

Voices and Visions: Symbolic Convergences in the Oral Narratives of Filipino Comfort Women¹

Oscar Tantoco Serquiña Jr.

University of the Philippines Diliman

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes oral narratives of 10 Filipino comfort women, who are members of the Liga ng mga Lolang Pilipina, or Lila Pilipina, an organization of victims and survivors of sexual slavery by Japanese military soldiers during the World War II in the Philippines. Guided by Ernest Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory, this paper aims to describe the content, identify the salient structure, and determine the rhetorical vision in the oral narratives of Filipino comfort women. This paper argues that a pattern of characters, settings, and plotlines may be discerned from the oral narratives, and that these formal elements structurally and ideologically constitute the comfort women's rhetorical vision of the future. This rhetorical vision is by and large a social drama that visualizes a just and warless society, renders the war as the major culprit in the destruction of Filipinos' lives, and highlights the roles of Filipino comfort women and the youth in fighting militarization and in seeking peace and social justice in society.

Keywords: Philippine rhetoric, rhetorical criticism, fantasy theme analysis, rhetorical vision, World War II

INTRODUCTION

Oral and written narratives constitute the Philippine nation's historical memory and social world. To articulate these narratives is to reveal how people, as *homo narrans*, not only communicate their experiences, but also how they ascribe sense, shape, and significance to their lives by way of rescuing them from disorder or oblivion. Sharing stories about personal experiences is an inevitable part of every human interaction, and being an experienced narrator is an important ability that members of a speech community must develop (Robinson 59). Telling a coherent narrative is popularly perceived as part of human nature, so capturing one's

experiences as history or (auto)biography, as well as making them appealing “to the various senses, to reason and emotion, to intellect and imagination, and to fact and value” (Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication” 15), may be considered constitutive of social and symbolic human interactions.

The turn to narratives as primary codes of communication does not only aim to identify how minds operate within the processes of making meaning, organizing memories, and recreating the very events of a life (Riessman 2), but it also responds to a need to determine the dynamisms of storytelling, as well as the discursive constructions of their attendant narrators, contexts, contents, and publics, in order to lay bare the structures of sentiment that underpin people and the social movements that enfold them and that they, in return, animate. This attempt is part of a desire to flesh out strategic interventions and conventions in *turning* personal experiences into stories, moments into historiographies (Langellier 128), as well as to identify the procedures of “logic’ for assessing stories, for determining whether or not one *should* adhere to the stories one is encouraged to endorse or to accept as the basis for decisions and actions” (Fisher, “The Narrative Paradigm” 348). In recognizing the ways by which oral narratives place human communication not only among marginalized experiences but also among the quotidian practices of individuals (Langellier 128), this paper focuses on members of a rhetorical community whose voices and visions have long been kept unheard by the public despite the many available channels through which they may be shared and re-shared. This rhetorical group concerns Filipino “comfort women,” or those Filipinas who were abducted between ages 11 to 20 years old, conscripted into military sexual slavery, and detained in “comfort stations” or brothels by the Japanese Imperial Army stationed in different parts of the country during World War II from 1943 to 1945 (Sancho iii; Yoko 54; Tanaka xii). These women were primarily used as “sanitary public toilets” by Japanese soldiers in the battlefield, whom the Japanese Empire had to discipline from raping natives and whose libidinal urges had to be domesticated through female prostitutes and sex slaves (Yoko 54; Hirofumi 215; Mendoza 254; Tanaka xi-xii). These Filipina military comfort women were indeed part of Japan’s distinctly imperial policy to institutionalize “an exclusive, elaborate, and strictly regulated system of prostitution that was considered essential to the optimal functioning of its military machine as well as the trouble-free management of the territories it invaded and occupied” (Mendoza 248). However, it must be noted that unlike their counterparts from the Korean peninsula, who were generally taken away from their home country and then brought to China and to several countries in Southeast Asia, a large number of Filipina comfort women were abducted and enslaved in the Philippines, as well as suffered immense atrocities

together with their families and own communities as their home villages became military zones of conflict during the war (Takagi Ken'ichi qtd. in Yoko 60).

The case of sexual slavery and the establishment of comfort stations for Japanese soldiers are not isolated to the Philippines. In Asia, an approximated number of 100,000-250,000 women were enlisted by Japan as *jugun ianfu*, or "military comfort woman," from 1942 to 1945 (Sancho iii). As of 1998, most of the conscripted victims (reaching up to 80 percent of the total number) are known to be from North and South Korea, but there, too, are those who come from Taiwan, China, Indonesia, the Netherlands, and even Japan. Historians have estimated that by the end of the war, less than 30 percent of these victims survived the trauma and torture they experienced under the Japanese Imperial Army (Lila Pilipina; Soh 123-124).

It was during the Asian Conference on Traffic in Women in December 1991 that the world first heard about the story of the so-called "comfort women," when a Korean woman, Kim Hak Sun, bravely narrated her experiences as a *jugun ianfu* during World War II. In the Philippines, Maria Rosa Luna Henson was the first Filipino comfort woman to recount her experiences as a sex slave under the Japanese Occupation. Together with volunteers of the Task Force on Filipino Comfort Women (TFFCW), Lola [grandmother] Rosa gave her first ever press conference on September 18, 1992. Since then, other women victims have also come out and told their own personal accounts about military sexual slavery by Japan.

A national assembly and consultation between members of TFFCW and comfort women-survivors happened on May 16, 1994. This gathering resulted in the creation of Lila Pilipina, an organization of Filipino comfort women, victims and survivors of rape and military sexual slavery by Japanese troops during World War II,² which continues to safeguard principles by which they stand as an organization, primarily through movement rhetoric and action that demand moral reparation and monetary remuneration not only for the damages done to all dead and living victims of wartime cruelties in the Philippines, but also for the following decades after World War II. With Japan's revisionist tendencies, the specific figure, voice, and memory of comfort women have been all but sanitized in the nation's and the whole world's reckoning of the historical past. While direct apologies, just compensation, and other essential actions to correct the past mistakes of the Imperial Army have yet to be received from the government of Japan, the mobilization of the Filipino comfort women contingent may be considered a crucial source of collective action in the web of alliances on this historical and political agenda in Asia and across the globe.

In 2009-2010, I was able to record and transcribe 10 oral narratives from respondents who were chosen for sit-down interviews depending on their availability and admitted capacity to deliver a coherent and cohesive narrative about their experiences before, during, and after the World War II. In this study, I emphasize the ways Filipina comfort women dramatically interpret their past and present experiences, are caught up in an overarching social reality of their movement, as well as come up with their own vision of the future. In this regard, I address a communication inquiry that involves narratives perceived as social achievements that contain certain symbols, like words or deeds, that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them (Carpenter 6).

