

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fictionalizing Error in Edberto Villegas's *Barikada*¹

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Barikada (2013), written by the late political scientist, writer, and consultant for the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) Edberto Villegas (1940–2020), is a novel that presents a counterfactual portrayal of an urban insurrection, waged by city-based national democratic (NatDem) revolutionaries who deviated from the Maoist rural-oriented protracted guerrilla warfare sanctioned by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). This essay reads this NatDem fiction in relation to the debates about revolutionary strategy that surfaced during the movement's crises-ridden years, and were taken up during the Second Great Rectification Movement. I undertake a detailed examination of the novel's reworking and invocation of the movement's complex history of crises and rectification, and reflect upon how its counterfactual representation of urban insurrection does not simply function to criticize the actual insurrectionist tendencies that emerged in the movement in the post-EDSA years, but more broadly, lays bare the figurative force of fiction in generating insights about the ever-present possibility of committing errors in the revolutionary struggle.

Keywords: *Barikada*, NatDem fiction, error, insurrection, novel, revolution

Introduction

Literary works about the revolution assume an important role not only in chronicling revolutionary experiences, but also in generating reflections about the difficulties and challenges of waging the political struggle. In the history of the longest-running Marxist insurgency in the world, the national democratic (NatDem) revolution led by the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), narratives serve as productive interventions through which such challenges, as well as the reality of revolutionary errors, are worked through. As Gelacio

Guillermo, eminent theorist of NatDem literature, noted, the importance of narratives about the struggle “ay nagmumula, hindi lang sa kanilang katangian bilang mga tala tungkol sa nakaraan, kundi sa kanilang kapangyarihang magbigay ng mga aral para sa ibayong pagsusulong ng digmang bayan, kahit man lang sa kasalukuyang yugto ng pag-unlad nito [derives from not only their documentation of the past, but their power to provide lessons for the continuing waging of the people's war, even in its present stage of development]” (G. Guillermo xxiv). Narratives do so by portraying experiences of errors to emphasize the difficulties in the struggle, as well as highlight the

need to rectify shortcomings and excesses—a recourse that affirms the continuing relevance of the struggle precisely through an assertion of the self-correcting tendency that the revolutionary movement cultivates.

This article focuses on how literature, particularly those that can be referred to as NatDem fiction,² engages with revolutionary experiences, particularly the reality of revolutionary error. At the center of my inquiry is the historical novel *Barikada*, written by the late political scientist, writer, and peace negotiator for the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) Edberto Villegas (1940–2020). This novel is a fictional chronicle of how a group of city-based revolutionaries formulate and wage an ill-fated insurrection in Manila. The present essay, which belongs to a broader study of NatDem fictions that reflects on the relevance of the revolutionary struggle in the contemporary period (Castillo, *NatDem Fictions: Revolutionary Experiences in Contemporary Film and Literature in the Philippines*), aims to foreground how the novel mobilizes counterfactuality to reflect on crucial contestations concerning revolutionary strategy, as well as on the role of error in the struggle.

It is important to mention a few things about the question of insurrection that *Barikada* directly engages with. Insurrection represents a deviation from the strategy of the protracted people's war in the countryside, to which the CPP has adhered since its re-establishment in 1968. This strategy is rooted in its analysis of Philippine society as semi-feudal and semi-colonial. The CPP views that “the peasant problem”—principally the struggle for land—“constitutes the main problem both politically and economically” (Communist Party of the Philippines 47). Since there are few industrial workers in a country where industrialization has failed to take off, the peasantry, according to this analysis, is the main force of the revolution, making the countryside the main arena of the revolutionary struggle (Communist Party of the Philippines 47). Inspired by Mao's policy of “encircling the cities from the countryside,” the Party thus established that the countryside would serve as the terrain where “the people's army can accumulate strength among the peasants by combining armed struggle, agrarian revolution and the building of revolutionary base areas” (“Program for a People's Democratic Revolution” 62). The countryside is where “[t]he worst of oppression and exploitation is carried out among the peasant masses by the reactionaries,”

making the peasantry particularly receptive to radical politics (Sison 184). It is also “far from the enemy's center and main lines of communications” and can provide “wider and better area for maneuver” for the movement's armed group, the New People's Army (NPA) (Sison 184). Based on this revolutionary line, urban areas assume the secondary role in the struggle. The importance of the mass movement and revolutionary activities in the cities resides primarily in their contribution to the expansion of the revolution in the rural areas (Sison 185). The Party's view of urban political work is thus oriented towards supporting the rural guerrilla warfare.

In the 1970s and 1980s, some cadres questioned the secondary importance given to urban political work. This questioning was spurred by many factors like the political developments from the end of the dictatorship to the post-EDSA democratic transition (including the boycott error), as well as the cadres' readings about experiences in insurrection in other countries like Nicaragua and Vietnam. They began formulating political tactics and strategies that privileged urban political work such as mainstream alliance-buildings, mass mobilizations, and tactical operations, while others entertained the strategic shift to insurrectionism (Kerkvliet; Weekley 145–223), a deviation that would later be broadly criticized as a major error during what would be known as the Second Great Rectification Movement. This rectification movement, which began in the 1990s, sought to criticize and rectify the errors committed by revolutionaries in the 1970s to the 1990s, particularly those that undermined the revolutionary strategy of the protracted rural guerrilla warfare.

