Magical Orality in Tess Uriza Holthe’s *When the Elephants Dance*

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Dedicated to Gerardo Pimentel Pacio,

my Lolo, who worked as a civil engineer under the Japanese during the occupation and risked his life by dropping food from the trains to the guerrillas under the cloak of the night.

This work is my humble contribution to the revolution.
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Introduction

“If history were told in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”
-Rudyard Kipling

It is no coincidence that I begin this work with the words of Rudyard Kipling. As a coveted English poet and storyteller in the late Victorian era, Kipling wrote a number of works, among the best remembered being the children’s story collection, The Jungle Book (1894), and his famous 1899 poem, “The White Man’s Burden.” The poem appears to be a favorite accompaniment to lectures and lessons on Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, published in the same year. Indeed, the poem is best known for its influence as a literary justification of imperialism. In an imperative tone, Kipling’s poem honors the imperialist movement of the 19th century as one of progress and sacrifice. The initial stanza reads,

“Take up the White Man’s burden, Send forth the best ye breed
   Go bind your sons to exile, to serve your captives’ need
   To wait in heavy harness, On fluttered folk and wild-
      Your new-caught sullen peoples, Half-devil and half-child.”

“Take up the White Man’s burden.” The first two words command citizens to save and civilize their imperial subjects—but to whom specifically are these imperative clauses directed?

Due to Kipling’s background as an English poet, readers may easily mistake “the White Man’s burden” as an expression alluding to the expansion of the British Empire. The poem, however, was intended to captivate an American audience. Originally published in the popular U.S. magazine, McClure’s (1893-1929), the poem, in its final stanza, distinguishes between addresser and addressee,

“Take up the White Man’s burden, Have done with childish days–
   The lightly proffered laurel, The easy, ungrudged praise.

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Comes now, to search your manhood, through all the thankless years
Cold, edged with dear-bought wisdom, The judgment of your peers!”^{2}

Who are the peers of which Kipling speaks? Who judges their actions? Published in *McClure’s* during a time in which the U.S. would begin its own imperialistic endeavors, the poem is manifestly addressed to an American audience. The poem, therefore, portrays the U.S. under scrutiny by its more experienced peers in the imperial arena—namely, the British Empire. The final stanza, with its proffered laurel and praise, welcomes the U.S. newcomers into the “colonial game.”^{3}

These details are commonly forgotten or overlooked in teachings of the text. Overtime, “The White Man’s Burden” has been reduced to a poetic reference and phrase generally alluding to this great imperial era. Few may know the precise occasion of its publication. On February 5, 1899, the publication of “The White Man’s Burden” coincided with the second and final day of the largest battle of the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), known as the Battle of Manila^{4}. The following day, the U.S. Congress ratified the Treaty of Paris and transferred control of the Philippines from Spain to the United States. The little-known, original title of Kipling’s poem alludes to this history: “The White Man’s Burden: the United States and the Philippine Islands.” But the latter half of the title receded into the abyss of historical memory as the prominent phrase, “The White Man’s Burden,” became the mantra of Western imperialism. Without the context of *McClure’s* and subsequent satirical cartoons depicting the Filipino savage in various media outlets at the time, the poem’s explicit reference to these historical tensions between the

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^{2} Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden.”
U.S. and the Philippines is, for the most part, left behind in the annals of the once famous magazine.

**Doomed to Repeat: A History Forgotten**

The United States was not the only country to begin a legacy of conquest inspired by the British Empire. Western imperialism provided a model of power that Japan would adopt in later wars and colonial acquisitions. Fearing subjugation by the Western powers, the leaders of Japan’s Meiji government in 1868 established a nationalistic policy of *fukoku kyohei* (rich country, strong military) that emphasized goals of economic development and military strength in order to keep up with the West and ensure its independence. Along with efforts to industrialize and modernize internally, there remained the need for Japan to maximize its political and economic position in order to remain competitive on an international scale. These concerns for national security would drive Japan into wars for territorial expansion in China, Russia, and Korea. Japan’s emulations of imperialistic behaviors by the Western powers between the late nineteenth and early-twentieth century fed into the infamous era of Japanese aggression throughout World War II.⁵

World War II began in the Pacific theater with the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The following morning, Japanese warplanes began a bombing campaign upon the Philippines, still a colony of the United States at that time. General Douglas MacArthur, leader of the Allied troops; island resident; and military advisor to the Philippines, declared Manila an open city on January 2, 1942 to spare the nation’s capital from the bombings. The Japanese ignored the proclamation and proceeded to infiltrate the country. Under the order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, MacArthur retreated on March 11, 1942 to Australia, where he would

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⁵ Bill Gordon, “Explanations of Japan’s Imperialistic Expansion, 1894-1910,” (Wesleyan University, December 2003.)
organize a guerrilla island force in the Philippines via radio communications. Nearly a month later, 70,000 American and Filipino troops would endure the infamous Bataan Death March from the Bataan Peninsula to become prisoners of war in Camp O’Donnell, Tarlac. Bombings continued, and on May 6, 1942, MacArthur’s successor, General Jonathan Wainwright, surrendered at the island of Corregidor. Japan successfully infiltrated the Philippines, gaining allies amongst the Filipinos through the promotion of an alliance among Asian nations known as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (GEACPS) that promised to stamp out Western imperialism. Under this guise of “Asia for the Asians,” Japan adopted similar techniques of colonial rule as the Western powers, relying upon pacification and education as a means of suppressing the Filipino people. The next three years became known as the Japanese occupation, the third major historic wave of colonization that the Philippines would experience until February 1945.

It is here that the subjects of our novel find themselves. “February 1945.” In light gray typeface, these two words begin Tess Uriza Holthe’s debut novel, When the Elephants Dance (2002). Her book remembers this dire and oft-forgotten history, the month of the Battle of Manila, a period in which the Japanese killed over 100,000 Filipinos as their final retaliation against the American troops that would soon close in on their forces. Civilians died by bombs, machine guns, bayonets, and katanas; thousands were subject to torture and rape. Manila would no longer be the illustrious capital of the Pearl of the Orient—the Japanese transformed the city into a center of devastation. The city’s majestic government buildings, from City Hall to the

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8 Holthe, author’s note, xi.
9 “The Pearl of the Orient” is a common nickname for the Philippines.
University of the Philippines, were converted into fortified strongholds. Hotels were transformed into towering brothels that held Filipinas captured in the midst of battle. Warehouses became the deathbeds of the thousands of civilians who were herded into buildings bolted shut and set ablaze\(^\text{10}\). By the end of the battle, the *Amerikanos* had won, but the Philippines, by and large, had fallen.

**Reconstructing the Past: A Glimpse at *When the Elephants Dance***

“My father was thirteen years old when he and a group of other civilians were caught by the Japanese while chopping wood in an undesignated area,” Holthe writes in her author’s note. “Their group was led into one of the nearby buildings and tortured. The opening scene of my novel is fictional, but based on his experience.”\(^\text{11}\) Based upon historical research and the firsthand experiences of wartime survivors, *When the Elephants Dance* shares the story of a community of survivors hiding in an underground cellar during the end of the Japanese occupation. This fragmented family, consisting of what few estranged relatives, neighbors and community members were able to escape the murderous killings, help one another to survive by sharing food, a home, and stories. Beginning in the province of Bulacan located just north of the capital of Manila, the novel moves across time and space as characters exchange the role of narrator, and also, of storyteller. This distinction, I later argue, is necessary to understanding the essential function of the form that Holthe employs in her reconstruction of this narrative of war.