Guided by Ernest Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory, I primarily raise the question: What fantasy themes, fantasy types, and rhetorical vision are embodied in the narratives of Filipino comfort women? I aim to describe the content of the narratives of the comfort women; identify the fantasy themes and fantasy types in the narratives of the comfort women; and project a rhetorical vision that accounts for the composite dramas that catch up large groups of people in a social reality. Not at all interested in authenticating the veracity of the comfort women's truth claims and shared historical details, and aware of the discursivity that contextualizes history and the protocols of its writing, this paper explores patterns of characters, settings, and plotlines that may be discerned from the personal and collective oral narratives of the comfort women, as well as investigates the ways by which they structurally and ideologically constitute and legitimate rhetorical visions of the future.

Table 1
List of Respondents

	Year of Victimization	Place of Victimization
R1	1943	Negros Occidental
R2	1942	Abra
R3	1942	Masbate
R4	1942	Bataan
R5	1943	Manila
R6	1944	Negros Occidental
R7	1943	Manila
R8	1943	Bulacan
R9	1942	Masbate
R10	1943	Manila

TELLING STORIES IN ORDER TO LIVE: BORMANN'S SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE THEORY

Considered a well-developed theory in communication, the Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) has evolved within the limits of small group communication and has been utilized most commonly to analyze this context's dynamic and dramatic process of group and individual fantasizing (Dainton and Zelley 157; Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision" 396). SCT is founded on the premise that members of a group considerably generate and maintain, through interaction, a communal consciousness, which includes symbols and meanings. In analyzing rhetorical patterns, SCT aids in understanding the vital process of human symbolization and accounts how dramatizing communication produces social reality for groups of people.

SCT's most significant concept is the fantasy theme. According to SCT, *fantasy* neither relates to something much-coveted nor some ungrounded, imaginary reality; instead, it refers to an artistic understanding of experiences and events that gratifies a psychological or rhetorical need, and to ways communities of people make manifest a shared common experience and turn it into social knowledge (Bormann, "The Symbolic Convergence Theory" 52). It must be understood that a fantasy theme starts with dramatizing messages, which can be in the form of an anecdote, a joke, a metaphor, or a figure of speech. It, too, can consist of real or fictive characters functioning in particular dramatic situations in particular settings of time and space. These messages, however, are not anchored on the present; rather, they relate to events that transpired in the past or are envisioned in the future.

If fantasy themes could transcend time and be continuously embellished, the result would be a fantasy chain, which is the product of fantasy themes that have evolved through interaction within the group and have successfully penetrated the group's consciousness. According to Bormann, "a member of a group dramatizes a theme that catches the group and causes it to chain out because it hits a common psychodynamic chord or a hidden agenda item or their common difficulties vis-à-vis the natural environment, the socio-political systems, or the economic structures" ("Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision" 399).

Building fantasy chains often results in group cohesion, a process termed symbolic convergence, which adumbrates not only how people permit themselves to realize "empathic communication" with one another, but also how they locate critical and creative bases for interacting with one another to build well-oriented and well-aligned communities of human emotions and experiences. The emergence of a

fantasy chain converts a group from a collection of individuals into a distinguishable group with its own group consciousness and symbolically constructed identity. Dainton and Zelle assert that every group has its numerous fantasy chains (158), which, in their congregation, produce a rhetorical vision.

A rhetorical vision is a group's unified manner of perceiving the world insofar as it carries several elements such as *dramatis personae*, typical plotlines, and scenes that can be alluded to in all communication situation and can produce evocative reactions among members of a rhetorical community (Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision" 398). Littlejohn and Foss write that a rhetorical vision forms the assumptions on which a group's knowledge is based and structures people's sense of reality in areas that they cannot experience directly but can only know by symbolic reproduction. In forming the assumptions on which a group's knowledge is based, a rhetorical vision is often consolidated by an overarching master analogy, slogan, or label that links all narrative elements together. Lastly, the use of fantasy themes and, therefore, the generation of a rhetorical vision serve as a social bonding agent and a force through which people create narrative structures that give meaning to their lives and to their sense of community (Littlejohn and Foss 158-159).

NARRATED DISCOMFORT: FANTASY THEMES IN THE ORAL NARRATIVES

I first determine rhetorical portrayals of characters, settings, and plotlines in the narratives of Filipino comfort women, and consider these historical elements as what Bormann calls fantasy themes, precisely because they account for a past and present time of crisis and are employed as the basis to unify and call members of *Lila Pilipina* to action. I seek to map the agents or actors (*dramatis personae*) and their assigned qualities; the settings (scenes) and their depictions; and finally, major and minor life events (plotlines) and the ways by which they unfold in the narratives. Focusing on junctures in the lives of the comfort women during prewar, wartime, and postwar Philippines, I attempt to make clear the constitution of the narratives, to provide important passages from the interviews to illustrate the lines of logic as well as the layers of pathos that characterize these narratives, and to initiate analyses of them to understand how a rhetorical vision may be derived from these oral narratives.

CHARACTERS

Comfort Women

The comfort women themselves were central characters in the narratives. They described themselves in varying roles as child, victim, returnee, wife, mother, and revolutionary. Some of them had a difficult childhood before the war, experiencing impoverishment, death in the family, and abandonment. R8, for example, confided: "I struggled when I was a kid. I endured all [difficulty] just so we could have something to eat ... Our life was extremely difficult at the time. Ever since our mother died, my life and my siblings' life had become miserable. Our father abandoned us."³ On the other hand, most of the comfort women experienced a happy and simple life with their families. R4 shared:

Our life was fine because we were disciplined. I stood as the eldest among my siblings, because our eldest one married early. That's why I took on the role of the eldest. That's why my siblings were also disciplined. They had their own work. Because I was a girl and the eldest of all, I helped our mother in household chores. That's why I would discipline my siblings in doing household chores. I even washed the plates, cleaned the house, to help my parents. I helped my mother do the laundry, cook our food.

All of them underwent extreme adversities when the Japanese soldiers invaded their towns and villages. They were raped day and night, and forced to do heavy chores for Japanese military soldiers. Some were brought along by the soldiers as they searched for Filipino guerrillas. While some attempted to break free from their detainment, all efforts did not succeed.

R3: I told [the Japanese soldiers], "Let me out ..." I was insistent. I couldn't eat. I really couldn't eat. I lost my hunger. I lost all my thirst ... I lost my appetite. Even if they gave me food ... I was not eating anymore. Until out of fear, out of extreme crying, out of nervousness, I got sick. Inside the room ... I was repeatedly raped every night. Three, four, five [times].

Upon their return, all of them were alienated and rejected by society. Others were able to relate their undertakings to their immediate relatives, but most of them opted to keep their experience a secret. With the fear of being stigmatized, they

suffered self-isolation and self-rejection, and in this regard, distanced themselves from their peers due to feelings of estrangement and difference.

R7: While sleeping I remembered what happened to me. It felt like I would go insane at the time, but I conquered everything. I strengthened my resolve. Of course, my aunts were also already old. I had no one to vent my grievances to. I had no one to tell my stories to. Because if you would tell your story, even if you didn't want [what happened to you], you would be mocked. So I chose to be quiet.

