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Alternative Epistemologies in Budjette Tan and Kajo Baldisimo's *TRESE*

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ABSTRACT

Postmodern readings are premised on the dissolution of grand narratives, disallowing the imagination of unity or truth, and giving primacy to decentering as novelty. Working against such a tendency, this essay presents a reading of Budjette Tan and Kajo Baldisimo's *TRESE* as a text grounded in particular social epistemologies, which allows the text to speak of Metro Manila as a unified entity where people share realities and myths. *TRESE*, I argue here, locates the impulse for resolution in alternative systems of knowledge—often between superstition and grand narrative—that are easily available, but often too quickly dismissed as useless or outmoded.

In stories such as "Wanted: Bedspacer" and "Cadena de Amor," different ways of accessing knowledge are allowed to play vital roles in detection without totally devaluing rational analyses. These alternatives to logic and science may themselves vary: from superstitions to the properly arcane, from "common sense" to emotional and sociological understanding of human interaction. The text engages in myth-making in an effort to approximate cultural unity, where such unity has always been problematic, by imagining alternative access points to truth; this is a move that must be read in the context of a culture that is not irrational or anti-rational, but one in which rationality is only one way of accessing knowledge. *TRESE* empowers alternative systems of knowledge that allow us to better comprehend ourselves as a society.

In this essay I employ critical insights from Kumkum Sangari's "The Politics of the Possible," through which *TRESE* can be read as a text that is not simply a novelty, but as one in which popular tropes and strategies of myth-making come together to present the possibility of a vision of a Philippine urban culture that embraces both the fantastic and the real, rather than being divided between them.

Keywords: Comics, cultural identity, postcolonial, supernatural detective, trese

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Mindfully veering away from tendencies of a postmodern reading that disables the grand narratives we require to be able to imagine unity or truth, this essay presents the comic book series *TRESE*[1] as a text that is grounded in particular social epistemologies, wherein such grounding allows the text to speak of Metro Manila as a unified entity where people share realities and myths. Budjette Tan and Kajo Baldisimo's *TRESE*, I argue here, locates the impulse for resolution in systems of knowledge—often between superstition and grand narrative—that are easily available, but often too easily dismissed as useless or outmoded.

Several cases in the series can be analyzed to see how different ways of accessing knowledge are allowed to play vital roles in detection without totally devaluing rational analysis; this paper focuses on several cases published in the *Last Seen After Midnight* (2011), particularly the cases "Wanted Bedspacer" and "Cadena de Amor." Other cases[2] are discussed in passing, often for comparison.

To help establish that there is a need for analyses alternative to postmodern readings of decentering, a kind of reading easily applicable to crime and detective fiction, let me first provide a brief overview of Kumkum Sangari's essay, "The Politics of the Possible." Through Sangari's work, *TRESE* can be read as a text that depends not simply on novelty, but as one in which popular tropes and the strategies of myth-making come together to present the possibility of a vision of a Philippine urban culture that embraces both the fantastic and the real, rather than being divided between them.

BEYOND POSTMODERNISM

In "The Politics of the Possible," Kumkum Sangari differentiates between the postcolonial and postmodern ways of seeing, as each informs readings of the Third World and its literary products. Sangari presents readings of Gabriel García Márquez's "marvellous realism" and Salman Rushdie's "fabulous realism" as non-mimetic narrative modes that "inhabit a social and conceptual space in which the problems of ascertaining meaning assume a political dimension qualitatively *different* from the current postmodern scepticism about meaning in Europe and America" (216). Sangari emphasizes the need to contextualize such narratives in their sociohistorical background—to take into consideration their cultural specificity—rather than to read their differences as literary strategies of novelty and surprise, the latter being the tendency of modernist and postmodernist readings.

Despite its leading to institutional canonization, ascribing the idiosyncrasies of texts to authorial inventiveness obscures the possibility that even the most fantastic

of literary strategies are grounded in specific cultural contexts. In addition to this, Sangari discusses the historical context of the critical approach that has espoused the kind of reading that puts a prime on seeking new ways of problematizing meaning; Postmodernism, itself a historically and culturally grounded epistemology, is described a mode of access that tends to swallow other ways of ascertaining meaning due to its own roots in high modernism and its being forwarded by Western global powers.

The hybrid writer, according to Sangari, is already given access to both the local and the international culture. This is made possible by the experience of colonialism or neocolonialism. But despite this exposure to two worlds, the postmodern epistemology dominates as the proper way of reading all cultural products, including those of the hybrid, Third World writer. This is partly due to the seemingly invisible and thus universalizing cultural origin of postmodernism; postmodernism's historicity is rendered invisible by the continuance of the colonial power of Euro-America and its former colonies, which still exists culturally, if not politically. It was through modernism that the West undertook cultural self-definition at a time when it was gradually losing its territories through decolonization; it internalized fragments of the cultures of these colonies that were breaking free. These cultural fragments are seen as signs of the other, against which the West could define itself. Thus art forms produced under modernism, claiming to be new and international, were often in themselves hybrid forms through which Third World artists and writers could re-absorb their own "indigenous" traditions, integrated into modernism as modes that denoted otherness, as non-linearity, as inarticulateness or irrationality. With postmodernism, informed as it is by the modernist crisis of meaning, comes scepticism against all grand narratives; this is a scepticism which is itself a product of cultural formations of the West, but is rather constructed as—ironically—the crisis of all the world. Because postmodernism is seen as, and propagates itself as, a universal epistemology, this scepticism is carried everywhere as the—the best, the correct, the only—epistemological frame through which cultural products of the rest of the world are to be understood.

The problem with postmodernism's denial of grand narratives and of the capability to express truth is that it disallows cultural self-definition for those who desire to form national discourses; postmodernism, Sangari points out, tends to disempower "the 'nation' as an enabling idea and relocates the impulses for change as everywhere and nowhere" (242). This universal everywhere and nowhere, which purports to represent everyone and no one, denies the cultural specificity required for a country to see itself in its cultural products or to claim cultural forms as its own.

