

RECONSTRUCTING AN UNREMEMBERED WAR

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Gina Apostol's latest novel *Insurrecto* (2018) is a piece of metafiction. It emphasizes "its own constructedness in a way that continually reminds readers to be aware that they are reading or viewing a fictional work."

It calls attention to itself as a self-conscious literary construct susceptible to all kinds of seemingly random, arbitrary or accidental manipulations. It is self-conscious about "language, literary form, and story-telling." It subverts reader expectations by up-ending the very conventions of traditional narratives that facilitate the creation of meaning and the promotion of understanding. It seems to obscure and to mystify, willfully, as a matter of design. It is burdensome, dark, and suspenseful, like crime fiction. It is also witty, playful, and intriguing, like a piece of Dada art.

This artificiality and constructedness, however, is not gratuitous. If anything, it is profoundly fitting. For Apostol, it is the essence of how we construct or reconstruct history and memory. It challenges our traditional assumption that history is a linear and sequential fleshing out of events with verifiable or objective facts, that history is a record of what actually happened, that it is quintessentially a kind of truth-telling. But pure objectivity as much as immutable truth is one of our most enduring myths.

What Apostol dramatizes in the novel is a manner of historical accounting that is full of gaps and holes, conflicting views, detours, blind spots, vested interests, and fanciful invention. She demonstrates the way histories are created by people who invariably carry their own biases and agendas. Their internal filters get in the way of what they see and report, coloring their perception and interpretation. No matter, who they are: combatants, bolo-men, witnesses, survivors, victims, historians, bystanders, observers, photographers, journalists, politicians. They are all caught up invariably in the illusion of their own truth.

The Balangiga massacre of September 28, 1901 provides the historical fulcrum around which the novel's episodes and characters revolve. Soldiers of Company C, 9th U.S. Infantry Regiment, arrived in Balangiga, in southern Samar, to close the town port and prevent supplies from reaching Filipino guerrillas in the interior. Initially, there was a lot of fraternizing between the Americans and the locals: watching cockfights, playing basketball and baseball, practicing *arnis*, drinking *tuba*. The trouble started when a couple of drunken soldiers tried to molest (to rape?) a young woman tending a store. Her brothers came to the rescue and mauled the soldiers. In retaliation, the company commander rounded up and arrested 143 males and ordered the confiscation of bolos from their houses.

Feeling aggrieved, the townspeople plotted an attack on the army garrison. At 6:45 a.m. of September 28, about 500 (a news story said 400) men wielding bolos, headed by the local chief of police Valeriano Abanador, stormed the barracks and killed 48 of the 74-man contingent. Twenty-six survived with 22 severely wounded. Among the Filipinos, 28 died (a news story said 150) and 22 were wounded.

Official retaliation was swift and brutal. U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt himself instructed Major General Adna R. Chafee, the military governor of the unpacified areas of the Philippines, to adopt "the most stern measures to pacify Samar." Chafee in turn ordered Brigadier General James Franklin Bell and Jacob Smith to give the Filipinos 'bayonet rule.' He wanted an 'Indian-style campaign.' General "Howling Wilderness" Smith issued Circular No. 6, specifying "no prisoners" and "the more you burn and kill, the better it will please me." Kill everyone over ten. Carte blanche. A perfect recipe for a large-scale massacre.

A British journalist put the number of civilians massacred at 2,500. Filipino historians put it at 50,000. It was overkill, by any standard. Instead of the Biblical "tooth for a tooth," it was a whole set of teeth, upper and lower canines, incisors, premolars and molars, the whole mouthful for a single tooth. Because of two horny drunken American soldiers, many people lost their lives in the bloodiest encounter during the Philippine-American war. ("Balangiga Massacre, <https://www.filipinoamericanwar.com/balangigamassacre1901.htm>.)

In a nutshell, that is the underlying impetus of the novel. Apostol claims that the Philippine-American War (1899-1902) is unremembered. Hard to imagine, but unfortunately true. It does not figure too much in the

popular imagination of contemporary Filipinos, whose idea of war is still defined by the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during World War II.