Written after this rectification movement, *Barikada* offers a counterfactual scenario that imagines the tragic consequences that would have ensued had insurrectionist revolutionaries prevailed in the debates over revolutionary strategy. The mobilization of counterfactuality, which, as expounded later, relies on the novel's generic adherence to the conventions of the roman à clef and the proletarian social novel, points to how the inventive resources proper to fiction allow a reworking of historical realities—details, events, and personages—to illustrate the tragic costs of errors in the struggle, and advance specific arguments about how the revolution should be conducted. This reworking of history also involves a closer look into the agential dimension of the struggle, by portraying, as well as reflecting on, the subjective dynamics and personal/

political motivations of revolutionary subjects, as they strive to master the revolutionary field of struggle, forge comradely relations, and develop political practices from, and through, political analysis.

It is important to highlight that the novel's counterfactual narrative functions as a polemic against the error of insurrection, as well as a pedagogical resource through which readers can learn about the reality of, and the need to overcome, errors in the struggle. A strong politico-ideological impulse governs the novel, as evident in its narrative features that principally engage with historical events and personalities, and bear didactic/explanatory registers that intend to elucidate upon issues related to revolutionary theory and practice. The novel's over engagement with, and expositions about, the historic debates and political discourses about the revolutionary struggle therefore call for an analytic approach that is less concerned with the aesthetic workings of fictional representation that preoccupy most close readings. Rather, I am persuaded that the novel warrants attentiveness to the narrative's reconfigurations of, and by extension, engagements with, the movement's history, as well as the debates concerning how to wage the struggle. In examining this work, I therefore pursue the analytic task of reading the work in relation to the movement's politics and history, positioning it firmly within particular politico-ideological contestations on revolutionary theory and practice that intensified in the post-EDSA years.

In the subsequent sections, I examine *Barikada*'s reimagining of the revolution in the past few decades of Philippine history. I first provide a background of the novel and its generic attributes as a roman à clef and proletarian social novel. I then offer an analysis cum retelling of the novel's narrative to highlight the various deployments, reconfigurations, and inventions of historical details in the novel that construct an alternative scenario of post-EDSA revolutionary engagement, while also laying bare the politico-ideological contestations underpinning the narrative enactment of the insurrection. I then conclude with a reflection of the novel's place in thinking about errors as resources for the struggle.

Barikada

Barikada is Villegas's second novel. His first novel *Sebyo* was written during his imprisonment by

the Marcos dictatorship, and was published in 1990 by the revolutionary publishing bureau under the nom de plume Carlos Humberto. This earlier novel focuses on the political awakening and revolutionary transformation of the titular character during the Martial Law years. *Sebyo*'s titular protagonist makes an appearance as a veteran NPA guerrilla in *Barikada*, which is set in the years between the administrations of Corazon Aquino and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

It is important to take note that Villegas was able to publish his second novel aboveground, largely as a result of the relatively liberal atmosphere for cultural production, as well as the immunity he gained by virtue of his role as consultant during the peace talks between the NatDem movement and the Philippine government initiated under the Corazon Aquino administration. The novel was published in 2013 by the Popular Bookstore, which is known for circulating progressive publications.³ As an aboveground work about the revolution, the novel openly engages with the complex politico-ideological contestations surrounding the movement, particularly in the aftermath of the much-publicized crises and schism within the movement. At the same time, its sympathetic portrayal of the revolution also posits a radical political claim in the public sphere, one that challenges the broad anti-communist hegemony facilitated by the state and civil society.

As an example of a counterfactual historical fiction, *Barikada* concocts a counterfactual scenario of revolutionary insurrection during the Arroyo administration. This "ill-advised armed uprising (not sanctioned by the central leadership)," writes literary scholar Elmer Ordoñez in his blurb for the book, "never takes place at all in reality." There were indeed proposals for insurrection, but they were entered and rejected in Party debates during the presidency of Corazon Aquino. By situating the insurrectionist agenda in the context of the Arroyo presidency, the novel invokes this regime's various mechanisms of control deployed against urban protest movements that condemned her corrupt and impunity-ridden governance. In response to these protest activities, Arroyo employed draconian measures to contain dissident claims to the urban space, as exemplified in her enforcement of the calibrated pre-emptive response (CPR), which the novel also mentions.

Braiding its narrative intimately with historical reality, *Barikada* adopts some of the conventions of

the roman à clef. Some of its characters are modelled after real life activists and personalities. For example, the character of Marita resembles the beauty queen-turned-revolutionary Margarita “Maita” Gomez (1947–2012);⁴ another character, Danny, the military student, appears to be patterned after Danilo Lim (1955–2021), a former military general who, disappointed with government corruption and incompetence, participated in the coup d’état against both the Aquino and the Arroyo administrations.⁵ In his review of *Barikada*, Marxist scholar Bomen Guillermo explains that these references to actual personalities index a “kind of ‘high context culture’” that contributes to “[t]he apparent fullness of the characters sketched in the novel” (B. Guillermo).

