intricate interconnectedness of things. Just before "returning to the world," Itos's final word is on the forest's mythic benevolence and abundance, as he notes that "whatever happens…help will come." Over the years, these relayed ideas, hazy and nebulous, gain increasing solidity as Yñiga navigates the "forest of history where roamed her family" (211).

During the long bus ride that Yñiga takes from the city back to her hometown after the fire, the forest registers as a literal space for the first time, in contrast to the mainly metonymic way in which it did prior to that. The appearance is couched in a transition that is more than just spatial or geographic, and notions of authority, temporality, and development are also implicated. After the bus exits the "controlled landscape" of the expressway comes "the parade of towns, one sleepier than the next, a backward slouch in time" (28). The subsequent montage of images concretizes this shift with details that transmit the political and economic milieu of this liminal place: "desolate gas stations and McDonald's signs…people [tending] to unmilled rice laid out to dry…vandalized cell site towers, faded election posters…Below them, in fiery red spray paint, Join the NPA!" "Still farther afield," the next paragraph continues, "the forest." The significance of this detail in Yñiga's life is explained when, just before dozing off, "a spot on a faraway mountaintop [catches] her eye." The narrative voice speculates how Itos "would have been well into his seventies…the captured general's fellow butchers in protracted pursuit…the decades-long hide-and-seek in the mountains still afoot."

In the world of *Yñiga*, set ostensibly "outside" the non-contiguous battlefield in which the Maoist revolution is fought, this hidden war registers in such oblique ways, even as its roots in oppressive social conditions reverberate undisguised in the narrative. For instance, the disastrous aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis in Yñiga's hometown saw farmers "buried in debt, with a hectare or two and upwards of five kids, either [killing] themselves or…[wandering] back, into the mountains" (138). The specter of the war also looms in the figure of the fugitive general, "the proud steward of the bloodbath against peasants and activists in the countryside" and, later, the biographer who is revealed to be a soldier, too, both of them apparatuses of the government's counterinsurgency program (161). In the Philippines, this campaign has its origins in the Cold War–era "defense" of the postcolonial state, which means it is a foundational feature, not an aberration, of the so-called democracy from which this state sources its legitimacy.[10]

Thus, the threat that the people's war represents, and which is historically facilitated by its harnessing of liminal spaces such as the forest in *Yñiga*, is ideologically foundational, exposing the trenchant failures of an unquestioned market-oriented paradigm and disrupting the state's self-legitimating narrative. The forest, as the spatial stronghold of the insurgency (and similar resistance movements in the past), is imbued with a radical historical charge. In making the forest central and ubiquitous to the spatio-poetics of *Yñiga*, I try to draw from this potential and bring the forest's marginalized paradigm to bear upon the history that the novel interrogates, even if, or especially since, this history ostensibly unfolds away from that war zone.

The forest as sentient protection in the city

As a spectral presence, the forest transmits the ideological counterpoint to the capitalist mainstream in *Yñiga*. In the "open world" of towns and cities, this manifests as sentient protection, intervening in the kind of urban configuration in Yñiga's neighborhood that constitutes part of what is at stake in the war unfolding under the forest's cover: the clash between development paradigms.

The prodigious balete tree at the center of her neighborhood in the city enacts the idea of protection. Newly arrived, Yñiga feels a "vague comfort" at seeing the tree (31). The balete, a species of so-called strangler fig related to the banyan, conjures up a tiny forest by itself and is replete with local folk and mythic significations. In the novel, it is described as a source of numinous power and protection, by virtue of its natural heft and longevity as well as its other, more spectral