Her novel *Insurrecto* is therefore an act of remembrance, a retrieval of a significant national moment in the forgotten past. Like Rizal in *Noli Me Tangere*, Apostol dedicates *Insurrecto* to “the people of the Philippines, for whom this book tries to keep memory, a history of revolution vital to our surviving; to tell the story of our resistance when our leaders pervert our past, and to speak so the world will know it, too” (318)

The novel’s two central characters want to make a movie, a la *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Platoon* (1986) but based on the Balangiga massacre as an act of historical retrieval and remembering.

Magsalin is the local contact from Samar hired by Chiara Brasi to be her travel guide, co-scriptwriter, and collaborator. She has lived in the States for some time and is conversant with current fashion trends. She is a staunch consumer of American culture and products. In other words, Magsalin knows her pop music and films and designer sunglasses, and knows that a Hermès bag can cost up to a hundred thousand dollars. (315) She functions, now and then, as a center of consciousness. Unreliable as a narrator.

Chiara Brasi is the filmmaker daughter of the famous filmmaker Ludo Brasi. Obsessed with her father’s work, the cult classic *The Unintended*, and his unfinished script of a forgotten war, she hopes to make a mark of her own in film history, by continuing her father’s unfinished film legacy. She is haunted by her father’s suicide and by a sense of alienation from her dysfunctional mother. She has money to burn and can afford to dream big, but is moody and a bit dazed. Probably drugged from taking too many antidepressants. She has an Italian-sounding name, Chiara or Lucia. “Both names mean *clear*, or *lucidity*, or something that has to do with *light*, something vaguely linked to *eyesight*, hence to *knowing*, thence to blindness, or paradox.” (4) Likewise, unreliable.

So there we have it: two fearless young women, an American filmmaker and a Filipino translator and mystery writer, embarked on an ambitious film project about a massacre that happened in Balangiga a long time ago in 1901. A simple enough storyline. Theoretically, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, with a discernible beginning, middle, and end. In a traditional narrative that would have been its clear trajectory. But in the deft hands of a meta-fictionist, the simple quickly turns complex and achieves an epic and dense convolution.

Early on, the novel foregrounds its subversion of the conventions of traditional narratives. Take the structure, for instance. The narrative is broken into a series of discrete segments. Chapters vary in length: some consist of several pages, others are only a few sentences long. The chapters are numbered according to a false chronology. The first one is number 20, followed by number 2, then number 3, then number 21. So on and so forth, without rhyme or reason.

If you re-arrange the chapters in correct numerical order, you run into another problem. Some numbers come not only once but several times. Several 1s and several 2s. Number 16 is also number 28. And the story they tell is just as fragmentary and episodic. No causal relationship from one point to the next, no logical thread to string the segments together. If you re-arrange the segments into some sort of a plot, meaning tracing an action-reaction or cause-effect progression, ditto. So, the only thing to do in the face of an overwhelming opacity is to go with the flow. Ride the rapids and jump the cataract. Then gradually you start to hear the story-telling voice, the narrative technique that relies, more on free-floating associations and suggestions and allusions, rather than on an explicit linear progression of events.

For instance, what is the connecting thread that ties the following elements together? Balangiga, Vietnam, Francis Ford Coppola, Oliver Stone, Ludo Brasi, Muhammad Ali, *The Heart of Darkness*, *The Unintended*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Platoon*? Obviously, their association with anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism as sites of trauma, bodies of trauma, narratives of trauma, or voices of resistance.

In other words, a narrative consisting of associations and parallelisms. A carnival of mirror images. The iterations of ideas, like mystery, machine, labyrinth, and puzzle. The recurrence of patterns. Are they supposed to be premonitory prompts or secret codes or hidden clues? And war itself exists within war within war. As Prof. Estrella Espejo points out: "Within the spiral of war and loops of art is an unknown war wrapped in another, *a ghost in its machine*." (313) She is the author of the essay, "Echolalia: Repetitive Spirals in Philippine History." (304)

