

# philippine studies

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## **To Love and To Suffer: The Development of the Religious Congregations for Women in the Spanish Philippines, 1565-1898**

**by Luciano P.R. Santiago**

Review Author: Rosario Cruz-Lucero

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the subaltern having been, in the first place, discursively positioned to such performance of subjectivity.

Hau's representation of the subaltern dramatizes its heterogeneity (as her choice of texts indicates). Such "representation"—modally interrogative and autocritical, though not at the expense of stylistic lucidity—is certainly conscious of the two senses of the term, as her notes indicate: representation simultaneously as an act of speaking for another, "political representation" (a *Vertretung*), and representation as an act of giving a portrait of that which one is representing (a *Darstellung*). Thus "heterogeneity" (of class, gender, race, and their material dynamics) is posed in this writing in/on history—this historiography—not merely as a general, empirical "given" with its appearance as a naïve claim to objectivity. Rather, "heterogeneity" is significantly foregrounded in the way the book directs its attention cogently to the textual specificity of these "noncanonical" and "nonliterary" texts as it "explor[es] the multifarious ways in which narrating the nation and narrating the self draw on a set of *literary conventions* . . . to construct their [the subjects'] . . . interlocking 'experiences'" (7; italics added). In the context of subaltern representation and the terms of complicity it poses to the organic intellectual, the book performs a significant hermeneutic move of underscoring "the complex, lived dimension of nationness, and with *the representational strategies for depicting, decoding, and ultimately deconstructing 'experience'*" (7; italic added). Given the choice of texts—autobiographical, ethnographic, and deterritorialized—and their generic association with the Real, the book overrides the receptive disposition accorded to what Catherine Belsey calls "expressive realism," and has done so without taking its toll on "experience" by "highlight[ing] the specific ways and contexts in which the individual and the collective, and the connections between them, are constituted in theory and practice, and shows how narratives can play an important role in theorizing and realizing these connections while offering ways of working through their often fraught relationship" (7).

"Can the subaltern speak?" Hau's book on "Philippine Studies" as a field of academic study—the versatility of her appropriation of a wide range of discourse theory and historiography, evident in her choice of texts and in the hermeneutic strategies she wields—is an insightful, cogent, and valuable affirmation articulated in the space between "positivist essentialism" (Spivak) and the moral/political category of agency and counterhegemony. And the book, given its polished magnitude, is likewise invaluable to the

"national quest" in the broad sense of the term, as it "reiterates" the subaltern question: Can the subaltern speak—this time or maybe next—in another tongue and in another woods or jungle, beyond the alluring academic tropes before it gets petrified again as another subject? Hau's project on the subject of the nation is certainly a projection of a utopian vision, and it is positively such that it reaches toward what Ernst Bloch would term the *Noch-Nicht* (Not-Yet).

**David Jonathan Y. Bayot**

Department of Literature  
De La Salle University-Manila  
<djbayot@yahoo.com>

LUCIANO P. R. SANTIAGO

## **To Love and To Suffer: The Development of the Religious Congregations for Women in the Spanish Philippines, 1565–1898**

Foreword by M. Maria Clarita R. Balleque, RVM  
Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2005. 275 pages.

A history of women in the Philippines is not complete without the religious component, ranging from the precolonial *catalonan* or *babaylan* to the present-day nun, whose Catholic beginnings we can trace back to the *beata* of the seventeenth century. Beatas, literally meaning "blessed women," were, by definition, laywomen who lived saintly lives but were not nuns. Native women *indias* were not allowed to become nuns; hence, they either lived as beatas in solitude or among their own families, formed their own *beaterios*, or joined the Spanish nuns in the convent as beatas.

This book unfolds three centuries of the beata's struggle for recognition and authority in her own domain, in the process forging opportunities and opening doors for all women in various sectors of Philippine society today. At the outset this may sound highly paradoxical, as the traditional image of the nun is one who lives an enclosed life dedicated solely to serving God. But, as the author offers us a cursory look at the histories of seventeen religious communities for women, we also glimpse the spectrum of social institutions and influences that they established and that live on to this day. Drawing on sources both primary and secondary, found in both local and foreign

archives, Santiago weaves together the minutiae of anecdote, folklore, biographography, letters, literary allusions—besides the standard sources of history—to illuminate the political, economic, and gender relations of the period that he depicts.

