

# philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

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**Luis H. Francia's**

*RE: Recollections, Reviews, Reflections*

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*Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*  
vol. 65 no. 4 (2017): 531–34

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## **RE: Recollections, Reviews, Reflections**

Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2015. 299 pages.

Multi-genre writer Luis H. Francia understands that compiling already-published works into a book may seem selfish. He had published an earlier collection, *Memories of Overdevelopment* (Anvil, 1998), which contained two decades' worth of work. However, the reason he does it again is that he also understands its aesthetic value. *RE* allows readers who have followed Francia's essays in various local and foreign as well as print and online publications throughout the years to "follow the arc of [his] writing" (ix). Even for these accustomed readers, but more so for new readers, that arc is surprising in its range and insight. Although the book conveniently and alliteratively classifies its contents into recollections, reviews, and reflections, the topics and treatment of the essays exceed the convention of these categories.

The collection starts with a brief interview with Salman Rushdie, who was supposedly hiding from Khomeini's fatwa and Shiv Sena's wrath. It is a revealing start since the book is full of those who have made indelible legacies in the arts, such as V. C. Igarte, Doreen Fernandez, Santiago Bose, and Nonoy Marcelo. To an extent, such legacies are built on the courage to represent truth as it is. Central among these personalities is Jose Garcia Villa, whom Francia considers to be a mentor and whose idiosyncrasies are well known. "Villanelles," the essay about Villa originally published in *The Anchored Angel* (Kaya Press, 1999), presents an intimate but frank portrait of the poet: his dislike for Scotch, French food, and *New Yorker* poetry; his friendship with E. E. Cummings and Allen Ginsberg; and his New School workshop. The essay however ends not with the poet's tastes but with questions, like afterthoughts after his death, about his relationship with exile and, à la Carlos Bulosan, America.

Because many of the essays come from Francia's regular column in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, The Artist Abroad, a common theme in the book is the Filipino diaspora. Reading the book can feel like reading a travel journal (without the bland language of a guidebook) told from different personas: Filipinos in Manhattan, Madrid, Paris, and Hong Kong. These personas are set against contrapuntal narratives and surprising situations.

For example, post-1986 Pinays in Hong Kong are set side-by-side with the ritual of the Tadtarin and Lino Brocka; and the Beatles beside Pete Lacaba watching a Pilita Corrales concert. These intertextual weavings are to be expected anyway given the historical provenance and social situation of the Filipino diaspora. But more than this, Francia not only reports scene and situation, a reportage whose perspective self-consciously comes from a writer in the diaspora himself, but also comments on their implications. In other words, Francia shows *and* tells. Endearing details, such as a Myanmar tour guide who eyes a *Lonely Planet* book and Atenistas visiting *colegialas* in Diliman, delight readers. However, the wonder of his essays is how they make every subject compelling and how they extend almost everything to a social critique.

The American empire is a frequent object of his critiques. Included in this volume are important essays from *Vestiges of War*, which Francia coedited with Angel Velasco Shaw (NYU Press, 2002), and *Topography of War* (Asian American Writers Workshop, 2006). Especially because the context of most of these essays is the post-9/11 world order, the ironies of empire and the pathos of the Philippine neocolonial republic are exposed. Francia reflects if, in the rhetoric and posturing in the “war on terror,” the aggressor has not in fact become what it seeks to defeat and whether the world has indeed become a safer place. Filipinos, especially seen in the sequence of neocolonial administrations in the Philippines, are complicit in this condition. The subtext of historical, economic, and political ties is too blatant not to be mentioned in the cases of Hacienda Luisita, the hunt for “terrorists,” and the elusive peace in Mindanao. Filipinos in the diaspora, therefore, are caught in a double-bind. Not only are they in a limbo of a journey (not fully departed, not fully arrived), they are also stuck in a “new world disorder” (192) in which their “homeland” ceases to promise home.

