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The Afterlives of María Clara

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an overview (by no means exhaustive) of the critical and popular reception of José Rizal's María Clara in the nearly one hundred and forty years since the publication of the *Noli Me Tángere*. Looking at the lively, at times heated, debates that have erupted over María Clara's character (that is, her mental, physical, and moral qualities) and María Clara as a character (that is, a "person-like" fictional construct), this article argues that influential character studies of María Clara employ the logic of exemplarity to make an example of her: on the one hand, she is held up as a "sublime exemplar," a model or standard, of a number of values ascribed to (elite) women, romantic love, and family; on the other hand, she is considered one among many examples of victims of Spanish colonialism. These debates over María Clara's exemplarity as model and as victim intervene in broader intellectual and public discussions not only about the colonial legacies and postcolonial issues and challenges confronting Philippine society, but also—and in particular—about women's "proper" comportment, evolving positions and roles, and continuing oppression (especially rape) in that society. This article argues that the staying power of María Clara as a female icon—disseminated through processes of translation and adaptation, temporalization, commodification, and transmedial storytelling—does not necessarily inhere in the reification, let alone imposition, of values defined as feminine and Filipino by generations of interlocutors. Rather, her staying power persists in the very gap that opens up between the ideals she is made to exemplify and the historically evolving, gendered lives and gendering of lived experience in the Philippines of which she serves as an example. Far from simply affirming the rules and norms governing Philippine society, María Clara's exemplarity has critical potentiality, serving as an instrument of contestation, often by Filipino women themselves.

Keywords: Jose Rizal, *Noli Me Tángere*, the Filipino novel, Filipino feminism, rape in the Philippines

Among the earliest character studies of María Clara, the heroine of José Rizal's *Noli Me Tángere* (1887), is the one offered by Antonio Ma. Regidor in a May 3, 1887 letter to his friend, the author, a mere forty-four days after the novel was printed in Berlin, Germany. Writes Regidor:

> "María Clara," ese tipo sublimo de amor puro, de respeto paternal, de gratitud y de sacrificio ni es nuevo ni inverosímil. Infelices víctimas de la concupiscencia religioso-colonial, son mártires expiatorias que con pequeñas variantes allá se llaman unas veces como su protagonista, otras Lucía de Ymus, otras Anita de Binondo, otras Ysabel de Pagsanjan, etc., etc. Con la vida de cualquiera de ellas hay para escribir un drama. (Regidor 4)

> "María Clara," that sublime exemplar of pure love, paternal respect, gratitude, and sacrifice, is neither novel nor improbable. Unfortunate victims of religious-colonial concupiscence, they are expiatory martyrs who, with minor variations, are sometimes named after your protagonist, other times called Lucía of Imus, Anita of Binondo, Isabel of Pagsanjan, etc., etc. A drama can be written about the life of any one of them. (author's trans.)[1]

Regidor's three-sentence commentary highlights María Clara's exemplarity as a literary character. This exemplarity has two related, but analytically distinct, features.

In the first sentence, she is held up as a "sublime" model of values and actions that are considered desirable—unalloyed love, filial piety, *utang na loob*, and self-sacrifice. *Prima inter pares*, María Clara rises above people (in literature and real-life) because she sets an example. Better yet, she sets the standard. She upholds, to an unparalleled degree, a series of lofty ideals. By the second and third sentences, however, far from being accorded the status of a sublime example, she is just one example among many, joining the ranks of "victims of religious-colonial concupiscence," martyrs who are known by different names and found in different places and whose life stories, like hers, lend themselves to being dramatized.

In the first instance, the relationship between María Clara and others is a vertical one inasmuch as she exemplifies the ideals to which the rest (ought to) aspire. In the second instance, her relationship to other "expiatory martyrs" of colonialism is a horizontal one inasmuch as her suffering is an experience she shares with other women. Whereas the former hews close to Plato's concept of the *paradeigma* (παράδειγμα, Latin *exemplar*) which moves from model, ideal, standard, paragon, or archetype to "multiple instantiations," the latter hews more closely to Aristotle's approach, which stresses the seriality of an example and goes "neither from part to

whole nor whole to part but from part to part, like to like, [as] when two things fall under the same genus but one is better known than the other" (*Aristotle on Rhetoric* 44, qtd. in Gelley 1).

The Spanish term "tipo," which Regidor uses in his description of María Clara, encompasses these two strands of exemplarity. In its nineteenth-century usage, "tipo" can refer to model or exemplar ("modelo ó ejemplo"), the image that serves as a rule for similar others ("imagen que sirve de regla para otras semejantes"; Caballero 1182). But it can also refer to each of the individuals who share marked characteristics that distinguish them as a group ("cada uno de los individuos en que se hallan bien marcados los caracteres que son distinguen una raza"; also "conjunto de estos mismos caracteres distintivos"; 1182).

Regidor's character study has retained its plangency over the nearly fourteen decades following the publication of the *Noli*. There have been lively, at times heated, debates over María Clara's character (that is, her mental and moral qualities) and María Clara *as a* character (that is, a "person-like" fictional construct [Frow 2]). These debates over María Clara's exemplarity as model and as victim intervene in broader intellectual and public discussions not only about the colonial legacies and postcolonial issues and challenges confronting Philippine society, but also—and in particular—about women's "proper" comportment, evolving positions and roles, and continuing oppression in that society.

More than any character in Rizal's novels or more generally in Philippine literature, María Clara has had a storied, lingering afterlife. For well over a century, she has joined the ranks of memorable literary characters who have become "objects of identification, sources of emotional response, or agents of moral vision and behavior" (Anderson et al. 4). It would be more accurate to say that María Clara has enjoyed (endured?) plural, branching afterlives, by turns lauded and pilloried, admired and pitied, emulated and rejected, remembered and ignored, cherished and dismissed. Her thinking, behavior, decisions, and actions; her gender, class, racial background and position; her sexuality (or perceived lack thereof); her tragic fate and precedent-setting enshrinement as legal doctrine in rape cases and trials; her variable incarnations in, across, and beyond media; and her relentless commodification—all of these have been noted and dissected. It is not just the intellectuals who sit in judgment of María Clara; ordinary people also occupy seats of judgment as they engage in active interpretation of her character, not only weighing existing and alternative opinions about her, but also proposing their own. "The rhetorical force of example is to impose on the audience or interlocutor an obligation to judge" (Gelley 14). Judged in terms of the (re)visions and (re)interpretations she has engendered, María Clara is proof that fiction "connects to ordinary life" and solicits

"the responses of lay as well as academic audiences" (Anderson et al. 2). Above all, María Clara bears testament to the fact that literary characters "can place claims on us, claims we may feel compelled to respond to" (Moi 27).

This article is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of the literary, academic, public-intellectual, and popular reception and character analyses of María Clara. Instead, it seeks to make provisional sense of the neuralgic resonance of the "character" (in two senses of the word) of María Clara by tracing her career as a mutable *figure* in literature and the real world, and as a personification of mutable *traits* ascribed to, and just as important contested by, Filipino women (and other people). Neuralgic resonance refers to María Clara's ability to elicit variegated, spirited responses from her interlocutors, who over the years have engaged in conversation *with*, *about*, and *around* her. Interlocutors include not only readers, audiences, and consumers who have dealt with María Clara and her manifold avatars and transmogrifications, but also ordinary Filipinos who have appropriated Rizal's creation for their own meaning-, life-, place-, and world-making practices.

This modest project examines María Clara's crucial role and position in Rizal's *Noli*. It also revisits a number of influential debates focusing on María Clara's character in order to illuminate the tension between the complex, individual personality of María Clara and the larger symbolic and ideological purposes for which her character has been conscripted over time. This article argues that the staying power of María Clara as a female icon—disseminated through processes of translation and adaptation, temporalization, commodification, and transmedial storytelling—does not necessarily inhere in the reification, let alone imposition, of values defined as feminine and Filipino by generations of interlocutors. Rather, her staying power persists in the very gap that opens up between the ideals she is made to exemplify and the historically evolving, gendered lives and gendering of lived experience in the Philippines of which she serves as an example. To say this is not to deny the pressure to conform to ideals to which Filipinos (and María Clara herself) have been historically subject. It is merely to point out that, far from simply affirming the rules and norms governing Philippine society, María Clara's exemplarity also has critical potentiality, serving as an "instrument of testing, of possible revision" (Gelley 12). Responses to María Clara are at once intellectual, affective, and ethical, involving as they do multiple—even competing and contradictory—interpretations, emotions, judgments, and actions.[2]

Virgin (Mary), Patria, Victim

In his study of the European realist novel, Alex Woloch defines character-space as "that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole" and

character-system as "the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces—differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure" (14).

What are María Clara's place and functions as a character in the *Noli*? How does her "character-space" relate to other character-spaces (of co-protagonists Ibarra or Elías, but also "minor characters" like Padre Damaso, Padre Salví, Capitán Tiago, Tia Isabel, Don Tiburcio and Doña Victorina, the leper in the *Noli*, and Simoun, Cabesang Tales, Julí, and Basilio in *El Filibusterismo* [1891])? How does her character-space figure in the overall character-system of the novel?

In the "distributional matrix" (Woloch 13)—the amount of narrative attention accorded each character—of the *Noli*, María Clara is second only to Juan Crisostomo Ibarra and well ahead of Elías. While Ibarra appears or is mentioned in forty-six out of the fifty-eight chapters and epilogue, María Clara occurs in thirty chapters, or a little over half of the novel. By contrast, Elías does not make his first appearance until Chapter 23.

For all that María Clara plays second fiddle to Ibarra, she has "preponderance" (*preponderancia*) in the novel (Casas [Otoño] 126). Her silhouette graces the book cover of the *Noli* designed by Rizal himself. She is arguably the fulcrum of the *Noli*'s basic plot.[3] Key characters are brought into dynamic relationship with each other through her; because of her and through her, the drama of the *Noli* and the fates of a number of its characters unfold. It is out of love for her (as much as honoring the wishes of his father) that Ibarra returns from Europe; he offers her (and the people of San Diego) the gift of a schoolhouse (Rizal, *Noli* 151), one of the more unusual love offerings in literature. It is out of love and concern for her that Padre Dámaso, who worries over his daughter's betrothal to a man likely to be persecuted for his enlightened, reformist stance, works to undermine the Ibarra family. It is out of lust for her (as much as humiliation at being manhandled by Ibarra) that Padre Salví hatches the insurrection conspiracy to implicate Crisostomo. Because María Clara says that she has never seen a live *buwaya* ("caiman vivo") before, Elías—who is fascinated by her and moved by her kindness to him at the picnic—jumps into the lake to catch the crocodile, thereby initiating the chain of events that puts him in debt to Ibarra for saving his life and leads him to uncover the truth concerning the Ibarra family's role in his own family tragedy.

Moreover, María Clara's beauty and grace make her a cynosure, a center of attention, if not admiration. In other words, she regularly invites interpretation, as the novel's characters *and* readers contemplate her and are not above projecting any number of qualities, motives, and actions onto her. It is instructive that she first appears in the novel unnamed, a "deity" ("deidad") at the center of a semicircle consisting "of every

class of people: there were the Chinese, Spanish, Filipinos, the military, priests, the old, the young" ("de toda clase de personas: allí había chinos, españoles, filipinos, militares, curas, viejas, jóvenes"; 23). More striking is the fact that these people are not passive onlookers who stare at María Clara in silent admiration. Instead, they respond to her, "gesticulating and moving about animatedly" ("gesticulando y moviéndose con animación"; 23).