Moreover, all of them were not able to finish schooling. Because of the trauma the war caused them, they felt the need to turn their gaze to something or somewhere else to appease themselves. They left their provinces, engaged in several jobs (i.e. as factory worker or domestic helper), and tried their luck in the Philippine capital.

After many years, they had their own families. While others were accepted by their husbands, some were belittled or, worse, abandoned because of the experiences these women underwent during the war. Soon they had their own children and took the role of subservient mothers. Family life was largely complicated for them, because they needed to confront and balance various problems in their personal lives. Their families had a hard time accepting the comfort women and their decision to expose their experiences in public. The lolas were ignored for a time and were even considered a disgrace by their children.

After two decades of fighting for justice, they remain unfazed. They presented themselves as bearers of wisdom. As revolutionaries, they all tried to be brave and steadfast in their beliefs and advocacies. Enlightened and empowered, they transformed from being victims into real revolutionaries who fought against the atrocities of war.

R2: And when I share stories, I really cry out of anger ... [I] am really angry at the hands of soldiers because of their extreme cruelty toward us. That's why I do not stop shouting [for] justice for all the injustice [done to us] during the [Second World] War. Because I was not only the oppressed one, [but] all of us in the family.

I can't articulate the kind of cruelty of [the] Japanese, the kind of savagery they did to us. Now, we continue to unravel to our people, to Filipinos, the treatment that Japanese soldiers did to us. Especially to the youth. What [I am mad] about now is that foreign soldiers are seen in our

country, especially with [the Visiting Forces Agreement] ... I told them [when we rallied against the VFA], "Get out! You have a big country. What are you doing here?"

JAPANESE SOLDIERS

The Japanese soldiers were clearly considered the enemies in the narratives. They were depicted as intruders, tormentors, and savages who destroyed lives of Filipinos (and in this particular study, those of women). Before the war, Japanese military men were depicted as enemies who were disguised as friends, in their initial attempts at assimilating with Filipino natives. As they started to show aggression, however, their mere presence caused fear and panic. The soldiers terrorized the natives, especially the men who were suspected to be part of the strong and pervasive anti-Japanese guerrilla movement at the time, even forcing them to leave their provinces and go up the mountains to evade military men and authorities.

R2: When the Japanese soldiers arrived ... men started to get captured. When we asked why they were abducting men, [the Japanese said that] they didn't have a ribbon. It seemed like the flag [of Japan] ... They were strict. The Japanese were already aggressive. Back then, before the Japanese would arrive, you must possess [a ribbon]. It had white here, red here, and a circle. That's their flag. They were mad if you didn't [wear] one.

The men they captured—punishment was what [the Japanese] did to them. They got tied up with a rope ... They were kicked ... The Japanese were inclined to violence. They did various things. A live chicken—that's why I say they were sadists—what did they do with it? They took off its head ... then released it. The chicken ran wherever, until it fell to the ground. They would laugh so hard. That's why I would say, "These are sadists."

The lolas also portrayed the Japanese military armies as sadists of the highest order, who found pleasure in seeing people suffer. They were also characterized as destroyers of life and livelihood. They burned down villages, freely carried around their guns and other ammunition to frighten or murder folks of the town, and stole livestock, produce, and other material properties they could use. For the most part, the Japanese soldiers were tormentors who took away innocence and childhood from the lolas through notoriously monstrous acts, specifically and notably massive

and repeated rape, that violated all codes of intimacy and control deemed constitutive of a normatively beautiful and pleasurable human activity such as sex. Although there were some Japanese soldiers, mostly higher officers, who were portrayed as relatively benevolent as compared to others in their overall dealings with the comfort women, very much like the “caring figure” of Captain Tanaka in Lola Rosa’s autobiography (Henson 41-48), most foreign military men were represented as unmercifully brutal in their sexual drive and thirst, which they inflicted upon young or mature Filipinas alike, and in their desire to divide and dominate, which manifested in the manner in which they governed their newly-claimed territories.

R5: Even while on the road [when] they pass by you, they could rape you. During those times, soldiers were sexually eager about women ... That’s why others must not say I am ugly and therefore will not be noticed ... Even old women [could get raped]. They were carnal.

FAMILIES OF THE COMFORT WOMEN

Families of the comfort women—which included their fathers and mothers, their siblings, their aunts and uncles—were acknowledged as major characters, especially during the early stages of their childhood and in the years that came after the destructive war. They were viewed as sources of comfort and security, who supported and cared for the victims after escaping the hands of the enemies. Like Lola Rosa who told her ordeal only to her mother who, in return, nurtured her deeply traumatized daughter and kept her hidden at home out of fear of the Japanese soldiers doing their daily rounds in the village (ibid. 50), most of the comfort women also turned to their parents, especially to their mothers, as soon as they were released from or escaped detainment. In this haunted time of aftershock and suffering that bore existential and social crises among the victims, family members largely assisted the comfort women on the path to wellness and recovery. Depicted in varying shades of kindness, compassion, strictness and leniency, immediate families were generally considered good characters.

Their husbands and children, like the parents of most comfort women, also played a big role in the lives of the comfort women, especially in the liberation or postwar era. However, their husbands were mostly rendered in a negative light, almost always attached to descriptions such as unsupportive, uncompassionate, and unforgiving. After learning about their wives’ travails, they often distanced themselves from them. Or worse, they abandoned their wives and their families for another woman.

R5: I still struggled with my life even when I got married. I always felt raped even by my husband. Even then, I told him I was raped. But I didn't reveal it was the Japanese. I didn't say I was captured. Of course, men know if you had sexual experience or none. I felt disgusted ... whenever my husband would come near [me]. I almost wrestled with him in instances like that ... I was disgusted. That's how I felt.

But to be sure, not all husbands were rude and promiscuous. Some were supportive, loving, and accepting. There were those who stood by their wives through and through, and tried to understand their plight. They acted as patient partners who guided and served the needs of the lolas.

R2: And now ... [my husband] talks to me. He tells me, "Do not think about what happened to you. Forget about that. I will not be disgusted with you. Please, have mercy on yourself. Do not mind those Japanese, because they are beasts." That's always the advice [of my husband] ... He supports me ... He does not abandon me. And I am grateful to the Lord because [it is my husband] who once again has set [my mind in perspective].

The children of the comfort women were depicted in three different ways. First, they were the reason the lolas had a hard time coming out in the open insofar as doing so not only meant embarrassment to themselves but also to their families. Second, they were the unsupportive relatives who disregarded their mothers. Troubled by the public's prying eyes, they felt shame upon witnessing their mothers' confessions on TV. And third, they were pictured as heirlooms to the fight for justice. After accepting the circumstances around the comfort women's plight, the children gradually came to empathize with their mothers. Through them, the fight and advocacy that the lolas had started would hopefully never come to an inconsequential end.