Not all congregations admitted *indias*, who were believed not to have *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) and were therefore counted among “Jews, Moors, Negroes, and gypsies” (66). The Poor Clares, for instance, generally did not admit *india* beatas but took them in as *nana*, domestic helpers in every sense of the word. Nanas still lived among the Poor Clares until 1945, when the archbishop, discovering their existence, had their status elevated into lay sisters. Moreover, one had to purchase the holy habit although she was not permitted to wear it until the last moments of her life.

*India* beatas living in a nunnery were called *hermanas de obediencia* (sisters of obedience), or *monja legas*, and they were assigned menial tasks. They had neither voting rights nor positions of authority. But they underwent rites of investiture, in which they donned the habit and black cape, and they professed the vows of chastity and obedience though not the vow of poverty, unless it was a “poverty of the spirit” (109). Many of these beatas came from the *principalia* class; hence one may speculate that it would have been to the economic disadvantage of the Catholic Church if they renounced their inheritance or were unable to make bequests to their family.

Beatas who wanted to live as a community, instead of living alone or with their family, formed a *beaterio*. We can guess why, during that era of colonial oppression, there were no *beaterios* for men, although there were *hermanos*, the closest male equivalent to beatas. “Hermana” eventually became a derogatory term, evidence of this being Rizal’s satirical depiction of the stereotypical spinsterish *manang*, who was a hypocritical, gossiping busybody with holier-than-thou airs. In contrast, “beata” connoted the more sincere and saintly maiden.

Against this historical backdrop, Santiago brings to life the complex dynamics of the sacred and profane through a memorable cast of characters: the mercurial Fray Diego de San Juan Joseph, prior of the Recollects, who threw a tantrum at the Augustinian Recollect sisters (1725), tearing down their house and demanding back their habits, when a crisis among them polarized his own friars, and then made up for it by building them a sturdier house and treating them respectfully, in exchange for their laundering and cleaning services; the impetuous Sor Cecilia de la Circuncision of the St.

Catherine of Sienna, who in her middle age eloped with the governor-general’s secretary, Don Francisco Figueroa, to Mexico and became the basis for the legend of Mariveles, Bataan (1746); the entrepreneurial Dominican Madre Vizenta Garay, who ran a money-lending business, foremost of which was the loan of school funds at 6 percent quarterly interest with a collateral of a house and lot (1828); the adventurous beatas of the Sienna order who were the first missionaries to China, where they established an orphanage for abandoned baby girls (1850s); the artistic Sor Justina of the Religious of the Virgin Mary, whom Rizal often visited in Dapitan when he was in exile there; the imprudent Augustinian Sor Teresa de Jesus from Capiz, who in 1896 advised a member of the Katipunan to warn the parish priest of Tondo about the impending revolt, “to avoid so many deaths and destruction” (201).

The more interesting characters merit a summary here of their triumphs and tribulations. The most impressive is Sor Juana de Sancta Antonio of the Poor Clares (1668), an *india* from Pampanga, who, though a mere “sister of obedience,” was a prolific intellectual. She wrote down her theological speculations, “highly original and radical” (72), in notebooks. She believed that her constant bleeding, caused by a liver ailment, made her “the repository of Christ’s blood as it continually dripped from the cross as reenacted in the Daily Mass” (72). She also concluded that the Blessed Virgin Mary was divine, not just immaculate, because upon her conception the Holy Trinity, as one entity, entered St. Anne’s womb. Such ideas were purportedly products of her “reflections, dreams, and visions” (72). At age 68, two years after she started writing, she was condemned for heresy by the Inquisition in Manila and ordered deported to Mexico. But she escaped punishment by dying before the ship arrived, and she was “buried in a secret place in the monastery ground with huge planks of timber to weigh down her coffin so that her forbidden ideas would never surface on this earth again” (73). Her notebooks disappeared when she was arrested, but her ideas as recounted by witnesses at the Inquisition are preserved in the archives of Mexico.