In the final section of the Epilogue, except for transitional sentences that bracket the "mad nun" incident, she too is unnamed, but under drastically different, tragic circumstances. No longer a deity, she is a "ghost," a "phantasm" ("fantasma"; 352). And yet, one of the two patrolmen who one stormy night in September stumble upon the wailing nun on the rooftop and take her for a ghost cannot help remarking that she is beautiful, "like the Virgin" ("es hermosa como la Virgen"; 353) and thinks he has seen her before. Like the semi-circle of admirers, both men are compelled to respond to her obvious distress and report the incident to their superior. A representative of the authorities, sent to the nunnery to investigate, asks to see all the nuns. One of the nuns, in a wet and torn gown, "very beautiful" ("hermosísima"; 354) and possessed of "the most lovely and expressive eyes that were ever seen" ("los más bellos y espresivos ojos que jamás sa hayan visto"; 354), tearfully asks for the official's protection against "las violencias de la hipocresía," blowing the whistle on the horrors ("delatando horrores"; 354) inflicted on her. The representative of the authorities chooses not to act on her accusations and pleas for help after talking to the abbess, who, resorting to gaslighting, calls the nun a "madwoman" ("una loca"; 354). Nevertheless, the matter reaches the high-ranking General J--, who is of a different opinion and wishes to protect "la loca" (354). But the abbess fails to produce the nun and bars all visitors from seeing her. Borrowing from Emmanuel Levinas, in her moments of extreme suffering, María Clara's face "shivers in its nudity. It is a distress," a supplication that "imposes itself upon me without my being able to be deaf to its call or to forget it, that is, without my being able to suspend my responsibility for its distress" (54, adapted by Frow 240).

As Vince Rafael has rightly observed, María Clara is closely associated with the Virgin Mary throughout the *Noli* (*Promise of the Foreign* 74). *Tipo sublimo* María Clara invites comparison with the ultimate tipo sublimo, Virgin Mary. The *Noli* is rife with references to the Holy Mother. The Virgin is regularly invoked or described with varying degrees of reverence (and also irreverence) by such characters as Capitán Tiago (Rizal, *Noli* Chapters 3, 36, 44, 55, 60), Sisa (Chapter 16), a newspaper correspondent (Chapter 28), Padre Dámaso (Chapter 38), Tia Isabel (Chapters 44, 60), Sister Puté's husband (Chapter 56), the women who find Lucas's corpse hanging from the branch of a santol tree (Chapter 56), Capitana Tinchang (Chapter 59), the "miraculous" party that credits Capitán Tiago's good stroke of fortune at avoiding

the fallout of the fake insurrection to the divine intervention of the Virgin (Chapter 60), Doña Victorina (Chapter 60), and one of the patrolmen (Epilogue).

In the *Noli*, there are two principal means by which the association between Biblical character and literary character is cemented. One textual strategy is comparison, made not by the narrator, but by other characters. The other is narrative placement of María Clara, often in physical proximity with the Virgin's likeness.

The *Noli* and its characters use Biblical, mythological, and otherworldly references to describe María Clara, comparing her to, among others, a "deity" ("deidad"; 23), "sylph" ("sílfide"; 23), "goddess" ("diosa"; 23), "sister of Cain" ("hermana de Cain"; 36), "fairy, spirit, and poetic incarnation" ("el hada, el espíritu, el encarnacion poética"; 37), and "ghost" ("fantasma"; 353). Significantly, it is not the narrator who directly compares María Clara with the Virgin Mary. Rather, it is sundry minor characters, a key point that leaves open-ended the characterization (and possible interpretations) of María Clara. Indeed, as people like Nick Joaquin will contend (discussed in the third section), María Clara's "character" resists being reduced to the María Clara=Virgin Mary equation.

Before the fiesta, "the people" ("gente"; 151) present at Capitán Tiago's house "contemplate ecstatically the beauty of María Clara, and some old women murmur while chewing buyo, 'She looks like the Virgin!'" ("contemplaban estasiados la hermosura de Maria Clara, y algunas viejas mumuraban mientras mascaban buyo: ¡Parece la Virgen!"; 151). At the fiesta procession, María Clara's rendition of Gounod's *Ave María* accompanies the Virgin as the latter's image is carried past Capitán Tiago's house (Chapter 38). Padre Salví compares María Clara's eyelids and thick lashes to those of the Virgins painted by Raphael and sees in the young woman the virtues of "virginity, purity, innocence" ("virginidad, pureza, inocencia"; 229).

Not only is María Clara compared by other people (but not by the narrator) to the Virgin. She also appears in close physical proximity to likenesses of the Virgin, most notably in the *oratorio* housing a congregation of saints as well as oil paintings depicting the miracles of the Virgin, while waiting to see Ibarra for the first time since his return from Europe (Chapter 6). The Virgin stands next to María Clara in moments of personal crisis. Disappointed by the brevity of her first meeting with Ibarra, cut short by Ibarra's urgent need to locate his father's grave, María Clara is seen weeping beside the image of the Virgin (40). The narrator explicitly tells us that, commanded by Capitán Tiago to break her engagement with Ibarra following the scene at the sermon, "[i]n her heartsickness she turned to the deified image of woman, the most beautiful idealization of the most ideal of creatures…who brings together the two most beautiful states of womanhood—virgin and mother—without their sorrows" ("ella en sus tristezas acudía á esa imagen divinizada de la mujer, la

idealización más hermosa de la más ideal de las criaturas…que reune en sí los dos más bellos estados de la mujer, virgen y madre, sin tener sus miserias"; 203). María Clara's invocation of "Mother! Mother" ("¡Madre, Madre!"; 203) foreshadows a more fraught invocation later on ("¡Madre, madre, madre mía!"; Chapter 60; 332), which readers in retrospect come to understand as referring to both the Virgin Mother and her mother Doña Pia Alba. When Tiburcio de Espadaña is called in to treat María Clara, he finds the sick girl in her bed chamber, which is illuminated by the candles before the image of the Virgin of Antipolo (Chapter 42).

If beauty, grace, proximity, and Christian devotion (particularly devotion to the Virgin) lend María Clara the saintly aura and attributes of the Virgin Mary, María Clara is not spared public opinion of a more critical bent. Elite women appear to be the cattiest, gloating over her misfortune in her own house, calling her a "conceited little thing" ("orgullosita"; 330), a "pretty little thing" ("bonita"; 330) albeit one with a "silly face" ("cara de tonta"; 330), a woman calculating (prudent, "prudente"; 330) enough to secure a marriage when her fiancé is about to be hanged. These women make sure that their opinions are overheard by María Clara, who is forced by good manners not only to welcome the women ceremoniously, but to remain silent while they badmouth her. The old soldier, who had earlier informed Ibarra of Don Rafael's persecution by Padre Dámaso and the townspeople of San Diego and subsequent incarceration and death, is not unsympathetic to María Clara, but wryly congratulates her on being a "prudent young woman. You did good to give up the letter…. You have thus assured yourself of a tranquil future" ("una jóven prudente…. Ha hecho V. bien en entregar la carta…así se aseguran Vs. un tranquilo porvenir"; 331).

Furthermore, on María Clara is placed the burden of conjuring other weighty associations. As the narrator describes it, María Clara first appears as "one of those fantastical visions, one of those magical apparitions" ("una de esas fantásticas visions, una de esas apariciones mágicas"; Rizal 1978, 23), a "very beautiful, slender young woman, dressed in the picturesque garments of the daughters of the Philippines" ("una joven hermosísima, esbelta, vestido con el pintoresco traje de las hijas de Filipinas"; 23). An "idol of all" ("ídolo de todos"; 33), she is possessed of a "pure soul" ("alma purísima"; 23), "good cheer" ("tan alegre"; 33), and "frank confidence" ("franca confianza"; 151). Her innocence is suggested by her propensity for "childlike chatter" ("charla infantil"; 151; also, "charla tan cándidamente infantile"; 33).

María Clara is made to personify no less than "la Patria" (37). Ibarra views his fiancée as a "nymph, the spirit, the poetic incarnation of my country: beautiful, unassuming, kind, innocent, daughter of Filipinas" ("hermosa, sencilla, amable, candorosa, hija de Filipinas"; 37). Moreover, as "a daughter of Filipinas" ("hija de Filipinas"; 37),

she embodies Ibarra's dream of amalgamation between Filipinas and "Madre España," as she unites in her whole being the best virtues and qualities—all that is beautiful and good—of both races ("como se unen en todo tu sér todo lo hermoso y bello que adornan ambas razas"; 37). In the fishing expedition, she is prompted to sing a song (now popularly known as "María Clara's Song") that connects life and death in "one's own country" ("la propia Patria"; 119) with the abiding presence and absence of the nurturing mother and lover.

Readers remember the *Noli* as a love story primarily involving María Clara and Ibarra. The only hints the novel gives of Elías's attraction to María Clara are the buwaya incident at the picnic and, later, the interrupted speech of the keenly observant Sinang, María Clara's confidant: "Look at what she [Doña Consolación] tried to do to the poor pilot [Elías], who threw himself into the water to please…" ("Mira que hacer prender al pobre piloto, que se arrojó al agua por complacer…"; 153). The one chapter in which Elías, prompted by Salomé to name the pretty women at the fishing expedition, singles out María Clara ("in an almost imperceptible voice" ["en voz casi imperceptible"; Appendix 3] and, "choking back a sigh" ["ahogando un suspiro"; Appendix 3], admits that "Oh yes! She's very beautiful and very good!" ["¡Oh si! ¡muy hermosa y muy buena!"; 3]) is excised by Rizal.

One can only speculate on why the *Noli* does not triangulate the relationship among the three protagonists. Eschewing a love triangle made sense from a logistical viewpoint, as it would have complicated further the plot of the novel and added more pages to the book manuscript, the publication of which had strained Rizal's limited budget and had had to be financed by his friend Maximo Viola. Too, the complicated emotional entanglements—rife with potential for jealousy, torment, intrigue, hatred, and heartbreak—of a love triangle might have conceivably diluted (rendered messy, perhaps even undermined) the political intent and import of the novel, which explores the fraught relationship between Ibarra and Elías and the process by which the blood debt and vengeance rooted in the sins of the Ibarra forebears against Elías's family are ultimately transmuted into patriotic (self-) sacrifice on Elías's part and revolution on Ibarra's (as discussed in Hau, *Necessary Fictions* 86-88).