LILA PILIPINA

Lila Pilipina was portrayed as the support group that directed the course of the comfort women's battle for justice. It advocated, defended, and lobbied for the rights of the lolas in the courts of Japan, at the Japanese embassy in the Philippines, and in the legislative and executive halls of the Philippine government, among others. By addressing concerns of and about the comfort women, the group was able to enlighten and empower the then terrified victims of sexual slavery. Lila Pilipina was not only the institutional support that pooled together the comfort

women under the aegis of a collective, but it was also an encouraging environment for enunciating what Pamela Thoma would note as “the sexualized nature of aggression under modern patriarchy generally, the sexual violence of imperialistic war typically, and the racist, sexual enslavement of former comfort women specifically” (42). Lila Pilipina further carries out various programs that are intended to lighten the burden of the comfort women as well as aid in the process of seeking transnational justice. These programs include self-esteem building and organizing; research and documentation; information, education and media relations; welfare assistance program; international networking program; campaigns and advocacy work; emergency shelter and counselling; and coordination of legal action (Lila Pilipina). It may, then, be said that Lila Pilipina, like the women’s movements in Korea and Japan that helped and are helping victims of sexual slavery during the war, is able to “bring about a revolution and liberation from patriarchy, militarism, and colonialism to raise consciousness and establish their own autonomy. [It has] also been working to make this historic case of military slavery an international issue, utilizing international human rights law that provide for an individual’s right to compensation” (Watanabe 12).

R2: The contribution of Lila Pilipina to our struggle [as comfort women] is, [they believe] the stories we tell the staff. Now, they guide us. I tell [them], “Believe it or not, this is what happened to us.”

R9: My only desire for the Lila Pilipina organization ... is that our demand for justice will be served ... Lila Pilipina organization has never been neglectful. They also strive to attain justice, in partnership with GABRIELA. That’s why we do not lose hope in achieving justice from the Japanese government. Our hopes rest on Lila Pilipina and GABRIELA. We depend on them in achieving justice.

JAPANESE GOVERNMENT

In their fight for justice, the comfort women held the Japanese government responsible for all the atrocities they suffered in the past. They considered the Japanese government as the main culprit of the war. The comfort women directly blame the Emperors of Japan, for despite the nearly twenty years of calling for justice from this institution, the comfort women have not received any reply that acknowledges their plight as victims. While there was institutional intervention from the Japanese government through the establishment of the Asian Women’s Fund in 1995, which aimed to express “a sense of national atonement from the

Japanese people to the former 'comfort women,' and to work to address contemporary issues regarding the honor and dignity of women" (qtd in Soh, "Japan's National/Asian Women's Fund" 218), Lila Pilipina and its members felt this gesture was an immediate corrective measure that lacked sincerity to redress political and historical erring Japan had made on war victims and was in fact expediently instituted to evade the Empire's legal responsibility. Although some members of Lila Pilipina, like Lola Maria Rosa Henson, accepted Japan's remuneration through the AWF, especially because of their personal health and financial needs in their twilight years, members of Lila Pilipina adamantly insisted that this measure was and would never be a form of justice, precisely because funds came from donations of the Japanese people, not from the Japanese government per se, and that they had added more divisions among communities of survivors, victims, and supporters.

R1: The government of Japan—they should [be accountable for all the trespasses done to us]. It was the one that [instructed] the Japanese soldiers to invade the Philippines. It could not be just the soldiers. It's really the Japanese government that decided on Japanese presence in the country. That's why it should be held liable for everything that happened to us.

THE AMERICANS

The Americans were specifically described as threats to the Japanese armies. Whenever American planes hovered above the sky to survey the terrain or to initiate air fight against the Japanese, it would cause panic and tension among the enemy. America defeated the Japanese military army, and in doing so, it was also believed to have freed Filipinos from the shackles of war.

However, some comfort women viewed the Americans as secondary heroes of the war. For some provinces, the period of liberation happened primarily because of the guerrillas who had already scoured Japanese territories and triumphantly defeated the Japanese armies. While they had contributed to the total defeat of the Japanese Imperial Army, as well as to the relief efforts done to Filipinos during the post-war period, the Americans, according to some narratives, were just the "publicized saviors" of the war, who grabbed both credit and the spotlight from underground Filipino war veterans and other guerrilla groups. American General Douglas MacArthur's promise of *I Shall Return* made a strong impact on Filipinos that the Americans' return to the Philippine Islands overshadowed any help or support done by the natives themselves.

R10: You could no longer think about anything. Your mind was confused. There was nothing. You were feeling weak. You could not sleep. You could not think properly. But my will got stimulated when I saw the Americans. That's when my will got animated... It was like seeing the light that I would remain alive because the Americans were there. That's what entered my mind. I would remain alive because the Americans were there to rescue me.

LOLA ROSA

Considered the first face of the Filipina comfort women, Maria Rosa Henson, more prominently known within the rhetorical community and various media outfits as Lola Rosa, was the initiator of courage and strong resolve. Because of her revelation in 1992, more than a half century after the conclusion of the short-lived Japanese occupation of the Philippine Islands, victims of military aggression and sexual slavery during World War II earned confidence to speak up and to come out openly. Encouraged and protected by the Task Force on Filipino Comfort Women, Lola Rosa and other Filipinas had come to the fore, one by one, to testify about their travails during the war, on the one hand, and finally to put public signification to the term "comfort women," on the other.

R8: Then Lola Rosa appeared [on TV]. Lola Rosa said, "Whoever was [victimized] by the Japanese, please come out in public." I told myself, "Who's this woman? Why did she even [appear publicly]? She better remain quiet. It's embarrassing to be like that."

She said, "Do not be ashamed so we can have justice for everything we went through. Do not be shy. Do not hide." I was thinking, "Wait a minute. If they are not ashamed, maybe I can also strengthen my resolve [to come out in public]?"

THE YOUTH

It was on members of the youth that the lolas rested their frustrations of the past as well as their hopes for the future. Acknowledged because of their physical vitality, intellection, creativity, and radical potential to challenge authorities within and outside the country, the youth was considered a well of inspiration, support, and joy. As most members of the youth who visit and support the comfort women are

researchers, students, and academics who discuss and write about their ongoing plight and life stories, they were deemed helpful in making this international and national agenda on sexual victimhood during the war relevant to present time and accessible to a wider audience of interested individuals or institutions.

R5: Hopefully [what happened to us] will not happen to the youth. That's what I am thinking. And the reason I came out publicly is for the youth to know. Let them not experience what we women underwent during the Japanese occupation. The hardship we went through—may they not experience it.

That's our hope. Our resolve is strong because of the youth. They believe that we victims get a stronger resolve because of them. If no one believes us, then [all our advocacies will become futile]...We will no longer have a stimulated resolve. How can we fight if the youth no longer believes us?

As long as the youth are on our side, supporting us, believing that we victims deserve justice for everything we underwent, [we will not surrender the fight.]