In addition to diasporic travel, the book also covers historical travel. José Rizal and the Marcoses have been favorite topics of Francia’s essays since the 1980s. This is also shown in *History of the Philippines: From Indios Bravos to Filipinos* (Overlook, 2010), which chronicles the formation of the nation through the layers of colonial and neocolonial influences. In *RE* Francia uses historical critique to contextualize his reviews and thicken the narratives in his personal essays. For example, in the review of David Byrne’s

*Here Lies Love*, a musical about Imelda Marcos, Francia laments that catchy tunes and the pop psychologizing of a girl's rags-to-riches story drown out her family's corruption that bled a country dry. Of the last song reserved for the Imelda character, Francia is unforgiving: "Good music, wrong notes" (155). In another review, Francia calls William Pomeroy, a soldier who was part of Douglas MacArthur's returning forces in Leyte in 1944, "more Filipino than many nationalists" (149). Pomeroy's books, *The Forest* and *Bilanggo* (Prisoner), tell an autobiographical account of him and his wife, Celia, joining the Huks and their subsequent incarceration as political prisoners in the early 1950s. There is also a letter addressed to Rizal where Francia asks whether the hero holds the same views after more than a century of the hero's death. Did Rizal, whose prophetic voice sparked the revolution and foretold the coming of other imperial powers in "The Philippines, a Century Hence," see this far? Long are the heroes' shadows in Francia's expositions of recent events and present social problems. How would Bonifacio have continued the fight for democracy after 1986? What would Plaridel and the Gomburza have said about the Reproductive Health (RH) Law debate? It is not difficult to surmise Francia's answers to these questions in his essays.

Francia is averse to power that is unchecked and abused. He writes about corruption in the military, bigotry in the Catholic Church, and publication censorship. The essay, "Pharisees in Manila," has been controversial. Given that it was written during the high tide of the RH Law debate, the essay criticized the church's gender bias and conservatism, making the institution irrelevant to many Filipinos. This same essay became the target of censorship of a university press, and the censorship became, in turn, the target of *RE*'s preface-postscript. For Francia these "political" issues are personal; the writer-memoirist-critic is, unavoidably, in the center of these issues. Family members even become characters in Francia's social critique. In the earlier essay critical of the Catholic Church, Francia does not find it ironic to end with his late sister Myrna, an ICM nun of more than forty years. Although he does not know if his sister would have opted to become a priest, her progressive faith makes Francia believe that she would have been an excellent one. Francia also writes about his two *lolo* (grandfathers), Henry and Pepe, to rightly point out the impossibility of thinking of 1898 (war against Spain) without 1899 (war against the US). Henry, a US Army captain, and Pepe, a landed *provinciano* (man from the province), present a family history that is analogous to the eccentricities of Philippine history.

Nowhere in the book is Francia most personal than in his pieces about writing and the creative process. These essays, coming from talks for different creative writing classes and workshops, are expositions about various literary genres and how the writer recreates one's self in the act of writing. A number of the essays explain the writing of Francia's memoir, *Eye of the Fish* (Kaya Press, 2001), about exploration and self-exploration, about travelling through the islands of the archipelago and piecing together a self that is restless, unwieldy, and always incomplete.

As readers go through the range of topics, their reactions will be different: delighted, moved, provoked, and angered. But readers of this collection will always find a writer who mines from a cosmopolitan perspective a critical and reflective voice and concern for the country in this new century.

*RE* won the Best Essays in English award in the 35th National Book Awards in 2016.

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ELOISA MAY P. HERNANDEZ

## **Digital Cinema in the Philippines, 1999–2009**

Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014. 318 pages.

Eloisa May P. Hernandez's *Digital Cinema in the Philippines, 1999–2009* argues time and again for Philippine cinema's continued life, albeit already in the contemporary era's most transformative and indeed progressive form—the digital medium. Most critics and scholars decry the unending lackluster production of Philippine cinema in general, which logically has led to pronouncements of its death over the years. For Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., for instance, it seems to die over and over again in film scholarship. Hernandez, however, turns to the ever-altering digital medium to trace how it has provided Philippine cinema a new lease on life by radically transforming film production, distribution, and consumption from 1999 to 2009. The book is an important contribution to the already full-bodied corpus of film studies in the Philippines as it not only takes on the argument once again for Philippine cinema, but also properly assesses what has been continually marginalized by the hegemonic, consumer-driven mainstream cinema. The