*Elephants*\(^\text{12}\) is split into four parts: “Part One: Alejandro Karangalan,” “Part Two: Isabelle Karangalan,” “Part Three: Domingo Matapang,” and “Part Four: Alejandro Karangalan.” As the three authorial narrators, Alejandro, Isabelle, and Domingo relate the

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\(^{11}\) Holthe, author’s note, ix.

\(^{12}\) I will occasionally refer to *When the Elephants Dance* as *Elephants*, the abbreviation used by Tess Uriza Holthe in our e-mail correspondence.
horrors of the war in the present tense and from a first-person point of view. Readers move from Alejandro’s account of torture to the brutal rape of Isabelle to the capture of legendary guerrilla leader, Domingo Matapang, and back to the final chapter of the family’s near-execution in the warehouses of Manila. For these characters, there are few places to turn for either safety or security in the wake of ongoing bombardment and battle. The storytellers of the novel, however, create an alternate space for survival.

Representations of oral storytelling pervade Elephants as minor characters insert their own tales into the narrative frame. Mang\(^{13}\) Carlito, Roman Flores, Aling\(^{14}\) Anna, Mang Pedro, and Tay\(^{15}\) Fredrico revive the broken spirits of their kababayan, their fellow countrymen, by sharing hardships and experiences previously unbeknownst to either their family or community. Mang Carlito begins by revealing a childhood of shame and emotional abuse within his family. Tay Fredrico imparts a final tale of loss in which his beloved family and wife are murdered at the hands of Spanish missionaries and conquistadores. These “storytellers,” as I term them, take up the narration for themselves to share their past experiences via the first-person perspective as the authorial narrators do, though their stories are distinguished by the use of the past tense.

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\(^{13}\) “Mang” is a contraction of the Tagalog honorific, “Mamang,” meaning “Mister.” Mang Carlito, for example, is the Tagalog equivalent of the title, “Mr. Carl.” Mang commonly precede the names of elder male characters in the Elephants.

\(^{14}\) Similar to “Mang,” “Aling” is a Tagalog honorific meaning “Miss” or “Missus.” “Mrs. Anna” is the English equivalent of the Tagalog title, Aling Anna.

\(^{15}\) “Tay” is an abbreviation for the word, “Tatay,” meaning “Father.” Tay Fredrico is the eldest character whose children refer to him as “Tay.” Subsequently, the rest of the family follows suit, including his grandchildren, although he is their grandfather.
Figure 1. Narrators vs. Storytellers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrators</th>
<th>Storytellers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Three narrators total for four parts/chapters</td>
<td>Five storytellers total for six oral stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-person POV, Present-Tense</td>
<td>First-person POV, Past-Tense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sample Text:**

“Papa is sick. His malaria has returned double strong, and his face is the color of dishwater. He sweats in his sleep but shakes beneath the woven blankets. When he talks there is phlegm and a quaking in his voice that is hard to listen to” (Holthe 3).

From *Part One: Alejandro Karangalan*  

**Sample Text:**

“I lived with my father, in the upper room of a decaying house held together by chicken wire in some places, bamboo and rattan in others. It belonged to my aunt, a strange woman who in many ways resembled the house itself” (Holthe 30).

From “a cure for happiness” (Mang Carlito)

Together, our storytellers share a total of six oral stories: “a cure for happiness” (Part 1) and “carlito’s story” (Part 3) by Mang Carlito; “mang minno”¹⁶ (Part 1) by Roman Flores; “ghost children” (Part 2) by Aling Anna; “the twilight people” (Part 3) by Mang Pedro; and “portrait of an aristocrat” (Part 3) by Tay Fredrico. Although their audience consists of family and community members who are present in that moment, each storyteller addresses their story to the narrator of the respective part, or chapter. Their courageous tales demonstrate an endurance that fuels the hope and resilience of the authorial narrators and ultimately give them the strength to survive.

**Storytelling as Survival**

Do they survive? For the most part, the leading characters of *Elephants* do indeed survive—all of the narrators and storytellers are alive by the end of the novel. But does storytelling determine life or death for the characters of *Elephants*? By the literal definition of survival,

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¹⁶ “Minno” is the Tagalog word for “minnow,” a type of fish that is prevalent in Roman’s oral stories.
perhaps not. But the content and form of the oral stories in *Elephants* compel readers to consider what it truly means to survive. What does it mean to survive the Battle of Manila? What does it mean to survive World War II? Survival in *When the Elephants Dance* goes beyond the miracle of a character’s physical existence from the beginning of war to the end. In *Elephants*, there is no one true hero – there is no saving grace, no sole survivor. Instead, there is a multitude of voices generated by a collection of oral stories that showcase how survival extends from the well-being of the individual to that of an entire community.

People, homes, buildings, cities, country, and culture are essential to defining what it means for a community to survive a war. “In this month-long conflict, Filipinos lost invaluable articulations of culture and their identity as a people,” reads the Philippine government’s 2015 online publication in remembrance of the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Manila. “Government buildings, universities and colleges, churches as well as other institutional landmarks perished along with all the valuables in their possession […] Only a few among the original edifices would remain intact.” Physical rebuilding would begin the road to recovery, but American-style architecture that arose during the immediate postwar period became early signs that Philippine liberation from the Japanese would mark the beginning of an American occupation. By way of monumental destruction, gradual erasure, and the fading of cultural memory, Philippine history and Filipino identity would struggle to survive.

Though storytelling does not ensure the survival of individual lives, it is a medium that promises the survival of the intangible—culture, history, identity, and experience—that are vital towards a true rebuilding of a nation. This literary critique of *When the Elephants Dance* examines how features of the novel’s narrative structure and the oral storytelling form

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reconstruct historical events in a way that reattributes agency to a community whose voice and identity are historically articulated by those of an imperial power. Thus far in the introduction, I have presented the historical context of the novel and the background of the Philippines as an imperialized nation. This knowledge provides the necessary foundation for understanding the significance of *When the Elephants Dance* as a historical fiction that relies upon a subversive narrative form to retell what is arguably one of the most defining turning points in history for the contemporary Filipino/Filipino-American.

The remainder of my thesis will demonstrate how storytelling is a form of survival at both the level of story and the level of discourse in the novel. “Chapter One: Magic” concerns the former, in which I examine the function of magic as a contained element solely located within the oral stories, a notable characteristic that distinguishes magical occurrences in Holthe’s novel from the literary aesthetic of “magical realism.” Similar to this concept, rather than understand the supernatural as a passive product inspired by the Philippine mythology of Holthe’s childhood, I interpret these magical memories as transformations of trauma. Magic as a recurring narrative phenomenon demonstrates how the storytellers can reclaim long-lost narratives of pain and loss through their independent imaginations. The ability to take ownership of harrowing past experiences by converting suppressed memories into a personal fable ultimately enables the storytellers to impart their wisdom and vicariously instill the experience of a prewar Philippines to the younger generation of authorial narrators. “Chapter Two: Orality” deals more closely with the discourse, the novel’s aforementioned structure of integrated representations of orality within the narrative frame, as representative of a tension between opposing narratives. In this chapter, I explore the significance of representations of oral storytelling as a form that reclaims a suppressed community voice and consider its significance.
in the context of the erasure of the oral tradition in Philippine history. I define my proposed
distinction between the narrators and the storytellers of the novel by highlighting distinct
qualities between the characters and their relationships to one another. Age differences are
notable trend—the authorial narrators are of a younger generation than the oral storytellers. These
distinct temporal patterns in narrator-storyteller relations present authorial narrators as
representative of an age of literacy in a colonial/postcolonial period and oral storytellers as
representative of the precolonial oral tradition. Recognizing literacy as a consequence of the first
major historic wave of colonization by the Spaniards, there is undeniable spatial tension
generated between the novel’s present-tense narrative of World War II by the authorial narrators
and the past-tense stories imparted through a precolonial oral tradition.