qualities. It is "a brown veiny cathedral that [dwarfs] the chapel and barangay hall next to it…an immovable landmark in a place where things routinely came and went." It is "a heaving sentinel" outside a neighbor's doorstep, whose "vigorous crown" casts a protective shadow over the house. When it is revealed that an upscale township is to be built on the community's razed neighborhood, someone notes that "no one was willing to touch [the tree] so they might just be building their fancy condos around it" (143). These, and the tree's implied celebration over the capture of the fugitive general, are a pointed "participation" in the struggles of the community, which is caught between competing visions of "development," i.e., between rapacious capitalism of which the general is a foot soldier and other, more just alternatives. In the novel, the tree's "natural" and otherworldly dimensions are notably juxtaposed with built objects and secular, "modern" realities such as infrastructure, historical time, and capitalist development. The tree exerts a determinative force in the configuration of what Henri Lefebvre calls the "logico-epistemological space" of the neighborhood, or the broad nexus of the physical, mental, and social fields with which space may be apprehended (11–12). It intervenes in the area as a "space of social practice" or as determined by an existing mode of production, but also, more crucially, in a field in which "products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias," are at play (12).

This also accounts for the way in which the forest seems to intervene in Yñiga's decision after she finds out the real identity and motives of the man who claims to be writing her father's biography. The realization that he is part of the force that terrorizes her family leads her to imagine Itos in the forest, "negotiating a lush undergrowth, face dappled with light" (213). Later, as she pours poison into the man's tea, it is the imagined rhythm of her father's steps in the forest that "[steadies] her shaking hands" (214). Later still, when she enlists the "help" of the balete in getting rid of the soldier's body, it heightens and concretizes the mostly aural and metonymic participation of the tree in the community's everyday affairs. The tree is "perfect" for the task, she decides, the "cavity as spacious as a small house"; it is "at the center of the neighborhood but…in a different dimension" and gives off "a catastrophically foul odor" that people "just accepted…[as] a period show of some numinous power" (180).

The specific combination of corporeal and incorporeal aspects, and the tree's liminal position in the neighborhood, points to some of the ways in which forest thought allows the tree—situated "outside" the people's war and mostly away from the forest—to evoke the specter of this war, imbuing the tree with the historical charge of the struggle. The "lush curtain of turgid roots" that hide a "spacious" interior point to, or suggest, seeing the tree (but also the forest) as an enclosing, protective inside that allows for the incubation of radical alternatives to the capitalist "outside." The tree gestures toward the tactically clandestine and "underground" conduct of the war, even if the war's "borders" are porous enough for the rest of society still to be implicated in the process. Both of these elements have been key to the longevity of the war, the same way that the tree is also characterized in terms of time, how it is said to occupy a "different dimension" or act as a "portal to a different time." The protracted nature of the war alludes to a similar sense of loose temporality, an almost abeyance of time, which also frames its envisioned socialist future. Elsewhere, Yñiga compares the "eternal forest where it was neither night nor day, a forest outside and above time" to her life in the city, one "still governed by clocks."

Forest time here thus disrupts what Benedict Anderson described as the empty, homogenous temporality of modernity and nationalism. It is a view of time as adrift and "out of place" but exerting a determinative force in a community also adrift in a superficially modernizing city. Bliss Cua Lim (2009), in her "temporal critique" of postcolonial Filipino cinema, points out that "colonialism and its aftermath underpin modern *historical time*," resulting in a kind of "temporal exclusion" that misidentifies its victims and violent consequences as "primitive" or "anachronistic" from the point of view of linear progress (12). In the novel, the balete helps project, if not embody, neighborhoods like Yñiga's as "underdeveloped" or "left behind" in the context of so-called development. "But who knows the temporal dimensions of the forests?" Gaston Bachelard asks in *The Poetics of Space* (1994), going on to assert: "History is not enough. We should have to know how the forest experiences its great age; why, in the reign of the imagination, there are no young forests" (188). Thus, the forest-in-the-city may be seen as the spatial expression of a clash in temporalities that is no less than a clash between paradigms of development. The

sentient protection offered by the balete hints at the historical relationship between the forest that shelters the people's war, and the "national" space carved out by capitalist state-making and guarded by its counterinsurgency.