It is important, then, to remember that postmodernism is only one way of seeing, a way which is grounded in the traditions and techniques the West has raided from its colonies. Sangari thus warns against the naiveté of reading all non-linear forms, such as marvellous realism, as a sign of postmodernism:

> To believe that a critique of the centered subject and of representation is equal to a critique of colonialism and its accoutrements is in fact to disregard the different historical formation of subjects and ways of seeing that have actually [been] obtained from colonization; and this often leads to a naive identification of all nonlinear forms with those of the decentered postmodern subject. (243)

Such decentering, she reminds us, returns to the binarism between self and other, and continues to relegate the Third World to the periphery, where it must remain in order to remain subversive. It is as though Third World cultural production exists only in relation to the West, the center. Sangari reminds us that the scepticism of postmodernism is not everyone's crisis, not even in the West, and that "there are different modes of de-essentialization which are socially and politically grounded and mediated by separate perspectives, goal, and strategies in other countries" (243). Third World writers do not necessarily imagine their cultures as *Other* when they use non-linear time or when they construct fantastic imagery. And while the strategies that surface may indeed be influenced by Western forms, we must not dismiss the possibility that they are grounded in local culture and systems of knowing; likewise, we should not so quickly dismiss their tendencies to aspire for unities and truths that, postmodernism informs us, are no longer possible to attain.

POISONS UNKNOWN TO SCIENCE

If writers of today were required to take the oath that members of The Detection Club of London took in the 1920s—the Golden Age of detective fiction in England—then Alexandra Trese could in no way claim to be a proper detective:

> Do you solemnly swear never to conceal a vital clue from the Reader? Do you promise to observe a seemly moderation in the use of Gangs, Conspiracies, Death Rays, Ghosts, Hypnotism, Trap-doors, Chinamen … and utterly and forever to forswear Mysterious Poisons Unknown to Science? (qtd. in Holquist 88)

Between the concealment of clues, or truths, and the use of at least half the devices listed above, it is only too obvious that *TRESE* has broken with the generic rules of

classic detective fiction, which, like modern rationalism, operates through a celebration of the power of reason and a faith in the capability of man's genius to dispel mystery.

The presence of the supernatural in a detective narrative makes such positivist ideological grounding problematic. It threatens not only the comprehensibility of the causalities the narrative proposes but also the realism behind which the positivist narrative conceals its fictional nature. The representation of truth as knowable, and the world as absolutely comprehensible, necessitates that the reader be allowed to comprehend all aspects of the puzzle or crime—that is, that no part is, in the end, left mysterious. The very presence of unknown forces makes questionable the positivism that allows the detective to resolve problems by dissolving mystery, but does it ultimately overthrow the need for scientific inquiry?

One grand narrative that *TRESE* subscribes to is the existence of knowable truth. This basic assumption that there is truth to discover, by whatever means available, later leads to other concepts deemed untenable under the lens of postmodernism: community, of nation and nationalism, or the determination between Good and Evil. These grand narratives are complicated by the specificities drawn from reality in the Metro, including the difficulty—but not impossibility!—of discovering the truth behind mysterious crimes. Trese, of course, brings in the supernatural into the act of detection, but while the fantastic appears to present opposition to realistic or practical methods of detection, Trese is not dismissive of these other methods. Indeed, on the literary level, detective fiction and the fantastic—though appearing initially contradictory—make an uneasy peace, if only because this combination appears to be the best way to access knowledge in *TRESE*'s Metro Manila, which is defined by shared social spaces and described by the simultaneity of practices and discourses that are more often construed as mutually exclusive.

This clash between scientific inquiry and mystification is best illustrated, in *TRESE*, in "Wanted Bedspacer" (*Last Seen After Midnight* 49-50) where the mystery revolves around a student's dorm wherein students, in a startlingly short amount of time, had either committed suicide or entered the medical state of comatose. About a third of the pages of this particular chapter are dedicated to Trese's conversation with a doctor about the cause of the students' condition. She coolly explains, after taking into consideration the clues available at the moment, that they have been victimized by a *bangungot*.[3] It is not surprising that the doctor dismisses her postulation as impossible and a complete waste of time. It is not until she proves her theory correct by finding the source of the bangungot's tears, which had apparently contaminated the building's water supply, and by resuscitating all his patients through

a kind of mass exorcism, that he finally gives her the benefit of the doubt. His growing belief, nonetheless, manifests through a series of questions: If the bangungot feeds on heartache, then how does it affect all other people who seemed to have happy relationships? Does it ever let go? Trese answers these questions obligingly. It is when Trese is asked about the source of her knowledge that she ends the conversation with a curt "Good night, Dr. Tuason" (72).

Of particular interest in this case is that Trese divulges out of her own volition, and to a non-believer at that, the nature of the bangungot. It must be noted that the doctor himself already has an idea of the bangungot's existence, even if it is only as popular "medical myth"; to his mind such myths are synonymous with falsity. If anything, his being quick to defend against such nonsense, his incredulity, do not equate to a total rejection of the bangungot's existence, except he assigns it exclusively to the realm of scary stories told to children and rejects it as a medical diagnosis (see Figure 1). It is part of the cultural reserve of narratives to explain phenomena such as sleep paralysis and sudden death, which the doctor is aware of, but which he unsurprisingly rejects as irrational and unscientific.

Figure 1. Alexandra Trese discusses the Batibat with Dr. Tuason; Tan and Baldisimo. "Wanted: Bedspacer." *Trese: Last Seen After Midnight.* Pasay, Philippines: Visprint, Inc. 2011. 56.

Trese not only corrects his taxonomical confusion between the *batibat* and the bangungot, she continues to converse with him without returning his dismissive attitude. She does not debate his theory of pancreatitis, instead she resorts to anecdotes from experience by telling Dr. Tuason of how his granduncle was found dead by his grandfather, exhibiting with the same symptoms as death by bangungot. It is due to this prior experience that Dr. Tuason's grandfather, a friend of Trese's grandfather, referred him to Alexandra Trese upon hearing about the case. Trese attempts to convince him through a narrative of lived experience, one that he should also be familiar with if only because it occurred within his own family.

