Gina Apostol, *Insurrecto: A Novel*. New York: Soho Books, 2018. 316pp. ISBN: 978-1-61695-944-9.
Dominic Sy, *A Natural History of Empire: Stories*. Quezon City: Bughaw, 2019. 110pp. ISBN: 978-971-550-925-1.

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In 1976, the American filmmaker Francis Coppola and his family flew to the Philippines, to create what would become the critically acclaimed *Apocalypse Now* (1979). An epic feature that adapts Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899) to the context of the then freshly-concluded Vietnam War, it was shot in the Philippines because of the country's noted "similarity to Vietnam" (Coppola 17). Of this resemblance, however, Jaya Jacobo writes that such is "a moment where the same makes its double vanish, where the other recedes into a shadow-image…[:] the verisimilar claims of cinematic realism transforms the filmic location into a space bereft of any locality, thereby subservient to any order to produce a performance that is *otherworldly*" (Jacobo 192). In other words, the film is a moment of *disappearance* of the Philippine islands: as much as an exhibition of the tropical landscape, it is also its most cruel "misrecognition… as something else" (Abbas 7, in Jacobo 191)—something un-Philippine.

In Gina Apostol's *Insurrecto* (2018), Coppola's film was supposedly "challenged" by another (albeit fictional) feature on the Vietnam War, made by a fellow (also fictional) American filmmaker, Ludo Brasi, whose *The Unintended* did not earn as much accolades as Coppola's film, but which became a cult classic in its own right (11). Years later, Brasi's daughter, Chiara, a filmmaker herself, realizes her father's inspiration for his film; this, in turn, inspires Chiara's vision for her third feature: a film about an American photographer named Cassandra Chase, who would document the barbaric American retaliation against the uprising of the natives of Balangiga, Samar, the Philippines, in 1901.

To materialize her vision, Chiara flies to the Philippines, and enlists the services of the Filipino Magsalin as her translator and company to the island of Samar. However, what was supposed to be a mere project on *reversion* for Magsalin (that is, a provision for "a set of matching signifiers that, if reversed, will portray the privileged language [read: English] as in fact the other [read: Filipino], and vice versa") (60) becomes a practice on *conversion*: Magsalin ends up rewriting Chiara's script, "present[ing] the possibilities of [its] translation," as to become a text in which the real-life revolutionary Casiana Nacionales is foregrounded, instead of the American

Chase. And when Chiara accuses Magsalin of "replacing the story… an invasion," Magsalin asserts that such was not her intention, offering other ways to look at her gesture: "A mirror perhaps? A double-crossing agent! An occupation!" (96-97).

At its core, the novel narrates the journey of these two women from the metropole to the island of Samar, riding a Mitsubishi Pajero and likening themselves to *Thelma & Louise* (1991) (121)—only they were accompanied by "a pair of privates first class" (118) who were also natives of Samar. This premise, however, is further complicated by Apostol's prominent technique of deferral, interweaving four narratives—the women's individual histories, as well as their own versions of the supposedly same script—deployed in a non-linear manner. What emerges is an embodiment of time after the deepest of trauma: a history that is because fractured, also "keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (Benjamin 257) with the inevitable linearity of a book.

For the book is divided into chapters that are not numbered in order: after a curious run-down of the novel's "cast of characters and some other figures," it opens with its supposed twentieth chapter, followed by the second, the third, the twenty-first, and so on, with no observable pattern. The novel's supposed first chapter only appears in its second part—along with ten other chapters similarly numbered as firsts. With such multiplication of the novel's proposed initial moment, it evidently resists any effort to be read in a chronological manner. Even if one attempts to begin with the novel's first chapter, one is confronted right away with the burden of choosing which of the eleven first chapters must come before which—a task that, on its own, can be done in over millions of ways, including the possibility that one simply chooses a version, or some versions, and deliberately ignores the rest.

Considering the common Filipino perception of the novel to be made up of a "connected series of events" ("konektadong serye ng mga pangyayari") (translation mine) ("Nobéla"), *Insurrecto*'s disordered design—or designed disorder—effectively disrupts then the purported metonymic unfolding of the form. This way, the novel as an embodiment of history is rendered to be contiguously aphasiac: similarities become more crucial, not only between fragments of the same narrative threads, but also among the fragments of all narrative threads, as to let a semblance of wholeness emerge, however impressionistic. In other words, what Apostol generates is a fiction that is most metaphoric in its strategy of performance.

Hence, the sparseness of its prose:

> During the best times Ali Mall is a *decrepit*, cramped cement block of shops hosting rugby glue sniffers, high school truants, and depressed carnival men in their off-hours. It was built in 1976, after the Thrilla in Manila. Ali Mall is across from the

> Araneta Coliseum in Cubao, site of the match that destroyed the career of the heavyweight champion of the world, Joe "The Gorilla" Frazier, and *the source of our modern discomfort* perhaps—a faint unease over earthly striving—whenever we remember the power and beauty of Muhammad Ali.
>
> Even at noon Ali Mall is *creepy*. The circus is nearby, and a cranky carousel rounds out *a tiresome concept of eternity*. Magsalin enters by the basement annex through the Philippine Airlines office toward the Botak shop and a trinket store selling Hello Kitty Barrettes. A security guard is texting by some plywood boards. A clown stands by, also holding a phone, his fingers in the act of reply. Magsalin heads straight to the bakery selling cinnamon buns and pan de sal. (9) (italics mine)

With the metaphoric strategy of the novel, such description is intuited to be less of a chronotropic maneuvering through the narrative than an insistence of argument regarding the landscape itself: Ali Mall is a monument for modern Manila, if not the Philippines itself. One can then infer that Ali Mall, as a metaphor, can also be hypothetically replaced (or in Chiara's words, "invaded"; or in Magsalin's, "occupied") by similar monuments of "modern discomfort" in the metropole—so long as the "decrepit" and "creepy" quality of the tropics is eternally, and tiresomely, rounded out.