SETTINGS

The Provinces

Provinces were the major setting of the narratives of every comfort woman. From childhood to victimization to return, provinces were sites in which personal histories of torture, trepidation, and trauma happened. The re-imagination of their provinces started beautifully in the narratives, with their parents and friends clearly in the picture. Childhood dreams and family ties were colorful and inviting, especially because everyone was at peace with one another, ecologies of habitation and subsistence were for the most part unbothered, and overall lifestyle was uncomplicated. Most of the provinces were coastal and agricultural, which made most of the inhabitants either farmers or fishermen. To the comfort women, these locations were already part of distant memories of a quaint life lived with their closest peers and relatives.

R2: I grew up with a good life ... Back in the day people were happy. Really happy. Because life and livelihood were easy. People did not

have a difficult life back in the day ... We only experienced extreme difficulty starting when Japanese soldiers arrived until the end of war.

These beautiful and peaceful renderings would immediately turn into bleak pictures of home once the Japanese military soldiers penetrated and ravaged the provinces. Men started abandoning their village towns, left even their own families, and began cooperating with guerrilla groups. All of these were done to protect themselves from accusations and torture by Japanese soldiers. Women became wary and careful of their actions, veering away from places where the Japanese positioned themselves. Children, especially little girls, were already warned not to play in the streets, with the fear of being abducted by the enemies. Lifestyle and livelihood also changed and declined eventually, as military soldiers embezzled a large number of properties and livestock. Also, the fields suffered neglect since most farmers went underground out of terror of getting picked up or killed.

R1: When we arrived in our barrio, we no longer had a house to stay in. All houses in the area [were burned down]. Only our chapel and school were left standing [by the Japanese soldiers]. Those were the only ones left. All houses on the highlands—all of those were burned. In our barrio, nothing was left, except for our school.

The Garrison

The garrison was another well-emphasized and vividly rendered setting in the narratives. It was described as a totally inaccessible place. While most comfort women were locked inside a room, some were allowed, amidst strict guards, to see other detained women. During the day, they did heavy chores for the Japanese soldiers, like washing clothes, cleaning the headquarters, and cooking food. The garrison was a physical architecture of horror, debasement, and barbarism, as much as it was a signifier for the loss of innocence inflicted upon then young and teenage women.

R4: We were not allowed to have long talks [inside the garrison], because we were guarded. We had a difficult life there because we were really like prisoners ... We could not talk. Our only window was the one facing the rice paddies. Nothing else. That was not even properly opened.

Also, military brothels or comfort stations were sites where defilement of female bodies by way of sexual slavery was facilitated as a component and consequence of a colonial project of the Japanese empire to repress uncontrollable carnal desires of its military men in their quest for expansion and control of the region. Thus, as Katharina Mendoza rightfully describes comfort stations in Foucauldian terms, these edifices served as disciplinary institutions of surveillance and punishment, where Filipinas were rendered easy prey to a multitude of army men, as well as where Japanese soldiers themselves were contained as “maximally intelligible” subjects for governance (251).

Manila

The Philippine capital city was a battleground for conflict and terror. It was a devastated place for both the living and the dead, since it suffered one of the most terrible historical wars witnessed in the Pacific region, if not the whole world; and whose post-war state of rapine distraughtness the comfort women could compare themselves to after Liberation. It was also in the country’s capital where the comfort women tried to regain their dignity by working hard for their families and for themselves. According to the comfort women, most of them moved to Manila to work as domestic helpers, factory workers, or street vendors on the streets and alleys of Divisoria and Quiapo. In the “big city,” they established their own family life by relocating them or raising them up here. After many years of keeping their stories hidden from the public, they eventually joined Lila Pilipina, the organization that advocated and cradled their concerns. It was largely on the streets of the capital city or specifically at the gates of the Japanese embassy where the comfort women would express their grievances, rights, stories, and demands as a group.

R4: When Intramuros was bombed out, our house also got burned down. Everything was razed down. There were a lot of dead people in our area. It stank. Dead people were said to be all over the place ... A lot of dead people were dug up in the church of St. Anthony ... Men were abducted. They were asked to line up. They were killed there. They were beheaded. That’s why our area really stank. [That’s what] my sibling said.

PLOTLINES

Atrocities of War

One of the major plotlines was the invasion of the Japanese armies in the country. In oftentimes dreary and brooding tones, the comfort women graphically and intensely recounted the atrocities of war. A number of their kin and friends were victims of the war. No one was spared, for even helpless babies and women were killed. Everywhere, there were hunting operations, bombings, tortures, and sexual abuse. Towns were planted with seeds of terror. They were manipulated by foreign armies, driving away the natives from their once decent lives. Hunger and poverty were as prevalent as the inexorable mortality rate in the areas. Indeed, danger was above and around the whole surrounding environment. The historian Yuki Tanaka writes that apart from going through the torment of continuous sexual violation, the comfort women, as young as they were during the war, tragically had had to suffer the dread of witnessing the massacre of their families by the Japanese at the time of their capture (xvi), as well as seeing harrowing spectacles of carnage in their villages as soon as they were released in the wake of encounters between American and Japanese forces months or years before or when liberation came. After the war, some comfort women were abandoned by Japanese soldiers, some summarily executed in military outfits, some were killed in trenches, some were instructed to commit suicide, and some were left in the jungles and had to find their way back to their old towns (Yoko 55).

R6: I was brought [by the Japanese] into the garrison. I was screaming, of course. I experienced being slapped and kicked. Whenever I kicked back, I was threatened with a bayonet. They wanted to stab me ... I didn't want it. I really resisted. I was pulled by the hair. I got slapped on the face. It was horrifying. I once told them, "I better be killed." I remained quiet. But when I was approached [by the Japanese], I would really scream.

Loss of Innocence

The comfort women narrated with anguish the moment when their childhood was taken away from them. The lolas were in their teenage years—the average age, according to Yuki Tanaka (xvi), was 17.6 years—when they were abducted by Japanese military soldiers. Some of them did not even have knowledge of sex, nor had even started to menstruate. With their abduction, they experienced aggression, physical

violence, and mental torture from the enemies. As rape victims, their lives drastically changed both on the personal and the social levels. On the personal level, they felt worthless to society. On the social level, they were subject to widespread rumor-mongering, social discrimination, and other forms of victimization. They neither finished schooling, nor did they enjoy their childhood because they felt alienated from their “clean and virginal” friends. As young as they were, they already had the compulsion to face the trades and travails of the world—as parents, wives, laborers, and very much later, revolutionaries—and to distract themselves from their dark past.

R1: We were there [in the garrison] for two months already. We were tagged along by the Japanese. We were always with the Japanese until sleeping time. Every single night. That’s what happened to us in the two months we were with the Japanese.

I was raped alternately by the Japanese. Six Japanese raped me. I don’t know about my women companions ... I couldn’t fight back. I couldn’t say no. If I would, I would get kicked by the Japanese. They would kick and punch when one resisted. They would really hurt you.

I was thinking, “What has my life become? I am so young but already raped by the Japanese.”