In addition to being a roman à clef narrative, the novel also bears the generic attributes of a proletarian social novel, with its multi-character narrative structure that allows multiple perspectives into the dynamics of radicalization across class divides. In her study of American proletarian novels, Barbara Foley provides a useful description of this genre, which can also apply to *Barikada*:

...a multiple-protagonist work of fiction using traditionally realistic techniques of representation. The characters are generally drawn from a range of social classes; through their juxtaposition and interaction they delineate significant patterns and forces in the class struggle. There may be relatively few important characters, or a dozen or more; all, however, are correlated with one another through a plot indicating their interconnectedness, and all are subjected to a controlling narratorial point of view. Although it contains a bildungsroman component—characters learn and change—the social novel routinely focuses upon a strike or some other event in the class struggle and stresses confrontation over apprenticeship (362).

This “event in the class struggle” in *Barikada* is of course the fictional insurrection spearheaded by a group of urban revolutionaries. It is the topic which the characters in the novel—mostly Party members—speak about, and debate on, propelling their individual and collective experiences in the struggle.

In the city

The novel opens on a suspenseful note in 1989, in the immediate post-EDSA political context when the revolutionary movement deployed urban assassination squads to cities and towns to execute abusive and corrupt military, police and other government officials and spies. A three-member special partisan unit (SPARU or “sparrows”) of revolutionaries known as the Alex Boncayao Brigade (ABB) spies upon, and kills their target, Colonel Abad, a brutal police officer responsible for the murder of five labor unionists from the Nestlé corporation and the disappearance of a female journalist.

The urban operation that opens the novel serves to forebode the aggressive posturing of the revolution in the cities. During this period, urban assassinations created an impression of the revolution’s strong presence in the cities, paving the ground for the formulation of the insurrectionist strategy. As the Party leadership later assessed during the rectification, sparrows were deployed “at a rate that tended to prejudice the legal and defensive character of the struggle in these urban areas” (Central Committee, Communist Party of the Philippines, “Reaffirm Our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors” 36). One NPA Manila commander explained that the killings by these sparrows aimed to “open a new front in the war effort and to organize residents of Manila, ‘especially the workers in the city, into higher revolutionary forms of struggle’” (Jones 248). The insurrectionist motive therefore neatly ties *Barikada*’s opening scene of a sparrow activity with its later chronicle of union organizing among the urban proletariat.

Another detail in this opening scene further indexes the emergent urban-centered orientation within the movement. The scene explicitly mentions that one of the assassins, Ben, is an NPA guerrilla deployed to the urban area to carry out this city operation. This detail brings to mind the prevalent practice of assigning Party cadres and activists from the countryside to the cities to do urban warfare (Central Committee, Communist Party of the Philippines, *Five Kinds of Insurrectionism*). This practice would later be criticized by the Party leadership for depriving the rural areas of many reliable revolutionaries.

From this early scene of political violence, the next chapter follows one of the urban assassins, Ben. At a restaurant, he meets up with his older brother Danny, a lieutenant in a company of the Philippine Marines. A member of the state’s armed forces, Danny

is also disenchanted with the government, prompting him to join the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM)—a real-life clandestine organization inside the AFP that emerged out of the discontent of military officers over the corruption inside the military institution (Hedman, Eva-Lotta E. and Sidel 48–50). The group, the novel reveals, plans to stage another coup d'état in Manila against the Aquino administration.

While both the NatDem movement and the RAM are united in their stance against the corruption in the government, these groups differ significantly in their visions of nationalism and democracy. These different visions would figure in the conversation between Ben and Danny, who engage in a friendly debate about politics and social change. Ben criticizes the military's plan to set up a junta once the planned coup d'état succeeds. Danny explains that like the NatDems, the RAM also believes in nationalism and democracy, but the younger brother is quick to argue that the military organization's nationalist conviction is influenced by the imperialism of the US, and adheres to free market policies favored by the US multinationals. Ben then explains the NDF's economic programme that aims to “isabansa ang mga bangko at mga estratehikong industriya sa ekonomiya kagaya ng sa langis, asero at transportasyon” (nationalize the banks and strategic industries in the economy like oil, steel and transportation), to be funded not by American imperialists, but by the people, and through means that do not follow the one-sided dictates of multilateral financial institution (Villegas, *Barikada* 9). The dialogues in this exchange assume a didactic, explanatory register that condense and simplify for the reader the political analyses and visions of social transformation held by some politico-ideological factions, such as the Left and the military—an expository feature that characterizes many of the conversations in the novel.

The events that follow would vindicate Ben's (and the NDF's) espousal of an anti-imperialist nationalism. Mirroring real-life developments in post-EDSA politics, the novel recounts the failure of the RAM's 1989 coup. After two weeks of siege by the dissenters, the US sends fighter jets to bomb the RAM headquarters. Witnessing firsthand the American imperialist intervention mentioned by Ben, Danny becomes disillusioned, and decides to embrace left-wing politics, recalling the real-life efforts within the factions in the military to forge alliances with the

revolutionary movement in an express aim to advance progressive politics (Melencio). He helps form a clandestine anti-imperialist organization of military cadets, the Young Officers Union (YOU).