"Today, all politics," Fredric Jameson (2016) argues, "is about real estate…essentially a matter of land grabs, on a local as well as a global scale" (13). Yñiga's community is loosely based on the urban-poor enclave Sitio San Roque in Quezon City, north of Manila, which sits on a 29-hectare plot of public land and at its peak is home to 17,000 residents (Ortega 286). Since the mid-2000s, it has faced various threats, including violent demolitions, forced evictions, arsons, and other human rights violations, geared to evict the residents and make way for a planned central business district being developed by the government and the private sector under the guidance of the World Bank. The districts, touted by the government since the 1980s as the "paragons of urban development" (288) in the metropolis, grew out of former estates owned by elite families and are built ostensibly to attract investment and generate jobs. It thus carves out and apportions space around capital and the market, inherently to the detriment of accessibility. Once completed, the development that threatens Sitio San Roque will have displaced some 24,000 families, their old homes and communities replaced by upscale residential high-rises and malls.[11] Attempts to evict residents, who today number around 7,000, persist, including some that reveal how state-endorsed "development" is entwined with the government's counterinsurgency program.[12]

While under unrelenting threat, the forest exists outside of, or at least simultaneously with, this tyrannical, totalizing system. That the balete "invites" then effectively neutralizes the corpse of the soldier in *Yñiga* may be understood as the forest taking part in the culmination of Yñiga's individual clash with the "enemy," which can be traced back, biographically and historically, to her family's involvement with Cold War–era state-making. However, the "action" by the tree in the middle of an urban neighborhood that is threatened and later decimated by state-sanctioned "development" can also be seen as transplanting into the city the ideological counterpoint incubated in the forest, laying bare the neoliberal paradigm, of which the neighborhood stands as a lucid and all-too-familiar repercussion. Thus, in place of more "conventional" methods, entombing the soldier inside the tree contests counterinsurgency in a specifically temporal and spectral way, by subordinating Anderson's empty, homogenous time—the time of industrial capitalism, of capitalist inevitability—to forest time and its alternative and radical imagining of the future.

The forest as radical resolve and utopian vision

An avatar of spatial and ideological resistance, the forest exerts a determinative force in Yñiga's consciousness, ultimately manifesting as radical resolve and utopian vision. Characterized as lethargic and indecisive, content to "[wither] away unseen" (168), Yñiga is haunted by the specter of the forest, which activates biographical and historical resonances that in key moments break her stupor and push her in a particular direction.

This specter is almost literal, as in the balete in the city that seems to follow her. On a research trip with an academic to a lighthouse on a nearby island, Yñiga spots "the billowy crown of a huge tree that she didn't notice earlier…somehow familiar…[its] trunk seemingly leaning on to the side of the crumbling structure" (129). She is on site to assist with the Filipino American historian's study on "lighthouses and social movements," and the sighting comes after a tediously contrived discussion on the subject, suggesting an encounter, if not a clash, between the discourses that the two "structures," the balete and the lighthouse, represent (86). Whereas the tree appears to be eternal and outside "academic" and positivist history, lighthouses pointedly evince the passage of historical time, apace with the arrival of colonial regimes and, later, a globalized world order. "A cipher for nation," quips the academic, "for history" (88). But the events rebuff all attempts to codify this amorphous history or subsume it under official history. Once inside the lighthouse, their informant orders the academic to leave. A forgetful nonagenarian, he recalls a crucial narrative that Yñiga fails to document. "Conceding defeat, she [puts] away the laptop" and proceeds to ask him about something else entirely (130).

Among the events that finally break Yñiga's indecision are news of the brutal murder of Marco, who is revealed to be the son of Itos and thus her brother, and receiving an unopened letter from Itos, both of which are telegraphed from the forest. What