Part I of the book is titled "Mystery" and the first chapter is titled "The Insoluble Puzzle at the Heart of the Labyrinth." What waits at the end? A minotaur or a revelation? Death or redemption? Ordinarily, the opening shot, say in a film, immediately establishes some crucial information about

time, place, people, and potential action. Apostol's novel starts differently. It starts with an enigma: "For the mystery writer, it is not enough to mourn the dead. One must also study the exit wounds, invite the coroner to tea, cloud the mind with ulterior motives." (3)

Thus, begins the mystery, the puzzle at the heart of the labyrinth. The point of view is omniscient. But wait. Fast forward. The enigma is not so enigmatic after all, if you put the paragraph in the context of Balangiga. Substitute history for mystery, historian for mystery writer, and the rest falls easily into place. This reading is supported by the strategic inclusion of the French-Tunisian mystery writer Stephane Real in the opening chapter. A critical move. Who is Stephane Real?

In Apostol, an important character does not always appear bodily with the other real characters within the novel itself but in the notes appended at the end. They function like premonitory prompts. The End Notes is where we find a fuller characterization of the French-Tunisian writer. It is said that Stephane Real has written 12 novels, 7,200 lists, and 16 manuals. "His last book, *Two Minutes*, condenses the entire seedy French colonial history of an unnamed African country into the time it takes an assassin to gun down the protagonist, a mystery writer also named Stephane Real." (299)

So we have a story within a story, a writer within a writer, an unfinished mystery within an unfinished mystery. Like Russian dolls, they are both content and container. In the hall of mirrors, Magsalin, meaning translator, can be read as a reincarnation of Stephane Real, figuratively speaking.

The second chapter titled "At Ali Mall" deals with the first meeting of the two central characters. The point of view shifts from omniscient to third person limited. Magsalin has received an email from somebody needing a translator. She arrives for the meet-up carrying her favorite duffel bag, leather, made in Venice, aubergine with olive handles.

In a pastry shop at Ali Mall, Magsalin assesses her texter. Chiara is wearing a felt-banded panama hat, designer shoes by Clergerie, and giant shades by Chanel. Indecent tank top, too-short designer shorts, flat-chested, buckle-mouthed, looking sedated or stoned.

She considers leaving. She is confused and suspicious. In her email, the woman had sounded urgent. Now she wears a faraway look. A look of indifference. Not exactly an auspicious beginning for a collaboration. A

sure sign of a long rocky road ahead. Magsalin feels that there is something pathetic “about reconstructing the trauma of whole countries through a movie’s palimpsest.” (15)

It is in the language of filmography that Apostol presents the most explicit formulation of the book’s metafictional strategy and rhetoric. In the words of Chiara, the filmmaker:

I would like to make a movie in which the spectator understands that she is in a work of someone else’s construction, and yet as she watches, she is devising her own translations for the movie in which she in fact exists. It seems as if *The Unintended* were constructed out of the story of Samar, but the reverse is also true. *The Unintended* also produces, for us, the horror of Balangiga. We enter others’ lives through two mediums, words and time, both faulty. And still, one story told may unbury another, and the dead, who knows, may be resurrected.” (51)

The thematic explication is found in the chapter titled “The Story She Wishes to Tell, an Abaca Weave, a Warp and Weft of Numbers.”

The story Magasalin wishes to tell is about loss. Any emblem will do: a French-Tunisian with an unfinished manuscript, an American obsessed with a Filipino war, a filmmaker’s possible murder, a wife’s sadness. An abaca weave, a warp and weft of numbers, is measured but invisible in the plot. Chapter numbers double up. Puzzle pieces scramble. Points of view will multiply. Allusions, ditto. There will be blood, a kidnapping, or a solution to a crime forgotten by history.” (107)