The failure of the coup d'état prefigures the disastrous insurrection that Party cadres would stage in the novel's climactic conclusion. While the military and revolutionary forces have different ideological and political motivations for planning and staging the coup d'état and the insurrection respectively, these two political blocs share the common view of Manila as the decisive, if not primary, arena to contest and capture political power. As detailed for the most part of the novel, NatDem revolutionaries belonging to the Manila-Rizal Regional Committee (MRRC), the committee based in the urban capital, would take this view of Manila to the level of strategy, prompting them to deviate from the Maoist rural guerrilla framework.⁶ In the next section, I discuss how *Barikada* offers a fictionalized exploration of the subjective dimensions of this collective of urban cadres, whose erroneous deviation would pave the way to a tragedy.

Revolutionary lives

As a multi-character proletarian social novel, *Barikada* traces the lives and destinies of fictional characters who would become part of the controversial urban regional committee. These characters hail from both subaltern and privileged classes in the city. They include the urban proletariat (the sex worker Helen, and labor union activists Caesar, Blas, and Ramon), and upper and middle-class, university-educated intellectuals (the state university professor David, his student Rosa, and the beauty queen Marita). These characters intersect in the spaces of the city where they live and work, and are eventually brought together by the revolution.

Barikada's exploration of the biographies of these revolutionaries are woven through the country's socio-political conditions in the 1980s to the 2000s. This is in line with what Villegas coins as “dialectical realism,” a representational principle that tracks the interior, subjective development of individuals in relation to social conditions and realities (Villegas, *Interview by the Author*). A literature major during his undergraduate years, Villegas explained that his exposure to, and synthesis of, the introspective narratives of existentialists, as exemplified by the

writings of the early Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, the realism of writers like Gustave Flaubert, and the Marxist dialectical framework that explains the dynamics of socio-subjective relations influenced his formulation of this principle. His theory of literature could be gleaned in the narrative techniques he used in *Barikada*, which, in his words, sought to reveal the dynamic interaction of human subjectivities with the external social conditions in the milieu that they inhabit and also help shape (Villegas, *Interview by the Author*).

A range of narrative registers evinces Villegas' employment of "dialectical realism." Some chapters in the novel assume an essayistic register in conveying the broader socio-political developments during the country's tumultuous years of democratization. One chapter features a chronicle of real-life political upheavals in the early 1990s like the historic Congressional vote against the renewal of American bases in the country, the change in administration that enables the return to power of Marcos cronies and allies, and the accelerated implementation of policies that favor foreign capitalists at the expense of Filipinos. The chapter locates the social impacts of these policies, as experienced by people in cities like Manila: "Nagdagsaan ang libu-libong nawawalan ng hanapbuhay sa mga kalunsuran. Lalong dumarami ang mga pamilyang iskwater sa mga siksik na lugar sa mga lungsod, lalo na sa Metro Manila. Lalong dumarami ang mga pulubi at tumataas ang kriminalidad at bilang ng mga puta." (Thousands of those who lost their jobs flocked to the cities. Squatter families increase in the crowded spots in the cities, especially in Metro Manila. Beggars increase, and crimes and the number of prostitutes surge) (Villegas, *Barikada* 79).

In other chapters, the novel's omniscient narrator turns introspective and character-oriented, portraying the thoughts and feelings of the members of the MRRC. This rendering of an ensemble of political subjectivities reveals the complex personal factors that propel revolutionary involvement in ways that do not adhere to orthodox conceptions of proper political remodeling. For instance, Helen, who is forced to work in the night club to provide for her siblings, agrees to learn about, and join the movement initially because she wants to be closer to Caesar, a cadre who frequents the night club where she works. Blas, who grows up exposed to the miserable realities of slum life in the city, and struggles with his closeted identity as a gay man, becomes drawn to the revolution partly because

of his attraction to Ramon. The wealthy socialite and beauty queen Marita yearns for independence, and refuses to be confined in the domestic sphere; she eventually leaves her privileged married life, and joins an activist women's organization. The university professor David, who sees the limits of his job as a teacher of politics and philosophy in effecting social change, becomes exposed to activism through the influence of his student, the youth activist Rosa. The latter drops out of college, abandoning her ambition to become a medical doctor to pursue full-time political work. These character-oriented portions also chronicle how interpersonal relationships develop inside the revolution: Rosa and David get married; Caesar enters into a relationship with Marita; Marita forges a bond with Helen; Helen befriends Blas, whose struggles as a closeted homosexual male speak to her own as a hostess stigmatized by society.

While providing space to the messy dynamics of the personal and political, *Barikada* also tends to turn some characters into "mouthpiece characters" who articulate and address political and ideological issues and discourses. Instructive in this regard is Foley's observation about proletarian social novels that "[u]tterances by 'mouthpiece' characters and mentors, coupled with debates and dialogues between these characters and the protagonist(s) furnish one of the principal means by which characters and readers alike are exposed to left-wing political ideas," and offers a way to integrate political discourse within the novel's "ontological domain," that is, as an organic part of the story, and not a discursive intrusion by the narratorial voice (272–74).