Dropping the "Elías and Salomé" chapter from the novel eliminates further discussion of Elías's private life, even as that very chapter elaborates on Elías's decision, given the cruelties and misfortunes visited upon him and his family, to forego a happy marriage and life "in the depths of our jungles, far from humanity" ("en el fondo de nuestras selvas lejos de los hombres"; Rizal, *Noli* Appendix 4) with his long-time sweetheart Salomé. This excision is crucial in consecrating the image (and ideal) of patriotic (self-)sacrifice that Elías personifies (Hau, *Subject of*

the Nation 163). The true patriot is (must be) one who is ready to sacrifice his own personal comforts and happiness in favor of the higher claims of the people and nation. Selfless, masculine, disciplined, the patriot must be prepared to abjure sexual intimacy and domestic (both marital and familial) happiness (163-65). It is worth noting that while a good marriage and happy family life are denied Ibarra by force of circumstance, Elías renounces them by choice.

There is a clear gender component to the novel's valorizing of male patriotism and sacrifice and the corresponding circumscription of female desire and power. María Clara's travails revolve mainly around two things: her intense love for Ibarra and the frustration and pain caused by his inability, under the circumstances, to accord her the attention she craves and, ultimately, his sundering from her; and the question of secret paternity that leads her to exchange Ibarra's letter for letters written by her mother to Padre Dámaso, a letter from Ibarra that Padre Salví then uses to engineer the fake rebellion. Both of these issues—involving romance and family—arise from the domestic, intimate, private sphere. Out of fidelity to the memory of Ibarra, whom she believes to have died while trying to escape, María Clara renounces marriage and enters the nunnery. Having spent seven years of her adolescence receiving religious training at the Sta. Catalina nunnery, where she had been happy (Rizal, *Noli* 34), she is unprepared for the shock of being at the mercy, no longer protected by the nuns, of Padre Salví's sexual predation, something Padre Dámaso has already warned her against. Her entry into the nunnery proves catastrophic to her and to the men who love her: the knowledge of what his daughter will be subjected to breaks Dámaso's heart and health; Tiago, a doting father who may or may not have been aware of the goings-on at the nunnery, ends up an opium addict; Ibarra conspires to mount a revolution in part to force open the doors of the nunnery, but upon learning of María Clara's death, is thrown into despair and temporarily loses his will to move ahead with the conspiracy.

"Religious-colonial concupiscence," as Regidor calls it, is one of the key anticlerical discursive tropes deployed by the Propaganda Movement to criticize "monastic supremacy in the Philippines" ("soberanía monacal") (to use Marcelo H. Del Pilar's term). In her excellent book, *Love, Passion and Patriotism: Sexuality and the Propaganda Movement, 1882-1892*, Raquel Reyes avers that while Rizal's novels criticize numerous aspects of friar practices and abuses in the Philippines, "the degeneracy and venality of Catholicism in the Philippines is personified in the characters of sexually opportunistic and depraved friars" (124) like Padres Dámaso and Salví. While Rizal invokes female victimhood in the service of anticlerical, anti-colonial propaganda, he also subjects Filipino religiosity—particularly female religiosity (as can be seen in Rizal's satirizing of the *hermanas*)—to stringent criticism (133-45). Female victimhood, "ignorance," and "susceptibility to superstition and

fanaticism" (128, 134) go hand in hand. Padre Dámaso not only boasts about "understanding" the women he confesses (Rizal, *Noli* 5), but he also sires an illegitimate daughter, María Clara, by his friend Capitán Tiago's wife Doña Pia Alba. Although the *Noli* is notably reticent about the exact nature (coerced or otherwise) of the sexual relationship between Dámaso and Pia Alba (Hau, *Interpreting Rizal* 11-30), there can be no doubt about Padre Salví's lascivious intentions—facilitated by his appointment as a preacher at the Church of Sta. Clara and his official duties at the Sta. Clara nunnery—toward María Clara, even though readers are left to imagine the precise details of "las violencias de la hipocresía" and "horrores" (Rizal, *Noli* 354) that María Clara would offer as her own testimony in the Epilogue.

It is worth recalling that the *Noli*'s "mad nun" episode is itself a doubly mediated textual reimagining—a textual interpretation of another textual interpretation—of a real-life incident involving the Order of the Poor Clares (Torres 104). Rizal based the María Clara section of the Epilogue on an anti-clerical pamphlet, *Escandaloso, horrendo y punible delito perpetrado en el Monasterio de Santa Clara por un Fraile Franciscano, Vicario de la Misma* (c. 1884), the authorship of which has been variously attributed to Marcelo H. del Pilar and Jose Ma. Basa (Torres 114). The pamphlet purports to be an account of the "extreme horrors which happened [to nuns] in this establishment" during the term of Governor-General Joaquin Jovellar and General of the Civil Administration Rafael Ruiz Martínez (trans. by Jose Victor Torres 109). The Commandant of the Guardia Civil, learning of the story of the crying nun from an army lieutenant who happened to be passing by the Monastery of Sta. Clara, goes to the nunnery, has the nun brought to him, and "proceed[s]… to take her testimony in the presence of the Civil Governor" (108). The nuns thwart the Civil Governor and Governor-General's orders to open the doors of their nunnery to allow an investigation, dismissing the nun as "insane" (109). Different from the *Noli*'s account, the pamphlet states that despite the resistance of the nuns, the Governor-General is able to force open the doors. The investigation sparks a "scandal": nuns who "will not yield to the CARNAL APPETITES OF THE VICAR WHICH THE MOTHER ABBESS INSTRUCTS THEM TO DO" are starved; three of the nuns are pregnant; and several infant corpses are discovered on the premise. A note appended to the pamphlet declares that the nun's name is Pepita Estrada, that "[n]othing was ever heard from her again and it is believed that she was poisoned," that the "Vicar and his accomplices have not been punished nor was there any proceedings for the exclaustration of the three pregnant women nor those other Seraglios" (109). The pamphlet ends with the exhortation "DOWN WITH THE RASCAL FRIARS! COME, PENINSULAR PRIESTS!" (109).

The reconstructed archives kept by the Order of the Poor Clares offer an undated, pared-down oral history of a Sor (San) Rafael (born Josefa "Pepita" Estrada), who suffers from depression and is "slowly becoming insane" (105; see also Luciano Santiago's account 288-89). The abbess ignores the nun's deteriorating mental health and leaves the nun alone. Past midnight, Sor Rafael makes her way to the rooftop with a bundle of clothes and asks for help from the sentries manning a barracks nearby. The soldiers try to notify the nuns at the convent, but the nuns are at matins and do not hear their calls. The abbess, distressed by the incident, takes to her bed, while Sor Rafael is locked up in a cell beneath the dining hall and subject to beatings as a form of penance. Rafael dies two years later (Torres 105-106).

The Propagandists spin an allegory of colonial exploitation and domination using familiar anti-clerical tropes of friar concupiscence, sexual abuse, and infanticide out of a tale of mental illness, extreme penitential practice, and medical maltreatment. True to form, storytelling breeds more storytelling, as stories of "pregnant nuns" and "murdered children in the convents" enter popular lore and continue to be repeated in the present time (107).

Ideals versus Realities

Scholars have rightly pointed to the prevailing concern—shared as much by secular priests as by Propagandists in the nineteenth century and endorsed by the elevation of Rizal's novels to "exemplary narratives" (to use Susan Suleiman's term) that American-era educators and post-independence Character Education (also Values/Moral Education) mined for "Good Manners and Right Conduct" and "moral lessons" aimed at character-building and schooling the youth to "liv[e]… the Rizal Way" (Rivera and Rivera 249-78)—with "disciplining" female bodies to conform to bourgeois (male) ideals and rules of conduct and comportment (Reyes 20-31; Almario 158, 164; see also Sánchez Pons "The Philippines" and "Mujeres de Filipinas").

Virgilio Almario has argued that during the Spanish era, prescriptive texts like Modesto de Castro's *Urbana at Feliza* (1864 [1996]), originally intended "for teaching good manners" ("pagtuturo ng mabuting kaugalian"; 150), had helped propound the ideal of the "Dalagang-Tagalog," with María Clara coming to represent "the sum total of female virtues" ("suma total ng mga birtud pambabae"; 150). And yet the pressure (especially for "bourgeois"—meaning elite and middle-class—women) to conform exerted by disciplinary texts and institutional (say, school, church, society) practices was and is often at variance with the everyday realities in which the majority of women find themselves.

There is, of course, something to be said about the important role of marriage and family in the socialization—not least the tempering of the political discontent—of the nineteenth-century colonial elite. Early in the novel, Padre Sibyla visits his ailing superior to discuss the arrival in Manila of Ibarra and its implications:

> —Además,—añadió concluyendo,—el joven se casa con la hija de Cpn. Tiago, educada en el colegio de nuestras hermanas, es rico, y no querrá hacerse de enemigos para perder felicidad y fortuna.
>
> El enfermo movía la cabeza en señal de asentimiento.
>
> —Sí, pienso como tú... Con una mujer tal y un suegro parecido, le tendremos en cuerpo y alma. Y si no, ¡tanto mejor si se declarase enemigo nuestro! (Rizal, *Noli* 46)

> "Furthermore," he [Sibyla] added in conclusion, "the young man is to marry the daughter of Capitán Tiago, who was educated in the school of our sisters. He is rich and will not want to lose his happiness and fortune by making enemies."
>
> The sick man [Sibyla's superior] nodded in agreement.
>
> "Yes, I think as you do...With such a woman and such a father-in-law, we will own him body and soul. If not, it is better that he declares himself our enemy!"

In making María Clara the tipo sublimo of romantic love, paternal respect, gratitude, and sacrifice, Antonio Regidor places María Clara in the service of values that are mainly corralled within the Catholic, bourgeois, feminine, domestic sphere. Her delimitation within the domestic sphere is a product not just of her specific class background as a woman of leisure, coupled with her limited education and exposure to the world through long-distance travel (unlike Ibarra and Elías). Just as crucial is the fact that the female-bourgeois body, certainly not lacking in libidinal desire and energy, is made to function as a signifier of the *lack* of political consciousness because she has neither access to nor the opportunity to participate in the political affairs of the country through elected office (Hau, *Subject of the Nation* 161; Rafael, "Language, Identity and Gender" 124-26; on Rizal's active "erasure of female pleasure," see Reyes 198-253). In contrast, while leadership at the highest level of the colonial state and the right to represent the country at the Spanish metropole's Cortes had been denied Filipinos for good (following periods of extension and abrogation in 1812-1814 and 1820-1823) after the promulgation of the 1837

Constitution, Filipino men could hold office at the municipal and provincial levels, as the number of official positions increased with the expansion of the colonial state.

Such corralling of María Clara within the bourgeois private, domestic sphere would raise the specter of the failure of (gender) representation. Just as Ibarra (and arguably the *Noli* as well) is haunted by the possibility of failure of artistic and political representation (Hau, *Necessary Fictions* 90-91), María Clara is haunted by a double failure of representation: the failure to represent Filipino women and the failure to represent *la Patria* (on María Clara as a symptom of the "impossibility" of constituting the nation, see Casas [Otoño]).

The principal means by which Filipino women were able to secure, or better yet improve, their status in the colonial hierarchy was by either wealth or marriage to a spouse in a higher-status social and/or racial category, preferably both (Wickberg 33; Chu 7; De Llobet 67). But Norman Owen has also pointed out that Filipino women were active participants in the colonial economy. A few were able to join the ranks of the *principalía* by building or inheriting substantial fortunes acquired through participation in global and domestic trade following the integration of the Philippines into the nineteenth-century British- (and, later, American-) dominated world economy.