Reluctant still, or perhaps hoping to prove Trese's diagnosis wrong, Dr. Tuason challenges her to explain how so many people remained catatonic even after the bangungot had dissipated. In the end, neither medical nor supernatural diagnosis is useful unless they lead to a cure. Trese's theory is only finally proven right when all the victims had been restored to their proper conditions.

What is worth emphasizing in Trese's debate against the doctor is that Trese treats myth as a legitimate system of knowledge without rejecting the supposedly opposing system which the doctor represents. It is a viable alternative which everyone has access to but which likewise requires a good deal of learning on the part of the detective/healer, because it also depends on a determination of specificity: the detective must consider the details of this particular case, this particular ghoul and its behavior, these particular victims and their routines and concerns, this particular building and how it unites everyone who makes use of it. Like any detective, Trese must be attentive to detail, but unlike the scientific positivist, she cannot reject the impossible.

Such a way of knowing is less liable to dismiss variation: Trese herself cannot let pass the lack of differentiation between two creatures. Also, having multiple living victims, while contrary to Trese's description of the bangungot crying itself to dissipation after the death of a lone host, does not lead her to dismiss the bangungot as culprit. As such creatures are not excluded from being affected by the natural world, their effects are likewise altered by context and environment. The bangungot's interaction with the world is as material as any "scientifically known" poison, and so the effects of such interaction are just as likely to vary over time and depending on the circumstances.

As in Sangari's analysis of Márquez, the appearances of supernatural in *TRESE,* despite their being mythical in nature, are largely grounded on a social and performative

aspect. Its meaning can only be appreciated at the singular instance in which it occurs, in the particular social context in which it occurs, as opposed to an archetypal narrative that can happen anywhere or at any time. The *bangungot* is not an archetype that has materialized; it is a member of a species whose singular action has a singular consequence.

This does not seem so difficult to imagine, until we consider the fact that this epidemic happens in an urban setting, where rationalism is not only set as the ideal, but where repetition and routine desensitize people rather than giving them a "historical sense" of things. We must not thoroughly discredit the rationalism represented by Dr. Tuason; instead, it must be seen as an aspect that is produced by and an important part of modern, urban life. Urban life is expected to be intellectual and impersonal. According to Georg Simmel, in his essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," those who live in big cities tend to develop a blasé attitude due to the complexity and immensity of city life. This blasé attitude is described by Simmel as "indifference toward the distinction between things.

> Not in the sense that they are not perceived, as in the case of mental dullness, but rather that the meaning and the value of the distinctions between things, and therewith of the things themselves, are experienced as meaningless. They appear to the blasé person in a homogeneous, flat and gray colour with no one of them worthy of being preferred to another. (14)

Dr. Tuason loses touch with meaning—the truth behind the crime—not because he is incompetent, but because his rationalism does not give him access to the meaning behind the symptoms of the epidemic. He perceives the symptoms, and tests them accordingly, but cannot see in them what Trese can: the heartbreak, the passion, and the sorrow that are shared by students who share the supposedly impersonal arrangement of the dorm building—who are strangers.

While science excludes the supernatural, the supernatural does not exclude science: While the poison is itself "unknown to science," the contamination which has taken place is itself scientifically plausible, similar as it is to radioactive or other kinds of poisoning which affect victims differently according to the degree of exposure (see Figure 2). This alternative way of knowing is nowhere near as absolute as science purports to be, owing to the very infinity of possibilities that describes the unknown. But it does have its sources. The nature of Trese's knowledge is itself incomprehensible: plot-wise, we may assume she attained it during her exodus up in the balete tree, where she earned her right to be a *babaylang mandirigma* (*Mass*

Murders)—Warrior Priestess, fighter and defender, healer and wise-woman. While the nature of her knowledge is beyond human science, its source is human imagination. Such knowledge manifests reflexively as myth, as shared cultural belief.

Figure 2. Trese explains the Bangungot-caused contagion; in Tan and Baldisimo. "Wanted: Bedspacer." *Trese: Last Seen After Midnight*. Pasay, Philippines: Visprint, Inc. 2011. 69.

The contagion of heartbreak and depression infecting the youth is a theme so general it needs little discussion, but interestingly enough it is accompanied by the notion that one person's heartache can be felt by an entire community and—considering what has been said—that it is through myth that such shared wounds are healed.

What I am suggesting, and here we return to Sangari, is that the story does not simply mystify the medical state of comatose or the emotional devastation of heartbreak: its style relies on existing ways of understanding. As Sangari points out for marvellous realism, the "performative aspect [...] lies outside the text in already existing ways of seeing and relies not on the shock of novelty but on shared

structures of knowledge and belief" (223). Neither the concept of bangungot nor the concept of heartbreak is unfamiliar to the Filipino reader—a reader like Dr. Tuason, for example. While we understand the way that contaminated water may eventually affect an entire community, the explanation for death by heartbreak eludes us, inspiring us to find the explanation elsewhere. The cultural function of the bangungot, which is to explain unexplainable death—particularly one that follows a nightmarish paralysis—is thus easily extended to the nightmare of being left alone and unloved. While there is novelty (in the revival of forgotten difference, perhaps) in the conception of the bangungot as different from the batibat, both are drawn from the shared belief in the paralyzing effects of nightmares, and loneliness is a veritable nightmare for many.

Beneath this narrative—as well as "Cadena de Amor," as we shall see later—is the notion that relatedness and interdependence continue to describe Philippine society. Even in urban Metro Manila, where a person is only one of millions, relationships are still felt at the level of the personal. This is a society that is not quite desensitized to intimacy. There is an interconnectedness wherein myth, substituting the human passions underestimated by rationalism, at once coexists with and mirrors the function the building's water supply—aptly the lifeblood of society—from which everyone draws and, sometimes unwittingly, contributes.