As in the earlier conversation between Ben and Danny, many dialogues in the novel express the political views and principles held by the characters. Conversations among the characters explain various aspects and dimensions of the revolutionary movement's principles and visions. These passages are also unprecedented in recent Philippine fiction in their descriptions of some features of the socialist order that the NatDem struggle aims to put in place.

In one chapter, Blas explains to Helen the socialist vision of the movement in relation to her personal experience:

"Sa sosyalistang lipunan na sinabi ko sa iyo, Helen, sisikaping bigyan ng trabaho ang lahat ng mga tao kaya dahan-dahang mawawala ang

mga diskuhan, mga sauna bath, kasa at iba pang lugar kung saan pinagsasamantalahan ang mga dukhang babaeng gaya mo.”

[In the socialist society I am telling you, Helen, everyone will be given work; discos, sauna baths, casas and other places where poor women like you are exploited will gradually disappear] (Villegas, *Barikada* 20).

Blas continues:

“Dahan-dahang mawawala ang pagsusukatan ng mga tao sa isa’t isa batay sa uring pinagmulan nila. Ang pag-ibig ay magiging tunay na pagturing sa katauhan ng isang indibidwal. Sa sosyalistang lipunang ito, ang mga kagaya ko ay malayang mabubuhay ayun sa kanilang mga inklinasyon at katagustuhan.”

[The valuation of people based on their class origins will gradually disappear. Love will be the genuine consideration of an individual’s personhood. In this socialist society, those like me will freely live according to our inclinations and wants] (Villegas, *Barikada* 20).

As expected in a “novel of ideas,” discussions like this abound the interactions among the novel’s characters, framed in the context of educating non-revolutionary characters and even the reader about the necessity of the revolution and the salience of its social vision. In his review of the novel, Bomen Guillermo points out that these discussions are a “kind of educational device embedded in literary prose” that is “reminiscent of Lope K. Santos’ *Banaag at Sikat* [sic] (1906),” one of the earliest socialist-themed novels in the Philippines. This device, which “Villegas does a service by resurrecting” however has “fallen into relative disuse” in later works by writers-activists whose “literary education in the universities” taught them to “shun ‘wordiness’ in literary texts” (B. Guillermo).

Commenting on the novel’s use of explanatory/discursive register, particularly in its dialogues, Guillermo adds that *Barikada* “can be used for educational purposes, above all, due to the very interesting extended discussions it contains on revolutionary and socialist theory” (B. Guillermo).

Guillermo particularly cites the scene in which Ramon serves as an instructor in a discussion among workers about the contradictions within capitalism as an example of this pedagogical device. The pedagogical register in this chapter takes after a question-and-answer format, like a typical political primer, as in the passage below:

“Sa sosyalistang lipunan, mawawala ba itong mga kontradiksyon na binanggit mo,” ibig malaman ng nakadilaw.

“Sa sosyalismo, ang produksyon para sa buong lipunan ay planado. Kung may papayagan mang magkaroon na mga pribadong kapitalista sa ilang sektor ng ekonomya ay aayun ang produksyon nila sa kabuuang plano para sa ekonomya. Ireregula ang pagprepresyo ng mga produkto ng mga pribadong kapitalistang ito. Dahil may pagpapalano para sa isa hanggang limang taon, maiiwasan ang sobrang produksyon.”

[In a socialist society, will these contradictions you mentioned disappear,” the one wearing yellow wants to know.

In socialism, the production for the entire society is planned. If there are private capitalists in some sectors of the economy to be allowed, their production will adhere to the overall plan for the economy. The pricing of products of these capitalists will be regulated. Because there is planning for one to five years, overproduction will be avoided] (Villegas, *Barikada* 25–26).

These explanatory dialogues also allow the reader a glimpse into the line of thinking that the urban cadres adopt in formulating the insurrectionist agenda. For instance, in one chapter, a supervisor in the factory challenges Ramon’s arguments about the character of class relations in a revolutionary juncture. He asks Ramon why the working class takes the role of leadership in the revolution, instead of the peasants who number the most in the Philippines. The latter responds that “sa lahat ng uri, masasabing ang uring manggagawa ang may potensyal maging pinakarebolusyonaryo, samakatuwid, kailangan niyang

pamunuan ang uring magsasaka.” [among all the classes, it can be said that the working class has more potential to be the most revolutionary, thus, they have to lead the peasant class] (Villegas, *Barikada* 59).

Indeed, Ramon's response reiterates the NatDem movement's official view of class alignments in the revolution. As expressed in the *Philippine Society and Revolution*, the proletariat is the primary force of the revolution, while the peasantry, being the majority, is the main one (Guerrero 156–58). Ramon's view of working-class leadership however veers towards justifying the urban uprising that the cadres would wage disastrously. Ramon's argumentation, in fact, mirrors how in the 1990s, real-life MRRC members invoked the centrality of the working class in adopting the framework described as “workerist-Leninist” (Borras 228). In *Barikada*, the “workerist” perspective translates to a privileging of the experiences of the urban working class— here embodied in the vibrant union movement, in which Ramon serves as organizer— as a decisive factor in staging the insurrection.