Understanding this amplification of a cultural voice and history would be incomplete
without a discussion on the importance of space and place in narratives of imperialism and
colonization. An examination of the literal “space” of the novel reveals a dramatic tension in the
amount of text occupied by storytellers versus the narrators. I demonstrate this through a
quantitative cross-comparison: each oral story spans about thirty to forty pages, a substantial
amount of physical space within the novel that creates a literal, physical competition between the
narration of war and the oral stories. The oral stories offer various periods and stories of the
Philippines prior to the Battle of Manila that serve to disrupt and interrupt the hegemonic
narrative of Japanese imperialism. I argue that oral storytelling as portrayed in Elephants serves
to provide not only a voice of cultural ownership, but at the level of discourse, provides a
physical space for the culture and the values to thrive where it may otherwise be lost or
forgotten. In this way, storytelling acts as a “place” within the novel and reconstructs the
homeland where its existence is otherwise impossible in the wake of physical, but also cultural,
destruction. I conclude the argument with an analysis of another physical space present in the novel: a political map of the Philippines that presents historical events and the locations of the various oral stories within *Elephants*. As the only illustration in *Elephants* and the single image that precedes the opening of the novel, the map, I argue, shapes how readers should understand the aesthetic of magic and oral stories in the novel.

Together, the two literary techniques that Holthe employs, magic and orality, come together to create a new literary aesthetic in *Elephants* that I coin as “magical orality.” This aesthetic allows for a reclamation of autonomy at the level of the individual via magical re-imaginings that alter traumatic memories into a bearable form and empower the storyteller to share otherwise unspeakable pasts. Magical orality reawakens a community voice as not one, but several characters offer up their own stories via a storytelling mode in which the youth, as defined by the age differences between narrator and storyteller, may experience and relive a Philippines that no longer exists, the Pearl of the Orient prior to the Battle of Manila. The novel’s setting enhances the power of magical oral storytelling, or “magical orality,” as a tool for rebuilding and redefining the Philippines as under the collective authority of the common people.
Chapter One: Magic

“I turned and bowed before the creature. His name is Diagos; he is one of four of his kind, and after them no more were created. He is immortal, and he is known as a tikbalang. He is larger than any horse you could ever imagine […]"

‘I am Diagos. Only the humble and the purest can see me. My powers are that of a watcher’[…] He always spoke in riddles” (Holthe 257).

In the midst of the fourth oral story, “the twilight people,” Mang Pedro seeks the guidance of Diagos, the tikbalang. Commonly found in Philippine folklore, the tikbalang is a horselike creature bearing the physical features of a horse, but with the posture and build of a human being. Mang Pedro describes Diagos as twice the size of a horse and with the ability to sit on his haunches with a vertical back, as a human can (Holthe 257). While many tales depict these demons as deceitful beasts who lead travelers astray, Diagos differs from this traditional characterization. As guardian of the forest, he promises Mang Pedro that he will confront the old magician, Mang Fausto Tarluc, who has placed a curse upon Mang Pedro’s family. In this, it is telling that Diagos is derived from a specific Philippine superstition of the tikbalang, one of the Tagalog people in the Rizal Province who believe that the Tikbalangs are benevolent guardians of the four elemental kingdoms.19

When the Elephants Dance exemplifies the inescapable influence of Philippine folklore and mythology in contemporary literature written by Filipino and Filipino-American authors today.20 Oral stories interspersed throughout the text feature magical moments ranging from

18 “Mang” is a contraction of the Tagalog honorific, “Mamang,” meaning “Mister.” Mang Pedro means Mister Pedro when translated to English.


20 My lack of distinction between literature by Filipino and Filipino-American authors does not intend to conflate the two. Filipino authors typically produce “Philippine literature in English” in the Philippines, whereas Filipino-American writers whose contents reflect Filipino/Fil-Am themes produce “Filipino-American literature” that is published in the United States. I argue, however, that both categories of writers of Filipino descent who write about the Philippines share a similar transnational identity as a writer due to shared influences, such as that of Philippine mythology and folklore. For this reason, I will not closely differentiate between the two categories throughout my
appearances of traditional mythological creatures, i.e. the tikbalang, to supernatural powers such as psychic abilities and the ability to speak to powerful spirits and the ghosts of the deceased, as in the case of Mang Pedro. The survival, or revival, of original tales and legends in contemporary literature is often attributed to a growing global trend of interest in speculative fiction amongst young writers. Increasing popularity in this umbrella genre—broadly covering science fiction, futurist fiction, fantasy, folk tales, and myths amongst other forms—are evident in the mass consumption of young adult novels such as J.K Rowling’s Harry Potter series, Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight saga, Suzanne Collin’s The Hunger Games trilogy, and novels such as The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle (1995) and IQ84 (2010) by critically acclaimed author Haruki Murakami. These mainstream successes are but a few examples of an emergent trend in defying the boundaries of realism in contemporary literary works.


argument, as my analysis focuses on shared literary techniques. Both, however, are generally referred to as “the Filipino novel in English” by literary scholars.

21 Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, introduction to Fabulists and Chroniclers (Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2008), xi.

influences mere coincidences, a passive pattern reflective of the zeitgeist of the contemporary literary time?

For Tezz Uriza Holthe, such an aesthetic is a natural product of her upbringing–she traces the origins of her tales in *Elephants* back to her childhood home. Her house in Bernal Heights became a hub for all incoming relatives and newly-arrived friends from the Philippines. In the spirit of *bayanihan*, or community, her family offered friends and foreigners alike a place to stay until they had their own jobs and could settle into a new apartment. It was a place to socialize and belong. “On average we would have 20 people a night ---until the wee hours,” Holthe writes. “During these long, almost meditative mahjong games, the house would eventually quiet and everyone would share their stories of immigration, the supernatural and wartime.” NIGHTLY rounds of mythical tales told alongside wartime stories eventually became a phenomenon manifest in Holthe’s very own debut novel.

Akin to her family tradition, *Elephants*, too, provides accounts of the Japanese occupation interspersed with supernatural tales. Four of the tales (“a cure for happiness,” “mang minno,” “ghost children,” and “the twilight people) are inspired by “sliver of stories” that her father once told. These seedlings are the foundation of the fictional accounts told by the storytellers of the novel. Each tale is independent of one another, and characterized by different magical elements.

**Figure 2. Examples of Magic in *When the Elephants Dance***

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23 I will occasionally refer to *When the Elephants Dance* as *Elephants*, the abbreviation that Tess Uriza Holthe utilized throughout our e-mail interview and correspondence.
24 Bernal Heights is a neighborhood located in San Francisco, California.
25 Tess Uriza Holthe, e-mail message to author, November 18, 2014.
26 I differentiate between “narrators” and storytellers.” Although both are responsible for providing a first-person account of their respective stories, I will refer to “narrators” as the characters who are in command of the story at the level of the chapter. I will refer to “storytellers” as the characters who narrate the storytelling interruptions throughout the novel. (In the final draft, this description will be included in the body and not as a footnote.)
The chart above provides a brief look at examples of magic that are present in five of the six spoken recollections, or oral stories, as we will refer to them throughout this essay. “Magic” will be defined as anything out of the realm of ordinary possibility (a church sinks into the ground), rooted in superstition (ghosts of family members), or derived from traditional Philippine mythology or folklore (tikbalang or anting-anting, meaning a talisman). The allure of these elements make for a fascinating, captivating story, one that effectively distracts and removes the listening audience in the novel from the reality of the war. They too, however, serve a powerful function in the context of their individual tales.