While the term "mystification" is problematic in the sense that it disguises, and thus conceals, the truths it supposedly reveals, myth-making—or mythopoeia—presents a larger purpose than simply deflecting causality. Joseph Campbell, in discussing the functions of Myth, ritual, and cult practices in society, describes how such symbolism or practices allow people to see themselves as part of the greater unity that is society, or society seeing itself as part of the larger cosmos:

> The whole society becomes visible to itself as an imperishable living unit. Generations of individuals pass, like anonymous cells from a living body; but the sustaining, timeless form remains. By an enlargement of vision to embrace this superindividual each discovers himself enhanced, enriched, supported and magnified. (355)

When *TRESE* engages in myth-making—a move that must be read in the context of a culture that is not irrational or anti-rational, but one in which rationality is only one way of accessing knowledge—it is in an effort to approximate cultural unity where such unity has always been problematic.

THE UNDERWORLD AND LIFE ON THE SURFACE

What kind of unity, then, is imagined to exist in *TRESE's* Metro Manila? In order to approximate those unities we must pay attention to the separations or oppositions that exist within the text. The first of these separations is that between the world and the underworld, the "natural" and the "supernatural."

One sign of the separation between the world and the underworld is the supposed secrecy of the latter. In her study of *Murder on Balete Drive*, where she provides a reading of *TRESE* as decentered text, Valero discusses the separation as necessary and "natural":

> It is natural for the underworld to be hidden, to be "under" the "world", as it were, and it would be useless, maybe even unwise, to try and make it otherwise. In her conversation with Senor Armanaz, Trese brings to our attention that the act of keeping the underworld a secret is actually a law when she mentions that Maliksi, though she didn't know his name at the time, "might have broken the pact and now runs with normal folk". This "pact", though its details aren't disclosed, is enough to tell us that Trese isn't simply keeping the underworld secret because she feels like it.

While a certain degree of secrecy is given, there is certainly no lack of humans who are knowledgeable about the workings of the underworld. Its existence is never understood in full—arguably, nothing is—but its powers are nonetheless accessed by many human beings: there is Ms. De la Rosa, who trapped the White Lady[4] (*Murder on Balete Drive*); Raul Lazaro, who used a *buhay na bato* [literally, living rock] to bring the dead back to life and white paint to direct them to the police outpost (*Unreported Murders*); and General Lanares, who summoned the Datu of war Talagbusao (*Mass Murders*), among others. This is not considering those approached by the supernatural entities themselves, like Heather Evangelista and Nova Aurora, the familiars of the duwende[5] (*Unreported Murders*), or all the residents of Livewell Village in Makati, who made a pact of human sacrifice with Bagyon Kulimlim (*Unreported Murders*).[6]

Increasingly telling is the story "A Private Collection" (*Last Seen After Midnight* 25-48), where the hunter-collector Jay Gerson, "a man who rebelled against life's routines" (48), decides to hunt supernatural creatures and store them as trophies in a private museum in Forbes. His collection is extensive, and one wonders how he so easily came upon the idea of hunting such creatures if they are as secretive, or secret, as they are supposed to be.

Is the underworld, after all, an open secret? We are no strangers to open secrets; much knowledge circulates in the form of rumor after all. We need only think of the *trapo*,[7] the kickback,[8] and multiple advantages of knowing someone "on the inside" in a bureaucratic system. Valero is not entirely incorrect in her observation: the text, if only at surface level, supports her. Trese herself reminds the owner of Robertson Mall, father of the lizard boy Jeremy,[9] about the prohibition: "anytime the underworld interferes with the lives of people topside, I go where I need to go" (*Unreported Murders* 54). Conflict between rule and practice is itself descriptive of political realities in Metro Manila. Valero explains that the problem is that we are not informed of the rules, of where the lines are drawn. Perhaps this is because interaction has always existed without respect for such rules anyway; throughout the series, humans and supernatural beings alike seek each other out so readily, and not always with crime in mind. To me this suggests an interdependence that is not always forbidden, or undesirable.

It may be a conscious decision of the author to make the underworld more public, but even if it isn't, there is nonetheless an apparent increasing willingness in Trese herself to expose the workings of the underworld. Trese herself goes to great lengths to explain—to an unbelieving doctor, no less—the nature of the *bangungot*, and herself exposes the reality of the "The Fight of the Year" (*Last Seen After Midnight* 73-96) to the boxer Noni. This growing openness by no means demystifies nor delimits the workings of the underworld, but it does open to discussion the relationship between humans and the supernatural in terms of how they share the world, rather than how it is divided between them.

In light of the current project, which is to recuperate the texts based on the unities it enables, I propose that the underworld and Metro Manila instead be seen as a unified, shared world. The term "underworld" could be understood as referring to cultures sometimes concealed but never really totally separated from surface life. While the *TRESE* universe has its literal underworld—and over-world, the Nexus realm—that underworld often simultaneously manifests as supernatural underworld and criminal underworld. The *aswang* and the *manananggal*[10] have their "illegal substances" syndicates and kidnapping rings which have legitimate fronts—the aswang are butchers, for example; but they also have legitimate territories that neither Trese nor fatalism has the right to take away from them. This is clear in "A Private Collection," where Trese visits the aswang tribe under suspicious, but not criminalizing, circumstances. Not even the aswang or manananggal is necessarily evil, and they too have a right not to be killed.

The trope of human intrusion into the supernatural realm—whose primary outlet is nature, ecosystem—is present in the very concept of the *nuno sa punso*,[11] a recurring

character who, appropriately enough, makes his Book 4 appearance in the tale of Gerson. His first appearance is in the very first story of the series "At the Intersection of Balete and 13th Street" (*Murder on Balete Drive* 1-22), denoting both his address and that of the White Lady. This story, like "A Private Collection" is a tale of human interference in the underworld's ecosystem—as Valero suggests:

> […] it can then be said that Ms. De La Rosa's crime is not of murder, per se, but of creating a serious disorder of the underworld's balance. This prompts the underworld to take matters into its own "hands" and restore its own concept, and indeed, Nature's concept of order, one that isn't necessarily the concept that Balete Drive needs a White Lady, but that the dead shouldn't actually be "killed."