Fight for Justice

The fight for justice was something that all of the comfort women emphasized. Many years after their emancipation, enlightenment had finally dawned on the victims. Through Lila Pilipina’s help, they became more confident of advancing their rights and advocacies. Justice for them meant inclusion of their experiences in history books, public apology, and legal compensation from the Japanese government. But their cry was not only pointed at Japan. Rather, it was also aimed at the Philippine government that remained insensitive to the national and international predicaments of the comfort women.

Gaining justice was truly important for the victims. “The fight continues,” they said. Despite their age, the victims now turned into revolutionaries who were brave enough to rally in the streets and share their stories with every man, woman, and child they would encounter and who would express interest in their political cause and historical experience.

R6: We do not run out of hope. We continue to fight. We really like to achieve genuine justice...Our call has to be heeded as soon as possible because we are already old. Until now, that's our recurrent and continuous call.

Fight against the War

Lastly, the fight against war was a recurrent plotline in the narratives. As an organization, they viewed the war as the basis of all violence against women and the youth. Without the war, they wouldn't be sexually abused by soldiers, and their relatives would not have died in such brutal manner. Ultimately, the ruinous war and its proponents were the real antagonists in this country or anywhere in the world. War was seen to operate on the premise of subjugation of perceived lower or marginal forms of life and non-life, especially those viewed as external and eccentric relative to the purveyed culture of dominion by colonizers and possessors of power. In this scheme of aggression, gender differences are flattened out as much as social divides are widened as these are the primary ways that individuals and institutions propel the overarching master narrative of patriarchy and hyper-masculinity, as well as the many cycles of violence war viciously breeds in society.

R4: I no longer want to have another war. So what we experienced during the Japanese occupation will not be experienced by the youth. That's my prayer. Wherever I am, I do not want them to experience that.

To Search for Converging Patterns: Chaining the Elements of the Narratives

In these characters, settings, and plotlines, a pattern may be discerned to make sense of the symbolic convergence of historical experiences and rhetorical portrayals in the oral narratives of the Filipino comfort women. This pattern involves a protagonist (the comfort women), an antagonist (the Japanese soldiers, the Japanese government, and the Philippine government), helpers or aids (guerrillas, parents, co-detainees, the youth, Lila Pilipina), and an adventure (a forced departure from the community, an initiation inside the garrison, and a return to society). Characters and events are given attributions, making them come to life, despite being one dimensional most of the time and aligned with the narrative trajectory that their narrators pursue to the advantage of their ideological investments. There are indeed

antagonisms, transitions and comings-of-age, and struggles for retribution and redemption. Expressed by the comfort women in what Bormann describes as “the same tone and manner” and “emotional intensity” (“Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: Ten Years” 296), all of these elements chain together before an intended audience whom the narrators themselves want to bring into involvement into the formulation of experience as history, narrative, and discourse. Notwithstanding the form and style they may take, retellings of these narratives that the comfort women tell themselves and others to construct sustainable life-worlds that they may inhabit are ways of conveying a “truth” about the human condition and of “living in common, in communities in which there is sanction for the story that constitutes one’s life” (Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication” 6).

The social reality that emerges from the comfort women’s collective narratives begins with a childhood set in a peaceful land. It may be argued that the internal elements of the world are in harmony with one another. It is an idyllic life, unspoiled by hazardous external forces. With this background, the central characters are safe with family and friends. As daughters, sisters, and members of their respective communities, they are generally considered safe from harm. Tied to traditional roles often associated to women, they are domesticated at home most of the time. While there are difficulties along the way, life remains unthreatened. Inasmuch as they stay in zones of comfort, there are no ominous characters involved. There are neither lurking enemies on the side, nor hints of urgent departures. The equation remains simple at this juncture: the comfort women are at home in their familiar world.

As enemies enter the picture, however, everything is shattered insofar as the once pleasant world becomes dangerous. Life is filled with pain and sorrow, as well as resistance and lack of liberty. Men are hunted down by Japanese soldiers, and whole towns are placed under hideous and hostile occupation. Soon enough, Japanese soldiers invade even the personal lives of the central characters and eventually take them to unfamiliar places where they are controlled and assaulted. Being transferred from their center of gravity to dangerous site signals the beginning of the arduous journey of most comfort women.

This unknown zone takes the form of a garrison, a brothel, or a military headquarter. It is here where the central characters experience various degrees of torment. In Joseph Campbell’s influential book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in which he develops the ideological, narratological, and functional constitutions of a “monomyth,” he states that the unknown place is a location “of strangely fluid and polymorphous

beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight” (48). Though the comfort women’s experiences inside the garrison are not as heightened as those aforementioned by Campbell, it may still be argued that the prison cell is the main locus of Japanese military men’s inhumane acts toward women. In their stay inside the garrison, the comfort women have “to face a long period of obscurity. This is a time of extreme danger, impediment, or disgrace. [They are] thrown to [their] own depths or outward to the unknown; either way, what [they experience] is a darkness unexplored” (Ibid. 280).

The comfort women’s departure from their original place into the area of ordeal “represent[s] only the beginning of the long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of illumination ... There will be a multitude of preliminary victories, unretainable ecstasies, and momentary glimpses of the wonderful land” (Ibid. 90). But before these women can attain such triumph, they are first placed under the manipulations of the enemy. Eventually, helpers need to intervene in the course of destiny. Apart from their fellow detainees, American soldiers and guerrillas are also considered as aids, if not saviors. Their primary role is to defeat the enemy, for the helpless protagonists to escape fully.

Returning to a familiar landscape is the last stage of the narrative’s trajectory. Here, the comfort women carry knowledge or wisdom that other people in their community may not seem to possess. Supposedly, this should liberate others in their personal and social maladies after the war. Again, akin to the hero that Campbell characterizes, liberation from the shackles of the enemy signals that the comfort women “shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom ... where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds” (167). In Campbell’s monomyth, the hero comes back to life as the initiated and transformed individual. However, unlike Campbell’s hero who willingly acts like a messianic figure, the comfort women remain largely hesitant and isolated. Their experiences as sexual slaves and the stigma they fear they will receive from their community give them a hard time reconciling the personal with the social.

Upon their return, these comfort women were daunted by the dishonor they felt as well as the discrimination they might suffer from society. They dismiss the crucial task of coming out in the open to tell what they had endured during the Japanese occupation. As Watanabe notes about Korean comfort women who felt a sense of

frustration after what they experienced during the war: “To live was to be guilty. They thought loss of chastity was shameful to their families. Some survivors committed suicide or stayed away from their families and led solitary lives. Thus these women suffered doubly and triply from sexual discrimination” (10).

In the course of their retreat, there are dislocations in time and place. The compulsion to relocate was strong among these victim-survivors, for they feel doubt and desperation in recognizable territory. They left the province under difficult circumstances. Moreover, displacement brought them different kinds of experiences. Along the way, they slipped into various roles and responsibilities: a worker, a wife, a mother, and a revolutionary. They also needed to face other forms of victimization, such as poverty, abuse, and other domestic predicaments. In this part of the narrative, the urgency to respond to these predicaments remains intense yet unrealized. The comfort women stayed passive, with the lingering fear that any revelation about their past may be taken against them.