Magical attributes of speculative fiction provide opportunities for re-representations of reality. In his anthology, *Philippine Speculative Fiction*, Dean Francis Alfar writes, “In essence, speculative fiction is a type of story that deals with observations of the human condition – just like realism – but offers the experience through a different lens.” Hidalgo applies this observation to works of historical fiction, such as *When the Elephants Dance*, as a revolutionary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of the Oral Story</th>
<th>Magical Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“a cure for happiness”</td>
<td>magical potions/cures; a church that sinks into the ground; the disappearance of the town “sorceress,” Esmeralda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“mang minno”</td>
<td><em>antiing-antiing</em> (talisman – wishbone); dark magic – ability to control the spirits of fish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“ghost children”</td>
<td>ghost of deceased sister returns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the twilight people”</td>
<td><em>Tikbalang</em> (guardian of the forest); dark magic by Mang Fausto Tarloc; visions; ghosts; spirits of the forests (twilight people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“carlito’s journey”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“portrait of an aristocrat”</td>
<td>curse upon the family – one 18-year old male dies per generation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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literary mode that expands the ability of authors to lay ownership over a reality that is to this day, is representative of a long history of colonization, particularly in the genre of “the Filipino novel in English.” She refers to Petronilo Bn. Daryo’s observation of unconventional techniques as a rejection of depiction reality in the techniques of social realism. He writes, “The limitations of realism today are becoming totally apparent. The conventions of the traditional novel have become inadequate for the representation of contemporary reality. A new mode of survival must be invented, and out of a recognition of this necessity, we can start to create a new literature.”

**Historical Representations Via Narrative**

History has long been contested as the “discourse of the real” as opposed to the “discourse of the imaginary.” Valuations of the appropriate modes of representing reality often leave the narrative form as a secondary option, lesser in value for its inherent subjectivity in light of the supposed objectivity of history proper. Hayden White, however, argues that narrative brings out meaning in history that would otherwise be lost in the dates and generalities of nonnarrative representations of reality. He asserts that “narrative might well be considered a solution to the problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture specific.” As a form that is rooted in “the discourse of the imaginary,” narrative acknowledges that appropriate representations of reality are not limited to the “real.” Instead, the narrative form embraces the

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31 According to Hayden White, this includes annals, chronicles, and history proper (without the narrativization).
essence of history as a record of human experiences and willingly blurs the boundaries between the possible and the possibilities.

The possibilities and the imaginary have served as essential mediums for those who choose to draw upon narrative techniques to retell and reconstruct painful historical memory. Common amongst communities whose histories are marred by experiences of trauma, literary representations of history have allowed unspeakable pasts to be resurrected and reborn from the “forgotten.” Through its unique structure and oral storytelling form, Elephants exemplifies how conversations surrounding traumatic histories and unspeakable pasts rely upon reconstruction and imagination to subvert the hegemonic narrative and reclaim autonomy and agency over one’s own history in an era of colonization.

*When the Elephants Dance* begins with a nonnarrative expression of history, “February 1945,” but the first sentence of the novel immediately lapses into mythic orality as the eponymous narrator of Part One, Alejandro Karangalan, begins,

“Papa explains the war like this: ‘When the elephants dance, the chickens must be careful. The great beasts, as they circle one another, shaking the trees and trumpeting loudly, are the Amerikanos and the Japanese as they fight. And our Philippine Islands? We are the small chickens.”

Alejandro is the second child and youngest son of the Karangalan clan, one of the last surviving families in the province of Bulacan during a war that has lasted for nearly three years now. His second word, “explains,” reveals that readers are to understand the events of the novel as taking place in the present. The present tense that the narrative utilizes emphasizes that his account of the events of the war can be drawn from recent memories, if not immediate experiences. His initial characterization of the war, however, is far from grounded in the moment. Instead, Alejandro offers a reflective summary of the war, distanced by its remove from the present but also because he cannot begin to articulate the war by himself. He relies upon his
father’s storytelling to encapsulate the war in a way that satisfies his memory of the events. Rather than to begin the novel with a description of the atrocities against his innocent neighbors and the destruction of his homeland, Alejandro relies upon the distancing techniques of citation and metaphor to convey the violence his community has experienced. It is not a war, but a dance. It is not people in their human forms, but representations of people transformed into imaginatively larger, mythic creatures. These animals engage with one another, leaving a legacy of destruction marked only by the disruptive sounds of shaking trees and trumpets. His father mutes the memory of pain in his retelling. He instead weaves one of the greatest tragedies in Filipino history into a noble tale that erases the memory of violence, all the while remaining true to the uneven frenzy of war. His representation of reality is no less valid by its fantastic depictions, rather, he sets the stage for what readers can expect throughout the rest of the duration of the novel – that history is not merely history, but a retelling of memory that differs depending upon who is telling the story.

Minority ethnic communities in the United States have turned to such magical realist techniques to transform their histories. Lyn Di Iorio Sandin refers to the term dissociation “that describes the way in which traumatic histories are not available to regular memory functioning.” The history is not necessarily forgotten, but involves a process of painful recollection that often leaves the memory incomplete. Moments of violence or trauma become inaccessible or cannot be articulated and instead, must be transformed. Experiences of trauma are often translated through the marvelous. This is because “[t]hrough momentary and infrequent

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32 The tradition of the “wild, baroque mixture” of many Philippine texts is argued by some to be either derived from patterns in Philippine myths and folktalest or to be a result of the influence of marvelous realism associated with the Latin Americas. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the novel is by a Filipino-American author and will therefore be associated with the literature written by minority ethnic authors in the US.

33 Co-author of “Trauma, Magic, and Genealogy” in Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures

34 Van Der Lolk and Van Der Hart use the term dissociation, borrowed from the work of Pierre Janet, one of the nineteenth-century predecessors of Freud and psychoanalysis (Sandin 20).
‘dramatic shocks’ of magic, US ethnic writers expose a fundamental discontinuity in communal versus institutional memory, bringing to the fore the violent foundations of social life. It is as if the shock of magic lies in the revelation that reality as is, is an insufficient barometer of lived experiences.” Literary realism and depictions of the “real” cannot appropriately convey events that occur within traumatized communities because of the suppression of “reality” and the reprocessing of actual events.

Translating “knowing into telling”35 is further complicated by how history is informed. Winston Churchill is claimed to have once said that “history is written by the victors.” The very uncertainty as to whether the claim was actually made and the claim itself exemplify how history can be filled with greater subjectivity than is often presupposed. Those who are historically in power, whether by circumstances of war or by rule, also have the ability to manipulate history by passing down a specific version of the “real” to shape reality. Elephants portrays this manipulation through the efforts of the Japanese army that actively works to shape education and knowledge in the Philippines through wartime propaganda. Alejandro narrates,

“The Japanese have been here for three years. They were happy at first, and I thought it was to be a long celebration. They made it appear that way. We were told to make Nippon flags when they arrived, to put outside of our houses to welcome them […]. Some of the children were given white armbands that said ‘Collaborator.’ Roderick told Mama that he wanted a special band” (Holthe 16).

In the author’s note, Holthe explains how the Japanese came to successfully establish themselves in the Philippines “under the guise of ‘Asia for the Asians’ to “stamp out Western imperialism.”36 Their anti-Western campaign gained the support of the people for the pro-Asia alliance that it initially propagated. As Alejandro phrases it, it was the appearance of celebration that masked a long period of oppression and rule that would slowly unravel overtime. Education

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36 Holthe, *When the Elephants Dance*, ix
became a tool for the colonizers to mold the minds of the people, the young ones in particular, into believing that the Japanese were allies. The novel emphasizes the colonial miseducation through the prevalence of Makapilis as characters fighting alongside the Japanese during the war.