rescues her from despair is a belatedly revealed act of solidarity that makes her reassess her solitude, for instance during the sessions with the biographer and the aftermath of his murder. Around her stands, she realizes, "an invisible forest" (257). The recalibration of her psyche from individual paralysis to a sense of readiness for collective action is textually framed, and motivated, by the forest. This trope of bodies assuming a grounded, forest-like quality recurs in the novel. When the general is captured, a vaguely celebratory "forest of bodies" watches his arrest. The group organizing the protest plans to be "armed with no other weapon except their bodies and staying put, to root like trees." Landscape is rendered as a source of decisive power, one that is mobilized as an anonymous collectivity contending with a superior force, an echo of the NPA's strategic use of space and terrain. The foregrounding of collectivity is also an embodiment of the "mass line," a key Marxist-Leninist principle that puts the masses, their needs and agency, at the center of all revolutionary theories and praxes, often to engage a system built around the structural expropriation and control of land. The image of "human forces fusing with the landscape" is "arguably…the political ontology of Filipino communism" (Tadiar 367). Yñiga's ultimate decision to dive headlong into the struggle is galvanized by another sighting of the balete from the city, which by this time has all but fused with, or returned to, the forest. The encounter takes place by the river on the outskirts of town, where six-year-old Yñiga and her sister, Ramona, found out that their father have been supporting the rebels. In this way it completes, or at least continues, her contact with this history. This time, she finds herself in a strange reality in which her body has regained its lost vitality and the many tragedies in her life are summarily, peculiarly overturned: "Ramona…at the house, un-drowned. Diego, too, still wild with affection for her. Marco un-salvaged. Yusing alive, her memory un-seized" (263).

The novel ends in and with this revolutionary utopia, even if Yñiga also recognizes that there is something precarious about this reality, how the slightest disturbance could make "everything, this tenuously conjoined new world…disappear" (264). As well as being meaningful in the world of the novel, this precarity also attests to, or is an expression of, a broad misgiving about the ease with which this resolution is reached. The deus ex machina not only superficially violates some internal narrative logic, it also falsifies to some extent the complex, intractable nature of the historical reality that the novel has just narrativized. It may be read, in other words, as the projection of an impotent wish-fulfillment impetus. But the utopian moment, Jameson (2004) writes, necessitates "a peculiar suspension of the political," occurring in the "very distance of the unchangeable system from the turbulent restlessness of the real world that seems to open up a moment of ideational and utopian-creative free play in the mind itself or in the political imagination" (24–25). In *Yñiga*, this fleeting utopia is couched in a reality in which counterinsurgency either does not exist or is abolished. It arrives in lieu of the climax of its narrativized obverse, which is suddenly made to confront its nullification. Utopia here thus comes at the precise point of its impossibility. For Jameson, it is this "gap between our empirical present and the utopian arrangements of [an] imaginary future" that furnishes it with a "diagnostic and a critical-substantive role" (38). Why, this ending asks, did Ramona have to drown, Marco have to be salvaged, Yusing's memory have to be seized? It is all rhetorical, but the implication here is that this reality is not impregnable, not inevitable. The documentary value of rendering the "real" historical violence of counterinsurgency in the novel thickens with an inquiry into the conditions of its possibility and thus its possible demise. It is not a coincidence that time seems to have collapsed in this dimension; part of what it seeks to demystify is the notion of inevitability, of a default future, that the history in the narrative is granted. It is this coherence that elevates this ending to a political vision.

The utopian moment is made possible by a radical will that upends Yñiga's indecision. It takes place in the forest, here rendered as a space that is similarly amorphous and irreal—"in her mind but also somehow interlaid with the vibrating wall of trees…[flashing] around her" (263). This indicates a frenzied completeness that encompasses both exterior and interior fields. It all culminates in the sight of the familiar balete in the middle of the forest—"the tangle of heaving roots, the gnarly wall of hanging limbs." In a very concrete way, the forest unites the real and the utopian vision in a portal-like encounter. It is the site of the imagining of the spectral alternative to the totalitarian narrative and reality.

In *Yñiga*, the utopian vision in the forest is confined to a singular, if final and thus eternal, moment. It is not

a sustained construction of a reconfigured reality but a momentary glimpse. Seen this way, the forest may be understood as no less than the conjuring interruption of the fictive imagination on the level of metatext, a glimpse that negates a necessarily still-impossible reality. It is Jameson's gap, the location of the novel's textual diagnosis. The final sentence—"Left, right, left"—hints at Yñiga's decision to join her father in the forest, a decision powered by the forest's bequeathed vigor, its ability to restore the human subject to an otherworldly degree (264). Thus, it is the force of the forest that enables the novel to affirm the correctness of both Yñiga's decision and the people's war as a program of action.