This chapter is the longest, at 15 pages, and the most autobiographical in tone and details. Here Magsalin takes on a suspiciously plausible identity as Gina Apostol’s alter ego. It is difficult to overlook the fraught connections between present and prior texts, their intertextuality. Some elements in the novel have previous reincarnations. Apostol’s earlier novel *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* (2009), for example, uses the same self-conscious techniques of metafiction. The deliberate disjunction between text and footnote, the multiplicity of voices, the mixture of languages, puzzles,

jokes, textural games, sleights of tongue. The reappearance of characters like Mimi Magsalin and Estrella Espejo. The allegorical play on seeing and not seeing: Raymundo's eyes and night blindness, Chiara's lucidity and paradox. The transformation of Apostol's short story "The Unintended" (included in the 2013 anthology *Manila Noir* edited by Jessica Hagedorn) into Ludo Brasi's cult classic. Sentences, paragraphs, segments from the story reappear in the novel, thinly disguised. Like rehearsal notes to a final performance. Echoes and reverberations abound, deliberate or unintended. The narrative whirling inside reaches outside in a dizzying game of intertextuality.

In the fourth chapter, number 21, "Everything in the World Is Doubled," the location shifts from Ali Mall in Cubao to The Sands in Las Vegas. Virginie, Chiara's mother, keeps seeing doubles. She suffers from diplopia. She stares because she and a woman are wearing the same Schreiner pink rose brooch. The segment changes not only location but also time. It is now 1969. The Ali Mall scene is set in 2017 or thereabouts.

The year is not given but we can triangulate the year based on certain references. We know it is set after the start of President Duterte's term in 2016, but before the return of the Balangiga bells in 2018. Undeniably, this is Duterte country, the "drug-war world of tokhang: toktok-hangyo: knock-knock, plead-plead." (95)

The novel opens with a listing of characters in order of appearance, which is convenient since so many characters saunter in and out of the narrative, it is difficult to keep track of their movements. Fictional characters freely mix with historical personages. Icons from music and films rub shoulders with celebrities from sports, books, and politics. A whirling merry-go-round, a dizzying hall of mirrors.

Why the plethora of characters? The glib answer is: because no man is an island. The simple answer is: because man really is more than a thousand islands. Man is always a multitude, just as life is always a matter of multitudes. And history, before it is cleaned up and powdered and transcribed on acid-free paper, is topsy-turvy and chaotic and peopled by all sorts of characters: the significant and the insignificant, the generals and the foot soldiers, the actors and the bystanders, the orphans and the cooks.

It is obvious, for example, that Muhammad Ali is an important character. But he is not a character in that sense the Magsalin and Chiara are characters. Still his presence permeates the novel. His memory lives on in the

fictional world of the novel as well as in the real world of Cubao. A famous mall is named after him; and every day thousands of Filipino commuters and shoppers utter his name as a point of destination. But he is more than a mall. He is more than the sum of his gaudy portraits adorning the walls of the mall like holy altars. And more than the destroyer of Joe “The Gorilla” Frazier—in the famous 1975 Thrilla in Manila boxing match for the world heavyweight championship, which Ali won by a technical KO. He is more than the People’s Champ.

In Apostol’s novel, Muhammad Ali exemplifies modern man’s moral dilemma. During the anti-war movement in America, he did something truly heroic. He refused to be drafted into the Vietnam War:

My conscience won’t let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America. And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn’t put no dogs on me, they didn’t rob me out of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father. Shoot them for what? How can I shoot them poor people, babies and women? Just take me to jail.” (300)

Names are important. Apostol considers naming as the first act of creating. Names carry burdens and memories. They are not pieces of *tabula rasa*. They are sites of contestation, allegory, prophesy, symbolism, history, superstition, irony, or paradox. Names clarify, obfuscate, or complicate.

In the confusing war, the names of the enemy are many and interchangeable: *katipunero*, *juramentado*, nigger, *insurrecto*. All misnomers, according to Magsalin, who prefers the word revolutionary. Chiara is indifferent or prefers *insurrecto*. Chiara means both light and loss of sight. Prof. Espejo is a mirror. Stephane is real and fictive. Cassandra is documentary photographer and priestess of Apollo cursed to utter true prophecies and doomed never to be believed. Cassandra Chase is also known as Chaya Sophia Chazanov of Sosnitsa and Madame Robinson of Robinson Fur Emporium on Park Avenue. She is both hero and traitor. The West Philippine Sea is also called the South China Sea. General Smith is war hero and butcher of Balangiga. It is not true a rose, by any other name, smells just as sweet. It depends on which nose is doing the sniffing. Names are truth-

bearers. Or false messiahs. Or red herrings. Truth is never one. It is always one and the other.