And so much so that the Ali Mall described in the novel is temporally asymmetrical with its supposed milieu: Ali Mall is hardly "creepy" now, since its renovation in 2010 that remarkably improved its interior lightings; the mentioned nearby circus has been long demolished, more than a decade prior to the current Duterte regime in which the novel is set. Therefore, in such metaphorization, similar to what takes place in Coppola's film, a violent disappearance must also be at work: as the novel reflexively ruminates eventually through Magsalin, such descriptions of the contemporary Philippines "might bear traces of her [Magsalin's—but also Apostol's?] memory's obsolescence… [and] in fact set among details of a vanished world" (61).

As a novel that attempts to "show us the dark heart of a forgotten war that would shape the next century of Philippine and American history," what *Insurrecto* ultimately offers then is a performance: the aforementioned war critically takes place less within the competing narratives in the novel, than in the struggle of reading the text itself, given its temporal and metaphoric strategies that disrupts the form, especially in its speciation in the Philippine imagination. And that such disruptions come from Apostol, a writer currently based in the United States, only doubles the violence of the Philippine disappearance to a Filipino reader: despite the desire to

foreground an often neglected moment in Philippine history, the novel induces the same neglect through its impressionistic metaphorizations and aphasiac techniques, dangerously repeating to the reader the phenomenon of forgetting. And if the latter is indeed the motivation of the performance—what for, and what then?

Perhaps, a novel response from the tropics can be nominated through Dominic Sy's *A Natural History of Empire* (2019), the winner of the inaugural Kritika Kultura/Ateneo de Manila University Press First Book Prize. Dubbed as "stories," it gathers seven of Sy's works set in various milieu, ranging from Mexico during the Spanish colonial era to Quezon City, the Philippines under the present regime. Of the "collection," the competition judge Apostol writes that it "redresses the innumerable slights perpetrated on Philippine history—whether by dictators, conquistadors, or that other killer, time—by touching directly on its material fabric, restitching it: documents, neglected episodes, personal memory" ("News").

In such collection of stories, repetitions are most expected, as a manifestation of the curatorial principle that gathers these otherwise discrete and separate texts. In Sy's book, however, repetitions become less crucial in the motifs of the stories than in the images to be found in scattered moments: the procession of a saint in Mexico during the Spanish colonial era ("The Fingers of Sta. Juana"), in another story, becomes the funeral for the Philippine hero Mabini in Manila during the American Occupation ("A Natural History of the Empire"); while the madness that seemed to befall a Spanish friar leading to his demise ("The Agonies of Fray Salvador") is hinted in another story to be merely a natural phenomenon understood by a few natives ("Some Quiet Conversation"). Characters in the first story would even reappear in the fourth, fifth, and seventh stories, provoking one to recall the other stories too, lest other recurrences are missed. This way, the collection becomes a practice in memory: instances become curiously familiar, however faintly—an experience of deja vu.

In Sy's collection, therefore, one can move from one distinct story to another, but is also somehow compelled to piece them all together, no matter how obliquely. The first story, titled "Prologomena," sets the imperative: briefly narrating the life of a man who repeatedly writes manuscripts of stories (4-6), it appears to preface the entire collection, suggesting that what follows are parts of these manuscripts. However, with the collection being inclined toward the conventions of the short story, the seeming discreteness of each text insists a gap among them: that despite recurrences and practically threading through the entire Philippine history in its most conventional periodization—from the "precolonial" (as in parts of "Some Quiet Conversation") to the present (as in "Prologomena" and "Before the Fire")—the book, as a whole, resists a clear, if not grand narrative—and hence, of being a novel too made up of a connected series of events.

History, thus embodied in Sy's book, becomes palimpsestic, with traces of other times dimly visible—and consequently, somehow contemporary—at any given point. Memory then is not merely subjected to the

givenness of historical disarray (for if so, one does not need to read anymore: this is already the daily Philippine traffic), but in fact urged to make connections where there seemed to be none. It is perhaps here that fiction, especially historical fiction, becomes most powerful as a decolonial gesture.

Philippine reappearance then, no matter how momentarily, becomes possible: in the critical attentiveness of the short story form to details, materials are recognized to be of this tropical world instead of some metaphorical other. In the story "Then Cruel Quiet," for instance, the marching of the ants in a bathroom (57) is sensed to be less of an impressionistic metaphor to, say, the Philippine "heritage of smallness" (Joaquin), than it is an implication of a middle-class household in a developing suburbs with a diabetic matriarch. And as the historian character named "Dom" argues in the story-cum-academic essay "The Agonies of Fray Salvador," details like this "constitute a valuable case of microhistory, a field that in our [Filipinos'] country's historiography remains remarkably and unfortunately bare" (60). Perhaps, it is through opening chances for similar reappearance of the Philippines, however minute, can Philippine historical fiction be truly novel.

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