Illumination only came when a figure of bravery, in the person of Lola Rosa, exposed the stories of comfort women to the public. Lola Rosa was the proverbial voice in the wilderness. Her calls for justice compelled other comfort women to come out of darkness; in doing so, she became the initiator of courage. However, despite calls from Lola Rosa, coming out with their own stories did not come easily to other comfort women. In revealing their long-withheld experiences during the war, their and their families’ reputations were at stake

It was through this desire to reconstruct their identities that these comfort women finally spoke up in public and met with other women victims of massive sexual slavery. All together, as they narrated the past as they had known and experienced it, these women became not only protagonists of a historical moment now made urgent for contemporary time; they, too, transformed into women revolutionaries whose collective voice resounded with demands for retribution and calls for action that are in tune with the exigencies of the present. As they reconfigured their past experiences into narratives worthy of telling, views of the comfort women also continued to evolve. The enemies, the helpers, and the course of their struggle became clearer and more specific. The chief enemy became the Japanese and the Philippine governments; the supporters became Lila Pilipina and the youth; and the adventure was situated in the here and the now.

In the words of Kandice Chuh, the term *comfort women* “emerges in reconceptualised form, dislodged from functioning as an identity or as a description of a person, and

reconstituted to work as a reference to multiple ideological and institutional discursive practices that materialize bodies—that make bodies matter, both literally and figuratively—in various ways” (9).

Versions of the Past, Views of the Future: Projecting the Rhetorical Vision

In analyzing the oral narratives of ten Filipino comfort women, I concur with Ernest Bormann’s proposition that whenever occasions are so chaotic and indiscriminate, people are given free rein to fantasize within the assumptions of their rhetorical vision without inhibition. When members of a group chain out a fantasy, they emerge from the meeting with new ideological perspectives and emotive chains that may not have existed before. Bormann further posits that people who generate, legitimize, and participate in a public fantasy are powerfully impelled to action by that process (“Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision” 398). He also adds that motives do not exist to be expressed in communication, but rather arise in the expression itself and come to be embedded within and circulated through fantasy themes which generate and serve to sustain them.

As part of one organization whose ideological positions they may have imbibed full well and perhaps automatically embody within their rhetorical community and beyond, the comfort women attribute meaning to certain events and characterize certain persons or places quite similarly. The resemblances found in the narratives may be taken as a symptom and a consequence of a strategically critical interpretation of historical events, or of an “assumptive system” (Bormann, “Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: Ten Years” 292) that taps into sociocultural reservoirs in order to comprehend human experience in governable terms, on the one hand, and to bring people into an empathic and emotionally evocative communion, on the other. To use Bormann’s words, Lila Pilipina may “have jointly experienced the same emotions; they have developed the same attitudes and emotional responses to the personae of the drama; and they have interpreted some aspect of their experience in the same way. They have thus achieved symbolic convergence about their common experiences” (in Foss 122-123). Symbolic convergence, then, leads to a shared reality from which the rhetorical community’s overall rhetorical vision spring: the fight against war and the clamor for social justice.

Placed at the core of the comfort women’s narratives, their allusions to the past and the present, as well as their emotional chains, the fight against war encompasses almost all perceptions of the comfort women have about their lives, in specific, and

their society, in general. Because the war carries unreasonable patriarchal ideologies, it puts the role of men above anything else, to the point of putting women and children under the oppressive forces of patriarchy. Militarism and patriarchal ideology are factors behind the long time it took for victims of sexual slavery to disclose their experiences during the war, as well as to dissociate themselves from the tyrannies of silence. Whether in times of war or in patriarchal societies, women's narratives are muted as much as their victimization is forced to be kept in secrecy out of the fear of being shamed or harassed once again. Because war and patriarchy are fuelled by ideas of power and conflict, people who embody and practice them tend to conquer all possible "antagonists" within the existing societal order.

The rhetorical vision expresses the comfort women's "firm opposition to Japan's renewed attempts to further re-militarize itself in order to be a political and military world power" (Sancho 9). It envisions a future untroubled by sexual violence against women and the youth, as well as a world where justice reigns and military powers no longer exist. The vision also underlines the argument that "the inhuman practice of comfort women is rooted in discrimination in gender, race, and ethnicity, and driven by the imbalance in the international economy and systematic commodifying of female bodies" (Watanabe 14). To appropriate what Patricia Arinto has written about letters, prison memoirs, recorded oral histories, and other published testimonial narratives of women members of the Philippine National Democratic Movement, the author believes that the rhetorical vision of comfort women "emerges as a challenge to authoritarian structures and state apparatuses" (66), specifically the conventional family structure, the oppressive military institution, and other hegemonic establishments, as well as helps in liberating their subjects by breaking the limiting dichotomies between the personal and the political, the individual and the collective.

As members of *Lila Pilipina*, the comfort women opened up fragments of their "private symbolic worlds" and made them overlap with one another, in order to "create community, to discuss their common experiences, and to achieve mutual understanding" (Bormann qtd. in Foss 122). By recounting their personal stories and making them revolve around a unified rhetorical vision, the comfort women aimed to reveal versions of history that may not be found, or have been watered down, in prevailing historiographies largely written by males (De Guzman 5). They further attempt to claim a discursive space in history as revolutionary *lolas* fighting for everyone who comes after them, and to perform a struggle for human agency that overcomes even while it operates within what is imposed by society as one's destiny, biology, or history. The articulation of these narratives and the generation

of their attendant actions locate comfort women within, as well as accord them the capacity to revise or transgress, the systematically institutionalized networks of symbolic relations that engender discourses about sexual slavery, victimhood, and social justice.

Through their personal and collective narratives, Filipino comfort women attempted to form a rupture in the dominant history that people know, perhaps with the hope to regain control over their subjectivity and to become active agents involved in the construction of their identities. In unfolding their experiences as life narratives that come from one common symbolic ground, the comfort women do not only convert themselves from being mere objects of narration into historical subjects with voice and volition. Also, they attempt to surpass their physiological limitations and set into motion what perhaps are the remaining inalienable possessions they keep in the face of elusive peace and justice: their bodies and their capacity to speak. Dispelling shame and fear of judgment, as well as setting aside individual interests in exchange for a strategic cause against sexual oppression, continued colonialism and militarization, and long-standing and eruptive wars across the globe, the comfort women neither separate the personal from the political, nor make a distinction between their own person and their organization, especially because any delineation made between the two may be seen as an oppressive discursive fiction that functions at the behest of patriarchal organizations and imperial/neocolonial practices in hindering complete emancipations and retributions to transpire (Mendoza 250). If the Japanese government denies according outright gestures of apologia to those who demand them, the comfort women, on the other hand, tirelessly enunciate the privacy of their experiences in the open and ascribe public significations to historical junctures in their lives that remain under institutional evasion, elision, and emendation.