Forest time, novelistic structure, and illegibility

Perhaps the broadest site of forest thought in *Yñiga* is its narrative design, or the formal decisions that attend the configuration of such a design. In this way, the forest assumes not just a position of setting and discourse in the novel but also of textual form. This architecture enables its ideas to enswathe the narrative and discursive lines, and because it can register as simple obfuscation or even chaos, its transmission is necessarily oblique and spectral, its meaning dispersed and deferred. The calibrated and strategic illegibility, I argue, makes the notion of the forest as a narrative apparatus even more potent and germane to the novel's political project.

The structure of *Yñiga* may be described as fragmented and circuitous. It briskly flits in and out of the present, often shuffling between pasts and futures in a rapid staccato with little discernible premeditation or uniform pattern. Jarring temporal shifts occur alongside unwieldy changes in focalization, from a panoramic one to that of a particular character. Snippets of scenes repeat. Blatant editorializing abounds, including quick turns between so-called showing and telling, between sweeping and granular, historical context and minute detail. The strategies attempt to propel the narrative forward by structurally approximating ebbs and flows in the "affect" in the narrative events so that panicked moments in truncated paragraphs alternate with subdued ones in extended passages. The prose seeks to sustain a level of ambivalence in the reading experience by creating a nervously pleasurable rhythm to which the gradual revelation of narrative can unfold, with the smattering of repeated scenes amplifying the disorientation. It also creates deliberate opportunities for both affective and political associations, juxtapositions, and continuities, at least more so than linear narration, with quick paragraph breaks uniting disparate moments and ideas. In the narrative the resonances and rhythms progressively accumulate, forest-like, conjuring what I envision as an uneasy, ambivalent trip for the reader.

What permits and regulates this narrative design is a notion of time that is anomalous and untamed, arbitrarily paced and perpetually unstable, with a sense of numinous disarray. If entombing the soldier inside the balete diegetically subordinates empty homogenous time to forest time, a narrative structure anchored on such a version of temporality reveals the capacious discursive and epistemological possibilities that are otherwise precluded by violently regimented, Western time—what Jonathan Martineau calls the "disciplinary character of clock-time in factory and social life" (108) that came to dominate other time-forms in the global transition from feudalism to capitalism. This sense of temporal critique hews closely to Deleuze and Guattari's critical appraisal of Western epistemology, also couched in botanical metaphors not far from that of the forest: the arborescent as the hegemonic logic of the West subscribing to a "causality along chronological lines [that] looks for the original source of 'things' and looks towards the pinnacle or conclusion of those 'things,'" while the rhizomatic "ceaselessly establishe[s] connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (7).

In Philippine historiography, Reynaldo Ileto (1997; 1998) and Resil Mojares (2002) have similarly noted the incapacity of dominant nationalist paradigms to apprehend fully what colonialism has either tried to subjugate or condemned as without, or outside, history. "Notions of evolution and rationality from the nineteenth century itself," writes Ileto, "are responsible for excluding from this history the 'repetitious' and 'mythical' aspects of reality" (70). Narratives that adopt "a Western form with its requisite values of proof, fullness, and coherence," Mojares argues, "do not quite escape the grid in which the country's past had been plotted in colonial histories" (286). By contrast, the nonlinear, sinuous, digressive emplotment and vigorous appetite for detail in *Yñiga* may be seen

as homologous to how revolutionary poet and critic Gelacio Guillermo characterizes the thinking of rural folk: "Paraan ng pag-iisip ng masa: paligoy-ligoy, madetalye" (The way the masses think: meandering, replete with details) (72). The narrative design seeks to actively resist the coherence and rationality of modern liberal historiography.