While it is easy to import the same conclusion to "A Private Collection," what I aim to emphasize is that the underworld's "order" is located on and intertwined with Manila's ecosystem—the order of nature includes humanity and the societies formed by it.

But what punishment can be dealt on these supernatural entities, when they are guilty of intrusion? The imbalance of power is in itself an unresolved reality. There are socioeconomic and political powers, like Sytan, Bagyon Lektro, or even Senor Armanaz of the Tikbalang tribe,[12] over whom Trese has little hold. It is difficult to answer the question of retribution in terms of such powers, but the political imbalance is describes is itself a function of "normal" human life. It brings to light a question that has surely been asked in the Philippines: How do you punish the drug lord or the gambling lord, if they also the ones who hold economic and legal power in society? This is best seen in the story of "The Association Dues of Livewell Village" (*Unreported Murders* 67-88), in which a tribesman of a Typhoon lord, Bagyon Kulimlim, arguably a typhoon lord in his own right, is both the typhoon that destroys and takes lives as well as the godlike entity that grants his chosen people the benefit of near perfect lives. As an elemental, his power is legitimate; it is as legitimate as Bagyon Lektro's co-ownership of Maharlika energy corp., which holds a monopoly over Metro Manila's power supply. Kulimlim's offer of a good life in exchange for human sacrifice, however, is an "underground" deal—it is as forbidden as it is commonplace—but he is at a seemingly untouchable position, so that when Trese does deal with him, her doing so turns the Lightning clan against her in a larger conflict later on. The political implications of her decision to eliminate the problem produce a whiplash that a weaker agent would not withstand. Imagine a wage-worker, reduced to serf-like status, facing an equivalent crime lord or landlord.

Nonetheless, that territories are shared between imbalanced powers does not contradict the notion that they are shared. It is the kind of unification that circumscribes even conflict: Spanish conquistadors and colonizers share in Philippine history just as they lived on Philippine soil; though foreign, they were undeniably part of Philippine life for at least three hundred years, living and interacting with the natives, impacting local culture and also changing because of where they were. Power is by no means balanced in this relationship, and life by no means fair. The relations between humans and the supernatural powers that appear in *TRESE* are as problematic as the relations between colonizer and colonized, or between the ancient Greeks and the Gods of antiquity. But it is in this linkage to the local that *TRESE* is able to problematize such relationships, even when it cannot produce answers for the social dilemmas it comes to reveal.

TRESE exposes Metro Manila as a shared world: it is shared not only by human inhabitants, but also by the paranormal beings that have, for so long, already been part of Philippine culture. It is not just typical, everyday, mainstream Metro Manila, but also Metro Manila of the marginalized, its street corners and crannies, its unwanted citizens and its dead. Although Alexandra Trese is a highly specialized detective investigating "weird" crimes, the underlying crises of those crimes are so widespread that they *pour over* one way or another: from the human world to the supernatural, or vice versa, and from private to public spaces. If we are to go by the idea that there is an amalgam rather than a simple division, simultaneity instead of opposition, within *TRESE's* world, then these social crises can be seen as affecting everyone—human, deity, and demon alike—albeit affecting them in different ways. Geographic location and cultural "locality" become the common denominator for their engagement and partisanship in society, rather than a differentiation of species.

While *TRESE* mystifies the "actual" causes of crimes, its mythologizing of greater social dilemmas that haunt Metro Manila brings to fore more important questions. It is through these mythic, strategic generalizations that we come to review what the problems—the real demons—of society are or have become. It is through such mythologizing that even the most specific and most personal dilemmas become the city's concern and the concern of all of us who live in it.

To return to Campbell's description of the function of myth, it is by making visible the creatures of myth, by giving them their place in society and insisting on their active social participation, that *TRESE* renders visible to Philippine society (or at least the part of it represented by Metro Manila) its features in "magnified" terms. Between the familiar streets and the familiar mythological inhabitants, the text allows the reader to identify the geographical and cultural representations all at

once. To live on Balete Drive is to live with the White Lady, to be part of the same society as the White Lady, which is also the society that believes in—or at least knows about the fiction that is—the White Lady.

TRESE establishes a social unity—a community—bound together by its living myths. It recreates culture as unity defined by a sense of shared space and shared experience. And, as some of these myths are often older than Metro Manila itself while others are created in the text through appropriations from contemporary culture, they also come to represent continuity between past "Philippine" civilizations to the society at present.

CAUSAL CHAINS

It may be that mythopoeia is simplistically defined as "the appropriation and reworking of mythical material, or the creation of a kind of 'private' myth" (Cuddon 527), but myth itself is a description of the social—of how society works or comes to be called a society. As such it allows the imagining of that society as singular or as unified under the rubric of a shared materiality. The very inexplicability of the supernatural rubs off on the social realities which they attempt to explain—such as the state of criminal investigation in the country. "Cadena de Amor" (*Last Seen After Midnight* 1-24*)* speaks of this specific plight.

In "Cadena de Amor," Luneta Park is at once private and public place. It is a cultural site where many national gatherings take place, but it is also the home of woodland creatures, most of whom have been shipped there at a landscaper's whim, displaced from their mother soil. It is Florabelle's place of employment as a gardener and also a personal garden where she raises her little family and where the plants identify her as their intimate. When Florabelle is forcibly uprooted from this garden, this home, Supling—a newly transplanted *cadena de amor* sapling—goes on a rampage, first within the park and then as far, and as public, as the United Nations Avenue LRT station. This becomes the smoke signal, making known to Trese and the police that a crime has been committed among human beings.