Not coincidentally, Rizal reserves some of his strongest satirical jabs for two female characters: the social-climbing Doña Victorina and the brutal and brutalized Doña Consolacion. Rizal skewers these two (along with Tiago) precisely because they are considered upstarts who have succeeded in elevating themselves above their own people and class within the limits of a racially determined hierarchy that places Spaniards at the apex of colonial society, mestizos in the middle ranks, and natives in the lowest (Hau, *Elites and Ilustrados* 50-51).

At the same time, however, state expansion and economic liberalization created opportunities for working women, who found gainful employment as *cigarreras*, seamstresses, vendors, domestic servants, and weavers, among others (Camagay). Women were able to take up positions as educators (especially in the wake of the 1863 educational reforms) and were allowed to register property transactions and sue their debtors (Owen 28, 27, 30, 34). Women migrated not only from neighboring Tagalog provinces to the capital, thus maintaining close links with their hometowns (30), but also (like Salomé) to frontier areas. They tended, however, to restrict their activities to the kind that took up no more than a day's trip, leaving long-distance trade to Chinese and Filipino men (52n42). Female tobacco workers even organized a strike in 1816 to protest their maltreatment by their employers.

Single motherhood was a fact of life, with as much as twenty-five percent of all births recorded in parishes listing the father as "unknown" (33). For those who stayed at home, as high as twenty to thirty percent of families or households (in Tigaon, Camarines Sur, for example) were headed by women (33). Owen's and Camagay's scholarship on the economic and social transformation of women's lives in the nineteenth century offer important correctives to the tendency of historiography (and literary criticism of Rizal's novels) to focus narrowly on the Filipino bourgeoisie and consciously or unconsciously adopt the latter's values and perspectives when evaluating Rizal's novels. (This is in part due to the *ilustrado* backgrounds of the critics themselves.) The historical evidence suggests that although gender ideology based on bourgeois models of female comportment and behavior did have some force, its effects were unevenly felt and experienced by actually-existing women, especially from non-bourgeois classes.

While sundry minor characters continue to flourish in colonial society (save for Consolación, who is further ostracized after her spouse the *alférez* abandons her and goes back to Spain following his promotion), the forcefulness of the *Noli*'s critique of colonial affairs in the Philippines derives in part from its denial of a happy ending for its three main protagonists. By the end of the novel, Ibarra is forced into exile abroad for the next thirteen years; Elías dies from bullet wounds he sustains while helping Ibarra make his escape; and *infeliz* María Clara becomes a victim of sexual abuse. The tragic fates of these protagonists give the *Noli* its critical and emotive charge.

But the dilemma María Clara finds herself in—protecting the reputations of her dead mother and her living biological and adoptive fathers from public shaming triggered by adultery and illegitimacy—may not be the only values affirmed by the *Noli*, even as the novel largely downplays these alternatives values.

One example is the incident that occurs on the morning of the town fiesta, when a young woman with black hair and brown skin, dressed in mourning clothes, carries a fair-skinned baby who cries out "Papa!" upon seeing Padre Salví (Rizal, *Noli* 165). The narrator emphatically informs the reader that the baby is mistaken in calling Padre Salví "father." What is interesting is the reaction of the people around them: while Salví blushes deeply and the mortified young mother runs away, the "maliciosos" merely wink at each other and the Spaniards smile ("se sonrieron"; 165). "Shame" appears to be internalized more by the woman than by the people around her.

A contrasting, non-judgmental alternative to the imputation of shame to relationships out of wedlock can be seen in the excised chapter "Elías and Salomé."

The phrase Elías uses—"you would be my wife in the eyes of God" ("serías mi esposa a los ojos de Dios"; 165)—indicates that he does not believe in a Catholic Church-sanctioned wedding. Salomé herself takes this for granted when she tells Elías that she hopes he will go with her to Mindoro, where she plans to live among her relatives (Appendix, 5). As previously mentioned, informal unions and illegitimacy were commonplace in colonial Filipinas, as exorbitant marriage fees charged by the priests prevented indigent Filipinos from registering their marriage with the church. A man and woman who moved into a house together without undergoing the rituals of a Church wedding ceremony were considered husband and wife in their eyes and in the eyes of their families and neighbors (MacMicking 75). It was not unusual for so-called "illegitimate" children to be baptized at church (76).

Sexual liaisons between Filipinas and the clergy were also commonplace and unexceptional. More importantly, then and now, they were generally neither stigmatized nor prohibited by the families and neighbors of the querida (see, for example, Blanc-Szanton 353). Such liaisons were, in fact, viewed favorably as a means of improving the querida's personal and family status and fortunes. It was not unusual for the priest to install his mistress as his housekeeper, marry off his mistress to one of his employees, or pass off his children by her as the children of a brother or sister (MacMicking 100; see the analysis of Reyes 117, 145). Nor did prostitution necessarily incur social stigma (evident in the fact that the women subsequently had no difficulty in finding a spouse), even though prostitutes were routinely subject to police harassment, imprisonment, and deportation (Bankoff 41).

The widespread reality of such informal unions and illegitimacy among ordinary Filipinos is revealing of a gap between the perceptions and expectations of the world shared by Rizal and the *Noli*'s imputed "socially respectable," educated readers, on the one hand, and Filipino readers (or those who heard about the novel) from across classes who may not have adhered to the same values, on the other hand—a gap, in other words, between the world of the novel and the larger world it seeks to intervene in.

It is true that the coercive aspect of friar sexual license is highlighted prominently in the revolutionary Katipunan's founding documents. The two final items out of the total twenty-two reasons given by the Katipunan to justify the Archipelago's separation from Mother Spain concern precisely the religious-colonial concupiscence that "ruins" ("sinisira") women and produces children, and friar abuse of power that prevents parents and relatives from being able to publicly denounce the sexual victimization for fear of being brought up on false charges and deported to far-away places:

> 21. Pinagpayagan ng mga Fraile ay maquiapid sa babaye, caya ngat sa manga provincia ang caramijan ay bijira ang jindi may manga anac at bijira rin naman ang mga binibini na jindi canilang sinisira.
>
> 22. Ang manga magulang at iba pang camag-anac nang magcagano-ong babaye, na mag taglay puot sa ganoon asal ay pararatangan agad nang gauang jindi totoo upang matapon sa lubjang malayo. (Katipunan, "Casaysayan" [History] section, transcribed by Richardson 8-9)

> 21. The friars are permitted to have sexual liaisons with women, so that in the provinces it is often not unusual to find their offspring and it is also not unusual to find women who are ruined by them.
>
> 22. The parents and other relatives of women in this situation who deplore this custom are brought up on false charges so that they will be exiled somewhere far away.

Notwithstanding the moral and political implications of friar concupiscence, the gap between ideals and realities persists into the contemporary era. In 2004, news reports that as many as one-third of the priests in Pampanga had had sexual relationships with women or had sired children failed to dampen the support of their parishioners (Rufo 45, 49). In her study of Ilonggo women published in 1990, Cristina Blanc-Szanton found that while ideal norms did prize *dalaga* virginity and chastity, such ideals were, for a significant proportion of the female population, honored more in the breach than in the observance (351-54). Chastity was not "stringently enforced," and premarital sex was frequent, considered "natural" rather than "inherently bad," and, above all, met with "remarkably little public condemnation" (incidences were as high as 28.6 percent in Cebu and up to 63.2 percent in Manila; statistics cited in 351). More strikingly, two-thirds of the elite weddings that Blanc-Szanton recorded during her eighteen months of fieldwork in Estancia involved pregnant brides (354).

Far from the unilateral imposition of a "María Clara" ideal on Visayan (or Philippine) society, Blanc-Szanton posits the "coexistence…of many different images and symbolic contents, presenting an often ambiguous and overlapping pool of potential arguments or metaphors to be utilized by different agents for different purposes at different times" (379; see also Ellwood-Clayton, who identifies three models of femininity negotiated by Filipino women: María Clara, Manila Girl, and the "other Mary"). To argue thus in no way discounts the incentives and pressures to affirm, and conform to, the values for which María Clara has come to stand in.

Rather, it exposes the limits to the reach and applicability of the example set by María Clara. The divergence between example and everyday practice neither confirms nor undermines the rules set by society's arbiters and authorities. Instead, society itself becomes the testing ground through which norms are affirmed, ignored, debated, reformulated, or revised. The lively debate over María Clara—as with the debate on gender imagery in literature, cinema, and popular media—can best be understood as part and parcel of the "ongoing struggles of meanings and their relationships to practices" (Blanc-Szanton 375).

Debating María Clara's Character

Different generations of interlocutors have debated María Clara's character. Over time, the gap between feminine, bourgeois, colonial, and nationalist ideals and actually-existing Filipino women's realities has been either downplayed or played up by the debates over María Clara's character following the publication of the *Noli*. These contending interpretations are indicative not only of the evolving attitudes toward this literary character and what she stands for, but also of the intellectual, political, and artistic stakes of these contending interpretations.

In her pioneering work on women's suffrage and activism in the Philippines, to which this article is indebted, Mina Roces in "Rethinking 'the Filipino Woman'" has cogently analyzed the ways in which María Clara became the focal point of feminist debate from the 1920s to the end of the twentieth century.

For female suffragists, María Clara served as a foil against which they defined not only themselves, but also the "modern Filipina" whom they claimed to represent in both social and political terms. Chafing against confinement in the domestic, private sphere, suffragists and their supporters like Delegado Lim had advocated voting rights for women by calling on the public to move beyond the "ideal type of the woman of yesteryear, that legendary María Clara" in favor of the "modern woman" who is "educated and learned, highly responsible" (Lim qtd. in Roces, "Is the Suffragist" 24). Said Sr. Joven, another delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1934: "I would be ashamed, Mr. President, of our women today if they were still the Maria Claras of yesterday—women who lived in seclusion, frail and fragile, taken care of. It is an insult to progress and civilization if we claim that our women of today are of a bygone era" (qtd. in Roces, "Is the Suffragist" 24).

Female suffragist construction of María Clara as a foil that stands in for the women of a "bygone era" was made possible by the American colonial project of "modernizing" Filipinas, in turn part of the overall project of modernizing the colony through democratic tutelage (Roces, "Is the Suffragist" 27). This meant greatly expanded educational opportunities for women, who for the first time could attend university,

study abroad on government scholarship, and pursue professional careers and greater civic participation. Although the "modern woman" was by definition "English-speaking, public school educated (preferably university educated, a professional or a 'clubwoman' active in civic work), and by the 1920s a suffragist (and thereby a participant in the American democratic project)" (27), civic organizations such as the Asociación Feminista Filipina founded in 1905 nonetheless campaigned actively against early marriage and in favor of improvements in labor regulations for women and children in factories and shops and working conditions in domestic service, and for filling municipal and provincial boards of education posts with women (29).

Repudiating María Clara was in part a response to anti-suffrage sentiments, which themselves conscripted María Clara to serve their own ideas of what women should be and how they should behave. While suffragists had the support of some pro-suffrage male allies, the majority of male politicians were against the enfranchisement of Filipino women (28). The debate, which became polarized, was in fact "essentialized" (28) around the status of María Clara's exemplarity.