Chapter number 5 titled “Chiara Crafts a Movie Script” shifts location to Chiara’s mother’s house (mansion? castle?) in the Catskills. Chiara and her cabal of emerging auteurs, play a parlor game: They use a random search term in Google and craft a movie script from the resulting materials. Chiara uses her father’s name. She misses him and searches for him in cyberspace. Lo and behold, a secret trove of enigmatic clues pours out of the Internet. Muhammad Ali, Balangiga, Samar, bells, massacre. From that Google search, the first intimation of Chiara’s script on the history of the Philippine-American War gradually takes shape. Strange how one’s most profound life choices come about under such casual and serendipitous circumstances,

Chapter number 21 is titled “The Photographer at the Heart of the Script.” The Balangiga massacre has left no first-hand accounts from the victims. The official narratives are provided by the victorious soldiers of Company C, 9th U.S. Infantry Regiment and the American press. This is not surprising. Who gets to write the history of any battle after all? A rhetorical question, because we have always known that it is the victor who sends the dispatches from the war zone. As they say, until the lion learns to write, the story of the hunt will always be written by the hunter.

But there is an unexpected source of damning documentary evidence of the massacre. The photographs of Cassandra Chase provide a counter-testimony to the official narrative. Deep within the archive of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographic Division, there are a number of late nineteenth-century index card-size pictures called stereo cards. The pictures have no captions, just sepia images:

Women cradling their naked babies at their breasts. A woman’s thighs spread open on a blanket, her baby’s head thrust against her vagina. A dead child sprawled in the middle of a road. A naked girl running toward the viewer in a field, her arms outstretched, as if waving. A beheaded, naked body splayed against a bamboo fence. A child’s arms spread out on the ground, in the shape of a cross. A woman holding the body of her dead husband in the pose of the Pietà. (89)

The above passage is repeated, verbatim, in chapter 35, “The Apotheosis,” indicating its centrality in the narrative. These are the photographs inside the manila envelope that Chiara hands over to Magsalin in Ali Mall. In crime fiction parlance, they constitute forensic evidence. Mute and without caption, but revelatory. The dead have stirred. The ghosts in the machine have spoken.

The exposé scandalizes and divides America. Senator Albert J. Beveridge, Republican of Indiana, calls Cassandra a traitor to her class and a vulgar creature not fit to be called a citizen, much less a woman. Senator George Frisbie Hoar, Republican of Massachusetts, calls her a hero of her time. (89)

Cassandra Chase emerges as the towering figure in Part II of the novel, bigger and braver even than the heroic Casiana Nacionales, the lone woman warrior among the Balangiga bolo-men. Cassandra, a slip of a woman, a socialite in silken skirts, dragging her heavy photographic equipment through the jungle. She rants in the congressional hearing:

“We told them we would free them from Spain. We lied. We took the islands for ourselves. We commit the crimes we say we abhor. We outdid the savagery for which we claim a just war. We reconcentrated their villages. We penned them up like cattle. We jailed their men for no reason they can fathom. We gave their people the water cure. We burned their crops. We burned their villages. We burned their pigs. We burned their children...” (280)

Republican and Democrat alike are flushed with embarrassment. The three volumes of *Affairs in the Philippine Islands, US Senate Hearings of January 1902* do not include Cassandra’s witness account “for after all she is only a woman and her pictures will be redacted.” (284) History is not always a written account. It is also a record of erasures and forced silences.

Magsalin tells Chiara: “The history of that war is beyond my powers to add or detract from the terrible pictures it left behind—those stereo cards in your manila envelope.” (293) She wonders if it is wishful thinking to believe an enemy could be a reliable witness.

After Cassandra’s photographs become public, there is a token hand-wringing for the atrocity and suffering. There is bitter disillusionment over

what the so-called liberators have brought to the islands. The Americans are seen as enemies of the Filipino people. But only for a while.