What must be emphasized here is that the crime itself is purely human, even though the entire investigation is conducted in tandem with the supernatural—from the witness testimonies of the other wood sprites, to the search for the body by the "seer" Mang Art, to its recovery by the *syrena*,[13] to the autopsy via *pagtatawas*.[14] Florabelle, we learn from her wax incarnation during the ritual autopsy, had been abducted by human traffickers. Because she refused to sit quietly as she was being

shipped off to the Middle East for slave labor, she ended up in a metal drum at the bottom of the bay. The crime is fully possible without supernatural intervention. Unfortunately, neither the investigation nor the punishment for it could have been possible otherwise. Without supernatural intervention, the discovery of Florabelle's fate would probably be delayed for years, if not forever, given the victim's relative anonymity and the method in which her corpse was disposed.

While the supernatural elements in *TRESE* should not be reduced to plot device, the classic notion that the supernatural speeds up plot—e.g., deus ex machina—is particularly significant to this narrative. This becomes apparent when we analyze the methods and characters Trese employs: clairvoyance and aid from elementals, including the initially offending Supling. Clairvoyance—seeing clearly what is unseen—is first represented by Mang Art, a mall caricaturist who "sees" and draws Florabelle and her location based on a picture of her, and then by the act of pagtatawas, which becomes a ritual summoning instead of a diagnosis, and in which the victim is herself conjured from wax to give testimony as part of her autopsy.

To use clairvoyance in detection is easily a narrative shortcut, but the centrality of the elemental creatures may be further read into. Even Santelmo[15]—a fire elemental and oracular creature summoned through text messaging—makes a quick appearance in the episode; and although his function in the narrative is rather arbitrary, it contributes to the preponderance of elemental powers present in the story. The elementals stand for revelation, recovery, and retribution: Supling reveals the existence of the crime, other wood sprites give testimony (see Figure 3), the syrena aid in recovering the body, and Supling once again embodies the possibility, or even inevitability, of punishing the evildoer.

In "Cadena de Amor," Trese not only discovers the truth in the fraction of the time it would take for an actual police investigation, she effectively links up nature and the human realm—allowing the former to find the true culprits and therefore to direct its wrath only to those guilty rather than lashing out at society like the Sphinx upon Thebes. As in classical mythology, nature is in sync with human morality: unpunished crimes bring on plagues and monsters as the ecosystem attempts to right itself and restore balance. Florabelle—as her name and occupation suggests—is in sync with nature, and her removal from the natural order of Luneta Park destabilizes the entire social system. It is a break in the chain: cadena de amor, the flowering vine *antigonon leptopus*, literally translates to "chain of love" and here denotes the linkage, illustrated as the holding of hands (see Figure 4), between Florabelle and her leafy foster children. Like the heartbroken student in "Wanted Bedspacer," Florabelle's fate cascades through society even while that society

remains ignorant of her fate. Nature continues to take its cues from human action, even while most humans have lost intimate knowledge of Nature's will or its needs. Nature continues to consider humans part of its great chain of being—as the wood sprites consider Florabelle their mother figure—even though humans consider themselves above it.

Figure 3. Trese questions the resident spirits of Luneta Park, including the sapling-children; in Tan and Baldisimo. "Cadena de Amor." *Trese: Last Seen After Midnight*. Pasay, Philippines: Visprint, Inc. 2011.

Figure 4. The shape-shifter Wari pretends to be Florabelle in the attempt to calm Supling down: she sings the lyrics of the song "Ang Huling El Bimbo" which translates roughly, panel by panel to "we held hands | and without | being aware of it | you taught my heart how to love truly" [translation mine]; in Tan and Baldisimo. "Cadena de Amor." *Trese: Last Seen After Midnight*. Pasay, Philippines: Visprint, Inc. 2011. 20.

Thus, when the traffickers kidnap Florabelle it is a though they have illegally uprooted one of the trees in the park; when they dispose of Florabelle, their chosen method replicates the way in which the oceans are polluted by human refuse. It is no surprise that the occupants of the park retaliate for their loss, or that the occupants of the ocean easily retrieve what has been tossed into their domain. The difference between *TRESE* and reality is that nature's retribution is relatively slow to manifest: *super*natural, mythic Nature, however, is able to produce results within the human timeline of an efficient criminal investigation.

This combination of clairvoyance and Nature's intervention is Trese's alternative to a normal police investigation. It brings us back to the idea that truth is knowable and that there is always hope for justice. Paradoxically, this is how "Cadena de Amor" highlights the problem of finding truth, the difficulty of arriving at fact and even more so the elusiveness of justice. That the entire investigation is displaced into the supernatural realm emphasizes the inability of human society to take care of its members. But instead of demonstrating the acquisition of truth as impossible, the supernatural here actually becomes a materialization of the possibility—the fantasy!—of obtaining truth. Where a postmodern reading would more likely suggest the impossibility of ascertaining truth, the narrative still rests on the assumption that there is truth to be found, only it cannot be accessed by the normal means.

LINKS WITH AND JUSTICE FOR THE DEAD

In addition to this concern, the narrative presents other societal fears relating to the lack of knowledge and communication: it touches upon the notion of uprooting not only as disconnection to the ecosystem but also the difficulties of displacement and separation between a mother and her children. The song "Huling El Bimbo," which Florabelle would sing to her wards, echoes the themes of intimacy and—although the final verses of the Eraserhead's cult hit are not included in the text—of loss. Like Florabelle, the beloved in "Huling El Bimbo" is reduced to an anonymous fate: she becomes a struggling single mother, washing dishes for a living, and dies from a hit-and-run along an unnamed alley one random night. Like Florabelle, her disappearance matters greatly to one who loves her—such as the persona singing the song and surely to the child she has left behind, mentioned only in passing in the lyrics—but her death is unlikely to make it to the evening news.

Like the titular plant cadena de amor, the song "Ang Huling El Bimbo," passed on from human to plant, both speaks of and becomes the bond between Florabelle and her adoptive children. This communion, signified by the holding of hands and sharing

of songs, is lost when the mother figure disappears: the child wants to know where she is, and why she has gone. This relationship echoes the plight of the overseas Filipino worker (OFW) in several ways: there is the inability of families to keep in touch with each other, usually when a parent has to work abroad; there is the inability to really know what it happening to the OFW while she is away from home. And this is only where the horrors begin.