If María Clara exemplified the "Filipino woman," what exactly did she exemplify? On the one hand, anti-suffrage men invoked María Clara as a model to nostalgically invoke Spanish-era constructions of femininity. On the other hand, female suffragists and their male allies relegated these constructions—and the María Clara to which Iberian female virtues (see the discussion of "good" and "bad" women by Brewer 39-62) were ascribed—to the Spanish colonial past by arguing that she was a mere "character of fiction who did not resemble the 'real' Filipino women who fought in the revolution and who wanted to contribute to nation-building" (Roces, "Is the Suffragist" 28; Roces "Rethinking" 41).[4]

Mina Roces has shown how contestation over "fashioning" the "new," "modern" (and often middle- or upper-class) woman was played out in fashion, as women forwent the *traje de mestiza* costume (which would come to be known as the María Clara dress) of their mothers and grandmothers in favor of an updated "traditional" national costume consisting of the *terno* and *pañuelo* ("Is the Suffragist" 46). Suffragists cloaked their demands for political power and equality in the "less threatening" image and language of the "non-militant, non-aggressive women who still glorified motherhood and the 'home'" (49). Their "beauty queen" and "moral guardian" gendered, public images belied the substantive reforms they sought and the actual, real-life changes already under way (49).

Not surprisingly, the polarized debates over María Clara's character spilled over into literary and journalistic circles.

Perhaps the harshest critique of Maria Clara was made by Salvador Lopez in his essay "Maria Clara—Paragon or Caricature?" Lopez challenges the idea of María Clara as a "model Filipino woman—loyal to the point of selflessness, modest to the point of weakness" (186). Lopez claims that María Clara suffers from the "double handicap" of being mestiza and an illegitimate child and Rizal "places her in questionable situations with another priest" (186). While Lopez is critical of the colonial-mindset that valorizes beautyism and colorism, his stance on illegitimacy is at variance with the widespread and little-stigmatized realities of illegitimate births in Philippine colonial society. His wariness of María Clara's "questionable situations with another priest" (186) also betrays the bourgeois notions of social respectability that he himself upholds.

Despite his acknowledgment that María Clara possesses the "virtues of modesty and loyalty" (186), Lopez evaluates her character and finds her wanting. He chides Rizal's heroine for lacking "interior strength" (186), for being "far too weak to justify her being held up as a model for the women of our country" (186).[5] Rather than faulting Rizal for "fall[ing]…into the error of setting up a feeble and inveterate woman as the model of his country" (187), Lopez admits that Rizal belonged to an "age which compelled a woman to remain in the background" (186), then proceeds to hail Rizal's characterization of María Clara as evidence of the "sublimity of the artist's conception," of Rizal's success "as an artist in creating a character that is fundamentally unsound without being contemptible, that is weak and yet appealing" (187). Lopez credits Rizal with the gift of prophecy: "He knew that the new age would witness the emergence of a new woman enjoying privileges and responsibilities of which before she was not even aware" (187). Lopez cites Rizal's letter to the women of Malolos, which "shows clearly that his conception of Filipino womanhood was enlightened, and that while he deplored none of their old virtues, he insisted that new and more vital qualities be added to these" (187). In pursuing this line of reasoning, Lopez puts himself squarely in the camp of advocates of the "modern Filipino woman" who define the modern Filipina as a woman who is *not* María Clara, the anti-María Clara.[6]

Problematically, Salvador Lopez tars Rizal's heroine with the taint of treason: "Maria Clara was the forerunner in fiction of that woman who, in 1896, betrayed the secret of the Katipunan to the priest of Tondo. You find in her the same feebleness, the same helplessness, the same fear—[n]one of the qualities that were possessed by… Tandang Sora of the Revolution or by Teodora Alonso, Rizal's own brave and gallant mother" (187).

Lopez parrots the trope of the traitorous woman, whose "treachery and betrayal" (Reyes 3) have been held historically accountable for undermining various revolutionary

movements. In the words of the historian José Montero y Vidal, "Love has played the principal part in the failure of nearly all the conspiracies in the Philippines" (qtd. in Reyes 3). A Tagalog woman in love with a Spanish sergeant in charge of the native regiment had warned her lover of the impending Cavite Mutiny of 1872 (2-3). "Terrified by the consequences of the criminal objectives of the Katipunan," Teodoro Patiño "told everything he knew about the organization to his sister… [who] then told what she had learned from her brother to the Mother Superior [of the Colegio de Looban, where she was a student]. The Mother Superior then led the distraught Patiño to Fr. Mariano Gil, the parish priest of Tondo. Patiño reiterated to the priest everything he knew…" (Cuerpo de Vigilancia report, trans. by Escalante 465). The simple fact that, unlike the historical examples of the Cavite Mutiny and Philippine Revolution, María Clara was ignorant of Padre Salví's plot to frame Ibarra, does not deter Lopez from adding treason to her list of failings.

Carmen Guerrero Nakpil's much-cited essay "Maria Clara" similarly echoes Lopez's contention that "[t]here is little evidence that he [Rizal] tried to enshrine Maria Clara as the ideal or, even, the typical Filipina" (33). "The greatest misfortune that has befallen Filipino women in the last one hundred years," writes Nakpil, "is Maria Clara," who has undergone transformation "from paragon to parody" (30). Nakpil seeks a "middle way" interpretation between Rizal's characterization and those of "clubwomen and their guest speakers" as well as "aggressive iconoclasts of the thirties" (31). As a "successful literary creation," María Clara is "not all of a piece. She was certainly a good and beautiful woman, innocent, unselfish, and admirable in many respects. But she was also—and quite indubitably—a silly girl, coy, sentimental, and often rather foolish. She was, as most people are, neither all good nor all bad" (31). She is "insufferably soggy and affected…. Whenever she hears any piece of bad news, she develops faintness and totters off to her bedroom…She appears inarticulate and humorless…But worst of all, she fails to respond to the patriotic needs of the hour; at the crucial moment, she does not choose the side of the *filibustero*, the reformer, the patriot, but the side of the friar and the peninsular" (32).

Like Lopez's elision of the facts of María Clara's non-involvement in Padre Salví's fake rebellion and Patiño's responsibility for betraying the Katipunan, Guerrero similarly glosses over the fact that neither María Clara nor, for that matter, the *Noli*'s reader, is aware of Salví's conspiracy to frame Ibarra until it comes to pass, and the political "choice" opened up between *filibusterismo* and maintaining the status quo lies as yet thirteen years into the future of the events recounted in the first novel.

Nakpil's contribution to complexifying the debate over María Clara's character lies in her attribution of Rizal's characterization to the "literary conventions of the period" (34). She faults "the generation of Filipinos who came after Rizal" for

making "the mistake of idealizing her [María Clara's] external traits… [instead of] her strength, her nobility, her inherent stubbornness" (34). Not only has María Clara "also influenced, and for worse, our feminine standard of beauty" (34), her legacy extends to the "masochistic attitude"—"self-sacrifice" as "the cruelest form of tyranny"—that schools Filipinas to "enjoy suffering and humiliation," to "see terror in the delights of love and sex, and to offset this…by a kind of frantic piety" (36). In all, María Clara has made "a talent for unhappiness her greatest virtue" (36).

These influential assessments of María Clara as "timid" and "weak"—downright traitorous—and intended as a figure of satire by Rizal provoked two sharp responses from Nick Joaquin. Refuting the "black legend" ("Hamlet" 275) in his essays, "The Novels of Rizal: An Appreciation" and "Hamlet and Maria Clara," Joaquin decries the "misreading" and "deliberate misstatements by persons who, it cannot be doubted, have read Rizal" ("Hamlet" 264, 260). *Contra* Lopez's argument that Rizal's portrait of María Clara is intended to be satirical, Joaquin declares that "anybody who reads the book cannot but feel that the author seems to have fallen in love with his heroine" ("Novels" 67).

What further distinguishes Joaquin's position is the fact that while suffragists defined María Clara as a relic of the Spanish colonial past and celebrated the "modern woman" as a beneficiary of American-era developments, Joaquin asserts that the "female Hamlet… was wrenched out of context and forced to be the image of a later culture… that of the early American era" ("Hamlet" 264). The Philippines had "never actually experienced" the Victorian Age; it was the era of America's "Manifest Destiny" in the Philippines that functioned as "a sort of Victorian twilight" (Joaquin, "Novels" 71, 72). The recasting of María Clara as a "mock-Victorian ideal in mock-Victorian twilight" is arguably an artefact of the American colonial era, one in which Filipinos had become a "people that had gone all the way back to the ABCs of a new culture, that had forgotten or were ignorant of the great days of the Revolution, and that were naturally and consequently rather unsure of their standards and of their taste" (71-72).[7]

Joaquin's sympathetic reading counters negative characterizations of María Clara with a battery of positive qualities: she is "firm, clean, honest, graceful, devout, dignified, modest, tender and true" (74), "thoughtful, smiling, amiable, frank, confident, loving, happy, virginal, graceful, joyful, unblushing, pure, alive" ("Hamlet" 265), "no shy violet or clinging vine" (265), has "a marvelous resilience of character" (265), is capable of a "frank display of sexual rapture" (267) and "passion, of a grand passion" (270), is possessed of an "innocent ruthlessness" (276), shows "compassion for the wretched, indifference to social position and worldly goods, moral courage, spontaneity of action" (269), is "passionate and compassionate, unconventional and courageous" (270).

"How many taboos did Maria Clara break by thus speaking to Elias?" (268). Also, "[s]he simply follows the impulses of the unique person called Maria Clara—and this impulsiveness, this spontaneity, is what makes her such a *modern* person, if we bear in mind that spontaneity is the quality most value by the mod" (267). Above all, "[t]here is, in fact, nothing at all of the María-Claraish about María Clara—no, nor in any of the other women in Rizal" ("Novels" 74). "You may question her decision, but you cannot question that she has a mind of her own and that she seems capable of bending the will of others to her own" (73).

Joaquin's impassioned defense of María Clara lays bare the fact that neither the *Noli* characters' nor subsequent interlocutors' ascriptions to María Clara of the qualities of the Virgin Mary and the ideals of *la Patria* can fully capture the complex personality of the literary character. More important, the example María Clara sets follows the logic of "an example that always disrupts and alters the conceptual argument it is adduced to support" (Miller 174). Paradoxically, the ability of an example to undermine the argument of which it is used as evidence accounts for María Clara's longevity as an icon. "Being a true novelist," says Joaquin, "he [Rizal] set out to create just one particular person, a single definite individual—and he succeeded so well that his heroine has become a folk-figure, the only one of his characters who has attained the highest form of literary immortality" ("Novels" 70).

Joaquin felt compelled to write his ripostes in 1951 ("Novels") and 1976 ("Hamlet"). In the space of that quarter of a century, there had been a further sea-change in debates (both literary and societal) over women's roles and active participation in Philippine society. Feminists found constricting the gendered tropes of female vulnerability and victimhood, even as female vulnerability and victimhood remained pressing issues. The sea-change owed much to the changing circumstances in which women found themselves amidst the political ferment and sexual revolution of the 1960s and the political and economic crises of the 1970s and 1980s. This was the same era in which the commercialization of women's bodies and sexuality; cases of rape and sexualized abuse and torture by military, police, and prison authorities; the sex trade that grew up around American bases; and the tourism industry promoted under Martial Law attracted feminist criticism and mobilization (Blanc-Szanton 377; Orentlicher, Frankel, and Greenberg 88, 105; Neumann 182).