In connection to this, Ramon is convinced that the developments in the urban capital are favorable conditions for insurrection. In a discussion with fellow workers, Ramon describes the conditions in the city in the context of Arroyo's increasing unpopularity and social discontent spreading across the capital: “hinog na ang panahon maglunsad ng insureksyon sa kalunsuran. Laganap na ang kahirapan ng mga tao, lalo na pagkatapos ipinataw ang proklamasyon ng national emergency⁷...Ang tiwala ng bayan sa presidente ay walang-wala na. Lampas sa sienta porsyento na ang ibig paalisin siya sa puwesto” [the time is ripe to wage insurrection in the city. Poverty among the people is widespread, especially after the proclamation of national emergency...The people's trust in the president is virtually lost. More than sixty percent want her out of office] (Villegas, *Barikada* 114–15).

Ramon's statement argues that poverty and Arroyo's unpopularity can generate political resistance. This optimistic projection of the people's radical capacity however neglects the level of political consciousness and preparedness that the people must develop in order to go beyond the agenda of ousting Arroyo, and participate in an urban insurrection to replace the political order and install a national democratic state. To articulate the problems of the city-centered view of urban cadres like Ramon, the novel moves to the countryside.

In the countryside

Barikada takes some of its urban cadres to the countryside where the limits of the insurrectionist vision become visible to them. The countryside, where the rural guerrilla warfare unfolds, is the space where revolutionaries gain political clarity and a comprehensive view of the social totality. In one subplot, the MRRC deploys Caesar to the countryside to undergo re-education as his disciplinary action for abandoning his duties after being occupied by his relationship with Marita. Here, the countryside serves as the space of rectification, where living with the peasant class, the main revolutionary force, would remind cadres of their urgent tasks in the revolution. The novel also portrays the countryside as a radicalizing space for activists who hail from the cities; for instance, the urban student-activist Rosa is convinced to become a full-time revolutionary after being immersed in the realities of social injustice and poverty among the peasantry.

The countryside is where the Party holds its official plenum to discuss the insurrectionist suggestion by the MRRC. Ben attends this plenum, held in the mountainous region of Cordillera in northern Philippines. Here, they discuss the document “Itaguyod ang Ating Estratehiya at Taktika sa Paglulunsad ng Rebolusyong Pilipino” [Uphold our Strategy and Tactic in Waging the Philippine Revolution], which criticizes the errors of the MRRC's suggestion to intensify partisan actions—portrayed in the urban assassination that opens the novel—to advance the strategy of insurrection.

It is also in the plenum that Ben encounters the veteran NPA guerrilla Sebyo, the titular character of Villegas's/Humberto's first novel. The veteran tells him that it is premature to wage an insurrection, adding that the urban cadres, in their impatience about the protracted armed revolution, uncritically hold up the first EDSA People Power's ouster of Marcos as proof of the possibility of seizing political power in the city (Villegas, *Barikada* 53). The veteran cadre continues: “Kailangan palawakin muna natin ang ating base sa kanayunan at kilusang lihim sa kalunsuran” [We first need to broaden our base in the countryside and the underground movement in the cities] (Villegas, *Barikada* 53). Sebyo's statement refutes the argument forwarded by urban cadres like Ramon who, as mentioned earlier, problematically conflates the

political potential for ousting the President with the people's capacity to embark on the altogether different and more radical agenda of staging an insurrection.

Like Ben, the university professor David also discusses the insurrection with revolutionaries outside of his own territory. As a staff of the Central Committee, he is assigned by the Party to travel to Mindanao to broker the peace negotiations with the Moro Liberation movement. The Moro group's spokesperson is his former classmate, Hadji Muztaz, modelled after Nur Misuari.⁸ During this travel, he learns from a labor leader based in Davao, the largest city in Mindanao, about the urban political activities in their area. The right political opportunity like widespread poverty and people's riots in the city, the latter tells him, should convince revolutionaries to stage an urban uprising. For David, this indicates that the insurrectionist line pursued by Manila-based cadres like Ramon seems to gain ground even among cities outside of Manila.⁹

Like Sebyo, David begins to be convinced that the armed struggle in the countryside must be strengthened first before an armed seizure in the city can be undertaken. This issue becomes a source of disagreement between him and Rosa. David tells her that the movement is ill-prepared and does not have enough weapons. Rosa retorts that "ang rebolusyon ay laging dehado sa armas, ngunit kaya nananalo ito ay dahil sa determinasyon ng masa lumaban para sa isang makatarungang lipunan" [the revolution is always disadvantaged in arms, but it wins because of the determination of the masses for a just society] (Villegas, *Barikada* 122).