A history of this sort must have the gothic character of the “mad nun,” and sure enough we have it in the hapless (or resourceful) Sor Josefa (Pepita) Estrada de San Rafael, who was the basis for Rizal’s Maria Clara. In 1880 Sor Pepita, again of an illustrious Pampango clan, was accepted as a nun despite her being an *india*. (If there seem to be a disproportionate number of beatas from Pampanga in his account, Santiago explains that the Pampango

seemed to be most open to hispanization and were consequently known as “the Castilians of the Indios” [68].) In 1883 a military officer spotted Sor Pepita Estrada on the convent roof at midnight. To put it in Victorian euphemism, she had been trying to elude the importunings of the Franciscan vicar, who was having his way with her and other nuns, with the collusion of the abbess. The governor-general who investigated it concluded that Sor Pepita was insane. Mercifully, she died after two years in the convent dungeon being flagellated by her sister nuns, who later admitted that “they had acted on this matter with excessive rigor and cruelty” (81). Sor Matilde de Santa Isabel, who wrote of this episode, joined the order in 1890 and died in 1960. The nana who nursed Sor Pepita, “wept oftentimes with compassion for the nun whenever she spoke of her to us” (81). There is just enough information given in this account to tempt one to speculate that Sor Pepita might have pretended insanity rather than suffer in the lewd friar’s hands.

To be sure, Santiago avers, archival sources dating from the seventeenth century are full of accounts of friars of all religious orders in the Philippines who were guilty of indecorous conduct, or inappropriate behavior. But, perhaps, for every hundred stories of lust and lechery there might be the one about the earnest, hardworking friar, such as the Dominican Fray Vicente del Riesgo, parish priest of the fishing towns of the Babuyan Islands in 1712. He was, unfortunately, also much misunderstood. He organized a beaterio of fifteen maidens from among the poor to devote themselves to the Blessed Virgin and, to this end, initiated a round-the-clock recitation of the rosary. He composed prayers emphasizing the virtue of purity and required the beatas to repeat their vow of chastity every month. He also kept them busy sewing, weaving, and cooking. Although he tried to expand this devotion to the rest of his parish, scurrilous gossip about him began to spread, and the vicar provincial, without investigation, promptly recalled him to Manila. A pestilence almost instantly fell on the town and was believed to be divine punishment. A chastened parish welcomed him back four years later, and he fell to working immediately with the beatas until he died another four years later.

Aside from individual and inner tensions, there were also instances of factionalism inside the convent’s hallowed walls. In 1700 the Spanish beatas of the Sienna Order mutinied against their prioress for her undue severity. This escalated with the archbishop’s unwelcome interference, until their defiance caused him to excommunicate the whole community. When they were reinstated two years later, even their Dominican spiritual director

refused to have anything to do with them. Fourteen years later, the Order changed its admissions policy to take in only “pure indias,” in contrast to the Order of the Poor Clares, which was exclusively for Spanish nuns.

The reader may marvel at these religious women’s powers of mollification, as they pleaded with a male superior while expressing in veiled terms their frustration over his petulance and even, in condescending tone, conveying their certainty that they would be vindicated, with God’s help: “We are like mustard seeds, which have been pressed and nearly crushed. From these shall emerge a sapling which, as the father prior will surely witness, shall grow into a big tree under whose shade the birds will build their nests and sing their canticles to God. . . . But for now, we have to be patient and suffer till Our Lord and His Most Holy Mother will have mercy on us” (140–41).

Certainly the india beatas struggled not only against universal gender biases but specifically against the Spanish colonial ones. Mother Ignacia, founder of what became the Religious of the Virgin Mary, received this backhanded compliment from her contemporary, the Jesuit Padre Pedro Murillo Velarde (1749): “She was truly a valiant woman, for she not only overcame the great difficulties which she met in this foundation from the beginning till the end, but she overcame with extraordinary constancy three kinds of indolence: that natural to the country, that co-natural to her sex, and that which is so deeply inborn in the race” (127).

Reading about the constant struggle within and without these women’s selves, in their earnest desire only to lead sanctified lives, one may be awed by their strength of will and daring. Despite the dismissiveness and machinations of power structures skeptical of their worth and work, they pioneered in women’s education, retreat movements, art and culture, business, and alternative lifestyles. With the wealth of data and their interconnections presented in the book, what emerges is a portrait of intrepid women having to contend with an irascible male hierarchy (which, if it were female, would be described as “hysterical”), a misapprehending secular community, and a stream of inexorably changing political and historical forces.

**Rosario Cruz-Lucero**

Departamento ng Filipino at Panitikan ng Pilipinas  
College of Arts and Letters  
University of the Philippines Diliman  
<rosario.lucero@yahoo.com>