In this context, female intellectuals and activists of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, sought to expand "the pantheon of role models" for Filipino women (Roces, "Rethinking" 42). Lilia Quindoza-Santiago has explored the ideological issues underpinning the "construction of women" and documented the efforts of women to move beyond the "negative and stereotyped roles of women," particularly the "martyred maiden and the martyred mother" represented by María Clara and Sisa respectively

("Roots of Feminist Thought" 169). The feminist song "Woman" exhorts women to "open our minds" by drawing a contrast between the literary characters María Clara, Julí, Sisa, Cinderella, and Nena, on the one hand, and real-life characters like Gabriela (Silang), Teresa (Magbanua), and Tandang Sora, and present-day "[w]omen who aimed to be free" and "were not afraid to fight" like Liza (Balando), Lorena (Barros), and Liliosa (Hilao), on the other hand (171).[8] Among the placards held aloft by members of the newly-established MAKIBAKA (Malayang Samahan ng Bagong Kababaihan, Free Movement of New Women)—founded by the Women's Organizing Committee of the Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan (Association of Democratic Youth) and led by Barros—who picketed the April 18, 1970 Binibining Pilipinas beauty pageant at the Araneta Coliseum was the one bearing the slogan "Maria Clara Laos Na" (Maria Clara Already Obsolete) ("MAKIBAKA Revisited").

A noteworthy literary consequence of the expanding pantheon of role models for women is the elevation and resignification not only of the female minor characters in Rizal's novels, but also of major female characters in Rizal's own life. Dolores Feria, for example, identifies two women in Rizal's life—Teodora Alonso and Josephine Bracken—who "approximate the qualities of the tragic literary heroine" (139), and goes on to link Bracken (with whom Rizal cohabited and whom he married *in articulo mortis* [at the point of death], mere hours before his execution on December 30, 1896) to the literary character, Salomé, whom Feria considers a "María Clara in reverse" and who "anticipates the 20th century woman's frankness and sexual freedom and the pre-Spanish Filipina's ignorance of original sin" (139).

Quindoza-Santiago betrays impatience with María Clara, a "rather weak character, lacking in good disposition and social conscience, oftentimes a wretch who is uncreative and unproductive" and a betrayer of her sweetheart to boot ("Filipina as Metaphor" 118). She lauds the alternative example set by "lighthearted characters like her cousins Sinang and Victoria" (121). She lauds Paulita Gomez (who, in the *Fili*, prudently marries the wealthy mestizo Juanito Pelaez instead of Isagani) as a "straightforward and practical" character who "entertains no romantic or silly notions of running away with her former sweetheart," and also Salomé for the latter's willingness to risk "living with Elias without benefit of sacrament of matrimony, an *unconventional* decision for a woman of the time" (121; emphasis added; a not unconventional decision, it turns out, as such unions were quite commonplace then and now [Blanc-Szanton 368-69]).

If "*minor characters are the proletariat of the novel*" (Woloch 27), the reappropriation and elevation of minor characters in Rizal's novels represent a veritable "revolt of the masses" (to borrow Teodoro Agoncillo's phrase).

The María Clara Doctrine

In the 1990s, activists further expanded the category of "heroine" to "include survivors of domestic violence, partner infidelity, trafficking, prostitute and exploitation abuse" (Roces, "Rethinking" 42). This redefinition would have important implications for feminist campaigns against domestic violence (including marital rape), pornography, and abortion (36)—campaigns that deployed a narrative of victimhood that at times risked downplaying women's agency but sought nonetheless to draw public attention to the plight of women, put pressure on various institutions to punish the perpetrators, and criticize Filipino society for its commodification and ostracism of women (Roces, *Women's Movements* 63-64).

Between 1980 to 1994, rape had been called "the crime of the decade" (Zarco et al. 49).[9] Although the murder rate was six times that of rape, more than half of the inmates on death-row were convicted of rape and rape-related crimes (49). The average age of their victims was sixteen years old, and fully half were below fifteen years of age (49). Ninety percent of rape cases involved rapists who were known to the victims (51), and there was a high incidence of father-daughter rape (50). Rape volumes and rates increased during this period, likely because more women reported the crime (51) and had better economic leverage (52), and because of the work done by the Women's Desk (52). Tellingly, middle- and upper-class women who had been raped tended not to report the crime to authorities (50).

A lightning rod of debates over the legal and social implications of rape is the so-called "María Clara [legal] doctrine" invoked in rape trials. María Clara enters public discussion yet again not only as an exemplar of the "model" Filipina, but also as an example—crucially, one of the victims who are able to provide their own testimonies—of Spanish-era (Phelan 36-40 and Bankoff 37) sexual violence, now updated to the modern-day era. Here, the most salient characteristic of María Clara is the fact that, as Joaquin has stated, "even in the cloister, she did not become resigned nor submissive; that she was not silenced; that she was protesting to the end" ("Hamlet" 278). At issue is the question of how much credence should be given to a testimony of rape.

Greg Bankoff has documented the increase in cases of sexual offences (including rape and abduction of women and children) in the nineteenth century. Many more cases went unrecorded as the nature of the crime "militated against reportage and prosecution in the court of law" (Bankoff 37).[10] Rape victims had to undergo "traumatic" medical examination by at least two doctors and midwives and were exposed to the "humiliation of public comment" (37). Families not wanting to risk their "family honor" tended to deal with the issue privately. To compound matters,

the legal system often imposed "inappropriate sentences" on convicted rapists, meting out, for example, a sentence of only two years of hard labor to a student who had been convicted of raping a four-year-old child (39).

In Biblical, Roman, and English common law, which influenced rape jurisprudence in the Philippines, rape had originally been classified as a crime against (the father's or husband's) property, not the person herself (Tracy et al. 3). Marital rape was not considered rape, and the rape of married women, if considered rape, carried a lighter penalty. While Spanish medieval canon law associated nonconsensual sexual contact with force, violence, and abduction (the term *rapere* means "to seize"), it prepared the ground for prosecuting rape as a crime against the person by focusing on the issue of nonconsent of women (Kelleher 130).

In the American colonial era in the Philippines, Assembly Bill no. 305 passed by the Lower House on December 27, 1910 had defined the crime of rape as a "private" offense against victims, not a public offense nor an offense against society, and was criticized for letting off too easily the perpetrators. The Penal Code (which is identical to the French, Austrian, Neapolitan, and Brazilian codes) classified crimes of seduction, abduction and rape, and adultery as crimes involving the "dishonor of the person and of the family offended" (*Congressional Record* 200). Only with the passage of the Anti-Rape Law in 1997 (Republic Act 8353) would rape be classified as both a crime against persons (meaning that "any person, whether a prostituted person or non-virgin or one who has an active sex life may be victimized by rape") and as a public offense (meaning that not only the victim herself, but "any person who has knowledge of the crime can file a case on the victim's behalf" and "prosecution continues even if the victim drops the case or pardons the offender") (Philippine Commission on Women).

The "women's honor" doctrine was first spelled out in *People of the Philippines vs. Porfirio Taño, et al.* (G.R. no. L-11991, October 31, 1960), a case involving the rape of Herminigilda Domingo by three armed robbers. The judgment reads in part:

> We have, however, carefully examined the evidence in this respect and we found that Herminigilda [Domingo] testified that when Taño placed himself on top of her, she scratched his face, but Camina came and took hold of, and then stretched her legs apart to aid Taño; hit her on the lap and tore away her "panty"; that her "panty" had a coloration at the lower part caused by the semen of Taño while on top of her (t.s.n. pp. 16-18). Her testimony is corroborated by the finding of a contusion on her left thigh and of a coloration of her "panty" which was produced to the court. Besides, the offended party expressly declared that Taño was able to have carnal knowledge of her (*Id*, pp. 18-19). *It is a well-known fact that*

> *women, especially Filipinos, would not admit that they have been abused unless that abuse had actually happened. This is due to their natural instinct to protect their honor.* We can not believe that the offended party would have positively stated that intercourse took place unless it did actually take place. (Republic of the Philippines, *Porfirio Taño*; emphasis added)

In later years, this legal doctrine would come to be known as the "María Clara doctrine." The 1960 ruling lends credence to women's testimonies of rape based not only on the physical evidence at hand (the contusion on the victim's thigh and the semen coloration of her "panty"), but on a crucial assumption about women's "nature": "women, especially Filipinos, would not admit they have been abused unless that abuse had actually happened" because "women, especially Filipinos," possess the "natural instinct to protect their honor."

Studies elsewhere have found that rape "is the most underreported of the violent crimes" and also the "easiest accusation of violent crimes to disprove" (Morris 157, 160). The former is owing to numerous factors: the jaundiced attitude of the police toward rape, the self-recrimination of the women, the persecution inflicted by the defense at the trial, and the public humiliation of a trial that the victims are forced to endure (158). In the U.S. context, rape trials often focus on the character of the victim and the jurors are unable or unwilling to "weigh the evidence impartially" (160).

On the face of it, the "women's honor" doctrine used in the Philippines differs from the notorious "cautionary instruction" issued by American courts at rape trials. Formulated by Lord Chief Justice Matthew Hale for a specific case, the cautionary instruction had entered English common law before being exported to America (Morris 154). Unlike the cautionary instruction, the María Clara doctrine does not presume that rape is "an accusation easily to be made, hard to be proved, and harder yet to be defended by the party accused" (Hale 634, qtd. in Kolsky 111).

In their trenchant critique of the María Clara doctrine, however, Amparita Sta. Maria and Patrick Edward Balisong maintain that while "[t]he Philippine Supreme Court has come up with doctrinal pronouncements which facilitate the establishment of a rape or sexual abuse victim's credibility," the doctrine remains deeply problematical because, "before the court is able to rely on said doctrine, the victim must still meet certain criteria for her testimony to become credible. She must be young; she must appear innocent; she must not have ill motives against the rapist or abuser; and/or she must have been chaste prior to the incident" (321).

In other words, the María Clara doctrine remains wedded to the idea of women's "natural instinct to protect their honor," one that Sta. Maria and Balisong explicitly

trace back to the influential characterization of María Clara as tipo sublimo, "the archetypal Filipina" narrowly defined as "beautiful, meek, reserved," an archetype that "flows from the construction of rape, dignity, innocence, and sex" (322). In setting the stereotypical construction of María Clara as the standard by which the rape plaintiffs are judged in court, "the doctrine imposes the characteristics of Rizal's Maria Clara upon victims of rape and sexual abuse, asking said victims to fit the 'Maria Clara' mold in order that she may be avenged by judicial machinery" (322).

The María Clara doctrine has nothing to say about the failures of the criminal justice system, that is, the difficulties that Filipino women (or, for that matter, other Filipinos) experience in reporting rape and subjecting themselves to a legal system that—from police investigation to defendant's legal defense to publicized trial—"revictimizes" (Tracy et al. 6) them several times over, a fact that makes it less likely for these victims to lie about their rape. Though lying about rape is not unknown, "a charge of rape is *not* easily made" (Morris 159, original emphasis).