Short for Makabayan Pilipinos, meaning “fellow countrymen,” these young Filipino men were Japanese sympathizers who not only fought against American rule, but hunted for Filipino guerrilla soldiers. “‘They will turn in their countrymen without hesitation,’” Alejandro remarks. “‘The Japanese have poisoned our minds against one another’” (Holthe 4). Contrary to the ownership of experience that magical transformations in storytelling and literature create for communities of oppression, education and misinformation has long been a tool for oppressors to similarly distort and control the reality, memory, and knowledge of communities at their hands.

The memory of cultural histories are at stake in the wake of colonization. In his sociological study on the “Miseducation of the Filipino,” Professor Renato Constantino37 writes that “[w]hile the Philippines shares with its neighbors a common colonial background, it exhibits certain historical particularities absent from the reality of its sister nations […] I refer to the diffusion and actual regression of national consciousness.” Relative to neighboring nations such as Vietnam under French colonial rule, one can argue that the influence of past colonizers has left the Philippines with a near-irreversible colonial mentality. Phrases such as “That’s ‘tate” that marks United States products as more fashionable and higher quality; the prominence of Taglish; and the literary genre of “Philippine literature in English” are but a few linguistic examples of the slow regression of Filipino culture and the rise of a dominating hegemonic mode of communicating.

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This hegemonic narrative is one that minority ethnic communities in the US have sought to combat through unconventional literary strategies that re-assert a near-forgotten cultural memory. Sandin observes that “magical moments or irruptions deepen narrative meaning and signal breaks with the hegemonic constitution of everyday American reality, which often hides colonial histories of race, class, and sexuality behind a realism that promises a straightforward representation of the myriad situations and conditions of contemporary life in the United States.” These texts rely upon a reimagining of reality, and while the story may remain essentially the same as history records it, the discourse of the events will be reshaped and reclaimed by marginalized communities who have had their stories told in voices other than their own for centuries.

*When the Elephants Dance* seeks to disrupt the hegemonic narrative of colonization by the Japanese through a literal disruption of the traditional literary realism, as in mimetic representations of reality, that are commonly associated as a modern Western literary aesthetic and a notable deviation from the traditional traumatic translations by minority ethnic authors. More closely representative of the experience of Filipinos is the resurrection of oral storytelling as a tool for reclaiming the oral tradition that was nearly eradicated and forgotten during the era of Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines. In this way, Elephants performs a contemporary departure from magical realism, a literary aesthetic emergent “in the 1960s on in formerly colonized countries which attempted to combine the old realistic tradition with elements variously referred to as the supernatural or magic.” Combined with the narrative form of

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representations of oral storytelling, I coin this new literary aesthetic within *Elephants* as “magical orality.”
Chapter Two: Orality

Authors of iconic magical realist works such as Garcia Marquez, Salmon Rushdie, and Toni Morrison integrate the marvelous. Magic becomes a casual occurrence at the level of the narrative in which moments, or irruptions, take place that in which magic appears with a fleeting physical presence while leaving a lasting impression in the story. But Elephants does not precisely fit the mold of magical realism. By definition, magical realism is a “literary style in which realistic techniques such as naturalistic detail, narrative, etc. are similarly combined with surreal or dreamlike elements.”\textsuperscript{40} The criteria of combination is complicated by the structure of the novel. Unlike traditional modes of texts utilizing magical realism, the supernatural events in Elephants do not take place at the level of the primary narrative.

Dissimilar in Elephants is the intentional texturing of marvelous elements. Magic is uniquely constrained and sustained only during the six interludes of oral storytelling by six minor characters\textsuperscript{41} throughout the novel. These interludes, or interruptions, are spread out amongst the four chapters of the novel; each chapter is told by one of three primary narrators and each interruption is told by a minor character within the chapter.\textsuperscript{42} Chapters 1 and 4 are told by Alejandro Karangalan. Two interruptions take place within the span of Alejandro’s narration – his father, Carlito Karangalan, shares “a cure for happiness,”\textsuperscript{43} and Roman Flores, a 24-year old journalist for the Manila Times, tells the tale of “mang minno.” Chapter 2 is narrated by the

\textsuperscript{40} “magical realism.” OED.
\textsuperscript{41} I define “minor characters” as any individual in the story that is not the protagonist of the respective chapter. Each chapter, for example, denotes who the narrator is by its title, e.g. “Part One: Alejandro Karangalan.” In Part One, Alejandro is clearly the protagonist conveying his story in present-tense, “I” narration. Any other character, including the storytellers, are deemed minor.
\textsuperscript{42} I differentiate between “narrators” and storytellers.” Although both are responsible for providing a first-person account of their respective stories, I will refer to “narrators” as the characters who are in command of the story at the level of the chapter. I will refer to “storytellers” as the characters who narrate the storytelling interruptions throughout the novel arch.
\textsuperscript{43} All interruptions are accompanied by light gray, lowercased sub-headers. These indicate the title of the oral story.
eldest child and daughter, Isabelle Karangalan. Her chapter includes “ghost children,” narrated by her aunt, Aling Anna. Finally, Chapter 3 is narrated by Domingo Matapang, the legendary guerilla leader who listens to the stories of Mang Pedro in the “the twilight people,” Carlito Karangalan in “carlito’s journey,” and Tay Frederico in “portrait of an aristocrat.” These interruptions of oral storytelling are the established parameters of magic.

**Figure 3. Breakdown of Oral Stories in *When the Elephants Dance* **

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of the Oral Story</th>
<th>Struggles Within the Plot</th>
<th>Magical Occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“a cure for happiness”</td>
<td>Father’s depression affects Carlito &amp; leads to emotional abuse by family members (<em>utang ng loob</em>—debt of the soul)</td>
<td>magical potions/cures; a church that sinks into the ground; the disappearance of the town “sorceress,” Esmeralda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“mang minno”</td>
<td>Roman feels neglected by parents occupied w/ wealth; seeks mentorship from a stranger &amp; endangers brother</td>
<td><em>anting-anting</em> (talisman—wishbone); dark magic—ability to control the spirits of fish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“ghost children”</td>
<td>Aling Anna’s twin sister dies at an early age; adopted sister dies at childbirth</td>
<td>ghost of deceased sister returns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the twilight people”</td>
<td>Mang Pedro’s sister is blind &amp; the family is poor; sells out his community’s homes for money with consequent gentrification</td>
<td><em>Tikbalang</em> (guardian of the forest); dark magic by Mang Fausto Tarloc; visions; ghosts; spirits of the forests (twilight people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“carlito’s journey”</td>
<td>Mang Carlito is nearly raped by a Japanese soldier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“portrait of an aristocrat”</td>
<td>Tay Fredrico’s wife, uncles, and brothers are killed by Spanish missionaries &amp; conquistadores</td>
<td>curse upon the family— one 18-year old male dies per generation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But what impact is created by an “interruption,” as opposed to an “irruption,” within the primary narrative? Text surrounding the individual interruptions suggest that storytelling serves the purpose of distraction in the novel. Each individual sub-story allows the listener to escape from the prevailing narrative of war. In the context of the novel, the Karangalan family and various neighbors are in hiding in a compact underground shelter beneath their physical home, away from the watch and awareness of the Japanese soldiers. In spite of their safety, the sounds of war, from the booming of bombings to the rumbling of the ground caused by military tanks, serve as constant reminders of danger and the nearness of death.
Characters appear to tell stories to take their company’s minds off of the war. Roman Flores, for example, plunges into “mang minno,” not once, but twice, to engage the attention of one of the community children, Taba, the first time, but also the company as a whole for an extended period of time afterwards. His tale of the enchanted fisherman leads Taba to occupy himself with a fishbone reminiscent of the talisman in the story and occupies the thoughts of the family even after he completes his narrative. Alejandro, the narrator of Chapter 1, observes,

“When Roman finishes his tale, it is early evening. I know because the room has cooled. The cellar is filled with silence. Roderick is in awe […] ‘Imagine if we had that bone, Jando,’ Roderick says to me. ‘The fishes we could call. I bet we could ride in the belly of a whale’” (Holthe 106).