These decisions—the protracted attention to the minutest details of gestures, sensations, and objects that further texturize the "rough" narrative plotting, as well as the unresolved gaps, gashes, and deferrals—amplify the aura of intransigence in Yñiga and furnish the novel with a degree of opaqueness. What I hope this produces, and which is central to the logic of the novel's design, is calibrated illegibility. In the introduction I describe how the notion of legibility is entwined with, if not centrally a requirement of, both state-making and narrativity, and how the forest as space and discourse have resisted appropriation as a political and narrative subject. Space is a critical component of historical subject-formation in this manner. As Mojares writes, "The historical bias in favor of the primate city has left the countryside in the backwaters of. . .historical consciousness" and thus "much of the country *terra incognita*" (45). Implicated in this fashion, state-making and narrativity have historically relegated "illegible" spaces like the forest to a perpetual periphery, deeming it a realm that is both backward and stigmatized, a reliable source of extractable raw materials and suffused with myths, but without an appropriable history like the "developed" lowlands, and thus ultimately ungoverned and unnarrated.

In *Yñiga*, forest thought facilitates the ways in which the novel eschews such easy legibility both structurally and epistemologically. In the novel (as in reality), the forest offers a physical but also temporal cover for the "hidden" war that rages alongside more "open" conflicts. Even the fake biographer notes that illegibility is central to the war's endurance, telling Yñiga how "people…hiding out in the mountains" prevents them from being "slaughtered like pigs" (213). Her belated realization about the "invisible forest" of her neighbors is "unwritten in any of the man's notes, absent from his files." Other such apparatuses for "legibility," for translating lived experience and history into extractable form, are rendered as fraught and slippery, if not doomed to fail. They include acts of documentation and translation, as in during the trip to the lighthouse and Yñiga's sessions with the biographer; naming, as in her sister being named after a president; and even memory, as in her mother's struggle with dementia.

This notion of legibility has world-historical implications. Rooted in the Cold War, the tools and ethos of counterinsurgency and capitalist development are invariably premised on making entities, experiences, and ideologies "legible" in the service of control and neutralization, a "battle of information, texts, narratives" (229). In the novel, these attempts are routinely frustrated and undermined, their nefarious objectives disclosed. City hall employees "sightseeing like bored tourists… surveying the damage" after the fire, before displacing the community through notices and signs, eventually must contend with the community's implied return (19). The fake biographer, who assiduously records the interviews in copious notes, and whose temporary hideout is found strewn with "heaps of paper and books, notepads and manila envelopes with memos and all sorts of documents," is killed, the operation quashed (159). State surveillance, a key aspect of this war of visibility and concealment, is ruthless and well-resourced, but often outmaneuvered by the people, the "oral tradition that kept their neighborhood intact… despite the physical decimation" (91). Most crucially, the entire armory of "propaganda, briefings, and letters" that outline the military's counterinsurgency approach—in which "both battlefield and enemy [seem] to have advanced well beyond the woods…[and thus essentially declaring] open season on everyone"—is exposed for its hollow and duplicitous agenda, the deliberate and unflinching terror that the state inflicts (203). Legibility facilitated by forest thought mediates the contesting ideologies and views of history at the heart of Yñiga and helps clarify and make its salient arguments.

The negotiation of legibility and illegibility, of what is visible and what is deliberately obfuscated, is also evident in the novel's way of metabolizing, managing, and intervening in the dizzying sleights of hand and routine manipulations through which late capitalism schematizes experience and consciousness, the "new techniques of distortion by way of suppression of history" that characterize the "new experience of spatiality" in globalization (Jameson 2003, 700–701). Jameson points out how "instant information transfers" and the "economic interdependence of the

world system" have reconfigured people's experience of space, resulting in a "kind of epistemological transparency [that] no doubt goes hand in hand with standardization and has often been characterized as the Americanization of the world" (701). In the novel, what enables this transparency is the forest, and in a way that is apart from the meta-analysis of the ideology carried by the resistance movement that it shelters. The long, supposedly aimless walks that Yñiga takes after returning to her hometown are revealed to be a survey of sorts, in which "she [draws] energy from the people and groups she [talks] to," among them waiters, market vendors, farmers, and fisherfolk. They realize that "the same violence somehow [cascades] through their disparate lives…[their] despairs [forming] a tapestry, a forest." The forest, then, unites the crises that urban and rural subjects face, the many but kindred versions of austerity, precarity, and dispossession that are the inevitable repercussions of neoliberal development in countries like the Philippines. The novel thus seeks to surface what to me is the mostly invisible, inextricable connection between counterinsurgency as a function of state-making and neoliberalism as the state-sanctioned mode of development, in particular counterinsurgency as ultimately invested in violently containing the social upheaval that the contradictions of such a social configuration reliably foment.