The oral narratives of the comfort women carry the elements of an overarching storyline that serves as the rallying cry of almost every victim of sexual slavery during the World War II. They are formed through “statements which suggest a relation of similitude between such events and processes and the story types that we conventionally use to endow the events of our lives with culturally sanctioned meanings” (White 96). They contain the deepest certainties and ambiguities of the comfort women, on the one hand, and the social histories as experienced and perceived by their narrators, on the other. They at once attempt to memorialize a past and generate social coherence in their once chaotic existence through enacting narratives containing memories and visions of the world they inhabit. Like myths told and retold by and in society, these narratives “generally refer to events alleged

to have taken place in the real historical past; but [they have] rhetorical value because [they claim] to be a valid model for the present and future” (McGuire 3). The narratives somehow assure that the experiences of their makers still matter to both the present and future generations. The established rhetorical vision that they purport seems to resolve “contradictions of some sort or address important questions which a culture is asking about itself” (ibid). Bormann is of the idea that group members caught up in a social reality “will cheer references to the heroic persona in their rhetorical vision. They will respond with antipathy to allusions to the villains. They will have agreed-upon procedures for problem-solving communication. They will share the same vision of what counts as evidence, how to build a case, and how to refute an argument” (qtd. in Foss 125-126).

Because it develops from as much as it animates lifetimes and life-worlds, the rhetorical vision constructs an identity “that runs counter to that created [against its narrators]. [The narrators] begin the process of carving out a space for themselves, where they can break down constraints imposed by other cultures and groups” (Flores 143). By weaving their narratives into a recognizable vision, “marginalized groups can combat their internalization of themselves as subordinates. Marginalized groups then find security and a sense of home within” (ibid. 146), as the act of affirming their life histories through narration builds “a sense of identity” among them. A rhetorical vision may not only aid a social group like that of *Lila Pilipina* in finding its potential for collective education, empowerment, and emancipation, but it may also cradle the comfort women’s reactions to the inharmonious dynamics of humanity. While a suspicious view of personal narratives may carry risks of capriciousness and self-indulgence, as well as reinforce tendencies to overpersonalize life histories and to deviate from material conditions (Langellier 129-130), the comfort women are careful in setting the progression of their existential crisis into a gendered sociopolitical agenda. That is, they remain critical in delineating the links between their resistance against military aggression and hegemonic empires of knowledge, on the one hand, and their call for institutional retribution and remuneration, on the other. Although recalling the suffering they experienced during the war comes with the burden of long-kept memories, and publicly exposing one’s victimhood in a habitus held captive by patriarchy, impunity, and what is perceived as collective historical amnesia may do more harm than good, these women narrators carry on in ascribing value to their oral narratives perhaps with the knowledge that it is only through this everyday tactic that they may sustain the impetus of both the rhetorical vision and the rhetorical community of which they are actively part. In their alignment with and commitment to *Lila*

Pilipina, the lolas may function “as powerful referential anchors” who do not only bring legibility to their advocacies for reparation and representation, but who also politicize their highly invested and ideologically constrained epistemological constructions to lay bare prevailing histories written and upheld against them, while also simultaneously advancing their narratives and “conjurings” (Kang 27) that may subvert those histories.

For the comfort women, the fight for justice remains unending not only because Japan’s corrective measures are yet to be witnessed, but also because the Philippine state, unlike its Taiwanese and Korean counterparts, remains compromised in its stand on militarized sexual slavery, as well as ungenerous in institutional support to Filipino nationals who claim victimization of this kind during World War II. This irresolution may be seen in relation to the Philippine state’s financial and political debt to Japanese private investors and the Japanese government, and to prevailing patriarchal ideologies and gender biases embedded within the technologies of nationalism and statehood in these parts, which suspend every reason to liberate the oppressed and to redeem those who are broadly positioned on the margins, like women, from completely falling away. As members of a rhetorical community that is Lila Pilipina, the comfort women structure their traumatic past life-worlds into a rhetorical vision that is made sensible through the characters, settings, and plotlines— all linguistic and ideological signifiers unto themselves—that are employed to constitute it. By coming up with a rhetorical vision against war and militarization, actively sustaining their rhetorical group through narratives and memories of their lives, as well as seeking alliances with the youth sector from whom they find inspiration and for whom they offer their unstinting fight for social justice, the comfort women revise notions of liberation and rehabilitation not as something handed to them without struggle by state-corporate entities, but instead as furtive aspirations situated in a protracted state of war that has to be indefatigably waged and guarded, especially when achieved. Speaking and acting as “the survivors of the original moment of violence,” the comfort women exemplify how “memories may challenge statist foreclosures and pose possibilities for critical interventions into the imagined linear progress of universal history” (Yoneyama 82). This act of “coming out in the open” leads to and is reinforced by a rhetorical vision consistently articulated and embodied not only for their own interests, but also for the present and future of the society to which they belong. In reality, dream, and memory, the comfort women, as voices and visionaries of an unfolding history, endure.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This essay is a revised version of my undergraduate thesis, "Crafting a Rhetorical Vision in the Oral Narratives of the Filipino Comfort Women," for the BA Speech Communication program at UP Diliman. I am indebted to members of Lila Pilipina, particularly all the lolas who had served as source, light, and inspiration for me to pursue this research, as well as to the organization's Executive Director, Rechilda Extremadura, who accommodatingly welcomed me into their headquarters and permitted me access to materials, ideas, and life narratives, without which this study would not be made possible. I also like to acknowledge Professor Josefina Agravante, my undergraduate thesis adviser, without whose careful supervision this study would have easily lapsed into juvenile vapidty.
- ² The original activist group handling the issues of comfort women had already split in half. This cleavage in the organization happened in the throes of controversy concerning the Asia Women's Fund (AWF) money which the Philippines received at the time. First group was Lila Pilipina and the second was Malaya Lolos. The latter's representatives, particularly Indai L. Sajor, alongside other members, rejected the fund. On the other hand, the former organization, led by Nelia Sancho and composed of comfort women like Maria Rosa Henson, chose to intermediate between the survivors and the Philippine government. Chunghee Sarah Soh writes that Lila Pilipina "has taken a pragmatic, dual approach to the AWF" and "respects the personal decisions of the survivors and has assisted them to receive the AWF money" (126).
- ³ I have translated into English all the passages quoted from the Filipino transcripts of my interviews with the comfort women. For the direct and comprehensive transcriptions of the narratives, please see "Crafting a Rhetorical Vision in the Oral Narratives of the Filipino Comfort Women," the author's unpublished undergraduate thesis.

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While pursuing his Master of Arts degree in Comparative Literature, **Oscar Tantoco Serquiña Jr.** <ojserquina@gmail.com> serves as instructor on the faculty of the Department of Speech Communication and Theatre Arts at the University of the Philippines in Diliman.