Fifty-eight years later, in a landmark judgment, the Supreme Court Third Division pointedly criticized the automatic application of the "women's honor" doctrine in trying rape cases:

> More often than not, where the alleged victim survives to tell her story of sexual depredation, rape cases are solely decided based on the credibility of the testimony of the private complainant. In doing so, we have hinged on the impression that *no young Filipina of decent repute would publicly admit that she has been sexually abused, unless that is the truth, for it is her natural instinct to protect her honor*. However, this misconception, particularly in this day and age, not only puts the accused at an unfair disadvantage, but creates a travesty of justice.
>
> …This opinion borders on the fallacy of *non sequitur*. And while the factual setting back then would have been appropriate to say it is natural for a woman to be reluctant in disclosing a sexual assault; today, we simply cannot be stuck to the *Maria Clara* stereotype of a demure and reserved Filipino woman. We should stay away from such mindset and accept the realities of a woman's dynamic role in society today; she who has over the years transformed into a strong and confidently intelligent and beautiful person, willing to fight for her rights. (Republic of the Philippines, *Juvy Amarela*, original emphasis)

The Supreme Court invokes the logic of moving with the times and acknowledging women's changing roles and status in society to warn against sticking to the "*Maria Clara* stereotype of a demure and reserved Filipino woman." Instead, evolving times necessitate "evaluat[ing]…the testimony of a private complainant of rape without gender bias or cultural misconception. It is important to weed out these unnecessary notions because an accused may be convicted solely on the testimony of the victim, provided of course, that the testimony is credible, natural, convincing, and consistent with human nature and the normal course of things. Thus, in order for us to affirm a conviction for rape, we must believe beyond reasonable doubt the version of events narrated by the victim" (Republic of the Philippines, *Juvy Amarela*).

The court ruled against the plaintiff Juvy Amarela because it found inconsistencies between the story she told in her affidavit and her testimony in court. Even as the court did not discount the possibility of rape in cases in which there were no visible physical signs of injury on the victim, it based its ruling on the fact that "medical findings do not corroborate physical injuries and are inconclusive of any signs of forced entry," on the fact that the crime scene was too dark for Amarela to have easily identified her rapists, and the fact that her testimony lacked "material details on how she was brought under the stage against her will."

Even though *Amarela* neither abandons nor reverses the "women's honor" doctrine, it has acted as a catalyst, spurring public debate along with "proper inquiry into the state of our laws and jurisprudence" (Sta. Maria and Balisong 323).

Equally suggestive is *People of the Philippines vs. William Villaros y Caranto*, decided later the same year, after the *Amarela* decision. The Second Division court dismissed an appeal by a convicted rapist after judging that the twelve-year-old rape victim had provided her testimony in a "candid and straightforward manner which was actually even strengthened by her cross-examination" (Republic of the Philippines, *William Villaros*). The court also judged the defense of the rapist to be "lame," underscoring the fact that "it is wrong to say that there is a standard reaction or behavior among victims of the crime of rape since each of them had to cope with different circumstances" (*William Villaros*). This is true "most certainly, when dealing with an innocent and immature child still of tender age" (*William Villaros*). "Medical findings or proofs of injuries, virginity, or an allegation of the exact time and date of the commission of the crime are not essential in the prosecution for rape" (*William Villaros*). Denial and alibi are "inherently weak defenses" compared to the "categorical testimony which has a ring of truth" (*William Villaros)*.

There have been several prominent negative reactions to the *Amarela* and *Villaros* rulings. For while *Villaros* lends credence to the testimony of the victim, it continues

to reinforce the tendency of the courts to "accord credibility to the offended parties mainly because they were a 'minor,' 'of tender age,' 'young and immature' or 'not yet exposed to the ways of the world'" (Sta. Maria and Balisong 338).

Instead, Sta. Maria and Balisong argue in favor of "[r]e-founding the Maria Clara doctrine" (345). This re-founding entails the following: "When she [the victim] comes forward and says, 'I did not consent,' premium must be put on her testimony and the *onus probandi* of proving the incredibility of the events so narrated and/or the fact of consent should fall upon the accused. Here, there is no presumption of rape, but a presumption of non-consent" (346). Sta. Maria and Balisong call for applying the doctrine "*equally to all victims*, without qualification regardless of age, level of maturity, or 'sophistication'" (324; emphasis added). They advocate the "replant[ing]" of the doctrine as

> (a) a doctrine that embodies the experience and identity of the modern Filipina, (b) a doctrine that strengthens the Philippines' Anti- Rape laws by encouraging victims to come forward and tell their stories, and (c) a rule of evidence consistent with our international obligations under the Convention on the elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and domestic laws to eliminate discrimination through gender bias and stereotyping. (324)

Sta. Maria and Balisong propose to replace the idea of the Filipina represented by the stereotype of María Clara with the idea of the "modern Filipina" as a model of diversity. "The uniformity of application, albeit nuanced, of the *Maria Clara* doctrine sought here removes it from its patriarchal origins and recognizes the diversity of women and the various ways they express themselves and the many ways they react to trauma" (347).

Sta. Maria and Balisong are in substantive agreement with *Amarela*'s insistence on going beyond the stereotyped-María Clara ideal in rape trials. Where they differ is in their effort to reinterpret, rather than ditch altogether, the María Clara doctrine. Given that definitions of the "modern Filipina" vary according to the people who invoke the term, this move may run the risk of some judges falling back on the default stereotype of María Clara in their rulings.[11]

Still, Sta. Maria and Balisong's recuperation of the María Clara doctrine is intended to emphasize two points. One is their proposal's firm and continued commitment to the 1997 Anti-Rape Act (Republic Act no. 8353) which considers rape no longer as a "crime against chastity" but as a "crime against persons"; expands the definition of rape to include marital rape and acts other than penile penetration; and installs the "rape shield" barring the plaintiff's sexual history from being admitted in court

(Roces, *Women's Movements* 111). The other is the universal applicability of the María Clara doctrine, which is no longer limited to (certain kinds of) women but should be applied "equally to all victims without qualification regardless of age, level of maturity, or 'sophistication'" (Sta. Maria and Balisong 324).

Purging the legal doctrine of its sexist assumptions about the character of rape victims has far-reaching implications: it affirms the universal character of rape victims' experiences, irrespective of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Instead of completely abjuring María Clara's exemplarity, Sta. Maria and Balisong propose to universalize it. "Re-founding" the María Clara doctrine broadens the doctrine's applicability without compromising the adjudication process that weighs all available evidence and testimonies. In this way, rape victims tell their stories and obtain justice without fear of judicial bias and character assassination.

In the same spirit of critical recuperation, the women's organization Gabriela warns against the abandonment of the María Clara doctrine, arguing that *Amarela* rests on faulty judgment that emboldens perpetrators to abuse women with impunity (Requejo). Gabriela secretary-general Joms Salvador points out that the Supreme Court's dismissal of the María Clara doctrine as a "non-sequitur" can just as "equally describe 'the absurd basis for assuming that Filipino women's position in society has improved and are no longer prone to abuse by men'" (Requejo). Adds Salvador:

> There is no reality-based connection to be drawn linking women's transformed social status or even willingness to fight for their own rights to making women immune to rape and other sexual attacks. The reasoning that the Supreme Court used flies in the face of actual rise of reported and unreported rapes, sexual harassment, bullying, trafficking, and other crimes against women….
>
> The complicated and overwhelming systems of justice, penology, investigative protocols, and services that victims face when trying to address their attackers are already loaded against women, as the legal process already forces them to prove the crimes and repeatedly relive the trauma in public…This Supreme Court ruling will surely add a very heavy layer of hardships and even higher financial and social strain especially on poor women victims, while practically giving perpetrators an easy way out. (Requejo)

Salvador issues a timely reminder that "more disadvantages are stacked up against millions of low-income women such as the complainant from Davao" (i.e., Amarela), and "[t]his sadly dovetails into [*sic*] the violent anti-women policies of the [Rodrigo] Duterte regime, whose frequent misogynist and cruel rape jokes are being taken

as official doctrine and moral standard. We can expect even more state forces and common criminals to quote his gospel for committing sexual violence and get absolved by the courts" (Requejo). Salvador challenges the Supreme Court "to not be party to a worsening of 'the already faulty system and desist from adding more burdens on women's access to justice'" (Requejo).

The Afterlives of María Clara

If the María Clara doctrine is currently undergoing an update to fit the diverse profile of the "modern Filipina" as well as an upgrade to broaden its applicability to all victims of rape, many more re-imaginings of María Clara are underway in the Philippines and across the Filipino diaspora. More than any Filipino literary character, María Clara has had a rich and variegated afterlife—or more accurately, afterlives—more than a hundred and twenty years after her "death" in the *Fili*. Her iterability and transmissibility allow her to proliferate in different forms across different platforms.

The circulation of María Clara is enabled by four processes:

1. *Translation and Adaptation*

   The *Noli* has been translated into many languages (Testa-De Ocampo 496-97) and adapted for film, radio, television, stage (play, musical, opera, ballet), *komiks* and *manga*, and school skits. María Clara has also been the subject of the visual and plastic arts, dance, documentaries, popular music (including a girl band that calls itself "Maria Clara. The New Generation"), and fashion design.

2. *Temporalization*

   María Clara evokes the Hispanic past and Filipino cultural heritage. She enjoys a person-like, as-if-alive existence. A TripAdvisor review of a trip to the Villa Angela Heritage House in Vigan City is entitled "We half-expected Maria Clara to show up!" That of the Casa de Obando B&B at the Sulyap Gallery Café in Laguna is entitled "Maria Clara feel" (TripAdvisor). Not for nothing is she identified with the Spanish-era *traje de mestiza* costume.

   In addition, she lends her name to nostalgic, heritage-affirming, and cultural initiatives such as a museum, an annual ball, a beauty contest, a suite of folk dances, a beauty-pageant catwalk, postage stamps, and streets in Sampaloc (Manila), Quezon City, and Tagbilaran City (Bohol).

3. *Commodification*

María Clara has become a brand name. She lends her name to the following: anti-covid masks (Burdang Lumban); a wooden folklore chess set, ca 1960; desserts like "Sikreto ni Maria Clara" (ripe mango, *suman* in cream [macapuno ice cream], and *panocha* [muscovado sugar]); condiments like spiced vinegar (Lutong MariaClara's advertising slogan is "Mababaliw ka sa Sarap!" [You'll go crazy over the great taste!]); cross-stitch patterns; Mattel Philippines' Barbie Doll Foreign Issue; wallpaper; jewelry; sanitary napkin advertising campaigns (Kotex's "End of Compromise: The Reinvented Maria Clara Movement": "Kotex believes that today's modern Maria Clara are basically progressive women and they deserve more elegant [*sic*] solution to tackle leakage problems so they introduced the latest innovation with Kotex with ProActive Guards" [Purple Plum Fairy]); hotel accommodations; cosmetics like lipstick (Features and Shades Filipiñana Collection in "Maria Clara" shade: "A LITERARY FIGURE OF CLASS AND ELEGANCE. SHE IS THE ULTIMATE FILIPINA OF GRACE AND PURITY.") and *tawas* (Maria Clara's Underarm Whitening Cream); cafés (Tablea de Maria Clara); bags (Maria Clara Original Urbanigs); and wine (Distilería Limtuaco's "María Clara Sangría," a "classic red wine with a whisper of citrus fruits").