Florabelle's senseless death—she was kidnapped to be "sold" in the Middle East, but is instead killed by her captors—echoes the plight of the OFW, whose compelling reality has led to the formation of the equally compelling stereotype of the Filipina mother, who suffers being parted from her children for the sake of financial gain. The ship itself—ironically also the type of vehicle that has taken away many seamen-fathers—and the destination are telling: the *Eden Star* promises to lead the way to paradise, and the Middle East one of the most popular destinations for overseas employment. Florabelle's refusal is easily imaginable in terms of plot: she was kidnapped after all. But in following the allegory, the myth of the OFW, Florabelle already becomes the victim of the oppressive fate that awaits many OFWs, even those who go willingly. The threat of sexual harassment hangs heavily all over the story: the spirit of Florabelle claims: "some men took me to the captain's room, and I fought back" (*Last Seen* 23); the captain's cabin, shown in the last panel of the story, is a place where pornography is both displayed and enjoyed (*Last Seen* 24; see Figure 5); alternately, the story begins with a scene of a rape attempt (*Last Seen* 3-4). Then there are the battery, the imprisonment, the inhumane disposal. Such a fate is often realized in secrecy, and being hidden cannot be addressed until the woman finally finds a way to escape her captors, or gets her story out in some roundabout way: letters dropped out of a window, a sneak text message to a family member back home. Or, in the world of *TRESE*, she could be summoned through pagtatawas.

While not all OFWs suffer this fate, the fear for their safety as well the insecurity of their being elsewhere make their fates a national concern. Florabelle's namesake is, after all Flor Contemplacion, a Filipina sentenced to death and executed in Singapore in 1995. Even though the circumstances behind the latter's death[16] differ greatly from the narrative here, the connection nonetheless emphasizes the relevance of the fictive crime as a national situation wherein the justice system is portrayed as fatally flawed. In Contemplacion's case, even with due trial—it has been questioned whether it was fair—many doubts remain as to whether she truly committed the double murder Singaporean government executed her for. If anything, the parallelism toes the boundaries between local and international politics, tricky

territory for a series as locally grounded as *TRESE*.[17] This is perhaps why Trese does not capture the criminals herself, but leaves a sapling aboard the *Eden Star* to avenge Florabelle (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. The captain's cabin aboard the Eden Star; in Tan and Baldisimo. "Cadena de Amor." *Trese: Last Seen After Midnight*. Pasay, Philippines: Visprint, Inc. 2011. 24.

The unknown death of Florabelle is equivalent to many other deaths and disappearances, the reasons for which can only be guessed at, improvised, opened to limitless possibilities. That the investigation itself is a project in improvisation—supernatural detective work—in the place of an investigation in terms of human law, illustrates the breakdown of the latter in keeping families together, their "natural" state.

The central problem of the plot—Supling's rampage—actually emphasizes what may seem to be a peripheral concern: effects of such crimes on the locals, on those left behind, is perhaps as vital as what happens on the other side. In a 2103 news article revisiting the execution of Flor Contemplacion, Associate Prof. Alan Chong of Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies points out that "[u]ntil that point, Singapore did not fully understand the issue of human development in the Philippines. We were not ready for the emotions of the Filipinos over the execution" (qtd. in Tupas). The diplomatic backlash between Singapore and the Philippines over Flor's execution cannot be reduced to misgivings that there was a mistrial; rather, it has to do with how OFWs are locally perceived—sometimes a priori—as heroes or as displaced family members whose loved ones constantly

await their homecoming. We witness this in Supling's rampage, when he takes on Florabelle's form and asks, "Where am I?" Although Trese finally interprets this as Supling's way of asking where Florabelle is, the Kambal's initial misinterpretation is also accurate: Supling, too, is lost without Florabelle.

The nature of Supling's rampage and the shrouded nature of Florabelle's death both speak of specific social conditions. As in marvellous realism, the "casting up of the strange, the incongruous, the peripheral" may result in the novelty of the story, but it is nonetheless incorporated into the narrative due to its "immersion in the social matrix wherein improvisation is not merely a formal literary reflex but a function of the living world" (Sangari 219). The difficulty in ascertaining truth then is not proof that truth does not exist; rather it speaks of the difficulty of finding truth, and after truth, justice.

A similar case in *Unreported Murders*, the case of "The Outpost on Kalayaan Street" (23-44) provides a parallel illustration of the concepts presented in "Cadena de Amor." While zombies are not particularly Filipino, the squatters living in the cemetery is a social reality which the author does not "improvise" or bring in simply as plot device. The zombies could have been summoned—i.e., the corpses reanimated—without the informal settlers' presence. With the settlers present, however, there are more living beings to zombify, enough for Trese to demand instant evacuation at the sight of the buhay na bato. The evacuation itself is telling: evacuating a graveyard of its residents is not the same as asking visitors to leave. Evacuation threatens informal residents' sense of territory, of home, so that many refuse to leave for fear their makeshift houses will be demolished.

The South Cemetery is a residence for the dead and the living, where life and death intermingle on a daily basis. "They are the ones who live among the dead. Make a living by taking care of the dead. And some find themselves joining the dead too soon" (*Unreported* 26). The exposure of these settlers to death, their zombification, is not all supernatural. Poverty is a state between life and death, a state of being only half-alive: a daily intermingling of survival and yielding to hardship, a bodily resemblance to the corpse, a hunger for sustenance, and, in this specific instance, a home amongst the tombs.