Time falls into the background as thirty-four pages of Roman’s narration pass by. The treatment of the substories as pseudo-chapters allows for a nearly complete departure from the anxieties of war⁴⁴, both for the reader and for the listeners of the tale. The tale, rather than the sounds of war, echo in the minds of the characters. There is a silence within the room that would otherwise be nonexistent if the characters’ minds were still focused on the reality of their situation. Their minds have relocated and settled into a previously existing Philippines. Roderick’s comment is particularly notable for his ability to conjure up a Philippines free of war and violence. Although his age is not revealed, readers understand that he is the youngest of the three Karangalan children. In his lifetime, one can assume that Roderick has proportionately experienced greater periods of war than peace relative to his siblings, or anyone within their

⁴⁴ For the most part, the substories or storytelling moments do not entertain the theme of war or relate to war in any way. “a cure for happiness” is about a young woman named Esmeralda famous for her magic potions; “mang minno” recounts the evils of dark magic in the old town fisherman of the Bohol-Mindanao province; “ghost children” tells the tale of Aling Anna’s ghost sister; and “the twilight people” reveals Mang Pedro’s abilities to see and communicate with ghosts as a child. The exception to this rule is “carlito’s journey,” the single substory devoid of magic in which Mang Carlito briefly explains his near-rape while in captivity by the Japanese, and “portrait of an aristocrat,” which delves into the history of Spanish colonization and educational warfare by the religious missionaries.
company for that matter. Yet, he is the first to invent adventures of a fruitful Philippines with its once thriving ocean that he would have the freedom to fish in and swim in and ride in the bellies of whales. Roderick may have experienced less of his country in times of peace, but dares to reimagine a newly-infused life in the Philippines based on what he has come to understand from the story.

Distraction occurs not within the parameters of Roman’s storytelling, but extends itself as far as an analysis of his story can last. After each story is told, the listeners discuss the implications of the storyteller’s narrative. Surprised at his younger brother’s response, Alejandro counters with his own opinions.

‘“Stupido,’ I tell him. ‘Did you not understand any of it? That man was bad. He wanted to take Roman down into the water forever, away from his family’” (Holthe 106).

His family members begin to chime in, providing their own take on what the story means. His mother suggests that the story, with its numerous references to the Bible and prayer as the counterpoint to the fisherman’s dark magic, means that the family must rely on God. Other family members use the story not as a moment of counsel, but as a moment of memory. Several of the family members begin to recollect their own childhoods as fisherman. Mang Selso, the man frequently described as timid and preoccupied with only minding his 75-year old father, joins in on the conversation, boldly stating, “I was quite a fisherman myself in my youth. I challenge anyone to a fishing contest the first chance we get.’ He winks at Roderick and me” (Holthe 107). Mang Selso is no longer fearful, but has acquired, or perhaps more strongly, reverted back to a more jovial personality that characterized him before the war. The storytelling plays a transformative role by allowing characters to relive the prewar periods of their lives and
become their bolder, happier selves if only while their minds are momentarily taken off of the war.

All of the characters vocalize their own opinions in a safe space amongst a trusted community. Their behavior contrasts significantly from the silence that they must adopt for survival when outside of the parameters of their shelter. Alejandro’s disagreement, for example, poses a sharp contrast to his interaction with the Makapili soldiers earlier on in the chapter. Although he is innocent, Alejandro does not say a word when he is believed to be the murderer of one of the Japanese generals. He knows better than to protest, and knows better than to even speak up and claim his innocence, particularly after witnessing the execution of another innocent man among their group of captives,

“The man was to be questioned. ‘I don’t know, sir,’ he begged. Tanaka lifted his chin with the tip of his sword. ‘I believe you.’ Relief crossed the man’s face. ‘But you disgust me.’ Tanaka spun around, and the heavy blade slices through the air, downward in a terrible arc. It slashes into the man’s neck, and his head falls forward. There is a gurgling sound, then only the silence” (Holthe 16).

Alejandro has learned that in an environment of violence, vocalization of any kind is considered a form of dissent. Sound is met with violence and severe repercussions and if emitted, can lead to a permanent silence imposed upon the Japanese by death. The storytelling in the novel, however, recreates an environment of space. As an inclusive art, storytelling not only conveys a message, but engages listeners. At the level of the story, an open forum can be created for discussing Roman’s story because of the safety of the shelter. Even more powerfully, at the level of discourse, the physical space that the stories occupy begin to compete with the space of the realistic narrative of war.
Figure 4. A Quantitative Cross-Comparison of Narration Versus Oral Storytelling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Number of Pages of Narration</th>
<th>Title of the Oral Story</th>
<th>Number of Pages of Oral Storytelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part One: Alejandro Karangalan</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>“a cure for happiness”</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“mang minno”</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Two: Isabelle Karangalan</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>“ghost children”</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Three: Domingo Matapang</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>“the twilight people”</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“carlito’s journey”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“portrait of an aristocrat”</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Four: Alejandro Karangalan</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>168</td>
<td></td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above chart indicates that indeed the amount of space, or physical pages, that the oral storytelling components occupy within the novel surpass even that of that narration and narrative of the Battle of Manila itself. I interpret this data as representative of a larger ongoing tension in the novel between the present-tense narrative of World War II (literacy, as expressed through traditional authorial narrators) and the past-tense stories imparted through a precolonial oral tradition (orality, as expressed through interruptions by minor characters who step up into the role of oral storyteller). Besides the phenomenon of orality vs. literacy, I argue that there exists a pertinent characteristic in the relationship between the narrators and the storytellers. The storytellers address their oral stories towards the narrator in all cases within the novel, and in each instance, the storyteller is significantly older than the narrator. The result of this relationship is one reminiscent of a parable, in which the stories are not only fantastic in essence, but have a teaching component to them. These oral stories, then, can be interpreted as lessons and as a form
of informal cultural education. By this interpretation, the oral stories are in themselves a form of education by the people and for the people and are actively countering the colonial miseducation enacted upon the colonized/imperialized subjects of the novel. These subjects push back against the narrative, literally, in the amount of space their voices consume.

Magical Orality as Spatial Representations

Significant to understanding the spatiality of When the Elephants Dance is an analysis of the novel’s most salient representation of space. Preceding the title page is a political map of the Philippines, meaning one that lacks topographical representation, but is characterized by the locations of cities and its national boundaries. The location of the paratext in the novel is notable. Such an aesthetic choice literally places the only piece of literary cartography in the novel outside of the confines of the story.
This drives the appearance of the map as an independent image and as a representative depiction similar to those found in commercial atlases. The Philippines is drawn accordingly and the names of the islands and the bodies of water surrounding the Pearl of the Orient are properly located. Further reinforcing a sense of realism to the map are actual measurements. Precise coordinates indicate the number of degrees North and East along the border of the illustration and accompany the latitudinal and longitudinal lines that stretch beneath the nation’s outline. These detailed features make clear that the map is intended to be perceived as an accurate representation of the geographical Philippines. However, it is important to recognize the limitations of a literal interpretation of the form.