4. *Transmediality*

Transmediality refers to stories that, in the process of crossing multiple texts, media, and publishing platforms, undergo such changes as to be no longer strictly dependent on their original source texts (a concept adapted from the original formulation by Henry Jenkins's discussion of *The Matrix* franchise [chapter 3]). Rizal's novels lend themselves to transmedial storytelling, as they are nowadays mostly read or consumed by Filipinos not in their original Spanish printed version, but in translation (often abridged), and in multiple formats and platforms (say, komiks, "moral lessons," even clipart). More than mere adaptations, they give birth to new stories about María Clara and to new characterizations of her modern-day incarnations that may or may not (and often do not) any longer refer back to Rizal's original creation and story.

While Roger P. Olivares's *Noli Me Tangere 2* engages in transposition by reimagining Ibarra as an official of the National Bureau of Investigation, María Clara as a medical student and volunteer social worker at Payatas, and Elías as Crisostomo's boyhood bosom buddy and college classmate, the writers who publish in Wattpad are even more adventurous, judging from the taglines of the following works:

"Codename: Maria Clara" by iangelspark: "She rebelled against oppression. She fought hand in hand with her friends and family. She fell in love but [*sic*] betrayed…She was the reason for the fall of rebellion [*sic*]. Can she fix the damage? Or forever hide as…Codename: Maria Clara." This is the story of a "princess of oppression" who is a social worker and pre-school teacher by day, a "magnanakaw" (thief) by night.

"Maria Clara na Humaling kay Maria Blanca" ("Maria Clara, Who is Mad About Maria Blanca"] by Librarian_MJ: "A not so common yet real lovestory [*sic*] between a straight and a bisexual."

"Maria Clara—ng Pokpok" ("Maria Clara—of the Prostitutes") by cityartemis11: "Ngunit ang lihim na di batid ng marami/Babaeng ito'y may angking kati/Matipid na ngiti'y may itinatagong landi/Babaeng makati, gusto ng kamot lagi!" ("But the secret unknown to many others/[Is that t]his woman has an inborn itch/Parsimonious smiles hide a flirtatious nature/A horny woman, always likes to be scratched!")

In Lieu of a Conclusion

On the centenary of Rizal's birth, Alfredo T. Morales wrote of "the star-crossed Maria Clara" that she was "more sinned against than sinning," that "[f]ew heroines in fiction have suffered worse torture than Maria Clara" (19). Morales concluded that by the end of the *Noli*, "Maria Clara remains alive but is better off dead" (21).

María Clara's posthumous career shows us that there is life in this literary character. Yet far from simply relaying the intent and content of the original *Noli,* María Clara's transmissibility—achieved through longstanding debates on her character and through multiple acts of translation and adaptation, commodification, temporalization, and transmedial storytelling—arguably changes the nature of Rizal's character as readers/audiences/consumers come to view her. It changes, too, people's relationships to, and understandings of, Rizal and his novels. In his study of the evolution of the *María Clara* folk-dance suite, for example, José Miguel Díaz-Rodríguez remarks that efforts at revision result in "new layers of signification acquired by María Clara," thereby making her "a renewed, empowered, and relevant figure for the 21st century" (41). In effect, María Clara's iterability "changes the meaning of the original, its structure, and its relation to history" (Ziarek 182).[12]

The *Noli* stages this compulsion to talk about María Clara by claiming *not* to talk about María Clara. The final section of its epilogue begins with the sentence "Of María Clara nothing is known except that the sepulcher guards her in its bosom"

("De María Clara no se volvió á saber nada más sino que el sepulcro parece la guarda en su seno"; Rizal, *Noli* 352). And yet, notwithstanding public ignorance of what has happened to the young woman, the epilogue proceeds to recount the incident of the rooftop. Readers are left in no doubt as to the identity of the unnamed nun. The key point here is that the nun is stripped of her name (nuns do, after all, take on new names when they enter the cloister) and her class background. She is as unprotected as the other nuns among whom she stands before church and state authorities. The *Noli* concludes with a sentence that again names her but claims to have no further information about her: "There was no more talk of the matter [the crying nun], nor of the unfortunate [unhappy] María Clara" ("Del hecho no se volvió á hablar más, como tampoco de la infeliz María Clara"; 354).

The final section of the epilogue is powered by the narrative compulsion to tell María Clara's story, even as it simultaneously performs the public and official "forgetting" of her. There is equally the narrative compulsion to let María Clara tell her story, as she herself offers testimony of her own plight. Significantly, however, none of that testimony is available as direct discourse, and must be inferred and elaborated on by the reader from vague but suggestive phrases about outrages against hypocrisy and horrors that María Clara herself denounces. It is the reader who fills in the "horror" story of what happens to María Clara inside the nunnery, while bearing witness to her effort to tell the tale and, just as important, the efforts of colonial authorities of the state and church to gaslight and silence her, to keep her story from being retold and acted upon. In inviting the reader to sit in judgment of María Clara, the *Noli* solicits the reader's verdict on—the reader's denunciation of and, above all, decision to act on—the miscarriage of justice.

History did not and will not silence María Clara. Filipinos haven't heard the last of her.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are the author's.
2. Toril Moi in her critique of the taboo against treating characters "as if they were real" argues that the rejection of thematic and moral analysis (in other words, criticism "explicitly drawing on identification, emotional responses and moral or ethical discussion of characters and behavior" which "came to be seen as the sign of amateurs at work") has more to do with the specific aesthetic and professional preferences and agenda of literary critics under the influence of formalism and modernism than with rigorous philosophical argumentation (40-47). Such a formalist orientation may have had its adherents in the English departments of Philippine universities in the 1950s and 1960s, but it never dominated the study of Rizal and his novels. This was in part owing to the fact that Rizal studies is a multi-(trans-)disciplinary field that is continually enriched by the contributions not only of academics and public intellectuals, but also government officials and other professionals, and, most important, lay persons.
3. Simoun (Ibarra) may be the fulcrum of the *Fili*, but María Clara haunts the second novel as well. Simoun's principal motive for returning to Filipinas and organizing an insurrection is to break down the doors of the nunnery and rescue, and reunite with, María Clara. María Clara's reliquary locket is an important leitmotif that drives the subplot involving Cabesang Tales, Julí, Basilio, and Capitán Tiago. The locket is a gift that connects people while resisting monetarization. The gift of a loving father, Tiago, to his daughter, the locket is in turn given by María Clara to a leper out of compassion for his plight. The leper then gives it in gratitude (not payment) to Basilio for the latter's medical services, and Basilio gives it to his fiancée Julí. Rather than sell it to obtain money to secure her father Cabesang Tales's freedom, Julí becomes a domestic servant. Cabesang Tales finally leaves it with Simoun in exchange for taking the latter's revolver. The *Noli* is about the thwarting of the love affair between Ibarra and María Clara by Spanish colonial authority, a thwarting that ultimately obstructs the elite alliance that would have united two of the wealthiest and most socially prominent Filipino families in San Diego. In the *Fili*, the symbolic barter across classes lays the foundation for the alliance between Simoun and the "terror of Luzon" Matanglawin, who would, together with disaffected students like Plácido Penitente, plan a revolution aimed at overthrowing the Spanish colonial government. Typical of the gender biases of Rizal's *ilustrado* generation and contrary to historical fact, women are not the main, direct participants in this fictional insurrection.
4. An important innovation of the women's movement has been its construction of a "near-Utopian vision of the pre-Hispanic Philippines, with no significant gender inequality" (Owen 24), with the babaylan as a "powerful icon" of the feminist movement (Roces, "Rethinking" 43).

5. Cf. Castrence 6; Radaic 114, 116; Cruz 86-87; and Arrizón 137, who sums up the critical attitude as one that views María Clara as an "embodiment of a static beauty and a subordinate agency," one that "inspires intense critical engagement."

6. See also Virgilio Almario's discussion of parallel efforts to delineate the character of, and hold up for emulation, the "Babaeng Makabago" on the part of pioneer Tagalog writers like Lope K. Santos (156).

7. Apolinario Mabini had been the first prominent Filipino to propose a qualified form of women's suffrage (Roces, "Is the Suffragist" 31). In his draft constitution for the 1899 Malolos Republic, he had set the following eligibility requirements for women: they must be at least twenty-one years old and taxpayers, and not subject to parental and marital authority (31). Limited though its enfranchisement proposal may have been, Mabini's draft was not adopted by the Republic. The one that was eventually adopted failed to include any provision for enfranchising women. It was not until 1937 that women's suffrage was legalized in the Philippines, the same year that European women were granted the vote in the Dutch East Indies, seven years ahead of women in Japan and the general female population of the Dutch East Indies, ten ahead of Taiwan and South Korea and twenty ahead of Malaya, and seventeen years after American women (excluding Native-American, Latinx, Asian-American, and African-American women) won the right of vote.

8. The last three were activist-revolutionaries who were killed during the Marcos era. On women's participation in the Philippine Revolution (1896-1902), see Doran.

9. The first judicial execution to be carried out under President Ferdinand E. Marcos's watch was that of the three rapists (the fourth died in jail of a drug overdose) of Maryknoll student and actress Magdalena "Maggie" de la Riva in May 1972 (Republic of the Philippines, *Jaime Jose Gomez*). The 1987 Constitution abolished the death penalty but allowed the Congress to reinstate it for crimes classified as "heinous." In 1993, Fidel Ramos signed Republic Act 7659 restoring the death penalty. The first person executed after the reinstatement of the death penalty was Leo Echegaray, who was convicted of raping his ten-year-old stepdaughter. Under Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, a moratorium was placed on the death penalty. In 2017, a bill to approve the death penalty for heinous crimes was passed by the House of Representatives. Rodrigo Duterte, who had campaigned to restore the death penalty, defended his War on Drugs by citing the Maggie de la Riva case, saying that drug-influenced rapists had no compunction about raping babies: "May I be forgiven by Maggie de la Riva. 'Yung mga nirerape doon, talagang magaganda. Worth going to jail and worth dying for.... Kaya nga electrocuted man 'yun sila. Well, 'yun ang kabayaran" ("In earlier times, those who were raped were really beautiful. That's why they were electrocuted. That was the payment"; Ranada). De la Riva expressed disappointment that rape had not been included in the list of crimes punishable by death (Abanilla). The bill to restore the death penalty passed the House of Representatives in 2017 but, as of this writing (May 13, 2021), has so far failed to garner sufficient support at the Senate.

10. Compare this with Kolsky's study of colonial India, where British handling of rape was deeply colored not only by gender prejudices focusing on "the menace of female deception and false complaints," but also by cultural-essentialist assumptions about the untrustworthiness of "native" witnesses and the "peculiarities of Indian culture" (113, 112).
11. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for this insight.
12. Ziarek is here drawing on Walter Benjamin's important insights, spelled out in "The Translator's Task" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": "For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change" (Benjamin, "Task of the Translator" 73).

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