The buhay na bato, a living stone, is itself appropriate to the metaphor. The graveyard itself is occupied by the stones marked and given significance by the living, stones that also represent the living and the amount of space living bodies take up. The significance Raul Lazaro gives his younger brother manifests in the use of that stone, which acts as a malevolent rune capable of raising the dead. As in "Cadena de

Amor" the plight of the dead, especially where death is unjustified, remains with the living, plaguing and haunting those who seek justice and those who deny it. To bring light to such injustice, those who hold dear the dead and disappeared resort to public clamor, to acts of desperation. Similar to Supling's rampage, Raul Lazaro directs the zombies to the outpost, beyond the boundaries of grave and of graveyard in order to make known his plight and to accomplish his revenge.

In the ending of "Cadena de Amor," Trese leaves a plant aboard the *Eden Star*, a potted cadena de amor that will likely take its revenge on the human traffickers. In the end of "The Outpost" she requests that Sgt. Revilla's badge be revoked, otherwise "the underworld will make sure it finishes what Lazaro wasn't able to do." This strange statement—which suggests that the underworld will take on Lazaro's side by finishing his endeavor—leads Capt. Guerrero, Trese's police contact and ally, to muse: "Sometimes I wish your dad had a rule book about how this whole underworld works." To this Trese replies, "It's quite simple, really. All those lessons about showing respect and helping others still apply. The consequences of disobeying those rules are just a little more dire. The underworld is not as forgiving as others" (*Unreported* 44).

While the underworld seems to have its own rules, the values behind those rules are achingly familiar. Substituting classic retribution and poetic justice where the system of human law and punishment malfunctions, the mythological realm in *TRESE* reveals that it not only coexists with the human world, but is an interactive part of it.

Despite the generalizing tendency of mythology, the way in which *TRESE* employs it is culturally grounded in specific spaces and practices, so that it blows to societal proportions what begins as or appears to be a personal problem, thus allowing us a view of our society as living unit that continues to survive as a society despite the vagaries of a history that affects us to this day. When the text engages in myth-making it is in an effort imagine modes of accessing the truth that is presumed to exist, but is concealed and inaccessible to dominant modes. It is a move that must be read in the context of a culture that is not irrational or anti-rational, but one in which rationality is only one way of accessing knowledge, and arguably not even the most popular approach. *TRESE* is not a story about cultural relativism or absolute tolerance; rather, it empowers the mythical and the superstitious as alternative systems of knowledge that allow us to better comprehend ourselves as a society.

ENDNOTES

[1] The series title is typed entirely in upper case to avoid confusion with the titular character, Alexandra Trese, who is also better known by her family name. I will also be referring to the different books by their subtitles: *Murder on Balete Drive, Unreported Murders, Mass Murders,* and *Last Seen After Midnight*.

[2] This paper is part of a series of essays on *TRESE*, thus "Private Collection" is only discussed in passing and "Fight of the Year" almost not at all. The latter case is the focus of an earlier essay "Enabling Mythologies: Specificity and Myth-making in *TRESE*" (*Cultural Excavation and Formal Expression in the Graphic Novel*. E-book. Eds. Jonathan Evans and Thomas Giddens. UK: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2013: 21-31) and the former of "Myth Museum: Synchronicity and Simultaneity as Conflicting Paradigms in *TRESE*" (presented in the *Transcultural Imaginaries* Moving Worlds Conference in NTU, Singapore, in 2013).

[3] *Bangungot* is the Filipino word for nightmare. In mythology, it is associated with the *Batibat*—an old hag that lives in wooden posts and suffocates humans who sleep near its home. It is associated with sleep paralysis and sudden death during sleep. In *TRESE,* Alexandra differentiates the Bangungot from the Batibat, opening up mythological space to redefine the Bangungot.

[4] The White Lady is a female ghost, manifesting as a wandering apparition all in white. The one associated with Balete Drive, New Manila in Quezon City, has urban legend status.

[5] *Duwende* (from the Spanish *duende*) are dwarf-like elemental creatures.

[6] Bagyon Kulimlim belongs to a category known as typhoon lords, a creation of the authors. Its significance is in its combination of the concept of crime lords or crime syndicates with that of local inclement weather. There is further elaboration on this later in the essay.

[7] Short for "traditional politician," *trapo* is a common euphemism for corrupt and often dynastic politicians.

[8] "Kickback" refers to illegal profit made from bloating the budget of a government project or other kinds of embezzlement.

[9] The mall and the lizard boy are taken from an urban legend.

[10] *Aswang* is one of the more generic terms for "ghoul," its description tends to differ across regions. The *Manananggal* is a female ghoul whose upper body detaches from the lower at the point of the waist or womb, and is a viscera sucker with a preference for foetal blood.

[11] *Nuno sa punso*, similar to duwende, is a dwarf-like, earth-dwelling creature. The punso, often identified with anthills, are thought to mark a kind of sacred ground or residence.

[12] Sytan is a cross of Satan and Singson, a corrupt politician known to back Manny Pacquiao. *Tikbalang* are creatures which have a horse's head and a man's body.

[13] *Syrena* are mermaids.

[14] *Pagtatawas* (from *tawas*, Filipino for "alum") is a ritual where an illness is diagnosed through the interpretation of wax drippings in water. Here it is used as an extension of the autopsy process rather than the diagnosis.

[15] Also Santo Elmo, or St. Elmo's Fire, an apparition in the form of a ball of fire and in *TRESE*'s Metro Manila associated with the Great Binondo Fire.

[16] Flor Contemplacion was tried in Singapore, but many doubts remain as to the truth of her confession to the murder of three-year old Nicholas Huang and his nanny, Delia Maga, also an OFW. It was alleged that she was tortured and thus confessed the double murder under duress. Medical evidence and testimonies also told a different story, but were dismissed in favor of the confession. For an overview and a recent take on the case, refer to Tupas's article: "The Lessons Singapore Learned from Flor Contemplacion" from www.newsdesk.asia.

[17] I establish in "Enabling Mythologies: Specificity and Myth-making in *TRESE*" that Trese's jurisdiction does not automatically extend past Metro Manila. In a nutshell, "Fight of the Year" suggesting the territorial nature of Alexandra Trese's function when the fictive equivalent of boxer Manny Pacquiao is portrayed playing a similar role in General Santos.

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