Despite their traditional roles as objective guides to new places, it must be recognized that maps are interpretations of environments that can differ in both creation and meaning. “The map maker asks the map reader to believe that a mosaic of points, lines, and areas of a flat sheet of paper is equivalent to a multidimensional world in space and time,” write Dr. Phillip Muehrcke, associate professor of geography at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and freelance writer Juliana Muehrcke, in their essay titled “Maps of Literature.” They go on to suggest that “[t]o read a map, one needs imagination.” Literary cartography in particular appears to serve a role beyond geographic positioning and have optimized the imaginative possibilities of maps in novels. Robert Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island and J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings trilogy are but a few examples of books that have created new worlds based on accompanying cartographic paratext. As Muehrcke points out, “the very

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fact that a map does not reproduce reality is its great allure.” Indeed, the defining trait of the political map of the Philippines lies not its exactness, but its ability to offer a narrativized history through unlikely imaginative details.

A closer examination of the map in *Elephants* reveals the inclusion of fictional cities (e.g. Blanca Negros), settings (e.g. the Karangalan home), and stories from the novel, as indicated by the key, all of which are magical interruptions. Denoted by bold font and numbered circles, the names of these stories are physically imprinted upon the map and figuratively establish their place in Holthe’s representation of the Philippines. In his study on spatiality in literature, Robert T. Tally Jr. points out, “The map is one of the most powerful and effective means humans have to make sense of their place in the world […] The map offers a fictional or figurative representation of the space in which we find ourselves.” But do these fictionalized representations take away from the reader’s sense of reality? I argue that the imposition of such imaginary features offers an alternate reality by framing the map, or literary cartography, as a narrativized history rather than as an objective historical representation.

Although literary cartography shares a tradition of fictionalized representations, the map of Elephants arguably utilizes a realistic style in its representation. Maps are commonly perceived as mimetic representations of reality, particularly in the context of historical records and texts. The accuracy of these maps, however, has overtime been challenged by research revealing a European bias in traditional cartographic works such as the Mercator projection, the original 1569 world map mostly commonly used to teach world geography in classrooms.

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First developed by Gerardus Mercator as a navigation tool, the map’s latitudinal and longitudinal lines represented “lines of constant compass bearing” and eased the journeys of navigators who relied upon a set compass direction that could be followed using the lines on the map. The rectangular shape and the grid of the Mercator projection, however, subsequently distorts the actual geography of the world by making the Northern hemisphere, a majority of which consists of European countries, physically larger than they actually are. Proponents of the Peters projection that accounts for accurate representation of size, shape, and location argue that the map offers an advantage for colonial powers due to proven positive psychological correlations between size and importance. Although *Elephants* does not indicate which projection its representative map uses, the novel most likely utilizes the standard map of the Mercator projection.

Understanding the map as a Western representation rather than as a universal reality enriches the relationship between the map and the novel’s historical context of Japanese colonization. The origins of the Mercator map as a tool for navigation offers an interpretation of the map as a symbol of imperialism and conquest, as the Philippines was originally “discovered” by Portuguese sailor Ferdinand Magellan during his overseas expedition in search of “a westward route to the Spice Islands of Indonesia” in 1521. In his essay titled “Decolonizing the Map: Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism, and the Cartographic Connection,” Graham Huggan connects the popular understanding of maps as mimetic

53 Although Japanese colonization is the historical concern of *Elephants*, it is important to recognize that the colonial pursuits of Japan began as an emulation of Western imperialism. Hence, I consider the Western aesthetic of literary realism an extended representation of hegemony in a narrative about Japanese colonization.
representations to colonial discourse. He, along with other theorists of colonialism such as Homi Bhaba and Edward Said, have shown that “mimesis has also historically served the colonial discourse which justifies the dispossession and subjugation of so-called ‘non-Western’ peoples; for the representation of reality endorsed by mimesis is, after all, the representation of a particular kind of view of reality: that of the West.”55 This can be seen in the example of the Mercator projection as well as specific maps portraying individual colonized nations. The illustration of the Philippines in Elephants, for example, is a political map whose current national boundaries were set by conquistadors and existed only after Spanish colonization. Prior to King Phillip’s claim to the islands, a centralized government did not exist, as communities, or barangays56, existed independently of one another because of the diversity of between native dialects and cultures between neighbors. Even today, such mimesis in cartography provides “a means of promoting and reinforcing the stability of Western culture,”57 as it is the standard map and not necessarily the histories of individual peoples that is most familiar and recognizable to students of classrooms in the Western world and beyond. The map, then, provides a national understanding of the Philippines based upon the views of a Western imperial power, but one that Holthe’s narrative attempts to reclaim through a literal relabeling and relocating of native tales onto the map.

This prominent piece of paratext resists the systemic “enclosure and hierarchization of space”58 characteristic of maps in colonial discursive practice by giving the authority of this map of the Philippines to its native peoples. Particular features of Holthe’s map, such as historical

55 Huggan, Territorial Disputes: Maps and Mapping Strategies In Contemporary Canadian and Australian Fiction, 116.
56 Barangay is a Tagalog word meaning “village.” In this context, communities can also serve as a synonymous word to barangays. However, the more accurate Tagalog translation for community is bayanihan.
57 Ibid.
58 Huggan, Territorial Disputes: Maps and Mapping Strategies In Contemporary Canadian and Australian Fiction, 115.
descriptions reading “U.S. Troops First Surrender in 1942 to the Japanese, Infamous Bataan Death March Begins” hint towards Filipino ownership of the map, as such an event would most likely be characterized as infamous by those oppressed by it. This cartographic reclamation is most apparent, however, not in labels delineating landmark events from the Pacific Theater of war, but in the labels locating the magical stories told by the minor characters of the novel. The key boldly numbers magical stories such as “Mang Minno” (told by Roman Flores) in the city of Bohol, “Ghost Children” (by Aling Anna) upon its setting of Mindanao, “Twilight People” (by Mang Pedro) in Samar, and “Portrait of an Aristocrat” (by Tay Frederico) in Manila. Of the five stories, the aforementioned four take place in actual cities in the Philippines. The first, “A Cure for Happiness,” however, takes place in a fictional town, a fact that the key also specifies. Blanca Negros is shown to be in the northern area of the Philippines known as Luzon and can be located on the map that the novel provides. The choice to include Blanca Negros, a fictional town, becomes a fascinating question when considering various components of the key. A closer look at this feature of the map reveals that one story is missing.

**Figure 5. A Quantitative Breakdown of the Oral Stories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of the Oral Story</th>
<th>Number of Pages of Oral Storytelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“a cure for happiness”</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“mang minno”</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“ghost children”</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the twilight people”</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“carlito’s journey”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“portrait of an aristocrat”</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What does it mean that the novel’s map recognizes only five of the six chapters of oral storytelling? The fifth oral story and notably, the shortest story, “Carlito’s journey,” is nowhere to be found. Why is Mang Carlito’s second story absent and untraceable on the map? This may have to do with the fact that his story is the only one without a trace of magic. All of the other five stories included in the key contain some magical aspect that has reformed the original memory that the minor character shares. Mang Carlito’s “A Cure for Happiness,” for example talks about Esmeralda and the magical services she offered to her community in the form of potions and concludes with “a church that sank into the ground” (Holthe 29). The way Mang Carlito tells the story likely exaggerates original events that could have simply consisted of a young woman who created her own medicines and an earthquake that caused a church to collapse. But the language that Mang Carlito uses is far from straightforward and factual in that way. As the first storyteller of the novel, he sets a fantastic tone for his company to follow in their later stories by beginning,

“If I am to tell the story of the church that sank into the ground, we must first begin with the village of Blanca Negros, west of the Chico River Valley, Mountain province. There were secrets in that town, so much anger building underneath the perfect exteriors, the perfect faces, like streams of water crisscrossing in the ground beneath smooth, polished floors and sowing discord in the houses above” (Holthe 30).