As Bomen Guillermo notes in his review of the novel, Rosa, with this line of thinking, recalls her historic namesake Rosa Luxemburg, known for her theory of spontaneous mass uprisings (B. Guillermo). Luxemburg warned against waiting "in a fatalist fashion, with folded arms for the advent of the 'revolutionary situation,'" and calls on the advanced segments of the proletariat to "hasten the development of things and endeavor to accelerate events" (Luxemburg 161). Lenin would criticize this principle of spontaneity, and emphasize the need for the vanguard Party's leadership to take the lead in, and develop an, organized, coordinated strategy for the seizure of political power. In *What Is To be Done*, he wrote that spontaneous mass movements like strikes "represented the class struggle in embryo, but only in embryo," which could thus not be taken hastily

to carry on towards the higher struggle for socialism (Lenin 74). Ernest Mandel would elaborate on Lenin's view of the limitations of such mass initiatives, suggesting that these alone cannot bring "about a sufficient centralization of forces to make possible the downfall of a centralized state power with its repressive apparatus resting on a full utilization of the advantages of its 'inside lines' of communication" (Mandel, *The Leninist Theory of Organization: Its Relevance for Today* 8). The tragic fate that awaits the insurrection would confirm Mandel's warning about the repressive capacities of the state, as well as the limits of urban political struggle.

Insurrection

Before the novel moves towards the planned insurrection, Villegas devotes a brief chapter that forebodes the violent crackdown awaiting the planned urban uprising. In this chapter, set in the early 2000s, President Arroyo confers with cabinet members and military generals about suspicions of political destabilization. These government officials are parodically constructed as gluttons, incompetent, and given to petty in-fighting. One character is named General Tsubibo Kapalpakan [General Merry-go-round Failure], the jocular homonym of Jovito Palparan, the military general who gained notoriety for his active role in counterinsurgency campaigns that resulted in massive human rights violations during the Arroyo administration.¹⁰

In this chapter, Arroyo and her cabinet set out to quash the planned mass action, even making mention of the notorious "calibrated pre-emptive response" (CPR), an Arroyo-era tactic to disperse activists violently (*Human Rights under the Arroyo Government- Task Force Detainees of the Philippines*). In addition to embodying the ruthless mechanisms with which the state intends to contain the urban capital, the villainous characters in this chapter are noticeably depicted as caricatures, suspending the gritty realism and complex depictions of subjectivity that dominate the novel. As Guillermo notes in his review of the novel, the representation of government officials in this chapter bears "the same predilection we encounter in Amado V. Hernandez's *Mga Ibong Mandaragit* (Birds of Prey) (1969), where the ruling class representatives are named rather coarsely as Huwes Pilato [Judge Pilate], Gobernador Doblado [Governor Folded],

General Bayoneta [General Bayonet], and Senador Botin [Senator Plunder]" (B. Guillermo). Within the revolutionary literary tradition, Montañez pointed out that this tendency also appears in the underground novel *Hulagpos* [Break Free], which bore characters named like Capt. Mamaril [Captain To-Fire] and Col. Hestapo [Colonel Gestapo] (Montañez 134).

Positing the error of enacting a socialist overthrow of the state through an assault to the city, the last few chapters of the novel depict the ill-fated insurrection led by the MRRC. Under the heat of the sun, the city becomes the focal point of encounter among workers marching out of their factories, peasants arriving from nearby provinces, and students coming out of their universities. These groups congeal into a massive *welgang bayan*, a detail that also recalls how the insurrectionist agenda of the early 1990s involved the staging of a similar multisectoral urban action (Weekley 220–21). In this drama of the moving crowd, the novel's multiple protagonists appear, simultaneously melding with, and standing out from, the multitude, evoking the Party urban committee's vanguardist agency and involvement in the uprising. Ben reflects, "parang siya'y isang patak lang ng tubig sa isang dambuhalang alon na rumaragasa tungo sa dalampasigan" [he is like a drop of water in a giant wave that rushes to the shore] (Villegas, *Barikada* 136).

As expected, the Arroyo-led armed forces of the state obstruct the wave of angry masses, violently dispersing them, hitting them with sticks and hosing them with dirty water. The scene escalates into a violent armed confrontation between state forces and the urban revolutionaries. Pitted against the police and military, the revolutionaries in the ranks of the protesters set up a stronghold in university buildings. They barricade themselves while throwing molotovs and firing at the state forces. As they face the brutal strength of enemy forces, the novel gives space to the fiery acts of bravery of revolutionaries in the insurrection. Eventually, Rosa, Ramon, Caesar, and Marita meet their ends in the intensely violent confrontation with the armed military.

The consolidated capacities of state violence in the city are therefore illustrated in the novel as an unavoidable political reality that should have dissuaded revolutionaries from pursuing insurrection. The remaining revolutionaries like Ben and his brother Danny retreat from the scene and meet up in the seashore by the city. Awash in regret, Ben informs Danny that the insurrection has not actually received

approval from the Central Committee, making the MRRC liable to face disciplinary action. Danny despairingly asks his brother "kailan pa tayo magiging handa? Kailan pa darating ang panahon ng tagumpay" [when will we be prepared? When will the time of victory arrive?]. Ben replies calmly, "darating at darating din yun" [it will arrive] (Villegas, *Barikada* 156). The tragic outcome of insurrection compels the surviving cadres to concede regretfully that the protracted war framework remains the appropriate political strategy for the NatDem revolution.