In October 1944, General Douglas MacArthur lands in Leyte Gulf to recapture the Philippines from the Japanese during World War II. Suddenly the popular perception changes. All is forgotten and forgiven. The people put up a war memorial commemorating the historic landing, now a tourist spot. The American is seen as friend and liberator again.

In Part II, Chiara and Magsalin undertake a trip back to Balangiga, Samar, where it all starts. The trip is part travelogue, part food trip, part nostalgic stroll down memory lane. But it is here that the fullest historical reconstructions in the novel are made. It is here where the few historical details noted in one's Google search are given the full scenic treatment. Statistics become flesh-and-blood characters with human strengths and weaknesses. Dry summaries become explosive clashes of human wills and choices with grave consequences. The general become specific, the abstract become concrete. History as here and now, in the process of becoming. History as imaginative construction and invention.

The two orphans of history, Casiana Nacionles (the key thief) and Frank Vitrine (the key keeper) make love in the *talahib*:

Casiana takes him into her carefully, mindful of his trembling. First she had divested him of his foreignness, his hat, his kersey shirt, his gristly shorts... What a hairy thing is a man, so noble if seasoned, so infinite in faculties, in sounds and moving, how pathetic. He heaves, grunts, pulls at the *talahib*, growls at the ants, mimics a hundred owls. . . Then she moves, and moves, and her own body, a warm agitator, surprises herself—her ruse is, to her astonishment, twice blessed. Then thrice and quadruply. The multiplying anarchy of her body is a pleasant detour..." (268)

"Breakfast in Balangiga" and the hacking begins: Bumpus holding a candlestick stuck in a bottle is shot with a *Mauser* and beheaded by Andronico Balais, a soft-spoken man; Grisword the surgeon is hacked and hacked and hacked by Dong Canillas; Connell the captain is stabbed and stabbed by the fifteen-year old Nemesio who then reaches in and grabs his heart; Sergeant Gustav Randles is felled while eating *saging na saba*; the teenager bugler Meyes is shot by the teenager son of Felisa Catalogo; Markley the orderly

vainly defends himself with a fork against Benito Nacionales; Walls the cook is thrown into his pot by Nancio Balasbas. The killing goes on and on in the worst incident in the annals of the United States Army since the Battle of Little Bighorn. (277-278)

The collaboration of the two strong-minded women in “Duel Scripts” is fraught with conflicting viewpoints. Magsalin takes the liberty of tearing Chiara’s script to pieces. Using a pale green Eastbrook fountain pen, she notes in her notebook its many infelicities: problems of continuity, hopscotching chapters, anachronisms, words spilled and reconstituted on other pages, interchangeable performers with identical names, doubles and understudies, unexplained switching of characters’ names, et cetera. (102) Interestingly but predictably, they also characterize the novel. In other words, Chiara’s script mirrors Apostol’s own novel *Insurrecto*.

“Duel Scripts” therefore underscores the profound issue of perception and interpretation. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. So is truth. Conflict is inevitable because different people are constituted differently. People have different personal histories; and their histories define them and color their perception and interpretation of the things around them.

But they can also share commonalities. Both Magsalin and Chiara are creatures of their time, children of the twentieth-century *zeitgeist*. The American century. American films, music, books, art, and fashion are constant points of reference in their lives, in their thoughts and conversations, in their dreams. American popular culture runs deep in their veins and colors their understanding of the world, whether they realize it or not. It is their secret bond, their common umbilical cord. Its hold is inescapable and complete.

In the end, their screenwriting collaboration results in a film titled *Insurrecto*. Credits: directed by Chiara Brasi and Magsalin. Or by Magsalin and Chiara Brasi. The opening shot is accompanied by the haunting musical strains of “Suspicious Minds.” In Punta, Sta. Ana, among deciduous shadows, howling cats, and occult strains of disco music, the bachelor brothers Nemesio, Exequiel, and Ambrosio belt out, sideways now in the doo-wop mode, another Elvis song. After some prompting, Chiara and Magsalin join in. Colonizer and colonized start dancing together, dancing and singing the golden oldies of their favorite American idol.