Mang Carlito’s opening words flow beautifully with language descriptive of natural settings during a catastrophic period in his life. Shortly after the introduction, Mang Carlito shares that he was seven years old at the time and had been experiencing familial abuse. He says, “I lived with my father, in the upper room of a decaying house held together by chicken wire in some places, bamboo and rattan in others. It belonged to my aunt, a strange woman who in many resembled the house itself” (Holthe 30). All throughout his story, Mang Carlito shares the abuse that he and his father endured from his aunt, as they were treated like second-class citizens who
owed his aunt everything for having a home to stay in. His childhood consisted entirely of work to support himself and his father, who had tuberculosis, but one of his most poignant memories during that time was when Esmeralda, the woman next door whom he adored, disappeared when a church sank into the ground. Before he dives into the bitterness of his childhood, Mang Carlito frames his tale with a beautiful, mysterious metaphor. He transforms the memory of his town from one of spite and secrets into an image of streaming water underground, constantly moving, rushing, and discordant on its own. His mysterious metaphor of water casts a natural appearance upon a very unhealthy societal dynamic that he had to grow up in and navigate on his own. Upon reflection, however, Mang Carlito takes ownership of his experience to present the first of six wondrous tales in the novel to his family.

The story missing on the map, however, “carlito’s journey,” does not utilize the same beautiful language. He utilizes far fewer comparisons and appears haunted, rather than comforted, in his sharing. When he is reunited with his family in Manila after days of separation, he tells them,

“I let my eyes look back at our house, and I thought of all of you inside. I longed to rush back and embrace you. I wanted to inhale the familiar scent of my wife’s hair one more time; the area below her ears and that certain place near her lips. It made me want to weep. I let my fingers linger on the doorknob before letting go. Looking at our house from the outside was like looking at a great coffin that would be lowered to the ground” (Holthe 272).

Brevity prevails –there is a feeling of discontinuity and breathlessness that comes with the shorter, choppier sentences in Mang Carlito’s telling of “Carlito’s Journey” relative to the way he tells “A Cure for Happiness.” Both stories are essentially traumatic ones, but his most recent memory of the events of war offers very little reformation of the horrendous events that took place, with the exception of his description of their home as a coffin lowered into the ground. This comparison, however, offers a far more haunting depiction than the church that
sunk into the ground in “A Cure for Happiness.” Mang Carlito has not yet had the time to process the events that he has most recently experienced. The five pages of narration that he utilizes to retell his experiences are reflective of a reality and language mimetic of that of the wartime narrative of the novel. The very brevity of his story points to this. He confides that after he was separated from Roman and Pedro in search of food, he was lured by the Japanese into a food warehouse that was actually a slaughterhouse for Filipino civilians. He had only narrowly escaped because he was singled out by an officer to be taken outside to be raped. To save his own life, Mang Carlito murdered the man with his poor leg, a physical disability that he believes explains why he was chosen, as the weakest in the group, and also saved him in the end. He concludes by stating, “I lost my mind. I walked for days. I could not cool the rage that burned in some.” The brevity of his sentences cause Mang Carlito to appear shaken in the moment. The fear and the trauma are still evident in his words.

“Carlito’s Journey” and “A Cure for Happiness” serve as useful contrasts as oral stories told by the same storyteller. Both share deeply traumatic events, but differ in the amount of time that the storyteller has had to process the memory. “A Cure for Happiness” transforms the guilt of losing a beloved neighbor into a tale of resilience. He is able to focus on the good that comes of his village’s drama. He, as young Carlito, eventually awakens his father from his depression to aid Esmeralda when she is nearly murdered by a hired bodyguard of her lover’s wicked fiancé. In “Carlito’s Journey,” however, Mang Carlito cannot escape the indignity and horror that he experienced. His language more closely parallels that of the novel’s narrators relating present-tense wartime experience than the alluring expressions of mysticism characteristically utilized by his fellow storytellers in the novel. In fact, Mang Carlito’s story is the only one amongst his fellow storytellers who relates an experience directly taking place during the Japanese
occupation. His story, therefore, is the most recent and the most real, yet is not locatable on the map of the Philippines. But as much as maps are believed to be representations of reality, maps can also be said to be representations of memory, as “[t]he main function of such maps is to preserve the memory of a place by reconstructing a spatial order which does not exist anymore.”\textsuperscript{59} If the map of the Philippines representative of the world of When the Elephants Dance is created under the ownership of the memory of the Filipinos, it rightfully would not acknowledge “carlito’s journey,” at least in the form that Mang Carlito currently remembers of his experience. The map appears to be selective in choosing memories that have been reclaimed, as Sandin asserts that “[h]istory, image, and memory form, outside of the tenets of traditional or archival time, the presence of pictures engraved into the landscape by degrees of intensity. In this sense, a rememory is an unintended integration of invisible “places” and events into an active consciousness.”\textsuperscript{60} This would explain the intentional inclusion of a fictional town, Blanca Negros, over the more realistic journey that Mang Carlito endures. Such an event is difficult to integrate into his memory in its current form, but similar to the many traumatic tales included on the map, may eventually undergo some transformation in memory. Only at that point does it appear that his story may acquire a form that has a rightful place in a newly-mapped memory of the Philippines during the Japanese occupation.

\textsuperscript{59} Wojciech Kalaga and Marzena Kubisz, \textit{Cartographies of Culture: Memory, Space, Representation} (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 29.
\textsuperscript{60} Sandin and Perez, \textit{Moments of Magical Realism in Us Ethnic Literatures}, 7.
Conclusion

“The Japanese Occupation was, in its entirety, just one more colonial rule in the Philippines,”
writes Dr. Angelito L. Santos in Under Japanese Rule: Memories and Reflections.

Is storytelling survival? For the characters of the novel, it cannot be said whether or not
the oral stories actively effected their decision-making, attitudes, or outlook upon the war. But in
the context of cultural and historical survival, much can be said about the function of oral
storytelling in altering the existing narrative of Filipino/Filipino-American identity. For the
100,000 Filipinos who perished in the Battle of Manila, storytelling is survival. Through
storytelling, their personal experiences and histories live on to this day. This analysis of When
the Elephants Dance merely begins the conversation on how Tess Uriza Holthe’s debut novel
contributes to a growing body of literature under the genre, “the Filipino Novel in English.” In
the words of Tess Uriza Holthe, “this is my humble contribution to the empty shelf I always
longed to fill.”
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I first opened Andrew X. Pham’s *Catfish and Mandala* during my junior year of high school. I was captivated by this narrative, the memoir of a man’s two-wheeled voyage through Vietnam, in a way that no other book has ever held my heart. My first leap into the realm of a literature that told a narrative familiar to that of my classmates and myself has since inspired me to pursue my own voyage through the waves of unheard voices, crests and troughs alike.

Though this work is a far cry from Pham’s masterpiece, I feel that I’ve grown much in this personal exploration of my own roots via literature. Thank you to all those who encouraged and supported me in the making of this work.

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61 Tess Uriza Holthe, acknowledgments to *When the Elephants Dance*, vii.
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