In the novel's final chapter, Ben consoles himself while lamenting the lives lost in the insurrection. Reiterating the metaphor of sea waves that earlier embodied the mass movement in the city, he looks at the sea and likens the insurrectionist wave to "mga rumaragasang alon sa kalayuan" [raging waves from afar] that "humuhupa pagdating sa dalampasigan" [fade upon arriving at the shore] (Villegas, *Barikada* 156), ruthlessly crushed by the urban stronghold of the state.

Conclusion

In tracing the urban cadres' formulation and implementation of the insurrectionist error arising from their confining experiences of struggle in the city, *Barikada* offers a rendering of the "reality of the subject's *finite* capacity for thought and action, and the reality of material constraints on the subject's thought and action" (Hau 27). At the same time, the novel's representation of errors advances an understanding of the revolution as in itself a pedagogical project, in which revolutionaries learn, and become transformed through trial, error, and rectification. As Hau explains in a discussion that recalls Mao's treatise on the indispensability of practice to knowledge (Mao Tse-tung), revolutionary subjects regard the revolution as in itself a way of obtaining knowledge through trial and error. Therefore, while it is ultimately a story of defeat, the novel highlights the value of tragic errors as experiential resources to learn from, and continue the struggle. Here, *Barikada*'s counterfactual narrative, which illustrates the tragic cost of erroneously deviating from revolutionary strategy, assumes pedagogical and polemical function in reaffirming the rural-based protracted people's war strategy, as resolved during the rectification. The fictional(ized) error therefore becomes instructive in illustrating how revolutionaries can learn from mistakes in the struggle.

The idea of errors as experiential resources is important, given the ever-present possibility of errors arising from the structural and conjunctural difficulties, as well as subjective crises and contradictions that crop up in the relay between epistemic work and political struggle. Hau writes that “the risk of error inherent in the political struggle impels, rather than suspends or terminates the theoretical task” undertaken in, and through, social practice (Hau 270). *Barikada*’s ending points to this insight, as it gestures to the need to overcome the tragedy of loss, assess the events, and abide by the imperative to continue and strengthen the revolution, this time, bearing the lessons gleaned from the errors. As I have elsewhere argued (Castillo, *Digmaan Ng Mga Alaala: Rebolusyon at Pagkakamali Sa Mga Talang-Gunita*), the revolutionary movement, as the facilitator of rectification, is crucial in this regard. Following Ernest Mandel, the revolutionary vanguard organization serves as “memory, which is codified, one way or another, in a program in which you can educate the new generation which then does not need to start from scratch in its concrete way of intervention in the class struggle” (Mandel, “Vanguard Parties” 6). In serving as a counterfactual chronicle of errors, *Barikada* evokes the need to edify such memory.

Endnotes

1 All translations of the novel’s passages are mine. I dedicate this essay to the memory of Professor Edberto Villegas (1940–2020).

2 I use the term NatDem fiction to refer to fictional narratives that portray experiences in the NatDem struggle that ultimately veer towards the affirmation of the need to continue the revolution.

3 Because it carries progressive publications about the NatDem struggle, the Popular Bookstore has in fact been the target of red-tagging. In 2022, its bookshop in Quezon City was defaced with a graffiti in red paint bearing the words “NPA Terrorista” (NPA Terrorist).

4 Gomez was a fashion model, socialite and beauty queen who joined the revolutionary underground during the Marcos dictatorship. She became a women’s movement activist after the fall of Marcos, and continued to become active in political activism until her death due to a heart attack in 2012. (“GOMEZ, Margarita F.”)

5 Lim, who died in 2019 as a government official in Metro Manila, would also harbor sentiments about American control of Philippine polity (Gloria), resonating with the fictional Danny in the novel.

6 The MRRC cadres would adhere to a political-military strategy that revolved around insurrection, out of the strong belief in “the capacity of the revolutionary

forces in the capital city to create decisive political moments regardless of what was happening in the rest of the country”(Weekley 220). Rejecting the Second Great Rectification Movement that criticized this urban strategy, the MRRC, along with other regional branches of the Party, would declare its autonomy from the CPP leadership (Weekley 252).

7 This is a direct reference to Arroyo’s Presidential Proclamation 1017 in 2006, which placed the country under “a state of national emergency” to contain a planned military coup d’etat. The proclamation earned condemnation for human rights violations that included the arrests of activists and government critics and raids of media offices (International Federation of Journalists).

8 A controversial figure, Nur Misuari spearheaded the formation of the Moro separatist group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), during the Martial Law period.

9 This detail portrays how deviations from rural guerrilla warfare spread beyond Manila, particularly referencing the intensification of urban activities like “all-out partisan warfare, sweeping propaganda, confrontational street actions and combinations of these” in regional cities like Davao in the 1980s, which created the effect of deemphasizing the rural territory as the terrain of armed revolution (Central Committee, Communist Party of the Philippines, “Reaffirm Our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors” 15).

10 Palparan, known as “Berdugo” or “the Butcher” was a key personnel in the Oplan Bantay Laya, the counterinsurgency programme of the Arroyo government. He was sentenced to imprisonment in 2018 for the disappearance of two university students, Karen Empeño and Sherlyn Cadapan, in 2006.

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