On the level of meta-critique, while the work's broader political argument is unambiguous, the many ways in which the forest mediates the fissures, gaps, and ellipses in *Yñiga* hopefully result in the kind of interpretive anxiety that for Caroline Hau enables the novels of Jose Rizal to continue to intervene in enduring questions about community and nation, a project I seek to participate in.[13] As in Rizal's novels, the ambiguities and ellipses in *Yñiga* are not so much in political stance as in plotting and key details, such as the nature of the malaise that afflicts the town or the contents of Itos's letter. I envision these as "enlarging" the text through a profusion of interpretive possibilities. Set in the mid-2000s—a decade into the country's embrace of globalization and half a century after the start of the Cold War—*Yñiga* hopes to intervene in the contemporary "event" in this historical continuum by attending to its latest crises and narratively and ideologically centering what I believe is a critical, "hidden" alternative—represented by the forest in what I hope the novel demonstrates are ample and complex ways.

Endnotes

[1] Palparan was christened "the butcher" by activists and human rights groups; his places of assignment saw an exponential rise in killings and disappearances. He would go into hiding in 2011, after a court ordered his arrest for the disappearance of two students, and be captured in 2014 and eventually convicted four years later. See Olea 2009; Tingcungco 2007, 2014; and Evangelista 2018.

[2] I propose a poetics of the forest in Philippine literature in Diaz 2022 and investigate the spatio-poetics of the forest in the novels of Jose Rizal in Diaz 2023, drawing on ideas from ecocriticism, tropicality, new materialism, and postcolonial theory, among others.

[3] See Sales 2009.

[4] See McCoy 2009.

[5] See Chakrabarty 2008 and Chatterjee 2003.

[6] Trying to stave off a communist takeover in the1950s, the Philippine state received from Washington a "long-term infusion of military aid that would reinvigorate the coercive capacities of the Philippine state and its ruling oligarchy" (McCoy 2009, 376). In this way counterinsurgency can be seen as primarily a defense of capitalism.

7 Park points to a "lack of reliable information" when it comes to tropical rainforests despite continous encroachment and strides in remote sensing technology (5), Kummer cites "data problems" in mapping the history of the decline of tropical forests in the country (185), and Luyt concludes that "empire forestry," as it was employed by the Bureau of Forestry during the American occupation, failed to fully comprehend and thus engage the complex "political and economic realities" in which Philippine forests are situated (87). Scott's description of such spaces as an "ungoverned periphery" is also germane (6).

[8] See Liwanag 2010 and Mao 1965.

[9] From sixty fighters when the party was founded, in 1969, its strength in the late 1980s after the ouster of Marcos had grown to some 16,500 full-time guerrillas in 60 fronts, "moving freely" in 63 out of the 73 provinces across the country. See Liwanag 2010.

[10] See McCoy 2009, especially chapter 17, "Crucibles of Counterinsurgency."

[11] Residents have fought against eviction by both legal means and collective action, including mobilizing a barikadang

bayan, or people's barricade, which successfully defended their community from some 600 police, fire, and traffic personnel in a morning raid in 2010. See Ortega 2016.

[12] In May 2020, in the middle of a COVID-19–related lockdown, a casino developer threatened community leaders with the newly passed Anti-Terrorism Law, over social media posts detailing the company's harassment of residents, who had organized to resist eviction (Kadamay San Roque). See also McCarthy 2020. For the genealogy of land grabs and dispossession in the country, which can be traced back to Spanish-era "friar lands" and haciendas, see Ortega 2016.

[13] A "play of narrative reticence and revelation" and "shifting perspectives" in Rizal's works generate an "undecidability" that opens them to productively unstable ways of reading (Hau 141).

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